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THE WORST MEMORY PLAYS SLOWEST

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

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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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LAMBARÉNÉ
OGOOUÉ
OCÉAN ATLANTIQUE
HERE BE
THE ANCESTORS
MASSIF DU CHAILLU

THE BOOK BEFORE

Each of these books stands on its own, and can be read in any order. The one before this was about a woman named Margit [MAR-git].

For thirty-one years Margit Halmos [HAL-mosh] sat in a glass booth above a hall of the United Nations in Geneva, carrying other people's words into English half a breath behind them. Delegates, doctors, witnesses at a war-crimes tribunal. If a thing could be said, Margit could say it in another language before the speaker had finished.

Then one morning in March a delegate said *heron*, and Margit said *the animal*.

A doctor gave it a name. It was rare and it was slow, and it took the meanings of words away one at a time, the rarest first, and it would not stop. Her partner in the booth, Inês [ee-NESH], began a list at the back of Margit's notebook, headed *Words gone*.

The country she lived in would let her choose the day she died, but only while her mind was clear enough to choose. Margit was given a paper that said she was able. It was good for six months.

Inês had a small brown bottle at the back of her freezer, and twenty notebooks about twelve minutes in Porto [POR-too], and she would not say what was in either.

For thirty-one years Margit had carried one sentence across the glass more often than any other: *there are no words*. Before her six months ran out, she wanted to know where the thing went, the thing there are no words for.

SYNOPSIS

Dana Whitlock is a respiratory therapist in Albuquerque [AL-buh-kur-kee]. She is good at her job. She lives alone. She has not slept a whole night in nearly seven years.

On the longest night of 2019, coming home from a Christmas party in a friend's truck, she was the passenger. That is what she told the deputy, and the lawyer, and that is what the man who was driving told them too. He went to prison. A boy of twelve on a bicycle did not come home. There is a white cross on the side of a county road with his name on it, and a woman in a grey coat who used to kneel beside it on Sundays.

Dana takes the long way round, to avoid that road. She has been taking it for nearly seven years.

Then, at three in the morning, a text from a number she does not know: *it helped me sleep*. And a link to a clinic on the coast of Mexico, a white house above the sea, that promises one night with a root from Africa will take everything you ever did wrong off you, like a coat.

It is illegal at home. People have died taking it. Dana is a medical professional, and she knows exactly what it can do to a heart, and she has one small secret on her intake form.

She drives twelve hours to the border, and walks across, and lies down in a room with a heart monitor and a woman in a grey cardigan who will sit up with her all night and write down everything she says.

The people who have been there say the root plays your life back to you like a film. They say the worst memory plays slowest.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This is a book about a woman who has told the same story about one night for nearly seven years, and about the night a root from Africa told it back to her.

The title comes from the people who have taken it. In interviews and studies, again and again, they say that it shows you your life like a film, years of it, too fast to hold, and then, when it reaches the thing you have spent your life not looking at, it slows down. One former soldier described his worst memories slowing to a crawl, so that he had to stand inside them. I have put it in my own words.

The substance is real, and so is everything this book says about it: what it does to the heart, how long it lasts, the grey day after, the deaths, the studies, the law. The clinics across the border are real, and some of them are careful and some of them are not; the white house is invented, and so is its doctor. The four short accounts between the parts are about real people and a real tradition, and are told in my words from what they have said in public. Their sources are at the back.

The law about how long a crime can wait to be charged is real, and the dates in this book follow it. Dana, the man she was with, the boy, his mother and everyone else in the story are invented. So is the road, though there are white crosses like Mateo's [mah-TAY-oh] on the side of roads all over New Mexico, and every one of them is somebody.

This book does not tell anyone to take it. People who have, and have lived, say it was the hardest night of their lives. Some of them say it saved them. Some of them did not live.

Chew Z

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I. THE PASSENGER

1.

I was the passenger.

I have said that sentence so many times that it has worn smooth, like a step on a staircase. I said it to the sheriff's deputy at the side of the road, with the blue lights going round and round on his face. I said it to the detective two days later, in a room with a box of tissues on the table that nobody had touched. I said it to my mother on the phone, and to every man I have been out with since, and to the woman who cuts my hair, who had read about it in the paper and asked me, very kindly, while my head was back in the sink.

I was the passenger. Wes was driving.

I want to tell you about that night first, because everything else in this book grew out of it, the way a crack grows out of one small chip in a windshield. I will tell it the way I have always told it. Later, I will tell it again.

2.

It was the twenty-first of December, 2019, the shortest day of the year. I was thirty-one. I was in my last semester of training as a respiratory therapist at the community college in Albuquerque [AL-buh-kur-kee], New Mexico, and in the spring I would be qualified, and I would have a job, and my life would finally start.

A respiratory therapist is the person in a hospital whose whole job is breathing. Other people's breathing. When a baby is born too early and its lungs are not ready, we are the ones who help it. When an old man with bad lungs cannot get enough air, we are the ones who fit the mask and turn the dials. When somebody stops breathing altogether, we are at the head of the bed, with a bag in our hands, squeezing air into them, once every six seconds, counting. That is the job. You count breaths for people who cannot count their own.

I loved it before I had even started. I loved that it was so simple. Air in, air out. A person is alive for as long as you can keep that going.

That night there was a Christmas party at the house of one of the girls in my class. She lived in the North Valley, which is the old part of Albuquerque along the river, where the roads are narrow and

dark and the houses sit back behind cottonwood trees and adobe walls, and there are no streetlights at all. Her mother had made posole [poh-SOH-leh], the pork and hominy stew we eat at Christmas, and her father had strung little white lights along every wall, and there was a fire in a pit in the yard, and there was wine.

I had three glasses. I want to be exact about that, because it matters, and because exactness is the only thing I have left that is worth anything. Three glasses of red wine in plastic cups, between about seven o'clock and about ten.

Wes did not drink. Wes never drank. His father had drunk himself to death in a trailer in Belen [buh-LEN] when Wes was fourteen, and Wes had decided, at fourteen, that he would never touch it, and he never did. He was a mechanic. He fixed diesel engines at a truck stop on the interstate, and his hands were always a little black in the cracks no matter how hard he scrubbed, and he was the kindest person I have ever known. I want you to know that about him from the start. Whatever else I tell you, he was kind.

We left at about twenty past ten. It was cold, the way the desert gets cold in December, sudden and deep, and the sky was very clear and full of stars. We walked out to Wes's truck. It was an old white Ford with a bench seat and a heater that took ten minutes to do anything, and the left headlight pointed slightly too high, because he had been meaning to fix it for a month.

He drove. I sat beside him with my hands between my knees to keep them warm.

3.

There is a road that runs north through the valley, between the irrigation ditches and the fields. In the summer it is green and shady. In winter it is bare and black, with the trees standing up on either side like the ribs of something. There are no lights on it. There is no line painted down the middle.

The boy was on a bicycle.

His name was Mateo [mah-TAY-oh]. I did not know that then. I learned it from the newspaper two days later, and I have not been able to unlearn it since. He was twelve years old. He had gone to his aunt's house, half a mile up the road, to bring back tamales for

Christmas, because his aunt made them every year and his mother had to work that night. He had the tamales in a plastic grocery bag hanging from his handlebars. His bicycle had no light on it. He was wearing a dark blue jacket.

I saw him at the very last moment, in the edge of the high left headlight. A shape. Something pale moving, which was the grocery bag, swinging.

Then the sound.

I am a respiratory therapist. I have heard a great many sounds that bodies make. I have never heard anything like that sound, and I hear it most nights, still.

The truck stopped. I remember the stopping, very hard, the way your whole body goes forward and then back. I remember that the radio was still playing, a Christmas song, a woman singing. I remember thinking, very clearly, *turn it off, turn it off*, and not being able to find the knob.

I remember the cold air when the door opened.

And then I remember running, or trying to run, in the dark, towards the ditch at the side of the road, where the bicycle was lying on its side with its back wheel still turning, ticking round and round, and the grocery bag had split and there were tamales all over the frozen ground, still in their corn husks, still warm, steaming a little in the cold.

The boy was in the ditch.

4.

The deputy arrived at eleven minutes to eleven. I know that because it was in the report, which I read, later, many times. The ambulance came four minutes after him. The boy was dead by then. The paramedics said, and the medical investigator said afterwards, that he had died at the scene.

The deputy asked who was driving.

Wes said, “I was.”

The deputy asked me. I was sitting in the passenger seat by then with the door open and my feet on the frozen ground, and a blanket

that somebody had put round my shoulders, and I looked up at the deputy with the blue lights going round on his face, and I said:

“I was the passenger.”

They tested Wes’s breath at the roadside, and then his blood at the hospital. There was nothing in it. Not one drop. He had been driving too fast for that road, they said, in the dark, with a bad headlight, and he had not seen the boy in time. They did not test me. There was no reason to test the passenger.

In New Mexico, when you kill someone with a car by driving carelessly, but you are not drunk, it is a crime called homicide by vehicle, and it is a felony, and you go to prison. Wes did not fight it. He did not want a trial. He told his lawyer he wanted to plead guilty and get it over with, and he did. He was sentenced to six years. He served a little under four.

I did not visit him once.

I am going to say that again, plainly, so that you know I am not hiding it. In the whole time Wes was in prison, I did not visit him once. I wrote to him twice in the first month. Then I stopped.

5.

I qualified in May 2020.

You will remember what May 2020 was. I started work at a big hospital in Albuquerque in the middle of the first wave of the pandemic, in the intensive care unit, where every bed had a person in it who could not breathe. I did not have time to learn the job slowly, the way you are meant to. I learned it all at once, in twelve-hour shifts, in a plastic gown and a mask that left a red groove across my nose that never quite faded.

I put people on ventilators. I turned them over onto their stomachs, with four other people, because their lungs worked better that way. I held up phones so that their families could say goodbye to them through a screen. I watched the numbers on the monitors go down, and down, and stop.

I am telling you this because I want you to understand that I am good at my job. Very good. People in my hospital will tell you so. I am the one they call when a tube has to go in fast and the doctor’s

hands are shaking. I do not shake. I have never shaken, not once, in six years.

And I am telling you this because of what the pandemic gave me, which was a reason.

When I woke up screaming at night, which I started doing in the spring of 2020, and which I have done, on and off, ever since, there was a reason ready. Everybody I worked with had nightmares that year. There were articles about it. There were support groups and helplines and a therapist the hospital paid for, who I saw for a while, and who was very patient with me, and who wrote *pandemic-related trauma* on her notes, because that was what I told her, and because it was partly true.

It was a good hiding place. I want to be honest with you about that. The worst thing that ever happened to the world turned out to be a very good place for me to hide.

6.

I live alone. I want to tell you that plainly, too, because people assume things about a woman of thirty-eight with a good job and a nice flat, and most of what they assume is wrong.

There have been men since Wes. Kind ones, some of them. I told each of them about the accident, usually on the third or fourth date, the way I have told you: Christmas party, dark road, a boy on a bicycle. My boyfriend was driving. I was the passenger. He went to prison.

The last one, a teacher, put his hand over mine on the table and said, “That’s an awful thing to have seen.”

Seen. I remember that word. I have thought about it a great deal. Not long after that, I stopped returning his calls.

I always drive, with everyone. I do not like being a passenger. People think it is because of the accident, which is true, in a way.

7.

I want to tell you about the cross.

In New Mexico, when somebody dies at the side of a road, the family puts up a small cross at the place where it happened. It is an

old custom here, older than cars, from the days when people carried their dead home on their shoulders and set them down to rest along the way, and marked the places where they had rested. The crosses are called *descansos* [des-KAHN-sohs], which means *resting places*. You see them everywhere if you drive in this state. On the highways, on mountain roads, in the middle of nowhere. White wooden crosses, mostly, with plastic flowers wired to them, and sometimes a name, and sometimes a photograph in a frame, faded by the sun.

Mateo has a descanso on that road in the North Valley, at the edge of the ditch.

I have never been to it. But I know it is there, because in the first year I drove past it once, by mistake, taking a short cut, and I saw it out of the corner of my eye: a white cross, and a small blue bicycle made of plastic tied to it, and a woman kneeling in front of it in the dirt, in a grey coat, tying something to it with wire.

It was a Sunday morning. I found out later that she went every Sunday.

I never took that road again. If you look at the way I drive around this city, you will see that I go a very long way round, every time, to avoid one half-mile in the North Valley. The girls at work call it my scenic route. They think I like the view.

8.

Wes got out of prison in the autumn of 2023.

I did not know that at the time. I found out from Facebook, the way you find out everything now. A photograph of him, much thinner, with his hair cut very short, standing in front of a garage in Las Cruces [lahs KROO-sess] with his arm around an older man, and a caption from the older man saying *welcome to the team*. I looked at it for a long time, on my phone, sitting in my car in the hospital car park at four in the morning, after a night shift. Then I blocked him. Then, a minute later, I unblocked him, because I thought that if he noticed he had been blocked, he would know that I had looked.

He never wrote to me. He never called. He never came to the door.

For three years, that was the most frightening thing about him.

9.

I want to describe the nightmare to you, because it is what sent me to Mexico.

It is always the same. I am on the road in the dark. It is very cold. I am counting.

That is all. That is the whole dream. I am standing on the road, in the dark, counting. One. Two. Three. Slowly. The way we count breaths, once every six seconds. Seven. Eight.

Nothing happens in it. Nobody comes. Nothing is shown. I am just counting, very calmly, very carefully, and I know that something terrible is going to happen when I get to a certain number, and I do not know which number it is, and I cannot stop.

I wake up before it comes. I always wake up before it comes. I wake up with my heart going so hard that I can see it moving the sheet, alone in the dark, saying out loud to nobody, the way you talk to a frightened patient: *you're okay, you're home, it's the hospital again, you're okay*.

In the summer of 2026 it got worse. It came every night. Then it started coming in the daytime, when I was awake: at work, at the head of a bed, with a bag in my hands, squeezing air into somebody, counting. I would hear my own voice counting out loud, and it would be the voice from the road, and my hands would go cold.

In August I had to stop in the middle of a procedure and hand the bag to a student and walk out into the corridor and stand against the wall with my eyes shut. It was the first time in six years. Nobody said anything. Nobody needed to. They all looked at me the way I had looked at other people, in 2020, when other people had walked out into the corridor and stood against the wall.

My doctor gave me pills for it, an ordinary kind, the kind half the people I know take for their nerves. They took the edges off the days. They did nothing for the nights.

10.

The message came on the fourteenth of September, at 3:12 in the morning. I was awake, of course. I was sitting on the edge of the bath in the dark, because the bathroom is the only room in my flat without a window onto the street.

It was a text from a number I did not know, with a Mexican code at the front of it.

It was a link, and one line of writing.

it helped me sleep

That was all. No name. No hello. Small letters, no full stop.

I should have deleted it. Anybody sensible would have deleted it. It could have been anything: a scam, a virus, a wrong number. I pressed on the link.

It was a website for a treatment house in a town called Rosarito [roh-sah-REE-toh], on the Pacific coast of Mexico, half an hour south of the border at Tijuana [tee-HWAH-nah]. There was a photograph of a white house on a cliff above the sea, with a terrace and three palm trees and a blue swimming pool that looked painted on. There were photographs of bedrooms with white sheets and wooden ceilings, and a photograph of a woman doctor in a white coat, smiling, with a stethoscope round her neck.

I read every page of it, sitting on the edge of the bath, until the sky outside the little window turned from black to grey.

11.

I am going to tell you what the website said, because it is what I believed, and you need to know what I believed in order to understand what I did.

It said that the house treated addiction. Heroin, mostly, and pills, and the new drug, fentanyl, which was killing more people in my country than cars or guns. But it said that it also treated what it called *trauma*: veterans who came back from wars and could not stop seeing them; people who had been through terrible things and carried them in their bodies.

It said that the treatment was a medicine made from the root of a shrub that grows in the rainforests of west-central Africa, in a country called Gabon [gah-BOHN], where people have used it for hundreds of years. It did not say the name of the medicine. It called it *the medicine*, everywhere, the way people in hospitals say *the procedure* when they do not want to frighten you.

It said that you took it once. One night. That it lasted a long time, a day and a half, and that it was hard, and that you would be watched over by doctors and nurses the whole time, with your heart on a monitor.

And it said that the people in Gabon who had used it for hundreds of years believed that the person who takes it travels to the land of the dead and comes back new. That they come back, the website said, *like a child that has just been born*. That everything they had done wrong in their life was taken off them, like a coat.

There were stories from people who had been. A soldier who had not slept properly for ten years and slept that night, the night after, for eleven hours. A woman who had used heroin for fifteen years and had not wanted it since, not once, not for a second, in four years. A man who said he had met his dead father in the medicine, and they had talked, and he had told his father everything, and his father had forgiven him.

Everything you did wrong taken off you, like a coat.

I read that line perhaps thirty times, on the edge of the bath. I am not a religious person. I have spent my whole working life with machines and numbers and blood gases. I do not believe in the land of the dead.

But I wanted to take my coat off. I wanted that more than I have ever wanted anything.

12.

There was a form on the website. I filled it in on my phone that same morning, in the car, in the hospital car park, before my shift.

It asked for my name, my age, my weight. It asked what I wanted treatment for. I wrote: *Trauma and nightmares after a fatal road accident (2019) and ICU work during COVID-19 (2020–21).*

It asked me to describe the accident. I wrote: *I was the passenger in a vehicle that struck and killed a cyclist.*

It asked about my health. My heart, my liver, my blood pressure. Any medicines I was taking. There was a list of medicines, and next to it, in red letters, it said that some of these were dangerous with the treatment, because they could affect the heart, and that it was *vital for your safety* that you told them everything.

The pills my doctor had given me in August were on the red list.

I am a respiratory therapist. I read that list the way a professional reads it. I understood exactly what it meant: that the medicine they used could slow the heart and disturb its rhythm, and that my pills could do the same thing, and that together the two of them could do it more. I understood the danger better than most of the people who would ever fill in that form.

If I told them about the pills, they would make me stop taking them for weeks before I could come. The nightmares would get worse. Or they might say no altogether.

I wrote: *None.*

I want you to remember that I did that. Later in this book it will matter a great deal, and I do not want you to think that I hid it from you, the way I hid it from them.

13.

They wrote back the next day. It was the doctor in the photograph, the woman with the stethoscope. She signed herself only *la doctora* [lah dohk-TOH-rah], *the doctor*, and that is what I will call her. She was very polite and very careful. She asked me to have a heart test done at home first, an ordinary one, the kind where they stick wires to your chest and print out the line of your heartbeat on a long strip of paper, and send it to her. She asked for blood tests.

I did them at my own hospital, from friends, on a quiet afternoon, and nobody asked why. A heart test is nothing to a person who works in a hospital. I stopped my pills four days before it, so they would not show, and started them again the evening after.

The trace came back normal. The doctor wrote that she was happy to accept me. She gave me a date: Thursday the eighth of October.

She said I should arrive in the morning, and stay three nights, and that the cost was eight thousand five hundred dollars, half in advance.

I paid it from my savings, the money I had been putting away for six years without knowing what for. Now I knew.

14.

I told the hospital it was a retreat. A trauma retreat, for health workers, in Mexico. Three days by the sea. Lots of nurses and doctors from the pandemic, I said. My manager signed the leave form without reading it and said she was glad, and that she had been worried about me since August.

All of that was a lie except the sea.

15.

It is about twelve hours from Albuquerque to San Diego by car, west across the desert: through Gallup, past the red rocks, to Flagstaff, then down off the high country into the heat of Phoenix, across the Colorado River at Yuma, and on through the dunes and the mountains to the sea.

I drove it in one day, on the seventh of October, alone, with the radio off.

You have to cross a lot of nothing to get from New Mexico to the sea. Hours of it. Rock and scrub and sky. I passed eleven descansos on that road. I counted them. Small white crosses at the side of the interstate, with plastic flowers, faded to the colour of old bone. I did not look at any of them directly. I counted them out of the corner of my eye, the way I count breaths.

I stayed the night in a motel near the border, in a town called San Ysidro [san ee-SEE-droh], which is the last piece of the United States before Mexico. It is mostly car parks and outlet shops and money-changing booths and a great deal of concrete. From the window of my room I could see the border itself: a high rust-coloured wall of steel posts, running away over the hills in both directions as far as I could see, with lights on tall poles every hundred yards.

I did not sleep. I sat by the window and watched the lights. I took my pill at ten o'clock, the way I always did, and I put the bottle in the zipped pocket at the bottom of my bag, under my socks.

16.

In the morning I left my car in a long-term car park, and I walked into Mexico.

You can do that at San Ysidro. It is the busiest land crossing in the western world. Tens of thousands of people cross it every day, in cars and on foot, to work, to shop, to see their families, to go to the dentist, which is cheaper on the other side. Walking south is easy. You go through a long covered walkway with metal railings, and a turnstile that only turns one way, and then a Mexican officer looks at your passport for about a second and a half and waves you on, and you are in another country.

It took me eleven minutes from the car park to Mexico. I timed it. I time everything.

On the other side there was noise, and colour, and heat, and men selling chewing gum and phone chargers and plaster statues of the Virgin, and taxis honking, and a smell of frying and of exhaust. There was a white van waiting for me at the place the email had said, with the clinic's name on a piece of card in the windscreen, and a young driver who took my bag and put it in the back and did not ask me anything at all.

We drove south along the coast, on a road above the sea. The ocean was enormous and grey-blue and very calm, and the hills on the left were brown and bare, and there were half-finished concrete houses everywhere, with iron rods sticking up from their roofs, waiting for the next floor to be built.

I sat in the back of the van, in the passenger seat behind the driver, with my hands between my knees.

I want to tell you that I did not notice that. That I did not notice I was a passenger for the first time in nearly seven years, being driven by someone else, towards something I could not see.

I noticed. I noticed for every one of the thirty-one minutes it took.

ANOTHER NIGHT

New York, 1962

In 1962, a young man in New York was nineteen years old and using heroin. His name was Howard Lotsof [LOT-sof].

He was not a scientist. He was a young man in the city who liked to try things. He and his friends were collecting substances the way other people collect records, and somebody had a white powder from a chemical company that nobody had heard of. It came from a root, they said, from Africa. It was supposed to make you see things.

He took it to see things. That was all.

He saw things. As he told it later, it lasted around thirty-two hours. For a long time, lying there, he watched his own life go past, like a film, scene after scene. The scenes were not happy ones, and they were not meant to be. They were the true ones.

That was not the strange part. The strange part was the morning.

When it was over, and he was sitting up again, tired and empty, he noticed that he did not want heroin.

Not *did not want it right now*. He was not sick, the way a man coming off heroin is sick. He was not shaking. He simply looked at the idea of it, and did not want it. He said afterwards that, after that night, heroin looked to him like something pretending to be death. He had been somewhere a lot closer to the real thing. He did not need the imitation any more.

He gave the powder to some of his friends who were also using. Of the friends who tried it, five stopped.

He spent the rest of his life on that one night. He took out patents. He wrote letters to scientists, and the scientists did not answer, and then some of them did. A government research programme looked at it. A trial was approved and never finished. He watched the root become illegal in his own country, in the same list as heroin, and he kept going anyway, and he helped people find it in other countries where it was not.

He died in 2010, of cancer. He was sixty-six.

He is the reason there is a clinic in Rosarito. He is the reason a website could promise Dana Whitlock that her past would be taken off her like a coat.

What he did not say, or did not say loudly, is that the film he watched that night was his own. He did not choose which scenes it showed him. Nobody does.

II. THE WHITE HOUSE

17.

The house was exactly like the photographs, which surprised me. Nothing is ever exactly like the photographs.

It stood by itself at the end of a dirt road, on top of a low cliff above the Pacific, with a wall around it and a metal gate that a man in a cap opened for the van. It was white and square and very clean, with blue shutters and a red-tiled roof, and three palm trees leaning a little to the left, the way the wind had taught them. There was a terrace that looked straight out over the sea, and the swimming pool, which was just as blue as it had looked on my phone, and which, I found out later, nobody ever swam in.

There were six bedrooms. Five of them had someone in them that week. I never learned anyone's name, and nobody used mine.

The clinic knew who I was; they had my passport. But I had decided, on the road through the desert, that for three days I would be nobody in particular. A tired woman from New Mexico with bad dreams. That was all they needed.

The doctor met me in the hall. She was smaller than in her photograph, about fifty, with grey streaks in her hair pulled back tight, and reading glasses on a cord round her neck, and the kind of calm, flat, slightly tired face I know from the best doctors I have worked with. The ones who have seen everything twice. She shook my hand and held it a moment longer than she needed to, and looked at my fingernails, and at the whites of my eyes, and I knew exactly what she was doing, because I do it too. She was examining me already, in the hall, while she said hello.

"You are a respiratory therapist," she said. Her English was very good, with an accent that made it sound careful.

"Yes."

"Good. Then you will understand everything I tell you, and you will not need me to make it softer." She let go of my hand. "That is very rare here. Come."

18.

She did the heart test again, in a small white room at the back of the house that had been a pantry once and was now full of machines. The same test I had done at home: the sticky pads on my chest and wrists and ankles, the wires, the long strip of paper with my heartbeat drawn on it in a thin black line, peak and dip and peak and dip, like a row of small mountains.

I want to explain one thing about that line, because the whole of this book depends on it.

Every heartbeat is an electrical signal. A little wave of electricity starts at the top of the heart and spreads down through it, and the heart muscle squeezes as the wave passes through, and then it has to *reset* itself, electrically, before the next beat can come. It is a bit like a toilet cistern. It empties, and then it has to fill again before you can flush again. On the strip of paper, there is a measurement of how long that resetting takes. Doctors call it the QT [kyoo-TEE]. You do not need to remember the letters. What matters is this: if the resetting takes too long, the next beat can arrive before the heart is ready for it. And when that happens, the heart can stop squeezing properly, and start to quiver instead, very fast, like a bag of worms. A heart that is quivering is not pumping. A person whose heart is quivering has a few minutes.

The medicine the clinic used makes the resetting take longer. So do my pills. So do a great many ordinary things: some antibiotics, some sickness tablets, low salts in the blood, being a woman, being frightened.

I knew all of that. I had known it since my second year of training. I watched the doctor look at the strip, and I watched her eyes stop at one point on it, and stay there, and I knew what she was looking at, before she said anything.

“It is a little long,” she said.

“How long?”

She told me the number. It was on the edge. Not bad enough to stop anything. Not good enough to ignore. A number I would have mentioned, if I had been looking after a patient, to the doctor in charge, and the doctor in charge would have said: *keep an eye on it.*

“Are you taking anything?” she asked. “Anything at all. Something for sleep. For your stomach. Anything. It is important.”

I looked at her. She looked back at me. She had very steady eyes, dark brown, a little bloodshot at the edges, like someone who had worked a lot of nights.

“No,” I said. “I drank a lot of coffee on the drive. And I didn’t sleep.”

She held my eyes a moment longer. Then she nodded, and wrote something on her clipboard, and said she would check my salts in the blood, and give me magnesium and potassium through a drip that afternoon, which helps the heart reset, and test me again.

She did not believe me. I could see she did not believe me. But she had no way to prove I was lying, and I had paid, and I was a professional, and I was standing in front of her, calm and polite, the way I stand at the head of a bed.

The bottle of pills was in the bottom of my bag in my room, under my socks. I had taken the last one in the motel at San Ysidro, at ten o’clock the night before.

19.

My room was at the end of the corridor, on the sea side. A wide bed with white sheets. A wooden ceiling with a fan in it, turning slowly. A small table with a jug of water and a glass, and, beside the bed, on the floor, a plastic bucket. A clean new orange one, the kind you buy at a hardware shop.

There was a monitor on a stand by the head of the bed, switched off, with its leads coiled on top of it like a sleeping snake. There was a chair in the corner, an old leather armchair, worn pale on the arms where hands had held it.

And there was a woman sitting in the chair.

She stood up when I came in. She was older than me, in her fifties perhaps, short and solid, with thick black hair going grey, pinned up, and a plain grey cardigan over a white blouse, and soft shoes that made no sound. She had a round, tired, ordinary face. If you had passed her in a supermarket in Albuquerque you would not have looked twice, and I did not look twice.

“I’m the one who stays with you at night,” she said. Her English was slower than the doctor’s, and easier, with the flat warm vowels of somebody who had lived a long time on the American side. “Tonight and tomorrow night. If you need anything, I’m here. If you need nothing, I’m also here.”

“What’s your name?” I said.

She smiled a little. “Everybody calls me Chela [CHEH-lah].”

That is a nickname in Spanish. It can be short for a lot of names. I did not ask which one.

She showed me where the light switch was, and how the window opened, and the bell by the bed, which rang in the doctor’s room, by the kitchen, and which, she said, I would not need, because she would be in the chair. Then she picked up the orange bucket and turned it round in her hands so I could see it was clean, and put it down again, exactly where it had been.

“You’ll want that,” she said. “Everybody wants that.”

20.

The day before is mostly waiting.

You do not eat after lunch. You drink water. They take blood, and give you the drip, and do the heart test again (the number was a little better, after the magnesium, and the doctor said *good*, but did not smile). In the late afternoon there is something called a test dose: a small amount of the medicine, a single capsule, to see how your body takes it before they give you the real one. They do not want to find out you are allergic halfway through the night.

The capsule was very ordinary. A hard gelatine capsule, the size of the ones you buy for headaches, filled with a pale powder the colour of sand. I took it with water at five o’clock, sitting on the edge of the bed, with the doctor watching and the sitter in the chair.

For about an hour, nothing.

Then a heaviness came into my arms and legs, like the first hour of a bad flu. When I stood up to go to the bathroom, the floor tilted, very gently, to the left, the way the deck of a boat does, and I had to put my hand on the wall. My mouth felt numb at the edges, as if I had been to the dentist. When I closed my eyes there was

something faint at the back of them, a grey shimmer, like a television left on in another room.

That was all. It wore off by about nine o'clock. I lay on the bed and listened to the sea, and to somebody, in one of the other rooms, being sick, over and over, and somebody else talking to them in a low voice in Spanish.

"That was the test," Chela said, from the chair. "Tomorrow night is the real one. Tomorrow it's a lot more."

"How much more?"

She thought about it.

"Tonight was the porch," she said. "Tomorrow is the house."

21.

I did not sleep that night either, and I did not take a pill, because I could not, now. I lay in the dark and counted the turns of the fan in the ceiling. I did not dream. I did not want to.

At some point, very late, I heard Chela get up from the chair and go out, and come back, and sit down again. I heard her breathing. She breathed very slowly and evenly, the way people breathe when they have taught themselves to stay awake all night without suffering. I recognised it. It is the way we breathe on night shifts.

Towards morning, I said into the dark, "Do you do this every night?"

"Most nights," she said.

"For how long?"

"Four years," she said. "Nearly five."

"Why?"

There was a long pause, long enough that I thought she had decided not to answer.

"Because somebody has to stay awake," she said.

22.

The next day was Friday the ninth of October, 2026.

I will not tell you much about the daytime, because nothing happened in it. I walked on the terrace and looked at the sea. A

young man from one of the other rooms, a boy really, from Ohio, with tattoos all down both arms and a grey face, sat at the end of the terrace with his knees up to his chin and his hands shaking, because he had stopped taking fentanyl two days before, so that his body would be clean of it for the treatment, and his body was screaming for it. He did not talk to me. I did not talk to him. Once, when he got up, he lost his balance and grabbed at the railing, and I caught his elbow without thinking, and he looked at me for a second with eyes like a frightened dog's, and said, "Thanks, ma'am," and went inside.

At four o'clock they gave me another drip, and did the heart test a third time. The doctor looked at the strip for a long time.

"I will give you less than I would give someone your weight," she said. "I will give it in two parts, with a gap. If your heart changes, I stop. You understand?"

"Yes."

"If it changes very much, we put you in an ambulance to the hospital in Tijuana, and you will be very sick, and very frightened, and it will be very expensive. You understand?"

"Yes."

"You can still say no."

"I understand," I said. "I don't want to say no."

She looked at me over her reading glasses.

"Nobody does," she said. "That is the problem with this work."

23.

From here, I am going to tell you the rest by the clock.

I am doing it because the clock is the only thing in that room I could trust. There was a clock on the monitor by the bed, small green numbers in the corner of the screen, and Chela wrote the time down in a notebook, every few minutes, all night, with a little note beside it. I have those pages now. Some of what follows is from my own memory, and some of it is from her notebook, and some of it is from the monitor, which kept its own record of every beat of my heart, and which printed it all night, on a long strip of paper.

Where my memory and the notebook disagree, I have trusted the notebook.

20:40.

They put the pads on my chest and wrists and switched on the monitor. The line came up on the screen, green on black, my heart, peak and dip and peak. Sixty-eight beats a minute. A small number in the corner showed the resetting time, the number the doctor did not like.

They put a needle in the back of my left hand and taped it down, with a bag of clear fluid hanging above it, dripping.

The doctor sat on the edge of the bed. Chela sat in the chair. The window was open a few inches and I could hear the sea, very regular, like breathing.

“Lie down,” the doctor said. “Get comfortable. Use the bathroom now, because later you will not be able to walk there alone. After the medicine, you do not stand up without Chela. Not once. If you stand up alone, you will fall, and if you fall you may hit your head, and I am not going to have a respiratory therapist from Albuquerque die on my bathroom floor from a stupid fall. You understand?”

I laughed. It came out strange. “Yes.”

“Lights will be very bright later. Sounds will be very loud. You will feel sick. You will be sick. That is normal. When you are sick, Chela will hold the bucket. You do not need to be polite to her.”

“Okay.”

“And you will see things,” the doctor said. “With your eyes closed, mostly. Like dreams, but you are awake. You may see things from your life. You may see people. People who are dead, sometimes. People always ask me, *is it real?* I do not know. I am a doctor. I only know that people see them.”

She opened a small brown pill bottle and tipped capsules into her palm, and counted them, with her lips moving very slightly, and put some back.

21:00.

I swallowed the first part with a glass of water. Three capsules. Pale powder the colour of sand.

They tasted of nothing, going down. Afterwards, at the back of my tongue, there was a bitterness, very faint at first and then not faint at all, a bitterness like chewing an aspirin, or the inside of a lemon pip, that got into my teeth and stayed there.

I lay back on the pillow. Chela wrote something in her notebook. The doctor went out and closed the door very quietly.

I lay with my eyes open, looking at the fan, waiting.

21:25.

The first thing was the sound.

I had been warned about it. Everybody who has been through this, the doctor had said, talks about the sound. Still, it was not like anything anyone had described.

It began very far away, so faint I thought it was outside: a motorbike on the coast road, a long way off. Then it was not outside. It was in the room. Then it was not in the room. It was in me, behind my eyes, between my ears, in the middle of my head.

It was a buzzing. A high, steady, electrical hum, like standing underneath a power line in the desert, or a fridge in an empty kitchen at night, or a swarm of bees inside a closed tin. It did not go up or down. It just got louder, very slowly, steadily, the way water rises in a bath.

And underneath it, keeping time with it, a sort of ticking. A clicking, fast and even. Like a bicycle wheel turning.

I said, “Do you hear that?”

Chela said, “No, *mija* [MEE-hah]. That’s in you.”

Mija means *my daughter*. People here say it to anyone younger than them. It did not mean anything. I noticed it anyway.

21:40.

My body began to go.

It started in my hands. They got heavy, and then they got far away, as if my arms had grown longer and my hands were at the end of them, a long way down the bed, belonging to someone else. I tried to lift my right hand to look at it and it came up slowly, very slowly, like something lifted out of deep water, and when I moved it from side to side, it left copies of itself in the air behind it, five or six hands, fading, like the trails a sparkler leaves on a dark night.

I put it down again. The copies followed it down, one after another, and caught up with it, and went back inside it.

My mouth was numb. My tongue was a strange thick object I did not recognise.

The light from the lamp on the table had become very bright. Not brighter, exactly. Sharper. As if every line in the room had been drawn with a fine black pen. The edges of the ceiling fan. The grain of the wood. The tiny hairs on the back of Chela's hand where it lay on her notebook.

I closed my eyes because the light hurt.

21:52.

Behind my eyes it was not dark.

It was grey, at first, a soft, moving grey, like static on an old television. Then the grey began to have shapes in it. Not pictures yet. Shapes. Things that moved too fast to see properly. Lines, and grids, and long straight corridors running away from me, made of something like light, or like wire.

And then, quite suddenly, something I recognised.

A kitchen. Somebody's kitchen. Yellow cupboards. A calendar on the wall with a picture of a horse. A window over the sink with a cactus in a pot on the sill.

It was my grandmother's kitchen in Socorro [soh-KOH-roh], in New Mexico, where I spent every summer until I was ten. I had not thought about that kitchen in thirty years. It was perfect. It was more real than this room. I could smell it: green chilli roasting, and the bleach she used on the floor, and her cigarettes.

Then it was gone. Snapped off, like a slide in a slide projector.

Another one. A school playground. A girl with red hair, laughing, holding a skipping rope.

Gone.

A car seat. Brown vinyl, cracked. The back of my father's head.

Gone.

A wave at a beach I do not remember ever visiting.

Gone.

I opened my eyes. The room came back, sharp and too bright, the fan turning. The buzzing went on, louder, steady. Chela was watching me.

"It's starting," she said. "That's the start."

22:00.

The doctor came back and looked at the monitor. She looked at it for a long time. My heart was going slower than it had been. Fifty-four. The little number in the corner, the resetting time, had gone up.

She gave me the second part of the dose. Two more capsules.

"This is the rest," she said. "After this there is no more. Whatever happens now happens."

I swallowed them. The bitterness came up into the back of my throat and I gagged, and Chela had the bucket under my chin before I knew I needed it, and nothing came up, and she took it away again.

"Thank you," I said.

"Don't be polite," she said. "The doctor told you."

22:20.

The sickness came in a wave.

I had been nauseous since the first capsules, a low steady nausea like being on a boat. Now it rose all at once, from my stomach into my chest into my throat, and I turned my head on the pillow to tell Chela, and the moment my head moved, the whole room swung

round me like a fairground ride, sickeningly, ninety degrees and back, and I was sick.

I was sick into the orange bucket, which she was holding, for what felt like a very long time. There was not much to bring up; I had not eaten since lunch the day before. Water and bile and that bitter taste, over and over, until I was just heaving air. My eyes ran. My nose ran. My whole body shook.

She held the bucket with one hand and held the back of my head with the other, very firmly, so it would not move. When I was finished she wiped my mouth with a wet cloth, and wiped my eyes, and took the bucket away and brought it back clean, and put it down exactly where it had been.

“Don’t move your head,” she said. “Moving your head makes it worse. Keep it still, like a glass of water on a tray.”

I kept it still.

I learned, that night, that this is one of the most famous things about this medicine, and one of the least talked about by the people who sell it. It takes away your balance completely. Not a little. Completely. The part of your brain that tells you which way is up stops working properly, and every time your head moves, even a little, the room spins, and the spinning makes you sick. The people who have been through it say: you lie still, and you keep your head still, for hours, because the alternative is the bucket.

So I lay still. I lay on my back with my eyes closed and my head held perfectly still, like a glass of water on a tray, and the buzzing got louder, and louder, and the pictures behind my eyes got faster.

22:41.

They were not slides any more. They were a film.

That is the only word for it. Everybody who has been through it uses that word, I found out later. Like a film, a home movie, run very fast, too fast to follow, a whole life flickering past.

It was my life.

Not in order. Not the important parts, or not only the important parts. Everything. Everything at once, at enormous speed. A birthday cake with five candles. Falling off a horse at a summer

camp. My first day at the community college, the smell of the corridor. The red groove across my nose from the mask. A boyfriend in high school, his car, his hands. My mother crying in a hospital car park. A dog I had forgotten I ever had, a small brown dog, called Pepper, running towards me across a lawn with something in its mouth. The inside of the ambulance bay at four in the morning. Snow on the Sandia Mountains [san-DEE-ah]. Wes laughing.

I stopped on that one. Or it stopped. I don't know which of us stopped it.

Wes laughing, in his truck, with the window down, in the summer, with his arm out of the window and his sunglasses on top of his head, at something I had said. I had forgotten that he laughed like that. With his whole face. With his head back.

Then the film went on, and he was gone.

23:05.

I opened my eyes because I needed to see something real.

The room had changed. It was the same room, the fan, the lamp, the chair, the window. But everything in it was very slightly *moving*. Breathing. The walls went in and out, gently, slowly, as if the house was asleep and breathing in its sleep. The pattern in the wood of the ceiling was flowing, the grain of it running like water in a stream, round and round the knots.

Chela was in the chair. She had her notebook on her knee and she was looking at me, and her face was in shadow except for a line of lamplight along her cheek.

For a second, only a second, her face was not her face. It flickered. It was a different face, younger, the same shape, very thin, crying.

Then it was hers again, tired and ordinary and kind.

"You're doing fine," she said. "Close your eyes. It's easier with your eyes closed."

I closed them.

The buzzing was enormous now. It filled everything. I could not hear the sea any more. I could hear only that one high hum, steady as a machine, and behind it, keeping time, the ticking.

Like a bicycle wheel turning, on its side, in the dark.

23:30.

I want to tell you what I said to Chela at half past eleven. It is in her notebook, in her handwriting, with the time beside it.

I said: “Please don’t let me go to the road.”

She wrote it down. Then she wrote, underneath, in Spanish: *Ya empezó* [yah em-peh-SOH].

It has started.

ANOTHER NIGHT

Mexico, 2017

In November 2017, a former Navy SEAL named Marcus Capone went to a clinic in Mexico. He had been out of the military for some years. He had come home from his deployments, the way many of them do, with a brain that would not slow down. He could not sleep properly. He could not control his temper. He could not remember things. He had tried what the doctors at home gave him, and it had not worked.

His wife had found the clinic. He went because she asked him to, and because there was nothing left to try.

He lay down, and took it, and the night started.

He has talked about that night many times since, in interviews and in front of politicians. He says the memories came very fast. Years of them. His whole life going past in flashes, too quick to hold.

And then, he says, some of them slowed down.

Not the good ones. The ones he had been running from. The worst days of his life, the ones he had spent years not looking at. Those came at walking speed. Then slower. Then so slowly that he had to stand inside each one and look at all of it, from every side, every detail, while it went on and on and did not end.

He says he saw his father, who had died. He says he saw men he had served with, who had died. He says he talked to them.

He came out of it different. That is the part he tells most often, and it is why he started a foundation, and why he has brought hundreds of other veterans to the same clinics, and why, in the end, a group at Stanford University studied thirty special-forces veterans treated in Mexico and wrote it up in one of the most respected medical journals in the world.

But the part that matters here is the slowing down.

The root does not show you everything at the same speed. It is not fair. It is not a film you can fast-forward. When it gets to the thing you have been carrying, it stops, and it makes you stand there.

The one thing you most needed not to see is the thing it plays slowest.

III. THE ROAD

24.

Before I go on, I want to explain what was happening to me, as simply as I can, because it is going to get strange, and I want you to be able to follow it.

For the next six hours I was in two places at once.

My body was in the white house in Rosarito, lying on its back on a bed, with wires on its chest and a needle in its hand, being sick into an orange bucket every time its head moved. That part of me could hear the buzzing and the sea. It could open its eyes and see the fan and the lamp and Chela in the chair. If Chela asked it a question, it could answer.

But the rest of me, most of me, was somewhere else. Behind my closed eyes the film was playing, and I was inside the film. Not watching it. Inside it. The way you are inside a dream. I could smell things there, and feel the cold there, and hear voices there, and they were more real than the room.

People who have been through this all say the same thing. You are awake and dreaming at the same time. You know you are lying in a bed, and you are also somewhere else, completely, and both are true.

That is how it was. Now I will tell you where I went.

00:05.

The film slowed down.

All evening it had been running too fast to follow, a whole life flickering past like the pages of a book flicked with your thumb. Now, quite suddenly, it slowed, the way a train slows coming into a station. The pictures stopped flashing and started to last. Ten seconds. Thirty. A minute.

And I knew where it was slowing down. I knew before I saw anything. I felt it in my stomach, the way you feel a lift start to drop.

It was cold. That was the first thing. A deep, dry, December cold, the cold of the high desert at night. I could feel it on my face.

Then I could smell wood smoke, and posole, and the plastic smell of Christmas lights warming up.

Then I was standing in a yard in the North Valley, beside a fire pit, with a plastic cup of red wine in my hand, and a girl from my class was laughing at something, and the little white lights were strung along the adobe wall, and it was the twenty-first of December, 2019, and I was thirty-one years old.

In the room in Rosarito, my body said out loud, “No.”

Chela wrote it down. *00:05. Dice que no* [DEE-seh keh NOH]. She says no.

00:12.

I want you to understand how real it was.

It was not like remembering. When you remember something, you remember a few pieces of it, and your mind fills in the rest, and it is soft and blurred at the edges, like an old photograph. This was not soft. This was sharper than life. I could see the grain on the wooden table where the drinks were. I could see a chip in the plastic cup in my hand. I could taste the wine, sour and warm. I could hear six conversations at once and understand every one.

I could see Wes, across the yard, by the gate, with a can of lemonade, talking to a man about trucks. He was wearing his brown work jacket with the fleece collar. I had forgotten that jacket. I had forgotten that he had a scar on his chin from a wrench that slipped.

I was in my own body, at the party, looking out of my own eyes.

And I could not stop it. That was the worst thing. I could not stop it, or speed it up, or look away. It was going to play, all of it, at its own speed, whether I wanted it or not.

00:20.

And then I was not in my own body any more.

This is the hardest part to explain, and it is the part that matters most, so I will go slowly.

The people who make this medicine in Africa, and the people who have taken it in clinics, and the scientists who have studied them, all describe something that happens in the middle of the night. The film of your life plays, and then, sometimes, it plays *again*, but not from your own eyes. From somebody else’s. You see your own life

from the inside of a person you hurt. You feel what they felt. A soldier who took it in Mexico said he spoke with his dead father and with the men from his unit who had died. People say it is the most terrible part, and some say it is the part that saves them.

That is what happened to me. I want to tell it plainly.

At twenty past twelve, I was on a bicycle.

00:21.

I was small. My legs were short and my hands on the handlebars were small, in grey woollen gloves with a hole in the left thumb. I was pedalling, hard, because it was cold and I wanted to get home.

I was twelve years old. My name was Mateo.

I knew that the way you know your own name. Not because someone told me. Because I was him.

There was a plastic bag hanging from the handlebars, banging against my knee with every turn of the pedals. It was heavy and warm and it smelled of corn and red chilli and pork, and the steam of it came up through the knot at the top. Tamales. Three dozen. My aunt had wrapped them in a towel inside the bag so they would stay warm, and told me to go straight home and not stop for anything, because my mother was working late at the laundry at the hospital and she wanted to come home to tamales on the table.

I was thinking about that. About her face when she came in.

The road was very dark. I knew it by heart. I had ridden it a thousand times, in daylight. There was the ditch on the right, with the water low and black in it, and the tall bare trees, and the dog at the Archuleta [ar-choo-LEH-tah] place that always barked. There was no light on my bike. It had broken in the summer and nobody had fixed it. I was not worried. Nobody drove fast on this road.

Then there was light behind me.

00:24.

It came up behind me very fast. Too fast for that road. The whole road lit up in front of me, white, and my own shadow jumped out ahead of me on the tarmac, long and thin, a boy on a bicycle, stretching away.

One of the lights was higher than the other. I remember that, as Mateo. I remember thinking, *that one is crooked*.

I looked back over my shoulder.

You do that, on a bicycle, when a car comes up behind you. You look back to see how close it is. I looked back over my left shoulder, into the lights, squinting, and through the windscreen, for one second, lit green from underneath by the lights on the dashboard, I saw the face of the driver.

It was a woman.

She was looking down. Not at the road. Down and to the right, at the radio, with one hand on the wheel and the other reaching for the knob. She had long dark hair tied back and a red scarf. She was laughing at something. Her mouth was open.

I knew that face. It was the face I see in the mirror every morning.

It was mine.

00:25.

I am going to stop here for a moment and speak to you directly, the way I spoke to you at the very beginning of this book.

I told you I was the passenger. I told it to you very carefully and very calmly and in great detail, and I told it the way I have told it to everybody for nearly seven years.

It was not true.

I was driving. Wes was in the passenger seat. I had had three glasses of wine and I was driving his truck, too fast, on a dark road, looking at the radio, laughing, when Mateo looked back over his shoulder and saw my face.

I am sorry I lied to you. I did it the same way I did it to everyone else: without thinking about it. It has been my story for so long that it came out of me first, before the true one, the way your name comes out when someone says hello.

That is the first thing the medicine showed me. It was not the worst.

00:31.

The impact, as Mateo, I will not describe. I will tell you only that it did not hurt at first. There was a very big sound and then a feeling of flying, and then cold water and mud, and the stars very bright above the black branches of the trees, and a weight on my chest, and a strange thing happening with my breathing. I could not get the air in. I was pulling and pulling and it would not come. There was a bubbling sound, in my chest, every time I tried.

I could see the bag of tamales split open on the road, steaming.

I was not frightened yet. I was confused. I was thinking: *Mama's tamales*.

In the room in Rosarito, Chela wrote: *00:31. No puede respirar. Dice que no puede respirar* [noh PWEH-deh res-pee-RAR. DEE-seh keh noh PWEH-deh res-pee-RAR].

She can't breathe. She says she can't breathe.

She stood up and looked at the monitor. My heart was steady, slow, fifty-one. My breathing, on the little clip on my finger, was fine. She sat down again. She knew. She had seen this before, a hundred times. She knew that what could not breathe was not in the room.

00:40.

Then I was Wes.

I was standing at the gate of the party with a can of lemonade, cold in my hand, and I was tired. I had been under trucks since six that morning and my back hurt, and I was watching Dana across the yard, and I loved her. I want you to know that I could feel that, as Wes. It was not a thought. It was a weight, warm and heavy, in the middle of the chest, like a cat asleep on you. I, Dana, had never been loved like that by anybody. Not by my parents. Not by any boyfriend. I had not known, until I was inside him, that anybody had ever felt that about me.

She came across the yard with the wine in her and her cheeks red from the fire and said, "Give me the keys."

I said, "No way."

She said, “Wes. Give me the keys. It’s Christmas. I’ve never driven your truck. I want to drive your stupid truck home.”

I said, “You’ve been drinking.”

She said, “Three glasses. Three glasses in three hours. I’m a medical professional, Wesley. I know my own blood alcohol. Give me the keys.”

And she put her hand in the pocket of my jacket, laughing, and took them out, and held them up and jingled them in front of my face, and ran off towards the truck, and I was tired, and I loved her, and I let her.

That is all. That is how it happened. Nobody forced anyone. A tired man let a laughing woman have his keys at a Christmas party. It happens every night, in every town, all over the world. It could happen to you this weekend.

00:52.

As Wes, I sat in the passenger seat of my own truck, and I watched her drive.

I watched her go too fast. I said, “Slow down, babe, this road’s bad.” She said, “I know this road.” She did not know this road. I watched her reach for the radio. I said, “Leave it, I’ll do it.” She laughed and said, “I want the Christmas station.” She was looking down at the radio when I saw the bicycle in the edge of the crooked headlight, and I shouted her name, and she looked up, and it was too late.

Then the sound.

Then the stopping.

Then, as Wes, I was out of the truck and running to the ditch, and the boy was there in the water and the mud, on his back, looking up at the trees, and he was alive. He was alive. His eyes were open. His chest was going up and down, very fast, in little jerks, and there was a terrible sound coming out of him, a wet, bubbling, sucking sound, every time.

I did not know what to do. I am a mechanic. I know engines. I knelt down in the water and I said to him, “Hey. Hey, buddy. Hey, you’re okay,” and I did not know what else to say.

And I turned round and shouted for Dana. Because Dana would know. Dana was nearly a respiratory therapist. Breathing was her whole job.

01:04.

I am going to tell the next part from my own eyes. The medicine did that too. It took me back into my own body, at the side of the road, at the exact second Wes turned round and shouted my name.

I was standing beside the open door of the truck. On the driver's side.

I could hear the sound the boy was making. I knew what it was. I had heard it in training, on recordings, and later I would hear it in real life many times, in the hospital. It is the sound a person makes when there is blood or fluid in their airway and they are trying to breathe through it. It means: *help me now*. It means: you have a few minutes. If somebody clears the airway, and tips the head back, and breathes for them, sometimes, often, they live.

I knew exactly what to do. I had practised it on plastic dummies a hundred times. I had passed the exam two weeks before, with the highest mark in my class.

I did not go to him.

I stood beside the driver's door, with the keys in the ignition and the Christmas song still playing on the radio, and I thought: *I have been drinking. I was driving. They will test my blood. I will lose everything. Everything. The job. The future. The whole of my life is about to start and it will never start.*

And I said, "Wes. Come here. Come here now."

01:10.

He came. He came because I called him, and because he was used to coming when I called him, and because he was frightened and did not know what to do, and I sounded as if I did.

I said, "You have to say you were driving."

He stared at me. He had mud on his knees, and water, and his hands were shaking.

I said, “You haven’t had a drink. Nothing. They’ll test you and there’ll be nothing. It’ll be an accident. A sober guy, a dark road, a kid with no light. They’ll go easy on you. If it’s me, it’s drunk driving, it’s manslaughter, it’s prison, it’s my licence, it’s everything, Wes, everything, I’ll never work, I’ll never—”

He said, “Dana, the kid—”

I said, “Please.”

I said, “Please. Please. I’ll wait for you. Whatever happens, I’ll wait. I love you. Please.”

I watched myself say it. From inside my own eyes, and then from outside, from above, the way the medicine sometimes lifts you out of yourself and lets you look down. I watched a woman in a red scarf, beside a white truck with its door open, holding a man by the front of his jacket with both hands, crying, begging, saying *please, please*, while twenty feet away in the ditch, in the dark, a boy made that sound, and made that sound, and made that sound.

That was the second thing the medicine showed me. It was my idea. All of it. Wes did not offer. Wes did not choose. I chose, and I asked him to carry it, and he said yes, because he loved me.

01:22.

Now I am going to tell you the third thing.

I have dreamed, on and off, for nearly seven years, that I am standing on a dark road counting. I told you that at the beginning. I told you I did not know what I was counting, or what would happen when I reached the number.

I knew. I had always known. I had just never let myself see it.

After Wes said yes, we moved me. I got out of the driver’s side and he got in. I wiped the steering wheel with the end of my red scarf, the whole way round, and the gear stick, and the radio knob, because I had seen people do that on television and it was the only thing my head could think of. I took my handbag off the floor on his side and put it on the floor on mine. We argued about whether the seat was too far forward for him, because I am shorter than him, and he pushed it back. I told him what to say. I made him say it

back to me. *I was driving. I didn't see him. I didn't see him until it was too late.*

I was counting the whole time. In my head. Out of habit. The way I count breaths. Without meaning to, without even knowing I was doing it, I was counting the seconds, the way we are taught, once every six seconds, ten to a minute, and at the end of every ten, the next number: one minute, two minutes, three.

It took nine minutes.

Nine minutes from the sound to the moment Wes took out his phone and called for an ambulance.

Mateo stopped making the sound at eight.

01:30.

I was in the bed in the white house. I mean my body was. I want to tell you what Chela wrote at half past one, because I have read it many times.

01:30. Habla. Habla mucho [AH-blah. AH-blah MOO-choh]. She is talking. Talking a lot.

And then, underneath, in English, in her small careful handwriting, all the words I said, one after another, as fast as she could write them. I said all of it out loud. The keys. The radio. The scarf. *You have to say you were driving.* The nine minutes. The number eight.

I did not know I was saying it. I was on the road. My body, in the bed, was telling the whole story to the woman in the chair, in a flat, quick voice, like a witness reading out a statement, and the woman in the chair was writing it down.

Her handwriting hardly changes on those pages. I have looked very hard. It stays small and neat and even from the top of the page to the bottom, and on to the next page, and the next. Except for one short line in brackets, which I did not understand until later.

And there is one place where the pen stopped and started again. You can see the little blot of ink where it rested on the paper. It is next to the word *eight*.

01:48.

People who come back from this medicine often say it does not let you look away. That it holds your face, like a parent holding a child's face in both hands, and makes you look.

That is what it did. It held me at the side of the road and made me look at the ditch, from the driver's door, for the whole nine minutes. In real time. Not fast, not slow. Every second of it. I could not close my eyes there, because my eyes there were already open. I could not turn my head, because if I turned my head in the bed I was sick, and if I turned my head on the road, the road turned with me.

So I watched him. I counted with myself, as I had counted then, under my breath. *One. Two. Three.* I watched the dark of the ditch and listened to the sound. I watched myself wiping the steering wheel with my scarf. I counted.

I have worked in intensive care for six years. I have watched a great many people die. I had never, until that night, watched one die while I stood twenty feet away with my hands full of the only thing that could have saved him, and chose to wipe a steering wheel instead.

At eight, the sound stopped.

The road was very quiet. Just the radio, the Christmas song, a woman singing, and the dog at the Archuleta place, barking.

02:10.

Then I was a woman in a laundry.

A hospital laundry, in the basement, very hot, with big steel machines and the smell of steam and bleach. I was folding sheets. I was tired. My feet hurt. I was looking at the clock on the wall, which said ten past eleven, and thinking: *he'll be home by now. He'll have put them in the oven to keep warm. He's a good boy. He does what you tell him.*

My phone rang in the pocket of my apron.

I will not tell you about the phone call, or what came after. Some things in this book are mine to tell and some are not mine. That night was hers. I will only tell you this: that I lived inside her for

what Chela's notebook says was twenty-four minutes, and that in those twenty-four minutes I learned what it is to wait at a hospital for a child who is already dead, and I learned what it is to go home afterwards to a kitchen where a pot of water is still sitting on the stove, cold, with the steamer basket in it, ready for the tamales.

And I learned one more thing.

The film jumped forward. It was a Sunday morning. I was kneeling in the dirt beside the ditch, in a grey coat, tying a small plastic bicycle to a white cross with green garden wire, because the old one had faded in the sun. I heard a car on the road behind me, coming slowly. I looked up.

It was a silver car. It slowed right down as it passed, the way people do when they see a descanso and someone kneeling at it. And then, instead of going on at the same speed, it suddenly sped up, very hard, so the engine roared, as if the driver had seen something terrible. I watched it go.

I knew that car. It was mine. I still drive it. I had driven past that cross exactly once, by mistake, taking a short cut, in the first year.

She had seen me. She had not known who I was. But she had seen the car speed away, and it had stayed with her, the way small strange things stay with you. Why would somebody speed up?

02:34.

I came back into the room for a few seconds. I want to tell you what it was like, because it is important for what happens next.

I opened my eyes. The fan. The lamp. The window, black. The buzzing, still enormous. My mouth was full of the bitter taste and my face was wet. I was very cold.

Chela was standing beside the bed, looking down at me. She was holding her notebook against her chest, in both arms, the way a schoolgirl holds her books.

Her face was in the lamplight. And for a second, the same as before, it flickered. It was a younger face, thinner. And then I saw that it was not flickering at all. It was the same face. It was the face of the woman in the laundry. The face of the woman in the grey coat, kneeling at the cross, looking up at a silver car.

I did not understand it. I want to be honest. I was lying in a bed with a monitor on my chest and a medicine in my blood that was showing me the inside of other people's lives, and I thought: *this is the medicine. The medicine has put her face on Chela, because I am frightened, and Chela is the only face in the room.*

I closed my eyes again.

02:40.

The monitor went off.

It is a sound I know very well. It is a sound I have heard thousands of times at work and run towards thousands of times. A high, fast, repeating tone. *Bip-bip-bip, bip-bip-bip.* It means: look at this patient's heart, now.

I could hear it from very far away, from inside the film, the way you can hear an alarm clock from inside a dream.

I want to tell you what was happening, because I know now, from the printout, exactly what it was.

My heart's resetting time had been getting longer all night. The medicine was doing that. My pills, the ones I had taken every night for two months and lied about on the form, were still in my blood, and they were doing it too. At 2:40 in the morning, the resetting took so long that the next beat came early, before my heart was ready. And then another. And then my heart did what I told you hearts can do. It stopped beating properly and began, in short runs, to quiver. A few seconds of quivering, then a normal beat, then a few seconds more.

It is the thing I had read in red letters on the website. It is the thing that has killed people in clinics like that one. On the monitor it looks like a twisting ribbon, a line that winds round itself like a corkscrew. It has a French name that means *a twisting of the points*. It can stop by itself. Or it can turn into the kind of quivering that does not stop, and then you have a few minutes.

The doctor was asleep, down the hall, in a room by the kitchen. There was a bell by the bed that rang in that room. One press. That was all it needed.

Chela was standing beside the bed.

02:41.

I was on the road, inside the film. And now I was in the ditch.

Not as Mateo. As me. I was lying on my back in the cold water and the mud, looking up at the black branches and the stars, and I could not get the air in. I was pulling and pulling and it would not come. There was a weight on my chest. And from far away, up on the road, I could hear the radio playing a Christmas song, and a woman's voice, crying, saying *please, please*.

I knew what was happening to me. I knew it in the bed and I knew it in the ditch at the same time. I knew it the way I know my job. I thought: *my heart is going. I need someone to press the bell.*

I could not speak. I could not move my hands.

I could hear, in the room, very close to my ear, someone counting.

Softly. In Spanish. Very slowly. In time with nothing. The way you count when you are counting minutes, not seconds.

Uno [OO-noh]. One.

02:42.

Dos [DOHS]. Two.

02:43.

Tres [TRESS]. Three.

02:44.

I want to tell you what I saw in the ditch, while she counted.

A boy came and knelt beside me in the water. A boy of about twelve, in a dark blue jacket and grey woollen gloves with a hole in the left thumb. He was not hurt. He was not angry. He looked at me with a sort of patient, serious curiosity, the way children look at a dead bird.

He did not say anything. He did not touch me. He did not breathe for me, or clear my airway, or tip my head back. He did not do any of the things I had been trained to do and had not done for him.

He just knelt there, in the cold water, and watched me, and counted along with her, under his breath, moving his lips.

Cuatro [KWAH-troh]. Four.

02:45.

Cinco [SEEN-koh]. Five.

02:46.

Seis [SAYSS]. Six.

I want to be honest with you about what I felt. I did not feel frightened. That surprised me, afterwards. I felt something very simple and very clear, like cold water. I felt: *this is fair*.

I did not want to die. I want to be clear about that too. But I lay in the ditch, with the boy beside me, and I could not find one single reason why somebody should press the bell for me, when I had not called for him.

02:47.

Siete [SYEH-teh]. Seven.

02:48.

Ocho [OH-choh]. Eight.

At eight, the boy stood up. He brushed the water off his knees. He looked down at me for a moment longer. Then he turned and walked away up the bank towards the road, where the bicycle was lying on its side with its back wheel still turning, ticking round and round, and I could not see him any more.

02:49.

Nueve [NWEH-beh]. Nine.

And then the bell.

I heard it, from very far away, ringing in a room down the hall. One long press.

02:50.

What happened next I know from the printout, and from the doctor, and from Chela's notebook, not from my own memory, because by then I was not anywhere at all.

The doctor came running, in a T-shirt and bare feet, with her reading glasses on their cord bouncing on her chest. She looked at the monitor for perhaps two seconds. She said something very short in Spanish that Chela did not write down. She opened a drawer by the bed that I had not noticed, and took out a small glass bottle and a syringe, and pushed the whole of it into the needle in the back of my hand. It was magnesium. It is the first thing you give for that twisting rhythm, and very often it is the only thing you need. She held my wrist with two fingers and watched the screen.

The twisting ribbon on the monitor straightened. Not all at once. Over about a minute. The quivering came less often, and then it stopped, and the line went back to peak and dip and peak and dip. Slow. Forty-four. Then forty-eight. Then fifty.

The doctor stayed with her fingers on my wrist for another twenty minutes. She did not say anything. Then she turned and looked at Chela.

Chela's notebook says: *02:50. Llamé a la doctora* [yah-MEH ah lah dohk-TOH-rah]. I called the doctor.

The line above that is *02:40. Alarma* [ah-LAR-mah]. Alarm.

There is nothing written between them.

05:50.

I came back very slowly, the way you come up from the bottom of a deep pool.

The film had stopped. Behind my eyes there was only grey, and then dark, and then the ordinary red-black of eyelids with a lamp on the other side of them. The buzzing had gone down to a hum, far away, like a fridge in another room. My body was a long, heavy, aching thing lying on a wet sheet. My mouth tasted of metal and bitterness and sick.

I opened my eyes.

The window was grey. The sea was grey. Dawn. The fan was still turning.

The doctor was asleep in the leather armchair in the corner, sitting up, with her head on one side and her glasses in her lap.

Chela was standing at the window with her back to me, looking out at the sea, with her arms folded across her grey cardigan.

I knew who she was. I am telling you that plainly, because it would be dishonest to pretend I did not. I knew in the way you know something at the end of a long illness, when you are too tired to argue with it any more. Her face had not been the medicine. It had been her face.

I did not say anything. I could not have said anything. My tongue was a dead thing in my mouth.

I lay and watched her back for a long time, as the room got lighter.

I had come to this house because someone had told me that the medicine would take everything I had done wrong off me, like a coat. That I would come back new.

It had not taken anything off me. It had put everything on.

ANOTHER NIGHT

The morning after

A writer named Kevin Franciotti went to a clinic called La Misión [lah mee-SYOHN], in Baja California [BAH-hah kah-lee-FOR-nyah], not far from the white house. He had his own reasons for going, and he wanted to know what the root would do to him. He wrote about it afterwards, plainly, without making it sound better than it was.

The night, he said, was loud. A buzzing that filled his head. A feeling of being pulled down a tunnel. Then hours of pictures, flashing and bursting, like a fireworks show that would not end. It was strange and long and hard, and he got through it.

It was the next day that frightened him.

The fireworks had stopped. The visions had gone. He was lying in a bed in a quiet room in daylight, and he was still in it. His body was heavy. He could not sleep. He could not get up. His mind, which should have been empty and tired, was not empty. It was turning over everything he had ever done wrong. Every person he had let down. Every lie. Not as pictures now. As plain thoughts, one after another, in full daylight, with nothing to hide behind.

He felt guilt like a weight on his chest. He felt panic. He felt that it would not end.

This is the part the websites leave out. The night is the part people tell stories about, because the night is strange and the stories are good. But the drug does not stop when the night stops. What the body makes from it stays in the blood for a day and more, sometimes for several. The pictures go, but the thinking stays on, and it is slow, and it is grey, and you are wide awake for all of it.

The people who work in these clinics have a name for it. They call it the grey day.

Some of them say the grey day is where the real work is done. That the night shows you, but the day makes you hold it.

Kevin Franciotti held it. He got up, in the end. He went home. He kept writing.

In the white house, the curtains were half open, and it was morning, and the doctor was asleep in Chela’s chair.

IV. THE GREY DAY

25.

Everybody who has been through this medicine talks about the day after. They call it the grey day. I had read the phrase somewhere and thought it sounded gentle, like a cloudy Sunday.

It is not gentle. I will tell you what it is, plainly.

The medicine itself does not last all that long in the body. A few hours. But the liver turns it into a second substance, a close cousin of the first, and the second one lasts much longer. A day. Two days. Sometimes more. It is quieter than the first. It does not show you films. What it does is keep you awake, and keep everything turned up.

So on the grey day you cannot sleep. You lie there with your eyes open, completely exhausted, more tired than you have ever been in your life, and sleep will not come, not for a minute. Every sound is too loud. A door closing at the other end of the house is a gunshot. Somebody's spoon against a cup in the kitchen goes through your head like a nail. The light is too bright. Your balance is still gone, so if you sit up, the room slides. You cannot eat. Your body aches everywhere, as if you have been beaten, and in a way you have.

And your mind is very, very clear. Not happy. Not sad. Clear, like water in a glass. Everything you saw in the night is still there, sitting in front of you, and you cannot stop looking at it, and you cannot pretend you did not see it, because the medicine is still in you, holding your face in both hands.

That is the grey day.

07:30.

The doctor woke up in the armchair, stiff, and looked at the monitor before she looked at me. Fifty-eight beats a minute. The resetting time was still long, but shorter than in the night. She took the strip of paper that had been printing all night from the machine, and stood by the window with it, pulling it through her fingers, metre by metre, reading it the way you read a long letter.

When she got to the place at 2:40 she stopped for a long time.

Then she folded the strip up into a thick square, and held it in her hand, and came and sat on the edge of the bed.

She looked tired. She looked about ten years older than she had the day before.

“Where are they?” she said.

I did not pretend. I did not have it in me. The medicine was still holding my face.

“In my bag,” I said. “Under the socks. At the bottom.”

She went to the bag and found them and read the label and put the bottle on the table beside the bed, very carefully, where I could see it. Then she sat down again.

“You know what those do with my medicine,” she said.

“Yes.”

“You knew when you filled in the form.”

“Yes.”

“You are a professional. You know the red list better than I do.”

“Yes.”

She was quiet for a while. Outside, the sea. Somewhere in the house, a door closed, and it went through my head like a nail.

“Three people,” she said. “Three people have died in this house in eleven years. One was a man who had a bad heart and did not know. One was a man who smoked heroin in the bathroom on the grey day, when his body had forgotten how to take it. One was a woman who lied on her form. Like you.”

I did not say anything.

“I go to their funerals,” she said. “Every one. I go and I sit at the back and I do not speak to anyone. I want you to know that. Last night I very nearly had to go to yours.”

26.

Then she told me the name of the medicine.

I want to tell you exactly how she did it, because it was not how I expected. I expected her to tell me as a punishment, or as a doctor reading out a diagnosis. She told it the way you tell somebody a secret you think they have earned.

She said: “You came all this way and you never asked me what it is. Everybody asks. You never asked once.”

“I didn’t want to know,” I said. “I didn’t want to know what I was taking. I just wanted it to work.”

“That is the most honest thing you have said since you came here,” she said. “So now I will tell you. It is called *ibogaine* [ih-BOH-gah-een]. It comes from a plant called *iboga* [ih-BOH-gah].”

I said it back to her. *Ibogaine.* It sounded like a name from a fairy tale. Like the name of a witch, or a country under a mountain.

“Now,” the doctor said, “you cannot sleep anyway. So I will tell you what you have in your blood. All of it. The good and the bad. And you will lie there and listen, because you cannot go anywhere.”

And she did. She sat on the edge of the bed for an hour, in the grey light, with her reading glasses on and the folded strip of my heartbeat in her pocket, and told me everything.

I will tell it to you the way she told it to me.

27.

Iboga is a shrub. A bush, about as tall as a man, with shiny green leaves and small white and pink flowers, and little orange fruits like olives. It grows wild in the shade of the rainforest of west-central Africa, mostly in a country called Gabon, on the Atlantic coast, right on the equator, and in the countries around it.

The part that matters is the root. If you dig the bush up and scrape the bark off the root, the scrapings are yellowish and bitter, very bitter, so bitter they make your mouth go numb. That bitterness is the medicine. In the bark of the root there are a dozen different natural substances, and the strongest of them is ibogaine.

The people in Gabon have known about it for a very long time. Nobody knows how long. Hundreds of years, at least.

Hunters used to chew a little of the root to stay awake on long hunts, and to go without food and water. A little iboga is like a very strong cup of coffee.

But a lot of iboga is something else.

28.

In Gabon there is a religion called *Bwiti* [BWEE-tee]. It is very old, and it has changed many times, and in the last hundred years it has mixed with Christianity, so that today some Bwiti churches have crosses in them as well as drums. Iboga is at the centre of it.

When a young person is initiated into Bwiti, they eat a great deal of the root bark, much more than any hunter would, over a long night, and sometimes several, in a temple, with music and singing and torches, and with older members of the church sitting around them to watch over them. Then they lie down, and they go a very long way.

The people of Bwiti have a phrase for what happens. It is sometimes translated into English as *breaking open the head*, or *cracking the skull*. The idea is that the root opens your head like a door, and you go out through it, and travel.

They say you travel to the land of the dead. That you meet your ancestors there, the people of your family who died before you, and they talk to you, and teach you, and show you things about your own life. Then you come back. And the people who come back are said to be new, like children just born, with the old things washed off them.

"That is what is on our website," the doctor said. "*Like a child that has just been born.* I did not write that. The man who owns this house wrote it. He likes it because it sells. It is not wrong, exactly. But he leaves out the most important part."

"What's the most important part?"

"The Bwiti do not say that the root takes your wrongs away," she said. "That is how foreigners tell it. Americans. Europeans. People who want to be forgiven for something by Monday. What the Bwiti say, as I understand it, from the ones I have talked to, is that the root makes you *see* what you did. You have to look at all of it. *Then* perhaps you are new. Not before." She took her glasses off and rubbed her eyes. "Nobody wants to pay eight thousand five hundred dollars to look. Everybody wants to pay to be washed."

29.

The rest of the world found the root very late.

In 1901, French chemists took the strongest substance out of the root bark and gave it a name, *ibogaine*. For about thirty years, from the 1930s to the 1960s, it was sold in chemists' shops in France as a tonic, in little tablets, to help tired people and sick people feel stronger. Nobody in France thought of it as a door to anywhere. It was a pick-me-up, like a vitamin.

Then, in 1962, it fell into the hands of a nineteen-year-old in New York City.

His name was Howard Lotsof [LOT-sof]. He was a heroin addict. He was looking, he said later, for a new way to get high, and someone gave him a bitter white powder made from the iboga root, and he took it. He was in it for more than a day. And when he came out of it, he noticed something that nobody had ever noticed before, because nobody who was addicted to heroin had ever taken it.

He did not want heroin any more.

Not a little less. Not at all. The sickness of withdrawal, the shaking and the sweating and the aching that every heroin addict knows and dreads, was not there. And the wanting was not there. He said, years afterwards, that during the night he had come to see heroin as something that copied death, and that he had decided he would rather live.

He gave it to some friends who were also using heroin. Six of them, he said. Five of them stopped.

Howard Lotsof spent the rest of his life trying to make the world take that seriously. It was very hard. In the United States, a few years after his discovery, ibogaine was put on the list of the most strictly forbidden drugs, with heroin and LSD, as something with no medical use at all. It is still on that list today. It is illegal to have it anywhere in my country.

30.

"So how do you have it?" I said. "Here?"

“Here, nobody says it is legal and nobody says it is illegal,” the doctor said. “Mexico does not have a law about it. So we use it. That is why the clinics are all here, along the coast, half an hour from your border. Americans come down, and go back up.”

“And it works? For addiction?”

She thought about it, honestly, the way I think about a patient’s numbers before I say anything to the family.

“For some people, it is a miracle,” she said. “I have seen it. People who used heroin for twenty years walk out of this house and never touch it again. I have letters on my wall from them. For some people, it does nothing. They are back on the street in Tijuana by the weekend. For most people, it is something in the middle. It takes away the sickness of stopping, and it takes away the wanting, for a few weeks, or a few months. A window. A door that opens for a while. What they do with that door is up to them.”

“How does it work?”

“Nobody knows,” she said. “Truly. I tell everybody this. It is not like most medicines, that fit one lock in the brain, like a key. Ibogaine touches a dozen locks at once, all over the brain, a little of this, a little of that. Somewhere in all that touching, it seems to reset something. Like turning a computer off and on again. But which lock does it, nobody knows yet. They are still arguing.”

31.

“And it kills people,” I said.

“Yes,” the doctor said. “It kills people. You know how. Last night you almost found out from the inside.”

She told me the numbers, the real ones, the way they are written in the medical journals. In 2012, a group of doctors went through every death they could find anywhere outside Africa where somebody had died after taking ibogaine. Between 1990 and 2008 they found nineteen. Later reviews have found more. Most of the people had hearts that were already weak, or had other drugs in their bodies at the same time, or were treated in someone’s apartment or a motel room by people with no training and no

monitor. One estimate is that something like one in every three hundred people who take it dies.

“One in three hundred,” I said. “In my hospital we would never—”

“No,” she said. “In your hospital you would never. In your hospital you have rules and lawyers and a defibrillator on every wall. And in your hospital you do not have ibogaine. So the people who want it come here, to me, and to houses much worse than this one, and some of them lie on the form.”

I looked at the pill bottle on the table.

“The heart is the danger,” she said. “Always the heart. You saw why. It makes the reset slower. If the reset is already slow, from another medicine, or a weak heart, or low salts in the blood, then you are standing on the edge of a cliff, and the medicine is a strong wind.”

32.

The last thing she told me surprised me.

“It is changing,” she said. “Slowly. Your country is starting to look.”

In January 2024, a team of doctors from Stanford University, one of the best universities in America, published a study in a very serious medical journal. They had followed thirty American soldiers from the special forces. Hard men. Men who had been blown up, many times, in many wars, and had come home with their brains damaged and their minds full of what they had seen, and could not sleep, and could not stop drinking, and some of them wanted to die.

The soldiers came to a clinic in Mexico, like this one, a few miles down this same coast. They were given ibogaine. And they were given magnesium with it, through a drip, to protect the heart.

“Magnesium,” I said.

“Yes,” she said, and gave me a long look. “The same thing I put into your vein at 2:50 this morning.”

One month afterwards, the soldiers’ worst symptoms had dropped by more than eighty per cent. Their nightmares, their depression, their fear. Their memories and concentration got better. Nobody’s

heart stopped. The doctors who wrote it up said they had never seen anything like it.

And in June 2025, the state of Texas decided to spend fifty million dollars of public money to help run proper scientific trials of ibogaine, so that one day, maybe, it can be a real medicine in America, given in real hospitals, with monitors, and rules, and lawyers, and defibrillators on the wall.

“One day,” the doctor said, “you will be able to have this in Albuquerque, and nobody will have to lie to anybody to get it.” She stood up. “Not this year.”

She went to the door. Then she stopped with her hand on the handle and turned round.

“Last night,” she said. “You talked. All night. You know that?”

“Yes,” I said. “I think I know.”

“I did not hear it,” she said. “I was asleep. I want you to know that. I did not hear a word.” She looked at me for a moment longer. “I am not the one who was awake.”

She went out, and closed the door very softly, and it went through my head like a nail.

33.

Chela came back at two in the afternoon.

She was not on duty. Her shift was the nights. She came in through the door without knocking, in different clothes, a blue dress and a straw bag over her shoulder, like a woman on her way to the market, and she pulled the leather armchair over from the corner, right up close to the bed, and sat in it.

She did not have her notebook.

The light was very bright. It hurt my eyes. I could not move my head. I lay and looked at her sideways, the way I had been looking at everything all day, like a glass of water on a tray.

“I know who you are,” I said.

“I know you know,” she said. “You’ve been looking at me since six o’clock this morning like I’m a ghost.”

“What’s your name?”

“Graciela [grah-see-EH-lah],” she said. “Graciela Ortiz [or-TEES]. *Chela* is short for Graciela. Everybody’s called me that since I was a baby. My son called me Mama. But when he wanted something, he called me Chela, to be funny. *Ay, Chela, por favor* [eye, CHEH-lah, por fah-BOR]. *Oh, Chela, please*.”

I had read her name in the newspaper nearly seven years before. I had read it many times. Graciela Ortiz, 44, mother of the victim, who works at the hospital laundry. I had read it and folded the paper and put it in the bin, and taken the bin out, so that it would not be in the flat.

I had never seen her face. At the sentencing I had sat at the back, in sunglasses, and looked at no one. I had never gone to the funeral. I had seen her once, from a car, out of the corner of my eye, kneeling in the dirt in a grey coat.

34.

I want to tell you what she told me that afternoon. I will tell it plainly, in her order, the way she told it. She had clearly told it to herself many times, and it came out of her smooth and flat, worn down like a step.

After Mateo died, she went to the cross every Sunday for a year and a half. She could not stay in the house. Every room in the house was him. She could not go on folding sheets in the hospital laundry, in the basement, with the clock on the wall that said ten past eleven every night. In the summer of 2021 she gave up the house and moved to Rosarito, to live with her own mother, who was old and needed looking after, in a little concrete house two streets back from the sea.

She got a job in a laundry in Tijuana. Then her mother died. Then she got this job, sitting with patients at night, because the clinic needed someone who could stay awake, and she found she could not sleep anyway.

“Why this?” I said. “Of all the jobs.”

“Because people come here who are dying,” she said. “Slowly. Of drugs. And some of them, in one night, stop dying. I sit in the chair

and I watch them come back. Every night I watch somebody come back." She looked out of the window at the sea. "I wanted to watch it happen to somebody. Since I could not watch it happen to him."

35.

In the spring of 2024 a man came to the clinic for nightmares. A thin man in his thirties with very short hair, who had been in prison and could not sleep since he came out. A mechanic, from New Mexico.

She sat with him, the way she sat with me. He talked in the night, the way I talked. They all talk.

He said *Dana*. He said it many times. He said *the keys*, and *she wanted the Christmas station*, and *I let her, I let her*. And then he said the name of the road in the North Valley, and the name of the boy.

"I had my notebook on my knee," she said. "I was writing down what he said, like always. When he said my son's name, I wrote it down. Then I put the pen in my mouth, so I would not make a sound. I bit it. It broke. There was ink all over my teeth." She showed me with her hand, on her mouth. "I sat there with ink on my teeth until six in the morning, and wrote down everything he said."

"Did you tell him?"

"On the grey day," she said. "Like this. Here. In this chair." She put her hand on the leather arm of it, where it was worn pale. "I told him who I was. He cried for a long time. He said he was sorry. He said he should have refused you. He said he had thought about coming to me, a thousand times, and telling me, but he had promised you, and he was a man who keeps promises, even stupid ones."

"Did he give you my number?"

"No," she said. "He would never. He still would not, I think. He still loves you, a little. He would never give me anything of yours." She almost smiled. "But a man who comes out of prison does not have many friends, and he leaves his phone on the table on the terrace when he goes to the bathroom."

36.

“So it was you,” I said. “The message. *It helped me sleep.*”

“Yes.”

“I thought it was him.”

“I know. That is why I wrote it like that.” She looked at me steadily. “It was true, too. It did help him sleep. He sleeps now. He told me.”

“What did you want?” I said. “When you sent it. What did you want to happen?”

She took a long time to answer. The sea went on outside, in and out, in and out.

“I wanted you to come here,” she said. “I wanted you to lie in that bed and take the medicine and go to the road. Because I knew you would. Everybody goes back to the worst place. I wanted you to have to see it. Him. Not in the newspaper. Him. The way I see him.”

“And then?”

“And then I didn’t know,” she said. “I didn’t know what I would do. I have thought about it for two years, and I didn’t know. I thought maybe I would hit you. Maybe I would spit on you. Maybe I would put a pillow on your face while you were lying there with your head like a glass of water and could not move.” She said it all quite calmly, in the same flat, worn-down voice. “I thought about all of those. Many nights. In that chair, with other people’s children in the bed.”

37.

“And then the alarm went,” I said.

“And then the alarm went.”

“You waited.”

“Yes.”

“You counted.”

“Yes. Nine minutes. I looked at the clock on the monitor and I counted, quietly, out loud. *Uno. Dos.* Like you counted, on the road. You told me, at half past one, how you counted. Every six seconds,

ten to a minute. Nine minutes. And at eight he stopped." Her voice did not change. "So I counted the same. To see."

"To see what?"

She leaned forward in the chair, close to me, so close I could smell her soap, and coffee, and the sea on her clothes. Her eyes were dark and dry and very tired.

"To see if I could," she said. "To see if I was like you."

We looked at each other.

"I am not," she said. "I want you to know that. I was there at nine, with my finger on the bell. I could have gone to ten. Eleven. Twenty. Nobody would ever know. The doctor was asleep. A woman with a bad heart lies on her form, takes the medicine, dies in the night. It happens. It is in the journals. One in three hundred." She sat back. "I rang the bell at nine. You did not ring yours at all."

38.

I asked her what she wanted now.

I asked it the way you ask a patient's family, at the end, what they want done. I did not have any other way of asking it. I was lying flat on my back, unable to move my head, with my heartbeat still printing out on a strip of paper beside me. There was nothing I could give her and nothing I could stop her taking.

"I don't want the police," she said. "That surprises you."

"Yes."

"It doesn't matter what I want. I asked a lawyer, in San Diego, last year. A woman. I paid her two hundred dollars to tell me." She counted on her fingers, the way you count for a child. "If they found out tomorrow that you were driving, drunk, what could they charge you with? Killing my son with a car. Lying to the police. Hiding evidence. And in New Mexico, she told me, each of those crimes has a clock on it. A time limit. If they do not charge you before the clock runs out, they can never charge you. Never. Not for the rest of your life."

"How long?" I said. I knew. I did not want to know.

“Six years for the worst one,” she said. “Five for the others. From the night it happened.” She put her hands back in her lap. “The last one ran out on the twenty-first of December last year. I sat at his cross that morning, in the cold, and watched the sun come up, and said goodbye to the law.”

I closed my eyes. Behind them it was only grey now, the ordinary grey of a tired woman’s eyelids.

“So there is nothing anybody can do to you,” she said. “Not me. Not the police. Not God, I think. I stopped believing in God the night I came home to the pot on the stove.” She stood up and pulled the strap of her straw bag onto her shoulder. “There is only what you do.”

39.

At the door, she turned round, the way the doctor had.

“On Sunday you go home,” she said. “The van takes you to the border at noon. You walk across at the pedestrian gate. The one on the west side, by the outlet shops.”

“Yes.”

“He will be there,” she said. “Wes. On the other side. I told him what day, and what time. He did not want to come. He said he would never come. Then last night, at four in the morning, after the doctor fell asleep in the chair, I sent him a message to say you nearly died, and he wrote back: *I’ll be there.*”

“What does he want?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I didn’t ask. Maybe nothing. Maybe to see your face once. Maybe he wants you to say it. Out loud. Once. To him, on the street, in daylight, with people walking past.” She shrugged. “That’s what I would want. But I am not him. He is a much kinder person than me. He might just want to drive you home.”

She went out.

40.

The grey day went on, and on, the way grey days do.

I could not sleep. I lay and watched the light move across the wooden ceiling, and the fan go round, and listened to every sound in the house as if it were a gunshot: the boy from Ohio being sick down the corridor, and laughing afterwards, a strange high laugh; the doctor's voice on the telephone in Spanish; a car on the coast road; gulls.

Towards evening I tried an experiment. I am a scientist, of a kind. I wanted to know.

I said out loud, in the empty room, to the fan, in my ordinary calm voice, the voice I use at work, the sentence I had said thousands of times.

"I was the passenger."

That is what I meant to say. I opened my mouth to say it, and took the breath for it, and it would not come. My mouth would not make it. My tongue lay in my mouth like a dead thing. I tried three times. On the third time I was sick into the orange bucket instead, and lay back, shaking, with the bitter taste in my teeth.

I tried something else.

"I was driving," I said.

It came out quite easily. Quietly, in the empty room. Three words. As easy as breathing out.

That is the only thing the medicine took from me, in the end. Not the nightmares. Not the guilt. Not my sins, whatever those are. It took away my ability to say the sentence I had lived inside for nearly seven years.

The doctor had told me that for the people who come here to stop heroin, it takes away the wanting. I had wanted nothing more, for nearly seven years, than to be the passenger.

I did not want it any more.

ANOTHER NIGHT

The forest

In the rainforest of west-central Africa there is a shrub that grows to about the height of a man. Its root is yellow under the bark. The people who have lived beside it longest scrape that bark into a powder and eat it.

For most of them it is a small thing. A pinch to stay awake on a long hunt, or through a night of dancing. But once in a life, for some, it is not a small thing at all.

There is a religion built around the root. It is called Bwiti [BWEE-tee], and it is still alive. It is practised today, in villages and in cities, by people with telephones and jobs. It is not a museum. It is not a story about the past. It belongs to the people who keep it, and what is written here is only what they have chosen to tell outsiders.

What they have told is this.

A person comes to the initiation because something is wrong, or because it is time. They are given the powder, spoon after spoon, far more than anyone would take to stay awake. Then they sit, or lie down, and the singing begins, and the harp begins, and it does not stop. People sit with them all night. Someone is always awake beside them.

The initiates say the root *cracks the skull*. They mean that the head is opened, and the person goes out through the opening.

Where they go is the land of the dead. Not a place of punishment. A place of the family. The grandmother who died before you were born is there. The father you buried is there. They walk with you. They show you things. Sometimes they show you a road. Sometimes the road is long, and there are things on it you did not want to see again.

The ceremony lasts for days, not one night. And when the root has worn off, there is one more thing to do. The new initiate tells the

others what they saw. All of it, out loud, to people who are awake. That is part of it. You do not keep the night to yourself. Only after the telling are you counted as one of them.

That is when you are said to be born again. What you did wrong before has been seen, by you and by the dead, and said out loud, and it is taken away.

That is the promise. It is an old one, and it was not made to strangers.

Over the last thirty years, strangers have come anyway. They fly to Gabon [gah-BOHN], or to clinics far from Gabon, and they pay. They take the root, or what a laboratory has pulled out of it, and they lie down in rooms with air conditioning, and somebody sits with them, and somebody writes down the time.

What they are promised, mostly, is the morning. Born again. The past taken off.

They are not always told the other half. That in the forest, the night is not the whole of it. That what you saw on the road, you have to say out loud, to someone who is awake. That nothing is taken off you until you have.

V. THE LINE

41.

I slept, in the end, on the Saturday night. Not much. Three hours, perhaps. It came all at once, at about two in the morning, like falling down a well, and there was nothing at the bottom of it at all. No road. No counting. Just black, and then the gulls, and grey light in the window.

It was the first night in nearly seven years that I did not dream about the road.

I want to be careful how I say that, because I know how it sounds. It sounds like the end of an advertisement. *After just one night, Dana slept like a baby.* It was not like that. I did not dream about the road because I did not need to dream about it any more. I had been there. I knew what was at the end of the counting. A dream is a door you have not opened. I had opened it.

42.

Chela came to my room at nine on Sunday morning, before the van.

She was in the blue dress again, with the straw bag. She did not sit down. She took something out of the bag and held it out to me.

It was a notebook. A cheap school exercise book with a green cardboard cover, the kind you buy in a pharmacy for a few pesos, soft and bent at the corners from being carried. On the front, in pen, she had written the date. *9–10 octubre 2026* [ok-TOO-breh]. The ninth and tenth of October.

“These are your pages,” she said. “I tore them out of my real one and put them in this. The rest of my real one is other people’s. These are yours.”

I took it. It weighed almost nothing.

“You don’t want to keep it?” I said. “It’s—” I did not know what to call it. Evidence. A confession. The only record in the world, in anybody’s hand, of what happened on that road.

“I don’t need it,” she said. “I was there. I heard it.” She hitched the strap of her bag up on her shoulder. “You’re the one who keeps forgetting.”

Then she did something I did not expect. She put out her hand, and touched my cheek, very briefly, with the backs of her fingers. The way you touch a child's face to see if they have a fever.

"You talked all night," she said. "Six hours. You never once said you were sorry. Did you know that?"

I opened my mouth.

"Don't," she said. "Not now. Not to me. I don't want it now. It's too late for me to want it." She took her hand away. "Say it to someone it's not too late for."

And she went.

I never saw her again.

43.

The van left at half past eleven. The same young driver, who still did not ask me anything. I sat in the back, behind him. A passenger.

The boy from Ohio was in the van too, on the seat beside me, going home on the same day. He looked very different. He was still grey and thin and shaky, but his face had changed. It had come back, the way a face comes back after a long fever. He looked out of the window at the sea the whole way, and once he laughed, out loud, at nothing, at a dog on the side of the road chasing a plastic bag.

When we got to the border he shook my hand and said, "Good luck, ma'am."

I said, "You too."

He said, "I don't want it. I don't want it at all. Isn't that crazy? I've wanted it every minute for six years and I don't want it." He was nearly crying. "I don't know how long it'll last."

"Nobody does," I said. "That's what the doctor said. It's a door. What you do with it is up to you."

He nodded, very seriously, as if I had said something wise. Then he picked up his bag and walked away into the crowd, and I never saw him again either, and I think about him more than I expected to. I hope he is alive. I have no way of knowing.

44.

From here I will tell it by the clock again, because the line at the border is like the night in the white house. It is a place where you wait, and cannot leave, and count the minutes.

12:02.

The pedestrian crossing going north, into the United States, is very different from the one going south. Going south, they barely look at you. Going north, you wait.

The line started outside, on the Mexican side, along a concrete walkway with a metal roof over it to keep off the sun, and railings on both sides, so that you shuffled forward in single file like cattle at a market. Hundreds of people. Women with shopping bags. Men in work clothes. Students with backpacks. Families with small children asleep on their shoulders. Old people with walking sticks, coming back from the dentist with new teeth. A man selling bottles of water and churros [CHOO-rohs], fried dough sticks, out of a cooler, walking up and down beside the railing, calling out.

I stood in the line with my bag over my shoulder and the green notebook in my hand.

The sign said: wait time from this point approximately 50 minutes.

12:19.

I read my pages while I waited.

I had not read them yet. I had held the notebook all morning, closed, in my lap, in the van, like something that might go off.

Now I opened it, standing in the line, in the heat, with the man with the churros calling out beside me, and I read what I had said in the night, in Chela's small careful handwriting, line by line, with the times down the side.

I am not going to copy it out for you. You know what it says. I have told you all of it already.

But I will tell you one thing I had not known.

Halfway down the second page, at 01:58, between two things I said about the road, there is a short line in brackets. Chela's

handwriting, but smaller, pressed hard into the paper. It is not something I said. It is something she wrote for herself.

(Wes me dijo que dijo: Chela.) [wes meh DEE-hoh keh DEE-hoh CHEH-lah]

I did not understand it, in the line. My Spanish is hospital Spanish. *Where does it hurt. Breathe in. Breathe out.* I read it three times. I asked the woman in front of me in the line, an old lady with a shopping bag full of medicine boxes, what it meant. I showed her the line.

She read it, and looked at me, and then looked at the line again.

"It says," she said, slowly, in English, "*Wes told me that he said Chela*." She frowned at it. "Who is Chela?"

"The boy's mother," I said.

12:31.

I stood in the line, and did not move, and the line moved without me, and the man behind me said, "*Señora*" [sen-YOR-ah], *ma'am*, politely, and I stepped forward.

I knew what it meant. I had been there. Not as myself. As Wes.

In the night, in the white house, the film had shown me Wes kneeling in the water, in the ditch, saying *hey, hey, buddy, you're okay*, not knowing what else to do. And then it had shown me Wes turning round and shouting for me. And then it had taken me into my own eyes, at the driver's door, and I had stayed there, at the driver's door, for nine minutes.

From the door, in the dark, I had seen only the shape of him in the ditch. I had not seen what Wes did there.

Wes had. Wes had gone back. While I was wiping the steering wheel, he had gone back to the ditch and knelt in the water again and held the boy's hand, because it was the only thing he could think of to do. And at some point, before eight, the boy had said one word.

He had called for his mother. The way he called her when he wanted something.

Chela.

The way you say *please*.

Wes had told her that, on his grey day, in the leather chair. It was the thing he had carried for four years in prison and never told anyone. Not his lawyer. Not me. The boy's last word. And she had written it down in my pages, in brackets, at 01:58, small and hard, at the exact moment in my story when I was standing at the door of the truck.

12:48.

The line went inside a long building with a low ceiling and strong air conditioning and fluorescent lights. There were signs everywhere, in English and Spanish. *Have your documents ready. No photographs. No mobile phones.*

At the far end there were booths. Glass booths, a row of them, each with an officer inside in a dark blue uniform, behind a window, with a computer and a camera. One person at a time stepped up to the window. The officer looked at their passport, and at their face, and asked them something, and they answered, and the officer either waved them on or pointed them to a door at the side.

It reminded me of something, and it took me a long time to understand what. Then I understood. It was the confessional. The little booths in the old church in Old Town that my grandmother took me to when I was small. A window, a person behind it, a question, an answer.

13:06.

My turn.

The officer was a man in his forties with a shaved head and reading glasses pushed up on top of it, the way people wear them who need them for close work and nothing else. He took my passport and scanned it and looked at the screen and then at my face. I must have looked terrible. Grey, thin, with dark rings under my eyes, after three nights without real sleep.

"Purpose of your trip?" he said.

"Medical," I said.

He nodded. He had heard it a thousand times. Half of San Diego goes to Tijuana for its teeth.

“Bringing anything back? Medicines, food, anything to declare?”

I stood at the window.

Anything to declare.

I want you to understand that I knew exactly what he meant. He meant: do you have pills in your bag, or cheese, or more than ten thousand dollars in cash. He meant nothing else. He was a tired man in a glass box asking the same question he asks four hundred times a day.

And I had a green school notebook in my hand with my crime written in it in another woman’s handwriting, and a medicine in my blood that would not let me say *I was the passenger*.

“Yes,” I said.

He looked up.

“Ma’am?”

“Nothing in the bag,” I said. “I’m sorry. I meant no. Nothing in the bag.”

He looked at me for a moment longer, the way the doctor had, the first afternoon. The look of someone who can see that you are not telling him everything and has no way to prove it.

Then he stamped nothing, because they do not stamp anything any more, and handed me back my passport, and said, “Welcome home,” and looked past me at the next person.

13:09.

I walked out of the building into the sun on the American side.

It was very bright and hot. There was a wide concrete plaza, and palm trees, and the outlet shops across the road with their big coloured signs, and a trolley station, and taxis, and people everywhere, meeting, hugging, waving, dragging suitcases.

He was standing by a lamppost at the edge of the plaza, in the shade, with his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

45.

He was thinner than in the photograph. His hair was still cut very short, and there was grey in it now, at the sides, though he was only thirty-nine. He was wearing a plain white T-shirt and work boots. He looked like what he was: a mechanic from New Mexico on his day off.

I had not seen him in the flesh since the day of his sentencing, in a courtroom in Albuquerque, in 2020, when I had sat at the back, in sunglasses, and left before he turned round.

He did not come towards me. He waited. I walked across the plaza to him, through the people, and stopped about six feet away, the way you stand from a patient's family when you are about to tell them something.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey."

He looked at my face for a long time. Then he said, "You look like hell, Dana."

And I laughed. I could not help it. It came up out of me like being sick, a horrible, cracked, helpless laugh, and he smiled, a little, at the corner of his mouth, the way he used to, and for one second we were two people at a Christmas party, and then we were not.

46.

I said it then. On the plaza, at about a quarter past one on a Sunday afternoon, with the trolley bell ringing and a family next to us arguing about which way to the car park. In daylight, with people walking past. The way Chela had said I should.

I am going to put it down exactly, because I have tried, since, to remember every word, and I think this is right.

I said: "I was driving. I had been drinking. I took your keys out of your pocket and I drove your truck and I was looking at the radio and I killed him. And then I made you say it was you. I begged you. It was my idea. All of it. And he was alive, Wes. He was alive for eight minutes, and I knew what to do, and I didn't go to him. I stood at the door and wiped the wheel. And then I let you go to prison for

it. And I never came. Not once. Not one time. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

That last part I had never said to anyone. Chela had been right. Six hours in the night, and I had not said it once.

It is not much of a sentence. *I'm sorry.* I have said it to families a thousand times at work. *I'm so sorry for your loss.* It is the most worn-out sentence in the English language. I said it anyway, because it was the only one I had, and because it was true, and because it was not too late, for him.

Wes listened to all of it without moving.

When I had finished he said: "I know."

That was all. *I know.*

"I was there," he said.

47.

We sat on a low concrete wall at the edge of the plaza, in the shade of the palm trees, with a space between us the width of a person.

He told me some things. Not many. He was never a talker.

He told me that prison had been about what I would imagine, and that he did not want to talk about it, and that the worst part had not been prison. The worst part had been the first year, when he waited for me to come.

He told me that he had gone to the white house in 2024 because he could not sleep, because every night in his cell and every night after he had heard the sound from the ditch. That he had gone because a man he worked with, who used to be on heroin, had gone and come back clean, and told him about it. That he had not wanted to see anything. He had only wanted to sleep.

He told me that on his grey day, in the leather chair, Chela had told him who she was, and he had told her the thing about the ditch, and that she had held his hand, and they had both cried, and then she had gone home, and he had never seen her again either.

"She sends me photographs," he said. "Of the sea. Once a month. No words. Just the sea."

He told me that he had kept the cross.

“After she moved to Mexico,” he said. “Somebody had to. It was falling down. The bicycle was all faded.” He looked at his boots. “I moved back to Albuquerque last year. I go on Sundays. I fixed it up. Put a new bike on it. I go after church. I don’t even go to church. I just say that.”

I asked him why he had come today.

He thought about it for a long time, the way he used to think about an engine before he touched it.

“I wanted to see if you’d say it,” he said. “That’s all. I didn’t know if you would. I thought maybe you’d walk out of there and see me and turn round and go back into Mexico.” He almost smiled. “That’s what you would have done before.”

“Yes,” I said. “It is.”

48.

I asked him what he wanted me to do.

“There’s nothing anybody can do,” I said. “Chela told me. The law’s run out. They can’t charge me now. It ran out last Christmas.”

“I know,” he said. “She told me too.”

“But your record,” I said. “It still says you. For the rest of your life, it says you killed a child with your truck. Every job you go for. Every apartment. Every time a cop runs your licence.”

“Yes.”

“I could make a statement,” I said. “To the police. In writing. Sworn. I could tell them. They can’t charge me, but they’d have it. On the file. It’s not much. It might not change anything. But it would be there.”

He looked at me.

“And your job?” he said.

I did not answer for a moment.

I knew what would happen. A respiratory therapist who drove drunk and killed a child and lied about it to the police and let another man go to prison for her and left a dying boy in a ditch, a

boy she knew how to save, because she was frightened for her future. I knew exactly what would happen to my licence. I would never stand at the head of a bed again. I would never hold the bag again, and count, and keep someone breathing.

The only thing in my life I had ever been really good at.

“It would go,” I said.

He nodded slowly.

“I’m not going to tell you to do it,” he said. “I’m done telling you things, and I’m done doing things because you ask. That’s what got us here.” He stood up off the wall and put his hands back in his pockets. “You do what you do, Dana. I’ll be at the cross on Sunday. Same as always. Ten o’clock.”

He looked at me one more time.

“He wasn’t scared, you know,” he said. “At the end. I want you to know that. He wasn’t scared. He was just asking for his mom.”

Then he walked away across the plaza, through the people, towards a dusty blue pickup truck in the car park on the other side of the road, and got in on the driver’s side, and drove away north, and did not look back.

49.

It is twelve hours from San Diego to Albuquerque.

I drove it through the night, the way I had come, in reverse: up into the mountains and down into the desert, across the river at Yuma, through the heat of Phoenix, up onto the high country at Flagstaff, east along the interstate in the dark, past Gallup and the red rocks.

I passed the eleven descansos again. I counted them again. This time I looked at every one. I slowed down and looked at each of them straight on, in my headlights, the white crosses and the plastic flowers and the names, all eleven, one after another, in the dark.

I did not have the radio on. I did not take my pill. I had thrown the bottle into a bin in the car park at San Ysidro, before I got in the car.

I got to Albuquerque at about half past three in the morning on Monday. I did not go home.

I drove to the North Valley, and I took the road. The one I had driven a long way round for nearly seven years.

50.

The cross was where it had always been, at the edge of the ditch.

Wes had kept it well. The wood was freshly painted white, very bright in my headlights. The little plastic bicycle tied to it was new, a bright blue one, with green garden wire twisted round the crossbar to hold it. There were plastic flowers in a jar, red and white, for Christmas already. And there was a small photograph in a frame, behind plastic, of a boy of twelve with a gap in his front teeth, grinning, in a dark blue jacket.

MATEO ORTIZ, it said, in black letters on the crossbar. And two dates, twelve years apart.

I turned the engine off. I turned the lights off. I got out of the car into the cold.

It was very dark, the way it had been that night. The same trees. The same black ditch, with the water low in it. The same stars. Somewhere a dog barked, at the Archuleta place, I suppose, though it could not be the same dog.

I knelt down in the dirt in front of the cross.

I did not pray. I do not know how. I did not say anything to him. I had nothing to say to him that would mean anything. He was twelve. He was asking for his mother.

What I did was count.

51.

I counted the way we are taught. Once every six seconds. Ten to a minute. And at the end of every minute, its number, out loud, softly, in the dark, on my knees beside the ditch.

One. Two. Three.

It was the counting from the dream. It was the counting from the road. It was the counting I had done at the door of the truck, wiping the wheel, without even knowing I was doing it.

Four. Five.

Only this time I knew what I was counting. I was counting the minutes that boy had been alive in the ditch while I stood twenty feet away. I was counting what I had owed him. I was going to count all of them, out loud, one after another, so that somebody, finally, had sat at the side of this road and counted them on purpose.

Six. Seven.

At eight I stopped.

I knelt there in the cold with my mouth open and the number nine in it, and I could not say it. Not because the medicine would not let me. Because nine was not mine. Nine was the minute after. Nine was the minute Wes took his phone out and called. Nine was the call. After nine, they came and asked who was driving, and I said—

I took my phone out of my coat.

My hands were very cold, and very steady. I have never shaken, at work, in six years. I did not shake now.

I did not call the newspaper, or a lawyer, or my mother, or my manager at the hospital. I called the number for the sheriff's office, the ordinary one, not the emergency one, that I found on the website in the dark with my thumb.

It rang a long time. It was four in the morning on a Monday.

A woman answered. She sounded tired. She sounded like someone on a night shift.

I said, "I'd like to make a statement about a fatal accident. Twenty-first of December, 2019. North Valley. A boy on a bicycle."

She said, "Is this an emergency, ma'am?"

I looked at the cross, at the boy in the frame with the gap in his teeth.

"No," I said. "It was. Not any more."

She said, "Okay. Can I take your name?"

And I gave it to her.

I said it slowly, the way you say a name to somebody who is writing it down. Then I spelled it for her, letter by letter, so that she would

get it right. So that it would be on the file, in the right place, at last, in the driver’s seat, where it belonged.

WHAT IT DID

Ibogaine, from the root bark of *Tabernanthe iboga* [tah-ber-NAN-thee ih-BOH-gah], a shrub of the rainforest of west-central Africa. **Grown.** The root has been eaten in Gabon for longer than anyone has written down; the molecule was first drawn out of it in 1901. **Door:** leaving the body.

How it was taken in this book. Once, by mouth, as capsules of a purified extract, in a private clinic in Mexico, lying on a bed, with a heart monitor attached, a drip of magnesium and potassium, a doctor in the house and a sitter beside her all night. A single test capsule in the late afternoon; then the full dose in two parts, an hour apart, at nine and ten at night.

How long. It began within the hour, with a buzzing. The visions ran from about ten at night until nearly six in the morning. Then the grey day: a day and a night more, awake, unable to sleep, the body heavy and the mind turning. The liver makes a second substance from the first, *noribogaine* [nor-ih-BOH-gah-een], and it stays in the blood for a day or two more. Altogether, about thirty hours before she slept, and days before she felt like herself.

What it did to time. Inside the night, time ran like a film: years in seconds, and then one night on a county road, which went on for most of the night. Outside, a sitter wrote the clock time beside everything she said.

What it did to the body. Nausea and vomiting. She could not walk or stand without falling. Her heart slowed, and the interval in each beat that lets the heart reset itself grew long. At 02:40 her heart fell into a dangerous rhythm, *torsades de pointes* [tor-SAHD duh PWANT], and the monitor's alarm went off. Ten minutes later the doctor pushed magnesium into her vein, and within a minute or so the rhythm came back. She had hidden a medicine that made this more likely.

What it did to the self. She was not one person. She was in two places at once: on a bed in Mexico, and on the road in December

2019. And on the road she was not herself. She was the boy, then the man beside her, then herself at the driver's door, then the boy's mother, and last of all, herself in the ditch.

What it did to the world. First a buzzing, and a ticking like a bicycle wheel. Trails behind moving hands. Then a film of her life, very fast, and then the one night, very slow, seen from every seat in the truck, and from the ditch, and from a hospital laundry across town.

What it meant. She came out of it knowing she could no longer say the sentence she had said for nearly seven years. It did not take anything off her. It put everything on.

What it did not do. It did not let her sleep that night, or the day after. It did not forgive her. It did not tell anyone else what she had seen. She had to do that herself.

On the strength scale made by the chemist Alexander Shulgin: *plus three*, the full effect, impossible to ignore.

THE MAPMAKER

For Howard Lotsof (1943–2010)

and for James W. Fernandez, who listened to the Bwiti

Howard Stephen Lotsof was born on 1 March 1943, in the Bronx, the only child of Abner and Lillian Lotsof.

In 1962 he was nineteen, and addicted to heroin, and looking for a new high. Somebody had a bitter white powder, a chemical drawn from the root of a shrub that grows in Gabon, in Africa. Almost nothing was known about it outside Africa. He took it to see what it would do.

What it did, he said, was give him a long and strange night of visions, and a morning on which he no longer wanted heroin. There was no sickness of withdrawal. The want was simply gone. He gave the powder to six friends who were also addicted. Five of them, he said, stopped.

He spent the rest of his life trying to make the world take that seriously. He was not a doctor or a scientist. He left one university, and years later graduated from New York University, in 1976. He had studied film.

In 1985 he was granted the first of a series of United States patents for using ibogaine to interrupt addiction to narcotics. The last of them was granted in 1992. In the 1980s he persuaded a company in Belgium to make capsules of it for addicts in the Netherlands, and worked with a Dutch psychiatrist, Jan Bastiaans [yahn BAHS-tee-ahns], treating people there. He wrote and co-wrote papers in medical journals. He founded the Dora Weiner Foundation, named for his grandmother, to help people find treatment and to push for research.

He knocked on doors at the drug companies and in government, and in the end, one opened. The National Institute on Drug Abuse studied ibogaine in the 1990s, and the work it paid for filled the journals and led the Food and Drug Administration to approve a

trial in people. The trial was never finished. There were disputes over contracts, and the money ran out. Ibogaine remains illegal in the United States, in the same class as heroin.

He was never short of critics, and some of them were serious people. They pointed out that there were no controlled studies, and that people had died. They were right about both.

Howard Lotsof died on 31 January 2010, at a hospital near his home on Staten Island, of cancer of the liver. He was sixty-six. His wife, Norma, whom he married in 1964, survived him.

Almost every clinic that offers ibogaine today, on either side of any border, exists because of one night when he was nineteen. This book is dedicated to him because he was the first outsider to come back from that night and say, out loud and for the rest of his life, what it had done.

James W. Fernandez

Long before the clinics, the root belonged to the people of the forest, and it still does. The Fang [FAHNG] people of Gabon and their neighbours built a religion around it, Bwiti, which mixes their own old faith in the ancestors with things they took from Christianity, and keeps them both.

Most of what outsiders know about Bwiti comes from one patient man. James W. Fernandez, an American anthropologist born in Chicago in 1930, first worked in Gabon in the late 1950s, and went back in 1960 to live among the Fang, at their chapels and their all-night ceremonies. He did not go to take anything from them. He went to listen. His book, *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa*, published by Princeton University Press in 1982, is still the place almost everyone begins.

He went on to teach at Dartmouth, Princeton and the University of Chicago, where he is professor emeritus. As this book went to press he was living, and this page says only what is in his public record.

The book does not end with him. Bwiti is not a museum. It belongs to the people who keep it, and much of what they know is theirs and is not written here.

The people around them

Jean Dybowski and Édouard Landrin [zhahn dih-BOF-skee, ay-DWAR lahn-DRAN], who in 1901 first drew the active substance out of the root, in France, and named it.

The makers of Lambarène [lahm-bah-REN], a French medicine sold from the 1930s until 1966 as a mild tonic against tiredness, made from a related plant. It was named after Lambaréné [lahm-bah-ray-NAY], a town on the Ogooué [oh-goh-WAY] River in Gabon.

Kenneth Alper and his colleagues, who in 2012 went through every death after ibogaine they could find outside Africa, and counted them.

Eduardo Schenberg and his colleagues in Brazil, who in 2017 asked patients what the night was like and wrote down what they said: difficult, physical, full of memories, and like a rehearsal of danger.

Marcus Capone, who took it in Mexico in 2017, and with his wife, Amber, has helped hundreds of other veterans to do the same.

Nolan Williams and his colleagues at Stanford University, who in 2024 published a study of thirty special-forces veterans treated with ibogaine and magnesium at a clinic in Mexico.

Kevin Franciotti, who went to a clinic in Baja California and wrote down the grey day honestly.

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GLOSSARY

Alarma [ah-LAR-mah] — Spanish, *alarm*.

Albuquerque [AL-buh-kur-kee] — The largest city in New Mexico, on the Rio Grande. Where Dana lives.

Archuleta [ar-choo-LEH-tah] — A family name, old in New Mexico.

Ay, Chela, por favor [eye, CHEH-lah, por fah-BOR] — Spanish, *Oh, Chela, please*.

Baja California [BAH-hah kah-lee-FOR-nyah] — Spanish, *lower California*. The long Mexican peninsula south of the border, where Rosarito is.

Bastiaans, Jan [yahn BAHS-tee-ahns] — The Dutch psychiatrist who treated addicts with ibogaine alongside Howard Lotsof.

Belen [buh-LEN] — Spanish, *Bethlehem*. A town on the Rio Grande south of Albuquerque.

Bwiti [BWEE-tee] — A living religion of Gabon and its neighbours, built around the iboga root and the ancestors.

Chela [CHEH-lah] — A short, loving form of the name Graciela.

Churros [CHOO-rohs] — Spanish. Sticks of fried dough rolled in sugar.

Cinco [SEEN-koh] — Spanish, *five*.

Cuatro [KWAH-troh] — Spanish, *four*.

Descanso [des-KAHN-soh], plural **descansos** [des-KAHN-sohs] — Spanish, *a resting place*. A small cross or shrine by the road where someone died.

Dice que no [DEE-seh keh NOH] — Spanish, *she says no*.

Dos [DOHS] — Spanish, *two*.

Dybowski, Jean [zhahn dih-BOF-skee] — One of the two who first drew ibogaine out of the root, in 1901.

Fang [FAHNG] — A people of Gabon, Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, among whom Bwiti grew.

Gabon [gah-BOHN] — A country on the Atlantic coast of Africa, on the equator. Where iboga grows.

Graciela Ortiz [grah-see-EH-lah or-TEES] — The sitter at the white house.

Habla. Habla mucho [AH-blah. AH-blah MOO-choh] — Spanish, *she's talking. She's talking a lot.*

Halmos, Margit [MAR-git HAL-mosh] — The interpreter in the book before this one.

Iboga [ih-BOH-gah] — The shrub, and its root.

Ibogaine [ih-BOH-gah-een] — The main active substance in the iboga root.

Inês [ee-NESH] — Margit's partner in the booth, in the book before this one.

La doctora [lah dohk-TOH-rah] — Spanish, *the doctor*, a woman.

La Misión [lah mee-SYOHN] — Spanish, *the mission*. A place on the coast of Baja California.

Lambarène [lahm-bah-REN] — The name of an old French tonic made from a related plant.

Lambaréné [lahm-bah-ray-NAY] — A town on the Ogooué River in Gabon.

Ogooué [oh-goh-WAY] — The great river of Gabon, running west to the Atlantic.

Landrin, Édouard [ay-DWAR lahn-DRAN] — One of the two who first drew ibogaine out of the root, in 1901.

Las Cruces [lahs KROO-sess] — Spanish, *the crosses*. A city in the south of New Mexico.

Llamé a la doctora [yah-MEH ah lah dohk-TOH-rah] — Spanish, *I called the doctor*.

Lotsof [LOT-sof] — Howard Lotsof, the mapmaker.

Mateo [mah-TAY-oh] — The boy on the bicycle.

Mija [MEE-hah] — Spanish, short for *mi hija*, *my daughter*. A word of tenderness.

No puede respirar. Dice que no puede respirar [noh PWEH-deh res-pee-RAR. DEE-seh keh noh PWEH-deh res-pee-RAR] — Spanish, *she can't breathe. She says she can't breathe.*

Noribogaine [nor-ih-BOH-gah-een] — The second substance the liver makes from ibogaine. It lasts much longer, and is thought to make the grey day.

Nueve [NWEH-beh] — Spanish, *nine*.

Ocho [OH-choh] — Spanish, *eight*.

Octubre [ok-TOO-breh] — Spanish, *October*.

Porto [POR-too] — A city in the north of Portugal.

Posole [poh-SOH-leh] — A stew of pork and hominy, eaten in New Mexico at Christmas.

QT [kyoo-TEE] — The part of each heartbeat in which the heart resets itself, measured on a heart tracing. If it grows too long, the heart can lose its rhythm.

Rosarito [roh-sah-REE-toh] — A town on the Pacific coast of Mexico, south of Tijuana.

San Ysidro [san ee-SEE-droh] — The part of San Diego at the border, with the busiest crossing in the western world.

Sandia Mountains [san-DEE-ah] — Spanish, *watermelon*. The mountains east of Albuquerque, which turn pink at sunset.

Seis [SAYSS] — Spanish, *six*.

Señora [sen-YOR-ah] — Spanish, *ma'am*.

Siete [SYEH-teh] — Spanish, *seven*.

Socorro [soh-KOH-roh] — Spanish, *help*. A town on the Rio Grande in New Mexico.

Tabernanthe iboga [tah-ber-NAN-thee ih-BOH-gah] — The scientific name of the iboga shrub.

Tijuana [tee-HWAH-nah] — The Mexican city across the border from San Diego.

Torsades de pointes [tor-SAHD duh PWANT] — French, *twisting of the points*. A dangerous fast rhythm of the heart, named for how it looks on a tracing.

Tres [TRESS] — Spanish, *three*.

Uno [OO-noh] — Spanish, *one*.

Wes me dijo que dijo: Chela [wes meh DEE-hoh keh DEE-hoh CHEH-lah] — Spanish, *Wes told me that he said Chela*.

Ya empezó [yah em-peh-SOH] — Spanish, *it has started*.



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