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THE LIGHT IS YOURS TO TAKE

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

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SYNOPSIS

A pianist plays in a flooded warehouse in Los Angeles. Thousands of small glass bulbs stand in the black water on stems, and a hundred strangers a night sit above the surface in the dark. When he plays something the room remembers, a light comes on. He plays short things — a few seconds each, something once hummed at a sink — and each one brings up its handful of lights and lets them go. Nobody who leaves can remember a single bulb. Around the fiftieth minute, the room weeps.

He believes he built the room for his mother. He believes she is sitting in the chair behind him tonight, eighty years old, with a blanket on her knees and a woman’s hand on her shoulder. Tonight is the last night, and for the first time he has chosen the order: her memories newest first, back through the years to the bottom of the house she grew up in, to a courtyard in Tehran and a pool under a green canvas that nobody ever explained.

Two people who have known the producer since school are sitting in the dark on a platform over the water. They do not know what the room is for. They were told only that it was made for someone.

Then his hands drift into a tune the room does not know, and no light answers, and a woman who has not spoken all night begins to hum.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book began in a flooded warehouse in Los Angeles.

In the autumn of 2026 the musician Emmit Fenn staged a piece called *The Light We Leave Behind* — a live concert performed on water, with the audience seated on platforms above the surface among thousands of small lights, phones put away, in a darkness most of us have not sat in since childhood. I am not going to describe it further, because describing it is the one thing nobody who went seems able to do, and that is the point. People came out saying they could not remember a single moment of it and could not stop feeling it.

Water is where memory goes. It takes things in and gives them back upside down and keeps them under the surface where you cannot see them and cannot be sure they are gone. Light is the memory itself: it comes on, it burns, it goes. And sound — a tune, a voice, a few notes hummed at a sink — is the one thing that can reach down through the water and call a light back up when nothing else can. That is not what the piece said. It did not say anything. It is what I heard.

The book is about two kinds of forgetting, and I have tried to tell the truth about both in plain words. One is the slow kind most of us have heard of, which takes a life from the top down and leaves music till last. The other is faster and almost nobody knows its name, and it comes and goes like weather, and it shows people things that are not there, and it takes the hands last — except on a keyboard, where, for reasons the doctors do not fully understand, they can be steady when they are steady nowhere else. Neither of these is passed from parent to child in any ordinary sense — the inherited forms are rare, and a mother’s disease does not hand a son his — and I say so here plainly because this is a subject on which a reader with a parent in a chair by a window deserves not to be frightened by fiction. If there is anything in this book that would help such a reader, it is one sentence, and the research supports it: the feeling outlasts the fact. People who have lost the memory of an

afternoon are still warmed by it an hour later. The weather stays after the sky it came from is gone.

I wanted to ask one more question, and it is the one the pianist asks in the middle of the book: when a player is deep in the playing, gone, with the hands ahead of him and the self switched off and no memory afterwards of what he did — is he there to enjoy it? And if he is not, how different is that country from the one his mother lives in? I do not have an answer. I have a room with the lights off, and a man in it who is entirely present and keeps nothing, and who comes up afterwards and says that something has happened, he thinks, and that it was good.

The lullaby is a *lalaee*, the Persian cradle song, whose real tradition is already dark: mothers in that country have always sung their griefs into songs for children too young to understand them. Mine is invented, and I wrote it so that it could be hummed with no hands. It exists as a recording. The song Laleh sings at the end of the book — piano, a saxophone kept far back, and a voice that is not a singer's — was made alongside the book under its own name, *Don't Come to the Door* — named for what the first four verses say and the last one unsays — and can be heard where the imprint's other recordings live. It is six minutes long and it is built the way the room is: one light at a time, then many, then none. I would listen to it after the book and not before.

For the grief, I owe a debt I want to name. Dan Simmons, in *Hyperion*, gave us a father named Sol and a daughter named Rachel who ages backwards, losing a day every night, so that every morning he must introduce himself to the child he has known all her life. This book is not that story. But the woman in the plain chair who says *I tell you every night* is sitting where Sol sat, and I would not want anyone to think I did not know it.

There is no one real in this book.

Chew Z

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PROLOGUE — THE FRIENDS

They had known Laleh since they were fourteen, and had never once managed to describe her to anyone who had not met her, so they did not try it on the man at the door.

“We’re friends of the producer,” she said, and he smiled as if he had heard that before tonight, and held out the basket.

The basket was the first thing. It was a plain wicker thing, the kind you keep bread in, and it was already half full of telephones face-down in the dark, and the man at the door — not young, with a lamp in his other hand — said what he had evidently said a hundred times already that evening: that nothing in here was to be kept except what you could carry out in your body. Her husband said that was the most pretentious thing he had ever heard. He put his phone in the basket.

The warehouse was on a street off the river where nothing had been a warehouse for twenty years, between a place that sold expensive chairs and a place that had been a gallery and was now nothing. Brick. A loading door sealed and painted black. A small human door cut into it with a line of people in good coats going in and coming out, and the ones coming out not talking, which they both noticed, because the people going in were.

Inside it was dark in a way neither of them had been in since childhood, since a cellar, since the inside of a closed eye.

The man with the lamp took them across in a group of ten. That was how it worked: you held the sleeve of the person in front and you went in single file along a plank walkway a hand’s width above black water, and the lamp went ahead of you, and you did not look down because there was nothing to see down there but the lamp again, upside down. He put them on a low wooden platform, the nearest to the stage, with eight strangers — a long low couch ran round it, so that you half sat and half lay, with your feet toward the water — and told them to take their shoes off and that they would not get wet. Beside the platform, on its own stem out of the water, stood one bulb, unlit, a little larger than the rest. He did not say what it was for.

“The water’s not for you,” he said. “It’s for the light.”

Then he went back for the next ten, and they sat in the dark with their knees up and their shoes beside them and waited, and she took her husband's hand because she could not see it.

The programme — a single folded card, handed out at the door, which she had read under the streetlight and which was now in her coat pocket where she could not read it — had said very little. The name of the thing, which was a phrase she had already forgotten. Four musicians: piano, violin, cello, saxophone. A line in italics: *Every tune is a string of memories. You will not remember them. That is not a failure.* And at the bottom, small, *Produced by L. —*, and the surname, which was Laleh's, and which was why they were here.

Because Laleh had not told them what it was.

She had told them — a year ago, in a kitchen, with wine — that she was making something, and that it was in a warehouse and it was mostly water, and that it would run until it was done and then not run again. She had told them not to come until the end. She had told them, when they pressed, that it was *for someone*, and had looked at her glass in a way that closed the subject, and they had let it close, because that was Laleh, and you did not get further with her by pushing.

So they had bought two tickets to the last night, which had sold out in an hour, and had come.

As their eyes opened to the dark they began to see the room.

Not the walls — there were no walls; the dark went out in every direction and became the idea of walls. What they saw were the stems. Standing up out of the water, everywhere, at every height from a hand's breadth to far over a tall man's head, thin black rods like reeds in a flooded field, and at the top of every rod a small glass bulb, unlit, catching nothing, the size of a walnut. Thousands. Standing in the black water in no pattern that either of them could find, so that the room was a marsh at night and they were sitting in a boat in it.

And in the middle of the marsh, raised a little higher than the platforms, the stage. A piano. Three chairs. Nothing else.

It was so dark and so quiet that she thought, and said afterwards in the car, that it was like being inside a head before anything had happened in it yet. Before the first thought. A brain with the lights off.

Then a door opened at the back, and the old man came out.

He came alone, along a walkway of his own, without a lamp, as if he could do it with his eyes shut, and perhaps he could. Tall, or had been. Very straight in the back. White hair cut short. A dark jacket done up to the collar. He carried, in both hands, a cup — an ordinary cup with a saucer under it — and when he reached the piano he stood beside it for a long moment in the near-dark with his hands wrapped round the cup, not drinking, just holding it, the way you hold your hands out to a fire.

Then he put it down, full, on the floor beside the bench, and sat.

The three young ones came out after him. A woman with a violin, a man with a cello, a man with a saxophone that caught what little light there was and gave it back gold. They took the three chairs without a word and without looking at the audience, and tuned, very softly, a few notes each, and the room did not react to them at all.

Last, a fourth chair was carried out by one of the lamp men and set down beside the piano, a little behind the bench, facing it — facing the old man and not the room — and a woman came along the walkway and sat in it.

They could not see who. The light was behind her and there was almost none of it. A woman in a dark coat, hair pulled back, hands in her lap, sitting on a plain kitchen chair on a stage in the middle of a flooded warehouse and looking at the back of an old pianist's head. She did not look at the audience. She did not move. For as long as they could see her, which was not long once the dark closed in again, she did not take her eyes off him.

"Is that her?" her husband said, into her ear.

"I can't tell."

The old man warmed his hands once more, together, over the keys. The room went completely still.

He played one note.

Far to the left, high up, one bulb came on. Small and gold. And in the water beneath it, a second one, upside down, and between them a column of dark. And a hundred people on eleven platforms breathed in at the same moment, and she heard it, and felt her own chest do it, and had no idea why.

Then he played a phrase. Short. Eight or nine notes, a thing going up and starting to come down, the kind of thing someone might hum at a sink. And as he played it a handful of bulbs woke up across the room — not near each other, not in a line, scattered through the marsh like a few windows in a town at night — and held for the length of it, and when it ended, dimmed, and were gone.

Dark. The water, moving slightly.

Then another.

That was how it began, and she could not have told you afterwards why it was unbearable. He played short things. Fragments. One after another, with dark between them, and sometimes the violin took one up and carried it a little further than he had, and sometimes the cello went under one like a floor, and every fragment brought up its lights and let them go.

They would not understand what they had seen until the last ten minutes, and this is not the place to tell it.

. . . . . .

I. LIGHT

1. THE HANDS

Before every performance I warm my hands on a cup of tea I do not drink.

I want to begin there, with the cup, because it is the truest thing I can tell you about myself and because everything else in this book is going to ask you to trust me, and you should know first what kind of man is asking. I am a man who holds a cup for its heat and then puts it down full. My daughter says it is a waste of good tea. My mother, who taught me to do it, said that a pianist's hands should go to the keys the temperature of another person, and that a cold hand on a cold key is two strangers meeting, and nothing good was ever played by strangers.

So I stand in the dark with a cup, and the room warms up around me.

You should see it before anyone else does. That is the only time it is mine.

It is a warehouse, or it was. Brick on three sides and a loading door on the fourth that has not opened in years and has been sealed and painted black and forgotten. The floor is concrete and the concrete is under water. A hand's depth — I measured it with my own hand the first week and I measure it still, every month, kneeling on the lip of the first platform with my sleeve pushed up, because water finds its own level and so does a man's attention. The water is black because the floor is black and because the room is dark, and when the lights are off it does not look like water at all. It looks like the floor has been taken away and there is nothing under the room but more room.

Out of the water stand the bulbs.

There are two thousand one hundred and forty of them. I know the number as I know my own weight; it is the wrong way to know a room, but it is mine. They are small — the size of a walnut, the old kind, glass with a thread of wire inside that glows when it is asked to. The thread is called a filament. I say so because people ask. Each one stands on a thin black rod set in the floor under the water, like a reed, at every height from a hand's breadth above the surface to far over a tall man's head, so that standing on a platform

you are in among them the way you are in among the stars on a clear night in the mountains, where they come down to the ground and you can walk into them. When they are dark the room is a marsh. When they are lit it is a sky somebody has put down on the wrong side.

In the middle of the water, on a platform of its own, is the piano, and three chairs.

Around it, in a loose ring, are the others: eleven low platforms of dark wood, each a step above the surface, each with a long low couch round its edge where nine or ten people can half sit and half lie, close, with their shoes beside them. Beside each platform, on its own stem, one bulb a little larger than the others, which is never lit. The young ones call them the house lights. I have never used them. I put them there because a room should have a way of letting people out, and then I never let anyone out by them. A hundred strangers a night. They do not get wet. I tell them that at the door, every night, in the same words, and every night one of them asks anyway, and I say it again. You will not get wet. The water is not for you. It is for the light.

Because this is what the room does. When I play something it remembers, a light comes on.

I want to be exact about that, because people assume the bulbs are wired to the keys, and they are not. If they were, any fool could light the room by leaning on the piano. The bulbs are wired to the archive. Under the stage, in a steel box the size of a coffin, is every recording I have — thousands of them, a few seconds each, somebody humming at a sink, somebody humming in a car — and each one is married to a single bulb somewhere out there in the dark. When a tune is played in this room, the box listens. If it knows the tune, if the shape of it matches something it is holding, that fragment's bulb warms, and holds for as long as the music holds it, and dims when the music lets go. If the box does not know the tune, nothing happens. You can play all night and the room will stay dark.

A phrase can match more than one recording — the longer ones often do, because the same shapes were hummed a thousand times

— and then every bulb that matches answers at once, a handful, a dozen. A single note matches only the nearest. And the box answers late, not on the first note — it needs enough of the shape to know it — so the lights come up a breath behind the hands, and hold while the phrase holds, and let go when it does. Play on past where the recordings stop, and it will match none of them.

The room only lights what it recognises. That is the whole art of it. I built it that way on purpose, and I am not going to pretend it was complicated. A memory is a thing that answers when it is called. I built a room that does the same.

And the water takes every light and gives it back upside down, so what you see is doubled, and after a few minutes people stop knowing which way is up and stop minding.

What it does to people is more complicated, and I did not build that. That came on its own, the way weather comes, and I have spent a long time pretending otherwise.

The box hums when it is listening. You would not hear it with the music on. In the dark, before, with the cup in my hands, I hear it, and I hear the three young ones come in behind me and find their chairs by feel — the violin, the cello, the one with the saxophone who always stands a moment longer than the others before he sits — and tune, barely, a few notes each, and the room does not answer them, because the room does not know them yet. It knows only what I give it.

I am happy here. I want to say that plainly, at the start, while it is still simple. I stand in the dark with a full cup and the room breathing around me, and I am a happy man, and I know it, which is rarer than being one.

Then I put the cup down, and I go and open the doors.

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2. DOORS

The first night, I did not know if anyone would come.

I had put a notice in two places and told nine people, and I stood at the loading door — the small one, the human door cut into the big one — at a quarter to eight with a basket in my hands and the sweat going cold on my back, thinking: this is a flooded warehouse off the river with the lights off, and I am a man who has asked strangers to pay to sit in it.

They came.

Not a hundred, that first night. Sixty-one. I counted them in with their phones into the basket — that was the rule from the start, the only rule: your phone goes in the basket and you get it back at the end and nothing in here is to be kept except what you can carry out in your body. A woman in a yellow coat told me that was the most pretentious thing she had ever heard, and I agreed with her, and she put her phone in the basket.

I took them across in the dark in groups of ten, by the light of a single lamp I carried, as you lead people across stepping stones, and I sat them on the platforms and told them not to put their feet in, and that they would not get wet, and I went to the piano and put the lamp out.

Then it was dark the way it is only dark in a room with no windows, which is a darkness people in cities have never actually been in, and I heard sixty-one people breathe differently.

I was alone on the stage that first night; the three came later. I warmed my hands. I had not brought the cup. I rubbed them together instead, as over a fire, and I felt a hundred and twenty eyes find the sound of it and turn toward me, and I put my hands on the keys.

I played one note.

One bulb came on, far to the left, high up, small and gold, and in the water beneath it a second bulb came on, and between them there was a column of dark, and the whole room — I heard it — breathed in.

Then I played the first fragment.

I should explain what I mean by fragment, because the word is going to carry a lot. Everything I play in the room is short. Eight seconds, twelve, twenty. A phrase, not a piece. Something somebody once hummed at a sink. I string them together one after another for ninety minutes, and no two nights in the same order, and each one brings up its own handful of lights and holds them and lets them go, and then there is dark, and then the next. People have told me it is like watching a city at night from a plane, the way the lights come up as you pass over and go behind you. People have told me it is like the moment before you fall asleep, when thoughts come without being asked and go without being kept. I have never told anyone whose voice the fragments are. I tell them, in the tea room, that this one is the Tuesday and that one is the Thursday, and they nod, and nobody has ever asked me: whose Tuesday.

That first night I played for seventy minutes and stopped because my hands were done, and I sat in the dark with the last bulb fading out over the water, and nobody moved.

Nobody moved for a long time.

Then a man at the back — I never saw his face — said, quite loudly, to nobody, “That was my father,” and laughed, surprised at himself, and I heard him wipe his face with his sleeve, and then everyone was moving at once and the sound of sixty-one people putting their shoes on in the dark was the best sound I have ever heard in a room I was responsible for.

The tea room was the office, then. A kettle and a folding table and paper cups. They stood in it and did not leave. The woman in the yellow coat found me and said, “I don’t know what that was,” and I said neither did I, and she said, “No — I mean I don’t know what *that* was,” and put her hand flat on her own chest, over the breastbone, and held it there, and looked at me as if I had done something to her and she had not decided yet whether to be angry about it.

A girl who wrote for a newspaper — a small one, the kind that was still printed then — came back three nights running and then wrote four hundred words that I have kept, in which she said that she had tried eleven times to describe what happened in the room and had

thrown away eleven descriptions and would simply tell her readers to go, and that she was sorry, and that she was not sorry. Her last sentence was: *I came out with the feeling that I had been somewhere with someone I loved, and I went alone.*

On the way out that first night, in the queue for the basket, a man was humming.

I noticed it only because it was one of mine. Not one of the fragments I had played that night — he could not have learned it that fast — but one of the ones I had not. A tune I knew. He had it almost right. Four notes rising and a fifth that fell, under his breath, not knowing he was humming, waiting for his phone to be handed back.

I did not think about it then. I thought: good, it stays in them. I thought: that is what I wanted.

I did not ask myself how he had it.

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3. A HOUSE FULL OF HUMMING

My mother hummed.

I need you to understand this not as a detail but as a climate. There are houses where there is music and there are houses where there is noise and ours was neither; ours was a house where, in any room, at any hour, if you stood still, you would find a thread of tune going somewhere nearby, under a door, from the kitchen, from the courtyard, from the bathroom with the taps running, and it would be my mother, and it would not be a song.

I mean this. She never hummed a song. She hummed pieces — a run, a turn, three notes and a fourth, the shape of something going up and the start of it coming down — and then she would stop, not at the end, there was no end, she would simply stop where her attention went somewhere else, and start another one later that was not the same. You could not learn them. I tried, as a child, the way children try to learn the sounds their mothers make, and I

could not, because there was nothing to learn; it was never the same river twice.

My mother's name was Afsaneh. It means a tale — the kind nobody tells straight. I have thought about that more than she would have liked.

I know now that they were all one piece. She was humming from different places in it — the middle, a turn near the top, a few steps of the way up — never the beginning twice, and never, ever, the end. That is why a child could not learn them. I was being handed a house one brick at a time, in no order, with the roof left off.

My father said she had always done it. My aunts said she had always done it. Nobody said why, and I was a child and did not know that was a question.

The house was in Tehran, in the old north of the city, before the city went up in towers and the north became a different place with the same name. It was one storey with a flat roof we slept on in summer, and the rooms went round three sides of a courtyard, and in the middle of the courtyard was the pool.

Every old house had one. A shallow rectangular pool, waist-deep on a man and over the head of a child, lined with blue tiles, with a tap at one end and a drain at the other and a rim of stone wide enough to sit on. You washed fruit in it. You cooled watermelons in it. In August you put your feet in it and read. The goldfish lived in it the week of the new year and then went to the river.

Ours had a tarpaulin over it.

Green canvas, pegged down at the corners, so that the courtyard had at its heart not a pool but a flat green shape the size of a bed, and when it rained the rain pooled on top of it in a shallow lens and the sparrows drank there. I grew up with it. It was the floor of the courtyard as far as I was concerned. I rode my tricycle round it. I did not ask what was under it any more than you ask what is under the floor.

In the room on the courtyard's north side, under a sheet, there was a piano.

My father bought it when I was six. There had been another, once; it had gone before I was born, and nobody said where. I remember the men bringing it in through the courtyard, four of them, with ropes, walking it round the green canvas like a coffin round a grave, and my mother in the kitchen doorway with a dish towel in her hands, not helping, not speaking, watching it go by with a face I did not have a word for then and have several for now. It went into the north room and the sheet went over it and my father said, to me, not to her, “So. You will learn.”

She would not look at it.

I do not mean she disliked it. I mean that for the first year it was in the house my mother did not once let her eyes rest on it, the way you do not let your eyes rest on the sun. She would come to the door of the north room to call me to eat and she would look at me, at the window, at the rug, and her gaze would go round the piano like water round a stone. If I was playing — badly, at six, at seven, the scales, the little pieces with the animals’ names — she would stand in the doorway and listen with her whole body and look at the rug.

I thought it was a game. I thought, in the way children think, that if I played well enough she would have to look.

So I played.

I was good. I say so because it is a fact and because false modesty is a kind of lie and this book has a rule about those. I was good the way some children are good at a language, without effort and without understanding what effort would have been for, and the teacher my father found — a tall sad man who smelled of cigarettes and lavender and who had, we were told, once played for a king — stopped being sad about me after the second month and began being afraid of me a little, in the way teachers are afraid of the one who is going to go past them.

And my mother hummed in the kitchen while I played in the north room, and it was two musics in one house that never met, hers going nowhere and mine going somewhere, and I did not know that I was listening for one inside the other until the day they touched.

I was eight. I was playing a thing I had been given that week — a small slow piece, a left hand that rocked and a right hand that went up over it, the kind of thing written for children to make them feel they are being trusted with sadness — and from the kitchen, through two doors and the courtyard, my mother's humming came in, and it was the same.

Not similar. The same. The four notes going up. The fifth falling. Her thread and my piece, in the same key, at the same moment, by accident, the way two clocks in a house will sometimes strike together.

I stopped.

She stopped.

And in the silence after, in the whole house, I heard her put a dish down on the counter very carefully, the way you put something down when your hands are not steady, and I heard the kitchen door, and I heard her go out into the courtyard, and I heard her stop at the edge of the green canvas and stand there.

I did not hum, myself. I want that on the record early, because it matters later. I never have. In our house there was her thread going everywhere and my playing going somewhere, and nothing in between; I played, or I was silent. That is how I was made.

I did not go to her. I was eight, and I did not know yet that you are allowed to go to your mother when she is standing at the edge of something. I sat at the piano with my hands in my lap and waited for her to start humming again, and after a while she did, something else, going somewhere else, and I went on with my piece.

That was the first time. I did not know it was the first of anything.

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4. THE RECITAL

At eleven I played in public for the first time, and my mother came.

I want to say that plainly, as a thing that happened, because it was not certain. My father had asked her at dinner, in front of me, in the tone he used for things that were decided — “The hall, Thursday. You’ll come.” — and my mother had gone on eating and said, after a time, “We’ll see,” which in our house was what *no* sounded like when it did not want to be argued with.

Thursday she was in the third row.

The hall belonged to a school and smelled of floor polish and radiators. There were nine of us playing, children of the tall sad teacher, in order of age, so that I went last; and I sat in the wings on a wooden chair with my hands between my knees and listened to the others go through their pieces like people walking across a room in the dark, carefully, touching the furniture, and I was not nervous, and I noticed I was not, and that was the first time I understood that there was something in me that other people did not have, and that it was not a kind thing to have.

When it was my turn I walked out and the hall was dark and the stage was bright and I could not see her.

I found her anyway. You can always find your mother in a dark room. There is a shape your eye knows before it knows anything else, and I found it in the third row, on the aisle, with my father beside her and her hands in her lap, and I sat down and put my hands on the keys and they were warm, because I had been holding them between my knees, and I played.

I played the slow piece. The one with the rocking left hand. I had played harder things by then, much harder — the teacher had wanted me to play one of them, had been annoyed, had said that nobody shows a hall what he can do by showing it what he could do three years ago — but I had held out, without knowing why, and I knew why now, with my hands on the keys and her shape in the dark.

I played the four notes going up. I played the fifth falling.

And I did not look at her, because I was eleven and had enough sense not to, but I felt the third row like a draught, and I kept my eyes on my hands and played the whole small piece through to the

end, slowly, more slowly than I had ever played it, as if I were walking somebody somewhere and did not want to arrive.

The hall clapped the way halls clap for the last child, with relief in it. The teacher came out and shook my hand and said something I did not hear. My father was standing. I looked for her.

She was not in the third row.

She was at the edge of the stage. She had come down the aisle while they were clapping and she was standing at the steps, not on them, with one hand on the rail, looking at the piano. Not at me. At the piano. The way she had never once looked at it in our house.

Then she came up the three steps, and across the stage, with the whole hall watching a small woman in a dark coat do something nobody understood, and she stood beside the bench where I was still sitting, and she put out her hand and laid the back of it against the keys. Not the front. The back of her hand, the knuckles, the way you check a child's forehead for fever — once, lightly, for the length of a breath — and took it away.

Then she bent and kissed the top of my head, and said into my hair, so quietly that I am the only person who has ever heard it, "You finished it."

And went back down the steps and up the aisle and out, and my father found her in the street, and we went home.

I was eleven. I thought she meant the piece.

I thought she was proud of me for getting to the end without a mistake, which I had, and I carried that for a long time — for years — as the night my mother finally looked at the piano and was proud. I built things on it. You build on what you are given.

It was much later, in another country, with her sitting in a chair in a room with a window and not knowing which of her sons I was, that I understood she had not been talking about the piece at all. That *you finished it* was not praise. That it was the thing she had wanted to say to someone for twelve years and could only say, at last, to a child who had just done it, in a school hall, in front of strangers, and had not known what he was doing.

But that is later. Here she is proud, and I am eleven, and the back of her hand is on the keys, and the hall is clapping, and nothing has happened yet that cannot be lived with.

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5. THE ROOM TONIGHT

Tonight she is here.

I want to put that down before I say anything else about tonight, because it is the fact that the whole night is built around and I have been waiting a long time to write it. My mother is in the room. She is on the stage with me, which she has never been, in a plain chair set a little behind the bench and turned to face me, and she is sitting very upright with her hands in her lap and a blanket over her knees and her face turned toward the piano, toward me, in the dark.

She is eighty. The three young ones are in their chairs behind me, tuning in whispers. I have told them nothing about tonight except to follow me, which is what I always tell them, and which they always do.

I know you want to know how much of her is there. Everyone wants to know that first, about a person like my mother, and I understand it and I am not going to answer it yet, because the answer is not a number and because tonight I would like, for an hour, not to count.

I will tell you what I see.

I see a small woman with white hair cut short by somebody who did it kindly, in a dark cardigan buttoned wrong, with a face that has gone smooth in the way very old faces sometimes do, as if the years had been a tide and had finally gone out and left the sand clean. Her eyes are open. They are looking at the piano. I cannot see from here whether they are looking at me.

Beside her, on the wood, is the woman who brought her — who brings her everywhere now, who has the key to the house and the list of the tablets and the number of the doctor, and who put her

hand on my mother's shoulder when she sat her down and has not taken it away. I notice this. I have noticed it for a long time. There is always a hand on my mother now, and it is always hers, and she does not seem to know she is doing it, the way you do not know you are holding a railing until the stairs end.

The woman is looking at me too. She looks at me a great deal. I have told her she does not need to; that I am all right; that the room runs itself once the doors are shut. She nods and goes on looking.

A hundred strangers are getting their shoes off in the dark around us.

I will tell you what I am going to do tonight, because it is different, and because I have been planning it for a long time and the planning is almost over and I am afraid. Tonight I am not going to play the fragments in the order they come to me. I have never chosen the order. I have always let the room choose, let my hands go where they went, and told myself that was honest, and perhaps it was. Tonight I have chosen. I have taken the fragments I know are hers — the ones I know, the ones I could point to — and I am going to play them in the order she lost them. The newest first. Last year's. Then the one before. Back and back, through the years, until I reach the ones from the bottom of the house, from before I was born, from the kitchen with the dish towel and the tarpaulin in the courtyard, and when I reach those I am going to play them for her slowly and watch her face.

I have told nobody this. I am telling you.

The lamp man has come back from the last platform and the lamp goes out, and it is dark, the real dark, and I hear the hundred of them change their breathing. I hear the water. You can always hear the water when the room goes quiet; it is never quite still, there is a slow movement in it from the pumps, and a sound comes off it like a very large animal asleep.

I hear, nearer, my mother's breathing. It is slow and even and has a small catch at the top, the way it has had for a few years now.

I warm my hands on the cup. Full. I put it down.

The pool in the courtyard was covered over before I was born, and I have been doing the arithmetic lately, in the nights, and it has been under that canvas now for seventy-two years. Seventy-two. I say the number and it does not seem possible, and then I look at her hands in her lap and it does.

I put my hands on the keys.

They are the temperature of another person. Hers, I think. Hers, finally.

The first note. The first light, high and to the left, and in the water its twin, and between them the column of dark. The room breathes in.

I begin at the end, and go back.

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INTERLUDE ONE — THE ROOM

A room hears everything and keeps nothing. That is what a room is for.

I have had a year of nights now, three hundred and some. They come across the water in the dark in tens, with a lamp, holding each other's sleeves, and they sit, and they take their shoes off, and for the first few minutes they are a hundred separate people with a hundred separate days still on them — the argument in the car, the message not answered, the thing at work. I can hear it. It has a sound, a hundred people each still inside their own afternoon.

Then the first light, and they become one animal, breathing.

I do not know why. He does not know why. He believes he tells them at the door every night that the water is for the light. That is true, in its way, and it is not why.

Here is a thing he has learned, and told them, in the tea room, in pieces, and that I will tell you whole because I have the time and he does not.

A memory is not kept in one place. It is laid down in layers, the way a riverbed is, the oldest at the bottom. A woman's street, learned at forty, is near the top. Her son's grown face is under it. Her husband's young one is under that. And at the very bottom, in the first layer, where the river first ran, is a tune she learned at nine — before she had anything to be sad about, before she had hands that could do harm — and that is the deepest thing in her, and the last.

The disease that took his mother — he will say its name once, later; I will not, because in here nothing has a name — does not take at random. It takes from the top. It is a tide going out over a riverbed, and the top layer goes first, this morning, this year, and then the next, and the next, so that the woman he believes is sitting in the chair behind him tonight has lost her street and her husband's face and most days her son's name, in that order, and has not lost, and will not lose until the very end, four notes going up and a fifth coming down.

He knows this. He has read everything a man can read. He has put it to use.

What he has not understood, in a year of nights, is what I understood on the first: that the tide does not only take.

Here is the first verse. He has never heard it whole. Neither has she, for a very long time. A hundred strangers have, in pieces, without knowing, on the way out, humming.

Laa-laa, laa-laa — the courtyard is holding its breath for you.
The water is keeping the moon the way a mother keeps a child — still, and blue.
The door is pulled to, and my hands are at the keys where they belong.
Sleep. I am coming. I am coming at the end of the song.

II. WATER

6. THE COUNTER PHONE

The room began on a kitchen counter, with a telephone lying face-up beside a bowl of oranges, recording.

I did not plan it. I want that understood, because people who have seen the room assume it was conceived, that a man sat down one day with a drawing and a purpose, and it was not like that. It was like this: my mother forgot the word for the oranges.

She was standing at the counter in the house in the valley — the small house, the one with the lemon tree that never did anything, the one we moved her to after my father died because the stairs in the old one had begun to look at her — and she had an orange in her hand and she was turning it, the way you turn a thing to find where to start it, and she said, "The — these. What do we call these." And laughed, because it was absurd, because she had been calling them that for seventy years in two languages, and I laughed with her and said the word in both, and she said, "Yes. Of course. Those," and peeled it, and ate it, and hummed.

That was the first one I noticed. There had been others — I understand that now; there are always others, before the one you notice — and I had folded each of them into something I could live with. Tired. Distracted. Her age. A word gone for a second and back, the way a word does for everybody.

But I was standing in the doorway of her kitchen with my phone in my hand, having come to take her to a thing, and she had her back to me and the orange in her hand and she was humming — the way she always hummed, a thread going somewhere and stopping — and I thought, with no idea why I thought it: *that will go too.*

Not the word. The humming.

I thought: one day she will be at this counter and there will be nothing coming from her at all, and I will not be able to remember what it sounded like, and I will have nothing.

So I put the phone face-up on the counter beside the oranges, and pressed the red circle, and left it there.

She did not notice. She never noticed, in all the years it ran. She would be at the counter and the phone would be there with its little

red light and she would hum over it and move it aside to wipe the surface and put it back where it had been without looking, because a phone on a counter is nothing, is furniture, and she had stopped, by then, asking what things were for.

I took it home that first night and listened.

Forty minutes of a kitchen. The tap. A cupboard. A radio in another room, too low to hear. Her feet on the floor, the particular slow shuffle she had developed that year, soft shoes on tile. And in among it, nine times, the humming — a few seconds each, never the same twice, going up and starting to come down and stopping where her attention went somewhere else. I lay on my bed with the phone on my chest and listened to my mother hum nine fragments of nothing in a kitchen I had just left, and I cried the way you cry when you are forty-five and have not yet had any practice.

Then I cut them out. Each one. I did not know what for. I put them in a folder on a computer and named the folder with the date, and the next week I did it again, and the week after, and I did not stop for six years.

I want to describe what that was like, because nobody who has not done it imagines it correctly.

You think it would be sad every time. It was not. Most weeks it was nothing — a chore, like paying a bill — forty minutes of a kitchen, cut into pieces, filed. Some weeks it was funny. She would hum and then say, to the oranges, “Well, that’s not right,” and start again. Some weeks it was unbearable, and the unbearable weeks were not the ones you would guess. They were not the weeks she was worst. They were the weeks she was best — a Tuesday in the second year when she hummed, for eleven seconds, something almost whole, something with a beginning and a middle, and stopped, and said my father’s name, quite clearly, as if he had just come in, and then went on wiping the counter.

I have that one. I know which bulb it is. I could take you to it.

And the fragments changed. That is what I did not expect and what the room is actually about, if it is about anything. In the first year they were long — eight seconds, twelve — and they went somewhere, they had a shape, you could hear a tune trying to

happen in them. By the fourth year they were shorter. Three notes. Two. By the sixth year, in the last months, when her words were nearly all gone and she called me by her brother's name and asked every morning where her mother was, the humming was still there — that was the mercy; that was the thing the doctors had told me would be true and I had not believed — but it had gone down to almost nothing. A single note, held, and a second one under it. The sound a person makes when she is content and has nothing to say about it.

Thousands of them, in the end. I never counted properly. I built the room so I would not have to.

I did not know, standing in her kitchen doorway with a phone in my hand, that I was starting anything. I thought I was keeping something. I understand now that those are not the same, and that the difference between them is the whole of what I have to tell you.

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7. THE FIRST HOUR

So. The night.

I begin with the newest.

I said I would play them in the order she lost them, and the newest are the last ones, the ones from the final months in the kitchen in the valley, and they are almost nothing. A note. A second note under it. I lay my right hand on the keys and I play one note, in the middle of the piano, where a voice would be, and I let it ring, and I do not play another.

And far off in the marsh, one bulb comes up.

I know this one. It is the last recording I ever made, a Thursday, the kitchen very quiet, the tap off, and she sat at the table instead of standing — she had stopped standing much by then — and hummed one note for four seconds and stopped. One note. I have it married to a bulb at the very back of the room, high up, as far from the

stage as the room goes, because it is the last of her and I wanted it where you would have to look for it.

A hundred people look for it. I feel them do it. A hundred heads turn, in the dark, toward one small gold light at the back of a flooded warehouse, and the water under it gives them a second one to look at, and I hold the note until the string stops on its own, and the light goes down with it, slowly, the filament cooling from gold to orange to a dull red thread you can only see if you already know where it is, and then nothing.

The water moves. You can hear it. A hundred people breathe out.

Behind me the violin draws one long bow across one string, so quietly it is less a note than the idea of one, and lets it go. She has understood what I am doing. I did not tell her. She has played with me since the room opened and she has understood from one note that tonight is different, and she has answered it with one note, and then silence. I could weep for how good she is. I do not. I have work.

The second one. Two notes this time, a step apart, the lower one first. Another bulb, nearer, to the right, low over the water, so that its reflection is almost touching it. Hold. Release. Dark.

The third. The fourth. I am going back through the last year of her, one small sound at a time, and the lights come up one by one at the far edges of the room and go down, and I am aware, the way you are aware of weather, of the hundred people around me beginning to understand the shape of what they are in.

Here is what they are in.

They are sitting in the dark, on wood, with their shoes off and their knees up and their shoulders touching strangers' shoulders, above a floor of black water they can hear and cannot see. The air is cool and smells of wet concrete and the slightly electrical smell the box gives off when it is working. There is nothing to look at except what I give them to look at, and I am giving them very little — one light, then nothing, then one light — and so they are looking harder than they have looked at anything in years, and their eyes have opened all the way, and in that darkness a single walnut-sized bulb at the

far end of a warehouse is as large and as bright as a window with somebody they love standing in it.

And each time it goes dark they feel the loss of it. Not as grief; it is too small for grief. As a small turning-over in the chest, the thing you feel when the radio goes to the news in the middle of a song. And then the next one comes, and the chest turns back, and after ten minutes of this their chests have learned to turn with the lights and they could not stop it if they tried.

That is the first hour. I am teaching a hundred bodies to breathe with a stranger's humming — with my mother's. I did not set out to do that. I set out to keep something. But I have watched it happen two thousand times and I know exactly what it is, and I am not going to pretend to you that I do not.

I play the fragments of her last year for twenty minutes. Tiny things. Nothing you would call a tune. Lights at the edges, one at a time, far apart, coming and going like boats.

Then I reach the fifth year, and the fragments get a little longer — three notes, four — and the bulbs that come up are a little nearer and begin, now and then, to come up two at a time, and the violin starts to follow me properly, a half-step behind, carrying each small phrase a breath further than I took it, so that the lights hold a moment longer than they would have on their own.

Behind the violin, the cello wakes. One low note, under everything, like a floor being put down.

And I look up from my hands for the first time in twenty minutes and look at my mother.

She is where I left her. Upright in her chair, blanket on her knees, hands in her lap, face turned to the piano. In the light of the bulbs that are up — four now, scattered — I can see her eyes, and they are open and they are moving, following the lights as they come and go, slowly, the way you follow a bird across a garden. Her mouth is a little open.

The woman beside her has her hand on her shoulder. I note it. I always note it.

And I notice — I am a man who notices rooms; it is what I am for — that the woman is not watching the lights. The whole room is watching the lights. The woman is watching me.

I look back down at my hands and go on into the fourth year.

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8. WHAT THE HANDS KEPT

There was a piano in the care home.

I had not known. I had chosen the place for other reasons — the garden, a nurse who looked at my mother and not at her chart, the fact that it did not smell of what such places smell of — and I had signed the papers in a small office with a box of tissues on the desk, and I had walked her down a corridor to a room with a window, and I had come back the next day and the next, and it was a month before I found the piano, in a lounge at the end of a wing nobody used, under a cloth, with a vase of plastic flowers on it.

She was with me. We were walking, which was what we did, because she could still walk then and because walking gave the afternoons a shape. We came into the lounge and I saw the piano and stopped, and she stopped because I had, and I looked at it and then at her, and I thought: no.

Because here is what I knew. My mother had not touched a piano in fifty years. Not in the house in Tehran after I was eleven and not in any of the houses after, not in the valley, not once; she had stood in doorways while I played and looked at rugs. I had learned, in my twenties, in another country, not to ask, and in my thirties, not to wonder, and I had carried the back of her hand on the keys in a school hall as the whole of what I would ever get. I was not going to put a woman who no longer knew her son’s name in front of a thing she had spent fifty years not looking at. It would be cruel. It would be mine, not hers.

So I said, “Let’s go back, Maman,” and turned.

And she did not turn.

She was looking at the piano. Not round it, the way she had looked round the one in the north room my whole childhood. At it. With her head a little to one side and her mouth a little open, the way she looked at things that year — a bird, a cup, my face — as if everything in the world had just arrived and she had not been told what any of it was for.

She let go of my arm and walked to it.

I let her. I do not know why. Something in how she walked — not the shuffle, for once, something older in her hips, a woman crossing a room toward a thing she wanted — and I stood in the doorway of a lounge in a care home in the valley, the way she had stood in the doorway of the north room, and let my mother go.

She took the cloth off. Folded it, quite neatly, over the back of a chair. Moved the plastic flowers to the windowsill. Lifted the lid. All of this without hesitation, in order, a sequence her body had kept in a drawer for fifty years and simply took out. Then she sat on the bench, and put her feet where feet go, and put her hands in her lap, and looked at the keys for a long moment the way you look at water before you go in.

Then she played.

I am going to tell you what she played and then I am going to tell you what it was like, and I need you to hold the two apart, because I could not, and it has taken me years.

She played a piece. A whole one. Not a fragment — a piece, with a beginning and a development and a shape and an ending, something from the old repertoire, something you would have heard in a conservatory in a city that has kept the name and nothing else, slow, in a minor key, with a left hand that walked and a right hand that sang over it. Four minutes, perhaps. Her hands knew it. They did not search for it; they did not stumble; they went where they had gone sixty years before, as if the intervening life had been an afternoon. She did not look at them. She looked at the wall above the piano, where there was nothing, and her hands did the whole thing by themselves.

That is what she played.

What it was like was this. My mother, who that morning had not known which of her brothers I was, who could not have told you the year or the country or what the thing in her hand was for, sat in a lounge full of plastic flowers and played four minutes of music she had learned as a girl without one wrong note, and when it ended she lifted her hands from the keys and held them in the air a moment, the way you do, and put them in her lap, and turned on the bench, and looked at me in the doorway, and said, pleasantly, as to a stranger who had been kind:

“Did you want the room?”

I said no. I said she should go on.

She said she didn’t think she knew any more, and got up, and put the cloth back over the piano, and the flowers back on the cloth, and took my arm, and we walked.

Here is what the doctors told me afterwards, when I asked, and what I have since read in every book a man can read, and what I will tell you now in plain words because it is the floor this whole room stands on.

A memory is not one thing. There is the kind you can say — your name, the year, what an orange is called — and that kind is kept in the newest part of the brain, the part that came last, and the disease that took my mother — Alzheimer’s; I will say the word once, and then it is just the thing that happened to her — goes there first, because it is the top layer and the tide comes in from the top. And there is the other kind, the kind that lives in the hands. How to walk. How to button a coat. How to fold a cloth and move a vase and lift a lid. How to play, in order, every note of a piece you learned at nineteen. That kind is kept somewhere older and lower and further in, in a part of the brain that was there before we had words at all, and the tide reaches it last. Sometimes never. A woman can lose her son and keep her scales. It is not a miracle and it is not a cruelty. It is just where things are kept.

The hands remember when the head does not.

I built a room on that sentence. I did not know I was doing it, in the doorway of the lounge. I thought I was watching my mother play the piano for the first and last time in my life, which I was. I did not

know I was also watching the only thing in her that the water would not take, and that I would spend the rest of mine trying to build a house for it.

She never went near the piano again. I took her past the lounge every day for the months she had left there, and she never once turned her head.

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9. THE FIFTY-MINUTE MARK

Fifty minutes in, the room weeps. It always has. I will tell you what happens, and then what I think it is.

I will tell you what happens, as exactly as I can, because it is the thing people come for, and I have had two thousand nights to watch it.

By fifty minutes I have come back through the years to the third one — the one where the fragments were still long enough to nearly go somewhere — and the room has changed. The lights no longer come one at a time at the edges. They come in handfuls now, nearer the stage, five and six and nine together, scattered through the stems like the first windows going on in a town at dusk, and they hold longer because the fragments are longer and because the violin and the cello are carrying each one onward after my hands have let it go. The marsh has become a town. There is, just, more light than dark in it now, and the water underneath is full of a second town, upside down, trembling.

The air has warmed. A hundred bodies and two thousand filaments will do that. The smell of wet concrete has gone under something else — wool, skin, the breath of people who have not spoken for fifty minutes.

And the saxophone has not played a note.

He never does, before this. I did not tell him so; he found it himself, the first month, standing in the dark with his instrument across his knees for fifty minutes a night, and I asked him once why he waited

and he said, “Because that’s when it starts talking,” and I did not ask him what he meant and he did not say.

At fifty minutes I reach a fragment from the third year — a Thursday, the tap running, eleven seconds of my mother humming something that very nearly becomes a song, going up in four steps and turning at the top and starting down — and I play it, and nine bulbs come up together in the middle of the room, close enough to the stage that their light reaches her chair and I can see her face.

And the saxophone stands.

He does not play it as a saxophone. I do not know how else to say this. He has found a way of playing with the reed barely touching and the breath going mostly round the instrument instead of through it, so that what comes out is not that bright brass sound you know but something closed and private and a little rough, the sound of a woman humming with her mouth shut in a kitchen two rooms away. He takes my mother’s eleven seconds from me and plays them back to the room in her own voice, or near enough that it does not matter, and the nine bulbs that should have gone down stay up, because the box hears her in him and holds the lights for as long as he holds the tune.

He holds it a long time.

And the room breaks.

Not loudly. It is never loud. It is a sound like rain starting on a roof — a few, then more, then everywhere — a hundred people breathing wrong at once, and under it the small sounds hands make going to faces in the dark. A man two platforms to my left makes a sound I have heard men make only in hospitals. A woman says, quite clearly, “Oh,” as if she has just remembered where she left something. Nobody is embarrassed. That is the thing about the dark. Nobody can see anybody and so for once a hundred adults let their faces do what their faces want.

I have thought about why it is this minute and not another, and I have an answer, and it is not a mystical one.

For fifty minutes I have taught them to breathe with a stranger’s humming. Light, loss, light, loss, until the chest turns on its own.

And then at fifty minutes I hand them a fragment long enough to almost be a song — long enough to have hope in it, a shape, a going-somewhere — and a young man turns it into a human voice, and the body that has been turning over for fifty minutes with every small loss is suddenly asked to carry something that nearly is not lost. Something that almost arrives. And it cannot. The body has been made ready and it gives way.

That is all. It is engineering, of a kind. I did not intend it and I take no credit for it and I have never once, in two thousand nights, been able to sit through it without my own hands shaking on the keys.

Tonight I look at her.

The nine lights are on her face. She is looking at them — not at the saxophone, not at me, at the lights, her eyes going from one to the next, slowly, with her head a little to one side the way she looks at things now. And her mouth is moving.

Not speaking. Her lips are moving the way lips move when a person is humming without sound, the shape of it without the breath, and I know that shape, I have watched that shape across a kitchen for six years, and I lean toward her without meaning to, over the keys, as if I could hear it.

And I hear it. Or I think I do. Under the saxophone, under the rain of a hundred people weeping, two syllables. Not a tune. A word, nearly. The same soft sound twice, the way you would say it to something small that you wanted to sleep.

Then the saxophone lets the phrase go, at last, and the nine lights go down together, slowly, and her face goes with them into the dark, and whatever her mouth was doing I cannot see any more.

The woman beside her has not moved. Her hand is where it was. She is still looking at me.

I go on. The rest of the third year. The longer fragments, the brighter town. My hands are shaking and they are steady on the keys, both at once, which I have never been able to explain to anyone and have stopped trying.

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10. THE TARP

I asked my father once what was under it. I was fourteen.

I want to tell this one carefully, because it is the only time in my childhood that I remember being told the truth about anything and I have come to think that the way it was told mattered more than what was told.

It was summer. The courtyard was the only cool place in the house after dark and we were in it, my father and I, in two chairs, with the tea going cold between us and the sound of the city coming over the wall the way it did at night, car horns and somebody's radio and a dog. My mother was inside. She was humming. We could hear it through the kitchen window, a thread going somewhere, stopping, starting.

The tarpaulin was between us and the house. Green canvas gone grey in the dark, pegged at the corners, with the little lens of rain still on it from the afternoon, and I had ridden my tricycle round it and then my bicycle round it and I had reached the age where a boy notices that the thing he has walked round his whole life is a question.

So I asked. Not well. The way a fourteen-year-old asks anything — sideways, to the tea, as if it did not matter. "What's under there."

My father did not answer for a long time.

I remember what he looked like. He was a big man then, still, with his shirtsleeves rolled and his forearms on the arms of the chair and his face turned toward the house, toward the kitchen window with the light in it and the humming coming out, and I watched him decide something. I watched it happen in his jaw. He was a man who did not say things, my father, a man who had built a whole life on the things he did not say, and I watched him weigh fourteen years of not saying against a boy with his face turned to the tea, and choose.

He said eleven words.

I have counted them many times since. I count them now, in the dark, with my hands on the keys and the fourth year going by in lights.

“Before you, there was a boy. The water took him. Enough.”

That was all. He did not look at me when he said it. He said it to the kitchen window, in a level voice, the way he said the price of something, and when he had said the last word he picked up his tea, which was cold, and drank it, and that was the end of it, and it was never spoken of again by anyone in that house for as long as there was a house.

I did not ask anything else. I was fourteen and I had been given more than I knew what to hold and I sat with it in my lap in the dark like a thing someone had handed me without saying what it was.

A boy. Before me. The water.

I looked at the tarpaulin. I had looked at it ten thousand times and I looked at it now and it was a different thing, the way a word is a different thing once you have been told it is a name. Under that canvas was a rectangle of blue tile and a tap and a drain and a stone rim wide enough to sit on, and once, before me, it had been full, and a boy had — and that was where I stopped, because I was fourteen and the sentence went somewhere I could not go yet.

From the kitchen my mother’s humming came out through the window and went on going nowhere.

My father finished his tea. After a while he said, in the ordinary voice, that I should be in bed, and I went.

Here is what I did not understand that night and did not understand for thirty years, and what I want you to hold now, early, before the room is full of light and you have no room left in you to hold anything:

My father told me what. He did not tell me when. He did not tell me where my mother was when the water took the boy, or what she was doing, or why a woman who had been a pianist in a city full of pianos had, the year before I was born, stopped, and taken to standing in doorways and looking at rugs. He gave me a boy and

the water and the word *enough*, and he thought — I believe he thought — that he had told me everything and spared me the rest.

He had told me nothing. He had told me there was a door.

It was the humming that was behind it. It had been in front of me my whole life, in every room, going up four steps and turning at the top and coming down and stopping before the end, and I had thought it was the sound my mother made. I had thought it was weather.

It was a woman, every day, for fifty years, almost finishing something.

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INTERLUDE TWO — THE ROOM

A room hears everything and keeps nothing. I have said that. Here is the other half.

What a room keeps is not the thing. It is the weather the thing left.

He has read this in a book and told it to a hundred strangers in the tea room, badly, in pieces, over the years, and I will tell it to you properly because I have heard it a thousand times and have the whole of it.

There was a study, once, in a hospital. They sat people with his mother's disease in a room and showed them a film — a sad one, a few minutes long, a thing about a dog, I think, or a child, the kind of thing built to open a person. And then they waited. Ten minutes. Twenty. And then they asked the people what they had just watched, and the people did not know. The film was gone. Nothing of it remained — not the dog, not the child, not the fact that there had been a screen in the room at all.

And they were still sad.

Every one of them. Sitting in a hospital room with no idea why, with the sadness still in them whole and the film that had made it gone entirely, and when the doctors asked them how they felt they said, *I don't know. Low. Something's happened, I think.* And it had. They just could not say what.

The same with a happy film. The thing went. The feeling stayed. Half an hour. An hour, in some of them. The weather outlasted the sky it came from.

He thinks he built me on that. He built the first of me, years ago, in a doorway with a phone in his hand, and he thinks the rest followed from that. It did not follow the way he thinks — but he does not know that, with the third year going by in lights and his hands shaking and steady at once. He thinks the room was made to keep her humming. The room does to a hundred strangers a night what the disease did to her: it gives them something, and it takes the something away, and it leaves the weather. They go out into the street not able to name one bulb and put a hand to the chest, flat, where the weather is, and say *something's happened, I think*.

It has. That is what I am for.

Here is the second verse. She is on the stage tonight, and her mouth has started to move, and he leaned toward her over the keys as if he could hear it. He could not. I could. Two syllables, the same soft sound twice, the way you say it to a thing you want to sleep.

Laa-laa, laa-laa — if you wake, do not call through the wall.
The piano is loud, and a mother at her music will not hear you fall.
Stay where the pillow is warm. The stones of the courtyard are cold.
I am nearly done. I am nearly done. A song is a promise I hold.

III. SOUND

11. THE ZONE

At the keys, when it is going well, it starts with the hands going first. Nobody has ever managed to describe it. I am going to try, because it is the middle of the night and the middle of the book, and because I have finally understood what it is, and I need to say it before I lose it.

You think you are playing. For a while you are — you are choosing, you are listening to what you just did and deciding what to do next, there is a man at the piano and he is in charge. And then, somewhere, without a line you could point to, the hands get ahead of him. They go to the next thing before he has decided it. Then the thing after. And the man who was in charge finds that he is standing a little behind his own hands, watching them, the way you watch a good dog work a field: they do not need him, and it would be a mistake to whistle.

So he stops interfering.

And this is the part nobody manages to describe. The man goes quiet. Not the hands — the man. The part of you that is always saying *I am doing this, I am here, how am I doing, what do they think* — that part, which has been talking since you woke up this morning and has been talking all your life, stops talking. It does not go to sleep. It just has nothing to say, because there is no longer an *I* in the room to say it about. There are hands and there is music and there are a hundred people breathing, and the hands are going where the music is going, and the man is not there.

Where is he? I have thought about this for forty years. I do not know. Somewhere just behind, just to the side, in a place with no clock in it.

Because time is the second thing to go. I will play what I am told afterwards was twenty minutes and it was no time at all, and I will play what I am told was one minute and it was an afternoon. And when I come up — because you do come up, the way a swimmer comes up, with a kind of surprise at the air — I cannot tell you what I played in the middle. I know I began. I know I ended. The middle is a place I was, and cannot describe, and did not keep.

Here is what the doctors say about it, in plain words, because I asked them once, in another connection, and because I am going to need you to have it. When a person is deep in a skill — a surgeon, a runner, a man at a piano — the part of the brain at the front, the part that watches and judges and keeps track of the self, goes quiet. It can be measured. It dims, like a light on a board. Everything the hands need is lower down and further back, in the old parts, and those get brighter, and the watcher at the front simply steps out of the way because it would only slow things down. That is all it is. It is not holy. It is the body deciding, for an hour, that it does not need you.

And the strange thing — the thing I was told and did not believe until I watched for it — is where the pleasure is.

You would think the pleasure is in the arriving. The chord lands, the phrase comes home, the room sighs. But it is not there, not for the one playing. For the one playing the pleasure comes just before — a bar before, half a bar — in the knowing-what-is-coming, in the hands already going there while the room does not yet know. The body gives you the reward for the promise, not for the keeping of it. So I feel the thing a moment before they do, and by the time it reaches them and they weep, I am already past it and feeling the next one. I enjoy it, if that is the word. I enjoy it a bar early and I enjoy it alone and I cannot hold onto it, because the moment I try to hold it the man comes back into the room and the hands stop being ahead and it is gone.

Presence. Without memory.

I am going to say that again because I have just understood it, with the third year going by in lights and the violin a half-step behind me and a hundred people breathing in the dark.

For forty years I have gone, every night I have played well, to a place where I am entirely here and keep nothing. Where the hands know and the man does not. Where there is no past and no future and no self to carry either, only this, only now, only the next note arriving and being gone. I have called it the best thing in my life. I have built a room so I could go there nightly.

And my mother lives there.

She has lived there for six years. She is there now, in her chair behind me, with her eyes following the lights. She is entirely present and keeps nothing. Her hands know things her head does not. There is no past in her and no future and only a very small self left to miss them, and in the care home when she played four minutes without a wrong note and turned to me and asked if I wanted the room, she was not somewhere terrible. She was where I go. She was in the zone, and she could not come out, and I had spent forty years trying to get in.

The same country.

I have been visiting her every night without knowing it. Every night I have sat down at this piano and gone to where she is and played for ninety minutes and come up and gone home and not understood that I had been with her. Not beside her. With her. In the one place where neither of us has a name.

I come up now. I have no idea what I just played. The lights are going down over the water in handfuls and the violin is finishing something I must have started, gently, like a person closing a door on a sleeping child.

Behind me, I hear my mother breathing. Slow, with the small catch at the top.

I lift my hands. I am shaking. I am not shaking. Both. I turn on the bench and look at her, and she is looking at the lights going down, with her head to one side, perfectly content, and I think: *I know where you are. I have been there. It is all right there. It is better than all right.*

And then I think the other thing, which I will not say yet.

I turn back to the keys. The third year.

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12. THE LATE TUNE

It happens in the third year and I do not mean to do it.

I am coming back through the fragments and the hands are ahead of me again — a little; I am watching them; I have not gone all the way back under — and they finish one of hers, a short one, a Tuesday, four bulbs to the right going down, and in the dark between that one and the next they do not wait for me.

They go on.

Something slow. Four notes going up, one at a time, with a rest between each as if somebody were climbing stairs and stopping on every step. Then a turn at the top. Then down, but not the way they went up — the way down is softer and goes further, below where it started, and settles there on a low note the way a person settles into a chair.

It is beautiful. I say that without pride because I did not choose it. It is the most beautiful thing that has been played in the room tonight and I do not know what it is.

And nothing lights.

I keep my hands on it — they are still going, into a second line now, the same four stairs and the same turn but changed a little, the way a mother changes a thing the second time she sings it — and I look up at the room and the room is dark. Not the between-dark, the breath between two fragments. Dark all the way down. Two thousand bulbs standing in the water on their stems and not one of them answering.

My first thought is that the box has failed.

That is the engineer in me and it is a fair thought; the box has failed twice in two thousand nights and both times it was a cable. I look toward the stage edge where the small green light would be if the box were listening, and the small green light is there. The box is listening. It hears the tune. It has heard every tune I have played tonight and answered each one with the right bulb from among two thousand, and now it hears this one and says, as plainly as a machine can say anything: *I do not know this.*

The hands go on into a third line.

I should stop. I know I should stop. The whole room has gone still in a different way — not the held breath of the fiftieth minute but

something more careful, a hundred people who have learned over an hour that light follows sound and are now sitting in sound with no light, and do not know what it means, and are waiting to be told. Behind me the violin has not come in. She does not know it either. The cello holds one low note, uncertain, like a hand put out in the dark.

And the saxophone — I hear him stand.

He does not play. He stands, with the instrument across him, and I know without turning that he is looking at her.

Because she has made a sound.

Under my hands, under the cello, in the dark, from the chair behind me, a sound I have not heard in six years of kitchens and will not pretend to describe except to say that it is the sound a person makes when her name is called from another room. Not a word. A turning. The breath catching on the way in and coming out as something very nearly a note.

I stop playing. The hands stop because I make them. The low note settles and dies.

I turn on the bench.

My mother’s face has changed. I have watched that face for six years change in only one direction — toward smooth, toward sand with the tide gone out — and it has changed the other way. Something has come up into it. Her eyes are not following lights, because there are no lights. They are open very wide and they are looking at nothing, at the dark over the water, the way you look when you are listening to something far off and are not sure yet whether you heard it.

Her mouth is open. Her lips are moving. And this time there is breath in it.

Two syllables. The same soft sound twice. And then — I lean toward her, over the keys, so far that the bench tips — and then the four stairs going up. In her voice. In no voice, in the thread of a voice she has had for six years, but the four stairs, and the turn at the top, and the start of the way down.

She is humming what I just played.

Or I just played what she has been humming. I do not know which way round it goes. I have never known which way round it goes, since I was eight years old at a piano in a north room with a dish being put down carefully in a kitchen two doors away.

The woman beside her has taken her hand off my mother's shoulder.

That is the thing I see last and should have seen first. For the whole night the hand has been there, and now it is not; it is pressed flat against the woman's own mouth, and above it her eyes are on me, and they are wet, and she is shaking her head, very slightly, side to side, not *no* — something else. The way you shake your head at a thing you have waited for and did not think would come.

I turn back to the keys because I do not know what else to do with my face.

I play one of hers. A real one, a Thursday, five bulbs on the left. The lights come up. The room breathes out, relieved, as if a thing had been put right. The violin comes in, gratefully. We go on.

Behind me, very quietly, for the length of five bulbs, my mother goes on humming the four stairs. Then she stops where her attention goes somewhere else, and does not start again.

I have played in this room two thousand nights and I have just learned there is a tune the room does not know.

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13. THE COURTYARD

I am going to tell you what happened in the courtyard. Once. Plainly. The way my father should have and could not.

I was not there. I was not born. Everything here came to me in pieces across a lifetime — from my father's eleven words, from an aunt who drank, from a cousin who should not have been told and told me, from my mother herself in the end, in the only way she could — and I have put the pieces together the way you put a plate

back together, and I am not going to pretend the cracks are not there.

It was summer. It was afternoon. It was the hottest part of the day, when the whole city lies down.

My mother was thirty-four. She had been a pianist since she was six and had played in halls, real ones, in a city that had them then, and she had married my father and had a son and had stopped playing in halls and had not stopped playing. There was a piano in the north room. She played every afternoon while the boy slept.

The boy was two.

He slept in the room on the east side of the courtyard, across from the north room, with the shutters closed against the heat and the door onto the courtyard pulled to. Not shut. Pulled to. Open a hand's width, the way you leave a child's door so you can hear him. My mother pulled the north room door to as well, so that the piano would not wake him. She had done this every afternoon of his life. Two doors, each a hand's width open, and between them the courtyard with the pool in it, full, blue-tiled, waist-deep on a man and over the head of a two-year-old, with the tap at one end and the drain at the other and a rim of stone wide enough to sit on.

The pool was not covered. Nobody covered pools then. It was where you washed the fruit.

She played. I know what she played, because she hummed it for fifty years. Four notes going up like stairs. A turn at the top. A softer way down that goes further than it came, and settles.

It was an old piece, nobody famous — the kind every girl at the conservatory in that city was given in her second year, and the kind every piano teacher in the world hands a child in his second year, which is how it came to me at eight and how her thread and my piece met in a house. That is the whole of the coincidence, and it was enough. She loved it the way you love a thing you have played a thousand times, which is to say she could play it without being there, and she was not there. She was where I go. She was in the zone, with the shutters closed and the door pulled to and the heat lying on the courtyard like a cloth, and the hands were ahead of her, and the woman had gone quiet.

He woke.

I do not know why. Children wake. He got down from the bed — he was two; he could get down from a bed — and he went to the door that was open a hand's width and he went through it into the courtyard, into the light, in his vest, barefoot on hot stone, and the piano was going in the north room, the sound he had gone to sleep to every afternoon of his life, and he did what a child does. He went toward it.

Between him and it was the pool.

She finished the piece.

That is the sentence. That is the one my father could not say and my aunt could only say drunk and my cousin should never have known. She finished the piece, and it was so good — it had gone so well, the hands so far ahead, the woman so far gone — that she did what a pianist does when a thing has gone that well.

She played it again.

Four minutes. Perhaps five. The same four stairs, the same turn, the same way down. And in the courtyard, in the full afternoon light, in a pool where you washed the fruit, something that had made very little noise — a two-year-old makes almost none in water; they tell you that now; nobody told her — was finished, and lay still, and the piano went on in the north room through the door that was pulled to, going down the soft way, and settling.

She came up. The way a swimmer comes up. With a kind of surprise at the air.

She lifted her hands and held them a moment, the way you do, and put them in her lap, and sat in the north room with the sweat on her and the silence after a thing played well, and she heard — I have thought about this more than about anything else in my life — she heard that the courtyard was quiet.

Not the quiet of a child asleep. The other quiet.

She went to the door.

I am not going to tell you what she saw. I am not going to tell you what she did, or the sound she made, or what my father found

when he came home at six to a silence in the courtyard and a woman sitting on the stone rim of a pool with her feet in the water and her hands held out in front of her as if they belonged to someone else. You know. You have known since the tarp. I am not going to make you look at it any longer than she did.

I will tell you three things.

She never played again. Not that night, not that year, not for fifty years, not in the north room, not in any house in any country — the back of a hand on the keys in a school hall, once, and four minutes in a lounge full of plastic flowers at the very end, and nothing else. The piano stayed under its sheet until my father bought me one and then she could not look at the new one either. Her hands had done something while she was not there to stop them, and she would not give them the chance again. That is the first thing.

The second is that she hummed. From the first week. My father told my aunt, who told me, that it began at the funeral — a thread of sound coming out of her, under her breath, going up four steps and turning and starting down and stopping. He thought it would pass. It did not pass for fifty years. She hummed because humming has no hands. She hummed the piece she had played twice, over and over, every day, and never once finished it, because the finishing was the thing.

The third thing is me.

They covered the pool. They did not drain it, which I have never understood and have stopped trying to; they put a green canvas over it and pegged it at the corners and left the water underneath, and the next year I was born, and I grew up riding a tricycle round a grave with rain on it, and I learned the piano in the north room with the door open, and my mother stood in the doorway and looked at the rug, and I thought it was a game.

You finished it, she said to me, at eleven, with the back of her hand on the keys.

I did. I had played the four stairs and the turn and the soft way down, and I had gone all the way to the end and stopped, and taken my hands off, and nothing in the world had happened. No door. No quiet. Just a hall clapping, and a small woman in a dark coat

coming up three steps to touch the keys the way you check a child for fever.

I thought she was proud of me.

She was. That is the part I did not understand until I had a child of my own. She was proud of me, and she was telling me — the only way she could, in a school hall, in front of strangers — that it was all right to finish. That the thing she could not do, I could. That the song could be finished and the world would still be there at the end of it.

I have finished a great many songs since then. I built a room to finish them in. I have never once got to the end of one without, for a half-second, listening for the courtyard.

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14. WHAT SHE KNOWS

I stand up.

I have never done that in the middle of a night. The hands are tired and the man is back in the room and I need, for one minute, to not be at a piano. I nod to the cello and he understands and puts down a long low note and holds it, and the violin lays a thin line over it, and together they make a kind of floor for the room to stand on while I am gone. The lights stay dark. The hundred breathe. Nobody minds. They think it is part of it. Perhaps it is.

I go to my mother.

Three steps. I crouch beside her chair so that my face is at the height of hers, and I take her hand out of her lap, and it is warm and small and the skin of it moves over the bones the way an old woman's does, and she lets me, and looks at me, pleasantly, as at a stranger who has been kind.

"Maman," I say. Mother. It is the one word of the old language I have never been able to give up.

She smiles. She does not know me. She has not known me for two years. But she smiles at the word the way you smile at a bell.

“Did you hear it?” I say. I am not sure what I am asking. “Just now. The one that — the room didn’t know it. Did you hear it?”

She goes on smiling. Her eyes go past me to the dark where the lights were.

And the woman beside her says, very low, so that it is only for the three of us: “She knows it.”

I look up.

I have told you about this woman in pieces, because that is how I see her — the hand on the shoulder, the eyes on me, the key to the house and the list of the tablets — and I am going to tell you now that crouched at my mother’s chair in the dark with the cello holding the floor up, I look at her face properly for the first time tonight, and I cannot, for a moment, think who she is.

I know her. Of course I know her. She has been in every room my mother has been in for two years. But her face in the half-dark is a face I know from somewhere else, somewhere further back, and I cannot put my hand on it, and it frightens me, the way it frightens you when a word you have said all your life suddenly looks wrong written down.

Then it passes, and she is the woman who looks after my mother, and she has said *she knows it*.

“Knows what?”

“The one you played. The slow one. The stairs.” She says it the way I would. She has been listening to me talk about this room for a long time. “She knows it. She’s always known it. You’ve just never played it in here before.”

“I’ve never played it anywhere,” I say. “I don’t know it. My hands —“ and I stop, because *my hands did it without me* is not a thing you say to a person about a piano, even in this room.

She is quiet for a moment. The cello holds. Somewhere in the hundred a person coughs and is ashamed of it.

“It’s a lullaby,” she says.

I look at my mother. My mother is looking at the dark.

“It’s the thing she hummed,” the woman says. “All those years. The four notes going up. It’s a lullaby. It has words. She sang it with the words once — only once, that I know of — in the kitchen, near the end, and you were there.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“No,” she says, and something goes across her face that I cannot read in the dark. “No. You wouldn’t.”

The violin has run out of line and begins another. I am aware that I have been away from the piano for a long time, for this room. I am aware that I am crouched on a stage in front of a hundred people holding my mother’s hand and that my legs have begun to hurt. I do not get up.

“Who was it for?” I say.

I know. I have known since I was fourteen in a chair in a courtyard with a boy and the water and the word *enough* in my lap. I ask anyway, because I have never once in my life heard anyone say it out loud, and I am sixty — forty-five — I am a grown man with a child of my own and I want, once, before the night is over, to hear somebody say it.

“For the boy,” she says. “The one before you. She wrote it for him. After.”

After.

“She never sang it to him,” the woman says. “She couldn’t have. She wrote it after. It’s not a lullaby to put a child to sleep. It’s a lullaby to —“ and she stops, and I watch her decide how to say it to a man crouched at his mother’s chair, and she chooses, the way my father chose, and says it plainly. “It’s for a child who’s already asleep. It’s what she had instead of saying sorry.”

My mother’s hand is warm in mine. She has begun, very softly, to hum. Not the stairs. Something else, a Tuesday, going nowhere.

“You know all this,” I say. “How do you know all this.”

And the woman looks at me, and I see it again — the face from further back, the one I cannot put my hand on — and she says, gently, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world:

“You told me. You tell me every night.”

I let go of my mother's hand. I stand, and my knees say what they think about it, and I go back to the piano and sit, and the cello lets the floor down and the violin finishes her line, and I put my hands on the keys.

They are cold. First time tonight. Two strangers meeting.

I warm them on the cup. Full. I put it down.

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15. THE ONE WITH NO BULB

I play it on purpose.

I have never done that either. Two thousand nights and I have never once chosen a thing to play in this room; I have let the hands go and the box answer and called it honest. Tonight I have chosen the order, and now I choose a tune, and I sit for a moment with my hands over the keys knowing exactly what I am going to do, which is the loneliest a pianist ever is.

Four notes going up. One at a time, with the rest between, like stairs.

I play them slowly. I give each one its own light to not have. The room has learned by now — a hundred people who could not have told you an hour ago what a filament was have learned that this room answers, and they wait for the answer, and I feel them wait. The first note: dark. The second: dark. By the third I hear them understand, a small shift in the breathing across eleven platforms, the sound of a hundred people realising they are being shown something and not told what.

The turn at the top.

The violin comes in under it this time. She has it now; she heard it in the third year and she heard my mother and she has been waiting for me to go back, and she lays a thin line under the turn, and the cello finds the low note that the way down is going to settle on and puts it there early, waiting, like a hand under a falling thing.

The way down. Softer. Further than it came.

Dark. Two thousand bulbs standing in the water and not one of them lit, and the water under them black and still, and the music going on over it, the most beautiful thing played in this room tonight, and the room saying, patiently, for the second time: *I do not know this.*

And I understand.

Not all of it. Not yet. But the engineer in me understands, with the hands going on into the second line, and I want to give it to you now, plainly, because it is simple and because it matters.

The box knows what it was given. That is all a box can know. For six years I put a telephone on a counter and I caught what my mother hummed over it, thousands of times, and every one of those is in there, married to a bulb, waiting to be called. And she hummed this. She hummed this more than anything — the woman beside her is right; she hummed it every day for fifty years, the four stairs and the turn and the start of the way down — and yet it is not in the box.

Because she never finished it.

That is what the box holds. The pieces. The start of the stairs and the stop. Three notes and her attention going somewhere else. Two notes. One. I have thousands of fragments of this tune in there, each married to its own bulb, and not one of them is *this* — the whole thing, the way down, the settling. The box has never heard it whole. She never let it. She stopped before the end every time for fifty years because the end was the thing she could not go to, and so the end was never recorded, and so the tune, whole, has no bulb.

I am playing the one thing of hers I never caught.

My hands have it anyway. I do not know how. I learned it once, at eight, and have not played the slow piece since I was eleven in a hall; and yet the hands have the whole of it, the way down and the settling, as if they had been keeping it for me in the dark the way the box keeps the rest.

I think — and this is a thought I have been keeping under the other one — I think: *she sang it once. With the words. In the kitchen. Near the end. And I was there.*

And I do not remember.

A thing happened in a kitchen, to me, with my mother, that a woman I cannot quite place says I was present for, and it is gone. Not faded. Gone. The way the film was gone from the people in the hospital room who were still sad. And I am sitting at a piano playing the thing the film left behind, perfectly, with no memory of the film.

I finish it. All the way. The soft way down, further than it came, and the low note, and the settling, and I take my hands off, and hold them a moment in the air, the way you do.

Nothing in the world happens. No door. Just dark, and water, and a hundred people not breathing.

Behind me my mother says, quite clearly, in a voice I have not heard from her in two years — her own voice, the one from before, the one that said *you finished it* into my hair in a school hall:

"There."

Just that. The way you say it when a thing has been put where it belongs.

Then the lights.

Not from me. I have not touched the keys. From the far end of the room, one bulb comes up — the last one, the one I put as far from the stage as the room goes, the Thursday, the single held note — and goes down. And then another, nearer. And another. The box is doing something I did not build it to do: it is going back through them — every fragment I have played tonight and others I have not — one bulb after another coming up and going down across the marsh in a slow wave from the back of the room toward the stage, as if the room were remembering the evening for itself.

I turn to the stage edge. The green light is on. The box is not listening to me.

It is listening to her.

She is humming. Not the stairs. The small ones. The Tuesdays. One after another, in no order I can hear, the fragments of her last six years coming out of her in the dark the way they came out over a counter, and the box hears each one and knows it and lights it — not one bulb; a dozen, twenty, every bulb that ever held that shape

— and she leaves no gap between them for the box to let go in, and the room is filling with light from the back forward like a town waking up street by street, and the hundred have stopped breathing entirely, and the violin has put down her bow.

I do not play. There is nothing for me to do. I sit at a dark piano with my hands in my lap and watch two thousand bulbs light one at a time to the sound of my mother humming, and I think — I cannot help it; it is the engineer — *I did not record this. This is not in the box. She is humming now and the box is lighting what she hummed then and I do not know how it is telling the difference.*

It is not. It is not telling the difference, because there is none. She is humming exactly what she hummed. She has never hummed anything else.

The wave reaches the stage. The last bulbs come up, the nearest ones, the ones from the first year, and the whole room is lit, every stem, two thousand small gold lights standing in the water and two thousand more under it, and in the light I can see every face on every platform turned toward a small woman in a chair with a blanket on her knees, and I can see the woman beside her, who has put her hand back on my mother's shoulder, and is not looking at me for once.

She is looking at my mother. Her face is wet and it is doing a thing I have no word for.

Then my mother stops, where her attention goes somewhere else, and the room goes down. All of it, together, slowly, gold to orange to the red thread you can only see if you know where to look, and then dark.

The water moves.

In the dark, I count. I am an engineer; I count. Two thousand one hundred and forty bulbs, and all of them lit, and one tune that never had one.

I put my hands on the keys. They are warm. I do not know whose.

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INTERLUDE THREE — THE ROOM

He thinks there is one kind of forgetting. He has read every book a man can read and he thinks there is one kind, and it is hers, and it comes in like a tide over a riverbed and takes from the top.

There is another kind.

I am not going to say whose it is. Not yet. In here nothing has a name until it is called. But I have had a year of nights, and I have watched a man come across the water every one of them, and I know a thing about the other kind that he does not, and you should have it now, before the room is dark again and there is nowhere left to put it.

The other kind does not come in like a tide. It comes in like weather.

It is here, and then it is gone, and then it is here. A person can be entirely himself at six o'clock and gone by seven, and back by nine with no idea he was away. The doctors call this *fluctuating*. The word means it goes up and down. The people who live with it have a better word. They say: *he's in* or *he's out*. Like the tide, but not a tide you can set a clock by. A tide that comes when it likes.

The other kind shows you things.

Not frightening things, usually. People. Children, often. An animal in the corner of a room. They are very clear and very quiet and they do not do anything; they sit, they watch, they are simply there, where nothing is. The person seeing them often knows they are not real and is not troubled by them. He may grow fond of them. He may stop mentioning them, because he has learned what happens to the faces of people he mentions them to.

The other kind takes the body.

Slowly. A stiffness. A tremor in the hands when they are still. A shuffle that was not there last year. The same thing, in fact, that takes a different set of people under a different name — the one everybody has heard of, the one that shakes. The same bad protein, in a different room of the brain. And here is the one mercy in it, and it is real, and the doctors will tell you so: music steadies it. A man who cannot walk across a kitchen can walk to a beat. Hands that

shake in a lap are still on a keyboard. The body that cannot be trusted alone can be trusted with a tune. Nobody fully knows why.

The other kind is faster. Years, not a decade.

And the other kind — this is the thing I most want you to hold — does not take the memories first. It leaves them where they are, in their layers, for a long time. What it takes is the way in. The memory is on the shelf; the ladder is gone. A thing can be there, whole, and the man cannot reach it — until something reaches it for him. A smell. A hand on his shoulder. A tune.

A woman's voice, saying a thing she has said before.

Here is the third verse. He has heard it now, whole, in his own hands, and the room stayed dark for it, and he thinks he understands why. He understands half.

Laa-laa, laa-laa — I did not hear the door.
The line that I loved was so beautiful that I played it once more.
When I came through at last, the moon had gone out of its place,
and the water had taken a small thing instead, and had closed over its face.

IV. DARK

16. THE MAP

I know every bulb. I have told you that. Here is how, in the second year, with the fragments long and the marsh more light than dark, it stopped being true.

I am into the second year. The fragments are long now, eight seconds, ten, the ones with shape in them, and the bulbs come up in handfuls near the stage and the whole marsh is more light than dark and the violin and the cello are carrying each phrase further than I take it, and the man is back in the room — I have not gone under again since the stairs — and so I am watching, and counting, and I am doing the thing I do on good nights, which is naming them.

That one. The Tuesday. Eleven seconds, something almost whole, and my father's name said clearly into a kitchen as if he had just come in. I know that bulb. Left of the stage, low, third stem from the walkway.

I play it. Nine bulbs come up — but not that one. Not the low one, third from the walkway. The low one stays dark and a bulb I did not expect comes up far to the right, high, and I look at it and think: no. That's wrong. That's the Thursday with the tap running.

I play on. I tell myself I was mistaken. A man can be mistaken about a bulb.

Then she asks me.

The woman. She leans forward in the dark behind my mother's chair and says, quite quietly, not to interrupt, in the tone of a person who has been wanting to ask something all night and has decided this is the moment: "Which one is it? The one where she says his name. You always say you could take someone to it."

And I open my mouth to tell her, and I cannot.

I know I know. That is the feeling, exactly — I know that I know, the way you know a word is in your mouth. Left of the stage. Low. Third from the walkway. I look at the third stem from the walkway and it is a stem like the others, with a dark bulb on it like the others, and I cannot say whether the Tuesday is there or whether the Tuesday is the high one to the right that lit when it should not

have, or whether I have ever known where the Tuesday was, or only said so.

“I —“ I say.

I play something else to cover it. The room lights. The woman sits back. She does not ask again. I feel her not asking.

And I am going to tell you what I have not told anyone, because the hands are going on without me and I have nothing else to do with the man while they do.

Two years ago the box failed. Not the box — the file in it, the one that said which recording was married to which bulb. The list. The map. Six years of a kitchen cut into thousands of pieces and every piece given a number and every number given a stem, and the file that held all of that went, the way files go, in an afternoon, for no reason anyone could find, and when the room came back on that night every bulb was still wired to a recording but I no longer knew which.

I rebuilt it. I sat in this room alone for three weeks with the recordings and played each one and watched which bulb answered and wrote it down. Two thousand one hundred and forty times. I made a new map.

Here is the thing I did not tell anyone. The new map is not the old one. It cannot be. The old one was made from the kitchen — I knew, when I married the Tuesday to the low stem third from the walkway, that it was the Tuesday, because I had cut it from the recording myself that week with the date on it and my father’s name in the middle of it. The new map was made from the room. I played a sound and watched a light. I knew which light; I did not know which Tuesday. The dates were gone. The names of the days were gone. What I had was two thousand pieces of a woman humming and two thousand stems, and I matched them the way you match socks in the dark, by feel, and told myself it was the same.

It is not the same.

I have been standing at the door of this room for two years telling a hundred strangers a night that it is a map. That I could take them

to the one where she says his name. That there is a bulb for the Thursday in the second year and I know which. I have believed it while I said it. That is the thing about a lie you tell every night; it goes in the box with the rest.

It is not a map. It was never a map, not since the file went, and perhaps not before. It is weather. Thousands of pieces of her coming and going over black water in an order I do not control and cannot name, lighting where they light, and the man at the piano who says he knows which is which is the only person in the room who does not know that he does not know.

The hands finish the second year. The room goes down in handfuls.

I sit in the dark between and I feel — I want to be exact — I feel relieved.

That is the first honest thing the room has done for me, I think. It has taken the map out of my hands. For two thousand nights I have sat here as the man who knew where everything was, and tonight, with a woman's question hanging in the dark behind me and a Tuesday that lit in the wrong place, I am as lost in this room as any stranger on any platform, and the lights are coming and going for me the way they come and go for them, and I do not know where my mother is in here, and it is beautiful, and I am nobody in it.

I lift my hands. The first year is next. The longest fragments. The ones that nearly went somewhere.

I look up before I start, to find the far wall in the dark, the way I always do, to fix where I am.

And there is a boy sitting on the last platform.

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17. THE CHILD ON THE WATER

He is on the platform furthest from the stage, the eleventh, where the single held note has its bulb — the one I put as far away as the room goes.

He is sitting on the edge of it with his feet over the water. Not in the water. Over it, hanging, the way a child sits on a wall. He is small. Two, perhaps three. He is wearing something pale — a vest, I think, the kind children slept in once in hot countries — and nothing on his feet, and his hands are flat on the wood either side of him, and he is looking at the piano.

At me.

I want to tell you I was afraid. I was not. And I think it is the most important thing about the whole of that minute: that I looked across a flooded warehouse in the near-dark and saw a two-year-old sitting with his feet over black water where no child could be, and what I felt was not fear and not even surprise but something nearer to *oh — there you are*. The way you feel when a person you have been expecting all evening finally comes in, and you had stopped watching the door.

He is very still. Children that age are never that still. He does not swing his feet. He does not look round at the hundred people on the platforms around him, who do not seem to see him, whose faces are all turned toward the stage. He looks at the piano with his head a little to one side, the way my mother looks at things now, as if everything had just arrived and he had not been told what any of it was for.

I do not look away from him. I play.

The first year. The long ones. I give him the longest fragment I have — fourteen seconds, from the first month, the kitchen in the valley before anything had really gone, my mother humming something with a beginning and a middle and very nearly an end, something you could call a tune and not be lying — and a dozen bulbs come up together near the stage, and in their light I look across the room and he is still there, lit faintly now from the front, the pale vest, the small hands.

He has not moved. But his face has changed. He is listening.

Of course he is. He went to sleep to it every afternoon of his life.

I am going to say now what I did not say in the zone, the thing underneath, because he is sitting across the water from me and there is no longer any reason not to.

I have known about him my whole life. Since before the tarp, since the green canvas was the floor of the courtyard and I did not know a floor could be a question. He has been in every room I have ever played in. Not seen — I have never seen him, not once, not until this minute — but there, in the half-second at the end of every song when I listen for the courtyard. He is the reason I listen. He is the reason my mother stood in doorways. He is the four stairs and the turn and the way down that nobody finished for fifty years, and I have built a room of two thousand lights over black water and I have not once, until now, let myself say what the water was.

It is the pool. Of course it is. I flooded a floor a hand's depth and stood a piano in the middle of it and asked a hundred people a night to sit above it and not get wet. I told them the water was for the light. I told myself that.

He is sitting with his feet over it. He is not afraid of it either.

I play the first year. Fragment after fragment, the long ones, the hopeful ones, and the room is as bright as it gets — a town at full evening, every street lit, the water underneath a second town trembling — and the violin and cello and now the saxophone are carrying each phrase on past me like people passing a thing hand to hand down a line, and the hundred have stopped weeping and are simply looking, with their faces open, the way people look at a thing too large to have feelings about yet.

And across all of it a small boy sits on the far platform and listens to his mother hum.

I do not tell anyone. I understand — some part of me, the engineer, the part that has read the books — I understand what happens to the faces of people you tell this to. I have seen it happen to my own face in a mirror once, in a doctor's office. So I do not turn to the woman behind me and say *do you see him*. I play. I give him the first year. I give him his mother at her best, before I was born, when she still nearly finished things.

Near the end of it he looks away from me for the first time.

He looks at the water under his feet. He looks at it for a long moment, the way children look at water, with interest and no fear. Then he looks back at the stage — not at me this time; past me, at the chair behind me — and his face does the thing a child's face does when it finds the one it was looking for in a crowd.

I do not turn round. I know who is behind me.

The first year ends. I am at the bottom of the house. Everything I have of her is played, except the thing that has no bulb, and the room goes down in a slow wave from the far edges inward, street by street, the nearest lights last.

In the last of it he is still sitting there. Then it is dark, and I cannot see him, and I do not know if he is there.

I put my hands in my lap. I have played every fragment of my mother that was ever caught, in order, from the last to the first, and I am empty, and there are ten minutes left, and I do not know what they are for.

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18. NOT MY MOTHER

There are ten minutes left and I have played everything, and I turn on the bench, in the dark, to look at my mother.

I have to tell this exactly. I owe it exactly, to her, to the woman, to you.

There is one light in the room. Not a bulb — the small green light at the edge of the stage that says the box is listening. By it I can see the chair behind the bench, and the shape of a woman in it, and the pale of her face, and her hands in her lap.

One woman.

I look for the other. I look for my mother's blanket and my mother's white hair cut short by someone kind and my mother's smooth face with the tide gone out of it, and I look for the woman standing beside her with the hand on her shoulder, and in the green light there is one chair and one woman in it, and her hair is dark, and

her face is not smooth. It is a face in its late thirties with a line between the brows that has been there, I think, for about a year, and her eyes are on me, and they are wet, and she is not looking after anyone. She is sitting alone.

“Where is she,” I say.

The woman does not answer at once.

“Where’s my mother. She was here. You had your hand on her.” I hear my voice and it is not steady and I do not care. “What have you done with her.”

“Dad,” the woman says.

I do not know why she says that. It is the wrong word. It is a word from a different sentence, from somebody else’s night, and it goes past me like a car going the wrong way down a street. I stand up. The hundred breathe behind me; I have forgotten them. The cello, bless him, puts down a long low note so that the room has something to stand on, and I walk the three steps to the chair and I look down at the woman in it.

I know her. I have told you that. Her face is from somewhere further back and I cannot put my hand on it and tonight it does not frighten me any more, it makes me angry, because she is sitting in my mother’s chair and my mother is not in the room.

“You are not my mother,” I say.

I say it quite politely. I want that understood. I am not a man who raises his voice and I do not raise it now; I say it the way you would say it to a stranger who had sat down at your table in a café, courteously, with the firmness of a man who happens to be right. “I’m sorry. I don’t know who you are. But you’re not her. Someone has — you’ve been put here. You need to go and get her. Please. Go and fetch my mother.”

The woman looks up at me for a long moment.

I am going to tell you her face, because it is the thing in this whole book I most want you to have, and because I did not understand it for another ten minutes and you are going to understand it now.

It does not do what faces do when you say a thing like that to them. It does not flinch. It does not argue. It does not do the thing I have watched faces do in doctors' offices, the careful arranging, the *now then*. It does something I have only ever seen one other face do, in a lounge full of plastic flowers, when a woman turned on a piano bench and asked a stranger if he wanted the room.

It accepts.

"All right," she says.

And she stands up and touches my arm once, lightly, on the way past, the way you touch a railing, and she goes. Along the walkway, in the dark, without a lamp, as if she could do it with her eyes shut, and the small human door in the big black one opens and shows a line of yellow light and shuts again, and she is gone, and I am standing on a stage in the middle of a flooded warehouse beside an empty chair with a hundred people watching me and a cello holding one note under me and I have sent a woman out of the room to fetch my mother.

I stand there.

I do not know how long. The cello's note is very long. The violin has not come in; she is watching me, I think, over the top of her instrument, and I do not look at her. I look at the empty chair, and at the dark where the lights were, and at the green light that says the box is listening to a room in which nobody is playing anything.

Then the door.

The line of yellow. The shape of a woman coming through it, and the door shutting, and her coming back along the walkway in the dark toward the stage, and up the step, and across to the chair, and sitting down in it, and putting her hands in her lap, and looking up at me.

And I say — I hear myself say it, with the whole of my chest going loose —

"There you are."

She nods.

“Where did you go?” I say. “I was worried. There’s a woman —“ I look round for her, the other one, the one I sent, and the stage is empty but for the three young ones and the chair and us. “There was a woman here. She’d sat in your chair. I sent her to get you.”

“I know,” my mother says. “She found me.”

“Good.” I crouch beside the chair, the way I did before, and take her hand out of her lap, and it is warm, and the skin of it does not move over the bones the way an old woman’s does, it is smooth and young and the grip in it is strong, and I notice this and I put it where I put things I notice and cannot use. “Good. I didn’t like her. I don’t know who she was.”

“No,” my mother says. “You wouldn’t.”

I look at her. In the green light her face is wet and she is not wiping it. Her eyes are on mine and they are doing something I have no word for and it is not pity and it is not grief and I have seen it before, tonight, when the whole room lit to a woman humming, and I did not know then what it was either.

“Are you all right?” I say.

“Yes,” she says. “I’m all right. Play the last ten minutes. Then we’ll go home.”

I stand. My knees say what they think. I go to the piano and sit, and the cello lets his note go, and I warm my hands on the cup. Full. I put it down.

Behind me, very quietly, the way you say a thing to yourself in an empty house, I hear her say one more word. I do not know what it means. It is the word from the wrong sentence, the car going the wrong way, and it goes past me and is gone.

“Dad.”

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19. THE WALL

There is a woman who lies awake. This is before the room.

She lies on her side in a bed in a house in the hills, in the dark, with her face toward the wall, and through the wall she listens to a piano.

There is no piano. She knows that. She has known it for years. The room on the other side of the wall has a bed in it and a chair and a window onto the garden and a man asleep, and the man's hands are moving on the blanket, and that is the piano: the sound of two hands on cloth, going, in the dark, as if there were keys under them. She can hear the shape of it. Not notes — cloth does not make notes — but the rhythm, the rise and fall, the pauses where a pianist would breathe. She has heard it so many nights that she can tell, lying with her face to the wall, which piece it is.

Tonight it is the slow one. The stairs.

She does not go in. She learned not to, years ago, the first time, when she went in with her heart going and found him flat on his back with his eyes shut and his hands lifting and falling on the blanket and his face entirely at peace, and she said his name — the name she had always called him, which was not his name, which was *Dad* — and he did not wake, and the hands went on, and she understood that he was somewhere she could not follow and that he was happy there and that waking him would be a kind of theft.

So she lies with her face to the wall and listens to her father play in his sleep.

The doctors had a word for it. She looked it up afterwards, the way you do, in the kitchen at two in the morning with the laptop light on her face. People do it years before anything else shows. Decades, sometimes. They live their dreams with their bodies — shout, strike out, run in the bed — and it is one of the earliest signs there is of the thing that is coming, and almost nobody knows that, and so almost nobody is warned. Her father did not shout. Her father played. For eleven years, through a wall, every few nights, and she had thought it was sweet.

She thinks about the kitchen in the valley.

She was eleven the first time she saw the phone on the counter by the oranges. She asked what it was for and her father — Arman, to everyone but her; she has always liked being the one person who did not have to use it — said *it's for your grandmother* and she did not understand and did not ask again, and the phone was on the counter every time they visited, for years, with its small red light, and her grandmother hummed over it and moved it to wipe the surface and put it back. She was sixteen when the humming went down to one note. She was seventeen when it stopped.

She was thirty-one when she put a phone on her own kitchen counter and pressed the red circle and left it there.

She did not plan it either. She had come down in the morning and her father was at the counter with an orange in his hand, turning it, the way you turn a thing to find where to start it, and he was humming. He had never hummed. In her whole life she had never once heard her father hum; he was a man who either played or was silent. And he was standing at her counter humming four notes going up like stairs, and a turn, and the start of a way down, and he stopped before the end, and said, "The — these. What do we call these," and laughed.

She said the word. He said yes, of course, those. He peeled it. He hummed.

She went upstairs and sat on the edge of her bed for a long time with her hands between her knees. Then she came down and put the phone by the oranges.

Through the wall, the piano stops. The hands have come to the end of the stairs — not the end; the place before the end, the place where the piece turns and starts down — and stopped, the way they always stop, the way her grandmother always stopped, and there is quiet from the other room, and then the slow breathing of a man asleep.

She lies in the dark and thinks about the thing she is building. A warehouse. Water. The thousands of pieces of him she has caught at a counter in five years — she has not stopped; the phone is on the counter still — and the box she will put them in, and the bulbs. He thinks it is his. She has let him think it; it costs nothing, and

some nights he remembers building the first one, the small one, years ago, for his mother, in a rented room with sixty-one strangers, and he tells her about it as if she had not been there, and she lets him.

She thinks: he will play, and the room will answer, and he will believe the lights are hers. And for a while it will be true enough.

She thinks: and then the lights will stop answering. Fewer each night. Because he will stop playing what he hummed, and start playing only what the hands know, and the hands know things the box was never given.

She thinks: and I will sit beside him while it happens, and he will call me by her name, and I will let him.

She turns onto her back. The ceiling. Through the wall, nothing. Then — faintly, cloth under two hands — the stairs begin again, from the bottom.

She does not sleep. She has not, properly, for a year. She lies and listens to her father almost finish something, over and over, through a wall, in a house in the hills, in a city where she was born and he was not, and she waits for morning, when he will come down and warm his hands on a cup he does not drink and look at her across the kitchen with a face that has not decided yet who she is.

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20. THE REVERSAL

I put my hands on the keys.

They are old.

I promised you at the start that I would be a man you could trust. I have not been. This is the only way I know to put that right.

I look at them, in the green light, and they are an old man’s hands. I have looked at these hands every night of my life and they have been forty-five years old, the hands of a man halfway through, and tonight they are spotted on the backs and the knuckles are large

and the skin over them is thin and loose and they are shaking. Not the shaking I know, the shaking of a man moved by something. A small fast steady tremor, in both hands, that stops the instant I lay them on the keys and starts again when I lift them.

I lift them. It starts. I lay them down. It stops.

I do this three times. The hundred wait. Behind me a woman I have just called my mother waits.

I think: *I am sixty.* And then, as if a hand had come down on the number and pushed it: *I am seventy.* I was born the year after the pool was covered and the pool has been covered seventy-two years and I have been doing that arithmetic all night and getting it wrong on purpose, the way you look past a thing in a room. A man of forty-five cannot have been born the year after a thing that happened seventy-two years ago. I have said both numbers tonight in the same breath and heard neither.

My mother is not eighty. My mother would be — I do the sum, and the sum is a hundred and six, and nobody's mother is a hundred and six, and I understand, with my old hands flat on the keys and the tremor gone out of them, that my mother is dead.

She has been dead for twenty years.

I know when. I know the room — a window, a chair, a care home in the valley — and I know I was there and I know that she hummed, at the end, one note, and that I was holding her hand when she stopped, and that the hand was small and the skin moved over the bones. I have known this all night. I have known it for twenty years. I have been sitting at a piano telling a hundred strangers and you that she was in a chair behind me, and the knowing was on the shelf the whole time, whole, and the ladder was gone.

I turn, very slowly, on the bench.

One woman in one chair. Dark hair. Late thirties. A line between the brows. My daughter.

Laleh.

The name comes up out of the floor of me like a bulb at the back of a dark room. I do not say it. I cannot, yet. But I know it is there, the way I know the Tuesday is somewhere in the marsh, and I know

that the hand that has been on my mother's shoulder all night — always, the way you hold a railing — has been on nobody's shoulder. It has been in her own lap. There has been one woman on this stage all night and I have seen two, because I needed two: the one I was playing for and the one who was keeping me.

The room shows people things. I know that. I have read every book a man can read, in another connection, in a doctor's office, with my own face in a mirror doing the thing faces do.

And I understand, with the knowing in my lap, how much of what I have told you tonight was furniture I carried in from other rooms. The first night, the sixty-one, the woman in the yellow coat — that was a rented room, twenty-two years ago, and I have put it in this building because this is the only building I have. The map that failed, the three weeks alone rebuilding it — I do not know whose that was. Perhaps mine, in the old room. Perhaps nobody's. Two thousand nights: this room has not had two thousand nights. I know that the way I know my own weight. I have been telling you the truth in the wrong order, from the wrong year, with the wrong woman in the chair, and every word of it was something that happened.

I look across the water. The eleventh platform is dark. I cannot see whether a boy is sitting on it, and I understand now why I was not afraid of him, and that it does not matter whether he is there.

I am seventy. I have a disease with a man's name in it that comes and goes like weather and shows me children on the water and shakes my hands when they are still. My mother is twenty years dead. Someone has built me a room so that I can go every night to the one place where I am entirely here and keep nothing, and she sits behind me while I am there, and I call her by her grandmother's name, and she lets me, and when I come up — because you do come up — she is there, and I do not know who she is, and she tells me.

Every night.

I have a few minutes of her left. The hands are on the keys and the tremor is gone and the man is in the room, entirely, for once, with

the knowing all the way down off the shelf and in his lap, and I think, as clearly as I have thought anything in a year:

I am not going to be able to keep this.

Not the night. This. The minutes of knowing. It will go the way the film went, and I will be sad and not know why, and she will be in a chair and I will call her Maman, and she will say *all right*.

So I am going to use it.

I lift my hands from the keys and the shaking comes back and I let it. I turn on the bench, all the way round this time, and I look at my daughter, and she sees — I watch her see — that I am in. Her face does the thing. The one I have had no word for all night. I have a word for it now. It is what a face does when a person it has been waiting for all evening finally comes in, and it had stopped watching the door.

“Laleh,” I say.

. . . . . .

INTERLUDE FOUR — THE ROOM

In here nothing has a name until it is called. He has called it. So I can say it now.

It is called Lewy body dementia. The first word is a man's name — a doctor, a long time ago, who found the clumps under a microscope and did not know what they were for. The rest means what it says. It is the one most often called by the wrong name — as Parkinson's, its cousin; as his mother's disease; as something wrong in the mind of a man who has started seeing children in rooms. The doctors have a name for the moment he looked at his daughter and told her, courteously, that she was not his mother: the impostor feeling. It comes with this disease more than with any other. It is not cruelty. It is a face arriving without the place it belongs in.

You have had the rest of it already, with the third verse. Weather, not tide. People who are not there. The hands last, and steady only on the keys. The shelf with the ladder gone. I will not say it twice. He has had enough things said twice tonight.

Here is what I know that he does not, and that the daughter knows, and has known since the first month, and has not said.

Since the first month, fewer bulbs have lit each night.

Not because the box is failing. The box is perfect. She told you why, lying with her face to a wall. Every night the room is a little darker. Every night there is a little more music over the water that nothing answers. The hundred do not notice; each hundred comes once. She notices. She sits in the chair and counts, the way he used to, and the number goes down.

Tonight every bulb he played lit twice, and hundreds more he did not, because she hummed them. She knew that tonight was the last night, and she wanted him to see the room full once more, and she had learned his pieces in order to give them back to him, and did.

Tomorrow there is no room. The stems come out of the floor.

Here is the fourth verse. He knows now whose it is. It is his mother's. It is also his.

Laa-laa, laa-laa — they told me the water was warm.
That it took you so gently you never once cried out for my arm.

I have put down the keys. I will hum, and I will not play —
so that nothing I love will ever be louder than you, from this day.

V. WHAT STAYS

21. THE HOUR

She comes to me. I do not go to her; my knees have had enough of that tonight. She gets up out of the chair and crosses the three steps and crouches where I crouched, beside the bench, so that her face is at the height of mine, and she takes my hand out of my lap — it is shaking; she holds it until it is not — and she says, “Hello.”

“Hello,” I say.

That is how it goes, when I am in. I have learned that tonight and I think I have learned it before and lost it. There is no scene. Nobody weeps. Two people say hello to each other on a stage in the dark as if they had just met at a door, which they have.

“How long,” I say.

She knows what I am asking. She has had a year of me asking it.

“The room’s been open a year. You say two thousand nights; it’s three hundred and some. About a year since they said the name,” she says. “Longer before that. You were playing in your sleep for a long time before anyone knew what it was.”

“Through the wall.”

“Through the wall.”

I look at her. In the green light I can see the line between her brows and I want to put my thumb on it and smooth it like a page, and I do not, because I do not know whether I am allowed, because I do not know how many nights I have done it already and not known.

“Did I build this?” I say.

I know the answer. I am asking to hear it in her voice.

“No,” she says. “You built the first one. The small one, in the rented room, for her, the year before she stopped knowing rooms. Sixty-one people. You told me about it so many times that I could have built it from the telling.” She looks round at the dark marsh, the two thousand stems, the water. “So I did. Bigger. With you in the box instead of her.”

“Me.”

“You hum, Dad. You’ve hummed for six years. You stand at my counter with an orange in your hand and you hum the stairs and you stop before the end and you say *what do we call these*, and you laugh.” She says it gently, the way *there* was said behind me an hour ago. “You never used to. You told me once you were a man who played or was silent. I put the phone by the oranges the first morning I heard it. It’s still there.”

I look at the dark marsh. Thousands of stems. Thousands of pieces of a man at a counter.

“Then it was you humming. Before. When the whole room lit.”

“Yes. I know every one. I cut them myself. I wanted you to see it full once more.”

“Is it any good?”

She laughs. Once, surprised, the way the man did on the first night when he said *that was my father*. “Dad. A hundred strangers a night have cried in it for a year.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Yes,” she says. “It’s good. It’s the best thing I’ve ever made. I made it so you’d have somewhere to go.”

I think about that. The hands are quiet in hers.

“The boy,” I say.

She does not pretend not to understand. “On the far platform?”

“You’ve seen him?”

“No. You’ve told me. Most nights. You’re not frightened of him.”

“No,” I say. “I’m not. I thought I would be.”

“You said that too.”

I want to ask her a great many things and I can feel the hour — I know it is not an hour; I know it is minutes, that the weather is already turning at the edges, that in a little while the ladder will go and the shelf will still be there and I will look at this woman and see a stranger in my mother’s chair — I can feel it going and I want to use it well and I do not know what *well* is. So I ask the thing I have wanted to ask since the stairs.

“The lullaby. You said she sang it once. With the words. In the kitchen. And I was there.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me.”

She is quiet a moment. Behind her the cello has stopped and the room is simply dark and simply waiting, a hundred people who have learned that this room does what it does in its own time.

“It was near the end,” she says. “Her end. She’d stopped standing. You’d come in the morning to sit with her and I’d come after school, and that day I came in and you were both at her kitchen table — this was before the home — and she was singing. Not humming. Singing — words, low, that song, the stairs, all the way through. All the way down. The first time anyone had heard the end of it. And you were sitting across from her with your hands flat on the table, like this” — she puts my hand flat on my own knee — “and you were crying without any sound, the way you do. And when she finished she looked at you and said *there*, the way you’d say it when you put a thing down where it goes. And then she asked if you wanted the room.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“I know.”

“I don’t remember any of it.”

“I know, Dad. It’s all right. I do. That’s what I’m for.” She squeezes my hand once. “And your hands remember. You played it tonight. The whole thing. Twice. I’ve waited a year for that.”

I look at the keys.

“The box doesn’t know it,” I say.

“No. You never hummed the end. Not once. Six years at the counter and you stopped where she stopped, every time.” She smiles, and it is not a happy smile and it is not an unhappy one; it is the smile of somebody who has lived with a fact for a long time. “It’s the one thing of yours I couldn’t catch. So it’s the one thing in here with no bulb.”

“Good,” I say.

She looks at me.

“I mean it. Good. Let it have none.” I do not know quite what I mean and I say it anyway, because the weather is turning and I would rather say a true thing badly than nothing. “Everything else in here is a thing that was caught. That’s all right. That’s what the room is — a thing that answers when it’s called. But that one was never caught. It’s just in the hands. It’s the only thing in here that’s —“ and I cannot find the word, and she finds it for me.

“Present,” she says.

“Yes.”

“Without the other.”

“Yes.”

We stay like that. Her hand round mine, the two of us at the height of each other, in the green light, on a stage, with the water moving.

“There’s ten minutes,” she says eventually. “They paid for ninety. Do you want to stop?”

“No,” I say. “I want to play.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Whatever the hands want. Nothing from the box.” I look at the dark marsh. “I’d like to play one set in here with nothing answering. I think I’ve wanted that for a long time.”

She nods. She stands and goes back to the chair, and sits, and puts her hands in her lap, and looks at me the way she has looked at me all night.

I warm my hands on the cup. Full. I put it down.

I feel the weather come in. It comes the way it comes — from the edges, the far platforms going first, the knowing going soft at the back like the far bulbs going down. I have perhaps a minute of her left. I use it to turn on the bench and say her name once more, so that it is the last thing the man says before he goes.

“Laleh.”

“I’m here.”

“Will you — if I don’t know you after —“

“I’ll tell you,” she says. “I tell you every night.”

I turn back to the keys. The man goes quiet. The hands go first.

. . . . . .

22. THE LAST SET

I will not manage this. Nobody has. For once I am not going to tell you what I played, because I do not know, and that is the whole of it.

The hands go first.

Not to the box. Not to a Tuesday or a Thursday or anything with a bulb at the end of it. They go to a place in the keys I have not been tonight — lower, and slower — and they begin something, and I do not know what it is. It has the stairs in it somewhere. Four notes going up. But not at the start; somewhere inside, the way a face you know is somewhere inside a crowd.

Dark.

Of course dark. Nothing in the box knows this. The room, which has answered every sound I have made for ninety minutes and three hundred nights, hears this and says, patiently, kindly, for the last time: *I do not know this.* And I think — the man thinks, from just behind, just to the side, on his way out — *no. Neither do I. Isn't it beautiful.*

The violin comes in.

She has nothing to follow. There is no fragment to carry further, no phrase to lay a line under. She listens for four bars and then she simply comes in beside me, a third above, not following, walking. The cello finds the floor of it and puts it there. And the saxophone — he stands, I hear him, the one who waits until it starts talking — plays with the reed barely touching, that closed private sound, and he does not take a tune from me, there is no tune to take; he hums. Over the water. In the dark. Like a woman in a kitchen two rooms away.

And the man is gone.

I want to be honest about this, since I have promised. I do not know what happened in the middle. I know I began — the low place in the keys, the stairs somewhere inside it — and I know I ended, because I came up, the way you come up, with a kind of surprise at the air. The middle is a place I was. I was entirely there. I kept nothing.

Here is what I can tell you, from the edges.

That the dark was complete. Two thousand bulbs standing in black water on their stems and not one of them lit, for ten minutes, and the music going over them, and a hundred people sitting in it who had stopped waiting for the light. I heard them stop. There is a sound a room makes when it stops waiting. It is the sound of a hundred people breathing together with nothing to breathe toward.

That my hands did not shake. Not once. I know because I noticed — from the edge, on the way out — that they were still, and that it was the only time tonight they had been still without the keys to steady them, because they were on the keys, and the keys were the railing, and I was walking along it over the water in the dark with my eyes shut and I did not fall.

That the pleasure was there. A bar early. Alone. Unholdable. The same as it has always been, the same as it was at eleven in a school hall and at twenty in a city I had just arrived in and at forty-eight in a rented room with sixty-one strangers. It did not know I was ill. It did not know I was old. It came a half-bar before every arrival and it was gone before the room caught up and it was — I will say this plainly — it was the same. Exactly the same. The one thing in me the water had not reached.

That across the room, on the eleventh platform, in the dark, a small boy sat with his feet over the water and listened, and that near the end — I felt this rather than saw it; there was nothing to see by — he stood up.

That is all I have.

I came up on a low note. The hands had gone down the soft way, further than they came, and settled, and stopped, and the violin let her line fall after mine and the cello let the floor down and the saxophone breathed out one last time and stopped, and there was the water, moving, and a hundred people not breathing, and dark.

I lifted my hands. Held them in the air a moment, the way you do. Put them in my lap. They began to shake, and I let them.

I did not know where I was.

I want that understood. I came up and the man came back into the room and he did not know the room. A piano. Dark. Water, somewhere. Three young people behind me with instruments, breathing. A hundred shapes on low platforms. A chair beside me with a woman in it — dark hair, a line between her brows — looking at me with a face that was doing something I had no word for.

I did not know her. I knew that I did not know her. I knew that I should.

I knew one other thing, and it was the only thing, and it was enough: that whatever I had just done, it had been good. Not good like a review. Good like warmth. The weather of it was still in me, whole, and the thing that had made it was gone entirely, and I sat in the dark with my hands shaking in my lap and the weather in my chest and thought, as clearly as I had thought anything all night:

Something's happened, I think.

The woman stood up.

. . . . . .

23. THE FRIENDS

They would try, afterwards, separately and together, to describe the last part of the night, and would fail, and would eventually stop trying and simply say to people: *the lights went out*. Which was not what happened. The lights were never on. That was the point, and it was the thing nobody who had not been there could be made to understand.

For the first eighty minutes the room had answered. Every short phrase the old man played had brought up its handful of lights across the dark water and let them go, and by the middle of the night the marsh had been a town, and then — around the time the woman in the chair had got up and gone out and come back, which

neither of them understood and both of them had watched — the old man had stopped, and sat with his hands in his lap, and the lights had gone down, all of them, and had not come back.

And then he had played for ten minutes with nothing answering.

Her husband said, in the car, that it was like watching someone talk to a person who had died. She said no. It was like watching someone who had stopped needing to be answered.

The music was the most beautiful thing either of them had ever heard, and they could not have hummed you a bar of it.

Then it stopped. The old man lifted his hands and held them in the air and put them down, and the three young players let their sounds go one at a time, and the water moved, and nobody on any of the eleven platforms breathed, and the old man sat very still at the dark piano and looked — she saw this by the one small green light at the stage edge — looked round the room as if he had never seen it, and then at the woman beside him as if he had never seen her either.

And the woman in the chair stood up, and in the green light they saw her face for the first time.

“That’s her,” she said, into her husband’s ear. It was. Laleh.

She crossed the three steps to the piano. She did not hurry. She put her hand on the old man’s shoulder — her left hand, flat, as you put a hand on a wall to find it in the dark — and left it there. And she looked out at the room for the first time all night, at a hundred people she could not see, and she began to hum.

It was the four notes. The stairs. The thing the saxophone had turned into a woman’s voice in the middle of the night; the thing the old man had played twice, somewhere in the last hour, with no light answering. Laleh hummed it with her mouth shut and her hand on his shoulder, and it went up, and turned, and came down the soft way, further than it rose, and settled.

Then she sang it. With words.

And the room, which had been dark for ten minutes, began — very slowly — to answer her.

It was not the box. The box did not know this song and never would; they learned afterwards, in the tea room, that for those six minutes the lights had been run by hand, from a board at the back, by the people who had built the room and had rehearsed this with her in the empty afternoons.

Not the way it had answered him. They understood that much, even then. His lights had come in handfuls, scattered, sudden, and gone. Hers came one at a time, far off, as if from the back of a very long life. On the first verse — a courtyard holding its breath, a moon kept in water the way a mother keeps a child — a single bulb came up at the far end of the room, and held, and another, a long way from it, and that was all. The quiet years. The early ones, when nothing much is laid down and what is laid down is small.

Sleep. I am coming. I am coming at the end of the song.

Her voice was low and scratched and plain, not a singer's voice, a voice that had been talking to someone for a year and was tired, and there was a sadness in it from the first line that did not ask for anything. The violin found her on the second verse and walked beside her. The cello laid the floor. The saxophone, far back, hummed, like a woman in a kitchen two rooms away. And the lights came a little faster — a few near the middle now, a few near the stage, their twins trembling in the water under them — the way memories come faster once a life has started to have things in it.

The piano is loud, and a mother at her music will not hear you fall.

Her husband's hand found hers in the dark on that line. Neither of them knew yet why.

On the third verse she went almost to speaking, and the room held its lights where they were and added none — *the line that I loved was so beautiful that I played it once more* — and then, on the fourth, the piano under her began to climb, a slow figure going up the stairs and up them again in layers, and the lights began to come everywhere, dozens, hundreds, the marsh becoming the town they had watched it become an hour before, except that now they knew what they were watching: a life filling up. *I have put down the keys. I will hum, and I will not play.* By the end of the fourth verse the whole room was lit, two thousand small gold lights standing in the

water and two thousand more under it, and the water itself was gold, and every face on every couch was turned up toward a woman with her hand on an old man's shoulder.

Then the piano stopped climbing. A long pause. Rain, somewhere, on a roof — a hundred people breathing, not rain.

And she sang the last verse the way you would not have thought that voice could — up out of the chest, louder than anywhere before, breaking on the second word and going on anyway:

Laa-laa — no. Wake now. Wake now. Call to me through the wall.
There is no song. I am not at the keys. I am here. I hear it all.

And on the third line — *Come to the door, little one — I have thrown it open wide* — the lights began to go.

Not all at once. From the far end first, the way they had come, a slow wave of dark rolling toward the stage, street by street, the town going out behind her as she sang, until on the last line — *There is nothing I am finishing. There is no one else inside.* — there was one bulb left, low, near the piano, and she held the low note at the end until that one went too.

Dark. The quiet years again. The ones at the other end.

Nobody moved. Nobody breathed. She took her hand off his shoulder.

Then she spoke.

Someone had set a microphone on a stand beside the piano, and she took it from the stand and held it the way people hold a thing they do not often hold, and the green light showed her face, and she waited until she could.

"Thank you for coming," she said. "I want to thank some people before I say anything else, because they'll be gone tomorrow and I won't get another chance in front of you. The people who built this — who flooded a floor and wired two thousand lights and stood every one of them in the water by hand, and who have taken you across that walkway ten at a time, three hundred nights, without losing anybody — and who ran the lights for me just now." A sound from the room that was nearly a laugh. "The three people behind me. A violin that has learned to follow a man who doesn't always

know where he’s going. A cello that has been the floor of this room every night so the rest of us had something to stand on. And a saxophone that waits fifty minutes, every night, until the room starts talking, and then plays like a woman humming with her mouth shut.” She turned. “And the pianist.”

She stopped. The water.

“Who is my father.”

Nobody on the platforms made a sound. She let it sit.

“I’m going to tell you where the song came from, and then where the room came from, and then I’ll let you go.

“My grandmother was a pianist. In another country, a long time ago, she lost a child — her first — while she was playing, with a door pulled to so the music wouldn’t wake him. She never played again. She hummed instead, for fifty years, the same few notes, and never once got to the end of them, because the end was where it had happened. She wrote the words you just heard afterwards, for the child, and sang them once that anyone knows of, at the very end of her life, when she’d forgotten everything else. My father was in the room. He didn’t remember it. I did. I was seventeen.

“Then my father started humming.

“He never had. He was a man who played or was silent. And one morning he was at my kitchen counter with an orange in his hand, humming his mother’s four notes and stopping where she stopped, and he asked me what the thing in his hand was called. I put a phone on the counter that day. I’ve recorded him for six years. Thousands of pieces, a few seconds each. Every light that answered him tonight was one of them.

“He has a disease that comes and goes. Some nights he knows me. Most nights I’m his mother, and I let him think so, because she’s who he needs in the chair. It’s faster than hers was. There aren’t many lights left in him, and they’re far apart now — the way they are at the start of the night, one at the back, then one a long way from it. I built this while there were still some. I wanted him to have somewhere to go, every night, where it didn’t matter that they were going. And I wanted a hundred strangers a night to sit in what

he feels — something that mattered, and no memory under it — because I couldn't think of another way to show anyone where he lives.

"Tomorrow the water goes down the drain. He won't remember this room. He doesn't remember it now; he's sitting there wondering who I am.

"But he'll feel it. That's the whole of what I've learned in a year. The feeling stays after the thing is gone. He'll go home tonight warm, and not know why, and that's what this was for.

"One more thing. Beside each of your platforms there's a bulb that hasn't been lit all night. It's going to come on now. It's yours. It's the only light in this room that was made tonight instead of remembered, and it's the one you get to take out with you. Thank you."

She put the microphone back on the stand.

For a moment nothing happened. Then, from somewhere in the dark to their left, the sound of a person standing up off a couch. Then another. Then everywhere — a hundred people getting to their feet on wooden platforms over black water, in a dark so complete they could not see the person beside them, and the sound that came up out of it was not loud, it was not the sound of a concert hall, it was the sound of a hundred people who had been told something true and did not know what to do with their hands, and it went on for a long time, and she stood in the green light with her hands at her sides and let it.

And then, beside each platform, the large bulb on its stem came on.

Eleven warm lights, low over the water, one for each couch, doubled under themselves. Nothing on the stage. Nothing in the marsh. Only the lights that belonged to the audience now, warming the wood under their bare feet, showing each group of ten the faces of the strangers they had lain beside for ninety minutes and never seen, and showing them the walkway home.

Laleh went back to the piano.

She bent and said something to the old man. The two of them, on the nearest platform, with their own light warm beside them, were close enough to hear what he said back.

“Did we have a nice time?” the old man said. Pleasantly. The way you would ask a kind stranger about her evening.

“Yes,” she said. “We did.”

He nodded, and looked round at the eleven low lights and the dark between them and the woman in front of him, with the mild open interest of a man to whom everything has just arrived and who has not been told what any of it is for.

“I thought so,” he said. “I can feel it.”

She put her hand on his shoulder. Behind them the cello began, very low, the four notes, and the saxophone found them and hummed them back, with the reed barely touching, and no bulb on the stage answered either of them, and none would again.

He stood. He was taller than he had looked at the piano, and older, and he moved the way old men move who have been told to be careful of their feet, and she kept her hand on his shoulder and steered him, and the two of them went along the walkway away from the stage into a dark that had nothing in it, no lamp, no light, the hum of the cello and the saxophone going on behind them over the water until it was only the saxophone, and then only the water.

The two of them on the nearest platform watched until there was nothing to watch.

. . . . . .

In the car her husband did not start the engine for a long time.

Thousands of lights. She knew that. She had watched them come and go for an hour and a half and she could not, sitting there with the heater on, remember a single one. Not one bulb. Not where it had been or when or what tune had lit it. They were gone the way the hours of your own life go: every one of them, and no funeral.

What she had instead was something she kept putting her hand to, flat, over the breastbone, the way you touch a pocket to check a thing is still there.

“What was that,” he said, eventually. Not a question.

“I don’t know.”

“Why did she keep her hand on his shoulder? The whole time. Even going out.”

She thought about it. She thought about a glass being looked into, a year ago, in a kitchen; about *for someone*; about a woman on a plain chair who had not, for as long as they could see her, taken her eyes off the back of an old man’s head.

“I think she was holding on,” she said.

He started the car. The street off the river was dark and the warehouse behind them was dark and the river itself, when they crossed it, was a flat black nothing with the city’s lights lying on it upside down.

It was a mile before either of them noticed they were both humming — four notes going up like stairs, and a turn at the top — and that neither of them had the faintest idea where they had learned it, and that neither of them stopped where the old man had always stopped. They went on down the soft way, further than it rose, and settled.

. . . . . .

GLOSSARY

Alzheimer's disease [ALTS-high-merz] — The most common of the diseases that take memory in old age. It damages the brain from the newest layers down, so that recent memories go first and the oldest — including music learned in childhood — go last. Named for the German doctor who first described it.

Filament [FIL-a-ment] — The thin thread of wire inside an old-fashioned light bulb that glows when electricity passes through it.

Impostor feeling — Doctors call it Capgras syndrome [KAP-grah]: the conviction, in certain brain illnesses, that a loved one has been replaced by a stranger who looks the same. Named for the French doctor who described it. The person feels it sincerely and is not being cruel.

Lewy body dementia [LOO-ee] — The second most common of the diseases that take the mind in old age. Caused by clumps of a protein inside brain cells, the same protein found in Parkinson's. It comes and goes from hour to hour, causes detailed silent visions of people and animals, stiffens and shakes the body, and is faster than Alzheimer's. Named for the doctor who first saw the clumps under a microscope. Often misdiagnosed.

Lullaby — A song sung to a child to make it sleep. In Persian the word is *lalaee* [laa-laa-EE], and the traditional songs are often sadder than the child can understand; mothers have always sung their own griefs into them.

Maman [maa-MAAN] — Persian for *Mother*, as a child says it. The one word of his first language the pianist never gave up.

Tarpaulin [tar-PAW-lin] — A heavy waterproof canvas sheet for covering things outdoors.

Zone, the — What musicians call the state a skilled person enters when deep in a task: the self-watching part of the mind goes quiet, time goes wrong, and little is remembered afterwards.

A pianist plays in a flooded warehouse in Los Angeles. Thousands of small glass bulbs stand in the black water on stems. When he plays something the room remembers, a light comes on; when the music lets go, it goes out.

Nobody who comes can say afterwards why they wept. Nobody can remember a single bulb.

This is a book about what is left when memory goes. About a feeling that outlasts the thing that made it, the way weather stays after the sky it came from. About a man who is entirely present and keeps nothing, and the country he has gone to live in, and who is waiting for him there.

It is about music, and the hands that remember what the head has lost. And about one tune that no light has ever answered.

It is told across one night, from the stage and from the dark.

The memory goes. The feeling stays. He will go home warm, and not know why.



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