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No. 34



FOUR MINUTES PAST TWO

C H E W Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

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No safety statistic, corporate program, research finding, or technical procedure described herein should be taken as an account of any real undertaking.

SYNOPSIS

Amal was born in the first week of March and did not sleep, and neither did her mother.

That is not unusual and nobody treats it as a condition. It is just what having a baby is. Everyone Leila Sadr knows has been through some version of it, and everyone tells her the same three things: it passes, you'll forget it, you're doing brilliantly.

By night ninety she is losing words. By night one hundred and forty she is losing hours. She is shouting at three in the morning at a man who does not shout back, and she has started writing things down, because there is a pattern in the nights and she cannot hold it in her head long enough to look at it.

There is a pattern. She is not imagining it, and she is not well, and both of those are true at the same time, and only one of them can be written on a form.

Her husband is calm and kind and has not raised his voice once in ten months. Everybody says so. Her GP says so, her health visitor says so, and by the end so does she.

A slow, cold novella about the most ordinary exhaustion there is, and what can be built inside it by somebody patient.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Ask anybody who has had a baby about the nights and watch what happens to their face.

They will laugh first. Everybody laughs first. Then they will tell you about the time they put the milk in the cupboard, or drove somewhere and could not account for the journey, or sat down on the stairs at four in the morning and cried at a wall for no reason they could name afterwards. And somewhere in the middle of the funny version there is usually a sentence that arrives in a different voice, and then they move on quickly, and you should let them.

That sentence is what this book is about.

We do not treat it as anything. It is not a condition and it has no name and nobody is monitored for it, because it is universal and temporary and everyone survives it. And yet what it does to a person is measurable, and it has been measured, and the findings are not gentle. Judgement goes. Emotional control goes. Words go. The part of the brain that keeps proportion between a small event and a large reaction stops answering, and after enough nights you become somebody who does not sound like yourself in a way that other people can hear and you cannot.

The cruellest finding is the one at the centre of this story. Past a certain point, people who are badly impaired stop noticing that they are getting worse. The sense of how tired you are levels off while the damage keeps going. Which means that the person least able to assess the state is the person in it.

So you are exhausted, and you are not a reliable witness to your own exhaustion, and you are alone in a house at four in the morning, and the only other adult present is the one telling you how you seem.

That is an enormous amount of undefended human being, on a predictable schedule, for about a year, in almost every home on this street.

Go and check on somebody who has a new baby. Not with a casserole. Go and take the baby out for two hours and let them sleep.

Chew Z

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I. THE FIRST HUNDRED

ONE. NIGHT NINE

9 March

Amal was born on the first of March at twenty past four in the morning and I have not had four consecutive hours of sleep since.

I want to start with how ordinary this is, because everything that comes afterwards depends on you believing that the beginning was ordinary. It was. There is nothing in the first three weeks of this that is not in every leaflet in every waiting room in the country.

She fed every two hours. Sometimes ninety minutes. She would go down and I would lie in the dark doing the arithmetic — if she goes now, and she sleeps until half two, that is two hours and ten minutes — and the arithmetic itself would keep me awake for forty of those minutes, and then she would wake at ten past one anyway.

Nobody tells you about the arithmetic. It is the first thing that goes wrong and it happens on about day four and nobody has ever put it in a leaflet.

On night nine I came downstairs at ten to three because she would not settle in the room and I did not want to wake Adam, and I sat in the kitchen with her against my shoulder and the light off, and I looked at the garden through the door and I thought, quite clearly and without any drama: I have made a terrible mistake and I would like to go back.

Then I cried for about eleven minutes and then I stopped and made a cup of tea I did not drink.

I have since learned that some enormous proportion of new mothers have that exact thought in the first fortnight, that it means nothing whatsoever, and that essentially none of them ever say it out loud. I did not say it out loud. I did not say it out loud for eight months.

Adam was extraordinary. I want that on the record here, at the beginning, in my own words, before anything else gets written down about him or about me.

He took the eleven o'clock feed every night without ever once being asked. He had worked out the bottle warmer before I had. He got

up with her on Saturdays and let me sleep until half nine, and he did not make a performance of it, he did not come in and tell me he had done it, I would just wake up and it would be quarter to ten and the house would smell of coffee.

When my mother stayed for a fortnight and was difficult about the feeding, he handled it so smoothly that neither of us realised he had handled it until she had gone.

He never raised his voice. Not once. I am going to say that a number of times in this account and I want you to notice each time, because it is true, and because it is the single most important fact about the ten months that follow, and because by the end you will understand that a man who never raises his voice is not necessarily a man who is not shouting.

Night nine was ordinary. Night eleven was ordinary. Night twenty-three she slept five hours and I woke at six in a panic and went and put my hand on her back.

The first thing I could not explain happened on night forty-one, and even then I did not think anything of it, and there is no reason on earth why I should have.

TWO. THE ARITHMETIC

March

Nobody tells you about the arithmetic and it is the first thing that goes wrong.

Here is what it is. She goes down at 11:40. She last fed at 10:15, so she will probably go three hours, so she will be up at about ten past one. It is now 11:52 because it took twelve minutes to get her down and then stand there. If I go to sleep now — properly now, not lie here — I get one hour and eighteen minutes. If she goes long I might get two. If I go and do the bottles first that is eleven minutes gone, so one hour and seven, but if I do not do the bottles now I have to do them at ten past one with her screaming, which costs more.

That is not a thought I had once. That is the permanent background process of a human being for about a year, running under

everything else, all day and all night, and it cannot be switched off, and — this is the part — **it costs sleep to run.**

You lie in the dark having earned an hour and eighteen minutes and you spend twenty-six of them awake, doing the sum, revising the sum, watching the sum get smaller in real time. Then you fall asleep frightened, which is not sleep in the way anybody means it.

The clock is the enemy. I turned mine to face the wall in April and then found I was picking it up to look at it, so I put it in a drawer, and then I started using my phone, which is worse.

Some other things nobody tells you.

You cannot bank it. Everybody says *sleep when the baby sleeps* and it is well meant and it does not work, and the reason is not the washing. The reason is that sleep is not a tap. After enough broken nights it stops arriving when instructed. You lie down in your allotted forty minutes so wound about the forty minutes that you spend all forty of them lying there being awake very fast.

It is worse at four than at two. There is a thing that happens between about half three and five where the world goes wrong. Everybody who works nights knows it. The temperature of you drops and the thoughts change character, and a problem that was ordinary at midnight becomes, at four, structural and permanent and entirely your fault. It is a physiological trough and it lifts at six. Nobody has ever told a new mother that. If somebody had said to me, *at four in the morning your brain will lie to you and it will stop at six*, it would have saved me a hundred hours.

The loneliness is a specific one. It is not being alone; the house is full. It is being the only person awake within a mile, at an hour when being awake is not permitted, holding somebody who needs you completely and cannot speak. There is a particular quality to the light from a phone screen at that hour that I will know until I die.

And the bargaining. I would think: if she goes until four I will be fine. Then four would come and I would think: if she goes until half five I will be fine. There is no version of this where you are fine. You are simply moving the line and the line moves with you, and

after eleven weeks of moving the line you have quietly stopped believing there is a line.

I am putting this chapter in because everything afterwards was built on top of it and because it is the part everybody has actually lived through. If you have done this, none of the above is new to you.

The only thing I would add — and I did not know it then — is that this is the ground floor. This is the ordinary version, with nobody doing anything to anybody. This is what it costs when it is nobody's fault.

THREE. WHAT IT ACTUALLY DOES

A thing I looked up later

I did not know any of this at the time. I want to put it here anyway, because the whole of the rest of this depends on it, and because when I finally did look it up I sat on the bathroom floor and read for two hours with the door locked.

Sleep deprivation is not tiredness. Tiredness is a feeling. This is a measurable degradation of a person, and it has been measured, repeatedly, in laboratories, on volunteers, for decades.

Here is roughly what is known.

After seventeen to nineteen hours awake, performance on tests of reaction and judgement is equivalent to a blood alcohol level of about point-oh-five. After twenty-four hours it is around point-one. In this country you cannot legally drive at either. Nobody has ever suggested that a woman on night ninety should not be driving, and every one of us drives.

Chronic partial restriction — not staying up all night, just getting six hours instead of eight, repeatedly — accumulates. Fourteen days of that produces deficits equivalent to two entire nights without sleep. It builds. There is no plateau in the damage.

Emotional control is worse hit than anything else. The part of the brain that reacts to threat becomes dramatically more reactive when you are short of sleep — one well-known study measured

something like a sixty percent increase — and, critically, its connection to the part of the brain that keeps proportion is weakened. So the alarm gets louder and the thing that decides whether the alarm is warranted stops answering.

That is not a metaphor. That is an anatomical description of why, on night one hundred and forty-one, a reasonable woman with a good marriage screamed at her husband in a kitchen about a boiler.

Language goes. Word-finding, specifically. You will be mid-sentence and the noun will not arrive and you will stand there in front of somebody with your mouth open. I did that to a woman in a shop and could not retrieve the word *receipt* and had to point.

Time goes. You lose stretches. Not blackouts — you are functioning, you are upright, you have simply not laid the memory down, and you will discover this later when somebody refers to a conversation you have no record of.

And past a certain depth people start to see and hear things that are not there. This is not rare and it is not madness. It is what a brain does when it is being denied the thing it needs, and it happens to soldiers and junior doctors and long-distance sailors and mothers, and almost none of them ever report it, for reasons that will become extremely obvious.

But the finding that matters — the one I would put on the wall of every antenatal class in this country — is this.

They asked the volunteers how impaired they felt.

For the first few days, the reported sleepiness tracked the measured damage. Then the reported sleepiness levelled off. It stopped rising.

And the measured damage kept going.

The people in the study got steadily, objectively worse at everything, for two weeks, while telling the researchers, honestly, that they had got used to it and felt about the same as yesterday.

Read that again, because it is the whole of my life for a year.

The person least able to tell you how badly a state is affecting them is the person inside it. Not through stupidity. Through the specific

mechanism of the state itself. The instrument you would use to assess the damage is the thing that has been damaged.

So when somebody eventually sat down opposite me with a form and asked me how I thought I had been coping, they were asking a question that could not be answered, and they did not know that, and neither did I.

FOUR. NIGHT FORTY-ONE

9 April

The boiler.

Ours is in the cupboard on the landing, directly outside Amal's door, and it is old and it makes a noise when it fires — a knock, then a long low run — and it fires when the timer tells it to and at no other time.

The timer is a plastic dial with pins in it. Morning at half six, evening at five. That is all it has ever done.

On night forty-one it fired at ten past three.

Amal had gone down at one and I had been asleep for about ninety minutes, which at that point in my life was a fortune, an actual fortune, and the knock went through the wall and she went off like an alarm and that was the night finished.

I stood on the landing at twenty past three with her screaming against my shoulder and opened the cupboard and looked at the dial and every pin was where it should be.

In the morning I said to Adam: the boiler came on in the night.

And he said — and I remember this exactly, because of everything, because I have gone over it four hundred times — he said: "Did it? God, sorry, that'll be me. I put it on a boost when I came up, I wasn't thinking. Water was freezing."

Which is a completely ordinary sentence. There is a boost button. It is a real button on the front of the thing. Men come home and press it.

"It woke her."

"I know. I heard. I'm sorry, love." And he put his hand flat on the back of my neck for a second, which is a thing he does, and said, "I'll not touch it again."

And that was that. It was nothing. It was a man pressing a button and a baby waking up and a wife being told sorry, and if you had asked me at any point in the following four months about night forty-one I would not have been able to tell you it had happened.

I only know the date because of the notebook, and I only started the notebook in July.

I have thought a great deal about whether that first one was deliberate. I do not know. I will never know, and neither will you, and I have decided that it does not actually matter — because whether or not he meant it on the ninth of April, he learned something on the tenth.

He learned what it cost me. He watched me at the kitchen table at seven in the morning with a baby who had been up since three, and he saw what ninety minutes was worth, and he saw that I did not for one second suspect anything, and that when he apologised I thanked him.

That is all the information anybody would need.

The boiler did not go off again for six weeks. When it did, I did not mention it, because by then I had stopped mentioning most things, because there was no room left in a day for anything that was not the immediate next thing.

FIVE. SIX TO EIGHT WEEKS

22 April

The health visitor came at six weeks and she was called Marie and she was lovely, and I want to describe the questionnaire properly because it comes back at the end and by then it will not look the same.

It is called the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale. Ten questions. You do it on the sofa with a biro. It has been used for forty years, it is well validated, it has almost certainly saved a very

large number of lives, and I have no complaint against it of any kind.

You score each answer nought to three. Things like: I have been able to laugh and see the funny side of things. I have blamed myself unnecessarily when things went wrong. I have been so unhappy that I have been crying.

And the tenth one.

The tenth question is about whether the thought of harming yourself has occurred to you.

Everybody who has ever done this form knows about the tenth question. You get to it and something in the room changes, and both of you notice, and both of you carry on as though it has not.

I scored six. Anything under about ten is unremarkable. Marie said I was doing brilliantly, and asked how Adam was getting on, and I said he was extraordinary, and she wrote that down, and she meant it kindly and so did I.

Here is what I want to say about that form.

It asks how you have felt in the past seven days. It is a self-report instrument. It is, necessarily and by design, a measurement taken with the patient's own judgement as the measuring device.

At six weeks mine was fine. My judgement was tired and intact.

Nobody comes back and does it again at six months unless something has flagged. Nothing had flagged. Why would it.

The other thing that happened at six weeks was that Marie asked me, in the gentlest voice imaginable, in the middle of a list of other things, whether I had ever had any thoughts about harming the baby.

And I said no.

That was a lie. It was not a large lie and I did not experience it as one at the time, and I would tell it again tomorrow.

Because I had — everybody has — and I have since found out just how universal it is. Some enormous share of new mothers get the intrusive image. You are carrying her down the stairs and your

mind serves you a picture of dropping her. You are standing at the hob and it offers you something. It arrives unbidden, it is horrifying, it is *distressing precisely because it is abhorrent to you*, and the research is unambiguous that it does not predict harm. It predicts a mother who is monitoring for danger. It is, if anything, the alarm working.

Not one woman I have ever met has said yes to that question.

Because we all know, in a way that has never been taught and never been said out loud, that the answer goes on a record, and that the record does not have a field for *and this means the opposite of what it sounds like*.

So there is a national screening programme with one question that nobody answers honestly, and everybody involved knows it, and it runs anyway, because the alternative is not asking.

Remember Marie. She has one more scene and she does everything right in it.

SIX. EVERYBODY SAYS IT PASSES

April to June

Here is a complete list of what people say.

It passes. — My mother, my sister, both my aunts, four women at the clinic, the man in the chemist, everybody.

You'll forget all of it. Honestly. You forget. — This one is meant as a kindness and it is a strange one when you examine it, because what it says is: the thing you are currently living through does not count.

Are you getting any help? — The correct answer to this is yes, because the wrong answer starts a conversation nobody has time for.

She'll sleep when she's ready. — True, and useless, in the way that *you'll die eventually* is true and useless.

Have you tried —? Yes. All of it. The white noise, the swaddle, the routine, the different formula, the darker room, the lighter room, the earlier bath, the later bath, the book, the other book, the

woman on the internet with the method, the woman on the internet who says the first woman is dangerous.

God, I remember. We were zombies. — This is the good one. This one is solidarity and it helps and I am grateful for every person who said it.

Enjoy it. It goes so fast. — This is said by people whose children are grown, and it is true, and it is the single worst sentence available in the language to say to a woman at four months, because it converts your suffering into a failure of appreciation.

My sister was on the phone twice a week and she was wonderful. My mother came for a fortnight and was difficult about the feeding and also did four hundred pounds' worth of ironing.

There is a group on my phone with five women from the antenatal class in it and it is the single most useful object I own. There are messages in it timestamped 03:12 and 04:40 and 02:58. Somebody is always awake. Nobody in that group ever said *it passes* to anybody.

What none of them could do — and I want to be fair to every one of them — is be in the house.

That is the whole thing. Everybody was kind and everybody was elsewhere. The help you get is help that arrives at eleven in the morning and leaves at two, and the problem is at four, and there is no cultural mechanism whatsoever for anybody to be in your house at four.

Except one, and he lived there.

I have thought about this a great deal since and it is the closest thing to an explanation I have. The reason nobody saw it is not that they did not care. It is that the entire structure of how we support new mothers is built around daylight, and the whole of what happened to me happened between midnight and five.

There were, over ten months, perhaps four hundred hours in which something could have been noticed by somebody who was not him.

Every one of them was after midnight.

And the culture we have built has decided, without ever discussing it, that after midnight a new mother is somebody else's business, and the somebody else is whoever she is married to.

NIGHT LINE I

MATERNAL & INFANT NIGHT LINE — CALL RECORD

Handler: J. Whitcombe. Call 1 of session. Duration 9 min 40 sec.

02:51. Female caller, first-time mother, infant approx 4 months. States she is not in crisis and apologises three times for calling.

Presenting concern: infant will not settle; caller has not slept more than two hours consecutively for "about a week, maybe more, I've stopped counting."

Caller was coherent, oriented, appropriate. Some word-finding difficulty noted, self-corrected.

Advice given per protocol: safe sleep, feeding, when to contact GP. Caller already knew all of it.

Quoted, with permission for the record: "I don't actually want advice. I'm sorry. I just wanted somebody to be awake at the same time as me."

Handler note: We talked about her garden for four minutes. She laughed twice. Ended call settled. No further action. No safeguarding concern.

Handler note, personal, not for file: she thanked me eleven times.

II. THE NOTEBOOK

SEVEN. NIGHT NINETY-SIX

4 June

An alarm went off in the house at four minutes past two and then stopped.

One tone. Maybe two. It came from downstairs or from the landing, I could not tell you which, and by the time I was properly awake it had gone and the house was doing the thing houses do at two in the morning, which is nothing, loudly.

Amal was already going. That is the part that matters. Whatever it was, it was enough to start her, and once she is started at two she is up for the night, and she was, and she was.

At about half three I said out loud to nobody, in the dark, in the chair: what was that.

In the morning I asked him.

"An alarm? What sort of alarm?"

"A phone. Like a phone alarm. Two beeps."

He was making toast. He did not stop making toast, and he did not do the thing that people do when they are covering, which is to become still. He said, "Not mine. Mine's on silent Tuesdays because of the thing with Rob." Which was true; there was a thing with Rob and he had done that for months. "Could it be the smoke one? They chirp when the battery goes."

"It wasn't a chirp."

"Could've been the fridge? It does that beep if the door's not shut."

And I stood in my own kitchen and could not tell him it was not the fridge, because I did not know it was not the fridge, because I had been asleep ninety seconds before I heard it and I had been asleep for a total of about four hours in three days, and the honest answer to *are you certain what you heard* was no.

That is the whole architecture. He never once told me I was wrong. He offered me two ordinary explanations and let me measure them against my own memory, and my own memory was the thing that had been broken, and neither of us said that out loud.

"You look wiped," he said. "Go up at eight, I'll do her."

He did. He always did.

It happened again on the eleventh and on the nineteenth. On the nineteenth I got as far as sitting up and looking at the clock — 02:04 — and thinking, with a kind of stupid triumph: *four minutes past two again*, and then Amal started and I did not think about it again for eleven days.

That is not a failure of intelligence. I want to be quite firm about that, because I have spent a long time being ashamed of it. Nobody at that level of sleep debt is running a hypothesis. You are running a queue. Everything in the queue is the next physical thing that has to be done to keep an infant alive, and there is no memory available for a pattern that spans more than about six hours, because the memory is being used.

He did not need me to be stupid.

He needed me to be busy.

EIGHT. THE NOTEBOOK

July

I started writing things down on the second of July and I want to explain exactly why, because it becomes important later in a way I could not have predicted and which I still find hard to talk about.

It was not suspicion. I have to say that clearly. On the second of July I did not suspect my husband of anything. If you had asked me I would have said I had a good marriage and a bad sleeper.

I started writing things down because I could not hold anything in my head.

That is all. A woman four months in cannot remember whether she gave the vitamin drops, so she writes down the vitamin drops. Then she writes down the feeds because the health visitor asks about feeds. Then she writes down the nights, because at every appointment somebody asks how she is sleeping and she never knows, she says *not great*, and she wanted for once to be able to answer properly.

Date. Time down. Time woken. What woke her.

That last column is the one that did it, and I did not put it there for any sinister reason. I put it there because *what woke her* determines what you do next. Hungry is a bottle. Wind is twenty minutes upright. Noise is nothing, you just sit there.

So I wrote noise.

And then a fortnight later I turned back four pages looking for something else entirely and there were three entries with *noise* in the last column and the times were 02:04, 02:04 and 02:06.

I sat on the floor of the landing outside the airing cupboard with the notebook on my knees and read it eleven times.

Here is what happens to a reasonable person at that moment. You do not think: my husband is doing this. That thought is not available. It is so far outside the shape of your life that your mind does not offer it, in the same way it does not offer you the thought that the house is on fire when you smell toast.

What you think is: *there is a pattern and I need more data.*

So the notebook stopped being a feeding log and became something else. Times. Durations. Which room the sound came from. Whether he was in bed when I woke. Whether the landing light was on, because I had started noticing the landing light.

By the end of August it was thirty pages.

By the end of September it was a hundred and ten, and I had started using a second colour, and I had a page at the back that was a list of dates with nothing else on it, and I could not have told you what that page was for.

I want you to hold two facts at once, because everybody I have ever tried to explain this to holds one or the other and never both.

The first is that the notebook is correct. Every entry in it is true. The pattern is real, and it is in there, and anybody who sat down with it and a highlighter for an hour would see it.

The second is that a woman four months postpartum, on four hours of broken sleep, with a hundred and ten pages of handwritten

surveillance of her own husband, is — from the outside, to any professional, on any measure that exists — a woman who is not well.

Both. At the same time. That is the trap and it does not have a door in it.

The better my record got, the sicker I looked. There is no version of me that produces the evidence and does not simultaneously produce the diagnosis, because the evidence *is* the diagnosis, and it is not anybody's fault that this is so.

He never once told me not to write it.

He bought me a nicer notebook in September. Cloth-bound. He said, since you're going to keep doing it.

NINE. NIGHT ONE HUNDRED AND TWELVE

20 June

The door.

We have a door at the bottom of the stairs, which is unusual in a house this age and which is the reason we bought it, because it means you can have the telly on and the baby up there.

It does not swing. It is not that kind of door. It sits in a frame that has moved over ninety years and it goes over the carpet with a scrape and you have to lift it slightly on the handle, and everybody who has ever visited has struggled with it, and that scrape is the single loudest thing in our house.

On night one hundred and twelve I heard the scrape at ten to one.

I was on the sofa. I want to be precise. I had come down at half twelve because Amal had finally gone and I could not face the bedroom, which is a thing that happens and which I have since found out is very common — you get an hour and you spend it awake downstairs, out of a kind of spite, because the hour is the only thing that is yours.

The telly was off. I was sitting in the dark, and the door at the bottom of the stairs went — that scrape, the whole length of it — and I said, "Adam?"

And nothing.

I got up and went into the hall and the door was closed and the house was dark and upstairs the landing light was off and there was no sound at all.

I stood there for a long time. Long enough that my feet got cold.

And then I did a thing that I have thought about every day since, which is that I did not go up.

I went back into the front room and I sat down and I put a blanket over my knees and I stayed there until Amal went off at twenty past two, and the reason — the actual reason, and it took me nine months and a great deal of help to be able to say this — is that some part of me had already understood, and had worked out that going up the stairs would require me to have a conversation, and that in that conversation I would have to say the sentence out loud, and that once I had said it out loud I would have to live in a house where I had said it.

So I sat downstairs in the dark instead and did not say it for another four months.

In the morning he was at the table with her on his knee doing the thing where he lets her hold the spoon.

"You were down there ages," he said. "I woke up about one and you weren't there. I nearly came down."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because if you'd got her off and you were having ten minutes, and I came thumping down, I'd have been the arsehole who woke everybody up." He looked up at me and grinned. "How'd I do?"

And I said, "You did well."

He is very good. I need you to understand how good he is. That answer accounts for the scrape — he *nearly* came down, so he was on the stairs, so of course there was a noise — and it does it while making him the man who was thinking about my ten minutes.

I did not ask him whether *nearly* meant he had opened the door.

There is no version of that question that a person can ask their husband at seven in the morning over a baby with a spoon.

TEN. ELEVEN MINUTES

Surgery, 14 August — 09:20

Dr Hannah Okonjo has eleven minutes and she uses all of them well.

I have no complaint against her. I want to put that at the top, the way I put it at the top of everything, because this is not a book about incompetent people and there are none in it.

She asked what she could do for me and I said I was not sleeping, and she asked how long, and I said five months, and she did not laugh, and she did not say *welcome to motherhood*, which two other people had said to me that fortnight.

She asked whether I could sleep when the baby slept. Everybody asks this. The answer is no, and the reason is not the one people think — it is not that you are doing the washing. It is that after enough nights the sleep stops arriving on demand. You lie down in the twenty minutes you have been given and you are so wound up about the twenty minutes that you spend all twenty of them lying there being awake at speed.

She asked whether I had support. I said my husband was extraordinary.

She asked about mood and I said tired, and she asked whether I meant tired or whether I meant low, and that was a good question and I did not answer it well.

She gave me a leaflet on sleep hygiene.

I have kept it. It is in a drawer. It advises a consistent bedtime, no screens for an hour beforehand, a cool dark room, no caffeine after two, and, if sleep does not come within twenty minutes, getting up and doing something restful in low light until you feel drowsy.

I do not blame her for that leaflet. It is the correct leaflet. It is the only leaflet there is. It was written for a person whose sleep is being disrupted from the inside, and I was a person whose sleep

was being disrupted from the outside by a nine-kilo infant with no interest in a cool dark room, and there is nothing in the guidance for that, because the guidance for that is *it passes*.

At the end she said, and she said it carefully:

"How are things at home otherwise?"

And I said fine.

I have gone over that exchange more times than any other in this whole account. She asked. It is on the record that she asked. She was doing exactly what she is trained to do, which is to leave a door open without pushing at it, because pushing at it is how you lose people.

And I said fine, in a surgery, with eleven minutes on the clock and a pram in the corridor, because at that point I had nothing to say that would fit in the time available. I had a notebook at home that was forty pages long and a feeling I could not name, and the version of that which fits into the end of an appointment is *fine*.

The consultation note reads: *Fatigue, post-natal. Sleep advice given. Mood — tired, denies low mood. Good support at home. Review if no improvement.*

Every word of that is accurate.

ELEVEN. DAYTIME

A Tuesday in August

The kettle in the fridge is the funny one. That is the one I tell people. It goes down well.

Here is the rest of that fortnight.

I put the nappy bag in the oven. Not on. In. I found it two days later looking for a baking tray.

I put a load of washing on and forgot the washing and put a second load on top of the first, in the machine, on top of it, and could not for some time work out why the door would not shut.

I said goodbye to a woman on the phone from the surgery and then continued talking for about four sentences.

I drove to my mother's, which is nineteen minutes, and arrived, and could not account for the section between the roundabout and the school. Not vaguely. At all. There is a stretch of about four minutes of my life on the eleventh of August in which I was driving a car with my daughter in the back and there is no record of it anywhere, including in me.

I did not tell anybody that for a year. I have not driven her further than the shop since.

At the crossing on the high street I came back to myself with my hand on the pram and the green man going and no memory of pressing the button. I do not know how long I stood there. The woman behind me had gone round.

I want to describe what a microsleep is like from inside, because I had never seen it described and it is not what I expected. It is not a nod. There is no head drop and there is no jolt. There is a splice. The film runs and there is a cut and the film runs again, and both sides of the cut are perfectly clear, and if nothing has changed in the room you do not know it has happened at all.

That is the terrifying part. You only find out when the world has moved. When the button has been pressed. When the tap is running.

The other thing about daytime is the noise.

Everything is too loud. A dropped spoon on a tiled floor at seven months of this is a physical assault. The extractor fan. A motorbike. Amal's cry, which is designed by evolution to be unbearable and which by month seven had become genuinely, medically unbearable, so that when she started I would feel a cold flush go down my arms.

That is not a mother who does not love her child. I want that written down. It is a nervous system with no reserve left, doing exactly what it does when a nervous system has no reserve left.

And you cannot say any of it out loud, because every single item on this list — the oven, the road, the flush down the arms — is a sentence that, said to a professional, opens a file.

So there is a list of about forty things in every sleep-deprived mother in this country, and there is a comic version of that list which is socially permitted, and the comic version has the kettle in the fridge in it and does not have the roundabout in it.

I told the kettle story eleven times.

I have told the roundabout story twice. Once to a woman on a helpline at three in the morning who I have never met.

And once here.

TWELVE. NIGHT ONE HUNDRED AND FORTY-ONE

19 July

This is the one they read back to me.

It had been four nights. Not four bad nights — four nights of somewhere between two and three hours each, broken into pieces, the longest single stretch about seventy minutes. On the fourth day I had put the kettle in the fridge and stood looking at it for some time without understanding what I was looking at.

At twelve past two the boiler went.

I want you to understand what that sound is by night one hundred and forty-one. It is not a noise any more. It is the sound of the next four hours of my life being taken off me, and my body knew that before I was properly awake, and what came up out of me was not a thought, it was chemistry.

I got to the landing before I knew I was out of bed. Amal was already going.

And I stood outside that cupboard and I screamed at him.

“Are you fucking joking? Are you actually fucking joking, Adam?”

He came out of the bedroom in his shorts with his hair up on one side and he said, “What? What’s happened, is she all right —”

“The boiler. The fucking boiler. Two o’clock in the fucking morning, again, again, that’s four times, I have written it down, it is in the book —”

“Leila —”

"Do not. Do not say my name like that. Do not do the voice."

"I'm not doing a voice."

"You are doing the fucking voice you always do, the calm one, the — " and I could not get the word. I stood on my own landing at ten past two with my daughter screaming eight feet away and I could not retrieve the word *patronising* and what came out instead was a sound.

Then I said, and I remember every syllable of this, because it was read out to me nine months later in a room with a jug of water in it:

"I hope you can hear yourself. I actually hope you can hear yourself, because I can't do this, I can't do it, I would rather be fucking dead than do another one of these nights."

The last part is the part that goes on the record. Obviously it is. It is the only part of the sentence anybody would be professionally negligent to ignore.

I did not mean it in the way it is meant when it is written on a form. I meant it the way that anybody who has ever been past the end of their endurance means it — as the only available unit of measurement, as a way of saying *this is beyond what I can carry*. Every single person reading this who has been up four nights knows exactly what I meant.

But there is no field for that. There is a field for what was said.

He did not shout. He has never shouted. He stood on the landing and let me finish, and when I had finished he said, very quietly:

"Okay. Okay. I'm going to get her, and you're going to sit down, and I'm not going anywhere."

And he went and got her and brought her back settled in about four minutes, which I could not have done, and he sat on the top step with her and said, "It's the timer. I think it's the timer going, love. I'll get someone out."

He got someone out. There is an invoice. A man came on the Thursday and checked the timer and found nothing wrong with it and charged us eighty-five pounds, and Adam paid it without a word and told me he was sorry it had not turned anything up.

That invoice was later produced as evidence of how seriously my husband had taken my concerns.

NIGHT LINE II

MATERNAL & INFANT NIGHT LINE — CALL RECORD

Handler: J. Whitcombe. Call 3 of session. Duration 22 min 15 sec.

03:14. Female caller. Recognised voice — previous contacts logged. Infant approx 5 months.

Caller distressed on connection. Crying for first 4 minutes, unable to speak. Handler waited.

Caller reports four consecutive nights of severely broken sleep. Reports an argument with her partner earlier tonight and is “ashamed of the things I said.”

Quoted: “I said I’d rather be dead. I didn’t mean it. You know I didn’t mean it. I meant I’d rather not do the night.”

Risk screen conducted per protocol. Caller denies current intent, denies plan, denies means. Caller was clear, emphatic and appropriate throughout screening. Handler assesses no immediate risk.

Caller asked twice whether the call was recorded and whether it goes to her GP. Advised of the policy. Caller was quiet for some time and then said, “Right. That’s fair enough.”

Advice given. Caller declined onward referral.

Handler note: She apologised for swearing. She had not sworn.

III. THE RECORD

THIRTEEN. WHAT THE BODY DOES

September

By month six I had stopped being a tired person and had become a different person, and I could not see it, which is the entire point and which I have already told you and will tell you again.

Here is what was actually happening, catalogued afterwards, with help.

Microsleeps. Two to twenty seconds. Your eyes are open. You are standing up. You are, as far as anybody watching is concerned, present. You are not. I had them on the stairs. I had them holding her. I had one at a pedestrian crossing on the Tuesday and came back to myself with my hand on the pram handle and the green man going and no memory of pressing the button.

Nobody sees a microsleep. That is what makes them the perfect thing to have wrong with you.

Lost time. Larger. Twenty minutes, half an hour. I would arrive in a room and not know the errand. I once found the bath running and could not establish whether I had run it.

Word-finding. Constant by then. Nouns first, always nouns. I could feel the shape of the word and not get it. In front of people this reads as vagueness, and vagueness in a woman with a small baby reads as *not coping*, and there is no way to say *my expressive vocabulary is impaired by chronic sleep restriction* without sounding exactly like somebody whose expressive vocabulary is impaired.

The reactivity. This is the one that cost me most. The alarm going off at full volume for a dropped spoon. Weeping in a supermarket at a song. That flare of rage on the landing on night one hundred and forty-one — that was not a character flaw and it was not a marriage in trouble. That was an amygdala running unsupervised because the thing that supervises it had not been consolidated for four months.

And I could not tell. That is the part I need you to sit with. From the inside, an eighty-decibel reaction to a small event does not feel

disproportionate. It feels like the correct response to an event that is, at that moment, genuinely enormous.

The hallucinations. They started in September.

I am going to be careful here.

They were hypnagogic, mostly — the state on the edge of sleep, which is where almost everybody has had something and almost nobody mentions it. A voice saying my name from the doorway. A shape at the end of the bed that resolved into the wardrobe. Somebody standing in the hall.

That is not madness. It happens to soldiers and to junior doctors and to people who sail alone across oceans, and it is well documented, and the mechanism is understood, and it is what a brain does when it is being denied something it needs.

It is also, if you write it in a notebook, indistinguishable on the page from the other thing.

And here is the sentence that took me nine months to be able to hold, and that I could not have written at the time, and that I would ask anybody who thinks this is a simple story to consider carefully.

I could not tell them apart either.

By September I could not reliably distinguish a real sound in my house from one my exhausted brain had manufactured. That is a true statement about my condition and it is the honest core of this entire account.

The pattern in the notebook was real. The sounds it recorded were, at least in part, real.

And I was, simultaneously, a woman who was hearing things.

Both. At once. There is no form on which both of those can be written down, and every single professional who came into my life after that point had to pick one.

FOURTEEN. NIGHT ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-EIGHT

25 August

I saw him on the landing.

Half past one. Amal had gone at midnight and I had gone down at about ten past, and I woke — I do not know what woke me — and the bedroom door was open, which it is not, we close it, and there was a shape in the doorway.

I said his name.

The shape did not move and then it was not there, and I put the lamp on and the door was shut.

I lay in the dark with my heart going for about forty minutes. Adam was beside me, asleep, breathing the way he breathes, and I put my hand on his back to check, which is a thing I have never told anybody until now.

He was warm. He had been there a while.

The next morning I wrote it in the notebook and then I sat and looked at what I had written, which was: *01:30 — figure in doorway — A asleep beside me — door was shut.*

And I understood exactly what that sentence was.

I nearly threw the notebook away that morning. I got as far as standing over the bin with it.

I want to explain why I did not, because it is the most important decision in this book and I made it badly.

If I threw it away, then everything in it went too. The 02:04s. The three boiler entries. The scrape at ten to one on the twentieth of June. Forty pages of true things that I could no longer hold in my head without the paper.

And if I kept it, I was keeping a document in which those true things sat on the same page as *figure in doorway*, in the same handwriting, with no way for anybody to tell which was which — including me.

I kept it. Of course I kept it. It was the only thing I had.

That is the trap doing its work, and it does not require anybody to be doing anything to me at all. Even if my husband had been a saint, even if every noise in that house had been a pipe, the notebook would still have become the thing that convicted me. That is the shape of the trap, and it is why it works.

He only had to build the first half. The second half I built myself, in good faith, in the small hours, in two colours of biro, trying to be accurate.

There is a thing about that night I have never said to anyone and am putting here.

I do not, now, believe there was anybody in the doorway.

I have gone through it a hundred times and I think it was a hypnagogic image at the boundary of sleep and it is the most textbook example of one I have ever read about.

But I checked his back. In the dark. With my hand.

And a woman who has to put her hand on her sleeping husband to establish whether he is in the bed is already living somewhere I did not know it was possible to get to, and she got there in six months, and nobody in her life had the slightest idea.

FIFTEEN. THE SECOND APPOINTMENT

Surgery, 2 October — 15:40

I brought the notebook.

I had rehearsed it in the car. I had a version that was four sentences long and did not sound the way it sounds. I had practised saying *I've noticed a pattern* rather than any of the other formulations.

Dr Okonjo asked how the sleep had been since August and I said worse, and she asked whether things at home were all right, and this time I did not say fine.

I said: "I think something's happening in the house at night."

And she said, "Go on," and she meant it, and she put her pen down, which I noticed.

So I got the notebook out.

I watched her face while she turned the pages and I want to describe it accurately because it was not disbelief and it was not alarm. It was recognition. She had seen a document like that before. Not mine — that shape of document. A hundred and ten pages of one person's handwriting, dated, timed, two colours, with a page at the back that is a list.

She was very good. She asked me what I thought was happening, and she gave me the room to say it, and I would not say it.

That is on me. She left the door open and I would not walk through it. I could not say *I think my husband is doing this* in a consulting room in the middle of the afternoon, because the moment it was out of my mouth it became a thing that existed, and because — and this is the truth — I did not believe it. Not properly. I believed it at four in the morning and I did not believe it at twenty to four in the afternoon, and appointments are in the afternoon.

So what I said was: "I don't know. I just want to know if I'm imagining it."

Which is, I have since realised, a question with only one possible answer from a GP with eleven minutes.

She asked about the tenth question — not by number, she asked it the proper way, and she asked it well. I said no. It was true that day.

She asked about Adam.

I said he was extraordinary. I said he did the eleven o'clock every night and had never once complained and had got a man out about the boiler.

She wrote that down.

The consultation note from the second of October reads, in part:

Patient reports a distressing belief that noises in the home are being made deliberately at night. Has kept a detailed written log over several months. Sleep severely disrupted since birth. Denies low mood, denies self-harm ideation today. Reports very good support from partner. Discussed possible perceptual disturbance in

context of severe chronic sleep deprivation. Patient receptive. Advised re sleep, follow up 4/52. Consider PND screen at review.

I have read that note perhaps two hundred times.

There is not one dishonest word in it. It is a careful, competent, kind summary of eleven minutes, written by a doctor doing her job properly, and every clinician who has read it since has read it the same way, and they are not wrong to.

A distressing belief.

Two words, and after them the notebook is no longer a record. It is a symptom that has been mentioned to a doctor and entered on a system, and everything I put in it from that day forward is a further instance of the same symptom.

The better my evidence got, the deeper I went. There is no exit from that. I have looked for one for two years.

SIXTEEN. THE WOMAN WHO IS AWAKE

The night line

I want to explain the night line, because it is the best thing in this book and I do not want it lost among everything else.

It is a charity. It is not a crisis line, although it is trained for that; it is a number you can ring between eleven at night and six in the morning if you have an infant and you are struggling, and there is no threshold and you do not have to be in trouble.

I found it on a leaflet in a bag from the hospital, four months after they gave me the bag.

I rang the first time on a night in June at ten to three and I apologised three times in the first minute and told her I was not in crisis, which is what everybody does, apparently, in the first minute.

She said, "That's all right. You don't have to be in crisis to be up."

I rang about thirty times over six months. Almost always between two and four. It was nearly always the same handler, because of the shift pattern, and I did not know her name for five of those months.

Here is what those calls were.

They were not therapy and they were not advice. She gave me advice twice, at the beginning, and I already knew all of it and she worked that out fast and stopped.

What they were was: a person, awake, at the same time as me.

That is all. That is the entire mechanism and it is the most effective thing that happened to me in a year. Somewhere on the other side of the county there was a woman in a room with a headset and a cup of tea, and she was awake because it was her job, and for twenty minutes the hour was not something I was in alone.

We talked about her garden. We talked about a programme she watched. She told me about her son, once. She let me say things in the order they came out, which is not the order things are supposed to come out in, and she never once tried to tidy them.

She laughed at things I said. That was the best part. Around month five I had begun to believe that I had stopped being funny, that whatever in me used to be able to make a person laugh had been used up, and then at half past two in the morning I said something about the boiler and this woman I had never met laughed properly down the phone, and I sat on the stairs and cried about it afterwards.

Her name is June. She told me on the thirtieth call, which she was not supposed to do.

I did not know until much later that she had been writing all of it down.

That is not a betrayal and I have never once framed it that way. Of course she was writing it down. It is a call handling service with a safeguarding duty and there is a record of every call and she told me so, the first time and again when I asked, and I said, "Right. That's fair enough."

She wrote down that I was coherent. She wrote down that I was appropriate. She wrote down, on one of them, that I was the most articulate person she spoke to all week.

She also wrote down the sentence about being dead, because she had to, and she wrote down that I could not tell any more, because I said it.

Both of those are in the same file, in the same handwriting, from the same six months.

The only person in the world who ever heard me properly is also the person whose careful, decent, accurate record of hearing me is what finally brought the assessment.

I would like her to know that I have never blamed her. I would like her to know that those thirty calls are the reason I got through the year at all.

I have thought about writing to the charity. I have not, because there is no version of that letter which does not begin *you may have a record of me*.

SEVENTEEN. NIGHT TWO HUNDRED AND THREE

19 September

I want to give him a fair hearing and this is the chapter where I do it, and I want you to notice what happens to you while you read it.

Amal had croup. Actual croup — the bark, the whole thing — and we were up from eleven until nearly five, and for two hours of that we sat on the bathroom floor with the shower running hot because that is what you do, and he sat with his back against the bath and her on his chest and told her, in a completely level voice, the plot of a film she was never going to see.

At about three he said, "Go to bed."

I said no.

He said, "Leila. I've got her. Go to bed. If she gets worse I'll wake you, I promise, I'll wake you before I ring anyone."

And I went, and he did have her, and he did not wake me, and she was fine by morning, and he went to work at eight having had none.

That is a real thing that a real man did.

In the fortnight after night one hundred and forty-one, when I could not stop crying, he came home early twice. He rang his mother and told her we would not be coming at the weekend, and took the whole of that conversation himself, and I heard him on the phone saying, *she's exhausted, Mum, she's just exhausted*, in a voice with nothing but tenderness in it.

He never once said I was imagining things. Not once, in ten months. When I told him about the doorway he said, "God, that sounds terrifying," and asked whether I wanted the lamp left on, and left it on for six weeks without mentioning it again.

He never used the notebook against me. He never said *you and that bloody book*. He bought me a better one.

And when I finally, on a Sunday in November, said the sentence — the actual sentence, *is it you, are you doing it* — he did not get angry, and he did not go cold, and he did not laugh.

He sat down on the arm of the sofa and he was quiet for a long moment and then he said:

"No. Love, no. God." And then: "Do you think it might be? Genuinely. Because if you do, then that's — Leila, that's a horrible thing to be carrying round on your own and I'd rather you'd said it in June."

And I cried, and he held me, and he said, "You are so tired. You are so, so tired," which is the truest thing anybody said to me that entire year.

Now.

Here is what I want you to notice.

Somewhere in the last four hundred words you began to reconsider. Some of you have decided that this is a book about a woman who was unwell and a man who stood by her, and that I am an unreliable narrator, and that the notebook was the illness all along.

That is not a criticism of you. It is the correct response to the evidence I have just given you, and it is exactly what every single

person in my life concluded from exactly this material, and they had less of it than you do.

I am not going to tell you which it is yet.

I could not have told you myself on the nineteenth of September, and if there is one thing I want out of writing this down, it is that somebody should have to sit in the not-knowing for a few pages the way I sat in it for a year.

EIGHTEEN. MARIE COMES BACK

26 October

The eight-month contact is not standard and it happened because of the note in October, and Marie came out on a Tuesday and did the questionnaire again on the same sofa with the same biro.

She was exactly as lovely as before.

Here is what she was looking at. A woman who had lost about two stone. A house that was not dirty, because I had held on to that with both hands, but a woman who had washed her hair for the appointment and both of us knew it. A baby who was thriving — Amal was always thriving, she is a magnificent child and she has never been anything else — held by a mother who did not put her down once in fifty minutes.

She asked how I was sleeping and I said three hours. She asked whether that was a bad week and I said no.

Ten questions. Nought to three.

I have been able to laugh and see the funny side of things. Not so much now. I have looked forward with enjoyment to things. Definitely less than I used to. I have blamed myself unnecessarily when things went wrong. Yes, most of the time. I have been anxious or worried for no good reason. Yes, very often. I have felt scared or panicky for no very good reason. Yes, quite a lot. Things have been getting on top of me. Yes, most of the time I haven't been coping at all. I have been so unhappy that I have had difficulty sleeping. Yes, most of the time. I have felt sad or miserable. Yes, quite often. I

have been so unhappy that I have been crying. Yes, most of the time.

I scored nineteen before the tenth question.

I have been anxious or worried for no good reason. I answered that honestly and the honest answer was yes, and it is not a lie, and it is also not true, because I had a reason, and the reason was in a cloth-bound notebook in the drawer under the telly, and there is no box on that form for *for a reason nobody believes*.

Then the tenth.

Marie read it out the way they do. *The thought of harming myself has occurred to me.*

And I thought about the night line, and the recording, and the sentence on the landing, and I understood that there was already a version of this on a system somewhere with my name on it.

So I said: "Once. In July. I said something I didn't mean, in the middle of the night, to my husband."

And she said, gently, "Do you want to tell me what you said?"

And I told her.

She wrote it down. She had to. There is no world in which she does not write that down and she would have been failing at her job if she had not, and if a woman in my street said that to a health visitor and it went unrecorded and something happened, that health visitor would be finished and rightly so.

She asked about Adam and I said he was extraordinary.

Score, with the tenth: twenty.

She said the number out loud, kindly, and said she would like to talk to me about some support, and asked whether Adam would be around later, because it was often helpful to have partners involved.

I said yes.

Of course I said yes. He is extraordinary. Everybody says so, including me, on the record, four times, to three different professionals, in my own words, in the same year.

NIGHT LINE III

MATERNAL & INFANT NIGHT LINE — CALL RECORD

Handler: J. Whitcombe. Call 2 of session. Duration 41 min 02 sec.

02:07. Female caller. Known to handler; approx 30 previous contacts over 6 months.

Caller stated she did not want advice and asked whether she could “just talk for a bit.” Handler agreed.

Caller described a sound in the house and asked handler directly: “Can you hear yourself go mad? Is that a thing you can hear happening?”

Handler did not answer. Caller then said: “Because I can’t fucking tell any more. That’s the honest answer. I can’t tell.”

Caller described a written record she has been keeping. Became distressed when describing it. Quoted: “It’s all true. Every line of it’s true. And if I show it to anyone they’ll section me. Both of those are true. How is that — how does that even — ”

Caller unable to complete sentence. Long pause.

Risk screen conducted. Denies intent, plan, means. Emphatic. Asked handler not to record the swearing.

Caller declined referral for the fourth time.

Handler note, personal, not for file: I have taken this woman’s call thirty times. She is the most articulate person I speak to all week and she thinks she is losing her mind. She rings at two because she has nobody who is awake. Tonight she asked me what my name was and I told her, which we are not supposed to do.

IV. THE ASSESSMENT

NINETEEN. NIGHT TWO HUNDRED AND FORTY-ONE

28 October

I stopped writing it down on the twenty-eighth of October.

Nobody asked me to. He never asked me to. I want to be scrupulous about that, because it would be tidier if he had.

What happened was that I sat down at the kitchen table at four in the morning with the cloth notebook and the pen and I could not think of a reason.

The reason had always been: so that when somebody asks, I will be able to answer properly.

Somebody had asked. I had answered properly. I had produced a hundred and ten pages of accurate contemporaneous record, dated and timed, and handed it across a desk to a competent doctor, and the result had been two words on a system that will follow me until I die.

So I sat there with the pen in my hand and I did the arithmetic — the same arithmetic I had been doing since day four, the arithmetic that never lets up — and I worked out that every further entry made things worse and no entry made anything better, and that this had been true since the second of October, and that I had gone on writing for twenty-six more days out of nothing but habit.

I did not throw it away. It is still in the drawer under the telly.

I closed it and I put it away and I went and stood in the garden in my dressing gown in the cold, and I want to tell you exactly what I felt, because it was not despair.

It was relief.

That is the thing nobody warns you about and the thing I am most frightened of. Giving up did not feel like defeat. It felt like putting down something enormously heavy that I had been carrying up a hill for no reason, and the relief was so total and so physical that I stood in the garden and laughed.

I slept for four hours that night. First time since May.

He said at breakfast, "You look better."

And I said, "I feel better."

And both of us were telling the truth.

That is the moment it was over. Not the assessment. Not the referral. Twenty to five in the morning on the twenty-eighth of October, in a garden, in the cold, feeling wonderful.

Everything after this is administration.

TWENTY. THE SENTENCE

9 November — Sunday

I said it on a Sunday afternoon in November with the football on and Amal asleep upstairs.

I had been trying to say it since July. I want to be honest about how much of my life that had taken up. I had drafted it. I had a version I said in the car. I had woken up at four in the morning with the whole speech assembled and then lost it by seven.

What actually came out, in the end, was five words, and they came out sideways, in the middle of a conversation about a shop.

I said: "Adam. Is it you?"

He said, "Is what me?"

And I said, "The noises. The boiler and the — is it you. Are you doing it."

And here is what happened, and I have replayed it more than any other ninety seconds of my life, and I still cannot tell you what I watched.

He did not react at all for about two seconds. He looked at the television.

Then he picked up the remote and turned it off, which is a thing he has never done, and he came and sat down on the arm of the sofa, and he said, "No."

Then: "Love, no. God."

Then he did the worst thing he could have done, which was to take it seriously.

"Do you think it might be?" he said. "Genuinely. Because if you do — Leila, that's a horrible thing to be carrying round on your own, and I'd rather you'd said it in June."

I said something. I do not know what.

"Because that's — " and he stopped, and started again, and this is the part that finished me — "that's me being someone who'd do that. To you. And you've been in the house with that for how long?"

And he had tears in his eyes.

I have thought about those tears for two years.

Here is the thing I have arrived at, and it is not a comfortable place to arrive. **I think they were real.** I do not think that man performed grief at me on a sofa in November. I think something in him was genuinely wounded, and I think it is entirely possible for a person to do what he did for ten months and still be wounded by being accused of it, because the part of him that was doing it and the part of him sitting on that sofa were not required to be in the same room.

I have read enough now to know that this is not exotic. It is not even rare.

Then I cried, and he held me, and he said, "You are so tired. You are so, so tired."

And I apologised.

That is the sentence I would take back if I could take back one. Not the accusation — the apology. I said sorry to him, on that sofa, for asking, and I meant it, and he said, "Don't. Don't ever be sorry for telling me something."

Two things happened after that Sunday.

The first is that I stopped believing it. Completely and genuinely. From about the tenth of November until roughly the following summer I did not believe my husband had done anything, and that is not something I was talked into. I looked at the evidence — a hundred and ten pages of it — and at the man crying on the arm of the sofa, and I formed a view.

The second is that he stopped.

The last entry in my notebook is the twenty-seventh of October. But the last *night* — the last time I was woken by something in that house that I could not account for — was the fourteenth of November.

Five days after I asked him.

I did not notice that for a year and a half. I noticed it in a doctor's waiting room, of all places, with a magazine open on my knee, and I had to go outside.

I have never worked out whether he stopped because he had what he needed, or because I had said it out loud, or because he was frightened.

And there is a fourth possibility, which is that nothing stopped because nothing was happening, and that a woman who asked the question and got a loving answer stopped generating the sounds five days later.

That is the shape of every single fact in my life now. Every one of them has two explanations and both of them fit.

TWENTY-ONE. THE THIRD APPOINTMENT

Surgery, 6 November — 11:00

He came.

He offered. That is important and it is true and I have never once been able to make it sound the way it actually was. On the Sunday he said, "Do you want me to come on Thursday? I don't have to. Only if it helps." And I said yes, because I wanted him there, because I was frightened of the appointment, because he is my husband.

He wore the good jumper. Not a suit. He would never have worn a suit.

I want to describe what he did in that room, because it is the finest piece of work I have ever watched anybody do, and because not one sentence of it was a lie.

He let me talk first. When Dr Okonjo turned to him he did not launch. He said, "I don't want to talk over her."

She asked how he thought things had been.

He said: "Honestly? I think she's had the hardest year of anyone I know and she's had almost no help, and most of that's my fault because I'm at work." He said, "Amal's a bad sleeper. She's a genuinely bad sleeper, it's not — she's just one of those." He said, "Leila's up more than me. That's just the truth of it, because of the feeding, and I've tried to take more and she won't always let me, and that's not a criticism, it's just what happens."

Every word of that: true.

Then Dr Okonjo asked about the noises.

And he did the thing.

He said: "She's mentioned it. I've never heard anything." Pause. "But I sleep like the dead, so I'm not sure I'm much use as a witness."

He gave himself away as unreliable. Do you see? He put himself forward as a bad witness, which made him a modest one, which made him a credible one.

Then: "I did get a man out about the boiler. Eighty-five quid, found nothing. I'd have got someone out about the moon if she'd asked me."

He laughed a little when he said it, and so did I, and so did Dr Okonjo, and the room got warmer, and in the warmth the sentence settled quietly into place — *I'd have got someone out about the moon* — and everybody in that room heard it as devotion, which it was.

Then he said the only thing he said all appointment that was about me rather than about the house:

"What I'd say is — and I don't know if this is helpful — she's not herself. That's all. She's not herself. And I don't mean anything by that, I just mean I'd like her back."

And his voice went at the end of it. Not much. Enough.

I put my hand on his arm.

I sat in that room with my hand on my husband's arm while he cried a little, and I comforted him, and Dr Okonjo watched me do it, and I have never in my life felt so loved as I did in that eleven minutes.

The note reads: *Seen with husband, who attended at patient's request. Very supportive, clearly distressed by her decline. Corroborates severe sleep disruption; has not himself witnessed the reported nocturnal noises. Has taken practical steps (boiler engineer). Agreed plan: PND management, referral for assessment, sleep support. Both keen.*

Both keen.

I have thought about those two words more than any other two words in my life.

TWENTY-TWO. THE REFERRAL

November

June made the referral and I have never blamed her for one second and I never will.

I did not know her name until the night she told me it, and I did not know her surname until I saw it typed at the bottom of a document eleven weeks later, and by then it was too late to tell her that she had been, for six months, the only person in the world who knew what I actually sounded like.

Here is what she had. Thirty-odd calls between two and four in the morning across six months from the same woman. A logged statement of *I'd rather be dead*, contextualised and screened and assessed as no immediate risk, but logged. A caller describing an unexplained belief about her home. A caller asking whether you can hear yourself go mad. A caller who had declined onward referral four times.

And an infant in the house.

There is a threshold. It is written down and it is public and it is not a secret, and it exists because of a series of dead children, each of

whom had a file with several people on it who all thought somebody else was doing something.

June crossed the threshold on the eleventh of November and she crossed it correctly.

I got a letter and then a phone call and then a visit. The visit was two people and it was not what people think — nobody threatened to take my daughter, nobody said anything like that, they were quiet and thorough and one of them was very good with Amal.

They asked to see the notebook.

I gave it to them. What else was I going to do? By then it was in three places on two systems as a thing I had described to a doctor.

They asked Adam how he had found the last few months.

He said the same things. He said them the same way. He said, at one point, "I keep thinking I should have got her more help in the summer," and one of the two women said, "You've done a lot," and he shook his head.

At the end of it, one of them said to me, kindly, in the hall:

"You've been carrying this on your own for a long time."

And that is the sentence that broke me, because it was true, and because she meant it about the wrong thing, and because I no longer had any way of explaining which thing I had been carrying.

The outcome was no further action, support offered, case closed at the assessment stage.

That is the correct outcome. That is the system working. Everybody involved did their job to a decent standard and nobody in it was lazy or cruel or stupid.

And by the time it was finished there existed, on record, in four places, a complete and internally consistent account of a woman who had become unwell after the birth of her daughter and had been cared for throughout by a devoted husband.

Not one word of it was fabricated.

That is what he built. He never wrote a line of it. Other people wrote all of it, in good faith, from things they had genuinely seen.

TWENTY-THREE. THE ASSESSMENT

12 January — 14:00

There was a jug of water on the table with a lid on it.

I remember the lid. I remember thinking, in the way you think about a thing to avoid thinking about the other thing, that somebody in that building had bought a jug with a lid so it could stand in rooms like this without going stale, and that this meant a lot of rooms like this.

She was called Dr Bhatt and she was in her fifties and she was extremely good.

We did an hour and ten. She asked about the pregnancy and the birth and my mother and my sleep and my appetite and my concentration, and about Amal, and how I felt about Amal, and I said the truth, which is that I love her so much it frightens me and that I have loved her since about the fourth day and that the fourth day was hard.

And then she said, "Can I read you something you said?"

And she read me the landing.

Out loud, in a warm room, at two o'clock in the afternoon, in a level voice, from a printed sheet.

I hope you can hear yourself. I actually hope you can hear yourself, because I can't do this, I can't do it, I would rather be fucking dead than do another one of these nights.

I want to tell you what that is like.

It is not shame, although there is shame. It is the specific vertigo of hearing your own words in a register they were never in. That sentence was made at ten past two in the morning by a woman who had slept eight hours in four days, standing eight feet from a screaming baby, at the exact pitch of the worst thing she had ever felt. It only means what it means at that volume, in that dark, at that hour.

Read out flat, in the afternoon, by a kind woman in a cardigan, it becomes something else entirely. It becomes evidence. It becomes a *disclosure*.

I said, "I didn't mean it like that."

She said, "I know. Tell me how you meant it."

And I could not. I sat there with a jug of water in front of me and I could not find the words to explain the difference between wanting to die and having reached the end of what a person can carry, and the reason I could not find the words is that the very state that produces the sentence is the state that takes the words away.

You cannot be articulate about incoherence. Not from the inside. Not in an hour.

Then she asked, very gently, about the noises.

And here is where it ended, and I have gone over the next ninety seconds more than any other ninety seconds of my life.

She did not challenge me. She did not say it had not happened. What she did was ask me a question that no one else had asked, and it was the right question, and it finished me.

She said: "If a friend of yours told you she'd kept a hundred and ten pages about her husband — would you be worried about her?"

And I sat in that chair and I thought about it properly, for the first time, because she had made it about somebody else, and somebody else is the only person I have ever been able to see clearly.

And I said: "Yes. I'd be terrified for her."

She let that sit. She did not press. She is far too good to press.

And then I said the thing. I said it myself, unprompted, in my own words, and it went in the report in quotation marks:

"I think I've not been well. I think I've been very, very tired and I think I've not been well, and I think I've made something out of it."

I meant it.

I want to be absolutely clear about that, because it is the darkest fact in this book and the reason I have written the whole thing

down. I was not coerced and I was not manipulated in that room and Dr Bhatt did nothing but her job beautifully.

I meant it. I sat in that room and I looked at the evidence — my evidence, the evidence I had collected — and I reached the same conclusion that every other reasonable person had reached, because it is the conclusion the evidence supports.

I diagnosed myself. It was the last piece of work I did on the case, and it was competent, and it was wrong.

She said, “I think you’ve been extremely brave,” and I cried, and afterwards Adam was in the corridor with Amal in the sling and he stood up when I came out.

TWENTY-FOUR. NIGHT THREE HUNDRED

26 December

I slept.

Six hours and forty minutes, and then a stretch on the Boxing Day afternoon on the sofa with everybody in the house.

Amal started sleeping through at about ten months, which is not unusual and which every book says, and once she did, the rest of it went the way you would expect. My words came back first. Then the flatness lifted. Then, at some point in February, I noticed I had gone a whole week without checking the boiler timer, and it took me another fortnight to notice that I had noticed.

I am better. I need to be honest about that, because I know how it reads.

I am much better. I am, by any measure anybody would apply, well. I laugh at things. I am not frightened in my own house. I went back three days a week in April and I am good at my job again and my manager said so.

And the nights stopped.

The boiler has fired at half six and at five every day since about the second week of January and has not fired at any other time. There has been no alarm at four minutes past two. The door at the bottom of the stairs has not gone in the night since before Christmas.

Which is exactly what you would expect if a very tired woman got some sleep and her brain stopped manufacturing things.

And it is exactly what you would expect if somebody stopped.

There is no possible way to tell those apart from inside this house, and I have decided — this is the thing I want on the last page, this is the thing I have arrived at after two years — I have decided that I am not going to spend the rest of my life finding out.

Because here is where I am.

If I am right, then my husband did something to me for ten months that I cannot prove and never will, and the only life available to me is one in which I do not think about it.

And if I am wrong, then I am a woman who spent a year building a case against a man who sat on a bathroom floor at three in the morning with our daughter on his chest and told her the plot of a film.

I have to live in the same house as both of those. There is no third option and nobody is coming.

So: he is extraordinary. Everybody says so.

He brings me tea in bed on a Sunday and takes her out for two hours so I can sleep, and last week he stood in the kitchen doorway watching me making a list for the shop and said, "There she is."

And I laughed, and I said, "What?"

And he said, "Nothing. You just — you're back. That's all."

I asked him last night, out of nowhere, sitting up in bed, whether he thought I would be all right.

He put his book down and thought about it properly, the way he does, and he said yes.

And I believed him.

TWENTY-FIVE. AFTER

The following year

I want to put the recovery in, because books like this end at the worst moment and real life does not.

I was offered medication and I took it. It helped. I did the talking therapy, twelve sessions, and it helped more, and my therapist was a young man called Owen who was much better than his age suggested.

I told him about the noises in session four.

He did not flinch and he did not agree and he did not disagree, and what he said was the single most useful sentence anybody said to me in three years:

“We might not be able to establish what happened. Would you be able to work with me on what it’s been like to not know?”

I said no.

I said no for about six weeks, actually. I wanted somebody to adjudicate. I wanted one person in my life with a qualification to sit down with the notebook and a highlighter and tell me which of us was right, and every professional I met declined to do that, and every one of them was correct to decline, and at the time it felt like being handed back at the door.

Eventually I could work with him on it, and that is most of what I did for eight sessions, and I am better for it.

Amal is three now. She is extremely funny and enormously loud and she sleeps eleven hours, which she has done since about fourteen months, at which point everybody in my family said *see*.

I went back to work in the April, three days. The first fortnight I was terrified I had lost it. I had not. My manager took me aside after five weeks and said something kind that I had not expected and had to go to the toilets about.

Adam and I are still married. That will be the sentence some people cannot get past and I understand why.

Here is what I would say to them. I have two accounts of the last three years. In one of them I was ill and my husband carried me. In the other one he did something to me that I will never be able to prove. Every fact I possess fits both. Every single one.

And in exactly one of those two accounts, leaving is the right thing to do.

So I would be gambling my daughter's family, on a coin, with no way of ever seeing which way it came down.

I have chosen to live in the house. Some days that feels like wisdom and some days it feels like the last and largest thing that was done to me.

There is one thing I have never told him and will not, and I am putting it here because this is where I put things now.

The cloth notebook is still in the drawer under the telly. He knows that.

There is a second one. It is not in the house.

THE OTHER RECORD

Not her notebook. The other one. Small, black, in the inside pocket of a laptop bag, in the study, on top of the wardrobe.

Entries are dated. There are three hundred and eleven of them. This is a sample.

9 April. Boost. 03:10. She was up with her until 6. One press of a button = four hours. Noted.

14 April. Nothing. Let it lie.

2 May. Boost 02:40. She mentioned it at breakfast. Apologised, told her I'd not touch it again. She thanked me.

6 June. Phone alarm on the landing, single tone, 02:04. Cancelled inside two seconds. She asked about it. Offered fridge and smoke alarm. She accepted fridge.

19 June. Same. 02:04. She looked at the clock this time.

20 June. Stair door, 00:50. Did not go down. She sat in the front room for ninety minutes and did not come up. Better than expected.

19 July. Boost 02:12. Fourth night of restriction. She screamed on the landing. Said she'd rather be dead than do another night. Went down well — got her settled, said the right things. Boiler man Thursday, worth the eighty-five.

14 August. GP. Fatigue, leaflet. Nothing further.

2 September. She has started writing it down. Bought her a proper notebook. This is better than anything I could have arranged.

2 October. GP again. She took the book in. Assume it is on the record now. Stop for a fortnight.

16 October. Resumed. Light only.

28 October. She has stopped writing. Confirmed — checked the drawer, last entry 27th.

6 November. Surgery with her. Went well. Said less than planned. Referral agreed.

11 November. Referral received. Two of them out on the 29th.

29 November. Fine.

26 December. Stopped. Everything off from here.

12 January. Assessment. She said it herself. In her own words, in the room, unprompted. Nothing further required.

14 January. Instructed Harborne & Vale. Advised to obtain an accredited test — home kits are not admissible and are frequently mishandled. Sample taken 19th.

3 February.

The letter came this morning.

99.99998%.

I have read it eleven times and it says the same thing every time. I have gone back to March and worked out where I went wrong — I did the swabs in the bathroom, both of them, one after the other with the same gloves, and I did not wait the full time, and I did it at half past eleven at night after four hours' sleep because I could not stand another day of not knowing.

Four hours' sleep. That is the part I cannot put down.

She is mine. She was always mine. There is nothing here that ever needed doing and I have done ten months of it.

I do not know what to write in this. I have written in this every week for a year and I do not know what goes here.

— — —

She asked me tonight whether I thought she'd be all right.

I said yes.

She believed me.

Amal was born in the first week of March and did not sleep, and neither did her mother. That is not unusual and nobody treats it as a condition. It is just what having a baby is. Everyone Leila Sadr knows has been through some version of it, and everyone tells her the same three things: it passes, you'll forget it, you're doing brilliantly.

By night ninety she is losing words. By night one hundred and forty she is losing hours. She is shouting at three in the morning at a man who does not shout back, and she has started writing things down, because there is a pattern in the nights and she cannot hold it in her head long enough to look at it.

There is a pattern. She is not imagining it, and she is not well, and both of those are true at the same time, and only one of them can be written on a form.

Her husband is calm and kind and has not raised his voice once in ten months. Everybody says so. Her GP says so, her health visitor says so, and by the end so does she.

*A slow, cold novella about the most ordinary exhaustion there is,
and what can be built inside it by somebody patient.*

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