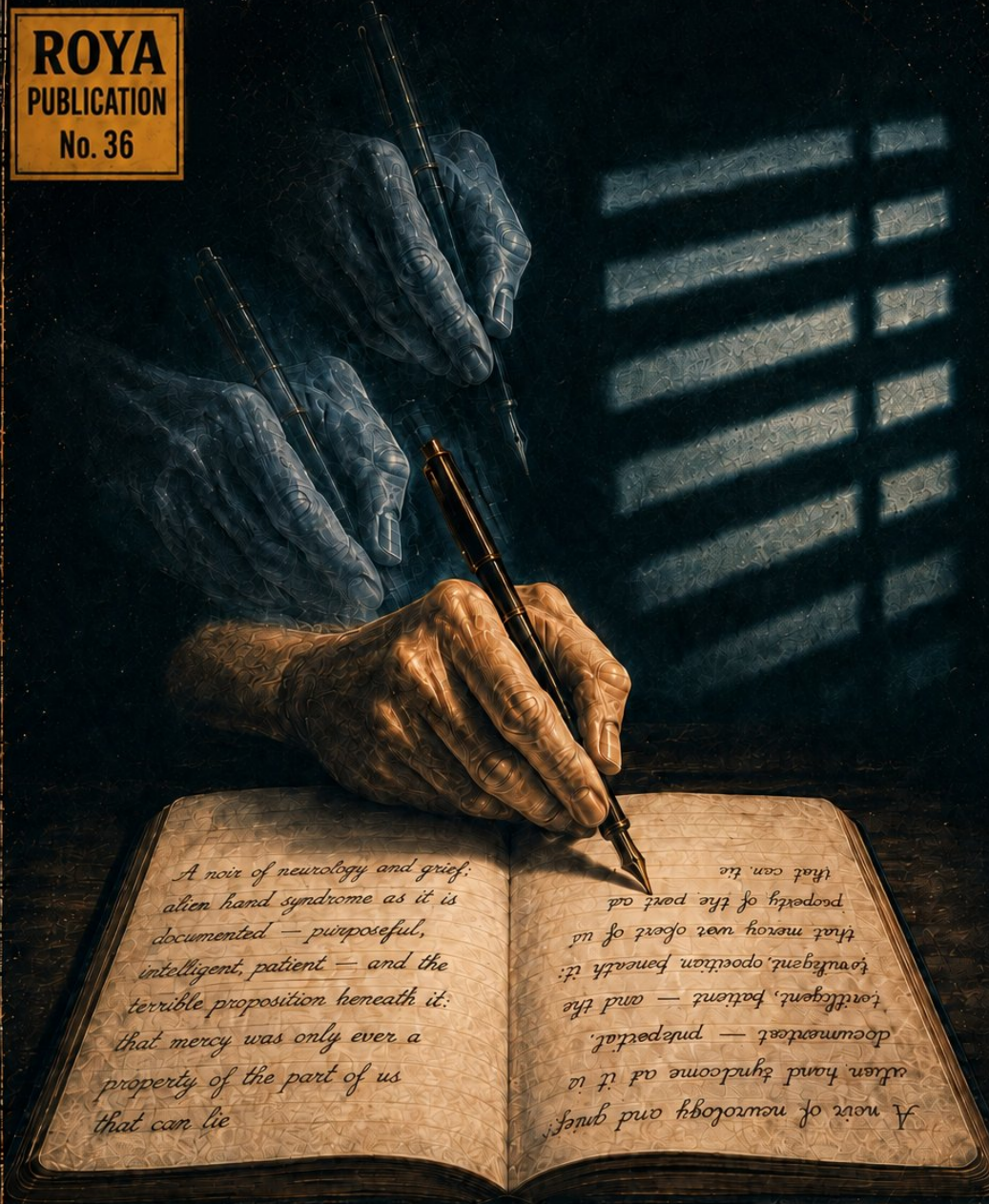


ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 36



*A noir of neurology and grief:
alien hand syndrome as it is
documented — purposeful,
intelligent, patient — and the
terrible proposition beneath it:
that mercy was only ever a
property of the part of us
that can lie*

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WHAT THE HAND KEPT

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 36

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

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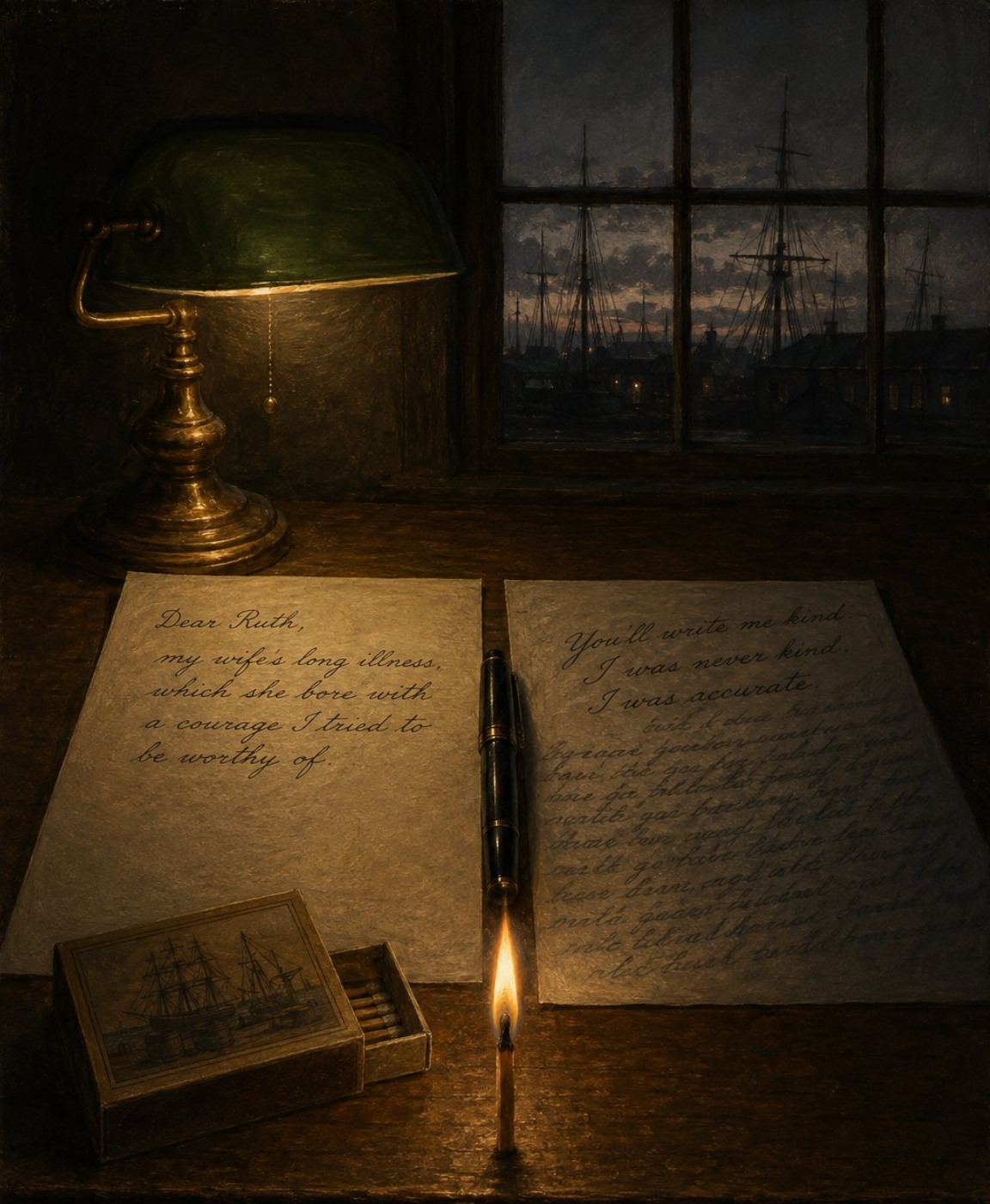
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THE TWO LETTERS. The room over the chandler's, the ninth night. Left, the fair copy — every sentence true, the lie in the selection.

Right, the second sheet, in his own script leaned wrong, in her cadence, down to the sentence that has no other copy on earth.

The record shows the match. The record does not show the verdict.

SYNOPSIS

For thirty years Martin Hale has been the hospice's letter-writer — the steady pair of hands called in when the dying want their last words in ink. He is famous on the ward for what he leaves out. The rough timber of a life comes to him warped and full of rot; the family receives furniture they can put their weight on. He calls it mercy. He has had a long time to practise the word.

Then a small, unlucky stroke severs the bridge between the two halves of his brain, and his left hand begins to write on its own.

It writes only after the dying have finished dictating. It writes what they spent their whole testimony avoiding — and it is never wrong. The buried inspection. The money that moved through the church fund. The girl paid to be elsewhere. Families read the pages and their lives come off at the roof, and the last of them, a family with everything to lose and precise ways of losing people, would like a word with the scribe about what else his hand may be keeping.

But the hand is not working through the ward's accounts. It is working towards one. Thirty years ago, in a bedroom that smelled of lanolin and pears going over, Martin Hale's dying wife dictated her last words to him — and he did not write them down. The hand remembers. The hand has always remembered. And when it finally sets down the one confession addressed to its own keeper, Martin must decide what a lifetime of guilt is worth — knowing, now, that the last honest witness cannot always tell memory from invention, and that the page in his hands may be his wife's true verdict, or the story his body built to explain the wound.

A noir of neurology and grief: alien hand syndrome as it is documented — purposeful, intelligent, patient — and the terrible proposition beneath it: that mercy was only ever a property of the part of us that can lie.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The body keeps the minutes. That has been the working conviction of this whole shelf of books, and this one takes it as literally as the clinical literature allows. Alien hand syndrome is real. After certain strokes, tumours, or the surgical severing of the corpus callosum, a hand can act with purpose its owner does not command — unbuttoning what was buttoned, grasping what was refused, and, in documented cases, writing. The papers use a phrase I have not improved on: autonomous purposeful movement. The hand watches. The hand is intelligent. The hand does nothing its owner could not do — only what its owner would not.

Equally real is confabulation: the disconnected hemisphere's habit of assembling coherent, convinced narrative from fragments, with no access to the machinery of doubt. Put the two together and you have a witness that cannot lie and cannot always tell memory from invention — which seemed to me not a neurological curiosity but a portrait of grief, and possibly of writing.

Vonnegut taught my generation that the true war story can only be told sideways, through the flinch; Slaughterhouse-Five stands behind this book as it stands behind most of mine. But this one is addressed, more than any of them, to the reader's own right hemisphere — the wordless tenant who has sat beside you at every bedside of your life, keeping the minutes you smoothed, filing what you would not say. It has no mercy because it has no speech. Whether that makes it the crueller half of you or the only honest one is the question of the book, and I have been careful, I hope, to leave the door of that room shut.

Chew Z

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ONE. THE CLEAN COPY

There is a way of holding a pen so the dying cannot see how fast you are writing, and Martin Hale had spent thirty years perfecting it. You keep the wrist low. You let the page tilt away, as if by accident of posture. You write in a hand small enough that a man propped on four pillows, his eyes going soft at the edges, cannot count the words and know that his life is coming out shorter than he is telling it.

Frank Adler was telling his life at some length that evening, and Martin was writing it shorter.

"Put down about the bridge at Verey Street," Adler said. His voice had gone to the dry rasp that came in the last fortnight, the sound of paper sliding on paper. "Nineteen sixty-one. Put down that I built that."

"You built that," Martin said, and wrote it.

He wrote it as: I helped raise the Verey Street bridge, which stands yet — because Adler had been one welder among forty, and because the sentence was for a daughter in another city who would read it aloud at a service, and a sentence read aloud at a service must stand up on its own legs. That was the craft. Nobody had taught it to him. The hospice had hired him thirty years ago to be a pair of steady hands, a lay scribe for those whose own script had failed before their voices did, and he had discovered in the first month that steady hands were the smallest part of the work. The work was carpentry. You took the green, warped timber of what a dying man actually said and you cut it square, and you left the knots and the rot on the floor of the room where they had always lived, and the family received a piece of furniture they could put their weight on.

Mercy, the chaplain called it, when he was being kind about Martin. Editing, when he was not.

The room did what hospice rooms do at seven in the evening. The radiator ticked its slow iamb. A humidifier breathed in the corner. Down the corridor a television laughed at something, was hushed, laughed again more quietly, like a mourner at the back of a church.

Adler's window held the last of the light, and in it the car park, and beyond the car park the flat roofs of the town going blue.

"Now put down about my brother," Adler said.

Martin's pen paused of its own long training. Brothers were where the rot usually was.

"What about him?"

"That I forgave him," Adler said. "For the business with the boat. Put down that I forgave him and there's an end of it."

Whatever the business with the boat had been, forgiveness delivered in that tone was a fist with a glove on. Martin wrote: To my brother Josef — the water is long under the bridge, and I think of the good summers. He read it back. Adler listened with his eyes shut and his jaw working, and Martin watched him decide, as they all decided, that the smoother sentence was the one he had meant all along.

"Yes," Adler said. "That's it exactly."

This was the moment Martin had come to think of as the sale. Not of the sentence to the dying man — that was easy, the dying were the easiest customers on earth, they were buying their own better selves with money they'd never have to pay — but of the version to the record. Once a man agreed the smooth sentence was what he had meant, the rough one stopped existing. It had been said into a room with a radiator and a humidifier and a professional forgetter, and rooms do not testify.

He had been a professional forgetter for thirty years. He was good at it the way a man is good at the thing that keeps him alive.

"Read it back," Adler said. "The whole of it. From the bridge."

Martin read it back. This was the sacrament of the trade, the read-back, and he had a voice for it, pitched a little under conversation, the voice of a man reading something that is already true. He had noticed in his first year that the read-back voice did half his work for him: sentences that would have been challenged on the page went by unquestioned on the breath, because the dying are listeners by then, the body retiring the other faculties one by

one and keeping the ear till last, the ear and the grip. Adler listened with his eyes shut and his big spoiled hands quiet on the blanket, and at the bridge he nodded, and at the daughter's paragraph his jaw went, and at the brother and the good summers he said "yes" again, fainter, and Martin thought, as he had thought some hundreds of times in that voice-lowered room-tone hour: this is the only honest transaction I know of that is built entirely out of falsehood. Scaffolding on both sides, and between them, for a minute, something true actually crossing.

He was never cynical about it. That should be put down fairly. The cynical ones didn't last in the work; the ward found them out in a season. You had to believe in the crossing — believe that the daughter, reading the good summers aloud at the service, would receive something real from a sentence her father had never quite said; that the truth of feeling could ride in a false particular the way a live man rides in a made-up name. Thirty years, and he had believed it the whole thirty. It was, he would think later, in a harbour town, at a bare table, the single most durable belief he had ever constructed, and it had needed to be, considering what it was built over.

Adler slept mid-sentence, the way the very sick do, a door closing softly on its own draught. Martin capped the pen, squared the pages, and sat a while, because sitting a while was also part of the job. In the folder on his knee were the letters of the week: the seamstress's letter to her son, which had wanted three revisions to get the drink out of it; the retired ferryman's letter, three sentences long and complete as an egg, which he had known better than to improve.

And under those, in the oilskin sleeve he never showed anyone, the notebook.

He didn't take it out. He never took it out at the hospice. But his thumb found the sleeve's edge through the folder, an old habit with the exact weight of touching a scar, and for a moment — the light going, the radiator ticking — he was thirty-one again, in a bedroom that smelled of lanolin, holding a different pen.

Write it exactly, Martin.

Ellen's dictation voice: schoolroom-level, unhurried, each clause set down like a card played face up. She had been a piano teacher; she dictated the way she taught, in phrases shaped for hands to follow. That first week of the notebook she had been all administration and comedy. Which pupil was to have the metronome — the Brahms metronome, mind, not the tin one. What Ruth was to be told about the Christmas cake, namely that it had never once, in forty years, been edible, and that this was now safe to say. He had laughed, writing. She had watched him laugh and dictated a little more slowly, feeding him the good hours, and he had written every word, back when writing every word was easy, back when there was nothing yet to leave out.

The radiator ticked. Adler breathed his paper breath.

Martin uncapped the pen to finish the evening's fair copy — the daughter would come Thursday, the letter should be ready, the bridge at Verey Street standing yet, the water long under it — and had written as far as the good summers when the room went strange.

Afterwards, in the weeks he spent taking that half-second apart, he could never make it dramatic. There was no pain. There was a smell like a struck match two rooms away, and the lamp seemed to move an inch to the left without moving, and the pen made a long, thin line down the page like a man's leg going out from under him on ice — and the line was the last thing his right hand wrote as the whole right side of the world folded quietly shut.

He did not feel himself fall out of the chair. He felt, with enormous clarity, the pen leave his fingers — and he felt his left hand catch it.

That detail he told no one, not the consultant, not Odile, not the chaplain: that in the darkness on the floor of Frank Adler's room, before the alarm was raised, before anything, his left hand had already curled around the barrel of the pen with the calm of a workman picking up a tool at the start of a shift. He told no one because it could not have happened, because the mind invents things in extremis, because a hand is not a person and does not wait its turn.

He was fifty-nine days learning otherwise.

TWO. THE SECOND PAGE

The stroke, the consultant explained, had been small and unlucky, like most of the worst things. An infarct with a talent for geography. It had spared his speech, spared his legs, spared the right hand's strength and taken instead a stretch of the white cabling that lets one half of a brain read the other half's post — the corpus callosum, she said, drawing it on a pad for him, a bridge of two hundred million fibres, and his with a span now out.

"You may find," she said, in the voice of a woman choosing her exit before entering the room, "that the left hand acts on its own initiative for a time. It can be distressing. It isn't rare, after damage of this kind. Intermanual conflict, we call it. Alien hand, in the older literature."

"Alien," Martin said.

"A poor word. It's not alien. That's rather the trouble — it's entirely you. It's simply a you that no longer answers to the switchboard." She clicked her pen. "It responds to what it sees. Keep it occupied. Give it something to hold."

In the ward, the hand introduced itself gradually, with the false modesty of a guest who means to stay. It buttoned what he had unbuttoned. It took the spoon out of his right hand at breakfast, not violently, but with a horrible reasonableness, the way you take a tool from an apprentice who is using it wrong. Once, in the dayroom, it reached across and switched off the television at the exact moment he had decided, privately, wordlessly, that the programme was idiotic — and that frightened him more than the spoon, because it meant the hand was not opposing him. It was agreeing with him faster than he could agree with himself.

He learned the literature the way frightened men do, thoroughly and at night. The syndrome had a small, appalled bibliography. Patients whose left hands unpacked the suitcases they packed. A woman whose hand slapped her awake when she nodded off in company. The dry clinical phrase autonomous purposeful

movement, which he read over and over because it was the only sentence in any of the papers with the decency to be terrifying. And everywhere, the same three findings, repeated across fifty years of case notes like a rhyme: the hand watches. The hand is intelligent. The hand does not do anything the patient could not do — only things the patient would not.

The registrar who ran the follow-up clinic was a young man named Osei with the gift, rare in his trade, of being interested without being entertained. It was Osei who first put a pen in the left hand deliberately, in a testing room with a two-way calm about it, and asked Martin to copy a sentence with his right hand while the left held paper of its own.

“Don’t look at it,” Osei said. “That’s the whole test. It works by sight, mostly, this syndrome — it wants to see the task. So we blind it and see what it does with idle capital.”

Martin copied his sentence — the quick brown fox, the alphabet’s old lie that it has no favourites — and kept his eyes on his own good work, and heard, at the edge of the room’s silence, the other nib moving. Not scratching. Moving, with the long confident draw of cursive, unhurried, and the sound went through him the way a step on a stair goes through a man who lives alone.

The left page, when Osei turned it round, said in mirror-slanted script: read that back.

“Interesting,” Osei said, in the voice of a man filing something under a different heading than the one he spoke aloud. “Echo phrases. Occupational residue. You said things like that at work, I imagine? Many times a day?” And Martin said yes, many times a day, and did not say what he had understood the instant he saw it, which was that it was not an echo. It was in the imperative. It was addressed. The hand had been given paper and a listener and had used its turn to make the one demand it had been storing up for thirty years of watching the fair copies go out unread by anyone who knew: read that back. Check it. Check it against what was said.

Osei ran the batteries. The hand could not name objects — put a key in it under a cloth and ask, and Martin's mouth said nothing, because naming lived on the far side of the down bridge — but the fingers turned the key over twice and mimed, precisely, the locking of a lock. It could not spell aloud. It could write. It could not be commanded — asked to raise itself on request it lay like a dropped glove — but it volunteered, and the distinction, Osei said, was the whole clinical picture in four words. It does not obey. It elects.

"I'll tell you the strangest thing in the literature," Osei said at the last appointment, signing him off with the wariness of a man releasing a licensed animal. "These cases — the hand is never trivial. You'd expect noise, wouldn't you? Random grabbing, motor static. But it's always themes. The devout woman whose hand tears up prayer cards. The miser whose hand gives money away. It's as if" — he clicked his pen, Osei too, they all clicked their pens, it was how the trade thought — "whatever the left hemisphere spent a lifetime sitting on is exactly what the right one has been taking minutes of. We sever the bridge and the minutes get published. So." He looked at Martin with his interested, unentertained eyes. "What did you sit on, Mr Hale? Professionally speaking."

"Other people's endings," Martin said, and Osei wrote that down, right-handed, in the swift dishonest shorthand of the profession, and Martin watched him do it and thought: every trade is mine. Every clipboard in this building is a smoothing iron.

Nobody at the hospital asked him what his left hand had done for a living for thirty years. Sat at deathbeds, he might have said. Held the paper down.

Frank Adler died on the ninth day of Martin's absence, at four in the morning, with a nurse in the room and the letter to his daughter — the fair copy, finished by another hand at Martin's dictation over the telephone, his one act of work from the ward — folded in the drawer of the nightstand where Martin's system said letters waited.

The daughter, Christine, came up on the Thursday as arranged. She was given the drawer's contents: the letter, a wristwatch, a folded map of a sailing route annotated in pencil. And a second page.

It was Odile Marsh who telephoned him, because it was Odile who had packed the drawer and Odile who knew, to the item, what had been in it. Night nurse for eleven years, a broad, unhurried woman who moved through the ward with the low-hulled calm of a barge, and who had covered Martin's small irregularities — the overlong sessions, the letters he took home against policy — for most of those years, on the private grounds that the regulations had been written by people who died in hospitals other than this one.

"Martin." Her telephone voice was the one she used for pronouncing. "The Adler letter. Did you write a second sheet?"

"There's one sheet. One and the envelope."

"There's two. Same paper, same ink. It's your writing, but it's" — a pause he could hear her frowning through — "leaned wrong. Like yours in a mirror. Martin, it says things."

The clinical papers had that too, he found later, filed under a term he came to hate for its tweedy neatness: mirror writing, the left hand's old tendency, Leonardo's trick, the script running sinister because the left arm's natural sweep is the right arm's reflection. The hand had written its page in his own script, reversed in slant, perfectly legible. It had, he would work out from the dates, written it in Adler's room — in the folder, in the dark, in the minutes he lay on the floor between the stroke and the alarm, or in some other unwatched interval he could not account for and never would. That was the version he could not live with, so he lived beside it instead.

What the page said was this: that in October 1988 Frank Adler, then site foreman, had signed the scaffold inspection at the Herron Street works on a Friday afternoon after four pints, that the signature had certified lashings he had not climbed to check, and that on the Monday the north face had come down with two men on it — and it gave their names. It gave their names.

Christine Adler was an auditor's clerk. Grief in such people goes to the archives. Inside a fortnight she had been to the county records office and found the inspection sheet, the inquest file, the finding of structural failure, misadventure, no individual fault assigned — and her father's Friday signature at the bottom of the certificate, in a

hand you didn't need to be a graphologist to see was four pints looser than his Monday one. The names on the inquest file were the names on the second page, to the letter.

She did not make a scandal. It was thirty-six years old and everyone in it was dead. What she did was worse, from where Martin sat when Odile told him: she believed it. She wrote the hospice a letter of thanks — of thanks — for her father's honesty at the last, for a confession she called the truest thing he ever gave us, and she had the second page framed, and the first page, the clean one, the bridge standing yet and the water long under it, she did not frame.

Martin read Odile's account of all this in the dayroom of the rehabilitation ward, holding the letter down with the hand that had written none of it, and understood, in the flat way you understand a diagnosis, that in thirty years of letters he had never once produced a document anybody would frame.

That night he set a biro and a pad on the nightstand, on the left side, the way you'd leave a saucer of milk at a door. In the morning the pad was blank, and he was ashamed of the depth of his disappointment, and more ashamed of the depth of his relief, and could not have said, then or ever, which of the two the hand had been waiting to see.

A fluke, he decided, riding home at last through the blue town with a discharge letter and a tremor. Damaged wiring, a hand twitching out fragments it had overheard, a coincidence of names. He decided it the way his customers decided the smooth sentence was what they had meant: because the alternative could not be lived in.

The alternative sat folded in his lap all the way home, weighing nothing, the way paper does.

THREE. THE ARCHIVIST

He went back to the ward in March, against the advice of the consultant, the physiotherapist, and every leaflet he had been given, and with the connivance of Odile Marsh, who signed him in as a volunteer visitor because the word scribe now appeared on a risk assessment somewhere with a query pencilled beside it.

"You understand what I'm doing," she said, first night back, not looking up from the drugs trolley. "I'm not doing it because I think it's wise. I'm doing it because Mrs Casals has asked for you by name four times and I'm not having her go without her letter over a pencilled query."

"Thank you, Odile."

"Don't thank me. Watch that hand."

He watched it. That spring he did little else. He developed, in a notebook of his own — a cheap spiral thing, kept in his right jacket pocket, the side the hand did not favour — a private taxonomy, in the numbered style of the case papers he now read like scripture, and the entries accumulated the way evidence does, indifferent to what they proved.

One. It writes only after. Never during a dictation, never while the customer is speaking. It waits for the session to end the way a junior colleague waits for the door to close.

Two. It writes only what was in the room. It has never yet produced a fact that could not have passed through that room in some form — a hesitation, a swallowed clause, a look at the door. It is not receiving. It is remembering.

Three. It does not editorialise. No adjectives beyond the customer's own. It writes like a clerk of the court.

Four. It is patient. It will wait days for paper.

Mrs Casals, the seamstress, dictated her letter over two evenings — a good letter, a modest life, the drink got out of it on the third pass as before, because her son had had enough of the drink from the inside and did not need it again by post. She died on a Sunday. The appendix, when Martin found it — folded into his own spiral notebook, which was the first time the hand had used his paper, a familiarity he felt in his stomach — ran to five lines. It said that the money for the son's first year at the technical college had not come from sewing. It said what it had come from, and for how long, and gave the name of the arcade off Bellamy Lane, and the name — this was the part that put Martin on the fire escape breathing like a man who'd been held under — of the other seamstress who had

covered for her every Friday for three years and was still alive, and could be asked.

He did not deliver it. That was the Casals decision, the first of the decisions, made on the fire escape with the March cold going through him: that he was now a man in possession of a machine that produced exactly one commodity, the thing his whole craft existed to remove, and that possession of such a machine did not oblige him to run it.

He burned the Casals page in the sink of the ward kitchenette. The hand let him. It held the taper, in fact, steady as a verger — and eleven days later, when the schoolmaster died, it wrote its five lines about him too, and folded them into the spiral notebook in the same place, and Martin understood the burning had been filed not as a defeat but as a delivery. The record had been produced and handed to its addressee. What the addressee did with his post was the addressee's affair. The hand was not a campaigner. It was an archivist, and archives do not care about circulation. They care about completeness.

The schoolmaster's appendix was the one that broke the pattern, and he made himself record that too, because a taxonomy that only keeps the specimens that bite is not a taxonomy, it is a grievance.

Aldous Pym had taught forty years of boys their Latin and was dying of it, one would have said, of chalk and repetition, a dry, precise, apologetic man whose dictated letter had needed roughening — the only customer that year whose actual speech required Martin to add warmth rather than subtract rot, because Pym's fear had polished him to the finish of an insurance notice. The letter went to a former pupil, now sixty himself, the only correspondent Pym could think of. It was a good letter by the end. It said very little and meant it.

The appendix said this: that in 1979 a boy called Weller had been expelled for the theft of the examination papers, and that Weller had not taken them; that Pym had known within the week who had, because he had seen the head boy coming out of the stationery room at an hour that had no honest explanation; and that he had said nothing, because the head boy's father sat on the board of

governors and Pym's position was probationary and his mother was ill and the sums of a small life had been done and had come out where such sums come out. The appendix gave the head boy's name. It gave Weller's initials and the name of the town his family had removed to, in the way of families after such things.

Martin sat with the five lines for two days, and on the third day, gently, feeling his way, he made enquiries — a library, an electoral roll, the patient telephoning of a man who had learned patience at bedsides — and found Weller. Alive. Sixty. A whole life assembled downstream of the expulsion: the apprenticeship instead of the university, the different wife in the different town, none of it, by the sound of his voice on the telephone, a ruin; a life, simply; but a life built on a foundation stone with the word thief cut into it, and the man had carried the word forty-five years, and when Martin — introducing himself as the hospice's scribe, executor of a dying teacher's last corrections — read him the five lines, there was a silence on the line of a very particular quality, a silence Martin knew professionally, the silence of a structure taking up a new load, and then Weller said, in a voice gone right back to fourteen: "I told them. I told them at the time," and wept, and Martin sat in the telephone box with the rain on the glass and let him, holding the page, the courier holding the delivery note.

So it was not a demolisher only. That was the entry, number six, written slowly: It does not take sides. It restores exactly as it ruins, and by the same operation, and cannot tell the difference, because there is no difference; there is only the record, corrected. The Adler girl framed her page. Weller, he learned later, framed nothing, but had the five lines read at his club, once, quietly, to the three men whose opinion had somehow still, after forty-five years, been the opinion that mattered.

And Father Brey, when the Pym story reached him — everything reached him — stopped Martin in the corridor and said only, with his monstrous mildness: "Fifty-seven years, Martin. Your scissors would have had that out of the letter in one pass," and walked on, and that was the day Martin stopped winning the argument even in the versions of it he conducted alone.

That was the spring he began, privately, to call it the archivist, because alien was wrong and the hand was worse — the hand, like the drink, like the war, a thing that had happened to him. Nothing had happened to him. That was the finding he kept arriving at, at two in the morning, in the flat, at the kitchen table with the taxonomy open: the syndrome had not installed anything. There was no second tenant. There was only the original tenant, with the connecting door taken off its hinges, and one half of the house turning out to have kept, all these years, every single thing the other half had thrown away.

Thirty years at deathbeds. Say four hundred customers. Say, conservatively, a thousand evenings of a man sitting closer to the dying than their own families sat, watching the mouth say one thing while the hands on the coverlet said another, watching the pause before brother, the glance at the door before money, the specific way a woman's thumb rubs her wedding ring when she is lying about being loved — and all of it going somewhere, every evening of it, into the half of him that had no speech to smooth it with and no way to forget, because forgetting, he had come to believe, reading the papers, is a thing you do with language. You round the memory off. You tell it shorter each time until the telling is all that's left. The right hemisphere cannot do this. It has no telling. It keeps the thing itself, in the grain, like a floorboard keeps a stain.

He put that in the taxonomy as entry seven, and under it, in smaller writing, the sentence he would spend the rest of the book arguing with: It has no mercy because it has no speech.

Father Brey found the argument irresistible, which was one of several reasons Martin came to regret starting it. The chaplain was a broad-faced, gentle, entirely relentless man who had wanted the pages from the moment the Adler story went around the ward — wanted them for God, was how Odile put it, though Brey himself put it in terms of the sacrament.

"What your hand is doing," Brey said, over the bad coffee of the family room, "the Church has a name for. It's confession. Late, and by an unusual courier, but confession. The dying man carries the weight to the very door and can't put it down, and something in the

room" — he nodded, with monstrous mildness, at Martin's left sleeve — "puts it down for him. You should be on your knees with gratitude. You're the first spiritual instrument I've ever met with a documented mechanism."

"It isn't absolution, Father. Nobody's absolved. The Adler girl framed it. The families read these things and the roof comes off their lives."

"The roof comes off." Brey turned his cup. "You've been thirty years nailing roofs down over rooms with gas leaks in them, Martin. Tell me about mercy again."

"The dying asked me to nail them down. That's the whole of it. They dictated, I wrote, they approved. Every clean letter in thirty years was approved by its owner. Your courier" — his left hand lay on the table between them, and both men were now speaking in front of it, as one does in front of a child who may or may not be old enough to understand — "asks nobody. Consults nobody. It publishes. There's a word for people who publish what they were told in a bedroom, and it isn't priest."

"No," Brey agreed pleasantly. "It's witness."

Martin had no answer to that at the time, and put the exchange in the taxonomy verbatim, which he recognised even as he did it was the hand's kind of record-keeping, not his.

Through all of it, at the kitchen table at two in the morning, the other notebook stayed in its oilskin sleeve, in the locked drawer of the desk, where it had lived for thirty years — Ellen's notebook, the fair copy, the one Ruth had read from at the funeral and posted back to him afterwards with a note saying she couldn't keep it, it was too sad and too lovely, and he had put it in the drawer and turned the key on the words too lovely and never once, in thirty years, opened it.

He noticed — March, April — that when he sat at the desk of an evening, the left hand had developed a habit of resting on that drawer. Not pulling. Not trying the key. Resting, flat, in the attitude of a man's hand on a coffin lid at a viewing: I know what's in here. We'll come to it.

Entry eleven, in the smallest writing yet: It is not working through the ward's accounts. It is working towards one.

FOUR. THE SERRANO LETTER

Luz Serrano arrived on the ward in June with four private nurses she did not need, flowers renewed daily by standing order, and the general atmosphere of a state visit. She was eighty-eight, small as a wren, courteous as a knife drawer, and dying of the pancreas with the same discipline she had apparently brought to everything else. The name meant nothing to Martin. It meant something to Odile, who had grown up in the parish of San Miguel and said only, when he asked, "Restoration money," in the tone other people say old money, and, after a moment, "Be careful what you're good at, around that family."

Luz asked for the letter-writer on her fourth day, having heard of him the way she had evidently heard of everything, slightly before it happened.

She dictated beautifully. He had had perhaps a dozen customers in thirty years who understood the form — who grasped that a last letter is not a speech but an inventory, and that the power is all in the selection — and she was the best of them. Three evenings, one letter, addressed to the family entire. The parish. The two marriages. The restoration of San Miguel, the tower rebuilt after the fire of '79, the fund she had chaired for forty years, the bishop's own thanks framed in the hall. Her husband, dead a decade, rendered in two sentences so precisely loving that Martin, writing them, felt the old professional envy of a craftsman watching better work than his own.

The second evening was the one he returned to afterwards, the way you return to the junction where the accident was later. She had been dictating the fund — the tower, the fire of '79, the bishop's framed thanks — in her small dry voice with its accent worn down to a lovely gravel, and she came to the year 1991 in the natural course of the chronology, and did not pause. That was the thing. Every customer paused somewhere; the pauses were the trade's whole cartography; he could have drawn you the relief map of any

life from its hesitations alone. Luz Serrano crossed 1991 like a woman crossing a hall she had swept herself. "In those years the fund also assisted families of the parish in difficulty," she said, "discreetly, as was proper," and went on to 1992, and the sentence sat in the letter like a coin in a cake, perfectly smooth, put there on purpose, daring the tooth.

And Martin's left hand, which had lain on his knee through five hours of dictation with the manners of a guide dog, rose — he felt it rise, felt the intention arrive in the arm like water in a pipe — and laid itself flat on the bedside table. Not towards paper. There was no paper it could reach. It simply placed itself, palm down, fingers spread, in the posture he had seen once in a photograph of a pointer marking a bird: everything in the animal stopped and aimed. Luz Serrano looked at the hand. She was the only customer who ever looked at it directly, and she considered it for a long moment with her small black unfrightened eyes, the eyes of a woman who had audited men for sixty years, and then she looked at Martin, and something passed over her face that he catalogued only later, lying awake: not alarm. Recognition. The look of one recording angel identifying another across a crowded room.

"Your hand is tired, Mr Hale," she said. "We will stop there this evening."

"As you like, señora."

"I do like." She settled back into the pillows, tiny, complete. And then, as he packed the folder, not looking at him, in the voice she might have used to note a small discrepancy in a column: "I had an aunt in Coristanco who wrote things in her sleep. Whole pages. The priest wanted them burned and my grandfather burned them, and my aunt thanked him, in front of everyone, most sincerely." A pause with forty years in it. "She had made copies, of course. A woman who keeps accounts always makes copies. Good night, Mr Hale."

He stood in the corridor afterwards with the folder against his chest, understanding that he had just been told something enormous and being unable, then or ever, to write down exactly what.

She required almost no carpentry. That should have told him. The customers who need no editing are the ones who did it themselves, years ago, and have been living in the fair copy ever since.

She approved the letter on the Thursday, thanked him in a way that made the thanks a payment and the payment an instruction, and died on the Sunday, at ten to four in the afternoon, with three generations in the corridor.

The hand wrote its appendix that night, in his flat, at the kitchen table, while he sat with his right hand flat on the taxonomy and let it — the second of the decisions, the one he replayed most. He could have sat on the hand. He could have worn the oven glove, which worked for an hour at a time. He let it write because Luz Serrano had been perfect, and in a year of the archivist he had learned what perfect meant.

Three sentences. The first said that the restoration fund of San Miguel had, between 1985 and 1994, restored considerably more than the tower, and named the two building firms through which parish money had gone out clean and come back cleaner, and the man — her husband's brother, Aurelio — who had run the passage. The second sentence said that in the summer of 1991 a girl of the parish, seventeen, had been paid from the same fund to be elsewhere for a year, and named the town she had been sent to, and the sum, and the man whose difficulty her absence resolved — not Aurelio; younger; a name with a career now attached to it. The third sentence said that Luz had kept the true ledger of all of it in her own hand, because the men could not be trusted to, and that she had burned it in the vestry stove on the feast of Saint Blaise, 2003, and that burning it was the only entry in it she regretted.

Martin sat looking at the three sentences for a long time.

Then he did what he had done since Casals: opened the folder, took out the top sheet — and found the appendix was not where he had put it. He searched the flat for two hours. The hand assisted, opening drawers with an air of helpfulness he could gladly have taken an axe to. The page was gone, and he knew by now that gone meant delivered to the archive, and that the archive had, since

roughly the Casals burning, ceased to share its filing locations with the department that lost things.

The page surfaced eleven days later, at the month's mind Mass for Luz Serrano at San Miguel, folded inside the book of condolence, between pages of signatures — where it was found not by family, first, but by the sacristan, who could not read English cursive well, and who gave it to the person standing nearest with an air of authority.

The person standing nearest with an air of authority was Tomas Serrano.

He came to the flat on a Tuesday evening, alone, which Martin understood later was the whole message: a family that sends one man is a family telling you how little of itself you are worth. He was fifty or so, Luz's grandson, dressed like a solicitor on a Saturday, and he stood at the door with a courtesy so complete it functioned as a wall.

"Mr Hale. Tomas Serrano. My grandmother spoke of you." He looked past Martin into the flat, once, a surveyor's look, pricing it. "May I take five minutes? I find these things are better done sitting down."

He sat with his hat on his knee. He declined tea in a way that made the offer seem, retrospectively, extravagant. On the table between them he laid the appendix, face up, smoothed flat, and Martin saw it had been handled by many hands and folded and refolded, and understood the family had been living with it for a week and a half.

"I'll tell you where we are," Tomas said, "so that you're not anxious. My grandmother is dead, my great-uncle Aurelio is dead, the fund was wound up before I was thirty. Whatever this page is, it is thirty-five years old and it accuses no one who can stand in a dock. So this is not that kind of conversation." He aligned the page with the table's edge, a small tidiness that put the hair up on Martin's arms. "But you'll appreciate that a document in your handwriting, containing matters my grandmother did not put in her letter — I sat with her, Mr Hale, I heard the letter, it was read to the family, it was exact — a document like that raises a question of method. I've

made enquiries. You have a condition. The hand writes on its own. There are medical papers; I've had them fetched and read to me; I'm told it's genuine, that it's involuntary, that the content comes from" — the first hesitation, and Martin watched him decide to say it plainly — "from what you've absorbed. Sitting with them."

"That's the doctors' belief."

"It's an interesting belief." Tomas looked at the left hand, which lay in Martin's lap being looked at. "Because it would mean my grandmother said none of this aloud, and this page is what forty years of her silences added up to, in the opinion of your nervous system." He let that sit. "I've read it many times now, Mr Hale. I knew her better than anyone alive. And the trouble — the reason I'm in your sitting room instead of leaving this to men I employ — is that it sounds like her. The regret about the ledger. That is her, to the bone. A stranger could not invent that." He stood, settled the hat. "So. We find ourselves the owners of an oracle. My family has one further use for it, and then, I'd hope, no more. My uncle Rafael is dying — your ward, next week or the week after; it's arranged. He was the treasurer, in the years the page speaks of. He is the last of them." At the door he paused, and for the first and only time that evening let something that was not courtesy show, briefly, like a coat opened on a warm day. "You'll write his letter. Only his letter. What he says, and nothing after. I'm told the hand can be restrained, and I'll expect it to be. We've had one honest document out of this family, Mr Hale, and it has cost us a week and a half of my mother not speaking. We won't want two."

He knew the staffing of the ward, the nights Odile worked, the visitor policy and its pencilled queries. He mentioned none of it and conveyed all of it, and was gone down the stair with the light step of a man whose evening had gone as evenings generally went for him.

Martin stood a long while at the table where the appendix no longer lay — Tomas had taken it, folding it away with the unconscious proprietary ease of a man pocketing his own receipt — and then went and sat at the desk, and found the left hand already there ahead of him, flat on the locked drawer, patient as a lid.

"Not yet," he said, out loud, alone, to his own hand, and it was the first time he had spoken to it, and the worst part was how natural it felt, how long overdue, like finally greeting a colleague after years of sharing an office in silence.

FIVE. THE HIRE

Rafael Serrano came onto the ward on a Wednesday, and was in every visible respect his sister-in-law's opposite: big, loud-blooded even now, a treasurer built like a hod-carrier, dying of the heart in instalments and furious about the schedule. He had no flowers by standing order. He had a transistor radio, racing pages, and a rotating guard of large nephews who called Martin maestro without warmth.

The commission had been settled beforehand, in a second visit from Tomas that lasted four minutes and involved an envelope Martin did not open in front of him. Terms: the letter as dictated, nothing after, the restraint worn and verified. Odile was to be on shift both evenings — Tomas said this as if granting a concession, and Martin understood it was surveillance dressed as kindness, and that some nephew or auxiliary would confirm her rota independently.

"You don't have to do this," Odile said, the afternoon before. They were in the sluice, the only room on the ward without a doorway you could be overheard through. "Say the hand's worse. Say the doctors have stopped you. I'll write the old man's letter myself; my handwriting's terrible, it'll look more sincere."

"He asked for me."

"Rafael Serrano doesn't know your name. Tomas asked for you." She stacked kidney dishes with unnecessary violence. "I looked after girls from that parish when I was training, Martin. When that family says only what he says and nothing after, that's not a stationery preference. Whatever your hand knows about the year 1991, you want it to have never learned to write."

"It already wrote it. This is the epilogue. Two evenings, one clean letter, and they file me under settled." He heard himself sell it,

heard the smooth sentence being offered to the room, and saw that she heard it too.

"You think you're the scribe in this," she said. "You're the loose page, Martin. Families like that don't file loose pages. They bind them or they burn them."

The restraint was his own design, and he was ashamed of its quality: a padded cuff of the kind used for wandering patients, anchored by webbing to his belt on the left side, the buckle set behind his back where the left hand — he had tested this at home, evening after evening, a man conducting arms-race trials against his own body — could not see it. The literature was blunt on this point and he had proved it in the kitchen: the hand worked by sight. Blind it to the mechanism and you bought time. What the literature was also blunt about, and what he did not tell Tomas, was the other clause: the hand does not tire of a problem. It has no boredom, no embarrassment, none of the muscles a mind uses to give up. Restraint of an alien hand is not a wall. It is a chess clock.

He had spent the week before the commission running trials in the kitchen, and if the trials had a spectator they would have looked like grief-madness, and they were the sanest week he had passed in a year: a man of sixty conducting a formal arms race against his own arm, with a notepad — right pocket — for the results.

The oven glove was the first generation. It bought him fifty minutes; the hand spent them learning the glove; on the second evening it had it off in four, having discovered — he watched it discover, that was the unbearable privilege of the syndrome, you were always in the gallery for your own defeat — that the glove's cuff would catch on the table's edge if the wrist supinated just so, and that a caught cuff was a fixed point, and that everything else was leverage. Second generation: the glove taped at the wrist. The hand did not pick at the tape. It presented the tape to the steam of the kettle while his attention was on the pad, warming the adhesive with the patience of a forger, and he caught it at the last peel and sat down on the kitchen floor and laughed until the laughing frightened him, because the countermeasure had required planning across time, and planning across time meant the thing in his arm

kept a calendar, and the calendar had his inattention marked on it in some notation of its own.

Third generation was the mitten-and-cord, abandoned when he woke at four with the cord half-hitched around the bedstead in a knot he had never learned to tie. Fourth was sitting on it, the folk remedy, the one thing the case literature and the ward auxiliaries agreed on, and it worked and could not be used, because a scribe with a hand under his thigh looks like exactly what he would be, a man barricading a colleague out of the meeting, and Rafael Serrano's room would be full of large observant nephews.

So: the cuff, the webbing, the buckle set behind the back, out of sight, because sight was its element — Osei had been right about that from the first testing room. And the final entry of the trials week, written small, because he was ashamed of it and because it was the finding on which the whole commission would stand or fall: It has one exploitable virtue. It is not devious. It solves in the open, like a good clerk. It has never once pretended to be quiet in order to work; when it works, you can feel it thinking. I will feel it start. What I will do then, the trials do not say.

The first evening went like the letters of his good years. Rafael dictated at the volume of a man ordering in a full bar, sentimental and coarse and rather magnificent — the wife, the horses, the brother Aurelio remembered wholly as a boy diving off the harbour arm, sixty years of subsequent Aurelio conducted straight past — and Martin's right hand wrote and smoothed and squared, and his left hand lay cuffed at his hip like a gun dog told down, and did not stir. A nephew sat by the door the whole session with the racing pages, not reading them.

It was in the second evening that he felt it begin. Rafael had got to the money — the years of the fund rendered as I kept the books straight for forty years and no man can say otherwise, which was, Martin's ear told him, the sound of a lie of the very oldest kind, worn perfectly smooth, load-bearing — and as the old man said the books, Martin felt the left wrist turn inside the cuff. Not pulling. Turning. Testing the bore of the thing, with the tradesman's calm of

a man putting his shoulder to a door he has been told is locked, out of thoroughness, because told is not the same as locked.

Then, methodically, it began on the webbing.

He kept writing. That was the performance the room required: the right hand producing the clean letter, the voice saying read that back, and shall I put the horses before the wife or after — while under the table, at the level of his belt, his own body worked at its buckles with a blind, unhurried, awful patience, fingertips walking the strap in quarter-inches, learning it, the way you'd watch a spider learn a windowsill. Twice the nephew glanced over. Twice Martin shifted his chair, coughed, turned the movement into a man easing a bad hip. He was drenched under his shirt. The hand did not sweat. That was the detail he took away from that hour and could not put down again: his own palm, six inches from his own spine, perfectly dry, perfectly busy, while the rest of him poured.

The buckle held. Afterwards he understood why, and it was not the design: the session had ended. Rafael signed off his letter — read it back, that's it, that's the lot, tell Tomas the maestro's a marvel — and the hand stopped. Instantly, completely, mid-purchase on the strap. It writes only after, said the taxonomy, but he had missed the corollary until he lived it: it also only fights for the pen when there is something to write. The dictation had ended and the hand had downed tools, and the horror of that was its implication, which he made himself set out that night in the spiral notebook in full: The restraint did not defeat it. The restraint was simply still holding when the whistle went. It now knows the buckle. There will not be a second evening on the same clock.

Rafael Serrano died four days later, on the Sunday — the family had a way of dying on Sundays, as if keeping office hours — with the clean letter done, delivered, and read aloud in the corridor by Tomas to a gathering of Serranos who wept at the harbour arm and nodded at the books kept straight.

The cuff had stayed on four days. Martin slept in it. He showered with the left arm in a dry-bag, cuffed to the towel rail, and if a man had seen him he'd have been sectioned, and he thought, fair enough. On the fifth day, the death confirmed, the letter delivered,

the account closed, he took it off in the kitchen with the specific joy of a man out of plaster, and stood flexing his own fingers, watching them be only fingers.

The envelope from Tomas arrived by hand the next morning — the second envelope, the settlement, thicker than the first, with a card: With the family's thanks for a document we can live on. T.S. Martin put it in the desk drawer, the other drawer, the unlocked one, and made tea, and stood at the window with the cup, and let himself feel it: out. Paid, released, filed under settled. The blue roofs of the town. The kettle ticking as it cooled, a small domestic iamb, radiator-like, ward-like — and it was exactly there, in the first unclenched minute in a fortnight, that his eye went of its own accord to the kitchen table, to the spiral notebook, which was lying two inches from where he had left it, squared to the table's edge with a tidiness that was not his.

He did not find the page, that morning or in the three days after, though he took the flat down to its boards. Because it was not in the flat. It had gone out wearing his coat — folded into the lining pocket he never used, riding to the ward and back on the days of the vigil, and posted, he reconstructed afterwards from the frank on the envelope when the news reached him, from the letterbox at the end of his own street, in an envelope from his own desk, addressed in mirror-slanted script that the post office had read perfectly well.

Addressed not to the family. To the girl. Seventeen in 1991; fifty-two now; a married name and a town four hours north, neither of which Martin knew, neither of which had ever been said in any room he had sat in.

The hand had known. The hand had watched Luz Serrano's silences for three evenings and taken down, from the pauses, from the currents under the pauses, a forwarding address held forty years — or it had assembled one, confabulated one, dreamed one with conviction, and posted it regardless; and which of those it was, and what it would mean if the letter found its addressee, and what it would mean if it found someone else entirely, were questions Martin was still circling at two in the morning on the Thursday,

when Odile telephoned to say a Serrano nephew had come to the ward asking, without any courtesy at all this time, where the maestro lived.

SIX. THE FOUND PAGE

What had happened, he pieced together in fragments over the following days, from Odile, from the parish grapevine she still had roots in, and finally from a single telephone call he would have given a great deal not to have listened to all the way through, was this.

The letter had reached the town four hours north. It had not reached the girl — the woman — first. It had been opened, in the ordinary domestic way that letters are opened in a shared house, by her husband, a decent man of thirty years' standing who knew his wife had grown up in the parish of San Miguel and knew nothing else about the year 1991, because she had built her whole adult life as a structure for containing that year, and had done it so well that the structure was invisible even to the man who lived inside it with her.

The page was three sentences long. It was the same three sentences. The hand did not write different versions for different readers; that was the whole terrible point of it, the thing Brey called witness and Odile called the loose page and Martin, by now, at two in the morning, called the truth, using the word the way you name a diagnosis: the truth, that commodity of which the world is supposed to be able to say the more the better, and of which no one who has spent thirty years in bedrooms believes any such thing.

The telephone call came on the fourth evening after the news reached him, to the flat, to a number that was in no book — which told him, before she said a word, what resources the parish grapevine ran in both directions. A woman's voice, level, prepared, the voice of someone who has written out what she means to say and has decided against reading it.

"You're the letter-writer. The one whose hand isn't his." She let that sit exactly long enough. "I'm not ringing to accuse you. I've done my accusing this week; there's none left over. I want to ask

you one question and I want the true answer, and I think you owe me that at the price I've just paid for your postage." Rain on a window at her end, four hours north. "Did she say it? The old woman. Out loud, any of it — my name, the town, the money. Was it ever said, in words, in that room?"

"No," Martin said. "Nothing was ever said. It doesn't write what's said. What's said, I write."

A long exhalation, and in it he heard something he had no right to hear and would keep for ever, which was relief — a specific, terrible, load-bearing relief — and she said, mostly to herself: "Then she kept it. All those years. She kept it even dying," and Martin understood that he had just been made the instrument of a verdict he could not follow, in a case whose parties he would never know; that somewhere in the arithmetic of that kitchen four hours north, it mattered more than the marriage itself that Luz Serrano had carried the thing to the door in silence; and the woman said one more sentence before she rang off, the sentence he took to the harbour town and turned over on the bare table on the nights that followed, oftener than he turned Ellen's: "Your hand got every fact of it wrong, Mr Hale — the year, the sum, all of it, wrong — and it still told the only truth in this family. I'd burn it, if I were you. Not because it lies. Because it doesn't know when it is."

She was, by the account that came back down the grapevine, all right. That was the word used, twice, at second hand: she's all right. The marriage was, at last report, still standing, in the way buildings are still standing after the event, pending inspection. What she had said to her husband across the kitchen table with the page between them, what thirty years of invisible architecture had sounded like coming down, or holding — that, no grapevine carried, and the hand, Martin noted with something that had stopped being surprise, showed no interest in finding out. It did not follow up. It never followed up. Delivery discharged the obligation entire. The archive did not read its own outgoing post.

It has no mercy because it has no speech, he had written in the spring, and in the summer, on the fire escape at two in the morning

with Odile's cigarette smoke going up past the security light, he finally finished the entry.

"I used to think that sentence was about the hand," he said. "It has no mercy because it has no speech — I wrote it like a finding. Poor brute, no language, no tact, can't help itself. But turn it over, Odile. Turn it over and it says: mercy is a property of speech. Mercy lives in the part of you that can lie. It's not a virtue, it's a feature of the equipment — it's what editing feels like from the inside. Thirty years I've called myself a merciful man." He looked at his two hands on the railing, the wet one and the dry one. "A merciful man is a man with a good editor. That's the entire specification. And the reason I got so good at it — the reason I was the best pair of scissors in this town —"

He stopped. Odile smoked and did not help him, which was her way of helping.

"You know what's in the locked drawer of my desk," he said eventually. It was not a question. Eleven years of covering for a man teaches a woman the shape of the thing she is covering.

"I know there's a drawer you touch on your way past like other people touch a mezuzah," she said. "I know you were married. I know you never once, in eleven years, have taken a customer whose wife was dying at home. You pass those to the day staff. You think nobody's noticed the pattern; everybody's noticed the pattern; we assumed it was grief and left it alone, because that's what you do with a colleague's grief, you leave it alone." She put the cigarette out with great care against the railing. "Was it grief, Martin?"

"It was practice," he said, and then the fire door opened and an auxiliary put her head out to say the Serrano nephew was downstairs again, and would not go away, and had asked for Odile Marsh by name.

Her cost came due that week, and it was exact, and nobody laid a finger on her, which was how Martin learned the true tax bracket of families like the Serranos: they did not punish you, they simply informed. A word in the right ear about volunteer access and

pencilled queries; a copy of the risk assessment finding its way to the trust; a nephew's statement, courteous and accurate, that letters had left the ward in a private individual's coat. Odile was suspended pending review on the Friday — eleven years, four hundred nights, a barge run aground on paperwork — and she telephoned Martin from the car park to tell him, and to tell him the other thing the nephew had said on his way out, pleasantly, to the ward at large: that the family knew a second document existed, that they had been patient about the first, and that Mr Hale would want to bring the matter to Tomas himself, at the house, before the family's patience found its own way to his address.

He went to the ward once more before he ran — against Odile's advice, delivered from the car park in language that eleven years of nursing had considerably enriched — because there was a thing in his locker he wanted, and because, he admitted on the stairs, he wanted to be seen there a last time by somebody. The somebody turned out to be Father Brey, planted in the family room with the bad coffee as if he had been notified, which, Martin reflected, he probably had; everything reached him.

"They tell me you're leaving us," Brey said. "Sit down for a minute. I'll not keep you; I know the difference between a man with a bag and a man with a suitcase." He poured a second cup unasked. "I have a last offer to put to you, and I've thought about it, and it's a serious one, so do me the courtesy of the minute." He folded his big hands. "The seal of the confessional, Martin, is the oldest data protection in the world. Two thousand years of case law, and it has never once leaked. What your hand produces — bring it to me. All of it, whatever it writes, wherever you end up; post it to me if you must. I will receive it as what I believe it to be, and it will go where confessions go, which is nowhere. Into the ground of God. The families needn't burn, the Serranos needn't hunt, and the record" — he turned his cup — "the record would still have been made, which I begin to think is all the thing in your arm actually requires. It doesn't crave the detonation, does it? You said so yourself: it never follows up. It requires a receiver. Let the receiver be me."

And Martin sat with the offer honestly, because it was honest, and it was the closest anyone came in the whole business to a door out; and found the flaw in it not with his head but with the flat of his left hand, which lay on the family-room table between them throughout, still as a paperweight, and which did not stir at the proposal at all — no interest, none of the pointer's aim — and Martin looked at its stillness and understood the refusal being lodged through him.

"It won't deal, Father. You're offering it a filing cabinet with a lock, and it already has one of those. It's had one for thirty years — I'm the cabinet. What it wants" — he heard the sentence arrive and let it come, because Brey of all men deserved the whole of it — "is the one thing your seal exists to prevent. It wants the addressee to read the letter. Confession into the ground isn't record, to it. It's my notebook trick with a cassock on. It's the white space, consecrated."

Brey was quiet for a while, which was unlike him and worse than argument.

"Then God help the addressee," he said at last, and stood, and shook Martin's right hand with both of his, and then — deliberately, in full sight, a priest doing a strange thing on purpose and letting it be seen — took up the left hand too, the still one, the dry one, and held it a moment with an expression Martin never managed to file: not blessing, exactly. Professional courtesy. One confessor to another. "Mind how you go, both of you," Father Brey said, and let it be the last thing.

There was no second Serrano document. There was the posted letter, which they knew about — the woman's family, it turned out, still had a cousin in the parish; four hours north was not far enough; nothing was ever far enough — and they had concluded, reasonably, in the grammar of families whose ledgers never balance in public, that a man whose hand wrote pages could be holding pages. That the archive had copies. That the oracle could be made to retract, or at least to close.

"Run," Odile said, from the car park, on her suspension day, having just paid eleven years for him. "Not to the house. Don't go to the house, Martin. Whatever you think you'll say to him, he's better at

rooms than you are, and the only page they actually want doesn't exist, which means the conversation can't ever end. Go somewhere with no post office and sit on that hand until it or you gives out."

He packed one bag. At the desk, keys in hand, he did the accounting a man does with sixty seconds and one bag: passport, money, the spiral notebook — and stood before the locked drawer for the length of four heartbeats, and did not open it, and could not have said, again, relief or disappointment. He took the oilskin sleeve out of the bag twice and put it back twice. In the end it travelled — not because he chose to bring Ellen's notebook, he told himself on the coach north, but because thirty years had proved he could not be trusted alone in a flat with it, and now there would be no flat.

The left hand rode on his knee the whole way, quiet, facing the window like a passenger, and somewhere past the river towns he caught himself checking that it was comfortable, and understood that of the two of them, only one was fleeing. The other was travelling on business, with its principal, towards the last unclosed account, and had merely been waiting — patient as a lid, patient as a chess clock — for the schedule to clear.

SEVEN. THE LAST LUCID WEEK

The room he took was over a Chandler's in a harbour town at the end of the coach line, one bed, one table, one window full of masts, and it took the room precisely one evening to become the other room, the first room, the one he had been re-entering at every stranger's deathbed for thirty years; because that is what such rooms do, when you finally stop moving. The kettle ticked as it cooled. The gauze curtain took the harbour light and made it the streetlight on Delft Road. He sat at the table with the oilskin sleeve in front of him, unopened, and let the room finish its work.

Ellen Hale taught piano for twenty-two years from the front room of the house on Delft Road, and the neighbourhood's children passed through her hands, in the literal way: she taught hands. She had no patience for talk about feeling. Feeling, she told the children, is what the listener has. What you have is fingers. Get the fingers

honest and the feeling will take care of itself — and honest was her whole vocabulary of praise and blame: an honest crotchet, a dishonest pedal, that trill was a fib, Susan. She was not kind and was universally loved, which took Martin years of marriage to stop finding mysterious. Children can smell exactness. It is adults who mistake it for coldness.

The illness took her the way frost takes a garden: by degrees that each seemed survivable. It announced itself in the September of her forty-ninth year as a tiredness she taught through, then as a pain she renamed twice — a stitch, a strain — and by the spring it had its true name, and the true name had a number attached, and the number was not large. Ovarian, disseminated, palliative from the outset: 1994's pharmacopoeia, morphine on a schedule drawn up by people who had never been in pain, the doses spaced like lamp-posts on a road with much dark between them.

She retired the pupils in strict order of seniority, a last lesson each, no announcements. The Brahms metronome went to a boy called Peter with fat, honest hands. And the frost worked inward through that summer in the order Martin would keep for the rest of his life, because he had watched it in nightly instalments and the watching had gone in where nothing is ever thrown away: the pedal foot first, the right, the ankle no longer to be trusted with sustain. Then the octave reach, the span folding day by day like a fan closing, until she was transposing everything into a child's compass, both hands in the middle of the keyboard, and the house filled for a fortnight with simple grave two-part settings that he could not hear afterwards, ever, in any arrangement, without leaving the room. Then the fingers themselves. Then the pen.

The pen was October. She sat at her desk one morning to write to her sister and her signature came out a seismograph, and she looked at it for a while, and blotted it, and said, in the voice she used for settling terms with tradesmen: "Right. Martin. You'll be my hands, then. We'll do an hour in the evenings. Ruth is to have an account of me, and I'm not leaving her one that shakes."

That was the notebook. Her idea; her project; conceived from the start as a fair copy. He understood that later — that Ellen, the great

enemy of the dishonest trill, had commissioned from the outset a performance, an account of me, selected and voiced and shaped for one reader, and that she knew exactly what she was doing, because selection was not lying, selection was composition, and she had spent her whole working life teaching the difference. The hour after supper. Him at the desk chair brought to the bedside, the good pen, the notebook squared to the lamplight. Her on the four pillows, hands on the coverlet, dictating in phrases shaped for hands to follow.

Write it exactly, Martin.

For a month, five weeks, it was — he had no other word for it, and had hated the word all his life — lovely. It was the best hour of the day and they both organised the day around it. She dictated the pupils, one by one, a paragraph each, their fat honest hands, their fibbing trills; the summers in Ruth's garden; the Christmas cake, never once edible in forty years, and that this was now safe to say. She fed him the good hours and he wrote every word, and the notebook grew plump with a finished woman, a rounded-off woman, and if he noticed — he noticed — that the account contained no October, no seismograph signature, no nights, he filed it under her composition, her selection, hers.

The turn came the way frost comes, in one clear night, mid-November. She had dictated a paragraph about the garden — the currants, netting the currants against the blackbirds, Ruth cursing in the canes — and then stopped, and was quiet for a while, and said, in a voice with no schoolroom left in it at all:

"Don't write this. I can smell myself leaving. Did you know that? It's like pears going over. It's in the pillow slip no matter what they wash it in." And then, before he could speak: "The currants. Read me back the currants." And he read her back the currants, and she nodded, and went on dictating, and he sat with the sentence she had ordered him not to write going into him whole, going in where nothing is thrown away, and the notebook that night got its currants and its blackbirds and a white space where his wife had briefly stood, and that was the first omission, and it was obedience,

and every omission he ever made afterwards was descended from it and claimed, on the strength of that ancestry, to be obedience too.

There was an evening in late November he could have produced whole at any hour of the following thirty years, and never once did, and it went like this. She had dictated a paragraph about the Michaelmas concert of 1981 — the church hall, the paraffin heaters, small Peter of the fat honest hands playing his grave two-part piece with the tip of his tongue out, and the whole rows of parents leaning forward as one body, the way parents do, as if the leaning could catch a dropped note — and it was a good paragraph, Ruth would love it, and he wrote it at dictation speed in his best hand. And then, in exactly the same cadence, the same card-laying calm, no signal given but a half-tone drop he had learned to hear the way sailors hear weather:

“The heater nearest the piano leaked, you know. Paraffin. I smelled it the whole concert and said nothing, because saying it meant stopping Peter mid-piece in front of his father, and I weighed a burnt-down hall against that boy’s face and chose the boy, and for years I’d wake thinking of it. Sixty people. Don’t write that.” Half a beat. “New paragraph. The mince pies afterwards were Mrs Aldous’s, and were, as always—”

And his pen, which had lifted at the heater, came down again at the mince pies, and took up the dictation without a mark on the page to show that anything had passed — that was the craft, already, forming in him under her hands like everything else he knew — and she watched the pen do it, both movements, the lifting and the coming down, and dictated on. That was what he could not explain afterwards to anyone, least of all himself: it was collaboration. She built the fork, he kept it. She was not confessing despite the notebook; she was confessing because of it, because the presence of the page for Ruth created, in the same room, its shadow — a second document, unwritten, with one reader — and into that shadow-book she entered, nightly, in perfect order, everything the fair copy could not hold: the paraffin, the wards she’d voted against at the church council out of spite and never recanted, the man before Martin, the miscarriage before the marriage, the whole

accurate woman, filed under white space. He was the shadow-book. He understood that now with a clarity that took the top of his head off, at a bare table in a harbour town: she had spent her last autumn dictating two accounts simultaneously, and both had been taken down entire, and only one of the clerks in the room had known he was working.

Don't write this became a register. Some nights it didn't come at all. Some nights it came three and four times, the dictation forking cleanly in her mouth — a paragraph for Ruth, a sentence for the dark, a paragraph for Ruth — and he kept the fork perfectly, wrote the one, held the other, and told himself he was the most trusted man alive, the sole custodian of the off-record Ellen, and did not let himself see what the custodianship was doing, which was teaching him, nightly, with his own wife as the practice material, that a page and a room could be two different countries and that he had a gift for keeping the border.

Her word counts fell through November like the light. He could chart it — he had charted it, in the ward years, in the taxonomy, in a cold hour: the notebook's entries shortening, eleven lines, nine, six, while the actual speech in the room grew and grew, because she was saying more and more of the things that were not for Ruth, that were for the dark, that were for him.

And then the last week, the lucid week, the week the disease, having taken the garden, opened for some reason all the windows of the house it was demolishing, and she was clearer than she had been since summer, terribly clear, pain-clear, and she stopped dictating to Ruth at all.

He would give the week to no one for thirty years, and the hand had sat beside him the whole seven nights of it, on the coverlet, holding nothing.

She asked him on the Monday. Calmly, without preamble, in the voice for settling terms: the pills saved in the dressing-table drawer since September — she had planned it like a syllabus — the amount, the manner, the night she had chosen, which was not far off, and what she needed from him, which was small, she said, in the scale of what was being asked of her. He said no. He believed

for years afterwards that he had said it out of principle, and had built the principle carefully in the following days like a man bricking up a doorway from inside; and it was the hand, three decades on, that would file the true minute of the meeting: that what he had felt in the moment of refusal was not conviction but terror, cold and specific — of the act, of the inquest, of the sister's eyes, of a sentence existing in the world that could never be revised — and that Ellen had watched the terror arrive in his face and had nodded slightly, once, the nod she gave a pupil whose wrong note had at least been honest.

She asked again on the Tuesday, with amendments, a negotiator's patience: less required of him each draft. On the Wednesday with anger, the only anger of the whole illness, brief and total, a house on fire in one window and out the next. On the Thursday softly, in the small hours, into the dark above their bed, in words he had never repeated even inside his own skull, though he had felt their exact weight riding in him for thirty years, the way you feel a coin in a coat you never wear.

And the notebook, that week, got: Tell Ruth the spare key is with the Pattersons. Six words. He had sat at the desk chair every one of those evenings with the pen full and the page open, her hour, kept faithfully to the last, and she had talked, and he had written six words, and the rest had gone into the white, and on the Friday she watched him do it.

That was the night. Not the asking — the watching. She had stopped asking by the Friday; she told him so, in the same administrative calm: "You can rest, Martin. I stopped asking you two nights ago. You didn't notice, did you. You'd stopped listening the way you'd stopped writing — I've watched you do it, you know. It's the same motion." Her hands were on the coverlet, and the fingers were moving, very slightly, in the worn hollows of the wool, and he realised — the last thing that went in whole, the deepest-filed exhibit of them all — that she was practising. Fingerings. On nothing. The hands, at the end of everything, keeping honest.

"I'm not angry about dying," she said. "I mind it, but I'm not angry; the thing is only doing what it does. I'm angry that the account of me will be yours. You'll write me kind. I was never kind. I was accurate." The streetlight through the gauze; the humidifier; pears going over. "So. Last lesson. Take the pen. Write this — all of it, this, exactly, every word since you sat down, and then we're square, you and I."

And he took the pen, because his hands always obeyed her; that was what their marriage had been made of. And she dictated it again, all of it, evenly, watching not his face but the page, the teacher's eyeline, watching the hands — and the pen moved, and what it wrote was Tell Ruth the spare key is with the Pattersons, and she watched every stroke of the omission being made, at dictation speed, by the hands she had trusted with her account, and when it was done she looked at it for a long moment, and then at him, and said nothing further. Not that night. Not on the remaining nights. She died eleven days later, beyond speech from the Sunday, and the last thing his wife ever said to him was nothing, on purpose, and it had taken him thirty years and a severed bridge and a hand with no speech in it at all to understand that the nothing had been dictation too, and that one half of him had taken it down.

EIGHT. THE LETTER TO HIMSELF

He had told four hundred customers, in the little speech he gave when the pen was uncapped and the family shooed out, that a last letter is easier than people fear. You just say it, he would tell them. Say it any way it comes; the saying is the hard part and it's not that hard; the shaping is my job. Thirty years of the speech, and he had believed every word of it, in the way you believe things you have never once tried.

The nine days over the Chandler's had their own dry chronicle, and he kept it, in the spiral notebook, because keeping chronicles was by now the whole of his character and he had stopped apologising to himself for it. The hand, in exile, changed. Not its nature — its tempo. On the second day he found it had written, on the flyleaf of

the room's Gideon Bible, a single line in the mirror slant: pears going over. On the fourth, on the margin of the chandler's receipt: the pattersons had the key. Fragments. Offcuts. He understood, watching the little deposits accumulate, that he was seeing something the ward had never given it scope for: the hand between commissions, the clerk at the desk with no customer in the chair, sorting. It was laying out its materials. Any tradesman would have recognised the behaviour. It was preparing a job, and the preparations were all from one file, and the file was thirty years old and smelled of lanolin.

On the sixth day he tried to open Ellen's notebook himself, forestalling — that was the word he used in the chronicle, forestalling, as if getting to the scaffold early improved the drop — and could not. Actually, physically could not: sat with the oilskin sleeve on the table for the length of a full harbour tide with his right hand flat on top of it, and the hand that would not move was the right one, his own, the obedient one, the editor; and the left lay in his lap all the while, relaxed, unhurried, declining to assist, and he apprehended for the first time the full black comedy of his position: the half of him that wanted the truth couldn't reach it, and the half that could reach it wasn't asking. The notebook did not need opening. That was what the left hand had known all along, with the connecting door off its hinges: nothing in the oilskin was news to it. The fair copy was for the other fellow.

On his ninth night over the chandler's, with the harbour dark and a Serrano deadline somewhere out there ripening — he had written to Tomas care of the house, three lines, there are no other pages, there were never copies, I am done writing, and had received no answer, and the no-answer had a pulse to it — Martin Hale sat down at the one table to write his own.

He did it properly, because doing it properly was the only liturgy he had. The good pen. Two sheets. The lamp set left of the paper, an old scribe's habit, shadowless for the writing hand. He addressed it to Ruth — who else; Ellen's sister was eighty-one now and sent a card each Christmas signed with love from us all to a man she believed had been the tenderest of husbands, because she had read

the notebook — and he did what he had told four hundred people to do. He said it aloud, any way it came, into the empty room, and let his right hand do the shaping.

And the old craft, the thirty-year craft, engaged like a well-kept machine, and he heard himself produce, at dictation pace, in a steady voice, a clean copy of Martin Hale. It was appalling and he could not stop it. Ellen was in it, of course — Ellen was its load-bearing wall — my wife's long illness, which she bore with a courage I tried to be worthy of; I sat with her each evening and took down her words for you, Ruth, and those evenings remain the honour of my life. Every sentence was true. That was the discovery that made him stop halfway and sit with his eyes shut: the fair copy is never made of lies. It is made entirely of true sentences, selected. The lie is the selection. He had known that professionally for thirty years and never once felt it, and now he felt it, saying honour of my life into an empty room over a chandler's while the harbour clinked, and it was true, and it was the biggest lie he had ever told, and both, and he finished the letter anyway. The saying is the hard part and it's not that hard. Signed, Martin. Squared the sheets. Capped the pen.

Set it down on the table, dead centre, between the two of them.

The left hand did not move for a long time. That was its way; he knew its ways now, knew them from the inside, which was where they had always been. It writes only after. It waited, unhurried, official, while the ink of the fair copy dried — and Martin sat and waited with it, in the position he had been trying not to name for nine chapters of his life, the position of every family he had ever shooed to the corridor: the position of the one who does not hold the pen, waiting to hear what the record will actually say.

When it took up the pen the movement was, as always, the worst part: not sudden, not spastic, nothing the ward's word involuntary had prepared anyone for. Deliberate. A workman's reach, the reach he had watched with his heart going through him at Frank Adler's bedside a lifetime ago in the spring. It drew the second sheet from under the first. It set the angle. And in the lamplight, in his own script leaned wrong, at an even clerk's pace that never once

hesitated or corrected — nothing to hesitate over; the copy had been proofed for thirty years — it began.

He knew the cadence before the third line. Not the handwriting — the handwriting was his own, mirrored — the cadence, the phrase-lengths, the clauses laid down like cards face up, each one shaped for hands to follow. A schoolroom in every full stop. He had taken dictation in that cadence for three months of evenings in 1994, and one half of him had kept the sessions the other half had burned, kept them in the grain, in the floorboard, in the wet dark on the far side of a bombed bridge, and now, with the connecting door off its hinges and the last account come due at the top of the ledger, the archive was reading it back.

It wrote the Monday: the syllabus in the dressing-table drawer, the amount, the chosen night, the small thing asked. It wrote the terror in his face, itemised, and the single nod she had given it — an honest wrong note. It wrote the Wednesday's anger, one window and out the next. It wrote the Thursday words, the small-hours words, the coin from the coat he never wore, and he read them as they formed and they were exact; he knew they were exact the way you know your own key in a lock in the dark; no inventing mind produces the specific unusable ordinariness of the true sentence.

It wrote the pears. It wrote the pillow slip. It wrote the fingerings practised on the coverlet, on nothing, at the end of everything.

And then, the lamp steady, the harbour clinking, it wrote the Friday, in first person, in her person, the entire last lesson at dictation speed — you'll write me kind, I was never kind, I was accurate — down to the final instruction and past it, past write this, all of it, exactly, to the sentence that had no other copy anywhere on earth, the one she had spoken while watching the pen omit her, the last thing his wife ever said to him in words, which he had held unrepeatable for thirty years below the floor of his own telling, and which he now watched his own body set down in her cadence, verbatim, the nib never lifting, and it was here — the reader will forgive the record for closing the door on the room at last, as he never did — that Martin Hale, who had sat dry-eyed and useful at four hundred deathbeds, put his right hand flat over the wet ink of

his fair copy, his clean and true and honourable and lying page, and wept the way the ward teaches you people actually weep, which is quietly, with the whole body, like a building settling.

The hand finished. It squared the sheet to the table's edge. And it did the thing it had never once done in all its months, the thing the taxonomy had no entry for: it did not hide the page, and it did not deliver it. It slid it across the table to him — to him — the addressee, the customer, the dying man's family in the corridor of himself, and then it lay down beside the lamp, open, empty, dry, in the attitude he knew from four hundred rooms and had never once expected to feel from the inside of: the attitude of the scribe when the letter is done and approved, waiting, with no opinion, to hear whether the customer will want anything changed.

He read it until the lamp's automatic timer clicked off near dawn, and the last line was still there in the dark, the way the true sentences are, and the terrible mercy of the night — the only mercy in it, and he checked the word, and let it stand — was that for a few hours, before Tomas Serrano's car came up the harbour road in the morning with its lights off, Martin Hale was permitted to believe that the page in his hands was, at last, at the end of everything, simply and completely true.

NINE. THE SETTLING

Dawn in the harbour town came up grey and workmanlike, boats going out under the window with their lights still on, and Martin sat where the night had left him, the two letters squared before him, and did a thing he had not done in the whole year of the syndrome: he telephoned Odile Marsh at six in the morning to hear a voice, and when she answered — instantly, first ring, night nurses answer like that until they die — he found he could not tell her about the page. Not would not. Could not: he opened his mouth to say the hand wrote Ellen last night and heard himself say instead that he was well, that the town was quiet, that she should take the reinstatement if it came and never mind on whose account it came, and Odile, who had eleven years of hearing what a voice was not saying, let a silence run its length down the line and then said only:

"Whatever it wrote you, Martin — you were the one who sat with her. Remember that when the clever man gets there. Records aren't the only thing that was in the room." He was still turning that over — she had known, of course she had known, the drawer, the mezuzah, the pattern everyone had noticed — when the car came up the harbour road with its lights off, early, the way men come who wish it understood that your time is theirs.

Tomas Serrano came up the stair alone, which meant, by the grammar Martin had now learned, that whoever had come with him was sufficient and downstairs. He knocked, which was its own message: doors were nothing to this family; the knock was a courtesy extended to a man they had decided to speak to before deciding anything else. He wore the Saturday-solicitor clothes. He carried a document case, and Martin understood, seeing it, that the case was the conversation, and that he himself had spent thirty years reading rooms and this man had spent thirty years arranging them, and that Odile had been right about the difference.

"Mr Hale." He took the room in once — the bed, the oilskin sleeve, the table with two letters on it, the left hand — and chose the chair that put his back to the window, so that Martin would spend the meeting looking into the light. "You wrote to me that there were no other pages. I believed you, as it happens. But I found I had a prior question, and it's kept me awake, which is not usual for me, so I've come to put it to the only relevant party." He set the case flat and opened it. "Not the hand's discretion, Mr Hale. The hand's accuracy."

He laid out four documents, squared, in a row, with the unhurried order of a man dealing patience.

"Since June I have had people checking. Not the family's people — outside people, paid people, records people. Everything the pages have said, every checkable assertion. I began, I'll admit, expecting to build a fraud case against you, and I want you to hear what I found instead, because you are going to have to live in it with me." He touched the first document. "The Adler matter. The scaffold, the Friday signature, the two names. True. Verified independently of the daughter; the inquest file is where she said." The second. "My

grandmother's ledger, burned in the vestry stove, feast of Saint Blaise, 2003. The stove was replaced in 2004. The fitter's invoice notes fire damage consistent with paper burned in quantity. I am prepared to call that true." His finger moved to the third document and stopped, and rested there, and for the first time in their acquaintance Tomas Serrano looked, briefly, like a man carrying something heavy.

"The girl," he said. "Nineteen ninety-one. Seventeen years old, paid from the fund to be elsewhere for a year. Mr Hale, my people are good, and they were motivated, and I gave them eight weeks and no ceiling. There is no girl. There is no payment. The fund's movements for 1991 survive — my grandmother's own reconciliations, in her own hand, the hand of a woman who by your page's account kept true books precisely because the men couldn't be trusted to — and they balance. There is no parish record, no school record, no absence. The man your page names — whose career, I remind you, my family has particular reasons to have watched closely — was abroad from the March to the December of that year; that is checkable and checked. And the woman four hours north, whose kitchen your hand's letter arrived in, whose marriage is now standing pending inspection —" he turned the fourth document to face Martin — "was not in this parish in 1991 at all. She moved here in 1993. She was seventeen once, and she is from San Miguel, and she left — two facts, Mr Hale, two true facts, and around them, a story."

The harbour clinked. The light behind Tomas made him a shape.

"I had a man read me the medical literature again, more carefully this time," he said. "There is a word the papers use for what the disconnected hemisphere does when it has fragments and no fact-checker. Confabulation. It doesn't lie — the papers are insistent on this, and I found the insistence chilling — it cannot lie; lying requires knowing the truth and steering off it. It assembles. It takes the true grain — a girl, a fund, a silence of my grandmother's with real weight in it — and it builds the most coherent thing the pieces will make, and it delivers the construction with total conviction, because conviction is all it has. Your hand, Mr Hale, is

an honest witness with no way of knowing which of its memories it made." He aligned the four documents with the table edge, the old tidiness. "Some of the families your pages have detonated were detonated by the truth. And at least one was detonated by a story your body believed. And there is no mark on the page to tell them apart. I have read everything it has written and I cannot find the seam. Can you?"

Martin looked at the two letters at his end of the table. The fair copy, in his own true slant. And the second sheet.

"So," Tomas said, "here is the settlement I came to offer, and it is the last document of any kind between us." From the case, a fifth page: short, typed. "A statement, yours to sign. That you suffer a recognised medical condition; that writings produced by it are involuntary and clinically unreliable; that the page concerning my family is, on the evidence, a confabulation; and that no further writings exist or will be circulated. In exchange the family's interest in you ends — permanently, warranted by me, and my warranties are good, ask this town. The nurse's suspension is withdrawn; I've had it looked into and it can be made never to have happened. The woman up north receives, through channels that cannot be traced to either of us, the documentary means to prove to her husband that the letter was a sick man's delusion — because it was, Mr Hale, on the evidence it was, and she is owed that even if some other page somewhere is gospel." He set a pen on the statement, not the good pen, a black corporate thing, and sat back out of the light at last, so that Martin could see his face for the ending, which was, Martin realised, deliberate, the single honest arrangement in a lifetime of arranged rooms.

"Sign it and it's true. That's what signatures are for; you of all men know that; you've been notarising smoothed lives for thirty years. The hand is unreliable. Every page it ever wrote inherits the doubt — every page, Mr Hale. That's the price, and I watched you understand it before I finished the sentence, so let me say it plainly, because I've read the second letter on your table from where I sit; I can't read the words but I can read a man sitting next to a page all night." He stood, and put on his hat, and delivered the terms to the

window rather than to Martin, a last courtesy, a coat left open on purpose. "If the hand confabulates, you sign, the nurse is restored, a marriage up north gets its inspection passed, my family closes its ledger, and the page your wife dictated to you across thirty years becomes — possibly — a grief's construction. A story your body built because it needed the guilt to be real. You'd never know. Not ever; you're the only witness, and you're the compromised instrument. Or the hand is a true witness: your page is her, verbatim, your thirty years mean exactly what they meant at four o'clock this morning — and then the Serrano page is true as well, and no signature of yours will make my family's problem into a delusion, and I make no warranties at all about what patience does when it stops." At the door he paused. "You have until the boats come in. I'll be in the car. Bring me the statement signed, or don't, and either way, Mr Hale, one of the two letters on that table has to be burned before I drive down this hill, and I have no opinion which. It's your dictation. First time for everything."

The stair took his weight down and away.

The gulls were starting. The lamp's timer had left the letters in the grey window-light, side by side, squared to the table's edge — one squared by the right hand, one by the left, and Martin Hale, professional forgetter, sole custodian of the off-record Ellen, last customer of his own long practice, sat between his two hands and did the accounting.

Sign, and she is possibly a story. Refuse, and she is certainly a verdict — hers and the Serranos' both, both records standing, both roofs off, Odile's eleven years gone for nothing and a marriage four hours north failing its inspection on the strength of a page his body may have dreamed. His guilt, thirty years in the keeping: was it worth dying for if it might be furniture — a construction, a fair copy in reverse, a life's grief carpentered by the wordless half of him into the shape of a wound because a wound was the only shape that explained the tenant?

He thought of her hands on the coverlet, practising on nothing. Keeping honest. The fingers moving; the account of me will be yours.

He took up one letter. The room was the room now, wholly: gauze, streetlight, pears going over, the humidifier's tick that was the kettle that was the radiator that was thirty years of other people's endings, and at the centre of it the matchbox from the chandler's shelf, and his two hands, the wet one and the dry one, and between them, at last, at the end of everything, the choice the whole practice had existed to defer.

He struck the match. The flame stood up straight in the still room, obedient, waiting to be told which truth was the clean copy.

The record shows the match. The record does not show the verdict. Some pages, the scribe finally learned, you are not permitted to smooth; you are the family in the corridor; you hear the pen stop, and the door stays shut, and what was decided in the room stays in the room, where it has always stayed, in the grain, in the floorboard, in the keeping of the last honest witness — who has no speech, and so cannot tell you, and no mercy, and so never will.

CODA. THE STANDING ORDER

In the spring, on the ward, restored and unrepentant, Odile Marsh received a letter with a harbour-town postmark and no signature. It thanked her, in eleven words, for eleven years. The hand was Martin's, but leaned wrong, like his in a mirror, and she noticed — because eleven years of nights teach a woman to read what a page is not saying — that the letter had been folded and refolded many times before posting, the way paper is when someone has carried it a while, deciding.

She wrote back to the chandler's address, twice, and got nothing, and let it be, because that is what you do.

But the sacristan of a parish four hours north of nowhere in particular will tell you, if you sit with him, that letters come sometimes to his church with no sender, in a strange leaned script, each one a page of some longer account — a pupil's hands, a garden's currants, a woman who was never kind and always accurate — as if an archive somewhere had opened at last and was releasing its holdings in order, one truth at a time, or one story, the seam not findable, the clerk not stopping; because a record, once

begun, does not end with the events it records, and somewhere, tonight, in a room with a lamp in it, paper is still filling.

For thirty years Martin Hale has been the hospice's letter-writer — the steady pair of hands called in when the dying want their last words in ink. He is famous on the ward for what he leaves out. The rough timber of a life comes to him warped and full of rot; the family receives furniture they can put their weight on. He calls it mercy. He has had a long time to practise the word.

Then a small, unlucky stroke severs the bridge between the two halves of his brain, and his left hand begins to write on its own. It writes only after the dying have finished dictating. It writes what they spent their whole testimony avoiding — and it is never wrong. The buried inspection. The money that moved through the church fund. The girl paid to be elsewhere. Families read the pages and their lives come off at the roof, and the last of them, a family with everything to lose and precise ways of losing people, would like a word with the scribe about what else his hand may be keeping.

But the hand is not working through the ward's accounts. It is working towards one. Thirty years ago, in a bedroom that smelled of lanolin and pears going over, Martin Hale's dying wife dictated her last words to him — and he did not write them down.

The hand remembers. The hand has always remembered. And when it finally sets down the one confession addressed to its own keeper, Martin must decide what a lifetime of guilt is worth — knowing, now, that the last honest witness cannot always tell memory from invention, and that the page in his hands may be his wife's true verdict, or the story his body built to explain the wound.

A noir of neurology and grief: alien hand syndrome as it is documented — purposeful, intelligent, patient — and the terrible proposition beneath it: that mercy was only ever a property of the part of us that can lie.

