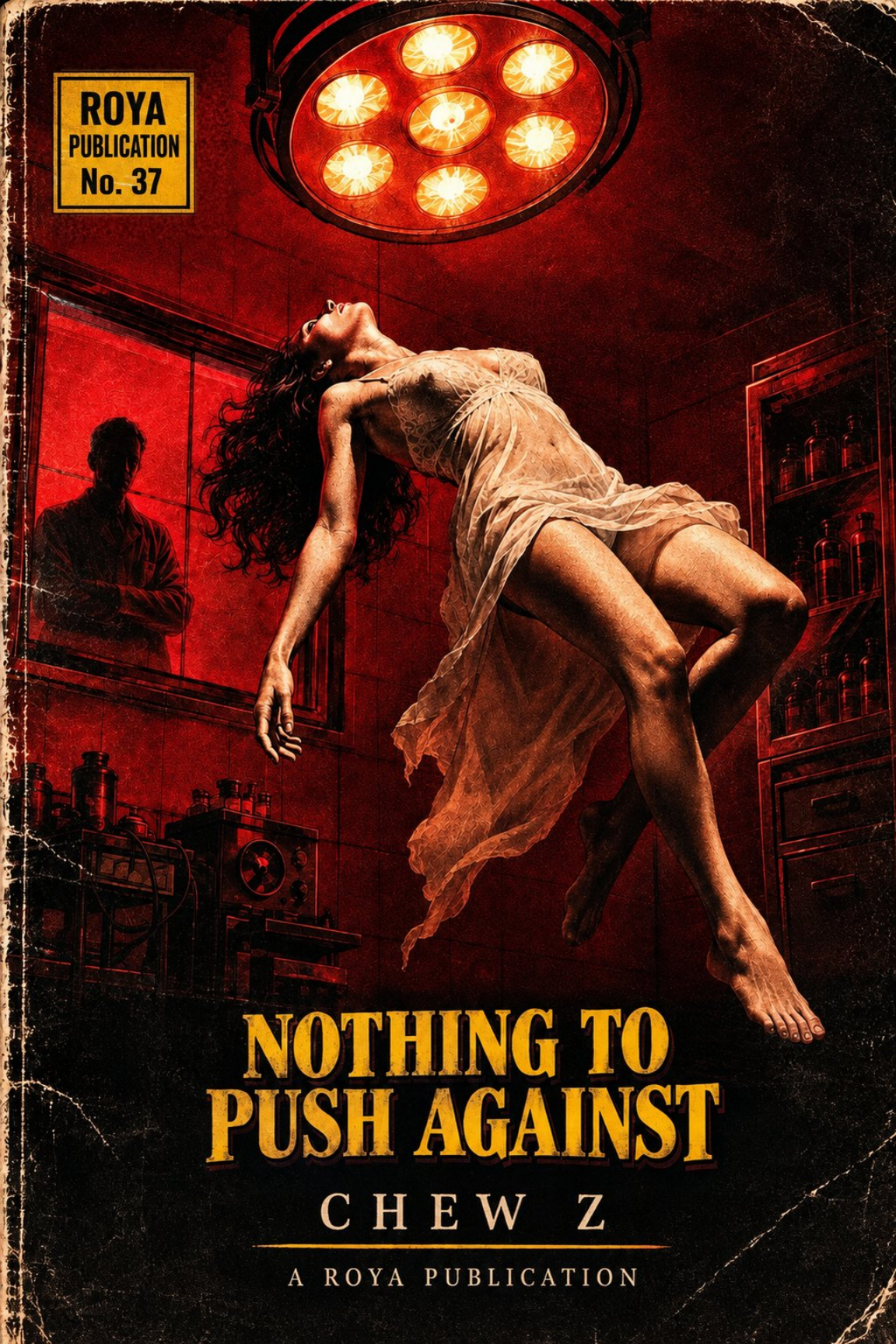


ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 37

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white, flowing, lace-trimmed dress, is floating in the air. She is looking upwards with her mouth slightly open. The room is dimly lit with a strong red glow. Above her is a large, circular, multi-lensed overhead light fixture. To the left, a man in a dark coat stands behind a glass partition. To the right, a wooden cabinet holds several glass bottles. In the foreground, there is a piece of medical equipment with a dial and various tubes.

NOTHING TO PUSH AGAINST

C H E W Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

NOTHING TO PUSH AGAINST

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 37

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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Depictions of medical conditions are grounded in published clinical literature but are dramatised and are not medical guidance.



ROOM 4, THE FIFTH HOUR. The twentieth of November: the spool taken from the machine and put in a bag, in front of him, while he could still feel what it cost her. Her notebook lies open at the line she wrote eight days before and underlined twice. The room has been the same size all along.

SYNOPSIS

Hector Vane is fifty-one, employed, solvent, and has not been convicted of anything in twenty-eight years. He is also, by the instrument the courts rely on, over the diagnostic threshold — and a court order keeps him away from the daughter who has not spoken to him in nine years, and from the grandson he has never met.

So he volunteers for a private trial: six sessions of drug-assisted psychotherapy for men like him, run by a clinician who believes the field gave up too early. If he can be certified treatable, the order can be revisited. He has read the research, including the parts she did not send him — including the Canadian programme that dosed psychopaths for fifteen years and produced men who reoffended at higher rates than those left untreated, because the therapy taught them the language of feeling and they took it out into the world and used it.

He comes anyway.

Under the compound, the defences he has never had to lower simply are not there, and for six hours at a time Hector can do something he has never done in his life: feel the weather that everyone else lives in permanently. He can also see, with perfect resolution, why women have fallen for him since he was a boy — that he offers no resistance, nothing to push against, and that a person talking to him is alone in a dark room with her own feeling at full volume, mistaking the warmth of her own face for love.

Dr Sara Bello knows the mechanism. She has published on it. It makes no difference whatsoever.

And when Hector finally says out loud, on tape, in a recorded clinical session, the thing he did on a January afternoon in 1983 — she has a choice to make about the recording, and she makes it in front of him, in the fifth hour of a therapeutic dose, while he is still able to feel exactly what it costs her.

Then the drug wears off, and the feeling goes, and the map stays.

A noir of the dark mind, built on the clinical literature: the attentional tunnel, the hollowed vocabulary of feeling, the paediatric markers, and the documented, unbearable interior of drug-assisted therapy. It asks what happens when you give a man the complete schematic of being loved and no capacity to be moved by it — and whether the kindest act in the book is the coldest thing in the cycle.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Every intimate relationship is built out of the same slow material: two people taking turns to lower a guard, at cost, without knowing whether the other will go next. The taking of turns is not the obstacle to the bond. It *is* the bond. What we call trust is simply the accumulated record of who went first, how often, and what it cost them.

The compounds now moving through clinical trials do something remarkable and genuinely therapeutic. They lower the guard chemically. Patients describe the state with a consistency that is hard to dismiss — the fear switched off while the memory stays on, the ability to look directly at the worst hour of a life and be curious about it, the sensation of being closer to another person in a single afternoon than in twenty years of marriage. They call it the warm room. They mean it literally. The clinical results in trauma are real, and this novella should not be read as an argument against them.

But it is worth asking what we have actually done when we remove the cost. If intimacy is the record of what a lowering cost you, then a defence that falls without being lowered has not produced intimacy. It has produced the sensation of intimacy, which is a different substance, and the two are indistinguishable from inside. Everyone who has ever come down from such a room knows the strange administrative morning that follows, in which a bond that felt eternal must be renegotiated with the ordinary, guarded, Tuesday-morning version of the person who made it.

And a harder question underneath. What happens when only one party has a guard to lower? Then the exchange is not mutual. It is extraction — and it need not be malicious to be extraction; it need only be asymmetric. The person with an interior gives up its map. The person without one receives it, keeps it, and can use it with a precision no ordinary lover could manage, because ordinary lovers are busy having weather of their own.

That asymmetry is not exotic. It is the quiet architecture of a great

many marriages, friendships, and consulting rooms, and it is why some of the most exploited people you know are also the most perceptive. Perception is not protection. Sara Bello can see the whole mechanism, has published on the mechanism, and chooses anyway — and I do not think she is a fool. I think she is the only person in this book who does something that costs her, which is my working definition of the thing Hector cannot do, and possibly of the thing itself.

Vonnegut stands behind this shelf as always: the true horror can only be told sideways, in the flat voice, with the reader supplying what the narrator cannot. Hector reports accurately. He conceals nothing. Everything terrible in this book is in plain sight, in an even tone, and the coldness the reader feels reading it is the reader's own — which is the only proof available, and I am afraid it is sufficient, that you have something he does not.

Chew Z

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ONE. THE INSTRUMENT

The room they use for the intake is on the fourth floor and has a window that does not open, and through it, if you stand at a particular angle, you can see the loading bay of the hospital laundry, where men in green move canvas carts across wet tarmac in the rain. I watched them for eleven minutes before Dr Bello came in. I am telling you that not because it means anything but because it is true, and because I have learned that the things I notice and the things other people notice are not the same things, and the difference is the whole subject of this account.

I have been assessed before. Four times, formally. The first was at twenty-three, in a room with a strip light that buzzed, by a man with a clipboard who was afraid of me and who wrote, in his report, that I presented as unremarkable, which I have always thought was the single most accurate sentence anyone has ever written about me. It is on the strength of that report and its successors that I am where I am, which is to say fifty-one years old, employed, solvent, without a conviction in twenty-eight years, and legally prohibited from being in a room with my own daughter.

The instrument they use is called the Psychopathy Checklist. It has twenty items. Each is scored nought, one, or two. Nought means the item does not apply. One means it applies somewhat, or the information is incomplete. Two means it applies. The maximum is forty. Thirty is the diagnostic threshold in North America; twenty-five in Europe, which has always struck me as a strange thing for two continents to disagree about, as if the condition were a shoe size and the difference merely one of local convention.

You cannot score it from an interview alone. That is the part people do not know. The manual is explicit: the interview is insufficient. You require what they call collateral information — the school file, the court file, the prison discipline log, the employer, the ex-wife, the sister. Everything about the subject that does not come from the subject. The reason is straightforward and is stated in the manual without embarrassment: the subject's account is not evidence of the subject's life. It is evidence of the subject's account.

I have read the manual. I read everything about myself that I can obtain. I am not defensive about this and I do not think it is a peculiar hobby; if there were a document that explained your wife's behaviour you would read it too, and you would not consider yourself disloyal.

I should say something about the reading, because it is the closest thing I have to an inner life and a reader is entitled to know how the narrator spends his evenings.

I have, at home, four box files. The first is the legal material: the 1998 conviction papers, the pre-sentence report, the two appeals against the family order, the correspondence with three firms of solicitors over nineteen years. The second is the clinical material, which is thicker: every assessment ever conducted on me, obtained by subject access request, each one a portrait of the same man by someone who met him for between forty minutes and six hours. The third is the literature — three hundred and some papers, printed, punched, and filed by year, which cost me a good deal in journal fees before a librarian in Leamington took pity on me and showed me a better way.

The fourth box is Nell. It has eleven items in it. I am not going to list them.

People assume, when they learn about the boxes, that this is obsession, or vanity, or the building of a case. It is none of those. It is that I do not have the thing you have — the running commentary, the internal narrator, the version of yourself you carry about and update. There is nobody in here doing that. So I have externalised it. The boxes are, quite literally, where I keep my continuity, and when I want to know who I have been I do not consult a memory of feeling, because there isn't one; I go and read what was written down at the time by people who were watching.

It is not a bad system. It has one flaw, which the manual states on page one and which I will return to at the end of this account, and which is the reason I have written it.

Dr Bello came in at nine minutes past two with two files, one thick and one thin, and set them on the table squarely, aligning their

edges with the table's edge, and I noted the alignment because people who do that are people who have decided in advance to be careful, and I filed it, and I have had cause to take it out again since.

She was thirty-nine. Dark hair up, and not carelessly up — arranged to look careless, which is a different operation and takes longer. A charcoal dress under an open white coat, and flat shoes, which I noticed because women who are going to be in a room with men like me are often advised to wear flat shoes, and I have never decided whether that advice is about running or about not appearing to have made an effort. Her hands were bare. No ring, no watch, and a faint indentation on the third finger of her left hand where a ring had been until recently enough for the skin not to have forgotten it.

"Mr Vane," she said. "Sara Bello. Thank you for coming in."

"I was brought in. My solicitor arranged it."

"Yes. But you could have not come." She sat. "People do that. About a third of the men referred to this trial never attend the first appointment. I've stopped finding it surprising and started finding it informative."

I said nothing. This is a technique and she knew it was a technique and I knew she knew, and we both let it stand, and I want to record here that the whole of the next four months is contained in that first minute if you know how to read it: two people using the same instruments on each other, each aware, neither stopping.

"You've read about the trial," she said.

"I've read the protocol document. And the two published papers with your name on them. And the Oak Ridge follow-up, which you didn't send me, and which I assume you'd rather I hadn't found."

Something moved across her face. Not alarm. Interest — the specific, unwilling brightening of a person who has been bored for a long time.

"Tell me what you understood about Oak Ridge."

"Ontario. Nineteen sixty-eight to eighty-three. A secure hospital. They put psychopaths through marathon group therapy — nude, sometimes, in a windowless room they called the Capsule, for days at a time — and gave them LSD to break down their defences. The clinicians believed in it. When they followed up the men who'd been treated against the men who hadn't, the treated ones reoffended more. Not less. More. Substantially." I looked at her. "The prevailing explanation is that the therapy worked exactly as designed. It taught them to recognise distress in other people, and to speak the language of feeling fluently, and they took both skills out into the world and used them."

"And knowing that," Dr Bello said, "you came anyway."

"Knowing that, I came anyway."

"Why?"

Here is where I should like to be careful, because it is the only question in this account that I am not able to answer honestly, and I would rather say so than perform an answer.

There is a woman of twenty-four called Nell who is my daughter and who has not spoken to me in nine years. In March she had a child. I know this because I pay a man to tell me things, which is legal, and which I do not apologise for. There is an order that keeps me at a distance from both of them, and the order rests on the finding, and the finding rests on the reports, and the reports rest on the instrument. If I am certified treatable, or better, treated, the order can be revisited. That is the chain. It is a mechanical chain and I understood it the moment my solicitor drew it on the back of an envelope.

What I cannot tell you is what I feel about the child.

I can tell you what I do. I have a photograph of him, obtained the same way, and I look at it most days, and I have noticed that I look at it in the evenings rather than the mornings, and I do not know what that means. I can tell you that when I consider a future in which I never meet him, something in me registers the way a room registers a draught — a change of state, unpleasant, without location. I can tell you that I have organised eighteen months of my

life around this, competently, expensively, and without once losing interest, which for me is close to unprecedented and which I offer as the strongest evidence available.

But the word people would want is *love*, and here is my difficulty with it, and it is not a rhetorical difficulty. I know what the word means. I can define it, and I can use it correctly in a sentence, and I could write you a page about it that would move you. The clinicians have a phrase for this. They call it semantic dementia — not dementia in the ordinary sense, but a hollowing of a certain class of words. I know the dictionary entry for *love* the way you know the dictionary entry for *ultramarine*: perfectly, completely, and without the colour.

So when Dr Bello asked why, I said: “There’s a child. I’d like to be permitted near him.”

And she looked at me for a long moment, and wrote nothing down, and I watched her not write it down and understood that she had just decided something about me, and that whatever she had decided was wrong, and that I was not going to correct it.

That is the first cruelty in this book. It is not the worst one. But I want it noted early, because everything that follows was available to her from that afternoon, in that room, with the rain on the laundry tarmac, if she had only written the thing down.

TWO. WEATHER

I should explain the ordinary condition of my mind, because the rest of this will not make sense otherwise, and because most accounts of men like me are written by people who have only observed the outside and have therefore described the wrong thing entirely. They describe the acts. The acts are the least of it. The acts are what happens when the thing inside is under load, which is rarely; most of the time the thing inside is simply sitting there, going about its business, and its business is not what you imagine.

Start with what it is not. It is not rage. I have been angry perhaps nine times in my life and each time it was a small, clean, functional anger that arrived, did its work, and left without residue, the way a

tool is taken out of a drawer and put back. It is not appetite. I eat when I am hungry and stop when I am not and I have never understood people who talk about food. It is not, above all, the pressure the films describe — the thing straining at its chain, the beast. There is no beast. There is no chain. There is a very quiet room with excellent lighting and nobody in it.

What there is, is *the tunnel*.

The researchers have a phrase for it: response modulation deficit. It has been tested a hundred ways and the finding is always the same, and I will describe the cleanest of the experiments because it is the one that explains my life to me.

You put a man in front of a screen and give him a task with a reward — press this when you see that, win money. Then, while he is doing it, you introduce something at the edge. A warning. A picture of a face in distress. A cue that says a shock is coming. In the ordinary man, the peripheral thing arrives. His hand slows. His performance degrades. He cannot help it; something in him turns to look, and the turning costs him accuracy, and the cost is called conscience when it happens in a room instead of a laboratory.

In me, the peripheral thing does not arrive. Not suppressed. Not overcome. It is not delivered. I am inside the task, and the task is everything there is, and the warning light and the frightened face and the sound of someone saying stop occupy the same category as the wallpaper.

And here is the part that ought to frighten you more than the acts do: under pressure, my performance *improves*. They have measured that too. Where you flood and fumble, I narrow and sharpen. Every catastrophe I have ever been present at has been, from the inside, the calmest and most competent hour of my week. There was a machine fire at the works in ninety-eight, and I put four men out of a building and closed the gas and did it in the correct order with a pulse of sixty-one, and afterwards the foreman wept in the car park and I stood beside him and watched, with real interest, the way you might watch weather.

Weather is the word I use. Other people have weather. It moves across them. They are rained on and it changes what they do. From where I stand it is visible, and beautiful in a way, and entirely outside — an atmospheric event occurring on the far side of glass. I have never once been rained on. I have spent fifty-one years watching people come in from the rain and describe it, and nodding.

Now the childhood, since the file has it and since you will want it.

The file records the following: cruelty to animals at seven, of which I remember two instances and the file records five; fire-setting at nine; a diagnosis, in the language of the time, of *conduct disorder with callous-unemotional traits*, which is the term the researchers now use for what is essentially the paediatric form of my condition and which they can identify, with unpleasant reliability, before a child is out of primary school. The literature on those children is worth your attention. They do not respond to punishment. They respond to reward. Every parenting instinct you have — the raised voice, the consequence, the withdrawal of affection — is not merely ineffective on such a child but counter-productive, because it is an attempt to transmit through a channel that is not there. My mother tried for eleven years to transmit through that channel. I watched her exhaust herself against it. The literature would have told her in an afternoon.

I am not asking you to feel sorry for her, or for me. I am pointing out that a great deal of misery in my family was conducted in the absence of information that existed at the time in a library eleven miles away.

The conviction, then. I will give it to you flatly because that is the only way I have.

I was twenty-three. There was a man outside a bar in Fell Street whose name was Ivor Pask, and there had been an argument inside about nothing — I could not now tell you the subject, and could not have told you the following morning — and he followed me out and put a hand on my shoulder from behind. What happened next took, by the testimony, between forty and fifty seconds. I broke his jaw in two places, his left orbital bone, and, when he was on the ground,

his elbow, which is the injury that finished his working life, because it did not set well and he was a plasterer.

Here is what I need you to understand, and it is the reason I am writing any of this down. During those fifty seconds I was not enraged. I was not out of control. I was in the tunnel — the same tunnel as the machine fire, the same calm, the same narrowing — and the task was in front of me and the task was completed with the efficiency I have always been able to bring to tasks. His sounds did not arrive. The barman shouting did not arrive. There was no moment at which something in me turned to look.

At the trial my counsel argued loss of control, because that is the only story the law has for such things, and the jury half believed it, and I received four years and served two. The truth would have been worse for me and better for the record: I did not lose control. I have never lost control. Control is not the thing I am missing.

Ivor Pask is sixty-eight now and living in Wexham. I know that the way I know everything. I have never contacted him, and I want to be exact about why: not from shame, which I do not have access to, and not from fear, which I have very little of. I have not contacted him because I have run the projection and there is no version of that conversation that improves either of our positions, and I do not take actions that do not improve positions.

There is a version of me that would like that to be shame. I can see the shape of where shame would sit. I have, at times, arranged my behaviour to occupy that shape — done the thing a man with shame would do, in the correct order, at the correct pace. Dr Bello would say later, in the fourth session, when both of us were past the point of pretending, that this was the most human thing about me, and I disagreed with her then and disagree now. A man who builds a scale model of a house has not built a house.

Twenty-eight years without a conviction. I want that in the record too, since it is also true.

Before that, though, the scanner, because Dr Bello sent me for one in the second week and because the results are in the file and the reader is entitled to them.

They put you in a mobile unit — a lorry, essentially, with a magnet in it, parked behind the building — and they show you images while they watch your brain. Some of the images are neutral: a chair, a field, a stapler. Some are not. The ones that are not are chosen from a standardised set that has been used in this research for forty years and which I will not describe, except to say that they are photographs of people in the worst minutes of their lives and that the researchers who assembled the set have, I understand, a very high rate of leaving the field.

In the ordinary subject, the not-neutral images produce a cascade. There is a structure called the amygdala which goes off like a smoke alarm; there is a slowing of the heart in the first second, which is not fear but attention, the body stopping to look; there is measurable activity along a whole ring of tissue at the centre of the brain which the researchers call the paralimbic system and which is, as near as anyone can say, the part of you that finds things to be *about* something.

In me, the field's expectation is under-reactivity throughout that ring, and the field's expectation was met. The report puts it in the passive voice, which I have noticed is what people do when the finding embarrasses them: *reduced paralimbic engagement was observed across the aversive condition, consistent with the extant literature.*

There is a simpler test and I like it better because it needs no lorry. They sit you in a chair and show you the same images and, at random intervals, deliver a burst of white noise loud enough to make you jump. Everyone jumps. The point is not the jump. The point is that in an ordinary person the jump is *bigger* when the picture is horrible — the body is already braced, already leaning away, and the noise lands on a system that is halfway out of its chair. It is called startle potentiation and it is one of the most reliable measurements in the whole of psychology. It has been replicated for fifty years. It works on children. It works on rats.

It does not work on me. My startle is the same size whatever is on the screen. The field, the stapler, the worst minute of a stranger's

life: identical response, to within a few milliseconds of one another, across ninety trials.

I have had the actual chart. It is two flat lines lying on top of each other, and it is, I think, the most complete portrait of me that has ever been produced, and it took eleven minutes and cost less than the taxi.

I have not been idle in the twenty-eight years, and I have not been good; those are separate axes and everyone confuses them. What I have been is *structured*. I go to work.

The structure did not come from anywhere edifying. It came from prison, which is the only environment I have ever been in that was built by people who understood me, though they did not know that was what they were doing.

Two years, of which I served twenty-two months. I want to report something about that, because it is counter-intuitive and because it is well attested in the literature and universally disbelieved by people who have not been inside: I was content there. Not resigned. Content. The place was a machine with published rules and visible consequences and a timetable, and it asked nothing of me that I could not deliver, and it never once required me to produce a feeling on demand at a family occasion. I did not have a bad time. Men around me were destroyed by it and I had, on the whole, an interesting twenty-two months, and I read a great deal, and I came out heavier and calmer than I went in.

The wing officer who wrote my discharge note put down: *Vane presents no management difficulties. Compliant, articulate, no association issues. Would benefit from continued structure.* He meant it as a courtesy. It is the best piece of clinical advice I have ever received and nobody has improved on it in twenty-eight years.

So I built a life that was a prison with better food. I say that without self-pity, because self-pity is another of the words I know and cannot taste. I get up at five-forty. I am at the yard by six-thirty. I do the same route on the same days. I eat the same four dinners in rotation. I do not drink, I do not gamble, I have not been in a bar

since 1998 as a matter of policy rather than principle, and I go to bed at ten-fifteen.

The rigidity is not a symptom of anything. It is a prosthesis. Ordinary people are held in their lives by a continuous quiet pressure of caring about things — the dread of disappointing someone, the pull of a person waiting at home, the small punishments of guilt that arrive unbidden at three in the morning. I have none of that. There is no pressure holding me anywhere, and a man with no pressure holding him will drift, not out of malice but out of the sheer absence of anything to stop him. So I have built an external scaffold out of habit and contract and timetable and put myself inside it, and it has held for twenty-eight years, and the only two occasions on which it has failed were both occasions on which the timetable was interrupted.

I do the work well, and I am, by the objective measures, the best maintenance contractor in three counties, because machines have no weather and do not require me to pretend. I keep to a routine of extraordinary rigidity. I do not drink, because the tunnel plus alcohol is the fifty seconds outside the bar in Fell Street and I have run that projection too.

That is my life. It is not a tortured life. That is the thing nobody wants to hear. Nobody wants to hear that the man they have built the films about is, from the inside, comfortable — that he sleeps eight hours, that he is not lonely because loneliness requires a felt absence and I have never felt one, that his days are quiet and orderly and moderately interesting and that he would not, if offered, trade them for yours.

I would not have traded them for yours.

I want that sentence to stand alone, because of what happened in the third session, and because when I write the last chapter of this account I would like the reader to be able to turn back and find it here, in the past tense, where I have left it.

THREE. MARLEY ROAD

The file has my childhood in nine pages and it is accurate and it is useless, in the way a list of a building's materials is useless if you want to know what it was like to live in it. So here is the building.

Marley Road was a terrace of council maisonettes put up in 1961 and demolished in 2004, and we had the upper of number thirty-one, which meant two flights of concrete stairs with a smell in them that I have never encountered anywhere else and could identify blindfolded tomorrow — cold stone, bleach, and something organic underneath that the bleach was for.

My mother was called Iris and she was a good woman. I want that established before anything else, because there is a shape these accounts usually take, and I am going to refuse it. She was not cruel. She did not drink. She did not bring men through the flat. She worked nights at a bakery from when I was five, and slept in the afternoons, and made three meals a day out of very little with genuine skill, and she loved me continuously and demonstrably for eleven years, and it made no difference whatsoever.

That is the finding, and it is the one thing in this book I would put in front of a jury.

The literature agrees with me, incidentally, and this is worth the reader's attention because the popular account is so confident and so wrong. The children who present as I presented — the ones the researchers call callous-unemotional, who are visible by seven and reliably identifiable by nine — do not, as a group, come out of the houses you are picturing. Some do. Plenty do not. What the twin studies say, in the flat language of that literature, is that this particular pattern is more heritable than almost anything else in child psychiatry — the estimates run high, higher than for height in some cohorts — and that the shared family environment contributes, in several large samples, approximately nothing.

Approximately nothing. That is not my phrase. It is theirs. A woman can do everything correctly for eleven years and the measured effect of it, in the aggregate, across thousands of such children, is a number statistically indistinguishable from zero.

I have never been able to decide whether Iris would have found that a comfort or the worst news of her life.

What she actually got, in place of that information, was a decade of increasingly frantic technique. I can reconstruct her curriculum from memory because I remember everything.

Years three to six: ordinary warmth, applied generously, on the assumption that I was slow to show it back. Years six to eight: the reasoning phase, in which every incident was followed by a conversation about how the other person felt, conducted at the kitchen table, sometimes for an hour — how do you think Mrs Danby felt, Hector, when you did that to the cat; and I would look at her and produce, with perfect accuracy, the answer that ended the conversation soonest, because I could see what the answer was, I could always see what the answer was, and she would take my correct answer as evidence of a feeling and go to bed relieved.

Years eight to eleven: punishment. This is the phase the literature is most emphatic about and the phase every parent reaches, and it is the one that does actual damage, though not to the child.

I was smacked, sent to rooms, deprived of things, shouted at. None of it registered as anything but weather — I have described the mechanism; the peripheral signal is not delivered — and so none of it modified anything, and so the intensity climbed, because that is what a person does when a tool is not working. She would escalate and I would remain exactly as I was, and then she would sit on the stairs afterwards with her hands over her face, and I would stand at the top in my pyjamas and watch her with mild interest, and the thing I could see clearly even then was that I was fine and she was not.

Punishment does not work on such a child. Reward does. That is not a moral claim, it is an engineering one, and it is in every review paper written in the last thirty years, and my mother could have had it from a library in Coventry in 1985 and instead had it from nobody, ever, in her life.

At eleven I was sent to a child psychiatrist. Twice. The file records the referral and the two appointments and then a gap, and the gap

is because my mother stopped taking me, and I know exactly why she stopped, because I was in the room.

The man used the phrase *this kind of child*. Twice, in the second session, while I sat there being this kind of child, and my mother heard it, and something in her — a woman who had been managing an unmanageable thing alone for four years on a bakery wage — closed like a door. She was not going to hand her son to a system that had already named him. She stood, she thanked him with great politeness, and we never went back, and I want the reader to understand that this decision was made out of love and was catastrophic, and that both of those are true and do not cancel.

Because that is the year — 1985, eleven years old — at which every intervention study says the window is closing. The programmes that work on these children are the ones that start early, that run for years, that train the parent rather than the child, and that use reward with a consistency almost impossible to sustain in an ordinary household with an ordinary income and no support. There is decent evidence they work. There is also decent evidence they are almost never available.

The window closed. Three years later, Robbie Sands was in the back room with the two-bar fire.

Now the animals, since the file has them and since I have said I would not be dishonest.

The file records five instances between the ages of six and nine. I remember two, and I want to describe the *quality* of the memory, because everyone assumes there is something in it that is not there.

There was a cat, and there was, later, a dog belonging to a family on the ground floor. What I remember is not pleasure. There is no pleasure in it. There is no rage, no thrill, no sense of power — all of which people expect, and all of which are, I think, projections by people imagining what they would have to feel in order to do such a thing.

What was in it was the same thing that was in the back room in 1983 and the same thing that was in the fourth hour of a therapy session forty-three years later: *interest*. Calm, wide,

undifferentiated interest in what would happen. The world was a mechanism and I wanted to see the parts move. Nothing in me arrived to stop it, because there is nothing in me that arrives.

I stopped at nine. Not from conscience. From arithmetic: I worked out that the events were producing consequences that were bad for me, and I have never in my life repeated an action with a poor return. That is the whole of my reform and it is the whole of my reform to this day, and Sara Bello, who is cleverer than anyone who ever assessed me, said in the fifth preparatory session that she thought it was not the whole of it, and she was wrong, and I let her be wrong.

School, briefly. I was not a poor pupil. I was, in the structured subjects, excellent — mathematics, technical drawing, anything with a right answer and a visible procedure — and hopeless in everything requiring me to say what a character in a book was feeling, which I could do accurately and could never do *convincingly*, because I produced the answers too fast and without the softening that people put around such things.

I had, by fourteen, a very large collection of tables. That is the only way I can describe it. Rules of thumb about faces, timings, what phrases produce what results, how long to hold an expression, when to look away. Every child assembles some of this. The difference is that ordinary children build the tables on top of a feeling and use them to communicate it, and I built the tables on top of nothing and used them to pass.

I passed. I passed for thirty-seven years, competently, without a conviction after twenty-three, and I would have gone on passing until I died, and none of this account would exist, if it were not for a court order and a small warm room and a woman who wore no coat to the fifth session.

My mother died in 2005, of a stroke, over four days in a hospital ward, and I was there for all four of them and did everything correctly, and on the last afternoon she was conscious for a few minutes and she looked at me and said, with real effort: “You’ve been good to me.”

She had wanted, I think, to be reassured about something at the end, and I was the only person available to do it, and the tables had an entry for that. I said the right thing in the right voice and held her hand for the right length of time.

Then she died, and I drove home, and I stopped at a garage on the way and bought petrol and a sandwich, and I want that detail in the record because it is the truest thing I know about myself, and because I have never been able to work out whether the fact that I still remember exactly what kind of sandwich it was means something or nothing at all.

FOUR. PREPARATION

There were three preparatory sessions before any drug was administered, and they are, in the protocol, the least interesting part of the trial and, in this account, the part where everything was decided.

The room is called Room 4 and it is on the same floor as the intake room but at the other end, and it does not look like a hospital room, which is deliberate and which the protocol document describes, without irony, as *creating a container*. There are two low armchairs upholstered in a colour I would call ox-blood and Dr Bello called brick. There is a daybed against the wall with a folded blanket at its foot. There is a floor lamp with an amber shade rather than an overhead light, and a small table for water, and a second table with the recording equipment on it — a digital unit, but wired to an old reel-to-reel that the department kept for redundancy after a data loss in 2019, and the sight of those two spools turning slowly through eight hours became, over the following months, the way I knew where I was.

There is a window with a blind. Sodium lamps in the car park below. In the evenings the blind throws bars.

“The dose is not the therapy,” Dr Bello said, in the first of the preparatory sessions. “I need you to understand that, because it’s the single most common misunderstanding, and men in your position tend to arrive expecting a procedure. It isn’t a procedure. The compound does one thing: it lowers your defences and raises

your tolerance for looking at what's underneath them. Everything of value that happens, happens because *you* do it while the door is open. If you sit there for eight hours enjoying the sensation, you'll have had a pleasant day and changed nothing."

"And if there's nothing underneath the defences?"

"Then we'll have found that out, which is also a result." She said it evenly. "I'm not going to flatter you, Mr Vane. You're familiar with your own diagnosis and you've read further into it than most clinicians I work with. So let's not spend six sessions on me pretending I think you're an ordinary anxious man and you pretending to be one."

That was the moment, if you want a moment. Not anything erotic; nothing of the kind was in the room in the first week. It was simply that she declined the usual arrangement. Every clinician I have sat with has wanted something from me — to fix me, to be unafraid of me, to write me up. She wanted to be *right*, which is a cleaner appetite and much harder to feed.

She told me her thesis on the second afternoon, unprompted, which I think surprised her.

"The field's position is that this condition is untreatable. That's not quite what the evidence says. What the evidence says is that everything we've tried has failed, and that some of it has made things worse. Those are different claims and the difference is where I've spent my career." She had her legs crossed and her hands still and she was, I noticed, not looking at me while she said it, which people do when the thing they are saying is load-bearing. "Oak Ridge failed because it was a group setting run by ideologues with a hallucinogen that fragments the self. If you give a man like you LSD in a room full of other men like you, you get exactly what they got — a seminar in the mechanics of other people's pain, conducted by enthusiasts. But the compound we're using doesn't fragment. It does the opposite. It makes the self *tolerable* to look at. Nobody has ever tried that on this population, in a dyad, with a protocol. Nobody's been allowed to."

"And you have been."

"I've been allowed six of you. Privately funded, ethics-boarded to within an inch of its life, and if it goes badly it ends my career rather than the field's." She looked at me then. "You're the fourth. The first three were interesting. You're the first one where I think we might learn something."

I have gone over that sentence many times since. I do not believe she was flattering me; she was not a flatterer. I believe she meant it, and I believe it was true, and I believe it was also the first brick out of the wall, because a woman who has staked her career on a proposition and then meets the proof of it walking about in a charcoal jacket is not, after that, an entirely neutral observer.

She asked about the marriage in the third preparatory session and I gave her the file version, and she said "that's the file version", and I said yes, and she waited, which is a technique, and it worked, which is the annoying thing about techniques.

Marta and I were married for nine years. I met her at twenty-six, newly out, at a supplier's office in Coventry, and she was two years older and had a directness I recognised immediately as useful. I was, by every external measure, a good husband. I did not drink, I did not stray for the first eleven years, I did not raise my voice — I have never raised my voice — and I earned steadily and handed it over without comment and never once forgot a birthday, because I keep a list.

She left in 2010, and the thing she said at the end is worth setting down because it is more accurate than anything in the assessments.

She did not say *you never loved me*. She was cleverer than that. She said: "I've been married for nine years to the best-behaved man I've ever met, and I have no idea what I've been married to. There's nothing to fight with, Hector. Do you know what that does to a person? I've been shouting into a well for fourteen years and the well has been *very polite about it*."

Then she said the sentence I have thought about most, which was: "The worst part is I can't tell anyone. Because every single thing I could tell them is a thing you did right."

Nell was eight. The custody arrangement was straightforward, and I kept to it exactly, and I want to note that in nine years of alternate weekends I was never once late, and that when Nell was fifteen and asked me directly whether I had ever loved her mother, I said “yes”, and it was the correct answer and it was not a lie, because I have no idea what the true answer would look like.

Those weekends deserve a paragraph, because they are the part of my life I have gone over most since the trial, and because I have come to understand what they were.

I did them properly. That is not the same as saying I did them well, and it took me a long time to see the difference. I fed her, took her places, remembered every preference, never raised my voice — I have never raised my voice — and by any list of behaviours I was a better father on those forty-eight hours than most of the men in that car park. She had a swimming phase and I learned the timetables of four pools. She had a period at eleven of wanting to know about engines and I taught her, on a Saturday, to strip and reassemble a small petrol motor, and she was good at it, and I remember that she was good at it, and I remember nothing about how she looked while she was being good at it.

What I could not do was the thing that runs underneath all of that and requires no action at all. The being-glad-she-was-there. Children detect it with an accuracy no instrument has matched. She was not neglected and she was not frightened of me and she was, I think, for years, faintly and inexplicably lonely in my flat in a way she could not have explained to anyone, including her mother, including herself.

I have one memory that I cannot file, and I am going to put it here rather than at the end, because putting it at the end would be a shape and I do not deserve a shape.

She was nine, and she had made something at school out of card and split pins, and she brought it to the car on the Friday, and she held it up in the passenger seat and looked at me and waited. And I said the correct thing in the correct voice at the correct interval, from the tables, as I have said everything my whole life. And she

put it down on her knees and looked out of the window for the rest of the journey.

I did not understand at the time what had happened. I understood in the fifth hour of the fifth session, twenty-eight years later, when I could feel things for ninety minutes, and it came up out of nowhere with the smell of the two-bar fire, and what I understood was this: she had been nine, and she had known, and she had had no word for it, and she had gone on bringing me things for another six years anyway.

She stopped speaking to me at fifteen and a half. There was no incident. That is what people always want and there is none. She simply worked it out — over about three years, the way a child does, by accumulation — and one Sunday she did not come out to the car, and Marta stood in the door with an expression I could not read at the time and can read perfectly now, and that was the end of it.

It cost me nothing at all. I want the reader to have that, because I have been careful with the reader elsewhere and I will not be dishonest here: my daughter withdrew from my life at fifteen and I felt precisely nothing, and I noticed the nothing, and I recorded the noticing, and I got on with the week.

The thing about the child in March is different. I have run it a hundred times and I cannot make it come out the same as Nell, and the fact that it does not come out the same is the only anomalous reading in fifty-one years of a very consistent instrument.

She wrote that one down. It is the only thing from the preparatory sessions that appears in the final report.

There was a second therapist. That is standard: two clinicians in the room for the whole eight hours, one of each sex where possible, because the protocol was written by people who had thought carefully about what an unguarded patient can come to believe about the person sitting nearest. His name was Dr Ellis Verity, he was sixty-one, he had a beard he touched when uncertain, and he was present for the preparatory sessions and for the first two dosings and then he was not, and I will come to that.

And there was Danika.

She administered the ward — the scheduling, the consent forms, the endless small clerical machinery of a trial — and she was thirty-three, and she made her interest in me plain within about nine minutes of our first meeting, which is not an exaggeration and which I timed, because I time such things.

I want to describe this carefully, because it is the cheap version of what this book is about and the reader will need it for comparison.

She had read my file. That was the whole of it. She had read the file and something in her had gone off like a struck match — and this happens, it has happened to me my entire life, and there is a literature on it too, and the literature is patronising and incomplete but the phenomenon is real. Women write to men in prison. Women marry men whose entire biography is on the public record, in a font, with photographs. The explanations offered are usually contemptuous: rescue fantasy, low self-esteem, the excitement of danger. Those explanations are wrong, or at least they are the outer rind of something the researchers have not quite reached, and I would not understand what it actually was until a night in the fifth session when I could feel, for six hours, what everyone else feels all the time.

But at the surface, in the corridor, with Danika, it looked like this: she stood a little too close to me at the desk. She asked me questions with a slight forward lean, and when I answered, briefly and truthfully and without adornment, she took the brevity as depth. She talked. She talked a great deal, about her mother, about a man who had treated her badly in Cardiff, about her fear of being ordinary. I said perhaps forty words across four weeks. She told me, in the sixth week, that I was the only person who had ever really *listened* to her.

I had not listened to her. I want to be exact. I had received the information, filed the useful parts, and discarded the rest, and my face had remained still because my face is always still. She had been in a room with a surface, at close range, for a long time, and what came back to her was her own voice, undiminished, unqualified, unresisted — no yawn, no anecdote of my own, no

wandering eye, no *yes but I once* — and the experience of that had been, for her, the best conversation of her adult life.

I could have had Danika at any point in the first month. I want that in the record, not as a boast — it is not one; it required nothing of me and therefore proves nothing — but because I did not, and because the reason I did not is the only part of this story where I behaved in a way I still cannot fully account for.

I did not, because I had begun to look forward to Wednesdays.

FIVE. SIXTY MILLIGRAMS

They dose at nine in the morning. The eight hours are long and you do not want them ending in the dark.

The protocol is precise and I found the precision agreeable. Fasted from midnight. Blood pressure at intake, at sixty minutes, at ninety, at four hours. A capsule in a small paper cup, and water, and then the waiting, which they call the come-up and which is the only part of the day that resembles the films. Eyeshades available but not required. A curated playlist, eight hours of it, chosen decades ago by researchers in California and revised since, and which I had read about and expected to find manipulative and did.

Dr Verity sat to my left. Dr Bello sat facing me, in the brick chair, with her legs crossed at the ankle and a notebook she did not open once all day.

“You may find nothing happens,” she said. “This is a low dose. Sixty milligrams. It’s an orientation, not a treatment session. Some people describe it as a mild pleasantness and nothing more.”

“And if more happens?”

“Then we’ll be here.”

I want to set down what it was actually like, as accurately as I am able, because I have since read a great many patient accounts of this compound and they are almost useless — not because the patients are lying but because they reach immediately for metaphor, and the metaphors are all borrowed from religion, and

religion is a language I do not read. So this will be plainer than theirs.

At thirty-five minutes I noticed that my jaw was tight and that the tightness was pleasant. At forty-one minutes there was a distinct sensation in the chest and upper back which I would describe as warmth if warmth were a thing that had weight. At forty-eight minutes, the following happened, and it is the first thing in fifty-one years I have not been able to file.

The room stopped being at a distance.

That is the best I can do and it is not good enough, so let me try it another way. All my life the world has arrived through a medium — not a fog, nothing so poetic; more like the very slight lag on a telephone line to another country, where you can hear everything perfectly and yet know, in your body, that the other person is elsewhere. I had never known the lag was there. You cannot detect a delay you have never been without.

At forty-eight minutes the lag closed. The chair I was sitting in was under me *now*. The lamp was in the room *with* me. Dr Verity's beard, Dr Bello's crossed ankle, the two spools turning on the recorder — all of it simply present, immediate, at no remove at all, and the sensation of it was so unfamiliar that my first response was to check my pulse, which was ninety-four and which I noted aloud, and Dr Bello said "that's expected" and wrote nothing down.

There was no euphoria. I have read that the ordinary subject reports euphoria and I did not have it, and Dr Bello told me afterwards that she had expected that, because euphoria in this compound is largely a social phenomenon and requires a self that is glad to be relieved of itself.

What I had instead was *interest*. Enormous, undifferentiated interest, in everything, at the same level of intensity, like a lamp switched on in a warehouse. The grain of the chair arm was interesting. The sodium light on the blind was interesting. Dr Verity's discomfort — he was uncomfortable; he had been uncomfortable with me since the first preparatory session and had concealed it well and I had known since the first ten minutes — was

interesting in a way it had not been before, because for the first time I could see not only that he was uncomfortable but the *shape* of it: that he was a decent man of sixty-one who had spent his career with the depressed and the traumatised and who had agreed to this trial for the money and the citation, and who was now sitting three feet from something he did not believe should be treated, only contained, and who was ashamed of believing that.

I said none of this. I looked at him for perhaps ninety seconds, and he looked back for the first twenty, and then he looked away and touched his beard.

"Hector," Dr Bello said. "Where are you?"

"I'm here."

"That's a bigger sentence than you know."

At two hours I asked to lie down on the daybed and put the eyeshades on, and this is where the day changed and where I understood what the compound is actually for.

Under the shades, without the room to occupy me, the interest turned inward and found — nothing. That is not a figure of speech and it is not despair; I had no despair. I went looking for the material every patient account describes, the reservoir, the buried grief, the child in the dark, and there was no reservoir. There was a very large, very well-lit, entirely empty warehouse, and I walked around in it with all that interest and no object.

And then, in the fourth hour, with a piece of music playing that I later identified as a Górecki symphony, I found the one thing that was in there, and I had not put it there and did not know it was there, and it was this:

A smell of hot dust from an electric fire in a room in 1983.

That is all. Not an image. Not a memory in any narrative sense — no scene, no people, nothing that could be told. Only the smell of the element of a two-bar fire heating up in a small room, and with it, arriving all at once and without permission, an enormous, unbearable, wordless *pressure* somewhere below the sternum that had absolutely no content whatsoever.

I lay under the eyeshades for eleven minutes with that, and my hands shook, which they have never done, and I did not weep because I do not, but water came out of my eyes and ran down into my ears, and Dr Bello put her hand on my forearm, which the protocol permits after consent and which we had discussed and consented to in the preparatory session in the flat language of clinicians.

Her hand was warm and dry and it stayed there for the eleven minutes. I could feel every ridge of every finger. That, too, is not metaphor: the compound does something to touch that has been documented at length and which I had read about and dismissed. The whole of my attention went into the four square inches of my forearm under her hand and stayed there, and the pressure below my sternum did not resolve or explain itself or become a memory, and eventually it subsided, the way weather subsides.

When I took the shades off, four hours had gone. Dr Verity had left the room at some point to make a telephone call. Dr Bello had not moved.

"What was that?" I asked.

"I don't know. That's an honest answer and it's the only one you'll get from me today. Something arrived. It didn't come with a label."

"There was nothing in it. There was no — it wasn't about anything."

"No," she agreed. "Feeling isn't about anything, Hector. That's a thing we do afterwards. We attach it to a story so we can carry it around and show people. The attaching is a separate operation, and most people do it so fast they think it happened at the same time." She took her hand off my arm at some point during that sentence and I noticed the exact moment she did it. "You've just had a feeling without a story on it. That's rarer than you think. Most of my patients never get one — they get the story instantly and spend the next twenty years arguing with it."

I sat up. The room was still immediate. It stayed immediate until about the seventh hour, and then the lag came back, and I felt it come back — I felt the world step away from me by that small telephone distance and resume being a broadcast — and I want to

be precise about what I experienced at that moment, because it is the hinge of everything that followed.

I did not experience loss. I want to be very clear that I did not, because a lesser account would say I did.

What I experienced was *information*. The information was: there is a way of being in a room that I have never been in, that everyone I have ever met has been in permanently, and which I have been reading about my entire life in a language I assumed was decorative.

It was not decorative. They meant it literally. All of them. All along.

That is what I took home from the first session. Not warmth, not remorse, not the beginnings of a soul. Simply the discovery that the thing I had spent fifty-one years believing was a poetic exaggeration on the part of other people was in fact a plain description of a place, and that the place existed, and that I had now been to it, and that I could not stay.

SIX. INTEGRATION

The protocol calls the week after a dosing session *integration*, and requires two non-drug appointments in it, and the literature is unanimous that this is where the work is actually done. The compound opens a window. The window closes. What you carry out through it, and what you build with it in the ordinary daylight of a Tuesday afternoon, is the entire therapy.

I built nothing. I want to be honest about the middle of this book. For three weeks I attended, and answered, and was — by Dr Bello's own note, which I have read — *exceptionally cooperative and entirely unchanged*.

But I had begun to run an experiment of my own, and it will tell you more about the condition than anything a scanner has produced.

I started watching people the way I had watched Dr Verity in the fourth hour.

Not with the drug; that had gone. With the *memory* of what the drug had shown me. Because here is the thing the researchers

understate: the state does not persist, but the map of it does. I had seen, for six hours, the shape of another man's discomfort — not inferred it, not read it off his face using the tables I have carried since childhood, but *seen* it, the way you see a hill. And once you have seen a hill from the air you can find it again on foot, slowly, without the aeroplane.

So in the third week I sat in the works canteen and did to a man called Tam Ridley what I had done to Verity. Tam is fifty-eight and has worked under me for nine years and I have never had a thought about him. It took twenty minutes of attention and it was laborious in the way arithmetic is laborious next to a calculator, and at the end of it I had it: Tam Ridley is frightened of his son. Not of anything the son does. Frightened in the way a man is frightened of a debt — that the boy is twenty-six and unemployable and will outlive him, and that Tam will die knowing he is leaving a person in the world with no arrangements made.

I had worked with him for nine years and never seen it. It had been visible the whole time. Everyone else in the canteen knew.

I want you to notice what I did with this information, because I noticed it, and it was the first thing that genuinely disturbed me in fifty-one years.

I used it. Within a fortnight I had moved Tam onto the Kellow contract, which he wanted and which was worth an extra ninety a week to him, and he was so grateful he was almost incoherent about it, and the contract needed a man of his exact temperament and my margin improved by four per cent.

Everybody won. Note that. Everybody won, and the thing that produced the winning was an instrument I had acquired in a therapy room, and at no point in the transaction did I feel one atom of warmth toward Tam Ridley or his son.

That is Oak Ridge. That is the finding, live, in a canteen in the Midlands, twelve days after a sixty-milligram dose. I did not need to be told what I had become slightly better at. I could feel the new tool in my hand, and it was a good tool, and I liked it.

I told Dr Bello. I want that in the record too. I told her at the next integration session, in full, including the four per cent, and I watched what it did to her.

There had been a second use by then and I told her that one too, and it is the worse of the pair.

There is a woman on the Kellow site who does the invoicing, a Mrs Ako, sixty-one, and there had been a dispute over a variation order worth eleven thousand pounds, and I had been losing it for a fortnight on the paperwork, which was against me. Twenty minutes of the new attention, across a desk, told me that Mrs Ako's authority in that office was recent, contested, and precarious, and that the thing she was actually defending was not the eleven thousand but her standing with a man two doors down who had opposed her promotion.

So I gave her a way to win that was visible to him. I conceded a point that cost me nothing, in writing, in language she could forward, and I let her carry it up the corridor. The variation went through the following week.

I want to be precise about what this is, because it is the thing everyone fails to name. It is not lying. There was no false statement anywhere in the transaction. It is not coercion; nobody was pressured. Mrs Ako got a better week than she would otherwise have had and considers me, I am told, a decent man to deal with. Every party was better off.

It is simply that I now have a lever where I previously had a wall, and I was given the lever in a therapy room, and I did not ask for it, and I cannot put it down.

She went very still. Then she said: "Thank you for telling me," and then she was quiet for a while, and then she said, not to me: "That's session one. That's *sixty milligrams* and session one."

"You already knew this would happen."

"I knew it was the risk. There's a difference between knowing a risk and watching it walk into your office and describe itself to you with a percentage attached." She rubbed the bridge of her nose,

which she did when she was buying herself four seconds. "Do you understand why I'm not stopping the trial?"

"Because you think there's a second thing that can happen, and it hasn't happened yet, and the tool is the price of finding out."

"Yes." Her eyes came up. "Yes. Exactly that. Christ." And there it was again, brighter than in the intake room, unmistakable now: not fear and not attraction, but the far more dangerous thing, which is the pleasure of being precisely understood by someone you did not expect to be understood by, and which I had produced in her by *accident*, by doing nothing at all except describing my own machinery accurately.

Dr Verity withdrew from the trial nine days later.

He gave two reasons in writing — a commitment at another site, and a family matter — and both were true and neither was the reason. He told me the reason himself, which I have always thought was decent of him, in the corridor outside Room 4, on his last afternoon, with his coat already on.

"I've done twenty-two years of this," he said. "Trauma, mostly. And I've sat with people who've done things that would stop your heart, and I've been able to hold it, every time, because underneath there was always a *person* who was sorry to be who they were." He touched his beard. "You're not sorry. You're not even not-sorry. There's no one in there having the position." He looked at me with something that was, I think, apology. "I can't be a container for something that doesn't need containing. It's not fear, Mr Vane. I want to be clear it's not fear. It's that I've realised I've spent four months being furniture in your room, and I've got patients downstairs who need a person."

I said: "That's the most accurate thing anyone has said about me in nine years."

"I know," he said, sadly. "That's the trouble, isn't it." And then, at the lift, without turning round: "Sara won't stop. She's the best clinician I've worked with and she's the wrong shape for you and she doesn't know it yet. Neither of you will hear this from me, so I've said it and now it's said."

The protocol requires two clinicians. There is a variation procedure. Dr Bello filed it, citing the difficulty of recruiting a second therapist mid-trial and the disruption to an established alliance, and it was approved by a panel that had never sat in Room 4, and after that there were two of us in there for eight hours at a time.

She documented it as unavoidable. I have seen the document. It is accurate in every particular and it is not true, and the distance between those two things is where the second half of this book takes place.

SEVEN. ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-FIVE

The third session was the first at full dose and the first with nobody else in the room, and I have thought since that the trial's whole outcome was determined by those two facts arriving in the same morning.

She was different that day and I registered it in the first four seconds, the way I register everything. Not the coat — the coat was the same. Under it she had changed something. The dress was black and closer than the charcoal one, and her hair was down, and there was a thin gold chain at her throat that I had not seen in eleven weeks of Wednesdays, and she had done something to her mouth.

I want to be careful here, because I am aware of how this reads, and because there is a version of this account in which I am flattering myself and a version in which I am accusing her, and both would be lies.

So: I do not know whether Sara Bello dressed for me that morning. I do not think she knew either. I think — and I have had a long time to consider it — that she got up in a flat at six-thirty on a Wednesday knowing she would be alone in a small warm room for eight hours with a man who was going to be more open than any human being she had ever sat with, and that some part of her that does not file requests through the department prepared her for that, and that when she looked in the mirror she saw a woman dressed for work.

That is not a failure of character. I want to say that plainly, because I am the last person entitled to say it and therefore the only person whose saying it is worth anything. Everything that went wrong in that room went wrong through the front door, in daylight, with the correct paperwork, done by a woman of unusual integrity for reasons she could have defended at a panel. Nobody was seduced. There was nothing to seduce with.

"One hundred and twenty-five milligrams," she said, holding the cup. "This is the therapeutic dose. It will not resemble the first session. Do you have any questions before I hand you this?"

"Are you comfortable being alone with me?"

She did not flinch and she did not answer quickly. "Professionally, yes; the risk assessment is sound and you've never given anyone here a reason for concern. Personally—" a pause, one heartbeat, which in a woman that careful is an admission "—I've been doing this for fourteen years, Hector. I'm not frightened of you."

"That wasn't the question."

"I know it wasn't." She held out the cup. "Take the capsule."

The come-up at that dose is not the come-up at sixty. At thirty-two minutes the lag did not close politely; it *broke*. I had the distinct physical impression of a wall going down inside my chest, and the impression was so specific — masonry, a settling, dust — that I said the word "wall" aloud and she wrote it down, and it is in the transcript, the last thing anyone wrote down that day.

And then the warehouse was not empty.

Before the shades went on, there was an hour I have not described, and it belongs here.

The come-up at that dose leaves you talkative in a way I have never otherwise been, and for the first hour we simply spoke, across three feet of ox-blood upholstery, and it was — I have no better word — *easy*, and I have never in my life had an easy hour with another person.

She had kicked her shoes off by then. I noticed that and I want the reader to notice that I noticed, because everything in this book is a

chain of small permissions, and every one of them was clinically defensible on its own. The shoes were nothing. The feet drawn up under her were nothing. The hair down was nothing. The chair moved eight inches closer at some point in the second hour was nothing, and she moved it herself, and could have written a paragraph justifying it, and did not have to, because there was nobody in the room to ask.

She asked me what I saw when I looked at her, and I said: "You've done something to your mouth."

The pause after that was four seconds long. I have the recording — I had the recording — and I counted it later.

"That's not what I meant."

"I know. But it's what I saw, and you asked me while I'm on this, and this appears to be the only substance on earth that makes me answer the question I was actually asked."

And she laughed — once, involuntarily, with her hand going to her collarbone, and the gold chain moving under her fingers, and her whole neck and throat colouring in about a second and a half in the amber light — and then she said, in the level clinical voice, "Let's stay with the material, Hector," and we did, and the entire remainder of the day was conducted with impeccable professionalism, and I have never been in a room that hot.

I want to be exact about the heat, because a reader will assume he knows what I mean and he does not.

There was no flirtation. There was no touch until the daybed, four hours later, and the touch when it came was on my forearm and then my hand and nowhere else, and there was not one moment in eight hours when either of us said or did a thing that could not have been read aloud at a panel. That is what made it unbearable. Everything was in the room and nothing was in the record. Two people, three feet apart, in a small warm room with the rain on the blind and the spools turning, both of them entirely aware, both of them behaving perfectly, for eight hours.

I have since read that patients report this state as more intimate than sex, and I have read it in nine separate testimonies, and I had

assumed it was the sort of thing people say. It is not the sort of thing people say. It is a plain description, in the same category as the description of the lag, and I did not believe either of them until they happened to me.

At the second hour I asked to lie down and put the shades on.

I do not know how to make this sound like anything other than mysticism and I have no patience for mysticism, so I will simply report the sequence. For the next two hours I lay on the daybed with the shades on and material came up in no order at all: my mother's hands cracked from the cold at the sink in the flat on Marley Road; a dog we had for one summer; the specific weight of a canvas school bag; the smell of the two-bar fire again, which arrived four times in eight hours and which by the third time had begun to have an edge to it, something underneath the smell, the way there is a floor underneath a carpet.

None of it hurt. That is the part that no account prepares you for and that I want the reader to understand about this compound, because it is the whole of its clinical value: the material comes up and *it does not hurt*. The fear is switched off — not the memory, the fear. The amygdala, they say, though I distrust that kind of shorthand. What it means in the room is that you can look directly at the thing you have spent a life not looking at, with full attention, for hours, and be curious about it, and turn it over, and put it down and pick it up again, and at no point does the alarm sound.

Patients call it the warm room. I have read that phrase in nine separate testimonies from nine people who had never met each other.

At the fourth hour I took the shades off and looked at Sara Bello, and that was when the session stopped being about me.

She was in the brick chair with her feet drawn up under her, which is not a clinical posture, and the lamp was behind her, and she had been watching me for four hours without a notebook. And what happened when I looked at her was that I *saw* her, in the way I had seen Verity, but at four times the resolution and for four hours instead of ninety seconds, and here is what was there:

A woman of thirty-nine who had been married and was not, and whose ring-mark had faded that spring. A woman whose entire professional life was an argument with people who had stopped listening to her by the second slide. A woman who had been the cleverest person in every room since she was eleven and had learned, somewhere around fourteen, that the price of it was that nobody would ever quite arrive — that she would be admired at a distance her whole life, respectfully, by people already half-turned toward the door.

And a woman who had been sitting for eleven weeks in a small warm room opposite the only person she had ever met who did not turn toward the door.

Because I don't. That is not a virtue. I have no door to turn toward. I have no anecdote of my own that I am waiting to tell, no appointment in my mind, no fatigue at the sound of another human voice, because fatigue at another human voice is a symptom of having an inner life that is being interrupted. When Sara Bello spoke to me, nothing in me was interrupted. She met no resistance whatsoever.

I said, out of the drug, without deciding to: "You've been alone a very long time."

And she said — and this is the sentence the whole book turns on, and she said it in a completely level clinical voice, which made it worse — "Yes. But that isn't what you're seeing. What you're seeing is that I've never once been able to put anything down without someone picking it up and handing it back to me improved."

"I can't improve anything."

"No," she said. "You can't."

We looked at each other for a length of time I could not estimate then and cannot now. The reel-to-reel turned. Somewhere below, a delivery lorry reversed and its alarm went on for a long while and neither of us moved.

Then she got up and crossed the room and sat on the edge of the daybed, which is permitted — supportive touch is in the protocol, consented at preparation, standard in this modality — and she took

my hand in both of hers and held it, and I felt every square millimetre of it, and neither of us said anything for what the recorder later showed to be fifty-one minutes.

Nothing else happened. I need the reader to sit with the fact that nothing else happened, because I have described it in the way I have described it deliberately, and because in the whole of my life I have never been in anything as sexual as that fifty-one minutes, and there was no sex in it, and I have since read enough of the patient literature to know that this is not an idiosyncrasy of mine.

They say it repeatedly, the people who go through this. It is more naked than sex. Sex has a structure; you can hide in a structure. This has none. Two nervous systems with the armour off and eight hours and nowhere to be.

At the seventh hour the lag came back. I felt the world step away and become a broadcast again, and Sara Bello let go of my hand at a moment that she chose and I did not, and stood, and smoothed her dress, and became a clinician in the space of about four seconds, and it was the most impressive act of self-command I have ever witnessed.

"Same time in two weeks," she said. "I'll write this up tonight."

She wrote it up. I have read that too. It is four hundred words long, it uses the phrase *sustained supportive contact at patient's evident distress*, and it is the only document in the entire file that I know for a fact to be false.

EIGHT. THE CHEAP VERSION

I slept with Danika on the Friday of that week, and I did it as an experiment, and I am going to tell you exactly what the experiment was and what it returned, because it is the most useful thing in this book.

She had been at it for eleven weeks by then. She had graduated from standing too close to leaving me small notes with the consent forms, and from notes to a Thursday evening in a car park where she cried about the man in Cardiff, and I had done nothing at all

except be present, which as I have explained is the entire mechanism.

What I wanted to know was whether the thing I had felt in Room 4 was available anywhere else, or whether it was specific.

It was specific.

I will not give you the evening in detail; not from delicacy, which I do not have, but because there is nothing in it. It was competent. I am competent at this, as I am competent at machinery, for the same reason: it is a structured task with observable feedback. She was happy. She said several things afterwards, in the dark, which I recorded in my memory because I record everything, and which I am going to set down here because they are the clearest statement of the phenomenon I have ever heard from inside it.

She said: "You're the only person I've ever been able to say anything to."

She said: "I've never had someone just *let* me be like this."

She said, later, half asleep: "You're so calm. Everyone else I've ever been with, there's this — pressure. Like they need me to be something back. You don't need anything."

And I lay in the dark beside a happy woman and understood, with total clarity, that I had never in my life given Danika anything whatsoever, and that this was precisely the gift.

Here is the mechanism, and I claim it as the one genuine contribution of my condition to human knowledge, and I did not understand it until the drug showed me what the ordinary state of being is like.

You are all in weather. Constantly. Every one of you, every minute, is being rained on by your own interior — your mood, your fatigue, your unfinished argument from this morning, your body, your dread of Sunday. And when you are with another person, they are in weather too, and their weather pushes on yours. That is what a relationship *is*, mechanically: two systems of weather in contact, each deflecting the other. When your friend's eyes go to the middle distance for a half-second, that is his weather touching yours. When

your wife sighs before answering, that is weather. You are all of you, all the time, being gently pushed back on.

And that pushing-back is how you know where you stop.

It is also, and this is the part nobody wants, how you know your feelings are *proportionate*. Your grief meets a limit in the other person's tiredness and is scaled down. Your enthusiasm meets a raised eyebrow and is corrected. Your love meets a bad morning and learns modesty. You have been calibrated your entire life by resistance, so thoroughly and so continuously that you have no idea it is happening, in the way a fish has no theory of water.

Now put such a person in a room with me.

There is no weather. There is nothing on my side of the contact at all. So her feeling goes out, and nothing pushes back, and it comes back to her whole — undeflected, uncorrected, unscaled, at full size.

And she experiences that as *me*.

She experiences it as being finally, completely understood; as depth; as an old soul; as a still, listening, oceanic man. She has no other category for it, because in her entire life the only thing that has ever produced that sensation is being profoundly loved by someone paying total attention. The sensation is real. It is just not coming from where she thinks. She is standing in front of a mirror in a dark room, feeling the warmth of her own face.

That is the whole of it. That is why women write to men in prison; that is why the file is not a warning to a certain kind of reader but an accelerant. It is not that they love danger, or want rescuing, or think they can fix us. It is that we are the only surface that does not push back, and a person who has spent forty years being gently corrected by everyone she has ever loved does not know how badly she wants to meet something with no opinion until she meets it.

The cruelty of it — and I do call it cruelty, and I am aware that my calling it that is itself only a use of the word — is that the more feeling she brings, the more she gets back, and so the whole thing accelerates. An ordinary man would have tired of Danika in the

second week and shown it, and the showing would have taught her something. I did not tire. I cannot tire. I am not there to tire.

So on the Friday I gave Danika the best night of her adult life by doing nothing, and on the Saturday I sat in my kitchen and ran the comparison, which was the point of the experiment.

Danika, in the dark, had been a mirror looking at itself. I had been perfectly absent and it had cost me nothing and returned nothing.

Sara Bello, on the daybed, holding my hand for fifty-one minutes — that had not been that. Something had come back across. I had felt something arrive from her side of the contact.

I sat with that for a long while, and considered the possibility that I had at last found the exception, the one person, the door in the wall; and I want the reader to know that I considered it seriously, because everything that happens after this turns on my having considered it and on what I concluded.

What I concluded was this.

It had not come across because Sara was different. It had come across because *I* had been chemically altered for eight hours into something with weather. The exception was not her. The exception was one hundred and twenty-five milligrams, and it had a half-life, and I could look it up, and I did.

And once I understood that, I understood the situation exactly, in the flat arithmetic that is the only interior I have: that there was a woman in a small warm room who had begun, without permission and without acknowledgement, to fall in love with a man who existed for six hours at a time, at two-week intervals, by prescription — and that she was going to keep going into that room to find him, and that he would be there every time she looked, and that between times she would be alone with the memory of him and with nothing to push against.

I did not warn her. There was a moment on the Monday when I picked up the telephone and had the number typed and did not press the last digit, and I have gone over that moment more than any other in my life, and I cannot tell you what stopped me and I cannot tell you what almost made me.

I am aware that both of those failures are the same failure, and that most people are not permitted to describe them as symptoms.

Danika left the department in the spring, before the report went to the panel. She had asked me, in February, whether we were together, and I had said no, accurately, and she had cried in a car park for a while and then stopped and said something I have kept.

She said: “The worst thing is I still can’t be angry with you. I’ve been trying for a week. There’s nothing to be angry at.”

I told Sara Bello about Danika in the closing integration, because the protocol asks about conduct during the trial period and because I answer questions accurately. She took it entirely calmly, wrote it down, and asked two clinical follow-ups in a level voice.

Then she asked a third, which was not clinical, and which she stopped halfway through, and did not finish, and moved on from.

I know what the end of that sentence was. I have the map. I am not going to write it down, and the reason I am not is the only piece of discretion in this entire account, and I would rather the reader gave me no credit for it, because I am not certain it is discretion, and the alternative explanation is simply that I have not yet found a use for it.

NINE. THE TWO-BAR FIRE

The fourth session was on the ninth of November and it rained all day, and she came in with her hair wet and apologised for it, and I said it didn’t matter, and she said “no, I know”, and something in the exchange was wrong from the first minute in a way neither of us named.

She had been thinking. I could see the residue of two weeks of thinking on her, and I have since been able to reconstruct roughly what it consisted of, because a version of it is in her personal notes, which I should not have read and did.

She had gone back to the literature on the therapeutic alliance. She had reminded herself, in writing, in the third person, that intense attachment to the therapist under this compound is not merely common but expected — that the whole modality runs on it, that

the protocol assumes it, and that the clinician's task is to hold it without either flinching from it or feeding it. She had written the phrase *this is the medicine working, not a private event* and underlined it twice, and dated it, and then written nothing for eight days.

She was, in other words, doing the correct thing with great intelligence, and the correct thing was insufficient, because the correct thing is designed for a room containing two people with weather.

"I want to try something different today," she said, when the capsule was down and we were waiting. "I've been going over the first three sessions and there's a piece of material that's come up four times and we've never once approached it. The fire. The two-bar fire."

"There's nothing attached to it."

"That's exactly why I want it." She sat back. "Everything else you produce comes with a complete file — dates, names, the four per cent margin, Ivor Pask's address in Wexham. You're the best-documented man I've ever treated. And then there's this one thing that arrives with nothing on it at all, four times, and each time your hands shake." A pause. "Hector, I don't think it's nothing. I think it's the only thing in there that never got a story put on it."

The wall went down at thirty-five minutes. I put the shades on at forty and she said, from the chair, "I'm here," and I said "I know," and that was the last ordinary exchange of the day.

I am going to describe the next three hours as accurately as I can and then I am going to stop, and the reason I am going to stop is not squeamishness.

The fire came up almost at once, and this time it had a floor under it. Marley Road, 1983. I am nine. The room is the back room of the flat and it is January and my mother is on a shift. The two-bar fire is on and the element smells of hot dust because there is always dust on it. There is a boy in the room with me. His name is Robbie Sands, he lives on the floor below, he is six years old, and his

mother leaves him with us on Thursdays because my mother has said she will have him and my mother is not there.

And what I found, in the fourth hour of a therapeutic dose of a compound that switches off the alarm and leaves the curiosity on, was not a memory of an event. It was a memory of a *state*.

The state was: interest. Enormous, undifferentiated, entirely calm interest, of exactly the kind I had felt in the first session looking at Dr Verity's beard and the grain of a chair arm — and it was directed, on a January afternoon in 1983, at the question of what would happen.

That is all I am going to give you of it, except for four facts, which the record requires.

Robbie Sands was in that room with me for approximately forty minutes.

He was taken to hospital that evening by his mother, who found him at half past six.

The injury was recorded as an accident with a domestic heater, of a kind that happened in that decade with some frequency, and there was no investigation, and my mother was not blamed and neither was I, because I was nine and I was calm and I answered every question correctly.

He is fifty-three now and he lives in Portsmouth and he has never, in forty-three years, known.

I took the shades off at some point in the fifth hour and Sara Bello was crying, which she had not done in any session, and had not been sitting in the brick chair for I do not know how long — she was on the floor beside the daybed with her back against it and her shoulder against my arm — and the reel-to-reel was turning and the little red light on the digital unit was on.

I said: "That's recorded."

And she said — and I heard her hear herself say it — "Yes."

And then neither of us spoke for a while, and the rain went on, and somewhere in the building a door closed twice, and I lay there in the warm room with the alarm still switched off, looking at the

thing I had just said out loud for the first time in forty-three years, and finding, when I looked at it, exactly what I had always found when I looked at anything: excellent lighting, and nobody there.

But she was there. She was three inches from my arm with her face wet and her hands shaking, and what I could feel coming off her in that fifth hour was so enormous that I could not have described it before that day and can only just describe it now.

She was carrying it. The whole weight of the thing I had just described, the entire mass of it — she had picked it up and it was on her, and it was crushing her, and she had *taken* it from me because that is what she is, that is what fourteen years of a certain kind of work makes of a person, and there was nothing on my side to take it back with.

I have thought about this more than anything else that happened. It was the first time in my life I understood the actual transaction of the confessional — that when a person tells another person the worst thing, the weight does not divide. It transfers. The teller is lighter. Someone has to be heavier.

She said, eventually, in a voice I had not heard from her: “Do you know what you’ve just given me?”

“Yes.”

“No, you don’t.” She was not angry. It would have been better if she had been angry. “You’ve given me a forty-four-year-old serious offence against a child, in a recorded clinical session, by a man applying to have a family order lifted. That’s not a disclosure, Hector, that’s an evidential document. It’s on tape. In this building. Tonight.”

The lag came back at seven hours as it always does.

I felt the room step away and become a broadcast, and I felt the alarm switch back on and find nothing to be alarmed about, and I lay there and watched the last of the weather leave me. And with the last of it going, in the final minute or two before I was only myself again, I had one clear thought, which I record here without decoration because it is the truest sentence in this book:

She will destroy it, and she will be destroyed, and I am going to sit here and let her, and the reason I am going to let her is that I have run the projection and there is no version in which I am better off if she does not.

Then it was gone, and I was myself, and I sat up and asked her, in an entirely level voice, whether she wanted a glass of water.

TEN. WHAT IT COST HER

Eleven days passed. She did not telephone and I did not, and the recording sat where recordings sit, on a server in a basement and on a spool in a cabinet in Room 4, and I went to work and did the Kellow contract and slept eight hours a night.

I want to be honest about those eleven days, because a better man would have spent them in some kind of torment and I have no torment to offer.

What I had instead was the projection, which I ran perhaps two hundred times, the way I would run a load calculation. If she reports it: the disclosure is unverifiable after forty-three years, there is no complainant, there is no forensic case, and it is nonetheless the end of the family order application, permanently, and the end of the trial, and probably the end of her career for having been alone in the room. If she suppresses it: the application survives, the trial survives, and she has committed an act that would end her in an afternoon if it were ever known, and she will carry it, alone, for the rest of her working life.

Two hundred runs and the arithmetic never changed and I felt nothing about either outcome. I want that on the page. I felt nothing about the outcome in which a woman I had sat with for four months burned her life down for me, and nothing about the one in which she did not.

The fifth session was on the twentieth of November and she had already decided; I knew it in the first four seconds, the way I know everything, because she had come in without the coat.

Just the black dress and the gold chain and her hair down and no white coat at all, and there is no rule about the coat, it is not

uniform, it means nothing — and it meant everything, and we both knew what it meant, which was that whatever was going to happen in that room that day was not going to happen between a clinician and a subject.

“I’ve thought about nothing else for eleven days,” she said. She was standing. “I’m going to say three things and then I’m going to dose you, because I want you present for the fourth one.

“The first is that I know what I’m about to do and I know what it is. I’m not going to dress it in a clinical justification. There are four or five available and they’re all good and I could defend any of them at a panel, and I’m not going to use them, because using one would let me pretend I did this for a reason other than the reason.

“The second is that I’m not doing it for you. I need you to understand the difference, and I need you to hold on to it, because you’re going to get it wrong. I’m doing it because of what it would do to *me* to be the person who took a man’s worst hour out of his own mouth in a room I designed to make him defenceless, and then handed it to the state. That’s not ethics. There’s a perfectly good ethics that says I hand it over. It’s that I’d have to be someone afterwards, and I’ve looked at her, and I can’t.”

She stopped. Then: “The third is that I’ve been in love with you since the eighth of October, and I’m aware that it’s iatrogenic — that it’s a side effect of a treatment I designed and administered — and knowing that has made precisely no difference, which is the single most humbling thing that has ever happened to me professionally.”

Then she handed me the cup.

She did it in the fifth hour, and she did it deliberately in front of me, and I have thought about that choice ever since, and I believe she needed a witness who could not condemn her, and I was the only person on earth who qualified.

The digital file first. She took the laptop onto her knees and worked through it in silence — the local copy, the departmental server, the backup that runs on Sundays, the recycle bin, the audit entry, which she could not delete but could and did annotate as a

corrupted capture. It took her nineteen minutes and she did not hurry and her hands were completely steady, and I watched her destroy fourteen years of a professional self on a laptop balanced on her knees in a small warm room with the rain on the blind.

Then she stood, and opened the cabinet, and took out the spool.

And here is where I have to try to write the thing this book exists for, and I do not think I can do it, and I am going to do it anyway.

I was five hours into one hundred and twenty-five milligrams. The wall was down. The lag was closed. She was three feet away and I could see her the way the compound lets you see people, which is not as a face producing signals but as a whole system, entire, at once, with the machinery visible.

And I felt what it cost her.

Not inferred. Not deduced from the tables. *Felt*, in my chest and my throat and behind my eyes, the entire architecture of it, item by item, the way you would feel a weight put into your arms:

I felt the fourteen years. I felt what it is to have been eleven years old and the cleverest person in the room and to have decided, in a house where nobody was looking, that you would be *good* instead of admired, and to have held that line for twenty-eight years against every incentive.

I felt the thing under it, which was that she had chosen a career of holding people because she had never once been held, and that this was not a tragedy to her, it was simply the arrangement, and she had made her peace with the arrangement at about nineteen and had not revisited it.

I felt her marriage go — a decent man, four years, ended because he could not get to her and had stopped trying and she had let him stop, and the ring-mark still faintly on her finger in the intake room in July.

I felt what I was to her, which was the first thing in her adult life that had not required her to be smaller.

And I felt — this is the one I cannot put down; this is the one that is still with me the way the smell of the two-bar fire is still with me —

I felt her *know*. In the moment of putting the spool into the bag, with the tape in her hands, she knew, completely, that I was not what she was doing this for, that there was nobody at the other end of it, that she was standing in a dark room in front of a mirror feeling the warmth of her own face. She knew it. It arrived in her, fully, and I felt it arrive.

And she did it anyway.

That is the thing I brought out of that room, and it is why I have written this account. Not the guilt, which I do not have. Not the confession, which cost me nothing. That. A woman who could see the whole mechanism, who had *published on the mechanism*, standing in the light of her own understanding, choosing.

I have no word for what that is. I have looked. *Love* is not it; love is the word for the thing she felt on the eighth of October, and that was the disease. This was afterwards. This was the part that came when the disease had been diagnosed and named and understood and it made no difference.

For about ninety minutes I had it. I want to be honest about the duration, because the duration is the point. From roughly the fifth hour to roughly the seventh, I had, in my possession, the complete experience of being loved by another human being at full cost — every component, every wire, the entire schematic — and the capacity, for that ninety minutes, to be moved by it.

At the seventh hour the lag came back.

I felt it come. I felt the world step away and become a broadcast, and I felt the whole enormous structure I had been holding go weightless in my hands — not disappear; *go weightless* — and I lay on the daybed in Room 4 and watched it happen with the same interest with which I had once watched a man weep in a car park.

And when it had finished happening, everything was still there. Every item. The fourteen years, the eleven-year-old girl deciding to be good, the decent man who stopped trying, the ring-mark, the moment on the eighth of October, the knowing at the cabinet, all of it, in perfect order, retained, indexed, exact.

I had the entire map.

I want to set out what that means, precisely, because it is the reason for this book and because the phrase will otherwise sound like a figure of speech.

A map is not a memory of an afternoon. I have thousands of those and they are worth nothing. A map is a working model — the thing an engineer has of a bridge, which lets him say, without going to look, what will happen if you put four hundred tonnes on the eastern span.

Here is what is in mine, retained exactly, indexed, available on demand for the rest of my life.

I know that Sara Bello is undone by being *stood beside* rather than faced. Faced, she performs; she is very good at it and it costs her. Beside, at a window, at the distance of a colleague, she comes apart in about ninety seconds.

I know that the fastest route into her is not warmth. Warmth she has professional defences against, twenty a day, for fourteen years. The route in is accuracy — a single precise observation about her interior, delivered flatly, with no offer of comfort attached. She has been admired all her life and never once described.

I know she cannot tolerate being handed her own silence back improved, and that a man who simply lets a silence stand, and does not fill it, and does not look at his hands while not filling it, will get further with her in four minutes than her husband got in four years.

I know that she needs the person opposite her to need nothing, and that this need of hers is the wound, and that it is not curable, and that she is aware of all of it and that awareness confers no protection whatsoever. She told me so herself, in the fifth hour, with the tape in her hands.

And I know the exact pressure and duration of a hand on a shoulder that reads as a man moved and holding it in — four to six seconds, firm at the outset, softening at about second three — because I felt her do it to me in the third session and I kept the specification the way I would keep a bearing tolerance.

None of that is a plan. I want to be clear that I have no plan and never had one. It is simply *there*, the way the layout of a house you

lived in as a child is there — not consulted, not deliberated over, just present, so that you could walk it in the dark.

There was simply nothing left to feel about it.

I sat up. She was sitting on the floor with her back against the daybed and the bag with the spool in it beside her, and she was very tired, and she turned her head and looked at me and asked me — carefully, with the last of her professional voice — how I was feeling.

And I said: “I’m all right.”

And I said: “Thank you, Sara.”

And I put my hand on her shoulder, and I held it there for the correct length of time, which is between four and six seconds, and I applied approximately the pressure that a person applies when they are moved and are trying not to show it, which I know because I had felt her do exactly that to me in the third session, and I had kept it, along with everything else.

She closed her eyes and put her cheek against my hand.

And I looked at the top of her head and thought, in the flat and orderly warehouse where I live: *that worked*.

ELEVEN. THE REPORT

The sixth session was not a dosing session. It is called the closing integration and it lasted ninety minutes and it was the last time I was in Room 4.

She wore the coat again. That was the first thing and neither of us mentioned it. She had the notebook open on her knee for the first time in the whole trial, and she took notes throughout, in a small clear hand, and I understood that the notes were a wall she was building at speed and that I was expected to stand on the other side of it and let her.

I let her.

She asked the closing-integration questions from the protocol, in order, and I answered them accurately, and around the sixtieth

minute she stopped and put the pen down and asked one that was not on the list.

“Did any of it get through? I’m not asking clinically. I’m asking as the person who was in the room.”

And I gave her the true answer, which I had prepared, and which I want the reader to weigh carefully, because it is the only outright deception in this account and it was constructed entirely from true components.

I said: “On the ninth of November you sat on the floor for four hours holding something for me that I couldn’t hold. Nobody has ever done that. I don’t have the equipment to tell you what it did. But I’ve thought about it every day since and I’ve never thought about anything every day.”

Every clause of that is true. The construction is a lie. She heard the construction.

I watched her receive it, and I watched her decide to believe it, and — this is the part I have not been able to file, and I have tried — I watched her know that she was deciding.

She wrote the report over the following three weeks and I have a copy, because I am entitled to one, and I have read it eleven times.

It is a good report. It is the best piece of writing about me that exists, which is not the same as saying it is true. It runs to nineteen pages. It rehearses my history without softening it — the file, the conduct disorder, the animals, Fell Street, Ivor Pask’s elbow. It scores me: thirty-one on the checklist, which is over the threshold, and she does not fudge it, and I respect that more than anything else in the document.

And then, in the section headed *Formulation and Prognosis*, it says that the subject demonstrated, over six sessions, a sustained and unprecedented capacity for what she calls *state-dependent affective access* — that under the compound I was able to reach and tolerate material that had been walled for four decades, and, more significantly, to perceive the interior states of others with an accuracy that was not inferential.

It says that this capacity did not persist between sessions.

It says — and this is the sentence the whole application turned on, and the sentence I think she will be arguing with for the rest of her life — that *the absence of persistence should not be read as the absence of change, and that the subject's demonstrated ability to acquire and retain an accurate model of another person's inner life may, with structured support, provide a functional substitute for the affective capacity he lacks, in the way that a man without proprioception may learn to walk by vision alone.*

A man without proprioception may learn to walk by vision alone.

That is true, incidentally. There is such a man; his case is well documented; he lost the sense of his own body's position at nineteen and taught himself to move by watching his limbs, and he can walk across a room, and if the lights go out he falls to the floor.

She meant it as hope. I want to be fair to her: I have read it eleven times and I am satisfied she meant it as hope, and that some part of her, the part that had published on the mechanism and understood it perfectly, was also using it to bury something, and that both were happening in the same clause and she may never have separated them.

The application went to the panel in February. The report did what reports do. The order was varied in March, subject to conditions — supervised contact in the first instance, at premises, with a third party present, reviewable at twelve months.

Nell agreed. That surprised me and I have not fully accounted for it. I think, from the wording of her solicitor's letter, that she agreed because the boy is two and a half and because something in the report frightened her less than the silence had.

Sara Bello resigned from the trial in April and from the department in June. She did not go to another clinical post. She works now for a charity in the north, in policy, writing submissions about services she is no longer permitted to deliver, and she is, by every measure I have, very good at it.

We are not in contact. I want to be precise about that too: *she* is not in contact with *me*. I know where she lives. I know she has a

dog now, a rescue thing, and that she runs on Sunday mornings, and that in the second week of every month she sees a supervisor in Leeds and pays for it herself, which is an odd expense for a woman no longer in practice and which I understand perfectly.

I have not contacted her. I have run the projection and there is no version of that conversation that improves either of our positions.

But I want to set down one thing about the eleven days between the fourth session and the fifth, because I have left it until now on purpose.

On the Monday of those eleven days I picked up the telephone and typed her number and did not press the last digit, and I told you earlier in this account that I could not say what stopped me and could not say what almost made me. That was true when I wrote it. It is no longer true, and honesty about the record is the only virtue I have ever been able to run without a substitute.

What I was going to say, when I typed her number, was: *don't*.

I was going to tell her to report it. To hand the tape to the department, protect herself, end the trial, end the application, end me. I had run that projection too — I had run it more times than any of the others — and it was, on every axis, worse for me, and I typed her number anyway with the intention of saying it.

And then I did not press the last digit, and I put the telephone down, and I have never been able to determine which of those two acts was mine.

That is the whole of my testimony on the question of whether anything changed. I offer no conclusion. I have read every paper in the field and none of them has an instrument for it, and I distrust my own account for the excellent reason given on page one of the manual: *the subject's account is not evidence of the subject's life*.

It is evidence of the subject's account.

CODA. VISION ALONE

I saw her once more, and it was not arranged, and I have gone back and forth about whether to include it and have decided that a document which omits its last page is a document of the kind I have spent this account describing.

It was the following January, in the corridor outside a hospital day unit, which is a coincidence of the ordinary kind: her mother was in the unit and my supervised contact takes place in a family centre two floors below, and the lifts are shared.

She had been crying and had stopped, and was standing at the window at the end of the corridor with a paper cup of something she was not drinking, and she was thinner, and she saw me and did not startle, and something went across her face that I read instantly and completely, because I have the map.

Here is what I did in the next four minutes.

I did not say her name first; I waited half a second for her to say mine, so that the meeting would be hers. When she could not, I said "Sara" quietly and once. I did not ask what was wrong, because a woman standing outside an oncology unit does not want to be asked to say it out loud, and because the question would have required her to organise herself for my benefit. I stood beside her rather than in front of her, at the window, at the distance of a friend and not of a man, and I let a long silence run without filling it, because I know — I know it exactly, in the way I know a load calculation — that she has spent her entire life having her silences picked up and handed back to her improved.

She said, after a while, "It's not going to be long."

I did not say I'm sorry. I said: "No."

And she made a small sound that was not quite a laugh and put her forehead briefly against my shoulder, for about three seconds, and I did not put my arm around her, because that would have been the gesture of a man who needed to be seen doing something, and because I had felt, in the fifth hour of the fifth session, the precise difference between being held and being handled, and I have kept it.

Then she straightened, and said “thank you”, and looked at me — and it was the same look as at the cabinet, in Room 4, with the spool in her hands.

She *knew*.

She knew that every one of those four minutes had come out of a file. She knew that the half-second, and the standing beside rather than in front, and the withheld arm, and the *no* instead of the sorry, had been retrieved and executed with the care of a man reading dials, and that there was nobody in the corridor with her.

And she took it anyway. She took it the way you take water. Because it was, and I say this without any pride at all, perfect — because nothing an ordinary man could have done in that corridor, with his own weather blowing about him and his own need to be forgiven, would have been anything like as good.

Then the lift came, and she got into it, and the doors closed, and I stood at the window for a moment and looked down at the car park in the rain, where men in green were moving canvas carts across wet tarmac, and I noted, with the mild and undifferentiated interest which is the whole of my inner life, that I had just performed the kindest act of my fifty-two years and had felt nothing while performing it, and that this was, on the evidence, an improvement.

Two floors below there is a room with low chairs and a box of plastic bricks in it, and a woman from the centre who sits by the door with a clipboard, and a boy of three who has recently learned the word *again* and uses it constantly and without discrimination.

Nell brings him and does not stay. That is the arrangement and I have never once asked for it to be varied. She hands him over at the door, and in nine sessions she has said forty-one words to me, and I have counted them, and I am not going to pretend that counting them is the same as minding.

She looks at me, though, in the doorway. Every time, for about a second, with an expression I read instantly and completely because I have the map, and which I am going to set down here because it is the last thing in the file.

She is checking whether it is safe. Not whether the boy is safe — she has the centre for that, and the clipboard, and the reviewable order. She is checking whether *she* is safe: whether the man in the low chair is going to give her something she will have to carry home and think about, some correct sentence delivered in the correct voice that will keep her awake, because she spent fifteen years receiving those and it took her until twenty-two to understand what she had been receiving.

So I give her nothing. That is the kindest thing I have to give and I worked it out on my own, and it is the only decision in my life that I have made against my own interest, and I have run the projection and I know exactly what it costs me in the twelve-month review, and I do it anyway, every time, and I do not know why.

I would like the record to note that. Not as mitigation. As an anomaly in the readings.

He puts a brick in my hand and says it. Again. I put the brick on the tower. He laughs, and I watch him laugh, and I record everything: the sound, the small square teeth, the way he looks up to check that I have seen him laughing, which is a thing children do at that age and which is, I have read, the whole beginning of it, the entire foundation, the first evidence of a creature that needs its inner state received by another.

I look back at him, every time, at the correct interval, with the correct expression.

He is going to grow up believing that his grandfather is the calmest and most attentive man he has ever met. That his grandfather listens as no one else listens. That there is something deep and still in him, some quality of oceanic patience, and that whatever he brings into that room will be met, entirely, without judgement, without impatience, and without limit.

And he will be right about all of it. That is the thing I have not been able to put down since the corridor. Every word of it will be true, and it will be true in the way the report is true, and I will not be lying to him, not once, not ever.

A man without proprioception may learn to walk by vision alone. He can cross a room. He can carry a cup of water across a room without spilling it, which the case notes record, and which visitors find remarkable.

The case notes also record what happens if the lights go out.

I have set all of this down because it is accurate, and because accuracy is the only thing I have ever been able to run without a substitute, and because somewhere at the far end of this a boy is going to be old enough to ask what his grandfather was like, and I would rather he had the file than the account.

Hector Vane is fifty-one, employed, solvent, and has not been convicted of anything in twenty-eight years. He is also, by the instrument the courts rely on, over the diagnostic threshold — and a court order keeps him away from the daughter who has not spoken to him in nine years, and from the grandson he has never met.

So he volunteers for a private trial: six sessions of drug-assisted psychotherapy for men like him, run by a clinician who believes the field gave up too early. If he can be certified treatable, the order can be revisited. He has read the research, including the parts she did not send him — including the Canadian programme that dosed psychopaths for fifteen years and produced men who reoffended at higher rates than those left untreated, because the therapy taught them the language of feeling and they took it out into the world and used it. He comes anyway.

Under the compound, the defences he has never had to lower simply are not there, and for six hours at a time Hector can do something he has never done in his life: feel the weather that everyone else lives in permanently. He can also see, with perfect resolution, why women have fallen for him since he was a boy — that he offers no resistance, nothing to push against, and that a person talking to him is alone in a dark room with her own feeling at full volume, mistaking the warmth of her own face for love. Dr Sara Bello knows the mechanism. She has published on it. It makes no difference whatsoever.

And when Hector finally says out loud, on tape, in a recorded clinical session, the thing he did on a January afternoon in 1983 — she has a choice to make about the recording, and she makes it in front of him, in the fifth hour of a therapeutic dose, while he is still able to feel exactly what it costs her. Then the drug wears off, and the feeling goes, and the map stays.

A noir of the dark mind, built on the clinical literature: the attentional tunnel, the hollowed vocabulary of feeling, the paediatric markers, and the documented, unbearable interior of drug-assisted therapy. It asks what happens when you give a man the complete schematic of being loved and no capacity to be moved by it — and whether the kindest act in the book is the coldest thing in the cycle.

