

ROYA
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No. 38



THE VERTICAL YES

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

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



THE CEILING. Four hundred and eleven days from the bed on Ridgeland Avenue: the water stain from the winter of 2011, shaped like Illinois drowned, going grey at what would be Rockford; the hairline crack he named the Sangamon; the four o'clock light crossing it left to right in ninety minutes. Low on the wall, his father's picture where she hung it, a third of the face behind the arm of the IV pole — another three and a half hours at the board to say four inches left. Nobody else has ever seen this room.

SYNOPSIS

Marek Sokol is fifty-four, runs a sealcoating crew out of a yard in Lyons, and has a mouth on him that has cost him a brother, a neighbour, and most of a marriage. On a Tuesday morning in January a clot takes out the bridge in his brainstem, and the last words he ever says out loud are *what the shit*.

Everything above the damage survives. He thinks, he remembers, he hears the ice maker two rooms away, and he feels every wrinkle in the sheet. What he has left is one vertical eye movement. One blink for yes, two for no. Twenty-two words an hour on a laminated alphabet board his wife made at the FedEx on Harlem.

Roz Sokol is a good woman doing an impossible job with her whole chest, and she starts to guess. Not from malice — from love, and exhaustion, and a nervous system that fills in a word before the question finishes. She begins writing what she is certain he means. Apologies he never made. The soft things he was never able to say without a hook in them. Every word of it true, and none of it his.

Then she starts on the long one: a confession to the hit-and-run that sent his brother to prison for eleven years in 1996. She is going to hand it to Del, and give a man back his name before it's too late, and it is the most decent thing anyone in that family has ever done.

She is right about everything except the fact.

And a home health aide named Toya Grant — Tuesdays and Fridays, nineteen dollars an hour, the only person in eighteen months who ever ran a control question to check whether he was in there — reads the pages one Friday morning, puts them back exactly as she found them, asks Marek a single question, and gets an answer nobody else in that house has ever bothered to get.

Then she thinks about it over a weekend.

A brutal, funny, foul-mouthed noir of the buried mind: what locked-in syndrome actually feels like from inside, and what a man is worth when the only thing he can still do is agree.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Locked-in syndrome is exactly as described here. A stroke in the basilar artery destroys the pons — the bridge every motor command has to cross — while sparing everything above it. Cognition, memory, hearing, and sensation remain wholly intact. Vertical gaze survives because its wiring sits higher, in the midbrain, above the flood line. One blink for yes. It is the only condition I know of in which a fully present adult is routinely discussed in the third person while he listens.

Two findings sit at the centre of this book.

The first is that locked-in patients, surveyed properly, report quality of life far higher than clinicians and families predict — a result so consistently replicated it has its own name in the literature, and so consistently disbelieved that it changes almost nothing about how these patients are treated. Whatever else that tells us, it tells us the estimate is being made by the wrong party.

The second is the facilitator problem, and it is the reason this is a crime novel. When one person supplies the alphabet and another supplies the blinks, authorship becomes a question with no reliable answer. This is not speculation; a whole modality was built on it in the eighties and nineties, produced thousands of pages of moving, articulate, entirely sincere communication, and collapsed under double-blind testing that showed the facilitators had written all of it without knowing. They were not frauds. They were tired, loving people whose hands answered a question their minds hadn't finished asking. The mechanism is called ideomotor and you can demonstrate it on your own kitchen table.

Put those together and you get the thing this book is about, which is not paralysis. It is consent. A man who can say yes and no cannot say *wait*, or *not quite*, or *that's close but you've made me kinder than I was*. And the difference between hearing someone and deciding in advance what they mean turns out to be the entire moral distance between a saint and a thief — with the thief, in this

case, being the only person in the room who ever actually asked.

Vonnegut stands behind this shelf as always. So does every home health aide I have ever watched work, on nineteen dollars an hour, reading bodies that nobody has taught them to read and nobody has ever paid them a cent extra for.

If you are ever at that bedside: ask a question you don't already know the answer to. Then wait. It takes ninety minutes. He has nothing else on.

Chew Z

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ONE. THE CEILING

There's a water stain on the ceiling of my front room shaped like the state of Illinois if you took Illinois and drowned it. It came from the upstairs radiator in the winter of 2011 and I never fixed it because fixing it meant pulling the ceiling and pulling the ceiling meant three days and a dumpster and Roz asking me every hour how it was coming, and I decided instead that I could live with a brown map over my head for the rest of my life.

I want that on the record early, because it's the funniest fucking thing that has ever happened to me and there's nobody I can tell.

I have looked at that stain for four hundred and eleven days.

Not glanced. Looked. Studied it the way a monk studies a wall. I know the exact place where the brown goes gray at what would be Rockford. I know that at four in the afternoon in February the light comes through the front window and crosses it left to right and takes about ninety minutes and that on the way it passes a small hairline crack that I have named, in my head, because there's nothing else to do in here, the Sangamon.

I have named things on my ceiling.

Right. So. Here's what happened, and I'll make it quick because it was quick.

I'm fifty-four. I'm in the kitchen on a Tuesday morning in January drinking coffee out of a Bears mug with a chip in it, and I stand up to get the half-and-half, and the floor goes sideways — not down, sideways, like somebody grabbed the corner of the linoleum and pulled — and I hear myself say what the shit, out loud, in my own voice, in my own kitchen, which is the last thing I will ever say out loud in my life.

What the shit.

Fifty-four years of a mouth on me. My mother used to say I could make a priest walk out of a room. Forty years of running crews, a thousand mornings of telling nineteen-year-olds to get their thumbs out of their asses, a marriage of thirty-one years in which I said, at a conservative estimate, four hundred thousand things I shouldn't

have — and the last transmission out of Marek Sokol, final words, chiseled on the monument, is what the shit.

I laughed about that for a while. I'll come back to the laughing.

The medical version, which I have heard maybe two hundred times now because people talk over you in this condition like you're a radiator: a clot in the basilar artery, which is the plumbing that runs up the front of the brainstem. It cooked a section of the pons. The pons is a bridge — that's literally what the word means, they named it in Latin because it looks like a little bridge — and everything your brain wants to say to your body has to cross it. Movement. Speech. The whole works. Bridge goes down, nothing crosses.

But — and this is the part where God, if He's up there, revealed Himself as a comedian working blue — the stuff above the bridge is fine.

Perfect, actually. Thinking, fine. Memory, fine. Hearing, better than fine, hearing gets *sharper*, I don't know why, nobody's explained it, but I can hear the ice maker drop a load two rooms away and tell you if it's a full tray. Feeling — and here's the joke, here's the real punchline — feeling is completely, entirely, one hundred percent intact.

I feel everything. Every fucking thing.

I feel the sheet. I feel the wrinkle in the sheet under my left shoulder blade that Toya smooths on Tuesdays and Fridays and that nobody smooths on the other five days, and by Sunday night that wrinkle is the central fact of my existence, it is the Cuban Missile Crisis, I am in there with it hour after hour and there is not one thing on this earth I can do about it.

Nerve pain. Oh, they don't tell you about the nerve pain. Somewhere around month two my legs started up — a deep electrical burn like somebody left a car battery hooked to my shins — and it comes at night, mostly, and it lasts anywhere from twenty minutes to five hours, and there is no way for me to report it, because the board they use with me has yes and no on it and nothing in between.

An itch. Let me tell you about an itch.

Say you get an itch on your eyelid. Just the eyelid, just the left one, and it's nothing, it's a nothing itch, a person with a working arm handles it in a quarter of a second without looking up from their phone. For me it's a four-hour event. Four hours. I have timed it against the light on the stain. It starts, and it builds, and it becomes the entire content of my consciousness, every neuron I've got standing around this one square centimeter of skin screaming, and then somewhere in hour three it hits some kind of ceiling and turns into a warm buzz and then it fades and you'd think, great, over — and then it comes back forty minutes later.

The literature on this — and yes, I've had the literature read to me, Roz's sister-in-law printed some off in the first month and read it out in her funeral voice — the literature says locked-in patients report quality of life comparable to healthy controls.

Comparable to healthy controls.

I want to find the guy who wrote that and put an itch on his eyelid and give him a bell to ring and then take away the bell.

Here's how you say a word.

The board is a piece of poster board with the alphabet on it in Roz's handwriting, in five rows, arranged by frequency because a speech pathologist named Bev told her to — E T A O I N in the top row, the letters you use most. Somebody sits by the bed and reads the rows. Row one. Row two. Row three. You blink at the right row. Then they read the letters in that row. A. B. C. You blink at the letter.

One blink yes. Two blinks no.

That's the whole language. That's everything I have.

Twenty-two words an hour, when Roz is fresh and paying attention. Eleven or twelve when she's tired. And every one of those words has to be spent on something, and here's what nobody understands from the outside: the budget is the cruelty. Not the paralysis. The *budget*. Because at twenty-two words an hour you learn very fast that there is no such thing in this room as a passing remark. There

are no jokes. There's no *hey, remember that*. Everything is triage.
TURN ME. PAIN LEG. COLD.

I have not made a joke out loud in four hundred and eleven days.

I make about nine hundred a day in here. I've never been funnier. I am the funniest son of a bitch in Cook County and my material dies in a room the size of a walnut behind my own face.

Two more things and then I'll get to the actual story, because there is one, and it's worse than this part.

First thing: my eyes.

They took everything but they left me up and down. That's the pons for you — it takes the horizontal gaze and leaves the vertical, because the wiring for up-down sits higher, in the midbrain, above the flood line. So I can't look left and I can't look right. I can look up and I can look down and I can shut my eyes.

Up is yes. Down is no. That's the whole of my citizenship. That is the total franchise of Marek Sokol, taxpayer, of Ridgeland Avenue: one vertical yes.

Everything in this book comes out of that. Every single thing that happens in this house over the next year happens because a man can say yes and cannot say *wait*.

You can say yes and no and you cannot say wait, hang on, that's not what I meant, back up, you got the row wrong, that's not the word, that's not the fucking word, Roz —

Second thing: the laughing.

Before that, though — the seventeen days. I have to put the seventeen days in here because it's the piece everybody skips and it's the piece that broke something in me that has not grown back.

I was awake on day three. Fully. In a room at Loyola with a curtain and a monitor and a woman coming in every four hours, and I was in there, thinking in whole sentences, and nobody knew.

Seventeen days.

The literature has a number on this and the number is obscene: something better than half of locked-in patients are not identified

by their medical team at all. The family gets it first — a wife, a daughter, somebody who sits there long enough to notice the eyes are doing something — and the average delay between a patient becoming aware and anybody figuring it out runs to weeks. Months, in some of the case reports. There's a man in the Belgian literature who was in there for twenty-three years.

Twenty-three years.

Mine was seventeen days, and I got off easy, and I want to describe what seventeen days is like so that number stops being a number.

Day four, two residents at the foot of the bed at maybe six in the morning, and one says to the other, "This one's a vegetable, basically," and the other one says, "Yeah," and they go.

Day six, a nurse washing me who sings while she works, hymns, and does not say one word to me the entire time, forty minutes, and at the end pats my hand twice and says "there we go" to the room.

Day nine, my wife on the phone in the corridor with her sister saying the words *I don't think there's anything left of him*, and then coming back in with her face fixed and holding my hand and telling me the Hawks won.

Day eleven, somebody's cell phone going off in my room for a full minute — an alarm, not a call — nobody in there, nobody coming, and me lying in that noise unable to move my eyes off the ceiling tile it was under.

And what you do, in there, for seventeen days, is you scream. Constantly. Every waking second is a scream in a language with no output — you're throwing your whole self at the wall of your own face over and over, trying to move a finger, a lip, anything, and the thing you learn about the human will in that room is that it is not a force. It's a request. And there's nobody at the desk.

It was Roz who found me. Day seventeen, she was talking about the furnace, of all things, and she said, "You'd know what to do about it," and something in the way she said it was a question, and I looked up.

And she stopped talking. And she leaned in over the bed and looked right at my face, close, for the first time, and she said: “Marek?”

And I looked up again.

I have never seen a human being’s face do what my wife’s face did. I have seen a lot of faces. Nothing like that.

She screamed for the nurse. She was screaming *he’s in there, he’s in there, he’s in there* and hanging onto the rail, and the room filled up, and inside two hours there was a neurologist doing exactly what Toya Grant would do for free eleven months later, which is ask a man a yes-or-no question twice to see if the answer holds.

I want to be fair to my wife. In the whole of this, when I get bitter — and I get bitter, it’s three in the morning most of the time in here — I put day seventeen up against it. She was the one. Two hundred people came through that room, half of them paid, and it was Roz Sokol talking about a furnace.

She found me. She just never went looking again.

Now here’s the other thing about time in here, and then I’ll get to the laughing.

Time is not slow. Everybody assumes it’s slow. In the first months it was slow, but what it turns into is worse, which is *shapeless*. Nothing marks it. No meals, no getting up, no going anywhere, no work, no week. Toya’s Tuesdays and Fridays are the only edges on it, and the light going left to right across Illinois, and after about a year I stopped being able to tell you whether something had happened in the spring or the fall.

And into all that empty, the mind pours the only material it’s got, which is the past.

There is no distraction in here. None. You cannot turn it off. So what runs, twenty-four hours a day, is an audit — a full, unsparing, chronological audit of everything you ever did, conducted by a prosecutor who has all the files and infinite time and no interest in your side of it.

I have relitigated the Ruben Ortega firing, at a conservative estimate, four hundred times.

I have relitigated the christening in 2004 more than that.

You get everything back. Not the big stuff — you get the small stuff, the stuff you thought was gone. The face of a kid I made cry on a job site in 1991 whose name I never knew. A thing I said to my mother in a car in 1983. And it doesn't fade with repetition, that's the part nobody warns you about, it *sharpens*, because every time you go back you notice something you missed and then that goes in the file too.

There is a word for a place where a man is held indefinitely with no distraction and made to review his own life in perfect detail with no possibility of restitution.

I'm not going to be dramatic about it. I'm just saying I've read the pamphlets and I know what the pamphlets are for and I know what this actually is.

About six weeks in, I started laughing. Out loud. Real laughing, or what's left of it — a wet, honking, terrible noise that comes up out of my chest without my say-so and goes on for twenty, thirty seconds and then quits.

It's a thing. It's got a name. Pseudobulbar affect. When the brainstem gets chewed up, the wiring that connects what you feel to what your face does comes apart, and the machinery starts firing on its own — laughing, crying, whatever, at random, with no connection whatsoever to what's actually going on inside you.

Do you understand what I'm telling you.

My brother Del came and sat with me in March and told me about his kid and cried, and I laughed. In his face. For half a minute. And he took my hand and he said, God, you're still in there, you asshole, and he laughed too, through it, and he thought — everybody in this house thinks — that it's *me*. That it's Marek being Marek. Spirit. Attitude. Hard old bastard laughing at death.

I have laughed at every worst moment of the last year. I laughed at my own diagnosis. I laughed when Roz told me she'd sold the truck. I have laughed, out loud, in a room where people were grieving me, and they've taken it every single time as a sign of life.

And here's the thing I want the reader to sit in for a second before we go on, because it's the whole architecture of what happened to me:

Everyone in this house believes they can hear me.

They've got a board and a system and a routine. They've got yes and no. They've got a man who laughs. They come away from that bed every day feeling like they've had a conversation.

They have never once in four hundred and eleven days heard a single fucking word I've said.

TWO. TWENTY-TWO WORDS AN HOUR

My wife is a good woman. I want to get that in before I say anything else about her, because everything I'm about to describe is going to make her look like a monster and she isn't one, and I have had four hundred days to work out exactly what she is, which is worse. She's a woman who was handed a task no human being should be handed and did it with her whole chest.

Rosalind Sokol, fifty-two, of Ridgeland Avenue. Thirty-one years married to me, which should qualify her for a pension and a plaque. She worked twenty-two years in the billing office at the orthopedic group on Cermak and she can find a coding error in a stack of paper the way a dog finds a rat, and when they let her go in the reorganization in 2022 she cried for one afternoon and then never mentioned it again.

The first week I was home she taught herself the scanning method off a printout and three videos. Bev the pathologist came twice. Roz practiced on her sister. She made the board herself with a Sharpie and a ruler and she got the letter frequency right and she laminated the thing at the FedEx on Harlem so it wouldn't warp.

That's who she is. That's exactly who she is. Understand that and you'll understand the rest.

Here's how it actually goes, in practice, in a front room, in February.

She sits at ten o'clock. She's got the board and a legal pad and a pen. She's already done the bag, the turn, the mouth swab, the eye drops, the whole ugly liturgy, and she's been up since five-thirty, and she says: "Okay. Go ahead, hon."

And I look up. Yes. Meaning: I've got something.

"Row one."

I do nothing. Two blinks. No.

"Row two."

Nothing.

"Row three."

Up. Yes.

"S. C. M. F."

Up at the M.

She writes M. She says it out loud, because Bev told her to read it back. "M."

And so on, letter by letter, and here's the thing that nobody who hasn't done it can understand: it is agonizingly slow and it is also, weirdly, hypnotic, and about four letters in, both people start guessing. You can't not. The brain will not sit there in the dark waiting for letter nine when it's already got a candidate at letter four.

M-Y-L-E — "My leg?" she says. Up. Yes.

That's efficient. That's the system working. She saved me forty minutes and she's right.

But now play it forward twenty times a day for a year and watch what happens to the guessing.

Because the guessing has a direction. It runs toward the thing the guesser expects. Bev warned her about this in the second visit — she called it *the facilitator's problem* and Roz nodded and wrote it down and I watched her write it down — and the warning does exactly nothing, because it's not a decision. It's the way a nervous system works. Roz isn't lying when she guesses. Roz has never lied

to me in thirty-one years, and I'd know, because I've done enough for both of us.

There's an old parlor trick. Ouija board. Everybody's hands on the little plastic thing and it slides across the letters and everybody swears they're not pushing it, and they're *not* — that's the actual finding, that's what makes it interesting instead of stupid — the muscles do it below the level of awareness. There's a name for it. Ideomotor. Your body answers a question your mind hasn't finished asking and reports back that it didn't do anything.

Now put that in a woman who has been awake since five-thirty, who loves you, who is exhausted past the point where exhaustion is a feeling and into where it's just the weather, and who needs — needs, the way you need air — for the man in the bed to still be in there.

She's not moving a planchette. She's choosing which row to read next, and how long to pause, and whether that flicker was a blink or a blink.

I'll give you the first one. The first wrong word. I remember it exactly.

Day thirty-something. She's spelling with me and I'm three letters into T-U-R and she says, "Turn you? You want a turn?" and I say yes, and then she says, "Or — hon, are you saying *tired*? Are you tired?"

And I go: two blinks. No.

And she writes *tired* on the legal pad.

That's it. That's the whole event. She had it in her hand before she asked and the asking was a formality, and she wrote it down, and she said "okay, we'll let you rest," and she went into the kitchen, and I lay there needing to be turned, with the wrinkle under my shoulder blade, for two hours and ten minutes.

I want to be fair. She turned me eventually. She always turns me eventually. Nobody died.

But I lay there for two hours and ten minutes with the arithmetic going, and the arithmetic was this: the board only works if she

wants to know. Not if she loves me. Not if she's careful. If she *wants to know*.

And a person can love you at full volume for thirty-one years and not want to know one single thing about you. I should know. I did it to her from 1996 to about a week before the stroke.

Here's the other half of the budget, and it's the part that gets you in the end.

Twenty-two words an hour means you can never say the long thing. You can only say the urgent thing. And what happens is that you begin to sort your own interior life by how *sayable* it is, and everything unsayable gets moved to the back of the warehouse, and then it gets moved further back, and after a while you stop taking it out at all.

So I said PAIN and COLD and TURN and BAG and TV OFF and I did not say, in four hundred and eleven days, one single thing about 1996, about Del, about the eleven years, about the thing in this house that everybody walks around like a hole in a porch. I never said it because it would have cost nine hundred words and I had twenty-two an hour and there was always a leg on fire.

And that, right there, is how a man ends up letting somebody else write his confession. Not because he can't talk.

Because talking costs too fucking much and there's always something closer to the front of the line.

One more thing about the budget and then I'll get on with it.

In April I spent an entire afternoon — three and a half hours, two sittings, Roz patient the whole way, and I want to credit her for that patience because it was real — spelling out a single sentence.

It was: PUT MY FATHERS PICTURE WHERE I CAN SEE IT

Thirty-eight characters. Three and a half hours. She got up twice, once for the phone and once because the mail came.

And when it was done she said, "Oh, honey," and she got up and she moved my father's picture off the piano and put it on the wall opposite the bed, low, at my angle, and stood back and said, "There. Is that good?"

And I looked at it, and it was mounted at exactly the height where the top corner of it sits behind the arm of the IV pole, and about a third of my father's face is behind that pole, and it has been for four hundred days, and I would need another three and a half hours to say *four inches left*.

And I couldn't do it. I couldn't spend it. Not because it wasn't worth three and a half hours to me — Christ, I've got nothing but hours — but because it wasn't worth three and a half hours of *her*, and because she'd stood back and said *is that good* with her face open like a kid's, and the yes was already out of me before I'd made any decision at all.

That's the whole mechanism, in one afternoon in April, before any of the rest of it started.

Everybody thinks the tragedy here is the paralysis. It isn't. The tragedy is that the cost of a correction is always higher than the cost of agreeing, and it is paid by the person you love, in front of you, and you can watch the invoice being written.

So you agree. And then you agree again. And the agreements pile up into a man, and after a while there's a whole guy in that bed built entirely out of the cheapest available answer, and everybody who comes through the door likes him a lot better than they liked you.

THREE. SOKOL & SONS SEALCOATING

You want to know what kind of man is lying in this bed. Fine. I'll give it to you straight because I've got no reason left to shine it up, and because the whole point of what's coming is that somebody else did the shining and did a much nicer job than I would have.

Sokol & Sons Sealcoating, established 1994 by my father Wladek, who had one son at the time and named the company hopeful. Driveways, church lots, the Jewel on Cermak for six years running, four condo associations in Berwyn and one in Riverside that I would burn to the ground if I could get out of this bed.

We laid asphalt emulsion out of a hot box on hundred-degree days. It's a filthy, stinking, straightforward business and I was good at it

for thirty years and nobody ever accused me of doing shoddy work, which was the one thing my old man cared about and the only thing about him I ever managed to inherit.

Here's what I was like.

I fired a kid named Ruben Ortega in 2009 for being nineteen minutes late two days in a row, in July, when we were three men short, and I did it in the parking lot in front of the crew because I wanted the crew to see it. He had a baby. I knew he had a baby. I did it because he was late and because I'd decided by then that being the kind of man who did that was more useful to me than being liked, and I was right, and everybody was on time for the next four years.

I didn't go to my mother's second surgery because we had the Jewel lot booked and you don't get a Jewel lot back once you bump it. She lived another nine years and never once brought it up, which was her way of bringing it up every day.

I called my wife stupid in front of her sister at a christening in 2004 over a thing with a car seat. Just — flat out, in the kitchen, with people there. *Don't be stupid, Roz*. I remember the sound the room made. It made no sound at all. That's what it does, a room, when a man does that: it goes completely quiet and everybody looks at the counter, and then somebody says something about the weather, and the whole thing gets folded up and put away and it's still in there twenty years later and everybody in the county can find it in the dark.

And Del. But Del is his own chapter and I'll get there.

I wasn't a drinker, particularly. I didn't hit anybody. I never cheated on my wife, not once, which is a fact I used to hold up like a trophy for years and which I now understand was not a virtue but a lack of imagination. I paid my taxes. I plowed the block after storms, every house, for free, in the dark, at five in the morning, for twenty-six winters, and I did that because I liked the feeling of the block waking up to a clean street I'd made and knowing it was me.

That's it. That's the ledger. A hard, cheap, exact man with a foul mouth who did good work and never let anything go and made his

money and made his wife smaller every year without ever once raising a hand, which in the neighborhood accounting made me a decent guy, because that's the bar and it's on the fucking floor.

Now.

Since the stroke, the casseroles.

You have not seen anything like it. Foil pans stacked on the counter three deep. Kolaczki from the Kaczmareks. A ham. Two hams. Cards. Cards from people I have thrown off a job site. Cards from the Riverside condo board, who I sued.

And they come in — three at a time, in coats, smelling of outside — and they stand at the foot of the bed and they look at the man in it and they say, to Roz, never to me, *how's he doing*, and Roz says, "He's right here, he can hear everything," and they nod and adjust and then say, to me, too loud and too slow, "MAREK. YOU LOOK GOOD."

I do not look good. I look like a man who's been dead for a year and hasn't been told.

And then they run out of things to say in about eleven seconds, which is the true and honest duration of most people's material, and they stand there, and then somebody says *well* — and here's the thing, here's the actual reason I'm telling you about the casseroles —

Then they talk to each other. Over me. Standing right there.

Cheryl Balek stood eighteen inches from my face in April and told her sister-in-law about a lump she was scared about that she had not told her husband about. In my front room. Because I was furniture. I've heard about affairs, a bankruptcy, a kid's arrest, and a thing about Father Nowak that I would pay money to unhear.

I am the single most well-informed man in this zip code and I cannot spell any of it at twenty-two words an hour.

And the casseroles aren't for me. That's what took me a couple months to work out, lying here doing nothing but working things out.

A word first about this block, because you need to understand the machinery it runs on or none of what my wife did will make sense.

Ridgeland Avenue is a mile and a half of brick bungalows and two-flats put up between 1922 and 1958 and it does not forget anything. Ever. That is not a figure of speech. There are four families on this street who have not spoken since a thing at a wedding in 1979 that nobody under sixty can even describe accurately anymore. My father was in a dispute about a garage roof that outlived both parties and is now being carried, with real feeling, by two men in their fifties who inherited it the way you inherit a china cabinet.

Nobody here says anything. That's the second rule. You don't accuse, you don't confront, you don't have it out. You adjust the temperature and you keep adjusting it for thirty years and everybody knows exactly where everybody stands and not one word of it is ever spoken out loud.

So take a family with a thing like ours in it and drop it into that.

Nineteen ninety-six. Two blocks south, on 26th, there's still a house with a photograph in it. Alicia Reyna would be thirty-nine this year. Her mother Marisol is alive and I saw her at the Jewel maybe nine times over twenty-five years and we never once looked at each other, and she never once came at me, because that isn't what people do here.

The Reynas moved off 26th in 2003 and Marisol moved back in 2016 when her own mother got sick, which is also what people do here. Del sees her sometimes. He told me once, in the recliner, watching a game, not looking at me: "I seen Mrs Reyna at the Walgreens." And that was the entire sentence, and we watched the rest of the game, and that was in 2019.

That's the block. And a block like that does not need evidence. It needs a shape. And the shape it settled on somewhere around 2005 was: the younger one went away for it and the older one paid for the lawyer, and you draw your own conclusions, and everybody drew them, and nobody has said one syllable of it out loud in twenty years.

The twenty-six winters of plowing was me trying to buy my way back out of a shape. I want that stated plainly, because I said earlier that I liked the feeling of a clean street I'd made, and that was true and it wasn't the whole of it. I was out there at five in the morning in the dark in the cold in front of houses where I knew what they thought of me, and I plowed every one, for free, for twenty-six years, and it bought me exactly nothing, because a block like this one does not accept payments.

The casseroles are for Roz.

They come to look at her. To see how she's holding up, which is the phrase, everybody's phrase, *how are you holding up* — and she is, she's holding up, she's holding up like a goddamn bridge — and every one of them goes back out to the car and drives home and says to whoever's in the passenger seat: *I don't know how she does it. After everything.*

After everything.

That's the part. That's the phrase that runs under this whole block like a sewer line. *After everything.* Meaning: after him. After the way he talked to her. After Del.

And so what my wife has, in the winter of the year I got locked in, is a room full of people who have decided that she is a saint married to a bastard, and a bastard in a bed who can say yes and no, and a legal pad.

You see where this is going. I saw where it was going about a week before it started going there, and I want to be honest, I want that in the record too:

I was flattered.

FOUR. THE FIRST WRONG WORD

It started with an apology to a woman named Bernice Kaczmarek about a fence.

The fence went up in 2013 four inches over the line and I made it a two-year war. Surveyor, letters, one screaming match on the parkway in front of the mailman. I was right about the four inches,

incidentally. I want that noted. I was right and it cost me a neighbor for eleven years and the last time Bernie Kaczmarek spoke to me she called me a small man, which stung more than it should have because it was true and because she said it quietly.

Bernie came in with the kolaczki in the third month. Stood at the end of the bed. Didn't say much.

And after she left, Roz sat down with the board and said: "Marek. Do you want to say something to Bernie?"

And I said yes. Up. One blink.

Because I did. I genuinely did. Lying there four hundred days you get a lot of these — a slow-drip audit of everything you ever did, running twenty-four hours, no volume control — and Bernie Kaczmarek had been on the list since about week six.

So we start spelling. And I'm going for S-O-R-R-Y and I get as far as S-O and Roz says, gently, "Sorry?"

Yes.

And she writes on the pad, and she says it out loud as she writes it, in her own voice, and what she writes is:

Bernie — I'm sorry about the fence. I was wrong and I knew it at the time and I let it go on because I couldn't stand to be the one who backed down. You were a good neighbor to us for thirty years and I threw it away over four inches of grass. Roz says you still make the apricot ones. I always liked the apricot ones.

Sixty-one words.

I said two letters.

And I lay there while she read it back to me and I felt — and I want to be exact about this, because it's where everything starts — I felt *grateful*. Because it was better than anything I could have said. It was true. Every word of it was true. I couldn't have got to it in six hours at the board, and I wouldn't have been able to make it sound like that if I had six years, because I have never in my life been able to say a soft thing without putting a hook in it.

And it was in her handwriting on a legal pad and she said, "Is that right?"

And I looked up.

Yes.

That's the crime. That's the whole crime, right there, day one, and I committed it, not her.

Because she asked. She did ask. She held up something that was ninety-five percent hers and five percent mine and she asked, and I could have blinked twice.

But blinking twice means: *no*. That's all it means. No. It doesn't mean *not quite*. It doesn't mean *closer*, *but I wouldn't have said the part about the apricot ones because that's you, that's not me, I don't have a sentence like that in me and never did*. Two blinks means no and no means we start again from the top of row one, another ninety minutes, and she's been up since five-thirty and there's a bag to change.

So I said yes to the better man.

Anybody would have. Don't sit there. Anybody would have.

Bernie Kaczmarek came back four days later and sat on the edge of the bed, on the bed, which nobody did, and she took my hand and she cried and she said "Oh, Marek," and I laughed for thirty seconds in her face and she took it as emotion and she was right for once, it just wasn't the emotion she thought.

And then it went around the block in about nine days.

That's the part I couldn't have predicted. Bernie told somebody, somebody told somebody, and by the end of the month there was a thing about me on Ridgeland Avenue. He's saying things. He's saying things now. Something happened to him. You know how sometimes a person, at the end—

And the casseroles doubled.

By May, Roz had a routine. Evenings, after the ten o'clock turn, board on her knees, legal pad, and she'd say, "Anything you want to get down tonight?" And some nights I said no and she'd sit there

anyway with the pen and after a while she'd say, "You know what I think you'd want to say to Danny Pilsen?" — and we'd be off.

And she got better at it. That's the horror. She got *better*. She stopped needing the two letters. She'd have the shape of it before we started, and the spelling became a kind of formality, a check-in, and half the time she'd just talk it out loud and then say, "Right? Is that right?" and I'd give her the yes because the yes was cheaper and because it was, mostly, in the neighborhood of right, and because it was three in the afternoon and there was nothing else.

Somewhere in June she stopped bringing the board out for it altogether.

I'm going to be very clear about the two things happening at once here, because if you only see one of them you'll get her wrong.

One: my wife was writing letters from a man who did not exist and giving him my name.

Two: every single letter was true.

She never wrote a lie. Not one. She knew what I'd done — she'd been in the room for all of it, thirty-one years, she had the whole file — and she just wrote it down straight for the first time, without a hook in it, which is the way it would have come out of me if I'd been built differently.

She was translating.

You can call it a forgery and you'd be right and it would still be the truest thing anybody ever said about me.

And I lay there under the drowned map of Illinois and let her do it, day after day, for one reason which I did not admit to myself until August:

For the first time in my adult life, people liked me.

FIVE. DEL

My brother Delmar is forty-seven and hangs drywall and has a laugh you can hear from the alley and has never once in his life had a bad idea about anybody.

He comes Sundays. He sits in the recliner Roz dragged in from the den and he watches whatever's on and he talks at me for two hours about nothing — the Hawks, a guy at work, his daughter Court and her boyfriend who Del does not care for. He doesn't use the board. He's tried twice and got frustrated and now he just talks and every so often he says, "You following me, Mar?" and I look up, and he says, "Okay. Good," and keeps going.

It's the best two hours of my week. It's the only two hours where nobody's trying to hear me.

Now. 1996.

March, a Saturday, wet snow. A girl named Alicia Reyna, nine years old, was crossing Ridgeland at 26th on her way back from her cousin's with a bag of chips, and a Ford F-150 came through and hit her and did not stop.

She lived four days at Loyola.

The truck was ours. Sokol & Sons, dark blue, the ladder rack, the whole thing. Two people saw it and neither of them saw a face, because it was snowing sideways and because it was seven-fifteen at night in March.

Del was nineteen. He had the truck that night. That is a fact, and it's the fact everything sits on. He'd taken it to a party in Stickney and he'd been drinking and he came home at midnight and put it in the driveway and went to bed, and at six in the morning the two of us were standing in that driveway in our coats looking at the right front quarter panel, and I said to him, "What did you do."

And he said, "I don't know."

He didn't know. He was nineteen and he'd had maybe nine beers and he'd driven home over that stretch and he genuinely, truly did not know, and I watched the not-knowing turn into knowing right there in the driveway in about four seconds, and I watched my brother's whole life go out of his face.

He turned himself in on the Monday. My mother went with him. He pled out because his lawyer was a guy from the parish who did

closings, and because Del wanted to, and because there was a family across the alley on 26th with a photograph on the mantel.

He got fifteen. He served eleven.

He came out at thirty-one. He was in for the whole of his twenties. He learned drywall inside, which is where the trade came from, and he does not drink, at all, ever, not a beer at a wedding, and he has never in twenty-nine years said one word to me about any of it.

Now here's the thing that lives in this house.

Everybody thinks it was me.

Not everybody. Not Del. Del thinks it was Del, because Del was driving, and Del is right.

But Roz thinks it was me.

She got there over about ten years. She never accused me — that's not how it works in a Polish house on Ridgeland Avenue, nobody accuses anybody of anything, you just adjust the temperature — and she has never once said the sentence out loud. But I can tell you the year the adjustment happened. It was 2004, after the christening, after *don't be stupid, Roz*. Something in her went and got a piece of information she'd been sitting on and turned it over.

Because here's what she has: I never talked about it. Ever. In twenty-nine years. Del goes to prison for eleven years and his brother does not talk about it — not the night, not the trial, not one word, not drunk, not at a funeral, not at three in the morning after the second miscarriage. Total silence for three decades on the biggest thing that ever happened to my family.

Innocent men don't do that. That's her reasoning and I want to say plainly: it's good reasoning.

She also has this: I paid for everything. Commissary, the lawyer, my mother's mortgage while she stopped working to do the visits, Del's first year out, the van, the tools. Two hundred grand across a decade out of a sealcoating business, and I never mentioned that either, and one Christmas she found the ledger where I'd been tracking it and she looked at it for a long time and then put it back exactly where it was.

Guilty men pay.

That's what she's got. She's got a silence and a ledger and thirty-one years of a man who could not say a soft thing without a hook in it, and out of that she built a picture, and it's a good picture, it's a hell of a picture, it explains everything about our marriage including the parts that were her fault.

It's wrong.

I'm going to say that here, once, flat, and then I'm going to leave it, because there's a whole book between here and the part where it matters:

Del was driving. I have never once in twenty-nine years lied about that, because nobody has ever once in twenty-nine years asked me.

That's the thing about being a bastard. It's efficient. People stop asking.

But I owe the reader the reason, because *why didn't you ever say anything* is the only fair question anybody could put to me and I've had five hundred days to get the answer straight.

It's not one reason. It's three, and they arrived in order, and each one made the next one easier.

The first was that morning in the driveway.

Twenty-six years old, six in the morning, wet snow going to slush, my brother standing there in a coat over pajama pants looking at the quarter panel. And what I said was, "What did you do," and what I did *not* say, in the eleven seconds after that, was the only thing that mattered, which was: *don't. Don't go in. Sit down. We'll get a lawyer, a real one, and you were nineteen and it was snowing sideways and you'll do four years, maybe three.*

I didn't say it because I was already somewhere else. I was already at the yard, at the schedule, at the Jewel lot, at what this does to the business, at the fact that my father had been dead eighteen months and the name on the trucks was now mine to protect. I did the arithmetic in about four seconds in a driveway in the snow with my brother's whole life on the counter, and then I let him walk into

that station on his own and I paid for everything afterward for a decade because paying is what I had instead of a soul.

I never told him not to go in. That's what I did in 1996. That's the actual crime, and it isn't the one my wife wrote down, and there's no name for it and no statute and no eleven years.

The second reason came later. Once you don't say a thing for five years, the not-saying becomes the fact. There's no way to introduce it. You can't be standing in a kitchen in 2001 and say *by the way*. The silence sets like concrete and after a while the silence is the relationship, and you would have to break the relationship to say the sentence, and the sentence is not worth what it costs by then, and every year it gets more expensive.

The third reason is the ugly one and it's true so it goes in.

I liked it.

Not the way you're thinking. I didn't enjoy being thought a coward. But by about 2006 I had worked out that my wife believed something about me that was worse than anything I'd actually done, and that she stayed anyway, and every day she stayed was a data point, and the data was: she will not leave, no matter what, she has already seen the worst version and set her bags down.

Do you understand what a man like me does with information like that?

I stopped trying. Completely. From about 2006 on I never once made an effort in that marriage, and I told myself it was because she'd decided I was a monster so what was the point, and the truth is it was the safest arrangement I'd ever had. She couldn't be disappointed in me. She'd already run the number down to the floor. There was no exposure left.

That's twenty years. That's the back half of my marriage, and I built it on a lie I never told, which is the cheapest kind because you never have to remember it.

So when people ask why I didn't say anything — and nobody has ever asked, that's the joke of it, nobody has ever once asked, which is why I'm putting it here — the answer is that the first time it was

cowardice, the second time it was logistics, and after that it was comfort.

And now I couldn't say it if I wanted to.

There's a symmetry in that I don't much care for.

SIX. TUESDAYS AND FRIDAYS

Toya Grant comes Tuesdays and Fridays, eight-thirty to noon, through an agency in Berwyn that bills at forty-one dollars an hour and pays her nineteen.

She is thirty-eight. She has a son, Amari, who is fifteen. She lives in Austin and drives an '09 Corolla with a bad wheel bearing that I can hear coming from the corner, three houses off, and I know Tuesdays are Tuesdays before Roz does.

She does not talk to me too loud or too slow. That was the first thing.

Second thing: the first morning, she pulled the sheet down to look at my legs and she said, "Oh, honey. Nobody's been at these." And she worked on them for forty minutes — the heels, the ankles, the whole ruined circuitry — and the nerve fire in my shins went down for the first time in four months, and she said, conversationally, not to Roz, to me: "That's been going on a while, huh."

Not a question for the board. Just a statement of the obvious, out loud, from somebody who'd looked.

Here's how a home health aide works when they're good, and I'd never once thought about it in fifty-five years on this earth. She reads bodies. That's the job. Not charts — bodies. She's got maybe eleven clients and most of them can't tell her anything either: dementia, stroke, ALS, the whole grim catalogue, and she has developed, over thirteen years and a couple thousand mornings, an instrument for reading people who cannot speak, and the instrument is very, very good and nobody in the healthcare system has ever asked her about it or paid her one dollar extra for it.

She read me like a newspaper.

Second week. She's doing the mouth care and she stops and looks at my face for a second and says, "You're not laughing at me, are you." Beat. "That's the machinery. That's not you."

Yes, I said. Up. Hard.

"Mm-hm." She kept swabbing. "My aunt had that. Everybody thought she was happy. She was pissed off for three years." She rinsed the sponge. "You want the TV on or you want quiet?"

And she waited. And I said no — two blinks — and she said, "Quiet. Okay," and she turned it off, and here's what I want the reader to understand about that small nothing of a moment:

Roz leaves the TV on. Roz has left the TV on for me, out of love, for months, because the silence would be terrible for her and so she assumes it is terrible for me. I have spelled TV OFF maybe six times, at ninety minutes a go, and each time she's turned it off and come back an hour later and put it back on because she cannot stand to think of me in here in the quiet.

Toya asked.

That's it. That's the whole difference and it took her nine seconds.

Third week she caught the wrinkle. She came in on a Tuesday, took one look at how my shoulder sat, said, "Somebody's been leaving you on that side," and fixed the sheet and rebuilt the whole pillow arrangement, and asked me two questions about it, both yes-or-no, both correct.

Fourth week she started talking to me while she worked. Not chatting. Talking.

About Amari and his grades. About the agency, which takes twenty-two dollars an hour off her back for what she describes as "a phone number and an insurance policy." About her mother, who she is also doing this for, at night, unpaid, in Austin, after she finishes doing it here for money.

She talked to me the way you talk to a guy at the counter. She swore in front of me — normal swearing, real swearing, *this fucking wheel bearing, that fucking agency* — and I want to tell you what

that did to me, four months into being a saint on a bed with a rosary on the rail.

I nearly died of gratitude.

Nobody swears in front of me anymore. Nobody tells me anything real. My wife has scrubbed the entire English language down to a soft cloth. And this woman comes in twice a week and treats me like a person you'd bum a cigarette off of, and by June I was living Tuesday to Friday and Friday to Tuesday, and the four days between were a hallway.

Now. The thing that matters.

Before that — a page on the economics, because I ran a business for thirty years and I could not stop myself from working it out, and once I had, it changed how I saw everything that came after.

Forty-one an hour billed. Nineteen an hour to her. That's a 54 percent take by a company whose entire contribution to my care is a phone number, a scheduling app, a background check from 2011, and a liability policy.

She's classified as an independent contractor. No benefits, no overtime, no paid sick leave, no mileage. She drives between four houses a day in a Corolla with a bad wheel bearing and eats that gas herself. If she's sick, she doesn't get paid and the client gets somebody else and sometimes doesn't get her back.

I priced labor for three decades. I squeezed men. I know exactly what I was doing when I did it and I did it anyway, and I want to say here that when I first worked out Toya's numbers, lying in that bed, my honest first reaction was professional admiration for whoever set up that agency.

That's who I am. That doesn't change because I got sick.

Second thing about her, and it's the one that matters for what comes later: she has been doing this thirteen years and she is astonishingly good at it and there is no ladder.

None. There is no promotion out of this. There's an LPN license, which is eleven hundred dollars and eighteen months of night classes, and there is no version of a woman with a fifteen-year-old

and a dying mother in her front room who has eighteen months of nights. So she'll do this at nineteen an hour until her back goes, and then she'll do something worse.

She told me all this in pieces over about three months, in the mornings, while working, in the flat voice of somebody stating conditions rather than complaining about them. She has never once complained. I want that on the record, because a lesser account would make her bitter and she isn't. She's *accurate*, which is a different thing and much more dangerous.

And here's the piece I keep coming back to.

Thirteen years, she said, and something like sixty clients, and she has been in the room for maybe thirty deaths.

Thirty. She has held more hands at the end than the priest at St. Leonard's. Nobody has ever asked her about it. Nobody debriefs an aide. There's no supervision, no processing, no counselor, no anything — she drives to the next house and does the next set of legs, and at the end of the week the agency deposits eight hundred and something dollars and takes a thousand off the top for the phone number.

Nobody in the healthcare system has ever asked Toya Grant a single question about the thirty people she watched die.

Now. The thing that matters.

She's the only person in this house who has ever tested me. She did it in the fifth week, casually, in the middle of doing something else, and I don't think she planned it. She was making the bed around me and she said:

"Marek. Is your wife's name Susan?"

Two blinks. No.

"Okay. Is it Rosalind?"

Up. Yes.

"Are we in Cicero?"

Two blinks. No. We're in Berwyn, twelve feet over the line, and it's the kind of distinction people around here will die on a hill about.

She laughed. "Berwyn. My bad." She snapped the sheet. "Is it hot in here?"

Yes.

"Is it hot in here?" Again. Same question. Thirty seconds later.

Yes.

And she looked at me for a second — really looked, straight down into my face, which almost nobody does, they all look at the middle distance around my chin — and she said, "Okay. There you are."

There you are.

Four months. Two hundred visitors. A wife who has written me sixty letters.

And the first person to actually establish that I was in here was a woman getting nineteen dollars an hour who ran a control question twice to see if I'd answer the same way both times.

SEVEN. THE LONG ONE

In July she started on the big one, and it took me most of a month to work out what she was doing, and when I did I laughed for forty seconds and she held my hand through it and told me it was okay.

It began as more letters. Then it stopped being letters.

She'd sit down in the evening with the pad and she'd say, "I want to do the long one tonight," and the long one had no addressee. It was pages. She'd read back what she had from the night before and then say, "Where were we," and then she'd start talking and writing at the same time, and every so often she'd surface and say, "Right? Is that right?" and I'd give her the yes.

It went like this. I can quote it because she read every page back to me a dozen times, and I've had four hundred days and nothing to do but memorize.

I have not been a good man and I've known it the whole time, which is worse than not knowing.

I let my brother take something that was mine. I was twenty-six years old and I had a business and a name in this neighborhood and

he was nineteen and had nothing yet, and I did the arithmetic and I let him go and stand in that driveway and decide it was him.

I never said one word for twenty-nine years. Not to him. Not to Roz. Not to my mother, who died still thinking I was the one holding that family together.

Alicia Reyna was nine years old. I have thought about her every day of my life and never once said her name out loud.

Line after line, night after night, seven weeks of it, in a laminated-alphabet house on Ridgeland Avenue, in my wife's handwriting, in my name.

She was writing my confession.

And here's the thing that took me the month to understand, and it's the reason I can't hate her and never will:

She wasn't doing it to expose me. She wasn't doing it for the neighbors or the parish or the record. There's no lawyer in this story. Nobody's going to prosecute a dead man for a thing with no evidence from 1996.

She was doing it for Del.

That's all it was. That's the whole engine. She's been sitting on this for twenty years watching a man who lost his twenties come sit in a recliner every Sunday and talk about the Hawks to the brother who put him there, and she has decided — with me now conveniently unable to argue, and dying, which the doctor said in this room in May, in front of me, using the word *trajectory* — that Delmar Sokol is going to get his name back before it's too late.

She's going to hand him those pages.

And Del is going to read them and he's going to know that his brother finally said it, and something in him that's been locked since 1996 is going to open, and Roz Sokol will have done, at fifty-two, in a front room, with a legal pad, the single most decent thing anybody in this family has ever done.

She's not a forger. She's a woman getting a confession out of a man who was never going to give one.

Now hold both of these in your hand at the same time, because this is the book:

She is right about everything except the fact.

Right that I'm a coward. Right that I let my brother carry something. Right that I have never said Alicia Reyna's name out loud in twenty-nine years — that's true, that one's exactly true, and when she wrote it I felt it go through me like a nail.

But I wasn't driving.

Del was driving, and Del knows he was driving, and the pages my wife is writing are going to be handed to a man who will read a confession from his brother to a crime that man committed himself.

Think about what that does to him.

Because Del has spent twenty-nine years being a person who did a terrible thing at nineteen and paid and came out and built a life on top of it — and the one clean thing he's got, the only thing, is that he stood up. He turned himself in. Nobody made him.

And now somebody's going to hand him a piece of paper that says his brother did it and let him take it, and Del — who is not a bright man but is a loyal one and worships me for reasons I have never deserved — Del is going to believe it.

He's going to believe it because it comes from my house in my wife's hand and because I'm going to be asked, in front of him, in that room, with everybody standing there, whether it's true.

And I'll have two options, and you know both of them by now.

Up. Or down.

I've had four hundred and eleven days to think about how to say *actually, hang on, it's more complicated than that, sit down, I need about nine thousand words*.

There is no way. There has never been a way. I've built it a hundred times in here and there is no route through a yes-no board that gets from where I am to that sentence, not with a woman who already knows the answer holding the pen.

So that's where things stood on the second Friday in August, when Toya Grant walked in at eight-thirty with her keys in her hand and the legal pad was lying on the arm of the recliner where Roz left it, open, face up.

And Toya, who has never once in five months touched anything in this house that wasn't her job, stopped and read it.

She read the whole thing standing up. Took her maybe six minutes.

Then she put it back exactly the way it had been lying, exactly, the corner square to the arm of the chair, and she came over to the bed and she looked down at me and I looked up at her.

And she said, very quietly:

"Did you say all that?"

And I blinked twice.

No.

And she didn't move for about four seconds. And then she said:

"Huh."

EIGHT. HUH

She didn't tell her.

I want you to understand what the next four days were like, because I spent every hour of them running the same loop, and the loop went: she's going to tell her Tuesday. Tuesday. She'll say something Tuesday.

You have to understand what had just happened to me. Four hundred days. And in one afternoon there was a person on this earth who *knew*. Not who suspected. Who had asked a real question and got a real answer and understood the answer. The relief was so enormous I couldn't hold it. It came up through me like heat and my chest started with the laughing and I laughed for a minute and a half, alone in the room, at nothing, at the drowned map of Illinois, and it was the closest I've come to crying since this started and I couldn't do that either.

Tuesday she came in and she didn't say anything.

She did the legs. She did the mouth. She did the bag and the turn and the sheet. She talked about Amari's summer job at the car wash on Roosevelt and about her mother's swelling. She was completely, exactly normal.

And at about eleven, when Roz was out at the pharmacy, she sat down on the edge of the bed — nobody sits on the bed — and she said:

"So I've been thinking about you all weekend."

Yes, I said.

"Yeah." She rubbed her thumb along her knuckle. She has a scar across the back of one hand from a client's dog in 2019 and she rubs it when she's working something out. "Let me lay it out and you tell me where I'm wrong. Yes or no. That work?"

Yes.

"She thinks you did something. Long time back. Something bad."

Yes.

"And you didn't."

Yes.

"But somebody did."

Yes.

"Somebody in this family."

Yes.

She nodded slowly. She didn't ask who. I want that noted, because I've thought about it a hundred times since: she never asked who. It wasn't information she needed.

"Okay," she said. "And she's writing it all down like it came out of you. And she's gonna give it to somebody."

Yes.

"And you can't stop her."

Yes.

Long pause. Wheel bearing ticking in my head; there was no car; that's just what my brain does with silence now.

"Can I tell you what I see?" she said. "Because I been in a lot of these houses. A *lot*. And this one's not the worst but it's got a thing I don't see much." She looked up at the ceiling, at my ceiling, at Illinois. "Your wife loves you like a job. She's doing everything right and she's not asking you nothing. And she's not gonna start, because at this point asking means finding out she's been wrong every night for four months, and there ain't a person alive gonna go get that."

Yes. Yes. Yes.

"So it's just gonna keep going," she said. "Till you're gone. And then those pages go out of this house and they're the last word on you." She stood up and smoothed the sheet across my chest with the flat of her hand, professionally, without any tenderness in it at all, which is a thing she does that I have never been able to read. "That's a hell of a thing, Marek."

Then she picked up her bag and said, "Same time Friday," and went.

Friday she started confirming.

Roz was doing the evening pages and Toya was still there, running late, doing the linen in the hall, and Roz surfaced from a paragraph and said, half to herself, "Is that right, hon?" — and I gave her the yes, because that's what I do, and Toya said, from the doorway, with an armful of sheets:

"He's tracking. He's right with you."

And Roz turned around like somebody had handed her something.

Understand: my wife has doubted this. Every night. Down under the exhaustion there's been a small cold voice going *are you sure, Rosalind, are you sure that's him*, and she has been beating that voice down alone for months with nothing but love and a laminated board.

And here's a professional. Thirteen years, an agency badge, in scrubs. The only person in the house with a credential. And she says: he's tracking.

Roz put her hand on her mouth and stood there for a second with her eyes shining and said, "Thank you. God. Thank you, I — some nights I don't know."

"You know," Toya said. "You're doing right by him."

You want to know what a nervous system sounds like when it stops arguing with itself? I heard it. It was silence, and then it was Roz sitting back down and writing four pages that night instead of one.

There's a thing in the literature about this. I know because Bev the pathologist mentioned it in the second visit, back when everybody still thought the pathologist mattered.

The trouble with a facilitator isn't the facilitator. It's the *second* one. One person guessing at somebody's blinks is a person with a doubt. Two people agreeing is a finding. The moment somebody else in the room says *yes, that's what he said*, the whole thing hardens, and after that it isn't a guess anymore, it's a fact with a witness attached, and you will never get it back out.

Toya Grant knew exactly what she was doing. I watched her do it from eighteen inches away.

And here's the part I've turned over more than any other thing in four hundred days: I couldn't tell what she was doing it *for*.

Not that Friday. Not for another three weeks.

All I knew was that the one person on this earth who could hear me had walked into my front room, established that my wife was writing a false confession in my name, thought about it over a weekend, come back, and started helping her write it.

NINE. NINETEEN DOLLARS AN HOUR

The house on Ridgeland is worth about two hundred and eighty and it's clear. My father put the last payment on it in 1998 and I have the deed in the safe in the basement with the business papers and my mother's rings.

Sokol & Sons is worth whatever the trucks and the hot box and the customer list are worth, which is maybe sixty on a good day and which nobody has touched since January of last year because there is nobody to run it. Roz has been paying the insurance on equipment sitting in a yard in Lyons for four hundred and eleven days because it did not occur to her to stop.

There's a hundred and ten in an IRA and about forty in the credit union.

I'm telling you the numbers because you need them, and because the man I am tells you numbers the way other men tell you what a place looked like.

It was the last week of August. Roz had gone to her sister's in Elmhurst for the night, first night away since January, and the agency had approved an overnight, and it was Toya, and it was ten-thirty at night, and the two of us were alone in that house.

She'd been quiet all evening. Then she came in and sat down in Del's recliner and pulled it around to face the bed and she said:

"All right. I'm gonna talk and you're gonna listen, and then you tell me yes or no."

Yes.

"My mother's got about a year. Maybe two. She's seventy-three and her kidneys are going and I got her in my front room in a rented bed same as this one." She wasn't looking at me. She was looking at the window. "I work fifty-two hours a week for an agency that bills forty-one and hands me nineteen and calls me an independent contractor so they don't got to give me nothing. Thirteen years. No pension, no benefits, no license, because the license is eleven hundred dollars and eighteen months of nights and I got a fifteen-year-old and a mother."

Yes. I said yes. I don't know if she wanted a yes there. I gave her one anyway.

"So." She turned and faced me. "Here's what's true, Marek, and you can be mad at me, that's all right, you got a right. You are the first person in thirteen years I could actually *talk* to. That's not a

line. Most of my people are gone — I mean gone, upstairs is empty, I'm turning a body. You're all the way in there and you're smart and you're mean and it has been the best part of my week for five months and I want you to know that before I say the next part, because the next part's ugly and I'd rather you had both."

Yes.

"Your wife is writing you into the ground. And when you go, that paper's the truth, and there's not one thing you can do to stop it, and there's not one thing *I* can do to stop it either — because if I go to her tomorrow and say ma'am, he's telling me no, you know what happens? She fires the aide. That's it. That's the whole outcome. She fires the agency, gets another girl, and you get somebody who leaves the TV on."

She was right. God help me, she was completely right, and I'd already run it forty times.

"So it's happening," she said. "It's happening either way. That's not something I'm doing to you. That's just what's already true."

She leaned forward with her elbows on her knees.

"But it doesn't got to be free."

There it was.

"There's a will," she said. "Your wife told me in April, she was talking about the house. Everything to her, then split to your brother and your brother's girl, nothing weird. What I want is a codicil. That's the word — I looked it up. It's a page you add on. It doesn't take anything from her. She keeps the house. I want the business."

Yes? No. I gave her nothing. First time in five months I gave her nothing, and she waited.

"The trucks and the box and the list," she said. "Sitting in Lyons rotting. Nobody in this family's gonna run a sealcoating crew, Marek, come on. Your brother hangs drywall and your wife can't back a trailer." A breath. "My cousin Reggie's got a paving license and no equipment and eleven years on a crew. He gets the iron, I get half, and my mother dies in a house I'm not gonna lose."

I lay there and looked at the ceiling.

And here's what went through me, and I'd like some credit for the honesty:

Not outrage. Not much, anyway. There was some. Then it burned off in about ninety seconds, because I have bought and sold and squeezed men for thirty years and I recognized what was happening in my front room and it was not villainy. It was a negotiation, and it was the first negotiation I'd been party to since January, and — I am not proud of this — it was *thrilling*. Somebody was treating me like a counterparty. Somebody wanted something from me. Do you understand how long it had been.

She said: "And here's what you get, so you know it's not charity going one direction. You get me in that room. Every day. Not twice a week — I'll come off the agency, I'll come direct, I'll be here. And when your wife holds up a page and says *is that right* —"

She stopped.

"I'll ask you first," she said. "Properly. Row by row, off the board, however long it takes. And whatever you say, that's what I say you said."

And that's the deal. That's the whole deal, in a front room in Berwyn, at ten-thirty at night in August.

She was selling me the only thing I had left, which was a witness.

And she was buying it with the only currency I had left, which was a signature I couldn't sign, on a document I couldn't read, for a business I couldn't run, from a bed I couldn't leave.

"Take your time," she said. "I'm here till six."

I took about forty minutes.

In those forty minutes I did what I have done my whole life, which is work a deal, and I want to put the terms down because it's the last piece of business Marek Sokol ever transacted and I'd like it in the file.

What she was selling: a witness. One human being in that house who would put a real question to me and report the real answer.

Price: sixty thousand dollars of iron and a customer list I built over thirty years and couldn't give my own brother because he hangs drywall.

What it was actually worth: everything I had. Not sixty. All of it. She was underpricing and she didn't know it, or she did and didn't push, and I have never worked out which and it's the only thing about that woman I've never worked out.

What I was giving up: nothing. That's what took me forty minutes to be sure of. The equipment was rotting in a yard and would go on rotting. Roz cannot back a trailer, that's just true. Del would have sold the lot to the first guy who came with a check and it'd have gone for thirty because that's what you get when the seller doesn't know the business. Court's twenty-four and works at a dental office.

The list, though. The list was thirty years. Four condo associations, the Jewel, eleven churches, the school district out in Riverside. That's not equipment. That's a thing a man builds by showing up in July with a hot box for three decades and never once doing shoddy work.

And she was going to hand it to a cousin with a paving license and eleven years on a crew.

Which — and here's what closed it, here's the actual reason, and it's got nothing to do with witnesses or wives or confessions —

Somebody was going to run it.

The trucks were going to go out again in the spring. The box was going to get hot. Somebody was going to lay emulsion on the Jewel lot on Cermak in July with my list in their hand, and the name'd be different and I don't care about the name, I never cared about the name, that was my father's thing.

Thirty years of work was going to survive me by more than nine weeks.

That's what she bought it with. Not the witness. She thought it was the witness. It was that.

Then I looked up.

Yes.

TEN. THE INSTRUMENT

Getting a paralyzed man to execute a legal document turns out to be a solved problem, which surprised me. There's a whole procedure. There's a body of law about it going back a hundred and fifty years, mostly built out of deathbed cases and men with tremors, and the standard is not *can he write* — the standard is capacity and intent and a reliable method of expression, witnessed.

Roz found the attorney. That's the part that gets me even now. Roz found him — a guy named Paul Wierzbicki off Ogden who does estates and closings and has a picture of a boat in his lobby — because in September Roz decided that we ought to get the paperwork clean while I was, and this is her word, sharp.

Toya never asked for a lawyer. Never mentioned one. She just waited, for six weeks, in a house where a decent woman was going to arrive at the necessary conclusion by herself.

That's when I started to understand what I was dealing with.

Wierzbicki came on a Thursday in late September. Sat where Del sits. He'd done one of these before, in 2011, and he ran it properly, and I'll give him this: he was the only professional who came into that room in eighteen months and treated the yes-no as a real language instead of a sad little novelty.

He asked me control questions first. Was my name Marek. Was it Tuesday. Did I have three children. Did I have one. Was the house on Austin Boulevard. Was it on Ridgeland. Twelve of them, mixed, with the wrong answers salted in, and he watched, and he wrote, and at the end he said to Roz and to Toya, "He's got capacity. That's not a close call."

Then he read the will and the codicil aloud, clause by clause, and after each one he said: "Is that your intention?"

And I gave him yes.

The equipment, the customer list, the LLC and its goodwill to Toya M. Grant.

Is that your intention?

Yes.

Roz cried. Not at the codicil — she cried at the whole thing, at the capacity finding, at a lawyer in a suit saying out loud in her front room that her husband was in there. She held my hand through the second half and got it on the sleeve of her cardigan.

And when Wierzbicki got to Toya's clause, my wife said the following, and I want it preserved:

"That's right. He wanted that. He's been trying to say something about her for weeks."

He had not been trying to say anything about her for weeks. Nobody had spelled one letter about Toya Grant in that house, ever.

Roz had watched a woman work on my legs for five months. Roz had had four hundred nights of doubt quieted by a professional in scrubs saying *he's tracking*. And when the codicil arrived, my wife's exhausted, generous, guessing nervous system reached out and produced a motive for it, and the motive was mine, and it was gratitude, and it was invented whole out of nothing, and she said it in front of a lawyer.

The instrument had gotten so good it was running without an operator.

I laughed. Thirty-five seconds. Wierzbicki waited it out with the patience of a man who does elder law. Roz said, "He does that. It's the brainstem. It's not — he's not laughing at anything."

Toya said nothing at all.

Two witnesses, neither a beneficiary — Bernie Kaczmarek from next door, of all people, and Wierzbicki's paralegal — and the notary, and my mark made by an attorney-in-fact at my direction, and there is a paragraph in there describing the blink protocol and the control questions in language so careful and so complete that I doubt anyone will ever break it.

Bernie held my hand on the way out and said, "You're a good man, Marek."

October, November.

And here's where I have to say the thing that will make the reader hate me, so let's get it over with:

They were the best months of my life.

Toya came off the agency and started direct on the first of October and after that she was in that house five days a week and sometimes six, and Roz — who had not slept a full night since January, who was seventy pounds of bone and will held together by a cardigan — Roz got her life back a little. She started going to Mass again. She got her hair done in November for the first time in a year. She would come in and find the two of us and say, "Am I interrupting?" and laugh, actually laugh, and go do something for herself for an hour.

And Toya kept the deal. She kept it exactly. Every single page, every night, she'd stop Roz and say, "Hold on. Let him do it," and get the board out and take it letter by letter, twenty minutes, forty minutes, whatever it took, and then she'd tell Roz what I said.

And what she told Roz was almost always what I said.

That's the part I couldn't have predicted. She was straight with me. Ninety percent of it she reported dead straight, including things that made Roz put her hand on her mouth, including a night in November when I spelled out, over an hour and a half, the whole business with Ruben Ortega and the parking lot in 2009, and Toya read it out flat, and Roz wrote it down and sat there and said, "Why are you telling me this one?"

Because it was mine. Because it was the first sentence of my own I'd got into the world since January. Because I'd rather be a man who fired a kid with a baby than a man somebody made up.

But the confession — the long one, the 1996 one, the pages for Del — Toya never touched. Not once. Never contradicted it, never confirmed it, never let it near the board.

She'd just say, "That one's between you two," and go do the linen.

She'd bought the witness. She didn't have to spend him.

And every night after Roz went up, Toya would sit in Del's recliner in the dark for a while before she left, and we'd talk — her out loud, me one blink and two — about Amari, about her mother, about the wheel bearing, about whether Reggie was going to bid the Jewel lot in the spring or wait a year, which he should, and I told her so, letter by letter, over two evenings, forty minutes a night, the best business advice I ever gave anybody in my life.

There was one night in December when it nearly came apart, and I've thought about it more than almost anything else, because of what it showed me about my wife.

Roz came down at eleven for a glass of water and found us — Toya in the recliner with the board on her knees, me mid-sentence, the two of us forty minutes into something that had nothing to do with care.

And Roz stood in the doorway in her robe and watched for a second, and something crossed her face.

It wasn't suspicion. I want to be precise, because suspicion would have been the beginning of the truth and it would have saved everybody. It was something else and it took me a week to name it and when I named it I laughed for a minute and a half alone at four in the morning.

It was *hurt*.

She was jealous. My wife stood in her own doorway at eleven o'clock at night and felt left out of a conversation, and the reason she felt left out is that she has been in this room for a year and never once had one.

And here's what she did with it, because she is who she is.

She said, "You two are up late." And Toya said, "He's got opinions about asphalt." And Roz laughed and got her water and, on the way back through, stopped at the foot of the bed and said to me, warmly, with her whole heart:

"You never talked to me about the business either. Thirty years."

And went up to bed.

That's it. That's the closest anybody came. Twelve inches from it, at eleven at night, in a robe, and she turned it into a joke about herself and climbed the stairs, because the alternative was a question, and this house has never once in its history asked one.

I want to record something else about those months, since I have been hard on my wife and it would be dishonest to leave the ledger where it is.

In November she washed my hair.

You can't do it properly in a bed — there's a basin thing, an inflatable, and it's a fifteen-minute job for two people — and she did it alone, badly, on a Sunday, because she'd got it in her head that I'd feel better. Water on the floor. Towel jammed under my neck. She talked the whole time about nothing. And at the end she combed it, and she did the part on the wrong side, the way she has done it wrong for thirty-one years, and I never once told her.

I have had four hundred and eleven days and then five hundred and then more to think about which of the two women in this story was good to me.

The answer is both. The answer is that one of them robbed me and asked me first, and the other one loved me and never asked at all, and if you want a clean moral out of that you're reading the wrong man's account.

ELEVEN. THE MACHINE

The machine came in January, four days after the anniversary, and it came because of Toya, and Roz never knew that either.

Bev the pathologist had mentioned eye-tracking back in the second month and it went nowhere — the county program had a waitlist and Roz had four hundred other things and the word *trajectory* had been used, and there is a quiet mathematics in a house like mine where nobody says out loud *is it worth it for the time he's got*.

Toya put my name in. Twice. Then called them in December and stayed on hold for fifty minutes in my front room with the phone on speaker so I could hear the hold music, which was a saxophone

version of a song I hated in 1988, and she said, "You're gonna have to sit through this with me, we're in it together now."

It's a monitor on an arm with a camera bar under the screen. You look at a letter and the cursor goes there. You hold a half second and it takes it.

The tech calibrated it in about twenty minutes, and the first thing I typed, on the second of January, with my wife standing on one side of the bed and Toya on the other, was:

THANK YOU

Then, after a minute:

TURN THE TV OFF PERMANENTLY

And they laughed, both of them, and Roz put her face in her hands and laughed until she was crying, and Toya said, "Told you. He's mean," and I want to say that was a good afternoon. That was the best afternoon anybody had in that house in two years.

Then everybody went home and I lay in the dark with a machine beside me and did the arithmetic for the last time.

Because I could say anything now.

Fourteen words a minute at first, then twenty. Anything. The whole nine thousand words. I could say: Del was driving. I could say: my wife wrote every one of those pages. I could say: Toya Grant has a codicil.

And I want to walk the reader through it exactly the way I did it that night, because I've been accused my whole life of being a cold man and this is the coldest thinking I ever did and I did it with the clearest head I've had since January of the year before.

Option one. I tell the truth about 1996.

What happens: Roz finds out that everything she has built since 2004 is wrong. Not slightly wrong. Wrong at the foundation. Twenty years of a marriage she survived by understanding her husband as a coward who fed his brother to the wolves — and the actual explanation is that her husband was just a mean man for no reason at all, which is worse, because a reason is a kind of comfort.

She burns seven weeks of pages. And then she has to sit with the fact that she wrote them. That she conducted a séance with her own dying husband and called it hearing him. That's not a thing a person recovers from at fifty-two, alone, in a house on Ridgeland with a dead man in it.

And Del. Del reads nothing, and gets nothing, and stays what he's been since he was nineteen, which is a man who killed a nine-year-old girl and knows it and gets no relief, ever, from anybody, until he dies.

Nobody is saved. That's option one. The truth costs two people everything and buys nobody a single thing.

Option two. I say nothing and let the pages stand.

Roz keeps her picture. Del gets handed the pages, believes them, and gets — this is the part I turned over for six hours — Del gets to be *forgiven*. Not by a court. By his brother, in writing, at the end, saying *it was mine and I let you carry it*. He'll believe it because it's in my house in my wife's hand and because he has wanted it to be true for twenty-nine years without ever once permitting himself to want it.

Del at forty-seven gets to put it down.

And it costs him nothing, because he'll never know. He'll go on being a man who thinks he did it and *also* a man whose brother says he didn't, and human beings can hold that combination indefinitely — I've watched this whole neighborhood do it for thirty years with worse material.

And the price of option two is one thing only: I go into the ground as the man who ran a nine-year-old girl down and let his brother do eleven years for it.

Now. Here's where I want to be honest, because I've read enough about myself in the last two years to know that I don't get to be the hero of this and I'm not going to try.

Because there's a version of me that does this for love. There's a version where Marek Sokol, at the end, in a bed, finally does one decent thing for his brother and his wife and takes the weight, and

if you want to read it that way you go ahead, and Bernie Kaczmarek will read it that way and so will the parish and so will everybody at the wake with a plate in their hand.

And there's another version.

In the other version, I have spent thirty-one years being hated by a woman who never once asked me a question, and I am not going to hand her, at the end, the relief of having been wrong. She built it. Let her keep it. Let her carry a dead child-killer's cardigan smell around that house for twenty more years and never know that the whole load was one she loaded herself.

That's revenge. That's the coldest thing a man has ever done to a woman who nursed him for two years and I could do it with eight words on a screen and everybody would cry at the funeral.

I've been in here for four hundred and eleven days, then five hundred, then more, with nothing but time.

And I cannot tell which one I'm doing.

I've looked. That's the thing I want written down, at the end, on the record, in my own words for the first time in two years: I have had more time to examine my own motives than any man alive, no distractions, no work, no drink, nothing to do but this, and I got all the way to the bottom of it and there was nothing at the bottom, there was just a man on Ridgeland Avenue who wanted a particular outcome and could not tell you why.

Maybe there's no difference. Maybe love and getting even are the same muscle and it's only the direction that changes, and you don't get to see the direction from the inside, ever, and everybody who's ever told you why they did something was guessing same as Roz with the board.

Three weeks went by between the machine arriving and the reading, and I typed about four thousand words in them, and I want to account for what I did with the first real voice I'd had in two years, because it says more about me than the ending does.

I did not use it on 1996. Not once. Not a letter.

I used it on: a list of who owed Sokol & Sons money going back to 2019, with amounts, which took two days and which Roz cried over because she had been paying insurance on equipment for two years and there was eleven thousand dollars sitting in receivables she never knew about.

I used it on: where the deed was, where the spare furnace filters were, which of the two shutoffs under the sink was the hot, the name of the guy at the bank, the combination to the safe, which she had never had.

I used it on: a long thing to Court about the boyfriend, about eight hundred words, which I made her promise not to read to anybody, and which was, I think, the only genuinely kind act of my adult life and took me four hours.

I used it on one joke a day for Toya, which was our arrangement, and which she rated out of ten, and which I never once got above a six on because she is a hard grader.

And I came within about ninety seconds, one night in the middle of January, of telling my wife.

She was sitting where she sits. I had the screen. She was talking about the pages, about how she was nearly finished, about whether to type them up so Del could read them easy, and she said — offhand, not looking at me, doing something with the blanket —

“I keep thinking about your mother. That she went not knowing.”

And I looked at the screen and I had the cursor on the D.

Two more letters and the whole thing comes down. Eleven characters, start to finish. Thirty seconds at the rate I was doing by then.

And I sat there with the cursor on the D for a minute and a half while my wife hummed and folded a blanket at the end of my bed, and then she said, “You want it up or down, hon?” — the bed, she meant the bed — and I looked away from the D to say up, because I was uncomfortable, because I had been on that hip for four hours, because there is always, always, always something closer to the front of the line.

And the moment went. Like they do.

I have thought about whether that was cowardice or whether it was a decision I had already made and was pretending to reconsider. I have had a lot of time. I do not know. I genuinely do not know, and the machine cannot tell me, and neither can anybody else.

So. The last week of January. Everybody in the room.

Roz standing beside the bed with her hand on my arm, reading it out loud, all seven weeks of it, in her steady billing-office voice, forty minutes, front to back.

And at the end she folded her hands on the pages and looked at me and asked me the only question she ever asked me in two years.

"Marek. Is that true?"

And the machine was right there. On its arm. Calibrated. Twenty words a minute. Everything I've just told you, available, in about eleven minutes.

And I looked up.

Yes.

CODA. SHE ASKED

Del didn't say anything for a long time. He sat in the recliner with the pages in his lap and his big spotty drywaller's hands flat on top of them like they'd blow away, and Roz went and stood at the window, and the furnace came on, and out on Ridgeland somebody was scraping a windshield.

Then he got up and came over and put his forehead down on my chest. Right on my sternum, all his weight, forty-seven years old.

And he said, into my shirt: "You dumb son of a bitch. All this time."

And I laughed.

Of course I did. Thirty seconds of it, that wet honking noise, with my brother's head on my chest, and he laughed too, the way he always does, and said, "Yeah, yeah," and wiped his face on my shoulder and stood up and blew out a breath and said he had to get the van off the street before the plow came.

He came back Sunday. He comes every Sunday. He watches whatever's on and talks about nothing and something has come out of his shoulders that had been in there since he was nineteen, and I have watched it leave him week by week like water going out of a basement, and I'm not going to apologize to anybody for that.

Roz put the pages in the safe in the basement with the deed and my mother's rings.

There's about nine or ten weeks left, at a guess. The lungs are the thing now; they always are. I've had two of what the discharge summary calls *events* and there'll be a third.

Which brings me to the last thing.

Two weeks ago, in the middle of February, Toya was here on a Thursday night doing the linen. Roz was upstairs asleep. And I'd had the machine six weeks by then and I'd said maybe four thousand words on it, mostly practical, some jokes, one long thing to Del's daughter Court about her boyfriend that I hope she reads in about ten years.

And Toya came in and sat down in the recliner in the dark and said, "You're quiet."

And I typed:

I WANT TO ADD SOMETHING TO THE PAPER

She sat forward. "The codicil?"

YES

"Okay."

THE HOUSE TOO. AFTER ROZ.

She looked at me for a while.

"Marek," she said. "Your wife's fifty-three years old. She could be in that house another thirty years. That's nothing to me. I'll be dead."

I know. I typed that. I know.

"Then what's it for?"

And that's the question. That's the one I'd been waiting eighteen months for somebody to ask me, and here it came at eleven o'clock at night from a woman in scrubs with a bad wheel bearing, and I want to put down exactly what I said, because these are the last words in this account and I typed them at fourteen words a minute with my eyes and they took me two and a half minutes and I have never in fifty-six years said anything so slowly or meant it so completely:

SO THERE'S A DOCUMENT SOMEWHERE THAT SAYS WHAT I ACTUALLY WANTED. ONE. ANYWHERE. IN MY OWN WORDS.

She read it twice.

Then she said: "Why me? You know what I did. You were laying right there."

And I said:

YOU ASKED.

That's it. That's the whole thing. That's the answer to every question in this book and it took me two years and a stroke and a hundred and thirty thousand dollars of equipment in a yard in Lyons to get it into the world.

She robbed me and she asked me first, and she read my blinks properly for eighteen months, and she never once decided in advance what I meant, and out of every human being who has stood at the end of that bed with a casserole and a card and a good heart, she is the only one who ever found out that there was somebody in here.

My wife is a good woman. She loved me for thirty-one years. She never once in her life asked me a question she didn't already have the answer to, and she is going to bury a man she made up, and she'll do it beautifully, and everybody at St. Leonard's will say what a saint she was to that bastard right to the end.

So the pages will stand. Del gets to put it down. Roz gets to keep her picture. Toya gets the trucks and the list and, eventually, a house on Ridgeland Avenue in a suburb she doesn't live in, for a mother who won't live to see it.

There'll be a wake at Zarzycki's on Cermak and it will be enormous, because that's what a block like this does, and because the story going around is a hell of a story: the hard man who couldn't say a soft word his whole life, who got locked in his own body and finally found a way to say all of it. They love that. It's got shape. It's got a moral. There's not one word of it true and it's the best thing this neighborhood has had to talk about since 1996.

Bernie Kaczmarek will bring the apricot ones.

Father Nowak will say something at St. Leonard's about how the Lord takes away a man's voice to teach him what he should have said with it, and everybody will nod, and I'd give a hundred dollars to be able to laugh at that one out loud, on purpose, in the correct place, instead of at random.

Marisol Reyna will not come. Nobody will remark on it.

And Roz will stand at the door of that funeral home for four hours and shake three hundred hands, and every single one of them will say some version of the same sentence, which is *he was lucky to have you*, and she'll say *he was a good man at the end*, and both of those are true and neither of them is about anybody who ever actually existed.

Here's my last accounting, and then I'm done.

Things I said out loud, unassisted, in two years: none.

Things I got through the board at twenty-two words an hour that were actually mine and arrived unchanged: I make it about six hundred words. Six hundred, in two years, and most of it PAIN and TURN and COLD.

Things said in my name, in my house, in my wife's handwriting, over seven weeks, now sitting in a safe in my basement next to the deed and my mother's rings: about nine thousand.

Fifteen to one against.

That's the number. That's the whole book. A man's account of himself at the end is fifteen parts what other people needed him to be and one part what he actually got out — and I'd bet the trucks

that the ratio isn't much different for people who can talk. You've just never had it counted.

And me?

I get the map. I get the drowned state of Illinois, and the Sangamon crack, and the light crossing it left to right for ninety minutes at four in the afternoon.

Somebody will paint that ceiling. That's the thing I can't get past, lying here in the last of it, and it's not even a sad thought, it's just the true one. Somebody will roll right over Rockford in about a year and a half and never know there was a country up there, and they'll be right to. It was never up there. It was in here the whole time, like everything else.

One blink for yes.

Ask me something.

Marek Sokol is fifty-four, runs a sealcoating crew out of a yard in Lyons, and has a mouth on him that has cost him a brother, a neighbour, and most of a marriage. On a Tuesday morning in January a clot takes out the bridge in his brainstem, and the last words he ever says out loud are what the shit.

Everything above the damage survives. He thinks, he remembers, he hears the ice maker two rooms away, and he feels every wrinkle in the sheet. What he has left is one vertical eye movement. One blink for yes, two for no. Twenty-two words an hour on a laminated alphabet board his wife made at the FedEx on Harlem.

Roz Sokol is a good woman doing an impossible job with her whole chest, and she starts to guess. Not from malice — from love, and exhaustion, and a nervous system that fills in a word before the question finishes. She begins writing what she is certain he means. Apologies he never made. The soft things he was never able to say without a hook in them. Every word of it true, and none of it his.

Then she starts on the long one: a confession to the hit-and-run that sent his brother to prison for eleven years in 1996. She is going to hand it to Del, and give a man back his name before it's too late, and it is the most decent thing anyone in that family has ever done. She is right about everything except the fact. And a home health aide named Toya Grant — Tuesdays and Fridays, nineteen dollars an hour, the only person in eighteen months who ever ran a control question to check whether he was in there — reads the pages one Friday morning, puts them back exactly as she found them, asks Marek a single question, and gets an answer nobody else in that house has ever bothered to get. Then she thinks about it over a weekend.

A brutal, funny, foul-mouthed noir of the buried mind: what locked-in syndrome actually feels like from inside, and what a man is worth when the only thing he can still do is agree.

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