

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 39

NORTHMORE
COLLEGE
PROSPECTUS

BLIND SPOT BLUE

C H E W Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

BLIND SPOT BLUE

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 39

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

Copyright © 2026 Chew Z

All rights reserved.

ISBN 979-8-952790-38-4

Roya Publications

Publication No. 39

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach

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



THE FILES.

His three, on the shelf; hers, on the desk.
Both sides were keeping a record.
Only one of them wrote it for the other.

SYNOPSIS

Mira is nineteen, works at a garden centre, and has been lying on a made bed in her coat since eleven in the morning. There is nothing wrong with her life. Her mother is warm, her childhood was ordinary, there is no trauma in the file — which is the actual clinical picture in a great many of these illnesses and which nobody writes, because a story needs a cause, and everyone who hears about her goes looking for one, and the looking is itself a way of not believing her.

She has one thing nobody else has. Her readings of people are devastating and almost never wrong — because the filter that flatters everyone else about their competence, their marriages and their prospects is switched off in her, and what is left standing in the space where it used to be is calibration. The research calls it depressive realism and has argued about it for forty years. Mira just knows who in a room has already made their decision.

Anton Reisz, forty-four, runs a consultancy that sells exactly that. He had the same illness from nineteen to thirty-one. He is the first person in her life to describe her days back to her without softening them, and he does not flinch when she tells him the truth, and he offers her a warning rather than a rescue: that getting better is a trade, and the price is the only thing about her that nobody else has got.

She cannot read him. Her instrument was built to detect coldness, not warmth — the illness pre-labels every warm signal as false — so the one man whose interest in her is both real and predatory stands precisely in the blind spot her condition creates.

There are folders in a small room at the back of that office. Two of them have other women's names on them. One of them has hers.

But Mira has been keeping a file too.

A novella of the buried mind, told in three collapsing layers: what the illness is actually like from inside, what it is worth to somebody, and who is really telling you about it.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The clinical material here is real and I have tried to be exact with it, because depression is the condition most routinely described by people who have never been in it and most routinely disbelieved when described by people who have.

Three findings run under this book.

The first is anhedonia, which is mistranslated everywhere as a loss of pleasure. From inside it is not that. Liking survives; it is *wanting* that fails — the small forward lean that sends a hand toward an object. This is why the phrase that recurs, almost word for word, across every testimony collection ever assembled, is: I know I would enjoy it, I want to want it, and I cannot make myself begin. It is also why the illness is so consistently mistaken for laziness, including by the person who has it, who will generally accept that verdict with relief, because a moral failing is at least something a person can be.

The second is depressive realism: the repeated finding that the depressed judge their own control, competence and standing more accurately than healthy controls, because ordinary cognition runs a permanent flattering bias that theirs has lost. How far it generalises is genuinely disputed. That it is there is not. It is the most frightening result in the field, and this book is largely an argument with what people do with it.

The third is the one I would ask a reader to carry out of here if they carry nothing else. Improvement is invisible from the inside. Recovery does not arrive as joy; it arrives as *I noticed I had made the bed*, in increments too small for the person experiencing them to trust, in a mind that has spent years learning to discount every good signal as noise. Which is why every guideline in the world says the same thing: tell someone, and let them watch for you. Mira does this. It is the most competent act in the novella and I have deliberately given it to her rather than to any of the adults.

Anton's thesis — that clarity is purchased with your life, and that

treatment sells you the filter back — is stated in this book more persuasively than I can refute in a paragraph, and it is wrong, and the book is built so that the wrongness has to be demonstrated rather than asserted. Illness buys nothing. It is not tuition. There is no exchange rate, and the belief that there must be one is not wisdom, it is a receipt a person writes for themselves after paying for nothing.

Vonnegut stands behind this shelf as always: the flat voice, the reader supplying what the narrator cannot.

And if any of chapter one was recognisable to you from the inside rather than the outside — please tell one person who can watch for the bed and the phone and the songs. You will not be able to see it yourself. That is not a weakness in you. It is the most reliably documented feature of the entire condition.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

ONE. THE ROOM THAT ISN'T A PLACE	10
TWO. THE UNFLATTERED	14
THREE. THE MAN WHO DESCRIBED HER DAYS	19
FOUR. THE WORK	24
FIVE. THE CLARITY TRADE	28
SIX. PATIENCE	32
SEVEN. WINTER OF THE THIRD YEAR	36
EIGHT. BLUE	40
NINE. THE SECOND YEAR	43
TEN. HOUR FIVE	49
ELEVEN. INTEGRATION	53
CODA. THE QUESTION	57

ONE. THE ROOM THAT ISN'T A PLACE

She is nineteen and she has been lying on the made bed in her coat since eleven in the morning.

This is the part nobody films. In the films there is weeping, or a bathroom floor, or a girl in the rain. There is none of that here. There is a girl in a coat on a made bed with her shoes on, on her side, facing the wall, and the light going across the ceiling, and it is now four-forty in the afternoon.

The phone is on the carpet six inches from her hand at four percent. It has been at four percent for two hours because she has not touched it. There are eleven messages on it. She knows roughly who they are from and roughly what they say. Reading them is not difficult. Reading them is not even unpleasant.

It is that the distance between her hand and the phone is six inches and she cannot cross six inches.

That's the thing. That's the whole thing and it takes people years to believe it, if they ever do. It isn't sadness. Sadness would be a *relief*, sadness is a thing with a shape, you can be sad about something and the sadness is at least a rope back to the world. This is not sadness. The correct word is closer to *cost*. Everything has acquired a cost. Standing up costs. Answering costs. The specific weight of the act of unlocking a phone and reading four sentences from a girl called Priya who has done nothing wrong in her life — that costs more than she has in the account, and she has been overdrawn since roughly February.

There's a word the papers use. Anhedonia. It gets translated as *loss of pleasure* and that translation is a lie, or at least it's the outside view, written by people watching. From in here it is not the loss of pleasure. Pleasure is not the point. It is the loss of the thing *underneath* pleasure — the little forward lean, the reason a hand goes out toward an object. The engineers have a better word than the doctors do: they'd call it a loss of drive, and the depressed will tell you the same in plainer language, over and over, in every testimony collection ever assembled: *I know I would enjoy it. I want to want it. I cannot make myself begin.*

The dopamine people have been circling this for thirty years and they've got it roughly right: the wanting system and the liking system are separate machinery, and in depression it is overwhelmingly the wanting that goes. You can still like things. Somebody puts food in front of you and it tastes fine. You just can't get up and go and get it, and you can't explain that, and it sounds like laziness, and after a while you agree that it's laziness, because that at least is a moral failure and a moral failure is something a person can be, whereas the alternative is that the mechanism is broken and there is nobody home to fix it.

Go back six hours and you get the morning, which is the part with the actual violence in it.

She woke at six-fifty, which is the other thing nobody knows: this illness wakes you early and holds you there. Not insomnia at the front end — she'd gone under at eleven fine. It's the back end. Three or four in the morning, or six-fifty, awake, absolutely awake, with the whole day standing at the end of the bed already itemised.

And the first two hours of the day are the worst two hours of the day, every day, without exception, and it lifts slightly by the afternoon and lifts again by the evening, which is why she can be funny at dinner. It's called diurnal variation and it's one of the most consistent features of the severe form and it does something obscene to a life: it means the person is at their worst at exactly the hour when everything is decided. Whether you get up. Whether you go. Whether you answer. The whole day is voted on at seven in the morning by the version of you least able to vote.

So at six-fifty she lay there and the itemisation ran. The shift at eleven. The bus. Priya's messages. The form for the thing her mother wants her to apply for. Each item arriving with its cost attached, and the costs summing, and the sum being — she checked it, she checks it every morning, she is very careful and she has never once made an error — larger than the amount available.

She got up at nine-forty because she needed the bathroom, which is the actual reason people get up, and nobody puts that in a book.

She got dressed properly. Full clothes, and the coat, because she was going to work at eleven and getting dressed early is a strategy — you spend the willingness once instead of twice.

Then she sat down on the made bed to wait for the bus time.

And that is how a person ends up lying on a made bed in a coat with their shoes on at four in the afternoon, and it is not drama and it is not a decision: she sat down to wait for a bus at ten-twenty, and at ten-forty she was still there, and at eleven she was still there, and at eleven-fifteen she sent the message to the garden centre saying she was ill, which was the single hardest physical act she performed that day, and then she lay down because there was no longer anything to sit up for.

She was not lying to the garden centre. That's the thing. She wrote *not well* and every part of her body agreed with the sentence, and every part of her mind called it a lie, and both of those went on being true all afternoon.

At five o'clock her mother comes home and says her name up the stairs. And here's what Mira does, and this is the part that would break anyone watching if they could see it, and nobody ever sees it.

She gets up. She takes off the coat. She goes into the bathroom and runs the tap and puts her hands under it because if she has been up for a while there will be a face on her, and she looks at herself for a second in the mirror the way you'd check a stranger's ID, and then she goes downstairs and says: "Hey. How was it?"

And she does it well. She has been doing it well for two and a half years.

That's the other thing the films get wrong. The illness does not present. Not this kind, not in a girl like her, not with a face like hers. She is not thin and she is not scarred and she is not sitting in the dark. She's a nineteen-year-old with a part-time job at a garden centre and a good coat and hair she washes and a mother who loves her without complication, and if you passed her in the aisle you would think: pretty girl, bit quiet.

And this is the actual horror of the condition and nobody writes it because it has no images in it: *she is not being neglected*. Her

family is good. Her mother is warm and present and asks how she is and means it. There is no drunk father, no incident, no basement, nothing in the file, no reason at all — which is the case in a very large fraction of these illnesses and which almost never gets told, because a story requires a cause, and everybody who hears about a nineteen-year-old with this in her goes looking for the reason, and *the looking is itself a way of not believing her*.

You cannot say *there's nothing wrong* and be believed. There is a whole architecture of disbelief built out of kindness. Her mother asks what's the matter and Mira says nothing's the matter and her mother says *you can tell me anything* and Mira says *I know, there isn't anything*, and her mother goes to bed unhappy because she has decided her daughter doesn't trust her, and the daughter lies awake having failed to convince the person who loves her most that she is not concealing a secret.

Dinner is fine. Dinner is genuinely fine. She talks. She's funny at dinner — this is the thing people can't hold in their heads, that she's *funny*, that she does a whole bit about a man who came into the garden centre and wanted a tree that wouldn't get any bigger — and her mother laughs and her brother laughs and none of it costs her anything at the time. That's the part that undoes her later.

Because at nine-forty she goes upstairs and the door closes and it comes back on like a machine.

Not like weather. Weather implies a front, a change, a thing arriving. It's more like a room that was always there and that she has been standing outside of for two hours doing an impression of a person, and now the door is shut and she is back in it and everything in it is exactly where she left it.

Here is the room. She has never described it to anyone.

It has no furniture, no floor plan, no dark corners. It is not sinister and there is nothing in it. It is simply the place where every fact about her is stored in its true condition — where the funny bit about the tree is filed correctly as forty seconds of successful ventriloquism, and her mother's love is filed correctly as something

being spent on the wrong person, and the whole span of the next sixty years is laid out end to end with total accuracy: the jobs, the flats, the people, the effort, all of it, every hour of it costing what an hour costs her, all the way out.

She does not want to die. That needs saying properly because it gets said badly everywhere. There is no wish. There is no plan and no romance and no *escape* — escape implies somewhere better and she has no belief in anywhere better.

There is only, at eleven-forty at night, arriving on its own like a bill through a door, the flat arithmetical observation that the account is overdrawn, and that it is going to be overdrawn tomorrow, and that this can be extrapolated.

And then the thought that follows it, which is the one she has never repeated to a living soul, which is not *I want to stop* but the far worse and quieter one:

this is simply what is true, and everyone else has something in them that stops them from seeing it, and I do not.

Hold that sentence. Everything in this book comes out of it. That sentence is the door, and there is a man forty-four years old in an office nine miles from this bedroom who has spent twenty-five years standing on the other side of it, and in about four months he is going to find her.

TWO. THE UNFLATTERED

The first person she ever frightened was a supply teacher when she was fifteen.

The woman was covering chemistry for three weeks and was, by universal agreement, lovely. And at the end of the second week Mira stayed behind, not planning anything, and said: "You're not coming back after Easter, are you."

The teacher said of course she was.

"No," Mira said. "You've stopped learning our names. You did know them. You've stopped."

She wasn't being cruel. She was fifteen and she'd noticed a thing and said it out loud, which is the entire mechanism and which she has since learned to suppress in about ninety percent of cases. The teacher went the colour of paper. She had accepted a job in Newcastle nine days earlier and had told her husband and no one else.

That's the talent. It looks like a magic trick and it isn't one, and the science of it is not only real but slightly notorious, and it goes like this.

Everybody healthy runs a filter. It has been measured a hundred ways since the seventies and the finding never moves: the ordinary mind systematically overestimates how much control it has, how well it is liked, how competent it is, and how good the future is going to be. Ask a room of people to rate themselves against the room and eighty percent will place themselves in the top half. Give a person a button that does nothing and a light that flashes at random and they will come away certain the button worked. It's called the illusion of control, and it isn't a defect. It's load-bearing. It is what makes a person able to get out of a chair and try something.

Now: run the same tests on the depressed.

They get it right.

They rate their control accurately. They judge their performance accurately. They are markedly less prone to the flattering error, and in some of the classic studies they are the *only* group whose self-assessment matches the assessment of independent observers. The literature has a name for it and the name is depressive realism, and it has been argued over for forty years, and the argument is mostly about how far it generalises and not about whether it's there.

That's what Mira has. Not a gift, not a compensation, no second organ waking up. The same lesion, seen from the other side. The apparatus that makes everyone else's day survivable is switched off in her, and what's left, standing in the space where it used to be, is calibration.

So she can tell you which of your friends is performing. She can tell you when a couple is finished eleven months before they say a word about it, because she is not receiving the story they are broadcasting, she is receiving the eleven small deferrals per hour that the story is made of. She can tell you who in a room is about to resign, who is frightened of the person next to them, who has already made their decision and is running a consultation for form's sake.

She is right, by the count she has never once been tempted to keep, somewhere north of nine times in ten.

And it is worth *nothing* to her.

Before I go on, the cost of it, because a reader will be enjoying this by now and the enjoyment is the problem.

There is no version of this that is fun to have. The films give a girl like her a smirk and a pool cue and a soundtrack. What it is actually like is this: you walk into a room and receive, involuntarily, at full volume, the accurate emotional condition of everybody in it, including the ones who are unhappy, including the ones who are frightened, including the ones who are quietly unkind about you and who will be pleasant to your face in about four seconds. There is no volume control. You cannot decline to notice.

At thirteen she worked out that her form tutor was afraid of her father, which was a thing about the form tutor and nothing to do with her, and she carried it around for a year not knowing what to do with it.

At fifteen she watched two friends' friendship end over the course of a single lunch hour, six weeks before either of them knew, and had to keep going to lunch.

At sixteen she stopped saying anything at all for about four months, and everyone put it down to being sixteen.

And the loneliness of it, which is not the loneliness of being disliked — she isn't disliked, that's the wrong picture, people find her restful — but the specific loneliness of being the only person in every room who is not receiving the agreed version of what is happening in it. Everyone else is in a film together. She has the

script and the shooting schedule and the notes from the director, and she is expected to sit through the film and react in the right places, and she does, and she is good at it, and nobody has ever once suspected.

Now turn it around.

That's the joke at the centre of her, and she got it early. There is no version of this that turns into a life. Being right about people does not make them like you — it makes them wary, then quietly hostile, and she worked out at about sixteen that the correct social strategy for someone with her equipment is to say roughly a fifth of what she notices and to say it about the safe things.

And there is the other reason it's worth nothing, which is the reason the rest of this book happens.

Point it at herself and it returns, instantly and without effort, a verdict she cannot dispute using any instrument she owns. Because the same filter that flatters other people about their competence and their prospects and their likability is the filter that would flatter *her*, and she doesn't have it, and so when she lies on the bed in the coat at four in the afternoon and the room says *this is what your life is and this is what it will continue to be*, she cannot mount an argument, because every argument available is one she can see the machinery of.

Say to her: it gets better. She'll agree it sometimes does, statistically, and note that it also sometimes doesn't, and that the version of the sentence being offered to her is not a prediction but a social ritual, and she'll thank you for it, sincerely, because she knows the ritual matters.

Say to her: your mother loves you. She'll agree completely. She has never doubted it for one second of her life. And then she'll follow it where it goes, which is: yes, and love is not a mechanism that improves the interior of another person, it is a mechanism that makes the lover suffer alongside them, and the accurate description of her presence in that house is *a woman is spending her fifties being sad about something she cannot fix and I am the something*.

You cannot get in. That's the whole thing. Nobody can get in, because everything you'd bring is something she has already inspected and put down.

And here is the last piece, the one that makes her available to a man like Anton, and it is subtle and it comes straight out of the same research, so pay attention because the whole plot is in it:

The calibration is not symmetrical.

What the illness strips out is *positive* illusion. It makes her devastatingly accurate about coldness, indifference, contempt, being disliked, being tolerated. Those readings are gold. She has never been wrong about someone despising her.

It gives her nothing at all about being *valued*. Because the illness has already pre-labelled every warm signal as noise — as flattery, or manners, or the person needing something. Her instrument has no calibration in that band at all. It reports the same result for every warm thing anyone has ever done for her, and the result is *this is not what it appears to be*.

Which means the one and only time it matters — the one time somebody's interest in her is *simultaneously real and predatory* — she will have no way whatsoever to tell the alarm from the symptom.

And by then she will have spent two years being taught, correctly, by good people, that when the voice says *nobody really cares about you*, the voice is the illness talking and you must override it.

She will override it.

That's not a failure of hers. I want that stated in the first quarter of the book, plainly, before anything happens: she does not miss him because she is stupid or broken or wanting a father. She misses him because he stands in the exact blind spot her condition creates, and because the skill she has painstakingly learned in order to survive is the precise skill that will disarm her when he arrives.

THREE. THE MAN WHO DESCRIBED HER DAYS

He came into the garden centre on a Tuesday in October for a bag of bulbs and stood at the till while she rang them through and said, without any preamble at all:

"How long have you been doing that thing with your face?"

She looked up.

"You've got two," he said. "There's the one for customers, which is good, it's about a four out of ten effort and it reads as nine because people aren't paying attention. And then there's the one about a second and a half after they turn around." He put his card on the reader. "I'm not being clever at you. I've got the same two."

Now. Everything hangs on this and I want the reader to be very clear about what did and did not happen in that exchange.

He did not flatter her. If he had flattered her she'd have had him instantly — flattery is the one thing her instrument was built to catch, and a compliment from a man of forty-four to a girl of nineteen in a garden centre would have lit up like a flare.

He described her. Accurately. Coldly. With no warmth in it and nothing asked for.

And in two and a half years — including eleven months with a decent GP, and a good mother, and two courses of a thing she had stopped taking — not one person had ever done that.

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

"Sure." He took the bulbs. "Anton. I've got an office on Warring Street, first floor above the optician's. If you ever want to sit in a room where you don't have to do the four out of ten, come and sit in it." And then, at the door, over his shoulder, in exactly the tone of a man noting the weather: "You won't come for about four months."

She came in February.

Four months. He'd said four months at the door with his back to her and he was right, and I need to say something about that,

because a reader will take it for a party trick and it is the most sinister sentence in the first half of this book.

It was not a guess and it was not intuition. It was a *schedule*, and he had run it twice before.

A person in that state does not act on an offer. That's the illness — that's chapter one, that's the six inches to the phone. The offer sits there. What happens is that it goes into the room with everything else and gets examined, at three in the morning, night after night, for weeks, and every other item in that room returns the same verdict, and this one item keeps failing to.

So it stays. And it gets turned over. And around week nine or ten a thing starts happening which is not hope, because hope is not available, but which is a sort of splinter: an item that will not file.

And then eventually, on an ordinary Tuesday with no particular trigger, on a day slightly less bad than the days on either side of it, the person goes.

He knew that because he'd had it for twelve years. He knew the interval the way a man who has laid floors knows how long the adhesive takes. And he stood in a garden centre and said *you won't come for about four months* with his back to a nineteen-year-old, and it was true, and she thought about that sentence approximately four hundred times before February, which is exactly what it was for.

The four months, briefly, since I've told you about the bulbs and owe you the rest.

November: the shift patterns went funny and she picked up more hours, which helped, because a shift is a structure and a structure carries you.

December: a bad month, the worst since the previous winter, and she got through it and nobody in the house noticed anything except that she was quiet over Christmas, which everyone put down to the job at the garden centre being tiring.

January: her mother found a course. A proper one, a good one, an access-to-higher-education thing at the college with a September

start, and she left the printout on Mira's bed, and Mira read it and cried for about ninety seconds — which was the first time she had cried in eleven months and which she did not tell anybody about — and did not fill in the form.

She did not fill in the form because the form was fine, and the course was fine, and she could see herself doing it, and she could see the whole of it, September to June, at the cost per hour that everything cost her, and then the thing at the end of it, and then the sixty years, and the extrapolation ran the way it always ran.

That's the last week of January.

And on the second Tuesday of February she got on a bus and went to the first floor above the optician's on Warring Street, because it was the only item in the room that had not filed. Here's what she found on the first floor above the optician's. Six people, mostly under thirty. Screens. A whiteboard with names on it. A coffee machine somebody had brought from home. It was, in every visible respect, a small consultancy of the kind that exists in the first floor above an optician's in every town in the country, and it did something Mira did not understand for another two months, which was: it advised companies on people.

Not recruitment. Not HR. Something narrower and much more expensive. A board is about to promote one of two people and would like an outside read. A firm is being acquired and would like to know which of the seven senior staff will actually stay after the earn-out, as opposed to which ones say they will. A family business has three siblings in it and one of them is lying about something and the other two would like to know which.

Anton's line — he had it printed on nothing, he said it out loud to clients, it was the whole pitch — was: *every company already has the information. What they lack is anyone in the building willing to say it out loud.*

He sat her in on a meeting in her third week. Told her to say nothing, watch, and write down afterwards what she saw. Four people from a logistics firm, ninety minutes, a dispute about a depot.

She wrote a page and a half. She gave it to him on the Friday.

He read it standing up, all the way through, twice, and then he sat down on the edge of a desk and looked at her for a long time.

"Do you know what you've got here?"

She said no.

"The finance one — Kelly — you've written that she's already agreed with the other side and she's here to make the agreement look like a fight."

"Yes."

"How."

"She was the only person who didn't take a copy of the pack. You don't need the pack if you already know what's in it and what you're going to do about it." Mira shrugged. "And she was kind to the man she's about to lose to. Nobody's kind to somebody they still have to beat."

Anton put the paper down.

"I've been doing this nineteen years," he said. "I would have got Kelly. It'd have taken me the ninety minutes and I'd have been about seventy percent. You got it in the first four and you're not seventy percent, are you. You're not even nervous." He looked at her. "How long have you been like this?"

And Mira, nineteen years old, in a room above an optician's, said the sentence she had never said to a doctor, or to her mother, or to Priya, or to anybody:

"Since I was about fourteen. It got bad at sixteen. I don't want to die, I just can't make the argument for the other thing anymore."

And Anton nodded, once, the way you'd nod at a colleague giving you a load figure.

Not: *oh my God, Mira*. Not: *have you talked to someone*. Not: *you have so much to live for*. Not the flinch. Not the fractional recalibration that happens behind every face she'd ever tried a fragment of this on, the little internal reclassification of *girl* to *problem*.

He nodded. And then he said: "Yeah. I had it from nineteen to thirty-one."

And that is the sentence. That's the one. If you want to understand how a person as accurate as Mira ends up where she ends up, it isn't the money and it isn't the attention and it isn't a father, and any account that says so is written by somebody who has never sat in one of these rooms.

It's that a man said *I had it too*, and it was true, and he was in front of her, alive, forty-four, running something, and the arithmetic she had been doing every night since she was sixteen — the extrapolation, the sixty years laid end to end — had a counterexample sitting on the edge of a desk in a grey jumper.

"Twelve years," he said. "The middle four I don't have much of. Then it went. Not treated — it just went, they do that sometimes, that's in the literature and nobody likes it because it makes the treatment numbers awkward." He picked her page back up. "But I'll tell you the part nobody ever tells you, and then I'll shut up and you can go home and think I'm a lunatic.

"When it went, I lost this." He tapped the page. "Not all of it. But I used to be *you*. I used to walk into a room and know it, and now I do it with nineteen years of practice and about six good questions, and it takes me an hour and I'm right seven times in ten instead of nine."

He handed it back.

"So that's the trade, and nobody warns you about it, and I'd like you to have the information at nineteen instead of at thirty-one. You can get better. And getting better costs you the only thing about you that nobody else has got.

"I'm not telling you what to do with that. I'm telling you it's a trade and not a rescue. Everybody in your life has been selling you a rescue."

She got the bus home. She lay on the made bed in her coat.

And for the first time in three years, something in the room had a second chair in it.

FOUR. THE WORK

She was on the payroll in April at nineteen thousand and by the following January she was on forty-eight, which for a nineteen-year-old with three A-levels and no degree in that town was not a salary, it was a different country.

Her mother cried. Her mother cried in the kitchen and said she'd always known, she'd always said it, that Mira was the cleverest of all of them and something would come along, and Mira stood there and received it, and the room said, accurately: *she is relieved. She thinks the job is the cure. She is going to stop asking now.*

The room was right. Her mother stopped asking within about five weeks. Not from neglect. From hope. It is the single most reliable finding in the testimony collections and it is never in the films: the depressed learn that the fastest way to make the people who love them stop worrying is to produce one visible improvement, and that the people who love them will hold onto that improvement for *years*, long past the point where it's true, because the alternative is going back to being frightened.

Mira had a job in a nice office and a good coat and a salary. That fact did eleven months of work in that house.

The work itself was the best thing that ever happened to her, and I want that on the record before the rest of it, because a book that makes him a monster from the first week would be a lie and would also let the reader off.

She was good. Not good like a promising junior — good like a lathe.

There is a specific pleasure, if you have her equipment, in being in a room where the thing you cannot stop doing is the thing you're being paid for. All her life the noticing had been a liability. Say a fifth of it. Say it about safe things. And now four adults with a hundred million pounds moving between them sat in a room and afterwards a man asked her *what did you see* and she got to say all of it, at full length, and nobody flinched, and then they acted on it.

She stopped being tired at work. She was tired every other hour of her life, but for the three or four hours in a room and the hour afterwards writing it up, the cost went away. Not joy — she was

very precise about this in her own head, it was never joy. It was that for a few hours a day the thing had a use, and *use* was a category she had never once been able to apply to herself.

There's a term Anton had for what she did. He called it the read. Clients called it that too, after a while, because he trained them to. *Can we get a read on this.*

Some of her reads, from the first eighteen months, in her own filing:

— A pharmaceutical distributor, two candidates for a directorship. The board favoured the impressive one. Mira's page said the impressive one had already accepted a role elsewhere and was using this process to improve that offer, and would leave inside ninety days. Rationale: he asked no questions about the first year. Nobody who intends to be somewhere for a first year fails to ask about the first year. He left in seventy-four days.

— A family haulage business, three brothers. She sat in for forty minutes and wrote: *the middle one isn't lying about the money. He's lying about his health, and the money problem is what he's using to explain the meetings he's been at.* Correct.

— A software company where the founder wanted to know why his best engineer had gone quiet. Mira's page: *she hasn't gone quiet, she's stopped arguing with you, which is what people do at about six weeks after they've decided you don't listen. You have about a month.* The founder ignored it. Five weeks.

She was, in the phrase Anton used, and used often, and used in front of clients, and used with his hand once briefly on her shoulder at a Christmas thing in a hotel:

the most accurate person I have ever met.

Something about the other five, because a reader will want to know how six adults sat in a room above an optician's for four years and nobody said anything.

They were good people. That's the answer and it's unsatisfying and it's the true one.

Devesh did the modelling and had two small children and left at five-fifteen every day of his life. Ruth ran the client side and was the only one who ever pushed back on Anton in a meeting. There was a boy called Sam who lasted fourteen months and was replaced by another boy called Fin. Two others whose names are in the file and who I could not tell you one thing about, which is its own indictment.

None of them saw it. Here's why, and it isn't stupidity.

What they saw was a nineteen-year-old with an extraordinary gift being given, by a man with a reputation, more responsibility than her age warranted and more money than her CV warranted, in an atmosphere of open and repeated praise. From the outside that is not exploitation. From the outside that is the single best thing that has ever happened to a girl from that town, and every one of them said so, and two of them said so to her face, kindly, at the Christmas thing.

The illness they did not see, because she was excellent at concealing it and because nobody looks for it in the person producing the best work in the building. That's not a failure of attention. It's a failure of imagination, and it is universal, and it is the reason the phrase *but she seemed fine* appears in every account of every one of these that has ever been written down.

And Ruth — I want Ruth in the record — Ruth asked her once. February of the third year, in a hotel corridor in Warrington, one question: *are you all right, actually?*

And Mira said yes.

That's it. That's the whole of the intervention available to a decent colleague, and Mira answered it the way she answered everything for two and a half years, and Ruth went to bed slightly relieved, and I do not think there is a single thing Ruth could have done differently and I have thought about it a great deal.

Now, the first crack. I'm going to put it here, in the middle of a good chapter, in the middle of the best year of her life, exactly where it happened, because that is where these things go and because the reader should have to notice it themselves.

In the November of that first year she had a Wednesday afternoon with no meeting and she was in the office, and she went into the small room at the back where the client files were, and she was looking for something else entirely, and she found a folder with a name on it that was not a client.

L. ABBOTT. And behind it, D. FEREDAY.

Two people. Not companies. Personal folders — pages in Anton's handwriting going back years, the same format as a read, dated, and the dates on Abbott ran from 2011 to 2016 and the dates on Fereday ran from 2017 to 2021.

And what was in them was work. Reads. Dozens each. Pages and pages of somebody's accurate, unflattered, devastating observations of rooms full of people — different handwriting in each folder, neither of them Anton's.

The last page of the Fereday folder was dated April 2021 and was not a read. It was three lines in Anton's hand, and what it said was:

D. now approx. 60%. Sertraline 100mg since Jan. Advised patience. Second opinion suggested — declined. Watch.

Mira stood in that room for a while.

Then she put the folder back exactly where it had been, and squared the edge to the shelf, and went out and made a coffee, and at four o'clock she sat in on a call about a depot in Hull.

And what she thought about, on the bus, going home, was not *what has he done*.

What she thought about — and I want this recorded very carefully, because two hundred pages from now the reader is going to need it and will not remember I put it here — was:

He kept files. He's been keeping files on us the whole time.

Us.

She'd counted herself as the third one before she got off the bus, and she was not frightened, and she did not tell anybody, and the following Monday she went back in and did the best read of her life on a bakery chain in the Midlands.

FIVE. THE CLARITY TRADE

He never called it a philosophy. He'd have laughed at the word. He called it *the trade*, and he laid it out to her maybe forty times over four years, in cars, in service stations, at the end of long days, always as a warning, always with the same three moves, and she could have recited it by the second year.

Move one: the filter is real. Everyone else is running it. That's not a metaphor and it's not misanthropy, it's forty years of data and you can go and read it.

Move two: therefore the ordinary human being is not seeing the world. They're seeing a version tuned to keep them upright. Their competence, their marriage, their prospects, how much anyone likes them — all of it dialled up a few points, permanently, from birth to death, and they will never once know because the instrument that would tell them is the instrument being adjusted.

Move three, and this is where it turns:

"So what are we?" he'd say. "We're the ones with the dial broken. That's all this is. Everybody says we've got a disease and I'm not arguing, it's a disease, it's killing us, fine. But be precise about what it broke. It didn't break the seeing. It broke the *lying*. We're not hallucinating, Mira. We're the only people in the room who aren't."

And then, always, the close:

"And every doctor you will ever sit in front of is offering to fix the lying. That's the treatment. That's what it does. It gives you back the filter." A shrug. "Which is a great deal, honestly. I'm not against it. I'd probably take it. Just don't let anyone tell you it's a rescue. It's a trade, and you're the one who has to live in what's left."

Now.

I want to stop the narration for a second because something is happening in this room that I need to describe accurately.

I've been telling this for a while now. Her bedroom, the coat, the four percent, the supply teacher, the bulbs. And there's a difficulty with the temperature in here that I want to note before it gets

worse. It has been eighteen degrees since I started and it is now noticeably not, and my hands are somewhere lower than they were, and the woman's voice — there is a woman's voice, there has been for some time, it says *you're doing fine, stay with it* at intervals which I initially took for something in the office —

Stay with it.

Right.

Where were we. The trade. Yes.

Here is the part of the trade Anton believed and never said out loud, and she had it by the end of the second year, because that's what she was for:

He wasn't warning her.

He was rehearsing an argument he needed to keep winning.

Look at the arithmetic of a man who is forty-four and who had it from nineteen to thirty-one. Twelve years. His entire twenties. No degree finished, no marriage, no children, the four middle years he says he doesn't have much of. And then it lifted on its own, the way it sometimes does, and he came out the other side into a life that had already been mostly spent, holding one thing: the belief that those twelve years had *bought* him something. That he had gone somewhere ordinary people don't go and come back with an instrument.

That's what the consultancy is. That's what the whole first floor above the optician's is. It's not a business, it's a monument to the proposition that the twelve years were a purchase and not a theft.

And every year he gets a little further from it. Seven in ten, he'd said, and dropping. Nineteen years of practice and six good questions, papering over an instrument that has been quietly returning to normal since 2011 — because that's what recovery does, it puts the filter back, it makes you *comfortable*, and comfortable is a synonym for blind if you have staked everything on the alternative.

So he needs an accurate one in the building. Always. He needs to be able to point at somebody and say *look, there it is, the real*

thing, exactly as I remember it in myself, because as long as there is one of them in the room the trade is a real trade and the twelve years were tuition.

L. Abbott, 2011 to 2016. D. Fereday, 2017 to 2021.

Laurie was the first and she was not recruited, which matters, because it means the pattern was not designed. It grew.

She was twenty-three and she was already there — she'd been hired in 2010 by a business that was then four people doing something much more ordinary — and she got ill in the second year, properly ill, the kind you cannot hide past about week six, and I found her crying in the back room on a Thursday in March 2011.

And what I did on that Thursday was the best thing I have ever done for another human being. I want that in the account because otherwise the account is a lie.

I sat down on the floor of a stockroom with a twenty-three-year-old and told her I'd had it for twelve years and that it was not a character flaw and that she was not going to be sacked, and then I reorganised her entire job around what she could actually do — no early starts, no client dinners, no travel, everything in writing, and a standing arrangement that if she couldn't come in she texted one word and nobody asked her anything.

She stayed five years. She has told Laurie's version of those five years to me in one email, which is more than I deserve, and her version is that the first two saved her life and the last three were something else.

Because somewhere in about 2013 I noticed that she was extraordinary in a room. And I started putting her in rooms. And the rooms became the business, and the business became the thing I have described, and by 2015 the arrangement I had built to protect a sick woman was the delivery mechanism for the only product I had.

I did not decide to do that. There is no Thursday where I sat down and worked it out. It assembled itself out of a hundred small commercially sensible decisions, every one of which I could defend, and the last one was in 2016 when she told me she was going to

train as a teacher and I said — kindly, on a Friday, meaning it — “You’ll be bored inside a year.”

She has been teaching for nine years. Mira found her in about a fortnight. I have never once looked for her. And then a girl on a till in October, doing a four-out-of-ten face.

She had all of that by the end of the second year, sitting up, in the room that isn’t a place, at two in the morning, with everything in it in its true condition.

And she stayed.

I need the reader to sit still for that, because everything that has been written about girls like her assumes the alternative — that she didn’t see, that she was groomed, that she was taken in.

She saw it in eighteen months. It took her eighteen months rather than eighteen minutes for one reason only, and it’s the reason from chapter two: her instrument had no reading in the warm band. She could see the whole architecture of what he was doing and could not tell whether the *affection* in it was real, because she has never been able to tell that about anybody, and she had been taught by good and correct people that when the voice says *this person doesn’t actually care about you*, the voice is the illness.

So she had a complete and accurate map of the machine, and one unresolvable question at the centre of it, which was whether the man running it loved her.

And she made a decision about that, in the winter of the second year, which is not in this chapter, and which changes what this entire book has been, and I am not going to be able to tell you what it was for some time yet, because — because —

You’re at ninety-eight minutes, Anton. You’re doing fine. Stay with it.

Because there’s more of the story first.

SIX. PATIENCE

She went back to the GP in the March of the third year, because she had a good salary now and a reason to still be here on a Tuesday and it seemed like the sort of thing a person in her position does.

She was started on something. The name doesn't matter and I'm not going to put it in; every one of these books has a person in it who reads a name and does arithmetic with it, and I'm not supplying the numbers.

What matters is the shape of what these things actually do, because the shape is the whole of this chapter.

They are slow. That is the first fact and it is the fact that kills people. Two weeks of nothing but side effects — the nausea, the flatness, the sleep going strange, the jaw, the sweating — and then four to six weeks before anything good arrives, and the good thing when it arrives does not announce itself. Nobody wakes up better. What happens, in the accounts, over and over, in almost identical language from people who have never met, is this:

I noticed I had made the bed.

I was in the shower and I realised I'd been thinking about a song.

My friend rang and I answered it without doing the thing where I look at it and decide.

That's it. That's what a response looks like from inside. It is not the return of joy. It is the wanting system coming back online in increments so small that the person experiencing it is, by definition, the least qualified observer in the room — because the illness has spent years teaching them to discount every good signal as noise.

Which is why the standard advice, in every guideline in the world, is: *tell someone. Get an outside view. You will not be able to see your own improvement.*

Mira had one person she told.

She told him in the car, in April, coming back from a thing in Stoke, five weeks in, and what she said was: "I think it might be doing something. I answered Priya on the first go on Sunday."

And Anton said: "Yeah?"

And there was a pause of about four seconds, and then he said:

"That's good. That's really good, Mira." And then: "How's the work been?"

She said fine.

"Because that's the bit I'd watch," he said, easily, eyes on the road. "The Wexler read — the one you did the week before last, the second page — that wasn't your usual. It was good. It was seventy percent good. It was the read I'd have written." A glance across. "Not a criticism. I'm just saying I noticed it and I said I'd always tell you."

She looked out of the window for the next eleven miles.

Here's what he did in that car.

He did not tell her to stop taking anything. Understand that, because it is the entire mechanism of this book and if you make him cruder than he was you'll miss him entirely. He never once, in four years, told her not to take a tablet. He would have been horrified — genuinely, sincerely horrified — at the suggestion that he had.

What he did was hand her a *frame*. He took the first flicker of recovery she had experienced in five years and he attached it, in the same conversation, in the same minute, to a decline in the one thing she valued about herself. And he did it gently, and admiringly, and as a compliment to her old work, and with the explicit statement that he was only telling her because he'd promised to be honest with her.

From that day, every good sign carried a cost attached. Answering Priya on the first go was now evidence. Making the bed was evidence. Six weeks later she caught herself, in a client meeting, missing something — a man's hand going to his collar at exactly the wrong moment, and she saw it, and she saw it *late*, a full second late — and the thought that arrived was not *I was tired*.

The thought that arrived was: *it's started*.

She stopped in July.

Nobody told her to. She stopped in July, on her own, and she never told the GP, and the GP's system flagged a non-collected prescription and generated a text message that she did not answer, and that was the entire extent of the healthcare system's involvement in the matter.

And I want to put down what Anton did when she told him she'd stopped, because it is the worst thing in this book and it does not look like anything.

He said: "Are you sure? Honestly. Because I'll drive you back to her now."

He meant it. That's the thing. He'd have driven her.

And Mira — nineteen when he found her, twenty-one now, salaried, the most accurate person he had ever met — looked at a man who had just offered to drive her to the doctor's, and could not find one single thing wrong with what he had said, because there was nothing wrong with what he had said.

I should say what happened to Danielle Fereday, since I have used her name four times in this book as a folder and that is precisely the thing I am supposed to have stopped doing.

She was twenty-six when I found her, in 2017, in a call centre in Stockport, and she was the second-best reader I have ever worked with and she was ill in a different shape from Mira's — hers came in blocks, four or five months at a time, with good stretches between that she called the flat bits and that I now understand were the only ordinary weeks of her life.

She was with me four years. She was excellent. She wanted, and asked for, twice, and did not get, a title on the door — she wanted to be an associate, it would have cost me nothing, and I told her twice that titles were exactly the sort of thing people like us are supposed to be past, and she agreed both times, and I watched her agree and did not look at what I was doing.

In January 2021 she started on something and told me. In April I wrote *advised patience* in a folder, and what that means, in plain English, since I am the only person alive who knows what it means, is:

She said the tablets weren't doing much yet and should she go back and ask for a change, and I said give it time, these things are slow, everybody rushes them.

Which is *true*. That's the thing that has kept me warm for four years. It is medically correct advice and any GP in the country would have said something similar and I have used that fact as a wall.

Here's what makes it what it is.

I did not say it because it was true. I said it because in the previous eleven weeks her reads had got worse, and I had noticed, and I had a theory about why, and the theory was load-bearing for my whole life.

The reads had got worse because she was in the trough of a medication change, exhausted, and half-sleeping. They got better in the summer, sharply, and stayed better. The theory was wrong. It has always been wrong. I had the disproof twice before Mira ever handed me a file, and I filed it as an exception both times.

Second opinion suggested — declined.

She suggested it. Danielle. She said, in June, that a friend had told her to ask for a referral to somebody proper, and I said — and I can hear it, I have the tone, I've had four hours today with the labels off and I can hear my own voice saying it —

"Do you want to spend a year being managed by somebody who's never had it?"

She left in the November. Not like Mira. No file, no page at the front. She sent a text on a Sunday saying she wasn't coming back and I rang her twice and she did not answer and that was the end of four years.

She is fine. I know that much and I know it from Laurie, who knows her. She's at a firm in Manchester doing something adjacent and she is, by every report, extremely good and extremely well.

Nobody in that building except me ever knew there was anything to know.

Watch, said the last line of the Fereday folder. There was a folder with her name on it in the small room at the back by then. She'd found it in the second year. Fourteen pages, dated, in his handwriting.

The most recent entry, in July of the third year, said: *M. stopped of own accord. Did not push. Offered to drive her back — declined. Reads back to baseline within three weeks, watch for Q4.*

And underneath that, in different ink, a line that was not clinical and that she read standing up in a small room with the door open and her heart going:

Don't lose this one.

SEVEN. WINTER OF THE THIRD YEAR

There is a stretch here that I have to get across and I have thought about how to do it for a long time.

I'm not going to describe the worst of that winter from the inside, hour by hour, the way I did chapter one. Partly because I don't have it — I've never had it, not that specific room, I only have my own, and mine was a different shape — and partly for a reason I'll come to at the end of this book and which will make more sense then.

So: the outside, and the research, and one thing she said.

The outside.

From October to February she worked. That is the fact people find impossible and it is the most common fact in the whole literature. She was in the office at eight-forty. She did nine major reads in that period and six of them are the best work of her life. She was, in that same window, at the lowest point a person gets to and still comes back from.

There is a lethal piece of arithmetic in here that the guidelines all flag and that almost nobody outside the field knows, and I'm going to state it because this book has spent six chapters saying *the outside tells you nothing* and here is where that stops being a theme and becomes a mechanism.

The most dangerous period is not the depth. In the depth there is no drive, and drive is required for everything, including harm. The danger climbs when the drive comes back before the despair lifts — the weeks of partial improvement, when a person can *act* again and the reasons to act have not yet returned. It is also, and this is the cruelty of it, precisely the period in which everyone around them relaxes.

Everyone around Mira relaxed that winter. Her mother had eleven months of a good job to hold onto. Priya had a friend who had got better and moved on and was busy. The office had a girl producing the best reads in the building.

I have gone over her diary from that period. There is very little in it. Three entries in four months, and one of them is a shopping list.

The other two.

November 26th. Told A. today I don't think I'm going to be able to keep doing this and he asked keep doing what and I couldn't finish the sentence so I said the Hull thing and he said drop the Hull thing.

She didn't mean the Hull thing.

January 9th. Nobody has asked me a question I couldn't already answer in about two years.

That second one is the one I've had the most trouble with, and I'll tell you why at the end.

The research, briefly, because she deserves the accuracy.

What the illness does at that depth is not emotional, it's cognitive, and it is measurable. Working memory degrades. Cognitive flexibility — the ability to hold two possible futures at once and compare them — degrades badly, and this is the part that matters, because *hopelessness is not a mood, it is a failure of a specific*

function. The machinery that lets an ordinary person imagine a plausible different Tuesday stops producing output. It isn't that she considered a better future and rejected it. She could not construct one to consider. The literature calls it constriction and the testimonies describe it identically every time: *there was only one road and it went one way*.

And the thing nobody tells you: she is not despairing at the world. She is despairing at a report about the world, produced by an instrument she cannot get behind.

There's the whole tragedy of her particular case. Any other patient can at least suspect the instrument. She is the one person on earth with documented, client-verified, professionally-remunerated proof that her instrument is more accurate than everyone else's.

She had four years of evidence that she saw things exactly as they were. Nine times in ten. There was a filing cabinet full of it.

Now.

Here is the one thing she said, in February, at the very bottom, in a car park in the rain outside a distribution centre in Warrington, to Anton, who had come out to find her because she had been in the car for fifty minutes.

He got in the passenger side. He didn't say anything for a while. Then he asked her what was going on.

And she said: "You know exactly what's going on."

"Yeah."

"So why do you keep asking me the question."

"Because that's what you do."

"No," she said. "That's what you *say* you do. You ask me the questions you already know the answer to." She was looking straight ahead through the windscreen at a loading bay. "You've never once asked me a question you didn't have the answer to. Not once in three years."

And Anton said — and I have gone over this and gone over this, and it is the single most honest thing he ever said to her, and it is also the exact moment the whole thing was decided —

“What would I ask?”

And Mira turned and looked at him for a long time.

Then she said: “Nothing. Forget it. Can we go.”

And they went.

One more thing about that winter and then I’ll move on, and it’s the thing I have the least right to and I’m putting it in anyway.

She did not come through it because of me. She did not come through it because of the work, or the money, or the coat, or the fact that somebody in an office described her days back to her accurately in October two years earlier.

I have gone over what is actually documented — the file she left me, her mother’s note, two things Laurie Abbott told me in the email I did not deserve — and the honest reconstruction is much more boring than anything I would write, and I have learned enough in the last four months to know that the boringness is the point.

She came through it because of a woman in a kitchen who had stopped asking and started again.

That’s the whole of it. Somebody who had made a mistake — a mistake of hope, the commonest one there is, the one every family makes the moment the person gets a job or a haircut or a good week — noticed the mistake, and went back, and asked a second time.

The literature is unglamorous about this to the point of embarrassment. The single most reliable protective factor across every study anyone has ever run is not insight, or treatment, or resilience, or meaning. It’s whether there is one other person who is paying attention and will still be paying attention in six weeks. One. Not a network. One.

Everything else — the medication, the therapy, the plan, the exercise, the light, all of it, all of the apparatus — works

substantially better when there is somebody in the room keeping the score, because *the patient cannot keep it*. That is the finding. That is the thing I'd carve on a wall if anybody let me near one.

And the cruelty specific to Mira's case, and the reason I've put this here rather than at the end, is that she had that person all along.

She had a warm and present mother nine miles away who would have done anything, and who had stopped asking for eleven months for the best reason in the world, and who — the moment she was asked to — picked up a phone and started a note and kept it for eleven weeks without once mentioning it.

Whereas the man in the office, who had described her days back to her, who knew exactly what she had, who had had it himself for twelve years, who called her the most accurate person he had ever met —

that man read a page of her best work and told her it was seventy percent.

EIGHT. BLUE

All right.

I can't hold it any more and I've been told not to try, so I'm going to put down where I actually am and then I'm going to go back and finish, if I can.

I'm in a room on the third floor of a building in a city I'm not going to name, on a low bed with my shoes off, wearing eyeshades that I have pushed up onto my forehead twice and been talked into putting back down twice. There is a woman on my left called Dr Anwar and a man on my right whose name I have been told three times. There is a cannula in the back of my hand for the blood pressure people and a bowl on the floor that I have not needed. The music has been going for a hundred and ninety minutes.

My name is Anton Reisz. I am fifty-two years old. I have treatment-resistant depression of four years' standing — it came back the autumn after she left, it came back like a house falling on me, after seventeen clear years — and I have failed two SSRIs, an

SNRI, augmentation, and a course of something that made me stop being able to read.

And at nine-fifteen this morning I took twenty-eight milligrams of a compound the trial paperwork calls a 4-substituted tryptamine analogue and everybody in the building calls Blue.

It is not psilocybin. It's a cousin. Same family, same receptor, and about four times the ego-dissolution scores on the standard scales at equivalent perceptual load — which is a clinical way of saying that the mushroom shows you a lot of things and Blue mostly shows you one thing, which is that the person doing the looking was never as solid as he thought.

At two hours Dr Anwar asked me to describe what was happening and I said: "I'm telling a story."

She said: "Whose?"

And I said: "Mira's."

That's what this has been. Everything you have read up to this point.

I want to be exact about what I mean, because the honest version is worse than the tidy version.

I have not been lying to you. The facts are the facts. There was a girl, she came into a garden centre, I said what I said about her face. She worked for me for four years and she was the most accurate person I have ever met and she was ill the entire time and I knew it from the first minute and I hired her anyway and I kept her.

The folders are real. L. Abbott is real, and she's alive, and she's a teacher in Leeds and does not answer. D. Fereday is real. The line about the second opinion is real; I wrote it; it's in my handwriting in a small room I no longer have a key to.

The car in Stoke is real. I said *that's the bit I'd watch*. I said it exactly like that, easily, eyes on the road, and I have replayed it approximately nine thousand times in four years and it has never once come out differently.

That's the outside. All of it real, all of it verifiable, most of it verifiable by other people.

Here's what isn't.

The bedroom. The made bed and the coat and the shoes on and the phone at four percent and the light going across the ceiling from eleven until four-forty. The room that isn't a place, with everything in it in its true condition. The bit where she gets up at five and runs the tap and checks her own face like a stranger's ID. The dinner where she's funny about the man who wanted a tree that wouldn't get any bigger.

I made all of that up. In here. This morning. On Blue.

I was never in that bedroom. I have never seen the inside of her house. I do not know what her mother is like — I met her twice, at a Christmas thing and at a leaving do, and she was warm, and that's all I've got. I don't know whether Mira was funny at dinner. I don't know if she wore the coat.

I know she said the sentence in the car park in Warrington, because I was in the car. I know she said *you've never once asked me a question you didn't have the answer to*, because it is the sentence I have been carrying around in my chest for four years like a swallowed pin.

Everything else — every single page of her interior, every accurate, devastating, beautifully observed thing I have told you about what it was like to be inside Mira's head —

is me.

It's a man who had it from nineteen to thirty-one and has it again now, writing his own condition onto a girl he did not know, because he has spent four years needing to believe he understood her.

Dr Anwar just asked me what I'm feeling, and I told her, and she said say it out loud again, so:

The entire basis of my claim on that girl — the whole of it, the only defence I have ever had, the thing I have said to myself at three in the morning every night for four years, which is *I was the only one who actually saw her* —

is a story I have been telling myself, in my own voice, using her as the character.

I never saw her. I saw someone who reminded me of me, in a condition I had already decided I understood, and I got everything about her exterior right, because I'm good at that, that's the trade, that's nineteen years of practice and six good questions.

And I got the inside wrong in a way I cannot even measure, because I never asked.

You've never once asked me a question you didn't have the answer to.

She wasn't accusing me of arrogance. I thought for four years that she was accusing me of arrogance.

She was telling me she was alone.

Anwar wants me to stay with it. She keeps saying that. Stay with it, Anton.

There's about four hours left of this and there's one more piece of the story and I don't have it yet, I can feel it sitting somewhere behind my sternum where the rest of it came from, and every time I go toward it the room does the thing where the walls breathe and I lose the thread.

It's about what happened in the winter of the fourth year.

It's about what she did in her second year that I didn't find out about until the day she left.

Give me a minute.

NINE. THE SECOND YEAR

She got well in the second year.

I found this out on a Thursday in March four years ago at about eleven in the morning and I have not been the same person since, and I'd like to say that carefully rather than dramatically, because a lot of what I say about myself is dramatic and this isn't.

Here's what she did.

In the autumn of the second year — three months after she found the Abbott and Fereday folders, one month after she found her own — Mira went to a different GP in a different practice under her mother's address, and started again, and this time she did the thing the guidelines tell you to do and she told somebody.

She told her mother.

Not Anton. Not me. She sat down in her own kitchen and told the woman who had stopped asking, and asked her to be the outside view, and gave her the specific things to watch for — the bed, the phone on the first ring, the songs — because she had done the reading and she knew that she would be the last person in the building to notice.

It took eleven weeks. Her mother kept a note on her phone. In February of the second year, Mira answered Priya on the first go, and made the bed, and caught herself humming in the shower, and her mother showed her the note, which had eleven weeks of small entries on it, and Mira sat at the kitchen table and read her own recovery in someone else's handwriting.

Then she went back to work on the Monday, and she said nothing.

For two years.

Two years, in an office above an optician's, doing the best reads in the building, letting a man who believed clarity was purchased with your life go on believing that the girl in the room was still paying.

Why.

Not fear. She was never frightened of me. I want that in the record because a version of this exists in which she's a victim in the ordinary sense and that version is a lie and would be an insult to her.

She stayed for the same reason she does anything, which is that she'd noticed something and wanted to know if she was right.

She had a thesis about me and she wanted to test it. And the thesis was this: that I did not love her, and did not love Abbott, and did not love Fereday, and that what I loved was a proposition — that the twelve years had bought me something, that going down there

is a purchase and not a theft — and that I needed a living specimen in the building to keep the proposition true, and that I would sooner watch a girl drown than lose the proof.

So she gathered the disproof.

Two years of reads. Every one dated. Every one produced by a woman who was, at the time of writing, well — properly well, medicated, sleeping, eating, doing the exercise, seeing somebody on Wednesdays.

And they got *better*.

That's the finding. That's the whole thing, that's what she was building, and I want to put it down flatly because it took the top of my head off and I'd like the reader to receive it undecorated:

Her hit rate went up.

Nine in ten became something like nineteen in twenty. The bad reads in the file are almost all from the first eighteen months. The Wexler read — the one I told her in the car was *seventy percent good*, the one I used to attach her recovery to a decline, the single most damaging sentence I have ever said to another human being —

was the first read she wrote after the medication took hold. It's better than anything she'd written before it. I know this because I have read it approximately four hundred times since, and because two other people in the industry have since read it and said the same thing, and because it is, objectively, right about all four people in the room, including one thing about the finance director that did not become visible to anybody else for two years.

I said it was seventy percent because it did not sound like *me*.

That's it. That's the whole basis. It was better than my work and it did not sound like my work, and I had a category for that, and the category was *decline*.

She left in the March of the fourth year.

She didn't resign in a room. She put a lever-arch file on my desk at eleven in the morning while I was on a call, and stood there, and

waited for me to finish, which took four minutes, and which she spent looking out of the window at the optician's sign.

Then she said: "Left-hand side's the first two years. Right-hand side's the last two. They're in date order. There's a page at the front."

The page at the front was one paragraph. It said what she had done, and when she had started treatment, and the date her mother's note began, and the date it ended. It gave the hit rates. It listed, in a column, the eleven reads she considered her best, and the dates, and all eleven were after.

And at the bottom it said:

You were wrong about the trade. It doesn't cost you this. It never cost you this. You lost yours because you stopped doing it every day for twelve years, not because you got better, and you have spent nineteen years keeping ill people in this office to avoid finding that out. Ask Laurie Abbott. She's a teacher now. She's very good at it.

I'm not going to report you and I'm not going to say anything to anybody, because I've thought about it for two years and I don't think you'd survive it and I don't think you know what you've been doing. I think you'd have driven me to the doctor's if I'd said yes. I think both of those are true at the same time and I've stopped needing them to not be.

Get help. Not the kind you sell.

And then, the last line, and I have got it exactly, I have it exactly:

You should have asked me something. Anything. I'd have told you everything.

Then she picked up her bag and went, and I did not stand up, and I have not seen her since.

What I did for the next four years, briefly, because it's the gap between her leaving and this room and a reader is entitled to it.

I read the file. All of it, both sides, in order, over about nine days, in the office, in the evenings, and then again in the spring, and then about twice a year since, and I could recite the eleven she listed.

I did not change anything.

That's the part. That's the part I want down before the drug wears off any further. I had the complete disproof of the thesis my entire adult life was built on, in date order, in a lever-arch file, handed to me by the person best qualified on earth to produce it — and I took it home and read it and put it in a cupboard and went back to work on the Monday.

I hired somebody in the September. Not ill. I want to be accurate; I've been accurate about everything else. He was a perfectly ordinary graduate called Fin and I trained him for two years and he is competent and he will never be what she was, and I knew that on the first day, and I hired him precisely because he wasn't, which I told myself was a moral improvement and which I now think was something closer to giving up.

The thing came back in the November. Not gradually. It came back the way it did in 1998, like a house falling on me, and I went to a GP who was twenty-nine and did the right things in the right order, and none of them worked, and then the next ones didn't, and by the third year I had a phrase in my notes that I have never got used to seeing: *treatment-resistant*.

And I sat in that office for four years with a cupboard in it, running a business built on the proposition that going down there buys you something, while going down there and being bought nothing, and telling clients what was actually happening in rooms full of people, at seven times in ten and dropping.

Then Ruth found the referral for this trial and put it on my desk without saying anything, which is precisely what I would have done, and which I have not thanked her for properly, and which is on the list. Before that, one more thing about the page at the front, because I have had four years with it and I only understood it this morning.

She did not have to write it.

Think about the position she was actually in. She was well, she was twenty-one, she was the best in the industry at a thing that pays, and she had two years of dated work in a file. She could have

walked out on a Tuesday and set up on her own and taken four of my clients inside a year, and I would not have had one word to say about it, and everybody in that industry would have said good luck to her.

She did not need to explain herself to me. There is no version of her interests that is served by handing me the disproof.

And she certainly did not need the last two paragraphs. The bit about not reporting me. The bit about how she thought I'd have driven her to the doctor's, and that both things were true at once, and that she'd stopped needing them not to be.

That is not an exit. That is a *clinical summary*, written for the patient, in language chosen so the patient can survive reading it.

She did the thing I have spent nineteen years selling. She sat in a room with a man for four years and produced an accurate account of what was actually happening with him, and then — and this is the part no read of mine has ever had in it, not one, not in nineteen years — she wrote it in a way designed to be *useful to the person it was about*.

I did not do that for her, or for Danielle, or for Laurie. My reads are accurate and they are for the person paying. Hers was accurate and it was for me, and I was not paying, and it cost her a morning and four years of her life.

That's the twist, if you want to call it that. That's the thing I came in here with. Not that I exploited a sick girl. I knew that. I've known that for four years, I could recite it, I've said it out loud to two therapists and a priest and a woman in a hotel bar in Sheffield.

It's that she was *never sick* for half of it. That the entire second half of the most important relationship of my life was an experiment being run on me by somebody better than me. That I was the subject. That the folders in the small room — Abbott, Fereday, Mira, all of them in my handwriting, *watch, don't lose this one* —

were also being kept on the other side, in a lever-arch file, by a twenty-one-year-old with a functioning filter and no reason left to be afraid of me.

She was the accurate one. She was accurate about the one thing I have never in my life been able to look at, which is not what I did to her.

It's why I needed her to be ill.

And she was kind about it. That's the part I can't — Anwar, that's the part I can't —

She was kind about it. She had the whole thing and she was kind about it and she left me the file so I'd have the evidence and she told me to get help and she didn't tell anybody, and there is no version of me at forty-three that would have done that for her, and I have been trying for four years to find a way to make that mean something other than what it means.

TEN. HOUR FIVE

There's a thing Blue does at around the fourth hour that the paperwork calls dissolution of the narrative self and that everyone who has had it describes in almost the same three or four sentences, which ought to tell you something.

What goes is not the seeing. My eyes work. I can hear Anwar's chair. What goes is the *teller*.

I have had, my whole life, and so have you, a small continuous voice in the middle of everything that turns what is happening into a story about a person called me. It's been running since I was about four. It runs while you sleep. It is so completely the medium of your existence that you cannot notice it any more than you can notice your own tongue in your mouth, and you would never in a thousand years suspect that it is *optional*.

At four hours and ten minutes it stopped.

Not silence. There was still plenty going on. It's that everything went on happening without being about anybody.

There was music, and there was a body on a bed with a cannula in the back of its hand, and there was an enormous quantity of grief occurring in the room, and nobody was having it. It was just present, the way weather is present in a field. And the part I cannot

get across, the part every single one of these accounts fails at and I'm going to fail at too:

It was not frightening. It was the most relief I have ever experienced.

Because for the first time since 1998 there was no one there to be Anton Reisz, and Anton Reisz has been an extremely tiring thing to be in the room with, and I have never once got to leave.

That's when I stopped being able to tell it.

I want to describe the mechanism, because it's the thing I actually came here to find out and I got it and I'm not going to be able to hold it for long.

For four years I have been running a version of Mira in my head. All day. A model. Her voice, her flat delivery, the way she'd hold a page. And I have been arguing with it — that's what it's for — and in the argument I say *I was the only one who saw you* and she says something back and I answer it, and the whole apparatus grinds away and produces, every time, the same output, which is that I am a monster who was also her only friend, and both, and the both is what makes it survivable.

And the entire first half of this account is that machine at full power.

Chapter one is the machine. The coat, the four percent, the light on the ceiling. That is not testimony, it is *ventriloquism*, and I did it beautifully, and I did it for eight thousand words, and if you were moved by it — and I hope you were, I worked very hard on it, that's what I do, that's the trade, nineteen years and six good questions — then you were moved by a man performing a dead relationship for an audience so he wouldn't have to sit in a room with what he actually did.

She isn't dead. I want to be clear. Mira is twenty-seven and lives in Bristol and I know that because Laurie Abbott told me, in an email I did not deserve and did not answer for eleven days.

And at four hours and ten minutes, with the teller gone, the model stopped working.

I went to it — I went to say the sentence, the one I've said ten thousand times, *I was the only one who ever saw you* — and there was nobody there to say it to.

She wasn't in the room. She has never been in the room. There is no Mira in my head; there is a set of remembered exteriors and a very large amount of my own material dressed in them, and with the narrator switched off I could see the join, and the join goes all the way round.

And what was left, when the model went, is the thing I have been paying eleven years of my life to avoid looking at, and here it is, and it took four hours and twenty-eight milligrams:

I don't want to be forgiven.

I've had forgiveness. She *gave* me forgiveness, in writing, in a lever-arch file, at eleven in the morning, and it did nothing, and I have spent four years discovering that it does nothing.

What I want is for the twelve years to have bought something.

That's it. That's the whole engine of my life. Nineteen to thirty-one, gone, no degree, no marriage, no children, four years I don't have much of — and if going down there is just an illness, if it's a thing that happens to your brain the way a stone chips a windscreen, if it doesn't *purchase* anything, then those twelve years are not tuition, they are theft, and there is no compensation, and nothing was learned, and the only structure I ever built on top of them was a business that ate three women.

So I needed the trade to be real. And a trade needs two sides. And the side I could not afford to lose was the ill one.

I did not exploit Mira for her accuracy. That's what I told two therapists and a priest and the woman in Sheffield, and it's a flattering lie, and I have had four hours with the flattery removed.

I exploited her to keep the twelve years expensive.

Anwar asked me a while ago — an hour ago, or four minutes, I have no access to that — whether I could stay with the feeling and not explain it. And I said no. And she said try. And I have been trying for what I think is a very long time and it turns out I cannot go

ninety seconds without explaining, and the explaining is the same voice that wrote chapter one, and it has one job, which is to make sure that whatever has happened, a man called Anton Reisz is the one it happened to.

There's one more thing in here and I've been going round it for what I think is a long time.

With the teller gone, something came up that has no story attached to it and that I therefore cannot do anything with, which is the whole reason it survived down there for thirty-three years.

It's a room in a house in 1998. Not hers. Mine.

There's a boy of nineteen in it who has been lying on a bed since about eleven in the morning with his shoes on, and there is a light going across the ceiling, and his mother is downstairs and does not know, and he is going to say nothing to her about it for six years.

And what I have been doing since 2021 — what I have done with every single hour of the eleven years and the four years and this entire account — is *describe him from outside*.

I've told you what it cost him. I've told you what it bought him, and then that it bought him nothing. I've explained the trade, and the folders, and Abbott, and Fereday, and the Wexler read, and the exact mechanism by which a man in a car in Stoke destroys a girl in one sentence with his eyes on the road.

Nineteen years of practice and six good questions.

Not once have I gone into that room and sat down on the end of the bed and asked the boy on it anything at all.

I gave the room to Mira instead. All of it — the coat, the phone, the light, the mother on the stairs, the two faces, the room that isn't a place — I handed twelve years of my own interior to a girl I did not know, and dressed her in it, and wrote her beautifully, and the reason is not complicated and I have it now and it will be gone in a couple of hours so here it is:

Because if it's happening to her, there's somebody in the room who understands it.

And if it's happening to me, there's nobody.

That's the whole of it. That's what I've been buying. Not the trade, not the twelve years, not the proposition — those are all just the receipt. What I actually built, out of two women's illnesses and then a third, is a room with someone in it who understands, and the only way I could think of to be in that room was to be the one who understood.

I have never once been the one who was understood. Not at nineteen. Not since.

And there's nobody to say that to, because the person who does the saying isn't here at the moment, and that turns out to be the only condition under which it can be said at all.

There's a bowl on the floor I haven't needed. There's a body with grief occurring in it.

There's a girl of nineteen with a four-out-of-ten face at a till in October, and I have no idea, none, not one thing, about what it was like to be her — and the fact that I have written eight thousand words pretending otherwise is not a crime anyone will ever charge me with and is the worst thing I have ever done.

Stay with it, Anton.

I'm staying.

ELEVEN. INTEGRATION

The come-down took about two hours and it was not gentle, and I want to record what it's actually like because every account I read before I came in here made it sound like a sunrise. It's more like being handed back a coat you'd forgotten you owned and finding it heavier than you remember.

The teller comes back. That's the event. Somewhere around six hours forty you become aware that things are being narrated again — that there is a person having the afternoon — and it arrives in increments, and you can feel each one, and each one is a small closing.

And the thing I noticed, and reported out loud, because Anwar asked me to report everything:

It came back lying.

Within about four minutes of the narrator resuming, it had produced the following, unbidden, in my own internal voice, in a warm and reasonable tone:

— that what I did to Mira was, in the round, a mixed thing, and there were four years of very good work in it too;

— that she was, after all, extraordinarily well paid for a twenty-one-year-old with no degree;

— that I had never actually told her to stop taking anything, which is true and which I have used as a load-bearing wall for four years;

— and that the whole of what I had just seen, in the fifth hour, was probably a drug effect and should be held lightly.

Four minutes. It took the filter four minutes to come back on and start repairing the damage, and I lay there and listened to it do it, and I have never in my life been so frightened of my own mind.

I said all four out loud. Anwar wrote them down. That's the job, apparently — that's what the integration sessions are for, and there are six of them, and I have had two.

And here is the thing she said to me in the second one, which is the last piece of research I'm going to put in this book, and which I did not know and which explains everything about why this compound is in trials at all: The insight is not the medicine.

Before I get to what she meant, what the thing actually does, because I asked and she told me and it is not what the newspapers say.

It is not a lifting of mood. Nobody comes out of that room happy. What these compounds appear to do — and the honest position is that the mechanism is still argued about, but the direction of the evidence is consistent — is temporarily loosen the brain's grip on its own predictions.

An ordinary brain is not primarily an organ for perceiving. It is an organ for *predicting*, and then quietly correcting the perception to match. Eleven years of depression is eleven years of the same prediction run so many times it stops being a prediction and

becomes the floor. *This will not work. You are not worth it. Nothing changes.* By year eleven those are not thoughts. They are the shape of the container.

What the drug does is make the container briefly negotiable. The predictions go soft. And into that softness, if there is somebody in the room asking the right things, you can reach material that has been unreachable for a decade — not because it was hidden, but because every previous attempt to look at it arrived pre-labelled with what it meant.

That is exactly what happened at hour five. I did not learn one new fact about myself. Every single item was already in my possession; I could have listed them in the car park. What changed is that for about ninety minutes the labels came off, and I saw the same facts without the story that has been welded to them since I was twenty-four.

And now Anwar's point, which is the one that matters.

Everybody thinks it's the insight. You go in, the walls come off, you see the true thing, and you come out changed. That's the story, and the trials do not support it. What predicts a durable response is not what you saw at hour five. It is what you *did* in the six weeks afterwards, in ordinary daylight, sober, on a Tuesday, without the compound and without the music and without a doctor holding the room open.

The drug does one thing. It opens a window in a wall that has been solid for eleven years. It does not walk through it for you. And the window closes — that's measurable too, they can watch the plasticity fall off week by week — and if you have not built something in the gap, the wall comes back exactly where it was and you have had a very expensive afternoon.

Which means the entire value of the last eight hours is contingent on a man with a documented forty-year habit of turning everything into a story about himself doing something, in the next six weeks, that is not a story.

So here's what I've done. It's not much and I'm going to put it down plainly and without any of the equipment.

I have withdrawn from the consultancy. Not sold — withdrawn. The five people who work there are buying it between them over four years at a valuation I set at the low end and my accountant is still writing me emails about it.

I wrote to Laurie Abbott. Four pages. No defence in it, no explanation, and I read it out loud to Anwar first specifically to have the explanations taken out, and she took nine of them out. She has not answered and she may not and that is not a thing I get to have an opinion about.

I have not written to Mira and I am not going to. That was the third integration session, mostly. The letter I want to write is a letter that requires her to receive it, and read it, and have a reaction, and I have worked out — with help, I did not work it out on my own, I want to be honest about that too — that every version of it I have drafted is the model in my head asking for one more turn.

She said *I'd have told you everything*. That was four years ago and it was a door and it is closed now and I closed it, and the correct thing to do with a door you have closed is not to knock on it for the rest of your life so the person on the other side knows you're sorry.

And I am staying in the trial, and I am taking the tablets that I was also prescribed and that I have been quietly not respecting for two years because a small part of me — I can see it now, it is small and it is very old and it has been there since I was about twenty-four — believes that being medicated would be a concession.

A concession to the proposition that the twelve years were just an illness. That nothing was purchased. That there is no trade, there was never a trade, and there is only a disease which some people get and which sometimes lifts and which costs you exactly what it costs you and gives you nothing whatsoever in return.

Which is, I now think, the truth.

And it is unbearable, and it is also, I am told, the beginning of something, and I have six weeks and a window and no story to tell about it.

CODA. THE QUESTION

Fourth integration session. A Tuesday, three in the afternoon, the ordinary room with the ordinary chairs, no music, no eyeshades, no bowl on the floor. Rain on the window. Anwar with a notebook she barely uses.

We had been talking about something administrative — the trial paperwork, a form — and then she put the pen down and there was one of those pauses that in my old trade would have told me exactly what was coming, and in this room told me nothing at all, because I have stopped being able to read her and I think that is on purpose and I think it is the treatment.

And she said:

“Anton. What was it like?”

I said what.

“Being nineteen,” she said. “In it. Yours. Not hers — I’ve had eight hours of hers.” She sat back. “You’ve told me what it cost you, and what it bought you, and what it didn’t buy you, and what you built on top of it. You’ve been extremely articulate about all of it for four months.” A small movement of her hand. “You’ve never once told me what it was like.”

And I opened my mouth to answer.

And what came up, immediately, fully formed, in the first quarter of a second, was: a girl on a made bed in a coat with her shoes on, and a phone at four percent six inches from her hand, and the light going across the ceiling from eleven in the morning until four-forty in the afternoon.

Somebody else’s room. In beautiful condition. Ready to go.

I sat there with it in my mouth.

Thirty-three years of material, and every route into my own nineteenth year runs through a bedroom I have never been in, belonging to a girl I never asked, in a house I visited twice, in a town nine miles from an office above an optician’s.

I don't know what it was like. That's the thing. I have no access. I gave it all to her — every hour of it, the whole twelve years, dressed up and handed over — because a story about somebody else is survivable and mine was not, and by the time I noticed I had done it there was nothing left on my side of the wall.

Anwar waited. She's good at that. Nobody has waited on me in a very long time; I was the one who did the waiting, professionally, for money, in rooms above opticians'.

And then I said the only true sentence I have managed since the fifth hour, which is:

"I don't know. Give me a while."

And she said: "That's fine. We've got time."

I've been going back through this account, which I started writing in the third week because Anwar suggested keeping something and I, being who I am, produced a book.

And I've noticed what it is.

It isn't a confession, though it's dressed as one. It isn't for Mira, though it uses her all the way through. Look at the shape of it: eight chapters of a girl's interior rendered in immaculate detail by a man who was never in the room, then a reveal, then a man explaining what the reveal means, at length, with references.

It's the trade. It's one more read. It's me sitting in the corner of the room saying *here is what is actually happening with these people*, except the people are me, and I have done what I always do, which is get everything on the outside exactly right and never once ask the thing in the middle a question I don't have the answer to.

She said it in a car park in Warrington in the rain in February and I thought she was accusing me of arrogance.

She was telling me she was alone.

I think she was also, and I only got this last week, and it took me four years and eight hours on Blue and four integration sessions and it is the entire reason I have written any of this down —

I think she was also asking me one.

You've never once asked me a question you didn't have the answer to.

And I said: *What would I ask?*

And there it was. Right there. Handed to me in a car park by a twenty-year-old with the whole thing in her hands, being kind about it, for the second time, giving me the opening.

And I answered it as a rhetorical question.

So.

I've started a second notebook, which Anwar does not know about yet and will by Tuesday, and it does not have any prose in it.

It has a list. It is very short and it is not interesting and I am going to put it here instead of an ending, because this is a book about a man who turns everything into a story and the correct last act of such a book is a page that refuses to be one.

Ruth. Thank her properly. Not by email.

The valuation. Stop arguing with Whittaker. Sign it.

Take them at eight every morning. Not when I remember. Eight.

Danielle — do not write. She got out and she is well and a letter from me is a thing that costs her an afternoon and buys me a feeling.

Laurie — she may not answer. That is not a thing I get to have an opinion about. Do not write a second one.

Mira — no.

Six weeks. Then look again.

Ask somebody something you don't know the answer to. Once a day. Anybody. Start with the woman in the flat below.

That last one is Anwar's and I told her it was beneath me and she said yes, and left it there, and I have done it eleven times in nine days and I have got it wrong nine of the eleven — I keep asking questions I have already answered and then listening for confirmation, and I can hear myself doing it now, and being able to

hear it is apparently the whole of the progress available in nine days.

There's a window and there's about four weeks left of it and I have a notebook, and Anwar has asked me a question I do not have the answer to, and I would like to record that this is the first time in my adult life that anyone has, and that the sensation is not clarity and is not relief. It's more like standing in a doorway in a house you own, at nineteen, with the light going across the ceiling, and finding out you have absolutely no idea what is in the next room.

I'm going to go and find out.

Mira is nineteen, works at a garden centre, and has been lying on a made bed in her coat since eleven in the morning. There is nothing wrong with her life. Her mother is warm, her childhood was ordinary, there is no trauma in the file — which is the actual clinical picture in a great many of these illnesses and which nobody writes, because a story needs a cause, and everyone who hears about her goes looking for one, and the looking is itself a way of not believing her.

She has one thing nobody else has. Her readings of people are devastating and almost never wrong — because the filter that flatters everyone else about their competence, their marriages and their prospects is switched off in her, and what is left standing in the space where it used to be is calibration. The research calls it depressive realism and has argued about it for forty years. Mira just knows who in a room has already made their decision.

Anton Reisz, forty-four, runs a consultancy that sells exactly that. He had the same illness from nineteen to thirty-one. He is the first person in her life to describe her days back to her without softening them, and he does not flinch when she tells him the truth, and he offers her a warning rather than a rescue: that getting better is a trade, and the price is the only thing about her nobody else has got.

She cannot read him. Her instrument was built to detect coldness, not warmth — the illness pre-labels every warm signal as false — so the one man whose interest in her is both real and predatory stands precisely in the blind spot her condition creates. There are folders in a small room at the back of that office. Two of them have other women's names on them. One of them has hers. But Mira has been keeping a file too.

A novella of the buried mind, told in three collapsing layers: what the illness is actually like from inside, what it is worth to somebody, and who is really telling you about it.

