

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 51

ONE CAME UP



CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

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

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THE DIVE

0 M —
THE SWITCH THROWS.
THE HEART SLOWS
TO A WALK.

20 M —
YELLOW GONE.
THE PUNCHES
BEGIN.

40 M —
GREEN GONE.
THE WATER STOPS
RESISTING.
COMPANY.

60 M —
THE AIR TURNS.
LUNGS SMALLER
THAN EMPTY.

80 M —
SOUND IS ONE
HEARTBEAT.
THEN TWO.

94 M —
THE FLOOR.
NOTHING IS
HAPPENING.

0m

10m

30m

40m

50m

60m

70m

80m

90m

94m

0 M —
THREE BREATHS.
MASK OFF. EYES.
I'M OKAY.

20 M —
YOU FEEL
EXCELLENT HERE

40 M —
THE HANDS
COME BACK

60 M —
THE COLD SHEETS
PART AGAIN

80 M —
PRESSURE
FALLING

94 M —
THE NEGOTIATION.

THE DESCENT RUNS DOWN THE LEFT OF THE COLUMN AND THE ASCENT UP THE RIGHT.
THE ANNOTATIONS ARE IN THE LANGUAGE DIVERS ACTUALLY USE, WHICH IS THE LANGUAGE OF THIS BOOK.
NOTHING ON THE PLATE IS METAPHORICAL.

SYNOPSIS

The Cut is a flooded slate quarry outside the town of Ossay. Six generations dug it dry; when the company folded they turned off the pumps and went home, and the hole took eleven years to fill. It is ninety-four metres to the floor. The town has no sea and no reason to be near water at all, and people drive a long way to get into it.

Sabine Vasseur has not put her face in that water in nine years. She coaches beginners on the shallow shelf, signs the safety paperwork, and walks down to the edge at the end of each day to put one hand in and take it out again. Everybody in Ossay believes they know why.

Then she finds a young man in the water on his own. Aurel Nizan works nights at the plastics works, has taught himself out of library books to a depth that should not be possible without a coach, and keeps a longhand log of everything that happens to him down there. He is not reckless. He has simply found the one place where he stops arguing with himself, and he will pay any amount to keep going back.

Sabine takes him on. Everything she teaches him is correct. Every number she gives him is defensible on the day she gives it.

She does not tell him what is waiting at the bottom of the hole, because she needs to know what he will say to it.

Her sister Maude assesses risk for the company that insures the site, has kept a file open for nine years on a death that was ruled an accident, and is about to be handed a document in her sister's handwriting that she was never meant to read.

A noir of cold water, trained silence, and the oldest offer there is.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book began with a single fact I could not put down.

The urge to breathe is not about running out of air. What makes a person desperate under water is waste gas building up, and the alarm that goes off is not measuring the thing that can kill them. The two timetables come apart. Which means the alarm fires long before there is real danger — and it also means the alarm can be finished, silent, satisfied, while the danger is still on its way.

And it can be trained out of you. That is the part I have not been able to leave alone. There is an entire sport built on teaching human beings to hear their own bodies screaming that they are dying and to file the screaming as noise. It works. It is taught kindly, by careful people, with tables and stopwatches and homework, and it produces divers who feel excellent in the last ten seconds before the lights go out.

The oldest alarm we have, the one that comes before language, the one no animal ignores. Trainable in a fortnight.

So the question the book is actually asking is: what else. What other alarms are measuring the wrong thing, and going off on timetables of their own, and what would happen to a person who was taught, patiently and correctly and by somebody who loved them, to stop listening.

Everything in these pages about what happens to a body at depth is drawn from the literature and is, as far as I have been able to establish, accurate. The colour dying in order. The heart down in the twenties with four seconds between beats. The chest squeezed smaller than empty and the smallest vessels giving way. The proteins that turn up in the blood afterwards, the same ones you would measure in a man who had been hit in the head. The sensed presence in the cold and the dark, which is so well documented in mountaineers and sailors and polar walkers that the coaching community has stopped remarking on it. The shaking on the surface, which ends roughly one competition dive in ten and which

nobody finds remarkable. Feeling wonderful immediately beforehand.

I have invented nothing about the water. I have only removed the disbelief.

The other debt is to a coast on the other side of the world. For centuries the women of the Shima region of Japan dived on one breath, several times a day, for their entire working lives, and they had a word for what some of them met down there: tomokazuki, the companion diver. Not a stranger. Themselves, met at depth, identical in every particular except that one thing was slightly too long. It does not attack. It offers, and it waits, and you do not take what it offers. In 1939 the folklorist Iwata Junichi published a dozen of their accounts. The medical literature attributes the encounters to cold, exhaustion, isolation and running low, all at once, and is very likely correct, and I do not think the women of that coast would have found the correction interesting. They cared about what you did.

I am grateful to both bodies of work and I have tried to be honest with them.

One last thing, which is the only personal note in this. When I was a child a dervish came through the town where I was living — very tall, long-bearded, carrying everything he owned in a single bag. He was not in a hurry about anything, and I could not work out what he was doing, and it did not seem to me that a person could be that still on the outside and be still on the inside as well. It frightened me. I have thought about him for most of my life, and I thought about him constantly while writing this, because the thing I have put at the bottom of the Cut is exactly that stillness, and the whole question of the book is what has to be taken out of a person to produce it.

Chew Z

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I. THE SPORT

ONE. 0 METRES

The woman comes up at eleven past nine and does everything right.

Sabine watches from the platform with her hands in her coat pockets. She is not required to watch. She is required to sign a form at the end of the day saying the water was managed, and the form does not ask whether she looked at it. But she has been coming out to the Cut for three weeks now and she has not yet found a way to stand on the platform without watching, so she watches.

The woman's head breaks the surface and she does not gasp. That is the first thing. The untrained gasp — they come up and they haul at the air like it owes them, and the hauling is the most dangerous thing they will do all morning, because a body that has been running on nothing for two minutes will sometimes take that first great greedy pull and simply stop. The woman does not gasp. She lets her mouth open and takes a small breath, then a second, then a third, each one deeper than the last, building back up in steps the way you would walk up out of a cellar rather than jumping.

Then she reaches up and takes the mask off her face. She does not push it up onto her forehead. She takes it off, all the way, and holds it, because the rule is that the safety diver has to see your eyes and there is no argument about whether he can see them through glass.

She finds him. He is a metre away, treading, waiting, and has been waiting since the moment she left. She looks at him. She holds his eyes for a full three seconds, which is longer than it sounds when you are cold and your heart is somewhere down in the twenties and climbing.

She lifts her hand out of the water, and makes a circle of her thumb and forefinger, and holds it up.

"I'm okay," she says.

The safety diver nods and says her time. Two minutes eleven. Thirty-one metres. She laughs, once, and the laugh goes out flat across the water and comes back off the slate walls a half-second

later, and that is the only echo you get at the Cut. Everything else the walls keep.

Sabine takes her hands out of her pockets.

It is a ritual for proving that you are still yourself, and it is performed, always, by somebody whose judgement is the least reliable it will be all day. That is the thing about it that nobody says out loud. The first symptom of running low is not weakness. It is confidence. A diver forty seconds from the lights going out will tell you, sincerely, in a clear voice, with steady eyes, that she feels excellent. So the sport built a test she can fail without knowing, and made it mandatory, and made it short, and gave it to a man who is watching for the wobble in her jaw and the drift in her eyes and the half-beat of hesitation before the words.

Mask off. Eyes. Sign. *I'm okay.*

Four things. She got all four.

. . .

The Cut is a hole that men dug for money and then stopped digging.

Six generations of Ossay went down into it dry, with lamps, and cut slate out of the walls in blocks, and brought the blocks up, and roofed most of the north of the department with them. Then slate stopped being what anyone wanted and the company that owned the hole discovered it owed more than the hole was worth, and one morning in a year Sabine's grandmother could remember, they turned off the pumps and went home.

A quarry is only ever dry on purpose. It took eleven years to fill. There was no ceremony about it. The water came up through the floor and in off the moor and down out of the sky and kept coming, and at some point in the middle of that decade the last of the machinery was hauled out and sold for the metal, and the men who had stripped it did a thorough job, because they were paid by weight. There is nothing down there now. That is a thing Sabine finds she has to tell people, and tell them twice, because they

always want there to be something. A cage. A winch. A cart on a rail. They want the bottom of the water to be a museum.

It is silt and slate. Ninety-four metres of black and then a floor with nothing on it.

The town has no sea. The nearest coast is four hours in a car and it is a bad coast, all shingle and wind and caravan parks with the shutters down eight months of the year. So Ossay has this instead: an inland abyss, forty minutes' walk from a Co-op, deeper than most of the sea anybody in the town has ever swum in. People drive a long way to get into it. That has always struck Sabine as the honest part. Nobody comes to the Cut for the scenery. There isn't any. You come because it is deep and because it is close, in the way that people come to a certain kind of house on a certain kind of street, and everyone involved understands the transaction.

. . .

Her sister finds her at half past ten, which means she has been in the hut watching her through the window for an hour and a half deciding how to open.

"Good turnout," he says.

"Eleven."

"Eleven's good for a Tuesday." Maude has a folder under her arm and she is being careful not to look at it. "Sabine. The report."

The man who holds the lease on the Cut has never once stood on this platform. He holds a licence to charge people to get into water he does not own, from a council that would prefer not to think about it, and he administers it from an office in a town twenty miles away, and he has spent two years asking the company that insures the site to reduce what he pays them. The company that insures the site employs Maude Vasseur to assess risk. That is the whole of the machinery and there is nobody in it who has ever put a hand in this water except the two of them.

"You'll have it."

"I know I'll have it. I'm asking what's in it."

"Then wait five days and read it."

He laughs the way men laugh when they have decided to be pleasant about something for exactly one more exchange. "The thing is," he says, "the last one. The last person who did this job. He wrote nine pages about the walls."

"The walls are undercut in three places."

"The walls have been undercut since before I was born. Nobody dives the walls, they dive the line. Nine pages." He shifts the folder. "And the insurer read nine pages about the walls and put the number up by a third, and I paid it, because what am I going to do. And this year they've said they want somebody who actually dives, not a surveyor. They said get a diver. So I got the best diver in the department."

"I don't dive."

"You coach."

"That's not the same sentence."

"It's near enough for the form." He says it lightly and it is the first cruel thing he has said, and she can see him decide to leave it there rather than sharpen it, which is worse. "Look. All I'm asking is that the report is about what happens in the water and not about the geology. That's not me leaning. That's me saying you're the only person they'd believe."

Sabine looks out at the Cut.

At this hour the surface is the colour of an unwashed window. The walls go straight down into it and there is a line where the slate stops being slate and starts being the reflection of slate, and then a little below that line the reflection gives up and there is simply an edge, and past the edge nothing. From the platform you can see perhaps two metres down. On a bright still afternoon in June, three. It looks like the top of something rather than the surface of it.

"They'd believe me," she says.

"You know they would."

"Maude, they'd believe me because of a thing that happened here nine years ago. That's the whole of it. That's the entire reason my name is worth anything to an insurer. You understand that."

Maude has the decency to take a moment.

"Yes," he says.

"All right."

"That's not why I asked."

"It's why they'll believe me."

"Yes." He puts the folder down on the rail, and does not open it, and looks at the water with her for a while, and out of what is either respect or fear he does not say the name. Nobody in Ossay says the name to her. It has been nine years and the town has arranged itself very carefully around a gap.

Down on the water the woman who came up at eleven past nine is going again. Sabine watches her do the breathe-up: face down, arms out, the long slow emptying that looks from a distance like a person asleep on the surface of a puddle. Her safety diver hangs beside her with a hand on her shoulder blade, and when she rolls to go he takes the hand away and says something Sabine can't hear, and the woman folds at the waist and is gone.

The line goes taut. That is the only sign. One thin rope running from a buoy down into the dark with a weight on the end of it, and for the next two minutes the only evidence that there is a person in the world under that buoy is that the rope is slightly less slack than it was.

"I'll write about the water," Sabine says.

. . .

She waits until the last car has gone at four and the light has begun to go with it, and then she walks down the ramp to the water's edge, which she does most days, and squats, and puts her right hand in.

The cold comes up through her wrist like a note being struck.

This is where the body remembers. Not the chest — everyone assumes it is the chest, and it isn't. It is the face and the hands. There are nerves in the skin of the face that have been waiting, in every human being who ever lived, for cold water, and when the cold arrives they throw a switch that has nothing to do with what anyone wants. The heart slows. Not gently. It drops away like a lift with the cable cut and then catches somewhere down in the twenties and walks. Four seconds between beats. Long enough that the first time it happens to a person they surface convinced they are dying, and the second time they surface convinced they have found religion. The blood leaves the hands and the feet and gathers in the middle where it is needed. The chest fills.

None of it is voluntary. That is the part she has never been able to teach properly, though she has said it a thousand times in a hundred different ways. You do not do the switch. The switch is done to you. All any diver ever gets to decide is whether to be in the water when it happens.

She holds her hand under until it stops hurting and starts belonging to somebody else, and counts, and at nineteen she feels her own pulse go long in her throat, and she takes the hand out.

Nine years. Her coat is dry. Her hair is dry. She has not put her face in this water since the fourth of April nine years ago, and she has stood at the edge of it four hundred times, and every single time she has put a hand in and taken it out again, and there is no version of this she can explain to anyone, including Maude, especially Maude, who has been trying to get her to explain it for most of a decade and who is under the impression that it is guilt.

It isn't guilt. Guilt would be easier. Guilt is a thing you can carry up a hill.

Sabine dries her hand on her coat, and looks at the black, and the black does what it always does, which is nothing at all, patiently.

Then she goes up to the hut and signs herself off the site for the day, and on the way out she notices that one of the eleven cars is still in the gravel: an old estate, mud to the sills, a wetsuit hung over the open tailgate steaming very slightly in the cold.

She stops.

She looks back at the water. From up here, in this light, you cannot see the buoy.

She stands in the gravel for a long moment with her keys in her hand, and then she puts them back in her pocket and walks down the ramp again.

TWO. 3 METRES

Nobody is in the water. That is the first thing she establishes, and it takes her ninety seconds of standing at the edge in the failing light to establish it, and it does not make her feel better.

The buoy sits where it sits. The line goes down out of it and disappears at a hand's depth. There is no diver on the surface and no diver hanging at three metres doing the slow thing beginners do, and there is nobody on the platform to say *he went that way*, because it is twenty past four on a Tuesday in Ossay and everyone with any sense has gone to get warm.

Then the surface breaks eight metres out from the ramp and a man comes up, and he is not gasping either.

He takes three breaths, small then larger then larger, and turns his head and sees her, and there is a fractional pause while he decides how much trouble he is in. Then he swims in with an easy sideways stroke, one arm, unhurried, and gets a hand on the concrete lip of the ramp.

"You're Sabine Vasseur," he says.

"You're on your own."

"I know."

"There's a rule."

"I know the rule."

He is somewhere in his middle twenties. Black hair flattened to his skull, three days of beard, a nose that has been broken once and set by somebody in a hurry. His lips have gone the colour lips go. He is shivering in the small tight way of a man who has been cold

for an hour and has stopped noticing, and he is looking at her with what she recognises immediately and with some annoyance as delight.

"How deep," she says.

"Not deep."

"How deep."

"Thirty-one."

She lets a beat go. "There's a woman who did thirty-one this morning with a safety diver on her shoulder and a stopwatch and a rope she could hold. She's been diving nine years."

"I know. She's good." He says it without any edge at all, as a fact he is glad about. "I wasn't on the line. I don't like the line."

"You don't like the line."

"It gets in the way."

Sabine crouches on the ramp so that her face is at the level of his, which is a thing she does with beginners in a pool and has not done outdoors in nine years, and she is aware that she is doing it and cannot make herself stop.

"The single rule," she says, "the only one, the one that comes before every other rule in this sport, is that you do not do it alone. Not because you might drown. You're not going to drown, you're too good to drown. Because at some point, and it will be at a depth you've done fifty times before, the lights are going to go out. Not dim. Out. And you will get no warning at all, and the last thing you'll remember is feeling fine." She holds up one finger. "Ten seconds. That's the window. Ten seconds where somebody who is already touching you gets your face out of the water, and if they do, you come round and you're embarrassed. If nobody's touching you—"

"I know."

"Then say the rest of it."

He looks at her. Then, obediently, as though it were a poem he had been made to learn: "Then the mouth opens by itself, and it isn't drowning yet, but it's the last part before drowning."

Something goes through her that she does not have a name for.

"Who taught you that."

"Nobody taught me anything," he says. "I read."

. . .

His name is Aurel Nizan and he has been coming to the Cut for fourteen months, which is a thing she can verify and does, later, from the sign-in book, where his name appears in a slanting hand ninety-one times. He works nights at the plastics works on the Ossay road, four on and four off, which means his diving is done on weekday afternoons in the empty hours, which means for fourteen months there has been a man in this water almost entirely unobserved.

He does not seem furtive about it. That is what unsettles her most, walking back up to the hut with him talking beside her, both of them steaming faintly in the cold. He is not sneaking. He has simply found something and gone at it, alone, in a hole outside a town of four thousand people, with no coach and no club and no safety diver, out of books, and he has got himself to thirty-one metres.

"How long can you hold it," she asks.

"On the surface? Five twenty."

"Say the number again."

"Five minutes and twenty seconds. Lying face down, not moving." He shrugs and immediately regrets the shrug, because his shoulders are locked with cold. "It's not a good number. There's a man who does eleven."

"There is one man in the recorded history of this sport who does eleven and he doesn't work nights at a plastics works."

Aurel laughs. It is a good laugh, unguarded, and it goes out flat across the water and comes back off the slate half a second later.

. . .

She should report him. There is a line on the form for it: *breaches observed*. There is even a procedure — a written warning, then a suspension of access, then a letter to the council. The lease-holder would sign it from twenty miles away without reading it, because a solo diver is an uninsured death waiting to happen on land he pays for and never visits.

She does not report him. She writes, in the log, *31m unaccompanied, verbal warning given, diver receptive*, which is two-thirds true, and she closes the book, and she goes home and does not sleep well.

. . .

On Thursday she teaches, because it is Thursday, and there are five of them on the shallow shelf at the western end where the old cutting bench sits three metres under and gives you a floor to stand on.

Two sisters in their thirties who have booked the course as a birthday thing and are already, she can see, going to be adequate and content and never come back. A man called Petar who is too strong, which is the commonest problem in the sport and the hardest to talk anybody out of. A boy of nineteen who has been sent by his father. And a woman in her fifties who has been diving nine years, does not need the session, and comes to the sessions anyway.

"Face in the water," Sabine says. "All of you. Don't hold your breath. I want you to just put your face in and breathe out slowly through your nose and count to twenty."

They do it. Petar does it too fast and comes up first.

"Again. Slower."

They do it again.

"Now. Hands up if your heart slowed down."

Nobody puts a hand up, because nobody can tell, because you almost never can from the outside.

"It did," Sabine says. "All five of you. Every one of you just had your heart rate drop, and you didn't feel it, and you couldn't have stopped it if you'd wanted to. There are nerves in the skin of your face, here—" she draws a line with two fingers, across her own cheekbones and along the ridge of her brow, "—that have been sitting in your head your entire life waiting to be touched by cold water. That's all they're for. And when they get touched, a switch goes, and your heart slows down, and the blood goes out of your hands and feet and gathers up in the middle of you where it's actually useful."

"Why," says one of the sisters.

"Because we used to live in it." Sabine says this the way she always says it, flatly, because the flatness is what makes it land. "Every animal that goes in and out of water has this. Seals have it, obviously. Beavers have it. So do we, and we didn't earn it, we just never lost it, and it means that a human being who has never dived in her life is already built for it and doesn't know."

The boy of nineteen has stopped looking bored.

"That's the switch," she says. "You'll hear people call it other things. Ignore them. It's the switch, it's free, it's the whole reason any of this is possible, and here is the important part." She waits until she has all five. "You don't do it. It is done to you. You can make it come on faster and harder with practice, and you can make it come on faster by getting the cold on your face early, and that's most of what training is. But you never do it. The only decision you ever get to make in this entire sport is whether you're in the water when it happens."

The woman in her fifties, treading beside the bench, catches her eye and looks away, and Sabine understands that she has heard

this said thirty times and has noticed, this time, that it was said differently.

. . .

She keeps them shallow. Three metres, the bench under their feet, twenty-five minutes, and then she takes them out because the two sisters have gone the grey-white that means the cold has got past the suit and into the meat, and cold is not a discomfort, cold is a bill. A cold diver burns through everything faster. A cold diver shivers, and shivering is expensive, and the expense comes off the only account that matters.

Petar wants to know when they can go to the line.

"You've been in the water four hours total," Sabine says. "The line's still going to be here."

"Other people are on the line."

"Other people have four thousand hours in this water."

Petar wants to argue. She lets him not argue, which is a technique, and while he is not arguing she is looking past his shoulder at the far end of the Cut where the buoy sits.

The line is taut.

It has been taut for — she does not know how long. She has been teaching. She looks at her watch, which is useless, and then at the buoy, and she counts, and at forty-one the surface breaks beside it and a dark head comes up and takes three breaths, small then larger then larger.

Nobody is with him.

Petar is still talking. Sabine says, "Excuse me a moment," in a voice that stops him mid-word, and walks the length of the shelf to the eastern end with her hands in her pockets, and stands, and waits, and watches Aurel Nizan tread water at the buoy for four minutes doing absolutely nothing that a person unfamiliar with the sport would find alarming.

He is not resting. She knows the difference. He is holding his position, and his head is turned so that he is looking down and

slightly to his left, at nothing, at forty metres of water and then fifty more, with the loose attention of a man on a station platform waiting for a train that he knows is coming and is not late.

Then he lifts his head, and sees her on the shelf, and raises a hand.

Not a wave. Thumb and forefinger, a circle, held up.

I'm okay.

She does not raise a hand back. She stands there with the cold coming up off the water and she thinks, with a clarity that will bother her for weeks, that she has just been told something by a man who has no idea he told her anything, in a language that she and one other person are the only ones ever to have spoken in this water.

He grins at her across forty metres of surface, and folds, and goes down again.

THREE. 5 METRES

From the log of Aurel Nizan. Fourth notebook, unnumbered pages, written in pencil.

. . .

Red is the first colour to die and it dies at five metres.

I want to put that down properly because when I tell people they think I mean it gets dark. It doesn't get dark at five metres. At five metres on a decent day it's bright enough to read a newspaper. What happens is that the water takes the red out of the light, the way a filter would, except a filter takes something out of what you see and this takes something out of what exists. There is no red down there to be seen. It isn't hiding. It has been removed.

So: the O-ring on my mask strap is red. In the car park it is red. At two metres it is a dull red, like brick. At five metres it is grey. Not greyish. Grey, exactly and completely, the same grey as the strap it sits on, and I can hold it up in front of my face in good light and know perfectly well that it is red and be entirely unable to make it be red.

Orange goes next, at about ten. Then yellow, around twenty, and yellow going is the one you notice, because yellow is what most of the light has been by then, and when it goes the whole hole changes character in about four metres. Green holds out longest. Green gets you to thirty.

After that it is blue for a while, and then it is not blue.

I have written *blue* in this notebook eleven times in fourteen months and every one of them is a lie of convenience. What is down there past thirty-five is not a colour. The closest I have come to it: shut your eyes in a dark room and keep them shut for longer than is comfortable, twenty minutes, half an hour, until you have stopped waiting for anything. What's there then isn't black. There's a field. It moves slightly. It has a grain to it, like the grain on a photograph pushed too far, and it has no source, because your eyes are closed and nothing is getting in.

That is what is in the Cut past thirty-five metres. That exact thing, at scale, with your eyes open.

The first time I understood that I had to come up. I did it wrong and got the shakes on the surface and had nobody with me, which I know, and I am putting it in the notebook because I said at the start that I would put everything in the notebook.

. . .

I gave up the spearfishing in the second month and I want to write down why, because I have not said it out loud to anybody and if I say it out loud it will come out sounding like a conversion and it isn't one.

I started with a gun, because that is how men my age start. You get a cheap gun and a snorkel and you go to that awful coast four hours away and you hang around in three metres of surge waiting for something stupid to swim past, and you shoot at it, and you miss, and the missing is most of it, and it is a good enough way to spend a Saturday.

The reason it works, the actual reason, is that it gives you an errand. You cannot hold your breath for two minutes as a project.

Nobody can. Try it dry in a chair sometime and you will find that the seconds have edges on them and you will be aware of every single one. But go under with an errand — with a thing you are looking for, a gully you want to see round, a fish you have decided is yours — and the seconds stop having edges. You come up and it's been ninety seconds and you'd have sworn it was thirty. The errand does that. The errand is a machine for making time not exist.

So I got very good at holding my breath by accident, while I was busy doing something else, which is how everybody gets good at everything.

And then in the second month, in the Cut, in maybe eight metres of water on the shelf, I put the gun down on the bench because it was in my way, and went down without it.

I do not have a good way of writing what happened next because nothing happened. That is the whole content of it. Nothing happened for about forty seconds and it was the most substantial forty seconds I have ever been present for.

No errand. Nothing to look for, nothing to be pointing at, nothing to want. Just a man in cold grey water with his lungs shut and his heart going once every four seconds and nowhere at all to be.

I have spent my entire life in an argument with myself. I don't say that for sympathy, I say it as a description of the weather. There is a voice and it has opinions about everything I do while I am doing it, and about everything I did years ago while I am trying to sleep, and I have tried the things people try. I have tried drink, which works for ninety minutes and then charges interest. I have tried running until I was sick. I have tried a course of tablets that made the voice quieter and made everything else quieter too, so that I was fine, and nothing was interesting, and I stopped taking them without telling the doctor, which was stupid.

Under the water on the bench in the second month the voice stopped.

Not quieter. Stopped. There was no argument, because there was no one to argue with, because the thing that does the arguing had put itself down along with the gun. And what was left was — I want

to be careful here — not peace. Peace suggests a good feeling and this was not a feeling. It was more like the removal of a noise you had forgotten was a noise. A room where a fridge has been unplugged.

I came up and I sat on the bench with my head out and I was shaking, and it was not the cold.

I sold the gun that week.

. . .

I have read everything I can find and most of it is written for people who want to compete, and I don't. There is a whole apparatus — the federations, the judges, the ratified attempts, the cards you hand up from the plate at the bottom to prove you got there. None of that is anything to me. I don't want a number on a website. I want the fridge unplugged and I want it for longer.

But the literature is useful in one particular way and I want to record the useful thing because it changed how I do this.

I had assumed, like everybody assumes, that the reason you have to come up is that you are running out of air.

It isn't.

The desperation — the thing that makes you claw for the surface, the thing that feels exactly like drowning — is not about running low. It is about waste. Your body makes a gas as it works, and that gas builds up, and there are sensors that watch the level of it, and when the level gets high they set off an alarm, and the alarm is the most convincing thing you will ever experience. It is not a suggestion. It is an absolute, screaming, total certainty that you must breathe now.

And it is not measuring the thing that can kill you.

The waste gas builds up on a timetable and the air runs down on a different timetable, and in a trained person those two timetables come apart. Which means the alarm goes off long before there is any danger — and it also means that the alarm can be over and done with, silent, finished, while the danger is still coming.

You can learn to ignore it. That is the entire skill. There is nothing else in this sport. Everything else is fins and technique and equalising your ears. The skill is that a man can be taught to hear his own body screaming that it is dying and to file the screaming as noise.

I read that and I put the book down and I went and stood in the kitchen for a while.

Because if it can be done with that alarm — the oldest one, the one that comes before language, the one that every animal has and no animal ignores — then what exactly is the status of all the other ones. I have alarms about my job, about money, about the woman I lived with for three years and the way it ended, about the fact that I am twenty-six and work nights in a building that makes plastic clips for a company that makes plastic clips. What if those are all the same class of object. What if they are all measuring the wrong thing and going off on a timetable of their own, and the only reason I have never been able to file them as noise is that nobody ever told me I was allowed to.

The books do not go into that. The books are about fins.

. . .

I have got to thirty-one metres.

I did it four times last week and the fourth time was better than the first, which is not how it is supposed to work — you get worse across a session, that's the rule, the debt accumulates — and I don't know what to make of that yet so I am putting it down without a conclusion.

I know I am supposed to have somebody with me. I have read every version of the argument and I agree with all of it, and when I am on land I fully intend to sort it out.

The difficulty is that there is nobody. There is a club forty miles away that meets on Sundays when I am on nights. There is a woman who comes on Thursdays who is good and who is kind and who dives with her husband. There is a coach who comes out to the Cut on Thursdays and teaches beginners on the shelf and has

apparently not been in the water herself for years, and who has watched me twice now from the concrete with her hands in her pockets, and who I have not worked out at all.

Something else, and this is the last thing and then I'll stop.

At thirty-one metres, at the deepest part of it, in that grey field with no source — the seconds have gone back to not having edges. And I have not got an errand.

Which means something is doing the job the errand used to do.

I don't know what. I am not going to invent something. But I have started noticing that I am *attending* down there, the way you attend when somebody is in the room, and I am aware that this is exactly what the literature says happens to people who are cold and alone and running low in the dark, and that it has a boring name, and that everyone it has ever happened to has believed at the time that theirs was different.

Mine is probably not different.

I am going deeper on Thursday.

FOUR. 10 METRES

"I'll dive with you," Sabine says.

It is the following Thursday and it is raining in the flat determined way it rains on the moor, and Aurel is standing on the ramp in a half-peeled wetsuit with his arms out of the sleeves and the top folded down at his waist, and he has just come up from twenty-eight metres alone for the second time that afternoon, and she has been standing there watching him do it, and she is as surprised as he is.

"You don't dive," he says.

"I'll be your safety. That's not the same sentence."

He looks at her for a moment too long. Then, because he is twenty-six and cannot help it: "Why?"

"Because you're going to keep going down there whether I'm on the surface or not, and if you do it alone you will die in that water

this year, and I'd rather not." She hears how it comes out. "Also because the man who holds the lease has asked me to write a report about how safe this hole is, and I can't very well write it while there's someone getting to thirty metres in it on his own four days a week."

"So I'm a liability."

"You're a liability."

"That's honest."

"It's a third of it," she says.

He waits for the other two thirds. She does not give them to him. What she does instead is hold out her hand for his mask, and when he hands it over she turns it in her fingers and looks at the strap, which is the wrong sort, and at the skirt, which is perished at one corner and will start letting water in within the month, and she gives it back.

"Sunday," she says. "You're not on nights Sunday."

"How do you know what I'm on?"

"You sign a book."

. . .

She takes him down to ten metres and keeps him there for an hour and he hates it.

This is deliberate and it is also the only honest thing she can do with him, because a diver who has taught himself out of books to thirty-one metres has one particular hole in him, always, in the same place, and the hole is not courage or technique. It is that he has never once had somebody watch him closely enough to tell him what he actually does.

"Again," she says. "And this time when you turn, look at me."

"I did look at you."

"You looked at the line."

"I don't use the line."

"You looked at where the line would be if you used it."

He goes down again. Ten metres, a slow drift to the bench, hang, turn, come up. She holds at five with her face out, watching the shape of him coming up out of the grey, and she is not diving, she is floating on the surface in a wetsuit with her head above the water and one arm hooked through the buoy strap, and that is what she has agreed to and she has made it clear that it is what she has agreed to.

He surfaces. Three breaths. Mask off. Eyes. Circle. "I'm okay."

"Better," she says. "You're kicking on the way down."

"I have to get down."

"You have to get down for the first twelve metres. After that you'll go on your own. Everybody knows that and everybody kicks anyway, and every kick you make in the first thirty seconds you pay for at the bottom with interest." She wipes rain off her face, which is pointless. "It's not about strength. Nothing here is about strength. The whole sport is arithmetic and you are the only variable that spends."

"How much."

"How much what?"

"How much does a kick cost."

And there it is: the actual question, asked plainly, by a man who wants the real answer and not the encouraging one, and Sabine feels the thing she has not felt in nine years and has been careful not to name, which is the pleasure of having something to give somebody who wants it.

"Come out," she says. "I'll draw it for you."

. . .

They sit in the hut with the heater going and two cups of tea and a page from the back of the sign-in book, and she draws him two lines.

"This," she says, "is what you've got. Air. It goes down at a rate. The rate depends on how hard you're working, how cold you are, how frightened you are, and how deep you are. It only ever goes down. When it gets to here—" she taps the bottom of the page, "—the lights go out. No warning. You'll feel excellent. That's not a joke and it's not a figure of speech, that is the documented thing: people feel *good* in the last ten seconds. Then nothing."

"All right."

"Now this." A second line, starting low, climbing. "This is the waste. Your body makes it while it works and there's nowhere for it to go, so it builds. And the alarm — the thing that makes you want to breathe, the thing that feels like dying — is watching this line. Not the other one. This one."

Aurel is very still.

"So," Sabine says. "The urge to breathe is a lie. It's not lying about whether it's uncomfortable, it's absolutely honest about that. It's lying about *what it's measuring*. It tells you you're about to die and what it actually knows is that there's rubbish piling up in a corner."

"I read that."

"Then you read the first half." She puts the pencil down. "Here's the second half, and this is the part the books do a bad job of, and it's the reason I'm sitting in a hut with you instead of writing you up.

"You can train the alarm. Everyone can. Two weeks of work and it comes later and quieter, and after a few years it comes so late that it's barely an event. And people describe that as getting stronger. It isn't. Nothing about you got stronger. You just turned down a bell." She taps the first line, the one going down. "This one never changes. This one has no bell on it at all. It never did. There is no sensation anywhere in the human body for the thing that actually kills freedivers.

"So what training does — what *I* would be doing to you, if I take you on — is not make you safer. It removes the only warning you had, which was never a warning about the right thing, and it replaces it with arithmetic and a person on the surface. That's it.

That's the whole of the safety in this sport. Sums, and somebody watching."

The rain goes on the roof of the hut.

"That's a bleak way to put it," Aurel says.

"It's the accurate way to put it. I've found that people who are told the bleak version early tend to be alive later." She drinks some tea.

"You'll want to go deeper than thirty-one. You'll go, whatever I say. So we'll do it with the sums."

"And somebody watching."

"And somebody watching."

He turns the page round and looks at the two lines, the one falling and the one climbing, and where they cross, and he says, not to her: "So the feeling is real and it's about the wrong thing, and you can be taught to stop listening to it, and nothing takes its place."

"Yes."

"How much of everything is like that?"

Sabine, who has spent nine years standing at the edge of cold water putting one hand in, says: "Drink your tea."

. . .

Maude arrives at twenty past three with a laptop bag over her shoulder and rain on her glasses, which is how Sabine knows she has walked from the road rather than driven in, which is how Sabine knows this is not a social call and is meant to look like one.

"They've hired you," Maude says.

"Hello, Maude."

"My company has hired you to write a water safety assessment on the Cut."

"He has."

"For the insurer."

"For the insurer."

Maude stands in the doorway of the hut and does not come in. She is three years younger than Sabine and looks five years older, which is a thing she achieved deliberately somewhere in her thirties and wears like a coat. Behind the wet glasses her eyes go once round the hut: the heater, the two cups, the page from the sign-in book with two lines drawn on it, the young man sitting on the bench in a half-peeled wetsuit who has stopped moving.

"And who's this," Maude says.

"Aurel Nizan."

"He dives here."

"He does."

"On his own." Maude has not looked at the sign-in book and does not need to; she has been reading sign-in books at the Cut for nine years, and Sabine understands, in that moment, with a lurch, that Maude has been reading *that particular name* for months. "Ninety-one times, mostly weekday afternoons. Nobody with him. I flagged it in March."

"You flagged it to who?"

"To the lease-holder. Who did nothing, because a man who dives alone four times a week is the most profitable customer he has, and because he has never been here." Maude finally comes in, and puts the laptop bag down, and takes her glasses off, and she looks at Aurel with an expression that Sabine has seen her use on claimants. "Mr Nizan. I'm Maude Vasseur. I assess risk for the company that insures this site. Would you tell me the deepest you've been in this water?"

Aurel looks at Sabine.

"Don't look at her," Maude says pleasantly. "She's not your solicitor."

"Thirty-one metres."

"Alone."

"Yes."

"Thank you." Maude sits down, and opens the laptop, and does not turn it on. "Sabine. Outside."

. . .

They stand in the rain at the top of the ramp, which is as far as Maude will go, because Maude does not go down the ramp.

"You cannot be his coach," Maude says.

"I'm his safety."

"You cannot be his *anything*. You are writing a report that says this water is safe, and the insurer is going to read it, and you have a documented interest in—"

"Say the sentence, Maude."

"—in the water being safe," Maude finishes, evenly. "That's the sentence. That's the whole sentence. Don't do that thing where you dare me."

Sabine looks out at the Cut. In the rain the surface has no shine on it at all; it takes the rain and gives back nothing, so that from up here the hole reads as a piece missing out of the moor.

"He's going to do it anyway," she says. "You know he is. You've had his name since March. You could have written to the council in March and had him barred and you didn't, and you didn't because you knew exactly what you know now, which is that a man like that gets barred from the Cut and drives to a reservoir and goes in off a bank with nobody within a mile of him. Barring him kills him. So don't stand in the rain and tell me about interests."

Maude is quiet for a moment.

"Nine years," she says.

"Don't."

"Nine years you haven't put your face in that water, and this week you got a wetsuit out." Maude puts her glasses back on. "I've stopped expecting you to tell me what happened. I've genuinely stopped, Sabine, it's been a relief, you should try it. But I want you to hear me say this once so it's said. I know what you look like

when you've decided something and are going to let it happen slowly. You've had that face since you were fifteen."

"He's twenty-six years old and he taught himself out of books and he's better already than I was at thirty."

"That's not a reassurance. Do you hear that that's not a reassurance?"

Sabine says nothing.

Down at the bottom of the ramp Aurel has come out of the hut with his wetsuit peeled to the waist and steam coming off his shoulders in the cold, and he is standing at the water's edge in the rain, not going in, looking down. He crouches. He puts his right hand in, past the wrist.

Sabine watches him do it and feels the floor of her chest go out from under her.

He holds it there. He is counting; she can see him counting. And at about nineteen his shoulders drop a fraction, the way they do when the throat goes long, and he takes the hand out and shakes it and stands up.

"What," says Maude.

"Nothing," says Sabine.

FIVE. 0 METRES

The first thing Sabine gives him is a sheet of paper, and he is visibly disappointed, which she enjoys.

"That's homework."

"I can see it's homework."

"You thought I was going to take you deep."

"I thought we'd be in the water," Aurel says.

"You'll be in the water on Sunday for an hour and you'll be on that sofa for nine hours between now and then, and the sofa is where

you'll actually get better." She taps the sheet. "Everybody hates this part. I hate this part. It's the part that works."

. . .

The sheet has two sets of numbers on it and she makes him read them in front of her, out loud, which is a technique.

"First one," she says. "You hold your breath for two minutes. Then you rest for two minutes. Then you hold for two minutes again, and rest for a minute forty. Then two minutes, rest a minute twenty. And so on down. Eight rounds. The hold never changes. The rest gets shorter every time."

"So it gets harder."

"It gets harder because you're starting each one with more rubbish in you than the last." Sabine sits back. "That table doesn't make you fitter. It doesn't buy you a single second. All it does is make you meet the alarm, eight times in an hour, in a room, with nothing at stake. You get to be screamed at by your own body while sitting on a sofa in your own house where you are in absolutely no danger, and after enough of that the screaming stops being an event."

"And the second table?"

"Opposite. The rest is always the same and the hold gets longer. Two minutes, then two ten, then two twenty, all the way up until you can't." She shrugs. "That one teaches you to be poor. To run low and keep functioning while you're low. The first one teaches you to put up with the alarm. The second teaches you to work with an empty account."

Aurel looks at the sheet. "Which is more important?"

"The first one keeps you comfortable. The second one is the one that kills people, because it teaches you to be very good at being nearly out." She says it flatly, in the tone she keeps for the bleak version. "You need both. And you need to write down every single round, including the ones you gave up on, especially the ones you

gave up on, because a table with no failures in it is a table somebody's lying about."

. . .

He does them and he does them properly and this is where she starts finding out who he is, which is what the dry work is actually for.

She has never told anybody that. There is a whole coaching literature about the physical purpose of the tables and it is accurate and it is not why she sets them. Anybody can be brave in water once. Water does most of the work — it is cold and dark and interesting, and a person with something to prove will go a long way into it on adrenaline alone and feel wonderful afterwards.

Nobody feels wonderful doing table work.

It is done alone, in a room, in ordinary clothes, on a Tuesday, with a phone propped against a mug for a timer. It is uncomfortable and dull and there is no scenery and nothing to look at and nobody watching, and it takes an hour, and it has to be done four times a week for the rest of your diving life, and it never gets more interesting.

So the tables tell you the only thing about a diver that matters, which is what they do when it is boring.

She has had eighty-one divers. Sixty of them stopped doing the tables within a month and lied about it for a while and then stopped lying. Fifteen did them in bursts, heroically, for a fortnight, and then not at all. Six did them.

Aurel does them at four in the morning.

. . .

That is the detail she cannot let go of.

He works nights. Four on, four off, at the plastics works on the Ossay road, six in the evening until six in the morning, and he comes off shift at six and drives home and eats something and does

an hour of table work at seven in the morning with the curtains shut before he sleeps.

He shows her the book. Every round, every date, every failure — and there are failures, plenty of them, marked with a small dash and a note. *Gave up r6. Gave up r7, r8. Bad night. Nearly threw up.* He has not tidied it. He has not made himself look better anywhere in it.

"This is four weeks," she says.

"Four and a bit."

"You haven't missed one."

"No."

"Why not?"

Aurel thinks about it. He always thinks about it, and she has stopped finding that charming and started finding it informative.

"Because it's the only thing I've ever been given to do that has a right answer," he says.

. . .

The rest of the dry work is worse and she gives him all of it in the second week.

The bowl. A washing-up bowl of cold water on the kitchen table, and he puts his face in it and holds. That is the whole exercise and it looks, and is, ridiculous. The switch lives in the skin of the face, and it can be trained, and it can be trained on land in a kitchen, and the more often you make it happen the sooner and harder it comes when you actually need it. She tells him to add ice.

He tells her, in the third week, that he does it at four in the morning after the tables, and that the neighbour's dog barks when the tap runs at that hour, and that he has started using water he put in the fridge the previous evening.

"You're keeping a jug of cold water in the fridge to put your face in."

"Yes."

"Do you understand how that would sound to a person?"

"There's nobody to say it to," Aurel says.

The stretching. This is the one that takes the longest and hurts the most and produces the least visible result. A chest that is going to be squeezed to a fifth of its size needs to be a chest that can *be* squeezed. Ribs, the muscle sheet underneath, the whole cage. A stiff diver is a diver who tears something at sixty metres, and almost every man who comes to this sport is stiff, because almost every man who comes to this sport has spent his life making himself hard in the front.

She gives him four positions and he is appalling at all of them.

That is the first honest pleasure she has had in nine years — watching a young man who can hold his breath for five and a half minutes fail completely at lying on the floor and letting his ribs move. He is furious about it. He is furious in a quiet flat way that she recognises, and she works him at it for forty minutes twice a week for a month, on the concrete, in the rain, and it is the only part of the training he complains about.

"This isn't diving," he says, face down on a mat in the drizzle.

"No. This is the bill for diving, paid early."

The breathe-up. Two minutes of doing nothing, correctly.

That is all it is. Face down on the surface, arms out, breathing slowly and completely out. And it is the hardest single thing she teaches anybody, and she teaches it last, because it cannot be done by effort and everything else in the sport can.

"You're trying," she tells him, on the surface, in June. "I can see you trying from here. You're doing relaxation the way you do the tables."

"How am I supposed to do it?"

"You're not supposed to *do* it."

"That's not instruction. That's a fortune cookie."

Sabine laughs — properly, out loud, across the water, and hears it come back off the slate half a second later, and is briefly appalled at herself.

“All right,” she says. “Here’s the instruction. Relaxation in this sport is not a mood and it is not a state of mind and it has nothing whatever to do with being calm. It is a measurable physical condition. It means: no muscle in your body is doing anything it hasn’t been asked to do. That’s it. That’s the whole definition. A jaw that’s slightly set is spending. A hand that’s slightly closed is spending. A shoulder up round your ear because the water’s four degrees is spending, and you’ll pay for it at sixty metres in a currency you can’t see the balance of.

“So don’t relax. Go through yourself, part by part, and find what’s switched on that doesn’t need to be, and switch it off. It’s an inventory. It’s plumbing.”

He is quiet for a moment, treading.

“That’s the first thing anybody’s ever said to me about calming down that made any sense,” he says.

. . .

She writes it all down, every session, every table, every failure, in a hardback book she bought in April for that purpose and has told nobody about.

What she is recording, if anybody ever asks — and somebody will, eventually, and it will be her sister — is a training programme that is conservative to the point of timidity. Six weeks before she let him past forty metres, when he was at thirty-one when she met him. Depth increases of five metres, never eight. Two rest days a week enforced. Homework logged. Stretching. Every single thing correct, every single thing defensible, every page signed and dated at the bottom in her own hand.

She has been coaching for twenty-two years and she has never once signed a training page.

She is not entirely sure, in the second week of May, who she thinks is going to read it.

But she knows the reason she started, and the reason is that on the twenty-sixth of April a young man came up out of that water and said six words to her on the surface, and every single thing she has done since has been done in the presence of those six words, and there is a version of what she is doing that would look, written down by somebody else, extremely bad.

So she writes it down herself.

That way it is a record.

If she stopped writing it down, it would be a secret.

SIX. 10 METRES

There is one skill in this sport that cannot be got at by wanting it, and it stops nearly everybody, and it stopped him.

"Your ears," Sabine says.

"My ears are fine."

"Your ears are fine to thirty-one metres because you're strong and because there was still something left in you to push with. There isn't at fifty. That's the wall. That's the whole wall, and it's got nothing to do with courage, and about half the people who come to this sport never get over it."

They are on the concrete in the last week of April with the rain off and the light going, and she draws it for him on the back of a page from the sign-in book, because she draws everything.

Going down, the water squeezes the air spaces in a head. Behind the eardrum there is a small space and it has to be filled or the drum bends inward and eventually gives, and filling it means getting air up into it from below. Everyone knows this; everyone who has ever been on an aeroplane has done a version of it.

The version everyone does is: shut the mouth, pinch the nose, and push from the chest.

"And that works," she says, "to about twenty metres, and then it stops working, and it stops working for a reason that has nothing to do with your technique. It stops working because *there is nothing left in your chest to push with*. By forty metres what you took down

with you is a fifth of the size it was. You can push as hard as you like. There's no volume there. You're squeezing an empty bag."

"So what do you do?"

"You stop using your chest. You move air with your tongue."

. . .

It takes him eleven weeks and it is the only part of the training that ever makes him look defeated.

The skill is to take a small amount of air, hold it in the mouth and throat, seal it off from the lungs entirely, and then pump it upward using the back of the tongue like a piston. The lungs are not involved. The chest does not move. It is a completely separate mechanism from breathing, and almost nobody can do it the first hundred times they try, and the reason is that it requires the deliberate voluntary control of muscles that no human being has ever had to think about.

"It's like being told to move your ears," Aurel says, on the concrete, in May, after forty minutes of failing.

"It's exactly like that. Some people can, most people can't, and everybody can *learn*, and there's no shortcut and no trick and nobody has ever found one in the whole history of the sport."

"How long did it take you?"

"Fourteen weeks."

He looks at her. "Fourteen."

"I was twenty-two and I cried about it in a car park in Brest and I have told nobody that in twenty-two years."

He laughs. She lets him.

. . .

The awful part is that he has been doing it wrong for fourteen months and getting away with it.

That is what she finds in the second week, and it is the first time she raises her voice at him.

He has taught himself, out of books, a hybrid — a bit of the tongue, a bit of the chest, done fast, done hard, and it has been working, and it has been working the way a bodged repair works, which is until it doesn't. She makes him take it apart. She makes him go back to five metres, on the shelf, over the bench, and do it slowly, and it is humiliating, and he is a man who has been to thirty-one metres alone and is now being made to hover at five metres in a wetsuit going *click, click, click* with his tongue while a woman watches his face.

"This is the worst thing I've ever done," he says.

"Good."

"You're enjoying it."

"I'm enjoying it enormously," Sabine says. "You've had fourteen months of nobody looking at you. This is what it's like when somebody looks."

And that, she thinks afterwards, driving home, is the whole of coaching. It is not knowledge. He had the knowledge; he read more than she has. It is that a person doing a difficult thing alone cannot see what they actually do, and will go on not seeing it for years, and the only cure is somebody standing close enough for long enough to say *you are doing this, not that*, and the strange violent intimacy of that is the reason people remember their coaches for the rest of their lives.

She has not done this for nine years.

She had forgotten she was good at it. That is not vanity. It is worse than vanity — it is that she had forgotten, and the forgetting had been comfortable, and the remembering is not.

. . .

The drill comes at the end of the third week and she does it on a Sunday when there is nobody else at the Cut, and she tells him what it is on the drive down and gives him the whole of it in the car park so that he cannot say afterwards that he was not warned.

"You're going to practise being taken."

"Being what?"

"You're going to go limp in the water and let me get you out, and you're going to do it about nine times, and you're going to hate it." She locks the car. "And then we're going to do it the other way round."

The four steps are simple and every diver on earth learns them and almost nobody ever uses them, and the ones who do use them use them once, badly, in a panic, on somebody they love.

Get the airway out of the water and keep it out. That comes before everything, before assessment, before shouting, before anything at all, because a person whose lights have gone out has perhaps ten seconds before the mouth opens by itself, and if the mouth opens above water they cough and come round and are embarrassed, and if it opens below water it is the beginning of the other thing.

Take the mask off.

Blow across the face. That is the actual instruction, and it sounds absurd until you know why: the cold on the face is the switch, and blowing air across wet skin is cold, and the switch is the last thing in a human being to stop working. You are not comforting them. You are ringing a bell in the only room that is still occupied.

And talk to them. Say their name and tell them to breathe, over and over, in an ordinary voice, to a person who is not there.

. . .

He is bad at going limp and good at everything else.

Nine times she tows him in, and nine times he cannot stop his neck from helping, and on the tenth she says, "You're holding your own head up," and he says, "I know," and on the eleventh he stops doing it, and she gets a hand under his jaw and his weight comes onto her forearm entirely, all of it, the whole dead mass of a twenty-six-year-old man in four-degree water, and she tows him thirty metres to the ramp with his face out and his eyes shut and his mouth slightly open.

She takes his mask off. She blows across his face. She says: "Aurel. Breathe."

And he opens his eyes.

They look at each other for slightly too long, at the bottom of a concrete ramp, in a hole in the moor, and then he says, "That's horrible," and she says, "Yes," and neither of them says anything else about it.

. . .

Then she has to be the body.

She has thought about this for eleven days and she has structured the entire session so that it arrives last, and she has considered four different ways of not doing it, and every single one of them would be a coach declining to complete the standard drill, and if she declines it she has to write down why in a book she signs and dates.

So she gets in the water and swims out to the buoy and turns onto her back and shuts her eyes and lets go.

It takes her three attempts. Twice she comes up on her own, spluttering, furious with herself, and the third time she gets it — everything off, everything switched out, the inventory done, the whole plumbing of her shut down deliberately for the first time in nine years — and she lies on the surface of the Cut with her face half under and her ears full of water and no muscle in her body doing anything it has not been asked to do.

And she hears, from a long way off, muffled, the sound of a young man coming through the water towards her.

Then a hand comes under her jaw.

Her face lifts clear. Her mask comes off — his hands are quick and careful and he does not fumble it. Cold air moves across her wet skin, deliberately, from a mouth held a few inches away.

And a voice says her name.

"Sabine. Breathe."

. . .

She lies there in his arms with her eyes shut for two seconds longer than the drill requires.

What she is checking for — and she knows exactly what she is checking for, she has known since she got in the water — is fear.

She has not been carried in this water since the fourth of April nine years ago, when a man walking a dog on the western path got her out because she could not get herself out, and she cannot remember any of it, and she has spent nine years being certain that if she were ever held in this water again it would come back and take her apart.

There is no fear.

She lies limp in four degrees of water at the eastern end of the Cut with her eyes closed and a stranger's hand under her jaw and the whole black column of it underneath her, ninety-four metres straight down, and what she feels is not fear and it is not relief and it is not even the ordinary animal comfort of being held.

It is *recognition*.

It is the feeling of arriving at a house you used to live in and finding your own coat still on the hook.

She opens her eyes.

"You did it right," she says. "All four. Good."

"You went completely," Aurel says. He sounds slightly shaken. "I've never — you were properly gone. I couldn't tell."

"That's the point of the drill."

"No, I mean I couldn't tell whether you'd gone on purpose."

Sabine treads water and looks at him.

"Neither could I," she says.

SEVEN. 20 METRES

The punches start at about a minute and a half and they are the reason most people never get past two.

Sabine teaches them on land, in a chair, because that is the only way to teach them honestly. She sits a beginner down, has them breathe normally, and then has them hold, and she says nothing at all for the first minute, and then when the first one lands she says: *there*.

The diaphragm is a sheet of muscle under the lungs and it is not on anybody's side. It has one job, which is to pull down and let air in, and it has been doing that job about twenty thousand times a day since before you were born without ever once being asked. When the waste starts building, the alarm goes to the diaphragm and the diaphragm tries to do its job.

You have your throat shut. So it pulls against nothing.

The result is a hit. From inside, under the ribs, hard enough to move a body in water. And then a pause, and then another, and the gaps get shorter and the hits get stronger, and there are people who have been diving for twenty years who will tell you honestly that the worst three minutes of their lives are the ones they chose.

The name divers use is *contractions*, which is a mealy word for it. Sabine has always called them the punches. She has never had a beginner fail to understand her.

"Here's the whole of it," she tells them, always, on the land, in the chair. "The punches are not the problem. The punches are not a warning. They mean the rubbish has reached a level, and the level is nowhere near the level that matters. You have — depending on who you are — between forty per cent and sixty per cent of your dive left when the first one lands. Sixty per cent. You are barely halfway.

"So you will be hit, repeatedly, by your own body, and it will feel exactly like drowning, and the correct response is to do absolutely nothing about it. Not to fight it. Not to brace. Not to breathe. To let

it happen and let the next one happen and keep going. That's the sport. That's all of it. Everything else is fins."

. . .

Aurel passes through them on his second Sunday and the way he does it is what starts the thing in her chest that will not sit down again.

She is at ten metres with her face out, one arm through the buoy strap, watching him come up from thirty-five. Thirty-five is the number she has given him and he has taken the number without argument, which she noted, because divers who take a number without argument are usually storing up an argument for later.

She sees him at fifteen. He is not swimming. He is coming up with his arms at his sides and his legs going in a slow economical beat that she would not change a thing about, and even at fifteen metres in bad light she can see him get hit, because the whole shape of him jolts and then resumes.

Then again. Then again, closer together.

And he does not alter.

That is the thing. She has coached eighty-odd people in this hole and every single one of them alters. They speed up, or they clench, or their kick loses its rhythm and turns into a scramble, or they lift their chin, which is the worst and the most human, as if the surface could be reached by wanting. Every diver alters, and a coach's job for the first three years is to teach them to alter less.

Aurel is hit six times in the last twelve metres and his kick does not change by a beat. He arrives at the surface on exactly the rhythm he left the bottom with, and he takes three breaths, small then larger then larger, and takes the mask off, and finds her eyes, and holds up the circle.

"I'm okay."

Sabine hears herself say, "Time," and her own voice sounds distant.

"Two forty-one."

"Depth?"

"Thirty-five."

"Punches?"

"Started about ninety seconds." He is treading, easy, and there is water in his eyebrows and he is not shivering yet. "Yes. Six or seven. Is that early?"

"It's normal." She makes herself say the next thing in the tone she would use with anybody. "You didn't change."

"I wasn't supposed to change."

"No. You weren't." She unhooks her arm from the strap. "Most people can't manage that in their first five years."

He shrugs, and this time the shrug is loose because he is not cold enough yet to be locked, and he says, in perfect innocence, the sentence that she will still be turning over at two in the morning three weeks from now:

"They don't feel like mine."

. . .

She takes it apart afterwards, driving home, and she can make it innocent four different ways.

He might mean what a hundred divers mean, which is that the punches are involuntary and so are experienced as something happening *to* you, not something you are doing. That is true and unremarkable and there is a whole literature of people saying it in slightly different words.

He might mean the ordinary dissociation that comes to anybody in a cold dark hole with a shut throat. The mind steps back a pace. Everybody's does. It is how the sport is possible at all: the diver watches the body from the next seat along and takes an interest.

He might mean nothing. People say things.

She gets home and puts the light on and stands in the kitchen with her coat still on, and she makes herself say the fourth version out loud, because there is nobody in the house and because if she does not say it in a kitchen she will end up saying it in a worse place.

"They don't feel like mine," she says. "Because there are two sets."

The house does not respond. The house is a two-bedroom terrace with slate on the roof out of the hole she will not go into and a boiler that comes on at six.

She had been thirty-five. It had been the fourth of April and the water had been four degrees, and by the second week of that March she and Elvire had been at seventy metres on a line that Elvire had rigged with her own hands, and Sabine had told her, on the drive back from a session in the second week of March, in a car with the heater on, with a bag of chips between them on the handbrake, *they don't feel like mine any more*.

And Elvire had said: *Whose, then?*

And Sabine had laughed, because it had been funny.

. . .

She does not sleep. At four she gives it up and comes downstairs and gets out the box.

The box lives at the back of the cupboard under the stairs and contains: two logbooks in Elvire's hand and one in her own; a folded and refolded newspaper page; a coroner's summary with a stamp on the front and four paragraphs on the inside; a photograph of two women on a slate ledge at the western end of the Cut, both laughing, both in wetsuits peeled to the waist, one of them holding up a thermos as though it were a trophy; and a mask.

She takes the mask out. It is nine years old and the skirt has gone hard and yellow, and the strap is a wide black strap, the good kind, the kind you had to send away for then.

She sits on the floor of the hall with it in her lap for a long time.

Then she puts it back, and puts the lid on the box, and pushes the box to the back of the cupboard, and at half past five she puts her coat on over her nightclothes and drives out to the Cut in the dark and stands at the top of the ramp until it is light enough to see the buoy.

She does not go down to the water. It is important to her, in a way she could not defend to anybody, that on that particular morning she does not go down the ramp and put her hand in.

. . .

"You're doing forty on Sunday," she tells Aurel on the Thursday.

"You said thirty-five."

"I've changed it."

He looks at her, and there is a fractional thing in his face, and it is not what she expected. It is not eagerness.

"Why," he says.

"Because you're ready for forty and you'd have got there on your own by August, and if you're going to get there I would rather you got there with me hanging at fifteen holding a watch."

"That's not why."

Sabine, who has been managing people in and out of dangerous water since she was twenty-two, is briefly and completely stopped.

"No," she says. "It's a third of it."

"That's the second time you've given me a third of something."

"You'll get the rest eventually."

"Will I?"

"No," she says, and it is the most honest sentence she says to him in the whole of April.

He laughs. She does not.

Forty metres is where the air starts behaving like a drug. She knows that and he knows that, because he reads, and he has probably read a better account of it than the one she would give him. He has not asked her about it. In fourteen months of teaching himself out of books he has not, as far as she can tell, once asked anybody anything.

She has decided to send a twenty-six-year-old man past the depth where the water starts talking, and to be on the surface with a

watch when it happens, and she has told herself four separate true reasons why, and the true reasons form a wall she cannot see over.

Behind the wall is the thing she said to Elvire in a car in March with a bag of chips on the handbrake. Behind the wall is the fourth of April. Behind the wall is a mask with a wide black strap in a box under the stairs, and a question she has not been able to put down in nine years, which is not *what happened to Elvire*.

It is: *would anybody else have said no?*

EIGHT. 20 METRES

From the working file of M. Vasseur, Claims & Risk. Site: OSSAY SLATE (THE CUT). File opened 4 April, nine years prior. Elvirer closed.

. . .

ITEM 1. Incident summary as recorded.

Two divers entered the water at the eastern buoy at 09:40. Water temperature four degrees. Line rigged to seventy-two metres by the deceased on the previous afternoon and left in place overnight, which is not against any rule and is against every recommendation.

Divers alternated. One dives, one holds the surface. Four dives completed between 09:40 and 11:15, depths of thirty, forty-five, fifty-five and sixty metres, all logged in the deceased's own hand in a book recovered from her car.

At 11:31 the deceased entered the water for a fifth dive with an intended depth of seventy-two metres. S. Vasseur held the surface.

At approximately 11:34 S. Vasseur descended to an unrecorded depth, described by her in the statement as "as far as I could get."

At 11:41 S. Vasseur surfaced alone. She was assisted from the water by a man walking a dog on the western path who had heard her shouting. She was not able to tell him what had happened for some minutes. Emergency services attended at 12:04.

The body was recovered on 9 April by a police dive team using equipment and gas.

Depth of recovery: sixty-eight metres. Four metres above the plate.

Cause of death: drowning, consequent on loss of consciousness due to lack of oxygen.

. . .

ITEM 2. Why this file is still open.

It is open because I never closed it and because nobody has ever asked me to.

The company settled in eleven weeks. There was no claim to fight: the deceased had no dependants, the site had no formal operator at the time, and the family in Charleroi wanted the body and the logbook and nothing else. My employer's exposure was assessed at nil. My recommendation was a formal notice to the council regarding unsupervised access, which was made and which produced, eventually, a locked gate that anybody can climb and a sign-in book that anybody can not sign.

The professional matter was concluded in eleven weeks.

I am going to write the rest of this down as though somebody else will read it, because that is the only discipline I have found that keeps it honest, and because on the days when I am least honest I am aware that I am building a case rather than keeping a record.

. . .

ITEM 3. The statement.

I have the statement. I have read it perhaps two hundred times over nine years, which I recognise is not a normal number.

It is four hundred words long. It was taken at Ossay police station on the evening of 4 April by an officer who had never taken a statement about diving and who wrote down, faithfully, everything he was told, including the parts that make no sense, which is the only reason this file has ever been of any use to me.

The four hundred words are, in summary:

She went down at 11:31. I held the surface. At about three minutes I went down after her. I got as far as I could get. I could not see

her. I came up. I do not know how long I was down. I do not know how deep I went. I came up and there was nobody there.

That is the substance and it is unimpeachable. Every diver I have ever spoken to about it, and I have spoken to eleven, has said the same thing: that is exactly what would have happened, and there is nothing in it to question, and she is lucky to be alive, and going down after a diver who has been under three minutes at that depth is the single most dangerous thing a human being can voluntarily do, and she did it, and she should not have, and everybody would have.

But.

In the statement there are two sentences that are not in the summary, and they are the two sentences the officer wrote down because he did not know they were unusual.

The first is: *"I got as far as I could get and then I could not make myself go further."*

The second is: *"There was somebody there and it was not her."*

The officer asked, according to his own note in the margin, whether she meant another diver had been present at the site. She said no. He asked whether she meant a member of the public. She said no. He wrote: *witness distressed, possibly confused, cold exposure. Did not pursue.*

. . .

ITEM 4. What I have done with those two sentences over nine years.

I have shown them to a doctor, who explained to me at length and with great patience the state a body is in after a rapid deep descent on no air, and used a word I have since read a great deal about, and said, in effect: *of course she said that. They say all sorts. It isn't evidence of anything except that she nearly died.*

I have shown them to a diving coach in Brest who charged me nothing and told me that people see things down there so routinely that the coaching community has stopped remarking on it. He said

the divers he worries about are not the ones who see things. They are the ones who go back looking.

I have looked, twice, into whether a third person was at the Cut on the morning of 4 April, and both times found nothing, because the answer to that question is a sign-in book which for that year was a spiral notebook kept in an unlocked hut.

And I have asked my sister once, nine years ago, in a hospital corridor, what she meant.

She said: "Nothing. I was gone."

She has never said another word about it, to me or to anyone, and in nine years she has not put her face in that water, and until this month I believed those two facts were one fact.

. . .

ITEM 5. What is new.

Three items.

(a) My employer has engaged S. Vasseur to produce a water safety assessment on the Cut, in support of a premium review the lease-holder has been pursuing for two years. The engagement was made on my recommendation.

I want that sentence to sit on the page on its own for a moment.

I recommended her. I was asked in February for the name of somebody whose finding on that water would not be argued with, and I gave them my sister's, and I did it in four seconds without appearing to think about it, and I have had five months to work out why.

Her name will be believed because of the fourth of April. That is the only reason it is worth anything to an insurer, and I knew that when I gave it, and so the commercial value of my sister's reputation derives entirely from the death of Elvire Baudry, and I am the person who put a price on it.

(b) K. Nizan, 26, of the Ossay road, has signed into the Cut ninety-one times in fourteen months, unaccompanied on eighty-eight of those occasions, and by his own admission to me on

16 April has reached thirty-one metres alone. I flagged this in March, to a lease-holder twenty miles away who has never set foot on the site. He did nothing. I did nothing further, and I want that recorded too, because it was a choice, and the reason for it was that a barred diver drives to a reservoir.

(c) On 16 April I found my sister in the hut at the Cut with this young man, a heater on, two cups of tea, and a diagram drawn on a page torn out of the sign-in book. She has since taken him on as a diver and is holding the surface for him. She has been in the water, in a suit, above him, three times.

I have been waiting nine years for her to go near that water again, and I find that now it has happened I am not relieved, and that the shape of what I feel is closer to the shape of what I felt at 12:04 on the fourth of April, standing in the gravel, before anybody had told me anything.

. . .

ITEM 6. My own position, stated for the record.

A finding of *satisfactorily managed* on this site is worth eleven thousand a year to the lease-holder and rather less than nothing to me, and the person who will decide whether that finding stands is me.

That is the position. I recommended the author. I will assess the document. There is a form for declaring an interest and I have had it in a drawer since February and I have not filled it in, and I have told myself four separate true things about why, and I am going to write the untrue thing down instead, for the reason I gave at Item 2.

If I declare the interest, the work goes to a colleague in Rennes who has never seen this water, and he reads eleven pages and signs them, and it is over in a fortnight, and I never find out anything.

If I keep it, I get to read every word my sister writes about the fourth of April, under her own signature, in a document she knows I will be assessing.

I have wanted for nine years to be told. I have arranged, at some cost and with some skill, to be told in writing by a woman who will not say it out loud.

I want to be precise about my own condition here, because a file that is only honest about other people is worthless. There are two things I want, and they are not compatible, and I have been carrying both of them for nine years without ever putting them in the same sentence:

I want to know what my sister meant.

And I want her to have been at fault.

If I am given the second I will stop looking for the first. I am aware of that. I have been aware of it for some time.

. . .

ITEM 7. Action.

Attend Sunday. Observe. Do not intervene.

Obtain, if it can be obtained without asking, whatever Nizan is writing in that notebook.

NINE. 30 METRES

The Sunday is the best day of the year so far, which is the sort of detail Sabine will resent later.

No wind. The surface of the Cut goes glass and holds the shape of the walls upside down in it, and you can see the line for the first four metres instead of the first two, and the water has come up a degree and a half since March, which is nothing and which everybody notices.

Maude comes and stands at the top of the ramp with her laptop bag and her glasses and does not come down, and Sabine lets her stand there.

They rig to forty-five and Sabine puts the plate at forty, and she checks the rig herself twice, and then a third time, and she is aware that she is doing the thing where competence is used as a place to hide.

"Two dives," she tells Aurel. "Thirty-two to warm, then forty. I'm at fifteen with a lanyard on. If I put my arm out flat, that's up, and you don't get to have an opinion."

"Understood."

"Say the arithmetic."

He says it. Time down, time at the plate, time up, plus the third she adds on top of everybody's numbers as a matter of policy. He has it exactly. He has had it exactly every time she has asked, for a month.

"Good," she says. "Last thing. At forty the air in you starts working like a drug. You've read about it."

"I've read about it."

"Reading about it is nothing. Here's what it actually is: at that depth the stuff you're carrying in your chest starts behaving the way a couple of drinks behave, except you can't tell that it's happened, because the thing that would tell you is the thing that's affected. And it doesn't feel like being drunk. It feels like being extremely clear. It feels like *finally* being clear. People get down there and become very interested in something and forget entirely what they came for."

"What sort of thing."

"Anything. A stone. Their own hand." Sabine adjusts her strap. "It also does the other thing, and this is the one I want you to hear. It makes people certain that somebody is with them."

Aurel's face does not change.

"That's very common," she says. "It's so common it's boring. It happens to climbers at altitude and to men in lifeboats and to people who walk across ice for weeks. There's a whole literature. It's the oldest trick the head has: you take away the light and the sound and the up and the down, and you leave a brain with nothing to work on, and a brain with nothing to work on will make you a companion out of whatever's lying about. It's the same machinery that makes you see a face in a curtain. It just has more room."

"All right."

"So if it happens, it means you're low and cold and deep. That's all it means. It's a reading on a gauge." She looks at him. "Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

And Aurel Nizan says, "Yes," and means, she is entirely certain, something other than what she said.

. . .

The warm dive is unremarkable.

He goes to thirty-two and comes back in two minutes flat and does the rite correctly and sits on the surface for six minutes, and Sabine notes his colour and his shivering and the way his hands move, and everything is where it should be, and there is nobody to give her a nod that means *he's good, stop worrying*, which she notices, and which she has arranged.

Then he does the breathe-up for forty and he does it beautifully, and at 13:22 he folds at the waist and goes.

. . .

She watches the line.

That is all there is to do. From fifteen metres with her face out, there is one rope and there is the amount of tension in the rope, and there is a watch on her wrist, and there is a silence that people who have never done it imagine to be peaceful.

Forty metres. Down in fifty seconds if he does it right. Six seconds at the plate. Fifty-five up, sixty with the punches. Two minutes six, and she has told him two twenty, and she will start being unhappy at two forty and she will go at three.

At two twenty the line has not moved.

At two thirty she looks at the buoy, and at the watch, and at the buoy.

At two forty Sabine puts her face in the water and looks down.

There is nothing to see. There has never been anything to see. Twelve metres of grey and then the edge and then the thing past the edge, and the line running away into it with no diver on it.

At two fifty she takes a breath and drops.

She is fifteen metres down before she understands what she is doing, and the understanding arrives with the cold on her face, which throws the switch it has been waiting nine years to throw, and her heart goes out from under her like a floor giving way, and she keeps going.

Twenty metres. Twenty-five.

The colour is gone out of everything and she has not been here in nine years and her body knows the exact texture of this depth the way a hand knows a bannister in the dark. Twenty-eight. Thirty. Her ears are behind and she clears them badly and something in the left one gives a small dry crack.

And she stops.

She does not decide to stop. She stops the way she stopped nine years ago at a depth she has never been able to name, and the sentence arrives in her whole and finished and in the officer's handwriting: *I got as far as I could get and then I could not make myself go further.*

Below her the line goes down into it.

There is nothing on the line.

She comes up.

She comes up badly, kicking, too fast, and she breaks the surface with her mouth already open and hauls at the air in exactly the way she has told eight hundred people never to do, and for four or five seconds the sky goes grainy at the edges and she has to hold the buoy strap with both hands.

Then she gets her eyes clear of the water and turns her head, and he is up.

. . .

He is up.

He is twenty metres away, on the other side of the buoy, treading, with his mask in his hand and his hair flat and his lips the colour

lips go. He has been up, she works out later, for perhaps thirty seconds. He came up quietly, and she did not see him do it, because she was looking down.

Sabine gets to him with three strokes and a hand on his shoulder that is not a coaching hand.

"Time," she says. "Say your time."

"I don't know."

"Say your depth."

"Forty." He looks at her. "I went to forty. I put my hand on the plate. I turned. I came up."

"You were under four minutes and eleven seconds."

"That's not right."

"I have it on the watch."

"That's not right," he says again, and there is not one particle of argument in it. He says it the way a man reads out a number that has come up wrong on a bill.

She takes hold of his chin, which she has no right to do, and turns his face into the light and looks at his eyes, and his eyes are steady. She takes his wrist. His pulse is where it should be, coming back up out of the twenties in the ordinary way. He is shivering appropriately. He is not confused. He knows the date, he knows her name, he knows what he had for breakfast, he knows the arithmetic.

Four minutes and eleven seconds.

She does the sums that afternoon on the back of a page from the sign-in book and then again that night in a chair at home and then again on the Monday, and the sums are not close. Four eleven at forty metres in four-degree water is not a hard dive for a man of his ability; it is a dive from a different sport. His best hold on the surface, lying still and warm and doing nothing at all, is five twenty. To spend four eleven working in cold black water at forty metres and come up with steady eyes and a good pulse and no shakes is not an achievement. It is a wrong answer.

There are three explanations and she works through all of them properly, because she is a coach and that is what a coach does.

One: her watch is wrong. She checks the watch against the clock in the hut and against the phone in her coat and against the speaking clock. The watch is right.

Two: he is lying about the depth — he did not go to forty, he went to twenty and hung there. She was at fifteen with her face out and she felt him go past her in the water, which is a thing you feel rather than see, and she has been feeling divers go past her for twenty-two years, and he went past her going down and he did not come back up through her.

Three: he is doing something to the timetable. Which is the only explanation left, and it is the one every coach reaches for, because divers cheat their own tables constantly and always in the same direction, and there are four or five ways to do it and every single one of them is a form of stealing from an account you cannot see the balance of.

She spends four days convinced it is the third thing.

She has a whole speech prepared. She has, God help her, been *looking forward* to giving it, because a diver who cheats the tables is a problem she has solved thirty times, and a solved problem is a comfort.

. . .

On the Sunday, before she can give the speech, Aurel comes up out of the water from thirty metres, and takes three breaths, and takes the mask all the way off his face rather than pushing it up, and finds her eyes and holds them for a full three seconds, and lifts his hand and makes the circle.

"I'm okay," he says.

And then, treading easily, in the tone of a man asking whether there is any more tea:

"When can we do sixty?"

Sabine, holding the buoy strap, hears herself say: "Why sixty."

"Because forty wasn't far enough."

"Far enough for what?"

And Aurel Nizan thinks about it. That is the part she will keep. He does not answer quickly and he does not answer defensively. He floats there in a hole in the moor with four hundred thousand tonnes of black water under him and he genuinely considers the question, as though it has occurred to him that he might not have the answer either.

"To get to where it starts," he says.

II. THE FALL

TEN. 30 METRES

From the log of Aurel Nizan. Fifth notebook. The hand is smaller than in the fourth and much more even.

. . .

Nobody told me about the falling.

That is not a complaint about the books. The books mention it. There is a paragraph in every one of them, and the paragraph says that past a certain depth your body stops floating and starts sinking, and that you can therefore stop swimming, and that this is called the free fall, and that divers enjoy it.

Divers enjoy it.

I have read that sentence perhaps forty times and I did not understand for fifteen months that I was reading a man standing in front of a door describing the door.

Here is the arithmetic of it, because the arithmetic is the honest part. A body with air in its chest floats. That is why you can lie on the surface without effort. As you go down the water squeezes the air in you smaller, and the smaller it gets the less it lifts you, and somewhere between twenty-five and thirty-five metres — it depends on your build and how much you took down — the sums cross over. Above that line you are a cork and the water is pushing you home. Below it you are a stone.

There is no announcement. That is what nobody writes down. You are working, kicking, spending, and you have been spending since the surface, and then at some point in the middle of a kick the kick is not doing anything, because the kick is not needed, and you put your legs together and your arms flat at your sides and you stop.

And you keep going down.

. . .

Sabine calls it the fall and she calls it the best thing in the sport and she is wrong about what it is, and I do not think she is wrong by accident. I have started to think she is wrong on purpose, the

way you say a thing slightly wrong in order not to say it right in front of somebody.

What she says is: *the water stops fighting you*.

That is not it. Fighting is the wrong frame entirely, because fighting has two parties in it and up to that moment there is only one. Above thirty metres the water is not fighting anybody. The water is not doing anything at all. It is a quantity, it has properties, and if you go into it hard it will hold you up because of what it is, in the way that a floor holds you up. Nobody says the floor is fighting them.

What happens at thirty metres is not that the water stops resisting.

It is that the water starts participating.

I have tried five ways to write this and they are all worse than the plain version, so here is the plain version. Up to thirty metres I am doing something to the water. Past thirty metres the water is doing something to me. And the something is not a push. It has no force in it. It is closer to *consent* — as though up to that point I have been an object being tolerated and past that point I have been agreed to.

. . .

The other thing about the fall is the speed, and the speed is the part that made me stop diving for eleven days in March and think about whether I was going to keep doing this.

You accelerate. Obviously you accelerate; you are a stone. But you have nothing to accelerate against. There is no wind, no ground going by, no sound of movement, no horizon, no reference of any kind. The line is there — I use the line now, Sabine has beaten that into me — and the line is going past my hand, and that is the only fact in the world that says you are moving.

So take the hand off the line.

I did it on the fourth of April, which I did not know at the time was a date that means anything, and I did it at thirty-eight metres in the dark, and for eleven or twelve seconds I fell through a place with no up, no down, no sound, no colour, no reference and no evidence that I was moving.

And it was not falling. It cannot have been falling, because falling is a relation between a thing and a place it is going, and there was no place.

It was being *taken in*. Down is the wrong word, and in is a better word, and the best word is a word I am not going to write in a notebook.

I got the hand back on the line and I came up and I sat in the car for a long time.

. . .

I have got to sixty.

That is the plain report and I will do the plain report first before the rest of it, because Sabine says a log with the feelings at the top is a log written for somebody else.

Sixty metres, four dives across two Sundays, plate at sixty, line to sixty-eight. Fall begins at thirty-one on the first dive and twenty-nine on the fourth, which means my chest is closing earlier, which means the training is working. Time on the last one: three fifty-one. Turn at sixty, no hang. Punches from a minute forty. Six on the way down and I lost count on the way up. Cold in the left ear on all four. Sabine at fifteen with the watch.

Correct on the surface all four times. Three breaths, mask off, eyes, circle, *I'm okay*.

. . .

Now the rest of it.

Sabine sat me down in the hut before the first sixty and told me about the drug. She did it well. She said that at forty the stuff in my chest starts working like a couple of drinks, and that I would not be able to tell, because the thing that would tell me is the thing affected. She said it does not feel like being drunk. She said it feels like being clear. She said: *it feels like finally being clear*.

I have thought about the word finally quite a lot since. She did not have to put that word in.

Then she told me about the companion.

She said it happens to everybody. She said it happens to climbers on mountains and men in lifeboats and people who walk across ice, and that there is a whole literature, and that it is the oldest trick the head has — take away the light and the sound and the up and the down, leave the brain with nothing to work on, and a brain with nothing to work on will build you a companion out of whatever is lying about. She said it is the same machinery that makes a face in a curtain. She said it has more room.

She said: *if it happens, it means you're low and cold and deep. That's all it means. It's a reading on a gauge.*

I said yes.

Here is what I want to put in the notebook, and then I am going to stop for tonight.

Everything she told me is true. I have checked it since, I have read the papers she was summarising, and she was summarising them accurately and generously and without inventing anything. A man in my position, low and cold and deep in a hole with no light in it, will be given company by his own head, and the company will feel entirely real, and that this has been established for a hundred years by people better qualified than me.

But she told me before it happened.

I want that on the page. She sat me in a hut with a heater on and told me, unprompted, in detail, before my first dive past forty, exactly what I was going to meet and exactly how to dismiss it. She has known me six weeks. She has not been in that water in nine years, and she got a suit out for me, and she has never once said why, and she has twice now told me she was giving me a third of a reason.

You do not warn a man that carefully about a face in a curtain.

You warn a man that carefully when you are hoping he will come up and tell you that he saw one.

. . .

I am not going to write what happened at sixty yet. Not because I am being coy in a notebook that nobody reads. Because I have noticed that when I write a thing down I finish with it, and I am not finished.

Two facts only, then, and both of them are facts and not feelings.

The first is that the punches, past forty, arrive in pairs. One and then, about a beat later, another, slightly stronger. This is not in any of the books. I have looked. There is a great deal about the punches being irregular, which they are, and nothing about them being *doubled*. I have counted. On the last dive it was six pairs down and I lost count up, and it was pairs all the way.

The second is that the second one of each pair does not feel like mine.

I said that to Sabine, on the surface, in April, about the ordinary punches at thirty-five, and she went very still and asked me nothing. I have thought about her face a lot. At the time I thought I had said something stupid.

I am beginning to think I said something she has been waiting nine years to hear somebody say.

ELEVEN. 40 METRES

The arithmetic does not work and Sabine spends the last week of May proving it.

She does it properly. She has kept tables on eighty-one divers over twenty-two years and she knows what a good progression looks like on paper: a curve that climbs and then flattens, with a scatter of bad days in it, and the bad days are the point — the bad days are how you know you are looking at a human being and not at somebody's hopes.

Aurel's page has no bad days on it.

She lays it out on the kitchen table on the Tuesday with the good lamp on. Fourteen months of his own logs, which he hands over without hesitation the moment she asks, in four notebooks, and then her own six weeks on top.

Depth, ascending, with no plateau: thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-five, forty, forty-eight, fifty-five, sixty. Time under, ascending. Surface interval, *descending* — he needs less rest between dives now than he did in March, which is backwards, that is not a thing that improves, the debt is supposed to accumulate across a session and it accumulates for everybody.

She goes through it three times looking for the theft.

There are four common ways a diver steals from his own tables and she knows all four in her hands. There is the extra air taken at the surface, packed in past what the chest wants, which buys thirty seconds and costs you a lung eventually. There is the shallow lie — the number in the book that never happened. There is the hidden line-pull, hauling yourself down hand over hand while claiming to have swum it. And there is the one nobody talks about, which is coming up on the very last of it every single time and calling that a normal dive, so that the whole table is written in a currency of near-misses.

Not one of them fits.

She has watched him pack and he does not pack. His hands never leave his sides in the fall — she has been at fifteen watching him come up out of it four Sundays running and she would see it. And a man who is coming up on the last of it every time gets the shakes, sooner or later, and gets them in front of somebody, and Aurel Nizan has not shaken once in fifteen months and ninety-nine dives.

That is the number that stops her, in the end. Ninety-nine dives, nineteen of them past forty metres, and not one episode. Not a wobble in the jaw. Not a bad surfacing.

Roughly one competition dive in ten ends with somebody shaking on the surface. That is the published figure and it has not moved in twenty years and it applies to the best divers in the world under judges with medics on the platform. It is so ordinary that nobody remarks on it. Sabine has had the shakes four times in her life. Elvire had them eleven times and kept a tally in the back of a book with a small tick for each, because Elvire found them funny.

Nineteen dives past forty metres in cold water with no line-pull and no packing and no rest and no bad days and no shakes.

She sits back in the chair.

The correct professional conclusion is available and she can see it from where she is sitting: *this man is an outlier, some people are, write it up and be glad*. Every coach in the world would take it. There is one in every generation who arrives already built, and the sport keeps a small mythology of them, and the mythology exists precisely so that coaches have somewhere to put the arithmetic when it stops working.

Sabine puts the pencil down and says, to an empty kitchen, "No."

. . .

She goes at it from the other end on the Wednesday, which means she goes at the depth.

Forty metres is where the air turns. She has explained this to perhaps three hundred people and she has a form of words she trusts, and the form of words is a lie of scale — accurate in every particular, and pitched to make the thing sound like weather rather than what it is.

What she tells people: at forty metres the stuff you are carrying starts working like a couple of drinks.

What is actually happening is that the pressure has squeezed her diver's chest to a fifth of what it was on the surface, and everything in it is now dissolved into him at a concentration his body has never met before, and one of the things in it is a gas that is inert at the surface and is a sedative at depth. Not a stimulant. Not a hallucinogen, whatever divers like to say in bars. A sedative, of the same broad family as the things they give you before a small operation.

And what a sedative does — the actual mechanism, the part she has read four papers on and never once said out loud to a beginner — is that it *interferes with the traffic*. It does not add anything. It does not put a voice in your head. It slows the passing of information between the parts of a brain, so that the parts stop cross-checking

each other, and one of the things a brain does with all that cross-checking, constantly, tirelessly, unnoticed, is decide which of the many things going on inside it are *me* and which are *not me*.

That decision is not a fact. It is a running calculation. It is performed several times a second, for free, for your entire life, and you have never once been aware of it.

At forty metres you begin to buy it on credit. At sixty you are behind on the payments.

So a man at sixty metres in the dark has a brain that is still generating everything a brain generates — impulses, images, intentions, the small constant hum of a body reporting in — and has lost the machinery that stamps each one *mine*.

And unstamped material has to go somewhere. It does not stop existing. It gets attributed. The head is very old and very practical and it has one enormous well-worn category for anything that is happening and is not you, and that category is: *someone else is here*.

Sabine writes this out longhand on the Wednesday night, four pages, in the clean flat prose she uses for reports, and reads it back, and it is completely satisfactory.

It explains the pairs.

That is the thing she is most pleased about for about ninety minutes. The doubled punches he described to her — one his, one a beat later that does not feel like his — are not two events. They are one irregular event, arriving in a body whose attribution machinery is failing, and half of it is coming through unstamped. There is nothing there. There is one diaphragm doing one thing badly and a brain that has run out of the ability to sign for it.

She reads the four pages again at midnight and finds that she has written a flawless account of how a man alone in the dark manufactures a companion, and that not one line of it is any use at all, because she is not trying to work out whether the companion is real.

She has never wondered that. Not for nine years. Not for one hour.

What she wants to know is why it takes him four minutes and eleven seconds to do a dive that should take two.

. . .

Thursday she teaches the beginners and does it well, on the shelf, in three metres, and is present for none of it.

Afterwards she coils line on her own in the last of the light, which is a job that leaves the hands busy and the rest of a person entirely free, and which is why she has always hated it.

In April she was watching his kick. Now she is doing sums, and the sums are a place to stand, and she has been standing in them for three weeks so as not to have to look at the thing she has actually observed nineteen times from fifteen metres with her face in the water.

He goes past her on the way down like a man getting into bed. Not calm — calm is an achievement, calm is something a diver does. Relaxed, which is something that happens to a diver when the water agrees with him.

And he comes back up past her more relaxed than he went down.

She gets to the end of the line and ties it off and stands in the dark at the top of the ramp with the coil over her forearm and says it out loud, once, to nobody, in the flat voice she uses for the bleak version.

“He’s better on the way up than the way down.”

Which cannot be. Because the way up is the expensive half. The way up is where the account empties and the pressure comes off and the lights go out without warning, and there is no diver in the world, at any level, in any water, who is more comfortable at the end of a dive than at the start of it. The whole shape of the sport is a curve going down. That is not a rule, it is not a convention, it is not something a talented man can be an exception to. It is *the bill arriving*.

The question she cannot put to anybody, and which she therefore puts to a coil of line on her own forearm in the dark at the top of a

ramp, is whether on Sunday, when he comes past her on the way up, he will look like a man coming back.

There is nobody to ask. She has arranged that. She could have had four people on this water on a Sunday — there is a club forty miles off that would send them and be glad — and she has kept it to herself and one boy and a watch, and she has had four separate good reasons for that all summer, and she is standing in the cold holding a rope and she cannot get any of the four to look at her.

“Sixty on Sunday,” she says. “Then seventy the Sunday after.” She picks up the crate. “He’s asked for ninety-four. He’ll get to ninety-four by August whatever I put on the plate, and he’ll get there with me at fifteen holding a watch or he’ll get there on a Tuesday afternoon with nobody in the department who knows he’s in the water.”

Those are not, she is aware, the only two things she could do.

She carries the crate up the ramp.

TWELVE. 50 METRES

From the log of Aurel Nizan. Fifth notebook, continued.

. . .

I am going to try to write the dark properly and I expect to fail.

Everybody who has been down there says it is like nothing else and then reaches for something else to compare it to, and the something else is always a room with the light off, and a room with the light off is not it. In a room the dark is a condition of the room. Take the light away and the dark is what is left over — it is the absence, it is what remains when you subtract.

Fifty metres in the Cut is not an absence. It is the most present thing I have ever been inside.

It has temperature. It has weight. It comes in *layers*, and the layers have edges, and I will come to that. It arrives the way a substance arrives: you go into it, it is displaced around you, it closes again behind. If somebody told me tomorrow that the black at fifty metres

was a material with a name and a price per tonne I would not be surprised. It behaves like one.

The nearest honest comparison I have found is not visual at all. It is the feeling of a wool blanket over your head as a child, in summer, in the afternoon, when you have made a tent of the bed and you are not hiding from anybody and you have been in there for an hour and the air has gone warm and used. That is the *company* of it. That is the weight and the closeness and the sense that you are inside something rather than in the middle of nothing.

Except the Cut is four degrees.

. . .

The colour dies on a timetable and I have written the timetable out before, so I will only put down what surprised me, which is that the timetable does not end.

You would think it ends. You would think there is a point where all the colour has gone and after that it is simply black and stays black, and there is nothing further to report.

But it keeps going. Past thirty-five, when the last of the green has gone and there is technically no colour left, the *not-colour* continues to change. There are perhaps four distinct not-colours between thirty-five and sixty and I could recognise any of them blind, and I have no words at all for the differences between them and no confidence that they exist outside my own head. It is like being asked to distinguish four kinds of silence. You can. You cannot say how.

The one at fifty is the one I have written about before as the closed eye. I stand by that. It has a grain in it. The grain moves.

I have read enough now to know what the grain is. My eyes are not receiving anything down there — there is nothing to receive — and an eye that is receiving nothing does not go quiet, it goes on generating, and what it generates is noise. Static, essentially, from the machinery itself. The interesting part is that it is the only thing down there my own body is still making for me on the outside.

Every other sense has been taken away or turned inward. That grain is the last manufactured thing.

So it is not true that there is nothing to see at fifty metres.

There is exactly one thing to see and it is your own eyes running with nothing in them.

. . .

The sound goes before the colour is finished and it goes in a way I did not expect.

I had assumed silence. Everybody assumes silence. Water is quiet, and deep water must be quieter, and the deepest must be silent.

It is the opposite. The sound does not go away, it *collapses inward*, and what is left is enormous.

By about twenty metres the outside is gone: no birds, no wind on the surface, no gravel under anybody's boots on the platform, no voices, nothing. And in the space where all of that was there is now one sound and it is my own heart, and I want to be careful about how I put this, because the obvious way to put it is that it gets louder.

It does not get louder. It gets *bigger*. It has size. It has a room to be in and the room is the whole of the water. And it is slow — that is the part nobody prepares you for — because the switch has taken it down into the twenties and there are nearly four seconds between one and the next, and in those four seconds there is no sound in the universe at all.

Four seconds is a long time. Try it now, with a watch. Four seconds of complete silence, and then something the size of the sky, and then four seconds again.

That is what fifty metres is. That is the metronome the rest of it happens on.

. . .

The layers.

This is the part that I have not been able to explain to Sabine, and I have tried twice, and both times she has given me the correct information and both times the correct information has been beside the point.

The Cut is not one temperature. It is stacked. There are bands of water at different temperatures sitting on top of one another, and they do not mix, and going down you pass through them one after another, and the boundaries between them are *thin*.

Sabine says: sheets of cold. She says it happens in every deep still water in the world, and it is a matter of density, and the sheets sit where they sit for months, and in the Cut there are three or four of them and the sharpest is somewhere between forty-two and forty-five metres and has been there since February.

All correct. I have read it. Here is what she has not got and I do not think it is her fault.

A sheet of cold, described that way, is a thing you pass *through*. You are here, then you are colder, and the change happens across half a metre.

That is not the sensation. The sensation is not of passing through. It is of something being *drawn aside* — the way a curtain is drawn aside, or a net, or one of those thin gauze things people used to hang over a bed in summer. There is a moment of contact across the whole face and body at once, and a moment of resistance so slight that calling it resistance is too strong, and then it is behind you and closed again, and you are on the other side.

I have gone down through it forty times now and every single time the words that arrive in my head, unbidden, before I have any say in the matter, are: *that one's been parted*.

Not crossed. Parted.

And I have started counting them, going down. Three at the moment, in June. There was a fourth in April.

. . .

The last thing and then I will stop.

At fifty metres, with the black weighing on me and the grain going and the four seconds of nothing between the heartbeats, I put my hand up in front of my face.

I could not see it. That is not remarkable; there is no light, there is nothing to see it by.

What is remarkable is that I could not *find* it.

I knew where my hand was. I could feel my hand. I had put it there. But the place I felt my hand and the place I was looking were not the same place, and I moved it about for what was probably four or five seconds trying to get the two to agree, and they would not agree, and at some point in that four or five seconds a thought arrived that I am going to write down because I promised at the start of the fourth notebook that I would put everything in.

The thought was: *how do I know it's mine*.

Not frightened. That is what I cannot get across and what I am not going to be able to get across to anybody, least of all a woman on the surface holding a stopwatch. There was no fear in it anywhere. It was a mild administrative question, of the sort you might have about a coat in a cloakroom.

Down there a man is being crushed at the chest and is bleeding a little into himself and cannot see any part of his own body and has no evidence, of any kind, in any sense, that he possesses one. There is a heartbeat the size of a hole in the moor and a grain that his own eyes are making and four seconds of nothing, over and over, and a question about a coat.

I have got to sixty and Sabine has put seventy on the plate for Sunday and I have asked for ninety-four, which is the floor, and she has not said no.

I do not think she is going to say no.

THIRTEEN. 55 METRES

From the log of Aurel Nizan. Fifth notebook. This entry is written in ink, which is the only entry in five notebooks that is.

. . .

There is somebody down there.

I have put off writing that sentence for six weeks and I want to record why, because the why is more interesting than the sentence.

It is not because I think it is untrue. It is because I have been protecting it.

I know exactly what happens if I say it out loud. I have been told what happens, in a hut, with a heater on, by a woman who had clearly rehearsed it. It is common. It is boring. It happens to climbers and to men in lifeboats and to people who walk across ice, and there is a literature, and it is the oldest trick the head has, and it means only that I am low and cold and deep. A reading on a gauge.

So the moment I say it, it stops being what it is and becomes an entry on a list of things that happen to people in my condition. And I have found that I do not want that. Not because I think the list is wrong. The list is almost certainly right. I do not want it because the list is *nothing to do with what it is like*, and once you have accepted the list you are no longer permitted to describe anything.

I would rather have the thing than the explanation of the thing. I am aware that is exactly what a man in my condition would write.

. . .

Facts first. Sabine's rule and it is a good rule.

It arrives past thirty. Not at a depth exactly — it is not like the colour going, it has no timetable I can hold it to — but never above thirty and usually within a few seconds of the fall beginning. Eleven dives out of the last fourteen. The three where it did not come were the three where I was cold going in, which I think is a real correlation and which I offer without a theory.

It does not approach.

That is the first thing I want on the page and it is the most important. It does not swim up, or emerge, or come out of the dark, or any of the things that would be in a story. When I notice it, it is

already there, and it is already falling, and it is already falling at exactly my rate.

Which means — and I have thought about this a great deal — that either it began falling when I began falling, or it has been falling the entire time and I have simply come alongside.

I cannot decide which of those is worse and I have stopped trying.

It is on my left. Always the left, all eleven times. About an arm's length, a little below, so that if I turned my head I would be looking slightly down at it.

I do not turn my head.

. . .

I am going to write down what I know about what it looks like, and the reader of this notebook, if there ever is one, should understand that I have never once seen it, because there is no light at fifty-five metres and nothing is visible and I am not claiming to have seen anything.

I know it the way you know somebody is standing in your kitchen doorway behind you.

It is my size.

It is in the same attitude I am in — head down, arms in, legs together. Not similar. The same. When I adjust, it has already adjusted; there is no lag and no imitation, which is what makes *copying* the wrong word. A thing that copies you is a beat behind. This is not a beat behind. It is more like the two of us are being held in the same position by the same arrangement.

The only difference I have ever been able to identify is the strap.

I do not know why I know this. I have no explanation for how a man in absolute blackness comes to be certain about a length of rubber. But there is something trailing from its head — a mask strap, it must be a mask strap — and it is too long. It goes back and up past where the shoulder would be, drifting the wrong way against the fall, and it is longer than mine by a clear amount, and it is the only thing in eleven dives that has ever been *wrong*.

Everything else matches. That one thing is too long.

I have started, in the car afterwards, checking my own.

. . .

It has never touched me.

It has never spoken. I want to be careful here because “spoken” is a word that will be used against me. There is no voice. Nothing says anything. There is no communication of any kind that I could describe to a doctor.

There is only the attitude of it, and the attitude is patient.

I have known one patient person in my life. My grandmother, who came out of Oran in nineteen-fifty-something with two bags and a sister and never in eighty-one years hurried at anything, and who used to sit in a chair by a window with her hands in her lap for whole afternoons, entirely awake, waiting for nothing in particular. When I was nine that frightened me. I could not work out what she was doing and it did not seem to me that a person could be that still and be *inside* still.

It is that. It is exactly that, at fifty-five metres, in four-degree water, at an arm’s length on my left.

. . .

On the ninth dive it held something out.

I am going to write this plainly and then I am going to stop for the night.

The hand came up — the near hand, the left one from my point of view, which would be its right — and turned over, palm upward, and stopped. And there was something in the palm. Small. Not heavy. The shape was not a shape I recognised, and it was pale, which is a thing I have no business saying about an object in total darkness, and I am saying it anyway because it was pale.

And then nothing happened.

That is the whole event. It held something out and waited, and I did not take it, because I did not think of taking it, because the thought

did not arrive, and I went on falling and it went on falling beside me and at sixty I put my hand on the plate and turned and came up and did the rite correctly on the surface and Sabine wrote down my time.

It has done it on every dive since. Nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen. The same hand. The same turn. The same pale small thing. The same waiting.

There is no pressure in it. I need that understood by anybody who ever reads this. It does not urge. It does not close the distance. It holds a thing out in a place where nothing can be seen and waits with the patience of a woman by a window for as long as I am there, and when I turn to go it does not follow and does not object.

The offer stays open. That is the shape of it. Not a demand — an *offer*, left standing, for as long as I care to leave it standing.

I have understood something in the last fortnight and I am putting it at the bottom where I can find it again.

I used to come down here for the fridge to be unplugged. For the voice to stop. I wrote that in the second notebook and it was true then.

The voice has not stopped in six weeks. The voice has *gone*, entirely, at any depth past thirty, and I no longer come down for the silence.

I come down because I have started to think that the offer will not stay open forever, and because I do not know what will happen when it closes, and because — and this is the thing I have not been able to say in sixteen months of writing in notebooks — I have begun to want to know what is in the hand.

Not to take it. To *know*.

Sabine has put seventy on the plate.

FOURTEEN. 60 METRES

Maude does not steal the notebook, which Sabine will think about later. She simply asks for it, in the car park, on a Saturday, in her professional voice, and Aurel hands it over.

"I'd like to photograph some pages," Maude says. "For the file."

"Which pages?"

"All of them."

"All right," he says.

She does it on the bonnet of her car, one page at a time, with her phone, in the flat white light of a June afternoon, ninety-odd pages, and it takes her forty minutes, and Aurel sits on the wall the whole time drinking tea out of a flask and does not read over her shoulder or ask what she wants it for.

Then she gives it back to him and drives to her sister's house and puts the phone on the kitchen table.

"Read it," she says.

. . .

Sabine reads it standing up. She reads it for an hour and ten minutes and does not sit down once, and at some point Maude makes tea that neither of them drinks, and at some point the light in the kitchen changes and neither of them puts a lamp on.

She reads about the red O-ring at five metres. She reads about the gun put down on the bench in the second month, and the fridge unplugged, and the sentence *I have spent my entire life in an argument with myself*. She reads the arithmetic, which is correct, and the account of the two lines that she drew herself on a page torn out of the sign-in book, transcribed accurately and understood better than she taught it.

She reads: *You do not warn a man that carefully about a face in a curtain.*

She reads the four not-colours between thirty-five and sixty. She reads the heart the size of the hole in the moor with four seconds of nothing between beats. She reads *that one's been parted*.

She reads the hand held up at fifty metres and not found, and the mild administrative question about the coat in the cloakroom.

And then she reads eleven pages in ink and she gets to the strap.

Maude, from the other side of the table, will say afterwards that her sister made no sound at all and did not move, and that the only thing that happened was that she stopped reading for about fifteen seconds, in the middle of a page, with her eyes open.

. . .

"Well," Maude says, when she has put the phone down.

"Well."

"I'd like you to tell me what I've just given you."

Sabine puts both hands flat on the table.

Here is what she could say, and she has all of it, she has had all of it for nine years and four papers' worth of reading on top:

He is describing the standard picture. All of it. The presence at depth, the failure of attribution, the doubling. The head loses the ability to sign for its own material and hands the surplus to a category, and the category is a person, and the person is the diver himself because the diver is the only template available. It is in the literature. It has been in the literature since men started going into caves. Cold, dark, alone, running low, no reference — you will be given a companion, and the companion will be you, and it will be you because there is nothing else down there to build one out of.

All of that is true. She could say it in ninety seconds and it would be honest and complete and Maude, who is not a fool, would recognise it as an answer.

What she says is: "The strap."

"What about it?"

"He's never seen it. He says so. He says there's no light and he's not claiming to have seen anything. And then he tells you a length of rubber is wrong." Sabine's voice is quite level. "You don't invent that, Maude. If your head is building you a companion out of whatever's lying about, it builds you something *significant*. It builds you your mother. It builds you the man you owe money to. It does not build you an accurate copy of yourself and then put one detail wrong in it and leave the detail there for eleven dives."

"Why not?"

"Because there's nothing in it. There's no meaning in a strap. It doesn't do anything." She looks up. "That's not what a head makes. That's what a *thing* looks like."

Maude says nothing for a moment. Then: "Say the rest of it."

"There is no rest of it."

"Sabine."

"There's no rest of it," Sabine says, and it is the first outright lie she has told her sister in nine years, and she tells it in a good clear voice with her hands flat on a table.

. . .

The seventy comes off the plate. She tells him on the Thursday and she does not explain, and she puts sixty back on, and she expects an argument and does not get one, which is worse.

"Sixty," Aurel says. "All right."

"You're not going to ask why."

"You'd give me a third of it."

She almost laughs.

What she has decided — and she has decided it over three sleepless nights with a phone full of photographs of a young man's handwriting — is that she is going to watch one more dive. That is all. One dive at sixty, with her at fifteen and the arithmetic on her wrist, and she is going to look at him properly on the way up, the way she has been avoiding looking at him all summer, and then she is going to make a decision.

She is aware, even while making this plan, that it is not a plan. It is a fortnight bought at retail.

. . .

He goes at 13:40 on the last Sunday in June and it is the ninth dive he has done past fifty metres and it is the one everybody in Ossay would tell you about afterwards if anybody in Ossay had been told.

Down in fifty-eight seconds. Fall from twenty-nine. Sabine holds at fifteen with her face out and one arm through the buoy strap and watches the line, and the line does the only thing the line ever does, which is be slightly less slack than it was.

At two twenty, which is early, the line moves.

She puts her face in.

He comes up out of the black at twenty-two metres and he comes up *easily*, on the same rhythm he went down on, and what she thinks — and she will write this down that night in her own hand because there is nobody in the world she can say it to — is that he looks like a man walking back up a garden path.

And then at eighteen metres he coughs.

. . .

Sabine sees it from fifteen and she sees all of it, and it is four seconds long, and it is the four seconds she will have for the rest of her life.

His body jolts — not a punch, she knows the punches, this is higher and it comes from the chest and it doubles him slightly — and his mouth opens, and something comes out of it.

It comes out slowly. That is the first wrong thing. It does not billow or spread; it leaves him in a thick unhurried rope and it hangs, and it turns over on itself once in the water in front of his face, and it holds together.

And it is black.

Absolutely black. Blacker than the water it is in — she can see it clearly, it is *the darkest thing at eighteen metres*, it reads against the grey the way ink reads on newsprint, and there is no red in it anywhere, and there cannot be, because red died at five metres and there is not one particle of it left in this hole to lend to anything.

He does not react.

He hangs there at eighteen metres in a hole in the moor with his own blood coming out of his mouth in a black rope, and he watches it, and he turns his head very slightly to keep watching it as it

moves, and the expression on his face is one that Sabine has seen on exactly one other human being in her life, at a distance of two feet, on a slate ledge at the western end of this water, nine years ago in April, holding up a thermos like a trophy.

Then he closes his mouth and comes up.

. . .

Three breaths. Small, then larger, then larger.

Mask off — all the way off, not pushed up. Eyes: he finds hers and holds them for a full three seconds. Hand out of the water. Thumb and forefinger. Circle.

"I'm okay."

Sabine gets to him and takes his jaw in her hand and turns his face and there is a thin dark line at the corner of his mouth, drying already, going red now that it is up in the air where red is allowed, and she says, "You're bleeding," and he says, "I know," and she says, "How long has that been happening," and Aurel Nizan, treading water with steady eyes and a good pulse and no shakes at all, says:

"Since April."

He is not evading. He does not think he has done anything. He answers in the voice of a man who has been asked how long he has had that cough.

"April," Sabine says.

"It doesn't hurt. It comes up and then it stops." He wipes his mouth with the back of his wrist, and looks at the wrist, and something crosses his face — and it is not fear, and it is not shame, and she will spend the rest of the summer failing to find a better word for it than *sorrow*. "It's the wrong colour on the surface," he says.

Then he says, "Sixty next week?"

FIFTEEN. 70 METRES

Maude does the reading on the Monday, which is what she does instead of sleeping.

She has a page from a diving forum, four years old, and two papers she has paid for out of her own account, and by two in the morning she can say it in her own words, which is the only test she trusts.

Past about thirty metres a chest gets squeezed smaller than it can go. Not smaller than full — smaller than *empty*, smaller than it goes when you have breathed everything out and pushed and there is nothing left. There is a floor to how small a chest can be made, and the water goes through the floor, and after the floor something has to give, and what gives is the smallest vessels in the lungs. They leak. What leaks is blood, and it gets into the space where the air is supposed to be, and later it comes up.

It is not exotic. That is what stops her. She had expected something rare and it is not rare at all — every competitive diver in the world has had a touch of it, half of them cough on the boat and say nothing, and there is an entire culture of saying nothing that the papers refer to, drily, as underreporting.

And it is not a sign of one dive going wrong.

That is the sentence she reads four times. You do not get this because a dive went badly. You get it because forty dives went well. It is the bill for a season, not for an afternoon, and it arrives quietly in a young man who feels excellent and whose numbers are all improving.

Aurel Nizan has been leaking since April, by his own admission, on a site her employer insures, under the supervision of a coach her employer engaged on her own recommendation, whose report she will be assessing in nine days.

At half past two she writes the position out plainly, because she has learned that she cannot lie to a document as easily as she can lie to herself.

I can end this on Wednesday. One letter to the lease-holder and one to the council and the gate gets a padlock that means something,

and he never sees that water again. Exposure goes to nil. My employer's interest is served. My professional duty is discharged in a morning.

I will not do it.

I will not do it because he will drive to a reservoir, which is true, and which I have been using as a reason since March, and which is not the reason.

The reason is that in nine days I am going to be handed a document in my sister's handwriting about the fourth of April, and if I bar him now there is no document, and the file closes, and I go the rest of my life without being told.

I have been describing myself for nine years as a woman who wants to know what happened. I am not sure that is what I am. I think I am a woman who has arranged for it to keep not happening, so that the asking never has to end.

She reads that back, and does not delete it, and puts the file away at three.

. . .

She goes to the house that night.

Sabine has the good lamp on and the kitchen table covered: the tables, the four notebooks copied out longhand into a fifth in her own writing, a page of arithmetic done three times, and the phone face down.

"I've been reading about lungs," Maude says.

"I know. You rang the club at Rennes on Saturday and they rang me."

"Then you know what I'm going to say."

"I know that too."

Maude sits down without being asked, which she has not done in this kitchen for nine years, and takes her glasses off, and rubs the bridge of her nose.

"Then let's do this properly," she says. "Because I've got about eleven days and then I have to write something down, and once I've written it down it's a fact about the world."

"All right."

"The report. Are you going to sign it?"

"I'm going to write the truth in it."

"That's not what I asked and you know it isn't." Maude puts the glasses back on. "You are going to write, in a document that goes into a file that outlives all three of us, that the water at the Cut is satisfactorily managed. And nine days after that, that boy is going to ask you for ninety-four metres, and you are going to be holding the watch."

"He's twenty-six."

"He's a *boy*, Sabine, he works nights making clips, he taught himself out of library books, he's been on his own in a hole for seventeen months and he found somebody at the bottom of it who's patient with him, and you have read what he wrote, and I have watched your face while you read it." Maude's voice does not rise. It does the opposite; it goes down and flattens, the way it does with claimants who are about to be caught. "You know what he's describing. Don't tell me it's in the literature. I've read the literature, I've read more of it than you have, I've had nine years and a subscription. You know what he's describing because you have been there."

"Maude—"

"There was somebody there and it was not her."

The kitchen goes very quiet.

"You've got the statement," Sabine says.

"I've had the statement since the week it was taken. I've read it two hundred times. I've read it more than I've read anything." Maude is completely steady now. "And I have never once asked you about that sentence, in nine years, and do you know why? Because I decided early on that if I asked you and you lied to me, I'd have

nothing left. So I kept it in a file and I built round it. I built a very good case. It's got sixty-one items in it."

"A case for what?"

"That you were negligent," Maude says. "That the line was rigged the night before and left overnight and neither of you checked it. That you did four dives at increasing depth with no medic and no third person on the surface. That you knew she was going for seventy-two and you held the surface anyway when you should have said no, and that you had said no to her *once before*, in February, and she'd sulked for a week, and you didn't fancy the week."

Sabine says nothing.

"That's the case. Sixty-one items. It's airtight and it's nine years old and I have never once submitted it anywhere, and last month I finally worked out why." Maude looks at her sister across a kitchen table. "It's not because I love you. Let's be honest for one evening. It's because it's *not the crime*."

"Maude."

"Every item's true and the whole thing's wrong. I've known that for years and I've kept adding to it anyway, because a wrong case that you can finish is worth more than a right question you can't ask." She takes a breath. "So I'm asking. Once. Tonight. And then never again, and I mean never, I'm too tired."

"What did you mean, there was somebody there and it was not her?"

And Sabine Vasseur, forty-four years old, nine years dry, with four notebooks copied out in her own hand on the table in front of her, looks at her sister and understands with absolute clarity that this is the moment — that it is here, that it has arrived early, that she could put it down right now on a Monday night in a kitchen with the good lamp on, and that everything after would be different and slower and survivable.

"Nothing," she says. "I was gone."

Maude sits very still.

Then she nods, once, and puts her hands on the table and pushes herself up out of the chair like a woman twenty years older.

"Right," she says.

At the door she stops.

"He'll get to ninety-four," she says, not turning round. "You know he will. And when he comes up from it you'll have your hand on his jaw looking at his eyes, and he'll do the four things, and he'll do them perfectly, because he does everything perfectly, and you'll write his time down."

"Yes."

"And you'll know."

"Yes," Sabine says.

"That's what I can't—" Maude stops. Starts again. "Nine years I've thought you couldn't go near that water because of what it took off you. And I've spent this month watching you get a suit out for a boy with a notebook, and Sabine, I'll tell you what it looks like from the top of the ramp.

"It looks like you're waiting to find out what he says yes to."

She lets herself out.

Sabine stays at the table until the boiler goes off.

Then she goes to the cupboard under the stairs and comes back with the mask and puts it down on the kitchen table among the notebooks and the arithmetic, and sits with her hands flat either side of it, and does not touch it again all night.

SIXTEEN. 94 METRES

From the log of Aurel Nizan. Sixth notebook, first page. The hand is completely even and there are no corrections anywhere in the entry.

. . .

Sabine did not put ninety-four on the plate. I want that recorded first because it matters and because there will be people afterwards who need it to be otherwise.

She put seventy on the plate. She rigged the line to seventy-eight herself, twice checked, and she told me seventy and she told me the arithmetic and I said it back to her and I had it exactly. She was at fifteen with a lanyard on. There were two medics on the platform from the club forty miles off, who came because she rang them on the Wednesday and asked them to, which I do not think she has ever done for anybody.

She did everything correctly. She has done everything correctly since April. If there is a form to be filled in afterwards, the form will say that the water was managed.

I went to the floor because I decided to, at about sixty-two metres, on my own, with nobody's permission.

. . .

The fall started at twenty-eight, which is the earliest yet.

I passed her at fifteen. I remember her hand come out and touch my shoulder as I went by, which is what she does, and which she has done on every dive since April, and I remember being glad about it.

Then the last of the green went and I was in it.

The layers: three. Forty-three, and then something small at about fifty-one that I have not felt before, and then the deep one at sixty which is the coldest thing in the hole and which I have written about as being like putting your face against a window in winter.

All three parted.

They parted the way they always part — the contact across the whole face at once and the almost-nothing of resistance and then behind me and closed again. And I counted them, because I always count them, and after the third one I was at sixty-two metres and I understood, with no drama about it at all, that there was nothing left to part.

That is how I knew. Not a feeling. An absence of the next thing.

Past sixty-two the water did not change temperature again. Not once, not by any amount, all the way down. Thirty-two more metres of water at exactly one temperature, with no edge in it anywhere, and nothing between me and the floor.

I have been going down through curtains for seventeen months.

There were no more curtains.

. . .

It was already there when the fall began, as always, on my left, a little below, and it fell at my rate all the way, and past sixty-two it came closer.

Not quickly. There was nothing sudden in it. It closed the distance the way water closes: continuously, without any moment you could point to.

By eighty metres it was an arm's length. By ninety it was less than that.

At the floor we were side by side.

. . .

The floor.

There is nothing there. I want to be very clear about this because everybody wants there to be something. Sabine says people always want the bottom of the water to be a museum. She is right and I have wanted it too — I have imagined the winch and the rails and the cart for seventeen months, in bed, before sleep, the way you imagine a room you have not been into.

There is silt. It is deep and it is very fine and it holds the shape of a hand for a long time, which I know because I put a hand into it. There is broken slate. There is the plate at the end of the line, which was not there, because the line was rigged to seventy-eight and I was at ninety-four.

That is the entire inventory of the bottom of the Cut. Silt, slate, and the fact of being there.

And the black at ninety-four is not the black at fifty. I have written about four not-colours between thirty-five and sixty and I have written that the timetable does not end, and I was right, it does not end, and what is at the floor is the last one and there will not be another.

There is no grain in it.

That is the difference and it is the whole difference. At fifty metres my own eyes were still making static for me — the last manufactured thing, I called it, and I was proud of the phrase. At ninety-four the static has stopped. I do not know why and I do not think anybody knows why. My eyes were open. There was nothing coming in and nothing going on and nothing being made.

I have spent my whole life inside a certain amount of noise and I have written in these notebooks about the fridge being unplugged, and I thought I knew what quiet was, and I did not.

Nothing is happening. Nothing has ever happened. Nothing is going to.

I have read about the men who sit in caves for years to arrive at a thing they will not describe afterwards, and I used to find that a sort of showing off. I do not now. I think they got there and found it was not describable and came out and had to say something to the people who had brought them food.

I was at the floor of a quarry in the north of a small department for perhaps eleven seconds and I was not lonely, and I was not frightened, and I was not anything, and the argument I have been having with myself since I was a child was not paused or quiet or under control.

It had never happened.

. . .

Then it turned to face me.

Fourteen months, forty-odd dives, and it has never once altered its attitude. Head down, arms in, exactly as I am, never a beat behind,

never imitating, held in the same position by the same arrangement.

At the floor it turned to face me.

I am not going to write that I saw it. There was no light of any kind and there is nothing at ninety-four metres to see anything by. But I knew what was in front of me the way you know the shape of your own kitchen in the dark, and what was in front of me was myself, at an arm's length, in four degrees of water, at the bottom of a hole, facing me.

Same size. Same build. Same set of the shoulders. The scar across the back of the left hand from the guard on the moulding machine in the second week of the job, which I have not written about in any notebook and which is the only mark on my body that nobody but me could have put there.

And the strap, going back and up, drifting the wrong way, too long.

. . .

The hand came up.

The same hand as always, the near one, and it turned over, palm upward, and there was the small pale thing in it. Not heavy. I have never had a word for the shape and I do not have one now. Pale, which I have no business saying, and I am saying it.

And it did not wait.

That is the only thing I want to put down about what happened next, and I have thought about it for four days, and I have written this entry in one sitting with no crossings-out because I have had four days to decide what I am willing to write.

In seventeen months it has never once urged and never once closed the distance and never once followed me up, and the offer has stayed open, standing, patient, for as long as I cared to leave it standing. And I wrote in the fifth notebook that I had begun to think the offer would not stay open forever, and I did not know how I knew that, and I still do not.

At the floor it did not wait.

The hand came up and turned over and it was not being offered to me any more.

It was being *given*.

. . .

I got to the surface. I did the four things. I did them correctly: three breaths, mask all the way off, her eyes for three seconds, the circle, and I said the words.

My time was five minutes and fifty-eight seconds and my depth was ninety-four metres and both of those numbers are impossible and Sabine wrote them down without her hand shaking, which I noticed, and which I have thought about since.

I am not going to write down whether I took it.

I have been putting everything in these notebooks for seventeen months. Everything, including the tablets, including the fridge, including the coat in the cloakroom, including a length of rubber I could not possibly have seen.

I am not putting this in.

Not because I am ashamed and not because I have decided to keep a secret from a notebook, which would be a stupid thing to do. It is because I have gone over the eleven seconds at the floor perhaps four hundred times in four days, in the car and at the machine and lying awake, and I cannot find the moment.

There is the hand coming up.

There is the surface.

There is nothing in between, and there has never been anything in between, and I have looked.

I know that I agreed to something. I know it the way you know you have signed for a parcel. And I cannot get back to the place where the pen was.

III. THE ASCENT

SEVENTEEN. 94 → 60 METRES

From the log of Aurel Nizan. Sixth notebook, second entry. Written eleven days after the first.

. . .

There is a thing I did not put in the last entry because I had not noticed it yet.

Coming up is not coming up.

I have done a hundred and eleven dives and until the floor I would have said that a dive has two halves and the second half is the expensive one. You go down, which is free after thirty metres, and then you turn, and then you pay. That is the shape of it. Sabine draws it as a line going down across a page and she is right and every book agrees with her.

From ninety-four metres it was not a line going down.

I turned. I know I turned, because I was at the floor with my hand in the silt and then I was not. And what happened between the floor and about sixty metres was not effort and not ascent and not anything I can put a verb to.

It was a discussion.

I want to be careful, because I have already written that nothing speaks down there and that remains true. There was no voice, no words, nothing that could be repeated. But there is a kind of exchange that happens between two people over a table when a thing has already been settled and all that is left is the terms — who carries what, what gets kept, what is going to be said afterwards — and that is the closest I can get to what happened between the floor and the deep cold layer at sixty.

I have been in that conversation before. I had it with the woman I lived with for three years, in a kitchen, in the last week, when we both already knew and were only working out the furniture.

At sixty metres I came through the deep cold layer. It was there again — it had been gone on the way down, and coming up it was

back, and it parted the way it always parts, and it closed behind me.

And past it I was swimming, and it was costing me, and everything after that was the ordinary bill in the ordinary currency. Sixty to the surface as a man. Punches from about fifty. Six pairs. The last twenty metres hard.

The other one did not come up past sixty.

I want that on the page. Below sixty it was beside me the whole way and above sixty it was not, and I did not look for it, and I was not sad about it, and it did not occur to me until I was in the car that anything had ended.

. . .

I want to record one more thing about the discussion, because it is the only part of it I can put a shape to.

At some point in the thirty-four metres between the floor and the deep cold layer, I did the inventory.

That is Sabine's word and it is her method and she taught it to me on the surface in June when I was trying to relax by effort and she told me that relaxation is not a mood, it is plumbing — that you go through yourself part by part and find what is switched on that does not need to be, and switch it off. A jaw slightly set. A hand slightly closed. A shoulder up round the ear because the water is four degrees. She said all of it is spending and all of it gets paid for at depth in a currency you cannot see the balance of.

I have done the inventory on every dive since June. It takes about eight seconds and by July I could do it without thinking.

Coming up from the floor I did it, and I got to the end of it, and everything was off.

Everything. Jaw, hands, shoulders, the whole cage, the small muscles round the eyes that nobody ever finds on the first hundred attempts. Not one thing in me was doing anything it had not been asked to do, and I was not making it happen, and it had not taken eight seconds, it had already been true when I started looking.

I have worked for four months at a skill that Sabine says takes most divers years and some divers never, and on the way up from ninety-four metres I found it finished. Completed. Handed back to me done.

That is the first thing in seventeen months that I have wanted to give back.

Sabine's account of the same dive, which she gave me on the Wednesday, in the hut, reading off a page:

Down in one minute nine to sixty-two. Then nothing on the watch for a very long time. She had told me seventy and rigged to seventy-eight and she went at three fifty, which is what she said she would do, and she got to thirty-one metres, and she says that is as far as she could get, and I believe her.

She came up empty at four twenty.

I surfaced at five fifty-eight.

She says that between four twenty and five fifty-eight she was on the surface with a hand on the buoy strap and one of the medics holding her wrist, and that she did not shout and did not send the second medic down and did not do any of the four things that she has spent twenty-two years teaching people to do in exactly that situation.

I asked her why not.

She said: "Because you weren't in trouble."

I said: "How could you know that?"

And she looked at the page for a while and then she said, "I've been at fifteen metres under you thirty-one times. I know what you feel like in the water when you're working. There was nothing in that water that was working."

That is not an answer that would survive an inquiry. She knows that. She wrote it down on the page in front of her while she was saying it, in her own hand, and then she signed the page and dated it, which she has done after every dive since April, and which I have only this week understood is not paperwork.

She is building a record. Deliberately. Of everything she has seen and every decision she has made and every reason she had at the time.

I asked her who it was for.

She said, "My sister."

. . .

Now the thing I have to write down, and I have put it at the end because I do not know what to do with it.

On the Thursday I did not go to see my mother.

I go on Thursdays. I have gone on Thursdays for six years, since the stroke, and it is forty minutes each way and she does not always know who I am and it does not matter, and I have never once minded going. That is not me being good. I want that clear. I have minded almost everything I have ever had to do and I have never minded that, and I used to think it was because the argument in my head went quiet in her room, the way it goes quiet in the water, and I now think it was simpler than that. I liked her. I like her.

On Thursday I finished at six and drove home and made food and read for two hours and went to bed.

I did not forget. That is the part. I have gone over it and there was no moment of forgetting — I did not think *I will go later* and then not go. I knew it was Thursday. I knew what Thursdays are. The knowledge was fully available to me all evening, in the way that the knowledge that there is a coat in a cupboard is available to you.

It simply did not come with anything attached.

I have sat with this for four days and the honest description is that I read the fact of it off the inside of my own head the way you read a note somebody else has left on a table. *Thursday. Mother.* And nothing moved. No pull, no guilt, no reluctance, not even the small mean relief of getting out of something. There was no pressure in it in either direction.

Six years of Thursdays and it had gone completely flat.

I went on the Friday instead and it was fine and she knew me for about ten minutes and I sat and held her hand.

And here is what frightens me, and it is not the missed evening.

Sitting there holding her hand I noticed that I was doing it correctly. Thumb across the back of the knuckles, the way she likes. Talking about the weather in the town, which is the only subject that reliably lands. Not too loud. All of it exactly right, all of it performed to a standard I have never once had to think about in six years.

Thinking about it is new.

I have written a hundred pages in these notebooks about the fridge being unplugged and the argument stopping and the seconds losing their edges, and I have been treating all of that as an unqualified good, and it has cost me nothing so far, and I have said so in writing more than once.

It has started costing.

The thing at the bottom of the Cut is not frightened, and is not lonely, and is not in an argument with itself, and is patient in a way that no living person has ever managed for more than an afternoon. I have wanted to be that for seventeen months.

I am only now working out what would have to be taken out of a man to make him like that.

Not the fear. The fear is the small part.

You would have to take out everybody.

EIGHTEEN. 40 METRES

From the working file of M. Vasseur, Claims & Risk. Site: OSSAY SLATE (THE CUT). Continued.

. . .

ITEM 62. The bloodwork.

I obtained it lawfully and I want the method recorded because the method is going to matter if anybody ever reads this file who is not me.

A. Nizan attended the occupational health provider retained by his employer on 3 July for a routine two-yearly assessment which he was due in any case. He asked them, at the appointment, to run a fuller panel than the one they were going to run, and he told them why, and he signed a release permitting the results to be sent to me.

He did not have to do that. I asked and I expected him to say no.

He said — and I wrote it down in the car park afterwards because I wanted it exactly — “You should have it. Somebody should have it who’s going to be difficult about it.”

I have thought about that sentence more than is useful.

. . .

ITEM 63. What is in the blood that should not be.

Four things, and they are all the same kind of thing.

There are proteins that live inside the cells of a brain and are not supposed to be anywhere else. They belong on the other side of a wall — there is a barrier between the blood and the brain, and it is a good barrier, and its whole purpose is that the two do not mix. When those proteins turn up in a blood sample it means the wall has been leaky.

They are the markers you would run on a man who had been hit in the head.

All four are up in A. Nizan.

I have had this looked at twice. The first doctor I asked said it was consistent with severe strain and probably transient and that she would want a second sample in three months. The second, a man in Brest who has published on breath-hold divers and who spoke to me for fifty minutes for nothing, said something more useful.

He said the wall goes leaky in these divers routinely and it is measurable after a single hard hold and that this is known and not

disputed. He said the honest state of the field is that nobody knows what it adds up to over years, because the sport is thirty years old and the people who would tell you are still alive.

Then he said: "Ask me what I actually worry about."

I asked.

He said: "Not the blood. I worry about the ones who feel better."

. . .

ITEM 64. The contradiction.

Here is what I cannot make resolve, and I have been trying for eleven days, and I am writing it down as a contradiction rather than pretending I have solved it.

Column one. Injury.

Blood in the lungs since April, by his own admission, witnessed once at twenty-two metres in front of my sister. Four brain proteins elevated where none should be. A left ear that has been giving him trouble since May and which he has not had looked at. A hundred and eleven dives in seventeen months, thirty-one of them past forty metres, nine past sixty, and one to the floor.

By every measure I am professionally equipped to apply, this is a man being taken apart.

Column two. Function.

His resting heart rate has come down eleven beats in four months. His hold on the surface has gone from five minutes twenty to six minutes forty. The depth at which his chest closes and he stops swimming has moved from thirty-one metres in April to twenty-eight in July, which the man in Brest tells me is a real adaptation and not a measurement error and takes most divers years.

He needs less rest between dives than he did in the spring. That is backwards. My sister has said this to me three times in three different tones of voice and I did not understand until this month that she was not admiring it.

And there has not been one single episode. Not one. In a hundred and eleven dives, not once has he come up shaking, and roughly one dive in ten ends that way at the top of this sport under judges with medics on a platform. My sister has had it four times in her life. Elvire Baudry had it eleven times and kept count of them at the back of a logbook, one mark apiece, apparently because she found it amusing.

By every measure available, this is a man in the best condition of his life.

Both columns are correct. I have checked the numbers three times. They are not in tension because one of them is wrong. They are simultaneously true.

I have a young man whose lungs are bleeding and whose brain is leaking and who is getting better.

. . .

ITEM 64b. The training record.

She has given me the training book, unasked, on 6 July. Hardback, bought in April, ninety-one pages, and she has put her signature and the date at the foot of every one of them.

I have assessed a great many training records in eleven years and most of them are written to survive an inquiry. Hers is not. It is worse than that. It is written by somebody who knew from the beginning that there would be an inquiry and decided to be the person who wrote everything down first.

The programme itself is conservative to the point of timidity and I want that stated plainly because it is the single most inconvenient fact in this entire file. She found him at thirty-one metres in April and would not let him past forty until the end of May. Depth increases of five metres. Two enforced rest days a week. Eleven weeks of remedial work on his ears at five metres over a bench, which he hated and which she made him do anyway. Chest and rib work twice a week on wet concrete in the rain. Dry tables logged daily, including — and this is unusual enough that I checked it

against three other coaches — including every round he failed, which she required him to record and which most coaches do not.

There is a full rescue drill on 4 May. Both directions. She let him tow her.

I do not know what to do with that entry. She has written it up in four flat lines and she has signed it, and I have read the four lines perhaps thirty times. My sister has not been carried in that water since a man with a dog got her out of it nine years ago, and on 4 May she got into it and went limp on purpose and let a twenty-six-year-old man she had known six weeks take her jaw in his hand.

Under *outcome* she has written: *drill completed correctly, all four steps. Diver competent.*

She has written nothing about herself.

ITEM 64c. What the record does not contain.

Nothing. That is the finding and it took me nine days to arrive at it and I resent it.

There is no negligence in the training book. There is no corner cut, no number inflated, no rest day skipped, no unlogged session, no depth she cannot defend on the day she set it. If I put that book in front of a coaching board in Europe they would find it exemplary, and several of them would ask her to teach.

Every single thing she did was correct.

And the boy is bleeding into his lungs and leaking four proteins across a wall in his head and getting better, and the book that records how it happened is the best document of its kind I have ever read.

I have spent nine years assembling a case that she was careless. I have now read ninety-one signed pages proving that she was not, and it has not made me feel better for one minute, because carelessness was never what I was looking for and I have known that since about the fourth year.

ITEM 65. The wrong frame.

I spent the first week on this trying to make it a case of harm, because harm is what I do, and a file that establishes harm is a file that closes.

It will not go. Every time I write it up as harm I have to explain away column two, and column two will not be explained away; it is the strongest part of the evidence and it points the wrong direction.

So on Tuesday night I did the thing you are not supposed to do, which is put the columns side by side and stop trying to make one of them the error.

If a machine came into my office in this condition — parts failing, output rising — I would not write *this machine is breaking down*. I would write *this machine is being run past its design and something is compensating*, and my next question would be what, and my question after that would be what the compensation is being paid for with.

I do not have the second answer. I want that on the record. I have no theory and I am not going to invent one for a file.

But I have the first answer as a shape, and the shape is that something is holding him together while he is used, and that the holding-together is what shows up in column two, and that it is a service being performed and not a strength he has developed.

And that services are paid for.

. . .

ITEM 66. What he said on 3 July.

Standing in a car park with a release form in his hand.

I asked him — badly, because I had not planned to ask it — whether he had considered that he might be being harmed.

He said: “I’m not being harmed. That’s the whole problem.”

I said I did not understand.

And he said, and I am confident of this because I wrote it in the car within a minute: “If it was hurting me I’d stop. Everyone stops when it hurts. That’s what hurting is for.”

Then he said: "Ask your sister what happens when it doesn't."

. . .

ITEM 67. The declaration.

The form has been in my drawer since February.

I filled it in on Wednesday. I dated it, and I signed it, and I put it back in the drawer.

That is not a joke and it is not indecision. I want the file to show that on 9 July I completed a declaration of interest in this matter and did not submit it, and that I have kept it signed and dated where I can see it, so that on the day I do submit it there is no version of events in which I discovered my conflict late.

The report comes to me on Monday. It will be seventeen pages, because she has told me it will be seventeen pages. She has been writing it in longhand for six weeks in a kitchen at a table with a lamp on, and she has been signing and dating a page after every single dive since April, and she told me in June that the record was for me, and I did not believe her, and I believe her now.

I am going to read it and I am going to assess it honestly and I am going to write down whatever it makes me write down.

And then, on the Sunday after, he is going to ask her for ninety-four metres again, and she is going to give it to him, and I am going to be standing at the top of the ramp where I have stood for nine years.

ITEM 68. Action.

None available.

I want that in the file too. Sixty-eight items over nine years and the honest entry under action is *none available*, because everything I could do makes it worse, and the only thing that would work is a sentence from my sister that she has refused to say twice.

NINETEEN. 20 METRES

The report is seventeen pages and Maude reads it in her own kitchen on the Monday night with the declaration of interest signed and dated in a drawer twenty miles away.

Sixteen of the pages are the best professional document she has read in eleven years. Water temperature by depth by month, going back four years, taken by hand. Wall condition with photographs. The line rig, drawn to scale, with the failure modes numbered. A section on access that recommends, in the flat prose of a woman who knows what she is doing, that the site be closed to unaccompanied divers by physical means rather than by signage, because signage at this site has been tested for nine years and does not work.

There is a section headed **Diver A** which runs four pages and gives every depth, every time, every surface interval, the blood in the lungs, the four proteins, and the missed rest days, and which concludes that the diver in question is beyond the capacity of the site to supervise and should be diving under a full club structure with a medic on the platform, and that the coach's continued supervision of him at the Cut is *not defensible on the evidence and is nonetheless what is happening*.

She has written that. About herself. In a document going into a file that outlives all three of them.

And then there is page seventeen.

. . .

Page seventeen is headed **Annex: Statement of the author's interest**, and it is in the same hand as the other sixteen and it is not a professional document at all.

Maude reads it standing up at the counter with her coat still on.

. . .

I was offered something at the bottom of this water on the fourth of April nine years ago and I refused it, and I have never told anybody,

and I am telling it here because my sister is going to read it and because I have run out of other ways to get it to her.

Elvire went at 11:31 for seventy-two metres. I held the surface. At about three minutes I knew — and I am not going to defend the word knew, I knew — and I went down after her.

I got to somewhere past fifty metres. I have never been able to give a number and I have stopped trying. It was the deepest I have ever been and it was the fastest I have ever gone and I was empty when I got there and I want that understood before anything else: I was, by every measure, a woman who was about to die.

She was not there.

Something was there.

It was on my left, a little below, and it was already there when I arrived, and it was not approaching and it did not have to, and it was me. My size, my build, my attitude in the water, and the only thing wrong with it in any particular was the strap, which was too long, and which went back and up and drifted the wrong way against the fall.

It held out its hand with something in it, palm up, and it waited.

I have had nine years to work out what was in the hand and I am no further on than I was in the water. I can tell you what it was not. It was not air and it was not Elvire and it was not a way out. It was not being rescued. Nothing about it was rescue.

The nearest I can get is this. I was thirty-five years old, at fifty-something metres, on nothing, four minutes in, with a woman I loved dead or dying somewhere below me, and I was being offered the thing that would mean none of that was pressing.

Not comfort. Not forgetting. The removal of the property that makes a thing press on you.

And I understood — completely, without being told, in the way you understand the shape of your own kitchen in the dark — that I could have it, and that having it was not free, and that what it cost was everybody.

I said no.

There were no words. I want to be accurate. There was nothing said by anybody. But there is no other honest verb for what I did and I have tried for nine years to find one. I was offered a thing and I declined it and then I turned round and swam up and left Elvire Baudry at sixty-eight metres, and I have signed a great many documents since and this is the first true one.

I did not come up because I was brave. I came up because I am small and frightened and I wanted my sister's telephone number to keep mattering to me, and I have never been able to make that sound like a virtue and I have stopped trying.

Here is the part that is the actual point of this annex, and I have taken sixteen pages to arrive at it because I have been a coward about it since February.

It was never withdrawn.

That is what nine years have been. Not grief. Not guilt — I have plenty of guilt and it is the ordinary kind and I can carry it up a hill. The reason I have not put my face in that water since the fourth of April is not that I cannot bear to remember what happened in it.

It is that the offer is still open, and it is still down there, and it is patient, and water is the only place where I would have to see it again.

I have stood at the edge of it four hundred times and put one hand in and taken it out. I have told you that was a habit. It is not a habit. It is a man looking through a window at a shop he has decided not to go into, and doing it every day for nine years, and calling it a walk.

And in April a young man came out of that water and said six words to me on the surface — they don't feel like mine — which are almost exactly the words I said to Elvire in a car in March nine years ago with a bag of chips on the handbrake, and she laughed, and I laughed, because at the time it was funny.

I have known since the twenty-sixth of April what he was going to meet.

I have taught him, since then, correctly, patiently, safely, everything he needed in order to get deep enough to meet it. Every lesson I gave him was true. Every number I put on that plate was defensible on the day I put it there. I have not lied to him once and I have not told him one thing that mattered, and if you put my conduct since April in front of any coaching board in Europe they would find nothing to strike me for, and they would be wrong.

Maude, you asked me twice.

You asked me in a corridor when I was thirty-five and I said nothing, I was gone, and you asked me at my own table in June and I said the same four words nine years later, and both times you took it and did not push, and I have spent nine years being grateful to you for not pushing and telling myself that gratitude was love.

It was not. It was relief.

Here is why I did not tell you, and it is the last thing and then the annex is finished and you can do what you like with it.

If I told you, it stopped being a thing that happened to me and became a thing about me. You would have taken it somewhere. You would have taken it to a doctor, which you did anyway with the two sentences you had, and the doctor would have been kind and correct and would have explained to me what a brain does at fifty metres with nothing in it, and I have read all of that, I have read more of it than you have, and it is all true.

And I would have had to believe it. That is what I could not have. Because if it is true — if it was a face in a curtain and nothing else — then I did not decline anything on the fourth of April. There was nothing to decline. I simply came up, the way a body comes up, and left her there, and the nine years are not a refusal held under pressure.

They are just nine years.

I needed it to have been an offer, because if it was an offer then I said no to it, and if I said no to it then leaving her was a choice a person made and not a thing a body did.

So I have needed, for nine years, for somebody else to be offered it. Somebody I did not put in the water, who came to it on his own, out of books, in a hole in the moor, without me.

And in April one arrived.

I have not pushed him one metre deeper than he was going anyway. I want that on the record and I believe it is true and I have checked it against the numbers and the numbers support me.

And I have watched him go down there forty times with a watch in my hand, and I have written down his times in a good clear hand, and every single time he has come up and done the four things correctly and looked me in the eye and said I'm okay, I have felt something that I am going to name here because this is the only document I am ever going to be honest in.

Disappointment.

I am forty-four years old and I have wanted, since the twenty-sixth of April, to find out whether anybody else would have said yes.

S. Vasseur. 13 July.

. . .

Maude stands at the counter for a long time.

Then she picks up her phone and does not ring her sister. She rings the number she has for A. Nizan and it goes to nothing, because he is on nights, because it is Monday, because he will be standing at a machine in a building on the Ossay road making clips until six in the morning with his phone in a locker.

She leaves no message.

She sits down at her own kitchen table at half past eleven at night with a seventeen-page report in front of her and a signed declaration of interest in a drawer twenty miles away, and she understands, with the flat clarity of a woman who has spent nine years building sixty-one items into an airtight case, that every item is true and the whole thing is worthless, and that the crime is not negligence, and never was.

It is that her sister has been waiting.

She opens the file and starts a new entry and writes, at the top, in her ordinary hand:

ITEM 69. She told me.

And then she cannot write anything else for a very long time, because the second thing she has understood, sitting there, is that she is not going to submit the declaration in the morning either.

She has waited nine years to be told. She has been told.

And there is one Sunday left, and Sunday is the only place where anybody is going to find out whether it was true.

TWENTY. 10 METRES

The word arrives on a Thursday, in a footnote, in the wrong document.

Maude is not looking for it. She has stopped looking; that is the point of the week. She has read her sister's annex nine times, and she has read the four papers the man in Brest sent her, and she has done what she does, which is establish whether a thing has been described before.

It has. Repeatedly. Well.

The literature on being accompanied is not thin and it is not fringe. It is in mountaineering, where the men who have written about it are not the kind of men who write about anything. It is in polar work. It is in the accounts of people who came off boats and were in the water for a long time. There is a whole shelf of it and there is a name for it that comes out of an expedition across an island in the southern ocean, where three men crossed on foot in nineteen-sixteen and all three of them believed, separately and without discussing it, that a fourth had walked with them. One of them wrote it down. A poet stole it four years later and put it in a poem that Maude had to learn part of at school and had never once understood.

She reads for four days and by the Wednesday she has the shape of it. Cold, exhaustion, monotony, isolation, and a brain that has been given nothing to work on will produce a companion. It is not a

symptom of anything wrong. It appears to be what the machinery does when it is run in a vacuum, and the people it happens to are, almost without exception, unshakeably certain at the time and mildly embarrassed afterwards.

Her sister is not embarrassed. Nine years and she has not moved an inch.

. . .

The footnote is in a paper about a different sport entirely.

It is a medical review of breath-hold diving injuries, published in a journal she has no business having access to and got anyway, and it is dry to the point of hostility, and on page nine there is a paragraph about historical populations of working divers.

The paragraph concerns the women who dived for shellfish on a particular stretch of Japanese coast, for centuries, without equipment, in cold water, several times a day, for their entire working lives. They went down on one breath and came up and went down again, and they did it into their seventies, and there were thousands of them, and they are the largest population of habitual breath-hold divers in the recorded history of the species.

And they had a word for it.

Maude reads the paragraph twice and then goes and finds the source, which takes her two days and a librarian in Rennes and forty euros: a collection of oral accounts gathered in the nineteen-thirties by a folklorist who spent years on that coast writing down what the divers told him, published in 1939, and translated into French in the sixties by somebody who did the work well and put a long apologetic preface on the front about how much he had failed to carry over.

There are twelve accounts.

. . .

The word is *tomokazuki*. The translator gives it as *the companion diver*, and notes that a more literal rendering would be nearer to *the one who dives alongside*.

Maude reads the twelve accounts in one evening at her kitchen table and does not get up.

They are short. Most of them are less than a page. They were given by women in their fifties and sixties and seventies, to a man with a notebook, about things that had happened to them decades earlier, and there is no apparatus in them at all — no theory, no explanation, no religion to speak of. They read like people describing a thing that happens at work.

Most of the twelve are of themselves.

That is the first thing the translator flags in his preface and it is the thing Maude has to put the book down over. Not a stranger. Not a spirit with a shape of its own. The diver, herself, met at depth. Same size, same body, doing what she is doing.

Two of the twelve are of somebody else — one of a woman's own mother, dead eleven years; one of a girl from the same village who had drowned the previous summer. One is of nothing visible at all, only a voice, and the voice was her own.

It does not attack. Not in any of the twelve. In eight of them it offers.

What it offers is shellfish. That is what it has in its hand, in eight separate accounts from eight women who did not know each other, taken down by a man with a notebook over a period of years — it holds out an abalone, prised loose, ready, and waits.

And every one of the twelve knows that you do not take it.

The tradition on that coast is completely unambiguous and it is unambiguous in the flat way that working practice is unambiguous, without any mysticism about it at all: if she offers you something you do not take it, and if she goes down you do not follow, and you surface, and you do not dive again that day.

The women who took it drowned.

. . .

There are two details that get up out of the book and stand in Maude's kitchen with her.

The first is the mark.

In the accounts the companion is identical. That is stated and restated: identical, exact, the same in every particular, and this is what makes it what it is rather than a ghost or a woman from another village. And in six of the twelve there is one difference and it is the same difference.

The headband is too long.

The divers wore a cloth band round the head. The companion's is longer. That is the whole of the mark — no wound, no wrongness of the face, no eyes that are not eyes. A working woman looks at a thing that is exactly herself in four metres of cold water and knows what she is looking at because of the length of a piece of cloth.

The second is the net.

Four of the twelve describe something between them. The translator struggles with the word and gives three options in a footnote, and the one he settles on is the light gauze that used to be hung over a bed against mosquitoes. A thin screen. Not a barrier — you can see through it and it does not hold you — and it is *there*, and its being there is the reason nothing has happened yet.

In two of the four accounts the woman describes the moment the screen was not there any more.

Both of those women describe it as the moment they went up.

. . .

The last thing in the collection is a page of the folklorist's own notes and it is the reason Maude sits at the table until three in the morning.

He asked the women what the companion was. He asked all of them; he was a careful man and it was the obvious question.

None of them would give him an origin. He records this with visible frustration. Some said it was a diver who had drowned. Some said it was a warning, and that the warning came before a death and not after, so that it was a thing you were shown in advance. One said it

was nothing at all and that she had been under too long and cold and that she still would not have taken the abalone.

And then he writes — and Maude reads this sentence four times — that the women of that coast did not appear to find the question interesting, and that what they cared about was not what it was but what you did, and that they had a great many charms sewn into their clothing and no theology whatsoever.

Two marks, stitched into the cloth. A five-pointed star drawn without lifting the needle, so that the line comes back to where it started, which the translator says was understood as: *the diver returns*. And a lattice, five one way and four the other, understood as a grid a thing cannot come through.

Maude turns the last page and there is nothing after it.

. . .

She rings her sister at ten past eight in the morning, which is the first time she has telephoned Sabine Vasseur rather than driven to her house in nine years.

"I've found something," she says.

"Maude—"

"There are twelve of them. Written down in nineteen-thirty-nine off a coast on the other side of the world by a man with a notebook, from women who dived on one breath every day of their working lives for fifty years, and there is a *word* for it, and they all say the same thing, and one of them said it was shown to you in advance."

There is a long silence on the line.

"Is it useful?" Sabine says.

And Maude, standing in her kitchen with a translated book from 1939 open on the counter and sixty-nine items in a file upstairs and a signed declaration of interest in a drawer she has not opened in five days, hears herself start to say *yes*, and stops, and stands there with her mouth open, and works it out.

Twelve accounts. Every one of them agrees. Do not take it, do not follow, surface, do not dive again that day.

There is nothing in the book about a man who has already taken it.

There is nothing in the book about what you do afterwards. Not one line, in twelve accounts and a folklorist's notes and a translator's preface, about a person who accepted and came up anyway. Because on that coast, in those accounts, that person does not come up. That is the entire content of the tradition. The women who took it drowned, and drowned women give no accounts, and so the thing Maude needs to know is precisely and exactly the thing that four hundred years of working practice on the other side of the world has no reason to have recorded.

She has the diagnosis. Complete, named, corroborated, four centuries deep and independently arrived at by thousands of women who never heard of a waste gas or of one another.

And it is Thursday, and he dives on Sunday, and there is not one word in any of it that tells her what to do.

"No," she says. "It isn't."

TWENTY-ONE. 5 METRES

He brings her the notebook on the Saturday evening, which she has not asked for and which he has never once offered.

"I've finished it," Aurel says.

They are in the hut. It is the last Saturday in July and the light is going and the heater is on because the heater is always on, and Sabine has the seventeen pages in a folder on the bench beside her because she has spent the afternoon at the Cut doing the thing she does instead of thinking, which is checking a line she has already checked.

"Finished what?"

"The sixth one." He puts it on the bench. "I'm not going to write another. I've written every day for seventeen months and there's nothing left to put in it, and I noticed on Wednesday that I was making things up to have something to write, and that seemed like a bad sign."

"Aurel—"

"I'd like you to have it." He is standing in the doorway with his hands in his coat pockets and he is entirely calm, and he has been entirely calm for three weeks, and it is the calm that has been frightening her since the fifteenth of July. "Not tonight. After tomorrow."

"Why after?"

"Because if you read it tonight you won't put ninety-four on the plate."

Sabine looks at the notebook on the bench.

"And you want ninety-four."

"I want it to be the last one," he says. "That's not the same thing and I know it isn't. But it's the truest way I can put it."

He goes. She hears the car on the gravel and then the gate, and then the enormous silence that the Cut makes at the end of a day, which is not silence at all but the sound of four hundred thousand tonnes of water doing nothing.

She reads it in the hut with the heater on and her coat still buttoned.

. . .

She reads the floor. The three layers parting and then nothing left to part, thirty-two metres at one temperature with no edge in it anywhere. She reads about the grain stopping. She reads *nothing is happening, nothing has ever happened, nothing is going to*.

She reads the hand coming up and turning over and not waiting.

She reads *I am not putting this in and I cannot find the moment and I know that I agreed to something. I know it the way you know you have signed for a parcel*.

She reads the missed Thursday, and the forty-minute drive not taken, and the flatness where six years of Thursdays used to be, and the thumb across the back of the knuckles performed correctly for the first time in his life. She reads *you would have to take out everybody* and puts her hand over her mouth and sits like that for a while.

And then she turns the page, and there are eleven pages left, and they are dated across the last fortnight, and they are the last thing he wrote.

. . .

I have been going back over the whole of it, all of it, from the first notebook, because I have decided this is the final notebook and because I want the record to be complete, and in going back over it I have found something I got wrong from the very beginning.

I have been writing, since the fifth notebook, that there is somebody down there.

Singular. One. Arriving past thirty, on my left, a little below, falling at my rate.

That is not what has been happening and I do not know how I have failed to see it, and the only defence I can offer is that when you are told a thing arrives you look for the thing arriving and you do not count.

There are two.

There have always been two.

I have gone through every dive I can reconstruct and it holds all the way back to April. One on the left, a little below, which is the one I have written a hundred pages about. And one further out on the same side, beyond it, at the edge of where knowing anybody is there stops being knowing anything.

The second one has never come closer. Not once. Not at sixty, not at ninety-four, not at the floor when the first one turned to face me and the strap was too long and the scar was on the left hand where nobody but me could have put it. The near one closed the whole distance across a year and a half and the far one has held exactly where it has always held, at the outside edge, for a hundred and eleven dives.

It is not falling with us. That is the thing I want on the page. The near one falls at my rate and always has. The far one is simply there at every depth I pass, which is not the same, and I have

thought about the difference for two weeks and the best I can do is this: the near one is coming down with me and the far one is already down.

It is smaller than me. Not by much. It has the attitude the near one has — head down, arms in — but it is not mine, and I have never once mistaken it for mine, and I have never told anybody about it because until this fortnight I did not know it was a fact. I have carried it the way you carry the weather.

It has never offered me anything.

Its hand is not out. In a hundred and eleven dives the hand has never come up.

It has something in it, and the hand is closed, and it is held in against the body the way you hold a thing you have been given and are not going to put down.

And the strap is too long.

I want to be careful because I have spent seventeen months being careful about a length of rubber. The near one's strap is too long and I have written about it perhaps thirty times and it is the one wrong detail in a thing that is otherwise exactly me.

The far one's is longer.

Not slightly. Very much longer, and wide rather than thin, and it goes back and up and it does not drift — that is the difference, that is the whole difference, it does not move at all. The near one's strap drifts against the fall the way a strap would. The far one's is straight and still and going up into the dark above us both like a line somebody is holding at the other end.

I do not know what to make of any of that and I am not going to invent something. I have put it in because I said at the start of the fourth notebook that I would put everything in, and because I am going to ask her for ninety-four on Sunday and after that I am going to give her the notebook.

She has known something since April. I have known that she has known since about May. I have never asked her, because in all this time of teaching myself out of books I have not once asked anybody

anything, and because I understood early that if I asked she would tell me, and if she told me I would have to decide about it as a man on land with a kitchen and a mother and a Thursday, and I did not want to decide about it there.

I wanted to decide about it at the bottom.

I think that was the wrong way round and I think I have known that for a fortnight, and it is too late, and it was probably too late in April.

The last thing.

Whatever the far one is, it has been at the edge of every single dive I have done since I met the near one, and it has never come in, and it has never offered, and it has never gone.

It is not waiting for me.

It is not looking at me at all. I have never once had the sense of being attended to by it, and I have had the sense of being attended to by the near one from the first day.

It is facing up.

. . .

Sabine sits in the hut with the notebook open on her knees and the heater going and the light entirely gone outside.

She does not move for eleven minutes.

Then she gets up and goes out and down the ramp in the dark, and she does not put her hand in the water, and she gets in the car and drives home and takes the box out from under the stairs and takes the mask out of the box and sits on the floor of the hall with it in her lap.

It is nine years old and the skirt has gone hard and yellow.

And the strap is a wide black strap, the good kind, the kind you had to send away for then, and it is very long, because Elvire Baudry had a great deal of hair and wore it up under the strap in a knot the size of a fist, and she used to complain about the length of it, and she never once cut it down, and Sabine has run the whole of it

through her fingers in the dark in this hallway perhaps four hundred times in nine years without ever letting herself finish the sentence.

It is facing up.

Not down at him. Not out at the dark. Up — at fifteen metres, at the surface, at a woman with her face in the water and a watch on her wrist and one arm through a buoy strap, holding station above a hole for nine years.

Sabine Vasseur sits on the floor of her hall at ten past one in the morning with her dead friend's mask in her lap and understands that she has not been waiting to find out whether anybody else would say yes.

She has been being waited for.

The offer was never withdrawn. She wrote that in a document and signed it and sent it to her sister and she thought she was confessing.

She was reporting a fact and had the direction wrong. It is not that the hand is still out and she has been declining to go back.

It is that something has spent nine years standing at the edge of every dive that has ever been made in that water, holding what it was given, facing up, and it did not need her to come down.

It needed somebody to bring her to the edge and stand her there with a watch in her hand, forty times, at fifteen metres, with her face in the water, looking down.

She has done every bit of that herself. Nobody made her. She rigged the line, she set the plate, she wrote the times down in a good clear hand.

The phone is in the kitchen. It is ten past one and he is on nights and his phone is in a locker in a building on the Ossay road and he will not have it until six.

She rings it anyway, and it goes to nothing, and she says nothing into the nothing, and at twenty past one she puts her coat on over her nightclothes and drives out to the Cut and stands at the top of the ramp in the dark until it is light enough to see the buoy.

TWENTY-TWO. 0 METRES

The Sunday is the best day of the year, which is the sort of detail she will resent for the rest of her life.

No wind. The surface goes glass and holds the walls upside down in it. The water has come up four degrees since March and you can see the line for six metres instead of two, and there is not one thing wrong with the day, and nine people afterwards will say so independently.

The two medics come from the club forty miles off, because she rang them on the Wednesday and asked them to.

Maude comes at nine and takes up the position she has held for nine years — top of the ramp, eleven metres up, arms folded, glasses on. She has brought nothing with her. No bag, no laptop, no file.

. . .

Sabine rigs to a hundred and two and puts the plate at ninety-four, and she checks it three times, and she is aware while she is doing it that competence is a place to hide and that she has been hiding in it since April.

Aurel arrives at ten past ten and is entirely calm.

"You read it," he says.

"I read it."

"And you've rigged to a hundred and two."

"I have."

He nods slowly. He is looking out at the water and not at her.

"There's a version of this where you tell me what you know."

"Yes."

"Are you going to?"

And there it is. Not in a corridor when she was thirty-five. Not at her own kitchen table in June with the good lamp on. Here, at ten past ten on a Sunday morning in July, in daylight, sober, rested,

with a folder on the bench and a notebook in her bag and nine years of it behind her, asked plainly by the one person entitled to ask.

Sabine Vasseur has, by her own account, twenty-two years of coaching, a hundred and eleven of his dives, four notebooks copied out in her own hand, seventeen pages signed and dated, and the whole of the fourth of April.

"There's a woman on that coast in Japan," she says, "who told a man with a notebook in nineteen-thirty-nine that it's shown to you in advance. Not after. Before."

"Shown to you as what?"

"As a warning."

"Of what?"

And Sabine opens her mouth, and the day is beautiful, and the surface is glass, and the two medics are laying kit out on the platform and talking about somebody's car, and her sister is at the top of the ramp forty metres away with her arms folded, and everything she needs to say is one sentence long and she has had nine years to compose it.

"Of nothing that can be helped," she says.

Aurel considers this for a moment. Then he says, "That's a third of it," and it is the last thing he ever says to her that is not a number.

He goes to put his suit on.

. . .

He goes at 13:22.

The breathe-up is the best she has ever seen him do and she watches all of it, and at the roll she is at fifteen metres already with her face out and one arm through the buoy strap and a lanyard on, and he folds at the waist and comes past her, and her hand comes out and touches his shoulder as he goes by. She has done that every time since April and she does not think about it any more than she thinks about breathing.

Then the line goes taut.

There is one rope. There is the amount of tension in the rope. There is a watch.

She puts her face in the water and looks down.

. . .

Ninety-four metres. Down in one minute eight. Nothing at the plate. Ninety-four up.

She has told him five ten and she will begin to be unhappy at five forty and she will go at six, and she knows perfectly well that going at six achieves nothing at all, that she cannot reach thirty-one metres let alone ninety-four, that she has never in her life reached the place he is going, and that the entire safety apparatus she has constructed on this water since April amounts to a woman at fifteen metres with a watch, keeping station over a hole, looking down.

At two minutes the line has stopped moving.

At three she takes her face out and finds her sister at the top of the ramp, forty metres away and eleven metres up, and Maude is not looking at the water. Maude is looking at her. Has been, she understands, for the whole dive.

At four minutes she puts her face back in.

At five ten there is nothing.

At five forty there is nothing.

At six minutes Sabine Vasseur takes a breath and does not go.

She will never be able to say why, and she will be asked, and she will give four separate true reasons over the years and none of them will be it. She hangs at fifteen metres with her face in four-degree water and her heart down in the twenties and one arm through a buoy strap, looking down into a place where the colour has gone and then the not-colour has gone and then the grain has gone, and she does not go, and the honest account, which she will never give anybody, is that she was not permitted and she was not prevented.

She was expected.

At six twenty-eight the line moves.

. . .

He comes up out of the black at twenty metres and he comes up easily, on the same rhythm he went down on, and he comes past her, and as he passes her his hand comes out and touches her shoulder.

He has never done that. In a hundred and twelve dives it has always been her hand and his shoulder and never once the other way round, and she is still turning her head to follow the touch when he breaks the surface eight metres away.

Three breaths.

Small, then larger, then larger.

He reaches up and takes the mask off his face. Not pushed up onto the forehead. All the way off, and held, because the rule is that somebody has to see your eyes and there is no argument about whether they can see them through glass.

He finds her. He holds her eyes for a full three seconds, which is longer than it sounds when you are cold and your heart is somewhere down in the twenties and climbing.

He lifts his hand out of the water and makes a circle of his thumb and forefinger, and holds it up.

"I'm okay," he says.

. . .

And it is perfect.

That is the whole of it and she will have it for the rest of her life. Every one of the four things, in order, correctly, at the right pace, in the right voice.

His eyes are steady. His pulse comes back up out of the twenties in the ordinary way under her fingers when she takes his wrist, because she takes his wrist, because that is the procedure and she

follows procedure. He is shivering appropriately. He knows the date. He knows her name. He gives her his time, six minutes twenty-eight, and his depth, ninety-four metres, and both numbers are impossible and he gives them the way a man reads a bill.

There is no blood at the corner of his mouth.

She notices that and she will think about it for years.

On the platform one of the medics says something and the other one laughs. Up at the top of the ramp her sister has taken two steps forward and stopped, and is standing at the edge of the concrete with her arms at her sides, waiting.

Sabine looks at the young man treading water in front of her in a hole in the moor.

There is one thing she could do. It would take four seconds. She could say a name — hers, or the other one, or the word she now knows was written down in nineteen-thirty-nine by a man with a notebook — and watch his face, and know.

And if she is wrong she will have said it out loud, in daylight, on a Sunday, to a boy who works nights making clips, and it will be in the world, and she will have to live in a version of the world where she said it.

And if she is right—

She does not finish that. She has never once finished that, in nine years, and she is not going to start at fifteen minutes past two in the afternoon on the last Sunday in July.

"Time and depth," she says. "Say them again."

"Six twenty-eight. Ninety-four."

"Good," Sabine says.

She writes it down in a good clear hand.

. . .

Afterwards, when the kit is in the crates and the medics have gone and the notebook is in her bag and it is nearly six and the light has begun to go, Maude comes down the ramp.

All the way down. To the water.

The two of them stand at the bottom of the concrete for a while, side by side, not touching, looking out at the Cut, which is doing what it always does, which is nothing at all, patiently.

"You didn't ask him," Maude says.

"No."

"You had it. You had all of it. You had nine years and seventeen pages and a book from nineteen-thirty-nine and a boy in front of you who'd have answered you, and you asked him for his time and his depth."

"Yes."

Maude nods.

"I didn't submit the form," she says.

"I know."

"Nine years I've told myself I wanted to be told." Maude takes her glasses off and holds them. "You told me. It's the worst fortnight of my life. I'd give a great deal to have it back."

"I know," Sabine says.

They stand there.

"He'll come back," Maude says. It is not a question and it is not comfort. It is an item in a file. "Not this week. He'll leave it a fortnight so it doesn't look like a compulsion. Then he'll ring you and ask what you're putting on the plate."

"Yes."

"And you'll be here."

Sabine Vasseur looks at the black water in the hole that six generations of Ossay dug dry and one generation let fill, and she thinks about a wide strap, very long, straight and still, going up into the dark above everybody, like a line somebody is holding at the other end.

"Yes," she says.

Then she crouches at the edge of the water, the way she does at the end of every day, and puts her right hand in past the wrist.

The cold comes up through her wrist like a note being struck. The switch throws, because the switch is not hers and never has been, and her heart goes long in her throat, and she counts, and at nineteen she does not take her hand out.

She stays there, crouched at the edge, with her hand in it, in the last of the light, for a long time.

The Cut is a flooded slate quarry outside a town with no sea. It is ninety-four metres to the floor, and there is nothing down there but silt and slate, and people drive a long way to get into it.

Sabine Vasseur has not put her face in that water for nine years. She stands at the edge most days and puts one hand in and counts to nineteen and takes it out again, and she calls it a habit.

Then a young man begins diving it alone, out of library books, on weekday afternoons when nobody is watching. She teaches him everything she knows, correctly and patiently and in the right order.

She does not teach him the one thing she has never told anybody.

The alarm can be trained out of a person, kindly, in a fortnight, by somebody who loves them.



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