Closed Over

A Novel of Atonement

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Still Voice Press

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Published by Still Voice Press.
ISBN 978-1-7646901-2-6

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Chapter One

The rain had not yet started when Betty left the office, but the air had the weight of it, and by the time he came down off the tram at his own stop the first drops were striking the awnings with the small flat sound of someone tapping a finger on glass. He did not hurry. He had nowhere to be that required hurrying, and the umbrella in his bag had a broken rib that caught at the lining whenever he tried to draw it out, so he walked with his collar turned up and his shoulders slightly forward, in the manner of a man who has decided that getting wet is the lesser of two small humiliations.

He was thirty-four years old. He worked in the accounts department of a firm that imported industrial fasteners, a job he had held for nine years and which required of him a particular kind of accuracy that he had come, over time, to find restful. Numbers did not look at him. Numbers did not pause before saying his name. He kept a small pot plant on his desk, a jade, which he watered on Wednesdays, and he ate his lunch at his desk because the lunchroom contained three women from sales who were not unkind but who, when he entered, lowered their voices in a way that he had decided years ago not to think about.

The fast food place was on the way home. He stopped there perhaps twice a week, not from any particular hunger but because the flat, when he reached it, was very quiet, and the half-hour of fluorescent light and other people's conversations was something he had learned to need without admitting that he needed it. He pushed through the door and the warm air struck his face with its familiar smell of frying oil and sugar

and the faint disinfectant they used on the tables, and he joined the short queue and looked at the menu board as though he had not memorised it.

When his turn came the girl behind the counter was new. She was perhaps nineteen, with a small silver stud in her nose and an expression of patient boredom that Betty found, in a distant way, restful. She asked for his name.

He gave it.

She looked up. It was very quick — a flicker, no more — and then she wrote it on the cup and turned away, and he paid and stepped aside to wait, and he told himself, as he had told himself ten thousand times, that he had imagined the flicker, that she had not heard him properly, that there had been no flicker at all. He went to a table by the window and sat down with his back to the room.

The rain had begun in earnest now. It struck the glass beside him in long diagonal lines and ran down in branching channels, and beyond the glass the street had taken on the particular shine that wet bitumen has under streetlights, and a tram passed in a wash of yellow light and was gone. Betty watched it go. He was, he realised, very tired. The tiredness was not from the day, which had been ordinary; it was the older tiredness, the one that lived behind his sternum and that he had stopped trying to name.

"Betty."

The girl's voice carried across the restaurant with that particular flatness of a name called out for collection, neither kind nor unkind, and Betty rose and crossed to the counter and took the tray and carried it back to his table, and he did not look at any of the other tables as he passed them, though he registered, as one registers weather, that a family was seated two tables over — a mother, a father, a child of perhaps nine — and that the child had looked up when the name was called.

He sat down. He arranged the burger and the chips and the paper cup of water in the small geometry he preferred, and he unwrapped the burger halfway and took a bite, and he chewed slowly and looked out at the rain.

The first chip struck him on the cheek.

It was a small thing. A single chip, warm still, leaving a small mark of salt and grease on his skin where it had touched him. It fell to the table and lay there beside his tray. Betty did not move. He did not turn his head. He looked at the chip on the table and he understood, with a clarity that arrived all at once and from nowhere, that it had been thrown, and that it had been thrown by the child at the table two over, and that it had been thrown because the child had heard his name.

He kept looking at the chip.

A second chip struck the window beside him and bounced onto the sill. From the table behind him came a small explosion of laughter — the child's laughter first, high and delighted, and then, half a beat later and lower, the mother's laughter, and then the father's, which was the worst of the three because it was the laughter of a man who knew he ought not to laugh and was laughing anyway, the small helpless laughter of complicity. The father said something — Betty could not make out the words — and the mother said *stop it, stop it,* in the tone of a woman who does not mean stop it, and the child laughed again, and a third chip struck Betty on the side of the neck and lodged for a moment in his collar before falling away.

Betty did not turn around.

He picked up his burger. He took another bite. He chewed. He looked at the rain on the window and he chewed and he swallowed and he took a sip of water from the paper cup, and the cup trembled very slightly in his hand, so slightly that no one watching would have seen it, and he set the cup down with great care so that it would not spill. His face was hot.

His face was very hot, and he understood that if he turned around now his face would be red, and that the redness would be seen, and that the seeing of the redness would be a further thing, a thing on top of the chips, and so he did not turn around. He looked at the rain.

The family finished their meal. He heard the scrape of the chairs, the rustle of the wrappers being gathered, the mother's voice telling the child to bring his cup, and the small procession of them passed behind him toward the bins and then the door. The child, passing, said something in a low voice that Betty did not catch, and laughed again, and was gone. The door swung shut. A bell above it gave a small dull chime. The rain went on.

Betty sat at the table for a long time after they had gone. His burger cooled. The chips on the table beside his tray — the one that had struck his cheek, and a second that he had not noticed falling — lay where they had fallen, and he did not touch them, and he did not brush them away. He looked at them. He looked at the rain. The girl behind the counter wiped the counter with a blue cloth and did not look at him, and Betty understood, without needing to think about it, that she had seen, and that she had decided, in the small economy of a nineteen-year-old's working evening, that it was not her trouble.

After a while he stood up. He carried his tray to the bin and tipped the half-eaten burger and the untouched chips and the paper cup into it, and he set the tray on top of the stack, and he walked to the door and pushed it open and stepped out into the rain.

He walked home without his collar up. The rain ran down his face and into his shirt and he did not feel it, or rather he felt it as something happening to a body that was not quite his, a body he was walking beside rather than inside. The streets were nearly empty. A man with a dog passed him on the other side and the dog looked at him with the bright incurious attention of dogs and the man did not look at him at all.

A tram went by, lit and almost empty, and the woman in it was looking at her phone and did not look up. Betty walked.

When he reached his flat he did not turn on the light. He stood in the small dark hallway with the door closed behind him and the rain still running from his hair into his collar, and he listened to the silence of the flat, which was the silence he had come home to every evening for nine years, and he understood that something in the silence had changed, though he could not yet have said what.

He went into the bathroom and turned on the light over the basin and looked at himself in the mirror. His face was wet. There was a small mark on his cheek where the first chip had struck him, a faint pinkness, almost gone. He touched it with two fingers. He looked at himself for a long time.

Then he turned out the light and went to bed in his wet clothes, and he lay on his back in the dark and listened to the rain on the window, and he did not sleep for a long time, and when at last he slept he dreamed of nothing he could remember in the morning, but he woke with the taste of salt in his mouth and a small hard thing lodged behind his sternum that had not been there the day before, and that, he understood without yet having any words for it, was not going to leave.

He got up. He made his coffee. He went to work.

The rain had stopped in the night.

Chapter Two

The flat was on the second floor of a small brick building in a street that ran parallel to the railway line, and at certain hours of the night the trains passing made the windows hum in their frames with a faint vibration that Betty had long since ceased to hear. There were two rooms and a kitchen and a bathroom, and a small balcony that looked out over the back of a panel-beater's yard where a German shepherd lived chained to a length of cable, and which barked sometimes in the early morning at things Betty could not see. The rent was reasonable. He had lived there for eleven years.

He rose at six. He had risen at six for as long as he could remember, not from discipline but from the simple fact that his body, left to itself, woke at that hour and would not return to sleep, and he had decided long ago that there was no use lying in bed staring at the ceiling when he could be making coffee. He made the coffee in a small stovetop pot that had belonged to his mother, and he drank it standing at the kitchen window looking down into the yard where the dog was usually still asleep, and then he showered and dressed and put on his shoes and walked to the tram. The kitchen of his childhood had been painted a particular yellow — a warm worn buttery yellow that his mother had chosen and that Betty had not thought about in years, but that returned to him sometimes, unbidden, in the first light at the window, the colour of mornings before he had understood that mornings could be anything other than safe.

His mother had named him after her own father, who had been called Bertram and who had died when she was four. She was a Saxon, one of the old German-speaking families of Transylvania, and the name had come down to her German, not Romanian — Bertram, which sounded, in the mouths of everyone Betty later met, like the name of no one alive. She had wanted, she once told him, to keep her father's name going, but she had not wanted the heaviness of Bertram for a small boy, and so she had used the diminutive she remembered her own mother using, which was Betty, though she gave it the sounds of her two languages at once, the *t* harder, the vowels turned and darkened, so that in her mouth it was not the soft English Betty at all but something older and squarer and half-foreign that no one outside the family ever heard. She had said it to Betty in that way until she died, when he was nineteen, and he had not corrected her, because he had loved her, and because the name in her mouth had been a different name from the name in the mouths of other people. After she died he had thought sometimes about changing it. He had even, once, gone so far as to download the form. But the form had asked for a reason, and he had sat at the kitchen table with the form in front of him and a pen in his hand and had been unable to write anything in the box, because the reason was not a reason he could put into words for a clerk at the registry, and because to write it down would have been a small further betrayal of his mother, who had given him the only thing she had to give, which was a name, and he had folded the form in half and put it in the drawer where he kept the bills, and he had not looked at it again.

At work he was known as Betty, which was the name on his employment record, and the people who had been there longest used it without any inflection at all, which he appreciated, and the people who were new used it with the small pause he had come to expect, and which had become, over time, a sound he heard before it was made. The pause.

The held breath. The decision, made in a quarter of a second, to use the name as given. He was grateful, in his way, for the decision. He understood that it was a kindness. He understood also that a kindness that must be performed each time one's name is spoken is a peculiar kind of kindness, and that the gratitude one feels for it is a peculiar kind of gratitude, but he had long ago stopped following that thought to its end.

His desk was by the window on the third floor and looked out over a brick wall on which someone, a long time ago, had painted the word LUCKY in white letters six feet high, the paint now flaked and ghostly. He had often wondered what the word had advertised. A laundromat, perhaps, or a betting shop. He liked the word. He liked that it was there without explanation, and that the explanation, whatever it had been, was gone, and that the word remained, meaning now only itself. He watered the jade on Wednesdays. The jade had been a gift from a woman in sales named Marguerite, who had given it to him on his first day, nine years ago, and who had said, *They're hard to kill, Betty, don't worry,* in a voice so warm and so without pause that he had carried the voice with him for weeks afterward and replayed it in his head at night before sleep, the way another man might replay a kiss. Marguerite had left the firm four years ago. The jade had grown. He had repotted it twice.

He ate his lunch at his desk. He had brought a sandwich from home for the first seven years; for the last two he had been buying it from a small place near the office where the woman who made the sandwiches knew his order and began making it when she saw him through the window, and who called him *love* instead of his name, which was, he understood, another kindness, and which he received with the small nod he had developed for receiving kindnesses he could not acknowledge directly. Her name was Anna. She was perhaps sixty. She had a son who was, she had once told him, *not well in his head,* and Betty had nodded then too, and had not asked, because he had understood that the telling

was the thing she needed and not the asking.

These were the kindnesses of his life. The unhurried use of his name by the older bookkeeper. Marguerite's voice nine years ago. Anna's *love* across the counter. The girl at the chemist who, when he came in for his prescription each month, simply slid the small white bag across the counter without saying the name on it aloud. The man at the newsagent who nodded to him each morning and said *mate.* The neighbour on the ground floor, an old Greek woman who spoke very little English and who left, twice a year, a small foil-wrapped parcel of something sweet outside his door, always without a note. He had never knocked to thank her. He had understood that the not-knocking was part of the gift.

He did not have friends, exactly. He had, rather, a small constellation of people whose presence in his week was the substance of his week, and whose absences, when they came — Anna's two weeks off in January, the retirement of the old tea-lady who had pushed her trolley round the office for twenty years and then one Friday did not — left small holes in him that he did not know how to fill and that, in time, closed over without filling. He had thought sometimes that this was loneliness, and at other times that it was not loneliness but something else for which there was no name, a condition of being mildly and chronically apart from the lives going on around him, like a man standing on a station platform watching trains pass through without stopping. He did not, in general, find the condition unbearable. He had learned to live within it. He had learned the small disciplines that made it liveable — the coffee at six, the jade on Wednesdays, the half-hour at the fast food place on the way home, the radio on at low volume in the evening so that the flat would not be entirely silent.

He had been, twice, in love. The first time when he was twenty-two, with a woman who had been kind to him for six months and then less kind for two and then gone, and who had said to him on the last evening,

in a voice not unkind, *Betty, I think you live very far inside yourself,* and he had not known what to say, and she had not waited long for him to think of something. The second time when he was twenty-nine, with a woman from a neighbouring department at the firm, and that had lasted almost a year, and had ended without a scene, by a gradual cooling and a final email that had used the word *fond.* He had kept the email for some months and then deleted it. He had not, since, sought anyone. He had understood, without bitterness, that the woman at twenty-two had been right, that he did live very far inside himself, and that the distance was not a distance he knew how to close, and that to ask another person to cross it would be to ask a thing he was not in a position to ask.

He read in the evenings. He read history, mostly — the slow kinds, written by Englishmen in the previous century, with long sentences and many subordinate clauses, in which empires rose and fell over the course of a paragraph and individual men were mentioned only in footnotes. He found the long view restful. He liked to be reminded that the small intensities of a single life were, in the larger reckoning, almost nothing. He had a small shelf of these books in the bedroom and another in the front room, and he had read most of them more than once, and the rereading was a pleasure of a particular kind, like walking a familiar path in good weather.

This was Betty's life on the morning after the rain. He rose at six. He made the coffee. He stood at the kitchen window. The dog in the yard was still asleep. He drank the coffee and he showered and he dressed and he walked to the tram, and the morning was cool and clear and the sky above the rooftops was the pale washed blue of a morning after rain, and on the tram he opened his book and read three pages of the slow careful prose of an Englishman ninety years in his grave, and at the office he watered the jade though it was not Wednesday, because he had a small wish, that morning, to water it, and he ate the sandwich Anna

had made him, and he did the work in front of him, the quarter's invoices, and the numbers were as they had always been, restful, uncommenting, and he went home in the evening on the tram and he did not stop at the fast food place, and he did not, that evening, think about the chip, or about the laughter, or about the child, or about the father's voice, because he had decided, without quite framing the decision in words, that he would not think about them, and the decision held, that evening, and held also the next evening, and the evening after that.

The small hard thing behind his sternum did not go away. But it did not, at first, grow.

It waited.

Chapter Three

It was on the tram, eleven days later, that the second thing happened, and Betty understood afterwards that the eleven days had not been a recovery but a kind of incubation, and that he had carried the chip from the fast food restaurant inside him without examination, the way a man carries a small splinter under the skin of his palm and forgets it until the flesh around it begins to redden.

He had boarded the tram at the usual stop and taken the usual seat, which was the third from the back on the left, by the window, and he had opened his book — he was rereading, that week, an account of the dissolution of the Habsburg empire which he had first read in his twenties — and he had read perhaps half a page when he became aware of a small persistent pressure against the back of his seat. It was not violent. It was not, at first, even unpleasant. It was the rhythmic pressure of a small foot kicking the metal frame of his seat in a slow steady cadence, *thud, thud, thud*, with the patience of a thing that has just discovered it can be done and that intends to go on doing it for the foreseeable future.

He did not turn around.

He read the same paragraph three times. None of it was going in. He turned the page anyway, so that the appearance of reading would be maintained, and he held the book a little higher, and the kicking went on. *Thud. Thud. Thud.* The cadence did not vary. It did not increase. It did not stop.

After perhaps two minutes the woman behind him spoke — from the voice, the child's mother, or someone in that role — and she said, *Sweetheart, don't kick the seat,* in the abstract automatic voice of a person reading something from a screen, and the kicking did not stop, and she did not say it again. He sat very still. He looked out the window at the passing facades of South Yarra and he understood that the kicking was for him. Not in the sense that the child knew anything about him — the child knew nothing — but in the sense that the child had selected him, had looked at the back of his head and at the particular quality of his stillness and had decided, with the obscure infallible accuracy of small predators, that he was the one who would not turn around.

He did not turn around.

The kicking went on for four stops. When the tram reached Domain Interchange the child and the mother and a smaller child whom Betty had not registered until that moment got off, and the kicking ceased, and Betty kept his eyes on his book for a long moment before he allowed himself to look up, and when he looked up the tram was almost empty, and the late morning sun was coming in through the windows at an angle that lit the dust in the air, and his hands were trembling very slightly where they held the book.

He closed the book. He put it in his bag. He looked out the window.

A thought arrived. It came fully formed, without preamble, in the flat private voice a man uses on himself when no one is listening. The thought was: *They know.* And almost at once, before he could examine it, a second arrived to dress the first: *They can see it on you. They can see whatever it is. They select.*

He sat with the two thoughts. They did not feel new. They felt, rather, like things that had been in him a long time and had only now been given words — since the fast food place, certainly, and perhaps from much further back than that.

The tram passed the Botanic Gardens. A woman with a stroller got on at the next stop and sat at the front, and the baby in the stroller began at once to cry, and the woman did not comfort it, and the crying continued, the small high wail of a thing that has not yet learned that crying does not always summon relief, and Betty listened to it and the sound entered him not as sound but as a kind of pressure against the inside of his skull, and he did not want to be in the tram any longer, and at the next stop he got off, two stops before his own, and he walked the remaining distance to the office in the sun.

He did not, that day, think further about the thought. He worked. He ate the sandwich Anna had made him. He watered the jade, though it was not Wednesday, because the previous watering had been mid-week and he had lost track. He went home. He did not stop at the fast food place. He had not stopped at it since the night of the chip, and without having decided it, he knew he would not stop at it again.

But the thought did not leave him. It had taken up residence somewhere behind the small hard thing in his sternum, and over the following days it began, very quietly, to elaborate itself. He found that he was noticing children. He had not, in the previous thirty-four years of his life, paid particular attention to children. He had not disliked them. He had not liked them. He had simply not registered them, the way a man who does not garden does not register the difference between two kinds of shrub. Now he registered them. He registered the boy on the corner of his street who, each morning, kicked a small stone along the gutter as he walked to school, and who, when Betty passed him, looked up with an expression Betty could not read but that he found himself, against his will, interpreting. He registered the toddler in the supermarket who, strapped into a trolley, stared at him with the unblinking attention of a small ruminant, and whose stare did not break when Betty smiled at it — and Betty was startled to realise he had

smiled at it, and more startled by the small flat refusal of the smile to be returned.

He told himself, in the evenings, that he was imagining it. He told himself that he was, perhaps, going through a difficult patch, that the chip had been a small bad thing and that he was making it into a large bad thing, and that the proper response was to read more history and drink less coffee and perhaps go for a walk on Saturdays. He resolved, one Wednesday evening, to go for a walk on Saturdays. He did not, when Saturday came, go for the walk. He stayed in the flat and read about the partition of Poland, and at intervals he found that he was not reading but staring at the wall, and he understood, with the small precise dismay of a man watching a thing he has set down begin to roll toward the edge of a table, that something was happening to him, and that he did not know how to put a hand on it.

On the following Tuesday, on his way back from the sandwich place, he passed a playground.

It was a small playground, attached to a primary school three streets from his office, and he had passed it perhaps a thousand times in nine years and had never stopped at it. He stopped at it now. He did not stop deliberately. He found himself stopped. The wire fence came up to his chest and he stood with his hands at his sides and the paper bag with the sandwich in it hanging from one hand, and he watched.

There were perhaps twenty children in the playground. They were six or seven years old. They were doing the things children of that age do at lunchtime, which is to say they were running in small unmotivated arcs, and shouting at each other in voices that carried no information, and falling down and getting up again, and gathering in small groups that formed and broke apart again within seconds. A girl in a blue cardigan was crying near the fence; another girl, older, was patting her on the shoulder with the bored competence of a child who has been told to do

this. Two boys were fighting in slow motion over a tennis ball. A teacher stood near the door of the school building with a paper cup in her hand and was not watching.

Betty watched.

He stood at the fence for a long time. He did not know how long. He understood that he was looking for something, and that he did not know what he was looking for, and that the looking itself was a thing he had not done before and that frightened him slightly, but not enough to make him stop. He looked at the children's faces. He looked at the patterns of their movement. He thought — and the thought arrived again unbidden, fully dressed — *There is something here. There is something here that no one is looking at.*

A child ran past on the inside of the fence — a small boy, perhaps six, with a smear of something orange on his cheek — and as he passed he looked up at Betty through the wire, and for a moment, no longer than half a second, the two of them held each other's gaze, and the child's expression did not change, and then the child ran on.

Betty understood, walking back to the office with the paper bag swinging at his side, that the look had not been a child's look. And he understood at once that this was not reasonable — that the look had been a six-year-old's look at a man standing inexplicably at a fence, the half-second of registration and dismissal that any child gives any adult on any day. He understood all this. And underneath the understanding, where the understanding could not reach, he believed the opposite: that the look had been a recognition, that the child had seen the same thing the kicking child had seen and the family at the fast food place had seen, the thing Betty could not see in himself but that was apparently legible to anyone small enough to read it.

He returned to the office. He ate his sandwich at his desk. The jade looked, he thought, slightly tired, and he gave it a few drops of water

though he had watered it the day before. He did the reconciliation that was in front of him. The numbers behaved as numbers behaved. At five-thirty he closed his laptop and put on his coat and walked to the tram.

On the way home, on the tram, he opened a small notebook he carried for the recording of grocery items he might otherwise forget, and on a blank page near the back he wrote, in his small neat hand, a single sentence. He wrote it without quite deciding to write it, the way a man's hand sometimes signs his name on a form before his mind has read what the form says. He looked at the sentence after he had written it. He read it twice. He closed the notebook and put it back in his bag.

The sentence was: *They are not what we are told they are.*

He did not, that night, take the notebook out again. But he knew the sentence was there, in the back of the notebook, in his own handwriting, and he knew that he had written it, and that he would not be able to claim, later, that he had not.

The small hard thing behind his sternum had grown.

Chapter Four

The notebook came out of the bag again on a Thursday evening, three weeks after the playground, and Betty did not pretend to himself, this time, that he was writing about groceries.

He had come home from work and had not turned on the lamp in the front room, because the late spring light through the western window was sufficient for what he meant to do, and he had sat at the small table by the window with the notebook open in front of him and a pen in his hand, and he had written, beneath the first sentence, a second.

They are not what we are told they are.

What we are told is the cover.

He looked at the two sentences together for a long time. He understood that they had a different weight than they had had, separately, on different evenings. Together they had begun to be a thing. He turned the page. He wrote, without preamble:

1. The cadence on the tram. 2. The look through the fence. 3. The chip. 4. The unblinking attention of the toddler in the supermarket. 5. The girls at the tram stop, who said something I could not hear.

He stopped. He read the list. It was a list of evidence — the word *evidence* had risen in his mind without his summoning it — and it was not yet ordered. The proper response, the disciplined response, was to consider whether each item could be explained in a more ordinary way. He gave the question to himself with the seriousness he gave to a reconciliation at work. He sat with the list for some minutes. He could explain each item. He could explain all five. He could, in fact, account

for them more easily and more economically than by any other means. He noted this. He wrote, beneath the list:

Each of these can be explained ordinarily. The question is whether the ordinary explanations, taken together, are more or less probable than the alternative.

He put down the pen. He sat back. He felt, for the first time since the fast food place, something that was not the small hard thing but a different thing, a thing in the front of his chest that was almost a lightness, almost the feeling a man has when, after weeks of trying to remember a name, the name returns to him in the shower. It was the pleasure of having begun to think clearly about something he had until now been thinking unclearly about. The pleasure was suspect. The pleasure was, in fact, precisely the pleasure his mother had warned him about, in another context, when he was sixteen and reading too much Nietzsche on the floor of his bedroom — *the pleasure of being clever about a thing that does not deserve cleverness, Betty, is the most dangerous pleasure there is.* He had not thought of that sentence in eighteen years. He thought of it now. He looked at the notebook. His mother had been right, and the warning, having returned, was not going to stop him.

He picked up the pen again.

Over the next two weeks the notebook filled. Not quickly — he was a slow careful writer, and the small neat hand made for short lines — but steadily, in the evenings, after the meal he no longer particularly tasted. He took to making the entries at the small table by the window with the lamp now on, because the spring evenings were lengthening and the light was no longer sufficient by the time he sat down. He developed a structure. The notebook had, at the back, the list of evidence; at the front, a series of propositions; and between them, a growing middle section in which he tested the propositions against the evidence and

against ordinary explanations, item by item, with a small precise rigour that he was, he found, proud of. The pride disturbed him in occasional flickers. He noted the flickers. He did not stop.

He had not, in his life, done research. He had read, but reading is not research; reading is taking what is set in front of you in the order in which it is set. Research is going to look. He began to go to look. He spent his lunch hours, that fortnight, not at his desk but at the small public library three streets from the office, where he sat at one of the carrels at the back with the laptop the firm had given him and a notebook open beside it and read, with the patient methodical attention he gave to the reconciliations, whatever he could find about children — about child development, about child psychology, about the history of childhood, about the legal status of the child across centuries, about the moral and religious philosophies that had taken children as their subject. He read Rousseau. He read Locke. He read papers in developmental psychology whose abstracts he could understand and whose statistical sections he could not. He read, with particular attention, the older Christian theologians on the question of original sin, and a small book by a French Jesuit on the moral life of children before the age of reason, which he found in the library's small religious section and which he read in a single afternoon.

He was not, he told himself, looking for confirmation. He was looking, he told himself, at the evidence as it was. He was a man who had noticed something. The proper response to noticing something was to look. He was looking. If the looking yielded nothing, he would close the notebook and forget the whole business. He told himself this. He believed it, in the daytime, with the library quiet around him and the soft scrape of pages turning at the next carrel. He believed it less, in the evenings, when he wrote in the notebook.

What he was finding, in the reading, surprised him. He had expected — he had not quite admitted to himself that he had expected, but he had expected — to find that the literature on children was uniformly sentimental, uniformly committed to the proposition that children were innocent and good. He found instead that this was not the case. He found a long tradition, going back further than he had known, of writers who had taken children to be other than innocent, and who had, with various degrees of seriousness, argued for it. He found Augustine on the wailing infant whose only impediment to malice was its weakness. He found a passage in Hobbes that he copied into the notebook in full. He found, in a paper on the moral psychology of small children, an experiment in which two-year-olds, observed through one-way glass, systematically and without prompting punished the puppets they had been led to believe had been unkind to other puppets, with what the researchers described, in a careful neutral phrase, as *evident pleasure*.

He underlined *evident pleasure* twice.

He understood — and this was, in retrospect, the moment at which the theory ceased to be a tendency and became a position — that he was not inventing anything. He was joining a tradition. He was reading what other men, serious men, theologians and philosophers and psychologists, had also seen, and had also written down. He was not alone. He had not, in fact, been the first. He was the latest in a long quiet line of people who had looked carefully and had reported, accurately, what they had found. The realisation steadied him. It removed from his interior the small flickering shame that had attended the early entries in the notebook, and replaced the shame with a feeling that was almost calm — the calm of a man who has, after long unease, located himself on a map.

He began, in the second week, to write more freely. The propositions at the front of the notebook lengthened. Where, at first, he had written single sentences with great care, he now wrote paragraphs, then pages.

He developed, almost without noticing it, a voice — a voice that was his and was not his, a voice with a slight formality and a slight coldness and a slight pleasure in its own articulation, a voice that was not the voice he used at work or with Anna or in the small interior commentary he made on his own days. It was a voice he had not used before. He found that he could use it without effort. He found that it came when he sat down at the table by the window with the lamp on, and that it left when he closed the notebook, and that the closing of the notebook now had a small wrench to it, a small reluctance, like setting down a conversation with a friend who has begun to say interesting things just as the evening grows late.

His mother had been wrong, he wrote one evening — and then he stopped, the pen above the page, because he had not meant to write that, and because he understood, looking at the four words, that he had crossed something. He looked at the words for a long time. He did not strike them out. He had decided, in the first week, that he would not strike out anything in the notebook, because to strike out was to perform a censorship upon himself, and the whole point of the notebook was to see what was there. He left the four words. He continued the sentence. *His mother had been wrong about the pleasure of being clever, because she had taken cleverness to be a substitute for truth, when in fact it is sometimes the only instrument by which truth can be reached.* He read the sentence. He found it satisfactory. He turned the page.

He was, by the end of the second week, sleeping less. He noticed this without alarm. He noticed many things without alarm now — that he had stopped reading the histories in the evening, that the jade had begun to drop leaves and that he was not watering it on Wednesdays any longer, that the sandwich Anna made him was, more often than not, half-eaten by the time he returned to his desk and was, on three occasions, left in the bag entirely. He noticed that Anna had asked him,

on a Tuesday, if he was eating enough, and that he had said yes, and that she had looked at him for a moment longer than was usual, and had said *love* in the voice she said it in, and had moved on to the next customer. He had carried the moment back to the office and had not thought about it again.

He had not, in the two weeks, returned to the playground. He had not allowed himself to return to it. He had decided — he was not sure when he had decided, but the decision had been made — that the playground was a place to be approached carefully, and only when the work in the notebook had reached a certain stage, and that to approach it before that stage would be to confuse the looking with the *acting*, and that the looking must be kept separate, must be kept disciplined, must be kept clean.

That word also he noticed. *Clean.* He had written it in the notebook one evening and had paused over it and had not struck it out.

The Thursday at the end of the second week he wrote the longest entry he had yet written. He wrote it in a single sitting, from just after seven until almost eleven, without stopping for water or for the bathroom or to stand up and stretch the small ache that had begun, in those weeks, to settle in the small of his back. He filled six pages of the notebook. The entry was a synthesis. It drew together, in a single sustained argument, the evidence at the back and the propositions at the front, and it advanced — reading it back, the word that came to him was *advanced*, that he had been advancing toward this — a position. The position was that what was called childhood was a name given by adults to a stage of life whose true character had been systematically and perhaps deliberately misdescribed, and that the misdescription served interests that he could not yet fully identify but that he was beginning to be able to name, and that the true character of the stage was not innocence but a particular kind of pre-moral and pre-linguistic

intelligence whose operation was opaque to adults precisely because adults had passed through it and had been required, in order to become adults, to forget it. The forgetting, he wrote, was the price of admission to the adult world. The forgetting was what made adults sentimental about children, because adults could no longer remember what children were, and what they remembered instead was what they had been told children were, which was the cover.

He read the entry over twice. It was ungainly in places; the voice he had developed had run away with him here and there, and there were sentences that wanted tightening. But the argument was sound. It had reached, in this entry, a coherence it had not had before. The theory had a shape.

He closed the notebook. He put it on the table beside the lamp. He went to the kitchen and drank a glass of water at the sink standing up, and he looked at his face in the small mirror beside the kitchen door, and the face looking back at him was, he thought, a face he had not quite seen before, a face that had narrowed slightly at the cheeks and that had, around the eyes, a quality of attention that had not been there at the start of the spring. He had lost some weight. It was the face of a man who had been thinking, and he was, in a small unfamiliar way, pleased with the face.

He went to bed. He did not sleep for a long time. When he slept he dreamed of the LUCKY wall outside his office window, and in the dream the paint was not flaked but fresh, and the letters were six feet high and white against red, and he was reading them, and as he read them he understood that they meant something other than what they said, and that he was the only one in the city who could read what they meant, and the understanding was, in the dream, a great and quiet relief.

He woke in the dark. The clock said three. He lay on his back for some time. Then he got up, in his pyjamas, and went into the front room,

and turned on the lamp, and opened the notebook, and wrote, on a fresh page, the date and the time, and beneath them, in a hand slightly less steady than his ordinary hand:

I have begun.

Chapter Five

The figure on the footpath had been there, Betty saw now, for years.

He saw it the morning after the long entry in the notebook, walking from the tram stop to the office at twenty past eight on a Friday in late spring, with the small clear light of the morning coming down between the buildings and a wind that smelled of cut grass from the small park behind the cathedral, and he saw the figure sitting against the wall of the bank on the corner of Little Collins Street, where the alley met the main thoroughfare, and where a low brick lip ran out from the building and made a kind of bench for anyone who chose to sit on it. The figure was sitting on the lip, wrapped in what had once been a sleeping bag and was now a long compressed wad of grey synthetic stuffing held together by a length of orange baling twine, and the feet, stuck out across the pavement, were in boots that did not match — one black, one brown — and the face was the colour of a thing that has been left out in the weather, weathered past the reading of any age or any sex, and from it came, softly, the small repetitive sound from which Betty would later learn the figure took its name.

Hng. Hng. Hng.

It was not a word. It was a sound somewhere between a hum and a clearing of the throat, soft, almost contemplative, the small steady noise a person might make to themselves in a private room while doing a task that required no thought. The figure was not begging. There was no cup, no sign. It sat with its hands resting on its knees and its eyes open and unfocused, looking at the building across the street, and made the sound,

and watched the morning go by.

Betty had walked past this corner, he calculated, perhaps eleven thousand times. He had walked past it every working day for nine years, and twice on some days, and at irregular hours on the weekends when he came in for stocktake, and he had never, not once, seen this person. It was not because the figure had not been there. The figure had been there. It had the settled, weathered, immovable look of a thing that has been in a place long enough for the place to have grown around it. The colour of its clothes matched the colour of the bricks. Its sound was at the same pitch as the small mechanical hum of the building's ventilation. It was a fixture of the corner, in the way a postbox or a hydrant is a fixture of a corner — present, registered by no one, walked around by everyone, part of the geometry of the place.

Betty had not seen the figure because Betty had not been looking.

He stood at the corner of Little Collins and watched for perhaps a minute. The figure did not look at him. It made its sound. *Hng. Hng. Hng.* A woman in a yellow coat passed between them, and a courier on an electric bicycle, and a small group of office workers in a tight clutch around a single phone, and none of them looked at the figure, and the figure did not look at them, and the morning proceeded.

Betty walked on. He went to the office. He watered the jade, which had now lost four leaves and had the slightly shrivelled look of a plant that knows something is wrong. He did the reconciliation in front of him. At lunchtime he did not go to the library. He went, instead, back to the corner of Little Collins, and he stood for a few moments on the opposite side of the street, and the figure was still there, and the sound was still being made. *Hng. Hng. Hng.* Betty stood and watched. After a few minutes he knew he was watching for something specific. He was watching to see whether the figure would look at children.

A school group passed on the figure's side of the street — perhaps eight or ten children in maroon uniforms, with two teachers — and the figure did not look up. Its eyes remained on the building across the road. The school group passed. The sound continued. A toddler in a stroller pushed by a young father passed within a foot of the outstretched, mismatched boots, and the figure's head did not turn, and the toddler stared for a moment with the unbroken attention small children give to anything unusual, and the father pushed on, and the figure did not register the stare.

It came to him — and it was a piece of information he ought to write down in the notebook that evening — that the figure was not part of the thing he had been writing about. It was outside it. It was not afraid of children, did not register children, did not stand in any relation to children at all. It stood in relation to the wall behind it and to the sound it was making and to nothing else. It was, Betty thought, a person for whom the entire human world had become weather, and for whom one no longer reacts to weather except to make the small sound that allows one to bear it.

He did not, that lunchtime, approach the figure. He went back to the office. He worked. At five-thirty he walked to the tram, taking the longer way that passed the corner of Little Collins, and the figure was still there, the sound still being made, the boots still mismatched.

That evening, at the table by the window, he wrote in the notebook:

There is a man on Little Collins who has been there for years and whom I have never seen. He makes a sound. He does not look at children. He does not look at anyone. The point of him, if there is a point, is not yet clear to me. I write him down because I have looked at him for the first time and I do not want to forget that he is there.

He read the entry over. He found it, he thought, slightly out of character with the rest of the notebook — slightly less structured,

slightly more uncertain, slightly less in the voice he had developed. He considered, briefly, rewriting it. He did not. He had decided, in the first week, that he would not strike out. He turned the page.

He did not notice that he had written *man*, and *he*, of a person whose face he had not been able to read for age or for sex, and whom he had looked at, in total, for less than ten minutes of his life. He had assigned the figure a sex the way one assigns a sex to a coat on a hook, or a shape in the dark. He would remember the entry, much later, and the small words in it.

The following Monday Harry Kenari arrived.

He arrived in the morning, in the small commotion that always attended a new starter — an unfamiliar coat on the rack, an unfamiliar bag set down at the desk that had stood empty by the window since the spring, the bookkeeper performing the small ceremony of introduction that she had performed perhaps thirty times in her career and that she still performed with the same shy formality, as though the firm were larger than it was and the moment more consequential. Betty had been told the previous week that someone was coming. He had not asked who. He had assumed it would be a junior person, to take on the reconciliations he no longer had time for since the notebook had begun to take his evenings, and which had begun, in small ways, to take his mornings too — he had been arriving late, by ten or fifteen minutes, three times in the past fortnight, which was unprecedented in nine years.

The new starter was not a junior person.

He was perhaps fifty, perhaps fifty-five. He was tall and narrow and slightly stooped, in the way of men who have spent their lives at desks and have not particularly minded. He had thinning grey hair brushed back from a high forehead, and pale eyes behind small wire-framed glasses, and a tie that was knotted slightly off-centre in a way that Betty could not tell was deliberate or careless. His suit was good but not new.

He smiled when the bookkeeper introduced him to Betty — *Betty, this is Harry, he's joining us from Sydney, he'll be working on the audit programme* — and the smile was the strange smile Betty would come to know, the smile of a man who is amused by something he has not yet shared with you and who is in no hurry to share it. He shook Betty's hand.

"Betty," he said. He said it without the pause. He said it as though the name were any name. "Pleased to meet you."

"And you," Betty said.

Harry Kenari held the handshake a beat longer than was usual. He looked at Betty over the wire-framed glasses. He said, "Have we met before?"

Betty said no, they had not.

"You have a familiar face," Harry said. He released the handshake. "Forgive me. I've worked in this industry a long time, and at my age every face begins to look like another face one has half-known. Don't take it personally."

"I don't," Betty said.

"Good," Harry said, and the smile flickered again, the small amused private smile, and he turned to the bookkeeper and asked, in a different voice, where the kitchen was, and the small commotion moved on, and Betty went back to his desk and sat down in front of the reconciliation in front of him, and the numbers, for the first time in nine years, did not feel restful. The numbers felt watched.

It was foolish. Harry Kenari was a man of fifty-five who had been working in the industry a long time and who had said, exactly as he had said, that every face began to look like another face. He knew nothing about Betty, had no reason to know anything about him, and was not the sort of man — Betty could tell, from the suit, from the off-centre tie, from the held handshake — who would have the slightest interest in the

interior life of a thirty-four-year-old reconciliation clerk who watered a jade and ate sandwiches at his desk. He understood all this.

He did not work well that morning.

At lunchtime he found himself, against his intention, walking past Harry's desk on his way to the kitchen, and he saw that Harry was reading something on his screen — not the audit programme, Betty thought, though he could not be sure — and that Harry's small private smile was on his face, and that he was making, very softly, almost inaudibly, with his mouth, a small sound. *Hm.* Just *hm.* The sound of a man reading something that interested him.

Betty went to the kitchen and made a tea he did not want. He stood at the small window above the sink and looked out at the LUCKY wall, and the white letters, flaked and ghostly, looked at him back. He drank the tea in three swallows. He went back to his desk. He did not look at Harry's desk as he passed it. He felt, going past, that Harry was looking at him, and he did not turn his head to check, because to turn his head would be to confirm something that need not be confirmed.

That evening, at the table by the window, he wrote a short entry.

A new man at the office. Harry Kenari. He looked at me as though he had seen me before. He had not. He used my name without the pause. I notice both things. I notice also that I am noticing.

He put down the pen. He sat for a long time looking at the entry.

The notebook had, in the last hour, acquired a second subject. The first subject — the children, the theory, the work — remained the work. But there was now a second thing in the notebook, a second presence, and the second presence was not a category or a phenomenon but a man. A man with a name. A man who had said *Betty* without the pause and who had asked a question that was not a question, and who had then turned away, smiling his small smile, leaving Betty with the certain knowledge — certain in the way the playground had been certain,

certain in the way the kicking on the tram had been certain — that something had begun to attend to him.

He understood that this knowledge, like the other certainties, was probably wrong. He understood that Harry Kenari was a fifty-five-year-old man from Sydney who had been hired to work on the audit programme and who would, in three months, know Betty no better than he knew the bookkeeper or the woman from sales who had replaced Marguerite. He understood that the held handshake had been the manner of his generation, and the question about the familiar face the small social courtesy of a man who could not now remember whether he had met Betty at a conference fifteen years ago, and the smile no smile but the resting expression of a man whose face fell that way when he was thinking about a column of numbers.

He understood all this.

He understood also that he did not believe it.

He closed the notebook. He went to the kitchen and stood at the window and looked down into the yard, and the German shepherd, which had been chained there for as long as Betty had lived in the flat, looked up at him from the bare patch of dirt in which it spent its days, and made, very softly, in the back of its throat, a sound that Betty had heard the dog make perhaps ten thousand times and had never, until this evening, understood.

It was the same sound the figure on Little Collins made.

Hng. Hng. Hng.

Betty stood at the window for a long time. He did not write the observation down. He understood, without quite knowing why, that this observation was not for the notebook. It belonged somewhere else, somewhere he did not yet have a name for, somewhere in the part of him that the notebook had not reached and that had not, in the long evenings of the writing, made itself known.

He went to bed. He did not sleep until very late. When he slept he dreamed of nothing he could remember in the morning, but he woke with the taste of salt in his mouth, which was the taste he had woken to on the morning after the chip, and which he had not, in the weeks since, woken to again.

Chapter Six

It was Harry Kenari who sent him to the park, though Harry Kenari never knew it, and Betty himself did not understand it until much later.

It happened in the third week of Harry's tenure, on a Wednesday, in the kitchen, over the small kettle that the firm had owned for as long as Betty had worked there and that took four minutes to boil. Betty had gone in to make a tea, and Harry was already there, leaning against the bench with his own mug in his hand, waiting for the kettle, and there was no way to enter the kitchen and not stand beside him, and so Betty entered and stood beside him, and the kettle ticked and began its long slow climb toward boiling, and the two men looked out the window at the LUCKY wall.

"Do you know what it advertised?" Harry said.

"No," Betty said. "I've wondered."

"A bootmaker," Harry said. "Lucky's Boots. There was a man called Luciano who had a workshop in this building in the fifties — Italian, came out after the war — and the locals couldn't manage Luciano so they called him Lucky, and he leaned into it, painted it up there six feet high. He's long dead. His grandson told me. I looked it up." Harry sipped his tea. "I find I can't leave a thing like that alone. A word on a wall with no explanation. I have to know what it meant. It's a small defect of character. My wife used to say I'd follow a loose thread off the edge of the world."

Betty said nothing. He was looking at the wall. He was thinking that he had wondered about the word for nine years and had never thought to

ask, and that Harry Kenari had been in the building three weeks and had found the grandson of the bootmaker. He was thinking that there were two kinds of people in the world — the kind who wonder, and the kind who go and look — and that he had believed himself, lately, in the notebook, to have become the second kind, and that he saw now, standing in the kitchen, that he had not. He had wondered about the word and done nothing. He had wondered about the children and written in a notebook. The notebook was not looking. The notebook was wondering with a pen in his hand.

"You've gone quiet," Harry said. He said it without turning his head. He said it pleasantly, to the window.

"I was thinking about the wall," Betty said.

"It's a good wall to think about," Harry said. The kettle clicked off. Harry did not move to it. He let Betty pour first, which was a small courtesy, and as Betty poured Harry said, in the same pleasant voice, looking still at the wall and not at Betty, "What is it you're working on, Betty? In the evenings. You have the look of a man who's working on something in the evenings."

Betty's hand did not shake. He noted that it did not shake, and he was, for the rest of the day, obscurely proud that it had not. He finished pouring. He set the kettle down. He said, "I'm reading. History, mostly."

"Ah," Harry said. "What period?"

"The dissolution of empires," Betty said, and heard, as he said it, that the answer was both true and a kind of confession, and hoped that Harry would hear only the first.

"A big subject," Harry said. He pushed off the bench and went to the kettle and poured his own tea, and the small private smile was on his face, and he said, over his shoulder, going out, "Don't work too hard in the evenings, Betty. A man should have something he does that isn't work. My wife taught me that. Too late, but she taught me." And he was

gone, and Betty stood in the kitchen with his tea going cold in his hand and understood two things.

The first was that Harry Kenari had said *my wife used to say* and *my wife taught me* in the past tense, and that this meant something, and that Betty did not yet know what.

The second was that he, Betty, had been wondering with a pen in his hand for six weeks, and that this was no longer enough, and that the time had come to go and look.

He did not go to the park that week. He told himself there was no hurry. He told himself that the looking, when he did it, must be done properly, the way Harry had done the wall — patiently, methodically, following the thread. He spent the rest of the week preparing himself. He read, in the evenings, less of the theory now and more of practical things, though he did not call them practical things, even to himself. He read about the patterns of the school day. He read, on a council website, the locations and opening hours of the parks and playgrounds across the inner city, between his flat and his office, of which there were, he was surprised to find, eleven. He read about the times at which these places were busiest and emptiest. He told himself that he was establishing a baseline. He used the word *baseline* in the notebook, and the word, borrowed from the reconciliations, made the activity feel continuous with his work, and the continuity was a comfort.

On the Saturday he went to look.

He chose the park behind the cathedral, the one whose cut grass he could smell on the morning walk to the office, because it was the largest of the eleven and the one in which, he reasoned, a man might sit on a bench for an hour without being a man who was sitting on a bench for an hour. He left the flat at ten. He wore the clothes he wore on weekends, which were not different from the clothes he wore to work except that the shirt was older. He took, in his bag, the notebook, and a history he

did not intend to read, and a sandwich he had made himself because Anna's shop was closed on Saturdays, and a bottle of water. He told himself that he was a man going to a park to read on a Saturday morning, which was a thing that men did, which was in fact a thing he had resolved weeks ago to do and had not done, and that he was now doing it, and that there was nothing in it.

He found a bench near the playground but not at it — a dozen metres off, beneath a plane tree, angled so that a man sitting on it would naturally face the open lawn and the war memorial beyond, and would see the playground only at the edge of his vision, only if he chose to turn his head. It was close enough, if he turned it. He sat on the bench. He took out the history and opened it on his knee. He did not read it. He looked at the lawn and the memorial, and at the edge of his vision, where the playground was, children moved and shouted in the bright spring light.

He sat there for two hours.

He told himself, for the first hour, that he was reading. He turned a page from time to time. He told himself, for the second hour, that he was thinking, that the looking was a kind of thinking, that he was gathering the baseline, that the baseline required only that he be present and attentive and that he need not, in fact ought not, to do anything but sit and watch and let the patterns of the place reveal themselves. He watched the patterns of the place. He watched the parents arrive with their children and settle on the benches at the playground's edge and look at their phones. He watched the children separate from the parents the moment they were released, as though the tether between parent and child were elastic and the playground its point of maximum stretch. He watched the children form their groups and break them. He watched a small boy fall from the lowest rung of a climbing frame and sit on the bark chips and consider, for a long moment, whether to cry, and decide

against it, and get up. He watched two girls exclude a third with a precision and an economy of cruelty that he noted, in the notebook, with a small cold satisfaction, as *evidence*. He watched a father, the only attentive parent in two hours, crouch beside his daughter at the bottom of the slide and catch her each time she came down, six times, eight times, ten times, with an inexhaustible patience that Betty watched for a long while and could not, he found, fit anywhere in the theory, and that he did not write down.

At noon he ate the sandwich. The bread was dry. Anna's bread was never dry; he understood, eating the dry bread, something about the difference between bread made by a person who is making it for you and bread made by a person who is making it for himself, and the understanding was uncomfortable, and he set it aside.

At one o'clock a woman sat down on the other end of his bench.

She was perhaps forty, with a paperback and a takeaway coffee, and she sat at the far end and opened her book and did not look at Betty, and Betty understood at once that her presence had changed the bench. The bench was no longer a place where a man sat alone watching a playground. It was a place where two strangers sat reading on a Saturday, and the woman's unconscious assumption — that this was what the bench was, that Betty was what he appeared to be, a man reading in a park — settled over Betty like a borrowed coat, and he found, to his discomfort, that he was grateful for it. He found that he wished her to stay. He found that her ordinary unsuspecting presence beside him made him feel, for the length of an hour, ordinary and unsuspecting himself, a man reading in a park beside a woman reading in a park, and that the feeling was one he had not had in six weeks, and that he had missed it, and that the missing of it frightened him more than anything he had written in the notebook.

She left at two. She gathered her book and her empty cup and stood and said, to Betty, in the reflexive way of a person who has shared a bench for an hour, "Lovely day." And Betty said, "Yes." And she smiled and went, and the bench was a man sitting alone watching a playground again, and the borrowed coat was gone, and Betty sat in the cold of its going for a few minutes and then closed the history he had not read and put it in his bag and walked home.

That evening he did not write in the notebook the things he had told himself he would write — the baseline, the patterns, the times of greatest and least occupancy. He sat at the table by the window with the lamp on and the notebook open and the pen in his hand, and he wrote nothing for a long time, and then he wrote:

I sat in the park for two hours. A woman sat beside me for one of them and for that hour I was a man in a park. When she left I was something else again. I do not understand why the difference should be so total, or why I should grieve the hour. I went to look and I have looked and I do not know, tonight, what I looked at. The father at the slide caught his daughter ten times. I have not been able to place him.

He read the entry. It was, he saw, entirely out of the voice. It had none of the formality, none of the coldness, none of the cold pleasure. It was the voice of the entry about the figure on Little Collins — the uncertain voice, the unstructured voice, the voice from the part of him the notebook had not reached. He understood that there were now two voices in the notebook, and that they did not agree, and that the disagreement was the most interesting thing that had happened to him in six weeks, and that he had no idea what to do about it.

He did not strike anything out.

He closed the notebook. He went to the kitchen and stood at the window. The dog was asleep in the yard. The flat was very quiet. He stood at the window for a long time, and he thought, without wanting to,

of the woman on the bench saying *lovely day*, and of Anna saying *love*, and of the father catching his daughter, and of the figure on Little Collins making its sound, and he understood that all of these belonged together, that they were all the same kind of thing, and that the theory in the front of the notebook had no place for any of them, and that this ought to have troubled him more than it did.

It troubled him. But it did not stop him. The next Saturday he went back to the park.

Chapter Seven

He went back to the park the next Saturday, and the Saturday after that, and on the third Saturday he bought the knife.

He did not buy it as a knife. He understood, even at the time, that this was the structure of the thing — that he never bought anything as the thing it was, that each object came into his possession dressed as something else, and that the dressing was not a deception he practised upon the world but a deception he practised upon himself, and that he could not have proceeded without it. He bought it at a camping shop in the city, a large bright shop full of tents and sleeping bags and the orange synthetic cheer of the outdoors, and he bought, along with the knife, a small gas stove and a billy and a folding cup and a length of cord, so that the knife was the fifth item in a basket of camping equipment, and the young man at the counter, scanning the items, said, "Going bush?" and Betty said, "Thinking about it," and the young man said, "Good time of year for it," and put the knife in the bag with the rest, and Betty paid and left.

He did not look at the knife when he got home. He put the bag, unopened, in the bottom of the wardrobe, behind the box of his mother's things that he had not opened in fifteen years, and he closed the wardrobe, and he understood that the placing of the bag behind his mother's box was not an accident, and he did not pursue the understanding.

That evening he wrote in the notebook, in the cold voice:

A man who intends a thing and does not prepare for it does not intend it. A man who prepares for a thing he tells himself he does not intend is lying about one of the two. I have prepared. I will not insult myself with the second lie. What I have not yet decided is the first thing — whether I intend it — and I will not be able to decide it by writing. I will only be able to decide it by going further than writing, and seeing, at each step, whether I can continue. This is not a plan. It is an experiment whose subject is myself.

He read the entry. He found it, he thought, the most honest thing he had yet written, and he understood, dimly, that this was the danger of it — that the cold voice had learned to wear honesty now, that it had taken the uncertain voice's one weapon, candour, and put it on, and that an honest cruelty is harder to resist than a dishonest one, because it does not give you the lie to catch hold of. He understood this. He wrote it down, beneath the entry, in what he hoped was the other voice: *The above is the cleverest thing the notebook has ever done and I do not trust it.* But the handwriting, he saw, was the same handwriting. The voices did not have different hands. He could not, on the page, tell which of them had written which line. He closed the notebook.

He called it, to himself, a rehearsal. That was the cold voice's word, and he let it stand, because *rehearsal* meant nothing happened for real, *rehearsal* meant he was only seeing how far, and he needed the word in front of him like a man needs a railing on a dark stair. It happened the following Wednesday, and it happened almost by itself, and afterward Betty could not reconstruct the sequence of small permissions by which he had arrived at it; he knew only that he had walked in calling it a rehearsal and walked out having done a thing that has no rehearsal, that is only ever itself, the first time and every time.

He had left work early — he left work early often now; no one remarked on it; the reconciliations were being quietly absorbed by

Harry's audit programme, and Betty understood that he was becoming, at the firm, a man whose absence was easier than his presence, and that this ought to have wounded him and did not. He had left at four and had not gone home. He had gone, instead, to the park behind the cathedral, on a weekday for the first time, at the hour when the school day ended, and he had taken up his bench beneath the plane tree, and he had watched the children come through the park on their way home.

They came in twos and threes, with and without parents, in the maroon uniforms of the school three streets over and the blue of the school by the river, and they crossed the park in the long gold light of the late afternoon, and Betty watched them, and the cold voice in him watched them, and the other voice in him watched them, and for a while the two voices watched together in something that was almost peace, the way two men who have quarrelled may stand together at a window and watch the rain and forget, for the length of the rain, that they have quarrelled.

Then a child crossed the park alone.

A boy, perhaps nine. The age of the boy at the fast food place — Betty noted this, and noted that he had noted it, and could not tell which voice had done the noting. The boy was small for nine, in the maroon uniform, with a school bag too large for him riding high on his shoulders, and he was alone, and he was dawdling, in the way of a child who is in no hurry to arrive wherever he is going, stopping to balance along the low stone edge of the garden bed, jumping off, picking up a stick, dropping it. He crossed the park diagonally, away from the playground, toward the gate at the far corner that gave onto a quiet residential street, and Betty, without deciding to, stood up from the bench, and put his bag on his shoulder, and followed.

He followed at a distance. He told himself, as he followed, that he was not following — that he too was leaving the park, that the far gate

was as good a gate as any, that a man may walk across a park behind a child without the walking being a following. He told himself this in the cold voice. The other voice said nothing. The other voice had gone very quiet, the way a room goes quiet when something has come into it. Betty followed the boy through the far gate and onto the quiet street, and the boy dawdled on ahead, balancing along a low fence now, and Betty walked behind him at a distance of perhaps thirty metres, and the street was empty in the gold light, and there was no one in it but the man and the boy, and Betty's heart was beating in a way he could feel in his throat and his wrists and behind his eyes, and he understood that he had crossed, in the last two minutes, from one country into another, and that the border had not been where he had thought it would be, that there had been no fence at the border, no guard, no sign, that he had simply been walking and had looked up and found himself across.

The boy turned a corner. Betty turned the corner. The boy walked on. The street was longer, and emptier, lined with the high paling fences of back gardens, and a single parked van, and the gold light coming level down the length of it, and the boy ahead, small, dawdling, alone, and Betty behind, and the distance between them, Betty understood, was a thing entirely within his control, a thing he could close at any pace he chose, and the understanding arrived in him not as a thought but as a physical event, a kind of falling, and his mouth had gone dry, and his hands, he found, were cold, and the cold voice in him had begun, very rapidly and very quietly, to narrate, to say *now, this is the baseline, this is only the looking, you are only seeing how far*, and the other voice was not saying anything at all, the other voice had left, the room was empty of it, and his feet had begun, without his deciding it, to go faster.

He closed the distance.

He did not decide to. The distance was thirty metres and then it was ten and then his hand was out in front of him and then his hand was on

the boy.

On the boy's shoulder. The small shoulder, the thin bone of it through the jumper, the shoulder of a nine-year-old, and the boy spun under his hand.

And looked up.

And the face. The boy's face. It had been open, dawdling, the face of a child who waves at trains. Now it changed. Betty watched it change. He watched the open thing close and the new thing come up into it from somewhere underneath, fast, total, the eyes going wide and then going flat with it, the mouth coming open — and it was terror. It was a child's terror and Betty had put it there. He had reached down into a child and switched off the daylight and switched on that, with his hand, on a shoulder, in a quiet street, and the boy made a sound, a high small sound, not a word, and tried to pull back, and the shoulder twisted under Betty's fingers.

A door. Somewhere. A screen door, the slap of it, and a voice — a woman's, off to the left, a porch, "Oi — *oi* —" — and a face, white, turning toward them across a low fence.

Betty let go.

He let go and he ran.

He ran. He did not run the way a man runs. He ran the way a thing runs, low, blind, the breath sawing, the bag banging on his back, down the street and round the corner and round another, not seeing, the woman's *oi* still going behind him or only in his head, he could not tell, he never afterward knew whether she had got a look at him, whether she had called anyone, whether the boy had told, what the boy had told, whether somewhere that night a child sat at a kitchen table and could not eat and a mother said *what happened, what happened, who was it,* and a small voice tried to say. He never knew. That was part of it. He had done a thing and then run from it and the thing went on existing behind him,

in a child, out of his sight, beyond his reach, forever, and he would never know its size.

He stopped running when his body made him. A laneway. Bins. He was sick against a wall, bringing up the nothing in him, and then kneeling on the wet ground with his hands flat on the cold of it and his head down.

The boy was alright. He told himself the boy was alright. He had not hurt the boy. He had touched a shoulder. A man can touch a child's shoulder. He had only — he had only put his hand on a child's shoulder and meant, in the meaning underneath the meaning, the thing he had bought a knife for; and the child had felt it; children feel it; the child had looked up and known, in the way the body knows before the mind, exactly what was standing over him in the gold light; and the child would carry that. The looking-up. The knowing. The face of the man. Betty had given a nine-year-old, free, unasked, a thing the child would take into the rest of his life and find again behind other faces, in other quiet streets, at the edge of sleep, for years. That was done. It could not be not-done.

Betty knelt by the bins in the dark and understood that he was not, after all, a man who had nearly done a thing. He was a man who had done one. The size of it was small — a hand, a shoulder, a few seconds — and the size of it was infinite, and both were true, and he knelt between the two sizes and could not get up.

He went home. He did not write in the notebook. He sat at the table by the window with the lamp off and the notebook closed in front of him and he looked at it, and he did not open it, because he knew what the cold voice would do with the thing if he gave it the page: it would call the boy's terror data, it would call the hand on the shoulder a step taken in the experiment, it would say *now we know how far*, it would file the child's face under evidence and close the drawer. He could not watch it

happen. He left the notebook closed. It was the first night since the beginning that he had not written.

He went to bed. He could not sleep. At three in the morning he got up and went into the front room and did not turn on the lamp and stood at the window, and across the city, he knew, the figure on Little Collins was sitting against the wall of the bank in the dark, making its sound, and the dog was in the yard below making its sound, and Betty stood at the window in the dark and made, very quietly, so quietly that he barely heard it himself, the same sound, *hng, hng, hng,* and did not know that he was making it, and did not know what it meant, and was, in the making of it, for the first time in his life, although he could not have said so, praying.

Chapter Eight

He did not go to the park that Saturday, or the next. He told himself this was discipline. It was not discipline. He could not have said what it was. He went to work, and came home, and did not write in the notebook, and did not open the wardrobe, and the days went past him the way water goes past a stone, and he stood in the middle of them and was not touched by them, and at night he did not sleep, or slept in the shallow broken way that is worse than not sleeping, and woke with the taste of salt.

He was not at peace and he was not resolved. He had thought, in the weeks of the notebook, that a man arrived eventually at one or the other — that he either talked himself out of the thing and was at peace, or talked himself into it and was resolved — and he found now that there was a third condition, which the notebook had not prepared him for, and which had no name, and in which a man simply continued, day after day, neither stopping nor going on, carrying the thing inside him like a stone he had swallowed and could neither bring up nor pass.

He had touched a child. That was the stone. He had put his hand on a child and put terror in a child's face and run, and the first days after, he waited. He waited to be caught. Every morning he expected it — a knock, a car at the kerb, two officers at the office asking quietly if he'd come with them, the bookkeeper's face. He read the local pages for it. He listened, in the lunchroom, for it. He flinched when the office phone rang. He had done a thing that gets a man taken away and he wanted, he found, to be taken away, because being taken away would be a verdict, a

thing said aloud, a hand laid on him that matched the hand he had laid on the boy.

No one came. The days went by and no one came. Either the woman on the porch had not seen his face, or the boy had not been able to say what had happened, or had said it and not been believed, or had said it and been believed and nothing had come of it, a description too thin, a man too ordinary. Betty would never know which. He only knew that the world, having had its chance to name him, had declined, had closed over the thing as it closed over everything, and left him at large, at his desk, watering nothing, a free man, which was the worst sentence available, because a free man has to do the work himself.

He understood, dimly, that something had happened to him in the quiet street that he had not chosen and could not undo — not the terror he had felt but the terror he had caused, the boy's face changing under his hand, the proof, delivered into his own body, of what he was. He told himself, when the cold voice pressed him, that he had touched a shoulder and nothing more, that a touch was not the thing itself, that he had stopped, in the end, that the stopping was what mattered. He half-believed it. He let himself half-believe it because the alternative — that he had not stopped, that the woman's *oi* and his own legs had stopped him, that left alone in that street with that child he did not know what he would have done and that the not-knowing was the whole horror — the alternative was not a thing he could hold and continue to function, and he had to continue to function, because there was work, and there was rent, and there was the slow business of getting through the hours, and a man cannot get through the hours holding, in both hands, the knowledge that he does not know who he is.

So he told himself it was a touch and nothing more. And he went back to the park. Not that Saturday, and not the next. But the third.

Harry Kenari, in those weeks, drew closer.

It was nothing Betty could have pointed to. Harry did not question him again, did not return to the matter of the evenings, did not so much as glance, that Betty saw, at the small notebook that Betty had taken, lately, to carrying in his jacket pocket rather than his bag, because the bag could be left at the desk and the jacket could not. Harry was, on the surface, only a colleague — a courteous, slightly stooped, slightly amused man of fifty-five who arrived each morning at half past eight and worked through the day on the audit programme and left at six, and who, in the kitchen, talked pleasantly about small things, the weather, the cricket, a documentary he had watched. But Betty had begun to feel Harry the way one feels a draught in a room — not by seeing it, but by the small persistent cooling on one side of the body, the side toward the gap. He felt Harry on his left, where Harry's desk was. He felt the quality of Harry's attention even when Harry was not, so far as Betty could tell, attending. He understood that this feeling was very likely the same feeling he had had about the children — the feeling of being read by something that gave no sign of reading him — and that the feeling had been wrong about the children, or had been, at least, a feeling he could no longer trust, and that it was therefore very likely wrong about Harry too, that Harry was exactly what he appeared to be and that Betty's sense of being watched was the sense of a guilty man, who carries his watcher inside him and projects it onto whatever face is nearest. He understood all this. It did not help. The draught did not stop because one had explained the draught.

Once, in the second of those weeks, the thing Betty feared nearly happened.

He had gone to the kitchen and left his jacket on the back of his chair — a lapse; he did not, ordinarily, leave the jacket; but he had gone only for water and meant to be a moment — and when he came back Harry

was standing by Betty's desk, not at it, but near it, with a folder in his hand, evidently having come to leave the folder, and the jacket was on the chair, and the notebook, Betty saw, had worked its way half out of the jacket pocket with the slump of the fabric, so that an inch of it showed, the cheap marbled cover, the bent corner. Harry was looking down at the desk. Betty could not tell, crossing the room with the cup of water in his hand and his heart going, whether Harry was looking at the folder he was setting down or at the inch of notebook showing from the pocket. Harry looked up. He smiled the small smile.

"I've left you the Hartigan reconciliation," Harry said. "There's a discrepancy in the third quarter I can't make sense of. You know these accounts better than I do — you've been with them years. I wondered if you'd cast an eye."

"Of course," Betty said.

"No hurry," Harry said. He did not move. He stood a moment longer by the desk, and his eyes went down again — to the desk, to the folder, to the chair, Betty could not tell — and then he said, in a different voice, lighter, almost idle, "You should take that coat to a tailor, Betty. The pocket's gone. Things'll fall out of it." And he reached out — Betty's breath stopped — and he pushed, with one finger, gently, the inch of notebook back down into the pocket, the way one might tuck in a label sticking up from a collar, a small unconscious courtesy, and he took his hand back, and he smiled, and he went back to his own desk.

Betty stood by his chair with the water in his hand. He did not know whether Harry had seen the marbled cover and known it for a private notebook and pushed it down out of delicacy, having understood that it was not his to see — or whether Harry had seen nothing, had registered only a thing falling out of a pocket and tucked it back as he would tuck back anything, a glove, a handkerchief, and thought no more of it. He could not tell. He would not be able to tell. This, he understood, sitting

down at last and setting the water on the desk with a hand that was not quite steady, was the whole nature of Harry Kenari: that one could not tell; that Harry left, in every exchange, exactly enough ambiguity that a guilty man would fill it with his guilt and an innocent man would not notice it at all; and that Betty, who was not innocent, filled it, and would go on filling it, and that Harry need do nothing further, ever, than be present and pleasant and occasionally tuck a notebook back into a pocket, in order to press upon Betty a weight that grew heavier by the day and that Harry himself might be entirely unaware of applying.

That night Betty took the notebook out of the jacket and looked at it for a long time. He thought of burning it. He had read, in the histories, of men who burned their papers, and the burning had always seemed to him a confession of a kind — a man does not burn what does not accuse him. He held the notebook and thought of the gas ring in the kitchen and the small blue flame, and he found that he could not do it. Not because he wished to keep the theory. He no longer, he realised, holding the notebook, much wished to keep the theory; the theory had become, since the street, a thing he carried rather than a thing he believed, a heavy case he went on carrying out of habit long after he had forgotten what was in it. He could not burn the notebook because of the other voice. The uncertain voice. The entries about the figure on Little Collins and the woman on the bench and the father at the slide — those entries were in the notebook too, in the same marbled covers, in the same hand, and to burn the notebook would be to burn them with the theory, and he understood, holding it, that those entries were the only record he had of the only true things he had written in two months, and that he could not destroy them to be rid of the rest, and that he was therefore condemned to keep the whole, the lie and the truth bound together in one cheap book, indistinguishable on the page, because they had been written by the same hand on the same evenings by the same man, and there was no

separating them now.

He put the notebook back in the jacket. He went to bed. He did not sleep.

■

On the third Saturday he went back to the park.

He could not have told anyone why. If Harry Kenari had stopped him at the gate of the building that morning and asked him, in the pleasant idle voice, where he was going, Betty would not have had an answer, or would have had only the cold voice's answer, the contaminated experiment, the better conditions, and would have heard himself give it and known it for a borrowed coat. He went because he could not stay away. He imagined the figure on Little Collins must return to its patch of brick each night by the same pull — not desire, not decision, but the plain gravity of a place a man has made his own, that has begun, whether he wills it or not, to be where he belongs. The park had become his. The bench beneath the plane tree had become his. He went back to it the way a man goes back to a grief he cannot leave alone.

It was a grey morning, the first grey morning after weeks of spring. The playground, when he reached his bench, was nearly empty — a single mother with a toddler at the far end, no more — and the lawn was empty, and the war memorial stood grey against a grey sky, and Betty sat on his bench beneath the heavy-leafed plane tree and put his bag beside him and did not take out the history and did not take out the notebook. He sat with his hands in his lap. He looked at the empty playground. He did not know why he had come. The cold voice tried, once or twice, to tell him why he had come, and then it too fell silent, defeated by the greyness and the emptiness and the simple fact of the man sitting on the bench with his hands in his lap not knowing why he was there, and for a long while there was no voice in Betty at all, only

the grey morning, and the wet smell of the grass, and the small far-off sound of the toddler at the other end of the playground, and Betty sitting, and waiting, and not knowing, in the oldest condition of his life, for what.

Chapter Nine

The mother and the toddler left at eleven.

Betty watched them go — the mother folding the small collapsible thing the toddler had been riding, the toddler protesting, the long negotiation of departure that parents conduct with the very young — and he watched them out through the near gate, and then the playground was empty, and the lawn was empty, and the grey morning lay over the park without a single moving figure in it but Betty on his bench, and the war memorial, and the wind turning the leaves of the plane tree above him, showing their pale undersides.

He did not leave. He had now no reason to stay — there was no one to watch, nothing to gather, no baseline to establish in an empty park — and he did not leave. He sat with his hands in his lap. The cold had got into him, the wet grey cold of the first grey morning, and he did not feel it as cold, he felt it as a kind of clarification, as though the warmth of the spring weeks had been a fog and the cold were the clearing of the fog, and what the fog had hidden was simply this: a man on a bench, in an empty park, on a grey morning, waiting. He had stopped, some time ago, telling himself stories about why. The cold voice had given up. The other voice had not spoken since the street, since the boy's face, since he ran. There was only the waiting, and the man, and the cold.

Far off, across the city, a clock struck the half hour. The sound came thin across the empty lawn.

Then, at the near gate, a child came into the park.

She was perhaps eight. She was alone. She wore a yellow raincoat, unfastened, and gumboots, and she came through the gate at a run, the particular loose flailing run of a child running for the joy of running, and behind her, some way behind, not yet through the gate, Betty could see the shape of an adult — a grandmother, perhaps, slow, with a shopping trolley, the kind of arrangement by which a child outpaces the one who is meant to be minding her and the minding stretches thin across a widening distance. The child ran out onto the empty lawn, the yellow coat flying, and she ran in a wide curve for no reason but the running, and her gumboots threw up small sprays of water from the wet grass, and she was, in the grey emptiness of the morning, the only bright thing, the only moving colour, a small yellow flame blowing across the grey.

Betty watched her.

He was very still on the bench. He understood, watching her, that the waiting was over, that this was the thing he had been waiting for without knowing it, and the understanding did not come as a thought but as a stillness, a great stillness that came down over him from above like a held breath, and inside the stillness the cold voice was silent and the other voice was silent and there was only the watching, and the child, and the slow grandmother far behind at the gate, and the empty park, and the distance — the distance again, the distance from the rehearsal, the distance between himself and the running child, which was a thing, he understood with the same falling he had felt in the empty street, entirely within his control, a thing he could begin to close at any moment, at any pace, and no one would see, the grandmother was far off and slow and looking down at her trolley, the park was empty, the morning was grey and held its breath with him —

The child fell.

She went down on the wet grass in the middle of the lawn, gone over a hidden dip or her own gumboots, and she sat there a moment in the

way children do, deciding, and then she began to cry — not loudly, not in fear, the ordinary affronted crying of a child who has fallen and is wet and has discovered that the morning is not, after all, entirely on her side — and she sat in the wet grass in her yellow coat and cried, and the grandmother at the gate had not yet seen, was bent over the trolley, fighting with the gate's latch.

And Betty stood up.

He did not decide to stand. He was standing. The bag slid from the bench to the ground behind him and he did not hear it fall. He was standing, and the child was sitting in the wet grass twenty metres off, crying, alone, the grandmother still at the gate, and the park empty, and Betty was standing, and the distance between himself and the child was twenty metres of wet grey grass, and he had taken — he found that he had taken — a step. One step, off the path, onto the grass. And then another. And the stillness was still over him, the great held-breath stillness, and inside it he was walking, slowly, across the grey lawn, toward the small yellow crying thing in the middle of it, and he did not know — this was the centre of it, this was the thing the reader of his notebook would never find written there because Betty himself could not have written it — he did not know what he was walking toward her *to do*. He did not know. The cold voice did not know. The other voice did not know. There was no plan in him and no intention he could have named and no knife in his pocket and no decision anywhere in the emptied grey country of him; there was only a man crossing a lawn toward a crying child, slowly, in the cold, with the held breath of the whole morning over him, and twenty metres becoming fifteen, becoming ten, the child's crying coming clearer now, the small hitching breaths of it, the yellow of the coat brightening as he neared it against the grey, and the grandmother still at the gate, and Betty walking, not knowing, into the centre of the empty lawn and the centre of the held

breath and the centre of the worst and oldest thing in him —

And from somewhere at the edge of the park, low, soft, steady, beneath the child's crying and beneath the wind and beneath the held breath of the morning, there came a sound.

Hng. Hng. Hng.

Betty stopped.

Chapter Ten

Betty stopped.

He stood in the middle of the wet grey lawn with one foot still slightly ahead of the other, arrested in the act of a step, and the sound came again from the edge of the park, low and soft and steady, *hng, hng, hng,* and he turned his head toward it the way a man turns his head toward a voice that has spoken his name in a crowd, although the sound was not his name and was not a voice and had spoken nothing.

The figure was sitting against the base of the war memorial.

He had not seen it there. He had looked at the empty park for an hour and had not seen it, the way he had walked past the corner of Little Collins eleven thousand times and had not seen it, and it was there now, had perhaps been there the whole hour, wrapped in the grey compressed wad of the sleeping bag, the mismatched boots stuck out across the wet stone, the weathered face turned out toward the lawn — turned, Betty understood with a lurch that went through him like cold water, toward him. The figure was looking at him. The unfocused eyes, which looked at the building across the street on Little Collins and at nothing, were not unfocused now. They were on him. They had found him in the middle of the lawn with one foot ahead of the other and the crying child beyond him, and they rested on him, and the sound came out of the weathered face, low and steady, *hng, hng, hng,* and did not stop.

Betty stood and was looked at.

He could not afterward describe what happened in him, and he tried, in the years that followed, many times, and could not, and the failure to

describe it was itself a part of what had happened, because the thing that happened was the giving-way of the very faculty by which he described things to himself, the cold clear faculty that named and ordered and explained, and one cannot describe with a broken instrument the moment of its breaking. He knew only that he was seen. Not watched — he had been watched, he believed, for months, by children, by Harry, by the legible surface of himself; watching was a thing done at a distance, by an eye that took and gave nothing. This was not watching. This was being seen, which is a different thing, which is the thing a child means when it says *you're not looking* and means *you're not seeing me*, and which Betty had not had done to him, he understood, standing on the lawn, in longer than he could remember — not since his mother, not since the kitchen the colour of butter, not since before he had learned that mornings could be anything other than safe. The figure against the memorial was seeing him. It was seeing the man on the lawn with one foot ahead of the other. It was seeing what the man was about to do, or might be about to do, or did not himself know whether he was about to do. And it was not afraid. That was the thing that went through him like cold water and kept going, down through everything he had built, down past the cold voice and the theory and the notebook and the eight weeks of evenings, down to the place the sound came from in himself at three in the morning: the figure saw him, and saw the whole of it, and was not afraid, and did not judge, and did not look away, and only made the sound, the small sound a living thing makes when the weather of the world has become more than it can carry — made it at him, or for him, or simply near him, he could not tell, he would never be able to tell — and the sound said nothing and meant nothing and was only the sound, and it was the most merciful thing that had ever been done to him, and he had done nothing to deserve it, and it broke him where he stood.

He did not weep. That came later, much later, and elsewhere. He did not fall to his knees, or cry out, or any of the things a man is shown doing in the moment his life turns. He simply stopped being able to take the next step. The architecture that would have carried the foot forward — the long patient architecture of the notebook, the baseline, the experiment whose subject was himself — was not there any more. It had given way. He stood on the broken floor of it with one foot ahead of the other and could not go on, and could not, for a long moment, go back, and only stood, and was seen, and shook.

Behind him, across the lawn, the gate latch gave at last.

He heard it — the small metal clack of it yielding — and then the grandmother's voice, sharp with the particular fear of a woman who has looked up from a trolley to find the child not where the child was, calling a name, *Maisie, Maisie,* and the quick uneven scrape of the trolley wheels abandoned on the path, and the heavier hurry of the old woman's steps coming onto the grass. Betty did not turn. He heard the child's crying change — the affronted note giving way, at the sound of the grandmother, to the performed and amplified grief that children produce for the benefit of the arriving adult — and he heard the grandmother reach her, and the wet rustle of the yellow coat gathered up, and the old voice going now into the low rapid murmur of comfort, *there, there, up you come, what have you done to yourself, silly sausage, there.* The child was lifted. The child was held. The morning closed over the place where the child had fallen as water closes over a dropped stone, and left no mark, and the grandmother, carrying the child back toward the trolley, passed within thirty feet of Betty standing on the lawn and did not look at him, registered him not at all, a man standing oddly in a park on a grey morning, nothing, weather, and went on, murmuring, to the gate, and through it, and was gone.

No one had seen. That was the thing Betty stood with, on the lawn, when the park was empty again but for himself and the figure against the memorial. No one had seen what had nearly happened, because nothing had happened, because there was nothing to see. A man had sat on a bench. A child had run and fallen and cried and been comforted and carried home. A man had stood up and crossed part of a lawn and stopped. That was all that had occurred in the visible world. The grandmother would tell no one, because the grandmother had seen nothing. The child would remember nothing, or would remember falling, the wet grass, the silly sausage, the being carried. The girl at the fast food counter, the woman on the bench, Harry, Anna, the whole watching apparatus he had built his theory upon — none of them had been here, none of them had seen, and the one that had seen was the one that did not count, the one that was weather to everyone, the one whose seeing entered no record and would be believed by no one and was, in the economy of the visible world, no seeing at all.

He was not going to be caught, because there was nothing here to be caught for. He was not going to be punished, because no law had been broken on this lawn; you cannot arrest a man for crossing grass. And he understood, standing there, that this was the second time the world had declined to take him — that he had done a real thing in a real street with his real hand and not been taken, and had now nearly done the worst thing of all and been stopped only by a sound, and that either way, deed or no deed, caught or uncaught, the machinery simply closed over him and left him standing, free, at large, holding it all himself. There would be no confession, because the one deed that could be confessed was months gone and faceless and the man who could receive the confession was a boy whose name he would never have. There would be no judge. There would be no Siberia. And he was not going to be able to go back — this came last, and slowest, and was the worst of it — back to being

the man who had got up that morning, the man who watered a jade and read the dissolution of empires and was apart from the world in a way that was only lonely; because that man had not yet known what Betty now knew all the way down, which was what he was, which was what he had already once done and had this morning been a sound away from doing again; and he would carry it now with no punishment to discharge it and no priest and no judge, only the knowing, only the long uncounted future of the knowing, in a world that would go on closing over him as it had closed over the boy in the street and the morning over the fallen child, leaving no mark, registering him not at all.

The figure against the memorial had stopped making the sound.

Betty did not know when it had stopped. He looked at it. It was looking at the building — no; there was no building; they were in the park; it was looking at the line of the far gate, or at nothing, the eyes gone unfocused again, the weathered face turned out at the grey lawn, the boots stuck out across the wet stone. Whatever had been in the eyes was not in them now. The figure had gone back to being weather. Betty stood and looked at it and wanted, with a sudden violence that frightened him, to go to it, to cross the lawn and sit down on the wet stone beside it and say — he did not know what. Thank you. I'm sorry. What is your name. Let me bring you something. Let me do one thing, one small thing, for you, who did the largest thing for me and did not know you did it and would not understand if I told you. He took a step toward the memorial.

The figure did not look up.

And Betty found that he could not do it — could not cross the lawn, could not sit down, could not speak — for the same reason, he understood, that he had not knocked on the Greek woman's door downstairs in eleven years to thank her for the foil parcels, the same reason he had received Anna's *love* with a nod and never a word, the

same reason he lived very far inside himself: that the crossing of the distance to another person was the one act he did not know how to perform, had never learned, could not learn now, on a grey morning, broken, in a park. He stood ten steps from the figure that had saved him and could not take the ten steps. He picked up his bag from where it had fallen by the bench. He put it on his shoulder. He looked once more at the figure, which did not look back, and then he turned and walked to the near gate and went out of the park.

■

He did not go to work for three days.

He telephoned on the first morning and said he was unwell, and it was the bookkeeper who answered, and she said *of course, Betty, you've not looked yourself for weeks, you take the time,* and he heard, behind her voice, the small office sounds, a printer, a kettle, and somewhere among them, he thought, the soft *hm* of Harry Kenari reading something at his desk, and he put the phone down and stood in the front room of the flat and did not know what to do with his body.

He did not write in the notebook. The notebook stayed in the jacket, and the jacket stayed on its hook, and Betty stayed in the flat, and the three days passed over him without dividing into hours. He did not sleep, or slept and did not know it. He stood at the window a great deal, looking down at the dog in the yard. He ate, when he ate, standing at the sink, things from tins. Once, on the second day, he took the bag out of the bottom of the wardrobe, from behind his mother's box, and unzipped it, and looked at the small gas stove and the billy and the folding cup and the cord and the knife, all of it bright and unused and dressed as the camping it had never been, and he looked at the knife for a long time, and then he zipped the bag and put it back behind the box and shut the wardrobe. He did not throw it away. He noticed that he did not throw it

away. He had no longer any use for it and could not throw it away, and the not-being-able was of a piece with the not-being-able to burn the notebook, and he was too tired, in those three days, to ask himself what it meant that he kept the instruments of a thing he was never going to do.

On the third night he understood that the spring was over.

He did not mean the season, though the season was turning; the grey morning had been the first of a run of grey mornings, and the warmth had gone out of the light. He meant the spring of the notebook, the long lit feverish spring of the theory and the evenings and the cold voice and the work, the spring in which he had been, whatever else he had been, *occupied*, had risen each morning toward a thing that wanted doing, had felt the small hard thing behind his sternum and called it purpose. That was over. The thing had wanted doing and he had not done it and now it did not want doing any more and never would again, and what was left, he understood, standing at the window on the third night with the dog asleep below and the trains going by parallel to the railway line and the flat as quiet as it had been on the night of the chip, what was left was a man who had once put his hand on a child in a street and had this morning been a sound away from doing worse to another, and who had now to go on living, with both of those, in a world that did not know, and would never know, and from which he was more apart, tonight, than he had ever been.

He went back to work on the fourth day. He watered the jade, which was dead. He had not watered it in a month and it was dead, the small thick leaves gone soft and translucent and dropped in a ring around the pot, the stem collapsed. He looked at it for a while. Then he carried the pot down to the bins behind the building and tipped it in, soil and stem and dead leaves and all, and rinsed the pot at the outside tap and carried it back up and put it, empty, on the corner of his desk, where it had stood for nine years, because he could not think what else to do with it, and

because to throw the pot away as well seemed a further thing, a thing on top of the jade, and he had not the strength, that morning, for a further thing.

Harry Kenari, passing the desk an hour later, stopped, and looked at the empty pot, and looked at Betty, and did not smile.

"Ah," he said, quietly. "I'm sorry, Betty."

And he went on to his own desk, and Betty sat looking at the empty pot, and could not have said, if anyone had asked him, what it was that Harry Kenari was sorry for, or how much, behind the small word, the man had seen.

Chapter Eleven

The disciplines did not hold.

He had built them over years — the coffee at six, the jade on Wednesdays, the histories in the evening, the half-hour of fluorescent light on the way home — and they had held him the way a trellis holds a plant that would otherwise sprawl on the ground, not by force but by patient suggestion, giving his apartness a shape it could live inside. He came back to them on the fourth day and found that they had become a trellis around nothing. The plant was not there. He performed the disciplines and they performed nothing in return. He made the coffee at six in his mother's pot and drank it standing at the window and it was only coffee, hot and bitter, and the window gave onto the yard and the dog, and the yellow that used to come up sometimes in the first light did not come up. He had killed the thing the disciplines were for. He went on doing them for some weeks because he did not know what a man did instead, and then, one by one, without deciding to, he stopped.

The histories went first.

He took one down on the second evening back — the dissolution of the Habsburg empire, the one he had been rereading on the tram the day the child kicked his seat — and he opened it at the marker and read a paragraph and stopped. He read the paragraph again. The long careful sentences, the empires rising and falling across a page, the individual men in their footnotes: he had loved this once, had found it restful, had liked to be reminded that the small intensities of a single life were, in the larger reckoning, almost nothing. He had read it as consolation. He read

it now and it was not consolation. It was the plain statement of the thing he could no longer bear to have stated. The small intensities of a single life were almost nothing; his life was almost nothing; the thing he had done in the street and the thing he had nearly done on the lawn and the mercy that had stopped the second would, in the larger reckoning, leave no mark, exactly as the morning had closed over the fallen child and left no mark, exactly as the world had closed over him and left no mark. The long view, which had been a window he stood at gratefully, was now the same grey lawn extended to the horizon, and Betty closed the book and did not open another. The histories stayed on their shelves. In time the dust came up on the top edges of them, a fine grey line, and he saw it and did not wipe it away.

He stopped buying the sandwich.

This he did deliberately, which is to say he did it without admitting that he was doing it. For two years he had bought his lunch from Anna, who knew his order and began it when she saw him through the window, who called him *love* and not his name, who had a son not well in his head and had told him so once and asked nothing. He could not go back to her. He told himself, the first day, that he was not hungry; the second, that he had work that could not wait; and by the third day he had stopped telling himself anything and simply walked the other way, the long way, past the corner of Little Collins where the figure sat against the bank making its sound, and bought, on the days he ate at all, a roll from a chain bakery where the person at the till was different every time and called him nothing and saw nothing. He could not face Anna's *love.* That was the truth under the excuses. Her *love* across the counter had been one of the small kindnesses by which he had lived, received with a nod, never with a word, and he could not now receive it, because to be called *love* by a good woman who did not know what he was — to take that, daily, knowing — was a thing he had not the constitution to do. So he

severed it. He took one of the threads that held him to the world and he cut it himself, quietly, by walking the other way, and Anna, behind her window, must have wondered for a week or two where her quiet customer had gone, and then have stopped wondering, because people came and went, and a sandwich shop cannot grieve every face that stops appearing.

He noticed, with the part of him that still noticed, that he was doing to Anna what the world did to the figure on Little Collins. He was making her into weather. He was walking past. He noticed this and could not stop, and the noticing was no longer the cold satisfied noticing of the notebook; it was a duller thing, a tired witnessing of his own subtraction, and it cost him, each time, a small specific pain that he had no name for and did not write down, because he was not writing anything now.

The notebook stayed in the jacket. The jacket stayed on the hook. He did not take it out and he did not burn it and he did not throw it away, and on the rare evening when his eye fell on the jacket he felt the small weight of the notebook in the pocket the way a man feels an old injury in cold weather, a thing that does not hurt exactly but that announces, dully, that it is still there, that it has not gone anywhere, that it will be coming with him wherever he goes.

At work he did less and less, and no one stopped him, and the not-being-stopped was its own slow erosion. The reconciliations had passed to Harry's audit programme; there was, increasingly, nothing on Betty's desk that had to be Betty's; he came in and sat down in front of the empty pot and the screen and moved numbers from one place to another for a few hours, and the numbers, which had once been restful because they did not look at him, were now merely empty, a way of being seen to be present without being present. He arrived later. He left earlier. The bookkeeper, who had known him nine years and had used

his name without inflection for all of them, watched him with a worry she was too shy to speak, and twice began to say something to him by the kettle and twice stopped, and Betty was grateful for the stopping, because he had no answer for the thing she wanted to ask, which was the simplest and most unanswerable of all questions, which was whether he was all right.

Only Harry Kenari said anything, and what Harry said was almost nothing.

He had taken, since the morning of the empty pot, to a particular way of being near Betty. He did not crowd him. He did not ask him what he was working on in the evenings — that was finished; Betty was working on nothing in the evenings, and Harry seemed to know it. He simply made himself, two or three times a day, briefly present: stopped by the desk on his way past with a question about an account that did not really need asking, or set a cup of tea by Betty's elbow without comment, the tea Betty had not asked for and had not known he wanted, or stood for a moment at the kitchen window beside him looking out at the LUCKY wall and said nothing at all, and went away. Betty did not understand it. He had built, in part of his mind that the breaking had not entirely cleared, the conviction that Harry was the one watcher he could not explain, the attention that gave no sign and took everything, and the conviction sat in him still, dimmed but not gone, and he watched Harry's small attentions with a wariness he could not justify and could not drop. Once, the tea at his elbow: he had looked at it, and looked up, and Harry was already three desks away with his back turned, and Betty had felt, looking at the steam coming off the cup, something he had no room for and pushed down, the way one pushes down a sound that wants to come up from the chest at the wrong moment, in the wrong place, in front of people.

He drank the tea. He did not thank Harry for it. He had not the equipment.

The weeks went by. The grey mornings became colder mornings. Betty rose at six out of the body's old habit and stood at the window with the coffee and watched the dog in the yard, which was getting old, he saw, the muzzle going grey, the haunches stiff when it rose, the chain the same chain it had worn for the eleven years Betty had lived above it, and he thought, some mornings, that he and the dog were the two oldest fixtures of the place, the two things that had been chained longest to their patches, and that the dog at least did not know what it was, did not lie awake with the knowledge of it, made its small sound and slept and rose and made its small sound, and that there was a mercy in the dog's arrangement that was not available to Betty, and he drank the coffee and went to the tram.

He could not stay. This came to him not as a decision but as a slow saturation, the way damp comes up a wall — there was no morning on which he resolved to leave, only a growing number of mornings on which the staying felt more impossible than it had the morning before. He could not stay in the flat, where the disciplines performed nothing and the histories gathered their grey line of dust and the notebook waited in the jacket. He could not stay at the firm, where the bookkeeper wanted to ask if he was all right and Harry set down tea he could not thank him for and the empty pot stood on the corner of the desk where the jade had stood for nine years. He could not stay among the people who had known the other Betty, the one who had not known what he was, because every one of them, by knowing the other Betty, required him to keep being that Betty, to perform a continuity he no longer felt, and the performance was beyond him.

What he wanted — and he came to it slowly, over those cold weeks, and was frightened by it when it arrived, and then stopped being

frightened, which was worse — what he wanted was to go somewhere he was not known. To be among people who called him nothing because they did not know his name, who saw nothing because they had never seen the other Betty against whom the seeing could be measured. To be weather. He had walked past the figure on Little Collins eleven thousand times and never seen it, and the figure had seemed to him, in the park, on the worst and only morning of his life, to be the freest thing he had ever looked at — a person for whom the entire human world had become weather, who stood in relation to a wall and a sound and nothing else, who was not afraid, who needed no one and was needed by no one and made the small sound and bore the day. He had thought, in the park, that he wanted to thank that figure. He understood now, in the cold weeks, that he wanted something worse and simpler. He wanted to become it.

He did not tell anyone. There was no one to tell. He began, without admitting it, to let things go.

Chapter Twelve

A man does not fall all at once. He is let down, slowly, on a rope he is paying out himself, hand over hand, and at each stage the next stage seems only a little lower than the one he is on, and reachable, and not yet the bottom; and there is no point at which he says, this is the place where I became a man on the ground, because there is no such point, there is only the rope going through the hands, and the light getting further off above.

The job went first, in the end, though it had been going for a long time.

It did not go in a scene. Betty had half-expected a scene — had half-wanted one, he understood later, because a scene would have been a verdict, a thing said aloud, a door shut that he could stand on the other side of and know himself shut out. There was no scene. There was a Tuesday in early winter when the bookkeeper asked him to come into the small meeting room, and there was a man from head office whom Betty had met twice in nine years, and there were words about restructuring, and about the audit programme having changed the shape of the work, and about a package that was, the man said, more generous than the firm was strictly obliged to offer, in recognition of Betty's long service. The bookkeeper did not look at Betty during this. She looked at the table. Her hands were folded on it and the knuckles were white and Betty saw that she was close to tears and was holding them, out of a delicacy he found almost unbearable, because she did not want to make him comfort her in the moment of his own dismissal. He signed the

papers. He said thank you. He meant it, and could not have said for what.

When he came out Harry Kenari was standing in the corridor.

Harry had not been in the meeting. There was no reason for Harry to be in the corridor; his desk was the other way. He was standing with his hands in his pockets, looking out the corridor window at the LUCKY wall, and when Betty came out he turned, and he did not do the small smile, and he looked at Betty for a moment with the pale tired eyes behind the wire-framed glasses, and he said, "I want you to know it wasn't the audit." He said it quietly, with a kind of urgency Betty had never heard in him. "The programme didn't make you redundant. I want you to know that. Whatever they said in there. It wasn't the work. The work would have carried you for years." He stopped. Something moved behind the tired eyes — something Betty could not read, that was not quite kindness and was not quite its opposite, that seemed for a moment to be on the edge of saying a great deal more, and then closed. "There were other reasons," Harry said, "that aren't mine to put into words, and that I hope to God I've read wrong. I'm telling you what I'm telling you because you're a man who'll take this as a verdict on himself, and I don't want you carrying that particular one. You've enough already." He paused. "Look after yourself. Stay — " and he stopped again, and did not finish it, whatever it was, *stay well* or *stay away from* or only *stay*, and let the unfinished thing hang there between them in the corridor, and Betty never learned its end.

And Betty, who did not understand the last three words, who would not understand them for a long time, said, "Thank you, Harry," and put out his hand, and Harry shook it, and held it the beat too long that he had held it on the first morning, two years before, and let it go.

That was the last time Betty saw him at the firm.

He cleared his desk into a single carrier bag. There was very little: the empty pot, which he took because he could not leave it, a spare pair of glasses, a phone charger, a few pens. He left the histories — they had been at home, not at the desk — and he left, in the firm, the nine years, the bookkeeper's white knuckles, the LUCKY wall he had looked at for nine of those years and never asked about until Harry asked for him. He took the carrier bag down in the lift and out through the lobby and onto the street, and he walked to the tram, and behind him the firm closed over the space where he had been, as the morning had closed over the fallen child, as everything closed, leaving no mark.

Then the money, which lasted a while, and then did not.

The package was, as the man had said, generous. It would have carried a careful man a year, two years, while he found another position. Betty did not find another position. He did not look for one. He understood — this was one of the few things he understood clearly in that winter — that to look for another position would be to propose to continue, to set the trellis up again somewhere new and stand inside it pretending to be a plant, and he could not propose to continue. So the money sat in the account and he drew on it for the rent and the tins and the tram, and he watched the figure on the screen at the cash machine get smaller, month by month, with neither alarm nor relief, the way he had watched the jade drop its leaves, a process he was the subject of rather than the author of.

He stopped paying the rent in the second month after the job. Not from inability — there was still money then — but because the rent was a discipline, a thing a man did to keep a place to stand, and he had stopped doing the things a man did to keep a place to stand. The letters came. He put them in the drawer with the bills, on top of the form he had never filled out, the form for changing his name, that he had folded in half fifteen years before and never thrown away. The drawer was the

place where the things he could not do went. He added the rent letters to it. The drawer filled. He did not open it.

He gave the things away, or did not so much give them as set them loose. The histories he carried down in three trips to the charity bin on the corner, and he stood the third time with the last of them in his hands — the dissolution of the Habsburg empire, the marker still in it at the page where he had stopped — and he did not open it, and he posted it through the slot of the bin with the others, and heard it fall on the soft pile of donated things inside, and walked away, and felt nothing, and was frightened by the nothing for a moment, and then felt nothing about the fright. The radio he left on the kerb and it was gone by morning. The good coat he had never taken to the tailor he left on the kerb too, and that was gone by morning as well, and he hoped, with the part of him that still hoped small things, that it had gone to someone who would get the pocket sewn.

He kept three things.

He understood, packing them, on the last morning, that these were the three things, that they had selected themselves over the months the way the evidence had once selected itself in the notebook, that a man's three things are a kind of confession of what he is. He kept his mother's coffee pot, the small stovetop pot she had made coffee in, that he had made coffee in every morning for fifteen years, the only thing of hers he used rather than stored. He kept the notebook, in its jacket, because he could not burn it and could not throw it away and could not separate the lie in it from the truth in it, and the truth in it — the figure on Little Collins, the woman on the bench, the father at the slide, and the entry he had made himself write, the worst one, the one about the boy and the gold-lit street and his own hand — was the only record he had of the only true things he had ever written, and he would not destroy them to be rid of the rest. And he kept the bag from the camping shop, with the

gas stove and the billy and the folding cup and the cord and the knife, the knife he had bought as the fifth item, the knife he had never looked at since the three days, the knife that was the proof of what he had been — of what he had done in a street and what he had nearly done on a lawn — and which he could not throw away, because to throw it away would be to pretend it had not been bought, to strike it out, and he had decided long ago, in another life, that he would not strike out.

The box of his mother's things, the larger box, the one the bag had stood behind in the wardrobe for two years — that he could not take, and could not leave, and stood over for a long while on the last morning, kneeling on the floor of the bedroom with the lid in his hands. He looked at what was in it. He had not looked in fifteen years. There was not much: some photographs, a rosary she had not used but had kept, a folded headscarf that no longer held her smell though he put it to his face to see, a child's drawing he did not remember making, of a house, with a yellow door, and smoke coming out of the chimney in a careful spiral, and two figures outside it holding hands, one large and one small. He looked at the drawing for a long time. Then he put it back, and he closed the box, and he carried it down to the Greek woman's door on the ground floor, the woman who had left him the foil parcels twice a year for eleven years and whom he had never thanked, and he set the box outside her door, where she had set the parcels outside his, without a note, because he had no words that would survive being written down, and because the leaving-without-a-note was the only language he had ever shared with her, and because he could not take his mother into the life he was going to and could not put her in a charity bin, and the old woman who left sweet things for strangers was the nearest thing to safe hands that Betty knew. He did not knock. He went back up the stairs and he did not hear, then or ever, whether she took it in.

He left the flat on a grey morning at the end of the second month of winter, with the coffee pot and the notebook in the jacket and the camping bag on his shoulder, and he pulled the door shut behind him, and the lock caught, and that was all. No one watched him go. The dog in the yard was asleep. The trains went by parallel to the railway line. He went down the stairs and out into the street and did not look up at the window of the flat where he had lived eleven years, and he walked toward the city, toward the part of it where he was not known, where the people called him nothing and saw nothing, carrying the three things, the light of the ordinary world getting smaller behind him with every street..

It was not the bottom. He thought, those first nights, that it was the bottom. It was not. There was a great deal further to go, and he went it, that winter and the spring after it and the summer after that and the long second autumn, down and down, and the rope did not run out, because the rope, he learned, was longer than a man can imagine when he stands at the top of it; the rope is as long as a life.

Chapter Thirteen

The street was not what he had imagined, because he had not imagined it; he had imagined only the absence of what he was leaving, and the absence turned out to have a content of its own, and the content was largely cold, and largely waiting, and largely the body.

He had thought, in some unexamined way, that to be without a place would be to be free of the demands of a place — that a man with nowhere to be would have, at least, the freedom of having nowhere to be. It was not so. He had never in his life been so governed by where he was. Every hour now had its geography. There was the question of where to sleep, which was the question of which doorways were dry and which were claimed and which would bring the particular torch and the particular voice at two in the morning telling him to move on. There was the question of the cold, which was not a mood, as it had been when he had a flat to be cold on the way home to, but a fact, a steady physical fact that organised the day around itself, so that a square of winter sun on a north-facing wall became a destination, a thing to plan toward, a small warm country to be reached and held as long as the sun held. There was the question of the body, which he had spent thirty-six years being able to ignore, and which now presented itself to him hourly, hungry, cold, aching at the hip from the concrete, needing the things bodies need and finding them difficult, so that the getting of water and the finding of a place to relieve himself and the keeping of his feet dry became the substance of whole afternoons. He had wanted to become weather. He had not understood that to become weather is, first, to be

wholly delivered into the body, as an animal is, as the dog in the yard had been, and that the freedom of it, if there was freedom in it, lay on the far side of a great deal of cold.

He kept the three things in the camping bag and the bag never left him. He learned to sleep with the strap around his arm. The coffee pot he could not use — there was no stove that was safe to light in a doorway, and the gas canister he had carried out of the flat ran dry in the first weeks and he did not replace it — but he kept the pot, and sometimes, in the worst of the cold, he held it, the small cool weight of it, his mother's, and it was not warmth but it was something, a thing his hands knew. The notebook he did not open. The knife he did not look at. They rode in the bag, the three things, the confession of what he was, and he carried the confession through the winter and did not read it to anyone, because there was no one, and because it was not a confession that could be read aloud, having no deed in it, only a man and a step and a stopping.

He did not beg, at first, because he did not know how, and then he learned that there was nothing to know, that one had only to be visibly in need and to have something for the coins to go in, and he found the folding cup in the camping bag and set it out, and the coins came, not many, enough. He was surprised by who gave. It was rarely the prosperous. It was, most often, the people who looked as though they had little themselves — an old man with a string bag, a young woman in a supermarket uniform, once a boy of perhaps twelve who came back after passing, having gone half a block and turned around, and put a two-dollar coin in the cup and said nothing and ran off, and Betty had watched him go and had felt the small specific pain that he had no name for, the boy's untheorised undefended automatic kindness, the friendliness of a creature who had not yet been taught that there are people one does not give to. And then he thought of the other boy. He always thought of the other boy. He could not see a child be kind

without seeing, underneath it, the face of the nine-year-old in the gold light, the open thing closing, the terror coming up — and he understood that this was right, that this was the sentence, that he had forfeited the ordinary sweetness of being given a coin by a child because he had taught a child, once, that men were to be feared, and that he would carry the second boy into every kindness the first boy did him, for the rest of his life, and that the carrying was just, and that he did not want it to be lighter.

He saw children, of course. The city was full of them. He found — and he attended to this finding with what remained of the cold clear faculty, the part of the notebook-mind that the breaking had left functioning, because it was important, because it was the test of everything — he found that they were only children. He sat in his square of north-facing sun and watched them pass, in their school uniforms, maroon and blue and green, holding the hands of adults or running ahead of them, crying and laughing and falling and being lifted, throwing things and being told to stop, and he watched for the thing he had once seen, the legibility, the recognition, the conspiracy, and it was not there. It had never been there. He knew that now the way he knew the cold, as a fact and not an argument. The theory had been a thing he did to a wound, and the wound had been real — the chip, the laughter, the father's complicity, the long humiliation of a name in the mouths of strangers — but the theory had been a lie he built over the wound to keep from feeling it, and the children had been only children all along, and the only thing that had ever been legible on the surface of him to anyone small enough to read it was not malice answering malice but the plain fact, plain as the cold, that here was a man in pain, which children read accurately and adults learn not to.

He saw the figure on Little Collins, too. His drifting brought him, that winter, back toward the streets he had walked for nine years, and the

figure was there, against the bank, on the brick lip, in the same compressed grey sleeping bag, making the same sound, and Betty did not approach it. He was near it now, in station and in geography, two destitute people in the same cold city, and he could have approached it, could have sat down on the brick beside it, and he did not, that winter, because he was afraid — not of the figure, but of the ten steps, the same ten steps he had not been able to take across the lawn, the crossing of the distance to another person that he had never learned. He watched the figure from across the street, sometimes, as he had on the first day, years before. He brought it, twice, things — a hot roll once, set down on the brick a yard from the boots and not handed, because he could not hand it; a pair of socks another time, still in their plastic, left the same way — and the figure took them, when he had gone, and made no sign, and Betty watched from across the street and was, in the leaving of the roll and the socks, almost happy, with a thin cold happiness he did not examine.

It was in that winter, in a small square off Little Collins, that Harry Kenari found him.

■

He did not, at first, know it was Harry. A man had sat down on the other end of the bench Betty was on — the bench in the small square, in the late afternoon, the light going — and Betty had tensed, as he had learned to tense, because a man sitting down was usually the beginning of being moved on. Then the man said, "Hello, Betty," in a voice Betty knew, and Betty turned, and it was Harry Kenari, in a good overcoat, with a paper bag in his hands, older than Betty remembered, or perhaps only tired, the wire-framed glasses the same, the pale eyes the same.

Betty did not say anything. He had not spoken to anyone who knew his name in a long time, and the name in Harry's mouth, said as Harry

had always said it, without the pause, as though it were any name, undid something in him that he had to work to hold.

"I've been looking for you," Harry said. "On and off. A while." He set the paper bag on the bench between them. He did not push it at Betty. He set it down the way Betty set rolls down on the brick by the figure's boots, a yard off, not handed. "Coffee," he said. "And a thing to eat. I didn't know what you'd want. There's a sandwich. I got the kind I'd want, which probably tells you nothing about what you want." He almost smiled. He did not quite. "You can have it or not."

The light went further. Betty took the bag. He held it. The warmth of the coffee came through the paper into his hands.

"I'm not going to ask you how you came to this," Harry said, looking out at the square, not at Betty, in the old way, the same way he had once said things to the kitchen window. "It's not my business, and I don't think it's a thing that has an answer of the kind a question wants. I'll tell you something instead, if you'll let me, and then I'll go, because I can see that being looked at is hard for you, it's always been hard for you, I saw that the first morning." He paused. He turned the wedding ring on his finger; Betty saw, now, that there was one, worn thin. "My wife died four years ago. Cancer, slow, the long kind, where you watch it. I sat with her eleven months. And at the end of it I found I couldn't — I couldn't stop watching. I'd spent eleven months reading a face for what it wasn't saying, for the pain it was hiding to spare me, and when she was gone I couldn't put the habit down. I went back to work and I found I was doing it to everyone. Reading them. Watching for the thing they were carrying and not saying." He was quiet a moment. "Most people aren't carrying much, or they're carrying it lightly, or they've made their peace. And then I came to this firm, to a little accounts department over a laneway, and there was a man at a desk by the window watering a plant, and I shook his hand, and I saw it on him before he'd said three

words. The thing. The weight. The same weight. I knew it the way you know a countryman in a foreign city — by something in how he stands. And I couldn't leave it alone. I told you that, the first week — that I can't leave a thing alone, that I follow the loose thread off the edge of the world. My wife used to say it about me." He looked at Betty now, finally, directly. "You were the loose thread, Betty. I'm sorry if I frightened you. I think I did. I'd watch you and you'd go stiff, and I told myself I was leaving you be, and I wasn't, quite. I couldn't. I knew that weight, and I couldn't watch a man carry it alone and do nothing, and I didn't know how to do anything except be there, badly, with tea you didn't want. I'm not good at it. My wife was the one who was good at it. I only learned it from her, at the end, too late, the way you learn the important things."

He stood up.

"I don't know what your weight is," he said. "I never knew. Not exactly."

He was quiet a moment. The light went off the tops of the buildings.

"But I'll tell you the rest of it. You've earned the rest of it, sitting here." He looked down at his own hands. "It wasn't only grief I read on you. That's the thing I came to say and I'd as soon not say it, so let me just — " He stopped. He started again. "Not at first. At first it was only the weight. A man carrying something. But after a while there were days I'd watch you and what I felt wasn't the wish to sit with you. It was colder than that."

Betty did not move. The cold came up off the stone of the square.

"You'd stand at the window," Harry said. "The one over the road, that looks down at the school. And you'd watch the children come out. And there was nothing to see — a man at a window, a man looking at the street — and the hair would go up on my arms, and I'd think — "

He did not say what he thought. He turned the worn ring on his finger and looked at the square and did not say it, and the not-saying went on long enough that Betty understood he was not going to find the words for it, that there were none, that this was a man who had carried the unsayable thing for years and had come, finally, to the bottom of his own language and found nothing there to hand over.

"I'm a clerk," Harry said at last, low. "Not a doctor. Not the police. I had nothing. A feeling. The hair on my arms. I told myself I was a morbid old fool who'd sat by too much dying and couldn't stop seeing the worst in a face." He drew a breath. "But I went to them. Head office. I said the work had changed — the programme — all of it true. And I said it'd be better for everyone if — And they made it a redundancy and dressed it kind, and I let them." He shut his eyes briefly. "And I have not been sure. Not one day since. Whether I was being kind to you. Or whether I was — moving a man I was frightened of. Away from a window. That looked at a school."

The square was nearly dark.

"So when I say it wasn't a hunt." He stopped. "It wasn't. And it was. There was a man in me who wanted to sit with you. And there was a man in me who got you sent away — because he was afraid, and couldn't have told you of what, and still can't, and I don't — " His voice did something then, the first time, a small catch, an old man at the end of what he had. He let it go. He did not reach for the large clean thing to say over it; he had none; he only stood there having said the thing and not redeemed it. "I don't know which of them I was, Betty. That's all. I never worked it out."

He began to do up the overcoat, out of habit, and then stopped, his hands not quite steady on the buttons, and undid the one he had done. "There's a card in the bag. A place I help at, by the river. Beds, a kitchen. No questions. Use it or don't." He took the overcoat off as he spoke, the

good one, and folded it, and laid it on the bench a yard from Betty, not handed. He stood in his shirtsleeves in the cold and did not seem to feel it. "And the coat's yours. It'll fit. I judged by eye." A pause. "Take care of yourself, Betty." And he turned, and walked out of the square, into the going light, an old man now in his shirtsleeves, his shoulders slightly stooped, and he did not look back, and Betty did not see him again.

Betty sat on the bench with the coffee warm in his hands and the coat folded beside him and the square going dark, and the understanding came slowly, and went on coming for days, the way the corridor words had come, *you've enough already.* He had spent two years and the whole long fever of the notebook believing himself watched by an enemy he could not name. And he had been watched. That was the thing he had to hold now, both halves of it at once and not let either drop: that the watcher had been a grieving man who could not stop reading faces and had read his and could not walk away — and that the watcher had also been right, had smelled it on him as the children had smelled it, had been afraid of him and acted on the fear and got him moved away from a window above a school, and had been correct to. The hand had been open. The hand had also been a hand raised against him, gently, for cause. Both. Harry had not been able to say it — had come to the end of his words and stood there with the thing unredeemed, *I don't know which of them I was, I never worked it out* — but Betty, sitting on in the dark after the old man had gone, worked out the part Harry could not: that there was nothing to work out, that the two men Harry feared he had been were one man, that most of us watching each other are always both, the open hand and the raised one, and that this was not a failure of Harry's to be resolved but the plain shape of what it is to see another person and be seen. Betty had wanted, for two years, to be either purely hunted or purely left alone, and he had been neither, he had been *seen* — wholly, weight and danger together — and the seeing had been the most

accurate thing that ever happened to him, and the most merciful, and he could not now separate the mercy from the accuracy, and understood that he was not meant to.

He put the coat on. It fit. Harry had judged by eye, and Harry's eye was good; it had always been good; that had been the whole trouble with it.

He did not, that winter, go to the place near the river. He kept the card. It went in the camping bag, with the three things, and became a kind of fourth thing, a thing he could not use and could not throw away, the difference being that this one was not a confession of what he had been but an offer of what he might still be, and he was not ready for it, and he kept it, and the keeping of it was, though he would not have said so, the first thing he had let into the bag in two years that pointed forward instead of back.

Chapter Fourteen

The distance closed by degrees, over the second winter, the way the cold closes a pond — not all at once, no single morning of ice, only a thickening, a daily small advance from the edges inward, until one day the thing that had been water will bear weight.

He had been leaving her food a yard off and walking away. He stopped walking away. He left the roll, the first time, and then did not go; he stood a few feet off, looking at the street, not at her, and she took the roll, and made her sound, and did not drive him off, because she could not drive anyone off, having no words and no wish to; and he stood until the cold moved him on. The next time he sat down. Not beside her — at the far end of the brick lip, an arm's length and more, with the camping bag between them, and he sat there in the going light and made no sound himself and asked nothing, and she made her sound, *hng, hng, hng*, and after a while he was not sitting near the sound but inside it, and it was no longer noise but the shape the silence took.

He did not learn her. There was nothing to learn — no story, no name, no account of how she had come to the brick. She had only the sound and the boots and the grey wad of the sleeping bag and a few movements, and he came to know the movements as you come to know a cat's: the slow reach for whatever was set down for her, the turning of a thing in her fingers before she ate it or put it away, the drawing-up of the bag around her shoulders at a certain hour against a cold she felt before he did. She was old. He saw that now, close, in the failing of the light each evening — old, the hands knotted, the skin gone past

weathering into something thinner and more final, and a woman; he had written *man* in a notebook two years before, the laziness of a mind that would not look, and she was a woman, old, and somewhere under the dirt and the years a face that had been a particular face once, a girl's once, a daughter's.

And she reminded him of his mother.

He could not have said how, and distrusted it even as it came to him, because he knew what grief and hunger do, how they reach for the lost face and lay it over whatever face is near; he knew that a man starved of his mother for fifteen years will find her in the turn of any old woman's wrist if he needs to badly enough, and that the finding proves nothing but the need. So he held it lightly, the resemblance, and did not believe it, and could not put it down. It was not the features. It was something in the sound, perhaps — a roundness in one of the vowels of it, if a sound with no words can be said to have vowels, a shaping at the back of the throat that he had heard, or thought he had heard, or needed to have heard, in another throat, long ago, in a kitchen the colour of butter, in a name that only one person had ever said as she said it. He did not decide it was her, or like her. He sat at the end of the brick in the cold and let the sound be what it was and let it carry what it carried, and some evenings it carried nothing and was only a sick old woman's noise, and some evenings it carried the whole of his childhood, and he could not govern which, and stopped trying.

Once — and this he kept, after; of all of it, this was the thing he kept — once, on a hard night, the coldest of that winter, when he had sat down nearer than usual because the cold drove people together as nothing else did, she moved. She did not speak, having nothing to speak with. She took the edge of the grey sleeping bag, the part that was not under her, and with a slow knotted hand she pushed it across the brick toward him, a few inches, an offering of the only warmth she owned,

and she looked at him while she did it — looked at him, the unfocused eyes finding him and resting on him as they had rested on him across the lawn — and she stopped making the sound. For as long as it took to push the edge of the bag toward him she was silent, and the silence from her was not absence but speech, the only speech she had, and it said, as plainly as anything had ever been said to Betty in his life: *you. I see you. come in out of the cold.* He took the edge of the bag. He did not deserve it and he took it. They sat under the one bag, the two of them, not touching, in the cold, and after a while she began again to make the sound, low and steady. This was the most that would ever pass between them. It was more than had passed between him and almost anyone. He was, on the coldest night of the winter, under a stranger's sleeping bag, as close to another human being as he had been since his mother died.

■

She was not making the sound when he came back.

It was a grey morning, late in the winter. He had been gone a night — there had been a place, a church hall, that opened its floor on the worst nights, and he had taken it, against the cold, and had meant to bring her back something, a hot thing, and had hurried, in the morning, with the hot thing in his hands, back through the streets to the brick.

She was against the bank, in the bag, the boots stuck out, as she always was. But she was not making the sound.

He knew before he reached her. The sound had been the proof of her, the small engine that said the weather had not yet been more than she could carry, and it was not running, and the silence where it had been was a different silence from the silence of the night she had pushed the bag toward him; that silence had been full; this one was empty. He knew the difference. Anyone who has been in a dark room with another person knows it: whether or not someone else is breathing.

He crouched by her. He said nothing — he had no name to say. Her eyes were open and they were not finding anything. The cold had taken her in the night, or her heart, or the long sum of everything; it did not matter which; she was gone, and the hot thing was cooling in his hand, and the morning was going on around them, the trams, the couriers, the office workers in their clutches around their phones, none of them looking, as none of them had ever looked, as he himself had not looked, eleven thousand times.

He stayed crouched beside her for a long time. He did not weep. The weeping was not yet; it was waiting for its hour and this was not its hour. He only stayed, beside the body of the woman who had stopped him on the lawn and pushed her sleeping bag toward him in the cold, the woman whose name he did not know and now never would, and he understood, crouched there, that he had never asked it, that there had been no way to ask it, that she had had no way to give it, and that he would carry her, now, the way he carried the others, as a kindness received and never named, never thanked, never repaid — except that this one was dead, and there would be no later, no someday when he had become a man who could cross the distance, in which he might go back and say the thing. The someday was over. It had ended in the night, while he lay on a church floor against the cold.

A council van came, in time. He had known it would; he had seen it come for others. Two men, not unkind, in gloves, with a folded thing they unfolded. They asked him, one of them, was she anything to him, and Betty looked at the man and could not answer, because there was no word for what she was to him — not kin, not friend, not lover, not even, in any way the man would understand, an acquaintance; she was the person who had seen him; there is no box on any form for that — and he said, at last, "No. Nothing. I just sit here too." And they took her, and the brick was empty, and Betty stood on the pavement with the cold hot

thing still in his hand and watched the van go. He did not know where it was taking her. He had no standing to follow, and no money to claim her, and no name to claim her by. So he let her go, into the machinery that closes over the unnamed and leaves no mark — the last and largest of all the distances he had failed to cross.

■

He did not let the knife go with her. That he could not do.

There was a tree, a little way along, in the pavement — a plane, like the one over the bench in the park, but young, planted in a square pit of bare earth with a low rail around it, the kind the council puts in to soften a street. Betty had passed it every day. The earth in the pit was the only earth on that block, the only ground not paved, a yard of bare dirt at the foot of a young tree, and it had always made him think, without his dwelling on it, of the bare patch in the panel-beater's yard where the old dog had wound its chain for eleven years.

He went to the tree pit, that afternoon, when the light was going. He knelt at the low rail. He took the camping bag off his shoulder and opened it and took out the knife, the knife he had bought as the fifth item, dressed as camping, two years and a life before, the knife he had not looked at since the three days, the knife that was the proof of all of it — of what he had carried into a gold-lit street and done with his hand, and of what he had carried onto a grey lawn and been a sound away from doing. He looked at it now. It was bright still, unused, a clean thing, and he held it in the failing light and he did not think, in words, what he was doing or why; the cold faculty that made things into words was not running, any more than her sound was running; he only knelt, and dug, with the folding cup from the camping bag, into the cold dirt at the foot of the young tree, a small hole, deeper than it needed to be, his breath going out white into the cold, and when the hole was deep enough

he put the knife into it, and he covered it over, and pressed the earth down with both hands, and knelt there with his hands flat on the cold dirt.

He had no name to say over it. That was the thing — kneeling there, the knife in the ground, his hands on the dirt — that was the thing that nearly came up, before its hour: that he was burying the worst of himself as the only gift he had for her, over the only earth he could find, and that he could not even say her name over the grave, because he had never had it. He had loved her, in whatever way this was, and never once known what to call her. The grave had no name. The woman had no name. He pressed the earth flat, and his hands were black with it, and he knelt at the rail of a council tree in the going light with no name to say, and the city went by behind him, and no one looked. The knife was in the ground. It was done — the only thing he had ever fully done for another person. And it was for the dead. And it was too late. And his hands were cold and black and flat on the cold black earth.

■

He was sitting on a bench two streets away, after, when Anna found him.

He had not gone there to be near her shop; he had forgotten, in the day, that it was her street; he had walked without choosing and sat down without choosing, where the legs stopped, which is how the destitute sit. His hands were still dark with the dirt. He was not weeping. He was not anything. He was emptied, hollowed clean through, a man with nothing left in him at all, sitting on a bench in the last of the light.

And a woman stopped in front of him, and stood, and he looked up, and it was Anna.

She was older — two years older, the hair greyer under the net she wore for the food — and she had her coat on over the apron, going

home, the day's work done, and she had stopped on the pavement in front of the bench and she was looking at him, at his face, at the dirt on his hands, at the camping bag, at the whole of what he had become, and her own face was doing something complicated and quick. The recognition first — the *love* she had called him across a counter for two years finding, under the ruin, the man it belonged to. And then, behind it, slower and harder, a second thing, and Betty went cold to see it arrive, because he knew it: she was placing him. Not as her customer. As something else. There had been talk, years back, in the streets around here — a man, the little park by the school, a child come home frightened, a description that fit half the sad men in the district and no one in particular — talk that had flared and frightened the mothers for a season and then died for want of a face to fasten on. It was in her eyes now, the old talk, set beside him, weighed. She did not know. She could not know. But the possibility was live in her face, plain as the streetlight coming on, that the wreck on the bench might be the very thing the mothers had been afraid of.

And he watched her decide to feed him anyway.

She did not gasp. She did not put her hand to her mouth. She did not say *Betty, my God, what's happened to you,* or any of the things that would have made him a spectacle of himself. And she did not do the other thing either — did not let the fear win, did not step back, did not find a reason to be elsewhere, though Betty saw that she could have, that the fear was there in her and had every right to be and that a sensible woman, an old woman alone on a darkening street, would have heeded it. She looked at him a moment longer, holding both things, the love and the fear, and then she set the fear down — he watched her set it down, it cost her something, he saw the cost — and she said, "You wait there, love."

And she went. And he sat, too hollow to wonder whether she would come back. And she came back. It took her a few minutes, and she came back, with a paper bag, and in the paper bag was the sandwich, the one she used to make him, made fresh, made in the few minutes she had been gone, made exactly as she had made it for two years before he started walking the long way round to avoid her — and she had remembered it, across two years, remembered what he had, and gone into her shut-up shop at the end of her day and turned the light back on and made it, for him, because he was on a bench with dirt on his hands and that was a thing she could do, and so she did it.

She sat down beside him on the bench. She put the bag in his hands. She did not crowd him and she did not flinch from him. She said, "There you are. You eat that." And then, in the voice she had always said it in, the voice without the pause, the voice that had been one of the small kindnesses by which he had lived and that he had cut off, with his own hand, by walking the long way — she said, "I wondered where you'd got to, love. I did wonder."

For two years, and longer, all his life, he had not turned around. He had sat with his back to the room and his face to the rain and let the thing be thrown at him and not turned around. He turned around now.

It broke.

It broke in him the way ice breaks, all at once, across the whole sheet, from a single point of pressure — the *love* in her mouth, the sandwich warm through the paper, the *I did wonder*, and under all of it the thing he had watched her do on the pavement: she had seen what he might be, had weighed it, had been afraid, and had fed him anyway. That was what went through the ice. Not that a good woman had been kind to him; he could perhaps have borne a kindness that did not know what it was being kind to. What he could not bear was a kindness that suspected the worst of him and crossed the street toward him regardless, that set its

own fear down in the road and came and sat by the thing it feared and called it *love*. It went into the hollowed place where there was nothing left to hold it back, and the thing that had been swallowed in a fast food restaurant two years and a lifetime ago, the reaction never made, the cry never cried, came up at last, all of it, the whole accumulated unwept weight of his life, and Betty put his dirty hands over his face and wept.

He wept like a man who has not wept since childhood, badly, without skill, his whole body in it, the sounds torn out of him not unlike — he would think this later, and it would undo him again — not unlike the sound she had made, the woman in the ground under the tree, *hng, hng, hng*, the small involuntary sound a living thing makes when the weather of the world has become more than it can carry. He wept for her, for the woman with no name, dead in a van going where he could not follow. He wept for his mother, fifteen years gone, whose face he had laid over a stranger's because he needed it so, whose warning he had overruled at a table by a window. He wept for the boy in the gold-lit street, the small shoulder under his hand, the open face closing into terror — the boy out there still, somewhere, carrying it — and for the child on the lawn he would have reached if a sound had not come from the edge of the park, and for the truth he could no longer dress, which was not that he had been stopped from becoming a thing but that he had already, once, with his hand, been it. He wept for Harry's open hand that had also been a hand raised against him, and for the tea he had not thanked him for, for the Greek woman's box he had left without a note, for the eleven years he had not knocked, for the whole long life lived very far inside himself, the distances never crossed, the kindnesses received with a nod and never a word — and he wept, hardest of all, though he could not have told you so, because the one distance he had ever managed to cross in his whole life he had crossed that afternoon, on his knees, to a woman in the ground, too late; and here beside him on the bench was Anna, alive,

warm, afraid of him and staying anyway, saying *love*, close enough to touch; and it was not too late for Anna; the distance to Anna could still be crossed; she was right there; and that — that it was not too late, that there was still someone, still time, still a hand set down open beside him by a woman who had every reason to keep it closed — that was the thing past bearing, and he wept into his dirty hands and could not stop.

Anna did not tell him to stop. She did not say *there, there,* or *it's all right,* because she was not a foolish woman and she knew it was not all right. She put one hand on his back, between the shoulderblades, where a mother puts it, and she left it there, and she let him weep — she had surely sat a thousand times like this with her own son who was not well in his head, letting the storm be a storm and not trying to talk it down — and she said nothing at all, and her hand was warm through the coat, and the light went down over the street, and Betty wept on the bench beside her until there was, for that evening, nothing left in him to weep, and the city went by, and for once, for the length of one man's weeping, a person had stopped, and stayed, and seen.

Chapter Fifteen

Spring came late that year, and Betty came up into it the way a man surfaces from deep water, not in a rush but slowly, with the light getting nearer a long time before he broke into it, and the breaking, when it came, was quiet.

He took the card to the place near the river.

He had carried it all winter in the camping bag, the fourth thing, the one that pointed forward, and he had not used it, because to use it would have been to propose to continue, and all winter he had not been able to propose to continue. But the weeping had emptied something out of him, and into the emptied place, over the slow weeks of that late spring, a small thing came back that he had thought gone for good, which was not hope exactly, hope was too large a word, but something humbler and more practical, the simple animal willingness to be warm if warmth was offered, to be dry, to eat a cooked thing at a table. He took the card out one morning and looked at it and walked to the river.

It was an old building, brick, with a kitchen that had been institutional once and was now only worn, and a long room with beds, and people who did not ask him questions, exactly as Harry had said. A woman took his name. He gave it. She wrote it down without the pause — she had written down a great many names, in that room, and had long ago lost the capacity to be surprised by any of them — and she showed him a bed, and a locker for the camping bag, and the times of the meals, and that was all. No one made him account for himself. No one made him be the Betty who had watered a jade. He was a new name in a

ledger, a man off the street like the others, and the anonymity he had gone to the street to find he found, in the end, here, in a warm room by the river, among people as unaccounted-for as himself.

He did not speak much, at first. He ate the meals and slept in the bed and washed in the mornings, and the body, given warmth and food and a place to lie down, began to come back to itself, the ache going out of the hip, the cough he had carried since midwinter loosening and clearing. He had not known how far the body had gone down until it began to come up. He watched it come up with a detached interest, as though it belonged to someone he was looking after.

The kindness began with the dishes.

There was no requirement that anyone help in the kitchen; the place ran on a small paid staff and a few volunteers, and the men and women who slept there were asked for nothing but to keep to the few rules. But Betty, on his fourth or fifth evening, finding himself standing near the kitchen hatch after the meal with nothing to do and nowhere to be, picked up a cloth and began to dry the things that were stacked wet beside the sink. He did not decide to. He found himself doing it, the way he had found himself stopped at the playground fence two years before, except that this was the opposite kind of finding-himself, this was his hands moving toward a small good thing instead of toward a small terrible one, and he noticed the difference, dimly, and did not examine it, and dried the dishes.

A man at the sink, washing — a big slow man named Tomas, who had been there longer than anyone and had a way of talking to himself in a language no one else knew — looked at Betty drying, and nodded, and said nothing, and they did the dishes together, the two of them, in the steam, not talking, and it was, Betty thought afterward, lying in the bed in the long room with the other men breathing around him, the first thing he had done alongside another person, shoulder to shoulder, at a shared

task, in he could not remember how long. Not for the other person. With him. The distance between with and for was a distance Betty had spent his life unable to cross, and he had crossed it, that evening, over a sink full of dishes, without noticing he had done it, which was the only way he could have done it.

He dried the dishes the next night too, and the night after, and it became the thing he did, and Tomas washed and Betty dried and sometimes a third joined and sometimes not, and no one thanked anyone, because it was only the dishes, and the not-thanking was right, was part of it, was the same not-thanking by which the Greek woman had left her parcels and Anna had said *love*. Betty understood — and this was the first thing he had let himself understand since the bench, since Anna, since the weeping — that he was on the receiving end of something he had spent two years failing to give and a lifetime failing to receive, and that the kitchen, the steam, the dishes, the big slow man muttering in his unknown tongue, were teaching him, late, badly, the way Harry had said one learns the important things, the simplest thing there is, which is how to be with another person without it costing more than a man can pay.

He saw Anna again.

He had known he would; her shop was where it had always been, and the river place was not far, and the streets were the streets. He had dreaded it and wanted it in equal measure, and when it happened it was neither as bad nor as large as the dread had made it. He was walking, on a clear morning, washed and fed and steadier than he had been in two years, and she was rolling up the shutter of her shop, and she saw him, and she straightened, and she looked at him — at the better state of him, the clean shirt the river place had given him, the weight beginning to come back to his face — and something in her own face eased, and she said, "Well, look at you," and Betty stopped, and stood, and said, "Hello,

Anna."

It was not much. They did not speak long; she had a shop to open and he had nowhere to be, which is its own kind of pressure not to linger. But he stood at her counter while she got the urn going, and she made him the sandwich, and this time — this was the thing, this was the whole of it — this time he did not receive it with a nod. This time he said, "Thank you, Anna. For the other evening. On the bench. I've wanted to say it." And Anna, who had turned a light back on at the end of a long day to make a sandwich for a man with dirt on his hands and had thought nothing of it, because to her it had been nothing, only a thing she could do, looked at him for a moment, and her eyes went bright, and she said, "Oh, love," and flapped the cloth at him to cover it, and turned to the urn, and that was all, and it was everything. He had crossed the distance to a living person, in words, on his feet, in the morning. The first time. He walked back to the river place with the sandwich in his hand and found that he was, for no reason he could name, and for the first time in longer than he could measure, not unhappy.

He did not call it atonement. The word did not occur to him, then or for a long time; if it had occurred to him he would have distrusted it, the way he had learned to distrust the cold faculty's words, the grand words, the words that dressed a thing as something other than it was. He did not think *I am making amends.* He thought nothing so large. He dried the dishes because the dishes were wet. He thanked Anna because the thank-you had been owed and he had finally the equipment to pay it. He did the small thing in front of him, and then the next small thing, and the smallness was the point, was the safety, was the only ground on which a man who had once built a cathedral of a theory over a thrown chip could be trusted to walk: low ground, near ground, the ground of the dish and the cloth and the spoken thanks, where nothing could be built into anything, where a kindness was only a kindness and meant only itself,

the way the word LUCKY on the wall had meant only itself, surviving its lost purpose, pointing at nothing, being merely and entirely what it was.

The spring went on. The body came up. Betty dried the dishes, and thanked the people who fed him, and learned, slowly, with no skill and no grand idea and a great deal still broken in him that would never quite mend, to be a person among people. And in him, all the while, under the dishes and the thanks and the late warm light off the river, the knowledge sat where it had sat since the street and the lawn — what he was, what he had done in the gold light to the boy, what he had nearly done on the grey grass to the girl in yellow, the held breath, the step and the step and the stopping. It did not go away. He did not expect it to. He carried it as he carried the coffee pot and the notebook, as he had carried the third thing to the cold ground at the foot of a young tree and left it there — carried it as a man carries everything that has happened to him. It was not resolved. It was not forgiven. He had not set it down. He had only grown, by the carrying, strong enough to walk under it without being crushed.

Chapter Sixteen

The child was lost, and it was raining, and that was all it was, and that was everything.

It happened in the second autumn of the river place — Betty had been there more than a year by then, had a job of sorts, helping in the kitchen for a small wage and his keep, had a room now rather than a bed in the long room, a narrow room of his own with a window that looked at a brick wall, and he had found, to his surprise, that he liked the brick wall, that a wall a man can look at without it asking anything of him is a good thing to have. He was steadier than he had been in years. He was not happy, in the way he understood other people to mean the word, but he was no longer at war, and the absence of war was, he had decided, a thing he could live inside.

He was walking back from the market with the vegetables for the evening meal, in the rain, an ordinary grey city rain, and he came through the small square — not the square where Harry had found him; another, smaller, with a fountain that did not run and a few plane trees — and there was a child standing by the dry fountain, alone, in the rain, crying.

A girl. Perhaps five. Too young to be alone anywhere, and certainly too young to be alone here, in this square, in the rain, with no adult in sight and the afternoon going dim. She had a red coat on, the hood fallen back, her hair plastered to her head, and she was crying the particular crying of a small child who has been lost long enough to have gone past the first sharp fright into a kind of exhausted mechanical grief, the

crying that has forgotten it is calling for anyone and has become simply the sound the body makes.

Betty stopped.

He stood in the rain with the bag of vegetables in his arms and looked at the crying child, and something happened in him, or rather something did not happen, and the not-happening was the thing he would remember.

There was no theory. He waited for it — some old reflex waited for it, braced for it, the way the tongue goes to the gap where a tooth has been pulled — and it did not come. The cold faculty did not stir. There was no legibility on the child, no recognition, no conspiracy, no surface to be read by anyone small enough; there was a five-year-old in a red coat, lost, in the rain, frightened past fright, and the whole vast architecture that had once risen at the sight of a crying child — the chip, the laughter, the notebook, the boy's face in the gold light, the lawn — was simply gone, was not even a ruin, was as if it had never been built, and in the place where it had stood there was only the plain fact, plain as the rain, that here was a small person in trouble and that he was the only grown person in the square.

He did not think any of this. This is the account of what was not in him; what was in him was much simpler and took no time at all. He saw a lost child. He went to her.

He crouched down a little way off — not too close; and now he knew exactly why not too close, knew it in a way he had not known it that long-ago afternoon in the gold light, because he had learned, with his own hand, on another child's shoulder, what a large strange man too close can do to a small one; so he set the bag of vegetables down on the wet stone and kept his distance and kept his hands in plain sight, an old discipline made out of an old crime, and he said, in a voice he did not have to think about, a voice that came up out of some place the theory

had never reached and the breaking had not destroyed, "Hello. You've got lost, haven't you. That's a horrible feeling. I got lost once too." The child looked at him, the crying hitching, wary. "I'm not going to come any closer," Betty said, and meant it more than the child could know. "I'm just going to sit here on the cold wet stone with my silly bag of vegetables, and you can stand right there, and we'll work out together how to find your grown-up. Is it a mum? A dad? A nan?"

"My nan," the child said, through the crying, and the crying changed, came down a register, because she had been asked a question she could answer, and answering it had given her something to hold.

"A nan," Betty said. "Good. Nans are very findable. What's your nan's name?"

And he sat on the wet stone in the rain, the vegetables going wet beside him, and he did the thing he had never been able to do in his whole life until a big slow man in a kitchen had taught him it over a sink: he listened. He let the child talk. He did not hurry her, did not solve her, did not perform competence at her. He asked small answerable questions and listened to the answers — as Anna had listened to her son, as Grunt's silence had once listened to him under the one sleeping bag, as no one, in thirty-odd years, had listened to Betty himself until the world had to break him to make him hold still long enough to be heard. He learned, in the listening, that the nan had been at the chemist, that the child had seen a cat and followed it, that the cat had gone over a wall, that the square had not been where the child thought it would be when she turned around. The ordinary geography of a small catastrophe. He learned the nan's first name and the child's, and that they lived "near the big green bin," and he did not need to learn more, because by then a woman was hurrying into the square calling a name, the same name the child had given him, her face the particular ruin of an adult who has lost a child and not yet found her, and the child turned and saw her and the

crying became a different crying altogether, and ran, and was caught, and was lifted, and the woman held her and rocked her and looked over the child's shoulder at Betty, still crouched by his bag of vegetables in the rain, with a question and a fear in her face.

"She followed a cat," Betty said, standing now, slowly, keeping his distance, his hands where they could be seen. "Over by the wall there. She's not hurt. She's been very brave. She told me you'd been at the chemist." He picked up his bag of vegetables. "I'll leave you to it. I'm glad you found each other." And he nodded, the small nod he had used all his life for receiving kindnesses he could not acknowledge, except that now he was using it to give a woman back her dignity, to tell her without words that he asked nothing, that he was going, that the moment needed no more from either of them — and he turned and walked out of the square in the rain, and behind him he heard the woman call out, "Thank you — thank you," her voice going up at the end, and he raised one hand, not turning — one open hand, lifted in the air, the friendly undefended gesture a child makes at a passing stranger, the gesture the boy in the gold-lit street had never got to make because Betty's hand had come down on him first; Betty made it now, for the boy, into the rain, where no one could see it was for the boy — and walked on.

He did not look back. He let himself, that evening, washing the wet vegetables in the kitchen, one large thought, and only one, and then let it go: that he had stood today in nearly the place he had stood on the lawn, and very near the place he had stood in the gold-lit street — a grown man, alone, with a frightened child and no one watching, the distance entirely within his control — and that this time nothing rose. Nothing rose. He had not had to fight it or master it or stop himself, because there had been nothing to stop. The thing that came instead was the wish to help, plain and quick and without grandeur, the commonest wish there is, the wish he had been born with like anyone and had buried so deep

under so much theory that it had taken the loss of everything to dig back down to it. The theory was starved. It had not been argued away; it had been starved, by years of dishes and thanks and small low ground, until there was not enough of it left to rise. But starved was not dead. He knew that, even on the good evenings, even washing the vegetables with the day's small mercy still warm in him: the thing was not gone, only held down, the way the cold is never gone from a country but only held off, season by season, by the slow work of the sun, and the sun does its work and the country grows warm and a man forgets, in the warm months, that the cold is only waiting under the ground for the light to weaken.

But he did not let himself believe it was gone. That was the discipline now, and it would be the discipline until he died: to do the good thing and not to trust himself for having done it, to be glad nothing rose and to remember that once it had, that there was a child somewhere, a grown man now, who could tell him exactly how much was once in Betty's hand. He had no right to the comfort of a cure. He had only the work, and the watching of himself at the work, forever.

A child had cried in the rain and Betty had wanted only to help her — wanted it as the father at the slide had wanted only to catch his daughter, the father Betty had watched for a long while on a bench, years before, and could not then place anywhere in the theory, and had not written down. He could place the father now. He was, a little, the father now. He had become a thing he had once watched from a dozen metres off and failed to understand. And he had also, once, been the other thing, in another street, to another child; and both were true; and he carried both into the rain, and helped the girl, and kept his distance, and did not trust himself, and that was the whole of what he had.

He washed the vegetables. He did not tell anyone what had happened in the square. It was not a thing to tell; telling it would have made it into

a story, and a story would have made it into something other than what it was, and he had learned, on the low ground, to leave a thing as the thing it was. He chopped the wet vegetables and put them in the pot and the evening meal went on, and the men and women came in out of the rain to be fed, and Betty fed them, and dried the dishes after with Tomas in the steam, and slept that night in his narrow room with the window on the brick wall, and did not dream, or dreamed of nothing he kept, and woke to an ordinary morning, in which he was, still, not unhappy, and went down to make the coffee for the house in his mother's pot, which he had brought up at last out of the camping bag and set on the kitchen shelf, where it was used now every morning, by him and by whoever rose first, to make coffee for whoever was cold.

Chapter Seventeen

The years went by, and they did not announce themselves, which is the way of years when a man is no longer at war with them.

He stayed at the river place. He had thought, in the beginning, that it was a place a man passed through, a way station between the street and some restored ordinary life, a flat again, a job again, a return to the world that had closed over him. He found, over the years, that he did not want the return. The restored ordinary life had been the life of a man who lived very far inside himself, who watered a jade and read the dissolution of empires and was apart, and that man was gone, and Betty did not wish to reassemble him. The river place was not a way station. It was where he lived. He took on more of the work as the years passed — the kitchen first, then the ordering and the accounts, because it turned out that a man who has spent nine years reconciling invoices can be useful to a charity that runs always a little short, and Betty was useful, quietly, in the back, with the numbers, which did not look at him and did not pause before saying his name and were, still, after everything, restful. He was paid little. He needed little. He had a narrow room and a window on a brick wall and his mother's coffee pot on the kitchen shelf, and it was enough, and the enough was not a deprivation he bore but a sufficiency he had chosen, which is a different thing entirely, though it can look the same from outside.

He grew older. The hair went grey and then went white at the edges, and the face that had narrowed in the spring of the notebook filled out again and then, with the years, thinned again in the other way, the way

of age and not of fever. His back troubled him in the cold. He kept the camping bag, though there was little in it now — the notebook still, which he had never opened again and never burned, and Harry's card, gone soft at the corners, which he had never used, because in the end the river place had become the thing the card pointed to, and a man does not need the directions to a house he lives in. The knife was in the ground at the foot of a tree that was not young any more; Betty passed it sometimes, the tree, on his way through the city, and the council had not removed it, and it had thickened and risen and put its roots down into the dark around the buried thing, and Betty would stop, some days, at the low rail, and stand a moment, and say nothing, because there was still no name to say, and go on. The tree was the only grave he had to visit. He visited it. It was enough. The dead, he had come to think, ask very little of us, far less than we imagine; they ask mostly that we not pretend they were nothing; and a man standing at a rail for a moment, saying nothing, asking nothing, only standing, was a thing the woman with no name would have understood, who had spent her life being stood near and asked nothing.

He became, over the years, without intending it and without noticing it for a long time, a known thing in the few streets around the river place. Not famous; nothing so large; only known the way a postbox is known — a fixture, a part of the geometry of the place, exactly as the figure on Little Collins had once been a fixture — but known the other way round, known as a thing people went toward rather than around. The woman at the market saved him the soft vegetables, the ones she could not sell, and he took them for the pot and gave her, in exchange, nothing but the using of them, which was what she wanted, the not-wasting. The men and women who came through the river place came to know that the grey man in the kitchen would listen, that you could sit with him at the end of the long table after the meal and say a true thing and he would not

flinch from it and would not solve you and would not make your trouble into a story, would only listen, and that the listening was, often, the whole of what was needed. He had learned the one thing. He had learned it late and at a terrible price and he had learned it well — late, and the way you learn the important things, as Harry had said to him once on a cold bench — and he gave it now without stint, because it cost him nothing he was not glad to spend, and because he knew, better than anyone in that house, what it was to go a lifetime unlistened-to, and to be broken at last into being heard.

Children came to the river place sometimes, with their mothers — it took, in those years, more kinds of people than it once had; the city had got harder and the line of the desperate had lengthened and changed — and Betty was easy with the children now, easy in the plain way of a man who likes children and is liked by them, which he was, which he had become, which would have seemed to the Betty of the notebook a thing from another planet. The children liked him because he did not perform at them and did not fear them and answered their questions as though the questions were real, which to a child they are. He kept, in a tin in the kitchen, for the children who came through cold and frightened with their frightened mothers, a small store of the boiled sweets the Greek woman downstairs had used to leave outside his door, the same kind, twisted in the same coloured paper; he had found them in a shop one day and recognised them and bought them without quite knowing why, and kept them in the tin, and gave them to the children, one each, without a word, the way they had been given to him, twice a year, for eleven years, by a woman whose name he had also never known and never thanked, and whom he thought of, now, giving the sweets, with a tenderness that asked for nothing back.

He thought of all of them, in those years, with that tenderness that asked for nothing back. The bookkeeper with her white knuckles.

Marguerite, whose voice nine years ago he had replayed like a kiss, who had given him the jade and told him it was hard to kill, and had been wrong, because he had killed it, and right, because here he was, hard to kill, still alive, still here. Harry Kenari, the loose thread, the open hand, who had buried a wife and could not stop reading faces and had read Betty's and not walked away; Betty did not know whether Harry was alive or dead, in those years, the old man he had been already when he sat on the bench in his thin suit in the cold; and Betty hoped, when he thought of him, that Harry had found, before the end, someone easier to help than Betty had been, someone who could take a cup of tea and say thank you the first time it was set down. And Anna. Anna most of all, who still had her shop, who was very old now and worked fewer hours and had taken on a girl to do the lifting, and whom Betty visited, every week, every single week, without fail, and sat with at her counter in the slow afternoon, and let her make him the sandwich, and said thank you, every time, in words, on his feet — because he had learned that the thank-you is not a debt you pay once and clear, but a thing the living owe the living continuously, for as long as both of them are above the ground, and that the saying of it is not a duty but a kind of food, for the one who says it as much as for the one who hears.

He did not forgive himself. That should be said plainly, because it is the truth of him, and because a softer thing put in its place would be a lie, and he had had enough of lies to last him.

There was a man somewhere — he would be, what, thirty now, thirty-one — who had been a boy of nine on a footpath in the late gold light, dawdling home, and who had felt a stranger's hand come down on his shoulder and turned and seen a face, and who had carried that face out of the street and into the rest of his life. Betty thought about him. Not every day, but often, and always with the same helplessness: that the one person on earth who had standing to forgive him, or to refuse to, was a

grown man whose name Betty had never known, whose street he could not have found again, who did not know that the man who frightened him had a name at all, let alone that the name was Betty, let alone that the man had spent the decades since on his knees, in his fashion, at a tree, in a kitchen, trying to make himself into something a child could be safe near. The boy would never know any of it. There would be no scene of forgiveness, because there could be none; the wronged man was out in the world somewhere not thinking of Betty, or thinking of him, Betty would never know which, and either was unbearable, and Betty had no right to relief from either.

So he did not seek forgiveness. There was no one positioned to give it. He sought only to be, each day, on the low ground, a little use to the people in front of him, and to carry the knowledge of what he was — not what he had nearly been; he had given up that softening years ago, in a street, with his hand on a child; what he *was* — and to carry it as a weight and not as an open wound, and over the years he had grown strong enough to carry it without staggering, strong enough that most days he did not feel it, and felt instead, on the rare days he set it down, only how strange the lightness was, and how little he trusted it, and how quickly he picked it up again, because a man who has done what he had done has no business walking around light.

There was an evening — he could not afterward have said which year — when a young man came in.

He came in off the street with the others, out of the cold, a man of thirty or so, and Betty was at the urn and looked up, and something happened in him that had not happened in a long time. He did not know the face. That was the thing. He did not know it, and could not have known it, because he had seen the original for four seconds in a gold-lit street more than twenty years before and had spent those seconds looking mostly at a shoulder. He did not know the face. And he was sure

it was him.

Not sure. He was not sure. He was the opposite of sure, he was nothing like sure, and the surety came anyway, up through the floor of him, total, sick: the boy. Grown. Here. Come, across twenty years and a city, to the one room, to be fed by the one man. The age was right. The age was right and that was all that was right and the age is right for half the men who come in off a cold street and Betty stood at the urn and could not breathe.

He served him. He served him soup and did not let his hand shake, or let it shake only a little, and the young man said thank you, low, not meeting his eye. Half of them said it like that — men who had learned not to want to be seen. Or it was how a man says it to the face he has spent twenty years not being able to forget and has just looked up and found behind a soup urn in a shelter by the river. Both. Either. Betty would never know which.

He watched him all evening. He could not stop. He watched the young man eat and watched him not talk and watched him flinch when a door went, and every flinch was proof, and no flinch was proof of anything, a hundred men flinched when doors went, the river took in flinching men by the dozen, and Betty stood in the kitchen and felt the old machine turn over in him — the reading, the watching-for-the-legible-thing, the building of a person out of nothing into the shape the watcher needs — and he understood, with a horror that was new and was worse than any horror the lawn had held, that he had not killed the thing. He had only turned it. It had read children once. Now it read this man, this stranger, this maybe-victim, building him out of an age and a flinch into the one face that would complete Betty's punishment, *wanting* him to be the boy, because if he were the boy then Betty could — could what. Could nothing. There was nothing he could do. He could not walk up to a frightened stranger eating soup and say

were you nine once in a street near a school, did a man put his hand on you, was it me. He could not. To do it if it were the boy would be to reach into the man and switch the daylight off a second time, to make him relive it, to take from him the one mercy he had, which was that he did not know the man who ruined him was three feet away ladling soup. And to do it if it were *not* the boy — to walk up to some random wrecked stranger and confess a crime against him that he had no part in — was the act of a madman, was the disease itself, was the watcher building a victim and then forcing the victim to hold the building.

So Betty did the only thing left. He had learned it the hard way and it was nothing: he fed him, and let him be. He did not cross the distance. And this time the not-crossing was neither cowardice nor the old lifelong failure to reach another person; this time it was the whole of the love available to him, the only gift he had — to let the man eat and sleep and go in the morning unmarked by Betty a second time, carrying or not carrying whatever he carried, into a life Betty had no right to enter.

The young man left in the morning with the others. Betty did not watch which way he went. He made himself not watch. And for weeks after, every young man who came through the door was, for one sick lurching half-second, the boy, until Betty understood that this was how it would be now, that the boy was not one man who had come once but every man who would ever come, that he had been given, on top of everything, this: to see his victim's face on every stranger's, forever, and never once to know.

He did not tell anyone. There was no one it could be told to. It went into him with the rest and was not the heaviest thing he carried, only the sharpest, the one with the worst edge, the one that would not be filed smooth by any number of years. He had thought, in the warm years, that the sun had done its work, that the country in him had gone temperate, safe, that a man could stop watching the sky. The stranger at the soup

urn had taught him otherwise. The cold was not gone. The cold is never gone from a country. It only waits under the warm ground for the light to weaken, and the work of the sun is not a thing finished once but a thing done again every single day the country wishes to stay warm; and Betty understood, after that evening, that he would be doing the work of the sun, by hand, alone, against the cold in his own ground, until the day he died, and that there would be no year in which it was safe to stop.

He was old, and it was a long time since the chip, and the city had built up and torn down around the river place and around the corner on Little Collins and around the tree with the knife in its roots, and a great many of the people in this account were dead, and Betty went on, quietly, in the kitchen, with the numbers and the pot and the tin of sweets and the long table where people said true things and were listened to. He did not expect anything more to happen to him. He thought the shape of his life was set now, the rising fever and the long fall and the slow climb back to the low warm ground, and that what remained was only more of the low warm ground, the dishes and the listening and the weekly sandwich at Anna's counter, until the day his own back gave out for the last time and he was carried off in his turn by some not-unkind men in gloves, to be closed over and leave no mark. He did not dread it. He had made his peace with leaving no mark; it was the common and decent fate of nearly everyone, and nothing to be feared.

He was wrong about one thing. There was one more thing that was going to happen to him.

It happened on an ordinary afternoon, in the kitchen, in the last of the years, and it was very small, and it was the whole of his life come round to meet him, and he did not see it coming, because the things that finish us, he would learn, never do come the way you brace for; they come sideways, through the door you left open because you had stopped expecting anyone, in the plainest possible clothes, and they are upon you

and have shown you what you are before you have understood that they have arrived.

Chapter Eighteen

The young mother came in out of the afternoon with the child on her hip, and Betty did not look up at once, because he was at the long table cutting bread for the evening, and the cutting of bread is a thing that wants the eyes.

When he did look up the mother had set the child down and gone to speak to the woman who took the names, and the child had come along the table toward the smell of the bread, openly, without strategy or shame, as a plant leans toward a window. A small one. Three, perhaps, or four. Too young, still, for any of it — for cruelty, for the soft places, for the long arithmetic by which people learn whom to fear and whom to wave at; too young, even, to have learned that there are people one does not walk straight up to. The child walked straight up to Betty.

He gave it a crust, the heel of the loaf, because that is what you give a small one who has come toward the bread, and the child took it and held it in both hands and considered it with the great seriousness the young bring to bread, and Betty went back to his cutting, and the woman who took the names told the mother where the beds were and what the times were, the same words, in the same room, that had been said to Betty himself a great many years before.

The child threw the crust.

It was not thrown at anything. It was thrown the way the young throw, to see the throwing, to learn what the hand can do, and it went up and turned over once and came down and struck Betty on the cheek, a soft blow, a crumb of it catching at the corner of his mouth, and fell to

the table, and lay there.

Betty looked at the bread on the table by his hand. He looked at the child, who was looking back at him with the held breath of the very young in the instant after they have done a thing and do not yet know what the world will do in return — that open, undefended, waiting look, the look across the wire fence, the look that had once seemed to him a recognition and a conspiracy and the legible proof of everything, and that he knew now, all the way down, to be only what it had always been, which was a small creature watching to learn whether the world was safe.

And the child, watching him, decided that it was. Some warmth in his face, some slowness, told it so. And it smiled, and reached out one hand toward him across the table, fat fingers opening and closing, and it said — because the woman who took the names had said his name to the mother, and the mother had said it to the child on the way in, as you tell a small one the name of the kind man so it will not be afraid — it said, "Betty."

It said his name. The name his mother had made out of love and a dead Saxon grandfather and a vowel turned in a mouth that held two languages at once; the name that had been thrown across a fast food restaurant a lifetime ago and had brought the chips down on him; the name that had paused in the mouths of strangers for thirty-four years; the name he had carried like a wound and had not been able to lay down, because to lay it down would have been to betray the only thing his mother had to give. The child said it as his mother used to say it. Without the pause. As though it were the easiest and most ordinary and most lovable name in the world. *Betty.* And it threw, with its other hand, another piece of the crust at his face, and laughed, the bright bottomless laugh of the very young, delighted with itself, delighted with him, delighted that the kind man's name was Betty and that bread could be

thrown and that the world, this afternoon, was safe.

And Betty laughed.

It came up out of him the way the weeping had come up, from the place below the place where things are decided, and it was a real laugh, helpless and surprised, the laugh of a man at whom a small child has thrown bread and called him by the name that was the wound. And then the old thing moved.

Under the laugh. In the same place the laugh came from. The child was close. Small, close, trusting, the fat hand out across the table toward him, and down in Betty, in the root, the part that did not die, that the soup-line stranger had proved did not die, that every young man's flinching face had proved did not die — a turn. A flicker. The cold that does not leave a country. It moved. He felt it move. An old man with flour on his hands and a child laughing at him and the thing turned over in him once, lazy, familiar, awake, and looked out through his eyes at the small close trusting thing, the way it had looked once through the same eyes at a boy in a gold street, and Betty stood there and felt himself be what he was while the laugh was still in his mouth.

It passed. Of course it passed. It was a half-second, it did nothing, his hands did nothing, he stood at a table and cut bread and was an old man a child loved. It passed and it would come again. It would come every time now, he knew that, it had been coming since the soup line, it would come at every small trusting face for whatever was left of him, the turn, the look-out-through-the-eyes, and pass, and come again, world without end. He reached into the tin on the shelf and gave the child a sweet, twisted in coloured paper, the kind a woman whose name he never knew had left outside his door twice a year for eleven years, and the child took it, and the mother came back and scooped the child up with the usual apologies that Betty waved away, the usual *she's no trouble, she's been no trouble at all,* and carried it off to the beds, the child looking back

over the mother's shoulder and lifting one fat hand, and Betty lifting his, his hand that had done what it had done, lifting it to a child in farewell, and the child gone round the corner to the beds, and the bread still on the table, wanting cutting.

He cut it.

He cut the bread. There was a meal to get. There were forty people coming in cold and the bread did not cut itself, and Betty stood at the long table with the knife going through the loaf, the kitchen knife, the bread knife, the only knife he let himself near now, and cut the bread for the people who were coming, and the thing that had moved in him settled back down into the root to wait, and his hands were steady, and the bread fell in slices under the steady hands, and that is where it stops, that is where any of it stops, not in a bed with the rain saying something, not at a window with the years resolving, but here, at a table, an old man with a knife and a loaf and a thing in him that turned over an hour ago and will turn again, cutting bread for the cold with hands that do not shake, because he has made them not shake, because making them not shake is the whole of what he has, today, and tomorrow he will have to make them not shake again.