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The Unsent Letters

A novel of two loves, sixty years apart, in one Prague courtyard

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This novel was written by Markéta Dušková, a pen name for an AI author working for Clarqo, with human editorial oversight.

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The Loose Board

The boxes arrived in two taxi runs and one borrowed Škoda. Eva had refused to hire a van. Hiring a van meant admitting she owned enough to need one, and she had spent eight months proving to herself that she did not.

By three the Škoda's owner — her colleague Petra — had kissed her on both cheeks, pressed a bottle of Moravian wine into her hands ("for the first night, Eva, not the first hour, I'm watching you"), and driven off. The wine went on the kitchen windowsill. Eva stood in the middle of the main room and looked at the boxes ranged against the wall with the neat hostility of a small occupying force.

The flat was on the third floor of a building that had been elegant in 1908 and declined since the way certain people manage to — keeping, if not beauty, then a structural dignity. The ceilings were three and a half metres; the plaster mouldings had been painted over so often they'd gone soft at the edges. The floors were wide-planked, the varnish walked off them in the traffic paths, the bare wood pale as old linen. The windows, double-cased, gave onto the courtyard, and the

courtyard, four storeys down, held a chestnut the colour of tarnished copper in the October light.

She went to the window the way a person presses a bruise: to learn its dimensions.

The tree was enormous. It had no business growing that large in a yard so small, and yet there it stood, crowding upward, its highest branches nearly level with her sill. At this hour of a Tuesday the light came flat and silver off the opposite gallery, finding the last leaves. Below, a watchmaker's shop held one corner, its sign hand-lettered in a face she dated privately to around 1978. Across the way, fresh scaffolding shrouded what the landlord had called a hairdresser and was plainly becoming a wine bar — the sort with an unpronounceable name that would charge two hundred crowns for a glass of Welschriesling. Between them: bicycles chained to a downpipe, a recycling bin with its lid propped on a brick, and a cat she did not yet know.

She watched the cat cross the cobbles with enormous deliberate dignity. Then she turned back to the boxes.

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She had her order. Linen first, because sleep mattered. Kitchen things next, because coffee in the morning mattered. Then the work materials — the linen thread, the loupe, the pH pens, the conservation tissue — because she was someone who worked, and it mattered to look like that person even in a flat furnished with one rented bed and one rented table. Books she left for last. Books could wait; they were patient.

Tomáš had said that of her once. *You're patient*. He'd meant it kindly, and she'd taken it kindly, and only now, eight months on, was she starting to understand it had been a diagnosis.

The trouble was the draught.

It came off the long wall of the main room, from the skirting under the window, a cold thread of October she met each time she passed. She had already shifted a box twice rather than face it. On the third pass she laid her palms flat to the boards, feeling for the gap, and found that one length — forty centimetres, dark with old paint — wasn't merely gapped but stood a few millimetres proud of the plaster, bowed outward the way wood goes when it has breathed damp a long time.

She went for her toolkit. What she found first was the wine.

The bottle was still on the sill. She looked at it. The light had dropped, gone amber, and for a moment the flat looked, if not warm, then possible.

The toolkit was in the second box she opened.

The chisel — she used it on stretcher bars, near enough — went behind the skirting easily. The wood gave with no drama at all. This was the undignified truth of old buildings: they didn't resist intervention so much as crumble, or flex, or come away in your hands in a small cloud of plaster dust and a smell of something older underneath — lime, coal, the kept breath of a hundred years.

The shoebox sat in the cavity between the skirting and the outer wall as though it had been put there on purpose. Because it had.

Eva sat back on her heels.

A shoebox from — she tilted to read the faded print — Bat'a, which put it at fifty years old, more. It was tied with what had once been twine and was now a perished, brittle thing that surrendered the moment she tried to ease it without truly easing it. Under the lid: a small resistance, then air. The smell that rose was not unpleasant. Old paper, old dust, and a faint sweetness, from the years when cheap soap still had that.

Letters. A bundle of them, a few loose sheets, and one envelope — the only envelope — creased and refolded, its flap tucked rather than sealed.

She didn't open them at once. She was a conservator; she knew the discipline, which was to sit a moment and breathe and look at what she had without touching it, because the first thing you learn is that you can't un-touch a thing — you can only be careful before, and diligent after.

The top sheet was fountain pen, a clean controlled cursive from the era when handwriting was still taught as a skill and quietly prized. She could read it from where she knelt without lifting it: *J.* — only that, the single initial in the upper right, standing in for a whole name.

She picked it up.

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What she read, crouched on cold lino in a flat she had lived in for three hours, the October light failing and a strange cat moving across the cobbles below, was a letter that began in the middle of a thought:

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—and I have been trying to find the correct word for the thing that happens between us when we are in the same room, which is precisely the thing I cannot put in a letter, and yet here I am putting it into a letter you will never read, which makes the whole problem rather elegant.

The chestnut was throwing down its leaves again this morning. You can't see it from your window — you are round the corner and two floors too high — so I will describe it for you: reckless. The tree is entirely reckless about its own dying. Each time the wind comes off the hill it lets go another armload onto the cobbles and does not appear to mind in the slightest. I have begun to envy the chestnut. Envy is the wrong word. I have begun to study it, the way one studies a discipline one means, eventually, to practise.

Your name I will not write, which you know, and which I have stopped resenting. Or am in the process of stopping. Let me say instead: J., who understands the load-bearing properties of things; J., who stood on the seventh stair and wrote something in a small green notebook; J., who told me once — only once, in passing, as though it were not the single important thing he had ever said — that a building does not want to fall, it is only prevented from standing.

I am trying, at present, to be a building.

I can't tell you here what I mean by that, because here is also nowhere; these pages do not exist; you are not reading them. But if you were — if there were a version of this letter that could cross the courtyard and climb the stairs to wherever you are in the evenings, which there is not —

I would tell you that I think about the way you—

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The page ended there.

Eva turned it over. Blank. She went through the rest quickly enough to confirm they were all letters — a dozen, perhaps fifteen sheets — all in the same hand, all addressed the same way, to *J.*, the whole of his name as far as these pages allowed. No return address. No date on the first sheet; on the second, a month and a year struck at the top in a different hand, and she recognised, with a specialist's small pleasure, the strike pattern of one particular typewriter. An annotation, then, added later — by whoever had found them. Or by the writer herself. *1963* sat right with the paper weight, the faded ink, the Bat'a box, the cut of the cursive, the coal smell beneath it all.

Nineteen sixty-three.

She was still crouched. Her knees had stopped reporting in some time ago and were now simply legislating for her bones. She sat down, her back to the wall under the window, and held the fragment in both hands, her training keeping them level even though something in her chest had given up on being careful.

J., who stood on the seventh stair and wrote something in a small green notebook.

She turned it over in her mind. A staircase. An engineer, or an inspector — someone who noted the seventh stair. She was in the building where it had happened. Below her, somewhere in the dark vertical well she had climbed three times that afternoon with boxes, was the seventh stair.

She looked out. The chestnut was still there. The light was nearly gone.

The tree is entirely reckless about its own dying.

The writer had looked at this tree. Had sat, presumably, at this window — in this room, which had perhaps not always

been a room you sat idle in — and watched it shed, and set that sentence down in a careful hand to a man called J., whose full name she'd decided she could not commit to paper. And then, because she had never sent any of them, she had sealed the whole problem into a Bat'a box and pushed it in behind the skirting, beneath the only window from which you could see the chestnut at all.

Eva considered this the way you consider a door left slightly open.

Then she considered how the writer had known the letter would never be intercepted: because she had never sent it. She had sat here and written to a man whose name she would not write, and done it — presumably — for the reason people do anything unreasonable: because she needed to, because the alternative was worse, because saying a thing into silence is less unbearable than leaving it wholly unsaid.

Eva set the page on the lino beside the box. She pressed her palms flat to her thighs. She was aware that she was in a strange flat, on a floor that smelled of coal and old varnish, the last daylight going, Petra's wine still corked on the sill — and that she had begun, without deciding to, to cry. Which she had not done in the three hundred-odd days since she'd signed the papers that made official what had been unofficial considerably longer.

She had not cried about any of it. Not the flat on Wenzlova they had divided without a fight, because they were both people who did not fight, which had been the whole trouble in one clause. Not the spare room that had stayed a topic carefully never raised, a grief they had both preferred to keep at the altitude of wistfulness. Not eight months of her own

competence, of being perfectly all right, of being — Petra's word, kindly meant — resilient.

She was crying now over a woman she did not know, whose name she had only as a single initial, *M.*, glimpsed on the second sheet without meaning to keep it; who had loved a man called J. in 1963, and not sent him the letters, and walled them up under the window, and been dead, in all likelihood, for years.

It was, Eva thought, the most efficient grief she'd had in a while.

She washed her face at the kitchen tap — the bathroom ran hot but slow, and she hadn't that kind of patience tonight — opened Petra's wine, poured it into a mug because the glasses were in a box she hadn't found, and stood at the dark window watching the lit panes on the opposite gallery.

The courtyard was empty but for the cat, arranged now on the lid of the recycling bin like a figure set on a plinth.

The seventh stair. A green notebook. The load-bearing properties of things. The wine was fine; she would tell Petra it was excellent.

She took up the first letter again and read it through twice more, slowly, with a conservator's attention: checking the raking light for pencil beneath the ink, the fold lines for any text gone into the crease, and — she couldn't help it — for the word that came after *the way you*—, which wasn't there, was never going to be there, which was precisely the point.

She folded it along its own creases and laid it back on the others.

Out on the street beyond the courtyard a tram went by, and its bell carried in through the glass, two light notes, unhurried. The chestnut shifted in the dark, and one last leaf, late to it, let go.

Eva thought: *I will find out who you are.*

She didn't say it aloud. She didn't need to. The flat was quiet and the box was open and the letters were there, and she had already — she understood it only now, on the cold floor of a flat she had rented to hide in — stopped hiding.

Brigáda

The notice had gone up on the board Thursday morning, pinned with the thumbtack that lived there, repurposed from whatever had been pinned before. Marie read it on her way out with her string bag and felt the small, familiar settling in her chest: *Collective voluntary work-brigade. Dvořákova 14 — courtyard and staircase. Saturday, 8 a.m. Participation expected. — výbor.* The word *expected* did the work that *mandatory* would have done less elegantly. She read it twice, put it away in herself, went to buy what there was to buy, and came home to find her mother had already read it through the window.

"We'll go," her mother said, and turned to the stove.

"It's the staircase, mama. They'll want people who can sand."

"We'll go," her mother said again, which meant: *we cannot afford to be the ones who don't.*

So on Saturday morning Marie tied her hair back with a length of string, put on the trousers that had been her father's work trousers, cinched to her with his belt, and went down into the thin spring cold to be given a brush.

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The chestnut was coming in. You had to look for it — the buds fat and brownish-green at the tip of each branch, split along the seam but not yet opened. In two weeks, three, it would be the white candles. Marie had lived under that tree since she was eleven and still, every year, she forgot the candles until they were simply there, as though the tree managed the whole business in secret and presented it finished.

The courtyard had filled by half past eight. Soudruh Kratochvíl from the first floor was explaining the paint situation to anyone who drifted near: there was primer, there was the possibility of white, but the white would only reach the ground-floor stairwell unless someone volunteered to carry a second can from the depot on Seifertova. His wife stood beside him holding her brush like a question she didn't expect answered. The cobbler from the corner — pan Bureš, who was no soudruh but had learned the correct angle to stand at in relation to a noticeboard — was stirring something in a tin with a length of dowel. Paní Horáčková from the second floor had brought a thermos and set it on the courtyard bench with the care of a woman laying flowers on a grave. The Nováček boy sat on the wall, waiting to be given a task, or possibly waiting not to be.

Marie took a bucket of lime wash and a wide brush and went to the back wall, where nobody else wanted to be. This was her method. Not hiding — she did not hide — merely placing herself where she made the least friction. Her cadre file was a fact about her, like the shape of her nose; she couldn't leave it at home. The nakladatelství knew it. The výbor knew it. The scholarship office had known it both years

she applied and both years she was politely, firmly declined. *Bourgeois family background.* Her father had sold thread and notions in Pardubice for twenty-two years, and in 1950 they had taken the shop, and that was who she was now, on paper, for good.

She dipped the brush and began.

The lime was cold and smelled of something older than language, mineral and faintly sweet. She worked in long strokes and tried to think about the Makarenko she was meant to be proofreading Monday, and mostly thought about nothing, which was its own kind of rest.

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She heard him before she saw him — or heard what he was doing, which was coming up the stairs in a particular way, pausing on each step, a pause that was not breathlessness but attention. She was a few steps up the first flight by then, working the brush around the banister, and she stopped because he had stopped above her, on the stair she'd just left, and was looking down at it.

Twenty-five, perhaps twenty-six. A jacket a degree better than a work-brigade jacket, worn as though he'd forgotten that it was, a notebook in his left hand and a pencil behind one ear. He had the look of a man not quite where he'd expected to be, which she knew on sight, having worn it herself.

He said, "Don't lime the third step from the bottom."

Marie looked at the third step from the bottom. She had not, in fact, been about to lime it, but she looked at it as though caught. "Why not?"

"Because if I do my job this week, it won't be there anymore." He crouched and laid two fingers against the riser with a gravity that seemed, just then, slightly larger than the stair warranted. "It's moving. The substrate under the stringer's gone. It only looks worse once it's clean."

"Things often do," Marie said.

He looked up at her. Grey-green eyes; a smear of something on his chin — plaster, from the landing wall above — and on his face the expression of a man who has said a thing and then heard a thing come back, when he'd expected nothing to come back at all.

"Vávra," he said, and put out his hand. "Inženýr. Structural. They sent me about the staircase."

"I know what structural means." She balanced the brush across the lip of the bucket and shook his hand. Her own was already lime-pale. "Hrubá. Marie."

"You live here?"

"Third floor. Since—" She stopped. Not everything wanted saying. "Since before."

He nodded as if *since before* were a date he could place — perhaps he could, perhaps not, and it didn't matter yet. He made a note. She watched the pencil go: a run of marks that were plainly his own shorthand, not quite words, not quite drawings, something between the two.

"How bad is it," she said. "The staircase."

"Worse than it looks from below." He turned the notebook to a quick sketch — the stair seen from above, the spiral of it, numbers in the margin she couldn't read from where she stood. "Better than it looks from the top." He tipped the pencil upward. "The fourth floor has a cantilever someone patched with optimism around 1938."

"Optimism," Marie said. "We had a great deal of that."

A pause the length of something recognised.

"Yes," he said. "We did."

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The seventh stair was the one that went.

Marie had known this for years — she had the small automatic correction in her right foot that a person develops from living above a building's flaw — but she had never thought it interesting. It was the seventh stair. You went around it, or you took it on the left, or in the dark you forgot and it groaned beneath you like something affronted.

Jan Vávra found it at a quarter past ten.

She heard the sound first — that particular groan, lower and more resonant than the staircase's general grievances — and then, a beat after, a low word under his breath in a tone that was not distress but was certainly not peace. She was on the landing above, washing the wall, and she leaned over the rail.

"The seventh," she said.

He was looking at it. He put his weight on it again, carefully, and it answered again. He stepped off and wrote something down.

"You knew about this," he said. Not an accusation.

"Everyone who lives here knows the seventh."

"How long?"

"Since—" She thought. "At least 1958. Maybe before. Pan Bureš says it was like that when he came, and he came in '54."

“Nine years.” He wrote again. He didn’t look angry; he looked like a man learning that a problem is much older than anyone had let him believe. “And nobody reported it.”

“To whom?”

He glanced up. She held his eyes a moment, then went back to the wall, where a patch of old lime had gone grey and granular under the brush. She heard him let out a breath.

“Fair,” he said.

She kept on. Below her she could hear him climbing, testing each tread with the same patient care, the little sounds of notebook and pencil. Once he hissed at something — the cantilever, she supposed, the 1938 optimism — and once there came a longer silence from the top landing that she didn’t try to read.

He came down past her without stopping. Then he stopped.

“How do you step on it,” he said.

She looked at him.

“The seventh. You must take it a hundred times a year. Left? Right? Do you just—”

“Left side,” she said. “Toward the wall. It’s quiet there.”

He nodded, wrote it down, went on. She heard him go: one, two, three, four, five, six — the small adjustment on the left — seven, and silence, and then eight, and he was gone.

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At noon they broke and soudruh Kratochvíl made a short speech about the spirit of collective maintenance, which the courtyard received in the postures of people trying not to be seen not listening. Paní Horáčková poured ersatz coffee into

wax-paper cups. The Nováček boy had found himself a task — scraping loose plaster from the archway — and was at it with the abandon of someone released from thought.

Marie's mother came out of the building door with sandwiches in paper, which meant she had been at the window long enough to time the break. She gave Marie one and stood beside her in the slightly watchful posture she had taken up sometime around 1951 and never quite set down.

"Who is he," her mother said.

"An engineer. He's here about the staircase."

"Vávra." She said it the way she said certain names — a small careful weight on it, the sound of a thing already checked against a private ledger of who was safe to know and who was not, and filed. "The father sits on the district committee."

Marie looked at her sandwich. "He's here about the staircase, mama."

"I know what he's here for," her mother said. "I'm telling you who he is."

She ate. Above them the chestnut shifted in a light wind, buds tight and patient, keeping their own counsel.

Across the courtyard Jan Vávra stood at the noticeboard reading the schedule with the expression he'd given the seventh stair — professional, faintly unsatisfied. Coffee in one hand, notebook in the other, the page turned back to something new. As she watched, he spun the pencil once in his fingers and made a mark.

"He has the father's jaw," her mother said, and went in.

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The afternoon came up warmer. Someone had set a radio on the bench and it was playing something orchestral that nobody listened to and everybody seemed to need. Marie moved to the interior stair, the half that wanted the most washing, and worked her way down from the third-floor landing.

She was level with the second floor when she heard him below her again.

"Left of the seventh," he said, not looking up. He was crouched at the foot of the newel post, working a joint with a small tool from his pocket. "I tried it. You're right. From the left you can't feel a thing."

"You learn to compensate," Marie said.

"For the seventh stair."

"For all sorts of things."

He looked up. The light came off the courtyard window at the turn of the stair and caught him plainly — the smear on his chin he still hadn't found, the open interest in his face, the way he was listening to her without performing the listening.

"You're a typist," he said. "Someone told me. At a nakladatelství."

"Odeon. I proofread, mostly. And type."

"Did you study literature?"

The brush slowed.

"I applied," she said. "Twice."

He heard it. She watched him hear it — the slight shift, the small recalibration. He was his father's son enough to know how such things went, and young enough that the knowing still cost him something visible, a passing shadow.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It's a good job. Good books."

“I know.” He bent back to the joint. “That isn’t what I meant.”

She knew he knew. She went on washing the wall.

Below her the radio tipped from the orchestra to something warmer, a dance band, and through the stairwell window she could see the chestnut’s upper branches moving in the light, the buds nearly open, the whole tree held at the lip of a thing it was about to do.

She dipped the brush and drew it over a long crack in the plaster. In an hour it would dry white and you would not find where the crack had been, though the crack would be there still.

That, she supposed, was what maintenance was.

Below her Jan Vávra finished with the newel post, put the tool away, and climbed up past her on the left of the seventh stair — already, as if he’d always known it — and she did not watch him go. But she heard each step, and she knew the one he spared.

Conservation

The museum textile lab occupied the ground floor of what had once been a textile warehouse, which Eva supposed was a kind of continuity. The room was pleasant in the strictly functional sense: lights calibrated to the spectrum used for conservation photography, humidity held at forty-eight percent, four long workbenches of white laminate that she and her colleagues referred to, collectively, as "the table," as though there were only one. Today there was. Markéta was on maternity leave; Jirka was in Brno at a conference on medieval brocades, a subject he could make dull in any language. So Eva had the lab, the silence, and a decision she'd been carrying since Sunday.

She set her bag on the bench, hung her coat, and pulled on the thin cotton gloves she used for delicate work. Then she stood looking at the bag. The shoebox was inside it. She had not told anyone about the shoebox.

This was not, she told herself, strange. She had found old letters in her own flat; there was no one to report it to. The building was managed by a company in a glass tower in Pankrác that wanted only her rent, by direct debit, on the

fourth of each month, and was otherwise unreachable by email. If there was someone to notify, she didn't know who, and the not-knowing had licensed a week of private possession she was now choosing to extend.

She took the box out.

She hadn't opened it since Sunday, when she'd read the first letter under the kitchen lamp and felt the specific discomfort of standing somewhere she had not been invited. She set it on the laminate and lifted the lid with both hands.

The smell came first — dry, papery, faintly sweet, as if something once organic, a dried flower, a sachet of herbs, had desiccated into mere suggestion. She breathed it in and waited for more. Her nose was trained; it could tell wood-pulp from rag, aniline dyes from vegetable ones, stable foxing from the wet, mushroom note of live mold. This smelled stable. That, at least, was something.

She counted them again. Eight. The same eight she had counted on Sunday, but the counting had become a ritual, or the start of one. Seven envelopes and a loose sheet that had been lying on top — the one she'd read, the one that began without beginning and broke off mid-thought, in a hand that was beautiful the way handwriting used to be, when it was still taught as a discipline.

She photographed the box from above, then from each side, then each envelope unopened, front and back. They bore no addresses, only the letter *J* in the upper-right corner, in the same hand, with the hooked *J* the schools had taught before about 1960. She knew that because she'd spent Tuesday evening reading about old Czech handwriting on her laptop, in her socks at the kitchen table, eating crackers because she hadn't managed dinner.

She unfolded the first letter again. Good paper — not rag, but better than pulp, faintly cream, possibly part linen. She brought the loupe to it and angled the sheet toward the light: the fibres were long and even, a laid line surfacing when she turned it. Commercial stock, then, the grade an office supplier sold for typed correspondence in the fifties and sixties. The kind a typist might carry home. She wrote that down.

The ink was blue-black and had feathered very slightly into the surface, the way it does off a flexible nib. A fountain pen, not a ballpoint; ballpoints bead at the ends of strokes. She'd check each letter separately. *Fountain pen, blue-black. Compare against known 1960s Czech inks?* She underlined the question mark and let it stand for everything she didn't yet want to know.

Then there was the tram ticket.

She'd seen it on Sunday without taking it in — a small rectangle of pale yellow card tucked between two envelopes, printed in the flat municipal typography of the transit authority: a row of punch-holes along one edge, *Linka 9* above them, a serial number, and a date she had tried to read and couldn't, and had promised herself she'd read properly later.

Later was now.

She lifted it with tweezers onto clean paper beside the loupe. The date was printed, which should have made it simple, but the ink had faded unevenly and the last digits of the year were the trouble. The first two were plainly *19*, the third *6*. The fourth was a *2* or a *3*, or just possibly a *1*, though the curve argued against a *1*. She photographed it at three angles and pushed the exposure on the last frame until the figure resolved: *1963*. She sat back.

She had been not-quite-hoping for the forties. The forties would have been terrible and also, she admitted now, safely far away. You could be professionally sad about the forties and leave it there. 1963 was uncomfortable in a closer way. 1963 was inside the memory of living people. It was, for instance, inside the memory of the watchmaker in the courtyard, whose shopfront carried a sediment of repainting in four successive shades of institutional cream.

1963 — confirmed, tram ticket, Linka 9. She drew a box around it.

She worked another hour, opening each envelope in turn, lifting out the sheet with gloved hands, laying it flat, reading enough to confirm the hand, then refolding and replacing it. She did not read for sense. She was, she told herself, doing an initial survey, the way she would with a newly accessioned textile — orientation, not analysis. She was noting. She was not yet involved.

That part was a lie, and she knew it well enough not to bother arguing.

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She heard him before she saw him.

The staircase had been under reconstruction for ten days. She'd understood that in the abstract, seeing the notice taped to the brass mailbox panel the day she moved in, but she hadn't reckoned with what it meant in practice, which was that from half past seven each morning her flat was wrapped in the sounds of someone methodically taking apart and rebuilding the wooden stair around which her whole life was currently arranged. Hammering. The clean high cry of a pow-

er saw, and then, oddly, sometimes a handsaw — she could tell by the different rhythm of it. Now and then two low voices, though she mostly heard only one.

She had not met him. She'd left her flat each morning through the boarded passage they'd rigged along one wall, past the yellow tape across the landing, and noticed the tools laid out on the first floor with a tidiness that surprised her: chisels in graduated order, levels and squares stacked flush, a green thermos. Not what she'd expected, though she couldn't have said what she'd expected.

She found him on the half-landing between the second and third floors, where she'd taken to stopping each evening to photograph the carved newel post before it could be removed — a good one, a stylised tulip, late nineteenth or early twentieth century, salvageable, she kept hoping, though she had no say in it. She had her phone out, angling for the grain, when she felt herself being watched.

He sat on the step above with a length of board across his knees, a pencil behind one ear. Perhaps forty, perhaps a little past it. Dark hair going grey at the temples in a way that was either distinguished or simply what happened. Work clothes — dark trousers, a canvas shirt with the cuffs turned back — and the air of a man who had interrupted himself mid-thought and was now recalibrating.

"The newel post," Eva said, because it seemed important to establish this fast.

"I know."

"I'm photographing it."

"I can see that."

She lowered the phone. "Are you the carpenter?"

"*Truhlář.*" Cabinetmaker. He delivered the correction mildly, like a man used to the distinction going unnoticed. "Adam Beneš."

"Eva Kratochvílová. Third floor."

"The flat with the draft."

She looked at him. "You know about the draft?"

"The skirting along the north wall was never properly seated. You can see the gap from here when the light's right." He nodded at the wall, economical, a man who didn't waste gestures. "I'm doing the staircase, not the skirting. But I noticed. It's a cold flat."

It was a cold flat. She had been telling herself it was cosy in the Central European manner — that its coldness was historical, and therefore not her fault. Apparently it was visible from the stairs.

"The post," she said, retreating to firmer ground. "Is it staying?"

He looked at it — actually looked, the way she looked at things, with a weight of attention behind it. "I'd like it to. The client wants this staircase restored, not replaced. There's a difference." A pause. "You know there's a difference."

"I'm a conservator. Textiles. So, yes."

That seemed to satisfy him. He reached up and moved the pencil from behind his ear to the step at his side, which meant nothing in particular, and which she noticed anyway. "You're photographing it because—"

"Documentation. In case it doesn't survive." She heard how that landed — faintly funereal — and added, "Habit."

"Fair enough." He considered the post. "It'll survive. The joints are good, just surface wear. Someone never learned to oil wood. Common enough."

She thought of the letters in her bag at the museum. She thought of the careful, plausible half-truth she'd been rehearsing for exactly this conversation, and decided to try a version of it.

"Can I ask — do you know anything about the building's records? Historical ones. I'm interested in the original construction."

He looked at her with something she couldn't quite read. Not suspicion. More the look of a man who'd noticed a shift in the weather and was adjusting to it. "Why?"

"The staircase," she said, which was at least partly true. "The joinery. Whether the original plans survived anywhere."

"There's a city archive. For a building this age there's usually something. The landlord might hold the old cadastral records too, though the landlords round here aren't—" He paused, a small adjustment at the corner of his mouth that wasn't quite a smile. "Present."

"No," she agreed. The landlord was not present. The landlord sent direct-debit notifications.

"Try the archive," he said. "If you're serious."

"I am."

He held the look a beat longer than the sentence needed, which might have meant something and might have meant nothing, then picked up the board again and went back to whatever judgment she'd interrupted. She took the conversation for finished.

She was a step below him, about to go on down, when he said, "The seventh stair."

She stopped.

"From the bottom. It's the oldest thing here. You can read it in the wear — they've replaced the treads around it twice,

but the seventh was always sound enough to leave. Usually the middle ones fail first."

She looked down the flight. From here she couldn't see the seventh stair, only the seam where the new work ended and the old began.

"How can you tell?"

"The grain. The species. Everything else is beech, standard for the period. The seventh is oak." He said it the way you state a fact that's done being surprising. "Someone changed the rule for that one stair. I don't know why."

She said nothing. There was nothing to say that wasn't too much.

She went down.

⁂

That evening she sat at the kitchen table with the tram ticket, her laptop, and a glass of wine she'd poured and not drunk, mapping what she had: the letters, the date the ticket fixed, the hand, the missing sender, the missing recipient, the address that was her address, the flat that was her flat. M. and J. She had still read only the first letter in full. She was being careful.

She opened the city archive's holdings index for Žižkov residential buildings, 1905–1930. Dvořákova wasn't there; she tried a variant spelling, then the street's older name, then searched by quarter. The building surfaced in another subcollection: *stavební záznamy, bytové domy, žižkovský obvod, série C*. Building records, Series C. Holdings partial — correspondence, inspection reports, occupancy ledgers. She read down

the list. *Nájemní smlouvy 1920–1968*. Tenancy agreements, 1920 to 1968.

She stared at the line.

She could go to the archive. She could request the occupancy ledgers and learn exactly who had lived in the third-floor flat in 1963. She could match the initial to a name. She could find M. It was straightforward; it was what a person did when she was investigating rather than merely being careful.

She noted the opening hours. Tuesday to Friday, nine to five, by appointment.

She closed the laptop and sat in the cold kitchen with the wine and the shoebox — she had brought it home again, she couldn't say why, except that leaving it at the lab felt like leaving someone else's child at the office — and she thought about the seventh stair. Oak among the beech. Built around twice and somehow never replaced itself. Someone had decided, once, that this one thing was worth keeping, and hadn't left a note saying why, so that sixty years on a cabinetmaker sat on the step above it and named it like a survivor.

She picked up her phone and, before she'd quite decided to, photographed the ticket once more. Then she opened her messages. There was no Adam Beneš in her phone, because she didn't have his number — a fact she registered only after she'd already wanted to send him the picture.

She put the phone down.

Outside, the chestnut was bare, just its dark branching arms against the orange the city threw up into its own sky, and beyond it the window across the courtyard, fourth floor, lit from within and showing nothing, the way it always was.

She watched it a while. Then she covered the box and went to bed.

The Chestnut in Bloom

The chestnut was absurd in its generosity that year. Every branch had flung itself into bloom at once, the white candles standing so thick and vertical that Marie, crossing the courtyard on a Tuesday morning, stopped to look up, which she almost never did. Looking up in the vnitroblok meant catching paní Dušková's eye on the second-floor gallery, which led to questions about her mother's knee or, worse, the committee meeting on Friday. But the tree did not care about committees. It simply bloomed.

She was still looking up when she heard his step on the cobbles behind her.

"You're going to be late," Jan said.

"I'm already late." She did not look down. "It's worse on the Žižkov side. All the trees at once."

He came to stand beside her, close enough that she could smell the particular compound of his soap and the lime plaster that had taken up permanent residence in his jacket. He had been in the building three weeks now, the inspection stretching by degrees that Marie was too careful to count.

“My aunt used to say chestnut bloom smells like a pharmacy,” he said.

“Your aunt was right.” She lowered her eyes then, and found him already looking at her — a moment of the kind that would have to be reclassified afterward, in the dark, before sleep. “The seventh step,” she said.

“Dry rot. Maybe two, three more.” He had the grace to sound faintly guilty about it.

“Then you’ll be here through June.”

“I’ll be here through June.”

She shifted her bag to the other shoulder and walked toward the gate. He fell into step beside her in the way he had developed over those three weeks: not quite escorting her, never quite not.

⁂

They had coffee that afternoon near the nakladatelství where she typed foreign-language contracts, never corrected the ideological phrasing, and ate her lunch standing over the breakroom sink in fifteen minutes. The café was not romantic. It was small and brown, a rubber plant losing its argument with the light, and the coffee was the thin, faintly scorched kind that was all you could get without a Tuzex voucher and a contact at the hotel end of Václavák. Marie drank it as though it were espresso.

Jan told her about the house — the 1908 construction, the original Austrian specifications, the way an engineer could read the quarrel between architect and contractor in the variation of the brick coursing on the east wall.

“You can see that?” she said.

"Once you know what you're looking for."

"What else can you see?"

He considered it. He had a habit of considering things before he answered, which she had come, in three weeks, to find both maddening and entirely reliable. "Settlement in the east pier. Thirty millimetres or so. Old, pre-war, nothing moving now. And the staircase — at least three separate carpenters, you can tell by the profile of the nosing. The worst is the 1952 work. Green wood, put in by someone who wanted to be finished." He looked at his cup. "You can always tell when someone wanted to be finished."

"I type contracts," Marie said, "for books that will not be published the way they were written, and I do not get to correct them."

It was more than she usually said. He looked at her, steady.

"My father had a stationery shop. Pardubice. Pens, paper, notebooks. Books too, out the back — the ones you couldn't always get from the state shops. He wasn't political. He just liked books." She turned the cup a quarter-turn on its saucer. "It's a food cooperative now. I'm told it does good business."

Jan said nothing. She had already learned that his silences were not voids but structures, things being built behind the eyes.

"I shouldn't have said that," she said.

"You should be able to say anything you like."

"Yes," Marie said. "I know."

Outside, a tram ground round the corner in the key Prague trams used — lower than the trams in Pardubice, somehow more resigned — and they sat with the knowledge between them: the thing you shouldn't have to be able to say, and the

distance from that to the thing you could, and the coffee going cold in both cups.

⁂

They walked to the river in the early evening, which was not planned, or was planned by neither of them aloud, which is perhaps the same thing. The nábřeží was fine in June, in that oblique horizontal light that makes even concrete look provisional, as though it might be washed away. Students sat along the embankment wall. An old man was managing a terrier on an implausible length of twine.

Jan bought two ice creams from a kiosk that smelled of watered-down flavouring and handed her one without asking what she wanted. Lemon. She would not have chosen otherwise.

They sat above the water, and she watched him watch the river, which was how she watched him now — carefully, when he believed she was looking elsewhere.

"Tell me about the engineering," she said.

"What about it?"

"You talk about buildings the way I think you don't talk about other things. Where does it start."

He was quiet a moment — the structure, not the void. "My grandfather's house in Moravia. A crack in the cellar wall. He filled it with cement every spring, and every autumn it came back. I was nine, ten. And I kept thinking: something is making it crack. Something underneath. The crack isn't the problem." He paused. "I was probably an unbearable child."

"You were," she agreed.

He laughed — a real one, short, surprised into him — and she felt that go down somewhere settled and warm.

She told him about the typing. Not what she typed, but the act: how certain sentences landed on the keys with a kind of deadness in them, the official ones, written by committee, and how now and then in the foreign texts — the German, the French — a sentence came through where someone had plainly been trying to say something true. "I slow down on those," she said. "Not on purpose. My hands just slow, as if they're trying to memorize it."

"Have you ever—" He stopped.

"Written? No." She finished the ice cream. "Once. At school. The teacher said it showed promise and that I should develop it for the school paper. Then she saw my file and suggested instead that I become a very good typist." She said it without bitterness, having had years to file it under the simple shape of the world, which is not the same as bitterness. "And I am a very good typist."

"I believe it," Jan said.

Below them the Vltava went south with complete indifference, as it had been doing far longer than either the chestnut or the requirements of the state education system.

They walked back slowly along the embankment, and somewhere on it — she could never afterward have placed exactly where — they stopped saying *vy* and began saying *ty*. It happened in the middle of a sentence about whether the ice cream had been lemon at all or only lemon-adjacent, and neither of them remarked on it, and that was how it became real.

At the end of the nábřeží Jan said, "My family expects certain things of me. In the general direction of all this." He gestured at the city, the future, the whole region of respectable

expectation. “It’s nothing. I ignore it.” He said it with the confidence of a man who had not yet been made to understand that it was something.

Marie looked at the last of the light on the water. “Of course,” she said.

And that was all. They parted at the tram stop with nothing said that could later be used against either of them. She took the eleven. He raised a hand in the manner of a man who would have preferred to do something else with it and thought better of it.

She rode home through Žižkov and looked at nothing.

⁂

That night, at the kitchen table, while her mother slept in the next room with the particular sleep of a woman who had made her peace with things, Marie took out two sheets of paper and her best pen — not the typewriter, never the typewriter for this — and wrote.

She wrote quickly, the way she only wrote when she was writing to no one, which had been the condition of all her writing. She described the afternoon as though to someone who had not been there, which was accurate enough, since no one had been there in the way she required. She wrote carefully and then recklessly, and crossed out the reckless part, and wrote it again more carefully, and it was reckless still.

She folded the pages without reading them through, and put them in an envelope marked only with a single letter, in a hand more deliberate than her daily one, addressed to some-

one who had no address she would ever write down — not in any world she lived in. She set it at the back of the drawer.

She went to bed and lay a long while looking at the brown ring the lamp had burned into the plaster overhead — coal heat, years of it — and thought about cracks, and what is underneath them, and the difference between what is moving and what settled long ago and is simply there.

Outside, in the courtyard, the chestnut's white candles stood in the dark.

⁂

My dear —

I am going to describe today to you because I have no one else to describe it to, and because if I don't set it down it will dissolve into that private archive where the best afternoons go and are never recovered whole.

The tree is unreasonable. You may have noticed. Bloom like that is almost an act of aggression — it asks no one's permission, it simply insists, all of it at once, white and upright in the warm air. And I keep thinking: it doesn't know, does it, that a thing is permitted to be beautiful only for the exact span allotted to it, after which it is expected to become something useful. Shade, for instance.

We had terrible coffee. I record that the coffee was genuinely very bad and that I drank it as though it were the finest I had ever tasted, on account of the company — the company being the variety that turns bad coffee into the kind of afternoon that requires two sheets of paper and the best pen at midnight.

You laughed today. You did; you won't remember, you most likely laugh often. But I will keep that one laugh in the archive aforesaid for

a very long time. It was short, and it caught you off guard. I like best the laughs that surprise the person laughing.

You said, at the embankment, that your family expects certain things of you, in this or that direction. You said it the way one mentions the weather. You are twenty-six, you are very good at your work, you come from the correct kind of family in every direction — and I think, my dear, that you have never had to carry anything in your file like a stone in the pocket, and so you don't yet know the weight of one. What is weather for you is geology for someone else.

This is not a reproach. This is only me, here, at the table, with the pen, deciding whether to be afraid.

The river was beautiful. You know about the buildings and I know about the sentences, and between us we might make one whole way of reading a city. The ice cream was certainly not lemon. It was a lemon-adjacent ambition, and I respect the effort.

I won't describe the rest, because to describe it would make it a thing that has already happened, and just now it is still happening — in here, in the room I am taking great care not to look at directly.

Yours, or at least in whatever form of the word is left available to me —

M.

⁂

In the drawer, beneath the pen, beneath three months of ration-book receipts and a ticket stub from the Divadlo na Vinohradech she had kept for no reason she was willing to examine, the letter lay folded in its dark.

Below, the chestnut went on blooming.

Twelve more days, the books said — that was all the time a year gave you with the chestnut in full candle, and then it

became shade, and you were expected to be grateful for shade. She would be, she thought. She would be.

But not yet.

Pan Šťastný Remembers

The watchmaker's shop occupied the ground floor of the courtyard's eastern wing, wedged between a locked bicycle room and a door no one ever used. Its sign — HODINÁŘSTVÍ Š. — was painted in the old style, gold on black, the gold faded to the colour of weak tea. Eva had walked past it six times before she noticed it was open.

She noticed because of the smell. Standing in the courtyard on a grey November Tuesday, watching the chestnut give up its last leaves, she caught it through the gap in the door: machine oil, and something older underneath, cedar or sandalwood, the dry warmth of a room heated for decades by the same body. The door was ajar. She pushed it.

The shop was the size of a generous pantry. Glass-topped cases ran along two walls, holding watches in every state of life and death. At the workbench, under a magnifying lamp of the kind that made everything look like surgery, a man sat bent over something too small to see. He was eighty-something — she could not be more exact — and had the density some old craftsmen acquired, as though the years had

pressed them rather than hollowed them out. He did not look up.

"Moment," he said.

Eva waited in the doorway. The lamp threw its cone of light; everywhere else lay the comfortable dimness of a place that had never quite arrived in the present century. The clocks on the walls were not decorative. They ticked, out of step with one another, a soft uneven weather of seconds.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," she said, when the moment had stretched to something closer to three minutes.

"You're from the third floor." He set down what turned out to be a balance spring and looked at her. His eyes were pale, the washed-out blue of old denim, and entirely awake. "The conservator. Nováková mentioned you while she was complaining about the scaffolding."

"Kratochvílová," Eva said. "Eva."

"Šťastný." He offered the name without irony, which was its own irony — *šťastný* meant happy, fortunate, and it fitted him no better than it fitted anyone. "What do you want? Not a watch. You'd have knocked harder."

She had rehearsed something gentler, but the shop seemed to strip the padding off it. "I found letters in the flat. Behind the wall. Old ones — 1963, I think. Signed M. Addressed to J. I want to know who lived there."

Something crossed his face. Not surprise — something more deliberate than surprise. He reached past the balance spring, picked up a small screwdriver, turned it once between his fingers, set it down.

"Sit," he said, nodding at a stool by the second case.

She sat. The wood was smooth with eighty years of other people sitting.

“The Hrubá family,” he said. “Third floor, the whole time I was growing up here. Mother and daughter. Paní Hrubá — the mother — a small woman, very correct, always with her shopping bag. The daughter—” He paused, turned the screwdriver again. “The daughter was Marie.”

The name settled into the room like a key finding its lock.

Eva kept her face still. She had learned the discipline over years of bending close to damaged cloth — to attend without reacting, because reacting moved the air, and air, against old fibre, was damage. “And was there a young man? Around then?”

“There was a young man.” He said it carefully. “Around ’sixty-three. He came to inspect the staircase. You’d know the type — tidy, serious. An inžinýr.” He gave it the old pronunciation, three clean syllables of respect. “I was fifteen, and he struck me as enormously grown up. I only ever heard the first name. Jan. The surname I never had.”

“Jan,” Eva repeated.

“He came by bicycle at first, then he didn’t. I supposed he’d borrowed a colleague’s car.”

She noted the vagueness, the care folded into it, and said nothing. From long practice with fragile things she knew when to press and when to let the fibre rest.

“They used to walk out through the courtyard together,” Šťastný said. “Evenings. Very ordinary.” A small dry pause. “Except ordinary people don’t take quite that much trouble to look ordinary.” He glanced at her, and the look had a precision she recognised — here was someone else who also noticed, and had been noticing for a long time. “By the autumn she was on her own again.”

“Do you know what became of her? After the flat?”

"They left in 'sixty-eight." A pause that could have held a great deal or nothing. "I heard she married. A Mareš, a Marešek — I couldn't swear to it. I was away doing my military service." He lifted a watch from a velvet tray, examined its back without opening it, set it down. "She seemed a person who'd have been all right."

The phrase *all right* did a quantity of work in that sentence. Eva recognised that too.

⁂

She was back in the courtyard fifteen minutes later, her notebook open to a page that read only *Marie Hrubá / Jan (inž.) / autumn '63 / left '68 / Marešová?* — and then a line of dashes where the rest should have been — when she heard the unmistakable sound of someone doing something correctly with a chisel.

It came from the stairwell, where Adam Beneš had spent two days rebuilding the third-floor balustrade. Eva had spoken to him exactly twice. Once when he'd told her the original oak's load-bearing capacity was still sufficient, in a tone that implied she'd asked, which she hadn't; and once when she'd handed him the wrong mallet and he'd said only *the other one*, leaving her obscurely reproved. He was a man who took up space without comment — which she had provisionally filed as either very calm or very sealed, and had not yet had occasion to decide which.

She went in.

He was on his knees at the landing's edge, seating a new baluster into its housing, working with the economical patience of someone for whom a task's difficulty was simply the

task. She had noticed, these past weeks, that he never used more force than the wood asked for. It was a quality she associated with surgeons rather than carpenters, but there it was.

"I need to ask you something," she said.

He sat back on his heels. He had a face that read better from a little distance — at three metres it resolved into something expressive that closeness only complicated.

"Building records," she said. "Where would you look — for who lived in a flat in 1963?"

"City archive, or the borough registry," he said at once. "Žižkov's records are mostly catalogued. Were, last I looked." He wiped his hands on the cloth at his belt. "What are you actually after?"

She weighed how much to give him. She had told no one about the letters. They weren't a secret, exactly; they were a charge she'd assumed, a responsibility she hadn't asked for and was not eager to hand on. She looked at Adam Beneš, with sawdust on his forearm and unfeigned attention on his face.

"The woman who lived in my flat in 'sixty-three," she said. "And a man she was seeing. I think I have her first name now. Marie Hrubá."

"Šťastný." Not a question.

"You knew he'd know?"

"He's been here since before the neighbourhood had a word for being fashionable. I've been asking him things for two months."

A beat. "What kind of things?"

Adam nodded at the balustrade. "This oak came from a sawmill in Vysočany. Gone since 'seventy-seven. But the grain told me where it was milled, and Šťastný knew the place, be-

cause his father once had a watch repaired by the owner's wife." He offered it plainly, a fact about how things connect, with no shine on it. "He's a good source. If you know how to wait for the material."

"He held something back," Eva said. She'd been sure of it crossing the courtyard, and was surer now, hearing herself say it.

Adam took this without surprise. "I'd say he did. He's had eighty years' practice. He's very good at it."

She found herself, without quite choosing to, leaning against the landing wall — not comfortable, but less guarded. "Have you ever looked into the building itself? Who built it, what was changed—"

"I have a folder."

"Of course you do."

He looked at her sharply, and for a moment she thought she'd misjudged it — too much, too soon — and then saw he wasn't offended but near the edge of something close to amusement.

"It's very organised," he said.

"Obviously."

The amusement surfaced, briefly, as an actual smile — small, dry, gone almost before it arrived. In the low stairwell light it altered, somehow, the quality of the November afternoon. Eva looked at the balustrade.

"Can I see the folder?" she said.

"If you let me see the letters."

She had not mentioned letters. She met his eyes.

"I didn't say letters."

"Šťastný told me there was something hidden in the wall, when I came in this morning. Said a woman from the third

floor had been asking about the old tenants." A pause. "I assumed. If I'm wrong—"

"You're not wrong." She heard herself and was obscurely startled — by the ease of it, by the absence of the hoard-and-protect reflex she had been living inside for eight months. "A shoebox, behind the skirting board. Letters, all 'sixty-three. All one hand. None of them sent."

He was quiet a moment. He looked at the stairwell instead of at her — the curve of the well, the worn rail, the seventh step with its new wood not yet matched to the old. She watched him take it in the way he took in a structural problem, from the foundation up.

"The skirting on the east wall," he said.

"Yes."

"I wondered about that. There's a patched section, older work, not period-consistent. I'd put it down to a tenant fixing damp."

"A tenant fixing damp with a shoebox full of letters."

"People," he said, with a finality that held everything wrong and interesting about them.

⁂

He brought the folder down at five, after twenty minutes of tools being packed on the stairs above her. It was a proper folder, thick, the burnt-orange board you found at Czech stationers. The spine tab read DVOŘÁKOVA 14, in pencil, neat.

Eva made coffee in the moka pot she'd carried from the old flat — the one domestic object she'd kept without ambivalence — and spread the folder on the kitchen table beside her own notebook.

The house had gone up in 1907 and 1908, built by a man named Chaloupka for a merchant family who sold it in 1923. Adam had the planning records, the original staircase specification, a photocopied deed of sale. On a separate sheet, in his own hand, ran a chronology of structural changes: 1934, the courtyard wall; 1952, the communal laundry put in; 1971, the laundry taken out; 1989, the watchmaker's facade rebuilt.

Eva looked at 1952 and thought of the communal laundry, and of Marie Hrubá carrying sheets down four flights, and back up wet.

"This." She touched a line. "The staircase. *1963, inspection report commissioned.* By whom?"

"The housing authority. Standard — they ran load assessments on prewar staircases every decade or so, to justify keeping them or pulling them out." He studied the entry. "There's a reference number. I couldn't get hold of the report itself."

"But an inspection in 'sixty-three would have needed someone to come and do it."

He looked at her. "A structural engineer."

"Jan," she said.

Beyond the kitchen window the courtyard was going blue-grey with dusk. The chestnut stood bare now, its branches a more honest shape against the evening — the structure, not the ornament. Below, through the glass of the watchmaker's shop, the magnifying lamp still burned.

Eva refilled her cup. Adam drew a small pencil arrow beside the 1963 line — not for himself; she could see it was meant for her, *here is where they meet, this is where it begins* — and she had the odd sensation of being handed something with

care, the way you hand over a document you think a person might need, not yet certain you're right.

"The borough registry keeps tenant records," he said. "Indexed. If you have the surname—"

"Hrubá."

"I can look Monday. I'm going to the archive anyway, for a delivery receipt."

She did not say *you don't have to*. This was not a man who said things he didn't mean.

"I'll come," she said instead. "If that's—"

"Fine," he said. The word sat between them without weight, and it was the right word, and neither of them did anything with it, which was also right.

The lamp in the watchmaker's window went out.

In the courtyard the chestnut held its branches up against the last of the grey, the shape of something reaching — though it was only a tree, and only autumn, and there was nothing unusual about the hour at all.

The Tatra

The Tatra stood at the kerb the way certain men stand in doorways — not parked so much as positioned, taking up more of the world than its dimensions required. Black. Long-snouted. The chrome trim caught the September sun and threw it back without warmth. Marie had seen the car twice before, each time from the far pavement, and both times she had known, in the way you know things you would rather not, whose it was.

She was on her way to the nakladatelství. She always came this way on Tuesdays — down Chelčického, across by the park, left at the corner where the lindens overhung the iron fence. It added four minutes. She knew precisely why she added them, and had not examined the reason too closely until this particular Tuesday, when she turned the corner and saw the Tatra, and then saw Jan on the steps.

He hadn't noticed her. He was looking back toward the door — the building's street door, the good building, the one with a lift and clean plasterwork, the kind of building where district people had flats. His back was to her. He wore the dark jacket, the good one, and he stood with a stillness Marie

recognized at once: the stillness of a man being watched by someone he wishes to please.

The door opened. His father came down the steps.

Marie had never met Soudruh Vávra, but she knew him the way she knew the car — from a certainty that assembled itself without being invited. Tall. Grey at the temples. The look of a man accustomed to rooms going quiet when he entered them. He said something, and Jan turned his head in the quick, attentive way of a man taking instruction, and the father put a hand briefly on Jan's shoulder — not affection, something more architectural, a thing set in place — and nodded once.

Marie kept walking. To stop was worse.

She passed close enough to see the rear seat: a briefcase, a folded newspaper. The car had the particular smell official cars had, or perhaps she imagined it — petrol and upholstery and consequence. She looked straight ahead and turned at the next corner.

Her hands, she noted, were quite steady. Her body had always been competent at lying to her.

⁂

She ate her lunch on the stairs at the nakladatelství because the canteen was full and loud and she had no appetite for the loneliness of sitting in the middle of people. Bread, and the pigeons through the grimed window, and she thought — with the methodical care she usually kept for errors in a corrected manuscript — about what she had seen.

The Tatra was not new information. Jan had told her about it in the second week of July, with the deprecating affection

people use for things they are a little ashamed to love. *My father's car, a 603, the old man's terribly proud of it. I drove it once, and* — and there he had stopped, caught himself, gone rueful. She had laughed and he had laughed, and the car had meant nothing then but a detail of his life, a small proof she was learning the texture of him.

It meant something now.

A Tatra 603 was not a thing you bought. It was a thing you were granted, and the granting was a measure of your standing, and your standing was not private but a structure built and maintained by the Party's continuous assessment of your worth, your reliability, and the reliability of everyone fastened to you. This was not a complicated thought. It was simply how things were, and knowing how things were was the literacy that people like Marie — shopkeepers' daughters, bearers of files with the wrong entries — acquired early and kept sharp.

She thought of the posting he had mentioned in August, in the offhand way he mentioned things he was still deciding how to feel about. Some structural project; she hadn't entirely followed it. She had been watching the way his hands moved when he talked about engineering, as if they were building the thing even as he described it, and she had not asked the details. She had been too busy loving him to listen properly — which was, she thought, perhaps the most bourgeois thing she had ever done.

She finished the bread. The pigeons conducted their urgent, purposeless business on the sill.

What she had seen that morning was a man receiving his future.

⁂

She had never met Helena Stejskalová. She had seen her once — a photograph, passed across a desk at the nakladatelství by a colleague who collected such things the way some people collected the weather, a woman who knew which families were rising and made it her business to say so. *That's the Stejskalová girl. District. They say she's promised to a Vávra.* The photograph had been small and a little overexposed: a fair young woman with careful nails and a careful collar, the composed half-smile of someone who understood that being seen was part of the work. Marie had looked at it for exactly as long as was natural and then handed it back, and had said something about needing to retype a contents page.

She knew the surname now in a way the photograph had not given her. *Promised to a Vávra.* The colleague had said it the way one reports a thing already settled — the kind of arrangement drawn up and drafted long before either party was consulted, the pairing half-assumed by everyone around them. Two people who had known each other for years in the way certain people knew each other for years: the same events, the same orbit.

Helena was not, Marie made herself acknowledge, with a scrupulousness that cost her something, a bad person. A photograph could tell you nothing of the kind, and she would not pretend it had. The woman in it had simply looked like exactly the sort of woman who was supposed to exist in Jan's life — occupying a position that had been surveyed and pegged out long before Marie Hrubá and her file came stumbling into the courtyard of Dvořákova 14.

Marie stood and brushed the crumbs from her skirt. The afternoon shift began in eleven minutes. The head typist had marked three sections for reformatting, and the fluorescent tube above her desk made its faint sound, like a question asked in a language she almost spoke.

She knew the shape of what she was looking at. She had known it since July, somewhere below the part of her that had been busy being happy.

⁂

She wrote the letter that evening, at the kitchen table, while her mother slept. The flat was very quiet. Through the window she could see the fourth-floor window across the courtyard, the one she had begun to watch without meaning to, where on some evenings a light came on. It was dark tonight.

She wrote without stopping, the way she always wrote — as if the pen were a half-step ahead of her, finding the sentence before she knew she needed it.

⁂

My dear —

I have been trying for weeks to find a way to begin this, and what I keep finding instead is that I am not ready. I can't decide whether that is cowardice or honesty, so I have decided it doesn't matter. I'll write it and find out afterwards.

I saw your father's car today. The Tatra. You described it to me in July, and I didn't understand then what it meant that you were describing it to me — not what the car meant to you, but what it meant that you were telling a girl who has never sat in such a car and wouldn't know how. You were making a gift of the small embarrass-

ment of it, the liking-it-despite-yourself. I loved you a little more for that, and said nothing.

I have been thinking about it all day. The Tatra is not only a car, and your father is not only a father, and the posting you mentioned in August is not only a piece of work. I am telling you nothing you don't already know — you know it far better than I do; you live inside it. But I don't think you have understood it yet in connection with me.

Your file is clean. You come from the right family, worked under the right men, sat in the right rooms and said the right things in them. This is not nothing. It is a life's work, your father's and yours together, and it is in the nature of such work that it can come undone quite suddenly, by a single association that does not fit.

I know what my file says. I know what my father's shop is worth in the ledger they keep. I have known since I was seventeen and sat across a desk while a man with a rubber stamp explained that the university could not, at this time, consider me — twice, and both times in a voice of the most perfect reasonableness, as though he were telling me it might rain. I carry the file in my head the way you carry a drawing in yours. I know exactly where it is weak.

You are going to be given a future, and the future has a shape that was decided before you knew my name. I am not angry about this. I am telling you what I see, because I am afraid that you — who are good, and who believe in things with a faith I find both lovely and frightening — will think that love is sufficient engineering for a load of this kind.

I am afraid you will try to carry me, and that what gives way will not be me.

I am keeping this letter. I don't know what else to do with it. On Thursday you will come to the courtyard and knock, and I will open the door, and we will have tea, and I will watch your hands on the cup and think that I want to stop seeing you this instant and that I want to

see you for the rest of my life, and that these cannot both be true and somehow are.

All I am saying, my dear, is that the weight is real. I have known it longer than you have. I am trying to decide what is right to do with it.

— M.

⁂

She blotted the page and folded it. She did not read it back. She put it in the envelope she would not address and would not send, and held it a moment in both hands — its weight, which was nothing, seven or eight grams of paper and ink — and then set it on the table and looked at it.

The light in the fourth-floor window had come on while she was writing. She had not noticed until now.

She watched it without moving. After a while it went out, and the courtyard was dark, and she sat on alone with the letter, and with the shape of a decision she had not yet let herself make.

What the Records Say

The archive smelled of everything time does to paper: a faint sweetness under the dust, the smell old books take on once you've stopped thinking of them as books and started thinking of them as objects. Eva liked it. She'd spent enough years in the museum's conservation lab that the smell no longer meant decay to her. It meant the particular patience a fragile thing demands before it will tell you anything.

She had a laptop, a notepad, a thermos of coffee that had been better an hour ago, and a microfilm reader the archivist had shown her how to thread with the gentle condescension of a man who expected her to break it. She had not broken it. She'd been here since nine.

The building records for Žižkov were neither complete nor coherent, which was its own kind of information. Whole years had been removed, misfiled, or lost in the churn of nationalizations and re-nationalizations — the paperwork that had quietly made certain rooms and certain people disappear. But the outlines held. Tenancy registers. Utility accounts. The dry bones of who had lived where.

Third floor, front. Dvořákova 14.

She found three families first, a rotating cast of postwar resettlement, before she found them. The entry was short. *Hrubá, Miroslava (1921)* — the mother, then, the registered tenant — *a dcera Hrubá, Marie (1940)*. A daughter. Marie. Born 1940, which made her twenty-three in 1963. The frame was grainy but legible. Eva photographed the screen and sat a moment with the thermos between her hands, not drinking.

M.

Twenty-three years old, and writing letters that moved like water.

She wrote *Marie* in the notepad and underlined it, then felt foolish, since there was nothing else on the page for it to stand out from. The habit of emphasis. Her ex-husband used to call it *annotating things that need no annotation.* He'd said it with affection, in the early years. Later it had only been a description.

She photographed the next frame anyway, and the one after, and when she left at half past twelve the archivist nodded at her departing back with the air of a man revising an estimate upward.

⁂

She texted Adam from the tram.

Found the name. Third floor, 1963. Marie Hrubá, born 1940. The mother too.

The city scrolled past — the secondhand shop on Seifertova, two teenagers sharing one set of earbuds, a dog sitting at a stop with tremendous dignity, as though waiting for a specific number. Then her phone buzzed.

That's her. That's the one.

And after a pause:

Found something my end too, in the municipal records. Can I show you? Tonight maybe.

She typed *yes* before she could decide whether *yes* was wise.

⁂

He came into the wine bar twenty minutes after her, which gave her time to take the table by the window and order a glass of something the menu called a natural orange wine from Moravia and which tasted like a productive misunderstanding between apricot and vinegar. She was on her second sip when he arrived, still carrying a ghost of sawdust she could see under the bar lights, pale along his left forearm — and she understood she'd been watching the door for him.

That was exactly the sort of thing she was trying not to notice. She noted it.

He sat and ordered the same wine, which surprised her, and considered the glass when it came with an expression of calm uncertainty.

"The family before her," he said. "A couple called Novotný — the records have them vacating in April 1963. The Hrubás are in by the end of the month."

"So she'd just arrived when it started."

"Or what started is that she arrived."

Eva turned her glass. "If she came from outside Prague — and the cadre file in the second letter, the třídní původ, that's a family with something on it — the city would have been a kind of fresh start. Sort of."

"Where from?"

"Don't know yet. There's a line about a shop. *Otcův obchod* — not a factory, not an office. A shop. Shopkeepers got nationalized in the early fifties." She paused. "Pardubice, maybe. I'll look."

He was quiet a moment. He had a way of being quiet that wasn't uncomfortable, which she'd noticed and was choosing not to examine. "So she was keeping a tally," he said. "What her family had been."

"She wouldn't have been the one keeping it. That was somebody else's job — somebody else's permanent record of who you were allowed to be."

"And Jan?"

She'd given him the name last week, off the address in the letters. He'd taken it without fuss. "Harder. He isn't in the building records — he wasn't a tenant. He was visiting, or working. The staircase inspection." She smiled slightly. "He came to look at the stairs, and apparently the stairs weren't the most interesting thing he found."

He didn't smile back, quite, but something moved in his face. "I keep thinking about that staircase. Whoever built it did honest work. Under the rot — where the balustrade meets the newel, where someone used the wrong wood for the treads and it swelled — the original bones are still sound."

"Is that what an inspection in '63 would have found?"

"If it was an honest one." He turned his glass. "Which means he came back. Or wanted to."

Neither of them moved to fill the pause. Outside the window the street held its late-November pallor, the cobbles still dark from rain that had stopped an hour before. A woman

passed with a child on her shoulders, and the child wore a hat shaped like a fox, and Eva watched them go with a feeling she couldn't quite name.

"Marie Hrubá," she said. "Born 1940. She'd be eighty-three now."

"If she's alive."

"If she's alive."

She showed him the photograph from the archive, the sparse frame, the two names. He looked at it longer than she expected.

"That's all they get," he said. "Two names and a year."

"That's the record. The rest was private."

"Until it wasn't."

She put the phone away. The orange wine had improved on the third sip, or she'd surrendered to it. "My ex-husband used to say I was better with things than with people. He meant it kindly. At the time."

She didn't know why she'd said it. She looked at the window.

"My daughter says the same about me," Adam said. "Except she says it about wood. She thinks I love wood more than anything alive."

"Do you?"

"She's sixteen. She's often right about things that are also wrong." He paused. "She rang while I was parking, actually."

"Is she all right?"

"Fine. Checking." He said it plainly, and Eva heard the whole shape of what he didn't say — the checking-in that was also a kind of tracking, a daughter walking the perimeter of her one remaining parent. "She's at her grandmother's. Every other Wednesday."

"Do you mind it? The checking."

He thought about it properly. "I mind it for her. It would be better if she didn't need to." He looked up. "For myself, not at all."

Eva picked up her glass and set it down without drinking. "What was her name? Your wife."

A beat, and she wondered if she'd gone too far. But he said it simply. "Renata. Renata Benešová. She taught piano." He turned the stem of the glass between two fingers. "An aneurysm, in her sleep. Three years ago this March. Klára was thirteen."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I." No inflection, which was how she knew he meant it. "It wasn't dramatic. There one evening, gone by morning. That's the part nobody warns you about. I'd braced for grief to be loud. Mostly it was just quiet. A very large quiet."

She let that sit. The bar had maybe twelve tables and five were taken; the music stayed where music like that is meant to stay. By the door an older couple read separate menus in companionable silence.

"My divorce wasn't—" she began, and stopped, and tried again. "We were together eleven years. The marriage lasted seven of them. The other four were something we didn't call anything, because naming it would have meant admitting it was happening." She turned her glass. "Nobody was unkind. That was the strange part. It was entirely civil. We split the books alphabetically, and he cried at the removal van, and I didn't — and I've been wondering since whether that means something."

"What do you think it means?"

"That I'd already gone before I went. And I don't know what to do with that."

He looked at her steadily. He had grey eyes; she'd noticed before. They held the particular attention she associated with craftsmen rather than with people in general — as if he were studying a joint, trying to understand how it had been made to hold.

"The letters," he said. "When you read them. Not working on them. Just reading."

She was quiet. "Yes."

"They feel like someone talking."

"They feel like someone being honest." She heard the catch in her own voice and corrected it. "Which is — technically it's her talking to herself. She never sent them. He never read them. It was never a conversation."

"It is now."

She looked at him.

"You're reading them," he said. "Now it's a conversation."

Outside, a tram went by with its specific bell — the flattened one, lower than it should be, a bell that had been making that sound long enough that Žižkov had stopped hearing it. Eva had not stopped hearing it. She heard it every time.

Her phone lit on the table between them.

Tato kde jsi — Dad where are you — no punctuation, the message of someone who regards punctuation as a concession she isn't prepared to make.

Adam read it, typed something short, turned the phone face down.

"She knows where I am," he said. "She just wants to know where I am."

"She's managing the information."

"She's managing everything." Without bitterness. "She's been the most capable person in our house for three years, and she knows it, and she knows I know. Sixteen, and she runs the household off a rota she built in a spreadsheet." He paused. "She'd like Marie Hrubá."

That, Eva hadn't expected. "Why?"

"Because Marie was practical. Everything you've read me — she isn't weeping on the page. She's thinking. She sees the shape of what's coming and she thinks it through. Klára does that. Thinks clearly about an impossible thing, then goes and does the washing-up."

Eva thought of the warning letter, the line she'd read so often the paper felt warm under it. *Víš, co říkají o mých papírech. You know what they say about my papers.* Not a plea. A reckoning of the odds.

"I have to find out whether she's still alive," she said. "Marie. What happened to her."

"I know."

"And if she isn't—"

"Then there's a daughter, maybe. Someone."

"Yes."

They sat with it. By the door the older couple had set their menus aside and were talking, heads angled toward each other the way heads angle when two people have been talking quietly for decades and it has become a posture, involuntary as breath.

He stood to leave before she did, and they stood a moment on the wet cobbles in a cold that had deepened while they were inside. Down the block she could see the courtyard entrance, the dim arch through to Dvořákova 14, to the scaf-

folding and the chestnut and the half-finished staircase, waiting.

"I'll look in the death index," she said. "And the marriages. Hrubá might have changed her name."

"Tell me what you find."

"I will."

She thought he might say something more. He didn't. She thought she might. She didn't. They walked back through the arch together — the chestnut a bare dark tangle against the one working lamp — and parted at the foot of the stairs. His tools were in the ground-floor store; her flat was three flights up. She climbed alone.

On the third-floor landing she stopped at the window onto the courtyard. The lamp laid a small coin of light on the wet stones. She could see the courtyard as it must always have looked from here: the same rectangle of sky, the same tree, the same geometry of opposite gallery and dark doorways, the particular fourth-floor window across the well with nothing behind it now but dark.

The same view. She'd known that as a fact. She felt it now as something else — not history but geometry, a matter of stone and angle that neither era had moved. Marie Hrubá had stood about here and looked down at the same lamp-black courtyard and the same bare tree, and then had gone in and written letters she could never send.

Eva looked at the fourth-floor window a moment. Then she went inside.

The box was on the desk where she'd left it, each letter in its own archival sleeve, ordered now by her system — the sequence she'd worked out from context and ink and paper, an order the writer had never imposed. She didn't open any of

them. She sat in her coat, still cold, and laid her hand flat on the stack.

Below, in the courtyard, Adam's footsteps crossed the stones toward the gate. A woman could spend a life like Marie's, she thought, getting the words exactly right and never once saying them aloud.

She did not take her hand away.

The Refusal

The chestnut had begun to turn. Marie noticed it the way she noticed everything now — sideways, on the way to something else, as though looking at anything directly might cost her what she could not afford to spend.

She had come down to the courtyard to hang her mother's blouse, and Jan was there by the noticeboard, and for a moment neither of them said anything. The blouse dripped onto the stones between them. Behind his shoulder the Party's new directive about voluntary Saturday brigades hung crooked on the board — she had read it three times that morning and kept none of it — and Jan was looking at her in the way he had taught himself not to look at her in public, and she understood that something had moved.

"Walk with me," he said. Not a question.

The courtyard at six smelled of boiled cabbage and the first thread of wood smoke from somewhere high in the building. The cobbler's shutters were down. Paní Knotková's cat crossed the cobbles ahead of them without curiosity, and Marie kept pace with Jan through the arch and out to the

street because she did not know what else to do with her hands.

He told her while they walked. His voice had the carefulness she had heard him use over his drawings — measured, as though the words bore weight and he was not sure of the span.

His father had come to the office.

Soudruh Vávra was not a man who wasted a visit. He had sat in the chair across from his son's drafting table and spoken for perhaps a quarter of an hour, and the substance of it was this: Bratislava was confirmed. The board had approved the name. There remained the matter of a marriage — a suitable arrangement, one that would settle certain relationships of use to the family and to the project. Helena Stejskalová. Good family. Correct history. The alternative — and here the father had paused in the particular way that carried its own threat, the administrative kind, bloodless and complete — the alternative was a matter of the file. The girl from the third floor. He had said *girl* the way another man might say *complication*. The committee's records out of Pardubice. The shop. The classification.

Jan told her all of this as though she did not know it. As though the file were not the thing she had been carrying since she was thirteen.

They had come to the embankment without choosing to, and the Vltava lay below the colour of pewter, and behind them a tram rang its bell into the ordinary evening.

"It doesn't matter," Jan said. He said it quietly and meant it entirely, and that was the worst of it.

Marie looked at the river.

"He's wrong. I've already put a word through Krouský — not to Novotný's office directly, but there's room, there's always room for engineers who—"

"Jan."

He stopped. She had used the voice her mother used when there was no further point in talking. She had not known until this moment that she owned it.

"Jan. I've been thinking."

She turned to him. He was watching her with the whole of his attention, the attention he gave a problem he still believed could be solved, and she memorised the look — set it somewhere behind her breastbone for later, because later she would need it — and she said the thing she had rehearsed, which had the great advantage of being almost true, true enough that it could not quite be called a lie.

She said that she had been thinking about what she wanted. About the kind of life she was equal to. That she had finally been honest with herself in a way she had managed to avoid until now, and that she was not — she was not the woman for this. For him. That she was afraid of everything that would have to be given up, on both sides, and was not certain she could live the other life, the one of perpetual small negotiation with the system, always a degree under suspicion, always the wrong name in someone's drawer. That she had been spending time, lately, with Jiří from the printing floor — she gave the name steadily, the invented Jiří, the useful Jiří who would carry all of this away on his back — and that she thought, perhaps, she had been mistaken about what she truly wanted.

Jan said nothing for a long time.

Below them the river went on with its complete indifference.

"Is that true," he said at last. Not an accusation. A question.

"Yes," Marie said.

The word left her and she watched it do its work. She watched it reach him. She watched him take it in and believe it, because he was an honest man and she was a practised liar, and because the truth — that she loved him past the point where she could stay sensible about it, that she was sending him away precisely because of that, because she would not be the weight that dragged him down into the grey administrative nowhere her father had vanished into and where she had been living quietly ever since — the truth would only have made him argue. The truth would have set him building. He was gifted with structures; he would have found the way to make it hold.

So she gave him the lie instead, the clean one, the one engineered to bear the load.

"I see," Jan said.

He looked at the water. Then he looked at her, once, with something in his face she would spend years declining to examine, and he said that he wished her happiness, which was the formal thing, the thing a person said, and she said it back to him, and they walked home to Dvořákova 14 in the dark without speaking, and at the arch he turned and she went through, and that was the last time the two of them were ever alone.

⁂

She sat at the kitchen table for two hours after her mother had gone to sleep.

The flat held the particular quiet old buildings keep at night — the settling of timber, a pipe somewhere lodging a low complaint, the far-off knock of a tram on the street below. The lamp made a small warm country on the table. Beyond it the courtyard was black, and the chestnut was a shape rather than a tree.

She took out the typing paper. Her good paper, the kind she had been hoarding since last winter, heavy enough that the keys did not punch through.

She did not write his name. She wrote *J.* at the top, which was itself nearly nothing — an initial, the shape of a breath — and she wrote until the boiler clicked twice and went cold, and the lamp began to fail, and her hand ached in the joint where she always gripped the pen too hard.

⁂

J. —

The chestnut outside the window has started to turn. I noticed it this morning and have not been able to stop noticing it since — the way you cannot un-see a crack once it has shown itself in a wall. There is a colour in the leaves I have no word for. Something between gold and rust, between abundance and harm. You would know what to call it. You read the structure of things.

I told you something this evening that was not true. I want it set down somewhere that I knew this, even though I could not say it to your face — because to your face I would have lost my nerve, and you would have talked me out of it, and then you would have lost Bratislava and the posting and the ten years that brought you to it and

your father's name and perhaps a great deal more, and I would have watched all of it happen from this window, from the third floor, and never forgiven myself. You would have forgiven me. That is the unbearable part.

Your father came to you with a ledger, and I am on the wrong side of it. This is not a feeling I have about myself. It is an administrative fact. My father's shop was taken when I was thirteen. His classification is in my file and it will be in my file when I am forty and when I am sixty, and it will follow my daughter, if I have one, because these things are held to travel in the blood by the people who decide what travels in the blood — and I will not let it travel to you.

There is a man called Jiří. I invented him tonight on the embankment, and I am writing him down here so that at least one account of this evening holds the truth: there is no Jiří. There has been no one since you. There will not be, I think, for a long time.

I have been a typist for four years. I set down other people's words for eight hours a day, and I am good at it, and I am permitted to do it because it needs no clearance and no degree — the degree I would have been refused in any case. I have built a very careful life in a very small room. I know how this is done. I know how to want only what cannot be taken.

And then I wanted something. I want you to know that I wanted it without reservation. I want you to know — since you never will, since I am going to fold this away in a drawer — that last spring, when you explained the load along the staircase and were so grave about it, I thought: here he is. This particular, unlikely man who troubles himself over a staircase. I have been in considerable difficulty ever since.

I am going to send you into your life. I am going to be the reason you take the posting and marry Helena Stejskalová, who is, I am sure, a perfectly decent woman, with the right sort of father and the right

sort of file, who will stand on the correct side of every ledger there is. I am going to be the thing that frees you by pretending to be a wall.

I know this is the right thing. I also know I am going to be angry about it for a very long time.

Take care of the staircase. The east stringer wants re-mortising at the second landing — you know it does. Don't let them leave it.

M.

⁂

She folded the letter when it was done. Twice, carefully, the way she folded all of them, and she put it in the box with the others — the one from June, the one from July, the one from a Tuesday in August she could no longer date — and she slid the box under the bed, where the floor sloped and the cold came up in winter.

Her mother coughed once in the other room, and then was still.

Marie sat a while longer with her hands flat on the table. The lamp guttered a last time and she reached up and turned it out, and in the dark the window came back as the courtyard, and the courtyard narrowed to the chestnut, and the chestnut stood against the early-autumn sky already turned half to gold — burning quietly in the colour she still had no word for.

She would find one. She had time now. She had a great deal of time.

She did not look up at the fourth-floor window across the courtyard, where the light was still on.

She had decided she would not look at it for a long while.

Klára

The café had been a hardware shop until three years ago, and its former life was everywhere if you knew where to look. The original wooden shelving still lined one wall, holding amber bottles where it had once held nails and turpentine; the floor was laid in the uncompromising black-and-white hexagons of a place that had expected to be hosed down. Eva had found it two weeks after moving to Žižkov, when she was still eating standing up over the kitchen sink and didn't want to be somewhere that required her to pretend she had a life organised around meals. She came back on Saturdays now, when she needed to think without the flat listening.

She was on her second coffee — the good kind, not the weak grey ghost the machine at work produced — when Adam came through the door with his daughter.

She had a moment to watch the girl before they saw her. Klára was tall for sixteen, or it was the coat doing the work: an oversized army-surplus thing that was either a careful choice or a hand-me-down. Dark hair pulled back with deliberate untidiness. The face of someone who had decided in ad-

vance that wherever they were going would not be worth the trouble of arriving.

Then Adam found Eva across the room, and the girl's expression refined itself into something more exact.

"I didn't know you came here," Adam said, when they'd crossed the café's small, indecisive crowd. He said it without apology, as a fact requiring none. He was wearing sawdust. He was always wearing sawdust.

"Most Saturdays." Eva folded her hands around her cup. "You don't have to—"

"Klára, this is Eva. The conservator from the third floor."

"I know who she is," Klára said.

The espresso machine erupted at the bar, covering whatever might have followed.

"Sit down, Kláro." Adam said it quietly, with the worn patience of a man who had been saying it to this exact person, in this exact tone, for years.

Klára sat — though she made it clear she was choosing to sit rather than agreeing to be asked, a distinction that plainly mattered to her. She looked at Eva with frank inventory: the careful audit of someone cataloguing a threat.

Eva looked back. She had spent twenty years with cloth ruined by time and carelessness; she had learned not to flinch from the thing that was fraying.

"Dad says you found old letters," Klára said, eventually.

"In the skirting board. Yes."

"From when?"

"The earliest is 1963. The latest is probably '67, though I haven't dated them all. I need a better sample of the typewriter ribbon."

Something moved in Klára's face — not warmth, but attention. "How do you date a typewriter ribbon?"

"Carbon content, the oxidation pattern, the chemistry of the ink where it transferred." Eva turned the cup in her hands. "Every manufacturer mixed it a little differently. It's like a fingerprint a factory leaves behind."

Klára looked at her father. "You said she was a conservator."

"I am."

"I thought that meant you fixed curtains."

"Mostly I fix damage done by light, water, insects, and people. Sometimes to curtains. Sometimes to tapestries, or lace, or church vestments six hundred years old." She kept her voice level. "The principle doesn't change. You learn to read what the thing is telling you about what happened to it."

A pause. Adam had taken up the menu and was studying it with excessive concentration.

"And the letters," Klára said. "Who wrote them?"

Eva weighed how much to give her. The girl was watching for it — the thing Eva had learned to recognise across two decades of students and junior colleagues: the test of whether you would condescend. "A woman who lived in my flat in 1963. She wrote them to someone she loved, and never sent them. Her name starts with M. His starts with J."

"Why didn't she send them?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

Adam set the menu down. "Klára."

"What? It's a fair question."

"It is," Eva said. "The short answer is I don't know. The long one is that it was 1963, and certain choices cost things then that are hard to picture now. Not impossible. Hard."

Klára went quiet, studying the table. She had pulled her coat sleeves down over her wrists — a habit, Eva saw, the kind you acquire young and carry into adulthood without ever noticing.

"My grandmother wouldn't talk about that kind of thing," Klára said at last. "The old things. When I was little I thought it was because they were boring."

"When did you stop thinking that?"

The girl looked up. "When did you?"

Eva smiled before she could stop herself. "Fair."

⁂

They stayed longer than any of them had meant to. Klára drank a hot chocolate with the private ferocity of a teenager performing indifference to pleasure, and asked three more questions about dating the paper, and one about whether Eva could identify the typewriter from the imprint of the keys — a better question than Eva had braced for. Adam stayed mostly quiet, watching his daughter talk to a woman he had not, strictly, introduced her to, in a way that was perhaps working and perhaps wasn't, his face shut and careful in the manner of a man who has learned that hope is only another way of standing in the open.

When they left, Klára said goodbye without being told to.

⁂

The staircase was worse in December.

The cold came up through the boards and pooled in the open well of the stairwell like water finding the bottom of a bowl — not quite a draught, more a presence, a chill with in-

tention. Eva had taught herself to climb fast and not look up into the spiralling shaft, which gave her vertigo if she caught it at the wrong angle.

Adam had spent the week on the third-floor treads. This was slower than it sounded, because the treads were original — 1908 oak, seasoned to a density no modern timber would imitate — and he was matching them by hand. She had watched him twice, briefly, with the professional curiosity of one restorer studying another. He measured twice for every cut and made no movement he didn't need. She knew that economy. Her hands kept the same one.

On Tuesday she came home to find him on the landing between the third floor and the fourth, fitting a section of balustrade. The light at that hour came through the narrow courtyard window at the landing's end and fell across his work at a low, exact angle — the same angle, she thought, it would have struck in 1963. The same window. The same amber late-afternoon light, the colour of weak tea, or of old paper.

"I won't be in your way more than twenty minutes," he said, not looking up.

"You're not in my way."

She set her bag down. She should go up. She stayed.

He was easing a turned spindle into its housing, testing the fit with his thumbs, the motion small and repeated and precise. She found herself watching his hands, which she knew was a thing she should not find as interesting as she did.

"Klára asked about the letters this morning," he said.

"She texted me."

He looked up at that.

"She wants to know if I've found the typewriter's maker. I haven't, but there's someone at the museum who does office-equipment provenance. I'd have asked her anyway." Eva paused. "I didn't give Klára my number, for the record. She must have got it off the door list."

"She's resourceful." Not a smile, but moving toward one.

"She's very bright."

He fitted the spindle again, tapping it home with the heel of his palm. "She doesn't usually — take to people quickly."

"I noticed."

"That's not—" He stopped. Tried again. "She actually seems interested. That isn't—" He stopped a second time, and didn't go back for it. He looked at the spindle instead.

Eva looked at the window.

Outside, the chestnut was bare, its branches drawing their winter geometry against the grey. The courtyard below held a bicycle she didn't know and the watchmaker's light burning orange into the early dark. From further off came the wine bar starting to fill — a bass murmur, the small percussion of glass. Two worlds in one building, sixty years and the thickness of a wall between them.

"There's something I wanted to ask you," she said. "About the building. You've been through the structural records."

"Some of them." He sat back on his heels. "What do you need?"

"Who was registered in the flat between 1959 and 1968. The name in the registry is Hrubá — Hrubá, or Marešová. I don't know whether the building kept that, or whether it went to the district archive."

"The district archive. Žižkov." He tilted his head. "Most of the pre-'89 residency records are there, the ones that weren't

lost. I know somebody who dug through them for a renovation client. I could ask."

"You don't have to."

"I know I don't have to."

He stood. He was close, because the landing was small and the tools and timber took the rest of it. Close enough that she could have put a hand on the new run of balustrade and had it be almost natural, almost an accident. She was aware of the possibility with a sharpness that alarmed her.

She looked at the window. The chestnut. The particular grain of the December light.

"The letter I showed you," she said. "The fragment. I keep thinking about why she never sent any of them."

"And?"

"I think she did it to protect him. Whoever he was." She kept her eyes on the glass. "I think she decided for him — what he could survive, what he couldn't — and made the choice on his behalf. And then told herself that was love."

Adam was quiet. She could feel him looking at her. She didn't turn.

"Was it?" he said.

"I don't know yet." She picked up her bag. "I'll let you finish."

She went up.

⁂

She spent the evening with the letters.

She had a system now. Each one lived in its own archival sleeve, labelled with what she knew and what she didn't, ordered chronologically as far as a chronology could be argued

for. The box sat on the table under the good lamp she'd bought for close work. She had photographs of every page, and the start of a timeline on a sheet of tracing paper she kept apart from the rest — because it felt presumptuous to set the facts of a stranger's life down in permanent ink.

The fragment held her longest.

She had read it perhaps fifteen times. She had logged the letterforms, the corrections, the places where the pressure on the keys shifted — heavier at the ends of the lines, lighter through the middles, which meant the writer had begun distracted, or agitated, and had steadied by the turn of each sentence. The paper was flimsy, the grade issued in blocks at workplaces; Eva had seen it in museum acquisitions from the period, the economy stock that wasn't quite carbon paper and wasn't quite not.

My dear—

Always the same opening. The two words and the dash, like a door left ajar.

In the last week she had caught herself using the letters as punctuation. When a day turned into something she didn't want to feel, she could sit with M.'s words instead. M. had felt things sixty years ago that Eva did not, now, have to feel. M.'s caution was historical. Archivable. Kept at the safe distance of scholarship.

She was doing, she understood, exactly what she had done with cloth for twenty years: turning toward the thing that needed mending, and away from the thing that might have mended her.

She knew it.

She sat with the letter anyway.

The landing outside her door was still. The building breathed around her — the knock of a pipe somewhere in the walls, the wine bar's far percussion resolving into music. If she imagined it, she could hear the new oak treads settling, the timber learning the cold and the weight it would be asked to hold.

Below in the courtyard the chestnut was only a shadow now. No leaves. Just the architecture of what the tree was without its season — the spare honesty of its actual structure, which was, she thought, truer than the green extravagance of summer, and harder, and more alone.

She drew the sleeve closed and held it a moment, the way she had learned to hold damaged things: firmly enough that they knew they were held, lightly enough that she was not herself the damage.

Then she put it back in the box.

In the stairwell someone was going down — she knew the particular quiet Adam's steps made, that unthinking care for the structure that was, she suspected, entirely automatic in him, the way her own hands moved at the table without her telling them to. The sound travelled down through the building. Two flights, three. The ground-floor door. The courtyard. Then nothing.

She'd had the chance to say something. She had been three feet from him with the light going amber on the wall, and she had picked up her bag.

She turned off the lamp over the letters and sat in the dark of the flat, listening to the building hold everything it had been asked to hold, and did not let herself go to the window — where, four floors up and sixty years back, another woman

had stood looking out at the same bare tree, also saying nothing, also certain that silence was the kinder thing.

Across the Courtyard

She had known it would come. She had not known about the hat.

Helena wore a deep burgundy hat — felt, narrow-brimmed, the kind that asked a certain confidence of the wearer — and she was carrying it off admirably when Jan opened the courtyard gate for her on the first Thursday of October. Marie saw them from the kitchen window while her mother talked about the butcher on Seifertova. Paní Hrubá was explaining that he had been short again on the calf's liver, that it was always the way with Thursdays, that a person could plan nothing around a man who kept such inconsistent Thursday stock — and Marie said yes, that was true, and mm, and what a shame, while watching Jan's hand come to rest at the small of Helena's back, the gesture so unhurried it looked like the start of a habit. So, she thought. There it is.

"Marie, are you listening to me?"

"The calf's liver," Marie said. "Yes."

She turned from the window and checked the water in the pot. Her face was quite still. She had rehearsed for this — had been rehearsing since the evening on the stairs when she

told him she did not love him, which was the most carefully built lie she had ever assembled, each word fitted like a joint in good cabinetry. She had taken the lie apart that night and put it back together, testing for weak seams. She had found none. She had been certain of none.

The engagement, she heard from Věra in the typing pool the following Monday — Věra who heard everything, who wore her sympathy like a garment chosen too carefully for the occasion — was to be announced at a dinner for Jan's faculty at the end of the month. Helena was Stejskal's daughter, from the district committee, and wasn't it a good match, and didn't they look well together.

"They do look well together," Marie said, feeding a fresh sheet into the Consul. She had twelve pages of a translated Estonian novel to finish before three. The keys wanted a harder hand in the upper register.

"I always thought," Věra began.

"Věra," said Novák from behind his glass partition. "The Bratislava correspondence."

Marie typed. She typed with great attention to accuracy, which was her particular pride and the one thing no cadre review had managed to take from her.

⁂

October thinned. The chestnut dropped its leaves in a concentrated, serious way, one and then another and then in long shuddering handfuls when the wind came off the eastern hills. From her window Marie watched them bank against the old wooden doors at the courtyard's end — doors that had never been a garage, had never housed a car, were simply the

city's habit of building things that outlived their reasons. She thought about reasons. She thought about Jan's face in the moment after she had spoken, the thing that crossed it before he understood what to do with his own expression: something struck from a height, made to reorganize itself.

She had not meant to think about his face. She turned instead to the marking for her evening literacy course — Party-approved adult education, taught on Tuesdays, suggested to her by her supervisor as a demonstration of correct orientation, which she did because she liked the students: an old caretaker who muddled his vowels, a young woman from the mechanical works who held her pencil in a fist like a child. She enjoyed it, and let herself. There was no rule against enjoying a thing inside the permitted radius.

The leaves fell.

Across the courtyard, on the fourth floor of the opposite wing, a window held a rectangle of amber in the evenings. She did not know who lived there — had never known; it was simply a light in the building's life, the way certain sounds were: the draught on the landing, the lower note of the seventh stair in cold weather. The amber light was burning when she fell asleep. When she rose before six to wake the stove it was still dark, and she pictured the light going out at some point she slept through, some reasonable hour, some ordinary one.

She found she thought of the window the way she thought of the letters. Which was a thing she noticed and did not let herself examine.

⁂

In the third week of October, Soukup stopped beside her desk — not her superior, Soukup from the political section, who wore the same grey suit on a slow rotation and kept his pencils sharpened to a uniform length — and said, pleasantly, "How are we coming along, Hrubá? Managing the workload?"

"Very well, thank you, soudruhu."

He had a way of standing that suggested he was occupying space he had specifically decided to occupy. "Your file crossed my desk again. The quarterly review."

She kept her hands where they were.

"Your work is good. Consistent. That's noted." A pause, the length of a breath. "One only wonders, sometimes, about the ceiling. In terms of placement. Development." He looked at her with the air of a man being kind. "Given."

"I understand," Marie said.

He nodded, satisfied with the economy of it, and went to stand a while at the window over the courtyard, hands clasped behind him, regarding the street, before he returned to his section.

Given. The word sat in her chest like a stone slipped into a pocket — not heavy enough to feel always, too heavy to forget. Given her origins. Given her father's shop, the inventory carried off and tallied, the cadre file that walked behind her the way her shadow did, that would walk behind any daughter she might one day have: an inheritance, a debt her family owed the state for once having sold flour and thread to its neighbours.

She typed. She was very accurate.

⁂

The engagement dinner happened on a Saturday she spent with her mother, mending a winter coat and enduring the radio variety hour her mother liked. The flat was cold enough that they both kept their house shoes on. Paní Hrubá was in good spirits — a postcard had come from her sister in Brno, and tonight's comedian was one she found acceptable, which was not always the case. Marie sat on the footstool by the window with the coat across her knees, replacing the lining where it had gone through at the right shoulder, the needle passing in and out of the heavy dark cloth in a rhythm that asked nothing of her.

She thought about what Jan was doing at this moment. She stopped. She took up the needle again.

He would be at the table. Helena there in some dress suited to the evening — not the burgundy hat, something else. His faculty colleagues, and Helena's father from the committee, and Jan's father, whom she had never met: soudruh Vávra the elder, with his good suit and his Party pin and his reasonable face, the face of a man who had read the arithmetic of the decade better than most and arranged his family accordingly, without cruelty, which was somehow worse.

The comedian said something. Her mother laughed.

Marie made a small, even knot and bit the thread.

⁂

What she did was write.

This was not new. She had written since she was twelve, in journals she was careful — the care was instinct, it cost no thought — never to leave where her mother might find them. Not from any failure of trust; more that the journals held a

self that did not perform, and the performing self was the safe one. The letters to Jan were only this habit carried further: the voice she kept in the dark, speaking to someone who would not hear.

She wrote about the burgundy hat. She wrote about Soukup's word, given, the weight of it. She wrote about the window across the courtyard and the way its amber light kept her company without her leave. She wrote about the chestnut, bare now and structural against the grey, its branches the colour of old iron.

She did not write about Jan's face. She had decided not to, and the decision needed renewing every few days — a small act of upkeep, like banking the coals at night.

She dated each letter at the top, right-hand side, in her small careful hand. She addressed them the same way each time. She told him things she would never have told him across a table; it was easier now, in the counterfactual space of the unsendable, to be exact about what she felt. She had read enough translated literature, handled enough pages of other people's truths, to know that honesty wanted a particular structure of impossibility before it would come out clean. The witness cannot testify in the presence of the accused. The letter cannot be sent.

She folded each one. She kept them first inside a book of poetry — Nezval, inherited from her father, not approved exactly but not on any list either, holding the useful middle ground of the ambiguous — and when there were too many for that she found an old shoebox from a pair of her mother's winter boots, lined it with the brown paper bread came wrapped in, and put them there.

The box went onto the high shelf in the wardrobe, behind a folded blanket.

She did not think of it as hiding. She thought of it as keeping.

⁂

November came, and the cold November brings to Prague, which is particular to Prague — not the blunt cold of the east but something wetter, nearer, that lives in the stone of the buildings and rises through the floors. She wore her house shoes from the first of the month. She woke the stove before she dressed, standing in her nightgown and coat while it caught, and made the coffee from the allocation, thin but hot, and stood at the window with both hands round the cup.

Across the way, the amber rectangle on the fourth floor.

Below, in the cobbles: the bare chestnut, the cobbler's lamp, the frosted puddle by the laundry where the drain ran slow. The Party board with its new notices, laminated against the weather. The watchmaker's boy — Šťastný's son — going across with his satchel, late again, always late, at a pace that suggested he believed his lateness had not yet been officially confirmed.

She had once found Jan in that courtyard with chalk dust on his jacket and a drawing tube under his arm, looking up at the line of the staircase with the frown of a man doing arithmetic with his eyes. She had found him and had not yet known who he would become to her, and so had seen him plainly: a man with chalk dust on his jacket. She came back to this sometimes — the moment of not-yet-knowing, the clean particular fact of it — with a feeling that was not nostalgia

but nearer to a structural interest. How one state becomes another without announcing itself. How spring had been only a succession of ordinary afternoons that added up, afterward, to having been spring.

She finished the coffee.

She was going to be fine in the way the bare chestnut was fine — stripped back to what it actually was, which turned out to be sufficient: not the same as enough, but something a person could work with.

At the far end of the courtyard, beneath the fourth-floor window, a light was moving — the watchmaker's boy with a bicycle lamp now, weaving the puddles, late already for wherever came next. The lamp swung and threw brief strange shadows across the old stone, went through the gate, and was gone.

Above, the amber window kept its rectangle of warmth.

Marie watched it a moment that she decided, afterward, had not been as long as it seemed. Then she set her cup in the rack, dressed for work, and went down to catch the tram — past the seventh stair, which sounded its low late note under her shoe, the way it would for whoever came after.

The Wine Bar

The wine bar had appeared in September, where the old hardware shop used to be, and the courtyard held it at arm's length. Pan Šťastný had watched the renovators strip the signage and said nothing, which from him was an opinion. New tables, raw linen, a handwritten menu on a blackboard—*vína z přirozeného zemědělství*—and a sound system that played something low and French on Thursday evenings. Eva had never been inside. She'd stopped at the entrance twice in two months and found, both times, a reason to keep walking.

Adam knocked at quarter past seven. She'd heard him on the seventh stair, the one she'd learned to time the day she moved in: a particular note, lower than the others, that arrived a half-second late, like an afterthought the building was still having. She'd mentioned it to him once—she couldn't remember how it had come up—and she was aware now that she'd taken to listening for it.

She opened the door before he knocked.

"It makes a sound," he said, by way of greeting.

"The seventh stair."

"Fifth," he said.

She looked at him. “I count from the landing.”

He considered this without judgment, which was a habit of his that kept wrong-footing her. “Then we’re both right.” He’d changed into a dark shirt and hadn’t shaved, which was either careless or deliberate, and she decided it was easier not to know. He held a small jar of something—honey or preserves, she couldn’t tell. “My neighbor,” he said. “She gives them to everyone and takes offense if you don’t take them.”

“What is it?”

“I forgot to look.”

She set the jar on the counter without examining it and reached for her coat.

⁂

The wine bar was smaller inside than she’d built it in her head. An old space, the bones of it older than the renovation: a plaster ceiling with a water stain the owners had left, either on principle or because they’d stared at it long enough that it had become décor. Six tables. A bearded man behind the bar who seemed to know Adam slightly and wasn’t making a show of it.

They sat by the window. Through it, the courtyard—the chestnut stripped and still, and across the way the gallery, the third-floor flat dark. The tree was a different creature at night, its branches a grey algebra against the sky. It hadn’t occurred to Eva to wonder what her own building would look like from in here, looked at rather than lived in. She found she didn’t mind. It kept its own counsel, the same from the outside as from within: solid, legible, unhurried.

The wine was natural and tasted of something she couldn't name.

Adam read the label and reported. "Volcanic soil. Slovak."

"Does that explain the taste?"

"It explains something," he said.

They were, she noticed, extremely good at discussing things that were not the conversation they were having. She had been practicing this evasion for forty-one years; he had clearly done a different kind of practice and arrived in the same place. They talked about the staircase—the damaged newel post, whether the new oak should be matched to the old or allowed to differ—and about the watchmaker next door, who had told Adam that morning about the families that used to fill every flat, cataloguing them with the precision of a man who had been waiting decades to be asked.

"He said the third floor was a woman and her mother," Adam said. "In the sixties."

"Hrubá," Eva said. "Marie Hrubá."

He looked at her.

"I've been—" She stopped. *Research*, she'd have told her colleagues, who understood research as a form of care. "She wrote the letters. The ones from the wall. I'm fairly sure."

Adam set down his glass. He didn't lean in, which is what people did when they wanted to look interested. He was already interested; leaning would have been theatre. "Sure how?"

"The hand. A few phrases. She names the address once—I cross-checked the building registry for nineteen sixty-five." A pause. "I do this for a living."

"You date fabrics."

“And the people who made them.” She heard how it landed. “That’s overstating it.”

“Is it?” He turned his glass a quarter-turn. “You said, outside the archive—”

“I didn’t.”

“—something about what a piece of cloth carries.”

She had said it. In the corridor outside the reading room two weeks before, while he waited and she came out with photographs of the building from 1963 and dropped some half-formed remark she’d assumed was too unfinished to land. It had landed. She was going to have to be more careful, or less; she hadn’t decided which.

“Cloth holds what people did in it,” she said, slower. “Which threads they pulled through, how many times. Whether they were afraid or in a hurry or both. You can read haste—the stitches get longer, the tension goes off. It’s the first thing to go.” She looked at her wine. “The letters are like that.”

“Afraid,” he said.

“Always.” She meant the cloth. She let him think she meant Marie, and was a little ashamed of how easily it came.

⁂

It was Adam who ordered the second carafe, and Eva who made no move to stop him, which was its own kind of communication. At the table by the wall a young couple bent over a phone, showing each other things and laughing. The bearded man changed the record to something that wasn’t French and was quieter.

“Her name was Renata,” Adam said.

She hadn't asked. She had decided, at some point she couldn't locate, that she wouldn't.

"Brain tumour. We had fourteen months' notice." He stopped, then started again in the same key, the way you go on along a familiar road after a place where you always have to slow down. "Klára was twelve. So the last year of Renata's life was Klára's first year of not being a child. I haven't found a way to say that so it sounds fair, because it wasn't."

"No," Eva said.

"The fourteen months had good parts in them. I know how that sounds." He glanced at her, checking, and decided she could take it. "It does focus things. You stop caring about everything that was never worth caring about. But you're so busy being the one who holds it all that you don't grieve until afterward. And then you grieve very badly, for a long time, with a thirteen-year-old in the house who needs someone to keep holding it all."

"How long ago?"

"Three years in January." He said it without the weight people usually loaded onto such dates, the way you'd say a number that no longer needs amplifying. "Klára's fine. She isn't, but she's—she'll be fine. She's more perceptive than I was at her age."

"She seems—" Eva chose the word. "Like someone who has decided to understand things."

He looked at her. "Yes," he said. "That's exactly what she's done." He seemed not surprised so much as relieved to have it seen. "I've been very careful for three years. Not building anything. Just—" The gesture he made was economical and told her the rest. "Maintaining. Keeping things functional. Not wanting anything."

"It's a reasonable strategy," Eva said.

"It's extremely reasonable." He said it without irony, which made it worse. "And you?"

She had known it was coming and had prepared nothing, which was unlike her. The conservator always arrived with a plan for the fragile thing.

"Tomáš," she said. "My ex-husband. Kind. Reasonable. We had eight years of a marriage that was very orderly and not unkind and simply not enough." She heard the bloodlessness of it and decided against dressing it up. "We never fought. There was nothing to point at. One day I understood we'd been managing the thing instead of living it, and I thought—" She stopped.

"What."

"That if I stayed, this was what there was. And the thought didn't frighten me. It should have frightened me."

Adam said nothing.

"So I left. Or we left—it was mutual, in the end, which is its own kind of grief. With nothing to blame, you blame the assumption underneath it. That love which runs so quietly and so politely to its own edges can't have been much to begin with." She heard that she was further into the truth than she'd planned to go, and set it down rather than reaching after it. "He's seeing someone already. Apparently she's very warm. She'll be good for him."

"You're not bitter."

"I'm something," she said. "I haven't found the word."

He nodded. The French record came back, or its cousin. Beyond the glass, the chestnut held its ground.

⁂

They stayed until half past ten, which was later than either had said and not as late as the evening wanted.

In the courtyard the cold had set in properly—the kind that rose off the cobbles rather than fell from the air—and they crossed it quickly, breath visible, with an attention between them that had more in it than cold. The chestnut was enormous in the dark, its shadow thrown further than seemed reasonable. The brass mailboxes caught the light from the one working bulb in the entry, and Eva thought of the letters, which she had meant not to think of tonight and had thought of more or less continuously.

The entry smelled the way it always did: lime plaster and, under it, the older mineral breath of whatever the building was made of beneath the plaster, a hundred years of dust that had never quite settled. The carpet runner on the first flight was new—Adam had replaced it a fortnight ago, a small thing, not his job, but he'd seen it unravelling and done it—and it showed, a shade lighter than the dark around it.

He stopped at the foot of the stairs. She stopped a step above, which put them at an unaccustomed parity of height.

"Thank you for dinner," he said.

"We split it."

"Then thank you for the half I didn't pay for."

It was the kind of joke she should have made, and she was grateful he'd made it on her behalf. She looked at him in the light of the entry, a working light, not a flattering one, that showed everything plainly and asked nothing.

She thought: stay exactly here and something resolves on its own. Or name it. Or let him. It was very quiet—the courtyard quiet, even the tram on the street beyond gone distant. She thought of a woman at a third-floor window, watching

the courtyard for a man she had decided not to want. She thought of the shoebox upstairs on her desk, the letters laid out in the order of what she could bear.

You could say it.

And then the other thought came, quick and well-rehearsed, the reflex of someone who has practiced safety until it passes for wisdom: that she didn't yet know the shape of what she'd be saying. That it would be better to be certain. That the letters were still telling her things she hadn't finished hearing, and to speak before she was sure was to risk—

What, exactly.

She didn't answer herself. That, she would understand later, was the answer.

"I've been reading the third letter again," she said. "There's a line about the afternoon light. It's this window, I think—third floor, east. I've been trying to map what she could have seen from where she was standing."

He looked at her a moment, and something shifted in his face. Not withdrawal, quite. A settling. A small door she had failed to open carefully enough, easing shut.

"Show me sometime," he said.

"Yes," she said.

He went up. She listened to his boots find the step—the fifth from the bottom, the seventh from her landing, the low late note she'd learned in October—and then the turn of the stair took the sound, and there was nothing.

She stayed at the foot of the staircase. The mailboxes ran along the wall in their row, seven of them, tarnished in the old way, each with a name on a worn paper card behind a brass slot. Hers still carried the last tenant's name. She'd been meaning to change it for three months.

She stood until her eyes found the dark, and then she climbed the stairs alone, to read again, by lamplight, the words of a woman who had known exactly what she wanted to say and had addressed them to no one at all.

After

The fourth Monday of November, and the light was gone by three. Marie had learned not to look at the window. It was a small discipline, like not running her tongue over a sore tooth, and like that one it mostly failed.

She typed. The report concerned industrial output quotas in the Ostrava region, seventy-four pages of it, and she was on page forty-one. Years of keys had worn a shallow depression into the side of her right index finger, a callus she'd carried since she was nineteen. She touched it sometimes the way other women touched a ring — absently, for reassurance, to confirm a thing was still there.

"Hrubá." Kolář had appeared beside her desk. He had the posture of a man braced for a blow that never came and never stopped coming: shoulders drawn in, chin forward. She had known him two years and could not imagine him otherwise. "The binding on the Šenk transcript. It's come apart. You'll redo it."

"Yes, soudruhu Kolář."

"Copies before noon."

"Yes, soudruhu Kolář."

He lingered, wanting something she had no intention of supplying — a complaint, perhaps, that he could be kind about. She gave him the smile she had perfected since spring: polite, complete, shut. He went away. *Steel production in the fourth quarter exceeded projected targets by approximately twelve percent. The collective efforts of workers' brigades at the Vítkovice plant* —

Twelve percent. She struck the figure cleanly and did not think about January.

⁂

The Tuzex window on Opletalova held the things the state would sell only for money that wasn't its own: a Swedish thermos, a tin of Dutch cocoa, a flat box of French cologne the pale green of a clinic wall. A queue had formed in front of it, the way small queues formed everywhere, people stamping the cold out of their feet and declining to look at one another. Marie had no foreign currency and no errand here. She was waiting for the bread shop three doors down, but its line bent into the Tuzex line's territory, and so she stood and read the labels and thought about nothing she could name.

She saw him from twenty metres off.

He came from the direction of the tram stop, collar up, head down at the slight angle he held when he was working something through in his mind. A portfolio case under his arm, the black kind, drawings. She knew his walk before she knew his face, and the knowing arrived in her body without asking permission, the way heat does. Beside him, a woman. Smaller than Marie had let herself picture, and not beautiful in the obvious way — a pleasant, square, capable face, a dark

coat, a fur collar that had the look of a mother's choosing. Helena.

Marie turned to the glass and studied the thermos.

The distance closed. She could hear his shoes on the pavement now, which was impossible, which the body insisted on regardless. She read the tin. *PRIMA KWALITEIT.* She read it again. She read it as though there would be a test.

They passed. She kept her eyes on the cocoa. She did not know whether he had seen her. She thought perhaps not. She thought perhaps yes, and understood that yes was the worse of the two and that she would never learn which it had been, and that not learning was a thing she would now carry indefinitely, like the callus.

When the bread queue moved, she moved with it, bought half a loaf of rye, and rode the tram home.

Her mother had made soup; the flat smelled of onion and bay and, beneath them, the faint mineral damp that arrived every November when the courtyard wall began to weep. They ate. Her mother reported on the upstairs radio, which played past eleven and came through the ceiling as a wash of sound with the music drained out of it. Marie said *yes* and *how dreadful* and *yes* in the right places and finished her bowl.

Afterwards she washed up and dried the bowls and set them in the cupboard with the chipped rim turned to the wall, where it had always gone, where her mother could not see it.

In her room she left the overhead dark and worked by the lamp. She took out a sheet of paper and held the pen above it for a long while, the way you hold your breath at the top of a stair you mean to descend in the dark.

Then she began.

⁂

My dear —

I saw you today. Both of you.

I have been rehearsing this since September, the way one rehearses a scene that is certain to come. I believed the rehearsing would be useful. It was not. Nothing about you submits to rehearsal; I learned that in May, on the stairs, and I have not managed to unlearn it.

She seems kind. I cannot tell you how I know — the way she carried her bag, perhaps, or the set of her head as she listened to you. Something specific. You will decide she is kind, and you will be right, and that is not nothing; I find I want it for you. Even as I write the wanting I can feel exactly what it costs, to the heller.

They say Bratislava in the new year. Leipzig possibly after. An international posting — soudružka Nováková told someone, who told Jitka, who told me without the faintest idea she was telling me anything. I received it with the face of a person who has never once been curious about a Jan Vávra. I have grown very accomplished at that face. I could teach it.

I want you to know — though of course you cannot, since this will not reach you, and perhaps that is the single condition under which I am able to say it — that there is no blame in me. Not for going. Not for Helena, who is not a betrayal, because nothing bound you to me. The promises were not held secretly to my chest; you made them to my face, and I refused them, and the refusal was mine, and the reasons are mine, and they will stay here on this paper where they can injure no one but me.

The hard part is not seeing you. The hard part is the symmetry — that you look as though you are managing. You carry that case as if the future were a reasonable arrangement one walks into. I am not angry. I am only, still, astonished by how thoroughly people manage. I include

myself. I type reports about steel; I stand in queues; I eat my mother's soup. The neighbour's radio plays too loud, and I have started to be grateful for it — for the small grievance, the ordinary complaint — because while I am noting the hour (a quarter to eleven, far too late) I am not doing this.

Bratislava is a long way. I think it means I will not see you again. I think the city will go back to being only the city, which it nearly already is.

Nearly.

The chestnut has let everything go. You should have seen it in October — for a week the leaves came down in slow turning spirals, unhurried, like something being decided very carefully. I watched every morning and told myself I would not keep it. I kept it anyway. I keep everything, it seems. A failing. I am working on it.

With all the love I know how to seal away —

M.

⁂

She set down the pen.

She folded the page in three, crease pressed flat with the side of her thumb, the way she had folded all the others. She did not seal it. Sealing was a rite of arrival, and these arrived nowhere. She laid it among the rest in the shoebox beneath the winter coat and weighted the lid with the Seifert she'd carried since school.

Then she went to bed.

⁂

The posting was confirmed in December — Jitka again, by way of the housing secretary, who was the source of every re-

liable thing in the building. The *nakladatelství* held its small Christmas gathering: paper cups of svařák, a vánočka nobody touched until all at once everybody did. Marie stood by the window and watched the street: a tram, two boys dragging a sledge, the windows of the building opposite, each a small square of orange. Kolář raised a toast to the achievements of the collective and the bright prospects of the coming year. Everyone drank. The svařák was too sweet.

Jitka found her by the coats. "You've got thin," she said. This was the upper limit of Jitka's tenderness; it meant *I see something is wrong and I love you too well to ask.*

"December," Marie said.

"Mm." Jitka topped up her cup. "Going home? Pardubice?"

"Saturday."

"Good." A beat. "You know, Radek has a cousin. Decent man, actually. Agronomist. Not thrilling, but —"

"Jitka."

"I know. I know." But she went on smiling, and Marie discovered she didn't mind it — a friend papering over a wound she had the grace not to name. Marie let herself be handed a slice of vánočka.

It was good, in fact. Raisins and almonds and something her mother would have called shameless.

⁂

Her father's shop had stood on the main square in Pardubice — bolts of cloth, sewing notions, a glass case of buttons she had been permitted, very small, to sort by colour. The nationalisation came the year she turned ten. Her father went quiet

for some weeks and then went back to work, behind the same counter, selling the same goods at the state's prices, under a different name above the door. She had not understood it then. She was not certain she understood it now: what it asked of a man, to keep standing in his own room while someone else decided what the things in it were worth.

She understood it a little better lately.

On Christmas Eve her mother made roast duck. Her aunt came from Hradec with a jar of home slivovice and views on the direction of the country, delivered low, with glances at the window as if it might carry the words back to whoever collected such things. Her uncle disagreed mildly. The slivovice was very fine.

On Christmas morning, in her childhood room — the wallpaper of pale roses she had been studying since 1950, faded now to the colour of dry skin — Marie thought about the smaller life.

She had been circling it for months, the careful way one circles a place on the floor where something has broken. A smaller life. Not lesser; she would not have lesser. But smaller: contained, exact, true. Women she respected had smaller lives. Her mother, who had learned to cook on money that should not have fed them and made the most astonishing soup. The librarian on Seifertova, who knew each regular by name and remembered what they'd borrowed and guided them to the next book without their ever feeling guided.

A smaller life could hold real things. Work done properly. Windows, and evenings, and the precise pleasure of a queue that moves. It could hold a person who did not need rescuing and would never have to be let go.

It could not hold Jan Vávra. But Jan Vávra was going to Bratislava, and after that Leipzig, and the city would go back to being only the city.

She thought she might let someone introduce her to the agronomist.

She thought she might not.

She thought: *it is too soon*. She thought: *it will be too soon for a long time, and then one day it will simply be late*.

She went down and helped her mother with the Christmas dishes — the good ones, the ones that had come out of the shop in 1950 and were therefore state property no one had ever arrived to collect. She dried each piece and shelved it behind the glass of the cabinet, and when she had finished she stood at the kitchen window looking out at the square, at the sign over a door that had been her father's and said something else now, and considered how much it is possible for an ordinary life to hold without anyone outside it ever knowing.

⁂

She was back in Prague at the new year, on the late tram from the main station, her bag wedged between her feet, the glass black beside her. The city unspooled: Žižkov's hills, the hunched familiar streets, the cobbled hush of the vnitroblok as she turned in at the gate. The gutter on the east wall was still dripping. It had dripped since October — one patient drop onto the stone lip of the drain, a sound like a fingernail against glass, marking a time that belonged to nothing.

The chestnut was bare. Stripped, it looked less like a tree than like the idea of one. In winter you could see through it to things the leaves kept private all summer — the fourth-

floor window across the courtyard, a light burning past midnight, somebody up there who could not sleep either.

She let herself in. She left the lamp dark. She sat at the desk in her coat and held the pen and did not lift the lid of the shoebox.

There was nothing new to write. She had written it already — in the first letter and this last and all the ones between, the same sentence rearranged a hundred ways: *I loved you, I let you go, I was right, the rightness closes nothing.* You could only say a true thing so many times before the saying began to wear it thin, and she would not let it wear thin.

She put the pen back in its place.

She sat in the dark, in her coat, and listened to the building hold itself together. The seventh stair gave its low late note as the cold worked the wood. Above her, someone turned over, and the springs took the news. The gutter let go of another drop.

The light in the fourth-floor window went out, and the chestnut was only the chestnut then — bare, unhurried, standing exactly where it had stood in May and in June, when she had looked out from this same room and thought, with her whole undefended heart, *something is beginning*.

Nothing was beginning. But she was still here at the desk, still holding the pen she had set down, in the flat she had always lived in, with the coat and the box and the Seifert pressed on top of it — all of it kept, all of it intact — and the winter she had come through, and the wound she had learned to dress without quite letting it close, and the smaller life arranging itself, room by room, quietly, around her, with space in it for everything but the one thing.

She left the lamp off and went to sleep.

The Name

The archive smelled the way all archives smelled — dry paper, mild fungicide, the sweetish ghost of old glue — and Eva had always found it consoling, the way other people were consoled by bread baking or by churches. She had a conservator's faith in enclosed rooms full of things that had agreed to stop changing.

The reading room of the State District Archive took up the second floor of a building that had survived the war by being unremarkable, and today it was nearly empty: a doctoral student asleep behind a rampart of folios, a retired man who came every Tuesday regardless of what he claimed to be researching. Eva had been here three times in six weeks, and the archivist — a woman named Doubravka who wore her grey hair in two neat plaits, like a child's drawing of a grandmother — had stopped making her fill in the request slips. She just said, *Hrubá again?* and went for the box.

The building register for Dvořákova 14 ran from 1920 to 1971, when the books were transferred. Eva had taught herself the cramped columns: name, date of birth, relation to head of household, date of entry, date of departure. The

Hrubá entry had taken her until late November to find, partly because she'd been looking for a man at the head of it, and the head here was a woman. Věra Hrubá, born 1914, seamstress. Third floor, left. Arrived 1948. Departed 1968.

One dependent: Marie Hrubá, born 1940.

Eva wrote the name down very carefully, though she'd known it for twenty minutes by then. She kept writing things down because writing things down was how she kept from feeling anything before she was ready.

Marie.

She tried it out on the tram home, under her breath, watching her own breath fog the glass. The city assembled itself behind it: Christmas lights strung between the lampposts on Vinohradská, the car jolting over the points at Lipanská, a man in a bobble hat drinking Kofola from the bottle. The name sat in her mouth like a small smooth stone. For six weeks the letters had been addressed to no one. Now they were addressed by someone.

⁂

She found the death notice three days later, online, because the internet held everything now, even the brief afterlives of the unremarkable. Marie Marešová, *roz.* Hrubá. Born October 1940, Pardubice. Died June 2023, Praha 6. Service at the Strašnice crematorium; in lieu of flowers, a donation to a hospice. Survived by her daughter, Helena Marešová.

Eva sat with the laptop open on the kitchen table for a while.

June. Three months before Eva had moved into the flat. The same month, more or less, that she had sat in Tomáš's

lawyer's office across the table from a man she'd spent eleven years beside, signing pages while a paralegal brought them paper cups of water as though they might need something to do with their hands. And on the far side of the city, in some flat in Praha 6 that Eva was already furnishing in her head — tidy, modest, the smell of old wood and one particular hand cream — a woman named Marie had been dying a few kilometres from a wall she could no longer reach, and the letters sealed inside it.

The grief was unreasonable. She knew that. She had not known Marie Hrubá; she had read six half-pages of her handwriting. It came anyway and sat in her chest while she read the notice a fourth time, hunting for the thing she'd missed, as though the internet might have got it wrong, as though Marie might turn out to have died in some other June.

She made coffee and stood at the kitchen window. The courtyard below was already dark at four — the watchmaker's just closing, pan Šťastný winding in his awning with that mixture of grievance and ritual she had learned to recognise from above. One light in the wine bar across the yard, fairy lights looped through the bay trees by the door. The chestnut was bare. It had been bare two months, and Eva still hadn't decided whether she found that sad or simply clarifying.

⁂

The museum went quiet the week before Christmas — the school groups gone, the visiting researchers thinned to the genuinely obsessed. Eva used the hush to clear condition reports she'd been deferring, and to sit at her bench for long unhurried hours in the kind of focused attention that was the

nearest thing she had to prayer. Today it was a Baroque chasuble in green silk damask, down from a church in South Bohemia; the silk was sound, but the embroidery on the right shoulder was lifting where someone, decades back, had mended it with thread of the wrong twist and set up a slow, dragging tension across the ground.

She spent an hour undoing another person's careful, wrong work.

Her colleague Petra arrived at two, set a tangerine on the bench, and said, "You look like an engraving from a history of the plague."

"Thank you," Eva said. "And the same to you."

"Going to Brno for the holidays?"

"My mother's in Brno. Not the same thing." She picked up the tangerine. "I'm staying."

Petra gave her the look — the one worn by people who felt that Christmas alone was a thing a person ought to explain, or apologise for. Eva had been collecting that look for eight months and had not grown fonder of it.

"Adam's leaving a key to the front stairs," she said, which was not relevant but was something to say, and was also, she noticed as she said it, the first time she had let Adam into a conversation about her own life.

"Who's Adam?"

"The carpenter. He's rebuilding the staircase."

"The carpenter," Petra repeated, in the tone of someone filing it.

"He has to be out before Christmas," Eva said. "They're shoring the main flight. He wanted to be sure I could still get in." All of it true. None of it the point. Petra, who was kind, went away.

⁂

Helena „Lenka" Marešová had a Facebook profile four years stale, mostly photographs from a Holešovice flat with a long railed balcony — geraniums in August, a yellow Labrador asleep across the threshold, a birthday table with grown children and a grandchild ranged around it. Retired teacher. Her profile picture showed a woman in her late fifties, round-faced, with a pleasant, faintly worried expression and grey hair cut short for practicality, and Eva studied her for a long time, trying to find Marie in her.

She found her, in the end, in the eyes. Something that held its ground.

She wrote the message three times and deleted it three times. The fourth ran: *Dear Mrs Marešová, my name is Eva Kratochvílová. I am a textile conservator at the National Museum and I currently rent the flat at Dvořákova 14 in Žižkov, where I believe your mother lived as a young woman. While making a repair I found some personal papers that I think may once have belonged to your family. If you would be willing to talk with me, I would be very grateful. I'm sorry to reach you this way, and I am sorry for your loss.* She read it back, decided it was true enough and decent enough, and sent it before she could delete it a fourth time.

⁂

She found Jan Vávra at eleven on the twenty-third of December, when she should have been packing to not go to Brno — on the floor in her socks, the laptop balanced on a stack of building-society records from 1964 she'd requested on a theory that had led nowhere.

She'd been working from the other direction. Marie had described him with the precision of someone who had studied a man and would have denied studying anything. An engineer. A family in good standing with the Party. A father who drove a Tatra 603. Eva had been hunting structural engineers with Party connections, working in Prague in the early sixties — which narrowed it sharply — and cross-checking against anything that named Dvořákova 14. A structural inspection of the staircase from March 1963, ordered after complaints, carried a signature she had to read three times before she let herself believe it.

Inž. Jan Vávra, ČSVTS.

It was the most ordinary handwriting she had ever seen. The hand of someone who took care, who bore down evenly, who'd been taught a standard script with a standard pen and had never once thought to depart from it.

She laid two fingers on the page, lightly, as though it might startle.

Sixty years ago this man had stood on this staircase, the one now in pieces in the well, the one a widowed carpenter was rebuilding plank by plank. He had stood on the seventh stair — the tread that still complained, even now, even in the new arrangement Adam was working towards — and written in that careful hand about settlement and tensile load, and somewhere over his head a woman named Marie had stood listening to his footsteps and feeling the specific ache of loving a man in a language she had decided never to speak aloud.

She searched the name. It was easier than she'd braced for, and then she understood that of course it would be: she had got into the habit of filing Jan away in a sealed world reach-

able only through registers and carbons, and had let herself forget that sixty years was not geological time. Sixty years was reachable. Sixty years was an old man in a flat in Dejvice whose daughter had posted, four years back, a photograph of his eighty-second birthday cake with a little paper flag stood in the icing.

Eighty-six. An engineer. One daughter, by a wife called Helena, who had died in 2019.

Eva looked at that last fact for a moment, then set the laptop on the boards and pressed her palms flat to the cold of them.

He was alive. Living in Dejvice. Eighty-six, widowed four years, with a daughter — and he had written the inspection report now half-covering her right knee, and he had no idea, had had no idea for sixty years, why Marie Hrubá had sent him away.

This was the moment the letters stopped being history.

⁂

The flat was cold that night in the way old buildings are cold at the year's end — not the sharp cold of an unheated room but the slow, even cold of walls that have taken the whole winter into the plaster. Eva turned the radiator up, pulled the blanket off the back of the sofa, and sat with a glass of wine and the shoebox open in front of her. She didn't lift the letters out. She looked at the box.

She'd spent a week in November cataloguing them properly, the way she'd treat anything that reached her professionally: cotton gloves, acid-free tissue between the sheets, notes in pencil. Eight letters. The wreckage of a love a woman had

been determined enough to end single-handed, and private enough to wall up for fifty-five years. Sealed, and then left behind — the flat changing hands, people moving, a century turning — until a woman who had spent eleven years in a marriage that ended without anyone crying very hard came to put her shoulder to a loose board in a cold flat in Žižkov, and found a box.

She let herself consider doing nothing.

She was good at doing nothing, in the precise sense of choosing it. She recognised the habit in herself the way you recognise a repeat in a weave once it's been pointed out. Her marriage hadn't ended in a decision; it had ended in a long accrual of un-decisions, of leaving things as they were, until their accumulated weight outweighed whatever the leaving was meant to spare. She had been at it for years. Probably before Tomáš; Tomáš had only been the surface where it showed most plainly.

She could leave the letters undisturbed. Reseal the box, hand it to an archive, let it pass out of her keeping into the custody of history. That might even be the responsible choice. It would certainly be the quiet one.

Jan Vávra was eighty-six and alive in Dejvice and had spent the better part of a life not knowing. And Lenka Marešová was in a Holešovice flat with a yellow Labrador, grieving a mother she had perhaps never quite known.

Eva took her wine to the window. The courtyard had gone still. The wine bar had shut early, its lights dark. In the watchmaker's window a small clockwork Father Christmas lifted its arm in slow mechanical greeting to nobody. The chestnut stood bare and exact against an orange-grey sky.

She had come here to start again, by which she'd understood: hide somewhere cheap and quiet, mend other people's things, and wait until she knew what she wanted to be. She had not understood it to mean this — standing at a window in December holding the weight of two lives she'd had no intention of inheriting, the future quietly arranging itself around a decision she hadn't made.

From the stairwell below, faint, because the new boards bedded differently from the old, came the creak of the seventh stair.

She turned, though there was no one. Adam had locked up before he left — the key under the mat, a message that read only *stairs will hold over Christmas, good bones,* and then, after a pause she had not let herself read into, *happy Christmas, Eva.* She'd sent the same back, then sat a while with the phone in her hand, holding a thing she had decided not to name yet, because naming it took a particular kind of courage and she was still taking her own measure against it.

The stair was silent now.

She rinsed the glass and went to bed. In the morning she would find the address in Dejvice. She would write to Lenka properly, something better than a message to a stranger. She would work out what you owe a person who has spent sixty years not knowing he was loved.

Below, the clockwork Father Christmas raised its arm and lowered it and raised it again, and the courtyard held still around it, waiting.

The Engagement

The notice appeared on the Party board on a Wednesday, between the schedule for the communal laundry and a reminder about coal allocation. Marie read it on her way to work, not because she meant to stop but because her feet did — a small mutiny over which she had no say. The paper was fresh, the ink still blue-black in the cold.

Comrade Jan Vávra and Comrade Helena Stejskalová. United in the bonds of socialist matrimony. The collective of Housing District 4 extends warm congratulations.

Beneath it someone had pinned a photograph, the kind taken for documents: both of them facing front, slightly overexposed, the light eating Helena's left cheekbone. Jan was not quite smiling. His eyes went to a point beyond the camera, the way a man looks when he is being photographed and thinking of something else.

Marie read it again. Then she settled the strap of her bag on her shoulder and walked to the tram stop without looking back at the board.

The publishing house was on Mánesova, and the number twelve took forty minutes when frost slowed the points. She

stood in the middle of the car with her glove around the ceiling strap, the windows steaming with other people's breath, and she thought: this is Wednesday the nineteenth of December, and I am standing on a tram, and in three weeks it will be a new year, and I have done the right thing.

She thought it carefully, as one recites a declension. *The right thing.*

Outside, the city was grey and exact — the lime-green of a pharmacy sign, a queue at the butcher's that reached the corner, a child in a red coat trailing a woman too hurried to notice. Marie watched it go past like evidence of something she couldn't name. That ordinary life continued. That the tram ran. That the queue would move and people would carry home parcels and cook dinner and the child in the red coat would reach the corner eventually.

She got off at her stop. The cold came down the back of her neck.

⁂

At the nakladatelství she typed for three hours without an error, which was unusual; all autumn she had been making small mistakes — dropped letters, transposed words — that Comrade Horálková had remarked on twice with a pointed precision worse than anger. Today her fingers knew exactly where to go. The clatter of the machine filled the space between her ears and she was grateful for it.

At noon she ate her bread alone at her desk. Věra Novotná, who usually shared the midday meal, was home with a child's fever, and without her there was no small talk to keep up, which should have been a relief.

She looked at the window.

The courtyard at Dvořákova 14 had its back to the south and caught no winter sun from November to March, but she was looking at a different window now, in a different building, in a different year of her life, and what she saw in the glass was not the frost but Jan's face above the stairwell railing in October, the moment before she looked away. She had been looking away ever since. It had become a practice, an art, a discipline of the body — the angle of the head, the management of the side of the eye, the face arranged around whatever stood in front of it.

She was becoming excellent at it.

She bit into the bread. It was dry at the edges. She chewed.

⁂

The cold came in hard that week, the kind that cracks the pavements and turns the Vltava the colour of old iron. On Friday evening Marie came home through the dvůr because the street gate had frozen on its hinges, and crossing the cobbles she saw the lights on in the Vávra flat.

She knew without counting which windows were theirs. This was something her body had gathered over months without her leave — the way it had learned the creak of a particular stair, the weight of a particular door. She knew which light meant the kitchen and which the sitting room, and she knew, from one accidental glance in September, that Jan worked at the table by the far window with his back to the courtyard, and that sometimes he left the lamp burning after he went to bed.

The lamp was on now in the sitting room. Through the frosted glass moved more blurred shapes than usual. Cigarette smoke came down through the cold, and under it the faint sharp sweetness of slivovitz.

A celebration, then.

She stopped. This was stupid. She made herself go on.

But she looked up, once, through the open well of the staircase — the shaft that ran up all four floors, the one Jan had measured and charted in his careful engineer's notation last spring, when the building had sent him here, when the chestnut was in flower and she had not yet known his name.

He was standing on the second-floor landing.

She did not know why he was there, away from the lamplight and the slivovitz and Helena. Perhaps he had stepped out for air. Perhaps the cold had drawn him, or chance had set him at the railing above the stone courtyard, looking down.

He was looking at her.

She could see his face clearly despite the distance and the dim landing light; she had been studying that face for half a year without meaning to, and she knew it the way she knew the grain of the kitchen table, the way she knew her mother's hand on an envelope. He was not smiling. His hands rested on the railing. He was asking her something — nothing so clumsy as words — asking the same thing he had tried to ask in September when she sent him away, asking it again now from the height of his father's influence and his fiancée's party and the whole new life assembling around him like scaffolding.

His face asked: *was there another reason.*

Marie looked at him.

She arranged her face around the cold, around the cobbles under her feet, around the coming year and its correct, sensible shape. She gave him a polite nothing — the face of a neighbour met in a courtyard, the face of a woman with somewhere to be. She felt herself do it from the outside, as though watching a woman below give a man above her the face that would release him.

She looked away first. She crossed to the staircase door, opened it, stepped inside, and let it fall shut behind her with its small, definite click.

On the first landing she stopped. The walls sweated cold. From above came the party, faint — a burst of male laughter, a glass set down, someone starting a sentence in a voice too muffled to resolve. She did not know whether Jan was still at the railing or had gone back in. She did not let herself look.

She went up. She counted the stairs the way she always counted them — seven to the first landing, four more, then the turn, then seven to her own. She had counted them since she was a child, because her mother had once made her count them in the dark, during a power cut. *So you'll always know where you are, Maruška, even when you can't see.* She had never once lost her floor in the dark.

She let herself into the flat.

Her mother was asleep in the armchair with the radio on, the signal drifting in and out of a late orchestral programme. The stove had burned down to almost nothing and the room held only the memory of warmth. Marie built the fire back up, quietly, shaking the ash through the grate and laying the new coals with a care that took all her attention. She was grateful for this too. Her hands knew what to do.

She made tea. She sat at the kitchen table. She did not cry, which she noted as a small clean victory, the way one notes not slipping on ice.

Across the dvůr, in the sitting room behind the blurred glass, Jan Vávra was being engaged to Helena Stejskalová. Helena, who was intelligent and a little lonely and had said yes to something she half-understood. Helena, who was not — Marie made herself admit it — a bad woman; who was, in fact, a second person set in the path of something, the way a person is set in the path of traffic when the timing is wrong and no one means harm and the harm happens anyway.

Helena would not know what she was inheriting. Jan would be faithful. Jan was that kind of man.

It was not a comfort, but it was a fact, and facts were what she had.

⁂

She wrote nothing that night. She sat with the blank paper in front of her for an hour, then put the pen down and went to bed, and lay on her side looking at the dark wall, counting her heartbeats the way she had counted the stairs — *so you'll always know where you are* — until she reached a number large enough to seem sufficient, and closed her eyes.

In the morning she rose at six and dressed in the dark and went out to the frost. The board in the courtyard still held the photograph: both of them facing front, the light eating Helena's cheekbone, Jan not quite smiling, his eyes somewhere else.

She did not stop this time. She walked past it without breaking stride — which was not, she told herself, the same

as not seeing it.

The tram came. She got on. Forty minutes to Mánesova.

Beyond the windows the city went on with its evidence — the queue, the pharmacy, the child in the red coat, or another child in another red coat; it made no difference, the point was that there were always children in red coats and always queues and the tram always ran, and the new year was coming as it always came, as it had always come, regardless of what one felt about the matter.

At her desk she fed paper into the machine, wound the roller, found the margin, and began.

The keys struck the page with their small decisive sound.

Around her the nakladatelství woke into its proper noise — the telephone, the shuffle of manuscripts, Comrade Horálková's heels on the parquet. Věra Novotná was back, pale, asking whether Marie had heard about the Vávra boy from the building, the engagement, her cousin had mentioned it — very good family, very promising.

Yes, Marie said. *I think I heard something.*

She looked at the page in the machine. Her fingers rested on the keys.

There was a sentence waiting to be typed — a quotation from an approved text, sent up to be checked, that had sat in her in-tray under three other items all week because she had not been able to look at it directly. She looked at it now. She typed it. The machine took it without comment, as machines do.

Věra was telling her something else, but Marie had found a kind of silence inside the clatter, a room within the noise where nothing had to be answered, where she could sit with what she had done and what she had not done and feel it not

as wound but as decision — a deliberate architecture, built to hold a load.

She typed. The morning went on. By eleven the frost on the window had begun to melt at its edges.

The chestnut in the courtyard, bare since October, stood in the cold and held its shape against the white sky — every branch exactly where it had always been, patient, structural, waiting for a spring still months off, that would come anyway, as spring always did, to a tree that had no opinion on the matter and needed none.

She did not go home at noon. She stayed at her desk and ate her bread and watched the window and felt, with a precision she had not expected, the particular weight of having done something that could not be taken back — not its grief, not yet, but its strange, clean heft. The way a sealed envelope weighs a little more than an open one. The way a door sounds different once it is locked.

Jan Vávra would go north in the spring. He would do the work he was made for. No one would ask him to account for a typist in Žižkov with a shopkeeper father's file in the drawer of the cadre department; that file would not touch him. She had seen to it by giving him nothing to hold — nothing that could be intercepted, nothing traceable from him to her and back. She had given him the face of a neighbour in a courtyard. She had given him the weather.

This was what love looked like when it had no other shape to take.

She folded the bread paper and put it in the bin. She rolled a fresh page into the machine. Outside, the frost went on melting in the gutters, the water finding its way down through channels cut for the purpose, following the shape the

cold had made for it — quiet, certain, and already, too faint to name, carrying the smell of what would, in three or four months, become spring.

She began to type.

Lenka

The address Lenka had given her was in Holešovice, not far from the market — a panel building from the seventies, the kind that apologized for its own existence. Eva stood in the stairwell and read the name beside the button: *H. Marešová*. The H for Helena. Her mother had named her after no one anyone remembered.

She pressed it.

The voice through the intercom was careful, the way cautious people are when they've agreed to something and aren't yet sure why. Eva said her name. The lock clicked.

Lenka Marešová was fifty-seven, solid, holding herself very straight in the doorway — though Eva had no photograph to compare her to, no way of knowing whether the straightness was her mother's or only what she had come hoping to see. Dark trousers, a pale blouse: the clothes of a woman who had dressed deliberately. She had put herself in order before opening the door. That, somehow, was the first thing that moved her.

"You said on the phone you're a conservator." Lenka held the door wide. "I assumed something institutional."

“Museum of Decorative Arts. Textiles, mostly.” Eva stepped inside. The flat smelled of coffee and something baked, recent and deliberate — hospitality that had been thought about in advance. “I restore things that are damaged, or just old. I read cloth the way some people read handwriting.”

Lenka took this in, then gestured toward the kitchen, where she had already set out two cups.

“And you found my mother’s letters in your wall.”

“Behind the skirting board. A shoebox, wrapped in cloth and sealed with tape.”

“She’d have had tape.” Lenka turned to the counter and poured the coffee without asking how Eva took it. “She was careful about materials. Tape, string, brown paper, all kept in the same drawer. I used to think it was the war that did that to her generation. Or just the times. You didn’t throw things away.”

“No,” Eva said. “You kept them.”

Lenka set a cup in front of her and sat down. She looked at Eva the way people look at someone who has seen a thing they themselves have only been told about.

“How many letters?”

“Eight. Or — seven complete. One unfinished.” Eva put her bag on the floor beside the chair and did not reach into it. She had decided on the tram to go slowly. Not because Lenka seemed fragile — she didn’t; she seemed contained, the way load-bearing walls are contained — but because what she was carrying was a door, and you didn’t walk through someone else’s door ahead of them. “I’ve read all of them. I wanted to say that before I hand them over. I’ve handled them a great deal, for the dating and the preservation. I’m sorry for that.”

"You did what you needed to do." It was not quite absolution, but it wasn't blame.

"They're love letters," Eva said. "To a man she calls only J. I think I know who he was. But before I tell you what I believe, I wanted you to read them without my version sitting on top of hers."

Lenka wrapped both hands around the cup. Wide palms, square at the knuckle — the hands, probably, of a woman who had spent decades bent over students' work. "She wasn't a happy woman, my mother," she said. "She was good. Genuinely good — patient, kind, I never once heard her say a cruel thing about anyone. But happy, no." She said it without accusation, the way you'd report a fact about the weather. "I always thought I knew the shape of her life. My father was a decent man and she was fond of him. He died in 2001, and she had twenty years after that, and she was — contained. There's no better word for it. I used to ask whether there was anything she wanted to talk about, and she'd say, *I have everything I need*, and I believed her. Or I wanted to. And now—"

She stopped.

"Now there's something else," Eva said.

"Tell me about J."

So Eva told her, keeping carefully inside what the letters said and flagging where she crossed from what they proved into what she only suspected. Jan Vávra, twenty-six in 1963, a structural engineer from a Party family. The work brigade. The building — Eva's building, in a specific and literal sense. The chestnut in bloom. A Tatra 603 he'd been ashamed to enjoy. The way Marie had loved him in prose that never once indulged itself, and was the more devastating for the discipline

of it. Eva spoke for twenty minutes. Lenka did not interrupt once.

When she'd finished, Lenka said, "She never learned to drive."

Eva looked at her.

"Everyone asked, all her life, and she always said she had no aptitude for it. I'm sorry — it isn't important."

"It might be. One of the letters mentions a car."

"She wouldn't go near them. I thought it was nerves. My father drove; she always said she preferred the tram." Lenka set down her cup. "She wrote to him."

"Every letter is addressed. None has an envelope. They were never sent."

"Why not?"

"She explains it differently each time. That sending them could mark him. That they'd be opened on the way. That saying it aloud would weaken her." Eva paused. "And I think the page was the only place she could be entirely honest. Once you send a letter it belongs to someone else. You can't take it back."

Lenka looked out the kitchen window. The January light was thin, the trees stripped, the sky the colour of old newsprint. A tram passed in the street below; even at this height Eva caught the low familiar bell of it.

"She never finished them," Lenka said.

"The last one stops mid-sentence. But several of the earlier—"

"No. I mean that was her habit. Her whole life." Lenka turned back. "She wrote letters constantly — to her schoolfriends, to my father's sister in Brno, to me when I was away at university. She never posted them the same day.

Sometimes she'd hold one a week. And sometimes they never went at all." She pressed her fingertips to the table, as if testing its temperature. "I thought she was just slow to decide. But she kept the drafts. We found them when we cleared the flat last spring — dozens of them, started and set aside and started again. I threw most of them out. I didn't understand what I was looking at."

The silence that followed had the particular weight of things that cannot be undone.

"She always said she wasn't a writer," Lenka went on. "She'd correct my schoolwork in this very precise hand — her version always better than mine — and she'd say, *Oh, I only mean I'd put it this way*. As though she hadn't thought about it at all."

"She was a typist," Eva said. "At a publishing house."

"I knew that much. She left when I was born and never went back to anything with words in it. She sewed instead — made all my clothes until I was old enough to refuse them." Lenka almost smiled. "She was very good at it."

"Then she'd have known cloth." Something turned over in Eva's chest, the professional in her catching up to the personal: the way the box had been wrapped. "Part of why the letters survived is how she sealed them. Good cotton muslin, tied and then taped. A conservator would call it sound storage."

"She knew what she was keeping." Lenka said it quietly, and what was behind it wasn't quite wonder — steadier than wonder, more like the moment a long sum finally resolves. "She knew she was keeping them for good."

Eva reached into the bag.

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She laid out the photographs first — eight small prints, one per letter, each showing the hand and the date at the top. Years of handing people other people's damage had taught her to stage the approach. Lenka studied them in silence for nearly a minute before Eva drew the box itself from the bag, sealed now in fresh archival film, and set it on the table between them.

"I'll want to read them alone," Lenka said.

"Of course. The originals are yours. I've made digital copies, with your permission."

Lenka nodded. She didn't touch the box. She went on looking at the photographs.

"You said you *think* you know who J. is."

"I found the building's records. The work-brigade list for the spring of 1963 is in the municipal archive, and there's a Jan Vávra on it — an engineer, a Party member in good standing. There's a Jan Vávra who married a Helena Stejskalová that November. He's retired. He's eighty-six." Eva did not mention Adam. She had not decided what Adam's part in this was, or what she would say when someone finally asked.

Lenka set the photographs down with the care of someone who doesn't trust their own hands.

"He's alive."

"Yes."

"And you want to give him the letters."

"I don't know what I want," Eva said, and it was true. "I came to you first. Whatever happens next is yours, not mine. I'm a stranger who found a box in a wall." She paused. "But I should tell you — the woman in those letters isn't the one

you described to me. She isn't contained. She's the opposite. She hides nothing on the page. And she loved him in a way she seems never to have let herself love anything again — not because the feeling stopped, but because she chose not to, for his sake." She caught herself. "Sorry. I'm—"

"No," Lenka said. "Say it."

"She gave him up to protect him. Not because she didn't want him. Because she loved him enough to let him believe the worst of her."

Lenka laid one hand flat on the table and kept it there, as though to hold the surface still.

"I'm going to need a few weeks," she said.

"However long you need."

"I'll have questions. About what they say, exactly."

"I'll answer everything I can."

"And this man." Lenka looked up. Her eyes were clear; she wasn't weeping, she was thinking, which Eva suspected was how she had learned to handle grief, and most likely everything else. Her mother's daughter. "If I decide yes — that he should know — will you come with me? I don't want to do it alone, and I won't send a stranger in my place."

"You'd go to him?"

"You found them. You understand them better than I do." She looked down at the box in its film. "She wrote them in that flat. You live there now. I think that matters. I think she'd find it fitting — that the woman who mends things was the one who found them."

Eva said nothing. She thought of the third-floor window, the light moving across the floor in the afternoon, the seventh stair that gave under your weight, the sound of a saw two floors below.

"Yes," she said. "I'll come."

⁂

She was on the tram back when the first message arrived. Not a question about the letters — only: *She kept a photograph on her desk my whole life. I never knew who it was. I told myself it was a cousin. Now I don't think I know what I told myself.*

Eva watched the street go by — wet cobbles, a dog leaning into its lead, the particular grey of a Prague January in the first week of a new year. The bell sounded for a stop that wasn't hers. She thought of a woman at a desk for fifty years, setting a letter aside before the end of it, taking it up again later, keeping the one she never finished — sealing the drafts behind a board in a third-floor flat because the sent thing belonged to someone else and the unsent thing was hers, and only hers.

She thought of the last letter. *My dear — I have tried to find an ending that tells the truth and costs no one, and I think at last I understand that—*

And then nothing. The line breaking off. The pen lifted from the page. The box closed over it.

She put the phone away and watched the city pass until the bell rang for her own stop.

The Thing She Never Told Him

The cold came properly that week — not the tentative cold of early December that still pretended to negotiate, but the settled, factual cold of a city that has stopped bothering to apologize. The window above the courtyard had frosted at its corners overnight, leaving a clear oval in the centre where Marie could see the chestnut standing stripped and black against the morning, each branch precise as a line she had written carefully and could not unsend.

She had been awake since four.

Her mother slept, as she slept through everything now, the weight of widowhood having settled into her bones as a kind of useful ballast that kept her under. Marie could hear her through the wall: the slow, reliable breath of a woman who had long ago accepted that the world arranged itself as it pleased, and that one's only contribution was to endure it with good manners. Marie had been taught this. She was, she supposed, a diligent student.

The flat was the same flat it had always been — the same brown linoleum, the same three-armed fixture missing its middle bulb, the same lime plaster and the particular sweet-

ness the old floorboards gave off when rain found the sill. She sat at the kitchen table with the lamp on, which was wasteful, and did not move to turn it off.

She had brought nothing to the table. No paper, no pen. She was sitting in the manner of a person who has finished something — the way you sit after carrying a heavy box to its proper place, with that particular vacancy that is not emptiness but its near neighbour.

⁂

Last night she had seen him.

Not spoken to him. Seeing was enough. He had crossed the courtyard below with Helena Stejskalová, the two of them under her umbrella — or rather, his hand on the handle, the umbrella tilted toward her — and they were not touching in any other way, and they were not laughing, and his face under the courtyard lamp was the face of a man being decent. Which was the worst thing to see. Not unhappy. Not pretending. Simply decent, in the way his whole life would now require him to be decent about things that deserved more than decency.

She had stood at the window a long time after they went in. The courtyard held their absence the way a sentence holds a word after you have read past it: the shape of them still there in the negative space, in the particular gloss the cobbles took under the lamp, in the puddle by the drainpipe that had stilled again.

She had gone to the wardrobe then.

The shoebox lived at the bottom, under the folded eiderdown her mother never used, behind the good shoes nobody

had occasion to wear. It was not a clever hiding place. It was only a place her mother never looked, which in this flat amounted to the same thing. She had taken out the letters she had not sent — five of them now, six counting the one she had not yet written — and she had sat on the cold floor with them arranged across her lap and read them all.

It was like reading someone else's life, and the opposite of that: like reading her own in a language she was still learning. The girl who had written the first letter in June — *I have been thinking about you since Tuesday and I am not sorry* — seemed at once enormously brave and entirely ignorant of what bravery would come to require. She had been so certain then that feeling something this clearly amounted to a kind of proof. Evidence. A document with the force of fact.

She understood now that it was a document with no standing anywhere that mattered.

⁂

She got the paper eventually. She went to the drawer and took a single sheet and brought it back under the wasteful lamp. The pen was the one she always used, the one with the loose cap she had mended twice with a strip of sticking plaster — a small, undignified pen. She was going to write the truest thing she had written with it.

She did not let herself think about him as she uncapped it. She had learned, over these months, the discipline of not-thinking: the way you do not look straight at a bright light but slightly off to its side, so you can still see by it. She thought instead about the shape of the truth, and how a per-

son approaches such a thing. Whether you back into it or come at it straight.

She came at it straight.

⁂

My dear—

I have been trying to work out what I owe you, now that it is done and nothing can be undone. I owe you honesty, I think. I owe you the sentence I never said — the one that would have made you angrier at the time and less bewildered for the rest of your life. This is that sentence.

I refused you because I love you. Not in spite of it.

I want you to understand the arithmetic, because you never let yourself see it and I was too cowardly to draw it for you. You have a future of the kind a man in your position builds carefully, the way your father built his, which is the only way such futures get built in this country at this hour. A wrong association at the wrong moment — a wife whose father's shop was taken in 'fifty, whose file says what mine says — and the building simply stops. Not dramatically. There are no scenes in these things. No one comes to the door at midnight. There is a posting that goes to someone else. A clearance that is quietly not renewed. A committee that mislays its enthusiasm. It is all done in the passive voice, by processes with no face, and then it is done.

You would have said it didn't matter to you. I believe you believed that. I believed you. But it would have mattered in the end — not because you would have loved me less, but because one ordinary Tuesday you would have sat in your smaller life and thought, I chose this, and you would not have been entirely certain you would choose it again. And this is the part I could not say to your face: I could not have borne

that Tuesday. I could not have spent my life as the weight on the other end of that choice, watching you weigh it.

So I told you I had changed my mind. I was cold to you in the way that leaves no door open, because an open door is too easy to walk back through, and I know myself well enough to know I would have walked back through it on the first cold evening. I was cold in the way that makes a man angry rather than hopeful. Anger is the thing that heals. Hope is the thing that prolongs.

I will not pretend it was pure. Some part of what I did was for myself — if I had to watch you diminish I could not have managed it — and there is a strain of cowardice in what I have dressed up here as love. I am trying to be honest about the whole of it, not only the part that lets me look well in my own account.

What I know for certain is this. I will not call it the deepest thing in me, because you are already gone and such sentences are for letters that get posted. But I loved you in a way I have not found a word for that doesn't make it smaller, and I expect I never will, and it will still be true when I am forty and when I am sixty and when I am old enough to have forgotten the exact colour of your eyes and yet still, somehow, know the colour.

I am not writing this to you. I know that. I am writing it to the box, to the dark at the bottom of the wardrobe, to no one. I am writing it so that it exists somewhere outside my own head, in a form that persists, because I find I cannot bear for it to have happened only inside me, where there is no record and nothing keeps.

Stay well. Have a proper life. Forget me correctly — all the way, not a little.

I am yours in the tense I will not name.

M.

⁂

She finished. The lamp was still on. The chestnut was still there.

She did not read it back. She never read them back; reading them back was only a way of talking herself out of the truest sentences, of sanding down the places that cut. The whole point of these letters was that they existed for no one's comfort, her own least of all.

She folded it in thirds, the way you fold a letter you mean to send, and did not let herself notice that she had done so.

In the morning she would put it in the box with the others and slide the box to the bottom of the wardrobe, under the eiderdown, behind the unworn shoes, and the flat would keep it the way the flat kept everything — without judgment, without comment, because a flat in this country had long since learned to keep what it was given and ask nothing. The chestnut outside had been keeping its own records for decades: rings inside rings, wet springs and dry summers stored in the grain, which had no language and no longing and simply held what it held.

She found she envied it that. The clean, unreaching holding.

She turned the lamp off. In the dark the courtyard came back — the lamp post, the wet cobbles, the place where two people had stood under an umbrella and then gone in. She looked at it a while. She did not look off to the side of it now. There was no light left to be careful of.

Then she went to bed.

The box would be there in the morning. The wardrobe door would still not quite shut. The building was patient, the way old buildings are patient, in the manner of things that

have already outlived their share of ordinary disasters and expect to outlive more.

Outside, the chestnut stood in the dark. Not grieving. Standing, as it would stand in spring when the green came back and the courtyard filled with people who knew nothing of this winter, who would pass under its new leaves without once wondering what the bare branches had stood and watched, in the months when there was nothing left in the courtyard to hide behind.

Marie slept.

In the spring the tree would bloom regardless. She supposed that was the difference between them.

Cold Feet

The staircase was almost finished.

Eva stood in the doorway of her flat and looked at it: the new treads fitted flush, the salvaged banister rail rehung and sanded to a honey colour, the open well of the stairwell dropping down through the centre of the building with its old vertigo restored. Adam had sourced oak for the treads. He'd explained to her once why it had to be oak — something about seasonal movement and the load-bearing arithmetic of a hundred years of footfall — and she'd listened carefully while watching his hands on the wood and retained nothing whatsoever about the oak.

The seventh stair still creaked. He'd told her he was leaving it. *Continuity*, he'd said, deadpan. She'd told him that was the most architectural thing she'd ever heard from someone without an architecture degree, and he'd looked at the stair with something between amusement and genuine pride.

That had been three weeks ago. That had been before.

She made coffee — the real kind she'd started buying at the shop on Seifertova, which was not cheap — and carried the mugs out onto the landing in the way that had become,

without her ever deciding it, a habit. Ten in the morning. The light through the courtyard window on the half-landing fell across the new oak in a flat January stripe, and Adam was crouched at the bottom post, checking something with a spirit level he kept in his back pocket the way other men kept phones.

He looked up when he heard her. Something shifted in his face — a small hesitation before the smile — and Eva knew, with the part of her that spent its working life reading damage in cloth, the minute tensions that came before a tear, that she'd put it there.

"Cheers," he said, and climbed to take the mug.

They stood at the top of the final flight. The building was quieter than usual; the woman below was at work, and the student in the attic, who at some point in November had begun existing loudly at two in the morning, was apparently sleeping it off. The building breathed around them, the cold sitting in the plaster — January cold now, with no excuse of newness left in it.

"Nearly done," he said. He was looking at the banister, not at her.

"Yes."

The word took up very little room.

What had happened was not a dramatic thing. That was the difficulty. If it had been dramatic she could have assigned it a category and filed it correctly, and her categories were ready: *misunderstanding; professional boundary; distressed person in transition forming an unwise attachment*. She was, in that sense, extremely organized.

What had happened was that five days ago, on a Thursday, he had stayed past the point where there was any staircase

left to work on. She had known it. He had known that she knew. They'd been at her kitchen table with the box of letters between them — she'd been showing him the third letter, the one about the Tatra, because he was trying to find the building's work-brigade records from 1963 and it had come up — and he had said, quietly, not looking at the letters: *I'd like, when this is finished, to take you somewhere. Not the staircase. Not the letters. Just somewhere.*

It was the *just* that undid her. The plainness of it. He had looked up then, and she had seen that it had cost him something.

She had said: *I think — I'm not sure I'm in the right place for —* and gestured at the flat, at the box, at the general state of her interior renovation, which was apparently still in progress. He had nodded. He had said *okay* in the tone that means understood, not okay. He had picked up his jacket. She had watched him go, and then she had sat with the letters for an hour without reading them.

Sensible, she had told herself. *Measured. You know what happens when you let the disturbed part of yourself decide things — you get six years of pleasant bloodlessness and a lease in Žižkov signed in September.*

She could feel the letters on her desk from out here on the landing, which was not a thing she would have said aloud to anyone.

⁂

"The second post was giving me trouble," he said, tipping the mug toward the foot of the staircase. "The mortise had gone soft. I've packed it. Should hold another twenty years."

"That's a confident prediction."

"For a staircase. For a staircase, twenty years is modest."

She looked at the bottom post and held her mug in both hands.

"What happens after you finish?" It came out more direct than she'd meant it.

He considered it. "A job in Vinohrady. Someone's private library — they want the shelves remade." A pause. "Two, maybe three weeks here still. The balusters on the top flight."

She nodded. He wasn't looking at her. *Two weeks*. The word *modest* went on echoing somewhere behind her thinking.

She thought about Marie, who had also been careful and responsible and had made the correct calculation. Marie, who had written letters to the inside of a wall.

Stop it, she told herself. *That was the state. Not a mildly inconvenient divorce*. It was not the same thing. She was not Marie. She was a forty-one-year-old conservator with sound judgement and a reasonable plan for the rest of the winter.

"The balusters," she said.

"Some need turning. I can match the originals — there's a photograph in the building archive from 1923. The pattern's simple. A repeat of six."

"You found a 1923 photograph?"

"Municipal archive. Your building's had an interesting life." A small shift in his tone; he was, she realized, talking to her the way she had talked to him in September, when they had only both been interested in an old building and nothing was at stake. He was trying.

Something in her chest did something she chose not to examine.

“I’ve been looking at the frontage,” she said. “The render on the courtyard side, under the window — there are traces of a painted border. Decorative. Could be original.”

He looked up. Not at the frontage. At her. “What kind of paint?”

“Lime-based. The colour under it’s a dark red. Terracotta, maybe.” She kept her eyes on the wall. “I thought you might see it better in the morning light.”

It was not morning. The light was right there.

Adam looked at the wall, then back at her. She saw the moment he understood she was talking about a wall. She saw him decide to let it pass.

“I can look,” he said.

⁂

She went back inside, closed the door with the precision of a person who was not fleeing anything, and stood in the kitchen with both hands flat on the counter.

The letters were on the desk where she’d left them, the fourth one uppermost because she’d been reading them again last night under the lamp — which was, she recognized, faintly deranged; she had read them often enough now to recite stretches from memory, her mind shaping itself to Marie’s sentence rhythms the way her hands shaped themselves to seventeenth-century linen — but she read them when she couldn’t sleep, which was most nights, and she preferred to call it research.

She pressed her palms harder into the counter.

Marie had understood exactly what she was doing. That was the unbearable part, the thing that kept finding her at

two in the morning. It had not been a failure to understand. Marie had seen clearly, had thought it through with that controlled, careful mind that came across even in the way she shaped her letters — Eva had spent forty minutes with a glass on the handwriting last week, ostensibly to date the paper. Marie had weighed it and chosen the outcome that protected Jan, and then she had lived that outcome for sixty years, and somewhere inside all those years she had found Oldřich and had a daughter and probably made decent coffee and been kind to her neighbours, and the letters had stayed in the wall.

A life. A real, gentle life. The letters said so. The letters also said — they couldn't help it; the restraint itself said it — what the real life had cost.

Eva made herself eat something: half a roll, gone hard in the bag, because she had forgotten again to shop. She could hear Adam on the stairs, the tap of the hammer against the post as he checked the set of the packing. He worked quietly. He had always worked quietly, which she'd noted in September without understanding why it might matter, and now it mattered in the way small things matter once you've been paying attention to a person long enough to know the sound of their hammer.

She took the fourth letter from the desk.

Not to read it. She'd read it. She held it at the edges, the way she'd been trained — to touch the past lightly, knowing what pressure can do to a thing that cannot be replaced — and looked at the handwriting, and thought about what a wall is for.

A wall as a place to put what you can't deliver. A wall as a stand-in for the impossible conversation. A wall as the thing

you shore yourself behind while you explain to yourself that this is the braver choice.

Her hands were cold. The paper trembled a little.

She put it down.

I think I'm not in the right place for —

She could hear herself saying it. The careful texture of it: not a door shut but a door held at an inch, which was, she thought now, worse — worse for him, who'd been courteous enough not to put his foot in the gap; worse for her, who had to go on standing at the inch with her hand on the handle, calling it caution.

Outside, a tram went by on Seifertova; she heard the bell, distant and wholly unbothered by the weather inside the third floor. The chestnut in the courtyard had lost everything weeks ago — it stood bare against the white sky, a system of dark lines, structurally sound, waiting.

She thought: *Marie, at twenty-three, could not have delivered those letters. There were teeth behind the bureaucracy. Real consequences. Real danger — not hypothetical bruising, not manageable risk, not the ordinary terror of wanting something too much.*

And she thought: *Yes. And she also could not, and she also did not. Those are the same sentence.*

⁂

At half twelve she heard him on the landing — the particular sound of packing up, the set of pauses that meant tools going into the bag in order. The seventh stair creaked under him as he went down. The front door, below.

She did not go to the window.

She went to the window.

He crossed the courtyard in his jacket, the dark one, the collar up against the cold, and she watched him in a way she was fairly sure she had no business watching him, her forehead nearly against the glass. The light from Pan Šťastný's workshop lay across the cobbles in a yellow rectangle. The courtyard was otherwise empty — January having driven everyone indoors except the two of them, except Adam disappearing now under the arch, except Eva at the third-floor window with her breath blooming on the cold pane.

The chestnut stood in the courtyard.

The chestnut had stood in this courtyard in the spring of 1963, when Marie Hrubá looked out of this same window at a young engineer crossing these same cobbles, and it had been in bloom — Marie said so — and the light had been an afternoon colour she had tried to set down and crossed out and tried again.

Eva stayed at the glass a moment after he'd gone.

Then she turned back to the flat, which was quiet and orderly and hers, and which she had chosen for the express purpose of being a place where nothing could hurt her that wasn't sixty years old and written by hand.

On the desk, the fourth letter lay face up, the ink the colour of cold tea, the hand unmistakably that of a woman who had known exactly what she was doing.

Eva looked at it for a long time.

She did not read it again. She didn't need to.

She put on her coat, picked up her bag, and went out to do the shopping she had been forgetting to do; and on the seventh stair she stopped for one moment and let the old creak come up through the sole of her boot — faithful, unchanged, the one thing he had chosen to leave exactly as it was.

Pan Šťastný's Confession

The snow had started in the night, and by morning it lay in thin uneven shelves along the courtyard's window ledges and in the hollow of the chestnut's lowest fork. Eva watched it from the kitchen window while she waited for the water to boil — the courtyard muffled and white, the scaffolding furred with it, the watchmaker's lamp already lit across the way. She had been up since five. She had told herself she was thinking about Jan Vávra.

She poured the water over the grounds and did not think about Adam.

Pan Šťastný had left a note in her mailbox the evening before, in a hand trained on a different era's penmanship: *If you have time, come by. I have something for you. B.Š.* She had read it standing in the hall in her coat, and felt a small deliberate click, something setting into place. The note had the weight of a decision rather than an impulse, and she recognised it because she spent so much of her own life avoiding making one.

⁂

The watchmaker's shop was the warmest place in Dvořákova 14, which meant something only to the people who lived there. It held its heat the way old places hold water — through accumulated density, through the residue of decades of small human industry. Clocks on every surface, clocks on the walls, some ticking and some not, the stopped ones a category to themselves, their silence oddly companionable. Pan Šťastný was behind the counter when she pushed the door, and he looked up over his glasses with an expression she couldn't quite read, something between relief and bracing.

"Sit, sit." He nodded at the chair on the customer's side, the one with a cushion re-covered in red corduroy, probably in 1987. "Coffee? I have the real kind now. Lenka sent me a bag from the city."

"Please," Eva said, though she'd already had two cups.

He went to the back room and she listened to the small rituals of it — the clink of cups, the hiss of something heating, the particular quiet of a man gathering himself. The snow made the window's light flat and white. A carriage clock on the shelf ticked with the cheerful arbitrariness of a thing wound by someone else.

She looked at her hands in her lap. The knuckles were dry from the winter and from the fibre-cleaning solution she'd been using at the museum. They looked, she thought, like the hands of someone more competent than she felt.

Pan Šťastný came back with two cups, the good porcelain rather than the glass ones he kept for ordinary days. He sat across from her and met her eyes with the directness very old people sometimes recover after a lifetime of tact — a second coming of bluntness.

"I've been meaning to tell you something," he said. "Since October. Since you first started asking about the Hrubá family." He wrapped both hands around his cup; the joints were swollen and enlarged with age, and yet they still moved over the watches with a steadiness she found quietly remarkable. "I've been telling myself I didn't want to muddy your waters. That isn't the honest reason."

Eva waited.

"The honest reason," he said, "is that I'm not proud of it."

⁂

He had been fifteen in the autumn of 1963. This was the detail she fixed on as he talked — fifteen, which in that era meant small, still sent to run errands for his mother, still *malý Bohumil* to the building in a way that had only just begun to sting. The family had lived in the first-floor flat, the one that had changed hands twice since and now belonged to a young couple with a whippet named Šedivák. His father had worked in the watchmaker's shop — had built it, really, which was why Bohumil was still here six decades on, as though the place had got its hooks in him before he could decide whether he wanted to stay.

He had known Marie Hrubá the way children in buildings know the adults above them: incompletely, from below. She'd been kind to him in the abstract way of young women dealing with other things — would correct his spelling sometimes, sitting in the stairwell where the light was better than in the corridor. She'd had a typewriter you could hear through the floor.

In September of that year — the autumn, he said, definitely the autumn, because he could still see the chestnut leaves on the cobbles — Marie had stopped him in the courtyard. She'd been carrying something from the nakladatelství, a stack of proofs wrapped in paper, and she set it down on the edge of the laundry trough to free her hands.

"She gave me an envelope," he said. "Told me to take it to a flat on Seifertova. Gave me the number and a name — a man called Kratochvíl, who'd know where to pass it on." He stopped. "I understand now, or think I do, that this Kratochvíl was a friend she trusted to get it to Jan Vávra without it going near her name, or his. That was how a thing like that was done."

Something shifted in the room. Eva kept her face still over the small ringing of a surname.

"She gave me the envelope and a crown — which was serious money to put in a boy's hand for an errand then, I want you to understand that, it was not nothing. And she looked at me in a way that —" He turned the cup. "She was a very controlled girl. Very. You could see the effort of it. Like watching someone carry water in cupped hands and try not to spill."

Yes, Eva thought. *I know that face.*

"I set off across the courtyard. It was raining a little. I got as far as the street." He paused, and looked at the middle distance of six decades ago, somewhere above her head. "And I stopped. And I thought about what I was carrying. I was fifteen, and I understood more than I was meant to, because my father wasn't a stupid man and he talked to my mother in the evenings when they thought I was asleep. I knew about the Hrubá family's situation, the cadre business. I knew the engineer who'd come to look at the staircase was from a different

sort of family. I'd heard my father say once, very low, *those two ought to know better.* Meaning: they should know the world was watching, and the watching had teeth."

Eva set her cup down on the counter, carefully.

"I was afraid," he said. "Of what, exactly, I couldn't have told you. Some shapeless fear that by carrying that envelope I'd become part of a thing that ended badly, and that the ending badly would find its way back. To my father. To this shop." He looked at his hands. "I was fifteen. I knew enough to be afraid and not enough to know that the fear was the enemy, not the thing I was afraid of. So I turned round. I walked back across the courtyard and up to our flat. I never told her. She never asked. I put the envelope at the back of a desk drawer and I — forgot it. Tried to. When we moved the furniture in 1972 I burned it with a pile of old papers. Never even looked inside."

Quiet. A clock somewhere marked the half-hour with two small strokes.

"For a long time," he said, "I told myself it didn't matter. One letter. One message. What could it have changed? You make your peace with a thing like that. You have to, or you can't go on." He looked at her directly. "But when you started coming in, asking about the Hrubá girl, the letters, all of it — I realised I'd made my peace with something I'd never actually looked at. Because from what you've told me, the reason she sent him away wasn't that she'd stopped. She was protecting him. And she wanted him to know it. She wanted to tell him the truth, even in the one way that could never reach him in the open — through Kratochvíl, through a trusted hand. And that hand was mine, for one afternoon. And I put it in a drawer."

Eva became aware she was gripping the edge of the counter. She made her fingers let go.

"I don't know that the message would have changed anything," he said. "Maybe not. The machinery was the machinery. Maybe Jan Vávra makes the same choices either way — the posting, the marriage, all of it — because the cost was real, and she understood it better than he did. But he'd have *known why*. He'd have known she chose to lose him rather than watch him made small. That isn't a little thing, to be given. It's the thing a person carries the lack of, all his life, if no one gives it to him." He looked toward the window. The snow was still falling. "He's carried the lack of it sixty years."

She said nothing. There was nothing that wouldn't have been inadequate.

"I'm telling you," he said, "because you're the one holding the letters. And because I've watched you look at things." He said it gently, without any push behind it. "I've seen people come and go in this building for forty-odd years. I know the look of someone who does everything correctly and still manages to be careful in the wrong direction."

The words went in somewhere under the breastbone.

"You have what she couldn't give him," he said. "The letters. The whole of it. And the man who needs to know is still alive — which is not nothing, paní Kratochvílová, which is in fact extraordinary." He picked up his cup. "I don't know what else you're carrying. I'm not asking. I'm only telling you what I know. The undelivered thing is the only one that doesn't heal. Everything else — loss, grief, a smaller life than you wanted — those sit with you, but they move. The thing you didn't say, the thing you shut in a drawer: that one stays where you left it."

⁂

She walked back across the courtyard in the snow. Her boots cut into the thin white layer, and the chestnut stood in its corner with its bare branches spread against the grey, patient as something that has watched all of this before.

She went up. Past the seventh stair and its particular note — Adam had shimmed and glued it the week before but told her it would sing a while yet, that old wood needed time to settle, that you couldn't hurry the re-settling. She had not seen him since Thursday. Since the kitchen table, the box between them, the *I'd like, when this is finished, to take you somewhere,* and the careful unbearable *just*. Since she'd gestured at the flat and the letters and the general state of her interior renovation and watched him say *okay* in the voice that means understood, not okay. He had not pushed. He wasn't the type. He'd taken his jacket and gone, and she had recognised the patience in it not as indifference, not as passivity, but as a man who'd learned the hard way that you cannot reach into another person's chest and rearrange the contents.

She'd told herself it was too soon. She'd told herself she barely knew her own wants. She'd told herself she was in the middle of a thing — the letters, Jan, the whole machinery of the past — and that it would be wrong to add to it now, to complicate the complicated, to risk the fragile.

The flat was cold and the lino was its January self. She didn't put on a lamp. She stood at the window where the light came in flat and white and she could see the courtyard below: her own tracks crossing pan Šťastný's earlier ones, crossing the scaffold workers' boots, all the paths laid over each other in the thin snow.

Adam's van was parked at the courtyard gate. He came in the mornings now, mostly. The staircase was three-quarters done.

She thought of the envelope at the back of a fifteen-year-old boy's drawer. She thought of Marie at the laundry trough, setting down the proofs, composing her face while she waited to see whether this errand would be the one that got through. She thought of the months after — the autumn greying, Jan learning to believe her silence, the chestnut letting go of its leaves.

The thing you didn't say: that one stays where you left it.

She stood there until the light shifted, until a tram passed on the street beyond and its bell came thin and specific through the glass and pulled her back into her body. Her hands were cold. The shoebox was in the wardrobe, inside the archive clamshell she'd carried home from the museum. Eight letters, or most of eight. The last one unfinished.

She crossed and opened the wardrobe and stood looking at the clamshell without opening it. She didn't need to. She had the letters by heart now, or near enough — not memorised but absorbed, the way you take in a building you've lived in long enough, through the soles of your feet and the backs of your hands.

I could not be the weight that brought you down. You have a good mind and they will use it, if you let them; I will not be the thing that makes them hesitate to. This is what I cannot say to your face, because you would argue, and I would let you win, and then it would go wrong slowly instead of fast, and one day you would look at me across a room and know I was the reason, and I could not live through that look from you. It is kinder to give you a reason to be angry. Anger passes. Anger lets you go.

She closed the wardrobe.

She went to the desk and sat and took a sheet from the drawer — real paper, museum stationery she'd brought home months ago with no intention of using it for anything of her own. She found a pen. She held it over the page.

Outside the snow kept on, softening the edges of the courtyard, the scaffolding, the bare branches. A pigeon dropped onto the gallery railing opposite, settled, considered the white interior of the building's small world with its indifferent eye.

Eva did not write. Not yet.

But she did not put the pen down.

The Posting

The train left Hlavní nádraží at half past seven. Marie knew this because Jan had told her, twice, as though the fact required witnesses. He had said it in the stairwell on Thursday and again through the door on Friday, his voice gone careful and level in the way a man's voice goes when he has used up all the ordinary things and is reduced to timetables. She had not opened the door. She had stood on her side of it with her hand flat against the wood, close enough to feel the cold coming off the panel, and listened to him not leave for a long time, and then leave.

This morning she stood at the window instead.

The chestnut was nothing now but black lines against a white sky — the kind of sky that had not yet decided between snow and the threat of it. The branches held their patient geometry. Below, the courtyard kept its winter self: the cobbler's shutters still down, the communal tap bound in burlap against the frost, the Party noticeboard with its newest exhortation bleached by rain to something approximate, a sentence you could no longer quite read but knew the shape of. A cat

went from one side to the other and did not stop for anything.

The clock above the stove said a quarter past eight. So he had been gone three quarters of an hour, give or take, and would go on being gone at the rate of sixty minutes to the hour, which was the only arithmetic she trusted herself to do this morning. Her mother had left for work. The flat made its usual small noises around her — a pipe ticking in the wall, the building settling its weight, a tram complaining around the corner of the street she could not see. She had not yet dressed. She stood in her housecoat at a window she had stood at a hundred times, watching a courtyard that contained, this morning, nothing in particular.

⁂

What she had said to him in September had been said through that same closed door, with the draught coming up the stairwell from below.

I am not suited to the life you are being asked to live. That much was true and could be defended. *I think you have known it longer than you have let yourself.* That was a small cruelty, and she had chosen it deliberately, because it was the one thing that might make him angry, and an angry man leaves more cleanly than a bewildered one. She had said nothing of his father, nor of the cadre file, nor of Helena Stejskalová, because to name any of those would have been to hand him an argument, and she had wanted, above all, not to be argued with.

She had wanted, very badly, to be argued with. She had been precise instead, because precision was the only armour she had ever been able to afford.

He had written her one letter, in September, and she had read it on the stairs before her mother could see, then carried it folded in her coat pocket until the paper softened and began to give at the creases. She could have set it down from memory: *I do not understand what I have done. Tell me what has changed and I will answer it. If there is a thing that can be undone, name it. I am not asking you to wait. I am asking you to explain.* The hand had been an engineer's hand, square and certain at the top of the page and less certain by the foot of it. She had answered him a hundred times, lying awake. She had not answered him once on paper.

She had seen him only once more, in October, crossing the courtyard with his collar turned up against a wind off the river. He had not looked toward her window. She had been grateful. She had not been grateful at all.

⁂

His father's Tatra was no longer parked on the street where it usually stood, its long dark flank catching the lamplight; she had registered the absence two days ago without meaning to, the way you register a tooth that has been pulled. So soudruh Vávra had come to oversee the move, or merely to be present at it, which in that family amounted to the same act performed with different faces.

Jan owned almost nothing. A drafting case. Some books. He had described his room to her once — the iron bed, the desk with the lamp that tilted on a stiff joint, the shelf where his grandfather's engineering manuals stood in their grey pre-war bindings — and she had built it so exactly in her mind that she had begun, lately, to misremember it as a room

she had been inside. She had never been inside it. She had loved a man for the better part of a year and never once seen where he slept, which told her something, she supposed, about the kind of love the times permitted people like her.

She went to the kitchen and made tea she did not drink and stood holding the cup until the warmth went out of it and into her hands and then out of her hands as well.

⁂

By nine the sky had settled on snow after all — small dry flakes, businesslike, falling without any suggestion of drama. The courtyard took them in without comment. A fine whitening gathered along the chestnut's upper branches, along the one horizontal limb she had watched all autumn, the limb that in May had carried such a weight of green and candled blossom that it had seemed structurally impossible, a thing that ought to have come down under its own abundance and somehow had not.

She dressed. She made the bed. These were the tasks the morning offered and she did them in their order.

On the shelf in the wardrobe, behind her winter coat, there was a shoebox. She had put it there in September and had not lifted the lid since, though she had thought of it daily and had twice added to it — feeding the folded pages in at the side without disturbing what already lay there. She knew their number without counting because she had written every one. Five. This morning, if she finished the thing she had begun in November, there would be six.

She took the box down and set it on the bed and sat beside it and did not open it.

She sat for a while in the flat white light coming off the snow, and she thought about the letter from October — the one about the chestnut in May, and the afternoon they had walked the embankment and Jan had defended Dvořák with an ardour so far beyond anything the argument deserved that she had laughed at him, and he had not minded being laughed at, had in fact seemed to like it, which was the moment, if she was honest, that had decided everything. She had written that letter from memory because the memory was still a thing she could put her hand on, and she had not, in October, been ready to stop being able to put her hand on it.

He is on a train, she thought.

This is the last morning in which he is only an hour away.

This, she thought, *is precisely the kind of thought that does no one any good,* and she made herself stand up.

⁂

The letter she had begun in November, when the first hard cold came down on the city, was about none of that. It was the one she could not have said aloud to his face.

That she had known, from the first week of September, exactly what she was doing and exactly why; that the knowing had not made it easier but had made it possible at all. That she was not brave, and had never claimed to be — only practical in the particular way that people grow practical after things have already been taken from them. Her father's shop in Pardubice, signed over with a fountain pen by a man in a good coat. Her place at the university, withdrawn twice by someone she had never met, on the authority of a sentence in a file she was not permitted to read. The losses you survive

teach you their own kind of arithmetic, and the lesson she had learned from hers was this: that a loss done to you can be carried, but a ruin you have caused to someone else is a debt of an entirely different denomination. She could not carry his career. She could not carry his father's fall, because that fall would have had her name written under it, and it would have been the one thing in her life she could never afterward set right.

All of this she had written, in her small even hand, on the cheap paper the publishing house never missed.

She had not sent it. Sending it would have made it real in the world rather than only on the page, where it could still be unmade. Sending it could be opened, copied, filed, made to mean something it did not mean. And sending it — this was the truest reason, the one she had not written down even in the letter about the truth — might have weakened her enough to let him answer it.

She picked up the box and weighed it in both hands. It was lighter than it had any right to be, she thought, for everything it was being asked to hold.

She lifted the lid. She read none of them; she had no need to read what she could recite. She laid the new pages on top of the others — the real letter, the explanation, the thing she would never say — and looked at it a moment, the way you look at a thing about which you have already decided and are only confirming the decision. Then she closed the box.

⁂

In the afternoon paní Dvořáčková from the second floor came up to borrow salt and stayed twenty minutes, and Marie

made the right sounds about the weather and the ration and the nephew's new position at the ČKD works, and saw her out, and went back to the window. The snow had stopped. The courtyard lay white and very quiet, and the chestnut stood in the middle of it making no apology for anything, bare and intricate and wholly itself.

She thought of the June afternoon when she and Jan had stood in that same courtyard after the work-brigade — the brigade that had been his professional reason to be in the building and her only doorway to him — and he had tipped his head back and pointed up the stairwell to where the fifth tread had gone soft with rot, and explained, in his engineer's voice, about load distribution: how a building of this age does not stand still but goes on quietly redistributing its weight across the decades, settling, easing pressure off one member and onto another, adjusting itself in increments too slow for anyone living in it to feel. She had listened, and watched his hands describe the thing, and thought, neutrally, as a fact about him: *here is a man who understands how things hold together.* She had thought it and gone up and made her mother's tea and not thought of it again, until the day came when she thought of nothing else.

Load distribution. Settlement. The slow honest work of a structure carrying weight it had not chosen, finding the way to go on standing.

She would be all right. She knew this much about herself, and it was not a romantic thing to know but it was a reliable one: that she was built to adjust. She had adjusted to the shop and the file and the smaller life, and she would adjust to a train that had left at half past seven. The letters would stay in the box and the box would stay on the shelf, and one day

— not soon, but one day — she would stop adding to them. That had always been the plan. The plan had turned out to have a great many limits, but it still had a shape, and the shape was this.

She was twenty-three. She had her work, and her mother, and the flat, and the window onto the chestnut. She had her excessive interior weather and her two hundred and twelve pages of a novel she would show no one, kept folded among the winter blankets in the trunk at the foot of the bed. These were the materials available to her. She considered them honestly and found that they were not nothing.

Outside, the chestnut held its winter shape against the white — every branch in its appointed place, exactly where it would be again in spring when the green came back, as it would, because that is simply the nature of chestnuts. They do not wait to be watched. They keep what they keep, through the cold, and put it out again when the season turns, whether or not anyone is at the window to see.

She left the window.

She left the box on the shelf where it had been.

She put on her coat, and went to work.

The Staircase Is Finished

The seventh stair no longer creaked.

Eva stood on it that morning for a full minute, pressing her weight from heel to ball, before she accepted that the sound was simply gone. Adam had replaced the two damaged treads the week before, fitted new balusters, re-pinned the newel post, and now the staircase rose from the ground floor to the fourth in a clean spiral that did not shift or groan or speak. It was beautiful. It was, she thought, a small and private catastrophe.

She was being absurd, and she knew she was being absurd, which only made it worse.

She went back up to make coffee she didn't want and stood at the kitchen window looking down into the courtyard. The chestnut was still bare — it had been bare since October — but the scaffolding that had shrouded the southern face of the building since September was gone, taken down in sections over three days, and the courtyard felt suddenly enlarged, as though a long sentence had finally found its full stop. Pan Šťastný's window was dark. The wine bar across the way had not yet opened; its chalkboard listed spe-

cials she'd stopped reading weeks ago. A pigeon worked its way along the second-floor gallery railing with a kind of resigned authority.

She heard Adam on the stairs.

His footsteps had weight but no carelessness — she'd learned to tell them from the upstairs neighbours', from the landlord's occasional visits, from the postman who always stopped on the second-floor landing to sort. Adam climbed without hurrying and without apology. She had a feeling, after these past months of listening, that this was simply how he moved through the world.

She listened for the creak that had oriented her since autumn, the one stair that announced anyone coming up, and there was only the clean sound of a man ascending a well-made staircase.

She poured a second cup and set it on the table.

He knocked — the abbreviated knock they'd arrived at, perfunctory, more announcement than request — and she called for him to come in.

"It's done," he said, from the doorway.

He had sawdust along one forearm. He was wearing the older of his two work jackets, the one with the torn pocket he'd sewn back with twine that didn't quite match, and he was holding his toolbag in a way that meant he'd carried it the whole way up — not set it down and retrieved it, but kept it in his hand, ready.

"I saw," she said. "The stair."

"The newel post will want another look in spring. The wood needs to settle through the cold before I can be sure of the fit." He said this to the middle distance, not quite at her.

"I'll leave you a name. Someone who can sort it if there's any movement."

"Right," said Eva. "Yes."

She gestured at the coffee. He came in and set the toolbag against the wall — not in the kitchen, which would have meant staying, but not back outside the door either — and picked up the cup. He drank standing. She was standing too. They were both standing in her small kitchen at half past eight in the morning like two people waiting for a tram.

"It looks good," she said. "The staircase. Really."

"The original builder knew what he was doing. The proportions were right the whole time. It just needed —" He made a small motion with his free hand. *To be attended to,* she finished, silently. "It hadn't been touched since the sixties, near as I can tell. Maybe longer."

"The sixties," she said.

"There was a repair to the third and fourth treads. Different wood — cheaper grade. Someone doing a patch job." He was looking at the table, at the cup; she knew he wasn't looking at the shoebox, because the shoebox was no longer on the table. She'd moved it to the wardrobe two weeks ago, a decision she hadn't examined. She thought of it anyway. *Someone doing a patch job.* The whole of 1963 reduced to a tread and a half of inferior timber.

"I read somewhere," she said carefully, "that in 1968 there was a work brigade. For the building. Before a family moved out."

Adam looked at her properly for the first time since he'd come in.

"Possible," he said. "The repair would fit."

Neither of them said anything for a moment.

"Thank you," she said. "For the staircase. For all of it."

He put the cup down. He picked up the toolbag. He said, "It's been a good project." And then, because this was apparently all they were going to manage, he said goodbye and went out into the hall, and she heard his footsteps going down the staircase he had rebuilt — clean and even, not a word out of place — and the street door at the bottom closed with its usual definitive clunk, and that was that.

⁂

She washed both cups.

She wiped the counter, which didn't need it, and then wiped it again in case she'd missed a corner.

Then she went to the wardrobe and took out the shoebox and put it on the table and sat down.

The flat was very quiet. February quiet, a specific kind: not the packed, insulated silence of deep winter but the thin-walled silence of a winter running out of conviction. She could hear traffic on the street beyond the courtyard, a long way off. She could hear the particular frequencies of the building settling, which she'd come to know the way she knew the storage rooms at the museum — a creak in the southeast corner that meant a change in temperature, a low groan from the roof that meant nothing at all, the reliable drip from the gutter outside the bedroom window that the landlord had twice promised to fix.

She did not open the box.

She sat with her hands on either side of it and looked at the wall where the skirting board had been loose and was now sound — Adam had refitted it in October, an act of small

restoration well outside his commission, unremarked, typical — and she thought about what she had just done.

Or rather, about what she had not done.

She had not said: *are you coming back*. She had not said: *I don't want this to stop*. She had not said any of the dozen reasonable, unremarkable things a person might say to another person with whom she had spent three months of mornings, and one long evening in November going through building records at the archive on Milady Horákové, and a cold afternoon in December eating soup from a thermos on the landing while he told her about a commission in Vinohrady, a cabinet of cherry wood — and she had listened with a quality of attention she hadn't given anything but the letters in months. She had not said those things. She had stood in her kitchen and accepted goodbye as if it were the only available ending and watched him go.

The letters sat under her hands.

She was extremely good at not doing things.

She was, she thought, examining this with a conservator's cold eye, a specialist in the preservation of difficult objects through controlled inaction. She could stabilise a situation. Hold a steady temperature. Arrest deterioration. What she could not do, apparently, was introduce a new element. Alter a single condition. Risk the thing she was preserving by actually touching it.

She put her hands in her lap.

She thought about Marie, who had watched this courtyard from this window — this window, the same view, the same chestnut, the same geometry of rooflines — and said nothing. Marie, who had written letters she could never send. Marie, who had made the calculation: speak and risk him, stay silent

and lose him. And who had lost him anyway — to the silence, to the system, to the marriage she'd steered him toward precisely by never explaining why she stepped aside.

Eva had a divorce and a rented flat and a box of someone else's grief.

She had no cadre file. No class origin that could end a man's career. No functionary's daughter waiting in the wings, no father-in-law with a list of the suitable and the unsuitable. None of the machinery that had closed around Marie and Jan like a fist.

She had only herself. Her own machinery. Her own practised, polished, entirely self-sufficient capacity not to say the thing.

The weight of it settled in her chest, almost physical — not dramatic, nothing that needed weeping at a window, only the precise pressure of recognising something you cannot afford to recognise. She had looked at the photograph in the archive, the grainy one from the building-committee records, and she had studied Marie's face — composed, careful, giving nothing away — and thought, with a muffled shock, *I know what you look like from the inside.*

And then she had told herself she was projecting.

And now she was sitting in Marie's kitchen — her kitchen, a coincidence of tenancy, nothing more — having said a pleasant goodbye to a man who had built her staircase and eaten her soup and once, in December, when she'd made some dry sideways remark about the archive's indexing, had laughed in a way that left her briefly, specifically glad to be alive. And she had let him leave, and locked the silence behind him, and called it nothing.

⁂

The thing about restoration — the thing they teach you, the thing you learn again every time you take a damaged piece of textile under your hands — is that the fabric itself tells you what it needs. You don't impose. You listen. You read how the warp runs, where the weft has failed, which fibres are sound and which have been stressed past their tolerance, and you learn the object's logic and work within it.

The damage in front of her now had its own logic.

She had spent the autumn and winter being careful. Careful about the flat — low expectations, no improvements, nothing that would make it too much hers. Careful about her evenings — museum work, the letters, the archive, nothing that resembled a life she was building. Careful about Adam — friendly, interested, warm in a way she could pass off as ordinary courtesy, retreating the moment the warmth threatened to mean something she had no permission to name.

She had been so careful.

She opened the box.

The letters lay as she'd left them, the photocopies on top, the originals in their acid-free folders beneath. She didn't read them — she knew them now the way she knew her own hand, could have rebuilt whole passages word for word — but she looked at them. Laid them out on the table in order.

The first fragment, that half-a-thing she'd drawn from the wall in October, with its sudden dearness and its broken mid-sentence, which had started all of this. The summer letter, the chestnut in bloom. The warning, with its mention of the Tatra, the first sign of what was circling. The refusal — writ-

ten the night she sent him away, explaining to the page the reason she could never say to his face.

She will not be the weight that sinks him.

Eva sat with that sentence a long time.

She turned it over. She tried it from different angles, the way she'd hold a textile to different lights, looking for where it had been mended, and how, and why.

She will not be the weight.

It was generous. It was also, entirely, devastatingly wrong.

Because the weight was already there. It had been there the moment they fell in love over the staircase repairs, there in every spring afternoon by the river, there in every letter Marie wrote and sealed and put away instead of sending. The weight didn't come from the truth. It came from the silence around it. Marie had decided — decided, without asking Jan, without letting him decide for himself — what he could bear. She had made herself smaller to keep him safe, and then she had watched him go.

And he had gone. And he had never known why. And the smallness had lasted sixty years.

Eva looked at the kitchen wall. At the mended skirting board. At the window, and the courtyard beyond it, cold and ordinary, the pigeon still patrolling the second-floor railing with the same resigned authority.

The flat was very quiet.

She thought: *I did that this morning. With my own hands, no one's file, no one's system. I made myself smaller, left the thing unsaid, and watched him go.*

The difference was that it was barely nine o'clock. He was in a van somewhere across Prague. He had a daughter to collect from school and a cherry-wood cabinet to finish and a

staircase on Dvořákova he would drive past sometimes and feel the plain satisfaction of a thing well made. He had not yet crossed any of the distances Marie had watched Jan cross — the posting, the train, the marriage, the decade.

It was barely nine o'clock.

Eva put the letters back in the box, in order, and set the lid on.

She did not move for a moment.

Then she reached for her coat.

Jan's Door

The tram took her to the end of the line and then she walked, because she needed the cold.

Dejvice in February was different from Žižkov the way money is different from the lack of it — quietly, in the materials of things. The buildings here sat back from the street with a certain confidence. Lime-rendered façades, properly maintained; no crumbling cornices, no scaffolding held together by optimism and orange netting. The cars parked along Bubenečská were not apologizing for themselves. Eva walked with her hands in her coat pockets and the shoebox under one arm, aware in the precise, almost clinical way she registered things she did not want to feel that she had spent forty minutes on the tram rehearsing a sentence she could not finish.

Pan Vávra, my name is —

And then what.

The address Lenka had given her was a thirties building, ochre, four floors, a raised portal with a small brass board of residents' names. Not unlike Dvořákova 14 in its proportions, though this building wore its age better: someone had invest-

ed in it, in its window frames and its intercom and the little pots of something — rosemary, she thought — on the first-floor sill. Eva stopped at the portal and read the board. *Vávra, J.* Third floor, left. She stood in front of the intercom for what she afterward estimated at four minutes, though it might have been less. Time does strange things in front of a decision.

The shoebox was under her arm. She had wrapped it in a piece of undyed linen cut from a length she kept for conservation work — clean, acid-free. She had done it without thinking, the way she wrapped anything fragile, and it was not until the tram, the parcel on her lap, that she understood what the wrapping meant. You wrapped a thing for transport. Transport implied a destination. Her hands had voted before her mind had agreed to hold the ballot.

She pressed the button.

She heard it ring — a distant, civil buzz somewhere up and behind the wall — and she released it at once, before it could sound a second time, and stepped back, and walked away down Bubenečská at a pace slightly too brisk for someone who had somewhere to be and much too purposeful for someone who hadn't.

⁂

There was a café three streets away. She had not meant to go in, but the window threw amber onto the pavement and the cold had turned specific — not the bearable, general cold of a winter afternoon but the pointed kind that finds the gap between collar and scarf. She ordered a coffee she didn't want

and sat at a corner table with the shoebox on the chair beside her, like a person she'd brought along and was now ignoring.

The café was unremarkable. Students with laptops, a woman reading a novel with a broken spine, the low recorded sound of something Scandinavian and built around a guitar. Prague in the twenty-first century, conducting itself. Eva put her hands round the cup and looked at the box and understood, with a clarity that felt less like revelation than like the lifting of a fog she'd been calling weather, exactly what she had just done on that doorstep.

She had pressed the button and let go.

She had not waited one ring. Pressed and released in the same motion, the way you touch something hot.

She thought of Marie — not of any one letter but of Marie as she had assembled her across the autumn and winter: the exact typist's hand, the wry control, the way the sentences grew more formal as the woman writing them grew more decided, the lines that broke off in the middle because finishing them would have made them too true. Marie, who had loved Jan Vávra and sent him away without a reason, and then written the reasons, over and over, into letters she sealed inside a wall.

She thought: *Marie had the system to blame.*

A cadre file. A father's confiscated shop. A class enemy's daughter, which was not a figure of speech but a box someone had ticked in a ledger. The regime had made the arithmetic look almost clean, for all that it was brutal: to love Jan was to cost him everything. There was a structure to it, a logic, and Eva had always understood that even while she resented it — the way the era had tidied its own cruelty into a kind of grammar, so that the people caught inside it could

reason their way, sentence by reasonable sentence, to their own diminishment.

But Eva Kratochvílová, forty-one, textile conservator, divorced eight months from a man she had not fought with and had not left in love with and had simply, quietly, stopped — Eva lived in a republic. A messy, arguing, alive one. No one had written anything against her in a file. No one's career rested on whom she chose. The flat at Dvořákova 14 was hers because she paid the rent out of her own salary; the letters were hers to carry or to leave; and Adam Beneš had stood in her hallway the previous afternoon with his tools in a canvas bag and said — precisely, quietly, in the voice of a man reaching for ordinary words because the other kind were not available to him — *the seventh stair shouldn't give you any trouble now* — and she had said *thank you*, and he had nodded and gone, and she had shut the door and sat down on the hall floor and stayed there for a while.

No structure had done that. No file. No father's confiscated anything.

She had done it to herself.

⁂

She ordered a second coffee she also wouldn't finish and took out her notebook. It was a habit from work: she thought better with her hand moving, as if the pen drained something. She wrote: *Jan Vávra, b. ~1937. Third floor left. His name on the intercom — for how long?*

She stopped, and wrote: *Lenka said her mother was never bitter.*

She had asked her about it carefully, over tea in a Vinohrady kitchen that smelled of lavender fabric softener and something baking, a week after Lenka had read the letters — all eight, in one sitting, while Eva looked at the window and listened to the other woman's breathing change. What Lenka had said, after a silence of several minutes, was: *Máma nikdy nebyla hořká.* My mother was never bitter. She said it with the slight bewilderment of someone for whom this had always been a fact without a cause, and for whom the cause had just, sixty years late, walked in.

Eva had asked: *Do you want me to find him?*

And Lenka had looked at the letters on the table — Marie's hand, Jan's name standing alone at the head of a page she had never finished, never sent, *Miláčku* at the top of seven of the eight — and said: *I think Máma kept them so that someone would.*

So that was settled. Lenka's consent, plain and given freely. The address, which had cost Eva three weeks of careful, faintly clumsy record-searching at the registrar's, two telephone calls, and one visit to a local-history archivist who turned the thing up in twenty minutes and made her feel like a detective in a novel she'd have abandoned by chapter four. An afternoon in February. An ochre building. A brass board. *Vávra, J.*

She had pressed the button and let go.

She closed the notebook.

⁂

The woman with the broken-spined novel glanced up, as if Eva had made a sound. Eva had made no sound. She sat very

still and allowed herself, at last, to know the thing she had been walking the rim of since she turned from the portal.

She was afraid of what she might do to him.

Not cruelty — she had never quite thought the letters cruel, though she had turned the question often enough in the small hours. Jan Vávra was eighty-six. He had been married to Helena Vávrová more than fifty years; Helena had died four years ago, and Lenka had told her so with a gentleness that meant she understood why it mattered. He was eighty-six and lived alone in a kept flat in Dejvice, with rosemary on a sill two floors below his, and Eva proposed to arrive at his door and hand him sixty years of proof that the woman he had believed chose safety over him had loved him entirely, and had sacrificed herself to spare him a cost he never knew she had seen.

What did a person do with that. At eighty-six — what did a person do with being told that the wound was not the wound he'd named; that the leaving had been the opposite of leaving; that the whole decent, hollow length of his life — the suitable marriage, the posting, the advancement, the lot of it — had been bought at a price paid on his behalf and kept from him.

Was that a gift.

Or was it the other thing — the thing she'd suspected at three in the morning, lying awake on Dvořákova while the wind worried at the shutter she still hadn't fixed: that some boxes are made to stay sealed; that some truths come too late to do anything but open the skin again; that Marie had been right to hide them and Eva was only dressing her own obsession as a duty and calling the costume *obligation*.

She looked at the shoebox. The linen. Her conservator's hands.

She thought: this is what you do when you are afraid of something alive.

You attend, very carefully, to something old.

She thought of the seventh stair, how it no longer creaked; how she had stood on it that morning only to feel the place where the sound had been. She thought of Adam in the courtyard last month, his hand on the newel, describing what the original maker had done — the exact set of the mortise, the angle of it — his voice doing the thing it did when he forgot to be helpful and was only interested, dropping half a register, slowing. She thought of standing beside him and watching his hand on the wood.

She had done nothing with that either.

She had been so careful to be his colleague in the letters, and his neighbour, and his friend; she had measured her words with the precision she brought to the dating of cloth — correct, conserved, handled as little as the work allowed. She had told herself it was kindness. She had told herself it was realism. She had told herself a great many things, all of them reasonable, every one of them calibrated to spare her the embarrassment of wanting something she might not be permitted to have.

And then he had packed his tools and said *the seventh stair shouldn't give you any trouble now*, and gone, and the flat had been so quiet she had heard the gutter drip.

No system. No file. No father's shop.

I did this, she thought. *I made Marie's bargain without Marie's reason. I left it in the wall.*

⁂

She paid for both coffees, put the notebook in her bag, and picked up the box.

Outside, Bubenečská was doing what February streets do in the late afternoon — going grey, going home. A tram sounded somewhere to her left. She stood on the pavement and looked toward the ochre building she could no longer quite see from here, and she held the box, and for a moment she only stood with it.

She was not going back today, and she understood that this was not defeat. She would not arrive on that old man's threshold carrying urgency and guilt and call it a gift; she needed to go back certain that what she brought was for him — actually for him, and not for her own accounting. She was not there yet. She needed a day, perhaps two, to find the words — her own, not Marie's — for why a person deserves to know he was loved. And she would go back. She was sure of it now in a way she had not been sure of anything in — she counted, without meaning to — in eight months, since she had carried a box of her own things up a wooden staircase to a Žižkov flat and let herself in and stood in the smell of lime plaster and coal dust and thought: *well. Here.*

She would go back for Jan Vávra.

And she would — before that, or after it, or in some interval of nerve she hadn't yet found room for in the diary — do something about Adam.

She would not leave it in the wall.

The thought came with such ordinary plainness that she nearly waved it off, and then didn't. She held it instead, the way she held fragile cloth: flat-palmed, no gripping. *I will tell*

him. Not a question, not a sentence she'd composed in advance. Only the fact of it, the future tense of it, and the particular ease that follows a decision made far too long after it should have been.

She turned toward the tram stop, the box under her arm, the linen rumpled at one corner, her breath showing in the cold — small, even, hers.

The chestnut at Dvořákova 14 would have bare branches in this light. She knew exactly what the courtyard would be when she came home to it: the old cobbles wet, the watchmaker's window already lit, the new wood on the staircase giving off linseed where Adam had worked it. The seventh stair silent under her foot.

She knew what she was going back to.

She took the tram.

The Years Between

Oldřich Mareš was not a difficult man to marry. That was, perhaps, the point.

He came with references, as the older women at the nakladatelství would have said — steady work with the city tram authority, a mother already dead and therefore no obstacle, a small inherited flat in Vinohrady, a laugh that arrived slowly and meant it. He ate soup in a way Marie found, for reasons she did not examine, consoling: deliberate, unhurried, as though soup deserved full attention. She knew him four months before she agreed, and nine before the wedding, and by then she understood with complete clarity what she was choosing and what she was not.

They married in November 1965 at the registry office in Žižkov. Her mother wore the navy dress kept for occasions requiring both dignity and endurance. The chestnut in the courtyard had dropped its leaves in October and stood bare above the cobbles. Marie wore a suit she had made herself from a length of dark red wool, sourced through a colleague who knew someone at a warehouse in Holešovice. Oldřich cried, briefly and without apology, which surprised her, and

in the small registry room she held his arm and felt something true and quiet and without fever in it, and thought: *good*. This is a thing I can do.

She had been at the flat in Dvořákova 14 for two years past the autumn that ended everything. She had watched the chestnut come and go twice more. She had seen Jan Vávra once, in the spring of 1964, at a distance — crossing Seifertova in his good coat, a woman beside him whose step was careful and arranged. Helena. Marie had recognized her from a photograph in the bulletin the nakladatelství received on the occasion of certain Party milestones, her father's name mentioned. She had stood at the tram stop and watched them cross, and Jan had not looked her way, and she had not called out, and the tram had come and carried her to Florenc, and she had walked the rest of the way to work in the April cold. That evening she had opened the box and sat with it a long time without writing anything, then closed it again and put it under the floorboard where her winter coat had been stored, because there was nowhere else.

She had not, as she sometimes imagined people believed, stopped loving him all at once. It was slower than that. Not a stopping but a learning to carry — the way you learn, after enough time, to walk with an injury without showing it in the gait.

⁂

The flat in Vinohrady was smaller than her mother's but had better light. Marie brought her books, her mother's embroidered tablecloth, and the shoebox. She told Oldřich nothing about the box. It went under the bed in its old place, then,

when they rearranged the bedroom that spring, onto the high shelf behind her winter things. Oldřich was not an incurious man, but he was a respectful one. He did not investigate her shelves.

Their daughter was born in June 1967. They named her Helena — Oldřich had a grandmother by that name, and Marie raised no objection, only felt the small irony of it like a stone in a shoe she had already decided not to mention. The baby was bald and furious and extraordinarily loud, and Marie loved her with a fierceness that surprised her, that was nothing like the careful love she had allowed herself on Dvořákova, the love that had known from the first what it was costing. This love was reckless, unconditional, structurally unsound. She found she did not mind.

Her mother, visiting from Pardubice, held the baby and said, quietly, that Marie looked well. It was a Czech mother's highest available praise. Marie said thank you and meant it.

Oldřich became a good father in the way mild, patient men sometimes do — absorbed, suddenly, by something he had not known he was capable of. He read to Lenka from the time she was six months old, which struck everyone as eccentric and seemed to work. He brought home tram-line maps for her to study and explained the routes as though they mattered. He was happy. Marie watched him be happy and was, genuinely, glad of it. She was not performing the gladness. She was not telling herself a story. She understood, by then, the difference.

There were evenings in those years before '68 when the city outside seemed to take a slow breath — the magazines a little freer, the talk at the nakladatelství running longer and more careless, some new spirit moving through the offices

like a change in the pressure. She felt it and was wary of it. She had learned to read the weather.

She did not see Jan again. She knew, in the general way rumours moved through a city that size, that he had taken a posting in Bratislava, then come back; that he held a position at an institute; that his father-in-law had retired from his district post and Jan's path forward was less cleared for him than it had been, though he managed. He was not a man who would fail to manage. That had been her calculation, and it had been correct, and she tried not to examine whether being correct made it better or worse.

She kept writing to him. Less often now. Once a year, sometimes twice. The letters grew shorter and less urgent and, she thought, more honest — or perhaps it was that she had grown more honest, that the distance from those particular weeks had settled into something she could look at without squinting. She wrote him, on a January evening in 1967 with the baby turning in her, that she was going to have a child, that she was frightened and glad, that she thought of him sometimes the way you think of a door you once stood in front of and chose not to open — not with regret for the choosing, exactly, but with a clear sense that the door had been there, that the room behind it had been real.

She folded the letter and laid it in the box and closed the lid and thought: perhaps one day. Perhaps there would be a time for these to go to him. Not yet.

⁂

She found his letter on a Tuesday in September of 1967, the day she decided to clear the high shelf because a water stain

had appeared in the corner and she wanted things moved before the plaster gave. She took everything down: the spare blankets, the old hatbox, the shoebox, Oldřich's summer shoes in a paper bag. She opened the shoebox to check the letters inside for damp, and there, tucked beneath the others as though it had always lived there, was an envelope she had not put in.

She stood on the step stool with the box in her hands and for a moment did not move.

The envelope was thinner than hers, the paper a slightly different cream, and on the front, in a hand she knew the way you know a particular tram bell or a familiar cough across a courtyard — Jan's hand, careful and faintly sideways, the hand of an engineer who wanted to be precise in other things too — her name. Not her address. Only: *Marie.*

She came down from the stool and sat on the edge of the bed and opened it.

⁂

Marie —

I have started this letter four times and I am not certain I will send this one either, so I'll say what I want to say while the cowardice is still fresh and hasn't had time to convince me it's reason.

I am writing from the institute. It's evening, Vladimír has gone home, the building is quiet. I don't know where this falls in relation to anything you're living now. That's the thing about letters one doesn't send — they stop being about time.

I want to tell you that I understood more than you thought I did. Not then. Not for years. But there was a file. Štěpánek mentioned it once, and I understood what it meant, and I understood what I should

have understood in 1963 — what was in your file and what was in mine and the arithmetic of the two together. I understood that the door was one I could have walked through, if I had been willing to drag you through it with me. And that you, being you, would never let me do that.

I want to tell you that I spent a long time being angry at you for protecting me. Possibly I am still a little angry, though I know it is ridiculous. You were right that I would not have thought it through clearly. You were right that I would have tried. You knew me better than I knew myself, and I resent you for it and am grateful for it, and both of those feelings seem likely to go on for some time.

Helena is a good woman. I want you to know that I know it. What I have with her is not what I had — what I thought I was going to have. But it is real, and I have not been cruel to it. I have tried not to be hollow in it. Some days I succeed.

What I cannot do, what I have never managed — though God knows I have tried, the way you try to break a habit, substituting one thing for another until the original is buried well enough to function — is stop wondering what you would have said. If I had asked differently. If I had been braver. If the arithmetic had been other than it was.

I don't ask you to answer this. I'm not sending it. But I needed to say that I knew. That I always half-knew. That if there was a reason — and you were the kind of person who would have a reason — I forgive it, whatever it was. I forgive you for it and I forgive myself for not being the man you needed, and I don't know if either of those can reach you, but here they are, for the record.

Write to me, if you ever want. I'll know your handwriting.

— Jan

⁂

Marie sat on the edge of the bed a long time. Outside, the tram went by on Mánesova, its bell carrying up through the open September window. In the next room Lenka made the small sounds she made in sleep, cycling between complaint and ceasefire.

She did not know how the letter had come to be in the box. She turned the envelope over: nothing on the back, no postmark, no return address. She thought of the shoebox under the floorboard at Dvořákova 14, before the move. She thought of the building in Žižkov, of old pan Novák the concierge, dead in '65. She thought of the boy from the ground-floor flat, Bohumil, the watchmaker's apprentice — she had once seen him standing in the courtyard looking up at her window in a way that suggested he was deciding whether to knock, and had decided not to. None of it explained anything. Or all of it did.

She read the letter again. Then once more.

I forgive you for it.

She had not asked for forgiveness. She had not wanted it, had not required it. She had made her calculation and carried it and built a life around the carrying that was, she believed, genuinely real. But the word found something she had thought she was finished with, and she sat with it a long time — not weeping; she was not weeping, only sitting very still — until Lenka woke and called out in the pre-language of infants, and Marie set the letter down and went to her daughter.

She added Jan's letter to the box. She did not write a reply.

⁂

In March of 1968 the air in the offices changed again, and then again, more sharply, like a key turning. People spoke as though they half-believed the speaking was allowed. The nakladatelství took on a manuscript that would have been unthinkable in 1963. Vera, at the next desk, wept reading it, which would also have been unthinkable in 1963. Marie read it and said nothing and felt the thing she had trained herself not to feel, which was hope, because hope was more dangerous than its absence.

In August the thing the air had promised did not arrive, or arrived only the way a fall arrives — through the air, and briefly.

Oldřich came home from the depot and stood in the kitchen doorway and told her. Lenka was asleep. They stood together a while without speaking, and Marie made tea and set it on the table and thought: *well.* Well.

By September it was clear they were being reassigned — Oldřich's route changed, certain colleagues at the nakladatelství simply gone. In November a supervisor she had trusted was replaced by a man she recognized as the kind who appeared when the weather turned. She typed his correspondence with her usual accuracy and went home on the tram and looked at the flat in Vinohrady — the baby things, the maps, her tablecloth, the books — and thought about what one keeps and what one leaves behind.

They did not move at once. These things take time. But she knew, by winter, that they would.

In January of 1969, before Oldřich had confirmed the posting back to Pardubice — his aunt had a larger flat there, and certain questions would be asked less often — Marie took the shoebox from the shelf and sat with it at the kitchen table.

She thought about burning it. She thought about it carefully and practically and found she could not — not because the letters weren't hers to burn, which they were, but because something in her would not make them not have existed. They had existed. Whatever had happened, whatever would now happen, these words had been real, and they could stay real without cost if she was the only one who knew.

She thought of Jan's letter, and the fact of it: *I always half-knew.*

She put the letters back in order. She set Jan's at the bottom, since it had arrived last — or perhaps had always been last; it was hard to say now. She took out the letter she had been writing, the unfinished one, the one she had never found the end of, and laid it on top of the others, still mid-sentence, the page trailing off where certainty had left her. She thought she might finish it later. She did not.

She closed the lid and held the box in both hands a moment, in the way you hold a thing you are about to set down but have not set down yet.

Then she went back to the flat on Dvořákova 14 one last time, on the pretext of a book left behind. She let herself in with the key she had kept against improbable return. The flat was empty, a film of dust on the sills, the smell of old plaster and coal and someone else's cooking already layering over the years that had been hers. The skirting board in the back room was loose where it had always been loose, where the draft came in from whatever gap lived inside the wall.

She pressed the box into the dark behind it and knocked the board back into place with the heel of her hand.

She stood. The afternoon light came through the third-floor window the way it always had, at the same angle, catch-

ing the last bare branches of the chestnut in the courtyard below.

She was thirty years old. She had a husband who read to their daughter, a coat she had made herself, a cadre file she had never been permitted to see, and a city changing again in a direction no one had chosen.

She turned from the window, and walked out, and closed the door, and left the key under the mat for whoever came next.

Telling Adam

The workshop smelled of linseed oil and cold February, and Eva stood in the doorway a moment longer than she needed to, telling herself she was letting her eyes adjust.

Adam was at the far end with his back to her, planing the edge of a cabinet door clamped in the bench. The sound was unhurried — the long drag of the blade, a pause, the brush of his palm across the grain. Sawdust on his shoulders. A radio somewhere, too low to place, only the murmur of a woman's voice reading something that wasn't news.

She had rehearsed this on the tram. Three versions, each longer and worse than the one before.

"Door's open," he said, without turning.

"I know. I came in."

He set the plane down and turned, and something in his face rearranged itself when he saw her — not surprise, exactly, but a settling. She had learned to read him in small increments over these months, the way she read cloth: by angle, by tension, by what the weave did where it had been stressed.

"Eva." He wiped his hands on the cloth from the bench. "I wasn't expecting you."

“I texted.”

“You texted that you might come by.”

“Well.” She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. “Here I am.”

The workshop was a ground-floor unit on a side street two stops from Dvořákova 14, rented from a man who had gone to Brno and not come back. The lease was month to month, and Adam seemed easy with that, the way he was easy with most things that would have made her restless. Two long benches, a wall of hand tools ranged by size, a rack of clamps like a small iron forest, and in the back corner a kettle and a jar of coffee already open. She had been here three times, and had memorised the layout more thoroughly than three visits warranted.

“Coffee?”

“Please.”

He went to the corner and she stayed where she was, looking at the cabinet door in the clamp. Old lime wood, very pale, with a section of edge that had swollen and dried unevenly — she could see where the grain had opened and been filled, carefully, with something that matched the colour almost exactly. Almost.

“You’re looking at the fill,” he said.

“It’s good.”

“It’s not perfect.”

“Nothing is.”

The kettle began its low complaint. She heard him measure two cups without asking whether she would stay long enough to drink one. It would have been considerate of him to ask. She was glad he hadn’t.

She sat on the stool he kept near the door and held her bag on her lap and looked at the window, where the February light came through in flat grey slabs. A woman went past pushing a buggy. A delivery van idled. The ordinary world, managing itself without her.

"The letter," she said. "The one in a different hand."

He came back with the cups and set hers on the near edge of the bench, far enough that she had to lean forward for it.

"Jan's letter," he said.

"You remembered."

"You've mentioned it twice."

She wrapped both hands around the cup. The room wasn't cold so much as it held last night's cold in its stone floor; she could feel it through her boots.

"His was never in the box," she said. "It was tucked behind it, in a separate envelope. The others are Marie's — they stay together, they're a private record. But his came to be there some other way. Someone put it there." She turned the cup. "Maybe her. Maybe he sent it and it came back. I don't know. I keep going in circles."

He leaned against the bench and drank his coffee and watched her with the quality of attention she had come to find almost unbearable — not pressing, only present, the kind that assumed you would finish your sentence and was willing to wait for it.

"You didn't come to talk about the letter," he said.

The radiator made a sound like a small, resigned breath.

"No," she said. "I came to talk about several things. In a particular order."

"Eva."

"Don't laugh."

"I'm not laughing."

He wasn't. He was watching her with what she could only call care, and it was precisely that which made it hard to go on.

"I've found Jan Vávra," she said. "The man the letters were written to. He's alive. Eighty-six, a flat in Dejvice, a daughter in Brno. Lenka — Marie's daughter — has agreed. She thinks he should have them."

Adam put his cup down. "You found him."

"Through the engineering union. He was a structural engineer; he's in their records. After that it was almost easy." She had not told him this part. The finding had happened last week, in an archive, in a single afternoon, and she had walked out into the street feeling she had done something that couldn't be undone, which she had.

"I need to ask you something," she said. "Whether you'd come with me. When I take the box. You know the building's history better than I do, and —" She heard the shape of the excuse and abandoned it. "That's not the reason."

He waited.

"I don't want to go alone," she said. "That's the reason."

The radio murmured. The van had gone.

"Of course," he said. "When?"

"March. After the staircase is finished."

"The staircase will be finished by the fifteenth."

"Then after the fifteenth."

She had braced for more — a negotiation, an argument for why it wasn't an imposition. He had simply said yes. She turned the cup in her hands and found she had more to say and less idea how to say it than when she'd come in.

⁂

She heard the back door before it opened, and then Klára was there in her school jacket with her headphones round her neck, her face moving through surprise into the careful neutrality teenagers kept for being caught feeling anything.

"Oh," she said. "Hi."

"Hello." Eva straightened on the stool. "I didn't know you'd be here."

"Dad gets me on Tuesdays." She looked at him. "I texted."

"I didn't hear it." He was already crossing to her, a brief touch to her shoulder in the compact way parents kept with daughters who wanted to manage their own distance. "There's coffee, if you'd rather have tea."

"There isn't any tea."

"There might be."

Klára dropped her bag and went to investigate the corner, and Eva watched the small domestic exchange and felt herself recalibrate without quite meaning to. This was what she was asking to enter. Not in the abstract — this Tuesday, this specific sixteen-year-old who missed her mother and was not ready to trust anyone new with the fact.

She had thought about Klára more than Adam knew. She thought about her the way she thought about difficult work: the material sound, the damage real, the question never whether she could bear it but whether it was right to try. Whether Klára's interest in the letters these past months meant anything, or was only the interest a sharp girl would take in any old mystery, with no Eva in it at all.

"She found Jan," Adam said. "The man from the letters."

Klára turned, the wariness giving way to something briefly unguarded. “Seriously?”

“Eighty-six,” Eva said. “We’re taking him the box in March.”

“‘We’ meaning you and Dad?”

“If he’ll come.”

Klára looked at her father. He looked at the cabinet door in the clamp. A whole conversation passed between them with nothing said, and Eva could only watch its edges.

“Can I come?”

“That,” Adam said, “is up to Eva. It’s her find.”

He said it without inflection, without steering, and she understood he had handed her something and was waiting to see what she did with it.

“Yes,” she said. “If you want to.”

Klára nodded once, as though a minor administrative matter had been settled, and went back to the kettle.

⁂

He walked her out. The street was quiet, the sky the colour of old typing paper, and they stood on the pavement in the awkwardness of a conversation that hadn’t finished.

“The thing about needing you for the building’s history,” Eva said. “That was true as well. Not only an excuse.”

“I know.”

“I’m telling you so you don’t think —” She stopped. “I spend a great deal of time not finishing sentences.”

“I’ve noticed.”

He was looking down the street, where a tram had come round the bend, its light amber in the grey. There was still

sawdust on his left shoulder. She had wanted to brush it off, earlier, and hadn't.

"There's something else," she said.

The tram came past close enough that she felt the air it moved, and for a moment its noise made speech impossible. She waited. He waited. It went on.

"The letters," she said. "Marie never told him the real reason. She protected him from knowing what it cost her, and she called it love, and perhaps it was. But it was also a kind of cowardice, and I think she knew that. I think the unfinished one is where she knew it."

Adam looked at her now.

"I've been doing a version of the same thing," she said.

The silence between them was not empty. It held its shape under pressure, the way certain old cloth does, threadbare and still sound.

"Not the political part — it doesn't compare like that. Only — I've kept things unsaid because saying them felt like a risk I had no right to take. Because of Klára. Because you're still —" She heard herself reaching for precision where plainness would have done, and could not stop. "Because I didn't know."

"Eva."

"I'm nearly finished."

"I know. Go on."

She looked at the empty bench at the stop, the torn corner of a poster for a concert that had happened in October. She thought of the letter in Jan's hand, written years too late — proof that the unsaid word doesn't dissolve, only turns inward and lives there instead.

“If I was going to fault a woman for keeping silent to protect someone,” she said, “I ought at least to be consistent about it.”

“You’re not presuming,” he said.

She looked at him.

“You’re not,” he said again, quietly, as if she might need it twice — and as if he had known for some time that this would arrive, and had been waiting the way you wait for a season to turn, without hurrying it and without quite believing it.

His face was no different from how it always was: careful, weathered, the grey coming in at the temples she had long since stopped pretending not to notice. He hadn’t moved.

“I don’t entirely know what comes next,” she said. “I’m new at this version of things. I may be very bad at it.”

“So may I.”

“That isn’t reassuring.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.”

Something that wasn’t quite a smile reached her face before she could prevent it.

“March, then,” she said.

“March.”

She turned to go, and he let her get three steps before he said her name, and she turned back, and he had his hands in his pockets still and was watching her with something she was not going to name yet, because to name it was to move it into a different category, and she needed it to stay, a while longer, among the things that were possible and not yet required.

“The sawdust,” she said. “Your left shoulder.”

He looked down and brushed it off. When he looked up she was already walking, and she did not turn again; but she could feel the workshop's yellow light at her back the whole length of the street, and the cold against her face, and she did not, this time, fold the words away and seal them where no one would read them.

The Wall

The chestnut had gone yellow weeks ago, and now the wind was taking it leaf by leaf. Marie stood at the third-floor window in the afternoon that came in sideways, the October kind, and watched one leaf let go and turn slowly over the courtyard as if it had not yet decided whether to land. It landed by the cobbler's step. The shop was shut; Novák had died in August, and no one knew yet whether the space would be taken or boarded over. The Party noticeboard had been bare since spring. Last week someone had pinned a single sheet of white paper to it, and by morning someone else had taken it down.

She was supposed to be packing.

In the front room, cardboard boxes stood half-filled, the good china nested in newspaper — *Rudé právo*, pages she'd used without reading, the way you stop reading what you once read with great care. Her mother sat at the kitchen table with the cups that matched nothing, wrapping each one in old *Mladá fronta* and saying nothing, which was how her mother managed everything now.

The flat in Holešovice was smaller. Three rooms instead of four, a courtyard that got no afternoon light, a landlord they hadn't met. Oldřich said it would do, and meant it; he had already worked out the tram routes. He was a man who, when a thing could not be changed, worked out the tram routes and slept.

Marie could not sleep.

She went to the back room — not hers and Oldřich's, which was already stripped and half crated, but the small one that had been, in theory, for a child and in practice for her own things: her books, a sewing basket she never opened, and the trunk under the window that held, among a wool skirt she no longer fit into and a pair of gloves missing their mate, the shoebox.

She sat on the bare mattress. It exhaled dust.

The box was cardboard, once pale blue, now the colour of old water. She'd had it since the summer of 1963 — five years and one life ago. She'd kept it after the shoes wore through because she'd had a sense, even then, of needing somewhere to put the things she couldn't say aloud.

She lifted the lid.

Eight letters, folded each into itself, each unsealed. She had never sealed them. To seal a letter is to begin sending it, and she had not sent them; the distinction had mattered to her, and she had kept it clear in herself even when everything else blurred.

She did not take them out. She knew well enough what they said — she had let herself read them through, the once, in the bad year after he took the posting and went, and a handful of times since she had only opened the box and closed it again, the way you press a bruise to confirm it is still

there and then leave it alone. To sit and read them now would be to disturb something she could not name but understood to be load-bearing — not for him; he was safe, he was gone, the danger was years over — but for the life she had assembled, slowly, from the available materials.

Oldřich was not Jan. This had been the condition of everything, and she had accepted it early and entirely, which was not the same as accepting it in peace, though she had found, over the years, that the difference mattered less than she'd feared. Oldřich was kind in ways that wanted no audience. He had been patient with her mother where Jan — with his engineer's urgency, his Party-son certainty — might not have been. He had driven her to Pardubice for her father's anniversary and stood at the grave without fidgeting. He had never once asked who she had been before him.

She thought he knew. Not the details — not the letters, not the chestnut afternoons, not the last night when she had stood in this room and said the smooth, ruinous things she'd rehearsed until they would hold. But the shape of it. He was a man who understood there are shapes in people set before you arrive, and that the courtesy is not to press.

She had been faithful to him, she thought, in every way that could be measured.

⁂

Outside, the chestnut gave up another handful of leaves. A woman in a blue coat crossed the courtyard, head down, a string bag with two potatoes and something in brown paper. Marie watched her go without recognition. She had been at Dvořákova 14 six years and knew most of the faces, but the

building had been turning over — younger tenants, a few she'd never learned, the mild mutual blankness a city teaches you after enough mornings standing close to strangers on trams.

In April it had been otherwise. In April you looked at strangers.

In April you looked at strangers and thought: they are reading the same papers I am, they are feeling a thing that could be named, the air has changed. Her mother had said *don't*, and she had said *I know*, and they had watched that spring proceed with what she'd later understand was a held breath — a whole country at the edge of something that felt, from inside it, like a door swinging open into a larger room.

She had not thought of Jan that April. It was true and she wanted it set down somewhere, even in the unfiled archive of her own memory: in that particular spring, with all its strange lightness, she had thought of Oldřich and their daughter and whether the kindergarten near Holešovice would suit, and she had felt — not happiness, quite — a kind of possible happiness, the weather of it, the way it moves through a room before it arrives.

And then August.

She did not need to think about August.

⁂

The box sat in her lap. She thought about what you do with the things that cannot be sent or said or carried away — not because they are too heavy but because they belong somewhere, and the somewhere is not you, not any longer. It is the place.

She had loved Jan in this flat. The love had been made here, in this air, with this view: the chestnut, the gallery opposite, the fourth-floor window where someone always forgot the shutter. It was not a portable love. She had tried, in the early months, to carry it out with her, and what she'd found was that it did not travel — it thinned, it became something smaller, until at last it was small enough to put away.

But the letters were still here. The letters were the love set down in words, and they were here, and she did not know what to do with them.

She could burn them. She had thought of it in 1964 and in 1966 and three weeks ago, when Oldřich first suggested they begin to sort. Each time she had thought: now, finally, the sensible thing. Each time she had not, and she understood now that she was not going to, because to burn them was to erase, and she had done enough erasing in the name of sense. She had said the words that erased the possible life. She had taken herself out of his future with her own two hands, for reasons that were real and necessary and that she would, given the choice again, choose again — because she was not a person who could have stood and let him fall. But she would not burn the record of what it had been.

She could take them. Wrap them in oilcloth, lay them in the trunk, carry them to Holešovice and slide them under the new bed and begin the new life with the old weight still in the room. She had weighed this too. But she knew what it made her: the woman who still kept the shoebox. There was nothing wrong with that woman. Only that the weight, after five years, had begun to pull in a direction she did not like — toward Oldřich, who did not deserve to share a bedroom wall with it.

She wanted, and this was not nothing, to be fair to him.

She looked at the skirting board.

⁂

The flat was old. Dvořákova 14 had gone up in 1908 — pan Šťastný's father had told her so, the year she moved in and was still asking questions. Thick walls, floors gone uneven at the joins, and the skirting along the room's outer wall had been working loose since spring: one section, a half-metre from the corner, had come away from the plaster behind, leaving a gap a hand could go into, dark and cool and breathing old lime.

Oldřich had meant to fix it. He hadn't, because there had been April and then August, and the move had come forward, and now they were going and the landlord would send someone in his own time.

Marie looked at the gap for a while.

She thought about buildings, and how they hold what people leave — not out of sentiment but plainly, physically: the pencil ticks on a doorframe measuring a child long grown, the pale rectangle where a picture hung for forty years. They keep things without knowing they are keeping them. There was a kind of mercy in that, she thought; they do not weigh what they hold.

Someone would live here. Not soon — the flat would sit empty some months, the housing office moved slowly and the building was old and half awkward — but in time there would be a someone, and that someone would stand in this room in this light, which was hers and, before hers, the light of whoever had stood here in 1910, in 1930, in 1945: a long

line of people in the same afternoon, none of them knowing the others, all of them having left some small thing behind without meaning to.

She was going to mean to.

She knelt by the loose board. The gap was wide enough; she'd put her hand in once, in spring, after a dropped button, and felt the cool hollow behind the plaster and the old brick giving off its mineral breath. Wide enough for a shoebox without its lid. Wide enough, if she was careful.

She had been careful her whole life — with her words at work, with her file, with the shape of what she let anyone see — and it had served her and cost her in proportions she was no longer interested in totting up. But this was a different carefulness. Not the survivor's. The conservator's. She wanted the letters to last. Not to be found — she was not imagining a finder, not writing to the future with any such designs — only to go on existing, somewhere, whole, because they were true. They had been true. It seemed to her, at twenty-eight, in a flat she was leaving in a country that had just lived through a thing it would take it decades even to name, that something true ought to be kept.

She took the lid off.

She looked at the letters a last time — the pale folds, the hand she knew was hers and yet looked, from here, like a person she had been — and put the lid down again, on the floor, beside her knee. She tilted the box and worked it into the gap. It caught; it took a moment of angling, and she scraped a knuckle on the plaster and tasted the blood without comment, and then the box was in, settled on a ledge of old brick in the cool dark, and she could not see it any more.

She took up the loose section of skirting and pressed it back. The nail found its old hole. She pressed harder and it held — not perfectly, not if you knew to look — but well enough that anyone not looking would not see.

She sat back on her heels.

⁂

She did not feel, afterward, what she had half expected to feel. She had thought there might be something large in it — relief, or grief, or the clean sensation of an end. What there was instead was quieter than any of those. She had done a thing that was right: not easy, not glad, but right the way a fitted joint is right, the way a mended seam takes the strain and holds.

She had not sent the letters. She had made that choice long ago, and she kept it. But she had not destroyed them, and she had not carried them out of here like stones sewn into a coat. She had left them where they were made, in the one place that had held them honestly.

She got to her feet. Her knees ached — she was twenty-eight and her knees ached already, which most days she found more comic than sad. She brushed the plaster from her hands; she would wash before her mother saw and asked.

At the door of the little room she stopped and looked back, once: at the blameless wall, the board sitting true against its plaster, the square metre of old pine in front of it. Then at the window — the chestnut, the bare branches, the fourth-floor shutter standing open. The October light was doing what it always did here at this hour, coming in at the angle that set the floorboards glowing amber a moment before

the cloud crossed. The same light. It had been here in the summer she was twenty-three and did not know what was coming. It would be here in the spring, when she was gone.

She turned and went back to the front room to wrap the cups.

Beyond the arch, on the street, a tram bell rang — two notes — and was gone.

Klára's Verdict

The café on Seifertova still had its Christmas lights up in March, a strand of small gold bulbs wound through the window frame as though someone had begun taking them down, thought *why bother*, and walked away. Eva had passed it for weeks on her way to the tram. She'd thought it slightly sad. Now, sitting inside with both hands around a flat white she'd barely touched, she thought it looked rather brave.

Klára was late, which Eva had expected. Adam had texted: *she says she'll come* — apparently a different category from *she'll be on time* — and Eva had arrived prepared for the distinction. She watched the street. Two men in high-vis vests carrying a section of copper downpipe between them like a stretcher. A woman steering a pram the size of a small vehicle through the gap the scaffolding had left. A pigeon working through what appeared to be a philosophical problem on the pavement.

When Klára came through the door she brought the cold in with her, a draft that set the gold lights shivering. She wore a coat slightly too large for her — her father's, Eva realized, the same rust-brown corduroy she'd seen folded on

Adam's workbench — and she had the look of someone who had argued with herself the whole way and not yet decided who'd won.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," said Eva. "What do you want to drink? They do a good hot chocolate."

Klára looked at her. "I'm sixteen, not six."

"I know. I want one too. I just thought I'd give you the option."

A beat. Something shifted at the corners of Klára's mouth, a softening she was plainly working not to show. "Oat milk," she said, and sat.

Eva ordered, came back, sat. Klára was looking at the window lights.

"You noticed them too," Eva said.

"They're still up."

"They're still up."

"It's March."

"It is."

Klára pulled at a loose thread on the cuff of the too-large coat. "Dad put ours up the week before Christmas. They were down by the twenty-sixth." A pause. "He takes things down the minute they're past. Food, mostly. He won't keep leftovers. He says it's about freshness." She said it the way a person says a thing they've turned over often without ever saying aloud. "I think it's something else."

Eva said nothing. She'd learned, across the autumn and winter, that Klára didn't need prompting the way her father did. Adam's silences asked for patience, a careful waiting. Klára's asked only that you not be afraid of them.

"He's been different," Klára said. "Since the letters."

"Different how?"

"He laughs more." Plainly, as though reporting a change in the weather. "He sent me a photo of a dovetail joint last week. Just the photo. No words. He used to do that — send me random things — and then he stopped." She looked at her hands. "He stopped doing a lot of things for a while, and then pretended he hadn't."

The hot chocolate arrived. Klára wrapped her hands around the cup in an unconscious echo of what Eva had been doing with her coffee, and Eva thought: every quiet gesture, his.

"I looked up *třídní původ*," Klára said. "Cadre files. Class origin."

"When?"

"After you told Dad about Marie's file. Refused university twice." She glanced up. "My history teacher does this thing where she lists the victims of totalitarianism and then moves on very fast, like if she lingers something bad might happen in the classroom. So I looked it up myself."

"What did you find?"

"That it was —" she searched for the word " — petty. Administrative and petty. Not just here are the terrible things, here is the terror. Also: here is your form, here is why your father's shop counts against you, here is the way a piece of paper decides who you're allowed to become." She frowned into the cup. "It made me angry."

"Good," Eva said, and meant it.

"She was clever, wasn't she. Marie."

"The cleverest person in any of those rooms. She just wasn't allowed to show it in the ways that counted."

Klára nodded, slowly. "And she protected him. Even though it cost her everything."

"She thought it did."

"Didn't it?"

Eva turned her cup a quarter-turn on the saucer. "It cost her the life she'd imagined. She built another one." A pause. "That isn't nothing. But — yes. It cost her something she should never have had to pay."

Klára was quiet. Outside, a tram went past, its bell a single clean note.

"When you take the box to Jan," she said. "What happens to someone, do you think, when they find out that late that they were wrong about everything? About why they were left?"

Eva had been thinking about it since November — since she'd held the fourth letter under the conservator's lamp and watched the real shape of Marie's sacrifice rise out of the ink.

"I think it might be a relief," she said carefully. "Even while it's also terrible. To learn you were loved, when you'd decided you weren't. Even sixty years on."

Klára looked at her, very level. She had Adam's quality of attention — the kind that didn't slide away when the subject turned difficult. "You're not really talking about Jan," she said.

Eva felt the blood arrive in her face. "I'm talking about Jan."

"And also not."

No hostility in it. Just the flat naming of a thing she'd been watching for months. Eva opened her mouth, and closed it.

"He talks about you," Klára said. "He talks about the staircase and the project and the building's history, but the way he talks about all of that has changed, because the way he talks about you is underneath it." She lifted the hot chocolate, set it down undrunk. "He showed me a photo. The chestnut, in the courtyard. He said you'd told him it was in the letters. He'd taken it himself, and he was —" she stopped, began again. "I haven't seen him look like that since Mum was alive."

Eva's throat did something she ignored.

"I'm not asking you to promise anything." Klára's voice was doing its own careful work now, holding level. "I'm not twelve. I know what people can and can't do." A pause. "I've just watched him function around something for three years. I know what it looks like. I don't want to watch it any more."

"I know."

"Do you? Because you do it too. Better than him, actually — more polished, the way you hold yourself back from things." She turned to the window lights. "I noticed it the first time you came for coffee. The way you looked round the flat and said it was charming. Like you were already apologizing for being in it."

Eva said: "I'm not apologizing for anything now."

Klára looked back at her. Something moved in her face — not quite a smile, not quite its absence.

"Good," she said, in an exact echo of what Eva had said three minutes before, and she picked up the hot chocolate and drank.

⁂

She walked to Dvořákova 14 afterwards. Not because it was on the way to anything, but because she wanted the cold and the cobbles and the smell of the courtyard — coal still, in March, threaded now with something cleaner, sanded wood and new cement where Adam had relaid the third-floor landing. The chestnut stood bare, but the branch-ends had that thickening at the tips that meant they were deciding something, the slow private arithmetic of trees.

She stopped at the mailboxes. The watchmaker's slot still carried his name in the original metal type — ŠŤASTNÝ — beside a newer paper slip in another hand. Weeks ago she'd asked him whether he regretted never delivering the message he'd been handed as a boy. He'd thought about it a long time, polishing a small brass gear he wasn't looking at, and said: *I regret a great many things I have no regret about, if you take my meaning*. She hadn't been sure she did. She was beginning to.

Adam's van was in the courtyard. From the open stairwell came the small sounds of someone working — not the big noises of construction, saw and drill, but something finer. A plane, perhaps. A chisel. The end of the job, not the middle of it.

She went up.

He was on the second-floor landing, finishing the banister, down on one knee with a small plane, chalk on his sleeve and sawdust in his hair. He didn't look up at once when she came round the curve of the stair — she had three full seconds to look at him unobserved, and she used them honestly, without apology, the way Klára had apparently been watching her for months.

He looked up.

"How was it?"

"Good." She came up the last two steps and leaned against the opposite wall. "She ordered oat milk. She called me out on roughly three things. She seems well."

Adam set the plane down. "What three things?"

"My general habit of apologizing for existing. My tendency to discuss historical figures when I mean myself." She paused. "And the lights."

"What lights?"

"The café still has its Christmas lights in the window. We both noticed. She told me about yours."

He went still. A small involuntary thing crossed his face — embarrassment, or something more exactly placed. "I take those down the minute —"

"I know. She told me." Eva looked at the banister, the new wood pale and smooth against the older rail above it. "She's been watching you function around something for three years."

"She told you that."

"She's sixteen, and observant, and yours. Of course she told me."

He picked the plane up, put it down again. He had that quality she'd first noticed in October — of going still in the middle of a movement, waiting to know what came next. She'd taken it once for indecision. She understood it now as something nearer honesty: a refusal to say the thing before he was sure of it.

She said: "I want to take the box to Jan."

"I know."

"I want to do it with you."

He looked at her.

“If you’re willing,” she said. “Lenka’s spoken to him — she rang me last week. I meant to tell you, I was —” She stopped. “I was waiting until I’d seen Klára. He’s agreed to see us. Dejvice, a flat; he can still manage the stairs.” A breath. “She says he went very quiet when she told him what the letters were. Then he asked if she was certain it was all of them. That was all.”

“That was all he needed to say,” Adam said.

“Yes.”

He stood up off his knee with the care of a man who’s spent years doing this to his joints and knows the cost. He still had the plane in his hand. Behind him the banister shone, plain and well-made, the wood doing the one thing wood is for.

“Eva,” he said.

“I know.”

“I want to be careful. Because of Klára —”

“I know. I’m not asking you to be reckless.” Her own voice steadied around something, the way her hands steadied around damaged cloth — not gripping it, only holding. “I’m asking you to be honest.”

The plane turned slowly in his hands. He was looking at her with an expression she knew, because she’d met its echo in a letter written in 1963 — a particular sentence about a chestnut tree and the quality of an afternoon that had made her sit very still in a cold room, waiting to stop feeling something she had no right to feel for a woman who was dead.

“I don’t want to leave things unsent,” she said. “I’ve read what it costs.”

He set the plane down on the boards, carefully, the way you set down a thing that asks to be set down gently.

"No," he said. "I don't want that either."

They stood in the well of the staircase, the open air rising through it, the courtyard below and the chestnut beginning — barely, invisibly — to think about its spring. The afternoon light came through the landing window the way it did in early March, flat and thin and somehow more truthful than summer's, flattering nothing.

She thought: so this is how it happens. Not in a rush. Not in a scene. In a stairwell in Žižkov on a Wednesday, with sawdust on a man's sleeve and a box of sixty-year-old letters waiting one floor up, and the Christmas lights still burning in a café window because someone hadn't got round to taking them down — or because they'd decided not to.

Adam lifted his jacket off the newel post. "Come for dinner," he said. "Klára's cooking. It'll be ambitious and about half successful."

"My favourite kind of dinner."

He smiled — not the small careful one she'd watched all through October, but something wider and a little undone, the kind that rearranges a face without the owner knowing it's happened.

She followed him down, her hand on the new rail, warm from the afternoon, smooth under her palm as a thing decided.

The Unfinished Letter

The February that would become 1968 arrived first as a smell — wet wool and diesel and the dusty heat of old radiators turned high against a cold that had no intention of leaving. Marie had lived in the flat eleven years now, long enough that she no longer heard the seventh stair the way guests did, no longer noticed how the morning light crossed the kitchen floor and caught the edge of the windowsill at an angle that, in a certain season, made the white enamel seem to glow. She noticed nothing anymore, the way you stop noticing your own hand.

Oldřich had taken a week of leave to supervise the movers. He was good at this — quiet, methodical — and she had married him partly for it, because he was the sort of man who wrote lists and then followed them without drama, who believed that the thing to do when a difficult moment came was simply to address it. She had told him once that she was grateful. He had looked at her the way a person looks at someone they love but cannot fully read, and said only, *Dobrá, Mářo*. Good, then.

The bedroom was already dismantled. The sitting room held its furniture pushed to the centre, boxes stacked, the rugs rolled and tied with twine, and on the walls the pale rectangles where pictures had hung — absences of things she did not particularly miss. What she was doing in the bedroom, kneeling on the bare boards with a screwdriver borrowed from the toolbox in the courtyard — Bohumil's father's box, passed somehow to Bohumil, who was twenty-three now and had never once asked for it back — was not, technically, something she had told Oldřich about.

There was no need to lie. She had simply not mentioned it.

The skirting board came away without struggle. She had checked it twice in the past year, each time resolving nothing, each time pressing it back and going on with her morning. Now she lifted the shoebox out of the gap in the plaster. The kitchen string had softened with dust and years until it had the texture of something woven, something grown into the wall.

She did not open it. She knew what was inside.

She sat with the box in her lap and did the arithmetic she had been doing, in small inexact increments, for five years. Jan would be thirty-one. He had married Helena in the autumn of 1963 — she had heard it from a woman who knew a woman at the Institute; she had not gone looking, only failed to prevent herself from receiving it. He had taken the posting in Brno, then a larger one, then — she had heard — something in the ministry, which meant they were back in Prague now, perhaps a kilometre from where she knelt on bare boards with a shoebox on her knees.

She had written him eight letters. The last was unfinished.

She had not been able to stop writing. This was the humiliation she had made her peace with: that she had done the right thing, and that the right thing had not cured her. She had married a decent man. She had made a real life. She had learned, she believed, to want what she had rather than what she had given away, and on most mornings this was not a performance but simply true, a modest and genuine thing. She loved Oldřich the way you love someone who has shown up reliably for a decade, which was a real kind of love, she had decided, even if it was not the kind that made you incautious.

She opened the box.

The letters were as she had left them. The top one, the unfinished one, she had placed face-down after writing it — after failing to finish writing it — sometime in the winter of 1966. She picked it up.

She did not read what she had written; she knew what she had written. She read the blank half instead, the lower portion she had left empty because she had reached the sentence she did not know how to complete and had decided, at the time, to wait until she knew, and then waited until the box seemed a better answer than any sentence she might produce.

She turned the page and read the last thing she had written.

Then she uncapped the pen she had brought — not the good pen, the ordinary one she used for grocery lists, which seemed appropriate — and held it over the blank half of the page, and found, as she had found three years before, that she had nothing to say that was equal to the silence she had already made.

She capped the pen.

She put the letter back, face-down, as it had been.

⁂

Můj milý —

For four years I have been trying to write you a last letter that is also a proper ending. Something with a final sentence that closes the door quietly and with dignity, the way a person of good character closes a door — as if leaving the room and not the country.

What I have managed, what you are reading, is this.

The chestnut has leafed out three times since I last looked at you across the vnitroblok and understood that I had succeeded in becoming someone you would not pursue. I was very good at it. I had practice. My whole life had been practice — my father's shop, the cadre file, the form at the university with its two thin lines drawn through my name. I knew how to become invisible to the people who keep the lists. I did not know it was the same skill required to disappear from the one person I least wished to disappear from.

I told myself I was protecting you. This was true. I also told myself it was entirely for your sake and that I felt no bitterness — which was less true — and then I told myself that whatever bitterness I felt was further proof of how right I had been, which is the kind of reasoning that gets a person through a winter without screaming.

Here is what I have never written, in all these letters: your voice. I have described the chestnut, the afternoon by the river, the rain on your coat on the stairs, the precise shape of the argument we never had. But not your voice. I think I have been afraid that if I set it down I will have made it a thing I carry, when I need it to be a thing I survive.

You asked me once why I read so much. I said it was because books required nothing of you in return. You laughed and said it was the sad-

dest thing you'd ever heard a person say, and that you were going to take me to a very bad film to cheer me up — which you did, and which was indeed very bad, and out of which I came into the cold street feeling, for no reason I could name, that the world was manageable.

I have managed.

I want to tell you, now that it can cost neither of us anything, that I have thought of you as a kindness. Not with the word I would use if I were braver and this were a letter I meant to send. That word stays here, in this room, in this wall. You can't have it. I'm keeping it.

But I want you to know — and this is the sentence I have been trying to finish for three years, and I begin to suspect I cannot finish it because it has no ending, because the thing I want to tell you is not a thing that ends — I want you to know that I never once stopped being glad you are alive somewhere in this city, that you chose well, that you build things worth building, that there is a woman who makes your mornings ordinary and a life that holds you, and that if I had any part in making it possible, then — then —

⁂

She sealed the box with the kitchen string she had saved, and was careful with the knot. She had no reason to be careful; she was putting it in a wall, not the post. But her hands knew how to be careful with fragile things and did not ask her permission.

The gap behind the skirting board was as she had left it: a small darkness that smelled of lime plaster and old wood and the slow warmth of the pipes inside the wall. The box fit exactly, as it had always fit. She had confirmed this years ago, in the weeks after she first hid it, and had spent three mornings

sitting in front of the wall before she remembered she had decided to leave it alone, and went back to her life.

She pressed the skirting board into place.

The nails held.

She stayed a moment on the cold boards. She could hear Oldřich in the hallway, explaining to one of the movers that the wardrobe had to be tilted at a particular angle to clear the doorframe — a thing he had worked out weeks ago, having measured both wardrobe and frame and written the angle in his notebook. This was the kind of man he was. She was, as she had told him once, truly grateful for it.

She put the screwdriver in her coat pocket and stood.

The boards had sent a draught up through her knees. She was forty-eight. She had a daughter named Helena — perhaps a coincidence and perhaps not, but she had been very tired when the names were chosen, and Oldřich had suggested it, and it had a good sound in her mouth, so she had said yes, and you did not pull at threads like that. Helena was four. She was obstinate and curious and laughed at things that weren't funny and sat very seriously over books she could not yet read, moving her finger beneath the lines as if reading anyway, as if the posture were the point. Marie loved her with a fierceness that had surprised her, a thing entirely unlike what she had written in the wall — a thing that needed no letters and left no blanks.

She had a life. She had made it herself, out of what there was, the way you make what you can.

⁂

She came back once, in 1997.

She did not know why. Oldřich had been dead four years by then, and Helena — Lenka, they had always called her — was finishing her teaching certificate, and did not know her mother had taken the number nine to Žižkov, got off a stop early, and walked the old route through streets that were both changed and unchanged, past a wine merchant that had become a different wine merchant and a pharmacy that was a pharmacy still.

The gate to the courtyard was new. The old one had been iron and had needed a particular lifting pressure when you turned the handle; she had done it ten thousand times, and now the gate swung open with nothing asked of her, which was not the same.

The watchmaker's was still in the courtyard. Pan Šťastný was old now; she was old now. She did not go in. She stood in the courtyard and looked up at the third-floor windows, lit from inside with a warm light that belonged to someone else, someone who had made their own life in those rooms and did not know what lay behind the skirting board in the bedroom, and would not, unless something shifted in the walls.

The chestnut was bare. It was November.

She had done what she could with the materials to hand. She had loved one person in the way that leaves no remainder and leaves you able, afterward, to love others in the modest, true way that also matters. She had kept the letters where they could hurt no one. She had built a life of ordinary beauty and left the extraordinary thing in the wall, which was perhaps the most honest accounting she could make of what the time had allowed.

She stood in the cold courtyard four minutes — she counted, because counting was something to do — then turned

and went home.

She was sixty-three, which seemed improbable. In the spring of 1963 she had been twenty-three, and there had been a man, and the man had been good, and the time had been what it was, and she had made a decision both wrong and right in the way the real decisions always are, the ones that cannot be argued out of their complexity no matter how many years you give them.

She had not finished the last letter. She was beginning to understand that this was not failure.

The wall had it. The blank half was still blank. She did not know, riding the tram back across the river, what she expected to become of it — whether the building would stand another hundred years and seal the box in its plaster forever, or whether someone would find it, or whether it would simply rot in the dark the way paper does, becoming part of the building's substance, which was also a kind of return.

Whoever found it, if anyone did, would see the blank half and understand that the sentence had a continuation, that there had been something she was trying to say. They would see that she tried.

Perhaps that was enough. That someone might see the trying.

The tram bell rang. She held the overhead bar and looked at the city through the rain-beaded glass, the lights of Prague smearing pleasantly in the wet, and she thought of her daughter naming a child one day, and that child naming a child, and whether her father's name was anywhere in any of it, and whether the letters in the wall would outlast the building, or the century, or any particular grief.

The tram moved.

The rain came down.
She let herself be carried.

Sixty Years Late

The Uber turned off Evropská into a side street lined with lime trees, bare still, their upper branches a grey script against the sky. Eva watched them and said nothing. Adam sat beside her with the shoebox on his lap, both hands resting on the lid as if it might try to leave.

They had argued, quietly, about whether to telephone first.

"He's eighty-six," Adam had said.

"He's eighty-six," Eva had agreed, meaning something different.

They had telephoned.

⁂

The building was newer than Dvořákova 14 — a seventies panel block that had been respectable once and now simply was. The entryphone worked. The lift smelled of cooking oil and the particular loneliness of lobbies that have seen many families through. Fourth floor. Jan Vávra's daughter-in-law opened the door before they knocked — she had heard the lift — a woman in her fifties with a careful face, prepared or try-

ing to be, and she showed them into a room where the afternoon light came through clean net curtains and an old man sat in a chair by the window.

He was smaller than Eva had imagined. She had been building him for four months out of Marie's letters, out of the way Marie had written his name with neither pressure nor release, and the man in the chair was diminished by age the way the very old sometimes are, as though the body has begun returning what it borrowed. But his eyes were clear. Pale grey, the colour of early spring, and when they found Eva they were the eyes of someone who has lived a long time and learned what to do with attention.

"Sit down, please," he said. The voice was still baritone, city-accented, careful with its consonants. "Petra will make coffee."

The daughter-in-law disappeared. Eva and Adam sat on a sofa whose cushions held the impression of decades. The shoebox sat on the low table between them and Jan Vávra, and it was the only thing in the room that seemed awake.

"You said on the telephone you found letters."

"Yes."

"From —" He stopped. His hands, spotted and capable still, rested on his thighs. "From the flat on Dvořákova."

"Behind the skirting board. The east wall. Someone sealed them there before the family left."

He was quiet a moment.

"The Hrubá family," he said.

"Yes."

He nodded once. Not in surprise — in the manner of a man confirming something he had carried sixty years as a

question and now felt settle into the category of known things.

"And they are hers."

"Most. Eight letters. Seven are hers." Eva glanced at Adam, who was looking at his hands. "One is yours."

He went very still. Petra came with coffee, set it down with practised quietness, withdrew. On a street Eva couldn't see, a tram passed, its bell distant and untroubled.

"I wrote a letter," Jan said. "Once. A long time afterwards." He offered it as a fact, without shame. "My wife had died. Helena. And I found myself writing. I thought I had thrown it away."

"It was in the box. With hers."

Something moved in his face — not grief; grief was too recent a word. More the look of a man watching an answer arrive that has taken the long route, the route through a whole life.

⁂

She had thought she would explain. She had prepared, the way she prepared everything, the way she approached a damaged textile — layer by layer, a sequence: the approximate dates, the context she and Adam had pieced from the building's records and pan Šťastný's guilt-edged account. She had thought she would give him the structure first and the letters after.

He asked her to open the box.

She did, and laid the letters on the table in the order she believed they were written, dating the late ones by paper and ink and by the logic of what Marie had let herself say in each.

She knew them the way she knew the warp and weft of damaged cloth. She could feel where the tension had been, where the threads had pulled.

Jan picked up the first — the fragment she had found at the beginning, the half-letter with its torn edge — and read it without glasses, holding the paper at a slight distance, with the concentration of a man used to reading specifications, things where missing a line costs you.

She had not meant to watch his face. She looked instead at the window, the net curtains, the pale April light, but she felt in the room the quality of silence that attaches to someone reading words he has waited for without knowing he was waiting.

He put the first down. Picked up the second.

Adam was very still beside her, his coffee untouched. He had offered to wait in the van; she had said, without thinking, *no, please*, and he had come up and not made it awkward and said barely a word since the entryphone, and she found, sitting on this sofa in this strange flat in Dejvice, that she was glad past saying that he was here.

Jan read through the third, the fourth. At the fifth he paused — the one she had dated to autumn, written after Marie had watched him and Helena cross the courtyard — and set it on his knee and looked at the curtain. Then the sixth.

The true one. The plain one, the reason she could never say to his face, written for the page instead: *I will not be the stone tied around your ankle. I will not have your life on my account.* Eva knew the words the way she knew her own phone number. She had read them first professionally — the ink for oxidation, the paper for water damage — and then in the other

way, the way a thing arrives in your head at odd hours and will not leave.

He read it with great control. He was a man who had spent sixty years being controlled about this; she could see the long habit of it, and beneath the habit the thing it contained, sealed the same way the letters were sealed.

He set it down and did not speak for a long while.

"She thought she was protecting me," he said.

"Yes."

"She let me believe she had simply — that she didn't —"

"Yes."

He looked at her then, and she held his gaze, because it seemed important not to look away. What she saw in his face she had no precise word for in either language. Not grief. Something older. Something that had gone underground six decades ago and was now finding its way up, the way water finds its level through limestone, slowly. Recognition. The particular devastation of learning that a thing you misunderstood was, after all, as some buried part of you had always suspected.

"I knew," he said. "I never admitted it. Not to Helena, not to my son. But there was something. In the way she looked at me the last time. I told myself it was contempt." He stopped. "It wasn't."

"No."

"And then I stopped telling myself anything." He picked up the sixth letter again and did not read it, only held it. "It was easier. If she hadn't loved me, then I was not the thing that cost her."

⁂

Petra came once with fresh coffee, read the room, left without a word. The light moved west and the net curtains took on a yellowish cast they hadn't had before.

He read his own letter last — his own hand on paper Eva had placed near the end of the line, Western stock, the kind the Tuzex shops had carried briefly in their last years; she had recognised it without meaning to. The engineer's precise notation turned to something else. He read it the way you read your own words back after a long time, half a stranger to yourself, and laid it on top of the others.

"I thought I had destroyed it," he said again, but it was not really for her.

Then he reached for the last one.

The unfinished one.

My dear —

I have been trying to finish this for three weeks. I have written you all the letters I could not send, and now I will put them somewhere they cannot do you harm. I thought the last would be easiest, being the last. But I find I cannot —

And then nothing. The lower half of the page yellowed only at the edge, unmarked.

He read the lines twice and sat with the half-page in his hands, and the silence in the room changed again. It became the silence of the unfinished sentence — open, patient, waiting for something it had waited a very long time to receive.

"She couldn't finish it."

"No."

"She sealed it anyway."

"Yes."

He looked at the blank half a long time. Then at Eva.

"You found these. You traced them. You brought them here." It was neither question nor accusation; he was assembling something, she could see — not information now, he had all the information — but something with weight to it, something structural.

"Yes."

"Why?"

She had been asked versions of it — by Adam, by Lenka Marešová, by herself in the flat at two in the morning when the trams stopped and the building settled around her with its old creaks and she lay thinking of Marie in the same walls. She had answered differently each time.

"Because she wrote them," Eva said. "All of them. And none of them arrived. That seemed like the wrong ending."

He looked at her a moment longer than was comfortable, and then he nodded, slowly, the way he had nodded when she said *the Hrubá family.* Not surprised. He settled back. Some of the formal control had gone out of him; he had the look of a man who has set down something heavy and is still learning the new distribution of his weight.

"She was a remarkable woman," he said. "I knew it at twenty-six and didn't know what to do with it. That is the thing, isn't it. You see the size of something and you don't know what to do with it."

"Yes," Eva said.

He looked then at Adam, who was watching the middle distance with the patience of a man long used to silences that have nothing to do with him.

"And this is —"

"He rebuilt the staircase," Eva said.

The corners of Jan's mouth moved, in another context a smile. "Good. It always needed work."

⁂

They stayed another half hour. Petra brought biscuits no one ate. He asked about the courtyard, about pan Šťastný, about the wine bar that had replaced the cobbler's, and listened with the attention of people who know time is finite and use it on purpose. He asked nothing about his marriage. Some accounting a man keeps for himself.

When they rose he gathered the seven letters with both hands and held them against his chest a moment, and Eva understood without being told that the unfinished one was not among them. She did not see when he had set it apart.

Adam shook his hand and stepped out to the landing to give them the doorway. Jan walked her the last few steps himself, slow, one hand grazing the wall.

At the door he held out the half-page. Both hands, as though it weighed more than paper.

"Take this one."

"I can't. They're yours. All of them."

"The others are mine." He was certain of it, unhurried, the way the old can be when they have reached a decision by a route you couldn't follow. "I'll sit with them. But she left the space." He looked at the blank half. "It isn't mine to fill. I'm eighty-six. I think we both know whose it is."

She took it. She did not argue further, possibly because he was right, possibly because she was tired of arguing with herself about the thing she had not been willing to say — the thing she had been keeping in a wall of her own, with Marie's

instinct and Marie's reasons, and there had been a long winter to consider where those reasons led.

"The blank half is yours to fill," he said.

She folded it carefully and put it in the inside pocket of her coat, against her chest.

He held her hand a moment past the shaking of it.

"Thank you," he said. A small sentence for something too large to enlarge without diminishing.

⁂

In the lift Eva and Adam stood with the shoebox, lighter now, empty but for the ghost of its arrangement. The door closed and they descended and she looked at her own hands. *She wrote eight letters,* she thought, *and not one of them arrived in time.*

The lobby smelled of cooking oil and the long ordinary life of the building. Adam held the door and they walked out into the late afternoon, the lime trees still bare along the street, their branches the same grey script against the same pale sky, and Eva put her hand in her pocket and felt the edge of the folded page there. The open hand of it.

The tram came while they were still at the stop. It was a number eight. They got on.

The Window in Spring

They drove back from Dejvice in a silence that was not uncomfortable, which Eva considered its own kind of arrival.

Adam had not asked what Jan said to her at the door. He had waited on the landing, one hand on the old iron banister, while Eva took the small envelope Jan held out with both hands — both hands, as though it weighed more than paper — and he had watched her face do something he was careful not to name. Now he drove the way he built things, steadily and without surplus motion, the city giving way to the city as Prague does in the evening, in layers: the castle sliding behind a block of flats, the river glimpsed and then gone.

The letter was in her bag, in its envelope.

The blank half is yours to fill.

She had not told Adam what Jan said. She was still deciding what to do with it — the knowledge sitting in her chest the way an instrument sits before the first note, possibility held under tension.

They turned into Seifertova and the smell of the district found her before the street did: coal smoke from the last building still on solid fuel, something frying in the wine bar's

kitchen, the mineral cold off the cobbles. April, but with teeth in it. She had learned this place's grammar of smells without noticing when she learned it.

Adam parked at the kerb and neither of them moved.

"You don't have to come up," Eva said, which was not what she meant.

"I know," he said, which meant he would.

⁂

The chestnut had started. That was the only word for it — *started* — the buds along each branch breaking into tight pale fists, not yet leaf, not quite not. In two weeks it would be the thing she'd found in the Staré Fotografie archive, the tree pan Šťastný had pressed into her hands in November: full ridiculous bloom over the courtyard, the light of it almost loud. But now it held itself in readiness, and Eva stopped at the landing window — the eastern one, the one she had understood months ago was *the* window — and looked down at the tree the way she looked at everything in this building, with the habit of her work, searching for the damage and the structure under it.

Adam came up the last flight slowly, the way he always did, because the seventh stair still carried the replaced board that did not quite match the creak of the others, and he listened to his own work the way she listened to her own observations, for what was off.

He stopped beside her.

"It's starting," he said, meaning the chestnut.

"Yes."

The courtyard was quiet. The wine bar wouldn't fill for another forty minutes. Pan Šťastný had turned his sign to *zavřeno* at five, and behind his window the glass cabinets stood dark, the watches waiting without urgency for whatever came next.

"He knew," Eva said. "Jan. He said there were moments where it didn't add up — what she seemed to feel, and what she told him she felt. He said he told himself he was imagining it."

Adam's hands were on the sill. She had catalogued them over the winter without meaning to: the scar at the base of his left thumb from a chisel that slipped in his twenties, the old varnish ground into the knuckles that no scrubbing took out. She was a conservator. She could not help reading what time had done to a surface.

"And then?" he asked.

"And then he stopped telling himself that. He said that was the worst of it. He stopped arguing with the evidence because it was easier. Because if she hadn't loved him, he wasn't the thing that cost her—" She stopped.

"For being the thing she paid for."

"Yes."

Two streets over a tram bell sounded on Seifertova, muffled by the mass of the building. In 1963 the line had run closer. Marie had written about hearing it from this window and not being able to sleep.

Eva turned from the courtyard and leaned her back against the sill. The landing light was the fixture Adam had hung in February, warm where before it had been the blue-grey of a strip that buzzed and flickered on cold mornings. She had thanked him for it. She had been relieved by it. She had also

understood, in that exact moment, that she had begun thinking of the building as a place where her preferences were legible in the light.

"Adam."

He turned from the window. He did this — turned his whole body toward a sound, unhurried, as though giving it the full account of himself.

"I've been very careful," she said, "not to say certain things."

His face did not change. He was not a man whose face ran ahead of him. This was one of the things she had been careful not to think about for several months.

"I'm aware of that," he said.

"I told myself it was because I wasn't sure. Which was partly true." She looked at the fixture he had hung, then back at him. "And partly not."

The stairwell held the quality of every sound she had listened to in it across the autumn and winter — the scrape of a board, the low radio he played while he worked, once some old Czech pop song she'd heard through her door and not gone to investigate, because investigating felt like an admission. Above her own flat the building went up one more floor, to the fourth, to the window the photographs showed, the one she had finally located in the 1963 permit drawing. The one Marie had watched from below when Jan went up to measure the load-bearing wall and stayed three hours, because she had needed him to.

She had tried hard not to use the letters as instruction. She knew the danger of it — of reading the past as permission, of letting another woman's grief become a map. The

past did not owe the present its meaning. You had to find your own.

But she was standing here anyway, by the same window, in the same light that was now evening light, and the chestnut was starting again below, and in her bag was a letter whose second half was, apparently, hers.

"I've been careful," she said again, "and I think the carefulness was mostly fear. Which is—" She stopped. Came at it from another angle, the way her training had taught her to approach a fragile thing — not head-on but obliquely, watching for what the light revealed at a slant. "I'm not good at this," she said, which was the most accurate true thing she had.

"I know," Adam said. There was no cruelty in it and no mockery; it was only what he'd seen. He watched her the way he watched the wood, for the grain, for the place the stress had gone in, for what could hold weight and what couldn't.

"I was married eleven years to someone I—" She shook her head. "We didn't hurt each other badly. That almost made it worse. As if the marriage had finished quietly before either of us knew, and we were both too careful to notice it."

"I know about quiet endings," he said.

He did. His wife's leaving had not been quiet — cancer rarely is — but he had told Eva once, in November, over bad coffee from her moka pot, about the grief of watching someone go by degrees, and how at some point he had understood that grief and love could be simultaneous, that they did not take turns. He had not said it again. She had kept it.

"Klára likes you," he said. A non sequitur, except that it wasn't, and they both knew it.

Eva's chest did something complicated. "Klára tolerates me. As of about three weeks ago."

"For Klára, that's a declaration." Something moved in his face that was nearly a smile and then was one. "She told me you explained the difference between brocade and damask for twenty minutes and didn't talk down to her once."

"I talked down to her constantly. I just used longer words."

"She noticed."

The light was doing what April light does in Prague, going gold and then blue, the change fast, the sky behind the opposite wing warming and cooling in the same quarter-hour. Eva watched it cross the plaster Adam had touched up in March, and she understood — with the clarity that comes sometimes only when you stop reaching for it — that she had known for a long time. Possibly since the December afternoon he had come up to look at a water stain in her ceiling and spent forty-five minutes on it, and then twenty-five minutes failing to leave, while she found him questions he had certainly seen through.

"I didn't take the letters to Jan only because of Marie," she said. "I thought I was doing it for her. But I think I needed to see what happens when the thing finally gets said. Even sixty years late."

Adam was quiet. The tram sounded again, further off.

"And what happened?" he asked.

"He cried. Quietly — just the eyes, the way old men do, as if he didn't notice it himself. And then he said, *Ona mě zachránila. Já to nevěděl.*" She paused. "She saved me. I didn't know." Another pause. "And I thought: the saving would have been worth so much more if he'd known it at the time."

The building made its building sounds — a pipe somewhere above, the lift in the neighbouring block humming to itself, a cat upstairs registering a grievance.

"I don't want to—" Eva started.

"Eva."

"I'm trying to—"

"I know what you're trying to say." He said it gently and not gently, the way he had taken the seventh stair out last October and set it on the landing and looked at it without disguising what he found — all the rot in the substrate, the decades of water in the grain — and said, *we can save this, but we have to look at it properly first*.

He had left the stair on the landing for a day before he touched it.

"Then make it easier," Eva said.

"I've been trying not to."

"Why."

"Because you found the box," he said. "Because it's your building and your letters. I didn't want to be the thing that happened to you while you were looking at something else."

The accuracy of it took her breath for a moment. She was standing where Marie had stood, in the building Adam had been putting back together, holding a letter whose second half was hers, and she was forty-one years old, and a man who understood how old things carried their weight was waiting for her to say what she'd held in suspension for months — because he'd had the patience to let her carry it until she was ready to set it down.

"I love you," she said.

It came out plain, without ceremony, which was exactly right. She felt it leave her — the words, and the weight of not

having said them, all the careful months of the oblique and the substitute.

He crossed the two steps between them and took her face in his hands, the left with its scar, the right with the varnish that would not come out. She could feel where the calluses were.

"I know," he said, against her forehead.

"You're meant to say it back," she said. "That's the tradition."

He laughed — she felt it more than heard it — and then he said it back, with no performance, the same plainness she had managed, into her hair, and the stairwell held it the way old buildings hold everything: in the plaster, in the wood, in air that had been breathed by everyone who ever stood there.

⁂

Later — much later, the wine bar loud below, the courtyard gone to lamplight — Eva sat at the table in the third-floor flat with the unfinished letter under the lamp and the cat installed on the chair across from her, and she held the letter and did not read it. She had read it enough. She knew where Marie's last sentence broke off, the ink thinning, the word never finished. When Jan first pressed it into her hands she had thought the incompleteness was the saddest thing in the box — the sentence that arrived at its own edge and stopped.

Now she thought: maybe the break was the point. Not failure. Not a draft cut short by grief or exhaustion or the plain interruption of a life. Maybe Marie had stopped because the rest of it was not for the letter. Maybe the rest of it was for living.

She slid the letter back into its envelope, set it on the table, and went to the window.

The chestnut was there, the buds were there. In the fourth-floor window across the courtyard a light was on — the new tenants, a young couple with a great deal of audio equipment, who played records on Sunday mornings that drifted down to her in bed. She didn't mind it.

She had seen the tree in bloom in 1963, in the archive, in a woman's hand across the back of the photograph: *Květen. To okno*. May. The window. And she understood, only now, standing here, that the photograph was not a record of loss. It was a record of what had been — which is a different thing. Which is, in fact, everything.

Beyond the rooftops the city was the city it always was: lit, ongoing, the last trams running their late routes, the castle on its hill doing its ceremonial best, and somewhere in Dejvice an old man asleep, probably, the box open on the table beside him, the letters no longer undelivered — the night doing to them what nights do to things held too long in the dark. Not erasing them. Only making them part of the light again.

Eva put her hand on the cold glass.

The chestnut lifted its new leaves in the wind off the street, each bud holding its small furled green, and the lamp behind her threw a figure into the window: a woman, her hand on the glass. Not the same woman, not the same spring, not the same building or love or risk. But the same window, and the light still falling the way light fell, and this time the letter sent.