

A story

MERCY

Written in AuthorCAT from the author's voice memo

cat AuthorCAT

About this text

Mercy is social science fiction in the tradition of the Strugatsky brothers, Stanisław Lem and Ray Bradbury. Seven scenes, 16,775 words.

The story was written in **AuthorCAT**. What went in was the author's voice memo: 36 thousand characters of live speech, with every "um," repetition and false start. An agent built the novel's canon from it — characters, places, the rules of the world, a style guide. The AI worked out the story and the scene plan. The autopilot wrote every scene to that plan, one after another, updating the novel's memory after each.

The original voice memo is printed at the end of the book, as is. Compare what went in with what came out.

PROSE	Claude Fable 5
PLANNING AND AGENT	Claude Fable 5; novel analytics — Claude Opus 5
ILLUSTRATIONS	42 frames made in AuthorCAT (GPT Image 2), American realist style

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Scene one

The find at the forest edge

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The light was already going when I turned onto the road that runs along the forest. I had stayed late over the notebooks — the sixth grade writes the way it lives, crookedly and with great confidence — and so the walk fell to that gray hour when the road is empty the whole stretch and a man has it to himself. I liked that hour. A man who has done his day's work honestly can let his thoughts run loose, and mine ran where they always run: that it is a good thing to serve the motherland even in a small way, even with chalk and a grade book, and that a small way is still a way. My father holds that a man serves where he is put, and he has never been fully at peace with where I put myself;

but children have to be taught by somebody, and taught right, and I would say that to him again the next time he called. The evening was cool and smelled of wet bark. I walked and was content.

The Big Forest stood on my right the whole way, quiet at the edge as it always is at that hour, birds settling somewhere in the dark of it with small dropping sounds. And under one of the first trees, just inside the line of them, sat a girl.

I stopped, because you stop. She sat with her back against the trunk and her knees drawn up, and she was young, and she was — I could see it even in that light — very beautiful. That has no bearing on anything; I set it down because it was the first thing there was to see. The second thing was the blood: a cut at her temple, and the blood had run from it and dried down her cheek in one dark thread, days old by the look of it, or a day at least. The third was what she had on — a one-piece garment with a zip up the front, some slick gray material I didn't know, scorched across the shoulder and torn at the knee. The wild ones wear whatever they can scavenge; somebody had burned this thing before throwing it out, and she had taken it anyway. That is how they dress.

I asked her what had happened to her. She raised her face and looked at me and answered nothing. I asked if she could stand, if she was from the diggings settlement, whose she was, whether anyone was with her. Nothing, to all of it — only the look, steady and dumb, the way a forest animal watches a man: watching my hands. A wild ais, then, or a stray one, come out of the Big Forest and knocked about by somebody on the way. It happens. They keep clear of people, mostly, and mostly people let them.

The correct thing was plain, and I want it understood that I never doubted the correct thing. You report a stray, the duty room passes it up, the sanitary service comes and collects her, and there the citizen's part of it ends. I have always loved the motherland and hated its enemies; there was nothing to decide in that quarter. What I stood there weighing was the practical side. The duty room lay a good forty min-

utes back the way I had come, and the dark was coming down, and there would be forms, and the duty officer's questions about what I had been doing on the forest road at such an hour — a question with a plain answer that would still cost me the evening. And the girl was hurt. And for a stray the sanitary service means the camp if her luck is in — I know what a camp is, better than most men my age — and looking at her, at the dried thread of blood and the way she held herself in small against the trunk, I felt sorry for her. That was the whole of it. My mouth had gone dry, as it goes dry when a decision is being made, and that was the pity working in me too; a man is a man and his body keeps him honest about his feelings.



I told her to get up. She got up — so she understood tone, at least, if not one word — and stood without favoring either leg, which settled the question of whether she could walk. I said she would come along with me for now and we would see about the rest, saying it more for my own order than for hers, and set off, and she came. The road stayed

empty to the last house. She kept half a step behind me and half a step to the side the whole way, and I let her keep it, because that is where they walk.

My house is the last one on that end, standing apart, two floors and a strip of yard, and nobody saw us come in, which I noted with a relief I put down to plain good sense. Inside I switched on the lamp and had my first proper look at her, and she had hers at me. We had to begin somewhere, so I put my hand on my chest and said: Rey. She said nothing. I said it again, patting the chest — Rey — and then, since a creature living under your roof has to be called something, and since a name is a thing you can give to someone who has nothing at all, I pointed at her and said: and you'll be Leia. I had no name ready before it came out of me. It came out warm. Rey, and Leia.

"Rey," she said. "Leia."

Her voice was low and even and the words came out clean, cleaner than I had expected from a wild one. That was our whole language, those two words, and it seemed to me a decent start.



The cut wanted seeing to, and under the dried blood she was filthy — earth, ash, whatever she had been lying in — so the bath came first. The bath in my house has its habits, and I know them all. The hot tap runs rusty for a count of ten before it clears. The boiler knocks twice when it takes, one big knock and one small, and the cold has to be opened to a thread, exactly a thread, or the water goes scalding with no warning at all. I got the temperature right against my wrist, twice. On the shelf over the tub I keep the washing soap, and the hair soap in the tall yellow bottle with a finger left in the bottom, and the jar of tar ointment for the cracks that open in my heels every autumn, and a flat brown bottle of liniment from the time I strained my back over the woodpile, and one green bottle whose contents I could no longer have named, standing there since before the winter. I moved the whole row to the far end of the shelf so nothing would get knocked in. The zip of her garment ran from the throat to the waist and had to be worked down a tooth at a time, because the scorched part had half melted into the track; the material was strange stuff under the fingers, slick and stiff at once. Before it went she had her hand in at the collar of it, quick, and came out with something small that shut up in her fist — a keepsake off the burnt cloth, a bit of junk of the kind they hoard, and I let her keep it; a fist is a fist, and I had the tap to see to. The garment went into the corner behind the door. I checked the tap again — the temperature holds better if the flow is kept up — put the cloth in her hand and her hand on the soap, and went out and shut the door.

I stood in the hallway while the water ran. The tub is slippery, and she was hurt and dazed, and they are like children about some things; a person can go under in a tub. So I stood where I would hear, and I heard: water moving, small sounds of water moving, a long time of them. The boiler knocked its two knocks. The supper wanted starting and the house was warm and at some point I found I had been standing there well past any use, and took myself to the kitchen and lit the stove.

She came out when I knocked, wrapped in the towel I had left her — I own one good big towel, and I had given her that one — and I sat her under the kitchen lamp and saw to the temple. It looked worse than it was. Washed clean it was a short cut, shallow, already pulling itself closed. The tincture stung; she drew a breath in through her teeth, and I heard myself saying there, there, easy, done now, the way you talk over any hurt thing, and blew on it, and dabbed it dry, and dressed it with a folded pad and the wound tape, neat as I could make the corners, and was pleased with the corners. Then clothes of mine: the softest of my shirts and the old trousers, the sleeves rolled at her wrists, the legs rolled at her ankles — I knelt to do the ankles, and she stood quite still and let me do it.



Then I fed her. Yesterday's soup, warmed through, and bread, and the pickled redroot because the jar stood open anyway. She was hungry as you are hungry after days, and at first she ate bent low with an arm curled round the bowl; then she saw me sitting across from

her, and straightened, and ate slowly and properly, watching me between spoonfuls. I caught myself making small excuses with my hands — sliding the bread board nearer, turning the bowl so the chipped rim faced me and the good rim faced her, half a shrug when the soup ran thin at the bottom of the pot. Turning the chip away is a thing you do at a table, that's all. She finished everything, and I filled the bowl again, and she finished that too.

Upstairs is the bedroom, the only real one, and in it my good wide bed, bought new two years back and hauled up that narrow stair by me and the neighbor's boy in an afternoon I still remember in my shoulders. I took her up, turned the blanket back, set the lamp where her hand could find it and showed her the switch, twice. She sat down on the edge of the bed and looked up at me with the dressing white at her temple, and I said sleep now, Leia, and felt the rightness of the whole arrangement settle in me — a hurt creature sleeps warm behind a door, and for one night the couch downstairs would do a healthy man fine. Going out, I locked the door from the outside. The house was strange to her; she might wander in the dark, pitch down the stair, walk out the street door with her cut barely closed and the cold coming on. You lock a door on a child for the child's own sake and think no more of it. The key is a small one and turns twice.

I stood in the hallway with the key in my hand. With the light off under her door the hallway is very dark, and the light was off — she had managed the switch — and the draft that lives under that door in the cold months came over my bare feet, thin as a blade of water. From inside came the sound of the bed taking her weight, once, and after it nothing. I stood there with the key and the draft for a while. Then I put the key in my trouser pocket and went down.



The couch is short for me; I sleep on it bent at the knees, when I sleep on it at all, which before that night was never. Lying there I went back over the evening and found it good. Another man would have walked on past — plenty would have thrown a stone first, and been within their rights. Of those who would have stopped, nearly all would have gone straight to the duty room and slept the sounder for it. I had taken on a risk instead: a stray in my own house, unregistered, under my own roof — real trouble if it ever came out, trouble my father's position would be hard put to sweep away, and I have made a point all my life of never needing it to. I had taken that on for a hurt creature that couldn't so much as thank me, and out of pity, which is the plainest reason there is. Laid out like that, end to end, it sat well. All the same I slept badly, waking at every sound the house made and once at no sound at all, lying bent on the short couch with my eyes open, listening to the room over my head.

Long before the window grayed, the list was running in me. The dressing to change before I left. Food set out where she would find it,

and water, and the taps shown again. The shutters latched, the street door locked, locked well, the small key kept on me. And school by the second bell, the children in their rows, and the day's words to stand up and say — words I know the way I know my own name, about the motherland, and about serving it, and about its enemies. Overhead the bed creaked once as she turned in her sleep, a small sound coming down through the boards, and I lay still under it with my list and waited for the light.



Scene two

The lesson on hatred

✦



I woke bent and cold on the couch before the shutters showed their seams, and lay a while with my eyes on the ceiling boards, which is where the bedroom floor is if you think of it from below. No sound came down. I told myself I was letting my back unstiffen before I stood, and my back did want it, after a night folded double on a couch a hand too short; but the unstiffening was done long before I moved, and still I lay there under the quiet, hearing the boiler tick as the house warmed toward morning.

She was awake when I turned the key and came in. Sitting up against the headboard with the blanket over her knees, hands on top

of the blanket, still. The lamp was off. She had been sitting like that in the dark, or she had heard me on the stair; either way her eyes were already on the door when it opened, and then on me, and then, which I was learning was her habit, on my hands.

I did the dressing first, while the light through the shutter slats was still gray and honest. Work goes better over a steady voice — any man who has handled a nervous animal knows it — so I talked the whole time, it costs nothing. Now we look, I said, peeling the tape with the flat of my thumb. Good. Better than good. The cut had closed to a thin dark seam with no anger around it, clean at the edges; young things heal like weeds. Now the fresh one, I said, hold still — and she held still, she was good at holding still, better at it than anyone I had ever dressed — and I laid the folded pad and ran the tape and pressed the corners down. Done, I said. Done now. She looked at me from under the white of it and said nothing, and I gathered the old dressing into my fist and went and started the porridge.



She ate at the kitchen table across from me, properly, the spoon going slow, her eyes coming up between mouthfuls and going down again. I had turned the good rim of the bowl toward her without thinking about it, which by now was just how the bowls went on that table. Then the day had to be arranged, and I arranged it. I carried up a tray with bread and the cold end of the meat and a jug of water and set it on the chair by the bed. I carried up the wash basin and a towel and the covered pail, as you fit out any room a person keeps to for a day, and set them in the corner, and she watched me do it from the doorway with her arms hanging. In the bathroom I showed her the taps once more anyway, the thread of cold, the count of ten on the hot, turning them with big slow turns like a lesson; she watched, and when I stood aside she turned them the same way, once each, exactly, and shut them off. Quick, for a wild one. They can be quick about small things.

At the bedroom door I stood a moment with my hand on the wood. She had gone in and sat on the edge of the bed, the tray beside her, and she looked at me across the room, and the look asked nothing, and there was nothing to be asked. If anyone came to the house in my absence — a meter man, a neighbor after a tool, my father taking it into his head at last to see how his son lived — a locked door upstairs is a locked door upstairs, and she was safest behind it, and there was nothing more in it. I said, back by dark. She could not have understood it. I said it anyway, and turned the key twice, and went down, and latched the shutters, and locked the street door well, and tried it, and walked.

The morning road along the forest was empty as it always is, the trees standing in their own mist to the knee. On that walk I run through the day's words the way you check your pockets, and I ran through them: the motherland, the serving of it, its enemies. I have said those words every school morning for four years and they say themselves, the tongue does the work the way the legs do the road. That morning they came up heavy, each one wanting a separate lift,

like wet wood. A bad night does that. Sleep folded on a short couch and a man's own words weigh double the next day; it is a thing of the body and means nothing, and by the school gate I had the stride of them back.

I was at my desk before the second bell, and the sixth grade came in with the cold on their coats and packed themselves into their rows, and the morning hour is the motherland's hour, and we began. I always loved the motherland and hated its enemies; I said it, and thirty voices said it after me, raggedly, because the sixth grade does everything raggedly, and I made them say it again together, because the words deserve saying properly or not at all.

The reader that day had us at the war. I had them open to the chapter and I told it the way the chapter tells it, standing, walking the rows. How Aisa broke the peace of the whole region; what was done in the occupied towns in the two black years — the reader gives the occupied towns one paragraph, set in smaller type, because the full account is not for children, and I told them that too, that the small type was for their sake, and they looked at the small type with respect. How a state that did such things could not be permitted to remain a state, and was not. How the war cost the motherland half of everything it had, which is why the diggings settlement is still called the diggings settlement, and why the road east still runs through two ruined-out villages nobody has come back to. Sella, in the front row, put up her hand and asked why, if the aises had done all that, they were allowed to live among people now, in the towns, in the houses.



That is the experimental class for you; the ordinary classes take the reader as read. But it is a fair question and it has a fair answer, and I gave it. Because the motherland is orderly even in victory, I said. An enemy people was broken and scattered, and what is broken and scattered must be kept track of, or it festers in the forests and the ruins and breeds trouble. That is what registration is. A registered ais has papers and a number and a master or a work place, and walks the street on legal grounds, and the patrols can read at a glance that she is accounted for. And the strays, the wild ones, the unregistered — the sanitary service gathers them in, which is better for everyone, the aises first of all, because a stray in the forest starves and sickens and freezes, and a gathered one is fed and put to use. The service protects the whole of it, I said, the town and the forest and the stray herself. The chalk was in my hand and I had written REGISTRATION on the board without noticing I had turned to do it, and under it I ruled a line.

Then Mott, from the window row, told the class about his uncle. His uncle keeps a registered pair for the yard and the heavy work, and dis-

ciplines them with switches he has Mott cut fresh from the hedge, because a green switch whips and a dry one breaks, and Mott told the cutting of the switches the way another boy tells a day at the river, and some of the class laughed, and Mott sat down pleased with himself. I let the laugh run out. Then I said what a teacher is there to say. An ais is not a person, I said. That is a fact of the world, like the seasons, and we do not argue with it. But listen now, because this is the part that matters: it is exactly because the ais is not a person that how you treat one is a measure of you and only you. An ais feels pain the way any beast feels pain. Tormenting a beast for the pleasure of it does not lower the beast; it lowers the man. Discipline belongs to the master, and it is done calm and to measure, or it is not discipline, it is cruelty, and cruelty is a citizen spoiling himself. The class wrote. Brin, who chews her pencil white, raised her hand halfway and asked whether it was a sin to feed a stray one, then, if you found one, since it wasn't cruelty — and the room went interested, and I heard my own voice come out level and unhurried, and while it came out I squared the chalk with the ledge of the board so it would not roll. Feeding a stray is not a sin, I said, it is a foolishness; you feed it and it comes back, and now the trouble is yours. The failure is in not reporting. Found means reported. That is the whole of a citizen's part, and it is not hard to remember. Brin wrote it down. The chalk lay square on the ledge and I left it lying there and walked back up the row.

We closed the hour where that hour always closes. Hatred of the ais, I told them, is not a feeling. Feelings come and go and nobody can be ordered into one. It is a duty, the same as any duty — and the old spot on my forearm set up its itch under the sleeve, the blurred blue smudge that was numbers once, when I was small, and is weather now, the way healed things are — and I scratched it through the wool without breaking stride and went on — the same as any duty, owed by every person to the motherland, and duty is done daily whether you feel it or not; that is what makes it duty. Write it, I said, and they wrote it, thirty

heads down, and I walked the rows while they ruled their neat lines under the word, each line straighter than any sentence the sixth grade has ever produced above one, and something in the watching of that sat crooked in me, as a thing sits crooked in a man who has slept four hours on a couch, and I put it where I put it every time, which is the argument with my father. He would have me in the service, chasing what is left to chase. I stand instead in front of thirty citizens at the soft age and see to it that they get the doctrine whole and straight and calm, from a man who says it properly, and not from the street, crooked. Somebody has to. That is service too, and I would tell him so again the next time he called.



In the teachers' room at midday the talk was of a sweep coming through the gray zones east of us — wagons had been seen staging on the far road, and Ottel, who teaches the older boys their numbers, had it from his brother that the lists were already drawn — and I took my stack of notebooks to the corner chair by the window and got through

eleven of them before the bell, and had no opinion on wagons, having not seen any. When the last bell let the building go I was out with the first wave of children, notebooks under my arm, because notebooks check better at a man's own table.

I walked the forest road home quicker than the road needs. There is a thing everyone knows, where a man steps out for the day and the stove catches, or the lock was not quite thrown, and he sees the whole of it behind his eyes until his own gate corrects him; I had that, and my legs had it worse than I did, and the last stretch I did not quite run. The house stood as I had left it, shuttered, blind, last on its end, with nobody near it and no wagon on the road, and the street lock turned its two turns, stiff as always on the second.

Inside, the house was warm and quiet. I went up and unlocked her door, and the room stopped me a moment in the doorway: the bed was made, and made square, the blanket folded back on itself in a flat clean band I have never once managed, the tray on the chair emptied and the crockery stacked, the towel on its nail. She was standing by the window shutter where the light came through in slats, and turned when the door opened, and looked at my hands first, and then at me.

She came down behind me, her half step back and half step to the side on the stair, and in the kitchen she went to the bread board — went to it, to the lower shelf where it lives, no casting about — and lifted it out and set it on the table and looked at me. Hol-still, she said. Low, even, the ends of it bent soft. Done now. My own morning coming back to me out of her mouth, worked loose from its uses; she laid her finger flat on the loaf and waited. Bread, I said. Brred, she said, and pointed at the jug. Water. Wa-ter. The kettle: I named it. The lamp over the table: I named it, and she said the lamp back so cleanly on the second try that I laughed before I knew I would, and she watched me laugh with the attention she gave everything, and did not smile, and pointed next at the salt.



I put the soup on to warm and cut the bread, and it was only when I sat down that I saw the table whole: two bowls, two cups, the spoons paired by the board, hers laid to her side and mine to mine, the good rim turned to her — my own hands had gone around the table ahead of me and set it out, all of it, while my head had been with the soup. She sat where her bowl was as if the chair had always been the second chair. I took up the jug and filled her cup and then mine. The shirt was loose on her shoulders and the rolled sleeves were coming down again over her wrists, and I thought that tomorrow after school I would go to the store rows and buy her proper clothes, trousers cut for her and a shirt her size and something warm for the cold coming, because a person keeping under a roof for the winter needs clothes that fit, and any decent man with a creature in his charge would do the same, and it is a responsibility like any other, and you meet it. The soup steamed between us. I told her to eat, and she ate.



Scene three

The house doubles

✦

That was the week the buying changed. A man alone buys small, a loaf at a time, and I had bought small for four years; now I took the second loaf, and the grain in the big paper sack, and the meat by the piece with bone in it for the pot, and when the counter woman raised an eyebrow at the size of the sack I told her winter was coming and I meant for once to be ahead of it. She approved of me for that. Laying in is a virtue in a young man, she said, and weighed me out an extra measure to round the price, and I carried the lot home along the forest edge with the strap cutting my shoulder and felt, under the cutting, well provided.



On the third day I went to the store rows after the last bell and bought her clothes. Trousers of the stiff brown cloth, a shirt, a knitted underlayer for the cold coming, wool socks, rolled together into one parcel. I guessed the sizes standing in the aisle with the cloth over my arm, and guessed right, all of it, to the finger, and put the guessing down to a schoolteacher's eye; a man who measures thirty children a year against their desks learns what a body takes. She put the trousers on that evening behind the bathroom door and came out with the cuffs breaking just where cuffs should break, and stood while I looked, and I looked, and then the stove wanted seeing to; and my shirt and my old trousers went folded onto the shelf, and the house had one more thing in it that was hers.

The books I bought on the fifth day. First-year primers, the words printed thick as a thumb, three of them and a slate, and I will say plainly why: she said everything back. Whatever I named she gave back bent and then, next day, straight, and she never argued, and she never asked why the lesson mattered or whether it would be on the reckoning, and after a day of the sixth grade, which contests every line it copies, an hour at my own table with a pupil who took what was given was an hour that gave more than it took. I taught, she learned. That is the cleanest arrangement there is between two creatures, and I had it every evening under my own lamp.

The first days kept their shape. The tray, the basin, the two turns of the key, school by the second bell; the walk home along the forest edge with the road going under me faster than a road needs to, the last stretch always with my eyes already on the roofline. Evenings, before the lesson, I changed the dressing. She sat under the kitchen lamp with her hands in her lap and held still, and by the sixth day the cut had drawn itself into a thin pale line that wanted nothing more from either of us, and I left the pad off, and missed the doing of it more than the look of her temple missed the white. By then I was coming down of a morning to find her already up and at the stove, the porridge on, and

eating what she had made, and it was good, and I said so, and went to school. The lesson moved up into its place, and the supper after the lesson, and the washing-up, her towel and mine being by then the same towel on the same nail; a house sorts such things out itself and there is nothing in them to remark.



Her speech came on that week at a pace I could barely account for, so I accounted for it. Broken phrases inside three days, and by the week's end whole sentences, bent at the ends, the small words dropping out when she hurried, and I reasoned it through over the notebooks one night: she had lived near people of the state, that was all — near a town, near work gangs, hearing the language over a fence for years with no one to practice it on. Wild, then, but quick, and quickness in the wild ones goes to waste, and here it was at my table being put to use at last. I set her sentences straight the way I set the sixth grade's, and she took the correction the way the sixth grade doesn't.

And her talk filled up with questions. Primer questions, the questions of that soft age every teacher knows, and I answered them the way a teacher should, fully, without impatience, and I will own that I enjoyed my own patience; it is a muscle, and it likes work. In the second primer there is the picture of a bus, drawn clean, the rows of people in the rows of seats and at the back the little pen with its rail, and three figures standing in the pen among the baggage. She laid her finger on the pen. Why do they ride there, she said. Because that is their place on the bus, I said; the seats are for people. She looked at the picture a while. It is better there, she said, at the back? It is theirs, I said, and while I said the rest of it — that a place of one's own is a kind of goodness, that the rail is there so the baggage doesn't shift onto them on the curves — I noticed the artist had given the bus seven windows a side and drawn every head in every window looking forward, all except one small head in the pen, which was drawn looking out, and I thought that careless of the artist, and straightened the primer square with the table edge, and we went on.

Another evening, over the meat: Can a person beat an ais? If the ais is his, I said, and to measure. Discipline belongs to the master; I teach the class the same. And if it is some other person's ais? Then the master has a complaint against that person, I said, for the damage. She wrote her letters a while. So the hurt goes to the master, she said. The damage does, I said, and the wick wanted trimming just then, and I trimmed it, though when I had done the flame stood no different than before.

Have you beaten one, she asked me once. You, ever, one? Never had one to beat, I said, and heard how that sat, and added: never had cause either. And then I found I was telling her, at more length than the thing deserves, how the school fence came to be painted the green it is — the paint had come in a state lot meant for the granaries, too much of it, and the caretaker and I did the whole fence in an afternoon rather than send it back, and the green went on sticky and dried dark, and

you can still see the lap marks where his brush met mine — a story with nothing in it at all, and she listened to every word of it with that attention of hers, and when it was done she said, Green, and wrote her letters.

Is the motherland good to everyone, she asked, last of the week. To its own, I said, it is good; and it is just to everyone. She turned that over. Just, she said. What is just, for an ais? Order, I said. Being accounted for, having a place and being kept in it and kept track of; that is what just comes to, for them, and it is more than they had. She nodded slowly, as she nodded at a new word before giving it back, and copied the line I had set her, and her letters that evening ran very small and very even, like stitching.



I would have called the week a good week entire, and it was, except for the door. Coming down in the evenings she would stop where the hallway meets the street door, a half-beat, her face turned to it, to the lock of it; and once at the kitchen window I saw her eyes go past her

own reflection to the road, and along the road, to where the forest makes its dark line against the last of the light, and stay there until I moved the pot and the noise brought her back. A creature that has never been told its own position will test the world's instead, and the world's answer to her is on the far road east staging wagons; the teachers' room had it that week for certain now, lists drawn, the gray zones to be swept before the freeze. She had to be told what she was. Kindly, plainly, by me, at my own table — or crookedly, by the street, once, with no second telling needed. I settled it on the walk home and had the words chosen before my gate, the simple ones, the ones I use when a thing must go into a child straight and stay straight.

So that evening I let the supper get eaten first. Then I moved my cup aside, which she marked — she marked everything — and I said, Leia. You know this word: ais. You have heard it from me over the books. She sat with her hands going still on the table. You are an ais, I said. There are people, and there are aises; the two are different kinds; a person is a person, and an ais is an ais, and that is a plain fact and no fault in it, the way there is no fault in weather. You are an ais, and you have no one and nothing of your own, and that is why everything of yours goes through me. The food goes through me, the clothes, the books, the door. Through me it is all safe, and only through me. I said it slowly, and kindly, and once more in shorter words, as you fix a lesson, and she heard the whole of it without moving; her eyes stayed on my face the entire time, which the sixth grade cannot do for half a minute together; and when I had finished she sat still a moment longer.



Then her eyes filled and went over. No sound came with it. The water simply gathered and ran, two lines of it, down to her jaw, and her face under the running stayed almost as it always was, and that near-stillness was harder to sit across from than any howling would have been. In all of it — the tincture that first night, the zip worked out of the burnt cloth, the locked days, the needle-sting of that first week — she had never once cried, and here she was crying at a few plain words said with all the kindness I own, and something in my chest went down and sideways like a stair-step giving. I am an honest man and it was my honesty that had set her leaking, and for a breath I was wounded by that, wounded at being made the cause; and then I understood the tears, because there was only one thing they could sensibly be, and that thing was relief. She had known. Carried it alone, unnamed, in a strange house — and a carried thing weighs double, any pack-strap teaches you that — and now it was named, and out, and shared.

I thought so, she said. Her voice came level under the water, bent soft at the ends the way it bends. I thought — some thing like this. From first days I thought it. And her breath went then, at last, in that short broken way, and I was around the table before I had decided to be, down on my heels by her chair with my arms around her and her forehead coming down to my collarbone, and I held her and talked over her, low, the words not mattering, all right, all right now, I have you, while her back went through its small quiet convulsions under my hands. She gripped my sleeve. One hand, hard, the cloth bunched in it.



And it was there, on my heels on my own kitchen floor with her breath going damp through my shirt, that the practical side of it opened under me. Papers. She had no papers. I had said the word she was out loud in my own kitchen, and that word comes with a ledger fastened to it, and in the ledger she was nowhere. Any eye that ever fell on her — a meter man at the wrong hour, a patrol walking the forest

road for once, one wagon swinging west out of the gray zones with room left in it — and the sanitary service takes her the same day, takes her from my yard the same as from the forest, and the law would call it a gathering-in and call me a question. The first mornings of that week I had turned a key on her against exactly that eye, and the key was tin. I saw the whole arrangement plain for a moment, the shutters and the lock and the routine, a roof latched down tight against weather that comes through walls.

She quieted by degrees, the grip on my sleeve loosening last. I got her to drink some water, and set her at the slate awhile because work steadies a creature, and she wrote her small even letters with her eyes swollen, and I washed up, and the evening closed over us as our evenings closed. By the time the house had gone quiet I had it settled, all of it, laid end to end as I had laid the first night out. She would be registered. Papers, a number, my name entered against hers in a book — accounted for, and accounted to me — and then no service on any road, wagons or no wagons, has any claim on her at all; that is the law's own arithmetic and I had taught it to thirty children with the chalk in my hand. Registration runs through a permit, and permits run through men, and I knew the one man whose word goes that deep; I have made it the point of my life to ask him for nothing, and this once, for this, I would ask. The city, then, on my next free day.



Scene four

The permit



I set out food for the day and water beside it, and said stay, and had it back from her at once — stay — in her bent way; latched the shutters, locked the street door behind me and tried it twice, and was on the early bus while the road was still gray. My free day had come round, and I had the city to get to and one errand in it, and a man does an errand best who starts it before his doubts are awake.

The metro cars in the city are the old green stock, and I have ridden them since I was a boy small enough to go under the bar. At the end of every car there is the pen: a corner taken off the standing room by a waist-high rail, the floor ribbed there where everywhere else it is

smooth, a latch on the rail gate worn down to bright metal by hands. I know the pen as a man knows the strap he holds and the doors he goes out by, which is to say with no looking at all. That morning my eye kept leaving the adverts and the backs of heads and going down the car to it. There was one ais in it, an old man in a coat gone the color of the floor, and he stood holding the rail with both hands though the corner itself would have held him up, and swayed when the car swayed, and looked at nothing. Nobody else in the car looked at him even once, which is the right way and the ordinary way, and I made myself study the route board instead and found I had read the same three station names four times over. The car was packed close and the air in it was old, breathed a hundred times, and a man who has slept short for weeks on end feels bad air worse than a rested man; between the crowd and the air I had a right to a sour morning, and I gave myself the right, and got off a stop early to finish the distance on my feet.



The stop early meant the park, which was no accident of mine; the park is the one handsome thing on that whole errand's road and everybody who walks to that quarter cuts through it. The paths had been raked that morning, the gravel lying in long combed rows still unstepped at the edges, and the bird-trees stood along the main alley with the last of their leaves rattling high up where the birds that give them the name were working at the seed cones. It was a clean cold day, the sky scoured pale. Couples went along the alley the slow way couples go, her hand in through his elbow, matching steps without trying to, and an old keeper raked the side path with the patience of a man who likes raking. I thought that she would like it here. I thought it simply, as you think a fact: that the one who looks the way she looks from the kitchen window at a plain wet road would look at a raked alley under bird-trees, and that of an evening a man could bring — and then the raking wanted watching, the keeper's stroke being a short stroke, six pulls and a lift, six pulls and a lift, and I watched it a fair while for a man with an errand. I had eaten nothing since before the bus, that was the whole of it; an empty man by mid-morning will think in every direction at once. And the asking itself was still ahead of me, an asking I had been ten years not making, and a thing like that sits in the legs and the neck all morning and calls itself whatever is nearest. I came out of the park at its far gate opposite the long gray front of the state-security building, and the old mark on my forearm itched once under the sleeve, as healed things itch in the cold, and I rubbed it through the wool and crossed the street.

Inside they know me by my face at the first desk, which spares showing papers, and a clerk with a soft collar took me up the stair and along the corridor to the door with his name on it, and said, ten minutes, in the voice of a man who has measured other men's ten minutes all his life.

My father did not get up. He was writing when I came in and he went on writing to the foot of the page, and pointed the free hand at

the chair across the desk, and I sat and waited, which in that room is the correct thing and I knew it. The office was warm, overwarm, the radiator ticking under the window. He finished the page, moved it left onto a stack, and looked at me across the desk the way he looks at everything, with the patience already spent in advance.



Well, he said.

I had the words prepared and I gave them prepared. I had taken in a stray ais, I said. Found at the forest edge by my house, hurt, and I had taken her in; she was useful in the house — the cooking, the wash, the garden come spring — and useful was worth keeping, and keeping wanted papers. There was a sweep staging east of us, the lists drawn by what the town said, and an unregistered ais in a house is a patrol's business any morning it cares to be. I wanted her registered before that morning. Registration wanted a permit. A permit wanted him.

He had put the pen down somewhere in the middle of it, which with him is attention, and he heard me to the end.

No, he said.

He said it with no heat at all, and then he explained it to me the way a man explains where the drain runs to someone who ought by his age to know the house. It's trash, boy. It was trash before you were born and it will be trash when the last of it is gone, and the last of it going is a thing we will live to see if the work is let go on. The whole breed wants wiping out; that is a working matter, and it is being worked. The sanitary service exists for exactly this — a citizen stumbles on a stray, the service takes the stray off him, everyone sleeps. You don't paper trash into your house. You put it out and you scrub the step. He picked the pen back up. Tonight, he said. The duty room in your town, and done, and you're clear of it and clean.

And then, in the same flat voice, with his eyes coming up from the papers to me: and what does a young man alone in a house want with a young ais in it, that a charwoman twice a week wouldn't do better and cheaper.

The desk between us was the same desk it has been all my life. The inkstand is black stone with two wells, only one of them ever filled that I have seen, and the blotter in its frame had fresh paper in it that day, and on the stack's corner sat the paperweight he has had since before my memory, a gray polished stone the size of a child's fist with one flat side, and the flat side down, the way it always sits. There is a small chip out of it near the base and I could not have said when the chip came, though I have known that stone my whole life.



She costs nothing, I said. She works.

He looked at me a while longer and went back to the page, and wrote, and I understood the ten minutes were meant to run out in that manner with me across the desk, and I stayed in the chair. I have never asked you for anything, I said. He wrote. Not the posting year, I said, when one word of yours would have had me in the capital schools; I sat the lists like everyone. Not money when the roof went, though you knew it went, and I did it in two summers out of a teacher's pay. Not a step, not a paper, not a name spoken anywhere, ever, once, my whole grown life. You know this better than I know it, because it has offended you my whole grown life. I am asking now. One permit.

The pen stopped. The radiator ticked. He sat back and looked at me the way you look at a wall you have decided to be honest about, and what he found to say, he said with disgust in it, level and old: you've my own jaw on you, and none of what sits behind it.

Then he pulled the pad of forms out of the second drawer without looking for it, took the top leaf, and filled it in fast, pressing hard,

asking me nothing except the district, which he asked in one word and I gave in one word. He signed it, and set the stamp into the pad and brought it down once, a small warm press of a sound in that warm room, and shoved leaf and all across the desk so that I had to stop it with my hand.

You are a fool, he said, and I'll tell you the shape of the foolery so you can watch it come. It turns on you — they do, it's in them like water is in wood — and when it turns you will not come here. You will walk it to the service yourself and stand in the yard while they load it, and that day you'll have the lesson you would not take across this desk. He squared the stack. And when that school of yours has finished with you, he said, third floor. I keep the desk empty. A man with your jaw is wasted on chalk.



The sixth grade is mid-book, I said. Somebody has to get them through the winter reader.

Shut the door going out, he said, and was writing before I was on my feet.

The corridor took me back past the soft-collared clerk, and the stair let me down, and the street door of that building weighs what it weighs so that you leave it feeling let out, and the cold came at my face clean off the whole scoured sky, and the day had turned light around me somewhere between the desk and the pavement. There was no accounting for the size of it and I did not stand about doing sums; a man who has done the hard errand of his year by noon is owed a good afternoon, and I took mine. The permit rode buttoned in my breast pocket, and I felt it there the way you feel a wallet on a market day, checking it with a forearm without meaning to. I went back through the park the long way. The keeper had finished his side path and the rows lay combed the whole length of it, and I walked the main alley under the bird-trees at the couples' pace with nobody on my arm and planned the trip out whole, and planning it was as good as sweets. The next free day, and the evening hour for it, last hour before the office closed, when the streets in that quarter go quiet and the queues are done; she would wear the new trousers and the shirt and the knitted underlayer against the cold, and look like anybody's well-kept ais, which is what she would that day become. At the goods rows by the metro I bought the tin of burn salve, the good kind with the yellow lid that they keep for stove burns, because it is wanted after and better bought ahead than hunted for at night; and a paper sack of sugared bread-nuts from the roaster's cart, because the cart stood there smelling the way it smelled, and the two went into the one string bag together and weighed nothing.

The evening car ran half empty going out. There was the pen in its corner with its bright-worn latch, and nobody in it, and I sat with the string bag between my boots and went over the hour of the inspector's office once more, and read the route board once, and the names stayed read. From the metro's end the bus, and from the bus the road, and the

road along the forest edge had the last light lying along it as it lies in the cold, low and level through the trunks. I saw the house from the bend, last on its end, shuttered and blind the way I leave it, with the light standing thin and yellow in the seams of the kitchen shutter, and the last stretch went under me quicker than I had told it to, and I had the key out of my pocket before I had the gate open.



Scene five

The inspector



Half a step behind me, I told her, and on my left, because the patrols walk the curb side and there is no sense putting her between me and them. Eyes at my shoulder, or down. Hands still. If a man in uniform speaks, I answer; she does nothing at all, which is the easiest work in the world and the hardest to teach. I had the kitchen chairs stood out in a row for the lesson, one for a lamppost, one for a patrol, one for a woman with a basket, and I walked her past them the length of the kitchen and back, and she took her place off my left elbow the first time and kept it every time after, exact as a shadow at noon. The sixth grade takes a week over less. I told her she had done

well, and she looked at me the way she looks — attention, all of it, and no smile with it — and said, and then papers. And then papers, I said. And after papers nobody can take you off this road or any road; that is what today is. She nodded slowly, her word-learning nod, and set the chairs back at the table herself, each one square.

She was dressed in the new things by four: the stiff brown trousers with the cuffs breaking where cuffs should, the shirt, the knitted underlayer against the evening coming, the wool socks inside her mended boots. I put the permit buttoned into my breast pocket and the tin of salve in the side pocket of my coat, one to each side, and at the gate she stopped. Just past the latch of it, one boot on the road, and stood. It was her first time out of that yard since the night I brought her in, and the road must be a large thing after a house, so I let her have a moment of it, the wet ruts and the hedges and the forest making its dark line away to the left, and then I said, half a step, Leia, and she came off the gate and folded in at my elbow, and we walked to the bus in the last full light.

On the bus she went to the back bench where her kind ride and I sat forward, and that was the first parting of the trip and the shortest. The metro was the second. The evening car ran near empty, and I brought her down the car to the pen in its corner, lifted the rail gate, and she stepped in among nothing at all, there being no baggage that hour, and stood on the ribbed floor with one hand on the rail. Regulation is regulation whether the car is full or empty, and an unregistered girl found riding among people would be a gift to the first pair of eyes with a whistle; so it was plain sense twice over, and I told her so with a look, and went and stood the length of the car away by the far doors, where I could see her and anyone could see I had nothing to do with her. She rode the sways with her hand light on the rail and her eyes moving over the adverts, the route board, the dark coming past the windows in cables and lit gaps, and I stood with my forearm across my chest in a way that kept the breast pocket under it, and thought that this was the

last ride of its kind. Papers change the pen into a formality. It would be her place still, but a place with her name on a booklet behind it, and there is all the difference in the law between a creature somewhere it must not be and a creature exactly where it belongs.



The quarter around the office was going quiet the way I had planned for, the queues done, the shops letting down their fronts. She took the streets in with her chin coming up despite the lesson, and I allowed it; a first city is owed a chin. What are they, she said, of the two men in gray crossing the square, and I said, patrols, they keep the order, and you see how they walk, that is a thing you may always see and never mind. And that, she said, at a building wearing its cage of poles and planking, the sky showing through its upper windows. From the war, I said; it is being put back; the whole quarter was worse and look at it now. She looked at it now. She read the shop signs to herself with her lips barely going, the ropemaker's, the scales-and-weights man, the dyer's with its painted arrow, and asked nothing about them, only

read, the way a quick child reads everything the year reading comes; and it pleased me the whole length of that street to be the one walking her through the first city of her life, answering what a city is made of, and I answered fully, and did not hurry her, though the hour was the hour.

The office had a bell over its door and one man in it. The inspector was in his shirtsleeves at the counter, one lamp lit, the day going, and he had the look they get in the registries, of a man for whom the whole world arrives flat and fits in drawers. He took the permit, read it once quick and once slow, and the bottom of it longest. That name doesn't cross this counter twice a year, he said. We close on the hour, but for that name the hour can stretch. Through there. And he lifted the counter flap and had her through into the back room, under the lamp, and me after, and the evening turned official.



He checked her for a prior brand first, that being the order of the form: pushed the hair back off her forehead with his thumb and held it

there under the lamp, turned her face by the chin left and right, then took her wrists one at a time and ran the sleeves up and turned her forearms over, inner side up, the way a man at a market opens a beast's mouth, quick, bored, his mind already on the next line of the form. Clean, he said, meaning unmarked, and wrote it. Then he told her to take the clothes off, all of it, folding as she went, and pointed at the chair for the folding, and took up his pen.

The back room had a filing cabinet of six drawers, each drawer carded in a brown holder, the cards lettered by district in a clerk's hand with the letters leaning left, which you rarely see, and the third drawer had a newer card than the rest, whiter, the ink still black where the others had gone gray. The room smelled of stamp ink, that flat oily smell that is in every state room in the country as if they issue it, and under it the smell of the lamp's heat on its metal shade. In the frosted glass of the door there was a crack, old, puttied over and painted, but the line of it still there when the lamp caught it, running from the latch corner up and branching once, like a river does on a map. He measured her against the paint-marked rule on the wall and read the number aloud to himself and wrote it. He noted her marks in the box for marks — the thin pale line at the temple went into the form in five words, and became a distinguishing feature, which I suppose is what it was. Then the camera on its stand, front and side, the lamp pulled close, her chin set by his finger the way you set a thing on a shelf; the flash went and left its blue swimming in my eyes and I counted the drawers of the cabinet again, six, and the room was warm from the lamp and she stood through the whole of it as her kind stand through things, that dumb patience that is bred into them somewhere below teaching, and it was the best thing she could have done and I had a mind to tell her so after, and my jaw ached from some clench I had put into it on the walk, likely, or on the stairs, and I unset it and studied the leaning letters on the drawer cards until he told her she could put the shirt back on, and the underlayer.

The arm, I said. It came out ahead of the question, which had not been asked yet, and came out too quick, and I heard my own voice arrive wrong, pitched like a man correcting a bill. On the arm, I mean — the brand. Regulation puts it on the forehead, he said, without looking up from the form. Arm's allowed. Patrols will stop her more, that's the cost of a covered mark; a sleeve is a question and a forehead is an answer. It can always be done again on the regulation spot later, if the stopping wears on you. Leave the left arm out, then, he told her, and she stood with the shirt on and the one arm bare under the lamp, and he looked at me then, and at her, and back at me, and something went over his mouth that had oil in it, a small smirk of a thing he didn't trouble to put away. I see, he said, and ticked the box for the arm, and I explained about a schoolteacher's house and the meter man and neighbors, and half through the explaining understood that nothing had been asked and stopped, and found my right hand closed over my own left forearm through the sleeve, over the old place, holding it as you hold a thing that has been knocked, and took the hand away.



There's the standard recommendation, he said, in the same voice the form was in. Females of breeding age, at registration: the increase question. Best settled while she's on the premises — it's a short procedure and the fee's nominal, and it saves the state and the keeper both a deal of paperwork down the years. The cuff of her shirt had come down over her wrist on the folded-back sleeve, and the button of it was hanging by a thread and a half, one of the new buttons already loosening, which is what you get from state thread, and I turned the cuff back on itself twice so it would sit above the elbow and out of the way of what came next, and made the roll flat, and the button held for now, though I would move it that evening with proper thread, waxed, as you do buttons that mean to stay. The lamp ticked on its shade. Declined, then, the inspector said, and shrugged the shrug of a man whose evening it shortens either way, and marked the form.

The device came out of the second drawer of his desk and went on its stand to heat. It is a small thing, smaller than you would say, a handle and a head, and the head is the numbers: little wheels of them, dialed round with a thumb until the number in the window is the number on the form, and he dialed them with his thumb, checking the window against the ledger line, and plugged the cord to the wall, and the head began to go from black to a deep coming red, and he filled in the top of the papers booklet while it heated, unhurried, a man setting the kettle on for the last time that day. I put myself in front of her. I took her shoulders, one hand each, and then her free hand in my one hand instead, the right, her left staying bare on the chair arm where he wanted it, and I stood so that her eyes, if she kept them up, would have only me in them and the tool would be a thing happening in another part of the room. Look at me, I said, low, though the lesson had no line for this. She looked at me. Her hand lay in mine folded and quiet like a bird carried in from the cold, and I held her by the shoulder and the hand and it seemed to me, standing in that lamp heat, that everything the day had been for was in that holding, the whole of my part of it,

and that a man who stands where I stood and holds what I held has done what can be done.

The head hissed going in. A short sound, like fat touching a pan, and a smell after it that the stamp ink did not cover. Her hand in mine went hard for the length of the hiss, every small bone of it standing up under the skin, and her eyes stayed on my face, wide open, all the way through, and she made no sound at all. Then the bones went down again. Good girl, the inspector said, unplugging the cord. For not making a fuss. He said it to her in the voice people keep for small dogs that have sat still, and then to me, over the booklet: well broken, that. You'd wait a year at this counter to see one take it so quiet. Congratulations. He pressed the stamp into its pad and brought it down on the booklet twice, two small warm sounds, and her number and her photograph were in it, and my name was in it against hers, entered in the keeper's line in the leaning left-hand letters, and he slid it across the counter, and it was done, all of it, inside the stretched hour.



I dressed her arm myself, there under the lamp. The tin came out of my coat pocket with the yellow lid, and I smoothed the salve on around the raw of it, not touching the digits themselves, which want air first, any stove burn teaches you that, and laid the loose gauze over and turned the sleeve down easy so the cloth would carry the weight off the skin, and she watched my hands do it the whole time. Bought this morning — bought before, I mean, bought ahead, I told her, holding up the tin, because it is wanted after, and here we are, after. The inspector held the counter flap for us with the keys already in his other hand.

The street had gone dark while we were in it. The streetlights were coming on down the quarter one after another, each with its small hum arriving before its light, and behind us the lock of the office went over twice and the frosted glass went black. She walked beside me — beside, I let it go for the dark and the empty street — with the arm carried across her front, cradled in the other, the way you carry a parcel worth more than the string bag it came in, and that was sensible of her and I said so. I talked going down toward the metro. I told her the soup was on the back of the stove and would want only heating, and that with the booklet in my pocket she could stand at the gate in open day now, any day, on legal grounds, and that the pale line at her temple was written in a state form and so, in a manner, was the whole of her, safe in a drawer in that room from now on, districts and letters and all. She answered nothing to any of it. A day the size of this one fills a creature to the top, and speech is the first thing crowded out; I have seen the sixth grade come back from the shearing-yards trip the same way, dumb as posts to a boy. Our boots kept the one rhythm on the pavement, hers and mine, and the lamps came on ahead of us all down the long street to the metro as if the quarter were being counted, and I carried the papers in my breast pocket and the empty side pocket swung light where the tin had been, and I fitted my step to hers, which was slower than mine that evening, and matched it the whole first stretch.



Scene six

The switches

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By the second stretch her silence had begun to sit wrong in me. I had been talking since the office lock went over — the soup, the heating of it, the last bus if the metro ran short, the standing at gates in open day — and I heard the soup come round in my own mouth a second time, and let it come, because a street that empty wants a voice on it and mine was the one we had.



And walking, I did the day over as you do a ledger. On the one side: I had asked my father for the first thing of my grown life, and sat across the desk while he called me a fool, and carried the yes away buttoned in my pocket. I had spoken up for the arm against the forehead and

taken the cost of it onto every road she would ever walk — each patrol that stops her from now on stops her because of an answer I gave too quick in a lamp-lit room, and I had given it gladly and would again. I had bought the salve ahead, the good tin with the yellow lid, and had it open on the burn before the burn was ten minutes old. The hour had been stretched for us on a name I never use. The soup stood on the back of the stove at home with the lid on. That was the one column. In the other column I looked for the line she might be holding against me, and the column was blank, and I forgave her the silence entire, there on the walk, without her asking. Tired, I judged, or the burn talking to her under the gauze, and whoever the burn is talking to has leave to say nothing back. I told her about the bus again, a little faster than the empty street asked for.

The quarter past the registry is day-workers' houses, the doors coming straight onto the pavement with one stone step apiece, the windows lit low behind curtains, suppers going by the smell of them through the seams. The streetlamps down that stretch are older than the office quarter's and hum louder, each at its own pitch, so that walking you pass from hum to hum as you pass fence to fence in the country. She walked beside me — the dark had bought her that — with the left arm carried across her front, and our boots kept their two sounds on the stones, and I was on the bus a third time, or the soup, when a door banged across the way.

A man came out of it backwards, hauling. What he hauled was a boy, thirteen or so by the length of him, with the brand sitting on his forehead where regulation puts it, and the man had a fist of collar in one hand and the switches in the other, five or six rods tied at the grip. He set his feet on his own step the way a man sets his feet for work of any kind, and started in. The boy went over small with his arms in and took it, and the sound of it went down the empty street, the whick and the catch of breath and the whick.



An owner about his own business, on his own step, with his own. Discipline belongs to the master; I teach the class the same words every winter. The manners of it are plain — you cross over and give the thing its room — and I took her elbow to cross us over, and I had the small lesson half composed by the time my hand closed: that what a man does with what is his is his, that eyes go to a shoulder and hands stay still, that a street is a schoolroom with no bell to end it.

The elbow did not come. My hand was on it and my hand might as well have been on my own gatepost. She had stopped, her face across the way, and while I still had her elbow she said, in the state language, quietly, the way you tell a child the stove is hot: Let the boy be.

The man stopped with the rods up. He looked at her the way you would look at a chair that had spoken, and then he found what she was — one breath was all it took him, as it takes anyone one breath — and past her he looked at me, the ordinary look, the one that hands a strayed beast back over the fence to the man who owns the fence. I had

my breath in to answer it. He turned from both of us and put the switches up higher, for the interruption's sake, over the boy.

She crossed the street. I will set down what my eyes had. She crossed it the way water leaves a tipped glass, and at the end of the crossing there was one short motion, one, that my eyes took in whole and could get no grip on anywhere, and the man sat down on his own step with all his length wrong, an arm bent at a place where arms keep no bend, and the switches went out of his hand and off the stone and rolled into the gutter. There had been no scuffle in it. I have pulled apart schoolyard fights for four years and I know what a scuffle is; a scuffle has a middle. This had an end and nothing before the end.

The man moaned against his own step. The lamp over the gutter hummed at its one pitch. The boy stayed folded on the stones with his face come up, looking at her.



I had a sentence starting in me, some sentence to set the street back level, a sentence with slipped in it, or fell — and the whistles came.

Both ends of the street at once, which is the drill, and the drill worked the way it is drilled: two pairs of them in gray, batons out, closing at the run, boots gaining on the stones from the left and the right together. I did the citizen's thing. I had the booklet out of my breast pocket with my thumb finding the stamped page — papers answer whistles, that is the whole sum I had spent the day buying — and I was choosing my first words, schoolteacher, registered, the keeper's line, when she went to meet them.

What I saw I will put down plainly, the way you put down weather. The first pair reached her ahead of the second. A baton went up, and the man who held it went down with his knees coming to his chest, and I could not tell you the how of it: a step in, a blow with no swing to it, shorter than the word blow. The second man took her by the burned arm — the arm she had carried across her front all down the long street, cradled like a parcel worth more than its string — and the arm came out of its cradle and worked with all the rest of her, and he went over her hip and onto the stones with a sound I have heard once before in my life, the day the school gate came off its upper hinge. The second pair had their whistles going the whole time, and the whistles changed nothing that I could see. She was brief with them. Brief is the word I have: each blow was one blow, and each blow stopped a man where he stood the way a full stop stops a line, and then the street held four uniformed men down on its stones under the lamp-hum, and no man of the four got up, and no man of the four was dead, because all four were moaning and the dead are past moaning. Four grown men in gray, around a girl I had spooned soup in front of and carried water up a stair for.

Where —

The switches lay in the gutter. Six rods, cut green and peeled white, tied at the grip with string, the string wound eight or nine turns and the end tucked back under itself; the peeling had been done with a knife in long strokes, you could see the flats of the strokes in the lamp-

light, careful work for what it was for. I was on the string, the turns of it, when her face came round to me under the lamp.



Down the street the curtains were moving. Every window lit and every curtain going at its edge, the whole quarter watching from behind its glass, and no door in the quarter opened. From the blocks beyond, fresh whistles were waking, one and then its answer, nearer on the left.

My hand went out and took her arm above the wrist — the grip from the forest edge, the first night's grip, come, you are mine to bring — the hand did it while the rest of me still stood where I had been standing since the door banged. She came. First she stooped and had the boy up off the stones by both shoulders, onto his feet inside the one bending, and then she came, and the boy came with her as though that had been said aloud, and nothing had been said aloud.

We ran. Off the lit street into a gap between two houses that I would have called shadow and she took for a way through, and it was a way

through — past bins, past a stack of shutters somebody had taken down for mending, out under somebody's strung washing with the damp of it dragging my neck, through a yard, through its gate, which gave. The turns after that were hers. I had this quarter half in my head from years of errands, and half a quarter is worse than none at a run: every time my legs chose a turning, her shoulder was already gone the other way, and her way opened and went on. I saw one of mine end as we passed its mouth — a yard with three blank walls and a chained handcart — and I stopped choosing. The boy ran between us with his breath whistling in him, the welts talking to him at every stride by any sense of it, and he made no more sound over them than she had made under the tool. My own breath was the loudest thing I owned. The booklet was still in my hand; I had run three streets holding it out before me like a lamp; I got it into the breast pocket at the run and buttoned the pocket, because papers are papers.



Behind us the whistles were finding one another. They linked, street to street, and thickened, and somewhere under them a deeper note stood up and began to turn, and then its brothers with it, the long rising wail the drill books keep for the word general, the one that gets the whole city out of its chair. It came from behind us, and then from the left of us, and then from out ahead where the metro was and could stay. She took the next turning before the lamplight touched her, downhill, and the boy went after her, and I went after the boy, and the sirens drove in from every side, and we ran.

Downhill is the quarter by the low bridges, where the river comes through the city in its stone trough and the streets go over it on humps no higher than a cart, and I knew that much of the city and no more. The lamps down there are fewer. We went through a stretch of them with the wail standing up on every side now, and I began to lose her. Not her way — her way was plain enough, she took it and it opened — but the stride of it: I am a man who walks the forest road, and she ran as if the road were hers, and at every turning I came round it a step later than the step before, and the boy's back went smaller ahead of me, and I ran after the boy's back. At one corner I lost the street entirely. I came out of a gap between two yards onto a crossing I had not seen her take, and she was already in the middle of it, stopped, with the boy behind her, because the lamps had come into that crossing from three streets at once.

They came up out of the dark at a trot, in the long shields, with the sticks over them, more of them than I could count and more behind those, and the first of them to reach her went down — two, and then two more, at the mouth of the crossing, in the same short way the four had gone down on the step — and the rest learned it from that, and stood off, and shields came up, and closed, and in a breath there was a ring around her and the boy where a moment before there had been a street. I stood at the edge of it. I had come out of the gap onto the stones in my coat with my collar up and my face out, a citizen on a

street corner in the general alarm, and the line of them closed past me and did not close on me: a sergeant's eye took my coat in and my hands and my empty street-corner face and went past me to what mattered, and nobody put a hand on me, because nobody puts a hand on a man in a coat standing in his own city with nothing in his hands. I had my hand flat over the breast pocket. I could not have told you when I put it there.



She stood in the middle of the ring with the boy pressed into her side and her face turned to the shields, and she did not look for me, and I did not call to her, and the ring closed a step. I stood. I will set down that I stood, and that nothing in me moved to do otherwise, and that I have no word for what that was. And then, over the roofs, through the wail and under it, there came a sound the drill books have no word for either — a long hush with a weight in it, coming down — and every face in the shield line went up, and mine went up with them.

Scene seven

The cutter comes down

✦

At four thousand the day was still going on. The sun lay level under the high haze and put a late light along the wings, and below the wings the city had been dark for an hour already, strung out down its valley in lines of lamps, and Sam flew the circuit and David watched the needle sit at nothing.



Anything, Sam said.

The same nothing there was over the river, David said. And over the farms. And the last eighteen nights running.

He said it without heat. They had been saying it to each other for two weeks and more in different orders of words, and the words had

gone smooth from handling. The ship asked on the hour, the way the ship had asked every hour of those weeks, and on the hour Sam thumbed the channel and told orbit: negative, continuing, and orbit said, understood, in the voice of a duty officer three hundred kilometers straight up who had other watches to stand.

You know what I keep coming back to, David said. The crash site. That was good work. He tapped the edge of his board, where the survey image had lived until they were sick of it. A burn scar and glass, he said. She put it down dying and the charges did the rest, and there is nothing in that field bigger than my hand. On a world like this one that's the whole design, the machine cleans up after itself, and the design worked, and now the design is why we've got nothing to home on. The thing did its job too well.

It did its job, Sam said.

And she doesn't answer, David said.

Can't, Sam said. Book's plain on it. A transmitter to sit by, she'd have sat by it the first day. No answer: off the site, gone quiet. Gone quiet: walking and eating. It's the loud ones you dig out of the ground.

Gone to ground where, though, David said, and looked down the wing at the lamps. That's the part of the book they wrote from a desk. Find a hole, it says. Find some quiet corner and somebody harmless and sit in it and wait. As if corners were issued. Eighteen days in a place like that, on nothing, in whatever she stood up in.

She'll have managed, Sam said. Tidy, that one. Always was.

The beacon was the rest of it, and there was no rest of it. A suit beacon off a burned cutter put out what it put out, a whisper on a bad battery, and the gear could take a lock off that whisper from a kilometer, call it two with the night clean. They had flown all that time at four and above, because under four you were a shape in the sky over a city that kept order with patrols and read its own rooftops, and a crew that gets its colleague hunted out of her hole by coming down loud to look for her has done the opposite of its work. So the needle sat at nothing,

at four thousand, lawfully, and they flew the circuit, and that was how the weeks went.



It was Sam who saw the city change. He had the western quarters under him on the turn, and he straightened the turn out without saying anything yet, and then he said, look at that.

The city was standing up. You could see it happen from altitude the way you see weather happen, whole districts waking one after another, and when David opened the outside pickup the sound came into the cockpit under the engine noise: a long rising wail, and then its brothers with it, more of them by the minute, and under the wail the small sharp stitching of whistles. And all of it moving. That was the thing you could read from four thousand that nobody on a pavement could have read: the noise had a direction. It was pouring itself downhill, out of half the city at once, toward one quarter by the low bridges, and the streets around that quarter were filling with running lamps the way water fills a print in sand.

That's a hunt, David said.

Don't know that, Sam said. Their city. Their nights.

Whole-city sirens, David said. On the eighteenth night. Driving at one district. There's exactly one thing in this town I can think of that's worth that much of their noise, and if it's her, she's burning right now, while we sit up here being lawful at four thousand. He had his straps tight already. And if it's their own trouble, he said, then it's the best cover anybody's going to issue us this year. Nobody counts shapes in the sky on a night like that. Either way it says the same thing. Down.

Ceiling, Sam said, and nothing after it, because he was already putting the nose over.

They came down the way you come down when you've decided, in one long spiral with the engines pulled back to a hush, and at two thousand the needle came off its pin. David said something wordless. At fifteen hundred the whisper firmed, at a thousand the lock light went steady and the bearing stood still, and he read it out, fine on the left, close, not moving, and Sam took the cutter along it over the roofs of the dark quarter with the wail now everywhere, above them, around them, the whole valley gone one animal sound.



Not moving, David said again. Eighteen days out there, and tonight she's standing still.

The canopy gave them the street in pieces. Chimneys, strung washing, the seams of shutters lit low, then a wider gap and lamps, and in the lamps: a line of the local force bent into a ring, the long shields up and the sticks over them, twenty of them, more, closing in step on the middle of a small crossing, and in the middle of the crossing a woman on her feet. There were men down around her, four of them, five, in the gray the shields wore, down and stirring. She had a small one pressed behind her, half wrapped in her shadow, a boy by the size of him, with something on his forehead that took the lamplight the way scar tissue takes it. And at the edge of the ring, inside nobody's line and nobody's reach, one local man stood with his arms down and one hand flat over his breast pocket, the way a man holds his wallet in a crowd, doing nothing at all.



Sam, David said.

I see it, Sam said, and put the cutter into the street.

He threaded it the way you thread a gate at speed, down through the lamp-glow with the belly lights off, and set it into the gap between the woman and the shield line with the last meters falling away all at once, and the line got half a step of stagger into itself at the sight, and David had the belly nozzles open before the skids took weight. The gas went out low and wide, a pale breath off the street stones, and the ring folded. It went down the way a crowd sits down when told, shields clattering flat, sticks rolling, twenty-odd men laid out inside their own circle, and the two behind the canopy did what crews do and counted chests. Moving, all of them. One of the gray ones lay snoring with his cheek on his shield, and near the middle one of them moaned where he lay, and the moaning was a good sound by the only book that flew in this cockpit.

She kept her feet. She'd had the boy's face turned into her side before the nozzles finished opening, her hand flat over his nose and

mouth, her own chin dropped into her shoulder, holding air, counting — you could see the count in the stillness of her — and when the wash thinned she lifted her head.

She remembers her gas drill, David said, in a low voice, as if there were anyone to wake.

The gas had been laid low and for the ring, and it lay where the ring had stood; the man at the edge stood past the reach of it, untouched, exactly where he had been standing. He had watched the ship come down the whole way, they saw that much through the canopy, his face tipped up and following it down, and he had never once moved his feet, with the street dropping asleep around him. Some of them freeze, Sam said, and gave the man no second look.

David worked the lock and put the hatch up, and the hatch light went out onto the stones, and the engine idle under everything was almost a silence after the sirens, which still turned in the distance, streets away, wide of the mark now and getting wider.

He leaned out into the light and called her name.

Nora.

She stood in the middle of the sleeping street in the clothes of the place, stiff brown trousers gone soft at the knees, a local shirt, boots that had been mended by hand, and she looked at the hatch and the light of it, and stood.

Nora. It's us. It's over, you're found — the ship's upstairs, come on.

There was a dressing on her left forearm, David saw. Clean gauze, laid on loose, the sleeve turned down over it easy, the way you turn a sleeve down over a wound you intend to keep whole; but the sleeve had ridden up in whatever the street had been, and the gauze with it, and under the edge of the gauze the skin was shining with something smoothed on, and in the shining, small and new and raw, a short row of burned figures. Somebody had dressed that arm, and dressed it right. Eighteen days, and she stood there fed, shod, mended, dressed, and it went through him quickly, in the working part of his mind, that

the desk had been right for once, that she had found her quiet corner after all, and then the thought went where thoughts go when the job is still open.



Sam, he said, low. Her arm.

Seen it, Sam said from behind the canopy. Get her up.

She bent and said something to the boy that the pickup lost, and took him by the hand.

The kid, David started, and stopped. She had the branded boy's small hand folded into hers, and she had already turned him toward the hatch, and the way she held it had no question in it anywhere. Sam let his breath out through his nose. Log it later, he said. Get them up.

She came one step toward the light.

Then she stopped. She stood a moment with the boy's hand in hers, in the hatch-light, on the stone street full of sleeping uniforms, and she turned. She turned back to the man at the edge, the frozen one, the local, standing where he had stood through the whole of it among the

fallen shields with his face still tipped toward the ship and his hand still flat on his coat, and she looked at him across the length of the street, and held out her free hand to him. Open. Palm up. Held out, and held there.

And waited.



Afterword

How this book was made

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1 **VOICE MEMO.** The author told the idea out loud: the world, the narrator, the heroine, what happens and how it ends. The raw transcript has no paragraphs and no edits; it closes this book.

2 **DRAFT.** AuthorCAT turned the live speech into working source material for the novel, keeping everything the author said.

3 **CANON.** The agent built 44 canon cards from the draft — characters, places, the rules of the world, a timeline and a style guide — and checked that they agree with one another.

4 **STORY.** Premise, then synopsis, then a plan of seven scenes, each with its own notebook.

5 **SCENES.** The autopilot wrote all seven scenes to the plan: intent, staging, prose, acceptance. After each scene the canon was updated, so the next one remembered what had happened.

6 **ILLUSTRATIONS.** A visual guide and character sheets came first, then storyboard frames for every scene: 218 frames the author accepted. The 42 in this book are spread evenly through the seven scenes.

Appendix

The original voice memo

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> This is everything the author gave AuthorCAT to start with: the raw transcript of the spoken idea. It is printed as is, with no cleanup — hesitations, repetitions, "um," speech-recognition slips and no paragraphs.
>
> From this text AuthorCAT built the canon, the story and the book you have just read.

okay so our job is to write a novel in six scenes, roughly six scenes, maybe a bit more, we'll see, and let's call it Mercy for now. So it's a novel, um, social science fiction, in English, written kind of in the style of the Strugatskys, Stanislaw Lem. Yeah. I mean, uh, Bradbury, maybe. I mean it's that kind of, uh, story, uh, and the voice has to be, uh, on the one hand kind of ordinary, you know? We've got, uh, uh- I mean it's this reflective voice of a guy who lives in a totalitarian state and doesn't realize it himself. Yeah. I mean, well, in that realist way he's kind of narrating it to himself in his head. is going on, he's basically not a bad guy, right, and, well, I mean, but overall it's this ordinariness, right, I mean the language has to describe an ordinary, basically-makes-sense-to-him simple life on a simple pattern, and inside that pattern he explains it to himself in this simple calm way, right, well, realism but the fantastical kind, but at the same time the tension has to build up gradually, right, there's gotta be something unsaid leaking through, uh, and every so often in the language, in the text, you get these little jabs, sharp, irritating, from, from- maybe from the realiz-from recognizing something creepy, or some other way, whatever. Anyway, but overall a simple, beautiful voice, right. And the plot should unfold gradually, not totally clear to the reader, right. And the main thing is that almost the whole, almost the whole story, right, is gonna be from the POV of the main character, an unreliable narrator. Let's call him Rey. Rey lives on a planet, on some totalitarian one, where a few, well, he's, I think, 25 to 27, that's roughly his age, and on this planet about fifteen years ago a terrible war ended, right, and with, and from the edge, or the planet, anyway, the region where he lives, it's gradually, really slowly coming back, in, like, atmosphere, in the whole, right, that's, well, and historically too, though that's not clear to him. Territory, right, so we have to be really careful here, uh, with all the names.

Okay, I'm picking the recording back up. It cut off. So, right, about the names, right, since this is another planet after all, even though that shouldn't be obvious right away, then we have to try not to use names of, well, say, Earth plants and animals, right, well, I mean Bird-tree is fine, right, but like snow or an apple, not so much. You can even use these kind of vague made-up names, right, he ate something that sounds like the name of some fruit or vegetable, but what exactly, unclear, right, I mean. I mean the point is, right, on a first read the reader shouldn't get, basically, right, what's going on here, that it's another world, where and what and how any of it works, but on a second read he should start finding these scattered details, crumbs we tossed him, that let him put the whole picture back together, right, but these details have to be really carefully rationed, right, there should be very few of them. They're scattered through the text, just a little, adding tension, you know? And honestly the story should be written so that for all the fairly detailed telling most of the events stay offscreen, right? Like, for example, the details of what's going on between the main guy and the main girl. We and we got what's happening between them more from hints, right, from gestures, slips, A look. Yeah. And that's actually the most important thing, right, that line between the two of them, it's physical, right, it's there the whole time, but we never once name it directly. I mean not one bedroom scene, nothing like that, right, we don't need any of that, it'd kill the whole thing. But the reader has to feel it the whole way through, right, like right there on the skin, yeah. Through how he looks at her, right, through where she sleeps, through what he says to himself and what he doesn't. Yeah. And the main thing, right, is that he never admits it to himself, and that's the key to the whole text really, right, he keeps putting some other word in the place of wanting her. Pity, mercy, responsibility, whatever. Yeah. Okay so the general plot is like this, right? A young guy lives in some totalitarian state. He doesn't realize it himself, and it won a big military victory about fifteen years back. He... no need for the teacher thing I there I mean all of this should probably come to me in hints, subtle, subtle, out of the text, so, the young guy rey He's coming home from work, he's a teacher, he's coming home from school late and at the edge of the forest, right? And he calls it the Big Forest, because the country's still kind of- half in ruins, right, and, like, not far off there are these barely-controlled territories, I mean the cities are patrolled and all that, right. Well, anyway, there are these gray zones, and basically the outlying towns count as gray zones. Yeah. Well, basically he's not scared, he's just walking along and thinking about his beloved motherland, right. Yeah. Oh and the war, another important thing I forg uh his state fought it against some, well, also, other people, state, whatever, that they call Aisa. uh in what, uh what, what exactly this Ai-this Aisa is and the details generally, well they're kind of hidden, right, we don't sh-we don't show any of that, right, all of it, well, we work from what the hero mutters to himself about it, uh, and we're watching him from inside, right, because he, but I've got it narrated in first person past tense right I walked I saw I came up and the characters so Yeah, okay, moving on. Yeah, so, I just wanted to say that the telling has to work so that, uh, yeah, the hero isn't gonna explain basic obvious stuff to himself, right, straight

out, well, because to him it's self-evident, right, and to build that, uh- Atmosphere, right, of the story we shouldn't spell any of it out in plain words, right, all of it comes through actions, through hints, through what he sees, what his inner voice comments on, but behind that there's always gotta be a second layer we never said out loud. And, and generally, that stuff I said about the war, about the aises and so on, none of it gets said out loud, it all runs along as one background, comes out of some, the reader should gradually taking into account, like a mosaic, right, the picture has to come together out of random excuses, things left hanging, throwaway lines and so on. Yeah, well, in gen Well, you can give a few simple basic clues, especially since the teacher works as a teacher at a school, right? And you can do one scene at the school, where he's talking to the kids in the cl-in the classroom, and there you can drop in an extra, like, set of facts, so the teacher comes out as a more formed, more understandable face. Okay. So, uh-uh- The point is, right, these aises and their state got destroyed, right, they're scattered, so to speak, right, and they're surviving somewhere somehow, right, inside the country, right, in the controlled territories. These aises are basically in the position of, like, serfs, slaves, and in- Kind of, well, a lot of them just live in these ruined-out settlements, I don't know, hiding in the forests, in ruins somewhere way out, right? And nobody pays them any attention as long as they don't make trouble. Yeah. Well, again, and I'll say it one more time, none of this gets stated directly. This is just so it's understood. Yeah, so he the young guy is walking back and he sees at the edge, by a tree, a girl, settled in there nicely, in some odd clothing, the kind we'd recognize as a jumpsuit, zipped up. He walks over to her. Yeah, he right away he looks at her and right away he gets that she's an ais, right? Well, he figures she came out of the Big Forest, got lost or something. So getting closer, he sees, okay, and just before this he's walking through the woods thinking about how he hates aises, right, and loves the motherland, generally, right. I always loved the motherland and hated its enemies, that's how he tells it, right, I mean he sees the girl, gets that she's an Ais, right, and at first, okay, confusion, right, on the one hand he feels this hatred toward her, but not toward her, toward Ais in general, right, on the other hand she pulls at him, well, especially since she's really beautiful there, and that pull is physical, right, his mouth goes dry, but he never says that word to himself, right, he tells himself he feels sorry for her, yeah, and she's sitting there, she's got, when he comes up blood running from her temple, right, so she's. Either somebody hit her, or something's wrong with her, right, and, like, part, uh, of the coverall is scorched, torn, uh, yeah. Well, and he gets it, he explains it to himself, that she was trying to- she got lost, or here, came out of the Big Forest, and somebody hurt her, and she's sitting there. And he gets, Therefore, well, they'll take her away. Underneath it Rey obviously knows what's most likely gonna happen to her, right, that further on best case a concentration camp, and worst case a lot worse. But of course he calls it the sanitary service. Well, again, none of this needs saying out loud, it should. And plus, given where the aises stand, right, in society it's already normal to work them pretty hard, and, well, this girl's suddenly looking at him, he likes her, he's obviously scared to admit to himself that she's attractive, beautiful and all that, right,

he's always coming up with these constant excuses for himself, that he feels sorry for her, that he's showing mercy, hence the story, so-called. and so he backs up sees she's disoriented yeah holding her head gets that she she got hit and by the way do the aises speak the same language as the people in the country and he so though no probably maybe different ones No, probably different, different after all. And he talks to her, she clearly doesn't get him, right, and can't really say anything at all, disoriented, but she smiles at him, right, she looks at him and smiles, sitting under the tree, and when he holds out his hand she comes too, gets up to meet him, though she's swaying, well, he catches her. Yeah. Well I mean he goes back and forth for a while about whether to call the sanitary service on her, and then he decides, okay, fine, he'll take her home with him, his place isn't far off, he brings her in, he's got a small detached house, two floors. Yeah. Well, jumping ahead, let's say his biography is such that, despite the fact that he works as a regular school te Even so his father's got some serious position in security, in state security or the police, and so he's always calling him to come serve the motherland somewhere, but he'd rather work with kids at the school. Though obviously, he calls it, it seems to him that he'll do more good for the kids, right, teaching, than chasing some criminals around out there. But underneath we get it, right, somewhere, though he's scared of it, of admitting it to himself, that he does feel uncomfortable with everything that's going on, with the violence and all that. Yeah, that's why he picked himself such a. A relatively safe job, but again we won't say that out loud, that should never be said out loud at all. Okay, so he brings the girl home to his place, tries to talk to her, she can't answer him anything, right, he gets that she doesn't know the language, that surprises him a little, even the wild ones usually more or less. speak at least some. Well, he still kind of figures the reason is the girl's head injury, right, that she forgot, forgot something, probably, where. Okay, so he brings her in and, so, kind of thinks about what to do with her next, right? She's dirty, torn jumpsuit, he decides to undress her, she looks at him surprised, I mean she goes along with everything, right, but, let's say, well, let's say, she's trying, on the one hand, to keep some distance, on the other hand to figure out at all what's going on with her, well, I mean she's disoriented, but, uh-uh-uh- Well, I mean, like, he, well, and he, well, he treats her like some kind of unconscious child, right? He figures she needs to be led by the little hand, she looks completely helpless to him and, how do I put it, like she's lost her subjectivity, right? He undresses her, obviously, he's got his own motives for that. Intimate ones, so to speak. But not so much because of that, right, he wants to help her, clean her up, deal with the wound, look and see if she's all right and so on. Okay, but here's the important bit, right, this is probably the first time in his life he's seen a naked woman for real, right, I mean sure, training films, a museum, I don't know what they've got over there, but like this, close up, close enough to touch - first time. And we've gotta give that, right, but again not head-on, we give it through the fact that he suddenly starts describing all this irrelevant stuff in enormous detail, right, the tap, the bottles on the shelf, anything, anything at all so he doesn't have to describe her. Yeah. And something drops out from under him, right, that pull in the stomach, and he imme-

diately explains it to himself, he's tired, he's hungry, whatever. Yeah. And he's embarrassed, and he tells himself, what's there to be embarrassed about, she's only an ais. Yeah, and that embarrassment is the whole giveaway, right, because nobody gets embarrassed in front of a thing. Okay. Well, after, like, a little awkward moment, she goes along with it, he takes her to the bath, she washes up in the bath. Yeah, and he's standing outside the door and for some reason he doesn't leave, right, and he doesn't understand himself why he isn't leaving. Well, he's meanwhile somehow, he a bit, seeing she doesn't know the language, Fine, I mean some in simple words. Oh, yeah, I forgot too, before this he obviously introduces himself to her. I mean he says he's Rey, asks her name, she doesn't really get it, he names her Leia, right? Says, I'm Rey, and you'll be Leia. I mean he's also giving her a name, right. I mean in every symbolic sense he's showing his complete control and ownership. Yeah. Well, dress her wound, and when she's already coming out of the bath he gives her some clothes like that, feeds her, and then locks her in the bedroom upstairs and goes to sleep, yeah, roughly like that. And he's down on the couch himself, by the way, right, that matters too, she's got the bed. And he stands in the doorway a bit longer than he needs to, right, and then he goes. Yeah. Well, roughly like that. End of scene one, next scene. It's the next day, he's at school, so he's talking, and here you can give a bit more context about his, so, history, talk about the Aises. But the class he got is a difficult one, experimental, sixth grade, and they're asking these provocative questions, which uh-uh somebody like that, I mean, more precisely, they, well, one of them says the motherland has to take care of everyone out there, and about the a-aises too, right, well, I mean, provocative questions of that kind about where the aises fit in society, right, about how you're supposed to treat them, so, uh-uh, he's torn, he says the aises aren't people, but you can't treat them like non-people either. I mean he starts. And the main thing, right, is that he actually, uh-uh, here again in this scene you can show, uh-uh, again literally in the background, that his, you know, his arm starts itching, the one with, uh-uh, what's left of a camp tattoo on it, right, so the reader would get it, right, that as a kid he himself, uh-uh, Rey was in a camp, in some concentra Well I mean like here, what, to show how complicated it is, how ambiguous the whole thing is, right, I mean we don't know the reasons for this war and we don't talk about it, obviously in the eyes of the Ais, oops, in Rey's eyes, he obviously, his country's in the right, but, well I mean he, well, like, says what Aises. bad ones, they tell all the horrors out there that they did. But at the same time, right, he says it's every person's duty to hate ais, right, well, I mean in this society of theirs clearly people are people, citizens, residents of the country, ais that's not people. You can't tell them apart on the outside, of course. But when he's saying all this to the kids he feels this split, right, he, having said it, remembers He's telling the kids just right now. Anyway, I think scene three is several days later already, and how Rey tells himself about the progress, how he-the one that happened. with Leia, right, that she already, obviously, feels herself, that she started picking up the language really fast, that she's moving through the language with astonishing speed, right, yeah. He sits with her, talks, looks at her, she's really beautiful, he's admiring her. Well here I have to think about

which moment exactly, maybe in this scene, and maybe the next one, I mean maybe the conversation about what she is, you can show that, though no, probably no point dragging it out, it's just one scene, right? Maybe about a week later. Well I mean and Leia talks, right, in his, well, somewhat broken but already really good language, right, really nicely. He bought her some kids' books with the words in them. Anyway, she picks everything up astonishingly fast, it blows him away. In the house, maybe, it started getting doubled up in there, at home everything's tidy, the dishes, washed and all that. Well, I mean the house with Leia in it, Leia. A table, warmth, coziness, right? And again, out of the context we should get, again, from subtle, again, hints, this never gets said directly, that Rey and Leia most likely have a sexual thing going too. And how do you show that, right, well, say, the door upstairs doesn't get locked anymore, right, and he never says a word about it, the key just quietly disappears out of the text. Yeah. Or he comes down in the morning and she's already downstairs, and that's it, right, nothing more. Or there's one towel for the two of them, I don't know, some little domestic thing like that, that says all of it by itself. Yeah, and no scenes, nothing, right, the reader just at some point realizes this has been going on for a while, and that he missed when it started, because it isn't in the text either. Yeah. So look, about a week in they've got this going, right, and for Rey it's completely self-evident, he doesn't dwell on it at all, right, not one thought, not one doubt, it just simply is. Because she belongs to him, right, that's the whole explanation, he doesn't need another one. And more than that, right, this is probably the most important thing in the whole story - he's doing it for her, as he sees it. I mean in his head he's doing her a kindness, right. He's responsible for her, he picked her up, he feeds her, treats her, registers her, yeah, and all of that sits in one single row for him, right, one more form of taking care of her, one more mercy. That's how he says it to himself, that she's better off, that she's got it good with him, that where else would she live like this, yeah. And not once, right, not once does he ask what she wants, and it never even occurs to him that the question exists. Yeah. And this is where the reader flinches, right, and the hero doesn't, the hero just carries on like nothing happened, and that gap is what the whole thing rests on. Well, he dis- he disposes of her, let's say, like a kind, caring master. He feels like the full-on master of the house, and it seems to him all of this is absolutely normal, natural, he's within his rights. And, well, uh, He tells her that she's an ais, right, ais and not people. I mean she listened, and cried, burst into tears, said, well, obviously, that I'd figured about as much. Well, anyway, some dramatic story like that to hide. Yeah. Then, I think, the next scene is Rey's conversation with his father, right? Well, maybe a short little scene here, well, rather than a big one, well, maybe, to-a bit more of, of, describing life generally, the everyday stuff, maybe he's riding the metro, watching, also how out there, uh, people ride the metro, they see buses, public transport, and a lot of them nearby, out there, aises, well, and not nearby, maybe, for the aises, I think, There are, there'd be separate little pens on the bus, right, but the one with family, riding with family, they sit at the back, right, people sit up front, and if they're carrying heavy stuff out there, helping with something, whatever, so, well, yeah. Well, and Rey's looking

at this and suddenly starts catching himself thinking that he's looking at it with slightly different eyes because of Leia, at first he wanted to, right, so he's walking through the city, through a nice park, say, right, he's walking along, and everything's kind of fine, he likes all of it, and he thinks, ooh, it'd be great to take a walk here with Leia, arm in arm, yeah, and he pushes that thought straight back down, right, because arm in arm is something else entirely, you don't walk that way with an ais. Only it's a shame she's not registered, right. Well, that can also be in the background, in the early, in the earlier scenes it can sit there, that she needs to get registered, right, now And so he's walking through this nice city, say, nice weather out there, sun, okay, and he's thinking how great it'd be with Leia to take a walk here, and then get on a bus or whatever and watch, how out there, and think, so it turns out I'd be sitting up front and she'd be sitting at the back, and somehow that thought makes him a little uncomfortable. Well Well and he has a hard conversation, right, I mean he asks his father to help with the legalization, right, and the father's obviously against it, says she's trash, that she's an a-a-ais, and that they all need wiping out, sanitary service and so on. Well, anyway, some emotional conversation like that. Rey says he hasn't gone to his father for help that often, yeah. Well, anyway, short version, Rey's happy, he's got the permit for Leia's registration, Leia comes home, well, or he just walks out of his father's office and happily goes home to Leia. The next scene is Rey and Leia going to get registered at the inspector's. Leia's walking, she's basically in the city for the first time, right, it's already getting evening-y, well there's still time before closing, closing, she's looking around, taking it in surprised, right, maybe she out there, they run into some cop, and Leia looks at him a long time, right, and the cop out there starts going red in the face, realizing she's an ais. and somebody out there says, look, look at him, I don't know, look at his eyes or whatever, and Leia can't figure out what's happening, but she goes along with it. well, finally they go in to the inspector. the inspector's this really soulless one, this, really indifferent one. Well, he obviously takes Leia as a thi, makes her undress, examines her, maybe photographs, out there, something, and right here, right, Rey suddenly feels this anger that somebody else is looking at her, right, and he doesn't understand where the anger's coming from, he brought her here himself. Yeah. I mean it's jealousy, but that word isn't there and can't be, right, you don't get jealous over a thing. Yeah, checks she's got no brand on her, says by the regs the brand goes on the forehead, well, he says, maybe on the arm, and the inspector gives this dirty little smirk, right, and says, "I see." Yeah, one word, "I see," and that's all, right, and Rey wants the floor to swallow him, because the inspector has understood everything about him, and they both know it, and out loud nothing has been said. Yeah, that's the kind of thing I want, right, that's the whole technique right there. And he also says, well, all right, sure, we can put it on the arm, but the patrols will give you hell, and you can always duplicate it later anyway. And I'd recommend sterilization. Yeah, and that sterilization line, right, it finishes the sentence for both of them, because why else would you. And Rey acts like he didn't catch it. Okay, and Leia's standing there through this conversation, probably, impassive, staring at the floor or at the wall, indifferent. Finally,

well, the branding is this special device, they say, out there, you dial in the digits, you get the number red hot and... You burn the skin, right? And the inspector also asks Rey to help, to hold Leia so she doesn't pull away. Yeah. Well, when it all happens, right, the smell of burnt meat, but Leia basically didn't make a sound, and didn't... barely flinched, twitched a little, braced her forehead, well I mean she obviously gets where all of this is going, and anyway she went along with it. And Rey, Rey feels, again, I mean on the one hand this doubleness, it seems to him, on the one hand, that everything happening, the happening is right, because, well, that's how it's supposed to be. Aises have to be registered, branded and that's it, finally Leia will have, Leia will have all the papers, she'll be able to walk around, go out, and everything will be, everything's gonna be fine and quiet now. Well, still, this scene leaves him with this odd awkwardness and this inner not-getting-it, that. Well, Leia doesn't say anything, he helps her get dressed. My arm hurts, she says, she thanks him, and he even handed her some ointment ahead of time, he gives it to her so she can put it on the burn. Well, anyway. And the inspector, right, he talks to her like she's a little dog. Good girl, for not making a fuss out there and all that, and I mean he treats her very Well obviously, right, like a thing, like an animal, like a dog. When they come out onto the street they're walking, right, Leia's quiet, Rey doesn't really get what's going on, right, and this silence starts to offend him, and to make him angry, right, because to him it seems everything ended fine, Leia's registration is done, and now she can go out on legal grounds. Nothing'll happen to her, the sanitary service isn't coming for her, there's nothing on her now, and he only thinks he's happy about this situation, though obviously on the other hand he must know this isn't it at all, and that's what starts making him furious. And suddenly they see a house across the way, where He walks up, jumps out. A guy drags out a boy, some boy or other, also with a brand on his forehead, thirteen years old, and starts, I don't know, beating him with switches. Clearly furious about something. Well, I mean, well and, What do you expect from aises, they're so clumsy, everything with them, they drop everything, break everything, well and obviously they have to be brought up right, right? Yeah. Well, that's what switches are for, bringing up the aisish ones. And yeah. Well, he doesn't much enjoy watching this, but he Leia, grabs her by the arm, tries, tries to cross over to the other side of the street. Somehow subconscious Well, she suddenly stops, steps off toward the two of them, leave him alone, you see. And the old man, oops, this, this, this, uh, guy who's beating down the Ais, he goes into a rage, sees who's talking to him, Leia, and maybe he notices the brand on her arm, gets that she's an Ais. Well, and also here, uh, an important point, this needs saying separately, something. We're not gonna reveal how an ais visually differs from people. By and large they don't differ at all, right? Everybody, actually, inside this society, so to speak, they can tell by behavior, by clothing, by how you hold your body, right, ais or not ais. I mean the brand out there is purely a backup thing. But actually, obviously, people don't differ from an ais in anything. But we don't say th Overall, right, a thoughtful reader should come out with the conclusion that an ais really doesn't differ from people in anything. Yeah. All, all this quote-unquote recognition is just a learned, so to speak,

posture and type of behavior. Yeah. Well and when Leia, so to speak, says, Leave him alone. He looks, well, and maybe, he sees the brand on her arm, gets it, or what, ais, uh, well, this him, obviously, this, uh, guy who was smashing the boy, blows up from the rage, okay, and Rey somehow tries to smooth the thing over, and they pull him off, he's saying, No, no, that's it, it's fine, fine. Sorry, we're j And this same guy starts winding up on the boy again, right, and here Leia with this impulsive, deft move immobilizes him, knocks the switches out of his hand or just does some kind of takedown, and the guy goes down on the pavement from the pain. And Leia takes the boy by the hand and lifts him up. And everyone's obviously watching in horror, in shock, and suddenly whistles go off on both sides, right? Police patrols come running from both sides, four guys on one side, three guys on the other, they panic, they've got no idea at all what to do, they're already pulling batons out there, they run at them, and then Rey sees it like it's all in slow motion, right, Leia suddenly turns into Short, precise strikes, moving fast, right, she takes out every one of the cops, okay, pretty hard, yeah. Uh, but not fatally. And literally a minute later, when it's all over that fast, he looks around in horror at all of it, right, at this picture of beaten-up, so to speak, cops, groaning. This guy, right, now somebody's gonna drive up and something's gonna happen, it's totally unclear. He grabs Leia by the arm, says run, she grabs the boy. Anyway, they start running away in a panic, no idea where they're running, and behind them somewhere the cops' whistles keep going. And finally the last scene, which completely flips the optics and generally puts everything back together. Here it's already told from the POV of two pilots, two pilots of an alien recon-and-rescue cruiser, let's call them, and they've clearly got these Earth ones, for example, David and Sam, well, I don't know, we'll pick something. those are typical names, so they're flying, they're shown, right, that a scout cutter's cruising over some big unclear city, right, and they're talking between themselves about how two weeks ago out there, ten days ago out there, an emergency signal came from down here, some cutter went down, some kind of accident happened, right, but Well, say, they talk about how they came down there from the ship that answered the signal, right, going off route. They talk about the best way to look for the pilot, right, given the planet turned out to be inhabited, that pilots in that situation are supposed to, if you end up on an inhabited planet, you're supposed to. Hide, right, stay unnoticed, wait to be found. Well, the beacon's not working. Well, I have to think about that one, actually. Is the beacon working or not working? Or maybe it is working. Probably the beacon's working. They fly toward the beacon signal and maybe they're talking about the best moment to make the drop and pick the pilot up, right? Well, they try to raise her, the radio's not working out, right, say, I mean they get that... All they've got is the beacon, the signal's really weak from the beacon, or say the beacon signal, right, probably, you have to get in closer, they fly over the city, they make, they wind circles, looking for this beacon signal, because it's really weak, they're trying to pin down the pilot, at this point already, almost desperately, or maybe the other way, they're watching this whole situation from up high, what's going on down in the city, suddenly they started to Sirens driving everywhere, they start, surprised, one of them

says, let's drop down lower, and the other one says, come on, what, we've been hunting this beacon for two days already, we can't get a lock, the signal's too weak, or maybe something happened. Yeah. Well I mean the general idea is that the cutter's signal, after the signal from with the cutter, it destroyed itself, looks like, or it self-destructed on its own, Well, in theory it's supposed to self-destruct, I think, in tech-level-four worlds. He's watching what's going on, trying to find the pilot roughly in this area, for many hours already, say, even a couple of days, circling, but for them to register the beacon, to get a lock on it, they've gotta drop down at least, like, a kilometer, two kilometers. Yeah. Well, he se-sees, this prison thing of some kind down below, it's evening already, say, right, getting dark, okay, and sirens all over the city and the district, and this surprises them. They think, well, one of them's talking the other one into it, come on, let's go down and look, and the second one says, yeah, well, come on, let's head back to base, well, base isn't from here, the ship's in orbit, Though no, no, that's wrong. A rescue crew wouldn't do it that way. Anyway, they decide to go down, they decide to drop lower, to catch the signal. Well, obviously, right, and they fly in, and, say, they… come down right onto Leia and these boys at the very last moment, when the cops out there have already got them surrounded, out there, maybe, surrounded, maybe they've got guns on them out there or something like that, right? Yeah. Or maybe Leia's still fighting, maybe ten bodies lying there, but they're already, already coming, out there, I don't know, running in with shields and batons. Well, I have to thin How to make it more dynamic. And they see this, right, and they, say, put out some special gas or non-toxic radiation, okay. And everyone around them, accordingly, goes down, right. And Rey with the boy watches the rescue cutter coming down in horror and in shock. human, Earth ones, right? And, uh, the airlock opens, the hatch, okay, and they're calling Leia, and Leia takes this boy by the hand, makes a step toward the ship, then turns and… Turns back to Rey and holds out her hand to him. Like, calling him along with her. Well, I think that's where the story can end, right? I mean, break off. The story, so it's clear that this is where he is, and that all of this is gonna end. Yeah. Well, it's clear, right, that Leia actually turned out to be an alien pilot who crashed, who had to… hide. So she never actually lost her memory, right, she was just trying really hard not to stand out, right, and not to draw suspicion as much as she could, yeah. But with Rey, let's say, she and him ended up with this, I mean, relationship, I mean, this arrangement. she's grateful to him for the help, right, and on the other hand she just felt sorry for him, so she, let's say, went along with him and, and with that too, right, I mean with that too. Yeah. And that's probably the most terrifying place in the whole story if you land it right, right, because in the finale the reader has to reassemble that entire line from scratch and understand that she was choosing the whole time, right, and he thought the whole time that he was taking. Yeah. And again not one direct word about it, right, the optics just flip, and everything that already happened starts reading backwards. And tried to him, and, well, the reader should get that during those conversations, which out there one, one, we can show, in a bit more detail, uh, well, she was kind of trying to humanize him, so to speak, to get him thinking about it. with naive, naive

provocative questions generally. Well I mean that she, well, the reader should come out with this final feeling, right, that she actually had the whole situation under control the entire time. And again, this never has to be said out loud, it should out of- just out of the facts, become clear. That she had the situation under control and just acted this way, because, well, first of all, obviously, she wanted to make minimal problems for herself and everyone around. And on the other hand, it seemed to her that this way she'd probably just be able to, well, let's say, re-educate him. And she felt sorry for him, she did it out of mercy. Well, I mean To get it across here, that it isn't that he took pity on her, actually she's the one who took pity on him. Yeah. The end of the story.



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