

This excerpt is from my novel-in-progress, *The Saints We Made Ourselves*. During her first year of college, Phoebe and her closest friend, Elvie, invent the Staircase Theory. What begins as a joke becomes a shared language, then a ritual, then a kind of private religion through which they romanticize coincidence, desire, and the dangerous comfort of postponing responsibility. The novel follows a close-knit group of students whose lives gradually diverge after an accident fractures their relationships and raises questions of guilt, loyalty, and complicity. In this section, the narrator recalls the origins of her relationship with a former lover, the development of the “Staircase Theory” she creates with her closest friend, Elvie, and the events that transform an ordinary superstition about coincidence into something much more difficult to escape. Years later, Phoebe reconstructs what happened—not to assign blame, but to understand what it means to witness harm without stopping it, and how easily silence can disguise itself as loyalty. Moving between memory and aftermath, friendship and fracture, *The Saints We Made Ourselves* explores the slow erosion of innocence and the dangerous appeal of remaining forever “in between.”

It happened on a Tuesday. Or maybe a Thursday. I knew it was a day that started with a T. One of those in-between days that never quite earns its own memory. I was halfway down when the door above me slammed open. A voice called out, “Wait—don’t slip.” Then footsteps. He appeared two landings up — breathless, hair damp, laughing at something I hadn’t said. Not handsome, exactly, but composed. I found myself looking anyway.

“Umbrella?” he asked, holding up a broken one.
“Lost cause,” I said. He looked at my soaked skirt, my hair plastered to my face, and said, “Then maybe a change of clothes.”

That should have annoyed me. It didn’t. His tone wasn’t flirtatious so much as observational, as though he’d accidentally stepped into my story mid-sentence and was trying to find his place. I brushed past him, muttering something about the weather. He followed, not too close, but enough that I saw him smirk when my foot slipped on the last step.

A collision disguised as coincidence.

In Dublin, rain still finds me. Even indoors. The roof above my flat leaks just enough to stain the wallpaper, thin brown veins that look almost like handwriting. Sometimes I trace them with my finger, pretending they spell something out. I think of that stairwell. I don’t miss him, though.

He didn’t stay long that day. Just enough to walk beside me to the quad, enough to make me laugh once.

Elvie said, when I told her, “You really are cursed. The universe keeps throwing men at you on stairs.” I said, “Maybe I’m just looking up too often.” She smiled faintly. “Or maybe you’re waiting to fall.”

I didn’t see him again for weeks. Then, one night, I did.

It was well after midnight. He looked up when he saw me, recognition spreading slowly across his face.

“You again,” he said.

“Me again,” I replied.

He held the door open for me, and for some reason, I stopped halfway through. He did too. It felt rehearsed, though we hadn’t practiced it.

“You never told me your name,” he said.

“You never asked.”

He tilted his head. “Maybe I liked the mystery.”

“OK, lazy.”

That was our first real conversation. The one that made me believe Elvie was right — that every story worth telling happens between floors.

He was sitting outside the dining hall, reading something dense about Genghis Khan. The first meetings felt accidental. The subsequent ones weren’t. We started meeting in small increments: coffee before class, library stairwell after.

In Dublin, there’s a staircase in a pub near Merrion Square that reminds me of him. It creaks at the third step, just like ours did. Sometimes I sit there before the crowd arrives and imagine he’s just behind me.

I still search for smile lines sharp like knife cuts in every face I come across, without realizing I’m looking. I noticed recently. I smile at anything slightly reminiscent of him. A couple of months ago, a man laughed behind me on the bus while I was on my way to the pub, and for half a second I thought it was him. It wasn’t. I spent the rest of the ride wondering what, exactly, I had recognized.

He had a temper, though he hid it well. He sometimes talked too loudly, and even by Olivia’s standards. And he never told me why he transferred mid-semester or why he never mentioned his mother. It wasn’t love, not yet. It was something smaller. Perhaps, recognition before definition. Looking back from Dublin, it might have been the only time I mistook peace for permanence. Eventually, we would call it “love”. We didn’t fall the way people describe it; we *slid* into it. No ceremony, no hesitation. The days blurred until there wasn’t a before to measure against. He’d show up at my door; I’d let him in without asking why he was there. I even gave him my spare Finding Nemo toothbrush. His pillow was impossibly hard. Mine was soft enough to disappear beneath my head. Eventually, we started sleeping on his anyway.

We didn’t talk about what it was. Naming things makes them real, and real things end. The night before he left, we were together in my bed. He had been outside drinking. I told him I loved him, though not directly. It slipped out. He was too drunk to remember

the next morning. He said, “You’ll forget me.” I said, “You wish.” I didn’t forget him, no. I just don’t remember him as well as he deserves. It took eleven men before I could look at his picture and feel nothing.

By March, Elvie and I had stopped eating with the others. It wasn’t a decision so much as an evolution. One week, we were just too tired. The next, too busy. After that, it became a habit. Hudson ate alone because we were rarely hungry at the same time. When we could arrange it, he would join us. There was an understanding, and that was enough. The group chat still existed, technically, but messages were not sent often.

Mallory and Derek were becoming a unit, their sentences starting to share pronouns. They had that phase of ironic flirtation that everyone believes isn’t real until it becomes too real to ignore. Sally was applying for summer internships and used every meal as an excuse to discuss her “leadership potential.” Olivia was still taking the train from Hamilton, her coat always damp, her eyes always far away. And Lewis... Lewis had started smiling differently. Not more, not less, just differently, like he’d learned a new language and wasn’t sure when to use it. Or maybe it was because he finally took off his braces.

We noticed everything because we’d stopped participating.

Elvie and I had started living together in isolation. Nothing had changed in our humble abode. She would sleep early and I would stay up late, studying, eating, letting laundry pile up until it became a wall in the middle of the common room. We spent nights watching old French films on her laptop, whispering lines to each other as if the subtitles were too heavy to read out loud. Sometimes we’d go three days without leaving the dorm, surviving on instant noodles and whatever we could steal from the dining hall under the guise of “study snacks.” There was comfort in that decay.

In the mornings, she’d sit by the window, legs tucked under her, sketching without purpose. She’d draw ladders, staircases, anything with steps. I asked her once if they were real places. She said, “No. Just the idea of up and down.” I told her that was the most pretentious thing she’d ever said. She laughed and threw a pencil at me. It missed by inches. She had started worshipping my god. We had created a fatal god to live our religion. Unfortunately, gods have a way of demanding sacrifice. Eventually, we wrote down our final interpretation of the Staircase Theory:

If something is meant to happen, it will not arrive in fireworks or revelations. It will find you in motion, halfway between two choices, one foot lifted, uncertain of where it will land. It will happen in the most ordinary of places: a stairwell, a rain-soaked corridor, a hallway where the light flickers for no reason. Life does not announce itself when it changes; it slips in quietly, disguised as coincidence. The Staircase Theory believes that meaning lives in transition, not destination. Every story worth telling begins between floors, where you can still go up or down,

stay or leave, love or forget. The staircase is not where things happen; it is where they become inevitable. Fate does not wait for the ceremony. It waits in the stairwells, in the everyday hesitations that make you ten seconds late and, somehow, right on time. The ordinary, if you look closely enough, is already extraordinary.

We called it a theory because calling it a religion seemed dramatic. But we believed in it the same way.

The night Olivia and Lewis started officially dating, Elvie and I were on the top bunk, eating cereal straight from the box. Mallory texted a photo. It was blurry, but clear enough to make out their faces. Lewis was smiling, and Olivia's head rested on his shoulder. Elvie showed me the phone without comment. I said, "Well, there it is." She said, "What?" I said, "The proof that our theory worked for once."

I wanted to be happy for them. I really did. I also wanted Olivia out of the room. She had become unrecognizable within the past two weeks they had been confirming the dating rumors. Something about their pairing felt too symmetrical, too much like proof that the staircase theory worked.

There was a time when we used to go everywhere together — lectures, cafés, even the laundromat, like a two-person cult of mutual avoidance. But by spring, we barely left our room. We weren't sad, not exactly. We were just suspended. Between semesters, between versions of ourselves, between what we wanted and what we'd already lost.

The others still invited us to things — dinners, parties, study groups — but our excuses grew too believable. I had become good at answering questions Elvie didn't want to answer. Elvie said she had migraines; I said I had deadlines which was just an excuse not to leave her alone. She didn't mind. She never does. But still, eventually, they stopped asking. I never corrected them.

Mallory once showed up at our door, holding two cups of tea. "Just checking you're alive," she said. Elvie was half-asleep. I told Mallory we were fine, that we were just "recharging."

In Dublin, I walk past the pharmacy where I used to buy my pills. The woman behind the counter still recognizes me. She asks if I'm doing alright. I tell her I am. She doesn't believe me, but she nods anyway. It's a small mercy, the way strangers let you lie without consequence.

Something ordinary.

A broken lightbulb on the landing outside our room. A noise that sounded like laughter until it didn't.

The proctors were fixing wiring that week, so the whole building smelled of dust. Every time I climbed the stairs, I'd feel a faint vibration under my feet like the building had a pulse it didn't know how to hide. Elvie said it reminded her of the trains in Geneva; I said it reminded me of heart disease.

We joked about it, of course. We joked about everything. Elvie had started journaling again that week. She said it helped her think. She said she didn't want to "waste pain." I remember laughing. I shouldn't have.

That semester, Lewis and Olivia had officially broken up; Mallory and Derek were engaged but wouldn't tell anyone; Hudson had started talking about marriage too, half-joking, half-not. The word itself hung around us like humidity.

And then there was Melanie.

Melanie was new. Sally's cousin from Kansas who was a government major. She had that easy friendliness that makes you trust her immediately, even when you shouldn't. She joined our lunches, our late-night talks, and our quiet rituals. She remembered everyone's coffee order by the end of the week. She wasn't meant to stay, but she did.

I liked her. She was the first person in weeks to knock before entering our room, and she would trust me to save her a seat during lectures. Elvie desperately tried to like her. She was beautiful in a way that made people rearrange themselves around her. And Hudson, predictably and stupidly, was one of them. Hudson remembered Melanie's three distinct coffee orders. He had only ever remembered one before: Elvie's. He never meant anything by it; Hudson never does. But meaning doesn't always need intention. Sometimes it's just proximity.

One night, Elvie caught them laughing together in the hallway — a simple, harmless sound. But she went silent afterward. When I asked if she was jealous, she said, "No. I'm terrified."

"Of what?"

"She's not right for him; she doesn't even know him."

By mid-October, the building was colder. The heating broke, and we slept in sweatshirts. Elvie and I were back to our routines. Then one Friday night, the fire alarm went off for no reason. Everyone poured into the stairwell, half-asleep and irritated. I remember standing on the third-floor landing, hair unbrushed, watching the light flicker. Elvie was beside me, shivering in an old hoodie.

That's when Melanie appeared, running up the stairs against the flow of people. Her eyes wide, barefoot, holding her phone.

“Hudson’s hurt,” she said.

Everything tilted.

He wasn’t seriously injured — just a sprained ankle, a slip during some late-night walk. She was exaggerating. He was a grown man, he would survive. Elvie was furious — not because of the injury, but because he hadn’t told her first. Elvie always believed Hudson had a special thing for her, a soft spot in his heart. Maybe she thought this because he would kiss her on the forehead when she was sad, or always save a seat for her when she was absent. I cared too much about Elvie to tell her that was just Hudson, same old Hudson, same to everyone. She accused him of caring more about attention than about her. He accused her of dramatizing everything.

When it was over, Elvie and I walked back to the dorm in silence. Halfway up the stairs, she stopped.

“Do you hear that?” she asked.

“Hear what?” I laughed nervously. “You’re imagining things.”

“Maybe,” she said.

The official “accident” — the one people still whisper about when they talk about that year — hadn’t happened yet. But looking back, everything makes sense.

Superstition had turned into prophecy, quietly rehearsing itself beneath our feet. It was one of those nights that looked harmless at first, with finished essays open on glowing screens. Elvie was sprawled on the couch, humming to herself, her hair damp from the shower. Melanie was downstairs with Hudson, trying to teach him a dance she’d learned from someone else. I could hear their laughter through the floorboards, that strange, overlapping sound that makes happiness seem performative.

We’d been drinking only a little, not enough to blur, just enough to loosen the words. Downstairs, Hudson shouted something; Melanie giggled. Elvie’s jaw tightened. She set her glass down on the table. “I can’t do this tonight,” she said.

“Then don’t.”

“She keeps acting like he’s hers.”

“She’s drunk.”

“So am I,” she said. “But I still know what’s mine.”

I should have stopped her when she stood. She left the room. I followed after a few seconds. The light on the landing was still broken, flickering like a pulse. I heard voices. Hudson’s low, apologetic; Melanie’s higher, sharp. He was quite obviously failing his dance class. When Elvie appeared at the top of the stairs, everything compressed: space,

air, time. She wasn't shouting. Her voice was calm, almost curious. "Is this what you wanted?" she asked him.

Hudson said something I couldn't catch. Melanie turned. "What are you talking about, Elvie?"

Melanie moved first, a small step upward, hand half-raised as if to steady herself. Elvie flinched back. I reached forward. Melanie's hand caught someone's sleeve. Someone's elbow hit the banister. The sound wasn't a scream — it was a gasp, a sharp exhale.

Then silence. What I remember next is stupidly small.

The sound her teeth made when they hit. Not a crack, not a break, just a dull, animal click, like biting down on something you didn't expect to be hard. And then the smell. Dust. Old paint. The staircase breathing out decades of itself. Then blood.

Her shoe was still on the step above her body, twisted sideways, the lace snapped. I stared at it because I couldn't look at her face. Melanie was at the bottom of the stairs, her arm hanging wrong, eyes open but unfocused. Hudson froze. Elvie's hands were trembling, palms up, like she'd been trying to catch rain. I don't remember running down, but I must have, because suddenly I was kneeling beside Melanie, saying her name over and over, as if repetition could reverse this disaster. She was barely breathing. Hudson called someone. Elvie backed against the wall. When the sirens came, their red light poured through the windows like accusation. I did the next right thing. I pulled Elvie, told her she had to come downstairs and act like she cares. I told her to look frightened.

In Dublin, ambulances still make me flinch. Every siren is that night, replayed.

The doctors said it was a concussion, a dislocated shoulder, a minor fracture. "Minor." The word sounded like forgiveness. She'd live. She'd even recover fully, except for some lingering tremor in her right hand. But rumors, unlike bones, don't heal cleanly. The doctors were wrong. She still cannot walk.

By morning, the story had split into a dozen versions. What we told everyone was the same:

"Melanie slipped."

Elvie pushed her.

I saw everything.

"I saw nothing."

The only thing everyone agreed on was that Hudson had carried her out, barefoot in the rain, his hoodie soaked through. Chivalry was not dead. When they asked questions, we answered them perfectly. Elvie had gone down first; Melanie had fallen after. No shouting, no violence, just bad luck. They believed us. Or maybe they didn't, but belief

isn't a requirement for closing a file. That week, Elvie stopped sleeping. She said, "Then why can I still hear her fall when I close my eyes?" I had all the answers. I had seen everything. When someone asked me what had happened, my answer was the same. *I saw nothing*. What I didn't say was that my sleeve smelled like her shampoo for days afterward. Something citrusy and wrong in the winter. Yet, I preferred it to blood. I kept lifting my wrist without thinking, like my body was checking whether the night was still there.

Some nights, I stand by the window and whisper, "It was an accident." But even lies need witnesses.

That winter, New Jersey froze over. Elvie and I started keeping the windows open at night; we said it was to "air out the ghosts." Really, we both just wanted proof that we were still capable of feeling regret. We were still the same, on the surface: two girls sharing a room, whispering jokes between midterms and migraines. Elvie had started biting her nails again. I'd started narrating our lives in my head, as if we were already memories. Sometimes, when the radiator clicked in the dark, she'd say, "It wasn't my fault." I'd say, "I know." And we'd go back to pretending to sleep.

Mallory and Derek's engagement party was two weeks later. I went alone. Elvie didn't come. Everyone looked the same. They were all familiar faces rearranged around new discomforts. Olivia was back for the weekend, standing by the window with Lewis. They didn't speak much. Hudson and Melanie arrived late. She wore a sling even though her arm had healed months ago. There was one *minor* difference — she was on a wheelchair. He hovered behind her like a shadow. When Mallory saw me, she hugged me too tightly and whispered, "Don't disappear."

By spring, the group was a myth. Hudson graduated early, he had decided to marry Melanie quietly that summer. Olivia moved to France for a while. Lewis stopped answering messages after that. Mallory and Derek eloped, sending a postcard from Rhode Island that said simply: *We did it*.

And Elvie — Elvana Aliaj vanished in stages. First from the dorm. Then from the campus. Then from everyone's stories. I was the only one who kept talking to her, every day. I won't explain where she went. Not yet. No one said her name after that. It was easier that way. I kept the bunk bed when they cleared the dorms. The proctor didn't ask why, and I didn't explain. I told them I'd donate it. I never did. That summer, I stayed on campus, working in the lab, living in a room too big for one person. At night, I'd climb to the top bunk and lie there, eyes open, waiting for the ceiling to tell me something. But the silence felt familiar. And sometimes, familiarity is the closest thing to forgiveness.

“Idle Minutes” is a standalone speculative short story set in a near-future city where people can donate unused waiting time and later spend it to move through small intervals between adjacent moments. The story follows a narrator attempting to reconnect with her estranged brother after realizing that the ability to shift time by only a few minutes cannot undo the consequences of silence.

On Tuesdays, the grocery store’s express lane held the same clientele: impatient office workers with apples and yogurt; a retiree with his single roll; a student with noodles. Lettuce misted at intervals, the machine humming faintly, and the floor, citrus-clean, reflected strangers’ ankles. Above the sign that read TEN ITEMS OR FEWER, a new sign was blinking:

QUIET CHECKOUT (Pilot Program)

Save time. Donate idle minutes.

Tap to round up your wait to the nearest five.

The city’s pamphlet said the rounded-up minutes were banked and, in sufficient sums, could be spent to cross into sanctioned intervals between near-adjacent moments. Not a jump. A nudge. City guidance warned: corridors only span a total of six minutes and never refund what you’ve spent. I was carrying bread, a bottle of milk, and olives. The woman ahead of me held her phone close to her face, edge-on. “He doesn’t answer,” she said, and the cashier, a man wearing a name tag that said JOHN, slid a cereal box over the red eye of the scanner. “Still no response,” the woman tried again. The line advanced by fractions. The woman, in a navy coat that must have once been crisp, tapped her card without looking up, placed her items back into the basket, and left with a purposeful slowness that let her be overtaken by a man in a funny-looking bicycle helmet.

I had told myself I came on Tuesdays because the store was quiet. My brother, Daniel, hadn’t called in three months, which is to say: I had left his last question unanswered for exactly that long. The fight, if it could be called one, consisted of him telling me something raw and inconvenient, and me placing a lid on it with my silence, as if words could cease to exist when you refused to listen to them.

At the register, John said, “Hi,” in the level tone adopted by people who greet dozens of strangers every hour. I returned the word softly; my voice had the shape of disuse. Bread, milk, olives (the kind with a paper-thin skin and a pit that insists on itself). He set them down, afraid they might get bruised.

“Do you want a bag?” he asked, because he had to.

“I have one,” I said, which was not entirely true; I had a backpack that I used for everything in my life and now was a bag for my keys and an umbrella.

His screen chimed. “You can round up your wait,” he said, nodding toward the sign. “It donates minutes to the transit pool.” I tapped without knowing which part of me was feeling civic. On the

receipt, below TOTAL and THANK YOU, a new line appeared: TIME CREDIT: 00:02 deducted. The two minutes did not return to me; they left obediently, like coins dropped into a slot. Outside, the evening breeze was just enough to move the air around your shoulders. A delivery truck idled at the curb, men smoking by its open doors, the smoke a modest ribbon that didn't disguise anything. The woman in the navy coat stood a little way off, staring at her phone, a small public disowning.

I went home by the long route, past the fishmonger in the North End and the bookstore in Back Bay that had more pigeons than readers. The apartment smelled faintly of last night's leftovers, which was an indictment of my habits, and my answering machine light, no longer a bulb but a red circle at the corner of an app, did not blink. Nothing really blinks anymore, they just wait. I poured milk in a glass I reserved for milk out of a superstition I call taste when speaking to people who might judge me, and then did not drink it. The olives I placed in a shallow dish as if I were expecting company.

The last time Daniel and I had spoken, he was in Mother's kitchen in Dorchester, auditioning for a better life and the light was ambitious for October, insisting on surfaces. My mother rotated one of the thin tea glasses on the tray so the small crescent chip faced inward, the way she always did.

"I'm moving," he said. "New York. Three weeks."

"Three weeks?" The human brain is an echo chamber; it is easier to repeat than to come up with something new. He said living in the city felt like having a conversation with someone he loved who no longer loved him back. He wanted mornings that did not begin with the Green Line's complaint, a coastline that was not this coastline.

"I thought you'd try to solve it," he said, shrugging ever-so-slightly.

Mother moved the glasses quietly as I said nothing. I could feel the urge to persuade him to swallow me: reasons to stay, warnings about friends you cannot replace, a quick lecture on the geography of regret. My silence, at first, was an act of mercy. "Say something," he said. I placed my hands on the counter as if I were holding up the edge of a map and folded my mouth into a shape not found in any language. He left with two bags, one larger than the other, and the expression of a man who is eager for anything other than what he currently has. "Call me when you arrive," I said, and he said, "I will," which was true until it wasn't.

After he went to the hall for his coat, I followed him with sentences that felt like persuasion tools I had forgotten how to use. Stay through the first snow. We'll repaint your room the stupid blue you liked. We'll cook something that takes all day. He stood with one hand on the knob. "You hate repainting," he said. "You say it makes the walls lie."

"Then we won't paint," I said, and heard the desperation in the swiftness of my response.

Mother, pretending to search inside a drawer, lifted the chipped glass, her thumb resting to the

right of the crescent so the chip faced inward again. When we were small, I once cut my lip on that edge and cried so hard she laughed, then cried too, which is the kind of memory so malleable that it changes shape depending on the day.

“You’re not wrong,” I said finally.

“What does that even mean?” He wasn’t rude, only tired.

“It means you should leave,” I said, “but I don’t know how to stay here without saying anything.”

He opened the door, and the cold came in. I watched our mother turn the glass again, as if she could put the chip back. At work, I proofread the short, desperate sentences of other people’s brochures. The city started hanging signs for something called the Quiet Network. At a kiosk near Boston City Hall, a staffer in a lanyard said, “We take waiting where you don’t want it and put it where you do.” The pamphlet promised to edit waiting for us. In the atrium, a narrow portal curtained in black read: QUIET LANE (ENROLLED USERS ONLY). Enrolled users stepped in; a hiccup passed through the light; they stepped out a few paces farther on, looking around as if they had misplaced something and then remembering they had not.

That night I dreamed that my phone rang and the caller ID said DANIEL in capital letters, unlike how I had actually saved his number. I did not answer. The next Tuesday, the Quiet sign above John’s register had evolved. Link your CharlieCard for corridor access, it advised. I did. The receipt read: TIME CREDIT: 00:05 deducted. My app tallied what my life had volunteered: Idle Minutes Available: 00:09. The call came on a Saturday. In town tomorrow, Daniel wrote. Quick visit. Tea at Long Wharf, four o’clock?

I left early and still found a line near Aquarium station. The Quiet booth sat to one side almost like a photo booth. A TIME HOST with a lanyard and clipboard said, “If you’ve donated minutes, you can cross via corridor. You hardly feel it.”

Inside, a dim light glowed. On the screen: Idle Minutes: 00:09. This passage costs 00:05. Stand still. Do not speak. Keep your eyes open. The hum in the walls braided into a single thread and stretched, not loudly, but the way a tailor pulls fabric to test its strength. Then the curtain parted, and the Harborwalk was there ahead of me, advancing. My phone buzzed. I’m here, Daniel texted. By the kiosk.

The harbor kiosk with a silver urn, two plastic tables, gulls performing their one reliable idea. Daniel waved at me. I saw his mouth form hey just as my phone flashed a missed call. I heard, faintly, an echo of his “hey” behind the one I was already walking toward, as if someone had laid two tracks of the same song imperfectly on top of each other.

Up close, we did the adult hug we learned late, practiced and careful. “You’re early,” he said. I

checked the Custom House clock; it disagreed by two. We sat. The attendant placed two steaming cups on the counter, mine with a teabag's tag tapping the rim. Daniel began, "I wanted to tell you," and then his voice doubled, not louder, just slightly out of register, like a subtitle misaligned by a heartbeat. I caught "wanted" twice and "tell" once, and the rest slipped under the table like a coin rolling to a stop.

"Sorry," he said. "Did you—?"

"What did you want to tell me?" I asked, careful with the verb.

A tourist leaned into our weather, her phone held like a compass. "Faneuil Hall?" she asked. I pointed. The misaligned minute let the steam catch me twice. I bit back the sound that wanted to come out. He noticed.

"You're bleeding," he said, and for a second I thought he meant my lip, the old story, the chipped glass. It was only a thin red slit on my thumb where the paper tag had stuck and pulled. He took a breath that seemed to belong to a different minute. "It doesn't matter," he said, and then, correcting what he had just said: "It does. Only not right now." He touched the cup's rim with his thumb, tracing a little crescent as if the glass could answer for me. We talked around it. We talked about Mother's roses that refuse the calendar, about a student of his who thought the Atlantic had a different gravity north of here, about a sudden fondness he had developed for a brand of biscuits he used to mock. A siren passed, then passed again, a sliver too late. When we stood to go, he said, "I heard you," like someone assuring a child that thunder is just the sky moving furniture. "Even if I didn't know which part was now." He lifted his cup and added, under his breath, "I meant to tell you I kept the habit, the way she turned the chip inward," and the overlap swallowed inward so it arrived late, a beat after the sentence ended. On the way back, I used the corridor again. The booth accepted my remaining minutes. The light stretched, the air behaved, the curtain settled, and I stepped onto the plaza that greeted me as if I were returning from a place that did not exist on maps. My phone displayed our thread: my message stamped 4:02 PM, his reply 4:01 PM, and below that, a call log like a door I remembered opening and not opening. Three minutes is plenty, the pamphlet had said: enough to move a hello, not enough to fix a goodbye.

Tuesdays continued. The woman with the navy coat reappeared with a green scarf. She was not on the phone this time. She bought lemons, parsley, and a jar of honey. At the register, John said, "Hi," and she said "Hi," the sound formal and kind at once, two people acknowledging the ritual that keeps a city from becoming a collection of doors. When she stepped aside to place the honey carefully in her bag, she glanced up in that way people do when they need a witness for a grievance too minor for court.

"Do you cook?" I asked, which is a question that allows a person to decide whether to tell you who they are.

"I'm learning," she said. Her r's were soft, not an accent so much as a memory of one.

"Sometimes the food forgives me."

“I see,” I said. I held up my bread as if presenting evidence.

“Have a good evening,” she said. I wanted to tell her I had traded minutes to arrive early and still lost something I could not name. That there are sentences you cannot reclaim once they overlap with themselves. That the city had discovered a way to turn silence into a utility, and I had paid my bill. Instead, I said, “You too.” I bought parsley I didn't know how to use and carried it home. In the kitchen, I texted Daniel: Bread and honey this weekend? Will you make tea? Of course, he replied. On the counter, the receipt lay face up, a list of modest confessions: BREAD \$4.29, MILK \$3.59, PARSLEY \$1.99, HONEY \$9.49, TIME CREDIT 00:03 deducted. I turned it over and wrote the sentence I had practiced and not said: I'm here. My phone sat without blinking. Then it vibrated once and showed nothing new.

Later, at home, the corridor again. I had four minutes left in the app. Not enough for magic, only for what the pamphlet would call administrative adjustments. I stood in the kitchen and watched the kettle. The corridor kiosk near City Hall would close at ten, but the corner store had installed a newer kind: a shoulder-high unit behind the lottery machine with a curtain so short you could see the attendant's sneakers. I walked there with my emptied backpack.

Inside the booth: Idle Minutes: 00:04. This passage costs 00:02. Stand still. Do not speak. Keep your eyes open. I thought of my mother rotating the glass, not to hide the chip but to keep us from treating it like fate. The air gathered itself. When the curtain moved, the street's light had not changed, but the bus that should have huffed past was gone, and a boy at the register was still holding his scratch ticket up to the fluorescent light, hunting for luck. The corridor had returned me to the same minute with a seam repositioned by a thumb's width. It was enough to keep the sound from finishing, not enough to teach me what to say. I set the chipped glass on the counter. I had taken it without telling anyone. The crescent was just visible when the kitchen light came at an angle. The parsley leaned toward the window. I poured the tea and watched the surface settle. The room waited. I listened for the seam and heard only the ordinary, which is to say: the minute I was in, and all the others, obedient as dogs.

One Hundred Fifty Steps is a standalone short story exploring memory, storytelling, and the unstable boundary between what happened and what is remembered. I wanted to create an ordinary, observational setting in which increasingly impossible events could unfold without ever feeling entirely unreal.

The old magician lived approximately one hundred and fifty steps from the two bookshops. I know this because I counted them later. At the time, I had no reason to count anything. I was walking Cherry in the park, and if you were walking west with your back turned against the sun in the afternoon, the two bookshops were just there, at the end of the street, one beside the other.

One had been there for years. The other had changed owners so many times that nobody could remember what it had originally been. The old man was known around Brooklyn as a pigeon feeder, although he had worked at various things before that. In his younger days, according to him, he had been involved with the art world. He had gone to art school. He had known painters, sculptors, people who disappeared for months and came back with new names. In the evenings they would share someone's basement, a place they called the Rooms, where they drank cheap wine and talked until morning.

The owner of the bookshop had known him from those days. The man's real name was Morris Mage Magrila. Or so he said. Usually people just called him Morris. Sometimes, when he was in the mood for it, he called himself the Magician. I had heard the name before, but only in passing. My father had mentioned him once or twice when I was younger, although never in any way that suggested Morris was important. There are people who occupy the edges of your family history without ever becoming part of your own life. Morris had been one of those people.

Until the afternoon I met him.

Cherry was with me. That afternoon he had decided that he wanted to stand in the middle of the path and watch a group of pigeons. I waited. The pigeons moved. Cherry did not. Then the old man approached. He came toward us slowly, carrying a small paper bag in one hand. He was wearing a dark coat even though it wasn't cold. He stopped beside Cherry.

"May I?" He pointed toward the dog.

"Sure."

He put his hand on Cherry's head. Cherry looked up at him. The old man scratched behind his ear. Cherry leaned against his leg. There was something familiar about his face. Not familiar in the ordinary way. I had never seen him before, or at least I didn't think I had. It was more like recognizing someone from a photograph you had never actually seen. Then he looked at me.

"You look like Shiela."

I didn't answer. He waited.

"You knew Shiela?"

"I knew your father."

That was not what I had asked. I remember looking down at Cherry because I didn't know what else to do. The old man seemed to understand.

"Your father used to bring her here."

"Here?"

"The bookshop."

He pointed toward the end of the street. I knew the bookshop. Everyone in the neighborhood did. It had a narrow front window, a green door, and a stone statue standing outside it. The statue was a fae. It wasn't beautiful. That was part of what made it memorable. Its hair had been worn smooth by the weather, and one of its wings was cracked near the base. Children used to leave coins beside it. Sometimes flowers. Once I saw somebody leave a cigarette. Morris followed my eyes.

"She liked that statue."

"Shiela?"

He nodded.

"She used to sit beside it." Shiela had been my father's first love, or so I had been told, although by the time I was old enough to ask questions she had already been dead for years. Her name survived mostly in fragments. My father did not speak about her. My grandmother spoke about her even less. Morris put his hands into his coat pockets.

"You want to see the shop?"

The sun was low enough that the trees cast long shadows across the path. Cherry walked ahead of us, stopping every few seconds to smell things that had no apparent importance. Morris didn't hurry. Neither did I. After a while he began telling me about the bookshop. He said the owner had known him since art school. He said that in those days there had been a group of them who met in basements after dark. They called one particular basement the Rooms, although Morris said there had been nothing remarkable about it. We kept walking.

Morris opened the door. A small bell rang above us. The smell was the first thing I noticed. It was old paper, dust, something sweet and slightly burnt. It reminded me of my grandmother's kitchen, although I couldn't say exactly why. Maybe it was the butter. Maybe onions. Maybe something she used to cook when I was little and had forgotten the name of. I stood in the doorway. The shop was narrow, with shelves reaching almost to the ceiling. There were books on the floor, books piled beside the counter, books stacked sideways on top of other books. Some had price stickers. Some didn't. There were old newspapers in one corner and a ladder against the back wall. The fae statue could be seen through the front window. From inside, it looked different. Smaller. Morris noticed me looking. "Don't worry about her."

"Her?"

"The statue."

"What?"

He shrugged.

"She's been here longer than either of us."

A man behind the counter lifted his head. He was very old, and for a second I thought he might be the owner Morris had told me about. The man stared at me.

Then at Cherry.

"That's a big dog."

"He's a Great Dane."

"I know what he is."

Cherry sat down. The man smiled. "He's welcome." Morris walked farther into the shop, and I followed. I didn't buy anything that day. Morris seemed to expect this. He walked toward the back of the shop and began pulling books from the shelves without looking at their titles. He would take one down, open it somewhere in the middle, read a few lines, then put it back. Cherry followed him. The man behind the counter had returned to his newspaper. I stood near the window, and then asked Morris who owned the shop.

"The man at the counter."

"I mean before him." He put the book in his hand back on the shelf.

"The shop belonged to a woman named *Sheila*."

I thought I had heard him incorrectly.

"Do you mean my father's lover?"

"No." He said it quietly. "She never owned the shop."

"But you said—"

"I said Sheila came here." He walked past me toward the front window. For a moment he stood looking at the statue. "She used to come here with your father."

"When?"

"Before you were born." Morris put his hand against the glass. I looked at him. Then he walked away. That afternoon he showed me the shelves. Not all of them. Only the ones he thought I would like. He had a strange way of choosing books. He didn't ask what I liked. He didn't ask what I had read. He simply took things down and handed them to me.

"This one." Then another. "Not this one." Then another. "Read the first page." I did. He watched me. "Well?"

"I don't know." He took the book back. Cherry had fallen asleep beneath the table. The owner came out from behind the counter carrying a cup of tea. "You'll get used to him," he said.

"To Morris?"

"To all of it."

I stayed until the shop closed. When I left, Morris came with me. We stood outside for a while. The street had become quieter. The park was almost empty, and the windows of the buildings opposite us had begun to light up one by one. Morris pointed toward the statue.

"Sheila used to talk to her."

I laughed. "The statue?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"Things."

"What things?"

Morris looked at me.

"Things she didn't want your father to hear."

Then he walked away. I stood there for a moment. Cherry pulled at the leash. We went home. After that, I began seeing Morris more often. At first it was accidental. I would take Cherry to the park and find him feeding the pigeons. Sometimes he was sitting on a bench. Sometimes he was walking along the edge of the pond. Sometimes he wasn't there at all, and I would find myself looking for him. Then I started going to the bookshop. I never made a decision to become a regular. It simply happened. Morris was almost always there. He began keeping a chair for me near the back window. He never said this was my chair. It simply became mine. Cherry would lie underneath it while I read. He told me stories about Brooklyn. Not the Brooklyn people wrote about in books. His Brooklyn. The painters who couldn't pay rent. The old cinemas that had

become supermarkets. The men who claimed to be poets but spent most of their time borrowing money. The women who disappeared from one neighborhood and turned up years later in another. He told me about art school. He told me about the Rooms. There had been seven of them, he said. Seven young people who thought they were going to change the world.

One afternoon I asked him about magic.

"What magic?"

"The magician thing."

He laughed.

"So you were one?"

"I was many things," he replied.

"What kind of magician?"

"The kind people paid to watch."

Then Cherry got up and walked toward the back of the shop. Morris watched him. "He's been there before." I thought he was joking. He stood up and followed Cherry. I followed them. At the end of the shop was a narrow corridor I had never noticed before. It was darker than the rest of the store. There was a door at the end. Morris put his hand on the handle. Then he stopped.

"Not today."

"What?" I did not understand half the things he said to me.

"You're not ready to see what happens to a story after you finish reading it."

Then he closed the door. We went back upstairs. I didn't ask him again. Not that day. But after that, I started noticing things. The books Morris kept behind the counter. The notebooks he never let anyone touch. The people who came into the shop and asked for him by name. And, every now and then, the old woman who would stand outside the window and look in without ever entering. The first time I saw her, Morris saw her too. His face changed. Only for a second. Then he said: "Don't let her talk to you." I looked through the window. The woman was standing beside the fae statue. She was staring directly at me. And then, very slowly, she smiled.

The woman stayed outside for a long time. She didn't knock on the window or come inside. She simply stood beside the fae statue with her hands folded in front of her, looking through the glass. Morris had gone back to the counter, sorting receipts. When I asked who she was, he first called her a customer, then admitted she wasn't one. He told me not to talk to her because she

wanted something, though he didn't know what. By the time I looked back through the window, she was gone.

I went outside anyway. Morris followed with Cherry's leash, warning me not to follow people. I told him I hadn't been following her, only looking for her, which he said was worse. There was nobody on the street and nothing in the direction of the park. After a while, Morris told me to come back. Instead of taking me through the front, he led me through the back and unlocked a narrow door at the end of the corridor.

The room beyond was smaller than I expected. A desk, a chair, two lamps, and shelves filled with notebooks. Hundreds of them. Some were tied together with string, some had names on their covers, others dates. Morris picked one up and explained that a life story was what a person thought had happened to them, while the notebook contained what had happened. He handed it to me. The name on the first page belonged to someone I knew, someone still alive whom I had seen and spoken to in the neighborhood. The notebook described something that had happened to them when they were twelve: a summer afternoon, a bicycle, a boy falling from a wall, a mother shouting from a window. But the story said the boy had died. When I told Morris that he hadn't, he only said, "Not yet."

The pages continued. The boy lived, grew up, left Brooklyn, married, had two children, became a doctor. Morris admitted that he had written it and called it a possibility. I thought it was a trick. He told me to read it aloud. I did. Nothing happened at first, and I was beginning to feel stupid when Cherry suddenly barked. Morris looked toward the door and made me read it again. This time, when I reached the last sentence, something crashed downstairs. Then the front door opened.

Morris went downstairs and told me to stay where I was, but I followed. The owner of the bookshop stood behind the counter, pale. He asked Morris whether he had given me one of the stories. Morris said no, but the man looked at the notebook in my hands and understood. He said I shouldn't have been brought there. Morris insisted that he hadn't brought me. For several seconds nobody spoke. I remember only the sound of Cherry's nails against the wooden floor and the fae statue outside the window. For the first time, I noticed that it wasn't looking toward the street. It was looking toward the bookshop, toward us. Morris followed my eyes and told me not to worry about her, but he no longer sounded amused. He sounded afraid.

For the next few weeks, Morris refused to explain anything. Whenever I asked about the notebooks, the woman, or the fae statue, he changed the subject. I began to understand that this was his particular way of answering questions. He did not lie exactly. He simply moved the answer somewhere else.

One afternoon I asked why he had shown me the first notebook. He was repairing an old watch behind the counter and denied having given me anything at all. When I reminded him that I had

been holding the book, he said that didn't mean he had given it to me. Eventually he admitted that he had let me read it because he knew I wouldn't have stopped asking. It was probably the closest thing to an explanation I was going to get.

After that, we became closer, slowly and without either of us acknowledging it. I began staying after the shop closed. Morris made coffee, Cherry slept beneath the table, and we talked about nothing until the conversation somehow turned to my father. Morris sometimes told me things I already knew and sometimes things I didn't believe. Eventually I trusted him. First he let me stay late, then he let me into the back room, and finally, one evening, he gave me a thin notebook with no name on the cover. He told me to read it to myself because he wanted to know whether I could tell the difference between what had happened and what had been written.

The notebook described an ordinary man living on the third floor of a Brooklyn apartment building with his wife, two children, and a dog. He worked at a post office, woke at six, drank coffee, went to work, came home, listened to his wife complain that he was never there, and listened to his son ask for a bicycle while his daughter dreamed of leaving Brooklyn. Then, halfway through the story, a sentence appeared that didn't belong: On the afternoon of October 17, the man decided not to come home.

The story split after that. In one version, the man left work, walked three blocks, entered a bar, met someone, gave them a letter, and disappeared. In the other, he eventually went home. Both versions continued at once. I stopped reading and asked Morris whose life it was, but he only asked whether it mattered and told me to keep reading.

A week later, I read one aloud. Then another. We told nobody. Morris insisted that the world didn't need to know how it worked, and when I asked what would happen if people found out, he said they wouldn't believe us. We began with small things: a missed train, a broken engagement, a lost wallet, a woman who wished she had taken another job. Nothing seemed dangerous. The stories worked without anything dramatic happening. The next time I saw those people, their lives simply contained different facts. The man had never lost his wallet. The woman had taken the other job. The engagement had never happened. When I mentioned the versions I remembered, they looked at me as though I had invented them.

Morris was delighted. He called it history. Soon we began doing it for money. The first person paid fifty dollars, the second a hundred, and by the third we had a system: people came with regrets, we gave them stories, they read them, and their past changed. Because nobody remembered the old version except us, there was no way to prove what we had done. For a while, it felt almost harmless.

Then the complaints started.

The complaints began with small things. A man came into the shop one morning and accused Morris of ruining his life. His wife had left him, his business had failed, and his brother had died, all after he had come to the shop. Morris barely reacted. He told the man not to come back, then insisted that whatever had happened was the man's own doing. When the man left, he paused beside the fae statue before disappearing down the street. I asked Morris whether he had been telling the truth. Morris said probably, then dismissed the story as unimportant. By then I knew that when Morris called something unimportant, he usually meant the opposite.

More people came after that. Some were angry, some frightened, one woman cried, and another threatened to call the police. Morris dismissed them all, insisting that people blamed the wrong things. When I accused us of changing their pasts, he corrected me: we hadn't changed anything, he said. We had given them stories, and they had chosen to read them. I hated the answer, but I knew he was right about one thing. They had all chosen. That was what made it difficult.

The business grew, and we became selective. We refused requests to bring back dead children, restore youth, or erase crimes. Smaller regrets were different. A woman wanted to forget the day her husband left. A man wanted to have accepted a job twenty years earlier. A painter wanted to have met a different gallery owner. Those stories we wrote. After a while, I stopped being surprised by the results. I would read a story aloud, and the next morning the world would contain different facts. Sometimes only one person had changed. Sometimes an entire chain of events changed with them.

Morris kept records of everything: names, dates, payments, consequences. He called the notebooks ledgers. When I asked why he bothered, he said somebody had to remember because the people who came to us didn't. That was when I understood that Morris wasn't doing this because he loved magic. Later, I became aware that he loved being the only person who knew what had really happened.

Then, one afternoon, the woman from beside the fae statue came into the shop. She ignored Morris and looked directly at me, asking whether I was the one who read the stories. Morris came from the back room and tried to dismiss her, but she accused him of having promised that it would stop. She told me I shouldn't be there. Morris stepped between us and ordered her to leave. She whispered something I couldn't hear. Whatever it was, it made Morris go pale. She smiled and told him to tell me, then walked out.

I asked what she had said. Morris refused to answer until, finally, he told me she had said Shiela's name. I froze. He gave no explanation, and I didn't ask again. That evening I took Cherry home early and stayed away from the shop for three days.

On the fourth day, Morris called. His voice sounded almost cheerful as he asked me to come by because he had something for me: a new story. I nearly hung up, but then he said it was about

Sylvie. I had never heard the name before. Still, the moment he said it, I knew I was going back to the bookshop.

I went back the next afternoon. Morris was sitting by the window with the newspaper, and Cherry went straight beneath the table. Nothing looked different. That was what bothered me. After everything that had happened, I expected the shop to have changed somehow, but the shelves, the light, the fae statue, even the smell of dust, old paper, burnt butter, and my grandmother's kitchen were exactly the same.

Morris had something waiting for me: a thin envelope with my first name written on it. Inside were six pages in his handwriting, the story of a woman named Sylvie. It described her ordinary life in Brooklyn, her mother, her childhood, the books she liked, and the man she had once loved before he left. Then the story reached the part where she disappeared. Sylvie had come to the bookshop, spoken to Morris, been given a story, and read it. Afterward she had become trapped inside another version of her life.

She had tried to leave, but every time she reached the end of the street, she found herself back at the bookshop. Whenever she called someone, they forgot the conversation. Whenever she wrote her own name, the letters disappeared. I asked Morris whether it was real. He told me to read the last page. There was only one sentence: *If you're reading this, I'm still here.*

I barely had time to react before Morris warned me not to read the story aloud. He said that if I did, Sylvie would know where I was. I laughed because I couldn't make sense of what he was saying. Then the telephone rang. Neither of us moved. It rang again, then a third time. Cherry lifted his head. Morris told me not to answer, but I picked up the receiver anyway. There was silence at first. Then a woman's voice asked whether I was the man who read the stories. Before I could answer, she said my name. She introduced herself as Sylvie. Morris had gone completely still. I asked where she was. She said she didn't know, not exactly, only that she had been there for three days. When I asked where, she said, "The shop." She began crying quietly, as if she were trying not to let someone hear her. Then she warned me not to give Morris the books because *they* were going to get me too, whatever that meant. When I asked who *they* were, the line went dead. Morris took the receiver from my hand and hung up. I asked who Sylvie was. He tried to walk away, but when I pressed him, he finally admitted that she was one of them. I asked who they were. He looked toward the fae statue through the window. His face seemed suddenly older. Then he said, "The people who remember."

I didn't understand what Morris meant by the people who remember, and he refused to explain. Instead, he told me to go home. I took Cherry and stayed away from the shop for several days, but Sylvie's voice kept returning to me, especially the way she had said *he's here*. I began thinking about the notebooks and wondering how many people had read them, how many remembered the lives they had before, and whether I remembered mine correctly.

There were small things I couldn't remember: a summer when I was eight, a birthday, the name of a boy who had once lived next door. I had always assumed that was normal. Now I wasn't sure. One evening, while looking through an old box beneath my grandmother's bed, I found photographs of my father and Shiela. Most were familiar. One wasn't. It showed my father, much younger, standing outside the bookshop beside Morris and Shiela. All three were looking at the camera, but neither my father nor Shiela was smiling. Morris was. On the back, someone had written: *The last day before the Rooms*.

I took the photograph to the bookshop the next morning. Morris wasn't there. The owner was behind the counter, and when he saw the photograph, his expression changed. He asked where I had found it, then identified the writing on the back as the Rooms. When I asked what they were, he told me to ask Morris. I pressed him, but he only said that perhaps I wasn't supposed to know. When I asked whether my father and Shiela knew about the stories, he finally looked toward the window and told me that my father had written the first one.

He said it was a story about Shiela, one Morris had never finished. Before I could ask where it was, the bell above the door rang and Morris walked in. He stopped when he saw the photograph. The owner had already disappeared into the back room. Morris admitted that my father had written a story about Shiela because he wanted to bring her back. He looked at the statue, "That's where it started."

I asked what had started there.

"The first mistake."

I went outside. Morris followed, but didn't stop me as I crouched beside the fae statue to read the worn inscription at its base. Most of it had disappeared, but I could make out SHE IS GONE... before the rest was lost. When I rubbed my thumb over the stone, Morris told me not to. He sat on the bench beside the statue, Cherry at his feet, while people crossed the park as if nothing had changed. A woman pushed a stroller, two boys kicked a ball, and an old man walked a small white dog. I asked Morris to tell me about my father, starting with Shiela.

Morris said my father had loved her, but not simply in the way I had been told. He had loved her with the certainty young people sometimes have that love can fix things, including death. Shiela had been sick, and my father couldn't accept it. So he wrote the story to save her. In the story, Shiela had never become sick. She lived, but my father still remembered the old life, because he and Morris had read the story. For a while, Shiela was alive in the new version of the world, while the two of them alone remembered watching her die. My father eventually asked Morris to change it back because he could no longer live with remembering both lives. He couldn't tell which one had been real.

Morris explained that this was what the stories did. They didn't change the past. They changed what people remembered about it. I thought of Sylvie, the people who remembered, the woman outside the window, my father, and Shiela. When I asked what happened to Shiela, Morris said she died again. My father died too, but Morris corrected me when I said I already knew that. I knew that my father had died. I didn't know what had happened before.

Back inside the empty shop, Morris went straight to the back room and opened a drawer filled with dozens of old envelopes. He took out a yellowed one with my name written across it in my father's handwriting. He told me my father had asked him to keep it before he died. Inside was a single page with three lines: *If Morris gives you a story, don't read it. If you've already read it, don't believe what you remember. And if you find Shiela, don't tell her about the bookshop.*

I read the last line twice. Morris turned toward the window, where the fae statue stood reflected in the glass. For a moment, I thought I saw a woman standing beside it. Then the reflection shifted, and there was nobody there. Morris quietly told me, "Not anymore."

I didn't go home that night. I walked Cherry through the park until it was too dark to see the paths, then sat on a bench watching the lights come on in the buildings around us. I kept thinking about my father's letter, especially the words *If you've already read it, don't believe what you remember*. I had read it twice, then again in my head. But the last line bothered me most: *If you find Shiela*. Not remember her. Not see her. Find her. I asked Cherry if he remembered her. He looked at me, then went back to chasing a pigeon.

The next morning I went to the bookshop. Morris opened the locked door just enough to tell me I shouldn't be there, then let me in. The shop looked smaller than usual, with fewer books on the counter, the chair by the window gone, and the back-room door closed. I let him know I was looking for Shiela. For the first time, he looked genuinely tired. He reminded me that she was dead and told me to stop looking for her. I showed him the letter and asked why my father had told me to find her. Morris finally explained that my father had changed his mind. At first he had wanted Shiela alive. Later, he wanted to know whether she had ever been alive at all. Changing a life, Morris said, eventually makes you forget which version you wanted.

He eventually opened the back room and showed me one of my father's notebooks, though he warned me there were things inside that my father hadn't wanted me to know. I grabbed it anyway. Most pages were blank, but two sentences appeared near the back: *Shiela remembers*. A few pages later: *Sheila doesn't remember*. The spelling was wrong.

I looked at the page again.

Shiela.

No.

Sheila.

I couldn't remember which one I had seen first.

I wrote her name at the top of a new page.

Shiela.

I stared at it for a while. Something about it looked wrong. I crossed out the *i* and wrote it again.

Sheila.

That looked worse.

That afternoon I stayed until closing. Cherry slept beneath the table while Morris made coffee. At six, the old woman appeared outside beside the fae statue, watching Morris rather than me. He locked the door, turned off the lights, and waited until she disappeared. When I asked who she was, he called her someone from before the shop. I asked if he meant before the Rooms. Morris answered no. Before she left, he told me I needed to stop coming to the shop. I reminded him that he'd wanted me there. He said he had, but something had changed. When I asked what, he looked at the door and said, "You." At the time, I thought he was blaming me.

The following week, people began coming to the shop demanding their money back. Their lives had changed in ways they hadn't expected: one man's wife remembered a different marriage, a woman claimed her dead brother had begun appearing in photographs, and another man remembered two childhoods. Morris refused to see them and left me to deal with the complaints. I started returning their money, but that only made things worse. They wanted new stories to restore their old lives. One man declared that Morris had been doing this for thirty years. When Morris finally accepted it, he said maybe forty. He explained that he'd once believed he could fix people, then called himself a magician. I called him a scammer. He smiled and said the two weren't always different.

His years in the art world, the galleries and private parties, the people who paid him to perform, the Rooms, the debts, the forged paintings, and the people who trusted him and lost money... He had moved between Brooklyn, Manhattan, Paris, and London before returning to Brooklyn because, as he put it, nobody remembers you forever. That was what he liked about the shop. People forgot. When I asked whether he had scammed my father, he said yes. When I asked about Sheila, he said no, because she knew him.

A few days later, Morris stopped coming to the shop. Then Sylvie called. She warned me not to go there because someone was waiting for me. Before I could ask who, she told me not to give Morris any more books.

“I don’t have any.”

“You do.”

I looked around the room. Beside me, on the floor, was a notebook I had never seen before. My name was written on the cover.

“Sylvie?”

The line went dead. I opened the notebook. The first page was blank. I waited. Then, beneath the empty line, words began appearing one at a time. The narrator is sitting at home. I closed the book. Cherry stood and went to the front door. Someone knocked three times. I didn’t move. A minute later came three more knocks, followed by a voice calling me by my name. I looked at Cherry. He was staring at the door. Outside stood the woman from the bookshop. Her face was the same as the statue’s. Her lips were slightly parted, and tears of stone ran slowly down her cheeks. I didn’t open the door.

The next morning she was gone.

For the following week, I tried to return to the bookshop. I knew where it was. I had been there dozens of times. I knew the green door, the narrow window, the shelves, the chair by the back window. But every street led somewhere else. I walked past the park three times. I passed the same bakery twice. Once, I found the two bookshops, but neither was the one I remembered. There was no fae statue. There was no green door. There was only an empty storefront with dust on the glass. Later, I read in the newspaper that Morris Mage Magrila had been “hunted down” by one of his illusions. I read the article twice. Then a third time. I recognized the name, but I couldn’t remember from where. Cherry and I went out for a walk. We crossed the park slowly. The afternoon sun was behind us, and the shadows of the trees stretched across the path. About a hundred and fifty steps from the place where I thought the bookshop had been, Cherry stopped. I waited for him.

He was looking at something beside the path. There was a small stone statue there. One of its wings was cracked near the base. I stared at it for a long time. I couldn’t remember having seen it before.