

Petals

A novella by Adept and Sis

A work of fiction set across the parade year of 1982 and into 1983.

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1 The move

Parade eve

The first thing out of the gate was a man walking backward.

He wore the same jacket as the man beside the gate and the woman standing farther down the street. A wire disappeared beneath his collar. He held one hand above his head, palm toward the driver, and watched the mouth of an enormous fish approach a telephone pole.

David stood where he had been told to stand.

From there, the fish looked certain to hit.

The man lowered two fingers. Somewhere inside the fish, a driver made an adjustment David couldn't see. The mouth moved toward him, its lower lip crowded with flowers. Then the entire creature began to turn. The pole passed through the space between a fin and the open mouth.

David let out his breath. The man walking backward had never stopped.

Behind the fish, eleven more floats waited in the lot. Their colors were strange beneath the work lights. White flowers held the light; dark coverings swallowed it. Places that would read as shadow in the morning appeared now as holes.

A voice spoke close to David's ear. He turned before remembering the earpiece.

"Gate clear?"

The man beside him pressed his transmitter.

"Clear."

David had heard that voice asking for mustard three hours earlier.

The Alden lot stood on the far side of a district of small factories and warehouses. People called the neighborhood Arroyo Junction, although David had never found the junction. To get to Pasadena, they had to take their creations past loading docks, a shopping strip, houses, and turns that looked perfectly ordinary until something fifty feet long attempted them. The route Leonard had worked through with the drivers was folded in David's pocket. He was not in charge of any part of it. He had been given a place, a person to listen to, and instructions about what to do if he lost either.

His mother had checked that he understood.

Then she had checked again.

At the motorhome near the Tournament headquarters, Margaret put her handbag in the sink. It was the only place where nobody had tried to sit on it.

The curtains were drawn across the windshield. Outside, people passed toward the Wrigley mansion or away from it carrying things that required both hands. Every time the motorhome door opened, cold air crossed Margaret's ankles.

She had a list on the table. Twelve entries. Beside each, room to write.

Someone had left a plate of sandwiches near the radio equipment. She moved it far enough away that an elbow couldn't send it into anything important, took one sandwich, and listened.

"First one clear."

She marked the list.

A man standing in the doorway began to tell her something. She held up a finger. The radio spoke again. He waited, one foot inside, one foot out.

Margaret finished listening.

"In or out, darling."

He came in and shut the door.

Leonard was beneath Number Six when the first float left. David could see his shoes and the lower legs of his immaculate coveralls. Beside him crouched a man in a cap, holding a light without moving it. When Leonard reached out, a tool went into his hand. When the tool came back, the light stayed where it was.

The man's name was Wes. David had seen him on other parade nights, but never long enough to discover where he went during the rest of the year. He and Leonard seemed to resume a conversation nobody else had heard begin.

David waited.

From underneath, Leonard said, "What?"

"They want to know how long."

"Who?"

David hesitated. Wes glanced at him.

"Go find out," Leonard said.

David went back up the aisle. Halfway there, he realized he had been sent with a question whose answer he had never obtained. Someone had said ask Leonard, and David had become the person who wanted to know.

When he returned, Leonard was standing. Wes was wiping a tool before putting it away.

"Gabe," David said.

Leonard nodded toward the office stairs.

"Tell him we're moving."

"What was wrong?"

Leonard reached past him for a rag.

"I wanted to look at something."

David waited for the rest. There wasn't any.

Gabe came down carrying nothing. All week there had been a drawing, a list, a flower, a telephone receiver, something in his hand that explained what he was doing. Now his hands were empty. He stopped beside a great bird and looked up.

Someone had moved a work light. The bird's head had emerged from shadow. Along its throat, the flowers changed color so gradually that Gabe had to look for the divisions he had drawn.

Gabe walked a few steps, stopped, and walked back.

Lionel watched him from beside a stack of empty trays.

"If you're about to ask me to change something," he said, "choose your words."

Gabe shook his head. His dark hair fell forward. He pushed it back, revealing the strong line of his brow and a face the light found almost as readily as it found the flowers. People looked at Gabe even when he wasn't doing anything. Lionel waited for him to finish looking at the bird.

"Good," Gabe said.

Lionel looked up too. From here the feather was a feather. From where he had stood all week, it was work he could still feel in his fingers.

"Yes."

Then someone called for the next driver, and Lionel stepped out of the aisle.

At the gate, the night acquired a rhythm. A float approached. A person checked the street. A hand rose. A voice said wait, or come ahead, or hold it there. Each departure exposed a piece of floor David hadn't seen in days.

A garden left and revealed a wall. An animal went through the gate and uncovered a ladder, two buckets, and a broom nobody remembered losing. Behind the cleared spaces, older frames remained, their shapes waiting to become something else.

The people moved with the floats. Matching jackets passed beneath enormous leaves. A man disappeared behind a bank of flowers and came out the other side still talking.

Leonard stopped beside the last float being checked and listened. David watched his face.

During the year he had watched an engine occupy an entire bench. Leonard had covered the pieces when he left, uncovered them when he returned, cleaned things David would have replaced and replaced things David would have thought looked perfectly good. There had been no audience for most of it.

Now everyone wanted the same thing from that work.

Wes waited with the service vehicle's door open. After a moment Leonard took his hand away from the frame and joined him.

They traveled slowly enough for David to study houses. A porch light came on. Behind a window, someone lifted a curtain. A woman in a robe stood in her doorway with a child pressed against her side.

The child waved at the fish. The driver couldn't see. David waved back.

Farther along, a man came outside carrying a camera. He walked beside the procession, trying to get far enough away to fit an entire float into the picture. He backed toward a hedge, looked behind him, and gave up.

For several blocks the parade belonged to people who had not bought seats or planned to watch it. It passed their parked cars and trash cans, their sleeping gardens, a bicycle left against a garage.

Then a radio call drew David's attention forward. The procession slowed. The gap ahead shortened. A hand went up.

They stopped.

No music. No applause. Only engines, an occasional voice, and the small sounds of people shifting their weight while they waited.

Leonard was already moving. Wes got out and followed with the light.

Margaret heard the call twice. She acknowledged it the first time, but the voice repeated itself, louder.

"Yes," she said. "I have you."

She wrote the location. Across the table, a man reached for the list. She kept her hand on it while she finished speaking.

"Leonard is there."

The man withdrew his hand.

For several seconds, the radio was quiet. She could hear the motorhome's little refrigerator running. Somewhere near the mansion, people laughed. She turned her pencil around and rubbed out a mark she had put in the wrong column.

Then Leonard's voice came through.

David had expected steam, a spill, something he could identify. There was only Leonard crouching, then standing, then asking the driver a question. Wes went around the other side. A light traveled across the pavement underneath.

The driver answered. Leonard listened without helping him finish.

Another exchange. Another look. Wes came back, and the two men spoke too quietly for David to hear.

David wanted to ask whether they were all right. He kept his mouth shut.

Leonard stepped clear and raised his hand toward the driver. The engine changed its sound. He listened. His hand stayed up.

Then he lowered it.

The float began to move. Its first few feet looked no different from all the feet it had traveled before stopping. David watched for something that would tell him what had happened.

Wes switched off his light.

"What was it?" David asked.

"Come on."

Ahead of them, the fish was already carrying its flowers into the next block.

Margaret made another mark.

"Moving?" the man beside the table asked.

"Moving."

He exhaled and sat back. She did not put the pencil down. There were other entries on the list, and some of the spaces beside them were still blank.

Through the motorhome's walls came the distant beginning of a drum. It stopped, began again, and was joined by another.

Margaret looked toward the curtained windshield. Then the radio spoke, and she turned back.

2 The city before morning

New Year's morning

The bands were somewhere else.

He had imagined the parade waiting for them, already in order. Instead the floats arrived among more floats, each crew concerned with its own place and its own problems. Music came from another part of the city. The horses had their own assembly area. People were moving between these separate gatherings with lists, searching for somebody who had last been seen beside a vehicle that had since moved.

The hospital stood beyond the streets where band buses had gathered. On a stretch of roadway closed to its usual purpose, a row of students stood with instruments at their feet while an adult counted them. David saw another adult counting from the opposite end. Both stopped at the same boy and began an argument he appeared to have expected.

In the distance a horse called. David turned toward the sound and saw only the roof of a truck.

He had delivered a bag of supplies to the motorhome. Margaret checked its contents while he stood in the narrow space between the table and a seat occupied by three jackets.

"You eaten?"

"Yes."

"When?"

He tried to remember.

She pointed at the sandwiches.

Arthur was at the far end of the vehicle, speaking into a telephone. He held it slightly away from his ear while the person on the other end talked. When he saw David, he lifted his eyebrows in greeting.

A cough interrupted his answer. He turned away, waited for it to pass, and resumed the conversation at the exact word where he had stopped.

Margaret looked up briefly, then returned to her list.

David ate two sandwiches. By the second, his knees had begun to notice how long he had been standing.

"Ruth knows where you are?" Margaret asked.

"Mostly."

"Improve that."

Outside, the sky had begun to lose its darkness. The floats acquired colors David recognized. Under the streetlights the fish had looked vaguely threatening. In the first daylight it became cheerful, an expression achieved by people who had spent the last two days looking anything but.

Gabe arrived with Luis carrying a large covered bird carrier between them.

"That's not riding in the service truck," Leonard said as they passed.

"It never has," Gabe replied.

"I'm getting ahead of you."

Gabe rode in the parade every year. There was always a place worked into one of his designs, and there was always the bird. Away from the drawing board, he dressed with a deliberateness that made other people's clothes seem accidental. This morning his shirt caught the light beneath his jacket. His hair had been brushed away from his face. The fatigue was there if you knew where to look, but strangers would not know.

Luis set down his end of the carrier beside the designated boarding place. While Gabe checked it, he straightened a folded collar at the back of Gabe's neck.

"Hold still."

"I am."

"Your version."

Later, when Gabe was in place and the great live parrot settled beside him, people began to point. The bird turned its head, inspecting the enormous floral birds around it with an attention that made David laugh.

"Does it know?" he asked.

"Know what?" Luis said.

David couldn't quite explain. He had spent weeks making an imitation of something that was now standing there, warm and impatient, with an opinion about its breakfast.

Gabe looked down and caught them watching. He smiled. It changed his entire face.

A photographer asked him to look the other way. Gabe did. The bird did not.

By the time the parade began, David was back where he had been assigned. The floats that had occupied separate streets entered the moving line. A band came between two of them. Somewhere behind, the horses followed. People who had spent the night among their own kind of noise now had to listen for one another.

The first cheer reached David before he could see its source.

Then they turned into it.

He had seen the route full of people the night before, but daylight altered the crowd as surely as it altered the flowers. Blankets became laps. Sleeping places became seats. Children appeared above adults' shoulders. Faces turned toward a thing he had helped scrape, carry, and cover, and their pleasure made him look at it again.

By the time a radio call reported trouble with Number Nine farther along the route, Leonard and Wes had already gone.

David heard pieces: a location, a request, confirmation. He could not see what had failed. His own assignment kept him where he was.

Afterward he learned that Nine had finished under tow. Leonard said little about it. Wes helped move the equipment needed for the recovery, and the two of them went on to the next job.

At the display grounds, a child pointed out a place where the flowers had been disturbed. His father photographed the rest.

Gabe's parrot went home with Luis. Gabe stayed until he had seen the last of their floats into place. He walked past a woman gathering fallen petals into a paper cup. She steadied the cup between her shoes while she picked up another handful. Beside her, a man was explaining to his wife how the birds moved. The man's explanation was wrong in three places. Gabe was too tired to correct him.

Arthur found him beside the garden.

"Come eat something."

"I ought to—"

"Leonard has it."

Gabe looked over. Leonard and Wes were beside Number Nine, speaking to its driver. Wes had a hand on the open panel. Neither looked like a man about to stop working.

At the motorhome, Margaret had crossed every arrival off her list. She checked once more before folding it. Arthur offered to take the bag from the sink. She handed him that and two other things.

The mansion stood beyond the windshield in full daylight now. People were still going in and out. Tomorrow the lists would be different. Margaret put hers in her handbag.

On the way back to the lot, she fell asleep with her head against the window. Arthur let her sleep.

3 The party

New Year's evening

Lionel changed his shoes in the parking lot.

He put one hand on the roof of his car, slipped off a brown leather loafer, and set his stockinged foot into a powder-blue heel. Then the other. He tucked the loafers behind the passenger seat and lifted a covered dish from the floor. The foil had sagged in the middle.

Inside the gate, Jules was arguing with an extension cord.

"Don't say anything," Jules said.

"I haven't opened my mouth."

"Your shoes said it."

Lionel stepped over the cord. "Then listen to them."

The party occupied the working spaces the finished floats had left behind. Long rectangles on the concrete remained comparatively clean, surrounded by crushed petals, wire clippings, and the pale dust of material that had been cut finer than anyone thought possible. Farther back, an old framework rose above the tables. There was always a float here, even when a visitor might have needed someone to point it out. Someone had tied a bow around the refrigerator handle. The refrigerator had resisted decoration for eleven months and twenty-five days, then lost.

Out at the display grounds, twelve finished floats stood under lights. Here, people could sit where they had been working. Jules had already claimed a chair and begun explaining what was wrong with the musical he had seen.

Gabe Navarro came through carrying two bags of ice against his chest. He had dressed for the party, which meant he had changed his shirt. There was a little black crescent beneath his thumbnail that neither soap nor a knife had removed.

"Those go in the tubs," Ruth called from the office door.

"I know."

"Last year you knew and put them in the freezer."

"Last year you said freezer."

"Last year you hadn't slept in three days. I could have said Cleveland."

Ruth Delaney kept the company's books, answered the telephone, found things that other people had put somewhere safe, and could identify an unpaid bill through its envelope. Tonight she wore gold earrings shaped like leaves. Her son David followed her with a stack of paper plates and the wary expression of a young man who had been promised a party and discovered employment.

Eric took the ice from Gabe. "Go sit."

"I just got here."

"You've been here since August."

Eric's beard still contained a thread of raffia. He had spent the afternoon sleeping upright in the passenger seat of a truck and now looked more rested than anyone had a right to look. He broke the bags against the concrete, poured ice around the cans of Tab, and accepted a kiss from his boyfriend, Paul, without interrupting either task.

Jules reached for a Tab without interrupting his account of the second act. He had weighed himself that morning and could still recall the number to the fraction. He took a careful spoonful of Lionel's macaroni and cheese, considered it, and returned half.

"That's not going to help the plot," Lionel said.

"I'm discussing the performance."

"You've been discussing your waist since Tuesday."

"They're both disappointing me."

At his desk, Arthur Alden watched Lionel uncover the macaroni and cheese.

Arthur was narrow through the shoulders, with large glasses and a face that could look severe until the mouth moved. He had removed his tie. Under his trousers he wore pink panties with a small, unnecessary quantity of lace.

"You're smiling," Margaret said.

"It happens."

"Usually means somebody's being charged for something."

She set a glass of water beside him and sat on the edge of the desk, keeping her Guinness in her other hand. Margaret was his age, English, with blunt fingers, close-cut hair, and a white shirt whose sleeves she had rolled twice to exactly the same height. She had learned to keep her hands useful during a war. Since then she had made a profession of it.

Arthur coughed into his fist. She glanced at him.

"Dust."

"There's water."

"I recognize it."

She left the glass where it was.

Gabe came in and closed the office door halfway. Jules's account of the musical became softer without becoming less determined.

"You should come out."

"I'm enjoying the management view."

"They're going to eat everything."

"I've tasted Jules's dip. This may be best."

Over Arthur's head, a framed rendering hung beside photographs of floats and a slightly crooked certificate. Gabe had drawn the rendering at seventeen. The perspective was wrong. Arthur had refused every offer to replace it.

"Your pelican made the paper," Arthur said.

"It isn't a pelican."

"Tell the paper."

Gabe leaned down and kissed his cheek. Arthur caught his wrist long enough to squeeze it, then let him go. He had been doing some version of this since Gabe first arrived with drawings rolled under his arm.

Outside, Lionel disputed Jules's judgment of the leading man. Ruth appeared in the doorway carrying a plate.

"Come out. We're about to get the entire second act."

By the time Arthur emerged, Jules was on his feet. He sang the number to establish a point, then stayed with it because everybody was listening. His voice went up into the roof and came back large enough to make Peter put down his plate. Even Lionel let him finish.

"That's how you sing it," Jules said.

"He'd be a bitch to you if he heard that," Lionel said.

"He can buy a ticket."

Arthur began laughing before Jules sat down. The first sound seemed to catch inside him; then another got past it, and he folded forward with his hand against his chest. Gabe watched him try to stop and decide against it. There seemed to be laughter waiting behind the laughter, years of it, all wanting its chance.

Margaret put her Guinness safely under her chair. She picked up a small sandwich, caught Arthur's eye, and dispatched it in two extraordinary bites. That finished him. She waited, cheeks full, pleased with the damage.

"Chew," he managed.

She swallowed. "You worry about breathing."

Peter, the second designer, stood near the food laughing with his whole face. Anne, beside him, had not seen him do that since Thanksgiving.

Arthur took a chair beside Margaret.

"Evelyn would have liked those shoes," he said.

"She'd have bought them first."

Their eyes stayed on Lionel. For a moment there was room between their chairs for a woman in a pale dress, considering whether to dance.

At the far end of the building, Leonard Bell carried a shallow tray of engine parts toward his bench.

"Leonard," Arthur called. "It's a party."

"I see it."

"Come have something."

"Set me a plate."

His dark work suit was spotless. The zipper lay in a straight line down his chest. He walked past Jules, who was accepting corrections to his performance without accepting that any were necessary.

"He'll miss the entire thing," Gabe said.

Margaret watched Leonard disappear behind a sheet of plywood.

"He knows where we are."

Jules resumed the argument from his chair, still holding the Tab. Now Eric had an opinion about the staging. Margaret leaned toward Arthur and told him he looked knackered. She moved her chair so he could stretch his legs without asking anybody to make room.

Gabe stood by the ice tub and listened.

For the first time in a week, nothing he could do would improve the morning's parade. The thought left him briefly without a task. Then Lionel demanded to know whether he had seen the musical. Gabe said yes, and five people wanted his opinion.

4 What comes home

January

The floats returned looking as though a small, determined population had eaten them.

A horse had lost the flowers around one eye. The river on the insurance company's entry had gone brown at its edges. People at the public display had pointed, photographed, admired, and sometimes helped themselves. By the time the first truck brought a section back to the lot, admiration had become a maintenance problem.

Leonard waited at the gate with a clipboard.

"Switch it off."

The driver did.

"Now tell me when it started doing that."

"Doing what?"

Leonard looked at him.

"Just after the display grounds," the driver said.

"Try again."

The driver looked down the length of the float, as though another answer might still be attached to it.

Leonard was sixty-seven and had been underestimated in enough garages to stop finding it interesting. Alabama was in his voice, especially when he asked a question he already knew the answer to. People called him an engineer. He rarely offered a correction or an explanation. He could draw what he intended to build, calculate what it would carry, and make it work with the machinery available. The title was welcome to catch up.

He listened while the driver revised the story.

Across the lot, Lionel stood before the wounded horse.

"Well," he said. "She's had a weekend."

"So have you," Jules said.

"And look at the difference."

The salvage crew began pulling water tubes. Thousands of small plastic vessels went into tubs for cleaning and sorting. Flowers came away in damp handfuls. Some dry materials could be recovered. Most of the visible world they had made went into refuse.

David stood with a scraper, unwilling to begin on the great bird whose wing he had helped cover.

"Take it from the tip," Eric said.

"I spent six hours on this."

"Then you know where it comes off."

David pushed the scraper beneath the first layer. A patch lifted. Under the feathers was the adhesive; under that, the prepared surface; farther in, the construction he had last seen before Christmas.

"It's ugly."

"It was ugly when we started."

"Yeah, but we were starting."

Eric reached past him and freed a length of wire. "Keep your gloves on."

As the covering came away, the lot became a room at the natural history museum: enormous bones, a curve where a belly had been, a long reach of neck without its animal. David could look through one creature into another. They would stand here while people argued over drawings upstairs, waiting for their next skin. Even stripped, a float occupied the place like something alive enough to be in the way.

* * *

Upstairs, Gabe was meeting with a representative from the city of Bell Vista, who had brought his wife and a grievance.

Their float had won no award.

"We were pleased with the execution," the man said.

"Thank you."

"Obviously we hoped for recognition."

Gabe looked at the photograph on the desk. He knew each area where the floral department had improved his drawing. He knew where a cheap decision had stayed cheap despite their efforts. He knew the difference between disappointment and a refund request.

"So did we."

The man's wife watched the workers below through the office window.

"It was beautiful," she said.

Her husband gave her a patient look.

"People clapped," she added.

Arthur entered with the next year's folder. He asked after their daughter, remembered the college she attended, and put the folder in front of the representative before the man could return to the trophies.

Afterward, Gabe said, "You make that look easy."

"I've heard the same speech before."

"Did they threaten to leave?"

"They asked for three ideas by March."

"So no."

"They know there's a waiting list."

Twelve commissions filled the year. They filled it every year. Arthur could have sold more; he could not have made the building larger by promising it, or doubled the number of people who knew the work. He kept a list of prospective clients in the drawer, and Gabe had learned that a place on it was something people called to ask about, sometimes for years.

Once, a sponsor had mistaken Arthur's willingness to hear a complaint for an obligation to hear anything. Gabe remembered the last word, and Arthur closing the folder.

"We won't be taking your commission next year."

The man had laughed first. Then he had explained that he was a customer. Then he had asked Arthur to be reasonable. By the time he began describing the television audience, his voice had acquired the wet, astonished pitch of a child discovering that crying had not changed the answer.

"An hour of publicity. Three networks. They say our name five hundred times. Do you understand what you're taking away?"

Arthur understood very well. That was why somebody else would be pleased to have the place.

For weeks afterward, Jules could silence a complaint about the coffee by asking whether the complainant wished to reconsider before next year's list was finalized.

At Leonard's bench, an engine lay open. A strip of clean cloth covered the pieces he did not want touched. Gabe stopped beside it on his way out.

"Which one?"

"Number Six."

"The swan?"

"This year."

Gabe looked at the numbered tag. Last year it had been a locomotive. Before that, a mountain with a moving waterfall. He could remember the drawings more easily than the equipment that had carried them.

"You rebuild all of them?"

"One or two engines a year. Keep up with the rest."

"How long will Six last?"

Leonard wiped his hands before answering, though Gabe could see nothing on them.

"How long you going to keep putting things on it?"

Outside, the horse's head lay on its side. Without the body it seemed smaller. Two volunteers were taking off the remaining flowers with the concentrated care they had used to put them on.

Gabe went back upstairs. There were three blank sheets on his drawing board.

5 The color before the flower

February

The client wanted blue.

"What blue?" Lionel asked.

The client pointed at Gabe's rendering.

"That blue."

Lionel turned the paper toward the window. "This is paint."

"I understand."

"Good. We're ahead."

The client, a man from a home-furnishings company, had brought a swatch from a promotional brochure. It was the blue of a sea no one had ever had to cross. He laid it beside the drawing as if the two blues could negotiate.

Gabe watched Lionel consider the scale of the area, the light under which it would be seen, and the money the company had refused to spend.

"I can make it read cool," Lionel said. "I can give you blue in the places that matter. I can't grow your printer."

The man smiled uncertainly. Jules, at the other end of the table, smiled with complete confidence and made the uncertainty worse.

When the client had gone, Lionel took Gabe downstairs to the sample board.

"You keep giving me weather."

"It's a garden."

"It's six acres of impossible twilight."

"Fifty-five feet."

"Of impossible twilight."

They worked with samples until lunch. Lionel moved pale blooms against deeper ones. Eric brought material he had been testing and set it in the light. Margaret asked how many days the surface had to hold and which parts would be applied first. Jules calculated quantities on a pad already marked by somebody's sandwich.

He looked up when Lionel filled a space at the edge.

"Oh honey. Is that really the way we want to go?"

Lionel kept his fingers on the flowers. "Do show us what you want."

Jules smiled. Lionel smiled back. Eric moved his coffee out of the space between them.

Jules took away two blooms and shifted a third. For a moment Lionel said nothing. He leaned sideways to judge it from farther off.

"Yes," he said. "That's better."

Jules's smile changed. He looked at the flowers again.

"Thank you."

"Don't make me regret saying it."

Peter came down with a tracing and watched for a while.

"What if the arch sits farther back?" he said.

Gabe looked at him. "Then you lose the opening."

"You narrow it. You don't lose it."

Peter placed the tracing over the drawing. His version shortened the field of blue, brought the flowers forward, and gave the eye a reason to move past the mechanical housing.

Lionel tapped the paper. "That."

Gabe studied it longer than he needed to.

"All right."

Peter began to lift the tracing.

"Leave it," Gabe said.

In four years at Alden Floral, Peter had become very good at watching an idea cease to belong to him once it moved onto Gabe's board.

At lunch he sat outside with a paper sack. Gabe joined him.

"It works," Gabe said.

"I know."

"I said all right."

"You said it like you were letting me borrow the car."

A truck backed through the gate. Both men waited for the reversing noise to stop.

"Put your initials on the revision," Gabe said.

"Will they stay there?"

Gabe had come prepared to be generous. The question made that preparation feel cheap.

"Yes."

Inside, Arthur was on the telephone with a grower. He held up a finger when Gabe passed his door, then motioned him in.

"Put Peter on the Bell Vista presentation."

"I was going to."

"Then we agree."

Gabe stood in the doorway. "Did he ask you?"

"He asked to work here four years ago."

The answer irritated him all afternoon. It remained irritating after he decided Arthur was right.

Near closing, Lionel's niece Denise arrived to wait for a ride. She was seventeen, carried a saxophone case, and had recently acquired the ability to make every adult question sound like an intrusion.

"School?" Lionel asked.

"Still there."

"Homework?"

"Also still there."

He gave her a chair and returned to a small bouquet. For delicate work he crossed one leg over the other, his blue heel suspended a few inches above the floor. A blade lay close to his fingers. He picked it up, turned a stem, and made a tiny cut, considered the result, then made another. Denise had seen pictures of people pruning bonsai trees; this had that same patient severity.

David stood nearby smoking a fat joint. Lionel had been talking to him when Denise arrived and continued now, darting from Nina to somebody's appalling shirt to a remark Jules had made at lunch. His voice fluttered and returned, bright as a bird. His attention never left the bouquet. While David listened, three almost invisible decisions changed its shape.

"Other direction, darling."

David turned his head and let the smoke go toward the open door. Lionel had not needed to look up.

"Who gets that?"

"A young woman who's been very patient with a young man."

"How do you know?"

"He's buying flowers."

David set the joint in an ashtray and reached for the camera he had borrowed from Ruth.

"Hold still."

Lionel looked up.

"The bouquet," David said quickly. "For Nina."

"Darling, if you wanted only the bouquet, you should have asked before I sat down."

He crossed his legs a little more decisively. David raised the camera.

The flash made everybody blink except Lionel, who had been ready.

David lowered the camera. He wanted a picture of the whole place like that, with nobody lined up and the work still in their hands. He looked down at the little window that counted how many exposures he had left.

6 A room with drawings

March

Peter wore a tie to Bell Vista.

Gabe noticed it in the car and nearly made a joke. Instead he asked whether Peter wanted the window open.

The presentation took place in a room where the previous meeting had concerned drainage. A map of the city remained pinned to the wall. The committee arrived with coffee in cups bearing the names of different departments, and the woman who had loved the previous float sat beside her husband again.

Peter set up the boards.

Before he could uncover them, a committee member laid a newspaper photograph on the table. It showed a towering float bent at a joint so it could pass beneath an obstruction.

"They say it stands right back up."

Gabe looked at the photograph. Peter had seen it already. So had Leonard, who had studied the mechanism with interest before returning to their own measurements.

"Can ours do that?" the chairman asked.

"It would need to be designed for it," Gabe said.

"People remember that sort of thing."

Gabe took the photograph by its edges and moved it where everyone could still see it. Then he uncovered the first board.

He had drawn three different answers to what the city wanted. None required the committee to pay for height it would spend part of the night folding away. He had used scale, space, the direction in which the flowers carried the eye. The last design was the one he wanted them to choose. He resisted putting it first.

When they reached it, the woman beside the chairman leaned forward.

"Oh."

The birds seemed to lift the garden with them. The space between their wings mattered as much as the wings. Peter had watched Gabe make that opening wider by an inch on paper, then another fraction, until the whole drawing began to breathe.

The committee discussed height anyway. Gabe answered without showing his impatience. He knew a folding giant could be beautiful. He knew Leonard could admire an invention without wanting to spend their own budget on it. What bothered him was the assumption that beauty must now come second because something else had learned a new trick.

"Look from here," he told the chairman, moving the board back.

The man leaned sideways. His wife remained where she was, looking at the birds.

"Can they move?" asked the chairman.

"Some of them," Gabe said.

"All of them?"

Peter looked at Gabe.

"We can discuss the effect you want," Gabe said.

On the way home, Peter stared out the window.

"Say it," Gabe told him.

"Leonard's going to kill you."

"He'll tell me it can't be done."

"You didn't tell them that."

"It can be done."

"For their money?"

Gabe changed lanes. A delivery truck had been sitting beside them for half a mile, its driver eating something out of a paper wrapper. Gabe envied the clarity of the man's occupation.

At the lot, Leonard studied the drawing without taking it from Gabe's hands.

"Where does the driver look?"

Gabe pointed.

"Through the garden?"

"There's an opening."

"There's a bush."

"We can move it."

"Move it now."

Peter laid his tracing on the bench. He had drawn the platform, the sightline, and a second arrangement of the birds.

Leonard looked at it. Then at Peter.

"This one sat in the driver's seat."

Gabe felt heat at the back of his neck. "I have sat in a driver's seat."

"Then draw what you saw."

The argument lasted forty minutes and improved the float. Gabe did not enjoy either fact.

* * *

Later he found Arthur inspecting a leaking faucet behind the building.

"You'll get wet," Gabe said.

Arthur held out his hand without looking up.

Gabe handed him a wrench.

"Did you ever think about doing something else?"

"This afternoon?"

"For work."

Arthur straightened. "Sometimes a bar. Then somebody comes in here drunk and I remember."

"I mean something with less—"

He stopped.

"Other people?" Arthur supplied.

Gabe smiled despite himself.

Arthur wiped water from his wrist. "You could stay home and draw. Send the drawings out. Collect a fee."

"I like seeing them built."

"That involves the people who build them."

At seventeen Gabe had imagined that Arthur knew everybody worth knowing. At twenty-five he had suspected Arthur had invented half of them. At thirty-eight he was beginning to understand that Arthur had spent years returning telephone calls nobody else wanted to return.

"Peter's good," Arthur said.

"I know."

"Then use him well."

* * *

That evening Gabe went home to a small house whose rooms contained almost no sign that he designed immense gardens for a living. There was a succulent in the kitchen. Eric had given it to him because neglect would suit it.

His partner Luis was waiting on the porch with groceries.

"You said seven."

"It is seven."

Luis showed him his watch.

"Approximately," Gabe said.

They cooked. For a while they discussed Luis's sister, who was marrying a man neither of them liked. Then Gabe began describing the birds.

Luis put down his fork.

"I'm here."

"I know."

"Try talking to me as though you know."

Gabe looked at the food Luis had bought and helped cook. He asked about Luis's day.

Luis had spent the afternoon correcting an order at the housewares distributor where he worked. A salesman had copied the quantity from the wrong column; three stores were expecting things they would not receive. Luis had called each one before anybody had asked him to.

"They're training somebody for buying," he said. "I put my name in."

"Would you like that?"

"I think so. I'd get to choose something before it became a problem on my desk."

Gabe asked what he would buy. Luis began with saucepans. He knew things about their handles Gabe had never considered. He brought one down from the cupboard to show him.

There would be travel, Luis said. He did not know how much yet.

Gabe turned the pan over. He nearly asked what they would do about the bird. Instead he asked when Luis would hear.

"They haven't told me."

Luis put the pan back and returned to his dinner. After a while he began talking about his sister again. This time Gabe remembered the question she had asked.

7 Six squares

April

Eric put a chair outside and told everyone to leave it alone.

By eleven, someone had sat in it. By noon, somebody else had brought it indoors because it looked as though it might rain. He found it beside the telephone, carried it back out, and tied a piece of cardboard across the seat.

THIS CHAIR IS WORKING.

On it sat a board divided into six squares. Each held a different covering. From the office window, the squares appeared to be roughly the same color. Up close, they disagreed.

Eric wrote the date along the edge, checked his watch, and went back to a delivery that had arrived while he was doing it.

The pale animal in Peter's new design needed to remain distinct from the white flowers around it. On paper, Peter had achieved the difference with water and a brush. Eric had six possible ways to make it survive being made of something. He checked them between other jobs: counting the trays in the delivery, calling a grower about an order, calculating how much of a dry material they could store without losing the space already promised to something else.

Margaret caught him at the doorway with her lunch in one hand and an invoice in the other.

"They've charged us for what they forgot to send."

"Ruth's got the copy."

"She's going to adore it."

Margaret looked at the board, then at the sky.

"Leaving it out?"

"Yes."

"Good."

She took a bite of her sandwich and went upstairs.

The four of them had shelves of books nobody visiting the lot thought to photograph. There were old classroom notes among the catalogs, diagrams, Latin names penciled beside a supplier's cheerful description. Eric knew which marks were his and which belonged to Margaret. Lionel had a habit of adding corrections without crossing out the original, leaving an argument on the page. Jules put slips of paper between the leaves and could remember what had been discussed when he put them there.

At a distance, their work became color. At the table it required questions about moisture, maturity, handling, temperature, time. A material could be right for a shape and wrong for the day when the shape needed to look right. Eric had learned to keep the unsuccessful trials too.

Peter came down after lunch with his drawing. Eric was answering a question about quantities and held up a hand until he had finished the arithmetic.

They carried the drawing outside. Margaret, on her way to inspect another delivery, held one corner against the breeze.

"The second one," Peter said.

"Today," Eric answered.

Peter looked at the dates.

"How long?"

"We'll see."

He studied the sample and the broad flank of the animal. Eric told him what was in each square. Peter asked about the third, then the fifth. Margaret kept the paper still while a truck reversed through the gate.

When they could hear each other again, she pointed to the flowers crowded against the animal's side.

"Can you give him some room?"

Peter frowned, then shifted his grip on the paper and looked from farther away.

"Yes."

Margaret released her corner only after he had a proper hold. She went to the truck. Eric made another note before going in to return a call.

By the next morning, the sign had acquired a second line.

MANAGEMENT MATERIAL.

Eric recognized Jules's lettering. He left it.

Arthur stopped on his way to an appointment, an envelope in his hand.

"What happens if it rains?"

"I learn something."

Arthur nodded. He was halfway to the car when he turned back.

"Will it be expensive?"

"The rain?"

"The answer."

"Maybe."

Arthur considered that, then went to his appointment.

On Friday, Paul arrived with dinner. Eric was checking a revised order against the first one and didn't hear him until he set the bag down.

"You went all the way over there?" Eric asked, looking inside.

"I was nearby."

Eric knew where Paul had been working. Nearby was a kindness that had required two buses.

He moved a tray to make room.

"We could eat somewhere else," Paul said.

Eric looked toward the open door. A corner of the sample board had begun to lift. He had a call to return and needed to finish checking the order before he forgot where the discrepancy was.

"Give me ten minutes."

Paul looked at the clock. "Ten."

Eric finished the order first. He made the call, left a message, and went outside with his pencil. Paul followed, examining the exposed structure nearest the door.

"Was this the one with the birds?"

"Next one."

Paul walked around it. Without its covering he could make out the place where the head had been and little else. A dropped fastener lay near a wheel. He picked it up and put it on the bench.

Eric wrote along the board's edge. Paul watched him. He loved the way Eric could become entirely occupied. He had loved it before he understood how often he would be standing nearby when it happened.

"Ten," he said.

Eric looked at his watch, then went inside and put away the pencil.

They made it as far as the gate before he stopped.

Margaret was standing in the doorway with her handbag.

"Would you—"

"Yes," she said.

"You don't know what I was going to ask."

"I'm taking the board in before I leave. Go and eat your supper."

Paul waved. She waved them both away.

On Monday, the square Eric had preferred was no longer his favorite. One of the less promising coverings had held its color better than expected. Rain had left a faint mark along an edge.

Peter arrived with his revised drawing. He had moved the flowers. The animal's flank had room to become legible before the white began. The head looked more alert, as though something beyond the edge of the paper had finally made a sound.

Eric studied it. Behind him, Jules was trying to reach a supplier and Margaret was giving measurements to a builder. Eric's own list lay open beneath a ruler, three things added since he had begun the morning.

"This helps," he said.

"How much?"

"I can use the paler covering if the flowers stay back here."

Peter stayed while they compared the samples. Then each took his part of the problem back to work.

8 Margaret takes a day

April

Margaret requested a Friday off in writing because Arthur claimed she had never asked him for anything politely.

She put the note on his desk. It read: Friday. Away. Cope.

He approved it with a red pencil.

Beatrice collected her at nine. She drove a yellow car and wore a scarf around her hair. From the office window Jules watched Margaret settle into the passenger seat.

"Well," he said.

"Don't," Lionel told him.

"I said one word."

"I heard the other forty."

They were going to the coast. Beatrice had insisted on somewhere Margaret could not return from at lunchtime to check a delivery. At the first stop she took Margaret's watch and put it in her handbag.

"If somebody needs a nurse," Margaret said, "they'll be disappointed by the delay."

"It's 1982. There are other nurses."

They ate fish from paper trays and walked beside the water. Margaret's trousers darkened at the cuffs. Beatrice told her about a customer at the bakery who had attempted to return a cake after eating half of it. Margaret listened, laughed, and found that she had not thought about work for nearly twenty minutes.

On a bench, Beatrice asked about Evelyn.

"What would you like to know?"

"What she was like when nobody was making her into a saint."

Margaret considered the sea.

"Late. Frequently. Expensively dressed. She could tell you a thing you didn't want to hear in a voice that made you thank her."

"Did you?"

"Usually."

"And Arthur?"

"He thanked her too. Then did as he pleased. Then came back and admitted she'd been right."

Evelyn had first appeared at the shop in a summer dress, looking for her husband. Margaret, recently hired, had assumed she was a client who had wandered into the wrong part of the operation.

Later, after circumstances had become clear enough to discuss, Margaret had said to Arthur, "If you don't want that pussy, I do."

Arthur had looked over her shoulder.

Evelyn was standing in the doorway.

"It does have an owner," Evelyn had said.

Beatrice laughed so hard she had to take off her glasses.

"Oh, I would have liked her."

"She'd have liked you. Though she might have asked why you let me dress myself."

There had been no single conversation that made their household possible. There had been many conversations, some generous and some ugly, and a child who eventually required answers less evasive than the ones supplied to neighbors. Arthur and Evelyn loved each other. Margaret and Evelyn loved each other. Love had not done the washing-up or decided whose name appeared on an invitation. They had arranged those things, badly at first, better with practice.

Helen, the child, had once asked Margaret whether she was her second mother.

"You have one perfectly capable mother."

"Then what are you?"

"The person telling you to put those scissors down."

When Evelyn died, Margaret found herself missing the quarrels as keenly as the tenderness. Arthur had continued buying the tea Evelyn liked for eight months. Margaret drank it without telling him she disliked it too.

Now Beatrice took her hand.

"You can miss her here."

"I know."

"I'm saying it in case you don't."

* * *

On Monday Margaret returned with a paper bag of pastries and a sunburn at the back of her neck.

Arthur accepted a pastry.

"Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Outrageously."

"Details?"

"Buy your own holiday."

He smiled and bent over the paper he was reading. Margaret saw the heading and recognized enough of the medical language to stop smiling.

"What's that?"

“Something Tom brought.”

It was a clipping about sick men. There had been clippings before. A man one of Jules’s friends knew had been in hospital. Another acquaintance had a diagnosis nobody could explain without referring to a disease normally found in somebody else.

“Anybody we know?” she asked.

“Not this one.”

Arthur folded the clipping and placed it beneath an invoice.

Downstairs a delivery driver leaned on his horn. Margaret went to tell him where to put the boxes. By eleven she was arguing about stems. At lunchtime Beatrice called to ask whether she had remembered the sea.

“Yes,” Margaret said, looking at a bucket of damaged flowers. “Frequently.”

9 A flower on an island

May

Arthur’s daughter came on a Thursday with her little boy and a bag of clothes she said her father had left at her house.

“I haven’t been to your house in those trousers.”

“Then you won’t miss them.”

Helen had inherited Evelyn’s way of settling an argument while appearing to discuss something else. She lived in Long Beach, worked in a school office, and had a marriage that Arthur asked about cautiously because she answered honestly.

Her son, Ben, was seven. He wanted to know where the floats were.

Arthur pointed at the frames.

“Those aren’t floats.”

“They will be.”

“Where’s the outside?”

“We’re working on it.”

Ben looked around for somebody who would give him a less disappointing answer. Eric took him to see the model birds, and Helen sat at Arthur’s desk.

“You look tired.”

“I’m fifty-six.”

“You’ve been fifty-six for months.”

Arthur moved his glass to make room for the photograph in her hand.

She gave him a photograph from Ben’s school. Arthur put it beside the telephone. His grandson had been asked to smile and had interpreted this as a threat against his teeth.

Helen looked at the old photograph partly hidden beneath the blotter: Arthur in uniform, a young face under a cap.

“Ben’s asking about the war.”

“He can ask.”

“I thought I’d warn you.”

After she left, Arthur took out the photograph.

On Okinawa he had believed that if he survived, he would one day become a man to whom those months had happened a long time ago. Thirty-seven years later, the photograph was old. Certain other things had not aged.

He remembered a woman trying to fasten something at a child's collar. They had come out near the broken rock above the sea. He could no longer recover the first moment he had seen them, only the woman bent toward the child and then looking up.

There had been a flower. In the hair, he believed. Sometimes memory placed it at the collar, where the woman's hands had been. Its color was clear when he woke and uncertain by breakfast.

He had shouted with the others. Stay. Stop. Words delivered with the urgency of men who could not make themselves understood. He had set his rifle down. Someone else was still holding one. He remembered being angry about that afterward, though he could not say whether it would have mattered.

The woman looked at them as if they were the thing she had been warned about all her life.

Then she took the child with her beyond the edge.

Arthur did not remember the sound. In dreams there was sometimes a sound. He had learned not to trust that part.

He remembered reaching the place where they had stood. A small bloom lay crushed against the rock, marked with blood. He had looked down at it while another Marine was speaking to him. For years he could remember the man's mouth moving and nothing the man had said.

There were explanations afterward. Orders, terror, stories about what Americans would do, civilians trapped between armies. None of the explanations told Arthur what the woman had called her child.

He put the photograph away.

Gabe arrived with a rendering that required a decision before the client called. Arthur looked at it, asked two useful questions, and sent him downstairs for Leonard's opinion.

Margaret came in later.

"Bad day?"

"Helen brought Ben."

"That usually improves one."

He nodded toward the photograph.

Margaret sat down. During her training she had learned how to keep working while people called for mothers she could not produce. She had been young enough to think competence might eventually protect her from remembering. Arthur knew that about her without knowing the names of her patients.

"I still don't know what kind of flower," he said.

She waited.

"All these years in this business."

"It may not be the part you get to know."

Downstairs somebody dropped a length of pipe. Arthur flinched and was annoyed that she had seen it. She did him the courtesy of continuing to look at his face.

"I used to think," he said, "if I could arrange one day properly."

"I know."

"It's a stupid thought."

"You can want it anyway."

She stayed until he asked what was holding up the flower order. Then she told him, in detail, and he became sufficiently irritated to telephone the supplier himself.

10 Number Six

June

Leonard named the chassis by number and sometimes addressed them by other names when he believed he was alone. Number Six had more names than the rest.

It had carried the swan and the locomotive and, years before Gabe arrived, something involving the Liberty Bell. It had a turn of its own, a set of responses Leonard could anticipate in his hands. A new driver needed to learn them. A designer needed to know they existed.

For the Bell Vista birds, Leonard had agreed to use Six after the engine work was complete. He had not agreed that the largest bird should lean as far forward as Gabe had drawn it.

The trial began at seven because the lot would be too busy later. Leonard stood on the frame with his work suit zipped to the chest and a pencil behind his ear. Gabe held the rendering. Peter held the revised drawing nobody had yet signed.

"You know the street doesn't move out of your way," Leonard said.

"I accounted for the turn."

"You accounted for a turn."

They marked out the space they had available, checked dimensions, and moved through the maneuver slowly. The big bird, still an unfinished shape, traveled through an arc that brought its beak uncomfortably close to the place where a spectator might expect to keep a head.

"Stop," Leonard said.

The driver stopped.

Gabe walked around the front. In the rendering, the reach of the bird gave the whole composition its promise. Drawing it back would make the float less startling. He knew exactly how much less.

"Can we change the mounting?"

"Yes."

"Then let's—"

"Back."

Gabe stared at the beak. "There has to be another way."

Leonard climbed down. He did not hurry, which made Gabe feel increasingly foolish for standing ready to argue.

"You can come up with another way," Leonard said. "You can't send this way."

They left the frame where it was. At nine Arthur came out, listened, and asked Leonard whether he wanted coffee. Gabe followed him into the office.

"You didn't even look."

"I looked yesterday."

"Not at the test."

"Leonard did."

Gabe shut the door.

Arthur put down his cup. "Open that."

"I want to talk."

"Then talk."

"You don't trust me."

Arthur's expression changed from patient to tired. "I trust you to design it. I trust Leonard to tell us whether it can go down a street. I pay both of you."

Gabe went back out through the open door.

Peter found him behind the material shed, smoking a cigarette he had been trying to quit since February.

"I have something," Peter said.

The revision divided the motion. The forward bird no longer needed to reach so far because the birds behind it rose at different points, carrying the viewer's eye outward. It required a change in the structure and an argument with the client. It also made the design better in a way Gabe resented before he admired it.

"You could have shown me this yesterday."

"I finished it this morning."

Gabe looked at the tracing again.

"Come on."

They took it to Leonard together.

Later, while the crew measured the new arrangement, David lingered at the workbench. He had begun spending more summer days at the lot and seemed to be choosing an education nobody had offered him formally.

"Did you really used to run women?" he asked.

Leonard finished writing a dimension.

"Somebody say that?"

David's ears went red.

"People say stuff."

"They got time."

"I didn't mean—"

"Hand me that rule."

David handed him the wrong one. Leonard pointed. David tried again.

For several minutes they measured in silence. Then Leonard said, "You're asking me about my life and you don't know whether I got a wife. Children. A mother still living. You went straight to the story you liked."

David looked down at the bench.

"Sorry."

Leonard accepted the apology by giving him another task.

At lunch a woman delivering office supplies stood beside Leonard while he signed. He asked how her morning was going. She began to answer, then drew her fingers through the hair at her temple, smoothing something that had already been smooth. Leonard noticed. He looked up, and she kept looking at him. He let the moment last before he winked. She laughed, told him he was trouble, and left with the signature she needed.

David saw it from the office steps.

Leonard caught him looking.

"Close your mouth. You got a girl."

* * *

That evening Gabe found Leonard putting his tools away. They had agreed on the revised motion. The client had complained for seventeen minutes, then asked if the birds could be white.

"I owe you an apology," Gabe said.

"For which part?"

Gabe smiled, then stopped when Leonard didn't.

"For trying to get Arthur to overrule you."

Leonard placed a wrench in its drawer.

"Accepted."

Gabe waited.

"You waiting for yours?" Leonard asked.

"No."

"Good."

On the way out, Gabe looked back. Leonard had taken off his glasses to polish them. Behind him, Six rested on the concrete with the unfinished birds rising above it. The two men had been taking care of different things. Tomorrow they would try again to make them fit.

11 Saturday flowers

July

Nina's mother wanted a church wedding when the time came. Nina wanted to finish school. David wanted Nina and had not yet worked out how many other people came with the arrangement.

For the moment there was a family anniversary party, and Lionel had promised flowers. Nina arrived to collect them wearing yellow, which made the bouquet on his table look suddenly as though it had been waiting for her.

"You made that for me?"

"I made it for whoever wore the right dress."

She kissed his cheek. David stood behind her with the photograph from February in a drugstore envelope.

Lionel looked at it and said, "Oh, that needs a frame."

The picture showed his long dark legs crossed at the knee, the blue heels, and the bouquet lifted toward his face. His expression had escaped both his professional concentration and his pose. He seemed to be listening to someone he liked.

"Can I keep one?" Nina asked.

"You can keep the handsome boy too, if you train him."

David took the flowers to the car. Nina stayed behind.

"Do you ever get tired of people asking you to do this on your day off?"

"Yes."

"Then why'd you say yes?"

Lionel adjusted one stem. "Because I wanted you to have it."

After they left, Jules came in carrying two bags of groceries for the picnic. He put them down and studied the photograph.

"That shoe is doing a lot of work."

“So is the man in it.”

They had known each other long enough to know when a joke had somewhere else to go. Jules looked at him more closely.

“What’s the matter?”

Lionel had spent the morning on the telephone with his sister Pearl. Denise wanted to try out for the Rose Court. Pearl wanted to encourage her without allowing encouragement to sound like a promise. Lionel had offered advice until Pearl asked whether he wanted to raise her daughter himself.

“She says I’m making it about me.”

“Are you?”

“I’m making it about her not being hurt.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

Lionel took the photograph away from him.

* * *

The company picnic was held in a park with insufficient shade and an excellent view of everybody’s bad decisions at the barbecue. Eric had brought more food than the table would hold. Paul arrived with a cake. Peter’s wife, Anne, came carrying their sleeping child against her shoulder. Tom, Arthur’s companion, brought folding chairs and a book he optimistically expected to read.

Tom taught history at a community college. He and Arthur had been seeing each other for nearly three years, and Tom still occasionally referred to a parade float as a project, in the tone of a man discussing a bookshelf. Arthur found this restful until it annoyed him.

Tom was trying to keep an evening class on the fall schedule. The college wanted more students in it. He wanted the people who worked days to have somewhere to come after work. Arthur suggested advertising.

“With what?” Tom asked.

Arthur began to describe a notice he could have Peter draw. Tom interrupted to explain that the problem was the number of places the college would fund, not whether anybody had seen a notice.

Arthur listened. When Tom finished, he asked a different question.

Later Tom found the piece of paper on which Arthur had written the course number. He left it beside Arthur’s plate.

They sat together beneath a tree, Tom’s hand resting on Arthur’s knee. Margaret and Beatrice occupied the next two chairs. Margaret had changed into shorts, revealing knees nobody on the lot had known existed.

“A scandal,” Arthur said.

“Charge admission.”

Gabe arrived late with Luis, who went to ask Paul where they had put the drinks. They were still talking when Gabe came looking for him with a plate.

For an hour they ate and talked about things that did not need to be finished. Then Gabe mentioned the birds and three people groaned at once.

Leonard arrived in a cream shirt, carrying a small folding chair of his own. Without the work suit he seemed neither younger nor older, only a man who had made another decision about how to look. He sat beside Ruth and asked after her mother.

“Still won’t use the handrail.”

“Which side did they put it on?”

Ruth showed him. He considered the arrangement while she unwrapped a plate for him. Before either had worked for Arthur, he had helped her mother get a car started outside a grocery store. Her mother still asked about the tall man who hadn't let her pay.

Denise came with Pearl. She was wearing a borrowed pair of sunglasses and carrying a magazine rolled in one hand. Lionel beckoned her over.

"Your mother tells me—"

"I know."

He stopped. Across the grass, Jules raised his eyebrows.

Lionel tried again.

"Do you want help?"

Denise considered him.

"With what?"

"Whatever part you want help with."

She took off the sunglasses. "I don't know yet."

"All right."

She sat beside him, an ordinary act that felt like being allowed back into a room.

At dusk, Arthur and Margaret walked to the parking lot together to fetch a blanket. The day had cooled. Music from another picnic drifted across the grass.

"Tom looks well," she said.

"He does."

"You sound pleased with yourself."

"I remain capable of pleasing someone."

She bumped his shoulder with hers.

"At our age, the stinky parts ought to be paying rent," he said.

Margaret laughed. "Yours have never met a bill they liked."

Arthur opened the trunk. They stood a moment longer than necessary, looking back at the tables. Beatrice was helping Anne settle the child. Tom had finally opened his book, but Eric was talking to him. Lionel and Denise sat shoulder to shoulder.

"Good day," Arthur said.

"Yes."

They took the blanket back.

* * *

The following Saturday Jules took Lionel to lunch and made him leave the photograph at home.

"You've shown it to the waiter twice," he said before they had reached the restaurant.

"It wasn't the same waiter."

They sat by a window. Lionel ordered without the menu. Jules read it from top to bottom, chose something sensible, and asked whether they could share a dessert later.

They discussed a musical for long enough that their sandwiches arrived before the leading man had been acquitted of anything. Jules demonstrated a phrase quietly, two fingers marking the beat against the table. Lionel listened. His expression changed halfway through.

"What?" Jules asked.

"Nothing. Do that again."

Jules didn't. He picked up his sandwich instead.

Outside, a family stopped to examine the menu in the window. The father looked in, glanced at them, and moved on. Lionel waited until they had gone before returning his hand to the table. Jules saw the movement. Neither said anything about it.

"Why didn't you?" Lionel asked.

"Do what?"

"Keep singing."

"I do sing."

"You know what I mean."

Jules chewed and swallowed. On the lot, people usually accepted his first answer because somebody needed him somewhere else. Here Lionel could wait.

"There were auditions. There were rooms full of people who could do what I could do. Some of them could do it better."

Lionel began to object. Jules shook his head.

"I was there."

The waiter refilled their water. Jules thanked him and watched him go.

"I liked the flowers," he said. "I liked being good at something people needed all the way through. I liked the schoolwork. Nobody believes that part."

"I believe it."

Jules ran his thumb along the edge of the napkin. He had been ready to argue.

Lionel looked down at Jules's hands beside the plate. One thumbnail was stained from work. He had heard Jules complain about actors for years and had never asked him about the classroom.

"Who taught you?"

Jules named a woman Lionel remembered. They spent the rest of the sandwiches disagreeing about her.

"I still want to hear you finish that phrase," Lionel said.

"Buy me dessert."

They did not share. Jules ordered his own. Afterward, walking to the car, he sang the phrase again, and Lionel waited until he had finished before reaching for the door.

12 The week on paper

August

Ruth ruled the December calendar in pencil, then pen, then pencil again when a band director telephoned to say that the bus company had misunderstood the date.

"Which date did they understand?"

She listened.

"That's Thanksgiving."

Across the office, Arthur kept his face turned toward a file until he could trust it.

The calendar covered the wall behind Ruth's desk. Church groups, school organizations, returning volunteers, first-timers, sponsors' employees: each occupied a penciled block. Beside some groups she recorded an agreed contribution to their organization. Beside others, a name and a warning about transportation. She knew who brought lunch, who needed feeding, and which adult always promised forty people and arrived with eleven.

David had been given the telephone list to check. After his third call he asked whether anyone ever answered a question directly.

"Now you understand my personality," Ruth said.

Below them, the lot had begun to fill. The frames divided the building into passages that would grow narrower every month. A piece of scenery leaning against a wall became an obstacle, then a landmark. People gave directions by it. Turn left at the whale. Ask Eric behind the castle. Margaret's near the thing that looks like a duck but isn't.

Peter's daughter came in one afternoon and identified the duck as a duck. Peter took her home before Gabe heard.

The home-furnishings garden had become his principal responsibility. His initials remained on the drawings. Gabe still revised things, sometimes usefully, sometimes because he had been standing too long in front of a design he had not made.

One afternoon Peter returned from lunch to find a new curve drawn across the entrance. He took the sheet down and brought it to Gabe.

"I've already given them the measurements."

"It's a small change."

Peter laid the drawing over the cutting list. The new curve crossed two pieces already made and moved the place where another would meet them.

Gabe studied it. "I didn't know they'd started."

"They asked me. I said yes."

From downstairs came the sound of a saw. Peter waited until it stopped.

"Do I need to ask you before I tell them anything?"

Gabe reached for an eraser. Peter put his hand on the edge of the sheet.

"I'll take it back."

He went downstairs with it. Gabe stayed at the board, where the unaltered copy suddenly looked less finished than it had that morning. He left it alone.

Eric spent several mornings testing surfaces. He kept dated samples and notes on what changed as materials dried. Some colors deepened, others flattened, and a beautiful piece could become a poor choice once the adhesive and time had their say. He liked these trials. Unlike people, the samples did not defend their intentions.

At home Paul had begun leaving brochures for a weekend cabin on the kitchen table.

"You know what August means," Eric said.

"I know what all the months mean. I live with you."

Eric looked at the photographs of trees.

"Two nights?"

"I'd like two. There's one I can afford if we decide this week."

Eric asked Margaret to watch his samples. She said yes before he finished describing where they were.

Arthur was pleased about the cabin. He liked people taking holidays as long as he was not expected to take one himself. Tom had stopped suggesting a week away and was working down toward an afternoon.

One Thursday Arthur came downstairs during a rehearsal of the bird movements. He stood beside Leonard, watched two cycles, and went back up more slowly than he had come down.

At the top he paused with his hand on the rail.

Ruth looked up.

"Hot," he said.

She glanced at the fan, which was turning directly toward him.

"Sit a minute."

He sat.

There had been days when the cough disappeared. Then it returned, an annoyance he could assign to dust, cigarettes other people smoked, the dry air. Recently the stairs had begun to require a little planning. He disliked planning them. He had planned much more difficult things.

Ruth brought water. He drank it without a remark, which she found more troubling than the pause.

"Have you called the doctor?"

"Yes."

"When's the appointment?"

He looked at her.

Ruth picked up the telephone and put it beside his hand.

The doctor examined him the following week and arranged tests. Arthur returned to the lot with a prescription, a request to rest, and a story about an overcautious man in an expensive tie.

By Friday he had a fever.

Tom found him asleep in the office chair at six, the window open, the work continuing below. He stood in the doorway for a moment, watching Arthur breathe. Then he went to find Margaret.

13 The name they had

September

At the hospital Arthur kept asking what time it was, although there was a clock above the door.

Tom answered each time. He had brought a sweater Arthur disliked, the wrong reading glasses, and a paperback neither of them could concentrate on. At midnight he went home to get the other glasses. Margaret stayed.

"You can go too," Arthur told her.

"I know."

He shifted against the pillows. Drawing a breath required attention now. It was humiliating to discover how many small things the body had been doing without asking him.

"Do you remember that hotel in San Diego?"

"The one with the bath in the cupboard?"

"Evelyn said it was European."

"Evelyn said anything she didn't want to complain about was European."

He smiled. The effort was followed by a fit of coughing that left his eyes wet. Margaret waited, then held the cup while he drank. She did not wipe his mouth. He was grateful enough for that to resent her knowing he needed the courtesy.

The pneumonia had a name he could not remember at first. Margaret could. By the third day he had learned it because several people had used it in the hall. The doctor explained that they were treating the infection and investigating why he had developed it. Arthur asked whether the explanation could wait until he was breathing more easily. The doctor said some of it could.

* * *

At the lot, everybody knew Mr. A had pneumonia. The first telling sounded manageable. Subsequent tellings became less so because nobody could supply a date when he was coming back.

Gabe visited with a drawing under his arm.

"You brought homework," Arthur said.

"You asked for it."

"I also asked for a decent lunch. Apparently there are limits."

Gabe set the rendering where Arthur could see it. They discussed the base of the Bell Vista float and the fact that a white bird needed enough contrast behind it to remain visible. For eight minutes the visit resembled work.

Then Arthur closed his eyes.

Gabe sat very still, as if movement might make the fatigue worse.

"Keep talking," Arthur said.

Gabe talked about a client who had asked for a rainbow without increasing the budget. He talked about Leonard's revised access panel and Peter's garden. He described Lionel's objection to a shipment using the cleaned-up version, then the original because Arthur opened one eye.

When Gabe left, he forgot the drawing.

* * *

Near the end of the month the doctor sat down. Helen was there, and Tom. Margaret had gone to buy coffee and came back while the doctor was explaining the immune system.

Arthur listened. He asked for the name again.

"Acquired immune deficiency syndrome. AIDS."

The abbreviation seemed too small for the explanation. Four letters, something a secretary might write in the margin. Arthur looked at Tom, whose face had become attentive in the manner of a person trying to memorize directions in a foreign city.

"And after the pneumonia?" Arthur asked.

The doctor explained what they could treat and what they did not yet know how to repair. He did not promise recovery from the syndrome. He did not give Arthur an exact date to die. Between those two omissions, Arthur felt his future change size.

"Is Tom ill?"

"I'm here to discuss your results today. We can arrange a separate appointment for Tom."

"That's not an answer."

"No," the doctor said. "It isn't one I can give you from this room."

Helen asked a question about bringing him home. Margaret asked about the treatment. Tom asked for the doctor's telephone number. Arthur watched them begin to arrange themselves around something he could not see.

Afterward he said, "I want to be part of these conversations."

They all turned toward him.

"Of course," Helen said.

"Then don't talk about bringing me home as though I'm the sofa."

She looked hurt. He was sorry and did not apologize until evening, when she returned with his own pajamas.

* * *

Tom went to the lot the next day because Arthur asked him to tell Gabe. They used the office. Ruth held the calls.

Gabe stood while Tom spoke, then sat down before Tom had finished. He knew the reports. He knew the fragments of conversations. He had made a private distinction between the men in those stories and Arthur, without ever admitting he was making it.

“Does he know?”

Tom looked at him.

“Yes.”

“I meant—”

“I know what you meant.”

Gabe pressed his thumb against the edge of the desk until it hurt.

Tom was not crying. This made Gabe feel he should not cry either, which he understood even then was unfair to both of them.

“What does he want us to do?”

“Finish the floats. Call him. Stop sending food he can’t eat. Visit in smaller numbers.”

For a while they could talk because there were instructions.

Downstairs, Lionel listened with his arms folded. Jules sat beside him. Eric leaned against the table. Leonard remained standing near the open door, and Margaret, who had already heard it, watched their faces.

No one made a speech.

Jules asked about Tom. Eric asked whether Arthur could have visitors. Lionel wanted to know exactly who had been told and whether Arthur had agreed to them being told. Margaret answered what she could and said she did not know when she did not know.

Then Leonard asked, “Who’s signing the checks?”

Gabe stared at him.

“They’re going to keep arriving,” Leonard said.

Ruth, who had come down from the office, answered. “We’ve made arrangements.”

Leonard nodded. He stayed long enough to ask what Arthur might like brought from home. Then he went back to the engine on his bench.

That night Gabe called Luis and said he did not want to be alone. He had never said it so plainly. Luis arrived with bread and soup, and they ate at the kitchen table without turning on the television.

14 Visitors

October

Arthur came home in a shirt that had become too large for him.

The first afternoon he sat in his own chair and objected to the number of objects people had placed within reach. Tom moved two of them. Margaret moved them back after Arthur needed one.

They did not know how to make him well. They learned a schedule instead: appointments, medicines, meals he might tolerate, calls he might enjoy. Helen arranged her work hours. Beatrice brought things from the bakery and never demanded he eat them. Ruth telephoned at ten with the

business he needed to know about, and he often called back at ten-twenty with questions she had hoped to avoid.

Tom kept teaching the evening class. A colleague had offered to take it, and he had thanked her and said not yet. On those nights Margaret came over after work. He left his notes by the door so he would not have to look for them when it was time to go.

One evening Arthur asked whether he had to.

"Margaret's here."

"That wasn't what I asked."

Tom put the notes down. He had changed his shirt and was trying to remember whether the car needed gas.

"I want to go," he said. "I'll be back by ten."

Arthur looked at the clock. Tom waited, then picked up the notes again.

"Will you tell me about it?" Arthur asked.

"If anything happens."

At ten-fifteen he came back with half a sandwich in a paper bag and an argument still running in his head. A student had challenged the question he had set them. He began to tell Margaret at the kitchen sink, then heard Arthur call from the other room.

"I asked first."

Tom pulled a chair near him. He talked while Arthur ate the part of the sandwich he wanted. When Arthur interrupted, Tom disagreed with him. Margaret took her bag out to the car.

There were good hours. In those hours he could talk until somebody forgot to watch the time. Then the effort caught up with him, sometimes in the middle of a sentence.

Gabe brought him the latest drawings one Sunday. Arthur looked at the Bell Vista birds and asked whether Peter had solved the wing.

"We solved it."

Arthur looked over his glasses.

"Peter solved the part you mean."

"Good."

They sat by the window. Outside, Tom was trying to persuade a garden hose to coil into a shape it had never voluntarily assumed.

"I want you to buy the company," Arthur said.

Gabe looked at the drawings, then back at him.

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Start doing this."

"Doing business? You've been asking me to retire since you were twenty-nine."

"That's different."

"Yes."

Arthur waited. He was too tired to push and disliked that Gabe might mistake the fatigue for uncertainty.

"The company and the property," he said. "There are things to work out. Helen knows I want to discuss it."

"I don't have that kind of money."

"Then that's one of the things."

Gabe stood and went to the window. Tom had abandoned the hose in a heap. He saw Gabe watching and raised both hands in surrender.

"I'm a designer," Gabe said.

"I noticed."

"Ruth knows the books. Leonard knows the machines. Lionel—"

"Yes. They work there."

"You know what I'm saying."

Arthur closed his eyes. Gabe turned back, ashamed of having made him tired, angry that every disagreement now arrived wearing that shame.

"If you're saying you don't want it," Arthur said, "say that. If you're saying you can't do everybody's job, you'll be the first owner in California to notice."

The next morning Gabe went through the books with Ruth.

He had known the company earned money. He had not known how many directions money could travel before anybody got to keep it. Deposits were already committed to work not yet complete. Receivables were promises from people who sometimes required three polite reminders and a fourth less polite one. The buildings needed repairs. Equipment he had regarded as permanent had replacement costs.

Ruth let him read in silence.

"How long have you known he wanted this?"

"He asked about possibilities before he went into hospital. He asked seriously last week."

"And you didn't tell me."

"It wasn't mine to tell."

He returned to the first page.

Downstairs, somebody had told a volunteer that Arthur was dying. The volunteer told somebody else that the business was closing. By afternoon a supplier called to ask whether next year's advance order should be held.

Ruth took the call. Gabe heard enough of it to come out of the office.

"Put him through."

She held up a hand.

"No," she said into the receiver. "The twelve places are spoken for. Keep the order. You can speak to me directly."

After she hung up, Gabe said, "You should have let me talk to him."

"What would you have said?"

He had several answers. None was as useful as Ruth's. The company had work waiting beyond the work they could see. Uncertainty about Arthur was becoming a rumor about everything, and she had no intention of allowing it to conduct business on their behalf.

Lionel went to see Arthur on Wednesday. He wore the blue heels because Arthur had specifically asked what had happened to them.

"I do own other shoes."

"My condition entitles me to favorites."

Lionel set a vase on the table. He had brought a modest arrangement, proportioned to the room and to a man who no longer wanted the house to resemble a hotel lobby.

"People talking?" Arthur asked.

"People breathe. Then they talk."

"About closing."

Lionel sat down.

"You need to tell us what you're thinking."

"I've asked Gabe to consider buying."

"Considering for how long?"

"Would you like me to arrange a deadline?"

"I'd like to know whether I should be arranging my life."

Arthur looked at him. Lionel's face was composed, but his hands had gone still in his lap.

"You should always be doing that."

"Don't get wise on me now. I have worked too hard for you."

Arthur reached out. Lionel took his hand, and they remained angry with each other for a little while because it was easier than making either one pretend the question had been unfair.

15 Who gets picked

October

Denise came home from the next round of Rose Court interviews with her good shoes in a grocery bag.

Pearl heard the front door and turned down the radio. She had arranged a bowl of fruit on the kitchen table, although nobody in the house had ever found fruit consoling.

"How'd it go?"

Denise set the bag down.

"It went."

She had made it farther than she expected and not as far as she had begun to hope. There had been a point, somewhere between the first and second interviews, when she stopped telling her friends it was only something to try. Now she had to return to the earlier version of herself in public, the girl who had not really cared.

Pearl took two glasses from the cupboard.

"You hungry?"

"No."

"Want me to call your uncle?"

"Definitely no."

Lionel arrived anyway, because nobody had told him not to come. He carried takeout food and a speech he abandoned when he saw Denise's face.

They ate in the kitchen. Pearl discussed the cost of having the washing machine repaired. Lionel told them about Jules accidentally answering a supplier's telephone call in the voice he used for clients who annoyed him. Denise laughed, then looked displeased with herself for having done it.

"You can be disappointed," Lionel said.

"Thank you for the permit."

Pearl put down her fork.

"It's all right," he said.

"No, it isn't," Pearl told him. Then, to Denise: "He's allowed to speak to you."

Denise stared at the table.

"I thought I did well."

"You may have," Lionel said.

"Then what am I supposed to do with that?"

He looked at Pearl, who did not rescue him.

He wanted to tell Denise that he knew what it meant to be judged by people who could admire your work and still misunderstand your presence. He wanted to tell her that beauty could be recognized selectively, that the rules could be real and still not explain every choice. He also knew he had not been in the room. He would not make his niece carry an explanation just because it fit a history he understood.

"I don't know," he said. "Tonight you can eat dinner."

* * *

A week later Denise returned to the lot with her saxophone case. Her band's parade rehearsals were increasing. She was furious about the early mornings and secretly pleased that the route now contained a place she would occupy under her own power.

Jules asked whether she would wave.

"While playing?"

"You're talented."

"I'll think of you when I take a breath."

She went to find Lionel, who was assembling a sample panel. He handed her a pair of scissors and showed her what to cut. They worked for twenty minutes before either spoke.

"I still want to try again," she said.

He kept his eyes on the panel.

"Then try again."

"You're not going to tell me I don't need a crown?"

"You don't. That doesn't mean you're forbidden to want one."

She nodded and continued cutting.

* * *

Across the lot, Gabe met Helen for the first time without Arthur between them. They had known each other for twenty years and still carried a little of their first encounter: she had been the daughter, he the boy who arrived and received hours of her father's attention.

Helen brought a folder. Gabe brought a list of reasons the purchase might be impossible.

"He isn't asking you to rob me," she said before he could begin.

"I didn't think—"

"You did. Or you thought I'd think it."

He sat down.

"I don't know how to do this without it feeling like—"

"He's dying?"

Gabe looked at the closed office door.

"We don't know when," she said. "But he's trying to make decisions while he can. We need to let him."

They opened the folder. An accountant and a lawyer would have to turn Arthur's wishes into an agreement. The proposed arrangement involved Gabe's savings, the sale of investments, and

payments over years. Arthur would carry part of the price; Helen's interests and the company's existing obligations would have to be protected. Nobody at the table pretended a handshake would settle it.

Halfway through, Helen rubbed her forehead.

"I used to hate you a little," she said.

Gabe waited.

"You got the interesting version. I got the one who asked about homework."

"He asked about mine."

"Did you do it?"

"Mostly."

She laughed. "Then you deserved him."

After she left, Gabe went downstairs and told Ruth he wanted the lawyer's number.

16 Terms

November

The first meeting with the lawyer took place at Arthur's house because he was having a good morning and refused to spend it in somebody else's waiting room. By the time everybody arrived, the morning was less good. Tom arranged the chairs, then stood behind the one he had intended to sit in.

"Sit down," Arthur told him. "You're making us look like a press conference."

The lawyer had questions. The accountant had different questions. Gabe had thought his own questions were numerous until he heard theirs. Helen wrote in the margins of the copies she had been given. Margaret brought tea and left; she wanted no part of a conversation in which she could offer an opinion but not a useful number.

Arthur owned the land and the buildings through arrangements Gabe had never needed to understand. The business had its own obligations. Equipment had values that differed depending on whether one intended to use it or sell it. Gabe's first offer had treated several of these distinctions as an inconvenience. The accountant treated them as the point.

They worked for an hour. Then Arthur asked everybody to leave except Gabe and Helen.

"They'll think we've fallen out," Helen said.

Arthur pushed the papers aside.

Arthur waited until the others were in the kitchen.

"You don't have to buy my whole life," he told Gabe. "Just the part you know how to continue."

Gabe looked at the papers. "I want the lot."

"And the people?"

"They aren't for sale."

Arthur smiled, tired and pleased.

"Correct. Ask them."

Gabe did. He spoke first to Ruth, who said she wanted a salary review and an assistant during the final two months. She had someone in mind. Gabe asked what it would cost and wrote the amount beside the other figures. Then Leonard, who wanted overdue equipment replaced and the right to refuse a chassis for a design he considered unsafe.

Peter brought a list of the next year's clients. Three names were circled.

"I'd like these from the beginning."

"You work on all of them."

"I know."

One was the home-furnishings company. Gabe understood that one. Another was a city whose committee he enjoyed, people who would listen when he brought them something they had not asked for. He had a drawing for them in his desk already.

"What happens if they ask for me?"

"Tell them I'm doing it."

"And if they don't like what you bring?"

"Then I'll have to find out why."

Gabe turned the paper around. Peter had left room beside the names. There were no drawings to argue with.

"I still need to see what we're committing to," Gabe said.

"Before it goes to the client. Give me the money and the limits before I start, and tell me then if I've missed them. But if you approve it, let me present it."

Gabe looked at the circled city again.

"All right."

Peter stayed where he was.

"What?"

"Put it on Ruth's list. So she knows who to give the calls to."

They took the paper to her together. Later Gabe opened his drawer and looked at the drawing he had begun. It was good. He rolled it up without showing Peter.

Eric asked whether they could improve the storage area and replace two unreliable pieces of equipment. Margaret wanted a dependable plan for the hours Arthur could no longer cover.

Lionel made him wait until he had finished a call.

"I want the floral decisions left with us," he said.

"Of course."

"When the money gets tight too."

"Everything can't be protected from the money."

"Then bring us the problem. Don't hand us something cheaper and call it the same."

Gabe wrote that down in his own words, then crossed them out and wrote Lionel's.

Jules had a folded sheet in his hand. He looked at what Gabe had written and put his own sheet into his pocket.

"Nothing?" Gabe asked.

"He's said the part I need settled."

"Keep the list."

Jules took it out again and laid it beside Gabe's notebook.

* * *

That weekend he told Luis what the purchase would do to his savings.

They were in Gabe's kitchen. A stack of papers sat beside the succulent, which remained indifferent to the company's future.

"And your hours?" Luis asked.

Gabe hesitated.

"I don't know yet."

Luis moved his glass off a page. "They offered me the buying job."

"When?"

"Yesterday. I said yes this morning."

Gabe looked up. He had known there would be an answer eventually. He had not imagined hearing it after Luis had given his own.

"That's good," he said.

"It is."

"How much travel?"

"Two nights some weeks. More while I'm learning."

Gabe began counting evenings without meaning to. Luis watched him.

"I can ask somebody about the bird," Gabe said.

"You'll have to. I'm going to be away."

"I meant I can arrange it."

"All right."

Gabe put the papers together. He had spent the week asking people what they needed to stay. Luis had accepted something that would take him elsewhere part of the time, and he was sitting across the same table, waiting to hear what Gabe thought of it.

"Are you pleased?" Gabe asked.

"Yes. I'm scared I'll be no good at it."

"You know more about those things than anyone I've met."

"I know what people send back. Now I have to choose what we order."

They talked until after midnight. Luis described the man who would train him, a hotel near the warehouse, what the extra money would mean. Gabe listened without trying to make the dates fit his own calendar. Before Luis left, they wrote down the first week he would be away.

On those evenings Gabe would need to go home. He put that in the calendar too.

On Monday the flower supplier called to say one of the expected varieties might be short.

Gabe took the problem downstairs.

Lionel listened without congratulating him for doing what they had agreed.

17 A place to sit

November

Pearl drove the route with Denise on a Sunday afternoon, studying the places where the grandstands were rising. Men worked above the sidewalk while other men below looked up and shouted things the traffic swallowed. The city had begun acquiring another set of rooms, open to the weather, built for people who would occupy them for a morning.

"Our place is farther down," Pearl said.

"I know where our place is."

"Then stop looking like we're lost."

The family had occupied the same stretch of sidewalk for years. Nobody owned it, a fact they would explain vigorously to any stranger attempting to behave as though he did. The earliest arrivals

established an arrangement of chairs, blankets, food, and relatives. Somebody always had to remain. Somebody always complained about being the somebody.

This year Denise would be walking past them.

Pearl pulled over near the usual spot. The ordinary sidewalk was narrow, a little stained, and unpromising. On New Year's Eve it would become a place where three generations could accuse one another of moving a chair.

"Your grandmother sat there," Pearl said.

"I remember."

"She used to say she could tell the good bands before she saw them."

"You can."

Pearl turned to her. "Well, then."

* * *

At the lot, Arthur arrived in Tom's car on a morning everybody had privately agreed to make easy for him.

Their agreement lasted eleven minutes.

Arthur wanted to see the birds move. Leonard said they were not ready. Arthur asked why. Leonard explained. Arthur asked whether they could make a partial run. Leonard said no.

Tom stood near the car with a blanket over his arm and watched Arthur become almost visibly stronger through irritation.

"Good," Margaret murmured.

"What?"

"Nobody's treating him like a visitor."

They had made a place for him downstairs so he did not need the office steps. From his chair he could see the garden, the side of the birds, and a portion of the float for a food company that had insisted on a giant basket. He looked at the basket for some time.

"That's too high."

Peter came over with the measurements.

"It looks too high," Arthur said.

Peter showed him the angle from the street.

Arthur studied it.

"All right."

Peter walked away with the faintly stunned expression of a man whose argument had succeeded before he had prepared his second sentence.

People came to Arthur one or two at a time. A welder asked after him and then asked about a tool that had vanished. Ruth brought signatures. Jules gave him a report on a shipment, including a detailed account of the supplier's sins. Eric placed a cup of coffee on the table without asking whether he wanted one. For almost an hour, Arthur could imagine he had simply decided to work downstairs.

Then a returning volunteer approached and stopped farther away than conversation required.

"We heard you've been poorly."

Arthur nodded.

The woman looked at the chair, the blanket, the cup. He could see her wanting to be kind and trying to calculate the cost.

"Is it all right if I—"

She did not finish. He did not know which question she meant to ask.

Margaret looked up from the table beside him. Before she could speak, Arthur held out his hand.

The woman took it. She held it awkwardly, briefly, but she took it.

After she left, Arthur said, "Don't."

"I haven't said anything."

"You've got the face."

Margaret lowered her eyes to the work.

Later, at home, he told Tom he had enjoyed the morning. Tom believed him because Arthur also complained for twenty minutes about the basket.

* * *

Gabe stayed late that evening. The lawyer had sent another revision. Outside his office, somebody was pulling the ticket booth out of storage, checking the casters before December. Its roof had a water stain. Its little counter was worn smooth where strangers rested their money.

When Gabe had first entered that gate, he had been seventeen and trying very hard to appear older. He remembered Arthur looking through his drawings without asking whether his parents approved of the things the drawings revealed. He remembered being given a place to sit, then work to do, then more work when the first was done well.

He had loved Arthur for many reasons over the years. That evening he remembered the chair.

He signed the instruction authorizing the next step of the purchase and went downstairs to help move the booth.

18 A contract and a cold room

December

The purchase papers were signed on a Tuesday. Gabe had expected a feeling that would distinguish the day. Mostly he felt that he should not lose the envelope.

Arthur signed slowly. Helen watched each page go where the lawyer directed it. Tom made coffee. When it was finished, Arthur asked whether Gabe had brought the latest photographs of the floats.

"That's it?" Gabe said.

"Would you like a ribbon?"

"I thought—"

"You bought a business. Go see if it's still there."

But before Gabe left, Arthur asked him to stay a moment.

From the drawer of the side table he took a key on a plain ring. It was the gate key, worn at the teeth and warm from his hand.

"You've got copies," Arthur said. "This one's mine."

Gabe took it.

"You still get in."

Arthur leaned back. "I should hope so. I'm owed money."

At the lot, Ruth put the documents away and gave Gabe three things to sign. Ownership had survived the drive.

The next problem was refrigeration.

One of the arrangements for cold storage had fallen through, and the replacement was smaller than promised. Eric stood in front of the diagram with a pencil behind his ear, calculating again. Some materials could wait outside the cold room; others could not. Some could arrive later; others had to come when transportation made them available. He had a list of what they were expecting, where it would go, and what would need to happen before the next load arrived. The diagram had already been erased so often that it looked bruised.

"We need another space," he said.

Gabe looked at the cost.

Eric waited.

"Can we change the delivery schedule?"

"I've called."

"Split the shipment?"

"I've called."

Gabe put the estimate down. "Book it."

That night he lay awake thinking about the amount. In the morning Ruth showed him what would have to be paid before the next installment came in. They moved figures from one column to another. The assistant was already at the second desk, answering a call Ruth would otherwise have had to take.

Gabe went downstairs with two estimates. Leonard chose the repair that could wait and wrote NOW beside the other one. There was no further reduction to be made there.

Upstairs, a representative from the circled city was asking for him. Ruth covered the mouthpiece.

"Peter's here," she said.

Gabe could have taken the call. He knew the man's wife, knew what had pleased the committee the year before, knew which joke would get them through the first five minutes.

"Give him Peter."

Through the open door he heard Peter introduce himself. The conversation paused. Then Peter asked a question, and Gabe stopped listening.

He had meant to spend the morning drawing. At noon the sheet on his board was still blank. Ruth brought him the cold-storage confirmation, and he checked the amount against the figure they had agreed.

That evening Luis called from his hotel. He had bought a meal he disliked and was trying to decide whether to complain. Gabe told him to order something else.

"Listen to the rich man."

Gabe laughed. Then Luis told him about the first order he had been allowed to place. Gabe sat down to hear it.

Lionel was making a different calculation. The blue in Peter's garden had become a set of neighboring colors that worked at street distance, provided the right flowers arrived in sufficient numbers. Peter stood back while the four florists examined the sample.

Margaret separated two clusters with the side of her hand. Jules moved a third. From where Peter stood, the darker shape almost disappeared.

"Leave those where they were," he said.

Jules put them back. Lionel went to check the trays. They would need more of that color along the lower edge, and the number in the order had already changed twice.

By the second week of December the booth stood at the gate. During public hours, visitors bought tickets and entered along the designated paths. They asked how long the work took, whether the flowers were real, and how anyone thought of such things. Some asked good questions. Some had brought children who asked better ones.

A little boy watched Lionel examine a tray of flowers.

"Are you the artist?"

Lionel glanced toward Gabe's drawings, then at Eric's sample board, then at the men fitting a section farther down the building.

"One of them."

"What do you do?"

Lionel held up two flowers that looked almost identical. "Tell me which one you like."

The boy chose.

"Now tell me why."

His mother began to answer for him. Lionel waited for the boy.

Outside, two teenage volunteers loitered near the cars. One kept looking toward the building, then away. When he finally came in, he stopped at the sight of Jules adjusting a scarf in the reflection of the office window.

Jules caught him watching.

"Crooked?"

The boy shook his head.

"Good. Carry this."

He put a light box in the boy's hands and led him toward the work tables.

At the table Jules asked his name.

"Anthony."

Jules repeated it to the woman beside him, who moved a tray and made a place. Anthony set down the box and stayed.

19 All the hands

The week after Christmas

On the morning after Christmas, the first bus arrived before the person carrying the keys to the volunteer supplies.

Forty-three students stood in the cold with their hands in their pockets. A band parent counted them, lost count when two went back to the bus, and began again. Ruth opened the office. Eric opened the material shed. David found the missing keys in a place everyone had already searched.

By eight, the lot had changed its population.

Tables filled with people cutting and sorting. Instructions were given, repeated, misunderstood, and demonstrated. The experienced volunteers acquired beginners on either side of them. Adults who had been important elsewhere learned that they needed to ask a seventeen-year-old how to prepare a surface. Students discovered that a task could be simple to describe and difficult to do neatly for six hours.

Margaret moved among them with a sample in her hand.

"This size. See? If it's larger, it won't sit properly. If it's much smaller, you'll be here until Easter."

At the next table a man held up his work for approval. Margaret inspected it and said, "Yes." He looked absurdly pleased. She did not spoil it by telling him how many remained.

The floats were already built. Now their exposed surfaces had to become plant material, with dry coverings applied where appropriate and fresh flowers arriving in the order the work could accept them. A curve that had looked complete in wire and prepared surface became a different shape when covered. A flower crowded its neighbor. An edge disappeared. The designers walked the aisles and saw their decisions become physical facts, then watched the florists make decisions no rendering had contained.

Lionel worked on the garden's main floral grouping with Jules beside him. For once they were quiet. A space near the center troubled them. Lionel removed three blooms. Jules moved a fourth. They stood back together.

"Again," Lionel said.

They did it again.

The shortage arrived in a cardboard box.

It was not the number of boxes that was wrong. It was what the flowers looked like when opened. Some were bruised, some too far along, and too many lacked the condition Lionel had specified. He examined one tray, then another, his face becoming less expressive with each.

Gabe came down when he heard Jules stop joking.

"How bad?"

Lionel showed him.

The supplier could replace some of the order. He could not replace enough in the time available. Gabe stood at the telephone while Lionel listed alternatives, rejected two, and asked where the third could be found. Behind them Ruth rearranged a delivery on another line.

Peter unpinned the rendering and brought it to the table.

"We can warm this section."

Lionel looked at him. "How warm?"

Peter put tracing paper over it and began to draw. Gabe stood beside him without taking the pencil. Eric brought samples. Margaret asked which areas needed to be finished first if the replacement flowers came late.

They worked out a changed palette that preserved the effect from the street. It required moving volunteers to other sections, contacting the client, and admitting that the finished float would not reproduce the colored paper exactly.

The client was unhappy.

"You approved a floral design," Gabe told him. "We're making the necessary changes to deliver it in good condition."

The man asked whether Arthur would have accepted this.

Gabe looked through the office window at Lionel, who was standing very still while a student tried to explain something with both hands.

"Arthur would have asked Lionel what could be done."

Afterward he went downstairs and told Peter to make sure his revised drawing was photographed.

* * *

That night Tom telephoned. Arthur was back in hospital.

Gabe stood with the receiver against his ear while a volunteer waited in the doorway holding a roll of tape. The volunteer saw his face and withdrew.

"Does he want me there?"

"He wants you to finish. He also wants you here. He won't say both."

Gabe closed his eyes.

Ruth drove him. On the way they stopped for coffee neither drank. At the hospital Arthur was too tired for a long visit. Gabe told him about the damaged shipment and the revised color.

"Show me," Arthur said.

"I didn't bring it."

Arthur looked at him with real annoyance.

The next morning David took photographs to be developed as quickly as the shop could manage. Peter prepared a smaller color sketch. Margaret brought both to the hospital and watched Arthur study them.

"Better," he said.

"They'll be unbearable if I tell them."

"Tell them anyway."

* * *

By the third afternoon, Eric knew the girl by the way she held her shoulders. Whenever he passed her table, they rose. When he stopped, they stayed up.

She had been given a curved panel and a bucket of material cut small enough to follow it. Most of the morning's work lay neatly on the wrong side. She had discovered this when she tried to fit the panel into place. Now it rested across her knees, and she was examining it as if there might be another way for it to belong to the float.

Eric set down his coffee.

"Let me have that end."

"I thought—"

He took the weight before she could finish. They carried it back to the table. He ran a thumb along the edge, fetched two scrapers, and handed her the narrower one.

For a while they worked without speaking. The material came away easily in some places and resisted in others. Eric showed her how to lower the angle of the scraper. She copied him. When she pressed too hard, he put two fingers beneath the panel to support it.

"Like that."

By the time they had cleared the panel, somebody had taken his coffee. Eric turned the panel over and placed it against the float. The girl stood beside him. From this side, its curve completed the underside of a great folded leaf.

"Oh," she said.

He let her look. Back at the table, he steadied the piece while she began again. Her first few applications were slow. Then her hand found the interval, and he could let go.

"Eric?"

He turned.

"Am I still supposed to come tomorrow?"

"What time did Ruth give you?"

"Eight."

"Eight, then."

He went to find his cup.

On the other side of the rope, a visiting couple had stopped walking. The woman held their tickets between two gloved fingers. Her husband had tied his sweatshirt around his waist. They were watching a boy cover a surface no larger than a serving tray.

"How long has he been doing that?" the woman asked David.

"This piece?"

"Yes."

"I don't know."

She considered the part he had finished, then the enormous unfinished shape above him.

"They all have to be done like that?"

David nodded.

Her husband leaned forward until the rope touched his stomach.

"Even underneath?"

"If you can see it."

The woman put the tickets in her purse. Until then, she had been carrying them as though someone might want them back. They moved a little farther down and stopped again.

David had been told to keep visitors moving. He had also learned there were different kinds of stopping. Some people stopped across an entrance to discuss lunch. These two tucked themselves against a post, making room without being asked.

The woman watched Lionel choose a flower. He held it beside another, rejected it, reached into a different tray. His fingers moved through the blooms with the assurance of somebody finding a familiar word.

She looked down at her gloves and began taking them off.

At the worktable, the girl's second attempt progressed in a clean, narrow band. A woman beside her was talking about the parade she had watched at home the year before. There had been sleet against the kitchen window. Her husband had fallen asleep before the football game, and she had let him sleep because it meant she could hear the television.

"Never occurred to me there were people doing all this."

The girl pressed another piece into place.

"What did you think?"

"I don't know. You turn it on and there it is."

Above them, someone called for a ladder to be moved. Four people looked up; two stood. The ladder traveled six feet, taking its little clearing of floor with it.

Eric returned carrying a different cup. He inspected the panel without lifting it. The girl's shoulders rose again, though less than before. He put a finger beside one small gap. She filled it. He nodded and went on.

Near six, Ruth came down with the sign-out sheets. The girl washed her hands in water that had already served several people. Her finished panel waited to be installed. She dried each finger carefully, looking over her shoulder.

Her father was outside in the car. She took three steps toward the door, stopped, and came back.

"Can I show him?"

Eric glanced toward the entrance.

"If he stays out of the aisle."

She ran before he had finished speaking. A few minutes later she returned with a man in a windbreaker who wore the strained patience of someone who had expected to remain in his car.

"This one."

He looked at the panel, then up at the float, trying to understand where it went. She showed him with both hands. Eric stood behind them holding the fastening he would need. He waited while the father changed the angle from which he was looking.

"All that little stuff?"

She nodded. He bent closer.

For the first time all day, her shoulders stayed down.

Across the building, Anthony was helping an older volunteer cover a border. He had come back after his group's shift ended and asked whether there was more to do.

"There's always more," Jules said. "Have you eaten?"

Anthony shook his head.

"Then that's first."

At midnight Leonard found David asleep sitting against a stack of clean tubs. He nudged his shoe.

"Your mother looking for you?"

David woke with a start. "Probably."

"Find out."

"You ever sleep?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"When people quit asking me questions."

But when David rose, Leonard gave him the sandwich he had been carrying. He had already eaten. He let David discover that later.

20 Before the judges

The last two days

In the small hours of the thirtieth, the building had the peculiar quiet of many people concentrating in the same place. There were voices, footsteps, the sounds of work, but the earlier excitement had worn away. Those who remained had settled into a pace they could survive.

Lionel sat at a table to change shoes. He had worn sensible ones for the shift, a concession Jules pretended not to notice. His blue heels waited in a bag beneath the table, wrapped separately so the leather would not rub.

"Who are those for?" Anthony asked.

Lionel looked at him.

"Me."

"I meant when."

"When I want them."

Anthony nodded with such care that Lionel softened.

"You don't have to decide anything because I own shoes."

The boy looked down and laughed.

"Go home," Lionel said. "Your mother called."

"She's picking me up."

"Then be where she can find you."

Across the building, Leonard opened the access panel in Number Six and checked what he had checked before. A hose had been crowded by material added during decoration. Nothing had failed, but the clearance was wrong. He called for the crew and had the surrounding work opened enough to correct it.

Gabe came over as flowers were being removed.

He looked at the gap, then at Leonard.

"How long?"

"For me, twenty minutes. For them, ask."

Gabe found Margaret. She came over, assessed the area, and moved two people from another section. Nobody raised a voice. It was almost disappointing after the year they had had.

Near dawn the last judging preparations began. Stray material was cleared. The planned movements were checked. The people who would ride practiced where to stand and how to remain there. A little girl on the food company's float complained that her shoes hurt. Eric found her mother and waited while the problem was addressed.

Gabe watched the girl bend to fasten a strap and thought of Arthur without knowing why. Then he remembered what Arthur had told him once, years earlier, after too much whiskey: a woman, a child, a flower. He had never asked for the rest. He did not ask it of his memory now.

The judges arrived in clean clothes.

The crew stood back. After so many months of touching everything, they had to keep their hands still while strangers looked. Gabe answered a question. Lionel answered another. Peter described the garden's revised composition. There was no useful way to tell whether a nod meant approval, politeness, or simply that the listener had heard.

When the judges left, Jules exhaled loudly enough to make people laugh.

"Well, they didn't call the police."

Margaret went to check the flowers in the section they had reopened. Leonard asked for the driver. Ruth went upstairs to answer the telephone. The pause ended without anybody declaring it over.

Arthur called late that morning. Gabe took the call downstairs, using the long cord to reach a quieter corner.

"How did they look?" Arthur asked.

"The judges or the floats?"

"Don't waste my telephone bill."

Gabe described them one by one. The birds. Peter's garden. The basket Arthur had thought too tall, now brought into proportion by its flowers. He described the smaller civic float where Eric had achieved an effect the sponsor could never have afforded by ordering more expensive material.

Arthur listened. Sometimes Gabe could hear him breathing. Sometimes another voice spoke in the room, and Arthur asked the person to wait.

"Are you pleased?" Arthur asked at last.

Gabe looked down the building. A tired volunteer had placed her palm against the finished edge of the garden, touching it lightly, as though checking whether it was real.

"Yes."

"Then say so to them."

"I will."

"Before something goes wrong and you forget."

That afternoon Gabe gathered the people still on shift. He had intended to say something about Arthur. Instead he told them specifically what they had done: the replacement flowers, the corrected mechanism, the hours, the care. He thanked Peter for the garden and Leonard for the birds' movement, then corrected himself and named the people who had built and covered them too.

The speech became longer and less graceful as he tried to get it right.

Nobody seemed to mind.

At the back, Ruth leaned against the office steps. Margaret stood beside her with folded arms. When Gabe finished, they began putting things away for the move to Pasadena.

21 The other party

New Year's Eve

Pearl's nephew had been holding the family's place since before Christmas, relieved by cousins, an uncle, and one neighbor whose reliability was praised more often than it was demonstrated. By New Year's Eve the claim had become a small domestic government. There was a place for the food, a place for the sleeping bags, and a chair nobody was allowed to move because Grandma had used it, though Grandma herself had been dead for nine years.

David and Nina arrived carrying a bag of marshmallows and a thermos Ruth had made them promise to bring back.

"You two find a corner," Pearl said.

They found a corner. A cousin immediately told them they had found his.

The party ran along both sides of the street, broken into territories of different sizes and different music. Between them, the roadway remained open enough for passing cars to become events. People stood near the curb until an officer walking the route reminded them of the boundary; then they withdrew with the practiced innocence of people who would be reminded again in ten minutes.

A car approached slowly, windows raised. Marshmallows struck its roof and bounced into the road. A tortilla folded over the windshield, clung for a moment, and slid away under the wiper. Inside, a woman laughed while the driver tried to look offended. From three camps at once came advice on how he should operate his car.

Nina leaned against David. Pearl tucked a blanket around her own knees.

"Better than the year we were sweating," she said.

David remembered that one. The sun had been down for five hours and the pavement was still giving the day back. Somebody had brought a water gun. By the time anyone thought to object, whole stretches of the route had acquired enemies across the street. People who had spent hours protecting their places came out of them to avenge a wet aunt.

"The fires were worse," a cousin said.

The cold year had brought little fires along the camps and officers walking from one to the next telling people to put them out. The arguments had traveled ahead of the police. So had the warning to get the marshmallows toasted while there was still something to toast them over. Later, David had seen a toasted one leave somebody's hand and wondered who had decided the night needed that improvement.

"You threw those," Nina said.

"I said I saw it."

"I heard you."

Pearl tightened the blanket. All those years occupied the same patch of pavement. Someone could name the weather and everybody would begin remembering a different offense.

The man from Madison wore shorts and a sweatshirt. Pearl had watched him standing there long enough to become personally offended by his knees.

"You didn't bring any trousers?"

"Got some at the hotel."

"You ought to go get them."

He smiled, waiting for her to smile too. She pulled the blanket higher.

Two days earlier he had stood beside his car scraping the windshield, changing hands when his fingers hurt. Here a woman was telling him it was freezing while somebody watered flowers outside a restaurant.

He crouched to look at the flowers. Touched a leaf.

"They leave these out?"

"All year," Pearl said.

His wife had stopped beside him. He looked up at her, and something passed between them that Pearl recognized.

"Visit in August before you do anything foolish," she said.

Every Rose Bowl brought a different crowd into the city. The colors changed, the songs changed, the voices asking where to eat changed. Visitors from the Midwest stood barelegged in weather that sent Pearl looking for another sweater. In the hot years they wore the same shorts and started asking what apartments cost. A cousin claimed somebody from a previous game was still here. Nobody could agree which game, or whose cousin he actually was.

Nina looked toward the lot's direction. "You going back?"

"In a little while."

"You always say that."

"Tonight it's true."

Farther along, three students were working on something they kept beneath a blanket whenever anybody approached. One wore a Caltech sweatshirt. Another kept saying the angle was wrong. The third asked whether the first two understood that the point was to make people laugh.

When they finally uncovered it, a cardboard head rose on a long, awkward neck and bowed toward the nearest camp. A hand-lettered sign invited donations to a nonexistent institute for the study of people who slept outdoors voluntarily. The mechanism jammed halfway through the second bow. The students disappeared beneath it while spectators offered engineering advice.

"Caltech," Pearl said, watching them.

"How do you know?" Nina asked.

Pearl pointed at the sweatshirt. Nina leaned out to read it.

Lionel arrived in loafers with Jules beside him. They had a brief interval before they were needed again and had come to see Denise, who was at home attempting to sleep before the band's early departure.

"She's sensible," Pearl said.

"That's an accusation," Lionel replied.

He sat in Grandma's chair. Nobody objected. Jules accepted food and asked who had made it. Pearl pointed out an aunt, who watched him take the first bite before returning to her conversation. Nina asked whether Arthur would see the parade.

Lionel looked at his hands.

"Tom's arranged a television."

Pearl passed him a cup. They sat quietly while the street continued around them.

Then a marshmallow struck Jules on the shoulder.

He turned with magnificent slowness.

Three children became deeply interested in unrelated objects.

"Cowards," he said.

They laughed. He threw it back and missed by a distance nobody allowed him to forget.

* * *

At the lot, Gabe watched the last preparations for the move. Without the daytime visitors, the flowers seemed to occupy more air. The finished floats rose out of the working spaces in which he had seen them daily, familiar and suddenly strange. People moved around them with flashlights, checking clearances, giving instructions, waiting for the next movement.

Leonard stood beside Six, speaking to its driver.

"You hear anything change, you tell somebody. You don't decide you're close enough to finish."

The driver nodded.

"You get hot, you say so. You lose what you need to see, you stop. I don't care who's waving."

Gabe waited until they were finished.

"Good?"

"As I can make it."

There was no promise in the answer, which was why Gabe trusted it.

He called the hospital before leaving. Arthur was asleep. Tom said he would tell him the floats were on their way.

"Don't wake him."

"I wasn't going to."

Gabe heard the fatigue in Tom's voice and asked whether somebody could bring him food.

"Helen's here. We've eaten."

"All right."

Neither hung up immediately.

At last Tom said, "Let him have this morning, Gabe."

Gabe looked toward the moving lights outside.

"I'll do what I can."

On Colorado, the camps settled and woke and settled again. Children slept through noise that kept adults awake. A man argued about three inches of pavement as if his family's future depended on them. Coffee passed from one camp to another. Somewhere a trumpet sounded a phrase and stopped when somebody shouted that the parade was tomorrow.

* * *

Margaret had taken her place in the motorhome before the first departure. Ruth was staying with the last work at the lot, then bringing the remaining paperwork. The two women had agreed on who would know what, and which questions belonged with neither of them.

Arthur's usual seat remained empty until a runner sat in it. Margaret moved a jacket off the cushion for him. She had no use for keeping a chair unoccupied while someone needed to sit.

The telephone number Tom had been given lay beside the radio list. Margaret checked that whoever relieved her would know what it was for.

Wes arrived at the lot with food and a clean shirt. Leonard handed him a list. Wes read it while he ate. When he reached the entry for Six, he looked up.

"Birds this time?"

"Birds."

Wes went to look at them.

A runner came looking for Gabe. He was beside the last float, answering a question about a rider and telling someone where a box belonged. His jacket matched the others. The runner passed him and had to be called back.

Ruth's camera hung against David's chest. From beside the gate he could almost get the whole crew into the picture: the matching jackets, Peter beneath the pale animal, a hand coming out from under a skirt of flowers. He backed up once, bringing the viewfinder to his eye.

A caller began to explain a location by describing the flowers. David lowered the camera, waited for the pause, and gave the chassis number. Leonard answered immediately. David repeated the instruction back and went to find the man who needed it.

By the time he returned, the first float was in the street. He put the camera in Ruth's office and took the list with him.

They moved out through the same gate, but the shapes were different. A turn that had been easy for last year's garden required everyone to pay attention. The pale animal Peter had drawn in April passed beneath a streetlight. Eric watched its flank remain distinct from the flowers around it and made no comment. He was already checking the edge behind it.

At headquarters, Margaret crossed off departures and wrote in arrivals. Ruth came aboard with a bag and asked whether she had eaten. Margaret pointed to a plate. Ruth looked at the plate and put a sandwich in her hand.

"Don't start," Margaret said.

"I work for Gabe now. I'm feeling reckless."

Near morning, Tom called. Arthur was awake and wanted to know how many were in place.

Margaret looked at the list.

"Eleven. One coming."

She could hear Tom repeat it. Then Arthur said something she couldn't catch.

"What?"

"He says tell them not to rush on his account."

Margaret smiled at the receiver. After she hung up, she waited for the last arrival before calling back.

22 The turn

The next New Year's morning

Before sunrise, Gabe stood on Orange Grove holding a cup he had forgotten to drink from. The floats waited in their assigned places. In the darkness their colors were subdued, but their shapes rose above the people walking between them. A rider asked for a safety pin. Somebody called for a missing adult. An official consulted a list, then consulted the street as if hoping the list would change.

The award news traveled faster than the people carrying it.

Peter's garden had won a trophy for its flowers. One of the civic entries had won another. Lionel listened, asked someone to repeat the category, and went to find Jules. They embraced between two floats, careful at first and then less careful. Margaret, stepping out of the motorhome to speak to a runner, saw their faces and knew before they spoke.

Gabe found Peter standing alone beside the garden.

"Congratulations."

Peter looked at the flowers.

"Tell them."

"I have."

"Tell them again."

They stood together while a photographer backed into the space in front of them and asked them to move. Both obeyed. The photographer took a picture of the float without them, and Peter began to laugh.

"That seems right," he said.

* * *

At the hospital, Tom adjusted the television while Arthur complained about the angle. Helen sat at the foot of the bed. Margaret had arranged to join them after the floats were moving; she had not yet arrived. The room contained a modest breakfast, an unopened newspaper, and more hope than anyone had agreed to discuss.

Arthur asked whether they had heard about awards.

Tom told him.

"Peter?"

"Yes."

Arthur looked toward the window. His eyes filled, and he kept them turned away until the sensation passed. Later, when Gabe appeared on the screen with the bird, he asked Helen to turn up the sound. For a moment he could hear the announcer saying the name of someone he had first known as a boy with drawings.

On Colorado, Pearl's family folded sleeping bags and redistributed bodies. David helped a little boy onto a better seat. Nina returned from an expedition for coffee carrying less coffee than people had requested and more information than anyone needed about the line.

Grandma's chair remained occupied. The television trucks and grandstands belonged to another part of the route; here, the spectacle arrived along the street they had been defending all night.

When Denise's band approached, Pearl heard it first.

"There."

Lionel, standing beside her for these few minutes, searched the ranks. He had seen Denise in rehearsal and at school, but the uniform, the formation, and the sheer fact of her coming toward them made finding her unexpectedly difficult. Then he recognized the angle of her head.

"Baby," Pearl said, too quietly for Denise to hear.

Denise kept playing. She saw them, though. Lionel caught the brief movement of her eyes and lifted his hand. She passed in a line of people whose separate months of practice had become one sound.

Pearl sat down hard.

"I'm all right."

Nobody had asked.

Luis brought the parrot before boarding time. The paper at the bottom of the carrier had been pulled into strips, and the bird was working on one of them when Gabe bent down.

"There's more paper in the bag," Luis said.

Gabe held out his hand for it. Luis steadied the carrier while he changed the lining. The bird screamed once, close enough to make Gabe shut his eyes.

"I heard you," he said.

They checked its place together. Luis brushed a scrap from Gabe's sleeve.

"My suitcase is by the door. Don't put anything on it when we get home."

"What time tomorrow?"

"Seven. I've written it beside the phone."

Gabe nodded. He found another strip caught in his cuff and pulled it free.

"Come find me when you're done."

"I will."

Gabe climbed aboard. From the street, the parrot's colors and the line of his shoulders belonged to the composition. He had drawn himself a place in the beauty before he knew how much he would need to stand in it this morning.

At TV Corner, he felt the Bell Vista float begin the turn beneath his feet.

He had looked at the design hundreds of times from imagined viewpoints. Now the actual street, actual spectators, and actual movement made a thing he could not revise. He could see the leading bird pass the corner and feel the change in direction through the platform. The next bird rose behind it. Ahead, faces lifted toward the opening Peter and Leonard had helped him preserve. For several seconds Gabe forgot to worry about anything.

The flowers held their color in the morning light. The driver brought Six around. Behind the finished surface, a year's worth of arguments remained invisible.

They cleared the corner.

Gabe took his first full breath in several minutes.

The trouble came farther along.

At first it looked like a normal pause. The parade ahead slowed; the birds waited, moving in their programmed rhythm. Then the space in front widened and Six did not follow.

An official moved toward it. The driver made the signal they had discussed. The call reached Margaret in the motorhome. She confirmed the location and sent it to Leonard. Wes drove him as near as access allowed; they came the last distance with what they could carry.

Gabe stayed in his place on the float. Beside him, a rider asked whether they should get down.

"Wait here," he said. "They'll tell us."

The parrot shifted, and he turned his attention to it while Leonard spoke to the driver.

The engine was running. The float had lost drive. Leonard listened, asked two questions, and inspected what he could safely reach. Whatever had failed was not something he could put right in the time the route allowed.

He looked toward Gabe and shook his head once.

Gabe felt it in his stomach.

There was a tow vehicle. There were people whose job was to get it into place. The waiting spectators could see something was wrong and began to supply their own explanations. Some stood to look. Others waved at the riders, who were doing their best to behave as though remaining cheerful had become a technical requirement.

Gabe wanted to apologize to each person separately: Leonard, the client, the volunteers, Arthur, the spectators who had waited through the night. He wanted someone to reverse the last two minutes and give him another chance to watch without relief.

Leonard came to the side of the float, close enough for Gabe to hear.

"We tow."

Gabe looked at him. Leonard's face was closed with disappointment, but his attention remained on what needed doing.

"Can the birds keep going?" Gabe asked.

The separate animation power was still operating. Leonard checked before answering.

"Yes."

"Then let them."

The connection was made. The float began moving again, plainly being towed. Applause broke out nearby, not the applause Gabe had wanted, but applause he could hear. One of the riders waved with both hands. The big bird rose behind her.

At Pearl's camp they saw the tow vehicle before the flowers.

"Oh, no," David said.

Nina took his arm.

The birds came forward, bright and absurdly alive above the evidence of their dependence. Pearl stood. The children shouted. David saw the section he had covered and pointed it out to Nina. She looked where he pointed, then at him, and applauded until he joined her.

* * *

In the hospital room, Arthur had already seen the float's television appearance. Tom had called the motorhome afterward and learned about the tow from Margaret. He considered waiting to tell him, then remembered the sofa.

Arthur listened.

"Where?"

Tom told him.

"After the corner?"

"Yes."

Arthur shut his eyes.

"Well," he said. "That's something."

Margaret arrived after the last of their floats was accounted for, carrying a bag and looking as though she had crossed half the city by argument. Arthur wanted to hear about the flowers. She told him what she had seen, where the color worked, how the volunteers had finished the difficult section. She told him about Lionel and Jules embracing in the street.

"And Leonard?" he asked.

"He'll want to speak to you himself."

Arthur nodded. He was tired now. Helen lowered the volume. On the screen another band came into view, still at the beginning of a route the people in the room could only watch in pieces.

23 What remains in the room

January

The party that night was smaller than the year before, partly because people were exhausted and partly because some had mistaken concern for a reason not to celebrate.

Ruth put the food out anyway.

"They worked," she said. "They can eat."

Peter arrived with Anne and their daughter. Eric brought Paul. Beatrice came with a cake and helped Margaret find a knife. David and Nina carried in the photograph of Lionel, now in a frame. He looked at it for a long time before objecting to the frame.

"We can change it," Nina said.

"No. Leave it. I'll endure."

He placed it on the table where everybody would see it.

Luis had taken the parrot home, then returned to the lot. Gabe saw him carrying in a bag of ice and raised a hand. Before joining him, he called Arthur while Jules and Lionel were arguing about the music. He held the receiver out so the people nearest could call their greetings. Arthur said something Gabe could not hear over the others. Gabe put the receiver back to his ear.

"Tell them I'm pleased."

"I will."

"Tell Leonard I know."

Gabe looked toward the back of the building. Leonard had come in clean clothes, but he was still standing near the workbench, speaking quietly to Wes and one of the drivers.

"You can tell him."

He brought Leonard to the telephone.

The conversation was brief. Leonard listened more than he spoke. At the end he said, "Yes, sir," in a voice Gabe had not heard him use before, and gave the receiver back.

"He wants you," Leonard said.

Arthur was breathing heavily enough that Gabe could hear the spaces between his words.

"Have the party."

"We are."

"Then go to it."

Gabe waited until Arthur hung up.

For a while the party moved cautiously, as though laughter might be an offense somebody would remember later. Then Jules spilled something, blamed Eric, and was contradicted by six witnesses. Lionel put on the blue heels. Margaret took Beatrice's hand when the radio found a song she liked. Peter danced with his daughter standing on his shoes.

Gabe remained near the office steps until Luis came and stood beside him.

"You can come out of there."

"I'm not in the office."

Luis held out his hand.

Gabe took it.

* * *

Arthur died two days later, before the floats had all been stripped.

Helen called Ruth. Ruth called Gabe. Margaret was already at the hospital with Tom. There was no announcement to the whole building because the news traveled through it in smaller distances, one person going to another, a hand placed on a shoulder, a task put down.

Leonard switched off the radio at his bench. Wes, who had come back to help with the recovery work, took the tool Leonard was holding and set it down. Lionel sat. Jules went outside and came back because being outside was no better. Eric found David and told him before somebody else could tell him badly.

Gabe went to the hospital with nothing in his hands.

Tom sat beside the bed. Helen stood when Gabe entered, then sat again. Margaret moved a chair toward him with her foot. There was no good place for his eyes to rest. Arthur's glasses lay folded on the table. Gabe looked at them because they were recognizable in a way the room was not.

After a while Tom said, "He was comfortable at the end."

Gabe nodded. He did not know whether Tom wanted him to ask anything, so he stayed.

At the funeral, people who knew different Arthurs occupied the same room. A man spoke of his military service. A client spoke of his artistry. Helen spoke of a father who could make a school project too elaborate and then stay up all night helping her finish it. Tom spoke briefly and had to stop. Margaret went to him, and he finished with her standing beside him.

Gabe had written something. In the car he had decided not to read it. When his turn came, he took the folded paper out anyway, looked at it, and put it back.

"I brought him drawings when I was in high school," he said. "He looked at them as if I had brought him something worth his time."

He described the jobs Arthur had given him, the corrections, the first time he had been allowed to speak to a client without Arthur taking over. He did not say that Arthur had saved him. There were people in the room who had known him longer, including his family. He said Arthur had made room for a life Gabe had wanted and had not yet known how to begin.

Afterward, Helen hugged him so tightly that the folded speech bent between them.

The lot remained busy through the days around the funeral. Perishable material could not wait for grief to become orderly. Equipment had to be cleaned and stored. Bills arrived, clients called, and the city's grandstands began coming down.

Gabe went into the office on a morning when Ruth had not yet arrived. He sat in Arthur's chair and disliked it immediately. It was adjusted for a narrower man. He changed the height, felt guilty, and left it at the height he needed.

The old rendering still hung on the wall. His seventeen-year-old self had put a fountain in a place no fountain could have worked. He had given a horse three visible knees. Arthur had framed it anyway.

He was looking at the horse when Leonard knocked on the open door.

"Found what went on Six."

Gabe turned.

Leonard explained it, using the failed part he had brought to show him. It was small enough to hold. Gabe listened until he understood why the float had stopped and what the repair would require.

"Do it," he said.

"Already started."

After Leonard left, Gabe took a pencil and wrote the repair in the book Ruth had opened for the new year.

Downstairs Lionel was making coffee. Margaret was sorting a box of tools somebody had packed badly. Peter arrived with a new sketchbook, Eric with breakfast, Jules with news he claimed was too good to tell before everyone was present.

The telephone rang. A prospective client wanted to know whether there might be a place next year.

“The twelve are booked,” Gabe said. “May I take your details?”

He listened, wrote down the name, and asked what they had in mind.

When Ruth arrived, she found the note on her desk and Gabe downstairs with the others. Lionel had poured him a cup. There was a chair beside the table. Gabe pulled it out and sat down.

For a few minutes, before the day’s work separated them, they had breakfast.