

THE FIRST CONVERSATION

The questions asked before anything is signed, and how to hear the answers

The door of the library — for adults 18 and over

I. WHAT THIS EVENING IS

Everything else in this library assumes a decision already made. This page is the evening before the decision — the conversation in which two adults find out whether this life is theirs, and it exists because the Introduction's one commandment, reveal everything and begin small, is easy to admire and easy to fumble. A partner persuaded by half a document has agreed to nothing; the same is true of a partner persuaded by half a conversation. This page is how the whole conversation gets had.

Three rules govern the evening. First, nothing is signed tonight — not tonight, not this week. An interval between the conversation and any signature is not hesitation; it is the proof against persuasion, and the reader who resents the interval has just learned something about themselves worth knowing. Second, either of you may end the evening at any point, without argument and without a second campaign; in this conversation, as everywhere afterward, hesitation is an answer, and the answer is no. Third, every answer given tonight is true. A covenant founded on one flattering lie is a covenant already breached — the Annex merely hasn't dated it yet.

Conditions before beginning: both of you have read the entire Set, not summaries of it; both of you are sober; nothing is burning — no fresh grief, no fresh quarrel, no crisis this is meant to answer; and there is time. This is an evening, not an hour.

II. QUESTIONS FOR THE ONE WHO WOULD GOVERN

She answers first — aloud, at length, and without help — because the whole architecture stands on her wanting this, and the commonest counterfeit of this life is a wife accommodating a husband's dream while calling it her own. He does not speak during her answers except to ask her to say more.

1. Do you want to govern — or are you willing to? Say which word is true, and say it slowly.
2. When you imagine holding authority on an ordinary dull Wednesday — the ledger, the standard, his eyes on you — does the picture feed you or tire you?
3. What do you expect this to cost you? Name three costs. If you cannot name three, you have not yet imagined it.
4. What frightens you in these pages? The answer 'nothing' ends the evening; it means the pages were not read.

5. Have you ever, in anger, wanted to hurt him? What is the difference, in your own words, between that hour and this office?
6. When you are empty — ill, grieving, flattened by the world — what do you want from him? (The library has a page on this; your answer tonight is what it will be checked against.)

III. QUESTIONS FOR THE ONE WHO WOULD SERVE

Then he answers, at the same length and the same depth, because a man can kneel for reasons that honour a marriage and for reasons that quietly poison one, and the two postures look identical from the outside.

7. What are you seeking here? Structure, intimacy, devotion, the erotic charge, relief from deciding — say the true proportions, not the respectable ones.
8. What are you fleeing? Answer carefully. A man running toward something can give himself; a man running from something — failure, self-hatred, a decision he cannot face — is asking his wife to be his hiding place, and that is a job, not a covenant.
9. Is her authority something you want to be real, or something you want to feel? A man who wants the feeling will obey until obedience is inconvenient. Which are you, on your worst day?
10. What in the Schedule's territory connects, for you, to anything dark — old harm, old punishment, anything once done to you without consent? Name it now, so that it is planned around rather than stumbled into.
11. What could she do, within these pages, that would make you stop trusting her? You are describing her hardest duty; be exact.
12. If she reads all of this and says no — not yet, or not ever — what happens to your devotion? Answer honestly; she is listening for whether her consent is required or merely preferred.

IV. QUESTIONS ASKED TOGETHER

13. What is currently broken between us? Name it plainly — money, desire, trust, attention, drink, temper — because this framework builds on marriages; it does not repair them. A covenant asked to save a failing marriage will fail with it, and take the marriage's dignity as it goes. Mend first. Build after.
14. Has there ever been violence, coercion, or fear between us — either direction, any year? If yes, stop here. These pages are not for us, and On Discipline and Abuse says why in words we should read tonight instead.

15. What do our bodies and minds carry that the Schedule must know? Conditions, medications, injuries, the mind's weather. Tonight is the amnesty in which everything is sayable.

16. Children — the ones we have or the ones we may have: have we both read *The House With Children*, and can we keep its standard, or is this the wrong decade to begin?

17. Who else effectively lives in our life — parents with keys, siblings, staff, colleagues in our home — and can the Public Theatre hold with them in the rooms?

18. If one of us, in a year or ten, wants out of the Covenant but not out of the marriage — say now, while it is hypothetical, that the Articles' door is real, and that using it is not a betrayal. Both of us, aloud.

V. HEARING THE ANSWERS

Some answers end the evening, and it is a mercy to know them in advance. This begins if: either of you is reluctant and the other is persuading. This is meant to fix a marriage already failing. There is violence or fear anywhere in the history. Drink or any compulsion is currently unmanaged. One of you wants it kept secret from the other's full understanding — a thing that should be impossible after reading, and happens anyway. Or the honest answer to question one was 'willing to,' unaccompanied by want. None of these verdicts is a judgement on the couple; each is a judgement on the timing, and several of them can change. The library will still be here.

And some answers are the quiet yes: fear named without flinching, costs counted before benefits, the door in question eighteen affirmed without a flicker. A couple who can do this evening well has already demonstrated the only skill the Covenant actually runs on. The instruments are furniture. This — two people telling the truth at length — is the thing itself.

VI. AFTER THE EVENING

Then wait. A fortnight is the floor, a season is not too long, and in the interval the Set stays available and unpushed. If both still want it on the far side, begin as the Introduction orders: the Schedule first and honestly, most of it closed; a starting covenant of daily standard, bare hand, and the evening ritual; growth at the governor's pace and on paper only. And keep this page. Some houses re-ask these questions every year on the anniversary of the first asking — because the answers drift, and a covenant that never re-hears them is governing two people who no longer exist.

The Covenant does not begin at the signing. It begins the first evening two people answer slowly.

A guide only. For consenting adults, 18 and over. Nothing is signed on the night it is discussed.