

THE ROOM THAT NEVER KNEW

One evening under the Protocols of the Public Theatre

A companion to the Protocols of the Public Theatre — for adults 18 and over

THE DRESSING

He is locked before he puts on his shirt, and that is the correct order.

I do it myself in the bedroom at half past six with his dinner jacket already hanging on the wardrobe door, and I take longer over it than the task needs, because the twenty minutes after the lock closes are the twenty minutes that set his whole evening. He stands and lets me. He has learned not to help.

Then I dress him. Not entirely — he can manage his own studs — but I do the tie, and I stand very close to do it, closer than the job requires, and I feel him go still and careful the way he does.

"Trousers," I say. "Turn."

He turns. I look at him properly, from the back and then the front, and then I make him sit down and stand up again, and then walk to the door and back.

"Nothing prints," I tell him. "Sit and stand once more."

He does. Nothing prints. This is not fussing. Discretion is his responsibility and his skill, and a man who is visibly uncomfortable in company has failed at preparation, and preparation is obedience. Tonight there will be two hundred people in a room and one of them is giving a speech, and it is him.

"You'll be at that lectern for eleven minutes," I say, doing the last of his cuff. "Sitting is the hard part, not standing. Don't cross your legs. Don't shift. If it becomes a problem you say the word and we leave, and I will make it look like my headache."

"It won't be a problem."

"I know. I'm telling you it's available anyway."

He looks at me for a second longer than he needs to. That is what that sentence is for.

Then I put the chain on, and the key goes where it always goes, and tonight the dress I am wearing means it will sit visible against my skin all night in a room of people who will look straight at it, and see a small gold pendant, and think nothing whatsoever.

THE CAR

He drives. I do not touch him in the car and I do not talk about it, because a man who is wound up before he arrives is no use to anybody.

We talk about his mother's operation. We talk about whether the Hendersons have separated. It is the most ordinary conversation in the world and it is happening between a woman with a key round her neck and a man in a dinner jacket who cannot get hard on the way to his own award ceremony.

At the lights he says, without any preamble, "Thank you for doing the tie."

"You can do a tie."

"I know."

THE ROOM

He is very good in a room. He always has been, but he is better now, and it took me two years to work out why.

It is not that the steel makes him confident. It is that it makes him unavailable to the room's opinion. A man who needs the room to like him works the room, and it shows, and everyone can smell it. A man who has already been assessed tonight, by the one person whose assessment he actually fears, walks in with nothing to find out.

So he is easy. He listens more than he speaks. He asks a junior man a real question and then stays for the answer, which almost nobody does. He does not look over shoulders for someone better to talk to.

My station is at his side and it is not decorative. Article Eight is the hardest article I signed and it is the one nobody thinks of as hard: dressed impeccably, carried with certainty, noticeable to everyone and reachable by none. Others may look. None may land.

A man from the Manchester office lands, or tries to, at about nine o'clock — the hand on the small of my back that is a half-inch too low and stays a half-inch too long. And I do not need my husband for this, and my husband knows it, and does not come. He watches from eight feet away, in conversation with somebody else, entirely relaxed, and lets me handle it, because a Regulator who has to be rescued is not a Regulator.

I step out from under the hand, turn, smile at the man with perfect warmth, and say something pleasant and completely final. He is gone in forty seconds and has no idea he has been dealt with.

When I get back to my husband he says quietly, "That was beautiful."

"That was Tuesday," I say.

THE HOUR BEFORE

There is a stretch between half past eight and half past nine which is, for him, the hardest hour of the entire evening, and it is the one I plan most carefully.

He is seated. That is the whole problem. Standing, a man in a cage has options — he can shift his weight, he can turn, he can walk away from a conversation. Seated at a round table for fifty minutes with a starter and a speech from somebody else, he has nothing at all, and the steel does not care that the chairman of the board is on his left.

So I do three things.

I sit on his right, not opposite, because opposite means eye contact across a centrepiece all night and eye contact is the one thing he cannot currently afford.

I put my hand on his knee under the tablecloth at the start of the starter and leave it there, entirely still, for the whole course. Not moving. Not stroking. Simply present, warm, and heavy, at a point six inches from the thing that is troubling him. It is astonishing how much that steadies a man. It says: I know exactly what is happening to you, I have not gone anywhere, and I am not going to make it worse.

And once, at about ten past nine, when I see his jaw go tight during a long dull passage about regional funding, I lean over and say into his ear, in the most ordinary voice in the world, "Two minutes. Then take your jacket to the cloakroom and stand up in the corridor for a bit."

He goes. He is gone four minutes. Nobody at that table gives it a second's thought.

That is not indulgence and it is not a break in the discipline. It is the discipline. A Regulator who cannot read a man across a table is not exercising authority, she is just enjoying herself.

THE SPEECH

He speaks at half past nine and he is excellent, and there is a moment in the middle of it that only I can see.

He is making a point about the last two years, and he pauses — a good pause, the room is with him — and he shifts his weight very slightly from one foot to the other. Nobody notices. Two hundred people see a man taking a breath.

I see a man being reminded, at the podium, in front of his entire industry, mid-sentence, exactly whose he is.

He does not falter. His voice does not change. But his eyes come off the room and find me at table four for about a second and a half, and I hold the stem of my glass and do not smile at all, and he goes back to his speech.

That second and a half is the entire evening. That is what the cage is for in public, and no amount of what happens later will beat it.

TABLE FOUR

Between courses I lean over as though I am saying something about the dessert.

"You looked at me."

"I did."

"Why?"

"You know why."

"Say it here," I tell him. "Quietly. With Marjorie sitting eighteen inches away."

He puts his napkin down and he says, in a completely level voice, at conversational volume, looking at the centrepiece: "Because I moved my weight and I felt you, and for about a second I forgot there was anyone else in the building."

Marjorie asks him about the parking.

"Dreadful," he says. "We came in the back way."

THE CORRIDOR

At ten past ten I take him out of the room.

Not far — the corridor by the cloakrooms where the noise drops and the carpet changes, and where anybody could come round the corner at any moment, which is exactly the amount of risk I am prepared to take and not one inch more. The Protocols are clear that the theatre is for the two of us and never for an unconsenting third, and a stranger walking into something is not a thrill, it is a failure.

So nothing happens in the corridor that could not be explained.

I stand him against the wall and I put one hand flat on his chest and I do not kiss him.

"Do you know what you are, right now?" I say. "In this building?"

"Tell me."

"You're the man they gave the award to." I move my hand up, over his collar, and I take his jaw. "And you're locked, and you're leaking into a dinner suit, and you're going to go back in there and be charming for another hour, and then you're going to drive me home. And not one of them will ever know."

His breathing has gone. Entirely gone.

"Say thank you."

"Thank you."

"Straighten your tie," I say, and I let go of him, and I walk back in ahead of him and leave him in the corridor to get himself in order.

He comes back four minutes later, entirely composed, and is immediately drawn into a conversation about industrial policy, and he handles it beautifully.

THE DRIVE

He does not speak for the first ten minutes of the drive. Then:

"I'd like to ask for something."

"Ask."

"When we get in," he says, "I don't want it to be quick."

I look out of the window and let him have that in silence for a moment, because he has asked well, and asking well should never be met with a joke.

"No," I say. "It isn't going to be quick."

HOME

I take his jacket off him in the hall and hang it up myself.

Then I make him stand in the middle of the bedroom and undress completely while I sit on the end of the bed with my dress still on and my shoes still on, and this is the mirror image of the ballroom and both of us know it. Two hours ago he was the most consequential man in a room of two hundred. Now he is standing in front of one woman with nothing on and no decisions available to him.

"Kneel."

He kneels.

I do not unlock him. Not tonight. Tonight was not about ending anything.

I take my shoes off, one at a time, and hand them to him, and he sets them down beside him without being told. Then I lift the hem of my dress and put my foot on the edge of the bed and tell him what to do, and he does it, and he does it with the same absolute focus he gave the room and the lectern and the speech, except that now the focus has come home and there is only one person left in the world to spend it on.

It takes a long time and I make it take a long time.

Twice he tries to speed up because he can feel me getting close and he wants it. Twice I put my hand in his hair and slow him back down, and the second time he makes a low sound of pure frustration into me and it very nearly finishes the argument on the spot.

When I come I go rigid and silent, which is how it takes me when it is a big one, and he stays exactly where he is, and afterwards I have to push him away because I cannot stand it.

He sits back on his heels with his mouth wet and his eyes unfocused, caged, hard, entirely untouched, and looks up at me like a man who has just been given something.

THE THING HE SAID AT ONE IN THE MORNING

He is lying with his head on my stomach and I am not entirely awake, and he says it into the dark without any preamble, the way he says the true things.

"I used to hate those evenings."

"I know you did."

"Not the speaking. The rest of it. Two hundred people deciding what I am." He is quiet for a moment. "I used to spend the whole night doing sums about it. Whether that man shook my hand for long enough. Whether they'd have given it to somebody else. I'd get in the car and be sick with it and you'd ask how it went and I'd say fine."

"You still say fine."

"It is fine now." His hand moves on my hip. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. It's fine because the verdict already happened. Upstairs. At half six. You looked at me and made me walk to the door and back and said nothing prints. Everything after that is just a room."

I lie there with my hand in his hair and think about how much I did not understand for the first fifteen years about what those evenings cost him, and

how none of it was ever going to come out at a dinner table, and how it took a piece of steel and a small ceremony at half past six to get it out at all.

"That's not what the cage is for," I say eventually.

"It's exactly what it's for. You just wrote the page before you knew."

AFTERWARD

In bed I put my hand flat on the steel — just resting there, warm palm on cold metal — and hold it, and he shivers.

"How long has that been uncomfortable?" I ask.

"Since the pudding."

"Not uncomfortable. Sore."

"It's not sore."

"Good."

We lie there. The evening is running down. Somewhere in a hotel car park two hundred people are getting into taxis and talking about him and none of them know anything at all.

"Best part of tonight," I say. "Go."

He does not even think about it.

"You didn't smile," he says. "When I looked at you from the lectern. I've thought about it four times since."

"I know," I say. "That's why I didn't."

A guide only. For consenting adults, 18 and over. One household's evening, not an instruction: nothing here overrides the Articles, the Schedule of Limits, or the discretion the Protocols require. The halt word governs this page as it governs every page, and works in company exactly as it works at home — instantly, and without explanation owed to anyone.