

# THE TENTH YEAR

*The Rite of Grand Renewal, one evening in October*  
*A companion to the Rite of Grand Renewal — for adults 18 and over*

Ten years to the week, and the Rite says the steel comes off first.

Not last. First. Before the accounting, before the question, before anything else — because a man cannot answer the only question that matters tonight while he is wearing the answer.

## I. THE TAKING DOWN

He kneels in the middle of the room and I unlock him, and then I take the chain off my own neck and put both key and chain on the table.

That is the part that makes my hands shake, and it does every time I imagine it and it does now. For ten years that chain has been the first thing I put on and the last thing I take off. My skin has a mark where it lies. Taking it off and setting it down two feet away is the single most exposed I have ever been in this house.

"Stand up," I tell him. "You're not kneeling for the rest of this."

He stands. And there we are: him uncaged, me unadorned, and nothing whatsoever holding either of us in place except ten years of choosing it.

"Tonight you are not mine," I say, and my voice does something in the middle of the sentence. "You're a man in a room with me. That's all you are until you say otherwise."

He says, "You're shaking."

"I know."

"Do you want it back on?"

"No," I say. "That's the point. Sit down."

## II. THE ACCOUNTING

We sit at the table with the documents between us and we go through it, and it takes two hours, and it is the least erotic and most important two hours of the decade.

We do it dressed. That was my rule from the first Renewal and I have never regretted it. There is a version of this evening where two people go through a

Schedule of Limits naked and half aroused, and everything on that page gets more ambitious rather than less, and in the morning they own a document written by somebody they were not.

So: clothes on, kitchen table, the good lamp, and a pot of tea going cold exactly as it did the first time.

Ten years of the Schedule. Every line. What has been used, what has never once been used, what was written in at thirty-six by two people who did not know what they were talking about.

Things come off. The Schedule that got signed in year one has a great deal of ambition in it and some of that ambition was frankly showing off. Three items come off because we have never done them and never will and it is dishonest to keep them on a page as decoration.

Things change. Two of the ceilings in Addendum I come down, because he is ten years older and so am I, and the figure that was arrived at by a man of thirty-six is not automatically the figure for a man of forty-six. He argues about one of them. I hold. He gives way, and later says I was right, and I write the new number in.

And one thing goes on that was not there before, which he asks for, out loud, at the table, with his own voice, in daylight terms — and which took him, he tells me, about four years to be able to say.

I say yes to it. And then I say: "Not tonight, though. We'll begin it in the spring, small, the way we begin everything."

The hardest half hour is the one nobody would put in a story about this.

There is a line in the original Schedule, written in year one, in my handwriting, about something I was to do to him weekly and have not done since the third year. Not because either of us objected. Because life happened — a baby, a business, two funerals — and it fell off the edge of the week and neither of us ever raised it.

He does not want to discuss it. I can see him deciding not to.

"Say it," I tell him.

"It doesn't matter."

"It has been on a signed page for seven years and neither of us has done it. Either it matters or it comes off. Those are the choices."

And it turns out it matters a great deal, and it turns out he has thought about it perhaps a thousand times, and it turns out the reason he never raised it is that

he decided somewhere around year four that I had gone off it and that asking would be pressure.

Seven years. Because neither of us would say a sentence.

I put it back on the page in ink and write a day of the week next to it, which is the only way anything survives in a house with children in it, and he watches me write the day and does not say anything at all.

### **III. THE QUESTION**

Then the accounting is finished, and the papers are square on the table, and there is nothing left to do but the thing the whole evening exists for.

I ask him. And the Rite is very specific that she asks first, and that she asks it as a real question, and that if she cannot ask it as a real question she is not fit to hold the office for another day.

"Do you want to do this again?"

And I have to sit still and let there be a silence, and I am not allowed to fill it, and every second of it costs me something.

He does not answer straight away. He is not being cruel; he is being honest, and honesty takes a moment. I watch him actually consider it — actually go and look at the alternative, the ordinary life, the version of us where none of this exists and the chain is in a drawer — and I sit with my hands flat on the table and let him go there.

"Yes," he says.

"Say the whole thing."

"I want you to take it back," he says. "All of it. Another ten."

And then he asks me, because it is not one-directional and never has been.

"Do you want to hold it? Not — do you love me. Do you want the job."

Because it is a job. It is bookkeeping and skin checks and holding the line on a Tuesday when I would rather be watching television and being the one who says six weeks when he wants eight. Ten years of it. Somebody should ask.

Nobody ever has, except him, every ten years, at this table.

"Yes," I say. "God, yes."

### **IV. THE RE-SIGNING**

We sign the amended pages. He signs first, because the surrender is his to offer before it is mine to hold, and I sign second, and in signing I take possession again.

And then — this is ours, it is not in the Rite, we added it in year one and have kept it — we each take out the old page, the original from ten years ago, and we do not destroy it. We put it back in the folder underneath the new one. Every version stays. The house keeps its receipts.

## **V. THE DISROBING AND THE LOCKING**

I take my clothes off in front of him for the second time that evening, and this time it is not exposure. It is display, and he knows the difference, and so do I.

Then I lock him.

It is the tenth time this particular ceremony has happened in this room and I have never once got used to the sound. The ring. The cold. The small, bright, entirely final click.

And then the chain, back over my head, back into the worn place on my breastbone, and the weight of it arriving again after two hours without it is the closest thing to a religious experience I am ever likely to have.

"There," I say. "Now you're mine again."

He puts his face against my stomach and stays there.

## **VI. THE OFFERING**

The rest of the night is his, and by his I do not mean that he takes anything.

I mean that for the rest of the night he is permitted to do to me exactly what he wants, without instruction, without correction, and without me running it — which he gets on one evening every ten years and on no other evening at all.

It is a stranger gift than it sounds. He does not know what to do with it for the first ten minutes. He keeps stopping and checking, and I keep saying no, no instructions, you choose, and he keeps almost asking anyway.

Then he stops asking.

And what he does with it, when he finally believes he has it, is nothing I would ever have chosen and nothing I will forget. He does not do anything elaborate. He puts me on the bed and he takes an hour and a half to go over the whole of me with his hands and his mouth, slowly, thoroughly, without any aim at all — arms, the backs of my knees, the place under my shoulder blade, my hands, one finger at a time.

At some point I realise I am crying and have been for a while.

"What?" he says.

"Nobody touches me," I say. "Do you understand? Ten years. Everybody in this house gets touched by me. Nobody touches me."

He does not say anything clever. He just carries on, and stays there, and does not stop when I come and does not stop when I come the second time either, and by the end I am wrung out and undone and entirely stupid with it.

He is caged the whole time. Straining, wet, ignored, and completely uninterested in his own condition. When I finally reach for him he moves my hand away.

"No," he says. "Tonight's not that."

Afterwards he lies on his back with his forearm over his eyes and says, "I've wanted to do that for about six years."

"You could have done that any night you liked."

"No," he says. "I couldn't. Any night I liked, it would have been me doing something to you. Tonight it was me doing something to you." He takes his arm down. "You don't know the difference because you've never been on this side of it. Everything I do is inside something you're running. Tonight was the only hour in ten years that wasn't."

I lie there and think about that for a long time, and I do not much like it, and I know he is right.

And then I think: he has one hour in ten years, and he did not spend it on himself. He spent it on the backs of my knees.

"Every year," I say.

"What?"

"Not every ten. That hour. Every year. It goes on the page."

He turns his head. "You'd write that in?"

"I'll write it in tonight."

I get up, naked, and go down to the table, and add a line in ink under the amendments, and initial it, and bring the page back up so he can initial it too. He does it against the headboard with the pen I have carried up in my teeth, and we both laugh at how ridiculous it is, and it is in ink and it is real and it will still be there in ten years.

## VII. THE SEAL

Late. Both of us awake. The lamp still on.

"What frightened you most tonight?" he asks.

"Putting the chain on the table," I say. "Not the question. The chain."

"Why?"

"Because for two hours nothing was stopping you from just — not. And nothing should be. That's the whole point of the evening and I hated every minute of it."

He thinks.

"Do you know what frightened me?" he says. "That you'd say yes out of duty. That you'd be tired and say yes because the alternative is a conversation. You've done ten years of the unglamorous half and I've never once seen you bored, and I keep waiting for the year you're bored, and I'd want you to say so."

"If I'm ever bored," I tell him, "you'll know before I do. You always do."

"One more thing," he says, almost asleep. "The children."

We have not mentioned them all evening and they are, of course, the whole architecture underneath it.

"What about them?"

"They're old enough now to notice that we're — " he searches for it " — like this. Not the details. God. But that you decide things. That I ask you."

"And?"

"And I've been waiting ten years to be embarrassed about it," he says, "and I'm not. I want them to see a house where two people are honest about who does what. I'd rather that than the one I grew up in, where nobody was in charge and everybody was resentful and it took thirty years to come apart."

I lie there in the dark and think about the page in this house about raising them to choose well, and about how little of it is about any of this and how much of it is about them seeing two adults be plain with one another.

"They'll choose their own," I say.

"They'll choose something honest," he says. "That's all I want."

## VIII. IN THE MORNING

The papers are still on the table when we come down. The old pages underneath the new ones. The pen where we left it.

He makes the tea. I sit at the table in his dressing gown with the chain on and read the amended Schedule again in daylight, cold, without a single thing in the room to make it seem romantic, and it still says what I want it to say.

That is the actual test, and it is a morning test, not a night one. Anything can be signed at eleven o'clock. The question is whether you would sign it again over tea.

I would.

He puts the mug down in front of me and kisses the top of my head on his way past, and goes to deal with the boiler, and I sit there with ten more years in front of me and the key lying exactly where it has worn its own small mark.

*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 On Discipline and Abuse. The question at the centre of this Rite is a real question, and a covenant in which no is not genuinely available is not a covenant. The halt word governs this page as it governs every page.*