

THE THIRD DAY

A locked week, from the inside of her hand

A companion to The Discipline of Desire — for adults 18 and over

MONDAY

I locked him on Sunday night and told him nothing about when it ends.

That is the only cruelty in the whole week, and it is not really cruelty. If he knows the date he will serve the sentence — he will count down, he will be patient, he will be admirable, and I will get a well-behaved husband and nothing else. If he does not know, he cannot serve it. He can only live inside it. And a man living inside it looks up every time I come into a room.

Monday he is fine. Monday he is almost smug. He kisses me at the door, he says something dry about how he has done longer, and he goes to work with his shoulders back.

I let him have Monday.

TUESDAY

I wear the key out of the shower.

Nothing else — I have the towel around me and I am doing my hair and the chain is around my neck and the key is lying in the hollow of my throat, and I am not doing anything at all except drying my hair with my arms up.

He is on the bed putting on his socks and he stops with one sock on.

"Something the matter?"

"No," he says.

"You've gone quiet."

"I'm putting my socks on."

"Mm."

I turn round and lean back against the basin and let him look, because he is going to look anyway and I would rather he did it with permission than furtively. And I watch the whole thing happen on his face: the wanting, and then the arithmetic underneath the wanting, and then the small physical wince as the steel reminds him that the arithmetic has already been done and the answer is no.

That wince. That is the entire practice, in one second, on a Tuesday morning.

"You'll be late," I say.

He is late.

WEDNESDAY

By Wednesday the change has arrived, and it always arrives on Wednesday.

He comes home and he does not go to his study. He does not put the television on. He comes into the kitchen where I am doing something dull with a chopping board and he stands near me — not touching, not asking, just occupying the same three feet of floor as me — and he starts talking about his day in actual detail, unprompted, at length, the way he did when we were twenty-six.

This is what the steel is for. Not the drama of it. This.

A free man comes home with his fire already banked and spent and he wants an hour of nothing. A caged man comes home with three days of nowhere-to-go pressing up behind his ribs, and it does not come out as sex, because it cannot. It comes out as attention. He notices I have changed my hair. He notices the chopping board is the wrong one and finds the right one. He notices, and says, that I have been quiet since Sunday and asks if it is my mother.

It is my mother. I had not told anyone.

He puts his arms around me from behind and he does not go anywhere near my breasts or my hips, and he holds on, and I stand there with a knife in my hand and let him.

Later, in bed, he asks. Not properly — he asks the way men ask when they are giving themselves room to pretend they were joking.

"Is there a chance," he says, "that this week is a short week?"

"No," I say. "But you may ask again tomorrow."

He groans into the pillow. I put my hand on the back of his neck and leave it there until he sleeps.

THURSDAY

Thursday I am not kind.

I come to bed in something I have not worn in a year and I do not mention it. I get in and I read for twenty minutes with the lamp on, and I can feel him beside me not reading.

Then I put the book down and I say, "Come here," and he comes, and I let him kiss me properly for the first time since Sunday.

He is shaking within about ninety seconds. Not from cold. His hands are on me and they are careful and slightly desperate and everywhere at once, and I let it go on far longer than is fair, and I let him get his mouth on my throat and my collarbone and lower, and I make an entirely honest sound that I do not perform, and I feel him respond to it against my hip — the sudden strain, the steel refusing him, the hitch in his breath as it stops him.

He puts his forehead down on my sternum and just breathes.

"Say it," I tell him.

"Please."

"Say the whole thing."

"Please unlock me. Please. I'll — " and here it comes, the part where a man who negotiates for a living starts making terms nobody asked for. "Not for me. I'll do whatever you want with it, I'll do exactly what you say, you can lock it straight back after, I just want — "

"Want what?"

"To be inside you." Very quiet. "That's all. That's the whole thing. That's been the whole thing since Sunday."

And here is what The Discipline of Desire says and what took me three years to actually believe: the refusal is the intimacy. Not the granting. The refusal. Because what he has just handed me is the most honest thing he owns, and if I take it and trade it immediately for the key, I have told him it was a transaction.

So I hold his face in both hands and I look at him and I say, unhurried, without any triumph in it at all:

"No."

He shuts his eyes.

"Look at me. — There. Do you know what you just gave me?"

"Yes."

"Tell me."

"Everything," he says. "Everything I've got."

"Yes. And I'm keeping it. Not spending it." I kiss him, once, slowly. "You're not being refused because you don't deserve it. You're being refused because I want to still have it tomorrow."

Then I finish what I started, on myself, with his hand where I put it and his mouth where I tell him, and he does it with an attention that no unlocked man has ever paid me in my life. When I come I say his name, which I do not always do, and I feel him make a sound against my thigh like something breaking open.

Afterwards he is wrecked and glassy and entirely happy in a way that makes no sense from the outside.

"How is that fair," he says into the dark, not really asking.

"It isn't."

"No."

"Do you want it to be?"

Long pause. "No."

FRIDAY, EARLY

There is a thing that happens on the Friday of a long week that I have never seen described anywhere, and I think it is the actual reason we do this.

He wakes at about five and cannot get back to sleep, and rather than get up and go to his emails — which is what that man did every morning of his thirties — he lies there in the dark and waits for me to wake up.

For two hours.

I know because I ask him, later, how long he had been awake, and he tells me, and I say why on earth didn't you get up, and he says, "Because you were going to wake up eventually."

That is the whole of it. That is what the steel does that nothing else does. It does not make him want me more — he always wanted me. It removes every other place for the wanting to go, and what is left is a man lying still in the dark for two hours because his wife is going to open her eyes at some point and he does not want to miss it.

No unlocked man does that. I was married to an unlocked man for eleven years and he was a good husband and he did not once do that.

FRIDAY

Friday he leaks all day. He texts me from a car park to tell me so, in a sentence that is spelled beautifully and punctuated correctly because he cannot help himself, and I read it standing in a supermarket and have to put a hand on the trolley.

I text back one word. Good.

He rings me at four for no reason at all. There is no reason. He wants to hear me say something to him. We talk about a delivery slot for ninety seconds and he says thank you at the end like I have done something for him.

SATURDAY

Saturday is the day it stops being lovely and becomes work, and this is the day the guides do not talk about enough.

He is short with me at eleven o'clock over nothing — a shelf, a bracket, some domestic idiocy — and he catches himself doing it and goes tight-jawed and silent, which is worse.

I stop what I am doing. I take him by the wrist and I walk him to the bedroom and I shut the door.

"Sit down."

He sits on the end of the bed.

"That was the steel, not you," I say. "Yes?"

"...Yes."

"Right. So we deal with the steel, not with you." I crouch in front of him so I am lower than he is, which I do about twice a year and which he notices instantly. "Answer me honestly, and I will believe your answer and there is nothing to earn back either way. Is it hurting? Not aching. Hurting."

"No."

"Rubbing anywhere?"

"There's a spot at the base ring. Not raw. It's fine."

"Off, then. Now, please."

And I take it off him — there, on a Saturday morning, in daylight, with nothing ceremonial about it at all — and I check the skin properly and it is slightly reddened and not broken, and I hold him in my bare hands while he swears and shudders at forty-five seconds of being touched with nothing in the way, and I do not let it go anywhere.

"That's not a reward," I tell him. "That's maintenance. Don't confuse them."

"I'm not confusing anything," he says, with his eyes shut, "I'm having a religious experience about a base ring."

We wait twenty minutes. I make him drink a glass of water and stand up and move around. Then I put him back in it, with a different ring, and lock it, and the sound of it lands the way it landed the first night.

He is a different man for the rest of the day. Not because he was released. Because he was checked.

SUNDAY

I do not tell him it is the last night. He finds out the way I intend him to find out, which is with the key in my hand instead of on my chest.

He sees it and he stops breathing.

"Seven days," I say. "You didn't count."

"I counted."

"You did not."

"I counted every hour," he says, "of every one of them."

I take my time with the lock — of course I do — and when it comes off him he makes a sound I would not be able to spell, and he is so hard it must genuinely hurt, and he is already close before I have touched him at all.

I do not let him have it quickly. I have not spent a week building this to spend it in ninety seconds.

I make him lie still. I make him keep his hands at his sides. I use my hands and then my mouth and I take him to the edge and stop, and again, and again, and by the third time he is begging without any dignity left and there is no performance anywhere in the room. Then I sit over him and take him inside me and hold entirely still with him buried in me, and watch his face, and refuse to move for a count I do not tell him.

When I finally let him go, he does not last. Nobody would.

Afterwards he cries a little, which he has done exactly twice in fifteen years, and I hold his head against my chest and do not say anything clever about it.

THE HOUR AFTER

I do not put it back on him that night, and this is a rule I made in the second year after getting it badly wrong in the first.

There is a moment, perhaps ninety seconds after a man finishes at the end of a week like that, where everything he has been running on for seven days simply evaporates. The wanting is gone. The devotion feels, briefly, like something that happened to somebody else. And if I lock him again in that ninety seconds, I am locking a man who does not, at that exact moment, want it — and he will comply, because he always complies, and a version of consent that only exists when he is desperate is not consent I am willing to build on.

So he stays out overnight. Every time. And in the morning, when the fog has gone and he is an ordinary man in an ordinary kitchen with a cup of tea, I ask him then.

That morning he says yes before I have finished the sentence.

But there was a morning in the fourth year when he said, "Not today," and I said fine and meant it, and we went four days, and he came and asked for it back himself on the Thursday. Those four days are worth more to me than any week I have ever run.

MONDAY, AGAIN

In the morning I ask him the question I always ask at the end of a week, and I ask it with the lights on and both of us dressed, because a question asked naked is not really a question.

"Honestly. Too long?"

He thinks about it properly. He always does.

"Wednesday was the best day of the year," he says. "Saturday I was horrible to you."

"You were mildly irritable about a bracket."

"I want to do eight next time."

"Six," I say. "We'll do six, and I'll check the ring twice."

He looks disappointed. He is genuinely disappointed. And I write six in the book, and I mean it, because the whole of my authority in this house rests on the fact that when he asks for more I am the one who says the sensible thing — and he knows it, and that is precisely why he hands me the key at all.

A guide only. Not medical advice. For consenting adults, 18 and over. One household's week, not an instruction: nothing here overrides the Articles, the Schedule of Limits, or the health checks set out in The Ring and the Rule of Hands. The halt word governs this page as it governs every page, and is never punished, never priced, never remembered against him.