

DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS
A Mistake That Couldn't Be Unmade

a 321Lumina.com book



by Blurt Snodgrass

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Chapter One

She arrived on a Monday morning in June carrying a folder.

Not a large folder — the kind of folder that held a small number of things that had been kept carefully for a long time, the folder itself worn at the corners in the way of something that had been taken out and put away many times over many years, the contents consulted and returned and consulted again.

She was forty-eight. Ethiopian-American, the specific San Francisco version — she had been here since she was twelve, she would tell Flora later, brought by parents who had come in the wave of the late 1980s, and she had grown up in this city with the particular ownership of someone who had arrived young enough to absorb it completely while retaining enough of the other place to understand that cities were not universal, that this specific city was a specific thing worth knowing. She had the quality of her profession before she named the profession — the composure of someone for whom composure was not personality but practice, the deliberate cultivation of stillness in the face of urgency, the quality of someone who knew that panic was a resource and had learned to spend it carefully.

She set the folder on the desk.

"Ms. Woldemichael," Flora said. "What do you need?"

"I need to find a patient," she said.

Flora looked at her.

"We don't usually —" Flora began.

"I know," Desta said. "Let me explain."

Nancy came in, hung her coat, wrote the name from the phone call.
Wrote the time.

Read both.

Looked at them again.

Good.

She looked at the folder and she looked at the woman and she opened her notepad and waited.

"I'm an emergency room nurse," Desta said. "SF General. Twenty-two years." She set her hands on the folder but did not open it yet. "Seventeen years ago I was working a night shift. A man was brought in. No ID of any kind — no wallet, no phone, nothing. He'd been found on the street in the Tenderloin by a passerby who called 911. He was unconscious, hypothermic, had clearly been outside for some time." She paused. "He was in his late fifties, I estimated. He regained consciousness after four hours."

"He spoke to you," Flora said.

"He spoke to me," Desta said. "Not a long conversation — he was still very ill and the shift was busy and I could only come back to his bedside between other patients. But enough. He was educated, that was clear from the first words. He had not always been on the street." She paused. "He said: I had a life. He said: I had a very specific life and then I didn't have it anymore."

She opened the folder.

She took out a piece of hospital notepaper, the pale green of institutional paper, preserved in a plastic sleeve. On it, in a handwriting that was not Desta's — larger, more deliberate, the handwriting of someone who had once written a great deal and still knew how but was out of practice — a single line:

a mistake that couldn't be unmade.

She set it on the desk.

"I asked him what happened," she said. "He said: I made a mistake that couldn't be unmade. And I have been trying to decide for three years whether the mistake was worth surviving." She paused. "I understood what he meant."

Flora looked at the piece of notepaper.

"You asked him to write it," she said.

"At the end of my shift," Desta said. "Before I left. I gave him the pad and the pen and I asked him to write something. Anything. I told him: I want something of yours so I can find you again if I need to." She paused.

"He looked at me for a long time and then he wrote that."

"And he gave you a name," Flora said.

"Possibly Leonard," she said. "He gave it reluctantly. The way people gave things they weren't sure they were entitled to anymore." She paused. "I came back the next day on my day off. He'd been discharged against medical advice early that morning. He'd walked out."

"And you've thought about him for seventeen years," Flora said.

"Not every day," Desta said. "But often. I've thought about whether the conversation meant anything to him. Whether I was just another person in a chain of people who tried and couldn't reach him." She paused. "I've thought about whether he survived."

"What made you come now?" Flora said.

"I saw him," Desta said. "Last month. Or I think I saw him. A man on Market Street, early morning, I was walking to work. A particular gait — not Leonard's gait exactly, the gait had changed, but there was something underneath it, the way someone moved who had once carried themselves differently and had never quite forgotten how." She paused. "I followed him for half a block. He turned into a coffee shop and I lost my nerve and didn't follow him in."

She took the second thing from the folder.

The composite sketch.

The face of a man in his late fifties, strong-featured, the face of someone who had been handsome in a particular way and was now something more complicated — the weathering had done something to it that was not destruction but revision, the way weather revised landscapes.

Flora looked at it.

She looked at the line of handwriting.

She looked at Desta.

"You had this done from memory," Flora said. "Five years after."

"Five years after," Desta said. "I went to a sketch artist. I described him as accurately as I could. I've kept it since." She paused. "I know I have very little to go on."

"You have a name that might be Leonard," Flora said. "A composite sketch from a seventeen-year-old memory. A piece of handwriting. And a possible sighting on Market Street."

"Yes," Desta said. "That's what I have."

"Tell me everything you remember about him," Flora said. "Not the medical facts. Him. What he was like. What he said. Everything."

Desta looked at the folder.

She had been preparing for this, Flora could see — she had been going over it, the way you went over something you needed to give accurately, the way a witness prepared testimony.

She began.

Leonard had spoken with the precision of someone who had been educated in a specific tradition — not American educated, she thought, or not primarily. Something in the syntax, the way he constructed sentences, that suggested English had been learned somewhere it was also formal. She had thought: British-educated, or educated in a British system. She had thought: professional, at some point. The words he chose were the words of someone who had a large vocabulary and used it without showiness, which suggested the vocabulary was native rather than acquired for effect.

He had gray hair, mostly, with remnants of a darker color she couldn't quite identify in the dim light of the room. Tall — she remembered that, that even lying down he had the presence of someone tall. Brown eyes. A scar on the left hand, old, the kind of scar that had healed so fully it was just part of the hand now.

He had not said where he was from. He had not said what the life was that he'd lost. He had said, at one point: I was good at what I did. He had said it without bitterness, just as a fact. I was good at what I did and then I was not doing it anymore and I have been trying to understand which part of me left with the doing.

She had asked: what did you do.

He had looked at the ceiling for a long time and then he said: I made decisions. That's all I'll say. I made decisions and one of them was wrong and the wrongness of it couldn't be fixed and I am here.

She had asked: what kind of decisions.

He had said: the kind that affected many people. The kind that you are trusted to make correctly because the trust has been earned over years and

the years of earning it make the error larger than it would otherwise be.

She had asked: were you a doctor.

He had looked at her with something that was not quite a smile and said: no. But something adjacent.

She had thought: lawyer. Judge. Politician. Scientist. Engineer. Some profession where decisions cascaded outward and couldn't be recalled.

"He said adjacent to a doctor," Flora said.

"Yes," Desta said.

"What else."

"He asked me about my work," Desta said. "At the end of the night, when he was more stable, he asked me what it was like to be in a room where people's lives were ending and beginning constantly. I told him. He listened carefully." She paused. "He said: you must develop a relationship with impermanence. I said: yes, I suppose you do. He said: I have not managed it. I have not been able to make my peace with the fact that the decision I made cannot be recalled." He paused. "He was specific about the word. Not unmade. Recalled. Like a decision you make in a room and then stand in the hallway and wish you could go back and change."

"He used the word recalled," Flora said.

"Yes," Desta said.

Flora looked at the notepad. Nancy was writing in the margin, the careful deliberate hand, the second system. Flora could see from across the desk that Nancy had written the word and circled it.

Recalled.

"He knew you understood what he meant," Flora said. "About deciding whether the mistake was worth surviving."

"Yes," Desta said. "He saw that I understood. I didn't pretend I hadn't understood. I said: yes. I said: that's a real question to be asking." She paused. "He said: you're not going to tell me it gets better. I said: I don't know if it gets better. I know it gets different." She paused. "He looked at me for a long time and then he said: that's the first honest thing anyone has said to me in a very long time."

The office was quiet.

The June morning outside the window, the summer in its early days, the city warm and specific.

"I stayed with him," Desta said. "The whole shift. I went back every chance I had. I don't know why exactly — there was something about him that required witnessing. He was a man who had been witnessed once, formally, in whatever setting his work existed in, and now he was in a hospital bed with no ID and no one who knew where he was and he was still — he was still worth witnessing." She paused. "I've thought about that word a lot. Witnessing. It's what nurses do. We're witnesses to the worst and the best moments of people's lives."

"Yes," Nancy said from her desk.

Desta looked at her.

"That's what this office does too," Desta said. "Isn't it."

"Yes," Nancy said. "I think so."

"All right," Flora said. "We'll try to find him."

Chapter Two

It was the hardest kind of search.

Most of their searches began with a name or a place or a date — an anchor, something to fix the search to. Leonard on Market Street seventeen years ago and then possibly again last month was a very light anchor. The composite sketch was from a seventeen-year-old memory. The handwriting was a single line.

Flora started with what she could start with.

The Tenderloin in the summer of 2007. The specific population of the Tenderloin in 2007, which was a documented population — the social services agencies kept records, the shelters kept records, the outreach workers kept records. She went to the organizations that had been operating in the Tenderloin in 2007 and she asked about a man named Leonard, possibly British-educated, late fifties, who had been living on the street for three years, who had previously had a professional life involving significant decisions.

She went to three organizations in three days.

At the third one — a long-running services organization that had been in the Tenderloin since the 1970s — she spoke to an outreach worker who had been there since 1998, a woman named Grace who had the specific quality of someone who had spent twenty-five years knowing people by their first names and their situations and their incremental progresses and occasional disasters.

"Leonard," Grace said, when Flora described him. She said it the way people said names they recognized — not confirming, not denying, just holding the name in the air while they searched their memory.

"British-educated," Flora said. "Late fifties, in 2007. Strong-featured. Had been on the street for approximately three years at that point.

Previously had a professional life."

"Leonard Marsh," Grace said.

Flora looked at her.

"He was around for a year or so," Grace said. "2006, 2007. He didn't stay at the shelter — he was resistant to shelter, which some people were and some people weren't, and I never forced it. But I knew where he slept and I checked on him." She paused. "He was educated, you're right about that. He had been something, before. He never told me what." She paused. "He had a quality of — he was someone who had been in charge of things and had lost that and had not found a way to be in the world without it. Some people lose their position and they find another way to be. He hadn't found it."

"What happened to him?" Flora said.

"He left," Grace said. "In the fall of 2007. He told me he was going. He was sober by then — he'd been sober for about four months, which was the first time in three years, and sobriety changes what people can bear to see about their situation. He said: I need to try again. He said: I don't know what trying again looks like but I need to find out." She paused. "I gave him what I could — some contacts, some resources. He left." She paused. "I've wondered about him sometimes."

"His last name was Marsh," Flora said.

"Yes," Grace said. "He told me that much. Leonard Marsh."

Leonard Marsh.

The name opened doors the first name alone had not.

Nancy found him in two days.

Not through the databases of the unhoused or the criminal records or the social services records. Through the professional records.

Leonard Marsh had been, before 2004, a senior official in the California Department of Public Health. Not the director — the second tier below the director, the tier where the substantial decisions were made by people who were expert and trusted and had earned that trust over years.

He had resigned in 2004.

The circumstances of the resignation were findable through the journalism of the period — a series of decisions made during a public health crisis in 2003 that had been subsequently reviewed and found, in the language of the review board, to have been made in good faith with available information but to have contributed to outcomes that were worse than they might have been. Three people had died who might not have died. The review board had been specific about this: might not have. The uncertainty was real. The deaths were real.

Leonard Marsh had resigned.

He had not been sanctioned. He had not been charged. The review board had been explicit that he had acted in good faith. He had resigned anyway.

And then he had been on the street in the Tenderloin for three years.

Nancy brought this to Flora without speaking and set the printed pages on the desk and stood back.

Flora read.

She read the review board report. She read the news coverage from 2003 and 2004. She read the statement Leonard Marsh had made upon his resignation, which was brief and said nothing except that he was stepping down and that he wished his colleagues well and that he took full responsibility for the decisions made under his leadership.

She read it again.

A mistake that couldn't be unmade.

Not his phrase. His phrase was more precise than that, she understood now. The review board had said: might not have. The uncertainty was real. He had resigned as though the uncertainty were certainty. As though he had decided that the possible error was the same as the certain error, and had punished himself accordingly.

"He made decisions that affected many people," Flora said. "And one of them was wrong. Or might have been wrong."

"Might have been," Nancy said.

"And he treated the might as though it were the certain," Flora said.

"Yes," Nancy said. "And he's been carrying that for twenty years."

She found him in six days.

Not in the Tenderloin — that was 2007. In 2007 Grace had given him contacts and resources and he had left to try again.

The trying again had taken a form.

Leonard Marsh, age seventy-two, was a volunteer coordinator at a community health clinic in the Mission. He had been there for fifteen years. The clinic's website listed staff and volunteers, and among the volunteers was a name she recognized — a man who had spent fifteen years in a community health clinic, doing the work he understood, in the setting he understood, not in the position of authority he had once occupied but in a position that put him in the same rooms.

He was not hiding. He was not using a different name. He was simply — somewhere else.

She found a phone number through the clinic's general contact.

She called on a Thursday.

She asked for Leonard Marsh.

He answered.

His voice was the voice she had somehow expected from everything Desta had told her — educated, measured, the syntax that suggested a formal tradition of English somewhere in the past. But there was something underneath the precision that was different from what she'd imagined. Something that sounded like a man who had arrived somewhere after a long journey and had, with care and imperfection and years of effort, found a way to be still.

"Mr. Marsh," she said. "My name is Flora Voss. I'm a private investigator. I've been hired by a nurse named Desta Woldemichael who treated you at SF General in the winter of 2007."

A silence.

Not a long one.

"Desta," he said.

"Yes."

"She found me," he said.

"She asked us to find you," Flora said. "She saw someone on Market Street last month who moved the way you moved and she has been thinking about you for seventeen years and she wanted to know if you survived."

A longer silence.

"I survived," he said.

"Yes," Flora said. "I can see that."

"How is she?" he said.

"She's well," Flora said. "She's still at SF General. Twenty-two years now."

He was quiet.

"She stayed with me through the whole shift," he said. "I didn't tell her what I'd done. But she stayed." He paused. "She said: I know it gets different. That was the most honest thing anyone had said to me in years." He paused. "I've thought about that night a great many times."

"She's thought about it too," Flora said. "For seventeen years."

"What does she want?" he said.

"To know you're alive," Flora said. "And —" She paused. "She said she wanted to know if the conversation meant anything to him. Whether it was just another moment in a chain of moments where someone tried and couldn't reach him."

The silence this time was the longest.

"It wasn't just another moment," he said. "It was —" He stopped. He started again. "I left the hospital that morning because I could and because staying felt like accepting something I wasn't ready to accept. But I had the piece of paper in my pocket. The notepaper with what I'd written. I kept it." He paused. "I kept it for three years, until I went to the clinic. I kept it to remind myself what I'd said, because I'd said the truth of it and the truth had a weight that I needed to feel." He paused. "I threw it away when I started at the clinic. I decided that was the moment I could put it down. But I didn't put down what she said. That stayed."

Flora held the phone.

"Would you be willing to see her?" she said.

"Yes," he said. Without hesitation. "Yes."

Chapter Three

Desta came in when Flora called her.

She came the same afternoon, in her scrubs, still on her way from the hospital, and she sat in the client chair and Flora told her.

Leonard Marsh. The Department of Public Health. The decision in 2003. The resignation. The Tenderloin. The fifteen years at the community health clinic.

Desta sat with it.

She sat with it the way she sat with everything — with the full stillness of her composure, the twenty-two years of it, the practice that had become character.

"He made a decision that might have cost people their lives," she said.

"Might have," Flora said. "The review board was specific about the might."

"And he resigned as though the might were certain," Desta said.

"Yes."

"And then he went to the street," she said.

"Yes."

"And then he tried again," she said. "Fifteen years in a community health clinic."

"Yes."

She looked at the folder on the desk. The composite sketch. The piece of notepaper.

"I carried that line for seventeen years," she said. *A mistake that couldn't be unmade.* "I didn't know what the mistake was. I've been carrying the weight of it without knowing what I was carrying."

"Does it change anything?" Flora said. "Knowing?"

Desta thought about it with the seriousness she brought to real questions.

"No," she said. "And yes." She paused. "No because he was still a man in a hospital bed trying to decide whether surviving was worth it, and that was real regardless of what the mistake was. And yes because —" She stopped. "Because now I understand the weight of it. The specific weight." She paused. "Three people who might not have died. He carries three people who might not have died. That's different from carrying a mistake in the abstract."

"Yes," Flora said. "It is."

"He's been at the clinic for fifteen years," Desta said.

"Yes."

"Fifteen years," she said. "That's trying." She looked at the notepad line. "He said: I have been trying to decide for three years whether the mistake was worth surviving. And then he decided it was and he went and he's been at the clinic for fifteen years." She paused. "I want to see him."

"He wants to see you," Flora said.

"Good," Desta said.

They met at a coffee shop on Valencia — his suggestion, neutral ground, somewhere neither of them was professionally defined. Flora did not go. This was not her meeting.

Desta called that evening.

She called from her car, parked outside the coffee shop, not yet ready to drive.

"He looks different," she said. "Of course he does — it's been seventeen years. But there's something underneath that's the same. The way he listens. He listened to me the same way he listened in the hospital room." She paused. "We talked for two hours."

"What did you talk about?" Flora said.

"Everything," she said. "The decision. The three years on the street. The clinic. What it's like to work in a space where you once had authority and now you don't. He said: I chose the clinic specifically because I would not be in charge there. He said: I needed to be in the work without the authority."

He said the authority had been part of what went wrong — not the authority itself but his relationship to it, the way he had trusted his own judgment past the point where it deserved trust." She paused. "He said: I was the best person for the position for many years and then I wasn't anymore and I didn't know I wasn't." He paused. "He said: the clinic teaches me that every day. That I am one person among many people who know things I don't know."

Flora looked at the cork board.

The twenty-seven things.

"What did he say about the night in the hospital?" Flora said.

"He said it was the night he stopped." Desta paused. "Not the night he got better — he was very clear about that. He said: I didn't get better that night. But I stopped getting worse. He said: you didn't say anything that fixed it. But you stayed. And staying is different from saying." She paused. "He said he'd thought about that for seventeen years too. That there was a nurse who stayed the whole shift who didn't have to and who was honest with him about the limits of what she could tell him." She paused. "He said: she told me it gets different. He said: she was right. It got very different."

Flora sat with this.

Outside the window Clement Street was doing its June evening thing — the restaurants open, the long light of early summer, the city in its good season.

"He asked me something," Desta said.

"Yes?"

"He asked me why I came looking for him now. After seventeen years." She paused. "I told him the truth. I said: I saw someone on Market Street who moved the way you moved and I didn't follow them into the coffee shop and I have regretted it ever since. He laughed. He said: I think that was me. I walk on Market Street some mornings." He paused. "He said: I'm glad you came looking. He said: I have wanted for seventeen years to thank you for staying."

She was quiet for a moment.

"I told him: you wrote something for me. I told him I still had it. I showed him the photograph of it on my phone — the piece of notepaper, the single line." She paused. "He looked at it for a long time. He said: I

remember writing that. I remember thinking: if I write it, it becomes real. If it becomes real I have to decide what to do with it." He paused. "He said: I decided to try again."

"Yes," Flora said.

"He said: you gave me the notepaper. That was the deciding. Not what you said, not even the staying. The notepaper. He said: you thought I was worth asking something of. Even then. You thought something of mine was worth keeping."

Flora looked at the piece of notepaper in its plastic sleeve on the desk.

a mistake that couldn't be unmade.

A line that had traveled seventeen years in a folder in the hands of a nurse who had stayed a whole shift with a man who had nearly decided not to survive.



Chapter Four

Desta came in the following week to settle the account.

She came without the folder. She had the folder with her — she had kept it — but she set it on the desk and said: I want to leave the notepaper here.

Flora looked at her.

"Not the original," Desta said. "He has the original now — I gave it back to him. I photographed it and I sent him the photograph and then I gave it back." She paused. "It belongs with him. It's his handwriting. It's his truth." She paused. "But I want to leave a photograph of it here. On the board."

Nancy had already printed it — Desta had sent it ahead. She set it on the desk.

The photograph of the piece of notepaper, the pale green institutional color, the single line in the larger deliberate handwriting of a man out of practice:

a mistake that couldn't be unmade.

Flora took it to the cork board.

She found a pin.

She pinned it below the twenty-seven things.

The twenty-eighth thing.

Desta looked at it.

"He's going to keep volunteering at the clinic," she said. "He said: I have no plans to stop. He said: it's where I'm supposed to be now. Not where I was supposed to be before — where I'm supposed to be now." She paused. "He said: the work I do there is smaller than the work I used to do and it's better. He said: I think I'm better at it because it's smaller."

"Yes," Nancy said from her desk. "Sometimes the smaller work is the better work."

Desta looked at Nancy.

"He wants to stay in touch," Desta said. "With me. I said I'd call. He gave me his number at the clinic." She paused. "I don't know what we'll be to each other. He's seventy-two and I'm forty-eight and we had one night seventeen years ago that neither of us forgot." She paused. "But we'll call."

She stood.

She went to the door.

She stopped and looked at the cork board.

At all twenty-eight things.

She looked at the piece of paper that said *Tell Flora. Today.*

She looked at the photograph of Tibor at his workbench.

She looked at the Farallon Islands above the door.

"You keep all of this," she said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"The record of what the work has done," Desta said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"And the piece of notepaper is part of that now," Desta said.

"Yes," Flora said. "It is."

Desta looked at the notepaper on the board.

a mistake that couldn't be unmade.

"He's been remaking it," she said. "For fifteen years. In the clinic. He can't unmake the original mistake. But he's been building something on the same ground." She paused. "That's something."

"Yes," Flora said. "It is."

"Good," Desta said.

She went down the stairs.

The fourth step.

The door.

The street.

Chapter Five

Nancy made tea.

She brought the cups and they sat in the June office with the evening coming on, the long light of summer doing what it did.

"He stayed the whole shift," Nancy said.

"She stayed," Flora said. "He was the patient."

"She stayed the whole shift," Nancy said. "Not because she had to. Because he required witnessing."

"Yes," Flora said.

"And she came looking for him seventeen years later because she saw someone on Market Street who moved the way he moved," Nancy said. "And she lost her nerve and didn't follow him into the coffee shop."

"Yes."

"And she came here," Nancy said. "And we found him."

"Yes."

"And the notepaper is on the wall," Nancy said.

She looked at the twenty-eighth thing.

The pale green of institutional paper. The single line.

a mistake that couldn't be unmade.

"He said: you thought something of mine was worth keeping," Nancy said. "He said the notepaper was the deciding."

"Yes," Flora said.

"Being asked to give something," Nancy said. "Even in that state. Even on the edge of not surviving. She asked him for something and he gave it and it meant he was still someone who could give things." She paused. "That was the deciding."

Flora looked at the cork board.

The twenty-eight things.

The Farallon Islands above the door.

The case note in her mother's handwriting.

Find the before.

She thought about Leonard Marsh's before. The public health official who had made decisions and trusted his judgment and been wrong in a way that might have cost lives. And then the after — the Tenderloin, the three years, the night in the hospital room, the notepaper, Desta saying: it gets different. And then the fifteen years in the clinic. The smaller work.

She thought about the before and the after being the same person. The same person who had made the decision in 2003 and who showed up to the clinic every day for fifteen years. Not redeemed — he hadn't used that word and she wouldn't use it either. Just continuing. Just doing the smaller work on the same ground where the larger work had failed.

"Nancy," she said.

Nancy looked at her.

"He said the smaller work is better," Flora said. "Because it's smaller. Because he can do it right."

Nancy looked at the notepad.

She picked up her pen.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.

She read both.

She looked at them again.

She looked at them a third time.

Good.

She set the pen down.

"The smaller work," Nancy said. "Yes." She paused. "This is the smaller work. This office. The individual cases. One person at a time." She paused. "It's better because it's smaller."

"Yes," Flora said.

"Good?" Nancy said.

"Good," Flora said.

The June evening continued outside the window. Clement Street in its summer mode, the light still generous at this hour, the city not yet ready to let go of the day. Somewhere below, the dry cleaner's door opening and closing, someone collecting a finished garment, something cleaned and pressed and ready to be worn back into a life.

Flora looked at the cork board.

She thought: twenty-eight things. She thought: the work continues.

She picked up her pen.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.

She waited.

A month later a note arrived, hand-delivered, pushed under the door.

On plain paper. The larger deliberate handwriting of a man out of practice who had been practicing for some time now.

It said: I have been a volunteer at the clinic for fifteen years. In that time I have sat with perhaps two thousand people in difficult moments. I have tried, in each of those moments, to do what was done for me in a hospital room in 2007. To stay. To be honest about the limits of what I could offer. To ask for something small, so the person knew they still had something to give.

Below that:

I don't know if it helps. I know it's what I can do.

Below that, one more line:

It gets different. She was right.

Flora read it.

She passed it to Nancy.

Nancy read it.

She stood and pinned it to the cork board below the twenty-eight things.

The twenty-ninth thing.

She stepped back.

She looked at the cork board.

Twenty-nine things.

She turned.

"Good," she said.

Flora said: "Good."

The work continued.

*In the office on the second floor, the cork board held what it held.
The Farallon Islands postcard above the door.
The note on card stock gone slightly yellow.
The postcard from Inverness. The postcard from Penang.
A folded note: Second movement. Last night. I got out of the way.
A single sheet: He wrote back.
A postcard of a table: I'm the one who gets to sit at it first.
A cream note in fountain pen: You cannot smell your own smell. But you
can know that it exists.
A card on good paper: Tell him he was right.
A postcard of a lake: She sang the song on Wednesday. She knew all the
words. She held my hand.
A cream card: Tell Cecile she has her grandmother's eyes.
A torn piece of paper: Tell Flora. Today.
A note in careful English: The book is home.
An envelope from 1999 in a hand that was not theirs.
A postcard of the Great Highway: We walked. The fog was in. / She
thinks like her mother.
A postcard of the Gulf of Guinea coast: Now he's in the record and
you're in his record.
A photograph of a viewport: darkness and faint cold light.
A deep-sea postcard: I'm going back down in March. This time I'll know
what I'm looking for.
A postcard of the Louisiana bayou: He played for two hours. I
understand now what he was doing for forty years.
A small folded paper: After the noise. Still.
A letter on architectural letterhead: She said her mother would have
approved of Drake and Voss.*

A case note in Marion Voss's handwriting: Find the before.

A letter in an envelope addressed to a man who had been looking for eleven years and found.

A photograph of an old man in a pew: mouth open, singing, looking ahead.

A note: That's him.

A photograph of a man at a workbench: hands on the work.

A postcard of wood grain: Tibor was right.

A photograph of a piece of notepaper: a mistake that couldn't be unmade.

A note on plain paper: It gets different. She was right.

The sign on the frosted glass door was still slightly crooked.

Neither of them had fixed it.

Neither of them ever would.

End.