



DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

# What It Actually Was

*a 321Lumina.com book*



by Blurt Snodgrass

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*A Drake & Voss Novella*

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## Chapter One

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He arrived on a Friday afternoon in November, the kind of Friday when the city felt like it had already mentally departed for the weekend and left only its physical self behind — the buildings and the traffic and the particular quality of late afternoon light that came in November when the sun was low enough to catch the windows of the buildings on the hill and make them briefly, collectively, gold.

He was fifty-one. Nigerian-Scottish was Flora's read — something of Lagos in the bone structure and something of Edinburgh in the vowels, which she didn't hear until he spoke but which were immediately, unmistakably there, not the accent of a man who had grown up in Edinburgh but the accent of a man who had spent formative years there, who had absorbed the city at an age when cities got into you. He was lean and held himself the way musicians held themselves — not stiffly, but with an awareness of the body as instrument, the posture that came from decades of understanding that how you sat and how you breathed and how you held your shoulders was not incidental to the work but was the work.

He carried nothing except his phone, which he put in his jacket pocket when he sat down, and the expression of a man who had been told by multiple people over a significant period of time that he should come to this particular office and had finally run out of reasons not to.

Nancy was already at her desk — she had come back from an errand, had the kettle on, had heard the knock and gone back to her notepad and let Flora get the door. She looked up when Roland Achebe came in and took him in with the economy of long practice and wrote his name in the margin before he'd said it, which sometimes happened when the name arrived before the person, a referral's referral, the accumulation of the firm's reputation working in ways neither of them fully tracked.

She looked at what she'd written.

She wrote the time beside it.

Both lines were right.

"Mr. —" Flora began.

"Achebe," he said. "Roland." He sat in the client chair with the careful placement of someone who was always conscious of how he occupied a seat. Not fussy — precise. "I've been told three times by three different people that I should come here. I take three as a sign."

"Who told you?" Flora said.

"A violinist in my orchestra whose sister you helped find something — I don't know what, she was vague about it, but she said you were the people who found things that weren't lost so much as — mislaid. Misplaced in time." He paused. "Her word. Misplaced in time." He looked at the cork board. "The other two are people I know less well. Word travels in the music community. People talk."

"What do you need to find?" Flora said.

He looked at his hands, which were resting on his knees. The left hand had the particular topography of a cellist's left hand — the calluses on the fingertips where the strings had pressed for decades, the slight asymmetry of the muscles from years of the specific demands of the instrument. He looked at them the way you looked at something that had been doing a job for a long time and had shaped itself around the job.

"A recording," he said. "A live recording. Made by someone in the audience at a concert I played in Edinburgh in 1997." He paused. "I was twenty-four. I was playing the Shostakovich cello sonata — the sonata in D minor, opus 40. It was a chamber music program, a small venue on the High Street, maybe a hundred and twenty people. My accompanist was a pianist named Vera Laing who I haven't seen since 2003." He paused. "It was the best I have ever played. In my life. The best thirty-eight minutes of music I have ever made."

Flora looked at him.

"And you haven't played it that way since," she said.

"Not once," he said. "In twenty-seven years. I've played the sonata hundreds of times. I played it last spring with the orchestra, a concert performance, the conductor said it was the best I'd done it in years. And it

was good. It was genuinely good." He paused. "It was not that."

"What was different about that night?" Nancy said.

He looked at her.

"I don't know," he said. "That's the thing I've been trying to understand for twenty-seven years. I don't know what was different. I know that something aligned — something between me and Vera and the room and the audience and the music itself — something that I have not been able to reproduce or even fully remember." He paused. "Memory is unreliable. I know that. I know that twenty-seven years of thinking something was the best you've ever done can make it larger than it was. Can make it mythological. Can turn a very good performance into a perfect one in your mind because the mind needs something to organize around." He looked at his hands again. "I need to know if it was real. I need to hear what it actually was."

"Someone recorded it," Flora said.

"A woman in the audience. She came up to me afterward — I remember her clearly, which I think means something, I don't usually remember audience members. She was in her fifties, I'd say. A green coat, a good one, wool. She had a small recording device in her hand, one of those handheld things, they were relatively new then, the digital ones. She said: I hope you don't mind, I recorded it, it was too beautiful not to." He paused. "I said I didn't mind. I was twenty-four and I'd just played the best thing I'd ever played and someone had come up and said it was beautiful and I didn't think about the recording. I thought about the beautiful." He paused. "I didn't think about it again for years. And then I started thinking about it constantly."

"When?" Flora said. "When did you start thinking about it constantly?"

He looked at the window.

"My daughter was born eleven years ago," he said. "I was playing the sonata about six months after she was born — practicing at home, she was asleep, my wife was asleep, it was late. And I was in the middle of the second movement and I stopped." He paused. "I stopped because I heard myself playing it and I thought: this is not what it can be. This is good, this is careful and correct, but it is not what it can be. And I remembered Edinburgh. And I haven't stopped thinking about it since."

Flora looked at him.

"You've been playing the sonata for twenty-seven years," she said, "and for eleven of them you've been measuring it against something you can't quite remember."

"Yes," he said. "That's exactly right."

"What will you do with it?" she said. "If we find it."

He looked at his hands.

"I don't know," he said. "I've thought about this a great deal and I don't know. I think I need to hear it before I can know what to do with it." He paused. "I think there are two possibilities. Either I hear it and it was real — it was as extraordinary as I remember — and then I have to understand what I had at twenty-four that I don't have now, which is one kind of difficult. Or I hear it and it was good but not extraordinary, it was a very good performance that my memory has made into something more, and then I have to understand why I've needed it to be more than it was for eleven years." He paused. "Both of those are hard. But both of those are better than not knowing."

Nancy had put her pen down.

She was looking at Roland Achebe with the expression she wore when something in a case had landed in a particular way, when the case had said something that went past the case and was about something larger.

Flora saw this.

"How do we find the woman in the green coat?" she said. "After twenty-seven years."

"The venue kept records," he said. "I've already checked — I went back to Edinburgh two years ago, I went to the venue, it's still there, still runs chamber music programs. They had a mailing list in 1997, a paper mailing list, people who'd signed up for their newsletter. They digitized some of it, not all of it. I spent three days in their archive." He reached into his pocket and produced a folded piece of paper, which he set on the desk. "Forty-seven names and addresses. People who were on that mailing list in 1997. I've tracked down twenty-nine of them myself. None of them is the woman in the green coat — or none of them remembers being her." He paused. "Eighteen I couldn't find."

Flora looked at the list.

Forty-seven names. Twenty-nine crossed out in pencil. Eighteen remaining, some with partial addresses, some with only names.

"You've been working on this yourself," she said.

"For two years," he said. "Since the Edinburgh trip. My wife says I've become obsessed. She's not wrong. But she also says: go find it, then, if it's doing this to you. Go find it and hear it and then come back." He paused. "She's a practical woman. She's right that the not-knowing is worse than whatever I'm going to find."

Flora picked up the list.

She looked at it. The remaining eighteen names, the partial addresses, the edges of a search that had been done carefully by an amateur with limited access to the tools the work required.

"We'll find the woman in the green coat," she said.

Roland Achebe looked at her.

"How long?" he said. Not impatiently — the question of a man who had been waiting twenty-seven years and understood that twenty-seven years made a certain kind of impatience irrelevant.

"I don't know," Flora said. "We'll tell you when we know something."

He nodded. He stood and picked up his jacket and paused at the door — not the cork board pause, not reading the card stock — just pausing, the way you paused when you'd put something down after carrying it alone for a long time and your body hadn't caught up with the putting-down yet.

"She said it was too beautiful not to," he said. "The woman in the green coat." He paused. "I've thought about that a great deal. The not being able to not. The way some things require a response from you whether you planned to give one or not."

He went down the stairs.

The fourth step.

The door.

The street.

## Chapter Two

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The eighteen remaining names took Nancy eight days.

She worked through them with the methodical patience of her archive work, the methods she had been using for thirty years brought to bear on a list of Edinburgh concertgoers from 1997, which was a specific kind of search requiring a specific kind of patience. Many of them had moved. Several had died. One had emigrated to New Zealand. Three she found through the Scottish electoral roll, two through professional registries, one through a death notice that eliminated her as a candidate, one through a genealogy database that placed her in Aberdeen.

Of the eighteen, she found fifteen.

None of them remembered recording the concert. None of them was the woman in the green coat.

Three she could not find.

She brought this to Flora on a Thursday morning, the list annotated in her careful hand, the three remaining names circled.

*Margaret Cairns. Last known address Morningside, Edinburgh, 1997. No further trace.*

*Eilidh Forsyth. No address in original record, name only.*

*Jean Vass. Leith, Edinburgh, 1997. No further trace.*

Flora looked at the three names.

"Cairns and Vass disappear from the Edinburgh records after 1997," Nancy said. "They could have moved, married, changed names. Cairns especially — if she married she could be anywhere under any name." She paused. "Forsyth is harder because we have no address to start from. Name only."

"Where does the mailing list come from?" Flora said. "What's the origin of these names?"

"The venue kept a sign-up sheet at the door for each performance," Nancy said. "People who wanted to be on the newsletter list would write their name and address on a sheet as they came in. Some people wrote legibly, some didn't. Some gave full addresses, some gave partial." She paused. "Forsyth is the most legible name on the list. Very clear handwriting. She just didn't write an address."

"She came alone," Flora said. "Maybe. She came to a chamber music concert alone on a weeknight and she signed the mailing list and she didn't write her address."

"Or she forgot," Nancy said.

"Or she was a regular and assumed they knew her address already," Flora said. "Or she didn't want to receive the newsletter, she just signed because people were signing." She looked at the name. *Eilidh Forsyth*. "Or she was the woman in the green coat."

Nancy looked at her.

"The woman in the green coat had a recording device," Flora said. "Digital, handheld, 1997. That was not common in 1997. She was someone who had sought that equipment out, who traveled with it to concerts. Someone who recorded things intentionally." She paused. "She came up to Roland afterward and said it was too beautiful not to. Not: I hope you don't mind I broke the rules. Not: I know I shouldn't have. She said it was too beautiful not to, as though recording beauty was a natural response, a reflex." She paused. "She was someone who recorded things as a practice. Not a collector. Someone who needed to keep what she heard."

Nancy was quiet for a moment.

"A musician," Nancy said. "Or someone adjacent to music. Someone for whom recording was professional or close to professional."

"Or a serious amateur," Flora said. "Someone who went to chamber music concerts alone on weeknights and carried a recorder and didn't feel the need to apologize for it."

Nancy looked at the three names.

"I'll look for Forsyth differently," she said. "Not through the address. Through the music."

She found Eilidh Forsyth in six days, through a route that she described to Flora as starting with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra archive and ending with a small classical music journal that had been published in Edinburgh from 1988 to 2009 and had, in its letters page, over twenty-one years, a recurring correspondent with opinions about chamber music and a willingness to defend those opinions in print.

The correspondent's name was E. Forsyth.

Nancy found twelve letters over the years. The earliest was from 1989. The most recent was from 2008. They were about repertoire, about interpretation, about the proper tempo of the Shostakovich D minor sonata, about the decline of a particular concert series, about a pianist who had given a transcendent performance of the Brahms in 1994. They were written with the authority of someone who attended concerts consistently and listened with the full force of their attention.

The address on the letters was in Stockbridge, Edinburgh.

"She's a listener," Nancy said. "A serious listener. She wrote about the Shostakovich tempo in 1996 — a year before Roland's concert."

Flora looked at the letters Nancy had printed.

The handwriting on the photocopied originals was clear and decisive, the handwriting of a woman who knew what she thought.

"She wrote to a classical music journal in her own name about the proper tempo of the piece Roland played," Flora said. "And then the following year she went to a concert and heard a twenty-four-year-old play it and she recorded it because it was too beautiful not to."

"Yes," Nancy said.

"Is she still in Stockbridge?"

"I don't know yet," Nancy said. "The last letter is 2008. The journal folded in 2009. I have the Stockbridge address. I have her name. She'd be in her late seventies now."

"Find her," Flora said.

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## Chapter Three

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Eilidh Forsyth was seventy-nine years old and lived in a flat in Stockbridge, Edinburgh, four blocks from the Water of Leith, which she walked every morning, she told Flora on the phone, because the walking was what kept her functional and the Water of Leith was what kept the walking interesting.

Flora called on a Tuesday.

Eilidh Forsyth answered on the second ring with the voice of a woman who answered phones decisively, who had no patience for the hesitation that some people brought to receiving calls.

Flora introduced herself. Explained she was a private investigator in San Francisco. Said she was calling about a concert in Edinburgh in 1997, a chamber music program on the High Street, a performance of the Shostakovich cello sonata.

A silence on the other end.

Not the silence of not remembering. The silence of remembering immediately and deciding what to do with the fact of being found.

"The young cellist," Eilidh Forsyth said.

"Yes," Flora said. "His name is Roland Achebe. He's fifty-one now. He hired us to find the person who recorded that concert."

Another silence.

"He wants the recording," she said.

"Yes."

"It was twenty-seven years ago."

"Yes," Flora said. "He knows. He's been looking for two years on his own. He hired us six weeks ago."

A longer silence. Flora heard, distantly, what might have been traffic, or might have been the Water of Leith.

"Why now?" Eilidh Forsyth said. "After twenty-seven years?"

"He says it was the best he ever played," Flora said. "And he needs to know if it was real."

The silence that followed was the longest yet.

"He was extraordinary that night," Eilidh Forsyth said finally. Her voice had changed — not softened, exactly, but opened, the way a door opened when someone decided to go through it. "I've been to a great many concerts in my life. I've heard a great many cellists. I've heard Rostropovich play the same sonata in 1981 and I've heard Maisky play it in 1993 and I've heard half a dozen others between and since." She paused. "That night. That boy. It was not the same category of thing. I don't say that lightly. I say it as someone who has spent fifty years listening carefully."

Flora looked at the wall in front of her desk. The October afternoon light, the cork board, the postcards.

"Do you still have the recording?" she said.

Another pause.

"I have it," Eilidh Forsyth said. "I've had it for twenty-seven years. I've listened to it —" She stopped. "I've listened to it a great many times."

"Would you be willing to share it with him?" Flora said.

The silence this time was not indecision. Flora could hear it — the quality of it was not someone working out what they thought but someone deciding how to say what they'd already decided.

"Tell him," Eilidh Forsyth said, "that I would like to give it to him in person. Not to send it electronically — not an email attachment, not a file transfer. I want to give it to him myself." She paused. "I'm seventy-nine years old and I'm not planning to travel to San Francisco. If he wants it, he'll need to come to Edinburgh."

Flora looked at the cork board.

"I'll tell him," she said.

"Tell him something else," Eilidh Forsyth said.

"Yes."

"Tell him I've wondered about him for twenty-seven years," she said. "Tell him I've thought about that concert more times than I can count and I've wondered whether he knew what he'd done. Whether he understood what happened in that room." A pause. "Tell him the recording is safe. Tell him it has been well kept."

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She called Roland.

She told him about Eilidh Forsyth. The Stockbridge flat. The Water of Leith. The fifty years of careful listening. The twelve letters to the classical music journal about chamber music and interpretation and the correct tempo of the Shostakovich.

She told him that Eilidh had been to that concert specifically because she had opinions about the sonata and had wanted to hear a young cellist she'd been told was worth hearing.

She told him that Eilidh had said it was not the same category of thing as other performances she'd heard, including Rostropovich in 1981.

He was quiet for a long time.

"She's been listening to it for twenty-seven years," he said.

"Yes."

"She wants me to come to Edinburgh."

"Yes."

Another silence.

"Flora," he said. It was the first time he'd used her name. "I need to ask you something."

"Yes."

"In your experience," he said slowly, "when people find the thing they've been looking for — the thing they've built up over years — is it ever what they hoped?"

Flora thought about Cresswell Obi in the office in London reading his own letter. About Marta Freed unrolling the map on the desk with the coffee cups at the corners. About Perpetua in Penang in a fabric shop with a woman she'd wronged and the three meters of blue silk between them.

"Sometimes," she said, "it's more than they hoped. And sometimes it's different from what they hoped in ways that turn out to matter more than

what they'd been hoping for." She paused. "I don't think it's ever nothing."

He was quiet.

"I'll go to Edinburgh," he said.

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## Chapter Four

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He went on a Thursday in December, which was the wrong time to go to Edinburgh in terms of weather and the only time he had free in terms of the orchestra's schedule, a gap between a series of Beethoven and a Christmas program that gave him four days.

He called Flora from the Edinburgh airport.

He said: I'm here.

She said: call me after.

He said: yes.

He didn't call that day. Or the following day. Flora did not call him. She had learned, from the work, the discipline of not filling the silences that belonged to other people, the silences in which the important things were happening and your job was to have done your part and wait.

Nancy, on the second day, looked up from her notepad and said: do you think she played it for him.

Flora said: I think she made him wait.

Nancy considered this. Then she said: yes. I think that's right.

He called on the third day, in the evening San Francisco time, which was the middle of the night in Edinburgh. Flora answered on the second ring.

He didn't speak immediately. She heard him breathing, and behind his breathing she heard something that it took her a moment to identify, and when she identified it she sat very still.

He was crying. Quietly, with the control of a man who didn't cry often and was not going to lose the control of it, but crying.

"Roland," she said.

"It was real," he said. His voice was steady under the crying, the voice intact even if the face wasn't. "It was real. It was — it was more than I

remembered. It was more than I'd let myself believe even in the most private version of the memory." A pause. "I sat in her flat and she put the recording on — she had it on a CD, she'd transferred it years ago, she had a good system, it was clean — and I sat there and I listened to myself at twenty-four play the Shostakovich D minor and I —"

He stopped.

Flora waited.

"I didn't recognize it," he said. "Not immediately. I knew it was me — I knew my own playing, my own sound — but it was me in a way I haven't been since. It was me playing the music as though the music was the only thing that existed. No self-consciousness, no management of the audience, no thinking about what comes next or what I did in the second movement or whether my bow arm is right. Just —" He paused. "Just the music and whatever I was at twenty-four that was able to get out of its own way."

Flora sat with this.

"What did she say?" she said. "Eilidh."

"She didn't say much," he said. "She let me listen and when it was finished she waited and eventually she said: you were twenty-four. She said it matter-of-factly, as though that explained something. I said: what does that mean. She said: you were twenty-four and you hadn't yet learned to be careful. She said: the music went through you before the caution had time to intercept it."

"Is that what happened?" Flora said.

"I think so," he said. "I've been thinking about it since — sitting in her flat after, walking along the Water of Leith in the cold, sitting in the hotel room tonight — and I think that's right. I think at twenty-four I was so new to performing at that level that I didn't have the habit of managing it. I didn't have the repertoire of self-protective gestures that you develop over years of doing this work. The music just — went through." He paused. "And I've spent twenty-seven years learning to be careful and what that's cost is — not everything, I don't mean everything, I've played things since that were good, genuinely good — but there's a directness I had then that the caution has accumulated over."

"Can you get it back?" Flora said.

A long pause.

"Eilidh says the recording is mine to keep," he said. "She made me a copy. She said: play it to yourself before you perform the sonata. Not to imitate it — she was very clear about that. She said: not to do what you did then. She said: to remember that you are capable of getting out of your own way." He paused. "She said: you've spent twenty-seven years learning things you needed to learn. Don't mistake the learning for the point. The point is still the music."

Flora looked at the window. The December night, the street below dark and quiet, the Christmas lights on Clement Street doing their annual attempt to make December feel festive.

"She's still teaching," Flora said. "Like Ida Swann."

He almost laughed. "Yes. She's seventy-nine and she's never taught a lesson in her life and she's still teaching." A pause. "She said one more thing. At the end. When I was leaving."

"Yes?"

"She said: I've kept this for twenty-seven years without knowing who I was keeping it for. I'm glad it found its way back." He paused. "She said it the way people said things they'd been wanting to say for a long time."

Flora looked at the cork board.

The postcard from Inverness. The postcard from Penang. The Farallon Islands above the door.

*It found its way back.*

"Roland," she said. "The recording. What are you going to do with it?"

He was quiet for a moment.

"I'm going to play the sonata in January," he said. "There's a concert. I'm going to listen to the recording the night before." He paused. "And then I'm going to walk out on that stage and I'm going to try to play the music as though the music is the only thing that exists." He paused. "I don't know if I can. I'm fifty-one and I have twenty-seven years of caution built in. But I'm going to try." Another pause. "I think that's what the recording is for. Not to go back. To go forward with the knowledge that going forward is possible."

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## Chapter Five

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He came in after Christmas to settle the account.

He brought nothing — no food, no tin, no bag from the bakery. He sat in the client chair and Nancy quoted him the fee and he wrote the check and he sat for a moment afterward with his hands on his knees and looked at the cork board.

"The January concert," Flora said. "How did it go?"

He looked at his hands.

"It wasn't Edinburgh," he said. "1997." He paused. "But it was — there were moments. There were passages in the second movement where I felt the caution lift. Where the music went through rather than being managed." He looked at the cork board. "My wife was in the audience. She came backstage afterward and she said: there you are. Like she'd seen someone she'd been looking for." He paused. "I don't know if that means what I hope it means. But it's something."

"It's something," Nancy said from her desk.

He looked at her. "She asked me — Eilidh, in Edinburgh — she asked me what I thought the difference was. Between that night and all the other nights. What I thought it was, not technically, but essentially."

"What did you tell her?" Flora said.

"I told her I thought I was in love that night," he said. "With the music, with the room, with Vera at the piano, with the idea that I was doing the thing I was supposed to be doing and doing it at the highest level I'd ever reached. I think I was in love with all of it simultaneously and the love was — it unlocked something. It made the self-consciousness impossible because there wasn't room for it alongside everything else."

"And now?" Nancy said.

He looked at his hands.

"I'm fifty-one," he said. "I'm not in love the way I was at twenty-four. But I have something I didn't have then." He paused. "I have the recording. I have the evidence that I was capable of it. And I have —" He stopped. He looked at the card stock above the door. "I have what that says."

Flora looked at the card stock.

*What do you actually know. Not what you feel. What you know.*

"What do you know?" she said.

He was quiet for a moment.

"I know the music is in me," he said. "I know it was there at twenty-four and it's still there now, underneath the caution, underneath the twenty-seven years of learning to manage and protect and be professional." He paused. "I know that the best playing happens when I stop managing it and let it move through." He paused again. "I know that's easier to know than to do. But knowing it is the start of doing it."

He stood.

He picked up his jacket.

At the door he stopped and turned.

"My daughter," he said. "The one born eleven years ago. The one who was asleep when I stopped in the middle of the second movement and remembered Edinburgh." He paused. "I played the recording for her. She's eleven and she has no patience for classical music in the usual way — she thinks it's slow and she's not wrong. But I played her the recording and she listened to the whole thing and when it was done she said: is that you?"

He paused.

"I said yes. She said: you sound different. I said: how do I sound different. She said —" He stopped. He looked at the floor for a moment and then back at Flora. "She said: you sound like you don't know you're being listened to."

The office was very quiet.

"She's eleven," he said. "She didn't know what she was saying. Or she did, and didn't know she knew." He paused. "I'm going to keep that."

He went down the stairs.

The fourth step.

## What It Actually Was

The door.

The street.



## Chapter Six

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Nancy made tea.

She brought the cups and sat at her desk and they sat in the January office — the light thin and specific, the dry cleaner below sending up the first steam of the new year, the year beginning its slow accumulation of days and cases and names on the cork board.

"You sound like you don't know you're being listened to," Nancy said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"The child named it," Nancy said. "Eilidh was working around it — the caution, the management, the getting out of your own way. The child just said it."

"Children do that," Flora said. "They don't have the vocabulary for the thing they're not supposed to say so they say the thing itself."

Nancy wrapped both hands around her cup.

She was quiet for a while.

Flora looked at the cork board. The accumulation of it — the Farallon Islands, Inverness, Penang. The note on the card stock. The things the room had gathered to itself over the years of the work and the partnership and the cases that had passed through.

"I've been thinking," Nancy said, "about what he said. About twenty-four. Being new enough that the caution hadn't accumulated." She paused. "About how you learn things you need to learn and the learning is necessary and it still costs something."

Flora looked at her.

"I learned a great many things in my career," Nancy said. "About how to be in a courtroom. How to hold the record. How to be invisible and precise and present all at once." She paused. "I'm losing some of that now. Not the

knowledge — the knowledge is still there, the grammar of it, the understanding. But the — the ease of it. The automaticity." She paused. "And I've been thinking about whether that's only loss. Or whether there's something underneath that the automaticity was covering."

"What do you think?" Flora said.

Nancy looked at her tea.

"I think," she said slowly, "that when you can no longer do something automatically you have to do it deliberately. And doing it deliberately means — you can't do it and do something else at the same time. You have to be entirely in it." She paused. "I write the date and I read it back. I write the time and I read it back. It takes longer. But I'm more in it than I used to be. I can't be somewhere else while I'm doing it." She paused. "I don't know if that's something or nothing. But it feels like something."

Flora looked at her.

"It's something," she said.

Nancy looked at the notepad.

"Eilidh said the music went through him before the caution had time to intercept it," she said. "She meant it as something that was lost. The uncautious directness of being twenty-four." She paused. "But she's seventy-nine and she still listens the way that recording suggests he played. She went to that concert with opinions about tempo and she sat in the dark and what she heard changed her understanding and she kept the recording for twenty-seven years." She looked at the window. "I don't think the caution took her the way it took him. I think she found a way to keep listening without the caution interceding."

"She didn't perform," Flora said. "She listened. Maybe that's the difference. Maybe performing accumulates the caution and listening wears it away."

"Or maybe," Nancy said, "she was just always like that. Some people are. Some people don't accumulate it the same way."

They sat with this.

The steam came up through the floor. Someone below was pressing something white, something cotton, something being made ready for a new year.

"What do you actually know," Nancy said. Not reading the card stock — saying it, the way you said things you'd said so many times they were in your body.

"What do I know," Flora said. Not a question.

"About the work," Nancy said. "After all of it. The cases. What do you actually know."

Flora looked at the cork board.

She thought about the shoe in the wall and the map in the oilcloth and the letter in the good handkerchief and the recording in Eilidh Forsyth's flat on the Water of Leith. She thought about all the things people had put in walls and boxes and notebooks and kept, without knowing for certain who they were keeping them for, only knowing that the keeping was necessary.

"I know," she said, "that people keep things because they understand, somewhere underneath the understanding they can articulate, that the thing will be needed. Not by them, necessarily. But by someone." She paused. "I know that the finding is usually not about the thing itself. It's about what the thing proves. That something was real. That someone was known. That a version of yourself that you've lost track of was actually there."

Nancy looked at her.

"I know," Flora said, "that the work is mostly about saying: yes. It was real. You were there. It happened." She paused. "And that's enough. That's the whole of it, most of the time."

Nancy was quiet for a long time.

Then she picked up her pen.

She wrote the date at the top of a fresh page.

She wrote the time in the margin.

She read both back.

"Yes," she said. "I think that's right."

Outside, Clement Street was going about its January business — a new year finding its feet, the decorations coming down, the ordinary resuming its tenure. The dry cleaner's steam rose through the floor. The postcard from Inverness and the postcard from Penang and the Farallon Islands held their places on the cork board. The note on the card stock in Nancy's handwriting kept its counsel above the door.

The room held what it held.

The work would continue.

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*In the month of February, Roland Achebe sent a note.*

*No envelope, no address — he'd come by when neither of them was in and pushed it through the gap under the door. A folded piece of paper. Flora found it on a Tuesday morning, under the door, and picked it up and read it.*

*It said: Second movement. Last night. I got out of the way.*

*Below that: My daughter was in the audience.*

*Flora pinned it to the cork board.*

*Nancy read it when she came in and said nothing and sat at her desk and wrote the date and the time and continued.*

*The work continued.*

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*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: He knew. He went.*

*The postcard from Penang: She didn't make it into a building. But she made something.*

*A folded piece of paper: Second movement. Last night. I got out of the way.*

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

*Neither of them had fixed it.*

*Neither of them ever would.*

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*End.*