

The Last Unison

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BOOKWRIGHT

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First edition

Set in Literata.

For everyone who stayed, and everyone who went.

SALVAGE

The water was under the floor as well as on it. Ines heard that first, before she had decided to look at anything: a slow knock beneath the boards, where the canal had got in under the joists and was trying the house from below. Over it came the softer business of the cushions. There were three, one velvet and two in faded chintz, and they bumped along the walls as if feeling for a door. Somewhere to her right a clock was not ticking. A stopped clock takes up more room than a going one. She had always thought so.

She stood in the parlor doorway with the water at her thighs and the cold coming through her waders, and she turned her left ear into the room. Only after that did she let herself see it. The clock on the mantel said twenty past four. It had said so for some time.

"Eleven crowns, he wanted," Fenn was saying from the window bay. He had the *Good Enough* tied up against the sill and was feeding a strap through the empty frame where the glass had been. "Eleven, for a tub I'd already hauled out of his own mother's bathroom with my own back. Lion's feet. Cast iron. Saltmarket, this was, last Tuesday. She kept eels in it for Sunday, the old lady, did I tell you? Live eels. I said to him, you can have it back with the eels or without, but you won't have eleven. Ines."

"Mm."

"You're in the water."

"Yes."

"Good. Stay there. I'll have the dolly round in a minute."

He went on threading. His beard moved when he talked, ginger going gray at the chin, and the strap ran through his left hand past the ring finger that stopped short at the last joint. The pockets of his oilskin clinked whenever he leaned. He talked the way the tide came in, without being asked, and he had long ago worked out that she liked him for it.

"Her nephew says she wouldn't budge. Mrs. Stroud. Sat in that chair till the water came over the keys." He pointed with his chin at an armchair floating upside down, its four legs in the air. "Then she let them carry her out. Then she wanted the husband's coat, so they went back in for the coat. The coat, mind. Not the piano."

Ines had stood in a great many rooms with water in them. When people left a house meaning to

come back, it held itself ready. The furniture was sheeted, the stairs creaked under nobody, and the whole place listened for a key in the lock. An empty house was waiting. This one wasn't. The parlor had stopped, the way the clock had. She put a hand to the wall to steady herself, and the wallpaper came away under her palm, a long wet sheet of pink cabbage roses. She let it go. It lay down on the water and turned slowly until the roses were face up.

The upright stood against the inside wall.

It had been walnut once. Silt had worked into the grain until the case was nearly black. The maker's heron stood on one leg above Hallam & Vey in rubbed gilt, and the brass candle sconces had gone the green of old pennies. Across the whole front, exactly at keyboard height, ran a tide line where the water had sat longest. It was brown and as level as a spirit bubble could have made it.

She waded over, pushing a cushion aside with her knee. The fallboard had swollen and stuck. She worked it up with the heel of her hand, an inch and then another, and the keys showed themselves, yellow and a little crooked like old teeth. The E above middle C had a crack straight through the ivory. She touched it. It was a fine crack, the kind she could have found in the dark.

She pressed middle C, then the G above it, then the cracked E. Each key went down like a foot into mud and came back late or not at all. There were no notes, only a dull thud of wool on wet wood, three times.

It's dead. She had the words ready. She had said them in forty parlors this year, and the year before. Saying them was most of her trade now: *It's dead, the pin block's gone, I'm sorry*. People thanked her for it and gave her tea.

She laid her right palm flat on the case above the keys. With her left hand she found the bottom A and struck it hard, the way you would knock at a door you were sure nobody would answer.

The hammer hardly moved, but under her palm, under all the rot, the soundboard answered. What came was a ring, thin and live, like a glass touched in another room. It went into her hand first. Then her good ear caught up and heard it, a beat behind. She held still until it was gone and stayed still a little after.

"Well?" Fenn had the dolly over the sill now, bumping it down into the water. "Do I bother, or do I leave it for the eels?"

She took her hand off the case.

"I'll look at it."

The strap stopped in his hands for one second.

"You'll look at it," he said. "Somebody write that down."

They got the straps under it and walked it on the dolly to the window bay, the water shoving at their legs. The winch on the barge clanked and took the strain. The piano tilted, rose, and went out through the empty frame. Over the canal it made a slow quarter turn on the strap, streaming from its bottom board. It was nearly dark on the Lantern,

and the lamplighters' guild had lit three of the old iron brackets out of habit. Each lamp burned twice, once on its bracket and once in the water underneath. The piano hung between them, dripping into its own reflection. Then Fenn swung it down onto the deck.

Going home, they had to take the long way. The rubble of Cooper's Reach ran out under the surface for a quarter mile, and the barge went wide around it the way the ferries did. Rooflines showed above the water, and chimney pots with gulls standing on them, each gull facing into the wind.

Fenn stopped talking.

He bent over the engine housing and fiddled with the choke, which didn't need it. Then he wiped the throttle linkage with a rag, slowly, one side and then the other. The engine coughed and steadied. He didn't price anything, or say whose roofs those were, or whose bathtubs had gone down under them. He didn't say anything at all.

He's never quiet.

Ines kept her hand on the wet case of the piano. She didn't look toward the bend, where the hoist beam stuck up out of the water. She didn't ask him anything.

Across the lagoon the *Wending* sounded its horn, coming in to Saltgate late again. It was two notes that wanted to make a fifth and fell a half step short, and the second one sagged into the first. Her jaw set. She had hated that interval since she was nine years old. It seemed a foolish thing to say aloud in a

city that needed its ferry, and she had never said it to anyone.

The horn died off over the water. Fenn straightened from the engine and looked at the piano, and then at her.

"So," he said. "What's it worth to you?"

"I'll tell you when it's dry."

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Fenn talked it up the stair.

"Step. And step. That's the fourth, the fourth's all right, it's the sixth you want to watch, the sixth has a soft board on the canal side, I've been telling you since spring. Step."

The upright went up backward on the dolly, with Fenn below taking most of it on his shoulder and Ines above with the strap wrapped twice around her fist. Water ran out of the bottom board and down the treads ahead of him, then off the edge into the canal, where it made a small steady sound like tea being poured. Below them the sailmaker's loft lay open to the tide. Its doors had gone years ago. In the dark inside, the water knocked against the old cutting tables.

"Sixth," Fenn said. "Mind. There. You felt that. Seventh. If this goes, Ines, I want it understood I'm going with it and you're to have my spoons."

"I don't want your spoons."

"Nobody wants my spoons. Eighth."

She backed through the door at the top and the room took them in. It was long and low under the

rafters and smelled of hide glue and lamp oil, and of the damp that got into the wool however hard she ran the radiator. They walked the piano down the length of it, past the key frame and the jars of center pins and the unclaimed actions hanging from their hooks like coats nobody had come back for, and stopped under the north window. She had the blocks ready, four lengths of oak she kept for this. They tipped the case and slid one under each corner until the piano stood clear of the floor and dripped onto newspaper instead of boards.

It stood beside her bench. The near end of the bench was scored where her father's chisels had slipped, the far end where hers had. She could tell them apart. His ran with the grain.

Fenn straightened and put both hands in the small of his back. His pockets clinked.

"Right," he said. "Options."

"Fenn."

"No, you'll hear them, it's only fair. The furniture burners up on the Rise pay by weight, and that's weight, I've had it on my shoulder. Walnut burns lovely, they tell me. Or there's a hotel by Saltgate wants something atmospheric for the lobby." He gave the word room to stand in. "Atmospheric. That's a drowned piano with a heron on it. They'd put a fern in it."

She took her purse from her apron, found a coin by feel, and laid it on the bench between them. One brass crown, worn smooth at the rim.

"So it's mine."

Fenn looked at the coin for a while.

"That's robbery," he said. "I want it written down somewhere. On this day, in his own presence, Fenn Ostrander was robbed by a woman holding a felt knife."

"I'm not holding anything."

"You've the look of someone who is." He picked up the crown, turned it to the last of the window light, and bit it with his side teeth, slowly, like a man in a picture. "It's real," he said, and sounded let down. It went into his pocket with the hinges.

He looked out at the canal. Lamps were coming on along the far side of the Row, a window at a time, fewer than last year.

"So," he said. "This winter. You going?"

Everyone asked it now. The coal man asked it. The woman at the glue merchant's asked it while she wrapped the glue.

"The pin block's what matters," Ines said. "If it holds, it holds."

He let that sit. Last winter he had asked her four times. Now he said the engine wanted looking at, which it didn't, and went down the stair telling the sixth step exactly what he thought of it.

When she could no longer hear him, she took a fresh job card from the drawer. *Hallam & Vey. Upright, walnut, eighty-five keys. Lantern Canal.* Under that, in pencil, she drew her mark: a tuning fork as a Y with a bar beneath it, then I.C., then a dot, which she had always added. Tonight she pressed it

harder than she needed to. Beside it she wrote the job number, 2216.

She unrolled her tool roll along the bench. Canvas, gone soft as a shirt. Tuning hammers in their pockets, the rubber mutes, the felt strip, the fork. In the last pocket, folded in four, was this autumn's ferry timetable, copied out in her own hand, as every year, the week the new times went up in chalk at Saltgate Quay. She knew without looking that the times were later than last year's. She pushed it back into the pocket and did not unfold it.

The action came out on its bolts with a wet suck, and she carried it to the bench like something asleep. The damper felts were done. She worked a thin knife under each one and they came off the heads in gray clumps that smelled of the canal bottom. Where the moth had been at them before the water came there were tracks eaten clean to the wood, small roads going nowhere. The hammer felts were worse. Seventy years of the same strings had grooved them nearly to the molding, and now they were swollen soft. She cut them away and let them drop into the bucket by her foot. Then the rails, which she cleaned where they sat. She set the glue pot on the radiator to warm and took the scraper to the old cloth and the old glue under it, in long strokes with the grain, until the wood came up pale and dry under the blade and the only sounds in the room were the scraper and, now and then, the radiator ticking as it took the cold out of the pipes. She unrolled new damper felt on the bench,

measured it against the old heads, and cut it with the shears that hung on the nail by the window. They were the same shears she cut her own hair with every third month, standing at the basin with a hand mirror, because felt was felt and gray was gray.

When she straightened, her back had set and the window had gone dark.

Felts first. Then the keys, which had drunk the canal and swollen in their bushings so they stuck on the pins and came up late. Every one would have to be eased out and rebushed in new cloth. Then the pins, reset one by one in a pin block that only just held, a quarter turn at a time, feeling for the grip and praying (she did not pray) for the grip to stay. Then the registers: treble, tenor, bass. Last the unisons, two and three strings at a time brought down to one, the beat between them slowing until it stopped. Weeks of it. She could see the whole job laid out ahead of her like the tools in the roll.

She struck the fork on her knee, set its stem to the bench, and hummed an A against it. Hers sat true. Her father used to hum a hair under, on purpose, standing behind her while she tuned, until she turned and glared at him. She nearly smiled at the bench.

She turned the lamp down and went behind the curtain. The cot creaked once. Below, water slapped the pilings in no hurry, the radiator ticked, and Fenn's engine coughed at the mooring and went quiet. Beyond the curtain the piano stood on

its four oak blocks and said nothing. Now and then a drop fell from its bottom board onto the newspaper. She lay listening for the next one, and the gaps between them grew longer.

THE OWNERS

The keys came first, all eighty-five of them, and they came out fat with the canal.

The water had swollen the cloth at the balance hole and the front rail until each key gripped its pin like a fist. She laid them on the bench in order, with the sharps in a row of their own. She knocked the old cloth out with a punch and glued in new baize cut no wider than a fingernail, pressing each strip with a little wooden caul while the glue took. Eighty-five keys, two bushings each, took four days. On the fifth she eased them on the frame. She squeezed the new cloth with the pliers a little and then a little more, until each key fell from her fingertip by its own weight and settled without a bounce. Too tight and it stuck. Too loose and it would click under a player's hand for the rest of its life.

The pins were harder. She drew the treble pins one at a time and looked into each hole. Where the wood still showed bright, she drove the same pin a hair deeper. Where it had gone soft and brown, she went up a size. Then she set the tuning hammer on the pin, leaned, and listened with her hand. A good block took a pin the way a door takes a key that fits. This one took it grudgingly, with a long creak in the grain, but it took it. Each pin was a small judgment: deeper or not, bigger or not, enough or not. She made ninety of them. She thought she was right about most.

Then she tuned.

She struck the fork on her knee and took her A from it. She laid the temperament first, in the middle octave, with the felt strip woven through so only the center string of each note could speak, setting the fifths and fourths out from the A and stepping around the E without letting it in, then checking each new note against its thirds and sixths until the beats climbed the octave evenly, a little quicker note by note. Then she built out into the treble, working upward with a rubber mute wedged between two of the three strings leaving the first string free. She brought that one to pitch. She shifted the mute so it held only the third string, struck again, and the second string came in against the first, and the two of them argued. *Wah. Wah. Wah.* It was a slow, sick throb in the note, like a pulse heard through a pillow. She turned the pin a

hair, the callus on her finger taking the strain. Wah. Wah. A hair more, almost nothing. Wah.

Then stillness. The note stood up in the room as one thing.

She pulled the mute and did it again with the third string, then went on to the next note. Unison by unison the register came true. She went up into the small notes at the top, where the strings were short as a finger and the beats ran fast and thin, like a fly at a window. Then she came back down below the A. When she reached the E above middle C, with its cracked ivory, she left the mute where it was and the strings slack, and stopped there. The treble ended at the F above it. She did not quite decide anything.

It was past midnight when she turned down the lamp.

She heard it as she was going under. It was a brisk run in the treble, five or six notes, quick as someone stepping off a curb, with a grace note snapped onto the last one like a click of the tongue. Then nothing.

She didn't get up. Her father had taught her to listen with her eyes shut and her mouth a little open, so the jaw took nothing away from the ear. She lay like that behind the curtain and waited. It came again: the same phrase, note for note, with the grace note in the same place, as if whoever played it had practiced. Then there was only the water under the floor and the radiator.

She hadn't decided to listen for words. They were there already, ahead of her, the way she could name

a buzz in a customer's piano before she had found the loose screw. It was the shape of the thing that did it. The phrase was brisk and a little pleased with itself, and the grace note sounded like a finger tapped once on a man's chest.

I knew about the woman on Saltmarket. She was welcome to you on Thursdays.

That was as near as she could get. It might have been something else. She lay with her eyes open in the dark and half hoped it was. Then she slept.

In the morning she made coffee on the ring and drank it standing at the bench. She played the treble up and down, then every unison on its own with her good ear close to the case. It had held. Two pins had crept, no more than she would expect from a block that had spent a winter underwater, and she brought them back. The piano did nothing it shouldn't. She didn't try to account for the night. Damp got into the wool however hard she ran the radiator, the north light went gray by ten, and the piano had said something. She wrote *Treble held* on the job card and put on her coat.

The Rise was the only part of Sevrin that went uphill, and the care houses had taken the top of it, where the water would come last. She climbed the steps past the offices. Every landing gave her a little more of the lower city: rooftops, the Lantern's iron brackets standing in the canal, the ferry lanes bending around the Reach.

Hedda Stroud's room was too warm and smelled of boiled greens. Hedda sat in a wing chair by the

window, so small the chair seemed to be holding her up. Over her cardigan she wore a harbor pilot's coat with the sleeves turned back twice. Her voice was much bigger than she was.

"They boil the greens till they give up," she said before Ines had sat down. "Then they boil them a bit more to be sure. Thursday it's fish. You can smell Thursday from the stairs. You're the piano woman. Fenn's friend. Are you going this winter?"

"I've a piano to finish."

"That's a job, not an answer." Hedda looked pleased with herself. "Is it alive, then? Pim's piano?"

"Some of it."

"More than Pim." She pulled the coat closer. "Six years he played it. Badly. Every evening, with the window open so the canal could share it. I bought it for him at Teodor Halm's estate sale. Halm, from the Meridian, with the wrists." She held up one hand and let it hang from the wrist, limp and lovely. "Halm got it off some schoolteacher, they said, like that made it respectable. Is the bench still in the parlor? It'll be swimming. Pim kept his dirty songs in it. Under the hymns, so the vicar wouldn't see."

"Fenn's going back for it."

"Tell him not to read them."

Below the window a barge went round the bend toward Saltmarket. Ines watched it go.

"Saltmarket's a long way to walk," she said. "On a Thursday."

Hedda stared at her. For a moment there was nothing in the room but the radiator and someone's tray rattling in the corridor. Then she began to laugh. It started low in the pilot's coat and got bigger, far too big for the chair, until it turned into a cough and she had to bury her face in Pim's sleeve. Ines half rose. Hedda waved her down without lifting her face. When she came up her eyes were wet and she had said nothing at all, either way.

"You tune it properly," she said. "He never could."

Going down the Rise steps, Ines was halfway to the water before she noticed that she was pleased. She had been pleased since the laugh. At the bottom, where the stone went green and the canal began, she noticed the other thing. The treble was done. The tenor was next, and she was already counting its pins.

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Fenn came up the stair with the bench on his back like a man carrying a calf, and he was talking before his head cleared the landing.

"Same three lamps on the Lantern last night. I asked old Corley at the guild hall who they're for now, and he said they'd always lit the Lantern. That was his whole answer." He came through the door sideways. "Sixth step held."

He swung the bench down in front of the piano and stood back from it with his hands spread, as if he'd landed it on a hook.

"Second trip. Clock was gone. This was floating in the hall."

The bench was walnut to match, black with silt, and one leg had split along the grain. Water still seeped from the joints. Ines crouched and got her fingers under the seat. It stuck, then gave with a sound like a boot leaving mud.

Inside, the music had swollen into one brick. She worked it apart a sheaf at a time on the newspaper. There were hymns, and a book of easy marches with the fingering penciled in a heavy hand. Under those lay a run of loose sheets printed cheap on yellow paper: *The Bosun's Daughter*, *Up She Rises*, Mrs. Malloy, and one with a drawing on the cover that made Fenn lean in and say, "Well, Pim," with real respect.

At the bottom, under all of it, was a card.

It was stiff cream board, and it had kept better than the paper around it. The lettering was engraved, and she could feel it under her thumb. HOTEL MERIDIAN. *In the Lounge, Nightly.* TEODOR HALM. Below that ran a list of songs in a narrow italic, the old standards the hotels used to want: *Stay Till the Lamps*, *Saltgate Blue*, *The Last Boat Home*. The foot of a glass had left a ring across the middle of them, brown at the edge.

"Halm," Fenn said. "There's a name." He sat on her stool without asking. "The Meridian lounge went under, what, fifteen winters back. Lovely room. Mirrors. He played there thirty years and never had a sheet of music on the stand in his life. All up here."

He tapped his temple. "Vain about his wrists. Wore his cuffs turned back so you'd see them."

Ines turned the card over. The back was blank.

"Best seat in the house was the piano," Fenn said. "Back to the room, face to the windows. Windows looked straight down the water stair at the back. Lovely at night, with the lamps on the canal." He scratched his beard. "They sold the chandeliers off by the drop. Half of Saltmarket has one in the window for luck."

She laid the card on the bench, face up, next to the fork.

After he had gone she tuned the tenor.

The pins were looser here. The block had taken more water in the middle, where the case sat lowest, and the first pin she tried turned under the hammer with no grip in it at all, like a spoon in honey. She drew it, cut a slip of maple veneer, and drove the pin back through it with three short taps, and this time when she leaned on the hammer the wood leaned back. Some pins only wanted tapping deeper. Some wanted a shim and then a long patient quarter turn, eased and let settle and eased again, her ear close to the strings and the callus on her finger hot against the handle. She ran the felt strip through the section so each note sounded on its middle string alone, then pulled the strip a note at a time and brought the outer strings in. Each unison began as two voices nearly agreeing, a slow *wah, wah* under the note. She turned. The *wah* stretched. It came once more, long and lazy, and

then the note stood up straight, one sound out of three strings.

At the E above middle C she lifted the hammer off. The F above it was already true from the treble. The E was where she had stopped coming down, and now it was where she stopped going up. She didn't ask herself why.

When the last pin of the register was set the window was dark. She didn't look at the card again.

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It came sometime after midnight.

She was awake, listening to the pilings, and then the room changed the way a room does when someone in it begins to play. A chord in the tenor, soft and full, voiced the way a man voices a chord he has played ten thousand times, when his hands no longer need him. Then a turn, smooth as oil, a falling line beneath it, and the dominant with its seventh laid in where it belonged, leaning toward home the way a door leans on a bad hinge. Any pianist in Sevrin could have played the next chord. A child at her first lesson could have. The whole phrase had been built to set it down.

It didn't come.

The seventh stayed in the room. It held the way a note holds when the pedal is down and the hands have gone somewhere else. Then it thinned and was gone, and the phrase began again from the top: the same soft chord, the same oiled turn, unhurried, as if the player had all night and a room full of people

who weren't listening. It leaned toward home a second time. Again the hands stopped short. Ines lay with her jaw loose and her eyes shut and waited for the chord, and the room gave her the water under the floor.

She didn't want the words. She tried to keep them off by naming what she heard instead, chord by chord, as she would for a customer, and they came anyway, in under the names. She was pulling away from them before they had finished forming, like a hand from a stove.

I saw her go in, and I finished the song.

That was all there was. She went over it and tried to make it something else. The phrase was too smooth for grief and too steady for fright. It was the playing of a man who kept his hands moving because his hands knew how, while something happened on the other side of a window. She might have it wrong. She had never known if she had the widow right. She lay on her back and wanted to be wrong, and her ear, which had never once lied to her about a unison, would not agree.

The floor was cold. She went round the curtain without the lamp, by the smell of glue and the faint gray of the north window, and found the case where it stood on its blocks. She put her palm flat on it above the keys, as she had in the parlor, the way you put a hand on a horse that has shied. The wood was cool and quite still. Nothing rang.

I don't want the next one.

She stood there until her feet ached. Then she went back behind the curtain and lay awake until the window began to show the rafters.

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In the morning the card was where she had left it, the glass ring brown across *The Last Boat Home*. She turned it face down. That didn't help either.

The bass hadn't been touched. Its strings lay dull across the iron in their copper winding, furred green at the bridge pins, the lowest of them as thick as a bootlace. Nothing in them would speak until she made it. She stood in front of the piano with the tuning hammer in her right hand and didn't fit it to anything.

She could leave it. A piano with no bass was a dead piano, and nobody in Sevrin would argue; she said it forty times a year. Fenn would have it down the stair by noon. The burners on the Rise paid by weight, and this was weight. She thought of the case broken up for a stove, the heron and the cracked E and whoever else was still in there going up a flue unheard, warming somebody's office for an afternoon.

Some schoolteacher, Hedda had said. Like that made it respectable.

The radiator ticked. Below the window, Fenn's engine coughed and caught.

The work's the work. She had said it to herself for years so that she wouldn't have to think. This

morning she thought first, standing there with the hammer, and then she said it anyway.

She fitted the hammer to the lowest pin, the A she had struck in the drowned parlor to find out if anything lived. She leaned. The block creaked deep in the grain, held, and the pin began to turn.

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The bass fought her for every note.

Down there the strings were wound in copper over steel, and the rust had got into the windings where the water had sat longest. The bottom A went first. It was the one that had answered her hand in the parlor, and on the first quarter turn it parted at the hitch pin with a crack like a dropped plate. The coil sprang loose and rattled down into the bottom of the case. One note higher, one string of the pair on the B-flat had rusted so thin she could see the steel through the copper. She took that one off before it could decide for itself.

The replacements came from the box under the bench, where she kept what she saved from pianos she had pronounced dead. These two were from a Fairlie grand on Saltmarket, in the spring. The owner had thanked her and given her tea. Ines laid each old string beside its replacement on the bench and matched them length for length, winding for winding. Then she hooked the loop over the hitch pin, fed the end through the eye of the tuning pin, and cranked it on in three tight coils. The copper ran under her right index finger as she guided it and

bit into the callus there. She felt it as heat, then as nothing. Callus was for that.

She brought them up slowly over the afternoon, letting the new steel stretch and settle, because new strings sulked and went flat overnight if they were rushed. Then the unisons. In the treble the beats had run quick and thin. Down here the beat was slow and deep, a long *wum* and a long silence, then *wum* again, like a moored barge nudging the pilings. She leaned on the hammer. The gap stretched. She turned a hair more. The next *wum* never came. The two strings stood together in the dusk and the room hummed with one low note until it faded out of the wood.

She set the last pin of the register by lamplight and put the hammer back in its pocket. She didn't touch the keys.

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It began very quietly, so that at first she took it for the pilings.

Five notes went up the scale and five came down, with a little turn at the top where small hands always stumble. It was the oldest tune in the world for teaching. It came from the bass, too low for it, a tune for small fingers set down where the strings were thick as nails. And it came slowly. Each note was let go and allowed to die before the next one was offered, the way a teacher plays it for a child whose hand is still deciding where to go.

Ines lay on her back behind the curtain and did not move.

She was nine. It was the top floor of the Tollgate school, the winter the ground floor went under, and the children had carried the piano up the stairs again. It stood crooked by the window where they had set it down. Her father sat on a stool before it with its front off, humming flat. Ines sat on the bench by the coat pegs with nothing to do, kicking her heels until he looked round. Then she stopped kicking.

A woman came in with chalk on her cuffs. She and Ines's father talked over Ines's head about the damp and what it did to a pin block. When he asked her, the way people asked, whether she had ever thought of the mainland, she laughed and said, "I have pupils, Aurel," as if that settled it. Then the woman bent down, and she smelled of cloves, warm and sharp at once. She pressed one into Ines's palm and closed her fingers over it.

"For the wait," she said.

The clove was hard as a tack, with a small rough head. It warmed in Ines's fist. Out over the lagoon the *Wending* sounded its two notes and the second sagged, and Ines squeezed the clove until it hurt. She could bring the smell back now exactly, lying in the dark forty-five years on. The face she could not. Brown hair, perhaps. A long neck. She couldn't have said what piano it was, either.

Miss Arbery. The name came up after the clove did.

The tune went round again, slower. At the top, where children stumble, it waited longer than it needed to on the high note, like someone at the head of a stair who has heard a door open below. Then it came down.

Take me with you.

Or something like it. It might have been only a scale, played slowly by a piano in the dark. If it was a sentence, Ines didn't know who it had been meant for, or whether that person had ever stood close enough to hear it. She thought of Saltgate Quay. She thought of the people she had seen there over the years, standing beside a bag while the *Wending* took on its passengers, then walking home with the bag and unpacking it. There were a great many of them in Sevrin. She knew the time the ferry left this winter without unfolding anything.

The last note came down to the bottom of the scale and stayed there until it was gone.

She lay awake after that. The tune didn't come again, but she kept hearing it, up five and down five with the turn at the top. It was what she knew of being taught: somebody's patience laid out note by note in front of her, whether she wanted it or not. Her father had put a tuning hammer in her hand when she was ten and closed her fingers round it, the way the woman had closed them round the clove. He had never once asked if she wanted the trade.

He never asked. You never said.

Below the floor the water went on knocking at its own slow beat, and nothing came to still it.

*
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In the morning she raised the lid to clean it.

The underside had a gray bloom of silt dried into the grain. She worked at it with a soft brush and a rag barely wet. Then she brought the lamp over and held it low, close to the wood, so the light came across the surface instead of onto it. That showed every ridge and every place where the grain had lifted. Raking light found what flat light hid. Her father had taught her that, too.

Near the hinge, letters came up out of the walnut.

It was ink, faded to the brown of weak tea, in a careful hand that had been taught its letters and had taught them in its turn.

C.A., bought of A. Calder, Cooper's Reach.

Her hand stopped on the rag.

She read it again. Then a third time, moving the lamp, as if the light might change it.

A. Calder.

Cooper's Reach. The bend, the hoist beam. Her father's name, written by a woman who had given her a clove, inside the piano Ines had been rebuilding for five weeks. She had cut its felts and set its pins and kept its tide line. She had paid a crown for it.

The lamp wick hissed.

She put the rag down. Before the schoolteacher, then. Before Halm and his wrists, before Pim and his Thursdays. Before her.

The action sat in the case behind the keys, back on its bolts. She had stripped it on the bench and glued new felt to every head. She had never had the hammer rail off. She had never turned it over.

She lowered the lamp. The light ran along the row of new white hammers resting on their rail. Below them the underside of the rail faced down into the dark of the case, where no lamp had reached.

3

THE MARK

The action came out the way it had gone in, on its bolts.

She backed the nuts off the brackets with the short wrench and laid each one in the lid of a glue tin so none could roll. Then she got her hands under the main rail at either end and tipped the action toward her until the hammers cleared the strings. She lifted. It came away dry this time, eighty-five hammers with their shanks and jacks and dampers all moving together like one animal, lighter than five weeks ago by the weight of a canal. She carried it to the bench and stood it on its feet.

Letoff was the last fine thing before the unisons. A hammer had to be thrown at the string and let go just short of it, so that it flew the last hair's breadth on its own, struck, and fell back clear. Too early and the note came thin; too late and the felt blocked

against the string and smothered what it struck. She measured the line of the strings off the case and clamped a length of batten across the brackets to stand in for them. She pressed the first bass key slowly with her left hand and held the regulating tool to its letoff button with her right. Down, and down, and the jack slipped from under the butt with a small dry click, and the hammer dropped back an inch. She gave the button a quarter turn and pressed again. The felt stopped a breath from the batten, and she looked at the gap with one eye shut and saw a line of lamplight there no wider than a pencil line. She went on to the next key, and the next, and up through the tenor, with the lamp pulled close and her glasses down her nose and the cord swinging against her collar. The radiator ticked and the water kept its own slow time at the pilings, and after a while there was nothing in the room but the press and the click and that thread of light between felt and wood, and she had stopped knowing the hour.

When she reached the treble she stopped and looked at the hammer rail. It lay across the shanks, felted along its front edge. At the near end, where the case had stood longest in the water, the wood had gone a shade darker. She unscrewed it from its brackets. She told herself she was turning it over to look for rot.

There was no rot. There was pencil.

A tuning fork, drawn as a Y. A bar beneath it. A.C. Then a number: 388.

She knew it before she had finished reading it. She had drawn it on more than two thousand job cards. It was her mark, and it had no dot.

The dot was the only thing I ever added.

She sat down on the floor. She didn't decide to. The rail stayed in her hands.

The lid said *bought of A. Calder, Cooper's Reach*. He had only had the Reach since the year before she was born. She had always known that much. He had told her once, the only time, carrying a window sash up the workshop stair with his back to her, that he'd sold something to make the first lease. "Rent's always something you'd rather keep," he'd said, and gone on up. She had pictured a lathe. A good saw. She had never once pictured this.

The floor was cold under her. Under the floor was the water.

*
**

She was thirty-one. The water came up through the Reach in a single night. It came through the drains first and then over the sills, and by midnight the high-water bell at Saltgate had stopped. She took the skiff from the Row and rowed. She went the short way, over streets she had walked that morning, and her oars touched railings. Then she came round the bend, and the hoist beam was over her, black against a sky with no moon in it. The workshop door stood open on water, and there was a lamp inside.

He was in water to his knees. His sleeves were rolled and his big hands were under an action on the floor rack, and he lifted it onto the bench as if it weighed nothing and went back down for another. The water made a hollow note in the stairwell every time he moved.

She brought the skiff against the doorframe. "Leave them," she said. "Leave the tools and come."

"I'm not leaving the hammer."

"Then bring the hammer."

"And tune what with it? Your boat?" He set the action down beside the others. "A tuner without his hammer is nobody. A tuner with a hammer and no workshop is a man holding a hammer."

"It's a bad hammer. The handle pulls left."

"It pulls left because you hold it like a spoon."

"I hold it the way you showed me."

"Then I showed you like a spoon." He waded back to the rack.

They went round it. She said she would buy him a new one. He said new hammers were for people with new hands. She said the water was still coming. He said it always was. She said she would take the hammer in the boat by itself, and he could follow when the actions were up. He said he would. They both knew the actions would never all be up, and they said it again anyway, hammer and hammer, until the lamp wanted oil and neither of them filled it.

There was another thing. It sat in her throat all night, small and hard as a clove in a fist, and every

time she opened her mouth the hammer came out instead.

At dawn she pushed off from the doorframe. He stood at the bench in the gray light and lifted one hand. It might have been a wave. He might only have been reaching for the next action.

He had taken a chill, standing in the water. It went to a fever, and six weeks later he died of it, upstairs. She didn't leave. She took on his customers, and then there were fewer of them, and she told most of what was left that their pianos were dead. Twenty-three winters.



The rail had gone warm in her hands.

She got up, knees cracking, and carried it to the bench. She held it the way she had held his hand that last week upstairs, when it was too hot and he didn't know she had it. She turned it mark side down and fitted it to its brackets. She found the screws by feel and turned each one slowly until it seated. Then she finished the treble letoff, click by click, without hurrying, and put the action back in the case on its bolts.

She turned the lamp down and went behind the curtain.

There was nothing new for it to play. Every register was true except the one unison she kept leaving slack, and she had not touched that today. She knew it. She lay with her eyes shut and her mouth a

little open, the way he had taught her, and listened anyway.

The pilings. The radiator, ticking as the pipes cooled. A barge going out toward Saltmarket, and then not.

Three times she lifted her head off the pillow at a sound that turned out to be only the house. Once it was a board settling. Once it was nothing she could name, and she lay propped on an elbow until her arm shook, waiting for it to come again so she could call it something.

Say something, then. She didn't know which of them she meant.

Nothing in the room answered. The piano stood on its blocks in the dark with its hammers resting a hair's breadth from the strings, all eighty-five of them let off exactly right, and it kept still.

Toward the gray of morning the water struck once, harder, against the piling under the bench. Along the shelf the jars of center pins chattered against each other, a small glass sound, and stopped.

*
**

By late afternoon the north light had gone the color of dishwater, and she had done nothing all day that she could have charged for.

She had swept the floor. She had filled the lamp. She had sorted a jar of center pins by size, which didn't need doing. Then she took the job card for

2216 out of the drawer and turned it over and sat a long time with the pencil above the blank side.

She wrote them in order, oldest first, the way she would list the work.

A. Calder.

C. Arbery.

T. Halm.

H. Stroud.

Four lines in her small square hand. A man in water to his knees. A woman with chalk on her cuffs. A man who kept playing. A widow who laughed into a dead man's sleeve. Under the fourth line the card was empty. The pencil went down into the space before she had agreed to anything. A list with the last item left off was a wrong list, and she had never let a wrong list stand.

I. Calder. *One crown.*

She laid the pencil beside the card, square to its edge.

Then she looked at the piano.

Every unison in it stood true but one. The E above middle C, with the crack through its ivory, still had its three strings lying slack across the bridge, well flat and nowhere near each other. She had stopped at it coming down through the treble. She had stopped at it again coming up through the tenor and not asked herself why, the way you don't ask why you keep walking the long way round a particular street. She had known she was leaving it. Now she knew what for.

It wasn't anything she could have explained to a customer. It was the sort of knowing she had about a pin block before the tuning hammer went on it, when the grain looked wrong to her and she couldn't have said how. She was right about those more often than not.

She would tune it. It would play. It would play what had sat in her throat all night at the Reach.

And he would be in it, or he wouldn't.

I don't want to know if he had nothing to say.

*
**

The sixth step complained, and then Fenn came through the door with a paper parcel held out in front of him, going dark with grease at the corners.

"Eel," he said. "Fried. The cart by the fish steps, the one with the dog. He's charging two now, two crowns for eel, and I said to him, I've hauled your whole family's bathwater out of the Saltmarket drains, and he gave me the dog's look." He set the parcel on the bench and opened it. Steam came up, and the smell of hot fat and vinegar. "Eat. You've had nothing. I can see you've had nothing, you've gone the color of your felt."

She took a piece because he would stand there until she did. It burned her fingers.

He was licking his own fingers and looking along the keys, the way he looked along a canal wall for anything worth a hook. His eye stopped.

"You've left one."

"It's dead," Ines said.

He laughed at that, a real laugh, head back. "Dead. That's good. Eighty-four notes singing like a choir and the eighty-fifth is dead." He reached for another piece of eel. "You'll put that on the card, will you. Lovely instrument, one note deceased."

She wiped her fingers on her apron. Then she took her purse out, found a crown by feel, and laid it on the bench between them, next to the paper. It might have been the coin he had bitten five weeks ago, come back round the city the way crowns did.

"Buy it back."

He grinned and waited for the rest of the joke. When it didn't come he looked at the crown, and then at her, and the grin stayed on his face a moment longer than it meant anything.

"No."

"One crown. Same as I paid."

"Sale's a sale." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I don't take back what the water gives me. Never have. You start taking things back, you'll have every widow on the Lantern at the boat wanting her soup tureen." He pushed the coin toward her with one finger, the short one. It didn't come out as funny as he wanted, and he heard that. "Anyway, what would I do with it. Burn it?"

"You said they pay by weight."

"I say a lot of things."

The coin lay between them. Below the window the water slapped the pilings, and something on the *Good Enough* knocked against the hull, a loose fender.

"There's a mark under the hammer rail," Ines said. "It's his. My father's. He sold it to pay for the Reach. The year before I was born." She stopped, and then made herself go on. "It was his before it was anybody's."

It was more than she had said to him in twenty years. It was more than she had said to anyone.

Fenn didn't say anything.

He stood with a piece of eel going cold in his fingers, and his face did nothing at all. She had seen him stand in a drowned nursery with the cot floating and keep talking. She had seen him talk to a corpse once, a drowned dog under Tallow Bridge, telling it the price of rope. He put the eel down on the paper. He looked at the piano, and then out of the window, and then at the floor, where the newspaper still lay under the blocks.

The radiator ticked. And again. And a third time.

"After the Reach went," he said. He cleared his throat. "Not the Long Tide. After, when it went for good. Three winters on. Everybody was out of there by then. Nobody's going to stop you. You go in at the windows."

He wasn't looking at her.

"Your father's. I went in your father's. Upstairs, through the hoist door. Most of it was gone. The rack was there. Under." He turned the brass crown over with his finger, once, and left it. "There was a case. His hammer. Leather. Up on a shelf, high, dry as you like. I took it."

The loose fender knocked against the hull.

"Twenty years, nearly," he said. "It's under my bunk. I'd think, give it her. And then I'd see you rowing round the long way so as not to go past the beam, and I'd think, no. And then I'd think I was a thief for thinking no." He breathed out through his nose. "I never knew which. I still don't."

Ines looked at the E. Three strings, slack. The crack in the ivory, fine as a hair.

She didn't tell him it was all right. She didn't tell him it wasn't. She sat with her hands in her lap until the light in the north window was nearly gone and she could hear him waiting, which she had never heard before. Fenn waiting made no sound at all.

She picked up the crown and put it back in her purse.

"Bring it in the morning," she said.

He stood a moment longer. Then he folded the paper over the last of the eel, corner to corner, and pushed it toward her.

"I'll fetch it," he said.

THE LAST UNISON

She went down at first light, before he could come up.

The *Good Enough* lay against the pilings below Tallow Row with its engine cold and its deck wet from the night. Fenn stood in the cabin door with a mug in each hand, and he was talking before her boot touched the gunwale.

"Mind the coil. Mind the—that's a pram wheel, I'm keeping it, don't ask me what for. Coffee. It's the good tin, off the Saltmarket chandler's. He's gone to his sister's on the mainland and left the whole shop to the tide, sugar and all. Sit. There's a crate. Not that one."

The cabin was built for one man lying down. Fenn had filled it for two standing up and then kept filling it. Hinges hung from nails in strings of a dozen, sorted by size. A drawer with no chest

around it held spoons, hundreds of them, handles down, catching the light from the porthole. Keys on a long wire looped across the ceiling like bunting: iron and brass, door keys and clock keys, and one as long as her hand that must have opened a church. When the barge shifted they all spoke at once, very softly, a dry jingle that ran from bow to stern and back.

She took a mug and sat on the crate he meant. It was oak, stenciled with the name of a shipping house that no longer existed.

"Spoons are steady," Fenn said. "Spoons are the one thing. Every house has spoons, and nobody goes back for them. I had a woman on Lantern last winter, wouldn't leave without the..."

He stopped. He looked at the mug in his hand as though someone had just given it to him.

He set it on the stove lid. Then he got down on his knees, slowly, a broad man folding himself into the space between the bunk and the bulkhead, and reached under. She heard leather drag on boards. He brought out a case about the length of her forearm, its corners rubbed pale, its strap stiffened into a curve that still remembered the buckle. He wiped the lid once with his sleeve. It made no difference.

He held it out with his left hand under it, the short finger lying along the side.

"I didn't know if it'd be a kindness."

She took it. It was lighter than she had expected and heavier than it should have been.

"Neither do I," she said.

His beard moved. Her mouth nearly did. Overhead the keys said something to each other and went quiet.

The buckle had rusted open years ago. She lifted the lid.

The hammer lay in its groove of green baize with the head toward the hinge, the way he had always laid it. Rosewood handle, steel star head. At the top the grip was worn into a hollow the shape of a palm, and lower down there was a second hollow where the side of a heavy forefinger had leaned through every job he ever did. Her hand went into it and did not fill it. Beside the hammer lay his mutes, three rubber wedges gone the brown of old toffee, and his fork, stamped A, with the nick at the base of the stem from the day he dropped it on the workshop stair and swore for a full minute without repeating himself. She had been eight. She had counted.

Under the baize was a pocket with something stiff in it. She drew it out.

It was a sheet folded in four. She knew the fold before she had it open.

Saltgate to Mainland. Winter sailings. Below that were the days and the times beside them, in pencil, in the big square capitals he used for job numbers. He had pressed every figure so hard it stood up on the back of the paper. The Wending at a quarter past seven, every morning, all through the winter of the Long Tide.

She read it down once, then again. Nothing was circled. Nothing was underlined or ticked or

crossed out. There wasn't a mark on it that hadn't come off the board.

She set the case on her knees, unrolled her tool roll along the bunk among the hinges, and found the last pocket by feel. Her own sheet came out folded in four. She opened it beside his.

The same heading, the same days. Her figures were smaller and leaned forward, and her boat left an hour and forty minutes later than his. That was twenty-three winters of silt.

He did it too.

Fenn had picked up his mug again and was looking hard out of the porthole at a gull on a piling. He drank and didn't ask. The keys turned on their wire and settled.

She folded the two sheets together, his on the outside, and put them in the last pocket of her roll.

*
**

The sixth step gave under her, and she climbed the rest with the case held against her chest.

In the north light she laid the case on the bench and raised the fallboard on the Hallam & Vey. The E sat where it always had, the crack running straight through the ivory from front to back, fine as a hair. In the box under the bench were ivories from the Fairlie grand, good ones, a shade too white. She could have matched one by evening. She put her thumb on the crack and felt it catch the skin. A crack in a key top changed nothing a string could do. She left it.

She took his hammer out of the baize.

It wouldn't sit right. She set the head on the middle tuning pin, and the handle swung left of where her hand wanted it, the way it always had. She let it. She gave up her own grip and held it the way he had shown her: low, fingers wrapped, the whole hand around it. Like a spoon.

She brought the three strings up from slack, a turn and then a rest, so the tension could run along the steel. Then she wedged one of his mutes between the outer strings so the middle one spoke alone, and set it against the A below and the B above until the intervals sat where her ear wanted them. She pulled the mute and moved it over.

Two strings. *Wah. Wah. Wah.* A quick sick pulse, almost a stammer. She leaned. The callus took the handle where his forefinger had worn it, and the pin answered with a long creak in the grain. *Wah. Wah.* Further apart. She leaned less than a hair. *Wah.*

Then nothing. One note where there had been two.

She pulled the mute. The third string came in sharp against the other two, fast and thin. She brought it down a breath at a time, and the beat stretched until it was one slow swell, and then the swell drew out so long she lost the place where the next one should begin. She waited for it with the handle under her palm. It didn't come.

The E stood in the room as one note, three strings and nothing between them, and went on standing in the wood after the sound had gone.

She laid the hammer back in its groove, head toward the hinge. Her hands were shaking. She looked at them. She had held a tuning hammer nearly every working day since she was ten, through cold rooms and bad blocks and customers watching from the doorway, and they had never once done that. She put them flat on the bench until they stopped.

She didn't strike the E again. She lowered the fallboard over the keys and left it down.

It was not yet nine. Night was a long way off.

*
**

By two the light had gone flat over the lagoon. There was no sun in it anywhere, only a lid of white that turned the water the color of pewter. She took the skiff from under the stair.

She rowed the long way. The short way had been a street once, then a channel, and now it was rubble a foot below the surface that would open a hull like a letter. The oars went in and came out with the same two sounds, a knock and a drip, and for a long while she let that be the only thing.

Then the Reach. It came up out of the water the way it always did, as if someone had drawn the rooftops and forgotten the rest: ridgelines, a run of slates with the moss gone black, a dormer with no glass in it, and the chimney pots standing in their

rows. There was a gull on nearly every pot, each one facing the same way into a wind she could barely feel on her cheek. As she came close the nearest one lifted, complained, and settled again two pots along.

Far out past the rubble, the *Wending* was coming back from the mainland. It was small and white, and its red funnel was the only color on the lagoon. It went wide round the Reach. It didn't sound its horn. She shipped her oars and watched it until it was past.

The hoist beam stood at the bend.

It stuck out of the water at the height of a man's shoulder, black oak with an iron eye at the end where the pulley had hung. She had seen it from a distance for twenty-three years and never this close. She brought the skiff in under it, passed the painter twice round the beam, and made it fast with the hitch he had taught her on the workshop stair. Then she sat with her hands in her lap.

Below her, under the pewter, was the hoist door, and through it the upstairs room where he had died of the fever. Below that was the workshop, and the bench, and the rack he had kept lifting actions off. Somewhere down there, too, was the stairwell that had made its hollow note every time he moved.

She reached up and put her palm flat on the beam. The wood was wet and cold, and soft at the surface, the way oak goes when it has stopped arguing with the water. She turned her left ear toward the place where the door would be, and listened.

Water moved against brick somewhere beneath the skiff, slow and regular. A gull shifted its feet on a chimney pot. There was nothing else, and the nothing had a particular sound. She knew it from the parlor on the Lantern, and from forty other rooms. An empty house held itself ready, listening for a key. This had stopped listening. Nothing down there was waiting for anyone, least of all for her.

She opened her mouth.

She had no idea what was going to come out. She had thought, rowing, that it might be his name, or the thing that had sat in her throat all that night, small and hard as a clove. She waited for it, the way she waited for a beat to show itself between two strings.

It didn't come. Her mouth stayed open on the cold air and nothing used it. A gull answered for her, harsh and short, and the others took it up along the rooftops and then let it drop.

She closed her mouth. She didn't try again.

Twenty-three years and I still can't get a word in.

She kept her hand on the beam a moment longer. Then she untied the hitch, pushed off with one oar against the oak, and rowed home the long way while the light went out of the white.

*
**

The radiator ticked. Below the floor the water slapped the pilings, then waited, then slapped them again. Fenn's engine was cold; she would have heard it.

She lay behind the curtain on her right side, so that her good ear was turned up toward the room. The fallboard was down. She had left it down. She didn't know what she expected a fallboard to do about anything.

It came a long time after midnight, and it came as one note.

It was the E above middle C. She knew it the way she knew her own A, before she had thought about it at all. It wasn't struck. It was simply there in the room, held, as if a key had been pressed down long ago and nobody had ever lifted the finger.

Then it wasn't one note. It was two, close as breath, and between them the beat began to swell. *Wah. Wah.* It was slow and wide, a long breath out and a long breath in.

One of the two sat exactly where her ear had put it that morning, true to the fork. She recognized it the way you recognize your own handwriting on an old envelope. It held, plain and a little stubborn, and the words came out of the shape of it whether she wanted them or not.

I'd go, if you would only once tell me to.

That was the nearest she could get. It might have been plainer than that, or meaner. She had carried it in her mouth across a flooded workshop all one night and had brought it home again, and she had never once set it down long enough to see what it was made of.

The other came in under it, a hair flat.

It wasn't flat the way a slipped pin goes flat. It sat a little low on purpose and stayed there, the way he had hummed behind her shoulder while she tuned, steady and pleased and maddening, until she turned round to glare at him. She almost turned now. She lay still, and the beat went on swelling between the two of them, and words came out of that one too, slowly and from a long way down.

I only stayed so you'd have somewhere to leave from.

Or something like it. She couldn't trust it. It might have been only what she had wanted from him for twenty-three winters, and her ear had made it out of a low string and the dark. She had never known if she had the widow right. She might have him wrong. She lay with her mouth a little open, the way he had taught her, so her jaw would take nothing from her ear.

The beat slowed.

She hadn't touched anything. The flat string came up by itself, the way a man stops humming low at last and lets the note sit where it belongs. *Wah*. The swell stretched. *Wah*. There was a longer gap, and she held still through it and waited for the next one. When it came it was so long and so lazy that she lost the place where the following one should begin.

Then there was one note in the room. It was two strings sounding as one, and nothing moved between them.

She couldn't tell any longer which string had been his and which hers. She listened for the difference with everything she had, and there wasn't one to find.

The note stood in the room, and then in the wood, and then it was gone.

*
**

She didn't get up.

The water came against the pilings, waited, and came again. The radiator ticked as the pipes cooled. Her hands lay on the blanket where she had put them, and her face was dry, and she let it stay dry. She lay on her right side with her ear to the dark, the way she had lain listening to the last drips from the bottom board the first night. Nothing else came. She didn't want it to.

When the north window had gone from black to the color of slate, she got up. The floor was cold. She lit the lamp and turned it low, took her tool roll from the bench, and found the last pocket by feel. The two sheets were folded together, his on the outside.

She opened them on the bench beside the case, his and then hers.

Saltgate to Mainland. Winter sailings. She ran her finger down her own column to the morning and read the time she had copied out at the quay in autumn. She had looked at it only once since, on the barge, and then only as a distance from his. The *Wending* left at five minutes to nine.

Beside her figures his quarter past seven stood up out of the paper, pressed so hard into it that she could feel every number from the back.



At first light she left the actions on their hooks.

There were eleven of them along the rafters, hanging like coats nobody had come back for, and nobody would now. She left the jars of center pins on the shelf in the order of size she had sorted them into the afternoon she could do nothing else. She left the felt and the baize, and the glue pot cold on the radiator. Into the one bag went two shirts, a coat, the hand mirror, and the shears. Into her father's case, beside his hammer and his mutes and his nicked fork, went her own fork and the two timetables, folded together, his on the outside.

She tied her tool roll with its hammers still in their pockets and laid it on the bench. Somebody would want it. Somebody always wanted a hammer.

She took out the job card for 2216. Under *Treble held* she wrote *Unisons true*. Under that, after a moment, *Sold*. She turned the card over to the list in her own hand and, under her name, wrote *F. Ostrander. One crown*. She drew her mark beside it, the Y and the bar and I.C., and added the dot lightly.

The Hallam & Vey stood on its four oak blocks under the north window, and the gray light came up along its case. The tide line still ran across the front at keyboard height, level as a ruled line. She

had never sanded it out. The fallboard was down. She didn't lift it.

The sixth step spoke before she had called anyone.

Fenn came up the rest without a word, which she noticed, and stood in the doorway in his oilskin with his pockets still. He looked at the bag by her feet and picked it up. He didn't heft it or guess at what was in it or name a price. He held it.

At the top of the stair, with the canal moving below them, she found a coin in her purse by feel and held it out.

"Buy the piano."

He looked at the crown. Then he took it and put it in among the hinges, and he didn't bite it.

"Robbery," he said, "and I'm the robber."

Whatever it plays for him, he'll have said it already. Twice. With prices.

"Mind the sixth," she said.

"Who's carrying what down here?"

The sixth step gave under both of them and held.

They went the long way, along the Row and over the Tallow Bridge and down past the ground floors that had gone to the water. Fenn talked.

"Green door. The Marrishes. I had a clock out of there with a cuckoo that only came out at half past, never on the hour, they kept it for spite. That one, the bricked one, copper tub, the old man used to sit in it with his hat on so the wife couldn't say he wasn't dressed. That stair goes down to nothing. I've been down it. Parlor at the bottom with a harp

in it, strings and all, you'd hate it." He shifted the bag to his other shoulder. "Corley'll want the piano. He'll say he doesn't. I'll leave it where it is and he'll come up the stair to complain about it and stay an hour. Nobody's burning it. I want that understood."

She let him go on. Their boots rang on the wet stone, and his voice ran ahead of them both, filling every gap before anyone could ask her to. He had been doing that for twenty years. She had never once thanked him for it, and she didn't now. She walked on his right, so her good ear was toward him, and let him fill it.

The board at Saltgate was chalked in a careful hand. WENDING. MAINLAND. 9:05. That was ten minutes later than her copy. The channel had silted since autumn. A boy on a ladder was blowing chalk dust off the old times.

The quay was full of chairs. A man went past with a kitchen chair upside down on his head like a hat. A woman and two girls were carrying a rocker between them up the quay steps, one flight higher than wherever it had been, and arguing about which end was heavier. Somewhere behind the customs house the high-water bell rang twice for the morning tide. Nobody looked up. Under the planking the water knocked at the piles in no hurry at all.

At the gangway Fenn held out the bag. She took it, and he kept his hand where it had been, empty, a moment longer.

He opened his mouth.

She waited. So did the gangway man.

"Eel's better over there," Fenn said. "The mainland. Everyone says so."

No eel anywhere was better than the cart by the fish steps, and they both knew it. He put his short-fingered hand in his pocket, where the crown was, and stepped back among the chairs.

She went up the gangway with the bag on her shoulder and the case against her chest. On deck she set both down between her feet.

Behind her, up the stair on Tallow Row, the light would be reaching the fallboard by now. The piano stood true on its blocks, playing for nobody, or for nobody she could hear. She turned her good ear to the water instead. It slapped the hull, and slapped it again, and went on keeping its own time.

The horn went.

Two notes. The second one reached for the fifth and fell a half step short and sagged back into the first, the way it had since she was nine.

"I've always hated that horn," Ines said, out loud.

From the quay, over the rope and the chairs and the boy on his ladder, Fenn called back, "Everyone hates that horn."

The lines came off. The *Wending* backed and turned and went wide round the Reach, the long way, the way everything went now. She didn't look for the hoist beam. Sevrin lay low behind her, rooftops and chimney pots and the iron brackets on the Lantern, each of them doubled, once in the air and once on the water. A gull lifted off a chimney

pot and settled again two pots along. Her hands were empty on the rail. She left them there.

