

THE BETTER PART



CRAIG WRIGHT

I

At breakfast, Adrian thanked her for the night.

Celia was trying to get a plum stone off her spoon. It clung to the silver by a thread of flesh, and the tremor in her left little finger was making the business more conspicuous than it deserved.

“What night?”

He looked up. The gladness went out of his face so quickly that she felt she had struck him.

“Last night.”

“I was at Continuance.”

“Of course.” He folded the paper beside his plate. Adrian still had the morning bulletin printed. He liked to read bad news on something he could crease. “I meant the other night.”

It was Thursday. There had been no other night. For eleven months she had slept at the institute from Sunday to Thursday, returning before seven in a car which brought her home already dressed. On Fridays and Saturdays she slept beside her husband and woke, intermittently, to the small labours of his breathing. Since the treatment started again, they had slept in the sitting room. Sometimes she found him sitting on the edge of the bed, his bare back so pale that its shape seemed unfinished.

She let the plum stone drop.

“Are you having trouble with the dates?”

“No, darling. I am having trouble with breakfast.”

He pushed back his chair. His cup stood between his plate and the folded paper, untouched. She reached for it.

“Leave it,” he said.

“It’s cold.”

“I know.”

He took it from her and fitted both hands around it. Then he looked down at them.

“You said I didn’t have to hold it.”

“What?”

“Last night. You said, ‘You needn’t hold on to everything.’ I thought it was rather unlike you.”

He tried to smile. She could think of no occasion on which she had said that. There had been a quarrel about his workshop the previous week; perhaps he meant the tools. She asked him.

“No,” he said. “The cup.”

He went into the garden carrying it. She watched him step over the drain, carefully, then use the back of a chair to lower himself into it. He could still manage the house and garden on foot. The folding wheelchair by the front door was for clinic visits; he made her close it when they came home.

Once she would have followed him. She had acquired a different understanding of such moments during her convalescence. People needed room. There was dignity in being left alone, and a great deal of it could be bestowed without leaving one’s seat.

The house opened east towards the old river. Beyond their garden wall, municipal reeds stood in rectangular beds through which the city’s water was passed, cleaned, and passed again. In the dry months the beds gave off a sweetish, intestinal smell.

This morning a wind came upstream. Celia could see the yellow undersides of the reed leaves.

Her training report waited beside the fruit bowl. Ninety-six minutes of resistance work, divided among the night’s prescribed sleep phases. Twenty-four minutes of assisted mobility. Eight hours and eleven minutes of restorative rest. The figures overlapped, as the brochure had promised they would.

Her legs had become magnificent.

She looked at them beneath the table with the private pleasure she had never entirely overcome. At the hospital they had lain in front of her, still hers but unresponsive to the increasingly humiliating messages she sent them. The injury had been in the lower spine. She had learned to hate the encouraging faces before she learned anything else.

Then Dr Saye had fitted the bridge.

Her first independent step had been towards a window. She remembered the square of sun on the floor and a fly striking the glass. She wanted to let it out.

Continuance came later. At first she went there to practise movements she could hardly bear to attempt in daylight. She slept, the machines held her upright, and in the morning a little more of her weight belonged to her again. After the cradles were no longer necessary, she stayed. Adrian had bought the additional training.

“After everything,” he said, “you are allowed to like yourself.”

She gathered the plates and took them into the kitchen. In the garden Adrian had closed his eyes. There was a violet smudge at the base of his throat, above the open collar. Yesterday’s infusion. She could not remember whether she had asked him how it had gone.

On her way to work she stopped at the covered market. There was no need; the house ordered food without her assistance. She liked the market’s bad arrangements, the fruit too high to reach. An old man sold flowers from a bucket marked NOT FOR HUMAN CONTACT. His carnations were the best in the district.

At the bread stall a woman caught her wrist.

“Mrs Marr.”

She was perhaps fifty, with a narrow face and flour on one shoulder. The hand about Celia’s wrist was warm. It held on after the greeting should have been over.

“I wanted to speak to you. I wasn’t able to. They moved us through so quickly.”

Celia smiled with the caution necessary when one had spent twenty years in public law.

“You must forgive me.”

The woman looked closely at her.

“Nera Sen.”

Nothing. A client, feasibly, in one of the early bridge appeals. There had been hundreds.

Behind them somebody wanted to pay for two rolls. Nera stepped aside without taking her eyes off Celia. The flour on her shoulder was plaster; a fine grey powder caught in the weave.

“I don’t think—” Celia began.

“Are you here now?”

The question was so quietly spoken that Celia leaned towards her.

“What?”

“Nothing. I’m sorry.”

Nera withdrew her hand. A strip of paper remained against Celia’s palm, damp from the heat between them. On it were a name, an address in the east basin, and the words AFTER SIX. Written, not printed. The ink had bled through on one side.

The woman was already retreating between the stalls.

“I don’t understand,” Celia called.

Nera stopped, looking for a moment as if she might come back. Then she shook her head and went out into the sunlight.

Celia stood holding the paper. In the lane beyond the market two men in running clothes passed each other, each raising a hand to touch the same place beneath his ear. Neither appeared to see the other.

She turned the paper over. The address had been written on the back of a hearing notice. Most of it had been torn away, but the time remained: *Friday, 02:40*. Beside it was her name, followed by *Independent Witness*.

Friday meant tonight.

She checked her calendar. There was nothing there. Dr Saye could see her at seven; Celia took the appointment, folded the address exceedingly small, and put it in her purse.

II

At six Celia climbed the staircase above the repair room. It was so narrow that she had to turn her shoulders. At the top she stopped, although she had no need to catch her breath.

Nera opened before she knocked.

“You came.”

“You asked me to.”

The room contained a bed folded into a cabinet, a table, three chairs, and a large plant standing in a tub of grey water. The leaves facing the window were brown along their edges; the others were thick and glossy. On the table stood a photograph of a young man balancing a spoon on his nose. Someone’s laughing mouth occupied the lower corner.

“Milo,” Nera said. “My son.”

She brought a viewer from a drawer. It was connected to an old power pack by a lead which had been repaired with tape. She had to bend the lead before the picture held.

“My sister works in the office. I wasn’t supposed to have this.”

A room painted a soft, expensive yellow. Milo sat at one side of a desk. Celia sat opposite him, wearing a linen suit she had ordered for a holiday and never remembered using. A clock on the wall read 02:16.

“Milo, do you feel safe here?”

“Yes.”

His voice was low and slightly blurred.

“Would you like your rehabilitation to continue?”

“Yes.”

“Can you show us that choice?”

He lifted his right hand and opened it, palm towards the camera.

Celia lifted hers.

“Thank you. We have a witnessed affirmative response.”

From somewhere beyond the picture came Nera’s voice.

“Milo. Look at me.”

The boy turned. He smiled.

“He doesn’t smile like that,” Nera said beside the table.

In the recording Celia reached forward and touched his wrist. Her thumb settled just above the pulse.

“Sometimes the people who love us find our progress frightening,” she said.

Nera stopped the viewer. The hand remained where it was.

“I was asleep.”

“So was he.”

“You knew?”

“I knew he wasn’t there. I thought you were.”

Celia could still feel the warmth of Nera’s hand around her wrist. She asked how long Milo had been in treatment.

“Eight months. We waited nineteen.”

He had fallen through a grating at the outer cooling banks, crushing two vertebrae. He was twenty-four. At first he had come home every weekend, and stood at the kitchen doorway for no reason except that he could stand there. Once he carried the plant to the sink. It had belonged to Nera's mother; she had been complaining about its weight for years.

"He knew about the work," she said. "Don't tell me he signed. He made me read every page. I did."

"I wasn't going to."

"You did last time."

Celia moved her hand away from the viewer.

Nera said that lately he had trouble accounting for a day. His body cleared the city's reed beds and lifted the screens out of the cooling channels. He slept through the work. The hours were entered as rehabilitation and paid towards his bridge. He might remember breakfast, the taste of something he disliked, then find himself washing a fork after supper. He wanted her to ask who chose his meals. The food was good; that was the answer she had been given.

"He came home with a new shirt. He said it fitted, but he couldn't think whether he liked it."

She opened the cabinet and took out the shirt. Plain blue, soft from washing, still folded around the board supplied by the laundry. Celia remembered choosing Adrian's clothes when he was too ill to care. Nera put the shirt back.

"He said it was like being put in a cupboard. Only whenever he came out somebody had shaved him."

"Did he tell them?"

Nera pointed at the stopped picture.

"This was because he told them."

Nera took a bus ticket from beneath the photograph. His day attendant had brought it to her at five. It was for that afternoon, bought during Milo's last waking interval. On the blank back he had written that he would be home by four.

"He tried to get on," she said. "They brought him back from the stop."

Celia read the ticket. It carried a second mark, added after purchase: *Journey surrendered*. The time was sixteen twenty.

"He was asleep by then."

"May I?"

Nera gave her the receiver. Celia called the number on the ticket and asked for the authorisation. The man sent it while she waited: the ticket's reference beside a photograph of an open palm.

"Can you restore the journey?"

"No. That departure has passed."

She was still holding the receiver when Nera took the ticket back and folded it with Milo's writing on the outside.

Below the window another bus opened its doors. Celia could hear somebody counting people aboard.

Nera handed her an envelope.

"The rest of the notice," Nera said. "I kept the pages about him."

Celia found the room number and the time she had been carrying all day. Nera had included the allocation notice being appealed. Its last page bore the same open palm.

"Can you stop it?"

"I can go."

"Will you be there?"

She looked up.

“Yes.”

Nera held out the viewer, then pulled it back and detached the small memory tab. She put the tab in the envelope. The flap remained open.

At the foot of the stairs Celia stopped beside the window of the repair room. Someone had left a small lamp on over the bench. She drew the allocation notice out of the open envelope and read it in that light.

Up to twenty-two hours in every twenty-four. The remaining intervals would be allocated according to tolerance. Family access was guaranteed.

Above her a floorboard creaked. She put the notice away before Nera could come to the landing.

III

By seven she was back at the institute. It had been a hotel in the years when visitors came to see the river. The river had since changed colour and the visitors had changed their reasons, but the entrance still possessed the tall, faintly mournful grandeur of somewhere intended for people with luggage.

At the reception desk a woman offered Celia chilled water. Above her stood a bronze figure of a running man. The sculptor had omitted the head.

“I would like my record for last night.”

“Of course. How did you find your recovery?”

“The record, please.”

“It should already be in your account.”

“The complete record.”

The receptionist's smile altered by a degree too small to call a change. Celia recognised the adjustment. She herself had taught officials to make it when a citizen used the word *complete*.

Dr Saye received her in a room overlooking the training court. Below the window, three sleepers moved on treadmills. Their eyes were open. A suspended cradle followed each person's centre of gravity. At the far end a silver-haired man performed an exact, unhurried series of squats. His slack lips gave him the look of someone listening to disagreeable music from another room.

Celia laid Nera's memory tab on the desk.

"Did you know about this?"

Saye played enough to see the yellow room. Her hands were small and broad, the nails cut square. One rested beside the viewer while Celia's recorded voice asked Milo to show his choice.

"The civic hearings aren't under my supervision."

"But I am."

The doctor stopped the recording.

Celia took back the tab.

"Adrian says I was at home."

Saye opened the previous night's record.

"What does he remember?"

"Something about a cup."

The doctor turned the screen towards her.

It showed their kitchen from above the refrigerator. Celia recognised the chipped bowl in which Adrian kept his tablets. She had bought him a better one; he used it for loose change.

He was sitting at the table, wearing the clothes she had seen him put on yesterday. Celia stood behind him. Her hand rested at the back of his neck. She saw her thumb move just inside his collar, a slow stroke repeated in the same small space.

“You needn’t hold on to everything,” she heard herself say.

He put down the cup. After a moment he reached back, feeling for her wrist.

“You don’t have to stay.”

“I love you, you idiot.”

Celia reached across the desk and stopped the recording. The hand remained on Adrian’s neck.

“Where did it get that?”

“The operator works from your own responses.”

“I didn’t say it.”

Saye glanced towards the screen.

“It wouldn’t be inventing that.”

Celia turned the screen a little farther away. In the glass she could see part of her own reflection, cut off below the nose.

The doctor brought up a consent panel. *Household continuity*. Celia’s signature was beneath it.

IV

It was after eight when she reached home. Adrian was in the room he still called his workshop, although the clay had dried in its bins and most of the shelves held medicines. Before he became ill he had made bowls, unfashionable heavy things which seemed to have been excavated rather than designed. Celia kept the imperfect ones.

He was cleaning a potter’s tool with a cloth.

“You might have told me.”

He laid the tool down.

“I thought you knew.”

“You thought I knew I was coming here unconscious and pretending to be your wife?”

He shut his eyes. The word *wife* had been too loud.

“You weren’t pretending.”

She put her purse on the bench, dislodging an old curl of clay. It broke against the floor.

“How long has it been happening?”

“Since the treatment started again.”

“You never mentioned it.”

“I did. You didn’t always want to talk about it.”

She could not remember. He was looking at her, waiting, and she asked another question.

“What do I do?”

“On Tuesday I was sick in the bathroom. You helped me clean up. Then we sat in the kitchen.”

“For two hours?”

“For some of it.”

“You can ask me to do those things.”

“Can I?”

“Adrian.”

“I’m not saying you wouldn’t. You would. You have. But afterwards you must get up, and you have appointments, and then you come home and I ask again. I can see you working out how much there is left of the day.”

He spoke without bitterness. She wished he had made an accusation she could answer.

“So this is better?”

“Some nights.”

Downstairs, the house was drawing water into the heat exchanger. A pipe knocked three times, a fault Celia had been asking someone to repair for months. Adrian lifted his head at each knock as though someone were at the door.

“Were you going to thank Continuance?” she asked. “Or did you think I deserved the credit?”

“I wanted to thank you. I was pleased to see you.”

She sat on the stool beside his bench.

There were things about her illness she had not told him. How she had resented his competence, the gentle way he lifted her from the chair, his knowledge of precisely which objects lay beyond her reach. Once, in the hospital, he had helped her put on a stocking and she had called him a word she had not used since she was a child. He had continued fitting the heel. She remembered that more painfully than anything he might have said.

“Does it sound like me?”

“Usually.”

“When doesn’t it?”

He considered this with an honesty she regretted inviting.

“It doesn’t look at the clock.”

She reached across the bench. He let her take his hand, but did not put down the cloth. After a little while she let go.

She told him about Milo and the hearing. In describing it she found herself using the passive voice, and had to start again.

“I held his wrist. I told his mother she was frightened of his progress.”

“I was going to send you back the first time,” he said. “The attendant told me you were asleep.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I had been alone for an hour. I felt sick. You came in and put your hand on the back of my neck. I thought perhaps some part of you had wanted to do it.”

“I may have to give up the bridge,” she said.

He glanced down at her shoes.

“A chair again?”

“Yes.”

“All right.”

She kept her feet on the rung of the stool.

“We still have the ramps for the garden steps,” he said.

He had kept them in the storage room, although she had insisted that they ought to be given away. She had been irritated by his reluctance then. She had wanted the space for a cabinet.

“They’re behind the boxes. The long ones.”

“Do you want me to stay?”

“Yes.”

She looked at him.

“Go anyway,” he said.

In the study she booked a nurse for the night and tried to cancel the domestic interval, scheduled between half past midnight and one forty-five.

Her account listed fourteen intervals in the previous month, totalling twenty-three hours; the last had run eleven minutes over, under *Respiratory settling*.

The interface required her to identify an alternative provider. She entered her own name. A message advised that the nominated person was already fulfilling the role.

Underneath it was an earlier Continuance notice, forwarded by Adrian: *Neighbourhood assurance*. There was a picture of two hands and an unopened attachment. She remembered him asking whether she had seen it. She had said they already paid for enough things. He had replied that this one was included.

The bell rang. The night nurse introduced herself as Helen and gave Celia her registration number. Celia entered it as the alternative provider. This time the cancellation went through. Tonight her body would not come home between the institute and the hearing.

Adrian was explaining where they kept the cups, how to open the kitchen drawer without waking him. Celia waited for him to finish, then went back upstairs.

V

The law was in a blue volume on her study shelf. The printed Act ended before the regulations she needed.

In the archive, her name brought up a consultation history. Support could be extended to meet an increased demand on the household. In an earlier version, *demand* had been *burden*. Her replacement had been accepted.

Farther down was the clause admitting a witness through a licensed operator. Her name was in the consultation margin there too.

The rest of her record arrived at nine: in a file from a cooling house, a man's bare heel rested against the hollow of her elbow while someone took his other leg.

She closed it before they began to move and called Saye's private number with the receiver held in both hands.

VI

At a quarter to ten the civic entrance would not admit her. Celia laid the hearing notice against the reader, then her wrist. The glass gate stayed shut.

Rusk, the director of the night hearings, came down and read the notice.

“This admits the operator.”

“Let me attend awake.”

“That requires an order from the daytime chair. Nobody here can issue one.”

“Call her.”

He called in front of her. They heard the recorded office hours. Nine in the morning.

“They are deciding whether he can be awake,” Celia said.

Rusk glanced at the guard. He lowered his voice.

“My father went for ten months without recognising me. He was awake for every minute he could manage. I don’t know what you want me to say about the value of that.”

She took the notice back. In the glass her reflected foot was already set forward.

At half past ten Saye took her through a side entrance to the institute. In the fitting room a drawer stood open on several old controller cuffs.

“And if I don’t go?” Celia asked.

“They’ll use the next witness.”

The doctor closed the door. She took a cuff from a box at the back of the drawer. A red seal ran through its clasp. The label said *Observation withdrawn*.

“You used one here once. Do you remember?”

She did. The indignity of having her foot set down exactly where she had been trying to put it, a moment too soon. She remembered telling Saye not to make her do it again.

“Will I be able to speak?”

“It is for observation.”

Saye clipped the seal. She left the red tab in the tray while she copied the equipment number onto a form and signed beneath it.

Through the partition came the soft whine of a winch taking someone’s weight. Celia pulled up her sleeve.

The cuff had a lever she did not remember. Saye let her touch it before fastening the strap. It would not move far.

“Is that to stop it?”

“It disconnects. That’s what the hearing system will see.”

“And then?”

“I don’t know what they’ll do.”

Celia tried to reach the lever with her little finger. The tip touched its edge and slid away.

“The operator can’t move that finger,” Saye said. “You can.”

She fitted a short extension to the lever.

“Try now. Hold it.”

Her finger began to shake. Saye steadied her wrist, but the lever slipped free.

“If it disconnects, you’ll need the old bridge fitted again. There is a queue.”

“How long?”

“Weeks.”

Celia turned her wrist. This time her nail caught against the extension and bent. She pulled it away before it tore.

The doctor returned to the form. In the line for the reason, Saye wrote *left-hand deficit*.

“Could you put *observation*?” Celia asked.

Saye’s pen stayed above the line.

“Do you want this fitted tonight?”

Celia looked at the severed seal.

“Did you get Milo’s file?”

Saye folded the form over the red tab.

“He asked them to let him be frightened for a little longer.”

She took the form out of the room.

VII

Celia went home for an hour. It was almost midnight.

Helen had made soup. Adrian was asleep in the armchair by the garden doors, a blanket over his knees, his mouth slightly open. He had eaten; his bowl stood empty beside a second one waiting for Celia.

Celia ate in the kitchen. The soup was too hot, and she burned the roof of her mouth because she would not slow down. She sat over the bowl.

In the sitting room Adrian opened his eyes as she passed. She stopped at the door, then came back and kissed the violet mark above his collar. He smelled of soup, of the faint chemical sweetness that came through his skin after treatment. She had been married to him for twenty-six years and could still be startled by the fact that he was another living creature, temporary, warm under her mouth.

She told Helen where the ramps were. The nurse wrote it on a pad. Underneath were the times of Adrian’s medicines, and a note about which lamp he liked.

At the institute, a technician checked the old cuff against Saye’s order. Celia lay in a narrow bed while a sleeve tightened around her calves and small contacts touched the skin behind her ears.

Saye came in after the technician left. She checked the strap and asked Celia to move her little finger. It twitched against the extension.

“Will you be here?” Celia asked.

“I have a clinic in the morning.”

“Before that.”

“Call me.”

The doctor placed her hand on Celia’s shoulder. Then she withdrew it.

The lights dimmed. Celia heard water circulating under the bed, the controlled hissing of valves. From the room next door came a man’s brief, unguarded laugh, followed by silence.

VIII

She came back while her body was fastening a button.

It was a small pearl button at her throat. She felt the nail pass beneath the rim, the cloth draw taut, the neat adjustment of the collar. Her hands dropped to her sides.

She was standing before a mirror in a dressing room. Along the wall behind her, six other people were dressing. A woman in late middle age reached back to close a clasp without searching for it. A heavy man tucked in his shirt and smoothed the front of it with both palms. Celia knew him: Darven, who had chaired the water allocation board. He had once spent a dinner telling her that the public had lost its capacity for sacrifice. Tonight his tie was crooked. His hands returned to it and corrected the knot.

She wanted to look at the cuff. Her eyes remained on the mirror.

Look down.

Her face did not move. She could see the little hollow beneath her collarbone, the fastening she had just completed. She ordered her left hand to rise. Nothing happened. Then the hand rose of its own accord and brushed an invisible speck from her sleeve.

In the mirror she smiled.

The door opened. A woman in a blue uniform stood with her hand on the handle. Her badge read BELL, RECORDING OFFICER.

Darven and the woman beside him took a step backwards at the same instant. Celia felt her own heel lift and settle into line with theirs. She had heard no instruction.

Bell looked along the row of shoes. She made a mark on her list before entering the space they had cleared.

“Good evening,” Bell said. “Thank you for coming.”

“Good evening,” Celia answered.

Her voice travelled through her throat. She felt her tongue form the consonants, her breath leave at exactly the pressure required.

She tried to say no.

Her lips stayed gently together.

Bell checked the list she was carrying. She counted them, then counted again, lifting her eyes to each face. At Celia’s wrist she paused.

“Accommodation recorded,” Celia said.

Bell looked at the list and made a mark. She was wearing soft black shoes; the back of one had folded under her heel. Before opening the door she bent and pulled it up with a finger.

The group walked into the corridor. Celia’s body waited courteously while Darven went first. She felt the weight shift through her heels, the small compensating turn at her hip as another sleeper

passed. She had not known how much intelligent movement went into standing aside for someone one disliked.

They were in the civic building. She recognised the carpet from committee meetings, a dark pattern worn smooth down the middle. The route passed above the service court. Through a window she saw a vehicle unloading patients. A young woman was laughing as she helped someone out. Celia wanted to see the person, but her body had already turned away.

They entered a waiting room.

On the walls hung photographs of rehabilitated citizens carrying their children, gardening, dancing at weddings. At the far end a live display showed the basin's reed beds under maintenance lights. Figures moved among the channels. One worker stopped and passed a bundle to another. The second bent before the first had completed the movement. Celia could not see the faces well enough to tell whether Milo was among them.

Her body sat down. It crossed its legs.

The cuff was under her right hand.

She tried the finger. A fraction of movement. The lever's edge came against the nail and slipped away. At once her right hand adjusted its position, protecting the left wrist with a gentleness so exact that she felt an obscure gratitude before she could resent it.

The lever was out of reach again.

She could feel the seam beneath her thigh, the weight of her hair against her neck, the slight burn where soup had scalded her mouth. She drew a breath, or tried to. Her chest rose at its own pace. In the room someone coughed. She waited for the cough to end and tried again.

Across from her a woman leaned towards Darven.

"How is your daughter?"

"Very well. She starts at the northern school in autumn."

Her body uncrossed its legs. Both feet came flat to the floor. For a moment she thought she had made it happen. Then her hands moved to her knees, palms down, and she could no longer see the cuff at all.

Bell brought the attendance sheet. It required a mark in the space beside each name. Celia accepted the pen. She felt the barrel settle into the small hollow against her thumb, where she had held pens since childhood.

Her signature appeared. Even the final stroke was right, a line she had acquired as a girl and since found affected.

“Thank you.”

Her hand gave back the pen. She tried to follow it with her eyes. It disappeared into Bell’s pocket.

Water was offered. Celia drank. She had not realised she was thirsty until the water touched her mouth. When the glass was taken away a drop remained on her upper lip. She wanted to lick it off. It dried there.

At two thirty-nine Nera came through the far door with an attendant. She had put on a dark dress and tied her hair back. Without the loose hair about her face she looked older. There was a red mark where the handle of her bag had pressed into her palm.

Nera saw her. She almost smiled.

Celia tried to blink. Her face offered the calm welcome appropriate to an independent witness.

Nera’s expression closed.

IX

The yellow room was smaller than it had appeared in the recording. Artificial lavender stood on the desk, its saucer filled with water. Milo sat opposite Celia in a freshly pressed shirt. Only a bitten area beside one thumbnail resisted the impression of comprehensive care.

“Will my son be awake?” Nera asked.

The medical officer moved a wrapped sandwich behind his terminal before answering. His name, Ives, stood on the small plate beside it.

“His previous statements form part of the evidence. We will hear them first.”

Celia’s mouth opened.

“Please sit down, Mrs Sen. We will give you all the time you need.”

Her tone was the one she had used with frightened clients, carefully moderated so as not to seem impatient. Nera sat, but not until the hearing attendant had drawn back his hand from the chair.

Darven was on her right. To her left sat the woman who had asked after his daughter: Lise Anholt, an insurance commissioner. Bell had the smaller desk near the door. The attendance sheet lay beside her keyboard; the pen was in her pocket.

Ives activated the record. Milo appeared on the wall behind him, wearing a different shirt. This Milo had a small spot at the corner of his mouth and kept running his tongue over it.

“State your preferred outcome,” a voice said.

“I want to go home. I want to stay there. I bought a ticket.”

“Would you prefer to lose function?”

He looked towards someone outside the picture.

“I would prefer you to stop asking it that way.”

Ives touched the screen. The 02:16 recording appeared, cropped to Milo’s open palm.

“He wasn’t awake,” Nera said.

Ives turned to Celia.

“Your case established the principle. Would you clarify it?”

Her body sat a little straighter.

“An act shall not be denied effect solely because assistance was required to express the person’s choice.”

She heard the sentence in the cadence with which she had read it aloud while it was being revised. A pause after *effect*. A slight emphasis on *solely*, to leave the door open for exceptions she had been required to concede.

The cuff lay against the edge of the desk. Celia drew her little finger inward while the other four lay flat. It found the lever. She pressed until the tip began to throb. Her thumb moved across the desk, lightly stroking the wood. It did not help her hold on.

Her body shifted its weight in the chair and the lever came free.

“Milo,” Nera said. “Do you remember the plant? I moved it away from the window. It got burned.”

The boy turned towards her.

“You should use the curtain in the afternoons.”

“I know.”

“I can move it when I come home.”

“What happened to your ticket?” Nera asked.

“You came for me.”

“I didn’t.”

Nera pressed her lips together. There was a little grease at the edge of his bitten nail, or perchance a shadow. She reached towards it, then stopped.

“You asked me not to let you say yes.”

Celia’s body leaned forward. Her hand travelled towards Nera’s.

She had time to feel the movement begin and time to dread where it would end. Her fingers closed around the woman’s wrist, firmly enough to keep it still, gently enough to leave no mark.

“Sometimes the people who love us—”

“Take your hand off me.”

The words were so sharp that Darven turned his head.

Celia let go. Her hand returned to the desk, palm down. Nera drew her own hand into her lap and rubbed the place where it had been held.

Ives touched his terminal.

“I think we should proceed to the question.”

He spoke to Milo. The boy lifted his head. His body opened its right hand, and the display recorded an affirmative response.

Then Ives turned towards the panel.

“Having considered the available evidence, do you affirm that the proposed support implements Mr Sen’s established preference for functional recovery?”

Celia’s arm began to rise.

The cuff shifted as her wrist extended. The lever settled against the pad of her little finger.

She curled it.

Her other fingers opened. The hand presented itself to the camera, graceful despite the old deficit. On the desk a green light appeared beneath her name.

She held the lever. Her finger hurt with an intensity out of proportion to the force she was exerting. Her arm began to lower. The lever moved with it; she thought she had lost it, pressed harder, felt the nail catch against the strap. Ives’s hand reached for the terminal. There was

something she ought to be doing about the green light. Her finger had become a single hot point against the mechanism.

The cuff clicked.

Her legs vanished from her balance. She slumped sideways, catching the edge of the desk with a hand whose freedom arrived as a clumsy scrape of nails. Her mouth would not work. For an instant she could only draw in air.

“I—”

Ives stood. Darven’s hand came out to steady her. She shoved it away, too hard, almost falling from the chair.

“I do not agree.”

“Bridge failure. Suspend the witness’s feed.”

The picture of her palm remained above her name. Bell’s hands stopped over the keyboard.

“I said I do not agree.”

Celia tried to brace her feet against the floor. Neither shoe moved. The hearing attendant caught her under the arms; she could feel him taking the weight she had been able to carry that morning.

“Record my dissent.”

“The response was completed before the equipment failure,” Ives said.

Nera stood up.

“She said no.”

He moved the water towards her. She pushed it away and knocked it over. Bell caught the attendance sheet before the water reached it.

“Your pen,” Celia said to Bell.

Ives asked the attendant to get a trolley. The man settled Celia against the back of her seat before letting go.

“The pen. Please.”

Bell took it from her pocket and laid the sheet on a dry part of the desk. Celia’s name was near the top, followed by the signature she had watched herself make. Her left hand would not hold the corner flat; Bell put two fingers on it.

Celia wrote beneath the signature: *I did not choose the response recorded in my name.*

She read the sentence aloud. Then she signed again. The last stroke ran downhill, colliding with the printed line below.

“That goes with this hearing.”

Ives read it from where he stood.

“Save it under signs of distress.”

Bell laid the paper beneath the reader. On the screen Celia’s two signatures were almost touching.

Bell entered the spoken words beside the scan. A tone sounded. She read the message and reached for her badge.

“You’re withholding certification,” Ives said.

“I can’t certify the record with this entered as distress.”

“The appeal will have to stay open,” Ives said. “He’ll have to be released from directed service until six.”

Bell held the badge against the reader. The tone ceased. Her name appeared beside *Certification withheld.*

Ives turned to the attendant at the door.

“Arrange a family transfer for Mr Sen. His bridge stays paired.”

Nera had her hand on Milo's shoulder. He was looking at her with the polite interest he had shown throughout. She did not ask Celia whether she had stopped it.

Ives faced Bell again.

"You'll have to account for this."

"Those are the words she said."

Celia's open palm was still glowing above her name.

X

The attendant had lifted her into Saye's car and laid her coat across her knees. Her face had been pressed against his shoulder while he asked her to tell him if anything hurt.

Saye was looking at the skin where the cuff had been.

"The cuff?"

Celia gave her the receipt. The equipment had been retained for examination. Saye's name was printed beside the serial number.

The doctor read it, folded it into her pocket, and asked Celia to follow a light.

XI

At home Adrian was standing beside the front window. He opened the level street door while Saye unfolded a clinic wheelchair on the pavement. Helen helped her settle Celia into it.

"You've brought the small chair," he said.

"Will it fit?"

"It fits. The big one never did."

He reached for the coat where it had caught in the wheel. His hand shook. Celia held still until he freed it.

After Saye left, they sat in the kitchen while Helen made tea. Adrian asked her to repeat something because he had not heard it. She began again, more slowly.

Helen brought his cup. He held it with both hands for a while, then let Celia set it down. She placed it close enough that he would not have to turn.

At six twelve Nera called.

“He’s asking for his old chair,” she said. “He wants the bridge taken off. Who can do that?”

Celia held the receiver closer.

“Nera—”

“I have to go.”

The connection ended. Celia kept the receiver against her cheek for a moment, then set it down.

The morning was still cool. Adrian wanted to go outside before the sun reached the path. Helen unfolded his wheelchair and fetched the old ramps for the garden steps. Celia waited while she fitted them: two strips of scuffed metal, a little grit caught in the hinges.

Adrian wheeled himself down first. Celia followed, awkwardly, favouring her right arm. At the gate her wheel caught on a stone. She swore and tried again. Beside her, Adrian drew breath.

“Don’t,” she said.

“I haven’t said anything.”

“You were going to.”

“I was enjoying not saying it.”

Beyond the garden the path curved along the reed beds. Workers were coming up from the night shift. One stopped to empty a shoe; another waited, looking across the river. A bus was standing beside the service gate with its doors open.

The smell from the beds was stronger at ground level. She had forgotten that.

They moved slowly. Adrian's shoulders tired first, and they stopped beside a bench where the paving was even.

Adrian put his hand on the low wall. She laid hers beside it, their fingers touching.

Along the path, a group of runners came into view. There were nine or ten of them, their clothes hanging correctly from bodies which never missed their training. One woman was speaking to the man beside her; he smiled, his breath falling easily between her words. Celia recognised him from a fundraiser. She had forgotten his name.

The runners approached the bend.

At precisely the same instant, every head turned towards her.

Half a beat later she felt Adrian's fingers tighten.