

I'M A WRITER

A novella

ADRIAN MOON

6:07 A.M.

There are mornings when the blank page looks white, and mornings when it looks lit from behind.

At 6:07 on the second of October it had the hard electrical brightness of an interrogation room. I had been sitting in front of it for nineteen minutes, though this is the sort of precision that makes a lie look honest, and I should say at once that I had not spent all nineteen minutes attempting to write. I had spent six minutes reading the same message from Pamela Kearns, four minutes looking at the rainless gray over the courtyard, perhaps three thinking about coffee, and the remainder moving a cursor from the first line of a document to the second and back again, as though the correct opening of a novel might be located by patrol.

Pamela's message had arrived at 5:41.

One chapter by midnight. Not notes about a chapter. Not an argument for why the chapter is difficult. One chapter I can send upstairs tomorrow and defend. I have defended you for six years, Richard. Give me something to defend.

There was no cruelty in it, which made it crueler.

Once, Pamela had written me at three in the morning from Frankfurt to say that she had just finished my first novel in a hotel bath because the room's chair was designed by a sadist and she had missed her flight while reading the last fifty pages. Once, she had walked out of an acquisitions meeting with my second book under her arm and told three men older than either of us that if they wanted something less strange they were welcome to buy something less good. Once she had used the phrase career book about a manuscript that became, after two years of rewriting and three months of sales, the kind of book that reviewers called elegant when they meant that no one had bought it.

I had not delivered a new manuscript in four years.

I had delivered outlines. I had delivered fragments. I had delivered a thirty-seven-page letter about why the novel I had not written needed to resist the false satisfactions of plot. Pamela, who had once loved a sentence of mine enough to miss an airplane, had replied: Richard, I am asking for the plot.

Now she wanted one chapter.

I looked at the page and thought, as I had thought every morning for some months, I'm a writer.

The sentence had once been a fact. Then it became a reassurance. Recently it had become something more like an alibi.

Across the courtyard, in the opposite wing of the old factory, a curtain moved.

Our building had been a biscuit works before it became expensive enough to be called historic. Four brick wings made a hollow square around a courtyard too narrow for trees and too wide for intimacy, though we had all achieved intimacy by looking. The windows faced one another at a distance that allowed you to know who rose early, who smoked, who slept in separate rooms, who stood naked at the refrigerator at two in the morning believing darkness was privacy. I knew the habits of twelve apartments better than I knew the names of the people in them.

Johanna Norris lived almost exactly opposite me, one floor down. I knew her name.

That requires saying because later I said I barely knew her, and there are statements that remain technically true only because language can be made to stand between an action and its proper name.

Her kitchen light came on.

She stood at the window.

At first what I saw was simply her face: pale in the weak morning, hair pulled back badly, one side of it loose. Then she raised her left hand to the latch and I saw the red on the sleeve of her cream-colored blouse.

Not a great deal of red. A handprint, perhaps, or a smear. It began below the elbow and darkened toward the cuff. I remember thinking paint before I remember thinking blood, which later seemed to me proof of decency, as if innocent explanations occurred only to innocent minds.

Johanna looked down into the courtyard.

Then she looked up.

At me.

There are accidental meetings of the eye through glass, and there are looks with verbs in them. Hers was the second kind.

She did not start. She did not lift a hand. She did not make the little embarrassed smile people make when caught living in view of others.

She looked directly at my window for perhaps two seconds.

Then she stepped back.

My first impulse was to stand. I did not.

My second was to go to the glass. I did that, but slowly, and not, I told myself, because slowness could make me invisible.

Johanna's kitchen was empty.

The cursor blinked behind me.

I had known her, if that is the word, for eleven months. She and Angelo Roth had moved into 3F the previous November. He was older by perhaps eight years, though his body had the compact impatience of a younger man. He restored furniture for people who used restoration as a form of conspicuous virtue. He could identify walnut from ash at a distance and had once repaired the broken arm of a courtyard bench without asking the building manager because, he said, ugly damage invited more damage. He laughed loudly, cooked with too much garlic, and remembered the names of delivery men.

He had also, I knew, a way of asking Johanna where she had been that made the geography sound criminal.

This is the sort of sentence I can write now.

At 6:09 I was not writing it.

I was watching their window.

Something moved in the apartment behind the kitchen. A shadow passed. There was a noise I could not hear through my own glass but could infer from the abruptness with which Johanna reappeared. She crossed the kitchen, took a towel from a hook, and pressed it to her sleeve. Her face was turned away.

I thought of calling her.

I had her number.

This also requires saying.

The number was stored under J. Norris because at some point, months earlier, I had decided that using only an initial made our acquaintance appropriately neighborly. That may be one of the more exact portraits of me available: a man capable of editing the moral implications of a contact list.

The first message in the thread was mine: Welcome to the aquarium. She had answered, Which of us is the fish? I had liked her for that and, apparently, filed the liking somewhere less compromising than memory.

Before I could decide whether calling would be an intrusion, Angelo came into view.

He carried a black canvas overnight bag in his right hand. He had on a navy coat over a white shirt, the shirt open at the throat. His left hand was wrapped in what looked like a dish towel. He stopped beside Johanna, said something. She did not answer, or answered without turning. He put the bag on the counter, opened it, placed something flat inside, then zipped it closed.

For one instant he faced the courtyard and I could see his expression.

Anger is too general a word. He looked affronted. There are people who become most dangerous when they believe themselves wronged, and people who become most ridiculous. Angelo, I had thought before, possessed the gift of being both.

He picked up the bag.

Johanna turned then. Her mouth moved.

He smiled.

She did not.

He left the kitchen.

At 6:18—yes, I checked, because I had begun by then to behave as if time itself were material—Angelo emerged from the far wing into the courtyard. He crossed toward the passage that led to the street, the black bag bumping his leg. He had changed the towel on his left hand for a white bandage. Near the archway he stopped to say something to Gabriel, the building's superintendent, who was carrying a collapsed cardboard box toward the recycling room. Gabriel laughed. Angelo did not. He went out.

Alive.

I knew he was alive because I saw him walking, which is one of those tautologies that later acquires the weight of testimony.

Johanna returned to the window at 6:20.

No blood was visible now. She had changed into a dark sweater.

She looked toward my window again.

This time I stepped back before she could know whether I was there.

I stood in the middle of my study with my heart behaving absurdly.

Call her, I thought.

Call the police, another part of me said, and this seemed so excessive that the first thought became contaminated by the second. Police? For what? A red sleeve? A bandaged hand? A married couple having an argument at an hour when married couples were statistically entitled to have arguments? The imagination is an excellent servant and a vulgar authority. A novelist who called emergency services every time reality resembled a scene would spend his life apologizing to dispatchers.

Besides, Angelo had just walked out.

Alive.

I sat down.

The blank page shone.

I typed:

At six eleven in the morning, the woman across the courtyard washed blood from her sleeve while her husband packed a bag.

I read the sentence.

I changed six eleven to six eighteen.

Then I changed it back.

The first time was more elegant.

I stared at the line until the shame of having written it became indistinguishable from the pleasure of having written anything at all.

Then I opened a second document and called it NOTES OCT 2.

6:07 J at window. red on left sleeve, looks directly here.

6:18 A leaves w black canvas bag, left hand bandaged.

6:20 J back at window, changed clothes.

I saved the document.

Not for the police.

For the book.