APOTHEOSIS

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Preface

On a hill stands a hospice with twenty-two beds and one room at the end of a corridor that people talk about more than the others.

You can read this book as nothing more than that: a story of a young nurse, a tired priest, a woman with herbs, and the men and women who come there to die. There is bad coffee and fluorescent light, small jokes, old fears, and hands held at inconvenient hours. If that is all you are looking for, it is enough.

Some readers, though, will feel something else under the floorboards. Certain numbers will catch your eye. A corridor will feel more familiar than it should. A dream about a river or a door may stir something you do not have a name for.

If that happens, let it.

This is not a map or a set of instructions. It is only a story about what can happen when people stop looking away from death, and from themselves, and stay in the room a little longer than is comfortable. If you are already on that path, you may recognise a few turns.

Walk it as you would walk a hospice corridor at night: quietly, attentively, without demanding answers too quickly. The doors will open, or not, in their own time.

Prologue

On the night Miriam Armitage died, the room learned how to listen.
It was not yet called St. Gabriel's Hospice. The brass letters outside still read *Home for the Dying*, and the sign on the road up the hill simply said **72** in chipped white paint. The building was young then, its bricks still too red, corridors too bright, staff too eager to pretend they weren't afraid.
The number on the door was straight in those days: **27**, nailed firmly into place.
Inside, Miriam lay propped up on thin pillows, coughed once, and smiled at the crack in the ceiling.
"It will be enough," she whispered to the empty room.
The nurse who checked on her at nine o'clock heard only the word *enough* and thought she meant the morphine. She adjusted the drip, smoothed the blanket, and tried not to stare at the objects on the bedside table that weren't supposed to be there.
A worn leather notebook.
A small wooden cross.
A stone the color of river mud, polished by years of handling.
No flowers. Miriam had refused them.
"They cling," she had said the week before, when a friend tried to bring roses. "Let everything that wants to stay, stay. Let everything else go."
She had spoken calmly, as if discussing weather.
Outside, the wind moved over the hill, pushing at the trees. Inside, the air in Room 27 felt unnaturally still, like a held breath. The night nurse would swear later that the beeping machines in the other rooms sounded softer when she walked past that door, as if sound itself stepped carefully around whatever was happening inside.
Miriam waited until the corridor lights dimmed and the hospice settled into its uneasy quiet. She was eighty in her file, seventy-two in the truth she counted, shaving off the wasted years. Her hair, once dark, was drawn

back in a loose knot. Her hands were veined and narrow, the fingers still elegant despite the swelling at her knuckles.

She turned her head slowly, facing the small window. Beyond it, Gabriel's Hill fell away into the town: streetlamps, scattered headlights, the occasional barking dog. Life moving on without her. She watched until the familiar ache rose in her chest, then let her gaze slide back to the blank wall opposite the bed.

She was alone now. The nurses had their rounds, the other patients their nightmares. The priest had visited earlier, offering prayer. She accepted politely and received the prayers with a soft smile and a very present silence. The priest told the nurse that he wasn't sure if he blessed her or that she blessed him. Friends from the old days had stopped coming weeks ago. It was better this way.

Some work must be done in solitude.

She drew a shallow breath and began.

Not out loud, at least not at first. The words lived inside her, worn smooth by decades of repetition. Fragments of Psalms. Snatches of strange names she'd learned in dim rooms with closed curtains. A line from a Rosicrucian tract. A sentence from a Theosophical lecture scribbled once in the margin of a notebook. A childhood prayer her mother had taught her at the kitchen table.

She threaded them together carefully, like beads.

"In the name of the One Light that is many…"

"In the name of the Love that wears all faces…"

"In the name of the Breath that enters and departs…"

Her lips moved now, but only a whisper passed them. The room leaned closer.

She felt it: the slow, invisible settling of something around her bed. Not a presence, not quite. More like a pattern. As if the air were remembering. As if every exhale she had ever given in this room had left a trace, and now all those traces were weaving themselves into a single shape.

Miriam let her thoughts dip below the surface of the words. She saw, with the tired clarity of someone who has looked too long at both darkness and light, the pieces of her life arranged like pages on the bedspread.

There she was as a young woman in London, hands ink-stained, copying diagrams of the Tree of Life into a cheap notebook.

There she was in a borrowed robe, standing in a circle of candles, taking oaths she half-understood and wholly believed.

There she was years later, leaving the Order with a small suitcase, heart

cracked by politics and pettiness and the realization that people could chase heaven and still be cruel.

There she was in a hospital waiting room, too late to say goodbye to a man she had loved badly and left too abruptly.

There she was at another bedside, holding the hand of a dying stranger because no one else had come.

Light and shadow. Knowing and not knowing. Pride and guilt. All laid out like cards.

"I tried," she told the ceiling softly. "You know I tried."

The room understood only that her voice shook.

Pain crawled up her chest, a dull, determined pressure. She rode it out, breathing through her teeth until the worst of it passed. Her hand groped for the stone on the bedside table and closed around it. Warm now. Familiar.

"Listen," she said, not to the stone, not to the room, not even to the God she had chased through so many languages. "If I cannot finish, let this place help them. Let it be…easier. Softer. Let them have the courage I lacked."

It was the closest she could come to confession.

The first shadow rose just after midnight.

It didn't come from under the bed or out of the wardrobe, and it didn't look like anything a child would draw. It began inside her: a thought, an old shame, a memory she had managed never to look at fully. For a moment it was only a sensation, a pressure at the back of her mind, the taste of metal on her tongue.

Then it spread.

On the wall opposite her, a shape darkened. It looked like a woman at first, someone her age, head bowed, shoulders stiff. Then it shifted, becoming two, then three: herself as a child, herself at thirty, herself last year, all layered and flickering. Each one carried something: a broken promise, an unkind word, a door slammed, a silence chosen when truth was required.

Her breath hitched. The words of her neat, constructed prayer scattered like scared birds.

"So," she whispered to the shadows. "You've found me."

They moved closer.

For a little while, she could not say how long, Miriam Armitage knew what it was to be devoured by her own life. Every unlooked-at moment she had hoped death would quietly erase came back with teeth. Faces of people she'd hurt. Faces of people she hadn't helped. Nights she called

devotion that had really been avoidance. Love offered, refused. Love withheld out of fear.

The room, which had never seen such a thing before, panicked.

The air thickened. The curtains shuddered though the window was closed. Down the corridor, another patient groaned in his sleep. A trolley rattled as a nurse walked past and slowed for no reason she could name, hand resting briefly on the door marked **27**.

Inside, Miriam clutched the stone so hard it dug crescents into her palm. "Not punishment," she gasped, to herself more than to anything else. "Purification. Let it burn. Let it all burn."

She didn't know if she believed that. But she said it anyway.

The shadows drew nearer until she could no longer tell where they ended and her body began. There was pain, but it was not like the pain in her chest. It was closer to honesty, or the tearing away of bandages left on too long.

Somewhere far off, a monitor beeped steadily. Somewhere nearer, a clock she could not see ticked past one, then two.

At some point, the exact moment vanished in the thick of it. The terror broke.

It didn't go gently. It fought, like something that had lived in her for decades and did not want to be evicted. It hurled its last images at her: the face of the man she had failed, the angry letters from her former brethren, the smallness of her rented rooms, the long years of being ordinary when she had once thought herself destined for greatness.

Then, quite suddenly, they weren't there.

The wall was only a wall. The ceiling was only a ceiling. Her body still hurt, but in a way she recognized now as purely physical. The true pain had been elsewhere, and that was easing.

Miriam exhaled. The breath went out of her like a tide withdrawing from the shore.

In the brief, clean silence that followed, she felt one last thing: not a vision, not a voice, but a knowing. Clear, simple, impossible to argue with. *You did not finish,* it said. *You did not fail.*

She tried to smile, but her face would not obey. Her hand slackened. The stone slipped from her fingers and rolled into the hollow between mattress and wall, forgotten.

The night nurse found her an hour later, mouth slightly open, eyes turned toward the window as if watching someone arrive.

They wrote down the time of death. They closed her eyes. They straightened the sheets. They removed the notebook and the cross and the cup on the bedside table. The stone stayed where it had fallen.

They did not write down the way the room felt different when they stepped back into the corridor. They did not have a box on the form for that.

Outside, Gabriel's Hill slept. Inside, Room 27 held its new pattern like a breath.

Years would pass. Signs would change. Staff would come and go. The crooked number on the door would loosen. Patients would arrive knowing nothing of Miriam Armitage, age seventy-two, who had tried to turn her death into a doorway.

But the room remembered.

And it was waiting.

PART

I

THE HOUSE OF THE THRESHOLD

Chapter 1
72 Gabriel's Hill

The taxi climbed the last bend of Gabriel's Hill with the slow determination of a tired animal. Anna pressed her forehead lightly against the window and watched the town fall away behind them, houses shrinking, streetlights thinning into scattered amber beads along the road.

"Number seventy-two, you said?" the driver asked.

"Yes. The hospice. On the hill."

He grunted, as if that explained something. For a moment she wondered what stories he had heard about this place, then decided not to ask.

The building appeared suddenly after a stand of trees, a square of brick and glass against the pale morning sky. Not large, not grand. The sign at the entrance was modest, metal letters fixed to a low wall.

St. Gabriel's Hospice
72 Gabriel's Hill

Someone had planted lavender and rosemary along the base of the sign. The bushes were leggy and overgrown, but when the car rolled past, she caught the faint clean smell through the open crack of the window.

The driver stopped near the front entrance. The automatic doors waited, closed and blank, reflecting the car and the grey sky.

"You sure this is where you want to be, miss?" he said, half joking, half not.

“It is,” Anna said. “Thank you.”

Her voice sounded steadier than she felt.

She paid, shouldered her bag, and stepped out. The air was cooler up here, with a sharper edge that smelled of wet earth and disinfectant drifting from somewhere inside. She stood for a moment under the jutting shelter of the entrance, staring at the glass doors and the faint shadow of her own face in them.

“Just go in,” she muttered. “You prayed for this.”

She had. Every night for weeks she had knelt beside her narrow bed in the little room she rented near the train station and asked God to send her somewhere she could be useful, somewhere she could do more than hand out leaflets after Sunday service. The acceptance letter from St. Gabriel’s had felt like an answer. A heavy one, but an answer.

The doors slid open as she approached, releasing a gust of conditioned air and the faint smell of coffee. Inside, the reception area was small and tidy, with two brown chairs, a low table scattered with outdated magazines, and a noticeboard pinned with family photos and handwritten thank you cards. A woman behind the desk looked up and smiled in a way that seemed both kind and very tired.

“You must be Anna,” she said. “First day, right?”

“Yes.” Her hand found the strap of her bag and squeezed it. “Intern. Nursing.”

“Welcome to St. Gabriel’s.” The woman’s badge read MARIA, ADMINISTRATION. “Monique will be with you in a minute. She runs the ward. Did you find us all right?”

“Yes. The driver knew the place.”

“They usually do.” Something flickered in Maria’s expression, there and gone. “You can leave your coat on that stand. And breathe. Everyone looks like you on their first day.”

Anna tried to laugh. It came out as a small sound that could have been agreement or apology. She hung her coat, smoothed her scrubs, and

touched the cross at her neck. Just a brush of fingertips against cool metal. Not a display. A reminder.

Footsteps approached from the corridor. A woman in dark blue scrubs appeared, pushing a trolley stacked with neatly folded sheets. Her hair was gathered into an unapologetic knot; a pen and a small notebook stuck out of her breast pocket. Her badge read MONIQUE LEWIS, HEAD NURSE.

“So,” Monique said, taking Anna in with one sharp, swift glance that felt like a complete inventory. “You are our new intern.”

“Yes. Anna Novak.”

Monique shifted the weight of the trolley with her hip and held out her hand. Her grip was warm and firm.

“Good. Come on then, Anna Novak. Welcome to the last stop before the mystery. Let me show you your battlefield.”

She said it lightly, but the word lodged in Anna’s chest. Battlefield. She followed anyway.

The main corridor smelt of floor polish, lukewarm soup, and something softer underneath that she could not name. The floors were a pale vinyl mottled to hide stains. The walls were hung with framed prints of landscapes, bridges, rivers, and stairs. Someone had chosen them with care, or perhaps had simply bought what was on sale; it was hard to tell.

“This,” Monique said, gesturing as they walked, “is not a hospital. We do some medical care, yes, we manage pain, we monitor, but mostly we try to make sure people are as comfortable as possible while life finishes what it started. We have twenty-two beds. Twenty-two lives at a time, give or take. You will probably try to remember them all. You will fail. That is all right.”

“Twenty-two,” Anna repeated softly.

“It is a good number. Manageable. Just enough to break your heart without breaking your back.”

They passed an open door. Inside, an old man sat in a chair by the window, a blanket over his knees, a television murmuring in the corner. A

young woman, maybe his daughter, sat on the edge of the bed knitting something in a bright green yarn. She did not look up as they went by.

“Rooms one to eight are near the nurses’ station,” Monique said. “The more stable patients, families in and out, lots of tea. Nine to sixteen down the west wing, quieter, a bit more complex care. Seventeen to twenty-two on the east side, past the kitchen. You will learn the faces first, then the names, then the medications. Do not worry about that today. Today you learn where the toilets are and how not to cry in front of everyone.”

Anna smiled despite herself.

“And if I fail at that?”

“You can cry in the staff toilet. It has seen much worse.”

They passed a small chapel, door open. Inside, a padded bench, a simple wooden cross on the wall, a votive candle stand with a few flickering lights. Anna glanced in as they walked, felt a brief strong urge to step inside and kneel, then kept moving. She would come back later, she promised herself. After she knew where everything was.

A side door opened onto the central garden. Monique paused, one hand on the push bar.

“We have a garden,” she said. “Very proud of it. You will bring people out here when the weather allows. You walk them around the path. Or you wheel them if they cannot walk. Round and round, like prayer beads. Good for everyone’s sanity. We will close the door for now, or we will never finish this tour.”

Anna caught a glimpse of green. A circular path of paving stones, a small tree in the middle, a wooden bench. Valerian and lavender grew in beds along the edge, pale flowers nodding in the breeze.

Back in the corridor, they continued. The air felt slightly cooler as they turned to the east wing. Monique moved with the ease and speed of someone who had walked these halls for years. Anna tried to remember the way, counting doors in her head without meaning to.

Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty.

At twenty-one, Monique slowed, almost imperceptibly. At twenty-two, she kept her gaze straight ahead. The corridor extended just a little further, past a fire extinguisher and a notice that read EMERGENCY EXIT, to one last door at the very end.

The plaque beside it read 27.

Anna frowned before she could stop herself.

“I thought there were twenty-two beds,” she said.

“There are,” Monique replied. “That one makes twenty-two.”

“But the number…”

“Old building. They renumbered the smaller rooms years ago, added some bathrooms, moved a wall. Accountants hate changing signs, so some numbers stayed. Do not worry about it. It is just a number.”

Her tone was neutral, but Anna noticed the way she did not look directly at the door as she said it.

The plaque was slightly crooked, one screw missing at the top so the little metal rectangle leaned to one side. Someone had stuck a small paper angel underneath it, wings spread, halo drawn in with blue ballpoint pen. The edges of the paper had yellowed and curled.

“That one,” Monique said, “we call the end room. It is closer to the nurses’ station than you think, because sound carries strangely along this corridor. There is a call bell that will ring whether the patient presses it or not. You will hear stories about it. Listen to them, then wash your hands and get back to work. That is my advice.”

Anna wanted to ask more, but Monique had already turned away.

“We will come back to that later,” she said. “For now, you have enough ghosts to meet among the living.”

They double back along the corridor. Anna glanced over her shoulder once. The door with its crooked 27 stood at the far end, the paper angel fluttering as if some invisible breath had moved past.

At the nurses' station, a low desk cluttered with files, clipboards, and a large tin of biscuits, another nurse was updating a chart. She looked up with a quick smile.

"This is Ruth," Monique said. "Ruth knows where everything is. If I am not around, ask her. If I am around, ask her anyway, she is faster."

Ruth waved with the pen.

"Welcome to the hill," she said. "Do you drink coffee?"

"Yes."

"Good. You will need it. If you say no, we put you straight in a bed and call the priest."

Anna laughed properly this time. The knot in her stomach loosened by a fraction.

They spent the next hour going through small things that did not feel small. Where the gloves were kept, how to log medication in the computer system, what to do if a patient fell, who to call in the night if a family member arrived in pieces. Anna tried to memorize it all, filling the little notebook she had brought with scribbles and arrows.

Names appeared and faded. Mr. Hansen in room three, likes his tea with too much sugar. Mrs. Clarke in room five, do not speak about her son unless she brings it up. A quiet woman in room seven who smiled without meeting anyone's eyes. A young man in room ten who listened to music on headphones and barely spoke at all.

Twenty-two beds, occupied by lives at various distances from their end. It was too much and not enough at the same time.

Toward midday, Monique led her to the staff kitchen, a cramped room with a kettle, a microwave, and a table scarred by years of mugs and elbows.

"You have a lunch break," she said. "Thirty minutes. Try to use it. If you do not, you will start resenting everyone who dares to die on your watch."

She poured coffee into two mismatched mugs and handed one to Anna.

“What do you think so far?”

“It feels smaller than I imagined,” Anna said. “For a place that does something so big.”

“Death is not big,” Monique replied. “Living is big. Death is small. It is the last step. The trouble is that we keep staring at it instead of the staircase.”

Anna sipped her coffee. It was bitter and hot and exactly what she needed.

“Why did you come here?” Monique asked.

The question surprised her. No one had asked it that directly at her interviews. They had asked about training, about grades, about empathy. Not about why she wanted to be in a building where everyone was either in the process of dying or helping someone who was.

“I thought…” Anna hesitated, choosing her words with care. “I thought if I worked somewhere like this, I might understand death better. People in my church talk about it all the time, but none of them have to stand next to a bed and watch it happen. I wanted to help. And I suppose I wanted to see if what I believe is still true when it is not just a sermon.”

Monique studied her for a long heartbeat.

“You will not understand it better,” she said at last. “You may fear it less. Or more. It changes every few months, in my experience. But you will become less surprised by it, and that is something. As for what you believe, you will find out soon enough what survives night shift.”

She said it without cruelty, just like a weather report.

“Why did you stay?” Anna asked.

“Because people insist on doing very human things at the last minute. They forgive, they confess, they tell bad jokes. Sometimes they eat ice cream for the first time in twenty years because their diet is over. I like to be there for that.” Monique shrugged. “Also, I am very good at this.”

Anna could imagine that. She could also imagine herself, in some future she could not yet see, saying the same thing.

After lunch, the day shifted. She helped Ruth change a bed while the patient sat in a chair, chatty and breathless, talking about her granddaughter's wedding. She watched Dr. Hart listen with sincere attention to a man who wanted to tell him, in detail, about his vegetable garden from five years ago. She fetched water, adjusted pillows, wrote down blood pressure readings with careful numbers.

At one point, as she charted a temperature, she became aware of a faint constant sound in the background. A soft recurrent ring, almost below hearing, like a distant bell. She looked up.

"Do you hear that?" she asked Ruth.

"Hear what?"

Anna listened harder. The sound faded, or she lost it. She shrugged and went back to the chart.

By late afternoon, her feet ached and her head felt full of a new kind of tiredness. Not the boredom of lectures or the simple fatigue of standing all day in a supermarket job. This was thinner and stranger, as if the weight of other people's waiting had settled on her shoulders.

When she finally stepped outside again, the light was already changing. The sun hovered low over the town below, roofs catching a brief flash of gold before sinking into shadow. The sign by the road glowed faintly in that light, the metal letters of St. Gabriel's Hospice softer now, the number 72 clear and ordinary.

From here, the hospice did not look like a battlefield. It looked like a square, steady house on a hill, doing its quiet work while the rest of the world went about its louder business.

Anna wrapped her arms around herself for a moment, feeling the chill of evening through her scrubs, and looked back at the windows. Somewhere behind one of them was the corridor with the crooked 27 at the end. Somewhere behind that door people had died already, and more would die, and she would be there.

"Help me," she whispered, not sure if she was speaking to God, the building, or something else entirely. "Help me not to run."

The wind tugged at her hair like a hand. The lavender by the entrance trembled and released a faint scent.

Then her phone buzzed in her pocket with a message from her mother, asking how the first day was going, and the spell broke. She smiled, typed back a short answer, and started down the path toward the bus stop.

Behind her, the hospice hummed quietly to itself, twenty-two beds filled or waiting, corridors holding the weight of footsteps and whispers. In the far corner of the east wing, the door marked 27 stood closed, the paper angel on its frame lifting and settling in a draft no one noticed.

Chapter 2
Twenty-Two Beds

On her second morning, the hospice already sounded different to Anna.

The hum of it had moved slightly, as if during the night some part of her hearing had tuned itself to a new frequency. The automatic doors greeted her with the same soft sigh, the reception smelled the same of coffee and printer ink, but the corridor beyond felt a fraction more familiar.

“Good,” Monique said when she saw her. “You came back. That is always the first test.”

“I told my mother I survived,” Anna replied. “She sent me three praying hands and a heart.”

“That sounds about right. Come, we start with the ones who like early rounds.”

They walked the corridor together, the trolley rattling softly ahead of them. Ruth joined for the first few rooms, then peeled away to answer a call bell.

Room three, Mr. Hansen, was already awake and fully dressed, sitting on the edge of his bed with his slippers on the wrong feet.

“You are late,” he announced.

“It is seven in the morning, Mr. Hansen,” Monique said. “If we came any earlier, we would be sleeping in the corridor.”

He harrumphed, but his eyes were bright.

Anna took his blood pressure while Monique checked his medication. His arm was thin and surprisingly strong under her fingers, the skin warm and dry.

“You are new,” he said, peering at her badge. “Novak. That is not from here.”

“My parents are from Poland,” she said. “I was born here.”

“Mm.” He considered this. “Then you are from two places at once. That is better than being from nowhere.”

She smiled, secured the cuff, and wrote down the numbers. His blood pressure was better than hers had been these last weeks.

Room five, Mrs. Clarke, was still half asleep, hair wild against the pillow, an empty mug on the bedside table.

“Let her rest,” Monique murmured at the door. “She had a bad night. Her daughter was here until three.”

Room seven, the quiet woman, gave them a small nod and watched them with steady eyes while they checked her drip. She refused breakfast but accepted tea.

By the time they reached room ten, Anna had a handful of names in her head and a growing sense of how each life filled its allotted space. The rooms were nearly identical in layout, but each one felt slightly different: the smell of a particular lotion, the flowers on a

table, a photograph taped to the wall, a suitcase half unpacked in the corner.

“This,” Monique said, stopping by the nurses’ station after the first round, “is the trick no one tells you. You think you will remember everyone because they are dying. You think that gives their names a special weight. But memory does not care about that. It cares about repetition. So you will remember Mr. Hansen because he is loud and Mrs. Clarke because her daughter cries a lot, and you will forget someone else who just slips away. Write the names down. Say them out loud. That is all you can do.”

Anna nodded, even though something in her resisted the idea that anyone could simply slip away.

“How long have these patients been here?” she asked.

“Some a week. Some three days. Mrs. Clarke, two months. We had one man last year who clung on for almost six. Everyone has their own timetable. We pretend we can predict it. Mostly we cannot.”

They worked through the morning. She helped wash a woman who apologised for the weight of her own arm. She changed bed linen while a small radio crackled old songs in the background. She watched Ruth distract a frightened grandson with a packet of biscuits while Dr. Hart explained cancer gently in the next room.

Just before noon, Monique asked, “Have you seen someone die before?”

“Only once,” Anna said. “In the hospital, during my training. We were covering the ward and a man… it was very quick. I was at the foot of the bed. I never knew his name.”

“Today you may get to know one,” Monique said. “Room sixteen is close.”

There was no drama to it. No sudden alarms, no rushing feet. Mr. Dal, in room sixteen, had been declining for days, they told her. He

was a small man in his seventies with a face that had once been broad and was now pared down to bone and skin. When they entered, he was breathing shallowly, eyes half open. His sister sat in the chair by the bed, knitting without looking at her hands, the yarn passing from one needle to the other in a quiet rhythm.

“Any change?” Monique asked.

“He is not in pain,” the sister said. “They said you adjusted the morphine. He was restless at dawn, but now he is calm. He smiled earlier. A little. He liked the music.”

A radio hummed softly on the windowsill, playing an instrumental piece Anna did not recognize.

Monique checked the chart, the pump, the line in his arm. Anna watched his chest rise and fall, counted the seconds between breaths.

“You can sit, if you like,” Monique told the sister. “We will be nearby. Call if you need anything.”

“I would like you to stay,” the woman said, surprising herself as much as them. “Just for a little while. If it is not too much.”

“It is not too much,” Monique said. “Anna, pull up another chair.”

Anna obeyed, heart beating faster for no good reason. She sat on the other side of the bed, near the foot, hands loose in her lap.

Silence settled. The radio played on. The sister’s knitting slowed, then stopped. Outside the window, a bird landed on the brick ledge, pecked at something invisible, flew away.

Mr. Dal’s breaths grew shallower.

No one said anything about heaven or angels. No one read a Psalm. It would have felt like putting a bright picture over a crack in the wall. There was only the sound of the radio, the small clink of

knitting needles when the sister started up again as if to keep her own hands from shaking.

Anna felt the moment before it happened, not in any mystical sense, but the way you feel a train gliding to a halt. Something in the room drew in its edges.

One breath. A gap. Another, smaller breath. A longer gap.

Then nothing.

The radio continued. The second hand on the wall clock ticked forward. A car drove past outside, its engine rising and falling. Anna stared at his chest, willing it to move. It did not.

Monique leaned closer, listened with her stethoscope, watched the monitor she had muted earlier. She nodded once.

“It is time,” she said softly.

The sister put her knitting down in her lap. Her fingers still moved, twisting the yarn.

“Can I…?” she began.

“Yes,” Monique said. “Take as long as you need.”

Anna stood, unsure whether to step back or forward. In the end she moved nearer, to where the sister could reach her if she wanted. The woman did not look up. She took her brother’s hand and held it gently, thumb moving back and forth over the knuckles.

“It is all right,” she whispered. “You can go. I will water the plants. I will see to everything. You can go.”

There was no change in the body on the bed in response, of course. The change had already happened. But the words seemed to settle something in the air. Anna felt a tightness in her own chest loosen. Her eyes stung.

Monique glanced at her and gave a small nod, as if to say, There. That is how it is.

Later, after the sister had kissed her brother's forehead and left the room to call relatives in the corridor, Anna helped Monique with the quiet tasks that came after. Removing the cannula. Straightening the sheets. Closing the eyes with a gentle press of fingertips. It felt almost intrusive, but Monique's movements were respectful, almost ceremonial.

"What happens now?" Anna asked, folding the blanket.

"We let the body rest for a while," Monique said. "Give the family time. Then the undertaker will come. There will be paperwork. There is always paperwork."

"And for him?" Anna nodded toward the bed. "I mean… after."

Monique gave a small snort, not unkind.

"I tidy. You wonder. That is the division of labour. Ask your priest, not me."

Anna thought of the little chapel with its flickering candles. Then of her church in town, the clean white walls and polished wood, the certainty in the pastor's voice when he spoke about the soul returning to God.

Here, in this plain room with its faint smell of antiseptic and wool, certainty felt fragile and far away.

In the afternoon, as she carried a tray back to the kitchen, she overheard Ruth talking to another nurse near the staff lockers.

"I told you," Ruth was saying. "It is always like that. He was restless, restless, restless, then calm, then gone."

"That is what the morphine is for," the other nurse replied.