
PROOF OF CURRENT EXISTENCE
THE INTAKE
A METAPHYSICAL & COSMIC HORROR STORY
AAT STUDIOS

The Intake

Reading edition

From Proof of Current Existence, an anthology of metaphysical and cosmic horror.

A.A.T. Studios bases its fiction on real esoteric traditions, occult teachings and metaphysical ideas.

Produced by A.A.T. Studios. AI-assisted production under Alexander Zheludev's creative direction. The companion audiobook uses synthetic narration generated with Chatterbox Turbo. Illustrations generated with OpenAI image tools.

Content note: bereavement, memory loss and threatened erasure of identity.

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I.

The first letter arrived on a Tuesday in October. David Marsh almost threw it away. It looked like junk mail - an off-white envelope, a machine-printed address, a bulk-rate stamp.

He opened it with the bills.

The letterhead was blank. No logo. No return address. No company name or government seal. Just a reference number in the top right corner, printed in a font that looked almost but not quite like Times New Roman:

CASE: 7,943,284,571-D-MARSH

The text read:

> Dear Mr. Marsh,
>
> This correspondence serves as formal acknowledgment of your ongoing existence. Our records indicate that your case (ref. above) was opened on March 3, 1987, and remains active as of this writing.
>
> No action is required on your part at this time. This is a routine status inquiry, conducted as per standard operating procedure.
>
> We appreciate your patience as we continue to process your matter.
>
> Regards,
>
> The Office of Procedural Oversight

David read it three times.

March 3, 1987 was his birthday.

He checked the envelope again. No return address. No postmark. The paper was slightly heavier than the stuff that came from his bank, but there was nothing else to distinguish it.

He'd worked in software for fifteen years. He had never heard of the Office of Procedural Oversight.

A prank, then. His college friend Colin, probably. David set the letter on the kitchen counter, planning to text him later and demand credit for the commitment to the bit.

He forgot to text. The letter sat on the counter for three days, migrating slowly under a stack of takeout menus and grocery lists. David didn't think about it.

The second letter arrived the following Tuesday.

* * *

The same envelope, with no postmark. The same reference number.

> Dear Mr. Marsh,
>
> Please be advised that your case has been selected for routine review. This is a standard procedure and does not necessarily indicate any irregularity.
>
> A representative from our department will contact you within ninety business days to conduct an interview. Please have the following documentation available:
>
> - Proof of current existence
>
> - Record of conscious experiences (calendar year)
>
> - Justification for continuance (Form 7-C, enclosed)
>
> We appreciate your cooperation.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> The Office of Procedural Oversight

There was no Form 7-C enclosed.

David stood in his kitchen, holding the letter. He checked inside the envelope once more. Nothing. Just the folded sheet, asking him to prove he was there.

He called Colin. Colin denied everything, sounding genuinely confused. He called his other friends. No one knew anything. He checked with his wife, Sarah, who was at work; she thought it was weird and suggested he throw them away.

He didn't throw them away.

He put the second letter with the first, in a drawer in his home office, and tried to forget about them. He mostly succeeded. Work was busy. Sarah's mother was sick. Life continued in its ordinary way, demanding attention, filling time.

At night he would go back to the drawer and check that the letters were still there.

The third letter arrived three days later.

II.

> Dear Mr. Marsh,
>
> Our records indicate that you have not submitted the requested documentation (see previous correspondence). Please be advised that failure to comply with review procedures may result in automatic case resolution.
>
> Automatic resolution outcomes are determined by default protocols and may not reflect your preferences.
>
> A representative will contact you shortly.
>
> Regards,
>
> The Office of Procedural Oversight

David's hands were shaking. He put the letter on the desk and searched for the Office of Procedural Oversight. Nothing. He searched for the reference number, then for the phrases from the letters. No complaints from other recipients. No warning about a scam. No address.

"Proof of current existence" brought him a page about Descartes. I think, therefore I am.

He closed it.

That night, Sarah found him sitting at his desk, staring at the screen.

"You're still thinking about those letters," she said.

"I can't find anything. No office. No department. No record of anything like this."

Sarah sat on the edge of the desk. She was still in her work clothes, her hair coming loose from its clip. She looked tired. Her mother had been moved to hospice that week.

“It's spam,” she said. “Or a scam. Something designed to freak you out so you call some number and give them your credit card.”

“There's no number to call.”

“Then it's a prank. Someone's messing with you.”

“No one I know would do this.”

Sarah sighed. She reached out and closed the laptop. “David, somebody's winding you up. Come to bed.”

He didn't argue.

He looked at the closed laptop.

He went to bed. He didn't forget.

* * *

A fourth letter arrived three days later. This one was shorter than the others.

> Dear Mr. Marsh,
>
> We note that our previous correspondence has not reached Mrs. Sarah Marsh. Please be advised that her case (ref. 7,943,284,572-S-MARSH) is also active.
>
> This is a separate matter and will be processed separately. We raise it only for purposes of complete disclosure.
>
> A representative will be in contact.
>
> Regards,
>
> The Office of Procedural Oversight

David read the letter standing in his driveway, the mailbox still open behind him. A neighbor waved from across the street. The world went on, ordinary and indifferent.

They knew about Sarah.

He went inside and locked the door. Sarah had seen the first two letters. He had told her about the third. Now her name was on one, with a number almost identical to his. He spent the next two days searching for anyone who had received the same thing.

He never told her about the fourth letter.

* * *

The fifth letter arrived on a Thursday.

The envelope was the same. The letterhead was the same. This time the letter omitted the word 'Dear'.

> Mr. Marsh,
>
> Your interview has been scheduled.
>
> Date: [PENDING]
>
> Time: [PENDING]
>
> Location: Your current residence
>
> Please do not attempt to relocate.
>
> A representative will arrive when processing allows.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> The Office of Procedural Oversight
>
> P.S. We note that you have been researching our organization. This is understandable. Please be aware that you will not find us in any

directory accessible to you. We operate in a capacity that is not - and cannot be - indexed by the systems you have access to.

This should not concern you unduly. It is simply a matter of categorical difference.

Please do not attempt to relocate.

He called in sick to work the next day. He searched again, though he knew what he would find.

“Automatic resolution” brought him articles about error handling. He used default behaviors in his own work: an input failed validation, a request timed out, a record went into the wrong queue. The system did something with it anyway. The fallback was still a decision someone had made.

He looked back at the letter. Someone knew what he'd been searching for. That was harder to explain than any of the words on the page.

III.

The representative arrived on a Sunday morning.

David was making coffee. Sarah was still asleep; her mother had died on Friday, and they'd been up late dealing with arrangements. The doorbell rang, and David answered it without thinking, expecting a delivery driver or a neighbor with condolences.

The man on the doorstep was not a delivery driver.

He was middle-aged, gray-suited, utterly unremarkable. The kind of face you'd forget while you were still looking at it. He smiled a little too late, after David had already opened his mouth to ask what he wanted.

“Mr. Marsh? David Marsh?”

“Yes.”

“I'm Mr. Heller. We've corresponded.” He held up a hand before David could object. “In a manner of speaking. I'm the representative mentioned in your letters. May I come in?”

David should have said no. Every instinct told him to say no, to close the door, to call the police or wake Sarah or do anything except step aside and let this man into his home.

He stepped aside.

Mr. Heller entered. He looked around the living room with an air of mild professional interest, the way an appraiser might look at furniture. His briefcase - David was certain he hadn't been carrying a briefcase a moment ago - was brown leather, worn at the corners.

“Please, sit,” David said, because he didn't know what else to say.

“Thank you.” Mr. Heller sat in the armchair by the window and set his briefcase on his lap. “I apologize for the intrusion. I understand this is a difficult time for your family.”

“How do you know about that?”

“It's in the file, Mr. Marsh. Everything is in the file. Please, don't be alarmed. This is all quite routine.”

David sat on the couch. His legs felt weak. The coffee maker beeped in the kitchen; he ignored it.

“Who are you?” he asked. “What is the Office of Procedural Oversight? What do you want?”

Mr. Heller opened his briefcase. Inside were files - hundreds of files, it seemed, far more than the case should have been able to hold. A loose sheet caught in the clasp and slipped onto the rug. David saw a street address: 414 Birch Street.

Mr. Heller picked it up, returned it to the case and selected another folder.

“First: who am I. I am a representative. A functionary. I process cases. I have no other identity that would be meaningful to you.”

“That's not an answer.”

“It's the only answer I'm equipped to give. I apologize if it's unsatisfying.” He consulted the file. “Second: the Office of Procedural Oversight. We are quality control. We monitor cases. We ensure compliance with protocols. We address irregularities.”

“Quality control for what?”

Mr. Heller looked up from the file.

“For existence, Mr. Marsh.”

David gripped the edge of the couch.

“I don't understand.”

“No. You wouldn't. That's part of the issue.” Mr. Heller flipped a page in the file. “Let me try an analogy. Imagine a factory that produces widgets. The factory has rules - detailed rules about what counts as a widget, how widgets are made, what widgets can do. Now imagine that one day, due to a very unusual combination of circumstances, the machinery produces something that isn't a widget. Something that observes. Something that experiences. Something that believes itself to be real.”

“I'm not a widget.”

“No. You're what happens when the widget-making process goes wrong in a very specific way.” Mr. Heller's smile didn't waver. “You're an edge case, Mr. Marsh. A loophole. A pattern that emerged from rules that were never designed to produce you.”

“This is insane.”

“I understand it must feel that way. But your case is irregular. Unplanned. We did not intend for there to be a David Marsh.”

David stood up. His hands were shaking again. “Get out of my house.”

Mr. Heller didn't move. “Asking me to leave will not change the status of your case. The review will proceed regardless. Cooperation simply makes the process more efficient.”

“There is no case. There is no review. I'm going to call the police.”

“If you wish,” Mr. Heller said.

David took his phone from the table and opened the camera. He pointed it at Heller. He wanted something to show Sarah.

On the screen, the armchair was empty.

He moved the phone to the left, then back. The window was there. The chair. The lamp beside it.

He lowered the phone. Mr. Heller waited with the file on his knees.

David sat back down. His legs wouldn't hold him.

“What do you want?” he asked again, quieter now.

Mr. Heller closed the file. “I want to explain your options. The review has determined that your case is a Category 7 - unauthorized instantiation. You exist, but you were not supposed to. This is not your fault. But it is an irregularity that must be addressed.”

“Addressed how?”

“You have three options.”

IV.

Option A: Voluntary Cessation.

David could sign a form - Mr. Heller produced it from the briefcase, a single sheet of paper with text in a language that seemed to rearrange itself when David tried to read it directly - authorizing the discontinuation of his case.

“Your consciousness will be unwound,” Mr. Heller explained. “The pattern that currently calls itself David Marsh will be corrected. Nothing need be destroyed.”

“You're talking about killing me.”

“Killing implies an ending of something that was supposed to continue. This is a restoration of proper function.”

David looked toward the stairs. “And my body? What happens to that?”

“The physical correction is part of the same process. There will be no body for your wife to find.”

Sarah had just spent two days making arrangements for her mother. David tried to imagine her being spared that work and having nothing left of him instead.

“What will she remember?”

“Her memories will adjust. The emotional weight goes first. A name may remain for a while, or an event, but she will find it difficult to connect those facts to anyone. The adjustment continues after the case is closed.”

David felt sick. “That's worse than dying.”

“It is a matter of perspective.”

Option B: Appeal.

David could file an appeal arguing that his instantiation, though unauthorized, should be permitted to continue.

“The appeal process takes approximately two hundred years, as measured by your subjective experience,” Mr. Heller said. “Your case will be placed in administrative suspension. Days will blur. Years may seem to pass in moments; individual moments may seem to last for years. Most appellants withdraw before completion.”

“Two hundred years. What about Sarah?”

“An appeal would suspend your case only.”

“She'd be dead.”

Mr. Heller waited for the next question.

“What happens if I win the appeal?”

“Your case would be reclassified. You would be retrofitted into the system as if you had always been intended. The success rate is approximately 0.003%.”

“And if I lose?”

“Option A is applied automatically.”

Option C: Reclassification (Proactive).

In rare cases, Mr. Heller explained, an unauthorized consciousness could demonstrate that it served a function within the larger procedural framework.

“What kind of function?”

“The system has requirements. Patterns it needs to maintain its operations. If you could demonstrate that your existence serves one of those requirements - that removing you would create a gap the system cannot easily fill - then correction would be counterproductive.”

“How would I demonstrate that?”

Mr. Heller looked down at the file.

“Your employment history is here,” he said. “It does not satisfy the requirement.”

“What requirement? I build systems. If there's something you need - ”

“I cannot provide the criteria.”

“Then how am I supposed to do it? You didn't even send me the form.”

“Form 7-C concerns justification for continuance. It would not change the classification.”

David stared at him. “You asked me for it.”

“The documentation request is standard.”

Mr. Heller stood and closed his briefcase.

“You have thirty days to select an option. Your response must be received by noon on November nineteenth. If no selection is made, Option A is applied by default.”

He walked to the door. David followed, feeling like he was moving through water.

“Mr. Heller. Wait.” David's voice was thin. “Is this actually happening? Do I need to - I don't know. See someone?”

Mr. Heller held out the notice. David hadn't seen him take it from the case. He took it anyway. The deadline was printed at the bottom.

“Your interview is now on record, Mr. Marsh.”

He stepped outside.

He walked down the driveway. David watched him reach the sidewalk and turn left. Before he reached the next house, Heller was gone. David looked back up the driveway, then along the other side of the street. Nothing.

David closed the door. He went to the kitchen. He poured his cold coffee into the sink and stood there, gripping the counter, staring at nothing.

Upstairs, Sarah was still asleep. He heard the bed creak as she turned over. He folded the notice and carried it to his desk.

V.

He didn't tell Sarah.

He tried once, the day after her mother's funeral. They were sitting in the backyard in the autumn cold. Sarah had wrapped herself in the old quilt from her mother's house, the one with the wedding ring pattern.

“There's something I - ”

She turned toward him. He could see how little she'd slept.

“What?”

“Nothing. Come here.”

She moved closer. He held her hand and let the chance pass.

* * *

The week after her mother's funeral, Sarah sorted through two boxes of her mother's things at the kitchen table, and David sat across from her and watched.

She was methodical about it in a way he hadn't expected. He'd braced for tears, had prepared himself to be useful in the way that grief required: to hold, to absorb, to stay close without crowding. But Sarah made two piles, keep and donate. Sometimes she turned an object over before deciding. Mostly she worked without speaking. Her mother's reading glasses. A small wooden box with a broken clasp. An envelope of recipes, handwritten on index cards, the cards stained with use.

She found a photograph: her parents at a beach, decades before Sarah was born, standing close but not touching, her father squinting into the

sun, her mother laughing at something outside the frame. Sarah held it a long time.

“She had a whole life before I existed,” she said.

“Everyone does.”

“I know. But it's different when you see evidence of it. She's laughing at a joke I'll never know. Someone said something funny and she laughed and it's preserved in this photograph and I'll never know what it was.” She set it in the keep pile. “I keep thinking about all the things she never told me. All the things I never asked.”

David watched her hands on the photograph. The careful way she set it down.

“Anything in particular?” he asked.

“All of it. Stupid things. Who took the picture.” She picked up the recipe cards and flipped through them. Chicken stew. Lemon tart. Then she held one up to him. “What do you think ‘P.T.P.’ means? She wrote it on everything.”

“Pinch to pour?”

“That doesn't even - ” She started laughing, then had to stop. David came around the table. By the time he put his arms around her she was crying, still holding the recipe cards against his shoulder.

Fourteen days left.

VI.

Eleven days before the deadline, David drove to a house on Birch Street.

He had been putting it off. For nearly three weeks, whenever he opened his own drawer of letters, he saw the address on the sheet that had fallen from Heller's briefcase. He hadn't written it down. He hadn't needed to. At Oak and Ridgeway he put on his turn signal and turned left.

Birch Street was three blocks from his own neighborhood. He'd driven past the intersection a thousand times but had never turned down it. There was no reason to. It was a residential street like any other - modest houses, lawns going brown in the November cold, cars in driveways.

Except for the house at the end.

Number 414 Birch Street was a perfectly ordinary house. Split-level, beige siding, a mailbox shaped like a little barn. The lawn was cut. The windows were clean. A welcome mat sat on the front step. It looked, in every measurable way, like a place where someone lived.

David couldn't see anyone inside. There was no car in the driveway. He parked at the curb and watched the house for five minutes, trying to decide whether to knock. A woman walked past on the sidewalk, pushing a stroller. She didn't look at the house. She kept her eyes on the far side of the street.

David watched three more people pass. None of them looked at the house. A jogger. A teenager on a bicycle. A man walking a golden retriever. The dog looked. The dog stopped, ears forward, staring at the house with the rigid attention of an animal that has detected something its owner cannot. The man tugged the leash. The dog didn't move. The man tugged again, harder, and the dog finally followed, looking back over its shoulder as they walked away.

David got out of the car and walked to the front door.

It was unlocked.

Inside, the house was furnished. A couch in the living room, still bearing the impression of a body in its cushions. A kitchen with dishes in the drying rack - two plates, two glasses, two forks, arranged with the neatness of habit. A calendar on the wall, turned to June of two years ago, with handwriting in the squares: dentist appointments, a birthday party, a note that said *anniversary dinner - reservation at 7.*

The dip in the couch was deep enough to see from the doorway.

David walked through the rooms. In the bedroom, the bed was made on both sides, but only one nightstand had anything on it - a lamp, a book with a cracked spine, a glass with a dried water ring. The other nightstand was bare.

He opened the closet. Clothes on one side. The other side was empty. The rod still held the marks of hangers, and the dust on the shelf had rectangular gaps where things had rested. He touched one of the clean patches with his finger.

In the home office, a laptop sat open, its battery long dead. A mug held pens. Taped above the monitor was a photograph of a kitchen table: two place settings, two glasses of wine, two chairs.

A woman sat in one chair, laughing, her hand reaching across the table. The other chair appeared empty. But its cushion was compressed. The woman's eyes were focused just above its back, where a face should have been. Her hand was waiting to be taken.

David leaned closer. The paper was glossy and undamaged. He could see the kitchen tiles through the place the person ought to occupy.

In the top drawer of the desk, he found a folder.

Inside the folder were letters.

The same off-white envelopes. The same letterheads. A different reference number - 5,108,772,349 - and a name he didn't recognize: Ellen Carr.

The letters followed the same progression. Status inquiry. Review notice. Documentation request. Deadline. The final letter was different from the rest:

> Ms. Carr,
>
> Your case has been resolved per default protocol (Option A). This notice is generated automatically.
>
> We thank you for your patience.
>
> Regards,
>
> The Office of Procedural Oversight

David looked from the letters to the photograph. He wondered whether the blank place was Ellen. The notice had no picture. He couldn't be sure.

He read her reference number again. Then his own. He stopped before he could start counting. There was no reason to assume the numbers meant what he feared they meant.

He put the letters back in the folder. In the kitchen, a grocery list was held to the fridge with a magnet shaped like a lobster. The handwriting was small and precise.

Milk. Eggs. That cheese R. likes.

R. A person Ellen had bought cheese for. David looked at the second plate in the drying rack. Were they still here, somewhere? Had they moved out? He had no name to search for beyond a single initial.

He left the list where it was. On the way out, he checked the couch again. The dent was still there.

He drove home.

That night, he lay awake beside Sarah. He pressed his hand against her shoulder blade, gently enough not to wake her, and waited until his breathing slowed.

Eleven days left.

VII.

On the last day, David woke early. Sarah was still asleep. He watched her breathe for a while - the gentle rise and fall of her chest, the way her hair fell across the pillow, the small frown she always wore when she was dreaming.

He got out of bed. He went to his office. He took out the letters and spread them on his desk.

He wasn't going to select an option. He had tried to find a way to comply. Heller had given him no criteria and no one else to ask. An appeal would take more years than he could bear to imagine, without Sarah.

He sat down and wrote:

> To Whom It May Concern,
>
> I am in receipt of your correspondence regarding Case 7,943,284,571-D-MARSH.
>
> I reject all three options.
>
> I didn't ask to exist. But I do exist. And I'm not going to justify it to you. I'm not going to appeal to a process designed to exhaust me. I'm not going to perform my utility for a system that has no right to demand it.
>
> You want to erase me? Then do it. But I won't sign anything. I won't pretend this is maintenance. If you erase me, that's murder.
>
> I will not make this easy for you.
>
> David Marsh

He printed the letter. He put it in an envelope. There was no address to send it to, so he simply wrote: **THE OFFICE OF PROCEDURAL OVERSIGHT.**

He walked to the mailbox. Across the street, Bill was getting into his car, coffee thermos under his arm. David watched him back out of the driveway, wait for a cyclist and drive away.

He raised the mailbox flag, then checked that the envelope was still inside.

He went back into his house. He made coffee. He sat in the living room and waited.

* * *

The deadline passed at noon.

Nothing happened.

David waited. He watched the clock. 12:00. 12:15. 12:30. The house was silent. The world was ordinary.

At 1:00, Sarah came down from her desk. “You're home? I thought you had that meeting.”

“I canceled it.”

“Are you okay?”

He looked at her. “I'm fine. Just thinking.”

She kissed his forehead. “Don't think too much. It's bad for you.”

She went to the kitchen. David sat in the silence and wondered if it had worked. If his letter had meant something.

At 3:47 PM, the doorbell rang.

VIII.

Mr. Heller stood on the doorstep. Same gray suit. Same forgettable face. Same impossible briefcase.

“Mr. Marsh. May I come in?”

“The deadline passed.”

“It did.”

“I didn't choose. You said Option A would apply automatically.”

“That's correct.”

“So why am I still here?”

Mr. Heller's expression didn't change. “May I come in? There's something I need to explain.”

Against his better judgment, David stepped aside.

* * *

They sat in the living room. Sarah came to the doorway with a dish towel in her hands. Her eyes passed across Heller's chair and stopped on David.

“Are you still working?”

“Just finishing.”

She went back to the kitchen. Heller sat facing the doorway. He hadn't moved. David could hear Sarah running the tap. He looked back at the chair, then toward the doorway again.

“Your letter was received,” Mr. Heller said.

“And?”

“And it has been filed.” He opened the briefcase and removed a single sheet - David's own words, reprinted in the near-familiar font. “It is now part of your case record.”

“That's not what I asked. I asked why I'm still here.”

Mr. Heller set the paper on his lap. “Your case was scheduled for default processing at noon. At eleven fifty-eight, your correspondence was received and logged. Logging creates an administrative hold.”

“How long?”

“Until Friday. Noon. Correction will begin then.”

David stared at him. “That's it? Until Friday?”

“Yes.”

“You haven't even read it.”

“It is in the record.”

“A refusal does not alter the default,” Mr. Heller said.

“Then why are you here?”

“I am required to notify you of the hold. This visit is logged.” He closed the briefcase. “I am sorry, Mr. Marsh.”

He stood and walked to the door. With his hand on the latch, he stopped.

“Your letter used the word ‘murder,’” he said. “That word has been filed. It will remain in the record.”

“Is that supposed to help?”

Heller didn't turn around. “I don't know.”

He left. David watched him reach the sidewalk. Then Heller was no longer there.

From the kitchen, Sarah was humming an old song. David stood with his hand still on the latch.

Friday. Noon.

He went to the kitchen. Sarah was washing dishes in the last light of the November afternoon.

“Want some tea?” she asked.

“Sure.”

She put the kettle on. He sat at the table. He wanted to tell her what had just happened. He couldn't find a place to start.

She asked about his project manager. He told her the meeting had been canceled. After a while she told him something from her book club, and he listened until the kettle clicked off.

IX.

On Saturday morning, David was brushing his teeth when the first piece went missing.

He was thinking about a bug in the authentication module - something about token expiration. Then he could no longer remember what a token was. Or authentication. He knew he'd been working on a problem. He couldn't say what it was.

He stood in front of the mirror with toothpaste in his mouth. After thirty seconds the words came back, along with the bug and three possible reasons for it. He watched his own mouth form the word authentication. It sounded right again.

He spat. He rinsed. His hands were steady.

It was starting.

* * *

The following Monday, he forgot his coworker's name. Janet. Janet Park, who sat three desks down, who'd helped him with the Henderson project, who brought homemade dumplings to the office potlucks. He'd been to her daughter's graduation party. For a moment in the morning meeting, he could not have introduced her to anyone.

“I agree with - ” He stopped. Gestured. “ - with what was just said.”

No one seemed to notice. The meeting moved on. He drew a question mark beside her item on the agenda.

Then he knew it again. Janet. Of course. Janet.

He wrote her name at the top of the page. Half a minute later he read it again, checking that he still knew who he meant.

A week later, he forgot the route home. He'd driven it a thousand times - left at the light, merge onto the highway, exit 23B, wind through the residential streets to the blue house on Maple. He sat at an intersection with his turn signal blinking, and the knowledge was simply not there. Not any of it. He didn't know where he lived.

Cars honked. Someone gestured at him through a windshield. David kept his foot on the brake. He tried to picture the front door, the hallway, Sarah's coat hanging by the stairs. He couldn't connect any of them to a road.

The route came back. Left at the light. Merge. Exit 23B. Home.

He pulled into the driveway and stayed in the car. It had been more than a week since the hold ended. Each lapse had passed. He'd gone back to work, back to driving, as if getting the words or the route back meant he was all right.

Sarah was in the kitchen. She said something as he came in. He heard her voice but couldn't assemble the words.

“David?”

He blinked. “Sorry. Long day.”

“You've said that all week.” She put down the knife she'd been using. “What's happened?”

“I got lost. Coming home. Just for a bit.”

“Where?”

“At the junction. I knew it was the junction. I just didn't know what to do after that.”

She came across the kitchen and touched his cheek. He leaned into her hand.

“You're not driving tomorrow,” she said. “I'll take you. And I'm calling the doctor in the morning.”

He nodded.

X.

He had started the journal the morning after Heller's second visit. He wanted a record outside his own memory. He wrote about Sarah, about work, about anything he could still set down in enough detail to recognize later.

Sarah kept notes too. She took them to his appointments, asked him to repeat answers when he lost the thread, waited while he tried. By December he was letting her do most of the talking. At home, when he could still write, he kept the notebook open beside him.

November 20: Sarah made soup. The good kind, with the lentils and the carrots and that spice I can never remember the name of. We ate on the couch and watched a documentary about penguins. She fell asleep against my shoulder. I didn't move for an hour. My arm went numb. I didn't care.

November 28: Thanksgiving. Just the two of us this year. We made a small turkey and too many side dishes. We said what we were thankful for. She said she was thankful for me. I almost told her everything. I didn't. I don't know if that was mercy or cowardice.

December 3: First snow. I stood at the window for forty minutes. Sarah asked if I was waiting for someone. I told her no. She brought a chair over and sat with me.

December 14: I forgot things today. Small things. Where I put my keys. The word for the thing you use to open a bottle. I wrote it down later: corkscrew. But for twenty minutes, the word was gone, and in its place was a smooth, blank space, like a wall that had been freshly plastered over a door.

December 25: Christmas. Sarah's brother came over with his wife and kids. The house was loud. I watched Sarah with her nieces, showing them how to make paper snowflakes. I gave her the necklace with the little sapphire that matches her grandmother's ring. Her face when she opened it - I'm writing this down because I need to remember it. I need to. Please let me remember it.

He kept writing. The entries grew shorter. On some pages there were whole lines crossed out where he had begun a sentence, lost it and tried again.

January 8: Good day. Sarah made - the hot drink. We sat in the - room with the table. Kitchen? Kitchen. We talked. I don't remember about what. I remember her voice. The way it sounds when she's not worried. That sound.

January 22: I looked in the mirror today and didn't recognize myself. It lasted almost a minute. I couldn't stop checking afterward. Every time I passed the bathroom I went back in.

February 14: A woman. There is a woman here. She is important. She made food and we ate and she looked at me the way people look at things they are afraid of losing. I think her name starts with S. She has brown eyes. Brown like - something. Something warm. I can't remember what brown is like.

June 7: Something

July: I

XI.

The system logged the closure.

Case 7,943,284,571-D-MARSH: resolved. Default protocol. The file was archived.

Among its forms and status updates was a printed letter addressed to the Office. The letter used the word “murder.” It remained legible. There was no response attached.

The man in the gray suit continued to visit houses. He carried his briefcase. He explained options and logged selections. Sometimes, between cases, he thought about the word in David Marsh's letter.

At the next door, he checked the name in the folder before he rang the bell.

“This correspondence serves as formal acknowledgment of your ongoing existence...”

XII.

Sarah found the journal three months later. She was cleaning out the home office - the office that had belonged to someone, she was sure, though she couldn't quite remember who. The house felt too big lately. Too full of furniture for a woman living alone.

She sat at the desk and flipped through the pages. Names she didn't recognize. Events she couldn't place. Entries about someone called Sarah - her name, but she didn't remember being loved like this.

She read about the soup, the snow, the sapphire necklace. She touched her throat. She was wearing a small sapphire on a silver chain. She'd assumed she'd bought it for herself.

Near the end, the handwriting deteriorated. There were gaps of weeks between entries. She turned the page after July, expecting more, and found nothing.

She went back to the last line.

I

She read it again. Then she put the journal in the drawer and closed it. Her hand stayed flat on the desk. There were scratches and coffee rings in the wood, and a groove where someone had pressed a pen too hard.

She went to the kitchen and made coffee. Outside, the October wind scattered leaves across the lawn.

There were two chairs at the table. She only needed one. They must have come as a set. She sat in the one nearest the window.

The cushion opposite was more worn than hers. Sometimes, early in the morning, she would look up before she was fully awake. She never knew what she expected to see.

She moved the sugar bowl closer to her cup.

The feeling passed. It always passed.

She finished her coffee. She washed the cup.

* * *

End.