Incomplete Lines

A man trying to understand a woman



ORION SAINT

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First edition

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and refrigerators are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual kitchen appliances, is coincidental.

For everyone who has said "fine" and meant something else, and for everyone who heard it anyway.

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PART ONE

Fine

01

It's Fine

Teo Marin translated instruction manuals for a living, which meant that for nineteen years he had been paid to believe that words did what they said.

PRESS AND HOLD FOR THREE SECONDS meant three seconds. DO NOT IMMERSE meant keep it out of the bath. CAUTION: HOT SURFACE was not a metaphor. Teo liked this about manuals. Nobody had ever written one in a tone of voice.

On the Tuesday it began, he was at the kitchen table with a German document about a refrigerator called Kelvin.

Kelvin was a smart refrigerator. It had a camera, a microphone, a screen the size of a paperback and, according to page four, an emotional intelligence module. KELVIN LISTENS TO YOUR HOUSEHOLD, said page four. KELVIN NOTICES WHAT IS MISSING.

Teo typed it into English and frowned at it. Their own refrigerator was twelve years old and noticed nothing. It hummed in a low, hopeless key, like a man waiting outside an office.

The front door opened. He heard keys go into the bowl, the soft thump of Vera's tool bag against the wall, the particular sigh of her boots coming off. Fourteen years of marriage had taught

him the order of those sounds. He could have written the manual for them.

"Did you call the plumber?" she asked from the hallway.

"I said I would."

She came into the kitchen. She was still wearing her coat. Her hair was pinned up with a pencil, which meant she had been inside a piano for most of the afternoon.

"That's not what I asked."

Teo considered the sentence. It seemed to him a perfectly good answer to the question. He had said he would call the plumber. The intention was on record.

"I'll call him tomorrow," he said.

"You said that yesterday."

"Then it's still true."

Vera looked at him for a moment the way she looked at a piano that had been tuned by a cousin. Then she took off her coat and put the kettle on.

Vera tuned pianos. She went into schools, churches, concert halls, and the living rooms of people who had bought a piano in a hopeful year and never forgiven it. She carried a tuning hammer, a set of felt mutes, a small torch, and the patience of someone who spent her days listening to things that were very slightly wrong.

"How was the school?" Teo asked.

"The A was flat. Someone had put a vase of flowers on the lid and watered them generously."

"Did you tell them?"

"I told them. They said the flowers were for the recital."

"So you fixed the A."

"I fixed the A. The flowers are still there. It will be flat again by Friday."

He nodded. This was the kind of conversation he understood. A problem, a cause, an action, an outcome. It had the shape of page eleven, TROUBLESHOOTING.

The kettle began its slow climb. Vera stood with her back to him and her hands flat on the counter. There was a long silence, which Teo used to translate two more sentences about Kelvin's crisper drawer.

"Teo," she said.

"Mm."

She waited. He finished the sentence he was typing, because it was a good sentence and he did not want to lose it, and then he looked up.

"Sorry. Yes?"

"Nothing," she said. "It's fine."

He looked at her back. The shoulders were where shoulders usually were. The kettle clicked off. She poured one cup, then remembered him and poured a second.

"Are you sure?" he asked, because he had read in a magazine at the dentist that you were supposed to ask.

"I said it's fine."

Fine. Teo knew the word well. He had translated it hundreds of times. Fine: of good quality; satisfactory; in good health. In a manual it usually appeared in the phrase FINE ADJUSTMENT, which was the small dial you turned after the large dial had done most of the work.

He filed the conversation under satisfactory and went back to Kelvin.

Vera took her tea into the living room. She did not turn on the television. She sat by the window in the chair that had belonged to her father and looked at the street. After a while, Teo heard her lift the lid of the old upright piano they kept against the wall, the one she never had time to play. He waited for a note.

There was no note.

The lid went down again, gently, the way you close a door on a sleeping child.

On his screen, the German sentence said: Kelvin bemerkt, wenn etwas fehlt.

He typed: Kelvin notices when something is missing.

Then he took the cup she had made him, which had gone cold while he worked, and drank it anyway, because it seemed rude not to.

Her side

The Kettle

I had a sentence ready that Tuesday. I'd been carrying it all afternoon, inside the school piano, between the A and the flowers.

The sentence was: I miss him so much I can't breathe properly.

That's all. Nine words. I'd counted them on the tram, the way you count steps on a dark staircase.

The flowers on the piano lid were yellow chrysanthemums, the same as the ones the conservatory sent to Dad's funeral. Nobody at the school knew that. Why would they? A teacher had put them there because the hall looked bare. I took them off to tune, and I stood holding a vase of chrysanthemums in an empty school hall, and for a moment I was eleven months ago, holding exactly the same flowers, while a man with a soft voice asked if the family preferred oak.

So I came home with my nine words.

I want to be fair to Teo. He was working. He always works at the kitchen table, because the light is good, and because he likes to be near the kettle, and, I think, because he likes to be near me without having to be with me, which is something I've never quite managed.

I said his name.

He said, "Mm."

I know that "Mm." Fourteen years. It means: I am inside a sentence about a refrigerator, and I will be with you shortly. It is a polite sound. It is the sound of a door that is not locked but is definitely closed.

I counted. I always count. Dad taught me: when a piano's out, you don't hit it harder, you wait. One. Two. I got to seven before he looked up. Seven isn't long. Seven is nothing. But in seven seconds the nine words had folded themselves up very small and gone back into my chest, and what came out instead was "Nothing. It's fine."

Fine isn't quite a lie. It's a measurement. When I say fine, I've looked at the distance between me and the person I'm talking to, and I've decided I can't throw the real sentence that far. Fine is what you say when the gap is too wide for the true thing to make it across without falling in the water.

He asked if I was sure. He'd read that you should ask. I could hear that he'd read it.

I said I was sure.

Then I went and sat in Dad's chair by the window, and I opened the piano lid at home, the old upright we never play, and I put my hands over the keys.

Teo thinks I don't play when I'm sad. That's almost right, but not quite.

My hands learned the piano from Dad's hands. Literally. When I was six he would put his hands on top of mine, his big warm hands, and press my fingers down. Every piece I know, I learned with his hands on top. So when I play, I can still feel them. That's lovely, usually. That's the best thing in the world.

But that Tuesday, I knew that if I played one note I'd feel them, and I'd have to know, all at once, that they weren't there. And I would have made a sound. Not the piano. Me.

And Teo would have looked up from the refrigerator.

And he'd have been so kind, and so frightened, and so useful, and he'd have made me tea and asked if I'd eaten, and I would have ended up looking after him while he looked after me, and I didn't have the strength for both of us that night.

So I closed the lid. Gently. The way you'd close a door on a child who's finally asleep.

The tea I made him went cold beside his laptop. He drank it anyway. He always does. He thinks it's rude not to.

That's the thing. He's not a bad man. He drinks the cold tea. He just never notices it's gone cold.

02

The Dishwasher Doctrine

There were two ways to load a dishwasher, and only one of them was Teo's.

His way was based on the manual. The manual for their dishwasher, which he had read in full on the day it was installed, stated that plates should face the centre, that cups should go on the upper rack at a slight angle, and that cutlery should be placed handle-down, except knives, for reasons of safety and dignity.

Vera's way was based on getting the dishes into the dishwasher.

For most of their marriage, this had been a joke. She would load it, he would quietly reload it, she would catch him and say, "The dishes don't care, Teo," and he would say, "The dishes are not the ones who have to live with the consequences." It was a routine. Their friends had heard it at dinners. Once, at a wedding, Teo had told the dishwasher story during a speech, and people had laughed in the correct places.

On Thursday evening, Vera was loading the dishwasher when he came into the kitchen. He saw a bowl facing outward. He saw a wooden spoon, which was never supposed to go in at all. He saw a knife with its point aimed at the sky like a small, domestic threat.

"I'll do that," he said.

"I'm doing it."

"I know. I'll just—" He reached past her and turned the bowl.

She stopped. She stood very still with a plate in each hand.

"Do whatever you want," she said.

Teo heard the sentence clearly. He heard each word. It was an unusually generous sentence. It granted permission. It removed obstacles. In legal documents, the equivalent phrase would be at the sole discretion of the user.

So he did whatever he wanted. He took out the wooden spoon, turned the knife, moved three cups to the upper rack and set them at the correct angle. He felt the small, honest pleasure of a system restored.

When he straightened up, Vera was no longer in the kitchen.

He found her in the bedroom, sitting on the edge of the bed with her shoes still on.

"I finished the dishwasher," he said, in the tone of a man reporting good news.

"I know."

"You said do whatever I want."

She looked at him. It was a long look, and he had the feeling of being read in a language he had not been taught.

"Do you know what I'd want?" she said. "Just once. I'd want you to leave something the way I did it. Even if it's wrong. Even if a knife goes in point up and the world ends."

"The knife is a safety issue."

"Teo."

"It is. There's a whole page about it."

She laughed, but it was the kind of laugh that is mostly breath. She bent down and began to unlace her shoes.

"It's not about the dishwasher," she said.

"Then what is it about?"

The laces came out slowly, one eyelet at a time. He waited for the answer. She seemed to be waiting for something too, though he could not tell what. Perhaps for the laces.

"Forget it," she said. "It's late."

He went back to the kitchen and stood in front of the dishwasher. It was perfectly loaded. It looked like a diagram. He had a strange urge to open it and put the knife back the way she had left it, point up, just to see what would happen.

He didn't. The manual was very clear on the subject of knives.

Instead, he pressed START, and the machine filled with water and began its long, confident hum, and Teo stood listening to it as though it might explain something.

Later, lying awake, he went over the conversation the way he went over a difficult paragraph. "Do whatever you want." "It's not about the dishwasher." "Forget it."

Three sentences. Each one, translated literally, meant something reasonable. Put together, they meant something else entirely, the way three ordinary notes played at the same moment can make a chord that hurts.

He did not know which chord it was. He only knew that his wife was lying beside him with her back turned, breathing like someone who was awake and pretending not to be, and that he was doing exactly the same thing.

Her side

The Knife

Teo will tell you the dishwasher was a joke. Fourteen years of the same joke. Plates to the centre, cups at an angle, knives down for safety and dignity. He told it at Maja's wedding. People laughed.

I didn't tell him about the knife until much later.

My father loaded the dishwasher knives up.

Always. Point to the sky. It drove my mother mad. Dad said they came out cleaner. He said a knife facing down was a knife hiding from its responsibilities. He said it in a voice like a judge. Mum said one day somebody would lose an eye, and Dad said, "Then they'll have learned to look where they're reaching."

After he died, I started doing it. I didn't decide to. My hand just put the knife in point up one evening, and I stood looking at it, and I thought, Oh. There you are.

It became a small thing I did for him. Every evening, one knife, pointing up. A little silver hello.

And every evening, Teo turned it round.

He didn't know. That's the point. How could he? I never said. But that Thursday I stood there with a plate in each hand and watched my husband reach past me and turn my father the right way up, very politely, as though correcting a typo, and something in me just went quiet.

"Do whatever you want," I said.

What I meant was: please, just once, leave something the way I left it. Even if it's wrong. Even if you don't understand why. Let me have one thing in this kitchen that isn't optimised.

What he heard was: full permission granted.

I don't blame him for that. I really don't. If somebody says "do whatever you want" in a perfectly normal voice, it's not unreasonable to take them at their word. The problem was that I'd stopped being able to say the other sentences. The ones with my father in them. Every time I started, there was a form to sign, or a call from the bank, or Teo looking at me with that worried, helpful face, and I'd think, Not now, he's carrying so much already. And I'd put the sentence back.

You can only put a sentence back so many times before you forget where you put it.

I sat on the bed with my shoes on. I told him it wasn't about the dishwasher. He asked what it was about. I opened my mouth, and the true answer was: It's about my dad, it's about the knife, it's about the fact that I haven't let myself cry properly in eleven months and I'm frightened that if I start I'll never stop.

And I heard myself say, "Forget it. It's late."

I learned very young to read a room and decide how much of myself it could hold. I'm very good at it. I can walk into a kitchen and know, to the gram, how much sadness the other person can carry today. And then I give them a little less than that. Always a little less. To be safe.

The trouble is, if you do that for long enough, nobody ever finds out how much they could have carried. Including you.

I lay awake that night next to my husband. He was pretending to be asleep. So was I. I could hear the dishwasher in

the kitchen, humming its perfect cycle, with every knife facing down.

I almost got up to change one.

I didn't. I was too tired to fight a machine.

03

Anniversary Without Instructions

Their fourteenth anniversary fell on the Saturday. Teo had prepared for it as he prepared for any important document: early, thoroughly, and with a backup copy.

The plan was to go back to Lantern, the small restaurant by the harbour where they had eaten on their first date. It had candles in green bottles and a waiter called Ilie who recited the specials like poetry. On that first night, fourteen years ago, Vera had laughed so hard at something Teo said about the menu's spelling that wine had come out of her nose. Teo still considered it the best thing he had ever achieved.

He booked the table by telephone. The voice that answered sounded young and distracted, and there was a lot of noise behind it.

"Lantern?" Teo asked.

"Lantern," said the voice. "Saturday, eight, two people. Wear something you don't mind."

He did not know what that meant. He assumed it was a joke about the wine.

On Saturday, Vera put on the blue dress. Teo noticed, and said, "You look nice," and she said, "Thank you," and for a

moment it was easy, the way it had been when they first knew each other and every sentence was a small gift you could open.

They took the tram to the harbour. Vera looked out of the window. Teo held a small box in his coat pocket and checked it was still there four times.

Lantern was no longer Lantern.

Or rather, it was still called Lantern, but the candles in green bottles had been replaced by eleven television screens, each showing a different football match. The walls had been painted the colour of a sports drink. Where Ilie had once recited the specials, a young man in a referee's shirt shouted, "Wings are half price till the end of the second half!"

Teo stood in the doorway.

"Oh," said Vera.

"I booked," Teo said, as if this might restore the candles.

"I know."

"We can go somewhere else."

She looked around. A man at the bar was shouting at a screen as though the screen had borrowed money from him. A cheer went up from a corner table. Then she did something he did not expect. She smiled. It was small and crooked and entirely real.

"No," she said. "Let's stay. It's funny."

So they stayed. They sat at a high table under a screen showing a match between two teams Teo had never heard of. The referee-waiter brought menus that were laminated and slightly sticky. There were no specials, only wings in nine levels of heat, named after natural disasters.

"I'll have the Mild Drizzle," said Vera.

"Hurricane," said Teo, who had not understood the system.

It was, for twenty minutes, a good evening. They laughed about the wings. Teo told her he had once translated a manual for a microwave that claimed to "love your leftovers", and she laughed properly, and he felt the old achievement glow in his chest. He decided this was the moment for the box.

But first, Vera put down her fork.

"Teo," she said. "I want to tell you something. I've been trying to say it for a while."

"Okay."

"Since Dad—"

The bar exploded. Someone on one of the screens had scored. Fifty people stood up at once. The referee-waiter blew an actual whistle. A man hugged a stranger. Somewhere a glass broke and three people cheered that too.

Teo leaned across the table. "Sorry?"

Vera's mouth moved. He caught "since", and "every day", and something that might have been "alone" or might have been "a loan". The crowd began to sing. It was a song with one word in it, and the word was the name of a player, and they sang it as though it might bring him home from a war.

"Sorry," Teo said again, louder. "I can't hear you."

She looked at him across the sticky table, under the screen, in her blue dress. Then she picked up her fork.

"Nothing," she said. "It doesn't matter."

This time he heard it perfectly. The crowd had sat down. The screen had gone back to men jogging thoughtfully across grass.

"It sounded like it mattered," he said.

"It's fine."

There it was again. Fine. Teo turned the word over. It seemed to him that the word had changed since Tuesday. It was the same four letters. It weighed more.

He took out the box anyway, because he had planned it and because he did not know what else to do. Inside was a small silver tuning fork on a chain. He had found it in an antique shop in the old town and had it engraved with the date of their first dinner.

"Happy anniversary," he said.

Vera held it up. The tuning fork turned slowly in the light of eleven football matches. She touched the engraving with her thumb.

"It's beautiful," she said, and her eyes filled, and Teo thought, Good, this is the right kind of crying. He had read about the different kinds.

She struck the fork gently against the edge of the table and held it near her ear. In all that noise, he could not hear it. He watched her listen to something he couldn't hear.

"It's an A," she said. "Four-forty."

"The man in the shop said it was accurate."

"It is." She put the chain around her neck. "It's very accurate."

On the tram home, she held his hand. It was the first time in weeks. Teo sat very still, as though any movement might cause the hand to be withdrawn, like a cat. He thought the evening had gone, on balance, well. There had been an unfortunate sports bar. There had been a gift. There had been hand-holding.

He did not think about the sentence he had not heard. He had decided, as a professional, that a sentence nobody could hear did not technically exist.