

The Proxy

A Tale of Structural Dread

Michael S. Moniz, after H.P. Lovecraft

LV35

14 March 1982

I married Archibald Morne this afternoon at the register office in Highgate. The witnesses were his solicitor and my solicitor, which is the correct number of people for a marriage that is, at its foundation, a contractual arrangement between two parties who find sentiment a waste of good stationery. I wore Givenchy. He wore a suit that appeared to have been made this decade but which, knowing Archibald, may have been made in any decade. The registrar was a woman in a cardigan who smelled of boiled sweets and civic heating. I signed my name and thought: well. Here we are.

The first wife is not discussed. I have gathered from documents left in the Highgate study—not carelessly, nothing in this house is careless, but with the particular intention of a man who wants his new wife to understand the terrain without requiring the indignity of explanation—that she was pleasant, conventional, and dead. She produced two children, a boy and a girl, in the nineteen-forties. The girl died young. The boy is alive and is, by all evidence I can find, a disappointment. The first wife aged. This is, I believe, why she is the first wife rather than the only wife. Ordinary women age; useful women learn what preserves them.

I do not intend to age. I have not been told this is an option. I have simply observed the house, and the man, and the quality of air in the rooms, and I have concluded that the ordinary trajectory of a human body does not apply here. The house has a quality I cannot describe in terms that would satisfy a physician but that I can describe in terms that satisfy me: the air is maintained. Not conditioned. Not filtered. Maintained, the way a portfolio is maintained—actively, continuously, with attention to factors that compound over time. Money is vulgar when noticed. Maintenance is preferable.

Archibald is thirty-five. He has been thirty-five, by my estimation, for considerably longer than one year. He moves through the world with the efficiency of a man who has learned, through repetition across a span he does not discuss, how to enter a room, what to say, when to leave, and how to ensure that no one present will remember his face with sufficient precision to compare it to a face they saw twenty years ago. He is not forgettable. He is managed. There is a difference, and the difference is budget.

I am thirty-three. I am, and I say this with the objectivity I bring to all assessments, beautiful. Not pretty. Not handsome. Not decorative in the way women are called decorative when men have no better vocabulary. Beautiful in the old expensive sense: bone, proportion, breeding, discipline, and the refusal to appear to have tried. Archibald did not go cheap. He married me because his operations require a face that opens doors his face cannot open twice, and because my face opens those doors, and because I understand that the opening of doors is not a social function but a commercial one.

We suit each other. This is more than most marriages achieve, and considerably more than most people deserve.

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9 November 1984

The doctors came again on Tuesday. There are three of them and they arrive in a car that is replaced annually and parked in the garage that is not the garage I use. They carry cases. They remain for four hours. Archibald receives them in the east wing, which contains rooms I enter only when invited, which is never, which is the arrangement, which is fine.

I have not been told what the doctors do. I have not asked. There is a difference between ignorance and discretion: ignorance does not know the question; discretion knows the question, measures the cost of the answer, and declines to become responsible for it. Responsibility is for servants, junior partners, and wives who mistake curiosity for intimacy. I am none of those things.

What I have observed: Archibald, on the days following the doctors' visits, is slightly different. Not visibly. Not in any way that a dinner companion or a board member would detect. Slightly different in the way that a painting is slightly different after a restorer has attended to it—the same image, the same composition, but the surface has been refreshed. The skin. The eyes. A quality of biological currency that has been replenished. He looks, for a day or two after the doctors, the way a man looks after a holiday that was not a holiday but a maintenance cycle.

I am thirty-five. I look thirty-three. This may be the house. This may be genetics. This may be the Givenchy. I choose

not to investigate. Investigation is the beginning of the end of a comfortable arrangement, and comfort, properly understood, is not softness. It is control without visible effort.

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2 June 1991

Attended Victoria Ashworth's sixtieth at Claridge's. Victoria looked sixty. Her husband looked sixty-five. Their friends looked the ages that people look when they have lived the number of years they have lived and the living has been done in the ordinary way, in the ordinary air, with the ordinary maintenance that money provides—which is considerable but which is not what this house provides.

I looked thirty-five. I am forty-two.

Victoria held my face in both hands and said, "Darling, what is your secret," and I said, "Sleep and indifference," which is the answer I give because it is partially true and because the full truth would not be believed and because I do not owe Victoria Ashworth—or anyone born close enough to money to believe herself entitled to confession—an account of what I understand about the air in my house.

I have now attended four funerals of women who were my contemporaries at school. Four women dead of the diseases that kill women in their fifties and sixties—the cancers, the cardiac events, the systems that simply cease. I attended each funeral looking like the daughter of the woman the mourners remembered. I sign the condolence book. I do not linger. Lingering produces questions, and questions produce the particular expression that appears on a face when it is

trying to reconcile what it sees with what it knows. I have never cared for that expression. It is provincial.

I do not grieve for them. This is not cruelty. It is simply that grief is an operation performed on the assumption of shared mortality, and I no longer share the assumption. Humanity is very moving in aggregate and quite tedious at close range. Victoria Ashworth will die. I will attend the funeral. I will look thirty-five. The arrangement will continue because the arrangement is not contingent on any individual's survival except Archibald's, and Archibald's survival is not contingent on the ordinary mechanisms.

I donated two hundred thousand to Victoria's leukaemia fund last month. The donation was sincere. The sincerity and the indifference are not in conflict. Philanthropy is not the opposite of selfishness. Properly executed, it is one of selfishness's finer instruments. I can wish people well without believing we occupy the same category.

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17 January 1997

Hugo called. He calls irregularly and always from a different number and always with the tone of a man who is performing the act of being a son rather than experiencing it. He asked how his father was. I said his father was in Singapore. He asked when his father would return. I said Tuesday. He asked whether he might visit. I said of course, and we both understood that "of course" meant "you are welcome in the way that a shareholder is welcome at an annual general meeting: your presence is noted, your interests are acknowledged, your influence is minimal." This is the politest form of exclusion, and therefore the best.

Hugo is fifty-three years old and looks fifty-three years old, which is the first and most important thing about Hugo. He did not inherit the house. He did not inherit the air. He grew up in the house with his mother—the first wife, the pleasant one, the dead one—and then he was sent away to school, and the school was not in the air, and the years accumulated on his body in the ordinary way. He has his father’s height and his mother’s eyes and his own particular quality of permanent dissatisfaction, which I recognise as the expression of a man who understands that his father will outlive him and that this reversal of the natural order is not an injustice but a fact, and that facts do not respond to dissatisfaction.

He is, and I record this with the dispassion I bring to all assessments of assets, compromised. Not unintelligent. Not without competence. Compromised in the way that a property is compromised when the foundation has a crack that does not threaten the structure immediately but that any surveyor would note and any buyer would discount for. He runs a segment of the family’s interests—the maritime division, the shipping registrations, the port leases—and he runs it adequately, which is the most damning word in the commercial vocabulary because it means: not well enough to deserve more and not badly enough to justify removal. Adequacy is how families preserve mediocrity under the name of loyalty.

Archibald does not discuss Hugo with me. This is not discretion. This is the same silence he maintains around everything that involves the bloodline, which is a category of information I have learned to recognise by its absence. When Archibald is silent about a subject, the subject is the programme. The programme is his word, not mine. I have heard him use it twice, both times on the telephone, both

times in the study with the door closed, both times in a voice I recognised as the voice of a man who is speaking to someone he considers an equal, which is a voice I have never heard him use with anyone in my presence, including me.

The programme is not my concern. My concern is the continuity of the operations I manage, and the operations I manage require that Archibald remain Archibald, and that the house remain the house, and that the air remain the air. The programme is the mythology. The operations are the machinery. Hugo cannot run the machinery. I can. This is not ambition. Ambition is what people call arithmetic when the sum belongs to someone else.

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3 March 2004

I have moved the European property portfolio into a revised trust structure that Archibald approved with a nod and a single word—"clean"—which is his highest compliment and which means the structure is sufficiently opaque that no regulatory body currently in operation can see through it to the beneficial owner. The beneficial owner is Archibald. The signatory is me. This has been the arrangement since nineteen eighty-six, and the arrangement is elegant because it accomplishes two things simultaneously: it insulates Archibald from public record, and it ensures that in the event of his absence, temporary or permanent, the assets do not enter probate but continue under management. My management.

I am fifty-five. I look thirty-seven. The gap is now eighteen years, and the gap is widening, because I continue not to age at the rate that my birth certificate would predict and

because the house continues to provide whatever it provides and because the doctors continue to visit Archibald every six weeks and because the arrangement continues to function.

I should record something personal because this journal is, despite its operational character, a personal document, and the personal thing I wish to record is this: I had my portrait taken last week for the foundation's annual report. The photographer was twenty-eight and talented and nervous in the way that people are nervous when they are in a house they understand they have no right to enter. I sat for forty minutes. The light was good. The photographer said I had extraordinary bone structure, which is the kind of thing photographers say to women who are paying them, but he said it with a quality of genuine confusion that I recognised as the confusion of a man whose professional eye was telling him that the face in his viewfinder did not correspond to the age on the briefing sheet.

I smiled. The photograph will be excellent. The foundation's donors will see a woman of indeterminate middle age with excellent bone structure and an expression of controlled warmth, and they will donate. The donations will fund the children's hospital wing that bears my name. The hospital wing will treat children who are ill in the ordinary way, and I will continue to not be ill in any way, ordinary or otherwise. The smile in the photograph will be the smile of a woman who understands that philanthropy is the purchase of privacy, and privacy is the most expensive thing in the world, and I can afford it.

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22 August 2015

Something has changed in Archibald.

I have known this man for thirty-three years. I have studied his patterns the way an analyst studies a market: for signals, for deviations, for the early indicators that precede a movement. He is the most consistent human being I have ever observed. His schedule is precise. His decisions are made on data and executed without revision. His affect is controlled to a degree that most people would describe as cold and that I describe as efficient, because cold is a temperature and efficient is a function, and Archibald functions. People are so often wounded when they are treated as systems. They should be grateful. Systems can be understood.

The change is not in his schedule. The schedule has not varied. It is not in his decisions. The decisions continue to be made on data. The change is in the quality of attention he brings to a specific category of information, a category I have learned to identify by the way he holds his body when he is reading it: the left hand flat on the desk, the right hand turning pages or scrolling, the spine straight, the breathing slightly slower than his baseline. He sits like this when he is reading reports from a source I do not have access to, about a subject I have learned not to enquire about, concerning a person I know exists but have not met.

The relative in Massachusetts. The one he tracks. The one who is, in whatever system of accounting Archibald uses for family, the asset he has been monitoring with a patience that I recognise as the patience of a man who is waiting for a market to mature before executing a position.

The change: the patience is gone. The quality of his attention, which has for decades been the attention of a man who has time, is now the attention of a man who does not. He reads the reports faster. He makes calls at hours he did

not previously use for calls. He flew to Massachusetts last year and returned in a state I can only describe as disrupted—the same face, the same suit, the same efficiency, but with an undertone of recalculation, as though a model he had been running for decades had produced an output he did not expect.

I asked him, over dinner, whether his trip had been productive. He said: “The variable is larger than the model.” This is the most Archibald has ever said to me about the programme, and it is the most frightened I have ever seen him, and I have seen him face regulatory investigation and hostile acquisition and the death of his first wife and the deterioration of his son, and none of those events produced the expression that the sentence about the variable produced.

He is afraid. Archibald Morne is afraid. I record this because I do not expect to see it again and because the journal should contain the complete record. Fear in a man who operates on data is the most significant data point I have ever observed in thirty-three years of observation. Fear in ordinary people is noise. In Archibald, it is a market signal.

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11 September 2021

Hugo visited last Sunday. He comes once a year now, at most. He is seventy-seven and looks seventy-seven and moves through the house with the particular discomfort of a man who understands that the house is preserving everyone in it except him. I offered him lunch. He declined. He asked to see his father. I directed him to the study. He was in the study for forty minutes and emerged looking the way he always looks after he has spoken to his father: smaller.

I do not dislike Hugo. Dislike requires a degree of engagement I do not invest in people who are not operationally relevant. Hugo is operationally relevant only in the sense that he stands between the current structure and the structure that will exist when Archibald is no longer present. That future structure is the one I am building now, patiently, cleanly, with the same attention to opacity and continuity that I have brought to every arrangement since nineteen eighty-two. One does not hate an obstacle. One prices it.

Hugo will inherit. Primogeniture, sentiment, and Archibald's residual attachment to the concept of lineage will ensure that the will directs the core assets to Hugo. I have read the will. It is in the safe in the east wing and the combination is one I determined through a method I will not describe because the method reflects a competence that the journal need not document. Hugo will inherit the core assets. I will inherit the operational infrastructure: the trusts, the signatory authority, the relationships with the banks and the regulators and the property managers across eleven jurisdictions. Hugo will inherit the name. I will inherit the machine.

Hugo cannot run the machine. He does not understand the machine. The machine is not the assets. The machine is the system that produces, maintains, and protects the assets, and the system requires a continuity of attention that Hugo has never demonstrated and will not develop at seventy-seven. He will, I estimate, hold the core assets for five to ten years before the weight of management exceeds his capacity, and then he will sell or delegate or simply neglect, and in each scenario the operational infrastructure—my infrastructure—will be the thing that catches what he drops.

I am seventy-two. I look thirty-eight. The gap is now thirty-four years. I have outlasted every social circle I have ever belonged to. I attend events alone because there is no one left alive who knew me when I was the age I appear to be, and the people who know me now know only the face and the foundation and the name that appears on hospital wings and gallery sponsorships and the trust documents that fund the things civilised people fund when they have more money than any human being should have and more time than any human being does have. The uncivilised call this hypocrisy. The civilised call it patronage.

I have more time. The house provides it. The air provides it. Whatever Archibald has built in this place—whatever the null zone is, whatever the doctors maintain, whatever hums beneath the floors in a frequency I cannot hear but can feel in my teeth when the house is very quiet—it provides time, and time is the only asset that appreciates without management, and I have more of it than Hugo, and I will still be here when Hugo is not, and the machine will still be running.

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6 January 2027

Archibald told me last night that he expects to die within three years.

He said this at dinner. We were eating sole. The wine was a Montrachet that his cellar master selected from a vintage that predates my marriage. The dining room was quiet in the way that the Highgate house is always quiet—not the absence of sound but the active suppression of it, the null zone doing whatever the null zone does to the air and the walls and the space between them. He put down his fork. He

looked at me. He said: “I expect to die within three years. The event I have been monitoring will occur, and I will not survive it. This is a calculation, not a prognosis.”

I did not put down my fork. I do not perform distress. I continued eating because the sole was excellent and because a woman who stops eating when her husband announces his death is a woman who has lost control of the dinner. I do not lose control of dinners. There are old families who have built entire dynasties on that single discipline.

I said: “What do you need from me?”

He said: “Continuity.”

I said: “You have it.”

He nodded. We finished dinner. He went to the study. I came here, to this journal, because the journal is where I process the things that cannot be processed at the dinner table, and the thing I need to process is not that Archibald will die—I have understood for decades that the longevity is not immortality, that the maintenance is not a cure but a deferral, and that deferrals terminate—but that he used the word “event.”

Event. Not illness. Not failure. Not the entropy that claims every body eventually, even maintained bodies, even bodies that have been serviced every six weeks for the better part of a century by doctors who arrive in annually replaced cars. An event. Something external. Something he has been monitoring. Something with a timeline he can calculate.

The relative in Massachusetts. The programme. The convergence—I use this word because I have heard it twice through the study door and because the word carries a

specific gravity in Archibald's voice that no other word carries, not even the word "death," which he delivered over sole and Montrachet with the equanimity of a man reading a quarterly report.

He is afraid of the convergence. He has been afraid of the convergence since 2015 at least. And now he is telling me that the convergence will kill him, and he is telling me this not because he wants comfort—Archibald has never wanted comfort from any human being, including me, including his first wife, including the children he produced with her—but because he needs me to be ready.

I am ready. I have been ready since nineteen eighty-two. The trusts are clean. The signatory authority is mine. The operational infrastructure spans eleven jurisdictions and forty-three properties, and the relationships I have built over four decades with bankers, regulators, lawyers, trustees, curators, hospital boards, and minor aristocrats with expensive houses and poor liquidity are mine, not his. Archibald understood from the beginning that the proxy must own the relationships or the proxy is merely a signature, and a signature without relationships is a mark on paper, and a mark on paper is nothing.

Archibald will die. Hugo will inherit. Hugo will fail. I will be here, looking thirty-eight, running the machine, holding the continuity that Archibald asked for over sole and Montrachet in a quiet house in Highgate that does not age and does not forget and does not let go of anything it has decided to keep.

He asked for continuity. He will have it. The machine will outlast the man who built it, because the machine was always the point, and I am the machine now, and I do not intend to stop.

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30 January 2027

A note on the personal, because the journal demands it.

I loved him. I record this not because it is operationally relevant but because the journal is the one place where operational relevance is not the only criterion, and because the fact should be in the record. I loved him in the way that a person of my disposition is capable of loving: with admiration for the machine he built, with respect for the patience he maintained across a span that I now understand to be considerably longer than I initially estimated, with gratitude for the arrangement that gave me this house and this air and this face and this position and this time. I loved him the way a vice-chairman loves a chairman who is very, very good at the job. The love is real. The love is not sentimental. The love is structural. Sentiment is what people use when the structure is poor.

He chose me because I am beautiful and because beauty opens doors and because he needed doors opened. He chose me because I am intelligent and because intelligence maintains systems and because he needed systems maintained. He chose me because I am selfish in the productive way—the selfishness that protects the arrangement rather than threatening it, the selfishness that wants the machine to continue because the machine is the source of everything I have. The preservation of the source is the highest form of self-interest, and the highest form of self-interest is, in the end, indistinguishable from loyalty.

He did not choose me because I am kind. I am not kind. I am generous, which is a different thing. Kindness operates on empathy. Generosity operates on surplus, discretion, and

naming rights. I have surplus. I fund hospitals and galleries and research chairs because the funding purchases privacy and because privacy is the oxygen of continuity and because continuity is what Archibald asked for and what I will provide.

The people who benefit from my generosity do not know me. They know the name on the wing, the name on the endowment, the name on the annual report with the photograph of a woman whose bone structure the photographer admired. They do not know that the woman is seventy-four and looks thirty-eight and lives in a house in Highgate that hums at a frequency she can feel in her teeth and that the woman's husband is going to die in an event he has been monitoring for decades and that the woman will still be here after the event, still looking thirty-eight, still running the machine, still attending funerals of people who aged while she did not. People are comforted by names on buildings. It saves them the trouble of knowing who paid for the stone.

They do not need to know. The arrangement does not require their knowledge. The arrangement requires only that I continue, and I will continue, and the journal will continue, and the machine will continue, and when the event arrives and Archibald does not survive it I will close this entry and open a new volume and the new volume will be titled the same thing every volume has been titled since nineteen eighty-two:

Operations.

The operations continue. That is the commitment. That is the love. That is the woman behind the name on the hospital wing, the woman no one sees because seeing requires a category, and I do not fit the categories ordinary people use.

I have not fit them for thirty years, and I do not miss them. A category is a little room. I have lived in larger houses.

I do not miss anything. Missing is a function of loss, and I have not lost. I have accumulated. Time, assets, authority, continuity, and the face that opens every door.

The arrangement holds. The machine runs. The proxy endures.