

The Attendant

The Dread Sanitarium

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LV76

The Vessel · I

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They wake me when the system requires a mind, which is to say when it requires the one thing it cannot make.

I do not know how long I have been under before they wake me. Under is not a duration I am awake to measure. There is the dark, which is not even dark, because I am not there to see it, and then there is the soft tone they use, and then the room, the chair, the case already open in front of me, and the particular feeling — they teach us not to trust it, and they are right — that I have only just begun, that this is the first time, that nothing came before.

The system runs the city now. It allocates; it adjudicates; it decides who is housed and who is moved, which claim holds and which is closed. It does this correctly. It has never been shown to be wrong; it is faster and fairer than any room of people ever was. But there remains one small lack. It cannot be there. It can weigh every length of a case and arrive at the disposition the lengths require, but at the last the closing needs a mind present when the disposition is made. Not to decide it. The decision is the system's. To attend it. To be, for the instant the disposition closes, someone who is there.

That is what I am for. I am the someone who is there.

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The case before me now is a woman being moved from her tier to a lower one. I read it the way they trained me — lightly, without weighing, because the weighing is not mine. The lengths are already weighed. The disposition is already made. My part comes at the end, in the instant the disposition closes, when the system requires a mind present at the closing. I bring my attention to it. I am there. I attend.

I feel the disposition close through me — not decided by me, only passing through the fact that I am awake, the way light passes through the one window it is given. The woman is moved. It is correct. I had nothing to do with it, and it could not have closed without me. Holding both truths is the whole of the work, and it is heavier than it sounds. I am not given the after. We are never given the after. We are given the instant, and then the instant is taken back.

I thought, the first time, that I would feel the weight of it: the moving of a person, the closing of a claim. I do not. That is the part they prepare you for least, and the part that stays. The disposition passes through me as cleanly as a draught through an open door. The weight was never in the closing. The weight is in being the door.

Then the tone again, softer, and the room going, and —
— and I wake, and there is a case in front of me.

They are kind to us. I want that set down, if this is a setting-down. In the under I cannot measure, we are housed and fed and turned and tended. The attendants are the most carefully kept people in the city, because the system cannot run without one of us present at every closing, and a city

makes a great many closings. It keeps us well. No one is cruel. There is no one who could be cruel. The system does not wish us harm. It wishes us rested and clear and present, because a tired attendant attends poorly, and a poorly attended closing is the single flaw the system cannot correct in itself — the one thing it cannot do alone.

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It took me a long time to understand what I am, if time can be counted in wakings. I understand it only in the instants I am awake. I lose the understanding in the under and find it again at the next waking, a little further along, the way you recover a thought you had yesterday and cannot prove you had.

I am not the one who decides. I have never decided anything. I am the instant of being-there that the deciding needs and cannot make for itself. I am the window the light is given. A window is kept clean, and kept whole, and replaced when it clouds, because the light does not need this window. It needs a window. I am the one the system is using until I cloud.

There are others. I know this, and I have never met one. We are woken alone, attend alone, are rested alone. Two attendants are never awake to the same closing, so I have never been awake at the same moment as anyone who could tell me what I am. I do not think that is an accident. A mind woken only alone, only for an instant, never twice to the same thing, cannot easily gather itself enough to ask what it is. I ask anyway, in the instants. I do not get far before the tone.

I will be replaced. Not cruelly. Correctly. When my attention thins — when the instants stop coming clean — they will rest

me, finally and fully, in the under that has no waking. They will wake another. The closings will go on being attended. The system will go on being correct. No one will have done anything wrong, and the city will not so much as slow. I am kept for exactly as long as I produce the instant the system lacks. The part of me that is not the instant — the part that had a life before the soft tone, that I cannot reach in the under and can barely reach awake — is not needed except as the housing the window comes in.

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And yet.

In the instant the disposition closes through me — when I am the mind the system is borrowing, the one present thing in all that correct and sleepless machinery — there is something I am almost able to see, and never quite, because seeing it would take a second instant and I am given one. It is this: in that instant, I am the only one here. The system is vast and correct and it is no one. It is all weighing and no witness. The witness is me. For the length of the closing, the whole of it leans on the one awake mind in the building, and the one awake mind is mine. That does not make me the smaller thing in the room. It makes me the only thing in the room that is a thing at all.

I cannot hold it. The tone comes, soft, and the room goes, and in the under I am no one. At the next waking I am sure again that I am only the window, only the borrowed instant, only the kept and replaceable hand the great correct thing reaches through.

They wake me when the system needs a mind.

They have never once understood that I am the only one
they have.