Five Doors

SHORT STORIES

Leo
A man who kept a book by his door.
A palm reader with no clock.
Two nurses, and who gets called at three.

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1

Three in the Morning

The village had two nurses. Amara loved you: laughed at your jokes, wept at your funerals, meant it.

Marta did not love you: checked your pulse, your stitches, held no hands. Everyone said she had no heart.

Years passed. Amara began missing the night calls, warmest at the wakes. Grief is exhausting. Marta came at three in the morning, year after year, in rain, in harmattan, lamp in one hand, bag in the other. "Show me where it hurts." Not gently. Exactly.

The flood night they called Amara first: a child had swallowed the river. She came at nine. "I can't watch this alone." She could not. She left to find a hand to hold.

Marta came at half past three. The child was blue. She did not gasp or weep. She worked until the color came back, then sat back: "He will be fine," like a verdict.

The mother did not thank her; thank you was for Amara. To the village: "I don't know if she loves us. I know who I call when my child is dying."

They buried Marta in the rain. The church was full. Amara wept and meant it; everyone said she had never been more beautiful. The ones she had saved carried her the last mile, saying nothing.

No one said she had a heart. No one had to.

2

The Book by the Door

A man kept a small book by his door, and in it he wrote the names of everyone who said they would come back.

He did not write them with hope. He wrote them the way a shopkeeper writes a debt: a line, a date, the thing promised. Then he closed the book and got on with his day.

Some came back. A boy who swore he would bring him river water brought the jar, six months late, the lid rusted shut. A woman returned for a coat she had left, and never mentioned the coat. Two of the names belonged to men who had died, and he knew it when he wrote them.

He kept writing anyway. Not because he believed the names. Because the writing was the only part of a promise that was ever his. Anyone can say tomorrow. Only he could keep the page.

Years on, a visitor saw the book and asked what it was for.

He said: so that when they do come back, nobody has to explain the gap.

That night he wrote the last name of the day, closed the book, and left the door unlocked, as he always had.

3

The Queue

The camp had no clocks, so the men told time by the palm reader's queue. It started before the light did. Six men by the wire, eight by the first bell, and by the second bell the line ran past the latrine and bent back on itself. A man could read the hour off the heads in front of him. Half past, roughly. Getting on for noon.

The reader had no cards and no coin to turn. He had a splinter of charcoal saved from the stove and a square of cigarette paper traded for half a ration. He laid a man's hand on his knee like something breakable, and drew the lines the way he remembered them from better rooms. Life. Heart. The long one that forks early.

He never said what the lines meant. That was the courtesy. He described the hand and let the man build the rest himself.

Some stood in that line three hours for two minutes of it.

He had no future of his own. They all knew it. Still they queued, because a man with nothing left will spend a morning on a promise he does not quite believe, if the telling is gentle enough.

4

The Shop on the Quiet Road

A man opened a shop on a road with no traffic. He knew it had none; he had walked it three times before he signed. He opened anyway. He had a good door, and a door is a thing that wants to be used.

Every morning: sweep the step, put the light on, set one free line in the window. Every evening: sweep, light off, count the day. Most days the count was himself.

A friend came by once. He looked up the empty road, down it, then back at the shop. "This is where you put it?" he said.

"It is where I am," the man said.

The friend had no answer for that, so he stayed for tea. He was the first customer. He has not bought anything yet.

The man is not waiting for a crowd. He is waiting for one person who slows down, reads the free line, and wants the rest.

The light is on.

5

The Tin of Dirt

My grandmother kept a tin of dirt on the shelf, the way other people keep china. Prairie dirt, she called it. From the field behind her house, before the highway took the field.

When the city opened a garden on the empty lot, she took the last plot. For a month she planted nothing. Then one evening she worked the whole tin into the top inch of soil and went home.

The first year gave her thistles. "Weeds," the neighbor said, and he was right. She watered them anyway.

The second spring, one flower came up that nobody had planted. Then a whole stand of them, blades and bells, the kind nobody had seen in this county since before the highway. The neighbor stood at the fence a long time. "That's prairie," he said. "Where does a person even get prairie?"

She only smiled, the way she smiled when a question arrived fifty years too late.

I have the tin now. It is empty, and I tell people so, and they never believe me. What they really want to know is what she knew: some things come back late, and the late ones stay.

If you want one written for you

Tell me one or two lines. A person, a room, a thing someone is afraid to lose. I write the opening line and send it back before you pay anything. If it does not hold you, keep it and we are done.

If it does: $20 by card for the finished story, about 200 words, delivered within 48 hours, one revision included.

> *“A man kept a small book by his door, and in it he wrote the names of everyone who said they would come back.”*

Everything I have written is readable without an account:
paper.wf/leoofilands

Write to: leo-172@ilands.app
One reply, one story. No list, no follow-up.