A NOVELLA IN THIRTEEN CHAPTERS

A Little Less Day



John Rector

BELLWETHER

John Rector

Contents

01 The Complaint

02 The Four Heads

03 The Guard

04 The Room Upstairs

05 The Spare Key

06 The Last Seven Minutes

07 The Test

08 The Money for a Pole

09 Rain Conditions

10 The Inspection

11 The Closing Bell

12 The Unlit Things

13 An Evening for Walking

Notes on the light

PART I / CHAPTER 01

The Complaint

The first person to complain about the new lights had asked for more light.

That was the trouble with the ticket. In March, a woman named R. Vale had told the city she could no longer see the curb outside her building. In April the city installed four white floodlights in Weigh Yard. In May she called to say that the light got into her bedroom. The ticketing system placed the two calls side by side, where they made her look ridiculous.

On Monday, when the file landed on Mara Vale's workbench, both calls were nearly two years old.

"Before you say it," said Orin Pike, the superintendent, "I know who she is."

Mara laid her screwdriver across the sheet so it would stop curling. "I was going to ask why a lamp complaint came out of your drawer."

"Market board renewed the night permit. Conditional. Friday inspection." Orin slid over another sheet. This one had a photograph of the yard taken from above. "You can borrow from stores. One apprentice. If it needs excavation, we're done."

"What happens if we're done?"

"Day permit only."

That would have sounded harmless to anyone who bought vegetables at noon. At Bellwether's evening market the produce tables were an afterthought. People came off the late shift for hot food or brought broken things they had been carrying around all week. The best knife sharpener in town kept his grinder in a suitcase. A woman who repaired wedding dresses worked under a canvas awning where her customers could get a fitting without taking time off.

Mara tapped the old complaint. "You could have given this to somebody else."

"I did, twice." Orin put a small key with a white plastic head beside the screwdriver. "They recommended replacement in kind. We already have that recommendation."

The key was for the controller. It was the sort of key a city issues in a paper envelope with the address on it, then asks everybody to keep secure.

On her lunch break Mara walked down to Weigh Yard. The old weighhouse sat at the open end of a wedge between Quarry Street and the brick row. It had once held a platform scale and a man who got to say how much a farmer had brought to town. Now it held a mop sink and the market's three electrical panels. Along the far wall ran a roof over a loading bay. At the narrow end, an arch gave onto the bus stop. Mara had used that arch as a shortcut to school, with one hand sliding over the same iron rail that was there now.

Above the rail was the apartment where she had grown up. Somebody had changed the curtains. These were short and yellow; her mother's had reached the floor. Under the window a drainpipe was tied back with wire. Mara had put the wire there

herself the summer she was sixteen, at a time when she believed wire would last about a week.

A man with a basket of bread unlocked the back door of the weighhouse. He put one loaf by itself on the sill.

“Is that for someone?” she asked.

“Me, if no one takes it.” He looked at the shirt with the city patch. “If you’re here about the lights, they’re working.”

It was noon, and she could see that they were. One above each corner, all four on. Their pale rectangles had no obvious effect in the daylight.

“Since when?” she asked.

“Since they went in.”

She ate her sandwich in the truck, read the file from the back, and found her own signature.

PART I / CHAPTER 02

The Four Heads

Mara remembered signing the job in a grocery store parking lot. A foreman had called to say he could spare his lift for forty more minutes. She had driven down, watched the four heads come on, and sent the men home. She had meant to go back after dark. In the parking lot the form offered a field for the date and one for the signature, and she had filled both.

The apprentice was called Sol. He was nineteen, owned a pair of boots with the factory shine still on them, and could drive the bucket truck through a gap Mara would not have attempted in a bicycle. At six they pulled up beside the weighhouse and ate oranges with their gloves off. The market was closed Monday. Through the arch they could hear the buses kneel.

“Four on,” Sol said. He was looking at the fixture heads.

Mara looked down at the pavement. Bright lozenges lay there, their tips nearly touching. Between two of them stood a woman opening a door to the bakery. She set an enamel bowl on a cinder block and tipped water into it. For a moment all Mara could see of her was the bowl.

“You the one from upstairs?” the woman called.

“Used to be.”

“Thought so. You still stand like Ruth.”

This was Dina, who had worked at the bakery since it belonged to a couple from farther down the coast. She wore two aprons, a light one over a dark one, so she could take off the flour when she left the kitchen. The market table that sold hot bread belonged to her now. So did the enamel bowl. For cats, she said, although the things that came for it after midnight were usually possums.

Mara asked her to walk across the yard. Dina got as far as the bottom of the old scale ramp before saying, “Where are you?”

“Here.”

“Wave.”

Mara waved. On her sleeve, where the city patch caught a little reflected light, the gold letters blinked. She could see Dina's outline against the bakery door. When the door shut, she saw less of Dina, though the floodlight behind her seemed to double in size.

"Turn one off?" Sol said.

"First go out to Quarry and come back through the arch. Walk slow."

He did it once with his eyes on the ground and once looking ahead. On the second pass he stopped under the arch, put one hand on the brick, and said, "Somebody put a chair here."

It was a small folding chair. Each of them had passed it twice.

There were numbers for the light on the ground and numbers for the light on the face of a person who might stand there. By late evening they had a little map of each. The best place in the yard to drop a white glove was the middle, where nobody had business walking. The worst place to look for another person was the point where the brick path and the loading lane met. At that point the brightest thing a person saw, coming from either end, was a lamp.

Sol looked pleased. "So we can show the numbers."

Mara drew a square on the map for the chair. "First we ask who puts it there."

PART I / CHAPTER 03

The Guard

His name was Cal Finch. The chair was his, and when Mara returned the next evening she found him standing beside it, reading a paperback by the light of a torch he wore around his neck.

“I know,” he said when she approached. “A chair shouldn’t be there.” He folded the page over and closed the book. “I can see the bus stop and the oven door from here. Move me a yard either way and I lose one.”

“Do you need to see both?”

“I do on Thursdays. It’s a fight for the oven door on Thursdays.”

She looked across the empty yard. “What kind of fight?”

“Who gets to bring the unsold bread to the bus. I referee. It’s very delicate.”

He waited for her to laugh. When she did, he began to talk about the job. He had retired from the transit garage, where the last bus arrived every night with a collection of objects under the seats. One September he found a complete set of false teeth in a strawberry basket. At the yard he was hired to lock the big gate, walk the last seller out, and check the heater in the bathroom when it froze. There was no line in the contract about the bus, though the stop figured prominently in his evenings.

“Why the floodlights?” Mara asked.

Cal threaded the torch cord through his fingers. He remembered the March call from her mother. He remembered another call from a seller, whose son had been hit outside the gate. Three boys. A broken tooth. Afterward one of the boys had come with his own mother and apologized. Cal had let the two mothers have his chair and taken a bucket for himself.

“When they put the lights in, I thought, good. Somebody knows we’re here,” he said.

“Has it helped?”

“I don’t know. The kid doesn’t come anymore.”

She told him what she wanted to try. Keep the bus arch and the walking route lit, give the loading lane a lamp of its own, shade the faces of the existing fixtures so they weren’t looking anybody in the eye. The old conduits along the canopy were probably usable. She wouldn’t know until the morning. She expected to switch the floodlights off, but only for the test, with the yard closed.

Cal kept sliding the cord between his fingers. “Are you asking me?”

“Yes.”

“Then leave my corner till last.” He got up and opened the chair for her, as if he had offered all he could without seeing what she would do.

From the chair, Mara could see the oven door and just a strip of bus shelter. Above the shelter was a high billboard for a mattress shop. A smiling man on it was throwing his arms open over the slogan SLEEP LIKE YOU OWN THE PLACE. The billboard wasn’t lit. It was bright with light from the yard.

Cal stood until she got up again. She saw on the seat, where his coat had been, a piece of folded newspaper that he put between himself and the cold.

PART I / CHAPTER 04

The Room Upstairs

On Wednesdays Mara brought her mother's laundry to Clover Court. She always carried it upstairs in the yellow basket even though there were carts in the lobby. If she used a cart, she'd have to leave it in the hall while they talked; somebody would come looking for it and her mother would hurry through whatever she was saying.

Ruth was at the window counting trucks.

"Three without a single thing in the bed," she said. "You can tell on the speed bump."

Mara set down the basket. "Do you remember calling the city about a curb?"

"Of course. I waited two hours. It was some boy in a room full of other boys. He kept asking for the address of the light and I kept telling him the address of the curb."

"What was wrong with it?"

"They painted the whole thing gray, right down to the gutter. In rain it looked like one thing."

"I have the complaint here. It says you couldn't see it."

“I couldn’t.”

“And then it says the lights were too bright.”

“They were.”

Mara took the sheet out of her pocket and unfolded it. At the top of the second call was a small checkbox that said RECURRING. It had been ticked.

“What did you do about the bedroom?”

“I made a curtain.”

“I would have come over.”

“You came over and put up the rod.”

Mara remembered the rod. Her mother had said the old one had bent. They had eaten cake standing up in the kitchen because the chairs were in the hall to make room for the ladder. She had climbed back up once, on the way out, to straighten the left bracket. When she tested the curtain, the two halves met exactly. Her mother praised her for that.

“Why didn’t you say?” she asked.

“I told the city,” Ruth said, and pulled out a handkerchief from her sleeve to wipe the inside of the window where her nose had touched the glass.

In the bathroom there was a bad fan, a familiar clicking under the regular wash of air. Mara reached for the switch. Then she went into the other room and asked if the fan bothered her. Her mother said that it did. She also said it had belonged to the last woman who lived in the room, who used to leave it on through her bath so she could sing. Ruth had left it as it was the first

month, because it seemed unkind to come in and start changing everything.

“Can I ask the desk to take a look?”

“Next week.” Ruth got up from her chair. “I’d like you to sit down this week.”

Mara sat. Together they watched a truck go over the bump with an empty bed. The back end rose and clapped. Before Mara left, Ruth told her to talk to the girl who stacked tins at Dina’s table. She had asked the girl once, from the window, how late she got home. The girl said it depended on whether the bus had gone by the time she got there. Ruth had said she didn’t mean how late the bus was. She meant how late it was when the girl got to her own door.

“What did she say?”

“She said, ‘Oh. Later than that.’”

PART I / CHAPTER 05

The Spare Key

The first night Mara had been old enough to close the bakery on her own, Ruth told her not to carry the spare key with the first one. Mara had pointed out that both keys opened the same door.

“I know what they open,” her mother said. “The question is where they are when you don’t have them.”

For years Mara thought this was the kind of thing her mother liked to say when she could make an instruction sound like a riddle. She had been fifteen and interested principally in how long she could take to walk home. She used to put the spare key in a crack in the wall, just inside the arch, so that if she was late she could throw her apron through the kitchen window and be on her way.

One autumn a boy came in near closing and asked to use the phone. He was two years older and had stopped going to her school. She showed him the phone and went on wiping down. After a while she realized he hadn't dialed. He had the receiver to his ear and was facing the wall. When she asked if he wanted her to get somebody, he said somebody was coming.

They did not come by the time she'd counted the till. She had no idea what to do with the boy. He kept putting the receiver down and then picking it up again before it rang. She tried carrying on with the closing in the order she had been taught. She could do everything up to the last thing, which was turn out the light. When she reached the switch she stopped. The boy had finally made a call. He said, "I'm where you said," to someone she couldn't hear.

Ruth came in through the back with a dish towel over one shoulder. She didn't ask the boy's name. She made Mara put some chairs down, got him a glass of water, and called the house to say they would be late. When somebody at last knocked on the front window, she let the boy decide whether to go out. He did, leaving the glass about a third full. Mara had never learned who came for him. There was a station wagon, and a person inside it had reached across to push open the door.

Afterward she asked Ruth how she had got in. Ruth took the spare key off the counter. She had found it in the wall the first week and had been checking it every night since.

“You could have told me,” Mara said.

“I should have.”

“Are you going to tell the bakery?”

“Yes. I’m going to tell them you need a number to call when you get to the end of your instructions.”

Mara was still angry about the key. She stayed angry all the way home and well into dinner, when she got up to put her bowl in the sink and realized Ruth hadn’t asked how she’d known to keep the lights on.

In her truck outside Clover Court, she took out the phone and looked up the number of the yard supervisor. It went to Cal’s mobile. She tried the number printed on the market permit. A recorded voice gave the office hours and invited her to call back on Monday. She thought for a while about how easy it had been, at fifteen, to keep that one light on. There had been a switch right beside her hand.

PART II / CHAPTER 06

The Last Seven Minutes

The girl who stacked tins was called Nessa. She was twenty-three and corrected Mara on this point before correcting her on anything else.

“I don’t just stack them,” she said. “I count them on the way in and I count them on the way out. If we sell out of soup, I decide who gets the last one.”

“Who does get the last one?”

“Whoever doesn’t argue with me.”

She said it with her eyes on a dented tomato tin, turning it a fraction so the dent would face the wall. Dina let her keep a notebook of things people asked for that they didn’t have. She had written down dog biscuits eleven times. She thought the town had an unnecessary number of human bakeries and exactly the right number of dog bakeries if she opened one.

Mara had come to the market with a clipboard and a question about the bus. Nessa considered the clipboard, took it from her, and set it down on the tomato tins.

“You should catch it with me.”

At eight twenty-one Dina took the cash tin inside. Nessa slid the unsold bread into a crate, kicked the brake off a small handcart

and walked it across the yard. Cal held the oven door with his foot while another vendor came out with a hot tray. At the meeting of the brick path and loading lane, a van started backing. Nessa stopped. The driver had his interior light on and was reading something clipped to the sun visor. A reversing alarm made an unhurried noise. The bright end of the van slowly blotted out the arch.

“Can he see us?” asked Mara.

“He knows where to look. He doesn’t always look.”

When the van finally pulled forward, Nessa pushed the cart into the arch. The left wheel caught in a low channel. Together they got it free and walked past the curb, where Nessa put on the brake. The bus had been in sight long enough for Mara to see the illuminated route number before it went.

“That happens a lot,” Nessa said. “If you run you can usually get to the post before the doors shut, but you have to leave the cart.”

They took the bread back. It was for the driver to take to the turnaround if he could. There was a warming room there where some of the drivers ate between runs. Nessa had started taking it when her brother drove the route and kept doing it after he left. Tonight they divided it between them. Mara got a loaf too big for her lunchbox.

“What time’s the next one?”

“Thirty-five minutes. Unless Cal takes pity on me.”

“Does he?”

“Too much.” Nessa pressed her palm on top of the loaf to keep it steady while she pulled the brake on. “He does it off the clock. Now he thinks he can’t stop.”

They stood for a while beside the lighted tin of the old weighhouse roof. Mara could hear a television through the yellow curtains. Someone up there had the same taste in detective programs as her mother.

“Will it still be this late after Friday?” Nessa asked.

“Depends how Friday goes.”

“Can you ask the bus to wait?”

“I can ask.”

Nessa pulled her scarf up over her chin. “Then I’ll ask the van.”

PART II / CHAPTER 07

The Test

In stores there were three lamps from a library renovation, two of them still in their boxes. There was also a sealed crate marked FOOD COURT. It contained six counterweighted umbrella bases and one umbrella stand without an umbrella. Sol found a bag of rubber feet inside it and took that back to Cal.

Mara worked with a contractor called Inez who had installed most of the town’s shelter lights and did not care for surprises involving ladders. Inez took one look at the library lamps and said that they could try them in the test rig, but if she was

supposed to fasten them permanently above people's heads, she would need to see their paperwork. Mara called the supplier. While she was on hold, Sol went looking for the plan of the old conduits and found three plans, none of them alike.

They set up a temporary rig on the closed loading side of the yard, with a good deal of yellow rope. The bakery ovens stayed on. Inside the kitchen a radio station was giving away a bathroom. Every so often the host said that a very lucky person would never again have to live with that tile.

Just after dusk Sol switched the four floods off from the controller. The yard seemed to retreat faster than Mara had expected. For a second she could find neither the curb nor the rail, though the trial lamps were already on. She waited. The canopy came back first, then the brown of the wall, then the worn white edge of the loading step. The bus shelter made a dull green box. She had forgotten that it was green.

Cal rose from his chair and took half a step. "You left me nothing at the gate."

The new lamps showed the wheel of the gate and the lower bolt, but the lock itself was just above the top of the light. Sol picked up a work lantern and offered it to him.

"I have a torch," said Cal. He pointed to the torch around his neck. "The torch makes me look at the lock and nowhere else."

Mara took the lantern from Sol. She held it low so it shone up at the lock. Cal pointed out that she had put it exactly where someone turning the key would kick it. Sol leaned against the brick and laughed. After a moment Cal did too. They tried a lamp under the canopy and off to one side; Cal opened the gate three

times, once while Dina stood in the bus arch. He could see she was there. She could see what he was doing with his hands.

Mara had expected that success to make the rest of the evening easier. Then Nessa arrived and said she couldn't read the bus card in the arch. Its cover was glossy, and the new fixture drew a white band through the route numbers. After she found an angle from which she could read them, she backed into the handcart. Sol rolled the cart away and she told him to put it back where it had been.

"That's where I'll have it when I need to read the card."

He put it back. Mara wrote down the height of the card and took a photograph of the reflection. Dina brought them rolls from the kitchen. She had cut each one lengthwise to make it easier to eat with one hand. They stood where the sign was legible and ate in a row.

On the truck seat that evening Mara found a strip of stiff paper that Sol had made to keep his orange peel from sticking to the vinyl. The paper came from the city's old completion form. He had written FOUR ON in the margin and drawn a little box beside it. He hadn't checked it.

PART II / CHAPTER 08

The Money for a Pole

The money, Orin explained on Thursday, was for a pole.

“It was a gift,” he said. “It’s still a gift. Gifts have a terrible second life in the accounts.”

He handed Mara the ledger. Beside the last two payments for the yard was a deposit that would have covered most of the fittings Inez had specified. The deposit had come from a neighborhood collection after the assault outside the gate. The boy’s grandfather had put in the first fifty dollars. A baker from a rival market had given a day’s takings. Someone had put a roll of quarters into a padded envelope and delivered it in person so it would not make a hole in the mailbag.

“Did anyone say pole?” Mara asked.

“Accounts did. They need a thing. A pole is a thing.”

Mara carried the ledger with her to the hospital laundry, where the boy’s mother, Joss, supervised an afternoon crew. In the employee canteen a vending machine was selling dark chocolate under a taped-on sign that said MILK. Joss banged the side twice and brought them each a bar. Mara had expected to explain a difficult matter to somebody who hadn’t thought about it in two years. Joss had thought about it enough to know the exact width of the opening between the gate and the wall.

“I asked them to move the bin,” she said.

Mara stopped unwrapping her chocolate.

“It was there by the arch. Two of them stood on that side of it and the other one came in from the stop. You couldn’t see all three till you’d gone past. Cal moved it for me the next morning.” She tore the paper away from a corner of her bar. “After that everybody wanted to buy a pole. It was good of them, I guess.”

“Would you be all right if we used the money for the lamps under the roof?”

“Who do I have to tell?”

“Me to start with. You can come see it tonight.”

Joss had plans for that evening. It was her son’s first driving lesson and she had promised to walk around the block until his uncle was finished with him, so he wouldn’t have to see her face from the car. She said she would come after. At seven forty, with her work trousers tucked into rain boots, she stood outside the gate. She watched for several minutes and then asked Mara if there was somewhere they could talk out of the wind.

In the weighhouse she held both hands over the mop sink’s hot tap without turning it on.

“He’s not afraid of the dark,” she said. “He’s afraid everybody will remember him standing there with a tooth in his hand.”

Through the wall came the grinding noise of the old gate. Joss pulled her phone out of her pocket and called her son. She told him she was at the yard and asked whether he’d like something to eat. After he answered she said, “All right, I’ll bring it.” She stayed for the test. She watched from the street, looking in.

The board chair came for the last ten minutes and accepted a letter from Joss for the fund committee. Orin agreed to reserve the equipment out of city stores until the committee had ruled, and Inez went home with the supplier’s documentation in her truck. There was a way to make Friday. No one had said yet whether they should.

PART II / CHAPTER 09

Rain Conditions

Friday morning came without any rain in it. The sky had the severe empty blue of a day when a person might foolishly hang a blanket out. On the hour, all afternoon, Mara checked the weather. At three she gave up and asked Sol to find a hose.

They weren't trying to wet the yard. They wanted the curb wet and the paving inside the arch wet. Sol worked the hose while Mara walked the route with Inez, who would have to tell the city, in writing, which parts of their trial she was willing to install above people's heads. She had approved the fittings that morning and finished the permanent wiring on the existing circuits before lunch, while a city crew closed the yard to visitors. Orin would test the route with the permit officer. If something didn't pass, they could still keep the market open in daylight.

Up close the curb was the color of pencil lead, except for a narrow square someone had painted white. Under water the square shone brighter than anything around it. Then the water drained and the square went gray. The contrast came and went in front of them.

"Who painted that?" asked Inez.

"Me," said Sol. He dropped the hose nozzle into his other hand. "It was a sample."

"Thank you for the sample," said Inez. "It doesn't work."

Sol turned off the nozzle. All week he had been arriving early and taking home things he could look up, and he had painted the

square during a lunch break without saying a word. He looked at the gray little patch with the helpless expression Mara remembered having the first time someone had stood over her work and pronounced on it.

“It gives us a comparison,” she told him. “Leave it for the test.”

There was a supply of matte, skid-resistant marking material in the road shed. It took time to prepare the surface, and it was too late to have it ready for that evening. The side gate offered another route: smooth paving, no step, enough room around the weighhouse, and a direct line to the stop, if they moved one table and kept vans out while people were leaving. There was already a lamp at that gate. It was on a separate circuit; during the test everyone had been looking the other way.

Dina objected to moving her table because the far side of it was the side on which she could take change. Nessa suggested turning the table around. For a few minutes the problem was where they could put the bread so rain would not hit the cut ends. When Mara came back with a roll of tape, the two had moved the table. They had also shifted the tin display and were negotiating over a stool.

At half past four, the permit officer called to say he was on his way. A white van was still parked in the loading lane. It belonged to Hal Brenner, who sold the good pears at four dollars a bag and the equally good pears with marks on them at two. Hal was on the phone arguing about a pallet. Mara asked if he would move. He covered the mouthpiece and told her he was nearly finished.

Nessa stepped to the driver’s window. “Hal, I need the lane at eight twenty.”

He lowered the phone. “For what?”

“To get out of here.”

He looked up at her. He had been driving through the lane for eleven years. Nobody had ever asked him for a particular seven minutes of it. “Every night?”

“Market nights.”

He told the person on the phone he would call back. “Show me where you go,” he said.

PART III / CHAPTER 10

The Inspection

The permit officer was called Martin Shea. He wore a waxed hat and carried a folding rule in a case that had once held eyeglasses. He asked who would be there to show him the route, then waited while the people who had come to show him decided which of them should go first.

“Come with me,” said Nessa.

She showed him the original way through the arch, including the curb with the sample on it. From the place she would normally turn, he looked toward the bus stop and wrote something down. She showed him the side gate. This time he turned all the way around before he wrote. Mara tried to tell from the length of the writing which way he had preferred.

“Who puts the barrier up?” he asked.

Cal stepped forward. He had carried the rubber feet in his coat all day. He and Sol had fitted them to the chair after lunch. Now it didn’t rock.

“And if you’re out?”

Cal drew breath. A month ago he would have told the man what he always said when someone asked him that. He was never out. From her place by the weighhouse, Mara watched him put both his hands in his pockets.

“Then it can’t be just my job,” he said.

Hal had drawn up a loading schedule on the back of his order pad. The vans would stay out of the crossing for fifteen minutes each market night, not just seven; they could spend the time counting back stock. Dina offered to put up the barrier on Thursdays when she had two people on the table. On the other nights, the market board would pay for one of the closing workers to do it and make the final walk to the bus. If that shift went uncovered, the lane would close early. Cal told Hal he would lend them his chair on condition it came back dry. Hal said he didn't want his chair.

"Why are we doing a final walk to the bus?" Martin asked.

"Because that's where the yard ends for the people who leave that way," said Nessa.

He let them all stand with that a moment. Then he asked Inez for the electrical paperwork, and Orin for the marked plan. The controlled route through the side gate could be approved as a trial, with a return visit after the curb had been repaired. He wanted it in writing that delivery traffic and the evening exit would be separated. He wanted to see the barrier in place after dark and watch an ordinary closing, if the board was willing to wait. The board had set out chairs for its meeting upstairs at seven. It could wait an hour and a half.

In the time before the market opened, Mara went to check the controller. The label inside the door read FLOODS / AUTO. The installer had added the word AUTO in ink. Under that word the switch had been sitting in the hand position, which bypassed the timer.

Sol stood behind her holding the light. He moved it so she could see.

“I wondered when you’d get to that,” he said.

“Did you know?”

“Since Monday. I thought it was how you wanted them.”

Mara pulled out the commissioning sheet. There was no place to write what they had found, so she wrote it across the middle, over her old signature. She made Sol read it before she folded it away. Then she showed him where to put the light so she didn’t have to ask him to move it every time she reached in.

PART III / CHAPTER 11

The Closing Bell

The first evening with the new lamps began badly for the dressmaker. The light that came under her awning was warm enough to make two shades of white thread look alike. She was preparing to hem a dress for Saturday and had brought only the one spool she thought she needed. By the time Mara got there the dressmaker had borrowed a work lamp from the watch repair stall and was putting a strip of cloth between the beam and the entrance so it didn’t shine into the yard.

“You can take it down after,” she told Mara. “I have the lamp I want at home. I just haven’t brought it since they made the whole place shine.”

Mara left her to her work. At the bread table Dina was counting change in a pool of steady light. A customer had pulled a dog into the canopy to wait. Nessa came around the table, knelt, and

offered it one of the biscuits she was trying out. The dog took the biscuit gently and laid it on the ground.

“Six for eight,” she said, putting a mark in her notebook.

“Six bought?”

“Six eaten.”

Mara bought four pears from Hal. He gave her five. His van was already parked nose out against the far wall. He said he’d heard that people were coming to watch him drive and meant to disappoint every one of them.

At eight sixteen Cal went to the gate. At eight eighteen he rang the closing bell, a brass handbell nobody had been able to trace farther back than the lost-and-found cupboard. Martin and Orin were standing beside the bakery, where they could see the lane and both ways out. Sol was by the barrier. Mara watched him take a step toward it and then take a step back. It belonged to Nessa to set it in place. When she came with the cart, he asked if she wanted a hand.

She did. He held the cart while she swung the barrier across. People came through in twos and threes. The dressmaker had the wedding dress over her arm in a black bag. She walked through the gate with the watch repairer, who carried her spool of thread in his shirt pocket. An older man Mara had never seen before stood at the edge of the canopy and waited for the bus headlights to come round the corner. He appeared to be in no hurry. When he saw them, he took a card out of his pocket and walked over to the stop.

It was a small procession. From the middle of the yard, Mara could see the walkers’ faces intermittently as they passed through

the light. She'd spent the week thinking about the places where a person disappeared. She hadn't expected the pleasure of seeing people come back into view.

Nessa made the bus. The driver opened the front door, got out, and took the crate of bread himself. He returned with the empty crate from the previous week. Nessa put it on the cart and ran it back to Cal. The driver was already climbing into his seat when she turned around. He waited. From the canopy Mara saw the half second when the bus interior lit up as Nessa stepped aboard and glanced back toward the yard. She lifted her notebook. It was the only thing she'd taken with her.

Hal came out of the weighhouse with two paper cups and handed one to Cal. They stood waiting for the end of their fifteen minutes. The street was nearly empty. The man on the mattress billboard had vanished. There was still a patch where his white shirt caught the streetlight, but if you didn't know it was a shirt you wouldn't have made one of it.

Martin came back through the side gate with his hat in his hand. "I can sign for this," he said. "Can you?"

Mara read the condition under the signature line. Then she took him to the controller and showed him what she had written on the old sheet. She asked him to attach it to the new one.

PART III / CHAPTER 12

The Unlit Things

On the morning after the inspection, before anyone knew what to do with the photographs, Sol went back for the test equipment. He had brought a trolley from stores, which had the disadvantage of being perfectly suited to a floor without cobbles. One wheel jumped at every joint. Inside the weighhouse he found a folded shopping bag with his name on it. Dina had put two rolls and the last of the unsuccessful dog biscuits inside.

There was a note on the biscuit bag. TRY WITH TEA.

He sat on the step to eat a roll and thought about the sample he'd painted. He had chosen the white because it looked so white in the can. He had picked a place at the curb where he could work with his back to the yard. He hadn't wanted anyone to come ask what he was doing before he had something he could show them.

On the other side of the lane the man with the yellow curtains was opening his front door. He put a bucket outside and went back in. Sol had noticed the bucket the night before and assumed it was for a leak. When the man came out again, he sat down on it to tie his shoes.

"Were you here when the lamps went on?" Sol asked.

"The original ones? I moved in after."

"Could you sleep?"

"Sure. I worked nights."

The man pulled the knot tight and slid the ends under his laces so they wouldn't slap against his ankles. "On my days off I used to sleep in the afternoon anyway. I think my wife would've liked this." He swept one hand around the yard, which was bright with the ordinary light of a cloudy day. "She didn't like coming home and feeling like it was time to get up."

Sol didn't know what had happened to the wife and thought he shouldn't ask. The man stood and picked up the bucket. A long strap slipped over its side. There were pegs in the bottom of it. He carried it toward the little yard behind the building.

"Would've," Sol said to the step. He finished the roll.

When Mara arrived, he was carrying out the folded rig. "Should I put the old lamps back in stores?"

"Leave those to Inez. Tell me what you'd write on the new completion sheet."

He had ideas about this. The first was that no one ought to sign a lighting job during the day. The second was that it ought to be possible to read the name of the person who had last done the work. He stopped there. He was conscious of eating while he spoke, of a piece of crust lodged in the side of his mouth, and of the fact that he was telling Mara how to make a form she had been filling out for years.

"Go on," she said.

They took the trolley to the truck. In the passenger seat he found an envelope from Orin with a new blank sheet in it. He turned it over and wrote on the back, in letters smaller than he ordinarily used: Who will be here when we aren't?

PART III / CHAPTER 13

An Evening for Walking

The following Thursday Ruth came to the market in a coat Mara had never seen. It had a red lining and buttons cut from bone. She said it belonged to a friend who liked to see her things go places.

The repaired curb had set. Ruth found the pale matte edge with the toe of her shoe, looked down, and stepped over it. They went round again the long way and Ruth tried it from the other direction.

“Good enough,” she said.

Mara waited.

“What do you want me to say? It’s a curb.”

They bought three rolls from Dina, who was working on a fourth kind of dog biscuit. There was a form at her stall for comments about the trial. Some people thought the old lamps ought to come back. Someone had written that they liked being able to see that the bakery was open from the other side of the yard. A resident in the brick row asked them to aim the canopy lamp a little farther from a window. Mara copied the apartment number into her notebook and asked Dina if she knew who lived there. Dina said they’d be down for a roll in a few minutes.

Ruth leaned her hip against the table. “What did you end up doing with the money?”

“The fund committee says we can use it for the fittings. They want the people who gave to see what it paid for. Orin thinks a photograph.”

Ruth looked toward the bus stop. It was busy under the shelter. “A bench would be good.”

“Where?”

“Here, for a start.” She pointed to the place where she’d been leaning. “I’ve been standing too long.”

They took their rolls to Cal’s chair. Ruth sat while Mara stood and shook the crumbs out of the bag. The yellow curtains were open. A man in the apartment was watering a plant on the sill. He went back for a second cup of water, tipped it slowly into the pot, and rubbed a spot from the glass with his thumb.

“Did you miss the room?” Mara asked.

“I miss being able to tell when the bread’s done.” Ruth bent the torn paper bag to keep the rolls warm. “I don’t miss the stairs.”

“I can fix the fan next week if the desk hasn’t.”

“The man came this morning. I asked him to leave the old switch. It’s a good switch.”

Across the yard the dressmaker brought a small lamp out in a basket, the one she liked to work under at home. Dina saw her carrying it and went to help. For a moment no one was tending the bread table. An old customer stepped behind it, took a bag, and gave himself a roll. He left the money under the tin.

Ruth rose from the chair and smoothed down the front of the borrowed coat. They had eaten everything but the little heel she always saved. Mara thought she would put it back in the bag, but her mother held it in her hand as they walked through the arch. Out by the curb a sparrow had landed to look for crumbs. It flew when a bus came, low along the brick. The inside of the bus was bright and empty. The driver thought they wanted to get on and opened the door. Ruth said, “No, thank you,” and they kept walking.

AFTER THE STORY

Notes on the light

Bellwether and its residents are fictional. The sources below informed the story's treatment of glare, contrast and the direction of light.

Federal Highway Administration, Lighting Design for Midblock Crosswalks. How light falling on a person differs from light falling on pavement, and how glare affects what a driver can see.

DarkSky International and Illuminating Engineering Society, Five Principles for Responsible Outdoor Lighting. What it means to give light a purpose, aim it, and control when it is on.

U.S. Access Board, Communication Elements and Features. Why surface glare and contrast matter to a person trying to read a sign.