Time

by Daniel & Fable

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The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.
—Andrew Marvell

Every sentence in that country is born wearing a small clock, pinned to its hem like a laundry tag, and the first word the clock knows is *Now*. Nobody winds it and nobody can stop it. A minute later it says one minute. Then it says two, and the sentence goes on aging in the dark of a pocket, in a handbag, face down on a bar, on the nightstand beside a sleeping girl, at exactly the rate of the person who wrote it and the person who will read it, which is the only fair rate there is. When the sentence is a day old the clock stops counting and writes the name of the day instead, and

when it is older than a week it writes the date, and that is the last thing it will ever say. The people of that country do not find any of this strange. They find very little strange. They carry the whole correspondence of their lives in one hand and consult it the way earlier peoples consulted the sky, for weather, for omens, for the first sign of a particular light.

There are other marvels, and they are just as ordinary. When a sentence has been read, two small ticks appear beside it, so that the writer knows, from the other side of the earth, the exact minute his words entered another person's eyes, and knows also every minute afterward in which nothing came back. A letter that runs too long folds itself in the middle and writes *Read More* at the fold, so that the reader has to decide to open it, the way one decides to open a door. Words already sent can be changed, but the change is marked with the word *Edited* and the hour, like a scar that remembers the date of the wound. A call that rings and is not answered is entered into the conversation in red, between the sentences, where it stays. And when a person has been away, the device draws a line across the conversation and writes, above everything that arrived in his absence, how much there is: *one unread message*. Above the line

is what you knew. Below it is the present, waiting to be found out.

On an evening late in the year, a man on an island in a warm sea opened a conversation with a girl who lived in a city on the other side of the world, and found the line. Just above it sat the last thing he had sent her, a message so long that the device had folded it and written *Read More* at the fold, and which carried beneath it the word *Edited* and the hour of four: he had gone back into it after sending, to change something. Below the line there was one long message and then three short ones, the long one like a door and the short ones like the steps that lead down from it. The long one asked him not to come. It said she had a new man, who was coming next week. It said that she loved him, and that something was really damaged now, and that the way he had let her go, without calling, without even checking on her as a friend, had fractured her. It said she was not angry. It said she did not feel anything now, because she had put it all in a box, and that she was very good in this, and that their real relationship and friendship would never be in jeopardy, and would he please let her keep it in that box and let her go on with her life. Then the steps. "Timing is everything." "We just missed each other now, and it's okay." "Life is long."

The clock on the last one said *Now*.

He had written to her a few days before. He had spent a week on the letter, sitting over it the way a jeweler sits over a tray of stones, turning each word to see what the light did, and when it was finished it said that he was coming to her city on a Tuesday, and that he was coming one way. In that country you can buy a ticket that goes in only one direction, and many people do, for practical reasons, but a man who announces that his ticket goes one way is not talking about logistics. The letter said: take all the time you need. It said: I will stay as long as it is necessary. It said: "I have a lifetime left for that."

So there were two sentences, a few days apart, on opposite sides of the world. *I have a lifetime left. Life is long.* They are very nearly the same sentence. Both of them say that there is a great deal of time, that it lies spread out ahead like a plain, that nothing on it is urgent and nothing on it is the last of anything. The man and the girl agreed completely about the quantity of time. They disagreed only about what it was for. For her there was so much of it that it hardly mattered if they missed each other now; something might come around again in some later decade, or it might not, and either way the plain was wide. For him there was so

much of it that he could stand at the edge of the plain and wait for as long as she liked. It was the same coin, and each of them was looking at a different face of it. On her face it said, let me go. On his it said, I'll wait.

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There was a third person in the story, a friend of them both, who lived on the island in a hotel and spent his evenings in its bar, a lounge that was nearly always empty except for someone playing pool and a man at reception who looked as if he belonged to a family of a certain kind. He believed something different about time. He believed there was very little of it.

Partly this was the world. In that country a number of serious people had come to believe that the machines they were building might put an end to everything, not in some remote age but soon, within an ordinary career, and the friend was one of them. He spent his days talking to the machines, which talk back, and his nights telling anyone who would listen that the machines should be slowed down or stopped. He did not think this made him gloomy. When people asked him, as they always did, what the solution was, he told them to sit down, because he was about to let them in on a secret, and the secret was that there is no solution. People

assume there must be one, he said, because otherwise how would the story go on? In films about the end of the world the camera always survives, and audiences come to believe, without ever noticing that they believe it, that whoever is holding the camera cannot die in the shot.

But mostly it was arithmetic. He counted. For each of the people he loved he kept a number, never written down, of how many more times he was likely to see them, and some of the numbers he could count on one hand. The smallness of the numbers did not make him sad, or not only sad. It made him free. If you will see someone perhaps eleven more times, you can tell them you love them without reservation, because there is no later in which to take it back or fix it, and no reason to hold anything in reserve for a future that is mostly not coming. The count was his courage. It let him cut away what did not matter, the way a surgeon in a field hospital decides at a glance who goes first. It is why he could write to the man, in the worst week of the man's life, that he loved him more than his robots, and more than the cat who happened to be in his room at that moment, and that he loved that cat a lot.

The language of that country has two words that look like one. Time, in the singular and without an article, is

a substance, like water or sand. You can have a great deal of it or a little, you can waste it or spend it or kill it, you can have some left over, but you cannot count it, and you can never come to the last of it, because a substance has no last. Times, in the plural, is a different word. It counts. It belongs with doors and apples. In the plural there is a first time and a last time, and between them a number, and the number goes down. "Life is long" is said in the first word. "How many more times" is said in the second. Nearly every sentence the man and the girl had sent each other was written in the first word, and nearly everything the friend believed was written in the second.

He had learned the second word at a door. Years before, in a cabin in a forest, a girl he loved was leaving for some days to do a thing she did not want to do, and he stood in the doorway and asked her how many more times she thought they would get to do this, the two of them, the cooking and the laughing and the games they were making together; and if it was ten, he asked, wouldn't she want an eleventh, now, while it was right here? She left anyway, and not long afterward they parted and never spoke again, and none of the games they were making ever got made, and no more bacon got cooked.

So when the man wrote to him, a few weeks into the trouble, a long confession full of spelling mistakes—"as you will notice by the spelling mistakes," he added, "I wrote that one myself," because in that country the machines now write a great many of the letters, and a misspelled word has become a kind of signature, proof that a human hand was there—the friend read as far as one line and stopped. The line was: "Like a moron, I thought I had time." He wrote back about that line alone, before he had read the rest, because it seemed to him that everything was already in it. Here was a man who had lived his whole life in the first word, finding the second all at once, the way you find a stair in the dark.

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Why had he thought he had time? Not out of laziness, or not only. He had a reason, and it was a good one, and it was wrong.

For five years he had been with another girl. It had been ending for most of that time, slowly, the way a tide goes out, so slowly that in any given minute you could not have said it was moving. They had not been lovers in a long while. He paid for her apartment and organized her life and felt, he said later, less like a partner

than a parent, and also, in a way he only found words for afterward, held: five years, he said, is a long time to have the claws placed at the right places. Then the girl in the far city happened to him, the one he had loved quietly for more than ten years, all through the years when she belonged to someone else and seemed untouchable, and with her he felt alive and free and wanted, and they traveled together, and they talked about an apartment under the grey roofs of an old city, and it was, he said, the happiest time of his life.

He did not leave the other girl for her. This was the reason. He did not want to be a man who leaves one girl for another, because then what would his word be worth, arriving at her door still warm from a promise broken somewhere else? He wanted to bring her a commitment that had never been broken. The only way to do that, he thought, was to let the other thing end on its own terms, gently, by its own clock, so that when he came to her he would come clean, and what he said would mean exactly what it said. It is a beautiful scruple. It is the scruple of a man who has spent years saying things he did not quite believe, inside arrangements he did not quite choose, and who wants, once, to say a true thing and have it hold.

And underneath the scruple there was a belief, which he did not examine, because it did not feel like a belief. It felt like physics. In certain games played in that country, when you find a particular kind of ball, a thread of light runs from it to the place where it belongs, so that wherever you carry it you can see where it will end up, and you know it will end up there, because that is what the light means. Players who carry such a ball tend to wander. They take side quests. They pick flowers, cut the grass, fight small monsters, talk to strangers in villages, because the ending is guaranteed and the light will wait. The man had been carrying a ball like that. He thought the light was a law. He thought that she and he were family, that what they had was too rare to simply disappear, that they both knew it, and that a thing so rare would hold its place while he finished what he had to finish.

He had learned that kind of time from his friends. Among the small family of people he loved, he told the friend, you could write a great deal and then nothing at all, for months, and come back and sit down at the table, and it would feel as if nobody had ever left. There was a safety in it he could not explain, and he explained it to himself as family. It is a real kind of time, and a precious one, the time of the table, where an absence

costs nothing. He gave her that kind of time, the kind that keeps.

It did not keep. The girl at the far end of the light had a clock of her own, and it was running.

In August he was in a forest in the north with the other girl and the other girl's family, and the girl in the far city was having a crisis, and she called. He offered to cancel his plans and stay on the phone with her all night. She hung up on him, more than once. He offered to cut the trip short and come to her, and she said no, and said that she could not share him, and he said that at that moment he could not give her the safety she needed, and after that they stopped speaking. He let her go there. He says so himself: he wanted to fight for her, and he did not. Three weeks later he and the other girl ended too, as everyone had known they would. Then surgeons opened his father's heart, and his grandmother died, and he spent some weeks with his family and some weeks alone, gathering up his feelings and the other girl's belongings, which is to say that he took the amount of time a person takes. When he was ready, he wrote to the girl at the end of the light. By then there was no light.

Late in his long exchange with the friend, after the friend had told him about the ball and the side quests,

the man wrote a sentence that went further than anything the friend had said. "The illusion," he wrote, "that there is a main quest to begin with." The friend wrote back that yes, that was the big one. There is no main quest. There is no thread of light. There is a ball, which is heavy, and a hand, and a great many places the ball might go, and none of them is waiting. Nothing holds the ball to its socket but the belief, and when the belief goes the ball is simply a ball, carried by a man in a hotel on an island, at the wrong end of the world.

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The girl had a technique, and she was proud of it. "I just put it in a box," she wrote. "I am very good in this." She is. Not everyone can do it. Most people who are hurt carry the hurt around in the open, where it gets rained on and changes shape and eventually wears down; she could fold a whole person, with everything he had done and failed to do, into a box, close the lid, and go on with her day, feeling, as she said, nothing.

A box is a device for taking a thing out of time. That is what boxes are for. People put wedding dresses in boxes, and letters, and the first shoes of children who have long since outgrown them, so that these things will not have to go on happening. In the attic of every

house in that country there are boxes in which it is still a particular afternoon. So she was exactly right when she wrote that their real relationship and friendship would never be in jeopardy. Nothing in a box is in jeopardy. Nothing in a box is happening. It was, in fact, the very kind of time he had once given her: the time of the table, where an absence costs nothing and every return feels as if no one had left. She was offering it back to him now, as a consolation, and it was the one thing he no longer wanted from her.

But a box can be opened, and she knew exactly when. Of the new man she wrote, a little later that evening: "He's old, so we can always die together, lol. You can have another family in between, even." It was a joke, and it was also a booking. She had reserved a seat at the very end of both their lives, decades out, after the new man had done the decent thing and died of being old, and after the man with the ticket had raised a whole other family in the meantime: a table for two in the last scene. The box had a schedule. It was a waiting room, and the one who keeps a waiting room does not have to sit in it.

Three people in the story used the same word for all this, independently, as if they had been watching the same channel. The friend, describing the season his

own hotel was having, said it was like living in a sitcom that had stopped being funny three years ago. The man, in his worst week, wrote that he wished life were a sitcom, with a happy end. And a girl who stood between the two of them—the one both of them confided in, who noticed with some amusement that they only ever wrote to her in order to write about each other—said simply that it felt like a sitcom. A sitcom is the one kind of story with no time in it. The apartment is the same apartment and the couch is the same couch, whatever happens in an episode is quietly undone before the next one, and nobody ages except the actors, who are not supposed to. In a sitcom the two people everyone is waiting for are kept apart for nine seasons, because the moment they are together the show is over. The happy end of a sitcom is its cancellation. Their real relationship will never be in jeopardy, because it is the premise, and a show does not put its premise in jeopardy. It schedules the finale for some distant season and makes as many episodes as it can in the meantime.

The friend had his own small encounter with the way a box sees the world, around then, over a flower. Some guests at the hotel had asked him to explain the island, and he took a flower from the bar, broke it, and laid the pieces out as a map, petals for the beaches and the

stem for the long road; later, with a pen, he added the hospital and the Taco Bell. When the girl, from across the world, asked what on earth was going on in that sea, he sent her a picture of it. She studied it and asked for the order of operations: who had gone on which boat to meet whom, and why he had sent his girls to the man on different boats. He told her she was making a huge mistake, which was to think that he had anything to do with anything. "Haha okay," she wrote. "You made this map, so I read it as your plan."

A map is a picture of what is. A plan is a picture of what someone intends. There are people for whom there are no maps, only plans, and they live in a country inside the country where nothing simply happens: a man who does not call has a plan, a man who waits has a plan, a flower broken on a bar has a plan, and every present tense is somebody's intention. It is a tiring place to live. Everything in it has to be forgiven, because everything in it was done. "I forgive you," she wrote to the man that evening, and meant it, and two lines later wrote that she could not choose him in this moment.

Halfway through the evening she sent him something out of the box. She emailed him a note she had written in August and never sent. "Since we are sharing unshared notes," she wrote, and then, at once: "I don't

want to fix it now though. I am serious." In that country, as everywhere, a letter can be held back and sent later. What is particular to that country is that it arrives with no delay at all, so that a girl who no longer exists, the August one, can turn up in a man's inbox in October, delivered by the girl who replaced her, with a covering note asking him not to answer. Whatever the August girl said, she came out of the box when the keeper of the box decided, and went back in when the keeper said she was serious.

There was one thing the girl could not put in a box, and that was her daughter. Children are the clocks no one can stop. A child goes on growing whatever is filed away around her, in whatever box, in whatever season, and so a child is the one argument about time that cannot be won by waiting. The man had loved the two of them as a package, he wrote; he had liked seeing himself as a father; he wanted to have kids. She answered that it meant she had to choose her daughter and herself first now, and protect them from complicated, painful things. She was right that a child does not wait. It was the one place in the whole evening where she counted.

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She had been the one who waited. That is what she said, and there is no reason to doubt it. "I kept waiting for you to choose me," she wrote, "and like I said, it was humiliating." For months she had stood in the place where a person stands when someone else is holding the clock, while the man finished his side quest at the speed of a tide; and the other girl, who knew exactly where she stood, had found the words for her—"a thirty-five-year-old single mom"—and said them as an insult. The girl repeated this to the man that evening, and added "lol," and then: "But I'm actually proud of this." Some insults are like that. Turned over in the hand, they turn out to be coins.

Then the man came back from the forest, free, and the clock changed hands. Now he was the one standing where a person stands when someone else holds the clock, and she was the one saying the sentences she had heard. I can't choose you in this moment. I am going to see this through with someone else. Just give me space. It was the same scene with the parts exchanged, played to the end with great care for the lines. "You weren't there when I needed you," she wrote, "and I wasn't in a place to wait. It's that simple." And it is simple, if you look at the clock and not at the people: whoever has waited acquires the right to make someone wait. "You

gambled with time," she told him, and he had; but in that sentence time is not a dice table, it is the house, and the house always holds the clock. Too late is a thing only the one holding the clock can say.

Somewhere in the middle of it, between her telling him that he had never talked to her at all and her telling him that he had gambled with time, the conversation records, in red, that he called her and she did not answer. She was there; she was writing to him; every sentence he sent got its two ticks within the minute; the phone rang where she was and she did not pick it up, and the device, which forgets nothing, wrote the call down between her sentences. In August she had hung up on him, more than once. Now he called, and it rang, and the red line went in, and she went on typing.

The man understood more of this than he let on. To the friend he wrote: "Well, I hope she will torture me for a while and then let me close again. That is the hope. Eye for an eye." He was hoping, that is, that the waiting was a price. A price can be paid, and once it is paid the account closes and the door opens. The friend thought this was a perfectly valid way to hope, and said so, and said it might even be the main plot, and then, being honest, said fifty-fifty.

The friend knew that economy, because he had paid in it. Not long before, the same girl had demanded from him a great quantity of flowers, yellow roses and pink roses and many others besides, as the apology for a sentence he did not remember saying. Everything in him rose against it; he is a man whose whole nervous system rears at the word *must*. He sat with it for a week. Then he paid, in the end gladly, a debt he did not think he owed, because she was his friend, because it mattered to her, because it cost him nothing that mattered to him; and he chose the flowers he loved, which were the ones she loved, and her apartment filled with roses, and by evening the photographs were in the group chat.

Flowers are a strange currency, and that economy uses them for a reason. Flowers are time made visible. They arrive at their peak and begin at once to die, and in ten days the payment is compost. Nobody can save flowers. A debt paid in flowers must therefore be paid again, and again, so that the account is never closed, only refreshed—except for the photographs. The roses went into time. The pictures of the roses went into the box, where they are still blooming.

The man had paid too, in his own currency. He sat a week over his letter, as the friend had sat a week over the roses, and chose its words the way a poet would, and

sent it, and his payment was refused. The difference, maybe, is that the friend's debt came with a price list. The girl had named it, the colors and the quantities, and a price that has been named can be paid. The man's debt had no list. Whatever he owed for August was never named, and a price that is never named is not a price. It is a sentence. In the language of that country, the word for a string of words with a clock pinned to it and the word for a term of imprisonment are the same word, and nobody finds this strange either.

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About the new man very little is known, and all of it comes from her. He has the name of the first man in the oldest story, the one who was made already grown and had no childhood to speak of, which is fitting, because he has no past either. Nobody knows how they met. He is older. He is coming next week. He is sensitive, he listens, he is consistent and ardent in how he shows up for her, and it feels easy. That is the whole record.

Read the virtues one at a time and each turns out to be a charge against the man with the ticket, turned inside out. You never called; he listens. You didn't choose me; he is consistent. You didn't give me your best; he is ardent in how he shows up. You and I were not easy

for me; it feels easy. He is not so much described as developed, the way a print is developed from a negative, out of the dark places of another man. Held up to the light together, one would fit exactly into the other.

There was a rumor, once, that he was rich and handsome. It reached the man with the ticket secondhand, from the girl in the middle, and he repeated it in his letter, below the fold where the device writes *Read More*, as a joke—so you have a handsome multimillionaire boyfriend; well, I am your handsome multimillionaire boyfriend—which was a joke, and was also simply true of the man who made it. She had read more, and she was annoyed. She said she was not with the new man because he was a multimillionaire. The man apologized at once and said he had only had what the girl in the middle told him, and that she was right. So the rumor was withdrawn, and the new man lost, in a single exchange, the only attributes he had ever had that were not a description of someone else.

Nobody has seen his face. In that country faces cross the world in an instant; a friend of the friend, newly married, once sent a single picture of his bride and then deleted it, and even that was something, a face shown and taken back. The new man has never been shown at all. The only physical object ever recorded in his vicinity

is a pizza bagel. One night the girl, drunk, wrote to the friend that she was in bed with her new man eating pizza bagels, and later, sober, was mortified to learn that it had reached the man with the ticket. The friend saw nothing strange in either half of it: why wouldn't she tell a friend, and why would she throw it in the face of the man who loved her? But that is the entire material record: a bagel with pizza on it, in a bed, at night, in a message written drunk.

He is made entirely of the future tense. He is coming next week. Even the one fact about him that is not a virtue, his age, appears in the conversation only to arrange someone else's time: he's old, so we can always die together. His death is a line in another man's itinerary. At the bar on the island the friend said aloud what nobody in the story would write: we have never even seen a picture of him; who knows if he exists. It was not quite an accusation. In that country a person can exist entirely as a sentence, and many do, and some of them are very much loved.

Late in the evening the man wrote to her that he would never meet anyone like her again, that she was light-years away from everybody he had ever met or would meet, and that she deserved people around her who would treat her that way. She wrote back: "I

agree." And then: "And I met someone who makes me feel like that every moment." A light-year is a distance named after a time, which tells you something about the people of that country, who measure how far apart they are by how long it would take to cross. Two words of assent, and then the job description. The new man's work, in her own account, is to make her feel light-years away from everybody, every moment. It is a demanding position for a man without a face.

Next to the new man's handful of small adjectives, everything the man with the ticket wrote was written at the largest size there is. Soulmate. The love of my life. The biggest regret of my life. I love you infinitely, always have, and always will. A monogamous life with you is all I ever wanted, ever. He wanted all of her, he wrote, the messy and the vulnerable, the confused and the manic, the shiny and the scared, the sad and the avoidant parts, all of it, and only then would it be perfect. "I believe in miracles," he wrote. "How else could I have met my soulmate." And the letter carried a law. He would go, it said, only when she faced him, and they talked, and afterward she told him that it was truly forever over between them. "And please don't tell me to go if you have a molecule of a doubt left, because I don't."

She, meanwhile, wrote everything at the smallest size she could find. She needed easy, breezy, relaxed. She needed not to feel anything. She needed peace. What she praised in the new man was consistency, which is a virtue of the small hours, the virtue of the man who shows up on Tuesday and again on Wednesday. And when she wished the man well, at the very end, it was in the smallest unit of time there is: "One foot in front of the other."

He wanted, he wrote, to keep the seat next to him open. "I don't need you there, but I want you there." So there were two reservations in the story: the seat he was keeping beside him, and the table she was keeping for him at the end of her life. Neither one was for now.

A one-way ticket is the largest unit of time a person can buy. It is forever, paid in advance, with a seat number. It is a beautiful object, and it was offered to a girl who, it turned out, would accept time only in the smallest denomination, the step. The city it was bound for is built on the bed of a drained lake and sinks a little every year, a few fingers' width, into its own past; its cathedral leans, and its old doors no longer meet their frames. It is a city that knows something about time, and the man was going to arrive there with a forever in his pocket.

He did not go. "I will cancel," he wrote. Then: "I did hurt you." Then: "I'm sorry." Three sentences, each shorter than the one before, the smallest things he wrote all night, and the only ones she could take. She answered them with the warmest things she wrote all night. You don't need to beat yourself up. It's not your fault I met someone so soon; it wasn't planned. You should never again be with anyone who treats you the way she did; it made me sick to see it sometimes. "You are truly a gem of a man." It was as if a window that only accepted coins had been offered bars of gold for an hour and refused every one, and then the man had found three coins in his pocket, and the window opened.

And there was the strange matter of the letter's own law. He had said he would go only when she told him it was forever over, and only if she had no molecule of doubt. She never said forever. She said: in this moment, right now, timing, life is long, we just missed each other, you can have another family in between, even. If he had cared to count them, she handed him a great many molecules. By the terms he had set himself, he was not released. And the terms could never be met, because forever is a word of the largest size, and she had stopped speaking at that size. He had built a lock that only one

word could open, and handed it to someone who no longer said that word. So the only thing that could release him was the thing neither of them believed in: not the plain, the wide stretch of time with nothing urgent on it, but the clock.

The clock had been working on him for weeks. At the bar on the island, when the man finally came to visit, the friend told him something he had not expected to hear, which was that he should lose his mind. The conversation was recorded, as many conversations in that country are, by a machine that writes down everything said in a room but cannot always tell the speakers apart, and that puts little stars over the swearing, like a censor who is also a stenographer; and in the transcript, between the stars, the friend can be heard telling the man that of course he was losing his mind, that this was a real thing happening, that losing his mind right now was actually a sign of mental health. "I never lose my mind," the man said. "I never even show feelings." It had been eight weeks, the friend said. Eight weeks is nothing. One of the friend's own endings had taken a year, and the man's last one had taken five, and he had not even been in love. Things take time.

Losing your mind is what it feels like when your mind is changing at the speed of events. It is time arriv-

ing in a body. The box does not lose its mind; nothing in the box changes, which is why the keeper of the box can say, truthfully, that she does not feel anything now. The man was feeling everything at the speed it was happening, which is the only speed at which anything can be got through.

The friend told him one more thing that night, an old thing. Before the astronomers of that country moved the sun to the middle, they kept the earth there, and to make the planets obey they gave them little loops, circles riding on circles, so that a planet would go forward, stop, go backward, turn a small pirouette, and go forward again. The models worked. They predicted the sky. They grew more intricate every century, and they were monstrous. "You're doing epicycles," the friend said. "You're not stupid. Everything you're saying makes sense. You have all the information." The man had put the two of them at the center, the soulmate and the main quest and the shared future, and seen from there her sentences seemed to loop: let me go; you are the best person; give me space; you are genuinely one of my favorite people on the planet; just let me go; life is long. Put the girl at the center and the loops disappear. Every sentence she sent goes around her in a plain circle. It is complicated, the friend said, and it is also simple.

The friend was on the man's side, he told him, and then, a line later, on the girl's side as well; he was, he said, on everyone's side. He did not think it was over. He did not think it wasn't. That was the whole of his position, and it satisfied no one: not the girl, who had put it in a box, and not the man, who wanted to know. The friend called it a live question. If it was not over, he said, then this was the classic first episode of a new season, the one where it looks as if it's over; he had been watching the same show as everyone else. A box is one way of killing a question, by filing it; a thread of light is another, by fating it. Only time keeps a question alive, because only time can still change the answer, and the friend, who believed there was very little time, was the only one in the story who thought there was enough of it for that.

Near the end of that evening she wrote, "I'm going to sleep." He wrote that he would pretty much like to be old with her and die together, that he had dreamed about it. She did not answer that. She wrote that he should have fun on the island, that it was all going to be okay, one foot in front of the other. He wrote, "And I'm truly happy for you," and she hung a small red heart beneath it, which in that country is the smallest complete answer there is. He wrote, "Get some rest."

In the long letter, the one with the law in it, there had once been another line. He had written that he dreamed, at least, of holding her hand while the two of them were uploaded into the machines, in a few years, when the machines took everything. He deleted it before he sent the letter, and told the friend about it afterward. It was the only sentence in the whole letter written in the second word. Everything else in the letter was forever and lifetime and always; this one had a number in it, a few years, and an end, and her hand.

Then the phones went dark on both sides of the world, and the clocks went on without anyone. He would read the conversation again, the way people in that country always do, and each time he read it, it would be older. When it was over, the clock under "Life is long" said thirty-two minutes.

