

Locked down

He sits alone in the room. Waiting. The road outside is empty. It is never empty; he lives in the centre of the city. It's 2:38pm and the sun sits oppressively overhead.

With closed eyes he can remember the outline of the feeling of sleep, tracing the rocking of the gentle wave. It's been four days. He remembers the last time it was four days.

The news is on; muted as he thinks it should be. Talking heads talk too much. People value silence too lightly. Everything that makes no sense: reported, debated, and then explained. They call it "wrapped up." And on the hour they do it all again.

He waits for the nights of fitful sleep and meandering dreams that were never meant to be remembered. Next to the bed he keeps a notepad, for comfort more than inspiration. 'The world knows not what I need.' A line of a song, misremembered.

The actual line is: 'the world knows just what I need.' But how could it know?

When she left she slammed the door.

He always knew that she would – leave, and go in anger. That was ten months ago. Twice she'd called and he let it ring both times, looking at the phone and turning it over in his hands. He didn't answer because he knew what the questions were. He understood them but he also understood that some things make no sense.

She called because she felt guilty, even though she couldn't quite figure out why. Everyone feels guilty. The key is to make it small enough to carry; ideally in your pocket.

The second time there was a follow-up text. He answered: 'I'm ok. Thanks.' She had expected more but a response was enough to manage expectations as well as guilt. 'Where does the conversation go when you delete it?' she wondered.

Two months ago he thought he'd seen her at the airport, going through security at Gate 18A. The flight was going to Doha. He was going to Osaka, to talk to men in button-down shirts in air conditioned conference rooms about things that he understood only marginally better than them; as though he were one chapter ahead in the textbook.

Coming back he watched a film on the plane: *The Curse of la Llorona*. Across the aisle, a woman was wearing a facemask. The pilot said they were flying in a South Westerly direction and cruising at 34,000 feet. He never understood why they felt the need to give such details.

Osaka had been a success; he was probably two chapters ahead of them. His boss would be satisfied, not happy but satisfied, and that was enough. His main career goal was to quit before being promoted to his boss's job.

Returning home late he slept alone as he had every night since she left. Sometimes he left the radio on to go to sleep and thought it strange that they'd never had a song that was theirs. But maybe we ask too much of songs.

He'd never asked her *the* question. It had existed as a thought, an unspoken proposition, but words are often too heavy for the tongue. There was a point in time, a narrow window, when if he'd asked she would have said yes.

He'd learned the weight of words from his father, a lawyer who taught him that anything you say might subsequently be used against you.

In fear of his father's judgement, he'd trained himself to speak slowly enough to measure his words, to examine them for the traps they could lay, and to avoid the risks inherent in ambiguity. It was a way of speaking that was useful for giving presentations in English to prospective Japanese clients.

She had got along quite well with his Dad, which surprised and irritated him. They spoke freely to each other and even when they first met, the anticipated cross-examination had never happened.

Being a lawyer seemed to him like a constant quest to catch people out, to catch them off guard. He had no interest in it and his father never explicitly pushed him. So he used his verbal control to explain and to sell software to large organisations that existed, quite reasonably, in a state of fear of having their corporate secrets stolen and, worse, published.

He'd met a lot of powerful people for whom privacy was worth a very high price.

His role in providing it had made him quite wealthy; he wore expensive shoes, discreetly luxurious watches, and had a healthy portfolio that he took pride in managing by himself. The room in which he now sat had been interior designed by a friend of one of his colleagues.

On the coffee table were the last five editions of *The Economist* magazine, all still in the cellophane wrapping that they had been delivered in. The front cover of the issue on top of the pile asked the question: 'How bad will it get?'

Carefully, he placed his cup of coffee on top of it. It was his seventh of the day and he had only eaten a banana and a leftover slice of pizza in the previous 48 hours. In that time he had taken 16 painkillers, five sedatives, and drank three bottles of wine. It wasn't intended to induce sleep but to make wakefulness tolerable.

Getting up out of the chair took a deliberate effort but having made it he did ten push-ups and then stood by the window. A police car drove by silently but with its lights flashing. An old man was walking his dog on the opposite side of the street. It looked more like the dog was walking the old man.

She had wanted a dog but he refused. "We both travel too much, who's going to take care of it?" Her suggestion was that his Dad could. He laughed and shook his head, a slight gesture that was slighting enough for her to stop talking to him for 24 hours. He hated *her* silences.

The last conversation he'd had was with the pizza delivery guy. "Thanks."

The last conversation before that was four days ago. The number wasn't saved in his phone but he knew who it was. They'd called almost every day for a week. He hesitated a moment before answering.

“Hello, eh, hi.”

“Hi, is that Mr. Roberts?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Hi, my name is Stephanie, I’m a nurse at St Mary’s ... it’s about your Dad ... he’s em ... I’m afraid he’s not doing well at all.”

“Uh ... I see.”

“The doctor has asked me to call you as we ... we don’t think he has long left. He doesn’t think he will make it through the night.”

“I see.”

“So I was wondering if there’s anything that you want to say to him, I can hold the phone next to him. I know how hard that you can’t be here. Actually your Dad he’s ... well he’s not really conscious right now but he can probably hear you if you want to talk to him ... if there’s anything you want to say?”

“I see. I mean yeah, I don’t know, uh I suppose, yes.”

“Ok, I’m so sorry. I’ll hold the phone up at his ear now.”

There was a pause as she did this and James Roberts tried to think of something to say to his unconscious father. He remembered a time when he was playing baseball as a child and his father had winked at him, a wink of encouragement.

The eyes of Albert Roberts were now shut. They neither flickered nor winked.

Four days on, James remembered most of what he’d said. Though he knew that he was trying to convince himself that he’d said more; something more meaningful, something more eloquent. He’d written fragments of a eulogy since then; one that he wouldn’t be able to deliver in person. It could only be read into the void.

It was on the table, covering the last word of *The Economist* headline.

He hadn’t slept and he hadn’t cried. He stayed inside as he was supposed to and everything stayed inside. What power do words have when they’re not heard? What power do they have on the page when they’re not read?

She once told him that he should say what he really thinks, that he should snap, just let it out. But he never dared risk the unravelling; as though carefully chosen words can keep a man stitched together, and the world from falling apart.