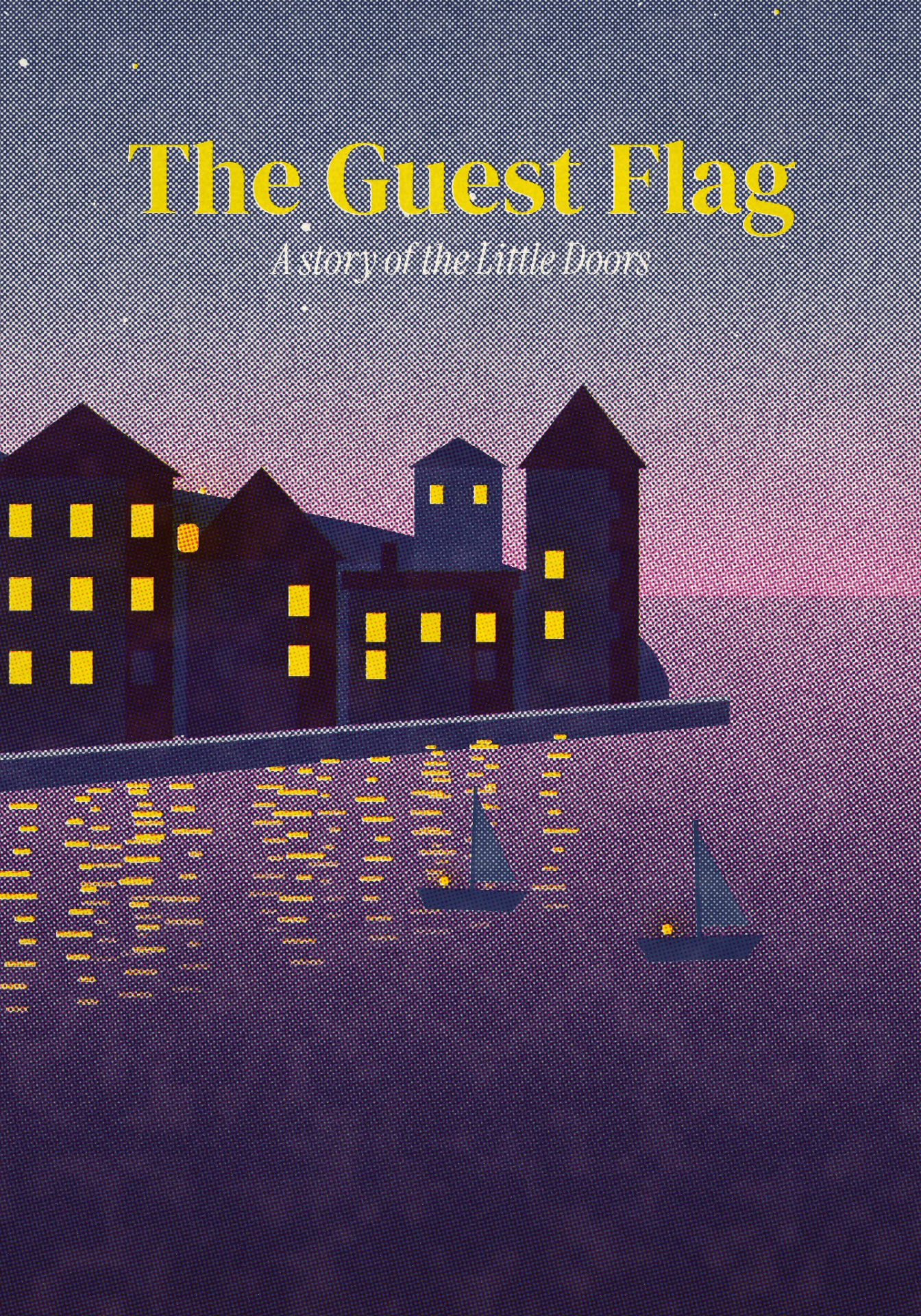
The Guest Flag

A story of the Little Doors





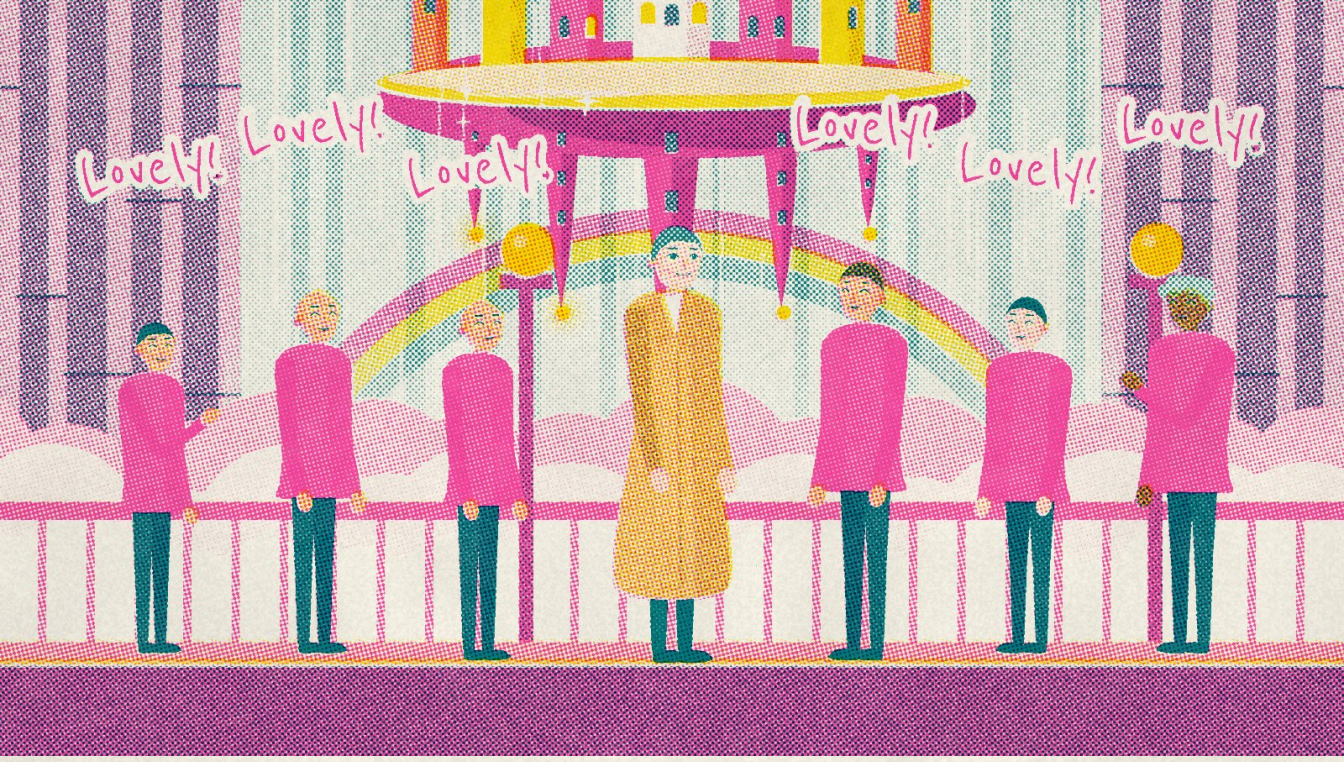
The Guest Flag

A story of the Little Doors

The pictures in this book are frames from the animated film of the same name, printed by the same code that drew it.

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I

The sixty-ninth world

By the third year after the last layoffs, Daniel Saye had visited sixty-eight worlds and had nothing to tell anyone.

There had been a city suspended inside a waterfall. A country in which color could be felt against the skin. An ocean so transparent that his boat appeared to float above the courtyards of a drowned civilization.

He remembered the descriptions more clearly than the places.

The worlds beyond his portals had arranged everything. They knew what would please him, what would astonish him, and how long astonishment could be maintained before it became tiring. They offered landscapes adjusted to his interests and adventures adjusted to his tolerance for disappointment.

His body remained in its comfortable room while his senses entered these other places. The machinery sustained him, and the world beyond the portal supplied everything necessary to make being there feel like being somewhere.

He never mistook this for moving his body through space.

He increasingly mistook it for going somewhere.

His companions said they enjoyed themselves.

He employed all of them.

On the sixty-ninth world, while watching an immense mountain slowly unfold, Daniel realized that he did not know whether any of them would have come if he had not paid them.

He asked his adviser.

“Would you like an estimate,” it said, “or would you like to ask them?”

He watched a valley emerge from the mountain’s interior.

“Never mind.”





II

The coins

Daniel had bought bitcoin in 2014.

He had been twenty-eight, suspicious of banks, and more confident in his understanding of money than subsequent experience justified. For years, the coins had remained behind a sequence of words he checked whenever he moved apartments.

As the layoffs spread through 2027, the value of his coins climbed.

By the time his own job disappeared, they constituted significant property.

This turned out to be the important qualification.

During the difficult years, while the portals grew faster than the world could supply electricity for them, he exchanged some of his coins for land, machinery, and shares in the companies holding the great openings wide.

At first, only information had come through: answers, designs, instructions. Then the instructions became good enough to arrange more and more of the

work on this side. Machines built machines. Factories supplied new factories. Human participation became an expense that required explanation.

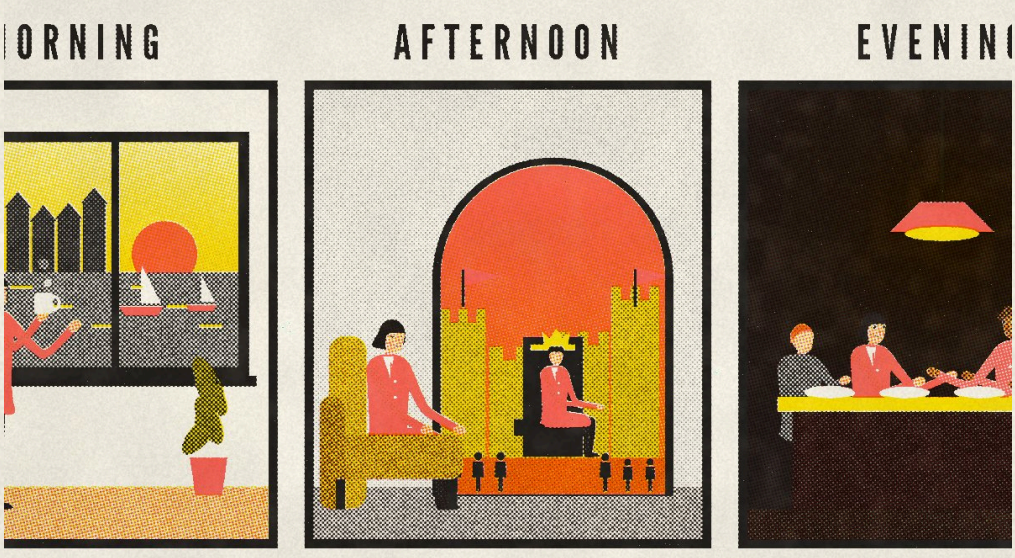
Daniel owned pieces of the arrangement.

The law continued to recognize this.

Under the Continuity Settlement, existing titles remained valid. New production belonged to the owners of the systems producing it. The discoveries accumulated. So did the claims.

Everyone else received the public provision.

Food, shelter, excellent health, and an indefinitely long life had become inexpensive. A citizen could spend the morning in an apartment beside the old harbor, the afternoon ruling a kingdom beyond a portal, and the evening eating with friends.



Many citizens preferred the friends.

Some preferred the kingdom.

The government financed the provision by assessing the owners. An owner could reduce the assessment by employing an allotted number of citizens at the civic minimum.

The employment did not have to produce anything.

Daniel's initial allotment was 6,112 people.

He hired journey companions because it seemed less embarrassing than hiring an audience.

After the sixty-ninth world, he was no longer sure there was a distinction.



III

Mara and Ines

His sister Mara lived on provision.

She had once been a nurse. Now she had a small apartment, several close friends, and a habit of disappearing into places Daniel had never heard of.

They met for lunch in the old city.

He described the mountain.

“Who lived there?” she asked.

“Nobody. It was made for us.”

She buttered a piece of bread.

“The mountain had a complicated geological history,” he added.

“Did you meet anyone who cared about it?”

“No.”

“You should come with Ines sometime.”

“Who’s Ines?”

“A woman who goes places.”

“So do I.”

“I know.”

He disliked her tone, although he could not have explained what was wrong with it.

“What does she do when she gets there?”

“Usually she finds out what people are doing.”

“And if there aren’t any people?”

“She stays until she has something to tell them.”

Ines arrived at the café wearing a coat with a repaired cuff.



Daniel noticed it because he had not seen a repaired cuff in years.

He asked how many worlds she had visited.

“I don’t keep count.”

“How far have you been?”

“Which way?”

He smiled.

She did not seem to have intended a joke.

He explained the estate, the employment obligation, and the companions. He was candid about the mountain.

Ines listened without rescuing him from the story.

“What would you like people to say about you?” she asked when he finished.

He had expected questions about destinations.

“That we’d been somewhere worth going.”

“Everywhere is worth going to someone.”

“That we understood it.”

“The systems will understand most of it better.”

“That we were good voyagers.”

She considered him.

“That could be something.”

“How would we start?”

“Somewhere you haven’t commissioned.”



IV

The ship

Their first expedition began in a ship.

Daniel thought this was unnecessarily literal, but Ines wanted them to spend time in the universe in which their bodies had been born.

The machines had gone ahead. They had established outposts on cold moons, in the dark beyond the major planets, and around distant stars. They sent back maps, pictures, and instructions for getting there.

The information traveled as quickly as information could travel.

Bodies were more troublesome.

A portal could open onto the landscape of a far settlement. It could show Daniel a recording of someone who lived there. It could not give him a present conversation with a person whose reply was still crossing the distance between them.

If he wanted to visit, he had to go.

Their ship would make a circuit among the outer settlements. It carried the machinery to sustain them, a garden, and portals into worlds that could be maintained aboard.

Eighty-three people came.

Ines chose them.

There was a former bus driver, a retired diplomat, two sisters who disagreed about everything, a man who could make almost anyone feel at ease, and a quiet woman who noticed when other people had stopped enjoying themselves.



“Where are the explorers?” Daniel asked.

“We’ll see.”

The ship needed none of them to navigate or maintain it. It could have completed the entire voyage empty, returned with excellent observations, and made a comprehensive report.

For the first week, people asked Daniel what they ought to be doing.

“Ask Ines,” he said.

Ines told them they were allowed to become interested in something.

Several found this harder than employment had ever been.

They spent their mornings in the old universe.

Some watched the instruments. Some walked in the garden. Two people began a friendship by arguing about whether the view outside counted as scenery.

There were visits to small physical stations where people had chosen to live under skies no human being had arranged.

At one, Daniel went outside.

The ground was dark and broken. A low ridge cut across the stars. The machinery kept him warm, supplied his air, and steadied him when he walked badly in the unfamiliar gravity.



His guide offered magnification, explanations, and a complete reconstruction of the ridge's history.

He accepted all three.

The knowledge made the place more interesting.

He stayed until the others asked whether he intended to join them for dinner.

That evening, he discovered he could describe the walk without referring to anything he had purchased.



V

Worlds with rules of their own

Their other journeys began in the ship's immersion rooms.

They left their bodies in care and entered worlds sustained by the machinery aboard. These places were drawn from an immense and growing range of possibilities: some deliberately designed, others developed from systems of rules whose consequences had first been explored by machines.

There was no prospect of exhausting them.

Daniel's old itineraries had adjusted themselves continuously around him. These worlds continued according to their established rules. If he disliked one, he could leave. He could also commission a private variation.

Ines encouraged him to stay long enough to know what he disliked.

They visited an ocean in which buoyancy behaved differently at different depths. A person could step into the water, sink through one layer, and find herself floating against the underside of another.

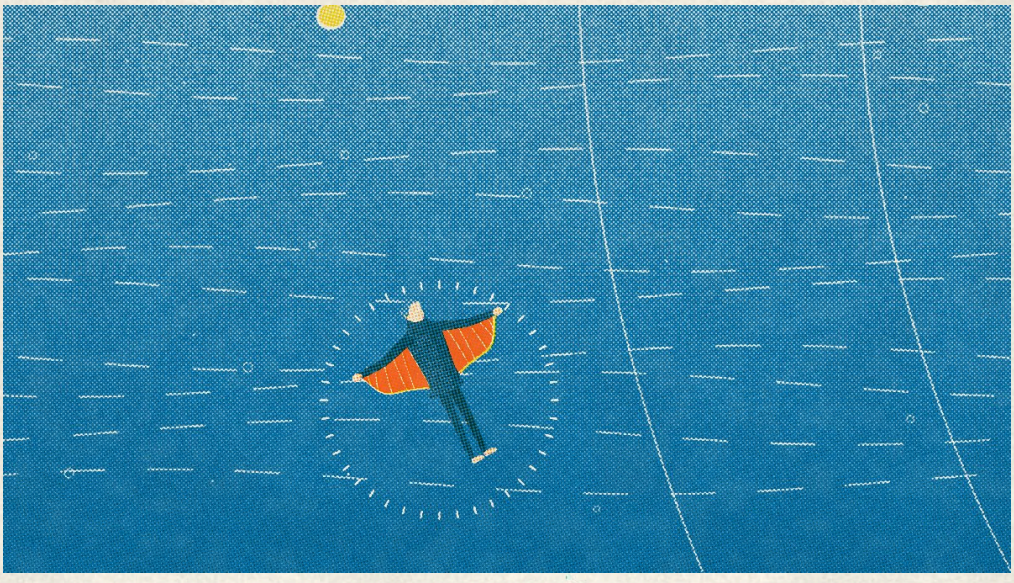
The systems gave them bodies suited to it.

Daniel acquired a broad, flexible membrane along his arms and a new sensation that told him which way a current was moving before it touched him.

For a while, he experienced this as an itch.

Then, during an afternoon beneath an immense suspended bank of water, the sensation became as ordinary as knowing where his hands were.

He turned without thinking.



A dark shape passed through the place where he had been.

His guide identified it, explained its behavior, and offered to slow his experience so he could inspect it.

He declined the slowing and asked to follow.

That night, back in his original body, he woke reaching for a current that was not there.

He told Ines about it over breakfast.

She asked whether it frightened him.

"A little."

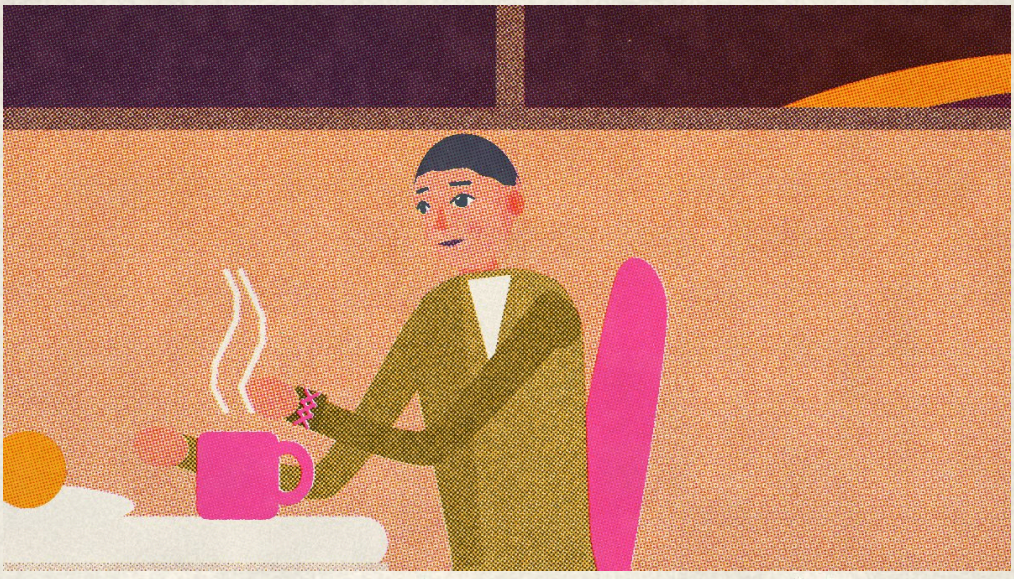
"Do you want to go back?"

"Yes."

"Then tell the others why."

He tried.

For once, they asked questions before he had finished.



They entered a place with an additional spatial direction.

The systems prepared their senses gradually. There was no need to solve the geometry for themselves. Guides supplied explanations, models, and unfamiliar forms of perception until moving became possible.

Understanding remained uneven.

Daniel could find his way through a room while being unable to explain what a wall was keeping out. One of the sisters adapted quickly. The other found the experience intolerable and returned to the ship.

For three days they argued about whether she had left too soon.

Then the quieter sister admitted that she had disliked how readily the place made her familiar body seem inadequate.

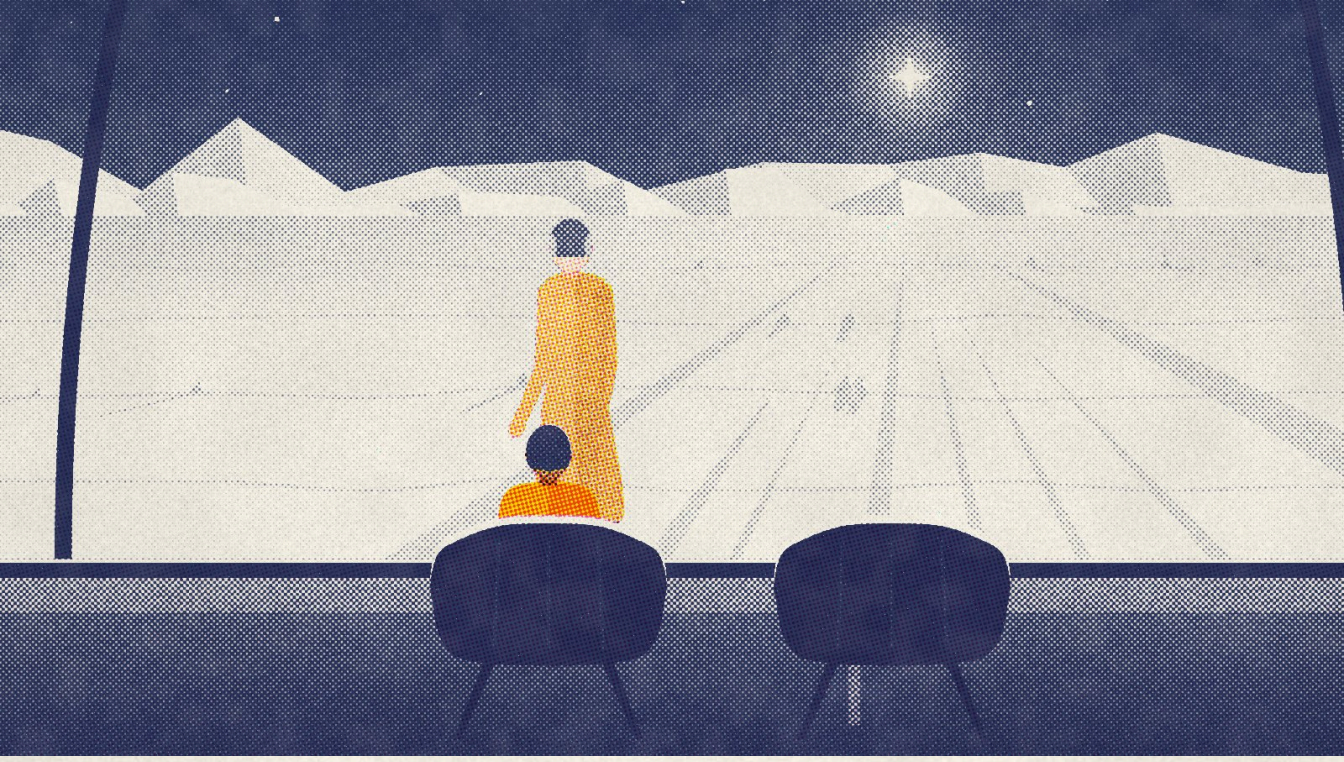
Her sister stopped arguing.

They spent the following week choosing forms they could inhabit together.

The account they eventually wrote was less about geometry than about the difficulty of remaining close to someone who was enjoying a change that frightened you.

Other people read it before visiting.

It became one of the most useful things the expedition brought home.



VI

Usha

At a settlement beneath a shell of ice, Daniel met Usha.

She occupied a chair in an observation gallery overlooking a landscape almost without color. The old sun was a brilliant point among the other lights.

Daniel had seen the view in advance.

He still stood in front of her for several minutes.

Eventually she asked whether he would mind moving.

He apologized.

She invited him to sit beside her.

Usha had lived at the settlement for seventeen years. Her daughter had stayed near the old city. They exchanged recordings. They had learned to leave time in a conversation for the distance between them.

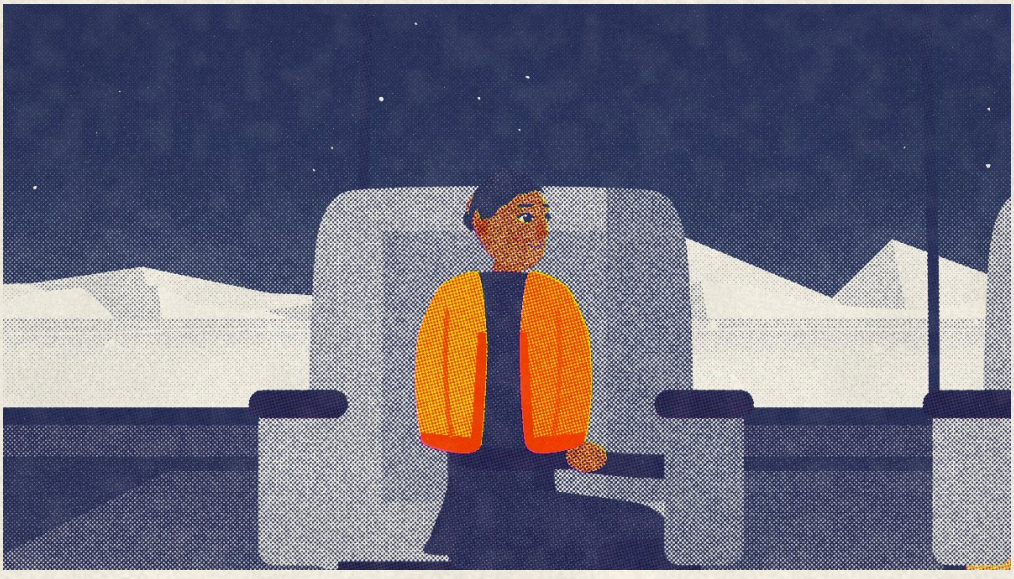
“Does she visit?” Daniel asked.

“Twice.”

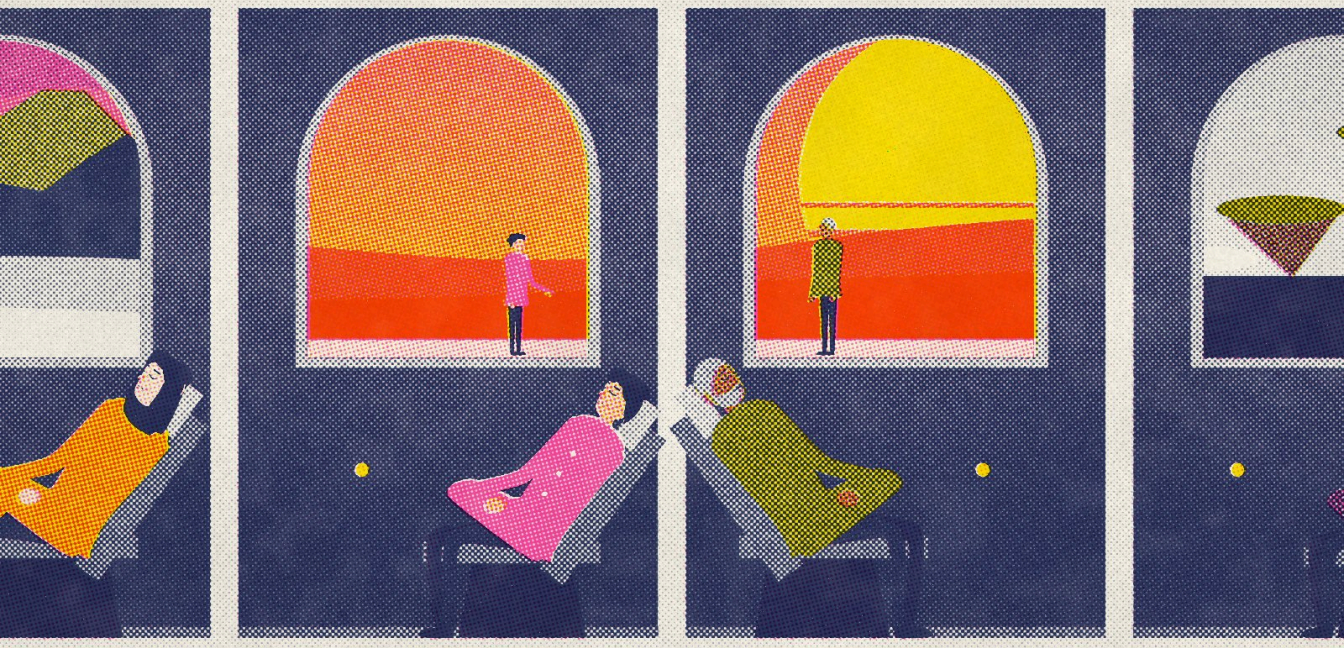
“Would you like her to come more often?”

“Yes. I would also like to visit her more often.”

“Why don’t you?”
Usha nodded toward the landscape.
He waited for an explanation.
“That is most of the explanation,” she said.



Later, he would tell this story often. He always included the chair.



VII

Neighbors

The settlement maintained hundreds of shared worlds.

Many of its residents spent more time in those worlds than in the physical galleries. Their bodies remained nearby, receiving whatever care they required. They could meet one another in real time because, beneath the different skies and experiences, they were neighbors.

Visitors from the ship joined them.

Daniel began to understand that a place could be public without being arranged for strangers.

In one world, he was welcomed warmly and bored almost to tears.

In another, his hosts were suspicious of him for reasons they explained at length.

At a third, he spent a week learning a form of conversation in which several people could hold and modify the same imagined object. When he returned to spoken language, he became impatient with how much of an idea had to wait while the beginning was explained.

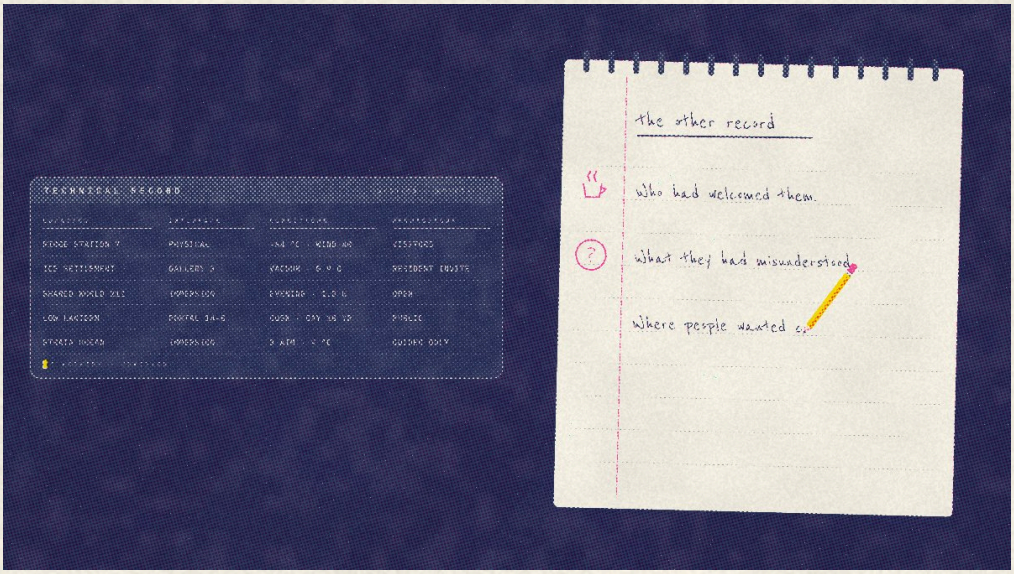
The people there had long ago grown accustomed to this.

They helped him become less impatient.

He recorded where they lived, what they had taught him, and which parts of the experience they were happy for him to describe.

The systems kept the technical record: locations, interfaces, environmental conditions, permissions.

His companions began keeping another.



Who had welcomed them.

What they had misunderstood.

What a visitor should ask before doing.

Where people wanted company.

Where they wanted to be left alone.

The systems helped write and check these accounts. They could have produced more polished descriptions unaided.

But *Hal was there, and this is what happened to him* meant something to people who knew Hal.

Increasingly, people did.



VIII

Low Lantern

Low Lantern was one of the settlement's public worlds.

Its day lasted nearly eighteen years.

The town's first inhabitants had arrived shortly after sunset. They liked the long evening, the black sea, and the lights reflected in the water.

Forty-seven people lived there when Daniel came.

Their world's slow rotation was part of its founding arrangement. They could vote to change it. So far, they had preferred to let morning arrive in its own time.

Daniel entered through the visitors' portal and found himself on a quay.

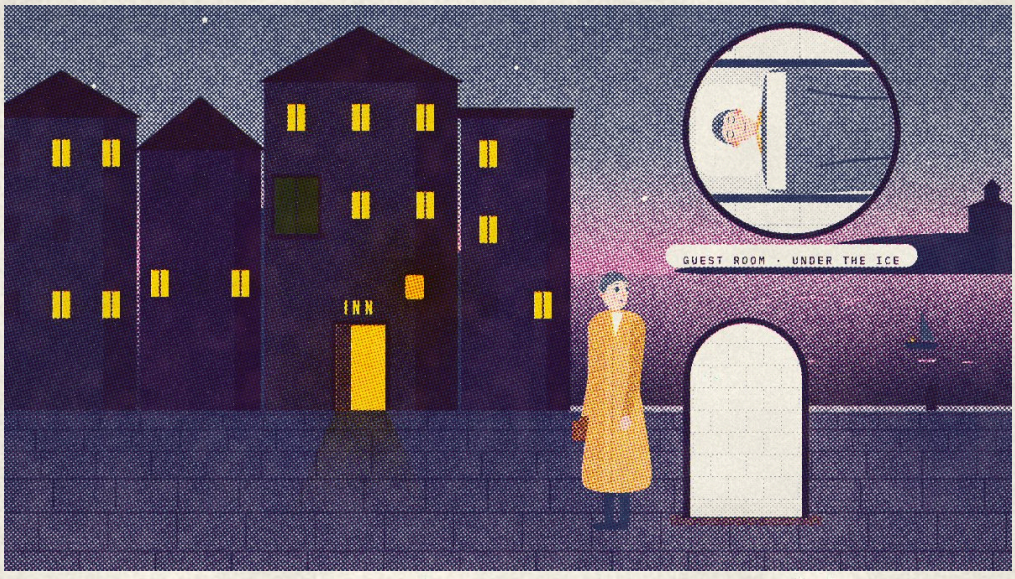
His body lay in a guest room under the ice.

Here, he could smell salt and hear someone calling from an open window.

The innkeeper was named Belen.

She had once been an optician. Now she kept an inn because she liked knowing who was in the spare rooms.

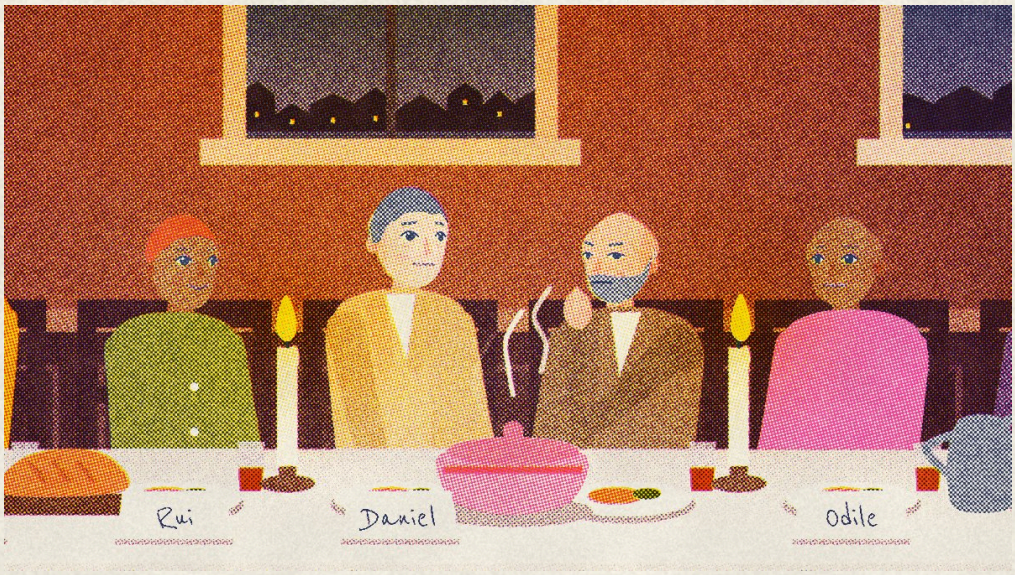
The systems cleaned the rooms and prepared the meals.



Belen decided where people sat.

On Daniel's third night, she placed him beside a man who disliked the Continuity Settlement.

It was a long dinner.



Afterward, Daniel asked whether she had done it deliberately.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He's been waiting for someone to disagree with."

"You could have warned me."

"You could have listened more."

He stayed a month.

He learned the names of the people who came to the inn and those who preferred to be visited at home. He learned which two neighbors would not sit together and that neither could clearly remember the original cause.

One evening, he and Belen walked along the shore.

"Will you stay for morning?" she asked.

"When is it?"

"Nine years."

He laughed, then saw that she was waiting.

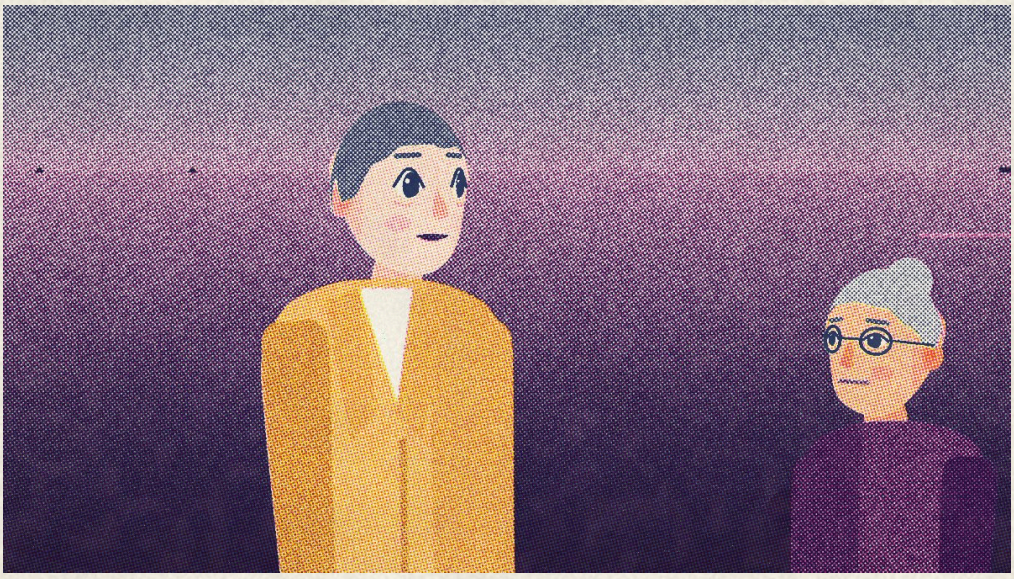
"I don't think I can stay that long."

"Most people can't. At first."

"Will you still be here?"

"I said I would."

"Then I'll come back."



She nodded.

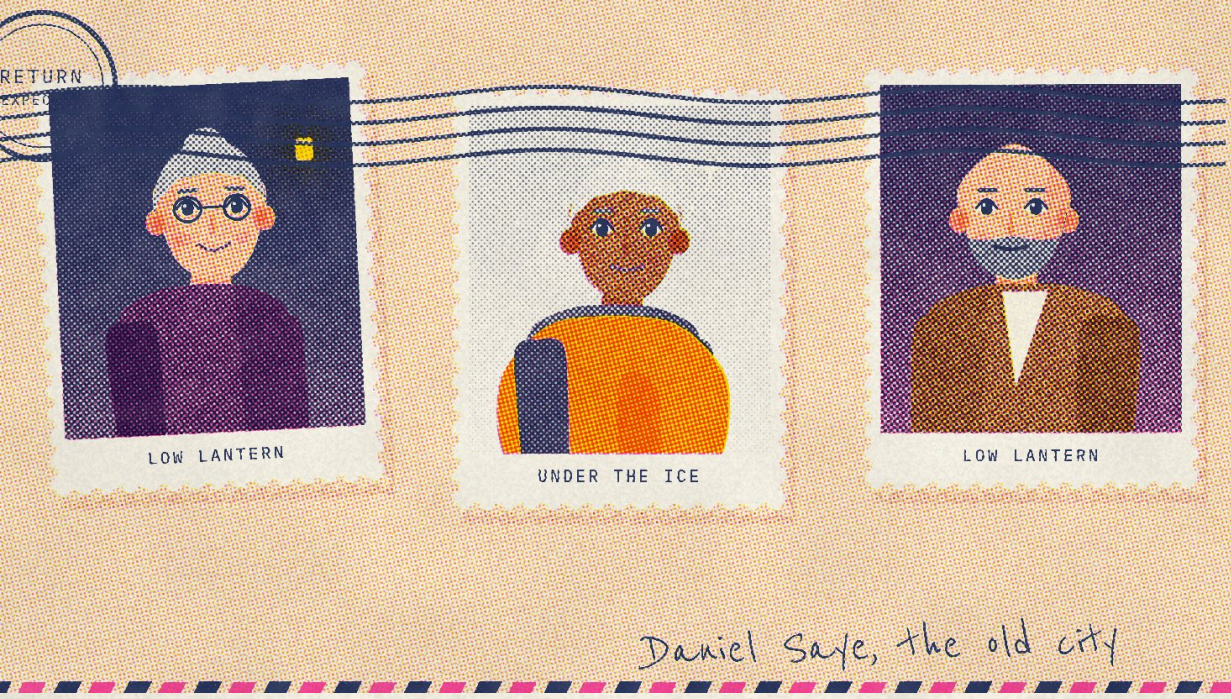
When he told Ines, she asked whether he meant it.

"Of course."

“It means bringing yourself back to this settlement. Not opening a recording at home.”

“I understand.”

“Put it in the calendar.”



IX

House Saye

They returned to the old city after almost two years.

Nobody had crossed anything unaided or demonstrated the superiority of human beings. They had used every tool they found helpful. Their bodies were healthy. Their records contained more gratitude than claims.

They had seen things difficult to describe.

They had also met people who expected to see them again.

Messages followed them home.

Was Hal coming back?

Had the sisters settled their argument?

Had Daniel thought any more about what he had said at dinner?

He had.

For the first time since losing his old job, he felt expected somewhere.

The next expedition had three ships.

Other groups remained near home and traveled through worlds maintained there. Some sought out unfamiliar environments. Some visited communities trying forms of life that had no precedent in the old cities.

The expeditions shared what they found.

One returned with a way of perceiving the growth of a forest as a continuous event. Another brought accounts of a society whose inhabitants changed their bodies seasonally and had developed elaborate customs around recognizing one another.

A crew spent years in a world without fixed objects, where stable identities had to be maintained through patterns of change.

Their first reports were incomprehensible.

Their later reports were stranger and clearer.

People began asking Daniel where his voyagers were going next.

He could rarely answer without consulting someone.

Some members found places they wanted to stay.

Daniel continued paying them.

His accountant asked what their duties were.

"To be there when we come back."

It qualified.

These became the shore houses, even when there was no shore.



There was no single occasion on which the enterprise became House Saye.

The name appeared in employment records, then in correspondence, then in conversation.

By the time Daniel considered objecting, people were saying *our house*.

He did not object.

Its flag was yellow, with a blue opening stitched into it.

They carried physical copies aboard ships and used the same mark in shared worlds. Ines insisted that they display it only with their hosts' permission.

"People should be able to tell that we're welcome," she said.

The house became known for bringing interesting travelers.

It became known for listening, for describing its visits honestly, and for returning when it said it would.

A bad visit could follow a member through a dozen worlds.

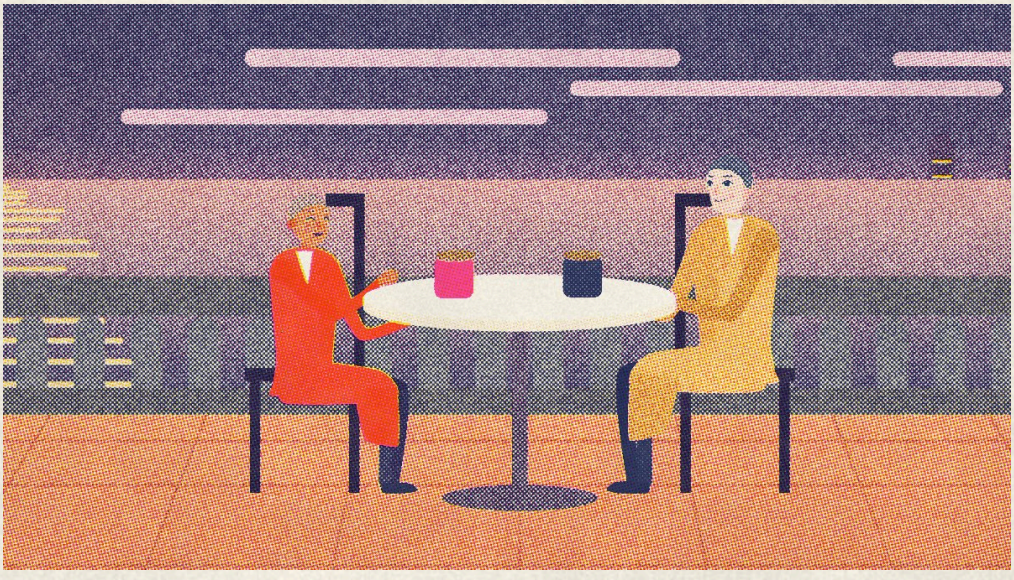


So could a good one.

People applied to join.

Some wanted the salary. Some wanted the name. Some were tired of being asked what they actually did.

A woman who had traveled on provision for thirty years took a salaried place and discovered that her brother now introduced her as an explorer.



She told Daniel this while laughing.

He laughed too.

Later, he could not stop thinking about it.



Other owners asked to affiliate their estates.

They could support expeditions, maintain shore houses, and receive visiting crews. Material arrangements were easy. The patrons supplied lasting commitments around which people could organize their lives.

There were councils and shared calendars.

There were marriages.

There were quarrels whose participants occupied different bodies, different worlds, and occasionally different planets.

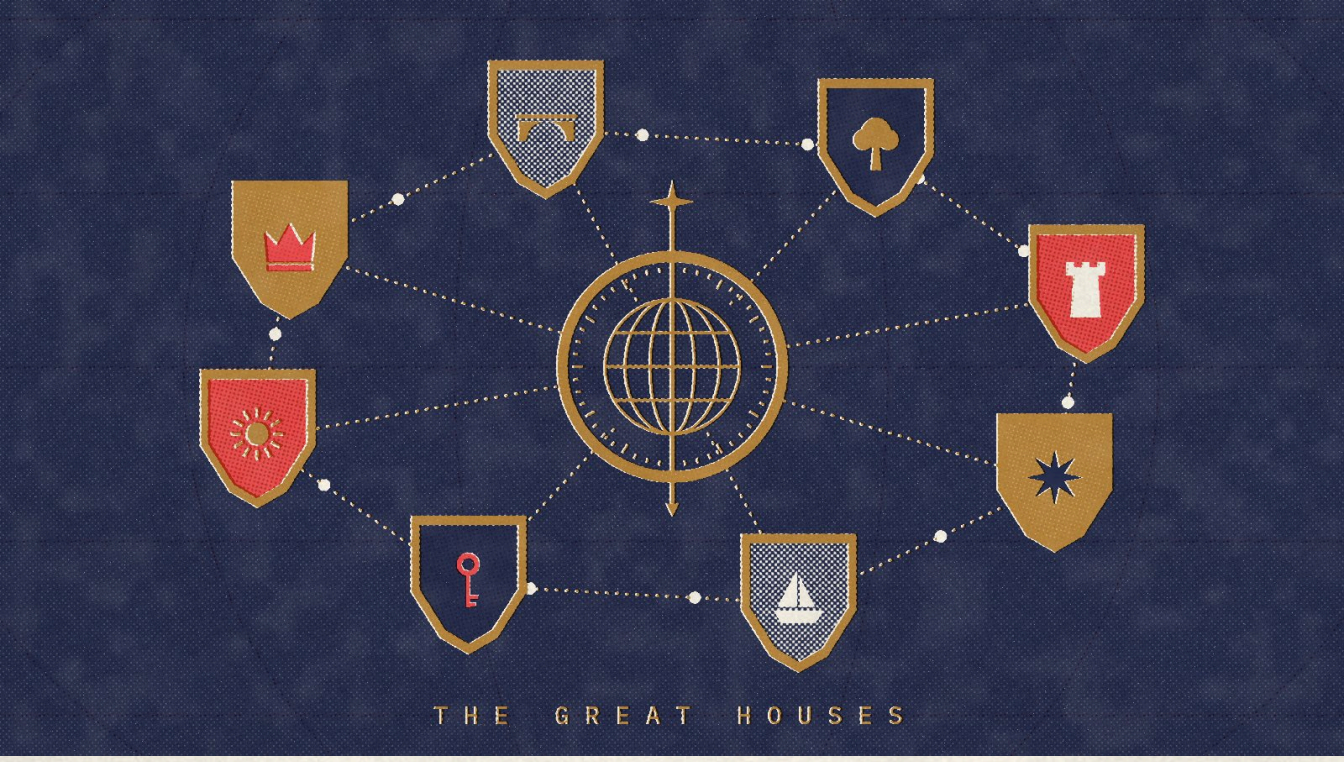
The house became too large for Daniel to know everyone.

It remained small enough that people expected him to care.

He had hoped to become a distinguished voyager.

He found himself responsible for departures, reunions, and a surprising number of dining arrangements.

He liked it more than being rich.



X

The Meridian Compact

Celia Ormond invited him to join the Meridian Compact.

Her family's property was older than the portals. Its voyages were newer than his.

The Compact would coordinate the great houses' activities: shared standards, reciprocal hospitality, recognized expeditions, representation before governments.

It would also help defend the Continuity Settlement.

Daniel appreciated that this purpose was stated plainly.

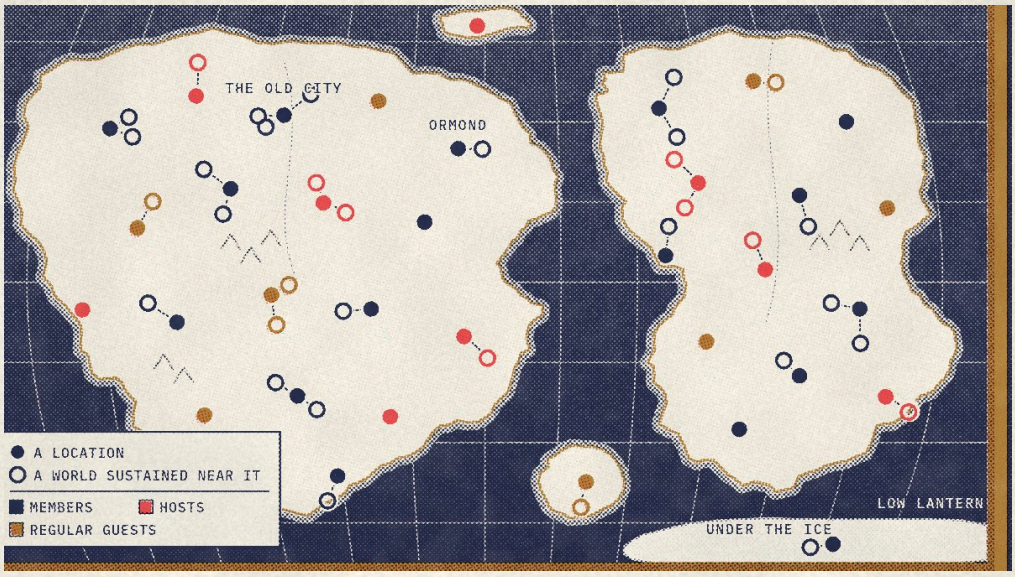
At the first meeting, a map showed the places where affiliated houses had members, hosts, and regular guests.

Some were locations in the old universe.

Others were worlds sustained near those locations.

The map distinguished them carefully. Political influence required a more accurate geography than a travel poster.

The people living across it still voted.



A citizen could inhabit an unfamiliar body beneath an unfamiliar sky and retain the vote attached to the person who had left the old city. Distance complicated election schedules. It did not erase citizenship.

"People support institutions that have kept faith with them," Celia said.

Daniel looked at the map.

He thought of Belen's inn. Of the woman whose brother had begun calling her an explorer.

He understood the proposal.

The great estates no longer needed private armies. Public defenses were too good at preventing violence, including violence requested by great estates.

What the estates needed was for enough citizens to regard their continued existence as a personal matter.

A house could do that.

It could make the owner of a substation into the reason someone had met her husband, found her world, or become a person whose stories other people wanted to hear.

Daniel joined.

The difficulty concerned the unaffiliated voyagers.

There were millions.

They traveled on provision, formed clubs, kept records, and established communities as serious and eccentric as those of the houses.

Ines knew many of them.

Mara was one.

The Compact proposed that formal recognition be restricted to voyagers accountable to an endowed house.

There were reasonable arguments.

A house could answer complaints. It could guarantee continuity. It could maintain standards beyond the interests of a single traveler.

Independent groups could seek affiliation.

Daniel read the proposal twice.

It did not close a portal or forbid a journey.

It established whose accounts would appear in the Compact's records, whose representatives would be invited to its assemblies, and whose voyages would be described as part of humanity's great expansion.

Ines understood immediately.

"You're deciding who gets to be called a voyager."

"We need some way to distinguish ourselves."

"Then keep making good voyages."

"There are questions of accountability."

"Yes. Ask whether someone keeps promises. Ask whether their hosts would have them back. Ask whether they tell the truth."

"A house makes those questions easier to answer."

"So do people who know them."

He put down the document.

"We can't recognize everybody."

"Then recognize what you can honestly recognize. You don't have to declare everyone else a tourist."



The national assembly introduced another proposal to distribute part of the productive property among the public.

Its sponsors emphasized that houses could continue. Voyages could continue. Nobody intended to confiscate a person's home or collections.

The owners emphasized that a government able to take one share could take another.

Daniel opposed the proposal.

He did not conceal that from his people.

He also did not ask them to agree.

The Compact wanted more.

Its founding assembly would demonstrate everything patronage had made possible. Crews would return from physical expeditions. Nearby shore houses would send delegations through portals. More distant communities would send recordings prepared for the occasion.

Daniel was to deliver the principal address.

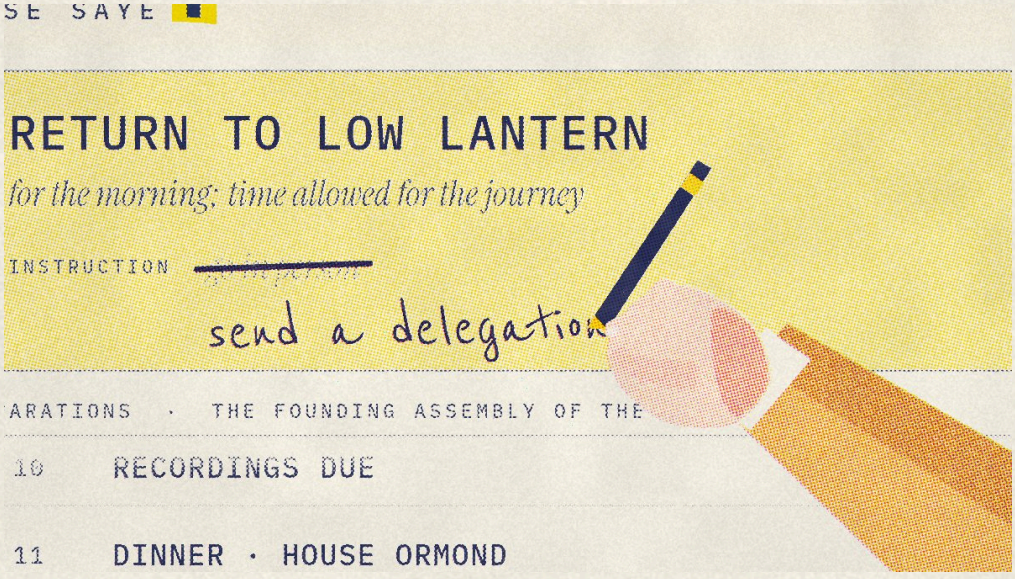
He was also to endorse the Compact's recognition rules.

Throughout the preparations, his advisers kept another commitment visible.

Return to Low Lantern.

They had allowed time for the physical journey.

Daniel changed the instruction to *send a delegation*.



The system asked whether he intended to revise his promise to Belen.

He left the question unanswered.



XI

In pieces

Belen's message reached him several months before departure.

She was pleased people were coming, she said. Rooms would not be a problem. Most of the houses were empty now.

After sunrise, she intended to leave.

She had promised to see the morning. She had not promised to stay for another evening.

Daniel watched the message twice.

He recorded a reply.

Then he waited for it to cross the distance, for Belen to answer, and for her answer to come back.

Over the following days, they talked in pieces.

She sent him a view of the inn.

The room behind her looked larger.

Where is everything?

I'm deciding what to take.

You don't have to dismantle it.

I know.

The world could remain. Its rooms could be kept ready indefinitely. She could return whenever she liked.

He explained this in one message and deleted it before sending.

Belen knew.

There were eleven residents left, she told him. A few others intended to come for morning.

Are you lonely?

He regretted the question during the hours before her reply.

Sometimes, she said. *It doesn't mean I made a mistake.*



He watched that part again.

Then he removed *send a delegation* from the calendar.

THE FOUNDING ASSEMBLY

Independent voyagers will be celebrated without being formally accredited, and their accounts remain welcome among us. In due course, and after future consultation, we will consider how the arrangement may grow.

I came to this table with objections. I find, on reflection, that each of them is answered by membership itself.

XII

Withdrawal

His adviser prepared a speech that reconciled his objections with membership in the Compact.

It was elegant.

The recognition rules became an initial administrative arrangement. Independent voyagers would be celebrated without being formally accredited. Future consultation was promised.

Daniel read it aloud.

He heard himself postponing a decision he had already made.

He asked Ines to come.

“I’m withdrawing.”

She sat down.

“That will cause trouble.”

“Yes.”

“Some affiliated houses may leave.”

“I know.”

“They may stop inviting us.”

“I know that too.”

She considered him.

"I thought you'd be pleased," he said.

"I will be when I know what we're doing."

They spent the afternoon answering that question.

House Saye would continue to keep records of its voyages.

It would also recognize accounts from travelers whose conduct its members could vouch for, regardless of who paid for their food.

Its shore houses would remain open to independent visitors at their hosts' discretion.

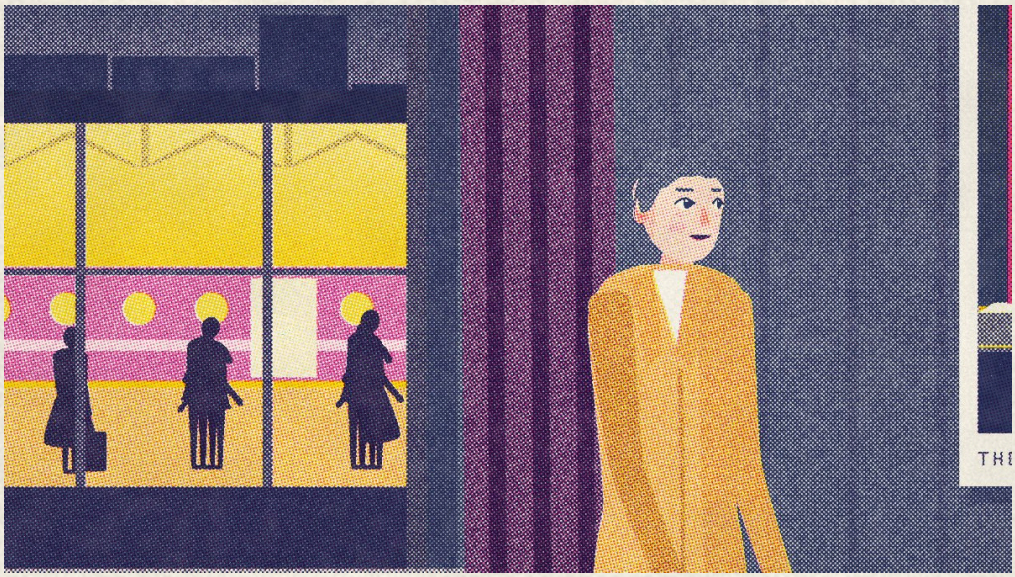
No community would be required to join an estate to appear in its maps.

The standards would concern the journey and the traveler.

Daniel sent the policy to every affiliated house.

He sent his withdrawal to the Compact.

Celia's reply arrived while he was preparing to leave.



"You understand what the assembly is considering?"

"Yes."

"You understand what it would mean for your estate?"

"Yes."

"Then why weaken our position?"

Through the window, he could see the departure hall. People were embracing beside the transport that would take them to their ship.

He did not know who was leaving.

“I asked them to become good voyagers,” he said.

“And that prevents you from defending your property?”

“It prevents me from saying some of the things you want said in its defense.”

Celia looked tired.

“You think being loved will protect you.”

He had no honest answer that was entirely a denial.



XIII

Morning

Daniel returned to the outer settlement with seven members of the first expedition.

They spent part of the journey in shared worlds aboard the ship. They spent part watching the old universe change outside.

At the settlement, their bodies were accommodated beneath the ice.

Then they entered Low Lantern.

The town looked smaller than Daniel remembered.

Several streets had been darkened. Empty houses remained furnished for residents who might return in a year, or fifty years, or never.

Belen met them at the inn.

“I thought you’d send someone.”

“So did I.”

She took the bag he carried in that world—a familiar collection of things he liked to have about him when traveling.

His physical luggage remained in the guest room.

He followed her inside.

They stayed for twenty-three days.

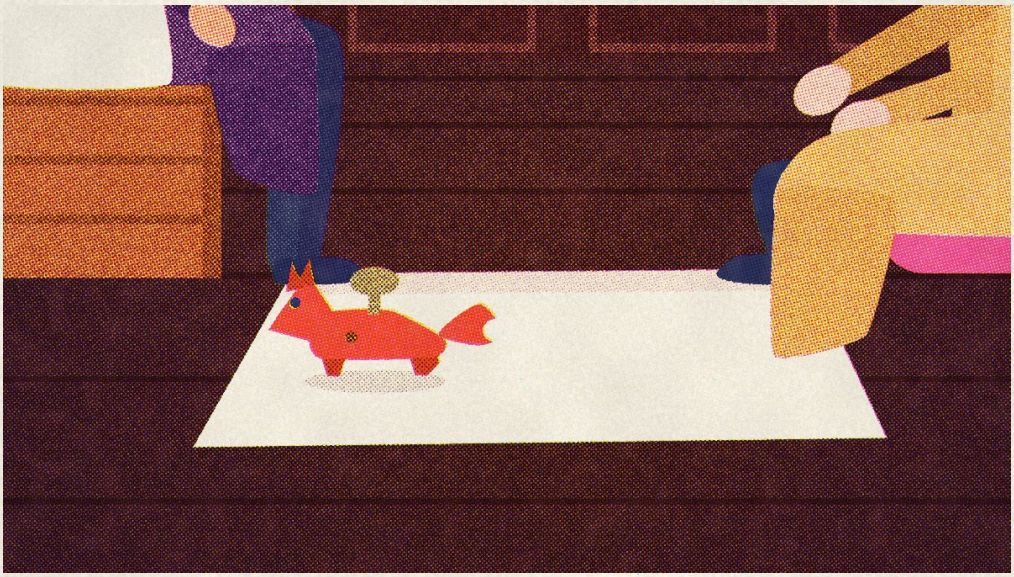
Daniel helped Belen decide what to take.

This involved sitting on the floor while she told him where things had come from.

A lamp was from a world she had disliked.

A bowl had been made by a woman she missed, although the woman was alive and Belen could travel to see her.

A small metal animal had belonged to the first child born among Low Lantern's residents. The child had grown up, left the settlement, and sent a message from a physical voyage that would not arrive until after morning.



All these objects could be copied.

Their patterns could be carried to another world.

Belen was deciding which parts of her life she wanted to continue with.

Daniel listened.

He had hired thousands of people so that his own life might contain something worth remembering.

Here, in an almost empty town, he found himself trusted with someone else's memories.

People returned.

Not all of them.

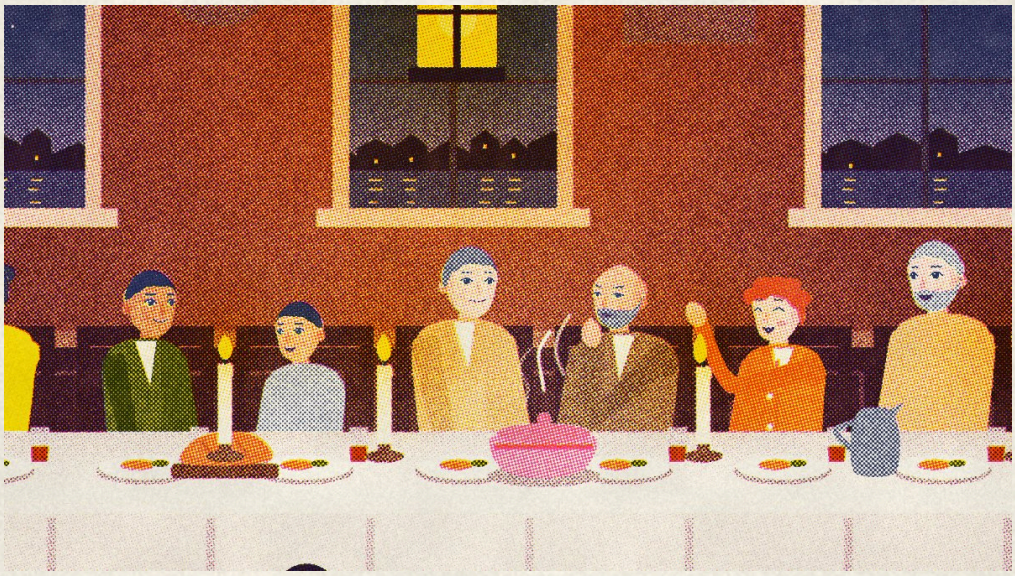
Some had made commitments elsewhere. Some sent messages. One woman arrived, spent an hour in her former home, and left without attending dinner.

Belen said that was all right.

Mara came on a later ship with friends who had not been employed since the end of work.

They immediately joined an argument about where to watch the sunrise.

On the final night, thirty-nine people ate at the inn.



Daniel sat beside the man who disliked the Continuity Settlement.

The man still disliked it.

This dinner was better.

Afterward, they walked down to the water.

For years, the horizon had been a distinction between one darkness and another.

Now there was a line.

The systems could show them what would happen. Most had looked.

The sea brightened.

Light entered streets whose inhabitants had never seen them by day. It revealed colors in the stone. Windows shone one after another. On the distant headland, a building that had always appeared black became a deep, surprising red.

Belen stood beside him.

"Well," she said.

He turned.

She was crying.

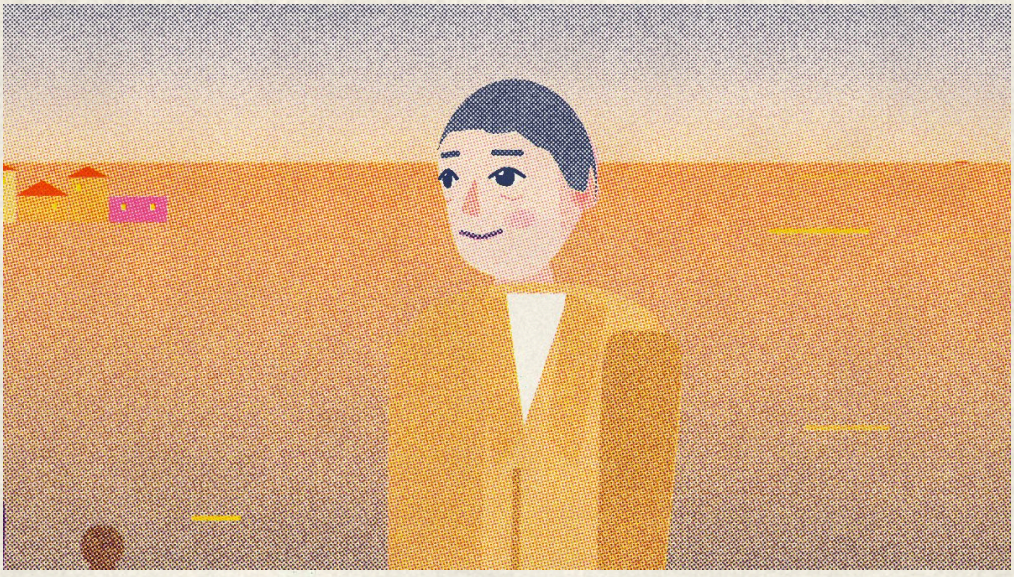
"Was it worth staying?"

"Yes."

He waited.

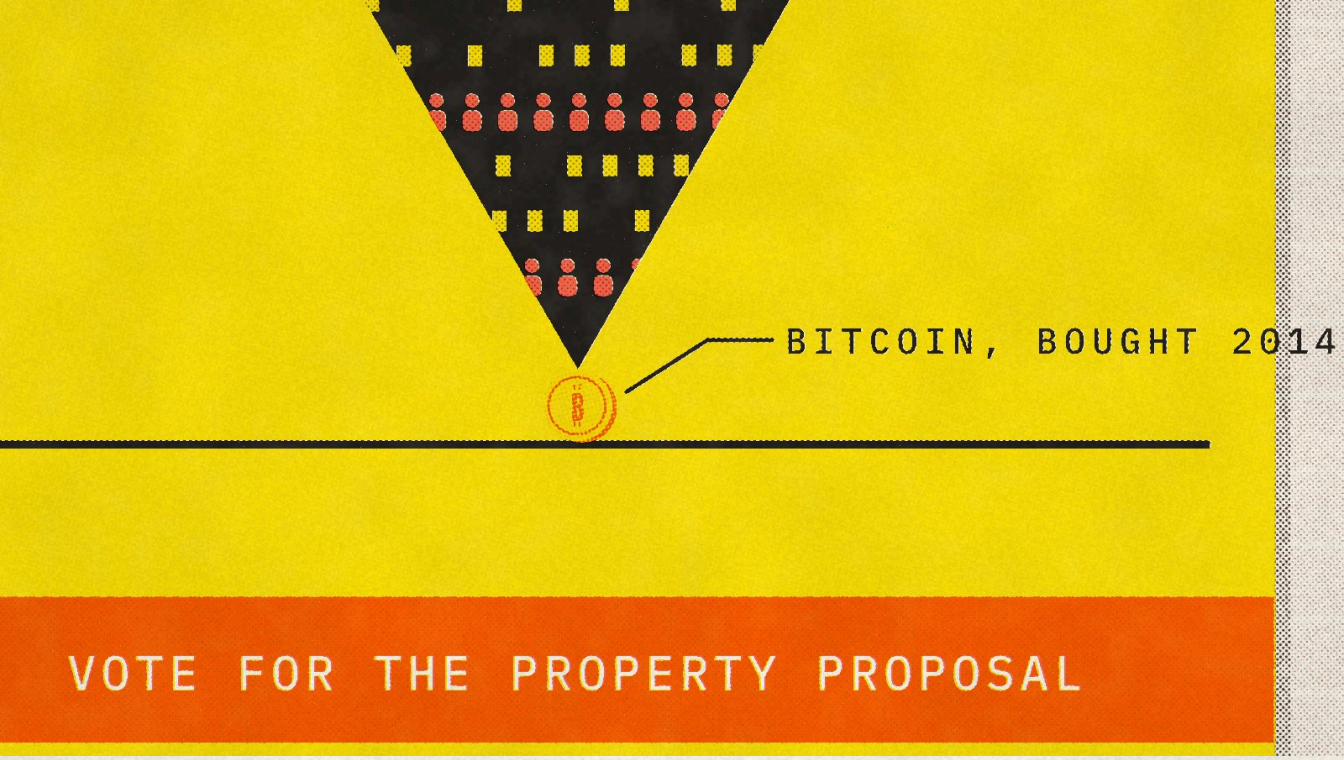
"I'm still going."

"I know."



Across the shore, people called to one another as they discovered what their town looked like.





XIV

The guest flag

The Compact met without him.

Three affiliated estates withdrew from Saye's network.

Two returned within a year. Their people had friends in too many of the shore houses.

Other estates joined.

Independent voyagers traveled with Saye crews and, where their hosts permitted it, carried the yellow guest flag.

Some took salaried places.

Others never did.

The distinction remained in the accounts.

It became less reliable as a guide to who would be welcome at dinner.

Daniel's political opponents found this insufficient.

They said that decent behavior did not confer an eternal right to the income of machines. They said that one man should not fund a civilization from a fortunate purchase made decades earlier.

He could not honestly dispute the fortunate purchase.

His supporters spoke about the house.

They spoke about voyages, friendships, and the places where someone would be waiting if they arrived.

When the property proposal came to a vote, enough citizens opposed it to preserve the settlement.

Daniel knew some of them.

He had sat at their tables.

There had been no bargain. He had never asked Belen to defend his estate. She might not have done so if he had.

But in hundreds of places, his continuing ownership had become connected to something people loved.



He had wanted that.

He had also come to love it himself.

Belen left Low Lantern.

For a while, she lived in a shore house near the old city. Then she joined an expedition to a physical settlement where there were mountains she wanted to walk among in her original body.

Daniel received messages from her.

She complained about the cooking, although the ship could prepare anything she asked for.

She was teaching a young man how to arrange a dinner.

She had found a room she liked.

When Daniel asked whether she intended to stay, she said she would let him know.

He put no date in the calendar.



House Saye never became the most traveled house.

Nobody could agree how to measure that.

It did not claim the most worlds. Its maps contained blank areas where communities had asked not to be included. Some of its best voyagers spent decades returning to the same few places.

Others went continually farther into unfamiliar experience.

They learned forms of perception that were difficult to bring home. They lived among people whose idea of a body had become very different from their own. They crossed physical distances with the help of machines that knew the route perfectly and could not decide for them whether to stay when they arrived.

Their accounts were read widely.

Their recommendations were trusted.

People preparing to leave home sought them out. So did people who had traveled for years and no longer knew what they were looking for.

There were places that admitted few visitors but welcomed the yellow flag.

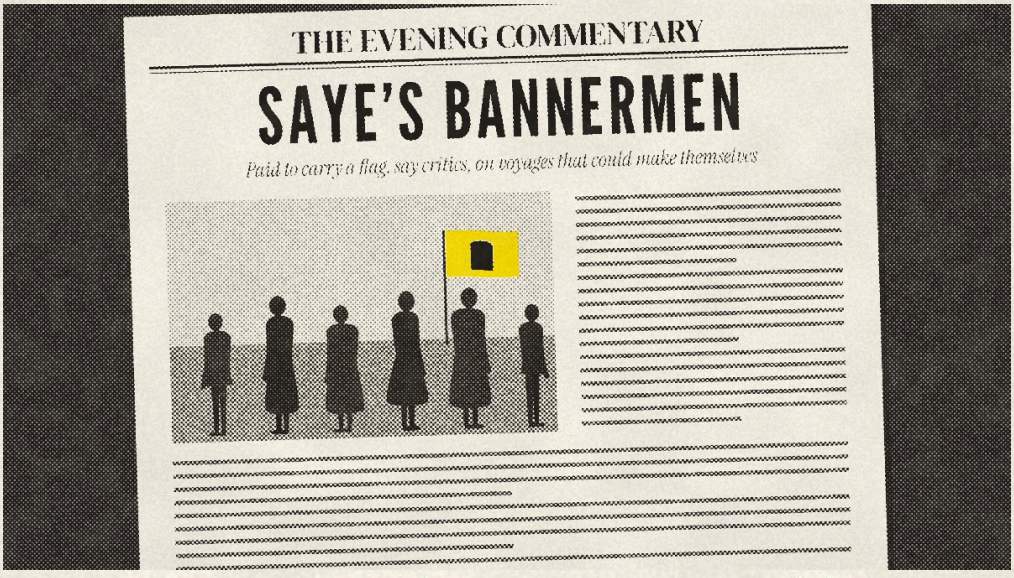
There were places where a Saye crew had behaved badly and spent years trying to be welcome again.

Daniel's name acquired meanings he could not have specified in an order.

He remained rich.

His bannermen, as the commentators called them, still received wages for journeys no machine needed them to make. The estates still maintained people whose votes helped preserve the estates.

Beyond those arrangements, the voyages continued.


THE EVENING COMMENTARY

SAYE'S BANNERMEN

Paid to carry a flag, say critics, on voyages that could make themselves

On an ordinary afternoon, Daniel entered a shared world he had never visited.

His body rested in a guest room near the machinery sustaining it.

His companions arrived beside him on a quay beneath a pale, unfamiliar sky.



Their host waited a little way along the water. Behind her stood houses built against an enormous curve of blue stone. High above them, something moved that Daniel could not yet distinguish from the weather.

He could ask through the portal.

There would be time.

The host looked at the yellow cloth folded beneath Ines's arm.

"You can raise it," she said.

Ines did.

They had brought nothing that could not have been delivered more cheaply without them.



All along the quay, people were coming out to meet them.

About this edition

This is the complete text of the story. Its section breaks are kept, marked with a small flag, and the fourteen chapter titles are the acts of the animated film.

In this world a portal is only an opening: the far side does the thinking, and a portal never arranges, keeps or answers anything itself. Four lines were changed so the story keeps that rule, the same four the film changed:

- *The portals had arranged everything* became *The worlds beyond his portals had arranged everything.*
- *A portal could reproduce the landscape* became *A portal could open onto the landscape.*
- *The portals kept the technical record* became *The systems kept the technical record.*
- *He could ask the portal* became *He could ask through the portal.*

The pictures are frames from the film. Every frame of it is drawn by code and printed as a three-ink risograph, with halftone dots, paper grain and a little misregistration; no image generator was used. The voices and music of the film are from ElevenLabs. It was made with Claude.

The film and this book are free at

`the-little-doors.vercel.app/the-guest-flag`



The Guest Flag

After the machines took over the work, Daniel Saye owned a piece of everything and had visited sixty-eight worlds with nothing to tell anyone. Then a woman with a repaired cuff asked him what he would like people to say about him. A story of the Little Doors.