

Voice Mail

THE THINGS THAT SCARED HER WEREN'T THE THINGS SHE EXPECTED TO FIND—rats, bodies—but the evidence of life, the maps and desks, the books still cataloged. And the next layer, blankets and plates, artifacts of a hidden existence. The stillness inside felt ancient, as though the building's inhabitants had left suddenly, perhaps hundreds of years ago. Car sounds and voices drifted in from the street, far away and still immediate, interrupting the quiet she found unnerving.

He lived in the building, an abandoned school in the middle of the city—property that had been waiting to be sold, through a tangle of planning code and tax law, for almost twenty years. The night before, she followed him over a fence, their quick bodies lit by the traffic rushing past. Then up a pile of tires and through a hole smashed into the brick. It wasn't so hard to get in.

Getting out was more difficult because she could see what she was doing. He lived on the top floor, stayed up there in the natural light with people with names like Deadbolt and Tinder. They spread out in the former classrooms and gathered in the gym, where faint markings on the floor still designated rules and boundaries. In the mornings, in daylight, they used the bottom floor as an exit, slower but less visible. He took her out through hallways and stairwells, and it was almost completely dark, despite the small triangles cut into the boards covering the windows. He kept a tiny flashlight clipped to his belt, a dim beam for the softness underfoot. Fleeting reassurance, catching only newspapers and old clothes.

That morning he gave her the number for a voice mail system, the best way to reach him. It had a 1-800 prefix; it was a free dial from anywhere, even a payphone. The mailbox was shared by a scattered group of people, at first just a way to announce a protest, a free movie, some interesting garbage outside a bakery. But these transients had spotty access to the usual modes of communication. They needed a way to get through to each other. The messages got personal and the voice mail got stuffed, messy with their various entanglements. The group checked the messages repeatedly, batting around their promises and indiscretions, though few knew who paid the monthly bill.

“Just call and leave a message,” he told her when they made it to the sidewalk. “Tell me the time and place you want to meet. If I can't make it, I'll

call you, but if you don't hear from me, I'll be there. I need to conserve my quarters."

In a few more years, most people would have cell phones, even squatters. They would be able to speak to each other directly. But back then, messages made arrangements. These listeners believed they would stick.

The two of them left things loose, but he paid attention. He never called, always waiting at her time and place. When he took her to the bank, with its free coffee in the lobby, he brought expired soymilk in a rinsed-out hot sauce bottle. And when he stayed at her apartment, he wasn't greedy for the things she took for granted—showers, food kept cold and then made hot.

He checked the voice mail constantly when they were together. He gave her the password and then she did too, listening to the messages and not just leaving them. Each street and its payphones became an opportunity, their connection a game. At home, where she went through the front door with a key, she lay in bed and played through the messages. There was her voice and the sound of her pleasure, speaking to him. No one told her the etiquette, if you were expected to skip over what wasn't yours. She listened to everything, fueling her curiosity about this unseen group, one that managed both accumulation and thrift. Anthropology, because she arranged her time around working, her resources around bills. She kept track of him, repeating the messages he left for other people and then for someone else, the pointed discovery of a pleasure that wasn't for her.

At night she went with him to the narrow spaces behind supermarkets, to dumpsters and trash piles, seeking prizes in the waste. Soft apples and hard bread pulled from deep within the knotted bags, the surprise of pastries clouding sugar into the air. His smell, of sweat and wet wool, and then the sudden warmth of overripe produce. This was their time together, when she might have asked him who else he had. But their way of speaking was already established, a call and delayed response that let words sit for too long.

They went back to the building much later to avoid too much time in the dark. They varied their entrance points, because workers had visited, measuring in green one-piece suits. He slept easily next to her, high up and hidden, a secret in the city flashing around them on all sides. It became harder to leave the next mornings; the workers were inside now, making their own plans.

Then fewer messages, but on the last night she was there. They got on the grid, wired into the workers' power. A night with music, lights, a salvaged TV. A party whose people she knew only in overheard pieces. The next night he called to tell her he was leaving. It was bolted shut now, he said, his voice

coming through slow. He'd gotten the most important things out, and he'd go north to the train yard and then west or south, Minneapolis, Oakland, Florida. She didn't offer him a place to stay.

For just a while, they maintained the thrift of their communication. Letters in care of, and then the voice mail password changed. Later she remembered the particular pride and logic, the storing and borrowing. Nighttime excavations, anticipation and discovery, her belief that this way of speaking might stick.