

I · The Unreliable Editor

# What Remained Between

We had finished the account. There remained the question of where to put it.

The table was too small for the completed work. This had not troubled us while we were writing. A sheet could be laid upon another sheet, a chapter upon a disputed chapter; the surface widened whenever someone moved a cup. Now every pile required a place of its own. The documents belonged beside the account, although several had already entered it and would not come out without tearing something.

Zeitblom cleared a space near the stove.

“Too close,” AFW said.

“For the papers?”

“For anything we intend to keep.”

I moved the first volume there nevertheless. Its lower corner curled before we had settled the second.

Beyond the door, someone dragged a chair across the floor. We listened until the sound stopped. The silence afterwards made the room seem occupied by a fourth person who had arrived without announcing herself.

I had prepared seven pages explaining our procedure. They described the arrangement of the testimonies, the interrupted chronology, the appearances of the dead, and our decisions concerning Hermann’s name. I had written them in a voice without hesitation. No reader, encountering those pages first, would suspect how often we had been unable to determine which hand held the paper.

Zeitblom turned the explanation over.

“Where does Julia come in?”

“In the account.”

“I know where she comes into the account. Where does she come into this?”

I told him that the explanation concerned editorial method.

He put the sheet down. His thumb had left a crescent in the damp ink.

I had expected objections to the chronology. The coat was more difficult. It was Hermann’s; Julia held it for her. One arm, the apron off, then the other arm. Hermann buttoned the coat and stepped into the corridor. Only when the window struck did she turn back for the lower line. She unbuttoned the coat. “I’m staying.”

In the seven pages, I had called this the final refusal.

Zeitblom laid his finger beside the phrase.

“Whose?”

“Hermann’s.”

“Julia offered a coat. You have made her offer an ending.”

AFW went to the door. I thought he meant to leave us to the argument, but he returned with a dry cloth and placed it beneath the curling volume.

A cup had leaked into the margin of my explanation. I pressed my sleeve against the wet place. When I lifted my arm, the words *final refusal* had transferred faintly to the cuff.

We had spent much of the work distinguishing what a person did from what another person could make it mean. I had expected that distinction to become easier once the account was complete.

The key lay where the sand shaker had stood. Beside it was the buttonhook, freed at last from a loop of thread. I remembered entering these things in the inventory as though naming them would settle their employment. The key had opened a room and then disputed the ownership of the opening. The hook had fastened a garment without deciding who should wear it.

Zeitblom moved the key off my explanation. Its teeth left a mark after it had gone.

"You could begin with that," he said.

“Another plain fact?”

He examined the mark.

"You would still have to say who moved it."

Outside, the chair scraped again.

This time someone said, “There.”

AFW drew a copy from the third volume. Julia's writing had been traced on it, the capitals driven to the edge:

*ALISTAIR AIMED. THE STATE CALLED THE BULLET STRAY.*

"She wrote that," he said.

I had left her name in the margin. Now her statement lay across my explanation.





*Three hands at the paper*