



An Unpolarized Life

A BOOK OF QUESTIONS

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B E F O R E

Before Anything Is Asked

A filter does not lie to you. It shows you everything that got through, and nothing whatever about what did not.

FROM THE LONG WATCH

There is an old shape for a hard conversation. One person arrives at the end of what they can work out alone. Another sits with them and does not tell them to be brave. They talk for a long time. By morning the problem has not moved an inch, and the person can stand next to it.

This book borrows that shape. A Seeker drives to a house at the end of a road, carrying a question they have to answer by Friday. Across the table sits the Oracle, who has watched people for a long time and has stopped being surprised by them. The Oracle does not comfort cheaply and does not pretend the week is longer than it is.

One object sits between them. A polarizing filter is a square of dark glass that admits light of a single orientation and turns away the rest. What comes through looks whole. It looks like all the light there ever was, and that is the entire trouble with it. Every chapter here is a question held up to that glass.

A caution, stated once so nobody has to keep restating it. Nothing in these pages claims that physics runs a human life. The filter is a picture. Held up to a decision you have been avoiding, it is a way of looking and it goes no further than that. Where the picture gets strong enough to be mistaken for a mechanism, the Oracle says so out loud, in the chapter, at the time.

B E F O R E Y O U B E G I N

What question are you being asked to close this week, and who set the date?

MOVEMENT I

The Turning

Must I Decide Now?

Every question arrives already tilted. The answer will leave at the same angle.

FROM THE LONG WATCH

The road ended at the house, so there was no arriving by accident. The Seeker had driven since morning and got there with the sun still well up. On the porch stood a table and two chairs, and the Oracle was in one of them doing nothing in particular, which was harder to walk into than any greeting would have been.

THE SEEKER

They want an answer by Friday. I have had six weeks. I have used all six of them and I am no nearer than I was on the first morning, so I have come to ask the only useful thing left. How do I decide.

THE ORACLE

That is not what you came to ask. You came to be told it is all right that you have not.

THE SEEKER

Then tell me that and I will drive home.

THE ORACLE

I will not, because it might not be all right. Sometimes the waiting is the whole problem. Sometimes a man waits until the thing decides itself and then calls the result his fate. I do not know yet which one you are. Sit down.

The Oracle went inside and came back with a tin, the sort that used to hold pastilles, and shook out two squares of dark glass about the size of postage stamps.

THE ORACLE

Hold one up to the window.

There. The world goes dim and it does not go strange. Everything is still where it was, the trees and the light lying along them. What you cannot see is that better than half that light never got through. This glass admits one orientation and turns away everything else. It has no opinion about trees. Its only opinion is about angle.

THE SEEKER

It looks whole.

THE ORACLE

It always does, and that is the one genuinely interesting thing about it.

Now take the question you are being asked. Yes or no, by Friday. That is a filter. Yes and no are the two orientations it admits, and everything in your six weeks that will not lie down along that direction is going to be turned away at the glass. The answer you hand them will look whole to them. It will look whole to you as well, later, when you tell the story of how you decided.

THE SEEKER

So the answer will be wrong.

THE ORACLE

The answer will be thin. Wrong is a different word and I did not use it. A thin answer can still be the right one to give. What I would not have you do is take the thinness for a fault in yourself. You have not failed to decide. You have been handed a filter and asked to agree that it is a window.

THE SEEKER

Naming the shape of my trouble does not move the date. Friday is still Friday.

THE ORACLE

One thing first, since you keep saying the date as though it came down out of the sky. Who set Friday.

THE SEEKER

They did.

THE ORACLE

Have you asked them why. I do not mean to move it. I mean to find out whether it is a real date or a habit. Half the deadlines I have watched people wreck themselves against were somebody's guess at a reasonable interval, typed into an email at four in the afternoon by a person who has since forgotten typing it.

THE SEEKER

And if it turns out to be real.

THE ORACLE

Then it is real and the asking cost you nothing. You will also have shown them you are still working, which is the same information as before arriving by a different road.

And there is a lazy version of what I told you about the glass, and people set up house inside it for years. The lazy version says that since every question narrows, no question deserves an answer. That is not wisdom. That is a man standing in a field admiring his own open mind while the season goes past him.

THE SEEKER

Then where is the line.

THE ORACLE

Time. A question held open is doing work only while you are still learning from it. The day the learning stops, the openness turns into avoidance and keeps the same face. Same posture. Same tone of voice when anybody asks how it is going. You could not tell the two apart from outside, and by Wednesday you will not be able to tell them apart from inside either.

So put it to yourself tonight. What did you learn this week about this decision that you did not know last week. If the honest answer is nothing, then Friday is not too early. Friday is late.

THE SEEKER

And if I did learn something.

THE ORACLE

Then you are working, and you should say so to the people waiting, in those words. A request for more time means nothing on its own. A piece of new information means a great deal, and it is the only thing that has ever bought anybody an extra week.

THE SEEKER

I do not know yet which of those I am.

The Seeker turned the square of glass over between two fingers. On the porch rail the light had gone the colour it goes at that hour, and through the glass it went that same colour still, only less of it.

A QUESTION FOR YOU

What did you learn this week about the thing you have not decided, and if the honest answer is nothing, what exactly are you waiting for?

What Did Choosing Cost Me?

The light a filter turns away does not go into another room.

FROM THE LONG WATCH

The sun dropped behind the ridge and the sky began doing the thing it does for twenty minutes and then stops. The Seeker had put the glass in a shirt pocket and kept forgetting it was there.

THE SEEKER

Eleven years ago I chose something. I do not think about it often. When I do, it is not regret, or not anything I would call regret to your face. It is more like standing at the door of a house I sold.

THE ORACLE

Say what you want from me about it.

THE SEEKER

The cost. I am not asking to undo anything. I would like to have the number.

THE ORACLE

There is no number, and I want to be blunt about why, because the gentle answer to this question has done a great deal of damage. People will tell you the other life is still out there somewhere. Some of them mean it as a picture. Some have talked themselves into meaning it as a fact. Nothing about the way this world is put together entitles anybody to that comfort, and I would keep it from you even if it did, because of what it does to a man to believe it.

THE SEEKER

What does it do.

THE ORACLE

It gives him somebody to lose to. A man with a real rival can at least go and meet him. A man with an invented one loses every year of his life and never gets a rematch.

THE SEEKER

I have never once said the other life is out there.

THE ORACLE

You have not said it. You have been keeping the accounts as though it were, which is the same thing with better manners. Every time you have weighed this year against that one, you weighed it against a year nobody has ever had to get through.

THE SEEKER

Then tell me the cost was nothing.

THE ORACLE

It was not nothing. Take the glass out and hold it up again while there is still something to look at.

Half the light is gone. It did not travel to a second room and nobody is keeping it for you anywhere. It was absorbed, the glass got very slightly warm, and that is the end of the story of that light. The cost is real. The cost is also unrecoverable, and there is no office holding your receipt.

THE SEEKER

That is worse.

THE ORACLE

It is worse and it is smaller. Those two travel together more often than people expect.

The thing you have been carrying for eleven years is not a life. It is a sketch. You drew it, and you have been retouching it ever since without noticing you were doing it, and every pass made it better than any real year ever comes out. You are not grieving a road. You are grieving a drawing of a road, made by a man with an interest in how it looked.

THE SEEKER

So there was no cost after all.

THE ORACLE

The cost was real. It was never the one you have been paying. The real one is duller. Some years went where they went. There are four or five people you did not meet and will not now, and a thing you would have become good at and are not. Those are countable and specific. I could sit here and help you count them, and none of them is a tragedy.

THE SEEKER

That is not what it feels like.

THE ORACLE

No. What you feel is the size of the sketch, and a sketch has no upper limit. That is why the feeling never settles. You cannot pay off a debt to a drawing.

There is one more real cost and it is the one that matters this week. Eleven years ago you found out you were a man who can choose. That is not free either. Some people spend it once and take care never to be in the position again.

THE SEEKER

I still want the number.

THE ORACLE

I know.

They sat with that. Somewhere below the house a dog had started barking at nothing, in the patient unhurried way a dog does when it has the whole evening in front of it.

A QUESTION FOR YOU

The life you did not take: how much of it have you added since, and would you still recognise the version that was actually on offer?

How Much Can I Hold At Once?

You may turn the glass to any angle you like. You may not turn it to two.

FROM THE LONG WATCH

The lamp in the front room came on by itself on a timer, and neither of them got up to see to it. It threw a rectangle of light out across the boards and made the porch feel later than it was.

THE SEEKER

I am not going to sit here and pretend Friday is the only thing. My mother has been in a chair since March. There is work, which has become mostly a matter of attending. There is a friend who stopped calling four years ago and I know why. And I am told at intervals to take care of myself, which is a fifth thing with nobody assigned to it.

THE ORACLE

Which of them did you think about on the drive.

THE SEEKER

All of them.

THE ORACLE

You did not. Nobody has ever done that. You went round them in a loop of about forty seconds and came back to the top, and the loop felt like holding all five because it never stopped moving. That is not capacity. That is one man with one bucket running between four fires and calling it a fire brigade.

THE SEEKER

It is what there is.

THE ORACLE

Some nights. Not this one. This one I want you to say out loud which of the five you are doing something about and which you are only carrying.

The Seeker took longer over it than either of them had expected.

THE SEEKER

Two. My mother is real work and I am doing it badly and I am doing it. Friday is real. Work is noise and I have known that since the spring. The friend I am only carrying. The fifth is a phrase somebody said to me in a corridor.

THE ORACLE

Then you have two, and you have been paying interest on three of them since March. The friend is the one I would look at, because that is the only one where the carrying is doing damage of its own. A thing you feel bad about and do nothing with turns, after long enough, into a fact about your character. Wait and you stop being a man who has not called and start being a man who does not call. The change comes without an announcement.

THE SEEKER

I know why I have not called.

THE ORACLE

I did not ask.

A moth found the lamplight and stayed in it.

THE SEEKER

Did you ever run out.

THE ORACLE

Yes. There were about two years when I was no use to anyone, least of all the people who needed me, and I have no lesson from it. Nothing I did ended it. I got old enough that some of the things put themselves down.

THE SEEKER

That is not advice.

THE ORACLE

No. That is the truth about it, and I would rather hand you the truth than a method. Methods for this are mostly sold by people who have never once been under it.

What I will give you is smaller. You cannot hold five. You can hold two of them properly, or hold five so badly that all five get worse while you watch. The choosing is not a failure of character. Refusing to choose, and letting the five sort themselves out by which one shouts loudest, is the failure of character, and it is the one nearly everybody picks.

THE SEEKER

Then I put three down.

THE ORACLE

You put two down and you make the third an appointment. The friend gets a day and an hour. Carrying is what you have been doing instead, and it has been heavier than the call would have been, and you have known that for about three years.

A QUESTION FOR YOU

*Of everything you are carrying this week, which are you doing something about,
and which are you only carrying?*

MOVEMENT II

The Cost of Looking

Why Does Being Watched Change Me?

You cannot look at a thing without spending some of it. With people the spending happens for a different reason, and the reason is the whole matter.

FROM THE LONG WATCH

Full dark. The porch light had collected its moths and settled into the business of the night. The Seeker's phone lay face down on the table, where it had been put with some ceremony an hour earlier.

THE SEEKER

There is a version of me that exists in meetings. He is competent and about half a step louder than I am. I did not build him deliberately. What I have started to notice is that after a day of him I cannot find my way back to ordinary talking, and whoever is across the table at dinner gets the residue.

THE ORACLE

You are asking why being watched changes you.

THE SEEKER

And I have already been given an answer, three times this year by three different people. Observation changes the thing observed. Physics apparently says so.

THE ORACLE

Physics says something very exact about very small things and it has no bearing on you whatever, and I want that settled before we go a step further, because the sentence you just repeated is used to sell an enormous quantity of nonsense. A particle does not know it is being looked at. You do. That difference is the entire mechanism. Nothing is being borrowed from physics to explain you, and anybody who tells you otherwise is charging for it.

THE SEEKER

Then why is the glass still on the table.

THE ORACLE

Because one part of it holds as a picture, and it goes exactly that far and stops.

When you take a reading of something you come away with one number, and getting it costs you the rest. Look at a man through the question of whether he is reliable and you will come away with a reliable answer, and everything about him that does not lie along that direction is gone out of your account of him. Not filed somewhere. Gone. You will not miss it either, because what you came away with looks complete.

THE SEEKER

So the room does that to me.

THE ORACLE

The room puts one question to you all day. You answer in the orientation of the question, Monday to Friday for nine years, and after a while that orientation is easier to hold than the rest of you is. Nothing acted on you at a distance. You practised.

THE SEEKER

Practice is worse. Practice means I did it.

THE ORACLE

Yes.

Something small went through the grass at the bottom of the steps and neither of them turned to look.

THE SEEKER

My mother, when I was small, looked at me as though I were interesting. I have not got that from anyone since, and I have been trying for thirty years without once admitting to myself that it was what I was doing.

THE ORACLE

That is the other half of it and it is worth more than the warning was.

A wide question admits more of a person. Hardly anybody asks one, because a wide question takes longer and gives you back something you cannot put in a column. The few who ask them get remembered for thirty years, which you have just finished demonstrating without meaning to.

THE SEEKER

I cannot ask my meetings to be wider.

THE ORACLE

You cannot. You can notice which question you are putting to the people in front of you, and whether you have been putting the same one to your mother since March. She is in a chair. The question you have been asking her is how she is doing, which is a narrow question with one permitted answer, and she has been handing it back to you for six months.

Ask her a wider one on Sunday. Not a better one. A wider one. You will get something you cannot write down, and you will not know what to do with it, and that is the correct outcome.

A QUESTION FOR YOU

What single question do the people around you put to you all day, and how much of you is the wrong shape to get through it?

What Am I Entitled To Keep Private?

There is a part of you that moves no count anybody is taking. That does not make it a secret. It only means it has nowhere to show.

FROM THE LONG WATCH

The Oracle went in and came back with bread and a heel of cheese, and set them down without ceremony. The ordinariness of it seemed pointed.

THE SEEKER

I was asked in a review to describe my personal values. I wrote four lines. Nothing in them was false. Nothing in them was mine either.

THE ORACLE

What did you keep back.

THE SEEKER

I do not know how to say it, which may be the whole of the problem.

THE ORACLE

It is close to the whole of it. There is a class of thing about a person that moves no count anyone is taking. No spreadsheet shifts. Nobody predicts your behaviour any better for knowing it. And it is not nothing, and there is no shame in it, and the reason you could not get it into four lines has nothing to do with hiding.

THE SEEKER

Then what is the reason.

THE ORACLE

It has nowhere to land. Say it out loud and what comes out is a sentence anybody could have written, and you hear that and conclude you were being shallow. You were not. That is what happens when a thing goes through a filter it does not fit. What arrives on the far side is the part of you that happened to lie in the direction of the form.

THE SEEKER

Everything asks now. The form at the doctor. The application that wants to know how I am feeling on a scale of one to five.

THE ORACLE

And each one is reasonable on its own, which is why nobody objects to any of them. What none of them will tell you is that being asked to be legible, over and over, teaches a man to keep only the parts of himself that answer well. Nobody forbade the rest. The rest stopped getting any practice.

THE SEEKER

So I should refuse the question.

THE ORACLE

Sometimes. And now the part you will like less.

I am a private person is also the most common sentence in the mouth of a man who has been unkind and would rather not go into it. The claim is real, and it is the best available cover for the thing it is not. You are going to have to tell those two apart yourself every time, and nobody can hand you the rule.

THE SEEKER

How do you tell.

THE ORACLE

One test has held up for me. Ask whether the keeping costs anybody except you. What you hold that costs only you is yours by right and I would defend it against anyone. What you hold that spends somebody else is going under a different name, whatever you happen to call it at the time.

THE SEEKER

Give me one that spends somebody else.

THE ORACLE

A man who will not say he is frightened, in a house where everyone can see that he is, and who therefore makes his family carry the fear and the pretending together. He has not kept anything private. He has moved the work sideways onto people who did not ask for it.

THE SEEKER

And the other way round. Am I obliged to be knowable to the people who love me.

THE ORACLE

Obliged is the wrong frame and it is the one everybody reaches for, because it turns a household into a set of terms. Nobody owes anybody a full account of himself. What is true is duller than an obligation. A person who is never knowable is very hard to stay with, and the difficulty there is practical. There is only so long anyone can go on guessing before they get tired and start guessing badly, and then you are living with their guess instead of with you.

THE SEEKER

That has happened.

THE ORACLE

It usually has, by the time somebody asks the question in that shape.

THE SEEKER

That is near enough to home that I am going to leave it.

THE ORACLE

Leave it.

THE SEEKER

Do you have one. A thing that moves no count.

THE ORACLE

Yes.

The Seeker waited. The Oracle cut more bread.

A QUESTION FOR YOU

What about you has never once turned up in anything anybody has measured about you, and does keeping it cost anyone except you?

Why Do I Forget?

Nothing is free to hold. Ask anybody who has held one thing for thirty years.

FROM THE LONG WATCH

Past eleven. The Seeker had begun to talk the way people do at that hour, when the sentences arrive ahead of the decision to say them.

THE SEEKER

I cannot remember my father's voice. I remember that I could. There was a year when I could still hear it if I went looking, and I did not know it was going, and I did nothing.

THE ORACLE

There was nothing to do.

THE SEEKER

There is always something. I could have recorded him. Two minutes on a telephone.

THE ORACLE

You could have. Then you would own a recording of his voice and you would still not have it. I have watched people play those. They do not come away with what they went in for. Often they come away worse, because now there is a version to check themselves against, and they fail it.

THE SEEKER

Then what did I lose.

THE ORACLE

The holding. Which was work, and you were doing it, and nobody can do that kind of work on purpose for very long. Every memory you keep, you keep by spending something. Sleep, and the thought you would have had instead. People talk about memory as storage, and storage is cheap and quiet. Memory is neither, and you can feel the bill on any night when you cannot get somebody out of your head.

THE SEEKER

There is a law about this. Something about what it costs to erase a thing.

THE ORACLE

There is, and I am not going to use it. It concerns a physical system and a cost measured in heat, and if I stretched it across your father's voice I would sound wiser than I am, and you would drive home remembering the sentence and not the point. What I told you stands without it. Holding costs. You have felt the cost yourself, this week, more than once. That is all the evidence the claim ever needed.

THE SEEKER

So forgetting is a mercy.

THE ORACLE

Sometimes. Sometimes it is theft. It does not know which it is doing and it does not consult you, and what it takes first is never what you would have offered. It took your father's voice. It left you an argument in a kitchen in 1998.

THE SEEKER

It did.

THE ORACLE

It always does, and the reason is duller than it sounds. You have gone over that kitchen a thousand times, in the car and at three in the morning, and every pass laid it down again a little firmer. The voice you never rehearsed, because you assumed you had it. What stays is what you handle.

THE SEEKER

My mother has been in that chair since March. I am going to lose her voice as well.

THE ORACLE

Yes.

THE SEEKER

You could soften that.

THE ORACLE

I could, and it would do nothing for you on the night it goes. What I will give you instead is the one useful thing I know about it, and it is small. You are with her now. You are with her badly, by your own account, in a hurry, with your mind on Friday. The being with her is the rehearsal. No separate exercise exists that you can do later when you have more time.

That will not keep her voice. Nothing keeps a voice. What it changes is the gap between what you will have and what you would otherwise have had, and that gap is the only thing anybody gets to move here.

THE SEEKER

Then I can choose.

THE ORACLE

You can choose what you rehearse. You cannot choose what stays. Those are close enough together to be confused and far enough apart to ruin a man who confuses them. Rehearsal is the only vote you get, and it is a small vote, and the count is taken somewhere you have no access to.

THE SEEKER

I rehearse the kitchen.

THE ORACLE

I know. Most people do. It is louder, and loud things are easier to practise.

The Seeker said 1998 out loud, and nothing after it.

A QUESTION FOR YOU

Which memory do you go over without meaning to, and what have you stopped rehearsing because you assumed you would always have it?

Can What Broke Be Repaired?

*A thing that has come through damage is a thing that has come through damage.
Nobody gets back the one that was never damaged.*

FROM THE LONG WATCH

The kettle went on. The Seeker took that as permission to stay, which it was.

THE SEEKER

I want to ask about the friend properly. Can it be repaired.

THE ORACLE

Not to how it was. I will say that first, so you do not spend the next hour listening for it underneath everything else I tell you.

THE SEEKER

Then no.

THE ORACLE

I did not say no. I said the thing you get back will have the break in it. Visible. Permanent. The two of you will see it from opposite ends of a room for the rest of your lives, and neither of you will mention it, and it will be there. Most people call that a failure, because they were measuring against a photograph.

THE SEEKER

What would you call it.

THE ORACLE

A repair. They are common and they hold, and hardly anybody is satisfied with one.

THE SEEKER

Why did it break at all. Nineteen years.

THE ORACLE

What was holding it up. Name the things.

The Seeker started three times before anything came out.

THE SEEKER

Work. We met at work. Then a stretch of the same music, which is not a real answer. Then his divorce, when I was useful.

THE ORACLE

So: a job you both left, and one bad year of his that ended. The music does not count. Music is weather.

Things that last are held up by more than one thing at a time, and the reason is dull. Any single strand fails eventually. Six of them do not fail on the same Tuesday. Yours was carried in turns by whatever happened to be in the room, and when the room emptied there was nothing underneath it, and you were both surprised, and neither of you should have been.

THE SEEKER

Then I should have built more strands.

THE ORACLE

You should have counted the ones you had. Counting is the actual skill, and it is not a warm one. Take a thing you would hate to lose and count what is holding it up. If the count comes to one, you have been lucky, and you have been calling it strength.

THE SEEKER

He should call me.

THE ORACLE

He should. He is not going to, and you have known that for four years, and the fact that he should has kept you warm the entire time. That is the other thing a grievance does for a man. It hands him a reason to do nothing that sounds like principle when he says it out loud.

Somebody has to spend first. Whoever spends first will feel it was unfair of the world to ask him, and he will be right, and that is what the repair costs.

THE SEEKER

I would rather be right.

THE ORACLE

I know. Most people manage it. They are right for thirty years and they are right at the funeral.

THE SEEKER

What do I do. Concretely. Tomorrow.

THE ORACLE

Call him. Do not explain. An explanation is a request for a verdict and he will hear it as one inside eight seconds. Say the plain thing, which is that you have not called in four years and you would like to.

He may not take it. It happens, and I would rather you sat with it here, at a table, than at two in the morning on your own, when it will get to you anyway and you will be worse equipped.

THE SEEKER

And if he does not take it.

THE ORACLE

Then you have a fact instead of a weight. A fact is lighter. A fact does not grow.

THE SEEKER

That is a line.

THE ORACLE

It is a line, and it also happens to be true. Keep it or do not.

The kettle came up and clicked itself off, and neither of them made the tea.

A QUESTION FOR YOU

Count what is holding up the relationship you would least like to lose. If the count comes to one, is that the relationship's fault or yours?

MOVEMENT III

What Comes Through

What Is Irreplaceable About Me?

There is nothing about you that could not be written down. Writing it down is not the difficulty.

FROM THE LONG WATCH

The tea had gone cold in the pot without either of them touching it again. It was the hour when a house makes its own noises and you stop attributing them to anything.

THE SEEKER

I read that there is a rule in physics against copying a thing exactly. Somebody told me it meant a person cannot be copied. I wanted that to be true and I have been carrying it around ever since.

THE ORACLE

Put it down. There is such a rule, about a particular kind of state in a particular kind of system, and it says nothing whatever about you. If you want to be irreplaceable, do not go looking for the guarantee inside a theorem. No guarantee is in there. Some of the people handing it to you know that perfectly well.

THE SEEKER

Then I can be copied.

THE ORACLE

Described. Which is a different word, and the difference is where your answer is.

Everything about you could be written down. Given long enough, somebody could produce a document from which a stranger could imitate you well enough to fool your colleagues for a week and your mother for an afternoon. That document would be accurate. It would also be worth nothing, because the description was never the thing. The running is.

THE SEEKER

Say that in a way I can use.

THE ORACLE

Your mother's hand on your head when you were seven and frightened. Whoever holds the description holds the sentence I have just said. You have the afternoon. The sentence can be copied all day by anyone with a pen. The afternoon happened once, to one nervous system, and it is not stored anywhere that could be got at, including inside you. What you have is the residue, and residue is what a life is made of.

THE SEEKER

That is thinner than I wanted.

THE ORACLE

Yes. Most true things about a self are. The version you were after had you made out of some material that resists duplication, so that your worth came underwritten by the way the world is built. You are made of the usual material. What cannot be repeated is the order things happened in and the fact that you were the one they happened to. That has to be enough, because there is nothing else on offer and there never was.

THE SEEKER

Then give me one thing that only I have.

THE ORACLE

You saw your father work out that notice period. Four people saw it. Three of them are dead and the fourth has forgotten. The account of it exists in one place now and nowhere else, and if you never say it to anybody it goes out when you do.

That is no mystical property of yours. It is a fact about who happened to be standing where. Most of what cannot be repeated about a person is of exactly that kind, which is why old people talk, and why it costs them something real when nobody in the room wants the story.

THE SEEKER

I do not think I was asking about physics.

THE ORACLE

No. You were asking whether they will manage without you.

They will. Everybody is managed without, usually faster than the person expected and slower than they feared. That is a fact about institutions and it says nothing at all about whether you were loved. People run those two together so reliably that I stopped being surprised by it a long time ago, and have not yet stopped being annoyed by it.

THE SEEKER

My father was managed without.

THE ORACLE

In about eleven days, I would guess.

THE SEEKER

Nine.

Neither of them said anything for a while after that.

A QUESTION FOR YOU

*Who in your life could be described accurately by somebody who never met them,
and what would that description miss that you could not put into words either?*

Does Distance Mean Separation?

Two people who began in the same house will often answer alike. Nothing travelled to arrange it.

FROM THE LONG WATCH

Two in the morning. Sound carries strangely at that hour. A car changed gear a mile off down the valley and it sounded like it was coming up the drive.

THE SEEKER

My sister is in Auckland. We speak perhaps three times a year. And there are days when I know something is wrong with her.

THE ORACLE

And you have been told there is a physics for that.

THE SEEKER

I have been told, yes. More than once, by people I respect.

THE ORACLE

There is not, and I am going to spend a minute here, because this is the picture that gets abused hardest and it is the one I would least like you to drive home holding.

There is a real phenomenon in which two things prepared together give matching results when each of them is finally examined, however far apart they have ended up. It is strange and it is well established. And it carries no message. Nothing passes between them. You cannot use it to send anything at all. Not one bit of information, not ever. That is a proved result and not a shortcoming of the equipment. Every book that tells you your bond with your sister works that way has kept the half that sounded useful and thrown away the half that made it true.

THE SEEKER

Then I am wrong about the days.

THE ORACLE

You are probably wrong about the days. You remember the three times you knew. You do not remember the two hundred times you had a bad feeling on a Tuesday and she was out buying milk. I say probably because I have not counted for you, and neither have you, and neither of us is going to.

THE SEEKER

That is a cold way to put it.

THE ORACLE

It is. Now the part that is not cold, and I think it is worth more than the thing you were offered.

You and your sister were prepared together. Thirty years in one kitchen with the same two people arguing upstairs, and a set of jokes worn down until each one is a single word. So when something happens to each of you separately, at opposite ends of the earth, you will often respond the same way, and neither of you will have been in touch, and it will feel exactly like a signal. Nothing signalled. A shared beginning showed up twice. Nothing travelled, and nothing needed to.

THE SEEKER

And that is supposed to comfort me.

THE ORACLE

That is supposed to be accurate. Whether it comforts you is your business.

What I would have you notice is what it does not do. A correlation is not contact. She does not know you thought about her on Tuesday, and nothing about the two of you having started in the same house gets her that information. If you want her to have it, that takes the ordinary thing, which is a telephone, at an hour that works in Auckland. There is no version of this in which you get out of making the call.

THE SEEKER

You have taken something off me tonight and put nothing in its place.

THE ORACLE

I have taken a story that let you feel close to her without doing anything about it, and I would take it again tomorrow. What I have put in its place is eleven hours and a number you already know by heart.

THE SEEKER

It is eleven hours.

THE ORACLE

Then it is the middle of her afternoon, and you have run through your excuses in the space of one sentence.

The Seeker worked the time out twice, to be sure of it, and did not say the number out loud.

A QUESTION FOR YOU

Who do you feel connected to and have not contacted, and what have you been letting the feeling stand in for?

How Do I Know What I Know?

One filter shows you a world. Two of them, turned against each other, show you the filter.

FROM THE LONG WATCH

The Oracle finally made the tea, four hours late. It came out too strong for either of them.

THE SEEKER

There is a man at work who tells me my plan will not survive the finance committee. He is right often enough to be irritating. I have started routing things around him.

THE ORACLE

Take both squares of glass. Hold them up together, one behind the other, and turn one of them slowly.

The Seeker turned. The window dimmed, and dimmed further, and at some angle went out altogether. There was no window. There were two pieces of glass with nothing at all between them.

THE ORACLE

With one, you saw a world and it looked whole. With two, turned against each other, you cannot see the world at all, and for the first time you can see that you were looking through something.

That is what the man in your finance meetings is for. He does not improve your plan. He shows you that you have a plan, which you had stopped being able to see.

THE SEEKER

I know my own plan.

THE ORACLE

You know its contents. You lost the ability to see its shape somewhere around March, because you have been standing inside it since then, and from inside, a plan does not look like a plan. It looks like the situation.

THE SEEKER

So I keep him.

THE ORACLE

You keep the kind he is, and the kind is worth naming exactly, because there are two of them and they wear the same coat.

He tells you where he expects it to break and roughly when. That is a gift, and you can go and check it. If he is wrong you will find out and so will he, and either way somebody has learned something by Thursday. The other kind tells you it will not work and never says how he would know. Nothing follows from that. You cannot check a mood.

THE SEEKER

The second kind is more common.

THE ORACLE

By a wide margin, and they are usually the more impressive talkers, because a specific prediction can be embarrassed and a general gloom never is. Watch who is willing to be embarrassed. That is nearly the whole test, and it costs you nothing to apply it.

THE SEEKER

And when there is nobody in the room willing to do it.

THE ORACLE

Then you write down what you expect to happen and the date you expect it by, and you put it somewhere you cannot get at, and you go and look in six weeks. A poor substitute, and the only one available. Memory will not do this job for you. Ask a man in October what he predicted in March and he will tell you, accurately and in good faith, whatever actually happened.

THE SEEKER

That is not flattering.

THE ORACLE

That is not the intention. This is the most reliable thing I know about people, and it applies to me as much as it does to you.

THE SEEKER

And you. What would embarrass you.

THE ORACLE

If you drove home on Friday and did the thing I have been circling all night, and it made your life worse. I would have no answer for that. I am not going to pretend I have one held back somewhere.

THE SEEKER

You have been circling something.

THE ORACLE

All night. You noticed about two hours ago and said nothing.

The tea was undrinkable. They drank it.

A QUESTION FOR YOU

Who tells you where you might be wrong in enough detail that you could go and check, and when did you last actually check?

What Do I Owe To What I Cannot See?

The glass keeps most of the world out of your account of it. The world does not notice, and does not stop.

FROM THE LONG WATCH

The sky in the east had not changed yet. The birds had started anyway, which is always earlier than seems reasonable.

THE SEEKER

You have spent all night on what I can see. What about what I cannot.

THE ORACLE

Ask it smaller.

THE SEEKER

Fine. Friday lands on four people I will never meet. I have not thought about them once in six weeks. Should I have.

THE ORACLE

Once. And I mean the number.

There is a way of thinking about the unseen that is a form of showing off, where a man gets so wide that nothing within reach of his own hands ever gets done. You are allowed one honest pass. Name the four. Say what happens to each of them. Then stop, and go back to the part you can actually move.

THE SEEKER

That seems too easy on me.

THE ORACLE

It is not easy at all. Hardly anybody does the one pass. They do nothing and feel bad about it, which costs those four people exactly what doing nothing and feeling fine would have cost them, and costs you a great deal more.

THE SEEKER

And the rest of it. Everything downstream of the four.

THE ORACLE

Is downstream, and you cannot see it, and no amount of sitting on this porch will bring it into view. What you owe the unseen is that you do not pretend it is absent. That is the whole obligation. It is smaller than people make it, and they make it large because a large obligation is easier to fail at gracefully.

THE SEEKER

Then give me the honest pass. Now.

THE ORACLE

Go on.

THE SEEKER

Two of them lose a manager they like, and they will be fine by Christmas. One of them gets the job I am leaving, which is the best thing to happen to her this year and she does not know it yet. The fourth I cannot work out at all, and that is the true answer rather than the modest one.

THE ORACLE

That took you ninety seconds. You had six weeks.

THE SEEKER

Yes.

THE ORACLE

I am not scoring you. I want you to notice how cheap it was, because at some point you will tell yourself you did not have the time, and you will believe it, and it will be false.

THE ORACLE

The debt I would look at is nearer than four strangers. There is a version of you that you have stopped consulting. Not the young one. That is a different sentimentality and I have no use for it. I mean the one who will be sitting in a chair like this one in twenty years, holding the results of Friday. He is not visible to you and he gets no vote. Every argument you have run this week has been run in a room he was not in.

THE SEEKER

He would tell me to do the safe thing.

THE ORACLE

He might. He might also tell you he cannot remember the safe thing, because nobody remembers a safe year. You have never asked him, so you are guessing, and you are guessing in the direction you were already leaning. Everybody does that. Ask him properly and write down what he says before you get a chance to retouch it.

THE SEEKER

And if I cannot hear him.

THE ORACLE

Then you cannot hear him. This is not a séance. Go to bed.

A QUESTION FOR YOU

Who is downstream of your next decision and has no way to object to it, and have you made even one honest pass at what happens to them?

What Survives Me?

Something is left over, and it will not be you.

FROM THE LONG WATCH

First grey light. The porch furniture had gone the colour things go before colour comes back to them.

THE SEEKER

Last one. I want to know what is left.

THE ORACLE

Of you.

THE SEEKER

Of me. And I already have the version where nothing is ever destroyed, so I go on in some form. Somebody said it at my father's funeral and it was meant kindly.

THE ORACLE

It was meant kindly, and it is a statement about energy, and it is not a statement about you. The atoms persist and they persist as atoms. The arrangement was what you were, and arrangements come apart. If you want that comfort you will have to get it somewhere else, and I would rather you did not get it at all, because of what people do once they have it. A man who believes he continues is careless with the part of him that does not.

THE SEEKER

Then nothing.

THE ORACLE

Effects. Which is less than you were after and a great deal more than nothing, and I want to be clear that I am not offering it as a consolation prize. This is the answer, and it has always been the answer, and people go looking for a better one and come back with a worse one dressed up.

THE SEEKER

Give me one.

THE ORACLE

Your father. You cannot hear his voice. You also cannot bring yourself to leave a job badly, and you got that from watching him work out a notice period he did not owe anybody, in a town he was leaving, for a firm that had treated him poorly. He is gone. That is not him surviving. That is a thing he did, still moving.

THE SEEKER

That is not the same.

THE ORACLE

That is not the same, and you should not let anybody tell you it is. What I will say is that the moving is real, and it will keep going long after the last person who could name where it started. Somebody in 2090 will do one thing slightly better than they would have. There will be no trace of your father anywhere in it. It will still be from him.

THE SEEKER

I would like to be remembered.

THE ORACLE

You want two different things there and you should keep them apart, because the two get run together and the confusion makes people ridiculous. Being remembered is a fact about other people and the state of their heads. It has almost nothing to do with what you did and a great deal to do with whether anybody wrote it down.

You can work at it if you like. Most who do end up building something with their name on the front of it and nothing much inside. I would rather you spent the effort on the moving part, which nobody will attribute to you, and which is the part that carries on.

THE SEEKER

You never told me what to do about Friday.

THE ORACLE

No.

THE SEEKER

Were you going to.

THE ORACLE

I was not. You have had a filter held up to you for six weeks and you drove four hours to be handed a better one. Nobody has a better one. What you can do is know that it is a filter while you are looking through it. Then answer on time, and do not tell yourself afterwards that what you handed them was everything you had.

THE SEEKER

And that is all.

THE ORACLE

That is all I have.

The Seeker stood at the rail a while with the tin in one hand. The Oracle did not offer it and did not ask for it back.

It was going to be a clear day. Through the glass it would also be a clear day, and less of one.

A QUESTION FOR YOU

When everyone who knew you is gone, something you did will still be moving. Do you know what it is, and would you have chosen it?

On the Pictures in This Book

Every image in this book is an image. A filter admits one orientation of light and turns away the rest; that is ordinary optics, and you can buy the glass for the price of a sandwich. Nothing here argues that the physics of very small things is at work inside a human decision. Where a picture came close to being read as a mechanism, the Oracle marks the edge inside the chapter rather than down here in a note. There are no citations, because there are no claims that need them.



AN UNPOLARIZED LIFE · A BOOK OF QUESTIONS

A conversation between the Seeker and the Oracle, over one night
The filter is a picture. Nothing in this book runs on physics.

Readable in a sitting. Answerable in your own time.

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