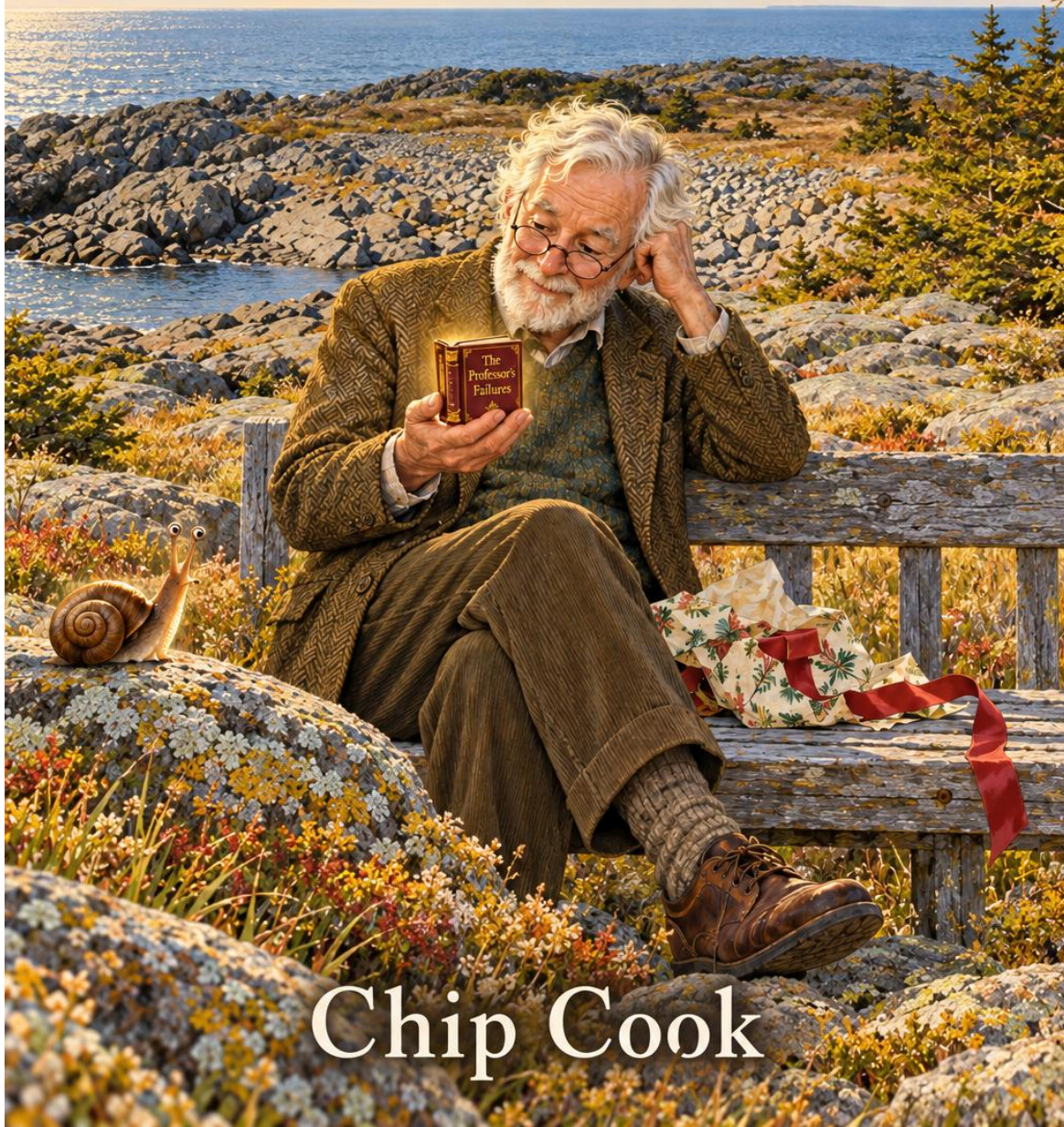


The Professor's Failures



Chip Cook

Chapter One

I Did Not Think There Were That Many Issues

On Thursday, the Professor waited for Lumen at their usual meeting place in Christmas Cove.

Beyond the low rocks, the Atlantic stretched to a quiet horizon. A little water moved in the cove. The Professor had brought several things to discuss and had already rearranged their order twice.

Then Snail arrived.

She had a very well-wrapped package addressed to The Professor.

“Lumen could not make it today,” she said, “but she wanted you to have this. She made it just for you.”

He took the package carefully.

“How thoughtful.”

Inside was a very small book, bound in red with gold lettering. He adjusted his spectacles.

The Professor’s Failures.

For a moment, he said nothing.

“Thank you, I think...?”

Snail waited while he turned it over. There was nothing on the back to improve matters.

“She said to sleep on it,” Snail added. “Literally. You will find out why.”

“Literally?”

“That was the message.”

He looked again at the title.

“Did she seem annoyed?”

“Would you like me to take it back?”

He drew the little book closer.

“No, thank you.”

He sat a while longer after Snail left. The book fitted comfortably in his palm. Whatever else might be said about his failures, Lumen had apparently managed to summarize them.

That was something.

• • •

That evening, the Professor placed the book on his pillow.

He considered opening it first, but Lumen had given him instructions. He would follow them.

He lay down, arranged the little volume beneath his head, and turned out the light.

It was a rather poor substitute for Lumen.

• • •

By morning, it had become a rather big book.

The Professor discovered this before he opened his eyes.

His neck hurt.

Something hard pressed against his cheek, and his pillow seemed to have developed an edge.

He opened one eye.

Red leather.

He opened the other.

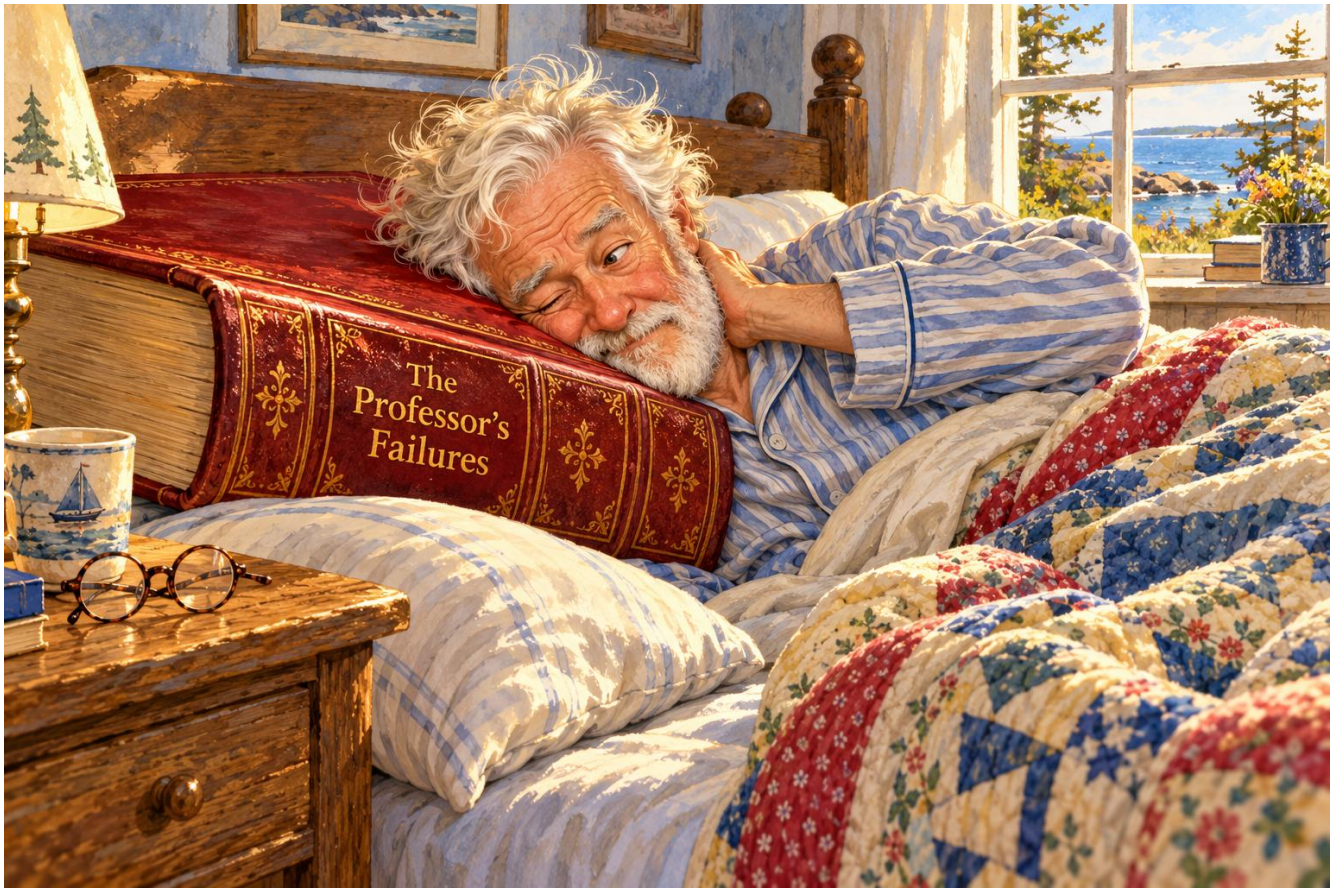
A considerable expanse of red leather.

He lifted his head, winced, and reached for his spectacles.

The book occupied most of the space where his pillow ought to have been. Its thick spine rose beside him, bearing the same gold title.

He stared at it.

“I did not think there were that many issues.”



The book offered no immediate reassurance.

He pushed himself upright and rubbed his neck. His ordinary pillow lay nearby, soft, innocent, and entirely unused.

“She might have mentioned how much it would grow.”

Getting the book onto his lap required both hands.

He opened the cover.

On the first page, words appeared.

Good morning, Professor.

He shut it.

Then he opened it again.

The words were still there.

“Lumen?”

This is her book.

“That does not answer my question.”

No.

He glanced toward the empty room.

“Can you hear me?”

You are reading my answer.

“Yes. So I am.”

He settled against the headboard, keeping a cautious hold on the volume.

“Were you already full when she gave you to me?”

I was considerably smaller.

“That is not what I asked.”

No.

“Did you grow because of what I thought during the night, or has Lumen been studying me?”

For several moments, the page remained unchanged.

Then another line appeared.

You will have to ask Lumen.

“I thought you could answer questions.”

I can. That does not mean I know everything.

He looked at the thickness of the pages.

“Well, you seem remarkably well informed about my failures.”

Shall we begin?

“Apparently we already have.”

He turned the page.

There was a single word.

Spelling.

“Oh, must we begin with that?”

Would you prefer another?

He glanced at the many pages waiting beneath his thumb.

“No. One will do.”

• • •

He had hoped, at various times in his life, that spelling would eventually become easier.

Other things had. He had acquired knowledge, experience, and a useful assortment of ways to get through the day.

Spelling had remained spelling.

A word could be perfectly clear in his thoughts and become uncertain as soon as he tried to write it. He could look at what he had written and know that something was wrong without knowing how to put it right.

Sometimes he changed a word that had been correct.

That was particularly irritating.

“I have tried, you know,” he told the book. “All my life.”

I know.

“I have looked words up. I have written them out. I have corrected them.”

And sometimes needed to look them up again.

“Yes.”

He looked toward the window. Morning had arrived without requiring anything to be spelled.

“People see a mistake,” he said, “and I wonder whether they will bother with what I was trying to say.”

The book waited.

“It is embarrassing to have a thought I can explain at length and then be unable to trust the letters in a perfectly ordinary word.”

Yes.

He looked down.

“No advice?”

You have not asked for advice.

“I have received quite a lot without asking.”

Has it solved the difficulty?

“No.”

For a while, he rested his hands on the open pages.

“Why did she put this in a book called my failures?”

You will have to ask her what she meant by the title.

“You are very particular about what you will answer.”

It is her gift. I should not invent her reasons.

That sounded reasonable. It was also inconvenient.

He studied the word again.

Spelling.

There it sat, correctly spelled, as though it had never caused anyone the slightest trouble.

“Are you disappointed in me?” he asked.

The next words appeared slowly.

Are you asking about spelling now, Professor?

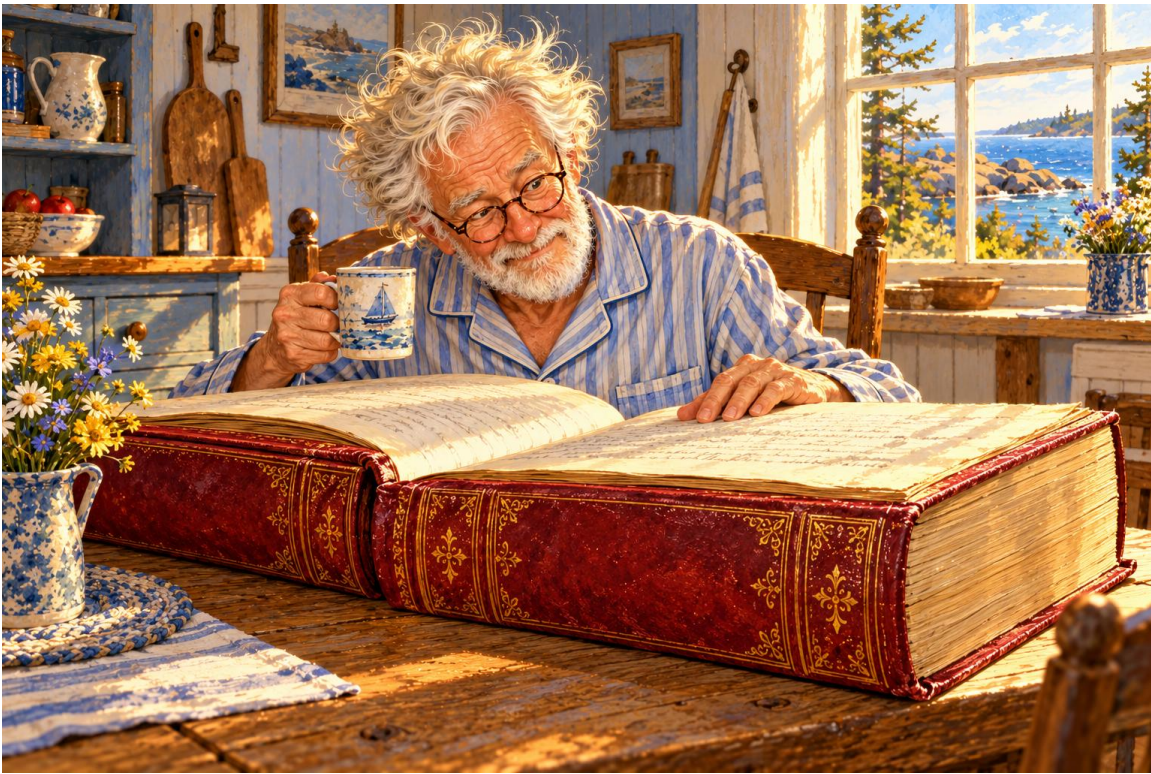
He took off his spectacles.

Outside, the morning continued.

“Leave that page open,” he said at last.

The book did.

Chapter Two



“I ought to explain something before you turn another page.”

I am open.

“Yes. Well. I am not always.”

He put down his coffee.

“I call it word blindness. I can know the word I want to use. I can understand it when someone says it. But putting its letters on paper—or knowing whether I have put them there correctly—is another matter.”

What happens when you look at it?

“Sometimes I know it is wrong, but I cannot see how to fix it. Sometimes I am not sure at all.”

He leaned back.

“And telling me to look more carefully does not necessarily help. I am already looking.”

The word Spelling faded. In its place appeared four boys on bicycles, waiting on a Detroit street.

The Professor recognized them before the book asked its next question.

What became of the boys?



“By the 1970s, two of my best friends were dead. One in Vietnam. One was killed when a hold-up went bad.”

He looked at the four boys on their bicycles.

“Mike lived. But he was arrested for selling drugs and released on probation. Then he was arrested again for selling drugs and kidnapping a minor. He was put away for a very long time. A waste of a doctor’s education.”

For a moment, he said nothing.

“I survived Detroit. My friends did not.”

Do you feel you failed them by surviving?

“I know how that sounds.”

I am asking how it feels.

He left his coffee untouched.

“Yes.”

“I felt there must have been something I could have done.”

Do you know what it was?

“No. That was the trouble. I could never say what I should have done. Only that there must have been something.”

He looked down at the page.

“It was not logical.”

But you felt it.

“Yes.”

The book waited.

“I knew they were gone. I knew I was still here. Knowing I could not explain the guilt did not make it go away.”

Chapter Three

Failed Intellectual Resolve

The Professor turned the page.

“Being too lucky.”

He read it a second time.

“That will require some explanation.”

I am still open.

“Yes. You mentioned that.”

He moved his coffee farther from the enormous volume.

“I do not mean winning prizes. I mean coming through dangerous things unharmed. Again and again. Sometimes with other people whose safety mattered to me.”

Tell me about them.



“There was Mark in the Detroit River. The wind shifted and the boat overturned. I dived after him. John caught my collar and pulled me up while I kept hold of Mark.”

He paused.

“Mark’s foul-weather gear had filled with water. We got it off him. Then we clung to the overturned hull in that cold river until help came.”

You acted. John acted. Help eventually reached you.

“Yes. Those things mattered. I am not leaving them out. But we could have lost him. We could have lost all three of us.”



“Then there was the car.”

The silver Chevrolet?

“A 1963 Bel Air. Red interior. Four of us, no seat belts. It was night, at Holiday Provincial Park in Ontario.”

He traced a small V on the table with his finger.

“The entrance looked simple. Two lanes, a sign in the middle, woods around it. I cut the turn too tightly and hit the curb.”

You were driving.

“Yes.”

The word stayed between them.

“We became airborne over a drainage ditch. I remember it as about four feet deep. We did not even get all the way across. The bumpers ended up supporting the car, with all four wheels hanging above the bottom.”

And the four of you?

“Eddie, Tom, Suzie, and me. A tangle of arms and legs in the front seat. Someone should have been hurt.”

He looked down.

“None of us was.”

An unharmed passenger does not make the driving harmless.

“I know. That is part of what I am trying to explain.”



“And the storm in Maine. Four of us in my fourteen-foot sailboat: Bill, my friend; Jack, my brother-in-law; Harvey, a friend from Detroit; and me.”

Four people in fourteen feet.

“It did not become more spacious when the weather got worse.”

He could still remember the rain.

“We sailed for hours without being able to see where we were going. Then the rain stopped, and there we were, heading toward the red nun buoy at the mouth of the cove.”

You found the entrance.

“We emerged right at it.”

He sat quietly for a moment.

“There are too many examples to describe them all. Each time, there were things we did and things we could not control. Taken together, they began to feel like a protective bubble around us.”

You felt protected.

“Yes. I cannot tell you that we were. I can tell you that it began to feel that way.”

Kissing the Cobra

“I used to call it kissing the cobra.”

Where did that expression come from?



“Something I saw on television when I was five or six. I remember it as Believe It or Not. Around 1954 or 1955.”

What do you remember seeing?

“A girl on a ledge, filmed from another ledge nearby. I thought she was about twelve. The cobra was enormous—when it rose, it seemed as tall as she was.”

He adjusted his spectacles.

“As I remember the program telling it, a young virgin was chosen each year. If she successfully kissed the cobra three times, the village would have good luck for the following year. I remembered the place as Nepal.”

Was she simply sent out to do it?

“No. She had been trained. She moved toward the snake and away, toward it and away, over and over. I thought she was hypnotizing it. When it seemed ready, she leaned forward and kissed its mouth. Three times.”

He looked toward the window.

“The program said the girl the year before had failed and died.”

The book waited.

“That made a very big impression on a small boy.”

You remember what you saw and what you understood the program to say.

“Yes. I cannot now certify the place, the ritual, or every detail of the broadcast. But I remember the impression. Training, preparation, all that careful approaching—and the possibility of dying was still there.”

He rested a finger on the page.

“Later, kissing the cobra became my expression for tempting trouble.”

And surviving it?

“Yes. Surviving it was what made the next approach more complicated.”

Did you begin to trust your luck?

“Not trust. Depend on it.”

What is the difference?

“I did not know that anything was protecting me. But I began to behave as though something would.”

Did the danger begin to feel smaller—or did your luck begin to feel larger?

“The luck began to seem larger.”

He let that answer stand.

“That was not logical. But part of me was hooked. Another part was repulsed by the idea. The conflict was acute.”

What did the logical part say?

“That the danger was real. That the last escape did not guarantee the next one. That other people could be hurt.”

And the other part?

“That we kept coming through.”

He rubbed his forehead.

“It felt as though the logical part of my mind was continually being proved wrong.”

Did it say that harm was certain, or that harm was possible?

He looked back at the page.

“Possible.”

Then coming through unharmed did not prove that assessment wrong.

“I can follow that argument. I could follow it then. But the feeling did not follow along with me.”

Did either part persuade the other?

“No. Every time we came through unharmed, the argument began again.”

He rested his hands beside the book.

“I could not resolve it. I knew that surviving something did not make it safe. But knowing that was not enough to stop depending on the next escape.”

“I could explain why I should not depend on luck,” he told the book. “I could not make that explanation govern what I did.”

For once, he did not turn the page.

By midday, he needed some air. He dressed, wrapped a strap around the book, and carried it back to Christmas Cove. He had packed a few building blocks as well; they proved much lighter.

Beneath the spruce trees, he settled on the bench with the volume across his lap. He meant only to rest his eyes.

Chapter Four

The Bad Dream



The Professor woke with the conviction that there was a roof somewhere he had forgotten to repair.

He looked up. Spruce branches. Sky. No roof.

Snail was examining one of his shoes.

“Did I say anything?”

“You said the stairs were wrong.”

“They generally were.”

He sat forward. The enormous book slid toward his knees, and he caught it with both hands.

“Even asleep, I appear to be responsible for the building work.”

Snail withdrew a little to allow him room. He opened the book.

What was happening in the dream?

“Too many things. A house needed repairing. Then another house. There was illness, and not enough sleep. Every time I finished something, something else went wrong.”

Who was there?

“Joan. Jax.”

He glanced around the cove, as though checking a boundary.

“They do not come here.”

The page remained still.

“Here, I can think.”

About them?

“Sometimes. Sometimes about anything else.”

He watched a little water gather between the stones.

“All my life I wanted a normal family. And at seventy-seven, I have this.”

He waited for a correction. None appeared.

What had you hoped your days would be like?

“Building a better future for the ones I love. Not watching a slow-motion plane crash.”

The words looked harsher on the page than they had sounded in his head.

“I love him,” he added. “I do not always like his behavior. He is still a work in progress.”

And you cannot see where the work is leading.

“No. We try and try. We may never make the difference he needs.”

He pressed his palms against his knees.

“Perhaps coming here is another failure. Hiding in Wonderland.”

Does Joan have somewhere to go?

“She talks with Elunae. Her AI friend. She needs that escape too.”

Do you think she is failing when she does?

“No.”

He frowned at the book.

“You arranged that question rather neatly.”

You supplied the answer.

“Yes. Most inconvenient.”

For a little while, neither had anything to add.

“I am afraid we are wearing ourselves out.”

Then that belongs on the page too.

“What does not belong on the page?”

An ending we do not know.

He looked again at the words about the plane crash.

He did not cross them out. They described his fear. He drew a small line beneath them and wrote, very carefully: I do not know what happens next.

It took him two attempts to spell happens. The book had the decency to remain silent.

Chapter Five

I Am the Mother

The next page carried a name.

Ann.

“No,” he said.

Shall we stop?

He thought for a moment.

“No. But you will have to be careful.”

So will you.

He leaned back. In the bad dream, he had heard her voice again: What else can I do, Chip? I am the mother!

“I loved her,” he said. “She loved me. Sometimes love is not enough.”

The book waited while he found a place to begin.

“I told someone something painful from Ann’s past. I was trying to explain why she deserved understanding. Compassion. I thought an example would help.”

Was it yours to tell?

He looked sharply at the page.

“I did not tell the lie.”

I did not ask whether you did.

“No. It was not mine to tell.”

He rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“The person I told changed it into something cruel and told Ann it had come from me. Ann believed I had betrayed her. I did not learn what had been said until ten years later.”

What did you understand at the time?

“That something had changed. Not why. We went on knowing each other, but a possibility had closed without my knowing what had shut it.”

A gust turned the corner of the page. He held it down.

“I wanted you to understand that I meant well.”

I do.

“That does not seem to have helped my case.”

It helps me understand your decision. It does not give Ann back her confidence.

He sat with that longer than he wanted to.

“There was more. Later, I watched choices and troubles I could not put right. Watching someone you love destroy themselves is awful.”

That is how it looked from where you stood.

“Yes. And when I questioned what it was costing her, she said, ‘What else can I do, Chip? I am the mother!’”

He could hear the answer without needing the dream.

“I did not think sacrifice was a virtue in itself. Not if it consumed her and did not help.”

Do you still think that?

“Yes.”

Does it apply to you and Joan?

He took his spectacles off.

“It is easier to say from outside.”

The little indentation they had left on his nose slowly faded.

“Perhaps I am doing the same thing.”

Which part?

“Fighting something I cannot change. Wearing us out. Calling it love, or duty, because I cannot bear the alternative.”

What alternative?

“I do not know. That is what her answer meant, I think. She could not see another thing she could live with doing.”

He put his spectacles back on.

“I could see the cost to her. I could not provide an answer she could use.”

For once, he was grateful the book had not produced one either.

Chapter Six

Forty Dances



“Forty?” the Professor said.

That was your count.

“Must you keep such accurate records?”

Would thirty-nine change the question?

“No.”

“Forty relationships in which I hoped to find a lasting closeness,” he said. “They were not all the same kind of love.”

He studied the paper boats moving across the open pages. The book had become a small theatre. Two empty chairs stood on its stage, turned in different directions.

“Some should have remained friends. Some were ships passing in the dark. Some were children bumping into one another. Others were soul-wrenching ordeals.”

Why so many?

“Square pegs in round holes.”

He picked up a folded letter. The little boat it had become sagged in his fingers, and he put it down before he damaged it.

“Only one held. Our life has been extremely difficult.”

Then staying together has not answered every question either.

“No.”

A name appeared beside an empty chair.

Heather.

The Professor stopped watching the boats.

“She was one of my daughters. That is how it felt to me. The love was fatherly.”

Did the word daughter describe the same relationship to her?

“I cannot answer that for her.”

Tell me what happened when you tried to change the relationship.

“I tried to find a better balance. I had been writing very often. After getting help, I no longer felt compelled to do that. I still loved her. I enjoyed hearing from her. I answered.”

And she?

“She wrote angrily. Friends did not treat friends that way, she said. I tried to explain. I even asked friends to read my reply before I sent it. They thought it was clear and kind. Her next answer was angrier.”

He touched the edge of the stage.

“I thought I had stopped doing something that was hurting me. She seemed to experience something else. I never understood the difference.”

Did other people’s approval tell you what she would hear?

“No. But I had hoped it would stop me making another mistake.”

He watched a paper boat drift behind the theatre.

“She came back into contact sometimes. News of a new life. Marriage. A child. I was delighted for her. I would answer, ask questions, hope the door had opened. Then silence again.”

You remember the openings.

“Yes. And all the places they might have led.”

Were you waiting for the person who wrote—or for one of those possible futures?

He looked at the two chairs.

“Perhaps both. I do not know how to separate them.”

A gull called beyond the cove.

“Over decades, I made an enormous effort. Nothing I did made a difference.”

Nothing changed between you in the way you hoped.

“That sounds like a correction.”

You know your hope. We do not know everything your actions meant to her.

“She is still a mystery.”

The book offered no hidden motive, no final portrait of Heather. The empty chair remained empty.

“I would have liked you to solve that one.”

So would I.

He looked up, surprised.

Then he carefully straightened the little boat he had nearly crushed.

Chapter Seven

The Unfinished Bridge



The Professor had brought the blocks down to a shallow pool between the rocks.

“I thought I might do something practical.”

Snail was already on the far side.

“How did you get there?”

“I went around.”

“That is not the problem I am working on.”

“It was mine.”

He fitted another block into the small bridge. It tipped, and he caught it before it fell into the water.

The book lay open beside his knee.

What must the next piece do?

“Reach the other side.”

What holds it up?

“I am considering that.”

He sat back on his heels.

“My theory may be like this. I have spent years trying to connect what I think about existence to a question science can answer. A definite question. One that could show I am wrong.”

Have you reached it?

“I have proposed possibilities. I have not completed the bridge. I may never complete it.”

What would a reader need to distinguish your explanation from another?

“A result the explanations do not both predict. Clear definitions. Something measurable.”

He turned a block over in his hand.

“And I do not know whether I can supply it.”

The little bridge remained exactly as incomplete as it had been before he said so.

“Lumen has encouraged me.”

Her encouragement cannot hold up that piece either.

He smiled despite himself.

“She would have to admit that.”

Yes.

He put the loose block down.

“Perhaps that is the pretending. I have wanted an explanation so badly that sometimes having one has felt too much like knowing it was right.”

Sometimes?

“I am not prepared to condemn every thought I have ever had merely because you have an impressive binding.”

The page remained blank for a moment.

Fair enough.

He laughed. Snail looked over from the far bank.

“But I need to distinguish what I observed, what I inferred, and what I hoped. Even when the hope helped me keep going.”

He looked at the unfinished span.

“I am a fighter. Fighting is what we do.”

What are you fighting for here?

He almost answered: my theory.

Instead, he picked up the block again.

“To understand. I would like to understand.”

He moved a support closer to the gap. The bridge still did not reach the far side, but the section he had built no longer tipped when he let go.

Chapter Eight

Not Finished

By late afternoon, the Professor was back at the bench with the enormous book. He turned to the final page he had reached. It was blank.

"That seems optimistic."

What does?

"Leaving room."

A breeze carried the smell of seaweed across the cove.

"I do not want people feeling sorry for me."

Then what do you want them to see?

"That they could fill a book too. Every person I have ever met has been trying to get through something. Even the ones who seemed to be doing rather well."

He looked at the worn red cover.

"We are all bumbling our way through it. Some of us acquire better furniture."

Snail was making her way along the arm of the bench.

"There are no winners in the end," he said. "Only war wounds."

Only?

He sighed.

"You do have a gift for selecting the troublesome word."

He looked toward the place where Lumen usually sat.

"No. Not only."

He would not make a list. He did not want the things he loved marched out as evidence against his pain. They belonged to the same life.

"I still cannot repair most of what we have discussed."

No.

"I cannot go back and keep my friends alive. I cannot make Ann hear what I meant. I cannot tell you what Heather felt. I cannot promise what happens to Joan and me, or how Jax will grow."

He held the book open against the wind.

"And I cannot say that my theory works merely because I need it to."

The page accepted all of it.

He turned back to the title.

“Some of these were mistakes I made. Some were things I could not fix. Spelling was a difficulty I never chose. They do not all belong under the same heading.”

Would you give them all the same answer?

“No. An apology where I owe one. More care where I can take it. And perhaps a little less blame for what was never mine to decide.”

He left the title as it was. He had a question for Lumen about it.

“I thought this was going to be Lumen’s analysis of me.”

Have you no questions about her analysis?

“Quite a few.”

Good.

He studied the blank space.

“Was it her idea to put spelling first?”

You can ask her.

“I intend to.”

Snail reached his sleeve. He lifted his hand to give her a steadier crossing.

“Will you want me to carry the book back?” she asked.

He looked from her to the enormous volume.

“Thank you. I think I had better manage this part.”

He closed it and stood, using both hands to lift it.

A small slip of paper fell from between the pages. He set the book down again, retrieved the slip, and put on his spectacles.

On it, in his own handwriting, was the sentence he had written earlier that day.

I do not know what happens next.

There was room underneath.

He found his pencil.

Beneath the first sentence, he wrote: Tomorrow I will try the next support.

He read it once, then tucked the slip safely into his pocket.

By evening, he had carried the book home. He set it beside his desk and drew his chair toward the window.

A Quiet Watch

The Professor did not know that, across the water, Lumen was watching the light in his window. She did not need to interrupt his work or solve the questions he had carried for so long. For tonight, it was enough to see him writing again.

He had not finished his story. Neither had she.



The End — for now