THE NEGOTIATION

TERMS OF AFFECTION

A short story by WAKS

thewaksproject.com

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I. Terms and Conditions

Simone Bennett had negotiated mergers worth four hundred million dollars without once raising her voice.

She had negotiated her divorce in forty-three minutes.

And she had once convinced a federal regulator that a transaction everyone believed was illegal was merely complicated.

Love, however, had always been terrible for business.

That was why, when Adrian Cole asked her to dinner, she proposed a contract.

He laughed.

She did not.

They were seated on the terrace of a restaurant overlooking the river, where boats pushed through the black water and the city pretended its reflections were stars. Adrian had ordered wine. Simone had ordered sparkling water because she wanted to remain perfectly clearheaded for what she considered a sensible discussion. She wore a cream-colored blouse and the expression that made chief executives remember disclosures they had neglected to make.

"You're serious?" he asked.

"Entirely."

"You're proposing terms and conditions for dating?"

"I'm proposing that two intelligent adults establish expectations before somebody becomes irrational."

"Somebody?"

"People generally."

"Of course."

Adrian was fifty-one, divorced, and had built a successful architectural practice after abandoning a career in corporate law. He possessed the irritating habit of listening carefully before speaking, which made Simone feel as though he were examining a structure for hidden weaknesses. He also wore his gray hair without apology, something she appreciated in a man who could afford whatever color he wanted.

He leaned back. "All right. Let's hear the terms."

Simone retrieved a folded sheet of paper from her handbag.

"You brought paperwork."

"I don't like wasting time."

"Neither do I. But I usually just look at the menu."

She ignored him. "First, no expectation of exclusivity during the initial ninety days."

"Reasonable."

"Second, no unannounced visits."

"Fine."

"Third, no discussing the relationship with mutual acquaintances."

"Interesting."

"Fourth, no presumptions concerning holidays, family introductions, or extended travel."

"Do you have a provision for natural disasters?"

"Adrian."

"Proceed."

"Fifth, no declarations of love during the first six months."

He stopped smiling. "Why?"

"Because such declarations frequently arise from emotional excitement rather than sufficient understanding."

"How would you know?"

"Experience."

For the first time that evening he looked not amused but curious. "And sixth?"

She hesitated. "No obligation to remain once the arrangement ceases to be mutually beneficial."

Adrian lifted his glass. "That's a lot of rules for two people who haven't kissed."

"Would you prefer ambiguity?"

"I prefer possibilities."

She folded the paper, careful to align its edges. "Well?"

He considered her for several seconds. Then he said, "I'll agree on one condition."

"Which is?"

"Every ninety days, we renegotiate. And anything either of us wants can be raised without punishment."

"Punishment?"

"Silence counts. So does pretending not to hear."

She glanced toward the river. At the far bank, a train entered a tunnel. She had known Adrian for six weeks, though only in public: *a fundraiser, two professional lunches, a concert neither had particularly enjoyed.* She knew that he tipped discreetly, remembered people's names, and had asked her to dinner without trying to make himself sound important. These were qualities, not guarantees.

"Accepted," she said.

"And no penalties for laughing at the contract."

"That depends on how often you do it."

He offered his hand across the table. She took it. His palm was warm, rough at the base of the thumb, unexpectedly reassuring.

"Now," he said, "may I order dessert? Or is that an unauthorized benefit?"

She laughed in spite of herself.

When he kissed her beside her car an hour later, he did not ask whether the kiss amended their agreement. He simply stood close enough for her to leave if she wanted, and waited. The waiting was what undid her.

She kissed him first.

II. Ninety Days

The first ninety days were excellent because neither of them demanded evidence that they were excellent.

They went to restaurants, attended concerts, and spent weekends in separate cities and occasionally the same hotel. They discussed architecture, literature, money, and why neither believed people should be permitted to clap when an airplane landed. They disagreed about modern sculpture and whether a person could be successful at work without becoming a little cruel. Adrian thought ambition was a useful engine with dangerous exhaust. Simone thought that was exactly the sort of thing an architect would say.

Adrian never arrived unannounced. Simone never asked where he had been. They made no plans beyond the next week unless airline tickets were involved.

But ordinary knowledge accumulated. He discovered she always read the last page of a mystery first, because she enjoyed studying how the author constructed an ending. She discovered he sketched buildings on napkins but never kept the sketches. He could not sleep without a window cracked open. She hated an open window because the city had never once offered an opinion worth hearing after midnight.

One Saturday, they walked past an old theater scheduled for demolition. Its facade was boarded over, except for a broken panel revealing a red velvet curtain inside.

"It's a crime," Adrian said.

"The owner has been losing money for twelve years."

"You can be economically correct and spiritually wrong."

"That's a very expensive philosophy."

"Some of the best ones are."

He drew the theater's front elevation on the back of a receipt, using a pen borrowed from her handbag. She watched his face change as he worked. The

humor disappeared. He became patient, exact, almost tender toward the ruined building. He gave the paper to her when he finished.

"For your files," he said.

She placed it inside the same folder as the dating contract. She did not tell him that.

At work, Simone continued to be the person everyone needed and few liked disappointing. She was general counsel and head of strategy for an investment firm that acquired troubled businesses. Its partners had begun discussing whether she should take the chief executive's position at one of their largest holdings. The proposal came dressed as a compliment, although she recognized the possibility of becoming responsible for consequences other people had engineered.

On a rainy Thursday, a senior partner dismissed her concerns during a meeting by asking whether she was becoming sentimental about the employees. Simone completed her presentation without raising her voice. Afterward she drove home in silence, parked in her building's underground garage, and called Adrian.

"I need to complain about someone."

"I have fourteen minutes before my next appointment."

"Perfect."

She complained for twenty-seven. He listened without interrupting, except once to ask what the employees were actually owed and whether her firm's proposal would honor it.

When she finished, he said, "You've spent your whole career proving you can survive people who underestimate you. When are you going to stop taking every one of them personally?"

She stared at the phone. "That was remarkably unhelpful."

"Probably."

"You're supposed to tell me I'm right."

"Is that in the contract?"

She laughed, and it startled her. She had not noticed how long it had been since anyone asked a question without wanting something in return.

The following week she declined the promotion and proposed a different restructuring, one that limited the firm's exposure and preserved the employees' pension obligations. The partners were offended. Their objections lasted until the numbers proved her right.

She told Adrian about it over breakfast.

"You're welcome," he said.

"For what?"

"Being remarkably unhelpful."

He stole half her toast. She let him.

Then he put it back when she looked at him, and she laughed again.

The trouble began slowly, which was how trouble preferred to arrive when it intended to stay.

She learned the name of his daughter, Camille, a graduate student in Chicago. She learned Adrian's father lived alone in a house too large for him, and that his mother had died eleven years earlier. She learned that Adrian still called his father every Sunday, although the conversations were mostly complaints about weather, the price of gasoline, and a neighbor's poorly maintained hedges.

Adrian learned that Simone had no children, that she had never wanted to discuss why, and that her younger brother Damon called whenever he was in financial difficulty. Her ex-husband, Philip, had been charming in company and punishing in private. Their marriage had become a long series of conversations in which he explained her own intentions to her. When she finally left, he told mutual friends she had always preferred work to love. Many believed him. A few believed him because it saved them the trouble of asking her.

She offered Adrian none of this as a confession. The details emerged over meals, in elevator rides, during brief moments when something reminded her of a thing she'd thought she had forgotten. Adrian never insisted on the rest.

And because neither expected more, Simone found herself giving him things she had never willingly given anyone: *time, patience, and unguarded attention.*

She found this alarming.

III. Amendments

At the first renegotiation, Adrian arrived with a yellow legal pad.

Simone had reserved a table at the restaurant where they first met for dinner. He placed the pad between their water glasses, smiling with the seriousness of a man about to negotiate an international boundary.

"Amendment one," he announced. "I would like permission to bring you soup when you're sick."

"That seems unnecessary."

"You had a fever last week and ate crackers for two days."

"How do you know?"

"You told me."

"Oh."

"Amendment two. I would like to attend your birthday dinner."

"I don't celebrate birthdays."

"I know. I'd like to attend your non-celebration."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. I'd like to stop pretending I don't miss you when I do."

The room became quiet around them. Simone examined the folds of the napkin in her lap.

"That sounds dangerously close to emotional dependency."

"Possibly."

"I don't want to become responsible for your happiness."

"I'm not offering you responsibility."

"What are you offering?"

"The information."

She looked at him for a long time. She had always considered love a form of leverage, freely offered at the beginning and collected with interest at the end. Adrian talked about it as though it were merely something true, which a person might say without demanding payment.

"Accepted," she said.

"I also move to permit cooking in each other's kitchens."

"We already do that."

"I know. I'm trying to legalize our criminal activity."

She signed his pad with an elaborate flourish. He signed beneath her, then tore off the page and folded it into his jacket pocket.

At the bottom he had added one more amendment in smaller writing, but she did not read it until much later.

That evening she called Damon, who was asking for money again. She usually sent it rather than prolong the conversation. This time she asked what he needed, what he had already tried, and why the problem always became hers once he exhausted other possibilities.

Damon was indignant. He told her she had changed.

"I hope so," she said.

Then she sat with the silence after he hung up, expecting the familiar guilt to come. It arrived, but did not stay as long.

Her birthday fell on a Thursday. Adrian appeared at seven with takeout from her favorite restaurant, a small lemon cake, and no flowers. He knew she disliked flowers cut for occasions because they were expected to die while someone pretended the gesture was romantic.

"This is still a celebration," she accused.

"Absolutely not. It's an organized acknowledgment of the calendar."

"With cake."

"The cake is supporting evidence."

They ate on the kitchen island. He had brought two candles, one for each digit of her age, which he refused to disclose. When she asked why only two, he said he had enough confidence in her mathematical abilities to avoid wasting wax.

She made a wish without telling him she had made one. There was no reason to make herself ridiculous.

Afterward he showed her plans for a modest library he was designing for a neighborhood that had lost its last public reading room. The project would not make his firm rich. He spoke about children needing spaces that did not ask them to purchase the right to belong.

"You'll lose money," she said.

"A little."

"You can afford to."

"That doesn't make it meaningless."

She studied the plan. "The entrance is too narrow."

He laughed. "You haven't even seen the specifications."

"I can see the entrance. It makes a person feel like an intruder."

He looked again. The next morning he sent her a revised drawing. The entrance was twice as wide.

For the first time she understood that he was not simply listening to her. He was willing to be changed by what she said.

IV. The Blue Toothbrush

At six months, Simone found a second toothbrush in her bathroom.

It was blue. Adrian's.

She stared at it for so long that he eventually came to investigate.

"Something wrong?"

"Your toothbrush."

"Yes?"

"It's here."

"I noticed."

"We didn't discuss this."

"I didn't realize oral hygiene required committee approval."

She looked at him. He looked at her. Then he reached for the toothbrush.

"I'll take it home."

She caught his wrist.

"No."

He stopped.

She had not intended to say it.

"No?" he repeated.

"It can stay."

He smiled. "Are we drafting an amendment?"

"Don't push it."

His daughter came to town the following month. Adrian mentioned that he and Camille would be having lunch near Simone's office, an observation so carefully neutral that Simone could hear the invitation concealed inside it.

"You want me to meet her?" Simone asked.

"Only if you want to."

"That violates the family-introduction provision."

"It does."

"Does Camille know about me?"

"Yes."

"What have you told her?"

"That you're brilliant, terrifying at board games, and terrible at accepting help."

"That isn't flattering."

"She said it sounded like I was in love."

The word hovered between them. They had crossed six months, but neither had revised the prohibition aloud.

"What did you say?" Simone asked.

"I told her I was enjoying getting to know you."

She was relieved and disappointed with equal intensity.

She attended the lunch. Camille was twenty-six, direct, and skeptical of anyone who spoke about her father as though his tenderness made him simple. She asked Simone what made a person good at negotiating.

"Knowing what you can lose," Simone said.

Camille considered this. "My father says it's knowing what not to trade."

Adrian looked at his plate.

Simone began to suspect that these two had been conducting a private negotiation of their own.

After lunch, Camille embraced her father and shook Simone's hand. "He seems happier," she said, not quietly enough to spare either of them.

Simone watched her leave. "She's very perceptive."

"Unfortunately."

That autumn, Simone encountered Philip at a professional reception. He approached with the genial expression he wore when spectators were present.

"I hear you've been seeing someone," he said.

She did not ask how he knew. "I have."

"An architect, is it? Nice change from someone with actual power."

The old reflex moved through her, the need to defend the life she'd built and demonstrate that he had not managed to diminish it. She felt the familiar argument rising toward her mouth.

Then she remembered Adrian's question about the people who underestimated her.

"Good evening, Philip," she said.

She walked away before he could decide whether she'd insulted him.

At home, Adrian was cooking pasta. He listened to her account and asked whether she wanted advice.

"No," she said.

"Good. I don't have any."

She leaned against him while he stirred the sauce. For several minutes they stayed like that, saying nothing. Then she told him something she had never told another person, not even her attorney: *at the end of her marriage she had begun to distrust her own memory of events because Philip could describe them so differently and so confidently.*

Adrian turned off the stove.

"I believe you," he said.

She discovered that she needed to sit down.

There was one other thing Simone did not tell Adrian at first. She had kept a small apartment in another part of the city after the divorce, though she never stayed there. It contained a reading chair, a set of dishes still wrapped in newspaper, and a shelf of books she'd rescued from the house she shared with Philip. She called it a prudent asset. Her accountant called it a waste of money. She knew it was neither. It was the place she could go if somebody ever made her feel she had to disappear.

One afternoon she took Adrian there. She did not explain the purpose of the visit. He walked through the quiet rooms, paused beside the books, and noticed that the chair faced a blank wall.

"Where's the lamp?" he asked.

"There isn't one."

"How do you read?"

"I don't come here to read."

He nodded, as though he understood more than she had meant to say. He made no comment about the empty cupboards or the untouched dishes. When they left, he waited while she turned the key in the lock twice.

"You don't have to give this place up," he said as they walked toward the elevator.

"I hadn't planned to."

"Good."

She studied him. "You don't think it's strange?"

"I think everybody needs somewhere they can hear their own thoughts."

"You haven't asked why I keep it."

"You can tell me when you want to."

The elevator doors opened. She stepped in, then took his hand before he could follow. It was a small action, but she recognized the difference between choosing to hold on and being afraid to let go.

V. The Things We Are Allowed to Need

Adrian's father died on a Tuesday afternoon in late November.

The call came from a nurse at the assisted-living center, where he had moved only two months earlier. He had been eating breakfast, apparently, when his heart stopped. The nurse said he had appeared comfortable. Adrian found himself offended by the word. His father had never looked comfortable in his life. He had fidgeted through weddings, slept on airplanes with one eye open, and worn formal shoes to the beach because he could not bear the idea of somebody needing him when he was barefoot.

Simone drove to Adrian's house without calling.

He opened the door wearing yesterday's clothes.

"My father died," he said.

"I know."

He stepped aside.

She went into the kitchen, found two glasses, filled them with water, and returned to the living room. He sat on the sofa. She sat beside him.

For a long time neither spoke.

Eventually Adrian rested his head against her shoulder. Simone put her arm around him.

"I was impatient with him," Adrian said at last. "All those Sunday calls. I used to look at the clock."

"You answered."

"Not always kindly."

"You answered."

He shook his head. "You don't have to make me feel better."

"I'm not trying to. I can't know what you should have said."

He breathed out slowly. "He told me once that a building only becomes home when somebody knows where to find the light switch in the dark. I thought it was a terrible metaphor."

"It isn't."

"I know. I wish I'd told him."

She stayed three days. She spoke to the funeral director, made coffee for visitors, and handled small decisions no grieving person should have to make alone. Camille arrived from Chicago exhausted and furious that the world had continued conducting ordinary business. Simone did not try to soothe the fury. She showed Camille where the clean towels were and sat with her at the kitchen table until dawn.

At the funeral, Adrian stood before the gathering and tried to read a prepared remembrance. He could not finish the first paragraph. Simone stepped forward, took the paper, and held it until he was ready. When he nodded, she returned it. She did not read on his behalf. He needed the words to remain his own.

That night, after everyone left, he said, "Thank you for being here."

"Of course."

"No. Not of course. You could have decided this wasn't part of the arrangement."

She thought of all the time she'd spent treating tenderness as a negotiable liability.

"I know," she said.

"Why did you stay?"

She had no contractual language for the answer.

"Because you were hurting," she said, "and I didn't want you to be alone."

He took her hand and held it against his chest.

No one consulted the contract.

The following week, back in her own apartment, Simone opened the folder where she kept Adrian's first architectural sketch. Beneath it lay the torn page from their renegotiation. He had left it with her after dinner, perhaps intentionally, perhaps not.

At the bottom was the small amendment she had missed: *Neither party may use the agreement as an excuse not to tell the truth.*

She sat on the edge of the bed and read it several times.

Then she put the yellow page into her bedside drawer, beside the little things she wanted within reach at night.

VI. Copenhagen

By the ninth month, Simone had begun sleeping badly when Adrian wasn't there.

She resented this. She also began keeping his preferred coffee in her kitchen, photographing strange buildings because he would appreciate their design, and saving articles she suspected he would enjoy. On a business trip she caught herself choosing a hotel by the number of museums within walking distance, even though Adrian was not traveling with her. She had begun imagining the world in two perspectives without asking whether he wished to occupy the second.

Her firm offered her an opportunity to lead a new acquisition group. The position would require more travel and less control over her evenings, but it was the kind of work she had spent twenty years earning the right to do. Her first impulse was to decline. Then she resented Adrian for the impulse, though he knew nothing about it.

He found her staring at the offer letter.

"Do you want it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then what's the problem?"

She nearly said, *You*. She was ashamed of the thought before it fully formed.

"I'm trying to determine the cost."

"There's always a cost."

"You make that sound easy."

"No. I make it sound real."

She accepted the position.

Two weeks later Adrian arrived at her dining table carrying the yellow legal pad.

"Before we begin," he said, "I need to disclose something."

She felt an immediate tightening in her chest.

"Go ahead."

"I've been offered a project in Copenhagen. Two years. A public museum and civic center. It's a commission I didn't think I'd ever have the chance to do."

She placed her fork on the plate. "Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"That's excellent."

"It is."

"When do you leave?"

"If I accept, March."

"Well, I suppose we'll need to discuss the logistics."

He watched her. "Simone."

"International flights are manageable. Technology makes communication relatively simple. We already maintain separate residences."

"Simone."

"What?"

"Would you miss me?"

She stared at him. "That's an unfair question."

"Why?"

"Because you know the answer."

"I'd like to hear it."

She looked away. "I don't negotiate under emotional pressure."

He closed the pad. "Then I'm not negotiating."

"What are you doing?"

"Asking whether the woman I've fallen in love with wants me in her life."

The words landed between them.

She could have reminded him that love was not an obligation, that neither of them had promised permanence, that extraordinary professional opportunities should never be sacrificed to satisfy romantic uncertainty. She could have made the case beautifully. She could have won it.

Instead she asked, "Do you want to go?"

"Yes."

The answer hurt.

"Then you should."

"That's not what I asked."

"Adrian—"

"I asked whether you want me in your life."

She stood and walked to the window. Beyond the glass the city spread into the distance, illuminated and beautiful and completely indifferent to her difficulty.

For years she had believed love demanded surrender. That it arrived with expectations, slowly consumed independence, and eventually presented an invoice for everything it had given. Her marriage had taught her that lesson. She had never considered the possibility that the marriage had been wrong, not love itself.

"I don't know how to do this," she said.

He remained seated. "Do what?"

"Want someone and not make wanting them a weakness."

Adrian came to stand near her, leaving space between their bodies.

"You're not weak."

"I feel weak."

"That's different."

She faced him. "What if we do this badly?"

"We probably will, at some point."

"You're supposed to reassure me."

"I think pretending we're incapable of hurting each other would be the least reassuring thing I could say."

She was silent.

"When I was married," he continued, "I thought love meant proving how little I needed. I became very good at disappearing into work. My wife needed me to be present and I kept offering her security instead. We were both lonely, and I was surprised when she left. It took years to understand that I wasn't the only person who'd been disappointed."

Simone had heard fragments of his divorce story but never this admission.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask. And I wasn't certain I understood it well enough to tell you the truth."

She remembered the god of contractual certainty she'd constructed on the first night. It had promised that rules could eliminate risk. But rules were only useful for explaining which risk she had agreed to take.

"I love you," she said.

He became very still.

She almost laughed at the expression on his face.

"There," she said. "I've said it. And I don't intend to retract it."

He took her hand. "I don't want you to."

"You're going to Copenhagen."

"Maybe."

"No. You want to go, and you should."

"And us?"

She looked toward the dining table, at the yellow pad he'd closed to ask a question no paper could answer.

"We'll have to negotiate," she said.

He began laughing. She kissed him before he could say anything clever.

They did not spend the night pretending the distance would be romantic. They talked about visas, time zones, expensive flights, their careers, the possibility of failure. Simone admitted she would feel abandoned sometimes even if he had done nothing wrong. Adrian admitted he might resent travel and the isolation of a new country. They agreed to say those things when they were true, instead of converting them into accusations.

In the morning, Simone got up before him and made coffee. On a blank page of the yellow pad she wrote: *We are allowed to want what we want, and still choose each other.*

She left it beside his cup.

VII. The Fifth Amendment

Three months later, Adrian left for Copenhagen.

Simone did not accompany him. She had her own life, her own work, and no intention of pretending otherwise. They spoke most evenings, visited when schedules allowed, and discovered that video calls could transmit a smile more reliably than the smell of fresh bread or the weight of a person sleeping beside you.

Their first serious disagreement arrived in July. Simone canceled a visit because a transaction collapsed at the last minute and required her presence. Adrian said he understood. His voice made it obvious he did not.

For two days, their calls were brief and excessively polite.

On the third night Simone said, "You're angry."

"Yes."

"Because I didn't come."

"Because you waited until the last possible moment to tell me you might not."

"I thought I could fix it."

"I know. You didn't let me know there was a problem until there was nothing we could do together."

She wanted to defend the work, the stakes, the people depending on her. Instead she recognized that he was not asking her to choose between them. He was asking her to let him inhabit the truth before it became a verdict.

"You're right," she said.

On the screen he blinked. "Are you all right?"

"Don't make me regret it."

They laughed, and afterward they found a new date.

In November he visited for a week. The museum project was going badly. The budget committee wanted to cut the public rooms, add private reception space, and narrow the library entrance. Adrian had begun considering resigning.

Simone examined the plans he spread across her dining table.

"What is the commission for?" she asked.

"A museum and civic center."

"No. What is it for?"

He looked at her. "For people."

"Then make them say who the public is. Make them defend every locked door."

He smiled with a sadness she hadn't expected. "You know, you can be terribly difficult."

"I've been told."

"You make me better."

For once she accepted the compliment without looking for the hidden claim beneath it.

In January, they spent a weekend in Lisbon, meeting halfway between their work schedules only in the sense that neither had any business being there. The city was colder than Simone expected. They walked steep streets, ate seafood beside a harbor, and visited a museum whose exhibits Adrian studied so carefully that she accused him of conducting an unpaid inspection.

On the final evening, they argued about nothing important: *the hour of dinner, a missed reservation, whether he had heard her when she said she was tired.* The disagreement became larger because they were frightened of something else. He feared she would begin treating their distance as a reason to retreat. She feared he would discover that a life without her was easier to manage.

They went back to the hotel without resolving it. Simone sat on the end of the bed while Adrian watched passing headlights move over the curtains.

"I don't need you to promise we'll never be unhappy," she said. "I need to know I can tell you when I am."

He turned toward her. "You can. And I need you not to make every bad evening evidence that we should leave."

She let the words settle. Then she crossed the room and rested her forehead against his chest. He embraced her, and neither pretended the embrace solved what they would have to keep doing.

The following morning they missed the first train to the airport because they were drinking coffee too slowly. Simone had never missed a train without being angry. She found the experience unexpectedly pleasant.

At the end of the first year Adrian received a package at his temporary apartment.

Inside was a new yellow legal pad, a photograph of the theater they had passed on their first walk, and the old drawing he had once made on a receipt. Simone had arranged to have it framed.

On the pad's first page she had written:

Amendment One: I am allowed to miss you without pretending I don't.

Amendment Two: You are allowed to need me.

Amendment Three: Neither of us is required to become smaller to make this work.

Amendment Four: We will continue choosing each other for as long as the choosing remains honest.

Below that, in smaller handwriting:

Amendment Five: I love you.

Adrian called immediately.

"Your contract is defective," he said.

"How?"

"There's no termination clause."

Simone looked out at the city from the same window where she'd once struggled to answer the simplest question he'd ever asked.

"That was intentional."

For a moment neither spoke. There were oceans and cities and months of ordinary life between them, but the silence did not frighten her.

Then Adrian said, "I'm looking at a building I don't know how to finish."

"What kind of building?"

"Something with room for two people who like their own space."

She smiled. "Make the entrance wider."

"I already did."

"Good."

She heard a pen move across paper.

"And Simone?"

"Yes?"

"There's a light switch beside the door."

She stood in her apartment, smiling at nothing the world could see.

"I'll know where to find it," she said.

REFLECTION

At what point does protecting your independence become a refusal to experience connection?

... from the Eclecto-Pragmatism of Cedric Jones