

Tuesday's minutes

Mara had volunteered for one morning, and by the time she reached the stairs she had been promoted to five.

The promotion came by telephone. The building's new meeting assistant had sent out the minutes, which were so handsome and orderly that it seemed almost ungrateful to find anything wrong with them. The repair fund added up. The electrician had acquired a single telephone number instead of the three he had enjoyed during the discussion. Even the lift inspection had been put on its proper day.

Under Actions stood this agreeable piece of news:

Mara will open the common room on weekday mornings until the entrance ramp is repaired.

She read it twice. Then she looked back up the stairs, as if there might be another Mara coming down who had made this arrangement.

There was not.

The ramp had been waiting for repairs long enough to become a regular item of business. Everybody deplored its condition. Several people had deplored it at considerable length. Meanwhile, residents who could not use the front steps had to enter through the common room and make their way past the chairs to the lift. Somebody had to unlock the side door at seven fifteen.

Daniel had brought a chart to the meeting. It contained five empty squares, and he had held it where nobody could help seeing them. This had produced a lively interest in the ceiling, the biscuit plate and the backs of people's own hands.

Mara's early shift had been cancelled. She had received the message under the table and spent a pleasant second imagining breakfast at home before she remembered the wages.

"I could do tomorrow," she had said.

Daniel thanked her with such relief that nobody troubled to ask what would happen the day after. The woman from the third floor began speaking about her leak, and the meeting escaped into that.

Now Mara stood on the stairs with the fire door against her shoulder and typed:

I only said tomorrow.

The assistant offered to make this more constructive.

She let it try.

Happy to help tomorrow! I'll do my best with the remaining mornings, but may need some support.

Mara studied the improvement. It had given her back nearly all the work she was trying to get rid of, and made her sound delighted with the bargain.

She erased it.

A neighbour came down carrying a bicycle. She let him pass, went out into the street and saw that the shop was still open. The man at the till was collecting the reduced bread into a crate. She had time to get a loaf, provided she let the matter rest.

She went upstairs again.

Daniel was clearing the cups. He had stacked three with a tea bag caught beneath the lowest, and wherever he carried them they left a brown account of his travels.

"The minutes have me opening up every morning," Mara said.

"Have they?"

He examined his phone.

"Oh, yes. That's the summary."

"I said tomorrow."

"I thought you meant you could start tomorrow."

"I've got work on Thursday."

"Of course. Naturally."

He found the recording. Her voice came out small and distant, but tomorrow was a perfectly serviceable word and could be heard without difficulty. A chair scraped. The leak began its testimony. Daniel stopped the recording.

"Yes. Sorry."

He altered weekday mornings to Wednesday and held up the phone.

"There."

"You'll need to send it again."

"It's the same document. They'll see the change."

"If they open it again."

Daniel looked at her. She waited. He had an expression she remembered from the meeting, when he had been holding the empty chart. She found she could bear it better from this side of the table.

He began a message to the residents' group.

There was an error in the minutes. Mara has kindly agreed to cover Wednesday only.

"Leave out kindly," she said.

"All right."

He sent it before she could discover another improvement.

On the paper chart, Thursday and Friday remained as empty as when they had arrived.

"I suppose I can do Thursday," he said. "But I'll have to leave straight away."

"So will I tomorrow."

He wrote his name into Thursday. It took rather less ink than Mara had expected.

She put on her coat.

“You'd better keep the key for now,” he said.

Her hand went towards it. The key lay beside the cups on a green plastic tag. It was an ordinary little key, but she had begun to see how much could be hung from it.

“I'll bring it to you tomorrow evening. When will you be home?”

“Six thirty, probably.”

“Six thirty, then.”

By the time she reached the shop, the reduced bread had gone. She bought a full price loaf and two eggs, carrying the eggs in her coat pocket because the man had run out of small bags.

Next morning, a woman with a walking frame was waiting at the side door. Mara opened it at seven fifteen and shifted a chair out of the passage.

“Will it be you tomorrow?” the woman asked.

“Daniel.”

“At this time?”

“That's what we've put down.”

The woman nodded and went through to the lift.

Upstairs, Mara set a reminder to return the key. Then she put the eggs in a saucepan and sat down beside the stove. The water had not yet begun to boil. She stayed where she was.