THE RIGHT TO BE UNFINISHED

The sentence that saved the Night Room was spoken by no one.

I know because I put it on the wall.

My job at City Hall was to caption public hearings. For eleven years I had worked from microphones and hurried notes, trying to catch names, figures, and the last few words spoken by people already sitting down. Then the city bought Clear. It could translate nineteen languages, separate voices talking at once, and suggest the end of a sentence when a speaker paused.

Clear was useful. Before it arrived, people sometimes waited for an interpreter longer than the council allowed them to speak. Once a hearing had been postponed because I lost my voice. With Clear, a woman could speak in the language she knew best and see her words appear, almost immediately, above the councillors' heads.

The predictions appeared first on my private screen. I could press the white key to accept them or the black key to keep listening. On the public wall, accepted predictions looked exactly like spoken words. The engineers had proposed marking them with a dotted line. The council declined. The dots, the chairwoman said, might confuse the public.

I learned to work the keys without looking down.

The Night Room stood at one end of Ferry Street Station, between the ticket machines and a flower shop that had been empty for years. It belonged to passengers waiting for the first bus. After the last one left, other people used it. There were twelve orange plastic chairs, a drinking fountain, two sockets, and a radiator that worked when it felt like it. The tiled floor was always wet near the entrance, no matter how often somebody mopped it.

The council's proposal was to lock the room from midnight until five. The budget called it an underutilized facility.

I had been there at two in the morning. Underutilized was not the word I would have chosen.

The woman who came to testify wore a blue maintenance uniform beneath a black cardigan. Her name was Rosa Vale. I knew her by sight: she pushed a bucket through the station, and one of its wheels squeaked each time it crossed a seam in the tiles. At the lectern she seemed surprised by the height of the microphone. She had brought a piece of paper folded into quarters.

“My shift finishes at eleven,” she said.

Clear offered: My shift finishes at eleven, but the needs of this community do not.

I ignored it.

“I clean the toilets, the floors. The windows, if somebody's written on them. The front door sticks. You have to lift the handle first, or the bolt won't turn.”

A councillor smiled at that. Rosa did not smile back.

“People say that room is open all night. What they mean is—”

She stopped. She glanced toward the public gallery, where a man was standing because all the seats were taken. The chairwoman looked at the timer. Six seconds was a long time in a room that charged silence against your three minutes.

Clear produced a line so clean it seemed already to belong on a poster.

NO ONE IN THIS CITY HAS TO FACE THE COLD ALONE.

My finger rested on the black key. The room was going to close. Rosa had come to save it. I knew how a good sentence worked on a committee at the end of a long evening; I had watched useful testimony disappear beneath awkward wording. The prediction seemed to say what Rosa wanted, only without making her struggle for it.

I pressed white.

Her words climbed the wall in three languages. The councillor who had been looking at his phone looked up. A woman behind me said, “Yes.” The chairwoman thanked Rosa for expressing the matter so clearly.

Rosa opened her mouth. The bell sounded. Her three minutes were over.

The vote was five to two. The Night Room would stay open. The staffing allocation would not change.

People applauded. Rosa folded her paper along the same worn creases and left.

By morning her sentence had become the city's sentence. Someone put it across a photograph of the station windows. The mayor shared it with a picture of himself. A newspaper called Rosa the conscience of Ferry Street.

That night, on my way home, I passed the station. The Night Room door was propped open by Rosa's bucket. Through the glass I could see her on her knees, mopping around the feet of a sleeping man. The clock above the ticket machines said 1:47.

The following afternoon Rosa came to my office carrying two coffees.

“I didn't say that,” she told me.

“I know.”

She set one cup in front of me. Someone had written ROSE on its lid.

“I was going to ask for another shift.”

I thought she meant another shift for herself.

“Someone to take over when I go,” she explained. “The cleaning doesn't stop at eleven. The buses don't stop there either. I stay because there's no one else. At five I go home. At seven I get my grandson ready for school.”

“Does your supervisor know?”

“He told me not to. He also gave me the keys.”

I looked at the coffee. She had paid for it out of money the city did give her.

“Why didn't you say it?” I asked.

Rosa turned the cup until her misspelled name faced away.

“I was trying to say it without sounding like I wanted those people locked outside.”

She unfolded the paper. It held figures, each written twice: hours and the wages for those hours. Beneath them was one question, underlined so heavily the pen had torn the page: WHO OPENS THE DOOR?

I brought up the correction form. It was intended for names, dates, figures, mistranslations. Replacing testimony after a vote required an official notice. The decision might be reopened.

“If I withdraw that sentence,” I told her, “they could close the room.”

“I know.”

“Do you want me to?”

Rosa sat for a while. I kept my hands on the desk, where she could see them.

“Can you put down what I actually said?”

“It stops halfway through.”

“Then stop there.”

I filed the correction. I included the audio: her voice, the scrape of the microphone, the room waiting, and then nothing from Rosa. In my incident report I wrote that Clear had suggested a completion and I had accepted it without confirmation. The report asked whether the prediction had materially affected the vote. I checked YES.

The city suspended the decision and scheduled another hearing. Until then, the midnight closure would go ahead.

Two nights later, I took the late bus past Ferry Street. A handful of people stood beneath the station awning. The man with the work boots was among them, holding his bag above the wet pavement. The Night Room was dark. Rosa wasn't there. She had done what her supervisor had told her to do: finished at eleven and gone home.

The bus window fogged. By the time I wiped it clear, the station was behind us.

My supervisor called the next morning. She said my honesty was appreciated, but the captioning desk needed someone whose decisions could be relied upon. I was taken off live hearings pending review. Clear continued to run. A contractor sat in my chair.

At the emergency hearing I had to enter through the public doors.

The gallery was fuller than before. Some people held signs asking the council to reopen the room. A woman in a green coat asked me whether I was the person who had changed Rosa's words. When I said yes, she told me that her brother had waited outside the station all night. She was not interested in how the software worked.

Near the front sat a man with a hearing aid who had attended nearly every transport hearing that year. He used live captions because even the best microphones left half the chamber inaccessible to him. When the chairwoman announced that predictions would be disabled during testimony, he raised his hand.

“Will the captions fall behind again?” he asked.

The chairwoman said the council was looking into it.

“Please don't solve this by taking away the part that worked.”

The chairwoman promised to record his concern. Someone typed it onto the wall, several seconds late.

The council heard from the station manager, the finance director, and two passengers. The manager said there was no authorized overnight cleaning post. The finance director said a three-month appointment was possible, but money would have to be moved from another service; she would not name which one until she had reviewed the accounts. The first passenger asked them to open the room immediately. The second asked who would be responsible if no employee was there and someone was hurt.

There were no absurd questions. That made the room harder to bear.

Rosa sat with her folded paper in her lap. When she was called, she placed it on the lectern and read without looking up.

“My shift ends at eleven. Sometimes there are still people inside. The bolt catches. The sink floods if somebody leaves the tap running. Someone has to take the rubbish out before the first bus.”

Her hands shook. She laid one palm flat against the paper.

“I don't want the doors closed,” she said. “I don't want to keep working after I stop being paid.”

The chairwoman asked whether she was saying the city had ordered her to work unpaid.

“No.”

“Then why did you stay?”

Rosa glanced at the gallery.

“Because they were there.”

“And you now expect compensation for that choice?”

Rosa looked back at her figures.

“I expect you to decide what happens at eleven. Not leave it to me every night.”

The chairwoman turned to the finance director. There was a long exchange about job descriptions, liability, and the definition of a public waiting area. The contractor at the captioning desk fell behind, then caught up all at once. Words flooded the wall after the people who had spoken them were already sitting down.

Then the woman in the green coat spoke from the gallery.

“Are you going to open it tonight?”

The chairwoman reminded her that public questions were out of order.

“It's cold tonight too.”

No one argued with that. No one had an answer.

The first motion, to restore the original decision without additional funding, failed. The second, to reopen immediately under the existing staffing plan, failed too. After a recess the council passed a three-month trial: paid overnight coverage, a relief rota, repairs to the door, and a public review before the end of winter. The finance director was instructed to present the reallocation within fourteen days.

The room would reopen on Monday. It was Thursday.

There was scattered applause. Some people were already leaving to catch the last bus. The woman in the green coat did not clap. Rosa gathered her papers. The council moved to the next item.

Outside, she found me by the steps.

“Are they going to fire you?” she asked.

“I don't know.”

“They shouldn't.”

“Maybe.”

Rosa did not insist. She had spent enough of the evening being asked to take responsibility for other people's decisions.

Before she left, I asked whether the corrected transcript was right now.

She considered the question.

“It's what I said,” she answered.

The next day I went to the station. The lights in the Night Room were off. The flower shop window reflected the people waiting outside. Someone had taped the famous sentence to the glass, where the weather had lifted one corner. I took it down. The paper tore across the word ALONE; half the letters stayed behind.

I had no authority to remove it. I did it anyway.

At home I opened the recording of Rosa's first hearing. My disciplinary interview was on Monday. I had been asked to provide a statement of the exact point at which I knew the prediction was not confirmed speech. I listened to her say, “People say that room is open all night. What they mean is—”

Then came six seconds of air moving through the chamber, a microphone being touched, her folded paper settling against the lectern.

Clear had already supplied a version of those seconds. The city had printed it. The council had voted on it. I had liked it. None of that made it Rosa's.

In the statement I wrote the time, the key I pressed, and the reason I pressed it. I left out the sentence about how I had only wanted to help. It was true, but it was too easy to put after everything else.

The official transcript had a blank where the prediction used to be. Under the blank, I entered the notation I should have entered that night:

[Speaker pauses. No words supplied.]

I played the six seconds once more to check the duration. Then I saved the file.