A FREE COMPANION TO REINCARNATION

Office Hours

New Haven, 1960. A translator three weeks in town, a medievalist who talks to fences, and seven Thursdays at a diner on Whalley Avenue.



RICHARD LOWE

Office Hours

Ruth read the yard from the back step before she went down into it.

It was a habit she had carried up from Brooklyn and stopped apologizing for. Left to right: the card table by the screen door with the bowls on it, three men at the grill arguing about baseball, a couple on folding chairs with their knees touching, the paper lanterns strung between the fence and the oak tree and not yet lit. Then Vera Adelman, coming at her across the grass with a plate held out in front of her like a summons.

"You came," Vera said. "Eat this, you're too thin for September."

"It's eighty degrees."

"Then you're too thin for eighty degrees."

Vera kept the books at the firm on Church Street. She had decided in Ruth's first week that Ruth needed feeding, and in the second week that Ruth needed people. She was not a woman who let a decision sit around unused.

Ruth took the plate. There was potato salad on it and a deviled egg and a slab of brisket that had been somebody's grandmother's recipe.

Ruth had been in New Haven three weeks. She had two rooms over a dry cleaner off Chapel Street that smelled, in the mornings, of hot cloth and solvent. She had a desk at the firm in a back office with a window onto an air shaft.

The partners had hired her to translate German and French into English. Contracts, mostly, the dull ones, the kind with eleven pages of definitions before anything happened.

She was twenty-one. She had a degree from Barnard and a secondhand typewriter her father had bought her. She had a mother in Brooklyn who asked on every Sunday call whether she had met anyone.

She had not met anyone. She ate the egg.

Then she saw the woman at the fence.

* * *

The woman was tall. She stood with her back to the party and her face to the fence, studying it as if it were a document with a problem in it. She held a glass of white wine she was not drinking, and she had her coat over her arm on a night that did not need a coat.

Every other person in the yard was turned toward someone. This one was turned toward a fence.

"Who's that," Ruth said.

Vera followed her look. "Diana. She teaches at the state college, history, the old kind."

She lowered her voice, which for Vera meant it went down from loud to ordinary. "Don't get her started on monks. Carl got her started on monks at New Year's and we lost him for an hour."

"I like monks," Ruth said.

Vera gave her a long look. "Nobody likes monks," she said, and went back to the grill.

Ruth stood with her plate. The woman's shoulders were held level and still, the stillness of someone who has decided where every part of her body will be. She was keeping them there by effort.

Ruth set the plate on the card table and walked across the grass.

* * *

"It's a good fence," Ruth said.

The woman did not startle. She turned her head a few degrees, enough to establish that someone had spoken, and then turned it back to the boards.

"It is an adequate fence," she said. "The posts on this side were set without gravel, and they'll rot from the bottom within ten years."

"You know fences."

"I know rot." She took a sip of the wine at last, as if she had been saving it for a reason to have something to do with her mouth. "I spend most of my working life with documents that have been sitting in damp rooms for eight hundred years."

"The monks," Ruth said.

The woman's head came around properly then. Her eyes were gray and she used them the way some people used a magnifying glass, close and exact, holding on one thing at a time. They held on Ruth's face for two seconds and then went to the oak tree over Ruth's shoulder.

"Vera warned you," she said.

"She said you'd keep me for an hour."

"I kept Carl for an hour. Carl asked a question and then didn't have the decency to stop listening."

She considered the oak. "It was a reasonable question. He wanted to know why anyone would give land to an abbey."

"Tell me."

The woman looked at her again, and this time the look stayed a moment longer.

"You're not being polite," she said.

"I'm never polite at parties. I'm polite at work, so somebody has to get a rest."

The woman's mouth moved toward amusement and was stopped before it arrived. Ruth watched it get stopped. It must take years of practice, she thought, to stop a thing that fast.

* * *

Her name was Diana Mercer, and she told it to the oak tree.

She told Ruth about the abbey at Cluny, in Burgundy. People had given it fields, mills and vineyards. In return the monks prayed for their souls after they were dead. Diana described it the way a person describes a house she has lived in for years, without hurry, knowing where every room was.

She did not look at Ruth while she talked.

"They wrote all of it down," Diana said. "Every gift, with the boundaries, which stream marked the edge, which old oak. And at the bottom, the names of everyone who stood there and watched it happen."

"Why?"

"So no one could say later that it hadn't happened." Diana turned the glass in her fingers. "A charter is a document that exists because someone was afraid of being contradicted."

"That's most of what I translate," Ruth said. "Contracts, where every clause is somebody being afraid of somebody else."

Diana looked at her. It was the third time.

"What do you translate," she said.

"German and French, for the firm, mostly German." Ruth heard herself talking faster and did nothing to slow it down. "Right now it's a lease for a warehouse in Hamburg, forty pages, and there's one word in it the man uses eleven times."

"Which word."

“Urkunde,” Ruth said.

“Urkunde,” Diana said back, and it was not the same word.

Ruth's had come out flat and quick, the way her teacher at Barnard said it, a woman from Berlin who talked as if she were late for a train. Diana's was rounder at the front and longer in the middle. She sounded as if she had learned it from a page first and then from a person.

“That's how I say it,” Ruth said.

“That's how a Berliner says it.” Diana tipped the glass toward the fence, a small professorial gesture. “It means a document, a deed, a charter, a thing that bears witness.”

She went on before Ruth could answer. “If your man in Hamburg is using it eleven different ways, he is either a poor writer or a lawyer. I gather those overlap.”

Ruth put her hands on her hips.

“Don't be a professor at me,” she said. “It's a party.”

Diana went still.

For a moment Ruth thought she had done it, the thing her mother was always warning her about, gone too far too fast with a stranger. Then she saw the corner of Diana's mouth. It had moved, and it was moving still, against what was clearly a determined effort to keep it where it had been.

“I am a professor,” Diana said. “I find it rather difficult to stop at the gate.”

“Try.”

“I am trying,” Diana said. “This is what it looks like.”

* * *

They talked until the lanterns were lit.

Somebody lit them while Ruth was not watching. The light went yellow and soft around them, and the shadows of the oak leaves moved on the fence.

Ruth did not remember afterward most of what they had said. She remembered the shape of it.

Diana answered questions. She answered them completely, with subordinate clauses and dates, and she did not ask any back. When Ruth said a thing that interested her, Diana's eyes came off the fence or the oak and rested on Ruth's face until the thing had been taken in, and then they went away again.

It was like talking to someone through a window that kept closing.

Ruth did not mind. She had grown up in a house where everybody said everything at full volume, where her mother announced the state of her feelings over dinner like the weather report. Diana said almost nothing about herself.

What came through anyway came through in pieces. She lived alone. She had been in New Haven six years, and she had grown up in Hartford and did not go there often.

“Your family's in Hartford?”

“My parents.” Diana studied the fence. “We are cordial.”

“Mine are loud,” Ruth said.

“I imagined they might be.”

“Is that a criticism?”

“It is an observation.” Diana's eyes came back. “You speak as if you've always had to talk over people, and it isn't unpleasant.”

Ruth's right hand went to her own left wrist and rested there, the fingers over the bones. She stood like that while she worked out what to say.

“I don't have to talk over you,” Ruth said. “You stop when I start.”

Diana said nothing to that. She looked at Ruth's hand on her wrist, briefly, and then away.

* * *

She left at ten.

She did it after deciding it, without discussion, which seemed to be how she did everything. She found Vera and thanked her and put on the coat she had carried all night. Then she came back across the grass to where Ruth was standing by the oak.

"It was a pleasure, Miss Solomon," she said.

"Ruth."

"Ruth," Diana said, trying the word as if she were checking a translation. "Good night."

She walked to the side gate. Ruth watched her go, the long back, the level shoulders, the coat buttoned to the throat in September.

At the gate Diana stopped. She did not turn around. Her right hand came up a little from her side, the palm turned back toward the yard, and held there.

Ruth thought she was going to wave without looking. Ruth's father did that getting onto the subway, a hand thrown back over the shoulder at whoever was still on the platform.

The hand stayed where it was. Then it went down. Diana opened the gate and went through, and the gate swung closed behind her on its spring.

"Well," Vera said at Ruth's elbow. Ruth had not heard her come. "She talked to you."

"She talked to the fence. I was standing near it."

Vera handed her a slice of cake on a napkin. "Two years she's been coming to my parties," she said. "That's the first time I've seen her stay past nine."

* * *

That night, in the rooms over the dry cleaner, Ruth lay on her back and did not sleep.

The window was open. Chapel Street came in through it, a bus, a man laughing, the late traffic heading out toward the highway. The room still smelled of the solvent from downstairs, faint and sweet, the smell of other people's clothes being made clean.

She went over the evening the way she went over a page before she sent it, checking each line against the original. Urkunde. The corner of the mouth, and the hand at the gate that had not waved.

She was almost asleep when the door came.

It always came like this, at the edge, when the room had started to go soft. A green door at the bottom of a flight of stone steps, the paint coming up at the lower corner and curling away from the wood. There was the smell of wet stone and, under it, burning, a long way off.

She had seen it since she was a child. She had never told anyone. It was not a dream and not a memory, and she knew no third word for it in any of her languages.

She waited on the steps in front of it. Nobody came.

Then she was asleep.

* * *

The state college posted its office hours on a corkboard in the history department hallway, typed on index cards and pinned in a row. Ruth found Diana's card on the first Tuesday in October. Dr. D. Mercer, Tuesdays 1 to 3, Thursdays by appointment.

There were two students ahead of her on the bench outside the door. Ruth sat at the end with a manila folder on her knees and her coat across her lap.

The first student went in with a paper and came out twenty minutes later, carrying it against his chest like a wounded bird. The second came out in five minutes. He looked relieved and slightly insulted, as people look when they have been let off easily and suspect they did not deserve it.

Ruth stood up and knocked on the open door.

Diana was at her desk under a window. The office was small and the window was large. It gave onto a parking lot and a strip of maples gone orange at the edges. There were books on every wall and in two stacks on the floor, with paper slips sticking out of them at intervals like feathers.

Diana looked up. Her face did nothing for a moment, and then it did a great many things fast and arrived at a polite blank.

"Miss Solomon," she said. "Are you enrolled?"

"No," Ruth said. "I have a document."

* * *

The document was real. That was the part Ruth had worked hardest on.

It belonged to a client of the firm, an old man in Woodbridge settling his late brother's estate. Among the brother's papers was a family deed from Swabia, most of it in a German so cramped and old-fashioned that Ruth could read one word in four. The last paragraph was in Latin.

The partner who handed it to her had said there was a man at Yale who did this sort of thing. Ruth had nodded and taken it back to her desk by the air shaft. She had looked at it for an hour and then gone to look up office hours.

She put the deed on Diana's desk. Diana looked at it without touching it.

"The German is last century," Diana said after a while. "A notary's hand. The Latin is older, a clause someone copied from an earlier grant to show the family had held the land a long time."

She drew the deed toward her by one corner with a single finger. "It's a field, bounded on the north by a stream and on the east by a road to a mill. Witnessed by five men, whose names I can give you."

"Can you give me the German too?"

"I can." Diana reached for a pencil. Then she stopped, the pencil over a legal pad, and did not write.

"There's a man at Yale who reads these hands," she said. "He is a great deal better at this period than I am. You could have taken it to him in an afternoon."

"I know," Ruth said.

Diana looked at the window.

The maples moved in the lot. A car door closed somewhere below. Ruth stood in front of the desk with her coat over her arm, the way Diana had stood at the fence, and waited.

"Why didn't you," Diana said to the window.

"I didn't want the man at Yale."

The pencil went down on the pad, parallel to the edge.

* * *

Diana did the German in forty minutes. She read it aloud as she went, slowly, in the round careful voice she had used for Urkunde. Ruth took it down in shorthand on the back of the folder.

When Diana reached a word she disliked she said so. When she reached a word she was not sure of she gave two possibilities and said which she preferred and why.

It was the best forty minutes Ruth had spent in New Haven.

When it was done Diana put the deed back in the folder and handed it across. Their fingers did not touch. They both kept them from touching, and the not touching sat on the desk between them like a

third thing.

"Thank you," Ruth said.

"You're welcome." Diana looked at her watch, a man's watch on a narrow wrist. "I have a seminar at three."

"Have coffee with me on Thursday."

Diana did not look at the window this time. She looked at Ruth, and it was the magnifying glass again, close and steady.

"I don't think that would be wise," she said.

"I didn't ask if it was wise."

"No," Diana said. "You didn't."

She did not say yes. She did not say no. She picked up a stack of blue examination books and squared their edges against the blotter, though they were already square, and kept her eyes on them.

Ruth took a receipt out of her coat pocket, from the delicatessen on the corner by the firm. She wrote her telephone number on the back in large clear figures. She set it on the corner of the desk under the edge of the blue books, where it could not blow away.

"In case the German keeps you up," she said.

She went out past the bench, where a new student was waiting with a paper, and down the stairs into the parking lot. She did not look up at the window. It was the hardest thing she had done in a month.

* * *

Diana did not call that week.

She did not call the week after. Ruth translated the Hamburg lease, and then a contract for Belgian machine parts, and then a letter from a widow in Lyon to her late husband's American partners. The letter was the only thing she had translated all autumn that made her want to cry.

She ate lunch at the delicatessen. She did not walk past the state college. It was not on the way to anything, and she would have known why she was doing it.

On Sunday she called Brooklyn.

"Have you met anyone," her mother said, after the weather and her father's knee and the neighbor's son who had gotten into dental school.

"I've met people. Vera from the firm, and Vera's friends."

"Men?"

"Some men." Ruth wound the cord around her finger.

In the background she could hear the radio and her father saying a word to the dog. "Ma," she said. "There's somebody I'd like to know better."

"Good," her mother said. "What does he do."

Ruth looked at the window. Chapel Street, and a bus going by with its lights on in the afternoon dark.

"Teaches," she said.

"A teacher, your father will be pleased." There was the sound of a pot being moved on the stove. "Bring him for Thanksgiving."

"Maybe," Ruth said. "It's early."

She hung up and sat with her hand on the receiver. Her finger ached where she had wound the cord too tight.

She had not lied, exactly. She had let a pronoun go by without correcting it, the way you let a word go by in a translation when the honest version would take a paragraph and nobody was paying for paragraphs. It sat in her the rest of the day like a bad meal.

* * *

The telephone rang at ten on a Wednesday night in the third week of October.

Ruth was in her slip with her hair wet, eating crackers over the sink. She let it ring twice, because nobody called at ten except the wrong number who wanted someone named Sal. Then she picked it up.

"This is Diana Mercer."

Ruth put the cracker down.

"I'm sorry for the hour," Diana said. "I was rereading my notes on your deed, and there's a word in the third paragraph I'm no longer satisfied with."

Her voice on the telephone was lower than in person, and more careful. It sounded as if every word had to be carried a long distance and set down without spilling.

"Which word," Ruth said.

A pause. On the line Ruth could hear the hum of the connection and, under it, a clock ticking in Diana's rooms.

"I don't recall," Diana said. "I had it a moment ago."

Ruth put her forehead against the cool wall beside the telephone and closed her eyes.

"Thursday," Ruth said. "The diner on Whalley, four o'clock."

"I have a seminar until three."

"Then four is fine."

Another pause. The clock ticked.

"Yes," Diana said. "All right, quite."

She hung up before Ruth could say anything else, as if she were afraid of being asked to repeat it.

* * *

The diner on Whalley Avenue had a counter, eight booths and a waitress named Dot who called everybody hon. Ruth got there at a quarter to four. She took the back corner booth with a view of the door and the street and the whole room, because that was where she always sat when she could.

Diana came in at four exactly. She stood inside the door and looked at the counter first and the pie case second. Then she found Ruth, and her shoulders came down half an inch.

She did not take off her coat. She sat across from Ruth in it, upright, with her hands folded on the table.

"You came," Ruth said.

"I said I would."

"You said quite. I didn't know if that was yes."

"It was yes." Diana looked at the menu, which was a single laminated card. "It's a word that lets me agree without having to stand directly underneath the agreement."

Ruth laughed. It came out louder than she meant, the Brooklyn laugh, the one her mother said could strip paint, and two men at the counter turned around.

Diana did not look at them. She looked at Ruth. The corner of her mouth went, and this time she let it.

* * *

They had coffee, and then pie, because Dot said the apple was out of the oven and Ruth would not be talked out of it. Diana ate hers in small exact bites, working inward from the crust.

She talked about her work. She was writing a long article on the charters of one Burgundian village across two hundred years, the same fields given and taken back and given again. The same families' names came up in the witness lists generation after generation, and she said she found it soothing.

"Soothing," Ruth said.

"The same people standing in the same field every forty years to watch a thing get written down." Diana turned her cup a quarter turn in its saucer. "I like the persistence. It's proof that a thing happened, even when you can't find the original."

Ruth watched her turn the cup.

"Can I ask you something," Ruth said.

"You'll ask it regardless."

"Why didn't you call for two weeks?"

Diana's eyes went to the window. On Whalley Avenue the light was going, the streetlamps coming on one by one. A man in a hat was walking a dog that kept stopping to examine the curb.

"Because I am thirty-one years old, and I teach at a state college with a dean who has opinions about the moral character of the faculty," Diana said to the window. "Because I live alone in four rooms, and I have arranged those rooms so that there is nothing in them anyone could witness. It took me a long time to arrange it."

"And I'm a witness."

"You are a great deal more than a witness," Diana said. "That's rather the difficulty."

Ruth sat with that. She put her right hand on her left wrist.

"I know what you are," Ruth said. "I'm the same thing, and you don't have to say it."

"I'm not going to say it," Diana said. "Not in a diner on Whalley Avenue."

"Then don't say it. Don't stop calling, either."

Diana looked at Ruth's hand on her wrist. She looked at it for a long time.

"You do that," she said. "With your hand, when you're deciding whether to say a thing."

"Do I?"

"You did it at the fence, twice, and in my office before you asked me to coffee." Diana's voice had gone lower, almost the telephone voice. "You've done it three times since you sat down."

Ruth took her hand away from her wrist and put it flat on the table.

"You watch me very closely," she said.

"I watch everything closely. It's my profession."

"Not like that," Ruth said. "You don't watch the fence like that."

Diana did not answer. Dot came by with the coffeepot and filled both cups without asking. "You two want anything else, hon?" she said, to the space between them.

Diana said no thank you to the coffeepot. When Dot had gone she was looking at the window again. Her hands were folded so tight on the table that the knuckles had gone pale.

* * *

They had coffee every Thursday after that.

November came in wet. The maples in the college lot went bare, the rain ran down the diner windows in sheets, and Dot started wearing a cardigan over her uniform.

Diana came every week at four exactly. She took off her coat on the third Thursday. On the fifth she let Ruth walk her to her car.

It was a gray Rambler, clean inside. Diana stood beside it with her keys in her hand and did not get in.

“Thank you for the coffee,” she said.

“You paid,” Ruth said.

“Then thank you for the company.”

They stood on the wet sidewalk. The rain had stopped and the street shone. The air smelled of wet leaves and the exhaust of a bus pulling away from the corner.

Ruth could have touched her. Diana's hand was right there, holding the keys, and Ruth's hand was a foot away from it. The foot of air between them was the widest thing on Whalley Avenue.

Ruth did not touch her. She had decided around the third Thursday that she would not be the one to cross it. She had found the office hours and left the number and named the diner, and Diana could cross one foot of sidewalk.

Diana got into the Rambler.

She sat behind the wheel without starting the engine. Through the windshield her face was turned forward, toward nothing, the jaw set.

Then the engine started and the headlights came on. The Rambler pulled out onto Whalley and went away toward the hill.

Ruth walked home. It was a long walk and she did not take the bus.

* * *

She told her mother on the second Sunday in December.

She had not planned to. Thanksgiving had come and gone, and she had gone home alone and said the teacher was busy with family, and her mother had looked at her across the turkey with an expression Ruth could not read. Then the train back, and the dry cleaner, and Diana on Thursday asking how Brooklyn had been and listening to the whole answer with her eyes on Ruth's face.

On that Sunday her mother asked about the teacher again.

“Ma,” Ruth said. “The teacher's name is Diana.”

Nothing came down the line.

It was not silence, exactly. Ruth could hear the kitchen in Brooklyn, the radio, the refrigerator going on with its shudder, the dog's nails on the linoleum. What she could not hear was her mother.

“Ma.”

“I heard you,” her mother said.

“I wanted you to know. I didn't want to keep…”

“I have to see to the roast,” her mother said. “Your father sends his love.”

Her voice was perfectly ordinary. It was the voice she used for the butcher and the man who read the gas meter. Then the line clicked.

Ruth stood in her kitchen with the receiver in her hand. After a while it began to make the noise receivers made when you left them off the hook too long, loud and insistent. She put it down.

She sat on the floor with her back against the cabinet under the sink. The solvent smell came up through the boards. She sat there until the windows were dark and her hands were cold.

She did not cry. There was nothing in her organized enough to cry with.

Then she got up and put on her coat.

* * *

Diana lived on the second floor of a brick house on Orange Street. Ruth knew the address because Diana had mentioned it once, in the middle of a sentence about a noisy neighbor. Ruth had kept it the way she kept everything Diana said.

She had never been inside. She stood on the sidewalk and looked up at the windows, where a lamp was on in the front room.

She rang the bell before her hand could go to her wrist.

Diana came down the stairs. Ruth could hear her on them, unhurried, a step at a time. The door opened on Diana in a gray cardigan, with a pencil behind her ear and her reading glasses pushed up on her head.

She looked at Ruth's face and did not say anything at all.

She stepped back from the door.

* * *

The front room was books, everywhere, shelved and stacked and laid open face down on the arm of the only chair. There was a desk under the window covered in index cards in neat rows, and a typewriter with a page in it. The radiator was ticking.

What Ruth had not expected was how clean it was. Diana's rooms were too full to be tidy, but they were clean the way a place is clean when someone has lived in it alone for years and never once had to explain anything in it to anyone.

There were no photographs. There was one cup on the drainboard, washed and upside down.

Diana put the kettle on without asking. Ruth stood in the middle of the front room with her coat on.

“Sit,” Diana said from the kitchen.

“There's only one chair.”

A pause. “Then sit in it.”

Ruth moved the open book from the arm of the chair, keeping it at the page, and sat. The chair was still warm.

Diana had been sitting in it with the book and the lamp and the radiator, alone on a Sunday night, the way she must have sat on a thousand Sunday nights. Ruth was sitting in the warmth she had left.

Diana came in with two cups. She put one in Ruth's hands and closed Ruth's fingers around it with her own, briefly, the first time she had ever touched her. Then she took her own cup to the desk and stood beside it, facing the window.

“Tell me,” Diana said.

* * *

Ruth told her.

She told it to Diana's back, which was easier. The roast. Your father sends his love. The noise the receiver made when you left it off the hook.

She told it in order, the way she would have translated it. She did not leave anything out and she did not add anything.

Diana stood at the window and listened.

When Ruth finished, the radiator ticked. A car went by on Orange Street and its lights went across the ceiling and down the far wall.

“You shouldn't have told her,” Diana said. Her voice was quiet and exact. “There was nothing to tell, we have had coffee.”

“I know.”

“Seven Thursdays, a slice of pie, a walk to a car.” Diana's hand had found the edge of the desk and was holding it. “You've told your mother about a slice of pie.”

“I didn't tell her about pie,” Ruth said. “I told her about me.”

Diana said nothing.

Ruth put the cup down on the floor beside the chair. Her hands had started to shake, a fine tremor in the fingers she could not stop, and she pressed them flat against her knees.

“I'm tired,” she said. “I'm not angry, I want you to know I'm not angry, I'm tired.”

Her voice was going and she let it go. “I found your office hours and the diner and I sat in the back booth seven times watching the door. I walked you to your car three times and I did not reach for you, because I wanted, once, for you to be the one who reached.”

Diana's hand was white on the edge of the desk.

“I've been reaching for you since the fence,” Ruth said. “I don't mind reaching, I'm good at it. But I would like, once, not to have to.”

The car lights went across the ceiling again, another car, going the other way. In the kitchen the kettle, left on a low flame, began to tick as the water settled in the bottom of it.

Diana turned around.

* * *

She did not look at the window or the bookshelves or the floor. She looked at Ruth. It was the look from the fence, the one she gave to anything she wanted to see exactly as it was, and she held it until Ruth's breath stopped somewhere under her ribs and stayed there.

Then Diana crossed the room.

It was four steps. Ruth counted them. Diana went down on her knees in front of the chair, on the bare boards, in the cardigan with the pencil still behind her ear.

She put her hands up and found Ruth's face and held it.

Her hands were cold from the window. Her thumbs were on Ruth's cheekbones and her palms along Ruth's jaw. She held Ruth's face the way a person holds a thing she has decided she will not drop.

“Hello,” Diana said.

Ruth's eyes had filled. She did not try to do anything about them.

“Hello,” she said.

“I'm not good at this,” Diana said. “I've had a great deal of practice at the opposite.”

Her voice had lost its clauses. It was a voice Ruth had never heard from her, plain and low, with nothing standing in front of it.

“I know,” Ruth said.

“You'll have to be patient with me.”

“I've been patient with you for three months,” Ruth said. “I translate for a living. I'm used to things that don't want to come into English.”

Diana laughed. It came out of her short and surprised, as if it had been shaken loose. She put her forehead against Ruth's forehead and stayed there.

Then she kissed her.

It was not careful. Ruth had thought it would be careful, if it ever came, a thing carried a long distance and set down without spilling.

Diana kissed her the way she read a page she cared about, completely, without hurry. Ruth put her hands in Diana's hair, and the pencil fell from behind her ear and rolled away across the boards. Neither of them went after it.

* * *

Later Diana turned off the kettle. It had boiled dry and the bottom had scorched, and the kitchen smelled of hot metal. She stood looking at it with an expression of mild academic disappointment.

"That was my mother's," she said.

"I'll buy you another."

"It was a terrible kettle," Diana said. "She'll be pleased I've finally ruined it."

She came back into the front room. Ruth was still in the chair.

Diana did not kneel this time. She stood beside the chair, and after a moment she put her hand on Ruth's shoulder and left it there.

"Your mother," Diana said.

"I know."

"She may not come round."

"I know that too."

Diana's thumb moved once across the top of Ruth's shoulder, through the wool of the coat Ruth had never taken off.

"Write to her," Diana said. "Not now, in a few weeks. Tell her the truth plainly, in as few words as the truth will go into, and then let it sit."

"And if she doesn't answer?"

"A letter is a document," Diana said. "It bears witness. Whether she answers it is hers to decide, but no one can say it didn't happen."

* * *

Ruth wrote the letter the week after New Year's. It was one page.

She read it to Diana on a Tuesday evening in the front room on Orange Street. There were two chairs now, the second one bought from a junk shop on State Street and carried up the stairs between them, swearing, on a Saturday in December.

Diana listened with her eyes closed and her reading glasses on top of her head.

"It's good," she said when Ruth finished. "It's honest and it isn't cruel, and those are hard to get onto the same page."

Ruth folded it into the envelope. Her mother's address in Brooklyn, in her own hand, looked like any other address. She had written it on birthday cards, on postcards from summer camp, on letters home from her first year at Barnard.

She mailed it on Wednesday.

No answer came that week. No answer came that month.

In February Ruth wrote a second letter, shorter than the first, and no answer came to that either. Her father wrote once, in his schoolteacher's hand on a sheet of lined paper torn from a pad. Your mother is your mother, it said. Give it time. I love you, Dad.

Ruth kept the note in the drawer of the little table beside the second chair, under the coasters. She took it out sometimes and read it and put it back.

* * *

On a Tuesday in March, Ruth sat in the second chair with a German contract on her knee and read it aloud, because Diana had asked her to.

It was a dull contract, for the sale of a printing press to a firm in Stuttgart. Nobody would want to hear it. Diana wanted to hear it anyway.

She sat in the first chair with her stockinged feet tucked under her and her eyes closed. A cup of tea was going cold on the floor beside her.

“Verpflichtung,” Ruth read.

“Verpflichtung,” Diana said, without opening her eyes. It came out rounder, and longer in the middle.

“That's what I said.”

“That's what a Berliner said.”

“My teacher was from Berlin.”

“So you've told me.” Diana's eyes stayed shut, and her mouth had moved at the corner, and she was not stopping it. “Your teacher had a great many gifts, but patience with vowels was not among them.”

“Don't be a professor at me,” Ruth said.

“I'm in my own chair, in my own rooms, on a Tuesday,” Diana said. “I believe I'm entitled.”

Ruth put the contract down on her knee and looked at her. The lamp was on and the radiator was ticking. Outside on Orange Street a car door slammed and somebody called good night to somebody else.

Diana's face in the lamplight was unguarded, the way it was in the dark and almost never in the day. The jaw was loose and the eyes were closed. Nothing in it was being managed at all.

Ruth's right hand went to her left wrist and rested there.

“What are you deciding,” Diana said, with her eyes still closed.

Ruth laughed. “How do you know I'm deciding anything?”

“I can hear it,” Diana said. “You go quiet in a particular way.”

Ruth looked at her a while longer. Then she took her hand off her wrist and picked up the contract and found her place.

“Nothing,” she said. “I already decided, a long time ago.”

“Quite,” Diana said.

Ruth read on. Diana corrected her twice more before the end of the page, and Ruth defended herself both times, and they argued about who was right.

Diana was right. Ruth did not tell her so, and she did not have to.

The World of Reincarnation

Who's Who

The people of the novel, as you first meet them. Nothing here gives away how anything ends.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Ruth Solomon	A translator, German and French into English, raised in Brooklyn and educated at Barnard. Ten years younger and four inches shorter than Diana. She reads every room from the doorway before she walks into it.
Diana Mercer	A medievalist who teaches at Southern Connecticut State and writes about the abbey of Cluny. Exact, reserved, fond of the word quite, and in the habit of looking at the window instead of the person.
Dr. Frances Webb	A New Haven psychologist with twenty-three years of practice, an office on Prospect Street with sage green wallpaper and an elm outside the window, and a weekend's training in past-life regression she has rarely used.
Dr. David Harmon	The Yale colleague who first sees Diana and Ruth for couples counseling, underlines the word specialist twice, and sends them to Frances.
Father Conneely	The priest Diana returns to in the spring of 1970, a large man in his sixties with a lived-in face and firm views on past-life belief.
Farrell	A retired New Haven police detective who drives a gray Plymouth Fury and parks it legally for hours.
Abrams	Ruth's classmate from Barnard, now a family lawyer in New Haven.
Vera Adelman and Carl	Friends of the couple. Vera hosts the backyard ceremony under the oak in June 1963. Carl is briefly ordained to perform it and sweats through his collar.

Some of the lives the regression sessions reach.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Werner Kessler	An Abwehr captain in occupied Lyon with a file he has kept on his desk for four days.
Agnes Parr	A former Shropshire schoolteacher nursing on Ward C of a casualty clearing station in 1916.
Karl Mayer and Marta Voss	A Viennese lecturer in classical philology, in analysis on a horsehair couch, and a visiting scholar from Berlin who studies the Isis cult at Delos.
Étienne Marchand and Isabelle de Miremont	A Revolutionary deputy who believes completely, and the comte's daughter he met in a Marais salon in 1784.

Hélène Vasseur and Adélaïde de Villiers	Two women of Madame Rossard's salon in 1750 who argue about Locke by the fire before anyone else arrives.
Ezra Morse and Mary Aldrich	Neighbors in Salem Village in 1692. He has sat two rows behind her in the meetinghouse for twenty-nine years.
Marco Danti and Caterina	A reliable Florentine painter of 1463 and the companion who sits with his patron's wife during her sittings.
Zaynab bint Khalid and Malik	A scholar in seventh-century Basra who gives the difficult problems first, and the student who walks from Medina to learn from her.
Gunnar	A Norse sea captain who looks at the cliff instead of the settlement.
Thalia and Gaius Marcus Varro	A scholar of the Museum at Alexandria and a Roman soldier billeted in a house with a library.
Myrto and Phaedra	Two Athenian women who have argued on the same hillside for most of their adult lives.
Mira and Adina	A couple in a mud brick house in Çatalhöyük. Mira always wakes first.

In this story only: Dot, the waitress at the diner on Whalley Avenue, and the old man in Woodbridge with his brother's deed. Ruth's mother and father are named in the novel only by their silence and their telegram.

Timeline

From the first chapter to the first session. The novel runs from 78,000 BCE to the Moon.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
82,000 years of lives	The span of history the novel depicts. Two souls keep finding each other across it.
78,000 BCE, East Africa	A woman comes back to camp with a steenbok across her shoulders and sees a stranger from the north by the fire.
65,000 to 30,000 BCE	An Arabian shore with shellfish beds, a painted cave in southern France, a hard winter on the Siberian steppe.
7,500 BCE	A morning in Çatalhöyük.
1620 BCE	Thera, as the mountain begins to speak.
399 BCE	Athens, the year of the trial of Socrates.
30 BCE	Alexandria, under the new Roman administration.
406 CE	Mediolanum, emptying as the tribes cross the frozen Rhine.
648 CE	Basra, a house with a blue door on the street behind the market.

900 CE	The Irish coast and the Norse settlement on Orkney.
1348 and 1463	Florence, in the plague year and a century later.
1521	Tenochtitlan and the great market at Tlatelolco.
1692 to 1793	Salem Village, a Paris salon in 1750, and Paris again in 1793.
1855	A cotton plantation in Bolivar County, Mississippi.
1894 to 1895	Vienna, and a doctor who keeps his office cold.
1916 and 1943	A casualty clearing station in the Pas-de-Calais. A green door in occupied Lyon.
Autumn 1960	Ruth Solomon, three weeks in New Haven, meets Diana Mercer at the fence in Vera Adelman's backyard. *Office Hours* takes place across that autumn and winter.
December 1960	Ruth tells her mother. Her mother's silence begins and holds for three years. Ruth writes her three letters.
June 15, 1963	Twelve friends, folding chairs, paper lanterns and a listing cake. Diana and Ruth marry under the oak. Four days later they sail on the Queen Mary.
1967	Diana's mother dies in Hartford without having come to the house on East Rock Road.
Winter 1969	The worst fight, which starts over nothing.
March 1970	Diana's physician gives her a diagnosis. She waits four days to tell Ruth.
October 1970	Harmon's referral reaches Frances Webb. On a Thursday, with the light going at four, Diana and Ruth climb the stairs to her office on Prospect Street.

Places

- **Vera Adelman's backyard**: New Haven. A fence, an oak tree, paper lanterns strung between them.
- **The house on East Rock Road**: Bought with what Ruth's grandmother left her. The kitchen is where the hard things get said.
- **Prospect Street**: Frances's second-floor office in a stone building that was once a private home. Two chairs at an angle, a radiator that knocks, the elm.
- **Edgehill Road**: Frances's third-floor apartment, too many books, and a blue ceramic bowl for her keys.
- **Southern Connecticut State**: Where Diana teaches medieval history.
- **The overhang**: A low shelf of rock in East Africa where a group shelters around its fire.
- **The green door**: On a narrow street off the Place des Jacobins in Lyon, the paint peeling at the lower right corner.
- **Berggasse**: A street in Vienna's ninth district.
- **Tlatelolco**: The great market beside Tenochtitlan.
- **Ward C**: Thirty-two beds at a casualty clearing station in the Pas-de-Calais.

Glossary

- **Regression**: Frances's method: a breathing sequence and a guided descent that takes a patient back past childhood, into material she cannot account for.
- **The other register**: Frances's name for the voice her patients use when they are under, flatter and older than their own.
- **The arm**: A right arm that rises without being told to, the palm turned toward someone's face, and holds there. Nobody making it knows they have done it.
- **Folie à deux**: A shared delusion between two people. In 1970 it is also a convenient label for two women whose primary attachment is to each other.
- **Quite**: Diana's word. A way of agreeing without standing directly underneath the agreement.
- **Otra vez**: Spanish for another time.
- **Urkunde**: German for a document, a deed, a charter. A thing that bears witness.
- **Charter**: A medieval record of a gift, with the names of its witnesses at the bottom, so that no one could say later that it had not happened.

Read the Novel

Office Hours tells how Ruth Solomon and Diana Mercer began. Reincarnation follows them ten years later into Frances Webb's office, and back across 82,000 years of lives in which they keep finding each other.



Reincarnation:
A Love Story for the Ages

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