

THE SECRET LANGUAGE

"The Fight"

Act Two, Part B

[Draft 2]

EXT. WHATCOM COMMUNITY COLLEGE - PARKING LOT - DAY

SUPER: SPRING, 2020

A graduation nobody planned: folding tables, traffic cones, a hand-lettered banner sagging between two light poles. Cars crawl through in a line, honking. Masked FACULTY wave from six feet apart.

The family minivan idles forward. Mary, nineteen, in the passenger seat in a gown. In the back, between Izzy and a helium balloon: SECRET -- and someone has put the mortarboard on the dog. It sits between her ears at a scholarly angle. She wears it like she earned it. Arguably she did.

A masked DEAN leans in the window with a diploma and a gloved fist-bump.

DEAN

(muffled)

Congratulations, Mary. You too,
Secret. Whole office follows
her.

They pull through. Horns. Izzy whoops out the window. Ted watches his daughter in the mirror, diploma in her lap, dog's chin on her shoulder.

TED

Associate of Arts.
(beat; to himself,
mostly)
Step one.

MARY

(to Secret, adjusting

the mortarboard)
You did the empty rooms. You
should get two of these.

Steps are his. Rooms are hers.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - NIGHT - MONTHS LATER

Mary at the table, laptop open. The screen glow on her face. Lisa mid-kitchen, Ted at the counter -- both of them held in that parental gravity of pretending not to hover.

MARY

Waitlist.

Silence. Izzy, on the stairs, stops.

TED

Waitlist isn't no. Waitlist is -- statistically, waitlist is a strong maybe. There's an appeal process. A letter. We can --

Mary closes the laptop and goes upstairs, Secret rising from the floor to follow, and the sound of her door isn't a slam. It's worse. It's quiet.

Ted looks at Lisa: the old fear, back in the room like weather off the water.

LISA

Give her tonight.

INT. TED'S OFFICE - NIGHT - DAYS LATER

Two pieces of paper on the desk. Ted holds one; his reading glasses are on.

HIS -- we glimpse it -- is typeset, structured:
"...continued interest... demonstrated capacity for rigorous coursework... unique circumstances..."

The one in his hand is Mary's. Handwritten, then typed, short. We catch only fragments over his shoulder --

"...I trained my dog in your empty classrooms at night before I ever sat in one of them. I know how to get ready for a room..."

"...We do not need it to be easy. We have never once had it easy..."

Ted stops reading. Sits back.

TED
You wrote "we."

MARY
(in the doorway,
Secret at her knee)
It's true.

Ted looks at his own letter -- the good bones, the right words, the sentences with load ratings -- and crumples it, one hand, without ceremony.

TED
Send yours.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - DAY

Mary's phone, face up on the counter, an email open. The word "Congratulations" visible from space.

IZZY is screaming. Lisa has both hands on her head. Ted is reading the email out loud for the third time as if it requires verification. Secret is barking at the joy, tail helicoptering --

Mary stands in the middle of it, nodding once, the surgery-is-scheduled nod --

-- and then Izzy grabs her and jumps, and something breaks open, and Mary is jumping too, both of them shrieking like the party lawn twelve years ago, the dog orbiting them, and Ted gets it on his phone, crooked, half of it his thumb, the way the true ones always are.

EXT. UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON - RED SQUARE - DAY

SUPER: FALL, 2021

Brick as far as the eye can see, and STUDENTS, a migration of them, and in the middle of the river: Mary and Secret, walking their line. The tuck-trained calm at full scale. Kids part around them; half of them do a double-take --

PASSING STUDENT

-- oh my god, that's the
PAINTING dog --

Secret, on duty, doesn't so much as flick an ear. Mary walks like she owns the place. She has always walked like that. It's just that now the place seems to agree.

INT. MARY'S APARTMENT - U DISTRICT - DAY

Small, top-floor, slanted ceilings. Boxes. Lisa assembling a bed frame with the focus of a woman who needs her hands full.

Mary is placing things. Not unpacking -- placing. The corkboard: leash, clicker, ribbons. The flower painting, hung first, dead center, the nail found on the first try.

LISA

I took a place in Wallingford
through Christmas. Month to
month.

(off Mary's look;
pre-armored)

I'm not hovering. It's twenty
minutes. I'm a twenty-minute
person until winter break,
that's all, and then I'm a
ninety-minute person again.

Mary looks at her mother a moment. Whatever moves across her face has no performance in it.

MARY

Twenty is good.

Lisa nods and keeps her eyes on the Allen wrench, and turns the next bolt considerably harder than the bed frame requires.

INT. UW - JAPANESE 101 - DAY

PROFESSOR MORI (60s, precise, kind) writes kana on the board, speaking a full sentence of Japanese at native speed -- then, in English:

PROF. MORI
By December that sentence
will be yours. Today we
start smaller --

MARY
(from the third row;
the sentence back,
complete, the pitch
and fall of it
exact -- an echo
with her voice
inside it)

The room turns. Prof. Mori stops with the chalk in the air.

PROF. MORI
You've studied?

MARY
No.

PROF. MORI
Then where did you hear
Japanese?

MARY
Here. You just said it.

Beat. Prof. Mori looks at her -- the look, we know it by now: the birdsong look, Ted at the piano, Carol at the pen. Under the desk, across Mary's feet, the dog sighs the sigh of the only creature on earth who finds none of this surprising.

EXT. UW CAMPUS - PATH ALONG RAINIER VISTA - DUSK

Late autumn. Wet leaves pasted to brick. Girl and dog walking home in the long gold light, an ordinary perfect evening --

-- and Mary stops.

Nothing happened. To any eye on this path, nothing whatsoever happened: a dog trotting at a knee.

She watches Secret take four more steps.

There. A sixteenth-note late on the left hind. A nothing. A grain of sand in a gearbox that has run silent for seven years.

MARY

Secret.

Secret circles back, sits, looks up: what's the game? Mary kneels. Runs her hands down the left leg -- hock, stifle, toes -- pressing gently. Secret licks her chin: I'm great, this is great, are we doing something?

Mary looks at the leg. Looks at the dog's eyes. The eyes say nothing is wrong.

For once, the eyes and the body are saying two different things. It's the first lie Secret has ever told her, and Secret doesn't even know she's telling it.

INT. MARY'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Mary on the floor against the couch, phone to her ear. Secret asleep beside her, the left hind leg stretched out. Mary's eyes don't leave the leg.

INTERCUT - FAMILY HOME KITCHEN: Ted at the sink, phone on speaker, Lisa drying dishes.

TED

Dogs tweak stuff, Mare. She's seven, she jumps like a maniac off that porch --

MARY

It doesn't go away. It's three weeks.

TED

Okay, so a soft-tissue thing. They take forever. Did you rest her? If you rest her two

weeks and it resolves, that
tells you --

MARY

I rested her. It doesn't
change. It's the same amount
every day.

A tiny pause on the line. That detail -- the SAME
amount, measured daily by an instrument nobody
else owns -- and the ground shifts somewhere under
Ted's paragraph, though the paragraph keeps going:

TED

...Could still be a dozen
things, kiddo. Most of them
are nothing.

MARY

(looking at the leg)
It's not her leg.

TED

What?

MARY

(quiet; the fact,
laid down)
The leg is where it shows.
It's not where it is.

Silence on both ends. In the kitchen, Lisa has
stopped drying the dish.

INT. VETERINARY CLINIC - SEATTLE - DAY

SUPER: JANUARY, 2022

A small exam room. Secret on the table, cheerful,
nosing the VET's pocket where the treats live. The
VET (40s) has a laptop open to lab results, and
the particular stillness of someone who has
rehearsed a sentence in the hallway.

VET

The bloodwork came back. I
want to walk you through
what we're seeing --

MARY

Say it plainly.

The vet looks at her -- nineteen, alone, one hand resting on the dog's shoulder -- and grants her the respect of the plain thing:

VET

It's leukemia, Mary.

The room holds. Secret, bored with the pocket, turns and licks Mary's wrist.

VET (CONT'D)

Do you want a minute?

MARY

No.

(beat)

What do we do first?

But her hand -- watch her hand on the dog's shoulder. It hasn't moved. It's holding on the way you hold the rail of something moving.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - NIGHT

The drive done in the dark. Mary stands in the kitchen doorway with Secret beside her, keys still in her hand. Ted, Lisa, Izzy -- home from her own freshman year -- around the table. They know she drove up. They don't know why.

MARY

It's leukemia. The bloodwork is -- it's bad.

The kitchen does what kitchens do with a bomb: nothing. Every object exactly where it was.

LISA

Oh, honey --

MARY

I'm pulling out of the quarter. I already emailed. I'm coming home.

(beat)

Dr. Sullivan is here. In

Bellingham. She does bone marrow transplants on dogs. There are two vets in the country who do it and one of them is twelve minutes from this house.

She's not crying. She's laying track, fact by fact, the surgery-is-scheduled voice --

-- and underneath it, if you know where to look -- and this family knows where to look -- the ground is shaking. Izzy starts to cry. Secret crosses to Izzy and leans against her legs, working, already working, and that -- the sight of the sick dog comforting the crying girl -- is the thing that puts Lisa's hand over her mouth.

TED

What does Sullivan need from us?

MARY

Everything.

INT. DR. SULLIVAN'S VETERINARY CLINIC - BELLINGHAM - DAY

A working clinic: linoleum, kennels somewhere, the smell you can almost see. DR. SULLIVAN (50s, forearms like a farrier, zero theater) studies films clipped to a lightbox, Secret's chart thick in her hands.

Mary across from her. Ted and Lisa behind, one seat back.

DR. SULLIVAN

I'll tell you what I tell everyone, and then I'll tell you the other thing.

(beat)

No dog has beaten this. That sentence is true and I hate it. Chemo buys months, usually good ones. That's the standard answer, and it's a real answer.

MARY

And the other thing.

DR. SULLIVAN

The other thing is a full protocol. Chemo here, then radiation and transplant down in California. It's brutal, it's expensive, and nobody can quote you odds because there's no data -- nobody's been far enough to make data.

(she looks at Mary straight)

Somebody's dog goes first. That's how data starts.

Silence. The lightbox hums.

MARY

She's not somebody's dog.

DR. SULLIVAN

(a beat; almost a smile; she's heard about this kid)

No. I don't suppose she is.

INT. FAMILY HOME - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

The whole table, papers everywhere: protocols, estimates. A number circled at the bottom of one page that makes civilians go quiet.

TED

I want to tell you guys something.

(beat)

Nineteen ninety-two, my brother Dan had leukemia. Not the slow kind. They put my marrow in him at Fred Hutchinson -- I was twenty-six, they ran it through my hip with a needle like a tent stake --

IZZY

Uncle DAN? Ski-trip Dan?

TED

Ski-trip Dan. There were twenty people in that cohort. Dan and one other man are alive. He walked out of that building and he's been walking around ever since.

(and here it comes,
the engineer's
sunrise)

And the dog protocol --
Sullivan said it herself --
it descends from that exact
work. Same city. Same
science. Same building,
basically. You see what I'm
--

(he's lit now)
-- the one vet is HERE. The
Hutch is THERE. It's all
sitting right --

IZZY

(phone up, already
building)

I'm doing a GoFundMe. I'm
setting the goal at fifteen
thousand --

LISA

Izzy, people don't --

PING. Izzy freezes. Looks at the phone.

IZZY

...That's Ruby's mom.

(PING)

That's -- I don't know who
that is.

(PING. PING.)

Mom, I posted it forty
seconds ago.

The table leans in around the little screen --
the counter climbing, the names arriving, Dublin
and Dallas and Nagoya, the whole warm waterfall,
the world Mary built with a phone and a dog now
running the other direction --

-- and across the table, outside the light of the phone, MARY. Wrapping a pill in a fold of cheese. Precise. Present tense.

MARY

(to no one; a fact)
She ate all her dinner
tonight.

TED

(folding even this
into the sunrise)
That's the appetite back --
that's the prednisone doing
its -- that's GOOD, that's
the protocol working
already --

Mary doesn't answer. She holds out the cheese. Under the table, gently, an old hand at this, a soft mouth takes it.

Everyone at this table is fighting. Only one of them is doing it in the present tense.

INT. FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT - WEEKS LATER

Izzy asleep on the couch, laptop open, the GoFundMe page glowing: a number with five zeroes in it. Fifty-some thousand messages beneath it.

Ted, passing through, stops. Scrolls, careful not to wake her. We read over his shoulder:

"Secret got my daughter through her treatment. Videos every night in the hospital. Please win this one."

"From Osaka. For the good girl."

"I don't even have a dog."

Ted stands in the dark a while, a man doing math he has no column for.

His phone RINGS: SPENCER.

TED

(low)
Hey, Spence.

SPENCER (V.O.)
(the family cadence:
data first)
So I pulled the veterinary
literature on canine ALL.
Median survival untreated is
weeks; with CHOP protocol
you're looking at months,
but the transplant approach
-- there's a Wisconsin paper
-- it's genuinely novel, the
math isn't zero, Dad --

TED
I know, Spence.

SPENCER (V.O.)
I'm just saying it isn't
zero.

TED
I know. I did the same
reading.

A pause on the line. Two modelers, models
exhausted.

SPENCER (V.O.)
(smaller; the real
call)
How's Mary?

Ted looks toward the stairs. The long pause IS
the answer, and Spencer, to his credit, doesn't
fill it.

INT. FAMILY HOME - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Ted's laptop: a spreadsheet, beautiful, color-
coded. Platelets. White counts. Trend lines like
gentle hills.

TED
Look -- platelets are up
eleven percent over the
two-week average. And the

white count's holding. If
this holds through Friday,
Sullivan said the LA window
opens --

Across the room, not looking at the screen: Mary.
She's watching Secret drink from the water bowl.
Just a dog drinking water.

MARY

She's worse.

TED

The numbers literally --

MARY

She's drinking wrong. She
rests in the middle now.
Yesterday it was once. It's
three times today.

Ted looks at the dog. The dog is drinking. It
looks -- to him, to us, to anyone -- like a dog
drinking. He looks at his trend lines, gentle
hills, eleven percent.

Friday's labs will side with Mary. We won't need
to see them; his face already knows it, and hates
knowing it, and --

TED

(quiet; laying down
the toolbox all the
way, this time for
good)

I believe you.

Mary looks over at him. Something passes -- the
table's length, twenty years, no words for it in
either language.

MARY

Keep doing the numbers, Dad.
Sullivan needs them.

She goes to the water bowl and sits down on the
floor next to the drinking dog. Ted watches the
two of them.

Then he pulls the laptop close and gets back to

work on the numbers. It is what he has. It is,
at last, exactly the size of what it is.

INT./EXT. THE FIGHT - VARIOUS - COMPRESSED

Not a montage. Three rooms, held:

-- SULLIVAN'S CLINIC, TREATMENT ROOM. Secret on the table for an IV, and MARY working: her hands on the dog through the whole stick, one long steady signal. Secret watches only Mary. Doesn't flinch. The tech looks at Sullivan: they've never had one like this.

-- THE STAIRS, HOME, NIGHT. Secret at the bottom, looking up at the climb like weather on a mountain. She gathers -- and Mary is already there, arms under, seventy pounds and lighter than last week, carrying her up. Secret rides it with dignity. This has become the arrangement, and neither of them has ever remarked on it.

-- MARY'S BEDROOM. The dog bed moved beside the bed, then ONTO the bed. Pills in cheese lined on the nightstand like a tiny city skyline. Mary adjusting the blanket around a sleeping dog with the precision she once aimed at crayfish, at chords, at petals. Attention is her love language. It has never had this much work to do.

SUPER: ONE WEEK TO CALIFORNIA.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Late. One light. Mary at the sink, washing the med syringes, and --

-- it gets her. Mid-motion, out of nowhere: her shoulders. The sob comes up silent, the way you cry when the house is asleep and you're the one holding the line. She grips the sink and rides it, water running, back to the room --

Behind her: the CLICK of nails on the floor.

She freezes. Wipes her face fast --

Too late. Secret is up -- up out of the warm bed

she can barely leave, walked herself down the hall on that failing chassis -- and now, in the kitchen doorway, thin, patchy, magnificent, she plants herself. Looks at Mary --

-- and OFFERS. A spin. Half of one -- the body can't finish it -- she wobbles, catches herself, squares up, and lifts the PAW instead. Holds it up in the air, trembling with the effort, eyes on Mary's face --

The old ones. The behaviors that always, always changed this particular weather. She is reading her girl -- grief coming off her like heat -- and she is doing her job. She has never once stopped doing her job.

Mary stands at the sink, dish towel in her hands, and reads the whole thing in one pass, all the way down:

The dog is holding the rope.

The dog will hold the rope as long as Mary is on the other end of it. That's the whole message, delivered in a trembling paw: as long as you need me, I will not let go, no matter what it costs, and it is costing --

Mary makes her face calm. It takes everything we have watched her learn in twenty years of this movie, and she does it in four seconds. She crosses, takes the paw, sets it gently down.

MARY

Good girl.

Treat from her pocket. The soft mouth. Secret's tail moves: weather changed. Job done.

Mary sits down on the kitchen floor and gathers the dog into her lap, and over Secret's shoulder, where the dog can't see it, her face is not calm at all.

Hold there. The two of them on the floor. The water still running in the sink.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Later. The house dead quiet.

Mary lifts Secret onto the bed -- the practiced arrangement -- and lies down facing her. Nose to nose. The lamp low.

Secret's eyes on Mary's eyes. Nothing between them. There has never been anything between them; that was the whole thing, from the pen in Oregon to here: two creatures at zero distance.

Mary's hand on the dog's cheek.

A long time.

MARY
(a whisper; four
words)
I will be okay.

ON SECRET.

Her face. Only her face.

The ears, which have been holding, settle. The brow, which has been working, unknots. Something that has been carried a long way is set down -- you can see it leave the body, an exhale that starts at the eyes and travels the whole spine, the weight going out of a working dog at the end of the shift --

-- and her eyes close.

Not death. Sleep. Real sleep, the deep kind, the first in weeks -- released.

Mary keeps her hand where it is. Watches her sleep.

We stay on the two of them, the lamp low, as long as we can bear it, and then a little longer.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - MORNING

Gray light through the curtains. The room

ordinary. The tiny skyline of cheese-wrapped pills on the nightstand, unneeded.

Mary, awake, lying exactly where she was.

Her hand is still on Secret's ribs.

They aren't rising.

She doesn't move. She doesn't call out. She stays, hand riding the stillness the way it rode seven years of sleep -- up and down, up and down, and now: the third thing. The one the wave teaches. She stays.

INT. FAMILY HOME - UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - MORNING

The kibble bowl at the kitchen door, downstairs, untouched -- Lisa, holding it, looks up the stairs, and the house tells her. Houses know.

She climbs. Ted behind her.

Mary's door is open an inch.

They see.

Lisa's hand comes up -- to her mouth, then flat against Ted's chest, holding one of them back, it isn't clear which. They do not go in. There is nothing to ask and for once, God help them, nobody asks it.

Ted lowers himself down the wall of the hallway until he is sitting on the floor -- the hallway, this exact hallway, the one where all his sentences used to live -- and Lisa stands in the doorway of her daughter's grief with the bowl still in her hand.

At the end of the hall, in pajamas: Izzy. Twenty years old and eight years old, both at once.

Nobody moves. The house is very quiet.

We have heard this house quiet once before, and so has this family, and that -- THAT -- is the thing moving under this floor like a current

under sand: not only what is lost, but what may
now come back.

INSIDE THE ROOM: Mary and Secret, girl and dog,
the hand on the ribs.

The wave, on the sand.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT TWO