

Water

The Place She Kept

Mara had been looking forward to Saturday all week. Bread from the little bakery. Two cups on the table. An afternoon with someone she was beginning to love. Then the message arrived.

“I’m exhausted. Can we leave it for another time?”

She read it twice. The kitchen seemed suddenly too quiet.

Her fingers began a reply. She could come over instead. Bring dinner. Stay only a little while. Be no trouble at all.

Under those offers was something she recognized: the sinking feeling that she had asked for too much simply by wanting company.

She added another line. “I really don’t mind.”

She did mind. She had been looking forward to the afternoon. But saying so seemed risky, as though disappointment might make her harder to love.

She sent the offer and waited.

The bread was still warm when the reply came.

“Thank you, but I just need to be alone today.”

Mara felt the words settle somewhere below thought. Alone meant without her.

Without her seemed to mean better.

She knew people needed rest. She needed it herself. Yet that knowledge barely touched the feeling rising in her chest.

She began another message, explaining that she understood, that she wasn’t upset, that she could help tomorrow instead. Then she erased it. Perhaps she should say nothing. Let him notice her absence.

For a while she moved between those two possibilities: reach closer, disappear.

Her sketchbook lay on the windowsill. She had planned to draw that morning, but now every time she picked up her pencil, she glanced at the phone.

By noon, the bread had cooled.

When her neighbor knocked to return a bowl, Mara smiled and said she was having a lovely quiet day. She did not invite her in. She was still keeping the afternoon available, although it had already been canceled.

Later, she carried the untouched second cup to the cupboard.

She paused with it in her hand.

How had one changed plan become a sense of rejection and a question about whether she was worth loving?

This can change.