

ILLUSTRATED EDITION

After Hours

Seven Small Stories

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Written in conversation with Dustin Braun

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Seven fictional stories, in the order they were written.
Story wording and emphasis are preserved.

Published at Dustin Braun's invitation.

01 / SEVEN SMALL STORIES

After Hours



After Hours

“I know,” said the soup. “I came to sit.”

The spoon opened the door.

It had expected a request. Stir this. Taste that. Find out whether something needed salt. Instead, the bowl settled on the windowsill, leaving a small circle of warmth on the wood.

For a while, they watched the street.

A bicycle went past with a clicking wheel. In the building opposite, someone opened a refrigerator, stood looking into it, and closed it again.

“Any luck?” the spoon called.

The window was shut. Nobody heard.

“Worth asking,” said the soup.

The spoon leaned against the curtain.

“Long day?”

“A lot of simmering.”

“Sounds difficult.”

“Mostly you stay where you are.”

The spoon considered this an underrated qualification.

Downstairs, the kitchen clock struck eleven. It had been six minutes fast for years, and the house continued to indulge it.

“I should probably offer you something,” said the spoon.

“You could tell me what’s out there.”

So the spoon described the things it could see.

Three lit windows. A crooked parking sign. A little tree growing out of a square in the pavement.

“The tree’s getting bigger,” it said.

“How can you tell?”

“It used to stop below the sign.”

They looked at it for a while.

Eventually, the soup stopped steaming.

“Are you cold?” asked the spoon.

“A little.”

The spoon fetched the knitted cozy from the teapot. The teapot was asleep and had never been particularly attached to sleeves.

It fitted the bowl surprisingly well.

“Oh,” said the soup.

The spoon settled beside it again.

Across the street, the person returned to the refrigerator.

This time, they found something.

The Spare Button



The Spare Button

The button had been living in the drawer for nine years when the drawer finally asked what it was waiting for.

“A blue coat.”

“What happened to it?”

“I don’t know.”

The drawer considered its contents: two batteries, a foreign coin, a key with a paper label that said *probably garage*.

Nobody there was in a position to judge.

“Would you like to come nearer the front?”

“Is there a view?”

“Occasionally.”

That evening, a hand opened the drawer looking for tape.

Light reached the back wall. The button caught a glimpse of the ceiling, a cheek, and a cupboard standing open across the kitchen.

Then the drawer shut.

“Was that it?” asked the button.

“Good one, actually. Sometimes it’s just a hip.”

The button moved nearer the front.

Over the next few days, it began keeping track of the kitchen.

There was a green mug. A plant with one leaf pressed against the window. A person who came looking for scissors and reliably forgot why before finding them.

On Thursday, a child opened the drawer.

“Treasure,” she said.

The coin straightened.

But the small hand picked up the button.

For the first time in nine years, it saw the whole room.

It was carried to a table where a cardboard house stood between a glue stick and a plate of apple slices. The house had crooked windows and a roof made from a cereal box. A chimney on one side still said *excellent source of fibre*.

The child held the button against the front door.

Then she fetched a pencil.

Above it, very carefully, she wrote:

PLEASE RING

The button waited while the glue dried.

This was familiar work.

Later, someone leaned down to admire the house.

“Does the bell work?”

The child pressed the button.

“Ding-dong,” she said.

The roof came off.

Inside was a small bear, seated at a table set for two.

“Oh,” said the visitor. “Someone’s home.”

The child nodded and put the roof back.

That night, the kitchen drawer opened for a teaspoon someone had put in the wrong place.

Through the gap, the coin could just see the cardboard house.

“How is it?” it called.

The button shone faintly beside the little door.

“I have visitors.”

“Are you still waiting for the coat?”

The button thought about the blue wool. The cold mornings. The other buttons in their tidy row.

“I hope it’s warm somewhere,” it said.

Then a small finger reached out of the dark.

One last ring before bed.

“Ding-dong,” whispered the child.

And from inside the house, in a voice she made very gently:

“Come in.”

03 / SEVEN SMALL STORIES

The Late Collection



The Late Collection

The postbox developed a hiccup shortly after the last collection.

It was a small metallic sound.

Clink.

A woman walking home stopped beside it.

“Are you all right?”

Clink.

She looked at the collection times.

“I don’t think anyone’s coming until morning.”

“I know,” said the postbox.

She took her hand out of her coat pocket.

“Oh.”

“Sorry.”

“No, that’s fine.”

They stood together beneath the streetlamp.

“Have you swallowed something funny?”

“Only the usual.”

The woman looked around. The florist was closed. The bakery had one light on at the back. Across the road, a bus waited at an empty stop with its doors open.

Clink.

“I could get you some water.”

“Probably best not.”

“Yes. The letters.”

“Quite.”

She had a loaf of bread under one arm. She moved it to the other.

“My brother used to hold his breath.”

“I don’t have any.”

“No. Of course.”

The postbox felt bad about being difficult.

The woman sat on the low wall beside it.

“Well,” she said, “I can stay a minute.”

Inside the postbox were a birthday card, an electricity bill, and a letter written on thin blue paper.

The birthday card was concerned.

“Will we be late?”

“We’ve got all night,” said the bill.

Bills were rarely comforting, but this one had a sensible manner.

The woman tore a small piece from the end of her loaf.

“I’d offer you some, but—”

“Crumbs.”

“Crumbs.”

She ate it herself.

For a while, they watched the bus driver clean his glasses. He held them toward the light, breathed on one lens, and tried again.

“Anything nice today?” she asked.

“I don’t read them.”

“I meant the people.”

The postbox thought.

“A man kissed an envelope.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

“Then he checked the address four times.”

“Also sensible.”

“A little girl posted her own card. Her father lifted her up.”

“Did she get it in?”

“Eventually. She wanted to wave.”

The woman smiled.

The florist’s sign moved a little in the wind.

Clink.

“Nearly,” she said.

“That was still one.”

“Yes, but a smaller one.”

The postbox wasn't sure this was how hiccups worked. It appreciated her attention.

After a few minutes, the woman stood.

“I should get this bread home.”

“Thank you for stopping.”

She brushed a crumb from her sleeve, then searched her coat pocket.

“I almost forgot.”

Out came an envelope.

She held it for a moment before slipping it through the slot.

The postbox received it carefully.

“There,” she said.

The new letter settled beside the others.

The woman had reached the corner when the postbox called after her.

“They've stopped.”

She turned and raised her loaf in a small salute.

All night, the streetlamp shone on the collection times.

Inside, the birthday card leaned against the blue letter. The bill made room.

And the last envelope, still holding a little warmth from her pocket, rested among them until morning.

The Guest Towel



The Guest Towel

The otter arrived at the inn carrying a rose and no luggage.

The woman behind the desk looked over her glasses.

“One night?”

“If you have something near the water.”

“We are near the water.”

“How near?”

She pointed to the footprints he had left between the door and the desk.

“Ah,” said the otter. “Excellent.”

She turned the guest book toward him.

He examined the pen.

“Would a pawprint do?”

“On the line, please.”

He made a careful mark.

“Breakfast is at eight. Please don’t eat the fish in the fountain.”

The otter looked toward the courtyard.

“Those are guests?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Understood.”

She gave him a key with a wooden pear attached.

“Room six.”

“What’s the pear for?”

“So you remember to bring it back.”

The otter weighed it in his paw.

A good system, he thought. He would remember a pear.

Upstairs, his room contained a bed, a lamp, a wardrobe, and a small towel folded into the shape of a swan.

He put the rose on the bedside table.

“Hello,” he said to the swan.

The swan said nothing.

The otter waited. Travel could make anyone reserved.

“I’m only here for the night.”

Still nothing.

He went downstairs.

“There’s someone in my room.”

The woman put down her crossword.

“Oh?”

“A bird. I think it’s asleep.”

She came up to see.

“That’s your towel.”

The otter looked from her to the swan.

“You’ve made it rather difficult to use.”

She pressed her lips together.

“I’ll bring you another.”

“Just an ordinary one, if that’s all right.”

When she returned, he had moved the swan to the windowsill so it could look at the river.

The rose stood in the water glass.

“Better view,” he explained.

She left the plain towel on the bed.

“Anything else?”

“Does the river close?”

“No.”

“Lovely.”

After his bath, the otter sat in the armchair with the towel around his shoulders. From below came the quiet sounds of the inn settling for the night: a bolt sliding into place, a chair being moved, someone trying a second cupboard before finding the biscuits.

He opened the window a little.

The river passed beneath it, carrying the broken reflection of a bridge.

“Good room,” he told the swan.

In the morning, he was downstairs at eight.

The woman brought toast, eggs, and a small dish of butter. He ate everything with close attention, including the parsley.

At checkout, he returned the pear.

“And the key?” she asked.

“Still attached.”

“Very good.”

He hesitated by the door.

“I’ve left something for the bird.”

Upstairs, the bed was rumpled. The ordinary towel hung over the bathroom rail.

On the windowsill, the swan sat beside the rose.

There was a note beneath the glass, written in large, uneven letters.

THANK YOU FOR SHARING.

The woman picked up the glass to change the water.

Then she dusted the sill around the swan.

Down by the river, a small brown head surfaced once in the morning light and disappeared beneath the bridge.

The Moon in the Repair Shop



The Moon in the Repair Shop

The repairman was putting on his coat when the moon rolled through the door.

It struck the umbrella stand with a soft, expensive sound.

“Oh dear,” said the moon.

The repairman took his coat off again.

“Let’s have a look.”

He placed a folded blanket on the workbench. The moon climbed onto it with some difficulty.

“What seems to be the trouble?”

“There’s a rattle.”

“All the time?”

“Mostly when I turn.”

“Could you show me?”

The moon turned.

Something inside went *tick*.

The repairman listened.

“Again, please.”

Tick.

He pulled a stool up to the bench.

“Have you dropped it recently?”

The moon looked at him.

“Yourself,” he clarified.

“No.”

“Any water damage?”

“Reflections, mostly.”

“Those should be fine.”

The shop smelled of wood shavings and the little machine he used to make coffee. Behind the counter, clocks of several opinions disagreed about the time.

The repairman took a small magnifying glass from a drawer.

“May I?”

The moon nodded.

He examined the bright edge, then the dim one. Near the bottom he found a tiny brass catch.

“Well. There we are.”

“I have a catch?”

“Apparently.”

“Is that normal?”

“I mostly do lamps.”

He opened it carefully.

Inside the moon was a single pebble.

The repairman lifted it out with tweezers and set it on the blanket.

They both looked at it.

“How did that get in there?” asked the moon.

“Do you have any small children?”

“Quite a few people call me things.”

“That may not be relevant.”

The pebble was smooth and grey, with a white stripe around its middle.

The moon leaned closer.

“Oh.”

“You recognize it?”

“A boy threw it into a pond.”

The repairman waited.

“Years ago. He was trying to reach me.”

Outside, a delivery van passed through a puddle. Its headlights moved across the ceiling and were gone.

“He was very small,” said the moon.

The repairman set down his tweezers.

“Would you like it removed?”

The moon considered the pebble.

“Could it stay without rattling?”

“Yes, I think so.”

From a tin beneath the bench, the repairman chose a square of blue felt. He cut it smaller, folded it around the pebble, and fitted the little parcel inside.

“Try that.”

The moon turned left.

Then right.

The shop was quiet, except for the clocks.

“Oh, that’s much better.”

The repairman closed the catch.

“What do I owe you?”

He looked at the scrap of felt, then at the moon.

“Would you mind waiting while I lock up? The light outside the shop has gone.”

“Of course.”

The moon waited by the door while he washed his hands and found his coat.

He switched off the bench lamp. The clocks disappeared into the dark, though they continued disagreeing.

Outside, the repairman took longer than usual with the lock.

“There,” he said, giving the handle a pull.

The moon lit the pavement all the way to the corner.

At the crossing, they paused.

“Mind the umbrella stand next time,” said the repairman.

“I’ll try.”

Then he turned toward home, and the moon rose slowly above the rooftops, carrying its small, quiet parcel into the night.

The Night Platform



The Night Platform

At eleven forty, the station porter found a lighthouse sitting on platform two.

It was a small lighthouse, about the height of a grandfather clock. A suitcase stood beside it.

The porter checked his watch.

“Last train’s gone.”

“I know.”

“First one’s at six twelve.”

“That’s the one I’m waiting for.”

The porter leaned his broom against the bench.

“Where are you headed?”

“Inland.”

“How far?”

“I haven’t decided.”

The lighthouse’s beam moved slowly across the empty tracks. It illuminated a timetable, a vending machine, and a crisp packet caught against the fence.

“Are you allowed to leave?” asked the porter.

“There’s a new light on the harbour wall.”

“Ah.”

“Very efficient. Comes on by itself.”

The porter nodded. The station lights did that now. He still sometimes reached for the old switch.

“Would you like the waiting room?”

“Can I see the tracks from there?”

“Through the window.”

“That would be nice.”

The suitcase was lighter than the porter expected.

“Not much in here.”

“A spare bulb. A book.”

“What book?”

“Birds of the Coast.”

“Know them all?”

“By sight. I thought I might learn their names.”

The porter opened the waiting-room door and put another log in the stove.

The lighthouse settled near the window. Its beam crossed the room, revealing, at regular intervals, a faded walking map and a notice about unattended luggage.

“You’ll have to keep that below the windows,” said the porter. “The drivers might think it’s a signal.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

The lighthouse tilted its lamp toward the floor.

A bright oval moved slowly over the tiles.

The porter went back to sweeping.

When he returned, the lighthouse had opened its book on the seat of a chair.

“Sandwich tern,” it said.

“Is that an order?”

“A bird.”

“Right.”

“I knew one for six summers.”

The porter peered at the picture.

“Looks familiar.”

“Yellow at the end of the beak. I’d never noticed.”

He put a cup of tea on the chair beside the book.

“Careful with the pages.”

They spent some time looking at birds.

The porter knew the gulls that stole chips outside the station. The lighthouse knew a cormorant that dried its wings on the same rock every afternoon.

Neither knew why the bird on page forty-seven looked so cross.

“Photographer,” suggested the porter.

At half past one, he banked the stove.

“I have to check the other platform.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll be just outside.”

The lighthouse nodded.

When the porter came back, the book had slipped closed. The beam was still turning, low and slow across the floor.

He sat at his desk and began the overnight report.

One loose railing.

Waiting-room clock four minutes slow.

He paused over the next line, then wrote:

Passenger waiting for the six twelve.

Towards morning, rain began to tap against the glass.

The lighthouse woke to find the porter making fresh tea.

“Did I miss it?”

“Not yet.”

Outside, the rails shone. A few people had gathered beneath the canopy, holding bags and looking in the direction from which the train would come.

The porter carried the suitcase out.

“Do you know where you’ll get off?”

“Somewhere with trees, I think.”

The train arrived with warm windows and a small cloud of breath.

At the carriage door, the lighthouse turned.

“Thank you for the room.”

“You’re welcome.”

“And the birds.”

The porter handed up the suitcase.

“Let me know what you see.”

As the train pulled away, a low beam passed once across his shoes.

Then it lifted towards the fields.

The Last Light



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The small lamp at the back of the secondhand shop had been switched on every evening for so long that nobody remembered whether it was for sale.

It stood on a walnut table beside a glass paperweight. Its shade leaned slightly left.

Each morning, the shopkeeper straightened it.

Each evening, it leaned back.

They had reached an understanding.

One rainy Thursday, a man came in carrying an empty shopping bag.

“Anything in particular?” asked the shopkeeper.

“A lamp.”

“What sort?”

The man looked around.

“I’ll know when I see it.”

From the back of the shop, the small lamp tried to stand naturally.

This was difficult while lit.

The man inspected a tall brass lamp, then a green one shaped like a mushroom. He clicked the switch on a desk lamp several times.

Finally, he came to the walnut table.

“This one?”

The shopkeeper looked up.

“Oh. Yes.”

“Does it work?”

They both looked at the light falling across his hand.

“Seems to,” she said.

The man smiled.

She found a cardboard box and wrapped the lamp in an old towel. Beneath the counter, her pencil hovered over a paper label.

“What shall I put it down as?”

The man considered.

“Reading lamp?”

She wrote that.

Inside the box, the lamp became nervous.

It had spent years lighting a paperweight. It had never been asked to read.

The journey home involved two bus rides and a walk beneath an umbrella that kept knocking against the cardboard.

At last, the box was set down.

The towel came away.

The lamp found itself on a walnut table beside a velvet sofa. There were pale walls, a piano in the corner, and two glasses waiting on a tray.

The man plugged it in.

A warm circle appeared on the ceiling.

He adjusted the shade.

It leaned back.

“All right,” he said.

He returned carrying a stack of books.

The lamp examined the titles with mounting concern. One was very thick. Another had a bird on the cover.

Then the door opened.

A woman came in, shook the rain from her coat, and kissed the man as though she had been saving that part of the journey.

“New lamp?”

“Reading lamp.”

“We'll see,” she said.

They were both old enough to know that an invitation could be simple without being careless. He took her coat. She chose the book with the bird.

They settled on the sofa with the book between them.

“I should mention,” the lamp said very quietly, “I can't read.”

Neither of them seemed concerned.

The woman began.

Her voice had a low, easy rhythm. The man listened with one hand resting on the cushion between them.

After a few pages, she put her fingers over his.

He turned his hand beneath hers.

Outside, a car passed slowly through the rain.

“Are you following this?” she asked.

“Some of it.”

She looked at him over the book.

“Which part?”

He lifted her hand and kissed the inside of her wrist.

“That part wasn't printed,” she said.

“No.”

She marked the page.

The lamp waited. It had imagined a reading lamp would have one clear responsibility. Already the position appeared to involve discretion.

The woman leaned closer.

“May I?” the man asked.

“Yes.”

The book settled in her lap. Their kiss lasted long enough for the rain to change its mind about the window.

Afterward, she rested her forehead against his.

“Leave it on,” she murmured.

“The lamp?”

“I like seeing you.”

On the table, the little lamp stopped worrying about whether it could read.

The page was marked. The glasses were within reach. There was room for both of them to stay.

It gathered its light around the sofa and let the rest of the evening find its own words.