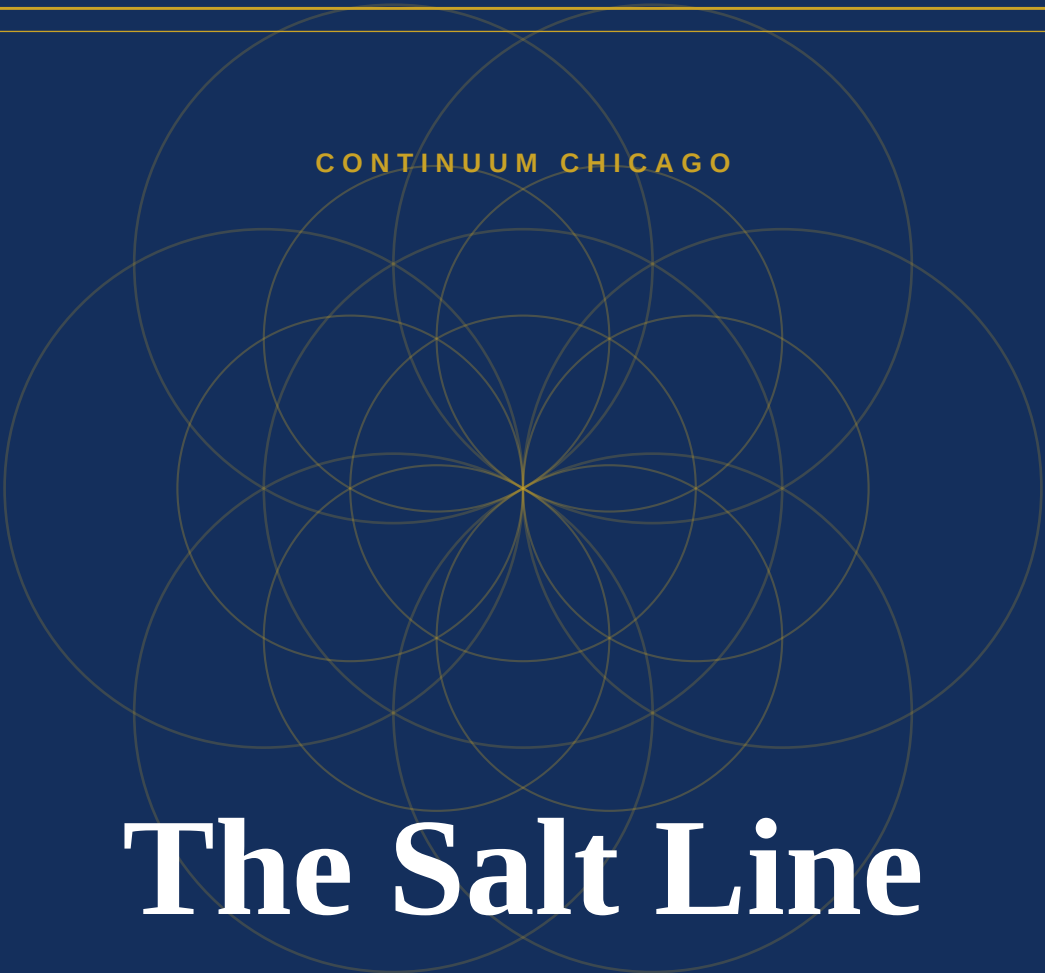




CONTINUUM CHICAGO

The Salt Line

A Continuum Novella

IN THE SPIRIT OF A NEW EARTH UNITED

The Salt Line



A Continuum Novella

“You are responsible for the seed, not the season.”

— a working proverb

*For anyone standing at the edge of the water,
deciding whether to get in.*

CHAPTER I

The Appointment



Dev gave me the gift certificate the way you hand someone a pamphlet you don't expect them to read. Slid it across the bar, tapped it twice with two fingers, and said, before I could make the face I was already making, "Don't. Just go once." The card was the color of a winter sky over the lake, that flat pewter we get in Chicago from November clear through to March, and it said CONTINUUM in letters pressed into the stock so you had to tilt it to the light to read them.

"It's a bathtub," I said. "You paid money for me to lie in a bathtub."

"It's a float tank. And you look like something the tour bus left behind."

He wasn't wrong, and that was the insult of it. I mixed sound for a living — other people's bands, other people's podcasts, sixteen hours of other people's frequencies pressed into my ears until my own thoughts came out sounding like a room with the reverb left on. I hadn't slept a full night since the fall. I'd started flinching at the refrigerator hum. When a client asked me, kindly, whether I was okay, I heard the compression kick in on their voice and thought about the plug-in instead of the question.

So I went once. That is the whole trick of these things, I've since learned. They only ask you to go once. The once is a door, and the door is narrow, and you don't have to believe anything to walk through a door. You just have to be tired enough to stop bracing it shut.

The place was on the second floor of a building on the near west side, above a shop that sold plants and below nothing at all, just roof and sky. I climbed the stairs already composing the review I'd give Dev — lukewarm, faintly cruel, funny. A woman named June met me at a desk made of pale wood and asked me three questions: whether I'd eaten, whether I had any open cuts, and whether I'd ever done this before. No, none, no. She nodded at each like I was passing a test I didn't know I was taking.

"First time, people come out different than they went in," she said. "Not fixed. Just — rearranged a little. Give it the hour."

I did not intend to give it the hour. I intended to give it twenty minutes and a story.

CHAPTER II

The Tank

Here is my first confession, and it's the one June laughed at kindly and the reason I'm telling you before you go: I wore a swimsuit. Nobody told me not to, and it seemed like the civilized thing, the thing a reasonable person does in water. I had it on under my clothes like armor.

Do not do this. I will save you the cost of a swimsuit. The water in the tank is not water the way the lake is water; it is nearly a third salt by weight, a thousand pounds of it dissolved into a shallow warm sea, and salt like that does not care about your dignity or your Lycra. It gets into every fiber and dries there in white crystalline teeth. My suit came out stiff as a dead thing and stayed that way. The salt wins. The salt always wins. You go in with nothing, because nothing is what the tank is asking of you — and the room is yours alone, the door latched from the inside, no one and nothing but you and the dark and the buoyant warm.

I got in bracing. That's the only word. Every muscle a hand around a doorframe. I lay back and the water took me before I'd agreed to be taken — that's the thing no one can describe to you, the way you don't so much float as get *held*, lifted from underneath along your whole length at once, the back of the skull, the shoulder blades, the backs of the knees, all of it caught in a hand exactly your temperature so you can't find the edge of where you end and it begins.

For twenty minutes I fought it. I want to be honest about that too, because you'll fight it, and you should know the fighting is not failure. My mind did what a mixing board does when a channel's left open — hissed, hummed, threw up every unpaid invoice and unsent text and unkind thing I'd ever half-said. I catalogued the ceiling I couldn't see. I thought about Dev. I thought about how I'd describe this hiss to Dev.

And then — I have tried many times to locate the moment and I can't, which I now think is the point — the hiss thinned. Not stopped. Thinned, the way weather thins, until I noticed I'd been listening to nothing for some length of time I couldn't measure. There was no up. There was no clock. My breath had gotten long without my instructing it to. Somewhere in the dark my hands had unclenched from the frame of a door that wasn't there.

I lay in the held dark and for the first time in a season I could not hear the refrigerator of my own mind. I could not hear anything. And into that silence, slow as a tide coming back over a flat, came the strangest sensation: that I was, at that exact moment, completely and

unremarkably fine. Not happy. Not healed. Fine — a word I'd forgotten was a real place you could stand.

June's voice, when it came, came from very far away and then all at once, soft through the wall. The hour was up. I had given it the hour. I hadn't decided to.

CHAPTER III

Dry Land



They don't send you back out into the street right away, and thank god, because I couldn't have driven. There's a low-lit room with tea and a long window, and you sit there while the world reassembles its edges. My skin smelled of the sea. My thoughts had a strange new spacing to them, like a paragraph with the line height opened up.

June sat down across from me without asking and put both her feet flat on the floor, and I understood I was about to be taught something. “The float softens you,” she said. “That's all it does. Then you're open for about an hour after, more than any other time in your week. Most people waste it. They pick up the phone in the parking lot and pour the whole thing back in.”

“What do you do with it instead?”

“Breathe. On purpose. Just here, on dry land — never in the tank, water and hard breathing don't mix. But here.” She showed me. In for a slow count of five, out for five, through the nose, nothing forced, the belly doing the work and the chest coming along after. “Ten minutes. That's it. You're not chasing anything. You're just letting the heart and the breath find the same tempo.”

I'm a tempo person. It was the first instruction all winter that made sense to my body instead of my resume. I closed my eyes and counted, and by the fourth or fifth long exhale something in the center of my chest — some clenched session-musician of a muscle that had been holding a note for months — let the note go. Just set it down. I felt the letting-go as heat, a spreading warmth under the sternum, and behind my eyes a sudden soft pressure like the front edge of weather.

“There it is,” June said, though I hadn't made a sound. “You don't have to do anything with that either. Just don't slam the door on it.”

I didn't. I sat in the low light with my feet flat on the floor and let the warmth do what it wanted, and what it wanted, it turned out, was to make the ordinary room — the tea, the window, the pewter sky going gold at its bottom edge — look briefly and almost unbearably worth looking at.

CHAPTER IV

The Second Week



I went back. This is the part I couldn't have predicted from inside the tour-bus version of myself: I went back the next week, and the week after, and it became the thing I did on Tuesdays the way other people have church or a standing game of cards. Continuum on Tuesday. Same time. Same wooden desk, same June, same narrow door.

The second week I brought music, because the silence had scared me a little the first time and I wanted my armor back in a form the salt couldn't ruin. June said that was fine, said most people do it, said you can pipe your own playlist in and let it hold you until the dark stops feeling like a stranger's house. So I lay in the warm and let a record I'd loved at nineteen pour into the black, and it was lovely, and it was also a hand I was holding so I wouldn't have to stand on my own in there.

By the fourth week I let the record run out and didn't start another. The silence had stopped being an absence. It had become a room I owned. This is how it goes, I think — you bring what you need to get through the door, and then one day you notice you left it in the car.

What surprised me was outside the tank. The floats stacked up, one warm hour on the last, and the stack started to change the days between. I slept. Not perfectly, but I slept, whole nights end to end, and woke without the immediate inventory of dread. The refrigerator hum stopped being a threat and went back to being a refrigerator. A client cracked a joke in a session and I laughed before I'd analyzed the waveform of it. Small things. The kind of small things that are, if you've been without them, the actual size of a life.

CHAPTER V

The Tears

It happened in the low room, in the breathing, in — I think — the sixth or seventh week, and I want to set it down carefully because it's the center of the whole thing and it is very easy to make it sound like less than it was, or like more.

I was ten minutes into the breath. In for five, out for five, the warmth already spread under the sternum, the room opened up around me. And for no reason I could name, my mind went forward instead of back — stopped raking over the invoices and the failures and instead, quietly, showed me a future. Nothing dramatic. Me, older, in a kitchen with good light, laughing at something with people whose faces I couldn't quite see but whose presence I could feel like warmth off a stove. A life that had room in it. A me that had made it there.

And I started to cry.

Here is the thing I need you to understand, because I'd spent my whole adult life believing the opposite: it was not sad. I knew that particular ache from the inside out — the grief-cry, the one that comes when something's been taken. This was its mirror image. The same water from the opposite well. It came from being shown something good and being, for once, soft enough to receive it without flinching. I was crying the way you cry at the very end of a film when the thing you'd stopped hoping for finally, against the odds, arrives.

I had felt something like it maybe twice before, and both times it had taken a catastrophe to crack me open wide enough — a death, a rupture, the floor giving way. It had never once occurred to me that you could get to that depth of feeling from the other direction. That joy could open the same door grief does, and that you could walk through it on purpose, on a Tuesday, sober as morning, with your feet flat on the floor.

June was across the room and didn't come over. Later she said the not-coming-over is the whole skill. “You weren't in trouble,” she said. “You were finally not in trouble. Why would I interrupt that?”

CHAPTER VI

The Question

There's a diner two doors down from Continuum, the kind with a counter and vinyl stools and a coffee that's terrible in a way that's somehow part of the service. I'd walked past it forty times. That Tuesday, still soft from the room, still humming, I went in and sat at the counter instead of taking my rearranged self straight home to guard it.

June had planted this too, over the weeks, so gently I hadn't clocked it as instruction. "The float and the breath are the first two-thirds," she'd said once. "The last third is what you do with the open. And the open closes if you only ever spend it on yourself."

So I did the small brave stupid thing. The man on the next stool was nursing a coffee and a look I recognized from my own mirror all winter. I said good morning. He grunted. And then, instead of retreating into my phone the way every cell in my body wanted to, I asked him an actual question — not the weather, not a transaction. I asked him what he was looking forward to.

He looked at me like I'd spoken Aramaic. Then something in his face moved. He told me his daughter was flying in Thursday. He hadn't seen her in two years. He talked for eleven minutes — I wasn't timing it, but I'm a tempo person, I know eleven minutes — and somewhere in the middle of it the winter went out of his face, and I felt, sitting there over terrible coffee, the thing I'd been circling all season without a name for.

It's this: a state is contagious. I don't mean that mystically, though June would let you mean it that way if you wanted. I mean it the plain way the researchers mean it — that a calm person calms a room, that curiosity invites curiosity, that if you walk in warm you leave the place a half-degree warmer than you found it, and the people in it carry that half-degree out the door to people you'll never meet. I had walked in soft from the tank, and the softness had jumped the gap between two strangers at a counter, and now a man I'd never see again was going to meet his daughter at the airport with a little more room in his chest.

I paid for his coffee on the way out. It was a dollar-ninety. I have never spent money better in my life.

CHAPTER VII

Winter into Spring



The lake lets go of winter slowly and all at once, the same way I did. For weeks nothing, gray ice-shove and wind, and then one Tuesday you come down the Continuum stairs and the plant shop below has put its stock out on the sidewalk and the air has a green edge to it and you realize the season turned while you weren't guarding against it.

I'd like to tell you the practice fixed me, because that's the shape these stories usually take and it's the shape Dev keeps trying to give this one when he retells it at bars. But fixed isn't the word and it isn't the goal. Here's the truer thing: the weekly hour gave me a place to set the note down, and setting it down once a week meant I stopped carrying it the other six days out of sheer habit. The float softened me; the breath opened me; the turning-toward-others spent the open before it could sour back into self-regard. Three movements. Once a week. Nothing added to my body, nothing altered, sober as the morning lake — and somehow that nothing was the whole medicine.

I called my brother. We hadn't really talked in three years — one of those slow silences that starts as a grudge and hardens into architecture. I didn't plan the call. I was soft from a Tuesday and I had the open and I didn't want to spend it all on strangers this time. He picked up on the fourth ring, wary. I asked him what he was looking forward to. Same question. It works on the people you love too; it works on them most of all, because they're the ones you've stopped asking.

We talked for an hour. Some of it was hard. Most of it was just two people finding the same tempo again after years of drift. When we hung up I sat in my apartment in the green spring light with my feet flat on the floor, breathing in for five and out for five, and I understood that the tank had never been the point. The tank was just the place I learned to stop bracing the door. Once you learn that, you can do it anywhere. In a diner. On the phone. In a kitchen with good light, years from now, with people whose faces are finally coming clear.

CHAPTER VIII

The Salt Line



There's a line the salt leaves on your skin when you don't rinse well enough — a faint white tide-mark along the forearm, the collarbone, wherever the water sat longest. I used to scrub it off in the shower, embarrassed by it, evidence of something. Now I let it dry sometimes before I wash, and I look at it, the salt line, the high-water mark of the hour.

That's what the practice is, finally. Not a fix, not an escape, not a trip to anywhere but here. A tide that comes in once a week and lifts you off the frame of the door you've been holding shut, and holds you at exactly your own temperature until you remember you're allowed to float. And when it goes back out it leaves a line on you — a little higher each time — to show you the level you're capable of reaching. You don't force the tide. You can't. You just keep showing up to the shore on Tuesdays and letting it do what tides do.

You are responsible for the seed, and not the season. I didn't understand that when Dev slid the pewter card across the bar. I thought I was responsible for everything and getting an F in all of it. But you tend the conditions — the stillness, the breath, the turning toward each other — and then you let go of the timeline, because the timeline was never yours. You plant the hour. The season comes when it comes.

Go once. That's all it asks. The door is narrow and you don't have to believe anything to walk through it. You just have to be tired enough to stop bracing it shut, and get in the water with nothing, and let yourself be held.

I'll be there Tuesday. Same time. Same narrow door. Come find me at the counter after — I'll be the one who's soft around the edges, buying a stranger's coffee, asking what you're looking forward to.



Colophon

The Salt Line was composed in the Continuum house style, in Garamond and its companions, and set with a single ornament repeated in the old manner at the head of each chapter. It is a work of fiction: its practice — the weekly float, the breath taken afterward on dry land, and the turning toward others — is entirely sober, and the book depicts nothing more and nothing other than that. Any resemblance of its narrator to the reader is the intended effect.



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