

Writing each day chronologically (though it won't all be seen in a single run-through), with choices indicated by numbers in square brackets.

Colour coding:

Blue -- Mr. Clement is alone

Gold -- someone has arrived

Purple -- someone is divulging a truth

Green -- someone is leaving

## PROLOGUE

The town was small, sleepy, quiet in the gray veil of twilight. Neat little houses lined the town's only cobbled road, nestled together as though for warmth. Though this particular locale was new to me, I had seen it before. It would be packed with kind, strange little people brimming with kind, strange little stories.

A rich quarry for the likes of me.

[[I guided my cart into the town square and made ready for the day.]] >>

## [TITLE] FOR SMALL TRUTHS

[[I peeled an orange.]] >>

## DAY 1

### Setting Up 1

The bright scent of my freshly peeled orange seemed to tempt the dawn forth. Pink light cut through the square to touch my humble stall, illuminating my wares: hand-bound books, displayed in charming, crooked stacks.

[[I sat back, enjoying the breeze.]] >>

### Ernest Arrives 1

Before long, a frog marched into the square, humming jarringly and leaving a trail of scattered letters behind him. I waved, and his attention flicked to me.

"Oh-ho!" He puffed his chest out, strode toward me. "A visitor! And a vendor, no less."

I inclined my head. "Correct on both counts."

"What do they call you, good bookseller?" His eyes traveled over my wares.

"Mr. Clement, if it pleases you. And yourself?"

"Postman Ernest Fielding, at your service. First to rise in this town, as you can see. Important work to be done." He paused expectantly.

"Truly! Where would we be without the post?" I filled in.

He swelled.

[[I offered him a segment of my orange.]] [1]

[[I gave him an indulgent smile.]] [2]

## [1] Ernest Truth 1

"Then please, have this token of thanks."

He smiled wide, and then wider as he flicked out his tongue to accept the juicy offering. He chortled, chewing. "Nobody refuses a bit of orange."

"Not in my experience," I agreed. "Do take a moment to enjoy it."

Ernest nodded, and savoured. When he was ready, he spoke.

"It's nice to be appreciated -- takes a good man to know good work." Juice dribbling down his chin. "Not that the folk of this town aren't good men. And women. It's just... it's like a smell, you know?"

I tilted my head intently. "I think I do."

I thought of my recent stay in a farming town, and the way the odour of manure -- which had so overpowered me upon arrival -- had become unworthy of notice by the time I left.

Clement wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his uniform. "Anyway. I'd best be off." He left me with a generous wink.

[[["Much appreciated, Postman Fielding."]] >>

## [2] Ernest Departs 1

“Well,” Ernest let his chest deflate. “I truly must be going, good chap. Duty calls!”

[[I watched him march away.]] >>

## Nia Arrives 1

As Ernest marched out of sight, a door across the square slammed open, making me jump. A calico cat hurried from the building, then began furiously to sweep the flagstones in front of her shop.

I squinted to read the sign above her head. “Gatti’s Fine Italian Bakery,” it read.

“Italian!” I exclaimed. I had trekked across the country in years past, and the fare there had been finer than any I had tasted since.

The cat looked up from her work, then grinned. “Hungry?”

She disappeared into her shop for a moment, then reappeared with a tray of muffins in hand. “I’m Nia, by the way. Nia Gatti. The shop is mine.” Fierce pride glimmered in her eyes.

[[I offered her a segment of orange.]] [1]

[[“Not at the moment, thank you!”]] [2]

## [1] Nia Truth 1

She reached out automatically to accept it, then stared at it, confused. “What’s this for?”

“Barter!”

She snorted. “Fair enough, old man. Here.”

Before I could splutter at the slight on my age, she handed me a golden muffin, still warm from the oven and topped with toasted sunflower seeds. “Go on, try it! And tell me what you think.”

I obeyed. Toasty, salty flavours mingled with caramel tones, the texture tender and melt-in-the-mouth. I made sure to reflect my enjoyment on my face.

“Do you think the sunflower seeds are over-salted?”

I rushed to swallow, but she screwed up her face before I could open my mouth. “They’re over-salted, aren’t they? It’s no good. I’ll have to make another batch.”

“I don’t-- ah.” Before I could reassure her, Nia had swept away. Her tail had hardly cleared the door before it slammed shut behind her. Not in anger -- I could tell that much. She seemed simply to be uninterested in wasting time.

[[I dusted the crumbs from my vest.]] >>

## [2] Nia Departs 1

“Your loss,” she called. She turned swiftly back to her sweeping.

[[I shrugged, and waited for the rest of the town to awaken.]] >>

## Cornelius Arrives 1

The sound of beating wings drew my attention to the sky. A crow had soared into the town square, clutching his briefcase in one taloned claw.

“Ah,” he cawed as he landed in front of me. “Ernest has been telling everyone we have a visitor. Mr. Clement, is it?”

“Yours truly.”

He tilted his head to scan my goods. “I don’t recognize these titles.”

“Many are unique copies, Mr.--”

His eyes glinted in sudden interest. “Mr. Cornelius Down. Accountant.”

[[I offered him a segment of my orange.]] [1]

[[“Would you like to make a purchase?”]] [2]

## [1] Cornelius Truth

He hopped closer, accepting the offered segment distractedly and swallowing it in one gulp. “Make a good gift, do they? Rare books?”

“I’m sure,” I concurred. “Who would it be for, Mr. Down?”

“The gift would be for my wife.”

“Ah,” I clicked my hooves. “A romantic gift, then!”

Cornelius shifted his wings, suddenly awkward.

“Or...” I changed tacts. “A gift of apology?”

Cornelius bobbed his head. “I think so.”

“You think so?”

Another bob. “I don’t know what could be making her so sad, if not something I’ve done.” He shifted his wings again. “I’ll have that one, then.”

His beak tapped a red leather book embossed with gold script -- one of the most beautiful books on my table. I could only hope that his wallet matched the size of his guilt.

I handed him the book and accepted the pay.

[[“Good luck, sir.”]] >>

## [2] Cornelius Departs 1

“Hmm.” He puffed his feathers out awkwardly. “Perhaps tomorrow, I can’t be late again today.”

He took off, and was out of sight in moments.

[[“Oh, to have wings.”]] >>

## Morning Stretch 1

I looked around for more approaching townsfolk, but it seemed I had a moment to myself. I stretched, enjoying the popping of my joints as my stiff spine realigned.

[[I ate a segment of orange.]] [1]

[[I lounged, waiting for the next customer.]] [2]

## [1] Mr. Clement Truth 1

The fruit glinted jewel-like in the light, and I smiled at the beauty such a simple thing could hold. Little pockets of juice burst like joy in my mouth as I bit. It was no wonder such an offering would loosen a tongue or two. I had noticed it long ago -- that the intimate gesture of sharing one's orange unfailingly enticed the recipient to share something in return.

A segment of orange for a single small truth.

[[I swallowed, and the moment ended.]] >>

## Mo Arrives 1

Something shifted across the square, a subtle movement among the sunflowers planted in front of Nia's bakery. It took me several moments to pick out the form of a chameleon, quietly tending to the flowerbed. I hadn't even seen them arrive.

The chameleon glanced up, noticed me watching, and turned a blushing pink before dropping their trowel.

"Apologies!" I called. "I didn't mean to startle you. I'm Mr. Clement."

The chameleon hesitated, then shuffled closer. "Mo," they whispered. "I... I-I'm Mo."

[[I offered them a segment of my orange.]] [1]

[[I smiled encouragingly. "Pleased to meet you."]] [2]

## [1] Mo Truth 1

Mo reached slowly out to accept the fruit, turning a brilliant orange as they took it.

"P...p-ostman Fielding told me about you. I'm sorry I h...hid, before."

I waved a dismissive hoof. "No need to apologize."

The chameleon chewed for a moment in silence. "They u-usually don't notice me. Unless... unless I w-ant them to."

"The townsfolk?"

Mo nodded.

“Do you prefer it that way?”

Mo paused. “I... I did.”

I waited, but that seemed all they had to say on the matter. I changed the subject. “You’re a gardener, then?”

Mo smiled widely, a wave of green spreading from nose to tail.

I laughed. “You must love your work.”

They gave a slow nod. “Plants... are k-kind.”

Mo glanced over their shoulder at Nia’s flowerbed, and I took the hint.

[[“It was good to meet you, Mo.”]] >>

## [2] Mo Departs 1

“I’d b-best get back to work,” they murmured, their colour already starting to shift back to sunflower yellow.

[[I gestured for them to carry on.]] >>

## Henry Arrives 1

A piercing call heralded the arrival of my next visitor -- a red-tailed hawk, who landed efficiently just a few steps away from my stall.

“Good morning, Mr. Clement.” The hawk offered his wing for a brisk handshake. “Welcome. I’m Henry Gallant, town mayor.”

“Ah, an honour to meet you!” I inclined my head respectfully. “Not often that I receive a personal welcome from the mayor.”

“Not often that a travelling artisan graces our town with his trade.” Though his tone was formal, something about him seemed sincere.

[[I offered him a segment of my orange.]] [1]

[[“You’re too kind, Mr. Mayor.]] [2]

## [1] Henry Truth 1

"How generous." He plucked the offering from my grasp with a taloned claw.

"It is you who has lent me a moment of your undoubtedly scarce time."

Henry tilted his head, pausing for the first time since he had arrived. "I will admit, time has been something of an enemy to me of late."

"Difficult work, running a town?"

"Indeed. Difficult even before I had a boy to take care of. Now-- ah, forgive me." He blinked. "I am grateful for all that I have."

"One can be both grateful and burdened."

Henry shook his head carefully. "Not I."

I considered him. "You know yourself better than an old bookseller, I'm sure."

Henry bobbed his head politely. "I had best not take up any more of your time." He made to take off, still not having eaten a bit of his orange.

[[["It has been a pleasure, sir."]] >>

## [2] Henry Departs 1

"Not at all." Henry stepped away, preparing to take flight. "Do enjoy your time with us, Mr. Clement."

[[["I'm certain I shall."]] >>

## Astrid Arrives 1

Not long after the mayor departed, a paint-spattered praying mantis stopped before my stall, her green stare magnified by a pair of thick spectacles.

Without speaking, she darted out her claw to pick up one of my books -- a blue tome embossed with a pattern of berried leaves. She drew a paintbrush from one of her many pockets, and before I could stop her, began to leave confident brushstrokes on my fine leather.



Just as I had recovered my voice to protest, she set the book down. The work was beautiful, leaves newly detailed in greens and golds and the berries picked out in red. In the corner, her signature read: Astrid Vass.

[[I offered her a segment of my orange.]] [1]

[[I stared, open-mouthed.]] [2]

## [1] Astrid Truth 1

“Mmm.” A ponderous hum. Astrid regarded the segment for a moment, then snatched it in a flash. “Fruit is godly, you know.”

“Is it?” I asked, forgetting my words as the mantis began abruptly to masticate.

“Dionysus in particular was known for his grapes, his orchards.”

“Ah, the Greek deity, yes? God of wine?”

“He was also known as the goat-shooter.” Astrid had finished devouring the segment of orange, and had returned her intent gaze to me. “And as the god that comes.”

“I--”

She was not interested in listening. “You arrived just in time. This town has been shrinking around me.”

“People have been leaving?”

“No.”

“Then how has the town been shrinking?”

Astrid tilted her head musingly. “Perhaps it is I who have grown.” She shifted, wings and forewings emerging. “I will return tomorrow, and I will expect another canvas.”

[[“They’re not--” I started, but she was already gone.]] >>

## [2] Astrid Departs 1

“Title it what you will. I do not need a cut, my name on the cover is enough.” She shook her wings from her back.

[[“It already has a ti--” I began, but her wings had born her away.]] >>

## Lunchtime 1

The parade of townsfolk lulled as the sun made its way to its zenith, and I decided that this was the moment for a spot of lunch. I drew hard bread and soft cheese from my bag, and made a feast of it there in the yellow light.

[[I followed the meal with a segment of orange.]] [1]

[[I patted my stomach, satisfied.]] [2]

## Mr. Clement Truth 2

I savoured the sweet tang of the fruit, looking around the square as I chewed.

The buildings here were worn in the way that all things in a small town are worn. Not neglected, not decrepit -- simply used and mended and used again.

I had never cared enough for a place to stay in it, let alone repair it. But I would mend a book a thousand times if it meant that I could preserve the story inside.

For a moment, I allowed myself to believe that these folk and I were alike. That their filled-in sidewalk cracks and repainted signs were the same as my glued spines and patched covers.

But no. We were not the same, for the stories I preserved were not my own.

[[But enough of these thoughts -- I had books to sell.]] >>

## Beau Arrives 1

A gleam of gold nearly blinded me as an ornamented stag came into my view. He was dressed far too beautifully to look so miserable, with a fashionable jacket and ornamental antlers glittering atop his head.

He glanced at my table. “Oh. Astrid’s been by, has she?”

“She has! Seems to have taken a liking to my... ‘canvases’, Mr...”

“Just call me Beau”, the stag intoned morosely. “Though the full name’s Beau Hartell.”

[[I offered him a segment of my orange.]] [1]

[[“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Beau.”]] [2]

## [1] Beau Truth 1

Beau accepted the sweet morsel, confusion shadowing his features. “What’s this for?”

“You seemed in need of a pick-me-up.”

“Oh.” Beau hesitated, then took a solemn bite. Then, to my astonishment, he began to cry.

“Whatever is the matter?” I leaned forward on my stool, offering a handkerchief.

He waved me off. “It’s nothing, it’s stupid, I--” he sniffled. “She’s stopped making things for me, you know? I used to be her muse, but now...”

He stared dejectedly at the berry-painted book cover.

“Ah,” I murmured, unsure of what else to say.

“I thought she might have encountered some sort of artist’s block, but I simply--” he wiped his large eyes with a sleeve. “I simply stopped inspiring her.”

I reached out a consoling hoof, but Beau shifted away.

“Sorry, I... I need to collect myself.”

[[I watched him go, helpless.]] >>

## [2] Beau Departs 1

“Is it?” Beau looked up at me, something between hope and disbelief in his enormous eyes.

“Truly.” I offered him a reassuring smile.

“Oh.” He stood there, looking lost for a moment, then wandered away with his hands in his pockets.

[[“Good... bye?”]] >>

## Mabel Arrives 1

As strange as my interaction with Beau had been, I was not prepared for my next visitor: an old ewe with a twinkle in her eye.

“Oh, Mr. Clement!” She stepped in close. “Old Postman Cornelius didn’t tell me you were such a looker.”

“Er... why thank you, Mrs.--?”

“Ms.--” the sheep articulated her title with care -- “Ms. Mabel Lynde.”

[[I offered her a segment of my orange.]]

[[“Charmed to meet you, Ms. Lynde.”]]

## [1] Mabel Truth 1

“Oh, well aren’t you a gem.” She took the fruit from me and plopped it onto her tongue with great satisfaction. “Quite the luxuriant gift to share with an old lady you hardly know.”

“My dear, I would certainly call you a lady... but I would hardly call you old.” It was a line, but Mabel had looked so hopeful that I delivered it faithfully.

Mabel’s ears perked at the flattery. “Why Mr. Clement, you *see* me, don’t you?”

I paused. “You are standing before me, are you not?”

Mabel chuckled. “That I am. But most of the people around here see only stooped shoulders and drooping skin.” She stood straighter, both hooves on her fine cane. “They hear the crackle of age in my voice, and disregard my words.”

I watched her for a moment, and she watched me.

“May I give you a piece of advice, Mr. Clement?”

I nodded, though I did not intend to take it.

“Speak often, my good bookseller, while you still have your youth.” Mabel paused to let the words ring, then stepped proudly away.

[[“To whom?” I wondered aloud, and the question hung before me like a mirror.]] >>

## [2] Mabel Departs 1

"Of course you are, ducky." Mabel patted my face. "I hope you'll be in town for a long, long time."

I smiled at her, and she gave me a stately nod as she shuffled from the square.

[[“Three days is all I need” I murmured to myself.]] >>

## Rosie-May Arrives 1

The tiniest shuffle of movement alerted me to a new presence in the town square. A demure rabbit hopped cautiously toward me, clutching her handbag with both paws.

"Mr. Clement?"

I gave a gracious nod. "At your service!"

She flinched at my boisterous voice, then caught herself. "Ah-- sorry. I don't leave the house often. But -- I do so love to read."

"Then I am honoured you made the trip just for me, Ms..."

"Mrs. Rosie-May Down."

[[I offered her a segment of my orange.]] [1]

[[We smiled at each other for a moment.]] [2]

## [1] Rosie-May Truth 1

"Oh," Rosie-May sighed, eyes damp as she accepted the proffered fruit. "Little gifts."

"Little gifts?" I prodded.

She turned her doleful gaze to me. "Cornelius -- that's my husband. Cornelius is always offering me little gifts like this. It's become almost meaningless, in a way. Every day, a token. They're starting to fill up the mantle."

I waited, for she clearly had more to say.

She sighed. "I'm sure he just can't think what else to do. Of course he wouldn't know that the gifts are only making things worse."

Her eyes were a little unfocused as she popped the orange slice into her mouth. “I haven’t told him yet, you see. That I’m... that I can’t have children.”

She swallowed, blinked, then looked sharply at me. “I haven’t said that to anyone, in fact. Only you.”

[[I gave her a reassuring smile. “I am only here to sell books.”]] >>

## [2] Rosie-May Departs 1

I let Rosie-May browse in silence for a while, and she was still smiling as she stepped away from the table, clutching her new purchase of a little brown book about a greek town, one that fit just perfectly into her bag.

[[“Come again, Mrs. Down.”]] >>

## Dinner 1

The belly of the sun grazed the rooftops, shadows lengthening as my first day in town rolled to a close. My stomach grumbled. I could spare a few minutes before packing up to fill it. Dried meat, and a can of cold beans.

[[And for dessert, a segment of orange.]] [1]

[[I stretched and belched, having eaten my fill.]] [2]

## Mr. Clement Truth 3

Without townsfolk to fill it, the square seemed larger somehow, and forbidden; I felt like an audience member lost backstage at intermission, staring at the taped and stapled backside of the set.

I imagined all the folk I had met, sitting down to meals or busy at their desks. Going about their lives as though scripted, certain on their paths and firm in their belonging. Each with a role in the story of this town.

It seemed suddenly unfair, that my own role be so small. A simple merchant, a convenient stranger, a box for them to place their secrets inside. I would be gone before the week was out, and they would not remember me in a year. Even in my own books, I would be nothing but a nameless narrator.

So it was, and always would be.

[[I sat for a moment with these thoughts, then shook them from me like water.]] >>

## Olly Arrives 1

I had just stood from my stool, intent upon the task of closing my stall, when a feather blew across my sightline. Then another, and another.

I looked up, expecting to see Henry or another avian townspeople, but instead I was confronted with the small, dangling feet of a badger. Before I could react, the badger had fallen to the ground, still shedding feathers -- but then he bounced to his feet.

"Oh. You're not usually here!" The badger snatched a feather from the air and stashed it in his pocket. "Don't tell daddy you saw me. I'm making him a surprise!"

Looking closer, I saw the name "Olly Gallant" embroidered into the fabric of the little badger's overalls.

[[I offered Olly a segment of my orange.]] [1]

[[["Your secret is safe with me, Olly!"]]] [2]

## [1] Olly Truth 1

Olly stared at the offering suspiciously. "Daddy says not to take things from strangers."

"You don't have to take it. I'm happy to eat it myself!" I made to bring the fruit to my mouth.

Olly gasped, then reached out in a flurry of flying feathers, grabbing the fruit and shoving it in his mouth before I could take it away from him.

I laughed, and he grinned back at me, juice dribbling down his chin. "It's good!"

"I'm glad!" I smiled. "Now I must know-- what were you doing in the air?"

Olly flapped a fistful of feathers. "Flying!"

I stared. Olly flapped.

"I've been practicing. You see my hat?" He flicked the propeller atop his head. "Nia told me to stop jumping from her roof, but I don't think she minds if she doesn't see me do it. I stayed in the air so long this time!"

"Ah... well done?"

Olly beamed, then looked around as the last beam of sunlight disappeared from the square. His face fell. "I have to go!"

I watched as he darted away, still flapping his little arms like wings.

[[A bit of down made its way into my nostril, and I sneezed.]] >>

## [2] Olly Departs 1

"Thanks, Mister!" Olly beamed. "Gotta go!"

Then, in the way that children do, he sprinted away without a care.

[[I dusted feathers from my wares with a sigh.]] >>

## Packing Up 1

One strange day now done, I tucked my books back into their crates and set to making ready for the night. The air was clear and warm, perfect for a sleep beneath the stars.

[I made a bed of my cart, and slept.] >>

## X Arrives 1

[[I offered X a segment of my orange.]] [1]

[[ ]] [2]

## [1] X Truth 1

[[ ]] >>

## [2] X Departs 1

[[ ]] >>