On the way to the scene of death, the obituarist groused about fucking invisibility: Fucking invisibility; as if I didn’t know that this empty street, just like every empty street in every other city, is teeming with people.

The only ones who could be seen were the ones whose jobs required public visibility: delivery people, plumbers, painters, etcetera. They got badges, and when they put them on, became what they had to be and only what they had to be: delivery person, plumber, painter, etcetera, each covered by a neon silhouette. The rest wandered about unseen, protected by a buffer that blocked images, sounds, odors, keeping their bodies at a distance. Which meant that, walking down a deserted street, you’d bump into soft lumps that knocked you gently from side to side. Only in the heaviest congestion could people’s contours be seen and thus avoided, but there was never any need to see faces or expressions, feel bones or fat. Ever. The buffer served as a laissez-passer, allowing travel, and owners could take them off only indoors.

Yeah, big deal, the obituarist muttered, as he did each day: he could still sense them at that very moment. Their irritated presence, their contained rage. He might be able to stop seeing others but he couldn’t stop sensing their essence. Sooner or later even children learn that hiding your eyes doesn’t actually make things disappear. I can sense them
right now, he repeated, making his way through the subdued reproach of those standing aside to let him pass.

He reached the building, saw the elevator doors open, and tried to get on but bounced gently off the people inside. He walked up three flights. There were already two badges at the scene of death. Certifiers. They certified the dead’s death, and he recounted the living’s life. Though the government possessed every piece of electronic communication anyone had ever sent in their life, the obituarist didn’t use them to tell their story, basing it instead on what the living had left behind. His obituaries were wildly successful. The public devoured them, not only to learn what a person had done without having had to put up with them while they were alive, but because many had high hopes that accumulating certain things would enable them to manipulate obituarists into telling better stories about them.

“Lotta people out today?” asked one of the badges, neon pulsating with each word.

“Same as ever,” replied the obituarist. “But the most important person in the room ain’t complaining.”

The obituarist didn’t like people criticizing his work. He prided himself on being punctual. Though it might seem his profession was the one least requiring haste, he knew how important it was to get to a story before its parts began to dissolve.

The certifier who’d spoken pulsed softly in silence. The other said:

“Nothing new. Guy had a functioning heart one second and a nonfunctioning heart a second later.”

The second certifier was, most likely, a woman.
He observed the body. It looked tired, even in death. The kind of tiredness that was no longer common: hands wrinkled, skin weathered, a rictus of severe resignation. While he studied the body, the certifiers put away their instruments and were already on their way out when the obituarist said:

“Don’t go.”

He thought he felt something.

“Is there someone else I need to see?” he asked.

The certifiers pulsed doubtfully, containing more than emitting their neon. They didn’t understand what he meant.

“Is it just the two of you?” he went on. “No one else came with you?”

“Two, as it should be,” said the one who’d spoken first.

“Wait for me at the door.”

The certifiers obeyed, no clear emotion discernible from their silhouettes.

He began searching through what the dead man had left behind. Kitchen utensils. Few. Generic. Indicating no interest in complicated dishes. Furniture. An armchair, a table, a chair, a bed, a dresser. Generic. Made to meet basic needs. And clothes. Lots of clothes. Odd. People didn’t tend to accumulate clothes now that buffers were mandatory; the obituarist had even found people who no longer bothered to get dressed. And this dead guy had a lot of clothes. But... generic. Identical. The obituarist looked at them for a bit—looked at the clothes, then looked at the body. Looked at the clothes, then looked at the body. Kept searching. On the dresser he found documents from the dead man’s job, including pictures of the sort of metal balls that had become popular. The obituarist had come upon them in many homes,
but not in this one, that of a man who had sold them. He felt curious about this man who’d left him almost nothing to work with: this was a list, not a life. Whatever he’d been inside could hardly be divined by his belongings.

But the belongings didn’t go with what he was piecing together from the body. He thought this, and went to observe it again.

Then he began pacing the tiny apartment, one side to the other, over and over. He stopped. Had the certifiers been able to see him under the neon, they’d have noted that for a second it looked like he was trying to hang in the air. He kept walking. Stopped. Continued. Stopped. Now he was sure.

He turned to the certifiers and said:
“You can go. Close the door on your way out.”

The certifiers walked out. He could see, beneath the door, the glow of their neon, pulsing. No doubt they were commenting on the obituarist’s behavior.

He took his time going over the furniture, clothes, dresser once more. Without much effort. Almost offhanded. Until again he felt clearly a spot giving off condensed tension, placed the chair in front of it, sat down, took off his badge, and stared at the empty space. After a few seconds he said:
“Who is this man?”

Silence.

The obituarist stood, felt in front of himself for a second, and then pushed the soft blob as hard as he could. Guy’d have no way out of that corner.

That was when the other man took off his buffer. Before the obituarist could make out any details, he got a whiff of
the guy’s smell, not a dirty smell or a dusty one but the smell of nervous sweat. Then he saw him. He was a soft man, a man who seemed to have been wearing buffers since before they were even invented. He must have been older than the obituarist, but not as old as the man laid out on the floor. There was plenty of hair on his head, and it was neatly combed.

“Who is he?” the obituarist said.

The man leaned back into the corner, glanced down at the man on the floor, and said:

“I don’t know, someone I found on the street and invited in.”

“What do you mean someone you found?”

The man waffled his hands vaguely, searching for a way to explain. Then let them drop.

“I sensed him passing by. I don’t know how to explain it . . . I sensed him in his buffer.”

The obituarist said nothing.

“I sensed he was dying,” the man said.

The obituarist turned back to the dead man. The other guy did the same. They remained thus for some time.

“So, fuck him, right?” the obituarist said finally. “You son of a bitch.”

He stood and called the certifiers back. What was the matter, they wanted to know. Theft of history, he told them. They’d be right there.

The man was now crumpled in the corner like a discarded overcoat. The obituarist said nothing. He had nothing to say. But he stared at him.

The certifiers arrived. They pinned on the man a badge identifying him as state property, and led him to the door. Before leaving he turned back to the obituarist.
“Tell me, what were you going to say about me?”

The obituarist didn’t so much as glance at him. He gestured at the man on the floor to the certifiers.

“Have someone come for him,” he said. “And let me know when you find his address.”

The certifiers pulsed in assent and led the thief out.

The obituarist sat back down in the chair and remained there a few more minutes. He wondered if he too were not a stand-in for a dead man. Was that how they saw him as he walked around, all lit up, among the invisible? Like someone who keeps looking when there’s nothing more to see? Perhaps that was why they consumed his obituaries, to discover whether it was possible to have a hand in the lie.

He tutted, suspicious of himself.

Turning on his badge, he closed the door, descended the three flights of stairs, and walked out into the empty street.