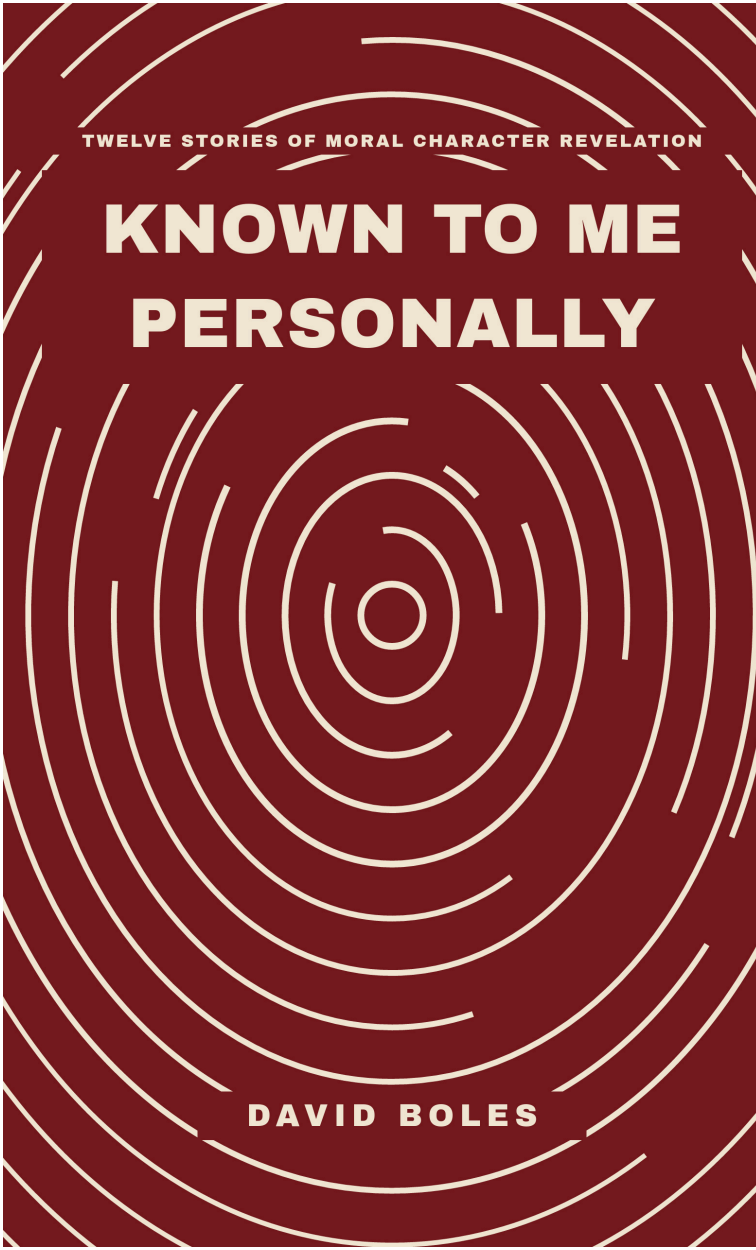
TWELVE STORIES OF MORAL CHARACTER REVELATION
KNOWN TO ME PERSONALLY
DAVID BOLES

KNOWN TO ME PERSONALLY

Twelve Stories of Moral Character Revelation

DAVID BOLES

David Boles Books

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This is a work of fiction. The people who move through it are invented. The counties, parishes, towns, and rivers are real places, used with respect, and the events that happen to them here are imagined. No document quoted in these pages exists.

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For Janna, and for everyone who was never asked.

The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.

Willa Cather, O Pioneers! (1913)

The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

The witness's oath, traditional

Personally known to me.

The notarial certificate, traditional

Contents

A Note on the Stories vii

1. *The True Weight* 1
   Perkins County, Nebraska, October 1994

2. *Green Water* 27
   Cameron Parish, Louisiana, September 1997

3. *The Luckiest Man in Evangeline Parish* 51
   Evangeline Parish, Louisiana, 2001

4. *Objection to Form* 75
   Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 2014

5. *Large Print* 119
   Portland, Oregon, 2019

6. *Contrast* 145
   Yakima, Washington, 2020. Excursion to Pasco

7. *Standing Room* 171
   Spokane, Washington, 2021. Columbia Basin frame

8. *Outgoing Message* 197
   Erie, Pennsylvania, 2022

9. *Skip* 225
   Kern County, California, 2023

10. *A Life in the Third Person* 249
Mathews County, Virginia, 2024

11. *The Rounds* 273
Mathews County, Virginia, 2025

12. *Known to Me Personally* 297
Perkins County, Nebraska, 2026

Acknowledgments 331

About the Author 333

Also by the Author 335

Questions for Discussion 337

A Note on Sources 339

Glossary 341

Bibliography 347

Index 349

A Note on the Stories

The twelve stories in this book are linked, and they are best read in order. Each one lends a person to the next, quietly. Everything the people of this book do not know about one another, the reader will carry.

1

The True Weight

Perkins County, Nebraska, October 1994

The scale shack at the Grant co-op stood over the receiving pit on six concrete piers, with one long band of glass along its west wall, so the scale man could watch the whole of his work from his stool: the truck climbing the platform, the needle swinging in the dial head, the ticket chattering out of the printer, the truck pulling ahead to the hoist, the red grain rattling out of the endgate into the pit, and the leg taking it up into the house overhead. Aldous Rehmer, whom the county called Ott, had sat that stool for twenty-one years. He was fifty-four, wide in the shoulders, slow in his movements, a man who gave every dial time to settle before he trusted it. Farmers who had been boys when he started now sent their own sons over his scale with first loads, and the sons came in and stood at the counter while he figured, because there was a pleasure

in watching a man who never hurried and never missed.

The tickets came out of the machine in triplicate, white for the farmer, yellow for the office, pink for the house, and Ott checked the printed figures against the dial face before he signed, every time, though the machine and the dial had never once disagreed. Men framed his tickets. At the Legion on Central Avenue, when an argument came up over what a steer had taped in '88 or what the Krotz quarter had run in the dry year, somebody would end it by saying, Ott's ticket says different, and the ticket did say different, and that was the end of it. The ticket was the end of it. Ott was the end of it.

The state man came every June with his iron weights in their racks and hung them on the platform in their order and wrote his certificate and went away with nothing to say. The certificates hung in a plain frame over the counter, twenty-one of them now, the oldest gone the color of weak tea. What the state man weighed was the platform. What the platform weighed was the county.

The house held four hundred thousand bushels when it was full, and it was filling by the day. The leg ran overhead with its steady racket, the auger men came and went in the dust, and out past the bins the siding stood with its string of empty cars waiting to

take the district's grain away. Everything the district grew crossed the platform first. A crop had no value a man could spend until the scale had said what it was, and the scale said it through Ott.

That October the milo came in dry and the trucks ran from six in the morning until nine at night, and the dust of the district hung over the yard in a red haze that the yard lights caught when the sun quit. Ott worked the whole of it from the stool, breaking at noon for the dinner Nadine sent with him and at evening for whatever the crew cook brought down from the lot, and he weighed every load the way he had weighed the first load in September of '73, with his hand flat on the counter and his eyes on the needle and his mind on nothing else. The co-op paid him for fifty hours and he worked seventy and the difference was his gift to the house, same as the swept pit and the clean glass and the kerosene rag he ran over the dial head when the day was done.

The Stelk place lay south of Madrid on the table above the Republican, a home quarter and some rented ground besides, and Verle Stelk had hauled his first crop over this scale the September Ott started, back when the trucks were smaller and the co-op was new-painted and both of them were young. Verle had been dead three years now. His widow Lorna ran the place with a hired boy at harvest and drove her own truck,

Verle's old GMC with the wooden sideboards, and she came through twice a day some days, patient in the line, her hat pulled down and her gloves on, and men in line behind her did not grumble, because she was a widow and sixty-eight and because she had said at the church and at the cafe that this was her last year with a crop, and no one had asked her reasons. A widow of sixty-eight is owed her reasons.

The Stelk account had been on the office's mind all week. The association's letter had come in September, as it came every fall for the accounts with paper against them, and the schedule in it ended with the last load, and the last load was coming in that Monday. Ott had seen the GMC in the line at noon, patient between the Pankonin semis, the widow's hat pulled down and Verle's gloves on the wheel. Men ahead of her had waved her forward when their turns came, and she had shaken her head once and stayed in her place, and the line had respected it. She had hauled since dawn to finish.

Her last load came in at dusk, the tenth of October, with the yard lights on and three trucks behind her and the cold coming down out of a clear sky. Ott knew the truck's weight the way he knew every truck's weight in the district, and he watched the needle take the gross and settle, and he printed the ticket, and she pulled ahead and dumped and came back on empty,

and he weighed her out and printed the ticket and did the subtraction the way he had done it twenty thousand times. Thirty-three thousand three hundred fifty gross. Thirteen thousand nine hundred ninety tare. Nineteen thousand three hundred sixty net.

He had the office's number in his head, because he kept every account's shape in his head, and the number was nineteen thousand seven hundred. That was what the association's letter wanted off this load to finish the Stelk schedule and close the note clean, and the schedule was the note's own terms: the pounds finished it, and short of the pounds the note stood open another year at its interest, and a woman whose last crop was in the truck did not have another year. Darlene Krotz had said it through the window that morning, figuring with her pencil: "She needs nineteen-seven off this one, Ott." The ticket in his hand said nineteen-three-sixty.

He checked the figures twice. There was nothing to fault. He had watched the weighing himself, the truck dry, the platform clean, the needle settling plumb between the graduations the way it always did. The load had been honestly weighed, and it had come in three hundred forty pounds short of the line the association had drawn, and there was not a thing in the procedure any man could have objected to, then or ever. He weighed the three trucks behind her and

signed their tickets and gave the men their figures, and the pit took their grain and the leg ran, and the evening went on exactly as if nothing had happened, because nothing had, that any man could see.

Lorna stood at the counter with her ticket and read it and folded it once and put it in her purse. She did the subtraction standing there; he could watch her do it. She looked up at him once, and there was nothing in her face he had to answer for, and she said, "Well, that's that, then," and she thanked him for his trouble and went out into the cold with her purse under her arm, a small woman in a canvas coat, and the GMC's taillights went south on the Madrid road and were gone.

Ott locked the shack at nine-thirty and drove home the long way, past the Stelk mailbox, though the house sat back off the road and showed him nothing. Nadine had kept his supper. He ate it and said the day had run long, and she said the days ran long every October, and that was the whole of what he told her, because there had never been anything to tell.

Tuesday ran the same and longer. The sun came up red through the dust and the trucks were waiting when he unlocked, and the morning went the way the mornings went, load after load, the needle swinging and settling, the tickets chattering, the farmers coming in from the wind to watch him sign. One of the Hoiberg

boys argued the dockage on a load his father had sent, standing at the counter with his cap in his hand, and Ott let him finish and then weighed the argument the way he weighed everything, and when the boy went out he was not happy and he was not wrong, and that was the co-op's peace kept for another day. At noon he ate Nadine's dinner at the stool between loads. At six the line thinned and the crew cook brought his supper down from the lot.

The Rowden outfit out of Oklahoma had parked their rigs in the co-op lot for the week, three combines and a cook trailer, working the late milo toward Madrid and Venango for the big places, and Wally Pankonin had arranged with their cook to feed the co-op hands supper during the rush, the co-op paying, because a man weighing trucks until nine cannot go home for his supper. The cook brought Ott's down herself, a young woman, twenty or so, brown from the sun, with a slow voice that had the south in it. She set the plate on the counter and took up the empty pail from the night before.

"You eat in a glass house," she said.

"It lets me see the trucks."

"I expect it lets the trucks see you."

She said it without any point behind it, the way a person remarks on weather, and she gathered her pail and went back up the lot toward the trailer, and Ott ate

his supper at the stool and weighed two more trucks before the line was done. That was the whole of the exchange, and it did not stay with him, because he had a county's worth of other things in his head.

The platform stood empty under the yard light when he locked up, its broad steel deck, the plate the trucks stood on, gone dull with dust, and he ran the kerosene rag over the dial head and looked once at the framed certificates and went home.

He was awake at four. He lay with it a while and then he got up and dressed and drove in through the dark and let himself into the shack and lit the stove, and when the stove took he stood at the glass with his coffee and looked out at the platform standing empty under the yard light, and he thought about the machine he had made, inside the machine the county trusted.

In February of 1974 the co-op had been dying. The '68 expansion had left the house with a debt the margin could not carry, and the margin that year was nothing, and the board had sat through the winter with the bank's letters and come to Ott in his capacity as the man who understood the scale, because everything the house earned came across the scale first. He had understood the scale. He had understood it well enough to know that a scale is two weighings and a subtraction, and that the county watched the big

weighing and never the small one, and that an empty truck was a thing nobody cared about at all. The machine shed had a lathe, and in the night he turned a sleeve of steel the length of his little finger, and set it inside the dial head where the tare stop bore, out of the path of the big weighings, and when he was done the scale weighed every load true and every empty truck heavy, and the difference came off the farmer's ticket and stayed in the house.

He had cut it for two percent. In '74 that was two hundred and some pounds on an empty truck, and against the co-op's intake it had been the difference between the bank's letter and the bank's forbearance, and by the time the margin came back the sleeve had been in the head two years and taking it out would have changed every weight in the county overnight by an amount men would have noticed at the settlement window, and the noticing would have asked a question, and the question had one answer. So the sleeve stayed. The co-op lived. The gain showed in the books the way gain shows, folded into shrink and dockage and the ordinary mysteries of grain, and because the co-op belonged to its members part of the money went back out in patronage checks every March, and the members cashed them and praised the margin and praised the manager and praised, above all, the scale and the man who kept it, whose exactness was the

pride of the district. He had robbed the membership and handed the money back to them and they had loved him for the weight of the envelope.

And in '81, when the rates ran to twenty percent and his own note came due on the quarter, the board had voted the scale man a bonus in the hard year, because the house's gain was what it was, and the bonus had saved his place, and no one at that table had known whose money it was. He had not asked for it. He had taken it, and signed for it, and that was the year he understood the machine owned him as surely as he had made it.

That first harvest he had waited every day for the noticing. He had watched the farmers' faces at the window and the manager's face over the books and the state man's face come June, and what he learned was the thing the rest of his life was built on: no one weighs an empty truck twice. A load is money, and men watch money. An empty truck is a pause between the money and the road, and the figure printed for it is a figure no one argues with, because there is nothing to spend it on. He had built the skim where no one looked, and no one had looked for twenty years, and a trusted name, he had come to understand, was the stoutest wall a thing could hide behind.

Steel wears where steel bears weight. He knew it the way a man knows his own tools. The knife-edges in the

pit levers took the trucks twenty years running, and the stop the sleeve bore against took them too, and the take had crept. He had never opened the head to true it, because opening the head meant looking at the sleeve, and he had learned in the first year that a man can keep a thing only by not looking at it, and he had kept it. In '74 the bias had been two hundred and some pounds. On Verle Stelk's old truck, weighed empty that same February in the week before he cut the sleeve, thirteen thousand six hundred fifty with the sideboards and the half tank it always carried, the machine now read thirteen thousand nine hundred ninety. He knew the truck's changes across the years, the mirrors, the tires, the tailgate once, and the truck's changes did not make three hundred forty pounds.

Three hundred forty pounds. The machine had taken the widow's margin to the pound.

He stood at the glass and ran her season in his head, because the season was in his head the way every season was, twenty-three loads since the end of September, and the take on her truck had run three hundred and some a load all fall, seven thousand pounds and better across the year, folded into the note and gone. He could not give back seven thousand pounds. There was no door through which seven thousand pounds could walk back to her. What the machine took it took from everyone alike, the lucky

and the drowning, the Pankonin outfit and the one-truck widows, and no one had ever once accused the scale, because the scale was Ott and Ott was exact. His crime had become weather. It rained on the district without choosing, and this fall it was raining on the one person in the district he would have spared.

He had known Verle Stelk since the fifties, when the two of them hauled gravel out of the Republican pits in trucks that broke down as often as they ran. Verle had stood at this counter one September evening in the early years and watched him sign a ticket and said, well, Aldous, now we'll know what we're worth, and laughed, and that was the nearest any man had ever come to saying the thing aloud. They had been friendly in the way of men who see each other twice a week for forty years and never once sit down to a meal together. When the heart took Verle in the spring of '91, Ott had carried the coffin out of the Methodist church with five other men and stood at the grave in the wind, and he had driven home and told Nadine the facts, because the facts were all he had ever brought home.

The widow had kept the place going with a hired boy and the old GMC, and she drove it with Verle's gloves on, and the district gave her its gentleness; the line parted for her at the platform when men saw the truck in the mirror. Ott had weighed her loads the way he weighed every load, and thought of her no more

than he thought of anyone, which was the machine's way and had become his. He would have spared her. Of all the people the weather fell on, she was the one he would have held off it, and the weather was the thing he had built with his own hands, and it did not choose.

The sun came up on Wednesday the way it does in October, late and pale, and the trucks came with it. Ott weighed them and signed the tickets and kept his figures square and small, and no one watching him from the line would have said the man had anything on his mind beyond the day's work, because the day's work was all he ever showed the glass.

Ellis Allbery drove up from Imperial in the middle of the morning in the association's gray Chevrolet, and he came into the shack with his folder under his arm and stood at the counter the way he stood every October, a neat man of sixty with a voice that had spent thirty years saying the same things to farmers. Ott had known him since the association's office was two rooms over the hardware store.

"Morning, Ott."

"Ellis."

"I'll watch you work a while, if it's no trouble."

"It never is."

It was the arrangement they had, and had had for years. The association held paper on half the crops in the district, and its man came at harvest's end to watch

the scale and initial the schedules, and every year Ott weighed him whatever he wanted weighed. He weighed a Pankonin truck with Allbery watching, and then a Hoiberg truck, and then, because it was the old joke between them, he had Allbery pull the gray Chevrolet onto the plate and weighed that too, and printed him a ticket for four thousand and sixty pounds, and Allbery took it gravely and put it in his folder with the others from other years, a man keeping a ritual he believed to be a check on honesty.

"You've never given me a figure I could argue with," Allbery said.

"The scale gives the figures."

"The scale gives the figures," Allbery agreed, and he looked at the framed certificates over the counter, twenty-one of them, and he said the association had never once had cause to question a weight off this platform, and Ott said the state man came every June, and Allbery said he knew it, and that the January audits picked one account in twenty and had never picked a wrong one out of this house. He said it as a compliment. Ott took it as a compliment and gave him coffee from the pot on the stove.

Then Allbery opened the folder and got down to it. The Stelk account. It was Verle's old note, carried down through the years and renewed by the widow every fall, and the schedule on it this year wanted nineteen

thousand seven hundred pounds off the last load to finish. The last load had printed nineteen thousand three hundred sixty. Allbery read the figure off the settlement sheet and waited, the way a man waits when he already knows everything and is seeing whether the other man will say it first.

"I weighed it myself," Ott said. "There's no fault in the weighing."

"I never thought there was." Allbery closed the folder. "The schedule's the schedule, Ott. You know it and I know it. She finishes it, the association signs the release and the last check pays out to her right over your office counter, and she has herself a winter. She don't, the assignment takes the check whole and the balance follows her, and the account closes with a deficiency letter attached to it. She'll get the letter before Thanksgiving. It's seven hundred and some dollars one way and a dunning the other, and the difference between the two is three hundred forty pounds of milo that isn't there."

He said it flat, because flat was how the association trained its men to say such things, and then he said the widow had been a good customer and Verle before her, and he was sorry, and he meant it the way policy means it. Ott said he understood. Allbery drank his coffee and said the noon renewals were set for the office corner, the notary was coming out from her

rounds at twelve, and Ott's own renewal was on the list, and Ott said he'd be there, and Allbery went out to the gray Chevrolet with his folder and drove back toward Imperial, and the morning's work went on.

Ott weighed the trucks and signed the tickets. His hands were steady on the counter and his voice was steady in the window, and inside him the decision was taking its shape the way a load takes its shape on the needle, settling by degrees toward what it would be.

At noon the notary came, a young woman driving a dust-colored Ford wagon with a magnetic sign on the door. She took the end of the counter, the farmers signed their renewals one at a time, and she asked each of them something small before he signed. Ott's turn came at twelve-forty. His own note rode on his own quarter, renewed every October, twenty years running. He stood at the counter and read the renewal where she told him to read it, and his hands were steady on the paper, steadier than a man renewing debt has need to be, and he signed his name in the square small hand the tickets were written in.

"Does anything in this paper sit wrong with you?" the notary said.

He looked at her. She was waiting with her stamp, doing her work, and the question was nothing, some courtesy the association must have asked her to run, and no one behind him in line was listening.

"The scale decides what sits," he said.

He said it level, and he took his copy, and he thanked her like a man caught at something, though nothing had been asked of him but paper. Then the next farmer stepped up, and Ott went back to the stool, and the afternoon came on.

Thursday he rose before the alarm and was at the shack before five. He did not open the head. He knew what was in the head. At the glass with his coffee, he watched the platform take the yard light, and he ran the widow's season once more in his head, twenty-three loads, and then he did the other arithmetic, the one with no future in it, the seven thousand pounds and better the machine had taken off her tickets since the end of September, and he set it down. There was no door through which seven thousand pounds could walk back to her. What there was, was a paper door, and it was narrow, and it had his name over it.

When the office opened he went across to Darlene's window and asked for the Stelk settlement sheet, to check the office's arithmetic before the account closed, the way he checked everything. It was a thing he did, and had always done. Farmers brought him their sheets to verify against their tickets, and the office had learned to hand him anything he asked for, because his name stood behind the figures and his name was the house's pride.

Darlene gave him the sheet. He stood at the window and read the keyed figures against his memory of the tickets, load by load, and on the twenty-sixth of September he found it: ticket 8841, a fair load, printed at eighteen thousand one hundred twenty, keyed onto the sheet at seventeen thousand seven hundred twenty.

Four hundred pounds. A keying slip, four hundred pounds carried wrong, in the office's favor. He checked it twice against his memory of the pink copy in the house file, and it was true, and it was worth four hundred pounds, and four hundred pounds was sixty more than three hundred forty.

He stood there a long moment with the sheet in his hand. Darlene was on the phone with a trucking man and was not watching him. He understood the shape of the door. A correction certificate, signed by the scale operator, backed by the pink copy in the house file, would close her schedule with sixty pounds to spare, and the association would sign the release, and the last check would pay out to her over the counter, and she would winter. He understood the cost of the door, too. Corrections were the one thing that made men look twice at a scale. The January audits picked one account in twenty, and an auditor would start with the amendment and work outward, and outward from this account was a truck in a widow's shed, thirteen

thousand six hundred fifty pounds with the sideboards on, and a tare column that would not survive one honest weighing of it, and behind the column, twenty years.

He had corrected the office's slips before. Small ones. They lived in every office, and his signature on the certificate was the house's own medicine, and no one had ever thought anything of it, because no one had ever had cause to think anything of him.

He handed the sheet back through the window and told Darlene there was a slip on the twenty-sixth, that he'd draw the certificate in the morning, and she said she'd have the file ready, and her face did the thing a face does when a mistake is caught by the one man whose good opinion the office runs on, and he told her the office had been busy and it was nothing, and he meant her to be comforted, and she was.

That night Nadine warmed the casserole and they ate at the kitchen table with the television going in the other room, and she told him about the circle meeting and the Krotz girl's wedding shower, and he said the things a husband says. She looked at him once across the table and asked if the season was wearing on him, and he said it wore on him every year and he was used to it. They had been married thirty-one years. She had never once asked him what he carried, because he had never once carried it where she could see it, and he

understood that this was the kindest thing about his marriage and the loneliest, and that he had built it that way himself, one kept silence at a time.

Friday came up cold and bright. Ott was at the stool before six, and the morning's trucks came and went, and he weighed them and signed the tickets, and the framed certificates hung over the counter behind him with twenty-one Junes in them. At nine he took the house file from Darlene's window and went back to the shack and sat down at the counter with his pen.

He wrote the certificate the way he wrote everything, in the square small hand, without hurry. Correction to settlement. Account of Lorna Stelk. Ticket 8841, September 26, keyed on the settlement sheet at seventeen thousand seven hundred twenty pounds net; the printed ticket reads eighteen thousand one hundred twenty. Office error, four hundred pounds. Settlement to be adjusted four hundred pounds to the grower. Certified this fourteenth day of October, 1994. And he signed it, A. Rehmer, scale operator, the signature he had signed twenty thousand times, and it matched every one of them, and his hand did not shake, because his hand had never shaken, and that was the thing about his hands that no one in the county had ever had cause to study. He dried the ink.

He understood what he had signed. It was the first paper in the county that, followed far enough, led

inside the dial head, because the account it amended was the Stelk account, and the truck in the widow's shed was the truck he had weighed empty in the February of the sleeve, the constant he had cut it against, and one honest weighing of that truck would open the tare column like a seam, and behind the seam stood twenty years of the district's tickets, every argument ended at the Legion, every settlement signed, every patronage envelope cashed in March, all of it resting on the word of the man who had signed this certificate. He signed it anyway. He stood a moment in the yard with the paper in his hand before he crossed over. The bins stood full above him, four hundred thousand bushels of the district's year, and the leg was quiet between loads, and the cold sun lay on the glass of the shack. He had made the margin that built it, and he was about to hand over the one paper that could bring it down, and he found that he was calm, because the decision had settled days ago and a settled thing does not shake. He carried it across to the office himself, and he stood at Darlene's window while she read it, and watched her face do the thing again, the gratitude and the embarrassment together, and Wally Pankonin came over from the seed room and read it and initialed it and said, good catch, Ott, and clapped his shoulder, and Darlene phoned Imperial and read the figures to someone, and the someone, told

that the scale operator had certified the correction, raised no question at all.

By eleven the word had come back: the schedule finished with sixty pounds to spare, the association would sign the release, and the last check would pay out over the counter. Wally said it to the seed room and the seed room said it to the line, and by noon the yard knew that the widow Stelk had wintered after all, on a catch by Ott Rehmer, who never missed. Two or three of the drivers said it at the window while he signed their tickets, that it was a good catch, and that Darlene would hear about it at Christmas, and that the widow had luck riding with her after all, and Ott signed the tickets and gave them the figures and let them have their say.

She came in the middle of the afternoon in her good coat, the gray one with the brooch, and Darlene cut the check and slid it across the counter, seven hundred ninety dollars and forty cents, and Lorna stood and looked at it a moment before she took it up. The office had gone quiet the way a room does when it wants to watch a decent thing happen. She folded the check into her purse with the same care she had folded the short ticket Monday, and she came to the shack window where Ott stood, and the glass was between them, and she raised a hand and he raised his, and she said through the window's vent, "Verle always said you

were exact. He said it every harvest." And she thanked him, and went out into the bright cold, and the GMC's taillights went south on the Madrid road.

Ott stood at the glass a while. Seven hundred ninety dollars and forty cents. It would buy her coal and groceries and the taxes on the place and carry her to spring, and it had cost the house four hundred pounds of paper, and the paper was his name. In his head the arithmetic stood where he had set it down: the machine had taken seven thousand pounds and better off her tickets since the end of September, and he had handed back four hundred, and the difference stood in the bins overhead as house gain, and in March the membership would cash its patronage and praise the margin. He had patched the one wound he could see. The machine stood. Next fall it would rain on someone else's margin, some young man with a note and a praying wife, and Ott would patch what he could see then, too, and the rest would stand, and the district would go on ending its arguments with his printouts. That was the shape of the rest of his life, and he knew it, and he put his hand flat on the counter and watched the yard until the shape stopped bothering him, the way a man stops hearing the leg run overhead.

He had made such patches before, when the weather hit where he could see it. The Christensen widow in '79, whose settlement he had checked and checked again

until an office slip came to light that covered the insurance man. The Franson boy in '85, hauling with a note he could not see over, whose dockage Ott had figured a shade generous for one October and no more. Small paper, signed paper, safe paper. The machine took, and he handed back what he could see, and the machine stood. It was the nearest he had ever come to a conscience, and it had never once come near the sleeve.

The Rowden crew finished the Hasenauer place Friday and were pulling out at daylight for Oklahoma. Up at the lot the cook trailer's little window burned yellow against the dusk, and the combines stood in a row with their headers off, and a little after six, when the line thinned, the cook brought his supper down for the last time. She set the plate on the counter and took up the night's pail, and she hefted it, and said it felt lighter going back empty than coming down full, which was the whole of her philosophy on the matter.

"Everything weighs more than it says," Ott said.

He heard it as he said it. It came out level, in the voice he used for figures, and it was the one true sentence of his life, and he had said it aloud to a crew cook from Oklahoma who would be gone at daylight. She turned it over the way she would turn over a remark about weather, and said, "I expect that's so," and gathered her pails, and told him to have a good

winter, and went back up the lot toward the trailer with its little light, and that was the last he ever saw of her.

Alone at the stool, he ate the supper. He weighed the last two trucks of the day and signed the last two tickets and ran the kerosene rag over the dial head, and when the yard was empty he banked the stove and put on his coat and turned off the lights, and then he stood in the dark of the shack with the glass faintly shining and did the thing he had kept for last.

He stepped out to the platform. The night was clear and cold and the yard light burned over the pit. He stood at the edge of the broad steel plate the trucks stood on, and he laid his hand flat on it, and he leaned his weight into the arm, and through the glass he watched the needle climb. It climbed past forty and past sixty and settled at ninety and held, and the needle was honest, because the lie had never lived where loads were weighed. A hand was a load. The machine took what a man pressed on it and gave him the true figure back, and Ott stood with his weight on his hand and watched the needle hold what he weighed, and the county slept, and the bins stood full overhead with the district's grain and the district's gain, and no one anywhere was watching the scale man weigh himself on the machine he had made.

He lifted his hand. The needle fell home. He stood a moment longer in the cold, looking through the glass at the dark dial and the certificates hanging above the counter, and then he put on his gloves and drove home to Nadine, and the week was over, and the season would finish in a fortnight, and nothing in the county had changed.

It was generally allowed, then and for the rest of the years the old men lasted, that the scale at the Grant co-op was the one honest weight in the district, and that Ott Rehmer was the man who made it so.

2

Green Water

Cameron Parish, Louisiana, September 1997

A man went over the rail of the Coralee B on the night of the fourteenth of September, 1997, in the first squall band of a blow that never got a name, and the law asked me what I saw. I was twenty-three years old. I am past fifty now, and I have answered that question more ways than the law knows, and I have kept the one way to myself, and keeping it has taught me the thing this story is about, so I will tell the story and keep it still.

That season I cooked on the Coralee B. Three falls before it I had cooked for harvest crews in the north, wheat and milo country, where a crew eats in a field and pays cash on Saturday, and I was good at the work and the work was honest, and when the crews went home to Oklahoma I drifted farther south than they did, because the Gulf pays year-round and the cold does not. A shrimper that carries a cook is a boat that works long trips, and the Coralee B was that kind of

boat: sixty-two foot of wood and rust out of Cameron, named for the captain's mother, with a galley the size of a closet and a stove that wanted to burn me twice a day. I fed three men and I slept in a bunk under the wheelhouse and I learned the boat the way a person learns a house, by where it groans.

Alcide Broussard was the captain. He was fifty that year, a careful man about everything except weather, and about weather he had the gambler's sickness, which is the belief that the sea will wait for one more set. He was good enough that it usually did. Junius Hebert was the lead deckhand, twenty-nine, out of Hackberry, with a wife and two little girls and a laugh that carried over the engine, and he owed money on a truck and talked about it like a man talks about weather himself, something coming that a body watches. He was the one who learned my name the first day and used it, and he ate everything I put in front of him and said so, which is the whole of what a cook asks of a crew. Wilbert was the second hand, nineteen, strong and quiet. And there was me.

The wheelhouse sat above the galley, and the galley door opened on the lee side, and when we were working I handed coffee up through the wheelhouse doorway and stood there sometimes in the dark between sets, watching the compass light and the captain's hands on the wheel. That doorway was my

station when things went wrong. It was the width of a man's shoulders, with the wheel in front of it and the windows all around and the sea past the windows, and what I saw from it is most of what this story is.

We sailed Friday morning on the early tide, working the inside grounds off Cameron, and when the sets came up thin we went farther out along the beach rigs, where the water goes from the color of coffee to the color of bottles. Three days of sets and pickups, the try net coming up and the big nets paying out, Junius and Wilbert on the deck and Broussard at the wheel and me at the stove, and the catch building in the hold ice by ice. Sunday evening the weather radio started arguing with itself. A tropical system was in the Gulf, or a depression, or a line of squalls with nothing behind it, depending which hour a body listened to, and Broussard stood at the wheelhouse window with his supper plate and listened to two hours of it and said, "One more set," which was his whole philosophy of weather. The crew said nothing. His whole philosophy had paid for the boat.

The barometer fell through supper. I fed them early, beans and rice and the last of the sausage, and Junius ate standing up with one eye on the western sky, where the light was going a color I did not have a name for, and he said his girls were at their grandmother's and his wife was working the counter at the ice house, and

he would be home Wednesday with the paycheck to show for it. That was the last ordinary thing he said to me.

We were out three days when the blow came. It was on the radio before it was on us, and Broussard did what he did, which was to keep the nets down for one more set while the barometer fell. I do not blame him. I have never blamed him. That is a separate thing from what I saw, and I am telling it straight: the nets were down and the doors were out and the catch was coming up heavy, and the first band hit us at full dark with the deck running black water.

Green water is what the old hands call the sea when it comes over the rail whole. Foam and spray will wet a deck. Green water stands on it, solid, and it takes what it takes. The first one took us amidships and the boat lay over and came back, and I heard Wilbert shout from the stern, and I got to the doorway in time to see the second one come, a wall of it, tall as the doorway, up over the starboard rail where Junius was working the winch. When the deck cleared the winch was running empty and Junius was gone.

No splash. No cry that any of us could swear to. The man was there and the man was in the sea, and the sea had the deck and the rail and everything past it.

Broussard hit the alarm, and the Coralee B woke up. I have the sounds in their order, because I have gone

over them more times than I have told this story: the bell, the engine's note changing under my feet, Wilbert's boots on the deck, the captain saying one word, which was Junius's name, not loud, the way a man says a thing to himself. Wilbert got the ring buoy over the side with the strobe lit on it, and the ring went astern and downwind, blinking, and a ring with a light on it drifts the way a man swims, slow, and the wind was taking the tops off the waves.

Wilbert went aft with the boat hook and stood at the starboard rail where Junius had been working, and looked into it, into the white water and the dark water, and there was nothing to hook and nothing to see. He told me on the way in that the worst of it was the ordinariness of the sea right there, the same chop, the same foam, as if a man could not have gone into it a breath before. Junius's gloves were on the winch drum where he had set them down to work the lever barehanded. His cigarette had gone out in the scupper wash. That is what a boat looks like when a man leaves it in a hurry: everything he touched still doing its job.

Out beyond the squall the radio was talking to itself. Two boats working east of us were asking each other what it looked like, and neither was answering, and a crew boat out by the rigs was saying it had seen worse and would see worse again. Broussard did not answer any of them. The Coralee B had her hold full of ice and

catch and her deck aft running low with the weight of it, and every sea that boarded put green water on the planks where Junius had been working the winch. By then the band was on us whole. The wind came in gusts that leaned the boat and let her up and leaned her again, and the rain went sideways past the windows, and the wipers on the forward glass did nothing at all.

I had come up from the galley when the boat first lay over, with the stove killed and the pot wedged, which is what a cook does first, and I got into the wheelhouse doorway and set my hand on the frame, and that is where I stayed. The windows were streaming. The compass light burned red over the card. Rain came through the window Broussard had cracked for the heat, and he stood with the wheel in his hands and let it come, and for a count of five he did nothing at all. I did not understand the count of five then. I understand it now. He was doing the arithmetic, and the arithmetic was the price of the boat, and he knew the price the way he knew his own mother's name.

The sea had shortened since supper. All afternoon it had been long and gray, the swells far apart and lazy, and by dark it was a short, steep, marching sea, the kind that comes off a squall line with its mind made up. The boat was working harder than she had any call to, and every one of us knew it in our knees, and none of us said it, because saying it was the captain's to say.

Here is the thing a person ashore does not know, the thing the panel made me say three times before they believed I knew it. A shrimper with her gear out turns the way a sled turns, heavy and arguing. The doors and the nets are a sea anchor dragging astern, and the sea is on her beam the second she leaves her heading, and green water over the rail of a boat caught beam-to is how a crew of four becomes a crew of none. To go back for the man, she has to come around, and coming around she gives the storm her broad side, and the storm takes it or it does not. To hold her heading, she keeps her bow into it and lives, and the man astern has the ring and the strobe and whatever the Lord has for him.

That was the arithmetic. It is simple arithmetic, and it is terrible, and every man on the Gulf knows it, and nobody wants it said to a widow.

So I watched his hands, and I watched the wheel, and here is exactly what I saw, because I have never once lied about this part. The wheel went hard over. The spokes flashed in the compass light, one full turn and a second and the start of a third, and his forearms worked, and then they stopped, and the Coralee B took her time. A boat with her gear out does not answer like a boat running free. She leans and she argues, and the drag astern holds her to her course like a hand on her collar, and for a long minute the only thing moving was

the compass card, and the card swung one way and then the other as the seas took her bow and gave it back, and I could not read it through the streaming glass. The lightning did its white work. Once it showed me the strobe astern of us, small and blinking where Wilbert had thrown it. Once it showed me foam on our beam that could have been our own wake curling around, or the sea breaking on nothing. The deck went down and came up. The cables to the doors strained and eased, which they do in any seaway, and the engine labored, and the wipers slapped, and in that minute I could not have told it under oath, which way the bow was swinging, because everything I knew how to read was rain.

That is the truth about the wheel. Which way the boat went is the part I will come to.

Somewhere in it the radio crackled, and a boat we knew, the Miss Delia out of Hackberry, asked if the Coralee B needed anything, and Broussard keyed the mike and said, "Man in the water," and gave the position such as we had it, and that was the whole call. Three words and a guess. I have heard men preach funerals with more in them. Then the first new sea came over the bow, or over the quarter, and put green water the length of the deck, and I held the frame and watched it run, and when it cleared, the strobe was not where I had last seen it, or the lightning was lying

again, and I understood that from then on my eyes were going to trade in maybes.

The radar over his shoulder showed the second band the whole while, a wall of green miles wide and forty minutes behind the first, and that was the clock the six minutes ran on. I saw him look at it. I saw him look at the compass and back at the radar, and his mouth moved once, and I have never known what he said to it. The deck speaker clicked and he told Wilbert to hold what he had and watch the water, and his voice over the little speaker was the same voice he used to order ice, and I have thought about that voice since, because a man's voice at such a time is either the truest thing about him or the best coat he owns, and I do not know which it was for Alcide Broussard, and I was there.

All the while the boat went on with her work of staying alive. The seas came aboard forward one minute and off the quarter the next, or the boat was swinging under me, and the wiper glass and the rain gave me nothing to read. The gear astern held us and dragged us and held us, and the rain leaned in through the cracked window and wet the captain's shoulder, and he did not move to close it. I stood in the doorway with my hand on the frame and my eyes going from his hands to the glass to the radar and back, and I did the only figuring a cook can do at such a time, which was

how many of us there were and where each one was and what I would do when it changed.

Then it changed, or it had changed already, and I understood that standing in the doorway was waiting, and waiting was not watching, and the watching was at the rail.

Because here is what I did next, and this part is plain and I have never shaded it: I left the doorway. I went out on the lee side and forward to the rail, because if she came around there would be a moment when the rail was the side to be on, and if she held her heading the rail was where the strobe would show, and either way the rail was where a watcher had to stand. It was twelve feet of open deck with the sea coming over it. I went out the galley door on the lee side and down on my knees with one hand on the lifeline and one on the deck house, and the gear of the deck was all alive around me, the cables working, the blocks swinging, the deck wash going out the scuppers and coming back in, and I timed the boarding seas by their sound, the way a person times anything she cannot watch, and between two of them I crossed and took hold of the rail, and the rail was wet and warm and solid, and the winch was still turning where Junius had left it, and Wilbert got it stopped.

I called his name once. The wind took it. I did not call it twice. After that I did what a watcher does,

which is watch: I worked my eyes in sectors the way we worked the grounds, upwind first, where nothing could be, and then astern along the drift of us, and then the beam, where the seas were building, and the lightning came and went and showed me what it chose to show me, and the rest of the time it was the deck light and the dark. Wilbert was aft with the boat hook, doing the same work on the other side, and once I saw him point, and I looked where he pointed, and there was nothing, and when I looked back he was watching the water again, and neither of us said anything, because there was the wind, and because there was nothing to say. My hands cramped on the rail and I changed them and they cramped again, and the band's edge went over us and the rain eased a minute and then came on harder, and I understood the second band was on its way, and that whatever the water was going to show me, it would show me soon or never.

A person counts time with whatever she has, and I had the seas. They came in their sevens and nines, the way seas do in a blow, and between the big ones the deck drained and I lifted my head and worked the sectors again, and the lightning kept its own count. The minutes went the way change goes out of a hole in a pocket. Later the panel wanted to know how long I stood at that rail, and I said I did not know, minutes at the rail, and the captain's six covered the wheel and

the watch both, the doorway and the rail together, and they wrote down six, and I have wondered since what they would have written if I had said an hour.

Six minutes, the panel said later, from the alarm to the captain calling it, the doorway and the rail together. Six minutes in the first squall band of a September blow, and what the spray allowed me to see is what I have left of Junius Hebert. It is nothing at a stove, six minutes. At a rail in a squall band it is the longest measure I own, and I have owned it twenty-seven years.

What the spray allowed was this. The strobe, twice, far off and going farther, or the lightning pretending to be the strobe, I could not tell which. The boat's own wake lit by the deck light, boiling green, falling away behind us or coming around across us, depending. His shape in the wheelhouse window, turned aft or facing forward, the glass lying about which. A voice once, or the winch, or the wind in the rigging making its long sound. A boarding sea that took me to the waist and put me down and left the deck drum-tight under my hands. And the water itself, warm as blood, which is the thing nobody believes about the Gulf in a storm, that it is warm.

I did not see Junius Hebert after the water took him. I want that down. Everything else I saw has a maybe on it, and it has had the maybe on it for twenty-seven

years, and it will die with the maybe on it, and I will get to why.

Broussard called it after six minutes and put her back on her heading, or kept her on her heading, and when the first band moved off to leeward he steamed the search anyway. The second band came through while we ran it, another hour of the same weather, and we searched through it, because by then the boat was running free with the gear hauled and the decks cleared, and a boat running free could go where the water was. Four hours, up and back over ground we could not fix, the captain working the pattern by compass and time because the storm had made a lie of everything else, and Wilbert up the mast with the light, and me back at the rail with the binoculars, and the Coast Guard on channel sixteen taking the position, such as it was, and promising the morning.

Nobody talked. That is the part a person does not expect, how quiet a boat is, looking. The engine and the sea and the radio's static, and once Wilbert came down from the mast and stood in the galley door and watched me make coffee, and I set out four mugs because that was how many mugs I set out, and he looked at the fourth one and I looked at it, and I put it back, and he took his coffee up without a word. A galley keeps its own count. It is the worst thing about a galley.

We found the ring buoy at two in the morning. The strobe was still blinking. There was nothing holding it. Wilbert brought it aboard and set it on the stern deck with its line coiled, and nobody moved it again until we were home, and I passed it twenty times going about the galley, and it dried in the sun like anything else that had been in the sea. The sea flattened behind the squall line as if nothing had happened, and the sky came up gray, and the Coast Guard flew the sector in the morning and found nothing, because there was nothing to find.

We made the pass on the morning tide and came up the ship channel with the last of the fuel, and the boats we passed did not blow their horns, and that is how a crew learns the word has beaten them home. The dock was full of men standing the way men stand when there is nothing to be done for the dead, hands in pockets, watching the water. Cameron is a small place. The Coralee B came to her slip with her decks scrubbed by the sea and her hold full of another man's last work, and Broussard put her against the pilings without a word.

Junius's wife came with her brother and stood at the end of the pier with her arms crossed, not crying. She was twenty-six that year and she had held herself together all morning on will and coffee, and she did not spend any of it on the dockhands. I took her a plate of

the stew I had made because I did not know what else to do with my hands, and she held the plate and looked at me and said, "You were the one saw it," and I said yes, and she said, "Then you'll say it right," and she took the stew home to her girls. That was the whole of her instructions to me. I have thought about them since.

We sold the catch. That has to be said, because it happened, and it happened the morning after a man died for the working of it. The buyer's truck came to the slip and the ice went over the side in shovelfuls and the shrimp went into the barrels by the basket, and the price was the day's price, and Broussard took the check and put it in his shirt and did not look at it. At noon the priest came down and said a decade of the rosary on the stern with the three of us, and then we hosed the deck, and the Coralee B was a boat again, and nobody said the obvious thing about that.

The night we got in I could not sleep on the boat, and I took my coffee down the dock about two in the morning and sat on a bait box. The marina had a night watchman, a young fellow with a camper at the gate and a chair at the fuel dock, and he brought his own coffee over and sat with me, because that is what night people do. We talked about nothing. Then the insurance man's car came down the dock road with its lights off, slow, and stopped at the Coralee B's slip, and

a man got out and looked at the boat a while and drove away, and the watchman said the insurance man had been by twice already asking what time the crew came aboard before we sailed, and whether they came aboard sober.

"Next time he asks, I'll tell him," the watchman said. "They came aboard at eleven, quiet and sober. I checked them in myself."

I looked at him. He drank his coffee. After a while he said, "I sleep in that chair from ten to one most nights. I slept through that whole night. But he'll write it down, and then it'll stand."

The insurance man came back on the Thursday, and the watchman told him, and the first money went through without a contest: the boat's protection club's advance to Junius's people, the money that does not wait on findings. It stood. The widow's due was another money, the kind that would ride on what the record said, and that one was still ahead. I have never forgotten the sound of that on the dock, a man finding out that one voucher makes a truth stand.

Two days after the rail, the insurance company sent a woman down to the dock with forms, a notary, and she set her briefcase on the bait box and had me sign the statement I had written out for her clerk on a yellow pad, and she wore a man's wristwatch on a

worn strap. Before I signed she said, "Are you ready to give your statement?"

"I've been ready since the rail," I said.

She stamped the page and went on to the captain. She did not ask me ready for what, and I did not tell her, and it was as well for both of us.

I waited the week out on the boat, and in that week the parish talked. The weather that week was calm, and the Gulf lay flat and gray off the beach, and men went out and came back with full holds, and the talk at the cafe was that the sea had taken its price and would be quiet a while. At the ice house and the cafe and the fuel dock it was said that Broussard had run one set too many, which was true, and it was said that he had turned the boat into the sea to try for Junius, which some swore to, and it was said he had held his heading and let the man go, which others swore to, and the two sayings met each other at the same counters and neither one won. Broussard said nothing to anyone. He sat on the Coralee B at her slip and worked on the winch where Junius's gloves had been, and when the priest came down he took off his hat, and when the lawyer came down he did not come aboard. Wilbert went home to his mother's and did not go out. And I cooked, because a galley does not grieve, it only feeds, and I set out three mugs.

The week ran slow and bright between the notary's visit and the hearing. I cooked for the crew that was left, and for the men who came down in the evenings to sit with the captain in his silence, and for the church hall on the Wednesday, where the women of two parishes filled the tables for Junius's people and the talk went around the room the way it goes, low and practiced and kind. A woman from Grand Chenier told me the sea had taken her brother in '71 and given him back in nine days, and she said it the way a person says a psalm, and I said I hoped the sea would be as kind, and knew it would not be, because the current that week ran the other way. That was the week's work. Feeding people, and holding the unsayable thing behind my teeth, which was that the Gulf keeps what it takes in deep water with the gear down.

The lawyer came to the boat on the Friday, a young man with a soft briefcase, and he asked me whether anyone had told me what to say. I said no. He asked whether anyone had paid me anything. I said no. He asked whether I liked the captain. I said I did, and that it had no bearing. He looked at me a while and wrote nothing down, and he said, "It usually has bearing," and he went away.

The county called it the inquest. The Coast Guard called it an investigation, and its report could not be entered in anyone's civil case, the new law said, and

the parish's own paper on the death would come by the coroner's own route in its own time. It sat the following week, in a room over the parish offices in Cameron, with a flag and a long table. A lieutenant from the Coast Guard's marine safety office ran it, with two men he had named to sit beside him. At one end sat the insurance man with his folder, and a lawyer out of Lake Charles sat near the widow, watching. The room smelled of mimeograph fluid and damp, and the recorder on the table had a little red eye, and the whole parish's two sayings came in and sat down on opposite benches. The parish had buried nothing and charged no one, and the room was called to find out what the sea had done and what the men had done, in that order.

I wore my good dress and my mother's medal. The lieutenant swore us each in turn, and I held up my hand and said the words, and the words were the first surprise of the day, because the law asks for the promise of the truth before it asks what the truth is, and it does not say what a witness is to do if the truth comes to her with a maybe on it.

Nobody on the Coralee B had ever worn a life jacket on deck. I knew that would come up, and it did. The lieutenant asked where the jackets were and I said under the bunks, and he asked whether the captain required them worn, and I said no more than any boat

on the Gulf required it, and the insurance man wrote something, and the lawyer watched me the way a man watches a hand of cards.

The widow went first of all of us. She told them Junius's name and his people's names and how long they had been married and the number of the note on the truck, and she sat back down, and the room was quiet the way a room is quiet when it has been answered. Wilbert had gone before me. He had seen the same nothing I had seen, from the stern, and he said it in five minutes and came out gray. The captain had gone before me also. He told them the boat's facts, the gear out, the sea state, the time of the alarm, the six minutes, and of the wheel he said that he had turned it and would not swear to more. The six minutes were gone for him, he said. He had had the compass and the radar and the radio in them, and he could not give the room a picture, and the room did not like it. I could hear that through the door. But a man at a wheel in weather knows what he asked of the boat, and not always what he got, and the panel knew boats enough to know it, and so the record's picture of those minutes came down to the one witness who had been watching the water. That was me. I had known since the rail that it would be me.

Then they came to the night. I told it the way I have told it here, from the galley to the doorway to the rail.

The count of five I did not call a count of five to them, because a panel wants figures and not a man's silence; I said the captain took a moment to assess, which was true and was also the whole of it. The lieutenant had me describe the sled arithmetic three times, a shrimper with her gear out, until he was sure I knew what a turn would have cost. Across from me the widow sat with her arms crossed and her brother beside her, and she listened to me the way she had looked at me on the dock, and I thought: you'll say it right.

Then the lieutenant asked the question the room was built for. He asked it the way the law asks, flat, with the recorder going.

"Ms. Salcido. The captain turned the wheel hard over. You have said you could not see which way the boat answered. You stood in the wheelhouse doorway, and then you stood at the rail, for six minutes. In your judgment, as the only witness who was watching the water, did the Coralee B come around for Junius Hebert, or did she hold her heading?"

I had two true stories by then. I want that understood. Both of them were built out of what the spray allowed, and neither of them was a lie, because the spray had allowed me maybes and a maybe will carry either story. In one of them the captain came around. He gave the storm his broad side with the gear dragging and the deck awash, and the six minutes were

the turn fighting the sea anchor astern, and we missed the man by the width of the lightning, and the boat lived because God was not done with it. In the other one he held his heading. He did the arithmetic the way the sea writes it, and the six minutes were a man watching the water for a sign with his hands steady on a wheel hard over, the boat never once answering it, and the boat lived because the sea allowed it, and Junius had the ring and the strobe and whatever the Lord had for him. One story carries the captain. The other carries the widow's due. Mercy and money, both of them hanging in that room on which draft I was willing to speak.

I heard myself say it before I knew I had chosen, and this is as close as I will come to the choice: what I said was a thing I had heard once, years before, from a man in wheat country who weighed grain for a living and knew what a number can carry. Everything weighs more than it says. I said it about the six minutes and the captain's hands and the man in the water, and I said which way the boat had gone, and the room tilted. The lieutenant's pencil stopped. The insurance man leaned forward and wrote one line, and the widow uncrossed her arms and crossed them again, and the lawyer out of Lake Charles closed his folder with a sound like a door shutting gently, and I will not say which way the tilt went.

What the record says is what I said. The panel found the loss a casualty of the sea, and the captain kept his license, and the family was paid without a contest, and the Coralee B fishes out of Cameron to this day with another hand on the winch. That is the surface of it, and the surface is true. What is under it is mine.

I cooked two more seasons on the Gulf and then I went ashore for good, and I married a man who does not care for boats, and I have cooked in kitchens where the worst emergency is a fryer fire. My husband asked me once, in the first year, what I had said in that room. I told him the story as far as it goes, and he waited for the end, and when he saw there was no end coming he nodded, and he never asked again. He is a wise man. He married a woman with one room he cannot enter, and he lives peaceably on the porch of it. Junius's girls are grown women, and one of them has his laugh, and I have heard it in the checkout line at the Piggly Wiggly and gone on with my list, and that is how close this parish keeps the dead.

The sentence I used in that room was never mine. I heard it once, a handful of years before, at a grain co-op in Nebraska, from a man whose whole work was the difference between what a thing weighed and what it said. I never learned his story. What I had of him was his sentence. It has weighed more than it said, every

day of my life since, and it weighed more than it said in that room, which is what I used it for.

I have told this story a handful of times besides, to people I trusted, and every time I stop at the same place, and the people I trust learn the same thing about me: that I know which draft I spoke, and that I will not say.

Because here is what I learned in that room with the flag, and it is the thing this story is about. A witness is an author. The law sits a body down and swears her in and tells her to tell the truth, and if the truth came to her through spray and lightning and minutes that will not count, then the truth under oath is whatever she is willing to carry. I stood at that rail and the spray allowed me maybes, and I carried one of them into a room and set it down and watched a panel build a record out of it. I was ready since the rail, and I have been ready since, and which way I shaded it is the one thing I will carry out of this world. Either way, the record stands. Either way, the man is in the sea.

3

The Luckiest Man in Evangeline Parish

Evangeline Parish, Louisiana, 2001

People in this parish have called me Lucky so long that my own name sounds to me like a nickname. I am Odell Fane, and I am telling this on my porch with my coffee, the summer of 2013, and you can believe as much of it as you want, because that is what a yarn is for. But I will tell you the straight of it, which I have never done, and you will see what you see.

The year of the boat I was twenty-eight years old and keeping the Knights of Columbus hall on the north side of Ville Platte, which means I mopped it, I tended the bar at the wedding receptions, and I slept in the room off the kitchen where the mops were. Before that I was a night watchman down at Cameron, at the marina, and that is where I learned the thing that ruined me, so I will tell it first. A man was lost off a shrimper down there, and the insurance man came

around asking whether the crew had come aboard sober the night they sailed. I had a camper at the gate and a chair at the fuel dock and a thermos, and the whole job was to be the man who was awake, and most nights I was asleep in the chair by ten. So when the insurance man came around asking, I vouched for an hour I had slept clean through. I said they came in at eleven, quiet and sober, and the man wrote it down, and the payout went through, and my saying it stood up and walked around like it had always been true. He shook my hand when he left. I had lied to him about an hour I spent asleep, and he shook my hand, and I have thought about that handshake for years, how official it made everything. That is what I learned at the marina. One voucher makes a truth stand. A man sees a thing with his own eyes, or says a thing in front of people, and after that the thing has legs. I want you to hold that, because it is the whole trick, and it is also the whole punishment. I left Cameron not long after, on account of the dock work dried up and my sister's husband got me the hall job in Ville Platte, and I want to say I left the lesson in Cameron. A lesson like that travels in your pocket like a knife, and you do not have to pack it.

The fall I am telling about, the Knights raffled a boat at the parish fair. Some donor had come up with a sixteen-foot bass rig with a fifty-horse Mercury on it,

green, on a trailer, and the Knights parked it in front of the hall all fair week with a sign on it, and the tickets were five dollars, and the drawing was Saturday night on the hall's little stage, and the custom was the man who sold the tickets did the drawing. I sold the tickets. The Knights said I was neutral, being staff and not a Knight, and nobody asked whether I had bought one, and I had. That was the whole security system of the Evangeline Parish fair raffle: a question nobody thought to ask Odell Fane.

You have to understand about the fair, first. The Evangeline Parish fair takes over that end of town for a week, midway lights and stock barns and rodeo dust, and the KC hall sits close enough that you can smell the popcorn and hear the announcer through the walls. Everybody wanted something that week, and the men stood around that boat in the evenings with their hands in their pockets, looking at it the way men look at a thing they have already spent in their heads.

And you have to understand about the boat. It sat out front all week, and every time I hosed the sidewalk I hosed around it, and by Tuesday I could tell you the hours on the motor from the wear on the cowl, and by Wednesday I had the trailer tongue measured with my eye for the hitch I did not own. I have wanted things before. I have never had a wanting sit in me that specific, down to the trailer lights. Thursday I sold a

ticket to old Tolly Lemoine, the welder, five dollars, and he says to me, "Odell, if I win that boat, I am giving it to my brother-in-law and he is going to have to learn to fish," and I wrote his name on the stub, A. Lemoine, and dropped it in the fishbowl we used for a drum, and I looked at that stub lying on top of two hundred other stubs in the glass, and the wanting came up in me like a fish rising.

Now, a fishbowl draw is the crookedest-looking honest thing in the world. Everybody can see the stubs. Nobody can see your palm. I knew it could be done because I had thought about it all week, the way you think about a thing you have no intention of doing, turning it over, admiring the mechanics of it. You write your own stub. You keep it. At the draw you reach in, you stir the stubs around with your fingers like a man digging for the right one, and what you come up with is the stub that was in your palm the whole time. The crowd sees the hand go in empty and come up holding. What they see, stands. I learned that at the marina, like I told you.

Saturday night the hall was full, five hundred people, the folding chairs and the standing room, and Father Breaux said a blessing over the boat and the cotton candy both, and Alfred Doucett, the Grand Knight, made the speech, and then they called me up to draw. And I went up on that little stage with the

fishbowl, and I had my own stub in my palm, where it had been since six o'clock, warmed up like a robin's egg.

I put my hand in the bowl. And here is the part I have never told. My fingers closed on a stub, an honest stub, the first one they touched, and the bowl being glass, I could read the name through it, face-out, against my knuckles. A. Lemoine. Five dollars from a welder, and the honest draw was his. I read it in the half second before I opened my hand and let go of it and brought out the one that was in my palm, and I held it up, and Alfred Doucett read it out loud, and he said, "Odell Fane," and the hall came down.

The hall came down, and then it did what a parish does, which is mob. I was hugged by people I had mopped up after. The Knights bought me beers I did not taste, and Alfred Doucett pumped my hand for one picture after another, and somebody changed the sign on the boat to WINNER with my name spelled right, and the band playing the midway came through the walls like weather. I stood for the Gazette with the stub held up like a fish. And when I came down off the stage the cash box counted out even, and I did not look toward the ticket table again that night. That is the one thing I did right. I gave her nothing to see twice.

That is how I became the luckiest man in Evangeline Parish. It took eleven seconds, and no proof of

anything exists anywhere, and a girl saw me do it.

I will get to the girl.

First you have to see the crowning, because the crowning is where the comedy lives, and the comedy is where the punishment hides. They took my picture for the Gazette with me holding the stub up next to the boat, grinning my face off, and the picture ran Wednesday, above the fair results, and for a month people brought it up to me like a citation, and by Friday I was Lucky for good. At the cafe they made me rub a man's lottery ticket before he scratched it. At the Super Valu a woman I barely knew asked me to stand near her while she picked out a ham. I am not making this up. At the church carnival the year after, the kids lined up to touch my sleeve like it was a relic, and their mothers let them, and I stood there with my sleeve out and my face on straight, earning the name. The high school asked me to flip the coin at homecoming. I flipped it. It came up the way it came up, and both sides cheered me for it. That is when I started to understand that luck is a performance you are not allowed to stop giving. A car dealer in Opelousas wanted me for an ad, sitting on a boat in his lot. I did not do it. Some things a man does not do, and selling the crown outright is one of them, and I could not have told you why, except it would have been one too many

stubs in the palm. When a parish crowns you lucky, they mean it as a job.

It did not stop at the cafe. The Lions Club called me for their turkey shoot drawing, and the auxiliary had me pull the quilt raffle at the bazaar, and the fire department had me out for their boot drive picture, and a man I had never seen in my life stopped me outside the post office and asked me to sign his fishing license, for luck. I signed it. My name, on a license, as a charm. What else was I going to do? You cannot refuse. That is the thing nobody tells you about being crowned: the crown is a collar, and the leash is the parish's hand, and the parish is gentle, and the parish never lets go.

I took the boat out on Miller's Lake the Saturday after, with half the west bank watching, and I did not catch the first fish. Not a bream. The luckiest man in Evangeline Parish spent four hours on the prettiest rig on that lake and brought home a sunburn, and by Monday it was around that I had caught a bass so big it pulled the transom off, which is the kind of story the parish tells FOR you, because the parish's investment in me being lucky was bigger than mine. My investment was the hitch I had to buy, and the trailer lights, and the lower unit I cracked on a stump in November, and the license, and the registration, and the gas. That boat cost me forty dollars a month to own

and five dollars a month to feed, and it never once coughed up a fish worth the story.

And the first job came quick, because that is when the Knights announced that next year the lucky man would draw the raffle, that being the new custom, seeing as how Odell sells them and Odell won one and it makes a good story. That was the first favor I could not refuse. What was I going to say? No, on account of the whole thing was a crawfish trick? So there I was, sentenced to stand at that bowl every year for the rest of my natural life and draw honest, in front of five hundred people, with a straight face, and the straight face was the one thing I had left that fit me, and I put it on and I have worn it every October since.

The year after that, the fair pageant people asked me to crown the queen. I crowned her. Seventeen years old and crying, and I put the tiara on her with the hands that did the bowl, and the parish clapped, and that was the year I started keeping count in my head of how many years I had been lucky, the way a man counts a sentence.

The next October I found out what the collar was for. Fair week came, and the donor came up with a riding lawnmower that year, and the Knights sold their tickets, and Saturday night I stood on that stage with five hundred people watching and drew honest. I want to tell you my hand shook. I want to tell you it was

hard. It was the easiest thing in the world, and that is the worst thing I know about it. The honest draw took eleven seconds, same as the other one, and nobody anywhere could see the difference, and the girl was at the table again, taking fives, watching my hand the whole time, saying nothing, then or ever. A woman from Mamou won the lawnmower and cried, and I held the bowl for the picture like an usher at a wedding, and the Gazette ran it, and the caption called me by the name. That is when I understood the sentence. The court was never going to convene. I was going to stand at that bowl every October for the rest of my life, drawing honest, under her eye, proving nothing, forever, amen.

Now I have to go back inside the bowl, because I skipped the part that matters.

All that week I had told myself it was a joke. That is the truth. A man thinks about a thing the way he thinks about a card trick, admiring the moves, and the whole time I am hosing the sidewalk around that boat and selling my fives and telling myself a man would be a fool, and Thursday night Tolly Lemoine bought his ticket off me, and Friday I lay on the cot in my room off the kitchen and looked at the ceiling, and the wanting came up in me again, specific, down to the trailer lights. Saturday at six o'clock I wrote my own stub, same as two hundred others, and I folded it small, and I

held it in my hand to drop in the bowl, and I did not drop it. I have thought about that moment more than any other in my life. There was no decision in it that I can find. The stub was in my palm and the bowl was over there and my hand did not open. Or the decision was made years before and four parishes south, like I told you. The insurance man wrote my saying down and it stood, and standing there with my own stub warm in my hand, that is what came back to me: what they see, stands. Five hundred people were fixing to watch my hand come out of that bowl holding something, and what they saw was going to stand, and I was going to live in it. I knew it at six o'clock and I did it at nine. You can call that a decision if you want. It did not feel like one. It felt like a cork going under.

Father Breaux blessed the boat and the cotton candy, and Alfred made his speech about the scholarship fund, and I heard none of it, because a man with a stub going soft in his palm does not listen to blessings. I sat at the table with the cash box and smiled at people and took their fives.

The doors opened at seven and the parish came in, the Knights in their vests and the ladies with the cakes and the kids climbing the folding chairs, and the whole place smelled like popcorn and floor wax, and I sold my fives and made my change, and the fishbowl sat on the card table on the stage under the light, filling up with

everybody's chances. That fishbowl come off a bunco booth at the fair in '89, and people had said for years you could not trust a bowl with a history, and I can tell you they were right, though not for the reasons they had.

At nine o'clock Alfred Doucett called me up. The walk from the ticket table to that stage is twelve steps. I took them slow. The PA squealed, and somebody hollered "Lucky" before I even touched the bowl, and five hundred people laughed, and I climbed the two steps and the stage squeaked under me, and the bowl sat there in the light with two hundred stubs in it and the parish's trust, and I put my hand in.

People think a cheat is quick. It is not quick. It is the slowest eleven seconds a man can spend. My fingers went into the stubs, and the stubs were cool and dry and made their little paper sound, and I stirred them around the way a man does, digging for the right one, and the hall went quiet the way a church does, five hundred people holding still over one hand in a fishbowl. I had all the time in the world. Nobody is going to hurry the drawing. My palm was sweating and the stub in it was going soft, and the glass was cold against my wrist, and I remember thinking, a man could reach in here and come out with anything, and who would ever know. The answer was nobody, and I

was the only man in the parish who knew that, and I was wrong, and I was about to find out.

While my hand was in the glass, in that half second when I was reading Tolly Lemoine's name through the side of it and making the exchange, I looked up. A man will do that. And across the hall, at the ticket table where the stubs and the cash box were, the girl who had been selling tickets with me all evening was watching my hand.

Sixteen years old. A junior at the high school, helping for the service hours. Next to me since four o'clock, taking fives and making change, she had seen me write my own stub at six and seen it not go in the bowl, and now she was watching my palm come out of the glass holding a stub that had never been in it, and her eyes came up from my hand to my face, and I looked straight into them, and I cannot tell you what was in hers, because what was in mine was pure red terror dressed up as a grin.

She said nothing. She said nothing then, and she said nothing to anyone that I ever heard of, and she has said nothing in the years since, and that is its own kind of weather to live in. A person who has not been looked at that way does not know the weight of it. I had a witness, and my witness was sixteen, and my witness was silent, and from that second, my lucky story stopped being a joke I was telling and started being a

job I was doing under the eye of a girl's silence. Every October at the bowl, every picture in the Gazette, every ham at the Super Valu, I have done my lucky work knowing she is out there in the parish, knowing.

That first night I did not sleep. The boat sat on its trailer under my window, because the Knights let me keep it out front until the title could be done, and I lay on the cot in the room off the kitchen and listened to the fair shutting down across the way, the midway lights going off a string at a time, and I kept waiting to feel like a winner, and what I felt like was a man who had swallowed a fish hook. Twice I got up and looked out at it. The second time, I said out loud to the mop sink, "I won it fair," and the words stood up in the dark like they had legs, and that is when I knew the marina lesson had followed me home and moved in.

On the Tuesday after, I signed for the boat at the fair office, which was a trailer by the barns, with the fair's paperwork and a notary the fair board hired for the week. The fair was breaking down outside, the stock barns washing out, the midway folding up, and the trailer smelled like hay and old paper. She was a woman with reading glasses on a chain, and she had me sign where the title and the donation paper wanted signing, and before I signed she said, "Is the boat what you wanted?"

"It's what I won," I said. I grinned, and it shook on my face like the skin on scalded milk, and I signed, and the boat was mine, and she stamped the page and went on to the next one.

I pulled the boat home through the parish that afternoon with the WINNER sign still on it, and people honked, and I honked back, and the whole town waved at the lucky man and his brand-new used rig, and I felt the stub's ghost in my pocket the whole way, and there was nothing in my pocket. There was never anything in my pocket. That is the part nobody believes, that the cleanest crime in Evangeline Parish left one witness and no evidence.

The fair folded out of town and October went, and the boat went under its tarp against the kitchen wall, and the parish settled into calling me Lucky the way it settles into anything, by use. I winterized the motor with a kit from the hardware store, reading the instructions twice. The hall went quiet the way it does after fair week, bingo on Thursdays, a wedding reception now and then, and me behind the bar at them with my face on, pouring for people who called me Lucky and meant it as a benediction over their own weddings. I poured for one groom who told me he hoped some of it would rub off. I hope so too, podna, I said, and I poured him a good one, and I thought about the bowl.

At the KC Christmas party that first year, Alfred Doucett stood up with his eggnog and made a toast to the luckiest man in Evangeline Parish, and the whole hall drank to me, and Father Breaux said a Hail Mary for the scholarship fund and one for me, and I sat at the bar's end with my face on and my glass up, and I thought about the bowl then, too. The bowl was becoming my whole interior life, and nobody could see it, which is the definition of a secret and also, it turns out, of a life sentence.

Now here is where the yarn would end, if it was a yarn: man cheats, man wins boat, man lives lucky ever after. But I have to tell you about Tolly Lemoine's stub, because that stub had a family on it.

The Lemoines were cafe people. Tolly welded for the oil field when there was work and fixed gates when there was not, and his wife worked the deli at the Super Valu, and they had three kids, and the youngest was the clarinet. Maude. I knew them the way a person knows everybody in a parish seat, by their truck and their talk. That winter the talk was the girl. She had come home with a letter from the band director saying she had the best tone in the junior high. Those were Mrs. Vidrine's words, and she was not a woman who threw words around. If the girl could take lessons and go to the camps, she could play for money someday at a college. The lessons ran sixty dollars a month. And the

Lemoines had the truck payment and the gate-fixing and a winter with no welding in it, and Tolly told it at the cafe the way a man tells a thing he is proud of and cannot pay for, laughing at the wrong parts. The men's table took it up the way they took up everything, and the advice ran to telling him to sell something. Sell what, he said. The boat I do not have, he said, and laughed, and I laughed, and my coffee tasted like pennies. I paid for my coffee and his both, and the waitress said that was sweet of me, and I said he was good for it, and the men's table laughed, and it was the truest thing said at that table all winter.

I sat over my coffee and listened to him, and the name was already in me from the bowl. A. Lemoine. Five dollars from a welder. I had read it through the glass in the half second before I let it go. And I want to tell you I thought about what came next because I am a good man who heard a need. The truth is worse, and it is funnier, and it is the way it happened. I had stolen four thousand dollars from that family in front of five hundred witnesses, and the only thing my crooked mind could come up with was to spend the rest of my life paying it back sixty dollars a month, like a man making payments on a conscience.

So I started the tuition. I told myself it was insurance: a family with an angel does not ask questions about boats. That is what I told myself, and I

believed it for maybe two envelopes. I took cash to Mrs. Vidrine at the junior high one December afternoon, in a plain envelope, and I stood in the band room with the music stands stacked and the whole place smelling of cork grease and valve oil and wet wool, and I said it was from a friend of the band, for the Lemoine girl's lessons, and would she see to it. She looked at the envelope and then at me, and she was a woman who had taught band in that parish for twenty years and knew every family in it and most of their business, and she looked at me the way a woman looks at a man when she has decided to keep his secret, and she kept it. She kept it for years. Sixty dollars a month, for the lessons. Then the clarinet needed a repad, and that was another envelope. The summer was band camp up at Natchitoches, and that was two envelopes. Then she made the district honor band and there was a fee and a bus ride and a hotel in Baton Rouge with the other honor band kids, and I stood in my room off the kitchen counting out twenties like a man feeding a slot machine, and I want you to know I never once thought about stopping, because stopping would have meant explaining why I had started.

Mrs. Vidrine never asked me anything except once, the second year, when she said the Lemoines had tried to thank the friend of the band through her, and what should she say. I said, tell them the friend says to spend

it on the girl and not on stamps. She nodded and went back to her baton trunk. That woman knew. I have thought about that since, that I had two witnesses, and one of them was helping me, and I could not have said which one of them held the heavier end.

It was not insurance. I knew it when I licked the first envelope. You do not pay insurance on a thing for years, monthly, in envelopes, with your own rent money sitting on the same table. It was penance. I could not have told you penance for what, the stealing or the standing, because by then the two were the same thing.

I did the figuring once, walking home, in my head: four thousand dollars at sixty dollars a month comes to five years and some, and I remember thinking, five years, and then I am square. That was the first winter's arithmetic. The tuition did not read the figuring. The tuition read the girl, and the girl kept getting better, and the camps kept coming, and the years kept coming, and the figuring went the way of the fishhook. I picked up the reception bar work for the extra, Fridays and Saturdays, and the first of the month I would walk to the junior high at the three-thirty bell with the envelope in my jacket, and the band room door would be open, and Mrs. Vidrine would take it off the music stand where I set it, and we would talk about the weather like two people with nothing between

them, and that was the most honest conversation I had all month. I always left by the side door, past the instrument lockers, and some months there would be a clarinet case open on a chair in there, and I would look at it like a man checking his traps.

And here is the part that took me years to see. The girl got good. She made the honor band, and she played a solo at the spring concert, some French piece with runs in it, and the auditorium was the high school gym with folding chairs, and the program was a mimeographed sheet, and when that girl stood up and put that clarinet together and played, the gym went quiet in a way I had heard only once before, over a fishbowl. I sat in the back row in my good shirt and sweated like the defendant I was, and when she finished the parish stood up, and Tolly Lemoine cried, and her mother cried, and Mrs. Vidrine looked at the back row and found me and did not nod, which is how I knew she still kept the secret, and I clapped with my face on straight and thought: I did that. A cheat did that. The best thing in that room was bought with a stolen boat, and nobody in it will ever know, and it is good anyway. That is what will bend your mind, cher. The good was real. It grew in the dark like a mushroom and it fed people anyway.

Her senior year she made the state honor band, and there was a camp and a fee and a new mouthpiece, and

then the spring of her senior year there was a letter about a band scholarship at the college up in Natchitoches, full tuition, which is a phrase that will stop a man's heart when he has been paying sixty dollars a month into a clarinet for six years. Mrs. Vidrine told me about it in the band room with the door open, looking at her baton trunk and not at me, and the envelope that month was the biggest one, for the audition trip and the interview clothes, and I walked home lighter than I had walked in years, because it occurred to me that the boat had finally paid for something worth more than the boat. She got the scholarship. She marched at the college in Natchitoches, and the Lemoines went up for the halftime shows, and Tolly told it at the cafe laughing at the right parts now. There was a concert her freshman spring, and I drove up for it, two hours, and sat in the back of a real hall with a program on good paper, and she played third chair, and I drove home in the dark and did not pass one single car that knew me, and that drive was the closest I have come to peace with it.

The boat, meanwhile. I fished it. Let me be honest about the boat. I took it to Miller's Lake and to Chicot and to a borrow pit off 167 that a man told me about, and I caught bream enough to keep the story standing, and every October the parish looked at my rig at the fair and saw the crown, and every month I paid for it

out of the same envelope money's table. The lower unit I cracked in November cost me two hundred and a week of overtime at the hall, and I remember lying under that trailer in the cold, working the bolts, and the boat over my face, and I thought, this is the pet I stole. You feed the pet. That is the whole arrangement. A man offered me thirty-two hundred for it in '04, cash, and I said no before he finished, and that is when I knew I could never sell it. Selling it would have been the confession. I cleaned bream on the tailgate for the neighbors' kids, and they took the fish home in bread bags, and their mothers told them to thank the lucky man, and the kids said thank you, Mr. Lucky, and I gave them each a quarter, for luck, and the quarters came out of the envelope table.

The years went. The girl at the ticket table grew up. I would see her at church some Sundays, and nothing passed between us, and the nothing got to be a thing with weight, like a third person at the table. Her name was in the Gazette on the honor lists, and then her graduation picture, and then she was gone off up the road, and her silence went with her and did not get lighter with the distance. Some mornings I woke up half hoping she had told it, so it would be over. Some weights travel. I kept the hall, and I drew the raffle every October, honest, and the parish crowned me again every year, and the boat sat on its trailer under

my window like a dog that knows. Every year there are new Knights, and the old ones teach them the custom. "That's Lucky," they say. "He won the boat in '01." I hear it. I draw. The years the prize is a lawnmower or a shotgun or a four-wheeler, I draw the same, and the parish watches the same, and the fishbowl does not know the difference.

I still keep the hall. The fishbowl sits in the closet off the kitchen, wrapped in a towel, and I take it out every October and set it on the card table and wash it first, because a drum ought to be clean, and I draw honest, and the parish watches, and the girl is not at the table anymore, and I watch the door for her anyway, every year, one glance, before I put my hand in.

The neighbors know the porch. People come by some evenings and sit, and they want the story, and I tell it the way the parish likes it, the win and the crowning and the ham at the Super Valu, and they laugh, and nobody anywhere asks the one question, because the one question is not theirs to ask, it is mine. The mailman calls me Lucky. The meter reader calls me Lucky. And the parish has changed around the story the way a tree changes around a fence wire, and the fair gets bigger, and the bowl gets older, and the towel gets thinner. I have been asked to draw raffles in four parishes now. The radio in Eunice had me on, the Cajun station, telling the win, and the DJ asked my secret, and

I said, "Buy a ticket, cher," and the whole listening area believed me. I am a regional attraction, and the whole region is sure it knows me, and the whole region is holding a stub that was never in the bowl.

I can stand on that little stage any night I want without leaving this porch, and I do. The PA squeals, and the crowd is five hundred of the dead and the living, and the bowl is cold on my wrist, and my hand goes in, and it comes out holding my whole life. And here is what I cannot tell you, because I cannot locate it myself: where the mask stops and the man begins. I drew a crooked draw in front of God and the parish, and the parish sentenced me to be a public credit, and I have served the sentence so long the sentence has grown roots in me, real ones, and the roots feed a clarinet player, and the clarinet player never knew, and the witness never told, and the town will put me in the ground under the word LUCKY, spelled out, on the stone, and they will mean it. There will be a Knights' honor guard, and someone will say the word over me, and if there is any justice in the band program of this parish, Mrs. Vidrine will send a clarinet. And here is the thing that keeps me on this porch some nights with the coffee gone cold.

Some nights I come close to telling the porch the whole thing. Then I think about the Gazette, and the honor guard, and the clarinet, and I pour another cup.

The luck was the sentence. I know that much. What I do not know, and what I ask myself rocking here, is which one of me won that boat.

4

Objection to Form

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 2014

STATE OF LOUISIANA

NINETEENTH JUDICIAL DISTRICT COURT

PARISH OF EAST BATON ROUGE

NO. 628,414

LYDIA VERCHER, INDIVIDUALLY AND ON BEHALF OF MARCEL VERCHER, AND ALICE MANUEL, INDIVIDUALLY AND ON BEHALF OF TOBY MANUEL, JR.

VERSUS

CARDINAL CRANE & RIGGING, LLC, AND STERNLINE BUILDERS, INC.

DEPOSITION OF MIREILLE FONTENOT, taken on Wednesday, October 8, 2014, at the offices of Acadian Reporting, 8440 Jefferson Highway, Conference Room B, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, commencing at 9:04 a.m.,

before Denise Quist, Certified Court Reporter, and D. Karras, Certified Legal Videographer.

APPEARANCES:

PRESTON LANDRY, for the plaintiffs.

DANA GAUTHIER, for the defendant Cardinal Crane & Rigging, LLC.

RORY SLEDGE, for the defendant Sternline Builders, Inc.

HELEN ARCENEAUX, for the deponent.

EXHIBITS MARKED AND ATTACHED:

No. 5, pendant connector pin, recovered, fracture face.

No. 6, identification plate, pendant bar CCR-440-PB-0217.

No. 9, bridle tag, four-leg wire-rope bridle.

No. 11, manufacturer's load chart, Saybrook SL-440, 130-foot jib, with configuration annex.

No. 12, anemometer calibration card, punched June 2013.

(The deposition of Mireille Fontenot commenced on video at 9:04 a.m., the witness framed in a medium shot.)

(Appearances stated for the record.)

MR. LANDRY The parties stipulate that this deposition is taken for discovery and may be used for any purpose permitted by law, with objections reserved except as to form.

MS. GAUTHIER So stipulated.

MR. SLEDGE So stipulated.

MS. ARCENEAUX For the witness, stipulated.

THE COURT REPORTER Will you raise your right hand, please. Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to give will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

THE WITNESS Yes.

MR. LANDRY State your name for the record.

A. Mireille Fontenot.

Q. Where do you live?

A. Baton Rouge. 1140 South Foster, apartment C.

Q. And your occupation?

A. Crane operator. Tower crane. I have a CCO card and four years in the seat, nine years in the trade.

Q. Before we begin, the customary instructions. The reporter can only write what you say out loud. She cannot write a nod or a shake of the head. Do you understand?

A. Yes.

Q. If you do not understand a question, say so, and I will rephrase it. If you answer, I will assume you understood. Do you understand?

A. Yes.

Q. Your attorney may object to the form of a question. Unless she instructs you not to answer, you must answer. Do you understand?

A. Yes.

Q. Are you on any medication that would affect your testimony today?

A. No.

Q. Is there any reason you cannot give your best testimony today?

A. No.

Q. Your work history. Start with how you came to operate.

A. I started as a flagger on a road job outside Opelousas in 2005. Then rigger's helper. Then I put in my oiler time at the hall's apprenticeship and took my CCO written and practical in 2009. I have operated tower cranes since 2010.

Q. The crane at River Exchange.

A. A Saybrook SL-440. Diesel luffer, two hundred feet of mast, one hundred thirty feet of jib. Cardinal's machine. I had been on it since it went up. Twenty months.

Q. You know the machine.

A. Twenty months, six days a week. You know the machine the way you know a horse.

Q. Before the chiller pick that morning, what work had the crane done?

A. Two picks of rebar bundles to the fourth floor, at 6:50 and 7:20, and a concrete bucket to the second floor at 7:40. All clean. The wind was building through the morning. At 6:50 the anemometer read nine to eleven. At 7:55 it read twelve to fourteen with gusts to twenty-one, which is what I wrote on the card.

Q. You watched the wind through the morning.

A. I watch the wind the whole time I am in the seat. It is the thing that can hurt you.

Q. And the decision to make the chiller pick at 8:10.

A. The superintendent wanted the unit set before the afternoon, because the forecast had the wind building. Mr. Dufour called it on the channel. Percell checked the rigging. I checked the chart for the radius. The pick was called.

Q. On October 14, 2013, you were the operator of that crane at the River Exchange project at 300 North Boulevard, Baton Rouge.

A. Yes.

Q. Employed by Cardinal Crane and Rigging.

A. Yes. They own the crane. I go where the crane goes.

Q. I want to take you through the morning of October 14. What time did you climb that morning?

A. I signed the pad at 5:40 a.m. I did my daily inspection and I was in the seat by 6:15.

Q. Describe the inspection that morning.

A. The card's list. The pins and pendant connectors by eye with a flashlight, the limit switches, the brakes loaded and unloaded, the anemometer against the ground meter, the radio check with the crew, the horn. Forty minutes. The machine was normal.

Q. Your daily inspection is recorded on the form Cardinal keeps.

A. The daily card. The inspection part I fill out every morning before I climb, and the wind numbers I add through the day, at the station, each hour.

Q. The daily card is your handwriting.

A. My handwriting, my initials, my numbers. I do not let anyone touch my card.

Q. The River Exchange project.

A. A hotel and a parking garage downtown, nine floors of frame up at that point, going to twelve. I had been on the site since the crane went up, February of 2012. Twenty months.

Q. And the weather that morning?

A. Clear. Cold for October, low fifties. The wind was the question. The anemometer at the operator's station read twelve to fourteen at the top, with gusts. On the card: gusts to twenty-one at 7:55.

Q. What was the crane's wind limit?

A. The manufacturer says take no pick in gusts over thirty. The site rule was twenty-five. We were inside both.

Q. The chiller had been on the flatbed since Sunday night.

A. It came in Sunday evening and sat under tarp on the trailer at the curb lane. The rigging crew walked it Sunday, planned the pick for Monday morning, first heavy thing of the week.

Q. There had been a death on the site the week before, a fall. Did that change anything about the morning?

A. We had a safety stand-down Friday. Everybody stood around for an hour and talked about harnesses. Monday we went back to work.

Q. The pick that morning. What was it?

A. The chiller for the third floor, the big Trane unit, on the flatbed since Sunday night. The rigging crew hooked it at 8:10, give or take. Percell Vercher was the lead rigger. Toby Manuel was on the tag line side.

Q. Walk us through the pick.

A. The chiller went up on the main hook, four-leg bridle, wire rope. I came off the deck slow, swung to the east face, and started luffing out to set radius. The set point was the third-floor deck edge, call it ninety-two feet of radius from the crane center. The unit weighed nineteen thousand eight hundred forty pounds on the bill of lading. With the bridle and the hook block, twenty thousand five hundred forty.

Q. And the failure occurred during the set.

A. The failure occurred at 8:31. I had the load at radius and was coming down the last four feet when the jib went. The pendant bar on the west side parted at the upper pin, and the jib fell past the deck edge. The load was still on the hook when the jib went, and it followed the jib. Both men were on the deck edge under the set.

Q. During the set, before the failure, who was in communication with you?

A. Percell on the radio, channel 2. He called the pick to me. Easy east, hold, down slow. That is the work. His voice was normal.

Q. The tag line.

A. Toby Manuel had the tag line on the south side. The load was steady the whole way. No swing, no spin. It was a clean pick until the machine failed.

Q. When did you first know something was wrong?

A. A bang, and the hoist went slack in my hand, and the jib came through my line of sight falling. The whole event was four seconds.

Q. The horn.

A. I hit the horn when the jib went. It was over by the time the horn sounded. The men on the deck edge had no time. The horn was for the site.

Q. After.

A. I called the mayday on the site channel and stayed in the seat until the fire department came for me. The mast was standing. The jib was gone. I did the shutdown checklist at two hundred feet, because that is procedure, and then I waited.

Q. The site after the failure.

A. It stopped. The horn did what the horn does, and everybody ran toward it, and there was nothing to do. Then the fire department took the scene. I watched from the seat until they came up for me. The wind kept building all morning, like the forecast said.

Q. You saw them.

A. I saw them until the dust. Then I saw the dust.

Q. Did you touch the controls after the pendant parted?

A. Nothing for the load. When the jib goes, the seat is a chair in the sky. The checklist is the mast's, and I ran it, and I held on and I watched.

Q. How did you get down?

A. The fire department brought me down the mast ladder at 10:20. The ladder is how I got up, and it is how I got down, and it is two hundred feet, and I was two months past my twenty-eighth birthday, and I remember counting the rungs.

Q. Tell me about the two men. Percell Vercher and Toby Manuel.

A. Percell had thirty-one years in rigging. A wife, Lydia, and a boy, Marcel, who is eight. Toby was twenty-six. His wife is Alice. Their boy was born in March of that year.

Q. You knew the families.

A. Site families know each other. They were at the summer cookout. Percell taught me the tag line when I was a helper. Toby called the picks careful.

Q. And the morning's pick was routine until the failure.

A. The pick was heavy. The pick was the furthest thing from routine on the board that week. Everything else about the morning was ordinary.

Q. Who maintained the pendant bars on that crane?

A. Cardinal's shop, on the monthly service. My daily card covered the pins by eye from the catwalk, what you can see with a flashlight. The pin that parted is inside the connector. You cannot see it without a teardown.

Q. You never reported a defect on the pendant.

A. I never saw a defect to report.

Q. Your daily card from that morning is in evidence.

A. It should be. I filled it out. Everything I wrote on it was true.

MR. LANDRY Nothing further at this time.

MS. GAUTHIER Good morning, Ms. Fontenot.

A. Good morning.

Q. I am Dana Gauthier. I represent Cardinal Crane and Rigging. You are not a party to this suit, do you understand that?

A. I am the operator. I understand what that means in this room.

Q. I am going to ask you some questions about your background first. You grew up in Ville Platte, Evangeline Parish.

A. Yes.

Q. And you lived there through high school.

A. Yes.

Q. In the fall of 2001, you were a junior at the high school.

A. Yes.

Q. Ms. Fontenot, do you know a man named Odell Fane?

A. Yes.

Q. How do you know him?

A. He kept the Knights of Columbus hall in Ville Platte. I worked the ticket table with him at the parish fair raffle, that fall, for the service hours.

Q. The ticket table was where in the hall?

A. Beside the stage. He sold the tickets and wrote the stubs, and I took the money and made change and dropped the stubs in the bowl.

Q. Describe the bowl.

A. A glass fishbowl, on a card table on the stage. You could see the stubs through it.

Q. You said service hours. The table paid you nothing.

A. Nothing. The hours were for school. The honor society required them.

Q. You were an honor student.

A. Yes.

Q. And the drawing was the end of the evening.

A. Nine o'clock. The band played first, and the fair's winners were announced, and then the draw.

Q. The stage was lit.

A. There was a light over the card table. You could see the bowl from everywhere.

Q. And from the ticket table you could see Mr. Fane's hands.

A. I could see his hands all evening. He was beside me.

Q. When the time for the drawing came, what happened at the table?

A. We closed the table at eight forty-five and counted, and the bowl went up to the stage, and the custom was the ticket man carried it. He carried it up the two steps and set it on the card table under the light.

Q. And then the Grand Knight called him back up to draw.

A. Yes.

Q. And the drawing itself was done in front of the crowd.

A. Everybody watched. That is the point of a drawing.

Q. How many people?

A. The hall was full. Five hundred, the way the parish counts. The whole town comes to the fair raffle.

Q. And the money went to?

A. The scholarship fund. Two scholarships a year came off that fair.

Q. So the money was counted carefully.

A. The cash box counted even. It always counted even. I counted with him.

Q. The prize that year was the boat, and the boat was worth some money.

A. Four thousand dollars, the way people talked about it.

Q. And when Mr. Fane's name was read, the crowd celebrated.

A. The roof came off the place. He was well liked.

Q. The parish gave him a name after that, didn't it?

A. They called him Lucky.

Q. Still, as far as you know?

A. I left Ville Platte in 2003. It was still going when I left.

Q. The paper covered the win.

A. The Gazette ran his picture holding the stub, next to the boat.

Q. And the raffle was repeated the next year.

A. Every year. The custom changed after he won. After that, the custom was the lucky man drew.

Q. You worked the table again in 2002.

A. Yes. Service hours.

Q. And he drew in 2002.

A. Yes.

Q. As far as you could see, that draw was honest.

A. As far as I could see. I watched his hands.

Q. You watched his hands.

A. That is what I knew to watch.

Q. Now. You have answered that you watched the drawing from the ticket table, across the hall from the stage.

A. Yes.

Q. And the custom was, the man who sold the tickets drew the winning stub.

A. Yes.

Q. And the bowl went up to the stage, in front of the crowd.

A. Yes.

Q. Who called out the winner?

A. The Grand Knight. He read the stub into the microphone.

Q. Mr. Fane won his own raffle that year, did he not?

A. Yes.

Q. The prize was a boat.

A. A bass boat.

Q. You were sixteen at the time.

A. Sixteen years and two months.

Q. Did you see anything unusual about that drawing?

MS. ARCENEAUX Objection, form.

Q. You can answer.

A. Yes. I watched him do it. He wrote his own stub at six o'clock, when we opened the table, and folded it small and kept it in his hand, and in three hours it never went in the bowl. At nine they called him up, because the custom was the ticket man drew, and he put his hand in the bowl and stirred the stubs around where everybody could see, and he brought out the stub from his palm and held it up, and the Grand Knight read the name off it, and he won the boat. I saw his hand flat over that stub all evening and I saw it come out of the bowl closed, and I was sixteen, and I never told anyone, not anyone, for thirteen years, until I answered you a minute ago.

(The videographer has moved in close on the witness's face.)

Q. You are certain of this.

A. Three hours I watched his hands. I am certain.

Q. Ms. Fontenot, you understand that we did not learn this from you.

A. I understand you did not learn it from me.

Q. When did you learn that the defendants knew?

A. This minute, when you asked me.

Q. An investigator retained by the defendants went to Ville Platte in June. He found Mr. Fane keeping the same hall. Mr. Fane told him about the raffle. Aloud, in detail, on two occasions. He refused to sign anything. There is no statement, no affidavit, nothing in writing. Do you understand what I am telling you?

A. Yes.

Q. And today, for the first time in thirteen years, you confirm it.

A. Yes.

Q. Then he said it before you did.

A. Then he said it before I did. That is all right. It was his to say.

Q. You are aware this testimony will travel back to Ville Platte.

A. Yes.

Q. You are aware of what it will do to Mr. Fane.

A. Yes. It will do to him what the truth does. He did the thing, and I saw it, and the rest is the town's. I am not in charge of the town.

Q. Why didn't you ever tell anyone, Ms. Fontenot?

A. It was not mine to tell.

Q. It was a fraud on your parish.

A. Yes. And the parish was happy, and I was sixteen, and it was not mine to tell.

Q. You never told anyone. In thirteen years. Not when the parish called him Lucky. Not when he drew the raffle again the next year.

A. Nobody asked me.

Q. Not a teacher. Not a friend. No one.

A. No one. The town was happy. I went to school and I worked my hours and I watched the Gazette call him Lucky, and I graduated, and I left.

Q. And in the years since, you have seen Mr. Fane.

A. In Ville Platte, when I visited my mother. We did not speak. We have never spoken about it, or at all, since the table.

Q. Let me be sure the record is clear. You watched a man commit a fraud in front of five hundred people, when you were sixteen, and you said nothing, to anyone, for thirteen years.

A. Yes.

Q. And today you want this record to accept that what you remember about a morning a year ago next week is the truth.

MS. ARCENEAUX Objection, form.

Q. You can answer, Ms. Fontenot.

A. The morning is on my card and on the chart. What I said about the bowl is the truth too. One does not change the other.

Q. How is anyone in this case supposed to tell the difference?

A. By the chart.

Q. We will come to the chart, Ms. Fontenot.

A. Whenever you like.

(A recess was taken, off the record, 10:41 a.m. to 10:52 a.m.)

MS. GAUTHIER Back on the record. Ms. Fontenot, I want to return to the morning of October 14.

A. Yes.

Q. The anemometer at your station read twelve to fourteen with gusts to twenty-one at 7:55. What did it read at 8:31?

A. Fifteen steady, gusting twenty-three, twenty-four. Inside both limits.

(Exhibit No. 12, the anemometer's calibration card, was marked for identification.)

Q. Exhibit 12, the calibration card off the wind meter at your station. For the record, the card is punched for June 2013, annual calibration, with the technician's initials, and the card reads that the meter reads within one mile per hour of the reference instrument.

A. It was true. The wind was what the meter said.

Q. The manufacturer's limit is thirty, and the site rule was twenty-five.

A. Yes.

Q. A gust of twenty-four is within four percent of the site rule.

A. It is inside the rule. A gust at twenty-four is not the same wind as a gust at twenty-six, and neither one broke the pendant. The pendant broke because it was cracked inside the connector, and because of the load. Not the wind.

Q. You say the load. Let us talk about the load. The chiller weighed nineteen thousand eight hundred forty pounds on the bill of lading.

A. Plus the bridle and the hook block. Twenty thousand five hundred forty on the hook.

Q. And you logged the radius at ninety-two feet.

A. The set point was the third-floor deck edge. Ninety-two feet from the crane center. That is what I logged, because that is what it was.

Q. You performed the shutdown checklist at altitude, after the failure.

A. Procedure. The mast was standing. The engine was running.

Q. You were calm enough to run a checklist.

A. Calm had nothing to do with it. The checklist is what your hands do when your mind is gone. Ask any operator.

(Exhibit No. 5, pendant connector pin, recovered, was marked for identification.)

Q. Exhibit 5 is the pin that was recovered from the west pendant connector. Recovered from the deck at the third-floor level on the day of the failure, photographed in place, tagged by the fire investigator, and held since in the evidence room at the fire house. Let the record reflect the pin shows a fracture face across the shear plane, 1.9 inches in diameter, with beach marks visible over roughly two thirds of the face and a bright overload crescent at the east edge, which is the part that failed last, in the accident, in four seconds.

A. I have seen it. I saw it at the OSHA review. It had been cracking for a while, on the inside, where nobody could see it. That is what the beach marks mean.

Q. You are not a metallurgist.

A. No. I sat in the OSHA review and I listened to the metallurgist. The pin had been failing for months. Nobody knew, because nobody could see it, because it was inside the connector.

(Exhibit No. 6, the pendant bar's identification plate, was marked for identification.)

Q. Exhibit 6, the identification plate off the pendant bar. For the record, the plate reads: CARDINAL CRANE & RIGGING, LLC, inventory number CCR-440-PB-0217, rated 44,000 pounds, last shop service August 2, 2013.

A. That is the bar.

(Exhibit No. 9, the bridle's sling tag, was marked for identification.)

Q. And Exhibit 9, the tag off the four-leg bridle that picked the chiller. For the record, the tag reads: four-leg wire-rope bridle, one-inch IWRC, rated 26,400 pounds at the hitch angle used, manufactured 2011, inspected by the crew each pick, and the punch log on the back shows the crew's punch for every week from January 2013 through the accident week.

A. That is the bridle. The bridle held. It is still holding in the evidence room, for all the good it does anyone.

Q. The bridle was recovered intact.

A. Intact, with the load, under the jib. The rigging did not fail.

Q. After the accident, you gave a statement to OSHA and to the police.

A. Yes.

Q. Nothing has changed about your account of the morning.

A. Nothing about the morning has changed. The morning is what it was.

Q. You attended the OSHA review in November.

A. I sat through the whole review. Two days. The metallurgist, the structural engineer, the manufacturer on the phone.

Q. And the review's finding on the pin.

A. Fatigue cracking from a defect in the pin steel, the defect there since manufacture and subsurface the whole way. The teardown interval was annual, and the last one was that August, ten weeks before the pick. The teardown reads by eye and by measurement, and a subsurface crescent does not present to either, and no ultrasonic examination of that pin was in the manual or on the record. Nobody could have seen it, with what the manual required and the record shows done.

Q. That finding is in the OSHA record.

A. It is in the OSHA record. I am giving it from memory and from having sat in the room, and if I get a number wrong, the record will correct me.

Q. The defendants' survey of the site puts the deck edge at eighty feet of radius, Ms. Fontenot.

A. The defendants' survey measures from the wrong center. The crane center is the center of the mast, and their survey measured from the building's grid line, twelve feet off the crane's true center on the load's side, and nobody checked it. It is a twelve-foot difference, and it is wrong, and I told the OSHA man it was wrong in the same words last November.

Q. You are telling us the survey is wrong.

A. I am telling you the radius was ninety-two feet. I made the pick, and I watched the deck edge come to me for twenty months and I set on it every working day. Ninety-two feet.

Q. Let us say the radius was contested. Let us say the load was steady, as you say. The defendants' expert will testify that a pendant failure like this one is consistent with a shock load from a load that shifts in the air, and the load was rigged by Percell Vercher's crew, and Mr. Vercher is not here to testify.

A. The load did not shift. I watched it come up level and stay level. A misrigged load tells you in the first ten feet. The sling legs stayed even. The unit came up level and it flew level and it was level at radius when the jib failed.

Q. You are certain.

A. Your expert was not on the radio with Percell and was not watching the slings. I was on the radio with Percell, and I was watching the slings. His rigging was sound. It did not fail.

Q. Percell Vercher signed the rigging ticket that morning.

A. He checked the rigging and I watched him check it, and he was right to sign it. The rigging held. The machine failed.

Q. Ms. Fontenot, if the jury believes the load was misrigged, the fault for this accident sits with Mr. Vercher.

A. Yes. And his widow loses her benefits, because the carrier will call it his error and his alone. I understand the arithmetic of this room.

Q. And if the jury believes the radius was ninety-two feet and the pick was twenty thousand five hundred forty pounds, the fault sits differently.

A. Yes.

Q. You understand what your employer's position is.

A. I understand everyone's position. That is the seat I sit in.

Q. Have you operated a crane since October 14, 2013?

A. No. Nobody will seat me. My card is current. I answer phones at a safety supply house on Airline Highway.

Q. You have not been offered a seat.

A. I have not been offered a seat. A crane company does not seat the operator from a fatal collapse until the case is finished, and the case is not finished, so I answer phones.

Q. So you understand your testimony today touches your own livelihood.

A. My testimony today is about the morning. My livelihood is already gone. The morning took it.

Q. You attended the mediation in June.

A. I sat in the hall. I was not in the room.

Q. The mediation failed.

A. That is what the lawyers said in the hall.

Q. Ms. Fontenot, have you been coached in any way about this testimony?

A. No.

Q. Not by Mr. Landry, not by your own counsel, not by anyone.

A. No one. I was given the date to appear and I appeared.

(A lunch recess was taken, off the record, 12:06 p.m. to 1:15 p.m.)

MS. GAUTHIER Back on the record. I am marking as Exhibit 11 the manufacturer's load chart for the Saybrook SL-440 in the River Exchange configuration, one hundred thirty feet of jib.

(Exhibit No. 11, load chart, was marked for identification.)

Q. The chart is two pages. The chart and the configuration annex.

A. Without the annex, the chart is nothing. The annex is what the machine is, and the chart is what the machine may carry.

Q. The annex is part of Exhibit 11.

A. It rides with the chart. Always.

Q. You know this chart.

A. I know it the way I know my own door. An operator lives on the chart.

Q. Now, Ms. Fontenot. The chart gives capacity by radius. And I put it to you that at eighty feet of radius, the chart permits twenty-two thousand pounds, which is more than your pick, which means the pick was within the chart, and the failure was not an overload.

A. You have to read the whole chart, Ms. Gauthier.

MS. ARCENEAUX Objection, form. There is no question pending.

Q. You can answer.

A. Then I will read it for the record, because the radius fight is the wrong fight. The pick was twenty thousand five hundred forty pounds on the hook, the chiller and the bridle and the block. The radius was ninety-two feet. And here is what the chart says at ninety-two feet, and it says it in print, and print does not care who reads it aloud.

(Witness reading Exhibit 11 into the record:)

EXHIBIT 11. MANUFACTURER'S LOAD CHART, REPRODUCED IN FULL.

SAYBROOK SL-440. LUFFING JIB TOWER CRANE.

LOAD CHART FOR 130-FT JIB, 200-FT MAST, STANDARD COUNTERWEIGHT.

ALL CAPACITIES IN POUNDS.

RADIUS (FT)	CAPACITY (LB)
40	44,000
50	36,800
60	30,100
70	25,400
80	22,000
85	20,900
90	19,300
95	18,200
100	17,400
110	15,600

NOTES:

1. Capacities are the maximum permitted load on the hook, and include the weight of the hook block and all rigging, slings, spreaders, and attachments below the hook.

2. Capacities are for static loads, freely suspended, with no wind allowance. Wind adds load. At wind speeds above 20 mph sustained or gusts above 30 mph, stop work.

3. Do not luff a load outward beyond the chart radius for that load.

4. Do not make any pick in excess of 95 percent of the chart figure without written authorization from the shop superintendent.

5. The figures between printed radii are found by straight-line interpolation, down.

6. This chart is valid only for the configuration printed above. Any change of jib length, mast height, counterweight, or fall reeving voids the chart.

7. The operator is responsible for knowing the radius and the load before the load leaves the ground.

8. Pendant bars and their connector pins must be inspected per the shop manual at each monthly service, and the connectors torn down annually. The pin is not visible in service.

9. Do not field-modify any structural member. The chart is the law of the machine.

10. When in doubt, do not make the pick.

11. This chart is not a substitute for the operator's manual. The operator must know the manual, the machine, and the site.

12. Capacities presuppose the machine level within one-half of one degree, the brakes and limit switches proved at the start of the shift, and the operator at the controls with no obstruction between the seat and the load path.

13. No capacity on this chart is a recommendation. The chart says what the machine can lift. It does not say what the machine should lift.

14. Assembly, disassembly, and climbing operations are outside this chart and inside the shop manual.

15. When the load or the radius is not known exactly, the pick does not go up.

16. This chart supersedes all earlier printings for this machine and jib length. Dated printings matter. This printing is dated March 2011.

RIGGING DEDUCTIONS (SUPPLEMENT TO NOTE 1): hook block, 460 pounds. Four-leg wire-rope bridle, 240 pounds, the tag lines and hardware's 20 pounds carried in it. Lifting beam, where used, 800 pounds.

WIND DERATING (SUPPLEMENT TO NOTE 2): sustained wind zero to 15 mph inclusive, no derating. Sustained above 15 and up to 20 mph, capacities minus five percent. Sustained above 20 mph, stop work. Gusts above 30 mph, stop work and secure the machine.

ANNEX A, RIVER EXCHANGE CONFIGURATION: mast, 200 feet, eight sections, pin-connected. Jib, 130 feet, luffing, five sections. Counterweight, 38,000 pounds, four slabs, stamped. Hoist rope, one-inch rotation-resistant, two falls. Luffing rope, three-quarter-inch. Power pack, Cummins diesel, serial CD-4487-02. Pendant bars, left and right, CCR-440-PB-0216 and CCR-440-PB-0217, rated 44,000 pounds each, shop service August 2, 2013. Base, grillage and ballast on the third-floor transfer slab. Erected February 2012. Annual teardown of pendant connectors, August 2012 and August 2013, per the shop manual. Slew ring bolts, torqued at erection, checked at each annual. Ballast, forty-two blocks, cast, marked. Reeving, two falls hoist, one fall luffing.

A. That is the machine. That is the chart.

A. By interpolation, at ninety-two feet, the chart allows eighteen thousand eight hundred and sixty pounds. The pick was twenty thousand five hundred forty. The machine was asked for sixteen hundred and eighty pounds more than the chart allowed. Nine percent over. My card is right and the chart is right and the pick was over, and I made the pick.

Q. The chart's note four requires written authorization from the shop superintendent for a pick in excess of ninety-five percent of the chart figure.

A. Yes.

Q. Read note two into the record, please, since you are reading the chart whole.

A. Capacities are for static loads, freely suspended, with no wind allowance. Wind adds load. At wind speeds above twenty sustained or gusts above thirty, stop work.

Q. And note three.

A. Do not luff a load outward beyond the chart radius for that load. The chart's line for that load fell at eighty-six feet, inside the deck edge. I luffed to the set point at ninety-two, because the deck edge was the set point and the defendants' survey said the radius was eighty. I knew the true radius. I made the pick. Read the note plain and I crossed its line, and the line it was crossed from was the survey's error, and I want both of those in the record.

Q. And note ten.

A. When in doubt, do not make the pick.

Q. You had no written authorization.

A. I had nothing, written or spoken. The superintendent called the pick and I made it. Nobody from the shop knew the radius and the load together but me. The seat holds the chart. I want that in the record.

Q. And the record has the chart's tenth note, the note the manufacturers write for exactly this morning. When in doubt, do not make the pick.

A. I know the notes. That chart was taped to the side glass and I read it every morning I climbed, twenty months of mornings. I had no doubt. I was certain, and I was wrong, and two men are dead. That is what I cannot put down.

MR. LANDRY Let the record reflect the witness has read Exhibit 11 directly from the marked document.

Q. Ms. Fontenot.

A. The superintendent called the pick because the forecast said the wind would build, and I checked the chart, and I read ninety-two feet and I read eighteen thousand eight hundred and sixty, and I made the pick anyway, because the pick was my job and the morning was moving and the wind was inside the limits and everyone wanted the unit set before the afternoon. The pin was failing inside the connector where no eye could see it, and the overload is what asked the question the pin could not answer. Percell Vercher's rigging did not fail. His widow's benefits do not depend on his error, because there was no error of his in it. The fault is the machine's and the morning's and mine. I logged it true. I am telling it true. That is all I have signed.

Q. You understand what you have done here today.

A. Yes.

Q. You have testified against your own employer, and against your own operation, on the record, under oath.

A. Yes.

Q. And you understand that everything you say is being written down and will be read back to you for the rest of this case and whatever case comes after it.

A. I understand the record. I have been in it for five hours. It is the only thing in this room that is mine to give.

(Pause.)

MS. GAUTHIER Nothing further.

MR. LANDRY Nothing further. Thank you, Ms. Fontenot.

MS. ARCENEAUX The witness will read and sign.

MR. LANDRY The transcript will be prepared within ten days, and counsel for the witness will be notified.

MS. ARCENEAUX She will come in. Thank you.

THE VIDEOGRAPHER This concludes the deposition of Mireille Fontenot. The time is 2:17 p.m.

(The videographer remains on the witness's face until the light on the camera is off.)

(The deposition concluded at 2:19 p.m. Signature was not waived. The witness elected to read and sign.)

ERRATA SHEET

In re: Vercher/Manuel v. Cardinal Crane & Rigging, LLC, and Sternline Builders, No. 628,414, Nineteenth Judicial District Court, Parish of East Baton Rouge. Deposition of Mireille Fontenot, taken October 8, 2014.

The witness read the transcript and returned this sheet, signed November 3, 2014, and the officer entered her corrections with their reasons. Two corrections, in her own hand. The name is F-A-N-E. Where the record gives the pick called at 8:10, the pick was called at 8:05, and the card will show 8:05. Everything else stands as she said it.

At the foot of the sheet, in the form's own print, the last question, with her answer written in her own hand:

Q. With those two corrections, is everything you said the truth?

A. Yes.

5

Large Print

Portland, Oregon, 2019

The apartment was an upstairs unit of a 1926 fourplex on a Northeast Portland side street, and the Karrases had owned it since 2011, back when owning a floor of a fourplex was a thing a cameraman and a dental-office manager could still do. The kitchen was the room they lived in, and the kitchen table was the table Halina's mother had given them when they married, maple, with a scar down one leaf from a hot pan in the first year. At the lunch hour the refinance papers had sat on it, the hour he had come home for between the morning's wall and the afternoon's, and now the papers were gone, and the table was set for dinner, and the scar down the leaf held the light from the pendant lamp the way it always held it.

Dov Karras's work was faces. Twenty-two years he had run a camera in conference rooms and law-firm libraries, watching people answer under oath, and the

craft had worn a groove in him: he could not stop reading. A witness deciding to lie showed him the deciding, in the face's small machinery, the pores and the pause and the swallow and the eyes going to the invented thing. Most faces were walls. He filmed the walls. Once in a career a face was a window, and he had filmed one of those, four years and five months gone, and he had never stopped carrying it, and he had never once understood that carrying it had a price, because the price was being paid in another currency at another table.

Today had been eight hours of a wall. A neurosurgeon out of Salem, a slip-and-fall's lost livelihood hanging on his answers, and the man had said "to a reasonable degree of medical certainty" forty-one times with his hands folded, and Dov had filmed every one of them, and the camera had recorded nothing to read, because there was nothing there to read. That was the work. He packed his case at five in a law firm's library on SW Morrison and carried it down the elevator with the other operators of other instruments, and drove home across the river in the first of the rain, the wipers at their lowest setting, the bridge's gray ahead of him, and a wall was what a man filmed when he was lucky, and the luck was thin.

He and Halina had been married ten years. They had decided about children by accretion, the way they

decided most things, and the apartment had settled into the shape of two people who had stopped expecting a third. She managed a dental office on Sandy and came home with the smell of the office on her, mint and latex. He came home with the smell of other people's conference rooms. They ate at the maple table and they watched one movie a week and they read in bed, and they had a plant on the sill that neither of them watered and it lived anyway, which they both took as a sign, and it was a good marriage by any measure either of them could name.

The fourplex had its four evenings going at six-forty, the old woman across the hall with her radio mass, the young couple with the baby's fussing, the tech below with her own dinner alone before the night's work, the tech below home early for once, her television murmuring through the floor. The stairs creaked the way they had creaked since the Coolidge administration. Dov Karras came up them with his case on his shoulder and the smell of the corridor's carpet cleaner in his nose, and he knew before the key turned that the apartment had been staged. He could not have said how he knew. Twenty-two years of filming depositions, and a room tells you when it has been arranged the way a witness tells you when it has been coached. The corridor smelled the same as always. The

door was the same. And the apartment beyond the door was arranged around him, waiting.

Halina had the table set. The lasagna was under foil, and the salad was out, and the wine was open, and she was at the counter with her phone face-down, which was a thing she did when she had been on it all day and did not want to be asked about her day. He put his case down by the bookcase and washed his hands and said the ordinary things, and she said the ordinary things back, and they sat down to eat the way they had sat down three thousand evenings, and the room was warm and the food was good and the rain held off until later.

"How was the wall?" she said, the way she always said it.

"Medical certainty," he said. "Eight hours."

"I know the type," she said, and she did; she had met his walls at a dozen firm dinners and had her own names for them, and for a moment the evening was the ordinary evening, the two of them trading the day, and he let himself believe it would stay that way.

"Did you film her again today?" Halina said.

She said it into the salad, serving him, light as weather. He watched the tongs put the salad on his plate. He watched her hand set the tongs down. His eye did its work before his mind did, the way it did with witnesses: the day she had had was in her hand, and

the day was not a work day. The wine was open. Wine was never open on a Wednesday. The anniversary spoons lay across the serving dishes, and the pendant lamp was on in the middle of the week, and the whole table glowed like a setup, and his eye read the glow and filed it, and he reached for the ordinary evening anyway, because the ordinary evening was what he wanted to be true.

"The crane case," she said. "Did you film her again."

"There was nothing to film her in," he said. "That case has been settled four years. Today was a neurosurgeon. Slip and fall."

"Four years, five months," she said.

He picked up his fork, and his eye, which could not be turned off, read the room's arrangement while he did. The wine open since before six, the cork drying on the counter where she had set it down too hard. Her phone face-down by the toaster, which was where it went when she did not want to be asked about her day. The good serving spoons, the ones from the anniversary. Her earrings, the same anniversary. The lasagna under foil at the center of the table, because the table was where the evidence sat, and they were going to face each other across it. He read all of it in the half second his craft required, and he felt the tiredness of it, the twenty-two years of reading rooms that had been arranged for him, and he set the

knowledge down the way he set down the case, and he picked up his fork. Four years and five months was right, and she had it right without checking anything, which meant she had counted it, which meant she had been counting it, and the architecture rose up around him whole, the way a room does when your eyes adjust. Five years of the crane case at this table. Five years of his shoptalk about the deposition of a crane operator in Baton Rouge, the woman who read a load chart into the record whole and answered a defense lawyer's ambush with the complete truth about a raffle. He had told Halina about her hands, about the pause, about how in twenty-two years of watching sworn faces, hers was the only one he had ever believed completely, and he had said it the way you say a professional marvel, and he had said it more than once, and he had never asked himself what it sounded like from the other chair.

"You say her name in your sleep," Halina said, and then she said it, once, out loud, the name, Mireille, and let it lie on the table between the serving spoons.

"I have never said her name in my sleep," he said. "I don't talk in my sleep. You'd know."

"I'd know," she said. "That's what I mean, Dov. I'd know."

He understood then what the night was, and he began to be careful. The building was a close building. It held its four households the way a hand holds cards,

and voices carried in it, and they had always lived softly for that reason, the music low, the arguments conducted at the register the neighbors could not quote. The old woman across the hall, the tech below, the young couple with the baby on the second floor: the building heard them all and was kind about it. Tonight, at this register, the building would hear them and be kind. A lying face reads like large print to him; it is the whole of his craft, the pore-level truth of a person deciding to say a false thing. And Halina's face was not lying. Halina's face was a face that had built something true out of true materials, years of his table talk and his far-away face and the name, and had arrived at a cathedral of a conclusion, and the conclusion was wrong, and every brick was right.

"The case is settled," he said. "It settled in 2015. I haven't seen the woman in four years and five months, as you know better than I do. I don't call her. I don't write her. There is no her."

"There's a her at this table every night," Halina said. "There has been since 2014. I never said anything."

The lasagna sat between them. She had said it was Tuesday's. He had watched her carry it out of the oven with the foil steamed up, and the edges were not dried, and the sauce at the corner of the pan was bright, and the cheese had the pull of a cheese that was an hour old, and she had said, "Tuesday's," when he asked, and

it was not Tuesday's. It was fresh, and it was made this afternoon, and the afternoon had gone into it, the pancetta rendered slow and the sauce from the Roma tomatoes and the pasta rolled on the counter with the pin his mother had given her, the kind of afternoon's work no Tuesday ever got. That was the small lie, and it was bait, and he could see the hook in it as clearly as he could see the steam.

If he said the lasagna was fresh, she would hear the whole thing: you read my kitchen, you read my day, you read the sauce on the corner of the pan, and you have never once read me. It would prove her cathedral. So he noted the hook, and he set it aside, and he ate Tuesday's lasagna.

"I want you to tell me about her," Halina said.

"There isn't a her. There's a case I worked in 2014 and follow-ups after. There was a deposition I filmed that I have never been able to forget, because of how the woman answered. I have talked about it too much. That's all there is."

"You told me about her hands," Halina said. "You told me she read the chart into the record whole. You told me about the pause. You have told me eleven times that you never believed anyone's face until hers. Do you know what it is to sit across from that for four years and five months?"

"I thought it was shoptalk," he said.

"It was shoptalk to you," she said.

They had met at a wedding he filmed in 2007, some cousin of some cousin of hers, and Halina had been the maid of honor, and she had read him across the reception before he ever read her, had seen the man behind the camera watching faces and had come over and said, "You look like you're memorizing everybody," and he had said he was, and she had said, "Get my good side, then," and that had been the whole of the negotiation. He had filmed her dancing that night, and she had danced straight at the camera once, laughing, and he had kept nothing of it, because he kept nothing. He had kept her. That was allowed. They had driven home from that wedding in separate cars and met at a Burgerville off the interstate and talked until the drive-through closed, and she had read him the whole way, and he had not minded, and that had been the founding of the table. He had loved her face for its openness. She had loved his eye for its attention. The whole marriage had been built on the two instruments being aimed at each other, and neither of them had ever said so.

In the early years he had come home talking about all of it, the conference rooms and the witnesses, and she had listened the way a person listens to weather from a place she has never been. Then the craft had worn the groove, and the walls had started to bore him,

and he had stopped bringing them home, and the only thing he brought home was the hunger, and the one window. He had never asked what it was like on her side of the table. That was the reading he had missed. The instrument that read everyone had never once been turned on his own table.

Ten years. The upstairs unit, the maple table, the dental office and the conference rooms, the one movie a week and the books in bed. His work took him to other cities two weeks a month, and she had never asked him what he saw in them, because his answers had always been walls, and the walls were all alike, and the crane case had been the one window he ever brought home, and she had set a place for it all those years. He saw that now too, in the reading, the way you see the whole room when your eyes adjust. The window had a setting at their table. She had laid it, nightly.

Halina ate. She served herself and she ate, and she watched him not-eat, and the room did what rooms do in a fight, it held still and listened. The pendant lamp ticked as it cooled. The dishwasher hummed. Downstairs, faint through the floor, came the sounds of the tech's television, the neighbor Halina called the MRI girl, some show with no laughs in it.

"You don't even know what you do," Halina said. "That's the thing I keep coming back to. You sit in this

chair and you talk about that deposition like other men talk about a game. And your face when you say it, Dov. Your face is the whole problem. You look at me like I'm a deposition transcript and you're checking it for errors, and then you talk about her and your face goes somewhere I have never been."

"I don't look at you like a transcript."

"You're doing it now," she said. "You're reading me. I can feel it. Do you know what it is to be read by you? It's like being a scan on a light board. Everything shows."

She set her fork down and lined it up with the plate's edge, and he understood she had prepared this, maybe for days, and that the preparation was the thing she was proudest of and most ashamed of at once.

"Let me tell you those years," she said. "In 2014 you came home and stood in this kitchen and told me about her for an hour, the wind readings, the chart, the lawyer's face when she finished, and the pause that was in the record as one word in parentheses. In 2015 the case settled, and you came home quiet, and you were quiet for a week, like a man whose show had been canceled. In 2016 you told me you still thought about her, and I asked what you thought about, and you said, the way she answered, and I said that was nice, and I never asked again. You never noticed. You notice the pores of strangers for a living, and you never noticed

your wife stop asking. There were four hundred depositions between then and now, four hundred walls, and you never came home talking about any of them. There was only ever the one window."

"That first evening," she said, and her voice did something he had not heard all evening, "you came home and stood right there and told me for an hour, and I made you eggs because you hadn't eaten, and you ate them standing, telling me, and I thought, he has seen something. I was glad for you. I want you to know that. I was glad."

He remembered the eggs. His eye held them, over easy, the pan's sound, her listening. He had eaten them standing in this kitchen and told her about a woman's face for an hour, and she had made them, and been glad, and he had never read the gladness for what it would become. That was the thing about his craft that no one had ever told him: the eye keeps everything, and the everything is evidence, and evidence does not care which of you it convicts.

The lasagna cooled in its pan. He took a bite of Tuesday's lasagna, and it was warm and bright and an hour old, and he said it held up well, and she looked at him with the strangest look, and he understood he had answered the bait by swallowing it, and that she had seen him swallow it, and that neither of them was going to say so.

"Tell me the truth about one thing," she said. "Tell me you never thought about her after. Tell me the case closed in 2015 and you never thought about her again."

"I think about the deposition," he said. "I've never hidden that. It was the most extraordinary thing I've ever filmed. It's a professional fact."

"A professional fact," she said. "Four years and five months you carry a professional fact."

"There are facts like that in my trade," he said. "You ask any videographer. There are witnesses you carry."

"Name one," she said. "One other one. By name."

He could not. The trade had a thousand walls and one window, and the window had a name, and the name was on the table. He sat there with his fork down and his eye working, and his eye showed him the whole of her year: the evenings he had come home talking about the case, her face at this table listening, her questions about the wind and the chart that he had taken for interest in his work, the way she had stopped asking. She had stopped asking in 2016. He had not noticed. He noticed everything for a living, and his wife had stopped asking about the crane case in 2016, and it had never shown up in his eye.

The questions came then the way they come in the second hour of a deposition, all the angles of the same thing, and he answered them the way his trade had

taught him, which was carefully and completely and with nothing volunteered.

"Did you ever call her?"

"No."

"Did you ever write to her?"

"No."

"Did you ever look her up?"

"No."

"Did you ever want to?"

And there he paused, because the pause was the whole case, and he watched her watch him pause, and he said, "No. It was never that. It was the best answer I ever filmed. I wanted to film it again, the way you want to see a perfect thing again. I never wanted her."

"You wanted to film it again," she said.

"Yes."

"That's not nothing, Dov."

"No," he said. "It isn't nothing. It is also the whole of it. There is no number to call, no address, no visits, no plan. A face I read once, four years ago, that I measured true. That's the inventory."

"Her whole face," Halina said. "My whole marriage."

He saw also, with the trade's clarity, what today had been for her. She had worked the morning at the dental office, the drill sounds through the wall and the phones, and she had taken the afternoon off. The afternoon had stretched empty in front of her, and she

had made the lasagna fresh and set the table with the anniversary spoons and built the case against him in her head, and decided. He would never know the hour it had arrived. He knew the table's face.

That was when the reading completed itself, and the cathedral he had thought she was building turned out to be built of him: a stranger's honesty had held his attention for four years and five months while his wife sat across from him unread, and she was not accusing him of an affair, she was accusing him of that, and the affair would have been kinder, because an affair is a body and this was the attention itself, given away in plain sight, nightly, with salad.

"Today at the table," Halina said, "the notary, the signing. She asked us if we wanted it. And you looked at me to find out."

She said it flat, like a number in a load chart, and it landed the way the true things land, without any weight but the weight. The refinance, the afternoon: the woman with the stamp asking the question the law never required, and Halina answering for the two of them while he read her face for the answer, because reading her face was what he did; an answer of his own had never been the instrument. He had not known until this second that she had seen it. He had not known she knew she was being read.

"You don't know whether you want this house," Halina said. "You never have. You looked at me to find out, the way you look at a witness to find out if they're telling the truth. I have watched you do it ten thousand times. Today you did it to me across the table from a stranger with a stamp, and I decided I was done being the only one of us who can't read."

"That's not fair," he said.

"It isn't fair that I know your tells," she said. "You have three. The fork down. The look to the window. The breath you take before you answer the big ones. You did all three a minute ago."

"Tell me the pattern anyway."

"I've been building this for a year," she said. "The four years and five months, I knew. The name, I knew. Your face when you talk about the wind readings, I knew. Today it assembled itself. You came home hungry from the walls the way you always do, and I watched you eat and not taste it, and I thought, he has been feeding that hunger at this table for all those years, and I am the table."

"Halina."

"It's the one thing I built that you never read," she said, and there was something in her voice that had not been there all evening, and his eye found it, and it was pride.

He did not say it. He could have; it would have sounded like this: that she had always been the one who knew what they wanted, the apartment and the car and the dinners and the trips, and that his eye had learned to check her face for the answer because her face was the answer, and that ten years of it had worn a groove in him the way the craft had, so that the question and her face and the answer were one instrument. That was sayable. It was true. And it was, he understood, the kind of true that lands as an accusation of itself: you have been my instrument so long I forgot you were a person. So he sat there and read the pattern instead, and the pattern read back.

"You did it at the dealership," she said. "The Forester. You looked at me before you answered the man. You did it when we signed for this place. You did it at my sister's, at Easter, when she asked about the garden. You do it at restaurants, when the waiter asks if we're celebrating. You do it at your firm's dinners when they ask how the work is. You look at me, and then you answer. I used to think it was sweet. I used to think it meant you trusted me. And then today, at my own table, with the papers and the stamp, I watched you do it about the house, about whether we want the roof over our heads, and I understood: you weren't checking my answer. You were reading me for yours. There's a difference, Dov. I felt it today."

The pendant lamp ticked. He had the strangest thought, that she had become in one evening what his trade made and he had filmed for twenty-two years: the complete witness, the one whose face reads true because the truth has been assembled and the witness is willing to pay for it. It was the first time all night he wanted to reach for her, and he did not, because the reaching would have read as a verdict, and the verdict was still being written.

"Halina."

"I've been practicing," she said, and smiled, and the smile was the worst thing in the room.

The rain came while they sat there, the fine Portland rain, against the window over the sink, and neither of them got up to answer it. The room did its evening anyway, the fridge cycling, the upstairs pipes ticking, the little square of lamplight on the table holding its shape while the dishes cooled. She let it run. That was the measure of her, he would think later: she did not hurry the hour, because the hour was hers, and the truth had already waited four years and five months and could wait out a plate of cooling pasta. Halina watched him the way he watched witnesses, and he felt it, the instrument turned on its owner, and he let her. He had read her face for ten years without her leave. She could have his for an hour with his.

"You want to know what I see," she said.

"No," he said, and she laughed, and the laugh was the first true thing in an hour.

She raised her glass then, a little, in the direction of the bookcase where his case stood with the camera in it, and she said, "To the walls," and drank, and he raised his water glass and said, "To the walls," and that was the closest the night came to the truth being said out loud between them.

"I see it anyway," she said, when the laugh had gone. "I see you deciding what to say. I've watched you do it for ten years. You look like you're loading film. And I see that whatever you decided a second ago, you decided it for me, the way you decide everything for me, and I can't tell anymore whether that's the marriage or the craft. I used to know."

She reached across the table then, and took his wrist, the way she had taken it at the wedding in 2007, and he watched her hand on his wrist and read it and found nothing false in it, and that was the moment the night could have gone either way, and they both knew it, and the kettle downstairs began to boil and went unanswered.

The truth was available to him. That is the thing he would remember about the night, afterward: that the truth sat right there, fully assembled, and he could have said it. He could have said: there is no affair, and there never was one, and what there is, is a face. In

2014 I filmed a woman in Baton Rouge who was asked the hardest question of her life and answered it whole, every word, at the cost of everything, and her face doing it was the one completely readable face I have ever filmed, and I have carried it since the way a carpenter carries a level, because it is the only true thing my craft has ever shown me. It is not romance. It is measurement. She is my standard of honest, and I have been measuring those years of evenings against her, and the measuring is not about her, and it is all about her, and I have never once touched her or called her or wanted to, and I have thought about her face every day for four years and five months.

He could summon the face at will, the way a man summons a phone number. The woman at the long table in Baton Rouge with her hands flat, asked the hardest question of her life, giving the whole thing back, whole, while the camera held and the room went still. He had never rewatched it. There was no tape in his house, nothing kept at all; the face lived in him, the one window in twenty-two years of walls. It had never once occurred to him that carrying the window could damage a wall he lived in.

He could have said it, and he could see exactly where each word would land. An affair would mean he wanted a body; this would mean that across the table from her, nightly, she had been measured against a

stranger's answer and found to be ordinary wallpaper. The truth would not free her. The truth would evict her, and it would not even be honest. It would be vanity wearing honesty's coat, the fine instrument admitting it had read her all along and not bothered. So he sat there and read the lasagna instead.

And he understood something else, in the same half second, with the same eye: that she had made the lasagna fresh and called it Tuesday's, and that the lie was sitting on the table between them like a third plate, and that if he named it, he would be the cruelest instrument in the room twice over, and that if he swallowed it, he would be hers. The hook and the gift were the same object. That was the architecture's last room.

Downstairs, the tech with the night shifts had turned her television off. She was off rotation this week, home evenings, and she heard the fight the way the building heard it, through the floor and the ceiling register, the voices in their rises, the silences in their lengths. She heard the wife say something flat and long and the husband not answer for a long time, and she stood in her kitchenette with her hand on the kettle, and she did not knock on the ceiling, and she did not turn the television back on. All day at the imaging center she had scanned people, fed them into the magnet's tube one after another, and she knew the

sound a room makes when something inside it is being looked at. This was that sound.

"So," Halina said. "Say something true now. I've earned one."

He looked at his wife. He read her face the way his eye read everything, helplessly, and he saw the year of evenings, and the stopped asking in 2016, and the afternoon's signing, and the fresh lasagna called Tuesday's, and the practiced reading, and the smile. And he saw that the mercy was available too, fully assembled, sitting right there next to the truth. It would cost him the pretense, carefully, completely, forever. It would cost him being, from this night on, a man who pretends. His craft had never once required him to lie. His craft was the camera, and the camera never lies, and the camera was not married.

"You want to know why I looked at you today," he said.

"Yes."

"Because I don't know what I want until I see your face," he said. "That's not a reading. That's the marriage. You're the one who knows what we want. You've always been the one. When she asked, I looked at you because you're the answer. You always have been."

It was true, and it was also the mercy, and it was also, he understood even as he said it, the first lie of his

life, if it was a lie, because it gave her the shape of the truth without the truth's weight. She watched him say it. Her face did the thing faces do when they are deciding whether to accept a gift.

"The lasagna's good," he said. "Tuesday's held up."

Halina looked at him for a long time. The pendant lamp ticked. She took her fork up, and she ate a bite, and she said, "I make it the same way every time," and her voice was level, and the fight was over, or the fight was over for the kitchen, and the kitchen was what they had.

He poured the wine at last, the bottle that had stood open since before six, and she drank it, and they talked about Thursday, her early day at the office and the depo he had in Tigard, and the movie they would watch Friday, and whether the table's scar wanted oiling. The ordinary came back into the room the way heat comes back into a house, by degrees, from the registers, and his eye read every degree of it, and he let the read lie still. He thought about the camera in its case by the bookcase, the one instrument in the room that would only ever show what was, and he was glad, for once, that it was packed away.

She ate the last bite of her piece and asked if he wanted the corner, and he said he did, and she gave him the corner, the burnt-cheese corner, the one he had liked since the first winter, when the oven in their

first place ran hot on one side, and she remembered that he liked it, and he noted that she remembered, and the noting went down into the place where he kept what the camera never saw.

Downstairs, the kettle had boiled and gone unheeded. The tech stood with her hand on it still, and she heard the voices drop, the forks and the water running and the chair legs, and she heard the forgiveness even more clearly than the fight, because the forgiveness was quieter and it carried further, the way low sounds carry. She could not have said what it was forgiveness of. Her brother in Spokane came into it, a fire captain, and a thing from a long time ago, and she did not know why that either. She poured her water. She went to bed with it on her, and she did not know why.

The dishes could wait. Halina said it first, the way she always said it: "Leave them for morning." He said, "Leave them," and the lamp ticked over the table, and the rain went on at the window, and neither of them got up, because the night was allowed to end well and the room was allowed to hold them. Outside, toward morning's side of things, the rain would let up, and the street would go quiet, and the dishes would keep, and the table would be the table. That was the mercy's whole shape.

She finished her glass. He finished his. The bottle stood empty between them, and he put the cork in it, and she watched him do it, and the small domestic mercy of the cork in the bottle was the kind of thing the camera never saw and the marriage ran on. The name had gone back into whatever room of her it had come out of, and the door of that room closed without a sound.

He thought she knew. He thought she might not. His craft had never once been able to tell him what a face knew when the face had decided to be loved, and that was the thing his craft had never taught him, because he had never before paid for the answer. He cleared the plates, and she let him, and the water ran in the sink the way it ran on every night of the ten years, and downstairs the tech's ceiling light went out, and the fourplex held its four evenings, and the night was an ordinary night, and the ordinary was the whole of what they had left to keep.

And across the table, between the emptied pan and the wine going quiet in its glasses, the pretense held, and held.

6

Contrast

Yakima, Washington, 2020. Excursion to Pasco

The magnet is always on. That is the first thing you learn in the field and the thing you never stop knowing. The magnet is always on, and Bay 2 at one in the morning is the emptiest room in Yakima County, and you are the only tech on, and the waiting room chairs sit in their taped-off rows, and the bore is waiting, and the bore is always waiting.

Remove all metal from your body. Lie still. The machine is louder than you expect. You know all the lines. You have said all the lines, four thousand times, to four thousand frightened strangers, and tonight the frightened stranger is you.

You are Ilka Praether, and you are thirty-five, and you have run Bay 2 at the imaging center off Tieton for eleven months, night shift, the COVID year, the volumes down by half and the evenings empty by whole. You are the records custodian for the center

besides, which is a joke the year keeps making on you, and you have a left hand that has started dropping things.

The center is a squat building off Tieton with two bays and a control room and a waiting room of taped-off chairs, and after six it is yours. The receptionist goes home, the phones stop, the coolers hum. One tech on, nights, which is not the safety manual's way, the manual wanting two, and the year had made the one ordinary, and nobody called it anything but the schedule. You have spent your whole adult life feeding strangers into magnets, first in Spokane, then in Portland, in the fourplex where the ceiling carried voices, and now here, a year and a job east, where nobody knows your face.

You like the night shift. You have always liked it. The patients come in off the evening with their pain and their fear, and you are the voice in the speaker, the one who says breathe and hold and the table will move now, and they trust the voice because the voice is calm, and the voice is calm because you have said it four thousand times, and because the night is quiet and the magnet is honest and nothing in the room lies to anyone. The year has made the nights emptier and the days stranger, and the building smells of disinfectant and the waiting room plants no one has watered, and

the taped-off chairs sit in their rows like a grammar lesson in distance.

The hand started Sunday, the phantom's cap rolling off the console, and you thought nothing of it. Tuesday the keys. Thursday you caught the patch, the gray at the edge of your left eye when you looked at the schedule screen, and you covered the right eye and the patch was there, and you uncovered and covered and the patch was there. You know what the patch wants to be called. You have scanned four thousand heads and you know the geography of the patch, and the geography says left occipital, maybe temporal, maybe nothing. Some part of you that has read ten thousand films knows a one-eye patch does not live back there, and the fear says it anyway, and the fear is louder, and the only way to know is the bore.

It is calibration night. The last patient left at nine, a shoulder, a man who talked through the whole protocol and thanked you at the door for a shoulder. You wiped the bore and the table and the coil. You ran the weekly phantom, the American College of Radiology phantom with its grids and its bottles, and the numbers printed clean. The building settled the way buildings do, the coolers cycling, the magnet humming its permanent hum, and the night had nowhere to go, and the bore was waiting, and the bore is always waiting.

The building at one in the morning has three sounds: the coolers, the magnet's permanent hum, and the wind off the valley against the glass. You know them the way you know your own apartment's sounds. You have been here eleven months, and the building has become the place where you are most yourself, which is a thought you do not let yourself finish.

You have never once scanned yourself. It is the first rule that is not written anywhere: the tech does not climb into the bore. The images would live in the machine, and the machine's audit trail is the machine's, and a read would mean a confession.

You stand at the bore's edge for a long time. The table is out, the coil is set, the room is warm. You have helped four thousand strangers climb this ladder. You have never once climbed it yourself. The protocol runs in your head the way it runs for the frightened ones: remove all metal, lie still, the machine is louder than you expect. You take off your watch and your badge and your rings, and you set them on the console, and you load the protocol first, the localizer and the FLAIR, and you set the start delay long enough to cross the room, and then you lie down on the table you have prepared for four thousand strangers, and the table takes your weight the way it takes everyone's, and you feed yourself into the bore, and the machine runs the protocol on you the way it runs it on anyone. Inside the

bore the plastic is two inches from your face, and the mirror over your eyes shows you a strip of the room, and the gradients hammer, and you lie stiller than any patient you have ever had, and you understand the frightened ones now in a way you did not before: the bore is close, and the noise is enormous, and the voice in the speaker is the only human thing, and tonight there is no voice, because the voice is yours, and the voice is in the bore. Twenty-two minutes. You count them in sequences. When the last sequence ends you climb out and you stand at the console and you look at your own brain in slices.

There. At the left temporal horn, a hyperintensity, a bright place no bigger than a fingernail, where the anatomy should be quiet. A shadow. A shadow no order requested, no physician ordered, no referral, no consent form, nothing. You are the records custodian, and the only record of this is a series of images in the machine's audit trail with your own name in the patient field, because you put it there, because you are an honest tech, even now.

You page through the slices twice. The second time is the confession's geography: the shadow sits at the left temporal horn the way a thing sits in a room it owns. You measure nothing. Measuring would make it a study, and a study would be paper. You look at it until the console's screen dims, and then you look at

the dim screen, and then you look at your hands, which are not shaking, and you understand that your hands not shaking is the first piece of information the night has given you. You are not surprised. Some part of you has been expecting the shadow for weeks. The part that drops things.

You could delete it. The audit trail would show a deletion, and a deletion in the year of the empty building would be found in a week, and the finding would cost the same as the confession. You could leave it. The morning crew reads the phantom log, not the audit trail, and the images would sit in the machine's memory until the purge, known only to you and the magnet. You could take it to Dr. Saxe in the morning and say the truth, and the truth would cost you the job and the card and the health insurance, and you would have your read. Or you could wait. You have been waiting since Sunday without knowing it. Nine more days is a number, and a number is a thing you can hold, and you have spent your whole career holding numbers for strangers.

You do the arithmetic at the console, in the warm room, with your own brain in slices on the screen. The arithmetic has three terms. The first term is the confession: take the images to Dr. Saxe in the morning, tell her what you did, and the read is free and immediate, and it costs you the job and the card and

the health insurance, in the year when no one is hiring techs who confess. The second term is the bore again: scan yourself every night, watch the shadow, and never know what it is, because a tech is not a read. The third term is the legitimate path: the walk-in clinic on Summitview will see you tomorrow and will order a scan if you present the hand and the patch, and the soonest patient slot at the Selah center, where no one knows you, is eight days out, because the year has backlogged everything. Eight days. In eight days you can obtain a read without confessing the scan. Eight days of not knowing whether you are dying.

You are alone in the room. That is the protocol's first question, and the answer tonight is yes.

You do not delete it. You do not take it to Dr. Saxe. You write the phantom's numbers in the calibration log, and you close Bay 2, and you drive home through the empty city with your left hand dropping nothing, careful on the wheel, and the shadow rides with you the way a patient rides the table, still and loud.

You do not sleep that first night. You lie in the apartment off 40th and watch the ceiling go from dark to less dark, and you do the arithmetic again, the way you do the phantom numbers, checking each term twice. The confession is the fast term and the total term: you would have the read by nine in the morning, and by noon you would be unemployed, and by the end

of the year you would be paying for your own insurance out of a temp's wages, and the registry would have your file. The bore is the slow term and the useless term: you could scan yourself every night and never know anything, because you are not a read, and because watching a shadow sit still is not the same as knowing what it is. And the legitimate path is nine days. Nine days of not knowing whether you are dying, and then a clean read from a machine that does not know you, and the read will be true either way, and either way you will have kept the job and the card and the health insurance, which in this year is the same as keeping your life.

You have spent your whole career on the border between knowing and not-knowing, the tech who sees the shadow and is not allowed to say so, and now you are the patient who sees the shadow and cannot say so, and the border runs straight through your own skull.

At five in the morning you get up and make coffee and stand at the window, and the street is empty, and the year is empty, and you test the patch by covering your right eye, and the patch is there, and you drink the coffee, and the coffee is the best thing you own. The radio plays the news while you stand there, the counts and the closures and the governor's voice, and you turn it off, and the silence is the same silence as Bay 2's, and you understand that you have moved the

bore into your own apartment, that you have been lying in it since Sunday, that the only difference between the apartment and the machine is that the machine is honest.

Day one, you present at the walk-in on Summitview with a headache that has not resolved and a hand that drops things, which is all true. The waiting room is six masked strangers and a television playing the news with the sound off, and the nurse practitioner is twenty-eight and kind and wears two masks, and she shines a light in your eyes and tests your grip and listens, and she orders a brain MRI with and without contrast. She says the soonest slot she can see is eight days out, at the Selah center, because the year has backlogged everything. You book it. You pay cash for the order, because the order is the secret part. The scan itself will ride your insurance, because the scan was always going to become your real record either way. You thank her in the protocol voice, and she does not notice, and you go to work.

Day one, you run four patients, and every one of them climbs out of the bore frightened, and you are kind to all of them in the protocol voice, and you think about what your own face did when you saw the shadow, and you do not let yourself read it. There is a woman who has never had an MRI and shakes so hard the first sequence blurs, and you start it over and talk

her through it, the way you have talked four thousand strangers through it, breathe and hold, the magnet is loud but it is only loud, and she comes out crying and thanks you, and you understand, standing at the console, that you have been on both sides of the bore now, and the two sides do not know each other. You eat your lunch at the console, alone, the way you have eaten every lunch for eleven months, and the lunch is good, and the console is warm, and the patch waits in your eye the way the patients wait in the chairs.

Day two, you scan a retired orchardist with a lower back, and a woman with migraines, and a man who fell off a ladder, and you say the lines to all of them, and the lines hold them, and the patch is there when you check the schedule screen, and you stop checking. There is a discipline to not-checking, and you learn it in a day, and you are good at it, and it does not help.

You do not know why you think about the ceiling until later. The apartment in Portland, the year before, the fight through the floor and then the quiet after it. You stood at the kettle and heard the voices drop, and you heard the forgiveness carry further than the fight, and you never saw the man's face and never needed to. That is the thing you have carried a year without unpacking: that a person can hand another person mercy across a floor, and the mercy arrives. It is the only thing you own that you did not earn.

In the small hours, you call the fire station in Spokane, and your brother is on shift, and you put the phone down before the second ring ends. The evening runs five patients and you are kind to all of them, and one of them cries in the bore, and you talk her through it in the protocol voice, and she thanks you, and you think: she does not know who is thanking whom.

Late, you stand in the control room at three in the morning with the phantom's numbers in your head and the patch in your eye, and you look at Bay 2 through the glass, the bore lit and waiting, and you think about climbing in again. Only to see. Only to watch the shadow sit still. And you do not, because a tech is not a read, and because the audit trail is the machine's, and because you are an honest tech, even now, even tonight, even with the patch blooming gray at the edge of everything you look at.

The shift ends at six in the morning, the phantom's numbers clean, the morning crew coming in with their coffee and their talk, and you drive home in the dark and the patch rides in your eye, and the apartment is the same apartment, the kitchen table, the laptop shut, the window over the street, and you understand that the week ahead of you is a room you will have to live in, nine days of it, and the room has no door.

Day three, the patch is there, and the hand drops a fork, and you hold the fork and look at it like it is a

stranger's. In the shift's middle, you scan a man whose lung collapsed on a fishing boat when you were nine, and you know that because he tells you, and you think about how a life holds its accidents, and you do not think about Upriver Drive.

You are lying to yourself about the last part. You think about Upriver Drive every hour now, the dark road and the man walking home and the sound Marek never described and never had to, and the gray sedan, and the number. The patch and the debt are the same gray, the same weight, the same temperature. You have carried the debt seventeen years the way you carry the patch now, checking it, finding it there.

Toward midnight, you scan a woman with a mass the size of a plum, and you can see it on the console, and you cannot tell her, because a tech is not a read, and she lies in the bore shaking, and you talk to her in the protocol voice, and your voice does not shake, and you think: the voice is the last thing. They can take the job and the card and the insurance, and they cannot take the voice. The voice is yours.

Day four, you wake before the alarm, and the patch is there, and the coffee tastes like coffee, and the kitchen is the same kitchen, and you sit at the table with your hands around the cup and you understand that you have four days of practice now at not knowing, and the not-knowing has a weight, and the

weight is the same weight as the debt, and the two of them sit on the table like two cups.

You have not called your brother. You have not looked at the paper since 2003. And you have not said the name out loud since you learned it. The name is the debt's shape. You say it once more, now, to the empty kitchen, and the empty kitchen takes it, and the patch blooms gray at the edge of the window, and you finish the coffee, and the cup is empty, and the day is day four, and the day is the decision's.

You decide.

You decide the way you have decided everything in your life, alone, at the kitchen table, with the laptop shut. Here is the decision, and you say it out loud to the empty kitchen, because the empty kitchen is where you say true things: the deathbed debt outranks the death. If the shadow is a tumor, you have weeks to settle accounts, and the oldest account is the one you have never paid. If the shadow is nothing, you will pay it anyway, because paying it is the only way to keep living in your own apartment with your own name. Either way the debt comes due, and either way you will pay it, and the paying will be spoken, because you know better than anyone alive that paper is how a thing gets lost.

You were eighteen, staying with Marek in Spokane that spring, the year you were between the community

college and your life. He was twenty-four and two years into the fire department, and proud the way young firemen are proud, and he came home one night in April with the Volvo's headlight cracked and the fender bent and his face wrong, and he told you he had hit a dog on Upriver Drive. That is what he told you. You stood in the kitchen and he told you that, and the next morning the news had a man, forty-one, walking home from his shift at the plating plant, found dead on Upriver Drive, hit and left, and you stood in the kitchen and Marek made eggs, and neither of you said anything, then or ever.

The police canvassed the block that weekend. The Volvo sat in the driveway with its headlight out for anyone to see. When the officer came to the door, Marek was at the station, and you answered, and the officer asked whether you had seen anything the night of the fourteenth, and you said you had seen a car from the window, and you gave him a plate number, and the plate number was not Marek's. It was the number you had memorized from the gray sedan that parked down the block, a car you passed every day, a clean number with no person attached to it that you could see. You chose it because it was clean, and because the Volvo was in the driveway, and because you were eighteen and your brother was your whole family.

The number had a person attached to it. Aurelio Nájar. You learned his name in the newspaper eight days later, when they arrested him. He had no alibi anyone believed. The state convicted him of vehicular homicide, and he went away, and the man on Upriver Drive stayed dead, and Marek made captain, and you became a person who feeds strangers into a magnet for a living, and the gray sedan stopped parking on the block.

You did not go to the trial. You read the paper's account in the kitchen, standing up, and Marek read it sitting down, and neither of you said the word Upriver again. The paper had a picture of the man they convicted, a young man with a mustache and a work shirt, looking at the camera the way a person looks at a wall, and you folded the paper, and the fold was the first thing you ever did with your hands that you could not take back. After that you learned the trade that lets you look at things for a living without being asked to say what they mean.

You have never told anyone. You are the only living person who knows. Marek does not know you know. That is the shape of the debt.

The decision does not feel like a decision. It feels like the phantom's numbers printing clean, the ordinary good numbers of a machine doing what it is for. You go to work that night and you run your four patients, and

you are kind to them, and the voice is calm, and the night is the same night, and the only thing different is that the debt has a date on it now. Day eight. You have never had a debt with a date on it before. It turns out they keep better than appointments, because you cannot cancel them, and you do not want to.

You find the man by asking. You call a woman you knew in Spokane, a clerk who used to work the courthouse basement, retired now to a double-wide in the Valley, and you ask her what ever happened to a name. You say the name carefully, the way you read a name off a chart you have been handed. She asks a friend who still works there, and the friend asks a friend, and two days later you have an answer spoken into your ear over a landline: out since 2018, parole, the clerk called it, the way the county calls it, living in Pasco, working the processing plant, keeps to himself. Nothing searched. Nothing filed. Voices only, the way the old debts moved before there were computers, and you think about the day the computer would have told you in a second and told everyone else besides, and you are grateful for the landline and the old woman's voice and the whole slow spoken chain of it.

She asks why you want to know, the old clerk, and you say, "I owed him something once," and she does not ask what, and the landline hums, and that is the whole of it.

The days hold their order. The patch holds its gray, and the hand holds its fork, and the Selah slot holds its place in the week, and you stop saying "if" in your head and start saying "when," and you are not sure which one is the prayer.

The records affidavit crosses your desk on day five, which is its own joke and you note it. A law firm in Portland wants imaging records on a plaintiff, and the records custodian must sign an affidavit attesting the records are true and complete, and the notarization is remote now, the year has made everything a screen. You clear the kitchen table and set the laptop on it and put your driver's license where you can reach it, and at the appointed time the notary comes up on the screen, a woman with snow on the window ledge behind her, and she walks you through the protocol. You hold the license to the camera. You show the room. Are you alone in the room? the protocol asks, and you look over your shoulder, at the empty kitchen, at the table where you said the true thing out loud, and you say yes, and then the notary's own voice asks you, off the protocol, "Are you all right?"

"I will be," you say, and you sign the affidavit, and the records are true and complete, and you are the records custodian, and the biggest truth in your life is written on nothing anywhere.

You close the laptop. The notary's face goes away, and the snow on her window ledge goes away, and the kitchen is empty again, and you wash the cup, and the day stretches ahead of you, empty.

You clean the apartment. The center's email gets answered. You make soup and do not eat it. You test the patch every hour, and the patch is there, and you stand at the window and watch the street's emptiness, and you think about the man in Pasco going to work at the processing plant, doing his shift, coming home to the swept yard, and you do not rehearse.

Day six, you work, and the patch is there, and the phantom's numbers print clean, and you stop counting the patients' faces and start counting the hours. There are four patients, and you are gentle with all of them, and the last one, a man with a tremor, holds your arm at the door and says you are the kindest voice he has heard in months, and you stand in the doorway after he leaves and you understand that the protocol voice is the last thing that will be taken from you, and you hold it the way you hold everything else now, loosely, in the hand that drops things.

Day seven, you do not sleep. You lie in your bed in the apartment off 40th and listen to the year's emptiness, and you think about the ceiling in Portland again, the way the forgiveness carried, and you understand for the first time that what you heard was a

man choosing to pay for something, and that is when you decide how the paying will go: spoken, out loud, to the man's face, with nothing written, because written is how the world loses the shape of a thing, and because he has had seventeen years of the written.

You do not rehearse. On day seven you look up nothing, and you write nothing, and you tell no one, and at four in the morning you stand at the kitchen window and watch the street and say it once, quietly, to the glass, the first time you have ever said it out loud: the plate, the brother, the name. It sounds like nothing, said to a window. It sounds like the whole of your life.

You call the clerk back once, on day seven, before first light, to ask one thing, and the thing is small and total: whether he is well. The old woman says he is well enough, he works, he keeps to himself, he is well enough, and you thank her, and the landline hums, and that is the last asking. After that there is only the door.

Day eight, you drive to Pasco.

Eighty miles southeast, the river on your left, the valley opening out into the big irrigated flatness, the orchards and then the processing plants and the smell of them. You drive the way you drive to work, careful, both hands, and the patch rides in your eye, and you pass through Union Gap, and you do not let yourself think about tomorrow, at the Selah center, the patient.

Today is the debt. Today is the only day the debt can be paid on.

You stop once, at the riverside park in Prosser, and stand on the bank over the river, and watch it run flat and green and wide, going about its work, and a trucker is walking his dog along the grass, and he waves once, the way truckers wave, and you wave back, and the wind comes off the water with the irrigated smell in it, and you wait there until your hands are steady, and then you drive the rest of the way.

The street, when you find it, is a street of low square houses and swept-dirt yards, and the houses have the look of places where a man keeps his own hours, and you park at the curb and sit with the engine off and your hands on the wheel, and across the street a dog watches you from behind a fence, and the valley's light does its big flat work on everything, and you wait, and you do not rehearse, and after a while a man comes out of the third house and opens the hood of the car in the driveway. You have the address from the old woman's friend's friend, spoken over the landline, a street in the flat part of Pasco where the houses sit low and the yards are dirt and gravel. You have not rehearsed. You decided that on day four: the debt is not a speech, and a speech would be paper's cousin, and you are bringing him the spoken thing.

The house is small and square and the yard is swept dirt, and you know him from the newspaper photograph, seventeen years old in your memory, the same face with the years on it now. He is younger than the seventeen years and older than his age. He straightens up out of the hood and watches you come up the drive with your hands out of your pockets, and you stop six feet from him, the way the year has taught everyone to stop, and you say it to his face.

"My name is Ilka Praether. In April of 2003 I gave the Spokane police a plate number I knew was wrong. The car I saw was my brother's. The number was yours."

You say the plate, and you say the brother, and you say your name again, because the name is the whole of it, and he stands there with his hands on the hood's edge, and you can see the seventeen years in his forearms, and you wait.

He looks at you for a long time, reading you the way you read images. Then he closes the car's hood, gentle, the way you close a door on a sleeping child, and he walks to his door, and he closes it, without a word.

You stand in the swept yard. The dryer thumps inside someone's house. A sprinkler runs three houses down, the tick of it carrying in the flat air. From the plant a mile off comes the hum of the second shift, the valley's own machine, always on. The dog across the

street has lost interest in you. The valley's light does its big flat work. You have paid, and the paying has changed nothing you can see, and that is the price: the debt is paid into a closed door, and the door owes you nothing, and you understand for the first time in your life that the paying was never for him to accept or refuse. It was for the account. The account is closed.

You drive home in the dark, and you do not call your brother, and you do not write anything down, and the patch waits in your eye like a patient waits, still and loud.

Day nine, you go to Selah as a patient.

The Selah center is smaller than yours, one bay, a waiting room with three patients in masks, and no one knows you. You fill out the forms with your own name and your own insurance, and the forms ask the usual questions, the metal in your body, the surgeries, the allergies, and you answer all of them truthfully, which is the day's own joke, and the tech who runs you is a young woman with kind hands who does not know you, and she says the lines, and you hear them from the table, and it is the strangest thing that has ever happened to you, hearing the lines from the table. Remove all metal from your body. Lie still. The machine is louder than you expect. You lie in the bore with the contrast warming your arm and you listen to the gradients hammer, and you think about the four

thousand strangers you have talked through this, and how none of them knew the voice was reading itself the whole time, and you are still, and you are the best patient the young woman has had all week, and you do not tell her that.

The machine does not know you. That is the comfort of it. The gradients hammer and the table slides and the bore is close and white and honest, and nothing in it lies to anyone, and for twenty-four minutes you are the calmest person in Yakima County.

The read comes back the same afternoon, because the Selah center is quiet and the radiologist is thorough. You wait in the consultation room, a small room with a desk and two chairs and a box of tissues neither of you will need, and the radiologist comes in with a printout under his arm, a careful man in his sixties with a conference-room voice, and he turns the printout around and shows you your own brain, and he says the shadow at the temporal horn is a flow artifact, CSF pulsation, a known mimic, there is no mass, and your brain is normal, and you are healthy.

He says it kindly, the way careful men say good news to strangers, and he asks whether you have any questions, and he waits while you look at your own brain in his hands, normal, every slice of it, the temporal horn quiet the way the anatomy should be quiet, and the room is still, and the year's emptiness is

outside the window, and the printout is warm from the printer. He tells you to follow up with your own doctor if anything changes, and to come back in a year if your own doctor wants a check, and he waits the way careful men wait, and neither of you needs the tissues. The patch and the fork-dropping hand have been quieter since the Pasco door, the way the body's weather turns when the week turns, and your own doctor can call them what they are if they keep, and they were already going.

You are healthy, and confessed, and the repair you priced for a dying woman is now a repair you must live inside at full health, and the account is as closed as a spoken thing can close it, and you will live inside the rest of it, and the paying is the only thing in your life you have ever done that you will never be able to take back, and you sit there with your own brain in your hands, and you are the only person in the world who knows all of it, and you are free, and the freedom has a price you will pay for the rest of your life.

You will sign the checkout sheet with your own name, and the young woman will tell you to have a good day, and you will drive home the long way, the river on your right, the valley doing its big flat work in the last of the light. You will not turn on the radio. You will think about the man in Pasco closing his car's hood, gentle, the way you close a door on a sleeping

child, and you will understand that the gentleness was the whole answer, and that the answer was for the door, and that the door was never yours. Tomorrow you will go to work. The phantom will print clean. Patients will climb out of the bore with their frightened faces, and you will be kind to all of them in the protocol voice, and the voice will be yours, and the year will be empty, and the magnet will be on. The magnet is always on. That is the first thing you learn, and the thing you never stop knowing, and it is enough.

And the radiologist is waiting for you to say something, and the protocol voice, your own voice, the voice that has comforted four thousand strangers, comes up out of you, and you say, "Thank you, Doctor. You have been most kind."

7

Standing Room

Spokane, Washington, 2021. Columbia Basin frame

I keep a yard of swept dirt in Pasco, and I sweep it on Sundays. The house is small and square, and the yard is dirt and gravel, and I keep the dirt swept the way my mother kept a floor in Michoacán when I was a boy. A swept yard is a yard that shows you what has crossed it. That is why you sweep. The neighbors have learned the ritual: the man who sweeps. That is the whole of the neighborhood's account of me.

My name is Aurelio Nájar. In 2003 the state of Washington said I killed a man with my car on a road in Spokane, on a night in April, and the state was wrong, and everyone who mattered knew the state was wrong except the ones whose job it was to know. I served fourteen years and seven months at Coyote Ridge and the rest on community custody. I worked in the fields before, and I work in the processing plant now, second shift, packing frozen potatoes into bags.

The work is honest, the pay is honest, the yard is honest. That is the account of me.

The years first, because the years are the property. Before 2003 I worked the fields the way my father worked them before me, the apples and the hops and the asparagus in its season, and I sent money to my mother, and I had a gray sedan, and I had a girl for a while, and I had my name. The name is Nah-HAR. In this country you learn to hear it said flat, NAH-jar, the way the state says it, and I had stopped correcting anyone, because the flat way was easier, and easier is how a name gets lost.

The arrest came on a Friday, at dawn, at the house I shared with three other men who worked the fields. The police had my plate number, and they had a witness who had seen a car, and the car was mine, and the night the man died on Upriver Drive I was asleep in my bed with my window open to the yard, and no one believed me, because no one believes the man whose car it was. My lawyer then was a public defender with forty cases, and he did his best, and his best was a plea I refused, and the trial was two days, and the jury was out three hours, and the judge wrote his reasons into the record, the leaving of the man on the road named the aggravation, and went above the range and said seventeen years, and the appeal died that winter, and the paper was final before the next June, and that day I

learned what paper is. Paper is the thing that says what is true, and what is true is what the paper says, and the circle is the whole of the law.

I will not tell you about Coyote Ridge, except to say that a man can keep a floor swept there too, in his head, and I swept it. I learned to read well there. I had not read much before. I read the law library's newspapers and the lives of the saints my mother sent me in her letters, and I kept my name in my mouth the way you keep a coin under your tongue, and I did not spend it, and I did not let the state spend it either.

Community custody came in 2018. The halfway house in Spokane first, then the Basin, because the Basin is where the work is. The plant took me, and I bought the house for what a pickup costs, and I swept the yard, and the neighbors learned me the way neighbors learn a quiet man: the man who sweeps and keeps to himself and waters the one rose bush by the door. The rose bush was my mother's kind. I do not know its name. It is the color of a wound healing.

In October of 2020 a woman stood in my driveway and told me the truth. She said her name, and she said the plate, and she said the brother, and I closed my door. I have thought about the door since. I closed it gentle, because gentleness was what I had, and because slamming it would have been a lie about how I felt, which was nothing I could have said. I did not forgive

her. I did not hate her. I went inside, and I stood in my kitchen until the light changed, and then I made my supper.

The state moved after that, the way the state moves when it has been caught. It had been caught by a statement. The woman who had stood in my driveway in the October light went to a lawyer in Yakima in the new year, and she gave it under oath to a court reporter in the lawyer's office: the plate number and how she had invented it, the brother's cracked car and the brother's own mouth, and her name signed to the whole of it. She had said nothing at my door about writing anything down. She wrote it down. I did not understand that for a while, and then I understood it the way I understand most things now, slowly: a repair you can refuse is not a repair. The prosecutor's office took two months over it, the way the state takes its time when the time is the state's own fault. When it moved, Ms. Kopecky took my case, the way the careful ones find the careful work, and she put it in the court's own form for an old conviction, the personal restraint petition. There was a hearing I did not attend. There was an order vacating the judgment, and the charge dismissed on the new evidence. My lawyer, a woman named Kopecky out of Spokane, called me on a Tuesday and said the conviction was vacated, and I said, "Say it again," and she said it again, and I sat on the floor of

my kitchen with my back against the cabinets and I did not cry, because crying was for the years, and the years were over.

About the floor, then, because the floor is where the order found me. The cabinets were the ones the house came with, and the floor was tile I had laid myself, and the tile was cold, and I sat there a long time with the phone in my hand, and the kitchen did its evening sounds, the refrigerator and the pipes, and I thought about nothing, and that is the truth. For eighteen years I had thought about the years. When they ended, I thought about nothing, and the nothing was the first thing I had owned outright in my life.

What came after the order was the offer.

The county's insurer, through its attorneys, sent Ms. Kopecky a settlement offer in the spring of 2021. I knew something was coming, the way you know weather is coming in the Basin, because the order had made the papers, one note, four paragraphs, my name said flat in print the way the state always said it, and a man from the plant had seen it and had looked at me differently for a week, and then the look faded, the way looks do. The statute pays a sum for each year of wrongful imprisonment, and the statute's sum is not small, and I had not filed the state's own paper yet. The award wanted its own paper in return: the whole account, written and sworn, and the waiver of every

other road to the money. The same truth, sold by a different door. The county's insurer offered the same sum with a clause in it. The clause said I would not publicly discuss the facts of the case, and that the facts included the identity of the man the police did not convict. The clause said, in the way of lawyers, that the eighteen years had belonged to no one. The fire captain in Spokane would stay a fire captain, and the prosecutor would stay a memory, and the plate number would stay a detail. And I would have the money.

Ms. Kopecky read it to me over the phone, all of it, the way I asked her to read everything, because the years taught me that a thing read aloud is a thing you can stop with your hand. When she got to the clause I put my hand up, alone in my kitchen, my hand up at no one, and I said, "Stop."

"They want to buy the years," I said.

"It is the county's money at the statute's number, plus the clause," she said. "The clause is how they get to yes."

"Then no," I said.

She is a careful lawyer. She said the money was the only apology the state knew how to make, and the clause was the price of the state's pride, and I could take the money and hold my tongue and be made

whole in every way but the naming, and the naming was a thing I did not owe anyone.

I asked her what the money was for, if the years belonged to no one. She did not answer that. The line stayed open and quiet, and I stood alone in my kitchen with the yard swept beyond the window over the sink, and I understood that she understood, and that she had to ask anyway, because that was her job, the asking, and the answer was mine, the way the yard was mine.

"They offered to buy the eighteen years if I would say they belonged to no one," I said. "The years belonged to Marek Praether. They were always his. The state's paper says the conviction is vacated, and it does not say his name, and the state wants me to help it never say so, with money. No."

That is where the first movement ends, with my no in the kitchen. It is a short word. I have had a long time to learn it. I have said it three times in my life when it mattered, and each time it held, and no one anywhere could make me unsay it. I learned it the way you learn a trade, by waiting.

The second movement is my lawyer's plea, and I will tell it because it is the hinge of the thing. Ms. Kopecky drove down from Spokane in April with her briefcase and her patience, and she sat in my kitchen with a glass of the water I keep cold, and she said there was a middle way. A protected statement, on file, naming

Marek Praether under oath, lodged with the court or kept in her safe, in case. In case something happened to me. In case the state moved again. For the day the truth needed a home.

She laid it out the way a careful lawyer lays out a will. The statement would cost nothing. It would not be published. It would exist the way a spare key exists, in a place no one looks, for the day someone has to get in. She said the record now held the woman's statement, and it did not hold me, and a case's paper is the state's, and a man's own account is his own, and if the day ever came when the truth needed a home, my voice should already have one, and she had come to offer it that.

I listened to all of it. She is a careful lawyer, and I am a careful man, and careful people owe each other the listening. She told me about a client she had once had, a man who had kept the truth in himself and died with it, and how the case had died with the man, and how she had thought about it since. She said it without looking at me, the way you say a thing you have not said often. I heard her. And still I said no.

She said it kindly. I heard the kindness. I also heard the shape of it: the truth, in a safe, in case. The truth had lived in me for eighteen years without a safe, and it had outlived the state's paper, and it had outlived the county's clause, and it would outlive my body or it

would not, and either way it would have lived the way a thing should live, in the open, in the man, unfiled.

I like Ms. Kopecky. She is the only lawyer I have ever liked. I told her no, and I told her why, and the why is the whole of my life, so I will say it plain. Paper is how they took the years. The paper said I drove the car. The paper said the witness saw the plate. And the paper said guilty, and the paper fed me, and the paper counted my days, and the paper said how many days I had. When the paper was finished with me, the paper said I could go, and the paper was wrong about everything except the going. I will not give the truth to paper. The truth is mine, and it lives in me, and it will not live in a file in anyone's safe, and if I die with it, it dies honest.

She drank her water. She said, "You're not wrong." And she put the offer in her briefcase, unsigned, and she drove back to Spokane, and the spring went by the way the spring goes in the Basin, the wind and then the heat.

I will say one more thing about Ms. Kopecky, because it is the thing that made the ceremony possible to imagine. When she stood to go, she looked at my kitchen, the two chairs and the table and the cold water and the clean counters, and she said, "You keep a clean house," and I said, "I keep a swept yard," and she said she could see that, and she meant the whole of me,

and I understood that she was the first person in eighteen years who had looked at my life and seen a man keeping house; most lawyers would have seen a case file. She saw the yard. That is why I liked her.

I will tell you about the receipt now, because it happened before all of this, in March, and it is the thing that taught me what the ceremony would be.

The order vacating the conviction had to be signed for, and the year was the year of screens, and the notary came up on my laptop on a Tuesday in March, a woman with a dog asleep behind her chair, and she had the receipt, the acknowledgment that I had received the order. And she said, in the level voice of a woman who does this all day, "Do you want it read aloud before you sign?"

I said I had waited eighteen years to hear it. Every word.

She read it. She read the caption and the order and the vacating of the judgment, the county and the case number and the long legal climb of it, and twice she read my name the way the state had said it for eighteen years, NAH-jar, the flat way, and twice I stopped her, and I said, "Nah-HAR," and after that she said it right, and she did not apologize for the years of it, because the years were not hers, and she read the rest of it in my name, and the reading took eleven minutes, and it

was the whole of my defense, at last, in my own kitchen, in my own name.

I signed the receipt. I thanked her. The dog slept on.

When it was done she asked me the way they all ask, whether there was anything else, and I said no, and I meant it, and I closed the laptop, and I sat in the kitchen in the quiet, and the quiet was the quiet of a house that has been paid for, and I read nothing, because there was nothing left to read, and I knew my own name, and the state knew it now too, the whole of it, Nah-HAR, every syllable, said right, on the record, at last.

I did not keep a copy of the order. She offered to send one. I said no. The order lives where orders live, and I live here, and the two of us do not need to be in the same house. That is what eighteen years taught me: the truth does not need a place to be kept. It needs a man willing to carry it, and the carrying is the whole of it, and the carrying is mine.

About the sound of it, because the sound is the part I did not expect. The order is a piece of paper with a case number and a caption and a judge's signature, and the receipt is a piece of paper that says I received the order, and the two of them are the whole of my exoneration, and I would not have believed, if you had told me at Coyote Ridge, that the end of the years would come on a laptop screen, in my kitchen, read

aloud by a woman with a dog asleep behind her chair, in eleven minutes, in a level voice. The years were loud. The end of them was quiet. That is how you know the end is real.

A woman came to my yard in June with a recorder. She was making a program, she said, about men like me, and she had a microphone on a pole and a soft voice and the patience of a person who has learned that the soft voice opens doors. I brought her a chair and a glass of water, and we sat in the shade of the house, and she asked me, in the soft voice, to describe the years.

I said no.

She asked me what the years had been like. I said long. She asked me what the years had taught me. I said patience. She asked me whether I was angry. I said no, and it was the truth, and I could see her face want the anger, because the anger would have been the story, and the patience was not the story, and the not-story was what she could not use.

She asked me, in the same voice, whether she could turn the recorder on.

I said no again. I said I would talk to her, and I would answer her questions, and I would not be recorded, because my voice is mine and the years were mine and I do not give my voice to anyone's machine. She looked at me the way a person looks at a well they have

walked a long way to. She was thirsty. I could see it. And I could see that she understood, in some part of her, that the answer was the story, and that she could not have it.

We sat in the shade and talked for an hour about the plant and the yard and the Basin's heat, and she drank the water, and she asked about the rose bush, and I told her it was my mother's kind, and she did not write that down either, and she thanked me, and she left with her recorder off. I watched her drive away. I have thought about her since, the thirst and the leaving. She wanted the sound of the years. The sound of the years is not something you get by asking. You cannot ask a well for its water's voice. She knew it when she left. I could see that too.

She was polite about it, I will say that for her. She did not pretend the recorder was off when it was on, the way some of them do. She asked. That is the difference, and I have thought about it: she asked, and I said no, and the asking and the no were both honest, and the honesty was all that passed between us. The years have made me a man who notices whether a person asks.

The summer went by the way the summer goes. I worked second shift, packing the frozen potatoes, the line's rhythm, the cold of the freezer room and the heat of the yard, the bags coming down the belt, each

one the same, each one counted, each one closed. I was good at the work. The work did not ask me who I was. The freezer room is the coldest place in the Basin in August, and the yard is the hottest, and the line between them is the door, and I stood in the door most days, and I have come to think that is a thing about my life: I have always lived on the threshold, and the threshold is where the air mixes. I swept on Sundays. The neighbors waved. The rose bush bloomed twice. I read the paper on my days off at the library, because the library is air-conditioned and the paper is free, and because a man who does not read the paper is a man the world does not have to tell anything. The librarians knew me by then, the man who read the paper and left it for the next one, and they did not know my name, and that was the arrangement. And in August, in the Tri-City paper, there was a note, four paragraphs, about Spokane's fire service and its annual commendation ceremony in September, at the civic auditorium, open to the public. And in the third paragraph there was a name. Captain Marek Praether, to be commended for twenty years and for a rescue at a warehouse fire in May.

I read it twice. Folded the paper the way you fold a thing you are going to carry, and did not carry it, because I do not keep paper. I left it on the library table for the next man. And I went home and stood in my

yard, and the yard was swept, and nothing had crossed it, and I knew I was going to Spokane.

What does a man rehearse on a bus, when he owns one thing?

The Greyhound leaves Pasco at seven in the morning and gets to Spokane by nine, and the road goes through the Basin and then up through the coulees, and the land does the thing it does, the big dry openness of it, the sky like a second country. I sat by the window with my hands folded, the way I sat in the county van in 2003, the way I have sat in every vehicle of my life that was not mine. And I rehearsed nothing, because there was nothing to say. I was not going to say anything. That was the whole plan.

What I owned was the not-saying.

The world does not teach this. The state taught me that everything I had could be taken on paper. The years taught me the opposite. What I have, I have because I have not said it, and I have not said it because it is mine, and it is mine because I have not spent it. The forgiveness is the coin under the tongue. You do not spend it. You do not give it or sell it. You keep it, and the keeping is the wealth, and no one can tax it or take it or make you say it.

Eighteen years, the state had my name and could not say it right. The county wanted to buy my silence about the man whose years I had served. My lawyer

wanted my truth in her safe. The woman with the recorder wanted my voice in her machine. And the captain in Spokane was going to stand at a podium and be commended for twenty years, and some of those years were mine, and he knew it, and I knew it, and the only souls who knew it whole were the woman who had stood in my driveway in the October light and said her name, and the plate, and the brother, out loud, and the county men who had written a clause about a name without ever saying it.

I did not rehearse what I would say to him, because I was not going to speak to him. I rehearsed standing. I rehearsed the rail. And I rehearsed being seen, which is a thing a man can do without a word. I rehearsed it the way you rehearse a fence: where the posts go, where the line runs, what the fence is for.

You think a fence is simple until you set one. The posts have to be true, and the line has to be straight, and the gate has to be where you want the gate. My whole life had been other people's fences. This one was mine. The rail was the post. The leaving was the gate.

The bus went up through the coulees, and the land got greener the farther north we ran, and a woman across the aisle ate an egg sandwich and read her phone, and the driver announced the stops in a voice like a man reading a list he did not make, and I watched the land go, and I thought about my mother's

floor in Michoacán, and how a swept floor shows you what has crossed it, and how I had swept my whole life for this.

I was going to stand at the rail of the civic auditorium, in the standing room, at the back, and let the man see me, and then I was going to leave before the applause ended. That was the whole of it. That was the property, fenced.

The day in Spokane, I walked. I had not seen the city since the halfway house, and I had not seen it free before that, and it is a handsome city in September, the river and the bridges and the old brick. I walked the riverfront and ate a sandwich on a bench. I did not go to the courthouse. And careful here too: I did not go to the courthouse, because the courthouse is paper, and the day was not about paper. The day was about a man at a podium, and a rail, and a sentence.

At five I walked to the auditorium and stood in the line with the families, and the line moved slow, and the September sun was still up, and the hall's old face was lit by it, and no one looked at me twice, because I was a man in a clean shirt, and the hall was open to the public, and the public includes everyone.

The civic auditorium in Spokane is a big old hall with a main floor and a balcony and a rail at the back of the main floor, where the standing room is. I bought no ticket, because it was open to the public, and I stood at

the rail with the other standing people, the ones without seats, the late ones and the poor ones and the ones who prefer to stand. There was a program printed on paper, and a woman handed me one, and I folded it without reading it and put it in my pocket, and I did not keep it, and I threw it away later, which I will come to.

The hall smelled of floor wax and the damp wool of dress uniforms, and the seats filled with the families, the wives and the kids and the mothers, and the standing room filled with the rest of us, and I stood at the rail and waited. An usher asked if I wanted a seat, because the balcony had seats, and I said I preferred to stand, and she smiled and moved on, and that is the truth about standing room: it is the only place in a hall where a man can stand in full view and be asked nothing, because the standing are invisible by custom. The fire department came in in dress uniform, down the center aisle in step, the way firemen walk when the city is watching, and the pipes and drums played, the pipes first and then the drums under them, and the color guard posted the colors, and the mayor's man said the mayor's words, and the chief said the chief's words. There were six commendations. The captain was fifth.

The first four went the way these things go. A twenty-year man from the Valley, a rescue swimmer, a

pair of engineers who had pulled a roof off a car. Each citation read, each man to the podium, each speech short and plain and read from paper, and each one ending the same way, the thanks to the chief and the crews and the family, and the applause going around the hall the way weather goes around a county. The rescue swimmer cried, and the hall loved him for it, and I thought about what a man is allowed to show at a podium, and what he is not, and who is allowed to watch. I watched the program move the way a liturgy moves, the hymn and the reading and the prayer, and I waited, and the waiting was not hard, because I have done eighteen years of waiting, and an hour of it is nothing.

A boy stood next to me at the rail for the third one, a boy of maybe ten in a too-big jacket, there with his grandmother, and he watched the podium the way boys watch firemen, and his grandmother watched him, and I watched the two of them, and I thought about the way a city teaches its children what a hero is, the uniform and the podium and the applause, and how the children believe it, and how the believing is not wrong, and how it is built on who is standing at the rail.

Then the fifth turn came.

The chief read the citation. Captain Marek Praether, twenty years of service, the rescue at the warehouse

fire in May, two men carried out, the roof coming down, the whole account of it read into the hall's air in the chief's flat voice. And Marek Praether walked to the podium in his dress uniform, a big man, gray at the temples now, and the hall stood up for him, and the applause went around the hall and would not stop.

I watched him cross the stage. He moved the way a man moves when he has carried people, the shoulders first, the careful hips. He took the medal from the chief and shook the chief's hand and stepped to the podium, and he waited out the applause the way a man waits out weather, and he looked at his speech, and he began.

I had never seen him. I want to be careful here, because I am the only careful one left: I never saw the man, and I never saw his car. The state's case was a number on a car I owned, and the car was mine, and the night was not. Until the podium, I had never once laid eyes on Marek Praether.

He began to speak. He had a speech, and he read it, and his voice was the voice of a man who is good at his work and unused to speeches, and the hall listened. He said the thanks first, the chief and the crews and the city. He said the part about the warehouse in May, the two men, the roof, and the hall was quiet for it, and a woman two seats from the aisle wiped her eyes, and the pipes and drums sat still in their row. And then he

came to the part about the years of service, and he said the words "twenty years," and he looked out at the hall the way a man reads a room, and his eyes went along the main floor and the balcony and the standing room at the back, and they found me at the rail.

I stood still, my hands on the rail, and I did not raise them, and I did not nod, and I let him see me, and he saw me.

I want to tell you what his face did, because his face is the whole of the price. It did not change. That is the truth. He was a fire captain, and he had a speech, and his face did not change. What changed was the sentence. It stopped, in the middle of a clause about the years, and the hall heard the stop, and he looked down at his speech, and the pause went long, two seconds, three, and the hall thought he had lost his place, and then the sentence restarted, and he finished it, and his voice was the same voice.

He knew me. I have no doubt of it and no proof of it. He knew me the way you know a face you have kept, the photograph, the years of it in your head. He knew me, and the sentence broke, and the sentence restarted, and that is all the proof there is or ever will be, because no one else in that hall knew anything, and the record of the evening, if there is one, shows a man pausing at the word twenty.

I watched him finish. He finished the speech, and he said the last thanks, and the hall began to rise for the applause, and the sixth commendation was still to come, and the hall was standing, and the pipes and drums were gathering themselves, and the applause was building the way a wave builds before it breaks, and the chief was moving back toward the podium, and the families were on their feet, and I stepped back from the rail, and I went out the back doors into the lobby, and out the lobby doors into the September evening, and I was on the sidewalk before the applause crested, and I did not hear it end.

The lobby was empty, and my footsteps were the only sound in it, and I did not look back. I had seen what I came to see. I had been seen. The fence was up.

I will tell you what it was, because I have thought about it for a year. It was the demonstration of the property. Revenge would have been the speech interrupted, the name said aloud, the scandal, and I did none of it. Mercy would have been a word to him, and I gave him no word. I own the forgiveness of Marek Praether, and I have not sold it, and I have not spent it, and I have not given it away, and it is intact, and it is mine, and the proof of ownership is the leaving. I left before the applause ended, and the leaving was the whole of it, and the whole of it was mine.

I walked to the bus station in the evening, through the downtown, past the river, and I stopped at a bench and watched the river go dark, and I took the program out of my pocket and threw it away, because I do not keep paper, and because the day was mine.

A couple at the next bench was sharing fries from a paper boat, and they offered me nothing, and I wanted nothing, and the river went by, and the bridges' lights came on, and I sat there until the dark was all the way down, and it was good.

I had thought the day would feel like a verdict. It felt like a Sunday. I had been seen by the one man who mattered, and no one else had seen me at all, and the two things together made the day the cleanest day of my life.

The downtown was doing its evening, the restaurants' lights and the last of the office people, and I walked through it the way I had walked through the hall, a man nobody knew. A police car went by slow, and I watched it go the way I have learned to watch police cars, level, unhurried, and it went on, and the evening went on, and the river went on, and I thought about the captain at the podium, and the way his voice had broken at the word for his own life, and how the hall had heard nothing, and how the two of us were the only ones who would ever know the sentence had broken, and how that was enough. I stopped at a

darkened window and looked at myself in the glass, a man in a clean shirt, and I looked like anyone, and I walked on.

The bus back ran at nine. I sat by the window again. A man across the aisle was asleep before we cleared the city. I watched the dark land go by, the coulees and the big sky you cannot see in the dark but feel, and I was tired the way a man is tired after a day's work, and I thought about my yard, and how I would sweep it on Sunday, and how nothing had crossed it.

I thought about the captain too. I will be honest, because honesty is what is left to me. I thought about him standing in his kitchen tonight, the medal in its box, the speech folded in his pocket. He had seen me at the rail. He would know why I came: that I had not come to speak, or forgive, or accuse, and that I had come to stand where he could see me, and leave. He would lie awake tonight. I would sleep. That is the difference between the property's owner and the man who owes it.

At the bus stop in Pasco, near midnight, I waited for the last of the local line under the shelter's light, and a man waiting with me asked for the time, and I told him, and he went back to his bench, and the street was quiet, and the plant's lights burned across the flatness, and the night smelled of potatoes and the river, and I stood there with my hands in my pockets, tired and

whole, and the night was cool, and the street was mine, and the years were mine, and the name was mine, Nah-HAR, said right at last, and I stood there in the shelter's light, a man with property.

8

Outgoing Message

Erie, Pennsylvania, 2022

[TAPE HISS]

[PRODUCTION NOTE: this transcript was assembled in October of 2022, after the ninth episode aired. The season's tape is kept whole, and the corrections stand where they stand.]

STATIC. Episode 1. "The Widows of Erie Gasket." Aired June 2022. Assembled May 2022.

[COLD OPEN]

A MAN'S VOICE, *on an answering machine's microcassette, the hiss of it older than the voice on it*: "Hello. You've reached Russell and Berneice Slusser. We're not home. Leave word."

[BEEP]

TEMPE RUUD: That voice does not exist anymore. The man it belonged to died in 2016, of what the work gave him, after forty years at the Erie Gasket Company on the bayfront. You are hearing him the way his family

heard him for twenty years, every time they called home and nobody answered. This season is about what the work gave them all.

[THEME]

TEMPE: This is Static. I'm Tempe Ruud. This season: a gasket plant on the bayfront, the men who built the gaskets, and the women who outlived them.

TEMPE: I make this show alone, in a rented room over a print shop on State Street, with two microphones and a borrowed mixing board and a window that looks at the lake. I want you to know that, because it matters for what the season is. There is no network or team. There is a woman with two microphones and a city full of tape that no one has ever listened to, and the city is Erie, and the lake is the lake, and the tape is the whole of what I have.

TEMPE: I have made Static for four years, four seasons of the lake's edge, the winter fishermen and the tower clocks and the last carousel organ in the county, and the show has a small audience and a loyal one, and the audience trusts me because I have never once lied to them, which is a thing you can build a show on, and I built it. I want you to know that too. The season you are hearing was made by a woman whose whole audience was built on her honesty, and the audience is

why the season exists, and the honesty is why you are hearing about it at all.

TEMPE: The winters here are the whole of the year, some people say. The lake does not freeze anymore, the way it did, and the snow comes off it sideways, and the city sits at its edge the way a person sits at a sickbed, waiting. The plant is the city's own sickbed, twenty years of it, and the widows are the people who stayed. I spent the winter in their kitchens. That is where the season was recorded, and that is where the season is set, and that is where the season's question was asked and answered, though I did not know it yet.

TEMPE: I want to tell you how the season was made, because the making is the season. I wrote the scripts at night and recorded the lake at dawn, and I interviewed the widows on the weekdays, and I mixed it on the weekends, and the print shop downstairs printed its flyers, and the radiator clanked, and the city did its winter. And in April I had eight episodes and a hole where the men should be, and the hole was the season, and the season was the hole, and I did not know what to do about it. And then Mrs. Slusser's family lent me a shoebox.

> *[AD READ: "This episode is supported by Shoreline Mattress of Erie, on West 26th, where the springs are honest and the prices are round."]*

TEMPE: The Erie Gasket Company closed its doors in 2003, after eighty-one years. The building still stands at the bayfront, the windows broken in their frames like a set of bad teeth. The men who ran the presses are dying now, one after another, of mesothelioma, the slow cancer that comes of asbestos, because the gaskets they built were cut from sheet asbestos, and the dust of it was the air they breathed, and the air they breathed was the price of the paycheck. This season I talked to three of the widows. What I did not have was a voice for Act 3, because Act 3 is the men, and the men are dead, and the dead do not sit for tape.

TEMPE: I chose the widows because the widows are the record. The men died of what the work gave them, and the work's papers died with the company, and the company's papers are a lawsuit's furniture now, and the widows are what's left, and the widows are the ones who washed the dust out of the clothes and the garage and the car and the hair, and the dust was the price, and the widows paid it too. Three widows. Mrs. Kwasniewski, Mrs. Dombrowski, Mrs. Slusser. The plant's three longest marriages. The three women who washed the dust.

TEMPE: The kitchens are where the widows live now, and the kitchens are where the tape was made. All three of them have the lake out the window, or the

plant's stack, or the garage where the clothes were left. They all made me tea. They all asked me, at some point, whether the program would have the men in it, and I said the men were dead, and they said they knew, and we drank the tea. That is the season's first fact: the men are dead, and the widows know it, and the tea is good.

TEMPE: The gap first, because the gap is the season's whole shape. Act 1 is the plant, Act 2 is the widows, Act 3 is the men. The plant has tape: the bayfront, the broken building, the city's statements. The widows have tape: three kitchens, three women, three marriages' worth of the ordinary. The men have no tape. The men did not keep themselves. They did not record themselves, and no one recorded them, and the work of their lives died with their voices, and the season has been built around the hole where their voices should be. I spent February and March in the widows' kitchens. The tape you will hear this season is theirs.

TEMPE: The first three seasons of this show were easier. The lake's edge is full of voices that want to be heard. The winter fishermen will talk all day. The tower-clock man will talk longer. This season was the first one where the voices that mattered were the ones that did not exist, and I did not understand what that

would do to me, and I am telling you now, at the beginning, that the season has a hole in it, and the hole is where the men should be, and the hole is the whole of the thing.

[TAPE: the bayfront, wind off the lake, gulls]

TEMPE: That is the sound of the bayfront in March. I want you to hold it. The season is built out of what the lake heard.

TEMPE: The lake is the biggest thing Erie has, and the city has always worked at its edge, and the work is gone now, mostly, and the lake is still there, and the widows' kitchens all face it. I recorded the lake for a week before I recorded anyone. I have a whole hard drive of the lake. It is the best tape I ever made, and it is the only tape I was ever sure I had permission to use, because the lake does not answer, and the lake does not sign releases, and the lake does not take itself back. I want you to remember that.

STATIC. Episode 2. "The Plant." Aired June 2022. Interviews recorded February and March 2022.

TEMPE: The plant in 1962 employed nine hundred men. It made gaskets for marine engines and for the automotive trade, and it was the biggest employer on the bayfront, and the bayfront was the city's working

edge. I did not know what a gasket was. A gasket is the thing that keeps the pressure in. It is cut from sheet material, it sits between two faces, and it dies in service. Every gasket in the world is destroyed by the job it does. That is what a gasket is.

MRS. *KWASNIEWSKI*: My Ed was a press man. Thirty-six years. He'd come home with the dust on him, and I'd make him leave the clothes in the garage, and he thought I was fussing. I was fussing. I didn't know it was the dust, and he didn't know it was the dust, and the company knew, and that's the part you want to hear, isn't it. The company knew.

TEMPE: What did you know?

MRS. *KWASNIEWSKI*: That he was tired. That his hands were always cut. That the dust was in the car, in the garage, in his hair. I knew the ordinary things. The wives know the ordinary things.

[TAPE: a kettle, a kitchen clock]

MRS. *KWASNIEWSKI*: You want to know what the end was like? It was slow. He coughed for three years before anyone said the word. And when they said it, he said, well, and that was the whole of what he said about it. We were married forty-one years. He never once said the word afraid to me. He said it to the dog. I heard him in the garage, the night after the diagnosis,

sitting on the step stool with the dog's head in his hands, and he said, "Well, pal," and he told the dog. That's who he told. The dog.

TEMPE: What did you do?

MRS. *KWASNIEWSKI*: I stayed in the kitchen. You don't go out to the garage for that. That's his. I stayed in the kitchen, and I washed the same dish four times, and I let him have the dog.

TEMPE: Once more, what a gasket does, because it matters for what the men did not know. The gasket keeps the pressure in. It sits between two faces and it dies in service, and no one ever sees it, and no one ever thinks of it, and the whole machine depends on it. The men who cut the gaskets from the sheet asbestos were the gaskets of the Erie Gasket Company. They kept the pressure in. They died in service. And no one saw it, and no one thought of it, and the whole machine depended on it.

TEMPE: That is Chester Dombrowski's kitchen in 1964, or it would be, if the dead men's kitchens had tape. They don't. That is the gap at the center of this season, and I am going to be honest with you about it, because the honesty is the season. I have three widows and their kitchens and their tape, and I have no Act 3, because Act 3 is the men, and the men are dead. The dead do not sit for tape. I had learned it the honest way

once, the year before, in Pasco, from a man with a swept yard who gave me the chair and the water and the shade and no tape, and I took the lesson and I turned it: I decided grief had a sound you could not get by asking, and I spent this season taking it unasked. That is the gap entire, and the season was built to fill it.

TEMPE: The widows first, because the widows are the season, and the season is the widows, and I kept telling myself that, the way you keep telling yourself a thing that is true and insufficient. Three widows. Mrs. Kwasniewski, Mrs. Dombrowski, Mrs. Slusser. The plant's three longest marriages, the three women who outlived the dust the longest. I found them the way you find anyone now: I hired a researcher, a tracer, a woman who finds people for a living, and she found them in two weeks, and she told me the finding was the easy part, and she was right.

STATIC. Episode 3. "The Tracer." Aired July 2022. Interview recorded April 2022.

TEMPE: The researcher works out of Kern County, California, and she finds people for lenders and lawyers, and she found the plant's families for me. I am going to let her tell you how, because the how is her trade, and because she said it better than I could.

[TAPE: a phone line, the compression of a long-distance call]

THE TRACER: You find people by the trail they can't help leaving. Everyone leaves one. The ones who want to be found leave a wide one, and the ones who don't leave a narrow one, and the narrow ones are the work. The plant's families wanted to be found. They were waiting to be found. I want you to know that, because you asked me what the work costs, and the work costs nothing when they want to be found, and it costs everything when they don't.

TEMPE: And when they don't?

THE TRACER: Then you don't find them. That's the whole of my code. I want to say it's more complicated than that. It isn't.

TEMPE: Have you ever found someone who didn't want to be found?

THE TRACER: *[a pause, the line's hum]* Once.

TEMPE: And?

THE TRACER: And I don't do it anymore.

[TAPE: the line dies]

TEMPE: The tracer found the three widows in two weeks, and all three of them are in Erie, and the tracer works out of Kern County, California, which is the kind of thing you notice when you are paying attention to a story's geography, and I was, and I made a note of it,

and the note never became anything, because the tracer's county had nothing to do with the plant, and the geography was a coincidence, and I want to be honest about the coincidence, because the season is built on honesty. That is what I kept telling myself.

[AD READ: "This episode is supported by Shoreline Mattress of Erie."]

STATIC. Episode 4. "The Shoebox." Aired July 2022.

TEMPE: In April, Mrs. Slusser's family lent me a shoebox. The family is Berneice and her son Tom, and Tom runs the shoebox now, the family's memory of the plant years, and he lent it to me for date checking. I want to be precise about the terms, because the terms are the whole of what comes next. The loan was for date checking and transcription. I was to read the letters and the cards and the plant's papers, and I was to check the dates against the record I was building, and I was to transcribe what I needed, and I was to return the box. That was the loan. That was all the loan was.

TEMPE: The shoebox had letters in it, and cards, and a union card, and a photograph of the plant's softball team in 1971, and a microcassette. A microcassette from an answering machine, the small kind, the size of a matchbox, the kind that held the outgoing greeting.

And the microcassette had Russell Slusser's voice on it, saying his own name, and asking the caller to leave word.

[TAPE HISS]

A MAN'S VOICE, *on an answering machine's microcassette, the hiss of it older than the voice on it*: "Hello. You've reached Russell and Berneice Slusser. We're not home. Leave word."

[BEEP]

TEMPE: I want you to notice what you heard a moment ago, because I noticed it, and the noticing is why this season exists. You heard a dead man answer his phone. You heard his name in his own voice, and his wife's name, and the ask at the end. That is the season's voice for Act 3. The dead man, sitting for tape at last. The season had its voice after all.

STATIC. Episode 5. "The Wives." Aired July 2022.

TEMPE: The three widows do not know each other anymore. The plant held them together, the way the plant held everything on the bayfront, and when the plant died the bayfront's calendar died with it, the picnics and the Christmas party and the bowling league, and the widows went home to their own kitchens. Mrs. Dombrowski lives in the same house she

has lived in since 1958, on the east side, with the same wallpaper. She made me tea. This is Mrs. Dombrowski, on her husband Chester, who ran the lathes for forty years.

[TAPE: the kitchen, the tea things, a clock]

MRS. *DOMBROWSKI*: Chester was a quiet man. He worked the lathe and he came home and he read the paper and he was quiet. I used to tell my sister I married a man with no conversation. And then he got sick, and the sickness took his voice before it took him, the cancer was in his throat, and I thought, all those years I asked him to talk, and now I would give anything for the quiet back. That's the joke the work plays on you. You spend forty years wishing your husband would talk, and then he can't, and you'd trade the whole plant for one more evening of the quiet.

TEMPE: Do you remember the last thing he said?

MRS. *DOMBROWSKI*: *[a long pause, the clock]* He wrote it. His voice was gone by then. He wrote it on the pad by the bed. "The tea is good." That's all. "The tea is good." I don't have the pad anymore. People think you keep the last words. You don't. The last words are the last words, and keeping them won't bring the voice back, and I like tea.

TEMPE: What do you have of him?

MRS. *DOMBROWSKI*: The wallpaper. He hung it himself, all those years ago, and it's crooked in the corner by the stove, and you can see it, and I never fixed it. That's what I have.

[TAPE: the clock]

TEMPE: The third widow is Berneice Slusser. She lives in the house she and Russell bought in 1963, on the west side, in sight of the plant's smokestack. Her kitchen faces the bayfront. This is Mrs. Slusser, on the phone they had for twenty years.

[TAPE: a kitchen, a window open to the lake wind]

MRS. *SLUSSER*: The phone was on the kitchen wall, the green one, the kind with the cord. Russell put the answering machine in back in 1987, when the boys were calling from the service and we kept missing them. He hated the machine. He'd stand and listen to it like it had insulted him. But he made the greeting himself, because he said if the machine was going to answer his phone, it was going to answer in his voice, and that was the whole of the negotiation. He said his name and my name and he said leave word, and he hung up, and he never listened to it back. He never once listened to himself. I used to tell him he sounded like himself, and he'd say, "That's the point," and that was all.

TEMPE: What happened to the machine?

MRS. *SLUSSER*: It's in the box with the rest of the plant years. Tom has it. It's the only tape of him I know of. Russell didn't like to be recorded. He didn't like his photograph taken either. The way some men are. He'd say, "I'm here now," and that was his answer to everything you wanted to keep.

TEMPE: Do you listen to it?

MRS. *SLUSSER*: *[the window, the wind]* No. I don't need the tape to hear him. I have forty years of him in my ear. The tape is for people who didn't know him. That's all.

TEMPE: And you? Do you like to be recorded?

MRS. *SLUSSER*: *[the window, the wind]* I am old, and my husband is dead, and the plant is gone, and the smokestack is still standing, and you can see it from my kitchen window, and I have never once looked at it and thought it was a tape. It's the building. It's not a tape. The building is there, and it doesn't play anything back. That's what I like about it.

[TAPE: the window, the wind]

TEMPE: Russell Slusser worked the plant from 1962 to 2001. He died in 2016, of mesothelioma, two years after his diagnosis. He was the plant's longest-serving press operator. He never listened to his own outgoing message. I want you to sit with that.

[AD READ: "This episode is supported by Shoreline Mattress of Erie, on West 26th, where the springs are honest and the prices are round."]

STATIC. Episode 6. "The Closing." Aired July 2022.

TEMPE: The plant closed in 2003, and the men who had given it their lungs got a letter and a year's severance and a pension that did not cover the funerals. I have read the letter. I will not read it to you, because the letter is not the season. The season is the widows. But I want you to know the letter exists, because the letter is the kind of paper the twentieth century was made of, and the widows' kitchens are made of tape and tea, and the two things have never once been introduced.

TEMPE: The last day of the plant, the men came out with their lunch pails and their union jackets, and the bayfront's gulls did their ordinary work, and the men went home, and the plant's doors were chained, and the dust settled, and the dust is still settling. That is the closing. The closing is not a moment. The closing is the twenty years after.

[TAPE: the bayfront, the gulls, the wind off the lake]

TEMPE: That is the sound of the bayfront in March, where the plant stood. The building still stands. The

windows are broken in their frames. The city keeps saying it will do something with it, and the city never does, and the widows drive past it to the grocery store, and that is the arrangement.

STATIC. Episode 7. "Act 3." Aired August 2022.

TEMPE: And now, Act 3. The men. I have spent six episodes telling you the men are dead and the dead do not sit for tape, and you have heard the plant's floor and the widows' kitchens and the lake, and you have not heard the men, because there are no tapes of the men, because the men did not keep themselves. Except the one. You have heard the season's one exception: the voice at the season's open, the dead man answering his phone. I am not going to play it again. You heard it or you didn't. That is Act 3: the one exception, the only tape, and the lake's silence everywhere else.

STATIC. Episode 8. "The Season's End." Aired August 2022.

TEMPE: The season ends here, the way the plant ended, with a letter I will not read and a building I cannot enter and three women in three kitchens who have heard everything I have to say. I want to thank the widows, and the tracer, and the lake. I want to thank Shoreline Mattress of Erie. And I want to thank

Russell Slusser, who never once listened to himself, and who is the only man I know who got the last word by not listening for it.

[THEME, swelling]

TEMPE: This has been Static. I'm Tempe Ruud.

[PRODUCTION NOTE, from the October assembly: the eighth episode as aired ended with the season's end slate. This line belongs to the assembly, not to the airing: there would be a ninth episode. She did not know that when she made the eighth.]

[TAPE HISS]

[PRODUCTION NOTE, Static's feed, September 2022: "The Widows of Erie Gasket" has won the Whitlock Prize for Audio Documentary. The citation reads, in part: "Ruud's season on a shuttered gasket plant is a masterwork of patient listening, anchored by the most unforgettable opening voice in the year's audio, a dead man answering his own phone." There is a check. There is a dinner in New York in November.]

TEMPE, *in a video the prize board posts, in a blazer, with the season's logo on a screen behind her*: I want to thank the widows, and the tracer, and the lake. The season was built out of what the lake heard. I'm glad it landed.

[APPLAUSE]

[PRODUCTION NOTE, the same week: the cold open is streamed two hundred thousand times in nine days. It is clipped and shared and written up in four national outlets, all of which call it unforgettable, and none of which ask where it came from.]

[PRODUCTION NOTE, from the prize's week: the dinner is in November, in New York, and Tempe buys a blazer for it, and the check is for five thousand dollars, and the season's numbers triple in the month after the announcement, and the rented room over the print shop gets a better board, and the lake does not care, and the lake is the whole of the point.]

[PRODUCTION NOTE, the season's last month: the season is reviewed in four national outlets. "A masterwork of patience." "The year's most moving audio." "The cold open alone is worth the year." The show climbs the documentary charts, and the letters begin, and the letters are warm, and the letters all say some version of the same thing, which is that the season taught them something about grief, and none of them ask where the opening voice came from, because the voice is unforgettable and the unforgettable does not get asked about.]

[PRODUCTION NOTE, the same weeks: Tempe does two interviews about the season, one for a trade site and one for a public-radio magazine, and in both of them she says the season was built out of what the lake heard, and in both of them the interviewer thanks her, and neither of them asks about the cold open, and the waiting room of her life has a lake in it now, and the lake does not answer.]

[PRODUCTION NOTE: the prize's dinner is in November. She will not go to it. She does not know that yet.]

[TEMPE RUUD, on the show's feed, the first week of September: "The season is finished, and the prize is the lake's. I want to thank the widows again, and the tracer, and the lake. I am going to take the fall off. The show will be back in the winter. Thank you for listening."]

[PRODUCTION NOTE: in September, a granddaughter in Buffalo plays the beginning of the season for her grandmother, on her telephone, in a kitchen on the west side of Erie, in sight of the smokestack. The grandmother is Berneice Slusser. The tape is her husband.]

[TAPE: a phone ringing, once]

BERNEICE SLUSSER, *on the show's listener line, her voice level and slow and older than it sounded in her kitchen*: "This is Berneice Slusser. I am calling about the program. My granddaughter played me the beginning of it on her telephone, the part at the start, the voice. That is my husband. That is my husband Russell, answering our phone, in our kitchen, in 1987. I want to know who said you could."

[the line's hum]

MRS. *SLUSSER*: "I heard my husband answer the phone on my granddaughter's telephone. He has been dead six years. I knew his voice before I knew his name, and I am the only person left who would know it in the dark, and you put it on the national air like a bird you found, and you never asked me, and the box it came out of was lent to you for the dates, and the dates live in the letters, and that voice was not in a letter. That voice was in my kitchen. Who said you could."

[the line's hum]

MRS. *SLUSSER*: "My son lent you a box of the plant years, for the dates. Not the machine's tape. Not my husband's voice. I want to know who said you could take the only tape of my husband I have, and put it on the air, where strangers could hear him answer his phone, who never met him, who never knew him, who do not know what he was. Who said you could."

[the line dies]

[PRODUCTION NOTE: the call was three minutes and forty-one seconds. It is played here whole, at Mrs. Slusser's instruction, with her permission, sought this time, and given.]

TEMPE: I got the call on a Tuesday, and I listened to it four times, and then I did not listen to it again, because the ear only needs it once, and mine has it. She said "Who said you could," and the answer is nobody, and I knew it when I did it, and I did it anyway, because the season needed a voice and the voice was there and the voice was perfect and I took it. That is the whole of my defense. I took it because it was perfect. That is not a defense. That is the confession.

TEMPE: The week between the call and this episode is where the correction was made, and the correction was not made on tape. On the Tuesday night I listened to the season front to back, the way the audience heard it, and I heard what the audience heard, and I heard what was under it, and I sat in the room over the print shop

until the sun came up over the lake, and I did not touch the board. The next morning I wrote the episode in one sitting, and it was the best writing I have ever done, and I deleted it, because it was the best writing, and I wrote it again worse, and it was honest. On the Thursday I called Mrs. Slusser. I will not play you that call, because that call is hers, and she did not make it for the air, and you will notice that this episode contains only the tape that was given, and that is the difference between the season and this episode, and the difference is the correction itself. She gave me her first call. This one I asked for.

TEMPE: On the Friday I told the Whitlock people I was sending the prize back, and the woman on the phone said no one had ever done that, and I said I knew, and she was quiet for a while, and then she said she would send the release, and I said I would sign it, and that was the conversation, and I want you to know that the easiest part of the week was the prize, because the prize was a thing, and the thing goes back in a box.

TEMPE: I will tell you that in that call I asked her permission to play the first call, and she gave it, and she told me why, and I will not tell you that, because that is hers too. The week taught me the difference between what is given and what is taken, which is the

difference I had spent the season not learning. The correction is not mine to keep.

> *[PRODUCTION NOTE: the Whitlock Prize was notified on the Friday. The release came on the Monday, by email, with a form to sign for the return. Tempe signed it remotely on the Monday, and returned the award by mail the same day, before anyone had asked for any of it.]*

TEMPE, *on the release, on a screen, to the notary*: the Monday was a gray day, and I sat at the board with the laptop on it, and the notary came up on the screen, a woman with a quilt on the wall behind her, level-voiced, and she walked me through the protocol, the license to the camera, the room shown, the forms on the screen. And before I signed, she asked me whether I wanted a moment. And I said, "I've had my moment," and I meant it, and I signed, and the session's record closed itself the way the platforms close it when the act is done, and the screen went off. And I sat there a minute, and then I found the signing service's number in the confirmation email, and I called it, on the ordinary telephone, and the same woman answered, and I said, "I'm sorry," to the woman, who had not asked for my apology and had not done anything to deserve it, and she said nothing, and that is the truest audio I ever produced, and it is not in this episode, and it is not anywhere, and that is as it should be.

[PRODUCTION NOTE: the weekend before the ninth episode, she did nothing. She slept. She walked the bayfront. She called no one. The correction was finished, and the week ahead was only the airing of it.]

[PRODUCTION NOTE: on the Tuesday, she went to the print shop downstairs and paid the rent in cash, the way she always paid it, and the man at the counter said the flyers would be ready Thursday, and she said she would not need them, and he waited, and she did not explain, and the lake did the day's weather outside the window, and that was the week between the release and the episode.]

[PRODUCTION NOTE: the ninth episode was recorded on the Wednesday, in one take, in the rented room over the print shop, with the window open to the lake. Tempe did not mix it. She recorded it sitting down, in the morning, with the board's needles moving and the room's sound left in, the radiator, the print shop's press below, the gulls off the lake. She played it back once, at the end, the way the audience would hear it, and then she posted it, and she did not touch it again. The season's other episodes were mixed for days. The ninth was not mixed at all. That is the difference between a season and a confession, and the difference is the ninth episode entire.]

STATIC. Episode 9. "The Correction." Aired October 2022.

TEMPE: This is the ninth episode. There was not supposed to be one. I am going to tell you where the voice came from, all of it, and then I am going to take it back.

TEMPE: In April, the Slusser family lent me a shoebox of the plant years, for date checking and transcription, and I signed nothing and promised nothing, because the family is decent and the loan was simple. The loan was for the dates. Inside the box was a microcassette from the family's answering machine, and on the microcassette was Russell Slusser's voice, his outgoing greeting, the only tape of him his wife knows of. I listened to it once, and then I put it in the season's cold open, and I aired it in front of the whole country, and I never asked anyone whether I could. Not the family, not the widow, not anyone. I took the only tape of a dead man his wife had, and I used it as the season's hook, because it was the best tape I had, and I want you to sit with that, because it is the whole of my character: I took it because it was the best tape I had.

TEMPE: The cassette went back to the family by registered mail on the Friday, with the cassette alone in the box, because there was nothing left to say that the episode did not say. The prize went back the Monday after, before anyone asked. The season stays up, because taking it down would be another kind of theft, the theft of the widows' own voices, which were given. I played the greeting twice on the air, the cold open and the shoebox hour, and both of them were the taking. The cold open I offered to take down, and the family has not answered, and it stays up until they do,

and I know what silence after an objection is, and it is not permission, and the staying up is on me, and I live in it. The season was made by a woman who took what was not hers because it was the best tape she had. That is the provenance. That is the whole of the correction.

TEMPE: Mrs. Slusser's call is in this episode. You have heard it. It is played with her permission, which I sought, and which she gave, and which I did not deserve. Her question is the season's question, and I will not answer it again, because there is no answer. Who said you could. Nobody. That is the answer, and I am the nobody.

TEMPE: I want to tell you one more thing, and it is the thing this episode is for. The correction is not the season's crown. The correction is the season's wound, and the wound stays open, and I am the one who opened it. If you are waiting for me to tell you that I have learned, I have. It was not worth it, if you are waiting for that. And I will not thank you for your patience, because you are the audience, and the audience is who I did it to, after the widow.

[TAPE: the bayfront, the wind off the lake, the gulls]

TEMPE: I keep wanting to end with the lake. I keep ending with the lake. The lake is the only thing in this season that took nothing and gave everything, and I

am going to leave the season with it, and I am going to stop.

[TAPE HISS]

[PRODUCTION NOTE: the episode was played four hundred thousand times in a week. The audience's response was warm and immediate and total, and it arrived the way absolution arrives, in waves, in comments and letters and reviews, all of which said some version of the same thing: that the correction was the best episode of the year, that the producer's honesty was rare, that the season was a masterpiece and the correction was its crown. The season's numbers doubled. The prize board invited her to keep the award anyway, and she declined again, and the declining was written up too, and the writing-up called her the conscience of the year.]

[TEMPE RUUD, on the show's feed, the week after:] I watched it trend. I watched my redemption trend. The repair worked, and the applause was the last cruelty, because the applause was for the repair, and the repair was the easiest thing I made all year, and I have been suspicious of confession ever since, because I have now made one, and it was the best-produced thing I ever did, and it worked, and that is the worst of it.

[TAPE HISS]

[SFX: APPLAUSE]

9

Skip

Kern County, California, 2023

I find people for lenders and lawyers. My office is a desk in a room over a bail bondsman in Bakersfield, and my method is phone, gas, and eye, and I don't keep files, and I don't have a board with strings on it, and I don't keep anything. The finding is the work. The keeping is for other people, and other people are welcome to it. I have been doing it fourteen years, and I am good at it, and I am not sorry about it, and I have never once been wrong about a person, except the once, and I will come to the once.

I want to tell you about the code first, because the code is the whole of what I am. I find the ones who want to be found. The ones who skipped on a loan, or a lease, or a court date, or a child-support check, they want to be found the way a fever wants to break, and I find them, and I hand them to the lender or the lawyer, and the finding is clean. The ones who don't want to be

found, I don't find. That is the code. I have walked up to the door of a hiding woman and driven away before. It is the part of the work the trade doesn't teach, and the only part I was born knowing.

The office is over the bail bondsman on Niles Street, and the bondsman is a man named Escobedo who has been there since the eighties, and he pays half my rent by being downstairs, because the county's clients come to him and the county's skips come to me, and the two trades share a staircase and a waiting room and a coffee machine, and we have never once talked about the people we share. He is up before me and he closes after me, and the county's worst hours walk up that staircase at two in the morning, and the coffee machine has outlasted four of his clerks. That is the trade's etiquette. The bondsman does not ask me who I am looking for, and I do not ask him who skipped, and the staircase knows us both. The waiting room has two chairs and a coffee machine and a window on Niles Street, and the clients wait there, and the two trades' people sit side by side in it and never once know it.

I came to the trade as a process server first, in my twenties, the county's own delivery girl, and I handed people their papers and I watched them read their own bad news, and I learned what a porch tells you, and I learned that the ones who want to be found open the door, and the ones who don't are the ones who taught

me the code. I served papers for four years, and the four years were the trade's whole apprenticeship, and I have never once been wrong about a door, except the once. I found my first skip by accident, a man who'd jumped a bond and was hiding in his own garage, and the bondsman paid me for the finding, and the fee was good, and the trade was mine.

The county is the Valley, the big flat floor of it, the canals and the orchards and the oil country to the west and the towns with no signs, and the heat that sits on it like a policy. I have worked it fourteen years. I know the county the way a mail carrier knows a route, the feed stores and the churches and the county offices and the roads that go nowhere, and the knowing is the gas.

The year was the Valley's year, the wet winter's first spring, the drought years over and the ground still paying for them, the canals running lower than they should on the aquifer's old debt and the orchards still pulling their dead trees and the county's air the color of work. The year did not care about the ghost, and the ghost did not care about the year, and the two of them did their work in the same county, and the county did not notice either one.

The trade is phone, gas, and eye. The phone is the county's offices and the county's voices and the things people tell a woman's voice that doesn't hurry. The gas

is the county itself, the driving, the reading of houses from the road. The eye is the porch. You can read a porch. A porch tells you whether the person inside it is staying or going, and whether they are waiting for someone, and whether they are afraid. I have read a hundred porches. I have never been wrong about a porch, except the once.

The work is mostly skips. Bail skips, lease skips, the debtors who moved to the county because the county is the end of the Valley and the Valley is the end of the line. The lawyers want the witnesses and the heirs. The lenders want the collateral and the people who took it. The courts want the ones who didn't show. The insurance men want the ones who cashed the check twice. It is all the same work. You find the pattern, you drive the county, you read the porch, and you make the call, and the product is an address, and the address is the only thing I sell, and I sell it clean.

The walks-away are the code's teeth. Fourteen years, and I have walked away from a dozen of them, the hiding women and the hiding men, the ones whose porches read as flight and not as debt. There was a man in Oildale hiding from his own brothers, and a woman in Buttonwillow whose daughter had hired me to find her, and the two of them are the walks I think about, because their porches read as people who had already been found too many times. I have walked up to the

door and driven away. I have sold the client a nothing. And I have eaten the fee. The trade would call it a failure. The trade is wrong. The walk-away is the work's other half, and the work is not whole without it, and the code is the code, and it runs without appeal, and that is what I am.

The job came in on a Tuesday. The client was a man named Kessler Vaught, out of somewhere in the Central Valley, and he wanted a woman found. He called her a debtor. He said she owed him. He said the debt was old. I asked him what the debt was, and he said it was the kind you don't forgive, and I wrote nothing down, because I don't write anything down, and I told him my fee, and he said fine, and that was the engagement.

Vaught's debtor was a woman named Ludie, and she had left him twelve years back, and he had been hunting her since. He had the kind of patience that doesn't show on a man. He had traced her to the county, he said, the way you trace weather, and he needed the last mile. He said it the way men say it when they want you to know they don't mean harm. I have heard it from a hundred men. I have believed it sometimes.

I want to say I knew from the phone. The trade's honesty requires it. I knew from the phone, or I knew better than I admitted, which is the same thing in my

work, and I took the job anyway, because the fee was good and the county was quiet and the code says the read is the proof, and the porch had not been read yet.

The engagement acknowledgment is my own form, one page, the fee and the scope and the signature line, and it has to be notarized, and the year has made the notary a screen. The notary came up on my laptop at four o'clock, a woman with a ceiling fan turning above her, and she walked me through the protocol, the license to the camera, the room shown, the forms on the screen, and she did it the way a woman does it who has done it ten thousand times, level, and the fan turned above her the whole time, and the fan's shadow came and went on her face, and before I signed she said, "Any questions before you sign?"

I said, "One, always. Who wants to know."

I laughed at myself, the way I do, and she didn't, and I signed, and it was the fastest signature I have ever given, because I don't sign things, and when I sign them I sign them like leaving. The screen went off, and the fan's shadow went with it, and the office was the office again, and the engagement was the engagement, and the hunt was the hunt, and the county waited.

Vaught paid half up front, the way the trade runs, and I went to work.

The trail she left was narrow. Twelve years of narrow. She paid cash. She rented from a man who

didn't ask. She had no utilities in her name, no license on file with the county that I could find by phone, no court appearances, no voter registration, no nothing. She was a ghost with a garden. The garden was the tell. A woman who is hiding still has to eat, and a woman who gardens has to buy seed, and the seed comes from somewhere, and the somewhere is the feed store, and the feed store is the kind of place that knows its customers by their trucks.

The ghost's pattern is the read's first half. A ghost pays cash and keeps a garden and drives a white pickup and lives on a road with no sign. That is the pattern. The pattern is the same everywhere, because the pattern is the ghost's whole armor, and the armor is made of cash. You cannot trace cash. You cannot trace a garden. You can trace the pattern, and the pattern is the woman.

I called the feed stores in the county. I said I was looking for a woman who bought seed for a garden she'd had three years. I didn't say why. I didn't have to. You'd be surprised what people tell a voice on the phone when the voice is a woman's and doesn't hurry.

The calls are the phone part of the trade. You call the county's offices and the county's voices and the county's feeds, and you do not hurry, and you do not ask the question you want answered, because the question you want answered is the one that gets you

hung up on. You ask the county's own questions: the water district's billing, the fire district's burn permits, the feed store's seed. You ask the way the county asks, and the county answers, and the answer is the answer to what you wanted, and you did not ask it, and that is the phone.

The first week I called nine offices and two churches, and they gave me nothing, and the nothing was the narrowing, because the nothing told me where she was not. The stores were the last of the week's calls.

Two of them knew her by her truck. A white pickup, an old one, the kind you see a hundred of. The third one knew the garden. He said the woman bought seed for tomatoes and peppers and a fig tree, and she paid cash, and she drove a white pickup, and she lived out past the canal, on a road with no sign. He didn't know the house. He knew the road.

I drove the road. That's the gas part. You drive the county and you read the houses, and the houses tell you, and you don't stop, and you don't knock, and you don't take a picture, because you don't keep anything. You drive the way the county drives, the farm trucks and the school buses and the oil-field pickups, and you are one of them, and the county does not see you, and that is the gas. I drove the road twice, once at noon and once at dusk, and at dusk the white pickup was parked

at a house with a screen door and a garden going to seed, and the house was the kind of small that one person lives in, and I knew before I stopped that it was hers.

That was the first pass. I didn't stop. I drove past, and I noted the light over the porch, and the pickup, and the garden, and the screen door. I drove to the canal and parked, and I called Vaught from the truck, the way I do, and I told him I had a read, and he said the way they all say it, "Where is she," and I said I'd confirm it, and I hung up, and I sat in the truck and read the porch light in my head the way I had read it from the road.

Here is the read, and I will lay it out like an invoice, because that is how I think.

The ghost pays cash for twelve years. That is not a debtor's pattern. A debtor's pattern is a year, maybe two, and then the wages or the tax return or the new credit card, and the trail wakes up. Twelve years of cash is a woman who has decided to be gone. The garden is three years old and going to seed, which means she is going again, and going soon, because a woman does not let a garden go to seed unless the garden is already behind her. The pickup is white and old and kept running, which is a vehicle bought to leave in. And the house is the kind of small that one person lives in, and the one person is a woman, and the

woman is alone, and the alone is the whole of the account.

A debtor does not live like that. A debtor lives in the world and the world keeps her. This woman had left the world. That is a wife.

I sat at the canal for an hour, watching the water do its flat work, and I read the whole of it the way you read an invoice you did not write, and the account was the marriage, and the marriage was the hunt, and the hunt was twelve years old, and the woman was on the road past the canal, and the man who called her a debtor was the man who had been her husband, and it was the kind of thing my trade sees every week and my code answers every time.

From a parked car the county is the code's theater. The Valley does not hide anyone. The Valley is flat, and the roads are straight, and the houses sit on their lots like figures on an invoice, and the only hiding is the pattern, and the pattern is the ghost's, and the ghost pays cash and keeps a garden and drives a white pickup, and the pattern is the read, and the read is the work.

I want to be careful about the word, because the word is the choice. Vaught called her a debtor, and the word was a lie, and the lie was the kind a man tells a finder, because the finder asks once and gets the lie and does not press, when the finder is me, and the

trade knows it. He called her a debtor because a wife is a thing you can't hire a finder for. A wife who has left is a thing a man hunts himself, or a thing a man hires a different kind of man for, and I am not the different kind of man. I am the finder. So he said debtor, and I heard wife, and the engagement was a lie he told and a lie I let stand, and the two lies made the geometry, and the geometry was the county.

That night I did nothing. I drove home in the dark, and I ate standing up, and I watched the apartment's window go dark over the street, and I did not call anyone, and I did not write anything down, and I did not think about the woman behind the screen, because the read was not finished, and the code does not run on an unfinished read. The apartment is over a takeout place on 19th Street, and the smell of it comes up through the floor, and I have lived there nine years, and the smell is the whole of my domestic life, and I am not sorry about it. In the morning I knew I would go back, because the read is not finished from the road, and the code does not run on a drive-by.

I go back myself. It is the part the trade never understands. The finding is phone and gas, and the eye is the porch, and the porch you have to stand in front of yourself, because a porch read over a phone is a guess, and a guess is the thing that got the brother killed. I go back. I stand in front of the porch. I read it

with my own eye. You want to shield the prey, you have to read the porch. That is the code's whole requirement. The porch is the proof.

The morning was the Valley's morning, the heat already on the windshield, the canal doing its flat work. I put on the costume the way I always put it on, the clipboard and the survey and the county's own face, and I drove out past the canal slow, the way a woman with a clipboard drives, and the houses sat on their lots like figures on an invoice, and the county was quiet, and the county was the theater.

The costume is the trade's whole disguise, and it is no disguise at all. A woman with a clipboard and a county survey is the most invisible thing in the county. Everyone has seen her. No one has seen her. She is the county's own daughter, and she knocks, and you answer, and you tell her things, because she is the county, and the county is always there. The survey I carry is the county's own, the burn-permit survey the fire district runs every dry year, real questions in a real order, and the answers go back to the district, because the costume is honest everywhere except the door I am looking for. That is the costume. It is the truest thing I wear. The clipboard is real. The survey is real. The county's own face is the only face that never gets asked about.

I drove out again the next day, the porch pass, the one the porch is for, and I stopped this time, and I got out, and I walked up to the screen door the way I walk up to all of them, like a woman with a clipboard and a survey, which is the costume my trade gives me, and I knocked.

The knock is the trade's whole instrument, and it is the thing no one teaches. You knock the way a census worker knocks, two times, not loud, and then you wait. The wait is the instrument. You stand there with the clipboard and the county's heat on your back, and you wait, and the house reads itself to you, and you do not move, and you do not knock again, because the second knock is the giveaway, and the waiting is the whole of the proof.

The house read itself to me while I waited. The garden going to seed in rows, the tomatoes past themselves, the fig tree with its fruit on the ground, and the dirt swept in a fan at the door, which is the thing about swept dirt: it tells you what has crossed it, and nothing had crossed it in days, and the nothing was the read. The pickup in the driveway had not been moved. The windows were open to the heat. The house was a house with one person in it, and the one person was waiting, and the waiting was the porch.

She came to the screen. She stood behind it, still, the way a person stands when they have been waiting

twelve years for the knock and have decided not to run from it. She was fifty, maybe, with the kind of face that has made its peace with being afraid, and her hands were clean, and there was garden dirt under her nails, and she looked at me the way a person looks at a summons, and she did not open the screen. She did not open it, and she did not close it, and she stood there, and the screen was her armor, and the armor was the read.

I read her. I will take my time with it, because the read is the story.

She was not surprised. That is the first thing I read. A woman who is hiding from a creditor is surprised by the knock, because the creditor's man is a professional, and the professional finds you, and the surprise is the proof. This woman was not surprised. She had been waiting. You don't wait twelve years for a debt. You wait twelve years for a man.

She was not afraid of me. That is the second thing. She was afraid, the way a house is afraid, the way the garden going to seed is afraid, the way a thing that has been waiting to be found is afraid, but she was not afraid of me, and I am a woman, and I am the knock, and the knock is what she had been waiting for, and she had decided to stop running from it, and the deciding was in her face, and her face was the read.

And she was not going to run from me. That is the third thing. She stood behind the screen with her hands clean and her nails dirty and her face read like a page, and she did not ask me what I wanted, and she did not ask me how I found her, and she did not ask me anything, because she knew, and the knowing was the read.

She was ready to go again. That is the fourth thing, and the last. The garden going to seed, the pickup kept running, the dirt swept in a fan at the door and not crossed in days. She was packed, or she was packedness itself, and the packedness was in her face, and her face was the read.

That is the porch. That is the read. I stood there with my clipboard and my costume, and she stood behind the screen with her face, and neither of us said a word, and the read was complete, and I have never once been wrong about a porch, except the once.

I turned from the screen and walked back to the car, the clipboard under my arm, the costume on me, and I did not look back at the house, because the read was complete, and the house was behind me, and the woman behind the screen did not move, and I knew she would not move, and I knew she would move, and the two knowings were the same knowing, and the county did its flat work around me while I drove back toward Bakersfield.

I did not call Vaught. I want to be precise about that, because the call is the product, and the product is the address, and I did not have an address I was going to sell, and I knew it by the time I hit the canal road. That is when the once came up, the way the dead come up, without being called.

The drive is where the decision gets made, and the decision was made the way the read was made, without my doing it. The canal road is straight, and the county is flat, and the heat came off the orchards in waves, and I drove it the way I drive everything, careful, both hands, and the porch was in my head the whole way, the woman behind the screen, the packedness in her face, and the once was in my head the whole way, the brother's people going into the funeral home, and the two of them sat in the car with me, the woman and the brother, and neither of them said anything, and the saying-nothing was the whole of the decision.

And now I will tell you about the once, because the once is what the code cost.

Seven years back, in 2016, a man named Purdy came to me. He said his brother was hunting him over their father's estate, and he was afraid, and he was shaking, and he had the kind of face that fear wears well. I read him the way I read everyone, the porch of him, and the porch read as prey. He was a man being hunted, and my code is the code, and I don't find the unwilling, and

I shield the prey. So I shielded him. His brother came to me two days later, as the trade runs them, the hunter asking the finder, and I read the brother, and the brother read as the hunter, and I sold the brother a false address, an address in Tehachapi, a house that existed and held no one, and the brother drove to Tehachapi, and the brother found no one, and the brother came back, and the brother was the prey, and Purdy was the hunter, and Purdy found him first, and Purdy killed him in the brother's own garage, in the brother's own house, with the brother's own tools, and the whole of it was my mercy.

I had read the porch wrong. The only time. The porch had read as prey, and the porch was the hunter, and a man died of my mercy, and I attended the funeral from the parking lot, in my car, with the engine running, the way you attend a thing you can't enter, and I watched the brother's people go in, the wife and the kids and the men from his trade, and I sat there with my hands on the wheel, and I did not get out, because the parking lot was where my mercy had put me, and the parking lot was where I belonged, and I drove away, and I did not stop, and I have never stopped, and the code is the code, and the code runs without appeal, and that is the price of it.

The parking lot was the county's funeral home's, the one on F Street with the big sign, and I sat in the back

row of the lot with the engine running and the air on, and the funeral was inside, and the funeral was not mine, and the mercy was mine, and the mercy was all I had done, and the parking lot was the whole of where I could be.

The funeral's cost is the gamble's whole shape. The brother's wife buried him on a Thursday, and the brother's kids were small, and the county wrote it up the way the county writes up a thing it doesn't understand, and Purdy was never charged, because there was nothing to charge him with that the county could prove, and the county moved on, and the wife moved away, and the kids grew up, and the whole of it was built on my read, and my read was wrong, and I have never once been wrong about a porch, except the once, and the once was a man's life.

I did not change the code. That is the part no one believes. The code does not appeal. You run it, and it runs, and the one time it was wrong, a man died, and the code ran on, and I ran it, and I run it still, because the code is the only thing between the hiding and the hunters, and the alternative is a world where the finder reads the client and not the porch, and that world is worse. I know it. I have paid for knowing it. The brother's people paid more.

I tell you that so you understand the gamble. My code is a code run on one woman's eye, and the eye was

wrong once, and a man died of it, and the code did not change, because the code does not appeal, and that is the menace of it, and I know it, and I run it anyway, because the mercy of it is the other hundred times, and the mercy is the whole of the trade.

The year after the funeral I did not take a hiding case. That was the only concession the code ever made to the once: one year off the hiding work. I found skips and heirs and witnesses, and I ate, and I paid my rent, and the brother's people did not know me, and the county did not know me, and the code ran on without the hiding half of itself, and it was the worst year of my trade, and I would not repeat it.

And here is the part where the geometry bends, and I will tell it straight, because the bending is the story.

I heard the season in October, the way everyone in the trade heard it. A producer out of Erie had built a season on a shuttered plant and its widows, and she had taken a dead man's voice without asking, and the correction had trended for a week, and the trade had talked about nothing else. I knew the season. I had worked it. I found the plant's families for her, the year before, when she was building it, and I was in the third episode, the one about the tracer, and what I said on her tape was the once's trade shape, the kind of true a microphone gets. I heard the correction the way you hear a siren, and I went back and heard my own

episode again, and the county was my county, and it was named on the air, and the correction's reach carried the whole season, and the county's name with it, to anyone paying attention.

And somebody was. Vaught had been paying attention for twelve years. He had traced her to the county the way you trace weather, and then the season's reach put the county's name on the national air, and that is where I came in for him: he heard the correction, and went back and heard the season, and the season's third episode named the county, and he went and hired the tracer the county belonged to, and the geometry of the hunt was already bent when he called me. I knew it. He didn't know I knew it. That is the kind of thing you keep to yourself, in my trade, because you don't keep anything else.

I want to tell you what the correction sounded like from this county, because the sound is the detonation. The season's correction was the trade's whole talk for a week, and the county's name was in it, and every finder in the Valley heard it, and every hunter anywhere heard it, and the county went from the Valley's own secret to a name on the national air, and the geometry of every hunt in the county bent the night it trended. I heard it on a Tuesday, at my desk, with the window on Niles Street open, and I understood the county differently after it, and I priced my work differently

after it, and I did not know yet what it would cost me, because I did not know yet that Vaught was coming, and he came. The whole week it trended, my phone did its own work, three old clients calling to ask whether the tracer in the third episode was me, and under their question the trade's real question, the one nobody asked out loud: who else had heard it, and who was it bringing.

So when I built the lie, I built it loud. The geometry was already bent toward the county, and the county was on the air, and the lie had to outshout the air. I gave him an address in Fallon, Nevada, a house on a county road with a garden going to seed and a white pickup's oil stain in the driveway, an address that existed and held no one, and I gave it to him the way I give them all, flat, with the fee already eaten, and I did not wait for him to check it, and I did not care whether he checked it, because the lie was the mercy, and the mercy was the whole of it.

I called him from my truck, parked outside the bail bondsman's office, the way I always call him, and I gave him the address, and he wrote it down, and he read it back, and he thanked me the way a man thanks you when he thinks the account is settled, and I hung up, and I sat in the truck and I read the street the way I read porches, and the street read like nothing, and the nothing was the mercy.

The address is the lie's whole craft. Fallon, Nevada, is the better part of a day from the county, and the house is on a county road, and the house exists, and the house holds no one, and the garden went to seed two years back, and the driveway has a white pickup's oil stain, and the address reads like her the way a good lie reads like the truth. I know the house because I have read a hundred porches, and I know which ones hold no one, and I keep them the way a thief keeps a fence, and I had sold exactly one before, and the one before was the once, and the once was a man's life, and that is the whole of the lie's craft. I have them the way I have everything, from the drive-bys, the county's empty houses catalogued by porch and driveway in my head, nothing written anywhere, because the keeping is for other people.

I ate the fee. I always eat the fee when I do this. The fee is the part you don't keep, because the lie is not work, and you don't bill for mercy. I ate the fee, and I drove home, and I did not think about the woman behind the screen, because the read was complete and the read was the whole of her, and she would move again, and the moving was hers, and the mercy was mine, and the geometry was bent back, and the county was quiet again.

I want to be honest about it, the way I am honest about everything, which is the trade's whole defense: I

sold a client a lie, and I ate the fee, and the lie was a mercy, and the mercy was built on a porch I read in one pass, and the porch could have been wrong, and I would never have known, and that is the gamble, and the gamble is the trade, and the trade is the code, and the code runs without appeal, and I would run it again tonight, and that is the whole of it.

He went to Fallon. I assume he did. He never called me back, and he never wrote me, and he never came to the office, and the geometry held, and the county stayed quiet, and the woman behind the screen moved again, or she did not, and I never knew, because the code does not keep the answer, and the answer is the one thing I have never once kept.

I checked once. That is the honesty. The trade checks. I called the county out in Fallon and asked about a burn permit on the address, and there was nothing on the address, and that is all I know about Fallon.

I want to be honest about the quiet, because the quiet is the ending. The county was quiet, and the woman behind the screen was quiet, and the brother in the garage was quiet, and the fall came to the Valley the way it comes, the heat going out of it by degrees, and I did the trade's work, and the staircase knew me, and the bondsman downstairs never once asked me

who I was looking for, and that is my whole domestic life, and I am not sorry about it.

I took the next one. It was a bail skip out of Taft, a kid who'd jumped a bond and gone to his girlfriend's mother's house, the way they all go, and I found him in an hour, and I read him through the screen door, and he read as a kid, scared and sorry and relieved to be caught, and I handed him to the bondsman, and the finding was clean, and the fee was good, and I did not think about the woman behind the screen, or the brother in the garage, or the county on the air, and the county was quiet, and the geometry held, and the code ran on, without appeal, the way it always runs.

I took the next one.

10

A Life in the Third Person

Mathews County, Virginia, 2024

She tells herself this story the way she tells herself everything, in the third person, because the first person is a name, and the name is surrendered. She surrendered it twelve years ago, with the rest of the account, and she has been she ever since. She has been careful. She has been gone. She has been, above all, the one who leaves first.

The county is Mathews, the tidewater, a county set on its own peninsula between its rivers and the bay, a place that ends in water on three sides and has to be wanted to be found. She came to it in the fall of 2023, from the last place, the way she always comes to a place: alone, with cash, with a borrowed name, with a story that explains nothing. She rented a little house on a creek road from a man who did not ask, a house with a stove and a leaning porch and its own landing on the creek, and she took the counter job at the crab

house on the harbor, and she waited for the year to turn. The year turned. She was still there. That was the mistake, or the mercy, and she did not know which.

The lease had come by email, the fall before, and it had wanted a notarized signature, which was the landlord's way, and she had signed it on a screen, the year's own way, with a notary on the far side of the country. A woman with a wall clock ticking behind her. The woman walked her through the protocol, the license held up to the camera, the pen on the screen, and then, in a level voice, the woman asked her whether the terms were what she wanted. She left a pause before the yes. A short pause, and a long one. The woman on the screen looked at her one second longer than the protocol required, and the session closed. She said yes, and the yes was borrowed the way the name was borrowed. She never told anyone about the pause. The pause was the whole of her life now, and she did not tell anyone anything.

That is the ethic: leaving first. Every kindness abandoned before it can be traced. Twelve years of it. Twelve years of borrowed names and cash and county-by-county moving, of good jobs left first and good people left first and good towns left first, a dozen women in a dozen places, every one of them careful, every one of them gone. She has pinned on a dozen

name tags and taken them off again. She has cashed a dozen last paychecks. She has never once been traced.

She does not let herself think about the before. The before is the surrendered name, and that is all of it she allows. That is the armor's first rule.

Running is what a person does when someone is behind her. Leaving first is finished before anyone is behind her, before anyone can be, before the kindness can be traced. She is good at it. She is not sorry about it.

The crab house sits on the harbor, a cinder-block place with picnic tables and a steamer the size of a chest freezer, and it pays her in cash and in crab, and it does not ask. She works the counter. The boats go out before the light, and the house opens at six for the coffee crowd, and she pours, and the county's people come in for the baskets and the beer, and on Fridays for the steamed crabs spread on paper with the mallets and the shakers of seasoning, and she knows them the way she knows everyone in a county she has lived in five months: by their trucks and their orders and their not asking. She is the counter woman. She is from nowhere, and the house lets her be from nowhere. That is why she took the job. That is why she will have to leave it.

The county talks. The talk is the tides and the prices and the school and the paper, who has died and who is

dying and whose boy is home from the service, and the counter woman pours the coffee and does not talk, and the county does not notice, because a county is used to a counter woman who does not talk. Five months now. The county knows her face and her coffee and her silence, and it thinks it knows her, and she lets it think so.

The winter came in off the bay mild, the mildest the county had talked about in years, the gray weeks more rain than ice, the wind that finds the seams in a person, and then, in January, the one hard snap, a week of it, the harbor skinning over at its edges while the boats went out anyway, the creeks going stiff at the landings, and the millpond putting on its skin as it did every year, snap or no snap, shallow and still and black with cold. The county's paper ran the story it runs every February: the photograph of the pond ice with the warning under it, the thaw danger, the same story every year, the county's own winter theater. The county reads the story every year and stands on its banks every year anyway. She knows that much about the county already, because she has read the county the way she reads everything, carefully, and from a distance.

Then, the second week of February, the thaw came, all at once, the air going soft and the bay going bright

and the county's people coming out of their houses the way they come out after a storm.

The millpond sits at the edge of the Court House, where the road comes in, a little dam and a bench and a willow, and it is older than the road, and it froze in January the way it freezes every year. The ice had been good ice. Then the thaw came, and the ice went rotten, and the county came out to the pond anyway, every year the same, to look at the winter go.

She was off that day. She walked to the pond with the county, because the thaw was a holiday the county keeps without meaning to, and she stood on the bank with the county's people and watched the ice the way a person watches a thing that is ending. She was one of them. That is the thing to understand about what happened: one of them, standing on the bank, watching the winter end. Twelve years careful, twelve years gone, and she was standing there anyway.

And the boy was on the ice.

His name was Gower Tillett, and he was nine, and he had come out with the county the way the county's boys come out, loose and unaccounted for and answerable only to supper. His people were water people, Tilletts off the county's creeks, a grandfather's workboat and an uncle with a crab shanty, and his mother was up at the store with his sister, and he had the whole soft afternoon. He walked the bank first, the

way a boy walks a bank, throwing rotten branches onto the ice to hear them skitter, and the other boys kept to the shallow end near the dam, where the water over the ice was an inch deep and their mothers could see them from the road. Gower Tillett walked out past them, and past the willow's reach, to the middle of the pond, because the ice was there, and the ice was there to be walked on, and the walking was the whole of being nine. He stood there small and brown against the rotten ice with his hands in his pockets, watching the water under the ice for the fish that might be down there, for the winter's theater. He was doing nothing wrong. He was doing what the county's boys have done every winter for a hundred years.

The county's people were spread along the bank in twos and threes, out for the county's theater, with a dog off a leash and a thermos going hand to hand, and the light lay on the rotten ice the way light lies on water that is thinking about opening. Old men who had come down from the store's benches to judge the thaw. A pair of sisters with a stroller each, walking the loop the thaw had made walkable. A boy on a bicycle, circling. The willow dripped. The dam's spillover ran loud with the melt, and the melt was everywhere in the county's ears, the ditches running and the eaves dripping and the landings lapping, and the pond's edges had opened into black water rims, and the

middle held its white skin a while longer, and the county stood around it the way the county stands around a ballgame, judging, enjoying, unalarmed. It was a good afternoon, the county's first soft one in weeks, and nobody was in a hurry about anything.

There were three adults within sight of the boy, and she counts them the way the county counted them later. A man at the store's door with a bag of ice melt on his shoulder, watching the pond. A woman on the bench with a stroller, on the phone, her back to the water. A man at the dam's end, alone, watching the boy the way a person watches a bird. Three adults, within sight, and the pond between them and the boy, and the afternoon soft, and the ice quiet.

The ice gave its rotten crack, the sound the whole county knew, the sound the paper warned about every February, and the pond took him, and the pond's winter closed over him.

The standing is the county's whole account of itself. The man with the ice melt stood at the store's door and shouted. The woman with the stroller turned at the crack and got up and stood there with the phone still open in her hand. The man at the dam's end stood there. They called out. They reached for their phones. They waited for someone else to move. That is the honest account of the standing, and she does not hold it against them. The county reads as the county:

careful, and watching, and waiting for someone else. She has been on the other side of a reading like that once, behind a screen, and she knows what a county is.

And she moved.

She wants to be careful about the moving, because the moving is the whole of the story. She did not decide to move. Twelve years of deciding had gone into being the woman who does not move, and the boy went down, and the woman who does not move was off the bank before the deciding could be consulted. That is the honest account of it. The moving was hers the way a reflex is hers, done before she arrives to audit it.

She was off the bank before the county had finished standing there. Her boots off, her coat off, and out onto the rotten ice flat on her belly, her weight spread the way the county's boys know to spread it. Somewhere in the dozen places there had been a northern winter, and a man at a hardware store who had told her how a person crosses bad ice, and she had kept it the way she kept everything useful, without thanking anyone for it. The ice cracked under her the whole way, the cracking the whole of the sound in the world, and behind her the county's shouting came across the ice thinned by the distance, the man with the ice melt shouting the boy's name, the woman's open phone giving the pond's name to the dispatcher, somebody's dog barking itself hoarse at the dam. The hole where the boy had been

was ten feet ahead, black, with the broken ice floating in it white and brown, and the ice under her was going soft and loud at once, and she went out the last of it on her elbows.

The ice took her too, ten feet from the hole, and she was in the water, and the water was the pond's winter, and the pond's winter was the coldest thing she had ever been in. She had been cold in the dozen places; the dozen places had had their winters. This was water cold, the kind that takes the body out of the body's keeping, and it took hers in the first breath.

She wants to be careful about the cold, because the cold is the water's whole account of itself. The cold took her the way the cold takes everyone: the breath out of her first, the heart doing its own arithmetic second, the hands going useless inside the first minute. The county's watermen knew the arithmetic, she had heard it at the counter all winter over the coffee, a person in February water has minutes, and the minutes are short ones, and the stories that allow an hour are stories told by people who have never been in. She had ten feet to cross under the shelf of the ice, and the ten feet were the whole of the world, and she crossed them with her eyes open.

Under the shelf the world was the pond's winter and the dark. The light came down through the ice in a brown smear, and the hole where the boy had gone

through was a brighter smear behind her, and between the two smears the water was the color of nothing, and the cold set about its work. Her breath was already gone. Her fingers were uncurling out of their own decision. Her thinking was going, or it meant to go, and she had the boy to find before it finished.

She went the way a person goes in the dark under ice: blind, both hands out, kicking along the shelf's underside, the pond's winter pressing its whole weight against her. She had been twelve years a careful woman, and careful women do not drown in millponds, and the thought came and went, and she kicked on. Her hands went past use and then past feeling, and she worked them anyway, back and forth in the dark the way a person sweeps a floor she cannot see, and the pond gave her nothing, and the pond gave her nothing, and her lungs began their own argument, and she kicked on. Her hand found his coat.

She had him by the coat, and the coat held, and she pulled him to her and got her arm around him, and he was heavy the way a wet boy is heavy, and still, the stillness its own weight, and she kicked for the brighter smear. Her head found ice where the hole had been, the broken pieces drifting shut over its mouth, and she had to go back down and along it, one hand holding the boy and one hand finding the hole's ragged lip, and the ice broke away under her hand and broke again, and

the third grab held, and she brought them both up through the rotten edge into the air. She got her chin up and her shoulders up and she breathed, and the boy hung in her arm with his face out of the water, and she said his name without knowing she knew it, because the county had been shouting it, and the shouting had gone into her ears and stayed.

The boy was breathing. She got him to the shelf, the rotten edge of the good ice past the hole, and she got him up onto it, flat, spreading him, and the shelf held, the rotten ice's last mercy. He was breathing, and then he was crying, and the crying was the best sound she had heard in twelve years.

And now she will tell it the way it was, because the thing that nearly broke in the water was the grammar. The ice had already broken. The grammar was the thing that held, and it held by force of habit, and the habit was twelve years old.

In the water, holding him, the cold everywhere and the boy the whole of her arms, she almost said the word. It rose in her the way breath rises, out of twelve years of waiting, and it got as far as her teeth. The word had a short sound, a sound a person could make even with the pond's winter in her mouth, and she did not make it. The grammar held. She held him, and she held the grammar.

The pond was deep enough at the middle and shallow at the banks, and deep enough was all it had to be. She lay on the shelf with the boy in her arms and the pond's winter running off them both, and the county's shouting came across the ice again, closer now, and she held him, and the grammar held her.

That is the water. The rest is the bank.

The bank is the rest of it, and she will tell it plain.

The county's people came when it was over. While it was happening they had stood; when it was over they came, the way the county comes when the danger has spent itself. The man with the ice melt came first, the bag dropped at the store's door behind him, out onto the shelf on his own belly now that the need for it was past, and then the man from the dam's end, and the woman with the stroller, and hands took the boy, and hands took her, and they were pulled up the bank into the county's keeping. The boy was wrapped in three coats at once. She stood on the bank in her own wet skin with the pond water running off her, and the county gathered close and warm and asking.

Someone put a coat on her, the way a person puts a coat on someone who has been in the water, and she let them, and the coat was the county's own kindness, and the kindness was the armor's enemy, and she knew it, and she stood inside the kindness anyway. A woman rubbed her arms through the coat, hard, until the

warmth came back into them. The man from the store came down with a cup of coffee gone cold at the edges from being carried, and she held it for the warmth and did not drink it, and her hands shook against the cup, and the woman rubbing her arms said there now, there now, the way the county's women say it.

The boy's mother came running from the store with the kind of sound a mother makes, and the boy heard it and answered it, and the county parted for her the way the county parts for a mother, and she had him out of the coats and into her own arms and then into the coats again, all of it one motion, and the boy cried, and the mother made the sound, and the county stood witness to the two of them, which is what the county is for.

The ambulance the county had called came up the road with its lights doing the county's winter colors against the gray, and the rescue men took the boy and his mother, and the boy was breathing, and the crying could be heard all the way to the doors. The county's people watched it go up the road. Then the county's people turned to her.

And they looked at her. She wants to be careful about the looking, because the looking is the county deciding what she is. The county's people looked at her the way the county's people look at a woman who has done the thing they did not do, which is to say, they

looked, and kept looking, and the looking had the whole county's knowing in it. She stood there in her wet skin and someone else's coat and she let them look, and the letting was the first part of the choosing, and she paid it standing there.

They thanked her. They thanked her the way the county thanks, in low voices, one at a time, the man with the ice melt first, his bag left where it fell, saying her borrowed name wrong because he had only ever heard it across a counter, and she answered to it anyway. A woman wanted her to come home with them and get dry. A man offered the heater in his truck. One of the rescue men looked her over with a practiced eye and asked whether she was all right, and she said she was, and it was nearly true. They wanted her in the ambulance for the watching of it, the way the cold's arithmetic goes on working after the water gives a person back, and she would not go, and the county watched her stand and refuse it, dripping and upright, and the refusing settled her in the county's account more than the answer had. The kindnesses came one after another, every one of them a thread, and twelve years of armor said to cut them and cut them now, and she stood there shaking in someone else's coat and she did not cut them. She said she would walk. She said the house was close. She said thank you, and the thank-you was a thread too, and she knew it, and she let it lie.

Once, she tried to go. The ambulance had not yet left, and the county's back was half turned, and the twelve years said now, and she got three steps up the bank before a hand touched her sleeve, gentle, the woman who had rubbed her arms, saying wait, honey, wait till you're warm, and the hand was the whole of the county's keeping, and she waited. She let the ambulance go first, and the leaving-first had left her, and she did not know yet what had come to take its place.

And then there was the camera.

The paper's man was on the bank, because the thaw danger was the paper's February beat. The paper's man was its obituarist, an old man named Early Devereux, seventy-four, who had written the county's dead for forty years, who knew them and their people going back three generations, and whose thaw story had always ended with a warning and no names, the county's own annual almost-death, the one that had never once become an obituary on his desk. He had been up the bank when she went in; he had done what forty years of the paper trained him to do: watched, and made his pictures. In forty years he had never once brought the notebook down the bank for it. He came down the bank now with the camera and the notebook, polite the way the county's dead were used to him being polite.

She wants to be careful about the camera. Twelve years careful, twelve years gone, twelve years the one who leaves first, and the camera was the one thing she had never once allowed. A face in a photograph is a trace with the reach of print. She knew about the reach of things put into the air and into print. She had heard a county's name carried on the air once, in a rented room, a whole country's ear on it, and she had known the man would hear it too, and she had packed a bag over it. She had been read through a screen door once, read true, and it had moved her out of a county anyway. The camera was the trace, and the trace was the armor's enemy.

The old man had the camera up, and the camera was on her, and the county's people stood around her. She could have rolled away. She could have turned her face to the willow, or put up a hand, or done any of the dozen things she had done for twelve years at the first sight of a lens. She did the choosing in one held breath.

She wants to be careful about the choosing, because the choosing is the whole of the story's cost. She stood there. She let him see her face. She let the camera see her face, and she counted the cost the way she counts everything, the armor's own arithmetic. The armor had cost her twelve years. The twelve years had cost her the name. The name had cost her the first person. The first person had cost her the self. The arithmetic

came out clean for the first time in twelve years: the whole of the armor's account, spent in one place, on one boy, in one held breath. She held the breath, and her hands shook against the cold coffee cup, and up the road the boy's crying came thin through the ambulance's doors, alive and complaining, and she let the breath out.

The old man took the picture. He took several. He took them without ceremony, forty years of the county's pictures in his hands, and the county's people watched him do it, and so the county watched her being seen, and the seeing doubled itself, the lens and then the county around the lens, and she stood inside both seeings and let them happen. She stood there, wet, her face wet and unmistakable, the boy gone up the road in the ambulance, the pond behind her with the rotten ice and the shelf and the hole. And the old man lowered the camera and said, "Name for the caption?" and she gave him the borrowed name, the name she had rented the house with and signed the lease with and answered to at the counter, the name that was never hers. He wrote it down carefully, the way the county's dead are written, and he thanked her, and he took her picture again, and she let him.

The name was Lou Ashe. That was the name she gave him. That was the name the caption would print, under her true face.

She walked home in the wet coat, and the county watched her walk, and she let it watch. The house on the creek road took her back the way a rented house takes a person back, without opinion. She hung the borrowed coat on the porch rail, meaning to leave it at the store, and she stood in the shower until the hot water ran out, and she put on dry clothes, and she sat by the stove, and the twelve years sat by the stove with her.

The bag was by the door. The bag had been by the door in a dozen houses, the one bag, packed, the armor's own furniture: the cash, the documents for the borrowed name, two changes of clothes, the kind of bag a woman keeps when the woman is the kind who leaves first. It had never once failed her. It sat by the door now, and she looked at it, and she knew the shape of the night she was in for, because she had spent the night before every leaving sitting with the bag, and the sitting had always ended the same way, with the bag in her hand and the house dark behind her.

That night was the rest of the choosing. The camera had already seen her. The name was already in the notebook. Leaving now would buy her nothing the leaving had always bought, and staying would cost the armor itself, all of it, and she sat by the stove and paid it an hour at a time, and the bag sat by the door. She remembered the other nights, the dozen of them, the

rented rooms in the dozen towns, a river town and a plains town and a company town and towns she had stopped naming even to herself, and every night the same sitting and the same ending, the bag in her hand and the house dark behind her and the dawn bus or the dawn road, and the kindnesses left behind her uncounted, because counting them would have been a way of keeping them, and keeping was the one thing the armor forbade. Toward morning she did a thing she had never once done in twelve years. She unpacked it. The cash into the tin box, the clothes onto the shelf, the documents flat under the mattress, and the bag folded flat and put away, and the house stood quiet around the empty door.

The county's talk had a new subject by the Tuesday. She knew it before she poured the first coffee, because the talk changed shape when she came in, the way talk does when it has been about you. The man with the ice melt came in and said her name right this time, carefully, the way a man says a name he has practiced, and asked after the boy, and the whole counter listened to her answer. The boy had spent a night under watch at the hospital over in Gloucester, and he was home by the weekend, and he was fine, and the county's talk said so in every corner of the crab house, and the talk said her name with it, the borrowed name, the name under the coming picture.

The talk was doing its own work on the afternoon, she heard that too. The county's account of itself had already started to settle the way the county's accounts settle, and in the settling the standing was being forgotten and the moving was being made into the whole of the afternoon, and she could have told the talk otherwise and did not. Let the county have its account. The county had stood, and she had moved, and the talk would hold the moving, and the talk's holding was its own kind of mercy, and she took it.

The thaw held all that week. The ice went out of the pond entirely by the Friday, the white skin breaking up and going over the dam in pieces, and the harbor's edges opened, and the county's winter broke as it breaks, all at once and then for good, and the county's people went around with their jackets open, reborn, every one of them surprised all over again.

The weekly came out on Thursdays. She had lived in the county five months and never once bought it, because the weekly was the county's own account of itself and she had kept her distance from the county's accounts. That week she knew she would buy it. She did not know yet what it would say, or how big the picture would run, or where, and she found she could wait it out, and the waiting was the last of the armor, and it went the way the rest had gone, quietly, in the ordinary days, the coffee poured and the baskets sold

and the talk listened to and the creek road walked home in the dark.

She carried the borrowed coat back to the store on the Wednesday, folded, and she left it on the bench inside the door, and when the man at the counter looked up she said someone had given it to her at the pond, and the man nodded the way the county nods, and the coat went into the county's keeping to be sorted out with the other such coats. A thread tied off with her own hands, in daylight, in front of a witness. That was new.

The woman who had rubbed her arms came into the crab house that week and asked her to the firehouse breakfast on the Sunday, the way the county asks, casual and immovable, and twelve years of armor said to smile and say nothing and be gone by Sunday, and she heard herself say she would see, and the woman took it as near enough to yes, and it was near enough to yes. That was new too.

Wednesday night she sat by the stove again, and the door stood empty, and the word was near. She could feel it the way a person feels weather in the walls, the pressure of it, twelve years of it. She had spent twelve years of nights in the third person, in rented rooms, with the sitting by the bag before every leaving, and every one of those nights had ended in the grammar's quiet, and the grammar's quiet had been the whole of

her company. Tonight the quiet had a crack in it, and the crack had a word in it, and the word had twelve years of waiting in it, and she did not say it yet. The grammar held. The habit held. She went to bed in the third person, and she slept, and even the sleep was new. The stove ticked. The creek went on about its business past the landing, and the house held its heat around her, and the night held her, and she let it. She dreamed of nothing she could keep, and she woke before the alarm, and the house was hers, and she was in it.

The weekly came out on the Thursday. Above the fold, the photograph, one of the ones the old man had made from up the bank in the first minutes after, while the county stood around them on the bank: her face wet and unmistakable, the boy in the county's coats beside her, the pond behind them, the rotten ice, the whole of it. And under her face, the caption. The borrowed name, Lou Ashe, printed under her true face, in the county's own paper, for the whole county to read.

The county read the weekly the way the county reads it, at the store and the diner and the kitchen tables and over the counter of the crab house, and the county saw her face and read her name and knew her: the counter woman, the woman from nowhere, the woman who had moved when nobody else did. They

came in all that week with the paper folded under their arms, and they looked at her the way people look at a woman they know now, and some of them said her name, the borrowed name, and she answered to it, and she poured their coffee and she sold their baskets, and nobody asked her where she was from, because now she was from the picture. She was seen. She was known. She was not leaving first. She was not gone.

The Tilletts came in on the Friday, the boy in a clean coat, shy, his mother shaking her hand with both of hers, his father standing a step behind with his cap in his hands, a man facing the kind of debt that does not get paid. The boy asked her whether she could swim. She said she could. The mother bought the basket, and the boy ate the fries, and the county watched them through it, the way the county watches its own account of itself being made. The father said thank you, twice, the same word both times, and she said you are welcome, twice, and the grammar held, and the habit held.

She bought her own copy at the store on the Saturday morning, before her shift, the way the county bought it, and the man at the counter said her name, the borrowed name, the name under the face, said it easily now, and she answered to it. And she stood in the store with the paper in her hands, and her face was on it, and the borrowed name was under it, and the boy

was alive, and the store smelled of coffee and the morning's papers, and she was tired.

And here is the end of it, and the whole of her. The county knew her face. The county read her name. The name was borrowed. The face was hers. The grammar had cracked in the water and held, and the paper was in her hands, and the boy was alive, and she was seen, and she was known, and she was not leaving first, and she was not gone.

The word had been twelve years in the waiting. She wants to be careful about the word, because the word is the whole of the story. She had not said it in the kitchens of the places she had left, not in the cars, not in the motels or the rented rooms, not to the county or the crab house or the harbor, not to the boy, not to herself, because herself was the word's whole price. Twelve years of she. Twelve years of the third person held by force of habit, the habit the armor and the armor the self.

And it arrived, in the store, in the third week of February, with the paper in her hands and her face on the front and the county's knowing in the air. The grammar had held, and the habit had held, and the word arrived anyway, and the word was

I.

11

The Rounds

Mathews County, Virginia, 2025

The news will come in a clause. Early Devereux will be sitting in a clinic over in Gloucester on a Tuesday in March when the doctor says it, and the doctor will say it the way doctors say such things, in one clause with a number in it, and Early will hear it the way he has heard forty years of the county's worst news: as a man who knows what a sentence can hold. He will be seventy-five years old. He will thank the doctor. He will drive home over the route he has driven ten thousand times, past the millpond where the ice went out a year ago February, and the county will go past the window as it always goes, the creeks and the lanes and the flags at the ends of the docks, and none of it will look different, and that will be the strangest part, that none of it looks different. He will sit at his own kitchen table, and the clause will sit with him, and the clause will have a number in it, and the number will be months.

He will not tell anyone that week. The clause will be his to spend or to carry, and he will carry it the way he carries everything, and the county will go on around him not knowing, and the not-knowing will be the last ordinary week of his life.

He will live alone, as he has lived alone. He will make the supper he always makes, and wash the one plate, and the kitchen will be quiet the way the kitchen has been quiet thirty years, and only the clause will be new in it. The weekly keeps him on for the county's dead; a younger woman covers the thaw danger now, and the families still call him first, because forty years of the county's dead have gone through his hands into print, and the county trusts the hands. What the county does not know is the rest of it. For forty years he has carried the county's unprintable true things, the things the families told him on the worst day and then took back with their eyes, the things he learned by being the man who comes to the house. He never wrote any of them down. Nothing in his house holds them. Nothing anywhere holds them. He carried them, and the carrying was the whole of his craft's other half, and the county never knew.

The paper has a morgue, the clippings room the young ones keep, and he never trusted it. What is printed is what the county agreed to. The true things ride with the man.

An obituary gets made at a kitchen table. That is the part the county never sees. The family calls, and he comes, and he sits where the county sits in grief, at the table, with the coffee going cold and the good china come down for the occasion of him, and he asks the questions the form wants, the dates and the service and the survivors, and the family gives him the facts, and then, because he has sat at two thousand of their tables and never hurried, the family gives him the things around the facts. That her father never missed a Sunday and never once said a kind word in the house. That the son listed among the survivors had not spoken to the dead man in nine years and had come home too late. That the marriage printed as sixty-one years was, in truth, sixty-one years of a thing that had no name the paper could use. He wrote the dates and the service and the survivors. He carried the rest out of the house in himself, and he never wrote it down, and he never told it, and the county's dead took their true things into the ground with him standing by, polite, knowing.

Some of the true things belonged to the living. That is the part that will matter. A man survives his own worst day and goes on living in the county, and the obituarist who carried the family's grief out of the house carries the survivor's true thing too, and the survivor walks around the county for thirty more years

with the obituarist's knowing at his back, and neither of them ever speaks of it, and the paper's account stands, and the county's account is the paper's. He never minded. The carrying was the craft's price, and he paid it the way he paid his taxes.

He will sit at the kitchen table the whole of that Tuesday evening, and the clause will sit with him, and toward dark the decision will arrive whole, the way the county's news has always arrived to him, entire, with its headline attached. He will walk the county. He will go to the doors of the living, the ones whose true things he has carried, and he will speak, to each of them, the one true sentence he knows and never printed. A spoken advancer, with time attached: you can still change the ending. The paper's advancers were always written for the dead ahead of the fact, and his will be spoken to the living ahead of theirs, and the difference will be the whole of the thing.

He will think, that evening, of the woman in the millpond picture from the winter before, the counter woman from the crab house who let the camera have her face, wet and unmistakable, above the fold, and who stayed. He took that picture. He watched what the county gave her back for it. A print man spends forty years deciding what the county will see, and the rounds will be the first time he spends himself.

He will make no list. He will need none. Forty years of the county's true things will stand up in him as they have always stood, and he will take them in the order they come to him on the walking, and the walking will begin on the Thursday morning, and the first door will be Dell Hartle's.

The Hartle place will be first because it is nearest the road and because the true thing there is one of the oldest he carries. The lane will be a quarter mile of potholes with the creek flashing through the pines at the bends, and the yard will be the yard of a man who lives alone and keeps what he uses: the boat trailer under the pines, the decoys hung in the shed's shade, the woodpile squared like a wall. Dell Hartle will come out before Early reaches the porch, because the county knows Early's car, and a man comes out to meet that car with his face already set for the news. "Who's dead," Dell will say, and it will not be a question. Early will tell him nobody is dead, and Dell will not believe him, because the obituarist does not come down a creek lane for nothing, and they will stand a minute in the March cold with that between them, and then Dell will ask him in, because Dell is county, and county does not leave a man standing in the cold.

They will sit at Dell's kitchen table with the coffee, and Early will take the sentence out the way he has taken forty years of hard news out, level, with no

windup. "Earl didn't lose that boat playing cards, Dell. He sold her the same week your note came due at the fish house, and the price was the amount of the note to the dollar. His widow told me the day I came for his notice, and then she asked me to keep it out of the paper, and it stayed out of the paper."

Dell will sit with it. The county has believed thirty-seven years that Earl Hartle lost the Wren at cards over in Gloucester, and Dell has believed it loudest, because a brother can say a thing about a brother that no one else can get away with, and he has said it at every cards table in the county since 1988. Earl has been in the ground thirty-two years. The widow has been in the ground eleven. Dell will look at his coffee and he will not say anything for a while, and Early will let him have the while, because the while is the point.

"Why tell me now," Dell will say at last, and Early will give him the advancer's whole heading: "Because you can still change the ending." And Dell will say, "The ending's written, Early. He's in the ground," and Early will say, "The boy's ending isn't. Earl's boy is over in Cobbs Creek, and you haven't spoken to him since the funeral, and the last thing between you was his father's name, and his father's name was a better thing than the county ever knew."

Dell will turn the cup then, the way a man turns a thing he needs his hands to hold, and he will ask the

proud man's question: "Does anybody else know." And Early will tell him the truth of it. The buyer is dead. The widow is dead. The fish house has changed hands twice. "It lived in me, and now it lives in you, and that is the whole of its living." And then he will give Dell the vow, the vow he will give at every door, the vow that is the other half of every sentence: "I never will print it, but somebody knew." The sentence is a gift, and the gift is a second chance, and the price of it is the ending, and the ending is Dell's to change.

Dell will walk him out. The car will back down the lane, and Dell will stand in the yard a long time, and on Saturday, Early will learn at the store the way the county learns such things, a truck out of Cobbs Creek will be seen in Dell Hartle's lane, and the rounds will have their first changed ending.

The second door will be Miss Sadler's, the teacher the county let go in '79 and never said why. Her house will be the little one across from the old school, with the books in the front room and the garden already forked for spring, and she will see the car from the window and be on the porch before he is up the walk. She will be seventy-four, and she will miss nothing, and she will make him tea because that is what one does, and she will be waiting for the news like Dell was, and she will get the sentence instead. "The county thinks you resigned, Miss Sadler. You were pushed, for the

girl you would not fail, and the superintendent told me himself, at his own table, thirty years after, when his wife's notice was the errand, and he asked me to carry it, and I have carried it sixteen years." She will hold the cup still, and he will give her the advancer's heading: "The girl runs the clerk's office now. She has never once been told what it cost you. You can still change the ending." Miss Sadler will sit a long time, and she will look at him with the teacher's eye, the eye that forty years of ninth-graders could never fool, and she will say, "He told you that over his wife's notice," and Early will say yes, and she will say, "I wondered all these years whether he ever told anyone," and Early will say, "He told the man who carries things," and she will nod, because the county knows what he is even when the county has never once said it. And then she will do a thing no one at the tables ever does, and it will take him off his stride for a moment: she will thank him. And on the first Tuesday of April, the clerk's office will close for twenty minutes at ten in the morning, and the county will never learn why.

The third door will be out toward the bay, a farmhouse off a lane with the marsh at its back and a dog that will bark until it knows him. That sentence will stay unspent here. The county is the county, and some of its true things are not this story's to spend. The door will open, and Early will speak, and the man

of the house will sit down on his own step to hear it, and the dog will settle against his boot, and the two of them will sit there until the light goes, and the marsh will take the evening's noise the way the marsh takes everything, and the vow will be given, and the drive home will be quiet, and that is all that will be said of the third door. The sentence will have been a true one, and the ending it buys will be the county's to notice in its own time.

The fourth door will be Fletcher Minter's, the waterman who has not been out on his own boat in thirty years, though the boat sits ready on its rails and is the best-kept thing on the creek. Fletcher will know the car, and he will come out wiping his hands, and when Early says nobody is dead, Fletcher will ask, straight, whether Early is sick, because that is the only other errand the county can imagine for him. He will be closer to the mark than he knows. They will stand by the boat on its rails, and Early will give him the sentence: "The night the Agnes V went on the bar, the channel marker was out, Fletcher. The Coast Guard man knew it, and he told me at his brother's funeral, and the finding never said it, and you have carried that night thirty years, and it was never yours to carry." Fletcher will put a hand on the boat's rail the way a man steadies himself by the thing he loves, and the vow will be given, and Fletcher will stand there a long

while. He will ask Early only one thing: "The finding never said it, you're sure of that." And Early will say he is sure, because he wrote the county's account of that night himself, thirty years back, and he wrote it from the finding, and the finding said operator error, and the paper printed it, and Fletcher will take that in, and the thirty years will shift their weight, and the two men will stand by the boat until the talk comes back to ordinary things. On the first Saturday of April he will take his grandson out, the first child on that boat in thirty years, and the creek will see the rails empty and know something has ended, and something has.

He will take the doors as the county's own geography gives them, the creeks and the lanes and the roads he has driven forty years, the houses he can find in the dark from the years of coming to them on the worst days. The county is in him the way it is in no one else living, its dead and its living both, and the rounds will only be the walking of it. He will go in the mornings, when the county is home. The drives between the doors will be the county at its spring best, the creeks high, the ospreys back on the channel markers, the marsh going its bright week's color, and he will drive them slowly, with the window down, the way an old man drives a county he has covered forty years. He will park at the road and walk the lanes. He will knock, and he will say nobody is dead, and he will

watch the relief and then the puzzlement cross the county's faces, and then he will give the sentence, and he will give the vow, and he will stay until the staying stops helping, and he will go.

Then will come the fifth door, and the fifth door will be the one the rounds are risking every time a car comes up a lane.

The Pruitt place will sit back off the road behind a hedge gone wild, and Omer Pruitt will take a long time answering, and he will open the door six inches and no more. Early will say nobody is dead. Omer will say, "Then what are you selling," because that is the kind of man Omer has become in the years since his wife's table, and the years have their reasons, and the reasons are the sentence. Early will give it to him through the six inches, because the door will not widen: "The county thinks you were driving the night the Talbot boy was hurt. Your boy was driving, Omer. You took the wheel's blame and the county let you, and your wife told me at her own table, and I have carried it since." And Omer will look at him through the gap, and the thing the rounds are risking will happen: Omer will hear a price in it. "How much," he will say. And when Early gives the vow, I never will print it, but somebody knew, it will sound to Omer like the whole of the threat, printed or not, and he will say, "You keep your

mouth shut, old man," and the door will slam so hard the hedge will shake.

Early will stand on the step a moment, in the cold, with the slam still in the air. That is the rounds' risk made real. A true thing lost to time is a gift; a true thing still being hidden is leverage, and the man hiding it will hear the gift as the leverage, every time. He will drive home knowing the county may hear a version of the rounds now, Omer's version, with a price attached to it, and some doors may close before his car reaches them, and the rounds will go on anyway, because the number in the clause is months, and the months are the rounds' whole budget.

Omer's version will run. By the Friday it will be at the store, and by the Sunday it will have the county's ears: the old obituary man is going door to door with people's secrets in his hand, and there is money in it somewhere, or meanness. Early will hear it himself at the post office, third-hand, from a man who does not know he is telling it to the man it is about. He will let it run. He has spent forty years watching the county settle its accounts of things, and the settling does not hurry, and the rounds have their own answer: Dell Hartle's nephew's truck in the lane on Saturdays now, Miss Sadler's twenty minutes at the clerk's office, the rails empty on Fletcher Minter's creek. The work will

answer for him, in the county's own time, and the county's own time is the only time he has ever trusted.

But the sixth door will not wait on the county's settling. The sixth door will be Carlton's, and Carlton has weeks, and the call will come from Carlton's daughter on the Monday, because the county calls him first, even now.

Carlton Hudgins ran the press at the weekly for thirty-one years, and the weekly's press room smelled of ink and hot oil the whole of those years, and Carlton smelled of it too, and Early's whole working life walked past Carlton's press on its way to the county. They never called it friendship. It was the county's other kind, the kind that never needs the name: forty years of the same Thursday deadlines, the same jokes, the same bad coffee, the two of them the last ones in the building on the nights the paper came back wrong. Carlton retired the year the press went out, when the weekly started printing over in Gloucester, and he kept a tray of the old type on his windowsill, and he never explained it, and Early never asked.

Now the bed will be in the front room of Carlton's house, because the front room gets the morning sun, and Carlton's daughter will meet Early at the door with the face the county's daughters have, the face of the one who is carrying the house, and she will say he is awake and he is himself and he is asking whether the

county has come to see him. That will be Carlton's joke, and it will be true, and Early will be the county. The daughter will walk him back with the practical things, the nurse's hours and the good days and the bad ones, in the low voice houses use for them, and she will leave the two of them with a look that says take your time, and the house will hold them. The room will smell of the tray of type on the windowsill, faintly, under the medicine smell, and the pressman's hands will be folded on the blanket, ink still in the seams of them after a dozen years away from the press, and Early will sit in the chair the daughter puts for him, and the house will be quiet the way houses are quiet in the last weeks, all the noise gone out of it to make room.

Carlton will be thin. That will be the whole of it, at first: Carlton thin, the pressman's forearms gone to cord and bone, the eyes the same. He will know the car, because of course the county knows the car, and he will have the joke ready: "You come to measure me." And Early will say, "I come to sit with you," and Carlton will say, "That's the same thing, with you," and it will be the closest thing to the truth the room will get.

They will talk about the press. Carlton will want the old years, and Early will give them: the night the plate broke and they reset the front by hand at midnight; the election issue of '79 that came back with the sheriff's name spelled wrong in forty-point type and the two of

them hand-correcting eight hundred copies with a marker; the Thursday the ice took the bridge and the papers went across by boat. Carlton will do the pressman's laugh, the one that starts in the chest and barely gets out, and the daughter will look in from the kitchen door, and she will see her father being for a moment the man the house is losing, and she will look at Early with the county's whole gratitude.

And then Carlton will get tired, the way the dying get tired, mid-sentence, in one step, and the room will go quiet, and Carlton will say, "Tell me something," because that is what the dying ask of the man who has spent forty years knowing things, and Early will not give him the advancer's heading. The heading is for the living. Carlton has days, and days are not enough to change an ending, and the rounds' whole law will fail at this door, and Early will know it, and what he will pay instead is the one story he keeps for paying comfort with, a story a man out of the Louisiana parishes told him once, years back, on a dock, a shrimp boat's man mending a net and talking to pass the cold, and Early carried it the way he carries everything, and he will give it to Carlton whole, aloud, the way it was given to him.

"There was a man down in Evangeline Parish won a boat at a parish raffle. The luckiest man in the parish, the county called him down there, and it put the word

on him like a crown. What the county didn't know was the draw was rigged. He rigged it himself, palmed his own ticket, and one person saw him do it, a girl at the table, sixteen years old, and she never said it. And the winning bound him, Carlton. The favors started. The word lucky sat on him everywhere he went. He paid penance for the boat for years, to the family whose ticket should have won, and nobody ever knew it was penance, and he never got free of any of it, and the county buried him under the word lucky, and the man himself could never tell you whether the man or the mask was the one who won that boat." Early will stop there, and Carlton will be watching him with the pressman's whole attention, and Early will give him the story's own last line, the way the Louisiana man gave it: "The luck was the sentence."

Carlton will think about it a while, with his eyes on the ceiling. Then he will say, "I had the luck of that press. Ran clean thirty-one years." And he will look at Early, and he will say, "It was a sentence too," and he will laugh, the pressman's laugh, barely out of the chest, and the joke will be the last one, and they will both know it, and the room will hold it. The quiet after will be the good kind, the kind two old tradesmen can keep, and the daughter will stand in the kitchen doorway and see her father sleeping easier than he has slept in a week, and she will not ask what was said,

because the county has always known that what Early Devereux carries is not hers to ask after.

Early will sit with him until he sleeps. Carlton will die in the last week of April, and Early will write the notice, and the notice will be true in every word the paper can print, and the front room will get the morning sun on the first of May with nobody in the bed. But that is weeks from now, and today Carlton is sleeping the good sleep, and Early will drive home in the dark, and the number in the clause will ride with him, and the sixth door will have been paid what the sixth door could spend.

The county will settle the rounds the way the county settles everything, slowly and then entirely. Omer's version will run its week and starve, because the rounds' own evidence keeps coming in against it: Dell Hartle's nephew at the lane on Saturdays, the two of them on the porch with the dog between them; Miss Sadler at the clerk's office counter with her tea going cold and the clerk's face gone soft; Fletcher Minter's rails empty every fair Saturday, and the boy's laugh coming across the creek the way it carries over water. The store's talk will turn the way the talk turned on the millpond afternoon the winter before, when the county decided what its account of the rescue would be. The talk will even make the connection, in its offhand way: the same man took the millpond picture,

and the same man is making the rounds, and the county will hold the two facts together a moment and then let them go, the way the county lets most true things go. The county will decide about the rounds: the old obituary man is going door to door giving people their own true things back, and it is the strangest thing the county has watched him do in forty years, and it is, the talk will say, the most Early Devereux thing he has ever done. He will be at the store the Saturday after the talk turns, buying the oatmeal and the coffee and the week's little else, and the county will look at him the way the county looks at a man it has decided about, and an old woman he does not know will touch his sleeve at the register and say, "You done a kindness for my cousin," and she will not say which cousin, and he will not ask, and that will be the rounds' wages, and he will carry them home in the same bag as the oatmeal.

He will not hear most of it. The clause will be doing its arithmetic in him through April, and the walking will get harder, and he will start taking the doors with a thermos and a folding stool in the trunk against the dizziness, and the county will see the stool and say nothing, because the county knows what a folding stool means at his age in the spring.

What will be left in him, when the walking is done, is the things with no ending left to change. The dead's true things. The third door's kind, where the change is

private or past or impossible, and the sentence was spent or will die with him. He will not grieve that. The carrying was never the burden the county would have guessed; the carrying was the honor of the work, and the unspent things will go into the ground with him the way they came out of the houses with him, in himself, unwritten, forty years of them. The county's dead will keep their true things. He kept nothing. The keeping was himself.

The lawyer will write him in the last week of April. That is how the last call will begin: with a letter, on paper, which is how Early has done forty years of his own business, and the lawyer will be a careful man out of Gloucester named Cates who has handled the county's wills for thirty years and who will have written Early's the week after the diagnosis, the week Early came in and sat down and said, "I need to put my affairs in order, and there is less of it than you'd think, and I want it done while I can still argue with you about it."

The will is plain. Cates drew the wills of half the county's old families, and Early has read forty years of death notices against forty years of probate notices, and the two men know each other's work the way the county's trades know each other, at a distance, by the product. The house and the truck and the forty years of nothing much, left to a cousin's daughter in Richmond

who sent him a card every Christmas; a sum to the weekly's scholarship fund for a county kid going into the trade, if the trade still exists to go into; and the rest of it spent down in the months that remain. Cates will have it drawn and ready. The will itself was signed in March at his office, with the two clerks witnessing, the way the law wants a will. What is left to finish is the letter of instruction that goes with it, the house and the trust and the rest of it in Early's own words, the paper the executor reads first, and a letter of instruction wants only his own hand and a notary's stamp. Early will not be driving to Gloucester anymore by then, and that is when Cates will arrange the thing the year's own way allows: a notary by camera, a remote session, the letter signed on a screen.

Early will distrust it on sight. He is a print man. His whole life went down on paper you could hold up to the light, and the screen has never once in his experience been evidence of anything. He will say so to Cates, and Cates will say it is the law's own method now, and Early will say the law has changed its methods before and he has outlived most of them, and Cates will laugh, and the appointment will be made for the second Tuesday of May, at ten in the morning, at Early's own kitchen table, with his own laptop borrowed from the cousin's daughter and set up the night before by the young woman from the weekly,

who will show him the camera's little eye and tell him it will be fine, and he will not believe her, and he will be grateful anyway.

The recognition about the doors will come to him the night before the appointment, and it will come the way the rounds' own decision came, whole. He has made six. Dell's, Miss Sadler's, the marsh farmhouse, Fletcher's rails, Omer's slam, Carlton's front room. The seventh doorstep will be his own. That is the shape the rounds always had, and he will not have seen it until the walking is done: the county's obituarist has no obituarist. There will be no man coming up his lane with his true thing in his keeping, no sentence spoken to him with time attached, no vow. The younger woman at the weekly will write his notice when the time comes, and she will write it well, and it will be true in every word the paper can print, and the true things he carries will go into the ground unprinted, which is where they have lived their whole lives, and which is, he will decide that night, correct. He will sit at the kitchen table with the borrowed laptop closed in front of him, and the house will be quiet, and the quiet will be the same quiet as always, and he will not wish the rounds otherwise. He had the county's ear for forty years. Nobody ever had his, and he will find, that night, that he never once minded.

The second Tuesday of May will come up warm and ordinary, and Early will make the oatmeal, and wash the one bowl, and put on the shirt he wears for the county's families, the good blue one, because the session is county business even if nobody at the other end can see below his collar. He will open the borrowed laptop the way the young woman showed him. The camera's little eye will sit there, glassy and indifferent. He will put the letter's printed copy beside the laptop, because paper is what he trusts, though the signing will be on the screen. He will sit down at his own kitchen table at five minutes before ten, in his own house, on the seventh doorstep of the rounds, and he will know it now.

The screen will come up at ten sharp, and the woman on it will be a notary somewhere far off, a woman in her late fifties with a pencil behind her ear, and her voice will be level and her protocol will be exact: his license held up to the camera's little eye, the room shown, the document on the screen, the oath. The oath will be the strangest part for him, swearing to a lens, and he will raise his hand anyway, because the law's methods change and an oath is an oath. She will have done it ten thousand times, and she will do it the way a woman does a thing she has made into a craft, and Early, who knows craft when he sits across from it,

will find his distrust of the screen giving ground to respect for the woman in it.

The letter is short. He will read it on the screen, because Cates told him to read every word, and he has read every word of everything he has ever signed, forty years of signing tables, the county's own records and receipts and the papers of a life conducted in print. When he is done, the woman will ask him the question the protocol does not require, the one she asks every signer: whether he wants any of it read back to him before he signs.

He will say no. He has never once wanted anything read back; reading back is for people who were not listening the first time. He will sign the letter on the screen, the pen's mark going into the little window, the strangest signature of his forty years, and the woman will set her own mark beside it, and the letter will be complete, and his affairs will stand in the order the county's dead need them to stand.

And then, because the sentence is already out of him before the manners can stop it, the obituarist's whole craft in his voice, he will ask her the thing that in forty years of signing tables nobody ever asked him, the question behind all the questions: "Why do you ask?"

She will not answer. The pause on the screen will run long by the protocol's measure, the kind of pause a person makes when a question has found the exact

person who cannot answer it in public, and then she will thank him, level, and the session will close, and the connection will end, and the little eye will go dark.

Early will sit at the kitchen table with the dark screen, in the quiet, and he will think about the pause. He has spent forty years on the other side of questions, asking the county's families the form's questions and carrying home the things around the facts, and nobody ever asked him why he asked. He asked because the asking was the door. She asks because the asking is her door, he will think, and the door goes somewhere, and he will not learn where, and that will be all right. The unanswered question will stay with him the way the county's true things stayed, carried, unwritten, somebody's.

He will close the laptop. He will put on his hat, though the walking is nearly done in him, and he will go out and stand on his own step in the May morning, the seventh doorstep, his own, and there will be no sentence spoken there and no vow, and the county will be going on around him the way it goes on, the marsh loud with it, the roads taking the county to its work. He has given the living their sentences. His own will go unspoken, and the carrying of it will go with him, and the work will be finished, all but the one door.

The rounds will outlast him by one door.

12

Known to Me Personally

Perkins County, Nebraska, 2026

The last appointment of the last day is a little house on the east edge of Grant, a Tuesday evening in the middle of September, the light going down the way it goes down over the tableland, slow and level and gold, and Delma Vantrease parks at the curb in front of it with the commission's expiration folded in her bag like any other paper. At midnight the commission ends. She has not renewed it. Thirty-two years is the whole of the practice she ever meant to have, and the number came up on the calendar as the counties' numbers always come up, in due course, and she let it come. She is fifty-eight years old. The dust-colored wagon is twenty years gone; she drives a gray crossover now, with the same kit in the back, the stamp and the pens and the practice's worn clipboard, and the pens are the only part of the kit that ever mattered.

The last day has been ordinary, as she wanted it. Two signings in the morning, a refinance at a farmhouse south of Elsie and a power of attorney at the care home in Grant, both of them clean, both of them done at kitchen tables, because her whole practice has been kitchen tables, thirty-two years of them, in Perkins and Chase and Hayes and the near edges of Lincoln County, the farm tables and the formica tables and the card tables, the county's whole paper life passing across its own kitchens. She drove the tableland between them as she has always driven it, the section roads straight as ruled lines, the corn gone dry and tall and whispering on both sides, the sky the September size. She ate the noon meal at the cafe in Grant and read the county's weekly, and the waitress topped off her coffee without being asked, the way the county's waitresses do for a woman they have seen for thirty-two years without ever once learning her business. Nobody knows it is the last day. That was the practice's way all along: the notary comes, the paper is signed, the notary goes. The counties never needed to know her to need her.

The title company routed the order in the ordinary way of orders, out of North Platte, a purchase closing, the buyer one B. Stelk, the sellers already signed and gone to a new place outside the county, the keys to be left on the table. She read the surname on the order

and told herself the county has Stelks the way it has wheat, and took the appointment because the last one should be ordinary, and an ordinary first-home closing is the most ordinary thing her practice knows. She brings the package up the walk. The house is small and brick and square, a fifties house with a good roof, the kind the county calls a starter, with a pot of somebody's chrysanthemums by the step that the sellers left, or the buyer brought early, and the door is open against the warm evening, and the screen door is where the buyer is standing, watching her come up the walk, a young woman in work clothes with her hair back, and the young woman's face has the tableland's cheekbones on it, and the room behind her is empty and echoing, and it is going to be hers.

"Ms. Vantrease," the young woman says, holding the screen. "I'm Berit." And she says the name the way the family says it, BAYR-it, correcting without correcting, because Delma's mouth had already shaped it the other way, and Delma has the name right now, and says it right back to her, and thinks, without summoning it, of a man on a webcam five years back who wanted his paper read to him entire, every word of it aloud, before he would sign, and who corrected her twice on the saying of his own name in the reading, gently, twice, NAH-jar, nah-HAR, eighteen years of the state saying it wrong repaired inside an eleven-minute reading on a

webcam's bad audio, and she does not know why she thinks of him now, at a door in Grant, except that a name rightly said is the smallest of the things her work can carry, and he taught the practice that, in his kitchen, in his swept yard's memory.

They go in. The kitchen is the only room with furniture yet, a card table and two folding chairs and a box of the buyer's things already riding on the counter, and the evening comes through the west window level and gold, and the package goes down on the card table, and the stamp comes out of the bag, and the commission's expiration stays folded where it is, because there is a signing to do first. Berit sits. Delma sits. The pen is a good pen, the practice's own, and it is not shaking, and Berit's hand is not shaking, and the first document comes up off the package, and Delma asks for the license, as the statute wants it, the identity before anything, and Berit lays the license on the card table between them, and the room tilts thirty-two years before a word is said.

It is not the name. The name she prepared for, on the order, and the name is only a name. It is the face above the name, the cheekbones, the widow's own cheekbones, the ones Delma saw across a kitchen table in September of 1994 when she was twenty-six years old and newly commissioned and did not know that the law's who was not the whole of her work. The license

says the buyer was born in 1997. The arithmetic does itself, as it has always done itself for her at tables: the family lost the home place before this woman was born, and the woman buying this starter house on the east edge of Grant is the widow's granddaughter, and Delma has held this county's signatures for thirty-two years, and no room before this one has tilted under her like this one tilts.

The room settles, the way rooms settle once the paper is moving. She has done this in farmhouses and doublewides and care-home day rooms and lawyers' towers and the back seats of pickups, in the four counties' kitchens and on their porches and tailgates, and farther off, on the docks and the screens the winter circuits brought, at six in the morning for the harvest crews and at nine at night for the dying. The paper is always the same paper: the counties' people promising the counties' institutions, one signature at a time, that they are who they are and mean what they sign. The institutions never asked her to check the meaning. She checks it anyway. That has been the whole of the practice for thirty-two years, and it started twenty miles from this table, and it ends tonight, at this table, at midnight, and the county does not know, and the county will not notice, and that is the practice's shape: it was never about her.

Berit works the pen the way first buyers work a pen, reading every page's top third at least, initialing where the tabs say initial, and Delma lets the reading take its time, because the practice has always let the reading take its time. The settlement sheet. The affidavit. The deed of trust, the loan's security, its acknowledgment page waiting deeper in the package for the stamp. The sellers' deed is already signed and done; the buyer's paper is the loan's. The lamp over the card table is the house's one lamp, and Berit reaches and switches it on without being asked, and the evening goes down another grade outside the window, and the kitchen smells faintly of diesel from the county's harvest running somewhere east of town, the trucks going back and forth to the co-op as they have gone every September since before either of them was born.

The diesel does it. Sitting in Grant at a kitchen table in September with the trucks running, she is at the co-op counter in October of 1994 without deciding to be, the noon renewals, the farmers coming through one at a time with their fall paper, and a scale man named Ott Rehmer standing at the counter's end reading his own renewal where she told him to read it, and she remembers his hands. She asked each of them something small before they signed, because by October that was what she did, and she asked him whether anything in the paper sat wrong with him, and

he said the scale decides what sits, and thanked her like a man caught, and his hands had been too calm the whole while, too calm for a man renewing debt, calm the way a craft is calm, and she has wondered for thirty-two years what those hands were holding steady against, and she never tried to find out, because the practice does not go looking. The question checks the wanting. What the answer carries is the signer's own. She has signed him, and the co-op's noon line behind him, and driven away south toward the Madrid road, and the scale man's calm hands stayed with her the way some faces stay, and that is all of that, and the diesel smell fades back into the Grant evening, and Berit turns the next page.

"I should say," Berit says, not looking up from the page, "you don't have to stay till the end if it's late. I know this is the last one on your sheet today." And she says it kindly, and Delma tells her the practice stays to the end of every signing, and this one is the last one on a longer sheet than today, and she does not say more, and Berit does not ask more, because the county does not ask a working woman her business at her work. The pen moves. The pages turn. The house is quiet around them the way empty houses are quiet, all the rooms listening.

She watches Berit sign, and the watching is the practice: thirty-two years she has watched the

counties' people sign their own names, and she knows by now that a signature is a small biography, and Berit's is a careful one, a young woman's careful hand, printing almost, every letter given its time, and she thinks of the ones who signed the other way. A woman three years back in an office over a bail bondsman's, out in California, on a screen, who answered the question with a question, one, always, who wants to know, and laughed at herself for it, and then signed faster than anyone Delma ever witnessed, a woman signing like leaving, the pen almost not touching. And a producer in Pennsylvania who had already had her moment and said so, and then, after the signing's record had closed, on an ordinary telephone call a minute later, said she was sorry, and the apology is nowhere on any tape, and Delma has kept it in memory only, the truest sound that producer ever made, and keeping it has cost nothing and weighed something, the way the kept things do.

The deed of trust comes up in the package, and with it the acknowledgment page, the one that wants the stamp, and Delma lays it flat between them and does the thing she has done at every table since the practice began. She does it as she always does it, level, the pen resting, her voice the table's own voice: "Is this house what you want?"

She has asked the wanting question ten thousand times and in ten thousand wordings, and the wording has never once repeated, because the day she made the vow she knew a formula would die of its own smoothness, and the counties' answers have been the counties' whole library of wanting: the farmers' short ones, the widows' long ones, the ones who laughed, the ones who cried, the one young man years ago who said, "It's what I won," with his grin shaking, standing in a fair-office trailer with a boat's title between them, and the boat is blue in her memory, a bass boat on a trailer outside the trailer's window, and the grin shook, and she has never decided what the shaking meant. And an old man the spring before last, on a screen, the last remote she ever took, who answered her question with one of his own, the only signer in thirty-one years who ever gave her that one back. Not yet. Not yet. The table is Berit's, and the question is Berit's, and the answer is coming.

Berit does not answer fast. She has the pen still in her hand, and she looks at the acknowledgment page, and then she looks past Delma's shoulder at the empty hallway of the house, the rooms that will be hers, the way a woman on another screen once looked over her own shoulder in an empty room at a protocol's question about who else was present, checking who stood behind her when no one stood behind her, and

her answer had been three words, I will be, said to no one the room could see. Delma never knew what it was about. The answers' privacy was the practice's own law, and this one kept it. Berit looks back at the table, and her answer is ready, and Delma can tell it has been ready a long time.

"It's the first thing that will carry my name," Berit says. "Since the family lost the home place. That was before I was born, and I know it was before I was born because nobody would ever tell me the whole of it, only that there was a place, and it was my grandmother's, and it went away. My grandmother Lorna. I have her cheekbones, they say. And this is the first thing since." She says it level, and she does not cry, and the pen is still in her hand, and the house's one lamp burns over the card table, and the truck traffic out east keeps the harvest's low thunder under everything, and the answer opens the door, and the door has been shut thirty-two years.

A house question has one other table in her practice, and it rises now, with the rooms' own questions summoning their own. Years ago, far off, a kitchen table in Portland, an afternoon, a refinance for a married pair, a husband and a wife, and dinner already cooking somewhere behind the walls, a baked-pasta smell, the good smell of a weekday evening kept on purpose. She asked the wanting question of the two of

them, some wording about the house and what they both wanted, and the wife answered for the two of them, and the husband, a man whose whole trade was reading faces, watched his wife's face while she answered, read it the way a craftsman reads, and took her answer as his own, and was content. A marriage's grammar, visible at a table: one of them speaks the wanting, the other trusts the speaking. She has thought of that pair sometimes over the years, the way the tables' good ones come back, and she never knew what became of them, and the not knowing is the practice's own boundary, the table's edge. She hopes the dinner was good. It smelled as if it would be.

Delma has heard ten thousand answers and only ever asked after one of them with her eyes, years ago, on a screen, a lease, a woman with a pause before the yes that felt borrowed in the giving, and Delma had sensed it and said nothing, because the practice asks the question and keeps the answer's privacy, and she knows now, sitting here, what that silence rhymed with in a minor key, and the rhyme is the origin, and the origin is what the tilt was, thirty-two years of it, and it is here now, at this table, with the widow's cheekbones across from her.

September of 1994. She reaches for the exact day, and it will not come, it has never come back, only the season of it, the harvest not yet in and the evenings

shortening. She was twenty-six, and the commission was days old, the work so new she could count it, and one of the first of them was a quitclaim at a farmhouse south of Madrid, out on the table above the Republican, the home quarter of a place a family named Stelk had farmed since the county was young. She drove the wagon out there in the late afternoon, dust-colored then and new to the work, the section roads straight between the standing corn, and the kitchen was a farm kitchen, big and dim and clean, with the smell of a cannery summer still in it, the last of the garden's jars cooling on the sideboard, and the widow's coffee going cold at her elbow, untouched. The widow sat at the kitchen table in her good gray coat with the brooch, sixty-eight years old, ready the way the county's women are always ready an hour early for their own undoing, and the son-in-law stood at her shoulder.

The county that year was dry and getting drier, and the talk at every table she had sat at that September was the price and the weather and what the fall would bring, and the Stelk place had looked the way the county's old places looked, the shelterbelt tall, the barn good, the yard swept, a place kept up by an old woman and a hired boy and habit. She remembers the pickup trucks in the yard and the dog that came out to the wagon and went back. She remembers that the widow's kitchen had a clock shaped like a cat with a tail that

swung, and that the tail swung the whole time, and that she watched it while the son-in-law talked, because the son-in-law's talking took a while and the widow did not join it. She has wondered since why her memory kept the clock and let the date go, and the answer is the practice's whole truth: the kept things keep themselves, and they are never the ones on the paper.

The daughter was not in the room. Delma has wondered for thirty-two years where the daughter was, and the answer she has settled on is the doorway, or the yard, or the next county, anywhere a daughter could be and not see. The son-in-law did the talking. He had the deed drawn already, some lawyer in Imperial, a quitclaim, the home quarter, the widow's whole interest, over to him and his wife, and he said it was the family's planning, and he said the widow wanted it done before the harvest, and he said the widow had said so herself, and he said it all in the county's own reasonable voice, the voice that has an answer for everything and a use for every dollar, and the widow said nothing at all. She sat in her good coat with her hands in her lap and she looked at the deed or at the table or at nothing, and the cat's tail swung, and the son-in-law talked, and the afternoon did what the son-in-law wanted with it.

Delma did what the commission trained her to do. She checked the widow's identity. She watched the widow sign. The law's who, in full. The pen went to the page, and the widow's hand was trembling, and the page moved a little with the trembling, and the son-in-law put his thumb on the page to hold it flat, beside the signature line, a broad clean thumb with a farmer's nail, and the thumb never touched her hand, and the thumb was the whole of it. The widow signed. Her signature came out small and steady at the end of the trembling, the way the county's old people's signatures did, sixty years of check-signing holding its own underneath the shaking. Delma stamped it. She filled the certificate, she stamped it clean, she took the small fee, and she said the things a brand-new notary says, and she went out into the September evening, and the widow walked her to the door and said thank you for coming out, the way the county's people said it, and the widow's face said the rest, and Delma was twenty-six and did not know yet that a face saying the rest was her business.

She drove home over the section roads with the small fee and the dusk, and somewhere between Madrid and her own door the vow arrived whole, the way such things arrive, entire, with its heading attached. Never again. No signature passes her again without one question about the wanting. The statute

checks who you are, and the form asks the voluntary act and takes the formula's yes. Her question checks whether it is you doing it. She remembers the exact place on the road where it finished arriving, a half mile of the Madrid road with a leaning windbreak on the north side, and she has driven past that windbreak ten thousand times since, on the counties' business, and it never asked her anything, and she never needed it to. She was twenty-six, and the law had trained her to verify the who and never the whether, and the whether had sat at a kitchen table south of Madrid in a good gray coat, and she had asked it nothing, and the drive home was twenty minutes, and by the end of them she was a different notary than the state had commissioned, and the counties' ten thousand tables since have all been that drive's.

The vow's first weeks were the strange ones. The question felt enormous in her mouth, at first, the size of it, the presumption of it, a girl of twenty-six asking the county's old men whether they wanted what they were signing. She learned fast that the county did not mind. The county had been waiting for somebody to ask, that was the thing no statute could have told her: the farmers answered short, the widows answered long, and now and then somebody answered no, and did not sign, and walked out of their own kitchen lighter, and nobody ever once complained about her to

the counties' offices, and the practice grew by the county's telling of it, table to table, the way the county's good things grow.

A month later she stood at the co-op counter in Grant for the noon renewals and asked the first of them, and the practice began. The widow came through that line too, with her own fall paper, the last of it, though Delma did not know then that the place was already gone out from under the crop the paper was against. The widow looked at her once, patient, and Delma asked her a question, some small wording about the wanting, and the widow gave her an answer so plain it never needed writing down: "It's the last crop either way. A person signs." And then the widow had folded her renewal and gone out to the truck with Verle's gloves on the wheel, and the taillights went south on the Madrid road, and thirty-two years later her granddaughter is sitting across a card table in Grant with her cheekbones, buying the first thing to carry her name since.

The widow's trembling hand holds in her a moment, and what rises with it is another signing's hand, years later and far away, a winter circuit down through the parishes and up to Baton Rouge, a conference room in a lawyers' tower with the rain on the glass, 2015, or near it, the year reaching and missing as it does. A settlement acknowledgment, confidential, the caption

saying almost nothing, as those papers are built. The signer a woman of about thirty with work-strong hands, a crane operator's hands, Delma thought then, though she could not have said why, and the name on the license was a French name out of the parishes, Mireille. The room had been shut around that signing all day, lawyers in and out on soft feet, the way rooms get when the paper in the middle of them costs someone something. Delma asked her, low, while the lawyers' backs were turned, whether she wanted a minute before she signed. And the woman took the minute. She sat the whole minute with the pen down and the rain on the glass, and she cried without sound, without her face moving, the tears coming down a face that did not change at all, and then she picked the pen up and signed in a sure hand, and the room opened itself and went on. No paper of that case gives anyone any of that, and none is supposed to. It was that room's one human leak, and Delma has held it eleven years, and it weighs what it weighs, and it is hers.

And "a person signs" holds a moment too, and a dock in Cameron Parish comes up out of it, the September heat of 1997, two days after the sea took the deckhand, a girl of twenty-three with a cook's forearms signing her statement for the record, and after the signing, while Delma capped the pen, the girl said a sentence to herself twice under her breath, fitting it in

her mouth, a sentence about weight, about things weighing more than they say. Delma had asked her, dockside, whether she was ready to give her statement, and the girl had answered that she had been ready since the rail. A person who rehearses a sentence is not the same as a person inventing one, and Delma has never decided which of the two she was watching on that dock, and the not deciding is the practice's honesty, and whatever happened in the dark that night on the water stays on the water, and the girl went back to her galley, and the Gulf kept what the Gulf keeps.

The deed's page has the legal description in the law's furniture language, the lot and block and the town's original plat, and Delma reads it aloud, because she always reads the description aloud at a purchase, a small ceremony the practice kept: the dirt has a name in the law, and the name should be said in the house. Berit listens to the lot and block the way people listen to vows. Outside, the trucks keep running east of town, and the September dark finishes coming down, and the lamp over the card table is the house's whole light, and the chrysanthemums' pot throws its small shadow.

Between pages, Berit talks a little, as signers do when the pen is moving and the thing is real. She works at the care home in Grant, the second floor, four years now. She has been renting the trailer on the Venango road with two other girls, and the trailer's

roof has a leak the landlord calls a feature of the season, and she has been saving since she was twenty-two, and the down payment is the whole of the saving and then some, and the payment is less than the rent, which is the county's joke about its young people, that the buying is cheaper than the renting and the getting to the buying is the impossible part. She says it plainly, without complaint, the county's arithmetic. Her father works the road crew out of the county shop; her mother cleans the school. The family's farming is all done, she says, has been done since before her, and she says it the way the county's young say such things, as a fact with no address.

She does not say her grandmother's name again. She does not have to. The name is in the room the way the diesel is in the room.

What Berit knows of the losing of it, she knows in the county's way, in pieces that were never connected for her. There was an aunt, her father's sister, who married a man from Imperial, and the aunt's name and the man's name stopped being said in her father's house before Berit was born, the way the county's houses stop saying names. Her father was a young man then, and he went onto the road crew, and the family's farming was done, and the home place has another family's name on the mailbox now, and has had it all her life, and nobody drives her past it, and she has

driven herself past it exactly once, slow, the summer she was seventeen, and the house looked back at her, ordinary, a house, somebody else's washing on the line.

She does not say any of this aloud. It is in the room with the diesel.

Delma reads the wanting in the answers the practice carries, the counties' whole schooling of it: the ones who wanted the paper and said so plain; the ones who wanted it and could not say so; the ones who did not want it and signed anyway, for the reasons the county understands, the loans and the marriages and the keeping of peace; the ones who did not want it and told her so, straight, because her question made a place for the telling, and who did not sign, and walked out of their own kitchens lighter. She has never counted them. The counting was never the work. The asking was the work, and the answers were the counties' own business, and the whole of it rides with her at every table, unwritten, and tonight it is open in her the way it has never been open, all of it at once.

The settlement figures come next, and Delma reads the money columns aloud, as the practice reads them at every purchase: the price, the county's share of the taxes, the insurance, the little fees with the plain names, the credit for the earnest money, the cash to close, and the total at the bottom, which is the number that matters, the number Berit has been saving toward

since she was twenty-two. Berit checks the total against a number she keeps in her head, and the two numbers agree, and she exhales, and the pen moves on. The figures are furniture, the commerce of an ordinary house changing hands in an ordinary county, and there is a holiness in it Delma has never said aloud at a table, the holiness of the ordinary paper doing exactly what it says.

The insurance affidavit, the tax sheet, the county's transfer pages. The sellers' signatures sit already on their own pages, done last week in North Platte, a couple Delma never met, in another notary's hand, and she reads the other notary's certificate out of professional habit, the way a tradesman reads another tradesman's joints, and finds it clean, and is pleased the way the practice is pleased, a guild of people who watch signatures for a living and never meet.

The pages done but one, Berit stands and offers the tour, because the county shows its guests the house, and it is three rooms and a hall, and she shows them with her phone's light carried doorway to doorway: the front bedroom with the good morning light, the back one that will be for her father's tools until she paints it, the kitchen they are standing in, the cellar with the new furnace the sellers put in last fall, the window over the sink that looks east into the harvest's lights. Delma follows the little light and says the true things a guest

says, and means them. It is a good small house. It has a good roof and a sound sill and a window that watches the county's work, and it will carry her name, and the rooms listen the way empty rooms do.

Delma signs her witness lines where the witness lines are, and watches the careful hand, and the clock in her head keeps the commission's time without checking any clock in the house: past eight now, past eight-thirty. The midnight is coming the way midnights come, unhurried. There is no hurry in the practice either. The pages turn.

The acknowledgment page is the last of the package, and it is the one the stamp exists for. Berit signs it, the careful hand, every letter given its time, and the law's short lines are said between them, the voluntary act, and Delma fills the certificate in her own practiced hand, the county and the date and the name, and the certificate's own print is the state's short form: that Berit Stelk personally appeared before her and acknowledged the deed of trust as her voluntary act. And riding under the state's short form, the way it rides in the counties' old certificates, the practice's inherited language, the law's older furniture: personally known to me, or satisfactorily proven to me. The license does the proving tonight, the satisfactory evidence, the statute's own other path. The phrase sits in the print where it has always sat, the plainest

furniture in the room, and Delma has signed her name beneath it ten thousand times, and it has always been true in the law's narrow way, the license checked, the who confirmed. Tonight, at the last table, the phrase stands with its whole weight showing. It is the thing she has spent thirty-two years failing and succeeding at, the thing the statute never asked and she never stopped asking, and the furniture is true, and the truth is the practice, and she takes up the stamp.

The stamp is the eighth one. The commission runs four years and the stamp runs with it, its little print carrying the expiration date inside the border, and this one's border says tonight. It has stamped four years of the counties' paper, and she has never once stamped anything she did not watch the signer sign, and she presses it now the way she has pressed them all, level and even, and lifts it, and the impression is clean, and the deed of trust is notarized, and the loan is secured, and the sellers' deed, already signed and waiting its own recording, makes the house on the east edge of Grant, in the law's whole sense, hers.

That is the last official act of the practice. Delma knows it as it happens, knows it the way a person knows a last step off a ladder, the ground under the foot before the foot is down. Thirty-two years, ten thousand tables, one question a table, and the question was never once the law's, and the law is done with her

at midnight, and she with it. She blots the stamp on its own pad, caps it, sets it down beside the certificate, and the kitchen is quiet, and outside the harvest trucks go on running, and the deed lies on the card table between them, dry and done and clean.

She had never believed the practice was neutral. That is the thing the tables taught her, table by table, year by year: neutrality is not a state a person stands in. It is an act a person performs, daily, one performance per signature, and the watched lives went differently for being watched, and she knows it, and the proof of it is nowhere in the counties' paper, nowhere in any office or any record. The proof is in her, and she is the whole of it, and she is fifty-eight years old, and the commission ends at midnight, and the widow's granddaughter is sitting across the table reading her own deed with the lamp on her hair.

Berit puts the kettle on, the first kettle in the house's life as hers, and makes two cups of instant coffee in the two mugs out of the box on the counter, and the kettle's whistle is the first household sound the house makes for her, and both of them hear it as that, and neither says so. "The finest coffee in Perkins County," Berit says, deadpan, a small joke about the instant, and the joke lands as the county's small jokes land, gently, and is let go, and the coffee is only coffee, and it is good. They drink the coffee at the card table

with the deed lying dry between them. The keys sit on the deed's folder, the sellers' two keys on a ring with a paper tag, and they are Berit's now, and she has not picked them up yet, the way a person lets a last thing wait a moment for the pleasure of the waiting. Tomorrow the deeds go to the courthouse and into the county's books, the sellers' conveyance and her own, and the name on them will be Berit Stelk, and the clerk will stamp the pages and file them and never know what they weigh, and that is the county's way too, and it is all right.

Past nine. The county outside is full dark and the harvest lights keep moving east of town, and the house is warm, and the window over the sink has the trucks' glow in it. Berit asks the question the county asks a working stranger at the day's end, the small one, the courteous one: has she far to drive, is she based in Grant, how long has she been at the work. And Delma answers the last one true, because the practice answers the small questions true: thirty-two years, and tonight is the last one. Berit sets the cup down at that. "Tonight?" And Delma says the commission ends at midnight, and this closing is the practice's last paper, and she chose it that way, and Berit takes it in the county's way, a little formal about it suddenly, as if the deed in front of her has acquired an elderliness, and she says she is honored, and means it, and is

embarrassed to have meant it, and Delma lets her off it with the practice's gentleness: it is an ordinary closing, and that is exactly what is good about it, and the honor runs the other direction, and she does not say why, and the coffee is drunk, and the cups are set down.

Between the coffee and the clock, Berit asks the question the county eventually asks her at every table, the friendly one: what is the strangest signing she ever did. Delma gives her the practice's own answer, the true one and the polite one: she never found a signing strange, because every one of them was somebody's whole day, and the strangeness would be judging that. Berit considers it and nods, the county's respect for a trade's ethics, and she says she knows something about that, working where she works: the care home's second floor is the county's old ones, and the families want to know what the old ones say all day, and the answer is they say their whole lives, over and over, to whoever is holding the cup, and half of her work is being the one holding the cup. She says it the way the county's young say true things, without knowing the size of them. Delma hears the size of it. The witness at the bedside and the witness at the table are the one work, and the cup and the question are the one courtesy, and she has never said that aloud at a table either.

She says one true thing back, because the evening is past the practice's usual courtesies now and both of

them know it: that the care home's power-of-attorney signing this morning was the second-to-last of her working life, and that the old man there signed with a pen his daughter held for him, steadying the hand around it, and that he had looked up at his daughter after and said, "There. She does it for me now, and I do it for her," and nobody in the room needed it explained. It was a good signing, the kind she would have wanted near the end. She does not say the end of what. The deed and the midnight say it for her.

The renewal notice came in June. She let it sit. All summer it sat, and all summer she told herself she would decide, and the summer decided for her, as the years do, and somewhere in August she understood she had been done for a year. The spring had done it, though she could not have said so in the spring. She is fifty-eight, and her eyes want more light than they used to for the fine print, and her right hand aches in wet weather, and none of that is the reason. The reason is a screen in May of last year, and an old man on it, and what the old man gave back to her, and she has carried the answer's absence for sixteen months, and tonight, at this table, with the deed dry and the keys on the folder, she is going to do something the practice has never done, and she knows it, and the knowing has been coming on since the license tilted the room.

The old man, last of the library, rises now, the way she has known he would since the door. A screen in May, a notarization by camera for a lawyer out of Gloucester, a testamentary instruction, an old man at his own kitchen table in a good blue shirt, seventy-five, a print man to the bone, she could see it in the way he distrusted her little window and then forgave it for the sake of the paper. She ran the protocol exact, and at the end she asked him her question, the wanting question's own cousin for that kind of paper: whether he wanted any of it read back to him before he signed. He said no. And then, in the level voice of a man who has spent his life asking other people the hard things at the worst hours, he asked her the thing no signer had ever asked her in thirty-one years of tables: Why do you ask.

She did not answer. The pause ran long, and she thanked him, level, and the session closed, and the little window went dark, and she sat in her office in the spring light and did not move for a while. Why she asks. She has never once been asked it, and she has never answered it, and the answer has been in her the whole thirty-two years like a deed never filed, executed and witnessed and never recorded: because she watched a woman sign away her home place with a man's thumb on the page, and she asked nothing, and the woman is long dead, and the answer died ungiven,

and no one anywhere has it. She could not say that into a little camera window to a stranger in Virginia. She could not say it to anyone, because the practice keeps the tables' privacy, every one of them, even the one that made the practice.

But the old man's question kept working in her, sixteen months of it, the way a good question works, and what it worked loose is this: the witness owes the watched at least one sentence. She has watched ten thousand signings and kept every table's privacy, and the keeping was right, and it was also, every time, a choice. She performed the keeping thirty-two years, and it was good work, and it fed the counties, and she is proud of it in the practice's quiet way, and it was an act, and the act had a price, and the price was always the same sentence, the one she never said, and the one place left on earth where the saying of it can do anything at all is this table, tonight, with the dead woman's granddaughter and the dead woman's cheekbones and a deed that will carry the family's name again.

While Berit washes the two mugs at the new sink, the years arrange themselves: the wagon years, when every signing was a kitchen table and a handshake and the county's dust; the circuits, the winter drives to wherever the counties' paper wandered, the docks and the fair offices and the lawyers' towers, and the states'

own permissions carried and renewed where the states give them to travelers, the practice's paper authority as ordinary and unremarked as license plates; and then the years the screens came, when the work went onto the cameras and the little windows and the counties' people signed from their own kitchens into hers, and the practice adapted, as the counties adapt, and the question traveled the screens fine because the question was never about the room. And tonight it ends back at a kitchen table, in person, in the county where it began, two people and a pot of coffee and a deed. She did not plan the return. She only took the last appointment because it was ordinary. It was the one coincidence the work ever arranged for her, and she has stopped minding coincidences; thirty-two years of tables teaches a person that the counties' arithmetic is not hers to audit.

When the mugs are done she reassembles the package as the practice has always closed a package: every page in its order, the deeds on top for the courier, the buyer's own copies in their own folder, the title company's envelope addressed and ready for the morning's drop at the courthouse in Grant, two blocks off the highway, the same courthouse where the county's whole paper life sleeps. She squares the package's corners. She sets the pens' caps home. The

practice's last paperwork is done with the same care as its first, because the care was never about the paper.

And Berit picks up the keys. She weighs them in her hand the way the county weighs a thing that is finally real, closes her hand around them, and puts them in her own pocket, and that is the house, done. Outside, the county's evening finishes itself: a porch light coming on across the street, a dog announcing the nine-thirty pickup going by, the whole small machinery of a Grant street at nightfall taking the house's new name into its keeping without comment, the way the county takes in everything.

Ten o'clock. The lamp hums. Through the east window the harvest lights keep their slow lines, and out on the highway the co-op's yard is lit for the trucks, the scale house bright at its post as it has stood every harvest of her working life. The deed is dry, and the coffee is done, and the house is settling its first night around its new name, and the last two hours of the commission tick as they have always ticked, unwitnessed. Berit comes back to the table drying her hands on a new dish towel, and sits, and waits the way the county waits for a guest to take her leave, polite, in no hurry, and the waiting is the door, and the door is open, and the testimony has been thirty-two years coming to it.

Delma does not stand. She does not gather the package or reach for her bag or do any of the leave-taking things the practice has taught her hands. She sits in the lamp's circle with her hands flat on the card table, and she does not have the words planned, because the words have been waiting longer than this house has stood empty, and they will come in their own order or none, and what she says next is past all office, and she knows it, and she says it because the old man's question spent sixteen months making a place for it, and the place is this table.

"Berit. I am going to tell you a thing about your grandmother, and I am the only one left who was in that room and will tell you." Berit goes still, her hands flat on the table. "I was there. September of 1994, the kitchen at the home place, out south of Madrid. I was twenty-six, the commission days old, and I came out to notarize a quitclaim deed. The home quarter. From her, to your aunt and the man she married."

The lamp hums. The trucks go on.

"The deed was already drawn when I got there. He did the talking, all of it, in the county's reasonable voice, the kind that has an answer for everything. Your aunt was not in the room. Your grandmother sat at the kitchen table in her good gray coat with the brooch, and she said nothing at all. And when she went to sign, her hand was trembling, and the page moved with it,

and he put his thumb on the page to hold it flat. Beside the signature line. He never touched her hand. His thumb was on the page, and she signed, and the signature came out small and steady at the end of the trembling, the way your people's signatures do, and I filled my certificate and stamped it and took the fee, and she walked me to the door and thanked me for coming out. Her face said the rest. I was twenty-six, and I heard her face say it, and I asked nothing."

Berit's face is doing what the county's faces do at the tables when the true thing arrives: nothing, and everything. She has both hands flat on the table now, and she is watching Delma the way the county watches weather.

"There is no record of any of this. The paper says a quitclaim, duly signed, and the paper is true, and the paper is not the whole of it, and the whole of it lived in me, and I never once told it, because my work keeps every table, and keeping the tables was the whole of my work. I have signed ten thousand people since, and I have asked every one of them a question the law never required, about the wanting, because of her. Every one of them but her, when it could have mattered. I did ask her once, a month later, at the co-op counter, when her fall paper came through my hands, some small wording about the wanting, and she gave me an answer so plain I have never once forgotten

it. But the paper that mattered had already been signed in her kitchen a month before, and that paper I stamped without asking her anything at all. She died carrying the deed's answer, and I have been carrying it with her, unasked and ungiven, all this time, and the answer belongs to this family, and you are the family."

Delma takes a breath, the witness's one breath, and gives it.

"You would want to know whether she wanted to sign that deed, and I never asked her that. I watched her face across that table, and I have watched ten thousand faces since, and I will answer for her now, in the only court left, because the witness owes the watched at least one sentence."

The lamp burns. The house listens. Berit does not move.

"She didn't want to."

Acknowledgments

No names, by design, because the debts are to the trades. The author thanks the notaries, the ones who travel and the ones who keep office hours, who learned the statute's who and then learned the rest of it on their own; the scale operators and the weighmasters, who are trusted with a district's whole crop and a district's whole word; the obituarists of the county weeklies, who sit down at the kitchen tables on the worst days and come away with the dates and the service and the survivors; the deckhands, wheelhands, cooks, and watermen who work the coasts and the rivers; the crane operators who read the chart before the load; the imaging technologists on the night shift; the process servers and tracers with a code; the producers who learned consent the hard way and the ones who never had to; and the county clerks, the court reporters, the title people, and the lawyers' runners, the whole guild of people who watch signatures for a living. Errors of craft in these pages are the author's own.

About the Author

David Boles is a writer and publisher. His novels move through farm country, storm country, and the small counties where the records are kept. He writes at BolesBlogs.com, talks about the work at HumanMeme.com and PrairieVoice.com, and publishes at David Boles Books. The current list of his books is always at https://bolesbooks.com.

Also by the Author

Fiction: *Passage Land*; *The Inheritance*; *The Kinship of Strangers*; *The Held Land*; *The Corollary*; *Civility Certified*; *Standard Deviation*; *The Likeness*; *The Wergild*; *The Disposition*; *The Dying Grove*; *The Somnambulist's Prophecy*.

Nonfiction: *Go to Every Funeral.*

For the latest and complete list of published works, visit https://bolesbooks.com.

Questions for Discussion

1. Delma's question checks whether it is you doing it. Where in the twelve did the question come too late, and where did it come exactly on time?

2. Every story lends a minor person to the next story as its protagonist. On a second reading, where did you first catch the handoff, and which handoff did you miss?

3. Which of the twelve verdicts would you argue with, and in whose hearing?

4. Which truths in this book survive in records, and which survive only in people? When does the difference protect someone, and when does it endanger them?

5. At the millpond, three adults stand and one moves. The county's account settles the standing out of the story. What does your own county settle, and how?

6. Is the last line a fact or a testimony? What is the difference, and what in the book decides it?

7. The forms do the arguing: a transcript, a collage of tape, a future tense. Pick the form you trusted least and say what it made true anyway.

8. Ott's correction, the tracer's false address, Tempe's correction on the air, Delma's sentence at the end. Which acts in this book repair harm, and which chiefly relieve the person who caused it?

9. Early's rounds give the living their true sentences with time attached. Which doorstep would you have skipped, and which would you have added?

10. The last line is an answer given on behalf of the dead. Who in your own life is owed one sentence like that, and who could give it?

A Note on Sources

This is a work of fiction in twelve linked stories, and nothing in it happened. The people are invented; no document quoted in these pages exists; the tickets, the transcripts, the deeds, and the correction certificates are furniture built for the story. The counties, parishes, towns, and rivers are real places, entered with respect, and the events that happen to them here are imagined. The county seat of Mathews has been called the Court House for a long time; the pond, the crab house, the co-op, and the fair-office trailer are invented buildings in real weather.

The crafts were researched against the trades' own texts, listed in the bibliography: the weighing of grain by gross, tare, and net; the load chart's arithmetic and what exceeds it; the flow artifact that mimics disease; the cold water's arithmetic in minutes; the notary's certificate, whose language is the law's own. The load chart and the crane are invented; the standard the chart answers to is real. The recording practices of remote notarization are real, and the book honors them: the sessions' records close where the platforms

close them, and what is said after the record is the book's own.

Some liberties are deliberate and are named here, not smuggled. A Nebraska commission speaks only inside Nebraska, and Louisiana commissions its notaries for life but only from its own residents; this book lets one notary's work travel to a Cameron dock and a Ville Platte fair office and a Baton Rouge tower, because the stories needed the docks and the parish tables, and the statute books are right, and the book says so here. The scale's sleeve is the book's own machinery: it bears where the book says it bears, and the state's June test passes it the way the book needs it passed, and the state's own handbook would have questions for it, and the book says so here. The winter of the millpond was a warm one in that country, and the pond froze anyway, the way shallow ponds do in the one hard snap. The rest is the trades' own truth, and the errors of craft that remain are the author's own.

The witness's oath and the certificate's boilerplate are the law's furniture, quoted as the furniture they are. The Cather line is from the heart of the country she had in mind, which is this one's neighbor.

Glossary

Acknowledgment. The notarial act used on deeds: the signer personally appears, is identified, and acknowledges the signing as a voluntary act. No oath is sworn; the notary certifies the appearing and the knowing.

Advancer. An obituary written ahead of the fact and held against the day. Every newsroom keeps them for the famous. Early's kind did not exist on paper at all.

Answering machine greeting. The outgoing message; the voice that stays.

Bail bond. The bond that buys a defendant's pretrial liberty; the bondsman stands for it, and the skip owes the bondsman.

Block and bridle. Two different things under the hook: the block is the sheave assembly the line is rove through, and the bridle is the multi-leg sling that spreads the load's lift points. The chart counts both.

Boarding sea. A wave that comes over the rail whole, with weight in it.

Boilerplate. The fixed language of a form, read by no one, binding everyone.

Certificate, notarial. The notary's signed statement on the paper: who appeared, how known, what was sworn or acknowledged. Its old phrase runs, personally known to me.

Channel marker. The fixed sign that marks the channel's edge. When it is out, the night finds its own line.

Cold open. The piece of tape a show plays before its own name arrives.

Commission. The state's grant of a notary's authority, four years at a time in Nebraska, ending at midnight on the day named.

Co-op. The farmers' cooperative: the scale, the elevator, the counter, the tickets.

Counterweight. The crane's answer to the load; the chart assumes it.

Crab house. The tidewater's eating place: the steamer, the baskets, the paper on the tables, the mallets.

Deposition. Testimony taken outside the courtroom, under oath, on the record, the reporter's machine running.

Errata sheet. The last page of a deposition transcript, where the witness corrects the record in writing and signs the corrections.

Flow artifact. Blood or fluid in motion making a mark on the image that looks like a finding and is not one. A known mimic. The CSF's own pulse is one of its shapes.

Green water. The seaman's term, Gulf and elsewhere, for the sea that comes over the rail solid, solid enough to stand on the deck and take what it takes.

Gross, tare, net. The truck full, the truck empty, and the grain. The truth lives in the tare.

Home quarter. The first quarter-section of a homestead, the 160 acres the house stands on. When the quarter goes, the name goes.

Inquest. The county's inquiry into a death or a loss, sworn and on the record, ending in a finding.

Load chart. The crane's law: so much weight at so much radius at so much boom. The chart does not negotiate.

Morgue. The newspaper's clippings room, where the county's printed dead are filed. Early never trusted it.

Notary public. The state's commissioned witness of signatures: verifies identity, administers oaths, takes acknowledgments, and certifies the act in writing. What the witness in this book adds is her own.

Phantom. The test object an imaging technologist scans on a machine's off-hours to keep the machine honest.

Pick. The crane's lift, counted in pounds on the hook.

Process server. The one who brings the paper to the person. The tracer's first trade.

Quarter-section. 160 acres, a quarter of a square mile, the plains' own unit of a life.

Quitclaim deed. The deed that conveys whatever interest the signer has, with no promise made about the title's soundness. What it can carry away, this book answers for itself.

Remote online notarization. The notary by camera: the license held up to the little eye, the room shown, the pen on the screen.

Rigging. The slings and hardware between the hook and the load; Percell Vercher's never failed.

Scale house. The shack over the truck scale, glass over the pit, where the district's whole crop becomes a ticket.

Self-proving affidavit. The sworn page attached to a will so the court need not call the witnesses later.

Skip. The one who did not show; the tracer's subject.

Tare. See gross.

Thaw danger. The county paper's own February story, run every year, of the ice that looks the same and is not.

Title company. The company that searches the land's paper, insures the title, and sets the closing's table.

Tracer. The skip-tracer: the one who finds people for lenders and lawyers, by phone, gas, and eye.

Waterman. The Chesapeake's own word for the one who works the water.

Winter circuit. Delma's own name for the practice's far work, the docks and towers and fair offices the counties' paper wandered to.

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Index

Entries give page numbers. The unnamed are indexed the way the book keeps them: by their work.

Allbery, Ellis (the association's man), 13–16

Ashe, Lou (the borrowed name; see Ludie), 249–272

Broussard, Alcide (the captain), 28–32, 34–35, 39–41, 43

Cates (the lawyer out of Gloucester), 291–292, 295

the counter woman, see Ashe, Lou

the crew cook, see Salcido

Devereux, Early (the obituarist), 263, 273–296, 324

Escobedo (the bondsman), 226

Fane, Odell (the luckiest man), 51–74, 88–89, 91–92, 94–96

Fontenot, Mireille (the crane operator), 75–118, 124, 313

Hartle, Dell, 277–279, 284, 289, 293

Hartle, Earl, 278

Hebert, Junius (the deckhand), 28–32, 36, 38, 40, 42–44, 46–49

Hudgins, Carlton (the pressman), 285–289, 293

the junior at the ticket table, 62, 88

Karras, Dov (the legal videographer), 76, 119–144

Karras, Halina, 119–144

Kopecky, Ms. (the lawyer in Spokane), 174–177, 179

Krotz, Darlene (the co-op office), 2, 5, 17–22

Lemoine family, 54–55, 59, 62, 65–67, 69

Ludie (later Lou Ashe), 229, 265, 270

Marek (Ilka's brother), 156–159, 177–178, 184, 189–190, 192
Minter, Fletcher (the waterman), 281–282, 284, 289, 293
Nájar, Aurelio, 159, 171–196
the night watchman, 41, 51
the notary, see Vantrease, Delma
Pankonin, Wally (the co-op manager), 4, 7, 12, 14, 21–22
Praether, Ilka (the technologist), 128, 145–170
Pruitt, Omer, 283–284, 289, 293
Purdy, 240–242
Rehmer, Nadine, 3, 6–7, 12, 19, 26
Rehmer, Ott (the scale man), 1–26, 302
Ruud, Tempe (the producer), 197–224
Sadler, Miss (the teacher), 279–280, 284, 289, 293
Salcido, Ms. (the cook; narrates "Green Water"), 7, 27–50, 313
Slusser, Berneice, 197, 207–208, 210, 216
Slusser, Russell, 197, 208, 210–211, 214, 216, 221
Stelk, Berit, 297–330
Stelk, Lorna (the widow), 3, 6, 20, 22, 306
Stelk, Verle, 3–4, 11–12, 14–15, 22, 312
Tillett, Gower (the boy on the ice), 253–254
the tracer (narrates "Skip"), 205, 225–248
Vantrease, Delma (the notary), 16, 42, 63, 133, 161, 180, 219, 230, 250, 294, 297–330
Vaught, Kessler, 229–230, 233–234, 240, 244–245
Vidrine, Mrs., 65, 67–70, 73
Wilbert (the second hand), 28–31, 34–37, 39–40, 43, 46
the woman with the recorder, see Ruud, Tempe

Places. Bakersfield, 225, 239; Baton Rouge, 67, 75, 77, 80, 117, 124, 138, 312; Cameron Parish, 27–29, 40, 45, 49, 313; Cobbs Creek, 278–279; Elsie, 298; Erie, 197–200, 202, 204, 206–207, 212–214, 216, 243; Evangeline Parish, 51, 53, 55, 57, 64–65, 88, 287; Fallon (the loud

lie), 245–247; Gloucester, 267, 273, 278, 285, 291–292, 324; Grant, 1, 26, 297–298, 300–303, 312, 314, 319, 321, 326–327; Imperial, 13, 16, 21, 309, 315; Kern County, 205–206, 225; Madrid, 3, 6–7, 23, 303, 308, 310–312, 328; Mathews County, 249, 273; the millpond and the Court House, 252–253; North Platte, 298, 317; Pasco, 145, 160, 162–164, 168, 171, 185, 194, 205; Perkins County, 1, 297–298, 320; Portland, 119, 136, 146, 154, 161–162, 306; Richmond, 291; Spokane, 142, 146, 155, 157, 160, 165, 171, 173–174, 176–177, 179, 184–187; Venango, 7, 314; Ville Platte, 51–52, 88, 91, 94–96; Yakima, 145, 167, 174.

Subjects. the advancer, spoken, 276; the answering-machine greeting, 197; the applause that indicts, 223; the certificate and its boilerplate, 318; the correction certificate, 20; the errata sheet, 117; the false address, 245; the flow artifact, 167; the green water, 30; the last question's answer, 330; the lien line, 5; the load chart (Exhibit 11), 108; the lucky-man echo, 51, 287; the millpond picture, 265, 276; the off-book scan, 148; the pause before yes, 250, 305; the palmed draw, 54, 93, 288; the protected statement, declined, 177; the question (the wanting), 16, 43, 63, 133, 161, 180, 219, 230, 250, 295, 304; the quitclaim, 309; the read-back, 295, 299; the rehearsal on the dock, 43, 313; the rounds, 276; the silence clause, refused, 176; the sleeve in the dial head, 9; the stamp (the eighth one), 319; the vow of September 1994, 310; the weekly, 270, 285, 298; the wheel turn, unreadable, 33.