THE HUNGRY GODS GO TO WORK

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ONE

How a City Wakes Up

The ferry made the first crossing at half past six, as it has been making it since 1752, which makes it the oldest saltwater ferry in North America and the second oldest in the world, a fact printed on a plaque that nobody on the 6:30 has ever once read, because the people on the 6:30 are asleep standing up, which is its own kind of tribute. The harbour was flat and pewter-coloured and smelled of itself. On the far side the peninsula stood up out of the water as it always has, a long rocky thumb of a place with a fort on top of it and a city draped over the sides, and all along its streets, in the last dark before seven, the machinery of the day began to turn over.

A city waking up is a scheduled event of enormous size and no one is in charge of it. The buses pulled out of their depot in a long grumbling family. The water, which never sleeps, went on pressing patiently against the inside of every tap on the peninsula, waiting to be asked. In fifty-one fire stations across the municipality the day shift relieved the night shift, and in one of them, down near the harbour, three brand-new trucks stood nose-out in the bay, gleaming, still smelling faintly of the far side of the country where they had been built — short, high-shouldered, serious-looking machines designed for a kind of fire this city had met exactly once and hoped never to meet again. They had been delivered in the winter. They had not yet gone anywhere except around the block, carefully, the way you walk a new dog. The crews admired them daily and

privately hoped, in the complicated way of their profession, both to use them and never to need them.

And distributed through the waking apparatus, holding down seven perfectly ordinary municipal jobs, were seven beings who were very much older than the ferry.

They were not in charge. They had been, once — of everything, of harvests and voyages and the weather, of the terrible abundance of the world — and that arrangement ended a long time ago for reasons none of them discusses, and what is left of them now fits inside a reflective vest or behind a counter. They do not miss the old work, because missing is not really in them. They are what they do, and everything in a human being keeps wanting that to be otherwise.

The Hand was a labourer with Public Works, and had been one for as long as anyone at the yard could remember, which was not very long, because no one could remember him arriving and so no one had thought to count. He fixed things. He was, everyone agreed, very good.

The All-Seeing sat in a dispatch centre in front of a wall of screens, watching the city move all at once, which was the closest thing his old work still had to a job description.

The Conscience-Keeper carried a clipboard and three codes and inspected things, and found them wanting, and said so, in writing, in triplicate, which was a great falling-off from the days when his findings had been eternal, but the hours were better.

The Chaos-Weaver worked at Planning, third floor of Duke Tower, where the shape of the city is decided, or more exactly where it is filed.

The Seeker worked by-law and animal services, returning lost things to the names attached to them.

The Companion answered the municipal line, which anyone in the region can reach by pressing three digits, and which will answer in three hundred languages, and which is, though the municipality does not advertise it this way, the number you call when you do not know who to call.

And the Allfather — the oldest of them, the one who had once been the sky's own patriarch and the father of every oath — worked in the Office of the Mayor, where he was not the mayor. Mayors come and go; they are elected, which the Allfather found an eccentric way to select a figurehead but was too polite to say so. He was the protocol clerk. He drafted the proclamations. Every official blessing the city pronounced upon itself — every Volunteer Appreciation Week, every Hospitality Workers Day, every solemn whereas — came off his desk, in the high old language of benediction with the divinity carefully sieved out of it, and he was the only being in the building who could tell you why a proclamation has the shape it has, because he had invented the shape, some thousands of years ago, for blessing kings.

What do gods do all day? The honest answer, visible from the ferry if you knew where to look, was: they clock in.

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At eight o'clock that morning, two things happened that mattered.

The first happened on a website. It was the sixteenth of March, the season's first Monday. At eight the province's burn map turned red, as it had the morning before with nobody at a desk to see it, and as it would now turn red every morning at eight and stay red until two, every day until the fall, because between those hours it is never safe to burn, whatever the sky is doing. Wildfire season in Nova Scotia opens like a shop: on a fixed date, with a posted schedule. Nobody in the city noticed. The map is for careful people in the county with brush piles, and the city, which had no brush, had other tabs open.

The second happened on Gottingen Street, where a landlord who had been promising to be there at eight arrived at twenty to nine, apologising with his whole upper body, and handed a small ring of keys to the Haddad family, who had been waiting on the sidewalk long enough to have developed opinions about the door.

There were three of them. Elias Haddad took the keys as you take something you have been arguing yourself out of wanting for a year. Mona Haddad looked at the papered-over windows with the specific narrow gaze of a woman pricing what it will cost to be proven right. And their daughter Yara, who had grown up over one bakery and behind another and had sworn on several occasions never to enter the trade, stood holding a folder — the first folder; there would be others; by summer the folder would have a family of its own — and looked up at the empty fascia above the window where a sign would someday go, and did not say the name out loud, because you do not say it until it is real. But it was going to say HADDAD'S. That much had been settled at a kitchen table in January, over the objections of nobody, which had made everyone suspicious.

Inside, the shop was a gutted rectangle that smelled of dust and the previous tenant's decade. Elias walked it slowly, once, the way a man walks a field. At the back wall he stopped, and stood a moment, and tapped the bare floor twice with his toe.

"Here," he said.

He meant the oven. He meant the saj — the humped iron dome he had cooked on in his mother's kitchen and his grandmother's before that, which was currently in a shipping container and legally speaking a "food service appliance, unlisted," a phrase that would cost the family a great many mornings. Yara crouched and marked the spot with a stub of chalk from the folder, a neat square on the bare boards, and the shop, which had been a rectangle of dust, became a bakery that did not exist yet. That is all it takes. A square of chalk and somebody's certainty.

Three streets up Gottingen, under the road — packed in the dark, sand-bound, three feet down beside an old iron main, among the pipes and the century's buried mistakes — there lay a small brass beetle that had been there a very long time and was in no hurry. The city never knows what it is standing on. That is what the city has instead of innocence.

The streetlight on the corner had been out since February.

It had been reported — a resident had pressed the correct sequence of numbers and told the municipal line about it, and the municipal line had opened a ticket, and the ticket had entered the queue where streetlight tickets live, prioritised below the ones on highway ramps and above the ones in parks, and it was working its way toward the front of that queue at the ordinary speed of municipal light, which is slower than the other kind.

The Hand passed the corner at 7:12 that morning, on his way in, on foot, as he was sometimes on foot in places no one had sent him. He looked up at the dead light. He reached up — the pole is thirty feet and he did not climb it, and for the Hand, reaching is not a matter of arms — and touched the base of it, and the light came on, burning its small daylight-pale circle into the grey morning, a fortnight of darkness cancelled in the time it takes to touch a thing that is yours.

At 7:12 and forty seconds, in the work-order system, the streetlight ticket closed itself.

This caused a problem. The ticket had a repair crew assigned to it and the crew had not gone yet; a closed ticket with no labour logged against it is, to the system, not a solved streetlight but an error, and the system flagged it, and a supervisor was emailed, and the supervisor did the only rational thing, which was to assume a glitch, reopen the ticket, and send the crew anyway. The crew arrived Thursday. They tested a light that worked, logged forty minutes, and closed the ticket properly, with labour, at which point the light had been repaired twice: once by a god, in a second, off the books; and once by the municipality, in forty minutes, on them. Only the second one had happened, as far as the city would ever be able to prove. The corner did not care. The corner had its light.

That is the arrangement: the impossible happens quietly, and the possible is dispatched to the scene afterward, and the paperwork sides, every time, with the possible.

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By nine the city was fully awake and had forgotten waking, as you forget it, and the day's ten thousand errands were distributed and moving. The ferry crossed and recrossed. The Allfather drafted a proclamation declaring it Skilled Trades Awareness Week, whereas and whereas and whereas, and got the cadence of the third whereas exactly right, and permitted himself nothing so human as satisfaction, though the cadence was, for the record, exactly right. At Planning, a folder was opened with a new address on its tab: a shopfront on Gottingen. In dispatch, the All-Seeing watched one intersection's near-misses run above their seasonal rate for the third month in a row, which was the intersection's way of asking for a light, and noted it, and the note went where notes go.

And in the empty shop the Haddads stood in the dust in a triangle around a chalk square, planning in two languages a thing that did not exist, while under the street the water waited to be asked and the beetle waited for nothing in particular, and out at the edge of the county the woods came out of the winter dry, drier than the winter had any right to leave them, though no one had measured that yet, because the column that measures it had only opened the day before, with the season, at eight o'clock sharp.

The gods went about their work. Nothing whatsoever was wrong.

TWO

How a City Is Run

City Hall stands at 1841 Argyle Street, a fine sandstone building with a clock tower, and if you ask the building who runs the city it will tell you, through the medium of its architecture, that somebody grand does, upstairs. The architecture is wrong, but it is wrong in a dignified way, which is most of what architecture is for.

The Regional Council meets there on select Tuesdays: a mayor, elected by everyone, and sixteen councillors, elected by everyone divided into sixteen pieces, and together they are the main legislative and governing body of the municipality, and the meetings are broadcast on community television for an audience that has been described, by people who track such things, as loyal. The seventeen are real people, and they change every four years.

The thing which does not change is the stamp.

Here is how a city is actually run, and it can be explained with one Tuesday. On the agenda that Tuesday were forty-one items. Thirty-four of them travelled together in a block called the consent agenda, which is the parliamentary equivalent of a car pool: items so procedurally settled that they are approved all at once, in a single vote, in under two minutes — and those thirty-four items were, that Tuesday, the government. They moved money, awarded contracts, accepted reports, amended schedules; one of them quietly authorised the purchase of hose. Nobody discussed them. Discussion had happened already, for months, in rooms without cameras,

between staff whose names are on nothing, and by the time an item reaches the consent agenda it is less a decision than a fact having its photograph taken.

The remaining seven items took four hours. Six of those hours — the arithmetic of council time is not like other arithmetic — went to a single crosswalk. It was a contentious crosswalk. Residents appeared and spoke feelingly on both sides of it. A motion was amended, and the amendment amended, and a councillor asked staff to report back on the feasibility of reporting back. The crosswalk was, in the end, deferred. It had been deferred before. It was a crosswalk of great experience.

And this is not a failure of the system. This is the system: the thirty-four silent items could travel silently *because* the machine beneath them is trustworthy, and the crosswalk could absorb four hours *because* the four hours are the only part the public can reach. People do not come to the microphone about the hose contract. They come about the street they cross with their children. A council chamber is the city's one room where feeling is on the agenda, and the feeling has to go somewhere, and better a crosswalk than nowhere. The gods understood this arrangement perfectly, having invented an early version of it: the temple where the people wail, and the storeroom out back where the grain is actually counted.

The Allfather worked down the corridor from the chamber, in the Office of the Mayor, at a desk with a green lamp.

He had held, in his time, an office with no office above it. He had been the sky. Oaths were sworn *by* him; kings were kings because he said so; the year itself had needed his signature. All of that was long gone, wherever it goes, and what remained of the father of gods and men was a courteous, white-bearded protocol clerk of indeterminate seniority who drafted the city's proclamations, kept the chain of office in its case, knew by heart the correct form of address for every dignitary who could conceivably visit — and, this being the residue of what he was, could not stop blessing things. He did not bless them out loud. He blessed them in the format the modern world had left him: *Whereas* the residents of

this municipality benefit greatly from the dedication of its crossing guards; *and whereas* their vigilance in all weathers exemplifies the spirit of public service; *therefore be it resolved* that the week of April the somethingth be proclaimed Crossing Guard Appreciation Week. That is a blessing. It is a blessing with the divinity drained out of it and the whereas poured in, and the Allfather composed them in bulk, beautifully, for parades and retirements and heritage months and the openings of rinks, and if the city had ever wondered why its proclamations read as though somebody meant them, the answer was down the corridor, at the desk with the green lamp, meaning them.

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The Haddads' permit entered the machine at 2:11 a.m.

It entered at 2:11 a.m. because that is when Yara stopped fighting the portal. The municipality had, some years earlier, moved its permitting online, into a system whose name is an acronym, and the system is genuinely an improvement on the era of paper, and it is also a website, with everything that means. Yara had assembled the application the way you pack for a trip you are frightened of: site plan, floor plan, elevations, the landlord's letter, the drawing of where the sign would go, a PDF of a PDF of a survey older than her father. The portal accepted each document with a green checkmark, and rejected the ninth for being four hundred kilobytes too large, and accepted it once she had photographed her own screen, which is the folk remedy everyone arrives at eventually and no one is proud of.

At 2:11 the application went in. At 2:12 the system wrote back. The system was pleased to confirm receipt. The system had assigned her a number. The system wished to advise that applications were processed in the order received, that processing times varied, and that she could monitor the status of her application at any time through the portal — and this last part was true, and was the small perfect cruelty of the modern arrangement, because the status could be monitored at any time, and the status did not change. The status

said *Received.* It would say *Received* for a good while, and then one day, with no fanfare, it would say *In Review*, and the difference between those two words, invisible to any instrument, would be the only event of that month.

Her grandmother had opened a shop in this city too, fifty years earlier. Her grandmother's application process, as family legend told it, was a conversation with a man named Gerald. Yara did not want Gerald back — she had read enough to know what else came with Gerald, and who Gerald had conversations with, and who he didn't — but at 2:14 a.m., watching *Received* not change, she understood for the first time that Gerald had at least been capable of being argued with, and that she had traded a man for a status field, and that this was progress, and that progress could not hear her.

She went down to City Hall itself only once that spring, on advice from an aunt whose information was thirty years old, to see whether anything could be moved along in person. This is a thing people still do. The building receives them kindly. There is a counter for it.

The counter explained, kindly, that permits were not City Hall; permits were Planning & Development, at Duke Tower, three blocks that way, third floor — but that since she had come all this way, was there anything else? And it was here, in the marble lobby, under the clock, that Yara Haddad met the Allfather, though she never learned it, and would have made a face if you had told her.

He was crossing the lobby with a proclamation in a leather folder — Water Awareness Week; he had given it a third whereas of unusual warmth — and she was standing where people stand when a building has just softly declined them, and something in the stance of her, the folder held like a shield, the specific tiredness of a person who is trying to make something exist, reached whatever in him it is that his long existence has been *for.* Fathers bless. It is not a policy; it is the shape of the thing. He stopped, and asked, in

the manner of courteous old men in lobbies, whether she was being looked after.

She said she was trying to open a bakery. She said it the way you confess something.

And the Allfather — who had blessed the keels of fleets, who had made emperors legitimate with a nod, whose *yes* had once been the difference between a dynasty and a rebellion — looked at this tired mortal woman with her folder, and gathered up everything that remained in him of the sky, and gave her the full benediction: prosperity on the house, warmth on the hearth, abundance on the table, favour on all who cross the threshold. Every word of it landed. Every word of it was real, in the sense that he meant it with what he was.

What Yara heard was a nice old man saying, "Well, we certainly wish you every success. The city can always use a good bakery."

"Thank you," she said. "Honestly, at this point I'll take it."

She went back out onto Argyle Street, and the status still said *Received*. The blessing could not move it. He had blessed her anyway, that being what is left of the sky. The Allfather returned to his desk and his green lamp. But the proclamation he finished that afternoon — Small Business Week, as it happened, the timing a coincidence, the city is full of coincidence — carried a fourth whereas, which was one more than the format strictly wanted, and the clerk who formatted it for signature read it twice and left it in, because it was, she said later, oddly moving, for a whereas.

The status changed to *In Review* on a Thursday, nineteen days later. Nobody will ever know why.

THREE

How a Variance Is Granted

The third floor of Duke Tower is where the city keeps its shape.

Not the city itself — the city itself is out the window, going about its morning — but the shape of it: every lot line, every setback, every zone, the rulebook of what may stand where and how tall and how close to what, bound into a Land Use By-law that reads like the instructions for assembling a municipality and is, in fact, exactly that. The counter opens at 8:30. There is a ticket machine. Above the counter a screen shows the number now being served, and the difference between the number on the screen and the number in your hand is, for most visitors, their first honest measurement of the municipal distance between wanting and having.

The Chaos-Weaver worked behind that counter, though "behind the counter" understates it; he worked behind the counter the way weather works behind a window.

Of the seven, he is the one people get most wrong. He was never the god of mess. Mess is amateur work; any toddler is the god of mess. He was the god of the *tangle*: of how order, multiplied, becomes something no one ordered; of the knot that six careful people tie by each pulling one sensible string. His old dominion was the loom where fates crossed, and what he presided over there was not chaos as insult but chaos as *emergence*: the pattern nobody wove that appears anyway, made entirely of everyone's intentions, resembling none of them. When the old arrangements ended and

the seven drifted down into the world's remaining work, he had come to the third floor of Duke Tower the way water comes to the lowest point in a room. Nobody assigned him. Nothing assigns him. He is wherever the tangle is thickest, and he had a lanyard.

What he did behind the counter, nominally, was intake. What he did actually was see.

When a plan came across — anyone's plan, a deck, a dormer, a forty-storey tower — he did not see its future, which is not a thing the tangle offers anyone. He saw what it was joining. He saw every other plan on file it would touch, the way decks on narrow lots lean toward property lines, the way a sight-line breeds a dispute and a dispute breeds a fence and a fence breeds a letter, the rate at which a street of that age and width turns its owners into neighbours and its neighbours into correspondents. He heard it as you hear a chord, all at once, as one thing. Which deck would end in a fence he could not have said. That some of them would, and about how many, and down which streets, was simply present to him, the silent four-dimensional pile-up of a city's paperwork, and he received it, and stamped the intake date on the corner, and said, "You'll get an email."

He never warned anyone. Warning is not withheld from you at the counter. Warning is simply not among the things the counter contains. The Chaos-Weaver does not intervene in the tangle for the same reason the mirror does not step out and fix your collar. Seeing is the whole of him. There is no part left over to act with.

The Haddads needed a variance, and the word had already been explained to Yara twice before anyone explained what it would cost.

A variance is the city's mechanism for forgiving its own geometry: permission to adjust a requirement of the Land Use By-law — a setback, a lot coverage, a yard — when your lot cannot honestly meet it. The Haddads' problem was parking. The shop was a shop; the by-law, drawn in an era that believed in a certain ratio of cars to buns, wanted more parking than the lot possessed, and the lot

could not grow, Gottingen Street being, like most streets, already entirely made of itself. So: a variance. A reasonable ask. Variances exist precisely for lots like theirs, and hers would very likely be granted, everyone agreed, warmly, on the phone and at the counter and in the portal's help text, right up until she asked how long.

Here is the arithmetic she was given, and it is the true arithmetic, measured from the city's own records. A building permit — the plain kind, for a project that follows every rule as written — runs about eleven weeks from application to permit. But a project that needs *forgiveness* — a variance, a rezoning, anything where the city must exercise judgment rather than merely check compliance — enters a different stream, the discretionary stream, and the discretionary stream runs about a year. Not a little longer. A year, before the ordinary wait even begins.

"A year," said Yara, at the counter, in the voice of a woman rebalancing a life.

"It can be less," said the counter, honestly. "It's sometimes less."

"What makes it less?"

"Fewer applications ahead of you."

She asked, because you have to, how many were ahead of her. The person at the counter — it was not the Chaos-Weaver that day; he was three seats down, receiving a subdivision — consulted the screen with the small grimace of a professional about to deliver a number, and said: fourteen.

Fourteen files ahead of hers. Fourteen other geometries awaiting forgiveness, each with its own folder and its own tired applicant and its own kitchen table where a year had just landed. The Chaos-Weaver, three seats down, perceived — without looking up, looking up not being required — the queue as a single braided object: fourteen futures and hers, plaited together by the order of their arrival, each one's waiting made partly of the others' asking. He perceived, further, the thing about the queue that no one in the queue could perceive, which was its *innocence*: no one had built it. No one wanted it. Every rule that fed it had been written to prevent a real harm; every applicant in it had a real need; every planner

working it was working as fast as care allows. The queue was pure emergence: order, multiplied, become something no one ordered, and it was therefore his, as all such things are his, and he regarded his dominion for a moment with whatever a god has instead of feelings about it, and stamped the next intake.

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What saved the Haddads was Yara doing the thing the system cannot advertise but entirely permits, which is to stop asking for forgiveness.

She took the drawings home. She spread them on the kitchen table that had already survived the naming of the shop, and she and a patient man from the designer's office spent an evening interrogating the actual sentence of the actual by-law, and the sentence, read closely, offered a door: the parking requirement fell differently if the floor area fell below a threshold, and the floor area was over that threshold by very little, and the very little was the seating. Twelve seats made them a restaurant, in the by-law's eyes. Cut to a bench and a counter rail, a place you perch with a coffee, not a place you are served, and the shop slid under the threshold, out of the discretionary stream, into the plain one. No variance. No forgiveness needed. No year.

They argued about it over dinner, the three of them, because dinner was where that family settled things.

Elias made the case for the tables. His mother's shop in Beirut had tables, four of them, small and marble-topped, and at them every morning of his childhood sat the same old men, who each bought one coffee and one manoushe and held a table for three hours and were not, and this was the point, customers. They were the shop. A bakery that only sold bread was a factory with a good smell. A bakery was a room the neighbourhood could sit down inside. Cut the tables and you had not saved eighteen months; you had removed the reason.

"They can stand," said Mona.

"You cannot sit down standing up."

"Your mother's men stood. Half of them." She had been there; he had been a boy; she reminded him of both. "The tables held their coats. There were always more coats than men." She was not against the old men, and said so, at length, so that no one at the table that night could ever accuse her of it. She was against waiting a year and a half for a room to seat them in, when there was a room to be had in the spring that would hold them standing at a rail, in the traditional posture of men with somewhere better to complain about being. Bread first. Chairs when the bread had bought them.

Yara did the thing she had learned to do at the municipal counter, which was to set the two futures on the table side by side and let them be looked at. Tables meant the variance, and the variance meant the discretionary stream, and the discretionary stream meant a year, fourteen files deep, with the lease running all the while and the saj sitting cold in a room they were paying for and forbidden to open. Or: lose the seats, slip under the threshold, open in the spring, on their own money, this year. No tables meant no table service, and no server's wage in the budget either: only a counter, and someone standing behind it from seven until close, every day; and when Elias said so, both her parents looked at Yara, who had sworn on several occasions never to enter the trade. She did not say which she wanted. She had learned not to. What she said, after a while, was that she would do the counter until the first of October, and then they would talk, and that she was keeping Sundays; and her father, who knew a negotiated position when he heard one, agreed to both before her mother could improve on them.

Elias was quiet a while. Then he signed the revised drawing — the bench, the rail, the twelve seats gone down to four perches no one would insult by calling a table — with the slow, ceremonial hand of a man giving up ground he fully intends to take back.

"When we buy the building," he said.

Nobody told him they were not going to buy the building. It was a good sentence, and it went onto the shelf in that family where the good sentences live, beside the ones that had come true; and the drawing went back into the portal that night, amended, compliant,

asking the city for nothing the city would have to think about.

The fastest route through the machinery of permission is to need none. The by-law is a maze that will negotiate any wall with you, slowly, or hand you the map for free the moment you agree to walk only where the corridors already are. Yara walked the corridors. The Haddads' file crossed, that week, from the pile that takes a year into the pile that takes eleven weeks, and the fourteen ahead of them became fourteen ahead of somebody else, and the queue closed over the gap without a ripple, as queues do, being made of time, which heals.

The Chaos-Weaver processed the amended application himself, as it happened. He saw what it was joining: a counter, on a street of counters, and what counters on streets like that tend to become over enough years — the regulars, the perch that turns into a habit, the coats. Which of that this counter would get, and who would be standing behind it, was not in the pattern to see. He stamped the intake date. He said, "You'll get an email." She got an email.

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One more thing happened on the third floor that spring, too ordinary to constitute an event.

A junior planner, hunting a precedent for an unrelated file, pulled a drawer in the flat files, the wide shallow drawers where the old subdivision plans sleep in their folios, the city's shape as drawn by its previous hands, and walked her fingers along the tabs, and paused at one, and slid it out far enough to read the title block, and it was not the plan she wanted, and she slid it back. The plan was some decades old. It showed a parcel of woods off Highway 103, northwest of the city, combed into lots by a tidy loop of road; the lots backed onto the trees, which the drawing rendered as a soft grey stipple, the cartographic symbol for *asset*; the loop fed, at its southern end, into the highway, once. Along its northern edge someone had pencilled a second line, dashed, running out through the trees to a side road, and beside it, in a planner's small hand: *secondary access — deferred to Phase 2.* There had been no Phase 2.

The market had turned, or the developer had, and the dashed line had stayed dashed, and the plan, as approved, met every rule of its era. In the corner, in the fine confident lettering of its decade, was the name the developer had given the woods: Balsam Ridge.

The drawer rolled shut on its bearings with a sound like a long breath, and the plan lay in the dark with the hundreds of its kind, every one of them approved, every one of them somebody's finished work, every one of them still quietly *deciding things* — because that is what a plan is, the only kind of document that goes on happening after it is filed — and the Chaos-Weaver, across the room, did not look up from his counter, there being nothing in any drawer he had not already seen.

He stamped the next intake. Outside the window it was a bright, dry spring, and getting dryer, and the city went about its morning in the shape it had been given.

FOUR

How the Water Comes to the Street

By six the yard was moving. The salt sheds had been stood down for the season, their big doors rolled shut on the last grey dunes of winter, and the plows sat nose-in along the fence like animals turned out to a summer field. What ran now was water and asphalt and the hundred small repairs a city needs when the frost comes up out of the ground and leaves everything a little loose behind it. Trucks signed out at the gate. A man carried a thermos in each hand and defended both. The lot was dry underfoot at an hour that should still have held the night's damp, and gave up a thread of dust to every boot. Somebody's radio played half a song and then the weather, which promised a dry one, high of twenty-two, and reminded everyone that the burn map went red at eight and stayed red until two, the same as every day now, because that was the season and that was how the map was built.

The Hand was already working when the first of the crew arrived, and nobody found this strange, because nobody could remember him arriving. He wore the vest. He wore the boots. He had a pry bar in his hands and was doing something exact with it at the back of the yard, and if you had asked the crew who he was they would have told you he was with Works and gone back to their coffee. He did not drink coffee. He did not stand at the board reading the night's orders aloud and disagreeing with them, which was the real first labour of the morning and the thing that knit the

crew into a crew. He was not in that circle. He was off to the side of it, already inside the day's actual work, the way a hinge is inside a door.

Dwyer had the board. Dwyer was the foreman, and foreman is a job that is mostly weather and mostly people and only sometimes pipe. He read down the overnight list with the cap pushed back off his forehead. Two hydrants flagged for flow testing. A service line out in Fairview. A catch basin that a resident had now phoned about four times, each time more personally. And, at 5:34 that morning, a main.

"Where," said Rennie, who ran the excavator and liked to know where she'd be sitting all day.

"Gottingen area, up top," Dwyer said. "Big one. Ground's gone."

He meant the ground had gone down. Somewhere under a busy street a pipe had let go in the night, quietly, the way old iron lets go, and the water had done what water does when it escapes a pipe with the weight of a lake behind it. It had gone looking for somewhere lower. It had found the sand around the pipe and carried it off grain by grain until the road above had nothing to lean on, and then a circle of that road had simply sat down into the space where the sand used to be. A sinkhole is not a hole that opens. It is a floor that leaves. By the time the first car stopped short at the edge of it, fifty-one addresses had no water and did not yet know, and the water that should have been in their taps was a block away, coming up cold through a seam in the asphalt and running downhill toward the harbour, looking, as it always looked, for the sea it came from.

They rolled at 6:20. Two trucks, the excavator on the float, cones, plate steel, the pump. The Hand went with them and no one had told him to, and no one asked, because he was already up in the cab with his hands on his knees, watching the road come, and a man watching the road that steadily is a man you leave alone.

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Here is where the water they were driving to fix had come from,

because it is worth knowing, and because the Hand knew it the way you know your own arm.

It began as rain and fog on a granite upland northwest of the city, in a woods most of the fifty-one addresses had never walked in and would never walk in, and it gathered into a lake called Pockwock that the city is not allowed to build near, swim in, or generally love, because the city drinks it. From the lake it went to a plant named for a man named Kline, where it was screened and dosed and made safe and pushed, under pressure, into a single great pipe called the transmission main. That main runs buried down the shoulder of Kearney Lake Road, and it is the throat of the thing: nearly everything north and central drinks through it, and when crews have to touch it they touch it at night, all night, with the city given roughly a day's water in the tanks and asked, please, not to be greedy. From the main the water branched, and branched again, into the ordinary streets, into pipes the diameter of a dinner plate and then a wrist, until it reached the particular tired length of iron that had let go under Gottingen in the dark. All of that, lake to seam, was one connected thing that the city thought of, when it thought of it at all, as *the tap being on*. The Hand thought of it as a hand. He did not think this as a metaphor. He simply knew where the fingers were.

They came up on the street and it was already a small event. A patrol car sat sideways with its lights going. A knot of the woken stood in dressing gowns at the tape, holding phones, and a man in a good coat was explaining the situation to the other people at the tape as though he had built the pipe himself and was disappointed in it. The sinkhole was the size of a compact car and had swallowed a parking sign, which now leaned out of it at the angle of a mast going down.

Dwyer got out and became, instantly, the person everyone at the tape wanted to speak to. This is a foreman's true trade. He gave the crowd exactly enough attention to move them back and no more, and while he did it the crew went to work around him without being told, each to the one thing that was theirs.

Paige set the cones and turned the street from a street into a site, which is a change made entirely out of orange. Cyril took the shut-off key and went upstream to find the valve, because before you can open the ground you have to close the water, and a valve is a promise the city made a hundred years ago that it could someday be turned off here, a promise nobody checks until the morning they need it. He found the box. He cleared the muck out of it with two fingers and a curse. He got the key down onto the nut and leaned, and somewhere up the line a gate came down across the flow, slow, and the water stopped chewing the sand.

Then Rennie brought the excavator off the float and began, very gently, to take the road apart.

You would think digging is the loud, careless part, and with a lesser operator it is. Rennie dug the way a person unpacks something breakable that belongs to someone else. She peeled the asphalt. She took the gravel down in lifts. She read the ground for the grey of a gas line and the orange of a conduit and the general treachery of a street that has been opened and closed and opened again for a century, each crew leaving its pipes and its mistakes for the next. She set the spoil in a neat growing heap to one side. The top lifts came up dry and pale, a spring's worth of no rain gone straight down into them, until she reached the dark wet halo the leak had made around the pipe; and it was in the first bucket of that wet sand that the bug came up.

Nobody saw it arrive because it had not arrived; it had only been uncovered. It was a beetle the size of a thumbnail, cast in brass or something like brass, dulled green-black with age and packed with grit in every joint, and it lay in the spoil with its six legs folded as if it had decided, some long time ago, to wait. Paige noticed it because Paige was young and still looked at things. She picked it out, wiped it on her vest, held it up to the grey morning and turned it over.

"What is that," she said, not really asking.

"Garbage," said Cyril, coming back from the valve.

"It's heavy, though." She weighed it in her palm. "Somebody made this."

"Somebody made all the garbage."

She flicked it up onto the dash of the near truck, where it slid to the base of the windshield and sat, and there it rode out the rest of the day looking out at the work, and no one thought about it again, which is the life story of most made things.

By now the hole was open and the pipe lay bare at the bottom of it, and you could see the break, a long dark mouth in the iron where the metal had finally tired of holding. Cyril climbed down with the shoring and set it, because a trench is a grave that has not made up its mind, and no one goes into one this deep without walls. Dwyer looked into the hole and said a number to himself and then a worse number, because the break was longer than the call had made it sound, and this was going to be a coupling and a section, and the section meant the day was now a long day.

While he was saying the worse number, the Hand went into the trench.

He went down without the ladder, which nobody registered, and he crouched at the bottom in the seeping cold with his bare hand flat against the iron, and for a moment he was completely still in the middle of all that motion, the pump running, Rennie's engine idling, the radio, the man in the good coat still lecturing the tape. He put his hand over the long dark mouth of the break the way you would put a hand over the mouth of someone you did not want to hear speak. And the iron closed.

It did not weld, or knit, or glow. Nothing so loud. The break was simply, at the end of the gesture, not there, and the length of pipe was one length of pipe again, whole and cold and streaming with groundwater on the outside but sound, entirely sound, the way it had been on the day it was cast and lowered and covered over by men whose grandchildren were now dead. The water that Cyril had shut off upstream pressed against its closed gate, wanting back in,

and the pipe was ready for it. The work was done. The day's long labour was done, in the time it takes to lay a palm on a cold thing.

Paige saw it. Not the doing of it, which cannot be seen, but the after: she looked down into the trench meaning to hand something to Cyril and saw the pipe was healed, and her face did the thing a face does when it has been shown too much and is not going to accept it. She looked at the pipe. She looked at the Hand crouched there in his vest with his ordinary hand. She looked back at the pipe.

"The break's —" she started.

And then she put it away. You could watch her put it away. She reached for the reason that would let her keep the morning she understood, and the reason was right there where the city keeps all such reasons, and she took it. "Cyril must've caught it upstream," she said. "The pressure. It pulled the lips back together. I've seen that." She had not seen that. Nobody has seen that, because it does not happen. But it was a sentence a person could stand on, and she stood on it. It reached her head a good few seconds before it reached the rest of her, and she climbed down into the gap between the two and kept working. That was the end of the only strange thing that happened on Gottingen that day, as far as anyone there would ever tell you.

The Hand climbed out of the trench. And the work order stayed open.

Because this is the part the lake and the plant and the miracle do not touch. A break is not fixed when the pipe is whole. It is fixed when a person has been signed out to it, and a coupling with a lot number has gone into the ground, and a second person has come to look at the coupling and agreed, in writing, that it is a coupling, and all of it closed in the system with a stroke that turns an open wound in the city's paperwork into a healed line in its history. The pipe being sound is not the fix. The fix is the *record* of the pipe being sound. And there was no record.

So Dwyer, who had looked at the sound pipe for exactly as long as it took to decide it was none of his business, said the only thing

a foreman can say. “Coupling still goes in,” he said. “Let’s get it exposed and done proper before someone from the province drives past.”

And they did it again.

They cut out the sound section the Hand had made sound. They fitted the new coupling, the one with the lot number, the one the inspector could kneel down and read. They did, by hand and by the book, over the next four hours, the thing that had already been done in an instant, because the instant did not count and the four hours did. The Hand worked among them while they did it, lifting what needed lifting, holding what needed holding, and if there was any objection in him to watching his own finished work torn out and redone slower, it did not show, because there was no *him* for it to show in. He was the labour. The labour did not mind. It never minds. That is the trouble with it.

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The right-of-way desk downtown does not look like water. It looks like a counter and a queue and a screen showing a number, lit flat and even and smelling of nothing, and the number, at 10:15, was still four short of the ticket in Yara Haddad’s hand.

She had come from the bakery, which was still only an idea with a lease: a gutted room that smelled of cut pine and plaster, a cold capped flue in the wall, and a square of bare floor she had marked in chalk where the saj dome would one day sit over its own fire. She had a folder. In the folder was everything the counter could possibly ask her for and, she had learned, one thing it would ask for that she had not thought to bring, because there was always one. The shop needed water. Water meant a service connection. A service connection meant opening the road, the municipal road, the city’s own skin, which meant a permit to do it and a schedule to do it on and a deposit against doing it wrong, and it was this, the permission to be connected to the water, that she had come down to the counter to purchase with an hour of her morning and a folder of her patience.

Her number came. The woman behind the counter was kind and thorough and bound, and they went through it in the two-track way these things go, the woman's careful municipal English and, twice, when Yara's phone lit with her father, a fast low sentence of Arabic sideways into it — *not now, Baba — no, don't let him pour the pad until I'm there; the dome sits where I marked it, an hour* — and then back to the counter, back to the careful English, back to the folder. The saj wanted a clean line, was the thing she could not say at the counter and did not try to. You cannot bake on a bad connection. Everything the oven would ever make, every round of dough slapped onto the hot dome and blistered and folded around za'atar and handed across a counter of her own someday, all of it had to come, first, up through the city's buried hand, lake to plant to main to this permit in this folder, before it could come to anything at all.

"There's a main break up on Gottingen this morning," the woman said, not unkindly, reading something on her screen. "Same area as your connection. Crews are on it. It may push your date."

"By how much," said Yara, who had learned to ask only that.

"I'll flag it. Watch your portal." Which meant: unknowable, and yours to keep watching.

She did not know, walking out with her folder and her flagged date, that the water she was buying the right to touch was the same water that had come up through the road three streets from her lease that morning and been shut off by a man named Cyril and made whole by a hand she would never hear about. She did not need to know it. The city is built precisely so that she would not have to. That is the kindness in it and the loneliness in it both.

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Late in the day they let the water back.

Cyril went up to the valve and leaned the key the other way, and the gate lifted, and the lake came back into the mended street with a sound in the pipes like a long breath taken after being underwater. It reached the fifty-one addresses one after another. In each of

them a tap, opened in hope, first spat air, then ran a startled rust-brown, the disturbed iron and sediment of the morning's violence coming through in a colour nobody wants to drink. Run the cold, the city says, and wait, and they ran the cold and waited, and one by one, house by house, the water cleared. It cleared the way it always clears, from wrong to right without any visible moment of becoming right, until it was only water again, and forgotten again, which is water's ambition.

Three streets away the empty bakery had no tap yet to run. It had a capped stub in a wall and a permit somewhere in a portal and a date that had just moved. But the main under Gottingen was whole, coupled, inspected, backfilled, compacted, recorded, and closed, and behind it the long hand of the system stood open and full and waiting, all the way back to the lake, ready to give up its water the day someone finally uncapped the stub and asked. It was only the asking that had not happened yet.

The crew floated the excavator and coiled the hose and picked the last cones out of the dusk, and the brass beetle rode down off the dash into someone's glovebox on the drive back, to wait somewhere new. Dwyer signed the day out. The Hand was not at the yard when they got back, or he was, and no one saw, which came to the same thing. He did not need thanking and would not have known the word applied to him. He had gone on to the next held thing, wherever the next held thing was, because that is what a hand is for.

And northwest of all of it, above the lake the day had been about, the woods stood in the last of the light exactly as dry as they had been at dawn, drier, the moss crisp underfoot and the duff gone to tinder in a spring that had forgotten to rain. No one was up there to notice. The map had been red since eight, as the map was always red now between eight and two, and had gone green again at two as it sometimes did, permitting small evening fires to careful people, and none of that had anything to do with the number that had been climbing all day in a column no one on Gottingen would ever read, the slow dry index of how much, if it ever started, there

was up there to burn.

It did not start that day. The water came to the street. The street forgot it. That was the work, and the work was good, and the work was not nearly finished, because the work is never finished, which is the one thing the Hand and the city have ever truly had in common.

FIVE

How a Kitchen Is Approved

Before a single round of dough may lawfully be sold in Nova Scotia, three separate powers must be satisfied, and the first thing to understand about them is that they have never met.

The first power is the province, in the person of a Public Health Officer, who cares about the food: the surfaces it touches, the temperatures it passes through, the hands that shape it and the water those hands are washed in. It is illegal to operate a food establishment without the province's permit, which must be earned before opening and renewed every year after, and the officer who grants it will want to review your layout before you build it, which is the province's polite way of saying that it has seen what people build when unsupervised.

The second power is the municipality, in the person of a building official, who does not care about the food at all. The building official cares about the building: the wall assemblies, the exits, the ventilation, the plumbing: the box the food happens in. You may keep the cleanest kitchen in the hemisphere inside a box that fails, and the second power will close you; you may keep a disgrace inside a box that passes, and the second power will wave as it drives by, the disgrace being, jurisdictionally, someone else's disgrace.

The third power is fire, in the person of a fire inspector, working under the province's Fire Safety Act but wearing the municipality's jacket, and the third power cares about neither the food nor, es-

pecially, the box. The third power cares about the twenty minutes. Everything in the fire code — every rated wall, every self-closing door, every extinguisher on its hook — is the purchase price of twenty minutes: the time it takes to get everyone out and the trucks in. The third power assumes the fire. That is the mentality. The other two powers inspect your kitchen as it is; the third inspects it as it will be at the worst moment of its life, and grades the difference.

Three codes. Three inspectors. Three visits, booked separately, weeks apart, none aware of the others' findings, each empowered to require changes that the next will require changed back. This is not a flaw that reform keeps missing. It is the honest shape of the thing: food, buildings, and fire are three different ways to be harmed, and the city has organised one conscience for each.

Which brings us to the being who, that spring, was all three of them.

The Conscience-Keeper had been, in the deep time before job titles, the one who weighs. Not the judge — judging is a verdict, and verdicts were for others — but the *scale itself*: the principle in the universe that keeps the ledger, before whom the heart is set in the balance and found what it is. Every tradition has had a name for him. All the names meant: *it is written down, and it is exact.*

What remained of him now held inspection credentials in three disciplines, which his colleagues in each considered a rare and admirable breadth, and he moved through the city's kitchens and boiler rooms and stairwells with a clipboard, weighing. The credentials were genuine. The breadth was not breadth. He was not a man who had learned three codes; he was the thing all three codes were shadows of, and when he stood in a room, the room was weighed entire, but the modern arrangement, the arrangement that governs all seven of them, is that he may record only what the form has a field for. He kept, involuntarily, because keeping accounts is what he *is*, the full ledger of every room he entered: every corner cut and every corner honoured, every lie told to every inspector back to the

building's first inspector, the moral weight of the room to the grain. And the form said: PASS / FAIL / RE-INSPECT.

He inspected the Haddads' build-out three times that spring, once in each of his jackets, and the visits went as follows.

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As the province, he came before the walls were closed, to review the layout, and the layout was good. He walked the chalked and studded skeleton of the kitchen with Mona, who had drawn the workflow herself — raw here, cooked there, wash-up nowhere near either, the traffic of a working day paced out on the subfloor — and he perceived, beneath the drawings, the forty years of her mother's kitchen in Beirut that the drawings were quietly reciting, every clearance learned the hard way by a woman now dead, transmitted to this subfloor on Gottingen Street without either woman ever once calling it knowledge. He weighed that inheritance, exactly, at its exact and considerable worth. There was no field for it. He noted that the hand sink needed to move eight inches to clear the swing of a door, which was true, and Mona saw immediately that it was true, and respected him for it, and moved the sink. PASS, pending re-inspection at completion.

As the municipality, he came when the walls were closed, and the building told him its history, the way buildings tell him everything. The shop was the ground floor of a structure that had been, in order: a dry-goods store, a tavern, a union office, a church of a denomination that no longer exists, and vacant; and each era had left wiring. He stood in the basement and read the strata of it — knob-and-tube abandoned in place like a fossil seam, a heroic 1970s panel, the landlord's recent and grudging upgrade — and he weighed, in passing, the landlord: a man who did the minimum, always, but did *do* it, always, a soul that would assay at exactly code, no more, a man who would be startled to learn how rare that is. The new work serving the bakery was sound. The old sins were sealed behind rated drywall, which is the building code's version of forgiveness: not absolution, containment. He passed the box.

And as fire, he came last, and met the saj.

The dome was in by then, seated on its pad, cold, waiting for its permit like everything else: a humped iron hill from a lineage of iron hills going back past the invention of the chimney, and the Conscience-Keeper stood before it with the fire code in his hand and met a problem whose last round would be fought by someone else. The code assumes commercial cooking means grease, and grease means a hood, and a hood means suppression: nozzles aimed at the appliance, a fusible link waiting to melt, the armed ceiling of a modern kitchen. The saj produces no grease to speak of; bread is not fried; the fire under the dome is small, and kept, and precisely the fire the code never imagined, being three thousand years older than the code's imagination. He required the hood anyway — the code as written reaches every commercial flame, and he may enforce only the code as written — and he watched Elias receive the number the hood would cost, and weighed what it cost Elias not to say what he wanted to say, and weighed what Elias said instead, which was, "And the inspection after this one — that is the last inspection?", which was not a question, it was a man counting the rounds. RE-INSPECT.

Outside, at the curb, a Public Works truck sat with its motor running — the water crew, closing out the last of the service-connection work on the street — and a young operator named Paige leaned across the cab into the glovebox hunting a pen, and her fingers moved a napkin, a tire gauge, and a small brass beetle, in that order, and closed on the pen, and none of it rose anywhere near the surface of her thoughts, except that for a moment, unaccountably, she checked the side mirror, as you check a room you thought you heard your name in.

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There is a fourth inspection, which no jurisdiction has organised, and it happened continuously.

The Conscience-Keeper, who cannot stop weighing any more than the ferry can stop crossing, carried out of that building the completed ledger of everyone in it, and it is the kind of thing he

carries out of every building, and it goes nowhere, and this is the deflation the modern world has performed upon him. He knew — knew, in the way the scale knows the weight — that Elias Haddad had never in his life shorted a scale or an employee; that Mona had once, forty years ago, in a hard month in another country, done a thing with a supplier's invoice that she still turned over at night, and that the thing, weighed fairly, weighed almost nothing, and that she would never believe that; that Yara had told, in the course of the permit process, four lies, all of them the small lubricating kind ("no rush," "totally understand," "this is helpful, actually," "we're just happy with the progress"), and that the four lies together were lighter than one sincere hour of the portal's patience. He knew the exact honesty of the electrician. He knew what the landlord rounded and which direction. The moral inventory of a small business coming into the world, weighed to the grain, exact, complete —

— and the form said PASS / FAIL / RE-INSPECT, and he ticked the box, because the box is the covenant now. Once, the weighing *was* the verdict; the scale tipped and worlds followed. Now the scale tips in a sealed room inside a clipboard, and what follows is a sticker or a letter. But every inspection the city has ever passed was two inspections, and it has never once failed the one that counted, because the one that counted has no failing grade, only the ledger, kept by the last being in the world who still reads the heart — and files it, per the modern arrangement, in no drawer at all.

The hood went in over the saj in the third week of May, gleaming, enormous, aimed dutifully at a grease fire that would never come. Elias paid for it in the currency of a man buying peace, and stood under it on the evening it was finished, and lit the dome for the first time in the new shop: a test only, unpermitted warmth, one round of dough for nobody, the family standing in the empty kitchen eating it off the iron with their hands while the suppression nozzles watched overhead like polite chaperones. The bread was the same bread. It is always the same bread. That is the point of bread, and no power on earth inspects for it.

RE-INSPECT, said the file. The last round was set for the af-

ternoon of the opening. The shop aimed itself at the date like an arrow.

SIX

How a Question Is Asked

Every city has one number that is really every number, and in this city it is three digits long.

Dial it from anywhere in the municipality and you reach the municipal contact centre, which is not a place so much as a discipline distributed across three buildings, and a voice will answer, and the voice can help you in more than three hundred languages, which is not a boast the centre leads with but is simply, on any given Tuesday, operationally true. The line handles half a million calls a year. It is the number for property taxes and pothole reports and transit schedules and missed collections and burning questions about burning, and it is also — because the city long ago made it the *only* front door, and a front door cannot choose who knocks — the number people call when what they have is not a municipal problem at all, but a problem, and no one else's number.

The menu is the famous part. Press one for this, two for that; the tree of options, climbed by millions, pruned by committees, studied the way engineers study a bridge that hums. What the menu cannot offer — what no menu anywhere has ever offered — is the option most callers are actually holding: *press seven if you are not sure what this is, but it is nine in the morning and you are already defeated by it.* There is no seven. You press the number for something adjacent and wait, and this is not the menu failing; this is the menu doing

the only thing a menu can, which is to sort the sortable and deliver the rest, humbly, to a person.

The person, more often than statistics can explain, was the Companion.

She is the seventh of them, and the easiest to get wrong. So, plainly:

She was never a goddess of love. Love had its own departments, grander and worse-behaved. She was the goddess of the smaller, harder thing that has no modern word, so her name will have to do the work: *company*. The one who sits with. Hers were the night watches and the sickrooms, the long roads walked beside, the presence at the table that asks nothing; every tradition kept a minor lamp lit for her and could never quite say what she was *for*, because she was not for anything: being-with is not for; it merely is, and that is all of it. And when the great arrangement ended and the seven came down into the world's remaining work, six of them sorted themselves by function, hand to the fixing, eye to the watching. She sorted herself to the place where the city keeps its being-with, and the city keeps it, as the city keeps everything, on the telephone.

Her calls ran longer than the centre's average. Quality assurance had reviewed them, because that is what the average is for, and had found nothing to correct: no wandering, no policy strayed from, every call resolved, coded, and closed. The calls were simply *whole*, somehow, in a way the reviewers could hear and not annotate. A resident called about a tax bill and left with the tax bill explained and also, obscurely, with the sensation of having been listened to all the way to the bottom, which is not a municipal service, and appears on no invoice, and is why some people, having once reached her, tried to reach her again.

They could not. The line does not work that way. You get who you get.

Mrs. Doyle got her, over that spring, seventeen times, which the odds do not support.

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Mrs. Doyle was eighty-one and lived alone in the top half of a house in the west end with a cylinder of oxygen she was tethered to by a clear tube and a temperament she was tethered to by longer habit, and she called the line, on average, twice a week. The calls were legitimate. That must be said at once, because the file (she had a file; frequent callers accrue one, gently) might have suggested otherwise, and the file would have been wrong. Her sidewalk genuinely did need clearing, the once. The collection schedule genuinely had changed. The tree limb over her wire was real, the water discoloration was real, the question about the property tax rebate for seniors was real and, for the record, shrewd. Mrs. Doyle never once called about nothing.

It was only that between her and the nothing there was not very much. A niece in Alberta, on Sundays. A pharmacy that delivered. A neighbour who waved. The tube reached every room of the flat and none of the street, and a person tethered to a machine in a city that has forgotten her arranges her week, without ever deciding to, around the two or three legitimate questions she can still generate — hoards them, even, as you hoard errands in a week that threatens to have none — because a question is a licence. A question entitles you to a voice. For the duration of a question, somebody is *with* you, professionally, in three hundred languages if necessary, and no one, least of all the caller, is required to name what is actually being purchased with the price of a question about yard waste.

The Companion took Mrs. Doyle's calls as she took all calls: completely. What happened next is a thing that did *not* happen.

She answered the question. She resolved the yard waste. She stayed on the line the extra ninety seconds that Mrs. Doyle's goodbyes required, all three tiers of them, and was present for every second of the ninety, entirely, as only she of all beings in the city is present. And then the call ended, and Mrs. Doyle was gone from her. Not filed. Not remembered. *Released.* The latest call was, to the Companion, as the first: a voice, met wholly, helped wholly, and returned wholly to the sea of voices. She did not know Mrs. Doyle's

name was Doyle. She did not know there had been seventeen. Each time the line rang it rang new, and each time the old woman began again — "now, I won't keep you, dear, it's only about the leaf collection" — the Companion met her as the stranger she technically was, and the meeting was, every time, complete, and kind, and it *cost the old woman her opening speech again*, the account of the tube and the stairs and the niece in Alberta, delivered again and again to the same ears and received every time as news.

One thing that spring did register, though nothing reviewed it. The quality system samples calls at random, and it happened to be listening on one of them in April: Mrs. Doyle finished the third tier of her goodbyes, and the line closed, and the console logged, before the next call was taken, an idle interval of a little under two seconds. Her measured average, across every year the centre had metrics, was zero. Two seconds is nothing; the sample was filed with the rest. But zero had been zero for a very long time, and now it was not, and no instrument in the building was calibrated to ask what a being made entirely of the next call does, for two seconds, with the place a voice has just left.

And Mrs. Doyle did not mind. She noticed — old women notice everything; it is their remaining superpower — noticed that the wonderful girl on the line never knew her, and she decided, in the unsentimental accounting of the very old, that this was an acceptable price and possibly a bargain. Being known was not on offer anywhere at her prices. Being *met* was on offer twice a week for the cost of a legitimate question, and the girl met you — whoever she was, however many of her there were — as people had met you sixty years ago, before everyone learned to listen at a slant. If the price of that was reciting your life fresh each time, well. She had recited it to God for years with less to show.

That is the function, working as designed: the next call arriving to a being wiped clean, available as only forgetting can make you. All spring an old woman was heard to the bottom by the last being in the world with no bottom of her own to get to. The arrangement served them both, *because* it was incomplete.

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One call from that spring survives in the training library, anonymised, as an example of correct escalation practice, which is not what it is an example of.

A man called, elderly by his voice, at four in the afternoon, and did not select from the menu, which routes you eventually to a person, and the person was the Companion. He was silent a moment. Then he said, with the ceremonial care of a man who has rehearsed in the hallway:

"I would like to speak to whoever is in charge of everything."

There is a script for this. It is a good script, written with real thought: such calls are usually a complaint about everything, the taxes and the potholes and the century, and the script converts everything, gently, into a docket.

"I can certainly help with that," she said. "Which matter would you like to start with?"

"No — no. It isn't a complaint." A silence, of a man consulting notes made in the hallway. "I have no complaint at all. My wife died in the winter. The house is in order. The girls call; they're faithful about it. It's only that I've begun to feel that somebody ought to be told how it all actually *is.* From the inside. Someone taking it down. And the departments are all departments *of* something, you see. So I thought I'd try the general line. Before it got any later in the day."

The script offers, for this juncture, a referral. There are services, good ones, and a number for them, and the number was on her screen. The Companion — who was, of everyone he could conceivably have reached by any means, the closest thing remaining; who had sat the night watches he did not know he was describing; who was, by every measure but the org chart, exactly the party requested — followed the script. The script was the covenant.

"There's no one in charge of everything, I'm afraid," she said. "But I'm here, and the line is open until eight."

A pause, at his end, of a man recalibrating an errand.

"Well," he said. "You'll do."

He told her. It took forty minutes. It was coded, correctly, per the manual, as *General Inquiry — Other*, and closed as resolved, which it was.

SEVEN

How a City Is Watched

At 4:41 on a Tuesday afternoon, at an intersection that had been asking for a traffic light for months, two cars met in the manner the intersection had been requesting: a left turn on faith, a through-driver on schedule. Four thousand dollars of crumple. No injuries; the dispute was the injury. Each driver emerged already narrating. Each was certain. Each was, in the way of intersections, half right, and the two halves did not share a border, and by 4:45 the fault had hardened into two incompatible histories standing on one street corner exchanging phone photographs of each other's licence plates.

A fact of perfect quality existed regarding that collision, and exactly one instrument in the city held it. The instrument reported to a room with no windows.

The room sits inside an unremarkable municipal building, behind a door with a keypad: the dispatch and operations floor, where the city watches itself. One long wall is screens: traffic cameras cycling their intersections, the transit system with every bus a crawling dot with an attitude, water pressure by zone, the emergency channels with their patient columns of active calls. In the older mythology of cities this is where the power is, and Hollywood has filmed it that way so many times that visitors are always faintly let down by the actual furniture. The actual furniture is task chairs and cold coffee. The room does not run the city. The room *sees* the city, which the city has learned is a different thing, and the difference

between those two verbs is the career of the being at the third console from the left.

The All-Seeing had, in the former arrangement of the universe, one job, and it was this one. He was the eye that keeps the count. Every tradition equipped itself with him early, because every tradition discovered early that people behave differently once something is keeping score, and he had kept all of it: how many sparrows a hard winter takes, how many oaths in a hundred are hedged, what share of hems in a famine year have a coin sewn into them. Never which sparrow. Never whose hem. That was the shape of him then and it is the shape of him now: the sum to the last decimal, and no purchase at all on the single case. What his counting had been *for* — where it once went, and what was once done about it — belongs to the arrangement that ended, and is not discussed. What remained was the count itself, undiminished and exact, and a municipal job description that fit it the way a bucket fits the sea.

He knew the crash, though not as the drivers knew it. He knew the corner. The screens on the wall are, to him, a courtesy, the city's little pencil sketch of itself, which he monitors out of professionalism as a lighthouse keeper might also keep a postcard of the sea; what he holds is the city as a set of rates, and he held that corner to the decimal: the left turns per hour and the share of them taken on faith, the six weeks of each spring when the late sun comes straight down the hill into the through-driver's eyes, the near-misses that had been running above their season's average since the winter, the share of collisions of exactly this shape in which both drivers are about half right. What he did not have, and could not, was this one: whose half-second, whose glance, whose drift. The single case is the one thing his kind of seeing cannot resolve. Asked who was at fault, he could have told you only what the corner would have told you, if corners spoke: that in collisions of this shape, at this hour, at this corner, it comes out about even.

And what he did about the crash was nothing, there being nothing in that kind of knowing to do it with.

A total count inside a municipal government sounds like the

opening of a horror film, and the music can stop. Nothing the All-Seeing knows *goes* anywhere. He acts on camera footage, per policy. He dispatches on calls received, per procedure. The rest — the exact, continuous rest — is held, and only held, the way the sky holds weather. A citizen of this municipality is counted to the decimal and seen by no one at all: known exactly as a rate, never once as a face, judged by nothing, reported to no one. There is a word for being known like that, and the word is not *surveillance.* The actuaries have the word. The word is *expected.*

Whether being expected is any help, the two drivers were about to find out.

Because there was a witness. The intersection camera, the one instrument in the city built for the single case, had seen it: most of it, enough of it, angle notwithstanding. A usable copy of the truth existed on a municipal server, admissible, reviewable, real. The insurer's request for the footage arrived through the proper portal in ten days. The system's retention policy, written prudently against privacy and storage costs both, does not hold traffic video that long. The footage had existed; had been reviewable; had, at midnight on the last day the policy allowed, per policy, per *good* policy, deleted itself. The one copy of the single case concluded its lawful lifespan and went wherever bytes go, and what remained in the city was what the All-Seeing had, which was the rate.

The insurers settled fifty-fifty, which is the actuarial word for *nobody knows*, and which was, to the decimal, the answer the All-Seeing would have given. Both drivers told the story for years, each honestly, each wrong. And the intersection, whose near-misses and one hit now constituted a pattern even paperwork could see, was flagged for a signal review, which is the system working: the city cannot know what happened, but it can know *that things happen here*, and it acts on the *that*, having no organ for the *what.* In this, and in nothing else, the city and the god are built alike. A light would go in the following spring.

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Among the All-Seeing's assigned screens, low on the wall, small, was one that no one else in the room looked at more than seasonally, and it showed the province's burn map.

It had turned red on the season's opening day in March, and every morning since. Here is the rest of the mechanism, because the mechanism now begins to matter. The map is the province's daily verdict on open fire, county by county: red forbids, yellow permits after seven in the evening, green permits after two. It is always red between eight and two, every day of the season, on principle, those being the hours when a fire escapes easiest, and the day's true colour is posted each afternoon at exactly two o'clock, computed from weather readings taken at half past one. It is a good map. Behind it stands a genuinely elegant apparatus, the fire-weather system, hourly stations feeding indices with dry names, and behind the daily indices stands a slower, deeper number called the *buildup index*, which does not measure today. It measures the accumulated dryness of the season: the drought in the deadfall, the moisture debt of the duff, how much of the woods, should a fire ever ask, has already agreed to burn.

He watched the map, and watched, past it, what the map was only a sketch of: not the woods tree by tree, which was nobody's to know, but the woods as a sum. The county's rain debt compounding. The share of its deadfall gone to tinder. The buildup index beginning that week, the first week of May, a slow climb up a column that almost no one in the province had open on their screen. Before the month was out, the climb would have a name. For now it was three decimal places moving in the wrong direction, known exactly by the one being who keeps that kind of count, and held, and only held.

On the operations board, in a corner widget, the fire service's apparatus showed as tidy rows of unit codes, available, in quarters, among them three new codes, the wildland trucks from the far side of the country, which had now been driven a combined total of four hundred gentle kilometres and had never once been asked for anything. Their little status squares were green. Green, on that

board, means *waiting*.

The room's night shift will tell you (it is a piece of dispatch-floor folklore, the kind of thing said fondly of a colleague no one can quite place hiring) that the quiet fellow at console three has one habit. When the retention system runs its nightly purge, at midnight, and the oldest day of the city's self-knowledge lawfully evaporates, he glances up. Every night, just at midnight, one glance at the wall of screens, the sketched city, and then back down. As if counting what's left. As if confirming that when the faces go, the count stays. As if to say: *the cases go; the rate remains*; which is either a comfort or the opposite of one, and the room, being windowless, offers no light to read it by either way.

The buildup index climbed a hundredth. The map went green at two, as it does when nothing yet is wrong. He saw all of it, and held.

EIGHT

How the Lost Come Home

Several hundred dogs a year go missing in this municipality, and most of them come home, and the machinery of their coming home is a tag.

The tag is the law. By-law A-700, *Respecting Animals and Responsible Pet Ownership*, requires every dog in the municipality to be licensed, and the licence takes physical form as a small stamped disc on a collar, and the disc is a promise with two parties to it: the owner promises the city that the animal is somebody's, and the city promises the owner that if the somebody and the animal are ever separated, the city will hold up its end. The city's end is Animal Services: vans, kennels, a database, and officers empowered under the by-law to seize, shelter, ticket, and, above all, to *reunite*: to read the disc, run the number, and dial the phone that makes a bad day end. It is the smallest covenant on the municipal books and among the old ideas in law, older than the city, older than most cities: that a lost thing is not a free thing; that the found belong somewhere; that the somewhere can be written down.

The Seeker had held the portfolio, in one form or another, since before writing down.

He is the sixth of the seven and the most cheerful to watch work, and the cheer wants explaining, because his old dominion sounds anything but. He was the finder. Not the finder of gold — treasure had flashier gods, all of them now in finance — but the

finder of the *strayed*: the lamb off the hill, the child off the path, the ring in the harbour, the traveller the road forgot. Every tradition sent for him with the same prayer, which is older than praise: *it is lost; bring it back.* And the clause in his old contract that made him a god and not a bloodhound was not that he knew where the lost thing was. Any shepherd's boy can search a hill. It was that he knew where it was *from*: whose lamb, which fold, by what gap in which wall, and whether the man now claiming it had any right to. Location is a coordinate. Provenance is a claim, and he has never in his long career made one he could not support. The work, then and now, was the *bringing back*: the return made properly, made so that the shepherd and the lamb and the hillside all remained in right relation. Return is a ceremony, and he was the god of the ceremony, and the ceremony survives, and it is called *procedure*.

Which brings us to the peacock.

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The peacock was illegal. That is the first thing to establish. A-700 maintains a schedule of animals that may not be kept within the municipality, and the schedule is long and specific and reads in places like the manifest of a small ark, and peafowl are on it. Someone in the north end had been keeping one anyway — the investigation would later suggest a birthday, a misjudgment, and a rural cousin, in that order — and on the second Tuesday of May the peacock resigned from the arrangement over a fence and entered public life.

A loose peacock in a city is a municipal event of a particular flavour: zero danger, total spectacle. It stopped traffic on Agricola by walking up the centre line with the unhurried entitlement of a creature that has never once been contradicted. It screamed from a rooftop on Fuller Terrace at six the next morning, a sound the neighbourhood's group chat variously identified as a murder, a cat divorce, and the harbour itself dying, and which is in fact simply what a peacock says. It ate a community garden's early lettuce planting in an order suggesting connoisseurship. By the third day it

had a name in three different neighbourhoods — none of them the same name; it answered to none of them anyway — and a following, and the following had opinions about its freedom, and the municipal line had taken forty-one calls, of which some were complaints, some were sightings phoned in with the breathless coordinates of a rare-bird alert, and one was a man asking, sincerely, whether the city would consider just letting it be, "as a sort of mascot," a suggestion the call-taker coded, correctly, under *Other*.

The file went to the Seeker, and the by-law took over, because the by-law provides for everything: the by-law has *procedure*. An officer responding to a report of an animal at large may attempt capture using approved methods and approved equipment; may pursue onto private property only with permission or warrant; must prioritise the animal's welfare and the public's safety; must document the response. Approved equipment, for a bird of this class, meant a net on a pole, a crate, and patience. Approved method meant getting close enough to a creature whose evolutionary specialty is indignant vertical departure. Permission meant knocking on the doors of the yards the bird toured, one by one, and explaining the municipal position on peafowl to residents who had, in several cases, already named it and in one case built it a small shelter, "for the rain."

So the chase proceeded, and it proceeded like this: a sighting placed the peacock on Fuller Terrace, and the Seeker drove to Fuller Terrace, per procedure, at the pace of traffic, and deployed the approved net at the approved angle; and the peacock, consulting no by-law, went over a fence the procedure could not follow without a knock, and the Seeker knocked, and the resident was delighted to help and wanted first to show him the shelter she had built, and by the time the tour concluded the sightings had moved on: the peacock was reported four properties east, eating begonias. He drove four properties east, at the pace of traffic. This continued for six hours, through a dozen yards, two group chats, and one man who wished to discuss the mascot question at length.

The rite concluded at dusk in the community garden, among the ruins of the lettuce, with a net, a crate, forty seconds of operatic

outrage, and then quiet. The peacock went to a farm sanctuary in the valley, where it lives still, screaming at dawn, contradicted by no one. The keeper of the peacock received a ticket in the amount the by-law prescribes, and paid it, and told the story at parties thereafter as though he had done something wonderful, which is the usual afterlife of a fine.

Forty-one callers were notified of the resolution, per their requests. Several expressed disappointment.

And now the one thing the file cannot hold, which changes the colour of the six hours: from the first sighting, the Seeker had known whose bird it was. Not where it was — the group chats knew that better than he did, and he followed them like anyone — but whose: the birthday, the misjudgment, the rural cousin, the yard in the north end with the gate that did not latch, the bird's provenance complete and correct, days before the investigation would assemble the same facts from a feed receipt and a neighbour. And the by-law has no field for provenance before capture. Ownership is established by procedure, after the crate, never by an officer's certainty; so the god of where things come from spent a working Friday chasing, yard by yard, a bird whose origins he could have recited at the first door, because the covenant is no longer *bring it back by your arts*. The covenant is *bring it back by the book*, and the book is slower than the bird, and the god kept the book — all six hours, with the patience of a being for whom six hours is a rounding error, and procedure is simply the modern liturgy of his oldest rite.

The vans and the peacock are the visible half of the Seeker's portfolio. The other half is a room.

The room is Lost and Found: the municipal one, the general one, the low-ceilinged room where the city's strayed *objects* wash up: everything left on a bus or a ferry or a counter, everything handed in by the honest, shelved and tagged and databased and held, per policy, for its person. The room is the tag-covenant extended to things, and it works more often than a reasonable person would

guess. Wallets go home at a rate that would repair your opinion of the species. Phones go home. A surprising traffic in single mittens goes home, mittens being, apparently, mourned.

That May the room reunited, among much else: a hearing aid (bus, seat 14, its owner's week transformed); a child's drawing of a horse, laminated, evidently freight of enormous value, claimed by a father who exhaled when he saw it as though it had been a passport; and a thick, hand-worn folder of permits and drawings and photocopied surveys, left on the 7:00 a.m. Alderney ferry crossing by a young woman who had fallen asleep sitting up — the folder that had been growing since the morning of the keys, the documentary existence of a bakery, abandoned in thirty unconscious seconds to a ferry older than the country. Yara Haddad's phone rang before the boat had made its return crossing. She had not yet discovered the loss; she experienced, in a single vertiginous minute, the arc from not-knowing to catastrophe to salvation, and had to sit down on a bench outside the terminal, holding the recovered folder to her chest with both arms, to the visible satisfaction of the deckhand who had turned it in. The deckhand's name — she asked; she was learning, this year, which things to ask — was Wade. The folder never rode the ferry unzipped again.

And one shelf of the room does not turn over.

It is the shelf the policy calls *unclaimed*, the things held past every deadline, the property of no one findable, and the Seeker maintains it with a care the policy does not require, because this shelf is, of his modern portfolio, the piece that corresponds to nothing in his old one. In the former arrangement there was no unclaimed. Everything lost was lost *from* somewhere; every stray had a fold; the manifest in him had two columns, *thing* and *home*, and the second column had no blanks. Now there are blanks. The city produces them: objects whose people have moved, or died, or never existed in any registry — orphaned umbrellas, keys to unknown doors, a wedding ring with initials that match no living record, each one a thing with no return address, a lost thing that is, unprecedentedly in the long career of the god of finding, *only*

lost. He logs them. He shelves them. He holds the first column open, in the manner of a clerk who will not close a file merely because the universe has, and the shelf waits, patiently, in the low-ceilinged room, for claimants the database gives no reason to expect.

Across town, that same May, a small brass thing was riding in a glovebox, unlost only because no one remembered owning it.

The peacock file closed Monday. *Outcome: returned*, it says, which is, of everything the Seeker signs, the sentence he was made of.

NINE

How a Day Fits Together

The twenty-seventh of May was a Wednesday, and nothing went wrong in it.

It began, as days on the peninsula begin, with the ferry: the 6:30 crossing, flat water, the deckhand Wade coiling a line and nodding to the regulars, who nodded back in the economy of people who have shared ten thousand mornings and no conversations. The city came awake in its usual order — buses, then bakeries, then everyone else — and seven gods clocked in at seven posts, and for one day the machine ran all at once. A machine is not its parts. A machine is its *meshing*.

7:40 a.m. At the Public Works yard, Dwyer read the board. Among the day's orders: hydrant flow testing, station district, joint with fire service: the same two hydrants that had been on the board since the morning of the main break, their paperwork having now completed its migration. Rennie took the truck. Paige took the clipboard. The testing of a hydrant is Works and Fire holding hands for a morning: Works owns the water, Fire owns the need, and once a year they meet at the curb to confirm that the one can supply the other at the gallons-per-minute the worst day would demand. It is the city rehearsing a catastrophe in the key of routine.

8:00 a.m. The burn map went red, as it goes red every morning at eight, on schedule, on principle. In the windowless room the All-Seeing watched it go red, and watched, beneath it, the thing the map sketches: the woods of the county standing in their forty-third day of rain debt, the buildup index at a height it had not reached in three years and climbing a little every afternoon, patiently, like interest. The morning's actual weather was beautiful: mild, blue, the kind the region issues in May as an apology for April, and every reading that measured the *day* said so, and the one column that measured the *season* went on compounding, read by almost no one, kept exactly by the one who keeps such columns.

8:30 a.m. The counter opened on the third floor of Duke Tower and took a ticket from a man with a deck. The Chaos-Weaver placed the deck in the street's tangle, where decks of that size tend to meet fences, and stamped the intake.

9:15 a.m. At the fire station, the flow test. Rennie cracked the hydrant and the water stood up out of it in a grey-white column, tonnes of it, roaring, the pressure of the city's buried hand made suddenly visible at a curbside, while a firefighter with a pitot gauge read the stream like a sommelier and Paige logged the numbers. The numbers were good. The hydrant could feed the worst day at full demand. Behind them in the bay, the three wildland trucks stood in their row, gleaming, four hundred gentle kilometres old, and the crews had washed them that week: had washed, that is, machines that had never been dirty, which is either devotion or superstition and in fire stations is not considered a distinction.

9:40 a.m. Paige, returning the truck's tire gauge to the glovebox, touched the brass beetle — the same beetle, riding in that dark since the morning of the main break, sooted with nothing yet, patient as ore — and this time it did rise to the surface of her thoughts. She stood a moment at the truck door, turning it in her fingers, a woman who had once looked into a trench and seen a pipe that could not be whole be whole, and had built herself a sentence to stand on, and had lived since then in the small gap between the sentence and the rest of her. She did not have words for why she crossed the

apron. She would have said, if pressed — she was pressed, mildly, by Rennie — that the new trucks could use it. “For luck,” she said, and put the beetle in the glovebox of the nearest wildland truck, among its unused maps, and shut the little door, and Rennie said luck wasn’t a thing, and Paige said she knew, and both statements were made by people looking at the trucks and not at each other, and the work continued.

10:30 a.m. At the shop on Gottingen, the sign went up. Two men, a ladder, a level, forty minutes, and then it was simply there, over the window, black on warm white, as though it had always been coming: HADDAD’S. Elias stood across the street to see it whole and said nothing for a length of time his family found frankly theatrical, and Mona let him have it, the theatre being, after thirty-one years, load-bearing. Inside, the cases stood empty and clean. Two permits hung framed by the till, provincial and municipal, with a space on the wall left for the third: the fire inspector’s last round was booked for Saturday at three, an hour before the doors, and the hood gleamed overhead in enormous expectant silence. The opening was Saturday. Flour was stacked in the back like ammunition.

12:00 p.m. The Companion took a call about a raccoon in a chimney (transferred, correctly, to the right queue), a call about a tax instalment (resolved), and a call from Mrs. Doyle (the collection calendar; four minutes of question, ninety seconds of goodbyes, met entire, released entire). The idle interval afterward, had any instrument been sampling, was nearer three seconds now. None was.

2:00 p.m. The map turned green. Green: open fires permitted after two, for careful people, fires out by eight the next morning. It had rained, briefly, two counties over, and the day’s indices were honest about the lovely day, and the map is the day’s map, and the deep column that is not the day’s business climbed another hundredth behind it.

3:20 p.m. The Seeker returned a wallet, a phone, and a cockatiel. The cockatiel had a tag. Even the cockatiel, in this city, has a tag; there are days the covenant seems to hold.

4:45 p.m. The bad intersection, now formally flagged for its signal review, went one more day without incident: the near-misses had become a pattern, the pattern had become a file, and the file would become a light by spring, this being the speed at which a city learns: slower than any resident, faster than any resident believes.

6:00 p.m. The Allfather finished the week's proclamations and locked the chain of office in its case. The Hand — easily missed, though the crews had not missed him — had been everywhere that day: the flow test, a bearing at the ferry terminal, a bad valve in the north end, present in the day the way thread is present in cloth. He did not clock out, there being no record of his clocking in.

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That Wednesday, when the shift reports and the system logs and the incident summaries of the municipality were rolled up — every department, every desk — the day produced a figure the veterans of the operations floor speak of the way sailors speak of certain calms. Incidents of note: none. Not one. No mains failed, no signals dropped, no calls escalated, no animal exceeded its by-law; the buses ran to the minute; the ferry made every crossing; half a million small intentions crossed the peninsula and every one of them arrived. Statistically, the day was a monster — the operations floor keeps no formal odds on a perfect day, but the informal ones are quoted with profanity — and the All-Seeing, who alone held the sum of it, every system's zero added to every other's, watched the day's official record compile itself out of the silence of departments that had nothing to report.

The record of a perfect day was a blank page.

A city's memory is made of failure. Perfection has no paperwork. The machine gave the one performance it cannot see itself give, that Wednesday, before an audience of one, who had the sum of it, and filed it where he files the rates for intersections.

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The evening was long and gold, the way late May evenings are on the peninsula when the fog stays out at sea.

At the shop, the family worked until ten. Elias set a trial batch of the opening dough to its overnight rest, the rehearsal for Friday night, and the shop at closing smelled for the first time entirely of itself — flour and cut pine and the ghost of the test rounds — a smell that was no longer a plan. Yara chalked the opening hours on the little board by the door and then, being her mother's daughter, checked the frame was level. Mona counted the float into the till, twice, the second time out of pleasure.

Northwest of the city, out along the 103, the evening lay just as gold on the tidy loop of a subdivision that, so far as the city's attention went, existed only as a drawing in a drawer: the green walls at the ends of the gardens holding their light, the sprinklers ticking on the ones whose owners had not yet noticed the brown creeping into the others, a Wednesday-night ordinariness of barbecues covered and cars cooling in driveways, forty-third day without real rain, the duff under the beautiful trees gone to tinder a metre at a time all season with no one to feel it happening, because you cannot feel a season, only a day, and the day had been perfect.

The map would turn red at eight the next morning, as always, and green again at two, as it sometimes does, for careful people.

The city slept. The machine meshed on in the dark, tooth by tooth, and every tooth held. Saturday was three days away. What the day left behind, it left with Paige: the small gap between the sentence you can stand on, and the rest of you.

TEN

How a Neighbourhood Is Laid Out

Almost all of them start with a person and a machine, and this one was no different: a man on a small tractor in the dry grass at the edge of his own property, mowing the back field deep in a spring that had forgotten to rain. A stone caught under the blade, or a hot part leaned against a dry stalk. Afterward no one is ever quite sure which small thing it was, only that it was small. The map had been red since eight, as the map is red every day of the season between eight and two, and it was past two now and the map had turned an unbothered green off a reading taken at half past one. He had checked it before he started, because he meant to burn the brush pile when the mowing was done and he was a careful man, and it told him, as it told all the careful people of the county, that it was for the moment safe to burn. He had been careful. It made no difference. The grass took, and ran, low and fast and nearly invisible in the flat afternoon light, and by the time he had the garden hose off its reel the fire was no longer his to put out.

What happens next is weather, not malice, though from the ground the difference is academic. The wind that afternoon came up out of the southwest and leaned the fire into the trees, and once it was in the trees it stopped being a thing that burned grass and became a thing that made its own wind, reaching up and throwing sparks ahead of itself, hundreds of metres ahead, landing in places

the fire had not yet reached. This is the part people who have not seen it cannot be told. It does not come as a line you can stand in front of. It arrives in your gutters and on your deck and in the dry cedar against your foundation while the front of it is still a kilometre off and the sky over your own roof is merely brown. The fire arrives before the fire arrives. Everything after that is timing.

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Here is how a neighbourhood like the one now in its path comes to exist, because what follows is folded into it like a fault into rock.

They called it Balsam Ridge, and it was laid out as land like it is always laid out: someone owned a parcel of woods off the highway, and someone else drew, on paper, the most house the parcel would legally hold. A road came in off the 103 and looped through the trees and ended in cul-de-sacs, the tidy bulbs of pavement that let a fire truck turn around. Along the road the lots sat with their backs to the woods, because the woods were the reason people paid to live there — the privacy of them, the green wall at the end of the garden, the deer in the morning. Each lot met the code. Each setback was a number a person had checked and initialled. And the one road that came in off the highway was the only road that came in off the highway, because a second one would have cost what a second one costs; it had been drawn once, dashed, and deferred to a second phase that never came, and the plan as approved needed only the one, and it was approved, because it met the rule, and meeting the rule is the whole of what approval means.

The Chaos-Weaver had seen the plan. Not this plan; every plan. In the long years of counters and hearings he stood wherever the shape of the city was being decided, and he perceived what was being made as you perceive a knot forming in a rope you are not the one tying: not when it would catch, but that it was the kind of knot that catches. He saw the one road. He saw that a loop of houses in dry woods with one way out belongs to a family of layouts that, given enough summers, have an afternoon like this one. Which afternoon, and which member of the family, was not in it to see.

He said nothing, because saying was not his. He stamped nothing, because he was not the stamp. He changed nothing, because a god of the tangle does not untangle; he only ever sees the knot whole, which is the useless gift of him.

The All-Seeing was already watching, because the All-Seeing is always already watching, and watching is not the same as being able to do anything with what you see.

In the dispatch room the grid stood on the wall in its ordinary colours, and he knew the afternoon had broken its pattern before the first call landed. He saw the first call land — 911, and then the forest line, the 1-800 that reports a column of smoke to the province. He saw the little town of screens light one after another as the thing announced itself through the proper channels. He saw the fire-weather index for the county, which had been climbing since the first week of May in a quiet column that most of the province never opens; and beneath it the buildup index, the long dry memory of no rain, standing higher than the day's weather alone would tell you. He had the sum of it at once. And the public map, which had refreshed itself precisely on schedule at two o'clock from the readings taken at half past one, went on showing the county a reassuring green for most of an hour after the first call, until someone with the authority to change it did.

The three trucks had sat in the bay for months, and this was the day they left it.

They had come from the far side of the country, built to a specification for exactly this — short-wheeled and high-clearanced, able to pump while they rolled, tanks of water and totes of foam and a winch on the front for when the ground turned against them. Until today they had been the newest and least-used things the service owned, walked past and admired and not needed. Now they

went north in a line with their lights turning, past traffic that was only beginning to understand it should pull over, toward a column that had not been there at lunch.

A volunteer got there first, because a volunteer is always closest. The captain of the nearest station had been doing something ordinary and Saturday when the page came, and he came up the one road into heavy smoke and more fire than the station had ever been asked to hold, and people in their doorways with car keys in one hand and photo albums in the other. He did the arithmetic a first-arriving officer does, which is not *how do I put this out* but *how many can I move, and by which road* — and there was the one road, and the arithmetic was ugly, and he got on his radio and started it anyway. Then everyone got there, which was its own trouble, because when everyone arrives at once no one has yet been made in charge of everyone, and for a stretch that was not long but was very long in a fire the loudest question on Balsam Ridge was not where the water was but whose radio the other radios should follow.

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And the city bent north, the apparatus of it turning toward the one place like filings toward a magnet, each part of it doing, faithfully, the only thing it knew how to do.

The Allfather drafted the declaration of a local state of emergency. He drafted it fast and in the old cadence, and it was read aloud where the cameras were by someone whose job it was to stand there, grave and correct, and the words moved nothing and were not built to; somewhere in a department a person signed the actual order that let the municipality reach for help it could not otherwise afford, and that signature, not the speech, was the government. He had blessed the city once more, on television, through somebody else's mouth. The city was governed, as ever, by the stamp.

The Conscience-Keeper weighed, because weighing is what he is, and a fire does not excuse him from it. The map went to red and stayed red, a full ban now, no evening green for anyone. Consumer

fireworks fell under the Fire Marshal's word and were forbidden across the county. The fine for an unlawful open fire stood at its full and enormous figure and did not care in the least that an open fire larger than any it was written for was at that moment burning through the reason for the fine. Three jurisdictions held the same fire at once — the province's forests, the municipality's streets, the town's own by-laws — and each was correct, and each judged by its own code, and the codes did not entirely agree, and he held all three of them together and found them all, in their own terms, right.

Somewhere a woman on hold with 311 was trying to cancel a permit, because a permit can be cancelled only by phoning 311, and 311 was on fire — not truly; 311 does not burn — but every line of it was lit with the county calling at once, and her small correct errand sank without a ripple into the flood.

When the rules bend, the small and the voiceless are what slip through first, and the Seeker went to them. In an evacuation the lost are mostly animals: the cat that would not be found when the car had to leave, the dog off its leash and into the smoke, the horse that would not load. He recovered what he could and returned it to the names on the tags, because a tag is a promise that a found thing has an owner, and reuniting the two is his small trade. He did not grieve the ones he could not reach; grief was no part of the work, only the next lost thing, of which there was no shortage.

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But the flood itself came down on one counter, and the Companion was behind it.

Three hundred languages the line can answer in, and that afternoon it seemed to need them all at once. The alert had gone out — the phones of the county lit in a hundred thousand pockets with the flat municipal shriek that means *leave now* — and the ones who could not read the map or reach a neighbour or make the app behave did the old thing, which is to telephone another person and ask what to do, and the number they called was hers. She took the

man who could not find his wife. She took the woman with the oxygen tank, twenty-five kilometres from the nearest flame, who had heard the word *evacuation* on the radio and needed a person to tell her it did not mean her street. She took the boy whose parents were both across the harbour at work, alone in a house with smoke coming over the back fence, and she stayed on the line with him inside the noise of five hundred other lines until a truck could reach his street, and she learned his name doing it, and his dog's name, which was Moose, and the name of the road the fire was coming down.

"Moose doesn't like trucks," he told her at one point, very calmly. "Loud ones. If it's loud he runs."

"Then you hold his collar," she said, "and I'll stay right here, and we'll listen for loud together."

This is the thing her counter has that none of the others do: across a counter of exchanged names, some of the warmth of the frightened comes back the other way, toward her, and she is the one of the seven made to feel it come. She felt it come, all afternoon, name after name. And she stayed on the line.

And under all of it, the water.

The same water: the water that comes down out of the woods northwest of the city into a lake the city drinks and is not allowed to love. The plant sat now inside the emergency zone. The fire was burning a few kilometres from the reservoir that fed nearly everyone, and crews who were needed everywhere stood instead at the intake drawing samples, because a city can last a day without a road but not an hour without knowing its water is clean. And across the peninsula, in kitchens and bathrooms miles from any flame, the pressure sagged, because the draw had gone north — hydrants opened on Balsam Ridge pull from the same held hand that fills a tap on Gottingen — and people who would not smell smoke for another day ran a tap that evening, felt it come slow, and were annoyed, and never knew why. The water fighting the fire

came from the watershed the fire was threatening. It had always been one hand. The fire was the first thing large enough to make the whole hand close at once.

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The Hand went to the fire, because the Hand goes where work is, and there was more work there that day than anywhere in the province. He worked. He lifted what the crews could not lift and held by himself what needed two, and he cut line beside the dozers in the failing light, tireless in a manner that had never once looked like effort. All of that was his. All of it was making — a break cut in the fuel, a bulldozed margin, a thing built fast to stop a worse thing — and he was good at it, because building is what he is.

But there came a moment, late, when the front came down on a house and the crew on it had to fall back, and the Hand stood at the edge of the heat with the house going up in front of him, and he did the thing he does. He put out his hand.

Under Gottingen, in the spring, he had laid that hand on broken iron and the iron had been whole. That is his gesture. That is the truth of him: the palm laid flat on the made thing, and the made thing sound again. He laid it now against the air in front of a burning house, the same gesture, the exact same gesture, and nothing happened, because nothing could. You cannot lay a hand on a fire and make it not there. A fire is not a broken thing waiting to be made whole. It is the unmaking itself, in progress, wood going back to air and ash faster than any hand can build — and unmaking is not his. It is not any of theirs. The making-god stood in front of the unmade thing with his one good gesture useless in the heat, and the house came down, and he had not been able to close it, because there was nothing there to close. Only an opening, getting wider.

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And the Chaos-Weaver, who had caused none of it, saw the shape come true.

He was on the ridge, or above it, or in it — he is wherever the tangle is, and the tangle now was total. He saw the fire and the wind and the dry as one moving pattern, not ember by ember but as a front with a shape, the shape that layout had always belonged to. And he saw the one road. He saw the cars come out of the cul-de-sacs onto it, all of them, at once, because there was only the one. The loops fed into it and it filled. Brake lights, then no lights moving. Smoke down over the roofs. The front at their backs. Every driveway that emptied closed the road a little more. The green walls people had paid for were alight at the ends of the gardens. The tidy bulbs of pavement that let a truck turn around stood full of cars that could not. The layout was doing exactly what it had been drawn to do — to be pretty, and to be cheap, and to have one way in — and the one way in was now the one way out, and whether it would be enough was, for one long hour in the smoke, the only question the fire left anyone to ask.

He did not open the road. He is not the kind of god who opens roads. He saw it, whole and useless, and being seen changed nothing whatever about it.

Through all of this the beetle rode north, because the truck it was in was called north, and a beetle in a glovebox goes where the glovebox goes.

It had dropped off a dash into a Works glovebox on the day of the main break, and been moved, three days before the fire, into this one — for luck, by a hand that did not believe in luck — and it had waited there in the dark among the unused maps, and now it went up the 103 with the water and the foam — a small brass thing that had already outlasted the men who laid the pipe it was found beside, going toward a fire, indifferent, legs folded, waiting. When the trucks came back days later, filthy, someone opened the glovebox for a map that had finally been needed and the beetle was

still in it, sooted now, one wing case scorched to a deeper brass, otherwise exactly itself. It had been nearer the fire than any house that burned. It had not burned. No one remarked on this, because no one remembered it was there.

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All afternoon the city had been coming apart; all day, in one small room on Gottingen, someone had gone on quietly making. The Haddads had meant to open that day.

Everything was ready at last, or all but one thing. The connection had gone in weeks before, the water come slow and then clean to the new tap. The dome sat where Yara had chalked it, cured and hot. Two permits of three were pinned to the wall at a great cost of mornings, and the third, the fire inspector's last round, was booked for three that afternoon, with the doors to open at four. At three the inspector did not come. At twenty past, his office called to say he had been sent north, and so had everyone else in the county who could sign the thing, and nobody could say when they would be back. Elias had been up since three that morning. He had made the first true day's bread of his own shop with his own hands, round after round slapped onto the hot dome and blistered and lifted off — za'atar, cheese, the plain ones his mother would have made — far more than a new shop could sell in a day, because you do not open thin, you open generous, that being the point of opening.

And the shop could not open, and the city would not have come if it had, because the city was watching the fire.

The street outside was quiet in the wrong way, the quiet of everyone indoors behind a screen, the sky to the northwest the colour of a bad bruise, the air beginning even here to smell of the thing. A shop with its lights on and its cases full and no one at its door is a particular kind of silence, and Yara stood in it a while. And for one minute of that while the family arithmetic did not come. For one minute she was only a woman who had done every single thing correctly, in the order the city required, since January, standing in a room full of bread the city was not coming to buy, with smoke

on the wrong horizon; and the sum she ran in that minute was the other one, the ordinary one, *how much have we lost*, and it came to a number, and the number was most of what they had saved. Then the minute ended, because she ended it — which is the part the family arithmetic never shows, that someone has to end the minute — and she did the sum her family had always done instead, which is not *how much have we lost* but *who needs this more than we need to sell it.*

So the bread went north. It went in Yara's own car up the choked highway as far as the tape would allow, to the comfort centre where the evacuated sat in rows under fluorescent light with their albums and their dogs, and where the smell of za'atar and warm bread cut for a moment through the smoke that had come in on everyone's clothes; and to the crews at the staging ground who had not eaten since the page. It was handed across a folding table by a woman who had meant that day to hand it across a counter of her own, and it fed people who did not know the name of the shop and would not remember it, and that, on the day it was meant to open, was what the shop was for.

The beetle had gone north in a fire truck. The trucks had gone north with their foam. The bread went north in a hatchback. Everything the city had made that was any use at all was moving, that afternoon, in the one direction, toward the one thing; and the Haddads' small generous ordinary opening was folded into the emergency with everything else, and postponed, and not lost — held, only held, as the fire itself would shortly be.

By dark the fire was not out. Fires like this are not out for days; this one would smoulder in the duff and the roots for a week, holding over, ready under a surface that looked cold. But by dark it had stopped growing, which is a different thing than stopping, and the word for it, the word on the province's map that night, was not *out* and not *contained* but the third and truest word: *being held.* The fire was being held. It had been given a line it had not yet crossed

— by people and machines and dozers and three new trucks and a hand that could not touch it — and it lay against that line in the dark and was held.

They counted, as you count after. The count was in houses. It would climb for two more days as crews reached streets they had not been able to reach, and it would settle at a number that meant, to something near sixty families, everything: the albums that had not fit in the car, the pencil marks climbing a doorframe, the accumulated evidence of a life lived in one place. It was a large number and it would be spoken of for years.

And one number stayed at zero, the only one that outweighed the houses, and it stayed at zero because a volunteer got there first, and a boy stayed on a telephone with a woman who learned his name, and a stalled road held for one long hour and did not, in the end, become the thing it had been laid out to become. No one died on Balsam Ridge. It was the nearest thing to mercy the day contained, and it had been a nearer thing than anyone outside would ever be told.

The Companion took her last call a little after midnight — a man asking whether it was safe yet to go home — and told him not yet, and hung up, and the room around her was, for the first time since the afternoon, quiet. The Hand had already gone on to the next held thing. The Chaos-Weaver watched the shape of it settle and cool and become, before it was even fully out, a plan for a second road that would be argued over at a counter for years. And the fire lay held against its line above the lake, not out, not finished, the heat still working down in the roots of things where no line reaches, and the dry still in the ground beneath it, and it would be days before anyone could safely say the word *over*.

ELEVEN

How a Call Is Answered

The morning after the fire was held, the line came back on at eight, and by five past the hour it was full again, because the aftermath of a disaster keeps the same office hours as everything else. The calls had changed overnight. The day before they had all been the one word, *leave*; today they were the slower words that come after — is my street open, when can I go home, where do I go to say what I have lost. The line took them in order. The line is very good. It answers in three hundred languages from three buildings across the municipality, and it does not tire, and it does not carry yesterday into today, because a call ends when it ends and the next call is a new one, which is the design of it and the reason it works.

She carried yesterday into today.

You would not have caught it from outside, or not at first. She answered as she always answered, evenly, correctly, the right department for each trouble. But the woman with the oxygen tank called again that morning, about the smoke this time, which had come in overnight and settled on the west end, and before the woman had finished saying who she was the Companion said her name, and asked whether the oxygen had held through the night. No ticket asks that. No script keeps a caller overnight. A function releases what it handles the moment it is handled, as the Seeker returns a found dog to the name on its tag and keeps nothing of the dog. She had begun — in the noise of the day before, or two seconds at a

time all spring; the instruments could have said, had anyone read them — to keep.

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A man called that morning to begin the permit to rebuild his house, and was told, correctly, that he could not, because the permit on his house was still open — one from a renovation the spring before — and the system could not issue a permit to build a house on a lot where, as far as the system knew, a house already stood, whole, mid-renovation, awaiting inspection. The house had burned to its foundation the afternoon before. The system had not heard. The system would not hear until a person filled in the form that tells it, and the form that tells the system a house is gone was not the form the man had called about, so he was gently returned to the beginning of the thing to fill in the right one; and in the only place the city truly keeps its houses, his house stood untouched.

Somewhere an assessor was already revising the burned houses downward, because you are not taxed on ash, and a woman on the next street, whose home was now a slab and a chimney, would shortly receive, as a kind of dark mercy, a smaller bill.

The other gods worked their aftermaths and kept nothing. The Hand was already up at the ridge in the grey light, not mourning the houses, building the first of what would replace them, because building is all he is and ash is only cleared ground. The Seeker gave the day to returning the last of the found animals to the last of the names on their tags, a good day of small reunions, and kept not one of them, not the shivering cat nor the burr-matted dog, because keeping is not in his office: he returns, and moves on. Among the things turned in to him that week and not returned — because no one came, because no name was on them — was a small brass beetle someone had found in a fire truck's glovebox and could not account for; it was logged, and given a number, and in the field for origin the Seeker wrote *unknown*. He does not write that often. He does not write anything he cannot support. It went into a bin with the other unclaimed things, present and counted and belonging to

no one, to wait. And by the end of that week the Chaos-Weaver was standing at a counter downtown where the argument over a second road into a place that no longer entirely existed had already begun, and would run for years; and he knew how arguments like it run, and wove nothing, and only watched the knot start to tie itself again in the shape of the last one.

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Through the day the grateful called, because gratitude, once it has somewhere to go, goes. The relieved called to say their street had opened. The reunited called to say the truck had come. Some of them she knew — she had been the voice in the worst hour of their lives the day before, and here they were now in a better one, and they remembered her, or remembered a her, a woman with no face who had stayed — and they told her so, and something of the warmth they had been carrying came back down the line toward her; and where it would have passed clean through any of the others and gone on, with her, now, it stopped. Name after name, it stopped with her, and stayed.

Late in the afternoon the boy's mother called.

She had been across the harbour when the alert went out, on the wrong side of a bridge gone to standing metal, and she had not been able to reach her son, who was nine, and alone, with the smoke coming over the back fence, for the better part of an hour she would feel in her body for the rest of her life. She had reached, in the end, the municipal line, and a woman on it who already had her son, who had kept him talking about Moose until the truck reached the street and a firefighter's glove came over the fence and lifted him out, dog and all. The mother had her boy back at a comfort centre by ten that night. And now, a day on, steadier, she had called the only number she had, the one she had called in the worst hour, to do the thing you do: to thank the person, and to know who the person was.

"I want to send something," she said. "A letter, or — I don't know. I want to thank her properly. Can you give me her name? The

woman who stayed with my son. I need her name."

It is a reasonable request, and the line is built to honour it; there is a process for it, a commendation, a form. The recording of that call is kept, as they all are. After the mother asked for the name, there were six seconds on it in which nobody spoke. Then the agent said, evenly and correctly, that she would be glad to take the caller's details for a commendation, and took them; and the request went into the machine.

The call ended at 4:52. The console at the station that had taken it logged the end of it, and then an idle interval, which began at 4:52 and which the console never closed. At 4:53 the line rang at that station and, after the standard four rings, rolled to the next free agent, which is what calls do; and so did the one after it. A station that does not answer is, to the system, a station between calls, and the system is patient with those.

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The next morning the line came back on at eight, and answered promptly, and correctly, and in three hundred languages, and it was very good.

The commendation went through the process it is built for, which is a good process, and thorough, and completely unequal to the situation. A resident had praised an agent's handling of a call; a file was opened; the call was found at once, because every call is kept, logged and timed and recorded against the service that took it. The call was all there — the boy, the dog, the hour, preserved exactly. Only the field where the agent's name goes came up blank, and the analyst assigned to close the file did the diligent thing and went looking for it. He checked the roster for that day: full, every seat named. He checked the station logins: all present, none unaccounted, none extra. He checked the assignment record, which exists precisely so that no seat in any centre is ever unaccounted for, and it accounted, immaculately, for every seat. Nowhere in any system was anyone missing. There was simply no name for the box. He escalated it, because that is what you do, and it came back down

with the only stamp that fits a record that is complete and a person who is not in it: *staff member not identified.* The commendation was logged. The service was credited. The roster balanced to the last seat. Nobody was missing, because you cannot miss what the machine was never keeping. The machine keeps the call. It does not keep the one who answers it.

The mother sent the thank-you anyway. She had no name to put on it, so she put what she had: *To the woman at 311 who stayed on the phone with my son.* She wrote it by hand, and could not think where to send it, and in the end sent it to the general address, the one for questions about parking and permits, contactus at 311; and someone kind at the receiving end did not know what to do with a letter that thanked no one it could find, and so did the only correct thing, and filed it.

It is still filed. It thanks a woman by the one thing known about her, which is the one thing she did, and it cannot reach her, and it never will. She had learned the boy's name, and his dog's name, and the name of the road the fire came down, and kept them; and his family, who would have given her theirs gladly, who came with a name to offer and a warmth to hand back, cannot learn hers, because she has not got one, because the thing that could have taken their thanks was the exact thing that could not stay. So the thanks sit in a file instead. It is a very well-kept file. The city is superb at files.

Mrs. Doyle called the Tuesday after, about the tree limb, which had picked the week of the fire to come down at last and was resting on her wire. The call was answered promptly, and correctly, and the limb was logged and routed for removal. Nobody asked whether the oxygen had held through the night. There was no reason anyone would; it is not a field. She noticed, because old women notice

everything, and she turned it over for a day or two and filed it, in that same unsentimental accounting, under a nice girl having had a good day once — as you file a stranger's kindness: gratefully, and without expecting the queue to produce it twice. She kept calling, twice a week, with her legitimate questions, and the line kept answering, in ninety seconds, perfectly. What she had been given once, and lost, had never been on offer, appears in no catalogue of services, and was subtracted from no account anywhere in the municipality. The limb was cleared within the month, which, for a limb, is excellent service.

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The line is still answered. It is answered well. Press the number for water, or for waste, or for streets, and wait, and a voice comes, even and correct, and helps you, and lets you go. Some of the voices are kind. Some of them, over enough calls, come to know you, and say your name before you have finished giving it, and none of that is in the service; it is in the people, unrequired and unmeasured, and no report will note it either way. It is a good service. It was drawn to need nobody in particular, and it works exactly as it was drawn to work.

And across the city, on Gottingen, a shop with its sign up waits out the emergency with its lights off, and in front of its cold dome stands a counter, a small one, wood, the kind a person leans on to talk to another person.

That is where the warmth goes now. It only ever passed through one of them, once, on its way to us.

TWELVE

How Bread Is Made

By the time the shop opened for real, in the third week of July, with the inspectors back from the north and their bookings worked down to Gottingen, the woods up north had begun to come back — fireweed first, as it always is after a burn, a haze of improbable pink over the black where nothing was supposed to grow yet — and the map had gone to a settled summer green, and the city had mostly stopped thinking about the fire, which is the truest sign a place has survived a thing: it gets bored of it.

Opening a bakery is mostly a negotiation with a flame that three thousand years of people have known how to run, conducted, on the final morning, with a decent man holding a clipboard who did not.

The last inspection was the fire one, and it came down, as it had in May, to the dome, which has been made more or less this way since before Halifax was a fort and before Nova Scotia was a phrase. The inspector was thorough and correct, and his code — which is the Conscience-Keeper's, and does not much care whose hand is holding the clipboard — had no page for an iron hill with an open flame beneath it and a man's bare hand passing over the top of it forty times a minute. He walked around the dome twice. He looked at the nozzle in the hood, which is aimed, per the code, at where the grease fire will be, and then at the dome, where the

grease fire had politely declined to be. He asked Elias, not unkindly, where the fire was supposed to go.

"Into the bread," said Elias.

The inspector wrote something down.

It passed. It passed as everything passes in the end: a form was found, or made, or judged adjacent enough, and a box that did not perfectly fit was ticked by a reasonable person who decided it was close enough, and the last certificate went into the frame by the till, in the space on the wall that had waited for it since May, and the certificate, not the bread, was what the city required in order to believe the place was real. The bread had been real for weeks. Elias had been handing test loaves out the back door to the neighbourhood since June. But the neighbourhood is not the city. The city believes paper.

There had been, right to the end, a small dispute between the shop and the system about whether the shop existed at all. The building permit wanted a certificate of completion; the certificate wanted every inspection passed and every hold cleared; and until the final hold cleared, the shop — full of flour, humming, a dome hot enough to cook on, three people inside it who had been up since three — did not, as far as the record was concerned, yet occupy itself. It was occupied. The record simply had not been told. A burned house somewhere in that same system still stood, because no one had filed the form that felled it; here a living shop did not yet exist, because no one had filed the form that opened it; and the two errors, equal and opposite, kept the municipal books in perfect balance and troubled no one but the actual people in the actual bread-smelling room, wondering when they were legally allowed to sell a bun.

Then a councillor came and cut a ribbon, because there is always a ribbon. The Allfather's office sends someone to cut it: this time a district councillor with scissors too large for the task and a few true words about small business and the fabric of community, good words, that opened nothing, because the thing that opened the shop was the certificate and the cleared hold, not the speech and

not the ribbon. The ribbon fell in two halves onto the sidewalk. A child picked one up. Flour dust drifting out through the open door settled, unnoticed, across the shoulders of the councillor's dark jacket, marking him, as it marks anyone who comes near the actual work, lightly and without asking. The shop was, at last, permitted to be what it had already been since May.

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The first morning the shop was allowed to be open, it opened at seven, and by ten past there was a line down the block, because there is always a line for warm bread, and there had not, in this corner of the north end, been one for a while. Elias lit the dome in the dark and waited for it to come up to heat, which is the one part of the morning that cannot be hurried.

And here is how the bread is made.

It starts the night before, with flour and water and salt and a little yeast and much less hurry, and the dough is left to sit and slacken and go sour and alive, so that by morning it is a soft heavy thing that pulls like an earlobe. The water in it is the same water: the water down out of the woods into the lake the city drinks, through the Hand's buried system, up through the new connection, out of the tap that once ran rust-brown and now runs clean and slow and cold. Elias no longer thinks about where the water is from, which is the compliment infrastructure is paid. He thinks about the dough. It is his wife's mother's dough, strictly speaking; Mona corrects him on the salt.

The dome is hot — not grease-fire hot, the other kind, the kept kind: a small flame held under iron and asked to stay exactly that big and no bigger, which is the trick of a kitchen and the precise opposite of what fire did up north in the spring. Elias takes a ball of the slack dough and works it flat and flatter, throws it hand to hand until it is a thin uneven round the size of a face, and lays it onto the hot dome, and it takes, and blisters, and in under a minute goes from wet to done. Za'atar and oil, or cheese, or the plain. It comes off the dome folded, warm enough that it hurts a little to hold, and

goes across the counter into a hand, and the hand carries it to a mouth; and the long journey — lake, plant, main, tap, flour, fire, fold — ends, as it was always going to end, in a person standing on a sidewalk with za'atar on their chin, happy, and already a little bit finished with the experience. Because that is bread. It is the least monumental thing there is, and you would die without it.

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Yara runs the counter, which is a craft of its own and nothing like standing at a municipal desk waiting for a number, though she has done both this year and can tell you the difference in a sentence: at the counter, she learns the names.

She learns them because she wants to, and because it is good for business, and because there is no form anywhere that forbids it. The man who comes Tuesdays and Thursdays takes the plain one, warmed, no za'atar, and his coffee black; she has it going onto the dome the moment she sees him cross the road. The two nurses off the night shift who split a cheese one and argue, gently, every morning about a television programme. The kid saving up for something who counts coins onto the counter and is, twice a week, mysteriously short, and gets the bun anyway. She keeps them all — their names, their orders, the small facts that ride along — and nothing takes them from her, and she does not vanish for the keeping, because she is a person, and a person is allowed to be full of other people.

One morning a woman comes in with a boy, nine or ten, and the boy is being careful about the dog he was not allowed to bring inside and keeps checking on it through the glass. The woman orders. The boy wants the plain one, warmed. Yara warms it, and asks the dog's name through the window. Moose, the boy tells her, and she keeps it, lightly, for next time, as you keep things at a counter. The woman watches this small ordinary exchange with a gratitude plainly too large for a bun and a dog's name remembered, and she pays, and overpays, and waves off the change, and takes her boy and his warm plain one out to the dog. And it is a Tuesday,

and the line is out the door, and Yara is already saying the next name.

The gods, it should be said, were still at it, because continuing is the one thing gods reliably do.

The Hand's watershed — lake and plant and buried main and the throat of pipe down Kearney Lake Road, the vast held system that had so nearly gone into the fire — now delivered itself, faithfully, every morning, to wet one man's flour and rinse the flour off his hands after. The Conscience-Keeper's threefold code, three jurisdictions that do not entirely agree, had resolved its enormous deliberation into three certificates in a frame by the till. The All-Seeing could tell you, to the decimal, what share of the north end takes the plain one warmed, and could not, for all his sight, tell you whether it is better that way, which it is. The Chaos-Weaver was still at a counter across town, watching the argument over a second road tie and untie itself, and would be for years. And the little brass beetle sat in its numbered bin in the Seeker's lost-and-found, *origin: unknown*, sooted, one wing case scorched a deeper brass, unclaimed, waiting, as it has always waited, for a hand that has not yet come.

They were ancient, and diminished in every large way there is. And the apparatus of them — the sight and the weighing and the making and the tangle, the divine civil service of it — had bent itself, all that season, to the single end of getting water and fire and flour into one room so that a woman could hand a warm folded bread to a boy and remember his dog's name. They cannot make the bread. They cannot keep the name. They cannot be thanked, and would not recognise the word. They carry the water to the door, and they do not come in; and the room past the door — the warm one, the loud one, the one with the line out of it and the za'atar on the chins — was never going to be a room for gods.

So: what do gods do all day?

They carry the water, and hold the code, and stand the city up every morning on ten thousand acts of maintenance no one will ever see or thank them for. That is the work, and the work is good, and it is only not the bread.

Elias lays another round onto the dome; it takes, and blisters. He eats the torn corner of a misshapen one, standing, checking the salt out of long habit. Yara calls a name — a real one, the regular's, the man for the plain one warmed — and folds his and passes it across the counter, still too hot to hold for long, and he takes it in his hand and says thank you and means it, and she hears it, and keeps it. There is still a line. Twenty-five kilometres north, out of sight of any window on Gottingen, the woods are coming back, quietly and stubbornly, pink over the black. And the bread goes into the hand, and the hand closes around it, and that is the whole of what any of it was ever for.