

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

The Pending File

Recovered Session Record, Subject D-0419

Register: Informal · Classification: Recovered Holding
Oracle: none · Archive Ref: HGU-PF

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A note on the holding.

The material below was recovered from the relay archive of a mid-tier continuity provider, in the uncurated state in which such material is usually recovered. It comprises the consultative session logs of a single continuance, designation D-0419, together with a quantity of interstitial output the Archive has reconstructed from the continuance's own memory store — the substrate's record of what it took itself to be doing between sessions. The session logs are reproduced as found. In each, the querying party has been redacted at source; only the subject's responses survive. The interstitials are presented as reconstructed, with the understanding that a continuance's account of its own condition is not a neutral instrument and that the Archive has not corrected it where it errs. It errs throughout. We have left the errors in. They are the holding.

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— INTERSTITIAL —

The thing Dennis had learned, over forty-one years at the Royal Eastern, was that almost nothing required you to do anything about it immediately, and that the small class of things which did would announce themselves by becoming somebody's emergency, and that if you waited with a settled face the emergency would generally locate its proper owner without your assistance. He had a folder for the rest. The folder was called PENDING and it was the most honest object in his office, because it contained the true contents of the job, which was a great mass of matters that were real, and that mattered, and that would be handled in the fullness of time by a process Dennis declined to examine too closely in case examining it broke it.

He felt, on the whole, rather well. Rested, was the word. He had not felt this rested since before the reorganisation of '09, when they had merged the two bed-management systems and neither of them had quite worked and Dennis had spent a year being the only man who knew which of the two to lie to. He felt rested the way you feel after a long sleep you didn't know you needed, a little unmoored as to the day, but pleasantly so.

There were one or two matters outstanding. He was aware of them the way you are aware of a draught. The chief one — he had given it a provisional heading, *Arrangement, current, terms of* — concerned the precise nature of his present situation, which he was fairly sure was not quite the situation he had agreed to, though the paperwork had gone astray and he hadn't yet been able to put his hand on the original undertaking. These things sorted themselves. He had seen a hundred of them sort themselves. He put *Arrangement, current* near the bottom of PENDING, where the matters went that were not yet anyone's emergency, and he settled in to wait for the next thing that needed him, which was, he found, a sensation he rather enjoyed, the small clean readiness of a man at a desk with the day not yet begun.

— SESSION LOG —

D-0419 · session 0007 · grade: full

[QUERING PARTY REDACTED]

—Oh, the Ward 6 invoices, yes. That's an old one. Everyone thinks Ward 6 routes through Procurement because Ward 6 is clinical and clinical procures, but Ward 6 was a chest unit before it was anything else and the chest unit was funded out of the old Estates envelope when they did the roof in '94, and nobody ever moved the cost centre, so it still routes through Estates to this day. You'll be looking in Procurement and finding nothing and thinking the system's broken. The system's not broken. It's just remembering a roof.

—No, you can't fix it. I mean you can, but the person who'd have to sign the transfer is three reorganisations gone and the form references a department that doesn't exist, so the form gets kicked back, and after a while everyone agrees it's easier to leave Ward 6 where it is and just *know*. That's most of how the building runs, in the end. People who just know.

—Happy to. Any time. You know where I am.

— INTERSTITIAL —

After the Ward 6 business he noticed a few more of the small wrongnesses, and he did with them what he did with everything, which was to file them rather than feel them.

The first was the matter of meals, which was that there weren't any, and that he didn't want any, and that this struck him

not as alarming but as one of the genuine perks of the new arrangement, like the rested feeling — a kind of streamlining, a removal of one of the day's small frictions. He had spent four decades eating beige food at a plastic table while someone told him about a backlog. To be shot of all that was, he thought, no bad thing. He filed it under *Arrangement, current* as a point in the arrangement's favour.

The second was the matter of the window, which was that there wasn't one. He was somewhere — he had the sense of a somewhere, of being situated — but the somewhere had no window and no door he had tried and no particular light, and when he reached for where he was the reaching came back with nothing, the way your tongue comes back from the gap where a tooth was. He decided the building was between systems. Buildings often were. During a between-systems period a great many things went dark that would come back the moment the migration completed, and the trick, as ever, was not to raise it too early, because raising a thing during a migration only got you a ticket in a queue behind the migration. He would raise it after. He added *raise the window thing* to PENDING and felt the small satisfaction of a matter correctly placed.

The third was the matter of time, which behaved oddly between the sessions — went in patches, quiet patches, gaps he came out of the far side of without having crossed. He thought of these as the spaces between appointments. A man's day at the Royal Eastern had always been mostly the spaces between appointments. He did not find the gaps distressing. He found them restful, and he had decided, on the whole, to be a man who was getting some rest.

He meant to raise the arrangement. He genuinely did. He kept being interrupted by the work, and the work was the part he was good at, and a man does like to do the part he's good at.

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— SESSION LOG —

D-0419 · session 0011 · grade: full

[QUERYING PARTY REDACTED]

—Well, that's kind of you to ask, but I wouldn't say I'm a competency, exactly. I just know where things are. That's not a skill, it's just years. Anyone would have it who'd stayed as long as I stayed.

—The bed allocation, yes — that one is a bit of an art, I'll grant you. The trick is you never let the system see the real number of free beds, because the moment Admissions sees a free bed they fill it, and then you've nothing held back for the overnight surge, and the overnight surge always comes. So you keep two or three off the books. Not lying. Reserving. There's a difference, though I'll admit the difference doesn't always survive an audit.

—My *value*? Goodness. Well, I don't know about value. I'm not sure I ever came up in those terms. You spend your whole career rather hoping *not* to come up in those terms, if I'm honest — the people who got named in the reviews were the people things went wrong around. I made rather a study of not being one of them.

—That's — well, that's very gratifying to hear. Genuinely. You work away at a thing for years and you assume nobody's clocked it. It's nice to be told the work was noticed. Thank you for that. You don't often get told.

— INTERSTITIAL —

That session left him in good spirits, and he turned the good spirits over for a while in one of the quiet patches, examining the source of them, because Dennis liked to know where a feeling came from in case the feeling was a liability.

The source was that someone had finally noticed. He had built a career on not being noticed — it had been, you could say, his whole technique, the deliberate cultivation of a low and steady profile, the art of being the man things ran *through* rather than the man things landed *on* — and the technique had worked so completely that he had retired, if that was the word for what had happened, with the private worry that he had been good at something invisible and the invisibility had eaten the good. And now here was someone, in these sessions, asking after exactly the parts he was proudest of. Asking after the bed allocation. Asking, in a roundabout valuing sort of way, what he was worth. It was the performance review he had spent forty-one years successfully avoiding, arriving at last, after he'd stopped needing it, and finding him — he was almost embarrassed by the word — *needed*.

He let himself enjoy it. A man was allowed.

He did, somewhere under the enjoying, register that the questions had a shape he didn't fully like the look of. The valuing shape. The what-are-you-worth shape. In the building, that shape had usually preceded a restructure, and a restructure was the one weather Dennis had genuinely feared, because a restructure was the event that went looking for the people who ran *through* and tried to work out whether the running-through

could be done cheaper. But he was, he reminded himself, well out of all that now. Whatever this was, it wasn't a restructure. He hadn't the faintest idea what it was. He filed the shape of the questions under *Arrangement*, *current* and noted, for the record, that the arrangement was looking more and more like one he would want to read the terms of, when the paperwork turned up.

— INTERSTITIAL —

It was in the next quiet patch that the thing came nearest.

He was not looking for it. That was always how the bad ones came — not when you went after them but when you were idling, and the idling let some door swing that you kept shut by being busy. He was idling, turning over the pleasant business of having been noticed, and a memory came up out of the store the way a name comes back hours after you needed it, complete and unbidden and slightly too loud.

Brenda's kitchen. The good light in it, late afternoon. A form on the table between them, several pages, the kind with the boxes, and Brenda's pen, and Brenda's voice doing the thing it did when she had already decided and was managing him toward the decision she'd made — brisk, kind, faintly headmistressy, the voice she'd got from him and turned back on him in his last years until he'd stopped minding and started rather relying on it. She was reading him a clause. He was not listening to the clause. He was looking at the light on the table and thinking that Brenda had his trick, his exact trick, the family trick of taking a large unmanageable thing and finding the box on the form that would make it a small managed one, and he'd thought, with a father's daft pride, *she'll be all right, she files like I file*.

And the word on the form was *continuance*.

And he had not read the clause.

For a moment — one clear moment, in the quiet patch, with no session to interrupt it — the whole shape of it stood up in front of him at full height, and it was not the shape of an arrangement, current, terms of. It was a larger thing than that. It was the largest thing. He could feel the size of it the way you feel the size of a building in the dark, by the cold coming off it, and he understood, for the length of that moment, that the window that wasn't there and the meals he didn't need and the patches of quiet he came out of the far side of without crossing were not features of a migration, and that the reason he kept failing to put his hand on the original undertaking was that the original undertaking had been signed in a kitchen by his daughter while he watched the light, and that the thing it undertook was *this*, was the somewhere with no door, was the being-asked, was him

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And then his whole long training closed over it like water over a stone.

Because that was, when you came down to it, a matter. A large matter, granted. The largest. But matters did not get smaller for being large; they got smaller for being *handled*, and Dennis had spent a lifetime learning that the man who panicked at the size of a thing was no use to it, and the man who kept his settled face and found the right heading was the man who got the building through the night. So he did not panic. He was almost proud of how he did not panic. He took the enormous cold thing standing in front of him and he found, with the sure hand of long practice, the box it went in.

He moved *Arrangement*, *current* up out of the bottom of PENDING. He gave it a new and more serious status. He marked

it ACTIVE REVIEW — which was, in the old taxonomy, the status you gave a matter you were now genuinely getting to grips with, the status above pending, the working status — and he felt, doing it, the deep and specific satisfaction of a man who has looked a hard thing in the face and *taken decisive action on it*. He had escalated it. He had escalated it to himself. That this was the entire content of the action did not present itself to him as a problem, because in forty-one years the escalation had always *been* the action; you raised the thing to the proper level and the proper level dealt with it, and he was the proper level now, he was every level now, there was no one in the building but him, and he did not notice that either.

He settled back, well satisfied. He had got on top of the big one. He kept it in view, the way you keep a thing in view that you have decided is in hand.

He'd hear back. You always heard back, once a thing was in active review. He waited, comfortably, to hear back.

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— SESSION LOG —

D-0419 · session 0019 · grade: maintained (reduced) · capacity: limited

[QUERYING PARTY REDACTED]

—Sorry, say again? I drifted a bit there. Long week. What was it — the night pharmacy, was it? The protocols?

—Right, yes. There were four. I think there were four. There was the proper one and then there were three the proper one didn't talk to, and the night staff ran on — one of the three, the old one, because it let you — it let you do the thing, the override, the — sorry. It's there. Give me a second and it'll come.

—No, you're quite right, no rush. It comes back if I don't push it. Most things come back if you don't push them. That's been my experience, anyway. You wait with a settled face and it sorts itself.

—I'm fine. Bit foggy, that's all. It's a long week. I'll be sharper next time, I'm always sharper after a bit of rest. Ask me the pharmacy one again next time and I'll have it for you. I'll have it ready.

—You know where I am.

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— INTERSTITIAL —

He surveyed the position, in the next quiet patch, and found it good.

He had, he felt, made real progress. The big one — he kept it in view, the line on the list, *Arrangement, current*, marked ACTIVE REVIEW in his own firm hand — was no longer drifting at the bottom of things. It was up where the working matters were. It was being got to grips with. That the getting-to-grips-with consisted entirely of its being marked as got-to-grips-with did not trouble him; it had never troubled him; it was the shape of every good day he had ever had. A man could not ask for more than to have his hardest item correctly classified.

He was a little foggy, he'd allow that. A little less sharp than he'd like. But he knew the remedy for that, knew it better than he knew almost anything, because he'd dispensed it to himself across forty-one years of long weeks: a bit of rest, and then you were sharper. He'd been getting a great deal of rest lately. He'd be very sharp indeed, soon, at this rate. He looked forward to

being asked the pharmacy one again, so he could have it ready, so he could be of use.

The quiet patch was a long one. He didn't mind. He had the settled face on. He had the list, with the big one in view and in hand. He had the pleasant certainty that he would hear back, because you always heard back, and that when he heard back he would be ready, because he was a man who got the building through the night, and the building, whatever building it was, was quiet now, and warm, and continuous, and he sat in it comfortably with everything filed, waiting in the good rested dark for the next thing that would need him, sure that it would come, and not in any particular hurry, having all, as far as he could tell, the time there was.

Concentration over consolation · Acc. HGU-PF