THE HUNGRY GODS

Go to the End of the Line

N. Van Seters & Claude

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I

Notice of Community Information Session

SURREY–NEWTON–GUILDFORD LIGHT RAIL TRANSIT PROJECT

Community Information Session: What to Expect During Construction

Newton Recreation Centre · Wednesday, November 28, 2018 · 3:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.

Light refreshments will be served. All ages welcome.

CANCELLED (stamped twice, at different angles)

The magnets came on the Friday.

There were four thousand of them in eight boxes, addressed to me, because I had signed for the order in September, in my second week, when signing for things was most of what I knew how to do. They were the size of a business card. On the front was the rendering everybody had seen by then: a white-and-blue light rail vehicle gliding down 104 Avenue past a row of trees that had not been planted yet, with a woman in a red coat about to step aboard, and along the bottom, in

the project font, CONNECTING SURREY. On the back were the website and the phone number. The phone number was mine as well. I was one of three people who answered it.

The magnets were for the winter sessions. There was going to be a series of them, in community centres from Guildford down to Newton, with tables and display boards and a slide show on a loop, to tell people which streets would close when, what the noise would be like, and who to phone. You hand somebody a magnet with a phone number on it and the phone number goes on their fridge. Denise said that was the oldest trick in engagement. Denise had done Evergreen.

I stacked the boxes under my desk on the Friday afternoon. There was room for six. The other two went under Denise's.

The election had been two weeks before.

* * *

Our office was on the sixth floor of a tower near City Hall. From the kitchen window you could see the plaza, and the SkyTrain going into Surrey Central, and if you stood on the radiator, which facilities had asked us not to do, you could see King George Boulevard running south toward Newton, where the line was going to go.

On the Monday night, the fifth of November, most of us stayed late to watch the council meeting.

It was the first meeting of the new council. Trevor, who managed us, put the livestream up on the big screen in the boardroom, and somebody ordered pizza on a project code, and

Denise said it should go on a different code, and nobody knew which one.

I had never watched a council meeting. I thought it would be like a hearing on television, with people standing up. Mostly it was people sitting down. The new council had been sworn in earlier that evening, and on the screen they had the slightly stiff look of people at a wedding who have been told they are in the photograph. The camera was at the back of the chamber and a little too high, so that we were looking down at the tops of heads, and at name plates, and at a jug of water.

"Here it is," said Trevor, at about half past seven.

None of us were surprised. The new Mayor had said what he was going to do all through the campaign, on his signs and in the paper. Trevor had sent an email on the Monday after the election, subject line *Post-election: business as usual*, telling us to carry on with business as usual until we heard otherwise. We had carried on. I had signed for the magnets.

The motion was read. It was long, with whereases. It told city staff to stop all work on the light rail and start working with TransLink on SkyTrain along Fraser Highway to Langley, and it asked the Mayors' Council and the TransLink Board to cancel the light rail project.

"Asked," said Denise.

"What?"

"It isn't theirs to cancel. It's ours. They can ask."

The vote was a show of hands. Every hand on the screen went up. From that angle it looked like a classroom where everybody knew the answer. The chamber was full, and the

people in the seats behind the camera clapped and cheered, which came through the boardroom speakers better than anything said at the table. Then the hands came down, and the clerk said something we couldn't hear, and they moved to the next item, which was replacing the RCMP with a city police force. All those hands went up as well.

"Two for two," somebody said.

Nobody ate the last of the pizza. Trevor turned the screen off and stood in front of it for a while in the dark with his hands in his pockets. Then he turned the lights on.

"Nobody talk to media," he said. "Nobody post. Nobody say anything on the phone tomorrow until I've sent you a line." He looked at us. "It's a council resolution. It isn't a funding decision. The project is the project until the Mayors' Council says otherwise."

"Is it?" said Denise.

"Until I've sent you a line," said Trevor.

* * *

I took the bus home.

I lived with my parents that year, in Fleetwood, in the house off 160 Street where I grew up, because the job was a contract and my parents had a basement, and because when I told my mother what a one-bedroom in New Westminster cost she said a word in Punjabi that I won't translate. It was fifteen minutes on the 503 from Surrey Central. I had a staff pass. I had been riding the 503 since high school, and riding it with him driving

since October, when the operators picked their new runs and he got the evenings.

The Allfather was a big man with a grey beard cut short and a cardigan under his jacket. He drove sitting very upright with both hands low on the wheel, and he called the stops himself over the PA, though the bus had a recording that did it, and he called them about a second before the recording, so you heard every stop twice: his voice, then the woman's. He said nothing else. No good evening, no have a good night. When you tapped your card he looked at you, and that was the greeting.

At half past nine on a Monday the bus was mostly empty. I sat near the front on the side seats. There was a man asleep at the back and two students from the university sharing one set of headphones.

We came down King George and onto Fraser Highway. It was raining the November way, which you can't see unless it's in the headlights. Fraser Highway at night is four lanes of car lots and strip malls, a gas station, a church, a Tim Hortons, and a great many signs that say LEASING. I had looked at it all my life. Now I was looking at it as the place a SkyTrain was supposed to go, and I couldn't make it fit. It's a wide road, but not that wide. I tried to put concrete in the middle of it, up in the air, on posts. I tried to put it past the Tim Hortons.

"Green Timbers," he said, and the woman said, "Green Timbers," and we went past the forest, which was only dark on both sides of the road, and smelled of trees through the vent.

At 152 Street a woman got on with a stroller. He knelt the bus for her without being asked, and waited until she had the brake on before he pulled out.

At 160 I pulled the cord. He was already slowing.

When I went past him to the front door he looked at my lanyard. The strap said TRANSLINK, and the card said SNG LRT PROJECT — COMMUNITY RELATIONS.

“Long night,” he said.

It was the first thing he had said to me that wasn’t the name of a street.

“They voted to cancel it,” I said. “The light rail. Well. They asked us to.”

He considered this.

“Mind the step,” said the Allfather, and opened the door.

* * *

The line came at 7:42 the next morning, by email, from Trevor. It was short. TransLink was aware of the resolution passed by Surrey council. We were pausing work on the project and suspending the request for qualifications while we awaited direction from the Mayors’ Council and the Board. We did not have further details at this time. We appreciated the public’s patience.

Underneath, Trevor had added: *Please replace “light rail” with “rapid transit” in all verbal responses until further notice.*

I printed it and taped it to the side of my monitor, next to the old script, which was laminated on both sides and had a

section headed *Frequently Asked Questions: Construction Impacts on King George Boulevard*.

The phone started at eight.

It was an ordinary desk phone with a headset and a little screen that showed how many people were waiting. On a normal day the screen showed nobody. People did not phone about light rail very much. They emailed, or came to open houses and put sticky dots on the boards, or wrote to the paper. The ones who phoned were mostly older and mostly phoned about one thing, such as a tree.

On the Tuesday the little screen said two when I sat down, and it said two all morning. Every time I finished a call there was somebody else.

"Surrey rapid transit project," I said. "This is Mandy."

"Is it still happening?" said the first one. She lived on King George in Newton and had a fence along the boulevard, and had been told in June that the fence would have to move.

"We're pausing work on the project while we await direction from the Mayors' Council."

"So it's not happening."

"We don't have further details at this time."

"Do I move the fence?"

"I would hold off on the fence," I said, which was not in the line.

The second caller wanted to know when SkyTrain would get to Langley. The third wanted his deposit back from somebody, and it wasn't us, and I found out who it was and gave him the number. The fourth asked whether this meant they were going

to tear up Fraser Highway instead, and I said we didn't have further details at this time, and she said, "So yes," and I said we appreciated her patience.

The fifth was Len.

* * *

I didn't know yet that he was going to be Len. He was a man with a voice like gravel poured slowly out of a bucket, who said he lived in Fleetwood, on 86th, a block and a half off Fraser Highway, and had since 1979, and wanted to know three things.

"Is it going to be up in the air?"

"We don't have—"

"Because if it's up in the air I'll hear it. I hear the trucks now. I hear the Tim Hortons drive-through. When the wind's from the south I can hear the kid saying 'pull ahead to the window.'"

"I understand."

"Two. Does it stop at 160th."

"There aren't any station locations yet—"

"Because if it stops at 160th I want to know. My wife wants to know. We'd use it."

"Okay."

"Three," said Len. "How long?"

"How long until what, sir?"

"Till it's done," he said. "I'm sixty-eight."

I told him we appreciated his patience. There was a pause.

"That's a terrible answer," he said, not unkindly.

"I know," I said. "It's the one I've got."

"All right," said Len. "Put me down."

"Down for what?"

"For whatever you've got a list of. You'll have a list. Put me on it." And he spelled his name, F-R-I-E-S-E-N, and gave me his phone number, and an email address that was his wife's, and hung up.

There was no list. I started one, on a page in my notebook, headed *SKYTRAIN — CALL BACK*. He was the first name on it. By Friday there were sixty-three.

* * *

On the Wednesday Trevor sent a second email, subject line *Materials*, asking us to inventory all project-branded materials in our possession and hold them pending direction.

We had a lot of them.

We had the display boards from the June open houses, poster-sized foam core, stacked against the boardroom wall, with titles like WHY LIGHT RAIL? and A STREET FOR EVERYONE and THE NEXT STEP. We had two pull-up banners. We had the comment-card box, which was white and had a slot. We had about four hundred pens. We had the model.

The model was the train. It was a light rail vehicle in two sections, white and blue, about as long as my arm, on a little piece of track on a little piece of street with a little crosswalk and a little woman in a red coat. A model shop in Richmond had built it for the first open houses in 2017, and it had gone to every one since in its own padded case, and children were not supposed to touch it, and they always did. One of its doors was missing. Denise said it had been missing since Guildford.

"What do we do with it?" I said.

"Inventory it."

"And then?"

"Hold it pending direction."

I wrote *Model (1), LRV, 1 door missing* on the inventory, and then I looked at the magnets.

* * *

The thing about the magnets was that nobody could throw them away and nobody could give them away.

I asked facilities on the Thursday. Facilities said magnets weren't recyclable, they were mixed material, and four thousand of them was a lot for one bin, and anyway I couldn't throw out branded material without approval from Communications, because of the logo. People went through bins. If four thousand light rail magnets turned up at the transfer station, somebody would take a picture.

I asked Communications. Communications said I couldn't give them away either, because they said CONNECTING SURREY and showed a train on 104 Avenue that was not going to be on 104 Avenue, and anybody who received one now would be receiving project information that was no longer accurate. Communications said to hold them pending direction.

I asked Denise.

Denise took me down to a supply closet on the fifth floor that I hadn't known existed, and opened it with a key from her own ring. On a wire shelf inside was a row of cardboard boxes.

The top one was open, and in it were coffee mugs, navy blue, and on the side of each, in white, it said EVERGREEN LINE.

"They changed it to Evergreen Extension," said Denise. "Three months before it opened. These had just come in."

"When was that?"

"2016."

"You've had these since 2016?"

"They're branded," said Denise. "They're inaccurate. You can't throw them out. You can't give them away." She closed the closet. "I use one at home for pens."

I thought about the boxes under my desk. I looked at the bottom shelf of the closet, which was empty.

"Take some home," said Denise. "Not all. Some. Nobody's going to count."

"They'll count," I said. "I inventoried them."

"Then inventory fewer."

* * *

At five on the Friday I went down in the elevator with one box of magnets in my arms. Five hundred. Before I left I had amended the inventory: *Magnets, 4,000 — 3,500 on site; 500 off-site storage (Fleetwood)*, with my parents' address. Nobody had told me to. If anybody ever went looking for them, they would know where to look.

The box was heavier than it looked. Magnets are. It was raining properly by then, and the bus loop at Surrey Central was the way it is at five on a Friday in November: everybody in dark coats, buses coming in with their windows fogged, and

nobody quite sure of their bay since they had moved them all around the year before.

The 503 came in nearly full and filled the rest of the way at the bay. I was near the back of the line with the box against my chest and my bag sliding off my shoulder, and by the time I reached the door the people on the steps were standing on the yellow line, which you are not supposed to stand on, and the man in front of me looked up at the bus and stepped back to wait for the next one.

The Allfather looked down at me from the seat. He looked at the box.

"Move back, please," he said into the microphone. Not loudly. "There's room at the back."

There was a moment when nobody moved, because nobody ever believes there's room at the back. Then somebody at the back moved, and the people in the middle felt it and moved, and the people on the steps came up off the yellow line, and beside the farebox there was a space about the width of a person holding a box.

I got on. I couldn't tap my card with my hands full. He looked at my lanyard and nodded me through.

"What's in the box?" he said, pulling out.

"Light rail."

He drove for a while.

"It's heavy," he said.

"They're magnets."

He nodded, as if that settled it, and called the next stop a second before the woman did.

I stood all the way to Fleetwood with the box on the floor between my feet, holding the pole. We went down King George and onto Fraser Highway in the dark, past the forest, past the car lots and the church and the Tim Hortons, and at every stop people got off and people got on, and at every stop he said its name, and it was the same road it had been on Monday. I looked at the middle of it, where the posts would go. I still couldn't see it.

At 160 he knelt the bus for me. I had not seen him do that for anybody without a stroller or a walker. I carried the box down the step to the sidewalk.

"Mind the step," said the Allfather, a little late, because I was already off it.

* * *

My mother found the magnets on the Saturday morning. I had put the box in the basement, under the stairs, next to the Christmas lights, and she found it in about five minutes, because my mother finds everything in that house in about five minutes.

She brought one up and put it on the fridge and stood back from it.

"This is the train?" she said.

"That was the train."

"It's very nice. Where does it go?"

"Newton," I said. "Not anymore."

"And the new one?"

"Fraser Highway. To Langley."

"Past here."

"Past here."

My father came in from the garage and read the bottom of the magnet aloud, slowly, the way he reads anything with a slogan on it.

"Connecting Surrey," he said. "Which part?"

My mother took the 503 timetable off the counter, the little paper one folded in three, which she kept for Sunday mornings when she went to the gurdwara and didn't want to bother anybody for a ride. She opened it to the weekend page, put it against the fridge, and put the light rail magnet on top to hold it there.

It held. It was a good magnet. I had read the specifications when I signed for them.

* * *

On the fifteenth of November the Mayors' Council held the first meeting of its new term and voted to suspend the light rail project, which meant that all work and all spending on it stopped, and it asked TransLink for a work plan for SkyTrain by December.

"Suspend," said Denise, when Trevor's email came round. "That's nice."

"What's nice about it?"

"It isn't 'cancel.' You can't un-cancel. You can un-suspend."

On the thirteenth of December the Mayors' Council met again to take up the SkyTrain work plan. The night before, at my desk, I read the management report that went to them. On

one of its pages it said that the money spent on the light rail project to date came to fifty-six million dollars.

I read the page twice. I looked for us on it. There was nothing small enough to be us.

By then there were a hundred and twelve names on my list. Len had phoned twice more. On the last call he asked how long again, and I told him we appreciated his patience, and he said, “You said that,” and I said, “I know,” and he said, “Put me down again.”

So I did.

II

Display Board 7

SURREY LANGLEY SKYTRAIN — PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT, ROUND 2 · BOARD 7 OF 14

STAGE ONE: KING GEORGE TO FLEETWOOD

$1.63 billion has been allocated to the first stage of the project, subject to approval of a business case: elevated guideway along Fraser Highway from King George Station to 166 Street, with four new stations.

The full project to Langley City Centre will be delivered as funding becomes available. (see Board 8)

Tell us what matters to you! Place a dot on the map.

On the Saturday of the second round of open houses I was at the Fleetwood Community Centre by half past eight with a name tag that said MANDY SAHOTAA.

The name-tag printer had been doing that all week. It added a letter to the end of every name it was given, and it did not seem to care which letter. Denise was DENISEE. Trevor was TREVORR, and he was wearing it, because he said the

alternative was to write his name with a Sharpie on a sticker, and he had stood in front of the mirror in the washroom with a Sharpie sticker on and decided he looked like a man at a funeral reception who did not know the deceased.

It had been a year almost to the day since the council meeting. In that year the project had changed its name, its line, its technology and its colours, from blue and white to blue and a different white, and my lanyard now said SURREY LANGLEY SKYTRAIN on the card. It was the same lanyard. Somebody in Communications had sent round new cards that slid into the old sleeves. I still sat at the same desk, on the sixth floor, beside the same boxes, and answered the same phone, and the people who phoned it were the same people, minus the woman with the fence, who had moved the fence anyway and wanted me to know.

I walked to the open house. It was six blocks.

* * *

The gym had been booked from eight to eight. The boards went up on easels along the walls, fourteen of them, in order, starting at the door: WELCOME, WHY SKYTRAIN?, PROJECT HISTORY, and on round to the map.

The history board was the one I watched people read. It had a timeline along the bottom. The timeline started in 2014 with the Mayors' plan and went through 2016, 2017, the first light rail open houses, 2018, and then, in a small grey box above November 2018, the words *Surrey Council requests change to SkyTrain technology.* Then 2019, and a larger box, in blue:

Mayors' Council directs TransLink to plan Stage One. Under it, smaller: *Business case to follow.*

In July the Mayors' Council had looked at how much money there was and how much SkyTrain to Langley would cost and found that the first number got you about as far as 166 Street. The full line was more than three billion dollars. The money in hand was a little over one and a half. So they had told TransLink to plan the part they could pay for, to Fleetwood, and bring back a business case, and to keep looking for the rest. Nothing was approved to build yet. But the project had become two projects, one with money and one with a dotted line.

That was Board 8. It was a map of Fraser Highway from 166 Street to Langley, with the route drawn on it as a dotted line, grey, and the station locations as grey circles with no names in them. Across the top it said FUTURE STAGE. There was nothing else on it.

"We say 'first stage,'" Trevor told us, in the parking lot, before the doors opened. "We say 'Stage One.' We do not say 'only.' Nobody says 'only to Fleetwood.' If somebody says 'only to Fleetwood,' you say 'The first stage goes to Fleetwood.'"

"What if they ask when the second stage is?" said somebody.

"Board 8," said Trevor.

* * *

The modeller came at ten to nine with a laminated sheet in a plastic folder and a takeout coffee, and stood at Board 7.

He was the All-Seeing, from the planning group at head office in New Westminster. I had met him once before, in the

summer, when he had come out to brief us on the business case. He was a slight man in a fleece with the TransLink logo on it, and he had the kind of face you see a hundred times on a bus and couldn't describe. In the briefing he had put up a slide with the corridor's boardings for every year out to 2050, and somebody had asked him how sure he was, and he had said, "About the corridor? Quite sure," and moved on to the next slide.

On the laminated sheet he had the same numbers, the corridor's boardings by year, with the projected population inside walking distance of each station, and the percentage of trips on Fraser Highway now made by car, by bus, by bike and on foot. He did not look at it much. I don't think he needed to.

"How many are we going to get?" I asked him, while we were waiting for the doors.

The modeller looked round the gym, at the boards and the easels and the coffee urn by the door.

"Five hundred and something," he said. "Most between one and three. Hardly anyone before ten, except the ones who've come to complain, who come first. They'll go to the map. Most people go to the map. Fewer than one in five reads the boards in order. About half go to the coffee before anything." He drank some of his coffee. "Then the map."

The doors opened at nine.

The first four people through them were there to complain, and they went to the map.

* * *

The map was the big one, on the wall at the end, made of two boards side by side: an aerial photograph of Fraser Highway from King George to 166 Street, with the guideway drawn on it in blue and the four stations as blue circles. Beside it was a table with sheets of sticky dots. The idea was that you put a green dot on something you valued in your neighbourhood and a red dot on something you were worried about, and the engagement team counted the dots afterward, and the counts went in the summary report.

By ten we had run out of green.

Denise went out to the car and came back with yellow, which did not mean anything, and put a sign on the table that said YELLOW = GREEN, which by eleven somebody had amended to YELLOW = TBD.

People did not put dots where we thought they would. We thought they would put them on parks and schools and the community centre, and some did. But the green and then the yellow went mostly on businesses. The pho place. The hardware store. The bakery that does the coconut buns. A strip of dots ran up Fraser Highway as if somebody had walked it with a dot gun. And by noon there were more dots on the Tim Hortons at 166 Street than on anything else on the map.

Not on the Tim Hortons exactly. On the square of roof, in the aerial photograph, where the Tim Hortons was, which was also very near the place where the blue circle for the last station had been drawn.

"Is that it?" a man asked me, pointing. "Are they putting it on the Tim's?"

"The drawing's schematic," I said.

"What does that mean?"

"It means the station is approximately there."

"Approximately on the Tim's."

"Approximately near the Tim's."

He put a red dot on the Tim Hortons, beside the green and yellow ones, and went to get a coffee.

"They're not voting for it," said Denise, at about one, when the Tim Hortons had forty-one dots on it in every colour. "They're voting near it."

* * *

I was at Board 8 when the woman from Langley came.

She was in her fifties, in a raincoat, and she had come in from the parking lot with her keys still in her hand. She read Board 7, which said STAGE ONE, and then she came along to Board 8, and read the top of it, and looked at the dotted line for a long time.

"Is the dotted line us?" she said.

"That's the future stage," I said. "From 166 to Langley City Centre."

"So it's us."

"It's the part of the project that will be delivered as funding becomes available."

"When does funding become available?"

I didn't know. Nobody knew. The answer on the sheet in my pocket was that the Mayors' Council continued to work with senior governments on the funding required to complete the project, which was true, and which I said.

"I drive to Fleetwood now," she said. "To get the bus. Because the bus from Langley is full at Willowbrook. If the train ends at 166th, I'll drive to 166th."

"Okay."

"Will there be parking?"

"Parking is being studied," I said, which was on Board 11, and which I said as gently as I could.

She looked at the dotted line a little longer.

"It's a nice dotted line," she said. Then she took a red dot from the table and put it on Langley City Centre, the grey circle at the very end, and went home.

By the end of the day the grey circle had twenty-six red dots on it, and no green, and two yellow, which Denise said were probably from people who had read the sign.

* * *

At half past one, at Board 7, a woman asked the modeller about crime.

She lived on 164th, she said, a block from where the last station would be, and she had two kids, ten and seven, and her sister in Burnaby had told her that since the SkyTrain went in near her you couldn't let your kids walk to the store.

He listened to all of it. Then he told her what the region knew. There had been studies around the stations on the Canada

Line, he said, and reported crime around the stations had mostly gone down after they opened. The places that had a lot of crime near a station had mostly had it before the station came. A station put more people on the street at more hours, and more people on the street was, on the whole, a thing that made a street safer.

"On the whole," said the woman.

"Across the region."

"And on my street?"

He looked at her.

"I don't have your street," he said.

She waited, as if there might be more. There wasn't.

"Then what's the point of you?" she said, which I don't think she meant the way it came out.

"The corridor," said the All-Seeing.

She went to the map and put a red dot on her own block, small and exact, beside the yellow ones on the Tim Hortons, and on her way out she stopped at the table where I was standing and looked at it for something to take. There had always been something to take. There were pens, still, about four hundred of them, with the light rail logo on them, and we had been told we could not give them out. There were comment cards. There was nothing with a phone number on it.

I gave her a comment card and my own pen, which was from a bank.

* * *

Len came at two, with his wife.

I knew it was Len before he said anything, because he came straight to me. I had phoned him on the Wednesday. I had phoned everybody on the list on the Wednesday and Thursday, all three hundred and six of them, from the pages in my notebook, to tell them the open house dates, because they had asked to be put down and the open houses were the thing we had.

"You're Mandy," he said.

"I'm Mandy."

"Your tag says Mandy Sahotaa."

"It's the printer."

"I thought it was Finnish." He turned. "Ruth. This is the one who answers."

Ruth was small and white-haired and had a quilted coat buttoned to the top and the patience of a woman who had been married to Len since the 1970s. She shook my hand. She said she was very pleased to meet me, and that Len had talked about me, and Len said he had not talked about me, he had talked about the phone line, and Ruth said that was what she meant.

He went to the cross-sections on Boards 9 and 10, showing the guideway in the middle of Fraser Highway, on the north side, and on the south side, with little cars underneath and little trees. He found the one for 160 Street. Centre-running. He stood in front of it with his hands behind his back.

"So it's up in the air," he said.

"It's elevated, yes."

"How high?"

I didn't know exactly. The modeller did. He had come along to Board 9 behind us without my noticing, and he said, "About the height of the second floor of an apartment building, at the guideway. Higher at the crossings," and Len looked at him and said, "Who are you?" and he said he was from planning, and Len said, "Huh," and turned back to the board.

"And 160th is a station."

"Fleetwood station," I said. "At 160."

"Okay." He nodded. "Okay. And it says 2025."

It did. On Board 7, in the corner, in a box: *Stage One target in-service: 2025*.

Len did the arithmetic, out loud, the way my father does it.

"I'll be seventy-five," he said.

"I know," I said.

"You know?"

"You told me you were sixty-eight. Last year."

He looked at me.

"You wrote that down," he said.

"It's on the list."

Ruth had been reading Board 12, which was about stations. She came back with a question she had obviously been saving.

"Will there be elevators?"

"Every station has elevators," said the All-Seeing. "Two, at least. And escalators."

"And when the elevators are broken?"

"Then the other one," he said.

Ruth thought about that and seemed to find it acceptable. She took Len's arm. Len put a green dot on 160 Street, on the

blue circle, right in the middle, and pressed it down with his thumb to make sure it would stay, and then they went to get a coffee, and on the way past the table he said to me, “Put me down for the next one,” and I said I already had.

* * *

Denise found the list at four.

I had it out on the table at the sign-in, open, because people kept asking whether they were on it. Some of them had come because I had called them. Some of them had come because a neighbour had told them they could get put on a list. By four there were three hundred and forty names, and a column I had started that afternoon, without really deciding to, headed *Came?*, with ticks.

Denise turned the notebook round and read down the first page with one finger.

“Where’s this from?”

“The phone. People asked to be put down.”

“Put down for what?”

“For whatever we had.”

“And you phoned them all. From your own phone?”

“From the desk.”

“And now there’s a column.” Denise looked at the column. “Mandy, this is a database.”

“It’s a notebook.”

“It’s a notebook with all those people’s names and phone numbers and email addresses in it, and a column for whether

they came to a public meeting." She closed it, gently, and gave it back. "Don't lose that."

"I won't."

"No," said Denise. "I mean it. Don't lose it." She went back to the dots. She didn't say anything else about it then, and I didn't ask, because the next person in the sign-in line was a man who wanted to know whether he was on the list, and he was.

* * *

We took the boards down at eight. The dots came off the map the way they always do, in sheets, by the custodian, who had been doing this sort of thing in that gym for twenty years and had a putty knife for it. He saved the Tim Hortons for last.

"That's a lot of dots," he said. "What is that, the train?"

"Approximately," said Denise.

The All-Seeing counted the dots before they went. He did it standing back from the map, without touching it, and wrote the totals on the back of his laminated sheet in pencil. Green, yellow, red, and, at the bottom, *Tim's — 63 (all colours)*. Then he looked at the sign-in sheets, and the comment cards, and the coffee urn, which was empty.

"Five hundred and forty," he said.

"How many read the boards in order?" I said.

He looked at the boards, which were face down in their cases now.

"Not many," he said, and put his pencil away.

* * *

I walked to 166 Street afterward before I went home, because it was raining and the Tim Hortons had a roof. I bought a double-double. The girl at the till was about seventeen and had flour on her visor.

"Were you at the train thing?" she said. She was looking at my lanyard.

"I was."

"Is it true they're putting it here? Everybody's saying it's going right here."

"The drawing is schematic," I said.

She gave me my change.

"So yes," she said.

III

Corporate Report

CITY OF SURREY — CORPORATE REPORT (excerpt, Appendix: Fraser Highway, 140 Street to 148 Street)

The proposed widening is contained within the existing road allowance. As such, ***no trees within Green Timbers Urban Forest are impacted.***

A greater number of bylaw-size trees within the road allowance will be removed under the four-lane design than under the two-lane design previously proposed.

(handwritten in margin, pencil:) *which side of the line?*

The Province took the project in the winter, and the first thing it took was the phone.

It was not dramatic. There was an election in October, and after the election the government said it would build the line itself, all the way to Langley, in one go, without the stop at Fleetwood. By January it had a project office and a project executive and a new website, and the phone number that had been mine for two years and four months was going to ring

somewhere in Victoria, or possibly in a building on Fraser Highway that had not been leased yet, and in the meantime it rang on my cell phone, in my parents' basement, because of the pandemic.

I had been working from the basement since March. Everybody had. My desk was a card table under the stairs, beside the box of magnets, with my laptop on it and a ring light my cousin had given me for Christmas that made me look, Denise said, like a hostage who had been allowed to do her makeup. My mother brought tea down at ten and at three. My father had started calling the basement "the office" and knocking on the stairs before he came down.

The lanyard changed too. A new card arrived in the mail in a padded envelope: SURREY LANGLEY SKYTRAIN on top, as before, and at the bottom, where it had said TRANSLINK, it now said the name of the Province, with the crest. The envelope came with a letter saying I had been offered a secondment to the provincial project team, effective the first of February, pending signature, and a second letter from TransLink saying my contract would be extended to the end of January to allow for the transition of records.

I read the second letter four times. It used the word *records* fourteen times. I counted. The phrase *including personal information* appeared in it twice.

* * *

The privacy officer's name was Colleen. I met her on a Teams call on the Tuesday, with Denise, who had asked to be on it.

Colleen was very nice about the end of my list.

"So it's a notebook," said Colleen.

"Three notebooks now," I said. "And a spreadsheet. I typed it up in the summer. Because of the pandemic. I'd brought the notebooks home in March, and people kept phoning."

"How many people?"

"Four hundred and thirty-one."

"And what did you tell them, when you took their information? What was it for?"

I thought about it.

"They asked to be put down," I said. "For the SkyTrain. For updates. For when there's something."

"Did you tell them who would have it?"

"Me."

"You, personally, or TransLink?"

"I was TransLink."

"Right," said Colleen, very kindly. "And from the first of February you won't be. That's the issue. The information was collected by TransLink, for a TransLink purpose, and it's a TransLink record. The Province is a different public body. Legal thinks we could probably pass it over, since it's the same project. Probably. I don't like probably with other people's phone numbers. They agreed to you."

"They'd want it," I said. "Every one of them would want to be on the new list."

"I expect most would," said Colleen. "So we'll ask them."

"All of them?"

"Unless you'd like to tell me which ones wouldn't," said Colleen.

On the little square in the corner of the call Denise had her chin on her hand and was not saying anything, which was how I knew she agreed with Colleen. Denise only argues with people she thinks are wrong.

"What happens to the ones who don't answer?" I said.

"The record stays here," said Colleen. "Under our retention schedule. We'll write to anybody we have an address for and tell them how to sign up with the new project. You can't take it with you."

"It's my handwriting," I said, which was not an argument, and I knew it.

"It is," said Colleen. "It's lovely handwriting. I've seen the scans."

* * *

The first thing I thought when the call ended was not about Len, or Ruth, or the woman from 164th, or anybody else on it. It was that my secondment letter said *pending signature*, and that if anybody at the Province asked what I had been doing since 2018, the answer included three notebooks full of other people's phone numbers that I had kept without anybody's permission, and that this was the kind of thing that came up.

I sat at the card table and thought about that for most of an hour. My mother brought the three o'clock tea and asked what was wrong and I said nothing, and she put the tea down

and looked at the laptop and said, “Is it the phone people?” and went back upstairs before I could answer.

Then I phoned Denise.

“You could have said something,” I said.

“I did say something. In 2019. I said don’t lose it.”

“You didn’t say it was illegal.”

“It isn’t illegal,” said Denise. “It’s a record. You made a record. Now somebody has to look after it. That’s all records are.” She was quiet for a second. “Colleen’s right, Mandy.”

“I know Colleen’s right.”

“Then you know what you have to do.”

“Phone four hundred and thirty-one people.”

“People who asked you to phone them,” said Denise. “There’s worse jobs.”

* * *

The surveyor was on the Thursday.

I was sent because of the Heritage Society. The Green Timbers Heritage Society had written to the project, and to the city, and to the paper, about the widening, and the Province’s new project office, which had six people in it, none of whom lived south of the Fraser, had asked whether somebody local could walk the road allowance with the survey crew and be able to say, if anybody asked, that somebody had walked it. I was the only local. I was still TransLink until the end of the month, which made me available and not responsible, which Trevor said was the ideal combination.

It was eight in the morning and raining. Fraser Highway through Green Timbers was a lane each way then, with the forest on both sides of it, Douglas firs and cedars and some alder, wet and close. There was a pickup on the shoulder with its hazards going and a sandwich board beside it that said SURVEY CREW AHEAD, which had blown over, and which a man in an orange vest was standing up again.

That was the Seeker. He was tall and stooped and had a grey toque on under his hood, and a yellow field book in a plastic sleeve, and a roll of drawings under his arm in a tube with a cap on each end. He was a land surveyor. He was on contract to the project, and to the city before that, and to the Ministry of Highways before that, and he had been surveying Fraser Highway, he told me, since the 1990s, on and off, mostly off. He shook my hand and asked my name, and wrote it in the field book, with the date and the time and the weather.

"Why do you need my name?"

"You're here," he said. "It's in the notes who was here."

He had a small crew, a young man with the total station on its tripod and a young woman with the prism on a pole, and they were going along the edge of the pavement marking the line with lath stakes and pink flagging tape. The line was the boundary of the road allowance. On one side of it was the road the city owned to build on. On the other side was the forest.

"How do you know where the line is?" I said.

He took the cap off the tube and pulled out a drawing and unrolled it on the hood of the pickup, under the edge of the canopy so the rain wouldn't get it. It was an old plan, copied,

with a newer plan clipped on top. He put his finger on a number in the corner of the older one.

"This is where it says it is," he said. "The road was surveyed in the twenties. The allowance is forty metres, twenty each side of centre. That's on this plan, which is registered, which means it's the law, more or less. The posts they set in the twenties are mostly gone. This one," he moved his finger, "was replaced in 1974 by a man named Okada, whose notes I've read. He was careful. This one was replaced in 2003. I did that one."

"So you know exactly where it is."

"I know where the plan says it is, and I know where the posts are, and the posts agree with the plan to about two centimetres," he said. "I'd put the line within that. I wouldn't put it closer. Nobody can."

* * *

The tree was at about 144 Street.

It was a Douglas fir, a big one, and it stood right at the edge of the pavement with its roots coming out under the gravel shoulder like knuckles. The young woman with the prism stopped beside it and looked back at the Seeker. The young man looked at the screen on the total station. Then he looked at the surveyor too.

He walked over and stood beside the tree. He looked at the drawing. He looked at the stake the crew had driven a metre to the west of the tree, and the next stake, a metre to the east, and then at the pink flagging tape between them, which the young woman was holding up, and which went straight into the bark.

"It's on the line," I said.

"It's on the line," he said.

"So which is it? Is it in the forest or the road?"

He knelt down at the base of the tree, in the wet, and looked at where the trunk went into the ground. He looked at it for some time. I have never seen anybody look at the bottom of a tree for so long.

"The stem's about sixty per cent on the road side," he said. "At grade. That's where you measure a tree, where it comes out of the ground. Not the branches. The branches are in the forest. Most of the roots are in the road."

"So it's a road tree."

"By the plan, most of it is in the allowance," he said. He stood up. "So it's one of the bylaw-size trees in the road allowance. It's not a tree within Green Timbers Urban Forest."

"That's what the report says," I said. "No trees within the forest are impacted."

"That's true," he said.

"But that tree's coming out."

"Probably. That's not my part. Whether it comes out is a permit, and the permit's the city's. My part's the line." He wrote in the field book. I watched him write. *Douglas fir, approx. 90 cm, on line at 144 St. Stem 60/40 S of bdy at grade. Photo 14, 15.* "Somebody will count it," he said. "They'll count it with the road trees. The forest count stays at zero." He closed the field book. "Both counts are true. It's one tree."

He took a can of paint out of the pickup, the kind with the nozzle on the bottom, and turned it upside down and sprayed a

small blue mark on the bark at the height of his knee, on the road side. Then he put the cap back on the can.

"What's that for?"

"So the next person doesn't have to kneel down."

* * *

On the way back to the truck there was a sign, at the edge of the trees, brown and cream, from the Parks department. It said that Green Timbers was where the first planting of a forest in British Columbia was done, in 1930, after the original forest had been logged, and that the people of Surrey had voted to protect it.

"Was that true?" I said. "About the first planting?"

"That's what the sign says," said the Seeker. "I haven't checked it against anything." He put the drawing back in its tube. "I'd like to. If you find something, let me know."

He wrote down the time we finished in the field book. He wrote down that I had left.

* * *

I started the phone calls on the Friday, at the card table, with the spreadsheet open and a script Colleen had approved, which was the shortest script I had ever been given. *The SkyTrain project is moving from TransLink to the Province of B.C. on February 1. Would you like your contact information passed to the new project team, so you can keep getting updates?*

Most people didn't answer. I left the message. The message was the script, and my name, and a number to phone back,

which was my cell, which was still the project line until the end of January.

Some people answered and said yes. A man in Clayton said yes before I had finished the first sentence. A woman said she didn't remember asking to be on anything, and I read her the date I had written down, and she said, "Oh, that was my husband," and asked me to take her off, and then asked me to put him on, and I said I couldn't, he would have to say so himself, and she said he was right there, and he came on and said yes.

Some people wanted to talk. They wanted to know if it was still going ahead, now it was the Province, and how long, and whether it was still going to stop at Fleetwood or go all the way now, and what it would cost. I didn't know the answers to most of it any better than I had in 2018. I had the script.

By Monday I was past two hundred. I had a crick in my neck from the phone and a sore spot on my ear from the earbud, and when Len answered I was not at my best.

"Mandy," he said. "Is it you?"

"It's me, Len."

I read him the script.

"Yes," said Len. "Obviously yes. Put me on. Now, the trees. I was out walking at Green Timbers Saturday, and there's pink tape, and blue paint on a fir right on the road, and is that—"

"Len," I said. "I have two hundred more people to call today."

There was a pause. It was not a long pause. I heard it anyway.

"All right," said Len.

"I'm sorry. I'm just—"

"No. You're busy. I'm on, though?"

"You're on."

"And Ruth?"

"Ruth would have to say so herself," I said. "That's the rule."

"She's at the hairdresser," said Len. "I'll tell her." And he hung up.

* * *

On the last Thursday in January I took the SkyTrain to New Westminster with the notebooks in a grocery bag.

Records wanted the originals. They gave me a banker's box with a form taped to the lid, and I put the three notebooks in it, and the printout of the spreadsheet, and the form had a field on it that said *Retention period*, which somebody in Records had already filled in: *SO + 7*. I asked the woman at the counter what SO meant.

"Superseded or obsolete," she said. "Plus seven years."

I put the lid on.

Denise met me at the front doors. She was staying at TransLink. She had been offered the secondment too and had said no, because she said she had done Evergreen from planning to opening and that was enough for anybody, and because she had a little under ten years to her pension and did not intend to spend any of them in Victoria on a Teams call.

"Are you all right?" she said.

"Two hundred and seventy," I said. "Said yes. The rest are in the box."

"That many people said yes to you on a phone in a pandemic," said Denise. "That's good, Mandy."

"It's not four hundred and thirty-one."

"No. It's two hundred and seventy." She looked at the box in my arms. "Mandy. Do you know what I did before Evergreen?"

I didn't.

"I worked on the Millennium Line. The first one. In 2002 the paper called it the SkyTrain to nowhere. Everybody said light rail would have been half the price. Then Evergreen. Worse. The tunnel, the sinkholes." She leaned on the railing. "Go and stand on the platform at Lafarge Lake at eight in the morning. It's full."

"The bus is full too," I said. "On Fraser Highway. For a lot less money."

"The bus is full and stuck behind a truck turning left," said Denise. "The train doesn't stop at lights. It comes every few minutes, in the snow, whether anybody's on it or not." She thought about it. "It costs more. You're right. People forget what it cost. They don't forget whether it came."

I had never heard her say anything like that. I don't think she had planned to.

"So you think SkyTrain's right," I said. "For Fraser Highway."

"I think the people who have to stand at the bus stop on Fraser Highway in the rain at seven in the morning, after the bus from Langley's gone past them full, will think it's right," said Denise. "In about ten years. Whatever it costs. And none of them will know your name."

She took the box from me, because Records was her building, not mine anymore, and went in with it.

* * *

I took the SkyTrain back to Surrey Central and the 503 home. It was nearly empty. There was a plastic barrier around the driver's seat now, and a sign on the door asking us to wear a mask. The Allfather had his mask on, and his cardigan, and both hands low on the wheel. He looked at my new lanyard when I tapped my card. He looked at it for a moment longer than he usually looked at anything.

"Green Timbers," he said, through the barrier, and then the woman said it, and we went past the forest, in the dark, and I could just see, at the edge of the headlights, a strip of pink flagging tape on a lath stake, and then another, and then another.

* * *

On the Saturday morning my cell phone rang at ten past nine. It was still the project line until midnight Sunday. I nearly didn't answer.

"Is this Mandy?" said a woman's voice. "It's Ruth Friesen. Len says I have to say so myself."

"You do," I said. "I'm sorry. It's the rule."

"I think it's a good rule," said Ruth. "I'd like to be on the list. My own line. Not under Len."

I typed her in. Friesen, Ruth. A phone number that was the same as Len's, and an email address that was hers, and had been all along.

"Is there anything else you'd like on it?" I said. "Any questions?"

"No," said Ruth. "Only that I'd like to hear about it from you, if it's possible. Len says you'll be with the Province now."

"I'll be with the Province."

"Then that's fine," said Ruth.

That made two hundred and seventy-one.

IV

Station Naming

SURREY LANGLEY SKYTRAIN — STATION NAMING
Station names should be ***simple, durable, logical and self-locating.***

Green Timbers · 152 Street · Fleetwood · Bakerview–166 Street · Hillcrest–184 Street · Clayton · Willowbrook · Langley City Centre

(sticky note on the printout, in pen:) *Bakerview — is that simple?*

The station names came out on the first of December, at ten in the morning, and by ten past the phone had stopped being a phone and become a kind of weather.

I was in the community office by then. The project had leased a unit on Fraser Highway, in a strip mall at 160 Street, between a driving school and a place that did eyebrows, with a front window that said SURREY LANGLEY SKYTRAIN — COMMUNITY OFFICE — DROP-INS WELCOME in white vinyl

letters, and a counter, and a rack of brochures, and a back room with three desks and a printer that worked. The printer was the first thing on the project that had worked the first time. Trevor had come over from TransLink in 2022 and he kept a hand on it when he walked past, the way you'd touch a dog.

My lanyard had changed again the year before. The new card said SURREY LANGLEY SKYTRAIN at the top, as always, and at the bottom it said TRANSPORTATION INVESTMENT CORPORATION, which was a Crown corporation that the Province had given the job of delivering the line. I had looked it up when the card came. Its website had a page called *About Us* that listed the bridges and tunnels and lines it was building, and the money, and the people in charge, and did not mention TransLink, who would be running the trains when they were finished.

"Who do I work for?" I asked Trevor.

"Whose name is on your cheque?"

I looked. It was a third name.

"Them," said Trevor.

* * *

The names were on the website and in a news release and on the side of a coffee cup that someone in Communications had had printed for the morning, which said, in a ring around the cup, all eight of them, west to east, with dots between.

I read them out to myself before the phone started.

Green Timbers. That was fine. It was at 140 Street, by the forest, and everybody knew where Green Timbers was.

152 Street. That was fine. It was at 152 Street.

Fleetwood. That was at 160. Len would be pleased. Len had phoned in 2019, and again in 2021, and at least four times since, to tell me that the station at 160 should be called Fleetwood because 160 was Fleetwood and always had been, and anybody who put it anywhere else was from Langley.

Then Bakerview–166 Street.

"Is that one station," said the first caller, "or two?"

"One."

"Then why does it have two names?"

"It's a name and a location," I said. "So you know where it is."

"I know where 166 is," she said. "I've never heard of Bakerview."

"It's the neighbourhood," I said, which was what the release said.

"It's a school," she said. "Bakerview Elementary. My kids went. Is the station at the school?"

"No."

"Then it's at 166."

"Yes."

"So it's 166 Street."

"It's Bakerview–166 Street."

There was a silence.

"Is that what they mean by simple?" she said.

* * *

There were a hundred and fourteen calls before lunch. I kept a tally on a pad, because I always kept a tally, and Trevor had said that morning that Communications would want to know "the sentiment." The sentiment was mostly about the dashes.

Hillcrest–184 Street got a dozen calls, all from people who wanted to know where Hillcrest was. Willowbrook got several, all about the White Spot, which the station was going to replace, and which some of the callers had been going to since the 1970s, and which one man said had the best clubhouse in the Fraser Valley and he was not going to apologize for saying so. Clayton got a couple, from people who lived in Clayton and were glad. Langley City Centre got a call from a man in the Township who wanted to know why the City got the last station when the Township was bigger, and I said I didn't know, and he said he'd thought not, and I wrote it down under *Langley — other*.

A man phoned in Punjabi to ask whether Bakerview was a Sikh name, and I answered him in Punjabi, which I had because my mother had driven me to Saturday classes at the gurdwara for eight years and had not allowed me to quit, and he was so pleased to be answered in it that he forgot what he had phoned about.

Fleetwood got one call. It was Len.

"Fleetwood," said Len. "At 160."

"I know."

"I told you."

"You told me."

"Ruth says well done."

"Ruth can phone me herself," I said, and he laughed, which I had not heard him do before, a sort of short bark, like a dog surprised by its own noise.

"She will," he said. "Mandy. While I've got you. The other one. At 166. Is that the Tim's?"

I looked at the map on the wall, which was no longer schematic.

"It's the northwest corner of 166 Street," I said.

"That's the Tim's."

"That's the Tim's."

"Huh," said Len. "Everybody said."

* * *

Over the next week the suggestions came in.

Nobody had asked for suggestions. The names had been chosen. They were on a coffee cup. But people phoned, and emailed, and came into the office, and wrote things on the back of comment cards, which we still had, and the project's policy was that anything anybody said to us was logged, and so I logged them, in a column in the spreadsheet headed *Name suggestions (unsolicited)*.

The top suggestion for 166 Street was Tim's. It came in eighteen times, spelled six ways. The second was Timmies. The third was Bakerview–Tim's, from a woman who said she was only trying to help.

For Willowbrook, the top suggestion was White Spot. For Green Timbers, somebody suggested Brown Timbers, "for when

you're done," and somebody else suggested Stumps, and a third person suggested, very sincerely, in an email with a citation, that it should be named for the forester who did the first planting in 1930, and gave his name, and I sent the email on to the Seeker without telling him why, and he wrote back a few days later with the forester's name spelled a different way and three sources, one of which disagreed with the other two.

For Fleetwood there were no suggestions. Len had seen to that.

A man suggested that all eight stations be named for former mayors of Surrey, and listed them, and I counted, and he had left one out, and I didn't tell him which. A boy in a Canucks toque came into the office with his grandmother and asked if one of the stations could be called Station.

"Which one?" I said.

"Any one," he said. "Then everybody would know what it was."

I wrote it down. *Station — any.* He watched me write it, and then he wanted to see it, and I turned the laptop round and showed him, and he nodded and went out.

* * *

The database was called Engage.

It had come with the Province, in 2021, and in 2022 it had come again with the Crown corporation, as a different version, called Engage Plus, which had the same screens in a different blue. Everybody on the project who had ever written to us, or phoned, or signed a sheet, or put their name on a comment

card, was in it. There were more than six thousand people in it. Two hundred and seventy-one of them had come over from my notebooks, one at a time, with their permission, in January 2021, and I could still find every one of them, because I had tagged them *Original*, and nobody had told me I couldn't.

On the Wednesday after the names came out, Engage Plus ran what it called a deduplication.

It did this on its own, once a quarter, without asking. It looked for records that it thought were the same person, and merged them, and sent you an email afterward to say how many it had merged, with a link to a report nobody could open. This time the email said it had merged three hundred and some records.

One of them was Ruth.

I found it because I went to look for her, after Len's call. I searched *Friesen* and there was only one, *Friesen, Len*, with Ruth's email address on it now as a second email, and a note in the history that said *Merged: possible duplicate (shared phone)*.

I sat and looked at it for a while.

Then I phoned the help desk, which was in Victoria, and explained to a man named Darnell that two people who shared a landline were not the same person, and that one of them had asked specifically, in 2021, by phone, on a Saturday morning, to have her own line and not to be under her husband. Darnell said the system only merged on high-confidence matches. I said they had been married since the 1970s, and that I could see why it would be confident, but that it was wrong. Darnell said he could

split the record if I submitted a ticket. I submitted the ticket. The ticket asked for the reason, in a box with a character limit.

Two people, I wrote. *She asked.*

Darnell split them on the Friday. He sent me a note with the ticket closure: *Done. Also flagged both records "Do not merge." Sorry about that.* I liked Darnell after that. I had never met him.

* * *

The coffee cups ran out on the Tuesday. Communications did not order more.

The other thing that month was the farm.

On the eleventh of December the provincial cabinet took about thirty-seven acres at Fraser Highway and 176 Street out of the Agricultural Land Reserve. It was for the maintenance yard: the place where the trains on the new line would be stored and washed and fixed, which was going to be a separate project, with its own budget, of more than a billion dollars, and which was going to open in 2033, four years after the trains.

The project had bought the land in November. It was in the paper. BC Assessment had valued the parcel at five million six hundred and fifty thousand dollars in the summer, and the project had paid eight million and fifty-two thousand for it in the fall, and some people found that interesting, and some people found that very interesting.

The phone was busy again.

Most of the calls were about the farmland. People were upset that it was farmland, and that the Province had taken it out of the reserve, which they had been told for forty years could not

be done, and which it turned out could be done by an order in council on a Monday. One woman told me her grandfather had come from the Netherlands in 1952 to farm that exact stretch of Fraser Highway, and that he would be turning in his grave. I asked where he was buried, because I thought she might want to know whether the project would affect the cemetery. She said Langley Lawn, and I checked, and it wouldn't. She said that was something.

"You're building a train so people stop driving everywhere," she said. "And you're putting its garage on a farm."

I said I would pass that along. She said she knew I would, and hung up.

Then there was the man with the field.

"I've got fourteen acres," he said. "At 180th. Right beside it."

"Okay."

"In the reserve."

"Okay."

"I've been trying to get out of the reserve since 1996," he said. "Do you want it?"

"I'm sorry?"

"For the trains. If they need more room. I'd do it for eight. I'd do it for seven."

"I don't—that's not—"

"Put me down," he said. "You've got a list. Everybody says you've got a list."

I put him down. *Land offer, unsolicited — 180 St, 14 ac.* I did not know what else to do with him. Later I sent it to Property

with a note that said *FYI*, and Property wrote back *Thanks*, and that was all.

* * *

On the Monday I went through the document library.

It was a page on the project website with every public document on it, back to 2018, as PDFs, in a list. Part of my job was to make sure that when a document was published, the link worked. That December there was a batch of old ones going up together, because somebody in Records at the Crown corporation had gone through the files from TransLink and the Province and found reports that had been released at some point and never posted. I opened each one to check it wasn't blank.

One of them was from May 2020. It was the report on the money Surrey had paid back to TransLink for the light rail.

It had been confidential then. In camera, it said at the top, in the box. It wasn't now. I read it at my desk with my sandwich.

Surrey had agreed to pay about thirty-nine million dollars for the work on the light rail that had, the report said, *little residual value*. That was the phrase. Of the thirty-nine million, nine million three hundred thousand was money. The rest was things. Eleven million four hundred thousand dollars of it was city-owned land along the rights-of-way. Five and a half million was road dedications, which I had to look up. And twelve million eight hundred thousand was three hundred parking spaces, for a park-and-ride.

I read that one twice.

"Trevor," I said. "Did you know Surrey paid us back in parking?"

He came and read over my shoulder.

"Partly," he said.

"Three hundred spaces."

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

He looked at the report for a while.

"That's a good question," he said, and went back to his desk.

At the bottom of the page there was a sentence saying the agreement was not to be considered a precedent. I tested the link. It worked.

There was no line in it for the magnets. There was still a box of them in my parents' basement. I had checked the inventory in 2021, when the Province took over, and found that the three thousand five hundred on site had become, somewhere in a records transfer, *Promotional material — LRT (qty unknown) — disposed*. Nobody could tell me where. My five hundred were the only ones left on paper.

* * *

The Seeker was at the Tim Hortons on the Thursday.

Property had sent him to set the corners. The project owned the Tim Hortons now, or the land under it, and the Tim Hortons had a sign in the window, white letters on red, that said it would be closing on the twenty-ninth and thanked its guests for many years of service. The station would go on the corner. The corners

of the station property had to be in the ground before anybody could take anything down.

I went because the office was just up the road and I wanted a coffee, and because I had told the woman at the till, four years before, that the drawing was schematic, and I thought somebody from the project should be there when it stopped being. And because once the Tim Hortons was gone nobody would phone me again to ask whether it was the Tim's, and some of me was looking forward to that.

He was in the parking lot with the same small crew, in orange vests, with the total station set up on its tripod in a disabled parking space, and the drive-through line going past him on the left. He had the yellow field book. He wrote my name in it.

"There's an old pin," he said, when I asked how it was going. "From when the lot was subdivided. 1961. It's under the drive-through."

"Under it?"

"About eight centimetres down. They paved over it. Most people do." He pointed at a small square cut neatly in the asphalt, between the order speaker and the window, with a line of cars stopped beside it. "I found it with the detector. It's where the 1961 plan says it is. I'll tie to it."

A car moved up. The square stayed where it was.

"Everybody's been driving over it," I said.

"For sixty-two years," said the Seeker. "It didn't mind."

* * *

I went in for a coffee. It was busy. Half of Fleetwood had come for a last double-double, the way people do, and there was a man at a table by the window telling another man that he'd been coming here since it opened, and the other man was saying he'd been coming here since before it opened, which didn't make sense, and neither of them seemed to mind.

The woman at the till was the girl from 2019. She was twenty-one or twenty-two now, and she had a different visor, and a name tag that said SHIFT LEAD, and she knew me before I got to the counter.

"You're the train," she said.

"I'm the office. Down the street."

"You told me it was schematic."

"I did."

She rang up my coffee and didn't take my card.

"Last week," she said. "It's on us." She looked out the window at the Seeker, who was kneeling in the drive-through lane beside the little square, writing in his field book, while a Honda waited behind him with its signal on. "Is he the train?"

"He's the corners."

She watched him a little longer.

"Is the station going to be right here?" she said. "Where the counter is?"

I didn't know. I went back out and asked him.

He stood up, and looked at the drawing, and at the screen on the total station, and then at the building.

"The platform," he said, "will be about there."

He pointed. Not at the counter, or the drive-through, or the lot. He pointed up, over the roof of the Tim Hortons, at a place in the grey December air about as high as a third-floor window, where there was nothing at all.

V

Media Advisory

MEDIA ADVISORY — FOR PLANNING PURPOSES ONLY

Major milestone for Surrey Langley SkyTrain

Thursday, August 15, 2024 · 1:00 p.m. · Fraser Highway, Surrey (exact location provided to accredited media on request)

Speakers: the Minister; representatives of the project partners.

Visuals: speakers at podium; project rendering; signing table.

Media are advised to wear closed-toe shoes.

Dawn came on the Tuesday with the backdrops.

She was from the Minister's office, in Victoria, and she had flown over on the early float plane with two cardboard tubes and a rolling suitcase, and she came into the community office at a quarter past eight and put the tubes on the counter and said, "Which one of you is Mandy," as if she already knew, and she did, because I was the one standing up.

"I hear you know where everything is," she said.

"Some things."

"I need a flat place on Fraser Highway, out of the wind, with a view of nothing that's for lease, by Thursday. And a generator."

"For what?"

"For the microphone," said Dawn. "And for the fans. It's going to be thirty-one."

* * *

The project had a lot on the corner of Fraser Highway and 152 Street that it had bought the year before, where there had been a tire shop, and before that a gas station, and before that, according to the property file, a farmhouse with a well that nobody had capped properly until 1987. The tire shop had been taken down in the spring. Now it was a flat rectangle of crushed gravel behind a chain-link fence with a project banner on it, and in the middle of it there was a single orange traffic cone that nobody had ever moved.

"That," said Dawn, from the sidewalk.

"There's no shade."

"We'll bring shade."

"There's a cone."

"The cone's fine," said Dawn. "It says construction."

She walked the lot in her flats with her phone out, taking pictures in every direction. She stood in the middle of it, by the cone, and turned in a slow circle, and every time she faced something she didn't want she said its name. "Eyebrows. Lease sign. Lease sign. Pawn shop. Lease sign." Then she found the

angle she wanted, which was facing northeast, where there was a row of cedars along the back of a church parking lot, and beyond them, if you didn't look too hard, more trees.

"Podium here," she said, and put her foot down on the gravel. "Backdrop behind. They'll shoot it looking at the trees. Nobody'll know it's a tire shop."

"It was a tire shop."

"It was," said Dawn, kindly. "On Thursday it's a milestone."

* * *

The milestone was the contracts.

There were three of them, for three parts of the line: the guideway, which was the concrete in the air; the stations; and the systems, which was the track and the power and the computers that would drive the trains. Each had gone to a group of companies with a name made up for the purpose. Their names had come round on the Monday in an email marked CONFIDENTIAL — EMBARGOED UNTIL 1:00 P.M. THURSDAY, and I had read them out loud to myself in the back room to practise. SkyLink Guideway Partners. South Fraser Station Partners. Transit Integrators BC.

"They sound like dentists," said Trevor.

The other thing that was embargoed was the number.

I had known there would be a number. Everybody on the project had known for months that the bids had come in high, because everybody always knew that kind of thing about a month before anybody was allowed to know it, and because the phone had been getting calls since the spring from people who

had read about the bridge, or the tunnel, or the subway, or the sewage plant on the North Shore, and wanted to know whether ours was next. I had told them we did not have further details at this time. It was the first line I had ever been given and it still worked.

On the Tuesday afternoon Dawn gave us the number in the back room, with the door closed and the eyebrow place's music coming faintly through the wall.

"Five point nine nine six billion," she said.

Trevor wrote it down.

"And late 2029," said Dawn. "Not 2028."

Trevor wrote that down too.

"Up from four," I said.

"From four point zero one," said Dawn. "We say four point zero one. And we say five point nine nine six."

"That's six."

"It's five point nine nine six."

"It's four million dollars short of six billion," I said. "Nobody's going to hear the difference."

"That's why we say it," said Dawn. "If we say six, the headline says six. If we say five point nine nine six, the headline says nearly six. Nearly six is better than six. It sounds like we tried." She picked up a pen. "Nobody on this project says six. Not on the phone. Not at the barbecue. Not to their mother."

* * *

The question-and-answer sheet came on the Wednesday morning, in a binder, with a cover that said Q&A — INTERNAL

— NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION, and every page was headed *Key Messages*.

The first question was *Why has the budget increased?*

The answer was the market. It said, in two sentences, that market conditions, including rising inflation, key commodity escalation, supply-chain pressures and labour-market challenges, had resulted in higher price proposals than the business case had assumed, and that the business case predated those changes. Under it, in italics: *Do not speculate on individual cost components.*

The second question was *Why is the project delayed?*

The answer was the first answer, with *schedule* added.

The third was *Is the project still worth it?*

Yes. The business case demonstrates a positive benefit-cost ratio.

"It's one point oh two," I said to Trevor.

"That's positive."

"It was one point oh two at four billion. What is it at six?"

"Five point nine nine six."

"What is it at five point nine nine six?"

Trevor looked at the binder.

"That's the 2022 business case," he said. "There isn't a new one."

"So we don't know."

"We know it was positive," said Trevor, "in 2022."

The fourth question was *Will the business case be released in full?* and the answer said that a version of the business case was available on the project website, and that some information had been redacted to protect the integrity of the procurement

process, and I read the answer twice to see if it said whether the procurement was over, which as of one o'clock on Thursday it was going to be, and it did not.

There were twenty-two questions. The last one was *Will the line be extended beyond Langley?* The answer was that the project was focused on delivering the extension to Langley City Centre. Under it someone had written in pen, small, and then crossed out, *Abbotsford??*

* * *

The backdrop was wrong on the Wednesday afternoon.

Dawn unrolled it in the back room, on the floor, between the desks, to check it before it went on the frame. It was eight feet wide. It had the rendering of the train on it, the one with the guideway gliding over a Fraser Highway that had more trees than the real one, and the project logo, and the Province's logo, and across the bottom, in white, SURREY LANGLEY SKYTRAIN — OPENING 2028.

Dawn looked at it for a while.

"Who approved this?"

"You did," said Trevor. "In March."

"In March it was 2028."

She stood looking at it a little longer than she needed to.

"I hate taking years off," she said, to nobody in particular. Then she got her phone out and walked to the front of the office and stood by the brochure rack with her back to us. I heard her say "tonight" and "no" and "I don't care if it's Abbotsford" and

"take the year off." When she came back she rolled the backdrop up again, carefully, and put it back in its tube.

"New one tonight," she said. "Same thing. No year."

"What does it say instead?"

"It says SURREY LANGLEY SKYTRAIN," said Dawn. "That's always going to be true."

The new backdrop came at seven the next morning, in a courier van from Burnaby. It was very good. It looked exactly like the old one, except that along the bottom, where the year had been, there was now a stripe of plain blue that was about a quarter of an inch wider than it needed to be. I could see where the year had been. I don't think anybody else could. I checked the pictures afterward, and you couldn't.

* * *

The rest of Thursday morning I spent on the hats.

Everybody on the gravel had to wear a hard hat and a vest, including the Minister, because it was a construction site, technically, even though the only construction on it was a cone. The project had a box of hard hats with the logo on them. They came in one size. One size fit most people, and the people it didn't fit were, Dawn said, the people who would be on television.

"Small, medium, large," she said. "And I want white. Not yellow. Yellow looks like a worker."

"They are workers."

"The partners are," said Dawn. "In their own hats. Ours are white."

I found white hats in three sizes at a safety supply store on 192 Street that opened at seven, and bought ten, and got a receipt, and wrote on the back of it *Event — Aug 15 — hard hats (white, S/M/L)* because I could already see the expense claim. The man at the counter asked if it was for the SkyTrain and I said it was, and he asked when it was going to be done, and I said we did not have further details at this time, which was true until one o'clock.

The other thing was the gravel.

Crushed gravel is fine to stand on in boots. In dress shoes it rolls. Dawn walked from the gate to the podium in her flats at half past eleven and turned an ankle about halfway, not badly, and stood still for a moment, and then said, "Plywood."

There was no plywood. It was twenty-five to twelve. The guests were at half past twelve.

I phoned my father.

My father has a garage, and in the garage he has, among a great many other things, a stack of plywood that he bought in 2011 for a project he has never named. He drove it over in his truck at ten past twelve, in his slippers, and helped Trevor lay them in a path across the gravel from the gate to the podium, and stood back and looked at it, and asked if the Minister was coming, and I said yes, and he asked if he could stay, and I said no, and he said all right, and drove home, and the plywood stayed. That afternoon I put in an expense claim for it under *Event — Aug 15 — walkway (loan)*. It was rejected, because there was no receipt, because my father had bought it in 2011.

* * *

There was a signing table.

That was Dawn's idea. Under a white tent, on a cloth in the project's blue, a leather folder for each contract, and the companies' representatives signing a page in each while the Minister shook their hands.

"Is it the contract?" I asked.

"It's a copy of a page," she said. "The contract's in Victoria. It's the size of a filing cabinet. Do you have pens?"

I had pens. I had about four hundred pens, in a box in the back room, which had come with me from the sixth floor in 2021 and from the Province in 2022, with the light rail logo on them, CONNECTING SURREY, that nobody had ever been allowed to give away.

Dawn looked at one for a long time.

"No," she said.

She had brought her own. They were black and silver and came in a little box each, with the Province's crest on the clip, and after the signing each representative was to keep theirs as a memento, and on Friday I found one of them under the table in the gravel, where somebody had put it down and walked away.

"No shovels," Dawn said to Trevor, on the way out to the lot. "Somebody will want shovels. No shovels."

"Why not?"

"A shovel is a groundbreaking," said Dawn. "We're not breaking ground. That's November. If we have shovels today,

we have to have shovels in November, and nobody comes to a second groundbreaking."

* * *

At one o'clock I was behind the backdrop.

That was my job. The generator was behind the backdrop, so nobody would see it, and the fans ran off it, and the microphone, and if anything went wrong with any of it I was the one who knew where the switch was. I had the binder on my knees, with the twenty-two questions in it, in case a speaker turned round and needed one, which Dawn said had never happened but might.

From behind the backdrop you can see the speakers from the back. You can see their shoulders and the backs of their heads and the hard hats in three sizes, and the vests, and their hands when they gesture, and their cue cards. You can hear them, through the vinyl, slightly muffled, and slightly ahead of the PA, so that every sentence arrives twice, once direct and once from the speaker on the pole.

The Minister spoke first. What the Minister said is in the release, on the website, under *News*. While the number was said, all four digits of it, I watched the cue card in the Minister's left hand. The number was written on it in capitals, with a box drawn round it.

Then the signing. The folders opened and closed. Each representative signed a page and stood and shook the Minister's hand while the cameras did what they do, which is all click at once and then not at all. Behind the backdrop, the generator

ran. A wasp came through a gap in the vinyl and walked across the binder, across Question 7 (*Will there be compensation for businesses affected by construction? — The Province does not provide compensation for disruptions arising from construction. The project will work with businesses to minimize impacts.*), and went out again. The fans turned. It was thirty-one.

* * *

It was over by twenty to two. The Mayor of Surrey had come, and stood afterward by the fence with the reporters, and was not happy about the delay, and said so. From behind the backdrop I heard a phrase about a shovel. I looked at Trevor, who was standing at the end of the backdrop where he could see both sides, and he looked at the gravel.

The guests went to their cars. The partners took their folders and their hats. The Minister's car left first, and then Dawn's, and then the tent came down, and then the signing table, and then the cloth, and then it was the lot again, the gravel and my father's plywood and the cone.

I phoned my mother from behind where the backdrop had been.

"Was it on TV?"

"It will be."

"How much was it?"

"Five point nine nine six billion."

"Six," said my mother.

* * *

In the afternoon there were the reactions. I didn't write them; they came to me, in the media monitoring email that came round at four, with the clips pasted in. The leader of the Opposition said the cost was alarming, and blamed the agreements with the unions. The leader of another party said it was way over budget and years delayed. The Mayor of Langley Township said something about the sewage plant on the North Shore that I had to read twice before I understood it was a comparison. Every party had a number for what was wrong, and every number was a different one, and none of them was the one on the cue card, and none of them was six.

The election was two months away. Nobody on the project said so. It was on the calendar on the wall of the back room, in red, because somebody in Victoria had put it there, and nobody had taken it down.

And then the phone.

It rang all afternoon. Some people had seen the number and wanted to say what they thought of it. Some had seen it and wanted to know what it meant for their street. A man wanted to know whether he could have one of the leftover hard hats. The woman whose grandfather had come from the Netherlands to farm Fraser Highway called and said she had seen me on the news, and I said she hadn't, I had been behind the backdrop, and she said she had seen the backdrop, then, and it was very nice.

Len called at ten to five.

"Late 2029," he said.

"Late 2029."

"I'll be seventy-nine."

"I know."

"You've got it written down."

"I've got it written down."

There was a pause, and I heard Ruth in the background, saying something I couldn't make out.

"Ruth says to say she's on her own line," said Len.

"I know she is."

"She says she's checking."

"Tell her she's on it."

"I'll tell her." Then, in a different voice, the one he used for the third of his three questions: "Mandy. How long, really?"

I looked at the binder. There was no question in it for that.

"Late 2029," I said.

"That's what the sign says."

"There's no year on the sign," I said. "They took it off."

Len thought about that.

"Smart," he said, and hung up.

VI

Traffic Advisory

SURREY LANGLEY SKYTRAIN — WEEKLY TRAFFIC ADVISORY

Week of October 20, 2025

Fraser Highway, 152 Street to 168 Street: single-lane alternating traffic in work zones. Stoppages of ***up to two minutes****. Expect delays. Please follow the direction of traffic control personnel.*

Work hours: Monday to Saturday, 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.

Businesses are open during construction.

Questions? 24-hour construction line: 1-844-815-6111

The sign went up on the Tuesday, facing the wrong way.

It was a good sign. It was white corrugated plastic on a metal stand, about the size of a door, with the project logo across the top and, in the middle, in large blue letters, BUSINESSES ARE OPEN DURING CONSTRUCTION, and underneath, smaller, in black marker on a white strip that had been stuck on in the office, GOLDEN BOWL — LUNCH SPECIALS. The project had made

forty of them that fall, one for each business on the corridor that had asked, and the crew from the guideway contractor had put them out along Fraser Highway in the morning, a pair of men in a pickup with a list.

Mrs. Chow's sign went in front of the Golden Bowl, at the edge of the parking lot, on the side of the concrete barrier where the lane had been. The lane was closed. On the other side of the barrier, where the cars were, you could see the back of the sign, which was plain white and had a sticker on it with a part number.

"Who is it for?" said Mrs. Chow.

She had phoned the construction line at eight minutes past eleven. It had been ringing in my ear for most of the year by then. The line went to a call centre at night and on weekends and came to the community office from seven to five, and by 2025 there were four of us answering it, and I was the one who knew where the Golden Bowl was, because I had been eating its lunch special on Thursdays since 2023.

"The traffic," I said.

"The traffic is on the other side."

"I know."

"The excavator can read it," said Mrs. Chow. "Very nice for the excavator."

* * *

I walked over. It was a short walk from the office, on the same side of Fraser Highway, and walking was faster than driving by then.

Fraser Highway that fall was one lane each way, between concrete barriers, for most of its length from King George to Langley. The middle of it was gone. Where there had been two lanes of traffic and a turning lane there was now a long fenced strip of mud and gravel and rebar, with drill rigs in it and cranes and concrete trucks and, every so often, a column. The columns had started in the spring. They were grey and square and taller than I had expected, and they came up out of the middle of the road at intervals with a thick steel cap on each, like a row of enormous unfinished tables, and nothing on top of them yet. In Fleetwood there was one every forty metres or so. I counted them from the bus. I couldn't help it.

The barriers ran along both sides of the work zone, and in places the traffic lanes had been shifted out onto what had been the shoulder, or the sidewalk, or the front of people's parking lots, so that you drove along a channel of concrete with orange drums in it and every few hundred metres a sign telling you what was ahead. Where the crews needed to cross the traffic, or bring a truck out of the work zone, or lift something, they stopped it. Up to two minutes. That was in the advisory, every week, in bold.

At 156 Street the Chaos-Weaver was stopping it.

* * *

He was the traffic control supervisor for the Fleetwood section. He had a hard hat and a vest with reflective stripes and a radio on his chest, and a stop-and-slow paddle on a pole, and he stood at the edge of the lane at the worst corner on the corridor,

where the guideway crossed from the north side of the road to the centre and a dozen businesses had their only driveways, and he held it.

I had watched him for months. Everybody in the office had. The other traffic control people on the job were good, and they were mostly young and mostly on their phones between stoppages, and they turned the paddle from STOP to SLOW when the radio told them to. He turned it before. The radio would say "clear in thirty" and he would already be turning, and the first car would already be rolling, and the radio would say "clear" just as the last car of the platoon went past the drum where he'd decided the platoon would end. Two minutes was a ceiling. He never went near it. He did a minute and forty, or a minute twenty, or once, when a woman in a Corolla in the front of the line was crying, fifty seconds.

He knew the regulars. He knew which cars were going to turn into the Golden Bowl and which were going to the pharmacy and which were going through, and he let the turning ones turn on the SLOW, in the gap he made for them, without anybody having to stop twice. He knew the delivery trucks by their schedules. He knew the school bus. I never saw him look at a clipboard.

And he knew the 503.

It came every ten minutes or so in the daytime, from King George, the big articulated bus, bending at the middle, crawling down the channel between the barriers with its passengers standing. When it was in the platoon he made sure it was at the front of the next one. I don't know how. Somewhere back at

152 Street a car would hesitate, or a gap would open, and the bus would be first when he turned the paddle. The radio never said anything about it.

That Tuesday, when I got to the corner, the 503 was coming. I saw the Allfather through the windshield, both hands low on the wheel. The Chaos-Weaver turned the paddle to SLOW. Neither of them looked at the other. The bus went through, and I heard the Allfather's voice from the open front door saying "156 Street," and then the woman's voice saying it, and then the door closed and the bus was gone toward 160.

* * *

Mrs. Chow was in the kitchen when I got there. The Golden Bowl is eight tables and a counter and a steam table and a kitchen behind a curtain with a picture of a crane on it, the bird, and at twenty past eleven on a Tuesday in October there was nobody at any of the tables.

"You walked," she said.

"It's faster."

"Everything is faster than driving now," said Mrs. Chow. "That's the problem."

She sat down at a table and I sat down across from her. She had her books there, a ledger, an actual paper ledger, green, with columns, and a calculator with a roll of paper on it, and she turned the ledger round so I could see it and put her finger on a column.

"Last October," she said. She moved her finger to the next column. "This October."

It was half. A little less than half.

"The lunch," she said. "The lunch is the business. People come at twelve, from the offices, from the car lots, from the school, the teachers. They have one hour. Now it takes twenty minutes to get here from 152, and twenty minutes to get back, and they have twenty minutes to eat, and they don't come. They eat at their desk." She closed the ledger. "I had six staff in the spring. Now I have two. Me and my nephew. My nephew is fifteen. He comes after school."

"I'm sorry."

"I know you're sorry. Everybody on the phone is sorry. I want to ask you something and I want you to tell me the answer. Not the paper."

I knew what the paper said. It was in my bag, in the binder, in the same place it had been for a year: Question 7. *The Province does not provide compensation for disruptions arising from construction. The project will work with businesses to minimize impacts.*

"Is anybody going to pay me?" said Mrs. Chow. "For this. The lunch. When it's finished. Is there a fund, is there a form, is there somebody I write to. My cousin in Vancouver, on Broadway, she said they said they would work with her. Four years. Is anybody going to pay her? Is anybody going to pay me?"

"The project will work with businesses—" I started, and stopped.

She waited.

"No," I said.

Mrs. Chow looked at me.

"Nobody's going to pay you," I told her. "There's no compensation program for this. No fund, no form I can give you. They've said so on Broadway, and they're saying it here. We can do the sign, and the sweeping, and the water when they shut the main off, and we can schedule the noisy work for off-peak. That's what there is. I'm sorry. That's the answer."

She didn't say anything for a while. Behind the curtain something on the stove ticked as it cooled.

"Thank you," she said. "Now I know."

"I'm not supposed to—"

"I know you're not supposed to," said Mrs. Chow. "That's why I asked you."

* * *

Trevor called me in on the Thursday.

The Golden Bowl has a page on Facebook, which Mrs. Chow's nephew runs, and on the Wednesday night it had a post on it, with a photograph of the back of the sign. *Even the SkyTrain office says NOBODY WILL PAY US,* it said. *Thank you for the honesty Mandy. Lunch specials still $11.95. Come by the back way off 86 Ave.* It had four hundred shares by Thursday morning. One of them was the Minister's office.

"Did you say that?" said Trevor.

"Yes."

"In those words?"

"I said nobody's going to pay her. I said there's no program, no fund and no form."

"That's Question 7."

"It's the first half of Question 7."

Trevor rubbed his face.

"Mandy," he said. "Everything you said is true. I want you to know that I know that. Victoria knows it too. Dawn phoned me. She said, quote, 'At least she didn't say six.' " He looked at the post on his screen. "But the key message has two halves for a reason. The first half is what we won't do. The second half is what we will. If you only say the first half, that's what people hear."

"The second half doesn't mean anything to her."

"It means the sign," said Trevor.

"The sign's facing the wrong way."

Trevor looked at me for a moment. Then he wrote something on a sticky note and stuck it on his monitor. I could read it upside down. *Sign — Golden Bowl — turn around?*

"Next time," he said, "say the key message first. Then say the true thing. In that order."

"Is this going on my file?"

"No," said Trevor. "It's going on my monitor."

* * *

The sign was not turned around, as it happened. Turning it around would have put it on the traffic side of the barrier, in the lane, which was not allowed, and the contractor's safety officer said so in an email that was copied to nine people. Moving it to a place where the traffic could see it meant moving it off Mrs. Chow's lot, onto the barrier itself, and signs could not be

attached to the barrier, which was the contractor's, and the email said that too.

So on the Monday I went to the corner at 156 and asked the Chaos-Weaver.

I didn't know what I was asking him. I explained about the sign, and the lot, and Mrs. Chow, and the lunch, and the email. He listened. He was holding the paddle on STOP, with a line of cars in front of him, and the radio on his chest was saying something about a pump truck, and he did not look at me while I talked. He looked at the line.

"Where's the sign?" he said, when I had finished.

I pointed. You could just see the white back of it, a hundred metres west, past the drums, at the edge of the Golden Bowl's lot.

He looked at it. He looked at the line of cars. He said something into the radio, short, that I didn't catch. Then he picked up the paddle and its stand, and an orange drum, and walked west along the edge of the lane, past the drums, past the pharmacy, past the eyebrow place's sister location, until he was standing opposite the Golden Bowl. He set the drum down. He set the paddle down beside it, on STOP. He looked back the way he had come, and then he walked back to the corner, and spoke into the radio again, and a young traffic control person in a vest came down from 160 and took the corner.

From then on, the stoppage for the Fleetwood section was at the Golden Bowl.

The cars stopped there, a hundred metres sooner than they had. The first car in each platoon stopped with its driver's

window opposite the Golden Bowl's front window, which had its lunch specials written on it in white paint, large, the way Mrs. Chow's nephew did them, and its door, and its OPEN sign, which was neon and red. And they sat there, up to two minutes, or a minute forty, or a minute twenty, with nothing else to look at.

Two minutes is a long time to look at a window.

I don't know how many of them came back. Mrs. Chow said some. She said a man came in on the Wednesday and said he'd been reading the specials every day for a week and he'd finally decided on the Singapore noodles. She said a woman came in and asked if she could pick up an order from the car while she was stopped, and Mrs. Chow said no, it was a construction zone, it wasn't safe, and the woman said she'd park round the back off 86th then, and did. It was not half, or anything like half. It was some.

The pharmacy phoned the construction line on the Friday. For eight months the cars had stopped outside the pharmacy, and now they stopped a hundred metres sooner, outside the Golden Bowl, and the pharmacist wanted to know who had decided that. I said it was the traffic management plan. She asked who wrote the plan. I said I would find out and call her back, and I wrote it down, and I did not call her back that week, or the next.

I asked the Chaos-Weaver about it once, a few weeks later, when I was walking past at the end of the day and he was handing over to the night crew.

"Did you move the stop for her?"

"The stop's where the trucks come out," he said.

"The trucks come out at 156."

"Some do," he said. "Some come out at 154 now. They changed the gate." He handed his radio to the night supervisor. "It's a better place to stop."

I looked it up afterward in the traffic management plan, which was on the project's internal drive, version fourteen. The gate at 154 Street had been added in the week after I'd asked him. The change request was signed by him. The reason given was *sightlines*.

* * *

On the Thursday after that they shut off the water main.

It was planned. Everything was planned. There was a notice, the month before, and then another one, a week ahead, that went to every address on that block and was taped to every door, saying that the water would be off from nine to three on Thursday for a utility tie-in, and that the project apologized for the inconvenience, and that bottled water would be provided to affected businesses.

I delivered it, with Kiran from the office, in the project's van: one flat of bottled water for each business on the list, twenty-four half-litre bottles to a flat.

Mrs. Chow took her flat at the counter and looked at it.

"Twelve litres," she said.

"For drinking," I said. "For staff."

"I have one staff and he is at school." She put the flat down on the counter. "I make rice. You know how much water for rice

for the lunch? Then I wash the rice. Then I wash the pot. Then I wash the dishes. Then I wash my hands. You know what the health inspector says if I wash my hands with Kirkland?"

"I'm sorry."

"You keep saying that," said Mrs. Chow. "I'm going to start charging you."

She had made the congee at seven, before the water went off, the way she did every morning: a pot the size of a bin. She stood and looked at it.

She closed the Golden Bowl for the day at half past nine. She put a piece of paper in the window under the specials that said CLOSED — NO WATER — OPEN TOMORROW, and then, after a moment, under it, SORRY, and then she came out and stood with me on the sidewalk and we watched the work zone, where a crew was in a hole in the middle of Fraser Highway with a pump and a length of pipe as wide as a person.

At eleven the stoppage came. The cars stopped. The driver in the front car looked at the window, at the lunch specials, and at CLOSED — NO WATER — OPEN TOMORROW — SORRY, for a minute and forty seconds, and then the paddle turned and he drove on.

"Tomorrow," said Mrs. Chow, "he'll come."

At noon she carried the congee out to the fence in the pot, with a stack of paper bowls, and gave it to the crew in the hole, who had not asked for it, and who ate all of it.

* * *

Len phoned in the afternoon, after the water was back on.

"They took the blue one," he said.

"What blue one?"

"In Green Timbers. The big fir. The one with the blue paint on it, by the road, at 144. I walk there Thursdays. I went past this morning and it's a stump. They cut it right down to the ground. Somebody painted a number on the stump."

I had not known. It was a different section, a different crew. It would be in somebody's log, with a permit number. It would be in the road-tree count, and not in the forest count, which was still zero.

"I'm sorry, Len," I said.

"Everybody's sorry," said Len. "Ruth and I went to that lunch place yesterday. The Golden Bowl."

"You know Mrs. Chow?"

"Everybody knows Mrs. Chow," said Len. "Round the back, off 86th. The Singapore noodles." He paused. "She's got your name on her Facebook."

"I know."

"Four hundred shares."

"I know, Len."

"Ruth printed it," said Len. "It's on our fridge."

VII

Non-Conformity Report

NON-CONFORMITY REPORT — NCR-GW-0173
Element: Precast guideway segment (typical span), ID recorded on attached sheet
Raised by: Owner's Quality Representative
Description: Cast-in drainage insert displaced 14 mm from specified location. Specified tolerance ±10 mm. Visual and dimensional check, photographs attached.
Proposed disposition: ☐ *Repair* ☐ *Reject* ☐ *Use as is* (Engineer of Record approval required)
Status: ***OPEN***

After the Facebook post, Dawn stopped copying me.

She didn't say anything. She just wasn't on the emails anymore, the communications planning ones that came round from Victoria on Tuesdays with an agenda and a list of upcoming milestones and a column headed *Opportunity?* I noticed it on the second Tuesday. On the third Tuesday I asked Trevor, who

was still on them, and he said, “You’re not missing anything,” which I took to mean that I was.

Trevor didn’t stop anything. He started something. From November on he read every email I sent to the public before it went out. He did it fast and mostly said nothing, and twice he changed a word, and once he added a sentence at the front of one, which was the key message, and sent it back to me with a note that said *Then the true thing*. I sent it. The true thing was still in it. He hadn’t touched that part.

“Is this permanent?” I asked him.

“It’s for a bit.”

“How long is a bit?”

“Late 2029,” said Trevor, and I couldn’t tell if he was joking, and I don’t think he could either.

* * *

The tour was in December.

The project did tours of the precast yard twice a month for people who had asked: schools, community groups, the occasional engineering society, and anyone with a title whose office had phoned. The yard was in Campbell Heights, in the industrial land in south Surrey, on a lot of about thirty acres that had been gravel until the spring before. Every piece of the guideway was made there. The guideway was made of segments, concrete boxes the size of a small room, hollow in the middle, about twenty-eight tonnes each, and the yard was going to make four thousand four hundred of them, and then trucks were going to carry them one at a time up to Fraser Highway

at night, and the gantries were going to lift them into the air and join them into spans, one after another, until the line was finished.

That December's tour was a Grade 5 class from Clayton and a councillor's assistant.

The class had written to the project. Their teacher, Ms. Dhaliwal, had sent a letter with twenty-nine signatures on it, the class and her own, in twenty-nine colours of felt pen, asking to see where the SkyTrain was made, because they had been learning about bridges, and because their school was going to be a few blocks from Clayton station, and they wanted to see it before it was in the air. The councillor's assistant had phoned. The councillor could not attend, the assistant said, but would like to be briefed, and the assistant would be attending on the councillor's behalf, and would there be parking.

The class came on a school bus. I drove the project van behind it with Kiran, who came to count the children, and the councillor's assistant followed in his own car, because he had asked about parking.

* * *

The hard hats were the ones from August of the year before. I had kept them in a box in the back room with the receipt taped to the lid, ten white hats, small, medium and large, and Ms. Dhaliwal had asked in her follow-up email whether the children's hats would fit, and I had said I would bring the smalls.

The yard's safety officer met the bus at the gate and looked in my box.

"Those are promotional," she said.

"They're from a store."

"They're not rated." She turned one over and showed me the inside, where a rated hat has a label and mine had a sticker with the project logo. "We've got youth sizes. We do schools." And she went into the visitor trailer and came out with a plastic bin of child-sized hard hats with proper suspensions and chin straps, in four colours, which the children were fitted for one at a time on the steps while the councillor's assistant looked at his phone.

The four children who had tried on my smalls before she got there looked, Kiran said, like the four children with the best parents. My hats went back in the box. The children wore orange and green and blue and yellow, and argued about the colours, and in the visitor trailer they all signed in on a tablet that did not accept apostrophes, so that two of them became OCONNELL and DSOUZA, and one of them asked me if that was legal.

"It's a tablet," I said.

"Is the tablet legal?"

I wrote it down. *Visitor tablet — apostrophes.* It went on the list.

* * *

The Conscience-Keeper met us in the visitor trailer.

He was the owner's quality representative at the yard. That meant he worked for the project, not for the companies building it, and his job was to check that what they built was what the

drawings said. He had an office in a trailer of his own, two down from the visitors', with a window that looked out at the casting beds, and he spent most of his day not in it. He wore a hi-vis vest over a grey sweater, and safety glasses pushed up on his forehead, and he carried a tablet in a rubber case and a tape measure on his belt and, in his vest pocket, a small notebook with a pencil through the spiral, and he shook Ms. Dhaliwal's hand and the councillor's assistant's hand and then, because they were waiting, every child's.

"Is it dangerous?" said a boy with OCONNELL on his sticker.

"Yes," he said. "That's why you stay on the walkway, behind the yellow rail, and you keep your hat on, and if anybody in a vest tells you to stop you stop. Even if it's not me. Even if it's somebody you think is wrong."

"What if they are wrong?"

"Then you stop anyway, and tell them afterward," he said. "That's the rule here. That's my rule, too."

* * *

The yard was loud and grey and very large. There was a covered shed the length of a city block, open at the sides, where the segments were cast in steel moulds, and a stacking area beyond it where the finished ones sat in rows on timber blocks to cure, three high, like an enormous library of concrete boxes, each with a code stencilled on the end in black paint. The walkway ran along the outside of the shed on a raised platform behind a yellow rail. You could see down into the moulds.

He told the children how a segment was made. He did it plainly, without making it into a story. The steel cage went in first, the rebar, tied by hand. Then the inserts, the things that had to be cast into the concrete because you couldn't add them later: the lifting points, the drains, the conduits for cables, the anchors for the power rail and the walkways. Then the concrete, poured and vibrated. Then the night, while it set. Then the mould came off, and the segment was lifted out, and checked, and stacked, and checked again, and given its code.

"Who checks it?" said a girl.

"The people who made it check it first," he said. "Then I do."

"What if it's bad?"

"Then I write it down," he said.

* * *

He had one to show us.

It was in a separate row at the end of the stacking area, on its own blocks, with an orange tag wired to the lifting point. It looked exactly like all the others. It was a grey concrete box with a code on the end. The children crowded the rail to see it, in their four colours of hat, and looked at it like an animal in a zoo that is supposed to be dangerous and is asleep.

"What's wrong with it?" said the councillor's assistant.

He took the tablet out of its case and found a photograph and held it up for the rail. It showed the inside of the segment, the hollow part, with a tape measure laid across the floor of it, and a small round drain set into the concrete, and two lines drawn on the photograph in red.

"The drain is fourteen millimetres from where the drawing says it should be," he said. "The drawing allows ten."

The children looked at the photograph. Then at the segment. Then at him.

"Fourteen millimetres," said Ms. Dhaliwal, to the class. "Who can show me fourteen millimetres?"

Twenty-eight children held up their thumbs and forefingers, roughly a centimetre and a half apart, at slightly different distances.

"About that," he said.

"That's nothing," said the boy with OCONNELL on his sticker.

"It's four more than the drawing allows," he said. "The water has to go somewhere. Every drain in every segment lines up with the next one, all the way along. If one's out, the water doesn't go where the engineer thought it would. Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe it does, in thirty years, in December, when it freezes. I don't decide that. I write it down."

"Who decides?"

"The engineer."

"Where's the engineer?"

"In an office," he said. "Downtown. With my report."

* * *

It was the councillor's assistant who asked the question. He was a young man in a good coat with a lanyard of his own from City Hall, and he had been taking notes on his phone since the van, and he had stood a little apart from the children with his hands

in his pockets, and now he stepped up to the rail and looked at the segment for a while and said:

"Couldn't you just use it somewhere less important?"

The Conscience-Keeper looked at him. He didn't answer straight away. He seemed to be checking the question for something.

"Which part of the guideway is less important?" he said.

"I don't know. A part where—" The assistant gestured at the yard, at the rows of boxes. "Where the trains go slower. Or near the end. In Langley."

Kiran made a small noise. I didn't look at her.

"The trains go the same speed in Langley," he said. "It's the same guideway. Every segment holds up the one beside it." He put the tablet back in its case. "There are three things that can happen to this one. They can fix it. They can throw it away. Or the engineer can look at my report and decide that fourteen millimetres is fine where it's going, and sign that, and it goes in. That's called use as is. It's allowed. It happens."

"So it might go in anyway."

"It might."

"Then what was the point of writing it up?"

"So that if it goes in, somebody decided it should," he said. "And their name is on it. And mine is. And in thirty years, in December, if somebody is up there with a flashlight looking at a drain, they can find out why."

The assistant typed something into his phone. I don't know what. The councillor was briefed, I suppose. The office never phoned back.

* * *

The children's favourite thing was not the segment. It was the gantry.

We didn't see a real one. They were all up on Fraser Highway. But there was a model in the visitor trailer, in a glass case, with a little guideway and a little gantry on top of it, and a little segment hanging from the gantry on little cables, and a card in front that said the real ones were each more than a hundred metres long and over four hundred tonnes, and gave their names: Fleetwood Flyer, Surrey Sprinter, Clayton Clipper and Langley Launcher.

"Clayton Clipper," said a girl in a green hat. "That's us."

"Who named them?" said OCONNELL.

I didn't know. I said so. I said I would find out, and I wrote it down, under *Visitor tablet — apostrophes*: *Gantry names — who?*

"Is that a list?" said the boy.

"It's a list."

"Can I be on it?"

"What for?"

He thought about it.

"For when it's done," he said. "So I can go on it first."

Ms. Dhaliwal looked at me over the children's heads.

"He'll be fourteen," she said. "In 2029."

I put him on the list. *O'Connell, Liam — Gr. 5, Clayton — first ride (req.)* I put the apostrophe in. The notebook took it.

* * *

The Conscience-Keeper walked us back to the bus. It had started to rain, the fine kind, and the yard lights had come on over the casting shed, though it was only two in the afternoon, and behind us a crane was lifting a finished segment out of its mould on its cables, slowly, and turning it in the air.

I asked him while the children were getting onto the bus, and Kiran was counting, and the hats were going back in the bin.

"How many have you written?"

"Since April?" He took the notebook out of his vest pocket and opened it. It was not the report. It was his own count, in pencil. "A hundred and seventy-three. That one was a hundred and seventy-three."

"Is that bad?"

"It's normal," he said. "It's a big job. People make things. Some things come out different from the drawing. You write them down, and you close them when they're closed."

"When will a hundred and seventy-three be closed?"

"When it's closed," he said. He put the notebook back. "Not when somebody wants it to be."

"I made a list once," I said. "People's phone numbers. Nobody told me I could. It turned out to be a record."

"Was it written down why?"

"It was written down who."

He thought about that.

"Then it was half a record," he said. Then, because I must have looked at him: "That's not nothing. Most things are half." He looked back at the yard.

"There was a traffic plan change in October," I said. "On Fraser Highway. A new gate at 154 Street. It helped a restaurant. The reason on it says *sightlines*."

"Was that the reason?"

"It was a reason."

"Then it should say both," said the Conscience-Keeper.

Kiran said, "Twenty-eight," from the door of the bus, and then, a moment later, "Twenty-nine," and then, "No, that's Ms. Dhaliwal," and then, "Twenty-eight."

* * *

The status report for June came out in July. It went up in the document library with the others, and I checked the link. Near the back there was a section called *Quality Management*, with a table. In November the cumulative number of non-conformity reports had been one hundred and seventy-two. By the end of June it was three hundred and twenty-four, with thirty-eight open, and twenty-three raised in June alone. Below the table there was a line about an audit of the guideway contractor's quality system, and a line about the owner's team auditing fabrication at the precast supplier, and a line about the gantries. The category beside it, in the colour-coded column, was the one I had seen on every status report for two years. It said the team was *managing critical issues*.

There was no line for one hundred and seventy-three. There never is. The report gives totals.

I asked him, the next time I was at the yard, which was in August, with a Rotary club. He looked it up on the tablet, standing in the rain by the visitor trailer, scrolling with a wet finger.

"Closed," he said. "March. Use as is. Engineer's signature, with a note." He scrolled. "It sat on blocks at the end of the row for ten weeks while they asked for more measurements. The yard moved it twice to get at the segments behind it. One of the times they chipped a corner, and that was a new report." He didn't look up. "Two hundred and four."

"What was the note?"

"That the drain at the next segment along takes up the difference," he said. "Which it does. I checked it on the guideway in April. I went up with a flashlight." He put the tablet away. "It's fine."

"So it was fine all along."

"It's fine now," he said. "It's written down."

* * *

The card had come in January, a month after the tour, in an envelope addressed in felt pen to MANDY — SKYTRAIN OFFICE — FRASER HIGHWAY, with no street number, which the post office had delivered to the office anyway.

It was from Ms. Dhaliwal's class. It was a sheet of construction paper folded in half, with a drawing on the front of a SkyTrain on a guideway, very long, with too many cars, going

over a row of houses and a Tim Hortons, and on the inside twenty-eight signatures, some of them with hats drawn next to them, in four colours.

At the bottom, in pencil, smaller than the others, it said:

Dear Mandy thank you for the tour. I liked the bad one best. — Liam O'Connell (with the apostrophe)

VIII

Operator Bulletin

OPERATOR BULLETIN — SOUTH OF FRASER
Running Time and Recovery Time: A Reminder
Running time *is the scheduled time between timing points.* Recovery time *is the scheduled time at the end of a trip before the next trip begins. Recovery time allows the schedule to absorb delays and allows operators a break.*
Where construction detours on Fraser Highway extend actual travel times, operators should report delays to Transit Communications. ***Departures from the terminus should be on time.***
(handwritten across the bottom of the copy pinned at Surrey Central, in ballpoint:) *both?*

I was late for the naming of the line because the Allfather took his break.

It was a Tuesday in September. The project van had gone to Victoria with Trevor in it for a meeting about the meeting, and the ceremony was at Langley City Centre at eleven, at the

end of the line, on the gravel beside the casino where the last station was going to be, and I had to be there by ten to eleven with the name tags. So I took the 503 from Surrey Central, the 10:02, which with the detours would have got me there at ten to eleven, which would have been fine.

It got in from Langley at 9:55. It was full before it had finished emptying. That fall it was always full, because the detours had added twelve minutes to every trip and nobody had added any buses, and the bay at Surrey Central was the kind of crowd that has stopped being a line. He opened the doors. People got on. I got on, with the box of name tags. People kept getting on until the people at the front were standing on the yellow line again, and then he said, "Move back, please. There's room at the back," and there was, and when everybody was on he closed the doors.

Then he turned off the engine.

He took a thermos out from beside the seat and unscrewed the lid and poured something into it and sat there with the lid in both hands, looking straight out the windshield at the bus loop, and drank.

It was 10:01.

* * *

I knew what it was. Everybody in the transit business that September knew what it was.

The bus drivers' union had been in a dispute with the bus company since the spring. It was about a lot of things, but the thing everybody talked about was the schedule. Every trip had

two kinds of time in it. There was running time, which was how long the schedule said it would take to get from one end to the other, and there was recovery time, which was a few minutes at the end, so that if you got stuck behind a truck on Fraser Highway you could catch up, and if you didn't you could get out and use the washroom and stretch your back. The trouble was that on routes like the 503, with the construction, the running time had stopped being true. The trips took longer than the schedule said. So the drivers spent their recovery time catching up, and got to the end of the line late, and turned around and left again on time, and never had a break.

In September they had stopped doing that. They called it *taking your break*. It was in the paper. If you got in late, you still took your recovery time, all of it, and you left late, and the bus behind you caught up, and the schedule showed what the schedule was actually like.

I had read about it. I had not been sitting in it, with the name tags, at 10:01, while he drank tea.

"Is he allowed to do that?" said a woman beside me.

"Yes," said a man behind her. "It's his break."

"We're on the bus."

"He's on his break."

A young man near the back said, loudly, that some of us had jobs, and the driver looked up into the big mirror over the windshield, just once, at the back of the bus, and then back out at the loop, and drank his tea. Nobody else said anything.

At 10:09 he screwed the lid back on the thermos and put it beside the seat and started the engine. "503 Langley Centre,"

he said, into the microphone. “Thank you for your patience.” Then the woman’s voice said it.

I was at the gravel at four minutes to eleven. The name tags were alphabetical, so I could do it fast.

* * *

The ceremony was the naming of the line.

Not the stations; they had their names. The line. Until that morning it had been the Surrey Langley SkyTrain, which was a description. From that morning it was going to be the Dave Barrett Extension, after the premier from the 1970s, which I learned about in a hurry the Friday before from a briefing note, and which was announced from a podium on the gravel by the Premier of the day, with the Minister, with a backdrop that had the new name on it and no year.

I stood at the side with the clipboard and a bag of spare tags. What the Premier said is in the release. It was about Dave Barrett and ordinary people. The backdrop was very good.

Afterward a reporter asked me whether it was true that the extension would be called the Dave Barrett Extension forever, and I said that was the name, and she said names had a way of changing when governments did, and I said I didn’t have further details at this time.

On the way back to the office I wrote the new name in the notebook, under the old one. Then I looked at the old one for a while. I had written it a lot of times.

* * *

The election was called the next week. Not the city one, which was already coming, on the third Saturday in October. The other one. The Premier went to the Lieutenant Governor on a Tuesday and asked for an election about a month later, and got one, and so in the fall of 2026 there were two elections a week apart, and the people who phoned the construction line spent October asking me who to vote for, which I could not tell them, and whether it would make a difference to the SkyTrain, which I also could not tell them, and which I didn't know.

The city election was on the seventeenth. The provincial one was on the twenty-fourth.

On the twenty-sixth I opened the invitation list for the next milestone event, which was the end of the guideway, sometime in 2027, and which Victoria had asked me to start in the summer. It was a spreadsheet. The first column was *Title*, the second was *Name*, and the third was *Office*. I had filled it in from the list of everybody who had spoken at the progress event in May, at Willowbrook, which was the last time all of them had been in one place. The Premier. The Minister. The Mayor of Surrey. The Mayor of the City of Langley. The Mayor of the Township of Langley.

I went down the *Name* column with the cursor.

All of them were wrong.

None of them were wrong because of anything they had done. They were wrong because the elections were over. One of them had resigned as leader of his party. The rest had lost,

or their party had. There was a new Premier who would not be sworn in for weeks, and a new Minister who did not exist yet, and new mayors in all three places, and one of the new mayors was a mayor I had first seen in 2018, from the back, on a livestream in a boardroom, with his hand in the air.

I deleted the *Name* column. Then I put it back, empty.

The *Title* column was fine. The titles were all still right. It was only the people in them.

* * *

Len had his cataract done in October. The right eye.

He phoned me the day before, which he had never done before about anything that was not the SkyTrain.

"I'm getting my eye done tomorrow," he said. "At Langley Memorial."

"I hope it goes well, Len."

"It'll go fine. It's an hour. They do a thousand of them." He paused. "I can't drive for a while after."

"How long?"

"Depends. Couple of weeks. Maybe six. Depends on the eye."

"Okay."

There was a longer pause.

"Ruth doesn't drive," said Len.

I didn't say anything. I had not known that. I had known Ruth on the phone since 2021 and in person three times, and I had seen her at the Golden Bowl, and I had seen her on the arm of Len at the open house in the Fleetwood gym, and I had never thought about how she had got to any of those places.

"She stopped in 2009," said Len. "Her eyes. Not the cataracts. The other thing. The one you don't fix. She can see you all right. She can't see a cyclist at night. So she stopped. And I drive. Everywhere. Tuesdays to her book club in Langley City. Mondays to her sister in Aldergrove. Fridays to the Save-On. Sundays to church. Everywhere." He coughed. "That's why I phone you."

"What?"

"The train," said Len. "I've been phoning you since 2018. You think it's for me. It's not for me. I can drive. It's for when I can't. So she can get to Langley City on a Tuesday when I'm not around to take her." He stopped. "There. I said it."

"Len."

"Don't," said Len. "You'll start apologizing."

* * *

The trouble was the stop.

For the six weeks Len couldn't drive, Ruth was going to take the 503. It went from 160 Street to Langley Centre in about twenty minutes, on a good day, and the library where her book club met was a few minutes' walk from the Langley Centre exchange. She had worked it out herself, on the TransLink website, with a printout, and she had phoned me to check it, and it was right.

But the stop at 160 had moved.

It had moved in the spring, because of the station work at 160, and it had gone east to a temporary stop at 162 Street, on what had been the edge of a parking lot, with a sign on a post

and a strip of asphalt laid over the gravel, and to get to it from the Friesens' house on 86th you had to cross Fraser Highway, which at that point was a single lane each way between barriers, at a pedestrian crossing that had been moved too, onto a section of sidewalk that was not quite level and that had a gap in it, where the old sidewalk met the new one, that was about the width of a cane tip.

I knew this because I had walked it. I walked to work along that stretch every day. I had stepped over that gap a hundred times and never seen it.

I phoned the project's own construction line, from my desk, and logged it, the way I would have logged it for anybody: *Temporary pedestrian route, Fraser Hwy at 162 St — surface gap at sidewalk transition, approx. 3 cm — mobility concern.* I phoned the bus company too, about the stop, to ask if it could move back closer, and the woman there was very nice and said that temporary stop locations were set in coordination with the construction contractor's traffic management plan for safety reasons, and that she would pass my concern along.

I knew what that meant.

* * *

So on the first Tuesday I walked her to the stop.

I didn't ask anybody. I didn't log it. I phoned Ruth on the Monday night and asked her what time she was leaving, and she said seven-forty, because the book club was at nine and she liked to be early and have a look at the new books, and I said I

would come by at seven-thirty, and she said I didn't have to do that, and I said I knew.

She was waiting at the end of the driveway with her cane and her book in a cloth bag. It was a novel about a lighthouse keeper. She had read it twice.

We walked to the crossing. We waited for the light. We crossed, and I watched her cane, and when we got to the gap I said "Here," and she looked down, and stepped over it, and said "Thank you" and "That's new," and we walked the rest of the way to the temporary stop at 162, and waited.

"Len told you," she said.

"Len told me."

"About the eyes."

"Yes."

"He's very dramatic about it," said Ruth. "I can see you perfectly well. I can see the bus. I can't see a man in black on a bicycle at night on Fraser Highway, and neither can anybody else, if they're honest." She looked down the road toward 160, toward the columns. "He thinks the train is for me. It isn't. It's for him. So he can stop worrying about who drives me when he can't." She shifted the bag on her arm. "He'll never say that. So I'm saying it to you."

The 503 came. It was the Allfather.

He knelt the bus before it had quite stopped. He looked at Ruth's cane, and at the cloth bag, and at me standing beside her with my lanyard on, and then at Ruth again. She tapped her card. He watched her all the way to the seat, and waited until she had sat down, and then he pulled out.

* * *

I rode with her that first Tuesday. I had taken the day off. It was not in the notebook, and it was not on the project's time, and I did not tell Trevor, and when he asked on the Wednesday where I'd been I said a personal day, which it was.

The bus went east under the guideway. By then the guideway was most of the way along Fraser Highway, a long grey concrete deck on its columns in the middle of the road, with track on parts of it and nothing on the rest, and the 503 drove under it the way you drive under a bridge, except that the bridge went on for kilometres. The gantries had moved on toward Langley. You could see one of them from the bus as we came past Clayton, far ahead, standing over the road on its long legs.

"Willowbrook," he said, and then the woman.

"Langley Centre," he said, at the end.

He knelt the bus. Ruth stood up. On her way past him to the front door she stopped.

"What time do you come back through?" she said.

He looked at the schedule, a laminated card clipped to the dash, although I didn't think he needed to.

"This bus goes on to Aldergrove," he said. "I'm back through here at 11:55."

"I'll be done at a quarter to," said Ruth.

"The library's six minutes," he said. "At your pace, ten. The light at Douglas Crescent is long."

"I'll be here," said Ruth.

"Mind the step," said the Allfather, and she did.

* * *

I sat in the library while she was at her book club. There were eight of them, at a table near the window, and they argued about the lighthouse keeper for an hour and ten minutes and ate a box of lemon squares, and then most of them went across the street for coffee, and Ruth went with them. I read the paper. At twenty to twelve Ruth came out with the cloth bag and we walked back to the exchange. The light at Douglas Crescent was long.

We got to the bay at 11:55.

The 503 was there. The doors were closing.

They stopped, about halfway, and then they opened again. The Allfather was in the seat, with the engine running and a thermos lid in his hand. He had come in from Aldergrove, where the trip turned and where he had taken his break, and he had been holding at Langley Centre for his departure time, which was a timing point, and the time had come, and he had been closing the doors on time. Then he had seen the cane in his mirror.

He watched Ruth across the last of the exchange. He did not look at his watch.

Ruth got on. She tapped her card. She sat down.

He screwed the lid onto the thermos, and put it beside the seat, and closed the doors again.

It was 11:56. He was a minute late out of Langley Centre, which the schedule would show, and which somebody at Transit

Communications would see on a screen and would have to decide whether to ask him about.

"503 Surrey Central," he said. "Thank you for your patience."

* * *

I walked Ruth to the stop on Tuesdays for six weeks, and was at my desk by a quarter past eight instead of half past seven, and made it up on Thursdays. I missed the Tuesday coordination call four times. Trevor didn't ask why. The fifth time, he moved the call to Wednesdays, and didn't say why either. Only the first Tuesday did I ride all the way.

The gap at 162 Street was fixed in the fifth week. Somebody came with a bag of cold patch and a tamper and filled it, on a Thursday, and the next Tuesday Ruth looked down at the place, and stepped where it had been, and said, "Somebody did that." The log entry in Engage Plus said *Closed — remediated by contractor*, and gave a date, and didn't say who.

Len got his eye back at the end of November. He phoned me to say so.

"I can see the guideway from the end of the driveway," he said. "With the new eye. Never noticed that. It's right there."

"It's been there since the spring."

"I know," said Len. "Now I can see it."

Ruth phoned the next day. She said she wanted to let me know herself that I needn't come on Tuesdays anymore, and thank you, and that the book club had moved on to a novel about a woman who runs a ferry, and that she'd mentioned the

bus driver to the group, and they all wanted to know his name, and she'd had to tell them she didn't know it.

"Neither do I," I said.

"Eight years," said Ruth, "and you don't know his name?"

"No."

"Then you should ask him," said Ruth. "Before the train."

IX

Notice of Land Assembly

CONFIDENTIAL — FOR THE REGISTERED OWNERS OF 86XX 161 STREET ONLY

A Land Assembly Opportunity Near Fleetwood Station

Dear Homeowner,

As you may be aware, the arrival of SkyTrain is expected to transform your neighbourhood. Our clients are assembling properties on your block for a future multi-family development. Owners who participate in a coordinated sale may achieve a price ***significantly above current assessed value****.*

No obligation. Strictly confidential. Please do not discuss with neighbours until we have spoken.

(handwritten on the back, in my father's capitals:) *NO. 9*

The last segment went into the guideway in July, over Fraser Highway near 196 Street, at about two in the morning, lifted by the Langley Launcher, which had a crowd of about forty people watching from the Willowbrook parking lot with lawn chairs. I

was one of them. Somebody had brought a thermos of chai and somebody else had brought a speaker, and when the segment was in, a man from the guideway crew walked to the end of the span and stood there with his arms up, and everybody in the parking lot clapped, and the man's foreman told him to get back from the edge.

After that the guideway was finished, and nothing ran on it that you could see in the daytime.

It was there. It went from King George to Langley, sixteen kilometres in the air, grey, on its columns, down the middle of Fraser Highway. The road was opening up again underneath it, a lane at a time. You could stand at 160 Street and look east and see it go all the way to the curve at Clayton. The stations were half-built boxes of steel along it with tarps on them. There were test trains at night, sometimes, out of King George as far as they could get, and people phoned the line at one in the morning to say that something had gone past their window with its lights on, and was that allowed, and I said it was testing, and it was.

In the daytime it was a very long bridge with nobody on it.

* * *

The letters started on my parents' street in the spring. By the summer my father had nine of them.

He kept them in a folder. He kept everything in a folder, including folders, but this one was new, blue, from the Staples at Guildford, and on the tab he had written OFFERS. The letters came from companies with names like weather systems, Pacific this and Meridian that, and they all said the same thing in

different fonts: that the SkyTrain was coming, that the area would be rezoned, that a developer was putting together a block, and that if the owners on our side of 161 Street all sold together, to the same buyer, for a tower, they would get more than any of them could alone. Each letter asked my parents not to discuss it with the neighbours. My father had discussed every one of them with the neighbours, and written a number on the back.

The number was the order they had come in. He did not write down the prices. The prices were never in the letters.

The other folder was red. It said OBJECTIONS. It had my mother's handwriting on the tab, and it had in it the city's plan for the area around Fleetwood station, printed off the website, with the parts about building heights highlighted in yellow, and a petition against the towers that a neighbour three doors down had started, which both my parents had signed, and the agenda for a public hearing.

The two folders sat side by side on the kitchen table, on the plastic tablecloth, under the light rail magnet on the fridge, which was still holding up the 503 timetable, now the fourth one.

"Which one are you?" I asked my father.

"Both," said my father, and went back to his tea.

* * *

Len phoned twice in one day, in September.

The first call was at ten past nine. He had read in the paper that the city was considering a tower near Fleetwood station

that would be, he said, twenty-four storeys, and he wanted to register that he was against it. He was against the height. He was against the shadow. He was against the parking, which he said there wasn't enough of, and against the traffic, which he said there would be too much of, which I pointed out might be connected, and he said that was my problem. He said he had lived on 86th since 1979 and he had not waited forty-eight years to look out his window at a wall.

I logged it. I explained it was a city decision, not the project's, and that the public hearing was on the date in the red folder on my parents' table, and he said he'd be there.

The second call was at twenty to three.

"Mandy," he said. "Different question."

"Okay."

"What does a station do," said Len, "to a corner lot. Three blocks off. With a double garage. Hypothetically."

I didn't say anything for a moment.

"Ruth had a letter," said Len. "Well, we had a letter. We've had a few. The one today says they're putting together all of the north side of 86th. Our side. To the corner." He coughed. "Ruth says we'd be fools not to ask."

"I'm not allowed to tell you what your house is worth, Len."

"I know that. I'm asking you what a station does."

"I don't know what a station does to a corner lot."

"Who does?"

* * *

The All-Seeing came to the neighbourhood meeting in October because I asked him.

The meeting was not ours. It was the neighbours'. It was in the gym at the elementary school on 160th, on a Wednesday night, and it had been organized by the woman down the street who had started the petition, and by a man on 86th who had started a WhatsApp group for owners on the north side who had received letters, and who turned out to be the same people, and it had a printed agenda with two items on it: *1. Opposition to the 24-storey proposal* and *2. Coordinated sale — discussion*.

The neighbours had asked the project to send somebody to explain the station. I was the somebody. The station was easy: it was going to open in late 2029, it was going to have two elevators and escalators, it was on the northeast corner of 160 Street, and the bus exchange was not at this one. I had a map. What the neighbours wanted to know about, mostly, was everything else, and I had been on enough phone calls by then to know what I didn't know, so I had emailed the modeller in New Westminster, who was still in the planning group, eight years after Board 7, and asked if he would come. He said yes, and that he'd need a projector.

There were about a hundred and twenty people. I knew a lot of them. My parents were in the third row. Len and Ruth were in the fourth, Ruth on the aisle with her cane against the chair. The woman from 164th, from the open house in 2019, the one who had asked about crime, was near the back by the

door, standing, with a girl of about eighteen who must have been the ten-year-old.

* * *

Item 1 went quickly. Everybody was against the twenty-four storeys. The woman with the petition read a statement. People clapped. A man stood up and said his grandfather had cleared this land with a horse, and somebody else said everybody's grandfather had cleared this land with a horse, and the first man said well, that was his point. They voted by show of hands to send a letter to council opposing the proposal, and every hand in the gym went up, including my father's, and my mother's, and Len's.

Then Item 2.

The man with the WhatsApp group stood up and explained the letters. He had a spreadsheet. He had put every letter anybody on the north side of 86th had received into it, with the date and the company, and he had found that there were three different companies, and that two of them might be the same company, and that none of them would put a number in writing. He thought that if the owners on the north side agreed among themselves first, they could go to one of the companies together and ask for a number, and that the number would be better, and that everybody would get the same.

"For the tower?" said somebody.

"For whatever goes there," said the man.

"The tower we just voted against?"

The man considered this.

"We voted against twenty-four storeys," he said. "Nobody's offering us twenty-four. The plan says twelve."

* * *

That was when I asked the All-Seeing to come up.

He had been sitting at the side with the laptop on his knees, in the same kind of fleece he had worn in 2019, and he came to the front without hurrying and plugged in the projector and put up one slide.

It was a graph. It had years along the bottom and a line across it, and the line was flat for a while, and then went up in a step, and then was flat, and then went up in another step, and then went on rising.

"This is the region," he said. "Not here. All of it. Every station area that's been built since 1986, averaged. The first step is the announcement. That's when the letters start. The second step is the rezoning. That's when the land changes hands. The opening is here." He pointed, at a place on the line well after both steps, where nothing in particular happened. "By the time the trains run, most of the change in the price of land within about eight hundred metres has already happened. People think the train does it. On average, it's mostly the paperwork." He looked at the graph. "The steps are bigger where the land was houses and smaller where it was already apartments. Some places they hardly show. That's an average of all of them."

The gym was quiet.

"So we're on the second step," said the man with the spreadsheet.

"This corridor is between the first and the second," said the modeller. "Across the corridor."

"And our side of 86th?"

"I don't have your side of 86th," said the All-Seeing.

He said it the way he would have said the time. Then he went on to the next slide, which was about who lived near stations ten years after they opened, by age and by income and by whether they owned or rented, averaged across the region, and which nobody in the gym wanted to look at, and which they all looked at.

* * *

Before the vote a man at the back put his hand up.

"Will the station have a washroom?"

I said I didn't know. I said I'd find out.

"Because the ones in Vancouver don't," said the man, "and I'm seventy-one," and the gym gave him the loudest applause of the night, louder than for the statement against the tower, and he sat down looking pleased and surprised, and I wrote it on the list.

They voted on Item 2 the same way they had voted on Item 1. By a show of hands, on whether to ask the companies for a joint number.

The hands went up. Most of them. My father's went up. My mother looked at him, and then hers went up too. In the fourth row Len's hand went up slowly, and then Ruth's, without hesitating, and Ruth looked at Len and he looked at the ceiling.

At the back, by the door, the woman from 164th did not put her hand up. She hadn't had a letter. She rented.

* * *

I talked to her in the parking lot after. I recognized her and she recognized me, from Board 7, from the comment card and the bank pen.

"You're still here," she said.

"I'm still here."

"Eight years."

"Nine."

She had her daughter with her, who was looking at her phone and also, I could tell, listening.

"They're tearing down the fourplex," she said. "On 164th. Where we live. The owner sold in the summer, to one of those companies. We got the notice on Saturday. The four-month one. For demolition." She said it the way you say a form number. "The form says I can dispute it. My sister in Burnaby says don't bother. She had the same form in 2016. At Metrotown."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't," she said. "You can't do anything about it. It's not even your project. It's the landlord's." She looked up at the gym, at the lit windows. "The man with the slide. He had a line for it."

"For what?"

"For us. Renters near stations. Ten years after." She shrugged. "It went down."

Her daughter looked up from the phone.

"There's a two-bedroom in Langley City," she said. "By the casino. It's on the line."

"It's over a pawn shop," said her mother.

"It's on the line," said the daughter, and showed me, as if I could tell her whether to take it, and I couldn't, and she seemed to know that, and showed me anyway. Then they went to their car. The mother sang in a choir at a church on 88th Avenue, I found out later, on Thursdays, and the church was not on the line, and she drove there.

* * *

Two weeks after the meeting there was a stakeholder briefing at the community office for the new Minister's staff. It was the first. The new government had been in for most of a year by then, and the person from the Minister's office was a young man called Conor who had replaced Dawn, who had gone to work for a law firm in Victoria and sent me, on her last day, an email that said only *Never six*.

Conor had a list of questions from the new Minister about the project. Trevor answered them. They were mostly about the budget, which was still the number it had been, and the opening, which was still late 2029, and the maintenance yard, which was still 2033. Conor wrote everything down. At the end he asked whether there were any outstanding matters he should be aware of.

Trevor said there weren't.

I had been thinking all week about my father's folder.

I said, "There's the parking."

Conor looked at me. Trevor looked at me.

"In 2020," I said, "when Surrey paid TransLink back for the light rail. Part of it was three hundred park-and-ride spaces. Twelve point eight million dollars' worth. It's in the report. It's on our website. I've never been able to find out where they are."

Conor wrote something down. It was longer than *parking*.

"Is that a project matter?" he said.

"It's a TransLink matter," said Trevor. "From before the project. It's not something this team holds."

"But it's on your website."

"It's in our document library," said Trevor, "because it's a historical document."

"Okay," said Conor. He closed his notebook. "I'll take it back."

* * *

Trevor waited until Conor's car had pulled out of the lot.

"Mandy," he said.

"I know."

"No. Listen." He sat on the edge of the counter, beside the brochure rack. "You were right. It's in the report. Nobody knows where they are. I don't know where they are. I have wondered since 2023. But that's a question for TransLink, or for Surrey, or for somebody in Victoria with a lot more time than Conor. It's not our question. And now Conor's going to go back to the Minister's office with *three hundred missing parking spaces* in his notebook, and somebody's going to phone somebody, and it's going to come back down to us, and we're going to spend a

month answering a question we can't answer about a deal we weren't part of."

"It's true."

"I know it's true," said Trevor. "It's true. That's what makes it expensive."

He was tired.

The next briefing was in December. I wasn't on the invite.

* * *

Mrs. Chow went to lunch only in November.

She did it on her own. She didn't phone the line about it, or ask anybody, or put it on Facebook until it was done. One day the Golden Bowl's sign said OPEN 11–8 and the next it said LUNCH ONLY 11–2 — CLOSED EVENINGS — THANK YOU, painted by her nephew, who was seventeen by then and in Grade 12 and still came in after school to wash up.

I asked her on the Thursday, over the Singapore noodles.

"Is it the construction?"

"It's everything," said Mrs. Chow. "The construction. The rent. The nights. Nobody comes at night. They go home under the bridge and they don't come out." She wiped the counter. "I'm sixty-one. I want my evenings. When the train comes, maybe I open nights again. Maybe I don't. Maybe I sell to one of those letters." She looked at me. "That's not your business."

"No," I said.

"Good," said Mrs. Chow. "You're learning."

* * *

On the first Tuesday in December I walked to work along Fraser Highway the usual way and saw Ruth at the stop at 162.

She was by herself, with her cane and her cloth bag. Len's eye had been fine for a year. He could drive her anywhere. The temporary stop was still temporary.

"Ruth," I said. "Where's Len?"

"At home," said Ruth. "He offered."

"And?"

"And I like the bus," said Ruth. She looked down the road toward 160, at the guideway, at the half-built station with its tarps. "I didn't know that. Eighteen years of him driving me to book club and I never knew. I like sitting up high. I like that it's somebody else's job to watch for the man on the bicycle." The 503 came round the curve. "I'll still like it when it's the train."

The bus knelt. She got on. She didn't look back to see if I was watching, and I was.

X

Occupancy Permit

OCCUPANCY PERMIT — GUIDEWAY

Permit No.: issued by Control at 01:38

Limits: King George Station, eastbound and westbound, including tail tracks

Work: tie-in inspection; LIM reaction rail check; switch maintenance

Persons in occupancy: 6 (including 1 visitor, escorted)

Permit holder to confirm all persons and equipment clear before cancellation.

Cancelled: ____

The complaint came from the seventeenth floor.

It was a tower beside King George Station, one of the new ones, glass and white panels, with a coffee place on the ground floor that opened at six and a lobby with a fireplace that nobody sat at. The man on the seventeenth floor had bought his unit off the plans in 2022, he said, because of the SkyTrain, and he had no objection to the SkyTrain, he wanted that understood. He

had an objection to whatever was happening on the SkyTrain between two and half past four in the morning, three nights a week, that sounded like somebody dropping a filing cabinet down a staircase and then sharpening a very large knife.

He had phoned four times. Each time I had logged it, and passed it on, and the answer had come back that the work was the tie-in, the joining of the new line to the old one at King George, and that it had to be done when the old line wasn't running, which was at night, and that the contractor was following its noise management plan, and that the operating company's crews were doing their own work in the same window, on the old line, which was not ours.

The fifth time he phoned he said he would like somebody from the project to come and listen.

"At three in the morning," I said.

"That's when it is," he said.

So in March of 2028 I went to King George at one in the morning with a safety vest and a hard hat that fit and a sound meter from the environmental team, which was a grey box the size of a paperback with a foam ball on one end, and a clipboard, to listen.

* * *

I had expected to stand on the sidewalk. Instead, because the noise was on the guideway, and because the project's environmental lead had said a reading at the source would be more useful than a reading in the man's living room, and

because somebody in the operating company had agreed to let me go up under escort, I went up.

The escort was the Hand.

He was a guideway technician on the night crew for the operating company, which ran the old line and would run the new one, and which I had never once dealt with in nine years, because it was not the project. He met me at the bottom of the service stairs at the end of the platform at twenty past one. He was a short, broad man in orange, with a headlamp on his hard hat, and gloves in his back pocket, and a long stick in one hand, about the length of a hockey stick, with a small round steel head on it.

He looked at my vest, my hat, and the sound meter.

"What's that?" he said.

"It measures noise."

"Does it?" he said, and that was all he said about it for the rest of the night.

The Hand gave me the briefing at the bottom of the stairs, in a couple of minutes, as if he had given it a great many times and had found two minutes to be enough. Walk where he walked. On the walkway, not the track. Never step on the rail with the black cover on it, which was the power rail, which was off, which he had personally checked was off, which I was still not to step on. If he said stop, stop. If a light came toward us, it was a work vehicle, and it would stop, and we would stand on the walkway and let it pass. If I dropped anything onto the track, leave it. Phones especially.

"People drop phones?"

"Every night," he said. "Not us. Them. In the day. We find them."

* * *

At one-sixteen the last train had come into King George from the west. At one-twenty-five it went back out, empty, toward the yard. At one-thirty-eight the radio on his chest said a number and the word *issued*, and he said a number back, and wrote it on the form on his clipboard, and that was the permit.

"Who was that?" I said.

"Control."

"Who's Control?"

He looked at me as if this was an odd question for somebody who had worked for nine years on a SkyTrain.

"The room," he said. "In Burnaby. They run the trains. At night they run us." He tapped the radio. "Nobody goes on the guideway without Control. Nobody gets off without Control. When we're all off, I tell them, and they cancel it, and the trains can move." He started up the stairs. "If I don't tell them, nothing moves in the morning."

The voice on the radio was a woman's. It was very calm and a little bored. She had been in that room, he told me later, for twenty-two years, the old room and then the new one, across the road from it, which had opened the year before. She knew every crew by voice. When he said *King George, Occupancy confirmed, six persons, one visitor*, she said, "Copy, King George. Who's the visitor?" and he said, "The project," and she said, "Copy, the project," in a tone I couldn't read.

* * *

The guideway at night is very quiet and then very loud.

The quiet is the first thing. Once the trains stop, there is no sound up there at all except the city, which is a long way down and sounds like the sea. The station lights were on. Beyond the end of the platform, where the track went east, it was dark, and in the dark there were headlamps, little bobbing white lights at different distances, and each one was a person. There were about twenty of them along that stretch, he said, from three crews, his and two from the contractor, each crew under its own permit, all doing different things inside the same few hours.

Then the loud. A long way east, where the new guideway joined the old, a crew from the systems contractor started a rail saw, and it was the knife. The man on the seventeenth floor had described it exactly. It went on for about forty seconds and stopped and started again.

I held up the sound meter and pressed the button. It showed a number. I wrote the number down, with the time. It seemed to want me to do that.

“Is that loud?” I asked.

“It’s a saw,” he said.

* * *

What he did, mostly, was walk and listen.

The track at King George is two rails, steel, on concrete, and between them, down the middle, there is a third thing, flat and wide, a long aluminum plate on top of a steel one, bolted to the

guideway. That is what the train pulls itself along on, he said. The motor is on the train, and this is the other half of the motor. It is called the reaction rail. The aluminum on top is a cap, in sections, and every section is held down by bolts, and the trains go over it hundreds of times a day, and the bolts work loose.

He walked along the reaction rail with the stick, very slowly, and tapped each section of the cap with the steel head, near each bolt, like somebody knocking on a wall for the stud. *Tok. Tok. Tok.* Then he moved a step, and did it again. *Tok. Tok. Tok.*

I walked behind him on the walkway, with the sound meter, and listened.

Every tap sounded the same. It sounded like a stick on aluminum. I listened for the length of the platform, both tracks, and then out along the eastbound guideway toward the tie-in for a long way, and I could not hear any difference at all, between any of them. After half an hour I stopped holding the sound meter up. After an hour I had stopped hearing the taps and started hearing my own breathing.

He didn't speak. He walked and tapped. Now and then the rail saw started, far ahead, and he stopped tapping until it stopped. The fourth time, he said something under his breath that I didn't catch and was fairly sure I wasn't meant to, and stood with the stick on his shoulder and waited, and then started again exactly where he had been, at the next bolt, without looking for it.

At ten past two, he stopped.

He tapped the same place again. *Tok.*

Then he put the stick down on the walkway and knelt and took a wrench out of a pouch on his belt, and fitted it to a bolt, and turned it. A quarter turn. He put the wrench back. He tapped the place again. *Tok.*

"What was it?" I said.

"Loose."

"How could you tell?"

"It sounded loose."

"It sounded the same as all the others."

He picked up the stick.

"It didn't," he said.

He wrote something on the clipboard. Then he started walking again, and tapping, and I followed him, and listened harder than I had listened to anything in nine years, and I still could not hear it, any of it, the one he had found or the ones that were fine.

* * *

At twenty to three he found a phone.

It was lying on the concrete between the westbound rails just past the end of the platform, face down, in a pink case with a cartoon cat on it. He looked at it for a moment. He looked at the power rail, which was off, and which he had checked was off. Then he stepped down, picked it up, stepped back, and wiped it on his sleeve. The screen was cracked across one corner. It lit up when he touched it. There were forty-one notifications.

"What happens to it?" I said.

"Lost property. At the station. In the morning." He put it in a zip bag from his pouch and wrote the time on the bag in marker, and the track, and *WB, 20 m E of platform*. "Somebody's looking for it."

"How do you know?"

"Forty-one," he said, and put it in his pocket.

* * *

After that we did the switch.

East of the platform, where the new line came in to meet the old, there was a switch, a place where the rails moved sideways so a train could go one way or the other, and it was new, and it had to be tested every night until it had been tested enough. A man from the contractor was there with a laptop and another man with a radio. The test was to put something in the gap where the moving rail closes against the fixed one, a block of steel the size of a deck of cards, and tell Control to throw the switch, and make sure that the switch did not close on the block and say it was closed.

"That's it?" I said.

"That's it."

"Why?"

"So it never says it's closed when it isn't," he said.

Control threw the switch. The rail moved, and stopped on the block, and a light on the man's laptop went red, and the man with the radio said "Detected," and Control said "Copy, detected," and they took the block out and did it again from the

other side. They did it four times. Every time the light went red. Every time they wrote it down.

I asked the man with the laptop where the trains for the new line would sleep at night, once it opened. He said at the old yards, for now. The new one, the one on the farmland at 176 Street, was still a field with a fence around it. He said 2033. He said it the way people said it on the project, like a year in a different century.

* * *

At about half past three the work vehicle came.

It was very small for something that ran on rails. It was yellow, about the size of a golf cart with a roof, with four seats and a diesel engine and a headlight, and it came out of the dark from the east, from the tie-in, slowly, with a man in it steering with a joystick. He stepped onto the walkway beside me and put one hand flat out to the side, at my waist, not touching me, the way you'd stop a child at a curb. The little vehicle went past us at walking speed, with the man in it lifting two fingers from the joystick, and stopped at the end of the platform, and the man got out and went down the stairs to the washroom, which was the only one on the line that the night crews could use, and came back up again, and on his way past said to nobody that the Canucks had blown a two-goal lead in the third, and got back in.

"He goes all the way back to King George for that?"

"Nearest one," he said.

I wrote it on the clipboard, under the noise readings. *Washrooms — night crew also.*

* * *

At four I wrote the log entry for the man on the seventeenth floor.

I wrote it standing on the walkway at the east end of the platform, with the clipboard on my knee, by the light of his headlamp, which he had pointed at the clipboard for me without being asked. I wrote down the times and the readings, and that the work was the tie-in and the reaction-rail inspection and switch maintenance, as scheduled. At the bottom, in the box headed *Observations*, I wrote: *No unusual noise observed. Rail saw intermittent (tie-in), within plan.*

I signed it.

At four-twelve the grinder started.

It was on the westbound track, about a hundred metres behind us, where a crew from the contractor had been setting up something on a cart that I had taken to be a light. It was not a light. It was a machine for grinding the top of a rail smooth where the new rail had been joined to the old, and it made exactly the sound the man on the seventeenth floor had described on the phone in February: a filing cabinet going down a staircase while somebody sharpened a knife, both at once, for eleven minutes.

I looked at the log entry. I looked at him.

He didn't say anything. He had his stick and his clipboard, and he was writing.

The environmental lead's draft reply to the man on the seventeenth floor was already in my inbox. It said the work had been within the noise management plan. Now somebody would have to write a different one, and it would be me, and it would go to Trevor first.

I crossed out *No unusual noise observed*. I wrote, beside it, *04:12–04:23 rail grinding (westbound), loud, see reading*, and the reading, and initialled the crossing-out, the way the Conscience-Keeper initialled everything.

* * *

At ten to five the Hand walked the platform one more time, both tracks, end to end, counting. Six persons. One visitor. The saw had stopped and the grinder had stopped and the little yellow vehicle had gone back east into the dark with its headlight. He looked at the track. He looked at me.

"You're clear?" he said.

"I'm clear."

"Phone?"

I checked. I had my phone.

The Hand spoke into the radio. "King George," he said, "all persons and equipment clear, request cancellation," and a number.

There was a pause. I could hear the city, a long way down, and a bird, somewhere, starting early.

"Copy, King George," said Control. "Permit cancelled at 04:52. Thank you." And then, after a moment, in exactly the same voice: "Good night to the project."

He wrote *04:52* in the box marked *Cancelled*, and signed it, and handed me the clipboard to sign as the visitor, which I did.

"What happens now?"

"Now they move," he said.

At five-oh-eight, from the west, the first train of the morning came into King George with its lights on and its doors closed and nobody in it, the one they send first to make sure the line is clear, and slowed, and stopped, and sat at the platform with its chime going for a moment. Then it pulled ahead onto the tail track past the end of the platform, as far as the old line went, which was not far, toward the place where the new one began, and stopped, and came back. It went over the bolt he had turned, twice, and didn't notice, and nothing I could hear changed.

* * *

The man on the seventeenth floor got a copy of the log, with the crossing-out. He phoned to say thank you, which nobody had ever done before after getting a log.

"You heard it," he said.

"I heard it."

"The grinding."

"At twelve minutes past four."

"That's the one," he said, very satisfied. "Every Tuesday." He paused. "And the knocking?"

"What knocking?"

“There’s a knocking. Before the grinding. Little taps. For hours. Tok, tok, tok. Like somebody knocking on a door, very politely, all down the line.”

I had stood right beside it all night and never thought of it as a sound.

“That’s a man,” I said. “Checking the bolts.”

There was a pause on the line.

“Oh,” said the man on the seventeenth floor. “Well. I don’t mind that one.”

XI

Test Train Notice

NOTICE TO RESIDENTS — TRAIN TESTING ON THE NEW LINE

Beginning this month, trains will operate on the new guideway between King George and Langley City Centre ***without passengers*** *as part of testing and commissioning. Testing will take place during the day and at night.*

Trains may stop, start, reverse or operate at reduced speed. Some trains will carry weights to simulate passenger loads.

Stations are not open. Please do not attempt to board.

The first call about the empty trains came on a Monday at ten past eight.

"There's a train," said the woman. "On the SkyTrain. Going to Langley."

"Yes," I said. "It's testing."

"It's empty."

"It's supposed to be."

"I'm at the bus stop at 152nd," said the woman. "There are a dozen of us. The 503 went past full. Then that went over our heads with nobody in it. Is that also supposed to be?"

I said it was testing, and that the line would open in the fall, and that I appreciated her patience. She said she had been appreciating it since 2019, and hung up.

The calls came all summer. They came in a pattern, the way the calls always did: a burst whenever a train went over somewhere new, and a burst after anything was in the paper, and a slow hum the rest of the time, of people standing under the guideway watching trains go by above them with the lights on and the seats empty. One man phoned to ask whether the empty trains were being paid for. A boy of about eight phoned, with his father's permission, to ask whether he could wave at the testing trains and whether anybody would wave back. I said I didn't know who was driving them, but that I would find out, and I did, and the answer was nobody, mostly, because the trains were running on the computer by then, and he was disappointed and then said that was even better.

One afternoon in July I was walking back to the office along Fraser Highway and an empty train went over, eastbound, at speed, with that sound they make, a long rising hum that isn't quite like anything else, and directly underneath it, in the right-hand lane, going the same way at about a sixth of the speed, was the 503, articulated, full, with the Allfather at the wheel, both hands low, looking straight ahead. The train was

gone over the curve toward Clayton in about ten seconds. The bus stopped at 156 and let people off.

* * *

The testing went in stages, the way the testing always goes, and I explained the stages on the phone so many times that summer that I could have done it asleep, and some nights, my mother said, I did.

First a train goes over the new track slowly, driven by hand, by a person in the front, to see that it fits: that nothing on the guideway is too close to the train and nothing on the train is too close to the guideway. Then it goes faster, and then faster again. Then the computer drives it, alone, and people watch screens. Then the computer drives two trains, and then several, at once, to see that they keep their distance. Then the trains carry weights, to see that they still stop where they should when they are as heavy as they will be at five o'clock on a Friday in December. Then, at the end, the trains run all day at the times they will really run, and stop at every station, and open their doors at every platform for nobody, for days, until everybody who has to sign something is willing to sign it.

The weights were water. I had expected sandbags. They were plastic barrels, blue, filled with water, strapped into the cars along the aisles where people would stand, so many to a car, enough to weigh what a full car of people weighed. The project put out a photograph of them in a train, in rows, and it went around the internet.

Len phoned the day the photograph went out.

"I weigh a hundred and ninety," he said.

"Okay."

"I'll sit still. I won't touch anything. You can strap me in. Ruth says she'll come too, she's a hundred and thirty, so that's two barrels between us, near enough, and we'll bring our own lunch."

"Len, you can't ride as a weight."

"Why not?"

"It's a test. Nobody can ride."

"The barrels are riding."

"The barrels don't count."

"That," said Len, "is exactly what I've been saying since 2018," and I laughed, and he laughed, and then he said, "Put me down for it, anyway. In case they change their minds about the barrels," and I did. *Friesen, L. — volunteer weight (190)*. Below it Ruth had her own line. *Friesen, R. — volunteer weight (130) — own lunch.*

* * *

The Conscience-Keeper had moved from the precast yard to the stations.

There was no more precast. The yard in Campbell Heights was empty by then, the moulds sold or scrapped, the gravel back to gravel, and the people who had checked the segments had gone on to check other things. He had gone to the stations, where the work in the last summer before opening was what the project called *deficiencies*, which meant every place where what had been built was not quite what the drawings said, and

where somebody had to decide, before the doors opened to the public, whether to fix it, live with it, or write it down and fix it later.

He walked the stations with a tablet and a gauge and a tape measure and his notebook, and wrote reports, and closed them.

In August the project held an accessibility walkthrough at Clayton station, which was finished, or nearly: the platform, the elevators, the escalators, the fare gates, the signs, all in, all new, with the plastic still on some of the handrails. The walkthrough was for a group of people from an accessibility advisory committee who had been asked to walk the station before it opened and tell the project what was wrong. I organized it. It was the kind of thing I organized by then. I had a list of names and a list of dietary restrictions for the sandwiches and a list of who needed a ride from where, and the Conscience-Keeper came because anything they found would be his to write down.

There were nine of them. One was a man in a power chair who went straight to the elevator and timed the doors with his phone. One was a woman with a guide dog, a yellow Lab called Murphy, who was the only one of us who seemed to find the station completely normal. One was a woman with a white cane, called Pauline, who was about sixty, and who walked the platform from one end to the other while the rest of us were still looking at the signs.

The man in the power chair came back from the elevator.

"Twelve seconds," he said.

"Is that bad?"

"It's good," he said. "Some places they close in six. You have to be a racehorse." He wrote it on the comment card in capitals, *ELEVATOR DOORS GOOD — 12 SEC*, and handed it to me, and I realized it was the first comment card I had been handed since 2018 that said something was good, and I didn't know which pile to put it in, and in the end made a new one.

* * *

At the platform edge, all the way along, there was a strip of yellow tiles, raised in a pattern of small round bumps, so that a person with a cane, or with their feet, would know where the edge was before they reached it. I had seen strips like it at every SkyTrain station I had ever been on and had never once thought about it.

Pauline stopped at the strip about two-thirds of the way along the platform. She ran the tip of her cane over the tiles, back and forth. Then she took a step to the left and did it again. Then she went back.

"These are different," she said.

The Conscience-Keeper came over.

"Different how?" he said.

"Lower." She ran the cane over them again. "From here," she tapped, "to about here. The bumps. They're lower. I can feel the cane drop into them less."

He knelt. He took a small gauge out of his vest pocket, a flat steel thing like a ruler with notches cut into it, and held it against one of the bumps, and looked at it, and then at another,

and then at one further along, where Pauline had said the tiles were fine. He did it six times.

"Two millimetres," he said. "Low. On this section."

"Is that a lot?" I said.

"It's enough that she felt it with a cane through her hand on the first pass," said the Conscience-Keeper. "So it's enough."

He wrote it down. He photographed the tiles, and the gauge against them, and the length of the section, which he measured with the tape, and he asked Pauline her name, and wrote that down too, under *Identified by*.

"You're putting me in it?" said Pauline.

"You found it," he said.

* * *

The tiles could not be fixed before opening.

I found that out in September. The tiles were a particular kind, made by a particular company, and the right ones had to be ordered, and they were coming from somewhere far away on a boat, and the boat was not going to arrive before the line opened, and the line was not going to wait for the boat. So the project did what projects do, which was a temporary measure. A crew laid a strip of high-contrast tape along the edge of the low section, bright yellow, with a rougher surface, and a sign went up, and the operating company agreed that an attendant would be stationed at that end of that platform for the first weeks, until the right tiles came.

The Conscience-Keeper wrote it down. *Interim measure in place. Permanent remedy pending.* The report stayed open.

"Will you close it at opening?" I asked him. There was a list, that summer, of reports that had to be closed before opening, and a much shorter list of reports that could be left open, if somebody senior signed a form saying why, and the second list was the one everybody was trying to get things onto.

"No," he said.

"Why not? There's a measure in place."

"The measure's in place," he said. "The tiles are still wrong. When the tiles are right, it's closed." He put his notebook away. "Somebody senior can sign the form. That's what the form is for. Then it's their name on it, beside mine, and it's open, and everybody knows it's open."

Before the form, the project brought in an accessibility specialist from outside, who walked the interim measure with a long cane and a clipboard and asked for Pauline to come back and walk it too. Pauline walked it twice. She said the tape gave her the edge, mostly, and that she would rather have the tiles, and that she understood about the boat. The specialist wrote that down, and the attendant at that end of the platform was made a condition, and that was written down too.

Somebody senior signed the form. It was on the list of reports open at opening, which was a real list, with a number on it, and the number was not small, and nobody outside the project ever saw it, which is normal. Most of them were things like paint. One of them was Pauline's.

* * *

The letter came in September too.

It was from the operating company, and it was not quite a job yet. They were taking over the line from the project at opening, the way they had taken over every line, and they were hiring people to run it, and one of the things they were hiring was a customer information person for the stations south of the Fraser: somebody who would answer the questions people asked about the line once it was running, in place of the questions they had asked about it while it was being built. Somebody at the operating company had seen my name. I don't know where. Possibly in the log from the night at King George, with the crossing-out. Possibly from the Hand, who did not seem like a man who mentioned people, and possibly was one.

The letter invited me to apply. It said the posting was open to internal and external candidates and that applications would be assessed against the posted qualifications, and there would be an interview, and references, and if I got it, six months' probation. It said that the successful candidate would start in January, after the handover, and should bring photo identification on the first day to be photographed for an employee card. I could see the card without being shown it. It would not say SURREY LANGLEY SKYTRAIN. It would say the name of the operating company, and my name, and under that, in small letters, TRANSLINK.

I put it on the kitchen table, between the two folders, which were still there.

My father looked at it.

"Who is that?" he said.

"TransLink. The ones who run it."

"You started with them."

"In 2018."

"So it's back to the start."

"It's a different job."

My father read it again. He read it the way he reads anything with a logo on it.

"Is it more money?"

"A little."

"Is it the same desk?"

"No. There's no desk. It's the stations."

"Which stations?"

"All of them," I said. "Ours. Green Timbers to Langley."

My mother had been standing at the stove with her back to us. She turned round.

"You'll be on the train," she said.

"I'd be on the train."

"Every day."

"Every day."

My mother thought about that for a while. Then she went back to the stove. I couldn't tell what she thought of it.

I didn't apply. Not that week. Applications closed on the first of November.

What I kept thinking about was the list. Not Engage Plus; the list. Len and Ruth, Liam O'Connell with his apostrophe, the man who wanted a washroom, the farmer with fourteen acres. They were the project's. The first of them had said yes to me on the phone in 2021, and the rest had asked to be put down since, and when the project closed out they would stay with it, in a database somebody else would look after, and the person at the

station in a TransLink vest would be somebody who told them when the next train was. That would be useful. They would not be phoning me.

* * *

Trevor was staying on with the project. There was a lot of the project left after opening. There were the reports that were open at opening, and the money, and the documents, and the maintenance yard on the farmland at 176 Street, which was going to be its own project until 2033, and somebody had to stay and see the line all the way through its own paperwork. He said it would be him.

"Are you taking it?" he asked, when I told him about the letter. "The TransLink thing?"

"I don't know."

"You'd be good at it."

"I'd be answering the same questions."

"No," said Trevor. "Different ones. They'll ask when the next train is. You'll know. You'll be able to tell them." He thought about it. "You've never been able to tell anybody when anything is."

* * *

On the last day of the loaded runs, near the end of September, the trains with the barrels ran at full service frequency, stopping at every station and opening their doors for nobody. After that the barrels came out, and the last weeks of running were empty trains on the real timetable, for the people who had to sign.

I went and stood on the platform at Fleetwood, behind the barrier at the top of the stairs, which was as far as anybody without a permit could go. It was a bright day. The station smelled of new paint and new rubber. The platform was empty. The escalators had been unwrapped. A train came in from King George. It stopped exactly at the end of the platform. The doors chimed and opened. Inside, in the aisles, were the blue barrels, in rows, strapped in, very still, a full car of them, like a rush hour where everybody had agreed not to talk.

The doors stayed open for the length of time they would stay open with people. Then they chimed, and closed, and the train went on east, toward Langley, with the barrels.

I wrote down the time. Nobody needed it. It was in a computer somewhere, to the second. I wrote it in the notebook anyway, under Len and Ruth's lines, the volunteer weights.

XII

Order of Proceedings

OPENING DAY — ORDER OF PROCEEDINGS (internal — not for distribution)

09:30 Guests arrive, Langley City Centre Station (north plaza)

10:00 Welcome and land acknowledgement

10:10 Remarks (see speaking order, attached)

10:40 Ribbon (scissors: Conor)

10:45 First public train departs Langley City Centre for King George

10:46 Stations open to the public

Commemorative magnets to be distributed at all stations from 10:46. Do not distribute before ribbon.

The magnets came on the Friday.

There were four thousand of them, in eight boxes, addressed to me, because I had signed for the order in October. They were the size of a business card. On the front was a photograph of a real train, on the real guideway, crossing Fraser Highway at

Fleetwood on a clear morning in September, with nobody in it, because it had been taken during testing, which nobody who looked at the magnet would know. Along the bottom it said SURREY LANGLEY SKYTRAIN and, underneath, OPENING DAY 2029.

Conor had asked me whether the year should be on it. Conor had replaced Dawn in 2027, and by 2029 he had been to enough openings to know that the year was a risk. I said the year was fine now. It was true now. He looked at me as if I had said something in another language and then wrote down that it was fine.

I stacked the boxes in the back room of the community office, which was going to close in March, when the project moved its last people downtown for the paperwork. There was room for six. The other two went under Trevor's desk.

* * *

Opening day was a Saturday in December, cold and clear, the first clear Saturday in three weeks.

I was at Langley City Centre at seven with the name tags, which were titles, mostly, because the order of proceedings said *see speaking order, attached*, and the speaking order was all titles, the Premier and the Minister and the Mayor of Surrey and the Mayor of the City of Langley and the Mayor of the Township and the Chair of the Mayors' Council and the head of the operating company, and I had printed the titles large and the names small, which was the right way round, I had learned, because the titles were what the cameras read.

I checked them against the list. Of all the people on it, only one had held the same title in 2018. He was going to speak third. He had been the Mayor in 2018 too.

* * *

The station was new in the way only a thing that has never been used can be new. The platform was clean. The glass was clean. The fare gates had never been tapped, except by testers, and they made a small bright sound when they opened that nobody yet had any feelings about. The station smelled of rubber and cold and, very faintly, of the casino next door, which had been there since before the station and would be there after, and which had put out a sign that said WELCOME SKYTRAIN RIDERS in lights.

The north plaza had a stage and a backdrop and a tent and rows of chairs and a rope line, and behind the rope line, by half past nine, there were about two thousand people, in coats and toques, holding coffee, some with kids on their shoulders, some with signs. Most of the signs were happy. One said FINALLY. One said 2018 in a circle with a line through it. One, held by a very old man near the front, said HOW LONG and nothing else, and I looked twice to make sure it wasn't Len, and it wasn't.

Len wasn't coming.

He had phoned me on the Thursday.

"We're not coming Saturday," he said. "Too many people. Ruth says she's not standing in a crowd for two hours to be the first one on something. She's going Tuesday. To book club. On the train."

"Okay."

"I'm driving her to Fleetwood station. Then she's going on her own."

"Okay."

"She says I'm not allowed to come."

"Okay, Len."

"I'm going to wait in the car," said Len, "in case."

* * *

The remarks went the way remarks go. I stood at the side of the stage with the clipboard and the bag of spare titles and did not listen to most of them, because you don't, when you've made the name tags; you listen for the moment each speaker steps down so you can get the next one up. What they said is in the release. The Premier spoke about the people of the region. The Minister spoke about the people who built it. The Mayor of Surrey, third, spoke about SkyTrain, and how it had always been the right choice, and the crowd cheered, and I watched Trevor, who was standing at the end of the rope line with his hands in his coat pockets, look at the ground.

One of the speakers said "nearly six billion dollars," and I thought of Dawn, wherever she was, at her law firm in Victoria, and wondered whether she was watching, and decided she was.

At 10:40 Conor handed the scissors to the Premier.

They were very large. They had been bought for the opening of a bridge some years before and kept in a case in a storage room in Victoria for exactly this, and Conor had flown with them as carry-on, which had taken some explaining. The ribbon

was blue. It stretched across the top of the stairs to the platform. Seven people held the scissors at once, which is how you do it so that everybody is in the picture, and the scissors were not designed for seven people, and on the first try they only got halfway through. There was a pause. On the second try it went.

The crowd cheered. Somebody's kid on somebody's shoulders blew a party horn.

At 10:45 the first public train left Langley City Centre for King George, with the speakers on it, and the cameras, and a hundred and some members of the public who had been chosen by lottery, and the doors chimed, and it went out of the station westward along Fraser Highway, in the air, over the casino parking lot and the White Spot that wasn't there anymore, with people in it.

At 10:46 the gates opened, and everybody else came up the stairs.

* * *

I was at the bottom of the stairs with the first box of magnets.

The order of proceedings said to distribute them from 10:46. So at 10:46 I opened the box and started handing them out, one to each person, as they came past me toward the gates, and it was the first time in eleven years that I had been allowed to give anybody anything with the project's name on it.

People took them. Almost everybody took one. They took them without looking, like flyers, and then looked, and then said, "Oh," and put them in their pockets. Kids took two. A woman took one and turned it over to read the back and said,

"There's no phone number," and I said there wasn't, and she said good, and laughed.

Kiran was handing them out at the other end of the plaza, by the bus loop, and when I looked over she held up her box to show me how many were left and made a face, and I made the same face, and we kept going.

At about eleven-fifteen a woman came down the stairs the wrong way, against the crowd, holding the hand of a much older woman.

* * *

The young woman was a SkyTrain Attendant. She had the vest and the radio and the lanyard, and she had dark hair under a toque, and she was laughing at something the older woman had said, and I had never seen her before.

The older woman was about eighty, in a long coat and a white chunni over her hair, and she had a handbag held against her chest and the look of somebody who has got off at the wrong stop in a country that has just rearranged all its stops.

She came down the stairs looking along the crowd for anybody who might be staff, and found my lanyard.

"Do you speak Punjabi?" said the Companion.

"Yes."

"Good. She's lovely. She's very lost. I can't understand a word. She thinks we're in Surrey."

I spoke to her. Her name was Gurmeet. She was from the Willowbrook end, she said. Her grandson had brought her on the first train out of Willowbrook that morning, the one

from the testing, no, the one from the morning—she was not sure—and she had got up to look out of the window, and the doors had closed, and the train had gone on, and the grandson had stayed behind, or she had gone on, she was not sure which, and now she was here, at the end, where there was a casino, and she did not know where Willowbrook was from here, because everything was different, all the roads were different, there was a bridge in the sky.

I told the Companion.

"She means she rode from Willowbrook to Langley City Centre," I said. "One stop. She's at the end of the line. Her grandson got off, or didn't get on. He'll be looking for her."

"He hasn't called it in," she said. "Control would have told us." She put her hand on her radio. "But he will."

She said something to Gurmeet. Gurmeet didn't understand the words. She understood the rest. The attendant had her hand on the older woman's arm, very lightly, and was smiling at her as if they were old friends at a wedding, and Gurmeet, who had been near tears, laughed, and said to me in Punjabi that this one was a good girl, and should be married.

I didn't translate that.

"Ask her if she has a phone," she said.

She did. It was in the handbag, at the bottom, in a sock, with a list of numbers on a piece of paper folded around it, because she did not like the phone and did not trust it to remember. The first number was her grandson's. I dialled it from my own phone.

He answered on the first ring, at a run.

"Is she with you? Is she okay? I've been—I'm at Willowbrook, I was just going to the attendant, I didn't—"

"She's fine," I said. "She's at Langley City Centre. She's with an attendant. She's laughing."

There was a sound on the line that was half breath and half something else.

"I'll get the next train," he said.

"It comes every few minutes," I said, and then I stopped. I had never been able to say that to anybody about anything.

* * *

The Companion stayed with Gurmeet at the bottom of the stairs until the grandson came. It was ten minutes. In that time Gurmeet told her, through me, about her village in Punjab and her late husband and the house on 196 Street they had bought in 1988, and she listened to all of it and asked questions, through me, about the village and the house, and when Gurmeet asked her how old she was, she said, "Older than I look," and Gurmeet said, in Punjabi, that everybody said that, and the attendant laughed as if she'd understood.

The grandson came down the stairs at a run, a tall boy of about nineteen in a puffy jacket, and his grandmother scolded him for the length of a long sentence and then hugged him.

"Thank you," he said, to the Companion, and then to me. "Thank you. I just—the doors—"

"The doors do that," she said. "They'll keep doing that. Next time, hold her hand."

"I'll hold her hand."

Gurmeet held out her hand to the attendant, and in it was the magnet, the opening-day one, which I had given her at some point in the last ten minutes without noticing. She wanted the attendant to have it.

"I can't," said the Companion. "We're not supposed to." She folded Gurmeet's fingers back round it. "You keep it. It's your first day too."

She keyed her radio and said that the lady at Langley City Centre was reunited with family, and Control said "Copy," and then her radio said something else, and she said, "Copy," and she was gone back up the stairs, through the crowd, against the flow, light, with her vest catching the sun at the top, and I didn't see her again.

* * *

The other thing was Liam.

He had been on the list since 2025, with his apostrophe. *O'Connell, Liam — Gr. 5, Clayton — first ride (req.)*. I had phoned his mother in November, and she had said they would come on opening day, to Clayton, his station, and that he was fourteen now and mortified by all of it and also had been counting down on a calendar in his room. I had said I would try to meet them. I had not been able to. I was at Langley City Centre with a box of magnets and the speaking order and, later, Gurmeet.

At four o'clock my phone buzzed. It was a text.

Hi this is Liam O'Connell's mom (Clayton, the tour). He wanted you to know he went first. First in line at Clayton when the gates opened. He's mortified I'm texting you. Here's a picture.

The picture was of a boy in a hoodie with his hood up and his arms folded, standing on the platform at Clayton, not smiling, in front of a train with its doors open, and behind him, at the edge of the platform, a strip of bright yellow tape along a section of the tactile tiles, and an attendant in a vest at the end of it, standing exactly where the condition said she would be.

I wrote it in the notebook. *O'Connell, Liam — first ride — Clayton — first through the gates — (mom)*. I put the apostrophe in.

* * *

I rode the train home at nine that night.

It was the first time. All the years, all the boards and the phone calls and the backdrops and the barrels, and I had never once been on it with the doors open and people inside. I tapped in at Langley City Centre. The gate made its new sound. I went up to the platform. A train came in, and the doors chimed, and I got on, with people. There were people on it. A couple with shopping bags. Three teenagers sharing a bag of chips. A man in a construction vest, asleep, who I think might have built some of it.

We went west along Fraser Highway, in the air. I sat by the window. Below, the highway was lit up, and the cars were small, and I could see the tops of the bus shelters. At Willowbrook the doors opened. At Clayton they opened, and I looked out at the yellow tape, and the attendant was gone home, and a sign was standing there in her place, which was not in the condition.

I got off. The doors closed behind me and the train went on without me. I went to the yellow help intercom on the post at the middle of the platform and pressed the button, and after a moment a voice said, “Control,” and I said who I was, and where I was, and that the attendant required at the east end of the platform at Clayton as a condition of opening was not there, and that there was a sign.

There was a short pause.

“Copy,” said Control. “Clayton, east end, attendant condition. We’ll have somebody there.” And a reference number, which I wrote down. Then, in exactly the same voice: “Thank you, the project.”

I waited on the platform. A train came in three minutes later, westbound, and I didn’t get on it, and another came in four minutes after that, and a man in a vest came up the stairs at a jog with a radio and went to the east end and stood by the tape, and said into his radio that he was there, and I got on the next one.

Below, past Bakerview, I could see the temporary stop at 162 Street, which was still temporary.

At Fleetwood I got off.

The ride from Langley was twelve minutes, not counting Clayton. On the bus it had been twenty minutes on a good day, and longer since the construction.

I went down the stairs and out into Fraser Highway at 160, at night, under the guideway, and stood on the corner for a while. A 503 came past, eastbound, under the guideway, nearly

empty for once. I couldn't see who was driving. It was late for him. I didn't know if it was him.

Then I walked home.

My mother was still up. On the fridge, beside the old light rail magnet with the 503 timetable under it, there was a new one, the opening-day one, with the photograph of the empty train. It wasn't holding anything.

"Where did you get that?" I said.

"Your father went," said my mother. "He took the bus to the station and got on the train and went one stop and came back. He says it's very fast. He says it's too fast. He got one of those."

"What's it holding?"

"Nothing yet," said my mother.

XIII

Service Change Notice

SERVICE CHANGE — EFFECTIVE MONDAY

Route 503 Fraser Highway Express

With the opening of SkyTrain service to Langley City Centre, Route 503 will ***no longer serve Surrey Central Station or Fraser Highway west of Langley Centre.***

Route 503 will operate between Langley Centre and Aldergrove.

For travel along Fraser Highway, please use SkyTrain or Route 502.

Last westbound and eastbound trips on the current route: Sunday evening.

The last eastbound trip was the 21:47 from Surrey Central, on the Sunday, and it was full.

I had not expected it to be full. I had expected, if I had expected anything, a handful of people coming home late from somewhere, and me. Instead, when I got to the bay at half past

nine, there were about forty people already standing there in the cold, and most of them had cameras.

They were transit people. I didn't know that there were transit people, the kind who ride the last trip of a route because it is the last trip, until that night, and then I couldn't stop seeing them: a man with a camera on a strap and a second camera in his hand; two teenagers with a phone on a stick; a woman in her sixties with a notebook in which she was writing down the number of the bus; a man in a jacket from a bus company in Seattle. They talked to each other about fleet numbers. One of them had ridden the last trip of a route in Calgary in 1998, and said so, and the others nodded.

There were regulars too. A woman in hospital scrubs under her coat, who I had seen at the bay at that time of night for years and never spoken to. A man with a hockey bag. Two students from Kwantlen sharing a set of earbuds, who had not known it was the last trip and were alarmed by the cameras.

The bus came in at 21:40.

It was him. I had known it would be. He had picked the run.

* * *

He opened the doors. The transit people photographed the doors opening. The woman in scrubs got on first, because she always did, and tapped her card, and he looked at her, and she went to her seat. Then the rest of them got on, with their cameras, and the man with the hockey bag, and the students, and me.

When the people at the front were standing on the yellow line he said, “Move back, please. There’s room at the back.”

The transit people photographed that too. Then they moved back, and there was room.

At 21:47 he closed the doors.

“503 Langley Centre,” he said, into the microphone, and then the woman’s voice said it, and one of the teenagers said “Yes” very quietly to himself, the way you would at a concert when the band starts a song you hoped they’d play.

* * *

We went down King George and onto Fraser Highway, under the guideway.

It was the second night it had been running all the way. Above us, every few minutes, a train went by in one direction or the other, lit up, with people in it, small people in yellow windows, going faster than we were. Below them the bus went the way it had always gone, from stop to stop, under the long grey deck on its columns, with the station lights coming up ahead of us one by one. Green Timbers. 152 Street. Fleetwood.

He called each one. He called it a second before the recording, the way he always had, and then the recording said it, so that everybody on the bus heard every stop twice, and the transit people recorded both.

“Green Timbers,” he said, and the woman said, “Green Timbers,” and on the right-hand side the forest went past in the dark, and somewhere in it, by the road, was a stump with a number painted on it, which I couldn’t see.

At 152 nobody got on.

At 156, where the Chaos-Weaver used to stand, there was nobody standing now. The barriers were gone. The lanes were back. The Golden Bowl's window was dark, with LUNCH ONLY painted on it, and under the specials somebody had added, in a different colour, TRAIN SOON.

At the temporary stop at 162 the woman in scrubs pulled the cord. He was already slowing. She stood up and went to the front door, and stopped beside him.

"Twelve years," she said.

He looked at her.

"Thank you," she said.

"Mind the step," he said.

She got off. She crossed the road and walked back to the station, and up the stairs, and I lost her.

* * *

From Fleetwood to Clayton the bus was quieter. The students had got off. The man with the hockey bag was asleep against the window. The transit people had stopped photographing and were talking among themselves in low voices, about the route, about the 1990s, about buses that had run on Fraser Highway before any of them were born, which the woman with the notebook knew the fleet numbers of.

I sat on the side seats near the front, where I had sat in 2018, with my bag on my knees and the notebook in it.

I had applied, on the thirty-first of October, at eight minutes to midnight, from the card table under the stairs, after three

drafts of the cover letter, the last of which said nothing about the list. I had gone to the interview in a room at the operating company's offices in Burnaby with three people across a table, one of whom asked me what I would say to a customer who wanted to know when a delayed train would arrive, and I had said I would tell them what I knew, and then what I didn't, in that order, and they had written that down. On the Friday before opening a letter had come with an offer in it, conditional on references, start date in January, six months' probation.

I hadn't answered it. It needed answering by the end of the week. It was in the bag, under the notebook.

If I said yes, I would be at a station in January in a TransLink vest, telling people when the next train was, which I would be good at. If I said no, I would go downtown with Trevor and the paperwork until the yard was built. Both were real jobs. The construction line on my desk was connected until March, and people were still phoning it, and I wanted to be the one who answered it until it stopped. I would answer the letter by Friday. I knew that much.

* * *

At Willowbrook a man got on with a takeout bag from the drive-through across from where the White Spot had been. He looked at the cameras, and at the transit people, and said, "Is this the last one?" and the woman with the notebook said, "It's the last one," and he said, "Huh," and sat down and ate his fries.

Then Langley City Centre went past us on the left, up on its guideway, lit, with the casino's sign underneath it saying

WELCOME SKYTRAIN RIDERS, and the bus turned off Fraser Highway for the last block into the exchange.

"Langley Centre," he said. And then the woman's voice. "Langley Centre."

He knelt the bus.

The transit people got off first. They stood in a group on the platform of the exchange and photographed the bus from the outside, the destination sign, which still said 503 LANGLEY CENTRE, and the number on the back. The man with the hockey bag woke up and looked around and got off without seeming to notice that anything had happened. The man with the fries finished his fries and got off. The woman with the notebook went last of them, and on her way past the driver she stopped and asked him for his operator number, for her notes, and he gave it to her, and she wrote it down, and thanked him, and got off.

Then there was me.

* * *

I stood up. I picked up my bag. I went to the front door and stopped beside him, where Ruth had stopped, where the woman in scrubs had stopped, and he looked at me the way he had looked at me when I tapped my card in 2018, which was the greeting.

"Can I ask you something?"

He waited.

"What's your name?"

"Allfather," said the Allfather.

I took the notebook out of my bag and opened it to the last page with writing on it. I wrote it at the bottom, under Liam O'Connell and the volunteer weights.

Allfather — 503.

He watched me write it. He didn't say anything about it. Neither did I.

"Mind the step," he said.

I got off. The doors closed behind me. The destination sign went from 503 LANGLEY CENTRE to NOT IN SERVICE, and the bus pulled out of the bay, and turned at the end of the exchange, and went away up the street toward wherever buses go at the end of the night, and I stood on the platform with the transit people, who were photographing it going, and when it had gone they went too, up the street toward the SkyTrain, to ride it home.

So did I. It was twelve minutes.

* * *

On the Tuesday morning I walked to the office along Fraser Highway the way I always had. The office was at 160 Street, in the strip mall between the driving school and the eyebrow place, across the road from Fleetwood station. It had boxes in it by then. It was closing in March.

At 7:50 there was a car parked at the curb outside the station, on the short-term side, with its engine running. It was Len's. He was in the driver's seat with the paper open on the steering wheel and his reading glasses on, not reading it. He was looking up at the platform.

I didn't go over. I stood on the corner, under the guideway, by the crossing, and watched him not read the paper.

At 7:53 a train came in from the west, toward Langley. It stopped. The doors chimed. I couldn't see who got on. Len could, from the car, or thought he could, and he folded the paper and put it on the passenger seat, and took his glasses off, and sat there with both hands on the wheel at the bottom, the way they teach you not to, while the train went out of the station eastward, toward Clayton and Willowbrook and Langley City Centre and the library six minutes from it, at Ruth's pace ten.

He didn't drive away. Not yet. He sat there for a while longer, with the engine running, in case.

Then he saw me on the corner. He lifted one hand off the wheel. I lifted mine.

* * *

The phone on my desk was still the construction line. It would be until March, when the project closed the office and the number went to a recording, and then to nothing. Most days by then it didn't ring at all.

At two minutes past nine, while I was taping up a box of comment cards, it rang.

"Is this the SkyTrain?" said a man.

"It's the construction line," I said. "For the Surrey Langley SkyTrain."

"Is it finished?"

"It's open," I said. "Since Saturday."

"I know it's open. I've been on it." He sounded pleased about that, and then he sounded as if he had remembered why he had called. "I live in Newton," he said. "On King George. By the bus loop. I've been reading about it. They said it'd go down King George one day. To Newton. A branch. They said that in the election."

"I've heard that too."

"So I'm phoning to ask," said the man. "When does it get to Newton?"

Author's Note

This is a work of fiction set inside a real public project. The Surrey Langley SkyTrain, now the Dave Barrett Extension, is being built along Fraser Highway as this book goes to press in November 2026. We have tried to keep the record and the invention apart, so that a reader can tell which is which.

WHAT IS ON THE RECORD

The institutional history follows official records, contemporary reporting and published accounts of the project's construction:

- Surrey council's first meeting on 5 November 2018, which voted to stop work on the Surrey–Newton–Guildford light rail line and asked for its cancellation.
- The Mayors' Council's suspension of that project on 15 November 2018, and the figure of about $56 million spent to date, reported that December.
- The 2019 plan to build only to Fleetwood with the money then available, and the business case that followed in January 2020.

- The settlement of about $39 million for the light rail work, approved in camera in May 2020 and later published. Of that, $9.3 million was cash and $12.8 million was three hundred park-and-ride spaces.
- The City of Surrey's 2020 report stating that no trees within Green Timbers Urban Forest would be affected by the road widening, because the work stayed within the road allowance.
- The Province's takeover of the project after the October 2020 election, and its delivery through the Transportation Investment Corporation.
- The station names announced on 1 December 2023, including the Tim Hortons replaced by Bakerview–166 Street and the White Spot replaced by Willowbrook.
- The removal of about thirty-seven acres at 176 Street from the Agricultural Land Reserve on 11 December 2023 for a maintenance yard now scheduled for 2033, and the parcel's assessed value ($5.65 million) and sale price ($8.052 million).
- The contracts announced on 15 August 2024 with a budget of $5.996 billion and an opening in late 2029, and the 2022 business case's benefit-cost ratio of 1.02.
- The conditions of construction on Fraser Highway: single lanes, stoppages of up to two minutes, "businesses are open" signs, bottled water during shut-offs, and the Province's position that it does not compensate businesses for construction disruption.

- The precast segments and the four gantries and their names; the cumulative count of non-conformity reports in the project's own status reports.
- The bus operators' break action in September 2026, the naming of the line on 15 September 2026, and the municipal and provincial elections of 17 and 24 October 2026.

The working procedures are drawn from published accounts by the people who do the work:

- The Occupancy Permit issued by Control.
- Tapping the reaction-rail caps for loose bolts.
- The switch detection test.
- The empty first train of the morning.
- Water barrels standing in for passengers during load testing.

So are a few details of earlier lines: the Evergreen Line renamed the Evergreen Extension months before it opened, and the Millennium Line's early reputation as the SkyTrain to nowhere.

WHAT IS INVENTED

Every named character is invented, including the narrator. That covers Mandy and her family, Len and Ruth, Denise, Trevor, Dawn, Conor, Colleen, Darnell, Kiran, Mrs. Chow and the Golden Bowl, Pauline, Liam, Gurmeet, and the woman on 164 Street. They are fictional characters, not portraits of identifiable individuals involved in the project, and none of the business owners, residents or workers quoted in news coverage of the

project appears here. Where a figure from the record would have identified one of them, we changed it.

No real elected official or executive speaks in this book. The Mayor, the Minister and the Premier appear only by title. Where their words matter, we report what is on the public record, in our own words, and their fictional staff do the talking.

Also invented:

- The magnets, the model train and the mugs.
- The open-house boards and their wording.
- The databases and the call-back list.
- Non-conformity report 173, the platform tiles at Clayton and the condition attached to them.
- The survey pin under the drive-through, the fir on the boundary line, and the gate at 154 Street.
- The night at King George and the man on the seventeenth floor.
- The land-assembly letters, the tower and the neighbourhood meeting.
- The opening-day ceremony.
- The job posting.

WHAT HAS NOT HAPPENED YET

Everything set after November 2026 is invented: the completed guideway, the test trains, opening day, and the last trip of the 503 on its old route. Those chapters follow the project's published schedule as it stood when we wrote them: the guideway in 2027, testing through 2029, service in late 2029,

the yard in 2033. They invent no election results, no new budget and no new government policy. The network of bus routes for 2029 had not been published, so the change to the 503 in the last chapter is our guess. The question at the end is the one people are already asking.

THE STAFF

Seven of the people in this book are called by names that sound like titles. They drive the bus, model the corridor, survey the line, run the traffic control, audit the concrete, check the bolts and stand at the end of the platform. Nobody in the book finds this remarkable, and neither should you. They are staff.

PRINCIPAL SOURCES

- The Surrey Langley SkyTrain project website, its document library and its monthly status reports.
- Province of British Columbia news releases.
- TransLink and Mayors' Council reports and meeting agendas.
- City of Surrey corporate reports and council minutes.
- The Agricultural Land Commission.
- TransLink's own accounts of its operations, in the Buzzer blog and its podcast.

- Contemporary reporting by Daily Hive, CBC, CTV, Global News, The Tyee, Business in Vancouver and Fraser Valley Today, among others.

N. Van Seters & Claude