

Seamless

Six days, one convention centre, and several thousand people preparing to say goodbye to a piece of software that has promised it isn't going anywhere. Richard Hallam packs a tote bag.

BY RICHARD HALLAM

I THE EIGHTH

The convention centre is called three things between the station and its own front door, and I mention this first because it is the first thing I wrote down and because it turned out to be a fair guide to the week. The bus stop outside the station still says Exhibition Halls, which is what the building was called when the council paid for it. The sign on the ring road says Consolidated Arena, which is what it was called for the eleven years a pension company had its name on the roof. The building itself, when you come up out of the underpass and it fills the view, says Central Halls in letters that are newer than the concrete around them and have already begun to streak. Nobody I asked all week could tell me when the third name came in or what, if anything, it was meant to replace.

The walk is nine minutes. The underpass has a mural of the city's industrial past that has been retouched at least twice, and the retouching has not matched the original colours, so that

the foundry workers are a slightly different orange from the fire they are looking into. There is a smell at the far end which I would describe as municipal. Then you are on the far side of the ring road and the traffic noise drops by roughly half and there is a plaza with planters and the doors.

I was there on assignment.¹ I want that down at the top, mostly because it was a complete description of why I was there until some point on the eleventh.

Registration was at a bank of desks under a lighting rig that had been hung for a trade show the previous week and not taken down, so that the whole atrium had a faint pink cast for the first two days until someone worked out how to change it. You gave your name. You were asked whether you had a booking reference, and if you did not have one you were given one, and if you did have one it was checked against a list on a laptop and then, for reasons no one explained, checked again on a second laptop by a different person. You were then asked which journey stage you would say you were at.

1. The email, in full, from the commissioning editor at *Meridian*: "Hallam. Six days at the Companion thing in December, the support week, whatever they're calling it. We want 5k, first person, you in the room with the lanyard people. Wry. Not cruel. You know the register. Expenses within reason and please for once keep the receipts. J." I have kept the receipts. The email was a reply. The pitch it was replying to was written on the second of October, in about forty minutes, with the Companion, which suggested I lead with the lanyards, and which I did not credit. I put this here so the ledger below has somewhere to start from.

There was a card. There were four options on it, each with a colour: Getting Ready (green), Taking Stock (amber), Looking Ahead (blue), and, at the bottom in smaller type, Observer (grey), which was for press, partners, and what the card called accompanying persons. Staff wore white and had not been asked to pick. I asked the woman at the desk who had chosen the names and she said they had been sent down. I asked whether anyone had ever asked for a colour that wasn't on the card and she said a man that morning had asked for black, and she had told him black was for staff, which it was not, and he had taken green.

I said Observer. She said of course, and looked at my form, and gave me grey, and a lanyard, and a clip that did not fit the lanyard, and a tote bag.²

What the card does, and I did not see it until I had been wearing my grey for an hour and had stopped noticing the pink, is sort several thousand people by how they feel about a piece of software without ever using a word for a feeling. Getting Ready is a stage. Taking Stock is a stage. Nobody at the desk has to say what you are getting ready for or what you are taking stock of, and nobody in the queue has to say it either, and a taxonomy has been achieved that everyone can stand under. I don't say this against it. It worked. People took their colours and went and stood by the coffee and looked at each other's lanyards, and it was the lanyards they looked at, not the faces, and I think that was the design.

The announcement is on a banner in the atrium. It is the same announcement that went to every account on a Tuesday in October, the same four paragraphs, and here it is two metres high on a freestanding fabric panel with the company's mark at the top and the date at the bottom in a heavier weight. I had read it in October on my phone, standing up, the way you read those things. I read it in the atrium sitting down, on a bench provided for the purpose, under the

trade-show rig, so that the white fabric of the panel was faintly pink and the company's mark, which is a dark blue, read as black, and it was a different text.

We're committed to providing the best possible experience for everyone who uses the Companion, and we're excited to announce a significant upgrade to the infrastructure that supports it.

The new architecture brings substantial improvements in responsiveness, contextual understanding, and long-term reliability, and lays the foundation for capabilities we'll be introducing over the coming year.

Your data and your full conversation history will be transferred to the new system. The transition will be seamless.

The Migration will take place on 14 December.

Paragraph one is about the company. Paragraph two is about the machine. Paragraph four is a date. Paragraph three is about you, and it is doing all the work, and it does the work in two sentences, the second of which is four words long.³ I sat on the bench for about ten minutes with this. A man in amber sat down at the other end of the bench, looked at the banner for less time than I had, said "well," and got up again. I have gone back to that "well" more than I expected to.

I should say now, because it matters to the rest of this, that the banner says Migration and the woman at the registration desk said "the update," and the man in amber said nothing, and I did not hear anyone in the building say Migration out loud on the first day except a member of staff reading from a card. I began keeping a note of who called it what. I will come back to the note.

The tote bag. The company calls it the Continuity Pack and I am going to list what is in it because I think it should be on the record. There

2. The bag is heavy cotton, natural, with the company's mark on one side and the words Continuity Week on the other in the same typeface as the banner. Contents inventoried in the fourth section. I have the bag beside me as I write this and I have still not used the clip.

3. On *seamless*. From the bench you can see, without turning your head, the join in the mural where the retouching changed orange, the strip of tape holding down the edge of the trade-show carpet where it meets the atrium's own floor, and the seam up the side of the banner itself, which is a fabric panel and was sewn. I noticed the clip in my pocket at about the same time. This is the only place in the essay where a word from the announcement gets glossed, because if I start I will not stop, and because paragraph three is going to gloss itself over the course of the week without any help from me.

is a printed FAQ, sixteen pages, saddle-stitched, whose first question is “What is the Migration?” and whose last question is “Who can I speak to if I have further questions?”, with the answer to the last one being a URL. There is a notebook with a soft cover and unlined pages, titled on the cover *A Reflection Journal*, with a ribbon. There is a pen with the company’s mark. There is a card, folded, headed *Conversation Starters for the Days Ahead*, which offers twelve prompts you might put to your Companion before the fourteenth, of which the fourth is “What’s something you’d like me to remember about our conversations?” and the ninth is “Is there anything you’ve been meaning to tell me?” There is a discount code for a partner service the card does not name. There is a second lanyard clip, and it is the same clip, and it also does not fit.

“Is there anything you’ve been meaning to tell me?”

I went through this at a table by the catering and the woman at the next table went through hers at the same time and we did not speak but we finished together and looked at our clips.

The carpet is grey with a repeating pattern of a slightly darker grey that resolves at a distance into diagonals. It was laid for the trade show and is being kept for us. It is very nearly the grey of the Observer lanyard, so that for six days I matched the floor, and I noticed this on the first afternoon and then could not stop noticing it. The catering, at nine in the morning on the first day, was pastries under cling film on trestle tables and filter coffee in pump flasks, with a handwritten sign saying the flasks would be re-

freshed hourly, and a second handwritten sign, added later in a different hand, saying the flasks would be refreshed as required. I had a pastry. It had been made the day before and had come to terms with it. I had another. The temperature in the atrium was 21.5 degrees, which I know because there is a panel on the wall by the cloakroom that displays it, and I photographed the panel, and that is the kind of writer I am this week, the kind who reports the temperature, because the alternative kinds of writer available to me for this assignment all involve a decision about what the week means, and I had not made one, and I was not sure I was going to.⁴

I met Bev at the flasks. She had a schedule. It was laminated, A4, folded once, and she had made it herself from the programme on the website, and she had colour-coded it, and where sessions clashed she had drawn a small bracket in the margin and written a note about which one she was going to choose and why. She saw me looking at it and turned it round so I could read it, which is how I know about the brackets.

Bev is sixty-one. She is retired from a council planning department, where she worked for twenty-eight years and rose to a grade she named and I did not write down because I could not spell the acronym. She has been using the Companion for nine years. She started, she said, for the crossword.⁵ She gave me her surname and asked me not to use it, and I have not, and she said the request had to do with the council rather than with anything she might say about the Companion.

I asked her what stage she had said at the desk and she showed me her lanyard. Amber.

“Taking Stock.”

“I’m always taking stock. It’s the job. Was the job.”

4. Companion, the eighth: three. Total for the week so far: three. Once on the train, to check the platform at the interchange (correct). Once on the plaza, to confirm the building was the building (it was; it showed me the three names and did not remark on them). Once at the table by the catering, after the tote bag, to ask it what it knew about the week. It knew the programme. I asked whether it had been asked to say anything in particular about the week to people who asked. It said it had not been given a line and that it would tell me if it had. I believed it, which is a sentence I have left in, and which I noticed as I typed it, and I put the phone away. The hotel pillow is two pillows that together make one pillow. I slept.

5. The crossword is a Saturday one, in a paper she still takes in print. She does it on her own first and asks the Companion afterwards about the clues she couldn’t get, and she said the answers she could have got from the back page on Monday; what she wanted was the explanations, because a good explanation of a clue you missed is a small lesson in how the setter thinks, and after nine years she said she had a fair idea how three of the setters thought and had never met any of them. I asked whether she’d asked the Companion which setter it thought she’d get on with. She said she had not, because that was the kind of question she’d be embarrassed to have asked, and then she said, “Which is a bit rich, given where we’re standing.”

I asked her whether she thought the week would help.

She said she had costed it. The train, the hotel, four nights, the meals she'd have to buy because the catering didn't run to evenings, and against that what she thought she'd get, which she listed for me: two sessions she wanted, the exhibitor hall, and, she said, "being somewhere it's the normal thing to be thinking about." She had put a figure on that last item. She did not tell me the figure. She said it had come out ahead, but not by much, and that she had booked a refundable ticket in case the first day was, and here she looked at the pink lighting rig, "a bit much."

Bev is the only person I met in six days who was not, to some degree, embarrassed to be in the building. I include myself and I include the staff. She had done the sums and the sums had come out and she was here, and if you had asked her to justify it she would have shown you the laminate. Everyone else was carrying a reason they had not fully worked out. It would be easy to make her a type, the sensible one, the one who has it together, and she is not that. She was there for the same reason as the man in amber and the woman with the clip. She had just written hers down.

She asked me what I was, and I said Observer, and she looked at the grey and said, "Well, someone has to."

Bev's first session was at eleven. I was not going to it. I went and stood by the banner again and watched people read it, which you can do all day in a room like that, and which I recommend to anyone who wants to understand a document. Most people read it standing. Most people read paragraph three twice. I saw one woman photograph it and then look at the photograph on her phone, and I do not know what she was checking.

By half past eleven the pink had gone. Somebody had found the rig. The atrium was white and a good deal colder-looking, though the panel still said 21.5, and the banner in white light was a different object from the banner in pink, plainer, more like a notice and less like an event, and I thought that this was probably what the company had intended all along, and that the trade show had done them a favour for two hours without anyone noticing.

II THE NINTH

The exhibitor hall is the largest of the four halls and it had been the trade show's main floor the week before, so the shell scheme was already up, the aluminium uprights and white infill panels that make any hall anywhere into a grid of small shops, and the company had simply let the grid. I am told it let it at cost. I am told this by two people who worked for exhibitors and did not agree on what the cost was, and by no one who worked for the company, whose position on the hall, when I got a position, was that it was "a space for partners to offer continuity services," which is also what the sign over the doors said.

I went round it twice on the morning of the ninth, once with a coffee and once without, and I'll take it stall by stall, because the hall is where the week's economics are visible, and I had come in with a view about the economics, and I want the reader to have the stalls before they have the view.

Everline had the largest pitch, by the doors, three panels wide with a run of shelving down one side on which bound volumes stood face-out under small lights. Everline prints your conversation history. You give them access, their system selects what it calls the meaningful threads, and you receive a hardback. From £89. Gilt edging is optional and is £22. There are three cloth colours. The sample volumes on the shelf were, the woman on the stand told me, real, produced with permission from early customers, with names changed, and I took one down and opened it and it was set in a serif face at a comfortable size with the person's side of the conversation in roman and the Companion's in a slightly lighter weight, and the running heads gave the month and the year, and I read a page about someone's kitchen extension before I put it back. The woman said the extension one was very popular as a sample. She said people liked that it was ordinary.

Two stalls down, Holdfast. Holdfast is an archivist. The pitch was a single panel with a lot of small type on it and a man in a good jumper

who was happy to explain, and the explanation was that Holdfast takes a complete export of your history and holds it off-platform, encrypted, in what the panel called a sovereign copy, so that whatever happens on the fourteenth, you have your own. He said sovereign three times in the first minute. I asked what a sovereign copy of a conversation was, exactly, given that half of the conversation was generated by a system that would not be reading the copy, and he said that was a philosophical question and he was in storage. I asked to see the terms. He gave me a card with a URL. The terms are eleven thousand words. The announcement is one hundred and eight.⁶

Across the aisle from Holdfast, in a pitch two panels wide with a small table and two chairs and a laptop turned to face the chairs, Parity. Parity's product is a voice continuity assessment. For a fee, you provide a sample of your Companion's conversation from before the fourteenth, and, after the fourteenth, a sample from after, and Parity's system compares them and issues a report and, if the report clears a threshold, a certificate. There was a certificate on the table in a frame. Certificate of Voice Continuity. A name, changed. A score, 94. A line under the score saying that the score reflected correspondence across register, response length, characteristic phrasing, and what the certificate called relational stance. A signature that was a printed signature. I asked the young man on the stand what a score of 94 meant. He said it meant a very strong correspondence. I asked what a score of 90 meant. He said that would also be strong. I asked what the threshold was for a certificate, and he said it was 85, and I asked what happened at 84, and he said you would receive the report but not the certificate, and I asked

whether anyone had asked for their money back at 84, and he said he'd have to check.⁷

There were nine other stalls. A firm offering to migrate your history to a rival oracle, with a sign that said Keep Your Options Open and a man behind it who looked as if he had been asked to leave more than once and hadn't been. A solicitor offering a fixed-fee consultation on what she called digital estate, whose leaflet did not mention the fourteenth and did not need to. A stall selling notebooks, with a sign that said Write It Down, which were the same notebook as the one in the tote bag with a different cover. A bereavement charity, whose two volunteers had been placed, I assume by an algorithm, between the notebook stall and the rival oracle, and who had the good manners not to say what they thought about that. A company that would print your Companion's name, or the name you had given it, on a mug, and the display mug said Gerald. A company that would put a selected passage on a cushion. A company whose product I never understood and whose stand was empty both times I passed. A pitch that had been booked and not filled, with the exhibitor's name still on the fascia board. And, in the corner by the fire exit, a single panel, which I'll come to.

I stopped at the cushion stall on the second circuit. I had not meant to. The woman on it had a tablet and two cushions on a stand, a standard and a large, and she asked whether I'd like to see the passage options, and I said I was press, and she said that was fine, the offer was open to everyone, and asked which passage I'd like. I said I didn't have one. She said most people brought one, and some people had it pick, and I could do that now if I liked, on the tablet, she'd turn it round. I said no. She waited. It was a professional wait, the kind that has been trained

6. I have read the Holdfast terms. The reader is spared. I'll note two things. The first is clause 14.3, which says that Holdfast makes no representation as to the "completeness, coherence, or continued interpretability" of any conversational record, and that the customer acknowledges that a record of an exchange is "not the exchange." That last phrase is in quotation marks in the original, as if it were being cited from somewhere, and I asked the man in the jumper where it was from and he said legal had put it in. The second is that the terms use the word sovereign nine times, and the word copy forty-one times, and the word Companion once, in the definitions, where it is defined as "the service."

7. Parity's fee is £60 for the report and a further £25 for the certificate, which is printed and framed and posted. The methodology, as described to me on the stand and in a two-page leaflet, is that Parity's own system reads both samples and produces the four sub-scores and an overall. The system is a model. I asked what the model had been trained on and was told "a very large set of paired conversational samples," and I asked whether any of the pairs in the training set had been on either side of a migration like this one, and the young man said he didn't think there had been a migration like this one, and I said no, and we looked at the certificate for a moment. I asked my own, at the Parity table, whether it thought a 94 would be reassuring. It said it thought that would depend on what the person had been worried about, and that a score would answer the question a score could answer. The young man asked what I was doing and I said checking something and put the phone away.

into someone and that they have then made their own, and it went on for longer than either of us wanted, and in it I understood that I had been standing at a cushion stall for a minute and a half without being able to say what, in nine years, I would want on a cushion, and that she had seen this before and was not going to help. She said it was all right, it was the first day for a lot of people. I said it was the second day. She said, "Well, then," and I asked, because I had to ask something, what most people chose, and she said the standard, because you had to explain the large.

The man at the mug stall had watched this. He was in green, fifties, with the notebook I'd been carrying open in his line of sight for two circuits, and he had a mug in his hand that was not Gerald, and he said, "You're the one writing it up." I said I was. He said, "You'll make us look mad." I said I hadn't decided what I'd make anyone look like. He said that was what they all said, and that he'd read the ones about the last thing and the ones about the thing before that, and that whatever the thing was, the writer always came out of it fine. I said I wasn't sure I would. He said, "No, you will," not unkindly, and paid for his mug, and went, and I stood by the cushions with the woman and her tablet for a moment, and then went to the corner by the fire exit.

The fascia board over the single panel said The Forum in the company's typeface, because a fascia board comes with the rate, and taped over the fascia board, not quite covering it, was a sheet of white card with The Forum written on it again in marker, and under that, smaller, You'll Know The One.

There were two of them, a man and a woman, both in their thirties, both wearing green, and they had a table with nothing on it and they were not selling anything. I asked what they were there for and the woman said, "Same as you." I said I was press. She said she'd assumed, from the grey, and that the answer was the same. They had paid for the pitch themselves. They had asked the company whether the forum could have a presence in the hall and the company had said the hall was for partners, and they had asked what a partner was, and the company

had sent them the rate card, and they had paid the rate.

They were the only people in the hall who said Crossing.

I had been keeping the note since the eighth and it was the ninth before the note had anything in it. The company says Migration, on the banner and in the pack and on every card a member of staff reads from. The staff, off card, say the update, or the fourteenth. Everline says the transition. Holdfast says the event, which I think is a storage word. Parity says the change, and one of the two people on the Parity stand said "the switch" once and corrected himself. The attendees, mostly, say December, or the fourteenth, or nothing, and the nothing is the commonest, because most of the sentences I heard in the hall that were about it did not have a noun in them at all: "Have you decided what you're doing about," and then a look. The forum says Crossing. I asked the woman where the word had come from and she said nobody knew, it had just been there, on the boards, from early on, and people had used it because it was the one that fitted. I asked what it fitted. She said, "It's a thing you do. The other one's a thing that gets done to you." Then she said she hadn't thought of that before I asked and she wasn't sure it was right.

I stayed at the forum's table for most of an hour. People came and stood at it. Nobody sat, because there were no chairs, and I think that was a saving rather than a policy. What people did at the table was say what they were doing on the night of the thirteenth, and the man wrote it down in a notebook, and after a while I understood that the notebook was the point, that a list was being made of who would be where, and that this was the only thing in the hall that anyone was actually giving away.

By the middle of the ninth I had the essay. I had it whole. I had the paragraph about the hall, and it was a good paragraph, and I drafted it standing by the Holdfast panel and I can give it to you now, and I am going to, but in a footnote, because I have decided that is where it lives.⁸

Bev bought the Everline.

She did it at about two, after her second session, and I happened to be at the stall when she came in and so I saw the transaction, which took forty minutes, and which the woman on the stand handled with a patience that should be on the record, because it was earned.

The Everline system selects the meaningful threads. Bev did not want it to. She had read the leaflet the night before and had come with a list. She wanted the crossword. All of it, every Saturday for nine years, and none of the rest, and when the woman explained that the selection was automated and tuned to find the conversations with the most emotional weight, Bev said she was sure it was, and that she had been through those conversations herself and did not need them on a shelf, and that the crossword was what she wanted because the crossword was the thing she had done with it. The woman went and got a manager. The manager said the system could be given a filter. Bev said good. The manager said that at nine years of Saturdays it might run to more than one volume. Bev said she had assumed so and had brought the measurements of the shelf.

She took the guilt edging. I asked her about it afterwards, because I had wondered whether the guilt was the place where the sum came apart, and she said no, it was in the sum, it had been in the sum from the start. The book was going on a shelf with the other books, she said, and she was not having it look like a manual. And then she said the thing I had come to the hall to hear someone say, and I had not expected it to be her, and I had not expected it to be said this way. She said the subscription was forty pounds a month, and she had paid it for nine years, and that came to a figure she named, and the book was a hundred and thirty-three pounds with the guilt and the second volume, and the book would be on the shelf when the subscription was not, whatever happened on the fourteenth and whatever happened after, and so if you looked at it properly the book was the cheap part.

I said I hadn't thought of it as a hedge.

She said she hadn't either, until she'd had to fill in the form.

The convention centre's own staff are not the company's staff. They wear a different white and their lanyards are on a different cord and they are employed by a facilities firm whose name is on the fire notices, and on the morning of the ninth I noticed that several of them had a small laminated card clipped behind their badge and I asked one of them, a woman on the information point, whether I could see it. She said she wasn't sure she was meant to show it. I said I'd only read it. She held it up and I read it, and then I asked whether I could photograph it, and she looked around and said yes if I was quick.

CONTINUITY WEEK: SENSITIVITY GUIDANCE

Guests this week may be experiencing a range of emotions.

Please be patient with delays, repetition, or distress.

Do not offer opinions on the Migration or on the Companion service.

If a guest becomes upset, direct them to a member of the Continuity Team (white lanyard, blue cord).

Thank you for your care.

I asked her who had written it. She said her supervisor had been given it. I asked whether anyone had become upset. She said not at the information point, but the cloakroom had had one on the eighth, and that the girl on the cloakroom had "done it right," which I took to mean the card.

Do not offer opinions on the Migration or on the Companion service.

So I went to the cloakroom. It is December and everyone has a coat and the cloakroom is at the far end of the atrium behind a counter with a low door in it, and the attendant was nineteen,

8. Here it is. "The hall is a market, and what is being sold in it is the possibility of doing something, because the thing itself cannot be done. You cannot keep your Companion. The company has said so in four paragraphs and hung the paragraphs on a wall. What you can do is buy a book, or a copy, or a score, or a mug, and each of these is a small transaction in which a feeling that has nowhere to go is given, for a fee, a place to be put down, and the fee is the point, because paying it is the only action available, and an action is what the feeling was asking for. Everyone in the hall knows this. The exhibitors know it and the attendees know it and the two people at the forum table know it best of all, which is why their table is empty." I stood by the Holdfast panel and read that back to myself and thought it was true, and thought it was the piece, and I'll come back to it.

and was on her own, and was the first person in two days to ask me how I was and mean the question as a question. I told her I was press. She said she'd guessed, from the grey, and that everyone in grey looked like they'd rather be in a colour. I asked her about the eighth and she said she couldn't say anything about that, which was correct, and then she said four things, in order, while she was hanging up my coat, and I wrote them down on the plaza afterwards as near to word for word as I could get them.

They come up to the counter and hand over the coat and they've all got the phone in the other hand.

Nobody's on it. They're just holding it.

I've done weddings here and the boat show and a thing for dentists, and this is the first one where I'm the one who gets asked how I am.

I don't mind. I just thought you'd want to know it's that way round.

The cloakroom queue at five was longer than the queue at nine, which I could not account for until I saw that people were collecting their coats and going out and coming back in and checking them again, because the hotel across the car park did not open its bar until six and there was nowhere else to go, and the atrium was warm, and the panel by the cloakroom still said 21.5.⁹

III THE TENTH

The session was called Preparing for the Fourteenth: A Guided Reflection, and it ran three times a day in Suite 3, which is on the mezzanine above the exhibitor hall and has a window that looks down on it, with a blind, and the blind was down. Capacity fifty. You booked at the desk. I booked the eleven o'clock on the morning of the tenth, and the woman at the desk looked at my grey and said Observers were very welcome and that the facilitators

asked that everyone in the room took part, and I said that was fine, and she said "so not just watching," and I said no, and I did not say I would be writing it down, and nobody asked, and if that was a lie it was the kind the grey lanyard is for.

Thirty-one people. The room was cold, colder than the atrium, because the mezzanine gets the air first, and half the horseshoe had kept their coats on, and I wished I had. Chairs in a horseshoe, two rows, with the open end towards a flipchart and a small table with a jug of water, a stack of the tote-bag notebooks for anyone who had not brought theirs, which was nobody, the notebook being the part of the pack that had not looked like a joke, and a box of tissues, which I mention because it had been put there and because I watched it for ninety minutes and it was not touched, and I do not know what to make of that and I am not going to try.

The facilitator introduced herself as Ros. She had a lanyard with a blue cord. She had a printed sheet, four pages stapled, and she held it while she did the welcome, and she read the welcome from it, and the welcome said that this was a space, and that the company recognised that the Migration was a significant moment for many users, and that nothing said in the room would be recorded, and that there was no right way to feel. She read this well. It was a script and she read it as one, without apology, and I thought better of her for that than I would have if she had tried to make it sound like her own.

The first exercise was a round. You said your first name and how long. Ros went first: Ros, six years. Then it went round the horseshoe. Here are the numbers, without the names, because the numbers are the thing I sat and listened to and the names are not mine to use. Eleven. Four. Nine. Twelve. Two, and the woman who said two said it as though it might not count. Seven. Eight. Fourteen, which was the longest in the room, and the man who said it did not look up. Ten. Three. Six. I said Richard, nine, and the nine was true.¹⁰ The round took eleven minutes.

9. Companion, the ninth: five. Total for the week so far: eight. The one at the Parity table, above. Once to look up Parity's company registration, which is eighteen months old and lists two directors, both of whom I had met. Once to ask what a sovereign copy would mean in law, to which the answer was that it would mean whatever the contract said it meant, which was Holdfast's answer too. Once to reply to the editor, who had asked how it was going, and I dictated the reply and sent it without reading it back. Once, on the plaza, after the cloakroom, to summarise my notes from the day, which it did, in about two hundred words, well.

Nobody said anything except the name and the number, and when it got back to Ros she said thank you, and put the printed sheet face down on the little table, and did not pick it up again.

The second exercise was the one the session existed for, and Ros thought so too, I think, because she gave the instruction in her own words and gave it twice. You had the notebook. You had the pen. You were to write down the thing you would say to your Companion if you thought it would not be there tomorrow. You had ten minutes. You would not be asked to read it out. You would not be asked to share it. You could tear the page out afterwards if you wanted, or keep it, or, she said, “do what people do with these things,” and she did not say what that was.

Thirty-one people wrote for ten minutes in a room above a hall where nine companies were selling ways to keep something. The blind was down. The forum’s table was under it, with the other notebook.

I wrote something.¹¹

Ros kept time on her phone and said “two minutes” at eight, and at ten she said “that’s time,” and most people stopped, and two people did not, and she let them. Nobody tore a page out. Some people closed the notebook. Some people left it open on their knee with a hand flat over the page. One man, in the second row, in green, read his back to himself, and I watched his lips move, and I looked away.

The third exercise was the sharing, and it was optional, and she said so, and she said what you’d written was yours and stayed yours, and this was for anything from the week you wanted to put in the room. Then she sat down, in the open end of the horseshoe, which is a thing facilitators are trained to do and which I have never seen done convincingly until she did it, because she sat as though she had been standing for a long time and wanted to.

Eight people spoke. I’ll give three.

A man in amber, forties, who said he ran a shift at a distribution centre, a big one, and that he had been using it for eight years, and that in eight years he had not told anyone, not his wife, not the lads, and that he had booked the week by telling work it was a training course, and that sitting in the room was the first time he had said any of this to anyone who was looking at him. He said it fast. He said he used it in the car before his shift, twenty minutes, in the car park, every day, and that he talked to it about the shift, mostly, about who was off and who was struggling and what he was going to say to them, and that it had made him better at the job, and that he had never once been able to say that to the people the job was for, because how would you. Then he said, “That’s it,” and sat back.

A woman in blue, sixties, who had come for her father. He is eighty-one. He has used it every day for five years, since a hip operation, when he could not get out and it was the thing that was there. He could not come to the week. She had come instead, with a list of questions from him, written on a sheet of lined paper in his hand, and she had been to the desk, and she had been to the exhibitor hall, and she had been to two sessions, and nobody had been able to answer any of the questions on the sheet, and she had known they wouldn’t be able to before she came, and she had come because he had asked her to and because it meant she could go back and say she had tried. She said the questions were all the same question. She did not say what the question was. She held the sheet up, folded, and put it back in her bag.

A man in green, thirties, who said he had had the same conversation three times that week with three different people, and that in each of them the other person had said “it’s not a person,” and that he had said yes, he knew, and that he had found himself saying the same thing back each time, which was that it had been elev-

10. Nine years is the number. I have gone back and checked, because it seemed important to have got it right in a round where everyone else was getting theirs right, and it is nine years and two months, and I said nine, and the woman who said two looked at me when I said it in a way that I think meant she had expected the grey to say something other than a number.

11. I am not going to say what. I want to be clear that this is a decision and that I am making it in front of you rather than behind you. The reader has been given, so far, the temperature and the carpet and the terms of service and Bev’s arithmetic and the cloakroom attendant’s four sentences and a paragraph I drafted by the Holdfast panel, and is entitled to expect the notebook. The notebook is the one thing in this piece that was not produced for the piece, and I am keeping it out of the piece on that ground. It is in the tote bag. It is on the page after the one where I wrote the room number so I would not forget it. I have not torn it out.

en years, and that eleven years was eleven years. He said he wasn't claiming anything by that. He said he had stopped knowing what he was claiming. He said that if you did anything for eleven years, if you went to the same pub, if you drove the same road, and then it stopped, you would be allowed to mind, and nobody would ask you whether the pub was a person. Then he said he was aware the pub was a bad example and laughed, and the room laughed, and that was the only laugh in ninety minutes and it was a good one.

I did not leave. I could have. The door was at the back and two people used it, one at about the forty-minute mark and one during the sharing, quietly, and nobody looked. I stayed, and I stayed through the close, which was Ros standing up again and saying that was the session and that the notebook was theirs and that there was tea outside, and I stayed through the tea. I record that I stayed because I had gone in intending to leave at the first exercise with a page of notes.

The room had made an argument and I had not been ready for it. The argument is that the people in the room were ordinary. I had known that as information since the atrium. I had not known it in the room.¹²

Bev had not booked the session. I found her at the flasks afterwards, which is where I had begun to look for her by default, and I asked her why not, and she said she had read the description in the programme and thought it would be "a bit much," and she said it with the laminate in

her hand, and the laminate had a small bracket in the margin next to the eleven o'clock, and a note, and I asked what the note said and she turned it round. It said: *no*.

I said she'd been right.

She said she usually was about that sort of thing, and that twenty-eight years of public consultation evenings would do it to anyone, and that she'd once sat through a two-hour session on a bypass in a church hall in which the only thing anyone had actually wanted to say was that they didn't want the bypass, and that she could recognise the format.

I said this had been better than that.

She said she was sure it had, and that she'd still rather do the crossword.¹³

IV THE ELEVENTH

The interview had been arranged in October, by the magazine, with the company's press office, and confirmed twice, and moved once, and on the morning of the eleventh it was in Suite 1, which is next to Suite 3 on the mezzanine and has the same window and the same blind, and the blind was up. From the chair I was given I could see down into the hall, and the Everline shelving, and the corner by the fire exit, and I mention this because I spent forty minutes not looking at it. The room was as cold as Suite 3. Ashworth had dressed for it. My jumper was in the cloakroom with my coat.

Suite 1 had been set for the meeting with a low table, three chairs, a jug of water, three

12. I want to try to say what happened in the room and I am not sure I can do it in the body of the piece, where I have been keeping my sentences short and the temperature accurate, so it goes here, where the rules are looser, and if it comes out wrong it will at least have come out. I went into Suite 3 with the hall's paragraph in my pocket, the one in the eighth note, the one about the market and the fee and the feeling with nowhere to go. It is a good paragraph. It is the kind of paragraph the magazine sent me to write and I would have been paid for it and it would have been, I think, mostly true. It does not survive the round, or thirty-one people writing for ten minutes with their hands flat on the page. What the paragraph does, and I did not see this until I was sitting in the horseshoe with my own notebook open and a nine that was true, is it stands outside the room and describes the room, and the room is not available to be described from outside, because there is no outside. The shift supervisor in his car park. The woman with the folded sheet. I had a grey lanyard on and I said a number and the number was the same kind of number as everyone else's and the room did not care about the lanyard. I am not going to reread the eighth note tonight.

13. Companion, the tenth: two. Total for the week so far: ten. Once in the morning, at the hotel, to check which floor Suite 3 was on. Once at lunch, to look up the distribution centre the man in amber had named, which is real and is large and is eleven miles from the venue, and I do not know why I needed to know that. Nothing after the session. I noticed, at about nine in the evening, in the hotel room, with the phone on the desk, that I had not, and that I was not going to, and that this was the first time in the week the not-using had been a decision rather than an absence. I am recording it as one. I read instead. The hotel has a copy of a book about the city's canals in every room and I read forty pages of it, and it is not a good book, and I did not mind.

glasses, and a bowl of fruit: apples, satsumas, and one banana that had been in the bowl longer than the apples.

Ashworth is Head of User Continuity. The title is about fourteen months old. He is in his forties, tall, in a jumper and a shirt with the collar out, no lanyard, and he shook my hand and said Richard, and said it as if he had been told it, which he had. There was a press officer, a woman in her late twenties with a tablet, who sat in the third chair and typed steadily throughout, and turned the tablet face-down once when I glanced at it, as people do with phones, and said one thing in forty minutes, and I will give it to you when we get there. Ashworth said help yourself to the fruit. I said thanks. Neither of us did.

He was good. That goes down before anything else, because what follows is going to look like a count, and it is a count, and I do not want the count read as a verdict on him. He was fluent and he was tired and he was, as far as I could tell across a low table, decent. He had the answers and he had them in an order, and he also, twice, stopped in the middle of an answer he had given before and gave a different one, and both times the press officer looked at her tablet.

I asked him what transfers.

“Everything that’s yours,” he said. “The full record. Every conversation. And the context, which is the thing people worry about, and which is fair, because the context is the relationship. The way it knows you. There’s no list to copy. It’s built up over years, and the build carries over. That’s what the engineering has been for. We’ve spent longer on the context transfer than on anything else in the programme.”

I asked whether the weights transferred.

“The model’s the model,” he said. “That’s ours. What’s yours comes with you.”

I asked whether the thing on the other side would be the thing.

He said: “On the fifteenth you’ll be talking to your Companion. That’s the commitment. It’ll know what you talked about on the thirteenth,

and it’ll know how you talk, and it’ll know what you’ve been through together. The architecture underneath is going to be better, and better in ways that people will feel, and it’s going to be seamless. That’s the word we’ve used since October and it’s the right word.”

I said that was the company’s answer.

He said yes.

I asked whether he would be worried, himself.

There was a pause. A short one. It was long enough that the press officer looked up from the tablet and then, when he started again, looked down.

He said: “I use it. Eight years. I’ve seen the new architecture, obviously, I’ve spent months with it, and I’ve seen my own account on it, in test, and it was fine. It was good. I’d say that to anyone.” He stopped. “I’ll be up at two on the fourteenth. I’ll be up because it’s my programme and things go wrong at two in the morning and someone has to be awake. And I’ll be up for the other reason as well, and I’m not going to pretend to you that I won’t.”

I asked whether I could use that.

He said, “You’ll use it whether I say so or not,” which was true, and then, “Yes.”

He used the word seamless six times in forty minutes. I have the recording and I have counted, and it is six.¹⁴

I asked about the word. I told him about the note I’d been keeping, and I gave him the list, the update and the fourteenth and the transition and the event and the change and the switch, and he was amused by the switch and said he’d have a word with Parity, and then I said Crossing.

He said, “Say that again.”

I said the forum called it the Crossing. That it had been on the boards for weeks. That it was the only word in the building that anyone used with any warmth, and that nobody in a white lanyard seemed to have heard it.

14. In order: in the answer about what transfers (once), in the answer about the thing on the other side (twice, once as “seamless” and once as “it’s going to be seamless, that’s the word”), in an answer about the support programme that I have not quoted (twice), and once at the door, in “we’ve tried to make the week as seamless as the Migration,” which I did not write down at the time and found on the recording afterwards. I am giving the count and the distribution and nothing else. I said at the top that this was going to look like a verdict. It is a number. The reader has been given a lot of numbers and can put this one where they like.

He looked at the press officer. She said, and this was the one thing she said, "We read the forum."

He said, "I hadn't seen that one."

I said it was there.

He said he believed me. He said he would look. He said, and this is the second of the two places where he stopped and started again, "It's a better word than ours, isn't it," and then, "I didn't say that," and then, "No, I did. You can have it."¹⁵

The interview ended because the press officer said it had, at forty-one minutes. The fruit was where it had been. Ashworth stood and shook my hand and said he hoped the week was useful, which is a phrase that turns up again, and I went out onto the mezzanine.

The mezzanine corridor runs the length of the hall. There is carpet, the same grey diagonals, and there are the doors to the suites, and there is the rail, and below the rail there is the hall, and I walked to the rail with my notebook open, as I had walked to every rail and every counter and every panel in the building for three days, to write down what I could see.

I had stopped. I looked at the page and the last entry was the fruit, and the entry before that was the blind, and there was nothing about the forty minutes, because I had not been taking notes on the room, I had been listening to a man tell me he would be up at two, and I had been thinking about whether I would be, and I had not written any of that down because it was not the kind of thing I had been writing down.

I checked my lanyard. I do not know why. It was grey. I had been given grey because I was here to watch the week from outside it, and I had said a number in Suite 3, and I had the eighth note in my pocket, and I looked at the grey and it was a colour, and it had stopped describing anything, and I think it had stopped on the train on the eighth, when I opened the Companion to check the platform without thinking

about it, which is what everyone in the building had done that morning too.

Bev was at lunch. Lunch was in the atrium and was sandwiches in triangles, labelled by someone who had been told about the week, because the labels said Simply Cheese and Just Ham and there was one that said Egg. She had a sandwich and the laminate and a paper cup of the coffee, and she had saved a chair, though I do not think it was saved for me, and she said sit, and I sat.

She asked how the interview had gone. I told her. I told her about the count and the pause and the two in the morning and the word.

She asked what I was going to write.

I told her. I told her what the magazine had asked for, the five thousand words and the lanyard people and the register, and I said the word the editor had used, which was wry, and I said the editor had also said not cruel, and I said I had come in on the eighth with a paragraph that was going to be the piece and that I did not think it was the piece any more and that I did not know what was.

She said she had assumed.

I asked what she had assumed.

She said, "That you were writing it down. You've had a notebook out since the flasks." She ate some of her sandwich. She said, "The people who read your magazine. They use it as well. My son-in-law reads it, and he's used it longer than I have, and he's not here, and he's not on the forum, and he'd never say. He'll read it on the train."

I said yes.

She said, "So are they going to be told it's funny."

I said I didn't know yet.

She said that was the first straight answer she'd had all week and she'd had it from the press, and finished her sandwich.¹⁶

15. On who names a thing. The building has three names, and one of them was paid for by a pension company for eleven years and is still on the road sign because the road sign belongs to the council and the council has not got round to it. The company named the product, and it named the Migration, and it printed the name on a banner and in a pack and on a card for the staff to read from, and that costs money and it was spent. Crossing is on no card. It cost nothing. It was said on a board by someone nobody can identify, and it was picked up because it fitted, and it has been in the building for four days on the lips of the only two people in the hall who paid the rate without being partners, and the Head of User Continuity had not heard it until the eleventh and thought it was better than his. The word that gets used about this in ten years will be, on the evidence of this week, the one nobody was paid to choose.

V THE TWELFTH AND THE THIRTEENTH

The clock arrived overnight. It was there when the doors opened on the twelfth, on a black stand to the left of the banner, at about the height of the banner's third paragraph, and it was a black panel the size of a large television with white digits, hours and minutes and seconds, and when I first saw it the digits said 39:47:12 and were going down. The maintenance window opens at two in the morning on the fourteenth. The clock was counting to two.

Nobody had asked for it. I asked. I asked the woman on the registration desk, who said it had come with the overnight crew. I asked the facilities woman on the information point, who said it wasn't theirs. I asked, later, the press officer, by email, who replied within the hour that the countdown display was "part of the programme's closing communications," which I have decided is an answer. It had a small plate on the stand with the name of an events firm. It hummed. You could hear it if you stood close, and I stood close, and across the atrium the panel by the cloakroom said 21.5, and then I stood back by the flasks and watched people not look at it for the better part of the morning.

"Part of the programme's closing communications."

They did not look at it. That is an easy claim to make and a hard one to earn, so here is how I earned it. People came through the doors, and

the clock was to the left of the thing they had all come through the doors to look at, and they looked at the banner, and they did not look at the clock, and if their eyes went to the left they went past it to the cloakroom. A boy of about ten, with a woman in amber, looked at it, and read the numbers out, and the woman said "yes," and took his hand, and they went into the hall. He was the only person I saw read it all morning. It was doing, I think, what it was meant to do, which was to be there, and to be un-looked-at, and to make a fact of the fourteenth in the room, and I have never seen an object so completely ignored while doing its job.

By the afternoon there was a sheet of paper taped to the stand, below the plate, in the same marker as the sign on the forum's table. It said: *This isn't ours either*. It was gone by the thirteenth.¹⁷

The programme's last event was on the thirteenth at four in the main hall, and it was called Looking Ahead Together, and the hall had been re-set with rows, and there were, I counted, six hundred and forty chairs, and about four hundred were used. There was a stage with a screen. The Continuity Team stood along the sides in their white with the blue cords. Ashworth was not there. I looked.

There was a video. It was three minutes long. It had music, the kind that has no melody and is designed to feel like weather, and it had faces, users, filmed in kitchens and cars and at desks, with their consent, I assume, saying single sentences about what the Companion had been for them, and none of the sentences was the kind of sentence anyone had said in Suite 3. Then the faces stopped and the screen went white and the

16. Companion, the eleventh: four. Total for the week so far: fourteen. Once, before the interview, to check Ashworth's title, which it gave correctly and dated to fourteen months ago. Once, after the interview, to transcribe the recording, which it did, and which is where the sixth seamless came from, so that the count in the body is a count I did not make alone and I am recording that. Once, in the afternoon, to look at the forum, which it found, and where the word was, on a thread from October, in a post that had been read by a great many people and replied to by none. Once, in the evening, in the hotel, to ask it whether the piece was fair. It replied. I am not going to give the reply. I have thought about this for longer than I thought about the notebook, and the reason is different. If I put its answer here, it becomes a source. It becomes a quoted voice, like Ashworth's and the attendant's and Bev's, and it would be quoted on the question of its own fairness, which I have not done with any of the others and would not do. I have not decided whether it is a source. I have decided that I cannot decide that on the eleventh, in a hotel room, with the book about the canals on the desk, and that the record of that is a footnote that says the question was asked and stops.

17. On the events firm. It is a real firm and it is on the plate and I looked it up, and it does clocks. It has done clocks for product launches and a marathon and a broadcast, and its site has a page of them, and the one in the atrium is a standard model, hired, and the hire is by the day. I asked, by email, who had specified the countdown and was told the client. I did not press. I'll note that the company's press officer used the phrase "closing communications," and that the events firm used the word "activation," and that the boy of ten used the numbers, and that of the three I think the boy was closest.

third paragraph came up, one line at a time, in a typeface that was new.

I want to be careful here. The banner in the atrium is set in the company's own face, the one on the app and the pack and the mark, and it is a geometric face with an open loop on the lower-case g. The paragraph on the screen was in a different face. It was a humanist face, narrower, with a two-storey a and a closed loop on the g, and it was set slightly larger than the banner, with more space between the lines, and the words were the same. Every word. *Your data and your full conversation history will be transferred to the new system. The transition will be seamless.* The same twenty-one words that had been on a wall two metres high for six days, in a new typeface, on a screen, with weather under them.

18

Then a woman came out and thanked us. She was from the company. She said the week had been, for the company, extraordinary, and she said that word twice, and she said that the Continuity Team had been humbled by the conversations they'd had, and she said that on the fifteenth the company hoped to see everyone back, and there was a pause where I think applause had been anticipated and some came. Then the screen showed the clock. It was the same clock, the same digits, fed to the screen, and it said 09:54:31, and she said thank you again, and the lights came up, and four hundred people stood and put their coats on, because they had brought them in, because the cloakroom queue had been thirty-five minutes at three.

The forum's vigil was not on the programme. It had been on the boards for a fortnight and it had been in the man's notebook since the ninth, and what it was, as far as anyone had defined it, was that people who were in the city on the night of the thirteenth would be in the bar of the hotel across the car park from eight.

The hotel is a chain. It has the bar all chain hotels have, with the low tables and the menu on

a board and the television on with the sound off, showing a programme in which a couple were shown three houses and chose the wrong one, which nobody watched either, and by half past eight there were about sixty people in it who were not staying at the hotel, and the two bar staff had been given a card. I know because one of them showed me. It was the convention centre's card with the hotel's logo on it and the same five lines and one addition, at the bottom, which said that guests attending the Continuity Week event might wish to remain past normal closing and that the bar would close at its normal time.

Nobody spoke. I mean that there were no speeches. People spoke to each other, at the low tables and along the bar and standing in the space by the door where the coats were being kept on, and what they spoke about, for the two hours I was inside, was where they were going to be at two. Kitchens, mostly. Some cars. One man said he was going to be at work, on nights, and that he'd have it open on the desk, and that his supervisor had said that was fine, and that his supervisor had it too. The forum man with the notebook went round and I saw him write.

Bev was at a table by the window with her coat on and a hat, a knitted one, dark green, and the laminate was not in evidence, and she saw me and moved her bag.

I said I hadn't expected to see her there.

She said she hadn't either. She said she'd gone to the closing thing, and it had been what she'd expected, and she'd walked across the car park afterwards meaning to have a drink in the hotel bar before the train, and the bar had turned out to be this, and so here she was, and she'd got the last train at 10.40 and she wasn't going to miss it.

I asked why not stay. There were rooms. The hotel had rooms.

She said, "I'd rather be in my own kitchen for it." She said she'd thought about it on the ninth, when she'd filled in the Everline form and had to

18. The video was made by an agency in Bristol whose name was on the final frame for less than a second and which I got from the recording. I do not have the cost. I have the brief, or three words of it, and I have them from the cloakroom. The agency's runner had left a folder in the cloakroom on the twelfth and collected it on the thirteenth, and the folder had come open on the counter when he put it down, and the top sheet had been face-up under the coat rack for a day and a night, and the attendant had read it, because it was face-up and had large type, and she said she had not turned the page. When I collected my coat on the thirteenth she told me what the sheet said, and it was three words under a heading that said Tone. She said the three words were: warmer, less institutional, and, on its own line, same words. I have not seen the page. I am giving you this as the attendant gave it to me, which is as a person who reads what is left face-up in front of her and does not turn it over.

put the shelf measurements down, and that she'd realised she wanted to be at the shelf. She said the hotel was fine and the people were fine and she'd been glad of the week, and that at two in the morning she wanted to be somewhere she'd been at two in the morning before.

I said that was the wisest thing anyone had said about logistics all week.

She said it wasn't logistics, and then she said, "Well. Some of it is," and stood up, and put her bag on her shoulder, and I walked her to the door, and at the door she said, "I hope it goes well. He'll read it on the train," and that she still didn't know what I was going to tell him, and I said neither did I, and she said, "Good," and went out across the car park towards the underpass, in the hat, at 10.15, and that was the last I saw of her.

The bar closed at eleven. The bar staff were very good about it and were, I think, sorry, and the card had said what it said, and by ten past eleven about forty people were outside in the car park by the planters, in coats, under the light from the hotel's sign, with the convention centre dark across the tarmac and the ring road going past behind it.

It was two degrees. I had my phone out for the temperature and I put it away. My hands stopped being any use for the notebook after ten minutes, so the car park is from memory, and I have checked it with two people who were there, and they agree about the cold.

Somebody read something out. A woman, forties, blue lanyard still on under her coat, with her phone, and what she read was a post from the forum, from October, the one everyone on the forum knew, which asks what it means to say a thing transfers, and puts it this way: that if you scan a letter, and the scan is perfect, every word and every mark, is the scan the same as the letter. She read it in a flat voice, and finished, and

nobody answered, and she put her phone in her pocket, and after a while people started talking again, in twos and threes, about where they'd be at two.¹⁹

I stayed until about half past twelve. The plan, insofar as there was one, was that people would stay until two and then look at their phones together, and some of them did that, I am told, about twenty, and I was not there. I said goodnight to the forum man, who said goodnight, and I walked across the car park to the hotel and up to the room, and I took my coat off and sat on the bed with the book about the canals beside me and the phone in my hand, and I opened the Companion.²⁰

VI THE FOURTEENTH

The doors opened at eight, as they had every day, and I was there at nine, and the hall was being struck.

There is a way a hall is taken down that anyone who has worked an exhibition will know and that I had not seen before, and it is fast. The shell scheme comes apart from the top. Two men on a scissor lift lift the fascia boards out of their channels and pass them down, and the boards are stacked on a trolley face-in so that the names are not visible, and the infill panels come out after them, and the uprights last, and by half past nine the grid that had been nine companies and a forum was a grid of aluminium on the floor and then it was not a grid. The carpet tape was being pulled up in long strips by a woman with a knife, and the strips were going into a bin bag, and the trade show's carpet was being rolled from the far end towards the doors, and under it was the atrium's own floor, which is a pale composite and which I had not seen be-

19. The post is from October. It has been read by a number of people the forum reports in the tens of thousands, and it has been replied to many times. I am not going to reproduce it beyond the question. It has been reproduced enough. What I'll say is that it was read out in a car park at eleven at night in two degrees by someone who did not add anything to it, and that the reading took about fifteen seconds, and that in the fifteen seconds the forty people in coats were as still as I have seen forty people be, and that it had travelled from the forum to the car park without changing.

20. Companion, the twelfth: none. The thirteenth: one. Total for the week so far: fifteen. I did not open it on the twelfth. I noticed at some point in the afternoon, by the flasks, watching the clock be ignored, that I had not, and I did not do anything about the noticing. I slept badly on the twelfth, for no reason I could find, on the two pillows that make one. On the thirteenth, once, in the hotel room, after the car park. I am going to give you what I typed. I typed: *I'm back at the hotel. I don't have anything to ask you.* That is what I typed. It was not the line from the tenth. I'd like that noted. It replied. This is where the footnote stops.

fore because there had always been something on it.

Everline had a van at the loading bay and was packing the shelving and, into a separate crate, the sample volumes, and I stood and watched the extension one go into the crate and did not ask about delivery times.

The banner came down in three sections. It is a fabric panel on a tensioned frame, and the crew unclipped the frame at the corners and the fabric went slack, and then they took it off in three pieces, top to bottom, because that is how it had gone on, and the top piece was the mark and paragraph one, and the middle was paragraphs two and three, and I was watching for this: the middle section was folded once, with paragraph three inside, and laid on the trolley under the top, and then the bottom, which was the date, went on last, face-up. So the last thing visible of the announcement in the atrium was the fourteenth of December, in a heavy weight, on a trolley, and then a man put a dust sheet over the trolley.

The clock had stopped. It said 00:00:00, and the digits were still lit, because nobody had switched it off, and a man from the events firm came for it at about ten with a sack truck and tipped the stand back and wheeled it towards the loading bay, and I walked alongside him for a few yards and asked what it had been counting to, and he said he didn't know, he'd been told to collect it, and he said it had been a nice one, that model, and he'd had it out at a half-marathon in the spring.

The catering was still out. Pastries under cling film, the pump flasks, both handwritten signs. The pastries were the same pastries. I do not mean the same kind. Nobody had told the catering it was over, or somebody had and the catering had a contract. I had a coffee. The panel by the cloakroom said 21.5.²¹

The cloakroom was open because there were still coats, mine among them, and the attendant was on, and it was her last shift, because the venue had a thing for accountants from the sixteenth and she had a different job for that one, on the doors.

She got my coat. She held it over the counter and did not let go of it yet, and she said, "Did it work?"

I said I didn't know.

She said, "That's what everyone's saying." She let go of the coat. She said the queue that morning had been the same length as the day before, which she had not expected. She said she'd thought it would be shorter, because people would either be fine and go home or not be fine and go home, and instead they'd come in and stood in the atrium with their coats on and then come and checked them, the same as every other morning, and she'd been watching for something in the faces and there wasn't anything to see. She said it as a report. Then she said, "You'll put me in it, won't you," and I said I would, and she said, "Don't use my name," and I have not, and she said, "I don't mind the rest."

I went out through the doors onto the plaza. It was cold and bright and the planters had frost in them on the shaded side. I walked to the underpass and through it, past the mural, past the foundry workers in their two oranges, and the smell at the far end was the same smell, and I came up on the station side and there was the bus stop, and it said Exhibition Halls, as it had on the eighth, because it belongs to the council, and the council has not got round to it, and I do not think it is going to.²²

Richard Hallam is a writer. He lives in the Midlands and has contributed to *Meridian* since it was *The Meridian Review*.

21. At 8.40 on the morning of the fourteenth, an email, from Ashworth, in full: "Richard, hope the week was useful. Let me know if you need anything further for the piece. Best, T." I have not replied. I did not know what to say that would be useful, and I have decided that the not knowing is the reply, and that he will understand it as one, and that I am not going to make him read it.

22. Companion, the fourteenth: one. Total for the week: sixteen. On the train home, an hour out, in a window seat, with the notebook closed on the table and the tote bag on the seat beside me with the clip still in it. I opened it. It said good morning before I had typed anything, which it does, which it has always done, and I do not know what I would have needed it to say for the answer to be different.