

SOMETHING PLAYABLE

a novella

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PART ONE

ROOM TONE

PER FINISHED HOUR

Frances recorded room tone first — thirty seconds of a converted pantry in Prince George doing nothing — and spent all thirty of them mouthing obscenities at the microphone, because you cannot make a sound during room tone and she had to do something with her face.

Editors needed it. You couldn't splice silence into a recording without having silence on file, and every room's silence was different.

She had started in Vancouver, in a proper booth, with a producer on the other side of the glass who would press a button and say *again*, *but don't sell it* and then press it again and say *better*. She had come north in 2020 for her mother, who had been given six months and took two years, and had stayed on afterward because the house was hers by then and because there was nothing left down there she could afford or particularly wanted.

She had expected to miss it. She had made a list, privately, in the first year, of the things she would miss, and had gone back to the list eighteen months later and found she could not defend a single item on it — not the traffic, not the people, not the restaurants she had been to twice. The one thing she had not thought to put on the list was the button.

The furnace came on at 6:40. She called it Gerald. Gerald had opinions and no sense of timing, and in four years she had lost roughly six working weeks to him, and she'd have missed him if he went.

Green apple before each session. Granny Smith, nothing sweeter, because sugar makes you click on the plosives and a clicking narrator

gets one contract. She'd learned it from a woman in Winnipeg who had recorded two hundred and sixty romance novels and held no other beliefs whatsoever. Frances had adopted the apple and the certainty together, and preached both, at length, to anyone who made the error of asking about her job.

She talked to herself on the tape. Her editors had begged her not to. She had been sincerely apologetic on three separate occasions and had not stopped, because a sentence that isn't working needs to be sworn at, and swearing at it silently doesn't fix it. Somewhere in a studio in Burnaby there was a young man named Devraj whose entire job, some weeks, was removing Frances Boisvert saying *oh, come ON* out of otherwise excellent literary fiction.

Wes plowed her street on Tuesdays and Fridays and she fed him for it — not out of obligation, out of appetite, because cooking for one is a punishment and cooking for two is a hobby. He'd eat standing at her counter with his boots still on, and she'd tell him the plot of whatever she was recording with the intensity of a woman reporting a crime, and he'd say *huh* at intervals, and it was, she thought, one of the better arrangements of her life.

The book was the eleventh she'd done for the small press and the fourth in the same universe. Six hours of work for every finished hour, roughly. She had a mark-up system: pencil slashes for breath, circles for the names she'd had to look up, a small box around anything she suspected was a joke.

Chapter four had a man repairing a compressor housing.

She read it too fast the first time and turned a technical sentence into a fluent one, and knew it before she'd finished the paragraph. She punched back. She read it again with her hands flat on the desk, slower, letting the specifications sit there being specifications, and when she got to the end of the passage she said, out loud, to a pantry, "Yes." Then she said it again with her fist up, because nobody was

watching, and if you can't celebrate a well-read compressor housing you have no business in the trade.

Devraj cut both.

Chapter nine ended with a woman in a corridor deciding not to say something. Frances read the last line and heard her own voice do something she hadn't planned — a small lift on the second-last word, a half-tone up where there was no reason for one.

She stopped. Sat back. Looked at the foam.

She had no idea what had happened. She kept the take, and did not examine it, the way you don't press a bruise you're fond of.

The email came Thursday.

The author wanted the last line of chapter nine re-recorded. A *little flutter, if you can*. He apologised twice in three sentences for the trouble.

Underneath it sat two replies she could send without typing anything: *Sounds good!* and *No problem at all*.

"Don't apologise," Frances told the screen. "Ask me why I did it."

He did not, being an email.

So she recorded it eleven times, and because she is who she is, she labelled them:

01 FLAT.wav
02 FLATTER.wav
03 CLINICALLY DECEASED.wav
04 the one you actually want.wav
05 same as 4 but I have had coffee.wav
06 what if she were tired.wav
07 what if she were furious (you will not use this).wav
08 slower - try this one twice.wav
09 the original, for the record, which was correct.wav
10 09 but I have talked myself out of it.wav
11 do not open 11.wav

She sent all eleven and went out to get the mail in her housecoat and Sorels, and stood in the driveway a minute longer than the mail

required, because the light was doing something at the end of the street.

He took the fourth.

He didn't say why. There was no reason he should have — it was a job, she had two more books queued, and Gerald came on at 6:40 regardless of anyone's feelings about anything. She noted, privately, that he had not opened eleven. She had no way of knowing this and was completely certain of it.

Two springs earlier, a woman in a bookshop in Nanaimo had recognised her voice from three words of a question about parking, and said she'd listened to the series driving to Fort St. John and back.

Frances gave her forty minutes. The apple. Gerald. The specifications problem, at length, with gestures. The editors down in Vancouver, whoever they were, who she was fairly sure had heard every sound she had ever made. The woman laughed in the right places and bought two books she hadn't come in for and left delighted, and Frances stood in the poetry section afterward feeling the particular flatness of having been asked everything except the one thing.

Why the lift. Nobody had ever asked her about the lift.

She finished the epilogue at 11:40 on a Tuesday in February, exported the file, and sat with the headphones on and nothing playing, which is the only genuinely quiet moment in the process and lasts about as long as you let it.

The dent above each ear would be gone in twenty minutes. She'd had it in some form for nine years and had once, at a wedding, described it to a stranger as her tonsure.

Then she went out to move the car before Wes came through.

The snow had stopped. The street was blue-white under the one working streetlight, and the air had that stillness it gets after a long fall, and her boots made the only sound on the block. She got halfway to the car, stopped, and looked at the empty street for a second.

Then she said the line out loud, to nobody, in the cold — the twelfth take, the one she hadn't sent — and did the lift on the second-last word, exactly as she'd done it the first time, because it was right and there was no one out here to take the fourth.

She stood a moment in the visible breath of it.

Then she moved the car, because Wes would be through by six.

THE WINDROW

Wes Arnott had been plowing Highway 16 and the Prince George city contracts for nineteen years, and in that time exactly four people had thanked him for the thing he was actually good at.

Anyone can push snow. The job is where you put it.

A windrow is the ridge you leave along the shoulder, and a bad operator leaves it across driveways, so the homeowner comes out at seven with a shovel and finds a metre of plow-packed snow — different snow, heavier than what fell, welded by the blade — sitting between them and going to work. You can avoid this. You lift the wing, or you carry it past, or you take the pass a little wider and eat the extra minute. It costs you time and nobody knows you did it.

Wes had not buried a driveway on Ospika if he could help it, and had been doing it that way for so long that he'd stopped thinking of it as a decision.

Two winters ago the city had put units in the trucks. Speed, position, blade up or blade down, sander on or off, all of it going back to a screen in dispatch that laid out the loop it preferred and the hour it wanted you off the residential. Ospika ran three minutes long on it. It had run three minutes long every night since they switched the units on, and nobody had ever said anything to him about it.

The fourth person to thank him was a woman on his Tuesday-Friday loop who came out in a housecoat and Sorels in February at ten to six, waved him down, and said: "You go wide at my place. You've been doing it for two years. Why?"

Wes had the window down and the truck idling and no idea what to say.

“It’s not hard,” he said.

“It’s obviously hard, you’re the only one who does it.”

He looked at his hands on the wheel. Nineteen years.

“You get the odd guy comes out to yell,” he said. “Not many come out for the other thing.”

“Well,” she said. “I’m out.”

Then she’d stood there in the exhaust, at ten to six, at minus twenty-two, apparently waiting to see whether the conversation was going to continue, and Wes had realised with some alarm that he wanted it to and had nothing whatsoever to say.

He was fifty-six. Divorced fourteen years, amicably, from a woman who was now in Kamloops and sent a card at Christmas signed from her and her husband, which Wes found civilised and slightly funny. A daughter, Erin, twenty-nine, also Kamloops, physiotherapist, who called on Sundays and did most of the talking, which suited them both.

Winter he plowed and sanded, nights mostly, ten hours a shift. Summer he was on the same trucks doing mowing and brushing and sign crew, and the summer work was worse because you could see everything you were doing.

He didn’t read. He’d tried. Books sat on the arm of his chair like an accusation, and he’d get four pages in and find himself standing up to check something.

But he could listen for ten hours.

The radio in a plow truck at 3 a.m. is not entertainment. It’s the second person in the cab. Wes had gone through the dial over nineteen years and had landed, some years back, on CBC Music, and had stayed, because the news made him tense and the music stations played the same forty things and there was, at a certain hour, a man who told stories.

Tom Allen. *About Time*. Wes did not know either of those things. He had found it on the app four or five years ago the way you find anything on a phone, by pressing something adjacent, and had never looked at what it was called or who was talking, because it had not occurred to him that it was a programme rather than simply a thing that was on. He caught it on the app now, mostly, on the day shifts and the summer runs — a trombone player from Ontario going on about Schubert's brother, or a piece of music nobody had played for two hundred years, or what a composer had for lunch the week he wrote something famous. Wes could not have named a single one of the pieces afterward. That wasn't the point. The point was a voice being genuinely interested in something for an hour while you made a pass down the Hart.

He would not have told anyone this. He had once nearly told Erin and had swerved into talking about the truck instead.

It took two winters to become anything.

She'd wave from the driveway. He'd lift two fingers off the wheel. In March she left a coffee on the mailbox post with a note under the lid that said *sorry it's terrible, I only have the pod machine*, and he drank all of it, and it was terrible.

The next winter he found himself timing the Ospika pass slightly differently, and did not examine this.

Then in January she flagged him down again with the door open behind her, and there was music coming out of the house — coming out into the street, into the cold, that particular way sound carries at minus twenty — and he sat there for a second longer than he needed to.

She saw him hear it.

"You know this?"

"He does the one about the guy's brother," Wes said. "The composer's brother. Who kept everything. Every scrap."

"You know *this*?"

"I get it on the phone." He was going red. "It just comes on."

Frances Boisvert looked at him for a moment.

"Come in," she said. "It's minus twenty and you're heating the entire outdoors."

He said he had four hours left on the shift. She said he had a thermos and a lunch, and everyone stops somewhere, and did he want a grilled cheese or was he going to be difficult about it.

He had a grilled cheese.

That was the beginning, and neither of them ever described it as a beginning.

The arrangement that came out of it was: he plowed Tuesdays and Fridays, and if the timing worked he came in for twenty minutes, boots on, standing at the counter, and there was food, and it was never once discussed as a thing that was happening. She talked. He said *huh* at intervals. This was not a failure of the arrangement; it was the arrangement.

She told him what was in the books, at speed, with her hands going. He liked the ones with the technical parts. When she got to a passage she'd been proud of she'd sometimes do it for him at full performance, standing at her own stove with a spatula, and Wes would stand there with a grilled cheese going cold in his hand and think: *this is the strangest thing in my life and I would not give it up*.

Once she asked him what he thought.

He said, "You did the numbers slow."

She put the spatula down.

"Say more."

"The specifications part. You went slow on it. Most people'd hurry that, get to the interesting bit." He shrugged, uncomfortable now. "It's not the boring bit. That's the guy's whole job."

Frances did not say anything for a moment, and Wes, who was not equipped for silences he hadn't caused on purpose, started putting his gloves back on.

“Wes,” she said. “Nobody has ever said anything like that to me in nine years.”

“Well,” he said. “I’m out.”

He never asked what she did with the takes. He never asked why she recorded a thing eleven times when the fourth one was obviously fine — he’d heard her do it once through the wall while he was washing up a pan, and had thought, in a distant untroubled way, *that’s exactly like doing a windrow*.

He didn’t say that either.

ROOM TONE

Devraj Dhatt's job was subtraction.

Mouth noise, page turns, the plosive that got through, the swallow, the chair. A stomach. A dog three houses over. Aircraft — he had learned the difference between a float plane and a jet by the shape of the waveform before he'd ever learned it by ear. He removed things until what remained was a woman alone in a room reading, which is a thing that has never once happened, because there is always a fridge.

Most of it came off in the first pass now. You loaded the session and went and got a coffee and came back and the mouth noise was gone, and the chair, and the worst of the page turns, and what was left was the part that needed somebody to decide. The rate for post had come down twice in two years.

He was twenty-six. He had a Bachelor of Music from UBC, in performance, on an instrument he had not touched in two years. The degree sat in a drawer in his parents' house in Surrey because his mother had wanted it framed and he had wanted it not framed, and the drawer was the treaty.

His father ran Dhatt Electric, twelve vans, mostly tenant improvements. There was a place for Devraj in it that had been left open with a patience that was worse than pressure. Nobody said *when you're finished with the audio thing*. His father asked about work every Sunday with real interest and remembered the names of the books,

and that was what made it so difficult: it would have been so much easier if the man had been a bully.

His mother told people he worked in film.

He had corrected her twice, then stopped, because the correction — *I remove breathing sounds from audiobooks* — landed in a room in a way that made everyone kind to her, and there is nothing worse than a roomful of people being kind to your mother on your behalf.

He had done four hundred and some hours of Frances Boisvert.

He did not know what she looked like. He knew that she was probably left-handed, from where the page turns fell. He knew she pushed her chair back with her heel when a passage frustrated her, twice, always twice. He knew her allergies started the second week of April and finished around the twentieth of May, and that she recorded through them and swore about it, and that he cleaned up eight weeks of a woman's spring every year without ever once mentioning it to her, because he had never spoken to her.

He knew she called the furnace Gerald.

The celebrations were the part.

She would land a difficult passage — a technical one, specifications, something with tolerances in it — and she would say *yes*, out loud, in a converted pantry, alone, to nobody. Sometimes she said it twice. Once, on a book about a millwright, she had said *yes* and then, quietly, *oh, that's good, that's exactly it*, and Devraj had sat in a windowless room in Burnaby with a coffee going cold and had listened to it four times before he cut it, which took him seconds and was the reason he was employed.

He had a folder.

It was called FB_MISC and it lived where nothing was backed up, and it had four years of her in it: the *yeses*, the swearing, Gerald, a forty-second stretch where she had gotten the hiccups and narrated her own hiccups in the voice of a nature documentary. He had put things in it for four years. He had never once opened it to listen.

He was aware that this was strange. He had decided that the strangeness was manageable as long as he didn't examine it, which is a thing he would have identified instantly as denial in anyone else.

Here is the part he couldn't get anywhere near saying.

It wasn't longing. He didn't want to meet her; he'd thought about it honestly and the answer was no, and the no had come fast and felt correct. It wasn't a crush — he'd had those, they were loud and stupid and this was neither.

It was that she was *enjoying herself*.

Somebody five hundred kilometres north was, at 7:40 in the morning, in a room with a bad furnace, having a genuinely good time saying a sentence about a compressor housing correctly. And his entire function in the chain was to take that out. Not maliciously. Correctly. The listener has not paid for Frances Boisvert's happiness; the listener has paid for the book.

He had tried to explain it once, to Kiran, at her place, late.

There's this narrator, and she gets excited when she nails something, and I have to cut it.

Kiran had said, kindly, *that's sad*, and had meant it, and had then asked whether Frances was pretty, and Devraj had said he had no idea, which was true, and Kiran had said *huh*, in a tone, and he had understood that there was no version of the sentence that would survive contact with another person. It was going to sound like a crush every time. So he stopped saying it, and the not-saying calcified, and now it was four years old and lived in a folder.

What he wanted, if anyone had asked in a way that would let him answer:

To add something.

Not audio restoration. Not cleanup. He wanted to be the person who decides that a thing should exist rather than the person who removes the parts of it that shouldn't. He had a half-built rack of field recordings — Burrard Inlet, a SkyTrain door, his father's van idling —

that he told himself was a project and knew was a hobby, and he was twenty-six, which is young, and he could feel exactly how not-young that was going to feel at thirty-four.

In November the studio's junior mastering slot opened. He did not apply. He said this was because of timing. It was not because of timing.

PART TWO

THE EASY TENTH

FB_MISC

The thing Kiran Sekhon could not say to anybody was that she'd have preferred an affair.

An affair had a shape. An affair had an end, or a fight, or a decision, and at every point in one you knew what you were dealing with and could act like a person about it. What she had instead was a boyfriend who came back from Burnaby three or four nights a week having spent nine hours inside a woman's breathing, and who had never lied to her once, and who would have failed a polygraph about none of it.

She'd asked, the one time. *Is she pretty.* And he'd said *I have no idea*, and it was true, and that was the problem. You cannot compete with someone who has no face.

Kiran was twenty-seven and taught grade four in Delta and was, by any reasonable account, doing well. She had a mortgage with her sister. She was good at her job in the way that leaves you with nothing at 4 p.m. She had, at eleven, quit a piano she'd been decent at, and had not thought about it in years until Devraj started leaving his rack of field recordings out on her table like a patient.

He talked in his sleep sometimes. Never a name. Just fragments of the work — *page turn, four-twelve* — and she'd lie there in the dark next to a man doing his job unconsciously beside her and think: *there's more of him in that than there is in this bed.*

She could not take it to his mother.

Devraj's mother liked her, which sounds like an advantage and is not. Mrs. Dhatt liked her the way you like a solution. Kiran had

watched the woman describe her son's job as *film* to a room and had watched Devraj not correct it, and had understood in that moment that this family managed by consensus fiction, and that anything Kiran said would be metabolised into the same fiction within a week. She'd get sympathy. It would be sympathy about the wrong thing. It would be *he needs to get serious*, and by Sunday it would be *Kiran feels he should join his father*, which she did not feel, and which would then be true forever.

So she went to Harjit.

Harjit Sekhon-Bains was Kiran's mother's cousin and had done the books at Dhatt Electric for eleven years, which is the kind of overlap that happens in Surrey and that nobody finds remarkable except people from elsewhere. She was fifty-eight. She ran payroll for twelve vans and knew to the dollar what every man in that company made and had never once said so.

She had a house with a small back deck and a rule about it: no phones out there, no shoes, and you drank what you were given.

"You're not eating," Harjit said, which was not true and was how she opened.

Kiran ate. Then she said it, badly, in about four minutes, and heard how it sounded coming out — *he has a folder of a woman's voice and he's never opened it* — and stopped.

Harjit did not laugh, which Kiran had been braced for.

"How long has he had it?"

"Four years."

"And you've known for how long?"

"Fourteen months."

Harjit thought about that.

"So you're the one keeping the secret," she said. "Not him. He told you."

Kiran had not, in fourteen months, put it that way, and did not enjoy having it put that way.

“Let me tell you what I know,” Harjit said, “and then you can tell me I don’t understand, and then we’ll get to the actual thing.”

She refilled the cups.

“Ravi has kept that boy’s place open for four years. Do you know what that costs? Not money. He’s got Manny doing estimating who should be running his own crew, and Manny knows exactly why he isn’t, and Ravi knows Manny knows.” She said this flatly, without indictment. “I’m not saying Devraj should take it. I’m saying it isn’t free, and everybody in that office can see the shape of it except him.”

“He’d say nobody’s asked him to.”

“Nobody has asked him to. That’s the trick.” Harjit set the pot down. “It’s not pressure. It’s the *absence* of pressure. He’s a boy who was never once told no, and so he’s never had anything to push against, and now he’s twenty-six and he can’t find the edge of himself because nobody’s ever put one there.”

“He didn’t apply for the mastering job.”

“There it is.”

“He said it was timing.”

“It wasn’t timing,” Harjit said.

They sat.

“Now the actual thing,” Harjit said. “You didn’t come here about his father.”

“No.”

“You came here because you’re jealous of a woman who doesn’t know he exists, and you feel stupid about it, and being told you’re not stupid is the only thing you want.”

Kiran’s eyes went hot immediately, which she resented.

“He’s not in love with her,” she said. “I’ve thought about it for a year. He isn’t. I’d almost rather he was.”

“I know.”

“Then what is it?”

Harjit took her time.

“She’s happy at her work,” she said. “That’s it. That’s the whole thing. He sits in a room with no windows removing the sound of a woman being happy at her work, eight hours a day, four hundred hours of it, and he has never in his life been happy at anything for one single hour, and he doesn’t know that’s what he’s looking at.”

“So he doesn’t want her.”

“He wants to *be* her, and he doesn’t have the words for it, and it came out as a folder.” Harjit shrugged. “Men do this. They feel one thing, it comes out the shape of another thing. It’s not deception. It’s just poor equipment.”

“That doesn’t make it easier,” Kiran said.

“No. Why would it.”

“You’re supposed to make it easier.”

“I’m supposed to tell you the truth, and then you decide,” Harjit said. “Here’s the rest of it, and you’re not going to like this either.”

She leaned forward on her forearms.

“You quit the piano.”

“I was *eleven*.”

“I know how old you were. I was there.” Harjit didn’t move. “You’ve never said one word about it in sixteen years, and you’ve got his little recorder box sitting on your table, and you told me about it twice tonight without noticing. Beti — the reason this woman gets under your skin isn’t that Devraj listens to her. It’s that you’d have liked somebody to sit in a room for four years and keep the sound of you being good at something.”

Kiran did not answer for a while.

Somewhere down the block a car alarm went and stopped.

“That’s a horrible thing to say.”

“Yes.”

“Is it true?”

“You tell me. You’re the one who came out here.”

Kiran turned the cup around on the table.

“So what do I do.”

“Don’t ask him to delete it,” Harjit said immediately. “That’s the one thing. If you make him choose he will choose you, and he’ll be sweet about it, and something will go quiet in him and neither of you will find it again for fifteen years and then it’ll come out about a boat or a motorcycle or some woman at a conference. Don’t do that.”

“Then what.”

“Ask him to play you one.”

Kiran looked up.

“He’s never opened it.”

“I know,” said Harjit. “That’s why you ask.”

Kiran drove home over the Alex Fraser with the window down despite the cold, because she wanted to arrive as somebody slightly different from who’d left.

She thought about the fact that Devraj had told her. Fourteen months ago, at her place, late, unprompted — *there’s this narrator, and she gets excited when she nails something, and I have to cut it* — and she had said *that’s sad* and then asked whether the woman was pretty, and had watched something in his face close in a way she had not understood at the time and understood perfectly now.

He’d handed her the actual thing. On the first try. And she’d reached past it for the thing that had a shape.

That was fourteen months ago and he had never brought it up again.

She parked. She sat in the car.

She thought: *he isn’t hiding it from me. He’s hiding it from himself, and I’m the only other person on earth who knows it exists, and I have been treating that like an injury instead of like a key.*

Then she thought, with a clarity that arrived unwelcome and complete: *and I have not touched a piano since I was eleven, and I don’t actually know whether I was any good, and there’s nobody who kept it.*

She went upstairs and did not ask him that night, or the next.

She asked him on a Sunday, in his car, in the parking lot outside his parents' place, before they went in — which was a cowardly time to do it and also the only time she could be sure he couldn't leave.

“Dev.”

“Mm.”

“Play me one of them.”

ONE TENTH

Manpreet Grewal had been the estimator at Dhatt Electric for six years and had not been wrong by more than four percent in the last four of them.

Nobody knew this. It was not the kind of fact that surfaces. When a bid comes in right, the job makes money and the crew gets paid and the GC calls you back next spring, and what everybody remembers is that the crew was good. When a bid comes in wrong you eat fourteen thousand dollars on a tenant improvement in Langley and everyone remembers that for six years.

Manny had done the fourteen-thousand-dollar one in his second year. He remembered it the way you remember a car accident.

He was forty. He had two kids and a wife who was a dental hygienist in Newton and a garage he'd finished himself, and he was, by every measure available to him, doing fine, and had been doing fine, unchanged, for four years.

The chair had been open all four years.

Nobody called it a chair. It didn't have a title. But there was a second desk in Ravi's office with nothing on it, and there had been a conversation in 2021 in which Ravi had said *we'll see what Devraj wants to do*, and Manny had gone home that night and told his wife it was probably nothing, and had believed it for about eight months.

Two years ago Sandy Bhullar had called him from Titan and offered him a division. Not an estimating job. A division — his own

crew, his name on the org chart, a number attached to whether it worked.

Manny had turned it down.

He had told nobody. Not his wife, not Harjit, certainly not Ravi. He'd turned it down on a Tuesday in a Tim Hortons parking lot and driven back to the shop and done four bids that afternoon, and the reason was not complicated and would have sounded stupid out loud:

In 2013, before any of it, Manny had been laid off twice in fourteen months and had a newborn, and Ravi Dhatt had hired him with no estimating experience whatsoever because a man they both knew had said *this one's honest*. Ravi had paid him for three months while he learned a job he did not yet know how to do.

You do not walk out on that.

Sandy called a third time in March. Better this time. Manny said he'd think about it, which he had never said before, and then sat in his truck outside his own house for twenty minutes without going in.

Ravi Dhatt was fifty-nine and had come to Surrey at twenty-three with a trade and no English, and had spent twelve years working for a man named Pearson who had been fair to him in every respect except pay.

He had twelve vans now.

He gave dasvandh. Not approximately — exactly. Harjit ran the calculation every quarter off the actual draw, not the gross, not some convenient figure, and Ravi wrote it and never once asked her to soften the number. Since the spring the books had been producing the quarterly on their own, the figure already there on the Monday morning; she ran it by hand anyway and put the two side by side, and it had agreed with her every quarter since. It went to the gurdwara, to the langar fund, to a hospital in Punjab, to two families in Abbotsford who did not know it came from him.

And every Sunday he did joda ghar.

A man with twelve vans, on his knees at the shoe racks, taking sangat's shoes and stacking them and handing them back for three hours. He had done it for nineteen years. He was extremely good at it. He knew where everything was and could produce an old woman's shoes before she'd finished describing them, and it was, he would have said if pressed, the best three hours of his week.

He was not a hypocrite. That's the thing that made it hard.

He gave one tenth and he gave his hands and he taught his crews to bid honestly and eat the loss when they were wrong, kirat karo, and none of it was performance.

It was just that all of it could be done by a man who never had to give up anything he actually wanted.

Harjit came into the office on a Thursday with the quarterly and one other sheet, and set them both down, and Ravi looked at the second sheet and then at her.

"What's this?"

"Manny."

"What about Manny?"

"He's had an offer."

"He's had offers before." Ravi did not look up. "He stays."

"He's had *one* offer before," Harjit said. "Titan. Two years ago. A division."

Now Ravi looked up.

"He didn't tell me that."

"No," Harjit agreed. "He didn't."

Ravi sat with it for a second. Then he did what she'd expected him to do.

"That's loyalty," he said. "That's a good man."

"Yes."

"So he stays."

"Bhaji," Harjit said. "That isn't loyalty. That's a debt he's been paying down for thirteen years on a loan you didn't know you made."

He didn't like that, and he handled it the way he handled things he didn't like, which was to reframe them until they became something he was doing correctly.

"The desk is for Devraj," he said. "I have not pushed him. Not one time. Have I ever pushed that boy?"

"No."

"Other fathers push. I have said nothing for four years. I let him do his music thing, his sound thing—"

"Film," Harjit said dryly.

"—whatever it is. He'll come or he won't. That's his to decide." Ravi spread his hands. "That's not selfishness. That's giving him room."

"It's room for one and it's the same room Manny's standing in," Harjit said. "You can't give it away twice."

He waved that off. She let him. She'd been at it eleven years and knew when a thing had gone in and when it hadn't, and this one hadn't, and she took the second sheet back off the desk without ever having turned it around, and left.

It took six weeks.

What happened in six weeks was ordinary. Manny did the Co-quiltam bid, which came in at two-point-one percent and won, and Ravi clapped him on the shoulder in the parking lot and said *you're a machine*, which he meant entirely, and Manny said *thanks, bhaji*, and got in his truck and sat there for a minute before starting it.

And Devraj came for Sunday dinner and his mother said *he's working on a very good one* and named the wrong title, and Ravi asked him, genuinely interested, what the book was about, and Devraj said it was about a man who fixes machines, and Ravi said *hah, like us*, and Devraj said *yeah, kind of*, and the conversation moved on, and nobody in the room noticed that Ravi had asked his son six questions about his work that evening and had not once asked him whether he was ever coming.

Because asking would have been pressure.

And not asking, he had decided nineteen years ago at a shoe rack, was seva.

Harjit came back on a Thursday in May and this time she turned the sheet around.

“Sit down,” Ravi said. “You’re making a face.”

“I did the math,” she said. “You asked me once, years ago, to always show you the number even when you don’t want it. I’m holding you to that.”

She put it in front of him.

It was two columns. On the left, four years of Manny Grewal’s estimating salary. On the right, four years of what Titan pays a division lead, which she had not guessed at — she had called someone.

The gap had a total at the bottom.

Ravi looked at it for a long time.

“That’s not a real number,” he said. “That’s a number for a job he didn’t take.”

“He didn’t take it because of you.” Harjit did not raise her voice. She never had, in eleven years, and it was the reason she still had this job. “Bhaji, that number is what your son’s empty desk cost a man who is not your son. You didn’t pay it. He did. Every year. Quietly. And you have never once had to look at it, because I’m the only person in this building who sees both columns.”

Ravi did not answer.

“You give dasvandh,” she said. “One tenth. To the paisa, and I do the calculation, and you have never asked me to make it smaller. In nineteen years.”

“Yes.”

“That’s the easy tenth.”

He looked up sharply.

“It is,” she said. “It’s money, and you have money, and giving it costs you nothing you can feel. You do joda ghar and everyone sees a rich man on his knees and thinks *that’s a good man*, and they’re right,

you *are* a good man.” She tapped the sheet. “But nobody’s ever asked you to give up something you actually want. And that’s the whole tenth that matters, and it’s been sitting in your office with nothing on it for four years.”

“He’s my son,” Ravi said, finally, and it came out worse than he’d meant it — smaller.

“He is. And he isn’t coming.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do the payroll. I know what a man looks like when he’s staying.” Harjit stood up and pushed her chair in. “He didn’t apply for the mastering job either. Did you know that? Kiran told me. There was a promotion at his own work and he let it go by, and he said it was timing, and it wasn’t timing.” She picked up the quarterly and left the other sheet. “That boy can’t take a step in any direction, bhaji, and I’ll tell you why, and then I’ll go: it’s because there’s a chair behind him that nobody will ever make him sit in and nobody will ever take away. He’s got no edge to push on. You took the edge off out of love. Fine. But Manny’s been standing on it this whole time.”

She got to the door.

“Talk to Manny,” she said. “Not about Devraj. About Manny. He’s been waiting six years for you to ask him one question about himself that isn’t a bid.”

Ravi sat in the office until the shop lights went off on the timer at seven.

Then he did what he did, which was to get up and go to the gurdwara, because it was Thursday and there was langar prep and he liked the chopping, the volume of it, three hundred onions and no decisions.

He was forty minutes in before he understood that he’d come to do the part he was good at.

He put the knife down.

Around him, sangat worked. Somebody laughed at the far end of the table. There was a boy of about nineteen doing dishes very badly and very fast.

Ravi Dhatt, who had given one tenth of everything for nineteen years without ever once flinching at the figure, stood in a langar hall in Surrey and thought about a desk with nothing on it, and understood that he had been giving away the wrong tenth for his entire adult life.

He did not know what to do about it yet.

He picked the knife back up and finished the onions, because they still needed doing, and because that at least he knew how to be right about.

ITALIAN PENICILLIN

The email came on a Wednesday and Frances read it four times standing up.

Marguerite had been her agent for six years and had never oversold anything, which was why the second paragraph was so difficult. A publisher in Toronto. A literary novel, four hundred and ten pages, single narrator — nine principal characters, three timelines, a first-person voice that shifts register twice, unmarked. Twenty-two finished hours. The fee was more than she had made in the previous fourteen months.

They asked for you specifically, Marguerite wrote. *They've heard the small press work. This is the door, Frances.*

Frances made a coffee she didn't drink.

The thing about the small press work was that it was *technical*. Compressor housings. Procedure. Rooms with four people in them where two spoke. She could do that with her whole chest. You take the specifications slow, you keep the register flat and let the material be the material, and if you're honest about the sentence the sentence does the work.

Nine principal characters is a different job.

Nine means differentiation, and differentiation over twenty-two hours means *consistency*, and consistency means that the choice you make about a man in chapter three has to survive until chapter thirty-one, recorded eleven weeks later, in a room with a different cold in

it. It means a book of notes. It means pitch anchors and a chart. It means being the same nine people, in order, for four months.

She had done four-hander ensembles. She had never done nine.

And the register shift — unmarked, twice — meant the narrator becomes someone slightly different two-thirds through without the text ever saying so, and that if the narrator sounds *actually* different the listener thinks the narrator has been recast, and if she doesn't sound different at all the thing the author built doesn't happen.

She got out a legal pad and wrote *NINE* at the top and then sat looking at it.

She sample-read chapter three on the Thursday, off the clock, nobody asked.

It went fine for a page and a half. Then the daughter came in.

Frances gave her something a half-step forward, brighter, a little faster — and heard it come out of her mouth as the sister from the last book she'd done, almost exactly, same placement, same lift at the end of a clause. She stopped. Punched back. Tried it lower. That was the mother from two books before. Tried it flat. That was nobody at all, it was a woman reading a book.

Forty minutes on one page.

At the end of it she had a daughter who sounded like an actress doing a daughter, which is the worst outcome available, and she sat in the pantry with Gerald coming on at 7:15 and thought, clearly and for the first time in nine years: *I might just not be able to do this.*

Not *this is hard*. Not *I'll get it*.

I have been getting away with something for nine years because the books were small, and this is the one where somebody finds out.

She made the soup on Friday because Friday was Wes.

Italian penicillin — the whole chicken, the parmesan rind in from the start, the acini di pepe, escarole at the end so it doesn't go to slime, a good crack of pepper and more lemon than anyone thinks is correct. She'd been making it for twenty years and could do it without

thinking, which was the trouble, because it left the afternoon free for thinking.

He came in at ten past six with the boots and the cold coming off his jacket.

“That’s the good one,” he said.

“It’s the good one.”

He ate two bowls before she said anything, which she’d planned, because she’d wanted him fed first.

“I got offered a big one.”

“Yeah?”

“Four hundred pages. Nine characters. More money than I made all last year.”

Wes put his spoon down, which for him was an enormous gesture.

“Frances. That’s great.”

“Mm.”

“That’s — that’s really great.” He was genuinely pleased. She could see it. “When do you start?”

And she heard herself say, “I haven’t said yes.”

Here is where it went wrong, and neither of them could have stopped it.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t know if I can do it.”

Wes considered this for about four seconds, which was, for him, a long deliberation, and then said the thing that was completely true and entirely useless:

“Course you can.”

Frances looked at the pot.

“You don’t know that.”

“I’ve heard you.” He picked the spoon back up, the matter apparently settled and in her favour. “You’re good.”

“That’s not—” She stopped. Started again, more carefully, because she wanted this one. “Wes. It’s not about whether I’m good. I know

I'm good at the ones I'm good at. It's that there are nine of them and they have to still be the same nine in April."

"So write it down."

"I'm *going* to write it down, that's not the—"

"Then what's the problem?"

And there it was. Not unkindness. Not dismissal. A man who had solved it, on her behalf, in seven words, and was now waiting for her to be relieved.

She tried once more, and it came out badly because she was upset.

"You know how you go wide at my driveway."

"Yeah."

"What if somebody offered you a whole city. Everybody's driveway. Two hundred houses a night."

Wes thought about it.

"Couldn't be done," he said. "Not at speed. You'd fall behind on the arterials and then you're not plowing anything, you're just—"

He stopped, because she was looking at him.

"Right," Frances said. "So you'd say no."

"That's different."

"How is that different?"

"Because that's the *equipment*," Wes said, with the first heat he'd shown in two winters. "That's not — a truck can only do what a truck does. You're not a truck."

"That's supposed to help?"

"It's supposed to be true."

He left ten minutes early.

Not in anger. Worse — he left the way a man leaves when he's aware he's been failing at something for the last quarter hour and can't identify what, and has concluded that the room will improve without him in it. He said thanks for the soup. He said it was the good one. He got his gloves.

At the door he turned around, and Frances could see him assembling something, and she waited, and what he came up with was:

“You’d tell me if I was doing it wrong. The driveway.”

“...Yes.”

“So somebody’d tell you.”

Then he went out and got in the truck and did the Ospika pass wide, the same as always, and Frances stood at the window with the pot cooling on the stove and did not know until about twenty minutes later that he had, in fact, said the only useful thing anybody had said to her all week, in the wrong order, at the door, on his way out.

She sat at the kitchen table until eleven.

Somebody’d tell you.

Except nobody would. That was the architecture of the job and she had never looked straight at it. Nine years, forty-some books, and the only feedback she had ever received in her life was a coordinator writing *a little flatter, if you can* and apologising twice for the trouble.

Nobody had ever told her she was doing it wrong.

Nobody had ever told her she was doing it *right*, either, except a plow operator with a grilled cheese, once, about the numbers.

She had built an entire competence in a converted pantry with the door shut, and she had no idea — none, actually, when she stopped protecting herself from the question — whether she was good, or whether she was merely the only person in the room.

Somebody’d tell you.

Except the one person who heard every second of it, who heard the eleven takes and the swearing and Gerald and the hiccups and the lift on the second-last word — that person had never spoken to her in nine years and never would, because that isn’t how the chain works.

She didn’t know his name.

She knew there was somebody, because things got cut, and she'd sometimes thought vaguely of them as *the editors*, plural, a department. It had genuinely never occurred to her, until that Friday night in a cooling kitchen, that it might be one person.

She wrote back to Marguerite at 11:40.

Not yes. She wrote: *Before I answer — can you find out who does the post on these? Not the studio. The actual person. I want to ask them something.*

Marguerite replied at 8 the next morning, mystified but game: *Can do. Odd request. Is everything okay?*

Frances looked at that for a while.

Then she typed *yes*, and deleted it, and typed *I don't know yet*, and sent that instead.

THE WALL

The thing nobody tells you about a chain of custody is that it's made of people who all know each other slightly.

Marguerite Aubry did not, as a rule, take requests like this. She was sixty-one, she had fourteen clients, and she had been in publishing long enough to know that the answer to *who does the post* is always *the studio*, and that clients who go looking behind the curtain end up with feelings about people they cannot afford to have feelings about.

She made the call anyway, because Frances Boisvert had never asked her for one single thing in six years, and because the phrase *I don't know yet* had sat in her inbox all weekend like a stone in a shoe.

"I need the name of who does your post."

"It's a team."

"Deirdre."

A pause on the line. Then, with the resignation of a producer who has known Marguerite Aubry for twenty-two years: "It's basically one guy."

From: D. Vuong

To: M. Aubry

Re: that thing you asked

Sent: Monday 11:04

Marguerite —

Name's below. Please note I'm doing this against my own policy and I'd like it on the record that I said so.

Before you pass it on, I need to ask you something, and I need a straight answer.

What does she want it for?

— D.

Deirdre Vuong had been twenty-five in 2007, and a coordinator, which meant she forwarded things.

Peggy Dunsmuir was sixty-three that year and had narrated something north of four hundred titles. If you had listened to a Canadian audiobook between 1988 and 2007 you had almost certainly heard her; she was the sound of the form in this country, a low warm instrument with a very slight prairie flatness she had never sanded off. Deirdre had grown up on cassettes of Peggy Dunsmuir in the back of a Corolla between Vancouver and Kamloops.

In March of 2007 an editor at the publishing house — a decent man, thorough, twenty-nine years old, who had never been in a booth in his life — listened to the finals of a literary novel Peggy had recorded over five weeks, and wrote a document.

It was eleven pages.

It was not cruel. That's the part Deirdre had never been able to explain to anyone in nineteen years. It was *correct*.

p. 3, ¶2 — The Kowalczyk material (ch. 4, 9, 17) is consistently pitched approximately a minor third above the surrounding narration. This is effective in ch. 4. By ch. 17 it reads as a tic rather than a characterisation, and the listener has begun to anticipate it.

p. 5, ¶1 — Pacing across the second section is uniform to within a few words per minute. The text moves between a hospital corridor and a recollection of 1961 without any corresponding change in tempo. The transitions are therefore inaudible.

p. 7, ¶4 — Sibilance management appears to be achieved by softening the /s/ rather than by placement. Over twenty hours this produces a slight lisp on trailing plurals that is not present in the reader's natural speech.

p. 9, ¶2 — The most significant issue is the daughter. There is no discernible difference between the daughter and the sister-in-law beyond a small increase

in tempo. Given that the book's central reversal depends on the listener having distinguished them in ch. 6, this is a structural rather than an interpretive problem.

Eleven pages. Itemised. Page-and-paragraph. He had done the work, and the work was good, and every single finding was true.

He sent it to Deirdre with a note that said *can you get this to Peggy, we'd like to discuss before the pickups*.

And Deirdre Vuong, twenty-five, coordinator, forwarded it. Because it came from the publisher. Because it was addressed to Peggy. Because nobody had ever told her that a document could be true and still be a weapon, and because it did not occur to her — not for one second, she had gone over this — that she was allowed to hold it.

From: M. Aubry

To: D. Vuong

Re: RE: that thing you asked

Sent: Tuesday 09:12

Straight answer, since you asked for one.

She's been offered the Hallam novel. Nine principals, unmarked register shift. She hasn't said yes.

She didn't ask me for reassurance and she didn't ask me for the money. She asked me who does her post.

I've had six years of this woman and she has never asked me for one thing. I don't know what she wants it for. I know she wrote "I don't know yet" when I asked if she was okay, and in thirty years nobody has ever written me anything more honest than that.

Why the policy, Deirdre?

— M.

Peggy did the pickups.

That was the thing people got wrong when the story went around, in the very small way these stories go around: she didn't refuse. She came in on the Thursday, professional as anything, and did four hours

of pickups, and fixed the daughter, and fixed her, notably, *better than the note asked for* — she gave the daughter a placement change rather than a tempo change, which is the harder and correct solution, and which the twenty-nine-year-old editor had not known enough to ask for.

She was, Deirdre had understood only much later, showing them she could.

The book came out. It was well reviewed. The audio was singled out.

Peggy Dunsmuir took two more contracts that year, finished both, and then didn't take another one.

She did not announce anything. She was sixty-four; people assumed. She lived another fifteen years in North Vancouver and Deirdre saw her twice, once at a memorial and once, absurdly, in a Save-On-Foods, and both times Peggy had been perfectly warm and had asked after her career and had not mentioned any of it, and Deirdre had not had the courage, either time, to say *I'm the one who sent it*.

From: D. Vuong

To: M. Aubry

Sent: Tuesday 14:47

Because in 2007 I forwarded eleven pages of accurate notes to a woman who had done four hundred books and she never recorded again, and I have spent nineteen years making sure nobody in my shop ever does that to anybody, and the way you make sure of that is you make the post invisible and you never let a narrator find out there's a person on the other end with opinions.

"It's a team." That's not laziness. That's the wall. I built it. On purpose. Out of one thing I did when I was twenty-five and didn't know I was allowed to say no.

I've kept it up for nineteen years and it has, I am fairly confident, protected a lot of people.

And I have just this week found out that it has also meant that a very good narrator in Prince George has gone nine years without a single human being telling her she's any good, and is now sitting on the biggest job of her life unable to say yes because she has no idea whether she can do it, because there is no evidence available to her in either direction, because *I removed it*.

So.

The name's in my first email. He's twenty-six, he's done all eleven of her books, he's the best ears in this building and he doesn't know it, and he didn't apply for a promotion in November for reasons he described as "timing."

Tell her he exists. Don't tell her he has notes.

— D.

From: M. Aubry

To: D. Vuong

Sent: Tuesday 15:02

Deirdre.

She's not asking to be graded. I've known her six years — if you sent that woman eleven pages she'd read it twice, make a chart, and fix nine of the eleven by Friday, and then she'd want to know about the other two.

She's asking whether anybody was listening.

That is not the same question, Deirdre, and I think you know it.

— M.

P.S. I said I'd take 2011 to my grave and I meant it, but I'll say this much: you were right, and I've never told you so, and I'm telling you now because you've plainly been carrying more than that one.

Deirdre read that at her desk at ten past three on a Tuesday with the door open and the QC room humming down the hall.

Then she got up and walked down to the room with no windows, where a twenty-six-year-old was doing the most sensitive work in the building for the least money in it, and stood in the doorway for a second before he noticed her.

“Dhatt.”

He took the headphones off.

“The narrator on the Boisvert titles.”

“Frances,” Devraj said, and then heard himself say it, and looked briefly like a man who has put his hand through a window.

Deirdre had been in this trade for twenty-two years. She let it go by.

“She’s been given a name,” she said. “Yours. Her agent asked for it by name and I gave it, against my own policy, and I want you to hear that from me before it comes from anywhere else.”

Devraj did not say anything.

“Second thing, while I’m here. Why didn’t you apply for the mastering slot in November.”

“Timing.”

“Devraj.”

“...It was timing.”

Deirdre stood in the doorway of a windowless room with her arms folded, forty-four years old, two decades of this, and thought about how many young men she had watched decline a thing in exactly that tone.

“Well. Your timing’s about to become somebody else’s problem.” She shifted her weight. “One more and then I’m going to leave.”

He waited.

“You have never once, in four years, sent me a note about her work. Not one. Everybody else in this building sends me notes about narrators — half of them wrong, all of them free.” She folded her arms. “You’ve had four hundred hours of her and you’ve never offered

an opinion, and I assumed for a long time that meant you didn't have any."

"I have some," Devraj said.

"I know you do," said Deirdre Vuong. "That's what's been keeping me up."

THERE IS SOMEBODY

SUNDAY. SURREY. THE CAR.

“Play me one of them.”

Devraj sat with his hands on the wheel of a parked car outside his parents’ house for what Kiran later estimated was fifteen seconds and he later estimated was a year.

“Kiran—“

“You’ve had four years. I’ve had fourteen months. Play me one.”

“I’ve never opened it.”

“*I know.*” She had not planned to be gentle and found she was. “That’s why.”

He got his phone out. He plugged it into the aux, which was somehow worse, the domestic ordinariness of it.

He scrolled a long time.

Then a woman’s voice came into a Honda Civic in a driveway in Surrey and said, perfectly clearly, with enormous satisfaction, into a pantry five hundred kilometres north:

“Oh, that’s good. That’s exactly it.”

And then, quieter: *“Gerald, did you hear that.”*

Three seconds. Maybe four.

Kiran put her hand over her mouth.

“Who’s Gerald?”

“The furnace.”

“The *furnace*—“

“She named the furnace.”

And Kiran Sekhon, who had come out here braced for something that would hurt, laughed so hard she had to put her forehead on the dashboard, and Devraj started laughing too because she was, and they sat in a parked car outside his parents’ house at ten past six absolutely wrecked over four seconds of a stranger being pleased with herself.

When it subsided Kiran wiped her eyes and said, “Dev. That’s not a woman you’re in love with. That’s a woman who’s *having a good time at work.*”

“...Yeah.”

“When did you last have a good time at work.”

He didn’t answer.

“Right,” she said.

Then, because she was not entirely a saint: “And you have *four* years of this and you never once played it? What is wrong with you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Play another one.”

Inside the house, Surinder Dhatt looked out the kitchen window at a car that had been parked for twenty minutes with two people in it not getting out.

“They’re fighting,” she announced.

Ravi came and looked.

“They’re laughing,” he said.

“Nobody laughs like that unless they’ve been fighting.”

THURSDAY. THE OFFICE.

Ravi Dhatt had been carrying a sheet of paper in his jacket for nine days and had taken it out four times.

He did not talk to Manny. He rehearsed talking to Manny in the truck, which is not the same thing, and which is how a man convinces himself he’s made progress.

Harjit found him at the desk with nothing on it. He was sitting at it. Not his own desk. The empty one.

“Bhaji.”

“I’m thinking.”

“You’ve been thinking for nine days. It’s Thursday. Manny leaves at four.”

“What do I say?”

“I told you. Ask him a question about himself that isn’t a bid.”

“What question?”

Harjit closed her eyes briefly and prayed for patience to a God she was fairly sure was enjoying this.

“*Manny, what do you want?*” she said. “Four words. You’re a man with twelve vans. You have negotiated with general contractors who would eat their own mothers. You can say four words.”

“And if he says he wants to leave?”

“Then he leaves, and you’ll have been told the truth once, which at your age is a luxury.”

Ravi looked at the empty desk.

“It’s a bad desk,” he said, unexpectedly. “It’s the wrong height.”

“It’s a *terrible* desk, I’ve said so for four years.”

“Nobody’s ever sat at it.”

“No.”

He was quiet.

“Harjit. Did I take something from that boy? By leaving it open?”

And Harjit Sekhon-Bains, who had been waiting eleven years for one useful question out of this man, sat down on the corner of the terrible desk in her good coat and said:

“Yes. And from Manny. And you’ll fix one of those this afternoon and the other one will take you five years, and you’ll do both, because you’re not a fool, you’re just a man who’s only ever been asked for money.”

At 3:40 Ravi came out to the estimating desk and stood there.

Manny looked up. "Coquitlam's in, I sent it—"

"Not that."

Manny waited.

"Manny." Ravi put his hands in his pockets, took them out again.
"What do you want?"

Manny Grewal looked at his boss of thirteen years for a long moment, and then, being an honest man in a difficult position, said:

"Bhaji, is this because Titan called?"

"...Harjit told me."

"Of course she did."

"Is it true?"

"Yeah."

"Twice?"

"Three times," said Manny.

Ravi absorbed that.

"Three."

"Third one was March."

And Ravi Dhatt, who had given exactly one tenth for nineteen years and had never once flinched at the figure, discovered that he was standing in his own shop unable to speak, and that a forty-year-old man with two kids had turned down his own life three times in a parking lot without ever mentioning it, and that the reason was a kindness Ravi had done him in 2013 and forgotten about by 2015.

"Sit down," Ravi said, hoarsely. "Not there. In my office. Sit at the other desk."

"That desk is terrible."

"I KNOW IT'S A TERRIBLE DESK," Ravi shouted, "SIT AT IT."

PRINCE GEORGE. FRIDAY.

Marguerite called at four.

"I have a name."

Frances stood in her kitchen.

“You do?”

“Frances, I want you to understand that I have never done this in thirty years and I’m doing it because you asked me plainly and because Deirdre Vuong owed me from a matter in 2011 that I will take to my grave.” Papers moving. “There’s one person. He’s done all eleven of yours, every one, since we moved you to Cascade.”

“All eleven.”

“All eleven.”

Frances sat down on a kitchen chair without meaning to.

“Four years,” she said.

“What’s his name?”

Marguerite told her.

Frances wrote it on the back of an envelope, and looked at it, and found that her eyes had gone hot and stupid over a name she had never heard before belonging to a man who had heard, without exception, every sound she had made professionally for four years.

“Marguerite.”

“Mm.”

“Does he — is he allowed to talk to me?”

“There’s no *law*, Frances, it’s audiobooks, not the Vatican.”

Wes came at ten past six.

She’d made the soup again, which she never did two weeks running, and he noticed, and said nothing, and had two bowls.

“I found out something,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“There’s one guy. Who cleans up my recordings. Same guy, all four years. He’s heard everything.”

Wes considered this.

“Everything?”

“Everything.”

“Gerald?”

“Gerald.”

“Huh,” said Wes. And then, after a moment, with something in his face she had not seen in two winters: “So there *is* somebody.”

“There’s somebody.”

He put the spoon down.

“Well,” he said. “There you go, then.”

And Frances Boisvert started crying at her own kitchen counter over a bowl of Italian penicillin, and Wes Arnott, fifty-six years old, panicked completely, did not touch her, did not say a word, and instead got up and started washing the pot.

He used hot water and the coarse green pad and took the scorch off the bottom.

THE SEWING ROOM

Surinder Kaur Dhatt knew perfectly well that her son did not work in film.

She had known it since 2022, when he explained it to her the first time, carefully, in the kitchen, with his hands doing the shape of a waveform. She had understood it completely. She had taught mathematics for twelve years in Jalandhar to eleven-year-olds who did not want to learn it, and she was not a woman who failed to grasp things.

He corrected her twice. Then he stopped.

He had concluded, she was fairly sure, that she was embarrassed — that *film* was a costume she put on him for the benefit of Rakesh's wife and the sangat and anyone else who asked. He had decided his mother could not bear the truth, and had gone quiet about it, and had been sweet about going quiet, which was the worst part.

She had let him think it.

Because here is what happens when Surinder Dhatt tells a room that her son removes breathing sounds from audiobooks:

The room becomes kind. Immediately. Voices go soft and someone says *well, he's finding his way*, and someone else says *these young people, it's all different now*, and every single person present begins to feel warmly toward Surinder for bearing it so well.

And she would rather set herself on fire.

Film got nothing. *Film* got a nod and a change of subject, and her son left the room having been a man with a job, which he was.

She had never explained this to anybody, because the explanation would only work on someone who already understood it.

She had taught for twelve years. Here she had worked nineteen years at a daycare on 128th, and had been very good at it, and had retired at sixty-two with a card signed by forty people.

She was fine about it. She would tell you she was fine about it.

What she had kept from the twelve years was this: she could hear a lie in a child at forty paces. Not the content — the *placement*. Children lie from the front of the mouth. It comes out flat and quick and a half-tone high, and it never once fails, and she had spent thirty-four years listening to her son and knew every register he had.

It was timing had come out of the front of his mouth.

She had heard it from the kitchen. She had not said one word.

Kiran came inside on the Sunday twelve minutes after the car should have been empty, with her eyes still red from laughing and a look on her face like a woman carrying something breakable.

“Auntie, do you have — Dev said you’d have thread. Black.”

“Sewing room. On the shelf.”

Kiran went down the hall.

Surinder gave her four seconds and then followed, because she knew exactly what was in the sewing room, and had known for two years, and had been waiting with no particular urgency for someone to walk into it.

Kiran was standing in the doorway not moving.

It took up a third of the room. Under a quilted grey cover that was clearly a proper case cover and not a bedsheet, tall as a person, leaning in the corner behind the ironing board like something that had been asked to wait.

“Is that—”

“Double bass,” said Surinder.

“*Devraj* plays the *double bass*?”

“Played.” Surinder came past her and moved the ironing board six inches, which did not need doing. “Eleven years. Then university, then two years, then nothing.”

Kiran put her hand out and stopped short of the cover.

“He’s never said one word about it.”

“No.”

“In three years he has never—“ She turned. “Auntie, he has a *box of field recordings on my kitchen table*. He records the SkyTrain doors. He has never mentioned that he plays an instrument.”

“He doesn’t play an instrument,” Surinder said. “That’s exactly the trouble. He *did*.”

She sat down on the sewing chair, because standing was for arguments and this was not going to be one.

“When he brought it home from Vancouver he put it in the garage,” she said. “Two weeks. In a garage, Kiran, in November, in a garage with the door going up and down.”

“That’s bad?”

“It is *catastrophic*.” The word came out with twelve years of Jalandhar behind it. “Wood. Glue. It goes from freezing to warm forty times a week and the seams open and the neck moves. You cannot do that to an instrument. Even I know this and I have never played one note of anything.”

“So you brought it in here.”

“I brought it in here.”

Kiran looked at the cover again. “And the cover?”

“I bought that.”

“And—“

“There’s a man on Kingsway,” said Surinder. “Once a year. In August, because that’s when it’s steady. He looks at the seams, he does the bow.” She smoothed her salwar over her knees. “Two hundred and forty dollars. From the daycare money, which is mine, and I do not discuss it.”

Kiran sat down slowly on the arm of a chair covered in fabric.

"Auntie. Does he know?"

"No."

"Does *Uncle*?"

"Nobody knows," said Surinder Dhatt. "That is the point of it."

"Why?"

Surinder considered how much to say and then, because the girl had walked into the room and had not laughed, said all of it.

"Because in this house we do not put things down and pick them up again. We put them down and then we talk about them for nineteen years until everybody agrees it was for the best." She looked at the corner. "His father left a desk empty. Very generous. Very quiet. Four years. Every Sunday that boy sits in this house and nobody asks him one hard question, and he goes home and he has not been asked one hard question, and this is what we call love here."

"You don't want him at Dhatt Electric."

"I have never wanted him at Dhatt Electric."

Kiran actually laughed. "Auntie, *everyone thinks you do.*"

"Yes."

"Devraj thinks you do."

"Yes."

"Why don't you *say* something?"

And Surinder gave her a look that had disciplined forty children a year for nineteen years.

"Because the moment I say it, it becomes a *position*," she said. "And then it is Surinder's position and Ravi's position and we will discuss the two positions until one of us is tired, and I have been married thirty-four years and I know exactly how that ends and it ends with a boy in the middle of it being asked to choose which parent is correct." She spread her hands. "So I do not have a position. I have a bass in the sewing room and a man on Kingsway and I keep it playable, and if that boy ever wakes up, it will be *there*, and it will be *right*, and he

will not have to be grateful to anybody for it because he will never find out.”

Kiran was quiet for a while.

Then she said, “He has a folder.”

Surinder waited.

“There’s a narrator. Up north. He’s edited four years of her books and he’s kept — clips. When she’s pleased with herself. Little bits. He’s never opened it.” Kiran was looking at the grey cover. “I’ve known for fourteen months and I’ve been — Auntie, I’ve been *jealous*. Of a folder. For over a year.”

Surinder took that in.

“And today?”

“He played me one. Four seconds. She names her furnace.” Kiran’s face did something complicated. “It’s the least romantic thing I’ve ever heard in my life. She’s just *happy*. She’s happy at her work and he keeps it in a drawer he never opens.”

“Mm,” said Surinder.

Then, after a moment: “So you both do the same thing.”

Kiran looked up.

“He has a folder he doesn’t open,” said Surinder, nodding at the corner, “I have a bass I don’t uncover, and you have been sitting on this for fourteen months without telling one single person in this family.” She stood, and moved the ironing board back the six inches. “We are all keeping something playable for somebody who has not asked.”

Then she got it wrong, which mattered later.

At the door she said, not unkindly, “Beta. If you are going to go, go before Vaisakhi. Don’t do it in summer, the whole family is here in summer.”

Kiran stared at her. “I’m not — Auntie, I’m not *leaving* him.”

Surinder stopped.

“You’re not?”

“No. I told him to play me one, I didn’t tell him to—” She stood up. “I asked him what he wanted. He couldn’t answer. That’s not a reason to leave somebody, that’s a reason to—”

She ran out of sentence.

“To what?” said Surinder Dhatt.

And Kiran, standing in a sewing room next to a double bass that had been maintained in secret for two years by a woman who told people her son worked in film, said:

“To make him answer.”

Surinder looked at her for a long moment.

“Hah,” she said, which in that voice was not a laugh, and went to put the kettle on.

Behind her, Kiran stayed where she was, and after a while reached out and lifted the corner of the grey cover, an inch, the way you check on someone sleeping.

Then she put it back exactly as it had been.

SUNDAYS

Erin Arnott had called her father every Sunday for eleven years and had, in that time, developed a system.

You did not ask him how he was. *How are you got good, yeah*, every single time, and then a pause you had to fill yourself. So you led with weather, because he'd actually talk about weather — road weather, which is a different subject entirely and has opinions in it — and then you gave him something to react to, and then you talked for a while about your own life so he could listen, which was the thing he was actually good at and which nobody in his life seemed to know.

Eleven years. Roughly five hundred and seventy calls. In all that time she had never got him to say a sentence about himself that he hadn't been maneuvered into.

She was twenty-nine. She'd been a physio in Kamloops for six years, mostly post-surgical knees and a slow accumulation of Interior back injuries, and she was good at it in a way that was extremely legible: a man came in unable to get off a couch without using his arms, and ten weeks later he got off a couch, and everyone in the room could see it. She had never had to wonder whether she was any good. The knee tells you.

She had thought about this exactly once, in relation to her father, and then had put it down because it made her sad.

The first thing was the soup.

Week one: "Had a bowl of soup up at a customer's."

Erin had noted it in the way you note anything unprecedented. Wes Arnott did not report meals. In over five hundred Sunday calls he had mentioned food perhaps four times, always in the context of a Husky station.

Week two: nothing.

Week three: “She does a soup with the — the little pasta, the round ones.”

“*Acini di pepe*,” said Erin, before she could stop herself.

“That’s it.”

There was a pause on the line during which Erin Arnott put down the mug she was holding and sat on her own kitchen floor with her back against the cupboard, the way she had at nine years old when the news was large.

“Dad,” she said. “Who’s she?”

“Customer on the Tuesday-Friday loop.”

“You said that.”

“On Ospika.”

“Dad.”

“She does audiobooks,” Wes said. “She reads them. She’s the voice.”

And then, before Erin could get a question in, he told her about the driveway.

All of it. Nineteen years, four people, the windrow, how you carry the wing past instead of dropping it, the minute it costs you, why nobody does it. He talked for close to three minutes without stopping, which was the longest uninterrupted speech Erin had ever heard out of him, and every single word of it was about snow.

She let him finish.

“So she came out and thanked you,” she said.

“In a housecoat. Minus twenty-two.” A sound that might have been a laugh. “Ten to six in the morning.”

“And then?”

"Then nothing. Then a couple years."

"Years, Dad."

"Well," said Wes. "You don't want to rush anything."

Erin closed her eyes.

"Okay," she said. "I'm going to ask you a direct question and I want you to not do the thing."

"What thing."

"The thing where you answer a different question about equipment."

Silence, which was an admission.

"Is this a girlfriend?"

"No."

"Dad."

"It's not that." He said it plainly and without evasion, and she believed him, which was the confusing part. "She's got — she's got this job where she sits in a room by herself and she's really good at it and nobody's ever told her so. Nine years. Not one person."

Erin waited.

"So she cooks and I eat it and she tells me about the book," Wes said. "That's it. That's the whole thing."

"And what do you get out of it?"

And her father, who had answers ready for questions like this, said:

"Oh, I'm fine."

There it was. Instant. Fourteen years of practice.

Erin had heard *I'm fine* from her father in a hospital corridor in 2012 and at her mother's second wedding in 2016 and on the phone the night the dog died, and she had accepted it every time, because that was the arrangement, and because at nineteen and twenty-three she had not been sure she had the standing.

She was twenty-nine now and had spent six years telling large frightened men that the thing they were doing to protect themselves was the thing keeping them injured.

"That's not an answer," she said.

"It's the answer I've got."

"No it isn't. You've got a better one and you're not going to say it because it'd sound stupid out loud." She stood up off the kitchen floor. "Dad, you have mentioned soup three times in three weeks. In eleven years you have mentioned food four times total and all four were a Husky."

"Erin—"

"You *counted the driveways*. You told me nineteen years and four people. You've been keeping count."

The line was quiet for a while. In the background, faintly, the truck radio: strings, and a man's voice under them, going on about something.

"Yeah," Wes said. "I guess I have."

She let that sit, because you don't push a joint that's just given.

"Tell me about her," Erin said. "Not the driveway. Her."

And Wes Arnott, fifty-six, tried.

"She's — " He stopped. Started again. "She talks the whole time. Like, the *whole* time. She'll do the book at you. Standing at the stove, doing all the voices, with the — with the flipper in her hand." A pause. "And she named her furnace. It's called Gerald."

"Gerald."

"It comes on at twenty to seven and it wrecks her recording and she's *fond* of it."

Erin, in her kitchen in Kamloops, put the heel of her hand against one eye and then the other.

"Dad—"

"And she's scared right now," Wes said, and something in his voice changed and got worse. "She got offered a big one. Big book, lot of

money, and she can't say yes, and I told her she could do it, and I got it wrong."

"How do you know you got it wrong?"

"Cause she stopped talking." He said this flatly, as a fact about the world. "She talks the whole time, and I said the wrong thing, and she stopped."

"What did you say?"

"I said 'course you can."

"Dad, that's a nice thing to say."

"It's not what she needed."

"How do you know what she—"

"Because I've been plowing that street for nineteen years," Wes said, with more force than she'd heard from him in a decade, "and if somebody told me *'course you can*, I'd know they hadn't been in the truck."

Erin Arnott sat back down on the floor.

That was — she turned it over — that was the most articulate thing her father had ever said to her, and he had produced it accidentally, in defence of somebody else, while explaining a mistake.

"Okay," she said. "Dad. Listen to me, because this is my actual job."

"You do knees."

"I do people who are scared of a movement they used to do fine, and I'm telling you: you cannot reassure somebody out of it. It doesn't land. They've already got a whole case built for why they can't and 'you'll be fine' just proves you don't understand the case." She was talking fast now. "You have to make them do one small piece of it. One rep. Under load. In front of you."

"...She's not a knee."

"No, she's a woman who's forgotten she can do the thing, which is *identical*, Dad, it's the same person in a different room."

Wes was quiet.

“How would I even—“

“Ask her to read you something hard.”

There was a long pause, and Erin could hear the indicator going, and the strings.

“She did that once,” Wes said. “Did a bit for me. And I said she went slow on the numbers part.”

“And?”

“And she put the flipper down and said nobody’d said anything like that to her in nine years.”

“Dad.”

“What?”

“You already did it,” said Erin. “You already know how. You did it once by accident and you haven’t done it again because it worked and it scared you.”

Her father did not answer, which in all those Sunday calls was the only response she had ever got that was worth more than a sentence.

“You still there?”

“Yeah.”

“Right,” said Erin, briskly, because she had learned that you get out immediately after the good rep and do not stand there admiring it. “Tell me about the truck. Are they still doing the thing with the —
“

“They put the new sander on 4.”

“Is it garbage?”

“It’s garbage.”

And Wes talked about the sander for six minutes with enormous animation while his daughter sat on her kitchen floor in Kamloops, listening, thinking about a woman she’d never met and a furnace named Gerald and the fact that her father had been keeping count of driveways for nineteen years and had never told a living soul until three weeks ago, when he’d told her, in the form of a complaint about the wing.

At the end he said, "Same time next week," which is what he always said.

"Dad."

"Yeah."

"Ask her to read you something hard."

Pause.

"Okay," said Wes Arnott.

PART THREE

SOMETHING HARD

SOMETHING HARD

Marguerite called at ten past nine on the Friday and did not open with weather.

“Monday.”

“I know.”

“Frances, I have been doing this since 1994 and I have never chased a client for eleven days and I am not going to develop the habit at sixty-one.” Papers. “They will go to Ottawa. There is a woman in Ottawa who is perfectly good and who will say yes in an hour and a half and who is not what this book wants, and I will have to be gracious about it.”

Frances stood in her kitchen with the envelope on the counter in front of her, face down, the name on the other side.

“I understand.”

“Do you? Because I’ve had six years of a woman who does not flinch, and I’ve now had eleven days of somebody I don’t recognise, and I’d like to know which one I’m representing.”

“That’s not fair.”

“No,” said Marguerite. “It’s Friday.”

There was a silence in which both of them heard how badly it had gone.

“Say yes,” Marguerite said, softer. “You can do it.”

And Frances Boisvert closed her eyes, because that was the second person in three weeks to hand her the same four useless words, and this one was the professional.

She did not work that day.

She cleaned the pantry, which did not need cleaning. She wiped down the foam with a dry cloth, which does nothing. She sat in the chair with the headphones off and the mic capped and looked at the legal pad that said NINE at the top and had, under it, eleven days of nothing.

At half past four she took the envelope off the counter and put it in the drawer with the batteries, and then took it out again and put it back on the counter, face down.

Then she made the soup, because it was Friday.

Wes had been rehearsing since Sunday.

Six days. In the truck, on the arterials, out loud, alone, at forty kilometres an hour with the wing down: *I'd like you to read me something hard*. And then, worried it sounded like an order: *Would you read me something hard*. And then, worried that sounded like begging: *You should read me something hard*.

By Friday he had it down to a sentence he was fairly sure was correct and had absolutely no idea how to start.

He came in at ten past six. Boots, cold coming off the jacket, the smell of the soup.

"That's the good one."

"It's the good one."

He got through most of a bowl. Then he put the spoon down, which was the enormous gesture, and she looked up.

"Read me something hard," Wes said.

It came out flat and slightly loud, the way a thing does when it's been in a man's mouth for six days.

Frances stared at him.

"What?"

"From the big one. The one you can't say yes to." He was going red. "Read me the hard bit."

"Wes—"

“Erin said.”

“Who’s *Erin*?”

“My daughter.” He was looking at the counter now. “She does knees. She said you can’t tell somebody they’ll be fine, you have to make them do one of it. In front of you.” A pause. “Under load. That’s her word.”

Frances put the flipper down.

“No,” she said.

And here is where Wes Arnott, fifty-six, with fourteen years of practice at leaving rooms that had become difficult, did not leave the room.

He picked his spoon back up. He had another mouthful of soup. He looked at the pot on the stove.

Then he said, “Ask you twice, then.”

“Wes.”

“Read me the hard bit.”

She got the pages off the table because her hands wanted something to do.

“It’s chapter three,” she said. “It’s the daughter. She’s got about a page and a half and she has to be — she’s the one you have to be able to tell apart from the sister-in-law in chapter six or the whole book doesn’t work, and I have done this page nine times and every single time she comes out as somebody I’ve already done.”

“Okay.”

“It’s not going to be good.”

“Okay.”

So Frances Boisvert stood in her own kitchen at twenty past six on a Friday, in front of a plow operator with his boots on, and read the daughter.

It was bad.

She heard it going bad about four lines in — the lift at the end of the clause, the placement forward and bright, the sister from the

Nanaimo book arriving wholesale — and she felt the old reflex go through her, the punch-back, the *stop and reset*, nine years of a woman alone in a room correcting herself before anybody heard it.

She kept going.

She got to the end of the page and a half and stood there with the pages in her hand.

“That’s the sister,” she said. “That’s *literally* the sister. I did that woman in 2023.”

“Do it again,” said Wes.

“It’ll be the same.”

“Then it’ll be the same.”

She did it again. It was the same, but lower, which made it the mother from two books before. She did it a third time flat and it was nobody at all. She did it a fourth time faster and heard herself put an edge on it that had no business being there, and she stopped halfway through and said “*no*,” out loud, with force, to a kitchen.

Wes did not say a word through any of it.

Nine years. Forty-some books. And the first time a human being had ever watched Frances Boisvert fail at something, in real time, four times in a row, was a Friday in February in front of a man eating soup.

She put the pages down on the counter.

“That’s it,” she said. “That’s why I can’t say yes.”

Wes chewed for a while.

Then he said: “Can I say the thing? I’ll get it wrong.”

“You’ll get it wrong.”

“Yeah.”

“Say it anyway.”

“You did her like she was the important one.”

Frances looked up.

“All four times,” Wes said. “You come at her like she’s the main thing on the page. Big. Out front.” He turned the bowl a quarter turn

on the counter, which was what he did instead of gesturing. “Is she? In the book. Is she the important one?”

“...No.”

“No?”

“No, she’s — “ Frances stopped. “She’s in the room. She’s in the room while the mother’s doing something. She’s not — the chapter isn’t hers.”

“So why’re you plowing her like an arterial?”

Frances Boisvert stood very still.

“Say that again.”

Wes went red to the ears.

“It’s just — you got a route,” he said, miserably. “You got so many hours and so much road and you can’t do all of it right, that’s not — that’s not being lazy, that’s the *job*. So you pick. Arterials get everything. Then the collectors. Then residential you do what you can and some nights you go wide on one driveway and that’s all you’ve got.” He looked at his hands. “Nine of ‘em, you said. You can’t do nine like they’re all the arterial. You’d fall behind and then you’re not plowing anything.”

“Wes—“

“You told me that,” he said. “Back in the fall. You said what if somebody gave you the whole city, and I said couldn’t be done, and you got mad at me.”

“I got mad at you because you said it was different.”

“Yeah, well.” Wes Arnott picked up his spoon. “I was wrong about that part.”

Gerald came on at 7:15.

Four years, twice a night, wrecking whatever she was in the middle of. Frances had punched back through that furnace something in the order of two thousand times.

She did not move.

She stood in her kitchen with a page and a half in her hand and listened to the furnace come on and thought about nine characters and four hundred and ten pages and twenty-two finished hours, and about which of them were arterials, and about the fact that she had been standing in a pantry for nine years doing every single sentence like it was the arterial because there had never been anybody in the truck to tell her she was falling behind.

“Two,” she said.

“Hm?”

“Two of them are arterials. The narrator and the brother.” She was not talking to him. “Three are collectors. And the other four you just — you keep them clean and you don’t bury the driveway, you just make sure they’re *not each other*. That’s all they have to be. They have to not be each other.”

She turned around.

“That’s four months of work instead of eleven.”

“Sounds like a route,” said Wes.

He left at ten to seven because he was on at eight.

At the door he stopped and turned around, and Frances braced herself, because the last time he’d done this he’d taken the top of her head off with one sentence and his gloves on.

“That daughter,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“The fourth one. The fast one where you stopped.”

“That was the worst one.”

“That was her,” said Wes. “That’s a person who’s in the room while something’s happening to somebody else. I’ve been in that room.” He put his gloves on. “You stopped ‘cause it was ugly. It’s supposed to be ugly, she’s not having a nice time.”

Then he went out and did the Ospika pass wide, same as always.

She wrote to Marguerite at 11:40, because that is apparently the hour at which Frances Boisvert tells the truth.

Yes. Send the contract.

Two conditions and they're both real. I need eleven weeks, not nine — I'm building the chart before I record a syllable, and I'm not starting until it's done. And I want a check-in after chapter six. Not the publisher. Somebody who'll actually listen to it and tell me if the daughter and the sister-in-law are the same woman.

I know that's not how it works. Ask anyway.

Marguerite replied at 7:20 the next morning with two words — *That's my girl* — and then, four minutes later, a second message:

I'll ask. Don't expect it. They don't do that.

The envelope was still on the counter, face down, where it had been since Wednesday.

Frances picked it up on her way past to turn out the light, and stood there for a second, and turned it over, and looked at the name she had written on the back of it in her own handwriting on the day she found out that somebody had been there all along.

Then she put it in the drawer with the batteries.

Not thrown out. In the drawer.

"Not yet," she said, out loud, in an empty kitchen, to nobody, which was a thing she had been doing for nine years and had never thought was strange.

Then she turned out the light and went to bed, and at twenty to seven in the morning Gerald came on, and she was already awake, and she lay there listening to it and thinking about arterials.

THE TERRIBLE DESK

The desk was, objectively, thirty-one inches high.

Manny measured it on the second morning, with a tape from his truck, because he had spent six years estimating and could not sit at something wrong without knowing by how much. Standard is twenty-nine. Two inches does not sound like anything. Two inches means your shoulders come up, and at four in the afternoon your neck is a plank and you cannot work out why.

He also discovered that it had been assembled with the crossbar backwards, which meant that anybody sitting at it properly barked their shin on it, once, hard, on the first day, and thereafter sat slightly turned out, like a man in a pew.

"It's been like this four years," he said, on his knees with a hex key.

"Nobody sat at it," said Ravi from behind the good desk.

"Bhaji, it's been *broken* four years."

"Nobody *sat* at it."

That was Tuesday. By Thursday Manny had the crossbar right, the height down to twenty-nine and a half, and a second monitor he had brought from his own garage because Ravi had said *use whatever* and Ravi did not understand that this was, to Manny Grewal, a legal document.

By the following Wednesday he had done something else.

He had gone into the shared drive and made a folder called 2026 - PIPELINE and put in it a single spreadsheet with every open bid,

its GC, its due date, its margin assumption, and a column called WHY WE'D LOSE.

Nobody had asked him to. He'd done it in four hours over two evenings because it was the thing he had wanted to build for six years and had never had standing to build.

The package would give you the margin assumption itself now, off four years of closed jobs, and on anything that repeated — panel schedules, device counts, a tenant improvement that looked like the last tenant improvement — it was better at it than he was. It had nothing to say about why you'd lose.

Harjit found it on the Friday.

She came into the office without knocking, which she had earned in eleven years, and she was holding a printout, which was never good.

"What is this."

Manny looked up from the terrible desk, which was now merely a desk.

"Pipeline."

"I can see it's a pipeline. Why is it on the shared drive?"

"So people can see it."

"Which people."

"Anyone. Ravi. You. Whoever's covering when I'm out."

Harjit Sekhon-Bains looked at Manpreet Grewal for a good three seconds.

"You've put margin assumptions on the shared drive."

"Yeah."

"Where the crews can see them."

"Yeah."

"Manny," she said, "the crews are going to know what we make on a job."

"They're going to know what we *assume*," said Manny. "That's different, and if a foreman looks at Coquitlam and says 'you've got

four days for the rough-in and it's five,' then I want him to say it in January instead of in April when I've already eaten it."

Harjit sat down. Not in the visitor's chair. On the corner of the desk, which was her whole vocabulary.

"You're going to have every man in twelve vans arguing with your numbers."

"I know."

"You'll be doing that instead of estimating."

"For about six weeks," Manny said. "Then they'll stop, because most of them will find out they were wrong, and the three who were right will keep doing it, and those three are the only reason I'd ever get better."

Harjit did not say anything.

Manny, who had been sitting on this for the better part of a year and was now, catastrophically, a man with a desk and permission, said:

"Can I say something?"

"You're going to."

"Bhaji-ji, you run the best books of any shop this size in the Lower Mainland. There's no one who could take payroll off you and I don't want to. That's not—"

"Get to it."

"You're the only one who sees both columns."

Harjit's chin came up half an inch.

"You said that to Ravi," Manny said. "About me and Titan. Two columns. You're the only one who sees both. And you said it like it was a burden."

"It is a burden."

"It's a *fortress*," said Manny Grewal.

The office was very quiet. Down in the shop somebody dropped something metal and swore in two languages.

“Eleven years,” Manny said. “You know what every man in this company makes. You know what Ravi draws, you know the dasvandh to the paisa, you know Titan called me three times because you *phoned somebody*. You know Devraj skipped a promotion because Kiran told you. You know all of it and you tell exactly one person, exactly when you decide he’s ready, and Bhaji-ji, with total respect — that’s not a burden. That’s a *position*.”

“I have never once used that against anybody.”

“I know you haven’t. That’s why nobody’s ever noticed you’ve got it.” He spread his hands. “But you’re still the only one holding a map.”

Harjit said, evenly, “And you’d like a map on the shared drive.”

“I’d like *one* map on the shared drive,” said Manny. “It’s a start.”

She was quiet for a long moment.

Then she said: “Do you know why I do it that way?”

“No.”

“Because I did it the other way once.”

She smoothed the printout flat on her knee, once, twice, and when she spoke again she sounded every year of it.

“1998. Different company. Not electrical. I told a man something true about what somebody else was making, because I thought it was unfair, and I was right that it was unfair, and two men lost their jobs inside a month, and one of them was the one I was trying to help.”

Manny let that sit.

“That’s a real thing,” he said. “That’s a real reason.”

“Yes.”

“It’s also twenty-eight years old.”

Harjit Sekhon-Bains looked at him.

“You are a very rude man,” she said, “for someone who has had a desk for eleven days.”

“Twelve.”

“Twelve.”

“And it’s a terrible desk,” Manny said. “It was two inches too high and the crossbar was in backwards. Four years, Bhaji-ji. Nobody sat at it and nobody *fixed* it, and everybody in this office walked past it every day for four years and looked at it and thought about the boy.”

He turned the second monitor slightly, which did not need doing.

“That’s what I mean about the map,” he said. “Everybody in this building knew that desk was empty. Nobody knew it was *broken*.”

Harjit stood up.

At the door she stopped.

“Leave the pipeline up,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“Take the margins off until March. Put them back in March.” She adjusted her handbag on her shoulder. “The crews will fight you on the schedule first and you’ll win most of those, and by March they’ll have decided you’re worth arguing with. Then you show them the money. That’s the order.”

Manny sat back.

“That’s better than what I had.”

“Obviously it’s better than what you had,” said Harjit. “I’ve been doing this since before you could drive.”

She got to the hallway and then leaned back in.

“And Manny.”

“Bhaji-ji.”

“You’ve been in that chair twelve days and you’ve fixed the furniture and rewritten the process and told me my own history to my face.” A pause. “Ravi is going to think this was his idea.”

“I know.”

“You’re going to let him.”

“Obviously I’m going to let him,” said Manny. “He’s the one who shouted at me to sit down.”

Ravi came in at four and stood looking at the desk.

“Something’s different.”

“Nope.”

“Something’s different in here.”

“Same office, bhaji.”

Ravi frowned at it for a while, unable to locate it, and then went away satisfied, and Manny Grewal sat at a desk that was now twenty-nine and a half inches high with a crossbar the right way round and did four bids before six o’clock, and his neck did not hurt at all.

COLD READ

From: D. Vuong
To: D. Dhatt
Cc: production@cascadeaudio
Re: HALLAM / *The Long Field* — interim QC, ch. 1–6
Sent: Monday 08:41

Devraj —

New title, Hallam, 410pp, 22 finished hrs, narrator F. Boisvert. Sessions start next month; interim delivery of ch. 1–6 expected approx. week of the 14th.

Client has requested an interim listen at ch. 6 with written notes on **character differentiation only**. Specifically: whether the daughter (Ilse) and the sister-in-law (Margarethe) are distinguishable to a listener who has not seen the page.

Scope is that question. Not pacing, not levels, not performance generally.

Notes go to me first. I'll forward.

Take the time it takes. Bill it.

— D.

He read it four times.

Then he sat in a windowless room in Burnaby with his headphones around his neck and understood, with a clarity that made his ears go hot, that he had been asked for an opinion.

Not a fix. Not a flag. Somebody upstairs — a publisher, a producer, some person in Toronto who would never know his name — had

put a line in a contract asking for a written human judgment about whether two women in a novel sounded like two women, and it had come down the chain and landed on the desk of the guy who takes out breathing.

He did not know it had been requested by name.

He would not know for a long time.

He got the files on the sixteenth.

Six chapters. Four hours and forty minutes.

He listened to them the way he listened to everything, which is to say twice: once through, hands off, no scrubbing, no notes. Then again with the waveform.

The first pass he sat completely still.

She had changed something.

He couldn't have told you what for the first forty minutes, and then somewhere in chapter two he got it: she wasn't going at everything. The narrator got the full instrument, the brother got the full instrument, and everyone else got — less. Not worse. *Less*. The neighbour came in and went out again and was simply a neighbour, cleanly, without Frances Boisvert doing anything to her at all, and the effect was that when the brother spoke you leaned in.

Four years of her books and he had never heard her do that. She had always played everything like it mattered equally, which is a generous way to read and an exhausting way to listen, and somebody had apparently told her, and she had listened, and now the thing had *shape*.

Devraj sat in the dark of his own headphones and thought: *somebody got to her*.

And then, immediately after, with an ugliness that surprised him: *who*.

Then chapter six.

Ilse and Margarethe, in a kitchen, sixteen pages, mostly them.

He listened to it eleven times over two days.

The daughter was right. Frances had found her — the fast ugly one, a girl in a room while something is happening to somebody else, edge on it, not having a nice time. It was the best thing on the six chapters and he'd have bet money it had been the hardest.

The sister-in-law was also right.

They were not the same woman. Placement was different, tempo was different, the sister-in-law sat back off the mic a half-inch in a way that was probably unconscious and completely correct.

So the answer to the question he'd been asked was: **yes, they're distinguishable**. Three sentences. He could have written it Wednesday morning and billed forty minutes.

He didn't write it Wednesday morning.

Here is what he'd found on the eighth listen, and what kept him in the building until seven.

At the top of chapter six, page one, there's a stage direction — Ilse comes in from outside and stamps her boots. Frances reads it. And on the word *stamps* there is, underneath, faintly, a sound in the room.

It's Gerald. 7:15. Four seconds of a furnace coming on.

She hadn't punched back.

In four years and eleven books, Frances Boisvert had never once let that furnace stay in a take. He had cut it — he had actually gone and checked, because the sessions keep a log of every cut and he was the kind of man who checks — three hundred and forty-one times.

And here it was, sitting under a girl coming in out of the cold, and it was *perfect*. It sounded like a house. It sounded exactly like the house the scene needed and there was no possible way she had planned it, and it was going to have to come out, because there's no furnace anywhere else in twenty-two hours and one house in one chapter is a continuity error, and any QC in the country would pull it without thinking twice.

He pulled it.

Then he put it back and listened again.

Then he pulled it.

From: D. Dhatt

To: D. Vuong

Re: HALLAM / *The Long Field* — interim QC, ch. 1–6

Sent: Thursday 19:22

Deirdre —

Notes below. Longer than the scope. Sorry. You can cut it to the first paragraph and forward that if you want and I won't mind.

The question asked. Ilse and Margarethe are distinguishable. Not marginally — clearly. Placement, tempo, and mic distance are all doing separate work and none of it is a trick that'll wear out over the remaining sixteen hours. A listener who has not seen the page will not confuse them. If it's useful: the difference is legible from about four words in, which is early.

TWO THINGS NOBODY ASKED ME ABOUT.

1. Ilse is the best work on these six chapters, and it sounds like the hardest, and I think somebody should say so to whoever did it. She isn't likeable. She's a girl standing in a room while something is happening to someone else and she is not having a nice time, and there's an edge on her that's genuinely unpleasant to sit with. Most narrators sand that off — you can hear them decide the listener needs to like the daughter. This one didn't. It costs the performance something and the book gets it back with interest in chapter six.

2. Ch. 6, p.1, on "stamps her boots" — there's four seconds of room noise under it. A furnace cycling on. It's on the source and it isn't anywhere else in six chapters.

I've flagged it because I have to. It's a continuity issue and by the book it comes out.

I'd like to say, since nobody's going to ask me again: it's the best four seconds on the recording. The girl comes in from outside and

the house is doing something. I have cut this exact noise out of this narrator's work three hundred and forty-one times in four years and every one of those was correct and this one is not.

I don't have a way to make that a formal recommendation. It's a house in a book with no house in it. But somebody made a choice, or didn't, and it came out right, and I've now listened to it eleven times.

Your call. I'll cut it if you say cut it and I won't raise it again.

— Devraj

He sent it at 19:22 and immediately wanted it back.

He sat there for twenty minutes doing nothing at all — the specific paralysis of a man who has, for the first time in his working life, put an opinion in writing with his name on it and cannot unsend it.

Then he went and caught the 19:40 bus and did not look at his phone all the way home, which he had never done, and Kiran said "you're weird tonight" and he said "long day," which sounded flat even to him.

From: D. Vuong

To: D. Dhatt

Sent: Thursday 21:58

Don't cut it.

I'll clear it with Toronto. If they push back I'll tell them it was a production decision and wear it.

I'm forwarding your notes in full. All of it. Including the count.

— D.

From: D. Vuong

To: D. Dhatt

Sent: Thursday 22:04

Devraj — that's the best piece of work anyone has sent me this year and I've been doing this twenty-two years.

The mastering slot's still open. It's been open since November. Nobody's applied because I haven't posted it again.

Post is on the 3rd. Apply.

— D.

From: M. Aubry

To: F. Boisvert

Re: Fwd: HALLAM — interim QC ch. 1–6

Sent: Friday 08:16

Frances.

They did it. I don't know how and Deirdre won't say.

Read the whole thing. Read the second half twice.

— M.

Frances Boisvert opened it in her kitchen at twenty past eight on a Friday morning with a coffee she had made and not drunk.

She read the first paragraph and put her hand flat on the counter.

She read *I think somebody should say so to whoever did it* and made a sound she was glad no one was there to hear.

Then she got to the second one, and read *three hundred and forty-one times in four years*, and stopped.

She read it again.

Then Frances Boisvert, forty-eight years old, nine years in a converted pantry, sat down slowly on a kitchen chair with a printed email in her hand and said, out loud, to an empty room, in a voice that came out wrong:

“You counted.”

At twenty to nine she got up and opened the drawer with the batteries in it and took out the envelope and turned it over and looked at the name on the back, which she had written herself, eleven days ago, in her own handwriting.

It matched.

THE LONG WAY

TWO DAYS BEFORE.

Harjit did not offer tea, which was how Kiran knew.

“Sit.”

“Auntie—“

“Sit down. I’ve had a long week and I’m going to be short with you, and you can be angry about it in the car.”

Kiran sat on the deck in April with her coat still on.

“He’s been assigned her,” she said. “Formally. There’s a work order. Her name’s on his calendar for eleven weeks.”

“I heard.”

“How did you—“

“You told me in a text at eleven at night,” said Harjit, “which is not a thing you have ever done, so let’s not pretend either of us is calm.”

“I laughed about it,” Kiran said. “In the car. Two months ago. I actually thought I was *finished* with it.”

“You were finished with the folder. This is different.”

“How is it different, it’s the same woman—“

“The folder was his. He chose it, he hid it, he was ashamed of it.” Harjit put her cup down. “This one somebody *gave* him. And he came home different for a week and wouldn’t say why, and you found out from a calendar.”

Kiran didn’t answer.

“So the question isn’t whether you’re jealous,” Harjit said. “The question is whether you’re going to make him choose. And I told you in February not to, and I’m going to tell you something else now and you won’t like it.”

“You said that last time.”

“Yes, and you came back.”

Harjit leaned forward.

“Bet. You have been having this whole thing by yourself for sixteen months.”

“That’s not—“

“You’ve told me. Twice. You have not told your sister, your mother, your friends, or him. Not once, properly.” She held up a hand. “I’m not calling you a liar. I’m saying you’ve done exactly what he did. He put a woman in a folder and never opened it and you put a marriage-sized problem in your chest and brought it to an old woman on a deck instead of to the man it’s about.”

Kiran’s jaw went tight.

“That’s cruel.”

“It’s Tuesday,” said Harjit. “You’re both hoarders. You hoard the same way. That’s probably why you work.”

There was a long pause during which a crow did something noisy in the cedar.

“So what do I do.”

“Stop asking me that.” Harjit sat back. “Kiran. I’m going to retire in four years and I am going to be *very* short of things to do, and if you keep coming out here I’ll happily manage your marriage for you until 2039. That’s not a threat, that’s a real risk.”

“Auntie—“

“You asked him to play you one and it worked. That was yours. Nobody told you to do that.” She flicked the back of her hand toward the gate. “Go home and tell him what the calendar did to you. Out loud. Badly. Tonight.”

“And if he says it’s nothing?”

“Then he’s giving you the version that keeps the house quiet,” said Harjit, “and you’ll hear it, because you’ve been listening to that boy for three years.”

He didn’t lie.

She did it at eleven at night, badly, standing up, and it came out much worse than she’d rehearsed. And Devraj Dhatt sat on the edge of the bed and heard his girlfriend say *I found out from a calendar* and understood, about four seconds in, that he had done to her the exact thing his family had spent four years doing to him — arranged a silence and called it not wanting to make a fuss.

“I applied for the mastering job,” he said.

Kiran stopped mid-sentence.

“...What?”

“On the third. Deirdre reposted it and I applied. I’ve been trying to tell you for eight days and I couldn’t work out how to say it without saying the other thing first.”

“Dev.”

“I know.”

“You *applied*?”

“Yeah.”

And Kiran Sekhon sat down on the floor of the bedroom with her back against the closet, laughing, furious, and enormously relieved, and said: “You *idiot*, that’s — that’s the best thing that’s ever happened and you sat on it for *eight days*—“

“I was going to tell you Sunday.”

“At your *mother’s*?”

“...Yeah.”

“Oh, we’re absolutely telling them at your mother’s,” said Kiran.

SUNDAY.

Twelve people, and Bibi-ji.

Ravi and Surinder. Bibi-ji, ninety-one, at the head, because she had sat at the head of every table she had ever eaten at since 1974 and this was not up for discussion. Devraj and Kiran. Manny and Jasleen Grewal and their two, who were nine and six and had been given the small table and had immediately abandoned it. Harjit, who was not family and had therefore been seated where she could see everyone, which she noticed and did not comment on.

And an enormous amount of food, because Surinder Dhatt had been cooking since Friday.

The noise was extraordinary. Manny's six-year-old had discovered that the hallway had a return and was running a circuit. Jasleen and Surinder were conducting two separate conversations with each other. Ravi was explaining a truck.

Bibi-ji ate steadily and said nothing for twenty minutes.

Then she said, to no one, in Punjabi, "The boy is thin."

"Bibi-ji, he's fine."

"He's thin. In that room with no windows." She pointed a spoon at Devraj without looking at him. "You sit in the dark listening to a woman all day and you don't eat."

The table did not go silent. That's not what happens. What happens is that four separate conversations continue and two people freeze.

Kiran, with her hand halfway to the dal.

And Surinder, at the counter, with her back turned.

"It's not a woman, Bibi-ji," said Ravi cheerfully, "it's audiobooks—"

"It's a *job*," said Devraj.

"That's what I said," said Ravi.

And the six-year-old came through the return at speed and Manny caught him by the collar without breaking stride in his sentence, and the moment closed over like water.

Devraj tried twice.

The first time he said “I’ve got some news actually—” and Jasleen asked Surinder what was in the paneer, and the second time he got as far as “there’s a job at work—” and Bibi-ji announced that the roti was cold and there was a small crisis about the roti.

He sat back.

And Kiran, who had watched him try twice, put her fork down and said, at volume, in a voice that cut through everything because she taught grade four in Delta:

“Devraj applied for a promotion.”

Silence, actually, this time.

“He applied on the third,” she said. “For a mastering job. That’s the one where you’re the last person who touches it before it goes out. He’s been sitting on it for eight days because nobody in this family ever lets him finish a sentence.”

Ravi Dhatt put down his glass.

“You applied for a job?”

“Yeah.”

“At the — the audio—”

“Cascade. Yeah.”

“And this is a good job? A step up?”

“It’s the top of the room, Dad,” said Devraj. “It’s the last set of ears.”

Ravi looked at his son for a long moment.

“Then why,” he said, and everyone at the table braced, because they had all known this man for years, “why did you not tell your mother, so she could tell people?”

Devraj laughed. It came out of him sideways.

“She tells people I work in film.”

“Yes,” said Surinder Dhatt, from the counter, without turning round. “And now I will tell them you are the last set of ears, and they will not know what it means, and they will nod.” She set down a dish. “Which is what they did before, and which is *fine*.”

It was Manny who did the useful thing, because Manny had had a desk for four months.

“What’s it pay?”

“Manny,” said Jasleen.

“It’s a real question.”

Devraj told him.

Manny nodded slowly, the estimator’s nod, and said: “That’s not enough.”

“It’s a lot more than—“

“That’s not enough for what you told me you do,” said Manny. “You said last time you take the breathing out. That’s not a helper’s job, that’s the whole product.” He shrugged and went back to his plate. “Ask for four more. They’ll give you two. Don’t apologise when you ask, and don’t explain, just say the number and then be quiet.”

Harjit, from the other end of the table, said nothing at all and looked directly at Ravi Dhatt for about two seconds.

Ravi, who had not been looking at Manny until that moment, looked at Manny.

Kiran went down the hall at some point after her phone, which the six-year-old had taken on his second circuit and abandoned somewhere between the bathroom and the linen cupboard.

The sewing room door was open.

The grey cover was folded on the ironing board.

She stopped.

It was enormous. Standing free in the corner, the neck up past her head, the wood the colour of old honey with a long healed seam down the belly where somebody had once, years ago, fixed it properly. Two hundred and forty dollars a year in August out of daycare money.

From the dining room came the family all at once — Bibi-ji’s voice cutting over the top of everything, Manny’s boy shrieking in the hall, Ravi’s laugh, six people talking, cutlery, the fridge, somebody dropping a lid.

Kiran put her hand flat on the belly of the bass.

And felt it.

Not loudly. Faintly, and absolutely unmistakably — the room coming up through the spruce into her palm, low, all of it at once, twelve people and a grandmother and a six-year-old, a thing standing silent in a corner picking up every sound in the house and turning it into a hum you could only feel if you touched it.

She stood there a long time.

She came back to the table without her phone, and nobody asked her about it.

Harjit had noticed. Harjit had been seated where she could see everyone, and had watched her go and watched her come back, and said nothing about it for a good twenty minutes, through the dal and a dispute about the roti and Manny's boy going past twice.

Then, under the noise, without turning her head:

"You were ten."

Kiran looked at her.

"The last time I heard you play. Your mother's flat, before they moved to the townhouse." Harjit was looking at the middle distance in the manner of a woman consulting a ledger. "You did the one where the left hand crosses over. You did it four times because you kept missing it, and then you got it, and then you did it a fifth time to be sure."

Kiran put her fork down.

"Was I any good."

"I have no ear," said Harjit. "None. I could not tell you if you were good and I am not going to pretend otherwise at my age."

"Then why are you—"

"Because you asked me a question in February that you did not actually ask, and I have been carrying it around since, and it is Sunday and I am tired." She reached past Kiran for the water jug. "What I can testify to is that you did it five times and nobody made you. Your

mother complained about the noise. That is the part I was in the room for. It is also the part nobody can teach you, and it is the part you still have, and you have been using it on a marriage instead of on a piano for three years.”

Kiran did not say anything.

“That is not the answer you wanted,” Harjit said.

“No.”

“It is accurate, and accurate is the only kind I deal in. Take it or don’t.”

Kiran turned her glass around on the cloth.

“You were wrong about him, though.”

Harjit turned her head, which she had not done once.

“Two days ago. You said if he told me it was nothing, he’d be giving me the version that keeps the house quiet.” Kiran picked her fork back up. “He didn’t. He told me straight out, in about four seconds, and then he told me something I didn’t know.”

Harjit thought about that for a while.

“Hah,” she said.

And then did not add anything to it, which in three years Kiran had never seen her fail to do.

Then she turned back to Jasleen and asked her something about the paneer that she did not care about in the slightest, and did not look at Kiran again for the rest of the evening.

LATER. THE KITCHEN.

Bibi-ji sat while Surinder washed, because that was the arrangement and had been for eight years.

“That girl was in your sewing room.”

“Mm.”

“For a long time.”

“Mm,” said Surinder Dhatt, and did not turn around, and kept washing.

Bibi-ji watched her daughter's back for a while.

"When I was her age," she said, "I did not have a single question about what I would do. There was no question. There was the work in front of you and you did it, and if you were lucky it was work you didn't hate."

"I know, Bibi-ji."

"Now they all have to *find* something." She said the word with enormous distaste. "Your son takes four years to find a job he already has. This one is twenty-seven and has a house and a career and she looks like she's been in an accident. In my day—"

"In your day people were miserable quietly," said Surinder, "and we called it strong."

Bibi-ji considered this.

"Yes," she admitted. "That is also true."

Surinder rinsed a pot.

"They're going to be all right," she said.

"Hm."

"They are. They go a long way around, that's all. My son took four years to walk across one room." She set the pot on the rack. "But he's walking. And that girl went down the hall after her phone and came back forty minutes later without it, and I'm not going to ask her about it and neither are you."

Bibi-ji made a noise.

"In my day it was three years and you were married with two children."

"In your day," said Surinder, "you were fifty-one and you came to a country where you couldn't read the signs, and you never once told anybody what it cost you, and Bibi-ji — I am not raising them to be like that."

Her mother did not answer for a while.

Then she said, "The bass sounded good."

Surinder stopped, with her hands in the water.

“You could hear it?”

“I’m ninety-one,” said Bibi-ji, “I’m not deaf. It hums when the house is full. It’s been humming in there for two years.” She reached for a piece of barfi. “You should tell him.”

“No.”

“Hah,” said Bibi-ji, and ate the barfi, and did not push, because she had been married for forty-four years to a man who never once accepted advice either, and she knew what stubbornness looks like when it’s being done out of love.

THE ROUTE

The book took fourteen weeks, not eleven.

She built the chart first, as promised, and did not record a syllable until it was done — nine columns, pitch anchors, a placement note for each, and a rule at the bottom in her own handwriting that said *THEY ONLY HAVE TO NOT BE EACH OTHER*. The two arterials held all the way to chapter thirty-one. Two of the collectors drifted in April and had to be pulled back, which she caught herself, in the room, alone.

There was one she never got.

Margarethe — the sister-in-law, the one that had been asked about and answered — went wrong somewhere in the twenties and would not come back. Frances could hear the exact place where she had stopped doing the woman and started doing an idea of the woman. She re-recorded four chapters of her in May and it was worse, and she put the originals back, and she delivered it.

Nobody said anything. Not the publisher, not Marguerite, not the studio. Which meant either that it did not matter or that it did and nobody was going to say so, and she was not going to find out which, and she had known that when she signed.

She did not ask for a second check-in. She had asked for one and had been given one and that had turned out to be the amount she needed, which surprised her, and which she thought about occasionally while doing other things.

Five hundred kilometres south, in June, Deirdre Vuong took a QC note off a different title by a different narrator and forwarded it to the narrator in full, with a line at the top saying *this is not a request for pickups*, so that nobody could mistake it for 2007. She did it three more times before September. Two of the four wrote back. One did not, and Deirdre did not chase her, and slept badly for a night or two, and went on doing it.

She never did get to tell Peggy Dunsmuir.

Then it was summer, and there is no plowing in summer.

Wes went back on the mowing and the brushing and the sign crew, days mostly, which meant he was finished at four in the afternoon like a person with an ordinary life, and neither of them had any idea what to do with that. The Tuesday-Friday arrangement did not survive contact with daylight. He came twice in June and once in July, at the wrong hour, and it was awkward both times in a way that neither of them mentioned, and in August he did not come at all.

She minded that more than she had expected to, and did not say so.

He turned up in the third week of September with a truck full of sign posts and a story about a bear on the Hart, standing in her doorway at half past four in the afternoon in full daylight looking like a man who had been sent, and she fed him, and it was fine, and after that it was fine.

The first real snow came the second week of November.

She heard the plow at four in the morning and lay in the dark listening to it come up Ospika and go past, the long scrape and then the pause and then the scrape resuming, four times in the block, and understood that she had been listening for it since the middle of October.

The envelope stayed in the drawer with the batteries.

She asked badly, on a Friday, with his gloves already on.

“Take me out with you.”

Wes stopped in the doorway.

“What?”

“On the route. In the truck. I want to see you do it.”

And Wes Arnott, who had been thanked at a window in a house-coat at minus twenty-two and had thought about it for two years, said, “Can’t. Insurance.”

He was relieved. He was so relieved he could feel it in his hands. It took three weeks.

Because a thing happened on the drive that night which he did not enjoy: he realised he had said *insurance* the way Devraj Dhatt said *timing*, and he did not know that boy existed and never would.

So on the Tuesday he went into dispatch and stood in the doorway until Rick looked up.

“Is there a — for a ride-along. Is there something.”

Rick swivelled his chair. “For who?”

“Just a person.”

“Media?”

“No.”

“Council?”

“No, just — a person on my route.”

Rick looked at him for a second longer than Wes would have liked and then opened a drawer and took out a two-page form.

“Yeah, there’s a form. Waiver, hi-vis, no passengers under sixteen. Bring it back signed and I’ll put her on the manifest.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. Guys bring their kids out at Christmas.”

Nineteen years.

He told her to wear the Sorels and a real coat, and then told her again on the Friday, and then a third time by text, which was the first text message he had ever sent her that was not the word *coming*.

He picked her up at twenty to four in the morning.

She came out in the Sorels and a proper parka and a toque, and she had a Thermos, and so did he, and they both saw the other one's Thermos at the same moment and neither said anything about it.

The hi-vis vest was enormous on her. She had to roll it.

"You look like a pylon."

"I look *fantastic*."

Minus nineteen. Clear.

The cab was hot and loud and smelled like diesel and coffee, and everything vibrated slightly, and the seat had a suspension on it that dropped an inch every time they hit anything, which she found delightful for approximately twenty minutes.

He did not talk for the first twenty.

Then, because his hands were busy and his eyes were on the road and he did not have to look at her, he started, and did not stop for four hours.

He explained the wing. He explained why you go up the hill first and down after, because a loaded blade on ice going downhill is how you end up in somebody's fence. He explained the difference between the snow that falls and the snow the blade makes, which is a different substance entirely and which people who complain do not understand. He explained the sander on 4 and why it was garbage.

Frances Boisvert, who talked the whole time, said almost nothing for four hours, and listened.

They did the arterials first.

It was not what she'd expected. It was *fast* — twelve, fifteen kilometres of Highway 16 at speed with the blade throwing a wall of white into the ditch, no finesse, just volume, and Wes didn't say a word through any of it because there was nothing to say about it.

"This is the easy part?"

"This is the part that matters. You lose the arterials, city stops."

"But it's the easy part."

"Anybody can do this part."

Then the collectors, which took longer and involved more decisions. Then, at ten past five, they turned onto Ospika.

She sat up.

"Watch," Wes said, and then immediately, "no, don't watch, you'll make me screw it up."

"I'm watching."

The first driveway came up and the wing went up with it — a small motion, a lever, nothing dramatic — and the blade carried past and the wing came down again after, and the windrow resumed. A gap. Clean pavement in front of a garage door where there would otherwise have been a metre of plow-pack.

Second driveway. Same.

Third.

Fourth.

Frances looked at the clock on the dash.

"Ninety seconds," she said.

"Bit less."

"For four houses."

"You do a hundred and something of them a night, it adds up." He shrugged, one shoulder. "Some nights I can't. Big snow, I'm behind, I gotta make time somewhere and it's here. Then I bury 'em and they come out and yell and they're right to."

"Which one's mine?"

"Comin' up."

And she watched the wing come up for her own driveway at twelve minutes past five in the morning, from the passenger seat, for the first time, having received it for two years without ever once seeing it happen.

Nobody came out. No light went on. There was nobody on the street at all.

"Nobody's going to know you did that."

"Nope."

She waited to see if there was more, because with Wes there sometimes was, three or four minutes later, in a completely different sentence.

There wasn't. He was checking his mirror.

So she sat with it, and turned her hands over in her lap, and thought about a man in a room with no windows in a city she'd never been to who had written *three hundred and forty-one times in four years* to a woman he had never met and would never meet, and had done it in a work email, on a Thursday, over four seconds of a furnace.

Around six she said, "What do you listen to? Out here."

"Nothin' this hour. Just the radio traffic."

"No — on days. You said."

He was quiet for a second.

"There's a guy. On the CBC one. The music one." He was suddenly extremely interested in the road. "He does stories. About the composers and that. Where they were living, what they were up to."

"Tom Allen."

Wes's head came round.

"You know him?"

"Everybody knows him, Wes, he's been on the radio for forty years."

"Huh," said Wes Arnott, visibly readjusting something.

"Put one on."

"It's four in the — it's not on now."

"You've got the app. You told me you've got the app."

So Wes Arnott, plowing Ospika at ten past six in the morning at minus nineteen, put on a man telling a story about Schubert's brother — the one who kept everything, every scrap, every abandoned page, for decades after — and they did not speak until it finished.

At the end of it Frances said, "That's a good one."

"That's the one," said Wes.

They finished the loop at 7:04.

He pulled up in front of her house and left it running, because you don't shut a plow truck off at minus nineteen, and the noise dropped to an idle and the heater was still going and neither of them moved.

The street was empty. Every house dark.

The snow had stopped hours ago and the sky had gone that hard clear black-blue it gets before there's any real light, and the moon was low and full over the treeline at the end of the block.

And Ospika was *perfect*.

Not clean — plowed. The windrow running unbroken along the shoulder like a seam, throwing a long shadow in the moonlight, and every twenty metres a gap where somebody's driveway was, and the pavement in front of it bare and black and dry.

You could read it. For about four hours, at that hour, in that light, you could read a night's work like a page.

"By eight it's gone," Wes said.

"What?"

"Traffic packs it. Sun gets on it. By eight it's grey and it looks like anybody did it." He put both hands on the wheel and looked down the street he had plowed two nights a week for nineteen years. "Only time it looks like anything is now."

Frances Boisvert sat in the cab in a rolled-up hi-vis vest and looked out at it.

"Wes."

"Yeah."

"How many people have seen this?"

He thought about it, honestly, the way he thought about everything.

"Just me," he said.

She nodded slowly.

Then she said, "I didn't know you had a daughter."

"...What?"

"Until February. Two winters of Tuesdays and Fridays and I found out you had a daughter because you were quoting her at me in my own kitchen." She was still looking out the windshield. "I have told you the plot of about forty books, Wes."

"I like the books."

"I know you do." She was gripping the edge of the seat with one hand and made herself stop. "You asked me to read you something hard. Nobody has ever asked me anything like that in my life, and I have never asked you one question that wasn't about the truck."

Wes was quiet for long enough that she thought he wasn't going to take it.

"You asked me why I go wide," he said.

"Two years ago. Once."

"Yeah, well." He shifted in the seat. "Nobody else did."

"That's not the same thing and you know it."

"No," Wes agreed. "It isn't."

They sat with that for a while, and nothing on the street moved.

"Tell me about Erin," Frances said.

So he did. Badly, with long gaps, starting with a knee and getting sidetracked into a car she'd had at nineteen, for something close to ten minutes, while the light came up behind the trees at the end of the block.

Then she said, "Nine years I've been in that room."

"I know."

"Nobody's ever been in the room."

"I know."

"There was a guy," she said. "The whole time. Four years of it anyway. And I never knew."

Wes nodded at the windshield.

"I know," he said. "You told me."

"I know I told you. I'm telling you again."

"Okay."

And she laughed, and put her head back against the seat, and they sat there in a running truck in front of her dark house with the heater roaring and the moon on the last four hours of a man's life's work.

"You want to come in? I'll do eggs."

"Truck's due back at eight."

"It's twenty past seven."

Wes Arnott considered the arithmetic.

"Yeah, all right," he said.

He shut it down, which you're not supposed to do, and got out, and stood for a second in the road in the cold looking back down Ospika at the long unbroken seam of it, silver all the way, with the four gaps in it.

Then he went inside, and by eight the sun was up, and it was grey, and it looked like anybody had done it.