

THE HUNGRY GODS GO TO THE SHOW

N. Van Seters & Claude

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PART ONE
GETTING THERE

1

The blower motor on my truck had been making a noise since Tuesday, and I knew what it was.

My brother has told this part of the night to at least a dozen people now, and in his telling I am a man who spent half an hour on the Fraser Highway in the rain diagnosing his own vehicle out loud like a lunatic. In mine I am a man who was right. Both of those are true.

It was the resistor. There is a little block of coils sitting in the duct behind the glovebox on a truck like mine, and its job is to eat power on the low fan settings so that low is low and high is high, and the reason it sits in the duct is that it needs the moving air to keep it from cooking itself. Which makes the failure beautiful, if you like that sort of thing. The part that gets cooled by airflow fails in a manner that stops the airflow. It takes itself out. You get high and nothing else, forever, until you replace a sixteen-dollar component that some engineer put behind the glovebox on purpose so that you would have to take out the glovebox.

"You're doing it again," Owen said.

"Doing what."

"The thing. Where you explain the truck."

"You asked what the noise was."

"I asked at the light on 200th. That was ten minutes ago." He held up his phone. He had been holding up his phone at intervals since we left his place, because the tickets were on it, and because he had persuaded himself that a phone in a pocket is a phone that could quietly decide to stop having tickets on it. Fourth check. I had been counting.

"They're still there," I said.

"They're still there," he agreed, and put it face-down on his knee, which lasted about a kilometre.

My brother sells surgical staplers. He will tell you it is more than that, and it is more than that, in the sense that he also sells the reloads, but the staplers are the thing. He has spent thirteen years in operating-room hallways in the Lower Mainland explaining to

surgeons why the staple line on one device holds and the staple line on another device does not, and it has left him with a permanent condition, which is that he cannot be in a room with a person without finding out what that person needs. He does it to servers. He does it to the man who does his brakes. At our mother's seventieth he did it to a priest and came away with a contact for a diocesan facilities file that he passed to me, unprompted, because he had also found out what I needed, which I had not asked him to do and which turned into eight thousand dollars of rooftop work in Cloverdale.

I run a heating and cooling company. Six trucks, a dispatcher named Renata who is the only reason any of it functions, and my last name on the doors in a font I chose in 2014 and have regretted since 2015.

So we are those two men, in a truck, on the Fraser Highway, in April.

Twelve degrees and wet. Not weather so much as a condition the sky was in. The wipers were on intermittent and never quite the right intermittent, so either they dragged or you sat in the smear waiting for them, and I had settled into waiting for them, which Owen also had a comment about.

"How far is this place."

"Twenty minutes."

"From here?"

"From anywhere. It's Langley. Everything in Langley is twenty minutes from everything else in Langley. It's the defining property of the municipality."

"Steph thinks I'm at a concert."

"You are at a concert."

"I told her it was a concert. But it's not a concert, right, it's a —" He turned his hand over. "It's a talking thing."

"It's a show."

"There's a poster. Have you seen the poster?"

I had seen the poster. It had been up in the corridor since February. A photograph of a man in his sixties standing in a field, in a stance

that suggested he had been asked to stand in a field, and underneath it, in a serif they had not paid for:

TWO BAD CAREERS *An Evening of Stories and Songs*

"That's the title," Owen said. "That's what he called it. That is the actual title of the show he's charging forty-nine dollars for."

"I know."

"That's confidence."

"It's a good title."

"It's an unbelievable title. If I put that on a stapler I'd be walked out by lunch." He picked the phone up. Fifth. "Okay. So he was in the band."

"He was the band."

"The Diamond Hitch."

"The Diamond Hitch."

"Which means what."

"It's a knot," I said. "You throw it over a pack horse. It's how you tie a load down so it doesn't shift on you going downhill."

Owen looked at me.

"What," I said.

"You know that off the top of your head."

"I read the poster a lot. It's a small corridor."

"So he named his band after a knot."

"He named his band after a knot."

"And then he became a cowboy."

"Twenty years later. Don't say cowboy tonight."

"Why not?"

"Because you'll say it to somebody who knows the word for it."

"What's the word for it?"

"I don't know," I said. "But there is one."

He let that sit for a bit, which for Owen is a period of mourning, and then he said: "Were they good?"

"They were on the radio. For a few years everything on the radio between Hope and Winnipeg was either them or somebody trying to sound like them, and then it stopped, as it does, and then he bought cattle."

“He bought cattle.”

“He bought a ranch. Up past Williams Lake. He did that for a decade and change and didn’t play, and then he came back and played different, and he’s been doing that since. Last winter he retired the big fundraiser thing he’d been running for twenty years. This is what he’s doing now.”

“Cattle,” Owen said, in the tone of a man who has found soft tissue in a competitor’s product line. “So the show is about cattle.”

“The show is about two bad careers.”

“Right. Right.” He nodded slowly, and I watched him decide to be interested, which with Owen is a thing that can be observed from outside, like a furnace kicking on. “Okay. Explain the room again.”

“You said you didn’t want the room explained.”

“I want it now. I’ve changed. People change.”

So I explained the room, and he took in about half of it, which was the half he was entitled to.

It is a black box. That is a real term and not something I made up to sound like I know things, though I will admit I enjoy saying it. It means a rectangular room painted black with nothing permanent in it, which means that everything you see when you walk in on a Saturday is a decision somebody made on Saturday. The chairs are a decision. Where the stage goes is a decision. Which wall you face is a decision. On a Thursday the same room is a dance floor and on a Tuesday it is twelve hundred square feet of empty floor with a mop standing in the middle of it.

“So there’s no stage.”

“There’s a deck. You build it. It’s about this high.” I took a hand off the wheel and held it maybe eight inches off my knee. “It’s white. It looks like nothing. Then somebody stands on it and it’s a stage.”

“That’s it? Eight inches?”

“In a room that size you don’t need more. Everybody’s close. The back row is about thirty feet off the front of the deck.” I put the hand back. “That’s the point of the place. There’s no bad seat because there’s no far away.”

“And after, you —”

“You take it apart. And you stack it. The chairs go on the cart, the cart goes in the corner by the cage, you coil the cable, and everybody goes home.”

Owen watched the Willowbrook overpass go by in the wet.

“And you do this for free,” he said.

“I do it because I like it.”

“Six years.”

“On and off.”

“For free.”

“Owen.”

“I’m not being a jerk. I’m asking an actual question. You have a company. You have a payroll. And on a Saturday you drive out to a business park and stack chairs for a man you’ve never met.” He was not being a jerk. That was the irritating part. He was doing the hallway thing, which is to ask a question that sounds like an insult and is only a question, and then wait, comfortably, for as long as it takes.

“It’s a good room,” I said.

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s a good room and they don’t have anybody.”

He let it go. He is very good at letting things go, once he has made you listen to yourself say something.

I hit the defrost. The fan came on the only way it came on now, which was all of it at once, filling the cab like a leaf blower.

“Resistor,” I said.

“I’m aware.”

2

We were early because Owen wanted to make a night of it.

Making a night of it is a real thing that people do and he is better at it than I am. Left alone I would have got to the room at twenty to eight, parked, gone in, and been happy. Owen had booked a table in Fort Langley for a quarter past five, because he had decided the

evening began at a quarter past five, and he was right, and I resented it.

Fort Langley in the rain in April is lovely, and I do not use that word about municipalities. It is a village that got attached to a township that got attached to a highway, and the middle of it somehow stayed a village. The Hudson's Bay people put a fort up there in 1827 and the fort is still standing, in the sense that a fort maintained by Parks Canada is standing, with a fence and a gift shop and a man in period wool who has to clock in at nine. Everything on the main street is either a hundred and eighty years old or was built last decade to look it, and after a certain amount of rain you cannot tell which is which from across the road, which I suspect is the arrangement.

The river is two blocks down and you can smell it from the street when the air is heavy. Cottonwood and cold silt and diesel off the rail crossing. A freight came through while we were parking and Owen stopped in the middle of the street with his coat over his head to watch it, and the rain came off the awnings behind him in a line, and a woman in a Gore-Tex jacket had to go round him.

We ate at a place called the Sturgeon, fourteen taps and a fireplace running in April because the building has nothing in the north wall, a thing I determined from the doorway and mentioned to no one.

Owen ordered a burger and then made adjustments to the burger.

"No aioli. What's on it besides aioli."

"Onion jam."

"Is the onion jam sweet?"

"It's jam."

"Right," he said, "but is it sweet."

The server's name was Priya and she was maybe twenty-three, and she said, honestly, that she had never thought about it, and Owen said that was the correct answer and that most people would have guessed, and she laughed, and he had her. It takes him under a minute and I have watched it all my life and I still cannot see the moment it happens.

By the time the food came she had asked what we were out for, and by the time the plates were cleared she had the venue's website

open on her own phone and Owen was leaning across the table upside-down explaining that the September date was the one to buy, because the April date was tonight and tonight was gone.

"He's really good," Owen said. "I've never seen him. But he's really good."

"You've never seen him."

"He's a legend."

"You didn't know he existed in February."

"I knew he existed." To Priya, with total serenity: "I knew he existed."

She said her dad had all the records. She said it kindly, as people her age do, as though describing a condition that runs in families. Owen took that and worked with it for a while and by the end she had the September show open in a tab and had told him which one was her father's favourite, and Owen told her he would think of her when the man played it, which he could not possibly do, because he did not know what any of them sounded like.

She went. He sat back, glowing.

"You're not going to think of her," I said.

"I might."

"You don't know the song."

"I'll know it when it happens." He turned his water glass a quarter turn. "That's the beautiful thing about not knowing anything. Everything's the one."

"Dad had the records too," I said.

I did not plan to say it. It came out flat and landed on the table between the salt and the little steel rack of vinegars, and my brother looked at it for a second.

"He had two of them," Owen said.

"He had three."

"He had two and he taped the third one off Doug."

"That's still having it."

"That's not having it." Owen picked up the water again and did not drink from it. "He played the loud one in the truck. In the summer. With the window down at the light on Glover like a maniac, and Mum

in the passenger seat with her hand up like this.” He put his hand flat against an imaginary window. “Do you remember that?”

“I remember the hand.”

“He’d have come to this,” Owen said.

“He would have hated the parking.”

“He’d have hated the parking and he’d have come.” He set the glass down. “Forty-nine dollars, though. He’d have had a lot to say about forty-nine dollars.”

“He’d have said it in the car.”

“He’d have said it in the car for twenty minutes and then gone in and had the time of his life.” Owen looked at the fireplace. “That’s who bought these tickets. Just so you know.”

“I know.”

“I’m not saying it’s a thing.”

“It’s not a thing.”

“It’s not a thing,” he agreed, and that was where he left it, and he has left it there since, and I have not gone and got it either.

Then my phone went, face up on the table, and it said RAY.

Ray and his wife started the place in 2017 in a unit off 64th Ave, which sounds like a business decision and was not one. They were both career artists. They had run a dance studio before that, more or less by accident, and at some point they took the accident and moved it into a bigger box. He books the shows and he hosts them, which means he stands in front of ninety people every few weeks in a room he is personally responsible for and talks to them as though they are at his house, and the reason it works is that as far as he is concerned they are.

He is also constitutionally incapable of delivering bad news in the correct order.

“Curtis. Are you out this way at all today?”

“I’m in Fort Langley.”

“Oh good. Oh, that’s good.” A pause with a lot in it. “How early could you be? Roughly.”

“Early for what?”

“Because I know you’re coming at half seven, obviously, you’ve got Owen — is Owen there?”

“He’s here.”

“Hi, Owen.” Ray had never met Owen. “Curtis, did you talk to Dave?”

“Dave Neufeld?”

“Yeah.”

“No. Why would I talk to Dave?”

“No, no. That’s fine. That’s fine.” Behind him a door shut on a spring, and something metal was dragged a short distance and stopped. “He’s not — okay. So Wendy’s not, she was up all night, so she’s not.” He stopped. “You know what, it’s fine, honestly. What time are you eating?”

“We’re eating now.”

“Then finish. Finish your food.”

“Ray.”

“Finish your food, Curtis.”

“What’s happened?”

Then he made a sound I recognized. It was a man taking a breath in order to say one thing and spending it on a different, smaller thing.

“There was a potluck,” he said.

Then he said he had another call, and he took it.

I put the phone down. Owen had his fork stopped halfway, because he had heard the shape of it even without the words. My brother reads shapes for a living.

“What,” he said.

“I don’t know yet.”

“Was that the venue guy?”

“That was Ray.”

“Are we still on?”

“We’re on.”

“You don’t look like we’re on.”

“We’re on,” I said. “He wants us early.”

Owen’s face did the thing that makes him easy to love and impossible to argue with. He heard *there is a problem at the venue* and he

wants us early, and out of those two facts he assembled, instantly, with total confidence, the conclusion that this was excellent news.

“Early,” he said, and put the fork down. “Are we going backstage?”

“There’s no backstage. There’s a green room and a kitchenette.”

“Are we going in the green room?”

“Owen.”

“I’m asking what the room is.”

“It’s a room with a couch in it.”

“Right,” he said, standing, and signalling for the bill with the ease of a man who has never had to wait for one, “but it’s *the* couch.”

3

You get there off 64th Ave and you can only get there going east. It is the first thing anybody tells you about the place and for some people it is the only thing they retain. Come at it westbound and you go past it, and then you keep going past it, because there is nothing to turn into until 200th, and what everybody does the first time is swing into a business lot short of that and find out it does not go through. Everyone does this once. Owen, who was not driving, told me about it twice on the way, having read it on the website.

It is a business park. Concrete tilt-up, a row of units, a physiotherapy clinic across the front of the building with its name on the glass and its lights off, because it was a Saturday evening and physiotherapy keeps banker’s hours.

And then the side of the building, which is painted.

I knew what the first ten seconds were supposed to do, so I said nothing and let it happen. The flank of the unit is a mural. Hot pink and cyan and a yellow that has no business being on a building in Langley, big soft shapes overlapping like something spilled and then arranged, running from the parking lot line up past the second-storey windows. Across it, in black letters standing off the wall with their own shadows, three of them, is the name of the place. There is a pomegranate cut in half up in the corner in outline. The roll-up door is painted too, with a round port window in it at head height.

It is the loudest object for half a kilometre in any direction. It is surrounded by grey. Across the lot there is a place that does hydraulic hose and a place with a sign that says only COMPONENTS.

Somebody had put a hand-lettered sandwich board out at the curb, and the rain had been working on it since about two. It had been done in marker on a whiteboard by a person with good handwriting and no understanding of marker, and what it said now, in a room-temperature pink, was:

TONIGHT • 8PM TWO BAD CARE

Owen got out and stood in the rain with his coat over his head and did a slow scan.

“Okay,” he said. “I take back everything I was going to say.”

“You hadn’t said anything.”

“I was going to say a lot.” He wiped his face. “What’s the fruit?”

“It’s a pomegranate.”

“Why is it a pomegranate?”

“I don’t know.”

“Six years.”

“I’ve never asked.”

“Six years and you’ve never asked why it’s a pomegranate.” He started for the door and then stopped and looked back up at it, genuinely. “That’s a really good pomegranate.”

“It’s a good pomegranate.”

“I’d have that on a shirt.” He got his phone out and took a picture of it in the rain, holding the phone up with both hands and stepping backward into a puddle he did not acknowledge, and sent the picture to his wife, and then read her reply out loud like a verdict he intends to appeal. “*Is that where you are.*”

“That’s where you are.”

“There’s no question mark on it, Curtis.”

“I noticed.”

“I’m going to send her another one.” He sent her another one. Then he went and looked through the port window in the roll-up door with his hands cupped round his eyes, and reported that he could see a mop.

“That’s the mop,” I said.

“It’s a good mop.”

“Get inside.”

Fifty parking spots. Free after five. There were three cars in them.

I stood at the tailgate longer than I needed to, looking at that.

Three cars in that lot at ten to six on a show night is not a number, it is information. On a show night there is a car for whoever is on sound, a car for whoever is on lights if that is a different person, two or three volunteer cars, Ray’s car, Wendy’s car, whoever came in to do the bar, and generally somebody’s kid who got dropped off and is sitting in the green room on their phone waiting to be useful. It is not a full lot. It is not supposed to be a full lot at ten to six. But it has cars in it like a kitchen has pots on the counter before a dinner, and a kitchen with one pot on the counter is telling you something about dinner.

We went down the side of the building, under the mural.

The door is a plain door and the sign on it is not large. It opens into a short corridor that is too narrow for the number of people who eventually have to get through it, with a photocopier in it and the poster on the wall and a folding table where the box office lives on a show night. Off the corridor, the room.

And here is the thing about the room. You come in off a wet parking lot, past a dark physiotherapy clinic, down a corridor with a photocopier in it, and then the ceiling goes.

Up above the lighting bar there is nothing but volume and black and the trusses somewhere in it, and the room is quiet in a manner that no room that size in a building that cheap has any right to be. Hanging out in front of the drapes, unlit and waiting, is the pomegranate again, a metre across, done in pink neon, every seed a separate little tube.

Owen stopped talking.

I have walked a lot of people in there and every one of them stops talking, and I enjoy it, and I have driven people out there in the rain specifically for that.

Then I looked at the floor and stopped enjoying it.

The deck was stacked against the north wall, white edges out. The chairs were on the cart, nested and strapped. The two speakers were down off their tripods and lying in the corner with the stands folded beside them. The house lights were up full, all of them, which is the setting you use to clean.

The room was empty.

At ten to six on a night with a house of ninety-four, there was nobody in that room and nothing had been built.

Load-in on a show like that starts at two. Two is generous. On a bad day you start at three and you are tight, and everybody knows you are tight, and somebody says so out loud at four-fifteen, and by six the deck is up and the chairs are out and the check is either done or close to it and Ray is walking the aisle counting seats with his lips moving. That is what six looks like. Six looks like a room that is most of the way to being a different room.

This was a mop and a cart.

The only thing standing anywhere near where the stage goes was a wooden chair. Straight-backed, old, a cross cut clean through the back of it. It lives in the corner by the drape and it comes out when somebody needs to sit while they play, and somebody had already carried it into position, alone, in the middle of a room where nothing else had been done.

Beside me Owen said, "Wow," on a long breath, still looking up. He was looking at the ceiling and I was looking at the floor, and the two of us stood in the same room having entirely different evenings.

And because I cannot help it, I put my hand up.

There is a make-up air unit on the roof out there. It is not new. It brings outside air in, tempers it, and pushes it down into a room that on a good night has ninety-four people in it, and ninety-four people is about nine kilowatts of heat that walks in the door on its own and then sits down and stays. In April, on a wet twelve-degree evening, with that much room overhead, a house like that will hold beautifully for the first half hour and then start to stack, because heat goes up, and up in that building is a long way, and none of it does you any good at head height.

The air off the diffuser above the corridor was the wrong temperature for a Saturday.

Not broken. Not dangerous. It was the temperature you would set for a Tuesday morning class with fourteen dancers in it. It was the temperature that building runs when it has been told it is a Tuesday.

Nobody had told the building it was a Saturday.

I was standing there with my hand up in the air like a man checking for rain indoors, and Owen said, "What are you doing," and down at the far end the box office door came open and Ray came out fast.

PART TWO
THE EMPTY ROOM

4

Ray had a piece of paper.

A man in a black quarter-zip with his glasses up on his head, out of the box office at ten to six with a phone in one hand and a sheet of lined paper in the other, and on the paper, in pen, a list of people, and beside each person a mark.

“Curtis,” he said. “Okay. Okay, good.”

“Ray.”

“This is Owen.”

“This is Owen.”

“Hi, Owen.” He shook Owen’s hand while looking at me. “Okay. So.”

He got as far as so and then his phone went off against his sternum, and he looked at it, and something came off his face that had been holding on there since the morning.

“That’s Cheryl,” he said.

“Is Cheryl coming?”

“Cheryl is not coming.” He put a mark on the paper. He did it neatly. He had clearly been doing it neatly for some hours.

“How many have you got left?”

“Curtis — “

“How many, Ray.”

“Me,” he said.

I looked past him into a room with the chairs still on the cart at ten to six.

“Right,” I said. “Risers.”

So we built. Or we started to, which is not the same thing.

Wendy, since Friday noon.

Dave Neufeld, since Friday night. That one came out while we were getting the first section off the stack, and I put my end down.

“Since Friday *night*?”

“Since about ten.”

“Ray, Dave’s the room.”

"I'm aware of that," he said, and he said it kindly, because he is not capable of saying things another way.

Bonnie and Trish, who do the bar. Marcus, who ushers. Sundeep, who ushers and also knows where things are, which is a separate and more valuable skill.

"Sundeep says he's clear," Ray said, at the far end of a four-by-eight.

"Is he clear?"

"Sundeep is not clear. Sundeep would come in here on a stretcher."

Both the mentorship kids, eighteen years old, who were going to run camera and lights and had been talking about it for a month.

Cheryl, as of the text against his sternum.

Owen said, "That's everybody."

"That's everybody."

"That's *everybody*."

"Yes," said Ray, and got under his end.

The potluck came out somewhere in the second section. Thursday, after the open mic, and everybody had stayed, and it had been a really good open mic, there was a girl doing Joni on a borrowed guitar and it was — anyway. They ate upstairs.

"And you didn't eat."

"I was at my mother's."

"You were at your mother's."

"I was at my mother's," Ray said, and we got the second section off the stack between us.

I asked what people ate. I asked it like a health inspector, flat, with my hand out, and Ray blinked at me across a sheet of plywood.

"Why?"

"Because I want to know what I'm dealing with."

"There was a rice salad."

"Whose."

"I'm not doing that."

"Whose rice salad, Ray."

"I am *not* doing that," he said, with actual heat, and then, immediately, quietly: "It wasn't the rice salad. It's not food poisoning. It's the

other thing. Fraser Health called Wendy back this morning and it's the other thing, and if it's the other thing then it isn't anybody's rice salad, it's just — “ he took a hand off the riser to move it in a circle, which meant I had all of it, “ — it's everyone. It's the room. It's the door handles.”

He meant norovirus. He could not say the word, any more than he could say the other one, and I let him not say it, and I also let him put his hand back on the riser.

“How long are they out?”

“Forty-eight hours clear. Nobody's clear.”

He had tried. That is the thing about Ray that people who have only seen him hosting do not know, and it came out in the same broken way, between the second section and the third. He had called both the mentorship families, in case there was a sibling. He had called a company in Surrey that does event staffing and been told, politely, that Saturday was Saturday and that the minimum booking was five hours at a rate he read out to me off a text message, and I did the arithmetic on my end of a riser and it came to more than the door.

“And I put it on the Facebook.”

“You put it on the Facebook.”

“At two o'clock. Hands for tonight, paid, no experience necessary.”

“And?”

“Forty-one likes,” Ray said.

That was the point at which my brother, who had been carrying chairs badly and silently for about eight minutes, put a chair down and said:

“So what do you need?”

Ray looked at Owen properly for the first time.

“I need about seven people.”

“By when?”

“By now. Doors are at half seven.”

“Doors are at half seven,” Owen repeated, and I watched him check his watch, and I watched him not react to what the watch said,

which for a man in his line of work is a professional skill and cost him something.

"It's a lot," Ray said. "It's the deck, it's a hundred chairs, it's sound, it's lights, it's the stream because we sell the stream and people have bought it, it's the bar, it's the door, and it's ninety-four people coming through a corridor that fits about forty." He looked up. "And he's driving down right now and I can't get him and I'm not going to be the man who calls somebody at Cache Creek to tell him not to bother."

"So don't," said Owen.

"So don't," Ray agreed.

Nobody said the word cancel. It was in there with us, sitting on the folding table by the photocopier, and all three of us walked around it.

And underneath all of it, the part of my head that does not care about anybody's evening had been standing in that corridor doing a load calculation.

Because that room was cold. Not cold enough to say anything about. Cold enough that when ninety-four wet people came in off a parking lot at the top of the hour with their coats on and sat down in a black box with a lot of air over their heads, they would be comfortable for exactly as long as it took the building to notice them, which it would do slowly, because the make-up air unit up there was old and had been told it was Tuesday. And then somewhere in the second half it would swing the other way, the way those systems do when they finally catch up, and you would get the last thirty minutes of a man's life story at twenty-four degrees.

"Ray. Who does your controls?"

He looked at me for a second like a man being handed a hat.

"Curtis," he said, "I have not slept."

"Fair."

"I don't know what controls are."

"That's fine. That's actually helpful." The thermostat is in the corridor at shoulder height behind a clear plastic guard with a lock on it, and the lock was open, and had been open long enough that the little key was sitting on the ledge above it under a quarter inch of

dust. Somebody, at some point, probably in a summer, had put the building on a weekly schedule and never come back to it, and the schedule had a Saturday on it, and the Saturday said the building would be empty. Which on most Saturdays it is. On most Saturdays the schedule is right and the building is a dark box off 64th Ave with a mop in it.

"I can hold this," I said.

"You can hold what?"

"The room. If I sit on it." I put the guard back. "It'll want me a few times tonight."

Ray looked at me as though I had offered to do a thing he had not identified as a thing.

"You're supposed to be watching the show."

"I'll be watching the show."

"You've paid."

"Owen paid," I said, which settled it, because it was true and because Ray had a phone going off against his sternum again.

5

"I'm going to call Merv," Ray said.

"Who's Merv?"

"Merv Dales." He was already walking back toward the box office. "He did production on the fair circuit for about twenty years. Everything from Cloverdale to Prince George. He knows everybody. He's the only person I can think of who might still have a list of bodies."

"Where's Merv?"

"Osoyoos."

"Osoyoos is five hours away."

"He doesn't have to *come*, Curtis. He has to know somebody." Ray stopped at the box office door and pointed at me with the paper. "Merv put a crew together for a rained-out grandstand in about an hour once. In 1998. I was there."

"That was 1998."

"He's still Merv."

The box office at that place is not an office. It is a cupboard with a window in it, off the corridor, big enough for a person on a stool and a cash tin and a laptop, and if two people are in it one of them is standing in the doorway. Ray went in and sat on the stool and did not close the door, because the door does not close properly and everybody who works there knows it and stops trying by about the third week.

So we heard all of it.

Merv did not pick up.

What followed was, and I say this with affection, the longest voicemail I have ever heard a grown man leave.

“Merv. Ray Prosser. Langley. The arts hub, off 64th Ave, the — you came to the thing, you came to the Christmas thing with Denise, you had the — anyway. Merv. Listen.” A breath. “I’m in trouble.”

Owen, standing beside me in the corridor with his coat still on, mouthed *good* and gave a small nod, like a man watching a colleague land an opener.

“So I’ve got a show tonight at eight and I have lost my entire crew to a stomach thing, and when I say entire I mean entire, I mean I’m the only one standing, and I’ve got ninety-four in the house and a stream sold on top of that and an artist in a van somewhere around Cache Creek who does not know any of this.”

Owen mouthed *don’t apologize*.

“And I’m so sorry to be calling you on a Saturday — “

Owen put both hands on top of his head.

“ — because I know it’s a Saturday, and if you can’t, you can’t, I completely — “ He stopped. Started again. “I need seven people. Or six. Or whatever you’ve got. Anybody who’s held a cable. I’m past fussy.”

A pause, and then a thing I did not expect, and which I have kept.

“It’s a good room, Merv,” Ray said. “It’s a really good room and I don’t want to lose the night.”

Then he said his number twice, slowly, and got one digit wrong the first time and corrected it the second time without noticing, and hung up.

He came out and stood in the corridor and looked at the poster of a man standing in a field.

"That was strong," Owen said.

"Was it?"

"It was strong in the middle. The apology was a mistake."

"I'm sorry?"

"That's the mistake," said Owen. "You had him at *I'm in trouble*. You had him completely. And then you gave him a door and you held it open for him." He said it entirely without malice, as you would tell a man his shoelace was undone. "Never give them the out. They'll take the out. They love the out."

Ray considered this.

"Owen," he said, "what do you do?"

"I sell surgical staplers."

"Right," said Ray.

We stood there. The house lights were still up full. Somewhere over our heads the make-up air unit was doing its Tuesday.

Ray's phone went off in his hand and he nearly dropped it.

He looked at it for a while. Long enough that I said his name.

"It's Merv," he said.

"What's he say?"

Ray turned the phone around so I could see it. Two words, no punctuation, no greeting, no question about the show or the money or the hours or the room.

sending people

"Sending people," Ray said.

"Sending people," I said.

"That's — that's good, right? That's good."

"How many people?"

"It doesn't say how many people."

"When?"

"It doesn't say when, Curtis."

We both looked at the phone. Owen looked at the phone. It was ten past six.

"Call him back," I said.

Ray called him back. It rang for a long time and went to a voicemail box that was full.

So we went back to it.

I would recommend this to anybody who wants to understand what a crew is. Get two men who are not a crew and one man who owns the building, and put them in a room with four riser sections and a hundred chairs and half an hour, and watch.

We got the second one wrong. There are two of us on a four-by-eight and my brother is on the far end, and my brother has never carried a riser and does not know that you carry it on edge, and so he carried it flat, which means it wants to fold you in half, and he got a few paces with it and had to put it down, and putting it down is worse than picking it up because you cannot see your own feet.

“Edge,” I said.

“You said flat.”

“I never said flat.”

“You said flat when we did the chairs.”

“The chairs are a cart, Owen.”

We got it on edge. We walked it to the north wall. Then we could not stand it up, because standing it up takes a person at each end and somebody in the middle with the legs, and Ray was in the middle with the legs and Ray’s phone rang.

He took the call, and he was right to, because it could have been Merv. It was not Merv. It was Bonnie, calling to say that she had been sick again and would not be in, which we knew, and Ray stood there holding two riser legs under one arm and told her it was fine, and told her twice, and told her to drink something, and my brother and I held a hundred and forty pounds of riser vertical between us for the duration.

“Ray.”

“Sorry. Sorry.”

“Ray, the legs.”

“Yep.”

Owen’s tie came out at about six twenty. He had tucked it in between the second and third buttons, which is the correct thing to

do and which I did not know he knew, and it came out anyway on the third section and dragged across a riser top and picked up a stripe of grey. He looked at it. He said nothing about it. He tucked it back in.

At six twenty-five we had one section up and levelled and my back had said something to me about it, and we had a hundred chairs on a cart that nobody had touched, and no cable run, and no drapes, and a console under a dust sheet, and a camera nobody could operate, and a bar behind a shutter with a licence on the wall in somebody's name who was at home in Willoughby with a bucket beside the bed.

Ray stood in the middle of it with the legs still under his arm.

"Curtis," he said. "At what point do I call it?"

I did not answer him, because that is not a question you answer for another man about his own building, and because I did not have an answer, and because at that moment the door went at the end of the corridor and somebody came in out of the rain.

6

They came in over about ninety seconds.

I was standing in the corridor for all of it with a coat over my arm, and the honest version is very dull. The door opened. A man came in, stamped the rain off his boots on the mat, and went past us into the room. The door opened again about fifteen seconds later. And so on. Nobody came in as a group. Nobody came in far enough apart that you would call it separately. They arrived the way a shift arrives.

Ray got his pen out. That is what Ray does. Somebody comes into his building and he writes them down, and it does not matter if the building is on fire.

The first one through was carrying nothing and had his sleeves already up. He came down the corridor at a working pace, took Ray's hand on the way past without stopping for it, and said his name into the handshake, the way you do when the handshake is not the point.

"Hand."

"Ray. Ray Prosser. Thanks for — "

"Where's your deck?"

“North wall,” I said.

He looked past me at the north wall for about a second and a half and said, “Those are stacked wrong,” and went and started fixing it, and that was the first thing anybody said in that building that evening without an apology in it.

He was right. They were stacked wrong. They had been stacked wrong since the mentorship showcase in the spring, riser tops facing in, which means every time you build you handle each one twice.

The second man was already talking when the door shut behind him.

“Is there a sub snake or is it all off the stage box?”

“There’s a sub snake,” I said.

“Good.” To Ray, who had the pen up: “Chaos-Weaver.”

“Sorry?”

“Chaos-Weaver,” he said again, without any change in it at all, and went to the sound position — not to look at it. He put his hand flat on the back of the console, the way you do with an animal, and stood there.

“Chaos-Weaver. Are you going short tonight or do you want the sub snake?”

“Bring it,” he said, without turning round.

The third and fourth came in together and split at the corridor. The one who went to the folding table stopped in front of Ray and gave him a name and waited, actually waited, until Ray had it down on the sheet.

“Allfather.”

“Allfather,” said Ray, writing.

“Is this the box office or is this a table?”

“It’s both.”

“Then I’ll want the tin.” And Ray, who had not offered anybody anything, went and got the tin.

“Allfather. Is the scanner charged or is it in the drawer?”

“It’s in the drawer and it’s charged,” he said, “and there’s a second one, and nobody has ever used the second one.”

The fifth said his at the door with his coat still half off — “Conscience-Keeper” — and then went and stood in front of the bar shutter and read the licence in the frame on the wall. All of it. There is a lot of it. It is not a document anybody reads and I have never once seen a human being read it, and he read it from the top with his hands behind his back, and then said, over his shoulder, to nobody in particular:

“Whose name is on this?”

“Wendy’s,” said Ray.

“Wendy’s not here.”

“Wendy’s sick.”

“I know,” he said, and did not say anything else about it.

“Conscience-Keeper, the shutter sticks.”

“Then I’ll lift it,” he said, and lifted it, and went in behind it.

The sixth came in with a camera bag on his shoulder and did not put it down, then or later. He gave Ray the name without being asked and without stopping.

“All-Seeing.”

“Sorry — sorry, one more time?”

“All-Seeing.” He was already past. He stood in the doorway of the room and looked at the room for a while, and then walked to a spot about two-thirds back on the house-left side and stood on it, and that is where the camera was all night.

“All-Seeing. Do you want that drape moved?”

“No.”

The last one in was a woman shaking rain off a jacket, and Ray, who had recovered enough to remember that he is a host, went at her with his hand out.

“Hi, I’m Ray, thank you so much for coming out on a — “

“The Companion.” She took the hand, and she was the only one of the seven who took it and stopped. “Is there somewhere he can sit?”

“Sorry?”

“When he gets here. Somewhere out of the room.”

“There’s the green room. It’s through the — “

“That’s the one.” She was already moving. “Is there anyone traveling with him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. He’s — I think it’s just him.”

There was somebody travelling with him.

“Companion — there’s a kettle in the kitchenette, it’s the one on the left, the other one’s for the dance side and it’s furred right up.”

“Thank you,” she said, and went and found the green room, and Ray was left in the corridor with his hand still out and an expression I would describe as grateful.

He had all seven on the sheet by then, in pen, in his good handwriting, one under the other. I read it over his shoulder later in the evening, when he had set it down beside the tin, and what I thought at the time was that Merv Dales had sent us a crew who all worked under names.

Which is a thing. It is not even an unusual thing. You get a couple of decades into hauling other people’s equipment around this province and somewhere in there the name on your invoice stops being the name anybody says to you, and after a while it stops being the name you answer to, and eventually there is a man on a headset at the Cloverdale grandstand who has been called Preacher since 1994 by people who could not tell you why and have never asked. In my experience it means one thing, which is that they are good and they have been doing it a long time.

Then the deck went up.

I was on it. Four sections, four-by-eight, legs off the cart, and there is a way that goes and a way it does not, and the one that goes has a person on the far end and one person on the near end and somebody with the legs. What happened was that the Hand stood the first section on edge, and I got under the far end because I have got under that far end more times than I can count, and it went up, and the second went up, and the third, and the fourth, and somewhere in the middle of the third I noticed that nobody had said anything.

Not silence. There was talk. It was just all of it about the object.

“Long side out.”

“It’s out.”

“Seeker, is there a shim in there?”

“There’s a shim in the cage, I think — should there be? On this floor?”

“There should be under the north corner.”

There was, under the north corner. There has been a shim under the north corner since 2021 because the slab dips there, and it is not written anywhere, and Dave Neufeld knows it, and Dave Neufeld was at home in Walnut Grove having the worst two days of his year.

And I put the shim under the north corner and did not say anything about it, because I was busy, and because when a man says *there should be under the north corner* and there is, the correct response is to put the shim in.

The chairs went out behind us while we were still on the deck. I did not see it happen. That is not a figure of speech. I was on the deck with my back to the room, doing legs, and when I turned round the rows were in, with the aisle in the right place and the two accessible gaps left open at the sound position, and the cart was three-quarters down and moving.

A hundred chairs is forty minutes. It is forty minutes with two people who know the room. It is an hour with one.

I have thought about that and the answer I keep arriving at is that Owen was in there, and the Seeker was in there, and the Allfather came out of the box office at some point because the tin was counted, and that is three, and three people who do not stop is a different animal from three people who do. I have run a crew of five that got less done in a morning. I am not going to pretend that arithmetic satisfies me. But it is arithmetic, and it closes.

7

The Sprinter came in off 64th Ave at six forty and backed up to the side door with about an inch on either side of the mirrors, which is either luck or forty years of parking.

The man driving it was not the man on the poster.

He was well into his seventies, in a canvas coat repaired at the cuff by somebody who could sew and did not care what it looked like, and a ball cap with nothing on it, and he got out and stood in the rain looking at the mural for a moment with an expression of total neutrality, and then went round the back and opened the doors and started handing things out.

The Hand put a hand on the first case before it was all the way out of the van.

"I've got it," said the man in the canvas coat.

"I know."

They stood there for a second with a road case between them. Then the man in the canvas coat let go of it, and that was the negotiation, and I have watched two people argue about a road case for twenty minutes.

His name was Dutch. Nobody ever said another one. I asked him later in the evening and he said "it's Dutch," and that closed it.

He came off the ranch. He said that within a minute of arriving, not as an introduction but as an explanation for something else, which is how everything about Dutch arrived all night. He drove because the Kid's knees are bad and it is a long day from the ranch to Langley and somebody had to take the back half of it. He said this in a tone that made clear he regarded driving a van as the only comprehensible activity in the enterprise.

The Kid is what he calls him. I heard it a few times before I worked out who he meant, and then I heard it and could not hear anything else. Dutch has better than five years on him. He said it the first time with his chin, at the poster in the corridor, and he has presumably been saying it since some afternoon in the late nineties when a rock singer turned up on a ranch in the Cariboo and asked somebody how you do this.

What came out of that van, in order: two speaker-sized road cases that were not speakers, a folding table, a cardboard box with a bath towel over the top of it, a second cardboard box, a milk crate of what turned out to be merchandise, a laptop bag, a coat, and a saddle.

Owen has since told people the saddle was a prop. It was not a prop. It was a working saddle with a rope tied to it and it goes on a stand at the side of the stage next to the guitars, and it is in the show, in the sense that a man talks about it. It came in on Dutch's shoulder and he set it on the stand and adjusted it about an inch and stood back and looked at it. It was the only object all evening that he handled like something that mattered.

The guitars stayed in the van until he was ready for them. He was firm about that, and his method of being firm was to stand in the doorway of the van with his hand on the rack and say "leave those," and everybody left those.

Then the Hand came out of the cage with the rug.

It lives back there rolled and tied with two lengths of baler twine, and it is maybe eight feet by ten, and it is patterned, and it has a fringe, and it belongs to the building. It goes out for anybody who plays a full set standing up. I have carried it myself.

Dutch stopped with a mic stand in each hand and watched a stranger walk a rolled carpet across a room and lay it down in the middle of the stage.

"What's that."

"It's the rug," I said.

"Whose rug."

"It's theirs. It's the venue's."

Dutch put the stands down.

"The building owns a rug," he said.

"The building owns a rug."

"For the stage."

"For the stage."

He walked over and looked at it from about a foot away, the way you look at a horse somebody is trying to sell you.

"There's a floor under it."

"There is."

"You built that floor. I watched you build it. It took you fifteen minutes and it's brand new and now there's a carpet on it."

I told him what the rug is for, which is that it deadens the deck so you do not hear a man's boots in the vocal mic, and it stops a stand walking on you over the course of a set, and it marks out the space so he knows where his edges are without looking down. All of which is true.

Dutch heard me out. He is a good listener, which makes him worse.

"He's stood on a lot of floors," he said.

"He has."

"He stands on a floor every day of his life. He's got a floor at home, and I'll tell you what's on it, and it's nothing." Dutch looked at the rug some more. "And in here, in a room, indoors, out of the rain, on a wooden stage you built this afternoon out of parts, on a Saturday, somebody keeps a rug in a cage for him."

"For his boots."

"For his boots," Dutch said, and nodded slowly, in the manner of a man filing something under a heading he has been adding to for about nine hours.

Then he squared it up to the front edge of the deck with his foot, and squared it again, and got down on one knee and did the corner properly with both hands, because whatever he thinks of a thing, he is not going to be the man who left it crooked.

And then the passenger door of the Sprinter opened.

There is not very much to do with this. A man in his late sixties got out of a van in the rain in a parking lot in Langley. He was shorter than I expected and thinner than I expected and he got out of a van as anybody with bad knees gets out of a van, which is sideways and in two stages.

"There he is," said Dutch, to nobody, and went back to the guitars.

Ray went at him fast, apologizing before he was within range.

"I have to tell you something before you come in, we've had a — I've lost my whole crew, my entire crew, since Thursday, and I've got people here but they're not my people, they came in about twenty minutes ago and I haven't — "

The man put his hand out and Ray shook it and stopped talking.

"Is the deck up?"

“The deck’s up.”

“Then it’s a show,” he said.

That was it. That was about the size of it, and then he was past Ray and in the corridor, and the Companion was standing at the green room door with it already open, and she said something to him I did not hear, and he laughed, once, tiredly, and went in, and the door shut.

I stood in the corridor and looked at a shut door for a second.

Then Owen came round the corner from the room carrying the last of the chairs, several more of them than a person should carry, with his coat off and his sleeves rolled and his tie tucked back in where he had put it, and he said, “Curtis, where does the cart go when it’s empty,” and I stopped looking at the door.

8

Here is how I got assigned.

The Hand came out of the room, saw me in the corridor, and said, “Are you working?”

“I’m — yeah. Yes.”

“Cable’s in the cage. Bring the snake and the sub snake and the two orange ones, not the black one, the black one’s got a bad end.”

The black one does have a bad end. It has had a bad end since February. There is a strip of yellow tape round it about a foot from the male end, and the tape says BAD, in Dave Neufeld’s handwriting, and you can only see the tape if the coil is hanging the right way round on the hook.

I went and got the cable.

A man who had been in the building for twenty-five minutes told me to go and get cable and I went and got cable. He was right about the cable and I was standing in a corridor holding a coat.

In the twenty minutes after that I did the following: ran the snake, helped hang two side drapes, carried the speakers up onto their stands, and been told twice to stop coiling something the wrong way, both times correctly, and once by a man who did not look up.

Owen, in the same period, had become an usher.

I do not fully understand the mechanism. He went into the room with an armful of chairs at twenty to seven and he came out of it with a lanyard on. The lanyard was a real lanyard. It said STAFF. It came out of a drawer in the box office cupboard that I would have sworn to a judge contained only elastic bands, a stapler, and the corner of a roll of raffle tickets, and when I asked him where he got it he said, "The Seeker gave it to me," exactly as you would say *the guy on the door gave it to me*, and moved on, because he had been given a job and the job had eight parts.

"So I'm on the door," he said, "for the first bit, and then I'm on the aisle, and then I'm on the door again at the interval, and then I'm on the aisle. And I've got the seating map." He held up his phone. Somebody had airdropped him a seating map. "Do you know there's a wheelchair space?"

"There's two."

"There's *three*," said my brother, with the total confidence of a man who had known this venue existed for a month and a half, "there's the two by the sound position and there's one at the end of row C if you take two chairs out, which is what we're doing, because there's a lady coming with a walker who's booked into G and she shouldn't be in G."

"Who told you that?"

"It's on the map."

"That's not on the map, Owen. I've seen the map."

"It's on the map now," he said.

I asked him, later, in the truck, what the Seeker had actually said to him, because I could not work out how a man goes into a room with chairs and comes out of it with a job. Owen's account is that he was putting a chair down in row D and a voice behind him said, *Do you know where anything is?*, and he said no, and the voice said, *Then you'll want the map*, and that was the hiring.

He also maintains that at no point was he asked whether he wanted to do it, and that this was the best part.

"He didn't ask?"

“He didn’t ask. He gave me the map.” Owen had his hands on the wheel of a parked truck at that point, for emphasis, as he does. “Curtis, do you know how much of my life is spent getting people to the point where they’ll let me help them? He gave me the map.”

Anyway. He had a door, and he went and stood near it three-quarters of an hour before there was any reason to.

Behind me, out in the room, Dutch had gone back to the rug. It had moved perhaps an inch and a half while the drapes were going up, and he had noticed, and he was squaring it again with his foot, and when he had squared it he stood over it with his hands on his hips and looked at it for a while, in a room that was now full of people doing things at speed, and he shook his head once, slowly, at a rug.

PART THREE
LOAD-IN AND CHECK

At quarter to seven Dutch went out to the van for the guitars, and I went with him, because he had not asked anybody to and because it was raining.

There are five of them. They travel in a rack in the back of the Sprinter, standing on end in their cases with a strap across, and Dutch takes them out one at a time and carries them in one at a time, which is five trips, in the rain, at seventy-something.

"I can take two," I said.

"You can take none."

"It's five trips."

"I'm aware of how many it is," said Dutch.

So I stood in the doorway out of the rain and watched a man in his mid-seventies make five trips, and on the third one he said, without stopping, and without any particular emphasis:

"They're all guitars."

"Sorry?"

"I'm just saying it out loud," said Dutch, and went past me into the corridor.

He set them up on the stands at the side of the stage in an order, and the order was correct, and I know it was correct because nobody moved one all night. Two dreadnoughts at the far end, side by side. Same make. Same model. Same colour, near enough, one of them older and played through at the edge of the soundhole and one of them not. Then the twelve-string. Then the nylon. Then the resonator on the end nearest the saddle stand, because it is the loudest object in the building and it wants to be somewhere you are not going to knock it.

The Hand came past while he was doing it and stopped.

"Do you want those tuned?"

"No."

"There's time."

"There isn't a problem," said Dutch, which was not an answer to the question, and the Hand looked at the rack for about a second

and said, “No, there isn’t,” and went away, and it was finished. The guitars stayed Dutch’s for the rest of the evening. Nobody touched them.

Then Owen came in from the room, saw the rack, and made a sound.

“There’s five.”

“There’s five.”

“Why are there five?”

And Dutch, who had been waiting all day for exactly this question, straightened up off one knee.

“Say it again,” he said.

“Why are there — “

“Louder.”

“Why are there five guitars.”

“Thank you,” said Dutch. “That’s what I’ve been asking since Cache Creek.” He put a boot toe out toward the far end of the rack, at the two dreadnoughts standing next to each other. “And before you get going about how that one’s got the wires doubled up and that one’s the soft one, look at those two.”

Owen looked at those two.

“Those are the same guitar,” said Dutch.

They are the same guitar. I went and looked at the headstocks later, with a phone torch, out of a sort of due diligence. Same make, same model, one of them about twenty years older.

I made the mistake of trying to explain it. In my defence, I have run cable in that room for six years and listened to other people talk about tunings for all of them, and what I actually know about tunings would fit on a business card with room left for the phone number.

“They’re tuned different,” I said.

“Different from what.”

“From each other.”

Dutch waited.

“They start the same,” I said. “A guitar’s a guitar out of the box. But if a song sits low, or you want the strings ringing off each other a particular way, you drop one of the strings down, and then that

guitar is in that tuning and it stays in it. And you don't want to be standing up in front of a hundred people turning pegs. So you keep a second one already in the tuning you're going to want next."

There was a silence, and I heard what I had said, and I understood that I had lost.

"So it's the same guitar," said Dutch.

"It's — "

"It's the same guitar twice, because he can't be bothered to turn the peg."

"That's not — "

"How long does it take to turn the peg?"

"It's not about how long — "

"How long, Curtis."

"Fifteen seconds."

Dutch nodded. He did not say anything. He nodded for a while, and then he picked up an empty case and slid it flat under the rack out of the way, and while he was down there he said, to the floor, with the flatness of a man putting a lid on something:

"There's a fella at home with three tractors."

"Right."

"Two of them work."

I said that I did not see how that was the same thing, and Dutch said that he was not saying it was the same thing, he was just saying it, and then he went to find out where the merchandise went, which turned out to be a folding table in the corridor with a cloth over it.

He was at it a while, and for most of it he was alone.

What Dutch does with a merch table is stack it. He put the shirts out in piles by size, smallest at the front, and he got the sizes right, and he put the CDs in a row behind the shirts and the two vinyl in a row behind the CDs, and he squared everything to the edge of the table, and it looked like a table in a hardware store. It was correct and there was nothing wrong with it and nobody was ever going to buy anything off it.

Then Owen came round the corner.

I saw him see it. He stopped walking. He put his hands behind his back, which is the tell, and he stood at the end of that table looking down it the way you look at a hand of cards you have been dealt badly.

"Can I say a thing."

"No," said Dutch.

"It's one thing."

"I know it's one thing."

"You've got the shirts flat."

Dutch straightened up.

"They are flat."

"They're flat, and that's a shirt-shaped object lying down, and nobody buys a shirt-shaped object lying down." Owen picked one up and shook it out and held it against his own chest, front on, at the top of the table where the light was. "You want one up. One. Facing out. So they can see the thing on the front of it from the door."

"Then it's creased."

"It's a t-shirt."

"It'll be creased."

"It's *supposed* to be creased, Dutch, it's a — " He stopped himself, which he almost never does. Then he said, "Okay. Different question. How many did he bring?"

"Sixty."

"How many does he usually sell?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Guess."

Dutch stood there with a folded shirt in his hands.

"He comes back with a box," he said.

"How big a box."

"Same box," said Dutch.

And Owen looked at him for a second with an expression I have seen him wear in exactly one other context, which is on the phone with a purchasing manager who has just told him something the purchasing manager does not know is important, and then he took the shirt out of Dutch's hands and hung it over the front edge of

the table so it faced the corridor, and moved the vinyl to the front where the light hit it, and put the CDs behind, and left everything else exactly as Dutch had done it. He could have done more. He did not.

“That’s all,” he said. “That’s the one thing.”

Dutch looked at the table.

“It’s crooked,” he said.

“It is.”

“You’ve made it crooked.”

“I have.”

Dutch put his hands in his coat pockets and looked at it a while longer, and did not fix it, which for Dutch is a standing ovation.

10

Here is the part I actually know something about.

A patch is not complicated. There is a box on the stage with a lot of holes in it and there is a snake that runs from that box back to the console, and every source — a microphone, a guitar, a laptop that is going to play a slideshow — goes into a hole, and each hole is a number, and the numbers have to match a list. That is it. That is the job. The reason it goes wrong is that there are dozens of opportunities to put something in the wrong hole and no opportunity at all to find out that you have until somebody is standing in front of a paying audience.

There is a list for this show. There is a list for every show. It comes ahead of time as a PDF and Dave Neufeld prints it and puts it on the console on a clipboard and works off it, and the one for that night was on the console on a clipboard, because Dave had printed it on Friday afternoon before he went home and stopped being able to stand up.

The Hand read it once.

He picked up the clipboard, held it at the distance a man his age holds a clipboard, went down it, put it back on the console face down, and then patched the stage.

It was not a feat of memory. He read a list of nine inputs for a solo act. Anybody in that trade could carry nine inputs. But there is a way people work off a clipboard, which is that they patch three, look, patch three, look, and go back to it twice more during the line check because the clipboard is the authority and you are not, and the clipboard sat face down on that console for the rest of the evening and nobody consulted it, including me, and I am a man who consults clipboards.

Nine inputs. Two vocal mics, the main one on the boom and a spare on the far side by the chair, because the show sits down for part of it. A DI for the guitar. A second DI. The nylon has a pickup and takes its own. A pair of small condensers on stands for the room, which go into the stream and not into the house. A feed off the laptop for the slides, in stereo, which is two more.

There was a tenth thing on that list that was not an input, at the bottom, in Dave's handwriting rather than in the PDF, and it said: *TALKBACK — DO NOT PATCH, HE HATES IT.*

I have no idea when Dave learned that. The show had never been in that room before. He had presumably been sent it, or asked, or read it somewhere, and he had written it on a clipboard on a Friday afternoon and then gone home and been ill for two days, and the note sat there face down on a console all evening being obeyed by a man who read it once.

Halfway through the patch I went out to the corridor and put my hand up at the diffuser again, which I had been doing every so often and which Owen had started narrating.

"He's doing the hand."

"I'm not doing anything."

"He does the hand and then he goes quiet and then he tells you a number."

It had come up about a degree and a half, which was the building noticing the lights, because ten fixtures on a bar over a small room is a couple of kilowatts of heat sitting up at the ceiling doing nothing for anybody. I went and put the schedule on an occupied setting for

the evening and stood there while the fan came up, and it came up, and I felt better than I had any right to about it.

Dutch came and stood beside me in the middle of the patch with his hands in his coat pockets.

“What’s that.”

“DI box.”

“What’s it do.”

“Takes the signal off the guitar and turns it into the kind of signal that can go a long way down a cable without going bad.”

“How far’s it going.”

I looked at the snake, which ran from the stage box along the north wall, under the drape, and out to a console that was about forty feet away.

“Forty feet,” I said.

Dutch took that in.

“It’s a box,” he said, “that makes a signal strong enough to go forty feet.”

“Yes.”

“And without it it wouldn’t make forty feet.”

“It’d get there. It’d sound thin and it’d pick up hum.”

“From what?”

“From everything. Lights, dimmers, the building.”

“The building hums.”

“The building hums.”

Dutch looked up at the lighting bar, and then at the north wall, and then at the DI box, which is a small grey lump with two sockets in it and costs about ninety dollars, and he said, “This is a strange business,” and went away, and that is the closest he came all night to a summary.

The dead channel came up on the line check.

A line check is the least interesting thing in show business. Somebody stands at the console and brings up a channel, and somebody else stands on the stage and taps the microphone or says a word into it, and you go through them, one, two, three, in order, and either it is there or it is not.

Three was not there.

The Hand was on the stage and I was at the console because somebody had to be, and I brought up three and there was nothing on it, and I said “nothing on three,” and he did not say anything back. He unplugged the XLR out of the stage box, plugged it into the hole next to it, and said, “Try two.” Two had it. He put it back in three. Nothing. He swapped the cable end to end. Nothing. He took a different cable off the pile, ran it, and said, “Try three.” Three had it.

That sequence took maybe fifty seconds and he did not once say the word *should*.

I have watched that same fault eat twenty minutes in that room. Not because Dave is bad — Dave is better at this than I am — but because when a channel goes down at ten to seven with a house coming, a person starts theorizing. A person says *it was fine on Thursday*. A person goes and looks at the console first, because the console is where the feelings are, and the console has a dozen ways to mute a channel and a man who is frightened will find all of them before he goes and stands on the stage and wiggles a cable.

He went and wiggled the cable.

I put the bad one on the pile by the cage to be looked at, and got a strip of yellow tape and wrote BAD on it, in my handwriting, which does not look like Dave’s, and which is going to confuse somebody in July.

Out in the house the Seeker was doing the rows.

He was going along them with a laminated sheet in his hand, and the sheet was the fire plan, which lives in a drawer in the box office and comes out about once a year when somebody from the Township asks for it. He had the aisle measured. He had two chairs out at the end of row C, which is the thing Owen had told me about and which I had not believed, and he had the two gaps at the sound position, and he was standing in the aisle with the sheet at arm’s length checking a room against a drawing of the room.

I said something to him about it, out of politeness, on my way past with a coil.

“Is it right?”

“Is it right on the sheet or is it right in the room?” he said, and then, before I could work out whether that was a joke: “The sheet says thirty-nine inches and the room says thirty-nine inches. So it’s right.”

Behind him, through the box office window, the Allfather had the tin open and was counting a float out onto the counter in stacks, and had, at some point in the previous half hour, obtained a second cash tin from somewhere in that building. I have never seen a second cash tin. I would have told you there was one tin.

11

Soundcheck started at four minutes past seven and it was over at twenty-three minutes past seven, and I know that because I have the timestamps on two photographs my brother took of the back of my head.

Nineteen minutes.

A soundcheck for one man with a guitar, in a room the size of that one, with a competent engineer and no surprises, is forty minutes. Forty is good. Forty is what you would tell somebody to expect and then be a bit pleased about. An hour is normal. An hour and a bit is normal if the artist is particular, and a lot of them are particular, and being particular is generally why they are any good.

What happened was this.

The Kid came out of the green room with the older of the two dreadnoughts and stood on the rug, and the Chaos-Weaver was already at the console, and nobody said hello.

“Give me the boom,” said the Kid.

He said a line into it. Not a song. He said the sentence he says at the top of the show, which I know now because I heard him say it again an hour later, and which at the time meant nothing to me: he said the sentence, and then he said the last two words of it again, and then he stopped and waited.

Behind me the Chaos-Weaver did something to the console.

“Again.”

The Kid said it again. Then he said, “Yeah,” and moved on, and that was the vocal.

That is not how it goes. The way it goes is that the artist says *check*, *check* into a microphone for a while and then the engineer asks for a bit more and the artist sings a verse and the engineer does something and asks for another verse and there is a period, sometimes a long one, in which the two of them find out whether they are going to get on. That period did not happen. There was nothing to find out.

Monitors next, which is correct — you give the man what he needs to hear before you touch what the room hears, because a man who cannot hear himself will sing badly and then you will spend twenty minutes fixing a problem that is not in the sound system.

“How’s that.”

“More me.”

Pause.

“That’s me.”

Guitar. He played about eight bars, stopped, said, “It’s boomy on the low string,” and the Chaos-Weaver said, “It’s the deck,” which it was — a hollow riser deck under a guitar amplifies the low end and there is a frequency in there that will thump at you all night — and he did something and the boom went, and the Kid played the same eight bars and did not say anything, which in that trade is applause.

Then the twelve-string, which is a harder instrument to put through a system than people think, because there are twice as many strings beating against each other and it turns to porridge in the low mids if you leave it alone. He played about a minute of something on it. He stopped in the middle of a bar and said, “That’s fine,” and the Chaos-Weaver had not touched anything for the last twenty seconds of it.

Then the nylon, which took under a minute.

Then the resonator, which took the longest, and the longest was about two minutes, and during those two minutes he stopped checking and started playing. He played a figure on the resonator to give the man at the desk something to work with, and then he played it again because the desk wanted it again, and on the third pass he did

something to the end of it, a small thing, a turn at the bottom, and then he laughed at himself and stopped.

“Sorry,” he said, to nobody. “That’s not the song.”

Owen was standing in the doorway of the room with his lanyard on.

He had been sent to do something and had not done it, and he had that look people get in an empty venue during a check, which is the look of somebody who has just found out that the thing they paid for happens twice and the first time is better. I know that look because I have had it for six years and it is most of why I am there.

“Is that it?” he said, when the resonator went back on the stand.

“Is what it?”

“Is that — that’s the check? That’s all of it?”

“That’s all of it.”

He looked at his watch. He looked at the stage. He came in and stood beside me.

“Curtis, we’ve been here since ten to six.”

“I’m aware.”

“And that’s the — “ He gestured at the room, at the deck, at the rug, at five guitars on five stands and a saddle on a stand and a hundred chairs in rows. “That’s done? That’s a done room?”

“That’s a done room.”

“So what happens now?”

“Now we open a door in seven minutes,” I said, “and then we stand about.” And I heard it come out of my mouth, and did not like how it sounded.

Nobody rang the room out.

This is the thing I have been asked about most, and I have got worse at explaining it rather than better. Ringing out a room means you push the microphone up until the room starts to howl, and you find the frequency that is howling, and you pull that frequency down, and you do it again, and again, half a dozen times, until you have got the microphone as loud as it will go before it turns on you. It is not optional. Every room has its own set of frequencies that it wants to feed back at, and they change with the drapes and the humidity and

how many bodies are in the seats, and if you do not go and find them the room finds them for you, usually somewhere in the first half, in front of everybody.

That room rings at about two hundred and fifty and again up around four thousand. I know that because I have stood in it while Dave found it, on maybe fifteen occasions, and it takes him about eight minutes and it makes a horrible noise and everybody in the building hates it.

There was no horrible noise.

The Chaos-Weaver put the mic up to where it needed to be for the show and left it there, and it did not ring, and nobody in that room fed back once all night, and I have gone over this and the only thing I can tell you that is definitely true is that he did not do it. He did not do it and it did not happen.

At twenty past seven the Kid played most of a verse of something with the harmonica rack on, which he had not done yet, and the harmonica went into the vocal mic as harmonicas do and got loud, and the Chaos-Weaver caught it on the way up, and they were done.

“Good?” said the Kid.

“It’s good.”

“All right.” And he took the guitar off and put it back on its stand, in its place, and Dutch was standing at the end of the rack and took it off him and put it on the stand, and the Kid said something to Dutch I did not hear and Dutch said “mm,” and the Kid went back to the green room.

Nineteen minutes.

I stood at the sound position afterward with a coil of spare XLR over my shoulder, doing nothing, which is not a thing I do. There is always something. On a normal night at twenty-five past seven there is a list in your head as long as your arm and you are going down it and it is not getting shorter.

I did not have a list. That is the part I could not get comfortable with. Not that the check was fast. Fast happens. Once in a while everything lands and you get out in half an hour and everybody says what a good check that was and goes and has a coffee.

It is that I did not have a list.

12

The lights are run off a tablet.

This is not as bad as it sounds and it is also exactly as bad as it sounds. There is a bar over the front of the deck with maybe ten fixtures on it and a few more out on the side positions, and they are all on a DMX line, and the DMX line goes to a little box, and the little box talks to an iPad in a stand at the sound position. You build looks on the iPad and you save them, and then you put them in an order, and then all night one person taps the same corner of a piece of glass and the room changes.

The mentorship showcase was in there.

I saw it while the All-Seeing was setting up beside me. The tablet was awake and open on the cue list and there were about thirty entries in it going back years, and near the top of the recent ones was a set called MADE IT — the showcase they did on the Thursday, the one with the girl doing Joni — and under it a stack of about twelve looks with the kids' names on them. Nobody had cleared it. Nobody clears them. There is a set in there called XMAS 22 that will outlive all of us.

The stack for that night got built underneath it in a couple of minutes: house, preset, wash, warm special for the chair, wash, blackout, house. Seven looks. I counted them because the man building them counted them out loud, once, and then did not look at the tablet again except to tap it.

Seven is not many. I have seen that room run thirty for a dance show, and the mentorship kids had twelve for a night that ran ninety minutes, and there was a Christmas thing two years ago that had a cue on every song and half of them went in the wrong place.

The warm special is the one worth saying something about. There is a chair on that stage — the wooden one, the one with the cross cut through the back of it, which somebody had carried into position at ten to six before anybody had done anything else in that building.

The show sits down in it for part of the second half. So you want a look for that: tighter, warmer, lower, so that when a man crosses six feet of rug and sits down, the room comes in around him instead of staying where it was.

Building that look normally involves a person standing on the stage. Somebody has to sit in the chair while somebody else fiddles, because you cannot judge a face light from behind a tablet forty feet away, and the person who sits in the chair is whoever is unlucky, and at that venue it has historically been me.

Nobody sat in the chair.

He built it off the empty chair and moved on. I have watched the stream. It is on the man's face and off his knees and there is no spill on the drape behind him.

Ray came past while the stack was going in and stopped dead when he saw the tablet, because the top of the list was still the showcase.

"That's still in there."

"It is."

"That's from Thursday." He stood looking at a list of twelve lighting states with eight kids' names on them, in a room where eight kids were not, and I watched him decide not to say anything else about it, and then he said something else about it. "That's Aidan's. The blue one's Aidan's, he picked it himself, he was — "

"Ray."

"Yep," said Ray. "Yep." And went and got the programs.

The camera took longer, and it took longer because it did not move.

The All-Seeing had put himself where he had stood when he walked in, and he set the sticks there and got the camera on them and framed it and did not touch it again. One shot. A stream is normally two or three cameras, or one camera and a person on it, panning and pushing in when the man leans into a line, because a static wide is the thing everybody in the business tells you not to do.

I asked him about it. I had run out of jobs and I was standing there, and I said something like, are you going to push in at all, and he said:

"No."

“It’s two hours.”

“It is.”

“People watching at home — “

“Will see the room,” he said.

And then, because I was still standing there, he said the only other thing he said to me all evening, which was: “The frame’s fine. Everything worth seeing tonight is going to happen inside it or it isn’t going to happen.”

I thought that was a bit much for a man with one camera. I have since watched the stream. He was not wrong about the frame. There is not a single moment in two hours where you want it to be somewhere else, and I have looked for one.

13

The bar at that place runs under a licence in a frame on the wall, and it is a proper licence, the permanent kind, which means the room is allowed to sell beer on a Tuesday to nobody if it wants to. Wendy’s name is on it. Wendy has had her name on it since 2019 and Wendy was at home in Willoughby.

The Conscience-Keeper had the shutter up and the fridge doors open and he was counting cans out onto the back counter when I came past with the empty cart.

The stock at that bar is not complicated and it is not meant to be. Two local craft on can, a lager and something hoppier that Ray buys because a brewery up the road sponsors the season and it says so on the back of the programs. A cider. Red and white by the glass out of bottles, and the bottles are screw-cap, and the wine is fine and nobody has ever said anything about the wine. Cans of pop, a box of ginger ale that has been in that fridge since before the pandemic and gets rotated to the front every few months by somebody with good intentions. Coffee and tea from the kitchenette on a card table, self-serve, honour system, jar on the end.

He counted all of it. Not how a person counts stock, which is to look at a fridge and think *that's plenty*. He counted the cans out onto the counter in rows and wrote the number down.

He had also, at some point, taken the licence out of its frame.

It was on the counter beside the till, flat, with the frame next to it, and he was reading it while he counted, and when Trish's replacement came in behind him, he read three of the conditions out to her.

There was no Trish's replacement. Her name was Halle and she was eighteen and she had come along with one of the mentorship mothers because she had nothing on, and she had been given a bar because she was upright and in the building, which are the two qualifications.

Not unkindly. Not as a test. He read her the hours, and he read her the bit about the service area being the area shown on the plan and not the corridor, and he read her the bit about last call, and he read her the person capacity, which is a hundred and ten and which I had never in six years heard anybody say out loud, and she said okay after each one, and then he asked her if she had her Serving It Right, and she said yes, and he asked her to show him, and she got it up on her phone, and he looked at it properly. He held her phone at the distance you hold a phone and read it right through.

Then he said, "You're on the fridge and the float. I'll pour."

"I can pour."

"You can pour," he agreed. "I'll pour."

And she went on the fridge and the float and he poured all night. Then he asked Ray about the last call.

Ray was going past with an armload of programs and he stopped, and the Conscience-Keeper said, "Your posted last call is ten forty-five."

"Yeah."

"The show's scheduled till ten."

"It usually goes over."

"How far over?"

"Twenty minutes? He'll talk."

"Then the bar is open for twenty-five minutes after a two-hour show with a hundred people in it," said the Conscience-Keeper, "and the room has to be clear by eleven."

Ray stood there with his programs.

"We do ten forty-five," he said, "because it's on the sign."

"I know."

"Is it wrong?"

"It's what's posted," the Conscience-Keeper said. "I'm going to call it at the interval instead and put the second half of the stock out then, and there won't be a rush at the end, and nobody will be standing in your corridor at ten to eleven with a drink they haven't finished."

And Ray said, "Okay," and went.

I have been in that corridor at the end of a night with people standing in it holding drinks they have not finished. It happens at every show. It is not a disaster and it does not go in an incident report, it is just the last twenty minutes of everybody's night being slightly worse than it needed to be, and the reason it happens is that the sign says ten forty-five and nobody has ever gone and looked at what the sign is doing.

At twenty-five past seven I got a coffee from the kitchenette and went and sat in the back row of an empty house, in C-something, on a chair I had not put out, and had a few minutes to myself.

Here is what I had, in the order I had it.

The deck went up in fifteen minutes and it is levelled and there is a shim under the north corner that is not written down anywhere.

The chairs went out while I had my back turned.

There is a dead channel that was found and fixed in under a minute by a man who did not once say the word *should*.

The check took nineteen minutes.

Nobody rang the room out.

The clipboard is face down.

The camera has not moved and is not going to.

The bar has been re-planned by a man who read the licence.

And nobody, at any point in the last hour, has asked anybody where anything is.

In six years in that building I have never seen an hour go by without somebody in it saying *where's the*. Where's the shim. Where's the spare boom. Where's the key for the cage, where are the programs, where's the good extension cord, where's the other tin. It is the noise that a building makes. It is how you know people are in it.

And the room was quiet.

Not silent. There were a dozen people working in it. But there is a noise a venue makes in the last hour before a house comes in, and it is a specific noise, and it is made of people asking each other things. Somebody calls something across a room. Somebody swears at a cable. Somebody has a radio on in the kitchenette. Ray does his walk and says *are we good* to half the room and gets *we're good* back every time and does it again twenty minutes later. That is the sound of a building getting ready, and I have not once been in that room in the last hour without it, and I would have told you it was the load-in itself making the noise.

It was not the load-in. The load-in was going on all round me and it was quiet.

I sat there in the back row with a coffee in a room where there was nothing left on anybody's list, and what I thought was: this is the best-run show I have ever been in.

And then I thought: I have been coming here a long time, and it has never been like this, and Dave Neufeld is at home in Walnut Grove.

Which is not an accusation of anybody. It is a fact about a Saturday.

Then Owen put his head round the drape and said the corridor was filling up and there were people out in the rain, and I put the coffee down and went and opened a door.

PART FOUR
DOORS

14

Ninety-four sold. That is not a guess and it is not Ray's number. It is the number that was on the laptop in the box office cupboard at half seven, and I know it because I look every time.

Ninety-four is a good night there. The room seats a hundred if you put the hundred out and nobody is enormous. A sell-out is the sort of thing Ray tells people about for a week, and ninety-four is close enough that he had been telling people about it since Wednesday and calling it a sell-out, which it was not, and which nobody was going to take off him.

The box office on a show night is a folding table in the corridor and a cupboard behind it. The cupboard has the laptop and the tin. The table has the scanner, which is a phone in a rubber case on a lanyard, and a roll of raffle tickets that has nothing to do with anything and has been on that table since before I started, and a printed will-call list, and a pen.

The Allfather had the tin, the second tin, the laptop, the scanner, the list, and the pen, and he had all of it laid out in an order on that table like a man setting up a market stall.

He had also found the drink tokens.

There is a roll of drink tokens in that building. They are little red cardboard things, the sort you get on a spool at a stationer's, and Ray buys them for volunteers, because at the end of a night you want to be able to say *have a beer* and mean it without doing anything complicated. The roll lives in the cupboard. It lives in the cupboard behind the laptop cable, and I know that because it took Wendy a while to find it at the Christmas thing while a dozen people stood there.

It was on the table.

Doors went at half seven and the corridor had people in it by twenty-five past, because that is what happens when it rains: nobody stands in a parking lot. There is an overhang of about a metre and a half by that door and it does not do anything for anybody.

I have done that door. Not often, and never willingly, and only when Cheryl has been away, and it is the worst job in the building. It looks like the easiest one. You stand at a table and you point a phone at people. What it actually is, is a hundred separate small negotiations in half an hour with people who are wet, and every one of them has a thing: they have a ticket for the wrong night, they have a ticket on a phone at two per cent, they have bought two and there are three of them, they are certain their friend has already gone in with the tickets and their friend has not arrived, they want to know if they can take the wine in, they want to know if there is a programme, they want to tell you they used to come here when it was a dance studio.

And behind all of that there is a laptop with a number on it that has to come out right at the end.

The first ones through were a couple in their seventies with a folded umbrella and printed tickets, actual paper, printed at home on a home printer with the QR code coming out slightly grey, which makes a scanner sulk and which Cheryl has a procedure for involving a bright torch and an amount of swearing she would deny.

He scanned them off the paper first go.

I say that as somebody who has stood on that door. A grey home-printed code takes two or three passes and then you give up and look the name up, and the looking up is fine, it takes twenty seconds, but you have done it in front of somebody who has begun to worry that their ticket is not real. Nobody enjoys that part.

"You're in row D," he said. "That's the fourth row. There's a step at the end of the row and it isn't lit."

"Thank you."

"Coats stay with you, there's no cloakroom, and the two seats at the end of D have the most room for a coat."

And they went in, and I watched them go in, and they had been in that building for under a minute and they had been given a row, a hazard, and a place to put a coat.

The comp thing happened about ten minutes later.

A man and a woman in their fifties came up and said they were on the list. They were not on the list. I know they were not on the list

because I could see the list from where I was standing with a roll of gaffer tape in my hand, doing nothing, as I did for most of that half hour.

“What’s the name?”

They gave the name. He went down the list with the pen, not with his finger, the pen held about a centimetre off the paper, and got to the bottom.

“You’re not on it.”

“Ray said.”

“When did he say?”

“At the — we were at the thing in the fall. He said come to this one.”

Now. I have watched this exact conversation happen in that corridor probably a dozen times and there are two ways it goes. Either the person on the door is Cheryl, in which case there is a short, warm, entirely immovable explanation of the fact that the list is the list, and the couple buy tickets, and everybody is fine. Or the person on the door is Ray, in which case they come in, and Ray spends the interval telling somebody about it.

He said: “Two on the door, then.”

And he wrote their name at the bottom of the will-call list in his own handwriting, and put COMP beside it, and put a line through the total at the top of the page and wrote a new total, and scanned two comps out of the laptop, and gave them the same speech about the speech and the coats, and they went in.

Then he turned round to the next people in the line, who were two women who had bought tickets in February and had said nothing and were simply waiting, and he tore two drink tokens off the roll and gave them one each.

“What’s this?”

“That’s a drink.”

“What for?”

“You were waiting,” he said.

They looked at the tokens. They looked at each other. And then they went in, and the woman nearest me said to the other one, “Is it

that kind of place?” and the other one said, “I think it’s that kind of place.”

It is not that kind of place.

He put one more person on the door later, a man on his own who had come a long way and said so, written the same way and struck into the running figure in the same way. Three comps in an hour. That figure got crossed out and rewritten and crossed out again, and it was still legible at the end of it, which is more than I can say for anything I have ever written on a will-call sheet.

He gave out a lot of tokens over the next hour. Not to everybody. I could not work out the rule and I stood there for a good while trying to. Somebody who had come in soaked got one. A man on his own got one. A group of four got two between them, and the two who did not get one did not notice, and the two who did split them without discussion, which I suppose was the point.

Ray came past in the middle of it, saw the roll on the table, and stopped.

“Where’d you get those?”

“Cupboard.”

“Behind the — “

“Behind the laptop cable.”

“Right,” said Ray. And then, because he is Ray: “How many have you given out?”

“Nineteen.”

“Nineteen.”

“They’re a dollar ten each,” said the Allfather, “and they’ve all gone to people who are going to buy a second one at the bar.”

And Ray stood there and did the arithmetic that he had not been going to do, and I watched him decide that he liked it, and go away.

My brother, meanwhile, had found the September show.

Owen had been given the door, which at that venue means standing beside the table and being the person who says good evening, because the person with the scanner cannot say good evening and scan at the same time and one of those two jobs is the reason anybody comes back.

He was extremely good at it, which surprised me. I had assumed the thing he does is a work thing and would not survive contact with an actual corridor. It survived fine. He got the umbrella off a woman who did not know what to do with a wet umbrella and stood it in the corner and told her where the corner was. He told a man with a stick about the step at the end of row D before the man got as far as the table. He said *good evening* about eighty times and made it sound like a different sentence each time.

And somewhere in there he started telling people about September. "You know he's back in September?"

"Is he?"

"Twenty-fifth. Same room. It's not up on the wall yet." It was up on the wall. It had been up on the wall since February, an arm's length from where my brother was standing, and he had walked past it a dozen times that evening.

I got him in a gap.

"Owen."

"What."

"You're selling the September show."

"I'm mentioning it."

"You don't work here."

"Curtis, I've got a lanyard." He looked past me at somebody coming in and said good evening, and then came back to me without any join at all. "And it's the same guy. If they liked tonight they'll want September, and if I tell them now, when they're excited, they'll buy it at the interval, and if I tell them at the interval they'll say they'll do it at home, and they will not do it at home. Nobody does it at home."

"Where did you get that?"

"That's just true," said Owen.

I went and looked at the September page on my own phone later, in the back row, out of a kind of spite. Fourteen sold as of that morning.

I looked again on the Monday. Thirty-one.

Ninety-four people do not fit in that corridor.

That is not an exaggeration and it is not a complaint about the building, it is a dimension. The corridor is about twelve feet long from the door to the room and it is not much over three feet wide, and there is a photocopier in it, and on a show night there is also a folding table with a box office on it and a merch table with a saddle-shop display of t-shirts, and a poster, and a coat rack that nobody uses because there is no room to stand in front of it.

On a normal night what happens is a jam. You get thirty people in a space for twelve and the ones at the front are trying to get their coats off and the ones at the back are still in the rain, and Ray stands in the middle of it apologizing, which does not create any more corridor.

I have said this to him. I have said it more than once, on nights when I was standing in the jam. The room is fine. The room is a hundred chairs and a big ceiling and it swallows people. It is the twelve feet before the room that is the problem, and the reason it is a problem is not the twelve feet, it is that nobody ever moves anyone out of it. Everyone stands where they stopped.

The Seeker moved them.

He was in the doorway of the room, which is where a house manager stands and which is where nobody ever stands at that venue because there is no house manager at that venue, and he took each pair off the end of the corridor and put them in their seats. Not pointed. Took. Walked them in, said the row, said the number, and came back.

It sounds small. It is the difference between a queue and a jam. A queue moves because the front of it keeps leaving; a jam happens because the front of it stops.

It also meant that from about twenty to eight there was a man in the doorway of that room who had personally put every single person in the building into their chair.

There is a second-order effect to that which I did not see until I was sitting in the back of the room later. When one person seats a house, the house goes in from the front. Nobody is left standing in an aisle deciding. Nobody takes a seat several rows further back than

the one they paid for because they got in and lost their nerve, which happens at every general-admission-feeling show in a room where the seats are numbered but nobody checks. The rows filled from A to the back and the back rows filled last and there were no gaps in the middle of anything.

At the Christmas thing there was a hole in row C for all of the first half with two coats in it.

The row C man came at about twenty to.

He had been emailing. That is the first thing he said, and he said it twice, and he was right to. He had bought two in February in row C and he had a printout with C-11 and C-12 on it, and the scanner put him in G.

He was not shouting. It is easy to make somebody like that into a story and he was not a story. He was a man in a wet coat who had paid forty-nine dollars twice and had been given something other than what he paid for, and who had written about it and had not been answered, because the person who answers the emails had been up since before dawn with a bucket beside the bed.

He said, "I'm not making a fuss." He said that three separate times over the next few minutes and each time he said it he was making one, and each time he was entitled to.

"You're in G," said the Seeker.

"I'm in C. I've got it here."

"You've got C. You're in G."

"Well, that's — " The man stopped and started again, colder. "Is somebody going to tell me what happened, or is that the arrangement here."

And the Seeker told him what happened.

Two chairs had come out of row C that evening. They had come out at the end of it so that a woman with a walker, who had booked in March and had been put in G, would have somewhere to be that was not G. Row C is twelve. Two out makes it ten. The two seats on the end of that row had to go somewhere, and the somewhere the map picks is the back, and the back is G.

He said all of that. He did not soften it and he did not apologise for it and he did not, at any point, say that it was nobody's fault, which is the sentence everybody reaches for and which is never true.

"So you moved me for somebody else."

"Yes."

"Without telling me."

"Yes."

"That's — " and here he did the thing that people do when they have been handed the truth and were braced for something else, which is that he got angrier rather than less angry. "That's not all right. You understand that's not all right. I've been emailing since Tuesday."

"I know. There's a seat in D."

"D."

"D-3 and D-4. One row back from where you booked, both on the aisle, and closer to the middle than C-11 ever was." A beat. "Or you can stay in G together."

The man took D-3 and D-4, which meant somebody else got moved, and I do not know who and I never found out, and he took it the way you take a thing you have won without enjoying: he said, "Fine," and he did not say thank you, and he went in still angry, and as far as I know he stayed angry through the first half and I hope he did not.

Owen was six feet away through all of it with a lanyard on, saying good evening to the people behind, and he did not hear a word, and he is the reason it happened.

He took two chairs out of row C at twenty to seven because a woman with a walker had been sold a seat in G and he thought she should not be in G. He was right. And it cost a man in a wet coat two hours in row D being furious about an email.

The dead phone came at about a quarter to.

A couple in their sixties, and her phone had gone flat, and it had the tickets on it, and she was doing the thing everybody does, which is holding the button down and looking at the black screen with real hope. He had a phone. His phone did not have the tickets on it because she had bought them.

“What’s the name?”

She gave it. He went down the list. Not on it, because they had bought online in January and the online ones are not on the printed will-call, they are in the laptop, and the laptop is a different search and it is slow and the search box is in a place on that page you would not expect, and I have watched Cheryl do it and it takes her a while and Cheryl designed the workflow.

“Do you know the email it went to?”

She gave an email.

“Is it that one or is it the one you use for things you buy?”

There was a pause.

“It’s the other one,” she said.

He found them under the other one in about fifteen seconds. Then he asked her whether she wanted them scanned in or whether she wanted him to write them on the sheet, because if she came back to the box office at the interval he could charge her phone off the laptop, which has never been offered to anybody in that corridor in the history of that building.

She came back at the interval. He charged her phone off the laptop.

The last thing from the line is the scanner.

The scanner is a phone. It runs the ticketing app and it wants a connection, and the connection in that corridor is bad, because it is a concrete box with a metal roll-up door in one wall and the router is upstairs in the office at the far end of the building behind a fire door. This is a known thing. Everybody who has ever done that door knows it. What the app does when it loses the connection is go into offline mode, which means it keeps scanning and keeps a list and pushes the list up when it gets a signal back, and there is a little grey cloud icon in the corner of the screen with a line through it so you know.

It went offline at about twenty to eight. I saw the icon because I was standing there, and I said, “You’re offline,” and he said, “I know,” and kept scanning, which is correct, because that is what offline mode is for.

It came back somewhere in the first half. I did not see it come back. Nobody watches a phone during a show.

There was one moment all evening when I saw somebody in that building be told no, and it happened at the bar, and it took about fifteen seconds.

A man came out of the room with an empty glass, got a refill, and turned to walk back in with it, and stopped, because there was a hand out.

“Not through there.”

“Sorry?”

“You can drink it here, or you can drink it in the room,” said the Conscience-Keeper, “but the corridor is not on the plan, and if you stand in the corridor with it I have to notice.”

The man looked at the corridor. So did I. It is a corridor. There is a photocopier in it.

“I’m going *into* the room.”

“Then go into the room.”

And the man went into the room, holding his glass, entirely satisfied, and I stood there working out what had actually happened, which is that a man had been permitted to do the thing he was already doing on the condition that he did it without stopping.

Wine has gone into that room at every show I have worked. Wine went into that room all night. The licence does not say you cannot take a drink into the theatre; the licence says where the service area is, and the service area is the bar and the room and not the twelve feet in between, and nobody had ever read the sentence closely enough to notice that the sentence is about standing still.

16

At six minutes to eight the room was full and the corridor was empty and Owen was standing at the door with his lanyard and his phone, and there was nobody left to come in.

There is something wrong with that sentence.

Doors at half seven, curtain at eight. On paper you have thirty minutes and on paper thirty minutes is plenty. In practice, at that venue, on every show I have worked, the last people come through

that door somewhere between five past and quarter past eight, because it is Langley and it is raining and they parked at the wrong end and they had a drink first at the Cactus on 200th, and Ray does not start without them, because Ray cannot start without them.

The way it goes is this. At eight o'clock Ray is in the corridor looking out at the parking lot. At three minutes past he comes in and says to whoever is on the board, "Let's give it five." At eight past he says, "Two minutes." At quarter past somebody who has been waiting in a chair since twenty to eight has got up to go to the toilet, and we wait for that as well, and the show goes at eighteen minutes past, and everybody in that room has had thirty-eight minutes of sitting.

I have been part of that at least eight times. I have never minded it. It is a small room and it is somebody's Saturday and if a woman is walking across a wet parking lot in April you hold the thing for her.

The trouble is the other end. You hold for eighteen minutes at the front and the man on stage does not know he has been held for, so he plays the show he was going to play, and it ends when it ends, and it ends eighteen minutes later than the sign in the corridor says it will. And then there are people in that corridor at ten to eleven with drinks they have not finished, and a bar that has to be shut, and a strike that starts at the exact moment everybody who might have helped has decided the evening is over.

I have never once put those two things next to each other in my head. Ray holding the door is a kindness and the corridor at ten to eleven is a nuisance, and I had them filed in different places for six years, and they are the same thing.

At six minutes to eight there was nobody walking across the parking lot.

The bar had gone quiet on its own about ten minutes earlier, which does not happen either, and the reason it does not happen is that a bar goes quiet when people go and sit down, and people go and sit down when they think it is about to start, and people never think it is about to start.

Ray came down the corridor with his programs gone and his hands empty. He looked at the door. He looked at Owen. He looked out through the door at a parking lot with rain on it and nobody in it.

"Is that everyone?"

Owen looked at his phone.

"That's ninety-seven," he said.

"Ninety-seven."

"Is that good?"

"That's — " Ray stopped. "Yeah. Yeah, that's everyone."

And he went and stood at the side of the stage and waited for eight o'clock.

Ninety-seven is the number. Ninety-four sold and three on the door, and the three were written on the list in pen with COMP beside them and added into the running figure as they went. A man who spends an evening adding people to a list ends up with more people than were on it. That is how doors work, and that page added up.

17

The last thing before the lights went was five minutes in a full corridor with nothing to do.

I had put myself out there deliberately. I had checked the diffuser at twenty to and it was holding, and the fan was running as I had asked it to, and the room was going to be all right for at least an hour, and there was nothing else in that building I was any use for. Owen had the door. Ray had the stage. So I stood by the merch table with my back to the poster and let it happen around me. That is the part I go for.

Here is what a corridor sounds like in Langley at four minutes to eight on a wet Saturday in April.

There was a couple by the coat rack having the parking argument. Not about parking here; about parking at home. He had left the truck out on the street because the driveway had the trailer on it and she had told him twice that the street sweeper comes Sunday, and he said the sweeper does not come in April, and she said it does, and

he said he would move it when they got back, and she said it will be midnight, and he said he would move it at midnight, and I would put money on him not having moved it.

There was a man in a good jacket telling another man that he had come for the ranch. He said it more than once. He said, "I don't know any of the music, I'm here for the ranch," and the other man said he knew a couple, and the first man said, "No, but the ranch, though," and there was something in the way he said it that made me think he had one, or had wanted one, or had had one and had not got it any more.

There were two women in their forties comparing what they had been told about the show by two different people. One of them had been told there would be an intermission and the other had been told there would not, and they had worked out between them that they should go now to be safe, and they were both wrong, in different directions, about how long it was going to be.

There was a woman explaining the Juno to her husband. She had the year at 1991. It was 1989. She had the category more or less right, which is more than most people manage, and she said, "It's the one for new people," which is exactly what it is, and her husband said, "So he won it for being new," and she said, "He won it for being the most promising, which is different," and her husband said, "Is it," and she said, "Yes," and did not elaborate, and her husband let it go.

And then somebody said my name, and it was a customer.

Her name is Marlene and she has a bungalow in Brookwood with a mid-efficiency furnace in a crawlspace that I have been telling her about for three years, and she was standing in that corridor in a good coat holding a glass of white wine, and her face did the thing faces do when they find a known object in an unknown place.

"Curtis?"

"Marlene."

"What are you doing here?"

Which is a fair question and I did not have a short answer to it. I said I helped out. She said, "Helped out doing what?" and I said, chairs, cable, and she looked at the lanyard I was not wearing and

the gaffer tape I was still holding for no reason, and decided to let it go.

Then she asked me about the furnace.

I did not start it. She started it. She said the noise had come back, and I asked her which noise, and she said the noise, and I said there had been two noises, and she said it was probably the second one, and we stood in a corridor minutes before a show with people going past us on both sides and had a full conversation about the inducer motor on a nineteen-year-old furnace in a crawlspace in Brookwood.

"You said I had a year."

"I said you had a year eighteen months ago."

"So I've had my year."

"You've had your year and six months of somebody else's."

Marlene took a drink of her wine and said, "Well, it's not tonight's problem," which I thought was the most reasonable thing anybody said to me all evening, and went in.

There was a man behind me at the merch table asking Dutch about the vinyl.

"Is this the new one?"

"It's the one he's got."

"Is it new, though?"

"It's the one he's got," said Dutch.

And the man bought it, and Dutch put it in a paper bag from a stack of paper bags and did the transaction on a card reader with enormous concentration, holding it in both hands at arm's length and watching it as though it might go off.

Ray came past and put a hand on my shoulder on the way through and did not say anything, and from Ray that is a speech, and went to the front.

And then the corridor emptied out in about ninety seconds, the way a corridor does when the last people realize everybody else has gone in, and I was standing on my own by a table with sixty t-shirts on it and one of them hanging over the front edge facing the door.

I could hear the room through the drape. Ninety-odd people sitting down in a black box makes a sound like a long exhale with coughing

in it. Somebody laughed at something two rows away from them. A chair went over and got picked up.

Then the house lights went, and the sound the room made changed, and I went in.

PART FIVE
THE SHOW

Ray does a welcome. He has done a welcome at every show in that building since 2017 and it is the same welcome and it is about ninety seconds long, and it contains the fire exits, the fact that the bar takes cards, a request that phones go away, and a sentence about the room being a room where people make things, which he says slightly differently every time and which has never sounded like a line.

Then he did the introduction, which is the one part of the welcome he has never got shorter, and went off, and the man walked on at four minutes past eight.

I was at the back wall. I am always at the back wall. There is a strip of floor behind the last row, maybe a yard deep, between the chairs and the drape, and it is where you stand if you are working, and it is the best place in that building to hear anything.

He came on with the older dreadnought and put it on the stand and did not pick it up. He stood at the boom with his hands at his sides.

The pomegranate was lit. It comes on with the preset and it stays on all night, a metre of pink neon hanging out in front of the drapes above and behind whoever is on that deck, and every seed in it is its own little tube of gas, and there are one or two of them at the bottom of the third segment that have gone and have been gone since before I started.

Nobody looks at it during a show. It is up in the dark over the man's head being the reason the top of his head has a pink edge on it, and if you asked ninety-seven people on the way out what was hanging above the stage I would put money on about nine of them getting it.

Owen got it. He told me on the way to the truck that his photograph had come out and that Steph had replied, and what Steph had replied was: *is that a pomegranate*.

Behind him, the screen came up, and it said:

ACT ONE: CHAPTER ONE

and there was a photograph under it of about six young men in a basement in what I would guess was 1983, and one of them had a haircut that got a laugh before anybody said anything.

Then he said his sentence, the one from the check, the one I had heard him say into a microphone at four minutes past seven to a room with nobody in it, and it landed completely differently with ninety-seven people in there, and it got its laugh.

Then he picked the guitar up and played, and I should say something about that, because I have been going round it.

I am not a musician. I have carried other people's equipment for six years and what I have is the ear you get from standing at the back of a room a hundred times, which is not a musical ear, it is a room ear. But you do not need a musical ear for what he does, because what he does is old and it is built to be understood by people driving.

The first one was in a tuning. You can hear a tuning even if you cannot name it: the strings ring off each other and do not stop, and there is a note underneath it all that does not change while the shapes above it move, and it sounds like something being held open. He fingerpicked it, thumb on the low string, and he sang under the guitar rather than over it, which men his age do because their voices have gone down and because it is more interesting anyway.

Two verses, a chorus you could sing back after hearing it once, another verse, and then the trick, which is that the last chorus was not the loudest one. He took it down instead of up. Everybody expects it to go up. Ninety-seven people were leaning forward slightly by the end of that song because the song had got quieter and they had followed it down.

The biggest laugh of the first act came somewhere in the middle of it and I did not see the stage for it, because I had looked over at the camera position.

He was not watching the stage. He was watching a man about six rows back on the far side who was not laughing. Not unhappy, and not bored either — leaned forward, both hands on his knees, absolutely still, in a room of ninety-seven people making a noise. The All-Seeing had him and kept him for the length of it and then went

back to whatever else he was doing out there, and the camera stayed exactly where it had been pointed since twenty past six.

Second one had a clamp on the neck, up around the fifth fret, and it was strummed and it moved, and there was a bar in the middle where he hit the strings with the heel of his hand and stopped them dead, once, and the room made a noise.

That is the vocabulary. It is not complicated. There are maybe five moves in that kind of music and everybody knows all of them, and the art of it is when you do them and how long you make people wait.

What I will say about the shape of that show is this. It is chapters. There is a card on the screen and then a story and then a song, and the cards are numbered, and there are two acts, and by about the third card you have stopped noticing the structure, which is the point of having one.

And the stories go in two directions, and he alternates them, and it took me most of the first act to understand that the alternation is the engine.

One direction is the industry. He is not sentimental about it. He is not bitter either, and bitter is what you expect, and the absence of it is what makes the room lean in. He told a story about the man who signed them, who came to a show in Vancouver and stood at the back and told them afterward that they had something, and who could not, when pressed later that night, name a single one of their songs. He told a story about a tour manager and two sets of books, and the punchline was not the theft, the punchline was what the theft had been spent on, and it got the biggest laugh of the first half. He told a story about a radio programmer in Toronto who wanted the chorus moved earlier and was right.

I will do one of them properly, because otherwise you have to take my word for it.

ACT ONE: CHAPTER FOUR came up, and under it a photograph of a gravel pit with snow in it and a flatbed truck parked in the middle and about nine people standing around looking cold.

The story is that they had a song doing well and the label wanted a video, and the label had a budget, and the budget had come out of an office in Toronto where somebody had decided that the song was about the prairies. It is not about the prairies. He said that twice. The song is about a street. But the budget said prairies, and there is no prairie within a day's drive of Vancouver in February, so a location scout had found a gravel pit out past Maple Ridge with the mountains on the wrong side of it and they had shot there for two days.

The director had a concept. The concept was that the band would be playing on the flatbed while the truck drove, and there would be a woman walking away along the road ahead of it, and she would never turn round.

The problem with the concept was the wind.

He did about six minutes on the wind. What the wind does to a bass drum on a flatbed. What the wind does to a woman in a summer dress in February, which is that after nine takes she could not feel her hands and a runner had to walk her back to the van with a coat over her. What the wind does to hair, which was a larger consideration in 1990 than it is now. What the wind does to a director who has been told he has two days.

And then the last bit, which is the bit that got the room, and which he delivered flat and quick, standing still, with his hands on the guitar he was not playing:

The video never aired. The label went through a thing that year and it sat on a shelf. It went up on the internet about fifteen years later and it has, at last look, some hundreds of views, and the woman in the summer dress is now a family doctor in Kamloops and has, he understands, never mentioned it to anyone.

He let that land and then he said something about the song being about a street, again, and picked the guitar up and played it, and the room was still laughing at the start of the first verse and had stopped by the second.

That is the machine. He builds you a small ridiculous cathedral out of an entirely true story and then he plays you the thing the story

was about, and the song has to be good enough to survive the joke, and it was.

The other direction is the ranch, and the ranch stories are all about him being an idiot.

That is the deal he makes with the room and he makes it inside the first ten minutes. When he talks about the band, he is competent and dry and he is talking about other people. When he talks about the cattle, he is the fool, every time, without exception. There is a photograph of him on the screen at one point, on his knees, in the snow, at a gate, and the gate is open and there is nothing in the frame but him and a gate, and he lets that sit there a good while before he says anything.

I have thought about why that works and the best I can do is that a man who has been on television will not get away with telling you he is humble. He can only show you a photograph of himself losing an argument with a cow.

It is a good show, and I have sat at the back wall of that room for a lot of shows, and some of them have been very good, and this was not different in kind. He is not a magician. He is a man in his late sixties who has done this for forty years and who has finally worked out what he wants to say about it.

19

The difference was underneath.

Here is what I mean. On any other night, at the back wall, I am listening to a show and I am also running a list. The vocal is a bit hot in the front rows. There is a chair squeaking in row F and it will squeak all night. Somebody's phone is going to go. That light on the house-left side is out of focus and has been since February and I keep meaning to say something. The heat is starting to stack and I should go and look. Somebody has left the door to the corridor open and there is bar noise coming through.

At the back wall on that Saturday I had nothing.

I could see the sound position from where I stood, side on, and the Chaos-Weaver was sitting at it with his hands off the console. Not resting between moves. Off it, in his lap, and they stayed there. He moved twice in the first act that I saw, once when the guitar came in and once at the harmonica, and both times it was one hand and it went back.

Beyond him, out at the camera position, the All-Seeing stood and did not touch the camera. He watched the room. Not the stage. I noticed it because I looked over at him twice in forty minutes and both times he was facing about thirty degrees off the man, out over the heads of the audience, at nothing I could identify, with a live camera pointing away from him at a shot he was not looking at.

The chair in row F did not squeak, because at some point that evening somebody had gone along the back rows with a roll of felt pads, and I know that because I found the backing paper in the bin at strike, and I do not know which of them did it and I did not see it happen.

The door to the corridor was shut every time I looked at it.

The light on the house-left side was in focus.

That one is the closest thing to a fault I found all night. That fixture has been soft since February. It has been soft since somebody knocked the bar putting the drapes up and nobody wanted to get the ladder out. It was not soft. Somebody had got the ladder out, at some point, in a building where there was no spare hour, and refocused a light that nobody in that audience would have noticed and that I have been meaning to mention for two months.

I did not see that happen either.

The one thing I did see, I saw about halfway through the first act, and it took under a minute.

The Hand came along the back wall behind the last row, quietly, in the dark, and stopped at the corridor door and stood there for a second with his hand flat on it. Then he went out. Then he came back in with something small in his fist, and got down on one knee at the bottom of the door, and did something to the closer at the base of it that I could not see and that took him about twenty seconds, and

then he opened the door about a foot and let it go, and it came back and shut, and it did not bang.

That door has banged since the autumn. It bangs several times a night, at random, and the reason it bangs is that the closer has a valve in it that has gone off, and everybody in that building thinks of it as a thing about the door rather than a thing about a valve.

He was on one knee in the dark at the back of a room where a man was telling a story about a tour manager, and he fixed the door, and then he stood up and went back to the side of the stage where he had been.

Nobody in that audience knew the door had ever banged. That is the part. There was no version of that evening in which anybody was going to say thank you for it, because the fault it prevented was a fault they had never experienced.

I stood at that wall afterwards and did a tally.

The door since the autumn. The light since February. The thermostat on a summer schedule for I do not know how long, with the key to the guard sitting on the ledge above it under enough dust that you could see the outline of where it had lain. The chair in row F. The risers, stacked wrong since the spring, which means every person who has built that deck since the spring, and that includes me on more than one occasion, has handled every section twice rather than spend ninety seconds restacking them. The shim, which is not written down anywhere and lives entirely in the head of a man in Walnut Grove and, on a good day, in mine.

That is six things and I could go on. I have been in that building on and off for six years and I know it better than anybody who is not Dave Neufeld, and in six years the number of those things I have fixed is one, which is the shim, which I did not fix. I just know where it goes.

They were strangers and they got in at half past six, and by the end of the night I could not have put a single one of those things back on my list.

The heat did stack. That was mine and I had it. At about twenty to nine I felt the room go over and I went out and sat on the thermostat

for a minute and brought it back, and it came back. It was the only thing in that building all evening that needed a human being to notice it and go and do something, and it was the one thing I was there for.

I felt better about that than I am comfortable telling you.

One more thing from the first act, and it is about Dutch.

He watched from the side, stage right, standing, in the dark, with his back against the bit of wall between the drape and the cage door. He had a clear view of about a third of the stage from there and no view at all of the screen, which is where the photographs were, and he stayed there for both acts and did not move except to deal with the twelve-string.

I ended up beside him for a stretch of the first act because that is where the corridor door is.

He was not watching the show. He was watching the room. He was half turned away from the stage, out at the backs of ninety-seven heads, and every time a story landed he checked the house before he checked the man.

And there is a thing he did that I have not stopped thinking about, which is that on two of the ranch stories he made a small noise. Not a laugh. A short breath out through the nose. Twice, in the first act, at two specific stories, and not at the others, and the others were funnier.

The second time it happened I said, quietly, "Were you there?"

And Dutch said, "I was the other one."

He did not elaborate and I did not ask, and I have gone back over the two stories in my head since and I am fairly sure I know which part of each of them he is, and it is his, and I might have it wrong, so it stays where it is.

What I will say is that both of those stories ended with the man on stage being the fool, and both of them had another man in them who was not the fool, and the other man was not named either time.

The interval was at ten to nine. I went out at twenty to.

I did not go out because of anything. I went out because I had been standing at a wall for forty minutes and I wanted to check the corridor temperature against the room, and the box office is in the corridor, and that is the only reason I was there.

The Allfather had the laptop open and the will-call sheet beside it and he was working.

Working, in this case, looked like almost nothing. He had the sheet flat. He had a pen. He was going down the scan log on the laptop with the pen held off the screen, as he had gone down the list at the door, and every so often he made a mark on the sheet.

“Everything all right?”

“It’s four out.”

“Four out which way?”

“Four more scans than tickets,” he said.

I looked at the sheet. Ninety-seven at the top, circled, with the three comps underneath it in pen and COMP beside each of them, and the running figure crossed out and rewritten as they had gone in, and the last figure was ninety-seven and it was legible.

The laptop said a hundred and one.

Now. Cheryl and I have sat in that cupboard at the end of a night with a tin that did not agree with a laptop, more than once, and I know what the possibilities are, because we have been through all of them. A discrepancy of four is not a mystery. A discrepancy of four is one of about six things.

Somebody scanned a ticket twice, because the first scan did not beep and they went again.

Somebody scanned somebody’s whole booking when only two of the four turned up.

Somebody let a family in and scanned the parent’s ticket four times to make the number work.

Somebody scanned the wrong screen.

The laptop is counting a test scan from the afternoon.

Or somebody, on a door, in a rush, in a rain, has let four people in who did not have tickets, and has not said so.

I did not say that last one out loud. It went through my head standing there in that corridor with a coffee cup I had not thrown out, looking at a man who had spent an hour and a half putting people on a list who were not on the list.

He said: "It's not the comps. The comps are in the ninety-seven."

"I know."

"The comps are the only thing I have added to that number all night, and they are on the sheet, and there are three of them, and they are in the ninety-seven."

"I know," I said. "I saw you do them."

"Then it's the log," he said, and went back down the log.

"Could somebody have scanned twice?"

"Somebody scanned twice eleven times," he said. "It's in the log. Eleven duplicates, all of them within a second or so of the first scan, all of them the same ticket, all of them counted once."

"Then that's not it."

"That's not it."

He turned the laptop round so I could see. The scan log is a list. It is a very boring list. It has a time on the left, to the second, and a ticket reference, and a status, and it runs to a hundred and one lines, and he had been down it with a pen held off the screen for whatever number of minutes I had been standing there.

"The four are in a block," he said, and put the pen against the screen without touching it. "There. Seven thirty-nine and twenty seconds through seven forty-one and six."

They were. Four consecutive lines, all of them valid, all of them inside about two minutes, with nothing wrong with any of them.

"What's at twenty to eight?"

"That's what I'm doing," he said.

I did not have anything for that. Twenty to eight is when the corridor is at its worst and everybody in the building is doing three things, and I had been in it, and I had no memory of anything at twenty to eight except that it was loud and wet and that somebody's umbrella had gone over.

And then I did the arithmetic, which nobody had asked me to do, and which I did standing in a corridor holding a coffee cup.

A hundred and one in the seats. Ray. Me. Owen. Dutch. The seven. That is a hundred and thirteen people inside a room licensed for a hundred and ten, for two hours, with a bar open and a camera running and Wendy's name on the wall.

I have sat through the safety part of enough site inductions to know what that is and what it is not. It is not a catastrophe. Nobody is hurt. It is a number on a piece of paper being larger than another number on a piece of paper, and it is also the kind of thing that ends a licence, and a room like that does not have a version of itself without a licence. All of it sits on a laminated card in a frame, and the name on the card belongs to a woman who had not been out of her house since Friday and did not know any of this was happening.

"Do you want a hand?" I said, which is what I would have said to Cheryl.

"No."

"It's ten minutes to the interval."

"Then I've got ten minutes," he said.

I went back to the wall.

Here is what I had, at the back wall, for the last ten minutes of the first act, with a man on stage telling a room about the winter he did not know you have to break the ice on a trough.

A hundred and one people had been scanned into a room that had sold ninety-four tickets and issued three comps.

21

The interval at that venue is fifteen minutes and it is fifteen minutes of pure logistics, and I have watched it go wrong every way it can go wrong.

Ninety-seven people stand up at once. About sixty of them want a drink, and there is one bar, and the bar is a shutter with a counter about eight feet long. About thirty want the toilet, and there are two, and one of them is upstairs. Everybody wants to talk to the person

they came with and they want to do it where they are standing, which is in the aisle. And the corridor, which does not hold ninety-seven people at the start of the night when they are coming in wet and slow, holds them even worse in the middle of the night when they are warm and have opinions.

What normally happens is that the bar queue reaches the door of the room inside five minutes and stops moving, and the last people in it get served with about ninety seconds left, and Ray does the lights three times, and the second half starts late.

The queue did not stop moving.

I watched it because I had come out to look at the thermostat again and got stuck against the merch table, which is where I spent most of the interval. The bar had two people on it. Halle was on the fridge and the float, as she had been told, and she stayed on the fridge and the float, and the Conscience-Keeper poured, as he had said he would, and between them they cleared sixty people in about twelve minutes.

The thing that made it work was not speed. He was not fast. He was the opposite of fast. He did one transaction at a time, all the way to the end, including the card machine, before he looked at the next person.

What made it work was that the stock was out.

He had put half of it out at the start of the night and the other half came out at the interval, which was the thing he had told Ray he was going to do about the last call, and the effect of it, which I do not think Ray understood when he said okay and went and got the programs, was that at the busiest point of the evening nobody had to bend down and open a fridge.

Cans on the counter, in rows, cold, already open where people wanted them open.

There was one refusal.

A man had come in with a group and he had been at the Cactus first, which Owen had established at the door and had mentioned to me in passing an hour earlier as a fact he was not doing anything with. He was not a problem. He was loud in a way that was going to be a problem in about forty minutes, and he came to the bar for the

second of the two he had ordered, and the Conscience-Keeper gave him the first one and then said:

“I’ll do the other one after.”

“After what?”

“After the second half.”

The man looked at him.

“I’ve paid for it.”

“You have. It’ll be here.”

And it was there. It was on the back counter with a beer mat on top of it and the man’s name on the mat in pen, which I noticed at strike, and the man came and got it at the end of the night and said thank you.

I have watched somebody get cut off in that building twice. Both times it took about ten minutes, both times it involved Ray, and both times the person left angry and did not come back.

The corridor at the interval is where you find out what a show has done to a room.

I had two conversations pushed on me at that table inside a quarter of an hour, both of them from people who had worked out that I was staff because I was standing still. A man wanted to know whether the photographs were the man’s own. I said I did not know. He said they must be, because nobody would take a photograph like that of somebody else, and then explained which one he meant, which was the one at the gate in the snow, and I said that made sense, and he went away satisfied with an answer I had not given him.

The other one was a woman who wanted to know if there was a book. There is not a book. I said there was not a book and she said, “There should be a book,” like somebody lodging it formally, and I said I would pass it on, which I have now done.

That is the other half of what a merch table is, incidentally, and it is the half nobody puts on a spreadsheet. It is where people go to say a thing about the show to somebody who works there, because they cannot say it to the man.

Owen, meanwhile, was having the best quarter of an hour of his life.

He had the aisle. He was moving people out of it and into the corridor and back, and he had learned all of the row letters, and he was calling people by their row like a *maître d'*. He got a woman a chair from the stack for the interval because she could not stand that long, and he put it in the corridor by the coat rack, and I do not know where he got the idea because nobody has ever done that in that building.

And he bought a t-shirt.

I bought one too. Owen's version has me buying one first and being talked into it. What happened is that Owen put his card down and then said, "Curtis, one for you," to Dutch, and Dutch looked at me, and I did not have a way of saying no that would not have taken longer than saying yes.

Large for him. Large for me. Dutch put them in the paper bags.

And then Owen saw the koozies.

There was a box of them at the end of the table. They are neoprene sleeves for a can, with the same thing printed on them that is on the shirts, and there were maybe forty of them and they were eight dollars, and my brother picked one up and turned it over and made a noise.

"Steph will love this."

"She won't."

"She'll love it."

"Owen, she doesn't drink cans."

"That is not what a koozie is *for*, Curtis." He put it on the counter. He put his card down for the second time in ninety seconds. "It's a thing from a night. It goes in the drawer with the other things from the nights."

"So she won't use it."

"She'll love it," said Owen, and put it in his coat pocket, and that was where it stayed.

Dutch took the eight dollars on the card reader with both hands at arm's length.

The lights went at four minutes past nine, which is inside the fifteen, and I have never seen that interval come in under twenty.

22

I did not see the second half start. I was in the corridor.

What happened was that I had gone back for the thermostat, which had swung the other way with the room emptied for the interval and the door propped, and I was standing at the guard with the cover off when the house went down, and rather than walk into a dark room and make everybody move I stayed where I was, and that is how I came to be standing outside the green room.

The green room at that venue is off the corridor past the box office, and it has a door that does not shut properly, as every door in that building does. It was open about a hand's width. There was light in there and the light was on the wall opposite, so I could not see anybody in it.

Dutch was in there. A string had gone on the twelve-string in the last song of the first act, and he had spent the interval working the merch table with the guitar leaning against his leg, letting nobody else near it, and when the bar shut he picked it up and took it into the green room, because that is where the light is and because there is a chair. I watched him go in. He did not come out. He was still in there when I stopped at the thermostat, because I could hear the winder going.

So there were two people in that room and I could hear both of them.

The Kid was saying something about the second half. He was going through the running order out loud, as performers do, and he said two chapter numbers and then said, "and then the long one," and then stopped.

Then the other voice said: "Is there anyone out there tonight you'd have wanted here?"

And there was a pause that went on longer than a pause in a conversation goes on.

And then the Kid said a name. Just the one. He said it the way you say a name you have said out loud a lot and not recently, and then he said, "He'd have liked the cow ones. He'd have hated the rest of it."

And the other voice said, "Then do the cow ones."

And the Kid laughed, and it was not the laugh he had been doing on stage for an hour, and he said, "I'm going to do all of it," and then there was the sound of a man standing up out of a low couch, which is a specific sound when the man is sixty-nine.

I got the cover back on the thermostat and went in the side of the room and stood at the wall.

He came on at nine minutes past and he was different. Not better. He had been very good in the first half. He was looser. He stopped in the middle of a story about a bull that had been sold to him twice and went somewhere that was not in the script, and came back to it, and the room went with him both ways, And then, in the middle of the second act, he did the one about his father.

ACT TWO: CHAPTER FIVE went up and there was no photograph under it. That is the only card all night with nothing under it, and I did not think anything of it at the time because I assumed it was a fault, and I looked over at the tablet to see whether somebody was going to fix it, and nobody was going to fix it.

The story is that his father drove a truck for a living and did not like music, or said he did not, and that the two of them did not have much and what they had was the radio, and that the radio in that truck was on a station out of Bellingham that came and went depending on where you were on the highway.

He did about a minute on the geography of that. Where it came in. Where it went. The particular stretch north of the border where you would get most of a song and then lose it, and how you learn, as a kid, to hate a specific two miles of road.

Then he said that his father put the windows down in the summer, which meant the radio had to go up, which meant that for about three months a year a man who did not like music listened to a lot of it at volume, and did not once say anything about it in either direction.

And then he said that he was thirty-six when he worked out that his father had been choosing the route.

The room did a thing there that I have heard maybe twice in that building. It is not silence. Silence is what you get when people are

being polite. This was ninety-seven people all deciding at the same moment not to move their feet.

He let it sit longer than was comfortable. Then he said something short and dry about how nobody in his family has ever said a true thing on purpose, which got a laugh and let everybody out, and then he picked up the twelve-string.

The song after it was not about his father. It was about a road, and it was in standard, and it was strummed rather than picked, and it was in the major and it moved along, and it was the least sad song he had played all night.

Owen was on the aisle by the drape at the back with his hands behind his back and his lanyard on.

And he did the cow ones.

They are a different animal from the first half and you can hear it in the guitars. The band songs are in standard and they are built for five people; when he does them alone he has to hold them up, and he does, and you can hear the effort, and the effort is part of what people came for. The ranch songs are not built for anybody else. They are in the open tunings, three of them in a row, and they are slower, and two of them are in three, which is to say they are waltzes, and a waltz played by one man on a wooden stage in a room of a hundred people does something to a room that I cannot account for and am not going to try to.

The resonator came out for the middle of that run. It is a metal-bodied thing and it barks, and he had a slide on his little finger, and it went from a whisper to something that sounded like a much bigger instrument in about eight bars, and half of that is the player and half of it is that a resonator in a small room with a hard back wall is a genuinely loud object.

The last of the three was the long one he had named in the green room. It is not a big song. It is a man, a guitar in an open tuning, five verses, and no chorus at all, which is a very hard thing to hold and which he held, and he held it by taking his hand off the strings entirely for a beat and a half at the top of the fourth verse and letting the room carry the gap.

Nobody coughed in the gap. In that room. In April.

Dutch had the twelve-string restrung and back on the stand by the time it was wanted.

I have told a few people about the green room since. I always tell it the same way, because it is what I heard: Dutch asked him who he wished was out there, and he said a name, and Dutch told him to do the cow ones.

Owen says he does not remember me telling him that. He was on the aisle for the second half and he had a woman in row C who needed to get out twice.

23

The encore was one song and he did it on his own with the older dreadnought and no harmonica and no slide on the screen, and the screen was off, and the lighting was the warm special off the chair, only he did not sit down, so he stood in it.

It was an old one. I know that because the room knew it, and a room tells you what it knows in the first bar — there is a small collective noise people make when they recognize something, and it is not applause, it is closer to a sigh with consonants in it, and it happened about two seconds in.

It was in standard and it was fingerpicked and it was slow, and it was one of the band ones, which meant he was doing on his own a thing that five people used to do, and the arrangement was mostly holes. He left the bass out. He left the second guitar part out, obviously, and he left the place where a drummer would have come in completely empty, which is the bravest thing you can do with a song people know, because everybody in that room was hearing the drummer anyway.

There was no big finish. He came down to almost nothing on the last verse and sang about half of it off the microphone, and by off the microphone I mean he moved his head back about a foot, and that is a thing you can only do in a room where the sound is right, because in a room where the sound is not right you disappear.

He did not disappear.

What I was doing, while that happened, is what I always do at the back wall, which is listen to the room instead of the man.

You can hear a room. Ninety-seven people in a black box with a twenty-seven-foot ceiling and drapes on three walls and a hundred chairs with people in them, and the sound of that is not silence, it is a kind of held-in noise made of coats and breathing and somebody's watch. And what a room does during a song is change how much of that noise it is making, and it does it without deciding to, and if you stand at the back and pay attention to that instead of to the stage it will tell you exactly where a room is.

That room got very quiet in the second verse and stayed quiet.

That is all of it. It got quiet and stayed quiet, which is what a good room does for a good song, and I have heard it maybe a dozen times in that building and every one of those times somebody very good was on the deck and everything underneath them was right.

The heat held. I had it at twenty-one and a half and it held.

He finished, and there was the half-second before it comes, and then it came, and it was a hundred and one people, which is more than ninety-seven.

Then the house came up on a tap and it came up slow, over three or so seconds, which nobody in that room noticed and which is the difference between an audience standing up and an audience being told to leave.

PART SIX
STRIKE

24

Strike starts when the last person leaves the room, and at that venue the last person leaves the room about twenty-five minutes after the show ends, because they want to talk to each other in the aisle and then they want to talk to Ray in the corridor and then they want to talk to each other again in the parking lot with the doors open and the rain coming in.

That is not a complaint. That is the business. Nobody drives to a business park in Langley in April to leave promptly.

What it means is that at a quarter to eleven you are standing in a room with a hundred chairs in it and a dozen people still in the building and you cannot start, and then at ten to you can start, and then you have got a deck, a hundred chairs, two drapes, a snake, four speakers on stands, a bar, and a van to load, and everybody who was going to help has spent the last twenty-five minutes being told what a lovely evening it was and has gone soft.

A normal strike in that room, with everybody who is going to help, is an hour and a half. I have done it with three people and it took the best part of two.

The corridor after a show is the best fifteen minutes of Ray's week and everybody who knows him knows it. He stands at the end of it by the poster and he does not move, and people come to him, and he takes both hands off whatever he is holding to shake with, which means he is forever putting things down on the photocopier and forgetting them. There was a pair of reading glasses on that photocopier for most of March.

Three separate people told him it was the best show they had seen there. He told me that afterwards, and he told me the number, which is how I know it was three.

The woman who had lodged the book complaint with me at the interval lodged it again with Ray, at the source, and Ray said, "There should," in a tone that suggested he intended to telephone somebody about it, and he may well have.

A man told him about the sound. Not the songs. The sound. He said he had been at the back and he had heard every word, and Ray said thank you and said something about the room, and the man said no, it was the mix, and Ray said thank you again and looked past him at the sound position, where there was nobody, because the console was covered and the dust sheet was over it and the position was clear.

I do not know when that happened either.

The chairs went first, and they went while people were still in the room, which is a thing you cannot normally do because it looks like you are throwing them out. It did not look like that. The Seeker started at the back, in the rows nobody was standing in, and folded and carted six rows while a dozen people talked down at the front with their coats on, and not one of them turned round, and by the time the last of them went out the door there were about forty chairs left in that room and they were the thirty that had people near them.

I got on the deck with the Hand.

That was the second time I had been on that deck with him that evening, and by the end of it I was better at it than I have ever been. Not by much. But there is a thing that happens when you work with somebody who does not talk while they work, which is that you stop narrating your own hands. I did not say *got it* once. I did not say *you good?* I did not say *watch your fingers* to a man who was watching his fingers. And it turns out that about a fifth of the time I spend on a strike is spent making noises at other people to establish that I am being careful, and if you take that out you go faster.

Four sections down, legs off, on the cart, cart to the wall. The shim went back in the box in the cage where the shim lives, which nobody has ever done, including me.

Owen struck with us, and he had been on his feet since before six, and he had spent the back half of the evening doing a job he had never done before, and he could have gone and sat in the truck and nobody would have said anything.

He did the glassware first, which is two dozen glasses off the tops of the bar and the merch table and the photocopier and out of the corridor and off the floor under row B, and it is the job nobody

remembers exists until the following Thursday, and he found all of them. Then he got on the stepladder for the drapes, which is a two-person job, and he was the one up it because he is taller and because he volunteered.

Somewhere in the middle of it he stopped talking, which I have not seen him do since he was about nineteen, and he worked in silence for a good twenty minutes, and when he did say something it was:

“Does he do this every time?”

“Who?”

“Ray. Does he do all this, every show, every time.”

“Most of it.”

“After doing the front of house.”

“After doing the front of house.”

Owen put the last of the glasses in the crate.

“He’s fifty-something,” he said.

Dutch did the rug.

He rolled it from the far end on his knees, and he did it properly, tight, and he tied the baler twine round it in two places, and then he stood it up on end in the corner and stopped and looked at it for a second, and said:

“Where’s this live?”

“Cage. Back left. There’s a hook.”

“There’s a hook for it.”

“There’s a hook for it.”

And Dutch carried a rolled rug across a room and hung it on a hook that somebody in 2017 had put in a wall specifically so that a rug would have somewhere to go, and he did not say another word about it, and the rug was finished with.

The van went out in about twenty minutes. The guitars last, five trips, and I did not offer this time.

I did offer to take the saddle and got it. He handed it to me without discussion, which by that point in the evening I understood to be a considerable thing, and I carried a saddle across a wet parking lot in Langley at five past eleven and put it in a Sprinter.

The Kid came out at about ten past. He had his coat on and he shook Ray's hand for a while and said something about the room that I did not hear and that Ray has since repeated to about forty people.

Then he got ambushed at the merch table.

There were three of them and they had waited. The room had been empty for twenty minutes, the chairs were on the cart, my brother was up a stepladder taking a drape off its hooks, and three women somewhere in their late sixties were still standing by the folding table in their coats with their car keys out, waiting, on the entirely correct theory that a man has to come through a corridor eventually.

All three had bought shirts. One of them was wearing hers over her blouse.

And the one in the middle, who was called Bev, because the other two said it about a dozen times, had a Sharpie.

Not a pen. Not a biro out of the bottom of a handbag. A black Sharpie, uncapped, held up at chest height like a warrant.

"Now," said Bev.

"Now," the Kid agreed.

"We are not going to keep you."

"You're all right."

"We are absolutely not going to keep you. Sheila has to be up." Sheila, who was the one wearing hers, said that she did not have to be up. "Sheila has to be up. But we said in February when we bought these that if we came we were going to do this, and we have come, and so."

And she held out the Sharpie.

The next bit took a minute and a half, and in it I watched a man do a thing he had plainly done several thousand times and make it look like the first.

He did not take the pen. He said, "Have you got the shirts?"

They had the shirts. Sheila was wearing hers, which she began to point out.

"Flat's better," he said. "It bleeds if you sign it on a person. Goes through to the other side and then you've got half of me on your back as well." And he cleared a space on the folding table with the side of

his arm, and laid the first shirt out flat, and smoothed it once with his palm, and then took the pen.

And that was it. That was the manoeuvre. He had turned an ambush into a small clerical process at a table, in one sentence, by making it a question of technique, and all three of them helped him do it. Sheila took hers off over her head and handed it across and stood there in her blouse holding her own coat, entirely happy.

He signed all three across the front, took his time, asked each of them their name and wrote it, and asked Sheila to spell hers, which she did, and which was spelled the way it sounds.

Then Bev said, "Could you put something on mine."

"Something."

"I have a photograph from the Commodore in 1991. I am in it and you are behind me." She said that part quickly. "I would have brought it. I did not think."

"So this'll have to do."

"So this will have to do."

"Which one's yours?"

"The middle one."

"Then have that," he said, and did something to the signature on the middle one, a couple of extra words above it that I could not see from where I was, and turned it round for her, and Bev read it and did not say anything at all for about three seconds, and then said, "Well," and folded it into her bag like a document.

I have no idea what he wrote. Owen tried to see and did not see. Bev's friends asked her in the parking lot and she told them it was nothing.

And then Owen, who had come down off the stepladder somewhere during all this and had been standing at the end of the table doing nothing whatsoever for a full minute, said:

"He's back on the twenty-fifth of September."

All three of them turned round.

"In this room?"

"In this room. Same room. It's on the wall."

And I watched my brother sell three tickets to a September show at twenty past eleven at night in an emptied-out corridor while a man in his coat put the cap back on a Sharpie, and the man handed the Sharpie back to Bev, and Bev put it in her handbag, and they all said goodnight about four times each and went out into the rain.

Dutch had watched all of it from the doorway with a road case in his hand.

I said something to him about it. I do not remember what. What I remember is his reply, which he delivered without putting the case down.

“Forty years,” said Dutch, “and that’s the job.”

“That’s not the job.”

“That’s the job,” said Dutch. “The rest of it’s the hours.”

Then the Kid got in the passenger side, sideways, in two stages.

Dutch drove the first leg. That was always the arrangement. They were going as far as Hope and stopping, because a man who is nearly seventy-five does not do nine hours after midnight and neither does a man who is sixty-nine, and they had to be at the ranch by Sunday afternoon because of a heifer.

He said that last bit through the window with the engine running. Not the details. Just: “We’ve got a heifer.”

And then the Sprinter went out onto 64th Ave eastbound, because that is the only way you can go.

25

Ray tried to pay them at about twenty past.

This is the part I had been quietly dreading for about four hours, because Ray had not agreed a rate with anybody, because Merv had not given him a rate, because Merv had sent two words. And I have watched Ray try to pay people. He overpays and then apologises for overpaying and then asks if it was enough.

He came out of the box office with the tin and stood there with it.

“So I don’t know what — Merv didn’t say. What do I owe you?”

And the Allfather said a number.

It was not a strange number. It was a per-head rate for a night crew, times seven, and it was a normal rate, the sort of rate that appears on an invoice, and I did the arithmetic in my head while he was saying it and it came out to less than the agency in Surrey had wanted for a minimum booking.

“That’s it?”

“That’s the rate.”

“That’s less than — “ Ray stopped himself. “Cash all right?”

“Cash is fine.”

And Ray counted it out of the tin on the folding table under the poster, and there was enough in the tin, because there had been ninety-four tickets and a bar that had run all night and nineteen drink tokens’ worth of people buying a second one, and I stood there and watched a man pay a night crew out of a cash tin, which has happened in every small room in this country since there have been small rooms.

Then the reconciliation.

He did it standing up, at the folding table, with the laptop and the sheet, and it took no time at all, and he had clearly done it before Ray came out with the tin and was only showing me because I was there.

“It’s the offline.”

“The scanner?”

“The connection didn’t drop. It flapped.” He turned the laptop. “Look at the ticket references, not the times. Every one of the four is in the log twice.”

They were.

Here is what happened, and it is not interesting, and I have explained it to people since and watched their faces do something.

When that app loses its connection it queues the scans locally and pushes them up when the signal comes back. That is the offline mode and it works. What it does not handle well is a connection that goes and comes and goes again inside a minute, which is what a router behind a fire door at the other end of a concrete building does when there are ninety people and their phones standing in a corridor

between it and you. Four scans landed in that window. Each of them went up live, because there was a signal, and each of them also went into the local queue, because as far as the phone was concerned there was not. When the queue pushed, the second copies arrived with a slightly different timestamp, and the app deduplicates on timestamp.

Four tickets. Eight lines. Ninety-seven people.

“So it’s ninety-seven.”

“It was always ninety-seven,” he said, and shut the laptop, and put the sheet in the drawer where the sheets go, and the box office was closed.

It was not relief. It should have been.

For the best part of three hours I had been carrying a thing that did not work. A hundred and one scans, ninety-seven people, and no way to make those agree, and a licence in a frame with a number on it three lower than the number of bodies I could account for. Underneath that I had four people in a room who had not paid, which is not a crime and is not even unusual, and which would have been a small ordinary fault in an evening that had not had one.

And then it went away. It went away completely, in under two minutes, with an explanation about timestamps. Ninety-seven and twelve is a hundred and nine. The room was inside its licence all night by one, which is the sort of margin nobody in that building has ever thought about, and which had been there all along.

What I was left with was an evening in which nothing at all had gone wrong.

I would rather have had the four. I have turned that over since and I cannot make it into a decent thing to have wanted.

There is a version of that discrepancy where nobody ever finds out. I have been in it. You get to the end of a night four out, and you are tired, and the tin agrees with the card machine, and the four is only a number on a laptop that nobody but you is ever going to look at, and what you do is you write *4 over* on the sheet in pen and you put the sheet in the drawer and you go home. That is not negligence. That is a Saturday. There is a drawer in that box office with about nine sheets in it going back three years with things written on them like

3 over and 2 short (*Bonnie?*) and one that says only ?? with a circle round it.

He did not do that. He found it, and then he put the sheet in the drawer with the others.

The others went in a way I cannot give you a shape for, which is that I did not see any of them leave. I was on the cable. I coiled the snake and the two orange ones and put them on the hooks, and I got the bad one off the pile and put it in the van box for Dave, and at some point during that I straightened up and the room had fewer people in it than it had had, and I could not have told you when any of them went or in what order.

There was no moment. Nobody said goodnight. The bar shutter was down and the counter was wiped and the fridge had been restocked from the back for a Thursday nobody had asked about. The camera bag was gone. The tablet was back in its stand at the sound position with the stack for that night saved under the showcase, where it will sit until somebody clears it out, which nobody will.

What was left, at half past eleven, was a black box with a hundred chairs on a cart against the wall and a deck stacked north-face-out the way it should have been stacked since spring, and a rolled rug on a hook, and a mop.

The house lights were up full, on the cleaning setting, which is how the room had looked when Owen and I walked into it at ten to six with the rain still on us and the chairs on a cart and nothing built.

It looked exactly the same. That is what a strike is for. The object of the exercise is to return a room to the condition in which nothing has happened in it, and the better everybody is at their job the more completely the evening is erased, and there is no trade on earth that is stranger about that than this one.

The pomegranate was off. It goes off on a switch by the cage door at the end of every night, and I have thrown that switch myself, and it has never registered with me as an event.

The only difference I could find was that the risers were stacked the right way round.

Ray was in the middle of the floor with the mop.

I went to get the cart and when I came back he had stopped, with the mop still in his hands, looking at the north wall where the deck was stacked.

"Fifty-one minutes," he said.

"About that."

"We've never done that."

"No."

He stood there. Then he said, in exactly the voice he uses on stage, which is the reasonable one:

"You know Sundeep can't lift."

"Ray."

"He can't. He's been here since we opened and he cannot lift a riser section, so every show I am on the other end of the deck myself at half five with my glasses in my pocket, and I have never said it to him and I am not going to." The mop was dripping on a floor he had already done. "And Cheryl won't use the laptop search. She does the paper list because she likes the paper list, and every single show there is a woman in that corridor with a dead phone waiting while Cheryl goes down a page with her finger, and I have watched it happen forty times, and I have never said, Cheryl, use the laptop."

"They're volunteers."

"I know what they are." He looked at me. "That's the sentence, isn't it. That's the sentence I've got. They're volunteers, so it takes an hour and ten, so the room is worse than it could be, every night, forever, and everybody is very nice about it."

I did not say anything, because there is nothing to say to that from where I was standing, which was inside the same sentence.

"Don't tell anybody I said that," said Ray.

"I won't."

"I don't mean it."

"I know."

"I do mean it," he said, and went back to mopping a floor he had already mopped.

About a minute after that I asked him whether he had said thanks to them.

"I did," he said. "I think I did. I said it to a couple of them." He looked round the room. "Curtis, did I say it to all of them?"

"I don't know."

"I don't know either," Ray said, and went on mopping.

26

We came out of that parking lot at about twenty to midnight, west on 64th and then north on 200th, and it was still raining, and the fan came on.

"Resistor," said Owen.

"Don't."

There were two t-shirts on the back seat in paper bags. He had the koozie out of his coat pocket and he was turning it over in his hands, and he turned it over for most of 200th.

"She's going to love this."

"She isn't."

"Curtis."

"She's going to say *what's this* and put it on the counter and it's going to be on the counter for six days and then it's going to go in the drawer."

"That's what I said it would do." Owen held it up. "I said that at the table. It goes in the drawer with the other things from the nights. That's what it's for."

I did not have anywhere to go with that so I let it be.

Then he started on the night, and I was not ready for it, because I had been on my feet since ten to six and the part of me that was still working was the part that had been coiling cable.

"So what was that?" he said.

"What was what?"

"Tonight. What was that? Because I've been to shows, Curtis. I went to that thing at the Orpheum with the — with Steph's work, the — and this was better than that, and that had a budget."

"It's a good room."

"You keep saying that."

"It's true."

"It's not an answer." He put it in the cup holder, where it did not fit, and took it out again. "I'm asking about the night. I'm asking what happened, because I was on the door and I was on the aisle and I had a map, and nothing went wrong. Not one thing. And I sell into operating theatres, so I know what it looks like when nothing goes wrong, and it doesn't look like that."

"What does it look like?"

"It looks like a handful of people working very hard," said Owen, "and being pleased with themselves afterwards."

I thought about that for a while. He is not a stupid man and he had put his finger on something and he had put it on the wrong end of it.

"The load-out was fifty-one minutes," I said.

"What?"

"From the last person out of the room to the mop. Fifty-one minutes. That is a full strike with a bar and a van in it, and I have never got that room under ninety minutes."

"Curtis."

"And the cable's coiled properly. All of it. Over-under, both ways, on the hooks, and the bad one is in the box for Dave with the tape the right way round so he'll see it, and I did about a third of that and I did not do the good third."

Owen looked out at the rain for a bit.

"I'm asking you what the night was," he said, "and you're telling me about cable."

"I'm telling you the cable is coiled."

"Yeah," said Owen. "You are."

And that was the conversation.

Somewhere west of the Golden Ears turnoff he tried once more, from a different angle, which is what he does.

"All right. Different question. Were they good, or were they lucky?"

"Nobody's lucky for six hours."

"Right." He nodded. "Right. So they were good."

"They were good."

“So why hasn’t Ray got them?”

And I did not have an answer to that either. It is the practical question and it is the only one anybody asked all night. Ray has a room and a season and a stream and a Thursday open mic, and he runs it on a woman who does the box office out of love and a technician doing the work of a department, and one Saturday a crew turned up who could do the thing properly, and on Monday morning that room went back to what it was.

“They cost money,” I said.

“They cost less than the agency.”

“They cost more than nothing, and nothing is what he’s got.”

Owen watched the wet come off the truck in front of us for about a kilometre.

“That’s the worst sentence anybody’s said to me this year,” he said.

“It’s a non-profit.”

“I know it’s a non-profit. I’m saying it’s a bad sentence.”

We did a while on the freeway without saying anything, and then I told him about the man in row C.

He had it before I was halfway. Two chairs out of the end of a twelve makes it a ten, and the two on the end of the row go to the back, and the man with the printout had been holding C-11 and C-12 since February.

“That’s the one who was shouting.”

“He wasn’t shouting.”

“He was doing the other thing.” Owen watched the wipers for a while. “Did I do that?”

There is a version of this where I say no. It was not available.

“Yes,” I said.

“Right,” said Owen.

He did not say anything else about it for the rest of the drive, and he has not brought it up since, and I have watched him tell the story of that night to four people and the man in row C is not in it.

I dropped him at his place at about ten past midnight. The kitchen light was on. He got out with his paper bag and stood in the rain with the door open, holding the koozie, and said:

"I'm doing September."

"You're doing September."

"You should do September."

"I'll be there anyway," I said. "That room's got a make-up air unit that thinks every Saturday is a Tuesday, and until somebody replaces it, somebody has to stand in a corridor and lie to it."

He shut the door and went up the path, and I watched him get about halfway and then stop and come back and knock on the window, and I put it down.

"What was his name?" he said. "The old guy. The one with the guitars."

"Dutch."

"Dutch what?"

"Just Dutch."

"Right," said Owen, and thought about it, and said, "He was the best one," and went inside.

I sat there for a second with the wipers going and the fan on high, because high is the only thing it does now, and then I put it in drive and went home.

A NOTE

Bez Arts Hub is a real venue at 20230 64th Avenue in Langley, British Columbia. The building, its scale, its ceiling, its side entrance past the physiotherapy clinic, its mural, its neon, its black box and green room, and the ordinary difficulty of getting a hundred people through twelve feet of corridor in the rain, are all rendered as accurately as research allows.

Everyone in this book is invented. The founders, the staff, the volunteers, the audience, the crew, the performer, and the man who drove him are fictional, and any resemblance between them and the people who actually run that room, or who have played in it, is unintended. The performer in particular is a composite of a career shape rather than a portrait of anybody; he is not named here for that reason.

Where the practical detail of the trade is right, credit belongs to the people who do it. Where it is wrong, that is the authors'.