

THE HUNGRY GODS GO ASHORE

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ms Marina · Oceania Cruises

*Athens (Piraeus) — Gythion — Corfu — Kotor
Dubrovnik — Split — Venice*

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Piraeus

The ship takes 1,250 guests and 800 crew. Call it two thousand people. They eat five times a day if they want to, and on that ship they want to, because the food is the reason they picked it. That is not my opinion. It is on the brochure and it is in the tonnage.

At my end that is nineteen pallets, two reefer trucks, one dry truck, and a window.

The window is the whole job. Everything else is lifting.

I am the agent's man on the stores contract at Akti Miaouli. Fifteen years. I have loaded this vessel forty times.

I have never been on her.

I go as far as the stores lift on the port side and no further, and there is a line painted on the deck plate to show me where that is. People ask me what it's like up there. I have a stores lift. It is grey. It smells like a stores lift.

MS MARINA · PIRAEUS · STORES REQUISITION

Fresh fish, chilled, mixed	640 kg
Beef, chilled, primal	1,180 kg
Dairy	2,240 kg
Fresh produce	4,600 kg
Butter	410 kg
Wine, bonded	3,100 btl

Special order — see attached

Delivery window 07:00–14:00. Vessel departs 18:00.

Four thousand six hundred kilos of vegetables. Two thousand people. Seven days.

Nobody eats four thousand six hundred kilos of vegetables. What the ship is buying is the ability to give any one of those people any thing at any hour, and *being able to* costs about three times what *doing it* costs, and the difference goes over the side at night and gets billed as provisioning.

The special order this trip was forty kilos of a lettuce. Not lettuce. A lettuce. There is a variety, and one man on that ship has decided about it, and I got a phone call in August from Miami, Florida, about a leaf.

I do not have a feeling about this. I am telling you what the number is.

The forklifts come out at ten to seven.

There are nine and they come down the quay in a line and they are the best thing you will see today. Old Linde machines, most of them, and the men driving them have been driving them since before the Chinese bought the port, and they can put a pallet through a gap you would not walk through.

There is an order to the line and the order is not written anywhere. Fotis goes second. Fotis has gone second for eleven years. A young man came in two seasons ago and went second on his fourth day and the whole quay stopped, all of it, nine machines, and nobody said a word to him and he never did it again and nobody has ever explained it to him.

I have watched Fotis reverse forty metres between a bollard and a reefer truck, in one movement, no spotter, at speed, while eating.

Nobody claps. It's Tuesday.

Piraeus is not a cruise port. Piraeus is a ferry port that has cruise ships in it.

Twenty million people a year go through here. The gates run E1 to E12, and on an August morning the Aegina boat alone moves more human beings before eight o'clock than are aboard the Marina in total.

I mention it because a woman came down to the rope at ten with a coffee and told me they'd chosen this ship specifically because it was *small*. She said the word the way you'd say it to a doctor. She said they didn't do the big ones. She said, and I am quoting her, "we don't like to overwhelm a place."

She was standing at that moment about ninety metres from Gate E7, where four thousand people were boarding a ferry to Paros, and behind her was the fourth-busiest passenger port in the world, and she meant every word of it, and she was very nice, and she asked me about my family.

The Conscience-Keeper came down the quay at twenty past nine, which they are not to do, and stood at my elbow while I counted off the dairy, and waited until the driver was finished, and then said, pleasantly, in English:

"Was the chain broken?"

I said which chain.

“That truck sat for forty minutes.”

It had. The reefer with the fish had come in behind a tour coach and lost forty minutes on the apron with the unit running, which is not a break. A break is a break. Forty minutes with the unit running is forty minutes with the unit running.

But the ship’s provision officer was standing two metres off with the sheet in his hand and he had heard it, and now I was answering a question in front of the man who signs.

I said the unit ran the whole time and the log would show it.

He said, “Will it?”

I said yes.

He said thank you, and did not buy anything, and did not want anything, and walked back up the quay.

The officer pulled the log. The log showed a rise of two degrees and a return, inside tolerance, and he was entirely within his rights and he rejected the consignment anyway, because he now had a question on the record and a rejected pallet costs him nothing.

Six hundred and forty kilos of fish went back on the truck.

Petros is paid by the load. He stood at my window a while and then asked who the man was, and I said I had no idea, which was true, and he said, “He’s a guest?” and I said yes, and he said, “He’s a *guest*,” and drove out through the gate.

The fish was fine. I want that understood. The man was not wrong about one single thing he said, and the fish was fine.

It went to a hotel in Glyfada. Petros sold the lot at the door for a third of the price and they served it that same night to a hundred and ten Germans and nobody died, and one of them, I am told, sent a compliment to the kitchen.

At eleven I lost a pallet.

Number seven. Dry stores, bonded, wine. I had it against the shed wall with the others and I turned round and it was four hundred metres away, going north, at the top of the gate, moving.

I ran. You do not run in a port. I ran.

By the time I got there it was through, and it was on Pier Two, which is not my pier, and it had not arrived there by accident. It was set down square against the stack with the pallet edges true. Somebody had put it there on purpose.

And there was a man in among the container crews. No vest. No boots. No card. Working.

You have to understand what a container pier is.

It is not a place where things get lifted. It is a place where every lift belongs to somebody. Which crew, which shift, which company, which union — and there are two unions on that pier and they are not speaking, and there is a man dead there from four years ago that nobody in that port has finished being angry about, and the anger has a shape now, and the shape is *who is permitted to touch what*.

Into this walked the Hand.

He was good. That is the part I have never been able to explain to anybody since. He wasn't in the way. He didn't slow anything, he didn't have to be worked around, nobody had to shout at him. He got under a load with two of their own men, on the correct side, at the correct moment, no word passing, and it went up clean, and he was already turning to the next one.

He worked two and a half hours and he did it for nothing.

Somebody brought him a vest, because you cannot be on that pier without a vest, and he put it on without breaking stride and it was the wrong company's vest and now he was, to anyone reading the pier from a distance, a Dport man. Somebody else brought him a coffee at half past eleven. He held it. He did not drink it. He held it for about forty minutes in his left hand and worked with his right, and then he put it down on a bollard, still full, and it was still there at four o'clock, and it may be there now.

By noon there were four dockers working alongside him who had not been assigned to that stack, and one of them was on his break.

Stelios came and found me at the gate at one.

He is the steward. About fifty. He has been doing this a long time and he is, on the merits, right about most things, and he was right about this.

“Who is he.”

I said he was off the cruise ship.

“I don’t care where he is off. Who is he. Give me the name.”

I said I didn’t have the name.

“He is your man.”

I said he was not my man. I said I had a pallet inside his fence and would like it back.

Stelios looked at me. Then he looked down the pier, where at that moment the Hand was taking one end of something heavy off a young docker who had it at a bad angle, and taking it in such a way that it looked as though the young man had set it down himself.

“Is he getting paid?”

I said I didn’t think so.

“Then what is he doing.”

I didn’t have an answer. He waited for one. He is entitled to an answer to that question — it is the only question on that pier that matters, and he asked it plainly, to my face, and I stood there and gave him nothing, and he went away angry with me, and he was right to.

The pallet came back at twenty to five.

It is four hundred metres. A man could carry a case of that wine across in five minutes and be back for the next one before the kettle boiled. What actually happened was this.

I telephoned my office. My office telephoned the terminal. The terminal said the pallet was not theirs and could not be released to me, because I am not a person, I am a contractor, and a contractor may not receive goods from a terminal he is not contracted to. The pallet had to be released to the Port Authority, and then the Port Authority could release it to me, and this is two movements and not one, and each movement is a form.

I said it was my wine.

They agreed it was my wine. That was never in question. Nobody at any point in the six hours suggested it was anybody else's wine. It was my wine, on their concrete, and their concrete has rules.

So a PPA man had to come, and a PPA forklift, and the forklift needed a gate pass, and the gate pass needed a reason, and the reason had to be typed. Then a man walked out ahead of the forklift for four hundred metres, at walking pace, in the sun, in front of a machine that can do twenty kilometres an hour, because a vehicle crossing between terminals is escorted, and the escort walks.

I watched them come. It took eleven minutes to cross the yard and I could have crawled it faster and I stood at my rope and I did not say one word, because the man walking in front of that forklift was doing his job correctly and there is nothing you can say to a man who is doing his job correctly.

Six hours. Four hundred metres. The ship sailed at six.

Nineteen pallets. Nineteen delivered. I closed my sheet.

At five they were all at the rail.

Twelve hundred people, port side, decks six and nine and eleven, phones already up. An hour to go and they were up there for the hour.

The light in Piraeus at that time of day in September is not a small thing. It comes low and orange up the harbour and it puts a good colour on everything, and everything, from where they were standing, is: the gantries at Pier Two, blue, COSCO down the side in white. The tank farm. The bunkering barge. Thirteen thousand boxes on the Ever Genius, alongside. The ferries at E8 with the ramps down and the trucks going in. Two crane bridges. A very large amount of steel.

That is the view. That is the entire view. The Aegean is four hours away and they will be asleep in it.

They photographed it for an hour.

Not one of them was pretending. That's what I want to say about it. They leaned on that rail and held their phones out over the water and got the cranes and the tanks and the boxes in the gold light, and

they were moved, all twelve hundred of them, and a woman on deck six called down to me at the bollards and asked if it was always this beautiful.

I said yes.

It was the only thing to say and it also happened to be true.

The Allfather was on deck six, about the middle of them.

I noticed him because he was the only man on that rail with nothing in his hands. Twelve hundred phones and one pair of empty hands, and he was not leaning on the rail either, he was standing back from it a little, with the whole of them in front of him.

He was not photographing the cranes. He was not looking at the cranes.

That is all. He was there for the hour and he did not do anything, and I had a sheet to close and a driver to pay off and I went back to the office at twenty past five and I did not think about him again until much later.

The horn went at six. They came off the springs, took the tug, and went out past the mole.

Fifteen years and I still stop for the horn. It is not sentiment. It's loud.

Stelios phoned me at eight that night, at home.

He said the man had walked off Pier Two at four o'clock, up the quay, and had not signed anything, and was not on any list, and he needed the name for the report, because there has to be a name in the report.

I said I didn't have it.

"You were standing right there."

I said I was.

He waited. I could hear his television.

“What do I put?”

I didn’t say anything.

“There’s a *box*,” Stelios said.

I said I knew there was a box.

He was quiet a while. Then he said that next Tuesday, if that man comes through his gate, he is stopping him. And then he asked after my mother, because we have known each other twenty years, and I asked after his knee, and we talked about the knee for a while, and then we hung up.

The next one is Thursday. Eleven pallets, one truck, smaller ship.

Gythion

Six coaches. I have three.

That's the whole business, if you want it in one line. The ship needs six. I have three. So every time a ship comes I telephone Kalamata and I telephone Sparti. I pay two men I have known thirty years to come down here and take my money and drive my people. They charge me what they like. What am I going to do?

They're not cruel about it. Vangelis sends his good driver. But we all know the arithmetic. Nobody has ever pretended otherwise. I have been paying him since before his wife got sick and I'll be paying him next year.

Six coaches. I have three. Everything else is telephones.

The ship comes in at seven and stands off the harbour, because she can't come alongside. Nothing that size can. We have a quay for the fishing boats and the ferry to Kythira and that's what we have.

So she anchors out there. Big and white and lit up in the grey. She puts her own boats down on davits and starts ferrying them in, forty at a time, and it takes as long as it takes.

Here's the thing they don't tell you about a tender port. If the sea is up, she doesn't tender. If she doesn't tender, nobody lands. If nobody lands, I still pay six drivers, because they're standing in my yard at half past six in the morning with their coffee, and that's a day.

Twice last year. Twice. Both times in May. Both times a decent sea, nothing you'd call weather. The master looked at it and said no.

Eleven hundred people had breakfast, looked at Gythion through the window, and went to Corfu.

I don't blame him. I'd do the same. I'm just telling you who pays.

Nikos didn't come.

Nikos is fifty-eight. He's driven for me nine years. He didn't come. When I rang him he said his back had gone in the night, and it had, probably. I said all right. What else is there.

So I drove coach four.

This isn't a crisis. I want to be clear that this isn't a crisis, in case you're building up to something. I've got the licence, I've had it since I was twenty-six, and I drive one or two a season and I'm perfectly good at it. It just means that on the day the ship is in, the person who should be at the quay counting heads is up a mountain in the front of a coach.

They started landing at eight and the last of them was on the ground at ten past nine.

Seventy minutes late. That is not the ship's fault, or the tender crew's, and it is nobody's fault, and it does not matter whose fault it is. The coaches leave at half past nine either way and the ship sails at six either way, and the seventy minutes comes out of the middle.

It comes out of Mystras. It always comes out of Mystras.

Six and a half hours on the ticket. Nobody has ever had six and a half hours.

They came up the quay in their groups and the first thing they all did, every single one, was stop at the octopus.

You know the racks. They're along the front, they've always been along the front, my grandmother's were along the front. Wooden frames. The octopus hung out on them in the sun with the arms

curled, going grey to brown-purple. The smell in the heat. The flies you'd expect and the flies you wouldn't.

It is not a display. It is lunch. Petros Vrettakos puts them out because that is how you dry an octopus. He has been doing it since he was a boy. He does not know he is a tourist attraction. I have never had the heart.

Eleven hundred people photographed them. In four hours. One woman asked me if they were real.

I said yes.

She said, "But like — *for* something?"

I said for eating.

She thought about it. She said, "Right," and she took another one.

I'm Voula. I've had the company nineteen years and my father had it before me and I do not have a driver under fifty.

We do four months. May, June, September, October. That's it, that's the whole year, and I don't mean it's the busy part of the year, I mean the rest of it does not exist. In February this harbour is nine boats and a dog and you could fire a cannon down the front and hit nothing.

So when a ship comes I take the ship. I take every ship. I will pay Vangelis whatever he asks. I will drive coach four myself with my back. You can call that whatever you want. I call it May.

Coach four. Front seat, by the door.

The Companion got on last. She sat in the jump seat next to me because the coach was full. She said was that all right. I said it was fine, and it was fine, and she was there for four hours.

I don't do this. I don't talk on the coach. The guide talks. I drive. If a guest wants to know how far it is I say forty minutes, which it is.

She asked me how many coaches I had.

I said three.

She said, "And today you need six."

I don't know why I told her the rest of it. There isn't a reason. She sat there by the door with her hands in her lap and she asked, and I told her about Vangelis. About Nikos's back. About the two days in May. She listened, and she asked good questions — the questions you'd ask if you were going to have to run a coach company on Thursday.

And then somewhere past Skala I told her about the fourth coach.

There is a fourth coach. It's in the shed behind the yard. It has been there nine years. It's a Mercedes, it was my father's, and it does not run and it has not run since 2017. I pay the insurance on it. Every year. I have never told anyone that I do that. Not my brother. Not my son, who would want to know why, and would be right to ask, and I don't have an answer for him.

I told her, in a coach, on the Sparti road, at eleven in the morning.

She said, "How much is the insurance?"

I said four hundred and ten euros.

She nodded, and she looked out the front for a while, and she said that was not very much, and we went up the valley.

Christos guides for me. He's got the licence. The real one, the state one, five semesters and the examinations and the badge. He can do this tour in English, German and Italian, and he does not particularly like doing it in any of them.

At Sparti he does the thing he does.

He stands them in the square, by the statue of Leonidas, and he lets them look around. He lets it go on a bit. He waits.

Because there is nothing there.

That is Sparti. It is a grid. It's a nineteenth-century planned town. Wide streets, orange trees, a municipal building, a very good bakery. The ancient city is a scatter of foundations in an olive grove up the road, with a wire fence and a sign. You can walk all of it in twenty minutes and you will not have seen anything.

They have paid for this. It's the name on the ticket. It is the most famous name in the world. It is the reason half of them booked. They

are standing in it and it is not there, and you can watch them deciding, one by one, not to say so.

And that is when Christos turns around and tells them about Thucydides.

He says: there was a man, twenty-four centuries ago, who was writing about this war while it was still going on, and he wrote down that if Sparta were ever emptied out, and you came here afterward and looked at it, you would find it very hard to believe that its power had ever matched its reputation. Nothing to look at. No great temples. Just a town.

He says: he wrote that down while they were still winning.

Then he says the bus is at two-fifteen and there's a bakery on the corner, and he walks off, because he has said it four hundred times and it is not his fault that it is true.

The Germans loved it. The Germans always love it.

The Seeker found me at the coaches at half past one.

He asked what was up there.

There's a mountain. It is called Taygetus. It is right there. It is the entire western sky. Two thousand four hundred metres, standing over this plain, and every one of us has lived underneath it our whole lives.

I said, that's Taygetus.

He asked what was on the other side.

I said Kalamata, and the sea. I said it like that, like the mountain was a wall with a town behind it. He looked up at it for a while. Then he asked me when I had last been on it.

I have driven the Langada pass eleven times. I could not tell you the last time I stopped on it.

He didn't say anything about that. He just kept looking at it. Then he asked if there was a road over the top, and I said yes, and he said thank you, and he went and got on coach two.

He did not come to Mystras. He sat on the coach.

Mystras is the one worth seeing.

Nobody books for Mystras. They book for the name on the ticket and then they get Mystras. It is a Byzantine city on the side of a hill. Churches with the paint still on the walls. A palace. A castle up top. It goes on and on and up and up and it is the best thing in this part of Greece by a distance, and it is *a hill*.

Moderate Activity. That's what the ship calls it. Somebody in Miami wrote that.

It is a mountainside with a cobbled path on it, in September, at thirty-one degrees. About a third of that coach could not do it. They had read *Moderate Activity* and they had believed it, and they got out at the lower gate and looked up.

A man in a straw hat asked me how far it was to the top. I told him. He did the arithmetic out loud — the arithmetic of a man who has come four thousand miles and does not have the legs — and then he said his wife should go on and he'd wait at the bottom.

His wife did not go on.

Ninety minutes at Mystras is the first two churches and then a woman waving at you from a coach door.

The old woman on coach four asked me, on the way down, whether there'd be Wi-Fi at the next stop.

I said the next stop was a fourteenth-century monastery.

She said, "Oh, lovely," and then, after a moment, "but will there be?"

There was, as it happens. There is Wi-Fi at Mystras. I did not have the heart to tell her the password is on a sign in Greek.

Back at the coach park the six drivers sat in six coaches with the engines running for the air conditioning and the doors open. None of us went in. None of us has ever gone in.

I have been coming to Mystras for nineteen years. I have been up to the castle once. It was a familiarization trip for the operators,

in 2011, put on by the tourism board, and there was a lunch, and I remember the lunch.

Vangelis's man from Kalamata had his seat back and his hat over his face. Christos came and stood by my door and we talked about his daughter's exams for a quarter of an hour. Then he went back and did the fortress, and the paint, and the Despot's palace. He did it beautifully. He always does. For the eleven who made it up that far.

All aboard at five. Last tender five-fifteen.

They come back down the quay slower than they went up. Everyone does. They stop at the octopus again on the way past and photograph it again. Some of them buy something at the front. A jar of oil, a bag of oregano, a magnet. Then they queue in the sun for the tender and they are counted, and the boats go out and out to the white ship, forty at a time, until the quay is empty and the front is just the front again and Petros comes out to bring the racks in.

She was on one of the last boats. She turned round at the top of the steps and waved at me. I waved back. I don't know what I was doing. I had six coaches to sign off and Vangelis to pay.

The last boat went out at twenty past five and by six the bay was empty and the water had gone flat, and you would not have known.

I did the money that night at the kitchen table.

The ticket says eighty-nine euros for Sparta and Mystras, six and a half hours. I am paid thirty-one a head. Out of my thirty-one comes the coach, the fuel, the driver, the guide, the site fee and my telephone. What I clear on a full coach is not nothing. It is not what you think it is either. It is not what the woman with the hat thinks I clear. She is a very nice woman. She tipped Christos ten euros and I hope she never finds out.

Nikos rang at nine to say his back was better and would there be Thursday.

I said there would be Thursday.

They only want the town on Thursday. No coaches. No Sparti. They will walk along the front and they will photograph the octopus, and Petros will not look up, and I will not have to telephone anybody at all.

Corfu

I am a licensed tourist guide of the Hellenic Republic, which means that I completed five semesters at the State School, and passed the language examination before I was permitted to begin it, and passed the examinations of the Ministry at the end, and that I carry a badge which is issued to me by the Ministry of Tourism and which I am obliged to wear where it can be seen. It entitles me to stand in front of a monument anywhere in this country and tell you what it is. A man who has not done these things may not.

There is such a man on the pier this morning. He is holding an umbrella above his head, which is the international signal of a person who has decided that the qualification is optional, and he has thirty people behind him, and he will take them to the fortress and tell them a great deal of nonsense with tremendous confidence, and they will like him very much.

I have watched his groups from thirty metres, across the esplanade, with my own group assembled behind me. His guests laugh a great deal. They laugh approximately four times as often as mine do, and I have counted, and I would prefer that this did not bother me, and it does.

Law 710 of 1977. The fine is between one thousand and ten thousand euros, and I can tell you that from memory, which tells you something about me that I would rather it did not.

I am not going to make a complaint about him. I have made the complaint. The complaint takes eleven months and produces a letter,

and the letter goes to an office, and the man is on the pier this morning with an umbrella.

My name is Spiros and I have been doing this for nineteen years.

The arrangement, since you will want to understand the arrangement, is that the ship does not pay me. The ship pays an operator, and the operator, which has a very fine office in Athens with a fountain in the reception, pays me a fee per departure, and the fee has moved by four euros since 2019.

What I actually live on is two things which do not appear in any contract, and I will name them plainly because there is no shame in either. The first is the tips, which vary by nationality in ways that would upset you if I set them out, and I will not set them out. The second is the commission.

The commission is why the tour finishes where it finishes.

The system is called Whisper. Each guest wears a receiver on a lanyard with a single earpiece, and I speak into a transmitter, and they hear me at a conversational volume from up to eighty metres away, which is the technology that has made it possible to conduct a walking tour of a UNESCO World Heritage site with two hundred people at once without any of them being able to hear the actual place.

This morning there are five hundred and ten of us ashore, and we are divided into seven groups, and each group has a channel, and each guide has a paddle with a number on it, and the paddle is raised above the head at all times, and I want you to picture, for a moment, seven men and women of professional training and considerable education, standing in the narrow streets of a Venetian town, holding numbered signs in the air like the auctioneers of an unsuccessful market.

Channel three is mine. Channel four is directly behind me for most of the morning, and channel four is a very good guide called Marianna, and twice this morning a guest of mine has walked off

with her because the earpiece is in the ear and the sound is in the head and it does not particularly matter which body is producing it.

They came off at half past eight, which is civilized, and we assembled at the Liston, which is the arcade the French built when they had us, and which everybody photographs and nobody asks about.

The first six of my group arrived nine minutes early, and they were pleased with themselves for it, and they sat down at the table.

I saw it from forty metres away and there was nothing on this earth that I could do about it.

There are three of them, and they are perhaps seventy-five, and they take that table, that specific table, at that hour. They have taken it for as long as I have been standing in this square with a paddle, and for a considerable period before that, and I have never learned their names. One of them has a small dog which does not do anything.

There is no sign on the table. There is no reservation. There is no card, no rope, no notice, no fact of any kind that a reasonable adult could be expected to perceive. There is simply a table at the north end of the arcade, and it is theirs, and it has been theirs since before the euro.

I went over. I said good morning, and I said that we would be forming up in just a moment and perhaps they would be more comfortable standing, and a very nice woman from Melbourne said that they were quite comfortable, thank you, and would I like to sit down.

I could not explain it. I have three languages and a state examination and I stood in front of six paying guests of the ship and I could not construct the sentence, because the sentence does not exist. *You are sitting in the wrong place, for reasons which are not written anywhere, and which I cannot show you, and which I would be unable to defend in any court.*

They arrived at four minutes to nine.

They did not say anything. They came up the arcade at their own speed and they stopped about a metre from the table, and they stood there, and they looked out at the square, not at the table, and they waited.

The woman from Melbourne said, brightly, that there was plenty of room and would they like to join.

Nothing happened. Not a flicker. It was as though she had addressed the arcade.

It took, I would estimate, forty seconds. First one of the six looked up, and then another, and then all of them were standing and gathering their bags and apologising extremely warmly to three people who were not accepting the apology, or refusing it, or hearing it. They moved to the next table along. They were flustered and cheerful about it for the whole of the walk to the fortress.

I have seen a woman with a paddle move fifty people in ninety seconds. I have never seen anything work as fast as that.

The one nearest me sat down and picked up her coffee, and she looked at me, once, over the top of it, for about a second and a half.

We assembled at a different table. It was fine. It was a slightly worse table.

The Old Fortress is Venetian, and the Venetians held this island for four hundred years, and the New Fortress is also Venetian and is called new because it is only four hundred and forty years old.

I say the following sentence, or something extremely close to it, on every departure, and I have made the calculation, which I regret making: I have said it approximately nine hundred times.

The Venetians did not fortify Corfu because they loved Corfu. They fortified Corfu because whoever holds this rock holds the mouth of the Adriatic, and whoever holds the mouth of the Adriatic decides whether Venice eats.

It is a good sentence. I wrote it myself, in my second year, and I was proud of it, and I am still proud of it, and I no longer hear it. It comes out of me on the ramp below the gate at the same point on the same step at the same hour, and while it is coming out of me I am counting the group and looking for the two who have stopped to buy a hat.

At the top, where the view is, I had a moment to stand still, and I noticed the All-Seeing, who was facing the wrong way.

He was not looking at the fortress. He was not looking at the sea, or at Vido, or at the town below, or at the Albanian coast, which on a clear morning is close enough to look like a mistake. He had his back to all of it. He was looking down the wall at the four hundred people spread out along the parapet with their arms up.

I know that view. I have made my living from that view for nineteen years, and I do not mean the sea. I mean the crowd. I can tell you, from the top of that ramp, within about four people, how many of a given group are going to buy something at the last stop, and I can tell you which ones, and I am not often wrong, and it is not a mystical talent. It is the same skill a fishmonger has.

He asked me how many of mine would buy.

Nobody asks me that. In nineteen years, no guest has ever asked me that, and no guest ever will, because it is not a thing they know is there to be asked. They ask about the year, and about the height of the wall, and whether the Venetians were Italian. This man stood on a parapet in the Ionian Sea with his back to one of the finest views in Europe and asked me the only question about this morning to which I am the world's leading authority.

I said forty-one.

He nodded, and he looked back down the wall a while longer. He did not ask which ones. I think he already had them.

Then he turned round and looked at the sea like everybody else, and went down the ramp, and he did not stay to see whether I was right.

The three of them came through the group at eleven o'clock in the Campiello.

Not around. Through.

We were at the widest point of a street which is not wide, and I had fifty people on channel three arranged in the standard formation, which is a horseshoe, and I was doing the Jewish quarter, which I do seriously and which I do not rush, and they came from the top of the

lane in single file at a pace that did not alter by one step in the whole of the transit.

Fifty people wearing five hundred euros of German audio equipment parted like the Red Sea.

The one in the middle, the one from the table, said something to me in Greek as she went past. It took her about two seconds. She did not stop.

It was not rude. It is the sort of thing that gets exaggerated in the retelling, and it was not rude, it was not clever, and it was not for them. It was one Corfiot remarking to another Corfiot, in passing, at eleven in the morning, on the subject of what he was doing with his life.

And then fifty people looked at me and waited, because they had seen a local person speak to their guide in the local language and they wanted to know what she had said, and it is my professional duty to serve them, and there is nothing in the examination about this.

I said she had wished us a pleasant visit.

They were delighted. Somebody wrote it down.

Now I am going to tell you the thing that I did today, which I have not done in nineteen years, and which I still cannot account for.

We were on the seaward wall. It was nearly noon. It was thirty-two degrees, and the two hundred metres of parapet in front of me held four hundred people from a ship that would leave at six, and I put my paddle down on the stone, which one does not do, and I said:

Four times, they came.

They say four. It depends what you are willing to call a siege, and the licensed answer, which is the answer I would give in the examination, is that the ones which matter are 1537, and 1571, and 1716. The Ottoman Empire, at the height of it, when it took everything it went for, came at this rock, and did not take it. Not once. Not in 1537 with Barbarossa, and not in 1716, when Schulenburg had somewhere in the region of eight thousand men against an army of thirty thousand and held for six weeks, and the Turks got inside the outer works and were thrown back out of them.

And if they had not been thrown back out of them, the Adriatic opens. And if the Adriatic opens, Venice is a coastal town. And if Venice is a coastal town, then a great deal of what you believe about the last five hundred years of Europe does not happen at all, and you would be on a different ship, going somewhere else, and I would be a different man.

That is what this rock is. That is the whole of it, and I said it in eleven seconds, and I said it well, because I have apparently been preparing it for nineteen years without being aware that I was doing so.

Four hundred people on the wall.

A woman in the second row put up her hand, and she was perfectly polite about it, and she said: is there a toilet?

There is. It is at the bottom of the ramp, past the church, on the left, and it is a long way, and she is seventy-one years old and she has been standing on hot stone for forty minutes and she came here on a coach.

I told her where it was. I told her kindly, and I told her accurately, and I walked six people down there myself, because the job is not the sieges. The job has never been the sieges. Anyone who tells you the job is the sieges has not done the job.

The Seeker asked me at the kumquat place.

I should explain the kumquat place. The tour finishes at a shop which sells a liqueur made from a small bitter citrus that the English brought here in the nineteenth century, and it is genuinely a Corfiot product, and it is genuinely quite good, and I receive a commission on what my group spends there, and my card is stamped at the till.

I have said that I would not be ashamed of this and I am not. Four euros since 2019.

Thirty-three bought.

I had said forty-one. I count them through the till every day of the season and I am not often out by one, and I have never in nineteen years been out by eight, and I stood at the door of that shop and counted them twice.

I have thought about where the eight went. I cannot find them.

And at the till, while the others were paying, a woman from Regensburg waited for me, very politely, and told me that the word I have been using in German for the outer works of the fortress does not mean the outer works. It means something nearer to the suburbs.

I passed the state examination in that language. I checked her word that evening in two dictionaries, and she is right, and I have been marching four hundred Germans a season around the suburbs of a fortress since 2007, and not one of them, in eighteen years, ever said a word. They understood me. They worked out what I meant. And they let it go, politely, by the coachload, for eighteen years, exactly the way I let them photograph the wrong gate.

He did not buy anything. He asked me what was up there, and he meant the mountain, and the mountain is Pantokrator, and it is nine hundred metres, and there are villages on the back of it.

I told him the villages. Old Perithia, which is a village of stone houses from the fourteenth century and which had, at the last count, a permanent population you could seat at one table. Strinilas. Lafki. My mother was born in Lafki, and my aunt is still in it, and she is eighty-four, and she is one of eleven people who are still in it.

He asked me when I had last been up.

I told him two years, and I heard myself add that it is a difficult road, which it is not, it is a perfectly good road, it is forty minutes, and I have a car.

He said thank you. He looked at the mountain for a while. He did not buy any kumquat liqueur and he did not stamp my card and I liked him a great deal.

At four o'clock I took the last twelve down to Faliraki, which is the swimming place below the old town, through the Gate of Saint Nicholas, down the steep road, and it is free, and it has always been free, and it is a concrete platform and some steps into the sea and the fortress standing over the top of you.

There is a bar at one end. If you want a lounge and a bit of shade you take a table, and a table has a minimum spend, and the minimum

spend in September is not small, and eight of my twelve queued for it.

They queued in the sun. They queued for twenty minutes. Then they sat under the umbrellas with a drink they had not especially wanted, in order to be permitted to lie down beside the sea, and one of them, a very decent man from Ontario who had been kind to me all day, asked me whether this was normal, and I said that it was, and he said, "Well. It's worth it, isn't it," and looked at the water, and he was right, it is worth it, the water there is like nothing else in the town.

Thirty metres away, off the concrete, the three of them were already in.

They had come down at four, as they do, and they had put their things on the wall in the place where their things go, and they had gone down the steps holding the rail, one after another, unhurried, and they were out past the pier by the time my people got their drinks.

The one with the dog swims a long way. She has a stroke like a woman rowing a boat and she goes out past the point and she comes back and she does not look at anything.

There are no loungers on the concrete. There have never been any loungers on the concrete.

They were still in the water when I took my twelve back up the hill to the shuttle, and they were still in it, I expect, when the ship sailed.

I signed off with the operator at half past six.

Marianna and I had a beer at a place on Guilford Street that does not have a view, because the places with a view are for the ships, and we talked about the man with the umbrella, and about whether it is worth the eleven months, and we agreed that it is not, and we will both do it again in the spring.

There will be eleven paddles in the air on the ramp below the gate tomorrow, because two ships come in within the hour and both of them will want the Old Fortress at eleven, and there is no arrangement between the operators and there has never been one and there is not going to be one.

I am channel three. I am always channel three.

Kotor

Six up. Five down.

I sat with that at seven o'clock, with the booth shut and the float in the bag, and I looked at it for longer than a man should look at a number.

I count. That is what I do at that window. Everything that goes up past me goes up counted, and everything that comes down comes down counted, and at the end of the day the two numbers agree, because they are the same people. Nine years, and the two numbers have agreed every night for nine years.

Tonight they did not agree.

I will come to it. It was a long day, and I am telling it the way it comes back to me, which is not the order it happened in.

The float, first, because the float is the truth of a day.

Three thousand nine hundred and twelve tickets at fifteen euro. It goes to the Old Town Trust, and where it goes after that is a question I have been asked at my own window by a Dutchman who was not being rude, and I told him it was not my department, which is the truth, and which is also the worst sentence I know.

Fifteen euro. Cash. In euro.

That is most of my job and I say it about nine hundred times a day and I say it in six languages and I have said it in languages I do not

Speak, and by two in the afternoon I am saying it before the person has finished walking up to the window.

The rest of my job is the turnstile, and the cats.

Three ships today. The big one from Malta at seven, and a middle one, and the small white one that came up the bay behind them and had to wait for the berth. Eight thousand four hundred passengers in a town where about nine hundred people actually live inside the walls.

I do not want you to feel anything about that number. It is a Tuesday number. Thursday will be worse.

The booth is at the north end, opposite St Mary's, and there is another at the south, and they lead to the same steps. There are one thousand three hundred and fifty steps and they go up two hundred and sixty metres to the fortress of St John, and at the top there is a ruin, and some goats, and a man selling grilled meat.

Fifteen euro in season. Eight in winter. Cash.

We do not take cards. I know. I *know*. There is no machine, there has never been a machine, and every single day between two and three hundred people stand at my window holding a piece of plastic and explaining to me, patiently, as though I have never considered it, that in their country one may pay for things with a card.

I say: fifteen euro, cash, in euro. There is a bank machine by the Sea Gate.

Then they go to the bank machine by the Sea Gate, which charges them six euro to give them their own money, and they come back, and they are not angry with the bank. They are angry with me. I have thought about why for a long time and I have decided it is because the bank is not a person.

The steps are not a path. I want that understood before you go any further.

They were built by men who were putting a wall on a mountain, and the steps are the wall's steps, and they are for soldiers, and they are worn in the middle where four hundred years of boots have been, and in some places they are not steps at all, they are stone that has been agreed upon.

There is no shade. There is no handrail on the long diagonals. There is no toilet, anywhere, at any point, on the entire ascent, and I am asked about this perhaps forty times a day, and forty times a day I say no, and forty times a day I watch a person do arithmetic in their face.

At about six hundred and fifty steps there is a church. Our Lady of Remedy. They built it for the plague. Most people stop there and about a third of them stop there permanently, and the ones who stop there permanently are the ones who have had a good day, though they do not know it.

The refund man was somewhere in the middle of the morning. I could not tell you when. He was English and he was extremely polite and he explained that he had thought it was a walk.

There is no refund. It says so on the ticket. It says so in three languages and it says so on a sign above my head in letters this big, and I would estimate that I have this conversation eleven or twelve times a day. They get to step forty. Sometimes step twenty. They look up. And they come back down and they stand at my window with the ticket and they say, reasonably, that they have not used it.

And they are right. They have not used it. They have used forty steps of it.

I said that it is a walk. He said that he had thought it was a walk on the *level*. He looked up the mountain, and then at me, and then at the ticket, and then he said, and I am quoting him, "Where did you think I thought it went?"

I gave him his fifteen euro. I am not supposed to. I did it because he made me laugh, and because he was going to be the only person who made me laugh that day, and I was right about that.

The Hand came through at eight-forty and I sold him a ticket.

He came through again at nine-fifteen, going up, carrying a woman's bag, and I let him through because he had a ticket.

He came down at nine-fifty. He went up at ten past ten with a red cooler on his shoulder, which is Marko's cooler, and Marko sells water on the third diagonal and Marko is sixty-one and does not carry his own cooler up any more, he pays a boy, and today he did not pay a boy.

I counted him eleven times.

Eleven times, in a day that got to thirty-four degrees, and I stopped asking him for the ticket after the fourth, and by noon he had a walking pole that belonged to somebody, and by two he was carrying a small child, and the child's father was walking behind him looking as though he had won a raffle.

You already know the number. Six up. Five down.

There are cats.

I would say there are three hundred cats in the walls of this town, and nobody owns them, and they are fed by everybody, and they have been here longer than any of us, and there is a shop that sells nothing but cat-related items, and it is not a joke shop, it is a serious business with a landlord.

The cats sleep on the steps. Specifically, they sleep on the steps at the exact points where the steps are narrowest and eight thousand people wish to pass.

They do not move. Not for a group of forty Germans, not for a wheeled suitcase, not for anything. The tourists step over them. The tourists photograph them. The tourists step over them again on the way down, at which point the cat is in the same place, in the same position, and has by then been photographed something in the region of six hundred times, and has not opened its eyes.

The cats are the only living thing in Kotor with a functioning strategy.

At about eleven the Conscience-Keeper came to the window.

He did not want a ticket. He had one. He stood a little to the side, so as not to block the queue, which I noticed, because nobody does that.

He said: "Do you ever tell them not to go?"

I said it was not my job.

He said, "That isn't what I asked."

I said no.

He said, "You can see it, though."

And I could not say no to that, because I can. I have been at that window nine years. I can tell you, when a man is forty metres from my booth and still walking toward me, whether he is going to make the church, and I am not often wrong, and in nine years I have not said a word to a single one of them, because there is a queue of two hundred behind him and a ticket is fifteen euro and I have no authority in law or in fact to refuse a man his own decision about his own afternoon.

He said thank you. He went up the steps.

At one o'clock a woman came down being carried between two men from the second diagonal, and she was conscious, and she was all right, and I had sold her the ticket at nine-forty and I had known, and it had taken me under a second, and I had said fifteen euro, cash, in euro.

I told him I had no authority. That was true. It was not an answer.

There is no law that says I cannot speak. Nobody fines a man for saying the church is far enough in this heat, the picture you want is at step four hundred, come down before noon. It is one sentence. I know it in six languages. In nine years I have not said it once, and the queue is not the reason. The queue is the excuse.

The reason is that the man who says that sentence once has to start saying it, and then he is the man who says it, to everyone, forever, at his own window, unpaid, and I looked at that once, nine years ago, for about as long as it takes to sell a ticket, and I chose the window.

The Conscience-Keeper did not come back past my window. There is a second way down. He was not there and he did not see it and he never asked me about it afterward.

The Seeker asked at four.

He asked what was over the top.

I said the fortress, and then above the fortress there is nothing, there is just the mountain, and the mountain is Lovćen.

He asked if there was a road.

There is a road. It goes up the back in twenty-five switchbacks, and every one of them is a hairpin cut into the rock, and it climbs to the mausoleum on the peak at sixteen hundred and fifty-seven metres where they put Njegoš, and the road is one of the roads that people who care about roads come here for.

He asked when I had last been over it.

I sit at the bottom of that mountain. I have sat at the bottom of that mountain for nine years, six days a week, in season, and I have watched about a million people climb two hundred and sixty metres of it and come back down again, and I have never been over the top of it, and my wife's family are from Njeguši, which is on the other side, and it is forty minutes.

I said forty minutes.

He said, "That isn't what I asked."

No. He did not say that. I have thought about this and he did not say that, the other one said that, and I have got them confused in the telling because it was a long day. I warned you about the order. The Seeker did not say anything. He looked up at the mountain for a while, and then he went and bought a bottle of water from Marko at the bottom rate, and he went up.

Here is what they come for.

The roofs. The red roofs of the old town, and the bay behind them, and the two arms of the bay going out, and the water. It is on the

front of the brochure and it is on the front of the town's own leaflet and it is the reason a person pays fifteen euro and goes up a mountain in August.

And the picture — the actual picture, the one on the brochure — is taken from about step four hundred.

That is where it is. Four hundred steps up, on the second long diagonal, where you are high enough that the roofs make a shape and low enough that they are still roofs. Above that they get smaller. By the church they are a pattern. By the fortress, nine hundred steps higher, in the heat, at the top, the town is a smudge the size of your thumbnail and the roofs have stopped being roofs and become a colour.

And in August the bay is hazed. Not always. Most days. The heat comes off the water and sits in the throat of the bay and it does not lift, and the two arms go grey and then paler grey and then they are not there, and you are standing on a ruin at two hundred and sixty metres looking at a white sky.

They come down past my booth at four and five and six and they are wrecked and they are proud and every one of them says it was worth it.

And the picture on their telephone — the good one, the one they will show people, the one that goes on the internet — is the one they took at step four hundred on the way up, when they still had their legs, and they do not know that, and I am never going to tell them, and neither is anybody else.

The ones who turned back at the church have the same photograph.

Marko came past at the end with the empty cooler on his own shoulder. He said the man had carried it up and had not carried it down, and that he had never once seen him drink anything, and that he had sold four hundred and ten bottles of water, which is a record.

Marko is not a curious man. He was pleased about the four hundred and ten.

The boy who carries for him had come at seven in the morning and been sent home. Five euro a carry, two carries a day. He came

back past my window at six to ask Marko about Thursday, and Marko told him Thursday, and he went off down the quay with his hands in his pockets, and that was the record, from where he stood.

They took them out in the order they came in. The big one first, then the middle one, and the small white one last, going down the bay in the flat grey light with all the arms of the water opening in front of her, and she will be in Dubrovnik at seven in the morning.

The cats did not move.

So that is the day, in the order it comes back, and the number is still six and five, and tomorrow I will sit at the window and count, because that is the job, and the numbers will agree.

Three tomorrow. Fifteen euro. Cash.

Dubrovnik

Ninety minutes. Thirty-eight euro. Meet at the Pile Gate under the tree.

That's the product. I do it four times a day now.

It used to be twice. The city capped the ships at two a day. It made them stay eight hours minimum. So instead of five thousand people arriving in one lump at ten and gone by two, they trickle. All day.

It's better for the city. Genuinely. I'm not being clever.

It also means my tour runs at nine, at eleven, at one, and at three. I say the same ninety minutes four times. My throat is finished by August.

I'm not complaining. Eighty per cent of this town eats off tourism and I'm in the eighty.

I've got the licence. I've got the degree too. History, Zagreb.

I could tell you what the Ragusan Senate was doing in 1667 and why it mattered. Every so often somebody asks me something real and I'm off, and then I catch myself.

That's not what they paid for.

What they paid for is King's Landing.

Here's the shape of it.

Pile Gate, which is where they came through the gates of King's Landing. Down the Stradun, which was the street. Up to Lovrijenac,

which was the Red Keep. Then the harbour, which was Blackwater Bay.

I have to say *Blackwater Bay* out loud, in daylight, standing in front of the actual Adriatic, to forty adults, and I have to say it like I mean it.

Then the stairs. Then it's over. Ninety minutes.

A man asked me on Tuesday where they keep the Iron Throne.

Not a stupid man. Not a child. A retired engineer from Alberta with a good camera and excellent shoes. He wanted to know where in the city they keep it. I understood the question. I said it's a prop and it lives in Belfast.

He was disappointed. He didn't say so. But he was, and I felt it.

Here's the part I'd rather not tell you. I felt bad. For a second I felt like I'd failed him.

That's the job. That's what the job does to you. You start being sorry that a chair isn't real.

I was eighteen months old.

Everybody who comes here knows about the siege now, more or less. It was seven months. They shelled it from the hills, and fifty-six per cent of the buildings in the old town took a hit, and the whole world watched it on television and nobody did anything for a while.

And I was eighteen months old, and I was in a basement in this city, and I do not remember one second of it.

Not one. I've been told about it my entire life. My mother can tell you what it smelled like.

I've got nothing. It's not a wound. It's a blank. You can't be nostalgic for a blank and you can't be traumatized by one either.

Mostly I don't think about it. Then somebody asks me about the roofs.

Because they do ask about the roofs, and it's a good question, and it's the only real question I get.

They say: are the roofs original?

Some of them are. You can see which. The old ones are darker and browner and mismatched. The new ones are bright. That orange. That particular orange, off the trucks in the nineties.

From up on the wall you can read it like a map. You can see exactly where the shells went.

So I say: the darker ones are old, the bright ones are new. Look at the wall when you go up.

And then I move them on, because the next thing on the sheet is Lovrijenac, and they have not booked ninety minutes of my war.

My mother lives in Mokošica. That's up the river, twenty minutes on the bus.

Nobody lives in here. There were five thousand people inside these walls when she was young. Now there are about fourteen hundred.

So the city has started buying houses. Actually buying them. With money. And renting them cheap to families to get people back in. They've put a school in a palace.

I think it's a good idea. I think it's about thirty years late. Both of those things can be true and I'm not going to argue about it with a man from Alberta.

The wall is forty euro and from this year you have to book a time.

You book a slot. You book the date and the hour, and only so many people are allowed up there at once, and it works, and the walk is much better than it was, and I approve.

But my group at eleven had a slot at 14:15 and the ship sails at six and they're three kilometres from the boat at Gruž.

So they can do the wall, or they can have lunch, or they can buy the presents. They can't do all three.

They stand in front of me doing arithmetic. A city that has been here since the seventh century, and they're doing arithmetic.

The woman who was most upset about it was upset with *me*. I said I don't run the wall.

She said, "Well, who does?"

I said the city.

She said, "Right, but who?"

I've thought about her a lot. I don't know what she wanted. I think she wanted there to be a man.

We go up Peline to get the view down over the roofs, and Peline means steps, a lot of steps, and at the top of the steps there's a restaurant, and in front of the restaurant there's the statue.

You'll know the one. Large stone woman. Seated. Legs apart. She is urinating and the water runs and it has run for years. The restaurant is named after her and the food is excellent.

Forty people. They have paid thirty-eight euro to walk in the footsteps of a television programme which has a brothel in episode one, and incest in episode one, and a man flayed alive, and a woman walked naked through this actual street while a nun rings a bell.

They see the statue. And there is a *rustle*.

A woman came up to me. Very nice woman. She lowered her voice and she asked me, kindly, whether it was quite appropriate, given that there were children in the group.

The children in the group were twelve and fourteen. They'd watched all eight seasons. The fourteen-year-old could tell you which characters were in which house and how each of them died. In order. With the injuries.

I said the statue had been there a long time.

She said, "Longer than the show?"

I said longer than the show.

She said, "Well," and she looked at it again, and then she photographed it, and then she rejoined the group.

Now. The stairs.

This happened on Thursday. It's Monday now. I've run the tour eleven times since and I'm still not sure I can tell it straight.

The Jesuit Stairs go up from Gundulić Square to St Ignatius. They're Baroque. They're a beautiful piece of architecture by a man called Passalacqua and he built them in 1738.

I have never once been permitted to say any of that.

They are the Walk of Shame steps. That is what they are now. That is what they will be for the rest of my life.

This is the end of the tour. Everything is built toward it. About half the people on any morning booked the whole thing for this. They know exactly what they're going to do. They've known since Toronto.

And at 12:40 on Thursday there were three of us on those stairs.

Me, with forty. A German guide with about fifty. And a young woman running a small private group of twelve who had paid a great deal more than thirty-eight euro and were extremely put out.

Three guides. One staircase.

So we did what guides do. We stood in a triangle at the bottom and we negotiated, in Croatian, in front of a hundred and two paying customers, about whose group would be permitted to walk down some public steps.

It was going to take twenty minutes. Easily.

The German had the better case. He'd been at the bottom first and he had fifty and he knew it. I had forty and I had the ship's schedule, which is a card you can only play once. The young woman had twelve people who had paid four hundred euro each and she was not going to be the one who told them to wait.

Everybody was being reasonable. Nobody was going to move.

And then the Chaos-Weaver walked down the middle of it.

Not fast. Not pushing. He didn't shoulder anybody. He came out of the top of the steps at an ordinary walking pace, straight through the middle of the negotiation, and he went down.

And it went.

I've thought about this for four days and I can't tell you the mechanism. He didn't say anything. He didn't do anything.

But he was moving, and the stairs were there, and a hundred and two people who had been standing still and being managed were suddenly not being managed.

The German's group went. Then mine went. Then the twelve went. Then all of them went, all at once, in both directions, on the same staircase.

It was chaos. It was an absolute shambles.

A hundred people on those stairs doing the Walk of Shame at the same time. Somebody shouting *shame* in an English accent. Somebody else shouting it in German and getting the rhythm wrong. A man from my group at the top with his arms out like a conductor.

The twelve expensive people abandoned their guide entirely and went down to the bottom with everyone else. One of them took his shirt off. I don't know why. Neither does he.

It was nothing like the show. Nothing at all. In the show it's silent and it's cruel and it takes about four minutes and it's the worst thing that happens to that woman.

This was a hundred strangers laughing on a staircase in the sun.

It was the best thing that happened on any of my tours this year and I did not do any of it.

And in the middle of it a woman came *up*.

Old woman, shopping bags, two of them, coming up from the market. She lives up there. There are still a few.

And she just came up. Through the middle of a hundred people.

Nobody stopped her. Nobody made way for her. Nobody photographed her. Nobody even *saw* her, because they were all looking at each other.

She got up her own staircase, in her own city, at her own speed, for the first time in about nine years.

I saw her. I don't think anybody else did.

Here's the thing, though.

Not one of them got the shot.

Every frame has somebody else's tour in it. A hundred and two people filming each other filming each other. On a staircase. In the sun.

There isn't a usable second of it. No clip. No post. Nothing for anybody at home.

The one thing they came for. The actual thing. The reason they booked. And they can't show it to a living soul.

They were still talking about it at the bottom. Delighted. Absolutely delighted.

They'll tell people about it for years and nobody will believe them. There's no proof. There is never going to be any proof.

The young woman with the twelve was at the bottom too, off to the side, with her phone. Two of her people were already on to her office about the money. They'd paid four hundred each for a private morning and the best part of it had gone to a crowd of ninety strangers, and they'd loved it, and they wanted something back anyway.

It wasn't her fault. That won't matter.

He was gone by then. I didn't see him leave. He didn't look back at any of it.

I saw the Seeker at about half past three.

I was starting the last tour of the day at the Pile Gate, and I looked up, because you look up. There was somebody on the road going up Srd.

On foot. Nobody does that. You take the cable car. That's what it's there for. Four minutes, twenty-seven euro return, fifteen if you only want to go up.

He was on the road in the afternoon heat, walking, and he was well past the second bend.

I noticed and then I stopped noticing because I had forty people and ninety minutes.

That's it. That's all there is. He was walking up the mountain and I had a tour.

Since Thursday I've done those stairs eleven more times. Regular pace. Regular order. One group at a time, at the bottom, waiting their turn. It has been completely normal, and nobody has taken his shirt off, and every time we get to the bottom I catch myself checking the top of the steps. Eleven times now. I know what I'm checking for. He's not going to be there.

We finished at five that day. Forty euro in tips, which is a good day.

One of them gave me a five and told me I should be on the television. I said thank you and I meant it.

Then I went and had a beer at a place on the Prijeko where the guides go and where the food is bad on purpose so the tourists don't come.

Both of them were away by six.

Two tomorrow. Nine, eleven, one, three. Pile Gate, under the tree. I'll say Blackwater Bay four more times.

Split

I get up at half five because I like the hour, and because if you live where I live and you do not get up at half five you do not get your own street.

There are three thousand of us inside the palace. People do not believe that. They think it is a ruin with a gift shop in it, and it is not, it is a neighbourhood, and my grandmother's flat is built into the east wall and one of the walls of my bedroom was put there by a Roman and the plumbing was put in by my uncle Duje in 1994 and I would like to tell you which of the two has given us more trouble.

At six the Peristyle belongs to whoever is standing in it, and at six I am standing in it, and there is nobody else, and I go through it with a bag of bread and I do not look at it, and I have not looked at it since I was about nineteen.

I go out through the Golden Gate and past Grgur.

He is eight metres of bronze and he has been standing there since Meštrović made him in 1929, and he was a bishop who told the Pope, more or less, that people ought to be able to hear a mass in a language they actually speak.

You are supposed to rub his toe. The big one, the shiny one, the one that is worn down to gold while the rest of him is black. You rub it and you make a wish. Nobody here has ever needed to say which foot.

At seven in the morning there is nobody at the toe. By eleven there is a queue of forty. I have heard people in that queue, and I want to tell you what they wish for, because I have heard them say it out loud to each other while they were waiting.

They wish they had more time in Split.

They are standing in Split. They have four hours and they are spending eleven minutes of it queueing to touch a foot in order to wish for more of the thing they are currently doing.

I put my hand on him going past. I do not queue and I do not stop and I have done it since I was small and I could not tell you whether I believe anything about it, and my grandmother did it, and that is the end of the discussion as far as I am concerned.

At noon they do the Romans.

Four men come out into the Peristyle in armour and they do a changing of the guard, and they stand very straight and they hold spears, and about three hundred people photograph them, and one of them is Jakov, who is my cousin's boy, and he is twenty-two and he is studying mechanical engineering at the university and he sweats in that costume like a horse.

He gets forty euro and he hates it and he is extremely good at it, and it is a genuine Roman courtyard, which is the only part of the whole performance that is actually Roman, and everything else about it is Jakov.

The ship came in at seven and she is not the biggest thing in this harbour and she is not the second biggest either.

Jadrolinija runs the islands all day out of here. Supetar, Hvar, Vis, Korčula. Great white ferries with the ramps down and the cars going in, hundreds of cars, every hour, all day, full of people going to work and going home and taking their mother to a wedding.

The Marina sits at the end of the mole looking very fine and nobody in this city looks at her twice.

In Kotor she would be an event. Here she is Tuesday, and she is a smaller Tuesday than the eleven-fifteen to Supetar.

I work the terrace at Bačvice from one o'clock, which is a fifteen-minute walk from my grandmother's Roman wall, and which is where I have worked for nine years, and which is where I intend to go on working. Nine years, and Boro still shouts *Ivana, dva!* at me across forty metres of water as though I might not hear him the first time, and as though I have not brought him the same two coffees since I was twenty-two.

Bačvice is a sandy bay and it is famous and it is also, and I say this with love, a puddle.

You can walk out eighty metres and the water is at your waist. Eighty metres. There is a particular thing the visitors do, and it never stops being funny, which is that they walk out and out and out, further than they have ever walked into a sea in their lives, and then they realise they are extremely far from land and still standing up, and they turn round to look for the beach, and they wave.

At nobody. They wave at nobody. Their people are on the sand and cannot see them and are not looking. And then they stand out there for a while, at their own waist, eighty metres from shore, in the middle of the Adriatic, alone, and they come back in slightly quieter than they went out.

Picigin.

It is played in that shallow water and it has been played there for over a hundred years and it is why Bačvice is Bačvice.

Here is what it looks like. Six men, most of them fifty or older, in small swimming costumes, standing in twenty centimetres of water in a rough circle, hitting a little ball with the flat of the hand and shouting. There is no team. There is no score. Nobody wins. The entire point is that the ball must not touch the water, and when it is about to touch the water a sixty-year-old retired postman throws his

whole body sideways into six inches of sea to keep it up, and everyone shouts, and then they do it again.

That is it. That is the whole sport.

The visitors film it. They film it very seriously, the way you would film a ceremony, and I understand why, because from the terrace, in the afternoon, with the light on the water and six old men flinging themselves flat and roaring at each other in Dalmatian, it looks like something ancient and it looks like it means something.

It is six retired men who have been meeting there since 1987 and two of them have not spoken to each other since 2011.

The two are Ante and Zoran, and here is the thing about picigin that the people filming it will never see, which is that you cannot play a game whose entire point is keeping the ball up with a man you are not speaking to unless the other four arrange themselves so that the ball never has to travel directly between you, and they have been doing that, without one word of discussion, for fourteen years, and if you watch from the terrace long enough you can see it, a sort of hole in the middle of the game where the quarrel is.

Nobody has ever asked either of them what it was about. The other four have got used to the shape.

At four o'clock two English people came up from the beach and took table four.

Nice people, sunburnt in the way that is going to be a serious problem for them tomorrow, and they'd done the town in the morning and the beach in the afternoon and they were pleased with the day, and they had the look people get in the last hour of a port.

And he said to me, ruefully, in the way you would confess a small failure to a stranger:

"We never did find the palace."

I didn't say anything at all for about two seconds.

Then I asked whether they'd walked down the Riva, and they had, and I asked whether they'd gone in under the arches to the cellars where the little shops are, and they had, and they'd bought a magnet, and I asked whether they'd come out into the big square with the

pillars and the sphinx and the cathedral with the bell tower, and they had, and they'd had a coffee sitting on the steps.

I said: that was it. You were in it. You were in it the whole time. It hasn't got a door. It's the town.

And they looked at each other, and then they laughed, and then he said, "Well, we did find it, then," and he was very happy about it, and he told me it had been the best day of the trip.

I brought the bread.

I've lived inside that palace for thirty-one years and my bedroom wall is a Roman wall, and there is nothing to find, and there never was, and they'd found all of it without ever once knowing they were looking at it, and honestly, when you think about it — no. I'm not going to do that. They had a good day. I brought them the bread and they left me eight euro.

The Companion came at half past two and sat at table nine, which is the small one at the end by the rail, and she stayed until half past five.

She was easy, and I'd put that plainly because you can't always say it, and some people are easy and most people are work, and after nine years you can tell which is which before they've sat down.

She had a coffee, and then another one, and she watched the picigin, and I went past her twelve or fourteen times in three hours carrying things for other tables, and every time I went past we said something to each other, and none of it was anything at all.

We talked about the man who dives, and about whether the ball is a real tennis ball with the fur taken off, which it is, and she asked about my shoes, which are terrible, and which I then complained about for a solid minute while a table of Austrians waited for their bill. I told her the burger's the honest thing to order and the fish is for people who want to have ordered fish, and she ordered the burger.

At about four she took her shoes off and went down and stood in the water.

Not to swim, because there's nowhere to swim, and she walked out to where the picigin was and stood at the edge of the circle with her skirt held up in one hand.

And Boro hit her the ball.

Boro is seventy, and he has been standing in that water since before I was born, and I have never once in nine years seen him let a stranger into that circle — not a Croat, not a Split man, not the nephew of a Split man who has been coming to that beach since he could walk. There's no rule about it anywhere. It just doesn't happen.

She put it back up, and he hit it to her again, and it went round.

She was out there about twenty minutes, and then she came up the steps and sat down again at table nine, wet to the knee, and asked me for another coffee.

I brought it, and I didn't say anything about it, because you don't.

She left at half past five, because they all left at half past five, because the all-aboard was six and they were told about it four times.

She tipped normally.

And I was clearing table nine and putting the cups on the tray when I realised that in three hours I hadn't asked her one single question about herself — not where she was from, not whether she had children, not one thing.

And I ask everybody everything, and it is my entire personality, and I've got the complete life story of a Norwegian couple who were here for one lunch in May and I could recite it to you standing on my head.

Then a table of six sat down and one of them wanted to know whether we did gluten free, and I didn't think about it again for six hours.

She was off the mole by six and out past Sustipan and gone.

The picigin was still going. It is still going at eight, and it is still going in October, and it is still going in January, because in January

they do it in the cold with the water at seven degrees and they film it and put it on the television every year, and the men are older every year and there are always six of them.

I finished at eleven and walked back up through the Golden Gate, past Grgur, and there's nobody at the toe at eleven at night, and I put my hand on it going past.

Then into the palace, which has no door, and up the stairs my uncle made, and to bed against a wall that a Roman put there.

The eleven-fifteen to Supetar will be busier tomorrow than either of the two ships, and it is busier than them most days, and it will still be running the week they stop coming.

Venice

I drive the number 2.

It is a bus. People do not like that word. It is a bus.

Twenty-four metres. Diesel. Two crew. I am on the wheel and Nicolò is on the rope. We go San Zaccaria, San Giorgio, the Giudecca, Tronchetto, Piazzale Roma, Ferrovia, and then down the Canal Grande and back. All day.

Every four minutes we stop and start again. I have done it for nineteen years.

A.C.T.V. · VENEZIA · TARIFFE

Biglietto ordinario, 75 min	€ 9,50
Biglietto ridotto, Venezia Unica (residente), 75 min	€ 1,50
Giornaliero, 24 ore	€ 25,00

Il biglietto va convalidato prima di ogni salita a bordo.

Same boat. Same seat. Same water.

The card is on the wall at every pontoon in the city. Nobody reads it. It is not a secret. It is printed.

What I care about, in order.

The tide. The current at the Rialto turn. The wash off the taxis. The ambulance, which can come at any time and which owns the water. And the gate.

The gate is the opening in the rail where Nicolò works. You do not stand in it. It is not a rule about politeness. It is a rule about a man's arms.

Every day, all day, people stand in it. With bags.

The rules permit three pieces of luggage per passenger.

Three. It is written. I have read it. Somebody in an office wrote *three* and went home to his family.

At eight in the morning I take forty people out of Piazzale Roma who have come off the coaches with three each, and there is a woman going to work in Santa Croce, and she is at the back of the pontoon, and the boat is full of luggage.

"Three hundred thousand."

That is Nicolò. He has been saying it since Tronchetto.

Piazzale Roma. Watch the gate.

"Every time they lift it. Three hundred thousand euro. Every single time."

Ferrovia. Ropes.

"So they don't lift it. That is the whole—"

Mind the step. Mind the step, signora.

"—that is the whole thing, Toni. That is the whole thing."

The barrier works.

I want to say that first because people get it wrong. It works. Seventy-eight gates, three inlets, and when they raise them the sea stops. It stopped. I have seen it stop.

Six billion euro. They said one and a half. Thirty-five people arrested and one of them was the mayor of this city and about a hundred more were looked at.

And it works.

And San Marco is the lowest place in Venice. San Marco is wet at ninety centimetres. And they do not close for ninety centimetres, because closing costs three hundred thousand euro and takes hours and shuts the port and the ships have to wait.

So the barrier works, and the square is wet, and both of those are true, and Nicolò and I have been having this argument since 2020.

And at ninety-five centimetres they split my line.

That is the part nobody writes about. At ninety-five the boat does not go under the bridge. Not this boat. So they cut the 2 in half and you run San Zaccaria to Tronchetto and somebody else runs the other end, and the city is in two pieces, and I sit at Tronchetto.

I am not talking about San Marco. I have never once been talking about San Marco.

“They’ll close it for the marathon.”

San Tomà.

“They will. Watch. They will close it for the marathon and they would not close it for my mother’s shop.”

Rialto. Mind the gate. Signore — the gate.

“You remember the year they ran it through the water.”

I remember the year they ran it through the water.

An English lady asked me, very kindly, at the Accademia, whether we were arguing about the football.

I said no.

She said, “It sounded quite serious.”

I said it was the tide.

She said, “Oh, how lovely,” and she went to the front to take a photograph.

At half past nine the Hand was standing in the gate.

I saw him from the wheel. I was going to say something. You always have to say something.

He took the rope.

He took it off Nicolò and he put it on the bollard and he did it right. The turn was right. The tension was right. He stood clear of the bight, which nobody does, which people who work on boats do not always do.

Nicolò looked at him. Then Nicolò went back to explaining about three hundred thousand euro.

He did the rope at Rialto. And at San Tomà, and at San Samuele, and at the Accademia, and at San Marco, and at San Zaccaria, and at San Giorgio, and at the Zitelle, and at the Redentore, and at the Palanca.

By eleven Nicolò was not doing his job. He was standing three feet from his own gate, with his hands free, talking to me about the barrier.

And the boat came alongside clean every time.

I have a licence. That man was not staff. He was not insured, he was not trained, he was not anything. If he goes in the water at the Rialto turn with the ebb running it is my licence and my name and I will be explaining it to a room.

I did not stop him. I want that on the record. I saw it, I knew the rule, and I did not stop him, and I am not going to tell you why, because I do not know why.

He got off at Piazzale Roma at half past four. He did not take a ticket all day.

A controller had boarded at the Accademia on the eleven-forty run. He stood at the back and watched the gate for three stops, and at all three of them a man who was not crew worked the rope while my marinaio stood clear of his own station.

There is a form. The form wants the name of the crew member responsible. Nobody has the man's name. So the name that goes in the box is Nicolò's.

He has a meeting on Monday, at the depot, at eight. He is not worried about it. He should be a little worried about it.

The woman with the trolley was at Rialto at ten past ten.

Shopping trolley. Red. She had come from the market and she was going home to San Tomà, which is one stop.

The boat was full. Not full of people. Full of *bags*. Two hundred bags standing on their own wheels in the middle of my deck with people attached to them.

She waited. I could not take her.

The next one was a 1. It was full.

The one after that was mine again, and it was full, and Nicolò got her on because Nicolò just gets people on, and she stood at the gate, which you must not do, and she got off at San Tomà, which is one stop, which is four minutes, and she had been standing on that pontoon for thirty-five.

That is all. That is what happened.

They tell me about it. Every single day, they tell me.

They come on and they stand near the wheel and they say that they wanted to do it *properly*. That they are not on one of the big ships. That they did not want a gondola, because a gondola is ninety euro and it is for tourists. That they wanted the real Venice, the one the Venetians use, and here they are on the actual bus, with the actual people.

They are not lying and they are not fools. They are right. It is the bus. This is the one the Venetians use.

And there are eleven Venetians on this boat and one hundred and ninety of them, and the woman with the trolley is on the pontoon at San Tomà watching us go.

I do not say anything. What am I going to say. They paid nine euro fifty and they are entitled to be on it.

They come off the coaches at Piazzale Roma with the breakfast still in their hands.

I know where they came from. They came from Marghera. The ship is at Marghera, at the industrial quay, past the tank farm and the chemical works, because she is too big for the lagoon and she is not allowed in and she never will be again.

So they saw this city for the first time out of the window of a bus, on a causeway, doing forty, with the refinery on the left.

I have never been to Marghera. I have no reason to go to Marghera.

Now the thing they get right. They do not get everything wrong and I will not pretend they do.

They get San Giorgio right.

You look at the island across the water from San Marco, with the white church on it, and that is Palladio, and it is the best thing in the basin, and there is a lift in the campanile.

A lift. Eight euro. There is nobody in the queue, because there is no queue.

And you go up, and you look back, and you see San Marco. All of it. The Doge's Palace, the two columns, the campanile, the domes, the water, the boats, the light on the roofs, laid out, from the correct distance, in one piece.

You cannot see San Marco from the top of the campanile at San Marco. You are standing on it.

Every Venetian knows this. About one visitor in forty works it out. And the ones who work it out come down that lift and get on my boat at San Giorgio and they are quiet, and they are quiet in the correct way, and not one of them has ever had to be told to get out of the gate.

The Canal Grande is the finest street on this earth. I will say that in front of anybody.

It is a mile and a half of the best building that has ever been done, and it has been standing in the water since before your country was a country, and it goes past at a walking pace, and there is nowhere on the planet like it.

My line is the fast one. Twenty-five minutes, Piazzale Roma to San Marco. The 1 takes forty-five and stops everywhere and that is the one they all want.

The twelve o'clock looks like this.

Two hundred people in the aft standing section. Shoulder to shoulder. Nobody is sitting because there are eighteen seats. They are packed in at chest height and the rail is above their heads and the palazzi are going past on both sides.

They cannot see any of it. They are looking at the back of the head in front of them, and at the wheels of a suitcase, and at a man's rucksack, which is at the level of their face.

Twenty-five minutes. San Marco.

The Allfather was in the middle of them.

I only saw him because of where I stand. I am up at the wheel, above the deck, facing the way we are going. On that boat, at that hour, I am the one man who can see anything at all, and I am the one man who is not looking at Venice.

Here is how you see a thing in a crush. Everybody moves. All the time. They shift, they lift up on the toes, they lean out for the shot, they turn to the person next to them, they get pushed and they push back. Two hundred people in that section and every one of them is going somewhere by about four centimetres, all the way down the canal.

He was not moving.

Not on his toes. Not craning. Nothing in his hands. He was standing in the middle of the aft section with the whole of them around him, and the palaces were going past on both sides, and he did not look at one of them.

That is all it was. A thing on my deck that was not moving when everything else was.

Then the Rialto turn came up with the ebb running under it and I had a boat to put through a bend, and that is where my eyes went, because that is where my eyes go.

And they get off at San Marco and I hear them, every day, on the pontoon, saying it was magical.

And it was. That is the part I cannot explain to anybody who has not driven it. They were not lying either. They came down that canal in a crowd, at shoulder height, seeing nothing, and it was magical, and it was, and I have been driving it for nineteen years and I do not know how both of those things are true and they are.

The ship went from Marghera at seven, which I did not see, and which I know about because Nicolò's cousin is on the tugs.

Nicolò said something about it. He said the ships are the reason they will not close the barrier for a ninety.

I said the ships are not the reason.

He said, "They're part of the reason."

I said everything is part of the reason.

San Zaccaria. Ropes.

The last run is at ten past eleven and there is nobody on it.

That is the good one. Twenty-four metres of boat and two crew and a black canal and the fronts of the palaces with two lights on in the length of them, and you take her down at the speed you want, and the water does what you tell it.

Nicolò had the rope himself. He was quiet.

Then he said the tide is going to be ninety-five on Thursday.

I said it will not be ninety-five. It will be eighty-eight.

He said ninety-five.

We will find out on Thursday.
Tied up at Giudecca at midnight.