

THE HUNGRY GODS
GO CAMPING

N. Van Seters & Claude

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PART I

THE PICKUP

BOARDING PASS KL681 · 24C · VAN HEESTERS/TESS

Everybody has a job except me.

Mum has the folder, and Dad has the bags and the count of the bags. Thijs has decided he is navigating. Nobody asked for that, and he has been at it since Greenland.

I have seat 24C and nine hours and nothing.

So I watch. It is the job I have given myself and the only one going. I watch out, at the strangers, at the country. Not at us. You do not watch your own family. There is nothing to find and they would catch you at it.

Nine hours, and then the door opens, and the air arrives before anybody moves. It is a temperature, not warm exactly, with a smell in it — green, cut wood maybe, rain. There is no rain. Where is the rain smell coming from?

Is it always like this?

Nobody answers. Dad is getting the bag down.

The corridor is carpeted and it goes on, and it turns, and it goes on again. Everyone here walks fast, and so we walk fast. Thijs is ahead of us by six metres.

The signs are in two languages and one of them is French, and nobody mentioned French. Do people here actually speak it, this far west?

Through the glass on the left there is a forest inside the airport, in a tall box open at the top, with rocks at the bottom and real rain coming into it. Not a picture of a forest — trees, actual living trees, indoors, in an airport. Who waters them?

Why is there weather in a building?

Nobody looks up at it, and a man walks past eating a sandwich.

First rule, maybe: the extraordinary thing does not get a sign, and it sits at the side and people walk past it.

Mum has the folder out already, in a corridor.

I have read the itinerary, all of it, twice, in June, with nobody looking. There are seventeen days on it, and every one of them has something in it, and day eleven has two things.

Is there a day with nothing on it? There is not.

I nearly say it to her. Right there, by the ropes, with the folder open in her hands and the officer four people away.

I do not say it. She did the work. It took her since February.

The line moves sideways and then forward, and lines do not move like this in Schiphol.

Then the booth.

He has a small screen, and he does not smile, and he is also not unfriendly. Both of those at once. I have not met that

before.

He looks at us for one second, then at the passports, and there are four of them. He fans them like a hand of cards.

Purpose of your visit.

How long are you staying.

Where are you staying tonight.

Anything to declare.

Mum answers all four, and the folder is open at the page, and she had the page ready. She has had that page ready since March.

He does not look at the folder.

Then he looks at me.

And where are you going, he says.

Canada, I say.

It is the wrong answer, and I know it is wrong, and it is also true.

He does not laugh, and he does something with his mouth. Not laughing. Adjacent to laughing.

Banff, Mum says. Jasper, the mountain parks.

Have a good trip, he says. He stamps four times. The stamp is extremely loud.

Second rule: they let you be wrong, out loud, in front of your family, and then they hand back your passport.

The hall after that is enormous and beige, with carousels everywhere.

Fourteen, Thijs says.

Fourteen what?

Carousels, he says, and he counted them.

Nobody asked him, and he tells us anyway, and then he tells a man standing near us. The man says huh. That is the reply.

Our belt is number six. Our flight number is on a screen above it. It does not move, and Dad checks his watch, then the screen, then his watch again.

Nineteen minutes so far, and I have timed all of it, and nobody else has.

Here the job I gave myself stops being enough.

At home there would be an announcement — a tone first, then a voice, then the same voice again in English. By minute twelve somebody would be shouting at somebody at a desk.

Here there is nothing at all, just fourteen belts, and ours, and about ninety people not minding.

Twenty-one minutes now.

There must be somebody behind that rubber curtain having a slower morning than usual. Nobody out here is angry with them.

Is that a rule too? Or is everybody just tired?

Mum has the folder open on the cart rail, and she checks the shuttle time against her watch, and she does it twice.

Thijs has found a map of the airport on a board and is counting something on it. Two terminals, he says, and the same name on both.

Dad has all four bags accounted for and nothing left to do about them. What does a person do with their hands here?

Out past the far doors, at the end of a road, mountains, with snow on the tops of them in July, and a parking garage in front. Nobody looks at either.

Third rule, and I am not sure about this one yet: nothing here impresses anybody who lives in it.

Then a bell somewhere low. A light on a post starts going round. The rubber curtain moves, and everybody in the hall stands up at once, including us, including me.

BOOKING 4471903-HTL · VAN HEESTERS, S.

The folder has done everything asked of it since February.

It has held the flights and moved them once. It survived the change of ferry. It produced, in a queue at Schiphol, the one document a man wanted at the moment he wanted it, and I have been quietly pleased about that for three weeks.

It could not, on the twenty-fifth of July, get four people to sleep.

The room faced east, which I chose, and the curtains had a gap of four centimetres down the middle, which I did not. There were two beds, a folding one, a kettle. In the corridor there was a machine that made ice, free, all night, for anybody.

We reached it at four in the afternoon.

Everything I had read said keep them up until nine. Eat late. Do not lie down.

Tess lay down at half past four. Thijs lay down at twenty to five and told me from under a pillow that he was not sleeping.

I let them go. That was a decision and I made it, and by six I understood what it had cost, because two of the four of us were now awake at the wrong end of the day and would be awake at three.

Joost stayed up with me and talked about the excess.

He has talked about the excess since February. The collision waiver reduces it, the reduction is not a removal, the figure that remains is the figure that matters, and he has said this to me in four separate rooms. At twenty to eight he was saying it again, sitting on the end of the bed with one shoe off.

Then he stopped mid-clause and was asleep.

Not lying down. Sitting, with the shoe in his hand. I took it off him and he did not stir, and I have never in twenty-two years seen him do that.

So at nine o'clock it was Tess and me, because Tess had woken at half past eight and would not go back down.

The shop was three minutes away on foot and took nine, since there is no crossing a road of that width except at the place built for it. There were sidewalks, technically. A strip of concrete beside each carriageway, unbroken, correctly surfaced, empty.

Inside it was the size of a business park and cold enough for a coat. Sixteen checkouts, one with a person at it, and two other customers in the building at nine at night on a Saturday.

Tess pushed the cart and did not talk for the first four aisles.

The packet sizes here are wrong. Not larger, which is what everybody says. Wrong: bread in a bag of twenty-four slices, cheese in a block of nine hundred grams, eggs in a tray of eighteen. There is no small. There is a size below large, and it is large.

One aisle for cereal. Both sides, forty metres.

The milk comes in a jug. Four litres of it in translucent

plastic with a moulded handle, of the sort you would fill with screenwash. The smaller size sits in a different aisle at more than half the price of the larger, which makes the larger the only rational purchase for people who will not drink four litres of milk.

Tess photographed it for Thijs. Then she said, without turning round, that the eggs were in a fridge.

They were. Behind a glass door, with the cheese and the yoghurt.

At home eggs sit on a shelf at the end of an aisle beside the flour. I have never once thought about why.

I asked the woman at the checkout, expecting a shrug. She said they wash them. I said pardon. She said they wash the eggs here before selling them, which takes something off the shell, which is why they go into the cold section afterwards.

Then she asked how our evening was going.

I gave a truthful answer of about nine words. She listened to all nine. Tess looked at me while I gave it, which she has not done in some time.

Nobody asks that where I come from. Nobody listens to the answer.

Back in the room I made the list, since a list is the thing I have instead of sleep.

The list of what still needs buying is longer than the list of what we bought. That is not a complaint about the shop. It is a consequence of a vehicle that must carry a house for seventeen days: a tin opener, dish soap, a sponge, tea towels, matches, a flashlight, batteries for the flashlight, string. Also

a second flashlight, because a flashlight shared between four people belongs to one of them. Also clothes pegs. Nobody thinks of clothes pegs until there is washing, and by then it is a campground at seven in the evening and there are none for two hundred kilometres.

At half past eleven I went through the campground confirmations against the vehicle.

I did it because I was awake and the folder was open, and not because I suspected anything.

The fourth one has a site length limit of six point four metres. Ours is seven point three.

I read it three times. Then I found the booking page in my sent items, from the fourth of February, and the page asked for a vehicle length, and I gave it one, and the number I gave it was an estimate from a diagram.

There is nobody to telephone at half past eleven. There is a form. The form wants a reason, and it offers a list, and the reason is that I guessed.

I woke him.

I said the fourth campground will not take the vehicle. He said, without opening his eyes, that it would be fine. I said that he did not know that. He agreed that he did not know that. Inside a minute he was gone again.

I sat with the light on for some time afterwards, which was unfair of him and then unfair of me, and I am recording it because it happened.

At half past midnight Thijs came and stood in the doorway of the bathroom and asked what time it was at home.

Half past nine in the morning, I said. He said that was worse. He went back to the folding bed.

The last thing I did was put the pass back in its sleeve at the front, where it goes, and where it comes out first.

Then I shut the folder and put it on the table between the beds, and left the light on, and did not sleep, and at some point stopped trying.

FILE MC-2026-04117 · MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

I am the person who answers the letters.

That is not the title. The title is longer, and contains the word correspondence twice, once as a noun and once folded into an adjective, which tells you most of what there is to know about this branch.

What it means in practice is this. A member of the public writes to the Agency, or to the Minister, or to their own Member. The Member forwards it with a covering slip. The letter then descends a chain of decreasing seniority until it reaches a desk where somebody will open the envelope. That desk is mine.

There are nine of us on this floor, accounting between them for eleven thousand replies a year. That sounds enormous until you divide it and find that it is five letters a working day.

Five in the tray this morning, which is light.

The visitation dashboard is on the wall behind me. Nobody asked for it, and it is part of the room now, the way a radiator is part of a room. Across last summer's free-admission window the Agency counted fourteen and a half million visits, up thirteen

per cent, with the historic sites up nearer twenty. The figure has been on that wall since June. In that time perhaps thirty people have come into this office, looked at it, and produced a version of the same sentence, which is that it is a lot of people. It is a lot of people. Nobody has ever added a second sentence.

The figure was on the wall before the release that contained it. The All-Seeing maintains the dashboard. He knows what every number on it is doing without consulting it, which I tested twice and then stopped testing. Ask him the visitation figure for a site he has never been to and he gives it, and it is current to the week, and he has not looked anything up. He does not say what any figure means, and has never once said what a figure means.

The second letter is four pages, typed, single-spaced, signed in ink.

I am going to set out what it says rather than summarize it, because the summary is worse than the thing, and because the file will keep my reply and will not keep his letter, which is the wrong way round and is how the system is built.

He has been coming to these parks for fifty-one years and he gives the dates. He says he is not writing about crowds, and underlines *not about crowds* twice, because he knows that is what everybody writes about and does not wish to be filed with them.

He is writing about arithmetic. If admission is free, more people come, and if more people come the thing they came for wears. Wear is not an opinion but a rate.

Then he gives his example, which is a meadow, and sets out

what it did in each of the five decades he has watched it. It is not sentimental. It is a series of observations about a plant, made by a man who returned to the same three hundred square metres every August for half a century.

Then he writes the part that makes the letter difficult.

He understands exactly why the Agency has done it. If people do not go they will not care, and if they do not care there will be nothing left to protect in eighty years. He has argued the other side of this at meetings, and lost, and has come to think he was wrong to be arguing it. He is not asking for the measure to be reversed, and he says so twice, the second time in a paragraph of its own, so that a person skimming cannot miss it.

He is asking whether anybody has sat down and worked out which of the two things wins.

Then he signs it, and underneath the signature, in the same ink, he has written: *I do not require a reply.*

Everybody requires a reply. A letter saying it does not require one gets one within twenty business days like every other letter, because the twenty days was never about him. It is about the Agency being the sort of organization that answers, which is a property of the organization rather than a service to the correspondent.

The fourth letter is nine lines long and comes from a man in Alberta who wants to know whether the free admission will be suspended if the parks begin closing things. It is filed under paragraph two, which covers closures and restrictions, and nobody has drafted the answer to that one, because nothing

has closed.

There are four approved paragraphs.

People outside the branch believe they are a mechanism for not answering. They are not. They are a mechanism for answering the same question the same way every time, which matters when the question arrives eleven thousand times a year, when every answer is disclosable, and when any two of them can be laid side by side on a committee table by somebody who has all afternoon.

Paragraph one is for objections to cost.

Paragraph two is for objections to a closure or a restriction.

Paragraph three is for objections to development.

Paragraph four is for objections to the mandate.

So the work this morning is not writing but deciding which of four things this man is doing. Then his particulars go into the paragraph correctly, and the meadow goes in by name, because the meadow is real and a man who has read to page three is owed the evidence that somebody else did.

He is doing the fourth thing.

Paragraph four opens by reciting subsection 4(1). The parks are dedicated to the people of Canada for their benefit, education and enjoyment. They are to be maintained and made use of so as to leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. The recitation is not decoration, because the sentence is the answer, and it answers in a way nobody on this floor enjoys, which is that it does not resolve. It puts both things in, and joins them with an *and*.

Everything downstream of that conjunction is somebody

deciding which half is under more pressure this year. Every management plan, every permit, every shuttle, every closure order, every fee schedule and every free-admission window, on an ordinary Tuesday, with incomplete information and a deadline.

He asked which one wins.

Strip the courtesies off paragraph four and its content is that nobody has worked it out, that nobody can, and that the statute is drafted so the question gets asked again every time instead of being settled once. That is not a drafting failure. I have read the parliamentary record. They knew.

The reply will tell him that he has identified the statutory tension accurately, that it is managed rather than solved, and that his observations have been shared with the relevant field unit. All three are true. The third is true because I will now share them, which takes forty seconds and generates an email that somebody reads on a Thursday and files, and the meadow will be precisely as it was.

He will know he has been answered by a form. He is a man in his seventies who wrote four pages in ink, and he is not going to be fooled by a paragraph. What he cannot know, because the file will not record it, is that his is the only letter this month to get paragraph four. I read it twice, and the second reading was not necessary for the work.

The outgoing tray has eleven items in it. One is an acknowledgment to an address in the Netherlands, a general enquiry from February about what a pass covers, answered in nine days, correct, and of no interest to anybody including the

person who sent it.

I go to attach the covering note and the signature is already on the file.

The block reads THE ALLFATHER, and beneath it the directorate, and beneath that today's date. This is not remarkable, and accuracy matters here. The signature is on everything this morning. It was on the Thursday summary before the summary was compiled, on two draft replies that have not been reviewed, and on a submission whose annexes are still with legal. It arrives at the pace signatures arrive at, which is faster than work, and it has never once been on a file which subsequently turned out to be wrong.

I raised it twice in my first year. The first time a colleague explained the workflow to me at length, patiently, and wrongly. The second time the same colleague said, in a different voice, that the signature was valid, that it had never been on a file that turned out to be wrong, and that I might consider what I was actually asking for.

What I was asking for was that the signature should arrive after the work, which is the order the work is in.

It arrives when it arrives. The reply goes out on the twentieth business day, which is the eleventh of August, to a man who does not require one. It will be correct, and it will change nothing, and both are true at once and neither softens the other.

I number the log entry and file it, and that is my entire contribution to the meadow.

RENTAL AGREEMENT 4471903 · DRIVER J. VAN HEESTERS

The vehicle is seven point three metres.

I knew the number before I arrived, because it was in the company's diagram, which I downloaded in February. I measured seven point three metres on the road outside our house with a tape, and I walked it end to end twice. So when Sanne asked whether I was certain I could drive such a thing, I was able to tell her that I had walked it.

Walking it is not the same.

The taxi went south from Richmond at seven, through farmland.

This needs describing properly, because it was the first thing that happened and it was not what I had prepared for. The land south of the airport is flat. It is dyked. There are drainage ditches running at right angles to one another, and long low fields, and pumping infrastructure, and a horizon with nothing on it at all. I have driven through that landscape perhaps four thousand times. It is the road to my mother's house.

Then there is a mountain at the end of it, and the trees are the wrong trees, and a semi goes past with a trailer longer than the law at home permits.

I had prepared myself for a country that would look like nothing I knew. I had not prepared for one that would look exactly like home for six minutes and then stop.

The depot is in a district of enormous flat buildings that do not appear to belong to anybody, on a road with no houses on it, so that a person arriving by taxi at half past seven has the

impression that somebody has delivered him to an industrial estate in error.

The man at the counter gave his name as Curtis, and he was kind and he was fast, and the speed was the difficulty, because he does this eleven times in a morning during July and I was going to do it once in my life.

He handed me a telephone and asked me to film the vehicle.

I understand the reason perfectly. You record every existing mark before you accept the keys, so that at the end there is no argument about which scratch belongs to whom. It is sensible, and I would have designed the same system myself. It is also true that I have never filmed anything, and that it was his telephone and not mine. So I walked around this immense white object at eight in the morning, holding a stranger's telephone at arm's length, saying aloud to nobody: here is a scratch. Here is another scratch. In the manner of a man reporting a crime to which he is the only witness.

There were many scratches, because the company has rented this vehicle out for nine years.

The propane briefing took four minutes and was the most useful four minutes of the day. The tank is closed when you drive, and the tank is closed when you take fuel. Do not take the refrigerator for granted, he said, because it runs on propane whenever the vehicle has nothing to draw power from. It will run all night, which is what you want, and it will equally run while you stand at a pump putting eighty litres of gasoline into the vehicle, which is what you do not want. He said all of this pleasantly and without emphasis, as though he were describing

a shelf.

Then he read the damage schedule, which is a list of what things cost when you break them.

The awning is on it at four hundred and ten dollars. The roof is on it, which surprised me until I had thought about it for two seconds. A chip in the windshield is on it at a fixed figure, regardless of how the chip arrived. The interior is on it in a general and unspecified way that I did not care for, and I did not ask about it, because Thijs was standing beside me, and Thijs is fourteen, and had already worked out that the roof was a thing one could damage.

Then Curtis gave me the keys and said, you'll be fine, which is a sentence people say here, and then he went to the next family.

I will put one thing on the record here, since I have told nobody.

Since February I have been thinking about a fire. Not a barbecue, which we own and which is a machine with a lid. A fire, on the ground, in Canada, in the dark, with the four of us round it and the wood we have paid for. I have not said this aloud to anybody, partly because it is not a thing a man announces about a trip, and partly because Sanne would put it on the schedule and then it would be an item.

The navigation unit defeated me in ninety seconds.

It sits low, below the level of the wheel, so that a person consulting it is not looking at the road. It wanted an address in a format that does not exist in this country, the work, I assume, of a company that also serves countries where postcodes are six

characters and mean something. And it renamed the highway. The road we were on was Highway 91, which three consecutive gantries called Highway 91, and the unit called it something else, and it called it that with complete confidence, and it never once revised the opinion.

This solved this from the back seat in under a minute, using his own telephone, which had a card that Sanne bought at the airport for fifteen dollars.

In two hundred metres, keep right.

He said it in the voice of the machine. He did not once say it in his own voice. He announced the distance, then the manoeuvre, then a confirmation that I had completed the manoeuvre correctly, which no navigation system does and which turned out to be the thing I needed.

He was right every time.

That belongs on the record, and it is not a father being generous. A fourteen-year-old boy who has been in the country for nineteen hours navigated a seven point three metre vehicle out of Delta, onto Highway 91, onto Highway 1, and east for fifty kilometres, without an error, while eating.

The first forty minutes were the finest of my life as a driver, for the reason that nothing whatever happened. The road is very wide. Everybody is calm in a way Dutch drivers are not calm, because there is no reason for anybody to be anything else. The mirrors are enormous, and what they show is a white wall travelling along behind my shoulder, which is my house, and which is following me.

Then I understood the height.

Three point two metres is printed on a card taped to the dashboard, and it is taped there because height is the one dimension you cannot feel. Length you learn in an afternoon. Width you learn from the mirrors, which is what the mirrors are for. But the clearance above a car you simply know, without thinking about it, the way a person knows the width of his own shoulders in a corridor. In this vehicle I knew nothing with my body and had to know everything with a number, and the number was on a card, and the card was down at the level of my knee, so that every time we came toward anything with a roof over it I looked at my knee, which is the precise action a driver ought never to perform.

Nothing was struck, and that goes on the record.

Fort Langley has a parking lot laid out at a period when the largest vehicle anybody expected was a station wagon with a family of five in it. The entrance is at one angle and the marked spaces are at another. There is a low wooden fence which is not there to stop a vehicle and would not stop one, but which a man nonetheless does not wish to be the one to test.

It took some time.

I will not give the number of attempts, since the number is not the point, and since Tess filmed the fourth and the sixth. By the fifth I had stopped speaking, because the heat was thirty-one degrees and the engine was running, and every time I selected reverse the vehicle produced a loud regular beeping which carried across the site.

On the sixth there was a sound.

It came from above and behind, on the left, and it was not

a heavy sound, and there is a row of maples along that fence which have not been cut back this year. Sanne asked what it was. I said a branch on the roof, which is what it was, since the roof is three point two metres and the branch was lower than that, and something up there had met it.

I did not get out. It was thirty-one degrees and I was on my sixth attempt, and a man does not get out on his sixth attempt in order to look at a tree.

Sanne stood on the grass and gave me the distance in metres, which was correct of her and which I had asked for.

Thijs stayed in the back seat with the telephone.

In four metres, he said. Then: in two metres. Then, when the handbrake was on and the engine was off and the door was open and Sanne had already walked away toward the ticket office: you have arrived at your destination.

He was still giving directions four minutes after we had arrived, and nobody in the vehicle told him to stop.

Inside, a woman in a wool coat in thirty-one degrees put us on a tour, and asked me a question I did not expect, and got an answer out of me I had not planned to give in front of my children. I will not set it down. Sanne says I was on that tour for four minutes longer than the tour was. I have no way to check that, since I was not watching the time, which is not like me.

PROGRAM FL-07 · COOPERAGE · HERITAGE PRESENTATION

The coat is wool. It is thirty-one degrees. This is the job.

People assume the coat is for the visitors, and it is not, or not only. Put a person in modern clothes inside a fur trade post and they explain the past to you. Put the same person in the coat and they are standing in it. The difference is not costume; it is that the visitor stops asking about the display and starts asking about you. That is the trick, and it costs about two litres of water a shift.

Here is the cooperage, and I do it at ten, at half eleven, at one, at half two, and at four.

You take a stave and you show them the croze, which is the groove near the end that the barrel head sits into. You explain that the groove is what makes it a barrel and not a bucket. Then you show them the hoop, and you say the thing about the hoop, which is that the barrel is not held together by the hoop so much as by being wrong. Every stave is cut so that it does not quite fit, and the not-quite-fitting is the fit. Then you drive the hoop, and it goes tight, and the barrel exists.

That is the ninth time today and it is correct on the ninth, because the demonstration does not degrade. What degrades is the space around it.

The questions, in the order the public actually asks them, are these. Where are the toilets. Is this real. Did people live here.

The toilets are past the storehouse, and everyone gets that one right, including me, nine times a day.

There is a fourth question, not asked often enough to make the list. It is whether the people who worked here were paid. They were, though not well, and not in money. About once a

fortnight somebody actually wants the rest of it.

Is this real is the difficult one, and I have a good answer, and the answer does not work.

The good answer is that the site is designated in 1923, for a post founded in 1827 upriver and moved to this ground in 1839, and for the nineteenth of November 1858, when the Colony of British Columbia is proclaimed in the building behind you. That most of what you are standing in is a reconstruction from the late 1950s. That the storehouse is the original. That the palisade is not a wall from 1840 but a very careful statement about where a wall from 1840 stood.

It is accurate, and I have checked every clause of it. It takes about fifty seconds to deliver and I watch a man's attention leave at the twentieth. He nods at the end, having learned that the answer is complicated, which is not what he asked.

He does not want the provenance. I know he does not want the provenance. I have never worked out what he does want and I have been saying that paragraph since my second summer here.

The eleven o'clock is a Dutch family and a retired couple from Kamloops and three others. The father is enormous and stands at the back with his arms folded, which is the posture of a man who intends to be finished with this by twelve. There is an outsized white motorhome parked across four spaces in a lot built for station wagons, and it is theirs; you can tell whose a vehicle is by which family will not quite look at it.

He asks it. Same question, near enough the same words. Is any of this actually real.

The Companion has the tour. She does not answer it.

She asks him what made him ask. Not brightly, and not as a technique — I have seen the technique, we are all taught a version of the technique. She asks it the way a person asks a real question. Then she waits, and the wait is longer than is comfortable, and she does not fill it.

So he says his wife's grandfather kept a photograph. A building with a palisade. The family always said it was this one. It is almost certainly not this one, and he has driven forty minutes, and he says he does not know why he has come, in the tone of a man who is annoyed to be saying it out loud in front of his children.

Four minutes. She gets four minutes out of him in front of five strangers and three members of his own family, and not one of them moves away.

Then she tells him the thing I would have told him. The reconstruction. The 1950s. The storehouse, the palisade, all of it. It is the same information and he takes it differently, because by then it is an answer to a question he actually asked rather than one he was assigned.

She will know him next year.

I have stopped trying to explain that to new staff. They come back, some of them, and a few come back specifically for her and say so, and she has it — the name, the wife's grandfather, the photograph, the forty minutes in the car — a year later, with nothing written down anywhere that I have ever found. She asks him how the photograph turned out.

It changes nothing for him. His grandfather is still not in

that building and the photograph is still of somewhere else. It is only easier while he is here.

Nobody minds. I have never understood why nobody minds.

The roster for next season goes up in the staff room on Friday, which is early, and which everybody pretends not to care about.

Six of us here are seasonal and two are indeterminate. The Seeker is one of the two, and if you ask him what the difference is he does not tell you what the difference is. He tells you it is in the collective agreement, and which part of it, and which classification, and that the appointment letter is the instrument and not the posting, and that a person in another region would be told the same thing by a different office. He has done this to me twice this week and I did not ask either time.

Half the seasonal staff move. That is normal, and it is how the Agency staffs a country in July with people it does not employ in February. Two from last summer are in the mountain parks now, one at a campground and one at a visitor centre, and one came here from Waterton, and the woman on the gate did three seasons at a canal in Ontario and can still recite the lock sequence.

You see the same faces in different parks. You see them in different shirts, at different desks, four hundred kilometres apart, and the correct response is to say hello.

The Hand is at the north gate with the hinge again.

The gate drops. It has dropped since May. Somebody reports it in May, and there is a work order, and the work order sits in a queue behind a roof. In the meantime the gate is rehung

roughly every eleven days by a man who is not assigned to it and does not mention it. Today he is doing the sign as well, and the loose board by the trough. Nobody reported either of those.

The Companion comes past on her way to the four o'clock and asks him whether it will hold until Monday.

It will hold, he says, and he does not stop, and he does not look up from the sign he has already moved on to, and the answer arrives at the same speed as the work.

She waits the way she waits, and he has gone round the storehouse by then.

The Seeker has come out for something else entirely and says that the work order sits with the field unit's asset section, that the site cannot authorise it at any value, and that the instrument is the maintenance plan and not the report. Nobody has asked him, and the gate is hung.

The group moves off to the blacksmith and I go back to the forge, because the four o'clock is mine.

The four o'clock is the smallest tour of the day and it is the one I would keep if they took the others away. People who come at four have decided to be here. Nobody arrives at a fur trade post at four in the afternoon by accident.

At six I bank the forge and hang the coat on its hook, and it is still thirty degrees in the yard, and it will be thirty-one again by ten tomorrow.

ADMISSION FL-26-07 · YOUTH · VANHEESTERS T

There is a cat at the fort, and it does not belong to anybody, and it has a name, and the name is on a laminated card in the office along with the names of all the people who work there. Which means that at some point somebody sat at a computer with a template on the screen and a list of employees in front of them and decided that a cat went on it. And that every year since, somebody has decided not to take it off again.

Whose cat is it?

I asked a woman with a radio on her belt and she said it was the fort's cat, in the tone you would use about a wheelbarrow. Is that the government's cat, then? She said she supposed technically yes, and then she went off to do something else and left me with it.

Is it fed out of a budget?

I never found out, and I would still like to know, because a cat on a list is either an animal somebody buys food for on a form or an animal four separate people are quietly buying food for without telling each other, and I have decided it is the second one.

The animals live there, which is the part nobody told me before we went. There are chickens, and there are two enormous slow cows of a kind I do not know the word for in either language, and they have a shelter with a roof on it that is better built than half the sheds I have ever seen. They are not there for a day and not for the summer but permanently, as their job, in a fur trade post outside Vancouver, with people

from Utrecht looking at them.

What happens to them in winter?

A man said they stay. Is it even open in winter? Not really, he said, and when I said so who feeds them he said somebody does, and then he looked at his radio in a way that ended the conversation without either of us being rude about it. That is roughly how all my questions went for the first three days.

The tents were the thing I actually wanted, and they are not tents.

They are wooden platforms with canvas stretched over the top and a proper door and beds inside. You can sleep in one, at the fort, inside the palisade, in among the animals and the cat, for one night, as an ordinary member of the public who has paid the money like anybody else.

I stood next to one for a while, working out where I would put my bag and which of the two beds I would take and whether you could hear the cows from inside, and then I went and asked at the desk, and somebody has booked every one of them until the twelfth of October, every single one of them, which my father said afterwards was the most Canadian sentence he had heard since the airplane.

Why are they booked until October?

Because people book them, the woman said. Yes, but why? Because there are four of them. She said it the way you would explain that a bus has a timetable, as though four were a number carrying its own explanation and I were the one being slow.

Four. In this country there must be thousands of the things

and at this fort there are four. Every one is spoken for by somebody who sat down in January, in the dark, in the rain, and decided that on the twenty-sixth of July they would want to sleep in a canvas box beside two cows.

How does a person do that?

I could not get to the end of the thought. The closest I got was that they must be people who know what they will want, which is not a thing I know about myself at all.

Tess said I should go and ask the people staying in one, and I did not. They were eating breakfast at a picnic table in the middle of a historic site while about sixty of us walked past them looking, which seemed like enough to be going on with without me standing over them as well.

The gold panning is a trough.

To be accurate about it, because I told everybody there was gold panning at the fort, and that is completely true. What it means in practice is a wooden trough of running water outside the blacksmith's shop, a bin of grit, and a stack of black plastic pans that are the same pans you would buy for a dog.

You take a pan and you put a scoop of grit in it and you swirl the water round and tip it out slowly over the lip, again and again, tipping away the thing you came for if you go too fast, for as long as you can stand it and about nine minutes longer than that, and at the bottom, sometimes, if you have been careful with the tipping and lucky with the scoop, there is a fleck.

Is the grit real river grit?

It comes from a supplier, the man said. Is the gold real gold?

It is, technically. How much of it is in there? He did something with his mouth and said not very much, and when I asked how much not very much was he said that in six seasons nobody had ever asked him that.

Then a family arrived and he went to them, and I did not get an answer, and I added it to the list of things I did not get an answer to, which by then had four things on it.

So the grit contains grit and the promise of grit, and I got four flecks out of it in forty minutes of tipping water over my own shoes, and they are in a plastic vial in the front pocket of my bag, and my mother says they are worth approximately nothing, and she is right about that as she is about most things of that kind, and I have them.

The queue for the forge was longer than the queue for the gold, and that is the fact about that day I keep coming back to, because at home a queue means the thing at the end of it is worth lined up for and here the arithmetic did not work.

There were eleven people waiting to watch a man hit a bar of hot metal with a hammer until it became a hook, and six people waiting to look for gold. The hook was free. The gold was also free. So it was not about money.

So what was the queue about?

I still do not know, and the blacksmith made a hook and then made a second hook, and the second one took him ninety seconds from cold bar to finished hook including the part where he put it in the water, and the eleven people watched both of them all the way through, without anybody leaving, and then a different eleven people arrived.

At the north gate there was a man rehangng the gate, and nobody had asked him to. His tag said HAND, which I read twice, because at that point I had been in the country for one day and had not yet worked out which words here were names.

I know this because I was standing there a while doing nothing, waiting for Tess to finish being somewhere else. There was no work van and there were no cones and no signs, and nobody came out to supervise him or to thank him or to notice. He arrived with a bar and a canvas bag and took the gate off its hinges by himself, which is not a thing one person can do, and did it.

The gate had dropped at the outer corner, just enough to catch, and you could see a short fresh scrape in the dirt where it had started to drag again since the last time somebody lifted it. Which meant somebody had been resetting it, over and over, all season, and putting up with it, and presumably reporting it to somebody who was also putting up with it.

He set the hinge without measuring anything.

I watched, because by then I had been watching him six or seven minutes and there was nothing else in that corner of the fort to look at. He did not use a rule and he did not use a level and he did not once stand back to check the line. He lifted the gate onto the pin and pushed it, and it swung, and it stopped exactly where a gate ought to stop.

Then he did the sign.

There was a sign near the gate leaning over at about ten degrees, and he straightened it and packed the base with two stones. Then he went to the loose board by the trough, the one

I had stood on twice that morning without ever thinking about it, and he lifted it and re-seated it and put his boot on it twice to check.

None of those three things was the thing he had come for, and none of them was on any list I could see or in any bag he was carrying for the purpose, and I do not think he finished so much as ran out of things in that particular corner of the fort and went round the storehouse to start on a different one.

How long is the queue for a gate repair?

He said there was a work order. How long has it been in? May. Is it your work order? No. Then he picked up the bag and went, and that was the conversation, and it is also the longest one I had with any member of staff at that fort.

There were three of them working within about thirty metres of each other and no two of them were doing the same job — HAND on the gate, COMPANION on the tours, and a man in a wool coat doing barrels — and a fourth was inside at the desk with a screen and a card reader whose tag said SEEKER, and between the four of them, in one afternoon, on one site, they covered barrels, guided tours, a dropped gate, a leaning sign, a loose board, and the winter permit rules for a national park in a different province four hundred kilometres away.

I did not ask about winter permits. I asked what the difference was between the two kinds of staff.

He answered both. He answered the second one for about four minutes, accurately, with numbers and dates and the name of a pass, to a boy of fourteen who had asked about the first one and who will never in his life go near a mountain in February.

Why can they not get to the end of it?

At home, if you ask a man in a museum a question, he gives you the answer and goes back to what he was doing. Here the answer arrives and then it keeps arriving, in numbers and dates and the names of things you did not ask about, and it is not showing off, and it is not exactly being friendly either, and it does not stop at the point where the answer is finished. None of the people I asked seemed to think there was anything in it to explain.

On the way out I went past the trough again.

The water was still running and the pans sat stacked and the bin of grit stood exactly where it had stood. A small girl was doing what I had done for forty minutes, swirling and tipping and holding it up to the light. I nearly went over to tell her about the four flecks and about tipping slowly and about how the good scoop is the one from the bottom of the bin, and then did not, because she was about nine and was doing perfectly well without a stranger telling her how.

I looked into the trough on my way past, which had grit in the bottom of it and nothing else at all, and then we went out through the gate that he had hung.

PART II

THE HIGH COUNTRY

DISCOVERY PASS 8804 1129 6 · VAN HEESTERS

I bought the pass on the eleventh of March.

It is a card. It is valid for twelve months from the date of purchase. It admits, in a national park, up to seven people arriving in a single vehicle, which is three more than we are. I checked that number three times in March, since it seemed generous and I did not believe it.

At the desk of the historic site, at twenty past three, I put it on the counter.

The young man said admission was free.

I said that I had the pass.

He said yes. He said that admission was free until the seventh of September, for everybody, under a measure called the Canada Strong Pass. He said I did not need to show him anything at all.

When a system tells you that you do not need the thing you

brought, the correct response is not to put it away. The correct response is to establish what the thing is for. So I asked him.

I asked whether the pass covered the camping.

He did not say no. He said that camping is charged under a different fee schedule, that the schedule is made under the regulations and not under the pass, that the current schedule runs to the thirty-first of March, and that the twenty-five per cent reduction this summer comes from a separate measure with its own end date. Then he said no.

I asked whether it covered the shuttle at the lake.

He said the shuttle is a reservation service, that reservations are handled nationally and not by the park, that the transaction fee attaches to the booking and not to the fare, and that the fee is not refundable in circumstances where the fare is. Then he said no.

I asked whether it covered the fire permit.

He said a fire permit is issued at the campground, per day, by the campground operator, under the fire regulations, and that the amount differs between campgrounds within the same park because the schedules are set separately. Then he said no.

I asked whether it covered parking at the lake.

He said that depended on which lake, that at one of them the question does not arise because I will not be driving there, that the vehicle restriction is a superintendent's order rather than a regulation, and that orders are made locally and are on the park's page rather than in the regulations. Then he said he could give me the section number if it would help.

I said that I did not need the section number.

He gave me the section number.

His name tag said SEEKER. I have written it on the back of the receipt, under a heading, because I have begun a list of people in this country who have been useful to me, and his is the first name on it.

I will set this down accurately, because it is not what I expected of an official. He never once told me what a rule was. He told me where the rule lived — which instrument, which office, which province, which page — and let me go and read it. Twice he said he was not the authority for a thing and named the authority.

Nine minutes. He looked nothing up.

What I have now, on the back of the receipt, is a list. Four instruments. Two offices. One superintendent's order. One section number I said I did not need.

Tess stood beside me for six of the nine minutes and then went out to the yard, where her brother had been since eleven and would not come in.

Two of the nine days I have marked for the pass do not need it. The Fort is one of them, since the seventh of September has not come yet. The other is a provincial campground, which is a different government, which I did not know on the fourth of February and know now.

The young man had that in front of him for nine minutes and did not say it. He answered four questions with four answers. He did not tell me I should not have bought the card. He did not tell me I had marked the wrong days, and he corrected nothing out loud.

At the end I asked whether they could refund it.

They cannot. The card is valid. The correct system issued it, at the correct price, on the correct day, and nothing has gone wrong with it anywhere.

That is the sentence I keep returning to. The pass is real. The purchase was sound. The card works. The free admission is a real measure with a real purpose, announced in the spring, and the two of them arrived in the same summer.

The result is a card, in a sleeve, at the front of a folder, which will not come out of the sleeve again.

Tess asked whether we could sell it.

I said that one cannot sell a pass. She asked why not. I did not have an answer. I still do not have one, and I have decided that the reason I do not have one is that there is no reason, only a convention nobody has ever had to defend.

There is a second item in the sleeve behind the card. It is the receipt, printed at home, in colour, for eighty-three dollars and fifty cents. Joost printed it in colour. He printed it in colour because the printer was already on for something else, and he has mentioned this once.

Behind the desk a woman with COMPANION on her tag was talking to an elderly couple about a photograph. Not about the site. About their photograph, and where somebody might have taken it.

She had time for it in the way that people at a counter do not have time for things.

She asked the woman whether her sister had had the operation. The woman said in April. She said she was glad,

and asked whether it was the left one in the end, and the woman said it was.

They had been in once before. In 2023. There was nothing on the desk in front of her, no screen turned toward her, no card.

Outside, past the window, a man was doing something to a hinge.

I asked the young man to spell my name back for the mailing list. He did. Correctly, with the space in it, in two words, capital V and capital H.

No system has managed it since.

I put the card back in the wallet, in the sleeve, at the front, where it goes.

ASSET 05711-B · CONDITION INSPECTION

The site is a line in the register.

The register holds, at last count, just under eighteen thousand two hundred built assets, at a current replacement value somewhere north of thirty billion dollars, and it contains — people find this funny, and it is funny — a national highway, several dams, a hundred and forty-odd lock stations, a very large number of privies, and this.

The register entry for it is four lines. Designated 1923. Reconstructed 1957 to 1958. Twenty-one structures, of which one — the storehouse — is original. The interpreters have a version of that with dates and a colony in it, and they deliver it nine times a day, and none of it appears in my file.

The condition methodology is the methodology used on a bridge, which is not a joke and is not a shortcut: there is a five-point scale, and a structure is assessed against what the structure is for. That last clause does all the work. A bridge is for carrying load. A storehouse from 1840 is for being a storehouse from 1840. A reconstruction from 1957 is for representing a storehouse from 1840, which means that a reconstruction can be in excellent condition as a 1957 building while failing at the only thing it exists to do, and the form has one field.

There is a paper somewhere with my name on it, from 2019, running to eleven pages. The answer that came back, in due course and in writing, was that the field is the field.

There is a further wrinkle which I have stopped raising in meetings and will set down here instead. The reconstruction is sixty-nine years old, and a place may be considered for designation once it is forty, which means that the 1957 buildings on this site are now, in their own right, of an age to be assessed as heritage, and that the thing built to represent the past has itself become the past. If anybody ever formally noticed this, the site would carry two designations, one inside the other, at different dates, describing the same timber.

So: shingles.

Cedar, on the storehouse roof, replaced in sections across eleven years, the most recent section four years ago. The moisture here is the story, and the rain shadow argument comes from people who have not stood in it in November. The shingles at the north end are going, and by going I mean they are performing exactly as cedar shingles perform at year nineteen

in this valley, which is not a defect, and is not an emergency, and will in about four years be both.

The north end is the end that matters, because it is the end that does not dry. A south elevation in this valley sheds and warms and is effectively on a different schedule from the north elevation of the same building, which means that a roof is not one asset but two. I rate it as one, because that is the rating there is, and I carry the other roof in my head.

It has been on the capital list. It has been sequenced behind other work four times, in 2021, 2022, 2024 and 2025, and every one of those four decisions was correct.

I have checked three of them against the submissions and would have made the same call, and the fourth I made myself. Nobody spends on a roof at year nineteen when there is a lock gate at year sixty and a bridge deck carrying a load restriction. That is not neglect; that is the register working as designed. The roof will be replaced in the year it makes the cut, and it will be replaced by somebody who does not know it was on the list four times, and nobody will make anything of it.

The register does not carry a single current figure for what is owed across all of this. It carried one in 2017, and the number that went to committee then was one point two billion dollars against heritage properties alone, and I have watched that figure quoted in three separate news items since as though it were live. It is not live. Nothing has replaced it in public, and the absence is not a cover-up; it is that the methodologies changed twice, and a number produced under one methodology and set against a number produced under another is worse than no

number at all.

Twenty-six thousand people came through the gate last year. That figure lives in a different system from mine and the two systems have never spoken to each other. Visitation is the reason these buildings are maintained and it is also the principal thing wearing them out, and there is no field anywhere in my register for that, and I would not know what to enter in it.

The gate at the north wall is on my list this morning, and the gate is hung.

It was reported dropped on the fourteenth of May, by a seasonal interpreter, correctly, with a photograph. The work order sits with the field unit asset section, at a value the site cannot authorise, behind a roof, a culvert, an electrical panel and a set of steps, each of which is correctly ahead of it. Nothing on that list moves until October.

The gate is hung. It swings true and it stops where a gate should stop. There is no completion against the work order, no contractor attendance, and no record of who. HAND was on the site yesterday and is on it today, and HAND is not assigned to gates.

I have logged it as inspected. That is the only field available to me, and it is accurate, since I have inspected it.

The animals are also mine, which surprises people. Not the animals — the animals belong to a different budget and a different set of standards entirely — but the shelter is a built asset, with a condition rating of three, and the heater in it has a service date in November and a serial number, and both of those are in my file.

So is the cat, which is not an animal for these purposes. The cat is on the register at a value of one dollar under a line item intended for movable heritage, entered in 2011 by somebody who has since retired, and it has been carried forward every year since, because removing an entry requires a disposal record, and there is no disposal record for a cat that has not been disposed of.

The danger rating is posted on a board at the gate, and this morning it is high.

That board is read by about one visitor in four hundred, and by every member of staff on the site before they touch a tool, because above a rating there is no brushing, no grinding, no chainsaw and no cutting of any kind out of doors. It is not a park rule; it is an occupational one, and it applies to the crew and not to the public, so a visitor may sit at a picnic table beside a man who is not allowed to use a saw within forty metres of them.

Two items on my schedule for August are spark-producing. I have moved them to the third week and I expect to move them again.

The All-Seeing came out with me at eleven.

He is not on the inspection. He is at the site for a week on something unrelated and he came along the way people come along, and he stood at the north end while I was up the ladder, and he said the rating.

He said it before I came down. He did not have the file with him — I had the file, it was in my hand, and last year's rating is not written on the exterior of anything — and he did not

ask what it had been. He gave a number. It was the number I entered forty minutes later, after the measurements.

I have been doing this nineteen years and I can do it too, within a grade, on a building I know. What I cannot do is what he did, which was to do it on a building he had not previously inspected, from the ground, in the time it takes to set a bundle of shingles down.

It was one below last year, which is what it should have been and is not what anybody would have guessed, because the roof looks better than it did last year: the south section was done in 2022 and it is bright and sound and a visitor would tell you the roof had improved. The rating is not about how a roof looks. It is about how long you have left.

He does not say what a rating means. I have asked him twice and he has told me the rating both times, and on neither occasion did he say what it meant, and I have stopped asking.

He also said, crossing the yard afterwards, without being asked and without any particular emphasis, that the storehouse floor would want looking at in 2029.

It is not on any list. I have put it in my own notebook rather than in the file, because there is no field in the file for a thing somebody said in a yard, and because a date entered into a system on no evidence stops being an observation and becomes a commitment.

The note reads: storehouse floor, 2029, per site visit. It does not say who. I have kept enough notebooks to know that in six years I will read that line and be unable to tell whether it recorded a measurement or a remark.

I entered the rating that afternoon, one grade below last year, in the field that exists.

FUEL RECEIPT 8815 · HOPE

Hope is where the valley stops being a valley.

I use the word valley because it is the word we have, and it is the wrong word. At home a valley is a thing you notice on a bicycle. Here the land comes down on both sides of the road at an angle a roof would be ashamed of, and the road goes up the middle of it, and at Hope it stops pretending that this is a countryside with hills in it.

We stopped for fuel and I filled the tank for the second time in two days.

Eighty-one litres, and I have kept the receipt, since I am keeping all of them, and since I have begun to want the evidence.

The Coquihalla begins at about fifty metres above the sea and finishes at twelve hundred, and it does it in under sixty kilometres, which is a number I looked up afterwards and which I wish I had looked up before.

For the first eleven minutes I did not understand what was happening, and then I did. The road was wide and well made and empty of everything except semis, and the vehicle was doing what it had been doing all morning, and then it was not.

The needle is on the left of the panel, below the fuel.

It went up in stages, and it went up on the climbs and came back on the flat sections, and each flat section came back a little

less than the one before, and by the fourth I had worked out that there were not going to be many more flat sections.

The semis are the other half of it. They pass at eighty tonnes, uphill, faster than I am, and for two seconds of each pass the back of the house is in air going the wrong way.

One of them was pulling two, hitched one behind the other, which I have since learned they call a B-train and is a normal thing here.

Nobody else in the vehicle knew.

That is what I have not been able to explain to Sanne since. Three people were having an extremely good time. Tess was asleep. Thijs was reading out the names of the exits, which are numbers here rather than names, and finding this funny. Sanne was looking out of the right-hand window and saying, at intervals of about ninety seconds, look at that.

I said, look at that, twice, at appropriate moments, without looking at anything.

At the twenty-eighth kilometre the needle stopped rising.

I did not celebrate this, because a needle that has stopped rising has not come down, and because there were nine kilometres of climb still on the map on Thijs's telephone, and because a man who has told his wife that the vehicle is fine is not in a position to announce that it has become fine.

The summit is a rest area, paved, with a building with toilets in it, and marked stalls, and a view of some mountains that I did not look at properly for about ten minutes.

There was a food truck.

It needs describing carefully. It was a converted trailer with

a hatch in the side and a chalk board, at twelve hundred metres, at half past three in the afternoon, and there were eleven people lined up at it and every one of them had just driven up the same hill. Nobody in the queue was talking about the hill. They were all standing in the manner of people who have arrived somewhere.

I had a coffee and a thing in pastry with meat in it, and I never learned its name, and it cost nine dollars, and I paid the nine dollars without any of the arithmetic I have performed on everything else in this country.

There was a fire ring at the edge of the asphalt, a black steel thing on legs, with a grate, and a sign beside it about permits, and it was cold and had been cold for some time.

I looked at it for longer than a man looks at an empty fire ring. In two days we will be at a campground in the mountains with a fire ring of our own, and I have known the shape of that evening since about the middle of February, though I have told nobody what it is.

That is not like me, and Sanne noticed and said nothing, which is worse.

Thijs asked whether we could stay there. Not stay the night; stay, for a while, at the rest area, which has nothing in it. I said we could have twenty minutes, and we had fifty.

I stood at the edge of the asphalt with the cup and looked at the vehicle from about thirty metres away, which I had not done since Delta.

It is very white and very large. The awning arm on the left side sits at an angle that I do not think it sat at on Sunday, when

I filmed the vehicle at the depot, and I looked at it for a while and decided that it had probably always been like that, since I had not looked at it properly then either.

I did not open it, since there is no reason to open an awning at a rest area.

Going down the far side is a different problem and it is not a better one.

Here is what I did not know on Monday. This vehicle has a gasoline engine. A gasoline engine does not hold a truck back on a hill in any meaningful way, and there is no exhaust brake and no button on the dash, and there is nothing at all between the accelerator and the brake pedal except a gear selector and a person's judgement.

The gear selector has a switch on the end of it marked with a picture of a trailer.

Curtis mentioned it in the four minutes and I did not attend, because at eight in the morning in Delta I was attending to propane. What it does is hold the transmission in a lower gear for longer. What it does not do is stop seven and a half tonnes.

The first two kilometres were fine. Then the road went over the edge of something and stayed there for a long time.

Sixty. Sixty-five. I put my foot on the brake and the speed came back to sixty and the road gave it back inside eleven seconds.

I did it again. Sixty-five, brake, sixty. Eleven seconds.

The third time I understood the arithmetic, which is that I was not slowing a vehicle down, I was renting eleven seconds at a price, and the price was the brakes, and I had no idea how

many I had bought.

There is a smell, and nobody tells you about the smell. It is hot metal and something sweeter behind it and it comes in through the vents, and it arrived at about the fourth kilometre, and Sanne said what is that.

I said brakes.

I said it in a voice that ended the conversation, which is not a thing I do, and Tess woke up.

I took it out of drive and put it into 2.

The engine went to four thousand revolutions and stayed there and made a noise I have never asked a vehicle to make in twenty-six years of driving, and the cab shook, and the speed came off, and it came off slowly, and it stayed off. That is the trade. The noise is the vehicle doing the work the brakes had been doing.

Fifty-five. Fifty-two. Fifty-five.

Thijs asked if the engine was all right. Nobody answered him. That is the only time on this trip that a question of his went into a silence and stayed there.

There is a lane on the right, at intervals, going uphill into gravel, with a sign, for trucks that have lost their brakes. It is not a metaphor and it is not a precaution. It is a piece of civil engineering built because vehicles arrive at the bottom of this hill unable to stop, often enough to justify the earthworks.

I read the sign the first three times. After that I read the surface of it, which is loose, and deep, and steeper than it looks, and I understood that a man who uses it does not get rescued so much as crash on purpose in an approved location.

Eleven kilometres. Both hands. Second gear.

At the bottom the road flattens and the engine came down out of four thousand and everything went quiet and my hands hurt.

Sanne said, well.

That is all the commentary I have received on it.

Merritt, then east and north. Sanne said the country looked like Spain, and it does not look like Spain, and I did not say so.

The distance sign outside Merritt said Kamloops 89, and the fuel gauge said a little under half.

Those two numbers do not have a problem with each other. They did not have a problem with each other at Hope either, when the sign said Kamloops 200 and the gauge said full, and I did the arithmetic then and did it again outside Merritt and got the same answer both times, which is that we are fine and that I will do it again at Kamloops.

I have started to understand what the distances are doing to me. It is not that they are large; it is that there is nothing between them.

At home the next thing is nine kilometres away and if it is closed there is another one. Here the sign says eighty-nine, and it means eighty-nine, and there is one road.

We arrived at the campground at ten past seven with the light still up, which I had also not expected, and which nobody had told me about.

I reversed onto the pad in one attempt, with nobody watching, and I have decided to mention this to nobody.

RESERVATION 71620883 · 12 JUNE

Headset on at six. The queue is at forty.

The queue is at forty every morning at six. It does not empty overnight. It accumulates.

The people in it at that hour are the people in Europe. They have worked out the time difference and they are pleased about it. If a caller has done the arithmetic, the call is usually competent. If a caller has not, they are calling at six by accident and are angry about something unrelated.

This one has done the arithmetic.

Netherlands. Female, fifties. Excellent English, the kind where the grammar is better than mine and the rhythm is not. She gives me a confirmation number before I ask. She gives it in blocks of three.

I pull it and the trip comes up as one list, end to end.

Nobody outside understands this. A caller experiences the system as their booking. I experience it as every booking. When I pull one file I get the shape of a trip on a single screen.

Seventeen days. Nine reservations. Two provinces. A shuttle. And a set of dates that says exactly what they think the distances are.

They think the distances are European. Everybody does.

I can date a European booking now without looking at the address. Two national parks in seventeen days is fine. Four is a person who has measured a map with a ruler. Six is somebody who will telephone from a pullout in ten days, calm, and ask me to cancel four things.

This one has four.

I can see other things. Two of these were made in February. One of them has a site length limit on it, and there is a vehicle length in the booking, and the two numbers are not compatible. It is not flagged. The system does not check that pair, because the length is entered by the customer as a free field and the limit is held on the site record, and nothing joins them.

If she asks about the fourth booking, I tell her.

She does not ask about the fourth booking. She asks about the twenty-ninth.

I answer about the twenty-ninth.

That is the procedure and the procedure is right. I have turned it over more than it deserves. The alternative is that I decide which of eleven things a stranger needs to hear at six in the morning. I am not equipped for that. There are four hundred of us. If each of us decides, the Agency has told four hundred different stories about the same season.

At the end I read the cancellation terms. Everybody gets them. Refunds, notice periods, the transaction fee, and the clause about closures.

The clause about closures says that where a park or a facility is closed by the Agency, the fee is refunded, and that closures may occur for reasons including but not limited to weather, wildlife activity and fire.

I say that sentence about ninety times a day. In four years nobody has asked me a question about it.

The COMPANION on the next row would have asked her about the fourth booking. Not because it is on the screen —

because it is on the screen and the caller sounded tired at the end of a sentence about something else. She has been told about that four times. It is in her file as a development area.

She thanks me. She reads the confirmation number back without being asked, in blocks of three. She is gone in six minutes with a completely accurate answer to the question she asked.

There is no field for the rest of it. There is a free-text box on the call record. It is for the call. What I would put in it is not about the call.

The Chaos-Weaver is at the next desk and has been on one call in the time I have handled three.

I can hear one side of it. There is no tree in it. He is not following the flow. He is not offering the two options. He has not once said the sentence about the transaction fee.

At some point he stops asking about the booking. He asks the caller what day they want to be at the lake. That is not a question the script contains and it is not a field the system has.

The caller had asked about a campground. She did not want a campground. She wanted to be at the lake on a particular morning and had worked backwards to the campground and got it wrong.

He books something. I do not know what he booked. I know the caller was audibly delighted, and that the file will show an ordinary reservation with an ordinary number on it.

He does this every shift. He follows no tree. Not once in six years.

His handle time is the worst on the floor. His outcomes are

the best on the floor. The reporting has no way to hold both of those at once, so it holds the first, and he is spoken to about it twice a year, and nothing changes in either direction.

He is not senior. He has been here longer than the reporting has, and nobody has ever asked him to explain it.

If he slowed down it would stop working. I do not know how I know that. I have watched him do it at the end of a shift when he is tired, and the questions are the same questions, and they land differently, and the calls run long and produce less.

I close the call. The next one is already there.

SITE 41 · REGISTRATION · VAN HEESTERS

The kiosk closes at eight, and we arrived at ten past seven, which is fifty minutes of margin on a day I had allowed ninety for.

There was a woman in it with a screen, a printer, a radio, and a laminated sheet taped to the counter at an angle. Many people have leaned over it.

She asked for the name, which is where every transaction in this country begins and where ours has now come out differently three separate times.

I gave it the way we give it: van Heesters, with a space, the first word lower case unless it stands alone.

She typed it. The screen put it under V. It did this without hesitating, the way a machine does the thing it does.

I have stopped explaining this. In the Netherlands the word goes with the given name, so the file goes under the H. A person

looking for us in an index looks under Heesters and finds us. Here the machine takes the letters in front of it and files them whole. Neither convention is wrong, and neither is careless. They are simply two conventions in a room together, working correctly, and one of them has a keyboard.

Then the printer produced the slip.

VANHEESTERS. One word, capitals, no space.

The slip says VANHEESTERS. One word, no space. The third rendering of our name in three days, and the one I mind least. The slip is not going in an index. Nobody will search for it. It only has to match the post it hangs on.

The slip goes in a clip on a post at the site. That is the system. The post has a clip, the clip holds the slip. A person walking the loop at ten in the evening can see at a glance which sites have paid and which have not.

It is a good system. No power, no signal, no application. It is the first thing since the airport that I understood on the first attempt, and I trust it more than anything in the folder.

Site 41 has a length limit of nine metres. I checked it before we booked. I have checked it again this evening, on paper, at the post, with a flashlight, at an hour with light enough not to need one.

The fourth campground has a limit of six point four.

I raised it with the kiosk. She was kind about it, and could do nothing, since a booking in another park in another province is not hers to touch. She said so in one sentence, without any of the apparatus of apology. Telephone the reservation service, she said. They open at six.

Six in the morning is three in the afternoon in Utrecht. That is the only time on this trip the difference has been useful to me. I will not be awake for it.

There is a form. I have looked at the form. It requires the reservation number, which I have. It requires a reason for the amendment, and it offers a list: change of dates, change of party size, change of vehicle, cancellation, other.

The reason is that I guessed a length in February. The page asked for a number. It accepted the number. It did not ask what the number was for.

That is not on the list. It is other. Other requires free text in a box of unstated length. I have not yet written the sentence, and I have composed four.

There is a bear locker at every site. A green steel box, bolted to a slab, the size of a chest freezer. The catch works in two stages, and Thijs did not manage it on the first attempt.

The instruction sheet is taped inside the lid. It lists what must go in it: all food, all cooking equipment, all garbage, all dishes whether washed or not, and all scented items.

Scented items includes toothpaste. It also includes sunscreen, insect repellent, lip balm, and, in a line I read twice and then read to Joost, deodorant.

I have therefore put our toothpaste in a steel box forty metres from where we sleep. I have done it correctly, and I will do it again tomorrow.

A man with HAND on his shirt was working on the standpipe at the end of the loop for as long as we were registering.

He had it in pieces. A canvas bag, a wrench, a small square

of cardboard on the ground with the parts laid out in order. He worked at the speed of a person nobody is watching.

The tap was working, and had been working, and nobody in the loop had suggested otherwise. I know it was working. Thijs filled a bottle from it at seven fifteen, before the man arrived. The woman in the kiosk said, when I mentioned it, that nobody had reported that standpipe all season.

He put it back together at about half past seven. He turned it on and it ran, and he stood a moment with his hand under it. Then he picked up the cardboard and the bag and went to the next loop.

He did not speak to the kiosk. He did not write anything down, and there was no vehicle with a number on it anywhere in the loop.

At eight the woman locked the hatch and put a sign in the window with a number on it for after hours. Her tag said CHAOS-WEAVER, worn back to front for most of the transaction. She got into a truck and drove out past our site with one hand up.

Everybody here does that, from a truck, from a bicycle, from the far side of a loop road. It is not friendliness exactly. It is closer to a signal, given at a distance, which costs the giver nothing and is never once withheld.

I put the slip in the clip on the post before I did anything else, because that is the system and the system works.

LOOP C · SHOWER BLOCK 2 · VAN HEESTERS

The trees here are a different shape and you can smell them from the parking lot.

Not like a Christmas tree. Sharper, and warm somehow. A smell should not be warm.

Getting the van onto the pad took nine tries and an audience.

The pad slopes. You cannot see it slopes. The van knows it slopes. Inside, the fridge door swings open the second Dad stops, every time, and a lemon goes across the floor. So you level it. You level it with two orange plastic ramps you drive one wheel up onto, and the trick is you cannot see the wheel from the driver's seat, so somebody stands outside and calls it.

Mum stood outside and called it. This is the part I want to get right.

Mum, who has the folder, who booked nine campgrounds and moved the flights and had the passport page ready since March, stood on brown needles in front of a stranger's motorhome and had no idea. Up a bit. Her up-a-bit was a hand moving like she was smoothing a tablecloth. Dad drove up and the ramp shot out behind the wheel like a watermelon seed and hit the picnic table. Mum said, that came out. Dad said, I felt that. Neither of them said the part where it was funny.

The family at the next site watched all of it. An older couple, set up an hour, chairs out, a little rug, a rug, outside, on the ground, on purpose. The man did not offer to help. Dad would have hated that. He did not not-offer in a way you could see either. He just watched. Like weather.

Thijs's whole contribution was to read the manual aloud from the back.

The manual said the vehicle should be levelled front-to-back before side-to-side. Thijs said this after the fourth try, from inside, not looking up, in the machine's voice he does. Dad said thank you Thijs. Thijs said the manual also says to chock the wheels. Dad said thank you Thijs. I have never heard my father say thank you and mean the other thing twice in a row.

On the ninth try the fridge door stayed shut, and Dad turned the engine off, and nobody clapped. Clapping would have ended the marriage.

Then the awning, which is a separate war.

It winds out on a pole with a hook, and it went out crooked, and Dad stood under it with the hook looking up at it like it had said something to him. One arm sits lower than the other. He pushed it and it did not move and he decided it was fine. It is a little bent, the left arm. I do not think it started bent. I did not say that. You do not tell Dad the van is bent on day two. We left it out for exactly one hour and then a wind came down off the mountain and he wound it back in faster than he has done anything on this trip.

The awning has not been out since. That is its own kind of decision.

The ground is brown needles, completely silent, and there is no grass anywhere in the loop.

Is it always like this?

Nobody knows. Everybody says probably.

No signal. Not one bar. Not at the site, not at the kiosk, not

standing on the picnic table with my arm up.

Dad says there is a mast at the highway. Is there? No.

The showers are in a block at the end of Loop C. Concrete, two doors, and a bench outside with a man on it in a towel reading a paperback at half past eight in the evening. He has a staff tag on a lanyard, turned around, the blank white back of it facing out. So he works here. Doing what, in a towel, on a bench, I could not say.

The shower needs a token.

Not money — a token, a brass thing the size of a two-euro coin with a hole in it.

Where do you get a token?

The office. The office closed at eight.

I stood there a bit. Rule, or mistake? It is a rule. There is a sign about it, laminated, and the sign has been there long enough to go yellow at the corner.

So the showers are open all night and the only way to use them shuts at eight.

Everybody knows except us. Everybody bought their token at four in the afternoon along with the firewood. You buy that in advance too. Nobody told us that either.

Mum would have known. Mum was doing the slip.

Dad was at the firewood shed at four. I saw him. There is a shed by the kiosk with split wood in a cage and a slot for the money and a sign, and he stood at it for a while with his hands in his pockets.

He did not buy any.

I do not know why. There is a fire ring at our site. I checked.

He looked at the wood and read the sign twice and then walked back to the van with nothing. He has not said anything about it. I am not going to ask him. His face was doing the thing it does with Mum's schedule, and I did not want to be the schedule.

The woman comes past at nine with a headtorch and a clipboard.

She is the campground host. That is a job. Her tag says COMPANION. She lives here from May to September in a caravan with a flag on it and she checks the loops at nine and at eleven.

She says hello like she is finishing a conversation rather than starting one. Is that a Canadian thing or a her thing?

I say we do not have tokens.

She says the office opens at seven, and that CHAOS-WEAVER is on it in the morning and will sort it, and that I can have one of hers meanwhile. She gives me one out of her pocket. She does not make it a favour. She does not say bring it back.

Then she asks where we have come from today.

I say Hope. Then I say the Coquihalla. That was the bit that was actually the day.

She says her son drives it. She says the temperature gauge is what matters, and did Dad watch the gauge.

I say I do not know. I was asleep.

She laughs. Not at me.

Then she asks whether we have been to the fort, and I say yes, and she asks about the man doing the cooperage, and I do not know the name, and I say the man in the coat.

She knows the one. She has the name.

She was at that site for two seasons, before here.

They move. All of them move. How does anybody keep track? She says it like you would say the buses run every twenty minutes.

I nearly ask her something else.

Not about the fort. About whether she gets bored, out here, in a caravan, from May to September, with a clipboard, at nine and at eleven.

I do not ask it. It would come out wrong and it would be about me.

She goes on down the loop. She stops at 44 and says something to a man about his dog and she uses his name.

Site 44 arrived twenty minutes before us. How does she have his name already?

I take the token down to the block at ten past nine.

The man in the towel is still on the bench. Same paperback. He has not turned a page.

His tag is still turned around. I could reach over and flip it and read what he is. I want to know which one he is, the way I have started wanting to know which one all of them are, the host a COMPANION, the morning one a CHAOS-WEAVER, a tag for each of them that tells you what they do.

His tag is blank-side out and he is not doing anything I have a word for.

He sees me looking. He does not turn the tag around. He turns the paperback face down on his knee, keeping his place with a finger, and looks at me for a second like he is the one deciding whether to read me, and then goes back to the page

he has not left.

Is he waiting for somebody? I do not think he is waiting for somebody.

I stand at the door for a bit, then walk back. It is not about him. I do not know what it is about, and for once I do not try to make it be about something.

Coming back, the sky is not dark. It is ten o'clock and it is not dark.

Why is it not dark?

Thijs asks whether we have crossed a time zone. Dad says no. Thijs asks why then, and nobody answers that one either.

Mum is at the table with the itinerary and a pen and the light on in the van behind her.

Does she know about the fourth campground? She knows. She has known from the hotel.

Nobody has said it out loud.

The token is still in my pocket. I did not use it.

PART III

THE PASS

HIGHWAY 1 · KM 74 · ROGERS PASS

There is a word I did not have on Monday and have now, which is gradient.

At home the word means the ramp of a parking garage, or the little rise before a canal bridge that a cyclist stands up for. I have used it all my life to mean a thing that is barely there. Here it is printed on a yellow sign with a number and a picture of a truck tilted backward, and the number was eight, and I did not know at the time whether eight was a lot.

Eight is a lot.

I know this now because I have driven up it in second gear at four thousand revolutions with the engine making the sound it made on the Coquihalla, which I had hoped was a one-time sound and is not. We left Revelstoke after the shuttle and turned east, and the road has gone up ever since.

The difference is that on the Coquihalla I was frightened

and did not understand why. Here I understood exactly why, and it did not help. Knowing the grade and the gross weight and the reason the engine sounds like that does not make the sound stop, and does not slow the heart, and I drove the middle of that pass with my understanding intact and my body not listening to it.

The trucks are the arithmetic of it.

A loaded truck going up passes me because I am going up slowly. A loaded truck coming down does not pass so much as arrive, and for the second and a half that it is beside me the air it pushes and then pulls takes the front of the vehicle and moves it. I have learned to feel the truck before I see it in the mirror, from what the steering does. Twice a minute. For forty minutes.

Sanne counted them for a while and then stopped counting them, which I noticed and did not remark on.

There are cedars in the ditches wider than the vehicle, unremarked, and a local truck went past the widest one I saw without the driver's head moving at all. I have stopped looking at them too. That is the fourth day doing its work.

There is no engine brake, or not the kind I was hoping for.

I have established this now. There is no lever, no stalk, no exhaust brake of the sort the diesels have, the thing that holds a heavy vehicle back on a grade with the engine instead of the pads. What there is, is a switch on the gear selector marked for towing. It holds a lower gear and makes the engine do some of the work. A held low gear is most of the braking strategy on a descent. The pedal is the rest, and the rest is the part that

fails. I know this because I have burned the actual brakes once already, and do not intend to explain that sentence to the man at the depot in ten days.

So I drive the pass the way I have learned to drive: up in second, over the top, and down in second before the down begins, not after, because after is too late and I have been too late once.

There is a lane on the right for trucks that cannot stop.

I read it, the first time, as a suggestion. A courtesy. A thing provided for the unlucky. By the third one I had understood that it is not a suggestion. It is a provision, the way a lifeboat is a provision, and the difference between the two is a number somebody once worked out about how often a vehicle arrives at the bottom of a hill unable to stop, and then divided by the cost of building the gravel, and found in favour of the gravel.

There is a smell that comes with the gauge now, and I know it, and it is the brakes, and it is not the engine, and I have learned the difference the hard way and will not forget it. It came in faint at kilometre sixty and I said nothing. Sanne had the window down for the air. I put it up, and said the air was cold, which it was, and which was not why.

The gauge started up again at kilometre seventy.

I did not say anything. There is a pattern to how I do not say anything now, which Sanne has learned to read, and which means that the good time everyone else is having is going to continue uninterrupted while I do arithmetic.

At kilometre seventy-four there is a pullout.

There is a pullout, and there is a mast on it, and there is a

Parks vehicle beside the mast, and I took the pullout because the gauge said take the pullout, and not because of the mast, which I would not have looked at twice.

I put the handbrake on and let it sit and got out, which you are meant to do, to let the air move through the engine, and I stood beside my overheating house in a national park with my hand on the warm metal of it and did the sum I had been not-saying since kilometre sixty. If the gauge did not come down, we did not go on. If we did not go on, we sat here. On a pass, in a vehicle that is a house, with no shade and no signal and no second vehicle. We sat until somebody with a flatbed came up from Revelstoke for a number I did not want to think about, and the number was the shape of the fire I am not allowed to want. I had my hand on the metal to feel whether it was still climbing.

The man at the mast had a clipboard.

The mast is an instrument. There is a set of sensors on it, and a small solar panel, and a box, and it measures something — temperature, wind, I do not know what — and it sends the number somewhere by itself, all day, whether or not a man is standing beside it. The man was not reading the mast. He was a few steps away at a flat cleared patch of ground, with a board on it and a ruler and a set of stakes. He was writing down by hand what the automatic mast could not tell him, which was what the snow on the ground was actually doing where he could put a hand on it.

I asked him what it measured. This was not like me; I do not talk to officials at the side of roads.

He told me, and I have forgotten most of it, because it was more than I asked for and it kept coming. He told me what the mast measured, and then what the mast beside it measured, and then what the network of them measured together. He told me how a reading here related to a reading forty kilometres on, and then what the absence of a reading told him when a mast went quiet, which he said was often the most useful thing the network did. A mast going dark in winter was itself information, and you could infer the state of the thing you could no longer see from the shape of the things around it that you still could.

I did not follow the last part, and it has stayed with me.

He wrote his number down while he talked. He did not stop writing to talk and he did not stop talking to write. And I understood, standing there, that the number was going to be written in that book whether I was there or not, whether anyone ever read the book or not. At that pullout, every day, into a season when there would be no cars and no me and no reason, because the writing of it was the thing and not the reading.

There was a second man further along doing something to a culvert.

I did not go and look. I had my own culvert, which was the engine. I stood with my hand flat on the panel over it, which was too hot to keep a hand on and which I kept a hand on anyway, and I watched the needle sit in the red and not move, and for those minutes I was not a man managing a temperature. I was a man at the side of a mountain road in a country where I know nobody, with my family thirty centimetres away behind

glass not knowing, doing the only thing I could think of, which was to keep my hand where the heat was so I would feel it change before the gauge did. My mouth had gone dry in the particular way. I could hear my own pulse. The needle did not move for six of the eleven minutes, and I did not have a thought in my head about arrangements or systems or the good time being real. I had one thought, which was please, in Dutch, to nobody. Then it moved. It moved a needle's width and then a finger's width and then it dropped, and my knees did a thing, and I have not told anybody any of this. Not one of the people having a good time in the vehicle asked why we had stopped, because the stop looked like every other stop, and a view is a view.

Thijs got out at minute nine and asked what would happen if you drove into the runaway lane.

I told him you would stop. Sanne said you would be fine but the truck would be a write-off, and Tess said you would be on the news. All three of us answered at once, with complete confidence, and none of us has ever done it or seen it done. He wrote none of it down. He had stopped believing us by then, which is the correct response, and which I was pleased to see.

The gauge came down and I got back in.

Nobody had noticed there was anything to come down from. Sanne said that was a nice stop. It was a nice stop. Both of those are true and I have stopped expecting the second one to cancel the first.

We went over the top of the pass at a place marked with a sign and a cairn and a monument I did not read, because the

road went down on the far side immediately, and the descent is the part that matters, and the descent was not over.

SNOW SHED 9 · GLACIER

There is a pullout beside the sheds with a sign and a place to leave the vehicle, and my father took it because my mother wanted a photograph and because he takes every pullout now, to let the engine rest. So we were out of the vehicle and on foot, off the road, behind the barrier, which is the only way you would ever be on foot near a thing built for traffic going seventy.

The snow sheds are tunnels with no mountain over them, which is the point of them. It took me about seven minutes standing at the mouth of one to understand that they are not tunnels at all but roofs. They stand out sideways from the slope, so that an avalanche comes down the mountain and goes over the top of the road instead of onto it. The road runs through the dark for two hundred metres in the middle of a bright August afternoon. It does this for the sake of a thing that will not happen until February.

I got it wrong first.

We had come up from Revelstoke that morning, out of the wet dark trees and into a valley that closes right in. My mother said it was the most beautiful road she had ever been on. My father said nothing, because he was driving it and it has a gradient, which is a word he now says the way other people say a swear word.

I thought they were for rockfall, because there is rock above them and rock falls. I said so to my father, who said maybe, in the voice he uses when he does not want to be wrong in front of me but also does not know. Then there was a sign at the next one, a white triangle sliding down a slope with a road underneath, and the picture corrected me before any person did, which is how I learned most things out here.

An avalanche needs somewhere to have come from.

There is a thing that happens to you in a place like that, which is that you start reading the mountain, and I did not know I was doing it until I caught myself. I was looking up at a slope and working out, without being asked to and without wanting to, which way the snow would go if it went, and where it would end up, and whether the road was in the way. The answer to the last one was always yes, because they only built the sheds where the answer was yes.

Once I understood that, I could see the places it comes from. An avalanche path in summer is a stripe going straight up the mountainside, where the trees are small and the same age and a different green from the big dark trees on either side. It is a scar that has healed into a shape. Once I had seen one stripe I could see forty, up both sides of the valley, each one a road-width or wider and pointed at the highway like somebody had drawn them.

There is a museum at the top, at the summit, which we did not go into, because we had spent our looking-at-things energy on the goats.

I keep coming back to what the goats were doing, which

was nothing, on a piece of rock at an angle I could not have stood on, hundreds of metres up. There was no path to it and no reason to be there except that the rock was theirs. They did not look up, any more than the man in the pickup had looked over. There is something about being looked at by forty people and a boy from Utrecht and not caring at all, which I have thought about since and cannot get to the bottom of.

The mountain goats did not care about any of it.

There were three of them on the rock above the eastern shed, white and unbothered, standing on a piece of cliff a person would need equipment and a reason to get to, eating something off the bare stone. There was a line of cars stopped below with everybody pointing telephones up. One pickup with a Parks arrowhead on the door went past all of it without slowing, because a man whose job is the mountain does not stop for the goats any more than my father stops for a canal.

There are avalanche paths above the road that have names, which I learned later, and the names are numbers, painted on small signs at the roadside. A person on a radio in winter can say the number and everybody knows exactly which piece of mountain is about to come down. I did not know there were that many until I started seeing the little numbered signs and could not stop seeing them, and I did not get the counting of them from a sign but from a man, and I will come to the man.

I counted the sheds on the way through and made it seven and my father made it six and we did not resolve it.

The disagreement is still open and I have decided it does not need resolving. One of the seven might have been a bridge,

or two might have been one long one with a gap in the middle where the light came in. The point of a thing is not always its number, which is a sentence I would not have written before this trip and am a little suspicious of now.

The inside of a shed is not like the inside of a tunnel, because a tunnel has mountain on both sides and a shed has mountain on one side and daylight on the other, held up on huge concrete legs. You are driving through a building that is open along one whole wall to a view of the valley dropping away, in the dark, which is a strange thing to do at two in the afternoon and stranger to do slowly.

One shed was closed to traffic for the work, with cones and a truck across the near end, and a crew inside it. That is the only reason I could be inside it, on foot, and I knew that even as I walked in.

They had lights on stands and a generator running and a section of concrete wall marked out with chalk, and a man doing something to the joint between two panels with a tool I did not know. It was summer work on winter equipment, done in August at the one time of year the thing it guards against cannot happen, which is the only time you could safely stand in the road to fix it. I worked that out by myself and was pleased with it, and then heard a man explain it to somebody else in one sentence.

The man with HAND on his jacket was not with the crew.

He was further in, past the lights, where it was dark again, doing something to a steel plate set into the wall at knee height that none of the crew were looking at and that was not marked

with chalk. He had a bar and a bag, and he did the plate and then a bolt further along that I had not noticed was a bolt. Then he walked out the far end into the light without saying anything to the crew, who did not say anything to him, and I do not think what he was doing was the job the crew was there to do.

I asked a woman with a clipboard whether the sheds were ever actually needed.

She said the one we were standing in takes a slide most winters. Then a man standing near her, who had SEEKER on a tag and who I had not been talking to, told me the rest of it, and the rest of it went on for a while.

He did not tell me whether the sheds worked.

He told me where I could find out whether the sheds worked, which was a different thing. He told it completely: the name of the program, the office that runs it, and the difference between the highway sheds and the railway sheds, which are run by two organizations under two sets of rules. He told me which of the two I would have to write to for which kind of answer. He told me that the railway had built the first ones more than a century ago, after a slide that killed dozens of men in a night, and that the road ones came later and are the ones I was standing in. All of it in the shed, in August, to a fourteen-year-old, and I had the strong sense that he would have told it to the wall if the wall had asked.

I did not ski, I said, at one point, thinking it might stop him.

It did not stop him, and he told me the winter permit system anyway, who needs a pass and who does not and where the

backcountry boundary runs and why it runs there and not somewhere else. He told it to a boy from a country with no mountains, who had come to look at a tunnel with no mountain over it. I have thought since that he was not doing it for me at all, and that I had walked into the space where the thing he does happens, and it happened.

I asked my father, later, in the vehicle, why they did not just move the road.

He said you cannot move a road away from a mountain when the reason for the road is to get through the mountains, and that the valley is the only way through for four hundred kilometres. The railway is in the same valley for the same reason. Everything in this country that is not near the coast is near a railway that somebody put through a place like this a hundred years ago and lost men doing it.

I did not know if all of that was true. He said it in the voice he uses for things he has just worked out and is fairly sure of, which is different from the voice he uses for things he actually knows, and I have learned to tell them apart.

The far end of the seventh shed is a rectangle of light with the road going into it.

I walked the closed shed to its far end, out of the dark, with the generator noise behind me and the crew's lights throwing my shadow ahead onto the cold concrete. When I came out at the far mouth the sun was on everything, and the next shed was there two hundred metres on, the live one, with the traffic going into it, a rectangle of dark in the green that I was not going to walk through and had no need to. I could see the

light at the far end of the closed one behind me and the dark mouth of the open one ahead, and my father calling that the photograph was done. I stood in the sun between the two and did not tell anybody why I had stopped.

SHUTTLE 2026-MRV-0619 · MEADOWS IN THE SKY

Sixty per cent of the seats come out at eight in the morning.

Not all of them, only sixty per cent, and the rest went months ago.

Eight in the morning, Pacific Time here, two days before you want to go.

There is a road up the mountain we are not going to drive. The vehicle is seven point three metres. The limit is seven point nine. That is close enough that Dad read the sign twice and said no. So there is a shuttle, from a parking lot at the bottom, and the shuttle needs booking, and the booking opens at eight.

We are two days out. So today is the day.

There is no signal at the campground.

None, not one bar, not at the site or the kiosk or the shower block, not on the picnic table with my arm straight up, and I have now done that in front of people.

Dad said there was a mast at the highway.

Is there ever a mast at the highway? There is never a mast at the highway. Why does he keep saying it? I think it makes him feel better about the map.

The visitor centre has wifi, and that is the plan: drive there, use the wifi, get the seats.

The visitor centre opens at nine.

The seats come out at eight.

I read that twice. I read it to Mum. Mum read it once and went quiet.

So the plan is the pullout.

There is a pullout about four kilometres down the highway where a bar of signal comes and goes, and the man in the next site told us about it like it was where the fish were. Go early, he said. Everybody knows about the pullout.

At 07:52 we are in the pullout.

We, meaning me. I have the fast thumbs. I have the account already logged in and the numbers in a note. And Mum has decided this is a thing I can do. That is new. I am not going to mention it, in case she changes her mind.

Dad drove me down and is standing by the car pretending not to watch.

One bar, then two, then one. Is one enough? I do not know if one is enough.

There are three other cars in the pullout. A person in each, holding a phone up, the same way I am. None of us looks at the others. All of us are here for the same eight o'clock.

07:58.

The screen is loaded. The page is open. I have picked the date. My thumb is on the place where the button will be, on the grey shape of the button before it goes live.

A woman two cars up got out to hold her phone higher. Now she is standing on the concrete barrier at the edge of the pullout. That is exactly what I did on the picnic table. Is

everybody doing this? Everybody is doing this. I do not feel better about mine. I feel less alone about it.

07:59.

08:00.

The button goes live.

I do not remember pressing it. I remember the page changing. A spinner. The spinner going long enough that the woman on the barrier said a word I knew, in a language I did not. Then a seat map. Then four seats together, which I did not expect and grabbed before the map could change its mind. Then a screen that said hold, four minutes fifty-nine, four fifty-eight.

We have seats.

Four of them, on the shuttle at eight-twenty, the day after tomorrow, up the mountain we are not driving. All four of us. I checked twice that it was four, because two would have started a conversation in the vehicle that I did not want to be the cause of.

I did the thing. Nobody helped me. I do not get to say that very often, and I am saying it.

Then I looked up and Dad was already back in the car. He had seen my face through the windshield. He knew. He decided the correct response was to not make it a thing. The campground woman did that with the token. Why do they all do that? I am starting to see it everywhere now.

On the way back he asked, did you get them.

I said obviously.

He laughed. Not at me. Have I made Dad laugh once since we landed? I do not think I have.

The seats are held. The confirmation is in the note. We drive back past the mast that is not there.

ITINERARY REV. 2 · VAN HEESTERS

At seven in the morning the picnic table is cold enough to want a coat, in July. I have wanted the coat every morning since the mountains, and it no longer surprises me.

I am alone. That is the arrangement I have made with the morning. The others sleep, and I sit with the itinerary and a pen and a coffee. For forty minutes nothing is anybody's fault.

Before the itinerary I did nothing for a while, which I will admit to here and to nobody.

There was a bird I could not name, small, brown, working the edge of the site for whatever a bird finds there, unbothered by me. I watched it instead of the list. At home I would have known the bird, or Joost would; we would have said its name, been finished with it. Here I did not know it, could not look it up, no signal. It stayed a bird, unfixed, hopping. I drank the coffee while it was still hot, which I do not do at home, where the coffee goes cold beside a thing I am fixing. Nothing here was mine to fix at seven in the morning. I did not know what to do with my hands. Then I did: I held the cup. A woman holding a warm cup and watching a bird she cannot name. I have not been only that, doing only that, in longer than I can properly say.

The itinerary is laminated.

I had it laminated in June, at a shop near the station. A

document that lives in a vehicle for seventeen days will be rained on, sat on, used as a plate. The reasoning was sound and I stand by it. It also means the sheet cannot take a pen, which I did not think about in June. I am solving that with a notebook, because a plan you cannot amend is not a plan but a photograph of one.

The Jade Lake trail is closed.

It is closed until the snow goes, which is to say it was closed before we left home. Which is to say it has been closed every day the itinerary has said we would walk it, including this one. The road up the mountain opens by viewpoint as the snow melts, and the upper trails open later than the road, and the page says so plainly. It is on page four of the notes I printed and put in the sleeve. I printed those notes. I read those notes. I read them the way you read a thing you have already decided about, which is not reading.

So this morning has a hole in it.

The trail goes up to an alpine lake with snow still on the far side of it in a photograph I found. We were going to take the shuttle to the summit and walk out to it and be down by lunch. The lake is available; the walk to it is not, because the trail past the summit is under snow until it is not, and the snow does not consult the itinerary. The reason is on the page and the reason is sound, and I have read enough of these pages now to know a sound reason when I see one.

I have a notebook and I have made two columns.

The left column is what we lose. The summit walk. The alpine lake. The far snow. A morning I had shaped in my

head since March, from a photograph somebody else took, in a different month, which I now understand I invented.

The right column I expected to leave empty, and did not. We gain the morning. Today becomes a morning with nothing in it, in a place we are already in.

I have looked at the map. There is a lake within walking distance of the campground. I measured the path with the edge of my thumbnail against the scale, which is a thing I know how to do and have not needed to on this trip until now. Two kilometres in, two back, an hour each way for people who stop to look at things, and my family stops to look at things. No road goes to it. No bus goes to it. It takes no booking, because it is simply a lake, at the end of a path, that you walk to.

I have not told anybody about the lake.

I have written it in the right column. I have not put it on the itinerary. Partly the lamination, and partly because I have begun to suspect that putting things on the itinerary is the thing I do instead of the thing itself. Tess has read the itinerary. I know she has, though she has never said so, from a look she gives it. I do not want her to read the day and see a plan. I would rather she arrived at a morning with nothing in it and did not know I shaped it.

There is a version of this trip forming that is not in the folder at all, and it is the better version, and I am the one keeping it out of the folder. Which is either growth or a small breakdown, and at seven in the morning I cannot tell which.

The schedule has been the thing I am good at. It connected the flights and got the vehicle mostly right and booked the

campgrounds before they filled, mostly, and it is not nothing. And I am tired of it in a way I did not expect.

The fourth campground is still wrong.

I have not fixed it. I telephoned at six, the one useful thing about the time difference. Nineteen minutes on hold. Then a young man, kind and quick, who said the amendment would go through, the fee difference would come back, the transaction fee would not, and there was nothing wrong with what I had done, only with the number, and numbers are the easy thing to change. He was right. It is done now. I have left it in the losing column anyway, because it was wrong for six weeks and the record should show it.

At half past seven I heard the vehicle door.

Thijs first, always, then the others. The morning stops being mine and becomes ours. That is the correct order of things and I do not resent it. Though I noted the exact minute it ended, which perhaps I do.

At breakfast I said the morning was open now, that we would stay put and see.

Nobody asked what happened to the glacier. Tess looked at me a second longer than the sentence needed, then reached for the bread. Joost said good, in the voice of a man who has been driving mountains since the Coquihalla and would welcome a morning that is a lake at the end of a path.

I did not tell them about the second column.

The pen goes back in the coat, and the map stays folded, and the coffee is cold, and I drink it anyway because I made it.

REFUND FILE 2026-0212 · 12 FEBRUARY

The relaunch was the twelfth of February.

The launch was meant to be January. January did not happen. What happened in January is not mine to explain. I have read three accounts of it, all internal, none matching. The only fact that survives all three is that the seats did not go on sale on the day the public was told they would.

So the twelfth of February is the day I say sorry.

There is an approved apology. Three sentences. The first acknowledges the delay. The second does not admit a cause. The third gives the caller the real release date. I have said it more times this year than I have said my own name.

The callers on the twelfth are not angry, mostly. The angry ones were in January. The ones who reach me in February have already been angry, at a wall, in a queue that was not moving. They arrive sanded down.

Revelstoke and Glacier went on sale on the sixteenth without incident.

Nobody mentions the sixteenth. A launch that works produces no calls. A thing that produces no calls does not exist in my day. I know the sixteenth happened because I was rostered on it, and the queue was short, and the calls were ordinary. That is the only mark a success leaves here. An ordinary afternoon.

The refund file is not a queue.

A queue moves. This one does not. It is every booking that ended in money going back, sorted by date, and it does not

clear. For every one I close, two more arrive. The old ones stay at the bottom, by date, and the old ones are the interesting ones.

I was working the February layer this morning.

A February refund is usually a cancellation from the first week, before a trip firmed up, by somebody who booked in hope and thought better of it. They are clean. The money goes back. The record closes. The reason code is one of six and almost always the same one.

Then there was the ferry.

It is in the file as a crossing booked on the fourth of February, on a route that connects to nothing else in the booking. The refund has not been claimed. The window is open until the ninth. The booking is real. It has a number, a vessel, a sailing time, and a fare paid and not reclaimed.

The crossing it is booked on did not run.

I do not mean it was cancelled. I mean the sailing in the record is not a sailing the operator ran that week, on that route, at that time. I checked it against the operator's own schedule, because the time looked wrong. The time is wrong. The booking exists anyway. Confirmed, paid, sitting in a file, attached to a family that also booked nine campgrounds and a shuttle and a pass.

I have written it up. One line. The sailing does not reconcile against the operator schedule; refund the fare in full at the window. That is true. It is the correct action. It closes the thing.

I have not written the other sentence, which is that I do not understand how the booking was made. There is no field for

that sentence. There is a field for what should happen and I have filled it in.

The Chaos-Weaver took a refund call while I was on the ferry line.

I heard the shape of it. A woman wanting to cancel the trip, all of it, upset. The kind of call that runs twenty minutes and ends in tears and a full refund and nothing solved. He did not run it that way.

He asked her which single day she was really cancelling.

There is no such question in a refund flow. A refund is all or nothing. A booking, a reason code, a sum. But he asked it. It turned out she was cancelling because of one day, a booking that had gone wrong in the middle, and the wrongness had spread until the trip felt ruined and had to go.

He fixed the one day. I do not know how. The trip stayed booked.

His refund numbers are the lowest on the floor. The reporting reads that as a man who will not process refunds, and he has been spoken to about it. The truth is the opposite. The refunds do not need processing because the trips do not need cancelling. There is no line on the report for a trip saved by a question that is not in the script.

If he stopped to explain how he does it, he could not do it. I believe that. I have watched him reach for it deliberately on a slow afternoon and miss.

I filed the ferry and read the apology to the next caller for the ninetieth time, unchanged.

POSITION 17 · GLACIER

Seventeen pads. I do them in order.

A pad is concrete. It carries a gun in winter. In August it carries nothing. The job is the concrete, the drainage, the bolts.

Pad one. Level. Drains clear. Bolts sound.

Pad two. The same.

Pad three. A bolt at half torque. I set it. I note it.

Pad four. Level. Drains clear.

I record each one on the tablet. A number, a date, three conditions. The form is short. The form has been short for years.

The guns are not here. They come in November and go in April. What is here in August is the concrete they stand on and the mountain they point at.

The mountain does not move.

There are a hundred and thirty-five paths above this road. There are two hundred and seventy registered targets. Each has a number. Each number is painted on a marker at the roadside. In August they are stripes of small trees. In February they are the job.

The paths do not change between now and then. A path is where the snow comes down. The snow comes down where it has always come down.

Pad nine is at the pullout at kilometre seventy-four.

There is a vehicle in the corner of it. White, rented, large, parked across the line, the kind a family drives. It has been there twenty minutes. The driver stands with a hand on the

engine cover. I do the pad.

Pad nine. Level. One drain slow. I note the drain.

The programme is the largest of its kind. Mobile guns, fixed positions, a road that carries a nation's freight, closed and opened by decision, all winter, on the reading.

In August it is a man with a tablet and a weed growing in the joint of pad nine.

The Allfather is at the office when I bring the tablet in.

He is not on the avalanche side. He signs. He has signed the seasonal readiness submission already, which is the document I am filling the pads in for, and which is not due until the fifteenth of September, and which cannot be complete until the pads are done, and the pads are not done, and the signature is on it.

I have seen this before and I have stopped raising it.

The submission goes up in September. It carries a recommendation. The recommendation requires a piece of information that is not yet in it, which is the state of the seventeen pads, which is on my tablet and not yet in the file.

The signature does not wait for the tablet.

I asked once, in my first year, how a thing gets signed before it is finished. A colleague told me the signature was valid. He told me it had never been on a submission that turned out wrong. He asked me what I was actually asking.

I was asking that the signature come after the work.

It comes when it comes. The submission will be complete on the fourteenth of September and correct and signed, and the signature was on it in August, and both of those are true.

Pad ten. Level. Drains clear. Bolts sound.

Pad eleven. The same.

Pad twelve. Level. Bolts sound.

Pad thirteen. A crack in the slab, hairline, mapped a year ago, no wider. I photograph it. I note no change.

The white vehicle was gone before I finished pad thirteen. I did not see it leave. The pullout was empty when I looked up, and the drain on nine is on the list for the crew, who will come in the third week, if the rating holds.

Seventeen pads. I did them in order. I recorded pad seventeen, and closed the tablet, and drove back down the road the snow will close in November.

PART IV

THE LOTTERY

FIRE PERMIT 3311-B · LAKE LOUISE

There was a cage of split wood by the kiosk with a slot for coins and a sign that said the wood was included, which I did not understand, because included is a word for breakfast and not for wood. My father read it twice and then told me to take an armful, and I took an armful. It was the best thing that had happened to me since the aquarium in the airport: a cage of dry split birch, already paid for, that I could carry away in both arms across a campground at ten in the morning.

I did not know why it made me happy and I still do not. It was just wood.

My father has wanted a fire since before we left home. I know it the way you know a thing about a parent that they have not said, from the way he stops at the ring on every site before he stops at anything else, and crouches at it, and turns over the old ash with a stick, and says nothing. He has priced a

fire in his head on every site since the ferry, the wood and the permit and the hour of the evening it would take, and he has never once said the word out loud, because to say it would be to want it, and my father does not let himself be seen wanting a thing he might not get. But he let me take the wood, and he let me buy the permit, and I understand now that the wood and the permit were his fire, being assembled by me because he could not let himself assemble it, and that this is a thing fathers do that I am only now old enough to catch.

There is a version of me at home who has never carried firewood anywhere, because at home a fire is a thing behind glass that turns on with a switch. This wood had bark on it and a weight to it and a smell, and I carried it the way you carry something you are afraid of dropping.

There was a man at the water standpipe by the wood cage, in the green Parks clothes, with a tag that said HAND, and he had the tap in pieces on a cloth on the ground and was doing something to the inside of it while I stacked my armful, and by the time I had my wood criss-crossed at the bottom the way I had seen a man on the next site do it, so the air gets in, which nobody taught me and I had simply watched, the standpipe man had the tap back together and the water running and was gone to something else, and I never saw him finish because there was no finish to see, only the tap working when it had not been working, and nobody at the standpipe who had watched him do it.

The permit was a separate thing and my father let me do it.
There is a hut with a counter and a person behind it whose

tag says CHAOS-WEAVER, which I read while I was waiting and did not understand. You say you would like a fire permit. The person asks which site. I had my passport out and my father's card and all of the speech ready, and she did not need any of it, she asked the site number and typed it and had the slip printing before I had finished reaching for the things I had brought, and it cost eight dollars and eighty cents, and none of the speech I had rehearsed was required, and she was already looking past me at the next person before the slip was dry. That is all it is. But I had rehearsed it in my head in the line, all of it, the way you rehearse a thing in a language you are not sure of. Then it happened exactly as I had rehearsed it and was over in a minute, and I came out holding the slip, and my father was looking at the mountains and did not ask to see it, which was the point.

He let me do it, which he has not done with anything official on this trip, and I think it was because it was under nine dollars and in my name. There is a thing that happens where a small enough amount of money becomes a lesson instead of a purchase. This was that, and I knew it was that even while it was happening, and did it anyway because I wanted the permit.

It has my name on it. Thijs van Heesters, printed by a machine, on a document, the first document that has ever had my name on it and not my father's above it. I have it folded in the map pocket, and I am aware of it there the way you are aware of a splinter, except good.

We walked to the lake before noon, the four of us, which does not happen often, because Tess walks ahead and I walk

behind and my parents walk at the speed of my mother reading a sign, so that we are usually a family strung out over forty metres of path pretending to be together. But there was one path and it was short and we were on it together, and my mother did not have the itinerary out, which I noticed and did not mention.

The lake is a colour I did not believe.

I will try to be accurate about this, because at home if you say a lake was turquoise everybody assumes you mean grey with a nice light on it. This was not that. This was the colour of the pool chemicals before you put them in the pool, a blue-green that a lake has no business being. I stood at the edge of it and decided it was a trick, a dye, a thing they did for the visitors, until the warden told me about the rock flour.

The rock flour is real and I made her prove it.

She said the glaciers grind the rock to a powder finer than sand. The powder hangs in the water and does not sink, and it is the hanging powder that throws the colour back. I said that sounded like something you tell tourists. Instead of taking it badly she filled a clear cup from the lake and held it up, and it was faintly cloudy, not blue at all, just water with the faintest smoke of grey in it. She said the blue is the lake's and not the water's, and you cannot carry the blue away in a cup, and I have thought about that more than I have thought about most things.

There was a warden at the campground when we got back, going site to site with a radio and a clipboard and a name tag that said CONSCIENCE-KEEPER, and she was not hurrying. She

stopped at each site whether or not anybody was on it, reading the ring and the picnic table and moving on, and she reached us at about five to twelve, which I know because I had started watching her come.

Then it was noon, and the fire ended, in three parks at once.

I did not see it happen, because a ban is not a thing you can see happening. It is a time on a clock and then a different rule on the other side of the time. The warden's radio said something and she looked at her watch and told us that as of this moment there was a fire prohibition in effect across the field unit, which was here and two other parks I could not see from where I stood.

She explained it and she was very exact.

No open flame, no wood fire, no charcoal, no briquette, nothing that produces an ember that can leave the ring. I listened to all of it, because I had just stacked the wood and had a stake in the list. At the end of it there was one thing still allowed, which was a propane fire pit with a certification mark on it, CSA or UL. An enclosed flame you can turn off, because a flame you can turn off cannot get away from you, and a flame with a stamp on it has been tested to prove it.

We do not own a propane fire pit.

She explained the propane fire pit thoroughly, how it is permitted, why it is permitted, where you may use it and where you may not. My father listened to all of it with his hands in his pockets, and I watched him listen. I have learned to tell when my father is being told about a thing he hoped for and is not going to have, and he was being told about it now. He said

thank you, because there was nothing else to say and he is not a man who makes a warden feel bad about a rule.

Then she said the number. I was waiting for it.

Twenty-five thousand dollars, she said, the way you would say a bus leaves at quarter past. Not as a threat and not even as a warning, just the figure that sits on the other side of the rule, the size of the thing if the thing is broken. She said it, and then she said have a good evening, and she meant it, and she went to the next site to say the same list to the next family with the same exactness.

The permit is still valid. I checked it twice.

It is valid until midnight. It has my name on it and it is valid until midnight and it permits nothing, because the thing it permits is the thing that is now prohibited. Both of those are true at once, the permit valid and the fire forbidden. Nobody made a mistake anywhere in the sequence that produced them.

I did not buy the permit wrong. The lake did not turn its colour wrong. The ban did not come at the wrong time. Each thing was correct and on time and in order, and the result is a boy with a valid fire permit and a stack of dry wood and a fire ring, at a distance from each other that is exactly the width of a rule that arrived at noon.

There is a thing I keep coming back to, which is that everybody in the sequence did their job correctly and the result is a punishment nobody chose, the wood dry and the permit valid and the ring cold, and no single person to be cross with, because the warden was right and the rules were right and my father was right to want the fire and right not to light it, and

rightness stacked on rightness produced a boy standing over wood he cannot burn.

The wood is stacked by the ring, criss-crossed at the bottom, dry, and it will still be there in the morning, and we will not have burned it. My father has not looked at it since noon and I have looked at nothing else.

SHUTTLE 2026-LL-40 · VAN HEESTERS, S.

The seats release in two tranches, which I did not know until it mattered.

I have booked many things for this trip. Flights, ferries, campgrounds, a vehicle, a pass. Nine reservations, four amendments, one that was wrong for six weeks. I have a system for it, a folder and a sleeve and a coloured tab per park, and the system has held. This shuttle is the smallest thing in the folder and it has taught me the most.

Forty per cent at launch, in the spring, when we were still at home. I was still treating the trip as a spreadsheet then. The other sixty at eight o'clock, two days before travel, for the people who did not get the first forty. I was one of the people who did not get the first forty. I have made my peace with the eight o'clock. Tess is good at the eight o'clock. This is the second time I have handed her a thing at that hour and watched it work.

The parking is free and it is eleven kilometres from the place you cannot park.

That is the design. It is a good one. A large free lot at a ski

hill, empty in July. A fleet of buses. A lake at the far end with no cars at it. The cars stay at the hill, in the free lot, and the people go on without them. I understood it at once, which is happening more often now, the understanding, as though the country is teaching me its grammar one sign at a time.

The fee is three dollars and fifty cents.

The fee is not refundable, although the fare is, which is a distinction I read twice. If you cancel, they refund the fare and not the fee. The fare is the thing you did not use. The fee is the work of booking it, which was done whether you travelled or not. It is correct. It is three dollars and fifty cents. It costs more than three dollars and fifty cents to explain, and a woman at the ticket window explained it to me anyway, fully, who did not have to.

There was a queue at the window, six deep, and it moved at the speed of a person being genuinely helped, which is slower than the speed of a person being processed. I minded, and then I reached the front and stopped minding, because the slowness was the helping and I had been the beneficiary of the slowness for the six minutes I was in the queue without knowing it.

There were two buses and one had not come. The queue for the missing bus had begun to tangle with the queue for the present one. Two lines becoming a crowd. A man in a hi-vis vest with a tag that said CHAOS-WEAVER walked into the middle of it and did nothing.

That was my first thought. I will set it down as I had it, because it is not a kind thought and I did not correct it. He stood there. He did not form the lines back up, which is the

obvious thing, the thing any competent person does. I decided in the two seconds I watched him that he was one of those men who is given a vest and a door and no ability. That the tangle would be his fault and somebody else's problem. I was already looking for who I would speak to about it.

Then he asked one question, which was who was on the eight-forty. The crowd sorted itself around the question, the eight-forty people to one side, and the tangle was gone. He had not touched anybody or raised his voice. He had done in one sentence the thing I would have done in ten minutes of herding. He went back to the door before I had finished being wrong about him. I did not go and tell him I had been wrong, because he did not know I had been. My being wrong was mine to carry and not his to absolve.

At the door was a woman with a tag that said CONSCIENCE-KEEPER, counting people onto the bus against a number on a clipboard. When the bus was full she stopped the line with one hand, not unkindly. She told the next family the bus takes fifty-two, and there were fifty-two on it. The penalty for standing in the aisle past the line falls on the driver's licence, she said, not a figure but the licence itself. The family stepped back. She did not apologise for the rule and did not soften it, and the next bus was twenty minutes.

Back at the window, the woman who had explained the fee was still there, and her name tag said COMPANION.

I have the ticket, the receipt and the confirmation, three documents for one journey of six minutes. I put them in the sleeve in order. She watched me do it. She said the confirmation

was the one they would ask for, the receipt the one I would want later. She was right on both counts. I have thought since that she had seen me be the kind of person who keeps all three, and was sorting them for me before I asked.

Then she did a thing I have been turning over since.

She said the shower block at our campground had the far tap running cold and the near one running hot, the reverse of the sign, and that I should tell the two children so they did not start the day with a shock. I had not told her which campground we were at. I had not mentioned the children. She said it the way you remind a friend of a thing, in passing, already looking at the next person in the line. By the time I thought to ask how she knew, she was three people on, and it would have been strange to go back.

She corrected three things for me and I had asked about none of them.

The fee, which I had not queried. The order of the documents, which I had not raised. The taps, which I could not have known to ask. Three things, each small, each exactly the thing I would have wanted and not asked for. A person cannot do that by being pleasant. A person can only do that by having watched. Three corrections, delivered warmly and in passing. She did not appear to notice she had done any of them. It was the way a person who is good at a thing stops noticing the thing they are good at. I have been the recipient of a lot of correct service in this country. This was not that. This was somebody keeping track of me.

There was a closure notice on the board by the window.

A boardwalk section in the next park over, closed, with a date and a file number. I read it, because I read boards now. I copied the file number into the notebook, because the number was tidy and I like a tidy number. I did not act on it, because there was nothing to act on. It was a boardwalk in a park we were not going to, closed for a reason the board did not give.

I will not need that number. I copied it anyway.

That is the version of me this trip is producing. A woman who copies a closure notice for a boardwalk she will never walk, into a notebook, at a ticket window, while a woman named for company sorts her documents and warns her about the taps. I put the pen back in the coat. The pen lives in the coat now. That is one thing on this trip that has found its place and stayed in it.

ASSET 11402-C · BOARDWALK · YOHO

The rot was found in June, during the scheduled inspection, in three stringers and eleven deck boards, at the far end where the boardwalk crosses the wet ground that is the reason the boardwalk exists.

Materials came in July, on a Tuesday, barrowed in from the trailhead one load at a time, because there is no vehicle access to that place and there is not meant to be, the point of the boardwalk being to put people across the wet ground without a road. Cedar for the deck, pressure-treated for the stringers, galvanized fasteners, gravel for the approach. The gravel came the same way, by barrow, forty loads, which a seasonal named

Devon counted because counting them was better than not counting them.

The crew is four. Two seasonal, myself, and one on rotation from the Kootenay side who knows stringers.

Devon is nineteen and in a second season and will not be back for a third, because Devon is going to be an engineer, which Devon mentions in the way people mention the life they are leaving a job for. The other seasonal, Priya, is in a first season and says less and is better with a driver. The Kootenay man's tag says HAND and everyone calls him that, and he has done this for long enough that he no longer says how long, and he is the one who cut the plank, and I will come to the plank.

We started at seven each morning, before the heat, which in the final stretch of July arrives by nine and makes the treated lumber too hot to hold by eleven.

The sequence does not vary. You set the stringers, you lay the deck, you edge it, you fasten it, and each step waits on the one before it, and there is no arguing with the order because the order is the structure. We set the stringers on the Monday. We laid deck Monday and Tuesday. The edging is Wednesday work.

There is a rhythm to a deck that you learn in your hands before your head, the reach for the board, the seat of it against the stringer, the two screws, the reach for the next, and by the second morning the four of us were in it, not talking, the drivers going in a rough round like a clock with four hands. I have built enough of these to know the rhythm is the work being done correctly. A crew that is talking is a crew that has stopped.

The plank that finished the north run was cut to length without being measured.

The Hand cut it. He did not draw a line and he did not run a tape, he looked at the gap and cut the plank and it went down into the gap with the two-millimetre margin you leave for swelling, and nobody remarked on it, because the edging still had to go on and a plank that fits is a plank that fits. I have watched people measure twice and cut wrong. I have not before watched somebody not measure and cut right. I entered it in the log as deck complete, north run, because that is what it was.

We had one delay on the Tuesday that was nobody's fault and cost an hour. A hiker came through, the one hiker of the day, and needed to cross, and the deck was open, and so the work stopped and a plank was laid as a temporary bridge and the hiker was walked across by Priya and the plank taken up again, an hour gone, for one person who thanked us and meant it. That is the job in a place with one path. You do not tell the path it is closed. You carry the person across your work and go back to the work.

There is a question of which field unit signs for the work.

Lake Louise, Yoho and Kootenay are one field unit, administered together, and Jasper is another, and this is an ordinary fact that becomes a live fact only when a form asks for the signature of the field unit manager and there are two people who could be meant. The materials were ordered against the Yoho budget. The Kootenay man is on the Yoho job. The form wants one name. Devon has a tag that says SEEKER, which nobody remarks on,

and he spent a genuine portion of Tuesday's lunch establishing which name the form wanted, not by knowing it but by naming the instrument that would say, the signing authority schedule and the office that holds it and the section number where the two field units are drawn apart. He does not decide which name. He names where the deciding is written down. A form that does not proceed is a job that does not close, and he is the one who finds the road to making it proceed.

The signature they need belongs to somebody who is, this week, at a meeting about signatures.

I am aware of how that reads. It reads as the kind of thing people say about an organization to be funny about it, the manager at a meeting about the thing the meeting is preventing. It is also simply true, and not funny from inside it. The meeting is about a new signing authority matrix that will, when it is finished, make it clearer which of the two field unit managers signs for a job like this one. Until that meeting concludes the old ambiguity stands, and the job waits inside the old ambiguity for the meeting about ending it to end.

I entered the plank in the log as deck complete, north run, because that is what it was. The log has a field for what was done and none for how strange it was that it was done, and I have kept enough logs to know the strangeness does not survive the entry, and that in six years I will read deck complete, north run, and remember nothing about the man who looked at a gap and cut a board to fit it without measuring anything.

The rating went to extreme on the twenty-ninth.

The saw is a spark-producing tool. Extreme is the rating at

which spark-producing tools stop, not as a matter of preference but as a matter of the same prohibition that governs the fires in the campgrounds forty kilometres away, and the edging is fastened with a saw and a driver, and the driver is fine and the saw is not. The edging did not get done on the Wednesday. It will not get done until the rating drops. The call comes from the duty officer whose tag says CONSCIENCE-KEEPER, who has never seen this boardwalk and does not need to. She does not tell us to be careful and she does not tell us the risk. She tells us the rating is extreme and that spark tools stop at extreme, which is not advice and not a warning but the line itself, stated, and then she is off the radio. The rating is the rating everywhere in the field unit at once.

I have watched a rating climb before. It goes high, then extreme, then the tools that make sparks go in the truck. The interesting thing is that nothing looks different. The forest looks the same at extreme as it does at high. The danger is not in the look of the day but in a number computed from the moisture in the wood and the wind and the days since rain. The number is right. I have learned to trust a number I cannot see the reason for over a day that looks fine, because the day that looks fine is the day the fires start.

So the section is finished and not signed off, which is not the same as unfinished.

Unfinished is a thing with work left in it. This has no work left in it that the rating permits. The deck is down, the north run complete, the plank that was not measured bearing weight like every plank around it, and the edging is stacked on the

finished deck under a tarp, cut to length, waiting for a day the saw is allowed to make the cuts that remain. The gap between finished and signed off is exactly the width of a fire rating and a manager in a meeting, and both of those will resolve, and neither has resolved yet.

The tarp went on the edging on the Wednesday evening, weighted at the corners with the offcuts, because a tarp not weighted is a tarp in a tree by morning. The Hand weighted it without being asked, the way he cut the plank without being asked. Then he drove back to Kootenay, because his rotation was done, and the job he had come for was done except for the part the rating would not permit. He did not say goodbye to the seasonals so much as put his tools in his truck and become, between one minute and the next, not there.

I put a closure notice on it.

The section is safe to stand on and not safe to leave open to the public with the edging off, so it closes, and the closure goes on the asset record and onto the boards at the trailheads and the shuttle depots, a file number and a date and no reason, because the reason is four separate true things and a board is not the place for four things. Somebody will read that notice who has no idea that a plank was cut without a tape or that two seasonals gave a lunch to a signature. They will read that a boardwalk is closed. That is all the board is for.

The plank is down. The section is closed. The tarp is on the edging, and the edging is cut, and the saw is in the truck with the rating written on the case where somebody wrote it in marker in a previous year, extreme, in case anybody forgot

what extreme meant.

VIEWPOINT 93-A · LOWER SPIRAL · FIELD

There is a mountain with a hole in it, and a parking lot, and a rail, and a panel that explains the hole. I read the panel before I looked at the hole, which Tess has told me is the wrong order, and which I do not intend to change at my age.

The hole is a tunnel, and there are two of them, and they are the reason the railway exists here at all. The story on the panel is the best thing I have read on this trip, because it is a story about a grade. A grade is a thing I now understand in my body and not only in my head.

In 1884 they built the line straight down the valley. Straight down meant four and a half per cent. That is a number that means nothing until you have driven eight per cent in a vehicle that is a house, and then it means everything. Four and a half per cent on a railway with the brakes of 1884 was not a grade but a weapon.

The trains ran away. That is not a figure of speech.

The very first construction train to go down the Big Hill ran away and into the Kicking Horse River, and three men were killed, before the line had even carried a paying passenger. Loaded trains came down faster than they could be stopped, which is the plain mechanical fact under all of it. They put speed limits on it, six miles an hour going down, and stationed extra engines at the bottom whose only job was to hold trains back. It was still the most dangerous piece of main line in the

country. Everybody who ran it knew that, and ran it anyway, for twenty-five years, because there was no other way through and the country on both ends needed the through. The railway's answer was a thing I have been thinking about since I read it, which was safety switches.

A safety switch is a set of points that is set, by default, to derail the train. You understand that correctly. The default position of the switch sent the train off the rails and into a gravel track climbing the hillside. A man had to actively decide, for each train, that it was under control and could go on. If he did nothing, the train derailed on purpose, because a derailment you choose is smaller than the one you do not.

I stood at the rail and thought about the man whose job was the switch. He is the reason I read the panel twice.

Then in 1909 an engineer named Schwitzer solved it properly, and the solution is the two holes in the mountain. He built two spiral tunnels, one in each of two mountains, that turn the train back under itself. By doing that he made the line longer, deliberately longer, so that the same drop in height was spread over more track. More track under the same drop is a gentler grade, and the grade came down from four and a half to two point two.

He made the railway longer on purpose to make it safer. I have read that sentence four times and it does not stop being a good sentence.

The panel cannot show you the tunnels, because they are inside the mountains, and this is the honest problem of the viewpoint. The achievement is invisible by its nature: a hole

you cannot see the inside of, a length you cannot perceive because it is folded into rock. So the panel shows a diagram, a corkscrew drawn in white on a photograph of a mountain that looks, to the eye, like an ordinary mountain with a train going into it.

There is a second panel about the men who built the tunnels, the drilling crews, working from both ends of each spiral toward a middle they had to meet inside solid rock, with the surveying of 1909, and meeting it, the two headings coming together inside the mountain five centimetres off the mark. I read that panel too. I read every panel. My family has gone quiet in the particular way that means they are waiting for me to finish reading the panels, and I have learned to feel that quiet on the back of my neck, and to read faster, and to pretend I was finished anyway.

You wait for a train. That is the actual activity here.

The activity is standing at a rail waiting for a train to come out of one hole and, some minutes later and at a different height, go into another. There is no schedule on the panel, because freight does not run to a panel. So you wait. I decided we would wait, and I did not put a limit on it.

Tess asked how long we would wait. I said as long as it takes.

I heard myself say it and I heard how it sounded, which was like a father being difficult, and it was not that, or it was not only that. I meant it in the exact sense. I did not know how long it would take, and I had decided the not-knowing was acceptable. That is a thing I have not been able to decide about

anything else on this trip, where the not-knowing has been the enemy from the start.

Thijs counted the minutes because Thijs counts things. Sanne read the panel, all of it, twice, because Sanne reads panels. Tess looked at the hole and then at me and then at the hole.

A family at a rail waiting for a thing that is not scheduled is a small test of a family. There is a point, somewhere around minute fifteen, where the thing had better come, and it did not come at minute fifteen, and we went past it, into the part of the waiting where somebody usually says we should go. Nobody said we should go. I do not know if that was for my sake or the train's, and I did not ask, because asking would have used up the thing I was grateful for.

Forty minutes. I will be honest that forty minutes at a rail is a long time with three people who did not choose the rail, and that at minute twenty-five I began to construct, privately, the sentence I would say if no train came, the sentence that would make the waiting have been worth it regardless, and I never had to say the sentence.

At minute thirty-eight I stopped constructing the sentence, because I heard it before I saw it. You hear a freight in a valley like that before there is anything to see, a sound that is not quite a sound yet, a pressure, and then a horn a long way off and above us, higher than a train has any business being.

At minute forty a train came out of the upper portal.

It came out of the hole in the top mountain, going one way, a long freight with three engines and more cars than Thijs could

count in the time. Then it went along and curved and went into the lower hole going what looked like the other way, the same train, lower now, threading the mountain the way the diagram promised. It took whole minutes to do it, and nobody in my family said a word while it did.

Tess put her phone away before it finished. I saw her do it. She stopped recording the train and just watched it, which is a thing I have wanted to teach her for years and never found the words for. A freight train did it in four minutes, in a place neither of us will come back to.

The train went into the lower portal and the mountain took it, and the valley was quiet again. We got back in the vehicle, and nobody mentioned it, because mentioning some things diminishes them, and my family knows which ones without being told.

SHUTTLE 2026-ML-1147 · SEAT 22

You cannot drive to Moraine Lake.

Not since 2023. They closed the road to cars. Too many cars, not enough lake.

So there is a shuttle. Of course there is. Is there anything here you can just walk up to?

There is a booking that opens at eight and is gone by four minutes past, for the good times, and a standby queue for the rest, and a lot at a ski hill where you leave the car you were not allowed to bring. We did the standby. We are good at queues now.

The bus is fifteen minutes. The driver does not narrate. I notice now when they do not narrate. I prefer it. Is that a thing you can get used to, being left alone?

There are four staff at the little building at the bottom. I read their tags now.

One checks tickets. Her tag says SEEKER. Somebody asks where the bathroom is. She does not say. She says where the sign is that says where it is. Not the same. Somehow more.

One answers a question about a bear. His tag says CHAOS-WEAVER. The question is long and worried. He cuts across it with one sentence that is in no script and is exactly right. The worried person stops being worried. He is already onto the next.

One is doing something to a bin. Her tag says COMPANION. She looks up at a woman in the queue and says the name of the woman's child, who is not there. The woman goes still. How did she know? Nobody else saw it.

One is standing where a path splits, pointing. Just pointing. All day, at the fork. Her tag says CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. She is not pointing to be kind. She is pointing so nobody can say they were not told.

None of them is doing the thing the queue came for. The thing the queue came for is not a thing a person does. It is a rock.

The rock is called the Rockpile. That is its actual name.

It is a heap of boulders at the end of the lake and you climb it and from the top you see the thing. Everybody climbs it. There is a path up the rock worn pale by everybody, and a rail, and a

sign about not going past the rail, and people past the rail.

Then you are at the top and there is the lake.

I will try to say it plainly. The water is not a colour water is. It is a blue-green that a lake has no business being. In front of me. Ten mountains behind it, in the rain. How is that a real colour?

It is raining. Nobody cares that it is raining.

There are maybe three hundred people on the Rockpile. Every one has a phone up. Every phone points at the same lake, from the same rock, at the same angle. Is there another angle? There is not. The rock decides the angle. Three hundred people are taking one photograph.

I take the photograph.

Did I decide to? I did not decide to. My phone was up before I chose it, the same as everybody, and I took the same photograph as three hundred strangers and it is on my phone now, identical to theirs, and I am not sorry I took it.

A boy near me asks his mother, is it real.

She says of course it is real. He says it does not look real. He is right. It does not look real. There is a sign at the bottom that says this exact view was on the old Canadian twenty-dollar bill, for years, in millions of pockets. So this is a place that looks like money. Or money that looked like this place. Is that not the wrong way round? It made my head hurt on the rock in the rain.

Millions of people carried this in a pocket and never came. That is the thing I cannot get past. It was money. You do not look at money. You spend it and it goes, and the picture on it

is the picture you look at least in the world, and it was this, this exact rock and lake and rain, folded in wallets, ignored, for years.

I will not ignore it. I am standing on the actual rock. But I am also taking the photograph everybody takes, which is the picture off the money, so maybe I am ignoring it too, in a newer way.

That is the strange thing. I cannot get to the end of it. The picture came first, for me, before the place. The place looks like the picture. I took the picture. Now the picture I took is the same as the one that was already everywhere, and the lake does not care, and the rain does not care, and the four staff at the bottom are still doing four things, and none of them is this.

I climb back down the Rockpile. The photograph is taken, and everybody else's photograph is taken, and the rain keeps on.

FILE MC-2026-05502

The enquiry is correct on every point, which is what makes it work.

A member of the public has written to ask how enforcement is handled when a fire prohibition takes effect during the validity of a permit already issued. He has read the regulations. He cites them. He has found the seam I would have found in his place, which is that the permit and the prohibition are issued under different instruments, by different authorities, and nothing in either instrument mentions the other. He would like

to know which one governs.

He is right that there is a seam. He is wrong that it is a problem.

I took the enforcement part of it to the Conscience-Keeper, whose name tag says that and who handles the penalty side. She did not soften it and did not sharpen it. She told me the figure for lighting a fire under a prohibition, which is twenty-five thousand dollars. She told it the way she tells everyone everything, as the number that sits on the far side of the rule and not as a threat, and then she went back to what she was doing. She does not forgive and she does not warn. She states the figure and stops. That is all of her contribution to it, and it is exactly enough.

The answer is not in my knowledge. I will be precise about that, because it is the part people do not believe. I do not answer him from what I know; I answer him from the archive, because the archive is what the Agency has actually said. What I know is only what I remember of it. The two are not the same, and only one of them can be cited back.

The bulletin archive holds every operational bulletin issued this season.

Each has a number, an effective date and time, an issuing office, and, where applicable, the number of the bulletin it amends or that amends it. They are in order. They do not editorialise. A bulletin says what became true and when it became true. It does not say whether that was wise, and it does not refer to the permits that were valid when it landed, because a bulletin is not aware of permits, the way a tide is not aware

of the boats.

The prohibition is Bulletin 2026-114, effective the thirtieth of July at twelve hundred.

I read it in the archive rather than from memory, though I remember it, because the version in my memory has softened at the edges and the version in the file has not. It prohibits open fire across the three parks of the field unit. It is two paragraphs. It took effect at noon and it is still in effect and the file will tell me the hour it lifts on the day it lifts, and not before, because the file does not speculate.

There is a column in the day's record for permits issued.

The thirtieth shows a number of fire permits issued that morning, before noon, each valid to midnight, each rendered inert at twelve hundred by 2026-114, and the column totals them without comment, because a total is not a comment. One of the numbers in that column is a permit issued at Lake Louise to a party whose name is given as van Heesters. It sits in the list between two other numbers, and nothing distinguishes it, and I would not have noticed it if I were not the kind of person who reads every line of a column before citing the total.

It permitted a fire until midnight. There was no fire after noon. Both true, and the file holds both without strain.

There is a second thing in the archive that the correspondent has not asked about and I will not raise.

Bulletin 2026-114 was amended at fifteen hundred the same day by 2026-114-A, which corrects a single word. The correction is to a word that does not appear in the original as posted. That means the original was itself corrected between

drafting and posting, and the amendment corrects the draft the public never saw. Both the original and the amendment are now posted, one above the other, both current, both correct, describing a difference the reader cannot detect because one side of it was never public.

I did not create that situation and I cannot resolve it and it is not mine to resolve. It is in the file. The file is complete.

I draft the reply from the bulletins and not from my account of them.

The reply tells the correspondent that the prohibition governs. It cites 2026-114 by number and effective time. It states that permits issued before that time remain validly issued and confer no authority to do the prohibited thing, and that this is not a conflict but a sequence. It agrees with him that there is a seam. It declines his invitation to call the seam a fault. It is four sentences. It is correct because the bulletins are correct and I have only arranged them.

There are, on paper, two officers entitled to approve outgoing correspondence in this office. The field in the archive is not signed by either of them. It is signed by the Allfather, whose name tag says it and whom nobody remarks on, and who is not on the list of two.

He signs in volume, ahead of the work, so that the approval is on the file before the file is finished. I stopped finding that strange in my first month. He does not read the letters. He does not need to and he does not pretend to. He is available to sign, always, before the thing exists to be signed. The signature is never wrong, which is a different property from the signature

being checked, and it is a different property again from the signature being authorised, which on paper it is not.

I have raised this once, in my first year, and was told the approval was valid, and that it had never been on a letter that turned out wrong. The reply goes out approved by a mark that belongs to none of the people entitled to make it. The correspondent will receive a correct answer, approved, on time, and the approval will be the least true and most settled thing in the exchange.

The reply is sent. The file closes. The column still totals the permits. One of them is still a permit for a fire that could not be lit, issued correctly, to a family I will never meet, filed between two numbers, flat.

PART V

THE TOWNSITE

OVERFLOW LOT · STALL 118

I drove eight hundred kilometres to be defeated by the final four hundred metres.

The town is laid out for people who walk. I understood that in theory before I arrived and understood it in my hands about ninety seconds after, when the first street I turned onto had cars parked both sides. The width between them was a width a normal car takes at a crawl and a vehicle of seven point three metres does not take at all, so that I reversed out of it with a man in a window watching me, which I have decided not to think about.

I made two circuits of the centre before I accepted the thing I had known since the highway.

I had known it since the highway because the signs told me, overflow parking with an arrow, oversized vehicles with an arrow. I had read the signs and hoped they were not for me,

which is not like me, and which is what a town does to a man who wants to park on the street like a person. They were for me. Everything with an arrow was for me. The overflow lot is where the vehicle was always going and I spent two circuits pretending otherwise.

The lot is at the edge, of course, because that is where you put the big ones, away from the walking.

There is a bridge on the way in that I could not account for. A bridge over the highway, wide, with trees growing on it, full-grown trees and grass and what looked like a path, and no road on it. A bridge built for no vehicle at all, and I looked at it twice and did not ask anybody what it was, because there was nobody to ask, and because a man who has just failed to park does not go looking for more things he does not understand.

I found out later it was for the animals. I did not find that out from asking.

The walk back into the centre from the overflow lot is the reason the overflow lot has room in it. The walk is fine. The town at the end of the walk is the thing the photographs had not prepared me for, because photographs have edges and the town does not.

The main street ends in a mountain.

Not near a mountain. Not with a mountain behind it. The street runs straight and the buildings run out and then there is a mountain standing at the end of it like something placed there, filling the space where in any other town there would be more town. I stopped on the sidewalk to look at it and was struck from behind by a family also looking at it. We apologised to each

other without either of us looking away from the mountain.

Then there was a crowd, and I went to the crowd, because a crowd means a thing.

The thing was elk. Three of them, on a grass verge beside the avenue, large, unbothered, doing nothing. A crowd of perhaps thirty people stopped at what somebody had decided was a safe distance and was in fact about three bus lengths. Thirty people with thirty phones held up, and the elk eating grass in the manner of animals no phone has ever impressed.

I watched the elk for a minute and then I watched the man watching the elk.

He was near the front, in the flat green of the Parks uniform, with a tag I could not read from where I stood, and he was not watching the elk the way the rest of us were watching the elk. He was watching the people. He had his back half to the animals and his front to the crowd, and his eyes went along the line of us, one at a time, not quickly. I understood that he had been watching the people since before the elk arrived and would be watching them after it left. The elk were not the danger and had never been the danger, and the danger was thirty people with phones deciding three bus lengths was too far.

When I got close enough to read the tag it said ALL-SEEING.

I asked him, because I had questions and he plainly had answers, whether the elk were dangerous, and he did not answer the question I asked. He told me the thing the question was standing in front of. A cow elk in August is between her spring calf and the winter, and will move a person who gets

between her and the calf. The calf was in the trees where nobody was looking, because everybody was looking at the three in the grass. The three in the grass were the ones you could afford to watch, and the one you could not afford to watch was the one you could not see.

He said it to me and to nobody and to all thirty of us at once, quietly, not as a warning, but as a description of where everybody's attention was and where the danger was. The two places were not the same place. He seemed to find that neither surprising nor alarming, only true, the way a man finds the weather true.

I moved back. I was the only one who moved back.

There was a haze that afternoon that I took for cloud and was not cloud. It was thin and high and it took the edges off the far mountains and put a colour in the light like a photograph left in a window too long, and I heard a woman ask one of the staff if it would rain, and the staff said it was smoke, from somewhere in the interior, a long way off, and that it had arrived in the night. It did not smell of anything yet. It only changed the light. And everybody went on photographing the elk in the changed light and nobody photographed the change.

Then there was a second one of them, a woman whose tag said COMPANION, working the same crowd from the other side. She was not describing the danger. She was moving people, one at a time, a hand and a word, closing the gap between the crowd and the road, because a reversing delivery truck was the actual thing about to go wrong while everybody watched the elk. The two of them were working the same thirty people

on two different problems the thirty people did not know they had.

Three of them, in the end. A third, further up, whose tag said SEEKER, was not moving anybody and not describing anything, but standing by the sign that gives the fine for approaching wildlife, and when a man asked him how close was too close he did not say a number, he pointed at the sign and said the number was on the sign and the regulation behind the number was posted at the visitor centre, and the man wanted thirty metres from a person and got directed to a document instead.

I went and bought a stroopwafel from a shop on the main street, because there was a shop on the main street selling stroopwafels, at a price that would buy a packet of twelve at home. It was a good stroopwafel. The mountain was still at the end of the street when I came out, which I had half expected it not to be.

I walked back to the lot. The stall is marked for vehicles up to seven metres.

The vehicle is seven point three. I stood and did the arithmetic in public, the way I have done arithmetic in public all trip. Thirty centimetres over a seven-metre stall puts the back of the vehicle thirty centimetres into a painted hatch, which is there precisely so that thirty centimetres has somewhere to go. I parked it, and it was fine, and nobody came.

I folded the mirror before I parked this time, not after.

That is what I learned in Banff and it is not nothing. You fold the mirror before. You read the arrow and believe it is for you. You watch the people and not the elk. And the mountain

is at the end of the street whether you are ready for it or not. It does not fold. It does not move for a delivery truck. It will be there in the morning at the end of the same street, being the end of the street.

LEASE 42-YEAR · CARD 7

There is an estate agent's window on the main street and I read every card in it.

Every card, in order, left to right, top to bottom, for forty minutes, on a Saturday, in a town I will leave in nine days. Joost had gone to look at the elk. The children were somewhere with an ice cream between them. I had a window full of houses, forty minutes, and nobody needing me. That is the condition under which I do my best and least useful work.

The prices are what you would expect and then they are not.

They are high, which I expected. A mountain town, a national park, scarcity with a view. That was not the surprising part. The surprising part was on the seventh card, in small print under a price with too many digits. A line that said the property was held on a leasehold with forty-two years remaining. I read it twice. Then I read the other cards for the same line. It was on all of them.

Nobody here owns the land. I did not know that.

You do not buy the land in this town. The land is a national park and the park is not for sale, not to anyone, not ever. What you buy is a lease. The leases run in a way I had to piece

together from four cards, because no single card explained it. Forty-two years, being what was left of a term that started at ninety-nine, decades ago. Ticking down under every price in the window while the prices went up.

That is the first strange thing. Here is the second.

You may buy the house. You may not necessarily live in it. There is a phrase, which was on the cards. The need to reside. It is not a description of your wish to live there. It is a test you must pass. A requirement that the occupant be a person with a demonstrated reason to be in the town, a job in the town, a business in the town, an eligibility. If you do not have the eligibility you may own the house and must find someone who does to live in it.

I read that three times and it did not stop being true.

You may buy it. You may not live in it. Someone eligible must live in it. And the price is not lower for any of that. Not lower for the leasehold ticking down, not lower for the eligibility you may not have. The price is the price a house costs in a place people would give anything to be, minus nothing for the two large facts: you will never own the ground, and you may never sleep a night under the roof.

There was a second desk in the office, and at it a woman whose tag said ALL-SEEING, and while I spoke to the man she answered a telephone and told the caller, without looking anything up, that the property on Otter Street had gone firm that morning and the backup offer had lapsed and the one on Muskrat was still conditional on financing that would not clear. She said all of it from memory, or not from memory,

from something faster than memory, the way you know the temperature of a room you are standing in. She did not say what any of it meant. She said only what was true of each file, current to the hour, and let the caller decide what it meant.

There was a man at the front desk and his tag said ALLFATHER.

I went in, not to buy, which he understood before I said anything, because a woman who has read the window for forty minutes and comes in is not a buyer. He did not treat me as a buyer. He did not treat me as a waste of the morning either. I asked him about the eligibility and he told me. I asked him about the forty-two years and he told me. He told me everything I asked, completely, in order, without once asking why I wanted to know or when I would be buying or where I was from. As though the information were simply available. I had simply come to where it was kept.

He did not sell me anything. He did not try. He answered.

He signs the listings, he said when I asked what he did there. Not sells them. Signs them. Every card in the window has his signature on it before it goes up, which he mentioned the way you mention a small fact about your work. I understood that he was the person through whom the information became official, the point at which a price and a term and an eligibility stopped being a rumour about a house and became a card in a window. He did this for every house in the town. He had done it for years, and would do it after the forty-two years were thirty.

I asked him the one that was not about houses. I asked whether it was a good place to live.

He did not answer that one. Not because he would not, I think, but because it was not the kind of thing he held. He held terms and prices and eligibilities and effective dates. Whether it was a good place to live was not written on any card, and so was not his to give. He told me that, kindly. He could tell me what a house cost and what the lease said and who was permitted to sleep in it. The other question was mine to answer, and he would not pretend to answer it for me.

I wrote the numbers in the notebook.

The price. The years remaining. The eligibility requirement, in the phrase they use, the need to reside. I wrote them in the notebook under a heading, the way I have written everything on this trip. Then I looked at what I had written and did not write a conclusion under it. There was no conclusion. Only a house I will never buy, on land I could never own, in a town I am not eligible to live in, priced as though none of that were so.

I closed the notebook and went to find the ice cream.

The numbers are in the notebook still. I have not looked at them since, and I know they are there. A house with a price and a countdown and a locked door. Recorded accurately, going nowhere. The best-kept records are the ones that will never be needed by anybody, including the person who kept them.

AUTHORISATION 00 · DECLINED

The card is Dutch and the gateway is Canadian and federal, and that is where it starts.

A man is trying to pay for something, a booking, a fee, the specifics do not reach me. The card will not authorise. He has come to me because the machine sent him to me. I take these calls all day. Most of them are one of four things. This is not one of the four.

The card declines. I try it again because trying it again is the first step and sometimes the first step is all of it.

It declines again. The same code. A code that means declined and nothing more specific than declined. The gateway is not permitted to say why. I am not permitted to guess why. The caller wants to know why, which is the one thing nobody in the chain is allowed to supply.

I check the gateway. The gateway is up. I check the service. The service is up.

I ask him to call his bank. He says he has, from the parking lot, before he called me. His bank says the card is fine. Money behind it, no hold, no flag, no reason on their end for a decline. I believe him. A man does not invent a call to his own bank in a parking lot in a country where his telephone costs him by the minute.

So the bank is fine. The card is fine. The gateway is fine.

Three systems, each working exactly as designed, each able to demonstrate that it is working. Between the three of them a transaction that will not complete. No system among them at fault. And no field anywhere in any of them for the sentence three correct systems failed to agree.

There is a man on the floor whose tag says CHAOS-WEAVER, and the call becomes his.

I do not hand it to him. He takes it. He takes the ones that have stopped being solvable by the steps. He does not do the steps. He has never done the steps. His numbers should be terrible and are the best on the floor, which the reporting cannot explain and has stopped trying to.

He asks the man one thing, which is whether the card has a chip that has been used since he landed.

It has not. The man has been tapping. Everywhere, tapping, because tapping works. The chip has never been inserted since he arrived. The Chaos-Weaver tells him to insert the chip at the next machine and enter the code, once, a real insertion with the code, not a tap. It will settle something between the card and the country that a tap does not settle. After that the tap will work.

I do not know if that is true. I know the man called back to say it worked.

He called back, which people do not do. The woman who took the callback had a tag that said COMPANION, and before he had finished his first sentence she said his booking reference and the amount and the fact that the payment had failed twice and then cleared, none of which he had given her, because she had taken his first call too, hours earlier, and had kept all of it. He did not ask for the Chaos-Weaver by name, because he did not know the name. He asked for the person who had been so helpful, and the Companion knew which one he meant, because she knew the shape of his afternoon, start to finish. The Companion told me all this afterward, because the thanks were for my floor and she thought I would want to know the

call had ended well. I said I would pass it on to the man himself. I passed it on. The Chaos-Weaver had already forgotten the call, not rudely. He had done it without a method, and there was no method to hang the memory on.

The payment went through on the chip and I read the confirmation back.

Seven one six two zero eight eight three, digit by digit. That is the procedure with a payment that failed and then succeeded. You read the confirmation back so the caller has it in their own hand. He wrote it down. I heard the pen. I had him read it back to me, and he did, seven one six two zero eight eight three, correct. I told him to keep it somewhere he would find it.

I told him he might need it at a gate, if a booking was ever questioned. He said which gate. I said any gate. That is the standard line.

I did not know there was a particular gate. There is always a particular gate, in the sense that a confirmation is read back because one day it is presented. I have read thousands of them back to thousands of people. I do not learn which ones are presented and which are never needed. This was one of the ones I read back. I read it back correctly. That is the end of what I have to do with it.

The call closed. Confirmation 71620883, read back, digit by digit, into a parking lot in a smoke-coloured afternoon, and then the next call, which was one of the four.

MACHINE 6 · DRYER 3

There is a laundromat two streets back from the main street and I spent two hours in it and they were the best two hours of the trip.

I have not said that to anybody. I am not going to. A man does not announce that the high point of a mountain holiday was a coin laundry. But it was, and I have decided to be honest with myself about it even while I lie about it to my family. They think I went to do the washing because somebody had to and I volunteered, which is also true and is not the reason.

Nine days of clothes for four people is more than I packed for.

I packed for eight days and we are on day nine, and the mathematics of that has been catching up with us. A smell in the vehicle nobody named. A morning when Thijs wore a shirt I recognised from three days earlier. So I gathered it all, every soft thing in the vehicle, into two bags, and carried it to the laundry, because the campground machines were four deep with a queue.

There was an attendant, or half of one, a woman who came in twice in the two hours to empty a bin and check a machine and did not speak to anybody, and there was a handwritten sign taped to machine four that said OUT OF ORDER SORRY in two languages, and a machine three doors down with a laminated card on it that said the same thing in a printed way, and I understood without being told that the laminated one had been broken longer and the handwritten one was this week.

The machine that makes change takes a note I do not have.

It takes fives and I had a ten and a twenty. It gives back not change but tokens, brass-coloured, stamped with the name of the laundry, which work in the machines here and nowhere else on earth. So the first decision is how many tokens to buy, which is a decision about how much laundry you will do now and how much you will ever do here again. The answer to the second part is never, so you buy exactly enough and no more, and you get the arithmetic wrong anyway.

I got it wrong. I bought one token short and had to break another note.

Breaking the second note meant feeding the twenty into the change machine, which does not give tokens for a twenty in one go but gives four fives back first. Then you feed the fives back in one at a time for tokens. A machine that turns your twenty into four fives so that you can turn the four fives into tokens. Two transactions where a sensible machine would do one. I stood and did the two transactions and thought about the man who chose that machine and whether he knew.

The washers take three tokens and the dryers take two. I did the sum for two washers and misremembered it by the time I reached the change machine, which is the kind of error I do not make with money and made here, because the tokens are not money. They are money's awkward cousin that only exists inside this room, and a part of my brain refused to treat them with the seriousness it treats the euro.

Then the machines were running and there was nothing to do.

That is the part. That is the part exactly. There was nothing to do, for the length of a wash and then the length of a dry, and I sat in a plastic chair bolted to the others in a row, and through the window was the mountain.

The mountain was through the window of a laundromat.

Anywhere in Europe a view like that has a terrace in front of it and a man selling you a coffee for the privilege. Here it was through the window of a coin laundry, free, framed by a poster about lint and a poster about not overloading the machines. I looked at it from a plastic chair for the better part of an hour, and no one asked me to buy anything or move along or be finished.

I folded the washing on a long table and I have a system.

The system is from my father, shirts folded in thirds with the buttons down, and I did both bags on the long table while the second dryer ran. I noticed that nobody else in the laundry had a system. They were pulling things out warm and pushing them into bags in a ball, four people all doing it the fast wrong way. I did it my father's way at my father's speed. I finished after all of them, and minded not at all.

The second dryer was required, which I had not budgeted.

Jeans do not dry in the time a dryer gives you for two tokens, which I learned when the cycle stopped and the jeans were still damp at the seams. So there was a second round of the change machine, and the arithmetic of two more tokens against the tokens I had left. I did it properly this time, exactly enough, then fed the machine and sat back down. There was nothing to do again. By now I had stopped resenting that and started

to want it. There was the mountain again, and another twenty minutes of nothing.

A woman came in at the ninety-minute mark with a child and a single small load. The child wanted to watch the clothes go round, and stood at the porthole of a front-loader with his hands on the glass. The woman let him, and did not photograph him doing it. I liked her for that in a way I cannot defend and did not examine.

Two hours. Nothing happened. It was the best two hours of the trip.

I think it is because there was nothing I could fail at. The washing washes itself. The mountain requires nothing. There is no gradient in a laundromat and no gauge and no sign on the wall that turns out to mean me. For two hours the only thing I had to do was fold a shirt the way my father folded a shirt, and get the tokens right the second time, and watch a mountain through a window nobody was charging me to look through.

There is a particular quiet in a room full of machines doing work you are not doing. The washers have a rhythm, a slosh and a pause, and the dryers have a lower one, a tumble with a click in it where a zip goes round. If you sit long enough the two rhythms drift together and apart. I sat long enough, and they did. I noticed a thing I have not noticed since I was a boy, which is the sound of nothing being required of me.

I put the folded clothes in the bags in order, heavy at the bottom.

The tokens I had left, three of them, I put on the folding table for the next person, because they are no use to me and

no use to anybody who leaves. The next person to buy the wrong number would find three waiting and be that much less wrong. I did not stay to see who it was, or what they made of it. I carried the two bags out into the smoke-coloured light and back to the vehicle, and I did not tell my family it was the best part, and I am not going to, and it was.

BEAR-PROOF BIN 212

My father let me take a bicycle across the town alone, which has not happened on this continent and had barely happened at home. I understood it as the largest thing given to me on the trip, larger than the permit, because the permit was a document and this was a town, all of it, that I was allowed to cross on a borrowed bicycle with a map in my head and nobody watching. I set off before he could reconsider it, which he sometimes does, out loud, after he has already said yes.

The bicycle was from the campground, a heavy thing with a basket and a bell that did not work, and I rode it down streets laid flat for bicycles, with painted lanes and little pictures of bicycles on the road. It was a town that had decided bicycles were a thing it wanted. My own country decided that a century ago, and this one seemed to be deciding it now, street by street, with paint.

For the first ten minutes I did nothing but ride, no destination, just the fact of being alone on a bicycle in a foreign town with money in my pocket and my father not able to see me. I rode to the end of a street to see what was there. It was

another street. I rode over a bridge and the river was under it, loud. I rang the bell that did not work at nobody, for the sound it did not make. I have not been this unwatched since before we came, and I noticed the exact feeling of it, which was lighter than I expected. And also, in a small way I did not admit at the time, frightening, because unwatched means that if something goes wrong it is only mine.

The first bear-proof bin defeated me completely, which I did not expect from a bin.

It was a metal box the size of a small refrigerator, with a handle you had to work in a sequence, a lift and a turn and a push, and a picture on it showing the sequence. I followed the picture and the bin did not open. I followed it again slower and the bin did not open. A woman walked past and did the sequence without looking at it, the lid came up, she dropped her cup in and let it fall shut, all in one motion, without breaking her stride or her conversation. I stood at a defeated bin holding my own rubbish while a person twice my age opened it by not thinking about it.

The bins are built for an animal that weighs three hundred kilograms and has all day. They had been built well enough to also defeat a boy who weighed fifty and was in a hurry, which is not what they were for but is what they achieved. I have thought since that a thing built to stop the strongest visitor will always also stop the weakest, and that this is a rule about more than bins.

I found the main street on my own and rode the length of it, and the mountain was still standing at the end of it, the way

my father had described it at dinner without my believing him. I believed him now. I did not tell him I had doubted him, which is a thing I am learning to keep to myself.

There is a river through the middle of the town the colour of milk.

Not blue like the lake, not green, but a pale opaque grey-white, moving fast and loud over rounded stones. I put my hand in it and took my hand out again in about four seconds, because it was cold in a way that was not cold water at home but a different substance that happened to be a liquid, glacier-cold, mountain-cold. There were people swimming in it, or getting into it and shouting and getting out, young people, locals I decided, because only a local would know that the river is survivable for the length of a shout.

I worked out the fence around the school by myself and was proud of it.

There is a school in the town with a playground, and around the playground a fence, higher than a fence needs to be to keep children in. I looked at the size of it and thought about what I had seen on the avenue the day before, the elk. I understood that the fence was not to keep the children in but to keep the elk out, that in this town the wild animals came into the playground and the fence was the answer. Nobody told me that; I read it off the height of the fence, and I was more pleased with that than with anything I have worked out on this trip.

Then the staff began giving me things I had not asked for.

The first was a woman near the river with a tag that said SEEKER, who saw me looking at the milk-coloured water and

told me, without my asking, that the colour was rock flour and that the river came off the same glacier as the lake. If I wanted to know how much rock a glacier grinds in a year, she said, there was a display about it at the visitor centre and a paper behind the display with the actual figure. She did not tell me the figure. She told me where the figure lived, and went back to what she was doing before I could decide whether I wanted it.

The second was a man refilling a water station, whose tag said ALL-SEEING, who told me, apropos of nothing I had said, that the water in the town taps was from a spring and was tested four times a day, and that the results were posted, and where they were posted, and that I could read today's if I wanted. He did not wait to see whether I wanted. He told me where the reading was and moved on, a fact placed in front of me and abandoned there.

The third was at the bin, my third bin of the day, when a staff member whose tag said COMPANION, watching me fail at it, told me not the trick of the bin but the reason for the bin, which was a particular bear in a particular year that had learned to open the old ones, and where I could read the incident report if I wanted it. I did not ask any of the three of them for anything. All three gave me something true and specific and then left. None of them stayed to see whether the thing they gave me was a thing I wanted.

Three facts, all accurate, none connected to any other, delivered by three people who did not check whether I was collecting facts.

There was a fourth one, and I am putting her here even though she does not fit, because she is the one I keep thinking about. She was sitting on the low wall by the last bin, not in the green clothes exactly, or in them but with a jacket over the top so I could not tell, and she had a tag but it was under the jacket zip and I only saw the lanyard. She did not tell me a fact. She did not tell me where a fact lived. She watched me do the bin, all of it, the lift and the turn and the push, and when I got it she did not say well done and did not say the thing about the bear, she said, you had it the second time and pretended you didn't, and then she looked back at the parking lot. Which was true. I had. I do not know how she knew, or what she was, or which of them she was, and there was no fact in it to take, and I took it anyway, and it is the only thing from that whole day I did not have to decide to keep.

What struck me, riding away from all of it, was that not one of them had asked me a single thing in return, not where I was from or how old I was or whether I was lost or whether my parents knew where I was, the questions an adult at home would ask a boy alone on a bicycle before telling him anything, and instead they had simply handed me the true thing and the address of the truer thing behind it and turned back to their work, as though a boy on a bicycle were exactly as entitled to the rock-flour figure and the water reading and the bear report as anybody else, which I suppose in this town he was.

And I was, by then, collecting them, because a town that hands you facts unasked turns you into a person who takes them. By the afternoon I had a river fact and a water fact and a

bear fact and the location of three separate papers I could read if I ever came back. I will not come back. So the facts are mine and their sources are stranded in a town I have left.

By the middle of the afternoon I had stopped being surprised by any of it. A town where you cannot drive to the famous lake, and where the bins fight you. Where the river is a glacier you are allowed to stand in, and the school has a fence against the wildlife, and the houses come with a countdown. At home the strange things are strange and the normal things are normal. Here everything was one or the other and nothing in between. After a while the everything-or-nothing became its own kind of normal. I rode through it on a bicycle with a broken bell as though I had always lived somewhere like this, which I have not, and will not.

This is a town where the animals have a bylaw and the people have a lease.

I did not work that sentence out on the bicycle; I worked it out later, at the campground, writing nothing down. On the bicycle I only had the pieces of it, the fence for the elk and the bins for the bears and the river you were allowed to freeze in because nobody could stop you, and the leases my mother had found in the window. I put them next to each other and did not do anything with them. It was enough to have put them next to each other.

The third bin opened on my third attempt and there was nothing in it worth the effort.

I did the sequence, the lift and the turn and the push, and I had it now, I had it the way the woman had it, without

looking at the picture. The lid came up, and I put my rubbish in, an apple core and a wrapper, and let it fall shut. It was the same rubbish it would have been at home. The bin had been engineered against a bear to receive it. I biked back to the campground having crossed a town alone and learned its shape and beaten a bin. I told my father none of it, because he would have heard only that I had put an apple core in a bin, and he would have been right, and it would not have been the thing that happened.

FILE MC-2026-05611

There were two documents in the tray and they had arrived together and they were not alike.

The first was a complaint about a lease. It required a four-part reply within two weeks, and carried a file number and a clock. The second was a workforce adjustment notice, an internal memo about a seasonal position not being renewed. It required nothing of anybody. That is why it was in my tray, because a thing that requires nothing has to go somewhere, and somewhere is a tray.

I worked the one that required work. That is correct and I will not pretend it was a hard choice.

The correct thing and the interesting thing were not the same document, which is the ordinary condition of this desk. The document with the clock on it gets the day. The document with nothing on it gets whatever is left, which is usually nothing. Today was not nothing, because the one with nothing on it was

the one I could not stop reading. I did the correct one first anyway, because the clock does not care which document is interesting.

The complaint concerned a leasehold property in the townsite, from a lessee who had read their lease and found a clause about permitted occupancy they believed the Agency was applying inconsistently. They were not wrong that it was complicated. They were wrong that it was inconsistent. The four-part reply exists to explain the difference to a person who has confused the two.

The lessee's letter was three pages and careful and aggrieved in the particular way of a person who is right about the facts and wrong about the conclusion. They had the clause number correct. They had the dates correct. They had built from correct parts a complaint that did not hold. That is harder to answer than a complaint that is simply wrong, because you must agree with every step and disagree with the destination.

The property is one whose card was in an estate agent's window on Saturday.

I know this because the file references the listing, and the listing carries a photograph, and I recognised the building. Not because I have any business recognising it, but because it is a distinctive building and its card has been in that window for months. A person who walks the main street on their lunch comes to know which houses are for sale. This is one. It has been one, and it will be one after this complaint is closed, because the complaint does not change whether it sells, only whether the lessee understands their own lease.

The four-part reply is three parts approved language and one part a date.

The three parts are the occupancy clause explained, the eligibility requirement explained, and the amendment history of the relevant schedule. All of these exist as approved paragraphs I assemble rather than write, because the Agency has explained these things before and the explanation does not improve by being rewritten. The fourth part is a date, the date the current schedule took effect, which I retrieve from the record and place in the sentence. The sentence is then complete, and correct, and mine only in the sense that I put the date in it.

There is a colleague whose tag says SEEKER and I take the amendment history to him.

Not because I cannot find it, but because he finds it faster and finds it better. What he does is not know the answer but know where the answer is kept. When I ask him when the occupancy schedule was most recently amended, he does not tell me the date. He tells me the instrument, the order number and the section and the office that holds the master. The date falls out of that, retrieved rather than recalled. It is slower to say and impossible to get wrong. I have learned to ask him for the road to the fact rather than the fact.

The reply requires approval and the approval is already on it.

The colleague whose tag says ALLFATHER signs the correspondence in this office, ahead of it, so that the block for approval is filled before the reply is drafted. This sounds like a problem and has never once been one. I have stopped

experiencing it as strange, a signature that precedes the document it approves, present and waiting, never wrong, on a reply that did not exist when it was signed.

Then there is the second document, which requires nothing, and I read it four times.

I read it four times, which is three more times than the four-part reply received, because the four-part reply was work and this was not. A thing that is not work is a thing you can actually read. What it said, under the adjustment language, was that a seasonal interpretation position at one of the sites would not be renewed for the coming season. A position, not a person. The memo was careful to say a position. I read it four times looking for the person the memo was careful not to name, and did not find them, because the memo was well written, and a well-written adjustment notice is one from which the person has been successfully removed.

There is a colleague who does the thing the memo does not do.

His tag says CHAOS-WEAVER, and he read it over my shoulder, uninvited, and said the name of the person. Just the name. Not with feeling, with accuracy. The person the memo was about. He knew, because he knows the sites and the seasons and who works them. He said the name and then said which site and then went back to his desk. He had completed the memo, supplied the one fact it was built to omit, and he did not appear to think he had done anything. By the standard of his job he had not. He had only said the true thing quickly.

I filed both. One with a reply, one without.

Filing is the final act and the truest. A file does not record which document mattered. It records which document was answered, and the answered one looks, in the record, like the important one, because it has a reply attached, and the reply is the evidence that it was taken seriously. The memo has no reply attached. In the record it will look like the smaller thing. It was not the smaller thing.

The complaint closes in two weeks with a four-part reply that is correct, about a house that will still be for sale, whose card I will still see on my lunch. The memo closes today, requiring nothing, a position and not a person, filed complete, with the name that is not written in it now spoken once over my shoulder and written nowhere. That is the difference between the two documents. One of them will be answered and one of them has already been closed, and the one that will be answered is the one that mattered less.

PART VI

THE PARKWAY

HIGHWAY 93N · KM 108

The Icefields Parkway is two hundred and thirty kilometres of federal highway with no municipality on it anywhere along its length, and that single fact governs everything I do.

A normal highway passes through towns, and the towns own their frontages, and the responsibility for a road divides itself among the places the road connects, so that no one office holds all of it. This road connects nothing to nothing, in the administrative sense, running from the edge of one park to the edge of another through country that belongs to no municipality and never will. The consequence, which took me a season to feel properly, is that every stockpile of gravel and every pullout and every culvert and every painted line on all two hundred and thirty kilometres is the only one, held by one office, which is mine.

There is a crack at kilometre one hundred and eight, and I

drove to it because the file told me to.

I know this road the way a person knows a face they have studied. Not fondly, which is not a word that applies, but completely. I know which kilometres shed water and which hold it. I know the three culverts that block every spring. The same debris, off the same slope, every year. I know the bend where the frost comes out of the ground first and the straight where it comes out last, and none of this is written on the road, it is written in me and in the file, and the file is the part of me that will still be here when I am posted elsewhere.

There is a crack at kilometre one hundred and eight. It has been in the file before.

It is a longitudinal crack in the wheel path, which is the kind that matters, running with the direction of travel rather than across it. It has a reference number (93N-108-L-04, the L for longitudinal and the 04 because it is the fourth defect logged at that chainage since the record began). It has a history, three prior entries across four years, each with a date and a measured length and a condition rating. And it has a review date, which is why I am standing over it, because the review date arrived and defects do not review themselves.

The crack, in other words, is administered like a small municipality with one resident.

It has a file older than some marriages. It has a name that is really a number. It has a condition tracked over time by people who write it down and hand it to the next people. The crack does not know any of this. It is simply a place where water has got into the structure and frozen and opened it a little more

each winter, indifferent to its own paperwork. I stood over its paperwork made asphalt and measured it, and it had grown eleven millimetres since the last entry, which I wrote down.

There was a colleague working the culvert at kilometre ninety-four when I passed, a man whose tag says HAND, and he had the grate up and was clearing the debris that blocks it every spring. He did not stop to talk, because the debris does not clear itself and a man talking is a man not clearing. By the time I came back down the road in the afternoon the grate was down and the culvert ran clear, and he was somewhere else on the road doing the next thing. I never saw him finish, because there is no finish to a culvert, only a culvert that runs and a man who has gone on.

I sealed it. That is the part of the job that is not paperwork. A man kneels on a highway with a machine and puts a hot material into a cold crack and smooths it and stands up, and the crack is closed, for now, for this year, until the water finds the next weakness, which it will, because water is patient and asphalt is not. I did not log the sealing as a repair completed and move to admiring it. I logged it and drove to the next thing, because there is always a next thing on a road this long, and a man who stops to admire a sealed crack has misunderstood the length of the road.

The nearest replacement for the joint sealant I use is four hundred kilometres away.

There are two suppliers of it in the country, and the near one is four hundred kilometres from here. A thing I use by the tube is therefore a thing I plan for by the season, ordering in a

quantity that assumes I cannot reorder, because between here and the sealant is a day of driving each way on the road the sealant is for. A man who runs out of sealant in the middle of a two-hundred-and-thirty-kilometre asset does not nip out for more. He waits, and the waiting is a line item.

I passed the glacier on the way up and it is not where it was.

There is a glacier visible from the roadway, with a parking lot at its foot and a walking path running up toward the ice. Along the path there are markers, small posts, each with a year on it, showing where the toe of the ice stood in that year. The markers are a long way apart, and the earliest of them is a considerable walk from where the ice is now. I have watched, across the seasons I have worked this road, the distance between the final marker and the actual ice become a walk in itself, which will need its own marker, which somebody will place, and date, and enter in a file.

There was smoke in the air all day, high and thin, from the fires to the north and west. It did nothing to the road and everything to the light. It is not my department. Air quality is a different file held by a different office. My file is the surface, and the surface does not care about smoke. I noted the smoke in the margin, not because it was mine to note but because a man who works alone on a long road writes down what he sees whether or not it is his. Then I moved on to the pullout.

The pullout at kilometre one hundred and twelve has a name, a number, a condition rating and no visitors.

Every pullout on the road is inventoried, this one among them, with a name (Tangle Ridge Viewpoint) and an asset

number and a surface condition rating and a drainage note and a review cycle. I stopped at it to check it against its record, and it was empty, as it usually is, because it is a viewpoint of a ridge less famous than the ridges on either side of it. It is maintained to exactly the standard of the famous ones, graded and drained and rated on the same cycle. An empty pullout kept to the condition of a full one, because the file does not know it is empty and the standard does not bend for an audience.

A family stopped there while I was checking it. The only family I saw at it all day.

A large rented motorhome pulled in while I had my clipboard out, and the people got out and looked at the ridge, which is worth looking at, that is why it is a viewpoint. They did not know that the pullout they stood on had a name and a number and a review date and a drainage note, that the surface under their feet had a condition rating entered by me in the spring, that they were the day's entire justification for a facility maintained whether or not they came. I did not tell them, because it is not the kind of thing one tells people. They got back in and drove north, and I finished my inspection of the surface they had briefly made worthwhile.

There is a thing about a receding glacier that the markers do not tell anybody and the file does not have a field for. The recession is not mine to stop or slow or note in any official way. My department is the road and not the ice. And yet I pass the ice every working day and watch it go, and there is no line in any form I fill for the sentence the ice was further back than last year. So it goes unrecorded by me, officially, and recorded

by me, privately, in the same way I record the smoke. It sits in a margin that is really just my own attention, which keeps its own file the Agency will never read.

I called it in at the end of the day, the crack and the pullout and the stockpile, to the office, and the woman who took it has a tag that says ALL-SEEING. I did not have to tell her which crack, because she already had the file open. She had it open before I said the chainage. She holds the condition of the road entire in a way I do not, section by section, defect by defect, not from memory but from the record read faster than memory. She took my three items and placed them where they went, and told me, before I asked, that the pullout was now due for its resurface in the same quarter as the two on either side of it, which I had not worked out and she had, from the shape of the file.

The stockpile that matters is at Wilcox and I measured it against a winter that has not happened.

The sand and the salt for this section are stockpiled at Wilcox, and the quantity is set by a formula that takes the length of road and the elevation and the historic snowfall and produces a tonnage. I measured the pile against the tonnage, walking it, estimating by eye and then checking the estimate against the survey. It was sufficient, sufficient for a winter that is four months away and will arrive on this road before it arrives anywhere people live. I noted it sufficient. That word in the file means a road two hundred and thirty kilometres long has enough grit to be kept open through a season nobody has seen yet, held in a pile at Wilcox, measured in August, by me, against

the snow to come.

PERMIT JAS-2026-1184

The development office in Jasper has a window and a queue, and the queue moves slowly, and I joined it.

I did not need a permit. I will be clear about that, because a woman who joins a permit queue without needing a permit requires an explanation. Mine is that I had walked past the office twice and seen the noticeboard through the glass and could not read it from outside. A noticeboard I cannot read is a thing I will stand in a queue to read, which is a fault in me this trip has not cured.

The town is being rebuilt. That is the fact under everything at this window and nobody at the window says it.

They do not say it because they do not need to, the way one does not say the weather to a person standing in it. The noticeboard says it instead, in the only language the noticeboard has, which is permits. Permits issued. Permits in application. The count of each, updated, high. A board that in another town would list a renovation and a fence and a deck was listing a town, one permit at a time. The number issued this year against the number in an ordinary year was the story entire. Told in the one place that could tell it without saying a word about it.

The fee is seven dollars per thousand of project value.

I read that off the board and did the arithmetic before I could stop myself. Seven dollars per thousand. A small fraction,

until the project value is a house, and then it is a number. The board did not list the project values, only the count, so I could not do the sum I wanted to do, which was the sum of the town. I stood there wanting a figure the board would not give me, and understood that the board was built precisely not to give it.

The wait is nineteen business days for a complete and conforming application.

Nineteen business days, on average, from a complete and conforming application to a decision. I read that number and then I read it again. There are two words in it doing separate work. I did not catch them both the first time. Complete. Conforming. I had read them as one requirement and they are two. The distance between them is the distance a family stands in when they think they have done the thing and have not.

Complete is whether all the parts are there. Conforming is whether the parts are allowed.

A man ahead of me in the queue learned the difference at the window, in front of everyone, not unkindly but completely. His application was complete. Every form present, every box filled, every signature signed. It was not conforming. The thing he had fully and correctly applied to build could not be built where he wished to build it. His complete application was a conforming failure. The words came apart in my head as I watched his face do the same thing.

He had done everything right and the answer was no. Those are not opposites here.

At home I would have said a rejected application was a

flawed application, that if one does it correctly it is approved, that correctness and approval are the same road. This window taught me, in four minutes, that they are two roads. That a person can travel all of correctness and arrive at no. That the forms can be perfect and the answer final. The man folded his complete and conforming-failed application and left. He did not shout, because there was nobody to shout at. Everyone had done their job, including him.

The woman at the window was called ALLFATHER on her tag and she signed nothing while I watched.

She did not decide the applications. She received them, and checked them for completeness, which is not the same as conforming, and stamped the complete ones as received. The stamp was not an approval. It was a date, the date the nineteen business days began. She gave each person their date, and the date was all she gave. Available to everyone, promised to no one. The beginning of a wait and not the end of one.

There was a second person behind her at a screen whose tag said ALL-SEEING.

She did not speak to the queue. She spoke to the woman at the window, quietly. What she supplied was the state of things. Which application was where, what had cleared and what had not, the standing of files nobody in the queue could see. She supplied it from the screen, or from something faster than the screen, without being asked twice. The condition of every file in the office, held by one person, dispensed a sentence at a time to the one person who needed each sentence.

A third came out from the back with a box of files and his

tag said HAND.

He did not join the counter and did not speak to the queue. He went to a cabinet and refiled the box, one folder at a time, correcting an order that had drifted. When a drawer stuck he took it apart at the runner and freed it and put it back, and it closed properly. Nobody thanked him, because nobody had seen the drawer stick. Only I had seen it. He did not finish so much as reach the end of the box and pick up another. The filing was not a task he completed but a condition he maintained.

The next date on the board is a Thursday, in three days.

That is the next decision date, the day a batch of the nineteen-business-day waits comes due. I looked at it, a Thursday, three days off, on which some number of complete and conforming applications will become permits and some number of complete and conforming-failed ones will become letters. I will be gone by then, north on the road. The Thursday will happen without me. The town will gain some permits. I did not need any of them. I had stood in the queue for twenty minutes to read a board about a town being built back one conforming application at a time.

RECEIPT 0041 · JASPER

There is a girl behind the counter my age.

I clock her the way I clock anyone my age, fast and complete and unfair. She is stuck here, I decide it in a second. Stuck in a mountain town in a shop, ringing up other people's holidays. I am on one and she is not. I decide she is small in some way I

am not.

I do not examine it. Why would I? It is hot, and it is the fourth stop of a day I did not pick. Being unkind about her is easier than being bored, so I am.

Her tag says COMPANION. I do not think anything of it.

She rings up my mother's postcards, quick. Then she says a thing I did not expect. She asks where we are headed. I say the icefield, back south. She says lucky, and means it. Do we have a spot booked? Everything is full, she says. We do not book, my dad does not book anymore. She laughs. A real one, not a shop one.

I ask where the postcards of the icefield are. Not these ones, the good ones. A man stocking a shelf turns. His tag says SEEKER. He does not point to a rack. He says the good ones are not here. They are at the icefield centre, the desk past the café, the second spinner. He says it like an address. Then he goes back to the shelf. I did not get a postcard. I got directions to one.

We talk for a minute. It is easy. That annoys me. I had decided.

She is sixteen and works here in summer. She did not pick the town either. Her mum works for the park. What is there to do here, I ask. She does not say hiking. She does not say the lake. She does not say any poster thing.

She says the thing everyone talks about is where you're going to live.

Do I mishear her? I do not mishear her. Housing. That is what people her age talk about here. Whether their family can

stay, whether the lease holds, whether there is a place for them when they are grown. She says it the way girls at home talk about a band. Easy. Constant. Always just there.

A person my age can worry about that? I worry about different things.

I do not say that. Here is what I think. I decided she was small, and she is carrying a thing I have never had to pick up. Whether the town she is from will let her stay in it. I was unkind in a second. She has been nothing but easy. I do not tell her. There is a customer behind me. My minute is up.

Then the next customer. I watch. Something happens.

A man, older, a tourist. She looks up and says his name, not off a card. He has not paid. She says his name. Then she says he came in last September, the long weekend. He bought the grey fleece. His own was in a lake. She says the name of the lake, a specific one. Did he ever dry it out?

The man laughs. She cannot possibly remember that, he says. She can. She remembers all of it.

A year ago. One customer in a summer of them, the fleece and the lake and the weekend. No card on the screen. No note anywhere I can see. She says it warm and exact, then rings his thing and turns to the next person with the same warmth. No less for a stranger than for a man she kept a year.

What did she just do? I do not have a word for it, and I do not look for one.

I take the postcards and my change, receipt 0041, and I go. Behind me she is already saying something true to somebody else. I was unkind in the first second, and she has been nothing

but kind since. To me, and to a man she met once, a year ago. I carry that out into the smoke and do not say it to anybody.

CALL-OUT B-4471

What was reported and what was the case were different, which is the normal condition of a call-out and not a complaint about anybody.

Reported: two hikers overdue, one injured, on the Wilcox Pass route, called in by a third party from the trailhead at 16:20. The case, established over the next ninety minutes. Two hikers, neither injured, not overdue by their own reckoning. Higher up the route than the reporting party believed possible. And adamant, when reached, that they had not needed reaching.

The hazard on that route this year is the trees. I will be specific because the specifics are the job.

The 2024 fire went through the lower Wilcox approach and left standing dead timber. Standing dead timber is not a memorial. It is a mechanical problem, because a burnt trunk holds until a wind and then does not. The route that was fine in 2023 now runs for four hundred metres under trees that are one gust from horizontal. We do not send people under them on a windy afternoon, and it was a windy afternoon.

So the call-out was real even though the emergency was not.

The party did not require rescue in the sense of being unable to descend. They required not descending through the burnt section in the wind. A different thing. The resolution was to hold

them where they were, above the timber, and bring them down the drainage instead. Longer, slower, and not under anything that falls.

Three services were on one frequency and each was correct and none said the same thing.

Parks dispatch, the provincial service on a mutual-aid channel, and our own field team, all on one frequency. Each had correct and current information that did not match the others', because each had been told by a different caller at a different minute. The radio traffic was the sound of three accurate accounts of one event failing to be the same account. That is not a failure of anybody. It is what happens when a thing is reported by more than one true witness.

There is a colleague whose tag says SEEKER and he does the frequency.

He does not resolve which account is right. He establishes where each account came from. The caller, the time, the position it was given from. He lays them in order. The picture is then not one story but a set of sourced fragments a person can navigate. From the sourced fragments the actual position of the actual hikers falls out. Not because he decided it, but because he showed where each claim stood, and the true one was the one all the roads led back to.

There is a colleague whose tag says ALL-SEEING and she reads the gaps.

What she does is not listen to what the radio says but notice what it does not. The caller who has gone quiet. The position nobody has confirmed. The ninety seconds since the last check-

in from the team on the drainage. She names the silence. She flags it. She asks for the confirmation nobody thought to ask for. The confirmation comes back fine, and the silence was nothing, this time. That is the point, because the silence is read whether or not it is nothing.

The specialist on the ground ran the arithmetic, which is most of the job.

The rope, the anchor, the angle, the weight, the daylight remaining against the length of the drainage descent. The arithmetic of whether a slower safe route beats a shorter exposed one. The wind doing what it was doing. The arithmetic said drainage, and the drainage it was. The party came down it unhurt and slightly insulted and alive, which is the outcome the arithmetic is for.

A colleague whose tag says CONSCIENCE-KEEPER logged the exposure figure.

Not as a scolding and not as a warning, but as a figure. The number of minutes the party had spent above the burnt timber, before the team reached them. It was worth logging. It is the figure that would have mattered if the wind had done the other thing. She logged it flat, the minutes of exposure, the way she logs everything. The cost that was not paid this time, written down at the same size as the costs that were.

The party had asked a family for directions ninety minutes before we reached them.

This came out in the debrief. Before they went up, at the trailhead, they had asked a family how long the route was. A family in a large rented motorhome. The family had guessed,

generously, and been wrong. The party had planned against the family's guess rather than the sign. That is not the family's fault; a guess asked for is a guess given. But it is in the log now, that a wrong number kindly offered at a trailhead is one of the inputs that put two people above a burnt slope in a rising wind.

Everything is logged, including the parts that did not need logging.

The rope is coiled and back on the truck. The party is down and gone, thanking us, and slightly insulted. The exposure figure is entered. The directions are entered. The silence that turned out to be nothing is entered, all of it in the same hand at the same size. The near-miss and the non-event are given equal weight, because the log does not know which is which until later. By the time anyone knows, the log is already written, and the knowing does not change it.

SITE 22 · NIGHT THREE

We tried Wabasso first and it was full and I could not understand why it was full.

It was full and the lights were on and there was nobody in it, or nobody who looked like a camper. It took me a while at the barrier to understand what I was looking at, which was a campground closed to the public and full of the people rebuilding the town. Crews, in the campground, with the lights on, that we could see and not enter. A full empty campground doing exactly its job and none of the job I wanted from it.

So we drove on to Wilcox Creek, which has forty-six sites

and no reservations.

Forty-six sites, first come first served, which the sign said and I did not believe. I have spent seventeen days believing that a place to sleep is a thing you arrange in advance or do not have. Here was a sign describing the opposite, a place you simply arrive at and take if there is room. There was room, and I took it, and I did not trust it for the first hour, the way you do not trust a door that opens before you touch it.

I checked three times whether we needed to register. The first time, a man at the next site said no. Just take a site. The second time I asked at the little shed with the rotation board. A woman said the same, no, first come first served. Pay the envelope if you want, but nobody checks tonight. The third time I asked nobody and simply believed it, which took me two days. A man who has read a confirmation number back to a call centre does not easily accept a campground that wants nothing from him.

There was no signal, which by now is not news, and I have stopped reaching for the phone.

That is a thing that happened somewhere on this road without my noticing it happen. There has been no signal for so long that the reaching stopped being worth the disappointment. I put the phone in the glovebox two days ago and have not taken it out, and the glovebox is where it lives now, the way the pen lives in Sanne's coat. Each of us has lost one small argument with this country and been improved by losing it.

Then it was eleven at night and I saw the sky.

Nobody had told me about the sky. The photographs do not

have it, cannot have it, because the sky at eleven at night at that place is not a photograph. It is a quantity. Too many of them, more stars than sky. I stood in the cold in the clothes I had slept in and looked up and could not find the constellations I know, because they were drowned in the ones I do not. I have not looked at anything that long since I do not know when. I did not tell the others to come out, which I regret, but a man cannot narrate a sky.

There is an icefield three kilometres up the road, and I walked toward it in the morning.

The Columbia Icefield, and the glacier that comes off it, the Athabasca, with a road to a parking lot and a walk from the lot toward the ice. Along the walk there are markers, posts with years on them, showing where the ice reached in that year. The years are 1908 and 1948 and 1982, and they are a long walk apart, each one further back than the last. The ice has retreated up its own valley across the century faster than a person would think a mountain of ice could move.

I walked from the 1908 marker to the ice and it took the length of a walk.

That is the thing that stayed with me. The distance the ice has given up in the years since my grandfather was a child is not a statistic when you walk it. It is a distance in the legs, ten minutes, fifteen, of walking over the ground the ice used to be on. At the end of it the ice, smaller than it was, dirty at its edge, still enormous, still the largest thing I have stood in front of, shrinking at a rate somebody has measured and posted on a series of small signs I walked past reading the years.

By the second day the distrust had gone out of me. The site was ours because we were on it, and would stop being ours when we left, and no paper anywhere recorded either fact. I found after a day that I did not mind. The lightness of not being recorded was a lightness I had not felt in seventeen days of being recorded at every turn, booked and confirmed and greeted by name and read back my own confirmation number. Here I was nobody's entry in anything. It was a relief I did not expect and could not have booked.

We stayed four days and nobody decided to.

That is the part I keep coming back to. We did not decide to stay four days. We stayed because the vehicle was parked and the parking was the arrangement, and each morning the reason to leave did not arrive, and so we did not leave. Four days at a campground with no reservation and no signal and no plan, the longest we have stayed anywhere. Arrived at not by decision but by the absence of the daily reason to move that had governed every other day of the trip.

Thijs asked what the site number is for and nobody could say.

The sites are numbered, ours was twenty-two, and Thijs asked what the number was for, given that nothing is booked and nothing is confirmed and no system anywhere holds the fact that we are in twenty-two. I did not have an answer, and neither did the people at the next site. The number is for nothing that anybody could name. A number on a post at a site in a campground with no system, numbered anyway, because a site is numbered whether or not a number is needed.

Sanne did not open the folder for four days.

The folder that has governed this trip, the sleeve and the tabs and the printed confirmations, sat in the vehicle unopened for four days, because there was nothing in it that applied to a place you cannot book. I asked her once, on the second evening, what she was thinking. She does not usually answer that question, and she answered it, and I am setting down what she said because I did not understand all of it and do not want to lose the part I did.

She said the folder was not about the trip. She said she had known that for years and not said it. The folder was about her mother, who had arrived somewhere once, a border, a long time ago, with the wrong paper, and had been turned back, and had told the story at every birthday until she died. The folder was so that no child of hers would ever stand at a counter with the wrong paper. She said she had built the folder, and the habit, and the years of it, to keep a thing from happening that had happened to somebody else in another country before Sanne was born. She said it plainly, the way she says the things she has decided about. Then she said the part I keep, which was only that here there is no counter, and nothing to have the wrong paper for, and that she had noticed this on the first morning and it had taken her until the second evening to stop checking for the counter anyway.

I did not know any of that. Twenty-two years, and I did not know the folder was her mother. I did not say so. I said it sounded like a good reason for a folder, which was the wrong thing to say, and she let me have said it, and we sat and watched

Thijs fail to light a stove that was not permitted to be lit.

I sat in a camp chair and did nothing for the first time in seventeen days.

I moved the chair once, in the afternoon, for the shade. That was the most decisive thing I did all day, and it was enough. I had wanted a fire for seventeen days and I did not want one now. I could not have told you what had changed. I moved the chair once, for the shade, and sat back down, and did not build the fire I was still not allowed to build and no longer minded not building.

SITE 22 · DAY FOUR

There is a sign at the entrance to Wilcox Creek that says first come first served, and I stood in front of it on the fourth morning reading it the way you read a sentence in a language you are fluent in but have never seen used this particular way. I have spent seventeen days inside booking systems, learning their grammar, the reservation and the confirmation and the window that opens at eight. Here was a sign whose entire content was the description of the absence of all of that, a system announcing that there is no system, posted, official, on a post. I could not stop reading it.

I have become, on this trip, a person who reads the machinery of a place before he looks at the place. I did not used to be that. I am not sure my father would recognise it as an improvement, though I think it is one. At home a campsite is a campsite. Here I have learned that a campsite is the visible

end of a long invisible thing. A reservation system, a field unit, a rotation, a budget, a warden's route. The campsite is easy precisely because all of that is hard and is being done by somebody. Once you have seen the invisible thing you cannot unsee it, and I have seen it, and I read the sign about no system knowing exactly how much system it takes to have no system.

The permit from Lake Louise is still in my wallet, seventeen days expired, and I have kept it.

It is the permit with my name on it, the fire permit that permitted a fire I never lit, and it expired at midnight seventeen days ago and is therefore now a piece of paper that authorises nothing and never really authorised anything. I have carried it in my wallet all the way and taken it out twice to look at, not because it is useful, it has never been useful, but because it has my name on it printed by a machine in a country that did not know my name before. I am not going to throw it away, and I have not examined why.

There is a rotation board on the wall of the shed and it explains four of the five things.

The board is a whiteboard, and on it in marker are the shifts, who is on and who is off and when the changeover is, the ordinary arithmetic of keeping a place staffed, and I read it because I read boards now. It told me four things I had wondered about, when the water gets checked and who empties the bins and when the warden comes through and where the nearest help is, four of the five things I wanted to know laid out in marker on a board. The fifth thing was not on the board and would not be, because the fifth thing was the warden.

There were two field units named on the board, in small letters at the bottom, a note about which office to call for what. I worked out from it that the boundary between two field units runs somewhere on this parkway, that the road I have been travelling crosses an administrative line I cannot see and the ice cannot see and the elk cannot see. A line that exists only in offices and on boards, dividing two hundred and thirty kilometres of the same mountains into two jurisdictions, for reasons that have nothing to do with the mountains and everything to do with how you staff a thing that long. I have started to find these lines everywhere. The trip has taught me to see the seams in things.

The warden came through on the fourth afternoon and I knew him.

I knew him. He was the warden from Lake Louise, the one with the tag, CONSCIENCE-KEEPER, the one who told my mother the fire was banned and said the figure, twenty-five thousand dollars, the way you say a bus time. Here he was a hundred and thirty kilometres north, in a different park in a different field unit, checking a campground nobody had booked, and it was him, the same man, the same tag. I said so, once, out loud, to myself. I said that is the man from Lake Louise, and then I did not say it again.

I did not say it to him. I do not know why I did not say it to him.

He did not appear to recognise me and I did not test whether he would. There was a thing in the way he moved through the campground, checking the sites against a list that could not

exist because nothing was booked, that told me the recognition was not the point and had never been the point. A man who is the same man in two parks a hundred and thirty kilometres apart is not a man having a coincidence. He is a man being what he is in more than one place. You do not point at that. You just see it, and let it be seen, and say nothing.

It was a colleague who said the thing, not me and not him.

A woman at the next site, a local, packing up, said to her husband without lowering her voice that the warden gets everywhere, that she had seen him at Lake Louise in July and at Two Jack before that and here now, that he must drive the parkway end to end in his sleep. She said it as a small joke about a hard-working man, and her husband laughed. Neither of them meant anything by it, and neither of them was wrong. The warden did not look up from the site he was checking. I watched him not look up, and understood that the not-looking-up was the answer to a question nobody had quite asked.

My father asked, at dinner that evening, whether I thought the warden being here too was strange, and I said no, and I meant it, and I could not have explained why I meant it. It is not strange that a warden works more than one campground. Wardens have routes. Routes cross parks. A man can be at Lake Louise in one week and here in another. It is a roster, not a marvel. All of that is true and I believe all of it. None of it is the reason I said no. The reason I said no is a thing I do not have words for, and did not try to find them for, at dinner, with my father watching to see whether his son had noticed something worth noticing.

He checked our site, twenty-two, thoroughly, against the list that does not exist.

He walked the site, our site, the one nobody booked and no paper records, and he checked it the way he would check a booked one, the fire ring cold because the ban has not lifted, the table, the ground, the distance to the trees, thorough, complete, against a standard that does not bend for the fact that we are nobody's entry in anything. He did not ask our names and did not write anything down that I could see, and did the full check anyway, because the check is the check whether or not there is a booking behind it.

The tap at our site is the same make as the tap at the first campground.

I noticed it filling the water jug on the fourth morning, the same handle, the same stiff quarter-turn, the same drip at the same point in the closing of it, a tap identical to the one at the first place we stayed, seventeen days and a country ago. I did not mention it to anybody, because it is the kind of thing only I notice and only I would find worth noticing. A tap being the same tap across two thousand kilometres, which is either nothing or is the trip entire in a single fitting. I filled the jug and did not decide which.

There is a thing I have been circling all trip and can nearly say now, on the fourth day, at the tap, which is that the people who run these places are not like the places. The places are wild, or made to look wild, mountains and ice and a river the colour of milk, and the people who run them are the opposite of wild, they are rosters and boards and figures and checks. I

spent the first two weeks thinking the wildness was the point and the people were in the way of it. I do not think that now. I am not sure yet what I think instead, and I have decided not to force it, and I stood at the tap and watched the warden check a site nobody had booked, against a list that could not exist, and I let the not-being-sure be where I was.

The tap ran the way it had run all four days, a stiff quarter-turn and then a full cold stream that did not warm no matter how long you left it, because the water came off the ice up the road and had been ice that morning, and I filled the jug to the line and turned it off and the last of it dripped at the same point in the closing it had dripped at every time, and the warden moved to the next site with the same walk he had used at the last one, and a raven that had been on the bear-bin since breakfast dropped down to the fire ring of the site he had just cleared and found nothing, because there is never anything, because the check is the check.

At four o'clock the warden went off shift and somebody else came on.

The changeover was on the board and it happened at four, the way the board said, the Conscience-Keeper handing the campground to whoever was next. He walked to the staff vehicles and was gone, off the parkway or further up it, I could not tell. The campground was exactly as staffed at one minute past four as it had been at one minute to, which is the point of a rotation, that the place does not notice the change. I filled the water jug at the tap that is the same tap, and the ordinary shift ended, and nobody but me had watched the man from Lake

Louise check a site nobody booked and then drive north into the smoke to be the same man somewhere else.

PART VII

THE RETURN

TABLE 9 · HOPE

We came back by the old road, which was my decision, and I will defend it.

A fast way and a slow way run from the mountains to the coast. The fast way is the one we did not take, the Coquihalla, a modern engineered climb that gets you there. The slow way is the Fraser Canyon, the older road, the one they built first, following the river because the river had already found the only way through. I chose the river, over the objection of nobody. Sanne had stopped objecting to my routing somewhere around the fourth day, and the children object to everything equally, which is the same as objecting to nothing.

We went east out of Jasper first, then south down the North Thompson to Kamloops, then west onto Highway 1 into the canyon.

The canyon is a thing I had read about and not understood,

because reading about a canyon gives you the depth and the length and does not give you the river. The river is the thing. Brown and fast and moving in a way water should not move, not flowing so much as being forced, a volume of water pushed through a space too small for it. I drove above it for an hour with the vehicle I had learned to drive and did not once feel the vehicle was the largest thing in the picture, because the river was.

The road itself is a lesson I did not expect at the end of the trip. It is narrow where the newer highway is wide, and it goes where the rock lets it rather than where an engineer would prefer. It has tunnels of its own, short ones, cut through the shoulders of the canyon where going around was not possible. I drove the vehicle I had learned to drive through them one at a time. The vehicle fit, because a road built before this vehicle existed was built for the loads of its own day, and those loads were bigger than a rented motorhome. I understood, going through the third tunnel, that I was no longer afraid of the vehicle, which I had been for seventeen days, and had stopped being without noticing when I stopped.

There are two railways in the canyon, one on each wall, and this is the detail I keep returning to.

Two railway companies, historically, each of which needed to get through the same canyon. Rather than share a route or come to an arrangement, they built separately. One line on the east wall and one on the west, each boring its own tunnels through its own rock on its own side. Two full railways in a canyon that a sensible arrangement would have crossed with

one. I looked at the tunnels on the far wall from the road and thought that somewhere in an office a century ago two men had failed to agree, and the failure was now geology.

Then there was Hell's Gate, which is a place where all of the river goes through a gap, and we went down into it.

At one point the canyon narrows and the Fraser, all of it, all of the water I had been driving above for an hour, is forced through a gap in the rock. About thirty-five metres wide. The effect is not a waterfall. It is worse than a waterfall, the same water going faster because the same volume through a smaller gap has nowhere to go but faster. A cable car takes you down into the gorge to look at it. We took the cable car, the four of us, into the gorge, to look at the water.

The cable car was a serious matter to us and a sandwich to everybody else.

The other people on the airtram treated it as transport, a way to get down to the café at the bottom. We treated it as an event, a cable car over a gorge, which is not a thing our country has, because our country has no gorges. I held the rail. Sanne held the rail. The children pretended not to hold the rail. At the bottom there was a café selling sandwiches to people for whom the descent had been a way to reach lunch. We had come down the same wire for the water.

Fishways run beside the narrows, and I read every sign about them.

The signs explained that in 1914 the building of the railway put rock into the river at that point and made the narrows worse. Worse for the fish, the salmon that go up the river to

spawn, which could no longer get through the gap that people had made narrower. The fishways beside it were built afterward and are maintained now, concrete channels that give the fish a way around the thing people did in 1914. So the river is a river that was damaged by people and has been managed by people ever since. I found I understood that better than I would have three weeks ago, before I had watched people manage a mountain.

Then we drove down to Hope, and stopped for pie, and the pie was the best thing in seventeen days.

I will stand behind that, including against the lake. The lake was beautiful, and I photographed it, and I will show people. The pie was better. The pie was in a restaurant on the highway with paper placemats and laminated menus and a waitress who called me hon. It was blackberry, and the blackberries were from somewhere near, and it came warm with ice cream going soft on the top of it. After seventeen days of being a foreigner who could not park, I sat at a table and ate a piece of pie and was simply a man eating pie. It was the most at home I had felt since we landed.

The vehicle got a name in the back seat somewhere around Boston Bar and the name stuck before I could stop it.

The children named it, and I will not record the name. The name is undignified, and the vehicle deserves better after what it and I went through together. The name was produced by committee in the back seat and adopted by three of the four of us within about ninety seconds. By the time we reached Hope the name was the vehicle's name. Sanne used it at the counter,

in front of the waitress, as though the vehicle had always been called that. The waitress did not blink, because a waitress in Hope has heard every rented motorhome called something by the time it reaches her.

Tess had the same pie and Thijs had apple and Sanne had a thing with lemon in it that she pronounced correct, which from Sanne is the highest grade. For a while nobody said anything, because we were four people eating pie at the end of a long thing we had done together and had not entirely finished doing, and the not-talking was the good kind. The waitress refilled the coffee without being asked and called me hon a second time. I have decided I like being called hon.

I ordered a second piece of pie without discussing it with anybody.

That is the thing I want to record. A man who had done arithmetic for seventeen days, who had counted tokens and measured stalls and folded the mirror before and read the arrow and believed it was for him. A man who had budgeted the second dryer and the stroopwafel and the shuttle tickets. He sat in a restaurant in Hope and ordered a second piece of pie without doing the arithmetic, without asking whether anybody minded, and without justifying it. He ate it, and it was as good as the first. That is the closest thing to a holiday I had on the holiday, the second piece of pie, ordered without discussion, at a table with paper placemats, on the old road home.

DAMAGE SCHEDULE 4471903-R

We came back through the flat farms and they had changed.

On the way out they looked like home. Dykes, ditches, low fields, a horizon with nothing on it. Exactly like the road to my oma's house. Now they look like nothing, not like home, not like anything. Seventeen days did that. The flat green fields are just fields now, in a country that is not mine, near the airport we fly out of tomorrow.

The depot is where we started. It is a different man.

Not the one from the start. My dad looked for him and did not say so. This one is younger. He has a clipboard and a phone, and the same speed the first one had. Eleven a morning in July. We are the once in a lifetime, and he is the eleventh today.

He walks around the vehicle slowly and reads it out loud.

Here is a scratch. Here is a scratch. He says each one and taps his phone. He is not unkind. He is thorough. He goes along the side and names every mark, one after another, the way you name things in a prayer. My dad walks behind him, and my mum walks behind my dad, and Thijs and I come last.

Some of the marks are ours. Some are not.

There is a scratch by the door and that one is ours. I saw it happen, a post at a campground, my dad's face. A scratch on the bumper I have never seen. A mark low on the back nobody claims. The man does not ask whose is whose. He names them, and the schedule does not care whose.

Then he gets to the roof.

There is a chip on the roof. A stone. High up. You would not

see it unless you climbed. He climbs, because that is the job, and he finds it and says it. Roof, chip. He taps the phone. Four of us stand and look up at a part of the vehicle none of us can see. Nobody says anything. Thijs looks at the ground. On the first day someone told my dad the roof was a thing you could damage. Nobody says that now.

Then the awning.

The awning arm on the left sits at an angle. My dad noticed it in the mountains, at a rest stop. He decided it had always been like that. It has not always been like that. The man sees it in two seconds. He does not decide it was always like that. Deciding is not his job, seeing is. He writes it down. Awning.

The charge for the awning is four hundred and ten dollars.

That is more than one of our flights. My dad does the sum without being asked. I watch him do it. Four hundred and ten dollars for an arm at an angle. It may have been us, or the family before us, or the wind. The schedule does not say which. The schedule is a list of what things cost, not a list of who broke them.

My mum takes out the folder.

The folder has been everywhere with us. The sleeve, the tabs, the confirmations. She takes it out at the counter and finds the page. One booking on it got closed. A campground near the fire, closed by the park, refunded. The clause about closures. The confirmation number in blocks of three. Seven one six two zero eight eight three. The refund is almost the awning. Not quite. Almost.

The man reads the closure refund off his screen. It matches

her folder.

He is not surprised she has the number. He reads it back, digit by digit. Always digit by digit. It is the same number. The one from the phone call in the parking lot four days ago, the one she has had since June. It lines up against the awning charge, and the two nearly cancel. The fire that closed the campground pays back most of the arm.

The awning minus the refund is a small number.

Smaller than a flight. Smaller than the pie, almost, with enough pie. My dad looks at the small number, and something goes out of his shoulders. The arithmetic he has carried for seventeen days. He signs.

I am watching him do it. I have watched all of them do everything for seventeen days, from the side, timing it, filing it. My mum is watching me.

Not the schedule. Not the folder. Me. The folder is shut under her arm. She is looking at me look at my dad, and she has been doing it a while, I think. I did not clock it. I do not point the watching at us. Her face is not doing the worry. I can always read the worry. It has a shape and I know the shape. This is not it. She catches me catching her. She does not look away. I do not look away. She does not make it a thing. I do not make it a thing. Then the man says something to my dad and it is over. I do not know what her face was. I am not going to decide what it was. For once I am the one who got seen. I am leaving it there.

He signs the damage schedule and it is over.

Rental agreement four four seven one nine zero three,

returned. One awning. One roof chip. Several scratches, some ours and some not, and one nobody will ever claim. Priced and signed and closed. The man gives my dad a copy and says you're all set, which is a thing they say here. He goes to the next family. Always a next family. We stand in the flat farm light with our bags and a folder with nothing left in it to organise. Tomorrow we fly. Nobody says the trip is over. It is, and saying it would not add anything.