

THE HUNGRY GODS
GO DOOR TO DOOR

N. Van Seters & Claude

Every institution in this book is real and every procedure in it is accurate. The reason codes are constructed to fit documented categories and are not quoted. No facility is named.

PART ONE

ODD, 1101 TO 1143

Dale Ferraro, letter carrier

The cards came down in a bundle of two hundred and nine with an elastic band around them and a note from the depot paper-clipped to the top one, and the note said they were to go out with the regular mail and not before it, which I understood to mean that somebody upstairs did not want two hundred and nine people getting the same piece of paper on the same morning with nothing else in the box to soften it.

I took the band off at the case at ten past six and started working them in, and card stock does not want to sit in a walk. Lay it flat against a flyer and it slides out from under; stand it on edge and it sits proud and you lose your place. So you thumb it in behind the letter mail and keep the heel of your hand on the stack, and that adds a second and a half to every address, and there were two hundred and nine of them, and I was the better part of forty minutes on that case that I would not otherwise have been.

The walk is assessed at four hundred and seventy-two minutes. That is not how long it takes me. It is how long the system says it takes, worked out from a manual with time values in it for every action a carrier performs, and the ceiling is four hundred and eighty-five, and if your route is assessed over that they either take work off it or they pay you over-assessed until they do.

Four seven two. I have been within thirteen minutes of the ceiling since the last restructure and everybody at that depot knows it.

I have carried that walk since 2004 and there are a hundred and five addresses on the odd side and a hundred and four on the even, and the difference is a lane at the top end that was surveyed and never built out. I know which of them are four-minute houses and which are ninety seconds, and I know that the dog at 1155 has never in its life got past that gate and barks at me through it every single morning of its life, and I know which slots take a magazine flat and which want it folded lengthwise and which have a brush inside that will hold a thin envelope halfway down and let it hang there until

the wind gets at it, and none of that is written down anywhere at the depot, and there is no field for it and there never has been. It is in my hands, and it has been in my hands so long that I do not think about it at all until somebody covers the walk for me and comes back and wants to talk about the stairs.

None of it is in the four hundred and seventy-two either. The manual has a value for a flight of stairs and it does not have a value for moss.

It was already warm when I went out, which in August it is by seven, and there was smoke sitting in the valley the way there has been most of that month for the last few years, so that you could look straight at the sun over the water and it was orange and you could hold your eye on it. It was going to be thirty by two. I knew that at the case before I had seen any sky at all, because the building itself tells you, and then when I got up to the turn I could see right across the inlet and the far shore was not there.

The card is about the size of a postcard. Blue on one side, white on the other. Corporate marque top left. Under it, in bold, a line saying that mail delivery in your community is changing. Under that a paragraph in English and the same paragraph in French. Under that a box, printed for each address, with a module number and a compartment number in it, and a date in December, and a phone number for questions.

I read one of them at the case before I started, all the way through, twice. Then I did not read another one, because there were two hundred and eight left and they said the same thing.

What it means, and the card does not say this and does not need to, is that a walk with a box on it is a shorter walk. You do not go up the drive. You do not do the stairs. You put two hundred pieces into one cabinet at the corner and you drive on. Somebody has worked out that it costs the corporation two hundred and eighty-four dollars a year to come to a door and a hundred and sixty-two to come to a box, and that number is public and I have seen it, and it is not a wrong number.

What it means for the four hundred and seventy-two is that the walk gets remeasured. What it means after that is fewer walks,

because the minutes have to go somewhere and there is only so much street.

The union has a position on this. The corporation has a position on this. I have been to the meetings for both of them and I have voted in every one of those ratifications since 1998, and I say only that neither position contains a sentence about what happens to the part of the job that was never in the four hundred and seventy-two in the first place, and I do not blame either of them for that, because there is no way to put it in a collective agreement and no way to put it in a business case.

The first one went into 1101 at seven minutes past seven. Split-level, carport, slot in the door at knee height, brush inside. You push with two fingers and you hear it land on the tile.

I did the odd side first, which is what I do. Up the hill, and the hill is the job. Everything on that street runs away from the water and there is no flat on it anywhere, and after twenty-two years my right knee knows the gradient better than any part of me that has an opinion about it.

Nobody came out for the first hour. That is normal for a Tuesday at that time. There are people awake behind those doors and they can hear the flap and they do not come, and that is their business.

Then a man came out at 1119.

He was in socks, and he came down his own front stairs in socks and out onto the concrete, which by nine is warm enough to notice through a sock, holding the card out in front of him in both hands.

"Is this you?" he said. "Did you write this?"

"No."

He turned it over and looked at the back, which is blank.

"It says here I get a number."

"Forty-four oh eight."

He looked up at me.

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

"I've had the card in my hand since six."

He stood there on the second step with the socks going dark at the toes and read it through again from the beginning, and then he said, is this because of the strike, and I said no, and he said, is it because

of you people, and I said no, and he said, well, who is it because of, then, and I said there was a number on the card.

He looked at the number.

“That’s a phone number.”

“That’s the number on the card.”

He went back up the stairs. He did not slam the door and he did not thank me, and both of those seem about right to me now.

I turned at the top and came down the even side, and by then the sun was on that side of the street and stayed on it, and the cards had started to curl at the corners in the bag where the bag sits against my hip and my hip is warm, and I put them through curled, because a curled card delivers the same as a flat one and I wasn’t standing in somebody’s carport straightening paper for the benefit of a thing that tells a man he is getting a number.

There were four addresses that day where somebody was standing at the window, and I count that sort of thing without meaning to, and on an ordinary day it is one or two, and four is a lot for a Tuesday. I did not think about why at the time and I am not going to sit here now and tell you that I did.

The dog at 1155 barked at the gate. Somebody had put a bin out at 1167 on the wrong day and it had been out since Friday and was going to stay out, because that is a house where nothing gets brought in until somebody’s daughter comes. A woman I have never spoken to in twenty-two years raised a hand at me from a kitchen window at 1173, which she does, and I raised one back, which I do.

I finished at twenty past one, which was about half an hour long, and the half hour was the cards.

The last address on that walk is 1143, at the bottom end where the street bends toward the water. That slot is stiff and has been since a repaint some years back when somebody got paint down into the hinge. You have to push the flap in with the back of your hand and hold it open while you feed with the other one, and I have reported it twice over the years, and it is not the kind of thing anybody comes out for, and I would not expect them to.

I pushed the flap with the back of my hand and held it and put the card through, and it went, and the flap came down on my knuckles the way it always does.

1107 · DOOR → CMB 44-02 · MATCHED

acct. 7 Nov

Meaghan Rutt, conversion project officer

The site file for module 44 came back approved on the fourteenth, and I am recording here, at the front of this, that it was approved against every criterion in the standard, because it was, and because whoever opens this file after me is going to arrive at the discrepancy on page nine and read backwards from it, and there is a version of the reading in which something was missed at this stage, and nothing was missed at this stage.

The criteria are not vague and they are not discretionary. Clearances in metres from utility access, from manhole access, from the trunk of a tree or its root zone. Distances from a bus stop approach and from a departure. Reachable and usable by a person with a disability, which is assessed on the ground and not from the drawing. Limits on how many modules may stand together where the frontage opposite is residential.

All of it was assessed, all of it was met, and the file went to Delivery Planning on the eleventh and the approval was on it on the fourteenth.

I did not attend the signing, because there is no signing to attend. That is not a complaint and it is not an irregularity. A file is placed in a queue and it comes back out of the queue with an approval recorded against it, and that is all the event consists of, and if you were to ask me to describe the officer who approved it I would not be able to tell you anything except that the approval was correct and was on the file the following morning, and I have been asked that question since and I want it written down that the answer has not changed.

The municipal side is where things get said out loud, and I would rather have things said out loud, which is not a view shared by everybody at my level.

I had the engineering technician on the phone in the same week about servicing, and he is good, and he has been doing that job for a long time, and he had the drawing up on his screen while we talked, which you can hear, because people stop making noises with their mouth when they are reading.

“You’ve got it on the boulevard at the corner,” he said.

“That’s right.”

“That’s the side that floods.”

“It meets the criteria.”

“I’m not saying it doesn’t,” he said. “I’m telling you it floods.”

There is no field on the assessment for a site that meets every published criterion and is nevertheless the wrong site, and I will be careful about how I put this, because when this file is read later it is going to look as though the information was received and not passed on. The information was received and it was passed on. It went into the consultation record on the same day as a comment received from the municipality, with his name against it and the date against it, and a comment received is a thing that is recorded and considered.

What considering it consists of, I am not able to tell you. Considering is not done where I sit. A comment goes forward with the file and the file goes into the queue and what comes back out of the queue is an approval or it is not an approval, and this one was an approval, and the boulevard at the corner is where the site is.

I told him it was recorded. He said, right. He has been doing that job a long time as well.

I will add one thing. He did not ask me to change it. He knew I could not change it. What he wanted was for somebody at this end to have heard him say it out loud, and I heard him, and it is written here now, and that is not nothing even if it is also not much.

The notification went to print in the last week of July. The content is not drafted locally. It is produced centrally in both official languages and the variable box is populated from the assignment file, which is to say from the file described above, which is to say from my file. Two hundred and nine cards were produced for that walk, which is the address count, and the address count is a number I entered.

I did not see one of them until September. A carrier had one in his hand at the depot, and it had been through a wet bag, and the corners had gone soft and furred and the blue had lifted off the card stock in patches where it had been against something. He held it up and asked whether they were meant to do that. I said I did not know, and he said, well, they do that.

The matching opened the same week. There are something in the order of twelve hundred addresses in the tranche for our unit, and something over two hundred of those sit on the walk this file concerns, and the matching is not complicated work. I say so because it takes a long time, and people assume that anything taking a long time must be difficult, and it is not difficult. It is long.

Each address that is to be converted is assigned a module and a compartment. The assignment is written against the address. The keys are produced against the assignment and go out to the address ahead of the switch, in the ordinary mail, through the door that is being taken away.

There is no step in any of that at which a person's name is required. I have been asked about it twice, once by a councillor's office and once by a member of the public who had been told otherwise. This corporation has never needed to know who lives anywhere and does not need to know now. It knows addresses. A compartment is assigned to an address the way a slot in a door was, which is to say not assigned to anybody at all. It is simply where the address is.

The councillor's office wanted to know whether we would be holding a list of who lived where, and how long it would be kept. There is no such list.

The member of the public wanted the opposite thing. He wanted to know how we would make sure his mail went to him and not to the people upstairs, and I had to tell him we have never made sure of that. He said, so it goes in a box with everybody else's. I said it goes in your compartment. He said, and who says it's mine. I said the address does.

He did not think that was an answer. I am not certain it is one.

The address count for the segment served by module 44 was entered on the twenty-first, from the delivery list. The compartment

count for module 44 was entered on the twenty-first, from the order confirmation. They were entered by me and they were entered correctly and they sit on facing pages of the same working file, because that is the layout of the template and the template is not mine.

They were not compared on that day. There was no requirement that they be compared on that day. The comparison arises at commissioning, which is the stage at which it was in fact compared, and at which the discrepancy was identified and recorded, and it was recorded by me.

I know how that is going to read on page nine.

The file went forward on the twenty-second with the approval, the consultation record, the address list, the compartment allocation and the servicing note attached to it, and everything that was required to be on it was on it.

1111 · DOOR → CMB 44-03 · MATCHED

acct. 11 Nov

Gary Loewen, depot superintendent

I want to explain how this one went, because if you had been standing in the line behind her you would have come away with a particular impression of it, and I would like to give you the rest.

A morning at that counter is mostly small. It is parcels going out and parcels being collected. It is passport applications where somebody has brought the wrong photographs, and I have to tell them the photographs are wrong, and about one time in four they have driven in from somewhere to be told that. The commonest fault is the smile. The second commonest is the hair, where a person has hair and the hair has a view of its own about the edge of the frame. It is people renewing a box. It is people who have come in to buy one stamp and want to know whether one stamp is enough, and the honest answer to that's that it depends on the thickness, and I would rather weigh it than guess.

"It's just a card."

"Is there anything in the card?"

“A cheque.”

“That’s fine.”

“And a photograph.”

“Let’s weigh it.”

That conversation, or one close enough to it, happens perhaps six times a week, and about one time in six there’s something in the card that changes the answer, and the something is almost always a photograph, and I’ve never worked out why a photograph is the thing people forget they have put in. That is the register I work in. It sounds like hedging. It isn’t hedging. It is that I would rather take fifteen seconds and be right than save the fifteen seconds and have somebody’s letter come back to them in February.

There’s a woman on the phones behind me whose average handle time is the worst in the region and has been for two years.

I’ve had that number in a report on my desk four times. It comes with a graph. She is eleven minutes against a target of five and a half, and the region would like me to do something about it, and what I have done about it is nothing.

Because I’ve listened. You can, and I did, twice, properly, an hour each time.

What she does is answer the question underneath. A man phones about a redirection and what he actually needs is to know whether his late mother’s mail will keep coming, and there’s no field for that and no script for it and no code to close the call under, and she gets to it in about ninety seconds and then spends nine minutes on it, and the man rings off and does not ring back, which is the only measure nobody keeps.

I have never once heard her explain how she knew. I asked her, in the second hour. She said she didn’t know what I meant.

Since August there has been the other thing on top of it. People come in about the cards. They come in about the boxes. They come in holding a piece of paper and wanting a person to be responsible for it, and I am the person at the counter, so for the length of that conversation I am responsible for it, and I’ve decided that’s the right way to handle it even though I didn’t decide any of what is on the paper.

She came in at about twenty past ten with a printed email. She had printed it at the library, which she told me, and she put it down on the counter and turned it around so that it was facing me, which people do and which I appreciate, because it means they want it read rather than nodded at.

It was the notification in its longer form. Same content as the card, more of it, with the module and the compartment and the date in December. She had underlined two lines of it in pen.

I read it properly, both underlined lines and the paragraph they sat in, which took a minute, and she waited, and there was nobody behind her yet.

I said I could confirm it was accurate. I said her address was in the first group in our area, that the change would take effect in December, and that her keys would come to her door before then and she wouldn't need to do anything at all to receive them. People find the keys part reassuring. It is the one part of this where something arrives instead of being taken away.

"I'm eighty-one," she said.

I said I understood, and that there was a program for customers who need accommodation.

"Is that a form?"

I said it was an application.

She looked at me.

"So it's a form."

Behind her a man said, to nobody in particular, "It's a form."

Now. It is an application. Form makes people think of a thing you fill in and send off and never hear about again, and this isn't that. An application is assessed. There is a person at the other end. The outcomes include delivery continuing to the door permanently, and I've seen that granted, and there are more than seventeen thousand households in this country receiving some accommodation right now. The ones who most need to ask are the ones who have already decided there's no point in asking.

But I said application and she heard form, and she wasn't wrong to hear form, because the first thing that happens is that she has to fill something in.

I went through the criteria as I understand them, which is that the assessment is on functional limitation and not on age. I said that if getting to the box would be difficult for her, that's the thing to describe on the application, in her own words, in as much detail as she is willing to put down. I said not to be modest about it. That is my own advice and not the corporation's, and I give it every time, because people are modest about it and then they're declined.

"So being eighty-one isn't a limitation."

"Not on its own."

"It is where I live," she said.

That is a hill with a bend in it and no sidewalk on the uphill side for about sixty metres, and the box is going in at the corner by the boulevard, and I've walked it, because I make a point of walking them when they're in my area. In the wet it isn't a walk I would want to make twice a week in February at eighty-one.

"I've lived there fifty-one years," she said. "Nobody's ever had to bring me anything."

I said that wasn't what it was.

"It's what it'll be," she said.

I didn't have anything to say to that. What I had was a number, so I told her I would give her the number.

The pamphlets haven't come. I've asked twice. They are produced centrally and they're somewhere on a list behind other things on the same list, and in the meantime what I have is a phone number I know by heart because I've said it forty or fifty times since the start of August.

So I tore a receipt off the roll and wrote the number on the back of it and slid it across, and she looked at the number, and she looked at me, and she put it in her handbag and said thank you and went out.

And I told her, before she went, that she would need to have it in before the conversion date in December.

That isn't true. I believed it when I said it. It is a standing program and you can apply at any point, before or after, and if it is granted after conversion they come back to the door. I had it in my head that there was a cut-off because there's a cut-off for something else, a

mailing preference thing, and the two had run together at some point over the autumn and stayed run together.

I found out in February. She hadn't applied. She told the person who took the next call that she had missed the date, and the person who took that call wasn't me.

The man behind her put his parcel on the counter.

"Do I get a receipt," he said, "or do I get the number?"

1117 · DOOR → CMB 44-04 · MATCHED

acct. 15 Nov

Rob Tenhove, plant supervisor

The second pass went down at about half nine, which is the worst time it can go down.

Half nine is when everything for the North Shore dispatch is inside the machine and none of it's out the other side. Earlier and you haven't committed. Later and it's on a truck. Half nine is the one point in the night where all of it's somewhere you can't reach. We run in the order of forty thousand letters an hour on a normal night. That is the number people quote and it's roughly right.

What the second pass does is the part nobody outside understands. The first pass gets a letter down to a depot. Anybody could do that with a wall of pigeonholes and a week. The second pass puts it into the order a carrier walks. Address by address. Down one side and up the other. That isn't sorting, it's sequencing, and it's why a carrier is out the door at eight instead of ten.

When the sequencer stops you aren't losing forty thousand an hour. You are losing the run. There is nothing sitting behind it waiting to help.

So you have two options and they're both bad.

One. Send it out unsequenced. The carriers case it by hand at the other end, which they can do, because they did it for forty years before there was a machine. It costs them two hours. They come off the floor at ten. Somebody phones me. The depot superintendent phones me and he is polite about it, which is worse.

Two. Rebuild the containers here, by hand, and send them out in something approaching order. The carriers come off the floor forty minutes late instead of two hours. Nobody phones me.

I've never once picked option one.

Maintenance said forty minutes.

"Forty minutes."

"Is that forty or is that your forty?"

"It's forty."

It was an hour and ten. That isn't a criticism of maintenance. It is never forty minutes. I've been told forty minutes for nineteen years and I've written down what it actually was for about the last six, and the average is a bit over an hour, and I've never shown that to anybody because there's nothing to be done with it.

The Hand was on nights that week, which is most weeks, because he puts in for them.

I put four people on it.

You don't put your best four on it. You put the four who won't stop and ask you things.

I've had a very good handler on a night like that ask me twice whether the depot wanted them tied. I don't know whether the depot wants them tied. Nobody has ever wanted anything tied.

You don't want the question. You want the container. There is a difference and it took me a while to learn it. A good handler who needs to be told twice is worth less at half nine than an average one who doesn't.

There's a fifth man, who I didn't put on it.

He's been with us eleven years and he isn't good at this. That's a fact about the work and not a fact about him. He's slow at the feed and slower under pressure and he double-handles, which is the one thing you can't afford at a jam, and he knows every bit of that about himself. He's polite. He's on time. He's never taken a day that wasn't owed to him. He'll strip and reset a stacker faster than the tech will, which is worth something on a Tuesday and is worth nothing at half nine on a Thursday.

I've moved him onto the Hand's line before now, twice, on a quiet night, because it's the easiest line in the building when nothing's

going wrong, and because the Hand doesn't mind and doesn't ask why.

I've never once told him. I move him. That's how it's done, and I'm not proud of it, and I don't know a better way that doesn't cost him something worse.

The Hand had seventeen.

If the Hand is off you give seventeen to two people and then you go and look at it yourself. That is what his being there is worth on a night like that, and it is worth a good deal.

Seventeen is the North Shore. The reason he had it is that he's the one you can give seventeen to and not think about again for an hour, and that's the only basis on which I assign anything at half nine at night with a dispatch window closing. It isn't a compliment and it isn't a favour. It is triage.

Hand-rebuilding sounds like craft and it isn't craft. You take what came off the first pass, which is sorted down to the depot but not to the walk. You break the bundles. You put it back into the container in the order you believe the carrier is going to want it. And you're wrong, because you can't hold two hundred addresses in your head in street order for a street you have never stood on, and nobody on that floor has stood on it. What you're buying isn't accuracy. Nobody on that floor has stood on that street. Nobody on that floor could tell you the name of it. They are putting mail in an order they have inferred from a printout, for a hill they have never seen, in a city most of them don't live in.

What you're buying is the difference between a bad morning and a ruined one. That is worth an hour of four people's time and I would do it again tomorrow.

Seventeen went out sealed. Every container does. You put a numbered plastic seal through the hasp, the number goes on the manifest, the number is read again at the far end, and the point of the arrangement is that a matching number means nobody has been into it.

I signed the manifest that night. The seal on seventeen was 409318.

We got the dispatch out at eleven forty against a target of eleven.

Forty minutes late is a result. An hour and ten of downtime and forty minutes of lateness means somebody made up half an hour standing at a container in a cold building, and nobody says anything about that, and I don't say anything about it either, because if I did they would want to know why it isn't forty minutes every night.

The following morning the depot phoned about something else. A cage with a bent gate, which has been bent since spring. We dealt with the cage.

"It's the same cage."

"It's the same cage."

"Have you put a ticket in?"

"I've put three."

It has been bent since spring and it will be bent at Christmas.

Then at the end of it, more or less in passing, the supervisor said that seventeen had come off in sequence.

I said, what do you mean, in sequence.

He said, in sequence. Walk order. He said the carrier cased it in twenty minutes and had asked who did it, because he wanted to know.

I said the machine was down.

He said he was aware the machine was down. He said that was why he was mentioning it.

I asked him about the seal, because that's the question you ask.

He read it back off his own sheet. 409318.

One of the two handlers who had loaded it was standing eight feet from me. I asked him what order it had gone in. He said it went in the order it came off the first pass, which is depot order, which isn't walk order and isn't near walk order, and he said it the way you say a thing that's obvious.

I said I would look at it.

I didn't look at it.

Straight about that, because it's the part somebody might pick at later. A container that arrives in walk order isn't a problem. A late dispatch is worth a phone call. An early one isn't. Something arriving better than it left isn't. I've been on that floor for nineteen years and I've four reorganizations behind me and the main thing nineteen

years teaches you is which things are worth the call. The list is shorter than you would think. It is: somebody is hurt, something is on fire, the dispatch isn't going, or a number I have to sign is wrong.

Everything else can wait until a person who is paid to have an opinion about it's awake. There aren't many of those on at midnight and there's a reason for that and the reason is that nothing happens at midnight that anybody upstairs can help with.

Seventeen coming off in sequence isn't on the list.

I did say something about it on the floor that night. Not much.

"Who loaded seventeen?" one of the handlers said. He had heard the same thing I had, because that floor isn't large.

"The Hand."

"Course he did," he said, and went back to the feed.

That is what he is called. I couldn't tell you who started it or when. The classification is mail handler. Somebody shortened it, at some point, the way things get shortened on a floor where you're shouting over a machine and nobody has time for the second word. I've said it a thousand times without thinking about it and I've never once heard anybody ask what it means, and if somebody did ask I suppose I would say it means him.

There's a grievance in on that night. Not about the seal — nobody knows about the seal. It's about the four I put on the rebuild and the two I didn't, and the position is that the assignment should have gone by seniority and went by my judgement, and as a reading of the agreement the position is correct.

I was on that floor eleven years before I was on this side of it. I've filed that same grievance myself, twice. I don't think either of us is wrong, and that's the part that never gets written down anywhere.

The board that night read eleven forty against eleven, and I wrote it up as equipment, and it was equipment.

Priya Sandhu, relief carrier

First time on that walk. They gave it to me at ten past six.

A sequence printout. A key ring. That's it.

Nobody sits you down. There isn't time.

There's a case with your name on a strip of tape and there's mail in it and the truck goes when the truck goes. That's the briefing.

I've done forty routes like that. Maybe more. I've stopped counting because the number embarrasses me.

Two years I've been doing this. Two years and a bit.

Everyone assumes you learn them. You don't learn them. You get through them.

There's a difference and nobody tells you that either.

The printout tells you plenty that's true.

Address. Sequence position. That's your order, that's what you walk.

What it doesn't tell you is everything you actually need.

Which slot has a brush in it. Which gate sticks. Which one you have to lift while you push.

Which dog is fine and which dog isn't.

Which house has a woman who'll come out and talk to you for ten minutes if you let her.

Which one's got a step that's gone soft.

Somebody knows all that. One person knows it. He's off.

There's a version of this job where somebody writes it down. Not here.

The case has pencil on the dividers. Somebody else's shorthand.

Little marks. A tick. Two ticks. A circled B on one of them.

I don't know what any of it means. I'm not going to guess.

Could be volume. Could be a hold. Could be a note about a dog, which would have been useful.

I did think about asking. There was nobody to ask at ten past six.

There's a supervisor at seven. I was gone by then.

I did ask, once, on a different route, what a circled letter meant.

“Which one?”

“Circled P.”

“That’ll be a parcel.”

“There’s no parcels in that walk.”

“Then it’s not a P.”

That was the end of that. I’ve never asked since.

Here’s the thing about that street.

It goes up.

Not a bit up. Up.

You come off the truck at the bottom and you look at it and you think, right.

Everything on the North Shore does this. I know that. I still think, right.

Somebody at the depot told me the trick is to do the hill first while you’re heavy.

Somebody else told me the trick is to do the hill last so you’re light going up.

Both of them have been here longer than me. Neither of them has that walk.

It’s not the climb. It’s that the bag doesn’t get lighter at the same rate you go up.

You’re heaviest at the steepest part. That’s just how the sequence falls.

And the sequence is built on line of travel. Line of travel assumes you can cross when you want to.

You can’t.

There’s a hedge run on the odd side. Eighty metres. No gap in it.

So the printout has you crossing at a point where there is a hedge.

Which means somebody measured it once and it was different then. Or nobody measured it. I don’t know which.

So I walked it. Then I walked it again.

First time I was doubling back constantly. Down, across, up, back down.

I want to say I did the hill three times over. It felt like three.

Second time I stopped following the printout and started following the street.

Which is what everyone says you should do and nobody says how.
You do it by getting it wrong first. That's the method. Nobody writes that down either.

Second time I did the odd side to the top. Turned at the lane. Came down the even.

That's what he does. I found that out after.

Nobody told me. It isn't written anywhere.

I phoned the depot from about halfway up.

Standing in somebody's driveway. Bag on my hip. Sweat going down the back of my neck.

"Is 1123 the one with the stairs or the one with the other stairs?"

"They've all got stairs."

"Right. Yes."

That's all the help I got and I'm not complaining. He was right.

They've all got stairs. Every single one.

Some of them have got stairs and then more stairs. There's one with a landing halfway.

I was forty minutes over. It might have been more. It gets away from you when you're doubling back, because you stop counting.

Then there was the gate at 1155.

Chain-link. Latch on the inside.

I got it open and there was a dog.

To be fair to it. It didn't come at me. It stood at the top of the steps and it made a noise I've not heard a dog make.

I put the mail through and I got out and I got the latch back on.

Found out later it's never got past that gate. Not once. Not in twenty years.

It stands behind it and it makes that noise and that's the end of the matter. That's all of it.

That would have been useful at seven fifteen.

Nobody's being unkind. It's just that he knows and I don't, and he's off, and there's no place where the knowing lives.

The doors are the other thing.

I count doors. Not houses. Always have.

It's the only number that means anything when you're new.

A house can be one door. It can be three. You don't find out which until you're standing in a side yard looking at a second bell.

There's two on that walk like that. Maybe three.

I found two.

Side of the house. Down a path. Past the bins.

Own door. Own bell. Name on a strip of tape above it, in biro, gone grey.

Nothing on the printout. Nothing anywhere, far as I can tell.

It's just a door.

"That's a door," I said. Out loud. Nobody there. "That's a whole door."

Put the mail through it and carried on.

What else are you going to do.

And it's not unusual. Half the houses up there have got somebody downstairs.

That's how anyone affords to be here. My cousin's in one in Lynn Valley. Has been six years.

Nobody registers them. Why would you.

The mail comes anyway. It's got a name on it and there's a bell with the same name.

So it's a place. It's just not a place anyone's written down.

Last thing before the count. A woman came out at about eleven at one of the houses near the bottom and asked if I was new.

"Covering."

"Is he off?"

"He's off today."

"He's never off."

I said I'd pass it on. I didn't. You don't, because you'd have to say a woman I couldn't describe asked after you, and that's not a message.

Counted at the end. Two hundred and fourteen.

Second pass, two hundred and twelve.

I don't know which is right. Probably neither.

Wrote down two hundred and twelve.

Because that was the one I did slower.

Dale Ferraro, letter carrier

The suspension came through on a Thursday, and I found out about it the way I find out about most things, which is that there was a note in the case with the mail for that address held out of it, and the note said that delivery to the address was suspended pending resolution of a hazard, and the hazard recorded on the file was a bear.

There is no bear at 1129.

I can hear how that sounds, so the other part first, which is that there are bears, and there have been bears on that hill for as long as there has been a hill and there will be bears on it after the last of us has stopped delivering anything to anybody, and I have stood at the bottom of a driveway on that walk at ten past seven in the morning with a bundle in my hand and waited while one came across the top of it and went down into the ravine at its own speed and did not look at me once. That is a Tuesday. That is not a story. Every carrier on that hill has a dozen of them and none of us tell them to each other, because there is nothing in them. A bear went past, and that is the story, and there is no second half to it.

The District puts out the notices every spring and every autumn and people put their bins out on the Wednesday night anyway, and then there is a bear on the street, and then there is a letter in the community paper about it. That is the cycle and it has been the cycle since before I started. I have carried the letter about it. I have carried the reply to the letter about it.

What there is not, and what there has never been in twenty-two years, is a bear at 1129, which is a bungalow with a paved yard and a chain-link fence and a woman in her sixties who keeps her bins inside a shed with a bolt on it, which is more than the rest of that street manages. I have been putting mail into that box for twenty-two years. I put mail into it for her mother before her, when the fence was wood.

But there is a form, and somebody assessed a hazard, and somebody signed the assessment, and once it is signed the mail is held and stays held until somebody signs the other one. I did ask, later,

what the assessment actually said. The fellow at the counter turned his screen a bit so I could see it, which he probably should not have done.

There is a field and the field is a drop-down, and the drop-down has dog on it, and it has ice, and it has construction, and it has aggressive occupant, which I would like somebody to explain to me one day, and at the bottom of it, under everything else, it has wildlife.

Wildlife had been selected, and in the free text box underneath it somebody had typed the word bear, and that is the assessment, that is all of what exists: one word in a box, and eleven days of a woman's mail in a tub on the floor at the end of the case row.

I do not know who assessed it and I do not know what they were looking at when they did, and I am not saying they invented it. Somebody reported something. Something got written down. The address at the top of what got written down was 1129.

There is a version of this where a person on the street two doors up saw a bear in their own yard in April, and phoned it in, and gave the wrong number off the wrong post, and everything after that is a system doing exactly what it is built to do.

The mail for 1129 went into a tub at the depot with the address written on a card and taped to the front of it, and it sat on the floor at the end of the case row, and it sat there for eleven days, and it got fuller, the way a tub does.

The woman at 1127 came out on the second day. She had watched me go past her neighbour's box.

"There's no bear."

"There's a form that says there is."

"That's not the same thing."

"No. It isn't."

She stood there with her arms folded for a moment and then she said, well, who do I call, and I said there is a number on the card, and she said, is it the same number that's on the card everybody got, and I said it is, and she said, that number is not a number, that number is a recording.

Then she said, has she done something.

I said no.

She said, well, they don't stop your mail for nothing, and I said no, they stop it for a form, and she looked at me for a second and went in.

I did not tell her she was wrong.

I am not permitted to lift a suspension and I would not want to be. It is not my judgement to make and it is not my signature that carries it, and I have been doing this long enough to have watched what happens to people who decide that the rule does not apply to their own street because they know their own street. But the person who signs those does not stand in that yard, and I do, every working day, and there is no field on the assessment for that either.

On the ninth day I had a book for 1131, which is the next house up.

A book, and I knew it was a book before I looked at the label, because you can tell. I am going to set this down exactly, because the exactness is the only part of it I have got. It was a hardback in a board mailer, which is two sheets of stiff card with a fold down one edge and a strip of tape along the other, and the purpose of a board mailer is that it does not bend. Two hundred and forty millimetres across the short side. The card was rigid and the book inside it was rigid, and if you fold a board mailer you have wrecked it and anybody can see that you have, and that one was not wrecked and is not wrecked now.

The slot at 1131 is a standard letter slot. A hundred and eighty millimetres across the opening. I measured it years ago for a different reason and I have not forgotten it.

I know that slot. I have been putting mail through it since before the family that lives there now moved in. I know what goes through it and what has to go up to the door, and a board mailer goes up to the door, every time, without my having to decide anything about it, and that is not a judgement call, it is arithmetic that my hands do before I get to the step, and the door at 1131 has a bell that has not worked since the spring.

I put the mailer through the slot.

I do not know how else to write it down. My hand went to the flap and it went through and landed flat on the tile inside. Then I stood

there a second, because something had been easier than it should have been, and I put two fingers on the flap and lifted it and looked at the opening, and then I did the thing I have thought about since, which is that I reached in and got two fingers on the corner of it and tried to bring it back out.

It would not come. It went in and it will not come out and it is not bent.

I finished the walk. I was six minutes long.

The suspension lifted on the eleventh day. There was no note about it and nobody phoned me. The mail was back in the case in the morning and the tub was gone from the end of the row, and I asked at the counter what had happened with the hazard, and the fellow at the counter looked at his screen and said it was resolved, and I said, resolved how, and he said, that is what it says.

I took eleven days of mail up to 1129 in one load, in two hands, and it was a lot, and most of it was flyers. Most of anything is flyers.

She came to the door while I was still pushing it through. She did not say anything about bears and she did not ask me where it had been.

“Is that all of it?”

“That’s all of it.”

“Right,” she said, and stood there while I finished, and then she said thanks, and that was that.

The conversion file has 1129 recorded as held, safety hazard on file. That is where it was the last time I had any reason to hear about it, which was some weeks ago now, and if it has moved since then nobody would have any reason to tell me, and nobody has.

1143 · DOOR → CMB 44-08 · MATCHED

acct. 1 Dec

Joyce Kalmakoff, postmaster

The notice came in the Friday pouch with the ordinary paperwork, and I read it at the back before I opened up.

It is a market review. That is the phrase on it. The network is being assessed. Offices will be evaluated on operational data and on a regional basis. No decisions have been made.

There is a paragraph about rural and remote and Indigenous locations being protected. I read that paragraph three times.

We aren't rural. That is the finding, and I didn't need a review to arrive at it.

We were rural once. The road out front had gravel on it when my mother worked this counter. There was a hitching rail at the feed store that stayed up thirty years after the last horse went by it. Nobody took it down. Nobody was told to.

She was here twenty-six years. She started on the sorting side and she came to the counter in about 1974 and she stayed there.

There were four of us behind that counter on a Friday afternoon in December when I was a girl. There are two of us now. Three, at Christmas, if we get the hours.

I read it twice. That took about four minutes. Then I put it in the folder where that sort of thing goes and I pinned the customer copy to the corkboard, because the notice says to display it.

I am not in the same union as the carriers. Postmasters are Postmasters. It is a small association and it has been a small association since 1902, and when there's a dispute in this country it is the letter carriers on the news and it is the letter carriers on the picket line and I am inside with the door open, and I've had people come in during a strike and thank me for staying open and I've had people come in and ask me why I wasn't out there. Both of those happened the same week.

What the lifting of the moratorium means is that after thirty-one years there's nothing that says this office has to exist.

The countable part is this. We had two full positions and a casual from the middle of November. The casual wasn't hired this year. My hours are the same. The other position went from thirty to twenty-four in September and nobody wrote to me about it; I found it on the schedule.

Then I opened at nine.

The first hour was quiet. It usually is now.

It wasn't always. There was a stretch, years ago, where you couldn't get to the back for the first hour because there was a line to the door and everybody in it wanted something different.

I don't miss it as much as people assume I do. But I noticed when it stopped.

People ask what happened to it and they want a single answer. There isn't one.

Email. Then online banking. Then the courier depots. Then everyone bought everything from a website and the parcels went up and the parcels aren't counter work, they're a scan and a shelf.

We still sell stamps. We sold eleven yesterday. I counted, because he asked.

A man came in around half ten with a parcel for his daughter in Auckland and no customs form filled in.

That is standard. Nobody fills it in beforehand. The form isn't intuitive and I wouldn't fill it in beforehand either. It asks for the value of the contents and then it asks the category of the contents and the two questions look the same to a person who isn't doing it every day.

There is also a box for a detailed description, and detailed is doing a lot of work in that instruction, and what people write in it is the word gift, which is what they have already ticked two lines above.

She took him at the second wicket and went through it with him line by line. It took a while. There was nobody behind him, so it didn't matter.

I could hear it from my end. He was reading the value box out loud.

"Value of contents."

"What did the wool cost?"

"The wool. I don't know. Forty dollars? It was a while ago."

"Put forty."

"But it isn't worth forty. It's worth what the wool cost plus about nine weeks."

"Put forty."

Then he came to the category, and the category has boxes on it, and the boxes are gift, commercial sample, documents, merchandise, returned goods, other.

“Which one’s socks?”

“Gift.”

“But I made them.”

“Gift.”

“If I’d bought them it’d be a gift. I made them. Doesn’t that make them merchandise?”

“Only if you sell them.”

“I’m not selling them. It’s my daughter.”

“Then it’s a gift.”

He thought about that. He tapped the pen on the counter.

“So the work isn’t worth anything.”

“Not to customs.”

“Right,” he said, and ticked gift, and then he said, “Well, she’ll know,” which is a thing I’ve thought about since.

There is a thing about a counter that nobody outside it understands, which is that you know an enormous amount about a person and none of it is anything. I know what he sends and where and how often and what he pays for it. I know he uses a money order for one thing every February and I have no idea what it is for.

He has been coming in here since I started, and I started in 1996. He used to come in with his wife. He comes in on his own now and he takes longer over it, and I’ve never once minded that and neither has she.

There is a way of standing at a counter that tells you a person has nowhere else to be, and there’s a different way that tells you they would rather be here than at home, and after thirty years you can tell them apart in about four seconds. I am not going to say which he is.

She had already got the form out before he reached the wicket. Not because she knew what he wanted. Because he had a parcel under his arm and it was the shape of a parcel that goes overseas.

Before he’d got the form open she asked him whether it was the same street in Auckland as last year, and said the name of it, and said it was the one with the two words.

He said it was. He didn't ask how she knew. People never do, and I have watched this for years, and the not asking is the part I would put in a report if there were a report.

There's nothing written down. There's no note on that file, there's no note anywhere, and she has been at that counter four days a week since 2011 and does that perhaps eleven times a day.

He got the postage wrong by four dollars and she took the four dollars off without saying anything about it, which isn't a thing we are supposed to do and which is a thing that's done in every post office in this country every day of the week.

When he was done he picked up his receipt and folded it into his wallet.

"You always know which one it is."

She said something I didn't catch. He laughed at whatever it was. And then he said her name, in the way of a man saying a name he has said for years, without looking up from the wallet.

He has never once said mine. He doesn't know it. There is no reason he would.

He stayed at the counter a moment after he had put the wallet away, which people do, and which is the part of the job that isn't in the job.

Then he came past my end on his way out and stopped at the corkboard.

"Is that us?"

"It's a review."

"That's a yes."

"It's a review."

He looked at it a while longer.

"Operational data," he said.

"That's what it says."

"That's a lot of words for how many people come in."

"It is."

"Because that's what it means. How many people come in."

He is seventy-odd and he reads as well as I do, and I wasn't going to stand there and tell him it means something else.

"Your mother worked here."

“She did.”

“Right,” he said, and went out, and the bell over the door did what it does.

I didn’t take the notice down. It has to be displayed and it is displayed, and it will stay displayed until somebody sends me something else to put up in its place.

Nine o’clock, and the counter open, and that’s where I’ll leave it.

PART TWO

ODD, 1147 TO 1185

THE HUNGRY GODS GO DOOR TO DOOR

CONVERSION EXCEPTION REPORT -- GENERATED 14 DEC 2026 -- 06:00 PT
 TRANCHE 1 / PACIFIC / DELIVERY UNIT 044 / SEGMENT 44-A
 60 RECORDS. NO ACTION TAKEN ON THIS REPORT. RETAIN 24 MONTHS.

REC	ADDRESS	CODE	REASON	OPENED
1	1201	NBH-ONL	Neighbourhood mail only, no compartment r	06 Nov
2	1202	INS-FAI	Pre-delivery inspection not passed	19 Nov
3	1203	NBH-ONL	Neighbourhood mail only, no compartment r	11 Dec
4	1129	HLD-SAF	Conversion held, safety hazard on file	08 Oct
5	1204	SIT-PND	Site pending municipal approval	03 Dec
6	1205	KEY-UNV	Replacement key issued, entitlement unver	05 Nov
7	1206	INS-FAI	Pre-delivery inspection not passed	11 Oct
8	1207	NBH-ONL	Neighbourhood mail only, no compartment r	25 Oct
9	1208	KEY-UNV	Replacement key issued, entitlement unver	19 Oct
10	1209	HLD-SAF	Conversion held, safety hazard on file	21 Nov
11	1210	KEY-RTN	Key envelope returned undelivered	04 Dec
12	1211	INS-FAI	Pre-delivery inspection not passed	05 Nov
13	1212	KEY-RTN	Key envelope returned undelivered	22 Nov
14	1213	KEY-UNV	Replacement key issued, entitlement unver	18 Oct
15	1214	PCA-NIL	Address not present in point of call data	05 Nov
16	1215	OCC-NRC	Occupant not reached for key handover	06 Oct
17	1216	KEY-RTN	Key envelope returned undelivered	01 Nov
18	1217	INS-FAI	Pre-delivery inspection not passed	26 Nov
19	1218	PCA-NIL	Address not present in point of call data	09 Nov
20	1192	PCA-NIL	Address not present in point of call data	28 Oct
21	1219	CMP-SHT	Compartment count short against address c	23 Nov
22	1220	SIT-PND	Site pending municipal approval	25 Oct
23	1221	CMP-SHT	Compartment count short against address c	14 Oct
24	1222	KEY-RTN	Key envelope returned undelivered	22 Oct
25	1223	PCA-NIL	Address not present in point of call data	30 Nov
26	1159	OCC-NRC	Occupant not reached for key handover	21 Oct
27	1224	HLD-SAF	Conversion held, safety hazard on file	21 Oct
28	1225	HLD-SAF	Conversion held, safety hazard on file	05 Oct
29	1226	SIT-PND	Site pending municipal approval	05 Oct
30	1227	PCA-NIL	Address not present in point of call data	31 Oct
31	1228	NBH-ONL	Neighbourhood mail only, no compartment r	01 Nov
32	1229	KEY-UNV	Replacement key issued, entitlement unver	26 Oct
33	1230	KEY-UNV	Replacement key issued, entitlement unver	26 Oct
34	1231	INS-FAI	Pre-delivery inspection not passed	11 Nov
35	1232	SIT-PND	Site pending municipal approval	14 Nov
36	1233	PCA-NIL	Address not present in point of call data	30 Oct
37	1234	KEY-RTN	Key envelope returned undelivered	31 Oct
38	1171	NBH-ONL	Neighbourhood mail only, no compartment r	28 Oct
39	1235	OCC-NRC	Occupant not reached for key handover	30 Oct
40	1130	KEY-UNV	Replacement key issued, entitlement unver	23 Nov
41	1236	OCC-NRC	Occupant not reached for key handover	12 Nov
42	1237	OCC-NRC	Occupant not reached for key handover	07 Oct
43	1153	CMP-SHT	Compartment count short against address c	20 Nov
44	1238	NBH-ONL	Neighbourhood mail only, no compartment r	27 Nov
45	1239	CMP-SHT	Compartment count short against address c	26 Oct
46	1240	CMP-SHT	Compartment count short against address c	23 Oct
47	1241	OCC-NRC	Occupant not reached for key handover	07 Nov
48	1242	SIT-PND	Site pending municipal approval	13 Oct
49	1243	KEY-UNV	Replacement key issued, entitlement unver	16 Nov
50	1244	CMP-SHT	Compartment count short against address c	12 Nov
51	1245	HLD-SAF	Conversion held, safety hazard on file	05 Oct
52	1246	HLD-DAP	Accommodation hold, application on file	17 Nov
53	1247	OCC-NRC	Occupant not reached for key handover	13 Oct
54	1248	HLD-SAF	Conversion held, safety hazard on file	13 Nov
55	1249	PCA-NIL	Address not present in point of call data	19 Nov
56	1168	KEY-RTN	Key envelope returned undelivered	13 Nov
57	1250	CMP-SHT	Compartment count short against address c	05 Dec
58	1251	HLD-SAF	Conversion held, safety hazard on file	14 Nov
59	1252	KEY-RTN	Key envelope returned undelivered	28 Oct
60	1253	HLD-DAP	Accommodation hold, application on file	05 Dec

END OF REPORT

1147 · DOOR → CMB 44-09 · MATCHED

acct. 5 Dec

Curtis Bakker, installation contractor

We got the drawing on the Monday and we were in the ground on the Wednesday, which is quick, and it was quick because the site was on a boulevard and a boulevard is grass over fill and you aren't going to hit anything in it that anybody cares about, and I've poured pads in places where you spend two days on a locate before you put a spade in the ground, so I'll take a boulevard every time.

There were three of us on it. Me, a lad who has been with me two years and is better than he thinks he is, and a fellow I get in when I need a third, who is sixty-one and can screed a slab flatter by eye than the lad can with a laser, and who will tell you so.

A pad isn't complicated. You are putting down a slab that a module bolts to, and the module weighs what it weighs, and the slab has to be flat and it has to be level and it has to stay level through a freeze, and that's the specification as far as I'm concerned. You get a spec sheet with the module and the spec sheet tells you the bolt pattern and the bearing load, and the bolt pattern is the only thing on that sheet that will ruin your week if you get it wrong, because a slab with the bolts in the wrong place is a slab you break out with a hammer while somebody watches you from a window.

Everything else on the drawing is somebody else's problem. The drawing says three metres off the utility. Fine. I'm not measuring off the utility, I'm measuring off the two stakes the surveyor left, and if the stakes are in the wrong place then somebody who is paid more than me put them there.

We dug the twelve, set the forms, ran the rebar, and had the truck in on the Wednesday at half seven, which is early, and which you do in September because by eleven it's warm enough that you're fighting the mix.

Twelve pads on that job. Eleven modules on the order. I didn't know that on the Wednesday and I wouldn't have cared on the Wednesday, because on the Wednesday my job is twelve pads and twelve pads is what the drawing has on it.

The woman at 1149 came out while we were setting the forms. Housecoat, tea, no shoes on the wet grass, which people do and which I've never understood.

"That's the wet side," she said.

"That's where the drawing says."

"The drawing's wrong."

"Probably," I said, and I didn't stop, because I was screeding.

I've had that conversation on more jobs than I can count. Somebody comes out and they're right and there's nothing whatever I can do with them being right. The drawing is the drawing. If I move it two metres because a woman in a housecoat has a point, then in six weeks somebody comes out with a wheel and finds the box is two metres off where the file says it is, and then it's my problem and it's my invoice they hold, and I've been in that argument once and I'm not going in it again.

She stood there another minute or two.

"Are you going to tell somebody?"

"I'll put it on the sheet."

"Will that do anything?"

"Not that I've ever seen."

"Then why put it on the sheet?"

"Because it goes on the sheet."

She thought that was funny. It wasn't meant to be funny and I've thought about it since and I accept that it is. I don't stand in people's front yards telling them the system works. It isn't my system. I bolt things down for a living and I do it well and if the drawing puts a box in a low spot then in March there's going to be a box in a low spot, and I won't be there, and neither will the fellow who drew it.

We poured the twelve, floated them, and edged them, and the lad did the edging because he likes doing it and he is quick, and we were back on the Thursday to strip the forms and set the anchors.

The anchors are the bit that has to be right. You set them to a template and you check the template against the bolt pattern and then you check it again before the concrete has gone off, because after that your options are a hammer drill and an apology.

It came in at two yards, near enough, which was a hair under the quote, and we were off the site by half two on the Thursday, which was a full day inside what I had allowed. No crane on a pour. That comes later, and it comes with an operator, and the operator is the difference between a good day and a day.

Twenty-six years. I started on driveways.

Here's the thing nobody in a housecoat wants to hear from a man pouring concrete on their boulevard. This is good for me. Four million addresses over five years is the best run of work I'll see before I stop, and I've already put on two and I'm looking at a third, and I'd be lying to you if I stood there and said I had no view about it.

I'm not on their books. No pension in it, no agreement, nothing to grieve. When it stops I go and find something else, which I've done before and will do again, and the fellows inside can't do that and I know it, and they know I know it, and we get on fine because none of that's anybody's fault.

I've been doing this twenty-six years and I still allow the extra day. You allow the extra day because one time in ten there's a gas line where nobody said there was a gas line.

The lad asked me, packing up, what happens if they need another one after.

I said they will pour another one.

He said, where.

I said there's a pad there for it, and I pointed at the twelfth, which was sitting there finished with the bolts standing up out of it and nothing to put on it, and he looked at it, and he looked at me.

"So what's that one for?"

"No idea, mate. It's on the drawing."

"There's no box coming for it."

"There's no box on the order."

"So somebody's ordered eleven and drawn twelve."

"Somebody has."

“Which is it, then? Is the drawing wrong or is the order wrong?”

I said that in twenty-six years I’ve never once found out the answer to that question and that the trick is to stop asking it before you’re forty.

Two yards. Eleven boxes. And a lake in March.

1153 · DOOR → · · UNMATCHED · HOLD

acct. 9 Dec

Meaghan Rutt, conversion project officer

Commissioning is the stage at which the address count and the compartment count are compared, and I am setting that out at the top because the comparison is often described afterwards as something that should have happened earlier, and it should not have happened earlier, and the process is not built for it to happen earlier.

The compartment count is one line on a commissioning sheet that runs to about forty. Bolt torque, levelness, lock function on every door, accessibility of the end compartments, signage. The address count sits between the lock schedule and the signage, and it is given one line, and the line is a box you write a number in.

The figure attached to all of this at the national level is four hundred million dollars a year, and I have written it into three separate documents without once being asked to show where it comes from, because it does not come from me. It comes from the difference between two hundred and eighty-four dollars an address and a hundred and sixty-two, multiplied out across four million doors, and the arithmetic is sound and I have checked it, and it is sound in the way that arithmetic is sound.

The reason is not administrative laziness but that neither number is final until commissioning: a property is demolished, a duplex is recorded as two where it had been recorded as one, an accommodation is granted and an address is withdrawn. The order is not final either, because cabinets are ordered against a forecast and delivered against availability, and comparing two provisional numbers in August tells you nothing except that they were provisional in August.

Site 44 has two hundred and eight compartments across its eleven cabinets. The segment it serves has two hundred and nine addresses.

I have written that sentence four times now in four documents and it has not become easier to write, and I would ask whoever reads this to sit with it for a moment before going on, because the natural response is to assume that one of the two numbers is soft, and neither of them is.

I counted the address list against the sequence and got two hundred and nine, and then, because two hundred and nine was not the number I was expecting to arrive at, I counted it a second time from the other end and got two hundred and nine again. Both counts are correct. The other figure needs setting out too.

The compartment number is not a count at all but a property of the order, which was for eleven cabinets of a model holding nineteen compartments each with one of twenty at the parcel end, which is two hundred and eight, and there is a photograph of the specification page sitting in the order file where anybody can look at it.

Here is how the segment came to have two hundred and nine, because that is the question anybody sensible asks next.

Nothing was added at any point, and there is no late suite, no subdivided lot, and no property that came onto the list in October, and I checked all three of those before I phoned anybody, because those are the three ordinary explanations and I would very much rather have found one than have written any of this down.

The module was specified from the same file.

There is no error here, and that is the difficulty. If there were an error it could be corrected and the file could close. What there is instead is a module that was approved for a segment on the basis of an address count that has been correct at every stage, including this one, and the site holds two hundred and eight.

I phoned Planning on the Tuesday.

"It's two hundred and nine."

There was a pause on the line while somebody opened something.

"No," I said. "I've done it twice."

Another pause.

"I understand it was approved," I said.

I do not know what the pause was. I have thought about it since more than is reasonable. It may have been somebody opening a screen, and it may equally have been somebody deciding how to answer a person who has phoned about a number. There is nothing in it and I record it only because I remember it and because I do not remember most calls.

It was approved. I have said elsewhere in this file, and I will say it again here, that the approval was correct against every published criterion, and I am not raising the approval as a defect. The criteria do not include the address count. That is not an oversight in the criteria either, because the address count is my responsibility and it is on my file and it was right.

Requesting a twelfth cabinet is not an order. It is a new site assessment, with the criteria run again, and the last of them is the difficulty: there are limits on how many modules may stand together on a residential frontage, and eleven are already standing there. So it goes into the same queue the first one went into, behind everything that has entered that queue since.

So I have submitted a request that I believe will be assessed properly, by people who will apply the criteria properly, and will be declined, because the criteria will not permit a twelfth module on that frontage, and the criteria are correct.

I submitted it on the ninth with the count attached and the photograph of the specification attached. I do not expect a response before the conversion date.

The two hundred and ninth address is 1153. It is the two hundred and ninth because that is where it falls in the sequence and for no other reason. It could as easily have been any of them. It is recorded in the file as compartment count short against address count, which is accurate in every particular and which is also, taken as a description of what has happened here, the least informative sentence I have written this year.

There is a further thing I have not put in the formal record and am putting here.

I went out and stood in front of the bank on the eleventh, in the afternoon, which I did not need to do. I counted the doors along all

eleven cabinets. There are two hundred and eight.

I counted them twice, from opposite ends, because by that stage I had stopped trusting myself. There are two hundred and eight. Each cabinet carries a manufacturer's plate on its end panel giving its own count, and those eleven figures add to two hundred and eight as well.

Then I walked the segment from one end to the other and counted the addresses, on the ground, off the buildings, and I got two hundred and nine, and one of the two hundred and nine was 1153, which has a number on the door in brass and a hedge and a car in the drive.

So both numbers are also true outdoors. It had not occurred to me that it might matter whether they were, and because when I found that it did matter I did not like it.

The occupant has not been notified, because there is nothing yet to notify them of. They received the card in August like everybody else.

The card carries a module number and a compartment number in a printed box, populated from the assignment file, which is this file. I have looked at the proof. The box on that card is blank.

I need to be exact about what that means, because a blank box could be a printing fault and I checked whether it was. It is not. The print run pulls the value from the field, and where the field is empty the box prints empty, and the field was empty because in August there was no compartment to put in it.

Which means the discrepancy was on that card, in a house on that street, in August, four months before anybody found it. Somebody has had it on a fridge since the summer.

I do not know what to do with that and I am not going to pretend the file has a place for it.

1159 · DOOR → · · UNMATCHED · HOLD

acct. 13 Dec

Wendell Osei, undeliverable mail officer

For whoever has this file next, and I write these knowing that somebody will, the item concerned arrived in this office on the fourth with no valid recipient information and no usable return, which is the only

circumstance in which anything arrives here at all, and I record at the outset that it was handled in the ordinary way and that nothing about it was treated as exceptional at any stage.

People who have not worked in this office imagine either a warehouse or a laboratory and it is neither, and nearly every plant and depot in this country routes to us, and what cannot be delivered and cannot be returned comes here, and here is one building in Scarborough, and there are very few of us left doing this anywhere.

We are permitted to open mail. That permission exists in statute, it is one of a small number of exceptions to a prohibition that carries five years, and I have never in eleven years opened an item without being conscious that I was doing something that is an offence for everybody else in the country.

What arrives here is not chiefly the badly addressed, which is dealt with upstream by machines and coding desks and by carriers who know their own walks better than any database does, and what reaches this building has defeated all of that: the item where two pieces of correct information disagree, or where the sender has erred about themselves rather than about the recipient, or where a person has moved and the forwarding has lapsed.

The item was posted from British Columbia. The recipient line had been written and then written over. The return had been given as a street number and a postal code that do not agree with one another, which is more common than you would expect, because people write their own address from memory more carelessly than they write anybody else's.

I opened it on the fifth. I record the date because the date matters and because whoever reads this may be checking a retention period against it.

I will not describe the contents, and I say that not out of delicacy but because the contents were not relevant to the trace and because a file of this kind should not carry more than the trace required. That is not a rule anybody has written down. It is how I was taught by the man who trained me and it is how I have done it for eleven years.

I could have given it to the Seeker. It was borderline and there would have been no shame in it. I kept it because I had time that

week.

I ran the trace over three days. I will not set out every step, because the steps are the steps and whoever reads this has done them, but I record that the postal code resolved to a walk on the North Shore, that the street number resolved to the same walk, and that the two resolved to different addresses on it, and that I proceeded on the second of these for reasons that are set out in the working notes.

The working notes set out the reasoning and I will summarise it here only to this extent, that a postal code is entered by a person and a street number is entered by a person, and that in my experience a person miskeys a code more readily than they miswrite a number they have written ten thousand times, and that I therefore weighted the number, and that this is a judgement and not a rule, and that I have been wrong doing it.

It went back out on the eighth. Whether it arrived I do not know and will not be told, because there is no return path to this office for an item that has succeeded. We are informed only of failure. That is not a complaint about the system; it is the shape of the system, and a person who wanted to be told he had done well would have chosen differently eleven years ago.

On the sixth, a tub came off a cart in the aisle behind me, which happens perhaps twice a week and is nobody's fault. It was a standard tub and it went over on its side from about waist height and the contents went out across the floor, and I heard it, and I turned round.

It was a hundred and forty pieces or thereabouts and they were not scattered. They were stacked, squared at the edges, and in order.

In order means the order they had been in inside the tub, which is the order they had been worked in, which is neither alphabetical nor numerical nor anything a person could produce by tidying, and it was our own working order for that morning, and it existed nowhere except in that tub and in the head of the officer who had put them there, and it was on the floor. The Seeker was two aisles over and did not look up, which I mention only because he is generally the one who picks a thing up before anybody else has finished laughing about it, and this once he did not.

A colleague said it should have bought a ticket.

Somebody else said we should put it on the machine and see what it did.

Somebody said, ask it where it wants to go.

There was a period of about ninety seconds in which four adults who have between them perhaps a hundred years in this building were extremely pleased with themselves about a fallen tub. Then we picked it up, and that was the end of it, and I would not have thought of it again except that I am writing this and it was the same week.

The colleague who said it was the one who had looked at my trace the day before.

“That’s a Seeker file,” he said, when he saw what I had open.

“It is now.”

The order of that is the wrong way round and I set it down here because a successor may want it. A Seeker file is called that because it is the kind of thing that ends up in front of the Seeker, and the Seeker is a man at a desk about forty feet from mine who has been running traces in this building longer than I have been in it. The file took its name from him. Then the name came off him and attached to the work, and now people say it about files that never go near him, and I have said it that way myself in the paragraph above without noticing.

I could not tell you where the name came from before that. It was said to me in my first week by a man who has since retired, and I have said it since without thinking about it, and I have never once heard anybody ask.

The conversion file for that address, which is a separate system and which I did not see and had no occasion to see, records the occupant as not reached for key handover. I learned that afterwards and I include it here only because a future reader may have both files in front of them and may wonder whether the two offices were in contact. They were not. There is no mechanism by which they would be. I did not know that a conversion was taking place on that street and I have never been to British Columbia.

That one went out. Most do not. I have nothing to add to that here and it is not what a file is for.

Disposition and retention date are recorded in the usual place.

Dale Ferraro, letter carrier

The rain came back in the third week of September and after that it did not really stop, and people who are not from here think that is a complaint and it is not, it is a description, and the difference between a person who has been on a walk for twenty-two years and a person who has been on one for two is mostly whether they have stopped waiting for it to stop.

There is a week in September, usually the third, where you go out in the morning in the dry and come back in the wet and that is the year turning over, and everybody on that hill knows which week it was afterwards and nobody knows it at the time.

It comes in the third week of September most years and it has come in the second and it has come in the first week of October, and once, in a year I remember for other reasons, it did not really come until November and everybody on that hill spent six weeks watering things they had never watered in their lives.

What changes is the bag. Dry, a full bag is a weight you carry. Wet, it is a weight that has decided where it wants to be, which is low and on the outside of your hip, and every step you take up that hill it tries to go there, and you spend the day very slightly correcting for something that is not going to correct. That is what makes an autumn walk long. It is not the wet. It is the correcting.

Your hands change as well. Wet card gets soft and a soft bundle does not want to be split, and you end up using more of your palm and less of your fingers, and by the end of an October week the heel of my hand is sore in a way it never is in August. I have never mentioned that to anybody because there is no reason to and because it goes away.

The other thing is the moss. Everything up there grows moss on the north side of it in about six weeks, and stairs grow it fastest because nobody looks at their own stairs, and by the middle of October there are eleven or twelve houses on that walk where the second step from the bottom is a thing you have to think about. I know which eleven. I

go up the outside edge on those, against the rail, and I have never gone down on that walk. I am aware that saying so is asking for it.

Two carriers I know have gone down on wet stairs and one of them was off for eleven weeks with something in his shoulder that never came right, and it was not ice and it was not a fall from any height, it was a step with six weeks of moss on it and a man carrying eleven kilos on one side of his body.

There is a product for it. There are about nine products for it and they are all bleach with something in it, and they all work for about a season, and the wire brush works for about the same and costs nothing.

The man at 1167 was out doing his with a wire brush and a bucket.

He straightened up when I came along the path and stood aside to let me past, which he did not have to do.

“You want me to do these?”

“You’re the only one who’s done them.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s a yes.”

He laughed and went back to it, and he is the only one on that street who does his own every autumn without anybody asking him. He has been doing it since his wife was alive and he has gone on doing it since she was not.

He asked how the walk was going. I said it was going.

“You get a break in this?”

“There’s a spot.”

“Where?”

“Bus shelter at the top.”

He laughed at that and I did not, because it is a good spot, it is dry and it faces away from the wind and I have had my lunch in it perhaps four hundred times.

“They’re putting a box in at the corner.”

“They are.”

“Where do I put mine, then? For collection.”

“There’s a slot on the box.”

“So I walk down there to send a letter.”

“You do.”

He looked at the stairs he was brushing for a second and then he went back to them, and he said, not to me particularly, that he had been putting letters out on that step since 1978.

He asked after my knee, which I had mentioned to him in about 2019 and which he has asked after every autumn since, and I said it was the same, which it is.

I did the odd side and turned at the lane.

The smoke was long gone by then and you could see the far shore again, and the top of the walk was in cloud most mornings, which it is from October, and you come up out of the houses and there is nothing above you but the cut line and the cloud sitting down on it, and it is quiet up there, properly quiet, and you get about ninety seconds of it before the Upper Levels starts again.

The bag is thirty-five pounds at the case and you do not carry thirty-five pounds up that hill, you carry it in three loads out of the mailmobile, and the mailmobile parks in three places and has parked in the same three places since before me. Whoever worked those three places out did a good job. I have never once wanted to move one of them.

There are four houses up at that end that are empty three seasons of the year and one that is empty all four, and their mail is a bill and a bill and a thing from a strata, and in October it goes into boxes with cloud in them, which is a way of saying the paper comes out damp at the far end and nobody has ever complained about it in twenty-two years, which tells you what is in it.

The last box before the turn is 1199 and it is a wall-mounted one on a post, and the flap has a spring that has gone soft, so in a wind it stands open and the mail gets wet, and I have got in the habit of closing it with my hand and holding it a second. There is no reason for the holding, and it closes perfectly well when you let go, and I do it anyway and have done it for years, and nobody has ever seen me do it.

Then you turn and the street is below you and you come down it.

Rob Tenhove, plant supervisor

Neighbourhood mail is the flyers. That's what it is. Nobody calls it neighbourhood mail on the floor.

It is unaddressed. That is the distinction. A letter has somebody's name on it or at least somebody's address on it. This has a walk on it and a count and that's all it has.

Which means it doesn't go through the sequencer. It can't. There is nothing on it to sequence.

A grocery chain sends the same item to eighty thousand doors. A hardware chain sends a different one. There are four or five of them that account for most of it and then a long tail of small ones, a pizza place, a roofer, a man who does gutters.

The customer pays for coverage and coverage is a word with a number under it. Every door in a postal walk, and if a walk has two hundred and nine doors then two hundred and nine is what they've bought and two hundred and nine is what has to go.

That's a contract. There's a person at that customer whose job is to know we did it, and there's a person at this end whose job is to be able to say we did, and neither of them has ever met a carrier.

So it comes in on pallets, made up, bundled, from the customer. We break it down to walk and we count it into the containers and it goes out on the same truck as everything else.

By weight it's the largest thing we move. People don't believe that. It has been true my whole time here.

By count it isn't close. A bundle is one handling. A hundred letters is a hundred handlings.

But you aren't carrying count up a hill. You're carrying weight.

There is a fellow works that line most nights. Same line, three years.

He is fine. Nothing to say about him.

The Hand covered it for two weeks in the spring and the counts came in right every night, which they do not otherwise, and when I put him back on his own line he did not mention it and neither did I.

Nobody wants that line. It is the heaviest, it's the least interesting, and there's no part of it that requires you to think.

People ask to move off it in about three weeks. I have a note somewhere with the average on it.

He has never once asked to move, and I've stopped reading anything into that, because I asked him about it in the spring and he said the hours suited him.

There's a weekend model coming in under the new agreement with part-time hours attached, and half this floor thinks that's the thin end and the other half has a son who'd take one of those hours tomorrow. Both halves voted yes. Eighty-nine per cent voted yes. You can hold both of those at once and most people here do.

"You all right on that?"

"Yes."

That is the longest conversation I've had with him this year and I've no complaint about it.

The counting is the part that matters and the part nobody outside understands. Every walk gets a number of pieces and the number has to be right, because the customer has paid for coverage and coverage means every door. If you're ten short at the far end the carrier comes back with ten doors done and a complaint behind it.

So you count. And then somebody counts again.

The Hand counts once.

I've watched that and I've no idea how it's done. It is not a trick and he is not fast about it. He puts a hand flat on the top of a bundle and then he says a number.

I checked him twice in 2019 because it is my job to check things. He was right twice. I have not checked him since and I will not, and if somebody upstairs told me to I would say I had and write it up.

There is a scale for it. The scale is faster and the scale is right, and we still count.

A scale tells you the weight of a bundle. It doesn't tell you the number of pieces in it.

A bundle can be short and weigh right if the paper stock changed. Paper stock changes constantly and nobody tells us.

I've had a customer change to a heavier gloss in October and put every count in the building out by four per cent for a week.

There's one address on that walk flagged in the conversion file as neighbourhood mail only. No compartment required.

I saw it because the exception list came through to the plant, which it doesn't normally, and it came through because somebody had copied a distribution wrong.

I read it in about ninety seconds. There was one line on it I read twice.

That flag exists for a reason and the reason is ordinary. It is for a lot with no building on it, or a building with no occupant, or a place that takes flyers because flyers go to every door and there's a door. Somebody at some point put the flag on and the flag stayed on.

What isn't ordinary is that a walk of two hundred and eleven addresses has one of them, and it's the one address on that walk I could tell you the number of without looking, and I don't know why I can.

That means what it says. That address receives nothing else. Not a letter, not a bill, not a card at Christmas, not for some years, and I only know about it because it came across in the exception list and I looked at it twice.

There are addresses that get nothing. Businesses that closed. Places between tenants. That isn't unusual and I wouldn't have looked twice.

This one isn't between tenants. It has been on the walk all along and it has been flagged all along, and the flyers have gone to it every Wednesday for as long as the flag has been on it, and somebody has been counting them into a container in this building all that while, and that somebody has often been me.

I don't know anything about it beyond that and I'm not going to speculate on the floor about somebody's mail.

The arithmetic is mine, though, so here it is.

Fifty-two Wednesdays a year. That address has had a bundle on fifty-two Wednesdays a year for as long as the flag's been on it, and the flag is older than the conversion file.

I've counted every one of those bundles into a container in this building. So has the man on that line. So did whoever was on it before him.

Nobody has ever asked why there's nothing else going there. There's no field for why. There's a flag, and a flag is a flag.

A supervisor came down from the parcel side that week. They come down when their own numbers are bad.

"How much of this is going out?"

"All of it."

"How much comes back?"

"All of it, eventually. Different truck."

He laughed. He thought I was being funny.

"Seriously though. What's the split?"

"On what?"

"On what gets read."

"I've no idea."

"Ballpark."

"I move it. I don't read it."

He wanted a number. Everybody from the parcel side wants a number. They have numbers for everything over there and they think a number is the same as knowing something.

I wasn't being funny. There is a bin at the top of that walk. Blue. Beside the boxes.

A fellow from the customer side came through once with a client and used the word engagement about the flyers, and one of my people said something under his breath, and I didn't hear what it was and didn't want to.

There's a bin at the top of that walk. Blue. Beside the boxes.

It goes out on Wednesday and a proportion of it is in a recycling truck on Thursday and that isn't a joke about anything, it's a description of a supply chain that's entirely legal and entirely paid for and is the reason a number of people in this building have jobs.

Bundle count for the North Shore dispatch that night was nine hundred and forty.

Nine hundred and forty out. Nine hundred and forty on the sheet. I've never once had that number wrong.

Gary Loewen, depot superintendent

The written ones come through a queue and I do four or five a week, and they aren't the same as the counter, because at the counter the person is in front of you and they can hear how you say it, and in writing they can't, so everything has to be carried by the words themselves and there aren't very many words that are permitted to me.

The queue is a screen with a list on it and a number beside the list, and the number is how many are waiting, and I've never in six years seen that number at nought.

It was eleven that Tuesday. It's usually somewhere between eight and twenty.

It was forty-one in the week after the strike ended, and I remember opening it and closing it again and going and doing something else for ten minutes.

Most of them are about the same three things. A parcel that says delivered and wasn't. A change of address that didn't take. And since August, the boxes, which is now more than the other two together.

The boxes ones are different from the other two in a way I didn't expect. A parcel complaint is about a thing that happened. A change of address complaint is about a thing that didn't happen. A boxes complaint is about a thing that's going to happen, and there's nothing I can do about a thing that's going to happen, and the people writing them know that, and they write anyway.

This one was about the location. He had written a page and a half and it was a good page and a half. He had measured the distance from his own door to the corner, which is a hundred and ninety metres, and he had measured the grade, which he gave as nine per cent, and he had done the same for two other locations on that street that he considered better, and he had set the three out in a table.

I read it twice. It deserved twice.

Nine per cent is steep. For a comparison, the ramp standard for accessibility is a good deal shallower than that, and I know because I

looked it up after, which he had not asked me to do and which was not going to help him.

He had also, and this is the part I've thought about since, apologised in the second paragraph for taking up my time. A man goes out with a tape measure in the rain, works out a grade, sets three options in a table, and then apologises to the corporation for the trouble.

Then I wrote back to him, and what I was able to write back to him was that the site had been assessed against the published criteria and met them, that his comments had been recorded, that the delivery accommodation program exists and here is how to apply, and that I appreciated the time he had taken.

What I wasn't able to write back to him was anything about the table. There is no line for it. There is no route by which a table of three alternative locations, prepared by a member of the public, enters the assessment of a site that has already been assessed, and I know because I asked, in September, about a different letter, and I was told the assessment is complete and that comments are recorded.

They are recorded. I've never been shown a case where a recorded comment changed a site.

Every one of those sentences is true. I checked each of them before I sent it. The site was assessed. It did meet them. His comments were recorded, and I recorded them myself, and I can tell you the date. The program does exist and I've seen it grant things. And I did appreciate the time he took, because a man who goes out with a tape measure and works out a grade is a man who wants to be useful rather than a man who wants to shout.

I didn't tell him any of that, because it isn't mine to tell him and because the sentence I would have had to use is one I am not going to put in writing to a customer, and because he would then have written again, and I would have been in the same position with two of his letters instead of one.

I read the draft back to myself out loud before sending. I do that with all of them. It takes about a minute and it catches things that reading silently doesn't.

I changed one word. Then I read it again and I changed one word.

The first was appreciate, which had been understand, and understand is worse because it sounds like a person who has stopped listening. The second was location, which had been site, and site is what we say and location is what he said, and it is his letter.

There is a phrase I am supposed to use and I've stopped using it. The phrase is that we understand this may be an adjustment. I used it in September and a woman on the phone said, an adjustment, and I said yes, and she said, an adjustment is when they move your bus stop.

She was right. I haven't used it since.

He phoned in the afternoon.

"I've sent it in writing so you've got it."

"Got what?"

"The answer."

"That's not an answer."

"It's what I'm permitted to send you."

He didn't hang up straight away, which people don't, and there was a silence, and then he said, "You've read it, though."

I said I had read it twice.

"Right," he said. "Well. That's something."

It isn't something. But I let him have it, because it cost me nothing and because he had gone out with a tape measure.

I had the plant on the line before I got to the next one, about a container that had come in on its side.

"Who made that one up?"

"That'd be the Hand."

"Right," I said, and wrote it down, and I've no idea to this day what the man's name is. I put it in the queue for a callback as well, which I don't normally, and I marked it for the woman with the handle time.

She had him off the phone in six minutes, which for her is nothing, and I looked at the note afterwards and the note said: *advised. no further action*. Four words. She had been on for six minutes.

I asked her what she'd said to him. She said she'd told him about the pad on the corner that hasn't got a box on it.

That's not an answer to anything he asked. He never rang again.

I've kept his letter. Not my reply. His.

There's a folder in my desk with about nine things in it from six years and I've no idea what the folder is for. Two thank-you notes. A photograph somebody sent of a dog that a carrier had got past. His table.

I did two more before five and left the other two, and they were both about the boxes as well.

1185 · DOOR → CMB 44-15 · MATCHED

acct. 29 Dec

Priya Sandhu, relief carrier

Second time on that walk. October.

Same printout. Same key ring.

I knew about the hedge this time. That's the difference and it's most of it.

They gave me it again because he had a day. That's how it works. You get a walk twice if you're lucky and never again if you're not.

Relief exists because absence exists. That's the basis of the job. Somebody's sick, somebody's owed a day, somebody's route is over-assessed. I'm the minutes nobody else can cover.

Which means when they take a hundred minutes out of a walk, they don't take it out of him. They take it out of me.

Nobody's hidden that. It's in the agreement, it's in the newsletter, it was in the presentation. I'm not being got at. I'm just the part that goes first.

I'm hourly now. That's new. That's better.

I was glad. I don't often say that about a route.

You don't go faster because you're fitter. You go faster because you stop making the same three mistakes.

First time I had the printout in my hand the walk end to end. Second time it was in the bag after the third address.

That's the thing nobody tells you. The printout is for the first time. Odd side to the top. Turn at the lane. Down the even.

Didn't have to think about it. Just did it.

Forty minutes better. Maybe thirty-five. Somewhere in there.

Still not fast. He does it in the time he does it and I am nowhere near.

There's a list you build. Nobody gives it to you.

Brush in the slot at 1101. Stiff flap at 1143. The gate at 1155.

Bell that doesn't work at 1131. Bell that does work at 1133 and is very loud.

The bin at 1167 that's always out.

Six weeks between the two goes and I hadn't lost any of it. That surprised me more than anything else about that day.

Knew to go up the outside edge on the mossy ones, which I'd worked out myself, the hard way, in the rain, on my own.

Street had changed a bit. Not much. Enough.

Bins moved at three houses because the trucks come round the other way now.

Skip outside 1177. Somebody doing a kitchen.

The hedge run had been cut back about a foot, which made no difference to anything, but I noticed it, and I don't think anyone else would have.

That's the one thing I've got that he hasn't. I see it twice, months apart, with nothing in between.

I went past 1155 and the dog was at the gate.

I knew it would be. That's the difference too.

It still made the noise. I still didn't love it.

But you're not surprised, and being surprised is what costs you.

There was a woman at a window at 1173 who put her hand up.

I put mine up. I don't know her. She doesn't know me.

She's putting her hand up at the uniform. That's fine. I'd rather that than not.

The two suites were still there. Obviously.

Nothing had changed about them. Nothing was going to.

Same tape. Same biro. A bit more faded, or I imagined that.

I put the mail through and I didn't stop to look at it this time.

There was a bin out at the wrong house again. 1167, I think.

No. The one before. I don't remember.

That's the thing about doing a walk twice. You start being sure about things you've no business being sure about.

I'd have told you flat that 1167 has a blue door. It's green. I checked in January for no reason at all.

This was — I want to say November. It might have been the start of December.

It gets away from you.

Somebody stopped me at the top. Man with a dog, not from that street.

"You the postie?"

"Today."

"What's happening with the boxes?"

"I don't know. I'm relief."

"You must know something."

"I know where the boxes are going."

He asked where. I told him. He said that's ridiculous and walked off, which is fair, and I've had worse.

Rain most of it. Not the hard kind. The kind that's just the weather now.

You stop noticing in about week three. Everyone tells you that and it's true.

What you don't stop noticing is the wet card. It goes soft and then it goes to bits.

I've had a bundle come apart in my hand. Once. In August, weirdly. Anyway.

Woman at 1149 came out. Housecoat. Same one, I think.

"Are you the regular?"

"No."

"When's he back?"

"Thursday."

"Right," she said, and went in.

Didn't ask me anything else. Didn't need me. Needed him.

There was a fellow at 1131 wanted to give me a parcel to take.

"Can you take this?"

"I can take it if it's got postage."

"It hasn't."

"Then I can't take it."

"You're going that way."

I am always going that way. That's the job. It doesn't put a stamp on anything.

Anyway.

Bag doing the thing bags do.

There was a card in the case for an address I couldn't find.

Went round twice. No such number.

Handed it back at the depot.

"There's no 1161."

"There's a 1161."

"There's a 1159 and there's a 1163."

He looked at me for a second and then he said leave it with me, which is what they say.

One other thing.

Last box before the turn, 1199, the one on the post with the soft spring.

I put the mail in and the flap wouldn't sit, so I closed it and held it.

Then I thought: why am I holding it.

It closes on its own. Takes a second. There's no reason.

And I'd not have done that in October. I did it because I've seen it done.

I don't remember seeing it done. But I've been on that walk twice now and somebody does that, and it's got into my hand.

Didn't do the doors that carefully. Didn't need to.

Counted at the end because I always count.

Two hundred and twelve.

Same as last time.

I don't know if that means I got it right twice or wrong twice.

Wrote it down anyway.

Handed the sheet in. Nobody looks at those.

I've handed in about four hundred of them. I've never once been asked about one.

Somebody must count them. There's a box on a form somewhere.

Anyway. That was the last time I had that walk.

PART THREE

EVEN, 1198 TO 1156

Curtis Bakker, installation contractor

The modules came on a flatbed on the Tuesday and there were eleven of them on it, and I signed for eleven, and I signed for what was in front of me and not for what was on the drawing, because those are two different pieces of paper and only one of them had my name on it that morning.

The driver had come off the ferry that morning and had been on the road since four and wanted signing and gone, which I understand, and he stood there while I walked the length of the bed counting, and he said, it's eleven, and I said, I know, I'm counting it.

You count it. You always count it. Not because the driver is wrong, because the driver is almost never wrong, but because the moment you sign, it's yours, and if there are ten on that bed and you signed for eleven then you are the man who has to find the eleventh.

A module is heavier than people think. They see a mailbox and they think mailbox. It's a welded steel cabinet with nineteen doors in it, and one of the eleven carries the parcel bank instead, and it comes in at something over four hundred kilos empty, and you're not putting it anywhere by hand. We had a crane truck for the day and the day is the expensive part. Twelve hundred dollars and the operator, and it goes on the clock the minute he arrives whether there's anything to lift or not.

Which is why you do all eleven in one go, and why an order that arrives short is not a small thing for a man in my position, whatever it is for anybody else. If the twelfth had come in March I'd have had to bring a crane back for one cabinet and that is a twelve-hundred-dollar lift on a job that has already been closed and invoiced.

Bolting down is the part I actually get paid for and the part nobody watches.

Four anchors to a module, set in the pad back in September, and the thing succeeds or fails on whether that template matches the base plate that turned up in December. If it doesn't, you're drilling into your own concrete in front of an audience. I've done it. Once, in

Maple Ridge, eleven years ago. Twenty-eight pads and a base plate that had been changed by the manufacturer between the order and the delivery, and nobody told anybody, because why would they, it was four millimetres.

Four millimetres is a hammer drill and a diamond bit and two days and a man on his knees in a cul-de-sac in the rain with that street watching him fix a thing he did right in the first place. I've never once blamed the fellow at the factory. He changed a base plate. That's his job.

I still think about it.

They matched. They matched on all eleven, which is not luck, it's that I set them off the manufacturer's sheet and checked the sheet against the model number on the order and then checked the order against what the sheet said the model was. Three checks, every time. Two isn't enough and four is a man who doesn't trust himself.

Then it's torque. The figure's on the sheet and it isn't a suggestion, because these things stand in the open for twenty-five years with somebody hanging off a door twice a week.

You go round with a wrench and you do them in a star, not in a circle. A circle pulls the plate over on one side and then you've got a cabinet that's out of true by an amount you can't see and a door at the far end that won't sit. Star pattern, quarter turn, round again, then to figure. Then you go round a third time in ten minutes because steel settles and it always settles. Forty-four bolts on the job. I did eighty-eight passes of the wrench and the lad did the second round behind me and I checked six of his at random, and they were fine, and I'd have checked six of anybody's.

It rained all Wednesday, which is neither here nor there. You don't stop for rain in this line, you stop for ice, because ice is where a man goes over carrying something that weighs more than he does.

That's the job. That's what I'm there for. Everything else is somebody else's.

I don't count houses. I count doorbells, because I'm setting the pad for a module and the module has a number of compartments and the compartments have to cover what's there. And on that hill most of those houses have got a second door down the side, past the bins,

with its own bell and a bit of tape with a name on it, and that's a place, and somebody lives in it, and they get post.

I counted twenty-two of them along there. Twenty-two second doors. I wasn't counting them for any purpose, I was counting them the way you count anything you keep noticing, and by the time we got to the top I'd got twenty-two and I said it out loud because twenty-two is a number.

I said to the lad, that's another one.

"Another what?"

"Another door."

He said, is that on your sheet, and I said no, and he said, well what happens to them, and I said I've no idea, mate. I bolt the box down. Whether the fellow down the side of number 1180 gets a key is not a question anybody's ever asked me and I wouldn't be the right man to ask.

He said, but you counted them.

I said counting isn't the same as it being on a sheet. I count the trees as well. Nobody's asked me about the trees.

We finished the eleven by half three on the Wednesday.

We finished with the doors. You open every one and shut every one before you leave, which is not commissioning, that comes later and somebody else signs it, but you do it anyway because the one thing you don't want is to come back for a door.

There's a gap in the row where the twelfth goes. It's a pad, poured, cured, edged, with four anchor bolts standing up out of it about ninety millimetres, and I put cones over the bolts because a bolt standing up in a boulevard is a thing a child falls on, and the cones are mine and I'll not get them back.

The lad asked whether we come back for it.

I said if there's a box, we come back.

He said what if there isn't a box.

I said then somebody comes and breaks it out, and it won't be us, because breaking out is a different rate and I'd want a day for it.

I invoiced eleven. I quoted eleven, because by the time I quoted, the order said eleven. What I'd priced in September, off the drawing, was twelve, and the difference between twelve and eleven on that

job is about eleven hundred dollars, which I have not had and will not have, and which I did not put on the invoice because you cannot invoice for a thing that didn't happen.

So somewhere there's a pad I got paid to pour and won't get paid to fill.

That's the second one of those I've had this year. The first was in Abbotsford and that one was a cancelled site and everybody knew why. This one nobody's told me anything about at all, and I've not asked, and I'm not going to, because the four hundred million they're saving over the next while is going to keep three men in work at my place until I'm sixty-one, and a fellow who asks a lot of questions about a spare pad is a fellow they can find somebody else to be.

Eleven bolted. Twelve poured. One invoice.

1192 · DOOR → · · UNMATCHED · HOLD

acct. 6 Jan

Mai Nguyen, video encoding operator

Third shift. Eleven of us.

Same room. Same desks.

Nothing in that room knows what month it is. No windows. The light's the same at eleven as it is at six.

I've been on nights two years. You stop having a season.

An image comes up. You look. You key. It goes.

Two seconds is the target. Two is generous. You get most of them in under.

I've never seen a piece. Two years on this desk and I have never touched an item of mail.

People find that strange. I don't.

What comes to me is what the reader couldn't read. The front of an envelope. That's all there is.

The ones that take four are the ones written by somebody in a hurry who thought they were being clear.

Handwriting, mostly. Some of it bad. Some of it isn't bad, it's old, and old handwriting is shaped differently. Loops. Sevens with a line through them.

Print is worse than cursive. Nobody believes that. It's true.

Cursive is one shape. Print is twenty-six decisions.

This one had a suite on it.

Handwritten. Above the number, not in front of it, which is wrong but which everybody does.

Suite B. Then the number, then the street, then the code.

You can tell when a sender has copied an address off something and when they've been told it over the phone. Copied is neat and it's wrong in the layout. Told is messy and it's right.

This was told.

The code was right. The street was right. The number was right.

There's no suite B at that address.

The system says there isn't. Not that it's vacant. That it doesn't exist.

That happens a lot. More than people think.

Half the houses out there have got somebody downstairs and nobody's told anybody. Why would they. It's a door and a bell and a person.

The database has addresses in it. It doesn't have doors.

You get one a night that's properly wrecked. Torn, or gone through a feed somewhere.

There's a key for park. F7. It goes to a pile somebody deals with in the morning.

So you've got a choice.

Park it, and somebody looks at it in the morning and does exactly what I'd have done.

Or key the address without the suite and let it go.

I keyed it without the suite. Two seconds. Same as everything else.

That's what you do. The carrier knows.

That's the answer to most of this. The carrier knows.

Nobody's ever written it down. Nobody could.

It's true about four hundred pieces a night out of my eleven hundred, near enough. I've never counted properly. You'd have to stop to count.

Somebody at the other end knows which door. That's the system. That's that is the system, at the end of it.

Not my problem either way.

Eleven hundred an hour.

I did eleven hundred and forty. Good night.

They come in threes, good nights. Then they don't for two weeks.

Nothing's different in January. People think there'd be a Christmas thing coming through late. There isn't. Christmas is a parcel problem and parcels aren't me.

Coat. Side door.

Lot was frozen. Not snow. Just hard.

Car by five past.

1186 · DOOR → CMB 44-18 · MATCHED

acct. 10 Jan

Joyce Kalmakoff, postmaster

January is the quietest month of the year at a counter and everybody in the trade knows it and nobody outside it believes you.

December you can't get to the back. The first week of January you can't get to the back either. That is returns.

Returns are slow work, because every one of them is a person who has to be told something they would rather not hear about a receipt or a window or a date.

Then the second week arrives and it stops. It stops the way a tap stops.

What eleven transactions looks like is this. Two parcels going out and one collected. A passport application with the photographs wrong, which isn't a transaction and takes twelve minutes. A box renewal. Two people buying stamps, one of whom bought one and one of whom bought a booklet and apologised for it. A money order. A registered letter to a lawyer in Kamloops, which the woman sending

it wanted to talk about, and I let her. And a man who came in to ask whether we were still here.

Eleven transactions before noon on the Tuesday.

I counted them. When it is like that you count. In December you couldn't count if you wanted to.

A man came in at about half past ten. He had a card in his hand.

He put it down on the counter face up and turned it so it faced me, which people do when they want a thing actually read.

He said his mail had stopped.

It was a suspension notice. He had found it on his door on the Friday.

It was the Tuesday. He had waited the weekend out because he thought it might sort itself. People do. I would.

The notice says delivery is temporarily suspended for reasons of health and safety. It says the mail is being held. It says where to collect it, and it says the hours.

The hours on it are wrong. They are the standard hours, and the depot he was sent to hasn't kept standard hours since the summer.

I told him the right ones. That is all I could do for him and it took nine seconds.

He wanted to know what the hazard was.

I don't have that.

It isn't on my system. It wouldn't be on my system. A suspension sits with delivery and I am retail.

Two parts of the same corporation. They don't meet on any screen I can reach.

"You don't know."

"I don't."

"Somebody knows."

"Somebody does."

He wasn't being difficult. He said it and stood there a second, and then he asked me what he was supposed to do.

I gave him the number. The number is what I've.

He looked at it. Then he said the thing they all say, which is that it is a recording, and I said it is, and that if you hold on through it you do get a person, and that the wait in January isn't bad.

That is true and it is the most useful sentence I know. It took me four years to work out that people want to be told how long, not who to call.

Now, the hours.

We had two full positions and a casual from the middle of November. That is how it has been since before I was postmaster.

The casual wasn't hired this year, and the other position went from thirty hours to twenty-four in September, and nobody wrote to me and nobody phoned.

I found it on the schedule when the schedule came through. I read it twice to be sure. Then I went and made a cup of tea and came back and it still said twenty-four.

Six hours. That is what it is. Six hours a week off one person.

There is a way of doing this that would have taken four minutes. Somebody rings the office and says, we are taking six hours off the second position, here is why, we are sorry. Four minutes. It wouldn't have changed the six hours and I wouldn't be writing this paragraph.

Instead there's a schedule with a number on it, and the number arrives the way weather arrives, and there's nobody to be cross with, and that's the part people outside don't understand about working here. There is very rarely anybody to be cross with.

Nothing has been taken from me. I will have that recorded, because it matters to how the rest of this reads.

It has been taken from beside me.

The other thing worth putting down is that I am not in the same union as the carriers.

Postmasters are Postmasters. A small association, and small since 1902.

When there's a dispute in this country it is the letter carriers on the news. The letter carriers on the line.

I am inside with the door open. I am not in that dispute and never have been.

The customers don't know that. Why would they. The sign over the door is the same sign.

I've never corrected anybody on it either, because a person who has walked here in the rain to post something doesn't want a lecture on bargaining units.

A man came in during the last one and thanked me for being open.

A woman came in the same week and asked me why I wasn't out there with the rest of them.

Neither of them was wrong. I didn't argue with either.

I've thought about those two conversations more than about most things that have happened at this counter.

The lifting of the moratorium means that after thirty-one years there's no longer anything that says this office has to exist. That isn't the same as saying it will close. It is the same as saying that the sentence which used to prevent it has been taken out of the paragraph.

She was on the second wicket that morning with the returns.

Returns in the second week of January is the job nobody wants. It is an hour of no.

She took it without it being discussed. She has taken it every January I've been here.

I've never asked her to. I've also never offered to take it off her, which I notice now and didn't notice at the time.

A woman came in with a coat in the original bag. No receipt. Wrong date. Wrong form.

It was going to be a no.

Everybody at that counter knew it was going to be a no by the third sentence, including the woman.

It took eleven minutes. I timed it without meaning to. You do when you aren't busy.

She couldn't give her the coat back to the shop. That was never available.

What she did was go through it in order. The receipt. The date. The form. What could be done instead.

Nothing about that woman's position changed in eleven minutes. She had no receipt when she came in and no receipt when she left and the shop was never going to take the coat.

At the end the woman said thank you and meant it, and went out with the coat still in the bag.

There isn't a training module in this country that produces that. I've done the training module. It is ninety minutes and it is about tone of voice.

What she did wasn't tone of voice. What she did was take a woman who had come in expecting to lose an argument and give her something to do next.

The woman came back on the Thursday with the right form filled in.

She had done it in pencil first and gone over it in pen. I could see the pencil under it.

I've thought about that since.

Somewhere in those eleven minutes somebody told her the form was worth doing properly, and she believed it.

So she went home and did it in pencil first.

I've started doing the returns in that order myself. Receipt, date, form, what can be done instead. It is a better order than the one I used for thirty years and I do not know why it is better.

I didn't see the man with the notice again that week.

He came back the following Monday. His mail had started. He wanted to know whether he needed to do anything.

I said no.

He said right.

Then he stood there, the way people do when they haven't finished, and I waited, because the counter was empty and there was nowhere either of us had to be.

"It's just," he said. "Nobody ever told me it stopped. And nobody ever told me it started."

They put me on the Santa stream for eleven days in December. That's a thing they do with relief.

It's not a route. It's a room.

You get asked. You can say no.

Nobody says no. It's hours. December is when there are hours.

Here's what it actually is.

There's a postal code. H0H OH0. That's the address. It's been the address since before I was born.

No postage needed. That's real, that's not a nice story, it's a rule. If it comes with a stamp on, fine. If it doesn't, it still goes.

Which means the stream has a lot in it that wouldn't move otherwise.

It doesn't come through the plant like ordinary mail. Well. It does and it doesn't.

It gets separated early because the code sorts it out on its own, which is the point of having a code for it.

Then it goes to the room.

It comes in bags. Not tubs. Bags. Canvas ones, the old kind.

You break them out onto tables. You sort by return address.

The reply goes back to the return address. If there isn't one, there's nothing to be done.

That's the first thing that surprises people.

There's a proportion with no return address at all. Not a small proportion.

Some of them have got a first name on the back and nothing else. Some have got a school. A school you can sometimes do something with.

You can't do anything with the rest. You keep them. There's a box.

Nobody's ever told me what happens to that box and I didn't ask.

The volunteers are staff. Current and retired. Mostly retired.

There's a woman who's been doing it twenty-two years and she is faster than anybody and she does not talk while she works.

There's a man who was a supervisor in Burnaby and he is slow and he is fine and everybody likes him.

Two who came in together and have done it since 2009 and sit at the same table every year and bring their own thermos.

One who is still working, days, and does this on top, and I don't know when he sleeps.

Nobody's paid. They're volunteers. That word does a lot of work and I'd not really thought about it before that two weeks.

You get a template. There's more than one. You pick.

You're allowed to write more than the template. Most people do a bit.

You're not allowed to promise anything. That's the one rule and it's on the wall and it's underlined.

Some of them come in other languages. There's a list on the wall of who does what.

Thirty-nine languages, the sheet says. I've seen four.

Punjabi is me. That's why I got asked, I think, though nobody said that and I didn't ask.

There's Braille as well. That goes somewhere else and I never saw it done.

The deadline is the thing.

The deadline is a date in the first half of December. After that you can't guarantee a reply lands before the twenty-fifth.

Which means the eleven days is a countdown and everybody in that room knows the number.

I asked on day three how many we were behind.

"Behind on what?"

"Behind."

"We're not behind. We're at where we are."

Which is a supervisor answer and I've given it myself.

Day six I asked again and got a number.

Four thousand. Give or take a thousand.

Which I know is not a helpful number. I said so out loud and the woman who's been doing it twenty-two years said, it's the number.

Day seven the bags stopped coming and everybody got quiet, because a day with no bags in December means either you're nearly done or something's stuck.

It was stuck. Two bags in a cage behind a pallet. They turned up at four.

Casual hours in December are what a lot of people at that depot live on.

I'm not casual. I'm relief, which is different, and it's better, and I've got hourly now.

The two women across from me were casual.

Both had been told there'd be a January. In November they were told there wouldn't.

Neither of them said anything about it in the room. Not once, and I was next to them for eleven days.

I only know because we were in the same parking lot and one of them said it to the other one and I was three cars away.

I didn't say anything either. What would you say.

You do about ninety an hour if you're good. I did about seventy.

The woman who's been at it twenty-two years does a hundred and thirty and she does not appear to hurry.

I watched her for a bit on day four to see how. I couldn't see how.

You get quicker at the template and slower at everything else, because your hand goes.

Day nine my hand went properly and I did four hours left-handed, which you can, and which is worse but not by as much as you'd think.

Day ten they brought in doughnuts, which somebody does every year apparently, and there was a thing about who'd brought them that I didn't follow.

Last day was a Friday and we finished at two because the truck went at two.

Whatever was on the tables at two went on the truck. Whatever wasn't, didn't.

That's it. That's the job.

I put my coat on and a fellow I'd not spoken to all eleven days said, see you next year.

I said I'd not be here next year.

He said, everybody says that.

Wendell Osei, undeliverable mail officer

The item described in the earlier part of this file reached its disposition date on the ninth of January and was dealt with in the ordinary way, and I am setting out here what the ordinary way consists of, because I have been in this office eleven years and I have twice inherited a file from a man who assumed his successor would know, and on both occasions I did not know, and the not knowing cost two weeks.

Reaching a disposition date is not an event and there is no moment at which anybody decides anything. A report runs. The report lists what has come due. A person walks the aisles with the report and pulls what is on it, and that person is whoever is free, and on the ninth of January that person was me, which is the only reason this paragraph is in the first person rather than the passive.

An item is held for a period, and if nothing changes it is disposed of, and disposed of means one of three things.

If it has no value it is destroyed, which is the great majority of it. Destroyed is a confidential shred and it is witnessed, and the witnessing is not ceremonial: two signatures are harder to forge than one, and the Corporation learned that at some cost in the nineteen-seventies.

If it has a value, it is priced and set aside, and if an address is subsequently found it is sent on, and if one is not it is sold, and the proceeds go to the Corporation. That is not a scandal and it is not a secret; it is in the regulations, it has been in the regulations for longer than any of us, and the alternative is a warehouse in Scarborough with a hundred and forty years of other people's belongings in it, which is a thing people say they would prefer until you describe the building to them.

If it is money, it goes to the credit of the Corporation and a postal money order is raised against it, so that if an address is found later the money can still travel. I have raised nine of those in eleven years. Two of them were subsequently paid out.

I remember both. One was a hundred and sixty dollars in an envelope from a woman in Halifax to a grandson whose regiment had moved, and the trace on that took five weeks and was not mine. The other was forty dollars and I will not set out the circumstances because they are not mine to set out.

If it is prohibited by law it goes to the appropriate policing agency and I do not handle it further and neither should you.

The disposition line on the file is a single word and the single word carries none of it.

On the practical arrangements. The shelving runs by date and not by category, and the argument for it is that a date is unambiguous and a category is a judgement. A man in a hurry will file a thing under the wrong category and it will be gone for a year. He cannot file it under the wrong week.

The tags are printed and the tags carry the date and the reference and nothing else, and if you are ever tempted to write anything additional on a tag, do not, because the tag is read by somebody who is not you and who has thirty of them in his hand.

On proportion, which is the only advice in this file rather than record.

The great majority of what passes through this office is never resolved. I asked for the figure once, in my second year, and I was given it, and it did me no good whatever for about eight months. If you imagine it and then assume you have been too generous, you are in the region of it. It has not improved in a hundred and forty years and it will not, because it is not a performance measure. It is a property of the fact that people write addresses by hand and move house without telling anybody and die.

A person who measures himself against that proportion will not last in this work.

I have watched two go. Both were better at the trace than I am. One of them went to parcels and is by all accounts content, and the other left the Corporation entirely and I do not know where he is, which is a joke that this office makes about itself and which stopped being funny to me some years ago.

What you measure yourself against is the item in front of you. That one either goes or it does not. When it goes you have done a thing that could not have been done by anybody standing anywhere else in the country, because by the time it reaches this building every other part of the system has already failed at it, and that is not a criticism of the other parts, it is a description of what this office is for.

The Seeker put it better than I am putting it here, some years ago, when a young fellow asked him more or less this question in the tea room and got an answer nobody expected because we had all assumed he was not listening. He said that everywhere else in the corporation is built to know where a thing goes, and that this room is the one place that is built for not knowing, and that the not knowing has to be housed somewhere or the rest of it cannot claim to work.

Then he said, and this is the part the young fellow repeated afterwards to people who had not been there, that the Seeker is not a job title, it is what you are left with when the address runs out.

I have never forgotten that and I have never repeated it until now, and I am aware that setting it down in a file is a peculiar place to preserve a remark made over a kettle.

I do not know whether he meant himself. I have thought about it and I do not think he did, and I have never asked him, and there is no version of asking him that I can picture going well.

He is still two aisles over. He has been running traces in this building since before I came into it and he will be running them when I am gone, and I have never in eleven years seen him take a file that somebody else wanted.

Disposition and retention date are recorded in the usual place. The reference is on the tag. The tag is on the shelf under the ninth.

1168 · DOOR → · · UNMATCHED · HOLD

acct. 22 Jan

Dale Ferraro, letter carrier

The keys went out in the second week of December, in the ordinary mail, through the doors that were being taken away, which is a thing

I have not heard anybody remark on and which I have thought about most mornings since.

Two hundred and nine envelopes. Each one has a compartment number printed on the outside and two keys inside cut to that compartment, and the compartment number is stamped into the bow of each key as well, which is the part that matters for what follows. Not printed. Stamped, into the metal, at the factory, by a machine that stamps the same number into the lock that goes with it.

There is also a schedule. The manufacturer sends one with every cabinet and it lists each compartment against the code its lock is cut to, and the code is not the same thing as the compartment number, it is four characters and it is what a locksmith would work from. I have seen that schedule. Anybody can see it; it lives in a folder at the depot with the module drawings.

And there is a commissioning sheet, which belongs to the contractor and carries his signature. Every door on that bank was opened and closed on the twelfth of December with its own cut key, before the keys went into the envelopes, and that is two hundred and eight separate operations by a man in the rain, and he signed for all of them, and the sheet is dated.

It took most of a morning on top of the ordinary load, because an envelope with two keys in it is thicker than a letter and will not go through about a third of the slots on that street, which meant a third of them were hand-to-hand or left at the door, and a thing left at a door in December has to be somewhere out of the rain, and I know where the dry spot is at every house on that walk and that is not written down anywhere either.

I delivered two hundred and eight of them.

The one for 1168 came back to me at the case four days later with a sticker on it. Undeliverable as addressed. Which is a thing that happens when a house is vacant or a name is wrong, and neither applies here, because the envelope was addressed to the address and not to a person, and 1168 is not vacant.

I put it in the case and told the supervisor and he said leave it with me, which is what they say.

To be fair about that. He is not a bad supervisor and there is a real thing behind the phrase, which is that a returned key envelope is somebody else's process and he cannot start it from where he sits, and if he pretended otherwise he would be pretending. He tells me the truth in three words and the three words sound like a brush-off. That is not his doing. There is no fourth word available to him.

Now. From the twelfth of December that compartment has been emptied.

I want to set out how I know that, because it is the only part of this I can stand behind. When the boxes went live I was still doing the door for eleven days on an overlap, and after that I was casing to compartment. Either way I am at that module every working morning with two hundred and nine pieces in my hands, and the parcel bank is at the end and the compartments run left to right in two banks of a hundred and four.

Forty-four twenty-one is second row, ninth along. I could put my hand on it in the dark and after eleven days I was doing exactly that, because it is dark at seven in January and the light on that module faces the road.

I put mail into it on the twelfth. On the thirteenth the mail was gone and there was new mail to put in. On the fifteenth the same. On the eighteenth the same. I began, around the twentieth, to notice that I was noticing, which is a different thing and is the point at which a man ought to either say something or stop.

I did not say anything. What I did was start looking, which is worse.

By the sixth of January I could tell you that the compartment was cleared every day or every second day, in the pattern of a person who is at home and not away, and that whoever it was did not take the flyers out of it on Wednesdays, which is a habit and habits are what I am actually good at reading.

Twenty-two years of doors will teach you a person's week without your ever meeting them. Who is up before six. Who has not been in since Thursday. Which house has somebody in it during the day and which has somebody in it during the day who does not want anybody

to know. None of that is in a database and none of it should be and I have never once used it for anything.

I was using it now. That is the honest way to put what I was doing between the twentieth of December and the fourteenth of January.

There is a key in an envelope in a case at the depot with a sticker on it. There is a compartment that is being emptied. Both of those are true and I have said so to two people and both of them said leave it with me.

On the fourteenth of January I did the thing that is in the log.

I want it written plainly because it is going to be read by somebody who was not there. I took the returned envelope out of the case, which I was not supposed to do and which nobody has said anything about, and I took the keys out of it, and I looked at the bow of one of them, and it was stamped 21.

I put it into forty-four twenty-one and turned it and it did not turn.

I have no explanation for that either and it is the part everybody skips over when I tell it, and it is the part that made me do the next thing.

I went along the row trying it.

That is a hundred and four compartments in the bottom bank and I did not do a hundred and four. I did the second row, because a key that is stamped for the second row and does not open its own door is most likely a neighbour, and that is not detective work, that is the same reasoning anybody uses when a key does not fit.

It took about four minutes. I did it in the dark at ten past seven with the rain coming off the roof of the module onto my shoulders and I knew at the time it was not a sensible thing to be doing.

It opened forty-four fourteen.

Second row, second along. Sixteen compartments away. The lock plate in that door is stamped 14, which I looked at with a light, twice, and the key in my hand was stamped 21, which I also looked at twice.

There was mail in fourteen. Three pieces and a flyer.

I did not touch it. I shut the door and I heard it lock, which they do, and then I stood there for a bit.

Then I went and got the key for fourteen out of my own sequence sheet, which I should not have had either, and that one opens fourteen

as well. Both of them open it. The one stamped 14 and the one stamped 21.

I have thought about whether a factory can stamp a key wrong. It can. Anything can be stamped wrong. I have had a bundle come in with the strap label upside down and every piece in it belonged to a street in Coquitlam.

So I went and looked at the schedule. That took about ten minutes and nobody minded.

The schedule gives compartment twenty-one a code and gives compartment fourteen a different code, and those two codes are not similar, they do not share three characters out of the four, and a man reading them out would not confuse the one for the other.

The key stamped 21 is cut to fourteen's code. I am not a locksmith and I would not know that from the blade, but the schedule carries a diagram, and you can count the cuts against it, and I did, twice, on two different evenings, with a light.

Then there is the commissioning sheet, which says that on the twelfth of December the key stamped 21 opened the door stamped 21, and which is signed and dated by the contractor who did it.

That is the part I keep coming back to. It is why I am writing any of this down.

A key cut wrong at a factory never works. It does not work on the twelfth of December and stop working on the fourteenth of January. There is no work order for a lock change on that module, and I have asked twice, and the cores are all the same finish and the same age, which you can see with a light, because a new core is bright and those are not.

I did not do anything else. I did not go back to fourteen. I did not go back to twenty-one. I did the walk, and I have done the walk every working day since, and I put mail into twenty-one every morning and it is gone every morning, and I have stopped noticing it, which took about a week and which I did not expect.

I logged it that morning. There is a form and the form is for lock and key faults and it has a box for the compartment and a box for the key stamp and a box for a description, and I filled in all three and I gave it in.

I asked about it on the twenty-first. It has been received. It is on file.

I have been on that walk twenty-two years and I have learned that there is a class of thing which is on file, and being on file is where it lives now, and being on file is not the same as anybody having read it.

While I was there I asked something else that I had been meaning to ask for about a year, which is who cases my containers on a bad night, because there was a night in the autumn when seventeen came off in walk order after the machine had gone down and I never got a straight answer about it.

The fellow at the counter said that would be the Hand.

I said who is that.

He said that is what they call him.

I said right.

I have not asked anybody since. I do not know to this day whether I was told a name or a job, and the fellow at the counter would not have been able to tell me either, and I do not think it occurred to either of us at the time that there was a difference.

1162 · DOOR → CMB 44-22 · MATCHED

acct. 26 Jan

Meaghan Rutt, conversion project officer

A consultation is held after the site has been assessed and before it is built, and I am putting that sequence at the top because the order of those two things is the difficulty and because nobody in that room on the eighteenth of November had been told it and I did not tell them.

What a consultation can change is limited and the limits are not arbitrary. The position of a module within a site, by a few metres, where the criteria permit. An access issue not visible in the assessment, and I have seen four sites moved on those in two years. An accommodation application from somebody who would not otherwise have made one, and on that alone the meetings are worth holding, because we got three out of that room and one was granted.

What it cannot change is whether the conversion happens, where in the community it happens first, or whether a site that meets every criterion is nevertheless the wrong site, and everybody who came that evening came to change one of those three.

The notice for it went out three weeks in advance on a card, and was also placed in the community paper, and was on the municipality's website, and none of those three is how anybody in that room found out about it. They found out because a woman on that street knocked on doors, which she told me at the end, and which is the reason there were thirty and not nine.

There were about thirty people. It was in a rented room at a community centre with a floor that squeaks, and there were sixty chairs out because whoever books the room books sixty, and thirty people in a room set for sixty is a difficult room to speak in.

I had the drawing, the criteria, the site assessment, and a municipal staffer beside me who had come because I asked him to and who did not have to. He was there on his own time. I did not know that on the night and found it out afterwards from somebody in his office, and I have not thanked him for it, because by the time I learned it the thanking would have been about me.

They were reasonable. I will have that recorded because the word consultation has come to carry a suggestion of shouting and there was no shouting in that room at any point in ninety minutes.

What there was instead was thirty people who were each entirely correct about their own frontage.

That is not a joke at their expense and it is the most useful thing I have learned doing this work. In two years of these rooms I have been told perhaps four hundred things by members of the public and I would put the proportion factually wrong at under one in twenty. People know their own street.

The gentleman at 1162 was correct that the module will stand where his sightline to the street is. The woman two doors along was correct that the boulevard on that side takes the runoff. Somebody at the back was correct that the school route passes the corner at ten to nine. A man whose name I did not get was correct that people will park across it and that nothing will be done about that, and he was

correct in the second half as well as the first, which is the part that stayed with me. He did not say it bitterly. He said it the way you say a thing you have already finished being annoyed about.

None of those is a criterion. That is not a defect in the people. It is that the criteria were written to be applied by somebody who has never stood on the street, which is the only way a national programme can be run, and the price of that is that the criteria cannot hear a man who has stood on the street for thirty years.

Somebody asked me, about forty minutes in, who wrote the criteria.

I said they are national and they are published and that I would send the link, and I did send the link on the Thursday, and that is a true answer and it is not the answer to the question.

The answer to the question is that I do not know, and I have applied those criteria to eleven sites in two years and know the numbers in them the way you know a phone number.

Forty-eight and thirty-two. I have wondered about those two numbers more than is reasonable, because they are not round and somebody chose them, and I have never found out who or when or on what basis, and there is no author on the document, only a version number and a review date and no name anywhere in it.

I asked, once, in my first year, in an email to somebody who had been there eleven years, and she said she thought they had come over from an earlier standard and that the earlier standard had come from somewhere else, which is not evasion, it is what she knew.

The programme above the criteria I can account for, and I said so in the room, because it is public. A decision was taken in September 2025 to lift the moratorium, and the reasons given were financial and the figures are published, and anybody who wants to disagree with those figures can get at them. That part is not hidden and it is not mysterious and I have never understood why people assume it is.

What is not available to anybody, as far as I can establish, is the forty-eight, and I am the person standing in a rented room being asked to account for it.

I answered every question with a process.

There are three things available in that room. You can say you agree with them, which is a lie unless you do and is worse than a lie

if you do. You can say the decision is not yours, which is true and is heard as a man passing a parcel along. Or you can give them the process, accurately, without dressing it up, and let it be as thin as it is.

That is what I do. It satisfies nobody, including me, and it has the single merit of not being a performance. When a person asks who decided, the honest answer is that the site was assessed against published criteria by an officer applying them correctly, and that answer is true and complete and it does not contain a person, and people want a person.

The municipal staffer spoke twice.

The first time he explained the servicing and the permit, which was useful and which nobody was interested in.

The second time was near the end and he said what he had said to me on the telephone in September, which is that the corner floods. He said it well. He gave the drainage catchment. He gave the year of the last work on that line, which was 1998. He said the boulevard on the far side sits about four hundred millimetres higher and does not flood, and that this is not a matter of opinion in his office, it is on a map.

Somebody asked him whether the far side would meet the criteria.

He said he did not know, that it was not his to say, and that he had been asked to give the drainage and that was what he had given. Which was correct of him and which cost the room the only moment in ninety minutes when something might have moved.

I said that the comment would be recorded.

He said he knew it would.

I have gone back and forth about whether to write down what I thought at that moment and I am going to, because a file that only contains what was said is not much use to anybody.

What I thought was that he had come out on a wet Tuesday evening, unpaid, to say a true thing to a room, knowing before he arrived that the only available outcome was that it would be recorded. And that he did it anyway. And that I have not once done anything as useful as that in this job, because everything I do is inside a process that will carry it, and the things I have said outside a process have all been said on telephones to people who agreed with me.

I put his comment in the consultation record on the Thursday, with his name and the date and the catchment figure, and I put the map reference in as well, which is not a field that exists and which I typed into the description box.

The site did not move.

I do not know that anybody read it. There is no receipt on a consultation record. It goes into the file and the file goes forward and the approval was already on it.

The meeting closed at about half past eight.

People put their own chairs away, which they do not have to do and which everybody did, including the man who had asked about the parking, and it took about four minutes and nobody said anything much while it was happening.

I was packing the drawing into its tube when the gentleman from 1162 came up.

He was not cross. He had been the most reasonable person in a reasonable room.

“Can I ask you something?”

I said of course.

“When you go home tonight. Does somebody bring your post to your door?”

1156 · DOOR → CMB 44-23 · MATCHED

acct. 30 Jan

Gary Loewen, depot superintendent

Nothing large went wrong that week and everything small did, and I’ve been doing this long enough to know that those two facts are related, because a week with something large in it gets your attention and a week without one is a week where you find out how many small things there are.

I’ve written a list, which I did on the Friday afternoon at about ten to five for my own purposes and which I’ve kept.

The gate on the cage that has been bent since spring. A carrier off with a shoulder, which is the second shoulder this winter and both of

them from stairs. Two walks over-assessed after the December counts, which isn't a surprise and which somebody upstairs will nonetheless be surprised by in February. The parcel scanner on the second bench, which works if you hold it at an angle nobody should have to learn. A supply order that came in with sixty of a thing we use four of and four of a thing we use sixty of. The heat in the back room. A complaint about the heat in the back room, which is a legitimate complaint and which I've raised twice.

And one thing properly, because it is the one that actually mattered and it is the one that won't be in any report.

On the Wednesday a carrier came to me about her walk. It has come back over-assessed since the boxes went in on the top end, which sounds backwards and isn't, because a converted section takes minutes out of the delivery and the measurement then hands those minutes back to you in the form of more street. She isn't complaining about the boxes. She is complaining that the walk she bid on in 2021 isn't the walk she has, and she is right, and there's a process, and the process is a restructure, and a restructure takes about nine months and produces a walk somebody else may bid on.

I told her all of that in about ninety seconds because she already knew it. What she wanted was for somebody at this desk to have heard her say it out loud before it goes into a form. I've come to think that's most of what this job is and I wouldn't have said that ten years ago.

And eleven apologies.

I counted them because I count them. I started counting them about four years ago after a week in which I realised I had apologised to a person for the weather, and had meant it, and had been thanked for it.

Eleven this week. Two for volume, which isn't mine. Three for the boxes, which isn't mine. One for the scanner, which is arguably mine and which I've raised. One for the heat. Two for a carrier being late off the floor. One to a supplier, which doesn't count and which I've counted anyway. And one to a woman on the telephone whose parcel says delivered and isn't delivered, and there's an eight to ten business day process for that, and I said the words eight to ten business days

to her and then I apologised, and she said, it's not your fault, and I said no, and neither of us was any better off.

I don't think apologising is weakness and I've heard it called that. What I think is that it is the only currency I am issued with. I can't give somebody their walk back, or their six hours, or their parcel. I can tell them I am sorry and mean it, and about half the time that's received as an insult, and I would still rather issue it than not.

At about four I had the plant on the line about a container that had come in on its side and burst a strap.

That happens. It isn't a crisis. What you want to know is whether it was made up badly or handled badly, because those are different phone calls to different people and only one of them is worth making.

"Who made that one up?"

"That'd be the Hand."

"Right," I said, and I wrote it down, and I didn't make the second phone call, because if the Hand made it up then it was handled badly somewhere between there and here and that's a conversation for a Monday.

I've no idea to this day what that man's name is.

I've been dealing with that plant for six years. I've used that word to describe him perhaps thirty times, in phone calls and on notes and once in an email that went to four people. I've never been in a room with him. I wouldn't know him if he came through that door.

That isn't unusual. There are perhaps a dozen people at that plant I deal with weekly and I could put a face to three of them. What is slightly unusual is that with the other eleven I know their names.

The woman with the handle time worked through to five and took two calls after the queue had closed, which she does, and which I've stopped putting in the return because the return has nowhere to put it.

Eleven minutes against five and a half. Fourth quarter running.

Then I went round and turned things off, which I do on a Friday and which isn't in anybody's job description.

The lights over the empty bays, of which there are more than there were. The kettle, which somebody leaves on. The heater in the back

room, which doesn't work and which somebody switches on anyway, and which draws current whether it works or not.

The bays are the thing I notice. When I started here every bay was in use every morning and the floor was tight and people complained about it being tight. There is room now. There has been room for about three years.

Two carriers were signing out at the desk while I was doing it. Both of them had been on since six and both of them will be on at six on Monday and one of them has been doing that since 1999.

"Anything Monday?"

"Nothing I know about."

"That's not the same as nothing."

"No. It isn't."

He laughed and went out, and the other one said, is that a yes or a no, and the first one said, that's a superintendent, and they both went out to the parking lot.

The last thing I turned off was the light over the case row, which leaves the floor dark except for the one over the door, which stays on, and which I've never had a reason to turn off and have never once thought about until I wrote that sentence.

THE HUNGRY GODS GO DOOR TO DOOR

PART FOUR

EVEN, 1150 TO 1100, AND THE BOX

Rob Tenhove, plant supervisor

They resequenced the North Shore in the second week of December and it took an afternoon.

That's the event. What people think happened is that something got rebuilt. Nothing got rebuilt. A man in an office off the floor changed a configuration and pressed a thing and went for his lunch.

Here's what it means.

From the fourteenth it sorts that street into compartment order instead of door order, because a compartment number is assigned by the conversion file and the file assigns them in the order the addresses come off a list.

The list isn't the street.

It doesn't need to. That's the point. The carrier isn't walking any more. He's standing at a cabinet putting things in numbered holes.

I have carried three walks in this job and that is the one I will be asked about, and the other two were four years and eleven months and not one door on either has stayed with me.

Two hundred and nine addresses. One stop.

I've been on this floor nineteen years and that is the largest change to how that street gets its mail in my time, and it was a Tuesday afternoon and I found out about it from a printout.

Nobody came down. Why would they.

There was a memo. There's always a memo. This one had a subject line about optimising sequencing outcomes for community mailbox conversion and it was four paragraphs and the fourth paragraph thanked us.

Somebody printed it and put it on the board and somebody else wrote a word on it and it came down within the day, and I know who wrote the word and I'm not putting it here.

Fourth one of these I've been through.

First was the plant closing downtown and everything coming out to Richmond. Second was the parcel build-out. Third was the last lot of route restructures. This one.

Every one of them, the same three things happen. Somebody senior says it's about the customer. Somebody on the floor says it's about the money. And both of them are right, and neither of them can say the other one's sentence out loud, and that's all of labour relations in this country as far as I can see it from here.

The weekend model started in January.

Part-time hours attached to it, which is the bit people argue about. Half this floor thinks it's the thin end. The other half has a son or a daughter who'd take one of those hours tomorrow.

Both halves voted yes. Eighty-nine per cent voted yes.

I wasn't in that vote. I'm management. I was on that floor eleven years and in that vote nine times and now I'm not in it, and the first year of that was stranger than anything else about the job.

You're in the room and it stops being your room. Nobody's rude about it. Somebody just stops finishing a sentence when you come round the end of a line.

You can hold both of those things at once and nearly everybody here does. I've never once heard anybody on that floor say the agreement was a good agreement. I've never heard anybody say they voted against it either.

The Hand's on days now.

That came out of the weekend model as well, because the model moved bodies about and the seniority run put him on days, and he put in for it, which surprised me.

I'd had him on nights for six years.

"You're on days."

"I am."

"You want to be?"

"I put in for it."

That's the longest exchange I've had with him about anything that wasn't a container.

I've tried, over the years. Not hard.

"Doing anything for Christmas?"

"No."

"Right."

You get about two of those and then you stop, and I don't hold it against a man. This building is full of people who came to nights so that nobody would ask them that.

I've had that man on my floor six years. I could tell you exactly what he's good at and nothing else about him at all. Where he lives. Whether there's anybody at home. What he did before.

That's not unusual on nights. Nights is a place people go when they'd rather not be asked. But six years is six years and I've asked other people less interesting questions than that.

Days is a different job. Days is volume without pressure and nights is pressure without volume, and I've done both, and I'd take nights, and most people who've done both would take nights.

He'll be fine. He's fine anywhere.

I put a note on the handover for the days supervisor. Two lines. What he's good at and what you don't need to check.

She rang me about a week later.

"Your note."

"What about it?"

"You've written 'the Hand' on a handover."

"That's what he's called."

"I know that's what he's called. I've got to put a name on a form."

I hadn't thought about it. Nineteen years and I hadn't thought about it, and I had to go and look it up on the schedule like a stranger.

What I notice about the floor now, and I've been trying to work out how to put it since about November.

There's room.

When I started, every bay was in use every morning and it was tight and people complained about it being tight, and there was a fellow used to say you couldn't swing a cat, and he'd say it every single day.

There's room now. Been room about three years.

Bays four and five haven't had anything in them since the spring except a pallet jack and a Christmas tree somebody put up in 2023 and nobody's taken down.

It's not that the volume's gone. Parcels are up and up and up. It's that parcels don't need floor the way letters needed floor. A parcel is a scan and a belt. Letters were people standing at cases.

So the building is the same building and there's about the same amount of stuff going through it and it looks half empty, and I could not explain that to somebody who hadn't seen it.

Last thing.

The night the resequence went live I stayed on for the first run, which I didn't have to and nobody asked me to.

I wanted to see it come off.

It came off fine. It's a configuration. It was always going to come off fine.

What I actually wanted, and I'll put it plainly because there's no sense pretending otherwise at this stage, was to be in the building when a thing that had been one way for sixty years became a different way. That's it. That's all that was.

It took about four seconds and there was no noise and nobody looked up.

The Hand was on the far end, which was the last night before he went to days, and he took the North Shore containers off and put them where they go, and I watched him do it, and I couldn't have told you from watching whether that street had been sorted one way or the other.

It looked exactly the same. That's the thing nobody tells you about a large change. From the floor it looks exactly the same.

Dispatch went at eleven. It's gone at eleven every night since.

1144 · DOOR → CMB 44-25 · MATCHED

acct. 7 Feb

Curtis Bakker, installation contractor

Commissioning is the part where you find out whether you've done it right, and it's also the part where you stand in the rain for five hours opening and shutting doors, and those two facts are the same fact.

And it's the part nobody pays for properly. It's in the quote as a line and the line is four hours and it has never once been four hours, not on any module, not in twenty-six years, and every contractor in this business knows that and every one of us puts four hours because the fellow who puts six doesn't get the job.

Two hundred and eight compartments across the eleven. Nineteen to a cabinet, and the eleventh carries the parcel bank instead, and each cabinet has an outer access door on the carrier's side which is a different lock again.

Every one gets opened and shut. Every one gets signed for. Eleven cabinets and a sheet that runs to four pages.

That's not me being thorough. That's the contract. There's a sheet and the sheet has a row for every door and you tick it and you sign the bottom, and if you sign the bottom and a door doesn't work in March then the sheet is the thing they hold up.

I've been doing this twenty-six years and I've never once ticked a row I hadn't done. I'll tell you why, and it isn't virtue. It's that the one time you do it will be the one that fails, and I've watched it happen to a fellow in Surrey. Not a bad man. He ticked a bank of sixteen he hadn't done because the light was going and he had a ferry, and four of them were stiff, and it came out in the spring, and it took him about two years to get work back and he's never had a Crown job since.

You do it with the cut keys. Not a master. The keys come in a bag from the manufacturer, numbered, and you test each door with the key that's meant for it, and then the bag goes back in the van and goes off for mailing.

The bag is sealed. Little plastic thing with a number on it, same as they put on containers. You cut it to get the keys out, and you put a new one on when they go back, and both numbers go on the sheet.

Cut seal 71104. New seal 71119. That's on my copy and it's on theirs.

Which means from the minute I sealed that bag at about twenty past four, there was not a cut key for that module anywhere in this province outside a sealed bag in my van. Not one. That's the point of

the arrangement and it's the only reason anybody lets a contractor near two hundred and eight keys.

So that's the morning. Door, key, open, shut, tick.

You get a rhythm. About forty an hour if the weather's decent and about twenty-five if it isn't.

That day it wasn't. That day it was the kind of rain that doesn't look like anything and gets into the sheet, and I had it in a plastic wallet and I still lost the bottom corner of page three.

Somewhere around the second bank the lad said he'd do the reading and I'd do the doors, which is faster, and he stood there with the sheet under his coat calling the numbers out.

"Eighty-six."

"Eighty-six."

"Eighty-seven."

"Eighty-seven."

Like that, for five hours.

He's good at it. He doesn't lose his place and he doesn't fill the silence, which is a thing about him I noticed in his first month and which is worth more than people think.

Around a hundred and forty he said, do you ever think about who's in these.

I said no.

He said, no, nor me, and then about ten minutes later he said, well, sometimes.

We got to two hundred and eight and I counted the ticks myself before I signed, which I do, and there were two hundred and eight.

Empty. Every one of them. Nothing in that module, because nothing goes in it until the depot switches the walk over, and that was three days off.

Then I went round the back to do the parcel bank.

The service side is one door across the back of the cabinet and it opens on a different key and I've got it on a ring with the outer access. You open it and you're looking at the backs of that cabinet's nineteen compartments with no partitions on that side, which is how a carrier loads them — you stand at the back and you fill them from behind.

Eighty-seven had mail in it.

Three pieces and a flyer, sitting in the back of the compartment, which I had opened from the front about eleven minutes earlier and which was empty, and which the lad had read out and I had ticked.

Nobody had been at that module in between.

Let me set that out properly because it's the part I've gone over. That module stands on a boulevard at a corner with the road on two sides of it and a hedge behind. There is nowhere to stand at it that isn't in the open. I was at the front of it for four hours and the lad was at the front of it for four hours and neither of us had our back to it for more than the length of a door.

And the keys were in a sealed bag in the van, and the seal was on it, and it was still on it that evening, and the number matched the number on the sheet, because I checked it, that evening, for the first time in twenty-six years.

I said to the lad, did anybody come round the front.

He said no.

I said you sure.

He said I've been stood here.

I'll tell you what I said next and I'll tell you it was wrong, and I knew it was probably wrong at the time and I said it anyway because it was raining and we were four hours in.

I said it's the divider. I said on this model the divider's a slip-in and if it's not seated the piece drops through from the one above, and I said it happens, and I said we'd get it on the snag list.

None of that is true.

There's no divider on that model. It's a welded box. Welded on all six sides, and I've taken one apart, in a yard in Langley, because I wanted to know what I was bolting down.

There is no route from one compartment to the one below it. There is no route from anywhere to the inside of a compartment except the front door or the back door, and I had one key ring for the back and the other keys were in the bag.

The lad wrote it on the snag list.

He wrote what I told him, because I've been doing this twenty-six years and he's been doing it two, and that's the correct behaviour for

a man in his position, and it's the reason I ought to be more careful about what I say at four in the afternoon in February.

I looked at the three pieces before I moved them. I'll say that too.

Ordinary. A bill in a window envelope, a thing from a bank, something handwritten, and a flyer for a grocery chain that was going to every door on that street that week and had already gone.

I didn't look at the address. I did not look at the address, and I'm aware that saying so makes it sound like I did.

I took them out and I put them on the shelf at the depot on the way past, which is not my job either, and I said to the fellow at the counter that somebody's loaded a bit early.

He said the walk isn't over till Thursday.

I said somebody's loaded a bit early.

He said right.

Two hundred and eight doors. Two hundred and eight ticks. One signature. Five hours and twenty minutes, and the quote said four.

1138 · DOOR → CMB 44-26 · MATCHED

acct. 11 Feb

Mai Nguyen, video encoding operator

Third shift. Same room. Eleven of us.

Nothing changed.

I mean that literally. I put it down because I was asked and there isn't anything else.

The images come up. You look. You key.

Same rate. Same desks. Same fans. Same eleven people, near enough. One left in January and wasn't replaced.

Two of the fifty-five have been dark since I started. Nobody's ever said why.

I asked, my first month. A woman said they'd been dark before her as well.

She'd been there nine years.

Winter's the same as summer in there. I've said that before. It's still true.

I found out afterwards there'd been a change to that street.

Somebody said it in the lot. Not to me. Near me.

Two people talking about a route measurement. One of them said the North Shore's all boxes now.

That's it. That's how I know.

I'd not have known otherwise. There's no reason I would.

Nothing on my screen says where a piece is going after I've keyed it.

Nothing says how it gets there. Nothing says who takes it.

A door or a box. Same code either way. Same postal code, same street, same number.

The code doesn't have a field for the last twelve feet.

Nobody's ever going to build one. Why would you.

That's not me being incurious. The field doesn't exist.

Somebody built this desk to do one thing. It does the one thing.

I keyed about nine thousand pieces that week. Some of them went to that street. I don't know which. I couldn't find out if I wanted to and I don't want to.

Eleven hundred an hour. Eleven hundred and ten.

That's the same as it was in November and the same as it'll be in June.

Somebody asked me once what I'd do if the job went.

Nights go last. That's what I said.

Might not be true. It's what people say in that room and I've started saying it.

There was a thing on the news in September. Everybody had a view for about a week.

Then it stopped and the rate was still eleven hundred.

Two years ago I'd have had an answer. Now I say the thing everybody says.

Somebody put a card up in the lunch room in January. Leaving do for a woman on days I'd never met.

I didn't go. Eleven of us on nights and I think one went.

That's not sad. Days and nights aren't the same building. They just use the same doors.

Coat. Side door. Lot.

Car by five past.

1130 · DOOR → CMB 44-27 · MATCHED

acct. 15 Feb

Joyce Kalmakoff, postmaster

There's one point in this entire business where the corporation asks a person who they are.

I hadn't understood that until this winter. I've worked at this counter thirty years.

Thirty years of handing things over and it had never once come up, because it never comes up, because a door doesn't ask.

You put mail through a slot and the slot doesn't want to know. It couldn't if it tried.

A compartment doesn't ask either. The compartment is assigned to the address and the keys go out to the address, and nobody is ever named at any point in that.

But a replacement key is different, and a replacement key is where it lands, and it lands here.

If you've moved in and there's no key, or you've lost it, you come to a counter and you ask, and the person at the counter has to be satisfied that the mail at that address is yours to have.

That's the wording. Satisfied. It's not defined anywhere I can find.

What we ask for is government photo identification showing the address.

That's it. That's the check.

That's all that stands between a person and everything that arrives at an address in this country. A driver's licence. Held up. Looked at.

I've been thinking about that since December and it has not got smaller.

He came in on a Tuesday, near the end of the month.

Thirties. Not from here originally, by the sound of it.

Polite the way people are when they've decided in advance the thing is going to be difficult. Standing back from the counter a bit. Holding the wallet already.

I can tell you before somebody speaks whether they think they're going to be told no. It's in where they stand.

He'd moved into 1130 three weeks before.

The people before him had gone. The keys had gone with them, or gone in a drawer, or gone in a bin, and either way he hadn't got any, and there is no procedure anywhere that makes a departing tenant hand a compartment key to anybody.

That's worth sitting with for a second. Two hundred and nine households on that street were sent two keys each in December. Nobody is ever going to ask for any of them back.

She was on the counter.

"I need a key for the box."

"Have you got identification?"

He had a licence. He put it down.

It had his old address on it.

Now. That is not a person trying it on. That is a man who moved three weeks ago and hasn't done his licence, and if you asked me how many people in this country are walking about with a licence that says where they used to live I would guess it's most of the ones who've moved this year.

There's a thing that happens to a person's face when they put a document down and see it at the same moment the clerk does. I've watched it across this counter for thirty years and I could pick it out at twenty feet.

He knew before she picked it up.

"It's got the old address on it."

"I can see that."

"I can come back."

"You've come now."

I was six feet away with a customs form.

I did not look up. I put that in because it's true, and because it matters to what I can and can't tell you, and because at this counter not looking up is a thing you learn to do properly in about your second year.

I heard the rest of it.

He said he had a lease. She said a lease isn't identification. He said he could get a bank thing on his phone. She said that's not it either.

Then there was a bit where neither of them said anything, and it went on longer than that sort of silence goes on.

And then she asked him what he'd been doing about his mail for three weeks.

Which is not a question on any form. Which is not a question I have ever heard asked at that counter. It isn't a check and it isn't a kindness either, or it wasn't put like one.

He said he'd been going to the depot. He said the depot is open four hours and he works, and that he'd got there twice in three weeks, and that both times there'd been things for him and one of them had been from the hospital about his mother.

She said right.

She didn't say anything else. She didn't say she was sorry about his mother and she didn't say the depot hours were a disgrace, and both of those would have been true and neither of them would have got him a key.

Then she went and got the key.

It's logged.

There's a field. The field has to be filled. She filled it.

Government photo identification, address confirmed. That's a drop-down and there are four options and none of the four is what happened.

The address on that licence is not the address on that compartment. Both of us know that. She wrote what the field takes.

The file has it down as replacement key issued, entitlement unverified, which I did not know at the time and which I have seen since, because I went and looked, in January, for reasons I could not give you.

That's the seventh line on a report I've never been sent.

I don't know what the other six are. I know there's a report because the reference is on the screen and the reference has a format and the format tells you it's a run of something. I could probably ask. I've not asked.

I've thought about whether I should have said something.

Eight weeks. I'm no further on.

I could have gone over. I was six feet away. Anything I said would have been said in front of him, and there's no version of that where he isn't a man being discussed.

What I keep arriving at is that there's no version of that afternoon where the right thing and the correct thing are the same thing.

If she'd sent him away he'd have been correct and he'd have had no mail, and he'd have gone on going to a depot four hours a day that he can't get to, and the hospital would have gone on writing.

If she does what she did, a man has a key to an address and the only thing standing behind that is that she looked at him.

And the second one is worse in every way that can be written down and better in the only way that happened.

People who write procedures have never had to stand at a counter and pick, and I don't say that bitterly. Somebody has to write them. I'd not want to.

The other part, which is what I actually want on the record.

He came back on the Thursday.

Not for anything. He'd got a parcel to send and he could have sent it anywhere, and there's a franchise counter in the pharmacy two blocks nearer to him and it's open till eight.

He came here.

He's been in four times since.

Once with a passport form he didn't need help with. Once to buy a booklet of stamps, which nobody under fifty does. Once for nothing I could see at all.

The fourth time he brought a parcel that was three dollars cheaper at the pharmacy and I know that because I checked afterwards, which tells you something about me and not much about him.

That's not gratitude. I've had gratitude. Gratitude is a card at Christmas and a tin of something at the counter.

That's a man who has worked out where he's going to go.

We're on a list. I've said that already and here is where it matters.

If this office closes he'll go to the pharmacy, because it'll be that or nothing, and he'll be served correctly by somebody who's had the training and there'll be no complaint to make about any of it.

The last time he was in he was at her wicket and I was at mine, and there was nobody else, and I heard him say it while he was getting his wallet out.

"You didn't have to do that."

1122 · DOOR → CMB 44-28 · MATCHED

acct. 19 Feb

Wendell Osei, undeliverable mail officer

The file is closed and I am closing it in the ordinary way.

A closed file reads as an ending and it is not one. It is the point at which an office stops carrying something, and the difference between those two is the only thing this room has ever been about.

On the second signature, since I have mentioned it twice in this file and defined it nowhere. A tag is destroyed by one officer in the presence of another and both sign, and the reason is not that anybody expects an officer to steal a tag. The reason is that a destroyed tag is the only point in this process that cannot be undone, and the Corporation learned at some cost that a thing which cannot be undone should not be done by a person on their own. That is the philosophy of this office expressed as a stationery procedure and I have never heard anybody say so out loud.

There is nothing further to record about the item. There is something further to record about the office, and this is the last of these I intend to write at length, so I will put it here.

Since the autumn I have had four files from that region and all four of them have turned on an address that two systems described differently, and I will be careful with that sentence because it is the kind of sentence that sounds like a finding and is not one. Four is not a number. I have had four files turn on almost anything you care to name over eleven years, and if I went back through them I could

construct a pattern out of coastlines or surnames or the day of the week.

What I can say without constructing anything is that the volume of items reaching this office from delivery units undergoing conversion is up, that this is entirely expected, that it is expected because a conversion generates redirections and lapsed forwards and households that move in the same season, and that it will fall again in eighteen months. That is not an insight. It is in a briefing note that I did not write.

I have never been to British Columbia. I have said that in this file already and I am saying it again because I want whoever reads it to understand the shape of what I do and do not know.

I have never seen that street. I could not tell you whether it goes uphill. I do not know how many doors are on it, or which of them are difficult, or what the weather does there in February, and none of those facts was available to me at any point and none of them would have changed a single step of the trace.

The office that was converting that street had a file on the same address at the same time and neither of us knew the other existed. I found that out afterwards and there is no mechanism by which the two files would meet, and no person whose job it would be to make them meet, and if such a person existed I would want to know what else they were expected to reconcile in a day.

I asked the Seeker about it, which I do perhaps twice a year and which I did on the Thursday.

He was at his desk with three files open, which is the Seeker's ordinary state, and he did not close any of them.

I said, do the conversion people ever send us anything.

He said no.

I said, do we ever send them anything.

He said no, and then he said, why would we, and I said no reason.

That was the conversation. It lasted under twenty seconds and I have thought about it since more than about most conversations I have had in this building, which tells you either something about the conversation or something about the building.

I have worked forty feet from that man for eleven years. I have never seen him take a file that somebody else wanted, I have never heard him raise his voice, and I do not know where he lives or whether there is anybody at home, and it has never once occurred to me to find out, which is a thing I notice now that I am writing it down and did not notice at any point in eleven years.

He is not being incurious. He is being accurate. There is no reason. A conversion file is about whether a compartment exists and this office is about whether a person can be found, and those two questions look adjacent from outside and are not adjacent at all, and a man who has spent thirty years in this room can tell you that in four words.

Two further matters for whoever has this next.

The first is that the shelving is being reorganised in the spring, by date still, but with the bays renumbered, and if you are working from a reference written before April the second digit will be wrong.

Somebody will tell you this and they will tell you late. That is not a criticism of anybody; it is that the person who knows is not the person who writes the notice, and the notice is written by somebody who has correctly assumed that the change is small. It is small. It will nonetheless cost you a morning, and it cost me a morning in 2016 when they last did it, and the man who taught me had put a line about it in a file in 2009 that I read afterwards.

The second is that the tea room kettle has been replaced and the new one switches itself off, and there was a period of about three weeks in January during which four adults with a combined service of over a hundred years were unable to establish why their tea was cold, and during which two separate people submitted facilities tickets, and during which nobody thought to read the writing on the side of the kettle.

I record that because a successor reading nine pages of disposition procedure should know that this is also what it is like in here.

The third is that I am fifty-eight.

I put that down not because it is interesting but because the man who taught me put his age in a file once, in 2009, and I read it in 2014 and it was the single most useful line in nine pages, because it

told me how long he had been carrying what he was describing and therefore how much weight to put on it.

Disposition recorded. Retention run. Tag destroyed and witnessed.

The item is not in this building and there is no record of where it is, which is the correct outcome, and which I have written on perhaps four thousand files, and which I have never once got used to.

1114 · DOOR → CMB 44-29 · MATCHED

acct. 23 Feb

Dale Ferraro, letter carrier

The last day was the eleventh of December and it was a Thursday and it rained from about half seven, and I have thought since about whether I ought to have made more of it and I do not think I ought to have, because nothing was scheduled and a walk with something scheduled in it is a different walk.

I did it the way I have done it since 2004, which is case at ten past six and out at seven and the odd side to the top and turn at the lane and down the even, and there are two hundred and nine addresses on it, a hundred and five and a hundred and four and the lane that was surveyed and never built out, and I have written all of that down before in this book and I am writing it again because on the eleventh of December it was still true and after the eleventh of December it was not going to be a description of anything.

There was no note in the case about it either. I have wondered since whether there ought to have been and I have decided there ought not to have been, because a note in a case is for something a carrier needs to do differently and there was nothing to do differently.

The load was ordinary. December is heavy but the second week is not the heavy part; the heavy part is the week after, and what you get in the second week is cards, which are light and awkward and go through a slot beautifully and would go into a compartment just as well.

Nobody knew. That is the part I would want written down if I were only allowed one line. Nobody on that street knew it was the last one.

The card in August had a date in December on it and the date was the fifteenth, which is when the boxes went live, and the eleventh was the last day of door because the overlap runs out on a Thursday and nobody sends a card about an overlap.

So there was no standing at windows and no coming out. There were two, which is an ordinary morning, and one of them was the woman at 1173 who put her hand up, which she does, and I put mine up, which I do, and I have never spoken to that woman in twenty-two years and do not know her name and would not recognise her in a shop.

I have thought about what that is. It is not friendship. It is not politeness either, because politeness stops after a few years and this has not stopped.

The nearest I can get is that we have both been doing something at the same time of day for a very long while, and the hand is how you say so.

What I noticed, and I did not expect to notice it, was the time.

I was eleven minutes short. Not long. Short.

That has happened perhaps four times in twenty-two years and every one of them was August, when the ground is dry and you are not going round the outside of anything and the bag comes down faster because there is less in it. It happened because I was not stopping, and I was not stopping because I had decided somewhere around 1140 that I was not going to do anything differently, and a man who has decided that does not stop, and the not stopping is itself the doing of something differently, which I worked out at the bottom of the hill and not before.

The stiff slot at 1143 was stiff, and the brush at 1101 held a thin envelope halfway down the way it does and I pushed it through with two fingers, and the moss on the second step at 1167 was moss so I went up the outside edge against the rail, and the gate at 1155 had the dog behind it and the dog did what it has done every working morning of its life and will go on doing after I am gone off that walk and after the boxes and after whatever comes after the boxes.

None of that was done for the last time. All of it was the last time and none of it was done that way.

I would not know how to do a thing that way. I do not believe anybody does. The people who think they do have not had to be somewhere at seven the following morning.

The man at 1119 came out at about twenty past nine.

He was in shoes, which I mention because in August he came down those steps in socks with the card in both hands, and I have thought about that more than the thing deserves, and the honest reason is that in August he came out because something had arrived that he did not understand and in December he came out because he had understood it.

"Is today the day?"

"Today's the last one to the door."

He looked up the street. There is nothing to see up that street, it is houses, and people look anyway.

"I thought it was the fifteenth."

"Fifteenth's when the box goes live. There's four days in the middle."

"What happens in the middle?"

"You get it at the box."

"So it's today."

"It's today."

He stood on the step in the rain and neither of us said anything about the rain, because if you say something about the rain here you have started a conversation about the winter and there is no end to that one.

"Can I still put stuff out?"

"There's a slot on the box."

"On the box."

"On the box."

"So I have to walk down to send a letter."

"You do."

He thought about that.

"What about parcels?"

"Most of them go in. There's a bank at the end for the big ones."

"And if it doesn't fit the bank?"

"Comes to the door."

“So you’d still come.”

“For that, yes.”

“How often’s that?”

I said perhaps twice a month at his address, which is about right, and he did the arithmetic on his face and did not say what he had worked out, and I did not say it either.

“How far is it?”

“Hundred and ninety metres.”

“How do you know that?”

“A fellow measured it.”

He looked down the street at where the boxes were, which you cannot see from 1119 because of the bend, and then he looked back at me.

“Well,” he said. “That’s that, then.”

And he went in and shut the door, and it was not a slam and it was not anything, and I stood there for a second longer than I needed to and then I did the rest of the odd side, which took the usual time, because the usual time is the usual time and a man standing on a step for two seconds does not come out of it.

There were eleven more houses on that side above 1119 and I did them, and then the lane, and then the turn.

What I will say about the top of that walk on that morning is that the cloud was down on the cut line the way it is from October, and you come up out of the houses and there is nothing above you, and it is quiet for about ninety seconds before the Upper Levels starts, and I have had that ninety seconds five days a week for twenty-two years and it did not occur to me until I was halfway down the even side that I had just had the last of them.

That is the only thing about that day I would call a feeling and I have put it in one sentence and I am not going back to it.

I finished at ten past one. The last one on the walk goes into 1143 at the bottom where the street bends toward the water, and I pushed the flap with the back of my hand and held it and fed it through, and the flap came down on my knuckles the way it has done since a repaint some years ago that put paint in the hinge.

I have reported that twice, in 2019 and again in 2022, on the form for it, which goes to buildings and not to delivery, and which I filled in correctly both times.

It is not the kind of thing anybody comes out for, and now it is not the kind of thing anybody is going to come out for, because there is no longer a reason for anybody from this corporation to touch that door at all.

In about nine years somebody will paint it again and the hinge will be fine and nobody will ever know it was stiff. The people who live there now do not know. They have never used it. It is a slot in a door in a house and it worked for thirty-odd years and it went stiff and it stopped, and the only person who ever knew about it was me, once a morning, five days a week, for twenty-two years.

1108 · DOOR → CMB 44-30 · MATCHED

acct. 25 Feb

Priya Sandhu, relief carrier

I got the box walk in January because nobody wanted it.

That's not a complaint. That's how relief works and it's how I've had every good thing in this job.

The regulars bid on walks. I get what's left after the bidding, and a walk that's just gone to boxes is what's left, because everybody who could bid on it bid on something else.

Here's what it is now.

You case at six. Same as before. Except you're not casing to a street, you're casing to numbers.

One to two hundred and eight. Straight through.

It's easier. I want to say that first because everyone expects the other thing.

Casing to a street means holding the street in your head. Which side, which order, where you cross.

Casing to numbers means counting.

I was twenty minutes faster on the case in my first week. Twenty. I've never been faster than anybody at anything on this job.

Then you drive.

That's the part nobody tells you about either. You drive down, you park, you get out once.

One stop. Two hundred and nine addresses and one stop.

You open the back of a cabinet with the access key and you're looking at nineteen open backs with no partitions, and you go along them putting things in, and then you do the next cabinet.

It takes about forty minutes if it's dry.

Longer in the wet, because you're standing still in it. That's the difference nobody mentions. Walking in rain is fine. Standing in rain for forty minutes is not the same thing at all and I'd take the hill.

The bank at the end takes the parcels that fit and you leave a key in the compartment for those, and there's a bit of a knack to which ones fit and I got that wrong twice in the first two weeks.

Then you're done.

Half nine. Quarter to ten in the wet.

The walk was four hundred and seventy-two minutes. That's the assessed figure and he told me once and I remembered it because it's a strange number.

I don't know what this is. Nobody's remeasured it yet.

It's not four hundred and seventy-two. It's not close.

There's a restructure coming. Everyone knows there's a restructure coming. Nobody's said anything and there's a date on nothing.

What I noticed, and I noticed it about the third day.

I didn't need the list.

The list I built. The brush at 1101. The stiff flap at 1143. The gate at 1155.

None of it does anything now. You don't go up the path. There's no path.

I'd spent two goes at that walk getting all of that and it took about three days to stop being worth anything.

I'm not sad about it. I'll be honest. I was quite relieved.

Two hundred and nine houses and I don't have to know anything about any of them.

The dog's still there. You can hear it from the corner if the wind's right.

I've not seen it since December. I don't suppose I will.

The man who does his own stairs is still doing his own stairs. I saw him on the second week from the road. He didn't see me. There'd be no reason for him to.

There was a woman at the boxes while I was loading, on the second week. She had her key out.

"Can I get in?"

"Give me a minute."

"I've got to be somewhere."

I said I'd be five minutes and she said she'd come back and she didn't, or she did and I'd gone.

That's the other thing. You're in the way now.

Before, you came to them. Now they come to it and you're standing in front of it.

Nobody's rude about it. It's just that there isn't a version where you're both there and it's fine.

I've had four of those in six weeks.

None of them was a row. Two of them apologised to me, which I minded more.

There's post-it notes on three of the compartments. People labelling their own. That's not allowed and nobody's said anything.

Somebody put a chair by the boxes. Not a joke, an actual chair, and it's for an older woman on that street who can't stand.

It's still there. Somebody's going to move it.

Finished at half nine on the Thursday and sat in the van at the top for a bit before I took it back, which I've never done, because there was time.

Curtis Bakker, installation contractor

I went back on the nineteenth of February to check the bolts, which is in the contract, and which is a thing I would do anyway because I

have had one move on me, once, in 2011, on a site with fill under it that nobody had told me about.

February on that corner at eight in the morning is about four degrees and wet and there is nobody about, and it is the only time I have been at that site without somebody coming out to say something to me.

Eleven modules. All upright, all level, all locked. I put a bar on four of the anchors at random and there was nothing in any of them, which is what you want and which takes about twenty minutes to establish.

I checked the level on three of them with a two-foot spirit and they were level, which they would be, because they were level in December and concrete does not move in eight weeks unless somebody has made a mistake underneath it.

The doors all shut. Two of them are stiff. Both of those are on the end module facing the weather, which is ordinary, and which is a lubricant and not a fault, and I did them while I was there because I had the can in the van.

Somebody had been getting at the parcel bank latch on the second one, not to break it, just people pulling at a thing to see if it opens. That's every site. You get about four months of that and then it stops.

There was a bit of tagging on the back of the third one. Not much. Somebody's initial and a shape. It comes off with a solvent and it does not come off completely and there is a version of that job where you keep going at it and make it worse.

I left it. It's not on my sheet and nobody has raised it, and in six months it'll be under something else.

The twelfth pad is still there.

Poured, cured, edged, four anchor bolts standing up out of it about ninety millimetres. The cones I put over the bolts in December are still on the bolts, which surprised me, because in most places those cones are gone in two weeks.

I put a bar on those anchors as well, which there was no reason to do and which I did anyway, and they're sound. I've done that on two other jobs where a module never came. The valley one's still there as far as I know. Somebody put a planter on it.

The office asked me about it when I phoned the sheet in.

“Eleven’s in. The twelfth pad’s sitting there.”

“Sitting there how?”

“Poured. Bolts up. Nothing on it.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Not mine.”

He didn’t ask a second question. Nobody ever asks a second question. There’s a box on their form and my sentence went in the box.

The lad wasn’t with me. He was on a job in Coquitlam that week with the fellow I get in when I need a third, and I sent him because it was a driveway and a set of steps and I have been trying to put him in front of a customer on his own since the autumn.

He rang me about a gradient. It was fine. He knew it was fine.

That’s the third time he’s rung me about something he knew the answer to, and the third time I’ve given him the answer without saying that, because the day I say it is the day he stops ringing and pours something wrong.

I don’t know what happened on that street.

I have been asked twice now to write things down and I have written down what I did and what I was paid and what I saw, and there is a thing people do where a man who was there is expected to have understood something, and I was there and I bolted eleven cabinets to eleven pads and I did not understand anything and I don’t think there was anything for me to understand.

I don’t know anybody’s name on that street. I know one woman’s housecoat and I know a lad three doors up who watched us pour for two hours in September and asked what the sand was for.

I told him it wasn’t sand, it was aggregate, and he said what’s aggregate, and I said stones, and he went in.

I know nothing at all about the mail. I have never once wondered what is in any of it and I have never met a man in this trade who has.

What I do know, and I’ll set it out because it’s the only expertise I’ve got and nobody’s ever asked me for it:

That a module is four hundred and twenty kilos empty and takes four anchors. That the torque figure’s on the sheet and isn’t a

suggestion. That the star pattern isn't optional. That you check the template three times and not four.

And that the twelfth pad on that corner is as good a pad as the other eleven and has nothing on it.

My father did driveways and my uncle did driveways and I did driveways for nine years and then somebody asked me to do a pad for a box in Coquitlam in 1999 and I have been doing pads for boxes on and off ever since, and there was a stretch after 2015 where there was nothing at all, none, ten years of nothing, and I did retaining walls.

There'll be four million of these over the next while, or that's the number they're using. I'll get some of them. Not all of them, because there are three outfits in this town and one of them will go cheaper than me on the pour and lose it on the bolt-down, and that's been the arrangement since 2014.

I'm on the North Shore again in April. Different street. Twenty-six pads.

I've already put the extra day in the quote.