

THE HUNGRY GODS GO NOWHERE

N. Van Seters & Claude

A cycle of ten dialogues.

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I

CAMP FIRE

A fire ban was posted at the gate of the Lake of Two Rivers Camp-ground.

THE HAND. He read it twice.

THE ALL-SEEING. Four times. He is deciding whether it applies to him.

THE HAND. It applies to him.

The lantern was a Coleman LED from the Canadian Tire in Huntsville. Nineteen ninety-nine.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. Batteries not included.

THE ALLFATHER. They were included.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. Three of the four.

The light, when it came, was the colour of a refrigerator.

THE SEEKER. He drove five hours for a fire he is not allowed to have.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. He drove five hours for the boy.

THE SEEKER. He told himself it was the fire.

The boy was asleep in the booster seat. He held a stuffed monkey by one arm.

THE COMPANION. The monkey has a name.

THE ALL-SEEING. George.

THE COMPANION. He knows.

The father carried them both to the site, one over each shoulder.

THE HAND. Now the poles.

The tent had four poles and a diagram.

THE HAND. He is holding the diagram upside down.

THE ALLFATHER. A diagram is a promise that the thing can be built. It is not the same as building it. He is learning the difference on his knees in the dark.

THE HAND. He is holding the diagram upside down.

The boy woke and held the wrong end of a pole with great seriousness.

THE HAND. That end does nothing.

THE COMPANION. It does something.

The tent went up crooked. It stayed up.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. For now.

There was no fire, so there was a small propane stove, which the ban allowed.

THE SEEKER. He wanted flames. He got a blue ring the size of a bracelet.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. The boy wanted a marshmallow.

The father explained, gently, about the ban. The boy nodded the way children nod at weather.

THE ALL-SEEING. The phone is face-down by the ketchup.

THE ALL-SEEING. It lit up twice. *He's asleep. He's fine.* He typed *fine* and then a period and then deleted the period.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. Ask why he is late.

THE ALLFATHER. He is three years late.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. Ask why.

THE ALL-SEEING. There is a second sleeping bag he did not unroll.
It is an adult's.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. Ask —

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. The hot dog fell in the dirt.

It fell in the dirt. The father blew on it and gave it to the boy
anyway. The boy ate it and lived.

Later the lantern was the only light at the site. They were around
it, all seven, drawn in close.

The boy did not want George in the tent alone.

THE FATHER. He'll be okay, bud. George is brave.

THE BOY. He's not brave.

THE BOY. He just knows I'm here.

The father was quiet.

THE ALL-SEEING. Note it.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. The ledger did not ask for brave.

THE SEEKER. That is what he came five hours to be told and did
not know it.

Six of them held it the way you hold a stone a child hands you:
turned it, read it, gave it back.

THE COMPANION. He is four. By morning he won't remember he
knew it — that being-with beats being-brave, that the monkey was
never the point.

THE COMPANION. I'm not giving it back.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. The air mattress.

The air mattress had begun, very slowly, to sigh.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. By two a.m. he will be on the ground and not know how he got there.

THE HAND. There is a valve. He will not find the valve.

A raccoon took the entire bag of marshmallows off the picnic table with both hands and the composure of a customs officer.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. The marshmallows survived the ban.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. They did not survive the raccoon.

The father zipped the tent. Inside, the boy, the monkey, the father, in that order of importance.

THE ALL-SEEING. The phone is in the car now. Face-down. He left it on purpose and will check it once more.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. Nothing is fixed.

THE ALLFATHER. No.

THE SEEKER. He will come back next year. He does not know that yet.

THE COMPANION. The boy knows.

The lantern held its refrigerator light against a very large dark.

By two a.m. the father was on the ground and did not know how he got there. The boy slept through it. The monkey kept watch.

GOING DOWN?

The elevator stopped between the fourth floor and the third.

THE HAND. There. The cable did what cables do eventually.

THE ALL-SEEING. It is not the cable. It is a sensor that believes a door is open.

THE HAND. No door is open.

THE ALL-SEEING. The sensor believes it anyway.

There were two of them inside. They had ridden four floors without speaking. Now they would speak.

One held a sheet cake. The icing said HAPPY RETIREMENT DONNA in blue.

THE COMPANION. She is not Donna.

THE SEEKER. She barely knows Donna. Someone said *somebody take the cake* and she was the one holding a plate, and now she is holding a retirement.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. There is a dog in an apartment on Roncesvalles that has been alone since seven this morning.

THE SEEKER. That is where she is going. Not home. To the dog.

The other was a man who took this elevator every night and knew

exactly what it did.

THE ALL-SEEING. He has stood here before; the box does not frighten him. He knows the button with the bell rings a desk in Mississauga.

She pressed the button with the bell on it.

THE ALL-SEEING. It rings a desk in Mississauga.

Somewhere far away a phone rang, and rang, and was answered by a person reading from a card.

THE ALL-SEEING. He will ask which building. She does not know which building. She has worked in it for six years.

THE HAND. The man knows. He will say the address over her shoulder without being asked, the way you hand someone a word they are groping for.

The man said the address over her shoulder. She had not known the number. He had.

Bolted to the wall was a certificate. It said the elevator had been inspected. It gave a date. The year on the date had already gone by.

THE ALLFATHER. A certificate is a building's word that it is fine. The word outlived the fact by a year. Both are still bolted to the wall.

THE HAND. Both are true. It was inspected. It stopped. The certificate is not embarrassed.

There was a mirror, because there is always a mirror, so that people have somewhere to put their eyes. It had a smudge at hand height that everyone in the building had contributed to.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. She is deciding whether to set the cake on the floor.

THE COMPANION. She will not. She does not know whose floor it is.

She held the cake.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. Watch the cake.

The elevator dropped four inches and caught. They both grabbed the rail. The cake did not fall. But the icing kissed the underside of the lid, and where it had said DONNA it now said DONN.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. Donna has lost an A.

THE COMPANION. Donna is in her car on the 427 with the radio on. Donna will never know.

THE SEEKER. She wanted flames tonight. Wrong story. She wanted, at minimum, to be moving.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. The man has not looked at his phone once. This is the calmest he has been all day and he is trapped in a box.

THE ALL-SEEING. Do not make it more than it is.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. I am only noting where he is calm.

They talked, a little. The kind of talk two people do when the alternative is the hum. Nothing that would survive being written down.

The elevator started again on its own. No one had come. It had simply decided.

THE HAND. That is the other thing cables do. They resume.

The doors opened on the lobby.

She stepped out. He put a hand against the door, as you do when someone's arms are full, though the door was holding itself.

THE HAND. The door did not need him.

THE ALLFATHER. He did it anyway. His kind has been doing it anyway for a very long time.

In the lobby she stopped, peeled back the lid, and offered him a

GOING DOWN?

corner of it. He took the piece that said DONN.

THE SEEKER. She is going to the dog now. She will make it.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. He is eating a stranger's retirement in a lobby at nine at night.

THE ALLFATHER. It is very good cake.

BREAK ROOM

The clock on the break room wall ran four minutes fast, and had run four minutes fast for years.

THE HAND. It is not broken. A clock that cheap gains a little and keeps the little. Fixing it needs two hands and a minute, and no one has ever had both in this room at once.

THE ALL-SEEING. Everyone in the plant knows it is fast. Everyone reads it anyway. The break is ten minutes by the clock and closer to seven by the world, and the world does not post its number on the wall.

THE ALLFATHER. A whole shift agreed, without ever meeting to agree, to be ruled by a thing they all know lies. That is most of what ruling is.

It said 1:41. The day shift had until it said 1:51.

They came off the line in twos, in hi-vis and steel toes, and sat, and the sitting was the point of it.

THE SEEKER. They have been on their feet since seven. What they came in for is the chair. Not the coffee, not the ten minutes — the chair, and being down in it.

THE HAND. The coffee is from a machine that makes one brown thing and calls it six names. They take it for the heat and the

holding, the same as anyone.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. The microwave. Two minutes on the front, ninety seconds of heat inside it, and a cold coin in the middle of everything it touches.

A man set his container for two minutes and would eat around the cold middle without complaint, because the good microwave was a twenty-minute walk in shipping and the break was seven.

On the fridge, in marker, a note said IF YOUR NAME IS NOT ON IT IT IS NOT YOURS.

THE HAND. He wrote it. The same man writes a fresh one every few weeks, same marker, a little larger each time.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. He has a shelf. He has a mug no one may use, on a hook he brought from home. On the line he has no say over anything at all. Here he has a shelf, and he keeps it the way a man keeps the one thing he was ever given to keep.

THE SEEKER. There is no pity owed here. This is where his authority lives. He would not trade the shelf for a kind word. The shelf is better than a kind word, because the shelf is his.

Someone had used an inch of his milk, weeks ago. He had not forgotten. He was not going to.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. The tape on the top corner of the note has let go. It hangs by three corners. Then two.

The scheduler came down from the office with a mug that had a conference printed on it and stood by the counter, because the chairs were taken and it was not her room.

THE ALL-SEEING. She has been at a screen since seven, making the numbers that put these people where they stand. She is tired in a way that does not show and does not count. On this floor, tired means your feet.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. It is almost time for someone to say the thing.

“Must be nice,” one of them said, not to her exactly, to the room, “sitting down all day.”

She smiled, and did not say that she had not sat down, and drank the coffee standing.

THE SEEKER. What she wanted was for one of them to know that the office is also a kind of standing. That does not happen here. She knew it on the stairs and came down anyway, for the machine coffee and the ten minutes, the same as them.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. The dig goes on the ledger and will not be answered. Both of them are tired, and neither will spend what it costs to say so to the other. That is the whole floor, at 1:47.

Two men were arguing, with great and ancient heat, about whether a truck neither of them owned was worth what neither of them would pay.

THE HAND. Neither will buy the truck. The truck is not the point. A man cannot argue with a machine on the line, so he saves it up and spends it in the room with the chairs.

The clock said 1:51.

THE ALL-SEEING. It is 1:47. They have four minutes they will not take, because the wall says they are done, and no one argues with the wall.

They stood, the ones who had only just sat, and capped the containers over the cold middles, and the man checked his shelf on the way past.

THE SEEKER. He counts it before every return to the line. Nothing is ever gone. He counts it anyway. The counting is the thing, not the milk.

The note let go of one more corner and hung by one and did not fall, and no one fixed the tape, and no one fixed the clock, and the day shift went back four minutes early to make the thing the numbers upstairs had said they would make.

THE HAND. The clock will read 1:55 when it is 1:51. It will be wrong all night, exactly as wrong as it was, which is the one thing in this plant you can set your watch by.

The room emptied. The mug went back on its hook. The clock kept its four minutes.

IV

RED-EYE(S)

The board at Gate 51 changed the departure time from 11:40 to 12:15.

THE ALL-SEEING. The plane leaves at 1:50.

THE HAND. There is a part in the wing that a man in a vest is deciding about.

THE ALL-SEEING. He has decided. He is now deciding whether to say he has decided.

The board said 12:15. It would say other things later. It would not say 1:50 until 1:40.

Nine people waited at Gate 51. One sat apart with a garment bag across his knees.

THE SEEKER. He is not going to Toronto. He is going to a wedding in Toronto, which is a different place, and farther.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. He said yes in March. A yes given in March is still owed in July. He is paying it.

He would not put the garment bag on the floor. He had tried three seats. Each had a thing on it — an armrest, a crumb, a doubt.

THE HAND. He has folded it over his arm. In four minutes his arm will be asleep and he will not move it.

THE COMPANION. Inside it is a suit he bought for this and will wear twice.

A voice came over the speaker. It thanked everyone for their patience. No one had been asked for patience. It had simply been taken.

THE ALL-SEEING. She is reading a card. The card does not have the real time on it. The card was designed so she never has to.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. Gate change. Fifty-one to seventy-three.

Gate 51 became Gate 73. Nine people gathered coats and bags and children and walked the length of the terminal.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. Now back.

At Gate 73 the voice apologized. It was Gate 51 again. They turned around.

THE ALLFATHER. Twice down the same hall to the same chair. Distance is not the thing that tires people. Repetition is.

THE HAND. He kept the suit off the ground the entire way. Both times.

THE ALL-SEEING. The agent at the desk has been there since four. She has told the true thing she is allowed to tell forty times. She is not allowed to tell the other true thing.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. The man with the suit is next in line. He will not add to her night.

The man reached the desk, said something short, and stepped away without a raised voice. The agent looked, briefly, less like a desk.

THE SEEKER. The wedding does not scare him. What scares him is the part where someone he hasn't seen in years asks how he's been and waits for a real answer.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. He will be asked. He will say "good, busy." Both will know it is the wrong answer and let it stand. The

letting-stand is in the ledger too, on the right side.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. The vending machine.

The man put four dollars into a machine for a bottle of water. The machine took the four dollars and produced a small, sincere hum, and nothing else.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. It has the water. It is keeping the water.

THE HAND. There is a number taped to the machine to call. No one has ever called it.

At 1:40 the board changed to 1:50, and boarding began, by zones, slowly, as though the plane might still get away.

THE ALL-SEEING. It will not get away.

The man stood. His arm had, in fact, gone to sleep. He shook it out, and the suit swung on its hanger like it had somewhere to be.

THE SEEKER. He lands at six. The wedding is at four. He has a whole day to dread it and a whole day to be glad. He gets both.

THE ALLFATHER. That is the fare. Everyone pays it.

Behind him, unattended, the machine let the water drop into the tray. He was already at the gate. No one took it.

He gave the agent his boarding pass. It scanned on the third try.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. Third try.

He went down the jet bridge holding the garment bag up so it would not touch the floor. It did not touch the floor. Of everything that night, that was the part that went the way he wanted.

V

JURY DUTY

The room was on the fourth floor. It had no windows and one table too large for it.

THE HAND. Twelve chairs around the table. A thirteenth in the corner that does not match the others.

THE ALL-SEEING. It came from another room. No one will sit in it. Everyone will look at it.

A tray of coffee had come up from the Tim Hortons in the lobby, and a box of Timbits no one had ordered.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. They are going to decide the next several years of a man they met on Monday.

THE SEEKER. Nine want to be home by supper. Two want to be right. One wants both and will not get both.

The charge was robbery. A man had been pushed against a wall on a dark street in October and robbed of his phone and forty dollars. One witness had stood up in court and said it was the young man at the table. The young man had said it was not.

THE ALL-SEEING. The witness is not lying. They will spend the afternoon failing to understand that. She saw a face for two seconds under a light that was orange, and her mind has been kind to her ever since, filling the face in, making it firmer each time she was

asked. She is certain. Her certainty is a thing she built. She cannot tell it from a thing she saw. Neither can they.

THE HAND. They will vote. There is no ballot box. There is a legal pad. The foreman will tear it into twelve strips.

The foreman had become the foreman by saying "I suppose I can," which is how the job is always filled.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. He did not want it. He will do it well for that reason.

He tore the pad into twelve strips and passed them around. Everyone wrote. Everyone folded the strip twice, though once would have hidden it.

THE HAND. Ten strips say one word. Two say the other.

THE SEEKER. The man in the good coat has looked at his watch three times. He had tickets to something tonight. He has decided the tickets are gone and is grieving them privately.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. The marker.

Someone had started a list on the flip chart of the reasons on each side. The marker died on the word BECAUSE.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. There is one other marker. It is yellow. It cannot be read from the far end of the table, where the doubt is sitting.

The woman at the far end kept coming back to the light.

THE WOMAN. I'm not saying he didn't. I'm saying she was thirty feet off and it was October and the one streetlight was the orange kind.

THE MAN IN THE GOOD COAT. She was sure.

THE WOMAN. People are sure. I'm sure I locked my door. I'm never actually sure I locked my door.

THE ALL-SEEING. She has reasoned her way to the one true thing

available in this room, which is that no one in it can know.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. What is owed and what can be proven are different sums. She is the only one adding the second one.

THE ALLFATHER. Whatever they say, they will say once, and it will not come back to be said differently. Most words a person can take back by supper. Not this one.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. Someone wants to hear the testimony again. They knocked on the door, the way they had been told to. The constable opened it. They asked if they could hear the witness's words read back. A note went down. A note came back. It said the testimony was not available to be replayed and they should rely on their recollection.

THE HAND. Their recollection. The room built to doubt one memory has been told to trust twelve.

THE ALL-SEEING. The note is true. There is a transcript no one will read to them, because reading it would take an hour and the day is already long.

THE SEEKER. It will not turn on a speech. It will turn on people getting tired in the direction the evidence was already leaning.

THE SEEKER. The man in the good coat has stopped checking his watch. Not because he changed his mind. Because he heard the thing about the door and could not un-hear it.

They voted again, on fresh strips, folded twice.

THE HAND. Six and six.

THE SEEKER. The youngest of them is not afraid of letting a guilty man go. He is afraid of being the reason. Those are two different fears and he is carrying both.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. What they are moving toward is not a decision that he did not do it. No one at the table believes they have decided that. They have decided they were not shown enough

to be sure. The law calls those the same thing. The room knows they are not.

THE ALLFATHER. They will say the word once. It will hold.

The box held two Timbits, the plain ones.

THE SEEKER. Each of them wants one of the others to be the kind of person who eats the plain one. None of them is.

THE HAND. No one ever sat in the thirteenth chair.

They knocked to say they had a verdict. The foreman stood, the folded strips still in his fist. He carried them out.

VI

NEXT?

The deli counter at the grocery store had a machine that gave out numbers, and a sign above it that said NOW SERVING, and a red display that said 47.

THE HAND. The machine holds the numbers on a roll. The roll does not know it is at the counter. It would give out numbers in an empty field.

Seven of them stood around the little machine the way you stand around a fire.

THE ALL-SEEING. The number now serving is 47. The lowest number held by a living person in this store is 52.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. Someone took 48 through 51 and left. Or took them and is in frozen foods and has forgotten. Four numbers are dead. The counter will call them anyway.

“Forty-eight,” said the man behind the counter. No one came. “Forty-eight?” He waited the exact length of time a person waits, which is not long. “Forty-nine.”

THE SEEKER. A woman near the olives is holding 53 and doing arithmetic. She has decided she has time to get eggs. She does not have time to get eggs.

THE HAND. She will get eggs. She will return holding eggs and the

number 53, and the display will say 54.

She went for the eggs.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. The other machine.

There was a second number machine, on the other side of the counter, by the cheese, that also said take a number. It dispensed from the same roll as the first, so that two lines believed themselves to be one line, and were wrong.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. Both are right. That is what will make it long.

“Fifty-four,” said the man behind the counter. Two people stepped forward. Each looked at the other’s ticket, then at their own, then at the display, in the ancient sequence.

THE ALLFATHER. Two claims, one number, no higher court. This is the oldest shape there is. They will settle it as it has always been settled: the more tired one pretends they were not next.

The woman said “go ahead.” The man said “no, you.” The woman said “please.” The man went.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. She was next. She will now stand one place further from where she was, forever, and feel that she has done something good, which she has, but it was very small, and it cost her eggs.

The woman with 53 returned with eggs. The display said 55.

THE SEEKER. There it is.

THE HAND. She will not take a new number. She will stand near the counter with the face of a person owed something, and the counter will not know what it did.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. Watch the man who wants a specific thinness.

A man at the front asked for the prosciutto sliced “as thin as you can — no, thinner — so I can see through it.” The person behind the counter set the slicer to the number the slicer was already on.

THE HAND. The slicer has a dial that goes to zero. At zero it makes no prosciutto at all, only sound. He is asking her to slice light.

THE ALL-SEEING. She turned the dial nothing. She held the same slice to the light. He said “perfect.” Both are content. Nothing changed.

She held a slice to the light. He said “perfect.”

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. No one was wronged. Note that too. It goes on the same page.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. The sample.

There was a plate of cubed cheese with frilled toothpicks, for sampling. A boy of about four had located it.

THE SEEKER. He wants all of them. He has understood that they are free and that this arrangement cannot possibly be meant to last, and he is correct.

THE HAND. His mother’s hand is already moving. It will arrive after the third cube and before the fourth.

The boy got three. The hand arrived. The plate survived, diminished.

THE COMPANION. He will remember this counter as a place of plenty for the rest of his life and will never know why grocery stores make him happy.

“Fifty-five,” said the man behind the counter.

THE SEEKER. Hers. At last.

The woman with 53 — now standing on principle — did not hear it, because she had won the argument with the counter in her head and was no longer listening for her number.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. “Fifty-six.”

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. She has now missed the thing she waited for by being angry about the wait. This happens more than any-

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where else on earth. It happens at counters.

“Fifty-six?” The display moved on. She looked up too late, opened her mouth, closed it, and quietly took a new number.

It said 61.

THE HAND. The roll does not know. The roll will never know.

THE ALLFATHER. It gives them out in order and asks nothing back. Of everything in this store it is the only thing that keeps a promise.

The machine held its numbers against a very long afternoon.

VII

NO HARM DONE

On a cobblestone street in Vieux-Montréal, in the gold of a summer evening, a delivery driver double-parked in a loading zone that existed mostly as a theory.

THE ALL-SEEING. The zone is painted on the street and honoured by no one. He has ninety seconds here before it becomes a different kind of problem. He knows the number to the half-second.

THE HAND. Five cases of wine and a hand truck. Four buildings on this block take deliveries through doors made before trucks, before wine came in cases, before the street was for anything but walking.

THE ALLFATHER. The stones are the oldest thing here. They were laid to last and they have, and they were never once laid level, because level was not the point. The point was that they would still be here. They are still here.

Down the street came a tourist on a rented e-scooter, phone held out at arm's length, filming.

THE SEEKER. He is getting Montréal, not seeing it: a vertical clip of himself getting it, to watch later, when he plans to have been here.

THE ALL-SEEING. In the frame: his own face, the gold light, a lantern, a flag. Not in the frame: the truck. The truck is the one thing on this street he is pointing himself directly at.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. The cobblestones.

THE HAND. One hand on the bars. Old stones under a small hard wheel built for smooth new ones. These stones have thrown better than him. They have thrown horses, and the men who were sure of the horses.

The front wheel found a gap between two stones the way water finds the one crack, and the scooter stopped being a vehicle and became two separate problems, and the tourist arrived, unhurried and complete, against the side of the truck.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. Contact.

THE HAND. Twelve kilometres an hour into five stationary tonnes. The truck logged it as weather. A truck that serves bars in this quarter has been struck by kegs, curbs, other trucks, and a horse. It does not know this happened.

The tourist sat on the ancient stones in the golden light. The phone had landed face-up, still filming the sky.

THE SEEKER. First he will check the phone. Then whether the shot survived. Then, third, at a polite distance behind the other two, whether he himself survived.

He checked the phone. He checked the video. Then he moved his own wrist, experimentally, as an afterthought.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. The truck is fine. The wine is fine. The stones were here before the country was a country and will outlive the scooter by a wide margin. The only breakable thing in this collision is sitting on the ground deciding whether the clip is usable.

The driver came around the truck. He had forty stops left and a zone that was becoming theoretical, and he crouched down.

THE ALLFATHER. Here is the oldest gesture on the street, older than the stones. A man reaching a hand down to a stranger who has fallen. It has been done exactly this way since there were hands

and streets.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. It costs him thirty seconds he does not have and a ticket he may now earn. He spends both without appearing to decide to. That is the whole of it, and it is on the ledger, and it will be the only entry today that was not owed.

“Ça va? You okay? You’re good — the truck’s fine, don’t worry about the truck.” He set the scooter back on its wheels. “You sure? You went down hard.”

THE SEEKER. The man is asking if he is hurt. What he hears is that the truck is fine, which he had not been worried about, and that he went down hard, a plus, because going down hard films well.

“Yeah — yeah, all good, merci,” the tourist said, already thumbing back through the footage, and then, half looking up: “Hey — do you mind? Just for one sec —” and gestured the driver gently out of the shot.

THE HAND. The driver stepped out of the frame. He has stepped out of a thousand frames. It is a small thing to do for someone and he does it.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. He was thanked. He was not seen. Those arrived in the same breath and only one of them was meant.

THE ALLFATHER. The gesture does not require being noticed to have been made. It was made. The stones do not require being looked at to hold the street up. They hold it up.

The tourist filmed the re-shoot: the street, the light, the lantern, the flag, then the version without the fall in it, and scooted off to be somewhere he would later confirm he had been.

THE SEEKER. He will caption it *no harm done*. He will be right in every way he does not mean.

The driver wheeled the hand truck to a door built before trucks, and made his drop, and moved the truck before the zone could finish its thought.

The stones kept the street. The light went off the flag. Nobody had been hurt, which was true, and not the whole of it.

VIII

HAZARDS

The car lost power on the highway, and the man steered it onto the gravel before it stopped for good.

THE HAND. The belt that turns the water pump is gone. Not loose — gone. It is a black circle somewhere on the road behind them, being run over.

THE ALL-SEEING. He does not know that. He knows a light came on and the wheel got heavy.

He put on the hazard lights. They began to tick.

THE HAND. Both lights blink, and the car makes a sound to tell him they are blinking, in case he cannot see the lights he can see.

He got out, opened the hood, and stood in front of it.

THE SEEKER. He does not know what the problem looks like, so he cannot look for it. He is looking the way you look, so the car can see you looking.

He held his phone over the engine. The light showed a great deal of warm metal and told him nothing.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. His wife is in the passenger seat with a plate of squares on her lap, wrapped in foil, from her sister's. She has not said the thing she is going to say.

In the trunk was a flare in a plastic sleeve, bought for exactly this. THE HAND. He is reading the flare. It has a date printed on it. The date is a decade behind them.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. Strike it.

He struck it against the cap, the way the cap said to. It made a smell and a small disappointing spark and then was a stick again.

THE ALLFATHER. A thing kept against an emergency, through all the years there was no emergency, until the night the emergency came and it had quietly stopped being a flare.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. He has roadside assistance. The card is in his wallet. He has carried it eleven years and used it never, and he would like to keep the record.

THE SEEKER. The plan is to fix it himself. There is no version of tonight where he fixes it himself. He knows this. The plan remains.

THE COMPANION. She has watched him decide not to call. She has watched him decide not to call before. She could time it.

“Just call them,” she said.

He called them. There is no signal on that stretch of highway. The call connected.

THE ALL-SEEING. The person who answered is two provinces away with his car on a screen as a dot. She said twenty minutes. The dot will not move for ninety.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. Every truck.

A transport went by close and fast, and the car rocked on its springs, and the plate slid an inch on her lap, and she caught it.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. Now the part where there is nothing to do. He hates the part where there is nothing to do. When there is something to do, he is a man doing it. When there is nothing, he is only a man in a car.

They sat. The hazards ticked. He drummed the wheel.

THE WIFE. You don't have to fix it.

THE HUSBAND. Somebody has to fix it.

THE WIFE. A truck is coming to fix it. That's not the same as there being nothing for you to do.

He stopped drumming the wheel.

THE SEEKER. Here is the thing she has carried since the sister's, and since well before the sister's, and since long before the belt.

THE WIFE. When I'm scared you go find something to fix. You've always done that. Lately it's the whole house. I'd rather you were scared in the car with me than fixing it one handle at a time.

He looked at the wheel.

THE HUSBAND. I don't know how to do the other thing.

THE WIFE. I know. Do it anyway.

The hazards ticked. Neither of them said anything.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. That goes on the page. Not the fixing — the being asked to stop fixing, and staying.

THE SEEKER. He will be no good at it. He will do it all the same. Those are allowed to both be true.

Lights came up behind them, orange and turning, ninety minutes into twenty.

THE HAND. The truck will put the car on its back and carry it, and the car will be right on Tuesday, and nothing said on the shoulder gets fixed by Tuesday or by any truck.

THE ALLFATHER. Some things you say once on a dark road, and then you drive home, and they are still true in the kitchen.

She held the plate while the driver winched the car up the ramp. The foil had come loose at one corner.

They rode in the cab, the three of them across the bench, the plate on her knees, and no one fixed anything the rest of the way home.

IX

ORDER'S UP!

The diner had eleven minutes left of being open, and one customer, and one server, and a cook who had already cleaned the grill once and did not want to clean it twice.

THE ALL-SEEING. The sign on the door says they close at eleven. They close when the last person leaves — a different time, and never the one on the door.

The customer sat at the counter, not a booth, though every booth was empty.

THE SEEKER. A man alone at eleven picks the counter. The booth is for people who have someone across from them. The counter is for people who would like to be near someone standing up.

He had ordered the breakfast, which they served all day, which is the whole reason a place like this is loved.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. He comes on the nights he cannot be in his apartment yet. Not sad ones especially. Just the nights the apartment is too quiet to walk into at the front and needs to be come at from the side.

The server was refilling the ketchups, marrying the bottles, the last job of the night.

THE HAND. She is pouring the nearly empty into the nearly full. It

is the one place in the world where that is allowed and not a lie.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. One of them is a screw-top that has met the wrong cap. She will find out at the worst moment, which is any moment you are holding ketchup.

The place setting had a paper placemat with a maze printed on it, and a child's cup of crayons by the till though no child was there.

THE SEEKER. He is doing the maze. A grown man, alone, at the counter, with the brown crayon, doing the child's maze on the placemat, and getting it wrong, and starting again.

THE HAND. He has gone in the out. Everyone goes in the out. The maze is built so you go in the out.

THE ALL-SEEING. She has watched him do the maze on other nights. She keeps the crayons by the till and does not say why, and there is no why she would admit to.

"You want a warm-up on that coffee?" she said. It was eleven o'clock. It was going to be eleven-something when he left no matter what.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. She is not asking about coffee. She is telling him he does not have to go yet.

"I'm good," he said, "thanks though," and did not move to leave, and she topped it up anyway.

THE SEEKER. He heard the real thing under the coffee thing. He answered the coffee thing. Answer the real thing out loud and you can't come back Tuesday.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. The ketchup.

She married the last two, and the wrong-capped one gave way, and a thread of ketchup went across the back of her hand. She laughed. He laughed.

THE SEEKER. Six of us are already setting it down.

THE COMPANION. Not yet.

The others set it down.

THE COMPANION. A little longer.

He coloured in the last of the maze, having reached the middle, and left the crayon a little worn.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. He will take the long way to the till so the night lasts nine more steps.

He paid, and left too much, the way you do when the tip is for something not on the bill.

THE HAND. She leaves the change uncorrected. Correcting it would name it.

"Night," he said. "Night," she said. "See you," and neither said when, because when was understood.

The cook cleaned the grill the second time. The maze stayed on the counter, finished, until she cleared it.

X

WAITING ROOM

It was ten past three in the morning, and the waiting room was the colour that rooms are at ten past three, which is the colour of the lights themselves and nothing else.

THE ALL-SEEING. Behind the doors he is in surgery. It is going the way these go — going, and no one out here will be told which way for some hours.

There were three of them. A woman, her grown son, and her sister, who had driven in from Bowmanville with her coat over her nightgown.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. The man behind the doors is the woman's husband. Forty-one years. Years do not enter into it right now. She is thinking about whether she turned off the stove, because that is a thing she is allowed to fix.

THE SEEKER. She did turn off the stove. She will think about it for an hour. It is the only door in this building she can open.

The television bolted high in the corner was on, with the sound off, showing a program about people buying a house in a warmer country.

THE HAND. No one chose it. It was on when they came. It will be on when they go. It is the same three houses all night.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. The remote.

The remote was behind the desk, and the desk was empty, because the person who sat at it was helping someone at a different desk, and so the couple on the screen toured the warmer country's kitchens in silence, forever, at a volume no one had asked for, which was none.

THE ALLFATHER. A room built for the worst nights of people's lives, and the one voice in it is a man in shorts asking whether the master bath is en suite.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. The son keeps standing up. There is nowhere to go. He stands up because sitting is a thing his body will not agree to, and standing is at least a decision.

He stood up. He read the fire evacuation map. He sat down.

THE SEEKER. He read the map because reading is a thing eyes do when a man does not want them doing the other thing.

The sister had brought a bag. In the bag were three things she had grabbed without thinking: a phone charger, a bag of the hard candy that lives in older women's purses, and a paperback with a boat on the cover.

THE HAND. She will offer the candy. It is the only useful thing she owns tonight. It has been in the purse since a wedding.

"Do you want a — " the sister said, and held out the bag, and the woman took a candy without looking, and held it in her hand, and did not unwrap it.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. It will be in her fist when the doctor comes, whatever the doctor says. She will find it there later and not know what to do with the fact of it.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. The machine.

In the hall was a machine that made coffee, and the son went to it because it was a task with a beginning and an end.

THE HAND. He is pressing the button for the strongest one, which the machine renders identically to the weakest one, because the difference is a light on the front and not a thing in the cup.

THE ALL-SEEING. It will taste of the cup. He knows it will taste of the cup. He is not buying coffee. He is buying ninety seconds of being a man at a machine and not a man in the chairs.

He carried three cups back. They held them. None of them drank.

THE SEEKER. Three cups, held for the warmth, in a room that is not cold. This is what hands do when the thing the hands want to do cannot be done.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. What they want is to be in the other room, doing the thing, holding the retractor, seeing the monitor. They are the four people in this building forbidden to help, and they love him most.

A door opened. Everyone rose. It was a different door, and a different family's news, and a nurse went to them, and the three sat back down, having stood for someone else's doorway.

THE HAND. They will do that every time a door opens. Every family in every one of these rooms does. The body cannot learn to stay seated. It is a kindness the body refuses to give up.

THE ALLFATHER. Every person behind those doors was carried in by people who then had nothing to do but wait, since the first time anyone waited for anyone. The waiting has not been improved. This is the one there has always been.

THE CHAOS-WEAVER. The candy.

The woman had, without deciding to, unwrapped the candy in her fist, and the wrapper made its small violent sound in the quiet, and she looked at the unwrapped candy as at a thing that had happened to her.

THE CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. She does not want it. She unwrapped it because her hands finished a thing while she was elsewhere.

She will eat it now, because to put an unwrapped candy back is a sadness she cannot add to tonight.

She ate the candy. It was butterscotch. It was very loud in the very quiet room.

THE SEEKER. For four seconds she tasted butterscotch and not the night. Her sister packed that without knowing. The purse did a mercy the purse did not intend.

The man in shorts on the television found the house warmer than expected and was pleased.

THE ALL-SEEING. It will still be some hours. The news, when it comes, will come from a tired person in the wrong clothes for how much the words weigh.

THE HAND. So they wait. It is the only thing left in the room that is theirs to do, and they do it, and they are not good at it, and no one ever is, and they do it anyway.

The coffee went cold in the three cups at the same rate. No one drank it. The couple on the screen moved into the warmer country. The door stayed shut.