

The Hungry Gods Go to Alaska

N. Van Seters & Claude

A Hungry Gods Universe volume

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I

Canada Place

Four thousand and eleven people left the ship this morning between seven and nine-thirty. Four thousand and six board this afternoon between eleven and four. In between there are six hours, and in those six hours the Zaandam is stripped, wiped, restocked, provisioned, inspected, and made to look as though nobody has ever been aboard her in her life.

Guests think a cruise is a journey. It isn't. It's a shift. It ends Wednesday and it starts Wednesday, and if you do this long enough you stop being able to say which one you're on.

I run the Shore Excursions desk on deck four. On turnaround day I am not a person. I am a queue.

The terminal has a glass wall angled at the North Shore mountains and it is the most effective piece of engineering in the building. People come through those doors already moved. They have not left the country yet and they are telling each other they'll never forget this.

By ten past eleven the first of them was at my counter.

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The Allfather booked eleven cabins.

“He booked eleven cabins” sounds like one transaction. It is not one transaction. It is, per the booking record: nineteen people, four surnames, three generations, and a shirt printed for the occasion in a blue that was doing nobody any favours — *THE HALLORAN CROSSING, ALASKA 2026*, and underneath, smaller, *49 YEARS AND COUNTING* — and he was not a Halloran, and he was not wearing the shirt, and he was standing at my desk at eleven-ten in the morning holding all of their paperwork.

“We’ll want the railway,” he said. “All of us.”

“For nineteen?”

“For everyone.”

I put nineteen on the White Pass railway. It took eleven minutes, and it took eleven minutes because he wanted them in a particular arrangement — the aunts together, the boy with his grandfather, one couple apart from another couple, for reasons he did not offer and I did not ask about — and the system does not do arrangements, so I did it by hand.

He came back at twelve-forty and changed it.

He came back at two-fifteen and changed it again, because by then two of them couldn’t do the railway, and the arrangement had to hold anyway, and so it all came apart and went back together with two names moved onto the Gold Rush streetcar and the aunts still together, which mattered.

Forty minutes of my afternoon, across three visits, on a party he had no relation to that I could establish. And at the end of it he stood in the middle of my queue while the nineteen of them found each other in the hall behind him — a boy hanging off an arm, two women who had not spoken since Easter both moving to stand near the grandfather and both taking care not to notice the other doing it, somebody counting heads out loud and getting it wrong twice, and then a third time, and everybody laughing, and the laughing

being the thing they had actually come for.

Then he moved four steps to his right, to a family from Winnipeg who were being handed their cabin keys, and stood a metre off them.

Somebody counted heads.

He was not a Halloran. I checked.

I checked because Jo checked. She came back at three and stood at my counter and asked me, in a completely level voice, who had booked her family onto the railway.

I said the gentleman had.

“Which gentleman.”

I turned the screen around. She looked at the name on it, and I watched her not recognize it, and I watched her decide not to say so — because there were forty people behind her, and she had eleven cabins to run, and a decision to make by Tuesday, and a man who books nineteen people onto a train in the correct arrangement is not, on the balance of her afternoon, a problem worth having.

“Leave it,” she said.

The queue starts before the ship moves. It always does. Nobody arrives on a cruise relaxed. They arrive with a plan and a folder, and by two o'clock the folder is on my counter and the plan is in trouble.

Here's what I hand them.

EXPLORATIONS CENTRAL™ · ms ZAANDAM		
SHORE EXCURSIONS — ALASKA INSIDE PASSAGE · 7 DAYS		
JUNEAU · Wed	Mendenhall Glacier by Helicopter & Guided Ice Trek	3½ hrs · \$649
	<i>Strenuous Activity · Limited Capacity · Weight declaration required at check-in</i>	
	Whale Watching & Mendenhall Photo Stop	4 hrs · \$189
	<i>Moderate Activity</i>	
	Juneau City Highlights	2½ hrs · \$79
SKAGWAY · Thu	<i>Panoramic Tour</i>	
	White Pass Scenic Railway	3¾ hrs · \$215
	<i>Moderate Activity</i>	
GLACIER BAY · Fri	Gold Rush Skagway by Streetcar	2 hrs · \$89
	<i>Panoramic Tour</i>	
	<i>Scenic cruising. No excursions available.</i>	
KETCHIKAN · Sat	Bering Sea Crab Fishermen's Tour	3½ hrs · \$229
	<i>Moderate Activity</i>	
	Great Alaskan Lumberjack Show	1½ hrs · \$69
	<i>Panoramic Tour</i>	
<i>Cancellation: full refund if cancelled more than 24 hours prior to tour departure. Within 24 hours no refund will be issued, including for reasons of illness or medical incapacity. Guests should assess their own physical condition before booking. Tour operators are not obligated to assist guests boarding or disembarking vehicles.</i>		

Panoramic Tour.

Nobody at this desk wrote that. It comes down from Seattle in the catalogue. It means *you will not be required to get off the bus*, and it is the most considerate sentence this company has ever printed, and it is not a considerate sentence.

They read it. They understand it exactly. Then they look up and ask me if there's much walking.

People lie to me all day at this desk and they are not lying to me. *He's very fit for his age. She's fine on stairs. We do a lot of walking at home.* They say it while looking directly at the person they are saying it about, who is standing right there, and who nods.

The Conscience-Keeper came to the counter behind a woman in a new rain shell who was booking her husband onto the ice trek. Strenuous Activity. The husband was standing beside her saying nothing whatsoever.

The Conscience-Keeper waited his turn. Then he leaned in — pleasantly, the way a man asks about the weather — and said, to me, over her shoulder, in a completely ordinary voice:

“Is it safe for him?”

The husband heard it. She heard it. I heard it, and I had forty people behind them, and it is my job to answer questions at this desk.

I said the tour was rated Strenuous. I said guests should assess their own physical condition before booking. I said the operator is not obligated to assist with boarding.

She said he'd be fine.

He said nothing.

The Conscience-Keeper said thank you, and did not book anything, and got out of the line, and did that four more times before three o'clock, to four other people, and every single time I had to answer him.

— — —

At one-forty a man came to the desk to ask about binoculars.

Not to buy binoculars. We sell binoculars — the shop on five has a wall of them. He had binoculars. He'd brought binoculars. He wanted to know if they were *good enough*, and he put them on my counter, and I want it understood that I sell bus tours.

I said they looked very nice.

He said they were 8x42s. He said his brother-in-law had told him he'd want 10x50s for bears, and his brother-in-law has been to Alaska twice, and I could hear an entire Christmas dinner inside

that sentence.

I said people see bears with all kinds.

He stood there. He wanted more than that, and I had thirty people behind him, and finally I leaned in and told him the truth, which is the one piece of optics expertise this desk actually has: sir, the bears are either close enough that the binoculars won't matter, or far enough that they won't help.

He bought the 10x50s anyway. Deck five, within the hour. His wife told me at the desk on Thursday, and she told me the price, and she told me it in the voice of a woman who intends to be telling it for years.

The Halloran granddaughter came through at ten past two with the old man on one arm and a binder under the other.

Not a folder. A binder. With tabs.

"Jo," she said, when I asked, and she said it the way you hand over a badge.

She wanted the helicopter for six of them. She had the six.

"It's a Strenuous Activity."

"I read it."

"There's a weight declaration at check-in."

"I read that too." Nothing moving. "Is it a number they say out loud, or a number they write down?"

"They write it down."

"Fine."

The grandfather was looking past me at the print on the wall behind the desk, a glacier photographed in a blue no glacier has ever actually been. He said it looked cold. Jo said yes, Grandpa. It's a glacier.

Then she said, in exactly the voice she'd used for the binder: "If he's not up to it Wednesday morning, when's the refund cut-off?"

"Twenty-four hours prior."

"So Tuesday."

"Tuesday."

“Then we’ll know Tuesday,” she said, and wrote it down.

She had put a date on her grandfather’s body so the money would work. I watched her do it and I did not blink and she did not blink and we got through it.

She had a hard-sided carry-on with her the whole time and she never once put it on the floor. Kept a hand flat on the top of it while she signed. Nobody in that family said a word about that case all week and I am not going to either.

“Anything else?”

“Not from you,” she said, which I took, correctly, as a compliment.

—————

By three the queue was forty deep and every one of them was asking me the same question in a costume.

Is there a washroom on the coach. How long can he go.

How many stairs up to the platform. Her knee.

If we book two and only one of us ends up going, is that a problem.
We both know how this is going to end and I would like it not to cost extra.

Does the helicopter go if it’s raining.

That last one is the only honest question anybody asks me. The answer is that in Juneau it flies about six days in ten, and on the days it doesn’t, people cry at this desk. Grown men. I keep a box of tissues below the counter next to the receipt roll, and I go through more tissues.

I answer them about logistics. There’s a washroom on the coach, ma’am. The platform has a ramp. Yes, we can do that, no charge.

—————

I work on commission. Four percent, and the helicopter is six forty-nine, so a full Juneau flight is a good week. People find this out sometimes and it changes their face. I’ve stopped explaining it. The alternative is a desk staffed by somebody who doesn’t care whether you get on the helicopter, and I promise you would like

that a great deal less.

The Seeker came to my desk at ten to four and asked what was north of Skagway.

I said the Yukon.

He asked what we sold there. I said we didn't go there. He asked what was north of that.

I gave him a map of the Inside Passage, which is what I have, and he looked at it for a while and handed it back and said it stopped too early.

I sold him nothing. He was at my desk eleven minutes.

Muster is at four-fifteen and it is a requirement of the flag state that four thousand and six people spend it thinking about drowning.

It's done by phone now. Scan the code in your cabin, watch the video, walk to your station, a crew member scans your card, you're mustered. Ninety seconds. It used to be everybody out on deck in orange for half an hour in the cold.

I stood at station 6B and watched a hundred and forty people learn to survive an emergency at sea while holding a drink. There was a woman in Halloran blue watching the lifejacket video on her phone with her reading glasses pushed up on her forehead, squinting, one hand on the rail, and she watched all of it. The entire video, right to the end. The only person on that deck who did.

"Well," she said. "I hope we don't need it."

Her son said we won't, Mum, and they went in to dinner.

Sailaway's at five.

It ought to be automatic. You come off the berth, you swing her nose west, you go out under the Lions Gate with the North Shore

standing up hard to starboard in that clean northern light, and it is one of the great departures anywhere on earth. Everybody knows it. That's why they were all up on the Lido at ten to five with a drink in a plastic glass and the phones already out. Four thousand people, waiting to be given something.

At four minutes to five the light came in low and gold across the inlet and every phone on that deck went up.

Then it started to rain.

Vancouver rain, sideways, straight in off the water. The horn went and nobody heard it, because they were all going down two decks to get inside.

By five past, the roof over the pool deck was shut and the party was under glass, and the DJ was playing sailaway music to eleven people. Four of them were crew.

The mountains went by at fourteen knots.

— — —

I went back to the desk. Fourteen booking changes before dinner. The Allfather was already there.

II

Inside Passage

I am not crew.

That needs establishing at the outset — or rather, it needs establishing to me, since nobody else has ever cared — because for seven days I will wear a jacket with the ship's name on it and stand behind a lectern with the ship's name on it and speak to you over a system that also says the ship's name, and at the end of the week you will thank me for the cruise, which I did not provide.

I am contracted. I hold a master's in marine biology from the University of Victoria. I have delivered the talk called *Ice, Water, Rock: Reading the Inside Passage* sixty-two times, which is fewer than you'd think and more than I can account for, and I could do the tidewater glacier segment while thinking about my mortgage, and last Tuesday I did.

Twelve of the sixty-two were the Mexican Riviera.

I am not a Mexican Riviera naturalist. I am an Inside Passage naturalist — a distinction, I have learned, that matters to exactly one person on any given vessel. I did a partial season on the Vancouver–Puerto Vallarta run three years ago, because the man

who was supposed to do it had a baby, and I said yes in eleven seconds, because I was thirty-one and it was February.

I did not know anything about the Sea of Cortez.

I learned it in nine days out of two textbooks and a documentary, and I stood up in that theatre twelve times and talked about the vaquita and the frigatebird and the gulf's productivity like a man who had spent his career there, and I was, I would estimate, about seventy percent right.

They loved me.

They filled the room to the front row, which I have never seen since and will not see again. A woman from Prince George told me I had changed the way she looked at the ocean, and I had got the frigatebird's wingspan wrong by nearly a foot.

Nobody asked me a single question the entire two weeks.

It was the happiest I have ever been at work, and I have thought about it a great deal in the last three days.

— — —

They put me in the Wajang Theatre at ten in the morning, which is the second-worst room on the ship at the second-worst hour. About ninety people come. Every one of them is over sixty-five and every one of them sits in the fourth row or further back, because nobody who has lived that long sits in the front row of anything voluntarily.

I tell them the truth. That's the job, and I'm good at it.

The Inside Passage is a drowned mountain range. The channels are not rivers; they are valleys the sea came up into when the ice left. The water under the hull this morning is deeper than the mountains on either side are high, and if you drained it we would be sitting on a summit looking down into a gorge you could lose a city in.

Ninety people write nothing down. One man asks whether there's Wi-Fi in the theatre.

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Then I do the salmon, and they come alive like a Sunday school.

There are five species of Pacific salmon and you can count them on one hand. This is a real mnemonic. It is taught to children in this province. I have a doctorate's worth of reading behind me and it is the most successful ninety seconds of my professional life.

Thumb. Chum — because it rhymes, and because your thumb is the one you'd chum around with. Ninety people put up a thumb.

Index. Sockeye — because you'd poke someone in the eye with it. Ninety people point at their own faces. Somebody's husband actually does it to his wife and the room laughs for eleven seconds.

Middle. King. The biggest one. And you say it fast, because a certain kind of gentleman in the fifth row has already worked out where this is going and is delighted with himself.

Ring. Silver — the ring, the silver ring, the wedding ring. And there is always, always, a table of women who look at each other at this point, and something happens between them that I am not party to.

Pinky. Pink.

That's it. That's all of it.

They are radiant. They do it back to me. A man in the sixth row does it three times, to himself, checking. On Saturday, in Ketchikan, in a fish market, I have watched passengers off my own ship hold up a hand and count off five fingers in front of a display case, out loud, to a fishmonger who has known the five species of Pacific salmon since he was four.

They remember nothing else from the talk. Not the drowned mountains, not the ice.

They remember the fingers. I taught them the fingers. I have been on this ship three seasons and it is the only thing I have ever given anybody.



Then the All-Seeing stands up at the back and asks his question.

He came to the first talk and he has come to every talk since, and he waits until the end, and he raises his hand, and he asks one, and

it is always right.

Day one: whether the figure I'd given for the depth of the channel was the mean or the maximum.

It was the mean. I had said it in a way that implied the maximum. Not wrong. Not accurate, either.

Day two: whether the retreat rate I'd quoted for Mendenhall was measured at the terminus or the centreline, because those are different numbers and the difference is not small.

Day three, in front of ninety people, he asked me — politely, with no edge in it whatsoever, and this is the thing, there is never any edge in it — whether I was aware that the figure I use for the age of the ice at Margerie has been revised.

I said I was.

He said, "You used the old one."

I had. I use the old one because it's rounder and it lands.

He does not correct me. That would be something I could take a position on. He asks whether I am aware, and I always am, and he thanks me, and he sits down.

I have started dreading ten in the morning.

I have started making notes the night before. Last night I checked three figures against the literature at eleven o'clock at night, in a windowless cabin below the waterline, for a talk I could give in my sleep, because there is a man in the fourth row who will know.

He is not doing anything to me. He asks one question a day. It is a good question, and it is always right.

— — —

Here's what nobody tells you about scenic cruising.

It is eight hours long.

At half past eight the port rail is packed four deep and the light is doing something and everybody has their coffee and their face is open. *This is beautiful. Look at that. Look at that.*

At nine-fifteen it is the same trees.

At ten it is still the same trees. By ten-forty the rail has thinned. By eleven there are people asking me, in complete sincerity, with

real courtesy, when the good part starts, and I tell them this is the good part, and they say oh — yes — no, it's lovely.

And then they go to trivia.

Because trivia is at eleven, in the Ocean Bar, and trivia has an outcome. There are teams, the teams have names, and the prize is a Holland America luggage tag that is worth nothing whatsoever and that people will fight for.

I have watched a retired dentist from Kelowna dispute a ruling on the capital of Suriname with an intensity he has not brought to anything else in ten years, while four hundred kilometres of temperate rainforest went past a window nobody was looking out of.

Suriname's capital is Paramaribo. He was right. He got the luggage tag.

By noon I am narrating a channel of extraordinary geological interest to four people, three of whom are asleep.

At two the Ocean Bar starts the Mariner's Trivia. At three there is a napkin-folding class. At four there is a lecture in a different room by a man selling gemstones, and he fills the theatre. He fills it to the front row.

I have never asked him what his margin is. I would like to know and I am afraid to find out.

— — —

The Halloran girl came to the Shore Ex desk at half two while I was there getting my Juneau numbers, and she had the binder.

"The streetcar," she said. "Gold Rush Skagway. Two hours."

"Panoramic," said Marisol.

"Right. Is it two hours, or is it two hours and then they wait around for the bus?"

Marisol looked at her. Marisol has a very good face. It does nothing at all and it does it on purpose.

"It's two hours," she said, "and then they wait around for the bus."

"How long?"

"Twenty minutes. Sometimes forty."

"In the rain?"

"There's a covered area at the depot."

"Is there anywhere to sit in the covered area at the depot?"

"There's a bench."

"One bench."

"One bench."

Jo wrote that down. Then she looked at the jacket with the ship's name on it and said, "You're the whale man."

I said I was the naturalist.

"Does the ranger come aboard at Glacier Bay, or do we get you?"

"You get the ranger. National Park Service. They board at the mouth of the bay."

"Good," she said, and closed the binder, and left.

I have thought about *good* on and off ever since.

— — —

At eleven-fifteen the next morning a woman on deck six saw a blow.

She saw it. I have no reason to doubt her. She was standing at the rail with a cup of tea and she said *whale* — quietly, to her husband, the way you say it if you have actually seen one.

Ninety seconds later four thousand people were on the port side of the ship.

Consider what that means physically. The *Zaandam* is sixty thousand gross tons and she took a list. Not a dramatic one. Not a maritime incident. But she went over, measurably, because every human being aboard was standing on the same side of her, and the drinks on the tables in the Ocean Bar all slid three inches to the left in unison, and the officer of the watch made a note.

By the time they got there, there was nothing. Grey water. Grey water going past at fourteen knots and four thousand phones held up over it in the rain.

They stayed twenty minutes. They wanted it very badly.

So I got on the microphone and I confirmed it.

Ladies and gentlemen, that was a humpback whale, positively identified, off the port bow at eleven-fifteen this morning.

Which is true. I believe her. It was a humpback and it was there and it went down and it did not come up anywhere anybody could see it, and there is no version of this where I get on that microphone and say *something happened that most of you missed and it is not going to happen again.*

That is not what the jacket is for.

Four thousand people applauded a whale that six of them saw.

That afternoon the Juneau Whale Watching excursion sold out. Marisol added a second coach and sold that out too. Some of them booked it standing at the rail, on their phones, still looking at the water.

The whale was there. That is the point. It was there whether they got to the rail in time or not.

But there is no version of the job where I say that.

The photo gallery is on deck three and I walk through it every night on my way to my cabin, because it's the shortest way and I am tired.

Four thousand faces on the wall. Everyone in front of the same backdrop, everyone with the same lifebuoy, everyone told to say something by the same photographer who says *and one more, lovely* nine hundred times a day. They come down after dinner and walk the rows looking for themselves, and when they find themselves they stop and look for longer than you would expect, and then most of them don't buy it.

The All-Seeing was in there tonight, in front of the boards.

He came over when he saw me.

"Tomorrow," he said. "The Mendenhall figure."

"The centreline," I said.

“Thank you,” he said, and went back to the wall.
I went to my cabin and I checked the centreline figure.

III

Juneau

My name is Rye.

I've heard them all, so let's save us both the time. Yes, like the bread. Yes, like the whiskey. No, not short for Ryan. Yes — wry — very good, sir. Nobody's said that one.

I get one of those about twelve times a day. That's fifteen hundred a season. Third season. Call it four thousand.

I laugh at every single one.

Not because I'm nice. I laugh while I'm doing the harness check. The laugh keeps them still. Four seconds is all I need to get my hands on the buckle, and the laugh buys me four seconds.

You laugh, they stop moving. That's the whole trick. Nobody ever wrote it down. It's the first thing you learn, and I thought it was the only thing that mattered.

I'm twenty-three. I work for the operator, not the ship. The ship sells you the tour. We fly you. My job on the ground is boots, crampons, harness, headset, weight, and getting eleven people out to the aircraft without anybody walking backwards into a rotor.

Here's what six hundred and forty-nine dollars buys you.

A bus. Twenty-five minutes. Then a hangar. You get weighed, booted, crampon-fitted, harnessed, headset-tested, and shown a four-minute safety video on a TV bolted to a girder. The video was made in 2016. The man in it has a haircut.

Then you wait. In the hangar, in your boots, standing up. There are no chairs. The chairs got removed after somebody figured out that people in crampons sit down and then can't get up.

Then you fly six minutes. Then you're on a glacier for forty. Then you fly six minutes back, and you're un-harnessed, un-cramponed, un-booted, and put on the bus.

Three and a half hours, total. Forty minutes of it is ice. Twelve minutes of it is air.

And it's worth every dollar. I've watched two thousand people come off that ice. Not one of them has ever asked for their money back. Not one.

The boots are big and stiff and they're somebody else's. Everybody walks about six steps in them and says the same thing.

"Well, these are a bit much."

Two thousand people. Same sentence. I started counting the ones who *don't* say it.

I'm at nine.

The card is called a PAX WEIGHT DECLARATION. It's not ours — it belongs to the aviation operator. Half-sheet of yellow paper. Tour date at the top. Eleven ruled lines.

Each line has three boxes. NAME. WEIGHT (LB). INITIAL.

There's a printed line across the bottom: *Declared weights are used for aircraft load and balance calculations. Inaccurate declaration may result in denial of boarding.*

Some lawyer in Anchorage wrote that, and it's the most tactful

thing anybody has ever done for me. It doesn't say *don't lie*. It says the aircraft won't fly, and everybody will see it not fly, and it will be about you.

I hand the card across a folding table. They write the number. They initial it.

Some write it like it's nothing. Some write a number that isn't the number. I can usually tell. Close enough, I take it. Not close enough, I say *sir, I have to be within ten pounds or the aircraft doesn't lift right*. Then they tell me. Then they don't look at me for the rest of the morning.

And about one in five says the number *out loud anyway*. To their wife. To their son. To the room. Too loud, unprompted, with a laugh. And everybody laughs.

Two thousand people. I've never understood why they do that.

Three years, and I've never once made a face. Not one. You make a face, you've taken something from a person who came here to see a glacier.

— — —

The Hallorans came in six.

The old man was in the middle of them. He came up to the table and said his number without being asked. Almost nobody does that. It was correct, too. He said it the way you give a badge number.

Then he looked at my name tag.

"Rye," he said. "Like the bread."

"Like the bread, sir."

"You know what they call a rye that goes bad?"

"No, sir."

"Sourdough."

It isn't a good joke. It isn't really a joke at all. But I hadn't heard it. Four thousand of them, and I hadn't heard that one. And I laughed — actually laughed, out loud, in the hangar, at twenty past ten in the morning. The old man looked absolutely delighted with himself. His granddaughter behind him said "*Grandpa*" in the voice you use for a man who's been telling that joke since 1974.

I checked his harness. I moved to the next one. I didn't think about it again until a lot later.

The Hand read the whole card. Both sides.

Then he wrote his weight in the box. Took him about a second. And he didn't initial it in the box. He initialled it on the *line*. Which is where the line is. Which nobody does.

Which was correct.

I got him into his boots. I did his crampons. I stood up.

He crouched back down and did them again.

Not rude about it. Not making a point. He just re-ran the straps. Both feet. About a quarter turn more tension than I'd used. Then he stood up, looked at me, and waited for me to carry on.

He was right.

That's the first thing, because everything else comes after it. He was right. I've done this three seasons and my straps were *adequate*.

That's the word. Adequate. They'd have held. Nobody was ever going to fall out of anything.

A quarter turn is the difference between a strap that holds and a strap that's right. I stopped putting in the quarter turn somewhere around the middle of last season. Couldn't tell you the day.

Except I can. I stopped when I got good at the laugh.

Because that's what they promote you for. Not the buckle. Nobody sees the buckle. Nobody has ever seen the buckle. They see a kid in a hangar who can take eleven frightened seventy-year-olds and get them calm and moving and out to an aircraft in under four minutes. That's a skill. I have it. I'm the best on that ground crew at it.

And I'd been coasting on it for fourteen months.

He did the woman next to him. Then her husband. Then the leg loop on a man from Calgary — correctly — and the man from

Calgary said thank you. To him.

By the time we walked out to the aircraft, I was carrying the bag.

And the part I haven't told anybody: it was the best thing that happened to me all summer.

Out on the ice I told him I had to do the crampon check myself. It's on me. It's a licence thing.

He said yes.

He stood there and let me do it. All eleven. And when I finished, he went along behind me and did every one of them again.

Never said a word about it. Never once looked at me while he did it. He wasn't correcting me. He wasn't showing anybody anything. He was putting them right. Over and over, all morning, in the cold, for people who didn't know he was doing it.

I had to write him up at the end. Incident log, *guest interference with safety procedure*. I sat in the hut with the pen for a long time, trying to figure out what to put in the box that says what happened.

I wrote: *Guest re-secured crampons. Correctly.*

My supervisor asked what I wanted him to do with that.

I said I didn't know.

The flight is six minutes.

You lift out of the valley and come up over the icefield, and it goes on. Actually goes on. Further than the window. Further than your head can hold. Fifteen hundred square miles of ice, blue in the cracks. And every person in that aircraft makes the same noise at the same second. It's not a word. I've heard it nine hundred times and I've never once got tired of it.

Then the pilot comes on the headsets.

Folks, on your left, that's the Mendenhall Towers. Coming up on your right, Nugget Falls. And the music starts. There's music. There's a soundtrack. It's licensed, it swells, it's timed to the approach —

timed *well* — and it's his fourth run of the day, and it's eleven-fifteen in the morning.

I've flown with that pilot three seasons. He's very good. Four thousand hours. He can put us down on a glacier in a crosswind. He's never scared me once.

The soundtrack is eight minutes long. The flight is six.

It never finishes. I've never heard the end of it.

— — —

The Seeker walked off the rope.

I need to explain the rope. We put people down on a landing zone. Inside the roped area you can walk around, take your photos, lie down, make an ice angel if you want. Outside the roped area is a glacier.

Not a metaphor. A glacier. Moving ice with holes in it. The holes have snow bridges over them, and the snow bridges are exactly as strong as they look.

Which is not.

He went out. Didn't run. Didn't sneak. Stepped over the rope at about the pace you'd cross a street and kept going. North. Up-glacier. Hands empty, rented parka. By the time I clocked him he was ninety metres out.

I went after him. Of course I went after him. That's what I'm for. I'm roped, he wasn't. I went out on the safe line to the limit of the safe line and I shouted. He didn't stop. I shouted again.

He stopped.

He turned around and looked at me. Then he looked back the way he'd been going. Out at the ice. All fifteen hundred square miles of it. He looked at it for a while.

Then he came back. Stepped over the rope, got in the aircraft, sat down, put his headset on.

He said one thing to me afterwards, in the hut, while I did the paperwork. It wasn't an apology. It wasn't an explanation.

"How far does it go?"

I said it went to the Yukon.

“And after that?”

I said I didn’t know.

He nodded — like I’d finally given him something — and got on the bus.

I filled in the incident form. There’s a box for *contributing factors*.

I left it empty. I couldn’t think of one.

The old man did the trek.

Forty minutes on the ice, which is what it is. The tour is three and a half hours and the ice is forty minutes. The rest is bus, hangar, weight, boots, flight, flight, boots, hangar, bus.

He walked it with his granddaughter on one side and a guide on the other. He didn’t need either of us. He went at his own speed. He got to the photo point.

The photo point is where the crevasse is. It’s a good one. Roped, safe, blue the whole way down. Blue in a way you can’t photograph.

Everybody photographs it.

He stood there and looked at it. Maybe fifteen seconds.

Then he turned around and said: “Well, that’s cold.”

His granddaughter said, “Yes, Grandpa.”

He said, “Is there food on the bus?”

He was last back to the hangar. Moving slow by then. I could see what it had cost him. I could see the granddaughter seeing it. Neither of us said anything. There’s nothing to say, and I had a two o’clock.

I got them on the coach. Did the count. Did the thing where you stand at the door and thank each one as they climb up. Eleven people thanked me for the best day of their trip.

The old man stopped on the bottom step.

“Thanks, Sourdough.”

“You already did that one, sir.”

“It’s still true,” he said, and went up.

The Hand was last off the ice.

He walked the whole landing zone before he came in. Every anchor. Every stake in the roped line. The guy-lines on the safety hut. The pins we drive in at the start of the season and pull at the end. He went around all of them and put his hands on each one. Where they were loose, he made them tight. Where they were tight, he left them.

Nobody asked him to. Nobody thanked him. Nobody watched him do it except me and the pilot, and the pilot was on his phone.

Then he got in the aircraft and flew back to a ship he didn’t seem to have any particular interest in.

I went out at the end of the day to pull the line. Every stake on that glacier was true.

I checked them anyway. All of them. Forty minutes, in the rain, after my shift ended. Every one was true, and I checked every one.

I’ve done it at the end of every day since.

IV

Skagway

I'm back.

Fair warning: on port days I do not leave the ship. Nobody at my desk does. Four thousand people go ashore between seven and nine, and the desk is busiest at ten past seven and busiest again at four, and in between I sit on deck four in an empty vessel selling Ketchikan to the two hundred who didn't get off.

You want to know what a cruise ship actually is? It's this. Skagway is a town of nine hundred and twenty people, and this morning eleven thousand cruise passengers landed on it off four ships, and I was not one of them, and I have never once walked up Broadway, and I have sold the Gold Rush streetcar three hundred times.

What I know about Skagway is what the briefing sheet knows, plus four seasons of listening.

It has one street. The street is a National Historic Site and the buildings on it are real — actually real, wooden false-front 1898

buildings that men threw up in a hurry on their way to somewhere else — and they are beautiful, and nearly every one of them is now a jewellery store.

For the record: there is a diamond retailer on Broadway owned by a company owned by a company that also owns the store in Juneau and the store in Ketchikan and the store in Cozumel. There are several. They open exactly when the ships are in. In October the street closes and nine hundred and twenty people get it back.

The Klondike rush lasted about two years. Around a hundred thousand set out. Something like thirty thousand made it over the passes, a few hundred got rich, and the rest went home broke or died on a mountain — and the entire economy of that street now runs on selling tanzanite to their descendants.

I don't say that to guests. It isn't on the form. But it's on the briefing sheet I read to prep the port talk, which is written in Seattle, and the sheet uses the phrase *spirit of adventure* four times.

— — —

Now. The two hundred.

My first season I thought they were the ones who *couldn't* go ashore. That was wrong, and it took me about six weeks to understand how wrong, and I have since come to regard them as the most sophisticated people on this vessel.

A few of them can't. Most of them won't. They will not go, on purpose; they have been doing it for years, and they have a system.

They are on the top deck by seven-fifteen. Not seven-thirty — seven-fifteen, because at seven-thirty the last shore party clears the gangway and the ship becomes theirs, and they intend to be in position when it happens.

There is a woman from Nanaimo who has done eleven of these and has never once set foot in Alaska. She has *seen* Alaska. She has seen it from a lounge on deck nine, with a book, with nobody in the pool. She told me Skagway is a shop.

By eight the hot tubs are full of men who look like they have won something. By nine there is a queue of zero at the Lido and a

man is having eggs made to order in under forty seconds and he says *that's more like it* out loud, to nobody, in triumph. By ten a couple have moved four loungers into a formation and established what I can only describe as a compound.

And they are smug. Nobody warns you about this. They are the smuggest people on the west coast of North America. They watch the tenders go and they raise a glass. And at four o'clock, when eleven thousand people come back off four ships up a single ramp, cold and wet and holding a bag containing a fudge, the two hundred are in the same loungers they were in at seven-fifteen, and they have not moved, and they say:

How was town?

They know exactly what they have done. That is what makes it magnificent.

— — —

The White Pass railway went out at eight with nineteen Hallorans on it in the correct arrangement.

The two who couldn't do it went on the streetcar at nine.

Nobody had to tell them anything, because the Allfather had told them. At dinner. On Wednesday. In front of everybody.

I got this from Manolo, who works that section, and who reported it to me the way you'd report weather. The way he told them, Manolo said, was to say out loud, at a table of nineteen: *the two of you will do the streetcar. It is a lovely tour. The railway is three and three-quarter hours.*

And the whole table went quiet. And then the aunt said, well, that's settled then, and picked up her fork.

Manolo said she didn't eat anything after that. He notices. It's his whole job.

Jo came to my desk at ten past nine, once they had gone, and stood there a second longer than she needed to.

"He did it at dinner," she said.

"I heard."

"In front of everyone."

“Yes.”

She looked at me. I have a very good face and it does nothing and it does it on purpose, and I watched her decide whether I was somebody she could say the next thing to.

“That’s what I was going to have to do,” she said, and went to get her grandfather a coffee.

The Seeker did not take the railway. He did not take the streetcar. He came to my desk at seven-forty in the morning, before the town was even open, and asked what was at the top of the pass.

I said the summit. I said the train turns around at the summit.

He asked what was past the summit.

I said Fraser, British Columbia. Then Carcross. Then Whitehorse. Then the Yukon. I said it the way you say the sheet, and then I stopped, because he was still looking at me.

“And after that?”

I said I didn’t know. I said it was north.

He asked whether we sold anything that went there.

We don’t. We sell three and three-quarter hours, a turnaround at the summit, and a hot chocolate on the way down. I told him that. He stood at my desk a while longer, and then he went ashore.

All aboard is four-thirty. Sailing is five.

At four-thirty the Zaandam had four thousand and five.

I want to tell you what happens on a ship at four-thirty when the count is short, because it is not what you think.

Nobody runs. I have never once seen anybody run. There’s a version of this in everybody’s head where officers sprint down a gangway shouting, and what actually happens is that a very tired Indonesian gangway supervisor named Bagus says into a radio, in

the voice you'd use to order a sandwich, "We are one short" — and then everything unfolds from there like a liturgy, in order, with everybody knowing their part, and at no stage does anybody raise their voice, and the thing has the unhurried dignity of a church that has done this funeral before.

Guest Services runs the card scans. The cabin steward is sent to the cabin, because a genuinely surprising proportion of the time they are asleep in it. They page. They page again with the name. At ten to five an officer stands at the top of the gangway with a phone and calls the agent ashore, and the agent gets in a truck and drives up Broadway looking in the jewellery stores.

Then the Captain makes a decision, and the decision is commercial, and everybody aboard pretends it isn't.

We held twenty-five minutes.

At two minutes past five the ship's photographer came back up the gangway from doing scenics and told the officer he'd seen the man. At the north end of town, where the road stops being a street and becomes the highway. Standing on the shoulder of it, facing away.

Not walking. Standing. Looking up a road that goes to the Yukon.



They got him back at five-twenty. The agent brought him in a truck.

There was a small group of officers waiting at the top of the gangway, because there is a form for this. It is called a **Guest Late Return**. It has a number, and the number is GS-114.

There is a box on GS-114 marked REASON, with four printed options and a little square beside each one.

GUEST LATE RETURN
FORM GS-114 · ms ZAANDAM

REASON:

☐ Lost track of time ☐ Transportation delay ☐ Medical ☐ Other

There is no box for *stood at the edge of town looking north up a road*.

The Staff Captain asked him, not unkindly, whether he'd been aware of the all-aboard time.

He said yes.

The Staff Captain waited. Everybody waits at that point, because this is the moment when the passenger explains, and they always explain, and the explanation is always *we lost track of time*, and everybody nods, and it goes in the box.

He didn't say anything.

The Staff Captain asked him where he had been.

"Looking at the road," he said.

And the Staff Captain ticked *Lost track of time* — because it is a tick-box and he had a ship to move, and in the man's defence, which is on file: he had two minutes, four thousand passengers and a fuel bill, and if he'd ticked *Other* he'd have had to write something on the line beside it, and the line beside it is nine centimetres long.

He gave the Seeker his card back. The Seeker went to his cabin.

— — —

I was on the gangway for all of it, because I'd been asked down with the shore excursion manifest to check whether he'd been on a tour — in case the tour was late, in case it was ours.

It was not ours. He had not booked anything. He had not booked anything all week.

So I stood there holding a manifest with his name absent from it and watched a man cost this ship twenty-five minutes, an agent, a truck, four thousand people's evening, and a fuel bill I do not want to think about.

My commission on him for the voyage, to date, was zero.

The woman from Nanaimo came to my desk at half four, once they were all back aboard, and booked the Ketchikan lumberjack show.

I said I thought she didn't go ashore.

"I don't," she said. "It's for my sister. She's coming Wednesday."

At six the sun was still up, because it is May and it does not go down here, not properly, and the ship came out of Skagway and ran down the Lynn Canal with the mountains standing up on both sides, and it was, I'm told, spectacular.

I had eighty-one Ketchikan bookings to enter and the Glacier Bay port talk to prep, and the desk was open till eight.

The Seeker came past at about half six on his way somewhere. He stopped and looked at the print behind me — the glacier, the impossible blue one — for a second or two.

Then he asked whether I had a map that went further north than the one I'd given him.

I said I didn't.

"Nobody does," he said, and went away.

It was not a complaint. He did not seem bothered in the slightest. I have never been able to decide what he meant, and I have stopped trying.

V

Glacier Bay

The United States of America boards this ship at six in the morning by ladder, in the rain, carrying its own coffee.

On the record — my record, the one nobody audits — for six days I have been the man who tells four thousand people what they are looking at, and on the seventh day the federal government arrives in a small boat and takes my microphone off me.

This is not a complaint. It is the law. Glacier Bay is a national park and the park comes aboard: two rangers up the pilot ladder at Bartlett Cove at six a.m., in Gore-Tex, with a folding table, a box of brochures for children, and a thermos each. They have learned not to trust us for coffee. They are correct.

They set up in the Crow's Nest on deck nine and one of them takes the ship-wide PA for eight hours.

Not me. Her.

The manifest for Friday is a single line.

EXPLORATIONS CENTRAL™ · ms ZAANDAM

SHORE EXCURSIONS — FRIDAY

GLACIER BAY *Scenic cruising. No excursions available.*

That's it. That's the document. It is the only day of the seven on which this company has nothing to sell you, and it prints the page anyway, and the page goes under four thousand doors on Thursday night, and I have never got over it.

The best day of the itinerary. The thing they came for. The reason the ship exists. And Seattle has printed a piece of paper to tell you that there is nothing available.

Marisol says it is the only day of the week she gets to sit down.

— — —

Her name was Ranger Okafor and she was twenty-nine and she was better than me.

I gave her my notes. I did that on purpose, as a professional courtesy, and also, since there is nobody left on this ship I haven't been honest with, because I wanted her to know I had notes.

She thanked me. She read them. She used one figure out of eleven pages, correctly, and then she got on the microphone and talked for eight hours about a bay she works in and I do not.

And here is the thing I have been circling for three days.

She was not better informed than me. Precise, now — precision being the only asset I have left. I know more about the glaciology of this coast than Ranger Okafor does. I have read more. I could take her apart on Margerie's mass balance and she would have to concede it.

She has just never given the talk sixty-two times.

She has given it fifteen. It is her second season. And it is *still in her*. When she said that the ice at the face of Margerie fell as snow on the mountains behind it around the time the first books were being printed in Europe, she said it like a woman who had recently found it out.

Four thousand people made a noise.

I have said that sentence. I have said that exact sentence. I said it in the Wajang Theatre on Monday at ten in the morning to ninety people in the fourth row, and I said it the way you read out a phone number.

The All-Seeing came to the Crow's Nest at half seven and stood at the back for the ranger's whole first hour and did not ask her a single question.

He didn't ask me one either. Not that day. He asked me one every day of the voyage except that one, and I had checked the centreline figure twice the night before, and nobody wanted it, and I carried it around all day like a man holding a coat.

What actually happens on this ship in Glacier Bay I have thought about how to say, and I cannot improve on saying it plainly.

The engines come down to nothing. There is no music. They shut the pool bar. The PA carries the ranger and nothing else, and between her sentences there is nothing at all, and four thousand people come out on deck in the cold and stand at the rail with their hands in their sleeves, and the ship makes her way up the West Arm at four knots into a bay with ice in it.

And they stop talking.

I have worked this ship three seasons. It is the only silence I have ever heard on her.

You can hear the ice against the hull. It knocks. It is a small noise and it goes on and on, and four thousand people stand in the cold at eight in the morning and listen to it and do not say anything, and I did not know what to do with that, so what I did was stand there with them.

Then a phone rang.

Not a phone. *The* phone. The default one, the marimba, the little

dee-dee-dee-dee that comes out of the box and that nobody ever changes. On maximum volume, off deck seven, off a bay full of ice. And it went for eleven seconds, because the woman could not find it in her bag, and everyone within thirty feet watched her not find it in her bag, and by the eighth second the man beside her was laughing.

And then everybody was.

I have never been so relieved in my life.

The buffet ran a Glacier Bay Special.

It was a sandwich.

There is also, and I will defend this to my last breath, pea soup. Proper Dutch *erwtensoup*, thick enough to stand a spoon in, which the galley crew make in industrial quantity and carry out to the open decks in urns on the one morning of the year when it is genuinely, medically necessary. It is the best thing this company does, and it is free, and four thousand people drink it out of paper cups in the rain looking at a glacier, and it is perfect.

And forty of them queued for hot chocolate on deck nine, facing away from the ice, for the entire approach to Margerie, and did not turn around once.

The two aunts were out on deck four from half past seven.

I knew who they were. Everyone on the crew side knew who they were by Thursday, because the story had gone round — the two who got taken off the railway at dinner, in front of nineteen people, and the one who put down her fork.

They were at the rail in the cold with a blanket each, and the Companion was with them, and she was with them all morning.

She wasn't doing anything. That's what I want to say, and I don't know how to make it sound like the thing it was. She wasn't comforting them. She wasn't talking much. She wasn't pointing at

ice. She was just *there*, at the rail, for four hours, with two women in their seventies who had been told in public that they were not up to a train.

And at about half nine, the aunt, the one who put the fork down, laughed.

I heard it from twenty feet away. It was a real one. It was the kind of laugh that comes out of you before you have decided anything about it, and she put her hand on the Companion's arm while she did it, and she left it there.

The Companion sat very still, and the aunt kept her hand where it was, and I went and got a coffee.

Margerie Glacier is a mile wide and stands two hundred and fifty feet out of the water, and the ship holds position in front of it, and turns, slowly, so that both sides get their turn.

And everybody waits for it to calve.

That's what they came for. They have seen the video. Everyone on this ship has seen the video — a hundred metres of ice coming off the face and going into the sea and the wave coming out — and they are all on deck, in the rain, in the cold, four thousand of them, with their phones up, waiting.

Ninety minutes. I have watched it forty-four times, and it has a shape.

The first ten minutes are perfect. Four thousand people, silent, in the cold, in front of a wall of ice a mile wide, and the ship turning slowly so both sides get their turn, and it is one of the great sights of the earth and everybody knows it and everybody is behaving beautifully.

Minutes ten to twenty-five: the cracking starts. Rifle shot with a bass note under it, off the face, across the water, back off the mountain behind you. Four thousand people gasp. Four thousand phones go up. And a wall of ice does absolutely nothing whatsoever.

Minutes twenty-five to forty: they get good at it. They learn the sound. They stop gasping at the small ones. Somebody near me

starts calling them (*there's one, no, small*) and by minute thirty-five there is a man from Red Deer who has appointed himself, and who is calling every crack in the glacier for the people around him, and they are letting him, and he is wrong every time.

Minutes forty to sixty: the hot chocolate.

Minutes sixty to seventy-five: an argument breaks out, quietly, four feet to my left, between a husband and wife about whether they should have gone to the Lido and come back, because it's warm in the Lido, and you can see it from the Lido, and *you cannot see it from the Lido, Brian, there's a pillar*.

Minutes seventy-five to ninety: hope, then patience, then the very specific, very Canadian silence of four thousand people who have all privately decided that it is fine, and that it doesn't matter, and that they would never say so.

Then we came about and left.

Nothing fell.

Not nothing *happened*. This is the part I could have explained beautifully, if anybody had asked me, which they did not. That noise is the ice moving under itself. It is not the sound of a calving. It is the sound of a thing that is not calving.

The great fall, the one from the video, happens perhaps twice a day, on no schedule, for nobody.

They filmed the sound for ninety minutes. And the general feeling on deck four, which I heard expressed several times as people filed inside, was that it had been *amazing*.

It had been. That's the thing. It had.



I saw the Companion once more, at eleven, on deck four, at the soup urn.

Manolo was serving it. He works the dining room, but on Glacier Bay day the whole restaurant crew comes out and pours soup on the decks for four hours in the rain, in their whites, and hands out four thousand paper cups and says *careful, ma'am, it's hot* every single time.

She took a cup. She said, "Thank you, Manolo."

He said, you're welcome, ma'am, careful, it's hot.

And then she said, "Do you get to see it?"

And he stopped.

I was six feet away with my hands in my pockets and no microphone and nothing to do, and I watched a man in a soaked white jacket standing behind a soup urn work out that he had been asked a question.

He said no. Not really. He said on this day they're out here the whole time, and you're facing the queue, and the queue is four thousand long.

She said, "What's it like behind you?"

And Manolo turned around and looked at Margerie Glacier for about four seconds, which is the longest anybody on that deck looked at it all morning, and then he turned back to the queue and said, "Very good, ma'am."

And she laughed. And he laughed.

And she stood at the end of his table where the crew stand, not where the guests stand, and she stayed about twenty minutes, and they didn't say very much else.

Then she took her cup in, and Manolo poured the next one, and said careful, ma'am, it's hot.

— — —

Ranger Okafor went off at four o'clock down the pilot ladder at Bartlett Cove with her thermos and her folding table.

The ship turned south. The PA came back to me.

And I got on the microphone at ten past four and told four thousand people about the Icy Strait, which is genuinely interesting, and which has a tidal exchange you would not believe, and I told them about it for twenty minutes.

By half past there were four people on deck.

I checked the centreline figure again that night. Nobody asked.

VI

Ketchikan

Yesterday four thousand people looked at a glacier a mile wide.
Today they are going to watch a man climb a pole.

Nobody planned this. Check the itinerary — Glacier Bay on Friday, Ketchikan on Saturday — and it comes down from Seattle, and it is the same every week of the season, and every week of the season I stand on a dock in the rain and watch four thousand people who have seen the ice at Margerie queue up, happily, to see the Great Alaskan Lumberjack Show.

They enjoy the lumberjack show more.

I have three seasons of data on this and I am not guessing.

Ketchikan gets about three and a half metres of rain a year. Not centimetres. Metres. It is raining now, it was raining last Saturday, it will be raining next Saturday, and this town does not consider it to be raining. The gift shops sell a shirt that says so. They sell a lot of that shirt.

Everybody comes down the gangway in a poncho. Everybody's poncho is the same poncho, because there is a bin of them at the gangway with the ship's name on it, and by nine in the morning there are four thousand identical translucent people moving up Front Street, and from the dock they look like one organism with a scoreboard somewhere ahead of it.

Two things about the ponchos.

The first is that they do not work. They are a rain-shaped object rather than a raincoat, and about eleven minutes into Ketchikan every one of them has funnelled three and a half metres a year of Alaskan rain directly down the wearer's sleeve, and the wearer keeps wearing it anyway, because they have committed.

The second is that four ships were in. Four ships, four bins, four different colours of poncho, and by half nine Front Street was a slow-moving diagram of who had come off which vessel: the blue ones, the yellow ones, our translucent ones, and the ones from the big Royal Caribbean, which were a sort of shrieking green. And I watched a couple in green stop dead in the middle of the street because they had lost their group and could not, in that crowd, work out which colour they were supposed to be.

I photograph them coming off. That's my morning.

— — —

I'm the ship's photographer. My name isn't going to help you and nobody uses it.

And one more. Lovely.

That's the job. Nine hundred repetitions a day, six days a week, in a voice I invented in my second month and have never been able to put down since, and the extraordinary thing is that it works. It works every time. Nine hundred people a day arrange their faces because a stranger says *lovely* to them.

I say it to all of them. I mean it about eleven times a week.

Four thousand frames. I sell about four hundred. Ten percent is a good week, and on Wednesday I shred the other three thousand six hundred faces in a machine on deck two and start again.

I am not a wedding photographer. Zero weddings, eleven years. Whatever else is true about my life, I have never once had to photograph a bride's mother.

One fact I have never said out loud to anybody on this vessel.

I am on the Inside Passage. Right now, this morning, I am on it. I have a professional body, I have glass on it that cost more than my car, and I have, thanks to a park permit and a captain who holds position for ninety minutes, stood at the rail in front of the Margerie face on twenty-two separate occasions. With time. With a tripod. In every light this coast has.

I have shot it every week for three years. I have files. I have the calving from last August. The real one: a hundred metres of ice going into the sea and the wave coming out of it, at eleven frames a second. and it is the best thing I have ever done and it is very probably the best thing I am ever going to do.

Nobody has bought a single frame of Alaska from me. Not one. Not in three years.

They don't want Alaska. They want *themselves in front of* Alaska, which is a different photograph, and it costs twenty-nine dollars, and it is the photograph I take four thousand times a week. Four thousand pale, dough-faced, kindly, freezing people in identical ponchos. And I take it *well*, because I am good at this.

That's the trap. I'm good at it.

Every year I tell myself I'll shoot the coast properly in September when the ships stop. Every year in September I am tired, and I go home, and I sleep for eleven days.

The Great Alaskan Lumberjack Show is a covered grandstand three minutes' walk from the dock. It is sixty-nine dollars, it is fifty minutes long, and it is one of the finest things I have ever seen.

Two teams. Spruce Mill against Dawson Creek. Chopping,

sawing, axe-throwing, a chainsaw event, a pole climb, and a log roll to finish. The men are real athletes. The axes are real axes. One of them this season is an actual Ketchikan man whose father did this and whose son is in the stands watching.

And there is an announcer with a lapel mic who tells you which side to cheer for.

That's the mechanism. He divides the grandstand down the middle and he *assigns* you. *This half, you're Spruce Mill. This half, you're Dawson Creek.* And four hundred people in their seventies, in wet ponchos, who have never met, who came off a Dutch cruise ship an hour ago, immediately and completely become partisans.

And they scream.

They scream for fifty minutes. There is a woman two rows in front of me, seventy-five if she's a day, who has been Dawson Creek for eleven minutes and who is on her feet with both fists up shouting at a man with a chainsaw. Her husband is filming her instead of the show. During the axe-throw a man near the aisle booed. He booed a competitor in a lumberjack show in Alaska and he meant it, and the people around him agreed with him, and when Spruce Mill dropped a saw the whole east side of that grandstand made a sound I have otherwise only heard in a hockey arena.

Then the pole climb comes down to two men going up sixty feet of spruce, and an entire grandstand of retired Canadians is on its feet howling at a stranger to go faster.

Dawson Creek won. The woman in front of me hugged a man she had never met.

It is the best day of their week.

It is not close.

Yesterday they stood in silence in front of an ice cliff two hundred and fifty feet high and listened to it crack like artillery for ninety minutes, and it did not fall, and nobody knew what to do. Today a man in a plaid shirt with a lapel mic told them who to be, and they knew *exactly* what to do.

I photographed them doing it. Those pictures sell.

Creek Street is built on pilings over the salmon creek. That's what it is: a boardwalk on stilts over water: wooden houses on posts, painted in colours, the creek running black underneath.

And the water is full of fish.

In season, black with them. Thousands. Stacked nose to tail in a creek four metres wide, doing the thing they have come two thousand kilometres to do, and dying while they do it.

You can see them from the boardwalk. You can lean on the rail and watch a salmon run happening under your feet, for nothing, in a town you have paid four thousand dollars to reach.

And forty feet away there is a shop.

And in the shop you can buy a salmon. Vacuum-packed, in a printed box, with a picture of a leaping fish on it, packed in a cooler with a gel pack, shipped to your home address in Ontario for a fee, and it is eighty-nine dollars, and they are lined up out the door.

I have photographed that queue. I photograph it every Saturday. It is fourteen people deep in the rain, standing on a bridge over a creek that is *made of salmon*, waiting to buy a salmon in a box.

And here is the part that keeps me honest: it's a good salmon. It's excellent. It's Alaskan, it's wild, it's exactly what it says, and it arrives frozen and perfect on a Tuesday in Ontario, and they eat it in November when it is dark at four in the afternoon, and they say to each other, *we got this in Ketchikan*.

And they did. They're not wrong.

They are never, ever wrong. That's the business.

The Chaos-Weaver went on *Ketchikan's Colourful Past: A Creek Street Heritage Walk*. Ninety minutes, forty people, thirty-nine dollars, guide with a numbered paddle.

I know how it went because I was shooting scenics on the boardwalk and I was thirty feet away for the whole thing.

It was the red-light district. It operated as one until 1954. The

tour is called *Colourful Past*, and the script contains the words *ladies of the line* and *madam* and *entrepreneur*, and it does not contain very much else.

The guide was about fifty. She had been doing it a long time. You could hear it in the way she hit her marks.

The Chaos-Weaver was at the back and he was not heckling. Thirty feet, clear sightline, no obstructions — I had the whole thing. He was not causing trouble. He was not being clever. He asked her a question, in an ordinary voice, at a completely ordinary volume, and the question was whether the women had been able to leave.

She said the script. Independent businesswomen. The only women in Ketchikan who could own property.

And he said, flatly, not unkindly, the way you'd correct a date: "That isn't what I asked."

And she stood on the boardwalk in the rain with forty people looking at her and the paddle in her hand.

And then she put the paddle down.

She talked for fifty minutes.

She told them the real thing. Who the women were. Where they came from and how they got here and how old they were. What the town did about it, and when, and why it stopped, and who owned the houses, and what the creek was actually for, and what any of it cost.

She used the word *girls*, because most of them were. She said the ages out loud. A woman near me put her hand over her mouth and left it there.

She was not performing. She was furious and she was precise and she had plainly been carrying every word of it for years, and she did not raise her voice once, not one time, on a boardwalk in the rain, over the sound of the creek.

Forty people stood there for fifty minutes past the end of their tour and nobody moved and nobody looked at their phone.

When she finished, nobody clapped, which was correct.

Then a man from Saskatchewan said, "Thank you."
And then all of them did.

She's finished, obviously. She tore up an operator's script in front of a paying group, on a route they sell four times a day. They knew by four o'clock.

And what happened next happened at Marisol's desk on deck four between five and eight in the evening, and I know because I was in the queue behind them.

Forty passengers came to complain.

They came to complain **about the refund**. The operator, hearing there had been an incident, had refunded the tour automatically: thirty-nine dollars a head, straight back to the folio, no questions asked, before anybody could tell them anything. And the forty of them formed a line at Shore Excursions to inform Marisol that they did not want it.

They wanted to pay. Several of them wanted to pay *more*. A woman from Calgary said she would happily have paid a hundred dollars for that and asked how she might go about doing so, and Marisol said there was no mechanism, and the woman said well, that's ridiculous, and then went and got in line at Guest Services to say it there as well.

Marisol filled out forty **Guest Comment** forms. There is a box on it for the nature of the comment and the options are *Complaint*, *Compliment*, *Suggestion*. She ticked *Compliment* forty times. Forty times she wrote, in the free-text field, some version of *guest wishes to be re-charged for a refunded tour*.

The free-text field is nine centimetres long.

She was at that desk until eight. She got the operator on the phone twice. There is no procedure for any of this. The system can charge and it can refund and it cannot be *told that it was wrong*. And so forty Canadians spent their evening trying to give money back to a woman who had already been fired for earning it.

Marisol didn't say one word about it. She just did the forms.

At half four I photographed the Hallorans on the dock.

All nineteen. Blue shirts, in the rain, ship behind them. The All-father arranged them, and he arranged them the way he'd arranged the railway: the aunts together, the boy with his grandfather, one couple set apart from another couple. And he did it in about forty seconds, and he consulted nobody, and the arrangement was *right*.

Eleven years, maybe nine thousand group shots. It was better than anything I would have done.

I said *and one more, lovely*, and they laughed, and the old man said something to his granddaughter that I didn't catch, and I got it, the frame where they'd stopped posing and hadn't stopped smiling, and it is a very good photograph. I knew it in the camera. That happens maybe four times a season.

They came down to the gallery after dinner and walked the rows and found themselves, and stood there. Forty seconds, fifty. I time these things; it is the only market research I get., all nineteen of them, saying *look at Dad. Look at your father*.

Jo bought it. Twenty-nine dollars. Just the one.

Nobody else in that family bought anything. They'd all seen it. They all said it was lovely. And fair enough: it was Saturday, they'd been up since six, and it was twenty-nine dollars.

Wednesday I shred three thousand six hundred faces.

The machine is on deck two next to the laundry. It takes about forty minutes. You feed them in a stack at a time and they come out the other end as strips, and the strips go into a clear bag, and the bag goes into a bin, and the bin goes ashore in Vancouver.

I don't look at them. There isn't time and there's nothing to be gained. I did once, my first season. It was a mistake and I have not made it again.

Then I clean the sensor. I charge the batteries. I set the backdrop up with the lifebuoy on the stand.

And at eleven o'clock the ramp opens, and four thousand people come through a glass wall angled at the mountains, already moved, already telling each other they will never forget this, and every single one of them has a face I have never seen before.

And one more.

Lovely.

VII

Inside Passage, Southbound

Five tables. Thirty-eight guests.

I serve all of them twice in one evening, the six-fifteen sitting and then the eight-thirty, and on the last night both sittings run long, because nobody wishes to leave, and the eight-thirty arrives on top of the six-fifteen, and it becomes my responsibility to make a table of eight who have been sitting for two hours and twenty minutes feel that they are being invited to stay forever, while I am getting them out of the chairs.

I am good at this. It has taken me eleven years.

My name is Manolo. I am from Iloilo, in the Philippines. I have been at sea nine years with two companies. This is my fourth contract with this one. A contract is eight months, and afterward I go home for two.

I have a daughter who is fourteen years old. I have been present for four of her birthdays.

I am not telling you this so that you will feel something. I am telling you because it is the arithmetic, and later in this account there is going to be an envelope, and I would like you to have the arithmetic before you have the envelope.

The two months at home are not a rest. I will be honest about that.

I return to Iloilo in March, and within approximately nine days I have become unbearable. I am awake at five. I have reorganized my mother's kitchen. On two occasions I have corrected the manner in which my brother-in-law carries a tray at a family party, and he does not work in a restaurant, and it was not the kind of party at which anyone was carrying a tray professionally.

My sister took me out for my birthday this year. A restaurant. A good one.

I lasted eleven minutes.

I did not say anything to the boy. I wish to be clear that I did not correct him. I simply stood up and fetched the water myself, and my sister said, *Manolo*, and I sat back down, and nine minutes later I did it again.

She has stopped taking me out.

A waiter knows things. Allow me to list them.

Five tables. The same guests, seven nights. By Tuesday I know what everybody drinks. By Wednesday I know who is going to send back the fish, and I know it before they do, and I have already spoken to the galley about it.

And I know who takes the pills.

The pills come out with the bread. Every night, at every table, across the entire room — the little plastic boxes with the days of the week printed on them, out of the handbag, onto the tablecloth, beside the butter. My part of this is the water. The water must be

on the table before the box is open, because if the water is late, the guest is obliged to ask for it, and asking means saying the thing out loud, and nobody wishes to say it out loud on their holiday.

So I bring the water first. Nobody instructed me to do this. It is not on any card. I have taught it to eleven junior waiters, and I have never once explained the reason.

And I know who has stopped eating.

I know because I clear the plates. Not the chef. Not the *maitre d'*. Nobody in that galley has ever seen a single plate come back. I see every one of them, and I have seen them for eleven years, and I can tell you the exact night on which a person stops finishing.

It is usually the fourth night. I do not know why it is the fourth.

Table 41 was a lady from Kamloops, travelling with her husband, and on the fourth night her plate came back with everything still on it, arranged.

That is what people do. They move the food around the plate so that it resembles a meal that happened.

I cleared it, and I said nothing, and I brought the dessert menu — because to withhold the dessert menu is itself to say something, and I am not permitted to say anything.

She had the sorbet, which is what they have. Two spoonfuls of it.

Table 38 is a two-top, a table for two, and he sat at it alone for all seven nights.

It is beside the service door, which means it is next to the noise and the swinging and the smell of the pass, and nobody wants it, and every week I am obliged to talk some unlucky couple into it.

He asked for it.

On the second night, the Conscience-Keeper said: “Does the kitchen know?”

I said, know what, sir.
“That she isn’t eating.”

I said that I would inform the chef, sir, and might she prefer something else.
He said no. He said she would not prefer something else. He said the kitchen should know.

So on the third night, I entered it into the system.
The card is called a Guest Dining Profile. There is a screen for it at the head waiter’s station, and I complete it on the first night of every cruise. The fields are as follows:

GUEST DINING PROFILE
ms ZAANDAM · TABLE _____ · CRUISE _____

ALLERGIES

INTOLERANCES

DISLIKES

CELEBRATIONS

SPECIAL REQUESTS

ALLERGIES is the field that could kill somebody. It is completed properly and it is checked twice, and I have not seen one mistake in it in eleven years, and that is not luck.

CELEBRATIONS is where the birthdays go. We sing. There is a song.

DISLIKES is where you write *no mushrooms*.

There is no field for *the lady at 41 has stopped being able to swallow the beef, her husband is ordering for her now, and she will not see Christmas*.

So I put it in DISLIKES.

I wrote: **Guest prefers lighter portions.**

And the kitchen read it, and the kitchen understood it perfectly — because every galley on this ocean knows precisely what *guest prefers lighter portions* means on the sixth night of an Alaska cruise

— and they plated her a smaller one, and it came out beautifully, and she ate two spoonfuls of it.

On the fourth night he said: “Does the kitchen know?”

I said, “Yes, sir.”

He said, “What did you tell them?”

And I told him. I told him what I had written, and the box in which I had written it, and he listened to the whole of it and said nothing for a moment, while I stood there with eleven guests waiting on their drinks.

Then he said: “That isn’t what’s happening to her.”

And I said, no, sir. It isn’t.

He asked me once more, on the sixth night. The same words. The same voice. The same volume.

“Does the kitchen know?”

I said yes, sir, and I went to fetch the fish, and behind me I heard him ask nobody in particular, at exactly the volume of the room, whether anyone had written it down.

Nobody had.

Nobody was ever going to. There is no box, and there is no procedure. There is a system on this vessel that can identify a shellfish allergy across four thousand guests, twice a day, without one error in eleven years — and it cannot record the fact that a woman is dying at table 41, and has agreed instead, internationally, in code, in a field marked DISLIKES, to serve her a smaller portion of something she is not going to eat.

He was not being cruel. I wish to be fair to him. There was nothing in it. He asked the question that somebody was supposed to ask, and I was the man standing where the asking gets done, and I had a very good answer for him, and it was a lie, and he knew that it was a lie, and he asked me again anyway.

The granddaughter brought the case to dinner. Every night. All seven.

She placed it on the floor by her foot. Not under the table; by her *foot*. And once, when a boy went past with a tray, she moved her leg.

I clear that floor twice in a service. I know what is under every table in my section: the handbags, the walking sticks, the oxygen concentrator at 44, the shopping from Skagway. It is my floor.

I worked around that case for one week, and I never once looked down.

The last night is called the Farewell Dinner, and it has returned this year, and I will tell you honestly that the crew was not pleased.

It is a beautiful thing, and it is forty minutes of unpaid work per waiter, and both of those statements are true at the same time.

Beef Wellington. Baked Alaska. The string quartet comes out and plays properly. The room is full — entirely full, four hundred guests in the good clothes they have been saving all week — and at nine o'clock the lights go down.

And then all of us come out.

Everybody. The chefs in their whites, the galley boys who never leave deck two, the head waiters, the stewards, the officers. Up the middle of the dining room in a line, the whole company of us, while four hundred people rise to their feet and wave their napkins over their heads and shout.

There are two songs. The first is “Home to Rotterdam.”

The second is called “Gelang Sipaku Gelang.” It is an Indonesian farewell song, very old and very simple, and it means, more or less, *let us go home*.

I am not Indonesian. I am from the Philippines. I learned that song phonetically in my first month at sea, standing behind a service station, from a boy from Surabaya. That was 2017, on a different

ship, for a different company.

This company only began doing it again this year.

So I have sung it fifteen times since May, and I sang it three hundred times before that, on a ship that is now in a scrapyard in Turkey, and I have never in my life been to Indonesia.

We sing it every week. It is a very good song.

The Hallorans took the long table.

Nineteen of them, and the blue shirts again. The entire family, in the shirts, on formal night, which is not permitted, and about which nobody was going to say one word.

The Allfather had arranged the seating, because of course he had. The aunts were together. The boy was beside his grandfather.

The old man was tired. He had been tired since Juneau. He had done the ice, and he had been paying for it every day since, and everybody at that table could see it, and every single one of them was being extremely careful not to look at him — which is the loudest thing a family can do.

The granddaughter ran that dinner. She ordered for him. She did not cut anything, she did not fuss, she did not hover. She simply ordered him the fish, because the Wellington is too much, and she did it before he had opened the menu, and he made no comment, and I understood the two of them exactly.

Then a nephew stood up and made the toast.

He said, forty-nine years. He said, next year is fifty, and we'll do it again, and we'll do it bigger, and here's to Grandpa —

and then he said, and I wish to be precise about this: "... and to Grandma, who'd have hated the boat."

And the table roared. All nineteen of them. The old man laughed until he had to put a hand flat on the table.

I was standing at the service station with nineteen fish, and I watched a family fall about laughing at a woman who was not there and had never been going to be there, and whose name I did not learn, that night or any other night.

And then the Conscience-Keeper, at 38, six feet away, said it.

Not to me. Not to the table. Into the middle of it, at exactly the volume of the room, in the manner of a man saying a thing he has been sent to say.

“He won’t do next year.”

Four words.

The granddaughter heard it. I know that she heard it, because I was watching her, and because everything in her face went still and then came back, the whole of it inside perhaps a second and a half, and she picked up her glass and said, “To Grandma,” and the table said it back to her, and the water closed over.

Nobody else heard. Nobody at that table heard.

Only her. And me.

She looked at me once, across the room, for perhaps half a second.

I brought the fish.

— — —

Now. The envelopes.

They hand them to you at the door, at the end, while they are saying good night. They shake your hand, and there is an envelope in the hand.

The gratuity is on the folio now. It is automatic; it has already been paid; and any guest who gives you nothing further is entirely correct and has done nothing wrong, and I wish that on the record before I say the rest.

We have a taxonomy.

I will not defend it and I will not apologize for it. Every waiter in every dining room on every ship on this ocean has one, and they are all approximately the same, and they are all approximately accurate. It is not about wealth. It has nothing whatsoever to do with wealth. Some of the richest people I have ever served have handed me a folded napkin with nothing inside it and a truly excellent handshake.

The Australians are magnificent. An Australian will tip you, and

then attempt to buy you a beer, which you are not permitted to accept, and then be offended, and then tip you again.

The Germans tip exactly correctly. To the dollar. It is almost frightening.

There is a man on this cruise, from Regina, who presented me with eighty dollars in Canadian Tire money as a joke, and then, at the door, gave me two hundred real dollars, and informed me that the Canadian Tire money was worth more, and shook my hand for a long time. I believe he may have been serious. I have kept it.

The cards are the ones that get you. A real card, in an envelope, with your name spelled correctly. Some of them tell you things. A woman on my second contract wrote three pages about her husband. I keep a box of them in my cabin, under the bunk, and I am not going to describe it to you.

And approximately one fifth of them spell your name wrong. It is on the badge. It is *right there*. I have been Marco, Manuel, Mano, and, once, from a very kind woman from Ohio who cried when she said goodbye, Miguel.

— — —

The Allfather gave me nothing.

He was the last one out. He shook my hand and said, "Very good, Manolo," and he looked at me while he said it. Properly. In the way that almost nobody does.

I would rather have had that than money.

I have thought about why, and I have not got to the bottom of it, and I do not expect to.

The granddaughter gave me an envelope at the door with two hundred dollars in it, and she did not stop walking.

— — —

At half past nine, the plate came back from 41 with everything on it, arranged.

I scraped it into the bin at the end of the service station, as I have

scraped nine thousand others, and I stacked it, and the boy took the stack to the wash.

Then I went back out onto the floor, because I had eleven covers waiting on their coffee.

— — —

We finished at ten past eleven.

There is a thing we do at the end of the last night. We stand in the empty dining room, all of us, and the head waiter reads out the numbers for tomorrow.

Four thousand and six off, between six and nine-thirty.

Four thousand and something on, from eleven.

Then we set the tables.

Four hundred covers. Cloths, cutlery, glasses, the fold on the napkin, every table exactly as it stood on Wednesday. It takes about one hour. We do it at midnight, and when we have finished, the room is perfect, and there is nobody in it.

Then I go down to deck two and I sleep, and at eleven o'clock tomorrow the doors open, and four hundred people I have never seen sit down at my tables, and I say good evening.

And I bring the water first.

VIII

Canada Place

Four thousand and six people leave the ship this morning between six and nine-thirty.

Four thousand and eleven board at eleven.

Disembarkation is the only part of a cruise the company has never found a way to make anybody enjoy. It is not for lack of trying; the trying is documented.

You get a coloured luggage tag. The tag has a number. The number corresponds to a time, and the time corresponds to a lounge, and the lounge is where you sit with four hundred other people holding coffee in a paper cup, at six-forty in the morning, wearing the coat you have not worn since Vancouver.

They call the numbers over the PA.

That's it. That is the last thing this ship says to you. Seven days, four ports, a glacier, a lumberjack show, an Indonesian farewell song. And then a woman's voice says *orange three*, and you stand up.

The tags go out on Tuesday night and they are the greatest single source of guest anxiety in the seven-day cycle, and I include the muster drill in that. People come to my desk about their tags. They want a different colour. They want to know whether orange is before or after mauve, and whether mauve is a *bad* colour, and I have watched a man in his seventies quietly and completely lose his composure at Guest Services over a piece of card.

He wasn't upset about the card. Obviously he wasn't upset about the card.

I'm at the gangway from five-thirty.

Not because Shore Excursions has any function in disembarkation. We don't. Every desk is at the gangway on Wednesday because there are four thousand people to move in three hours, and every crew member on this vessel who is not asleep or cooking is standing in a corridor saying *good morning, mind the step, good morning, mind the step*.

I said it about nine hundred times. My face hurt by eight.

At seven-ten the light came.

I mean the light. The one from the brochure. The one everybody stood on the Lido for on Wednesday with their phones up, the one the rain took off them — it arrived over the North Shore at ten past seven on disembarkation morning, gold, low, flat across the water, the mountains lit up like a judgement, the whole inlet doing the thing it is famous for doing.

It held for about twenty minutes. It was the best light of the entire voyage and I would put that in writing.

Four thousand people were below decks in windowless lounges, holding paper cups, watching a screen for their colour.

Orange three.

They stood up.

They don't want to go.

That's not sentiment. It is an operational fact, and it is the hardest part of the morning, and if you have never worked a disembarkation you will not believe how hard.

They sit down. They will not move through the lounge. They stand in the corridor outside the dining room, which is closed and dark and set for tonight, and they take a photograph of the door.

They go back up to the Lido for one more coffee at seven-fifteen when their number was called at seven, and a Guest Services officer has to go up and get them.

And they say goodbye to us. All of them. Every one, and they mean it, and it takes an extremely long time, and this is the great unsolved problem of the modern cruise industry: four thousand people who are so grateful that they cannot be got off the ship.

The woman from Nanaimo (eleven cruises, never once set foot in Alaska, told me on Saturday that Skagway is a shop) stopped at the gangway this morning and shook my hand and said it had been a wonderful week and she'd see me in September.

She will, too.

Bagus has been doing the gangway eleven years.

He is from Semarang and he is fifty-one and he is the calmest human being I have ever worked alongside. I have never seen him hurry. I have never seen him irritated. I have seen him tell a very drunk man from Alberta that he could not board with an open bottle, four times, in the same pleasant voice, until the man simply gave up and drank it.

The scanner takes about a second a card. Four thousand and six cards is one hour and seven minutes of a man standing in a doorway saying good morning at a rate of one per second, and he does it twice a week, and he has done it eleven years, which is, I have worked this out, and I told him, and he was not interested,

somewhere north of four and a half million good mornings.

He said, "Is it?"

I said it was.

He said, "That's a lot."

Then he scanned the next one and said good morning.

— — —

He also carries. That's the part nobody sees.

Every third or fourth guest at that gangway cannot manage the ramp with a bag, and there is a rule about crew lifting guest luggage, and there is a different rule about crew touching guests, and Bagus has spent eleven years in the six inches between those two rules.

He gets an elbow under an arm without appearing to. He takes a case out of a hand in a way that makes it look like the person put it down. He does it forty times a morning and he never once makes it a moment. Because if he makes it a moment, then somebody has to be grateful, and being grateful for that, at six in the morning, in front of your grandchildren, is not a thing anybody should have to do before breakfast.

I asked him about it once. He said, "It's the step."

I said what about the step.

He said, "Everybody can do the ramp. Nobody can do the step."

He has been standing at that step for eleven years and I have never heard him say one other thing about it.

— — —

At eight-forty he said, into the radio, in the voice you would use to order a sandwich:

"We are complete."

Nobody clapped. He put the scanner on the shelf and went to breakfast.

— — —

The Hallorans went at seven-twenty. Orange four. All nineteen of them, in ordinary clothes.

I hadn't thought about that until I saw it. The shirts were in the bags. They'd worn them for six days: the terminal, the dock at Ketchikan, formal night, which is not permitted and which nobody was ever going to mention. And this morning they were nineteen people in nineteen different coats standing in a queue in a lounge at seven in the morning, and they looked like strangers who had happened to arrive at the same time.

Which, in about four hours, is what they would be.

The old man came out slowly. Somebody had a wheelchair, and he was not in it, and it went down the gangway ahead of him, empty, pushed by a nephew, in case.

He got to the bottom and turned round and looked up at the ship for a second.

Somebody behind him said Dad, come on. And he came on.

Bagus scanned him and said good morning and got a hand under his elbow on the step, and the old man did not notice.

Jo went past me with the binder under one arm and the case in the other hand.

"Thank you," she said.

I said, "Safe travels."

That was the transaction. She had been at my desk nine times in seven days and she did not stop walking, and she went down the ramp into the terminal, and the doors did what the doors do.

— — —

The Seeker was on the first group off. Six a.m. He was in the terminal before the coffee was out.

He didn't stop at the desk. He didn't thank anybody. I didn't see him go.

He had been aboard seven days. He had cost this ship twenty-five minutes at Skagway, an agent, a truck, and a fuel bill I still do not want to think about, and he had bought nothing. Not a tour. Not a photograph. Not a drink that I ever saw. My commission on him for

the voyage was zero.

He asked me for a map that went further north, and I didn't have one, and he wasn't bothered.

That's all I've got. He got off at six and I do not know where he went and I am not going to pretend that I do.

At nine-forty they took the last of the luggage off and hosed the pier.

At ten the ship was empty.

That's the hour I was talking about at the start, if you're still with me. Four thousand people gone and four thousand not yet come, and the Zaandam sitting at Canada Place with the mountains behind her and nobody aboard except us.

The pools are still. Nobody is at the rail. Every lounge on deck nine is empty and stacked, and the ice machines have stopped, and you can hear the ship. The actual ship, the hum of her, which is there all week and which you never once hear all week.

It is the best hour of the week and I have never told a guest that it exists.

The photographer was on deck two feeding three thousand six hundred faces into a machine.

The naturalist was in the Wajang Theatre with the lights off, checking a figure that nobody was going to ask him for.

Manolo's dining room was already set. Four hundred covers, cloths, cutlery, the fold on the napkin, done at midnight, perfect, nobody in it.

And somewhere in Juneau, at eight in the morning, in the rain, Rye was walking a landing zone putting his hands on every stake.

I went down to deck four and opened the desk and printed the manifests.

EXPLORATIONS CENTRAL™ · ms ZAANDAM

SHORE EXCURSIONS — ALASKA INSIDE PASSAGE · 7 DAYS

Mendenhall Glacier by Helicopter & Guided Ice Trek — Strenuous Activity — Limited Capacity — weight declaration required at check-in.

Gold Rush Skagway by Streetcar — Panoramic Tour.

Glacier Bay — scenic cruising. No excursions available.

Cancellation: full refund if cancelled more than 24 hours prior to tour departure. Within 24 hours no refund will be issued, including for reasons of illness or medical incapacity. Guests should assess their own physical condition before booking.

Same document. Same tours, same prices, same rain, same glacier. The same twenty-four hours in which to decide what a person's body is going to be able to do on a Wednesday morning next week.

I put them in the rack.

At eleven the ramp opened.

They came through the glass wall with the light behind them and the mountains doing what the mountains do, and every one of them was already moved, and the first of them was at my counter at ten past.

A woman with a folder. A husband behind her, not saying anything.

She wanted to know about the helicopter.

She said he was very fit for his age.