

THE HUNGRY GODS
GO TO THE AIRPORT

N. Van Seters & Claude

This is a work of fiction.
Institutions, procedures and figures are drawn from the public record;
every person in it is invented.

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PART I

THE FILE

THE PASS

DAY 1 · 63 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH
TEMPORARY PASS T-4471 · ESCORT REQUIRED

The letter arrived in February and the package arrived in March, and the package was heavier.

The letter said that the Board of Directors of Vancouver Airport Authority was pleased to advise that I had been appointed a Director at Large for a term of three years commencing the eleventh of April. It ran to a page and a half and it was warm in the way that such letters are warm, which is to say it used my name twice and the word *pleased* three times.

The package took me four evenings. There was a governance rules and practices manual. There was a code of conduct. There was a schedule of Board and Committee meeting dates set three years in advance, which struck me as either admirable or a challenge to fate, and there was an indemnity agreement running to eleven pages that explained the circumstances under which the Airport Authority would save me harmless, along with the four circumstances under which it would not, of which the fourth was fraud.

And there was the attestation.

I had to confirm, in writing, that I was not a corporation.

I read it twice. It is item (a). Barred from membership on the Board, under the by-laws: a corporation. Then a person aged seventeen years or younger. Then a person who is not a citizen of Canada, then a person who is not a resident of British Columbia — with the note that one director may sit under each of those two exclusions at any one time, so that they are not exclusions so much as quotas. Then a person holding elected office. Then a person employed full time by any government

department or agency, or by any corporation owned by His Majesty in right of Canada. Then an undischarged bankrupt. Then a person found by a court to be a mentally incompetent person or of unsound mind. Then, at (i), the fraud clause, which is long, and which ends by explaining that the disability ceases upon a pardon.

I signed to confirm that I was none of these things. It took a moment to sign the first one. I am a person, and I have been a person for fifty-eight years, and I have never in that time been required to certify it to anybody.

I asked, later, whether the corporation clause had ever caught anything. The answer was that it had not, and that it was not going anywhere.

For nineteen years before this I ran a community services society on the east side. The largest asset I was ever responsible for was a fifteen-year-old accessible van with a lift that failed in cold weather, and the argument about replacing it ran across four annual general meetings and two boards and was finally settled by a bequest from a woman who had used the van twice.

I mention this because it is my qualification entire, and because it took me four evenings to read a package for an organization that moves twenty-six million people a year, and I understood every word of it and none of the scale.

They told me to arrive at ten and to come to the departures level, which is Level 3, and which is where you also arrive when you are leaving. I took a taxi because I did not want to spend my first morning working out the parkade, and the taxi put me down in the middle of what I can only describe as an ongoing negotiation.

There is no assigned drop-off at YVR. Not for taxis, not for private cars, not for the ride app services, which have three regulated pickup areas and no designated drop-off at all.

Everyone unloads anywhere along the curb that is permitted, and every driver has a theory about which part of the curb is best, and the theories are incompatible.

So there were four lanes of vehicles doing four different things at once. There was a family with a luggage cart and a stroller occupying the width of two vehicles. There was a man refusing to move a sedan until his mother had finished saying goodbye, and his mother was in no hurry. Somewhere behind that there was a shuttle bus, and behind the shuttle bus, opinion.

Standing in the middle of it, not moving, was a man in a high-visibility vest with a radio.

He was not directing traffic. Nobody directs that traffic; there is too much of it and it is not the kind of thing that responds to being directed. He was watching it, and he was talking into the radio in a low steady voice, and what he was saying was where it was going to go wrong next.

“Outer’s about to fold,” he said. “Give it four minutes.”

I was close enough to hear the reply, which was that outer looked fine.

“It’ll fold at the crosswalk,” he said. “The white van’s come round twice. He’ll go for the second bay and he won’t fit, and then the bus can’t get by. Four minutes. Have someone at the crosswalk.”

Then he said something about the third bay and a coach that had not yet arrived, and then he stopped talking and went on watching.

This was the All-Seeing. He is a ground transportation supervisor. He has been one for a long time. I have since been told, by three separate people, that he is very good, and all three of them said it in the same slightly flattened way, as though reporting a fact about the building rather than a quality of a colleague.

The white van came round a second time. It went for the second bay. It did not fit.

I was inside by then and did not see the rest, so I cannot tell you about the crosswalk. But I looked at the clock in reception when I got there, which said 10:04, and I had been standing at the curb at ten to.

Reception gave me a badge that said VISITOR in letters considerably larger than my name, and then a young man arrived who was to be my escort, and we established the terms of our relationship in about ninety seconds.

He was required to keep me within eyesight at all times.

I was required to leave the restricted area at once if I could no longer see him.

I said that seemed to cover it from both ends. He said it did, and that people usually asked why it needed to work both ways, and that the answer was that either of us could be the one who wandered off. He had the manner of a person who had explained this many times and had made peace with it, which I would come to recognize as the house manner.

We went upstairs. I signed the conflict of interest acknowledgement, which every director signs at the time of appointment, confirming that I had read and was bound by the guidelines. I had read them. There is a section about gifts and a section about outside directorships and a section that explains that a director's fiduciary duty to the Airport Authority must be paramount at all times, and I remember thinking that *paramount* is a strong word to put in a document that is otherwise so careful.

Then I was given a folder with my orientation schedule in it. Eight and a half weeks. Five briefings from senior management, six operational areas, and a note at the bottom that the schedule was subject to change owing to operational requirements, which turned out to be the truest sentence in the folder.

At the top of the first page, in the same typeface as everything else, was a line I understood immediately and did not understand at all:

DAYS TO FIRST MATCH: 63.

Everybody in the province knew what the matches were. They had been on the buses since March. What I did not understand was why the number was on my orientation schedule, above the room bookings and the parking instructions, in the position where an ordinary document puts the date.

The pass office is not glamorous. It is a counter, four chairs, a camera on a stand, a machine for irises, a machine for fingerprints, and a poster about the consequences of failing to display your identification correctly, which involves a fine measured in the thousands and levied by Transport Canada rather than by anyone in the room.

There were three people ahead of me. A woman in a ramp handler's jacket, renewing. A man in a suit who was, I gathered, a contractor's project manager and who had brought the wrong sponsor signature. And a very young man in coveralls who had brought everything correctly and seemed startled by this.

Behind the counter was the Seeker.

He is the access control officer. He is somewhere in his fifties, he wears the shirt, and he does not hurry. He asked the ramp handler four questions and each answer was one he already had, which I noticed because he did not write any of them down. He told the project manager which of the three possible sponsors could sign his form, and in what order, and that the second of them was on leave until Tuesday and the third had signing authority only for airside projects, and that his project was landside, so it would have to be the first one, who would be back at two.

The project manager said he had been told the second one could sign it.

“He could,” the Seeker said. “In March.”

The project manager left. The young man in coveralls got his temporary pass in six minutes.

Then it was me, and I put my documents on the counter, and the Seeker looked at them and then looked at me, and asked whether I understood that the card I was applying for was not the card I would be leaving with.

I said I did not, yet.

So he explained it, and he explained it well, and in the order he explained it.

To go where the airport actually happens, you need a Restricted Area Identification Card. To get one you need a Transportation Security Clearance, which is granted by the Minister and not by anybody in this building. To apply for that you need a sponsor with signing authority who will certify that you have both a right and a need. Then you attend in person with original documents. Then your irises and your fingerprints are enrolled, because the card is biometric, and the checkpoint reads the person rather than the card. Then you complete the national training module and the site-specific module. Then you wait.

I asked how long.

“Three months,” he said. “It can be more.”

My orientation is eight and a half weeks.

I did not say that. He did not say it either. He was already turning to the terminal to open my temporary pass record, and there was nothing in his manner to suggest that a director of the Airport Authority applying for a card that would arrive a month after her orientation had finished was in any way a remarkable event, and I have come to believe that this is because it is not one. Nobody in the room did the arithmetic out loud. I include myself. I sat there and did it privately and said nothing, which I now understand to have been my first act as a director.

He photographed me. While the camera was warming up the Seeker told me about the modules — the national one and the site-specific one, both of which I would complete online, both of which end in a test, and the site-specific one of which, he said, people fail. I asked what they fail on. He said the escort questions. He said everyone reads the escort questions as being about the escort.

Then he printed the pass. He handed it across the counter and told me three things.

The first was that it must be visibly displayed on my outer clothing at all times when I was in or entering a restricted area.

The second was that it was valid only while I was on duty, and that I was not to use it to go anywhere for a personal reason, and that the Aerodrome Operator, its representatives, the Minister, or a peace officer could confirm my duties at any time.

The third was that if I saw someone in a restricted area who was not displaying a pass, I was to challenge them.

I said, and I think I said it lightly, that I had been in the building for forty minutes.

“You’ll still challenge them,” he said.

The pass says T-4471. Under the number it says ESCORT REQUIRED, in a red band, in capitals.

Here is the part I have gone back over.

While he was printing, I was looking at the counter, because there is nothing else to look at in that office except the poster about the fine. There was a day-sheet lying there, face up — the running tally the office keeps, temporary passes issued today, with a count at the foot of the column.

The count was seven.

I had been sitting in that office for the better part of half an hour, and I am a person who counts a room, because I have

chaired too many meetings in rooms that were too small. The ramp handler was a renewal, not an issue. The project manager left without one. That left the young man in coveralls, and me. Before I arrived there had been two people leaving as I came up the corridor, and I will grant them both. Four. There had been nobody else.

The count was seven.

I counted it again. I looked at the column rather than the total, because a total can be a slip of a pen, and the column has one line per pass with a time beside it, and there were seven lines, and the times were spread across the morning at intervals that looked like a morning.

The clerk who had come in behind the counter to take the next application did not look up. He turned the sheet over, wrote the time in the margin of the new side, and asked whether I wanted the plastic holder or the retractable one.

I said the plastic one.

That is all. I have never gone back to ask about the sheet. In my third week I learned what the reporting line for the pass office is, and it does not run to me.

The rest of the day was a boardroom.

The boardroom is not the sort of thing anybody puts in a governance manual.

The Airport Authority publishes a schedule of commercial fees and charges. It runs to three pages. It sets out the annual fee per vehicle for certain ground transportation operations, and the development permit fee, which begins at five hundred dollars and rises by a hundred for each additional hundred square metres to a maximum of five thousand. It sets out fuel spill clean-up as cost recovery plus an administration fee, which seems fair, and key issuing at five dollars per key, which seems modest.

And it sets out boardroom rentals at two hundred and eighteen dollars and fifty-five cents per four hours or portion thereof, and thereafter at an hourly rate.

I sat in one of those rooms for three hours on my first afternoon, being oriented, and at some point in the second hour it came to me that the room had a price, and that the price was being paid by the organization that operates the building, to the organization that operates the building, out of money that had been remitted to it by passengers who had already paid the fee to leave.

I asked about this later. I was told, correctly, that the schedule is a commercial schedule, that it exists so that tenants and business partners are charged consistently, and that internal bookings are handled differently. That is a complete answer. It is also true that the number is printed, that somebody arrived at fifty-five cents, and that the phrase *or portion thereof* was chosen by a person who had been burned.

In the boardroom I met, on a screen, the Chair, who was two weeks into the role himself and who was pleasant and brief and clearly had somewhere else to be. I met, in person, a woman from the corporate secretary's office who took me through the committee structure and who used the phrase "in the normal course" nine times, and I am confident about nine, because by the fourth I had begun keeping count on the inside cover of my folder.

The committee structure took forty minutes. There are committees, and the committees meet on average four times a year each, and I was walked through which ones I might be placed on and which ones I would not, and by the end of it I understood that the Board meets five times a year plus a strategic retreat plus the annual meeting of the members, and that this comes to twenty-one days a year of Board business.

Twenty-one days. Not counting preparation.

She was careful about that last part, and she said it twice, and I understood that the phrase *not counting preparation* was doing more work than the twenty-one.

Then we did the remuneration, because it is published and there is no sense being coy about it: a retainer, then fourteen hundred dollars for a Board or Committee meeting, which includes a day of travel or a speaking engagement, and seven hundred for other meetings. I asked what an *other* meeting was. She said it was a meeting that was not a Board or Committee meeting. I said that was clear enough. She said that in the normal course it was, and that was the tenth.

And I was told what I was for.

The Board reviews its Directors Skills and Experience Matrix every year. It sets out what every director is expected to bring, and then what specific skills the Board needs. Having reviewed its composition, the Board had identified gaps: digital and technology, international markets, driving sustainability. And community leadership experience.

That last one is me.

Around the table there is a former airline captain with thousands of hours. There is a chartered accountant who has been the chief financial officer of companies I have bought socks from. There is senior counsel. There is a man who has spent thirty years in airline maintenance and logistics and who, I am told, can price a hangar in his head.

And there is me, who ran a community services society on the east side for nineteen years, and before that a neighbourhood house, and who has spent the better part of my working life in rooms where the budget was under two million dollars and the argument was about a van.

Everyone was extremely glad I was there. Three separate people told me so before four o'clock, and I believed all three of them, and not one of them said what I would be doing.

At the end of the day my escort walked me back down to the curb, because a temporary pass that says ESCORT REQUIRED means what it says, and it does not stop meaning it at five o'clock.

We went through the concourse. It was the beginning of the evening bank and the building had that particular sound, which I have since learned to hear as a number: not busy, not full, just the sound of twenty-six million people a year arriving in the amount of one afternoon.

Things I saw between the elevator and the door, in about four minutes.

A man weighing a suitcase by lifting it, putting it down, lifting it again, and looking at his wife, who had not moved and did not intend to.

A toddler going flat on the floor in the manner of a dropped coat, with no warning and no sound, entirely on purpose, while both parents continued the conversation over the top of him at the same volume.

A woman running for something with a neck pillow already on, which meant she had put it on with hours to spare and was now running in it.

Four people at a self-serve kiosk, one of them using it and three supervising.

And a boy of about nine who had discovered that if he stood on the moving walkway and walked backwards at exactly the right speed he could remain in one place indefinitely, and who had clearly been doing it for some time, and whose father, when he found him, was neither surprised nor impressed.

A woman stopped me by the escalator. She had two children and a boarding pass in her teeth and she was looking for the washrooms.

She had stopped me because my badge was the largest thing on my chest, and because in a building full of people wearing lanyards, the person whose lanyard says DIRECTOR looks like the person to ask.

I did not know where the washrooms were.

My escort did, and told her, and she went off, and we carried on to the curb. He was kind about it. He said everybody gets asked in the first week, that he had been asked on his second day, and that the washrooms move because the building keeps being renovated, which is not an excuse anybody accepts.

The All-Seeing was still at the curb, or was there again. The lanes were doing something different from what they had been doing that morning and he was watching them do it, and as we came out he was saying into the radio that the coach in the third bay had four minutes in it and then he would need the bay.

I got into a taxi. There is a passenger load charge of four dollars built into the flat zone fare, which I know now and did not know then.

The taxi went up Granville and I asked to be let out four blocks early because the light was still good and I had not walked anywhere all day.

The society building is on the east side and I did not go near it and have not been back since March. It is a converted bank with a ramp somebody built out of plywood in 2011 that is still there. The van is parked behind it, or was, and it has a hundred and ninety thousand kilometres on it and a sliding door that has to be lifted while it is slid.

I walked four blocks and thought about none of that, and then I went home and put the folder on the kitchen table and did not open it.

I had been a director of an airport for one day and I had been permitted, unescorted, into precisely none of it.

THE MONEY

DAY 4 · 60 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH
TEMPORARY PASS T-4471 · ESCORT REQUIRED

The second week began with money, which I had asked for, because I had spent the weekend with the financial statements and had come out of them with the strong impression that I had read a document about a different organization.

What had done it was a single line in the notes. Somewhere in the back of the statements there is a schedule of contractual commitments, and the figure in it was larger than the figure I had understood to be the size of the organization, and it was not described as a problem. It was described in a footnote. I read the footnote four times on the Sunday and then put the statements down and made a list of questions, and the list had eleven items on it, and by the Monday I had realized that item one made items two through eleven unnecessary. Item one was: what does this organization actually own.

They gave me the Director, Financial Planning and Analysis, for two hours in a room on the third floor with a screen that would not wake up. She had a deck. She did not use the deck.

What she said, when I told her I had done the reading, was that she was going to do it in the order she did it in, because everyone comes to it wrong in the same direction and it saves time to start there.

I have set down what she said as closely as I can. I took notes, and afterwards I asked her to check them, and she corrected two numbers and one word, and the word was *own*.

I've done this eleven times. Twelve, counting you. And every single one of you arrives having read the statements, and every single one of you arrives with the same picture in your head, which is that the airport is a business that owns an airport.

So I start with the lease, because until the lease is in your head nothing else sits properly.

We don't own it. Not the land, not the runways, not the ground under the terminal. His Majesty owns it, which in practice means Transport Canada, and we lease it, and the lease runs to 2072 with extensions. We are the tenant. We have been the tenant since 1992 and we will be the tenant when everyone in this building is dead.

Now. What does a tenant pay.

We pay ground rent, and the ground rent is not a number, it's a formula, and it's the same formula for every airport in the national system. It's progressive. It steps up in bands as gross revenue rises, and the top band is twelve per cent. Twelve per cent of gross. Not of profit. There is no profit; we're a not-for-profit corporation, we have no shareholders, and every dollar that isn't spent goes back into the airport. Twelve per cent of the top band of what comes in the door.

Because our revenue is what it is, the effective rate lands somewhere between ten and twelve.

Then, separately, we pay the municipalities. We're on federal land, so we're not taxable in the ordinary way, so we pay Payment in Lieu of Taxes instead — to Richmond, principally, because we're in Richmond. Last published year that was thirty-one and a half million dollars.

Put the two together and we remit somewhere close to sixteen per cent of gross revenue to government, before we service a dollar of debt.

(I asked her whether that was high. She said it was the formula. I asked whether it was high compared to other countries. She said that was a different question, that people asked it in exactly that

tone, and that she was not going to answer it before the coffee arrived.)

We receive no government funding to operate. None. Not a dollar. This is the part I have to be careful about, because it's true and because of what people do with it.

When I say we receive no government funding, half the room hears *we have no money*, and the other half hears *so why are you charging me*. Both of those are the wrong conclusion from a correct fact. We have money. We have a lot of money. Twenty-six point nine million passengers came through here last year, which is the most that has ever come through here, and money came with all of them. What we don't have is a shareholder to take it and a government to give us any.

So everything you see was paid for by the people using it, and by borrowing against the people who will use it later.

The not-for-profit line is the one I'd retire if I could. It's accurate. It's in our incorporating documents. And it means something quite narrow — no shareholders, no dividend, surpluses reinvested — and what people hear is *charity*, and then they see the terminal, and then they feel they have caught us at something.

I sat in a community meeting in Richmond two years ago where a man stood up and said, and I'm quoting him, if you're a not-for-profit where did the piano come from. There is a piano. It was donated. I had the answer and it didn't matter, because he wasn't asking about the piano.

Revenue comes in three streams and I'll do them in the order of how often they're misunderstood.

Aeronautical. This is what the airlines pay. Landing fees, calculated on the maximum take-off weight of the arriving aircraft — so a fully loaded widebody from Asia pays considerably more than a turboprop from Terrace, which people find fair, and it is

fair, and it also means our revenue is exposed to what aircraft type an airline chooses to schedule, which people find less interesting and which keeps me awake. Then general terminal fees, which are on seats and on sector — domestic, transborder, international. Then apron, gate and bridge charges.

Non-aeronautical. Concessions, parking, car rental, property rentals, and land. This is the stream people don't take seriously and it is enormous, and it is the reason there is a duty free shop where you might otherwise have expected a chair.

Parking is the one that surprises directors. It is not a parking lot, it is a business that happens to be conducted in a parking lot, and it has short-term and long-term and park-and-fly products the way a bank has products, and it has yield management, and there is a person whose working life is the fourth Sunday in August.

There's a Customer Facility Charge on car rentals, which is a separate thing again, and which funds the facility the rentals happen in.

And I will say the part that lands badly at dinner parties, which is that a person who drives out here to collect their mother and buys a coffee while they wait is, on some days, worth more to this organization than a person who flies to Calgary. That is not a complaint about the person flying to Calgary. It's a fact about where the margin sits, and the commercial strategy of every airport in the developed world proceeds from it.

And the Airport Improvement Fee. Charged to each departing passenger. There's a lower rate if you're flying within British Columbia or the Yukon, which was a deliberate decision about who should carry the cost of a gateway, and which almost nobody knows about unless they live in Whitehorse.

The AIF is the one that gets us letters.

I keep one in my desk. It's from a man in Kamloops, it's four pages, it is handwritten, and it is entirely correct on the facts. He knows what the fee is. He knows it goes to capital. He has

read our annual report, which puts him ahead of most of the people who write to us and, on a bad week, ahead of me. His position, stated in the fourth page, is that he did not ask for a new pier.

There is no answer to that letter. I have drafted one twice.

Here is the thing about the AIF that I want you to have, because you will be asked about it in a grocery store.

It's restricted. It funds capital. It doesn't fund my salary and it doesn't fund the flowers in arrivals and it doesn't fund the scholarships.

We fund ten scholarships a year for Musqueam students, ten thousand dollars each, under the agreement. That money comes from non-aeronautical revenue. Explicitly. It is written down that it does not come from the AIF, and the accounting is maintained scrupulously, and it is maintained scrupulously by people who will tell you privately that money is fungible, because money is fungible, because it is money.

The distinction is real and the money is fungible. I've stopped finding that funny. You will find it funny for about a year.

(I have not stopped finding it funny.)

Somewhere in here the screen woke up.

It had been dark for fifty minutes and it came on by itself, at full brightness, showing the last thing that had been put on it, which was somebody else's deck — a slide headed WASHROOM RENEWAL PROGRAM: PHASE 2, with a photograph of a washroom on it.

She looked at it. She said that the room did that, and that facilities had been told, and that a ticket existed. Then she went

and found the remote, which was in the drawer where the remotes are, and turned the screen off, and it stayed off for the rest of the meeting.

I was pleased to see a photograph of a washroom. It was the first thing anyone had shown me all week that I could have found by myself.

Debt. We carry a lot of it and we carry it at a good price, because we're rated AA, and we are rated AA because the rating agencies look at us and see a monopoly gateway on a constrained land base with a captive revenue base and a formula for raising fees.

That's not how we describe ourselves. That is how we are described by the people who lend to us.

Keeping the rating is a discipline and the discipline is mostly saying no. The rating is why the parkade is what the parkade is, and you'll see the parkade on Thursday, and I'd rather the Manager, Asset Management Planning tell you about it, because I get short about it.

Two more things and then you can ask me the question you've been holding.

First. Our financial model is built on the fiftieth percentile of the traffic forecast. Our capacity is built to the eighty-fifth.

That means we plan to be able to handle a volume of passengers that we have not planned to be paid by. Deliberately. If we financed to the eighty-fifth we'd be charging today for a passenger who arrives in 2039, and if we built to the fiftieth we'd be putting people on the floor by 2032. So we finance conservatively and we build ambitiously, using two different numbers for the same airport, in the same document, on facing pages.

Every director asks about this. Four of the eleven have asked whether it's a mistake.

Second. The thing that actually keeps me up.

Ninety per cent of what happens at this airport is done by somebody who doesn't work here. The screening is a federal Crown corporation which contracts it to a screening company. The border is two national governments. The tower is a private non-share corporation. The fire service is a municipality on contract. The fuel is a not-for-profit owned by the airlines. The airlines have their own handlers and their handlers have their own subcontractors. Five hundred and fifty businesses operate on this island and about a thousand of the thirty thousand people out there are ours.

We have the building. We have the debt. And we have the accountability, which is the item that never appears on a balance sheet and is the only one that can't be refinanced.

Now ask me.

I asked her what I was responsible for.

She said: everything.

I said that I understood that in the fiduciary sense, and that I had signed a document about it, and that what I meant was the practical sense — which of the things she had just listed would come to me.

She said: all of them, eventually, but only after they have gone wrong.

I asked whether there was a version of the answer that was shorter.

She thought about it. She said that the Board reviews, validates and endorses strategy; that the Board must understand the principal risks; that management runs the business day to day; and that the honest version is that a director is a person who is responsible for an airport they are not permitted to operate, cannot enter without an escort, and will be asked about at a dinner party.

Then the coffee came, and she answered the question about other countries, and the answer took twenty minutes and was very interesting and I am not going to set it down here, because she asked me not to.

What I did not say to her, and have not said to anyone, is what happened to me somewhere in the second hour.

I ran a society for nineteen years. Our operating budget in the last year was one point nine million dollars. I know what one point nine million dollars is. I know it the way you know the weight of a bag you carry every day — I could tell you what it buys in staff hours, in rent, in a van, in the number of people who get an afternoon.

She said sixteen per cent of gross and I wrote it down, and then a little later she said a number for annual revenue, and I did the arithmetic in the margin, because that is what I do, and the ground rent alone came to more than my society had spent in its entire existence.

I did not have a reaction to that. I did not feel small, and I did not feel outraged, and I did not have any of the responses that would be available in a book. I wrote the figure down and drew a box around it, and then she moved on to the AIF, and I went with her, because she was in the middle of explaining something and it would have been rude.

The box is still in the notebook. I look at it sometimes. It doesn't do anything.

At the end she walked me to the elevator, which she did not have to do, and told me the thing I have found most useful of anything I was told in my first month.

She said: when you hear a number in this building, ask who collects it.

Not who pays it. Not what it's for. Who collects it.

She said half of the arguments here are between people who agree about the number.

I asked for an example.

She said: the train.

She said, there's a surcharge on every transit trip that leaves this airport. Five dollars, and it went up in the summer. It's called the YVR AddFare. It has our name on it. It's collected at our door. Every passenger who pays it believes they have paid it to us, and a certain number of them come and find somebody in a vest to say so.

We don't get any of it. Not a cent. Never have.

She said: and when you go out to Ground Transportation you will meet people who have been explaining that for fifteen years, and you will notice that they have all arrived at the same six words, and you will understand that they didn't agree on them, they just wore down to them.

The elevator came. My escort was waiting in it, because he had been waiting outside the room for two hours, which I had not thought about, and I thought about it then.

I asked him what he had done for two hours. He said he had done his email and then he had done a training module, and that he was three modules behind because he kept getting assigned to escorts. I asked whether the escorting counted as anything, in the sense of being recorded somewhere as work. He said it counted as his day.

On the way down I asked him who collects the parking revenue. He said we do. I asked who collects the fee on the train. He said not us, and then he said it before I could ask the next part: *not a cent, never have*.

Six words. He was twenty-six years old.

THE COUNT

DAY 9 · 55 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH
TEMPORARY PASS T-4471 · ESCORT REQUIRED

There is no good way to get to Sea Island at four in the morning. The train does not run. I drove, and there was nobody on the bridge, and the airport at that hour from the road is a low line of orange light lying on the water with nothing above it, and then a tail fin goes past behind a berm at the speed of a walk and you understand that it is awake.

I was told to be at the Operations gate at twenty past four in the morning, and to wear boots, and that there would be a vest for me.

The vest was three sizes too large and had somebody else's name tape on it, which nobody offered to remove and I left where it was. It is a serious garment. It weighs something. I stood in the dark at the gate at eighteen minutes past four holding it over my arm like a coat I had been asked to mind, and a truck came along the fence line and stopped, and the window came down.

I have written up most of the day from my notes. This one I have not, because I was in the passenger seat of a truck for five hours and I did not take any notes at all, and afterwards I asked the technician whose truck it was whether she would tell it to me again so I could get it right.

She said she would, and she came in on a day off to do it, and would not let me buy her anything, and then she said it much better the second time than she had at four in the morning when she was also driving.

So what follows is hers. Where I have put myself in it I have marked it, because otherwise it would look as though I

had been the one who noticed things, and I was not. I was a passenger with a headache who had been awake since three.

Tickets first, because everybody asks eventually and it's easier at the start.

To do this job I hold a restricted area card. An airside vehicle operator's permit, which is its own course and its own test and its own annual thing. A radio operator's certificate, because I talk to the tower and you don't talk to the tower on a hope. A non-restricted firearms licence. A class five. And I have to be able to put a name on a bird at four hundred metres in bad light from the movement it makes when it turns.

People stop at the firearms one. It's the fourth on my list and it's the fourth in importance too, but it's the one that gets the eyebrow, so I front it: yes, and mostly what it's for is noise.

I've been out here eleven years. Before that I was doing shorebird surveys on contract and living in a trailer, and the trailer was colder.

Here's the thing about where we are, and I say this to every visitor because it explains everything that comes after.

You have built an international airport in the middle of the best bird habitat on the coast.

Not near it. In it. This is the Fraser delta. It's one of the biggest river estuaries on the west side of the continent and it is on the flyway, and in the winter there is a higher density of raptors here than anywhere else in the country. Hundreds of thousands of waterfowl. Shorebirds in numbers that don't sound true when you say them. The reason there's an airport on Sea Island is that Sea Island was flat and empty and nobody's

house was on it, and the reason nobody's house was on it is that it's a sandbar in an estuary.

So we're not managing an incursion. There's no incursion. They were here. We're the thing that arrived.

Nobody can fix that. It isn't a fixable condition. What it is, is a thing you work at every day forever, which is a different category of problem and one that people are bad at understanding, because the first question is always what's the solution and there isn't one, there's a shift.

We drove the perimeter first. She calls it the fence run and she does it in the same direction every time, which she said was so that the day has a spine.

There is more grass on an airfield than anyone expects, and how you cut it is a management decision with consequences. Too short and the geese can see far enough to feel safe and they land on it. Too long and the voles are happy, and if the voles are happy the raptors come to eat the voles. There is a height at which neither party is comfortable and the airport maintains it, at scale, forever, with mowers.

She told me the mowing height. I wrote it down later and I got it wrong, and when I checked with her she gave me the number again and added that people always remember the number and forget that it's a range and that the range moves in June.

Somewhere in the second half-hour we had to cross a runway, and I want you to understand what that involves, because it is the part of the morning that visitors remember and it takes about eleven seconds.

She stopped at a painted line short of the pavement. She said a sequence of words into the radio — her call sign, her position, what she wanted. A voice came back and gave it to her. She said it back. Then we crossed, at a speed that felt to me like a

decision, and on the far side she said her call sign again and that she was clear.

I said something admiring about the discipline of it and she said it wasn't discipline, it was a script, and that the point of a script is that it works when you are tired.

Later I looked at the phraseology in the manual. There is a right way to say every one of those things and there is a wrong way, and the wrong ways are not wrong because somebody is fussy. They are wrong because at some point each of them killed somebody.

We stopped four times in the first hour. Twice for counts. Once for a piece of shredded tire on a taxiway shoulder, which she got out and picked up and put in the back of the truck without breaking the sentence she was in the middle of. Once for a coyote.

I'll do the coyote, since you saw one.

We used to chase them. That was the policy for years — see a coyote, put it out a gate, log it. Half a shift some days. They come in under the fence, they come in along the dyke, they come in because there is more to eat inside the fence than outside it and they are not stupid.

Then somebody sat down and actually looked at the numbers, and the numbers said the coyotes were eating the birds.

So now we don't chase them. There's a memorandum. The coyotes stay, we condition them off the runways and the taxiways with hazing so they know where the noise happens and they learn it in about a season, and they get on with reducing the small mammals and the ground-nesting birds, and our strike numbers are better for it.

I've watched a coyote sit down at the edge of a taxiway, wait for an aircraft to go past, and then cross behind it. Not run.

Wait, then cross. Nobody taught it that on purpose. It learned that the noise comes past and then it doesn't.

So: yes. We have a predator on the establishment. It doesn't have a card.

(This is the point at which I said that I had spent four evenings in March certifying that I was not a corporation, and she said that was interesting, and drove on. She was being polite. I had said it too soon and in the wrong company, and I have not made that mistake since.)

We do the counts on a tablet in a mount, and the counts go into the system, and the system is the reason any of this can be argued about later.

I'll give you last year's, because you'll want a number for the Board.

Just under a million birds dispersed. Somewhere over nine hundred and fifty thousand animals moved off runways, taxiways and aprons. Sixteen of us, nine vehicles, twenty-four hours a day, more of us in winter than in summer.

Those are large numbers and they are also completely ordinary numbers, and I've learned to say them flatly because if I say them with any weight on them people think I'm making a case. I'm not making a case. It's a shift, and then another one.

Dispersal is a ladder and you start at the bottom. You drive at them. You use the vehicle. Most of it is the vehicle. Then noise — bangers, screamers, the pistol. Then the dogs. Dev has the dog now, a Mudi, small black thing called Pepper, and she works a flock better than a truck does because she is a shape they have opinions about.

Dev is also the reason I have heard the same joke four hundred times. Any morning the count is high he comes up on the radio and says it is a good day for the birds and a bad day for the aviation. Every time. Word for word. It was funny in

about 2019. What it is now is a thing that means the count is high, and if he ever stopped saying it I would ask him what was wrong. Then the falcon, when we have her, for the days when nothing else is moving them.

The falcon is not for killing anything. I say that first because everybody arrives at it. She flies, and what she does is put a shape in the sky that every bird within a kilometre has an inherited opinion about, and the field empties, and it stays empty for longer than a truck or a banger will buy you, because the birds don't come back to a place a falcon has been for a while.

We fly her under a permit and the permit has conditions and there is a logbook, and the logbook is inspected.

She has a better card than the coyote.

And then, when a bird is a bird that will keep coming back — an eagle, a red-tail — we trap it. Band it. Put it in a crate, drive it hours away, and let it out somewhere it will be happy.

Some of them come back. There's one that has come back three times and we know him by the band and there is a file, and the file has his measurements and his capture dates and the three release sites, and it is a file the way a person has a file.

He is not in trouble. He's just in the system.

We went into the office at about half past five so she could get more bangers and so I could see the place, and the place is a portable building with a kettle, a wall of pigeonholes, a whiteboard with the shift on it, and two chest freezers.

The freezers are for remains. If we pick something up off a runway it goes in a bag with a label, and the labels are pre-printed because handwriting a label at five in the morning in a wind is how you get a bag that means nothing.

And along one wall there is a run of shallow drawers, and in the drawers there are wings.

They're the reference collection. Prepared, dried, laid out flat, one to a card, with the species on the card. When something

comes off a runway in a condition that will not identify itself, you take it to the drawers and you match it. She pulled out two so I could see, and put them back, and squared the drawer with her hip on the way past.

I said it was a beautiful thing to have in a room, and she said that it was a working tool and that the good one is at the museum, and that ours has gaps in the gulls because gulls are hard and nobody wants to prepare another gull.

The Allfather was on shift that morning and we crossed him twice.

(This was the Allfather.)

There is nothing to tell about him.

He runs the field. He was in a truck like mine on the south side and then later he was standing at a hold short with a hand-held, and both times we said good morning on the radio and both times he said what he had, which was nothing.

Nothing on his section. Nothing all morning. No strike, no incursion, no hold, no vehicle where a vehicle shouldn't be, no lighting fault, no one asking the tower for anything. Six hours of an airfield doing exactly what an airfield is supposed to do, which is a thing so unremarkable that I have to make an effort to remember it happened.

I've worked beside him for nine years. He's very good. I don't know how else to say it. When he has your section you don't get the calls.

The second time we came across the Allfather he was standing at a hold short with the hand-held down by his side, not using it, looking at the south end. There was a company doing pavement work under a closure down there and three vehicles inside the closure and a fourth arriving.

He didn't say anything to them. He didn't say anything to us either, beyond the good morning. He watched the fourth vehicle go in and then he went back to his truck.

I checked the log after, because that closure was on my sheet. Nothing came out of it. It ran its window and it handed the pavement back four minutes early.

What he does do, constantly, is answer. Every call that comes to him on that frequency gets an answer inside about two seconds, and the answer is never a question back. He does not ask who is asking or why they want it. Somebody wants a number and he gives the number.

I listened to nine of those exchanges before I understood what was odd about them, which is that not one of them ended with him deciding anything.

Marguerite says the schedule works itself out so that he's on for the difficult mornings and I've told her that's not a real thing, and she says she isn't saying it's a real thing, she's saying look at the schedule.

(Here is the part I saw myself. I have been over it with her twice and she has confirmed it both times and does not think it is worth confirming.)

We were on the north side, on the service road, at about a quarter past six. The tablet was in its mount between us and I could see it, because there was nothing else to look at, and because at that hour a lit screen is the brightest thing in the truck.

She logged a count. She said the number out loud as she entered it, which she does, and the number was for a location out past the fence on the foreshore — the mudflat side, beyond the wire, down where the dyke runs.

We had not been there. We had come the other way round, along the inside of the fence, and the fence was on my right

throughout, and there is no gate on that stretch. I had been looking out that window for forty minutes because the light was starting and there was something to see.

The entry took a number. They all take a number; the system assigns them in sequence, and this one got the next one in the sequence, and the tablet made the small sound it makes.

She said, “Six-forty-one,” which was the entry, and then she said, “Right,” and put the truck in gear.

I did not ask. The reason is not flattering and is also simply true: it was six in the morning, she was working, and I did not want to be the director in the passenger seat who does not know what she is looking at.

I asked her about it three weeks later. She said the count was correct.

What if it happens anyway.

It does happen anyway. That’s the thing to hold on to, and I’d rather you hold on to it now than find it out from a phone call.

You do all of this, sixteen people and nine trucks and a dog and a falcon and a million birds a year, and an aircraft still ingests a gull on rotation, and then there is a procedure, and the procedure is good.

The crew declares. The tower rolls the trucks. The aircraft comes back or it continues, and that decision is not ours and not yours either. We attend the runway and we sweep it. What’s there gets bagged and goes to Ottawa, because there’s a lab, and the lab identifies it off feather structure and off DNA, and eight weeks later you find out it was a herring gull.

And that goes in the numbers, and the numbers go to the regulator, and the numbers are also how we argue for the next truck.

That's the answer. There's a full answer to what if it happens anyway, and it goes all the way from the second it happens to a form in Ottawa, and no part of it is missing.

(She gave me that answer complete, at speed, without a pause anywhere in it, and it took about ninety seconds, and it is the most thorough answer to a question I have received in my life. I asked her afterwards whether it helped, having an answer that complete. She said it helped enormously with the paperwork.)

At the end we sat at a hold short position on the north side with the engine off, because she had eleven minutes and because she said this was the good part.

The light came up behind the mountains, which it does very slowly and then all at once, and the field went from grey to green in the space of about four minutes, and every wire and every blade and every painted line came out of the dark in the order of how high off the ground it was.

There were birds on the foreshore in numbers I could not have estimated and she could have, and did not, because nobody had asked her to.

At twelve minutes past seven the first arrival came in over the water and put down on the south runway, and the sound arrived after it, the way it does.

Nobody watched it.

She was writing up. The Allfather was somewhere on the south side, not visible, saying nothing on the radio. Two vehicles went along the far taxiway on some errand of their own. A fuel truck. Somewhere behind us the terminal was doing the first of everything it does.

An aircraft with a hundred and eighty people on it came out of the dark over one of the largest estuaries on the coast and landed on a sandbar, and the only person on the airfield looking

at it was the one who was not allowed to be out there without a chaperone.

THE GROUND

DAY 14 · 50 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH
TEMPORARY PASS T-4471 · ESCORT REQUIRED

The Manager, Asset Management Planning had prepared eleven items and we got through three, and the fault was entirely mine.

He is a careful man who had been told that I was interested and had believed it. I have since learned that believing it is a mistake, because what I do when somebody is interesting is ask questions until the afternoon is gone, and by then their agenda is on the floor. He had a printed agenda. He had brought a spare copy for my escort, who did not want one and took it anyway.

“So the discipline is called asset management planning,” he said, “and the thing everybody gets wrong about it is that they think it’s maintenance. It isn’t maintenance. Maintenance is what you do. This is the argument about when.”

He put up a curve.

“Every asset in this airport has one of these. Escalator, boiler, runway, the roof over your head. It’s condition against time and it is not a straight line, it’s a hockey stick, and the job is knowing where on the stick a thing is before it tells you.”

“And you know that how?”

“Inspection, mostly. Instrumentation on the big ones. History on the rest. We hold condition indices on about,” he checked, “twelve thousand records, and I’d trust maybe two-thirds of them.”

I asked what happened with the other third.

“Somebody goes and looks.”

I liked him very much by this point, which was four minutes in.

He was also, I think, the first person in the building to be straightforwardly pleased that I had come. Not welcoming. Everyone had been welcoming, relentlessly, in a way that had begun to feel like weather. Pleased. He had an argument he wanted made at a level he cannot reach, and a director had walked into his afternoon, and he was not going to waste it.

I did not understand that for another two weeks. At the time I thought he simply enjoyed his subject, which he does, and which is not the same thing.

He took me through the two categories that matter, and I am setting them down because they were the first two ideas in three weeks that I could have used at the society.

An asset that has failed is a problem. It is an expensive problem, and it is loud, and everybody knows about it, and it is nobody's fault in a way that is very comfortable for everybody.

An asset that has been *scheduled* to fail is a decision. Somebody looked at the curve, and looked at the money, and moved the work to the right, and wrote down why. Then it fails in the year they said it would, on a Tuesday, and it is entirely somebody's fault, and that somebody is in the room.

"The second one is better," he said. "It's better in every way that matters and it feels much worse, and that's the profession."

Then he said, "You can pay me now or you can pay me later," which I would hear him say twice more that afternoon, and once by email.

He also has one about concrete. Concrete, he told me, does exactly two things: it gets hard, and it cracks. And then he waited, and I understood that I was supposed to ask which one it does first, and I asked, and he said, "Both," and was very pleased.

Then he said we should go and look at some plant, and I said I was sorry, some what, and he said plant. Mechanical plant, he said: the machinery that heats and cools and moves and powers the building, all of it, collectively, singular. A noun with no plural doing the work of about nine hundred separate objects.

I have used the word since and it is a good word and I did not have it four weeks ago.

We went down.

There were three plant rooms and they were hot and they were extremely clean, and cleanliness in a plant room turns out not to be housekeeping. It is diagnostics. You keep the floor clean so that you can see what has arrived on it. A patch of oil on a clean floor is information. On a dirty floor it is nothing, because it has always been there.

In the second room there was a man doing something to a valve, and he had put a small radio up on a shelf above the pipework and turned it very low. Not low enough to be hidden. Low enough that you would have to be standing where he was standing to make out what it was.

He nodded at us and went back to the valve. Nobody said anything about the radio. A man alone in a hot room for eight hours wants company. That is the reading and it is the only reading, and it is not a small thing. Nine hundred people work for the Airport Authority. Thirty thousand work on Sea Island. Somewhere inside those two numbers is a man who has worked out the volume at which a radio is permissible, and holds it.

The data centre was cold and had two of everything.

The electrical backup had three of some things, and he explained the difference between the things there are two of and the things there are three of, and the explanation was about

how long you can stand to be without each one, expressed in seconds.

Then we went outside, and I asked the question that ended the briefing.

We were standing on a service road looking at a field, and the field had a fence round it and nothing in it. Grass, some low equipment housings, and a grid of small steel caps in the ground going away from us in rows further than I could see.

“Wells,” he said.

“For water?”

“For heat. It’s a geoexchange field. You drill, you put a loop in, you pump fluid down, and the ground gives you back its temperature. In the winter you take heat out of the island and put it in the terminal. In the summer you take heat out of the terminal and put it in the island.”

“How many are there?”

“Just over eight hundred. Hundred and fifty-two metres each.”

I did that arithmetic standing up and got it wrong twice and then got it, and it is a hundred and twenty-two kilometres of hole in the ground under a field with nothing in it.

“It’s one of the largest in the country,” he said. “It isn’t finished.”

He told me the rest flatly, the way people here tell you the things they are tired of telling. The wells went in. So did a parkade and a utilities building, all of it one programme, all of it approved in a world where the passenger numbers went in one direction. Then the world stopped, and the programme stopped with it, and by then the money spent was north of half a billion dollars, and finishing it wants several hundred million more that nobody has.

“So what’s out here right now,” he said, “is a heat source with nothing attached to it and a parkade you can see through.”

And that is when I asked how long the wells would last, and the afternoon went sideways from there.

He said he’d rather I asked the man who was already walking towards us, because it was his ground and not the asset manager’s, and he said it in the tone of somebody handing over a thing he was pleased to hand over.

(This was the Conscience-Keeper.)

He does infrastructure and environment. He had come out for a different reason and had a folder under one arm that he did not open at any point.

“No,” he said. Not to me; to the question. “Not the wells. Ask about the ground.”

I said I thought I had.

“You asked how long they’ll last. Two hundred years, probably. It’s a hole with a pipe in it; there’s nothing in it to break. The question that has an interesting answer is the other one.”

“Which is what?”

“How long the ground’s been here.”

I said that I had assumed the ground had been here the way ground is.

“Some of it has. Not this.” He put a boot on the road. “You’re standing on fill. Most of the north side is fill and a lot of it went in inside living memory, and where it isn’t fill it’s delta, river sand laid down by the Fraser, and the part of the island we’re on is somewhere around three thousand years old. It is one of the youngest pieces of ground in the province and it is still being made.”

“Still?”

“The river’s still bringing it. And it’s still settling. We’ve been monitoring settlement here since the fifties. The record goes

back seventy-odd years.” He looked at the field. “It has never once read zero.”

I asked whether that was a problem.

“Settlement isn’t. Settlement’s arithmetic. You measure it and you build for it and you go back and shim things.” He tipped his head towards the south. “The other one’s the interesting one.”

The asset manager said, in the voice of a man saying a word he says often, “Liquefaction.”

“Saturated sand in an earthquake stops behaving like ground and starts behaving like a liquid,” the Conscience-Keeper said. “This is saturated sand. So under the things that matter, the ground has been treated — densified, drained, improved, depending which decade did it. There’s a map of what’s been done and when, and the map has been extended four times since 1990, and each time somebody looked at the previous map and thought it was optimistic.”

I asked whether the current one was optimistic.

“Ask in 2050,” the asset manager said, and the Conscience-Keeper said, “It’s the best map anyone’s had,” and both of those are answers, and neither of them is the same answer.

Then they went back to the instrumentation, at some length, and were very happy.

I said — and I regret the phrasing — that it sounded as though the island had not finished arriving.

“It hasn’t,” he said. “That’s not unusual. That’s what a delta is.”

And he was right, and it is what a delta is, and there was nothing in his manner to suggest he had said anything at all, and both of them went back to the instrumentation, and I stood on three-thousand-year-old sand and wrote *settlement* — *never zero* in the notebook, under the box.

They had a tablet with the asset record open for one of the housings, and the asset manager turned it so I could see the fields, because I had asked what a record actually contains.

Remaining service life, in years, to one decimal place. Last inspection. Previous inspection.

The figure was the same at both inspections. Not close. The same number to the decimal, at two visits a month apart.

I pointed at it, in the way you point at a thing you assume you have misunderstood.

“That’ll be the refresh,” he said, and the Conscience-Keeper said, “Mm,” and the asset manager scrolled on to show me the maintenance history, which was long and which he was proud of.

I have since learned what the refresh is. It runs quarterly.

We did not get to items four through eleven.

We got to the parkade instead, which is item four and which I forced, because you cannot stand at the bottom of an unfinished parkade and not ask about it.

It is a frame. Levels of poured concrete standing in the air with the sky in it, and the ramps go up and turn and come back down again exactly as they will when there are cars on them, so that what you are looking at is a building doing its full function with nothing in it.

Birds use it. There is a management arrangement about the birds, because of course there is, and it involves the wildlife team, and I later asked the technician about it and she said it was on the rotation and that the frame was actually one of the easier assignments because nothing on it is trying to land at two hundred knots.

The frame has an asset record. It has a condition rating. It is inspected, and the inspections are logged, and there is a line in

the deferred maintenance register that is the cost of continuing to have it.

Somewhere on the walk back I ask him how he gets condition data for the assets that are not his to inspect, and he tells me, and the answer is the first unadministered thing anybody at this airport has said to me.

There is a department. He does not name it and I am not going to guess. It holds records he needs about four times a year and it does not answer email. Not sometimes. He says he has had one reply in two years and it was an out-of-office.

So there is a workaround, and the workaround is a woman on the second floor who will walk down there and ask, and who is not in that department and does not work for him and has no reason to do it, and who has done it every time she has been asked for six years.

I ask why nobody has escalated it.

He says it has been escalated. Twice. He says that both times the outcome was an agreed service standard, in writing, which is now two agreed service standards, in writing, and one woman on the second floor.

He is not bitter about it. He thinks it is funny in the specific way that people find a thing funny after they have stopped expecting it to change.

He showed me the deferred maintenance register on the way back, on the tablet, because I asked whether there was a single document that would tell me how much of this airport is being run on borrowed time.

There is. It is a list, and it is long, and each line is an asset and a condition and a year and a number, and the numbers add to a figure I am not going to write down, because I do not know whether I am permitted to and because I have never seen it in a public document.

What I will put down is that the register is not a scandal. That was my first thought and it was wrong. Every organization that owns physical things has one, and a register at zero would mean

somebody was replacing things before they needed replacing, which is a different and more expensive failure. The register is the honest version of the argument about when.

He said the trick is that the register has to be *believed*. Not by him. By the people who decide. And that a register nobody believes is worse than no register, because then the argument goes back to being about who is most persuasive in a meeting.

And there is a brochure. He had it on his phone and turned the screen towards me, and I have since been sent a copy, and it is a real document produced by real people who were doing their jobs properly. It describes a commercial opportunity on Sea Island with excellent transit connections and generous floor-to-ceiling heights, and the photograph is a rendering, and in the rendering the building is finished and there is a coffee shop at the bottom of it and a woman crossing the road with a cup.

“Somebody has to try,” the asset manager said. “That’s not a joke. If nobody tries, in ten years it’s a write-down and a demolition line, and demolition is a number too.”

I asked him what he would do with it.

He said that was above his level, which was the third time that day somebody had told me that a question was above their level, and I had begun to notice that the level it was above was always the one just below mine.

We ran out of time at ten past four because he had a call, and we agreed to pick up items five through eleven the following week.

The following week it moved, because of a thing on the airfield. The week after that it moved again, because the work window on the airfield closes at the end of May — everything out there has to be handed back before the matches, and by the middle of May there was no such thing as an afternoon.

In the first week of June I had an email. It said that in light of the schedule, items five through eleven would be covered in the normal course, and attached the deck.

I opened the deck. It is very good. It has all eleven items in it and it is clear and it is properly sourced, and I read it on a Sunday and understood perhaps half.

I never did get the other seven items from him, and I do not think he noticed, and I am nearly certain nobody else did, and the airport was entirely unaffected.

THE ROUNDS

DAY 19 · 45 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH
TEMPORARY PASS T-4471 · ESCORT REQUIRED

The terminal duty manager is the person who has the building for a shift.

I have that sentence from the org chart and not from him, because he did not tell me what he does, and by the end of four hours I had understood that not telling me was neither rudeness nor shyness. It is the job. He is a man listening to a radio and a building at the same time, and conversation costs him one of them.

I was told to meet him at the top of the escalators on the departures level at half past eleven, which is not the start of his shift. His shift had started at six. Half past eleven was the first point in it at which somebody had judged that he could carry a director.

He arrived four minutes late from a handover with the outgoing duty manager, which I did not see and which I later learned takes twenty minutes and is done off a form, and the form has a section at the bottom headed OUTSTANDING, and the section is never empty, and a handover in which it were empty would be regarded as a handover done badly.

He said, "Right," and started walking, and I went with him.

What follows is what I saw. Where I have put in an explanation it came afterwards, out of a document or out of somebody else, because on the day almost nothing was explained to me at all. That is what the four hours were like and there is no improving them.

He stopped at a set of doors and stood looking at them for about forty seconds.

I looked at them too. They opened, twice, for nobody. Then a family came through and they opened for the family, and then they opened again for nobody, and he took out his phone and did something on it and put it away and started walking.

(Afterwards: the sensors read movement and heat, and a door on a corner in the middle of the day takes sun off the glass across the road. The airport has a fixed number of doors and a spreadsheet of them, and this one is on it. He raised a ticket. I have seen the ticket. It is not the interesting ticket.)

We went along the concourse at a pace that was not a stroll.

The moving walkways run at a set speed, and it is the same speed as every other moving walkway in the world, more or less, because it is the speed at which an ordinary person can step off one without going over. Somebody arrived at that number a long time ago and it is now simply the speed at which walkways go.

He stood on one. I had assumed he would walk on it. He stood, and rode it end to end, and I stood next to him, and at the far end he stepped off and said, "Fine," and kept going.

I worked out on the third one that he was not resting. He was riding it to feel it. A belt does something before it goes wrong that does not show, and the way you find it is to put your feet on it and go the length.

He rode four walkways in four hours and said "Fine" three times.

The fourth one he rode twice. He went to the end, walked back along beside it, and rode it again, and then he stood at the end of it looking back down its length with his hands in his pockets for long enough that a woman with a suitcase asked him if it was working.

He said, "Yes."

He raised no ticket. I checked, afterwards, with the login. There is no ticket on that walkway that week and there is no ticket on it the week after. What there is, eleven days later, is a planned maintenance visit that was already on the schedule.

The escalators he did with his eyes, at the comb plate, which is the toothed strip at the end where the steps go under. He crouched at two of them. He put a finger on one and looked at the finger.

He did not tell me what he was looking for.

(Afterwards, from the maintenance schedule: comb plate teeth are the thing that breaks first and the thing that takes fingers. There is a count of them. A missing one is a fault that stops the machine, and somebody looks at every comb plate in this airport every day.)

We came past the top of the screening queue at the point in the afternoon when it is families, and he stopped for a moment to look at the length of it, and I stopped to look at the families.

A man was repacking a case on the floor with the lid open and the contents in three piles, and the three piles were his, hers, and a pile he had stopped defending.

A woman two along had put her boots into a bin, then her coat, then her bag, then her other bag, then stood back and counted the bins, and there were five, and I watched her arrive at the same conclusion I had, which is that she was going to have to collect five bins at the other end with two hands.

There was a child sitting inside an empty bin. Nobody had noticed yet.

And at the front there was a couple having the conversation about the water bottle, which is a conversation that is happening at that queue at every hour the airport is open, and which has never once been won by the person holding the bottle.

He said, "It moves," and we went on, and it did.

He took me down into the baggage hall without saying that we were going into the baggage hall.

It is the loudest place I have ever stood in that was not a construction site, and it is the first part of the airport I had seen that looked like what it is. Everything upstairs is finished. Down there the building has its clothes off: steel, belts, chutes, the grey trays going by overhead on a rail with a sound like a train that never ends, and men and women in ear defenders and high-visibility working at a speed that is not hurried and is not slow and does not vary.

A bag came down a chute and went the wrong way and somebody put a hand out and turned it and it went the right way, and I do not know how they knew.

He watched a junction for perhaps three minutes. He said nothing at all.

(Afterwards, out of the systems overview: the hall sorts by tag, the tag is read by an array of scanners, and the bags that will not read go to a station where a person reads them. There is a rate at which the machines fail to read, and it is published, and the design of the manual station is built around that rate being what it is. There is a person on shift whose job exists because barcodes get wet.)

On the way out he stopped at a wall of trolleys and pulled one out and pushed it back in, and I have never established why, and I did ask.

At the top of the ramp there is a sign.

He looked at it and I looked at it and I could see nothing wrong with it. It says what it says, in two languages and a pictogram, and it points left.

He said, "That's wrong."

I looked at it again and it was still a sign.

"It's not wrong," he said. "It's wrong for people coming off the ramp."

Then he waited, because I had not understood, and he had decided that waiting was cheaper than a sentence. So I went and stood at the top of the ramp and did what a person coming off the ramp does, which is come off the ramp, and from there the sign is edge-on. The first thing you see is the sign behind it, which points right, and which is correct for a different set of people who are not you.

What it takes to change it got me the longest answer of the morning. Signage is a system and not a sign; changing one changes the ones either side of it; it goes to a working group; the working group meets. The last time the working group changed a sign, the change was approved in eleven weeks and installed in one night by two people on a lift at three in the morning.

Then he said, "Everyone knows about that sign," and walked off, and I stayed a moment to watch. In about ninety seconds four people came off the ramp and three of them went right.

We went past a washroom that was closed, with a hoarding across it and a printed sign apologizing, and I said, before I could stop myself, that I had seen a slide about this.

He said, "Phase two."

"How many phases?"

"Four."

How long a phase takes depends on the washroom, and then he told me the only unprompted thing he told me all morning, which is that a washroom renewal is not a plumbing job, it is a queueing job. You cannot close two in the same pier at the same time or the pressure goes somewhere and the somewhere is a different washroom that was fine that morning. There is a sequence, and the sequence took longer to agree than the work takes to do.

Then he said, “Everything in here is a queue,” and walked on, and that is the closest thing to a philosophy that anybody has offered me in this building.

We went past the canoe.

It is enormous and it is black-green and there are thirteen figures in it, and it was cast in New York and installed here in 1996, and it was on the twenty-dollar bill for a while, and people put their hands on it.

There has never been a rope. That is a decision and not an oversight; the airport’s art is meant to be in the building rather than in a case in the building.

The patina has gone off the reachable parts. Terminal Operations holds it as an asset with a condition rating. There is a conservation schedule and an annual condition report, and the report notes the wear, and the wear is stable, and the recommendation is to continue as at present.

The wear stops at a height of about five feet. Above that the surface is as it was cast.

(That is the height at which an adult holding a child can reach.)

He did not stop walking.

There is a unit on the departures level behind hoarding, being fitted out, with a paper sign on it giving the name of a restaurant and the word SOON.

He glanced at the hoarding and kept going, and when I asked he said that side of it was not his, it was Tenant Relations, and that his interest in it began on the day it opened and would not stop for as long as it existed.

He said, "Grease."

The aquarium is thirty thousand litres of salt water standing in a departures hall with a rockfish population in it. There is a service contract. There are divers who come in on a cycle. There is a room behind it with pumps and a chiller and a protein skimmer, and there is a person at this airport whose job description contains the phrase *aquatic life*.

He stopped there for a while. Not to look at the fish. He was watching the level.

While we were standing there a woman sat down on the floor with her back against the glass, in among the seating, with her bag beside her, and put her face in her hands.

The duty manager looked at her for about four seconds. Then he said something into the radio that I did not catch and we carried on walking, and when we came back through twenty minutes later there was a person from customer care sitting on the floor next to her, in the same position, at the same height, not touching her, saying nothing that I could hear.

There is a procedure for that. It is two pages long.

Somewhere on the lower level, with the radio going in his ear, he turned and started back the way we had come, and I went after him, and he did not say why.

Coming the other way up the corridor was a man in Terminal Operations coveralls carrying a part.

It was about the size of a loaf, in a bag with the top folded over, held down at his side without effort. The Hand nodded at the duty manager. The duty manager took out his phone, photographed the label on the bag, said “Thanks,” and the Hand went past us and up the corridor and around the corner.

Nobody had called him.

I have since watched for it. The Hand walks the building four or five times a shift on no route I have been able to establish, and Terminal Operations has thirty-one people on it, and he is the one whose name is not on the callout list because he does not need to be called out.

I was standing in it and I have gone over it since. The duty manager turned back before the radio traffic came. The radio traffic, when it came, was the belt on carousel four. The part was for the belt on carousel four. And the man carrying it had come from the direction of the stores, which is a nine-minute walk.

I asked how the parts get there so fast.

He said, “He’s good at it.”

(Here is the ticket that is interesting. I have it in front of me, because in the third week I was given a read-only login to the maintenance system and nobody has taken it away.)

There is a component on the departures level — I am not going to say which, because it does not matter, and because I do not want it looked at on my account — that has generated five tickets.

The first is raised, worked, resolved, closed. Two weeks later the same fault, at the same location, on the same asset, raised as a new ticket with a new number. Resolved. Closed. Then again. Then again.

Between the second and the third, the component was replaced. There is a parts record. The old one went out and a new one went in and the new one was commissioned and signed for.

The fifth ticket has a note in it. The note says: *as previous*.

I put it to him on the walk, before I had the login, when all I had was the version he had mentioned in passing: whether it bothered him that a thing kept coming back after it had been replaced.

He said, "It's in the system."

Then the radio said something about the doors at the west end, and we went and looked at the doors at the west end, and I did not ask again.

The cleaning crews were everywhere all morning and I could not have told you the face of one of them by lunchtime.

I noticed this on the drive home, which is late to notice it. They were at every point we stopped at. When we stood at the sign there was a machine going along the ramp behind us. When we stood at the aquarium somebody was doing the glass on the far side of it. They moved when we moved.

I mention it only because I spent nineteen years running an organization where I knew the name of the person who cleaned the building, and it took me four hours in this one to fail to see about eleven human beings.

At the end he took me back to the escalators, which is where we had started, and I understood that this was because his four hours were up and mine were too, and that the walk had been a circle for administrative reasons and not for any other kind.

I had one question saved. I had been keeping it since about the second hour because I wanted it to be a good one, and what I asked was what in this building gives him the most trouble.

I had a list ready in my head. The doors. The walkways. The aquarium, surely, with the salt and the pumps and the fish. Something in the baggage hall.

“The piano,” he said.

There is a piano in the international departures hall. It was donated. Anyone can play it and people do, constantly, and at three in the morning it is played badly by people who have missed a connection.

“It’s wood,” he said. “In a building we run dry. It goes out of tune every four days. There’s a contract, and the contract is a man who comes and tunes it, and every time he comes he tells me the same thing, which is that it shouldn’t be here.”

I asked whether he agreed.

He said, “It shouldn’t be here.”

I said did he want it gone.

He looked at me as though I had failed a test he had not told me he was setting, and said, “It’s the only thing in the building anybody’s ever glad to see.”

Then his radio went, and he said, “Right,” and left me standing on the departures level next to my escort, who had followed us for four hours at a distance of about eight metres and whom I had entirely forgotten was there.

PART II

THE FLOOR

THE WORK WINDOW

DAY 22 · 42 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH
TEMPORARY PASS T-4471 · ESCORT REQUIRED

There were two of them, which I had not expected, and by twenty past ten I had started writing P and O in the margin of my notes because it was the only way to keep track of which conversation I was in.

P is the Manager, Airport Terminal Projects. He builds things.

O is an operations planner, and I never did establish who had invited her, and I have since concluded that nobody had and that she comes to these anyway.

They are friends. That has to be said at the start, because otherwise what follows reads as a quarrel and it was not a quarrel. They have worked together for nine years, they finish each other's acronyms, and in two hours they did not once hear each other, and neither of them appeared to notice, and I do not believe either of them has noticed in nine years.

P began by saying that the thing to understand about building at an airport is that nothing ever closes.

"You can't shut it. There's no Sunday. There's no August. Whatever you're doing, you're doing it beside a running airport with passengers in it, and the airport gets the daytime, so you get the other bit."

O said, "It's the passengers that make it hard."

P said, "It's the sequence that makes it hard," and neither of them registered that they had disagreed.

It went on like that. He said *closure* and meant a window with a start time and an end time and a notice number. She said *closure* and meant a place people can no longer walk, which is a different object with different edges, and which does not end when the notice does, because a route people have stopped using takes a while to become a route again.

He said *impact* and meant days. She said *impact* and meant people.

At one point they spent four minutes agreeing enthusiastically about a hoarding and I am confident they were describing two different hoardings.

I looked at my notes afterwards and that exchange is the shape of the morning. He was answering *what makes this project difficult to deliver*. She was answering *what makes this project difficult to be near*. Nobody had asked either question.

Here is what I learned about how the work gets done, from P, who is very good at this and who I would have listened to for another two hours.

An airside job runs on a window. The window is a set of hours during which a piece of the airfield is yours, and it is published to the world before it happens, so that pilots know a taxiway is not there. The publication is done through the air navigation service, and it goes out as a notice, and the notice is real in a way that a schedule in a folder is not: once it says the taxiway is closed from one to five, the taxiway is closed from one to five, and if you are not off it at five you are not late, you are a hazard.

There is a further wrinkle, which is that the notice goes out days in advance and the weather does not.

"That's the one that gets people," P said. "You've published. It's in the system, airlines have planned round it, and at nine o'clock the night before the forecast turns and you have to

decide whether you're going out. And if you cancel, you've burned a window you can't get back, and if you go out and you can't finish, you've burned two."

I asked how he decides.

He said he asks the airside lead on shift what the night's going to do, and that some of them are better at it than others, and that when a certain one is on he does not bother phoning anybody else.

Then he said the thing about the permits, which is that the airside authorization for every one of those windows carries a signature at the foot of it, and that the signature is not an approval in any sense he can identify. Nobody weighs anything. You send it and it comes back signed, usually within the hour, sometimes before he has finished sending the covering note.

I asked whether that worried him.

He said it would worry him enormously if the paragraph above the signature were not correct, and that in eighteen years it always has been, and that he has stopped being able to work out which of those two facts is the reassuring one.

So the work is built backwards from the handback. You do not plan when you start. You plan when you are finished and clear, and then you work out how far back that lets you begin, and then you find out that it does not let you begin at all, and you go and ask for a second window.

Then the noise rules bite from the other side. Between one minute past midnight and seven in the morning there are restrictions, and they are not only about aircraft. A generator is noise. A saw is noise. There are people asleep across the water in Richmond who are entitled to expect that a fence a kilometre away is not being cut all night, and they are correct to expect it, and their expectation is written down.

"So the window is four hours," P said, "and two of them are setting up and packing up, and you own the airfield for the other two, and that's your night, and you've got about twenty-five of them before the end of May."

O said, "And every one of those nights the cleaning goes long, because you're tracking."

P said, "We sweep."

O said, "I know you sweep."

She said it warmly. She has said it before. I think she says it every time and I think he says *we sweep* every time, and that this is now a thing they do rather than a thing either of them means, and that if I came back in four years they would still be doing it.

The permits are where the airport stops being an airport and becomes a diagram.

To do a piece of work here you may need the Authority's own permit, because on federal land the municipality's building permit does not run and the Authority administers the code itself — which means the organization issues a permit to the organization, and there is a fee, and the fee is a real fee that moves from one account to another. There is a development permit fee that starts at five hundred dollars and climbs by a hundred for every additional hundred square metres to a ceiling of five thousand.

You may need the regulator, for anything that touches the operation of the aerodrome.

You may need agreement from the air navigation service if you are going to put anything in the air, and a crane is something in the air.

And you may need the tenant. This is the one that surprised me. If your work is in front of a shop, that shop has a lease, and the lease is not a licence to be inconvenienced. Somebody has to go and sit down with a person whose sales will fall for eleven weeks, and that conversation is a commercial conversation with a commercial outcome, and it happens before a single hoarding goes up.

P told me about one of those conversations, without naming the tenant, and it is the least airport-shaped thing I have been told at this airport.

A unit was going to lose its sightline for a season. Not its access. You never take a tenant's access, that is not negotiable and everybody knows it. Its sightline: the thing that makes a person going past turn their head. The operator's own numbers said the sightline was worth about a fifth of their trade. The Authority's numbers said something a little smaller. Both sets of numbers were honestly produced.

They settled it with a temporary secondary sign, some rent relief, and a promise about the order of the phases. The negotiation took eleven weeks and the work took nine.

"You do the deal first," P said. "If you build first you're not negotiating, you're apologizing."

"Four sign-offs on a good one. Seven if it's landside and near retail."

O said, "Nine if it's near a washroom."

I wrote that down and did not understand it, and looked at it that evening, and understood it, and it is the best sentence anybody said all morning.

We went out at eleven for a site walk, which is why my pass has an escort line on it, and which is the part of the morning where I stopped being able to take notes.

The site is a stretch of apron with a hoarding round it and a plate over a trench, and there were nine people inside the hoarding and a container and a board with the day's work on it.

It is loud in a way I had not anticipated, because the hoarding does nothing about the airport. An aircraft ran up somewhere behind us twice while we were in there and both times every conversation simply stopped, without anybody indicating that

it was going to, and then resumed at the word it had stopped on. I lost the thread both times. Nobody else did.

The trench had water in the bottom of it. I asked whether that was a problem and P said the water is always there, that is what the island is, and that the pumps are a line in the tender.

Everything in there is counted. Every tool in and every tool out, on a tally, against a list, by a named person, and if the count does not reconcile at the end the work does not finish, it stops, and the area is searched. A bolt on an apron is not litter. It is object damage waiting for an engine.

I said something about how carefully they must have to work.

The foreman said they work normally, they just count.

Four of the nine were escorted. They do not hold cards. A card takes months and most of them will be off this job before one could arrive, so they work under people who do, at a ratio, and the ratio is a number that is argued about at the start of every contract and is never argued about again once the job begins.

I asked what happens if the escort has to leave the compound.

The foreman said everybody leaves the compound.

I asked whether that had ever happened.

He said it happens when somebody's wife goes into labour, and that it had happened to him, and that eleven men had stood on the wrong side of a fence for forty minutes in the rain and that not one of them had said a word about it, and that his son is nineteen.

(P, on the way back in: the count is the only part of the process he has not had an argument about with anybody, at any level, in eighteen years. Everybody agrees about the count.)

The Hand was in the compound.

I did not see him arrive and I could not tell you which gate he came through. He was standing at the board with the day's

work on it, and one of the crew was carrying an order sheet — a clipboard with the morning's requisitions on it, half-filled — and he did not hand it over.

He put it down on the ledge to do something with both hands, and by the time he turned round the Hand had it, and had signed the second line, and was giving it back.

The crew member said thanks. Not surprised thanks. The other kind.

I asked P afterwards whether Terminal Operations normally signs project requisitions and he said no, generally not, but that it saves a walk and nobody minds, and then his phone went and we talked about something else.

(Here is the interruption, and I only have it because I was standing beside the hoarding with nothing to do.)

The foreman and one of the crew were disagreeing about a lift. Not seriously — about whether they could take it up before six or whether they had to wait.

The crew member said the permit was until seven.

The foreman said the condition was six.

The crew member said, and I wrote this down because it was said with total confidence, that the six was in the permit.

They went and got the permit. It is a sheet of paper in a plastic sleeve on the container door, and I read it over the foreman's shoulder, because nobody stopped me, and I had begun to learn by then that nobody will. Four weeks in, I had been handed a tablet with a maintenance system on it, walked through a baggage hall, and left alone beside an open trench, and the only thing anybody had ever refused me was a door.

The permit says seven.

There is no six anywhere on it. There is no six on the second page. Everybody on that site works to a six that is not written

down on the document they are all pointing at, and they have been doing it for the length of the job.

The foreman said, "It's six."

The crew member said, "It's six."

Then P's phone rang about something else entirely and we went in.

Back inside, they did the thing I had been waiting two hours for without knowing I was waiting for it.

O said the pier work was going to displace the queue at the far end into the crossing, and that the crossing is where families stop, and that they would need to move the seating or they would have a standing crowd where the trolleys come through.

P said the pier work finishes on the twenty-second.

O said, "That's what I mean."

P said, "That's what I'm saying."

And then, for about eight seconds, they both stopped, because they had heard each other, and the shape of it went across the table like a change in the weather.

O said: so you're finishing before it, and I'm asking what happens during it.

P said: during it is four weeks.

O said: four weeks is the four weeks.

P said the seating move would cost him a night he does not have. O said the standing crowd would cost her a crossing she cannot close. Both of them were right and both of them knew the other was right, and neither of them had anywhere to go with it, because the thing that would fix it is a fifth night in May and there is no fifth night in May.

It was the only genuine disagreement I had seen in the building.

It lasted about ninety seconds. Then P said they should take it offline, and O said yes, offline, and they both wrote *offline* on their pads, and I watched them both write it.

I asked, at the door, when offline would be.

P said before the end of the month.

O said she would send something.

Nothing came. I know that nothing came because I asked her in the second week of June, on a different matter, and she said it had sorted itself out, and I said how, and she said the crossing had been fine.

I asked whether the seating had been moved.

She said no. She said the queue had gone somewhere else on its own, which happens, and that this is why she does not spend her nights arguing about seating.

I said that P would be pleased.

She said, "P doesn't know there was anything to be pleased about," and then, before I could say anything to that, "and I'm not telling him, because then he'd want the night back."

She was entirely cheerful about it. They are having lunch on Thursday. They have had lunch on Thursdays for nine years.

THE COUNTER

DAY 30 · 34 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH
TEMPORARY PASS T-4471 · ESCORT REQUIRED

Forty-one people came through the counter between half past eight and noon, and I watched all of them from a moulded chair in the corner of the room I had been processed in myself in April.

The conditions had come back within a day and were three: sit in the corner, do not speak to applicants, and if a matter becomes sensitive you will be asked to leave the room and you will leave the room. I had written back that this was fair. The person who had drafted them had plainly expected an argument.

The room has not changed since April and will not change. Four chairs, the counter, the camera on its stand, the two machines, the kettle nobody in the queue is offered, and the poster about the fine, which is laminated and which has been up long enough that the top corners have gone soft.

There is a second poster now that was not there on my first day. It lists the three things people forget. It has been up since the middle of April. I asked whether it had made a difference and was told that it had made no difference whatsoever and that she was not going to take it down.

The clerk is a woman who has been on that counter eleven years. In the gaps she talked to me, in the way you talk to somebody while doing something else, and I have put her here in pieces because that is how it arrived.

People arrive in four states.

There's the ones who have everything. They've read the list, they've brought the originals, the sponsor's signed it, and they're out in six minutes and they're almost always the ones with the least reason to be organized. Students. Apprentices. First job.

There's the ones who have almost everything, and they're the bulk, and what they're missing is nearly always the same three things, and I could put a poster up about those three things and I have put a poster up about those three things.

There's the ones who've been sent by somebody who told them it would be fine. Those are hard, because they're not the ones who got it wrong.

And there's the ones who come in angry. Not many. But you know within about a second and a half, and the thing to do is slow down. Everybody's instinct is to go faster to get them out of the room. It's the wrong instinct. You go slower and you do every single step out loud, and by about the fourth step they've usually stopped, because there's nothing to push against.

Things that came across that counter before eleven o'clock.

A renewal, six minutes.

A woman who had brought a photocopy of a passport, laminated. She had laminated it herself, at some cost and effort, which made it worse rather than better and which she had done because she was being careful.

A man from a catering contractor with a sponsor signature from someone who left that company in February. He did not know. The company did not appear to know either. He was told which of two people could sign it now, and that one of them was in Calgary, and he said, in the tone of a man learning something about his employer, "Right."

Two apprentices together, both perfect, out in nine minutes, delighted with themselves. One of them had brought a folder. An actual folder, with dividers.

A woman collecting a card on behalf of her son, who was at work, which cannot be done, and which she had been told could not be done, and which she attempted anyway with considerable charm and one falsified assumption, and who took it well.

A driver whose card had been fine on Friday and was fine again on Monday and about whom nothing was ever established.

A man in a hurry who wanted to know why this could not be done online. The answer is that the biometric enrolment cannot be done online and the original documents cannot be verified online, and he said that everything else in his life is done online, and the clerk agreed with him, and he stayed and did it in person, because there is no other way, and this exchange happens, she told me, between nine and fourteen times a week.

A man who wanted a card for a job he had been offered but not yet started, and could not have one, because the sponsor certifies both a right and a need and he had neither until the first day, and the first day is when the three months begin. He worked this out while standing there. You could watch him do it.

A woman renewing who had put her card through the wash. Not lost. Washed. There is a fee for a replacement and a different fee for a lost one, and the difference between the two is whether you can produce the remains, and she could, and did, out of a sandwich bag.

The enrolment is the part nobody warns anybody about.

The card reads the person and not the card, so the person has to be put into the system first: irises, and fingerprints. The iris capture is quick and slightly undignified and requires you to hold still while a machine considers you.

The fingerprints are the problem, and the problem is work.

Two men that morning could not be enrolled at the first attempt. One was a tiler. One had spent eleven years on a ramp. Hands that have done that much of that kind of work do not present the ridges a scanner wants, and it is not an injury and it is not a defect, it is simply what happens to the surface of a hand that is used, and a procedure exists for it, involving more attempts, different fingers, and a supervisor's note.

The tiler was embarrassed. He apologized to the machine twice.

The clerk said what she says, which is that it happens to the people who work hardest, and that she has never once had trouble reading the fingers of anybody who came in wearing a suit.

(She said this to me afterwards, not to him. She is careful about who is in the room.)

The photograph rules produced the best twenty minutes of the morning.

No hats. No sunglasses. Ordinary glasses are permitted but there must be no glare, and a surprising proportion of people cannot be photographed without glare, and the solution is to take the glasses off, and a surprising proportion of those people then cannot see the camera and photograph as though they are in some distress.

A neutral expression is required. Not stern. Neutral. The clerk says the single hardest instruction in her job is telling a cheerful man to stop smiling, and that men over about fifty-five

will keep doing it, and will apologize each time, and will do it again.

She said, "This card's going on your chest for five years. You should like the picture. It's the only bit of the process where anybody's opinion matters and it's yours."

Then she said, "Least popular room in the building and the busiest," which she has said before, and which she said in the manner of a person putting down a familiar object in a familiar place.

The Seeker came in at about half nine and worked the second position for the rest of the morning.

He does not process. He decides. The clerk takes what arrives; he takes what has gone wrong with what arrives, and there is a low door between the two positions and things go over it sideways without anything being said.

I watched him for two hours and I will set down what I think the job is, because I had it wrong from unit to unit until that morning.

He is not looking for anything. Nothing in that room is hidden and nothing in that room is being searched for. The Seeker's morning contains no discoveries at all.

What he holds is the map of permission: which instrument opens which door, who is entitled to issue that instrument, what it does not cover, and what expired last Thursday. A contractor's authorization for a work area is not a card. An escort's authority is not the same as a sponsor's authority. A person may be permitted through one door and not through the next one along, and the reason is not security in any dramatic sense, it is that two different bodies wrote two different lists in two different decades.

A little after ten a man came in convinced that he had been refused something, and had not been; he had been told the

wrong thing by a colleague and had spent four days being angry about a decision nobody had made. The Seeker took nine minutes over him and did not once say that the colleague was wrong.

Somebody asked him whether a temporary could be extended. He said no, and then said what could be done instead, which was three steps long and correct, and the person went away and did it.

A supervisor came in wanting to know whether one of her people could be escorted through an area for a single shift rather than waiting on a card, and was told yes, and under what ratio, and by whom, and then told the part she had not asked about, which is that the escort must be able to see the person and that a person working inside a machine cannot be seen.

She said she had not thought of that.

He said most people have not thought of that.

Somebody else came in with a card that had stopped working at a specific door on a specific pier. He looked at the card, did not swipe it, and said the card was fine and the door was on a group that had been changed in April, and to go to that pier's coordinator and say those two things. He was right; I checked, because I have the login, and there is a group that was changed in April.

The clerk told me later that he does not go and look things up.

I asked whether that was unusual.

She said, "It's useful."

I asked her whether he had ever been wrong.

She thought about it for longer than the question warranted, which I have noticed people in this building do, and said that he had told a contractor in 2023 that a door group would be changed at the end of the month and that it had not been changed at the end of the month.

I asked when it had been changed.

She said the fourth of the following month, and then she went back to her screen, and I understood that in her accounting this counted as him having been wrong and that she had produced it in good faith.

Somewhere in the second hour I asked about the challenge rule.

Every card holder is required to challenge a person in a restricted area who is not displaying identification. It is on the poster. It was said to me on my first day in that room, by that man, in that chair.

I asked how often people actually do it.

The clerk said, "Do you?"

I said that I had not yet been anywhere unescorted, which is a true answer and is not an answer.

She said that it happens, that it happens more than people think, and that what mostly happens is not a challenge but a slower version of one — you look, and the other person feels you look, and they put their hand to their chest and turn the card over, and nobody says anything at all. She said that is a challenge. She said the poster wants the words but the building runs on the gesture.

Then she said that once a year somebody challenges the President and CEO, and that this is regarded as an excellent thing to have happened, and that the person who does it is generally three weeks into the job.

At about ten she checked my application without my asking. I had not raised it. I had decided before I came in that I was not going to raise it, on the grounds that a director asking about

her own card in a room full of people waiting for theirs is not a good look and is also, more to the point, not more important than any of the other thirty-nine files on that counter.

She brought it up, looked at it, and said it was with the Minister.

Which is true, and which is not a date.

I said thank you and wrote nothing down.

The day-sheet was on the counter.

It is the same sheet. It is the running tally of temporary passes issued, in a column, with a total at the foot, and it sat face up about two metres from my chair for three and a half hours.

I could read the column. I want to be accurate about that, because it matters to what follows: the sheet was legible from where I sat. I could see the entries going down it through the morning, one at a time, in her hand.

I did not look at the total.

I am aware of how that reads. I have not decided, myself, whether it was discipline or the other thing, and I am not going to pretend to a conclusion I do not have. I sat in a chair with a piece of paper in front of me and I looked at the applicants instead, and at eleven o'clock the clerk turned the sheet over to write on the back of it, which she does, and that was that.

The last thing that happened before I left was a refusal, and I am going to record it carefully, because it was the clearest thing I saw in my first two months and because I have nothing to add to it.

A man in his thirties came in with a file. He had been offered a job with a ground handling company, ramp side. He had done everything correctly. He had been waiting since February.

His Transportation Security Clearance had been refused.

The refusal is not made in that room. It is not made in this building or by this organization. It is made by the Minister, on advice, against criteria that are published, and the criteria are not secret and the reasoning in an individual case is not disclosed.

He asked why.

The Seeker told him that he would not be told why, that this was not a decision anybody at the airport had made or could review, and that there is a process: he may request reconsideration, and he may appeal to a tribunal, and both of those are real and both of them take time.

He asked how long.

He was told: months. Possibly many.

He said his start date was the second of June.

Nobody said anything to that, because there was nothing to say to it that would be true.

Then he said, "Okay," and asked whether he could have the appeal information in writing, and was given it, printed, while he waited. He read the first page standing at the counter. He said thank you twice, once to each of them, and folded the pages into his jacket and left.

He was not angry. He did not think an injustice had occurred. I watched him closely, because I was waiting for him to think that, and he did not. Neither did the clerk, and neither did the Seeker, and neither, I discovered on the drive home, did I.

Everything in that exchange was correct. Every person in it behaved properly. The criteria are published. The process exists. The reasoning is withheld for reasons that are themselves defensible and are not hard to find if you want to read them.

And a man who has done nothing wrong that anybody will name will not be starting a job on the second of June.

The clerk called the next number, and a woman came up with a renewal, and the morning went on being a Tuesday.

THE SEQUENCE

DAY 34 · 30 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH
TEMPORARY PASS T-4471 · ESCORT REQUIRED

I asked for a copy of whatever document explains the trans-border journey and was given a laminated card that is used in training. It is one page. It has fourteen numbered steps on it and it is written in the voice that such documents are written in, which is the voice of nobody.

I spent the fourteenth of May going down it in order, mostly with a screening officer who had been assigned to walk me through and who turned out to have done the job for six years and to have opinions.

What follows is the card, and what I wrote next to it.

1. The passenger travelling to the United States proceeds to the transborder check-in area.

They do not. A meaningful number of them proceed to the domestic check-in area, discover their error, and cross the building, and the reason is that the transborder area is where it is because of where the aircraft park, and where the aircraft park is a fact about 1968.

The officer said the ones who get it wrong are almost never first-time travellers. First-timers read the signs. It is people who fly this route four times a year who walk on memory into the wrong hall, and the ones who are angriest about the walk are the ones who have made it most often.

2. The passenger completes check-in and bag drop.

There is a kiosk, and a bag drop, and there is a person standing beside both whose entire function is to be a person standing beside both. That role has a name and a budget line, and every year somebody asks whether the kiosks have removed the need for it, and every year the answer is that the kiosks have created it.

I watched that hall for twenty minutes. In twenty minutes she reset a kiosk twice, printed a tag for a man who had printed it already and did not believe he had, explained to a family of five that they were at the wrong airline's kiosk in a tone that suggested this was a reasonable mistake, which it is, and lifted a case that a woman could not lift, which is not in any description of her job and which she did without breaking off the sentence she was in.

The bags themselves are weighed and the weight matters more than the passenger imagines and less than the passenger fears. A bag is charged by the piece and by a threshold, and the threshold produces the reweighing dance, which is a thing you can watch at any check-in hall in the world: a case on the floor, two people kneeling, a jumper moving from one bag to another, and everybody in the queue behind performing patience.

3. The passenger proceeds to security screening.

Here is the thing I had not understood, and which reorganized my thinking about this part of the building entirely.

You are screened by CATSA before you meet the United States.

Everywhere else in the world, you clear the American border on arrival in America. Here you clear it before you leave, and because you clear it before you leave, the American inspection happens after the Canadian screening, in a Canadian building, under an agreement between two governments, performed by American officers standing on Canadian soil.

The arrangement is treaty-backed and it is not a courtesy. It exists because it is useful to both countries: the traveller arrives in the United States as a domestic arrival and walks off into the terminal, and the United States gets to decide who boards rather than who lands. Not every airport in Canada has it. The ones that do have been building their route networks on it for decades, and much of what this airport is has been shaped by that door.

The order also matters commercially, which I will come back to at step ten, because the order of steps three and four is why there is a shop.

4. Screening is conducted by screening officers under contract to the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority.

Under contract. This is the sentence I made him say twice.

He is not a federal employee. CATSA is a federal Crown corporation and CATSA does not screen anybody; CATSA contracts the screening to a company, and the company employs him, and he wears the company's shirt with the Crown corporation's mark on it, in a terminal operated by a not-for-profit corporation, on land owned by the federal government, to a standard set in consultation with a foreign administration.

I asked him who he works for.

He said, "Depends who's asking and what's gone wrong."

Then he said that in six years nobody has ever asked him that except me, and that passengers believe he is a police officer, and that this belief is useful about four times a year and unhelpful every other day.

5. The passenger presents boarding pass and identification.

The document does not mention that there are three ways through this step and that they are sorted by two completely different principles.

There is the ordinary line.

There is the trusted traveller line, which you enter by having submitted to a background check and an interview and a fee, and which is a statement about you.

And there is the priority line, which you enter by having bought a particular class of ticket or by holding a particular tier of a loyalty programme, and which is a statement about your fare.

The two fast lines are physically adjacent. They merge. A person who has been vetted by two national governments and a person who has purchased an upgrade arrive at the same belt at the same moment by different theories of the world, and neither of them has ever thought about this, and nor had I until I was standing in front of it.

The officer said the lanes are not the interesting part. The interesting part is that the ordinary line is often faster and that nobody in the fast lines ever believes it.

6. Divestiture.

That is the word on the card. Divestiture.

What it means is putting your things in a tray, and it is the single point in the sequence where the technology has moved and the people have not. The scanners are new; a passenger can leave a laptop in a bag and, in most cases, need not surrender liquids in the old way. This is announced. There are signs. There are announcements about the signs.

People unpack anyway.

He said they unpack because they have been trained for twenty years, and because the person in front of them is unpacking, and because when the officer says you can leave it in, a proportion of people hear a test.

He said the second thing is that the announcement is the problem. If nobody said anything, people would copy the person in front. Say it, and half of them do the opposite, because an instruction that removes a step sounds like a trick.

He said the worst thing that ever happened to divestiture was reusable water bottles.

I asked why.

He said because a bottle is a thing a person has a relationship with. Nobody argues about a lighter. Everybody argues about a bottle. Everybody says the same three sentences in the same order, and he can do all three of them, and did, and was exactly right about the order.

He also said that the emptying station is the single most effective thing anybody has ever installed in that hall, and that the man who put it there should have a plaque, and that a good half of what he does is not security at all, it is queueing, and that a queue is a physical object with a weight and a shape and that you can feel it change against your back before you can see it.

That is a screening officer describing his job, at half past nine in the morning, in a corridor, in about forty words, and I would like it on the record that nobody at this airport is unaware of what they are doing.

7. Screening of accessible property.

Their term for hand baggage. Nobody in the queue says accessible property. Nobody in the world says accessible property.

I asked where the phrase comes from and was told it comes from the regulation, and I went and looked, and it does. The regulation distinguishes property to which a passenger has access from property to which they do not, which is precise, and which is necessary, and which is also how a carry-on bag came to be described in the same register as a mortgage.

The officer said the card is written for the audit and not for the officer, and that the training that matters is done by standing next to somebody for three weeks.

8. The passenger proceeds to United States Customs and Border Protection primary inspection.

Through a door, and now you are talking to another country, in Richmond.

I was not permitted into that hall and did not ask to be. What I can say is what any passenger can see, which is a hall of booths in a Canadian building with an American seal on the far wall, and a queue that is managed by nobody I could hire or dismiss.

If that queue is long, the airport is blamed. Every survey says so. The Authority measures the wait, publishes the wait, is judged on the wait, and staffs none of it. What it can do is build the room, count the people in it, and ask, and it does all three, and asking is a diplomatic activity conducted between an airport authority and a foreign federal agency, and it is conducted very politely, forever.

(The Seeker was at the doorway on the Canadian side for part of the morning. Not in the hall — at the boundary, on our side of it, which is exactly where the map of permission stops being ours. Somebody's card would not open a door and he named the door group before he had seen the card. Then the door was fine and he went back to the desk. He did not once cross the line and I have thought about that since, because he was the only person in that corridor of whom it could be said that it looked like a decision.)

9. The passenger proceeds to the transborder departures area.

You are now, in every sense that matters to a border officer, in the United States.

You are also in British Columbia, and if you have a medical emergency in that lounge you will be attended by British Columbia paramedics, and if there is a fire the fire service is Richmond's, under contract, and if you drop a coffee it will be cleaned up by somebody employed by a contractor to the Airport Authority under a living wage certification that is a matter of Canadian municipal policy.

10. Retail and food and beverage services are available in the transborder departures area.

Here is step ten, and this is the one I would put on a poster.

Because the American inspection happens before the shops rather than after them, the duty free in that lounge is downstream of the United States border. It is a shop past the border, which is what duty free is for, and it works, and it is worth a very large amount of money, and it exists in that form because somebody thirty years ago got the order of steps three and four right.

The duty is collected at the till.

The duty is remitted to the government of the United States.

By a shop in Richmond, British Columbia, on a cheque, monthly.

10a. (there is no step ten-a. I am putting one in, because there is a thing between the shop and the aircraft that the card does not mention and that took up the middle of my morning.)

The lounge is where the arrangement stops being clever and starts being a place where people sit.

It is a room with a border on one side of it and a wall of windows on the other, and nobody in it can leave except forwards. That is the part I had not thought through. In an ordinary departures hall a person who has three hours can go back out, get a haircut, meet somebody, change their mind. Here they cannot. Once you have been admitted to the United States in Richmond, the room is the country.

So the room has to do more than a room usually does. It needs the seating, the power, the food, the quiet corner, the place to lie down that is not a bench with arms on it, and it needs all of that for the person whose flight has just gone from two hours to six.

The officer said that the mood of that lounge on a bad afternoon is the single best measure of how the terminal is being run, and that no report he has ever seen contains it.

I asked whether anybody measures it.

He said there is a satisfaction survey.

He said it neutrally and did not add anything, and the not-adding-anything was his comment.

11. Boarding.

12. Departure.

Two lines. Steps eleven and twelve are two lines, and between them sits every single thing that is actually difficult about running an airline, and the card gives them nine words, because the card is not about the aircraft. Nothing in this building is about the aircraft. The aircraft is the part that leaves.

13. (the card has a step thirteen and it is about irregular operations and I am not going to reproduce it, because it is essentially a list of what to do when steps one through twelve have not worked, and it is four times as long as everything above it)

Here is the thing that is not on the card at all, and which I only found because I asked the wrong question.

The border keeps hours.

The American inspection facility is staffed for a defined operating window. It opens and it closes. Outside that window there is no United States in this building, and an aircraft that

wants to leave for the United States outside those hours cannot be handled the way every other transborder flight is handled, and the alternatives are ingenious and are entirely a matter of procedure, and they involve segregating passengers who will be inspected on arrival instead.

I asked what happens if a flight is delayed past closing.

There is an answer. It has several branches. It was explained to me twice and I understood it both times and could not now reproduce it, and the officer's own summary was that when it happens everybody finds out what everybody else's job actually is.

What I did retain is that the fix is never technical. The fix is always that some number of people who were about to go home do not go home. There is no button. There is a phone call, and then another one, and somewhere in Richmond a person who had a plan for the evening puts their coat back on.

And the tournament, he said, is thirty days away, and the schedule for those weeks has flights in it at hours that are not ordinary hours, and everybody has known about that since the autumn, and it will still come as a surprise to somebody.

The two logs.

I was shown the lane record for the morning, because I had asked how throughput is measured and it was easier to show me than to describe it. There is a count per lane, per hour, produced automatically, and a supervisor's sheet, produced by hand.

For the eight o'clock hour on one lane, the two do not agree, and they do not disagree in the way that two counts of a busy thing normally disagree. The automatic count is lower than the manual one, and the difference is not a rounding, and the manual sheet is the one signed by a person who was standing there.

I said the two numbers were different.

The supervisor said, "Yeah, they do that," and turned the page, and showed me the ten o'clock hour, which was the hour I had actually asked about.

At the end I asked him the question I had been saving, which is what happens if somebody in the transborder lounge realizes they have left something behind, on the Canadian side, and wants to go back.

He said they can't just walk back.

I said but they have not left the country.

He said, "No, but they've been admitted to the States."

I said they are standing in Richmond.

He said, "Standing in Richmond, admitted to the States." Then he said that to come back out they have to be dealt with as a person entering Canada, by Canadian officers, which they can be, because they never left, but it is not nothing and it takes a while and there is paperwork.

I asked how often.

He said about once a week.

I asked what they go back for.

He said, "Charger, mostly."

THE CURB

DAY 38 · 26 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH

There is no escort line on this one, because the curb is public.

That is the first thing about the eighteenth of May: I drove out, parked, walked up the ramp, and stood on Level 3 outside the doors, alone, for seven hours, and nobody was responsible for my position. I could have gone anywhere on that curb. A director of the airport is permitted, without supervision, to stand on the pavement outside it with everybody else.

I had asked to spend a shift with Ground Transportation and had expected to be driven around. What I got was a place to stand, which turned out to be the point.

The geography is the argument, so I will do it once and quickly.

Departures is Level 3 and Arrivals is Level 2, one above the other, and they are governed by opposite philosophies.

Upstairs, where people are dropped off, there is no designated anything. Private cars, taxis, app drivers, hotel shuttles and courtesy buses all unload wherever along the permitted length they can get a wheel in. Nobody is assigned a bay. The rule is only that you do not stop where you may not stop and that you do not stay.

Downstairs, where people are picked up, everything is assigned. Taxis have a stand. App drivers have three designated areas and are not permitted to collect anywhere else. Buses have positions. There is signage, there is enforcement, and there is a scheme of permits and licences that runs to several pages and several thousand dollars a vehicle a year.

Departure is anarchy. Arrival is administered.

The administration is a schedule of fees. A commercial vehicle operating here holds a permit and pays for it — an annual figure per vehicle that runs to a few thousand dollars for some categories, a licensing fee for a courtesy bus, a charge on luggage vehicles that is one number under a ton and a different number over it. There is a decal. There is an inspection. There is a list of who may stop where, and it is enforced, and the enforcement is a job that somebody does all day in a marked vehicle and that generates more correspondence than anything else on this curb.

I asked the supervisor whether the permit system is about money.

He said it is about knowing who is out here. He said the money is real and the money is not the reason: if anybody could operate a shuttle off this curb, then on the worst evening of the year there would be forty vehicles out here belonging to nobody, and no way to tell them to move, because you cannot instruct a person you have no relationship with.

The reason is not philosophical. Dropping somebody off takes eleven seconds and picking somebody up takes as long as they take, and a system full of people waiting is a different animal from a system full of people leaving. But the effect, standing between the two levels for an afternoon, is that the airport is generous to you on the way out and strict with you on the way in, which is the reverse of how it feels.

The supervisor came out at ten past two and said, “You want the wall,” and put me against the wall by the third column, which is where you can see the length of the curb without being in it, and then he did not talk to me for forty minutes because the two o’clock bank was landing.

He has done this for nineteen years and he did it at two other airports before that, and when I asked him what he did before airports he said he had been on a fish boat, and when I asked whether there was anything in common he said yes, and did not elaborate, and about an hour later, apropos of nothing, said, “You can’t argue with the tide. You can only be somewhere else.”

The All-Seeing has a radio, a phone, and a hand.

The hand is for the drivers. He does not shout. In seven hours I did not once hear him raise his voice above the ambient, and the ambient out there is a wall of engine and rolling luggage and door chime. What he does is move a hand, and a driver forty metres away sees it and moves, and I could not work out for an hour why they were all watching him.

Then I worked it out, which is that they are not all watching him. About one in six is watching him. And one in six is enough, because the one in six is the taxi and shuttle drivers who are out here every day, and the private cars follow the taxis, because a private car on a strange curb always follows a vehicle that looks like it belongs.

He never touches the private cars. The All-Seeing steers the professionals and the amateurs come along behind.

The private cars are where the afternoon’s comedy lives, and it is not unkind comedy, because everybody out there is either leaving somebody or about to be left.

There is the long goodbye, which is the single greatest threat to the operation of that curb. A person who is being dropped off knows they should go. The person dropping them off knows it too. Both of them keep finding one more thing, and behind them the queue builds, and the thing that ends it is never a horn, it is always a third party — a child in the back seat, or an officer, or the weather.

There is the man who opens the boot and stands looking into it, having forgotten which of the four bags is his wife’s.

There is the family that unloads completely and then discovers that the small case with the documents in it is still at home,

and the recalibration that goes through the group as everybody understands at slightly different speeds.

There is a woman that afternoon who hugged her son for a length of time that made me look away, and then got back into her car and sat there with both hands on the wheel not starting it, and the young man in the vest let her have about ninety seconds, which was longer than that lane could really spare, and then knocked very gently on the roof.

What he says into the radio, all afternoon, is where it is going to go wrong next.

I wrote down thirty-one of them. Not one was about what was happening. Every single one was about what would be happening in two to six minutes.

The bay four coach will not clear before the next one wants it.

Someone is about to try to reverse at the crosswalk.

The van in the third position is unloading a wheelchair and will need another three minutes and the bay behind it should be held rather than filled.

The rain is starting on the north side, which will put a hundred and forty people onto a curb that had been coping.

That last one is the sort of thing I would have thought was a flourish if I had read it in a book. It came true in about four minutes. The rain arrives here from a particular direction and you can see it on the water before you feel it, and people who were content to wait outside come in under the canopy, and the canopy is where the doors are, and the doors are where the cases are.

He said, without looking at me, "Now it's a curb problem."

Somewhere in the third hour I got the AddFare.

A man came out of the station doors and up the ramp and found the nearest person in a vest, which was not the supervisor, it was a traffic control contractor of about twenty-two whose entire job that day was a section of curb forty metres long.

The man was not aggressive. He was aggrieved in the specific way of a person who has done the arithmetic and would like it acknowledged.

He had paid five dollars extra to take the train from the airport. He had paid it that morning at his hotel — no, he had paid it now, leaving; he had not paid it coming in, and had not known he would pay it going out, and had discovered it at the gate with a bag in each hand.

He wanted to know why the airport charges people to leave on the train.

The young man in the vest said, “We don’t get any of it.”

The man said that could not be right, it has the airport’s name on it.

The young man said, “Not a cent. Never have.”

Six words, and then the other five, and I have now heard that pair of sentences from three different people at this airport at three different levels, and the twenty-two-year-old on the curb delivered them with less ceremony than either of the others.

The man said, “Well, that’s ridiculous,” which is a complete and accurate summary, and went to find a taxi.

(The surcharge is levied by the transit authority on trips departing the airport and the two stations on the island. Trips towards the airport do not carry it. Travel within the island is free. The Airport Authority receives none of it and has never received any of it, and it is called the YVR AddFare.)

The young man in the vest went back to his forty metres.

I watched him for the rest of the shift. He did not say anything else that was worth writing down. Not once, in four hours. He was extremely good at his job. He kept a lane open in a rainstorm, he found a dropped phone and got it to the desk,

he explained the same thing about the crosswalk perhaps forty times, and he told me nothing at all about the human condition, and there is no reason on earth why he should have.

The station is at the end of the building and the flow to it is the thing nobody designed and everybody has adapted to.

People come out of arrivals and go up rather than along, because the sign that would send them along is competing with a sign about parking, and the two of them are both correct. So a proportion of the train traffic crosses the departures curb, at grade, with luggage, against the direction of everything on it.

There is a crossing. It is marked, it is signalled, and it is the single point on this curb that the supervisor watches more than any other, and it is also the place where a person with a case in each hand and a boarding pass in their teeth is least able to look both ways.

Nothing happened there that day. He said nothing has happened there in a long time, and then said the number of years, and then knocked twice on the metal handrail beside him, and I have thought about a man who reads a curb for a living being superstitious about a crossing.

The taxis are their own country.

Two stands. Something over twenty companies. First come, first served, by the stand and not by the passenger, so you take the one at the front and there is no choosing, which is deliberate and which prevents about nine problems and creates one.

The fares out of here to the common places are flat, published on a board, and almost nobody reads the board.

There is a passenger load charge of four dollars on the fare. It goes to the airport. I asked what it is for and was told it is

for the stand — the road, the paint, the shelter, the supervision, the enforcement, the fact that a taxi can be certain of a place to wait.

I said that would be worth explaining to passengers.

The supervisor said it is explained on the board.

I said nobody reads the board.

He said, “No.”

At about half past six the curb failed for eleven minutes, and it was not anybody's fault.

An aircraft had gone tech somewhere and its passengers came out three hours late into the middle of an ordinary evening bank, and a coach in bay two had a mechanical, and it stopped where it was, and a coach cannot be pushed.

Everything downstream of bay two stopped. The taxi feed backed up into the loop. The loop backed up to the approach. Somewhere behind all of it a busload of people who had been travelling for fourteen hours sat still on a bus two hundred metres from a door they could see.

The All-Seeing did not do anything dramatic. What he did was give up on bay two entirely, in about four seconds, and start rebuilding the curb from the far end backwards, which meant sending vehicles past the problem to a place they did not want to go, which meant a lot of drivers being told to do something that looked wrong.

The eleven minutes were unpleasant. Nobody was hurt and nobody missed anything and about four hundred people had a worse evening than they had planned.

Afterwards he stood next to me for the first time in four hours and said, “That's the job.”

I said it had looked to me like it went well.

He said, “It went. Well would have been the coach not stopping there.”

I asked him, in the quiet after, whether he had known the coach was going to fail.

He said no. Nobody knows that. What he had known since about four o'clock was that bay two was the one he could least afford to lose that evening, because of the coach schedule and the late arrival and the rain, and he had spent two hours keeping it clear for exactly that reason. That is the job: you cannot know what will break, you can only know what it will cost you if it does, and stand near that.

Then he said the tournament is twenty-six days away and that on those days he will have three more people out here and it will not be enough, and that this is fine, because it is a curb, and a curb absorbs everything eventually, and the only real question is how long people stand in the rain first.

By nine the curb was almost empty, and it was the cleanest I had seen it, because two people had come along the length of it with machines and taken the day off it.

Seven hours. No incident report. No injury. A coach recovery, a rainstorm, an eleven-minute failure, and something over three thousand vehicle movements past a hundred and eighty metres of curb.

Tomorrow there will be a figure in a report. It will be a dwell-time average and it will be inside its target, and somebody will look at it for four seconds in a meeting, and the four seconds will be a good outcome, because the alternative is that somebody looks at it for a long time.

There is no line in that report for the All-Seeing saying *four minutes* into a radio, three hundred times, correctly, in the rain, to people who mostly did not know he had said it.

I went and got my car. It took a while. The exit was busy.

THE LEASE

DAY 45 · 19 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH

I had asked, on the terminal walk, about the hoarding with the paper sign on it that said the name of a restaurant and the word SOON. I was told that one was done and had been done for two years and that the interesting part had happened long before the hoarding.

So on the twenty-fifth of May I was allowed to sit in on the interesting part.

It was ninety minutes in a meeting room with no window, and I have written it as it happened, because it happened in one piece and there is nothing I can do to it that would not make it worse.

Present: the Companion, who does Tenant Relations; a man from the commercial team with a laptop; a woman who runs a restaurant on Kingsway and has done for eleven years; and me, in the corner, introduced as a director who was observing, which produced from the restaurant owner a small adjustment of posture.

The space on offer is not the one behind the hoarding. It is a smaller unit further down, four hundred and ten square feet, currently a hoarding with nothing behind it at all.

The Companion began by asking her what she cooks.

Not what she does, not how the business is going, not what her covers are. What she cooks.

The answer took four minutes. There was a chicken dish in it that the woman described twice, because she was not satisfied with the first description, and the second one had the order of the spices in it and a thing about the pan being wrong on purpose.

I have sat through many meetings that opened with a question designed to relax somebody. This was not that. The question was asked because the answer was wanted, and the difference between those two things is visible at about ten feet.

Then the man with the laptop said he would take her through the commercial framework, and did, in this order.

Use. The lease says what she may sell. Not roughly. Specifically, by category, with a list. She may not decide in year four that the room would do better as a bar. If a neighbouring unit holds an exclusivity on coffee then she has a problem with coffee, and coffee is the highest-margin thing any food business sells.

She asked whether there was an exclusivity near that unit.

He said he would check. He did not know. It was the only thing all morning that anybody in that room did not know, and I noticed that she noticed.

Term. Ten years, with the fit-out amortized across it. Shorter is available and shorter is worse, because the fit-out does not get shorter.

Rent. A minimum annual guarantee, or a percentage of gross sales, whichever is greater. The percentage is not small. The guarantee is a floor and the floor is real: in a bad year you pay the floor.

She said, "So the good years I pay percentage and the bad years I pay the floor."

He said, "Yes."

She said, "So it's never the smaller one."

He said, “That’s what *whichever is greater* means,” and she laughed, and he did not, because he had not been joking, and I liked her enormously from that moment.

Reporting. She reports her gross sales monthly, on a form, and the landlord has the right to audit them, and the right is exercised. Her point-of-sale system has to be one that can be read. There is a list of acceptable systems and hers is not on it.

She said, “So I buy a new till.”

He said, “You buy a new till.”

Common costs. A share of the common area maintenance, calculated by area, covering the cleaning and the heating and the lighting of everything that is not inside her four hundred and ten square feet.

Fit-out. At her cost. At airport construction rates, which are not street rates, because the work happens at night in a live building through the permit stack — the Authority’s permit, the trades, the escorts for anybody without a card, and a tally on every tool.

The number for the fit-out was said aloud once and she wrote it down and put a circle round it and then, after about a second, a second circle.

Deliveries. Nothing comes in the front. Everything she sells arrives through a loading dock, and everything that comes through that dock is screened, because a terminal is a sterile area and a box of onions is a box until somebody has looked in it.

So the produce arrives earlier than it would anywhere else, and it waits, and it is handled by more people, and the driver bringing it either holds a card or is escorted. If the driver is escorted then somebody from her staff is standing at a dock at five in the morning instead of being in the kitchen.

She asked how long the screening takes.

The man with the laptop said it depends on the day.

She said, “That’s not a number.”

He said, “No, it isn’t,” and wrote something down, and to his credit he wrote it down properly and not for show.

Waste. Out the same way, on a schedule, separated by stream. And there is a grease requirement, which means an interceptor, and a maintenance contract for the interceptor, and a log for the maintenance contract.

I thought about the terminal duty manager standing in front of a hoarding a month earlier, being asked what his interest in a restaurant was, and answering with one word, and the word being *grease*. He had answered the question and I had taken it for a joke.

Street pricing. This is the one I had not known about and it is the best thing in the lease.

She may not charge airport prices. The agreement requires that the same dish costs the same as it costs on Kingsway, within a stated tolerance, and it is audited, and the audit is a person who goes and looks at her other menu.

She said, “You’re telling me I can’t charge more here.”

He said, “Correct.”

She said, “But everything costs me more here.”

He said, “Also correct.”

And she sat with that for a moment and said, “Okay,” and I do not think anybody else in the room registered how much was in that *okay*.

Fit-out, continued. He came back to it, because she had gone quiet after the two circles.

The number is what it is because of the building it is in. Nothing arrives through a front door. Materials come in through a dock and get screened, and go up in a service lift on a booking, and the work happens between the last departure and the first, and a crew that would work eight hours on Kingsway works four here and spends two of those setting up and packing down.

Every trade needs a card or an escort. Every tool is counted in and counted out. If the fire system is touched, that is its own permit and its own watch. If the work makes noise that carries into the hall, it stops when the hall is occupied, and the hall is occupied for nineteen hours a day.

She asked whether she could use her own contractor.

He said she could, from a list, and that people on the list are on it because they have done work here before, and that people who have not done work here before bid low and then discover the four hours.

She said, "So the list is the people who know what it costs."

He said, "The list is the people who are still doing it."

Staff. This is where the Seeker came in, because he had been asked to and because ten minutes of a meeting is cheaper than a misunderstanding.

Every person she employs in that unit needs a restricted area card. Every one. The dishwasher, the sixteen-year-old on a Saturday, her sister.

A card requires a security clearance from the Minister. The clearance takes three months and can take longer. It requires a sponsor with signing authority, biometric enrolment, and original documents in person.

She said her turnover in the Kingsway kitchen is about forty per cent a year, which is good for the industry, and said it slightly defensively, and did not need to, because everybody in that room over the age of thirty knew that it was good.

He said then she should plan on carrying people for a season before they can work, or hiring only people who already hold cards, and that there is a pool of those people and everyone at this airport is fishing in it.

She said, "So I'm not hiring cooks. I'm hiring cooks who've already been cleared."

He said, "You're hiring people who can be cleared. It isn't the same list."

That is the entire Seeker, in one sentence, and he said it to a woman worrying about a dishwasher.

Getting to work. Her staff will drive, because the shift that opens the unit starts before the train runs, and they will pay to park, at staff rates, which are better than public rates and are not nothing. This came up because she asked, and it came up as a cost to her, because in her experience if the commute is expensive the wage has to be better or nobody stays.

Nobody in the room disputed that. The man with the laptop said the staff parking rate is set centrally and is not a lever available in this negotiation, which is true, and which is the fourth time that morning something correct had been said in a way that closed a door.

Hours. Set by the flight schedule and not by her. There is a required opening — first departure bank to last — and the first bank is early and the last is late, and there are hours in the middle of that when nobody will come, and she will be open through them, and staffed through them, because a closed unit in a terminal is a hole in a wall that everybody sees.

She asked what the actual trade looks like across a day, because a restaurant is a shape and she wanted the shape.

He had it. Two peaks and a long flat middle and a small third peak late. The morning peak is the biggest and it is the one where people buy the least per head, because a person at five in the morning buys coffee and something in a bag, and a person at four in the afternoon buys a sit-down meal and does not exist here in the numbers she would want.

She said that was the opposite of Kingsway.

He said that most people who come out here are running a lunch business on a breakfast footprint, and that the ones who fail are the ones who staffed for the wrong peak.

She wrote that down too.

She said, “Who eats at five in the morning?”

The Companion said, “People who have been awake since two.”

The drawings came out flat on the table so she could see the unit: a plan with the counter on it and a seating envelope hatched in grey, four hundred and ten square feet reduced to a shape.

She did not look at the numbers. She turned the sheet ninety degrees and put a finger where the door is and asked whether the counter could go on the other side.

He said probably not, because of the services.

She asked where the services are, and he showed her, and she asked what it would cost to move them, and he said more than the counter is worth, and she said that everything in this building seems to cost more than the thing it is for, and he said, "Yes. That's the actual lesson. Everything else I've told you today is detail."

She wrote that down. It is the only thing all morning that she wrote down without being given a number first.

The last twenty minutes were not commercial.

She asked what happens if it does not work.

He explained the personal guarantee. What it covers, what it does not, how long it survives the lease, and what a landlord in this position does and does not typically pursue. He did it well and without softening it, which I have come to understand is the kindest way that particular information can be delivered, and which perhaps four people in ten are capable of.

She asked whether she could put a company between herself and it.

He said she could, and that the guarantee would be asked for anyway, because the company would be eleven months old with no covenant, and that this is not the airport being difficult, it is what any landlord does with a single-site operator, and that

her own landlord on Kingsway had almost certainly done the same thing eleven years ago.

She said her landlord on Kingsway had.

She said, "So I could lose the Kingsway place."

He said, "In the worst case."

She said, "Right," and looked at the table for a while, and then said, "My mother had a stall. She'd have thought this was funny."

And then she said what I think she had come to say, which was that she does not want to be an airport restaurant. She wants to be a restaurant that is at the airport. She said that she has eaten in airports her entire adult life and that the food in them is made by people who have given up in a specific way and that she could tell, every time, and that she has thought about it for years.

She said, "I want somebody to get off a plane at six in the morning and eat something their grandmother made."

Nobody said anything for a second, and then the Companion said, "Then don't take the ten-year."

The man with the laptop looked up.

She said it again, evenly. She said that the ten-year is the right instrument for a group with three other sites and a construction contact, and that this woman has one kitchen and a mother's stall behind her and eleven years of not going under, and that if the fit-out number was going to require the Kingsway place as security then the deal was the wrong shape and she should go away and come back at the smaller unit at the north end, which is coming up, and which needs half the fit-out.

The man with the laptop said the north end unit is not scheduled.

The Companion said, "It'll be scheduled."

The woman put her hand on the Companion's arm as she was gathering the pages.

It was not a large gesture. It lasted about a second. She said, "Thank you for saying that in front of me," and then, because she had heard what she had said, "In front of him, I mean. With me here."

The Companion said, "You'd have found out in September."

The woman said, "People don't, though."

Afterwards we walked her out to the elevator, and the Companion asked her the chicken dish question again — what is in it, exactly, in order — and got a longer answer than the first one, and asked one further question about the marinade that was a real question and not a polite one, and the woman answered it with her hands.

At the elevator the woman said, "You've eaten at my place."

The Companion said, "Twice."

The doors closed. I did not ask about that and I am not going to.

I asked the Companion, walking back, whether the north end unit really would be scheduled.

She said it would.

I asked whether the woman would take it.

She said, "She'll go away and do the arithmetic four times and she'll take it, and she'll be right to, and the first eighteen months will be worse than she thinks."

I asked whether somebody should tell her that.

She said, "I did tell her that. That's what I said in the room."

I went and found the unit afterwards, because I wanted to see it.

Four hundred and ten square feet behind a hoarding, on the departures level, past the point where people stop looking at the shops because they have started looking at the gate numbers. There is a service door and a dead conduit and a section of the floor where an older tenant's tile line still shows.

Somebody had propped the hoarding open at one end to get a cart through and had not closed it, so I stood in the gap and looked in at an empty grey box with a light in it.

Nineteen days from now this building will do the largest few weeks it has ever done. Sixteen thousand people an hour will go past the front of that box on their way to somewhere, and almost all of them will be hungry at some point.

And in three years, if the north end unit gets scheduled and the fit-out comes in and the cards come through and forty per cent turnover does not become sixty, somebody who has been awake since two in the morning will sit down at a counter at five o'clock and be given a chicken dish that a woman on Kingsway learned from her mother, in an airport, in the dark, and will have no idea what it took.

NIGHTS

DAY 49 · 15 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH
TEMPORARY PASS T-4471 · ESCORT REQUIRED

Twice on the twenty-ninth of May somebody asked me whether I was sure. Once by email, from the person arranging it, and once at eleven o'clock at night by the man who would be looking after me, in a corridor, while putting on gloves. Both of them asked it mildly and both of them were carrying more than they were saying.

Eleven at night until half past five in the morning. The night lead has been here fourteen years and has been the lead for six. He talked for most of it, in the gaps and while working, and this is his, and the places where I have put myself in are marked.

You've picked a Thursday, which is fine. Friday's the one people want and Friday's not the real thing. Thursday's the real thing.

A night runs in three parts and they don't blend into each other, they change over, and if you stand still you can feel it happen.

First part is the tail. Eleven till about one. There are still people in the building and they are the people who have had the worst day, because they're the ones still here. Delays, misconnects, the ones who came in on the last bank and have nowhere to go until morning. You do not deep clean around a person who has been travelling for nineteen hours. You do the parts they're not in and you come back.

Second part's the dead one. One till about half three. That's when the work happens. That's why there's a night shift at all.

Third part is the turn. Half three, the first staff come through, the first bank starts checking in about half four, and by five you are not cleaning any more, you are keeping up, which is a completely different job with the same equipment.

We did the tail together, which meant working round about forty people.

There is a difference between a person who is waiting and a person who has stopped waiting, and it is visible from a long way off and the crew read it instantly. A person waiting sits up. A person who has stopped waiting has made an arrangement with a bench.

He said there are three kinds. There are the misconnects, who will be gone by six and who are angry in a way that burns off. There are the ones who came in on an international arrival with nothing booked and are here until a morning flight, usually families, usually asleep in a row with a coat over them.

And there is the third kind, who are here because the terminal is warm and open and has washrooms and does not ask.

I asked what the policy is.

He said the policy is not his. He said what the practice is, which is that you clean around them, and you do not wake anybody who is not causing a problem, and if somebody is causing a problem you call it in and it stops being your business. He said in fourteen years he has called it in maybe nine times.

He said the hard one is not the third kind. The hard one is the families, because a child asleep across two seats at three in the morning is a child asleep across two seats at three in the morning, and you have a burnisher.

The building at half past one is not quiet. It has never once been quiet in its life. The ventilation is a constant, and the

ventilation at night is the loudest thing because everything that used to be over the top of it has gone.

There are machines. There are three sizes of floor machine and the largest is ridden and the smallest is pushed, and they all make a sound like a distant vacuum in a house where you are trying to sleep. There is a burnisher, which is the one that makes the floor shine, and the floor has a gloss level, and the gloss level is measured with an instrument, and the target is written down.

(I asked what the target is. He told me. I asked what happens if it isn't met. He said nothing happens, and then, after a moment, said that the number goes in a report and that the report goes to somebody, and that in fourteen years he has never been asked about the number by a human being. He said it without resentment. He said the floor is either right or it isn't and he can see it from the end of a concourse.)

What we find.

Phones. Constant. Chargers, more than phones. Passports — about one a week, and a passport goes straight to the desk and you do not put a passport in your pocket, ever, you carry it in your hand where people can see it.

Wedding rings, off washroom shelves. People take them off to wash their hands.

Teeth. I'll say that once and leave it.

Somebody's ashes, once, in the box, in a bag, in a seat. Yes. Somebody came back.

Food in places food should not be. Under seats is normal. Inside a light fitting is a person making a decision.

And every single night, without fail, at least one thing that is genuinely somebody's entire life. Medication. A laptop with a thesis on it. A folder of immigration papers. Every night. Not most nights.

Lost property goes to a room and the room has a system, and about half of it is never claimed, and once a year there's a disposal, and I've stopped thinking about the disposal.

People ask us things. All night and again in the morning, and we're in a different uniform from every single person who would know, and they ask us anyway, and we know, because we're here.

The washrooms are on a cycle and the cycle is the spine of the night.

There is a count. Each one gets a full service on a rota and a check on a much shorter interval, set by traffic rather than by clock, and there is a card on the back of the door that people sign, and nobody believes the card and everybody signs it.

He said the card is not for the passengers. It is for the next person on the crew, so that they know what has been done, and that a card signed for work that was not done is the one thing that will get somebody moved off his shift, because the rota depends entirely on believing it.

(Renewal phase two is in progress. There is hoarding. I asked about the sequencing and got the same explanation I had been given a month earlier by the terminal duty manager, in almost the same words, from a completely different part of the organization: you cannot close two in the same pier or the pressure goes somewhere. I have now heard that sentence from a manager and from a man with a mop and neither of them was quoting the other.)

At about a quarter to three we came round a corner into the international departures hall and there was a man playing the piano.

Not playing. Tuning. He had the lid up and a mute wedged in and he was working through it note by note with the little

hammer, and it sounded like a piano being taken apart very slowly.

The night lead said, "He's in twice a month."

I said I had been told the piano goes out of tune every four days.

He said, "It does."

The tuner did not look up and did not stop, and we went round him. He was still there forty minutes later. He was there when we came back through at four. I never saw his face.

There's one on nights I have to work around and I'll say it because you'll see it.

He's been here longer than me. He does the job. He does exactly the job and not one thing beyond it, and if a thing is not his he will stand next to it. I've seen him stand next to a spill for four minutes waiting for the person whose section it was.

He isn't lazy. That's the thing people get wrong. He was moved off a section eleven years ago over something that wasn't his fault and it was never put right, and this is what was left afterwards.

So I put him where the work is defined. That's it. That's the management of it, and it took me two years to stop trying to fix him, and the crew know, and nobody says anything, and he'll retire out of here.

You asked what's hard. That's what's hard. Not the floors.

What we can get into.

More than people think. Not everything — there's areas we don't hold, and there's cages and rooms that belong to tenants and to the airlines and to the border people, and we're not in those.

But the building. The public building. At three in the morning there is nobody in this terminal except us, a duty manager, two engineers, some contractors on whatever's been booked, and whoever's still stuck out there in seating.

So yes. We hold a lot of doors.

Nobody's ever made anything of that in fourteen years and I have not heard anybody worry about it out loud, and I have thought about why. I think it's because the checking's all been done at the front. You've had the clearance, you've had the card, you've done the training. By the time you're on the floor at three in the morning the assumption is finished. You are simply a person who is allowed to be there.

The Chaos-Weaver runs the night services side and I met him at half past three at a service door on the lower level, which he was holding open with his foot.

I had been half expecting him all night, in the sense that his name had come up four times without anybody making anything of it. The machine charging point had been moved on his say-so. The rota for the retail units had been changed at some point that nobody could date. When I asked the night lead earlier who decides which crew does which pier, he said it works itself out and then, after a moment, said that it works itself out and somebody writes it down afterwards.

He is not the night lead's boss and he is not not the night lead's boss; the reporting line goes somewhere else and the two of them work it out. He was there because a contractor's van needed the door and would need it in about four minutes.

(The van was not there yet. I looked. The corridor was empty in both directions and there was no vehicle on the ramp and no radio call had come, and he was standing there with the door open on his foot doing something on a phone.)

The van came round at about twenty-five to four and the driver did not have to stop, get out, and go and find somebody, which is what would otherwise have happened, and which the night lead said, without any weight on it at all, costs about twenty minutes when it happens.

He asked the night lead two questions and neither of them was the question the night lead was braced for.

The first was about a machine left on charge in the wrong place, which was true and which the night lead had not known. The second was whether the crew who do the retail units were running early tonight, and the night lead said he thought so, and the Chaos-Weaver said, "They are," and did not say how he knew, and nobody expected him to.

The night lead had come down that corridor to raise a rota problem he has been carrying for three weeks. He did not raise it. Afterwards I asked why and he said it had stopped being a problem somewhere in those two questions, and that he could not tell me at what point, and that this happens.

Then the Chaos-Weaver said something to him about the west end and went off, and about ten minutes later there was a spill at the west end.

I asked whether that was a coincidence.

The night lead said the west end always goes about then, because that's when the overnight cleaning of the retail units puts water out, and everybody knows the west end goes about then.

I said that made sense.

He said, "Yeah," and then, "he's a good one for the timing, though."

The Hand came through at four, going the other way, carrying nothing.

He did not stop and did not speak to us. He walked the length of the concourse looking at the ceiling, at the run of it, and went out through the far doors.

I asked what that was.

The night lead said Terminal Ops walk the ceilings at night because you can hear the plant when the building's empty and you cannot hear it at noon.

I said I had not seen him listening.

He said, "You were watching his face."

I asked whether the Hand does that every night.

He said he's about the place. He said Terminal Ops have thirty-odd people and four of them are ever out at that hour, and the other three you hear coming, and then he laughed at something he did not explain and went to get the trolley.

(Here is the work order.)

There is a tablet on the trolley and the trolley is a rolling office with the job list on it. Each job on the list has a number, a location, a status, and an assignee.

At about half four I was looking at the list, because he had shown me how it works and then gone to do something, and I went down it out of nosiness.

Section eleven, lower level, burnish and detail, marked complete at 02:14.

I had been on the lower level at ten past two. I had come along that section behind the machines. The floor is done; I saw it done, and I could go now and look at it and it is done, and it is very good.

The assignee field is empty. Not a name I did not recognize. Empty.

I go back up the list. Every other job on that shift has a name in it. Forty-one of them. Some of the names are the same name over and over because two people are doing most of the work,

and one job has two names because two people did it, and one has a name and then a second name in brackets because somebody took it over at three.

Forty-one names and one blank.

I scroll down past it and then back up to it twice, which is a thing you do with a screen when you are expecting the screen to have changed.

I showed him when he came back and asked whose job that had been.

He looked at the line for about a second and said, "It's closed."

He said it the way you say a thing that has already been dealt with. He was not dismissing me. He had answered the question he had been asked, which is whether there was a problem, and there was not, because the number was closed and the floor was done.

Then he said the list eats assignees sometimes when a shift is split, and that they get pushed back in on Mondays, and he moved the trolley.

I have looked since. It is still empty.

At about ten to five the night lead went for his break and handed me to somebody else.

The new man introduced himself, took me along to the east end, and was perfectly pleasant, and about four minutes into it I understood that I did not know his name, that I had not caught it, and that this had happened before.

I have been escorted since the eleventh of April. Every restricted area, every airside walk, every site compound, every night. Somebody has been within eyesight of me for every one of those hours, by regulation, because I hold a temporary pass with a red band on it.

I sat down that morning in the parking lot and tried to make a list.

I got to eleven and I am not confident about eleven, and of those eleven I can name one, and that is only because he told me on the first day that he had been asked about the washrooms on his second.

Every one of them had a card and a shift and a set of things they were not doing while they were doing this. Two of them stood outside meeting rooms for two hours. One of them followed me for four hours at a distance of eight metres. One drove.

I could not tell you the face of a single one of them apart from the first.

Twenty past five, third part of the night, the turn.

The building comes back the way a tide does, not the way a light does. There are staff, and then there are more staff, and then there is a queue at a check-in desk that is not open yet with four people in it who know it is not open yet, and the machines have gone, and the crew are on keeping-up now, working a route that follows the passengers rather than the floor.

He was in the middle of telling me about the first bank — about how you can hear the difference in the concourse when the security lane opens, that there is a change in the sound before there is a change in what you can see —

and his radio went, and he said, “Yeah, coming,” and looked at me and said, “Stay with him, I’ll be back,” and went at a pace that was not running and was not walking either, and the man whose name I did not know said, “It’ll be the arrivals side,” and we went the other way.

THE LINE

DAY 52 · 12 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH

The meeting was about surge staffing and it was about surge staffing for nineteen minutes.

Present: the Senior Human Resources Business Partner, who I will call the Business Partner because that is what everybody in the room called her, including her; a labour relations advisor who holds the living wage file among other things; and, for the first half, the Chaos-Weaver, who had come to give the contractor numbers and who left when he had given them.

The surge material first, because it is what I had come for.

Twelve days out. The Authority's own staff go onto an amended pattern for the operational window. Leave is embargoed for some groups. Shifts extend for others. A small number of roles are doubled up, which means two people doing a job that ordinarily takes one, because the failure mode in those weeks is not that somebody cannot do the work, it is that somebody is in the wrong place and there is no second one.

The union has been consulted, which is a word that covers a range of experiences, and in this case appears to have gone well, and the Business Partner said twice that it had gone well, which I noted.

She then took me through the parts nobody puts in a plan.

Parking, because the amended pattern puts more staff on site at once than there are usual staff spaces, and a temporary arrangement exists, and the temporary arrangement has already generated correspondence.

Food, because the staff cafeteria closes at a time that made sense before the pattern changed, and somebody has had to

negotiate with a tenant to keep a unit open for the people who work here, and that negotiation was commercial, because it would be.

Rest space, which is the one she was most concerned about and which she said is always the first thing to be given away and the first thing you regret.

And a bank of what she called, without any irony that I could detect, *unplanned absence assumptions* — a number, arrived at by looking at what happened in previous heavy periods, which is the organization writing down in advance how many people it expects will not come in.

I asked whether that felt strange to write down.

She said it feels much stranger not to.

Everybody else out there — the airlines, the handlers, the screening contractor, the concessions, the fuel company, the cleaning contractors — is doing the same exercise on their own account, at their own cost, to their own timetable, and the Authority has visibility of some of it and asks nicely about the rest.

The Chaos-Weaver gave the contractor headcount. Janitorial, building maintenance, landscaping, traffic management: about sixteen hundred people across those services, against a direct establishment of a little under a thousand.

He was asked whether the sixteen hundred would hold through the operational window. He said it would go to nineteen hundred and forty in the second week of June and back down over the following ten days, and gave the shape of it week by week, and the Business Partner asked whether that was the plan or the forecast, and he said it was the number.

He was asked one further question, about a specific contract, and did not answer it. He answered a different one, which was what the questioner had needed and had not asked for, and which took nine words, and the questioner said “Right, yes” in the voice of somebody who has just been saved two weeks.

Then he left.

(He was in the room eleven minutes. He did not sit down. Nobody asked him to, and he did not appear to be waiting for it, and it was only afterwards that I worked out that he had come up two floors to say four sentences that could have been an email, and that the four sentences had put a real number on the table before the argument started rather than after it.)

It was the advisor who asked, and he did not ask it as an ambush. He asked whether the amended pattern applied to the qualifying contractors as well, which is a completely ordinary operational question with an answer, and the answer is that it applies to them through their contracts and not through us, and that we ask.

And then, because we were already there, he said, "And the tenants we just ask."

And the meeting stopped being about June.

I should say what the Business Partner actually does, because I had assumed a Senior Human Resources Business Partner was a person who runs recruitment and I was wrong by an order of magnitude.

She sits with the operating leaders. She is in the room when a department is restructured and she is in the room when somebody is dismissed and she is in the room for the grievance afterwards. She holds the classification questions, which are the ones about whether a job is the job it says it is on the sheet, and she told me those take longer than anything else and matter more than anybody outside believes.

She has an office and does not use it. She said the job is done in other people's offices, and that the day she starts holding meetings in her own is the day she has stopped being useful.

She also has, on the shelf behind that unused desk, the framed living wage certification.

I did not comment on this and neither did she and I do not think for one second that she had failed to notice.

The facts are not in dispute and neither of them ever disputed them, so I will set them out once.

The Airport Authority is a certified living wage employer and was the first airport in Canada to be certified.

The rate is not set by the Authority. It is calculated annually by a third party for the region, on a model household with two working parents and two children, against the actual local cost of shelter, food, childcare and transit, and it moves, and in this region it moves upward, hard, because of the first of those four. When the number moves, the certification requires the employer to move with it. That is the part employers find difficult and it is the point of the thing.

The certification covers the Authority's own employees. It also covers what the scheme calls Qualifying Contractors: a contractor whose contract is above a value threshold and whose people are on site above an hours threshold. That is what captures the sixteen hundred — janitorial, building maintenance, landscaping, traffic management.

It does not capture people who work for tenants.

A tenant is not a contractor. A tenant has a lease, and a lease is not a service agreement, and the Authority is not a party to what a tenant pays.

That is the position. It is accurate. Both people in that room agreed it was accurate. What they disagreed about was whether it was the end of the sentence.

The Business Partner's case, which she made first and made well:

We are not the employer. We cannot be the employer. The moment we start setting the wage in somebody else's business we have taken on the liability of a joint employer without any of the control, and that is not a theoretical exposure, there is case law, and it moves.

Second, and this is the one she cared about: put it in the lease and it gets priced. Every operator bidding for a unit prices it in. A national group with forty sites absorbs it in a spreadsheet. A woman with one kitchen on Kingsway cannot, and she is already looking at a fit-out at airport construction rates and a personal guarantee against her existing business. You will have written a clause that says we care about low-paid workers and its first effect will be to remove from the competition every operator who is not a chain.

And third: we would have to audit it. Payroll. Somebody's actual payroll, monthly, at forty-odd businesses, with the enforcement that implies. We do not have that function. We would have to build it, and it would be a real department, and it would be adversarial from the first week.

(She was not defending anything. She has spent nine years inside this and has the arguments at her fingertips because she has had them, repeatedly, mostly with herself.)

The advisor's case, which he made second, quietly, and which took about ninety seconds:

We already audit them.

Every tenant reports gross sales monthly on a prescribed form. We hold the right to audit those sales and we exercise it. We require them to use point-of-sale systems from a list, because the list is what we can read.

And we enforce street pricing. Which means that if a tenant charges eleven dollars for a sandwich here that costs nine dollars downtown, somebody from this organization goes and

looks at their downtown menu and compares it, and then a letter goes out.

So the mechanism exists. There is a person whose job includes checking what our tenants charge.

There is nobody whose job includes checking what our tenants pay.

He said: I am not saying we should do it. I am saying we should stop describing it as something we cannot do. We can do it. We have decided not to, for reasons that are mostly good, and one of them is the Kingsway woman and one of them is the liability and one of them is that it would be an enormous amount of work. Those are decisions. Let's call them decisions.

The Business Partner said that was not fair, and then, immediately, that it was fair, and that she disliked it, and those two things arrived about a second apart.

Then she said the thing that I think is the strongest argument anybody made in that room, and it was against her own side:

She said that when she explains the position externally she says *we are not a party to those negotiations*, and that the sentence is true, and that she has noticed she says it slightly faster than she says her other sentences.

They went round it twice more, and it was in the second round that the meeting produced the thing I have kept.

She asked him what he thought the number was — how many people work in this terminal for a tenant, at a wage below the certified rate.

He said he did not know precisely, that a figure had been published by a union in a report she had also read, that the figure was in the low thousands across the site, and that he was not going to quote a number he could not stand behind in a room with a director in it.

She said that was the right answer and that it was also the problem.

He said, "We could count them."

She said, "We could ask them to be counted."

He said, "That's a different sentence."

She said, "It's the only one we've got standing."

He said the certification could be extended at lease renewal, phased, with a floor rather than the certified rate, and a carve-out below a size threshold that would protect the single-site operator.

She said a carve-out below a size threshold means the smallest employers can pay the least, which is where the problem already is.

He said yes. He said that was the flaw and he had not solved it.

She said she had been trying to solve it since 2022.

Neither of them raised their voice. Nobody said anything they had not thought about carefully beforehand. It was the most useful forty minutes I have spent at this airport and nothing came of it.

Neither of them said anything I could use. That is not a complaint. I had come into that room believing, in the vague way a person believes things they have not examined, that inside every institution there is somebody who knows the answer and is being prevented from saying it. There was nobody like that in that room. There were two people who had both thought about it longer than I have and had arrived at different places and could each say the strongest version of the other's case.

I read the papers for this at my own kitchen table on the Sunday, which is where all of it gets read.

The table seats four and has done since 2009 and the third chair has a wobble that a person who lives here has stopped noticing. There is a stack on it that is now permanent: the board pack, the two binders, a printout of the certification standard, and underneath all of that a folder from the society that I have not opened and that has the AGM minutes in it, which are somebody else's business now and which somebody has forwarded me anyway.

Nineteen years of my working life fit in that folder. The board pack on top of it is one meeting.

I am not making a point with that. It is a description of a table.

Here is what I saw on the terminal walk in April, before I knew any of this.

A woman was cleaning the glass on the outside of a food unit. Inside the unit, three feet away with the counter between them, a man was making coffee.

She is covered by a certification this organization is proud of and puts on its website. He is not.

Neither of them chose that. The difference between them is not a wall or a floor or a security door. It is that her employer holds a service contract and his employer holds a lease.

We audit what our tenants charge. We do not audit what they pay. Every reason for that is a real reason, and the arrangement is still that the organization decided to look at one of those two things.

The meeting ended at twenty past eleven because the room was booked.

There is a booking system. It is on a panel by the door and it goes red four minutes before your time is up, and the red is not subtle and is not meant to be, and there is a person somewhere who chose that shade.

The meeting ended at twenty past eleven because the room was booked.

There was a genuine knock. Four people came in with laptops for something about signage and stood in the doorway doing the apologetic shuffle that people do, and the advisor started stacking his papers before the Business Partner had finished her sentence, and she finished it anyway, at speed, to nobody in particular.

In the corridor she said we should pick it up.

He said yes.

She said she would find a slot.

I do not know whether she did. I am writing this ten days later and I have not asked, and there is a version of these weeks in which nobody in this building has a forty-minute conversation about anything that is not June.

What I know is that the certification is on the website, that it is accurate, that sixteen hundred people are covered by it who would not otherwise be, that the rate moves every year and the Authority moves with it, that this is a genuinely good thing which this organization did before any other airport in this country did it.

And that a man was making coffee three feet from a woman cleaning the glass.

THE COMMITTEE

DAY 54 · 10 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH

The papers arrived on the Wednesday of the week before and ran to two hundred and eighty pages.

I read all of them, which I am told is a thing new directors do and stop doing, and which took two evenings and most of a Sunday, and by the end of it I had a page of notes with eleven items on it.

The meeting ran ninety-four minutes and I used one of the eleven.

The two hundred and eighty pages are not padding. I want to be accurate about that, because *two hundred and eighty pages* is a figure people use to mean something. It is a year-end audit plan, an enterprise risk register with its supporting narrative, two internal audit reports in full, a quarterly capital report with appendices, a treasury update, and the minutes and terms of reference. Every page of it is a thing somebody made.

What is difficult about it is not the volume. It is that a director is expected to arrive knowing which forty pages matter, and the pack does not say which forty, and cannot, because which forty depends on what you already know.

I read all two hundred and eighty because I do not yet know which forty. That is not diligence. It is the absence of a skill.

Audit and Risk. Nine o'clock, the boardroom, six people at the table and four along the wall.

The terms of reference say what the committee does and I had read them twice and understood them properly only when I watched it. It oversees financial reporting, the external audit, internal audit, the risk framework, and compliance. It does not manage any of those things. It satisfies itself that somebody else is managing them, and the art of it is the difference between those two verbs.

I am a member of this committee, which I had not particularly registered when I was appointed to it, and which means my presence has a function beyond being present. There is a quorum and I am part of it.

The chair is a director I have met twice. She runs it the way you run something you have run before: she starts on the minute, she says what the meeting is going to do before it does it, and she does not read anything out.

I am going to give the items with the time each one took, because the times are the meeting.

ITEM 1 — MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING. TWO MINUTES.

Approved. One correction, from the corporate secretary, to a figure in a paragraph that summarized somebody else's summary.

ITEM 2 — MATTERS ARISING. FOUR MINUTES.

Three of them. Two are closed. The third is not and the chair asks for it to come back in September with a date attached, and somebody writes that down, and I have since watched enough of this building to know that the date attached is the instruction.

ITEM 3 — THE EXTERNAL AUDITORS. TWENTY-SIX MINUTES, OF WHICH ELEVEN ARE IN CAMERA.

They come in. They have a plan for the year-end audit and it is in the papers and they walk it in about seven minutes, and then there are questions, and the questions are better than I expected and one of them is quite hard and the auditor answers it well.

Then management leaves the room.

I had read the phrase *in camera* in the terms of reference and had understood it as a procedure. It is a thing that happens to a room. Eleven people become six. The chair asks the auditors whether there is anything they wish to raise in the absence of management, in a form of words that is clearly the form of words, and the senior one says no, and then says one thing anyway, and it is not a criticism, it is an observation about the timetable.

The exchange takes ninety seconds, start to finish. The point of it is not the ninety seconds. The point of it is that it happens every time, so that on the occasion when there is something, saying it does not require anybody to do anything unusual.

Management comes back in. Nobody says anything about it.

ITEM 4 — THE ENTERPRISE RISK REGISTER. NINETEEN MINUTES.

This is the item I had spent most of the Sunday on.

There is a register of principal risks. Each one has an owner, a rating, a direction of travel and a set of mitigations, and the ratings are on a matrix, and the matrix has the property every such matrix has, which is that everything important ends up in the same corner of it.

The discussion is not about the top risks. Everybody agrees about the top risks. The discussion is about two things that have moved, and about one that has been on the register for four years without moving, which the chair asks about, and the answer is that it is being managed and not solved, and the chair says that is an answer and asks for it to be described that way in the next paper rather than as a mitigation.

That is the sharpest thing anybody says all morning and it is about a word.

The four-year risk, for the record, is not a secret and is not interesting: it is a dependency on a category of specialist labour that this region does not produce enough of. The mitigations are training, retention and contracts. All three are real, all three are being done, and none of them changes the fact that the province does not make enough of these people.

Somebody says the word *structural* and the chair lets it stand.

I asked, afterwards, why a risk that cannot be reduced stays on a register at all. The corporate secretary said that a register is not a list of things you are going to fix. It is a list of the things that would kill you, kept where you can see it, so that nobody is ever surprised in a way that requires an explanation afterwards.

ITEM 4A — TREASURY UPDATE. SIX MINUTES.

Debt maturities, the rating, covenant headroom, the interest rate position. It is presented by somebody from finance who is plainly enjoying himself and who is asked two questions, both by the same director, both about the same thing, and the second one is better than the first.

I understood about two thirds of this and I marked the third I did not understand, and I have since asked, and it is now about ninety per cent, and the ten per cent is a swap.

ITEM 5 — CAPITAL PROGRAMME, QUARTERLY REPORT. FORTY SECONDS.
Taken as read.

I want to give that its own line. Forty seconds.

It is thirty-one pages. It has the deferred maintenance position in it as an appendix. The manager who prepares it spends, I later establish, the best part of three weeks a quarter on it, and it goes to this committee, and this committee reads it in

advance and has no questions, and the chair says “taken as read” and somebody says “agreed” and it is done.

Nothing is wrong. That is what taken as read means. It means the paper was good enough that nobody needed to ask.

I understand this and I have understood it since about item two and I still wrote down the forty seconds.

(A note on the room, because it is not the room from my first day and I had assumed there was only one.

This is the smaller one. Twelve chairs, a screen nobody uses, a window on the north side, and a jug of water with the condensation already going by nine because somebody filled it at half past eight.

Nobody sits at the head. The chair sits along the side, third from the end, which I am fairly sure is deliberate and which nobody has ever explained to me.

Along the wall there are four people from management who are present in case an item needs them. Two of them are needed. The other two sit through ninety-four minutes for an item that takes eleven, and neither of them appears to consider this remarkable, and both of them have laptops open and are working.)

ITEM 6 — INTERNAL AUDIT, PLAN AND FINDINGS. TWENTY-TWO MINUTES.

Three completed reviews. Two are fine. The third has findings, and the person who owns the area is at the table, and the way she handles it is the most useful thing I see all morning: she agrees with all of it, gives dates for the two she can, says she cannot give a date for the third and says why, and asks for the third to be recorded as accepted rather than as remediated.

The chair says that is the right thing to have asked for.

Then she asks whether anybody has told the team that they did the right thing, and there is a pause, and the answer is no,

and the chair says, “Somebody should,” and the meeting moves on and it takes eleven seconds and I do not know whether anybody did.

ITEM 7 — PRESENTATION, COMMERCIAL REVENUE OUTLOOK. EIGHT MINUTES.

This is the item I have thought about most since.

The item is presented by an analyst from the commercial team. She is young and it is plainly her first time in this room and she has brought slides that she does not need. She gets through it. She is good and she is fast and her hands shake slightly at the beginning and stop.

She is the only person at that table who has no ally in the room. Her manager is not present. Nobody in the horseshoe has any stake in whether she does well.

The Companion is along the wall, because Tenant Relations has an interest in the retail numbers and because that is the sort of thing that puts a person along a wall.

At the end of it, when the questions have stopped and the analyst is gathering her laptop, the Companion asks her one thing, from the wall, which is about a footnote on the fourth slide.

It is a real question. It is about her actual work and it is about the part she was most careful with, and the analyst answers it standing up, holding a laptop, at some length, and much better than she presented.

The chair lets it run.

When the analyst gets to the door she looks back at the wall and the Companion nods at her, and she goes out.

That is all of it. Nobody at the table registers that anything has happened, because nothing has.

ITEM 8 — THE OPERATIONAL WINDOW. ELEVEN MINUTES.

The state of readiness, the surge staffing, the arrangements with the agencies, the exercise last week and the eight findings

from it, two of which the committee is told will be actioned before the period and six of which will not.

Nobody is anxious. That is the thing I had not anticipated and I am still turning it over. There is a room of people a week and a half out from the largest operational period in the history of this organization and the register is discussed with less heat than the word *mitigation*.

The chair asks one question, which is whether anything on the risk register has moved because of the period.

The answer is no. The answer is that everything on the register is a thing that would be true anyway and will simply be more expensive to get wrong for three weeks.

The manager, in this case, is somebody I have not met, and I have thought since about what it costs to say *I cannot give you a date and here is why* in a room whose function is to be satisfied that things are under control.

It costs nothing, in that room, on that day, because the chair is good. That is a fact about the chair and not about the institution, and it is the sort of thing a person cannot put in a paper.

ITEM 9 — ANY OTHER BUSINESS. NINE MINUTES.

Here is my one contribution.

I asked a question about the interaction between two of the mitigations on item four, because it seemed to me that one of them assumed a resource the other one consumed.

It is a good question. It is a good enough question that the chair let it be asked properly and did not head it off.

It is answered on page fourteen of the paper.

There is a particular sensation attached to this and I had not had it since about 1998. It is not embarrassment. Embarrassment would require somebody in the room to be enjoying it and nobody is. It is closer to the sensation of putting your

weight on a step that is not there — a very short drop, entirely private, over before anybody could have seen it.

It is answered on page fourteen.

Not adjacent to page fourteen. Not implied by page fourteen. There is a paragraph on page fourteen which addresses precisely the point I raised, in about sixty words, and which I read on the Sunday and did not connect to the two mitigations, which are on pages thirty-one and thirty-three.

The person who answered did it kindly. He said, “There’s something on that at fourteen, I think — yes, fourteen,” and read it out, and then said the honest part, which was that the paper does not link the three and probably should, and that he would link them.

So the outcome of my one contribution is a cross-reference. The chair said, “Good,” and moved to close.

CLOSE. TWO MINUTES.

The chair went round the table and asked each member whether there was anything else. Everybody said no. It is a form and it takes two minutes and its function is that saying yes has to be possible.

Then she thanked the people along the wall by department, without notes, correctly, including the analyst.

Afterwards, in the corridor, I said something to the corporate secretary about item five and the forty seconds.

She said that is the item that would have taken forty minutes eleven years ago, before the paper was any good.

I said that seemed like the wrong direction of travel for the person who writes it.

She said, "It's the only direction of travel there is. If it's working you don't hear about it."

I said something else, which I have thought about since and which I would not say again in those words.

I said that the meeting had been shorter than I expected.

She stopped walking, briefly, in the way of somebody deciding how much to say, and then said that it was ninety-four minutes on top of about nine hundred hours of preparation across the organization, and that the ratio is the point rather than a failure of the ratio, and that a committee which takes four hours is a committee whose papers were not finished.

Then she said the papers for the next one go out in September and asked whether I would be reading all of them again, and I said yes, and she said, "For a while," and held the lift.

THE PROTOCOL

DAY 55 · 9 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH
TEMPORARY PASS T-4471 · ESCORT REQUIRED

The environment team gave me a morning and sent two people, and one of them makes jokes.

He is also very good at his job. Those two things sit together perfectly comfortably in a corridor and I have found them harder to keep together on a page.

He runs the team. Within four minutes of meeting me he had said that the airport is the only place he knows where the environmental file involves both the highest density of raptors in the country and a duty free, and that most days he cannot tell which is the harder to manage.

That is not a good joke. It is not a bad one either. It is a *fine* joke, delivered with the timing of a man who has been told his jokes are fine, and he made eleven more before lunch, and by the fourth I had understood that this is how he holds a conversation open while he thinks, and by the eighth I was laughing at them, and I am not sure whether that was the jokes improving or me.

The other was the specialist, who is the Conscience-Keeper, and who did not make any jokes and did not need to.

Before any of it, though, the document.

There is a paragraph in this organization's own published material, the material it uses to recruit people onto its board, which is how I came to read it in the first place. It says that

the Authority recognizes its activities affect different groups in different ways, and that it strives to balance the access it provides to the wider world against the effects of aviation on the quality of life of local residents, and against the climate impact of air travel.

It is a recruiting document. It states the case against air travel, in the third paragraph, and then asks you to apply.

I raised this with them expecting either a defence or a wince and got neither. The manager said that paragraph is the reason he took the job, that he had worked somewhere previously that would not have put it in writing, and that a file like his is unmanageable inside an organization that will not say the difficult sentence out loud.

Then he said that of course saying it and doing something about it are two different things, and that his department is the second one, and that they have the smaller budget.

We started with the commitment, because everybody starts with the commitment.

Net zero by 2030, from the Authority's own operations. Not the aircraft. This distinction is the first thing they explain and it is the thing that arrives in the room already contested, because a person hearing *the airport will be net zero* hears something enormous, and what is being said is narrower and is still very hard.

The Authority controls the buildings, the ground fleet, the plant, the heat, the light, the power, and the ground it sits on. It does not control what an airline burns. It can influence — it can price, it can provide, it can build the infrastructure for a different fuel and it can make the case at a level above itself — but the emissions that a passenger thinks of when they think of an airport are somebody else's inventory.

He said, "We are responsible for the kettle, not the tea."

I wrote it down and then looked at it for a while, because it is either quite good or it is nothing at all, and I have not settled it.

Then water, which is the part of the file nobody outside ever asks about and which takes up more of their year than the carbon does.

An airport is a very large impermeable surface sitting in an estuary. Everything that lands on it goes somewhere, and where it goes has to be known, sampled, and defended.

The one that gets attention is glycol. In a cold snap the aircraft are sprayed, and the fluid comes off, and it does not evaporate politely. It has to be collected. Pads, drains, holding, treatment. Glycol in water strips the oxygen out of it, and the water on the other side of this fence has salmon in it.

The specialist said the design problem is that you build the collection for the worst winter and then you have nine winters that are not that winter.

The manager said, "Nine years of very expensive nothing, and then one year where it's the only thing anybody cares about," and then said that this describes his entire department, and looked pleased.

There is also the ordinary business of a place this size: fuel interception, spill response, contaminated ground from decades when nobody wrote anything down, and a remediation file on a lot at the south end that has been running longer than anybody currently on the team.

The heat is the part they are proudest of and I had seen it already, from the other end, in a field.

The wells go down into the island and the island gives back its temperature, and a building this size heated and cooled off the ground under it is a serious piece of engineering that was

half-built and stopped. They did not dwell on the stopping. It has been dwelt on enough by other people.

What the Conscience-Keeper said about it was that the field will still be there in two hundred years and that the question of whether it is connected to anything is a question about the next forty.

The fuel work is at an earlier stage and is honest about being at an earlier stage. There is study money, some of it provincial. There is a question about supply, which is the real question, because a sustainable aviation fuel is not a thing you install, it is a thing you buy, forever, at a price, in competition with every other airport that wants it.

He said, "Everyone wants to be the first airport to fuel a flight with it. Nobody wants to be the fourteenth airport to have a contract for it."

I asked whether any of this changes in June.

The manager said no. The specialist said it doesn't change, but the reporting year does, and the reporting year is what everybody argues about afterwards.

Then noise, which is the part I had not expected to be the substance of the morning.

There is a restricted period overnight, from a minute after midnight until the morning shift. It is not a curfew; the airport does not close. It is a set of restrictions, and they are published, and the exceptions run through a process, and the exceptions are recorded.

There is a Noise Management Plan. It runs to a document. There is a committee. There is a line people can call, and people call it, and every call is logged, and the log is real, and I asked whether anything happens as a result of a call and was told: sometimes.

The pattern of the calls is not what I expected. A large share of the volume comes from a small number of people, which everybody in this field knows and which is used unfairly. The specialist was careful about it. He said a person who calls forty times a year is not a nuisance, they are a person who has been given a phone number instead of an answer, and that the number of calls is a measurement of the organization and not of the caller.

He also said that the calls go up when the weather changes, because the weather changes the routes, and that on some evenings you can tell the wind has swung by looking at the log before looking out of a window.

The manager said a complaint about noise is almost never about the decibel.

He said it very quickly, in the middle of something else, and then went on, and I made him come back to it.

He said that when you go out and measure at the address, the measurement is nearly always inside what was predicted. And that this does not mean the person is wrong. It means that what they are reporting is not what you measured. He said the thing people are actually reporting is a change: a route moved, or a frequency went up, or a new type came onto the schedule that sounds different at the same volume. And that the second thing they are reporting, underneath, is that nobody told them.

Then he made a joke about how the only sound anybody wants at an airport is the sound of somebody else's plane, and it landed about as well as the previous nine.

They hold an annual workshop on the Noise Management Plan. It is hosted with Musqueam, on whose traditional territory this island sits, under the agreement, and I will come to the agreement.

The manager described how the workshop runs. Presentation, then technical explanation, then questions.

I asked how many people come.

He told me. It is not many.

And how many of them are the same people every year.

Most of them, he said, and said it a little more slowly, because he had heard where the question was going before I got there.

So I told them what I know, which is the only thing in nine weeks that I have known and nobody else in the room did.

If you run a consultation as presentation, explanation, questions, you will get the same eleven people every year, and they will be the eleven people who are comfortable standing up in a room, and everybody else will decide within four minutes that this is not a meeting where their thing can be said. I ran meetings like that for two years before somebody older than me took me aside.

What you do instead is you break the room. Tables of six. No microphone. Somebody at each table writing down what is said in the words it was said in, and the writing-down visible. You lose the ability to answer everything on the spot and you gain the eighty per cent of people who will talk at a table and will never talk at a microphone.

It is not a clever technique. It is nineteen years old in my sector and older than that in others. Nobody teaches it to engineers.

The specialist wrote it down. Actually wrote it down, at length, and asked two questions about how you handle the person who wants the microphone anyway, which is the right question and is the only hard part.

The manager said, "So we're doing tables."

And then he said the workshop is in October and that October is a long way past June, and that we would come back to it, and I said fine.

(It is in the plan for October. I have seen the plan. It says presentation, technical explanation, questions.)

The agreement is a thirty-year agreement with Musqueam, signed in 2017, and it was the first of its kind between an airport and a First Nation in this country.

It has four pillars: social, economic, environment, governance.

Under it there are scholarships — ten a year, at ten thousand dollars each, funded from non-aeronautical revenue and explicitly not from the improvement fee. There are apprenticeships and employment commitments. There is revenue sharing. There is an engagement protocol for future development on the island. There is joint identification and protection of archaeological resources, which on Sea Island is not a formality. There is Musqueam input into environmental emergency planning. And there is the annual noise workshop, which Musqueam hosts.

The agreement followed decades in which Musqueam asserted rights and title over these lands, and, by the Band's own account, the prospect of litigation.

The agreement is not a recognition of title. It says so. Musqueam's commitment under it operates regardless of whether title is recognized.

Both of those sentences are in the public record and I have set them down in the order they occur.

The specialist's account of the working relationship was procedural and specific: who is contacted, at what stage, on what kind of work, and what happens when something is found in the ground. He described a stop-work process in the flat voice of a man describing a stop-work process, and then said the thing I have kept.

I had asked how long the engagement protocol takes when something is found.

He said, "Everything stops."

I said that this must be difficult to hold against a construction programme.

He said, "That's what stopping is."

Then he said the number, which is the only thing he said all day with any weight behind it at all: thirty years against about eleven thousand.

What happens in practice when work stops he described flatly: the crew stands down, the area is protected, the protocol runs, the specialists come, and the cost of that time sits with somebody, and which somebody depends on the contract, and the contracts have got better at saying so because they had to.

Has it ever gone badly.

The process has never gone badly, he said. He said the thing that goes badly is when somebody schedules a job as though it will not happen, and then it happens, and then a person who has never read the protocol is standing in a trench at four in the afternoon making a decision they are not qualified to make.

"So how do you stop that?"

"You tell them at the tender stage that it's going to happen. Not that it might."

The structure on the dyke.

We went out to the west side in the afternoon, along the dyke, because I had asked to see the conservation area and because the specialist wanted to look at something.

The conservation area is the part of Sea Island that is not the airport, and standing on the dyke you can see both at once, which is the environmental file rendered as a view. On one side, foreshore and marsh and the tide out and birds in a quantity I have stopped trying to estimate. On the other, the fence, and then grass cut to a height chosen by argument, and then the field.

There are people out there on a Thursday afternoon with binoculars. They are not staff. They have driven out to a dyke beside an international airport to look at birds, and they are

correct to, because it is one of the best places in the country to do it, and the reason the birds are there is the reason the airport has sixteen people and nine trucks.

The manager said, “Everyone comes for the ducks, nobody stays for the ducks,” and I asked him what that meant and he said he wasn’t sure yet, he was still working on it.

There is a post out there. Concrete pad, galvanized post, a small enclosure on top about the size of a bread bin, a solar panel the size of a book, and a conduit going down into the pad.

I asked what it monitors.

The manager said he had always assumed it was the province.

The specialist said the province had said in 2019 that it was not theirs, and that at various points it had been attributed to the federal fisheries people, to the diking authority, to a university, and to us.

I asked who maintains it.

He said the panel is clean.

That is all he said. The panel was clean; you could see it was clean; the enclosure had been opened at some point by somebody with the right key and closed again properly.

Then he pointed at a stand of grass forty metres on and said that was what he had come out to look at, and we went and looked at it, and it was a stand of grass, and it was the wrong grass, and that turned out to be genuinely interesting and took twenty minutes.

The Conscience-Keeper said one further thing on the walk back to the vehicle and I am setting it down without surrounding it.

I had asked him, because it had been nagging at me since the well field in April, what the longest-dated thing on his file is. What has the furthest-out end date.

He said the remediation lot at the south end. He gave me a year for it. Then he said that the year is not when it ends, it is when the monitoring is currently scheduled to be reviewed, and that a monitoring schedule is reviewed and extended, and that in his experience the review has never yet resulted in a shorter number.

Does anything ever come off the list.

He said, "Not while I've been here."

On the way back the manager asked me what I had made of the morning, and I said something about how much of the environmental file turns out to be conversations with people who do not report to us.

He said, "That's the job. We're the only department where the client is a duck."

I said that was the best one he had made all day.

He said, "That one's fifteen years old."

Then he said he had a better one about the wastewater, and told it, and it was not better.

THE PIPE

DAY 57 · 7 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH
TEMPORARY PASS T-4471 · ESCORT REQUIRED

Ninety minutes, with a man who does not work for us, on a site we do not own, about a system nobody in this building can instruct.

He did twelve years in air cargo before this and he talked about that too, and he talked more or less without stopping, and I have not cut into it, because there was nowhere to cut in.

I used to write these up at the weekend. I am writing this one at ten o'clock the same night with my coat still on.

Right. First thing. We're not you.

You're the airport. We're the fuel company. Different company, different board, different insurance, different everything. We're a not-for-profit and we're owned by the airlines — the carriers that use the system are the members, and the members own it, and the members pay for it through a charge on every litre that goes through. That's the model, entire. No shareholder, no dividend, no return. Cost, spread over throughput.

So when you ask who owns the fuel at this airport: not the airport. Not us either, mostly. We own the pipe and the tanks and the trucks and the hydrant. The fuel in it belongs to whoever bought it, and that's the carriers, and it's tracked to the litre.

We're a tenant of the Authority on the airside land and we're a tenant of the Port down at the water and we're a licensee

of the province on the line between them. Four landlords, one system.

Now. Where does it come from.

It comes in by ship and by rail and by truck to a terminal on the south arm, and there's a tank farm there, and from there it goes by pipeline. That pipeline is about thirteen kilometres and it's buried end to end, and it goes under a river, and it took twelve years and a hearing to build and about two years to actually build.

It took that long because a pipeline through an estuary and under a working river is not a thing anybody waves through, and should not be. There were hearings. There were years of them. There were people who did not want it and who had good reasons and who lost, and there were conditions attached to the permission that we live with now and will live with for the life of the asset.

And roughly eleven hundred metres of it is inside your fence.

Think about that for a second. There is a regulated hydrocarbon pipeline running under the airside portion of this airport, and it is regulated by the provincial energy regulator, not by Transport Canada, not by the Authority. Your people cannot dig on that alignment without our locate and our sign-off. Ours. On your land.

That is the single strangest sentence in my job and I've said it eleven times in this building.

What happens once it's here.

It comes into storage on Sea Island. There's days of it. I won't give you the number of days but it is days and not hours, and the design principle is that a supply interruption at the water end does not become a schedule interruption at the gate end for a meaningful period.

From storage it goes into a hydrant system. That's a network of pipe under the apron with valves at the stands. So the fuel does not arrive at the aircraft on a truck. The fuel is already there, under the concrete, and the truck that pulls up next to a widebody is not carrying anything. It's a cart. It's a filter and a meter and a hose and a man. It plugs into the ground.

People find that disappointing. They shouldn't. A hydrant system is the reason you can turn a widebody in ninety minutes and the reason there aren't forty tankers driving around the apron all day, and every tanker you remove from an apron is a collision you don't have.

And here's a layer you won't have got yet. The man on the hose doesn't work for me either.

Fuelling the aircraft is called into-plane, and into-plane is contracted, and the contractor is a separate company again, and in some cases the carrier has its own arrangement. So on any given stand you have got: fuel that belongs to an airline, in a pipe that belongs to a company owned by the airlines, under an apron that belongs to the federal Crown and is operated by the Authority, being put into an aircraft by an employee of a fourth company, watched by a handler working for a fifth.

Five entities, one hose. And if that hose comes out of the wing on the ground, everybody in that list is in the room afterwards.

I have been in that room. It is a very calm room, and it is calm because the reporting lines are written down and everybody knew before they walked in what they were responsible for. That is not luck. Somebody sat down years ago and wrote it, and the person who wrote it is retired and nobody knows their name.

The testing. This is the part I'd want a director to hear.

Jet fuel is tested more than any other thing on this airport, and it is tested more than most of you would believe.

Water is the enemy. Water gets into fuel. Condensation, temperature; it simply does. And water in a fuel system at altitude becomes ice, and ice does not go through a fuel control unit. So there is filtration at every stage and a check at every transfer and there are sumps that get drawn and looked at by a human being with a jar.

A jar. In this system, with the money that is in it, the last line is a man holding a glass jar up to the light to see if there's water in the bottom of it.

That is not a legacy embarrassment. That is deliberate. That check has been kept because it works, and because every single thing above it can produce a reading, and a reading is a thing that can be wrong quietly. Water in a jar is not ambiguous.

The sump draw happens on a schedule and it happens after anything unusual: a delivery, a temperature swing, a period of standing. It is written in a book. There is an actual book.

We also test for particulates, and for microbial growth, because yes, things live in it, at the interface, and they are a maintenance problem and not a horror film. And for conductivity, and there's a certificate chain from the refinery to the wing and if a link in that chain is missing the fuel does not go on the aircraft. It does not matter whose flight it is or how late it is.

I have had that conversation with a captain. Once. It was short.

Now cargo, because you asked and because I did it for twelve years and I miss it.

Cargo is the half of this airport that nobody looks at, and it is the half that will still be running on a day when no passenger wants to fly anywhere.

Two kinds. Belly cargo, which goes in the hold under the passengers on a normal flight, and which is most of it by tonnage on a lot of routes, and which is why an airline will keep

a route that looks marginal on seats. And freighters, which are aircraft with no seats and a nose that opens, and which run at hours that suit nobody except the people who like those hours.

What goes out of here: seafood. Live crab, spot prawns, geoduck. Out of the water, into a box with a chill pack, onto an aircraft, and eating in Asia inside about a day and a half. There is a whole industry on this coast that exists because of a widebody schedule, and if you told those fishermen their business model depends on an airline's decision about aircraft type on a Tuesday they'd tell you they know that already.

The seafood side has a rhythm you can set a watch by. There is a day in the season when the spot prawn boats land and there is a queue of refrigerated trucks on the airside road that afternoon, and the freight forwarders are on the phone about a widebody's belly space in a way that would make a passenger airline blush, and if the aircraft goes tech that day it is not an inconvenience, it is a total loss of a perishable product with a shelf life measured in hours.

What comes in: flowers. Produce out of season. Pharmaceutical, which is the fussiest freight there is and pays accordingly, because it has a temperature range and a documented chain and if the chain breaks the product is not late, it is destroyed. Electronics. And parcels, more every year, which is the thing that has changed most in fifteen years and which has changed what the aircraft look like.

And live animals. Horses go through here. Day-old chicks, in their thousands, which have a window of a very few days and which are the most time-critical thing anybody moves. Tropical fish, in bags, in boxes, with oxygen. Somebody's dog, in the hold, which is the one that gets the attention and is the one the handlers are most careful about, and I will tell you that I have watched a ramp crew move a dog crate like it was a piece of glass in weather where they were not moving anything else carefully.

You want a number that will stay with you: a freighter turn is a couple of hours and inside those two hours the aircraft is unloaded, the deck is reconfigured, and it is loaded again to a weight and balance that is calculated to a tighter tolerance than anything on the passenger side, because passengers move about and sit where they're told and pallets do not.

The bonded side of it is its own education. Freight sits in a warehouse that is technically not yet in the country. The border people have to release it. There are forwarders, and brokers, and a document set for everything, and about half of what goes wrong in air cargo goes wrong on paper rather than in the air.

Why I left it. Since you're going to ask.

Cargo is better and it is harder on your life. Freighters land at three in the morning. Perishables do not wait. The customer is not a person who is going somewhere, it is a person whose money is sitting on a pallet, and they will call you at any hour.

Fuel is a system. A good day in fuel is a day where nothing at all happened and every aircraft left with exactly what it was supposed to have and nobody phoned me.

I've been here nine years and nobody outside this fence has ever thanked me for fuel. Nobody has ever said, that was well fuelled. And that's right. That's correct. If you're thinking about the fuel, something has gone wrong.

He said one more thing on the way out, about the weeks starting on Saturday, and there was no weight on it at all, because for him it was a delivery schedule.

He said: our number goes up about twenty per cent for those weeks. We knew that in the autumn. The tanks are the tanks,

the pipe is the pipe, and the answer to a busy few weeks is that the ship comes more often, and the ship has been booked since the autumn as well.

He said, "The fuel's the easy bit. It's the only part of this airport where you can just order more."

Then he said the only thing that was about a person rather than a system, and he said it as an aside while looking for his keys.

He said the airside road out to their compound is the worst road on the island for getting stuck behind something, because it is the road everybody uses to get to everywhere else.

He said there is a bloke on the services side who is generally out there when it matters. He said he asked him about it once, properly, in a meeting, with a diagram, and the answer took about four seconds and was not about the road at all, and was correct, and he has never been able to reproduce it for anybody since.

His carts have not sat in a queue on that road in about three years. He does not know how that is organized and has stopped asking, because you do not ask about the one thing that has stopped being a problem.

The Chaos-Weaver was at the junction when we drove out.

Not doing anything. Standing at the side of the airside road by the compound gate with a hand-held, at four in the afternoon, in the middle of an entirely clear road. Nothing came the other way while we were on it.

Here is what I had not understood before that morning.

I sat down in April believing that the Airport Authority operates this airport. It does not, in the sense I meant. It

owns the building and the debt and the accountability, and it convenes.

But there is a thing underneath that I had not seen until a man who does not work for us told me where the pipe runs.

If the pipeline stops, this airport stops. Not slowly. Days.

The pipeline is owned by a company owned by the airlines, and licensed by the province, and it runs under land leased from the Port and under a river and under the fence and under the runway I stood beside at five in the morning in April watching a technician log a bird count, and there is no person in this organization who can pick up a telephone and instruct any part of it.

There is a contract. There is a relationship. There are meetings, and they are good meetings, and the man I spent ninety minutes with is manifestly excellent at his job and has been doing it for nine years.

That is the arrangement. It has worked for decades and there is no evident reason it should not work for decades more.

I sit on a board that is accountable for an airport whose fuel arrives through a pipe that nobody at that board has the authority to open or close, and until the sixth of June I did not know the pipe was there.

AIRPORT SOUTH

DAY 58 · 6 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH
TEMPORARY PASS T-4471 · ESCORT REQUIRED

It is a nine-minute drive and it is a different airport.

You come off the road along the north bank of the river and the buildings get lower and closer together and older, and then there is a terminal that is one storey and has a parking lot you can see the end of, and beyond it a line of hangars, and beyond those, water.

The handler meeting me is thirty-ish and has been here four years and does the walking backwards thing that people do when they are showing you something they like.

He says, "So this is the other one."

The scale is the first thing and it does not stop being the first thing.

Across the island there is a building that took twenty-six point nine million people last year. Here there is a terminal with a desk, a scale for weighing bags that is also used for weighing fish, a row of eleven chairs, and a door to the ramp that is propped open with a wooden wedge.

Three aircraft on the near apron. A twin, a single, and something with floats being pulled by hand.

Nobody is wearing a lanyard on the outside of their coat. I check, because I have spent eight weeks in a building where the first thing you do with a stranger is read their chest, and out here everybody knows everybody and the cards are in pockets.

I am the only person in view with a red band on my pass and I am the only person being escorted.

He walks me down the line and does it by hangar.

The first is maintenance. There is a light aircraft with a wing off and two men doing something inside the wing root, and it smells of solvent and hot metal and slightly of coffee. A radio is on. Nobody looks up.

“That’s a six-week job,” he says. “It’s been ten.”

The second hangar is charter. Two turboprops that fly people to places on this coast with no road to them. He tells me the destinations and half of them I have heard of and half I have not, and the half I have not are the ones with about four hundred people in them.

“That’s a lifeline run,” he says, of one of them. “Groceries, mail, somebody’s mother. They know the crew’s names.”

The third is the private side, which is what people picture when they hear this part of the airport exists.

There are two jets in it. One is being cleaned by a woman with a bucket, on a stepladder, doing the leading edge by hand.

The fourth is helicopters, which are their own culture and which he describes to me the way a person describes in-laws they are fond of.

Utility work, mostly. Powerline patrol, survey, fire in the season, heli-logging, and the ones that take people to boats. There is one out on the pad with the doors off and a man lying on his back underneath it.

And behind that, the part of this apron that changes the temperature of the conversation.

Air ambulance operates off this coast, and some of it is fixed wing and some of it is rotary, and the geography here is a long thin province with communities on it that have a nursing station and no hospital. So a person in a town eleven hundred kilometres up the coast who needs a surgeon is a flight.

He tells me about the calls the way you would tell someone about the weather, which is to say without any decoration, and then he says that the crews on that side of the ramp are the only people out here that everybody else gets out of the way for, automatically, without being asked, and that you can tell a call has come in by watching the vehicles rather than the aircraft.

The weather is the thing this end of the airport runs on and the big terminal barely notices.

Over there, an aircraft with a full instrument fit and two pilots and a runway with lights and a system on the ground goes in weather that is genuinely poor. Here, much of the flying is done lower and slower and closer to terrain, up inlets, into places with water on one side and rock on the other, and the ceiling matters, and the ceiling on this coast is a local phenomenon that can be one thing at the dock and another thing forty kilometres north.

So somebody has to decide. And the decision is made by a pilot, and the pilot is under exactly the pressure you would expect: there are people waiting, there is a lodge with a booking, there is a mother with mail, there is another operator who went twenty minutes ago.

The handler says the good outfits are the ones where nobody ever asks the pilot twice.

I ask whether anybody ever asks twice.

He says, "Not here." Then he says, "Not now," which is a different sentence, and he knows it is, and he goes on.

Because the other thing about this side of the island is the thing nobody puts on the wall next to the photographs of the fish.

Coastal aviation in this province has a history. The mountains are where they are, the weather does what it does, and the record of small aircraft operating into inlets and onto water and up valleys with a schedule and a customer and a margin is not a record anybody in this industry is comfortable reciting. There have been inquiries. There have been recommendations about pressure, and fatigue, and the economics of an operator with four aircraft and a fixed price.

The regulator has been over it more than once. The rules are tighter than they were. The good outfits were already doing most of it.

He tells me this without being asked and without softening it, and then says the part he plainly wants me to leave with, which is that the reason nobody asks the pilot twice here is not that they are nicer people. It is that somebody, at some point, made it a rule, and then made it a habit, and the habit cost money.

Then he says that the day he started, four years ago, somebody sat him down and told him that his job includes not putting a face on when a flight cancels, because a handler's face is a form of pressure, and that he has thought about that sentence more than anything else anybody has said to him at work.

The private terminal is a room with a sofa and a coffee machine and a view of the ramp.

They can do customs here. There is a small room off the side of the lobby with a counter and a chair and a sign, and when an international flight comes in the border people come out from the main airport and process it, and that is a booking and not

a magic wand: you tell them you are coming, and they come, and if you are late they have gone.

The handler says the thing everybody gets wrong is thinking this is faster because it is expensive.

"It's faster because it's smaller," he says. "Twelve people. You can do twelve people in a room. That's all it is."

He says the second thing everybody gets wrong is thinking the clients are difficult. He says some are, in the way some of anybody are, and that most of it is medical, and industry, and people going to a job at a mine, and a lot of it is a family flying to a funeral because there was no other way to get four adults from three cities to one town by Thursday.

The coffee machine is a good one and he is proud of it and points it out.



The water aerodrome is the part I did not know existed.

There is a second aerodrome here, on the river, and it has its own designation and its own procedures, and aircraft take off from it and land on it and it is not the runway, it is the Fraser.

A floatplane comes in while we are standing on the dock. It comes down the river and settles and the spray goes up and it turns and comes toward us, and the sound off water is completely different from the sound off concrete, and I have been at this airport since April and this is the first arrival I have watched from start to finish.

"Twelve minutes," he says. "Dock to dock, if the bags are ready."

He starts telling me about the tide, which matters here, because it is a river and it does what a river does, and the docks float, and the ramp angle at low water is a thing they have opinions about, and he is explaining the winter version of this problem when I look back at the water.

The aircraft is going out. It is already going out, taxiing down the river with the dock behind it empty and the lines flaked on the cleats.

He sees me looking and says the bags were on the dock before it landed, which is all of it, and that on a good day it is not twelve.

He is still talking about the ramp angle. He goes on talking about the ramp angle, which is a good subject and which he knows a lot about, and then a truck comes onto the dock and he waves at it, and we go back up.

He worked the north side first. Two years, ramp, for a handling company, on the international gates.

I ask him what the difference is.

He thinks about it for longer than the question deserves, which is a thing people at this airport do, and says that over there you are working to a time and here you are working to a person. Over there the aircraft has a slot and the slot is the point and there are eleven people on that turn and each of them has a piece of it. Here there is him, and a pilot, and whoever is going, and the aircraft goes when it is ready.

I ask which he prefers.

He says the money is better over there.

I ask again.

He says, "I know everybody's name here." And then, before I can write that down as the answer, he says that he is also the only person on this shift, that there is no relief, that if he is sick somebody's day stops, and that over on the north side there were eleven of them and any one of them could be off.

He says, "It's better here. It's not easier. People get those the wrong way round when they come and look at it."

The Allfather is out on the south ramp.

I have not been told he would be here and he is not on this establishment. His field is the other one. He is standing at the edge of the movement area, off to one side, with his hands in his jacket pockets, looking at the pavement about forty metres away.

The handler says good morning to him and he says good morning back.

I ask what he is doing here.

The handler says the two aerodromes talk. Anything that affects the north side affects the south side eventually, because the vehicles cross and the frequencies overlap and there is only one island. He says somebody from over there comes across a few times a month.

The Allfather does not come over and does not join us. He stays where he is, looking at that piece of pavement.

I watch him for a while, because I have got into the habit.

He does not look at the jets, and he does not look at the hangars, and when the floatplane goes out down the river he does not turn his head. He is looking at a surface, and at some point he takes a hand out of his pocket and points at it, at nothing, at nobody, and then puts the hand back.

The handler says, "There's a crack out there they're arguing about."

I ask who is arguing about it.

He says the pavement people say it is surface and the operators say it is not, and a survey is booked, and it has been booked twice.

Nothing happens for a while. The Allfather stays where he is. A fuel truck goes past behind him and the driver lifts two fingers off the wheel and he lifts a hand.

Then he walks out onto the pavement, in a straight line, to the place he was pointing at, and stands on it for perhaps four seconds, and walks back to where he was.

The handler is telling me about the coolers by then and does not see it.

The fishing charters have their own building and it is the least airport-like place on Sea Island.

There is a wall of photographs of people holding fish. There are coolers stacked to the ceiling, empty, waiting. In the season, an aircraft comes back from a lodge on the north coast and forty coolers come off it and go into vehicles and are at a house in Vancouver by dinner.

The scale at the desk, the handler says, is for the bags.

I ask about the fish.

He says, "The fish get weighed at the lodge. They come back with a certificate."

There is a fish, in this building, with paperwork.

There is an aerospace shop at the far end that does components. Not aircraft; parts of them. Instruments come in from all over the coast in padded cases and go out again with a tag on them, and the tag is the product: a piece of paper that says a named person, holding a named authority, has done a named thing to this item on a named date.

I ask the man at the counter what he actually sells.

He says, "Traceability."

The last thing he shows me is the wall in the maintenance hangar office.

It is a work board, whiteboard, hand-ruled, with aircraft registrations down the left and dates across the top and magnets, and it is the only planning system I have seen in eight weeks that a person could understand from the doorway.

I ask whether there is a version of this in a computer.

He says there is, and that the computer one is the real one, and that the board is what they actually use, and that when there is a difference between them somebody stands here and works out which one is wrong.

I ask which one usually is.

He says, "The board's usually right and the computer's usually correct."

I stand on the apron for a few minutes before I go, because my escort is on a call and because nobody is asking me to move.

It occurs to me, standing there, that I have been on this side of the island for four hours and nobody has once told me a number I could take to a board. There is no dwell-time average out here. There is no condition index and no percentile and no throughput. There is a board with magnets on it, and a fish with a certificate, and a man who knows everybody's name.

There is a widebody climbing out from the north side. It is very high already by the time it goes over here, and it is silent for a beat and then not, and it is going to somewhere with a name on a departure board.

On this side of the island a man is putting a wing back on. A woman on a stepladder is cleaning a leading edge by hand. Two turboprops are going to towns with four hundred people in them and the crew know whose mother is on board. A floatplane is coming back up the river with the light behind it. Somewhere a fish is travelling with its documentation.

In six days this island will do the biggest three weeks of its life and none of it will happen here.

The tide is going out. You can see it against the pilings, a wet line, a few inches down and dropping, and the docks are settling with it the way they do, and the handler comes back off his call and says we should go, and I say yes, in a minute.

PART III

THE FORUM

THE PLAN FOR THE PLAN

DAY 59 · 5 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH

The Manager, Business Resilience has forty minutes and gives me the point in the first two.

I have come from the other end of the building and I am eleven minutes late, and the eleven minutes were spent behind a family with a stroller on a travelator, which is a sentence I would not have understood in April and which now describes a category of delay I plan around.

“The plan is not the point,” she says. “Nobody reads the plan during the thing. Nobody has ever, in the history of this or any other airport, opened the binder at the moment. The plan is the record of the conversations we had while we were writing it, and the conversations are the thing you actually use.”

Then she sits back slightly, and I understand that she has said this before and that she expects it to take up most of the meeting.

It does not, because I believe her immediately, and so we spend the rest of the forty minutes on what follows from it, which is a much stranger conversation.

She came here four years ago out of health emergency management, which she did for fifteen years, and she says the transition was smaller than people assume.

“Hospital is: the thing arrives and you cannot close the doors. Airport is: the thing arrives and you cannot close the doors. Everything else is detail.”

Her department is four people.

I say that seems small for what it covers.

She says four is generous, that it was two when she arrived, and that the number is not the resource. The resource is about six hundred people across this island who have a role in a plan and have practised it, and her job is not to be ready. Her job is to make other people ready and then get out of the way.

The first thing she corrects me on is her own job title.

I say something about emergency management and she says that emergency management is the part people ask about and about a tenth of the year.

The rest is continuity. Which is: a system goes down and there is no emergency, there is only a Tuesday in which a thing that always works does not work. The baggage system. The power to a pier. A payments platform. A network. Snow, which happens here rarely enough that the city forgets how and often enough that the airport may not.

She says the difference matters because the two need opposite instincts. Response is: convene, decide, act, and accept that you will be wrong about some of it. Continuity is: do not convene, do not escalate, work the degraded process that was written down in advance, and above all do not improvise, because the improvised version of a check-in process is how you lose a day.

“Everybody wants to be in an emergency,” she says. “Nobody wants to be in a Tuesday. And the Tuesdays are what we do.”

She gives me one. Two winters ago a system that prints something went down for nine hours. Not a system anybody outside would name; a printing service, somewhere in the middle of a process, of the kind that exists in every organization and appears on no diagram anybody has drawn since it was installed.

Nine hours. Four airlines affected, unevenly, because they used it for different things. A degraded process existed and was written down and the people on shift had never used it, because it had never been needed, and the first two hours were therefore spent finding out that the written version assumed a form that had been discontinued.

Nobody was hurt. Nobody wrote about it. The finding was three lines long and the fix cost almost nothing.

She says that is what most of it looks like, and that a person could work in this department for four years and not once stand in the room with the chairs.

Here is the structure, and it took me the length of the meeting to see why it is built like this.

There is an activation. Somebody declares. The declaration is a specific act by a specific role, and the roles who can do it are named, and the list is short and does not include the Board.

There are levels. A level is not a measure of how bad the thing is. It is a measure of how many people need to be in a room, and that is a different question, and confusing the two is the classic error.

There is an Emergency Operations Centre, which is a room, and which is not where the emergency is. That distinction takes about four sentences to explain and about four years to internalize. The people at the site handle the site. The room handles everything that is not the site: the other aircraft, the other passengers, the families, the media, the two cities, the province, the aircraft that is still forty minutes out and does not know yet.

She says the failure mode of an operations centre is that everybody wants to be in it.

“Everyone senior wants to come. That’s not vanity, it’s responsibility, they feel it. And a room with thirty concerned senior people in it is not a decision-making body, it’s a broadcast.”

I ask how she handles that.

She says, “Chairs.”

There are a fixed number of chairs and every chair has a role written on the back of it and if your role is not on a chair you are welcome to be extremely available in the corridor.

I ask what is different about the next few weeks.

She says less than I would think and more than she would like.

Less, because the plans do not change for a busy period. The same declaration, the same levels, the same room, the same chairs. An airport that needs a different emergency plan for its busiest three weeks did not have a plan, it had a plan for quiet days.

More, because everything degrades faster when the building is full. The margin is what disappears. On an ordinary Wednesday a stand out of service is absorbed; in the second week of June a stand out of service is four aircraft with nowhere to go and a curb that fills from the inside.

“Nothing gets harder,” she says. “Everything gets less forgiving. That’s not the same thing and people write it down as if it is.”

She has one addition for the period and only one, and it is not glamorous: a person on shift whose entire job is to answer the phone from other organizations. Not to decide anything. To answer, and to know who to route it to, and to be a human being who picks up.

I ask why that is worth a whole post.

She says because in a busy period the failure is almost never that nobody knew. It is that four people knew and each of them assumed it had gone to somebody.

There is one item in her structure that she explains twice, in two different ways, and the second explanation is the real one.

A particular notification has to go to a particular role within a particular number of minutes of a declaration. It is not an operational step. It does not help anybody at the site. It is a phone call to a person who will not act on it and who will be told everything again forty minutes later in a briefing they are also invited to.

The first explanation is about assurance and the reporting chain.

The second explanation, when I ask why that role and not the one above it, is that in 2016 there was an incident and that role found out from a colleague, and the argument that followed went on for a long time and was lost by the people who thought the requirement was unnecessary, and the requirement went into the plan and has been in it since.

I ask whether it is unnecessary.

She says it takes ninety seconds and it costs one person's attention at the worst moment of their year, and that she has never proposed removing it and will not, because the cost of the ninety seconds is known and the cost of removing it is a conversation with somebody who remembers 2016.

She says every plan has three or four of those, and that you can date them.

The agency list is the part where I stop taking notes because I cannot keep up.

Police. The border agency. The air navigation service. Provincial ambulance. Two municipal fire services, one of which is ours by contract and has been since before I could drive. The two cities, the province, public health, and the coast guard, because there is water on three sides. The federal regulator, who is not a responder and who is going to want everything afterwards. The airlines, each with their own plan and their own people arriving from head offices elsewhere. Musqueam.

She says the number of organizations with a written role is somewhere past thirty and that the exact figure depends on what you count.

I ask what the hardest part of the coordination is.

She says the phone list.

I laugh, and she does not, and then explains, and by the end of the explanation it is not funny. A phone list at this scale is a living document about people who change jobs. Every entry is a person who might have been promoted, seconded, retired, or be on a night shift in April and a day shift in June. The list is verified on a cycle. Verification is a person ringing a number and asking whether it is still the right number. There is no way to automate the part that matters, which is whether the human being who answers still has the authority the list says they have.

"I have a good phone list," she says. "It is the single thing in this department I am proudest of and I would not put that in a performance review."

The exercise she describes is the one I missed by two months.

It ran in April, before I was appointed, and it is the annual full-scale, and it takes eleven months to plan.

There was an aircraft. Not a real one — a decommissioned fuselage brought in and positioned, broken, with a section on the foreshore and a section on land, because the geography here means a serious event is quite likely to involve both.

There were volunteers. A hundred and eighty of them, with makeup, with assigned injuries on cards around their necks, some of them instructed to wander, because the ones who wander are the ones the plan is worst at.

There was a hovercraft, and a helicopter, and two fire services meeting at a boundary that exists on a map and not on the ground.

And inside the terminal, at the same time, actors playing distressed passengers and relatives, testing the customer care response, which she says is the part everybody underestimates and the part that generates the most findings.

There was a mock media conference with real journalists asking hostile questions on purpose.

There was a family and friends reception centre, which is a room where you put people who are waiting to find out.

She spends longer on that room than on the hovercraft.

It is not a room for information, because for the first several hours there is no information, and the plan says so in those words. It is a room where people are not in a corridor and not in front of a camera and not being asked for a comment. It needs privacy, it needs somewhere for children, it needs a way to feed people, it needs staff who will not say anything reassuring that later turns out to be untrue, and it needs to be far enough from the operational side that nobody walks through it carrying a radio.

The finding from April was that the room was correct and the route to it was not: the signage took people past a window.

“That’s a real finding,” she says. “That’s worth eleven months.”

The customer care findings are the largest category every year and she says nobody expects that either. Not the fire response, not the medical, not the aircraft. The findings are about what somebody was told at a desk, and by whom, and whether the person at the desk had any way of knowing it.

She says the exercise is the only day of the year when you can watch a person be given the wrong information kindly and then follow it up and find out exactly where it came from, and that this is worth more than the fuselage.

And around all of it, on stands, at every entrance to the affected area, signs saying that an exercise was in progress and that the casualties were not real, because there are twenty-six million people a year in this building and a proportion of them were walking past a man with a compound fracture drawn on his leg.

I ask what the top finding was.

She says the phone list.

The Conscience-Keeper comes in for the last quarter of an hour and he is here for the part that starts when everybody else goes home.

He does not begin with what his team does. He begins with what stops.

He says: at the moment of a declaration, four things halt on this island that nobody in this room has mentioned, and gives them, and two of them are ordinary work that would otherwise continue for hours before anybody thought about it. He says his entire role in the first hour is knowing which of those four have actually stopped.

Then he says the incident is short and the consequence is long.

Firefighting foam is a chemical event on a sandbar in an estuary. Fuel on the ground is a remediation file with a start date. Wreckage is waste with a classification. A runway that has been used as a working surface for an emergency does not simply reopen; it is inspected, and cleared, and signed for.

He says the environmental team's role in the plan is small and their role in the year afterwards is not.

I ask whether the year afterwards is in the plan.

He says it is, in an annex.

I ask whether anybody reads the annex.

He says, "Afterwards."

Then he says the thing he came to say, which is that his team's number in the plan is a mobile that rings at any hour and is answered, and that the reason it is answered is not dedication, it is that somebody eleven years ago put it in the plan as a role and not as a name.

She says that is the single best sentence anybody has ever said about her department and that he says it every time.

He says he says it every time because it stops being true about eighteen months after anybody stops saying it.

I ask about the two fire services meeting at a boundary.

She says it is not a problem and has never been a problem and is the thing visitors always ask about, and that the reason it is not a problem is that it was a problem once, decades ago, somewhere else, and the discipline of mutual aid exists because of a set of incidents in which two competent organizations stood on either side of a line.

Now there are agreements. There are joint exercises. There is a common terminology, which sounds trivial and is not: two services using the same word for two different things is how an instruction gets carried out backwards.

She says the airport fire service and the municipal one train together, and that the crews know each other, and that this is a management achievement disguised as a friendship.

Then she says we have twenty minutes and asks whether I have boots in the car.

I do, because I have learned that much.

The fire hall is on the airfield and it is the only building I have been in at this airport that smells of anything.

Diesel, and rubber, and something under that which is the smell of kit that has been used and cleaned and used. The bay doors are up. There are four vehicles in there and they are enormous, and they are enormous in a specific way: high, wide, on huge tires, built to leave a paved surface and keep going, because an aircraft that comes down short does not come down on the runway.

Each one has a monitor on the roof, which is a nozzle, which throws foam. The numbers involved in how much and how far are the sort of numbers you nod at.

The requirement is a time. From the alarm going to the first vehicle reaching the midpoint of the furthest runway is a fixed number of minutes and it is not a target, it is a condition of the airport operating. They train against that clock constantly. There is a board on the wall with times on it.

The crew are Richmond's. This is a municipal fire service, on contract, on federal land, at an airport, and the people in that bay are city firefighters who happen to work at an aerodrome, and two of them have done fifteen years on the city side and came out here and one of them tells me that the hardest adjustment was the waiting.

Because most days nothing happens. They check, they clean, they drill, they do the medical calls, which are constant and unglamorous and are most of what they actually attend. And then they wait, in a building beside a runway, in full readiness, for a thing that has not happened here in a very long time and that they are the only reason anybody can be relaxed about.

The kit is laid out in the way it is laid out everywhere, boots open with the trousers concertinaed down over them, so a person can step in and pull up in one movement.

Somebody has a kettle going. There is a plant on a windowsill that is thriving in a way that suggests an argument about who waters it.

I ask what happens tomorrow.

The one who came out from the city side says, "Same as today."

I ask whether they will be busier.

He says, "More people. Same fire."

She takes me to see the room, which is not much to look at and which is the point.

Tables in a horseshoe. Screens. A whiteboard that has been wiped so many times it is grey. A wall of laminated role cards on hooks. Two doors. A kettle.

There is a printed sheet by the door about catering, with a number on it, because a room that activates at two in the morning and runs for eighteen hours contains people who have not eaten, and somebody worked out years ago that this is not a comfort question, it is a decision-quality question.

There is a stack of paper forms in a tray. I ask about them and she says the log. Everything said and decided in that room gets written down by hand by a person whose only job is to write it down, and that person is a role on a chair, and the log is contemporaneous, and it will be read by a regulator and possibly by a court.

I ask whether the log is ever awkward.

She says, "The log is the only thing in here that is definitely going to be read."

The chairs have roles on the backs of them. I read along the row. Nothing on any of them says Director.

She sees me reading and says, without any edge at all, "You'd be told."

I say I understand that.

She says, "You'd be told properly, and quite early, and you would be given something to do or you would be told to stay off the phone. Both of those are the job."

And then, at the door, with about ninety seconds left, she corrects herself.

She says: "That thing I said at the start. About the plan not being the point."

I say yes.

She says she has been saying it for six years and that it is nearly right and that she wants to fix it, because she has been thinking about it since a night in February.

In February something happened here overnight. Not a large thing; she describes it in one sentence and does not dress it. What matters is that the person who had to open the response at ten past two in the morning was somebody who had not been in a single one of the conversations. New in post. Had done the training, had never been in the room where the plan was argued about.

And he opened the binder.

"He opened it and he ran the first forty minutes off the page," she says, "and he ran them well, and by the time the rest of us got here he had done everything in the right order."

So the correction is this. The conversations are what you use, if you were in them. And the document is what carries them to the person who was not, and that person is going to exist, and on the worst night they will be the one who is here.

She says, "So it's both, and I've been telling people it's one, and I've been telling them that for six years."

I ask whether she is going to change how she says it.

She says she already has, twice this week, and that both times it took longer and was less memorable, and that she is going to keep doing it anyway.

THE REHEARSAL

DAY 60 · 4 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH
TEMPORARY PASS T-4471 · ESCORT REQUIRED

The phone goes at ten past seven and it is the corporate secretary's office, and the question is whether I can be at the Operations building by nine.

I say yes. I ask what it is about.

She says somebody will meet me at the door, and that is the answer, and it is delivered pleasantly and it is not evasive, it is simply all she has been given to say. I have been a director for two months and this is the first time anybody at this airport has asked me to be somewhere without telling me why.

I am at the door at four minutes to nine. The person meeting me is from Business Resilience and hands me a lanyard with a card on it that says OBSERVER — DO NOT ROLE PLAY, and says the exercise starts at nine, and walks off.

I sit in the lot for two minutes first, which I have started doing, and which is not thinking so much as arriving.

The room is the horseshoe I stood in yesterday.

Every chair has a role on the back of it and every chair is occupied and I count nineteen people at the tables and about the same number standing along the walls with laptops. Two doors, one for people who are in the exercise and one for the controllers, who wear high-visibility vests over their ordinary clothes so that everybody can see who is not real.

The vests came from stores and are all extra large. One of the controllers is about five foot two and has hers on over a

cardigan and looks like a child on a school trip, and she is the person running the morning.

The people at the tables are not, on the whole, the people I have been meeting for two months. There is one duty manager, one airside supervisor, one communications lead, one from each of five external agencies, one airline representative sitting for all of them, and eleven others. Most of them are the second or third name on a list rather than the first, because the first names are running an airport today and this is a Tuesday and the aircraft are real.

That is deliberate and it is the first thing anybody explains to me. You do not exercise the people who would obviously cope. You exercise the depth.

At the front there is a whiteboard, and on the whiteboard somebody has written, in capitals:

EXERCISE EXERCISE EXERCISE

That is written on the whiteboard, said at the beginning and end of every radio transmission, and printed at the top of every piece of paper that will be produced today, and the reason is that a person who walks into this room at eleven o'clock without context needs to know inside one second that the building is not on fire.

The rule is applied without exception, which means that at 9:52 a man says, "Exercise, exercise, exercise. Is anyone else's chair broken. Exercise, exercise, exercise," and nobody laughs, and somebody gets him another chair.

I stand at the back next to a pillar. There is no chair with Director on it.

Somebody offers me one of the spare chairs against the wall about ten minutes in and I say no, and I am not entirely sure why I say no, and I stand for an hour and twelve minutes in shoes I chose in April for a boardroom.

By E+40 I have taken up the position that every person who has ever stood at the back of a long meeting arrives at, which

is one hip against the pillar with the notebook braced on a forearm, and by E+60 I have swapped hips.

The card round my neck says OBSERVER — DO NOT ROLE PLAY. I look at it twice during the morning. It is the clearest description of my position anybody at this airport has produced in two months, and it was printed by a person who was not thinking about me at all.

INJECT 01 · E+00

The controller reads it out and puts a paper copy in front of the duty manager's chair.

There is a loss of supply from one of the incoming feeders. It is not the island; it is a section, and the section includes a pier, and the affected pier includes the systems that pier depends on.

The response is immediate and boring, and boring turns out to be a technical achievement.

The duty manager declares. He names the level. He says the words that make this a formal thing, and the log-keeper writes them down by hand, with the time, and reads the time back. That read-back continues all morning and I stop hearing it after about twenty minutes, which is presumably what it is for.

He does not ask anybody how bad it is. Nobody asks it at any point in the next hour and twelve minutes. It is the question I would have asked first.

Then he does the part I do not expect, which is that he says out loud what he does *not* know, in a list, and asks for four of the people at the table to go and find out those four things and come back inside ten minutes.

Nobody debates anything. The opening is forty seconds long, start to finish.

I write in my notebook: *no discussion*. I underline it, and I have to look at it twice later in the morning to remember why it seemed remarkable.

INJECT 02 · E+06

The baggage system's southern loop is down.

This is a consequence and not a new event, and everybody in the room knows it is a consequence, and there is a small ripple of something around the table that is not quite satisfaction.

Terminal Operations takes it. The Hand is at that end of the horseshoe with a laptop he has not opened.

What he says is a list: which loop, which chutes are downstream of it, which carousels that leaves, how many bags are on the belt right now in real life at this hour on a Tuesday, and how many minutes of manual handling that converts to before the manual handling itself becomes the problem.

The number he gives for the manual handling is not round. It is a specific number of minutes and it is derived from something, and when the airline representative asks what it is derived from, he says the last time, and gives a month.

Somebody asks whether it is the drive or the control.

He says control.

The controller in the vest, who is holding the sheet with the answer on it, looks at the sheet.

Then the table does the thing that it will do six more times this morning: somebody says *so what does that give us*, and four people answer different parts of it, and the duty manager repeats back a single sentence containing all four answers, and the log-keeper writes down his sentence and not theirs.

I watch that happen and I think about a boardroom in April where a briefing on eleven items got through three.

INJECT 03 · E+11

The landside flight information displays freeze on their last state.

The screens do not go blank. That is the point of the inject and it is a nasty one. A blank screen tells the public something is wrong. A screen showing information from eleven minutes ago tells the public something confident and false, and people act on it.

The communications lead takes it and the first thing she asks for is not a fix, it is a person at the top of the escalator with a printed sheet and a lanyard.

Somebody says that is thirty screens and one person.

She says one person with a sheet beats thirty screens with a lie, and asks for four people, and gets them, and the four names go on the board.

Then she asks the second question, which is whether the screens can be blanked deliberately, and the answer comes back that they can, in about eleven minutes, from a room that is on the affected pier.

She says do it anyway.

Somebody points out that blank screens will generate calls.

She says calls are fine. Calls are people asking. What she cannot manage is people not asking, because they have read something confident.

The airline representative says something about the app, which is not ours and does not go down, and which will be showing the correct information throughout, and there is about four seconds of silence while everybody in the room absorbs the fact that the most reliable public information channel in this scenario belongs to somebody else and is already working.

(The Chaos-Weaver is not at the table. He is in the corridor outside the controllers' door. I can see him through the glass panel

with a clipboard, talking to two people in cleaning uniforms, and neither of them is in the exercise.)

INJECT 04 · E+17

Three arrivals inbound. One is thirty-one minutes out, one is nineteen, one is on approach. The stands they were going to are on the affected pier.

This is the Allfather's.

He does not stand up. He says four things: which stands are available now, which two of those cannot take the type, what that leaves, and the number of minutes the third aircraft can hold before the decision stops being his.

Then he says the sentence the room has been waiting for without knowing it: that the aircraft on approach lands, because it is on approach, and everything else is a conversation about where it goes afterwards.

Somebody from an airline seat asks about the other two.

The Allfather gives them a number. Not an opinion; a number of minutes, per aircraft, after which each becomes a diversion.

The airline representative asks where they would divert to and answers his own question, and the answer is another city, and the answer includes the crews' duty hours, which is a thing that has not been mentioned all morning and which turns out to govern everything downstream of it. A crew that times out is an aircraft that stops being able to fly regardless of whether anything is wrong with it.

He says, and this is the exercise working, that he has just realized his own answer depends on a number he does not have in the room.

The controller writes that down and says it is a finding.

The Allfather says one further thing, unprompted, which is that if the third aircraft goes around there is a sequence behind

it and gives the sequence. Nobody asked for the sequence. Nobody at the table appears to find it odd that he has it.

The controller in the vest writes something.

(A word about the clock. There are two clocks in this room. One is the wall clock, which says the time, and one is the exercise clock, which says E-plus, and everybody has agreed to obey the second one.

At about this point a man from one of the agencies looks at his watch, then at the exercise clock, then at his watch again, and you can see him decide not to raise it.

Somebody's phone goes at E+22. It is a marimba. He silences it in under two seconds and does not look at anybody, and about ninety seconds later the same marimba goes off across the room, because two people have the same phone, and the second man silences it faster than the first, which is not a competition and is being treated as one.)

INJECT 05 · E+24

The border hall's booth systems are degraded. Not down. Slow.

Two arrivals have landed in the meantime, in the exercise, and there are now people in a hall being processed at a fraction of the normal rate, and the hall has a capacity, and the capacity is a real number and a fire code number.

The Seeker is not on a chair either. He is standing against the wall behind the border agency's seat, and when the question arrives — whether an alternate processing arrangement can be opened, and by whom — he answers it in the direction of the table without moving.

He gives the instrument. He gives who may authorise it. He gives the one condition under which it does not apply.

The person in the border agency's chair says, "That's right," and then, to the room, "and he's saved us about ten minutes of me phoning."

The controller in the vest says, "That is a finding. That is a good finding."

Somebody asks what the finding is.

She says the finding is that the answer was in this room and not in the plan.

Somebody else says that the answer being in the room is quite good.

She says it is excellent today and worthless in November, and that the purpose of the next four weeks of her life is converting things that are in rooms into things that are on paper, and that she will lose about a third of them.

Meanwhile the hall keeps filling in the exercise. The number is on the board and somebody updates it every few minutes and it goes up. Nobody is dramatic about the number. It is simply written larger each time because the marker is running out.

INJECT 06 · E+31

A movement is confirmed inbound inside the window.

There is a delegation on a state aircraft and it is on the schedule and it has been on the schedule for six weeks and it is now arriving in the middle of this.

The protocol liaison takes it. She wants two decisions: whether the arrangement runs as planned, and if not, who tells whom, and in what order, because there is a circular note and there are people at another end of it.

The room's instinct is to protect the movement. She says, before anybody can say it, that the movement is not a priority over the hall.

Then she says what the actual constraint is, and it is not security and it is not protocol. It is that the arrangement requires a specific room, and the specific room is on the affected pier, and there is one alternative, and the alternative is currently full of people from the second arrival.

The Seeker says the alternative has a different access group and names it, and says which two roles hold it, and that one of those two is in this room.

The person he means says, "Yes," and stands up and goes out to make a call, which is exactly the correct thing to do and which removes a chair from the horseshoe for four minutes.

The Allfather says the aircraft can be parked at a stand that makes the walk shorter and gives the stand, and says which vehicle route that puts the movement on, and that the route crosses a service road.

The protocol liaison says the service road is a problem because there is a delivery pattern on it at that hour.

The Allfather says there is not, today.

Neither he nor the Seeker says anything to the other at any point. They speak to the table. Both of them are looking at different things and neither is looking at a person.

The protocol liaison gets both her decisions inside six minutes and says, to nobody in particular, that in real life this conversation takes an afternoon, and the controller says that is because in real life nobody is in the room.

INJECT 06A · E+35

There is one that is not on the schedule.

A controller walks over to the communications lead and hands her a card, and she reads it and says, out loud, "Exercise. This is exercise," twice, and then reads it out.

Somebody outside the exercise has phoned the media line to ask whether the airport is on fire, because they have seen the vests.

The room finds this funnier than it is. It is the only laugh of the morning and it lasts about three seconds.

Then the communications lead deals with it properly, which takes forty seconds and involves a form of words that exists already and has existed for years, and the controller says that inject is real and is in every exercise and has been triggered by an actual member of the public every single time.

INJECT 07 · E+38

The room is hot. Nineteen people, twenty laptops, no windows, and a ventilation setting somebody put in place for a room used four times a year. Two people have taken jackets off. Somebody props the controllers' door with a bin.

The injects themselves are pieces of paper that have to be physically walked across the horseshoe by a person in a vest, and the horseshoe is not designed for anybody to walk across, so the controllers do a small ducking sidestep behind the chairs each time, forty-odd times over the morning, and by the end they have worn a route.

A photograph is circulating. Somebody in the hall has posted a picture of a queue with a caption that is not accurate, and a broadcaster has called.

The communications lead does not ask for a line to take. She asks what is true right now, in one sentence, that will still be true in forty minutes.

Somebody offers a sentence. She says the second half of it will not survive.

They try again. The version they arrive at is shorter and duller and contains no reassurance whatsoever, and she says that will do, and the controller notes the time, and I notice that the exchange took under two minutes and produced nineteen words.

The exercise has been running thirty-eight minutes. Two people have got up and gone out and come back. Somebody has put a plate of sandwiches on the side table, from a real caterer, for a fake emergency, and nobody has touched them, and the plate stays there untouched for the rest of the morning like a small monument to something.

INJECT 08 · E+45

A person in the queue is unwell.

Provincial ambulance takes it, and the fire service, and the interesting part is not the medical, it is the access: an ambulance crew needs to get to a point inside a hall that is currently full of people who cannot be moved out of the way because the hall has one exit and the exit is the queue.

The paramedic in the ambulance chair is the calmest person in the room by a distance and asks three questions. Where is the nearest point a stretcher can reach. How many doors between that point and the patient. Who has the key to each one.

The third question is the one nobody at the table can answer immediately, and there is a pause of perhaps four seconds, which is the longest pause of the morning.

Then two people answer it at once and give the same answer.

The paramedic says, "Good," and writes it on her own hand.

The Conscience-Keeper's neighbour at the table asks about the generators, out of order, ahead of the inject.

He answers it anyway: run time, fuel state, the point at which somebody has to order a delivery, and the fact that the delivery is a road movement onto an island with a curb problem.

The controller in the vest stops writing and looks at her sheet, and then at the clock, and then hands the generator inject to the table.

It is the next one. It has not been read out yet.

She reads it out. He has already answered it. Nobody at the table remarks on this, because they are all still on the ambulance, and the ambulance is the one with a person in it.

(The controller writes something on her sheet. I am four metres away and I can see that she writes two words and underlines the second one, and then the room moves to the next thing and does not come back to it.)

The marker on the whiteboard finally dies at E+51 and there is no spare in the room, which is a finding, and which somebody says out loud is a finding, and the number goes up on a sheet of paper stuck to the board with tape instead.

The tape is exercise tape. It says EXERCISE on it.

INJECT 09 · E+52

The generators, formally.

The answer is the answer he gave a minute ago. The table takes it as read and adds the part he did not have, which is that one of the two units is due a service and the service was deferred in April.

Somebody asks who deferred it.

The Manager, Asset Management Planning is at this table today. He says he did. He gives the reason, and the reason is a

curve and a number and a competing item that was in worse condition, and he gives it in about fifteen seconds without any defensiveness whatever, and finishes by saying that on today's scenario the deferral costs the room eleven minutes of margin and that he wants that in the report.

Nobody argues with him. The log-keeper writes it down. The controller writes it down separately.

I watch a man volunteer a fact against himself, in a room containing five external agencies and a director, in fifteen seconds, and I think about the difference between an asset that has failed and an asset that has been scheduled to fail, and about which of those two a person has to be able to stand up in a room and own.

INJECT 10 · E+58

Partial restoration. One feeder back. Not everything can come up at once and the order matters.

This is the longest discussion of the morning and it is the only one that is genuinely difficult, because the order is a set of competing correct answers.

The Hand gives the technical sequence: what must come up before what, physically, or it does not come up at all. That part is not negotiable and takes ninety seconds.

Everything after that is choices. Border processing, or baggage, or the displays, or the lifts on the affected pier, which nobody has mentioned all morning and which contain the only people in this scenario who are actually trapped.

The border agency makes the case for the hall, and it is a good case, and it is about a number of people and a fire code.

The airline representative makes the case for baggage, and it is a good case, and it is about the next eighteen hours rather than the next hour.

The communications lead does not make a case for the displays, which I notice, and which she explains afterwards in one sentence: she had the four people with the sheets and therefore did not need the screens, and asking for them would have cost her something she did not need to spend.

Somebody says the lifts.

Everybody says the lifts.

It takes four seconds and I watch nineteen people arrive at the same place at the same time without a vote, and the duty manager says the lifts, and the log-keeper writes it down, and the argument that was about to happen does not happen.

Then the border agency says the hall, second, and the airline says the hall, second, and the person who lost that exchange is the one who conceded it, and nobody notices except the controller, who writes it down.

INJECT 11 · E+66

When is it over.

The controller asks the room to work the deactivation, and the room slows down for the first time all morning.

Because deactivation is not a moment. The power is back and the systems are up and there are still eleven hundred people in the wrong part of the building, four aircraft in the wrong places, a baggage backlog that will run into the evening, a person in an ambulance, a delegation in a room that was not the room, and a broadcaster with nineteen words.

The Conscience-Keeper stops the room.

He does it without raising anything. He says the word *wait*, once, and the duty manager waits, and the Conscience-Keeper says the environmental annex opens now and not at the end.

Somebody asks what that means today.

He says: nothing was spilled, so today it means one form. Then he says that on a different scenario it would mean a file that outlives the incident by years, and that the annex opens at the same point either way, because you do not know on the day which one you are in.

The controller does something here she has not done all morning, which is to stop the room and ask a question that is not on a card.

She asks each agency what *their* end looks like. Not the airport's. Theirs.

The answers are all different and none of them is wrong. Ambulance ends when the patient is handed over. Police end considerably later and in a way that involves paperwork about people who were nowhere near it. The border agency ends when the hall is clear, and then does not end, because there is a report. The airline ends tomorrow evening with the last misconnected bag. The regulator has not started.

Somebody says that means there is no single end.

The controller says correct, and that this is why the airport's deactivation is only the airport's, and why the last thing the room does is tell everybody else that the room is closing, rather than that the incident is over, because those are two different statements and only one of them is ours to make.

Somebody asks the honest question, which is who decides that it is over.

The duty manager says he does, and then says that this is the part he has got wrong before, and that the temptation is to stand down when the cause is fixed rather than when the consequences are handled, because the cause is a thing you can point at and the consequences are a Tuesday evening.

He stands the room down in stages, by role, and the roles go out in an order, and about half the room leaves.

The four people with the printed sheets are stood down last. On paper they were the smallest measure taken all morning.

ENDEX · E+72

The exercise was scheduled for two hours. It finishes in an hour and twelve minutes.

There is a moment when the controller says the words that end it, three times, and everybody sits back, and the noise level in the room goes up about forty per cent for approximately six seconds and then drops again to something quieter than it has been all morning.

I had expected relief. What is actually in the room is closer to mild disappointment, and it takes me a while to work out that this is because the exercise did not break anybody, and an exercise that does not break anybody has not told you where you break.

There is also, underneath it, something I do not have a word for. Nineteen people have just spent seventy-two minutes managing a thing that did not occur, competently, at speed, and they are now going to go back to their desks. Whatever they did in here leaves no trace anywhere except nineteen sheets of handwriting and a list of eight findings, two of which will survive.

Two of them are already on their phones about something else before the controller has finished speaking.

The controller says as much in the first thirty seconds of the hot debrief: that the scenario was ambitious on paper and that the room absorbed it faster than the design assumed, and that she would rather have that problem, and that she is going to be honest in the report about the design and not about the room.

The sandwiches are still there.

HOT DEBRIEF

Twenty minutes, standing up, everybody who was in it, one at a time round the room.

Everybody stands up for the debrief, which the controller says is deliberate and keeps it to twenty minutes, and three people who have been sitting for seventy-two minutes stand up in the manner of people who have been sitting for seventy-two minutes.

The rule is one contribution each and no defending. If somebody says your thing was slow you say thank you and the next person goes. The controller enforces it twice, both times gently, both times on people who work here rather than on the agencies, which I suspect is not an accident.

The findings, in the order they arrive:

The alternate processing authority was known in the room and is not in the plan. That is the good finding and it is written up as an action.

The lift decision was correct and unanimous and is not written down anywhere as a priority, which means it was correct today because the right nineteen people were in the room.

The displays inject produced a response that was not in any procedure and that the communications lead says she will now put in one.

The generator service deferral is noted, with the reason, and the person who deferred it says he would do it again and is not argued with.

The paramedic's contribution is that the third question — who holds the key to each door — should be on a card on a wall and not in nineteen heads, and that she will send us the format her service uses, and that it fits on one side.

The airline representative says his crew-hours point again, shorter, and asks for it to be an action rather than a finding, and the controller says it is already an action and reads out who owns it, and it is him.

And then, seventh or eighth, from a woman near the door who has not spoken all morning and who works for one of the agencies rather than for us:

She could not reach her counterpart at another organization for eleven minutes, because the number in her copy of the list was a desk that person left in March.

She says it without weight. She says it as the fourth item on her own short list, after two things about her own agency's radios, and she does not appear to know that she has said the important thing.

The room goes very quiet in a way it did not go quiet at any point during the exercise itself.

It is not a dramatic silence. Nobody looks at anybody. It is the silence of about twenty people privately checking a number in their own phone.

Somebody near the front says, "Mine's the same." Somebody else says, "March?" and the woman says March.

Three people take out phones.

The Manager, Business Resilience writes it down. She does not say anything about the phone list. She does not look at me. She writes it down, and asks the woman for the correct number, and gets it, and writes that down too.

Afterwards the room empties in about ninety seconds, the way rooms do.

Two of the controllers are stacking the paper injects into a box. The log-keeper is initialling the bottom of every page of her log, which runs to nineteen sheets for an event that did not happen.

I ask her whether she writes in the same hand when it is real.

She says she writes slower when it is real, and that this is the wrong way round, and that she knows it is the wrong way round, and that she has never been able to fix it.

The Manager, Business Resilience is at the whiteboard with a controller, and the two of them are not talking about the exercise. They are talking about the report, and about which of the eight findings will still be findings in three weeks, and the answer they arrive at is two.

The Chaos-Weaver comes in through the controllers' door with two people and they begin taking the chairs back to wherever chairs live, and one of them starts on the whiteboard, and **EXERCISE EXERCISE EXERCISE** comes off in three passes and leaves the board slightly greyer than it was.

The Manager, Business Resilience stops on her way past and asks what I made of it.

I say something about how fast it went.

She says the speed is the exercise. She says a real one runs at about a fifth of that pace and that everybody knows this and everybody exercises at speed anyway, because what you are training is the order things happen in and not the interval between them.

Then she says she has to go, because there is a thing about a delivery bay, which is a real thing, happening now, in the actual airport, which has been running all morning about eleven metres from this room and has not needed any of us.

I am the last person to leave, because I have nowhere I am supposed to be, and because I want to look at the room with nothing in it.

There is a plate of sandwiches on the side table. I stand there for a while and then I take one, because they are going to be thrown out, and I stand at the back of an empty room eating a sandwich that was ordered for an emergency that was not real, in a week when the other kind is on the schedule.

TWO GREETERS

DAY 61 · 3 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH

I am double-booked at two o'clock, which is nobody's fault and is the first genuine administrative failure anybody has committed on my behalf. Two meetings, both with my name on the invitation, both running two until three, in rooms four doors apart on the same corridor.

I decide to do both, badly.

The corridor between them has a carpet tile that is loose and that I have now stepped on four times in two months, and I mention it to somebody at the end of the day and it is fixed the following morning, which is the fastest anything has ever happened to me here and which I have decided not to think about.

ROOM ONE · 2:02

Protocol.

There are four people and a printed pack, and the pack has a cover sheet with a list of arrivals on it and a column headed CATEGORY.

The liaison explains the programme. It is a federal one, it applies at airports across the country, and it exists because a person arriving to do business with the Government of Canada should not be processed by accident.

Eligibility starts, broadly, at deputy minister level and above, and goes up from there through ministers, heads of government,

heads of state, and their equivalents from other countries, plus a set of categories that exist for reasons of history and are not going to be removed.

What the programme provides: courtesy or expedited clearance at the border. An escort where one is available. Exemption from screening where the individual qualifies for it. Use of a facility where one exists.

And access, into the customs hall, for greeters.

Up to two.

ROOM ONE · 2:09

What the two greeters may not do is also in the pack, and it is longer than what they may do.

They are met. They do not arrive independently and find their own way; somebody collects them, at a place, at a time. They are in the hall for a defined window. They do not go through into the baggage area. They do not go airside. If the flight is late, the window moves, and moving the window is a phone call to four people.

The liaison says the greeters generate more work than the principal does, per head, by a factor she does not quantify and clearly could.

Somebody asks why it is worth it.

She says because a person who has flown eleven hours to do something difficult should be met by somebody who is glad to see them, and that this is not sentiment, it is the job, and that a delegation that lands into an empty hall arrives at the table an hour later in a different mood.

ROOM TWO · 2:26

Queue management, arrivals hall.

Nine people, one screen, and a model of the hall on it with coloured blocks moving through it very slowly while somebody talks over the top.

They are working the second week: the arrival banks, the halls, the connectors, the two lifts that will be the constraint and are always the constraint. There is a capacity figure for the hall, and it is not one figure, it is three — the operating one, the uncomfortable one, and the one that is a fire code and is not negotiable by anybody in this building including me.

Somebody is asking about the modelled effect of a delayed bank landing into an on-time bank.

Somebody else says that is the same question as last Tuesday and that the answer was that it depends on the widebody mix, and that they should stop asking it and start asking about the widebody mix.

There is a pause and then general agreement that this is correct, and a small amount of laughter that is at nobody's expense.

The model is not a prediction. Somebody explains this to me in about forty seconds when I ask what the coloured blocks are, and it is the most useful forty seconds of the hour.

The model is a way of finding out which of your assumptions is load-bearing. You run it, and you change one number, and if the picture does not move then that number was never the problem and you can stop arguing about it. Most of the arguments in an airport are about numbers that are not load-bearing, and the model's job is to end those arguments so that people have time for the four that matter.

I ask what the four are, this week.

The lifts. The widebody mix. The baggage reclaim dwell. And whether the second bank on the Thursday slips.

They have been talking for half an hour about the second bank on the Thursday.

ROOM ONE · 2:31

I have missed four minutes and they have moved on to aircraft.

State and private aircraft largely go to the other side of the island, and the reason is not status, it is that the facilities for a small number of people processed privately are over there and the facilities for eleven thousand people an hour are over here.

The liaison says the phrase I write down: *the arrangement is the same, the room is smaller.*

Then somebody asks about noise, and the answer is the flat one.

The overnight restriction applies. It applies to a head of state exactly as it applies to a freighter carrying flowers. There is a process for exceptions and it is the same process, with the same form, and it is not a fast one, and it has been used and it has also been declined.

Nobody in the room finds this remarkable. It is the fourth item on a page.

ROOM TWO · 2:38

The overlays.

Temporary wayfinding goes up for the period and comes down after: additional signage, floor graphics, a language set beyond the two that are always there.

The person responsible for this has an installation schedule and a removal schedule and says the removal schedule is the one that gets forgotten, and that at a previous event somewhere else she watched temporary signage stay up for fourteen months and start being maintained.

Somebody asks what the risk is.

She says that a temporary sign that becomes permanent is a sign nobody has ever checked against the actual route, and that this is how you get the sign at the top of the ramp.

Three people in the room make a noise of recognition. Everybody in this building knows about that sign.

ROOM ONE · 2:44

The Seeker is here for one item and takes about six minutes.

The item is the difference between a document that says who you are and a document that says where you may go, and the six minutes are spent on the fact that a large number of people at a very senior level do not distinguish between them.

A diplomatic passport is an identity and a status. It is not a security clearance. It does not open an airside door. A person may be entitled to bypass screening and still not be entitled to walk onto an apron, and those two facts sit in different instruments issued by different authorities for different reasons.

He gives the sequence for the movement they are discussing, door by door, and for each door he gives which instrument opens it and who signs. There are five doors. Two of them are opened by the same instrument for different reasons.

Somebody asks what happens if a member of a delegation simply walks through a door.

He says nothing happens to the delegate.

He gives the name of the role that the something happens to, and it is not a senior role, and it is the role of the person who was standing nearest the door.

The room takes this in. Somebody says that seems hard on that person.

The Seeker says it is, and gives the reason it is written that way, which is that a rule enforceable against a delegate is not enforceable at all, and a rule enforceable against a card

holder is enforceable within the hour. Then he says the practical version, which is that the person nearest the door is also the only person in the sequence who can actually prevent it, and that the way you prevent it is to be standing in the right place before anybody arrives rather than saying anything to anybody.

The liaison says that is why her people walk the route the day before, and that they walk it with the person who will be standing nearest the door, and that this is not in the programme and is the only part of her method she would defend to the death.

He says he knows.

ROOM TWO · 2:49

I come back in and they are on the greeters.

Somebody says the two, and somebody else says the two are fine, and a third person says the two are fine per movement and asks how many movements are in the window.

The answer is a number I would not have guessed and it is not small.

Then somebody works it out out loud: two greeters, per movement, in a hall that is at its operating figure for six hours a day in that week, and each greeter is not one person in the room, because a greeter arrives, and parks, and comes through a door, and waits, and stands somewhere.

Somebody says they should ask protocol whether it can be one.

The person running the meeting says protocol will say no.

Somebody asks whether anybody has asked.

There is a short silence of the kind that means nobody has asked and everybody has assumed.

ROOM ONE · 2:50

The last of protocol before I go back down the corridor is the CATEGORY column on the cover sheet.

There are five categories and they are not ranked by importance. They are ranked by what the airport has to do. A category that requires a room is a bigger operational fact than a category that requires a person to be waiting at a door, regardless of who is more senior, and the pack is ordered accordingly, so that a deputy minister who needs the room appears above a minister who does not.

I ask whether anybody objects to that ordering.

The liaison says nobody outside this room has ever seen this pack.

ROOM ONE · 2:52

Here is my mistake. I made it in a room and it lasted eight minutes.

When the liaison said *up to two*, I heard a limit.

I heard a security measure — a small, cold, sensible restriction on the number of unscreened people who may be admitted into a controlled hall for a ceremonial purpose. I thought it was tightly drawn and slightly bleak and rather good, and I wrote in my notebook, and I was pleased with the sentence:

the number of people permitted to be pleased to see you is two.

I looked at that for a moment. I thought it was the best thing I had noticed in a week.

ROOM TWO · 2:57

The person running the queue meeting is explaining to somebody new why the number is two.

It is not a security number.

It came out of this room, or a room like it, four years ago. The number before it was one. Protocol asked for four. The hall people said the hall is the hall, and the fire code is the fire code, and produced the modelling, and the two sides went round it for most of a season.

Two is where they landed. Two is a concession, extracted from a capacity argument, by people whose entire job is to make sure a family is not standing in a corridor.

Somebody who joined in March asks whether protocol know that the two came out of this room.

She says of course they know, they were in it.

She says the modelling that finally settled it was not about the hall at all. It was about the lift. One greeter or two made almost no difference to the hall and a measurable difference to the lift, and the reason the number is two rather than three is a lift, and the reason it is not one is that somebody in protocol produced a photograph.

Somebody asks what the photograph was of.

She says a woman at a barrier.

She says, without emphasis, because she is explaining a piece of history to somebody who joined in March, "Protocol won that one. They should have. One was mean."

I am standing at the back of the room with my notebook and my pleasing sentence in it.

Nobody looks at me. Nobody has any reason to. The person explaining it does not know I was in the other room, and would not care, and is already onto the lift capacity.

I do not say anything and I do not cross it out.

ROOM ONE · 3:01

They run four minutes over and I catch the end of it.

The last item is the greeters, from this side. The liaison is saying that she has a request in for a marginal increase for two specific movements involving families with children, that she expects to be refused, and that she will ask again.

Somebody asks who refuses it.

She says operations.

She says it without any heat whatsoever. She says operations are right to, that the hall is a real constraint and not an excuse, and that her job is to ask anyway, because if she stops asking the number goes back down inside three years.

ROOM TWO · 3:03

They also run over.

The last item in this room is a request that has come in from protocol for a marginal increase on two movements, and the person running the meeting says no, and gives the reason, and the reason is the modelling and the six hours and the lifts.

Then she says: "Tell them no properly, though. Don't just send the number. They'll ask again in the autumn and I want them to."

ROOM ONE · 3:04

I am in the doorway now, because they have finished and the next people are outside.

The liaison is putting the pack back together and says, to nobody, that the thing about protocol is that everybody assumes it

is about grandeur and it is almost entirely about not humiliating anybody.

She says most of what is in that pack exists because at some point somebody was left standing.

Both rooms empty into the same corridor within about ninety seconds of each other.

The two people who have just refused each other's request walk past one another. One of them says something about a parking gate. The other laughs.

Neither meeting mentioned the other. Not once, in an hour, in two rooms four doors apart, about the same twenty minutes of the same afternoon in the same hall. Room One knows operations will refuse. Room Two knows protocol will ask. Both are correct. Neither has any idea that the other has spent part of the afternoon rehearsing a conversation they are both going to have properly in the autumn, on paper, at length, and that both of them are looking forward to.

I stand in the corridor for a moment with the loose tile under my foot.

I go back to my office and read what I wrote at 2:52.

It is a good sentence. It is about a number that means the opposite of what I thought it meant, arrived at by people arguing on behalf of somebody's grandmother, and it is still, on the page, a good sentence, which is the part I have not worked out what to do with.

THE DESK

DAY 62 · 2 DAYS TO FIRST MATCH

The coordinator is saying that the thing she needs is not more people, it is a second printer, and that she has asked three times, when the woman on position four takes off her headset and says the scanner has stopped.

I have been here since two, on my feet, having eaten a sandwich in the car at half past one because I did not know whether there would be a break and there is not one. There was no tour. I came in behind somebody with a card and stood at the end of the desk and after about ten minutes the coordinator said, without turning round, “You can sit on the stool, it’s not for anything,” and that has been the extent of my induction.

The desk is in the arrivals concourse behind a low barrier, six positions, a printer, two laptops per position, a rack of lanyards, a locked drawer, and a stand-up sign in three languages. It has been operating for eleven days and will operate for about six weeks and then not exist.

What comes to it: accredited people. Officials, media, contractors on short-term credentials, volunteers who need theirs activated, and a steady flow of people who are none of those and have simply seen a desk with staff at it and would like some help, which the desk gives them, because that is what a desk with staff at it is for.

Six positions. Four staff on at any time, two of them on loan from other parts of the organization and one on loan

from a partner and one hired for the period. Plus volunteers in coloured vests, in shifts, who are not staff and who do more of the actual talking to human beings than anybody at this airport who is paid to.

The volunteers are the part I had not thought about at all.

There are a lot of them and they are not employees and they are not contractors and they are, in the strict sense, nobody's. They have a coordinator, they have a training module, they have a vest and a lanyard, and they hold a restricted-area escort arrangement rather than cards, which means they go where somebody takes them.

They are mostly retired and mostly local and they applied. There was a form. More people applied than were needed, which the coordinator says surprises people who do not live here and surprises nobody who does.

They work four-hour shifts and a large number of them do six.

I ask what they get.

She says a vest, a hot drink, and a certificate, and then says that this is the wrong question and that the right question is what they give, and then apologizes for saying it like that, and I say she does not need to apologize, and she says she does because it sounded like a poster.

Languages.

There is a phone line that gets you an interpreter in something over two hundred languages, and it takes a couple of minutes to connect, and the coordinator says the two minutes are the problem and not the two hundred.

Because in two minutes a person standing at a desk with a bag and a problem has already decided that this is not going to work.

So the desk has a second system, which is not a system. It is a list, on the wall, of who is on shift today and what they speak, and there are nine languages on it this afternoon between eleven people, and when somebody arrives who is stuck, the first move is a shout down the desk rather than a phone call.

The interpreter line is used, she says, perhaps four times a day. The wall is used constantly.

I ask what happens when the wall does not cover it.

She says then it is the phone, and it is two minutes, and it works, and everybody involved has had a worse time than they needed to.

The All-Seeing comes past at about ten to three.

He does not stop at the desk. He is on the far side of the concourse looking at the doors to the curb, and he stands there for perhaps two minutes and then goes out through them.

The coordinator sees me watching and says he does that four or five times a shift and that he is the reason the desk is where it is: it was going to be forty metres further along, and he said it should be here, and gave a reason involving where people stop walking, and the reason turned out to be right, and now the desk is here and everybody has forgotten that it was ever going to be anywhere else.

She says, "He's ground transportation. I don't know why he cares."

At 3:04 the scanner stops.

The credential scanner reads a code on an accreditation pass and calls out to a validation service and comes back with a green tick or a red cross and a name. It takes about two seconds.

It is not our system; it belongs to the accreditation programme, and it has been tested, and everybody has been told it is robust.

At 3:04 it starts taking eleven seconds. Then twenty. Then it stops returning anything at all and the position hangs.

At 3:06 the second position goes the same way, then the third.

There are, at that moment, about forty people at the desk and a bank has just landed.



Here is what happens over the next hour and forty minutes. Nobody senior comes.

Nobody phones anybody senior either, for the first thirty-five minutes, because for the first thirty-five minutes everybody reasonably believes this is about to come back.

3:07. The coordinator moves everybody to one position, the one that is still working, and it is working slowly.

3:11. It stops working too.

3:12. The woman on position four — the one who noticed — opens the locked drawer and takes out a printed list.

The printed list is the accreditation manifest. It exists because somebody at some point insisted that a paper copy be printed daily and put in a drawer, and it has been printed daily for eleven days and has never once been opened.

3:14. The list is on the desk. Two of them are working it with a highlighter. The process is: find the name, check the photograph on the pass against the face, highlight the line, write the time.

It takes about forty seconds a person instead of two.

3:16. The coordinator does the thing that decides the afternoon: she splits the queue.

Not by category and not by urgency. By whether the person's name will be on the list. Anybody whose credential was issued in the last two days will not be on today's printout, because the

printout is generated overnight. Those people go to one side and wait, and everybody else goes through the paper process.

It costs her two minutes to explain and it saves an hour of finding out one name at a time.

3:20. The queue is at the barrier.

It is June and the hall is glass on two sides and it faces the afternoon. The air handling is doing what it can. Three hundred people who have been on aircraft are standing in a line with everything they own, in coats they put on in another climate, and the smell of a queue in a warm hall is a specific smell that no amount of money has ever solved anywhere in the world.

Somebody's case falls over. Somebody sits on their case and it rolls and they get up faster than they sat down and look around to see who saw. A man takes off a jumper without putting down either of his bags, which cannot be done, and does it anyway, and emerges with his hair standing up and his glasses somewhere in the jumper.

Two children have found that the barrier posts are on a spring. This is discovered at 3:24 and is still being explored at 4:15.

3:22. A volunteer, unprompted, goes and stands at the back of the queue and starts walking down it telling people what is happening, and how long, and what the alternative is, and nobody has asked her to do it and she is not paid.

3:41. Somebody phones somebody.

4:05. A person from the accreditation side arrives, looks at it, says the words *validation service*, and goes away to make calls. He is helpful and can do nothing.

4:09. A man reaches the front, is verified off the list, and then asks whether he can have a note saying why he was late, because there is somebody at the other end who will not believe him.

The coordinator writes it on desk paper, signs it, and puts the time on it. It takes eleven seconds. Four more people ask for one before five o'clock and she does all four.

Nobody has ever told her to do that and there is no such document.

4:12. The coordinator makes the only decision of the afternoon that is properly hers, which is to stop verifying two of the four credential categories against the list and take them on the pass alone, on her own authority, and to write down that she has done it and at what time.

I watch her do that. She does not consult anybody. She says afterwards it is the kind of thing you either do at 4:12 or explain at nine the next morning why you did not.

4:26. The printer runs out of paper. There is more, in a cupboard on the other side of the concourse, and the person who goes for it is gone six minutes.

This is the point at which somebody at the desk says the thing about the second printer out loud, and the coordinator says, "I know," and does not look up.

4:40. The scanner starts working again.

Nobody notices for about ninety seconds, because nobody is looking at it. Position two tries it on a hunch and gets a green tick and a name in two seconds and says so, and there is no cheer and no comment. They finish the eleven people currently mid-process on paper, because switching mid-person is how you lose somebody, and then they go back to the scanner.

(The announcement.)

Somewhere in the middle of it, while the queue is at its longest, the concourse announcement system plays a message.

It is not in English and it is not in French. I do not know what it is. It runs about eleven seconds and it has the cadence of a standard notice rather than an emergency one, and the system carries more languages than anybody at this desk could list.

Nobody in the queue reacts. Nobody at the desk reacts. The coordinator is mid-sentence about the highlighter and does not stop.

I ask her afterwards what that announcement was.

She says, "Which one?"

The volunteer who walked the queue is on her third shift this week and her shift finishes at four and she stays until half past five.

She is somebody's grandmother and she took a course and she has a vest and a badge on a lanyard with a photograph on it in which she is smiling, which is against the rules for our passes and is not against the rules for hers.

Near five she comes back to the desk and the Companion is standing at the end of it.

I have not seen the Companion arrive. She is in tenant relations and there is no reason for her to be at this desk and no reason for her not to be.

The volunteer says something to her about a man in the queue who has come for a funeral and who is not, in fact, accredited for anything, and who was in the wrong queue entirely and who she has walked to the right place.

The Companion asks whether she took him or told him.

The volunteer says she took him.

The Companion says, "Good."

And the volunteer puts her hand flat on the desk in front of her, the way you do when you have decided to say the thing, and says, "I've been doing this eleven days and you're the first person who's asked me a question about it."

The Companion says, "You've been asked a lot of questions."

The volunteer says, "Not about the work."

They talk for a couple of minutes and I am four feet away and can hear all of it and it is not private, and the second half of it is entirely about a route through the building and whether the lift on the east side counts as step-free when the door to it is not.

The volunteer thinks it does not. She has a specific reason involving a threshold and a wheel size and she is plainly correct.

The Companion asks her to send it to somebody and gives her the name and spells it, and the volunteer writes it on the back of her own hand, and says she does not have an email address for work.

The Companion says use your own.

The volunteer says is that allowed.

The Companion says, "Put the lift in the subject line."

At the end the volunteer says she is going home, and then does not go home, and stands at the desk for another forty minutes.

At about twenty past five the man from the accreditation side comes back.

He is the person who specified the load requirement and signed off on the test. He tells me the number it was tested to and it is a large number, several times what was in the concourse this afternoon, and the test was real and the test was witnessed and the report exists.

He says, "It should have held."

Then he says, "I said it would hold. I said it in a meeting in April."

He is not defending himself and nobody has attacked him. He says it to a director, unprompted, standing at a desk, and the only other person who hears it is a woman restocking lanyards.

I ask whether the test was wrong.

He says no. He says the test was correct and was run properly and the number in it is real, and then he says that a test tells you the system can do a thing, and it does not tell you the system will.

I ask what the difference is.

He says the difference is everything between the two ends of it on a Wednesday.

He says the vendor has been through the logs and there is nothing in them. No timeout, no spike, no failed calls. The service reports that it was answering normally throughout.

I ask what that means.

He says it means something between here and there, and that between here and there is four organizations, and that he does not think anybody is going to find it.

At about ten past five the queue is gone and the desk is quiet and I look at the concourse properly for the first time in two hours.

It has absorbed all of it. There is no evidence anywhere in that hall that four hundred people spent an hour longer in it than they intended. The floor is clean. The seating is at the ordinary level of occupied. Somebody is asleep. Two children are running the length of the barrier and back for no reason and their father is watching them and not stopping them, which at this hour is the correct parenting decision.

The ninety-six minutes cost this: about three hundred people delayed by between twenty minutes and an hour. Two people who had a bus. One accreditation category taken on trust from 4:12 to 4:40 on the coordinator's signature. Four staff who did not get their breaks. A volunteer who stayed ninety minutes past the end of a shift she is not paid for.

And a printed list, in a drawer, printed daily for eleven days by somebody nobody has identified, which worked.

The other thing about him is that he stays.

He has nothing to do. The scanner is working and the calls are made and his organization is not ours and his day finished at five. He stands at the end of the desk until twenty to seven, and twice somebody asks him something and both times he knows the answer, and the rest of the time he is simply present in the place where the thing went wrong.

Nobody asks him to. Nobody thanks him for it. He does not appear to be waiting for anything.

At six the coordinator writes it up. It takes her eleven minutes and it is one page.

I ask what happens to the page.

She says it goes in the log, and the log gets read if there is a reason to read it, and there is not going to be a reason.

I ask whether the scanner will do it again on Saturday.

She says she does not know. She says the vendor says it was fine, and the report says it was fine, and it stopped for ninety-six minutes in front of four hundred people, and all three of those are true.

I ask what she will do differently on Saturday.

She says the list comes out of the drawer at the start of the shift and sits on the desk, face down, for the six weeks.

I say that seems small.

She says it is small. She says the alternative is a project.

Then she says the printer thing again — that what she actually needs is a second printer — and asks whether I am the sort of director who can do anything about a printer.

I say I do not know yet.

She says that is the honest answer and that most people say yes.

The scanner is working. Position four is reading two seconds a person, green tick, name, next. The list is back in the drawer. Tomorrow somebody will print a new one.

ON THE RECORD

DAY 63 · 1 DAY TO FIRST MATCH

The Manager, Asset Management Planning asks for twenty minutes and gets fifty, which is the reverse of what happened in April.

He has not asked for anything since April. I have looked. There is no email, no request, no reminder about items five through eleven, no follow-up of any kind, and this morning there is a message that says he has twenty minutes free at eleven if I do, and nothing else in it.

The building this morning is the readiest I have seen it and the quietest, in the way that a room is quiet after everybody has finished moving the furniture. The overlays are up. There is new signage at the top of the ramp, which I look at for slightly too long. There are people in vests at points where there are not usually people.

Nobody is doing anything urgent. Everything urgent was done in the last three weeks.

He starts by apologizing for the timing, which is tomorrow.

I say tomorrow is not my day, it is everybody else's.

He says that is more true than I know, and then says that this is exactly why he picked it, because for the next three weeks nobody is going to ask him a single question about anything that is not immediate, and he has therefore got some time.

Then he says he has been trying to work out since April whether to have this conversation, and has decided to have it,

and that he wants to say at the front that he is not asking me to do anything.

I say people usually are.

He says he knows. He says that is why he is saying it.

The deferred maintenance register goes to the Board in the autumn.

It goes as part of a paper. The paper is prepared by management and it has a covering note, and the covering note is not written by him. It is written above him, and it is written by somebody competent, and it will be accurate.

The room is on the north side and gets no sun and is four degrees colder than the corridor, and he keeps his jacket on for the fifty minutes and I wish I had kept mine.

He has brought the register with him, printed, and it is thicker than I expected and he has to move his coffee to get it flat. There are tabs in it. There are three colours of tab and he explains the colours and then says the colours are his own and mean nothing to anybody else, and that he made them up in 2019 and has never told anyone, and that if he is off sick the tabs are useless.

He says this cheerfully and does not appear to regard it as a problem worth solving.

He is very careful about the note and repeats it twice. The note will be accurate. Every number in it will be a number he supplied. Nothing in it will be false.

I ask what the problem is.

He says, "There's nothing wrong with the note. That's the problem with it."

Here is the thing he wants understood. It takes him about ten minutes.

A deferred maintenance register is a list of decisions to wait. Each line has an asset, a condition, a year and a number, and the number is what it would cost to do the work.

What the register does not have is a column for what it costs *not* to.

Because that column would be an estimate, and an estimate of a consequence that has not happened is not auditable, and anything not auditable does not go to a Board in a paper prepared by competent people. So it is left out, correctly.

Which means the register, read as it stands, is a list of things that cost money. Read properly, it is a list of things that are getting more expensive at different rates, and the rates are not in it, and the rates are the argument.

He gives me two lines off it, without the asset names, because he says the names would make me argue about the wrong thing.

The first is a large number. It has been on the register for six years, the condition has moved by an amount he describes as almost nothing, and the cost of doing it has gone up with construction inflation and nothing else. Waiting on that one has cost the airport the difference between two prices and no more.

The second is a much smaller number. It has been on for two years. The condition has moved a long way in those two years and it is now at a point on a curve where the next movement is not gradual, and if it goes, the work is not the work on the register, it is the work on the register plus the consequence of the failure plus the fact that it will be done in an unplanned week by whoever is available.

Same register. Same format. One line is a price and the other is a fuse, and on the page they look identical.

He says: "Every year they ask me what's on the list. Nobody has ever asked me what's moving."

(The Hand comes into the room at about twenty past.)

I have not requested anything. Nobody has reported anything. This room is booked to me for fifty minutes and does not appear on anybody's list.

He knocks twice and comes in on the second knock without waiting, which is the correct amount of knocking. He says nothing to either of us, and stands on a chair to do something to a ceiling vent that has been making a sound I had stopped hearing about ten minutes earlier and which I now realize has been going since we sat down.

It takes him under a minute. He gets down, puts the chair back where it was, and goes out.

The asset manager does not break sentence.

Afterwards I ask him whether that is normal.

He says Terminal Ops do the rooms on a cycle, and then, because he is a precise man and cannot help it, says that the cycle is monthly and that this room was done on the second.

Our coffees have gone cold. Neither of us mentions it and neither of us drinks any more of it, and at the end of the meeting he takes both cups without asking and puts them on the trolley in the corridor, which is a thing he does without appearing to notice that he is doing it.

I ask him the question I have been building to for ten minutes, which is what he actually wants.

He says he does not want anything. He says it again.

Then he says that if a director were to ask a question at a meeting — not a challenge, a question — about whether the register could show rates of change as well as amounts, then somebody above him would be asked to look at whether that is possible, and it is possible, and it would take a quarter to build, and it would then exist forever.

I ask why he cannot ask that himself.

He says he has. Three times. He says it is not that anybody said no. He says it is that it goes into a list of things that would be good to do and stays in the list, because the list is long and nothing in it is wrong, and a thing that nobody is arguing about is a thing that nobody schedules.

Then he says the sentence he has clearly been carrying up here.

He says, "A director asking it is not a better idea. It's the same idea with a date on it."

I have the login still. Nobody has taken it away.

While he is talking I have it open on my phone, which is rude, and I am not doing what he thinks I am doing.

There is a component on the departures level that generated five tickets between April and May. Same fault, same location, same asset, five separate numbers, with the component replaced between the second and the third.

There are six now.

The sixth was raised eleven days ago and closed nine days ago. The note on it is two words.

As previous.

I look at that for a while. The asset manager is explaining the difference between a condition index and a criticality rating and he is right about all of it.

I put the phone face down.

At the end I ask him what happens if nothing changes.

He says nothing happens. He says that is the honest answer and that people expect him to say something else. The register goes up, the note is accurate, the Board notes it, the year turns,

and the list gets longer at a rate that is entirely predictable and that nobody has ever been asked to predict.

I ask what he would do if it were his decision.

He says he would not change the amounts and he would not change the list. He would add one column and he would let it be ugly for two years while the data caught up with it, and he would take the argument about the ugliness rather than the argument about the amounts, because the argument about the amounts is unwinnable and the argument about the ugliness has an end.

He says he has eleven years to retirement and that the list will outlive him at this airport, and that this is fine, because it is a list about a building and the building is going to be here in two hundred years, and somebody in 2140 is going to be having this conversation about a thing we are pouring next spring.

I ask whether that is depressing.

He says no, and then does not produce a better word for what it is instead, and we sit there for a second while he does not produce one, and then he says it is just the job and looks at the clock.

I eat lunch standing at a counter on the departures level, which I have started doing, because sitting down makes it an hour.

I go and see the corporate secretary in the afternoon, because I have decided to ask the question and I want to know the mechanics of it, and because after two months I have finally worked out that the mechanics are not a detail.

She is precise and she is quick.

Before the question I ask about the pass, because I am in her office and because it is the first time in two months I have been in a room where asking would not take somebody off a task.

She checks. It is with the Minister. It has been with the Minister since the end of April.

I ask whether that is unusual and she says no. I ask whether anybody follows it up and she says the pass office does, on a cycle, and that there is nothing to follow up, because it is not stuck, it is in a queue with several thousand other people's in it, most of whom need theirs in order to earn a living.

I say I had assumed somebody would have chased it by now on the grounds that I am a director.

She says, "Would you like somebody to?"

I say no.

She says, "No," in the tone of a person confirming an entry, and moves on, and that is the treatment the question receives from anybody at this airport in two months. Nobody has ever mentioned it to me. Nobody has apologized for it. As far as I can establish, nobody outside the pass office has noticed.

The corporate secretary's job turns out to be the one I had most completely misunderstood.

I had it filed as minutes and calendars. It is minutes and calendars, and it is also the only role in this organization whose duty runs to the Board rather than to the executive while sitting in the executive's building, eating in its cafeteria, and depending on its goodwill for every practical thing.

She says the job is mostly timing. Not obtaining information — she can obtain anything, that is the easy part — but working out when a director needs a thing in order for having it to be any use. Too early and it is a briefing nobody asked for and it gets skimmed. Too late and it is a complaint.

She is less fluent about this than she was about the procedure. She starts a sentence about the difference and abandons it and says she has never found a good way to explain it and has stopped trying.

I ask who decides the timing.

She says, "I do. And if I get it wrong nobody finds out until something has already gone through."

A director may ask a question at a meeting. It goes in the minutes as a question, in a form of words agreed at the following meeting. Management responds, either in the meeting or afterwards in writing. If it is a substantive matter, it may be added to a forward agenda.

That is what will happen. It is not blocked and it is not discouraged and there is no procedural difficulty of any kind.

I ask what usually happens after that.

She says, "It depends on the question."

I ask what usually happens.

She thinks about it and gives me the accurate answer, which is that it is noted, and that noting is real, and that things which are noted twice tend to acquire an owner, and that this takes about eighteen months.

So the decision is not whether it is possible. It is possible.

The decision is whether a director two months into a first term, who has not yet been issued a permanent pass, who has been escorted into every part of this airport she has been into, and who spent the first week not knowing where the washrooms are, should stand up in the autumn and ask a question that was written for her in June by a man who is eleven years from retiring and who has asked it three times himself.

I decide that she should.

Not because I have worked something out. I have a date in October and he does not, and that is the only difference between us, and it is not a difference I earned.

I may be wrong about this. It is possible that the reason it has sat in a list for three years is a reason nobody has told me, and that I will ask the question in October and find out what it is in front of eleven people.

I have written the question down. It is one sentence and it took me an hour and I have not shown it to him and I am not going to, because if I show it to him it becomes his again.

I do not have a conclusion. I have a sentence in a notebook and a meeting in October.

The last thing I ask the corporate secretary is whether I can see the covering note before it goes.

She says no.

She says it is not drafted yet, and that when it is drafted it will go to the Board with the papers, at the same time as it goes to everybody else, and that a director reviewing management's covering note before the Board sees it is not a director reviewing a note, it is a director writing one.

She says it without any edge at all. She says it the way you explain a thing that is obvious once said.

I say that makes sense.

She says, "It's also the only protection you've got. If you've seen it, you can't be surprised by it, and being surprised by it in a meeting is sometimes the most useful thing a director does all year."

I ask whether that has happened.

She says, "Not since I've been here."

Then she says the papers go out on the twenty-ninth of September and asks whether I want them by post or electronically.

I say electronically.

She says most directors say electronically and then ask for paper by the second meeting, and that she prints a set anyway and keeps it in a drawer, and that she has never once had to say she has done that because they all ask in a way that lets her produce it as though it were their idea.

I ask whether she is telling me that in order to save us both the trouble.

She says, "I'm telling you because you asked about the pass."

I do not know what that means and I do not ask, and she writes *electronically* on a form, and that is the meeting.

THE TWELFTH OF JUNE

DAY 63 · THE EVENING
TEMPORARY PASS T-4471 · ESCORT REQUIRED

Nobody has asked me to come out this evening and there is nothing on my calendar.

I drive out at about seven because I want to see it, and I sign in at Operations, and the person on the desk finds somebody to walk with me, which takes eleven minutes and which she apologizes for twice.

He is about thirty and he is on a night shift that starts at eight and he says he does not mind starting early. He asks where I want to go and I say I do not know, and he takes this as a reasonable answer and says we can walk and see.

The building is finished.

That is the wrong word and it is the one that keeps arriving. Everything that was going to be done has been done. The overlays are up: additional signage over the permanent signage, floor graphics at the decision points, a language set on the screens that was not there in April.

There are people in vests at positions that do not normally have people, standing in ones and twos, talking to each other, being early.

The coordination desk is staffed at all six positions and has about four people at it, and one of them is being taught something by another one, and the printed list is on the desk, face down, exactly as she said it would be.

Nobody is hurrying. There is nothing left that would be improved by hurrying.

We go up to the departures level and along.

There is a man at the top of the ramp with a label gun and a printed sheet, checking the temporary signage against a list, and he is on the second-to-last page of the list, and he tells me without being asked that this is the fourth check.

I ask what the first three found.

He says two errors, both his own, both on the same sign, both the day he put it up.

I ask what the fourth check is for.

He says, "The fourth check is for me."

The volunteers are being briefed near the escalators, about fourteen of them in a loose semicircle, and the woman doing the briefing is going through the phrase they are to use if somebody asks them something they do not know.

It is a short phrase and it is a good one, and they say it back to her, not in unison, in the embarrassed way adults say a thing back to somebody, and one man says it wrong and says it again and gets it right and looks pleased.

Then she tells them where the washrooms are, twice, and says that this will be seventy per cent of it.

There is a vending machine on the lower level that has been restocked to a level I have not seen it at before. Every coil is full. There is nothing at the front that has fallen and stuck.

I stand in front of it for slightly longer than is dignified and I buy nothing.

A family is asleep in the seating by the window, four of them, in the arrangement families arrive at, which is one adult upright with everything on them and the rest horizontal. The upright one is awake and is doing nothing at all with total concentration.

Further along a man is attempting to shrink-wrap his own suitcase at the machine, having declined help, and is going round it for the third time and is now wrapping the handle to the body of the case, which is going to be a problem later and is not going to be a problem for him.

A shop is closing. The shutter comes down in stages and the woman doing it stops halfway to let a man out, and he says something and she laughs, and then it comes the rest of the way down.

Two units along, one is still open and will be open until the last departure, and the person in it is doing a crossword on the counter and looking up every time somebody passes and going back down when they do not stop.

Somebody is playing the piano.

Badly, and cheerfully, and with two hands, and the person playing it is wearing an airline uniform and is playing to nobody, because the international departures hall at ten past eight on a Thursday in June is not empty but is not paying attention.

It is out of tune. It has been four days.

We stand for a bit and then he says we should keep going.

Down at the far end of the departures level a man is riding an escalator up, walking down beside it, and riding it up again. He does this four times while we are in sight of him. Nobody is with him and he has a tablet in one hand.

Either that is a comb plate check or it is somebody who has had a report and cannot make the thing happen again, and the second is the worse job by a distance, and you can tell them apart by whether the person looks annoyed.

I ask which this one is.

He says, "He looks annoyed."

On the mezzanine there is a room with the door propped that I have not been in and am not taken into. There are about twenty people in it in three different uniforms, sitting on chairs that have been carried in from somewhere else, and somebody at the front with a laptop, and the laptop is not connected to anything and he is reading off the screen of it held up in front of him like a hymn book.

It is a shift briefing. There are four of them tonight, staggered, and the reason they are staggered is that the room only holds twenty.

There is a queue at the staff cafeteria, at nine at night, which he says there has not been in years.

The arrivals side is nearly empty and has been cleaned to a standard that will not survive nine o'clock tomorrow morning.

The baggage hall is running, because there is always something running, but it is running at the rate of a building with four flights left rather than at the rate it will run at from about eleven tomorrow.

Out on the freight aprons there are lights and vehicles and people working, and for that half of this airport tomorrow is Friday. A freighter is being loaded. The perishables do not know about any of this.

The All-Seeing is at the curb.

Departures level, third column, where you can see the length of it without being in it. There is nothing happening. The evening bank has gone and the curb is at the state it reaches around then, which is four vehicles and a lot of pavement.

He is doing nothing at all.

I watch for about four minutes from inside the doors and in four minutes he moves twice, both times about a metre, and he does not use the radio and does not raise a hand and nothing on that curb requires anything from anybody.

At one point a taxi driver walking back from the far end says something to him and he answers it and the driver goes on.

That is the content of it.

The curb has been marked out for tomorrow. There is new tape on the roadway in two colours and there are barriers folded flat against the wall where they will go, and a sign on a stand that is facing the wrong way because it is not needed yet.

He is not looking at any of that. He is looking down the length of the curb at where it bends, which is the thing he was looking at in May and the thing he will be looking at on Saturday.

I do not go and speak to him. I have been out here before and I know what he would do, which is answer whatever I asked and then look back down the curb, and I would learn something and it would cost him the four minutes.

At about nine the night crew starts arriving.

They come through in twos and threes with bags, from the staff entrance, and go past the front of the desk without looking at it, and eleven minutes later the first machine starts somewhere out of sight and the building acquires the sound it has between one and five in the morning, only earlier tonight, because there is more to do and they have been told to start early.

A woman goes past pushing a trolley with a mop and a tablet on it and says something in a language I do not have, and the man walking with me answers in it, and neither of them breaks stride.

I do not ask him about that either.

We go out through a gate on the south side and stand at the edge of the apron where I am allowed to be with him beside me.

The field has its lights on. Everything is marked, everything is lit, the taxiway centrelines are green and go away in both directions further than I can follow them, and it is not dark yet but it is going that way, and the sky behind the mountains is doing what it does in June, which is to take about an hour and a half over it.

The apron is clean. It has been swept. It was swept anyway, on the schedule, and it has also been swept again.

There is water on three sides of this and you cannot see it from here and you can tell it is there.

There are aircraft at stands with nobody near them. Three of them have their cabin lights on and nobody in them. One has a set of steps against it and the door open at the top and no one on the steps.

A long way down, past the end of the lit apron, a single vehicle is parked facing the fence with its lights off and somebody sitting in it. My escort looks at it for a moment and then does not look at it again, which I take to mean it is either somebody having their break or somebody he is not going to speculate about in front of a director.

The Allfather is out there.

He is at a hold short, off to one side, about eighty metres from us.

He is not doing anything either.

Here is what he does in the eight or nine minutes I watch him.

He stands. He looks up the runway, and then at the ground about four metres in front of him, and then up the runway again. Twice he turns and looks back towards the terminal.

The hand-held goes twice. Both times he answers it inside a couple of seconds and both times the exchange is four or five words and he is the one who ends it. He does not walk anywhere afterwards. Whatever was wanted, he had it.

Nothing comes and nothing goes.

At one point a vehicle crosses at the far end, a long way off, with its beacon on, and he watches it all the way across and then goes back to looking at the ground in front of him.

At some point the lights on the runway change to a different setting. I do not know what the setting is or who did it. It is

not dramatic; it is the difference between one kind of lit and another kind of lit, and if I had blinked I would have missed it.

He does not react to it. He is already looking that way.

My escort says the last departure went at four minutes past eight and the first arrival of the morning bank is not until much later, and that there is a period every night when there is nothing moving on this airfield at all, and that it is about forty minutes at this time of year and longer in the winter.

I ask what the field is doing during those forty minutes.

He says, "Sitting there."

I ask whether the airside lead is waiting for something.

My escort looks over.

He says he does not know. He says that one is generally out somewhere and that you tend not to notice.

Then he says, in the flat way of a man passing on a fact about a rota, "He's usually on when it's the one you'd want to be on."

Then he says he is going to go and check the gate because he has to go and check the gate.

He says, on the way, that his sister is bringing her kids out tomorrow afternoon to watch the aircraft, that he told her not to, that she is coming anyway, and that he will be working and will not see them.

Then he goes to check the gate.

For about six minutes I am standing at the edge of an airfield on my own, which is not permitted, and which happens because my escort is eleven metres away with his back to me doing exactly what he is supposed to be doing.

I do not go anywhere. I stand where I was standing.

The Allfather does not turn round.

Tomorrow this island will do the largest single day it has ever done and I have no idea what that will be like. I have read the plan. I have watched a rehearsal of a scenario that will not happen. I have been told the number of people per hour and I cannot picture it, because I have never seen it, because it has never happened.

I do not know whether the scanner will fail again on Saturday. I do not know whether the crossing will hold when the queue folds into it, or what is in the covering note, because it is not written yet.

Nobody in this building knows any of that either. That is not a consolation and I am not offering it as one. It is simply the position everybody is in at eight o'clock on the twelfth of June.

We come back in through the gate and he swipes and holds it and I go through, and it is the last time this evening that a door is opened for me by somebody whose card works.

At the top of the stairs he asks what it is I actually do.

I tell him. It takes about forty seconds and it does not sound like very much.

He says, "So you're the ones who say yes to things."

I say sometimes, and mostly to things that have already been decided.

He says, "Yeah," in a way that is not agreement or disagreement, and holds the door.

At the Operations desk I hand back the visitor sheet.

The woman there says, "All right?"

I say yes.

She says, "Big one tomorrow," in the tone in which a person says *cold out*, and turns the sheet over and puts it on a spike.

The staff lot at half past nine is emptier than the last time I was in it at this hour, which was April, and it is emptier because the day staff have gone and it will fill again at five.

In the lot a man is putting a bicycle on a rack on the back of a car in a way that suggests he has never done it before, and another man is helping him, and neither of them appears to work here.

My feet hurt. I have been walking for two and a half hours in the shoes, again, and I have owned a pair of the other kind since the end of April and have not brought them, and I am aware that this is a decision I keep making.

I sit in the car for a while before I start it.

There is a fence, and behind the fence a line of blue and green lights going away, and above that the tail of something with its logo lit, and above that the sky still doing the thing it does in June.

Somewhere out there a man is standing at a hold short with his hands in his pockets, and nothing is moving on the field, and nothing is going to move on it for another half an hour.

There is no aircraft on the runway. There is no vehicle on the taxiway. The tower is lit and there is nobody visible in it. The wind is doing about nothing. On the water past the end of the runway there are birds in numbers I could not estimate and

somebody could, and is not counting them tonight, because the count is at six in the morning.

A car comes into the row behind me and somebody gets out and goes in through the doors with a bag, on their way somewhere tonight, which is a thing this building will do about forty more times before it stops for the night and starts again.

I sit there until the light goes off the water.

Nothing happens, and then I drive home.