

THE HUNGRY GODS
GO TO THE LEGISLATURE

N. Van Seters & Claude

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I PRO FORMA

HANSARD

The Lieutenant Governor left at 2:51, and the Chamber spent the next eleven minutes deciding that it had never been anything but a legislature.

I do not watch the procession. I could — there is a feed, and it runs whether anybody is looking at it or not — but the room I work in has no sightline to the Chamber, and in eleven years I have not once wished it did. There is nothing in it for me. Nobody says anything during a procession that has to be written down, and the parts that are spoken were written in advance by people who are paid to write them, and circulated in advance to people who are paid to read them, so that by the time the words arrive in my room they have been three places already and are tired.

What I have instead of a view is the sound the building makes on the day. A procession has a floor under it and the floor is over my head. You get the doors first, then the standing — a full Chamber getting to its feet is not a noise so much as a change in the pressure of the ceiling — then the long formal quiet of somebody reading aloud to a room that is not permitted to answer. Then the release, which is chairs. It is always chairs. Nothing else in this building sounds like eighty chairs deciding at the same moment that the ceremonial part of

the afternoon is over, It is not an event. It is a schedule item arriving on time.

The Speech is the easiest afternoon of the year. It is also the longest, because everyone in the building who has ever wanted to see the inside of the Chamber has arranged to be inside it, and they breathe.

Then the chairs. Then my afternoon starts.

At 3:02 the Honourable the Attorney General rose and introduced a bill.

I had the file open before she was fully up. This is not skill. It is the calendar.

The bill is called An Act to Ensure the Supremacy of Parliament. It is introduced at the opening of every session, immediately after the Lieutenant Governor has gone, and it is the first bill of the session, which is why it is numbered 1. That is the only bill number in the entire session that means anything. The rest are assigned by the government in whatever order suits the government, so that Bill 4 may be introduced in March and Bill 3 in May, and twice in my career Bill 2 has never appeared at all, which raises a question I have decided not to pursue.

Bill 1 asserts the right of the Assembly to sit and to legislate without leave from the Crown. It says so in a short statement that the sponsor is permitted to make, not exceeding two minutes, to explain the bill's purpose. The right being asserted was first put on the record in March of 1603.

Then the bill is read a first time, and placed on the order paper, and it is never called again.

Nobody has ever explained this to me, and I have never asked, because I have transcribed it eleven times and the explanation is evidently that we do it. What I know about Bill 1 is that it runs about four hundred words including the motion, that the sponsor almost always speeds up in the middle third, and that whoever is in the second row directly behind her will cough. Somebody always coughs. I have begun to think of it as scored.

Roz, who sits across from me and has been here two years longer, calls it the housekeeping bill, which annoys me more than it should.

“It’s not housekeeping,” I said. “Housekeeping gets used.”

“So does this.”

“Used for what?”

She thought about it long enough that I felt bad. “For being there,” she said.

I typed the coughing member out. He was not recognized, and the rule is that if you were not recognized you were not speaking, whatever your lungs were doing.

— . —

The transcript we produce first is called the Blues. It is a draft. It goes out marked as a draft, in capitals, which I have always found slightly frantic of us, as though the document might otherwise be mistaken for something a person could rely on. Nothing else in this building shouts. The mace does not shout. The Blues shout.

They exist because members would like to see what they said before the rest of the province sees what they said, and because sometimes what they said was not what they meant, and there is a narrow and well-policed corridor between those two things which is where I spend my working life. A member may write to us about an inadvertent factual inaccuracy. A member may not write to us about having been unpersuasive. The line between those has been walked up to, and leaned on, and in one case in my second year sat down beside for most of an afternoon, but it has never actually moved.

The rule I work to was written in 1907, for a parliament on the other side of the world, and it has never been replaced anywhere in the Commonwealth. It asks for a report that is substantially, rather than strictly, what was said. Repetitions come out. Obvious errors are put right. Nothing is removed if it carries any part of the meaning, or shows how the argument was made.

Which sounds tidy until four o’clock, when a member says *and I think it’s fair to say, I think it’s fair to say, that this is, in my view, fair* and you have to decide, with the audio still running and the next speaker already up, which of those is a repetition and which of them is the argument.

The other trouble with obvious errors is that the word doing the work is *obvious*. A member says 1974 and means 1947: mistake, goes right. A member says the ferry runs four times a day and it runs three: not a mistake. That is a position, and it stays in, because we are not the department of being right. We are the department of what was said, minus the coughing.

Roz has a laminated card taped inside her drawer that reads WAS IT A MISTAKE OR IS HE JUST LIKE THAT. She made it herself. She has never once needed to look at it.

I leave more in than she does. She says I am sentimental. I say she is editing people into a standard of eloquence that nobody in that room has ever met, and that if you smooth a man's sentence until it stands up straight, you have made him a better speaker than he is, and someone in eleven years is going to quote it, and it will not be him they are quoting.

We have had this argument enough times that we can now have it in about nine seconds.

What I have never said to her, because it would sound like agreeing, is that the job has done something to my hearing that I do not think reverses. Years of pulling repetitions out of other people's sentences and I now hear them everywhere, all the time, in a way I did not ask for and cannot switch off. My mother tells a story about a dog she had in Kamloops and I know before she reaches it that she will say the dog was enormous, actually enormous, and then say enormous again in the next sentence with her hands apart, and I love the story and I love her telling it and some part of me that is paid by the hour has already lifted the second enormous out and set it on the table beside the plate. A friend describes a bad week and I am counting. The radio in the car is a running transcript with the redundancies marked. It is not that I want people to speak better. I do not care how anybody speaks. It is that the mechanism that decides what carries meaning and what is only the mouth getting up to speed has been running in me for eleven years without a stop, on evenings and weekends and right through one funeral, and it does not know the difference between a member on their feet at four o'clock and my mother with her hands apart. So when Roz tells me I am sentimental, she is not wrong, and she does

not know what she is describing. I know what it costs to take a thing out. I know it in a way that has nothing to do with the record. I am not going to explain that to her at half four on a Tuesday.

— . —

At ten to five a member's office telephoned about the Blues — an assistant, courteous, reading from a note: the member wishes to advise of an inadvertent factual inaccuracy in this afternoon's draft.

The procedure exists and I like it. A member may correct the record where the record has them saying a thing they did not say, or a number that came out wrong between the brain and the microphone. What a member may not do is correct the record where the record has them saying exactly what they said, in the order they said it, to an effect they have since had described to them by colleagues.

The inaccuracy in question was that the member had said a project would be finished "next year." The member had said that. I had the audio. The audio was not ambiguous, and neither, at the time, was the member, who had said it twice, the second time with a gesture I could hear.

Roz took the call, because Roz enjoys them, and I have watched her take enough of them over the years to know the entire shape of the thing from across the room: yes; yes; she understood entirely; and then, in the tone of a person asking about the weather, could the office indicate which word, precisely, had been transcribed in error. There is then a pause on the other end that I have come to think of as the sound of a note being read again. The office said that it would consult the member and telephone us again, which is a sentence I have now heard in every one of its available inflections.

They do not call back, almost ever. The corridor between what was said and what was meant is narrow, as I have said, and well policed, and the policing is mostly this: one polite question, asked once, about which word.

Roz put the phone down and wrote nothing on anything.

"Next year," she said, to the room generally, and went back to her pass.

— . —

The All-Seeing came in at some point during the second pass. He does that. He does not knock, but he does not not knock either — he arrives in the doorway at roughly the speed of somebody who has knocked, so the question of whether he did never quite gets asked.

He had a printout with him, folded back on itself the way you fold a document you have finished with, and he held it against his leg throughout, and did not open it.

He wanted to know whether we had the Attorney General's statement at 3:02 or 3:04.

"3:02," I said.

He said 3:04.

I turned the screen on its arm, which sticks, so that turning it is a two-handed operation and takes about four seconds longer than the gesture is worth. The clock is stamped on the feed. It said 3:02, the way it had said 3:02 the first time.

He looked at it for a moment and then said, "3:02," in the tone of a man confirming something rather than a man correcting himself, and went away down the corridor toward the Legislative Library, where I assume the same conversation was had with somebody else.

Roz did not look up. "Was he right?"

"No."

"Huh," she said, and kept typing.

— . —

By half past five the gallery had emptied and the building had begun the annual business of pretending that it does this every day. I sent the Blues, marked as they are always marked. Somewhere below me a caterer was taking down a folding table that had been up since noon — borrowed, I assume, from wherever folding tables live in this building — and I could hear, faintly, the particular clatter of a stack of chairs being wheeled somewhere else.

The Speech itself will be quoted for a week. The bill introduced twenty minutes after it will not be mentioned again this session, or

next session, or the one after that, and it will be introduced every time.

I still have to get the coughing right, in the sense of getting it out.

Tomorrow the House sits at ten, and after that it sits until the last Thursday in May. There will be actual bills, ones that go somewhere. There will be an afternoon four hours long that contains thirty thousand words, none of them written in advance by anybody. It will not be this one.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

PARLIAMENTARY CALENDAR — PUBLISHED BY THE CLERK OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Pursuant to Standing Order 2(2)(c)

SPRING SITTING — second Tuesday in February to the last Thursday in May, inclusive.

The House stands adjourned: the week of Spring Vacation as provided in the School Act; the week of Good Friday; the week of Easter Monday; the week of Victoria Day.

FALL SITTING — first Monday in October to the last Thursday in November, inclusive.

The House stands adjourned: the week of Thanksgiving Day; the week of Remembrance Day.

Sitting days are subject to further order of the House. This calendar is provided for information.

PARLIAMENTARY DINING ROOM · THIS WEEK

Feature: Pan-seared halibut, spring pea risotto — 21

Soup: Roasted cauliflower and thyme — 7

Weekly special: Chicken schnitzel burger, house slaw — 17

Bea's shortbread squares, at the counter — 2.50

Dinner service Mon–Wed while the House is sitting. Reservations recommended.

II FIRST READING

THE TABLE

Nothing happens until the mace is on the table.

Not “nothing important.” Nothing. The room’s a room, with people in it, some of them Members, and the lights on. But the Sergeant-at-Arms has to walk the mace up the floor and set it down in front of me first, and until he does the Assembly hasn’t got the permission of the Crown to do anything at all. So it doesn’t.

Then he sets it down. Then it does.

I’m told not finding this strange is the sign of a good Table Officer. It may be the sign of something else.

— . —

Three seats at the Table, and I’ve got one of them.

We sit in front of the Speaker’s chair with our backs to the Speaker. Visitors find that odd. Then you explain we’re not the audience, and they find it odder.

Black robes and white tabs, and the Speaker the same, and nobody else in the room. I’ve never worked out if that makes us clergy or waiters.

On the Table there's a panel of lights that says how long a Member's been speaking, an ornate bell for the end of Question Period, and a switch that rings the division bells in every corridor of the building. I'm allowed to touch that one. I've touched it eleven times in four years and I remember all eleven. What I'd give for a twelfth that could go either way, I've never worked out, because it's never been on offer.

Also on the Table: three water glasses. The Standing Orders. The fifth edition of the procedural authority, with the Clerk's name on the cover. And a dish of paperclips nobody's ever been seen to fill.

— . —

Question Period ran at its hour. Thirty minutes. The ornate bell ends it — I ring it, it's mine to ring — and the half hour between the start and my bell is the fastest procedural time in the building.

From the Table you don't hear Question Period as the gallery hears it. You hear durations. A question's got a length and an answer's got a length, and the panel of lights in front of me turns both into arithmetic, and my half hour is spent making sure nobody's arithmetic runs over. What the questions are about reaches me the way weather reaches a submarine. Something's going on up there. The instruments say how much.

That morning one of the durations became a division. Doesn't happen often out of Question Period's neighbourhood, but a motion got moved and the House wanted to be counted about it, and that's the switch — the bells, every corridor, the building suddenly full of Members walking fast and pretending not to.

Twelfth time. Four years.

The count went where the count was always going — not cynicism, arithmetic: you can read a division from the seating plan before a single Member stands, and my job is to record it as though you can't, so that's what I did.

Then the bell, mine, the ornate one, and the half hour was over, and the House went back to talking at its ordinary speed.

— . —

Routine Business runs in a fixed order, and it runs in that order because it always has, and it'll run in that order tomorrow.

My job's mostly knowing where we are in it, and knowing it slightly before anyone else does, so that when the Speaker glances down I'm already looking up.

Third item along, one of us called Introduction of Bills.

The Honourable the Attorney General rose.

She stated the title, which is required: a bill's introduced upon a motion specifying its title, and the title's what gets moved, not the bill.

The title was Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act (No. 2).

Then she took her two minutes. That's what she's allowed — a statement not exceeding two minutes to explain the purpose, no further debate — and she used about ninety seconds of it.

She said the bill makes minor amendments to a number of acts, that they're technical, and that one of them fixes a reference to a board that changed its name some years ago.

None of it was untrue. None of it was checkable. The bill was still in a box.

— . —

The question is: That this Bill be now read a first time.

Decided without amendment and without debate. That's the Standing Order, and there's nothing to amend anyway, because the only thing on the floor is the title. Nobody's ever wanted to argue about a title. I keep hoping.

I timed it. Forty-one seconds, Attorney General sitting down to question resolved.

In that time the House agreed to consider a document not one Member in the Chamber had read. On the strength of a description lasting a minute and a half.

That's the procedure, and it's the only one there is. You can't hand out a bill before the House agrees to receive it, and the House can't agree before somebody says what it is, and the somebody saying it is the person who wants it received.

That's the shape of the thing, and it's been the shape a long time.

I recorded the vote.

The Member for one of the north Island ridings, second row, government side. He voted with everybody else on the government side, which is what he does. The Allfather's been in the House longer than anyone at the Table, and I've never had to write his name in a division that was in any doubt. He comes in a little after prayers and goes out a little before the adjournment, same as he did in March.

I can read a division off the seating plan and I want to be exact about what that means, because it sounds like a boast and it is nearer to a condition. It isn't foresight. It's that the plan is the answer, printed, in front of me, all day. Where a Member sits is where a Member votes, and there are eighty-odd of them, and the arithmetic of who sits where was settled by other people in other rooms long before any question reaches this floor. So when the bells go and they come in fast down both aisles doing the thing they do — the walking-in-and-pretending-not-to-hurry, which I'd defend as dignified if anybody attacked it — I'm not watching a decision. I'm watching a number arrive that I already had. My hands do the recording and my face does the face, and somewhere underneath both of those a small part of me is standing at the window of a shop it has decided not to go into. I've thought about whether that's cynicism and decided it isn't, because cynicism would require me to think they're pretending, and they're not. They mean it. Every one of them means it, all the way down, and the plan means it too, and both of those are true at once and only one of them gets written in the book. Eleven times I've had my hand on that switch. What I'd want, once, before I'm done here, is to ring those bells not knowing. Not a scandal. Not a crisis. Just a half hour where the plan on the Table in front of me is a piece of paper about seating and the count is a genuine count, and I get to find out at the same time as everybody else. It isn't on offer. I've read enough of the authority to know it isn't structurally on offer, and that the not being on offer is more or less the point of the arrangement itself, and I record the divisions as though it were, which is either professionalism or the same thing wearing a robe.

— . —

The boxes went out straight after.

Copies to every Member, handed round on the floor while the House moved to the next item. Members held them. Two opened them. One turned to the back, where the commencement clause lives, which on the day is the only part of a miscellaneous bill anybody reads.

By the time tomorrow's Orders of the Day were printed, the title had PRINTED beside it, in capitals, which is a signal from one document that a second document now exists.

Until that word shows up, the bill can't be read a second time. The word's the permission, not the printing.

— . —

There's a last thing that happens to a bill after first reading, and it's my favourite thing in the building.

The Law Clerk revises it. Standing Order 87 — it's her duty to revise all bills after first reading and certify they're correct. She's got a power of deletion and substitution and addition, used sparingly, and only for what the authority calls patent errors: a printing fault, a grammatical slip, a cross-reference pointing at nothing.

So there's a window where eighty-odd Members have voted to receive a bill, none of them have discussed it, and the document's legitimately in the hands of one official on the second floor with a red pen. The House has no idea what she's doing.

What she's doing is helping.

She came down about half four to ask whether a schedule heading was a heading or a clause. I said heading. She said she thought so too, and went back up.

— . —

One more thing about the order paper, since I'm the one who keeps it.

There's a bill on it that hasn't moved since February. Second reading, adjourned debate, and the adjourned debate has stayed adjourned through fourteen sitting days that I've counted and probably some I haven't. It'll be on tomorrow's paper. It'll be on the paper the last Thursday in May, and at whatever hour the House rises that day it

will stop existing, along with everything else that hasn't finished, and next October somebody will decide whether to start it again from the beginning or not at all.

Somebody wrote that bill. Somebody was assigned it, and consulted on it, and took it through a ministry, and got it drafted and numbered and printed, and stood up in that Chamber and had two minutes.

I print the paper. I don't do anything else about it.

— . —

At six the House rose.

The Sergeant-at-Arms came for the mace and took it out the same road he'd brought it in. The Members went past the Bar of the House, a long brass rod that visitors may not pass while the Assembly's sitting. They can pass it now. It isn't.

I stayed to square the Table — Standing Orders back in the middle, glasses off, lights panel reset to zero, which it does by itself and I do as well.

The paperclips were where they always are, and there were as many as there always are, and I've been here four years.

VOTES AND PROCEEDINGS — extract

On the motion "That Bill (No. 14) be now read a first time" — question put and agreed to.

On the motion of the Government House Leader (division) — Yeas 47, Nays 33.

YEAS — 47

Boundary-Similkameen

Bulkley Valley-Stikine

Cariboo-Chilcotin

Columbia River-Revelstoke

Courtenay-Comox

Kamloops Centre

Ladysmith-Oceanside

Nanaimo-Gabriola Island

North Island

Peace River South

Prince George-Mackenzie

Richmond Centre

Skeena

Surrey-Panorama

Vernon-Lumby

(list continues)

MACE — out of office 09:52, placed Table 10:00. Off Table 18:04, returned 18:09. — R.T.

ORDERS OF THE DAY — PUBLIC BILLS AND ORDERS

8. Second reading — Bill 11, Energy Statutes Amendment Act (adjourned debate)

9. Second reading — Bill 14, Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act (No. 2) — PRINTED

10. Committee — Bill 9, Municipal Affairs Statutes Amendment Act

12. Second reading — Bill 6, Provincial Symbols Amendment Act (not proceeded with since February 19)

14. Second reading — Bill 12, Finance Statutes Amendment Act

III SECOND READING

HANSARD

I said there would be an afternoon of four hours and thirty thousand words. It took until the second week of May to arrive, which is about usual, and this was it. I want to describe what that is actually like, because people assume it is like typing and it is not like typing.

It is like standing in a river holding a net.

The words arrive at the speed a person speaks, which is between a hundred and forty and a hundred and eighty a minute in that Chamber, and they do not stop when you need them to. We work in rotations for that reason, in blocks, with somebody always coming on and somebody always coming off, and the handover has to be clean because the sentence does not care that you have changed. There is a particular kind of tiredness at the end of a rotation that is not physical and is not exactly mental either. It is the tiredness of having made four hundred small decisions about other people's meaning without being permitted to have an opinion about any of it.

— . —

The bill was called for second reading at twenty past two.

Second reading is debate on the principle of the bill, which in the case of this bill is a philosophical difficulty I am not paid to resolve. Its principle, so far as I can determine from having now typed every word said about it, is that a number of acts require minor amendment. Whether that is a principle or a category was raised by one Member and left where it fell.

The Member for one of the Kootenay ridings spoke for twenty-two minutes.

I have the timing because I have the timing on everything. Twenty-two minutes at her rate is a little over three thousand words, and I typed all of them, and I will tell you what I have not told anybody, which is that it was a good speech. Not important. Nobody will read it. But she had been given a bill with no argument in it and half an hour to fill, and she did not repeat herself once, and she did not say anything she would regret, and she built the thing out of examples — a board that changed its name, a cross-reference pointing nowhere, a definition that had drifted from the one beside it — and by the end of it a person listening would have understood what a miscellaneous bill is and why the province has them.

I have transcribed a great many speeches that were about something and were worse than that.

— . —

Now. The Speaker.

I have typed the Speaker in that Chamber since before she was the Speaker, and I could tell you her total output for the afternoon almost to the word, because I keep the running count without deciding to.

Twenty-two minutes of the Kootenay Member. Fourteen from the Member for a Vancouver Island riding. Nine, six, eleven, four. Two points of order, both disposed of. Something under thirty thousand words in all, from something over a dozen mouths.

The Speaker said: the Member for the riding. The Speaker said: Member. The Speaker said: the Member will come to order. The Speaker said: I will hear the Member on the point of order. The Speaker said: the point is not well taken, and gave a reason, and

cited the authority, because that is required, and it ran to about ninety words and it was the longest thing she said all day.

She cannot debate. It is a Standing Order, not a habit — the Speaker shall not take part in any debate before the House. She does not vote unless the House ties, and the Act is quite bald about it: questions are determined by a majority of the votes of the Members present, other than the Speaker. She does not go to her own caucus. She sits in the largest chair in the province, six feet above everybody, presiding over a room whose entire function is people saying what they think, and she has said two hundred and forty words today, and none of them were what she thinks.

And nothing she decides can be appealed to the House. That is Standing Order 9. If your rulings cannot be argued with, nobody argues with you. Nobody argues with her about anything, ever, in that room. She has the last word on every question of order in the province and she is the only person in the building who never gets to be wrong out loud.

I put in what she says, all of it, every time, because it carries meaning and the rule is that meaning stays. It comes to about a page.

— . —

The Conscience-Keeper was down to speak and did not.

That happens. A Member's name goes on the list with the Whip and the list runs long, and the House rises at half six whether or not the list has run out, and the ones at the bottom go to the next sitting day or nowhere. He sat through the afternoon. He did not rise, was not called, and produced no words for me to take down, which means that as far as this afternoon's record of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia is concerned he was not present, because attendance is not a thing the transcript keeps.

At ten past four a Member said something across the floor while another Member was on their feet, and it was the funniest thing said in that Chamber in weeks, and it is not in the record and never will be, because he had not been recognized.

Roz heard it too. We did not discuss it. There is nothing to discuss: the rule is the rule, and I have defended the rule at length to people

at parties who think it is a scandal, and it is not a scandal, it is the difference between a record of proceedings and a recording of a room.

But I will say this. I have typed enough of that Chamber to know exactly how much of what happens in it does not survive contact with the record. It is not a small proportion. Every one of the omissions is correct.

— . —

The question was put at ten to six and the bill was read a second time.

The vote took about forty seconds and produced eleven words of transcript. The twenty-two minutes about the principle of the bill produced three thousand, and the forty seconds that actually moved the bill produced eleven, and I have never once heard anybody remark that this is the ratio, in every parliament, on every bill, in the entire history of the practice.

Blues out at half seven. Committee stage is tomorrow week, which is the last week, which means a night sitting, which means one of us will be here at eleven at night in this room typing a man reading numbers.

I have already put my name down for it.

PARLIAMENTARY DINING ROOM · THIS WEEK

Feature: Halibut, salsa verde, new potatoes — 21

Soup: Leek and potato — 7

Weekly special: Steak sandwich, frites — 19

Dinner service Mon–Wed while the House is sitting. Reservations recommended.

Wednesday 12:30 — room fully booked.

PARLIAMENTARY DINING ROOM

Closed — the House stands adjourned (Spring Vacation, per the School Act).

Reopening Tuesday. The book is open for bookings.

MACE — no movements. In office.

BLACK ROD — no movements. In office.

Week of adjournment. Nil return filed per practice. — R.T.

IV SECOND READING

ROOM 008

You can tell whether the House is sitting by whether I'm here at seven at night.

We do breakfast and lunch year-round, which is the part everybody knows about. The dinner service is Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and only when the Assembly's actually sitting, which means the room's existence after six o'clock is itself a piece of information. Not Thursdays. Nobody's ever asked me why not Thursdays, and I don't volunteer it any more, because the answer is that they all go home Thursday, and people don't like being told that the Legislature has a commute.

It was a Tuesday. So we were open.

— . —

Room 008 is in the basement and it isn't underground, which is a distinction I've had to make roughly four hundred times. There are windows. They're at the height where you see people's shoes on the lawn, and in June you see a lot of shoes, because the tours run all day.

White cloths. Real china. Framed photographs on the walls from the provincial archives — men in high collars standing in front of this

building while it was still going up, all of them looking like they'd have sent the soup back.

Marguerite has run the pass for nineteen years. Trev's been here since March and still says "enjoy" at every table, which I've told him is fine and which Marguerite says is not fine, and that's an argument I'm staying out of.

— . —

Lunch is the other room. Same tables, different animal.

Dinner's staff and stragglers and the occasional booked-ahead couple. Lunch, when the House is sitting, is the working meal of the working building, and the book fills by Monday for the Wednesday. I run the book. I could tell you things about this town from the book alone, and what I could tell you is table arrangements, because that's what the book knows.

There's a consultant, and I'd say his name, but he's a table to me, he's table six. He has the Wednesday twelve-thirty, most sitting weeks, party of three, and the three rotates. He books it proper, pays it proper, tips fair, orders the fish. Whoever's with him gets walked in past the archive photographs and you can watch the photographs do their work on a first-timer, which I'd say is half of why anyone books this room instead of somewhere with a wine list twice as long.

What do they talk about at table six. I've no idea, is the honest answer, and I mean that mechanically: I'm at the table maybe ninety seconds an hour, and ninety seconds of any conversation in this building is a man saying "well, exactly" while somebody else nods. That's lunch, wall to wall. Well, exactly.

Marguerite's rule for the room is the same at lunch as at dinner and she's had it nineteen years: we do the food, they do the rest. It's a good rule because it's a true division of labour, and the one time Trev asked her what the rest was, she looked at him until he went and did the cloths. I've a theory about what the rest is, and I've had it nineteen years, and it's not the kind of theory you improve by asking.

Here it is anyway, since you're not Marguerite. The rest is the part where a room does something to people that the people don't know is being done, and you can't do it from a table, you can only do it from

the pass. Think about what actually happens. A man comes down a basement corridor following a green line painted on a floor, past a boiler room and a door marked with a number and nothing else, and it's ugly every step of it and he's beginning to think he's been sent somewhere wrong, and then a door, and then white cloths and china and forty feet of photographs of men in high collars standing in front of this exact building when it was scaffolding. And whatever he came down here to do, he does it about ten per cent differently than he would have done it upstairs, and he does not know that, and neither does the person he came to do it with. That's the rest. It isn't a service. Nobody's ever paid for it and nobody's ever thanked anybody for it and it doesn't go on the bill. Marguerite's had nineteen years of putting people in a room that arranges them and then leaving before it works, which is why she won't discuss it — not because it's a secret but because saying it out loud makes it sound like a trick, and it isn't a trick, it's a floor plan and some laundry and a photograph budget from 1978. I've watched two hundred first-timers come through that door and do the small involuntary straightening you do when a room turns out to be better than you were promised. Every one of them thought it was about them. And Trev'll get all this in a year or two, or he won't, and either way he'll go on saying enjoy at every table, and Marguerite will go on not liking it, and I'll go on doing the cloths and staying out of it.

— . —

Three things were happening in my room at seven o'clock.

At table four, a couple from Nanaimo who'd booked six weeks ago. They'd come through the accessible entrance at the front, gone through security, been given a visitor badge, and followed a green line painted on the floor of a basement corridor to get here. That's the actual route. The green line is not a metaphor and I wish people would stop looking at me like it is.

At table nine, two from the press gallery, eating fast, both with their phones face-up beside the cutlery.

And at eleven, in the corner, three Members, who'd come down at twenty to seven looking like people let out of something.

The difference is the paying. Members have got an account number, and what they eat comes off their pay, which sounds grand until you've watched somebody sign for a bowl of soup with the resignation of a man doing a timesheet. Press gallery pays. Public pays. Everyone pays. It's only the route the money takes that changes, and I'd say that four hundred times too if anybody asked, which they don't, because nobody's ever curious about the till.

Nigel was at the two-top under the window, where he sits. I didn't see him come in. I never do. Marguerite had his plate away before he'd finished deciding he was finished, which is a courtesy she extends to nobody else, and at some point in the next while he went out past table eleven, and none of them looked up.

— . —

The three at eleven were juniors. I've been doing this long enough to tell without being told: they still take their jackets off in here, and they still look at the archive photographs.

The Kootenay one had been on her feet for twenty-two minutes that afternoon.

"On what," said the one from somewhere in the Fraser Valley.

"On the bill."

"On the principle of the bill."

"Yes."

"It hasn't got one."

She said it had a principle. She said the principle was that a number of acts require minor amendment. He said that's not a principle, that's a category, and she said take it up with the drafters, and the third one, who'd said nothing at all so far and had been working steadily through the bread, said: "Somebody has to be up."

That stopped it, because it's true. The House sits until six-thirty on a Tuesday and the government's business has to occupy the hours, and if nobody's speaking the House isn't doing anything, and a House that isn't doing anything has to be adjourned, and nobody wants to explain an early adjournment in May. So somebody's up. It rotates. It was her.

She said the trick is that you can't repeat yourself, because it's on the record and it's searchable, and you can't say nothing, because that's on the record too. You have to say twenty-two minutes of new things about a bill that changes the name of a board.

I put the plates down. Nobody stopped talking, which they don't.

— . —

Partway through the mains the Kootenay Member got the bill out.

It's a small stack, stapled, printed the day it was introduced. She put it beside her water and opened it flat with the side of her hand.

Trev asked me afterwards whether that meant she hadn't read it, and I told him it meant she'd read the parts she'd needed. Which is different, and which is also what everyone in this building does with everything, and which is why the room can be full of people who all know something and none of them the same thing.

She turned to the back first. Marguerite says they always turn to the back first. I've never asked why and Marguerite's never offered, and I've come to think she doesn't know either — it's just something she's watched happen for nineteen years and filed under things people do at that table.

Then she read a page of it properly, with her finger, the way you read a menu in a language you did about four years of.

"There's a schedule," she said.

"There's always a schedule."

"No, there's a schedule about weigh scales."

The Fraser Valley one leaned over. There was a pause of the sort I've learned not to fill.

"That's not weigh scales," he said. "That's the definition."

"It says weigh scales."

"It says the definition of a thing that includes weigh scales."

She looked at it for a bit and then said, "Well, I'll be asked about it," and put it face down, and asked me if there was anything with rhubarb, and there was.

— . —

They went at ten past eight. The press gallery had gone at half seven, and the couple from Nanaimo stayed nearly to the end, because they'd booked it six weeks ago and they were going to have every minute of the evening they'd paid for, and good for them.

Marguerite killed the pass lights. Trev did the cloths. I did the till, which balances or doesn't, and tonight did.

The last thing out of the room is always the bread board, because Marguerite won't let it go in with the plates. I've never been given a reason. Nineteen years.

PARLIAMENTARY DINING ROOM · THIS WEEK

Feature: Halibut, brown butter, first asparagus — 21

Soup: Carrot and ginger — 7

Weekly special: Rigatoni, ratatouille, pecorino — 16

Dinner service Mon–Wed while the House is sitting. Reservations recommended.

V DRAFTING

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL

A miscellaneous bill is not written. It is assembled. It is made out of things other people could not fit anywhere else, by a small number of us, on the second floor, in the months when the House is not sitting and nobody is watching.

The requests arrive through the year. A ministry has found a cross-reference pointing at a section repealed in 2011. A ministry has a definition that no longer matches the definition in the act next to it. A ministry has an act naming a body that changed its name in 2009. The body has been signing its correspondence one way and appearing in the statutes the other way for fifteen years. Somebody new has arrived in that ministry and been unable to let it alone. There is always at least one of that last kind, and it is always somebody new, I have a private theory. The miscellaneous bill exists to hold the discomfort of people who have recently started a job.

None of these things is large enough to be a bill. Every one of them is a genuine defect in the law of the province. That is the space we work in. It is not a glamorous space. I have been in it a long time.

The first question is never whether a fix is correct. It is whether the fix is small.

Small is a term of art. It means a reasonable person reading the amendment would not find a policy in it. If there is a policy in it, however slight, however obviously sensible, it does not go in a miscellaneous bill, because a miscellaneous bill is passed on the understanding that nobody has hidden anything in it, and that understanding is the only reason a bundle of forty-one unrelated amendments can move through a House at all. Break it once and every miscellaneous bill afterwards gets read line by line by people looking for the thing you did. I have never seen it broken. I have twice seen it nearly broken by somebody who did not understand what they were being told when they were told no.

So we say no often, and the saying of no is most of the craft. A ministry proposes to correct a definition and the correction would, incidentally, bring four hundred people inside a licensing scheme who are currently outside it. That is not small. That is a policy wearing a definition. It goes back with a note. The note is polite. The ministry is disappointed. The following year it returns as an actual bill with a minister's name on the front, which is where it should have been.

What survives the triage is genuinely dull, and its dullness is the certificate that the process worked.

— . —

Section 14 arrived in February. On a form. Everything arrives here on a form.

A ministry had a provision referring to a weigh scale. The facilities have not been called weigh scales in that ministry's own documents since a reorganisation. They are vehicle inspection stations. The statute had not been told. The request was to strike out one term and substitute the other. One subsection. One act.

I read it. I checked that the term appeared nowhere else in the act. I checked that the substituted term was not defined elsewhere in a way that would drag something unintended along behind it. Then I marked it in. It took me under a minute, which I record only because

I was later asked how long it took, and the honest answer surprised the person asking.

It is a good amendment. The statute now says what the thing is called. I would defend it in front of anybody.

— . —

The bundling is the part I would show somebody if I could only show them one part.

Forty-one sections, drawn from acts belonging to nine ministries, and the person who introduces the bill and answers for every line of it is the Attorney General, who did not request any of them. That is convention, not rule. It exists because the alternative is nine ministers taking turns about their own three sections. That is an afternoon nobody survives. And the Attorney General is the law officer, and this is a bill about the law being tidy rather than about anything anybody wants.

Her office gets a binder. We build the binder. Every section gets a page. The page has to be written so that a person who has never heard of the act in question can answer a question about it in a chamber, at speed, on their feet, without saying anything that will be quoted back at them for a decade. The binder is longer than the bill. It is always longer than the bill. Ours ran a hundred and sixty pages against a bill of eleven.

I have watched an Attorney General answer for a section I drafted. In words I supplied. To a Member asking a question I had anticipated, in a page I wrote in March. It is not pride. It is the feeling of machinery having been correctly greased by somebody nobody will ever name. There is a version of this job that would make a person bitter about that. I have met two of them. Both left.

— . —

The All-Seeing keeps the table.

That is not a metaphor about anything. There is a table — it is a document, it is enormous, and it lists every act, every amendment to it, and the date each amendment came into force, along with the

ones that have not come into force and were passed years ago and are sitting in the statutes waiting for a regulation nobody has made. He maintains it. He circulates the changes twice a year, in a memorandum of some length. It is the least-read essential document in this building. I read all of it. I would estimate four of us do.

The last section of it is the part I find hardest to look at. It lists provisions passed by this Legislative Assembly and never brought into force. Some of them are older than my career. They were debated. Somebody stood up about them. They received Royal Assent. They are law in the sense of having been made. They have never once applied to anybody, and they sit in his table with a blank where the date goes.

He came round in March with a page of it. Two of the acts we were amending had provisions on that list. He thought I would want to know before I drafted over them. I did want to know, and it saved me a day. He put the page on the corner of my desk, said the thing about the second column being the one to look at, and went off down the corridor.

I have never had a conversation with him about anything other than the table.



There is a version of what I do that is only checking, and there is a version that is writing, and the writing is a smaller part of the day than anybody imagines and it is the part I would not give up.

You are given a thing that must be true. You must make a sentence that is only that thing. Not nearly that thing. Not that thing and a shade of another. There is a way of putting a clause together that closes every door but one. There is another way that leaves a door ajar. Nobody finds it for fifteen years, and then somebody does, in a dispute, with money on it, and the door turns out to be the case itself. Every drafter I know has one of those. Mine is in a consequential amendment from my fourth year and I am not going to describe it.

So you sit with a subsection for a morning. You try it with *and*. You try it with *or*. You try the qualifier at the front, where it governs everything after it. Then at the back, where a reasonable person might attach it only to the last item in the list. Then you remember that a

reasonable person is exactly who will read this, in a bad mood, in a room with a court reporter in it. You put the qualifier at the front, and then you take a very short walk.

And then it goes into a bundle of forty other things. It is read a first time in about forty seconds. It is debated for twenty minutes in a chamber where nobody has read it. It becomes the law of the province, and it works, and nobody ever thinks about it again. Which is the outcome. It only sounds like a complaint if you say it out loud in a certain tone, and I have learned not to, particularly at parties.

— . —

Last week I went back into an act I drafted in my sixth year, to check something else, and found a provision of mine gone.

It had been my provision. I remember the morning. Four subsections. A day and a half. I had been rather pleased with the structure, which handled three cases and a residual, and somebody in 2019 had replaced all four of them with one sentence.

I read the sentence twice. It handles all three cases and the residual. It does it in thirty words. There is nothing in it I could improve. There is nothing in it that is wrong. Whoever wrote it did not know or care whose it had been. There is no name on any of this, ever, anywhere. It is a rule I have always liked, and liked slightly less for about ninety seconds last Tuesday.

Then I got on with what I had gone in there to check.

The bill goes to the House Leader's office in April, and it gets a number when it gets a number, and by then it is not mine and never was.

BILL 14 — MISCELLANEOUS STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT (No. 2)**COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE — SPEAKING NOTES**

Prepared by Legislative Counsel. Not for distribution.

SECTION 14 — Transport Act, s. 41 (2)

What it does: Strikes out “weigh scale” and substitutes “vehicle inspection station.”

Why: The facilities have been designated vehicle inspection stations in ministry operational documents since 2019. The statute was not updated at that time.

Effect on any person: None. No change to powers, duties, offences or fees. Terminology only.

If asked whether signage must change: Signage is an operational matter for the ministry and is not addressed by this section.

If asked when this takes effect: See commencement (s. 43). This section comes into force by regulation of the Lieutenant Governor in Council.

If pressed on the date: The date is a matter for the Lieutenant Governor in Council.

PARLIAMENTARY DINING ROOM

Closed to the public December 20 – January 5.

Breakfast and lunch service continues for Assembly staff. No dinner service — the House is not sitting.

VI COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

THE TABLE

The House ordered itself to sit past the hour at about half four, and at twenty past seven it stopped being the House, and I was three feet away when it did.

The Speaker called somebody else to take the chair. That's the phrase. Called, like it's a favour, and in a sense it is: the Chair of the Committee's a Member with a riding and a caucus and a Thursday flight like everyone else, and four hours in that chair on the last Tuesday in May isn't a promotion.

Then the Speaker came down off the dais and went out, and passed behind me on the way, and said good evening.

That's all of it. Four years at this Table. The sum of what the Speaker's ever said to me while the House was up is good evening, good evening, and once — a day I'd got a bill number wrong on the paper and caught it myself before anyone else did — thank you.

— . —

The Sergeant-at-Arms took the mace off the top of the Table and put it in the brackets underneath.

I'll be exact about the geography, because the geography's the point. The mace is above the Table when the House is the House. In committee it goes to a bracket below. Eighteen inches. Same room, same eighty people, same carpet we spent three hundred grand on. The mace comes down eighteen inches and the thing in that room is a committee.

The Chair sat down in the Clerk's chair, which is a chair I look at all day and had never in four years seen anybody else in.

So for four hours I sat at the Table beside a person I had to address as Speaker, who wasn't the Speaker, while the Speaker was somewhere in the building being addressed as nothing at all.

I'd like it noted that I found this normal by about half eight.

— . —

In committee they're less formal and it shows straight off. They can speak more than once to the same question, which they can't in the House. One change, and the room stops making speeches and starts asking things.

Section by section — one, two, three — and each one handled as though it's a bill on its own, which is a practice rather than a rule and has been the practice since long before me.

Forty-one sections, and most of them a word.

Section 14 went through in about eleven seconds. Somebody asked what it did. The Attorney General said it changes a term to the term the facilities are actually called. Nobody said anything else, and the Chair said section 14, and the Chair said carried, and I wrote it down.

Section 19 took nineteen minutes, because there was an amendment.

— . —

Here is what an amendment looks like from where I sit, which is not what it looks like from the gallery.

A Member moves it, the Chair puts it, it carries. And then my sheet and the Law Clerk's sheet and the bill printed back in April all stop

agreeing with each other. Reconciling them is a job with my name on it, starting the moment the room empties.

I recorded the amendment as moved and as carried, with the section number, and the striking-out, and what went in its place. Four lines. Those four lines are why there's a reprint tomorrow with the deletions showing, and why somebody's printer goes on at five in the morning. I've never met the somebody, and I've been the reason for it twice a year for four years.

— . —

The other thing about a committee.

Standing Order 9 says no decision of the Chair is subject to an appeal to the House. I've said that sentence to myself before and it never landed till Tuesday night, when the House wasn't sitting because the House had resolved itself into something else, and there was therefore no House for anything to be appealed to.

For four hours the final authority on any question of order in that room was a backbench Member in a borrowed chair. Nothing existed that could overrule her. She used it to say *section 22* and *carried* about two hundred times.

The Allfather sat through the entire four hours.

I looked up at some point around ten because I was counting the benches for something and he was there, second row, government side, same seat he has in the House, which in committee is the seat he has in the committee. He did not speak. Members may speak more than once in committee and he did not use it once. He was there at twenty past seven and he was there at ten past eleven. I couldn't tell you what he did in between. Neither, I expect, could he.

My hand was nowhere near the division switch. There was never going to be a division. The Attorney General had the numbers before she stood up, and the room knew it, and I knew it, and the plan in front of me had it printed.

That's the closest I've come: four hours in a room that wasn't officially the House, with a Speaker who wasn't the Speaker and a mace eighteen inches low, and nothing on the paper in front of me that could've gone any other way.

— . —

They reported the bill complete with amendment at ten past eleven. The room turned back into the House in the time it takes a man to lift a mace.

The Chair went back to being the Member for wherever she's from. The Speaker's chair had been empty since twenty past seven and stayed empty. The House doesn't need the Speaker to rise.

I squared the Table. Standing Orders in the middle. Glasses off. The lights panel reset itself, and I reset it.

Then I took my four lines up to the Law Clerk's office, where the light was on, and left them on the desk of a woman who'd be there a good while longer than me.

MACE — out of office 09:52, placed Table 10:00. Table to lower brackets 19:22. — R.T.

Note: Chair of Committee occupied Clerk's chair 19:24. Clerk's chair returned 23:09. No damage. Noted at request of Office of the Clerk.

MACE — out of office 09:52, placed Table 10:00. Table to lower brackets 19:22. Brackets to Table 23:07. Off Table 23:14, returned 23:19. — R.T.

Note: late sitting per order of the House. No movement irregularities.

VII COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

THE PRECINCT

They have to vote to keep working, which is the part nobody outside knows.

The hours're set. Half six Monday, half six Tuesday, seven Wednesday, half five Thursday because they're all flying. If they're not finished they're not finished. The Speaker leaves the chair and it goes over. That's the default, it's in the Standing Orders, and it's been there longer than anyone.

So if they want to go past it, somebody moves it and the House agrees. Which means about half four on the last Tuesday in May, a motion passed upstairs and my night changed.

I don't get told. I watch the monitor in the corridor like everyone else in this building who's got a shift depending on it.

— . —

Here's what a late sitting is, from where I sit.

Security doesn't change. They're on regardless: it's a twenty-four-hour precinct, nobody's locking the Parliament Buildings and going home. But the front desk stays staffed and Hansard's got people in. Dining room's shut, so anybody eating's eating out of the machine on

the lower corridor, which takes tap now and didn't till last year, and I'd like it noted I asked four times.

And the cleaners can't start.

That's the one. They can't go into the Chamber, they can't do the corridor outside it, and they can't do the Members' side while there are Members on it. So Fatima's six sit in the room by the loading bay with the lights half off, waiting on a motion they didn't vote on to stop applying to them.

At half nine I told them another hour. At half ten I told them another hour.

— . —

Twenty past seven, the Assembly resolved itself into Committee of the Whole. I was at the corridor door when it did, because I'd gone up to see if the press gallery wanted the kettle on.

The Speaker called somebody else to take the chair at the Table. Then the Speaker left the Chamber. She came out through the doors I was standing beside and went up the corridor without stopping, and there was nothing for me to do about it, and I did not do anything about it.

Then the Sergeant-at-Arms took the mace off the top of the Table and put it in the brackets underneath.

I've watched that maybe forty times and it still gets me. Not for any grand reason. It's that it's done by hand, by a man in the room, and it takes six seconds, and after it the same eighty people in the same chairs're a different thing with different rules. Manny on the door reckons it's the only job in Canada where you demote a room.

The Speaker's chair sat empty the rest of the night.

— . —

In committee they go clause by clause. Section one, section two, section three. Each one's handled as though it's a bill on its own, which is how forty-one sections eat four hours.

Ours had forty-one sections. Most of them are a word.

The Attorney General took all of it. That's a miscellaneous bill for you. The sections belong to eight or nine ministries and she's the one up for every one, answering for departments that aren't hers about amendments she didn't ask for. Two staff behind the curtain and a binder. She'd been up since twenty past seven.

Somebody has to be up. I heard one of them say that on the stairs.

— . —

The one asking the questions was three along on the opposition benches.

The Conscience-Keeper went at it section by section. Not fast and not clever. He'd ask what a clause did. She'd say what it did. He'd ask whether anyone was worse off after it than before, and she'd say who, and how many, and by how much, and he'd say thank you, and they'd go to the next one.

Section 19 he asked twice. The first answer was about the department. The second one was about people. He didn't say anything about the difference.

Nobody was shouting. Two of the press gallery had gone. I stood in the doorway with a kettle in my hand for longer than I meant to and then went back down.

They've to address the Chair, not each other, and call each other by their districts. Whoever's in that chair gets called Speaker, because it's the chair being spoken to, not the person in it. And nothing that chair decides can be appealed to the House — which is a funny sentence to write down, because for four hours there wasn't a House to appeal to.

— . —

The Seeker came through about ten, going the other way along the lower corridor.

He does the walk on late nights. Somebody's got to go through the building room by room once the public's out: committee rooms, the corridors on the Members' side, the two rooms nobody uses that still get checked because they're on the list — an hour and a bit, all told.

He had a suit jacket over his arm that he'd picked up off a chair in one of the committee rooms, and he asked was lost property still going through the front desk or had it moved. I said the desk. He said right, and went on.

The jacket was claimed Thursday.

— . —

The arithmetic of a late night, since I'm the one who does it:

Six cleaners at four and a half hours of waiting. Two desk staff past shift. One first-aid attendant who's got to be on site while the building's occupied and who'd been on since seven that morning. The Seeker, doing the walk, who I don't schedule and don't pay because he isn't mine. They get paid for the waiting — people assume they don't — and it doesn't help, because the buses stop when they stop and paid waiting doesn't put one on the road.

Two of the six sorted lifts. One walked. Two got the last one. I drove Amrit, which took forty minutes I'd rather have had.

She apologised the entire way and I want to put down what that's actually like, because "she apologised" doesn't cover it. It started at the loading bay door and it did not stop. Sorry about this. Sorry, it's out of your way. Sorry — you can drop me at the highway, I'll walk the rest, honestly, I've done it. Sorry about the bag. And I'm saying it's fine, it's on my way, it isn't, and she knows it isn't because she's seen the sheet with my postcode on it, and neither of us says that. Twenty minutes in I stopped answering because answering was making it worse, and then the silence made it worse, so I put the radio on and we listened to a man take calls about a bridge. She's forty-four. She's been on this crew four years. She does the desks in a room where the province gets governed and she is extremely good at it, and at half one in the morning she is apologising to me for existing in a car. What I couldn't say, and have thought about since more than is useful, is that the apology isn't aimed at me. It's the shape a person makes when the thing that's inconvenienced them has no address. You can't apologise to a motion passed at half four. You can't be annoyed at a standing order. So it comes out at whoever's in the car, in the only direction a person can push, which is sideways and at themselves. I've done the

same thing. I did it to a supervisor in 2019 over a shift I hadn't asked for and I remember being surprised at myself and doing it again the following week. I dropped her at her door and she said sorry once more, at the door, with the bag, and I said goodnight, Amrit, and drove home and got four hours.

None of that's a scandal. It's the invoice for a vote taken at half four by people who'd all be sleeping in Victoria.

— . —

House rose ten past eleven and reported the bill complete with amendment. Fatima's crew went in at twenty past and were done at ten to two. I know because I sign it.

— . —

I went up at one to see how they were getting on, which they don't need, but at that hour the building's mine to walk.

The Chamber at one in the morning, cleaning lights on, is a room like any room. Two vacuums going. Amrit on the desks with the cloth and the spray that's approved for the wood, which is a specific spray, which took a four-month procurement. Fatima does the Speaker's end herself, always has — dais, chair, the Table — and the mace isn't there, it's back in the office by then, so the Table's just a table, and she does it like a table.

They have an order and the order isn't mine. Galleries first, floor second, aisles last, working toward the doors. Nobody assigned that. It's just how a room comes out right, per Fatima, and she's been coming this room out right for nine years, so the order's the order.

The corridor outside had two more people in it who weren't going home either. The works fella was sat on the flight case by the west door with his boots out in front of him, waiting on the floor to clear so he could get at a closer that's been slamming since April, and he'd been waiting since ten and would wait another half hour and did not appear to mind. And the light was still on in Hansard, three doors up, which it is until the last of it's typed, and I put my head in on the way past because I always do and the woman in there said the same thing

she says, which is that she's nearly done, which is what she said at nine.

So that's four sets of us on the one floor at one in the morning: six with the vacuums, one on a flight case, one at a keyboard, and me with a clipboard and a car. Nobody's meeting. There's no reason for any of us to speak to any of the others and mostly we don't. It's just what the building has in it after the people it's for have gone.

Works said goodnight to Fatima by name and she said it back without looking up. That's about the entire social life of a late sitting.

The seats got done same as the carpets got done same as the brass got done. Forty minutes to go, she said, without looking up. She was right to the minute, which she also didn't look up for.

I went to write the night up and pulled my own log for last year's comparison.

Last week of May, three late sittings. Year before, last week of May, three. The year before that, three. I went back as far as the file goes, which is eleven years. It's three. Every year, same week, bar one year they weren't sitting in May at all.

I've been telling people it was an unusual night. Eleven years of that, and I'd have gone on saying it, and it's in my own handwriting.

— . —

Bill's back in the House tomorrow to be reported. Takes about a minute. Then it's third reading before the last Thursday or it's nothing.

I've put Fatima's crew on a nine-thirty start for the rest of the week without asking anyone, and if somebody wants to have a conversation about that, they know where the loading bay is.

PARLIAMENTARY DINING ROOM · THIS WEEK

Feature: Halibut, brown butter, first asparagus — 21

Soup: Carrot and ginger — 7

Weekly special: Rigatoni, ratatouille, pecorino — 16

Dinner service Mon–Wed while the House is sitting. Reservations recommended.

-

kitchen closes 6:00 as usual

VIII REPORT

THE LOWER CAUSEWAY

I'm not on city land, that's the first thing people get wrong.

The causeway's the harbour authority's, the lower walk, all of it, and my agreement's with them — five million in liability with their name on it as additional insured, which for a cart that sells four things is a number I've made my peace with, plus the health certificate, which is the Island Health people, who are different people. Kelly with the guitar, ten feet up the rail from me since April, she's on a busking permit from the city, because performers are the city's, and food's the harbour's, and the lawn behind us with the big grey building on it is the province's, and none of the three of us has ever needed to know that and all three of us do.

I sell coffee, two kinds of bun, and a lemonade in the warm months. I've been on this pitch nine seasons and I'll be on it a tenth.

The building's the backdrop. I'll be straight about that, because people ask, tourists mostly — what's it like working in front of it, and the honest answer is it's like working in front of something large. It holds the light of an evening, the dome does, and from October they've the little lights along it, and it's the number one thing I'm asked about, and the answer to what're the lights for is they're for being lights.

— . —

You can tell things from out here. I don't try to, they just arrive.

The flags tell you nothing, they're always up. The tour groups tell you the season. But the windows tell you the hours — when they're sitting late there's a band of lit rooms on the right-hand end long after the front's gone dark, and Tuesday it was lit past eleven, because I'd done the food bank drop at the church on Superior and come back along the walk for the van, and there it was, burning away on the end like a stove element somebody's forgotten.

Wednesday morning I had them early. Not the tourists. The staff. There's a difference in how people cross that lawn. A tourist crosses it like it's a park and a staffer crosses it like it's a corridor, and Wednesday the corridor crowd were in numbers by half seven, and a young guy I know by his order — large, two sugars, every day since March — was at my cart at twenty to eight with a stack of paper under his arm done up in elastic bands, actual elastic bands, waiting on somebody he kept looking up the walk for.

I asked him was it a big day. He said the printer'd been on since five.

That's the entire conversation. He got his large-two-sugars and stood there holding the state of British Columbia together with elastic bands, and then whoever it was arrived and off they went across the corridor that looks like a lawn.

— . —

The Players started the Victoria Day weekend, same as every year. Costumes on the front drive, gold rush, the judge with the hat — they do twenty minutes and the crowd claps and some of the crowd comes down after and buys lemonade, so I've no complaint. Kelly says they're her competition. I've told her they're her warm-up act.

— . —

Midday out here in the season is its own economy and I'll describe it once: two cruise loads, a school group, the pedicabs working the rank, the whale boats coming in at eleven-forty and going out again at

one, and every third person on the walk photographing the building over my awning, so that I'm in more holiday albums than anyone I'm related to, mostly as a blur with a kettle.

Kelly's set list runs seasonal. She's got the standards for the cruise crowd, and a run of her own stuff for the locals in the shoulder months, and one instrumental she keeps for when the wind drops and the water goes flat, which she won't play on request and won't name, and fair play to her; a person should keep one thing off the menu.

The school group asked me what the building was. Not what's in it, what it was. I said it's the Legislature, and the kid looked at it, and looked at me, and said "what does it do," and I gave him the answer I've given nine seasons of kids, which is that the province gets run out of it, and he took his bun and said "by who," walking away, not waiting, the way you ask the sea a question.

— . —

The Empress side, now. That I have watched, because it's straight across the water from my cart and it's been hoarding and lifts and men on the roofline since the winter.

There's one of them I'd know at distance now. Big fella, deliberate, the Hand they call him — one of the Fairmont crowd said it at my cart one morning, the way you'd say a nickname that's outlasted its story, and it stuck with me because he was pointing at him while he said it, which is the only reason I know who's who. He works the north wing. Tuesday he was at the front of it on the low scaffold doing something to the window boxes, the long run of them under the second-floor windows, out and back along the boards all afternoon, no hurry on him at all. Whatever he was at, he finished it, because Wednesday the boards were down off that stretch and the boxes were planted, and that's the first thing on that hotel anyone's finished since Christmas.

Nine seasons I've faced the one building and it took a hotel to show me what done looks like.

Nine seasons is a long look at one stretch of water and I'd not have chosen it, is the thing. I came out here for a summer with a cart I'd bought off a fella in Sooke who was getting out, and the plan was the summer, and then the plan was the season, and there's no moment

I can point at where the plan became this. The harbour's the same harbour every morning. The float planes go at the same times and I could tell you the times and nobody's ever asked. The tide does what the tide does and I've never once looked it up and I know it in my legs, how the walk empties an hour earlier when it's out because the smell comes up off the flats and the cruise people don't care for it. Same gulls, more or less; there's one with a bad foot I've been seeing three years and I'd be lying if I said I hadn't looked for him this spring. And the building sits there behind all of it doing whatever it does, which as established I could not tell you, lit up at night like it's pleased with itself. People ask if I don't get bored and the honest answer is that boredom's not the shape of it. What it is, is that I've got nine years of one view laid on top of each other like the same photograph developed nine times, and most days you see the top one and some days the light comes in a certain way and you see all nine at once — the summer the water was full of jellyfish, the year of the smoke when you couldn't see the far shore till noon, the morning Kelly first turned up with that guitar and no case for it. I'm not sad about it. It's just that a person should know what they've spent, and I know what I've spent, and it was nine seasons, and I've a tenth coming, and I've never been able to say out loud what I got for it in a way that sounds like anything.

— . —

Wednesday afternoon a woman from one of the offices — I know her by the lanyard and the lemonade — told me they'd be going late again, and I said late again Thursday too then, and she said no, Thursday they all fly, nothing happens Thursday, and took her lemonade back across the lawn to whatever it is she does in there.

Nothing happens out here on a Thursday either; we watch the same water.

— . —

The stack of paper with the elastic bands, I found out what that was, more or less, because the large-two-sugars came back Thursday

morning at his usual time with no stack and I asked him did his big day go all right.

He said it wasn't his day, it was the bill's. They'd redone the printing overnight — the entire bill again, but with the crossed-out parts showing, so everyone could see what'd been cut before they vote on the rest of it. That's a rule, apparently. You don't just get the new version, you get the new version wearing the old one.

I said that sounded like more printing than a person needs, and he said you'd think so, and we left it there, because his bus of a boss was coming across the lawn and my kettle was going, and that's the two of us told.

They vote on it next, he says. Or they voted already. One of the two.

MACE — out of office 09:52, placed Table 10:00. Off Table 17:33, returned 17:38. — R.T.

Note: report bill distribution on floor 10:15–10:25. No custody role. Noted for completeness.

BILL 14 — MISCELLANEOUS STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT (No. 2)

REPORT BILL

As reported from Committee of the Whole, complete with amendment. Deletions are shown struck-through; additions are shown underlined.

14 Section 41 (2) of the *Transport Act* is amended by striking out "weigh scale" and substituting "vehicle inspection station".

19 Section 6 of the *Assessment Authority Act* is amended

(a) in subsection (1) by striking out "board of directors" and substituting "board", and

(b) by repealing subsection (3), and

(c) ~~in subsection (4) by striking out "as the case may be".~~

Explanatory Note re section 19: consequential to amendments made in Committee. Subsection (4) is unamended.

IX THIRD READING

WORKS

The first thing this building ever did was send the granite back.

1893. First shipment in for the foundations, and it was too dark, wrong for the front, and back it went, and they got lighter stuff from Vermont instead. I keep that fact where I can reach it, because people like to tell me the place has standards, and it does — it's had them since before it existed, and they have always been somebody else's problem to meet.

I'm on the works side. My list doesn't say works, it says a number of other things, but works is what it is: the fabric, the systems, the plant. Heating that was put in when the heating was the marvel of the coast. Wiring the 1970s crowd fixed, and the word fixed is doing a lot of lifting there, because what the seventies actually were was ten years of leaks and foundation rot and undoing what the record calls insensitive alterations, which is the politest sentence ever written about a man with a saw.

There's a plan now. Twenty-five years: plumbing, heating, electrical, fire detection. I'll be retired before the middle of it.

Thursday. Last Thursday in May.

Half six start, which means the counter on the lower corridor. It's two of them down there and the one who's on at that hour has my order before I've said it, which after this long is less impressive than it sounds and more useful than it sounds. Coffee, and one of the squares if it's a Thursday, and it was. Two seventy-five. She's never once got it wrong and she's never once made anything of getting it right, and I've watched three men come off nights and be handled in about ninety seconds each, and then she wiped the counter down and that was the morning's transaction between us.

Upstairs that means something enormous, apparently. Down here Thursday means the building empties at half five instead of half six, which means we get into the Chamber corridor an hour earlier, which means Renny can get at the door closer that's been slamming since April before the weekend instead of after it.

The bill they were all up about went through in the afternoon. Third reading. I heard it from Dev on the desk, who heard it on the monitor. Takes a few minutes, that part, after everything. All that running and the tape at the end's a metre off the ground.

They'll want the Chamber for the ceremony next week, is what third reading means on my list.

A Royal Assent, in works terms, is three jobs. The flag gets checked, because the flag flies when the Lieutenant Governor's in the building and a flag that sticks is a constitutional incident nobody wants. The Speaker's chair gets looked over, and the Speaker's chair is a piece of furniture I have opinions about: it's the one chair in the place with two authorized users — the Speaker all year, and the Lieutenant Governor for about eleven minutes per ceremony — and on that basis it has its own file, its own conservation schedule, and a standing instruction that nobody oils anything without asking.

And the carpet gets vacuumed the day before and again the morning of. Same carpet. No new dirt. I schedule both passes and I'll defend both passes: the first one's for the carpet and the second one's for the occasion, and if you can't hear the difference between a clean room and a room that's been cleaned at somebody, you haven't worked ceremonies.

The Weaver was on the roof walk Thursday morning. That's what we call him on the sheet — the Chaos-Weaver's what the sign-in book says, in full, because the book's a stickler, but a sheet only has so much line.

He'd been sent up about the flashing on the east pavilion, where the water's been getting in since March in a way that has opinions about which wind. He was up there the morning, and the flashing's the flashing still — that one's staying stuck, I'd put money on it, it's been stuck since before him and it'll be stuck after — but while he was up he found the junction box for the string lighting that Bal's been hunting since the winter, the one that runs the north face, that was behind a panel that isn't on the drawings. He came down and told Bal where it was, and Bal went up and had it open in ten minutes, and the full north run's back for the first time since January.

The lights, I should say, are not lights anymore. The flashing has a file, and the file's older than the leak. There's correspondence from 2019 about the east pavilion in general terms, moisture, heritage envelope, scope to be determined, and then the specific run of flashing enters the file in 2021, and there's a costing from 2022 that was overtaken by a costing in 2024, and between the two costings the thing being costed got worse, which changed the numbers, which meant new correspondence. The water, meanwhile, has been coming in the entire time, on its own schedule, unaware it's under review.

Renny read the file once, all of it, on a rain delay, and his review was: "The leak's the only one pulling its weight."

The cell's on my list this month too. There's a jail cell in the basement — every tour asks, every tour's disappointed — and the file's version is this: nobody has ever been held in it, and the archivist who looked into it found that Rattenbury's own drawings don't call it a jail at all. They call it a storage room. So it's the one room in the building that's spent a hundred and thirty years being exactly what the drawings say it is, and we keep the toner in it, and this month it gets its shelving anchored, because the seismic plan covers everything and the plan doesn't know it's famous.

— . —

They're a system. Colour-tuning, sensors, false skylights, programmable down to the bulb — there's a fella whose job is the lights now, seconded from somewhere, and the word retrofit is in his email signature. From the causeway they look as they've always looked. That took most of the budget, making it look like nothing happened.

The dome's on the plan too. The dome is, in fact, the plan — it's the part the engineers named when they went looking for what a big one would take down, and the number attached to doing something about it has three digits and the word million, and the year attached to it doesn't exist yet. In the meantime they did the front steps in '23. The steps are excellent now. You could ride out anything on the steps.

— . —

Somebody has to be up. That's scaffolding law before it's anything else — you don't drop a man's boards while his kit's on them, so if the kit's up, somebody's up, and the trade runs on knowing which somebody.

— . —

Six new seats went into the Chamber last summer. Three hundred grand, new red carpet, and every trade in this building took a turn explaining that you can't just *fit six more seats* into a heritage chamber. Then we fitted them. That's the job — the explaining's free and the fitting's what's invoiced. The carpet's holding up well. I'll say that. It's good carpet.

— . —

End of the day I did the walk-round with the Weaver, which on a Thursday is short. West door closer: Renny's got it, parts Monday. Flashing: stuck. North lights: back, and Bal's put the panel on the drawings himself, in pencil, with an arrow and the word HERE, which is now the most accurate drawing we own.

The Weaver signed out at six. Full name in the book, same as everyone; the book doesn't bend.

Nigel was on the steps when I came out — no lanyard, no hurry, been coming in longer than most of the people with passes. He asked was the scaffold coming off the east side before the fall, and I said it wasn't, and he said right, and that was that. He asks me one thing a year and it's never the thing anybody else asks, which is when it'll be finished.

I stood on the front steps a minute on my way to the lot. The excellent steps. Behind me all five hundred feet of it, andesite and marble and a dome with a number attached and no year, lit up like nothing had ever happened to it.

Twenty-five years, the plan says. The granite went back in ninety-three. We're not behind. This is the speed.

And I'll tell you what the granite's actually for, in my head. It's not a fun fact. I've had years of use out of it. Somebody in 1893 opened a shipment they'd waited months on, looked at it, and said no. Not because it was bad stone. Because it was the wrong colour for the front. They sent it back across the water and waited again. Everything downstream of that got later. Every man on that site got paid for longer, and somebody somewhere had a very bad month explaining it. Now, a hundred and thirty-one years on, nobody knows that happened. You cannot see the sent-back granite. It isn't there. No plaque. There's a building the right colour and there always has been, as far as anyone looking at it can tell, and the correction is invisible precisely because it worked. Every good thing I've done in this building is invisible on exactly that principle — the leak that didn't happen, the closer that stopped slamming, the panel Bal drew an arrow on. You get no credit for the absence of a problem. That isn't a complaint. It's the definition of the work, and a man who wants credit for absences will go mad in his first year. Several have. What you get instead — and it took me a decade to notice I was getting it — is that the building looks like nothing has ever happened to it. Five hundred feet of andesite and marble and a dome with a number and no year, looking exactly as though it simply arrived that way and has been fine ever since. A hundred and thirty-one years of men and women taking things down

and putting things back so that the thing you see when you stand on the steps is a building that appears never to have needed anybody. We do that. That's what we do. And then we go to the lot.

PARLIAMENTARY DINING ROOM · THIS WEEK

Feature: Sockeye, herb risotto, charred lemon — 22

Soup: Spring nettle and potato — 7

Weekly special: Cobb salad, house dressing — 16

First local strawberries — ask

Dinner service Mon–Wed while the House is sitting. Reservations recommended.

LEGISLATIVE FACILITY SERVICES — WEEK COMMENCING MONDAY

Post	Hours	Assigned	Relief
Counter, lower corridor	0630–1500	B.	the Companion (per sign-in register)
Works — roof walk / east pavilion	0700–1530	the Chaos-Weaver (per sign-in register)	R.M.
Ceremonial custody	per Order Paper	R.T.	—
Chamber corridor (access per sitting)	as posted	F.O. crew ×6	—

Relief entries per the sign-in register. The register records full names. Initials are used on this sheet for brevity except where the register does not abbreviate.

THE COUNTER

The urn goes on at half six whatever the day is. That's the first thing to know about the counter: upstairs has occasions, and an urn doesn't.

We're along the lower corridor from the dining room, which is the fancy end — cloths, china, reservations. We're the other thing. Coffee, tea, the squares Bea does, a till, and a fridge that hums in E, according to Bea, who'd know. Staff mostly. Some of them are in at seven and some of them have been in since five, and the ones since five don't want china.

Bea's been on the counter longer than I've been in the building. I do the till, the stock, the cashing-out. She does the rest, which sounds like a small word and isn't.

The Companion is what the sign-in register has her down as, because the register takes full names and won't take anything else, and the rota sheet copies the register, and the rota sheet goes up on the wall by the lockers where anybody can read it. Nobody does read it. Everybody down here has called her Bea since before I got here and I would not know how to start doing otherwise, and the sheet on the wall says what the sheet on the wall says, and both of those have been true for nine years without anybody once having to reconcile them.

— . —

Assent day, so upstairs was dressing.

You can hear a building get formal. It's in the shoes — the corridor over our heads went from soft shoes to hard shoes about nine, and hard shoes in numbers, and then the vacuum going over carpet that was vacuumed yesterday. Our two folding tables went up before eight, the same two that go up for everything, and they'll come back down whenever they come back down, the way furniture circulates in this place without ever being seen to move. Dev from the desk came down for two teas and said the flowers were in. There are flowers now, apparently. There's a fella whose morning that was.

Trade doesn't change. If anything it's up — ceremony makes people thirsty, Bea says, and she says it the flat way she says things that turn out to be printed somewhere.

— . —

The since-five crowd came through at seven like they do, and a rush at our counter is a specific machine: Bea calls the order back before some of them have finished deciding, because she's got the building memorized by stomach, and my job in a rush is money and lids. Money and lids. You can hold a counter with two people if one of them is Bea and the other one accepts that the till is his kingdom entire.

Fourteen coffees, five teas, squares till the tray went, and one man with a flask who only ever wants hot water and pays for it over my objection and Bea's ruling.

By twenty to eight it was done, as a rush is always done — all at once, the counter suddenly an acre wide, and Bea wiping down while the urn recovered.

— . —

Cass from Hansard was in at ten past nine looking like the end of something, and I'd say she'd earned whatever she ordered, going by the week the lights upstairs had kept. She had a tea and one of the squares, and she had it there at the end of the counter, standing, the way she does when the room she's avoiding is her own.

She'd brought Bea a tin of the shortbread her mother makes, because Bea'd asked after the recipe in April and been told it doesn't leave the family, and this was evidently the compromise position. Bea took the tin, looked in it, and put it under the counter with her bag.

"That's mine going home," she said. "I'm not sharing it with this lot."

Cass paid for the tea and the square — three fifty, tapped — and went back up the way people go up on a day with shoes.

— . —

The procession went over us at eleven. You don't see it from down here, you get it through the ceiling: the corridor clearing, a quiet that's organized rather than natural, and the bells beforehand, and then the hard shoes in a line.

Marco was on the door of it and came down after for his coffee, and I asked him how it went, and he said she nodded.

That's the ceremony. The Clerk reads the titles out and the Lieutenant Governor nods, and everything read out is law from the nod. Marco's seen it a dozen times and the only thing he ever reports is the nod, and the year he said "she nodded twice, there were a lot of them," which is still quoted at the desk.

I asked him once what the Speaker does at an assent, since the Speaker's the one who runs that room and this building and the entire precinct including, by some route I've never followed, us.

He thought about it. He said: stands up, sits down.

He said the Lieutenant Governor sits in the Speaker's chair for it, which is the only time anybody else does, so the Speaker hasn't even got the chair. And that's the last ceremony of the session, and the person who has presided over every minute of it is stood to one side of her own chair with nothing to say and nothing to sign, watching somebody nod.

The Sergeant-at-Arms carries the other rod for it — not the mace, the black one, the Jubilee one, the one with the coin in it. Marco held the door for it going back to the office where it lives. An ordinary day is one stick and a big day is the other stick, and either way it's Marco holding the door.

— . —

A woman from the finance side was in at half twelve, one of the since-five people, and she was going on leave from Friday, the baby kind, first one, and you could see the fortnight of handover on her. She bought a coffee and asked Bea, in the voice people use when they're not joking, whether the squares would still be going in November.

Bea took the order pad, wrote the woman's name at the top of a page, wrote NOVEMBER under it, tore it off, and put it in the drawer under the till, in the corner where the float slips go, where nothing gets lost because the float's counted every day.

"There's yours," Bea said. "Bring the baby, mind. I don't hold squares for people who come in without the baby."

The coffee was two twenty-five. She paid the two twenty-five.

— . —

A man was at the counter around half one who didn't belong to the building and knew it — high-vis folded over his arm, out-of-town boots, early for a meeting he wasn't sure was happening. He runs a weigh scale up-island, or he did until April, when a bill down here renamed it a vehicle inspection station, and he'd driven down on his own diesel to find out who pays for the sign. He'd been sent to three offices so far. Nobody in any of them had heard of section 14, including, he said, the office that sent him to the second office.

Bea gave him his coffee and he paid for it, and he stood at the end of the counter with it, looking at the ceiling the amount you look at a ceiling with a legislature on the other side of it.

"Somebody in this building renamed my Tuesdays," he said, to the room, not unhappily, and went up for his meeting.

Nigel was in about two, between the lunch he has at the dining room and whatever his afternoons are. He had a tea at the counter and told me the window boxes were out on the Empress, the front run of them, done and flowering — he'd come along the causeway and seen them from the walk. He said it as he says everything: one fact among the available facts — and finished the tea and went up to watch the tours.



The House rose in the afternoon, for good this time. Prorogued or adjourned or whichever it was, the distinction matters greatly to about nine people and I've never been one of them. What it means down here is the last week of the since-five crowd, and then the building goes over to the tours and the summer, and the urn stays on at half six regardless, because somebody's always in.

I cashed out at four. Till exact, as it is when Bea's on.

I used to check it twice. First year, every day, both counts, because a till that comes out exact every single time is the sort of thing that makes a person my age with my job start thinking about how it could not be. I've done the maths on it since and the maths is boring: it's a small counter, it's mostly tap, the cash is coffee money, and Bea's been doing this longer than I've been alive. There is no mystery in the drawer. What there is instead — and this is the part I'd have trouble saying to anyone who works upstairs — is that the exactness is the only thing in my working life that comes out clean. Nothing else does. The stock order's an estimate. The wastage is a guess we write down as a figure. The staffing's whatever the House does to us that week, and the House doesn't know we're here. Somebody upstairs spends four hours arguing about whether a clause means a thing or the definition of a thing that includes the thing, and it goes into a book, and next year somebody argues about it again. That's fine. That's their job and I'm not sneering at it. But I sit down at four o'clock with a drawer and a number, and either they match or they don't, and today they matched, and there is no committee that can be struck about whether they matched. I have thought about why that's worth as much to me as it is and the best I've got is that it's the one place I stand where the answer is already true before I get there and all I have to do is not be wrong about it. Enter the figure, close the drawer.

Nobody had to be up today. The titles were read, and she nodded, and that was the year.

The order slip's in the float corner. November. The urn goes on at half six.

PARLIAMENTARY DINING ROOM · THIS WEEK

Feature: Sockeye, herb risotto, charred lemon — 22

Soup: Spring nettle and potato — 7

Weekly special: Cobb salad, house dressing — 16

Strawberry shortcake, while the berries last — 8

Summer hours from Monday: breakfast and lunch only.

BLACK ROD — out of office 10:40. Returned 12:05. — R.T.

MACE — out of office 09:52, placed Table 10:00. Off Table 15:20, returned 15:26. — R.T.

Note: both items in office as of 15:30. End of session. Next scheduled movement: October.

ACTS IN FORCE

Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act (No. 2) — Royal Assent received. Sections 1 to 13, 15 to 18, and 20 to 41 in force on the date of Royal Assent. Section 14 in force by regulation of the Lieutenant Governor in Council; date to be determined. Section 19 in force January 1 next following.

XI OCTOBER

THE LOWER CAUSEWAY

Tenth season, then, and I did say.

The first Monday in October and they're back, which I know before I know it, because the walk tells you a week ahead — the tour buses thin out and the corridor people thicken up, and there's a particular fortnight in late September where the cart does nothing at all and I stand out here in a coat wondering whether nine seasons of anything constitutes a decision.

Kelly's not out, and won't be — she's out April to September and then she's inside somewhere with a heater, which she's earned twice over, and the rail beside me is empty and will stay empty till the spring, and I've caught myself twice this week looking at it as though there were something to see.

The lights went on along the dome the first week of the month, same as they do every year, and I still don't know what they're for. A fella came by in the summer, one of the trades, and started telling me about them — colours, and sensors, and how much of the money went on making it look like nothing had been done — and I'll be honest with you, I got about a minute into it and stopped taking it in, because I'd had nine years of the answer being that they're lights and I found I'd rather keep it.

— . —

The building fills up in a way you can see from out here, which is the thing about a lawn.

February to May it's full and it empties on a Thursday. June, July, August it's tours, and the tours go where the staff won't, right up to the glass. Then October and it's full again and it empties on a Thursday again, and somewhere in between there's a week when there's nobody in it at all and the place sits there lit up for its own benefit.

Nine seasons of that, ten now, and I'd not have been able to tell you a word of it in year one, and that's the education out here — you don't learn what the building does, you learn its year.

— . —

The one that came looking for whoever pays for a sign came back in August.

Not to my cart, to the building. He'd had a coffee off me in the spring on his way in, the first time, and told me all of it standing where he stood again in August, and I only know he came back at all because he stopped a second time on the way out. I recognised the boots before I recognised him. He stood there a minute looking at the front of the place as they all do.

They'd been very good to him, he said, three offices again and everybody very good, and what it came down to in the end is that the section that changed the name isn't in force yet. It goes when a regulation says it goes, and there isn't a regulation, and nobody could tell him when there'd be a regulation, because that isn't a thing a person can be told.

So the law says one thing and hasn't started saying it, and his sign says the other thing and can stay where it is, and he's to keep an eye out.

He wasn't put out about it, and that's the part I'd want written down somewhere if anybody was keeping a record of it. He said the woman in the third office had gone back through it with him twice and drawn him a little chart, and he'd taken a photograph of the chart, and he showed it to me on his phone, and it was a good chart.

Then he drove back up-island. Two hundred and something kilometres each way, twice now, for a sign that doesn't need changing yet.

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There was a procession the first day, because there's a procession every first day.

I watch them from out here, which is a better view than most of the people inside get. And I'll say this much for it: it's the one time all year the front of that building gets used for what it's shaped like — doors, and steps, and people coming down them in an order somebody decided.

There's one of them who doesn't talk. I noticed it years ago and I've never had it explained and I've never once asked, because asking would spoil a perfectly good nine years of noticing. Everyone else in a procession is talking — to the person beside them, to somebody behind, into a phone before they've got to the bottom of the steps. And then there's the one in the middle of it who says nothing to anyone at all, the entire way down and back again, and who appears to be the one the entire arrangement is arranged around.

I don't know what that job is. I could ask. Half my regulars would know.

The Seeker was down on the walk after, which he is now and then in the shoulder months, going along at the pace of a man on his own time rather than anybody else's. He took a coffee, black, and stood a bit off from the cart drinking it and looking at the water as people look at water, and when he'd finished it he put the cup in my bin himself rather than carrying it off to a bin of his own choosing, which is a thing about a person that I notice and that I have never been able to explain the importance of to anybody.

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Anyway, the cart.

Coffee, two kinds of bun, no lemonade till May. The urn takes eleven minutes to come up in October and nine in July. I've never

worked out why and it isn't important. Tenth season. There'll be an eleventh, and I don't say that any more like it's a surprise.

Water's the same water, and it went out at half four this afternoon and the flats came up and the smell came with them, and the walk cleared as the walk clears, and I had an hour to myself out here before the lights came on behind me.

MACE — out of office 09:52, placed Table 10:00. — R.T.

BLACK ROD — out of office 13:40. Returned 15:15.

Note: first sitting day, autumn. Both items inspected prior to session. Black Rod: coin secure.