

THE HUNGRY GODS GO TO THE MOUNTAIN

N. Van Seters & Claude

CONTENTS

SATURDAY	
HIGHWAY 33	2
THE BULLWHEEL	7
SUNDAY	
THE RENTAL SHOP	14
THE KIDS' CENTRE	22
MONDAY	
THE TOUR	30
THE PLAZA CHAIR	36
SNOWSHOE SAM'S	43
TUESDAY	
THE HOLD	49
THE MALL	53
WEDNESDAY	
GUEST SERVICES	61
THE RINK	67
THURSDAY	
CARNIVAL NIGHT	74
BLUE RIBBON	77
THE SWEEP	85
FRIDAY	
KELOWNA GENERAL	91
BINGO	97
LAST CALL	100
SATURDAY	
CHECKOUT	107
THE LIFT STARTS	111

SATURDAY

UNIT 1

HIGHWAY 33

There is no fuel on the mountain. This is printed on the resort's own website, in the section written for first-time visitors, in a paragraph I read in October and filed under things that would be true of some other trip.

We left Kelowna with a quarter tank and an argument I was having by myself. The last service station is out in Rutland, and I went past it at eighty because Teddy had been asleep for nine minutes, and I'd decided — in the way you decide things at half past three in the afternoon in February — that nine minutes of sleep was a resource I was managing. Robin looked up from the back and said we should stop. I said we were fine. She said Mum always stops there. I said that was a good policy, and that we were fine.

The resort says fifty-six kilometres from Kelowna and the resort is telling the truth. What it leaves out is that eleven of them go up. Highway 97 to Highway 33, then Big White Road, and Big White Road is a road in the way a staircase is a hallway. The snowbanks come past the mirrors and keep coming. Somewhere around two-thirds of the way along, the trees change over and start wearing the snow instead of holding it — every branch out at the same angle, the shapes going from tree to something else with no stage in between where they're both. I've since learned there's a word for it. I've learned that people fly in from Australia to photograph it, and that it's also the reason a chairlift won't start in the morning. At the time I assumed somebody had done it on purpose.

Robin stopped talking around then. Teddy woke up and didn't.

It got dark at four, which is not the same as saying it was light before that. It had been going since Rutland. At four it finished. The headlights held about thirty metres of falling snow and then a wall of the same snow not falling, and the difference between those two was the only information the road was willing to give me. I drove at twenty-five kilometres an hour with both hands on the wheel and told the children a story about a family who arrived at a ski hill, which was the only story available to me, and which I hadn't planned out past the arrival.

What I wanted out of the week was a specific thing and I could have told you what it was in one sentence, because I had said it out loud to two people in January. I wanted Robin to have six days she would talk about afterwards.

That was the ambition. I had priced it.

A pickup came the other way with a plow blade up and a light bar going, and took the corner like a man who'd done it eight thousand times, and I held my line.

The fuel light came on eight kilometres from the village. Nobody in the car mentioned it. Not once, in eight kilometres.

We got in on fumes and a downhill grade, and I'm calling that planning.

The lockbox is bolted beside the door of Whitefoot Lodge on the ski-in side, and the ski-in side is where the snow goes. I had the code in an email. The email had come in on the fourteenth of March. It's four digits, and I got it wrong four times.

It wasn't the code. I've been back and checked the email since, and the code in the email is the code that opened the box on the fifth attempt, and it is the code I put in on the first

four. The thing standing between the email and the box was a hand that had spent two hours on a steering wheel inside a coat sized for a car. I got it open at seven minutes past six with my glove held in my teeth, which turns out to be something people up here do on purpose.

The resort's line is *Arrive. Unload. Keep it that way.* They print it. It's on the accommodation page and I'm fairly sure it's on a sign near the ticket desk. What it means is that once your equipment is at Big White it doesn't have to travel again. That's true. It's a genuinely good idea. It is not a claim about the arriving. It isn't a claim about the unloading either. It's got nothing whatsoever to say about the part where a four-year-old in a snowsuit is standing in a third-floor corridor holding a bag of his own containing one sock and a plastic dinosaur, and won't put it down, and won't be helped, and is now crying about the dinosaur, which is in the bag.

Six trips. I counted, because by the fourth I'd started counting. Skis, boots, bags, food, a sled we didn't need and hadn't needed in Kelowna either. A case of water I bought on the way up, because I didn't know then what I know now, which is that Big White's tap water comes off a lake at six and a half thousand feet inside a watershed with no logging in it and no cattle on it, and gets tested to a standard that beats the bottled stuff. There's a notice about this. I read the notice on Tuesday, when I had time. I carried twenty-four bottles of water up three flights of stairs in a building sitting on the cleanest water in the province, and on the Saturday I carried twenty-two of them back down.

Parking's under the building and the permit's a piece of paper on the dash. I had it face down for the first two days and nobody ticketed me. At the time I read that as evidence of a relaxed

sort of place. I now think it was somebody deciding it wasn't worth the walk.

Robin carried her own skis up. Both times. I didn't ask her to and I didn't stop her. She is nine.

The unit's on the third floor and it's fine. It's genuinely fine. Two bedrooms and a pull-out, a kitchen with a kettle and a bread knife and forty coffee mugs, a drying rack over a heater that turned out to be the single most valuable object in the building, and a window that at seven o'clock on a Saturday in February looks down the village at people still coming off the Bullet under lights, in ones and twos, at seven o'clock at night, in February. I stood at it a while with a bag of hockey socks in my hand.

Robin found the sheet on the fridge before I did. Building quiet times, eleven p.m. to seven a.m. She read it out in the voice of a person establishing terms, put it back under the magnet squarely, and asked what time we were getting up.

At half past seven I went down for milk, because we had a kettle and forty mugs and nothing to put in anything.

The Market is in the same building. Groceries, deli, liquor, all of it, and it's the reason people book Whitefoot and it's the reason Whitefoot has a corridor that smells like a corner store. I bought milk, bread, eggs, pasta, a jar of sauce, four bananas and a chocolate bar, and it came to seventy-one dollars, and in the store's defence every item in it came up the same road I'd just come up.

There were four bins by the till with paper tags on them and names written on the tags. A woman came in while I was queuing and gave a name and signed something and two of the bins went out the door on a trolley with her husband pushing it, and there was a case of wine in the top one and a rotisserie

chicken, and it had all been sitting there waiting since before they'd left home. You can order your groceries ahead and have them here when you arrive. There's a company that does it. It is on the website, three clicks from the paragraph about the fuel, and I had read one of those paragraphs and not the other.

The man in front of me bought firelighters and one lime and nothing else, and paid, and left.

Coming back I went out the ski-in door for thirty seconds to look at the village, which is a thing I'd read about and hadn't believed. The main street at Big White is a ski run. Not beside one. It is the run, and it's also the sidewalk, and at twenty to eight on a Saturday there were people walking up it in boots and people coming down it on skis and nobody had strong feelings about the arrangement. A kid went past me at about thirty kilometres an hour holding a slice of pizza.

The run at our own door is Hummingbird. I learned that off a sign, and I said it out loud a few times on the stairs so I'd have it.

The tub at Whitefoot is communal and it sits out on the deck at the end of the corridor, and you can see the steam coming off it from the stairwell a good while before you can see the water. There were four adults in it when we went past at half past eight, with drinks, in the middle of a conversation that had clearly been running some time and had no intention of stopping. Two of them were Australian. One was explaining the difference between two chairlifts to a person who had asked about neither, and the person who had asked about neither was nodding.

Teddy stopped dead in the corridor and said he wanted to go in the soup.

I said tomorrow. He said tonight. I said tomorrow, in daylight, when we have our swimsuits — which are in a bag currently, and I did the arithmetic out loud, which was the mistake, in the trunk of the car, in the parkade, at the bottom of three flights of stairs. He looked at me for a while with an expression I have seen on his mother, and then he went and stood at the window until Robin came and collected him.

I sat on the pull-out at eleven with the printout. It's a booking confirmation, it runs to nine pages for reasons I can't account for, and it carries a reservation date of the fourteenth of March. The name at the top is Marnie's, because Marnie booked it, and the accommodation office has no way of knowing anything about that has changed and no particular reason to want to. Page four is the ski school registration. Page six is the parking permit, also in her name. So is the second adult lift ticket. I folded that page over and put it in the drawer with the takeout menus, which is where I found it again on the Saturday, when I was checking the drawers.

The drive is fifty-five minutes. The resort says so, in the first-timer's guide, and I'd read that too. It took us two hours and fifty minutes, and I would do the second half of it again exactly the same way.

The tub went quiet a bit before eleven, which I thought was good of them.

UNIT 2

THE BULLWHEEL

Alarm's at ten to five and it isn't mine, it's Corey's, and Corey doesn't get up for it.

Twenty past six and the deck lights are on at Ridge Rocket and nothing turns.

Rime comes on overnight when the cloud sits down and the temperature does what it did last night. By morning the haul rope's wearing a coat. So are the running wheels. So's every tower up the line, the lot of them, and none of it comes off on its own.

Same stuff that's on the trees. People fly here to photograph that. Up here it's a job.

The Conscience-Keeper's on the drive terminal with a bar, taking it off the sheaves one at a time. He's got a glove off.

Minus nineteen. He works the bar in with the bare hand and the ice comes away in a curved plate, like something off the bottom of a boat, and he goes to the next one. He doesn't put the glove back on for nine minutes. Then he does.

I've been here nine weeks. My hands have been cold for eight of them.

Ridge Rocket did 1,048,581 scans last season. That number's on the wall in the ops room, printed out, bar chart under it, because it was the busiest lift up here and somebody was pleased about that. I've done the maths on it more than once. A hundred and thirty-odd days. Say four of us on the load ramp across a day. Say I'm on the ramp a bit over half my shifts. I've got it down to a number I carry round with me. I don't say it out loud. I like it too much.

Vinnie comes up at twenty-five to seven with two coffees, hands me one, says nothing. That's correct. He learned it his first week. Took me three.

He does say one thing, which is *morning, Jonty*, and that's the conversation, start to finish, and it's the right length.

Radio goes at ten to. It's the ops desk down in the village, asking about Gem Lake.

The Conscience-Keeper takes it on the second call. He gives the wind out of the southwest at the top station. He gives the humidity. He gives the temperature at the terminal. Then he says he can't run it in this.

Ops asks when.

He says he can't run it in this.

That's the exchange. Happens most weeks, and it happens in about that many words. Ops isn't being thick — Ops has fourteen hundred people coming up a road and needs something for the board by eight thirty. But there's no answer to *when* that isn't a guess, and he hasn't got guesses in him. He's got a thing he can do and a thing he can't, and everyone here's worked out you get told which side of it you're on and nothing after that. Took me a while to stop hearing it as him being short with me.

Gem Lake's the one that goes. Long lift, west side, drops further than anything else here, and the top of it sits out where the weather doesn't have to go round anything to get at it. When it holds, it holds till it doesn't. No schedule to it, and nobody up here who'd pretend there is.

Corey reckons he's ex-military. Corey reckons everyone's ex-military. Corey's twenty, he's from the Gold Coast, and he's got a theory about the grooming department. Nobody asks him about it twice.

Christchurch is twenty hours away and one season. That isn't a complaint.

I came because Bec's brother did a winter here in 2019 and wouldn't shut up about it after. Then Bec and I did the thing where you agree to go together and only one of you fills in the form, and by the time I'd worked out which one of us that was, I had a start date and a bed. She's meant to come over in March. That's still what we're both saying.

Rent comes off the paycheque before I see it, which I've decided is a kindness rather than the other thing. There's no hot tub in the house. There's no hot tub in any staff house I've been in, and the bloke from Perth has a line for it, which is that if you wanted a spa you should've got a job in guest services. He says it every time. It's still funny about half the time, which is a better rate than most things in that kitchen.

Five to seven and the Conscience-Keeper walks the ramp with a shovel and cuts the load platform back down to the mat. Got to be right inside about two centimetres. Get it wrong and you spend your day picking people up off the deck, and they're never annoyed with the platform.

At seven he takes a sled down the line and checks towers four through nine. Back at twenty past. He doesn't report anything to anyone, which means they were fine.

Half past, he starts it empty. Rope comes up to speed, chairs come round the bullwheel and out over the first pylon, and the noise changes twice. Once when it takes the load, once when it settles. Second one's the one you listen for.

He shuts it down.

He goes and looks at something on tower two for a while. Comes back. Starts it again. This time the second noise is different, and he leaves it running.

Nobody skis for another hour and a quarter.

Twenty to eight patrol go up. Four of them, first chairs off the empty start, packs on, before it's open to anybody.

I watch them go, and then I go and do the gates.

Vinnie does the ropes, I do the corral, Corey does what Corey does. Dermot goes past at twenty past and says *ramp's yours, Jonty*, which is not information, and which I've worked out is how he says good morning. Signs go out at twenty to eight. Corral opens at quarter to nine.

Here's the job on a ramp. Four seats, four people, alternate. Left group, right group, left, right.

That's it. That's all of it, and it fails about two hundred times a day, because people arrive in threes. A three won't split and a three won't take a fourth, and a three will stand there and not make eye contact with a single who's eight feet away looking straight at them, and up the hill goes a chair with an empty seat on it.

That's what the singles line's for. Nobody understands the singles line.

"How many in your group?"

"Four."

"That's not a single, mate."

Patrol come through about nine, four of them, and they go up the singles side because it's empty and because they can.

I know all their names. Dermot gave me most of them, and I got the rest off the radio and off the board in the ops room, which took a while and which I did on purpose.

Not one of them knows mine. That's not a complaint, it's the arrangement. What I've noticed is I've stopped saying anything when they go past and started nodding instead, which is worse.

There's a bloke standing at the gates when they come open and he's been there since about eight. Jacket that cost more than my flights. He wants to know if Gem Lake's going.

I tell him it's on hold.

He asks when.

SUNDAY

UNIT 3

THE RENTAL SHOP

You get to the Village Centre Mall from Whitefoot by going outside for about ninety seconds, and at eight in the morning in February those ninety seconds are an education.

It was minus fourteen and there was no wind at all, which is a combination I hadn't met before and which I'd describe as the air having opinions. The village was blue. The sun was somewhere behind the ridge doing something orange to the underside of the cloud, and the snow on the roofs was a metre deep and hanging over the eaves in a curl like the top of a wave, and a machine was working down in Happy Valley with its beacon going round.

Robin walked it in her boots, all of it, because she'd decided that was more efficient, and she walked like a person on stilts, and she didn't complain once.

Teddy came too, because Teddy had to come. His gear comes with the lesson and gets handed over at the Kids' Centre, so he had nothing to collect and no reason to be there, and he was there, in a snowsuit, at ten past eight, for thirty-two minutes.

There's a board on the outside wall of the mall with the lifts down one side and the runs down the other, and a column of little lights, and at eight in the morning on that Sunday every light on it was green. I stood in front of it for longer than the information required. A man came and stood beside me and read the same board and said, to nobody, that it was going to be a good one.

Under the board there's a rack of maps in a plastic sleeve and the sleeve was empty, and it stayed empty every time I passed

it that week, and on the Thursday I saw a woman refill it and it was empty again by the time I came back the other way.

There was a line out the doors of the rental shop at ten past eight.

It went along the front of the mall and turned the corner at the end where the ticket windows are, and I counted it, because Robin asked how long we'd be and I wanted to give her a real answer.

Thirty-one people ahead of us. I counted it twice, because a family of four had arranged themselves in a way that made them ambiguous, and I settled on thirty-one.

Robin said we'd miss the lifts. I said we wouldn't. She asked what time the lifts went, and I said quarter to nine, and she looked at the line and then at me and didn't say anything else about it, which was worse.

Teddy lay down in the line twice. Both times on his back, both times without warning, and both times he got up again on his own before I'd finished deciding what to do about it. An Australian woman ahead of us said her youngest used to do that and that it stops.

Behind us it kept building. By twenty past there were another twelve or so, and by then it had stopped being a line and become the thing a line becomes once it goes round a corner and nobody at the back can see the front.

Everybody in it was carrying something. Helmets mostly, and poles under an arm at the wrong angle, and jackets held the particular way people hold a jacket when they're already too warm indoors and haven't got indoors yet.

Two Australian families ahead of us and one behind. A German couple. A group of four lads from somewhere in the Prairies who'd driven through the night and were saying so.

Somebody's grandmother, in her seventies, in her own gear, who'd clearly done this a hundred times and had come at ten past eight anyway.

They hand you a clipboard at the door.

Height, weight, age, boot size if you know it, whether you've skied in the last three years, and then a box for ability, which is a number from one to nine with a description next to each one.

The descriptions are honest. *Never skied. Snowplough turns, green runs only. Parallel on groomed blue.* And so on up to nine, which is a sentence about variable conditions and steep terrain that I read twice and then read a third time.

The box is not honest, because it's filled in by the person.

You can watch people do the arithmetic. A man two ahead of us wrote a seven, and then read the description of a seven, and then looked at the seven for a while. Then he turned the clipboard slightly away from his wife and changed it to a five.

In forty minutes in that line I did not see one person revise upward.

The number matters, incidentally, and it isn't a personality quiz. It goes into the binding setting along with the height and the weight and the age, and the binding setting is the number at which the ski comes off your foot instead of taking your leg with it. Put down a seven and the ski holds on longer. That's the trade. It's printed on the form, in a box, above the signature line. I would put the number of people in that line who read it at four.

I stood in a line of forty-odd people on a Sunday morning and I would put money on the average number in that box being five and a half, and I'd put more money on the true average being about two. The man with the four lads from the

Prairies put down a seven while telling his friend he hadn't skied since 2019.

I put down a four, and then I crossed it out, and then I put down a four again.

Robin put down a five and it was accurate, which is the only reason I let it stand.

The woman behind us had been in on the Saturday. She said so, twice, to the room. She said the left one had come loose by lunch and she'd skied on it anyway and that was an afternoon wasted.

When she got to the bench the fitter took the boot off her and went to the wall and came back with a different shell, and it went on, and she said oh, that's it, that's the thing.

There was nothing in any of it that said she had been there the day before. Not a word about it, not a look. Whatever had gone wrong on the Saturday had gone wrong somewhere the fitter was not, and had come back to him as a fresh foot.

The man directly in front of me had a lot to say about his own feet. He'd had them measured somewhere. He had a width problem and a volume problem and an old fracture in the fifth metatarsal, and he laid all three out for his wife, who had heard it before, and then for me, who hadn't. He said the trouble with rental boots is they're built for a foot that doesn't exist. He said he'd been fitted properly once, in Calgary, by a man who understood.

I said that sounded frustrating. He said it was.

Then he said the word *volume* four more times in about a minute, and each time he said it he made a shape with his hand.

His wife had the clipboard. She had filled in his height, his weight and his age without consulting him on any of the three,

and then she wrote a six in the ability box while he was still talking about Calgary, and he did not see her do it.

Inside, the shop is a wall.

Boots on it floor to ceiling, nine feet of them, in racks by half size, and the racks go back further than you'd think from the front. There's a rolling ladder on a rail and it moves along the wall with a sound like a shopping trolley in another aisle.

The top two rows are the ones nobody can reach standing, and twice while we were in there the ladder went down the rail and came back with somebody on it, and the second time it was moving before the fitter had finished with the boot in his hands.

Skis stood in trees down the middle. A bench along the left with a rubber mat in front of it and a bin at the end.

It smells like a hockey bag and a hardware store had an argument.

Two staff at the far end doing bindings with drivers on lanyards, and one at a screen taking the clipboards, and there's a printer going constantly, and the noise in there at twenty past eight on a Sunday is somewhere between a school gym and a garage.

The Hand is the boot fitter.

The Hand does not ask what size you are.

The man with the feet got to the bench and started in on the width and the volume and the fracture, and the Hand was already turning, and the boot was already down off the rack.

He put it on. Not offered, not held out — on, and buckled, and the man was standing on the mat driving his knee forward while he was still mid-sentence about Calgary. Then he stopped being mid-sentence. He shifted his weight twice and rolled onto

the outside of one foot and back, and he said that was actually fine.

His wife said something I didn't hear and he said no, genuinely, it was fine.

He was two people along the bench by then, and did not look up.

The Hand picks with one hand and buckles with two. He doesn't look at the rack when he reaches for it. The bin at the end of the bench is for the ones coming back and they go into it without him turning round.

There's no measuring device on the bench. There's a bench, a mat, a bin and a wall.

A woman ahead of us had a heel that lifted and she knew it did and she said so, and he took the boot off and went six feet along the wall and came back and it was a different make, not a different size. She stood on the mat and went up on her toes and came down and said oh.

A teenager wanted the buckles tighter than the fitter had set them. The fitter let the top one out another click and told him to try it at the bottom of the first run and come back at lunch if he still wanted it tighter. The teenager did not come back at lunch, because he was fifteen and had been told a thing by an adult, but I saw him on the Tuesday in the mall and his boots were on his feet and his buckles were where they'd been left.

The grandmother went up two before Robin. She'd been in the line since ten past eight with her own gear, and what she wanted was one boot, because she'd cracked a shell buckle on her own on the Friday and had come down to have the pair matched rather than replaced.

The fitter looked at the boot she'd brought. He went along the wall and came back with one boot. Singular, off a pair. Same model, same year, same size. I have no idea what that says about the depth of that wall, or about how long that shell has been in production.

She put it on standing up, holding the bench, and said that would do.

Robin went up ahead of me.

She sat and had her boot on before she'd got her sock straight. He pushed the shell back with a thumb and asked her to bang her heel, and she banged her heel, and he did the second one and she stood up.

He asked if her toes touched the front when she stood straight.

She said yes.

He said good, and if they stopped touching by lunch to come back and see him. That was the fitting.

Mine took longer.

I sat on the bench with my sock bunched at the arch and I was still sorting that out when the boot came down off the wall. The Hand put my foot in it — that's the accurate description, I didn't put my foot in the boot, my foot went into the boot and I was present for it. He shut the two lower buckles, then the top, then the strap, and then went back and let the top one out a click.

He put a palm flat on my shin and told me to drive forward against it. I drove forward against it. My heel came up.

He took the boot off.

He went four steps along the wall and came back with a different one, and I felt that one lock down at the heel like a door closing in another room.

He asked me to walk to the pole and back. I walked to the pole and back. The boots felt like a mistake I'd already paid for, which is what all ski boots feel like, and they went on feeling that way for six days, and my feet never hurt once.

The skis came from the far end with my name on a strip of masking tape wrapped round the tip, and the bindings were set off the form, and the man at the screen read the number back to me twice.

Then I was standing near the door with a boot bag in my hand and nowhere left to be.

There's a clock over the door on the inside. A round one, white face, the kind that comes with a building rather than being chosen for it.

It said twenty-two minutes past eight.

Robin was already outside with her skis over her shoulder in the carry she'd worked out on the stairs on Saturday. Through the glass I could see the line was down to the doors and back off the corner. The family of four who'd been ambiguous were sitting on the bench with the mat in front of them, and the grandmother was two along from them with one boot on.

She said something as I went past her. Not to me — to the room, in the way people her age say things to a room.

She said she had been coming up here nineteen years and had never once got out of that shop before nine.

Out on the walkway the light had come over the ridge and gone down the far side of the village onto the roofs, and there were five or six people already sliding down the main street with their poles tucked under their arms, and the machine was still going somewhere below, and the air smelled like woodsmoke and diesel.

Robin asked if we had time for a hot chocolate.

I said we had twenty minutes.

She said that wasn't what she asked, and went to look at the board.

UNIT 4

THE KIDS' CENTRE

The Kids' Centre has its own entrance off the Whitefoot corridor and there's a sign at child height with an arrow on it.

Teddy read the arrow correctly and went the other way.

We walked him back up from the mall, which cost us the hot chocolate and most of the twenty minutes.

The walk back is the same ninety seconds outside and then a set of stairs, except that this time I had two sets of skis over one shoulder, a helmet on my wrist like a bracelet, and a four-year-old who'd developed a theory about the stairs. Robin carried her own and mine for the last flight without being asked and without making anything of it.

Getting him into the snowsuit that morning had taken nineteen minutes in the unit and I had lost my temper twice, once about a boot and once about nothing.

He'd been fine after that. He'd been fine in the rental line, twice horizontal but fine. He'd been fine about the boots, which surprised me, because the boots are objectively the worst part of the day for a person that size and nobody has ever explained to them why they're necessary.

He got to the door of the room and he was done.

Drop-off runs from half past eight, and the room at twenty to nine holds, at a guess, sixty children and ninety adults.

It's warm in a way that suggests the heating was specified by somebody who'd thought hard about wet snowsuits, and the air in there at that hour has a smell to it that's wool and floor cleaner and, underneath, faintly, banana.

Cubbies down one wall, three rows of them, names on masking tape in marker, about a third already full. Some of the names are laminated, which tells you which families come every year and which ones are us.

A low bench runs the length of the room and there's a parent kneeling in front of a child every eighteen inches of it, and every one of them is doing the same four things in the same order, and none of them is looking at any of the others.

A bin of loose mittens sits by the door and I'd put it at ninety mittens. Not forty-five pairs. Ninety singles, because a pair does not get lost — one of a pair gets lost, and then its partner goes into a bin and waits for a reunion that is not coming.

I would come to know that bin well.

Along the far wall there's a window at adult height that looks out onto the bottom of the beginner area, and through it you can see about a dozen very small people in a line behind an instructor, all of them stationary, one of them lying down.

The noise isn't crying. That's what I'd got wrong on the walk over. It's about four hundred buckles.

The man two along from me was giving an instructor a briefing. Not a fact — a briefing. It covered the puffer, the word they use at home for needing the toilet, a friend called Marcus who was not present and must not be mentioned under any circumstances, and something structural about socks. It ran a good two minutes and it had a beginning and a middle.

The instructor was seventeen. She nodded all the way through it and said *no worries* twice, and I would put money on none of it surviving as far as the magic carpet.

The man beside me had two boys in matching jackets and was doing them both at once, one under each arm, in a routine that had been rehearsed across several winters and involved almost no speech. He caught me watching and said, without any particular pride, that it's the fourth year and the trick is you don't sit down.

Two along, a woman was on the phone to somebody about a flight while getting a helmet onto a girl of about six, and the girl was helping in the way children help, which is by moving.

And by the cubbies there was a father who'd got his daughter fully dressed and had then discovered her boots were on the wrong feet, and who had taken this the way you take a thing at twenty to nine when you've already lost.

You check in at a counter at the far end.

There's a card for each child with the day on it, the group, the lunch arrangement, and a box at the bottom for notes.

The rates are on a board behind the counter in white vinyl letters on black, the kind where the letters slot into channels and one of them is always slightly out of line. This one had the second L in FULL sitting a half-step low, and it sat a half-step low all week.

Full day with lunch. Full day without. Half day morning, half day afternoon. Helmet rental separate, per day, and there's a note that helmets are mandatory and are not optional at any age, and the word *mandatory* has been added later in a different letter set.

Underneath all of it, the line about pickup, which is three thirty.

Underneath that, the late fee, charged per fifteen minutes or part thereof, beginning at three thirty-one. Not three thirty-five. Not a grace period with a name on it. Three thirty-one, in vinyl, on a board, where every parent in the room can read it while they're kneeling.

There's a waiver, and it's two sides, and I signed it standing up with Teddy attached to my left leg above the knee.

Full day with lunch, times one, plus the helmet, plus tax. I paid it on tap and the machine thought about it for a while and then agreed.

The Companion works the counter.

There were four groups ahead of us and I watched all four of them, because Teddy had my leg and there was nowhere to go.

The first was a couple with a boy of about seven who'd plainly done this before and went in without breaking stride, and she had his card marked and his helmet checked and the parents pointed at the window before either of them had got a question out.

The second was a man who wanted to change from a half day to a full day, and she did it, and charged him the difference, and told him the difference, and printed it.

The third was a woman who asked whether her daughter could stay past three thirty because of a thing at four, and she said yes, and told her what it would cost and how it's counted, and the woman said fine, and it was fine.

The fourth was twin girls, both crying, both in before their mother had finished apologising for them.

Then it was us, and the Companion had Teddy's card up before I gave the name.

Teddy would not go.

He had his arms round my leg above the knee with his face against the outside of my thigh, and he was making no noise at all, which with Teddy is the serious version. Silence in that boy is a much later stage than shouting.

I did the things. I crouched. I said the name of the girl he'd met at the pool at home. I said there'd be a snack. I said I'd be back at three thirty and I said what three thirty means in the units a four-year-old measures things in, which is sleeps and dinners, and neither of those units applies to three thirty, so that went badly.

Robin, who had been standing by the door holding two sets of skis for twelve minutes, said nothing at all.

She came round the counter and crouched down. She did not touch him and she did not say anything to him for a while.

Then she asked him what the dinosaur was called.

He'd had it since Saturday. It had been in the bag with the sock and it had come to breakfast, and it was down in the front pocket of his snowsuit with the head sticking out, and I hadn't registered it since the corridor at Whitefoot.

He said it didn't have a name.

She said that was allowed. She said about half of them don't.

He said this one definitely didn't.

She said fair enough, and asked whether it was coming in or staying with me.

He said it couldn't come in.

She said she knew, and that there's a shelf behind the counter where things wait, and that it's the shelf she can see from anywhere in the room, and did he want to come and have a look at where.

He looked.

It's a shelf. It's above the card box and it's got a stapler on it and a roll of tape and one lost mitten and a small brass thing off a door.

He put the dinosaur on it facing out into the room, and adjusted it, and then adjusted it again.

Then he went. He went the way children go when they finally go, which is instantly and without a goodbye, straight to a girl about his size who was doing something to a bootstrap, and I was left standing at a counter holding a helmet I was supposed to have handed over.

She took the helmet off me. She wrote something on his card.

I said he's not usually like this, his mum does the mornings.

The tense was wrong and it came out anyway, and it was three days before I noticed which way it had come out.

She stopped writing and looked up.

The Companion said that was a useful thing to be told, and that she'd hang onto it.

Then she wrote it in the notes box at the bottom of the card, in pen, with me watching, and turned the card round so I could read it. What it says is *mornings are new to him*. Then she put the card in the box with the rest.

I said something about three thirty.

She said three thirty.

I came back at three thirty and he was fine, and the card was in the box with the note on it. It was in the box on the Monday and it was in the box on the Friday, and every morning that week he went in faster than the morning before, and by Wednesday he was going in before I'd got the helmet off my wrist.

The dinosaur stayed on that shelf all week.

Out in the corridor on the Sunday I stood for a minute with a helmet-shaped absence in my hands and no child attached to any part of me. Robin was by the door in her boots with both sets of skis, waiting, not saying anything about the time.

It was quarter to.

MONDAY

UNIT 5

THE TOUR

The mountain tours are free and they go at ten and at one, and they leave from a sign outside the Village Centre Mall that says so.

We found this out from the sign and not from anybody. It took me until Monday to notice it, and it had been thirty feet from the rental shop door for every minute we stood in that line on Sunday.

The sign gives the time and the meeting spot and one line about the tours being complimentary. There is a laminated card zip-tied under it with the words NO BOOKING REQUIRED on it in a font somebody chose in about 2009.

There is nothing on the sign about how long the tour is. That was the only piece of information anybody needed.

There were ten of us at ten o'clock.

A couple from Sydney. Two men in their sixties in matching jackets who turned out not to know each other, which took most of the first hour to establish and which they established in front of everybody. A family of three from Calgary. Robin and me. And a woman on her own who had been coming here twenty years and who was on the tour, she said, because she had never once been on it.

Teddy was at the Kids' Centre and had gone in without stopping.

The Allfather takes the ten o'clock. Lanyard, vest with SNOW HOST on the back, folded map in a pocket at his hip. It's a vol-

unteer's vest and not a staff jacket, which somebody explained to me later and which I would not otherwise have known.

He said good morning and then he asked what everybody wanted to see.

Nobody answered. Ten adults on skis at ten in the morning and not one of us had an answer to that. One of the matching jackets said *ooh*, in the way you do when you are buying time, and then did not follow it with anything.

The Allfather waited about four seconds and pushed off.

The trouble started at the top of the first chair and it started with the man from Calgary.

He asked whether it was always this cold.

What he wanted was *no*. That is what everybody wants when they ask that. He'd have taken *no*, *this is a cold snap*, and we'd have gone skiing.

The Allfather said the resort's average daytime winter temperature is minus five. He said this wasn't an average day. He said the reason was an inversion — cold air sitting down in the valley, warm air riding over the top of it — except that we were above the inversion rather than under it, so what we had was a cold morning at elevation with no wind in it, and that's the coldest a morning gets and the least dangerous.

Then he said the village sits at 1,755 metres. The summit's 2,319. The snow plot where the readings are taken is at 2,025. That's why the temperature on the board and the temperature on your face are two different pieces of information about two different places.

The man from Calgary said huh.

Then he said that Kelowna, at the valley base, is at 344 metres, and that the difference between there and the summit

is very nearly two thousand metres, and that this is what the drive is for.

The man from Calgary said huh again, in a different key.

Their boy had got a glove off at the top and could not get it back on, because the liner had come out with his hand and had turned itself inside the glove, which happens, and which at nine years old is the end of the world.

He held it up.

The Allfather explained what a liner is and why it does that and how to stop it doing it — pull the fingers first, then the cuff — and it was correct and it was clear and it took about forty seconds, and while he was saying it the boy's mother took the glove off the boy, turned the liner out with two fingers, and gave it back.

Nobody thought anything of it.

His wife asked whether we'd get sun later.

She had just watched what happened to her husband and she asked anyway. Courage or not listening. I have never worked out which and it does not matter.

He said the mountain faces mostly south, which surprises people. He said that at this latitude in February the sun's doing about what it does in Colorado at Christmas. He said the effect of that on a groomed run isn't the effect people expect. Then he said the runs on the far side hold differently, named three of them, and said which of the three would go soft first.

He was right about that on the Wednesday. Almost everything he said that morning turned out to be useful and I have repeated about a third of it since.

It was just that none of us had asked.

We skied about four hundred metres, which was good, and then stopped again.

Robin asked which run we were on.

It is a reasonable question. It has a one-word answer. I watched her ask it and I watched her father fail to warn her.

The host said Serwa's.

Then he said it's named for Cliff Serwa, who cut this mountain in 1963 with Doug Mervyn, and that Mervyn was a pilot and had seen the terrain from the air, which is how anybody knew it was up here at all. Then he said Serwa's granddaughter Kelsey won Olympic gold in ski cross in 2018 and silver in 2014, and gave both years without pausing to find them.

Robin, to her credit, asked whether the granddaughter had learned here.

I made a small noise at that point.

The matching jackets went at the bottom of the second chair.

They did it well — a thank you, a wave, gone, in about six seconds.

The Allfather said good day to them without breaking off what he was saying.

What he was saying was about the day lodge and the T-bar they opened with in 1963. The T-bar was the longest in Canada when it went in. There is still one up there and it is still running. It runs on diesel rather than electricity.

The woman who'd been coming for twenty years said she had not known that.

He said most people don't. He said it's more wind-resistant than any of the chairs. He said it's also the first lift to shut in fog. He said the two facts aren't in conflict.

Then he explained why they aren't in conflict, and the explanation took us down to the next chair.

Here is that explanation, because it is the one thing from that morning I actually used.

Fog shuts the alpine, because only about the top five hundred vertical feet of this mountain is above the treeline and there is nothing up there to give your eye a reference, and a lift that delivers you into terrain you cannot read is not a lift you should be on. Wind shuts the west side, because the top of Gem Lake sits out where the weather does not have to go around anything to reach it.

Different lifts. Different reasons. Both called a hold on the same board, in the same word.

On the Tuesday I stood in a parking lot and knew which one it was.

The Sydney couple went at eleven.

Their method was a binding. He crouched down at the top of the third chair and did something to a toe piece that did not need doing, and she stood over him looking concerned, and they were still doing it when we left.

The family from Calgary went at twenty past. The boy first, straight down, no goodbye. Then the parents a minute or so later, going after him, which is a reason nobody can argue with and which they had clearly been holding since the inversion.

That left Robin, me, and the woman who had been coming for twenty years.

My own position was this. I could have left at eleven. There was a moment at the bottom of the third chair where the Sydney couple were on their bindings and the Calgary boy was already gone, and I could have said something about lunch and taken my daughter down the hill.

What stopped me was that Robin had worked it out.

She'd stopped asking questions somewhere around the second chair, not because she'd stopped listening but because she'd understood the mechanism, and by eleven o'clock she was watching four adults try to escape a man who was answering them, and she was enjoying it more than she had enjoyed anything all week including the skiing.

At about twenty past eleven she looked at me and did not say anything, and I did not say anything, and we both stayed.

At the top of the fourth chair the wind got up for a minute and the Allfather got the map out of his hip pocket.

He took his right glove off to unfold it. Bare hand, in that wind, on a laminated sheet that was trying to leave. He held it open and traced two lines on it with a finger, one for the way we'd come and one for the way we were going, and the woman who'd been coming for twenty years leaned in over it, and the business took a minute and a half.

Then he folded it, and put it back in the pocket, and put the glove on.

Robin asked me afterwards whether his hand was cold.

I said it must have been.

The woman asked him one question in two hours and she asked it just before noon and it was where the water comes from.

He told her. It comes off a lake at 2,012 metres, tucked in under the Cliff, holding somewhere around two hundred and eighty million litres, and the watershed above it has no logging in it, no cattle on it and nobody living up there, and the tested result comes back cleaner than the distilled water you can buy.

She said she'd been drinking bottled water up here for twenty years.

He said a lot of people do. Then he told her what the watershed puts out in a year, which is more than a billion litres, and what the snowpack is doing when it isn't being skied on, which is being next summer's water.

She looked down the valley for a bit. Then she asked whether the tour went past the lake.

He said no. He said you can't get to it, and that this is the point of it.

We finished at twenty past twelve, which is not when the tour finishes, because the tour does not finish.

The woman who had been coming for twenty years shook his hand at the bottom and said thank you and meant it.

He was still talking when we left. Not to us. He'd got to the bottom of the hill and there was a group of four standing at the sign for the one o'clock, forty minutes early, and one of them had asked him something.

UNIT 6

THE PLAZA CHAIR

The Plaza Chair is the short one in the village and it is the one you take when you have a nine-year-old and forty minutes before pickup.

We'd done it four times.

Four is enough to have a system. Robin had worked out that if you go left off the top you get a hundred metres of nothing before the pitch, which suits a person who wants a hundred

metres to think in. I'd worked out that the Plaza's short enough that a nine-year-old doesn't get bored of it and long enough that a forty-one-year-old gets a sit down.

I'd also worked out that I was going to be tired before she was, and that this was going to be true every day of the week, and that there was nothing available to me about it.

On the fifth, at about ten past three on the Monday afternoon, Robin caught an edge coming off the top and went down on the ramp.

I was three chairs behind her.

Everything about the next forty seconds followed from that. I had put her on ahead of me because the singles line had put us out of order and I had thought, at the bottom, that it did not matter for a four-minute lift.

From three chairs back you can see the offload perfectly and you can do nothing about any of it.

At the bottom the singles line had been three deep and the main line had been fourteen, and the operator down there had waved Robin forward into a gap on a chair with two Australians on it, and I had gone into the next gap but one.

It is a four-minute lift. I did the sum at the bottom and the sum said it did not matter.

She came off, and her left ski went across the front of her right, and she sat down hard on her hip about two metres past the end of the mat and did not get up. Her poles went one each way, one of them out past the sign. The chair she'd come off went on round and up over the return and away down the line, empty.

Behind her a family of four was coming up to the offload, and the man on the outside was already standing.

Then the lift stopped.

I don't mean it slowed. Chairlifts slow at the offload, they do it all day and you stop noticing by the second morning. This stopped, hard, and my chair swung forward and came back and swung forward again, and the line of chairs above the village went quiet in a way I hadn't understood was a sound until it wasn't there.

Somebody two chairs behind me said whoa.

The family of four had got off. I could see the man on the outside of it standing at the top of the ramp with his hands out from his sides.

Robin was up on one knee.

There was a lift operator at the top. He'd been standing at the end of the ramp doing nothing, in the way they do, every time we'd been up.

He'd got to her before I'd finished registering that the lift had stopped. It is not a great distance. It is not nothing either.

He didn't pick her up. He stood between her and the ramp with one arm out flat, which is what stopped the family of four from walking through the middle of it, and he said something to her that I could not hear from where I was, and she got her ski off the way you get a ski off when somebody has told you which foot to do first.

Then he handed her the poles, both of them, and she went and stood by the sign, and he went back up to where he'd been standing.

The four went through. One of them, the woman, looked back twice.

It can't have been forty seconds from the ski crossing to Robin standing by the sign. I've counted it out since, against a clock, and forty's generous.

At the time it was long enough to plan a life in. I got through: the hip, the femur, the helicopter, the drive to Kelowna, the phone call, and what the phone call would consist of, and who would be on the other end of it, and what she'd say first. All of that, in under forty seconds, three chairs back, with my hands on a safety bar.

The lift started again.

I got off at the top like a man walking into a room where something has happened. I got to her and asked whether she was hurt, and she said no, and she wasn't, and her hip came up a colour on the Wednesday that I did not tell her mother about.

She said it wasn't the ski. She said the mat was slippery on the last bit.

I said okay. I did not believe her and I said okay in the voice of a man not believing her. She heard it. She let it go.

On the Tuesday the mat at the top of the Plaza was a different colour. I noticed it on the second lap and assumed I had been wrong about the colour on the Monday.

For most of those forty seconds I was not thinking about Robin. I was thinking that I had put my nine-year-old on a chairlift ahead of me because I had not wanted to make a small fuss in a line, and that everybody at the top of that ramp now knew it.

She was fine. She was fine at the bottom of the next run and she was fine at pickup, and at four o'clock she asked whether we could do the Plaza again before dinner.

The operator did not look at me at any point.

I've turned that over. At the time I read it as a judgement, and I spent the walk down to the Kids' Centre constructing

what he thought of me, and it was detailed, and I was fluent about it.

I think now that he was watching the ramp.

There were forty people still coming up that hill behind me and he had all of them, and the thing I'd built out of his not looking at me was a thing I'd made on my own, out of materials I'd brought with me.

They move you around. Monday afternoon I was on Plaza.

That's a chair I'd worked maybe three times all season. Plaza's different. It's the village chair, so everyone on it is either eight, or learning, or both, and about a third of them are on rental gear they got that morning.

The Conscience-Keeper puts me up top on the unload. He doesn't say why and I don't ask. You get moved and you go.

Ten past three, a kid goes down on the unload.

She's nine, maybe. Comes off, crosses her tips, sits down about two metres past the mat. Poles go. She stays down.

I've got a four coming in behind her and one of them's already up.

I hit the stop.

That's the decision, start to finish, and it takes about as long as reading it. You don't wait to see if she's getting up. She's inside the unload zone, she's between the mat and the ramp, and there's four people arriving with about six seconds on them. You hit it.

The Conscience-Keeper's in the shack and he's out before the rope's finished moving.

He doesn't come to the kid. He goes straight up the line and looks at the first two towers and then at the drive, and then he

stands at the terminal with a hand on the housing, and that's where he stays until it's over.

Here's what actually goes wrong on an unload, and it isn't the person who fell.

It's the four behind them. They've got a chair under them, they're already standing, and they've been watching the person in front go down. Half of them will try to go round. One of them will try to go round on the side where the kid is, because that's the side their eye is on.

So you get an arm out. You get between. You don't pick the kid up first, you make the space first, and then you deal with the kid, and everyone who's ever watched that happen from a chair has thought you were slow to help.

Four goes through. I get the arm down.

The kid's got a ski still on and she's trying to stand on it, which won't work, so I tell her the downhill one first and she does it first go.

She's not crying. She's furious, which is better.

I give her the poles and point her at the sign and she goes and stands at the sign.

Then I look at the mat.

The last two metres of it is worn through to the plate underneath. It's been like that a while. It's fine for an adult. It's fine for a kid with their weight forward. It is not fine for a nine-year-old coming off a chair at ten past three with her legs gone, and it is a mat, so nobody's ever going to put it on a form.

I'd been on this chair three times all season and I hadn't clocked it. Whoever's been on it every day has.

He's still at the terminal with his hand on the housing. He hasn't looked at the mat once.

Restart's two minutes by the book and it was about that.

The Conscience-Keeper brings it up himself from the terminal. He lets it run empty two chairs before he lets me load again. That's not in the book. That's him.

He doesn't ask me what happened. He doesn't ask the kid anything. He doesn't ask the four who went through, and one of them was going to tell him.

There's a form for a stop. I filled it in at four. It's got a box for the reason and I put *guest down in unload zone*, which is true, and it's got no box at all for a mat.

At three thirty he comes down the ramp and stands on the worn part of the mat with his boot on it, and moves his foot on it twice, and goes back up.

The mat was replaced overnight. It was a different colour on Tuesday and nobody said anything to me about it, before or after.

Somebody's dad came off three chairs later and got to her and asked her the thing they ask. She answered it. He said okay.

Then he stood there.

I've seen that a lot this season. It's the thing dads do at the top of a lift, where they've arrived after the part they'd have been useful for and they've got nowhere to put it.

I went back to the end of the ramp. There were forty people coming up the hill behind him and the day still had ninety minutes in it.

UNIT 7

SNOWSHOE SAM'S

Snowshoe Sam's sits at the top of the village and you go up to it, which at half past four on a Monday in ski boots is a piece of design I'd like to discuss with somebody.

The village at that hour is a river running the other way. Everybody is walking uphill in boots and everybody is carrying skis and nobody is going the direction the slope wants them to, and about one person in eight is towing a child on a plastic sled with one hand and holding two sets of poles in the other.

It's the longest-running pub on this mountain. There's a sign in there that says it's been voted the best ski bar in North America and there's another sign that says children are welcome until seven and that after seven you'll be asked for two pieces of identification, and both of those signs are load-bearing.

We got there at twenty to five with a nine-year-old, a four-year-old, and a boot bag.

It's loud and it's hot. There's a fire at one end with about fourteen people round it in various stages of getting their gear off. The floor by the door is a lake.

Twenty-odd taps, and the list is chalked, and about half of it is from within two hours of here. Pool tables at the back with a queue system that appeared to be coins on the rail. A television with something on it that four people were watching and about sixty were not.

The boot situation in there is its own thing. Nobody takes them off. There's nowhere to put them, and you'd only have to put them back on. So the room's full of people sitting at a forty-five-degree angle in chairs designed for feet that bend.

Robin got a table by having a strategy about it, which was to stand beside one where a couple had just got their coats.

The Chaos-Weaver works the bar.

There were nine people at it and he was doing all nine, and the thing you notice from four back is that he is not working left to right. He goes to whoever is about to need him, which is a different order, and it means about half the bar believes it has been served early.

I ordered a beer and two hot chocolates and a plate of fries for the table.

What came was a beer, two hot chocolates, a plate of fries, and a bowl of the soup.

I hadn't ordered the soup.

The soup was on the bill. It was on the bill at four dollars and I paid four dollars for it. I did not ask for it. It arrived first, before the fries and before the drinks, and Teddy — who had not eaten since a Kids' Centre lunch at eleven thirty and had reached the stage of the day where he was going to be a problem inside three minutes — ate the bowl of it standing up, all of it.

Then he sat down and was reasonable for an hour.

I asked the Chaos-Weaver at the bar about Gem Lake.

We had not been over there and Robin wanted to, and it's the long one on the west side with a lift that drops seven hundred metres in a go.

He said it's the best thing here. He said you want to be on it at first light. He said the line at the Gem Lake base at eight thirty is nothing compared to the village lifts. He said we should drive round rather than ski across, and park at the bottom of it.

The first two things are true and everybody says so.

The third one is true as well, and it saves about ten kilometres each way.

He also said the run to take off the top of it is Blue Ribbon, and that it's a groomer all the way down.

Blue Ribbon is not a groomer all the way down. I found this out on the Thursday, about two-thirds of the way down. He was three-for-four. The fourth one was about a place at the far end of a mountain he was not standing on.

Robin got twenty minutes on a pool table off a man from Adelaide who was on his fourth season and who taught her to bridge properly, and who told her, when she asked, that he'd meant to come for one winter. He said it the way you say a thing you've said before. Then he said the lift pass makes it hard to leave, and laughed, and went back to his table.

At six they do the gunbarrel.

You hear it before you see it. There's a bell, and the room turns.

It happens up at the bar. There's a genuine double-barrelled shotgun, held level over a line of glasses, and what goes down the barrel is Grand Marnier, and it's on fire. Blue, the length of the bar, running downhill through the glasses one after another.

The bartender warms the barrel first. That's the part nobody watches, and it's the part the thing depends on.

Teddy stood on his chair. About forty other people stood on nothing and got their phones out.

He did it in something under a minute. The flame went out at the end of the line and everybody clapped.

Then he was back on the taps and there were four beers up before the applause had properly finished, and one of the four went to a man who had been standing at the bar with his back to it, waiting, from the bell to the applause.

We were out by six thirty, which was fifty per cent about the seven o'clock rule and fifty per cent about Teddy.

Getting three people into swimwear in a warm unit with a cold deck forty feet away takes fourteen minutes and produces one casualty.

Teddy will not undress in a cold room and will not accept that the room is not cold. Robin will not have her swimsuit put on over anything or under anything, which leaves a window of about four seconds. And the swimsuits themselves had spent six days in a bag in a trunk in a parkade and had come up the stairs the temperature of the parkade.

And at ten to seven, with both children in swimsuits under their coats and towels over their arms, we finally got into the tub at Whitefoot, which had been the standing item on the agenda since Saturday night and which I had personally underwritten.

It was empty. That's the first thing that was wrong with it. I had built an entire theory of that tub around it being full of Australians, and at ten to seven on a Monday there was nobody in it at all.

Teddy got in, said it was too hot, and got out, and stood on the deck in a swimsuit and a towel in about minus twelve and would not be persuaded.

Robin got as far as sitting on the edge with her feet in and then said the steam was making her cold, which is not a thing I could argue with, because it was.

So I sat in a hot tub on my own at ten to seven, in the dark, in a cloud of my own steam, with a beer I'd brought up from The Market. Both of my children stood two metres away in towels, in minus twelve, having an argument about whose idea this had been.

Above the deck the cloud had come off and there were more stars than I've got any use for. The runs were dark — it was a Monday, and the lights don't go on again until Tuesday — and a groomer was working across the face of the hill with its beacon turning, a long way off and taking its time.

Robin took Teddy in at about seven. I heard the door and I heard her telling him to leave the towel where it was.

I stayed in until the beer was finished.

TUESDAY

UNIT 8

THE HOLD

Wind's out of the southwest, and has been since about two in the morning. The number at the top station at first light is thirty-eight, gusting fifty-one.

They put me on Gem Lake for the Tuesday. That's the far side. Its own base, its own car park, its own little building with a ticket window and a boot room and a coffee machine that takes coins. You get driven round, or you ski across. If the lift's not going there's no skiing across. So on a Tuesday in February, everybody who comes to Gem Lake comes in a car.

I get there at ten past seven. The Conscience-Keeper's already out on the deck with a bar and he's doing the sheaves. There's rime on everything the same as any other morning and he takes it off the same as any other morning.

Bare hand again, right one, same as Saturday. It's minus eleven down here, which is warm for this week, and it's the wind that's the problem and not the cold.

We do the running gear. We do the two towers you can reach from the bottom. Takes till about ten to eight, and it's good work, and none of it matters. Everyone on that deck knows none of it matters. We do it properly anyway. The alternative's standing about.

First car in is at twenty past seven and it's a family in a rental from the airport, and they sit in it with the engine going for fifty minutes.

By eight thirty there's about forty cars and by nine there's about a hundred and ten. The lot holds more than that but not

much more. People get out, look up at the lift, look at the little building, and go and stand in front of the sign.

The sign's a whiteboard on an easel and it says GEM LAKE — WIND HOLD in marker, and underneath that it says CHECK LIFT STATUS FOR UPDATES.

That's what this resort has published on the subject, and it isn't a dodge. There's nothing else true to write on it.

The Conscience-Keeper stands at the rope.

That's the job for the morning. There's a rope across the bottom of the ramp and he stands behind it and he's there from eight until it lifts, and I don't think he sits down once.

People come up to him in about the same order every time. First the question, which is always some version of when. Then, once he's answered it, a second one. It's the first one rephrased. People ask it because they reckon the first came out wrong.

He says the wind's out of the southwest at the top station. He says the number. He says he can't run it in this.

He says it to a man from Vernon at ten past eight, and to a woman with three kids at twenty past. He says it to six Australians at half past. Same words each time, and the same length each time. By about nine I've heard it enough that I've stopped hearing it as language.

Nobody gets a different answer. Not one person out of the several hundred who asked got told anything the person before them wasn't told. Nobody got told less, either. The bloke who shouted got exactly what the woman who apologised for asking got.

The shouting one comes at about twenty to ten.

He's driven up from Kelowna. He's got a day pass and he's got his kid in the car. He says he wants to know when. He tells

him. The man says that's not an answer. He says it's the answer he's got. The man says who do I talk to. He tells him — guest services, in the village, and he gives him the building — and then the man says something about the money and he doesn't say anything at all to that, and stands there, and the man goes.

I watched it from about six metres. He never raised his voice, and he never lowered it either, and the second one is the harder of the two.

Here's what a hold actually is, from the inside.

It isn't a decision that gets made once. It gets made continuously, every few minutes, all morning. The answer keeps coming out the same. Each time it comes out the same it costs exactly what the first one cost.

The Conscience-Keeper's on the radio to the ops desk about every quarter of an hour. Wind direction. Speed. Gusts. Humidity's up, temperature's up two degrees since eight. They ran it for patrol at eight thirty.

Four of them up, nobody else, one chair each, and it stopped again after. Took about six minutes end to end.

That's the thing I keep going back to. It was too dangerous to run and they ran it — once, for four people, up into the same wind — and nobody in that car park said a word about it, because nobody in that car park was watching the right thing.

He never said he was going to. He didn't say anything afterwards either, and it didn't go on the radio, and there is no version of the morning written down anywhere in which that lift moved.

He'd told four hundred people he couldn't run it. He hadn't told them anything about what he'd do.

I'd have got on that chair. I'd have got on it for nothing.

At about nine thirty he runs it empty for nine minutes. The chairs come round and go out and swing in a way you don't want to see with people in them. He brings it in and shuts it down.

That's the closest it comes all morning. He goes back to the rope, and a woman who's been there since twenty past eight saw the chairs move and says oh. He says no. She says right. She stays.

Ten forty it lifts.

I don't know what changed. I mean that plainly. The wind came off some, and the gusts came off more than the wind did. There was a stretch of about twenty minutes where it stayed off. At ten forty he picked up the rope, dropped it on the snow, and went and stood at the load ramp.

He didn't announce it. There's no announcement. The rope goes down. Four hundred people who've stood in a car park for two and a half hours understand what's happened without a word said. They come up the ramp, and it's very orderly for about a minute, and then it isn't.

Nobody was told why it lifted, then or later. Nobody was told why it went on, either. Those are the same piece of information and it was never anybody's to give.

I got off at four thirty and I was more tired than I've been since I got here, and I'd loaded chairs for five hours and forty minutes out of a nine-hour shift.

Here's the thing I've been turning over since.

The scan's the record. Everything up here goes through the scan — every lift, every rider, every time. End of the season it goes on a wall with a bar chart under it and somebody's pleased

about it. That's what a day is, on paper. That's what a day is *made of*, on paper.

There's no scan for a hold. There's nothing at all. The morning of Tuesday the seventeenth at Gem Lake, first light to ten forty, produced no number of any kind. The hardest four hours I've worked on this mountain isn't anywhere. Neither is his.

Corey said at the end of it that we'd basically had the morning off.

UNIT 9

THE MALL

The bartender at Sam's had told me to drive round to Gem Lake rather than ski across, and he was right, and on the Tuesday morning I drove round to Gem Lake.

It's about twenty minutes on the mountain road with the kids in the back and the skis in the trunk. Robin had been talking about it since Monday night. I had made rather a lot of it, in the way you do when you have found a plan and are pleased with the plan.

The fuel light had been on since eight kilometres out on the Saturday. It had been on for three days in a parkade, and I had done nothing about it because you do not need a car at Big White, which is the pitch, top to bottom, and which is true right up until it isn't.

Forty kilometres, there and back. The light comes on with about fifty in the tank. I sat in the parkade on Tuesday morning and did that sum twice and then went anyway.

I had also said the words *seven hundred metres of vertical* to a nine-year-old at breakfast, twice, as though I had personally arranged it.

The lift was on hold. I found this out from a whiteboard on an easel with the words written in marker, and I read it three times, standing in a parking lot in the wind, in the way you read a thing that has not changed since the first reading.

We sat in the car for forty minutes with the heater going, and then I got out and went and asked the lift operator when it would open.

He told me the wind direction and the wind speed and that he couldn't run it in that.

I asked when. I had heard the answer the first time and I asked again anyway. I was the eleventh or twelfth person to do that in the ten minutes I stood there, and the answer did not change for any of us.

We drove back round. Nobody said anything for the first ten minutes and then Teddy asked whether we were going home, meaning to the unit, and Robin said no, meaning to Kelowna, and that took some sorting out.

The Village Centre Mall at eleven o'clock on a hold day contains, at a conservative estimate, fourteen hundred people.

It is not a mall. It's a covered walkway with about nine businesses off it — a bakery, two coffee places, the rental shop, the repair shop, a ski shop, a liquor store, the ticket windows and guest services — and it was built for people crossing from one side of the village to the other with skis on their shoulders. On a normal Tuesday there'd be forty in it.

The noise in there at eleven is a specific noise. It's about four hundred conversations under a low ceiling with a hard floor,

and every one of them is a version of the same conversation, and the word *wind* comes out of it about twice a second.

Every bench was taken by half past ten.

Then the floor, and the floor goes in a particular order. First the wall spots, because a wall is a back. Then the corners. Then the raised bit by the ticket windows, which is a step and not a seat and was full by eleven anyway. By twenty past eleven people were sitting in the open in the middle of the walkway with their backs to nothing, which is the shopping-arcade equivalent of camping above the treeline.

There were families along the wall outside the rental shop with their boots off and their liners out. A group of teenagers had established something in the corner by the ATM that had a structure to it. Outside Beano's the line was thirty deep and moving well and getting no shorter.

The lift board is at the far end and people watched it the way people watch a departures board — constantly, in shifts, with a designated person who had volunteered and who reported back.

The Clocktower ran out of milk at about noon. I know this because I was in front of the person who was told.

The people I remember: a man in full gear including helmet and goggles, sitting on the floor, asleep. A woman reading a paperback with her boots off and her feet on a helmet, who did not look up once in the forty minutes I could see her. Two Australians in their fifties working through the beer list at the far end at half past eleven with the air of men who had made peace. And a family sitting in a row on a bench in absolute silence, all five of them, in boots, doing nothing at all, for as long as I was in that building.

I went to guest services because I had worked out that somebody must be able to tell me something.

The Seeker's on the desk.

I said I'd bought a six-day pass on the Saturday and had lost a day of it, and I asked who I talk to about that.

The Seeker didn't answer the question. He didn't fail to answer it either. He told me that pass adjustments are the ticket office, which is the window at the far end and not this desk. He said if the pass was bought through the accommodation booking it goes through central reservations and not the ticket office, and asked which it was, and I didn't know, and he said the confirmation number would tell me, and told me which digits.

Then he said that if I was asking about a refund rather than an adjustment there's a policy, and the policy is published, and he told me where it's published and what it's called. He said the lift itself is a mountain operations matter. He said nobody on this side of the building makes that call.

I asked whether it was the resort I'd be dealing with or the booking company. He said that depended on the confirmation number, which we had already established I did not have on me, and he said that the accommodation office could pull it, and that the accommodation office is not in this building either.

I asked who does.

He said the lift operations supervisor, at the lift.

I said I'd just driven back from the lift.

He said yes.

Two desks, three phone numbers and about nine minutes, and at the end of it I had the right piece of paper and I had it from the third place he sent me, and I could not have told you afterwards which of them had actually solved it.

He was correct every time. Every referral was the right referral, not one was a brush-off, and not one was wrong. The effect of nine minutes of entirely accurate information was that I ended up standing in a covered walkway holding a receipt and unable to say who had helped me.

The address on the receipt says Beaverdell. Nobody in that building has been to Beaverdell.

The distribution in that building at eleven o'clock was about four hundred adults visibly deteriorating and about ninety children having the best morning of the week, and not one adult in the place had noticed the second half of that sentence.

I found the children at twenty past twelve, and they did not see me, and I stood at the end of the walkway for a while because there was nowhere to sit down.

They were on the floor outside the ski shop with about nine other kids and two dogs.

Here is the game, as far as I could reconstruct it from a minute of watching. The tiles outside the ski shop are about a foot square and the pattern changes where the frontage starts, and that change is a line, and the line mattered. One child was It. It could not move and could not speak. It could only point. If It pointed at you, you had to name something you could see from where you were sitting, and you could not stand up to see more, and if two people named the same thing they were both out and had to go and sit behind the line.

Teddy's job was to remember what had already been named.

He is four. He cannot have been doing it correctly. Every child in that ring accepted his ruling every time he gave one, including twice when he gave one to a boy about twice his size, and the boy got up and went and sat behind the line.

The small one who had been crying earlier was about five and had been given a job as well and had stopped.

I watched about a minute of it.

Then I said we were going, and it stopped.

I got them a hot chocolate each from the Clocktower, which had milk again by then, and I sat on the floor against the wall with my back to the ski shop window and I did the sums.

Six-day pass times two. Ski school five days, with lunch, plus the helmet. The unit. The rental. The bag of groceries that had cost seventy-one dollars. The fuel I had not yet bought and was going to have to drive a hundred and twelve kilometres to buy. What the drive round to Gem Lake had been worth in the morning, and what it was worth now.

I got to a number. Then I got to the number divided by six, which is the figure that matters, and which I had not looked at directly at any point since the fourteenth of March. Then I sat with my legs out on the floor of a shopping arcade at six and a half thousand feet, with a receipt in one hand, doing arithmetic that had stopped being about skiing several sums earlier.

At two o'clock the board said Gem Lake was running.

It is twenty minutes back round the road and it shuts at three. I stood in the mall and worked out that by the time we were at the base we would have forty minutes of a lift I had driven to twice that day.

I said to Robin we could still get three hours in on the village side, and she said she'd rather stay, and I said we'd paid for the day, and she said okay, and got up.

We did four runs on the Ridge Rocket. The light had gone flat by then and the snow was cut up from a mountain's worth of people arriving on it at once, and the third one was better than the first two, and the fourth was better than the third.

They were fine. I had been right about the three hours and we got them.

We got in the tub at seven.

Everybody got in the tub at seven. That is what a hold day does to a building — nobody skied a morning, so nobody was tired, so at seven o'clock on a Tuesday there were eleven people in a tub built for eight and three more on the deck in towels waiting, and it was all being run by consent.

There is an etiquette and I had not known there was one. You come in at the shallow end. You do not take a seat, you take a space. When somebody arrives you move eight inches and the eight inches propagates round the tub in about four seconds and nobody looks up. Two people left while we were in it and both of them said something to the group on the way out, and both times the group said something back.

Robin lasted nine minutes. Teddy lasted four and then sat on the edge with his feet in and gave a commentary.

The Australian from Saturday night was in it. I know because he was still explaining the difference between two chairlifts, to a different person, who had also not asked.

Teddy fell asleep at ten to eight that night in his clothes on the pull-out, on top of the dinosaur, which he had brought home for the first time all week.

I moved him and I didn't move the dinosaur.

WEDNESDAY

UNIT 10

GUEST SERVICES

There was a notice on the windshield of my car on Wednesday morning and it was not a ticket, which took me most of the day to establish.

I found it at ten past eight, on the way to the Kids' Centre, with Teddy on one hand and both sets of poles in the other, and I read it standing in a parkade in ski boots with a four-year-old pulling steadily downward.

It was a printed slip in a plastic sleeve under the wiper. It said the vehicle's parking authorization could not be verified. It said continued parking without a valid permit displayed may result in towing at the owner's expense. It gave a phone number with a Grand Forks area code, and a reference number, and a date and time that put somebody in that parkade at twenty to six that morning with a torch.

The permit was on the dash. It had been on the dash since Saturday. It was face up by Wednesday, because I had fixed that on Monday.

The permit is in Marnie's name.

There is a specific quality to a piece of paper like that on the fourth morning of a holiday. It is not the content. The content is nine lines. It is that the paper has arrived from an organization you did not know existed, about a thing you thought was settled, in a place where you do not know where anything is.

I dropped Teddy. I put Robin in ski school for the morning. I had not planned to. It cost extra. She was pleased about it.

I also had to buy fuel. That is not a small errand at Big White and I had spent three days pretending it was.

There is no fuel up there. I had read that in October. The nearest is Rutland. That is fifty-odd kilometres down a road that drops eleven hundred metres, and it is a hundred and twelve kilometres and the better part of two hours for a tank of gas, and there is no version of it that does not cost you a morning.

So Wednesday was the car. All of it. The notice and the fuel, which is one errand if you are being efficient about it and two disasters if you are not.

I started at the accommodation office, because they issued the permit.

The accommodation office is a room off the back of the mall with two desks and a wall of key envelopes in slots.

They issue permits. That is the thing they can do, and they had already done it, correctly, in March.

The woman there was helpful and quick. She turned the slip round on the counter to read it, which meant she had read it properly. She said the permit was correctly issued against the booking, that the booking is in the name on the permit, and that enforcement is not theirs — the lot is enforced by a contractor. She gave me the contractor's name and spelled it.

I asked whether she could reissue it in my name.

She said no, and told me why: the permit follows the booking, and changing a name on a booking mid-stay is central reservations, and central reservations is a phone number rather than a place.

I said the person named is not here.

She said she understood, and she did, and it did not change what she was able to do.

There was a version of that morning that took one phone call.

Marnie made the booking. Marnie has the confirmation number in an email in a folder. Marnie would have rung central reservations from her own kitchen and had the name changed on it before I had my boots off, and it would not have occurred to her to make anything of having done it.

I did not ring her.

I went to guest services.

Guest services is at the far end of the mall past the ticket windows, and at half past nine on a Wednesday there were five people in front of me.

A man wanting to know if the road was open. A couple whose unit had no hot water. A woman with a lost glove, one glove, left-hand, described in detail. A man who wanted to change a lesson booking from a group to a private. And a teenager sent up by a parent to ask something the teenager had not been told properly and could not therefore convey.

The Seeker is on the desk and there is nobody else on it. He took all five in about nine minutes and none of them was hurried and none of them got fewer words than their question needed.

I put the slip on the counter and I explained it. The Seeker read the slip. Then he told me four things, in order, and the order turned out to matter.

The Seeker did not ask me what I wanted done about it, which every other person I spoke to that day asked first.

One: the slip is not a ticket. It is a notice, issued by the contractor, and it carries no charge. That was the single most useful sentence anybody said to me on Wednesday and it was the first thing out of him.

Two: he said the contractor is engaged by the resort, not by the strata, and the phone number on the slip is the contractor's dispatch and not the resort's.

Three: he said that if I wanted the notice cleared rather than the permit reissued, the contractor can do that, at dispatch, with the booking reference, and I would need to be able to say the name on the booking.

Four: he said that if none of that worked, the parking bylaw in the residential lots sits with the regional district, which is the Regional District of Kootenay Boundary, whose office is in Trail.

I said Trail.

The Seeker said Trail.

I said how far is Trail.

He said about four and a half hours, and then he said that nobody has ever needed to go there about a parking notice, and that he was answering the question I had asked.

Big White is not near Trail. Big White is fifty-six kilometres from Kelowna, and Kelowna is the city everybody on this mountain flies into, drives from, buys groceries in and goes to hospital in. But the mountain sits over a line, administratively, into a regional district whose seat is on the other side of two mountain ranges.

And the address on the booking confirmation, on the parking permit, on the notice under my wiper, and on the receipt I had got on Tuesday, is not Big White and is not Kelowna.

It says Beaverdell.

Beaverdell is a place down Highway 33 with a population you could fit in the Kids' Centre. I have never been there. Nobody I met that week had been there. Every system that holds a record of my family being on this mountain in February has us

in Beavertown, and every human being on the mountain would tell you we were at Big White, and both of those are correct, and one of them is a place on a map that none of us went to.

I called the contractor's dispatch from the walkway outside guest services, standing against the wall between the ATM and a rack of trail maps, with about four hundred people going past me both ways.

It rang fourteen times. There is a hold message and the hold message is about winter tire requirements on Highway 33, which had nothing to do with anything and which I listened to twice.

The man who answered was in Grand Forks, four hours away in the other direction, and had the flat unbothered manner of somebody who deals with this all day and has never once been shouted at successfully. He asked for the reference off the slip. He asked for the booking reference, and I had it on my phone. Then he asked for the name on the booking, and I said it.

He said thank you and typed for a while. I could hear a radio going wherever he was, and somebody talking behind him about a different vehicle in a different place.

Then he said the notice was cleared. He said the vehicle would not be listed. He said if I got another one to call the same number and quote the same reference, and that it happens sometimes when the permit's issued in one name and the vehicle's registered in another, and that the system flags it and a person then has to un-flag it.

I asked whether I could stop it happening again.

He said no.

I got down to Rutland at twenty past eleven with the needle flat on the pin and the last four kilometres done at fifty with the heater off, which does nothing and which everybody does.

Ninety-one litres. I stood at a pump in a strip mall in the rain at six degrees, in ski socks, fifty kilometres from a mountain I had paid to be on, and I filled a tank I had let run down to nothing on the first evening because a website had told me I would not need the car.

Then I bought a coffee and a bag of doughnuts and drove back up, and I was at the Kids' Centre at ten to one, and Robin had had a good morning and had been put in a group above the one I had booked her into.

The call took four minutes and eleven seconds, because I looked at the phone afterwards.

Three organizations. Four referrals. One problem, solved on the third thing he told me, by a man in Grand Forks who had no idea about any of it.

I went back into guest services to say thanks.

He was mid-way through the same operation with a couple who had a question about a shuttle. He was sending them to three places. All three were going to be correct. The woman had a pen out and was writing them down in order.

They went. I got to the counter and I did not say thank you.

What I said was that I wanted to know who you talk to if somebody has done their job well.

He said there's a card in the accommodation office for service feedback and a form on the website.

I said not a card. A person.

That is the only point that week where a man with an answer for everything did not have one. He said he would find out. He did not say who from.

He did not come and find me and I did not go back.

I told Robin about it at lunch and she asked why the man with the notice didn't just look at the permit.

I said that he probably had, and that the name on it didn't match anything he could check.

She asked whose name was on it.

I said Mum's, because it is, and because she can read, and because the permit had been sitting face up on the dash of a car she gets into four times a day.

She said okay.

Then she asked if we could do Gem Lake tomorrow, since we hadn't got it on Tuesday, and I said yes.

UNIT 11

THE RINK

Lara's Gondola is free and it runs until nine at night and it takes three minutes, and it goes from the village down to Happy Valley, and once you have worked out that it exists you use it about six times a day.

We went down at half past six on the Wednesday with skates we didn't own and a four-year-old who had been promised ice since Monday.

The cabin holds eight and we had it to ourselves going down.

The village lights went behind us and the trees came up on either side with the ice on them, lit from underneath by whatever was on at the tube park, so they came out of the dark

white and went back into it. The cabin swung once going over a tower. Teddy stood with both hands and his forehead against the glass and said nothing at all for three minutes, which is a record.

Happy Valley at night is a different place from the village. It is lower and flatter and it is where the resort puts the things that are not skiing, so at seven o'clock on a Wednesday there is a tube park running under lights with a carpet lift going, and a sixty-foot ice tower with somebody on it, and a line of snowmobiles nose-in against a fence, and the rink.

The rink at Happy Valley is Olympic-sized and it is outdoors and it sits at one thousand seven hundred and fifty-five metres, which makes it the highest one in Canada.

It is free. There is no ticket and there is no gate and nobody checks anything. There are rules on a board and the rules are: everybody on the ice must be wearing skates, no pedestrians, and skate rentals come back by half past eight at the latest.

The rentals are in a hut about the size of a garden shed with a counter across the front of it and skates on shelves behind, and the shelves are by size and the sizes are written on the edge in marker and half of them have been written over.

Six dollars an hour for a child. Twelve for an adult. There is a waiver, and a parent signs for anyone under nineteen, and I signed it on the counter with a pen on a string.

The boy in the hut found Teddy a pair of doubles and a plastic penguin to push. He found Robin hers on the second try. He got me a pair that were a size and a half out, on the basis that the alternative was two sizes out, and he said so rather than pretending otherwise.

He did all three of us in under five minutes without hurrying, and he was, I would guess, seventeen. There was a paperback

face-down on the shelf behind him and a phone charging and a mug, and I got the strong impression that we had interrupted a good evening and that he did not mind.

Here is what it looks like from the bench where you put your skates on.

The ice is under lights on poles and the lights are the yellow-white kind, and the surface had been done that afternoon and had about forty people on it by the time we got out there. Boards all the way round with the paint coming off them. Snow-banks past the boards, chest high, with skate guards and mittens and one boot standing on top of them like things left on a wall.

And above all of it the mountain goes up black, and there are no lights on it at all on a Wednesday, and the sky was completely clear that night and there was more of it than I am used to.

You could hear the ice from the bench. Not the skaters — the ice, which at that temperature makes a sound under people that carries.

There was a game on at the far end.

Nine or ten kids, most of them between about eight and thirteen, two of them adults who had plainly been asked and had said yes. No nets — they were using boots. No referee. No score that I could establish by watching for twenty minutes, and I did watch for twenty minutes.

What they had instead was complete agreement.

I did not see a single argument. I saw a puck go over the boards and I saw a kid go and get it without being told, twice. I saw the biggest of them stop carrying it through the little ones a few minutes in, without anybody saying anything to him,

and start passing it back to the eight-year-old, and I saw the eight-year-old lose it every time and get it back every time.

One of the adults was a woman in a parka and jeans and no gloves who could obviously play, and who spent those twenty minutes not playing — turning away from the puck, giving it up, standing in the wrong place on purpose. The other adult was a man who could not play at all and was having the time of his life.

At one point a small one went down hard and three of them stopped and one of them didn't, and the two nearest picked him up under the arms and the game went on around it.

Somebody's mother shouted from the boards that it was ten more minutes. Nobody acknowledged this and everybody heard it, and about nine minutes later they came off.

Robin can skate, because she is nine and Canadian and has been skating since she was four, and she went off around the outside and did not come back for a while, and I let her go.

Getting Teddy onto the ice took twelve minutes and involved a negotiation about the penguin, which he did not want, and then a second negotiation about the penguin, which he would not now give up.

He went about fourteen metres in forty minutes. He fell over roughly every four metres, from a standing height of about a metre, onto ice, and got up every time, and at no point did it occur to him that this was going badly. Twice he stopped to watch the game at the far end and then went back to it.

He considered it a triumph, which it was.

I hadn't been on skates in nine years.

I was not good. But I could still do it, and there is a thing your feet remember, and after about a lap and a half I stopped thinking about it and just went, and I did four or five laps of

the outside of an Olympic sheet at six thousand feet in the dark with my hands behind my back like an idiot.

Robin came past me on the third one and looked at me and then went round again and came past on the other side to check.

She said, when I came off, that she didn't know I could do that.

I said nobody asked.

The firepits are wood and they are at the end of the rink near the tube park, and they are lit every night, and at seven o'clock somebody brings hot chocolate out on a trolley and it is free and there is a sign that says what time it comes.

We got there at four minutes past seven and there were about thirty people round it and the trolley was going.

Teddy had two. I do not know how he got the second one and I have decided not to look into it.

The firepit itself is a steel ring about two metres across with a grate and proper cordwood in it, not offcuts, and it throws enough heat that the ring of people round it is standing three deep at a distance nobody has to negotiate.

The family next to us were from Sydney, nine days on the mountain, flying home Friday. The father said the thing everybody says, which is that they should have booked longer. Then he said they'd had two days of flat light and one on hold, and that it worked out to five days of skiing out of nine, and he said it the way you read out a number rather than the way you complain.

I said something agreeable. I was doing my own version of that sum before he'd finished saying his.

They turn the rink lights off at half past eight on a timer, and they do not warn you.

They just go, all at once, and what is left is the light off the hut and the firepits and whatever the sky is doing, and there were still maybe twenty people on the ice.

Nobody left.

They kept going in the dark for another eight or nine minutes, slower, and you could hear where everybody was, and the game at the far end turned into something else that had no puck in it that I could see. Then people started coming off in twos and threes and sitting on the benches and taking a long time about their laces.

The boy in the hut waited. He had to be there anyway.

We got the gondola back up at ten to nine with Teddy asleep on my shoulder in his coat and Robin holding all three pairs of skates because she had worked out that this was the arrangement that got us home fastest.

Halfway up she said her feet had gone.

I said that happens, and that tomorrow we were doing Gem Lake, and she said good, and went back to the window.

THURSDAY

UNIT 12

CARNIVAL NIGHT

They pull lift staff for the Thursday. There isn't anyone else to pull.

It's the Village Centre Mall, cleared down one end, and it runs from five until nine. Family Carnival Night. There's a poster in the staff room and there's a list on the poster and you find out you're on it by reading it.

You get told on the Tuesday. It's four hours on top of a nine-hour day, it's paid, and there's no version where you say no that doesn't cost you something later, so everybody says yes and everybody complains about having said yes.

I got the ring toss.

The ring toss is a board with nine bottles on it and a bucket of rope rings. The rings are bigger than the bottle necks by about a centimetre and a half. That's the design. That's all of it.

Parents play. That is the thing nobody tells you about a ring toss.

A kid gets five rings. They throw three. Then a parent says *here, like this* and takes the other two, and misses with both, and then buys another ticket, and the child by this point has gone to look at the balloon animals.

I had one father go through six dollars in about three minutes with his daughter standing eight feet away eating a doughnut and facing the other way.

Kids get five rings for a ticket. Tickets are two dollars or six for ten, and the prizes are on a table behind me and they go:

pencils, a rubber ball, a plastic dinosaur, a headlamp, and a stuffed marmot about the size of a loaf of bread.

Nobody gets the marmot. You need five out of five.

In four hours I gave out one marmot. It went to a girl of about six. She threw all five underarm without looking, and she wasn't trying, and she got five.

Her father took a photo of her holding it. That photo outlives both of them.

By half past six there's four hundred people in the Village Centre Mall and the noise is coming back off the ceiling.

The Chaos-Weaver's on the bar at the end.

He's not on the games. He's got the taps.

There's a line four deep. All parents. All of them on a mountain with their children since eight in the morning. He goes down that line in an order that isn't the order they're standing in, and I watched him do it for about ten minutes and I couldn't work out the rule.

A woman asks him for a glass of white. What she gets is a glass of white and a jug of water with ice in it and four glasses. She takes the four glasses back to a table with three kids at it. She didn't ask for those either.

A bloke asks him for something on tap and says surprise me. That's a mistake and everyone at the bar knows it's a mistake except him. What he gets is a stout from a brewery in Vernon that I'd guess moves four pints a week up here, and he drinks it, and he comes back for another one at eight and asks for it by name.

Eight thirty I get twenty minutes and I go and sit on the step outside the doors with a plate of chips, and it's minus fifteen

and I can see my breath and I've got no coat on and it's the best I've felt all day.

Bec messages while I'm out there. It's the afternoon of the next day where she is.

She asks how it's going. I say good.

She says she's been looking at flights. I say good.

Then she sends one that just says *Jonty*, on its own, and nothing after it for about a minute.

Then she says the March ones have gone up a lot.

I say yeah.

She's typing for a bit after that. Then she stops typing. Then she sends a photo of the dog.

I started something back. Got a line and a half in. Put the phone in my jacket.

It was still in there unsent on the Saturday morning and I read it once before I deleted it, and it wasn't about flights.

That's it. That's what was said, both ways, and I sat on that step and read it over and over looking for something in it that wasn't there.

The season finishes the second week of April. My visa's got until October and my money's got until about the end of May.

There's a first aid ticket you need before you can go anywhere near patrol. Level 3. Eighty hours, and you sit it in a room in Kelowna or Vernon and it costs two thousand one hundred dollars.

I've got about two thousand three.

The flight's two thousand and change.

Everybody up here is having some version of this conversation with somebody. The two Brisbane lads are going to Japan. Bree, who's from Wānaka and has been on the corral since November, is staying and doing summer, which is bike park

and weddings. The girl from Córdoba, who's the best of us on a ramp and has no English past what the ramp needs, is going home and has known it since she got here and is the only person on this mountain who seems all right about the end of anything.

I've been out here nine weeks and a bit. I came for a reason. I've stopped being able to say what it was, and I've noticed that I don't try any more when somebody asks.

Everyone asks. It's the first thing anybody says to you up here, after your name and where you're from. What brought you over. There's a version I give and it's about the snow and it's true enough to say out loud.

Nine o'clock they call time on the games and the prize table's got nothing on it but pencils.

I hand out pencils to fourteen kids who did not want pencils and every one of them says thank you, which is a thing about Canadians I haven't got used to.

We're stacking bottles into crates at twenty past when the Chaos-Weaver comes down the mall with two beers and gives me one and doesn't stop walking.

UNIT 13

BLUE RIBBON

The bartender at Snowshoe Sam's had told me on the Monday that the run to take off the top of Gem Lake is Blue Ribbon, and that it's a groomer all the way down.

We drove round on the Thursday morning and it was open.

The road out to the Gem Lake base goes round the back of the mountain and it takes twenty minutes and there is nothing on it. No village, no lights, no other buildings, and one gate that was standing open. The sky had come clear overnight and the temperature had dropped to about minus sixteen and the trees on that side had a full week of rime on them, so what you drive through is a corridor of white shapes that were trees in November.

Robin talked from the gate to the lot, without a break.

What came after it was the best two hours of the week, and the order of what came after that is the part people get wrong when I tell them.

Gem Lake drops seven hundred and eleven metres in a single lift and there is nothing else on this mountain that does that.

You come off the top and the trees are the ones with the ice on them and they go on for longer than you expect, and the runs off there are long in a way that changes what skiing is. On the village side a run is ninety seconds. Off Gem Lake a run is six or seven minutes and your legs know about it by the fourth one.

We did five in the morning.

The first one I skied like a man who had read about it. The second was better. By the third I had worked out that you have to commit to it early because there is so much of it left, and that the thing that gets you on a seven-minute run is not the pitch, it's the fourth minute.

Robin was better on the fifth than she'd been on the first. I said so. She said she knew.

At the top of the fourth she asked whether we could come back tomorrow and I said yes.

We had lunch in the little building at the bottom at twelve thirty. She had a hot dog and I had a coffee and we sat outside on a bench with our jackets open because it had come up to about minus four.

There were maybe thirty people at that base and the lot was half full and it stayed half full, because the people who know about Gem Lake go there first thing and the people who don't never get round to it. Somebody's dog was tied to a rail and was being visited by everyone who went past.

There is a notice on a board at the top of Gem Lake. It says to think about what you are skiing at approximately two thirty in the afternoon, and that your last run of the day should not be the most serious run of the day.

It doesn't have the shape of a warning. It is written the way a person tells you a thing they have watched happen more than once, and it is signed by the patrol, and there is a second line underneath about how tired legs do not turn.

At about half past one the cloud came in.

It doesn't come in the way weather comes in at home. There's no front and no wind and nothing arrives. The cloud is already at that elevation and the mountain goes into it, and what happens is that the difference between the snow and the air stops existing.

That's flat light and I'd read about it and I had not understood it. It isn't that you can't see. You can see perfectly. You can see the trees, and the other people, and the signs, and your own skis. What you cannot see is the ground, because there is no shadow on it anywhere and a two-foot rollover and a flat pitch return exactly the same information, which is none.

We did one run in it and it was fine.

It was fine because we did it on the wide part, and because we went slowly, and because Robin skied it the way she'd been taught to ski something she couldn't see, which is with her feet apart and her hands out. She did that without being told. Somebody at the Kids' Centre had told her that at some point in the previous five days and it had gone in.

At the bottom she said her legs were tired.

I said we'd do one more and then go in.

Blue Ribbon is a groomer for about two thirds of it.

Then it isn't. There's a section in the middle where it narrows and steepens and the groomer hasn't been through, and on that Thursday afternoon that section had about a foot and a half of cut-up snow on it in flat light.

I went first.

I got through it badly. I stopped below it, on the flat, and turned round. Robin was at the top, where I had left her, which is what you do — you go first and you stop where they can see you and you wave.

I waved.

She came into it too fast. She was in the back seat by the second turn and I could see it from below and there is nothing you can do about that from below.

About halfway down her right ski stopped and she did not. She went over the front of it and landed on her side with her arm underneath her, and she slid maybe four metres, and one ski stayed on.

She got up. She got up on her own, before I got to her, and she was standing when I reached her with her right arm held against her body with her left hand.

She said she was fine. Then she said she thought she wasn't.

There's a phone number on the back of every lift ticket on this mountain and it is the patrol number.

I did not know that until I was standing on Blue Ribbon at twenty to three, in flat light, reading the back of my own lift ticket for the first time in five days.

There is no signal on parts of that run. There was signal where we were.

A man stopped who I had never seen before and did not see again, and he crossed our skis in the snow uphill of us, which is the thing you do and which I did not know, and he said they'd be here and he stood there until they were.

They were four minutes.

Her poles went one each way and the left one went further, and I did not go and get either of them. Both of them were still there when patrol came. One was in the way and he moved it with his foot without looking down.

A ski came down past us on the left, off somebody above, running on its own. I put a hand up. That does nothing. I knew it did nothing while I was doing it.

Robin said she was cold. She said it twice. She was not cold — it was minus nine and she had been on her feet ninety seconds — and I said I know, and I said it in a voice I have not used on either of my children before or since.

There was a place to sit down beside her. It was flat and it was two feet away.

I stood.

Four minutes is not a long time. I have had longer dental appointments. I have waited longer than that for a kettle.

The All-Seeing came down from above us and stopped square across the fall line about two metres up.

There was a second patroller behind with the toboggan and I did not see him arrive.

The All-Seeing crouched down on the downhill side and asked Robin her name and asked her what happened and asked her which arm, and she told him all three. He asked her if anything else hurt and she said no. He asked her to squeeze his fingers with her left hand and she did.

Then he took his right glove off and put it in his pocket, and he put his hand on the outside of her jacket and went down the arm to the wrist without pressing.

It was minus nine and there was no wind and the light was gone. He was bare-handed on her sleeve for the better part of two minutes.

He said the forearm. He said it in a normal voice and he said it to her and not to me, and then he said they were going to splint it and take her down in the sled, and that the sled is more comfortable than it looks and she'd be all right.

She asked if she could ski down.

The All-Seeing said no.

She asked why not.

I did not say anything useful.

He said because the arm needs to be still, and because it's a long way, and because it's the answer. He said it without any of the softening people use on children, and she stopped asking.

They splinted it on the snow. A vacuum splint, which is a bag that goes hard when you take the air out of it, and a sling, and it took about six minutes.

The second patroller did the pump and the patroller who'd come down first did the arm, and neither of them said anything to the other at any point in it, and both of them talked to Robin

from start to finish. Not to reassure her. To tell her what was about to happen, about four seconds before it happened, every time.

The second patroller went down first with the toboggan. He skied behind it with a rope, and I skied behind him, badly, in flat light, on legs that had stopped working properly.

The toboggan goes slowly and it takes a long time and you follow it down a run you cannot see, and there is nothing to do on that descent except ski behind it.

At the bottom they took her into the patrol room at the Gem Lake base. It's a room with a bed and a desk and a whiteboard and a poster about frostbite, and it is warmer than any other room on that mountain.

I sat on a plastic chair and gave a woman my details and Robin's date of birth and the name of our doctor in Kelowna. She asked whether Robin had eaten and when, and wrote down twelve thirty, and told me that mattered and why.

Robin sat on the bed and looked at the ceiling.

I asked him, while she was on the bed, whether it had been the light.

He said the forearm would take about six weeks and that she should keep the fingers moving.

That is not an answer to the question and he is not a man who mishears. I asked it again on the way out, differently, and got the fracture clinic and the referral and a sentence about swelling.

He knew what I was asking both times. There was no version of that conversation in which he was going to tell me whether that run should have been open at twenty to three, and I worked that out somewhere in the second answer, and stopped.

She said, at some point in there, that she'd been going too fast.

I said it wasn't that.

They said Kelowna. Not urgently — they said it in the tone of a thing that has to happen tonight rather than a thing that has to happen now — and the woman wrote a name and a department on a slip of paper and said to go to emergency and hand it over.

I collected Teddy from the Kids' Centre at twenty past three with a splinted nine-year-old holding my hand and I did not explain any of it well.

We went down Highway 33 at half past four with the light going.

It is the same road. That is the thing about it. It is the same eleven kilometres of Big White Road and then the same fifty down through the trees, in the same car, and on the Saturday I had driven up it with two children and a full trunk and no idea what any of it was going to be, and on the Thursday I drove down it with a splint in the back seat and a four-year-old asleep beside it, on a full tank, and I knew where the service station in Rutland was and what it cost to stand at it.

Robin was fine. She was better than fine. Somewhere around the bottom of the hill she started giving Teddy a version of the accident with the interesting parts moved around, and Teddy asked whether she had seen the helicopter, and there had not been a helicopter, and she said yes.

Kelowna General took four hours. They X-rayed it, and they told us what it was, which was both bones of the forearm with an angle in it, and they said it needed a general and a reduction and that the list was in the morning.

They admitted her at half past nine.

I called Marnie from the corridor at twenty to ten.

I had rehearsed it in the car from about Rutland onward and I had three versions of it by the bottom of the hill and I used none of them. What I said was that Robin had broken her arm at Big White, that we were at Kelowna General, that they were doing it in the morning under a general, and that she was fine.

She asked which arm. Everybody asks which arm.

Then she asked whether I wanted her to come. I said there wasn't anything to come for, which was true, and which was not an answer to the question she had asked.

Four minutes. Then I took the phone in to Robin and she had it for eleven.

I stood in a corridor at ten at night and did the thing where you tell your child you'll be back before she's awake, which was not true, and which she knew, and which she let go for the second time in six days.

Then I drove back up with Teddy asleep in the back and got in at twenty to one.

The tub at Whitefoot was going. The tub is always going. There were two people in it at half past midnight, in the steam, and I stood in the corridor with my keys and looked at them for a while and went to bed.

UNIT 14

THE SWEEP

Gem Lake shuts at three. That's earlier than the village lifts.

It shuts earlier because of what's under it. Seven hundred metres of vertical, and the bottom of it is a long way from anywhere, and if you're still up there at four you're not walking out.

Last chair's three. After that it's the count.

Here's the count, and it is the only part of this job that has ever frightened me.

Everything that goes up has to come down.

The scan tells you what went up. It doesn't tell you what came down. There's no scan at the bottom of a run. Nobody taps out.

So the bottom of the mountain is the one place up here where the number can't be read off a screen. It has to be arrived at. By people, looking.

So at three you close the gates. You count what's on the hill in front of you. Ops has the scan figure. Patrol runs the sweep from the top down and every run gets a set of tracks on it and somebody's eyes.

And at the end of it the number either reconciles or it doesn't.

I've been on Gem Lake since Tuesday and Thursday was the first time I'd worked a close over there.

Radio traffic from about quarter past two.

At twenty to three there's a call about Blue Ribbon. There's a location and a code and an age and then the word paediatric, and then nothing for four minutes, and then two patrollers off the top with a toboggan and the call closed.

I hear all of it standing on a load ramp with eleven people in front of me wanting to go up.

I loaded them. That's the job and I did the job and every one of those eleven got up the hill.

Then I stood on that ramp for the next fifty minutes and listened to four people do the other one.

They came down at ten past three and went into the patrol room at the base and I saw the sled go past from about forty metres and I couldn't tell you anything about who was in it.

There was a bloke skiing behind it who was skiing very badly and who I took at the time for somebody who'd got in the way.

Sweep starts at quarter past.

The All-Seeing takes the top. There's four of them and they take a side each and they go down through everything, and what they're doing is not looking for a person.

That's the bit I had wrong.

They're looking for the absence of a reason to keep looking. Every run gets crossed. Every rope gets checked. Every tree line gets looked into from the uphill side, because from below you see nothing and from above you see everything.

The thing that ends a sweep is that nothing turns up. Anywhere. That's the finding.

It goes like this, and I only know because I sat in the base with the radio on and listened to all of it, start to finish.

The All-Seeing takes the top and calls it when he's on. Then the four of them peel off, one to each side of the mountain, and they call in by name as they clear things. Not runs. Sections. A run is not a unit of anything for a sweep, because a person doesn't stop in the middle of a run, a person stops at the edge of one.

So it's the edges. It's the tree lines, the cat tracks, the flat bits where somebody who's tired sits down, the traverse out at the bottom of the bowl where the sign is, the two places on that

mountain where a green run runs out of pitch and a beginner ends up walking.

Every one of those gets a name and gets called.

Forty minutes in, one of them calls a set of tracks going into trees off the lower traverse and everything stops. Everything.

The radio goes quiet. He asks two questions and gets two answers. Then he says single set, out the other side, and the sweep starts again.

That took the best part of two minutes and it aged me about a year and I wasn't even on the hill.

It's a clean sweep.

A clean sweep is four people spending fifty minutes finding nothing. There's no form for that. Nothing gets written.

There's no report of a sweep where nobody was found. What would it say?

Ten past four the last of them comes off. He calls it in and the number reconciles.

His right glove is off. It's been off since somewhere on the way down, and he does the buckle on his own boot bare-handed at the bottom of the ramp in the dark, and puts the glove on after.

That's it. That's the day.

The hill's empty. It's empty because four people went and looked at every part of it and found nobody. By four thirty there's nothing left to say about it and nothing anywhere that says it happened.

Corey asked me on the shuttle whether anything happened today.

I said a kid broke an arm on Blue Ribbon.

THURSDAY

He said oh well and got his phone out, and he was right to. One arm. It went on the board in the morning as a one, in a column, with all the others.

FRIDAY

UNIT 15

KELOWNA GENERAL

I phoned the Kids' Centre at half past seven on the Friday morning from the parkade.

The Companion answered it, which I had not expected at that hour, and which meant she had opened the room.

I said I needed a full day and I needed it to run late, and I did not know how late. She told me what it cost — full day with lunch, plus the helmet, plus late care charged per fifteen minutes or part thereof from three thirty-one — in the tone of somebody reading a screen, which is what it was.

I told her about Robin because it was relevant to the day. She said she was sorry and then asked which arm, and I said the right, and she wrote it down.

I said I'd probably be back by seven.

She said that was fine, and then she said that they close at six, and that after six a child waits in the Kids' Centre with a member of staff and the rate is the same, and that somebody would be there for as long as it took.

I dropped Teddy at twenty to nine.

The room was at its worst hour and he went through it without stopping and without looking back, straight past the cubbies, to a boy he had apparently acquired at some point in the week and about whom I knew nothing at all. I stood in the doorway for a second like an idiot with a helmet in my hand.

The woman at the counter took the helmet. She said they'd be here whatever time it was.

I said I'd probably be back by seven, again, having already said it twice.

Highway 33 in the daylight is a different road.

I had been down it twice in the dark and up it twice, and on the Friday morning I went down it at nine in full sun with nobody in the car, and I could see the drop on the right-hand side where the trees go away, and I could see how far it goes.

You come out of the snow at about the twenty-kilometre mark and it happens over a couple of kilometres. The banks drop. The trees change back into trees. The road goes white to grey to black, and by the time you hit the highway it is a different season and you are still in the same car with the same rack on the roof.

Three cars went up as I came down, all with boxes on top, all of them starting a week I was finishing.

Fifty-eight minutes. The resort says fifty-five. On the Saturday I had thought that was a lie.

Kelowna General is a large hospital and paediatrics is on the third floor and Robin had been on the list since seven and went down at ten past eleven.

They give you a pager. It's the round one with the lights round the edge, the same one they give you in a restaurant, and I sat and held it for two hours and understood for the first time in my life why people hate them.

The waiting area on that floor has nine chairs, a fish tank, a television playing something with the sound off, and a shelf of books that have been read by a great number of frightened children. There was a woman opposite whose son had been in since Wednesday. She told me that inside a minute and then nothing else for three hours, and at about noon somebody came

and got her and she left everything on the chair and did not come back for it.

I texted Marnie at twenty past twelve, three words, and she answered in about nine seconds, which meant the phone had been in her hand since seven.

The surgeon came out afterwards and drew it for me on the back of a form.

Both bones of the forearm, both broken, with an angle in them. They had put her under and straightened them by hand — the word he used was reduced, and he used it three times, and I have used it since to people who did not ask — and then put a cast on from the hand to above the elbow, because at nine years old you cast the elbow too, or the forearm turns inside the cast.

He said it was a good result. He said she would not remember any of it.

She came round at about half past one and was extremely rude to a nurse for a solid five minutes.

She said the pillow was wrong. She said she wanted to go home. She said nobody had told her anything, which was not true and which she believed completely, and she said all of it in a voice I have not heard out of her since she was four.

The nurse said this was normal and appeared to enjoy it, and told me that the ones who come round polite are the ones you watch.

Then she slept for forty minutes and woke up entirely herself and asked what colour the cast was. It's blue. She was fine about that.

By three she was sitting up eating a popsicle and had found the limit of the bed controls in both directions and settled on a height.

They let her go at four.

The paperwork takes about an hour and none of it is difficult. Blue cast, hand to above the elbow. Sling. A sheet about what to watch for, which is swelling and colour and pain that gets worse rather than better. A referral to a fracture clinic in six weeks. A printed page of things she is not allowed to do, which she read in the corridor and disputed twice.

She'd been on that ward one night and had made a friend, a boy of about seven in the next bay with something wrong with his leg, and the two of them had a system involving the bed controls that I was not given the details of. She said goodbye to him the way you say goodbye to somebody you are going to see at breakfast.

In the lift she asked whether she could still go on the ice at the end of the season at home.

A cast to above the elbow in February is off by the middle of April.

I said yes. It was the one thing I told her all day that I knew.

Highway 33 in the dark, going up, for the third time in six days.

She talked for the first twenty minutes and then went quiet, and then somewhere around the bottom of the Big White Road she said, without any lead-up, that she'd thought she was going to be sick in the toboggan and hadn't wanted to say.

I asked why not.

She said because the man was skiing.

We got to the village at twenty-five to nine.

The Kids' Centre at that hour is locked. There is a bell and a sign over it that says AFTER HOURS — PLEASE RING, laminated, gone yellow at one corner.

I rang it and stood in a corridor with one light on at the far end and the ski lockers behind me, all of them shut, and Robin beside me in a sling with her jacket over one shoulder.

It took about forty seconds.

The room behind her was empty.

That is what I was not ready for. It is a room I had only ever seen with sixty children and ninety adults in it, and at twenty to nine it is a long low space with the chairs up on the tables, the cubbies empty, the masking tape peeled off, and one small boy sitting at the end of the bench with his boots off and a book he could not read open on his knees.

Teddy said hello. He did not get up.

He looked at Robin's cast for a while and then asked whether she'd had to have a needle, and she said several, which was a lie, and he took it very seriously.

The invoice was done.

Full day with lunch. Helmet. Late care from three thirty-one to eight forty, which is five hours and nine minutes, which is twenty-one blocks of fifteen minutes or part thereof.

She talked me through it with a pen on the paper. Not defensively, and not quickly, and without any of the softening people put round a number when they think you are going to mind it.

It came to more than the day pass had. I paid it on tap and the machine thought about it and agreed, and she gave me the receipt and a copy of the invoice, and there was no discount on any line of it and there was never going to be.

Then she got the card out of the box.

It's the day card — the one with the group and the lunch arrangement and the notes box at the bottom. The notes box said *mornings are new to him*, which she had written on the Sunday, in pen, with me watching.

Underneath it, in the same pen, dated, there was a second line.

It says *Friday — in on his own*.

She said the cards get shredded on the Sunday, and that they always do, and that if I wanted it I could have it.

I said yes.

She folded it once and gave it to me, and it went in the inside pocket of my jacket, and it was in the inside pocket of my jacket when I put the jacket on at ten past nine the following morning.

I asked her, because I could not think of anything else to say, whether she was all right getting home.

She said she was. She said the last gondola was at nine and she had eight minutes.

Then she said, and it is the only thing she said all week that was not about the running of that room, that he would be fine next year, and that they run the same weeks every February, and that by the second morning next time he would not need anybody at all, and that whoever brought him up would find it easier than I had.

She said it the way you state a fact.

Teddy got the dinosaur off the shelf himself. It had been there since the Sunday morning, facing out, and he did not ask anybody and nobody stopped him, and he put it in the front pocket of his snowsuit with the head sticking out.

Robin watched all of it from the doorway with her arm in a sling and did not say a word about any of it.

We walked back up the corridor at ten to nine and I carried him from about halfway.

He asked where we were going tomorrow. I said home.

He said, in the tone of a man closing a file, that Robin had been very silly.

Robin said nothing at all, and then about four steps later said that she had, a bit.

UNIT 16

BINGO

Friday night is bingo in the Village Centre Mall. Has been for longer than anyone can tell you.

Doors at half past six. First game at seven. Last game before ten, because of the licence.

The Allfather calls it.

He's got a microphone on a stand and a cage with the balls in it. He winds the cage by hand.

He calls the number twice. Then he calls it a third time the other way round, digits reversed. Apparently that's how it's done. Apparently it's been how it's done since before the mall was built.

Between the numbers he talks.

That's the thing about it. There's nine seconds between one number and the next while people are marking.

Nine seconds, ninety numbers. That's a lot of a Friday night. The Allfather fills every second of it.

The Allfather told the room, on Friday, in no particular order:

That the mountain opened in 1963 with a day lodge and one T-bar. That the T-bar held a record when it went in, and he gave the record, and he gave the year twice.

That the resort got bought out of receivership in the eighties by a family from Adelaide. That's why there's so many Australians up here. About half that room didn't know it. About half of that half were Australian.

That the water comes off a lake under the Cliff.

That the snowfall average is seven hundred and fifty centimetres and that this year was running above it but not by as much as people were saying.

That patrol take applications for next season and they close at the end of the month. That you need the ticket before the season starts and not after. That there's a course in Kelowna in May and one in Vernon in June and nothing after that until it's too late.

Nobody had asked him. He said it between fifty-two and eleven, in the same voice he'd used for the snowfall.

I was on the door with a cash box in front of me and I did not move for about four numbers.

That Serwa's is named for Cliff Serwa, who cut the hill with Doug Mervyn. That Serwa's granddaughter won two Olympic medals in ski cross. He gave the years.

Nobody asked him any of it.

There's about a hundred and forty people in there.

At the back there's a group of women in their seventies who come up every February. They've got their own daubers. In a case.

Bree won the third game and made a noise you could hear at Gem Lake. The women at the back did not look round.

Full house at half past nine and there's a dispute for the Allfather to settle.

Two cards, both called, and one of them is a woman at the back with the daubers and the other is a boy of about ten near the front, and the boy called about a second later and everyone heard both.

He checks them.

He reads out both cards, all fifteen numbers each, twice. He says both are valid. He says the house rule is that a simultaneous call splits the prize and he says where the house rule is written, which is on the back of the ticket, which nobody in that room has ever turned over.

Then he explains what a split means for a hamper, which is not obvious, and he keeps explaining it for a while after everybody has understood.

The woman at the back says the boy can have it.

He says that's not the house rule either. Then he explains what happens if a winner declines. There's a procedure. It has steps.

By the time he's finished, the boy's mother has come up and the two of them have sorted it out between themselves in about nine seconds. He's still talking while they do it. He's still talking after they've shaken hands.

Nobody minds. A hundred and forty people sat there and let a man finish.

Ten o'clock we stack chairs.

I'm on the last row with Vinnie and the microphone's still on because nobody's turned it off, and the caller is at the front telling a man with a hamper how the wax kit works, and the man has not got the wax kit.

Bree cleans a unit in Trapper's Crossing on her second job and the people in it flew out Friday morning and the next lot don't come up till Saturday afternoon.

So at eleven thirty there's six of us in a hot tub on a balcony in Trapper's Crossing that belongs to nobody, in the dark, at minus fourteen, with the steam going straight up because there's no wind, and Bree has a key and a cleaning schedule and a defensible position.

It's the first time I've been in one since I got here. Ten weeks.

The two Brisbane lads talked about Japan. Bree talked about the bike park. The girl from Córdoba didn't say anything and had her head back looking up, and there's a lot up there on a clear night at this elevation, and after a while everybody else stopped talking too.

I was back in my own bed at ten past midnight and up at ten to five.

I'm not going in one again this season. There isn't another empty week.

UNIT 17

LAST CALL

There was nothing in the unit to eat on the Friday night except two bananas and a heel of bread. I had bought six days of food for three people on the Saturday and it was the sixth day.

Teddy had eaten at the Kids' Centre at half past five. I had eaten a sandwich at Kelowna General at eleven in the morning.

I looked in the fridge for a while, which is a thing people do, as though a fridge is a place where circumstances change.

So at ten past nine on Friday I put a four-year-old back into a snowsuit he had been out of for about a quarter of an hour, and got a nine-year-old back into a coat over a sling, and walked the pair of them up the village to Snowshoe Sam's.

The snowsuit took two minutes. Boots, legs, arms, zip, hood, mittens on a string.

Robin did not want to come. Robin wanted to lie on the pull-out and not be moved again by anybody for any reason, and she had a case, and she lost it, because you cannot leave a child eleven hours out of a general anaesthetic in a room on her own while you go to a pub, whatever the pub is for.

The village at that hour on the last night of a week is not the village at half past four. There's nobody on the main street. The runs are dark. The snow that has been walked on all day has set hard and squeaks, and you can hear a groomer working somewhere above the Bullet, and the ice on the trees at the edge of the light is doing the thing it does.

Teddy went to sleep on my shoulder somewhere around the Kids' Centre door and stayed asleep through everything that followed.

Children are welcome at Sam's until seven. After seven you get asked for two pieces of identification.

I knew that. I had read the sign on the Monday and I had made a joke about it to Robin.

I walked up there anyway, at ten past nine, with a four-year-old asleep on my shoulder and a nine-year-old walking beside me with her arm in a sling saying nothing at all, because I had done the arithmetic on the two bananas and it had come out short.

You could hear the room from the bottom of the steps.

On the Monday I had been in there at half past four with two children and a boot bag and it had been loud in the way a room is loud when everybody has just come inside. On the Friday at ten past nine it was loud in a different way, and it is the difference between a room full of people who are about to go and have dinner and a room full of people who have decided not to.

The applause was still going when I got to the door and there was a smell of burnt orange all the way out onto the deck, and about sixty people were sitting back down and putting their phones away, and there was a copper barrel on the bar with a cloth over it.

I had missed it by under a minute.

I had not gone up there for that. But I had known it happened at some point in the evening, and I had walked a bit faster than I needed to.

There is a kid on the door on a Friday and the kid was doing his job.

He looked at Teddy. Then he looked at Robin, and at the sling, and at the cast, and something crossed his face that was plainly arithmetic. Then he looked at me. Then he looked at Teddy

again, on the off chance, and I watched a nineteen-year-old work out that the child was not going to become older.

He said, apologetically, that he couldn't let a child in after seven.

He was right. He was completely right and he was about nineteen and he was not enjoying it, and there is nothing in the world more uncomfortable than a young man correctly enforcing a rule against somebody's dad.

I said that was fine and I asked whether there was any way to get food to take out, and he said he'd ask, and he went and asked.

Through the doorway I could see the Chaos-Weaver working the bar, which on a Friday at that hour is nine deep and four wide and moving.

He goes to whoever's about to need him. I had watched him do that on the Monday from a table and I had not been able to see the pattern. From the door on the Friday, standing outside it, I still could not see the pattern.

The Chaos-Weaver came to the door.

He did not come out from behind the bar. He came to the end of it where it meets the doorway, which is about four metres, and off the taps he was a different proposition. Slower. Ordinary, nearly.

He looked at the man on the step with the child on his shoulder and he said what does he eat.

I said chicken. I said anything, really, but chicken.

He said ten minutes.

It was six.

What came out was a paper bag with a box in it, and in the box was chicken and fries and a lid of gravy on the side, and

there were two more boxes behind it, and in those were two burgers, which I had not ordered, and which were for Robin and for me, and which I had not said anything about at any point.

He charged me for both. It was on the bill and I paid it at the door on a machine the kid brought out.

The kid said sorry again. I said he'd done exactly the right thing, and he looked relieved in a way that made me think somebody had shouted at him earlier in the week.

Here is the thing I noticed on the way back down.

On the Sunday morning the man who put my boots on was the boot fitter. The man on the ramp at the Plaza was the lift operator. The woman at the Kids' Centre was the woman at the Kids' Centre. The man on the tour was the guide, and the one behind the bar was the bartender, and that is genuinely how I thought about all of them for the first three days.

By Friday night I knew that the kid on the door at Sam's is called Ryan, that the girl who does the ticket window on the mall side is called Pip and is from Wānaka, that there is a Corey who everyone talks about and who I never met, and that the man who had been on the Gem Lake rope on Tuesday morning does the lifts and is not somebody you ask twice.

So by the Friday I had a village full of names.

Ryan on the door. Pip on the ticket window. A Corey everybody discusses and nobody produces. The woman in the accommodation office is Deb and has been here nineteen years. There's a Vinnie, and there's a bloke from Perth whose name I never got but whose opinions I heard three times from three different people.

And I never learned one of theirs. Not one, in six days.

We ate it on the floor of the unit at twenty to ten with the box between us. Teddy woke up enough to eat about half of it and went back to sleep on the pull-out with gravy on his chin.

Robin ate a burger one-handed off her own knee and did not drop it.

I sat with my back against the couch and the phone on my knee and a text from Marnie that said tell me when she's asleep, sent at nine forty, and I had not answered it yet.

The nine pages of booking confirmation were still on the counter where I had left them on the Saturday night. The parking permit was still face up on the dash of a car in the parkade three floors down. The card was in my jacket pocket on the back of a chair.

I got the calculator out again for about a minute and then put the phone down.

The tub was going out on the deck. Two people in it. Same as Thursday, possibly the same two.

I didn't go out. I had a four-year-old asleep six feet away, a nine-year-old asleep in the other room with her arm on a pillow, and a burger I hadn't asked for, and I sat there and ate it, and it was ten o'clock on the last night, and I had one day left, a car to pack, and both of them here to get down the hill.

SATURDAY

UNIT 18

CHECKOUT

Quiet hours at Whitefoot end at seven and on the last morning they ended at ten past five.

It was the people above us and it was not a party. It was four adults getting up in the dark to be on the first chair on their first full day, in ski boots, on a floor that is somebody's ceiling, and they did it as quietly as it can be done, which is not quietly.

I lay there and listened to a family beginning a week directly above a family ending one, and I could have given you their plan for the day off the ceiling alone. One of them was going back for something twice. One had strong views about what time they should have left. At about twenty to six somebody dropped a boot, once, and then there was the particular silence of four adults deciding not to say anything.

They were out the door at ten to six for a lift that opens at quarter to nine.

Robin got up at half past six, because a cast is not a thing you sleep through on the first night.

There is a lot a nine-year-old cannot do one-handed and we found most of it before eight. You cannot do a zip. You cannot do a ponytail, and she has strong feelings about her hair, and I am not good at hair with two hands. You cannot carry a bowl. You cannot get a sock onto the other foot without sitting down and thinking about it first, and she would not sit down and would not be helped and got there in the end by a method I could not follow.

At one point she stood in the middle of the kitchen holding a cereal box against her chest with the cast, using her chin, and said that this was ridiculous, and it was.

Teddy offered to help five times and was declined five times and took it well.

Checkout is ten. You leave the keys in the lockbox and you scramble the code.

Packing took two trips, which is four fewer than it took to unpack, and the difference is twenty-two bottles of water and about six days of not being organised.

I did the drawers last. Whitefoot has three in the kitchen and one in each bedside table, and I went through all five the way you do at the end, and in the second kitchen drawer, under the takeout menus, there was a folded page.

It's page six. The parking permit and the second adult lift ticket, both in Marnie's name.

The permit had been used. It had been on the dash all week and it had got us a notice on the Wednesday and it had cost me a morning.

The lift ticket had not. It had sat in that drawer under a menu for the Loose Moose for six days, unscanned, still valid until midnight, worth about a hundred and thirty dollars.

I put it in my inside pocket with the card from the Kids' Centre and I took both of them home, and I could not tell you now where either of them is.

I had told Robin on the Thursday, in the patrol room at Gem Lake, that I would take the skis back for her.

I did not take the skis back. Both pairs had been in the ski locker since Thursday afternoon, hers brought down off the hill by somebody I never met and left at the Gem Lake base

with her name on a strip of tape, and at ten past nine on the Saturday I went down to hand them in and she came with me, in a sling, because she wanted to and because there was no argument available to me.

The rental shop on a Saturday morning is the same shop with the flow reversed. About thirty people in it, all handing something in, no queue, because handing in takes twelve seconds and getting fitted takes twelve minutes. The wall was filling from the bottom.

I put two pairs of skis and two pairs of boots on the counter.

The woman taking them scanned the tape on the tips, and then looked at the cast, and asked what happened.

Robin said Blue Ribbon.

The woman said Blue Ribbon will do that, and asked which day, and Robin said Thursday, and the woman said that was the flat light and that everybody came in off Gem Lake on Thursday afternoon looking like they'd been in a fight.

Then she said, doing the second pair of boots, whether apart from that she'd had a good week.

Robin said yes.

The woman asked what the best bit was.

I was standing two feet away with a boot bag in each hand and I knew the answer. I had it ready. It was the Thursday morning at Gem Lake, five runs before lunch, seven hundred metres of vertical and a nine-year-old getting better between the first one and the fifth, and I had already told two people about it that week including a surgeon.

Robin said Tuesday.

The woman said what happened Tuesday.

Robin said the lift was shut all morning so everybody had to go in the mall, and there was nowhere to sit so everyone sat on the floor, and there were two dogs, and she'd made up a game with rules and got about nine kids playing it, and it didn't need anything, you just needed the floor. She said one of the little ones cried and then didn't. She said they were there from about eleven until her dad came and got them.

She said it was the best day.

The woman said that sounded better than skiing.

Robin said it was.

The woman put the boots in the bin behind her and said thanks and that was the transaction.

Six days, four hundred and something dollars, one broken arm, and it closed in about twelve seconds.

Robin's boots went up on the wall while I was standing there. Somebody put them in a rack at about shoulder height and they'll have gone out on somebody else's feet by nine.

I scrambled the lockbox code and stood in the corridor for a second with the door shut behind me and Teddy holding my hand, and there wasn't anything to feel about it, and I'd been in that unit six days.

The corridor smelled like The Market. The tub was steaming out on the deck with nobody in it.

Big White Road at half past ten on a Saturday goes both ways and one of them is winning.

Everybody coming up has boxes on the roof and everybody going down has the same boxes and a different quality of driving. We passed a car with a Christmas tree strapped to the roof rack in February.

The trees came back the other way. The ice went off them around the two-thirds mark, over about a kilometre, and what had been shapes on the way up turned back into pines and stayed pines.

Teddy asked at about kilometre four whether we were coming back.

I said we'd see. Then I heard myself say it and said yes, probably, next year.

He said good, and asked whether Robin would still have the cast on, and I said no, and he took that as a straightforward improvement.

We came down the Coquihalla and the light went at about half past four and Teddy asked twice how long and Robin slept from Merritt.

At the bottom of the hill the temperature came up and the snow had been gone for two hours and the road was black and wet, and there was a service station at the junction and I stopped and filled the tank, which took four minutes and cost nothing I had to think about, and which is what buying fuel is when you are not on a mountain.

UNIT 19

THE LIFT STARTS

Twenty past six on the Saturday and the deck lights are on and nothing turns.

Rime came on again overnight. It comes on most nights this month. The haul rope's got a coat, the running wheels have got a coat, and every tower up the line is white on the windward side and black on the other.

The Conscience-Keeper's on the drive terminal with a bar. Right glove off. Same nine minutes he did it in last Saturday, same order, and I've stopped noticing, which I'd not have believed in December.

I've been here ten weeks now.

Bec hasn't said anything else about March and neither have I. That's four days.

Changeover day. Everybody who's been up since last Saturday goes down this morning. Everybody coming up gets in this afternoon. By four o'clock it's a different mountain with the same weather on it and the same lift under the same ice.

Patrol go up at twenty to eight, four of them, first chairs off the empty start, before it's open to anybody.

I've watched that every morning for ten weeks and I stopped pretending I watch it by accident somewhere around Christmas.

I went into the ops room at ten to seven for the kettle.

They'd put the new sheets up. Same wall it's been all season — season figures on the left, month on the right, a bar chart under each because somebody in marketing likes a bar chart.

Ridge Rocket, 1,048,581 last season. That number's been on that wall since November.

February's up there now next to it. Scans by lift. Scans by day. Busiest day of the month, which was the Sunday, and the Sunday's number is bigger than I'd have guessed and I stood there working out where I'd been on it.

I looked for the other one.

Not the riders. How many chairs got loaded, and by who. There's four of us on a ramp on a Sunday and we swap round, and I've had a number in my head since about week two that I worked out off the season total and the day count and the share.

I've never said it out loud. I like it.

It isn't there.

I went through all of it, top to bottom. Scans by lift, scans by day, scans by pass type, first-timers, season passes, the weekly comparison, the thing with the arrows on it.

There is no column with a person in it.

The scan is a rider going through a gate. That's what it counts and that's all it counts, and it has never at any point been counting me. The bloke who opens the gate isn't in the number and can't be, because there's nothing at the gate that knows he's there.

I asked Dermot at the shuttle stop whether anyone tracks it.

Dermot said tracks what.

I said loads. Chairs out. Per person.

He thought about it for four seconds, which for Dermot is a long conversation, and said no. Then he said Ops track downtime, and they track stops, and that if you stop a lift twice in a week somebody comes and has a word.

So there's a number with me in it. It's the one where I've got something wrong.

The posting's been on the staff room board since Monday and I'd read it four times without doing one thing about it, and then a man calling bingo told a room of a hundred and forty people the dates.

Patrol, next season, applications close the twenty-eighth. You need OFA Level 3 before the season starts. Eighty hours. There's a course in Kelowna in May and one in Vernon in June and after that there's nothing until it's too late.

The course is two thousand one hundred.

The flight's about the same. Not exactly. Close enough that there isn't a version of this where I do both, and I've done that sum on the walk to work nine times and it comes out the same every time, and the sum was never the problem.

Here's what I know.

The morning at Gem Lake on the Tuesday isn't on that wall. Neither's the hold. Neither's four hours in a car park telling four hundred people the same nine words. Neither's the sweep on the Thursday when four of them went and looked at every part of a mountain and found nobody, which took fifty minutes and produced no report, because what would it say.

None of that's a number.

All of it happened.

I did it in the ops room at ten past seven with the kettle going, on my phone, standing up.

Booked the course. May, Kelowna, two thousand one hundred, non-refundable after the fourteenth of April.

I put the form in the tray on the way out.

I haven't booked the flight and I haven't told Bec, and I'm going to have to do one of those today and I know which.

Five to seven the Conscience-Keeper walks the ramp with a shovel and cuts the platform back down to the mat. Two centimetres. He does it every morning and he'll do it tomorrow,

and there's no line on that wall for it either, and I'd bet he's never looked.

At seven he takes the sled down the line and checks the towers. Back at twenty past. Doesn't report anything, which means they were fine.

Half past he starts it empty. The rope comes up to speed, the chairs come round the bullwheel and out over the first pylon, and the noise changes twice. Once when it takes the load, once when it settles. The second one's the one you listen for.

He leaves it running.

Twenty to eight, signs go out. Then it's an hour of nothing, which on a changeover Saturday is the only hour of nothing there is.

Gates at quarter to nine.

There's a family standing at them when they come open.

Kid of about nine, jacket with the tag still on the sleeve. Father's got both sets of poles and a look I've seen about four hundred times, which is the one where a man has been awake since five and has already lost something.

The kid goes straight past him to the front.

Bar down, please.

They go up and the chair swings out over the first pylon and away, and there's another one behind it, and another one behind that.

The lift turns.