

THE HUNGRY GODS
GO TO VEGAS

N. Van Seters & Claude

Two brothers. One ticket. Three days.

DAY ONE

Saturday, 7 December 2024

CHAPTER 1

LATE ARRIVAL

The snow had come down on Friday night. Not much of it — a dusting, an inch at the most, the kind that goes grey along the road by mid-morning and hangs on in the shade of a hedge for two days after that. It was enough to make a driveway white and not nearly enough to require anything to be done about it.

Nathan left his unshovelled.

He did it at half past five on Saturday morning, in the dark, walking out to the car with his bag across an unbroken white surface that a broom would have cleared in six minutes, past the shovel standing upright beside the step where he had propped it the night before with every intention. The porch light was on behind him. He did not look back at the house and he did not look at the shovel.

The amount of snow was not going to come into it. There had been snow, and there had been a shovel, and there had been a man in the house who was now going to be in Nevada.

He drove across the city and picked up Neil at ten past six, and Neil came down his own front walk across his own unbroken white surface, and neither of them said anything about either driveway.

. . .

The lounge was on the departures level, past security, behind a door that did not announce itself, and Neil had the passes on his phone.

“Two,” he said to the woman at the desk, and held up the screen, and the woman scanned it and said welcome and that was that, and they were inside, and it was seven-fifteen in the morning.

There is a particular quality to a lounge at seven-fifteen in the morning. The lighting is optimistic. There are newspapers on a rack that nobody has touched. There is a wall of glass looking out at an

aircraft being de-iced by a man in a cherry picker with a hose, and there is a sideboard.

The brothers assessed the sideboard.

It ran about fourteen feet along the wall. It had chafing dishes at one end with scrambled eggs and sausages and a tray of hash browns, and after that a bank of pastries under a plastic dome, and after that yogurt in small glass jars, and after that cheese, actual cheese, in wedges, at seven-fifteen in the morning, and after that a bowl of whole apples that nobody in the history of the airport had ever eaten.

“How do you get these?” Nathan said.

“The card.”

“You buy them?”

“You don’t buy them. You get an allocation.” Neil put his jacket over the back of a chair. “Six a year.”

Nathan stopped.

“Six.”

“Six.”

“And you’ve used two.”

“I’ve used two.”

“Of six.”

“There’s another four,” Neil said.

Nathan considered the sideboard again with a slightly different expression.

Sixty-five dollars a pass would have been one thing; sixty-five dollars a pass could be recovered, in principle, by a sufficiently determined man working steadily through the pastry dome. But there was no price on these at all. These could not be bought back. A third of the annual supply had been spent to get two men through a door at seven-fifteen on a Saturday, and the only mechanism available for realizing the value of that decision was standing along the wall in chafing dishes.

They had come off the same card as the seats on the plane, and the two nights at the far end, and the airport transfers — all of it out of eleven years of Tuesday nights in hotels in cities Neil had not chosen, converted into a number on a screen and then converted back into this: two brothers, a wall of glass, an aircraft being de-iced, and a bowl of apples nobody was going to eat.

Nathan had not paid for anything yet and was not going to be permitted to pay for the large items at any point in the following three days. He had worked this out in October, on the phone, at the moment the word *points* had entered the conversation and had then been moved past very quickly.

He had made his own arrangements accordingly.

They ate a lot of it. They ate more than either of them would have eaten at home and considerably more than either of them wanted, and they did it with the quiet method of men executing a plan. Neil went back for the cheese twice. Nathan took a yogurt he did not want, and then a second pastry, and then, on the way past, an apple, which he carried to the table and set down in front of him and looked at and did not eat, because nobody eats the apple, but the apple was included.

At the bar, which was self-serve, a small placard said COMPLIMENTARY BEVERAGES with the hours printed underneath.

"It's seven-twenty," Nathan said.

"It's included."

"I know it's included."

"It's a holiday," Neil said, and poured two beers.

They were not good beers. They were the beers that a lounge has because a lounge has to have beers, in a can with a label designed in 2011, and they were free, and the brothers drank them at seven-twenty in the morning looking out at a de-icing rig, and both of them were entirely content.

Neil had arranged the passes. Neil had arranged everything. This was a comparatively recent development in the history of the family and Nathan had not fully finished adjusting to it. For thirty-odd years the arrangements had run the other way, on the straightforward principle that Nathan was older and therefore in charge — a principle that had survived university, two weddings and a shared cabin rental, and which had begun to come apart somewhere around the point that Neil acquired a personal assistant and the sort of job where people put things on his calendar without asking him first.

Neil booked the trips now. He was extremely good at it. He also could not stop.

“Boarding’s at eight-ten,” he said, checking his phone. “We’ve got fifty minutes.”

Nathan considered the sideboard.

“That’s plenty,” he said.

. . .

The flight came in at half past three.

Nathan had watched the mountains go past the window, and then pale ground for a long time, and then, all at once, the golf courses — nine or ten of them in a row, arranged around the ends of the runways in a green so uniform and so total that from four thousand feet it looked less like grass than like a decision.

Harry Reid International has no curb.

It has a parking structure, and inside the parking structure it has a level given over to rideshare, and on that level it has zones, and inside the zones it has numbered bays, and an application on a telephone will tell a passenger which of the numbered bays to stand in and how long the car will be. The system is efficient. It is also the first instruction the city issues, and it is issued before anyone has got outside.

Neil stood in bay 22 with his phone held out in front of him at the angle a man uses when he is not going to admit he needs reading glasses.

“Eleven minutes,” he said.

“You said four.”

“It was four. Now it’s eleven. There’s a thing on the Fifteen.”

There were slot machines at the gate they had come off. There had been slot machines at the gate, and slot machines by the baggage carousels, and slot machines in a bank of eight beside the doors out to the structure, chiming quietly to nobody at four o’clock on a Saturday afternoon. Neither brother had looked at them. Neither brother had thought about them. They had walked past forty-one slot machines in eleven minutes with their bags, discussing whether there would be time to eat, and the machines had made their small encouraging noises into the middle distance the way a fountain does in a shopping mall.

The car came in nine minutes. The driver said nothing beyond confirming the name, which was Neil’s.

They went north on Paradise with the sun getting low behind the Strip, so that the Strip was a row of dark shapes with light coming around the edges of it and none of it doing anything yet. A pyramid. A tower. Something enormous and round that was not lit and that Nathan could not identify and did not ask about. He looked at it sideways as they passed the ends of the cross streets, one gap at a time, the way you see things from a moving car, and then the driver turned right and it was gone and they were among low buildings and parking lots and a place that rented medical equipment.

The car window was down two inches. The air coming in was warm. Not warm for December. Warm.

Nathan put his hand out into it and took it back in again and said nothing, and thought about the shovel standing in the snow beside his step, seventeen hundred kilometres north-west, waiting.

. . .

The Westin Las Vegas Hotel & Spa stands at 160 East Flamingo Road, a block and a half east of Las Vegas Boulevard, and it opened on the first of July, 1977, as the Maxim. It became a Westin in 2003. It has eight hundred and twenty-six rooms.

It does not have a casino. There was one. It is closed.

The lobby was busy, and the hour had nothing to do with it. A first officer in a white shirt with four bars was going out through the doors pulling a bag; two flight attendants were coming in through the same doors pulling identical bags; a man in the epaulettes of an airline Nathan did not recognize was asleep in an armchair by the luggage cart with his hat over his face and his ankles crossed, and nobody was looking at him, because everybody in the room had at some point been that man.

It is a crew hotel. People arrive at hours that make no sense and do not explain themselves to anyone, and the building does not ask.

At the desk, the Allfather was checking in a party of four.

He took his time about it. He was a large man with white in his beard and the shoulders of somebody who had once done something else for a living, and he wore the property's grey waistcoat as though it had been made for him, which it had not. He enunciated. He was

the only person in the room who was not in a hurry, and the effect of this was that the party of four stopped being in a hurry too, and stood there in a loose semicircle letting him tell them about their room as though he were reading them something.

Then it was their turn.

“Checking in,” Neil said. “Should be under —”

“It is,” the Allfather said. He had the reservation up before Neil finished. “Two queens, two nights, departing Monday. Eighth floor.”

“That’s us.”

“The rate you booked does not include the resort fee.” He said this without apology and without emphasis, as a man reads out a tide table. “The resort fee is thirty-five dollars per night, plus tax, and is charged to the room.”

“Sure.”

“It covers wireless internet for two devices. Access to the fitness centre, the sauna and the steam room. Two bottles of water daily. One dessert per stay at the restaurant.” He turned the folder around on the desk and touched a line on the card inside it with one finger. “And ten dollars of slot play and ten dollars of table play.”

There was a pause.

“Slot play,” Neil said.

“Ten dollars of slot play and ten dollars of table play.”

“Here?”

“At the OYO.”

“Where’s the OYO?”

“On Tropicana,” said the Allfather. “There’s a shuttle.”

Nathan, who had been reading the framed notice about the pool hours, turned his head.

“How far is Tropicana?”

“Two and a half miles.”

“So we pay thirty-five dollars a night,” Nathan said slowly, wanting to have this right, “and in exchange we get twenty dollars to gamble with at a hotel two and a half miles away that we are not staying at.”

“Per stay,” the Allfather said. “Not per night.”

“Per stay.”

“Per stay.”

Nathan did the arithmetic. He did not do it out loud, and there was nothing in his face to say he was doing it, except that for about a second and a half he said nothing at all, and then said something entirely different.

“Is the pool open? In December?”

“The pool is open year round. It’s heated. It’s on four.” The Allfather put two key cards into the folder and wrote the room number on the outside of it, in pen, which Nathan had not seen anyone do in some years. “The deck opens at seven and closes at eleven. There is no lifeguard. No glass on the deck.”

“Heated,” Nathan said.

“Heated,” said the Allfather.

He handed the folder to Neil, because Neil had the reservation, and he told them where the elevators were, and he wished them a pleasant stay, and by then the next party was already at the desk and he had begun again.

. . .

The room was on eight and faced west.

Which meant, first, that it faced the Strip, over the roofs of lower things — a mechanical plant, a parking deck, the flat top of a shopping arcade with the ductwork laid out on it like the back of a watch. And second, that it looked straight down four floors onto the pool deck, which was tiled in a pale blue that had been chosen in a decade nobody now living would defend, and which had loungers arranged around three sides of it in a row, each with a folded white towel on it, and nobody on any of them.

Nathan stood at the window with his hands in his pockets and looked down at it for a while.

Behind him, Neil put his bag on the far bed without opening it and took a folded sheet of paper out of the inside pocket of his jacket.

“Okay,” he said. “So.”

“Is that printed?”

“It’s printed.”

“You printed it.”

"There are a lot of confirmation numbers," Neil said, with dignity. "Breakfast is nine, at Giada. It's in the Cromwell, we can walk it. Then the track's booked for ten."

"Ten in the morning."

"Ten in the morning. It's twenty minutes south, we'll be back by one. Cowboy Christmas is one-thirty, and it shuts at four."

"Shuts at four."

"In the afternoon."

"In Las Vegas."

"In the afternoon, in Las Vegas," Neil said, with satisfaction, as though he had arranged this himself. "Then dinner's five-thirty at Caesars, doors at the theatre are seven, show's at eight."

Nathan took the sheet and read it.

It had been laid out in a table. There was a column for times and a column for what he could only think of as events, and a third column, narrower, for confirmation numbers, and the confirmation numbers were all there, all of them, in a small tidy font, including one for breakfast. Nathan read down it. Breakfast at nine and a car at nine-forty and the track at ten and the drive back at one and the hall at one-thirty and out of the hall at four and a table at five-thirty and doors at seven, on a Sunday in December, in a city that had a hundred and seventy thousand extra people in it that week and one road through the middle.

He stopped at the line that said 13:30 COWBOY CHRISTMAS and the line under it that said 16:00 HALL CLOSES.

"Two and a half hours," he said.

"For what?"

"For the shirt."

"It's a shirt."

"It's the shirt," Nathan said, and stopped there, because the shirt had grown in importance over four weeks of telephone calls to a point neither of them had committed to out loud and neither of them was going to start committing to now.

Neil took the sheet back and folded it along its existing creases.

"Two and a half hours is loads," he said.

Nathan looked out of the window.

He had stood in his own driveway that morning in the dark with an inch of snow on it and a shovel four feet away, and had chosen, freely, as an adult, to leave it. Now it was quarter past five in the evening on the seventh of December and it was eighteen degrees outside and there was a heated pool four floors below him with nobody in it and a folded white towel on every lounge.

He was going to that pool.

He was not going to mention it in advance, because if he mentioned it in advance it would go on the sheet, and it would acquire a duration, and a confirmation number, and Neil would establish what time the deck opened and build something around it.

“What about tonight?” he said.

“Tonight’s open,” Neil said.

This was not true. It was going to become steadily less true over the following eight hours, at the end of which the two of them would have walked seventeen thousand five hundred and twenty-one steps, and then, after midnight, another two thousand six hundred and forty-five.

Then his phone went.

He checked the screen and held up one finger — the finger, the one that means fifteen seconds and never means fifteen seconds — and walked to the window with it at his ear.

“Hey. Yeah. No, I’m — yeah, I’m here. I’ve got two minutes.”

Nathan sat down on the near bed and read the sheet again from the top.

Behind him, at the window, standing over four floors of empty loungers, his brother said, “Can you hear me? Can everyone hear me? I think I’m on mute,” and then, “No, I can hear *you*,” and then, “Sure. Sure. No, put it on the agenda for Wednesday.”

Neither of them had eaten since the lounge.

CHAPTER 2

TEKKA BAR

You cannot cross Las Vegas Boulevard.

This is not a figure of speech and it is not a matter of difficulty. At the major intersections along the Strip it is not permitted to cross at street level, and it is not merely discouraged; the corners are fenced, and the fencing is the ornamental kind that has been designed to look like a decision about landscaping rather than a decision about pedestrians. To get from one side to the other a person must go up. There is an escalator, or a staircase, or in some cases an escalator going one way and a staircase going the other, and there is a bridge, and there is a further staircase down, and by the time a person has done all this he is on the far side of the road and has walked a hundred and ten metres to travel forty.

The brothers went up their first bridge at twenty to six with the light going and the traffic beginning to stack southbound, and stood on it a while because everyone does.

From up there the boulevard ran off in both directions with the tail-lights on it in a solid red line as far as they could see, and the sidewalks moving underneath in both directions, and every building along it lit from the ground up like something being presented.

"That's the Bellagio," Neil said, pointing.

"I know."

"The fountains go every fifteen minutes."

"Do they."

"We're not doing them tonight," Neil said, "they're on the sheet for tomorrow," which turned out not to be true, and they went down the far staircase.

. . .

The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas stands at 3708 Las Vegas Boulevard South, and to reach the food from the street a person walks through the casino.

There is no arrangement by which this can be avoided. It is not an accident of the floor plan. The doors let out into gaming, and gaming lies between the doors and the escalators, and a person who wants a sandwich goes through it.

The brothers went through it at ten to six on a Saturday and it was already loud. There were machines in banks with seats in front of them and people in the seats, and there were tables under low lamps with dealers standing very straight behind them, and there was carpet with a pattern on it that had been engineered over a period of months by professionals to be looked at without being seen. The air was cold. There was music underneath everything at a volume calculated to be one notch below the point at which a person notices music.

Neither of them slowed down.

Neither of them stopped, or looked at a table, or read a sign, or considered for even a moment putting money into any of it. They walked through the thing that pays for the building the way you walk through a hotel corridor, without any opinion of it whatsoever, and Neil said “escalator’s up here” and they went up.

. . .

Block 16 Urban Food Hall is on the second level of the Boulevard Tower and it is named after Block 16, which was the part of early Las Vegas where liquor could be sold and where a number of other things were tolerated, on First Street between Ogden and Stewart, in the decades before the town became respectable and then became something else.

The food hall holds half a dozen counters. Nobody eating in it knows what it is named after.

Tekka Bar is the one at the end. The sign is red and silver, hand-lettered to suggest spray paint and was in fact very carefully made, and under the name it says HANDROLL & SAKE, and beside it a neon in the shape of a bit of fish says TO GO.

Tekka Bar takes its name from *tekkaba*, which was a gambling den. The story runs that the rolls were the food you could eat at the tables — a thing you could hold in one hand, that did not need a plate, and that did not leave anything on your fingers to put on the cards. Whether that is the true origin is argued about by people who care, and it is printed on nothing at Tekka Bar, and there is no sign anywhere in that food hall explaining it, and the brothers did not know it, and neither did anyone else in the room.

So they sat down at a counter named after a gambling den, inside a casino, twenty metres above a floor they had crossed without looking at it, and ordered fish.

. . .

There were two stools free at the far end. They took them.

The counter was pale wood and worn along the front edge in the way that wood gets worn by forearms. Above it, on a rail, small bottles of sake stood in a row with their caps on, blue and red and gold, thirty or forty of them, arranged as decoration and also for sale. A column beside the counter had a mural on it — a fish, done in bright drips and blocks, yellow and pink and green, that owed nothing whatever to Japan and was very good.

Behind the counter three people worked in black shirts and black caps with TEKKA on them.

At the order point stood the Conscience-Keeper.

He was neither young nor old and he had the flat expression of a man who has said the same sentence several thousand times without ever once deciding to say it faster. He took the order. He confirmed the order. Then he said:

“Consuming raw or undercooked meats, poultry, seafood, shellfish or eggs may increase your risk of foodborne illness, especially if you have certain medical conditions.”

Neither brother heard it.

Nathan was looking at the sake rail and Neil was looking at his phone, and the sentence went past both of them and out into the food hall the way an announcement goes past you in an airport, and eleven seconds later a small card went down in front of each of them and the

Conscience-Keeper had already begun saying it again to the two people behind them.

The plaque was on the wall four feet away. It said the same thing in a slightly different order, brass on black, screwed on properly, at eye height.

He said it to everyone. He said it to the couple behind, and to the man on his own after them, and to a party of five at ten past six who talked through the middle of it, and he did not raise his voice at any point and he did not shorten it and he did not once look to see whether it had landed. It was not his to make land. It was his to say.

. . .

The rolls came one at a time.

This is the point of the place and it is also, from about the fourth minute onward, the structure of the evening, and neither brother understood it going in.

A hand roll is nori wrapped around warm rice and something cold, made to order, put down in front of you on a square of brown paper with a black brushstroke in the corner. It is crisp when it reaches you. It stays crisp for approximately thirty seconds, and after ninety seconds it is not the same object, and after four minutes it is a soft parcel that a person eats out of politeness. Every hand roll bar in the world is built around this fact. It is why they come singly, and why the counter is short, and why the person who makes it puts it directly into your hand rather than onto a plate that a runner carries.

Which means that the counter sets the pace.

Not the customer. The counter. You do not order six things and receive them and manage your own evening. You order, and a roll arrives, and you eat it now, and then you decide, and then the next one arrives when it arrives, and the transaction proceeds throughout at a speed determined by a sheet of dried seaweed.

Neil put his phone face down on the counter at six-oh-four.

"Blue crab," he said, of the first one.

"Mm."

"That's — Nathan. That's very good."

It was very good. The rice was warm and loosely packed, and the nori snapped, and the crab had something in it that was doing work, and it was gone in three bites and left nothing on his fingers.

They ordered the same thing as each other all evening, without discussing it, which is a thing brothers do.

The second was toro. The third was salmon with a scallion oil, and it took eleven minutes to arrive, because there were now nine people at the counter and one man building them.

Somewhere in there the sake arrived in two small glass tumblers sitting inside two small wooden boxes, and it was poured to overflowing into the box on purpose, and the brothers regarded this, and then each other, and then drank it.

By six-thirty they had had three.

Neil began, at about that point, to look at his watch.

"We're at seven at the pizza place," he said.

"I know."

"So we should probably —" and then the salmon came down in front of him, and he ate it, and said "that's the good one," and ordered another.

. . .

There was nothing he could do about the pace, and it took him a while to accept it.

He tried. He asked, at about twenty to seven, whether he could have two at once — the yellowtail and another blue crab, together, to save a turn.

The man making them — young, quick, entirely pleasant — said sure, and made two, and handed the first one across, and Neil took it and held it while he waited for the second, and by the time the second was in his other hand the first had had forty seconds and had gone slightly soft along one edge.

Neil considered it. He said nothing. He ate both of them, and that was four and five, and he did not try it again.

The counter was going to take as long as the counter took. This was not a queue and it was not a delay. Nothing was going wrong. Every part of the operation was running at the speed the food required,

which happened to be a speed that no amount of forward planning, confirmation numbers or printed schedules could compress, and the man who had built a Sunday out of twenty-minute margins sat on a stool in front of it and waited his turn like a person.

At quarter to seven his phone went.

He was off the stool before he had finished reading the screen, and ten feet away toward the middle of the food hall with the phone at his ear, and Nathan watched him go, and then watched the man behind the counter put down the scallop — the sixth and last, ordered ninety seconds before the phone went — on a square of brown paper in front of Neil's empty stool.

Nathan watched it.

"Neil."

Neil turned, made a small face, raised a hand, and turned back.

The roll sat there.

At thirty seconds it was perfect. At a minute it was still good. At two minutes the nori had gone matte and had begun to take up moisture from the rice, and had lost the small structural tension that had been holding it in a cone, and the top edge had leaned over about four degrees. At three minutes it was a different food. Nathan watched all of it with his own drink in his hand, from beginning to end, and did not touch it, because it was not his.

Neil came back at six-fifty-one.

He sat down, and picked it up, and ate it in two bites, and said nothing at all about it, and Nathan said nothing either, and the two of them read the menu board for a while.

That was six each, over an hour, which neither of them would have believed at the start and which had not felt like six at any point.

They left at four minutes past seven, which put them four minutes behind, and Neil said nothing about that either, and went down the escalator working it out in his head.

. . .

The bill was a hundred and forty-seven dollars and thirty-nine cents.

Nathan held it on the counter under one finger for a second and a half, and did the arithmetic, and got a number, and put his card down on top of it without saying the number out loud.

He would have paid it again. That was the difficulty with all of it, and he had begun to notice the pattern — that the thing was almost always worth the money, right up until you converted it, and that the conversion was not a piece of information you could unhave. He had eaten six small pieces of fish over the course of an hour, at a counter, sitting on a stool, and had enjoyed himself more than he had expected to enjoy himself at any point that day.

He picked up his card and put it away.

Behind him, at the order point, the Conscience-Keeper was telling a woman in a Christmas sweater that consuming raw or undercooked meats, poultry, seafood, shellfish or eggs might increase her risk of foodborne illness, especially if she had certain medical conditions.

She said, “Just the one to start.”

He rang it in.

EATALY

Neil had scheduled dinner twice.

He had not thought of it that way. On the sheet it appeared as two lines — 18:00 TEKKA BAR and 19:00 EATALY — and each line had a name beside it and a reason, and the reasons were sound, and the two of them had been arrived at independently over the course of four weeks and had never once been considered next to each other. One was a hand roll bar that a colleague had described in some detail, twice, at a meeting, until other people had started looking at their phones. The other was a place Neil had read about in an article about Roman pizza which he had sent to Nathan in October and about which Nathan had said *looks good* and thought no more.

Both were on the list. The list had times against it, and these were the times that worked.

So the brothers came down the escalator at Park MGM at four minutes past seven, having eaten six pieces of fish each and drunk sake out of a wooden box, in order to have dinner.

“Are you hungry?” Nathan said.

“Not enormously,” said Neil, and went in.

. . .

Eataly occupies forty thousand square feet at the Strip end of Park MGM, and a person coming in off the boulevard walks straight into it.

It is a market. It is also two restaurants, and a dozen or so counters, and three bars, and a considerable quantity of shelving on which things are for sale that are not going to be eaten this evening — dried pasta in blue and yellow boxes, tins of tomatoes stacked into a pyramid the height of a man, olive oil in green bottles ranked under a wooden sign, coffee, chocolate, honey, a wall of vinegar with a spotlight on it.

There is a butcher, with a case of red meat and a rack of things hanging behind him. There is a fishmonger, with ice. There is a cheese counter with a man behind it in a white coat and a queue of nine people in front of it at ten past seven on a Saturday night, all of whom are going to be given a small piece of something to taste before they decide, which is why there are nine of them.

The lighting is warm and comes from low pendants on long cords. The floors are stone. There is a smell of bread that is not being pumped in from anywhere, because there is a bakery on the far side and the smell is simply what a bakery does to a room.

Above the shelving there are quotations painted on the wall in Italian, and beneath each of them, in smaller letters, the same thing in English.

Nathan stopped about fifteen feet inside the door and looked around and understood immediately that he did not know how any of it worked.

This is not an accident and it is not a failure. It is the design. Eataly is not a restaurant with sections; it is a market with restaurants in it, and each counter is a separate operation with its own staff and its own queue and its own till and its own receipt. A person does not sit down and order. A person goes to the counter that has the thing, and queues there, and pays there, and carries the thing away, and then, if he also wants wine, goes and queues somewhere else, and pays somewhere else, and comes back to a table that he has in the meantime been holding by putting his jacket on it.

Nobody explains this at the door. There is no sign that says it. There is no way to find it out except by doing it, and at any given moment on a Saturday evening the room contains two hundred people at eleven different stages of finding it out.

You can see it on them. There is a specific posture that a person adopts about ninety seconds after coming through the doors of Eataly, which involves stopping, turning through about forty degrees, and looking up.

“Okay,” said Neil, who had a plan. “Pizza’s over there.”

. . .

La Pizzeria runs along the left-hand side under a yellow board with the name on it in white capitals and a strip of bare bulbs beneath, and behind the counter there is a deck oven with three doors and a rack of trays beside it and a man working a peel.

Roman pizza alla pala is baked flat on a long paddle, comes out as a rectangle about two feet by one, and lies on a wooden board behind glass until somebody asks for a piece of it, at which point it is cut with a pair of scissors, put on a tray, and reheated.

There were seven of them in the case, side by side down the counter, each with a small card in a stand in front of it.

FUNGHI, at the near end, dark all over with roasted mushrooms sliced thin and laid in overlapping and gone almost black at the edges, with the cheese underneath rather than on top so that it came through in patches.

CAPRICCIOSA. Prosciutto cotto, artichokes, mushrooms, olives, and basil put on after.

SALSICCIA E CIPOLLA, with the sausage broken over it in pieces the size of hazelnuts, all the way out to the rim, and something yellow underneath it that Nathan could not identify from four feet away.

Then, along the far half of the case, three with white on them: mozzarella or burrata torn and laid on after the bake, prosciutto over that in loose folds, basil, oil.

Behind the pass, in a white jacket and a black cap, stood the All-Seeing.

. . .

"Two of the sausage," said Neil. "And what's the one with the — that one."

"Which one?"

"The white one."

"There's three white ones," said the All-Seeing.

"The one with the ham."

"There's two with the ham."

Neil pointed.

"That's the Ventina," said the All-Seeing. "That one's burrata, not mozzarella. It's a dollar more."

“Two of those.”

“You want them heated?”

“Do we want them heated?” said Neil, over his shoulder.

“Yes,” said Nathan, who had no idea.

“He wants them heated.”

The All-Seeing took the scissors and cut, and the scissors went through the base with a sound like a paper guillotine, and he laid the pieces on a tray with a sheet under them and put the tray in under the salamander for as long as he judged and not a second either side of it, and turned round and set it on the counter.

“Eighty-two forty,” he said. “That’s this till, here. Wine’s the bar at the back, not this one. Beer’s the same bar but the far end, because this end can’t ring beer.”

“The far end of the same bar.”

“The far end of the same bar.”

“But not this bar.”

“This isn’t a bar,” said the All-Seeing. “This is pizza.”

He said all of it without any impatience whatever, and without simplifying it, and without at any point suggesting that the arrangement was unusual or that he was sorry about it. It was not his arrangement and he was not defending it. He was telling a man where the beer was.

Nathan, waiting, watched him do it eleven more times.

It took a few minutes at the counter to see what he was: he could not be pointed at vaguely. Every person who came up gestured at the case and said *that one*, because that is what people do, and every time he said which one, and every time it turned out there were two or three of the thing they meant. It was not obstruction. He was not making a point. There were, factually, three white ones, and two of those had ham on them, and one of those two had burrata rather than mozzarella, and a customer who said *the white one with the ham* had described two different pizzas at two different prices and the man could not proceed until it was one.

A woman asked what was in the Capricciosa and he told her, all of it, in order, including the thing she had not asked about, which was that the prosciutto cotto went on after the bake and the mushrooms went on before.

A man asked whether the Funghi was vegetarian. He said the pizza contained no meat and the mushrooms were roasted in the same oven that the meat pizzas went through, and that if what the man was asking was whether it was suitable for a vegetarian, the answer was yes, and if what he was asking was something stricter than that, the answer was different. The man said the first one. The All-Seeing cut him a piece.

Nobody thanked him for any of this. Two people were visibly irritated by it. Every single one of them left the counter holding the thing they had actually wanted.

. . .

They found a table by the front, along the marble, near the glass, and put jackets on the chairs the way everyone else had.

The tray came down between them and there were four pieces on it and they were still too hot to pick up, and both of them tried anyway.

The sausage one went first, because it was nearest. The base had a raised rim, thin in the middle and puffed at the edge and blistered black in three or four places along it, and the sausage had gone slightly crisp where it stood proud, and underneath there was a smear of something the colour of egg yolk that turned out to be a squash of some kind, and it was very good and they said so.

Then the other one.

Nathan had eaten burrata before. He had eaten it at home, in restaurants, where it came whole and cold in the middle of a plate with tomatoes round it and a lot of oil and some leaves, and he had thought of it as a thing that was fine.

This was not that.

It had been torn rather than cut, so the edges were rough and the inside had come open across the base of its own accord, and it had gone on after the bake, which meant it was cold in the middle and warm along the underside where it sat against the crust, and the difference between those two temperatures was somehow the point of it. The prosciutto over the top had relaxed in the heat and gone soft and slightly translucent. There was oil, and salt somewhere in it, and basil that had wilted rather than crisped, and underneath it a crust with a

large open crumb that held together right to the last centimetre and then gave.

Nathan ate his piece and put the paper down and sat back.

“Right,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Neil.

“No, but —”

“I know.”

“Because I’ve had —”

“I know,” said Neil, and got up.

He came back six minutes later with two more pieces of it on a fresh tray and set it down between them and sat, and neither of them mentioned that they had eaten dinner at six o’clock, or that they had walked past a cheese counter with a queue of nine people at it to get here, or that there was a full sit-down restaurant forty feet away with tablecloths on the tables and nobody waiting.

They ate those as well.

. . .

Through the far side of the building, past the shelving and the tins and the wall of vinegar, there was a corridor, and at the end of the corridor a set of doors, and above the doors a sign that said DOLBY LIVE.

Neil pointed at it with a piece of crust.

“That’s us tomorrow.”

“That’s here?”

“Same building. We come in the same doors.”

Nathan looked down the corridor. There was a stanchion line set up outside the theatre with the ropes clipped across it, and the doors behind it were dark, and there was a stack of black flight cases on a trolley against the wall that somebody would move in the morning. A cleaner crossed the bottom of the corridor pushing something and did not look up.

“Eight o’clock,” said Neil.

“Doors at seven.”

“Doors at seven.”

Neither of them walked down to look at it. It was a corridor with a closed door at the end of it, in a building where they were currently eating their second dinner, and tomorrow at this time they would be sitting inside it.

Neil checked his watch.

“Right,” he said. “So if we head south now —”

. . .

The bill for the second trip was forty-four fifty.

Nathan read it, and then the first one, and then took the receipt from the hand roll counter out of his jacket pocket, where it had been since ten past seven, and unfolded it and laid all three of them on the marble next to the empty tray and lined them up along their bottom edges.

One hundred and forty-seven dollars and thirty-nine cents.

Eighty-two forty.

Forty-four fifty.

Two hundred and seventy-four dollars and twenty-nine cents.

He did the second sum after the first one, which took him about three seconds, and which was not a difficult calculation and was in fact the same calculation he had performed six times already that day, and which produced, as it always did, a larger number.

Two hundred and seventy-four dollars and twenty-nine cents for dinner and dinner.

He folded the three receipts together and put them in his inside pocket, where they stayed, and where they were joined over the following thirty-six hours by others.

He stood up and put his jacket on.

“Where are we going?”

“South,” said Neil, and went.

SOUTH

They came out of Park MGM at twenty past eight into a boulevard that had got dark and considerably louder while they were inside, and turned left, which is to say south, which felt like downhill, although nothing on the Strip is downhill and it only feels that way because south is where the buildings get bigger.

Neil had a route. Of course he had a route. It was not on the sheet, because the sheet had 19:00 EATALY and then nothing until the following morning, and so the evening south of Park MGM existed in a space the sheet did not govern, and Neil had filled it in his head over four weeks the way other men fill in a crossword.

“So there’s New York, then Excalibur, then Luxor, then Mandalay Bay, and then we’re basically at the end,” he said. “And then we come back up.”

“Come back up how far?”

“To the hotel.”

Nathan did some arithmetic of a kind he was more comfortable with. Park MGM to Mandalay Bay was about a mile. Mandalay Bay back to the Westin was about two.

“So three miles.”

“About three miles,” said Neil, “but it’s flat.”

. . .

The first thing about the Strip at night, for a person who has not walked it, is that it is not a street.

A street has buildings along it and you can see the buildings and between them there are gaps through which you can see other things. The Strip has fronts. Each property presents a face to the boulevard that is scaled to be read at forty miles an hour from the far lanes, and

the faces are pushed forward to the property line and lit from below, so that walking along the sidewalk is less like passing buildings than like walking along the outside of a series of very large boxes, each of which is arranged to be looked at from a point about two hundred feet away and none of which is arranged to be looked at from the sidewalk directly beneath it.

The second thing is the noise, which is layered. There is traffic, six lanes of it, moving at nine miles an hour and revving. There is music from each property, which does not carry more than about sixty feet and so arrives as a sequence of unrelated tracks, each of which is louder than the last one for three or four steps while you cross the boundary between them. There are people. And there is, at intervals of roughly fifteen feet along the busier stretches, a sound that Nathan noticed before he identified it, which was a dry snap.

It took him a block to work out that it was card stock.

The men doing it stood in threes and fours with their backs to the property wall, wearing matching shirts, each holding a thick stack of small glossy cards in one hand and flicking the top card against the heel of the other with a movement of the wrist, over and over, the way a person clicks a pen. Snap. Snap. Snap. When a group of men went past they extended the arm and put a card forward without stopping the rhythm, and said something short, and if the card was not taken they retracted the arm and carried on snapping, and had already moved on to the next people before the first ones had gone by.

Nathan did not take a card. Neither did Neil. The arm came out at both of them perhaps a dozen times between Park MGM and Mandalay Bay and neither brother broke stride or said anything, and after the third or fourth time Nathan stopped registering it as an event and it became weather, along with the traffic and the music and the heat coming up out of the sidewalk from the day.

Further along there were women in feathers and very little else, standing beside a chalked sign about tips, being photographed with a bachelor party; and a man in a Minion costume with the head off, sitting on a low wall, eating; and two more women outside a property whose approach was different and considerably more effective, and who worked the sidewalk with the economy of a long shift; and a

person selling bottled water out of a cooler with the ice still in it at half past eight at night.

The brothers walked past all of it, at pace, with somewhere to be.

. . .

New York-New York came first.

There is a skyline on it. Not a picture of a skyline: a skyline, made of about a dozen towers at roughly a third scale, jammed together in a footprint far too small for them, so that the Chrysler Building stands eleven feet from the Empire State and both of them are shorter than the hotel behind. There is a Statue of Liberty in the forecourt at about half height, and still tall. There is a length of the Brooklyn Bridge running along the front with cables and towers and a walkway on it, over a lagoon.

And around and above all of it runs a roller coaster, painted red and yellow, which came over their heads as they walked underneath with a noise Nathan had no word for, something between a filing cabinet going downstairs and a wave breaking on gravel, and which took a second and a half to pass and was followed, at a slight delay, by the screaming.

“That’s the Chrysler,” said Neil, pointing. “That’s the Empire State. That one at the back’s the Seagram, I think. And that’s — no, hang on.”

He stood there working it out.

Neil had been to New York five or six times, and had once spent eleven days there on a piece of work, walking most of Manhattan in the evenings out of restlessness.

Nathan had never been.

So it was Neil who did the pointing, in front of a compressed and rearranged Manhattan on a sidewalk in the Mojave Desert, and Nathan who listened, and who had no way of checking any of it, and who was aware — mildly, without resentment, in the manner of a man noticing a small fact about his own life — that he had now seen the Chrysler Building.

It is not a good copy. It is not attempting to be a good copy. A good copy would be a different and much smaller achievement. What is on that corner is a proposal, made in steel and stucco at enormous

expense, that a person standing in a desert should be able to look at a third-scale Manhattan with a roller coaster round it and think *yes, all right*.

And it works. It has worked on everybody who has walked past it since 1997. It was working now on a man who had spent eleven days in the actual city and could name the buildings.

"It's very good," Neil said, still looking up. "It's genuinely very good."

. . .

Excalibur was next and was a castle.

It was white with turrets, and the turrets had conical roofs in red and blue and gold, and there was a drawbridge arrangement over the entrance, and it had the specific quality of an object designed to be immediately legible to a child, which it was, because when it opened it was the family property.

"It's very —" said Nathan.

"Yeah."

"It's just a castle."

"It's just a castle," Neil agreed.

They considered it for a bit.

"There's a jousting show," said Neil.

"Is there."

"Dinner and jousting. You eat with your hands, there's no cutlery."

"Are we doing that?"

"We are not doing that," said Neil, in a tone that suggested he had considered it for longer than he was going to admit.

. . .

Luxor is a black glass pyramid, thirty storeys of it, with a sphinx out front and an obelisk beside the sphinx, and it is not a scale model of anything; the pyramid at Giza is roughly twice as tall. But it is a pyramid, and a pyramid at any size does the thing that pyramids do, which is to look permanent.

The rooms are around the outside of the slope, which means the corridors are on an incline, which means the elevators do not go up.

They go up at an angle of thirty-nine degrees, along the inside face, and are not called elevators.

"They're inclinators," said Neil.

"That's not a word."

"That's what they're called."

And out of the apex, straight up, went the beam.

They stood underneath it on the sidewalk and looked up into it, along with about nine other people who were also standing underneath it looking up into it. It comes from an array of lamps set into the top of the pyramid, close to forty of them, and it is generally described as the strongest beam of light in the world, and it goes up into the sky every night and does not illuminate anything, because there is nothing up there to light. On a clear night it is visible from an aircraft at a considerable distance. Pilots use it.

What Nathan noticed, standing under it with his head back, was that the column of light was full of things moving.

Moths. Thousands of them, going up and around inside the beam and turning in it, catching the light on their wings so that the beam appeared to have a texture, a kind of drifting grain. And then something bigger crossed it fast — and then again — and he understood that the second things were eating the first things, and that this had presumably been going on every night for thirty years, and that an actual functioning food chain had assembled itself inside a beam of light that was pointed at nothing on purpose.

"Bats," said Neil, who had seen it too.

"Or owls."

"Bats," said Neil.

Nathan tried, standing there, to work out what it cost to run.

He got about nine seconds into it. Some hundreds of kilowatts, and eleven hours a night in December, and then the sum wanted a figure he did not have and was never going to have, and it stopped.

He tried the pyramid instead. Then New York-New York. Then the lighting on four miles of boulevard.

Nothing came. He had spent the day converting a room rate, a resort fee, three receipts and a drink he could not justify, and every one of

them had produced a number, and the number had told him something. Here the operation simply did not apply.

He put his head down and his neck hurt.

. . .

They went in through the doors because Neil wanted to see the inside, and the inside is a single hollow space all the way up, thirty floors of open air with the room corridors running round the walls as balconies, and you stand at the bottom of it and look up into a dark point.

On the way through to the attractions level there were signs.

Nathan slowed down at the second one and read it properly.

There was a Titanic exhibition in the building. Not a film about it and not a display of photographs: the actual objects, brought up off the sea floor, including a section of the hull weighing fifteen tons. A recreation of the grand staircase, built to the drawings. And, at the door, every visitor was handed a boarding pass printed with the name of a real passenger, and carried it round the exhibition, and did not find out until the final room whether that person had lived.

Nathan stood in front of the sign for a few seconds.

Both wives would have gone. There was no question about it, and there never had been. Both wives, handed the itinerary and a pen, would have crossed off two properties without hesitation and drawn a line straight to this, and would have taken the boarding pass seriously, and would have carried it all the way round with the name turned inward, and would have looked at it in the last room, and one of them would have said something in the car afterward that the other one would have remembered for years.

It was not on the sheet. It was not on the back of the sheet. It had never been within a hundred miles of the sheet, and it was not going to be, and both brothers were going to be on a plane in thirty-nine hours.

"You coming?" said Neil, from twenty feet on.

"Yeah," said Nathan, and went.

. . .

Mandalay Bay was gold glass and palms and a porte-cochère you could have landed something in, and it was the end of the line, and they got there at twenty past nine.

There is an aquarium in it.

Not a tank in a lobby. An aquarium — a proper one, on the far side of the casino floor, holding something in the region of a million and a half gallons of seawater, with a walk-through tunnel and a sunken ship in it and a couple of thousand animals, and among the animals a full complement of sharks, more species than almost anywhere else in the country.

There is no sea within two hundred and fifty miles. There is, in that part of the world, barely any water at all above ground. So the seawater is made. It is manufactured on site, to specification, out of fresh water and salt that arrives on a truck, and it is filtered and heated and circulated and tested, continuously, by people whose job that is, in order that fifteen or sixteen species of shark can go round and round inside a hotel in the driest metropolitan area in the United States.

It was shut. They had missed it by two hours.

They stood at the signage outside the entrance and read it, and the sign had the opening hours on it, and the ticket price, and, in smaller type at the bottom, the times of the daily feeds.

Eleven-fifteen in the morning. Three-thirty in the afternoon.

Nathan read that line twice, and then looked through the darkened glass at nothing, because there was nothing behind it, because it was shut and the lighting was down and the corridor beyond the turnstiles was empty.

“Shame,” said Neil.

“Yeah.”

“We could’ve — no. No, we couldn’t.”

They turned round.

Neil stood on the sidewalk facing north, back up the way they had come, at four miles of it going away from them with the traffic stacked solid in both directions and the light coming off the fronts, and said:

“Okay. So if we head back up —”

And Nathan understood, standing there, that the plan had never at any point contained the concept of stopping. It contained turning. He

had walked a mile south under the assumption that a mile south was a destination, and it was not; it was the turn of a loop, and the loop had a second half, and the second half was two miles long and started now.

“Neil.”

“What?”

“I want to sit down.”

PINKY'S

The walk back north was two miles and they talked all of it.

This surprised both of them, if either had stopped to notice it, because they had been walking since half past eight and eating since six and awake since half past four in the morning, Pacific time, and by any reasonable accounting they should have been quiet. They were not quiet. They went up the east side of the boulevard at a decent pace with the traffic beside them and talked the way men talk when they have been given too much to look at and have not yet worked out what any of it meant.

They did the Sphere first, which was still ahead of them, and which Neil had views about. They did the roller coaster, and whether either of them would go on it, and established that Neil would and Nathan would not, and then established the more interesting question of whether Nathan would have gone on it at twenty-two, and could not agree. They did the moths. They came back to the moths twice. Neil said something about the bats which Nathan disputed on the grounds that Neil had no way of knowing, and Neil conceded the point and then five minutes later referred to them again as bats.

They did the inclinators.

"It's still not a word."

"It's on the sign," said Neil, and that took them four hundred yards.

Then they did the castle, and whether the jousting was any good, and Neil admitted he had looked it up, and Nathan said he knew he had looked it up, and Neil said the reviews were mixed in the particular way that means a thing is either terrible or the best thing in the city.

Then they did the sharks.

That one went differently. They walked most of a block on the seawater — on the fact of it being manufactured, on where the salt

came from, on what a truck of salt costs, on whether the water was ever changed or only ever topped up and filtered, and on how many people it took to keep a million and a half gallons of artificial ocean at temperature in a building in a desert, day and night, forever, so that the sharks could go round.

“Somebody’s job,” said Nathan.

“Somebody’s whole career.”

“There’s a guy who is the shark water guy.”

“There’s a *team*,” said Neil.

They also passed, in the course of that two miles, nine or ten more men with cards, and two more women in feathers, and a person dressed as a large yellow character with the head off, and did not break stride or comment on any of it, and by then Nathan had stopped seeing them at all.

His feet had begun to report in. Not painfully; just a general communication from below that a number of things had happened today, and that the day had started in the dark, in snow, with a bag.

They came level with the Flamingo at a few minutes to ten.

. . .

“So the Sphere’s north,” said Neil, “which is about —”

“No.”

Neil stopped walking.

“No?”

“I want to sit down.”

“There’s a wall right —”

“I do not,” said Nathan, “want to sit on a wall.”

He had been thinking about how to say this for approximately half a mile. He had rehearsed a version that was lighter than this and had discarded it somewhere around the Bellagio, because a lighter version would have been received as a preference, and a preference could be scheduled around, and would be.

“I want to sit down somewhere with chairs,” he said, “and a table, and a person who brings things to the table, and I want to be there for at least half an hour, and I would like it to have air conditioning,

because I have walked five miles today and I am wearing a shirt I got dressed in at half past four this morning in a different country.”

Neil turned round.

“Half an hour.”

“At least half an hour.”

“Because the Sphere —”

“The Sphere is a building,” said Nathan. “It is not going anywhere. It will be there at midnight and it will be there at one, and if it is not there at one then something has happened that we will hear about on the news, and in that event I will regret this.”

There was a pause of about two seconds.

“There’s a place right here,” said Neil.

. . .

Pinky’s stands at the front of the Flamingo, on the boulevard, next door to the Cromwell, and it had been open since Thursday.

Nathan did not know this. Nobody standing on the sidewalk knew it. It did not have the look of a new restaurant, because a lot of money had been spent making sure it did not: it looked like something that had been on that corner since 1926, which was thirty-nine years before the corner had a building on it and twenty years before the Flamingo, and it looked that way on purpose, with a terrace out toward the traffic and a canopy over the terrace and blush pink in the awnings.

The terrace was full. It was eighteen degrees at ten at night in December and every table under the canopy had people at it.

“Inside?” said the woman at the podium.

“Inside,” said Nathan, before Neil could evaluate it.

The doors closed behind them and the air changed, and the noise of six lanes of Las Vegas Boulevard went out like a switch, and it was about nineteen degrees cooler, and Nathan stood there for a second in the entrance letting it happen to him.

The room was greens and brass and more of the pink, arranged to be photographed and being photographed steadily by four separate parties. There were birdcages on some of the tables, actual birdcages, with cheese in them. Nathan watched one go past and did not comment.

They took two stools at the bar, which was the only thing free, and which was the correct outcome for reasons neither of them had anticipated.

. . .

What Nathan noticed, sitting down, was that nothing in the place had a groove yet.

The server came over with two menus and then came back forty seconds later with a third, apologizing, because the first two were the same menu. A woman at the podium worked her tablet with the specific hesitancy of somebody who had been shown the system on Wednesday. Somebody down the bar said “where do we keep the —” and then a word Nathan did not catch, and somebody else said “ask Marco,” and a third voice said “Marco’s off.”

Every single thing that happened, happened correctly. None of it happened smoothly. It was like watching a very good band play together for the third time.

The menu was thick card, cream, with gold fans printed at the corners, laid out in framed panels with a heading over each one.

The heading over the panel on the right-hand page was set in small capitals and read:

SPRITZ, BITCH

DADDY ISSUES · 23.95

a white peach French 75

Vodka, White Peach, St. Germain, Agave, Lemon, Aquafaba,
Rosé Sparkling

THE ROSATO · 25.95

strawberry basil campari spritz

SPRITZ ME BABY · 26.95

a pumped up Aperol Spritz

THE PAPA NICK · 23.95

a sage matcha spritz

SIN & TONIC · 26.95

a blood orange hibiscus gin & tonic

Underneath it, in the same lettering, a second panel was headed MUST HAVES.

Nathan read the page twice. He read the first heading, and then he read the prices, and then he read the first heading again, and then he did the arithmetic, and the arithmetic took him somewhat longer than it had at the front desk, because it was a larger number and because he did it twice.

Neither brother said anything.

Then the server arrived, and Neil put his finger on the card and said, at full volume, at a bar, in a public place, "Can I get a Daddy Issues?"

"Absolutely," said the server.

"And he'll have —"

"The gin one," Nathan said, and pointed at it.

"The Sin and Tonic?"

"That one," said Nathan, and gave her the menu back.

. . .

The Chaos-Weaver was working the spritz end of the bar, and had been for two days.

From a stool you could see the station end to end, which is a thing you cannot do from a table, and the station was wrong. Anyone could see it was wrong. The chilled coupes were on the back shelf instead of under the rail; the peach was in the second well when everything it went with was in the first; the ice bin was eight inches too far left for a right-handed man, and he was right-handed. Somebody had drawn that station on paper, in an office, without ever standing at it, and then it had been built.

The other man behind the bar was suffering. He was a good bartender and he was fighting the layout one drink at a time, resetting himself after each one, and every twenty minutes or so he said something to nobody about the coupes.

The Chaos-Weaver was not fighting it.

He had built himself a way through. He was making the peach ones in threes, out of order, seeding the coupes two builds ahead so they came down off the back shelf while his hands were busy elsewhere, and running the matcha in the gap that left, which meant the matcha

was always finished before the drink it had been ordered with. He never crossed his own arms. He never took a step he had not already committed to.

It was not anything a manager could have written down.

Everything he sent out was correct. He was, on the evidence available, having the best two days anyone in that building was having.

Partway through, the other bartender came down and watched him build three at once and said, "How are you doing that?"

The Chaos-Weaver showed him. He did it slowly, in order, naming the steps.

The other man watched it through twice and said, "Right," and went back to his own end and did it his own way, because nothing in what he had just seen could be lifted out and carried anywhere. It was not a method. It was a set of moves that fit one particular wrong station in one particular week, and it belonged to the man doing them, and when the coupes were eventually moved under the rail — which they would be, within a month, because somebody would notice — none of it would exist any more, and it would not have been written down.

A ticket printer beside him produced a long tongue of paper, stopped, produced four inches more, and made a noise. He tore the strip off, read it, hung it up, and carried on.

. . .

The drinks came.

Nathan's was the colour of a stained-glass window and had a wheel of blood orange in it and more ice than seemed structurally advisable, and it was, he was obliged to concede within four seconds, extremely good. It was properly made. The tonic was the good tonic. The gin was doing something specific rather than sitting there. Somebody had thought about it, and then somebody else, two days into a job, had executed the thought exactly.

This did not help.

He could afford it. That had never been the question, and framing it as the question would have been a way of avoiding the actual difficulty, which was that there was no argument available. He had tried, in the time it took to swallow, to construct one. The drink was excellent —

but he had drunk excellent things for a third of the price and would again. It was Las Vegas — but he had not come to Las Vegas in order to be charged for the privilege of being in it. It was a holiday, and he was with his brother, and it was eighteen degrees in December — all true, all worth something, and none of it worth the difference. The number sat there, and every metric he could bring to it came back with the same answer, and the answer was no.

He drank about a third of it and put it down and sat on a stool in the cold air with his feet off the ground for the first time in five hours.

“Good?” said Neil.

“It’s very good.”

“Mine’s got egg white in it.”

“It’s got aquafaba in it.”

“What’s aquafaba?”

“Chickpea water,” Nathan said.

Neil considered his drink.

“It’s very good,” he said.

They sat. Somewhere behind them a birdcage went past.

This was, Nathan reflected, the first thing that had happened all evening that was not on the sheet and had not been in Neil’s head as a substitute for the sheet. It had happened because he had said, out loud, twice, that he wanted to sit down. He had exercised a veto over the itinerary of the man who had printed the itinerary, and the consequence of the veto was a stool, and air conditioning, and a drink no reasonable person would order twice.

He was going to do that again. He made a note of it.

Then Neil’s phone went.

He checked the screen, and then Nathan, and did the thing with his eyebrows that means *this one is actually important*, which it was not, and got off the stool and walked out through the doors to where the canopy stopped, and stood with his back to the restaurant and his hand over his other ear.

Nathan watched him through the glass.

He could not hear any of it, but he could see the shape of it, which he knew well: the nodding, and the pause, and the small hand movement that meant Neil was making a point to people who could not see him

making it, and then the checking of the phone to see whether it was still connected, and then more nodding.

It went eleven minutes.

By the time Neil came back, Nathan had finished his drink and was holding the ice against the side of the glass with his thumb and looking at the leftover slice of blood orange, and had established from the menu that a second one would be another twenty-six ninety-five, and had established from himself that he was not going to.

“Sorry,” Neil said, sitting down. “Wednesday thing.”

“On a Saturday.”

“They’re in Zurich.”

Nathan let that go.

“Right,” said Neil, and picked up his glass, and drank the last of his Daddy Issues, and set it down, and checked his watch. “So it’s ten past eleven.”

“It is.”

“The Sphere’s about twenty minutes north.”

Nathan looked at him.

“Twenty-two,” Neil said. “I checked.”

NORTH

The Bellagio fountains are directly across the boulevard from the Flamingo and they go every fifteen minutes after eight o'clock.

The brothers came out of Pinky's at twelve minutes past eleven and one was going off as they hit the sidewalk. They could see the top third of it over the traffic — the water going up white against the dark and hanging there and coming down — and they could hear it, which is the part nobody tells you about, a low collapsing rush underneath the music that arrives about a second after the water does.

Nathan slowed.

"It's twelve minutes back," said Neil.

"To what?"

"To where we'd be crossing anyway. It's twelve minutes back and then twelve minutes forward, and they're on again at eleven-thirty, so if we did it we'd be waiting as well."

"They're on now."

"We can see it from here."

They could, more or less, if you did not mind seeing the top third of it through six lanes of stationary traffic and a row of palms. They stood and watched it that way until it finished, which took about ninety seconds, and then Neil said "right" and turned north, and that was the Bellagio fountains.

They were still on the sheet for the following day. They were going to come off it.

. . .

The CVS was two hundred yards up.

There is a particular category of establishment on the Las Vegas Strip and this is it: a pharmacy, an actual functioning pharmacy with a

dispensing counter at the back and a person in a white coat behind the counter, which also sells sunglasses, phone chargers, aspirin, souvenir shot glasses, playing cards with the property names on them, foam neck pillows, a wall of liquor in bottles shaped like guitars, and — along the back wall, in a run of glass doors — cold beer.

There was a queue at the cold doors. It was eleven-twenty at night. The queue was eleven people long and moved quickly and was composed without exception of adults, most of them in their forties, several of them in shorts, all of them holding four-packs.

The brothers joined it.

“How much are these,” said Nathan, at the door, holding one.

“Four seventy-nine.”

Nathan did not answer straight away. He had, two hundred yards south of where he was standing, and rather less than an hour previously, paid twenty-six dollars and ninety-five cents for a drink. He had converted it at the table and got a number and had been unable to construct any argument that survived contact with the number.

He took two four-packs.

At the till the girl scanned them and put them in a bag and then said, without looking up and in the tone of somebody who has said it eleven thousand times:

“You can’t open those for a thousand feet.”

Neil stopped.

“Sorry?”

“You can drink outside,” she said. “On the Strip. That’s fine, it’s legal, it’s just got to be a can or a cup, no glass. But you can’t open it within a thousand feet of where you bought it. Because you bought it closed. So you have to be a thousand feet away from the store before you crack it.”

“A thousand feet.”

“A thousand feet.”

“From this store.”

“From any store you bought it closed from,” she said. “It’s the county. It’s not us.”

“What happens if you do?”

“It’s a misdemeanour.”

She said this the way a person reads out a serial number, and gave him his card back, and the next people moved up.

. . .

They walked a thousand feet.

They did not discuss whether to. There was no moment at which either of them raised the possibility of not doing it, and no moment at which either of them made a joke about doing it, and no glance passed between them.

They came out of the CVS with two four-packs in a plastic bag, unopened, and turned north, and walked. Neil had his phone out and was watching the little blue dot, and at one point he said “three hundred,” and later “six,” and the two of them proceeded up the busiest sidewalk in North America at twenty past eleven at night carrying cold beer they were not permitted to drink yet, past three separate men snapping cards at them, past a woman in feathers, past a costumed character with the head off, in a city where two hundred yards behind them a person could legally purchase a spritz for twenty-six dollars and ninety-five cents and drink it on a terrace.

At about a thousand and fifty feet Neil stopped and said, “That’s it.”

They opened them. They were extremely cold, and they were entirely ordinary, and Nathan drank about a third of his standing on the sidewalk with the bag hanging off his wrist and could not remember when a beer had last been that good.

He did not say so.

. . .

The Venetian is a mile north of the Flamingo on the east side, and Neil had it on the list.

Nathan had been to Venice.

He had been in October 2019, for three days, and it had not rained once. What the city had done instead was hold water — not flooding, nothing dramatic, nothing anyone put in the news; just standing water lying in the low parts of certain streets in the mornings, an inch or two of it, come up on the tide through the drains rather than in over the edge, and gone again by lunchtime. In some places there were boards

down. In most there were not, and people simply went round, or went through, depending on their shoes.

The marathon had been on the Sunday, and the course had run through some of those streets.

Nathan had stood against a wall near the Basilica and watched the back half of the field come past. The good runners were long gone. What was coming through were people who had been going for four and a half hours, at the point where a marathon has stopped being a race, and the course put them through two or three of the wet stretches in the last mile — not deep, ankle-deep at the worst of it, but enough that every single one of them changed their stride to get through it and then had to find the old one again on the far side. Nobody stopped. They came through in ones and threes, splashing, faces set, and then went on toward the finish with their shoes full.

He watched about four hundred of them and had not been able to stop.

He had also got lost twice a day, deliberately the first time and then not deliberately after that, and had walked over a bridge somewhere behind the Rialto at seven in the morning with nobody else on it, and had stood in the middle and looked down the canal at the mist on it, and it remained, five years later, one of the four or five best things that had ever happened to him.

So he came at the front of the Venetian, at twenty to midnight on a Saturday, with a certain amount of equipment.

The Campanile is there, in the forecourt, at something like two-thirds scale, with the loggia and the arches and the spire and the golden figure on the top of it, lit from below and from within, and it is a good Campanile. Behind it, the Doge's Palace arcade runs along the front with the statues on the roofline. And out in front of that, over the water, goes the Rialto — the actual arch of it, the shape of it, with the balustrade and the shops along the top.

Except that the shops along the top are not shops, and the inside of the Rialto Bridge at the Venetian contains an escalator, because it is also the pedestrian crossing over Las Vegas Boulevard, and a person going over it is being carried up an incline inside a replica of a

sixteenth-century bridge in order to get to the other side of a six-lane road.

Neil was delighted. He took eleven photographs.

They went in, because of course they went in, and up onto the second level where the Grand Canal Shoppes are, and there is a canal in there, a real one with real water in it, running down the middle of a shopping arcade under a painted sky.

Nathan stood on the little bridge with his forearms on the rail.

The water was clear. That was the first thing. You could see the bottom of it, and the bottom of it was clean, and nothing floated on the surface, and it did not smell of anything at all. The sky overhead was painted in blue and gold and white and had been fixed at a time of day that was somewhere around five in the afternoon in early summer and would be five in the afternoon in early summer at three o'clock in the morning and in February and forever. The buildings along the sides were plaster and were the correct colours, ochre and rose and umber, and had been distressed by hand along the lower courses to suggest damp that had never occurred and could not occur.

A gondola came under the bridge with four people in it, and the gondolier was standing at the back in the striped shirt and the ribboned hat, working the oar properly, and he was singing, and he was singing well — really well, a trained voice, carrying up into the painted sky — and he finished the phrase exactly as the gondola came out from under the bridge, because he had done this eleven times that evening and knew where the bridge was.

Neil leaned on the rail beside him.

“Is it like it?”

Nathan thought about that for longer than Neil had expected.

“Yes,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“It’s cleaner,” said Nathan. “And there’s no smell. And the sky’s better.”

Neil laughed.

“No, but —” Nathan started, and then did not have the second half of it, and left it there, and they walked on down the arcade past a

Sephora and a Godiva and a shop selling luggage, along the side of a canal, under a sky.

Nathan did not take a photograph.

. . .

They came out onto Sands Avenue at eight minutes past midnight.

“Where are we going?”

“There’s an overpass,” said Neil. “Right up by the Wynn. It’s about four minutes.”

“An overpass.”

“It’s the best view of it. I looked it up.”

The overpass on Sands is a pedestrian bridge like the others, concrete and steel with a mesh side and a roof over part of it, and it exists so that people can cross a road, and at eight minutes past midnight on the eighth of December there were perhaps thirty people standing on it, none of whom were crossing.

They were all facing the same way, and most of them had their phones up.

. . .

The Sphere is three hundred and sixty-six feet high.

The outside of it — all of it, every square foot of sphere — is a screen. Five hundred and eighty thousand square feet of it, made of something in the order of one point two million individually addressable light units, each of which holds about forty-eight separate diodes. It is the largest video display of its kind that has been built.

When the brothers came up onto the overpass it was showing a liquid.

Something like oil on water, or ink dropped into milk, in red and green and blue and yellow, turning and folding over itself across the surface of a sphere thirty-six storeys tall, at a scale where a single fold of it was the size of a house. It moved slowly. It had no edges anywhere, because the object it was being shown on had no edges, and so the image did not appear to be *on* anything; the building had simply stopped being a building.

Then it changed, over three or four seconds, and became a flower.

A stained-glass flower — pink and green and blue, thick black leading between the panels, a rose of some kind in the middle of it with leaves coming off, in the manner of a window in a church. It filled the sphere. It sat there, doing nothing, being a flower, at half past midnight, in the desert, on a screen with fifty-seven million light sources in it.

Nobody on the overpass said anything. About twenty phones were up.

The Seeker was at the rail.

He was standing next to a man in a Raiders jacket who had his phone out in landscape and had been filming for some time, and after a while he said:

“What’s that for?”

“It’s the Sphere,” said the man, not lowering the phone.

“No, I know what it is.”

“Right.”

“I mean what’s it for. Like what does it do.”

The man lowered the phone about six inches.

“It’s a venue,” he said. “They do shows in it. There’s a screen on the inside as well, all the way round, it’s meant to be unbelievable. My cousin saw U2 in there.”

“But the outside.”

“The outside’s ads, mostly. In the daytime. Actual ads, for products. Then at night they do this.”

“And this is a flower.”

“Yeah.”

“So what’s the flower for?”

“Nothing,” said the man. “It’s just a flower.”

“Right,” said the Seeker.

The man went back to filming. The Seeker stayed where he was with his hands on the concrete, and the flower stayed where it was, and after about a minute and a half it began, very slowly, to open.

. . .

Neil got his photographs. Nathan got one, which he took because it seemed like the kind of thing you take a photograph of, and which he never looked at again.

They stood on the overpass finishing the beers.

"That's the thing I wanted to see," said Neil.

"It's good."

"That's the thing that made me want to come."

Nathan considered it.

He tried, briefly, out of habit, to convert something, and there was nothing available to convert. There was no price on the rail and no ticket and no receipt; the building was simply on, and it was free to look at from a pedestrian overpass, and it would be on tomorrow and every night after that whether or not anybody stood there, and thirty people were standing there.

He gave up, and drank the last of the beer, and put the can in the bag with the other one.

"Right," said Neil. "So the hotel's about a mile and a half back down."

"A mile and a half."

"Bit less. Twenty-five minutes." A pause. "There's one more thing on the way."

. . .

The one more thing was at the LINQ, which is not a hotel so much as a lane.

They came off the boulevard into it a little after one, and it opened out in front of them as an actual pedestrian street — no traffic, no card men, string lights overhead between the buildings, bars and burger places down both sides with their doors open, a Christmas tree thirty feet high in the middle of the paving with a ring of small fountains round the base of it lit blue from underneath, and people sitting on the low wall of the fountain in ones and twos at one in the morning eating.

And at the head of it, filling the space between the rooflines, the wheel.

The High Roller is five hundred and fifty feet high and it is a ring. There is no rim structure of the kind a fairground wheel has, no spokes

in the ordinary sense; there is a white circular frame supported from below by an A-frame in tension, and the wheel is held in a web of cables so fine that from a quarter mile away at night the cables are not visible at all and the ring appears to be standing in the air on nothing.

Twenty-eight cabins run round the outside of it, spherical, glass, lit from within. A rotation takes half an hour, and it is slow enough that from the ground the wheel does not appear to be moving, and you have to pick one cabin and hold it against a fixed point for a while to establish that it is.

They stopped in the middle of the lane by the Christmas tree, and Nathan took a beer out of the bag and opened it, and it was the last one, and they stood and looked at the wheel.

“We’re not going up it?” said Nathan.

“Thirty-five dollars.”

“Right.”

“Fifty-five after seven, and it’s the same wheel.”

“Right,” said Nathan again.

They stood there a while longer.

There was, he would think afterward, nothing to do at the High Roller except go up it, and they were not going up it, and so what they were doing was standing in a shopping lane at one in the morning drinking a can of beer from a pharmacy and looking at a large white circle with lights on it. Somewhere over their heads a hundred and fifty people were paying to see the same thing from a different height. The wheel did not care either way. It went round on its half-hour whether it was full or empty, and it had done every night since 2014, and it was going round now with maybe four of the twenty-eight cabins occupied.

Neil took a photograph. Then he took another one from lower down, crouching, so that the tree came into the bottom of the frame with the wheel behind it.

“That’s the shot,” he said.

“Is it?”

“That’s the shot.”

They finished the beers and put the empties in the bag, and Nathan carried the bag, and they went out of the top of the lane and turned east.

It was, in the event, thirty-eight minutes.

STEP COUNT

They came out of the top of the LINQ at ten past one and turned east, and the city stopped.

It stops immediately. There is no transition and no falling-off. On one side of the property line there is a lane with string lights and a thirty-foot Christmas tree and forty people eating burgers at one in the morning; forty feet later there is Flamingo Road, six lanes of it, with a concrete median and a chain-link fence along part of one side, and a self-storage place, and a lot with cars in it under a sodium light, and nobody on the sidewalk in either direction for as far as either brother could see.

The noise went too. Not to silence — there was traffic, and a long way behind them the boulevard was still doing what it does — but the layered thing, the music-every-sixty-feet, that stopped, and what replaced it was the sound of two men's shoes.

"This is a block and a half," said Neil.

"You said that at the wheel."

"It is a block and a half."

It was, in fact, a block and a half. It was also a block and a half at one in the morning after twenty-nine thousand steps, which is a different unit.

. . .

The last stretch of a long day on foot does not contain anything.

Everything they had seen that evening had been arranged, at considerable expense, to be looked at. Flamingo Road east of the boulevard has not been arranged at all. It is a road that exists so that vehicles can get from the Strip to the highway, and the things along it are the things that end up on such a road: a parking structure, a wall, a low building

with a dentist in it, a fenced lot, a bus shelter with an advertisement for a personal injury lawyer, a fire hydrant, and the back of a hotel.

Nathan took all of it in with total attention, the way you do when there is nothing else to see and you have stopped being able to have thoughts.

They passed a man going the other way in a high-visibility vest with a lanyard round his neck, walking fast, at one-fifteen in the morning, on his way to something. Neither brother had any idea what. He went past them without looking up and was gone.

Neil had stopped talking somewhere around the parking structure.

This was itself remarkable and Nathan noticed it, in the vague way he was noticing things by that point. His brother had talked for two miles up the boulevard about sharks and inclinators and moths; had talked at the Venetian; had talked at the overpass with a beer in his hand about the Sphere and what it must be like inside it. And now he was walking beside Nathan with his hands in his jacket pockets and his head slightly down, and had said nothing for about four hundred metres, and was not on his phone.

Nathan let it be. He was not certain he had a sentence available either.

. . .

They got to the hotel at twenty-two minutes past one.

The lobby was lit and empty. The armchair by the luggage cart had nobody in it. At the desk a young woman Nathan had not seen before was doing something on a screen, and she looked up and said good evening, and both brothers said good evening back, and that was the transaction complete.

Somewhere behind the desk a printer was running. There were four suitcases standing together by the elevators with tags on the handles, waiting for a pickup at some hour that made sense to somebody.

In the elevator Neil checked his phone for the first time in twenty minutes.

“Twenty thousand and sixty-six,” he said.

“That’s not right.”

“That’s what it says.”

"It's more than that."

"That's what it says." He held it out. It said twenty thousand and sixty-six, and Nathan got his own out, and his said seventeen thousand five hundred and twenty-one.

Neither of them could account for the difference. Neil suggested that Nathan's phone had been in his jacket rather than his pocket for part of the evening, which was true. Nathan suggested that Neil had walked the length of the Pinky's terrace eleven times during a telephone call, which was also true.

"It's not a competition," said Neil.

"No," said Nathan.

They both looked at their phones again.

. . .

The room was as they had left it: Neil's bag still on the far bed unopened and both of their jackets from the plane were over the same chair.

Nathan sat down on the edge of the near bed and did not take his shoes off for about a minute and a half, because taking his shoes off was going to require a decision and a movement, and he was going to make both of them shortly.

Neil went and stood at the window.

He did not open the curtain, because the curtain was already open. He stood there with his hands in his pockets looking west, out over the mechanical plant and the parking deck and the flat top of the arcade, at the boulevard.

From the eighth floor at half past one it is mostly light rather than objects. You can see where things are without seeing what they are. The Strip runs north to south as a bright irregular band, and you can pick out the beam from Luxor at the far south end going up into nothing, and the wheel closer in, and a red one and a blue one and a white one and a gold one, and all of it moving very slightly all the time without ever resolving into anything.

Below him, four floors down, was the pool deck.

The pool lights were on. They are on all night; the deck closes at eleven but the water stays lit, which means that from the eighth floor

at half past one in the morning there is a rectangle of pale blue-green sitting in the dark with nobody near it, absolutely still, and the loungers in a row around three sides of it with the folded towels on them exactly as they had been at five in the afternoon.

Neil stood there about forty seconds.

"Breakfast is nine," he said.

"I know."

"Track's ten."

"I know."

He came away from the window and started, at last, to open his bag.

Nathan took his shoes off.

. . .

What neither of them said, at any point in the following six and a half hours, was anything about the day.

There was no summary. Neither of them lay in the dark and said *that was a good day*, or *I can't believe we walked that*, or *what was your favourite bit*, because they were forty-eight and forty-six years old respectively and had known each other for as long as the younger one had been alive, and men in that situation do not do that, and pretending otherwise gains nobody anything.

What they did instead was this.

Neil, from the far bed, in the dark, at nine minutes to two: "The thing about the sharks —"

"Go on."

"They have to have somebody on call. Like a vet. There has to be a shark vet."

"There's a shark vet," Nathan agreed.

"On call. At three in the morning."

"Yeah."

A pause of perhaps thirty seconds.

"What do you think they pay him?"

Nathan lay in the dark with his eyes closed and, for the ninth time that day, attempted a conversion, and got about as far as the observation that he had no idea what an American aquarium veterinarian

earned and no basis whatever for estimating it, and that the number would in any case be in the wrong currency, and that the currency was down.

“No idea,” he said.

“No,” said Neil.

The air conditioning came on, ran for a while, and went off.

Sometime after that they both went to sleep, and neither of them set an alarm, because Neil had set two before they went out and had told Nathan about them at the Sphere, and Nathan had forgotten, and it did not matter.

. . .

The step counters, in the end, disagreed by two and a half thousand and both of them were wrong.

Nathan’s phone recorded seventeen thousand five hundred and twenty-one for Saturday the seventh of December, and then, because the phone worked to midnight and the brothers had not, it opened a new day at zero and put a further two thousand six hundred and forty-five against Sunday the eighth — steps taken on the walk back up the boulevard, and along Flamingo Road, and through the lobby, and to the elevator, and along the corridor on eight.

So that when Nathan looked at his phone the following morning at ten past eight, before he had left the room, before he had eaten, before he had done anything at all with the day that was going to include a racetrack and a convention centre and a beef Wellington and a concert, it told him he had already walked two thousand six hundred and forty-five steps.

He considered that.

Then he got up.

DAY TWO

Sunday, 8 December 2024

GIADA

Giada

. . .

The alarm went at ten past eight and Nathan was already awake, lying on his back in a dark room with the curtain shut, listening to the air conditioning.

He had been awake since about ten to. He had not moved, because moving would have committed him, and because there was a specific and quite pleasant quality to lying in a hotel bed in a dark room in a warm city knowing that the alarm had not gone yet. He had established, without opening his eyes, that his legs were going to have opinions later. He had established that his phone said 2,645 before he had done anything at all with the day.

Across the room Neil said, into the pillow, "What time is it."

"Ten past."

"Right."

Neither of them moved for about four minutes.

They had been asleep for something under six hours. There had been, on Neil's sheet, a line reading 09:00 BREAKFAST — GIADA (CROMWELL), and below it a confirmation number, and the confirmation number had been obtained four weeks earlier at a point when the previous evening had not yet existed and had certainly not contained six miles of walking, and there was no mechanism by which the sheet could be told about any of that.

"It's a nine o'clock," said Neil.

"I know it's a nine o'clock."

"We could push it."

Nathan opened his eyes.

This was, he understood immediately, not an offer. It was a formality — the thing Neil said in order to have said it, so that later, if the day went sideways, it could be established that he had offered. Behind it stood the racetrack at ten, twenty minutes south of the Strip, which could not be pushed, because it was booked in a session with other people in it.

“No,” said Nathan. “Let’s go.”

Neil was up and in the bathroom in about nine seconds.

. . .

The Cromwell is two hundred yards from the Westin — the same corner, effectively — and it is the smallest hotel on the Strip.

They walked it at ten to nine and the boulevard was — not empty; it is never empty — but noticeably reduced. The card men were not out. The women in feathers were not out. There was a street-sweeping vehicle going slowly along the far curb with its brushes down and its yellow light turning, and there were three people in high-visibility jackets picking things up off the sidewalk with grabbers and putting them into a rolling bin, and there was a man in shorts running, actually running, for exercise, with a wristwatch.

The light was different too. In the morning the Strip is beige. All the surfaces that had been doing things at midnight had stopped doing them, and what was left was the material they were made of, which was stucco and glass and painted steel, and most of it needed washing.

Nathan liked it enormously and did not say so.

. . .

Giada is on the second floor of the Cromwell, at the corner, and it is mostly window.

They went up and were shown to a table by a woman who was awake in a way neither of them was, past a framed pink canvas with GIADA scratched into it, and put at a two-top against the window, which is the good table, and which they got because it was nine o’clock on a Sunday morning and four tables were occupied out of thirty.

The room is low and warm and does not look Italian. The ceiling is walnut, laid in narrow slats running the length of the room; there is a

long leather banquette down one side in a colour somewhere between tan and rust; and the open kitchen at the far end has a hood over it faced in a single sheet of book-matched marble, grey on white, veined symmetrically outward from the centre line so that the two halves mirror each other exactly.

Below the window was Las Vegas Boulevard, four floors down, at the intersection of Flamingo Road, with the Bellagio directly opposite and Caesars up to the right, all of it going on behind glass with nothing audible coming through it at all.

Nathan sat down and put his hands flat on the table and looked out at a silent six lanes.

“Right,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

. . .

Nobody else in Las Vegas had got up.

It took Nathan about ten minutes to work out that this was what he was enjoying. It was Sunday morning of the second week of December, the restaurant was almost empty, the sidewalk below was nearly empty, and the enormous machine of the place was running at about eleven percent.

The four occupied tables told the story between them. There was a couple in their sixties, dressed and pressed, who had clearly been up since six-thirty and had a guidebook. There was a woman on her own with a laptop and a coffee, working. There were two men in golf clothes with a tee time, eating fast. And there was a table of four in the far corner who had not been to bed — that was visible from across the room, in the posture and the sunglasses indoors and the specific way one of them was holding a glass of water with both hands — and who were not talking, and who were seeing this end of the day rather than the other one.

Everyone else was horizontal. There are somewhere around a hundred and fifty thousand hotel rooms in Las Vegas and on a weekend in December about eighty-nine per cent of them have somebody in them, which is a hundred and thirty-odd thousand rooms with the

curtains shut at nine o'clock in the morning and the day going on outside without any of them.

The brothers had, at this point, had five hours and forty minutes of sleep and had walked twenty thousand steps the day before.

"We're not going to feel this until about two," said Nathan.

"We're going to feel it at the track."

"We are not going to feel it at the track. Nobody has ever been tired at a racetrack."

Neil thought about that.

"That's probably true," he said.

. . .

The menu at Giada does breakfast the way an Italian restaurant does breakfast, which is to say it does not entirely believe in it and has therefore made it a lunch.

There is a polenta waffle. There is a lobster hash with piquillo peppers and a confit of tomato and onion. There are pancakes with hazelnut and chocolate in them. There is a breakfast calzone, which is a calzone. There is a chicken cacciatore served over the polenta waffle, at nine in the morning, which Neil read out loud twice.

"It's chicken cacciatore."

"I heard."

"On a waffle."

"Order it."

"I'm not going to order it."

"Order it."

"I'm going to have the lobster thing," said Neil, and closed the menu, and then opened it again forty seconds later and looked at the cacciatore once more before closing it for good.

Nathan had the meatballs and eggs, which arrived as a small white boat of meatballs in tomato sauce under a snow of grated parmesan, set on the plate at an angle, with two fried eggs beside it and a pile of roast potato wedges dusted with more of the parmesan and some parsley, and three triangles of toasted sourdough leaning against the back of it. There was a separate dish for the butter and a separate dish

for the jam and a separate dish for something white that neither of them identified.

He looked at it for a second and a half. It was, by weight, dinner.

It was also extremely good, and he ate all of it, including the toast.

They both had coffee, which came in a pot, and both had a second pot.

The bill, when it came, was a hundred and eight dollars and thirty-eight cents.

Nathan put his card on it and added twenty per cent and signed, and folded the receipt into his jacket pocket with the other three, and drank the last of the coffee.

. . .

At twenty past nine Neil's phone went.

He looked at it, and then he did something Nathan had not seen him do since Vancouver, which was to turn it face down on the tablecloth and leave it there.

It buzzed twice more against the wood over the next ninety seconds.

"You're not getting that."

"It's Sunday," said Neil.

"It was Sunday last night."

"Last night they were in Zurich."

Nathan let that go, because it was not worth having and because his brother had put the phone face down, and pouring more coffee seemed a better use of the moment than winning it.

They sat for a while without saying anything.

The traffic went past four floors down. Somewhere behind them a member of staff was setting out cutlery on the unoccupied tables, one after another, working along the row. The couple with the guidebook left. The two golfers left. The four who had not been to bed stayed exactly where they were.

"Track's ten," said Neil eventually.

"I know."

"Car's at nine-forty."

"I know."

Neil turned the phone back over, and looked at it, and put it in his pocket without doing anything about whatever was on it, and stood up.

“It’s a good room,” he said.

“It’s a very good room.”

They went down the stairs and out into the beige light, and the car was already there, and the boulevard was starting to fill.

SOUTH ON THE BOULEVARD

Las Vegas Boulevard runs for about four and a half miles as the Strip and then keeps going for another nine as a road.

The brothers found this out at ten to ten on a Sunday morning in the back of a car, and the discovery had a shape to it. First the properties get shorter. Then they stop being properties and start being businesses — a wedding chapel, a tattoo parlour, a place selling above-ground pools. Then there is the airport on the left, very close, with the fences and the approach lights and a 737 coming down over the road low enough to read. Then there is a stretch of nothing much: storage, a scrapyard, a solar array, a billboard offering to buy houses for cash.

And then it opens out and there is desert on both sides, actual desert, brown and grey and scattered with creosote, going away to a ridge of hills the colour of an old coin.

“How far south is this?” said Nathan.

“Fourteen miles.”

“Fourteen.”

“There’s a track at the Motor Speedway too, but that’s north, and that’s the oval.” Neil was looking at his phone. “This one’s a road course. It’s got a banked turn.”

Nathan looked out of the window at some hills.

The night before, this same boulevard had been six lanes of stationary traffic with a man selling water out of a cooler on the corner. Now it was a state highway with a speed limit of sixty-five and almost nothing on it, and the car was doing seventy, and the city had gone off the back of them in about eight minutes.

. . .

SpeedVegas Motorsports Park is at 14200 South Las Vegas Boulevard and is announced by a sign on a pole about forty feet up.

They came in off the highway onto gravel and past a chain-link gate and into a parking lot, and the first thing either of them saw properly was the canopies.

There are long open-sided steel canopies along one edge of the paddock, and under them, nose out and not quite in a row, were the cars. A GT3 RS with a wing on it the width of the car. A green AMG. A silver GT-R. A blue saloon of some kind. Two Ferraris, one red and one yellow. A Cayman in a yellow so aggressive it looked like a warning. Perhaps twenty of them altogether, in colours that do not occur in nature, parked on gravel in a desert with the hills behind.

Beyond the canopies was the track, and beyond the track was desert, and beyond the desert were the hills.

It was, Nathan noticed, extremely quiet. There was a compressor running somewhere and a radio playing in an office and that was it. The cars were not doing anything. Two men in team shirts were walking across the paddock carrying a folding table between them.

“That’s the GT3,” said Neil.

“Which one?”

“The one with the wing. That’s a two hundred thousand dollar car.”
Nathan did the arithmetic before he could stop himself.

. . .

Inside, at a counter, they signed things.

There is a specific American document that a person signs before doing anything at all interesting, and it has a shape and a rhythm, and it does not attempt to be reassuring. It uses the word *death* in the second paragraph. It uses it again in the fourth. It requires the signatory to acknowledge that motorsport is dangerous, that the risks cannot be eliminated, that the facility does not warrant that any part of the property or equipment is safe, and that the signatory is voluntarily assuming all of it, including risks arising from the negligence of the operator.

Neil signed his without reading it.

Nathan read his, because he reads things, and got as far as *including but not limited to* before deciding that the exercise was not going to improve his morning, and signed it.

They were given wristbands. They were told to go through to the classroom.

. . .

The classroom was a room with about twenty stacking chairs in it and a whiteboard and a diagram of the circuit on the wall, and a coffee machine that had been switched off.

Eleven people were in the session. Two of them were the brothers. There was a father and a son of about nineteen; a couple in their thirties in matching sunglasses on the tops of their heads; four men together who had the specific loud quiet of a group at the end of a weekend; and a woman on her own, about sixty, in trainers, who had brought a notebook.

At two minutes past ten the Conscience-Keeper came in and shut the door.

He was somewhere in his fifties and had a lanyard and a clipboard and the build of a man who had spent a long time either in cars or under them, and he said good morning, and eleven people said good morning back at three different speeds.

“Right,” he said. “Nobody has an accident here because they went too fast. People have accidents here because they braked in the wrong place. So we’re going to talk about where you brake.”

Then he talked, without a slide, for nineteen minutes.

. . .

He did the circuit first, off the diagram, corner by corner, using his hand.

He did the flags. Green. Yellow, which means there is something on the circuit and you slow and you do not overtake. Red, which means you stop where you are, on the racing line if necessary, and wait. Black, which means the flag is for you, specifically, and you come in.

“If you see the black flag,” he said, “come in. Don’t decide whether you agree with it.”

He did the braking markers, which are boards at the side of the circuit at three, two and one, and he was extremely specific about them, and about the fact that a person who brakes at the two board on his first lap and the three board on his fifth has not got better, he has got braver, and that these are different things.

He did the instructor. There is an instructor in the passenger seat and he does not stop talking, and what he says is not a suggestion.

He did the circuit specs, off a board on the wall: a mile and three tenths, ten turns, a two-thousand-foot straight, Formula One safety barriers. He said the barriers twice.

Then he did the alcohol rule.

“No alcohol on the property. Not before, not after, not in the parking lot. If we think you’ve been drinking you don’t drive, and you don’t get a refund, and there’s no argument about it.”

Nathan, who twelve hours previously had walked a thousand feet up Las Vegas Boulevard carrying an unopened can of beer in order to comply with a county ordinance, nodded along with everybody else.

. . .

Then he read the rain list.

He did not introduce it. He turned a page on the clipboard and said, “One more thing. If it rains, the following cars do not run,” and read it out.

“Ferrari 488 Pista. Ferrari 488 Challenge EVO. McLaren 570 GT4. Porsche 911 GT3 RS. Porsche 911 GT2 RS. Lamborghini Huracán Tecnica. Lamborghini Huracán STO. Mercedes-AMG GTR.”

He read it at the speed a person reads a list. He did not smile at any point, and he did not pause after it, and he did not indicate in any way that he was aware of having just informed eleven adults that eight of the fastest cars on the property are afraid of water.

Somebody at the back — one of the four men — laughed once.

The Conscience-Keeper looked up at him without any expression whatever, and waited, and the man stopped, and the Conscience-Keeper said, “It’s slicks and it’s a lot of power. There’s no sensible line through turn four in the wet in a GT2. That’s all it is.”

He put the clipboard down.

"Anybody not driving today needs to be behind the barrier. Helmets are through there. Questions."

The woman with the notebook put her hand up and asked how many laps the discovery laps were.

"Two," he said.

She wrote it down.

. . .

The discovery laps are done in a Porsche Macan S.

This is not something either brother had known in advance and it is not on the website in large letters. Before any customer is permitted near a supercar, an instructor drives him round the circuit twice, at moderate speed, in a mid-size family SUV, pointing out the braking markers and the apexes and the two places where the surface changes.

So Nathan's first experience of a racing circuit was sitting in the back of a car of the sort that does the school run, going round at about sixty miles an hour, with a man in the front saying "so you'll come off the brakes here, and you'll let it run out to the curb, and don't look at the curb, look at where you're going next."

It was, and he did not expect this, extremely useful.

Also, from the back seat of a Macan at sixty, the circuit was small. It was a mile and a bit of grey tarmac in the desert with red-and-white barriers round the outside and a lot of gravel and some tire stacks, and it looked like a place where a person could not possibly get into trouble.

He would revise that.

. . .

They came in and got out and stood by the barrier in the sun.

"Right," said Neil, and rubbed his hands together, actually rubbed his hands together, which Nathan had not seen him do since they were children. "So you're in the Corvette and I'm in the Mustang."

"That's what you booked."

"That's what I booked."

Nathan looked down the line.

The Mustang was midnight blue with two black stripes over the bonnet and roof, sitting lower than a Mustang generally does, with its nose to the barrier. It was, in the way of dark blue cars in bright sun, difficult to see the shape of.

The Corvette was canary yellow.

Not gold and not amber — canary, the flat saturated yellow of a highlighter pen, on a car nine inches high with a black wing across the back and black wheels and vents cut into the flanks behind the doors, so that from thirty feet away it did not read as a colour so much as an announcement. There were, on that entire paddock, perhaps three objects visible from the highway. It was one of them.

“That one,” said Nathan.

“That one,” Neil agreed.

He was entirely content with the arrangement.

Then he got into it.

. . .

The cockpit of a modern mid-engined supercar has been designed around a driver who is between five foot eight and six foot one, weighs about a hundred and seventy pounds, and does not sit at a desk for nine hours a day.

Nathan is none of these things.

Getting in is the first problem. The sill is wide and flat and about as high as your knee, and the seat is below the sill, so the manoeuvre is not a matter of sitting down; it is a matter of getting one leg over an obstacle, lowering yourself past the point at which your thigh will bear it, and arriving. There is a moment, roughly two-thirds of the way through, at which a man of forty-eight becomes aware that he has committed to something and that reversing it in front of witnesses would be worse than finishing it.

He arrived. The seat was a bucket with fixed bolsters at the ribs, and he was between them, and it was closer than he wanted.

Then the wheel.

It is not round. It is a squared-off carbon-and-leather shape with flat sections top and bottom and a chunky rim, and it comes back toward you a long way, and once it is where the instructor wants it, the gap

between the underside of it and the tops of your thighs is not generous. Nathan put his hands on it at nine and three and looked at the distance between his forearms and his stomach and made no comment about it.

Behind his left shoulder the engine was directly there, four inches of firewall away, so that when it started the sound did not come from in front of him or from outside. It came from behind his head, at a volume that made further conversation a matter of shouting, and he felt it in his back before he heard it.

“Comfortable?” said the instructor.

“Yes,” said Nathan.

CHAPTER 10

FIVE LAPS

The Hand stood at the head of pit lane with a radio on his hip and did the cars.

He had been doing it since seven. Between every driver he came round to the passenger side, leaned in past the instructor, and reset the car: seat rails, mirror, belts, the wheel down and back. He asked each driver his height before he touched anything and then did not ask him anything else. He checked pressures on all four corners with a gauge from his back pocket and wrote nothing down, and twice while Nathan was watching he took air out of a front tire by about the amount you would let out of a bicycle.

He worked on the Corvette for perhaps ninety seconds.

He did the seat first, because the seat determines everything after it, and he did it by putting one hand flat on Nathan's shoulder and pressing him back into the bucket before he moved the rail, so that the seat was set to where Nathan would actually be rather than where he was currently sitting. Then the wheel. Then he pulled the belts down over both shoulders and put the tongue in and dragged the lap section tight across Nathan's hips in a single hard pull, which was tighter than Nathan would have done it, and which made the next five minutes possible.

He said, "That's you," and moved to the next car.

He gave the Mustang the same ninety seconds.

. . .

The instructor was about thirty and was called Dave and had been talking since Nathan sat down.

He talked all the way out of pit lane, and he did not stop once in the six minutes that followed, and none of it was conversation.

“Okay, so we’re just going to roll out, don’t worry about the revs, roll out — good — and we’re going to stay left, left, left, and I want you looking way up the track, not at the front of the car, way up. Way up. That’s it. Now this next one comes to you quicker than you think, so we’re going to be off the throttle — off — brake, brake, brake, and *squeeze* it off, don’t lift straight off it, squeeze, and turn. Turn. Turn now. Good. Now unwind and get on it. On it. On it. All the way. All the way. All the way.”

There is nothing in ordinary life that prepares a person for being told *all the way* about a throttle pedal by a stranger sitting eighteen inches away.

Nathan’s first lap was slow and he knew it was slow.

His second was faster and felt wrong in three places. Somewhere in the third he stopped hearing the engine as noise and started hearing it as information, which nobody had told him would happen, and which he did not have time to think about at the time. On the fourth he came out of the second-to-last corner onto the straight and put his foot flat and held it there for the full two thousand feet, and the car did something to the horizon that Nathan had no previous experience of, and Dave said “keep it, keep it, keep it — and brake” and he braked and the belts came into his shoulders and the car stopped as though it had been caught.

On the fifth Dave stopped talking for a stretch in the middle of the lap, which Nathan understood afterward to have been a compliment.

Then the pit board came out and it was over.

. . .

He got out of the car in the way a middle-aged man gets out of a car nine inches high, which is to say in stages, and stood on the tarmac and found that his hands were not entirely his own.

Not shaking. Just at one remove, the way they are after a near miss on a highway, and his heart was doing something it did not usually do at eleven in the morning.

He had been driving for approximately six minutes and forty seconds.

Neil came in about a quarter of an hour later. Nathan watched the last two of his laps from behind the barrier — the midnight blue car coming through the fast right at the end of the straight and going away from him, small and dark and quick against the grey and the red-and-white barriers and the hills, and it looked, from outside, extremely fast and completely unremarkable, in the way that all of it does from outside.

Neil got out grinning.

“Well,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Well.”

“Yeah,” said Nathan.

Neither of them was capable of anything more precise than that for several minutes, and both of them were entirely satisfied with the exchange.

. . .

Then they went inside, and there was a screen.

It is on the wall of the main building, opposite the counter, angled slightly down. It is not hidden and it is not ceremonial. It is a flat panel of the kind that shows departures in a small airport, and on it, in white on a dark background, is a table.

It has four columns. Position. Driver. Car. Best lap.

The All-Seeing sat at a desk beneath it with two monitors in front of him and a set of transponder receivers in a rack, and put the session up.

It appeared all at once, the way a results table does.

Fourteen entries, one for every driver who had run in that hour, first name and last initial, car, and a time to three decimal places. Third from the top, in a black Mustang Shelby GT500, was a driver whose first name was Neil.

Nathan found his own line by going down from the top, which took him longer than he wanted it to.

. . .

Nobody said anything.

There was no moment. Neil did not react. He read it for the ordinary length of time a person reads a screen, and then read it again, and then said “huh,” and that was the entirety of his commentary.

He said nothing to Nathan about it. He did not point. He did not do any of the things a man does when he has beaten his brother at something, because he had not beaten his brother at anything — there had been no contest, they had driven different cars in different sessions with different instructors, and the two lines on the screen were not a comparison. They were an artefact of a timing system.

Nathan understood all of that clearly and completely and it did not help in the slightest.

He was the older one. That was the thing, and it was not a thing he could say out loud at forty-eight years of age in the lobby of a racetrack, and it was not even really a thought so much as a piece of load-bearing structure that had been in place since about 1980 and had just been told, by a screen, in white on a dark background, to three decimal places, that it was not there.

Neil had also booked the cars. Neil had assigned them. Neil had been in the Mustang because Neil had put himself in the Mustang, four weeks ago, at a keyboard, and had put Nathan in the Corvette, and the order the two of them appeared in on that screen had in some sense been settled before either of them got on a plane.

Nathan read it again from the top.

“Third,” he said.

“Out of fourteen.”

“Out of fourteen.”

“First time out,” said Neil, and then heard himself, and stopped.

. . .

The All-Seeing did not look up when the brothers came in, and did not look up when they stood in front of the screen.

At one point a man from the group of four came over and asked whether the times included the out lap.

“No.”

“Because on my first one I was still —”

“It’s your best flying lap,” said the All-Seeing. “Out lap and in lap don’t count.”

The man said that his fourth had felt quicker than his third.

“Your third was quicker,” said the All-Seeing, and turned one of the monitors about fifteen degrees so the man could see it, and showed him the four times, and the man read them and said right, and went away.

He turned the monitor back.

The board stayed up.

That was the part Nathan had not anticipated. It did not clear when they finished looking at it. It stayed up while they queued at the counter, and while a woman ahead of them argued pleasantly about a gift voucher, and while Neil bought the onboard video from his laps, and while Nathan did not.

It was still up when they went out through the doors, and it would be up until the next session displaced it, at which point it would be replaced by another one exactly like it, and the fourteen names on it would go wherever those go.

. . .

Outside it was sixteen degrees and the light off the gravel was hard.

Neil stopped on the gravel and turned round and looked back at the canopies.

“I have to tell you something,” he said.

“Go on.”

“I think that’s the car.”

Nathan waited.

“No, I mean — I’ve thought about cars my entire life. I had the posters. I’ve read about them, I’ve watched every video, I’ve sat in a 911 at a dealership in Richmond and had to be asked to get out. And I got into that thing this morning thinking it was the one they put in the fleet so there’s something for the Americans, and it is not that, it is —”

He stopped, and started again.

“It weighs two tonnes. It should not work. It’s got a supercharger the size of a microwave sitting on top of the engine and it is not a

precise instrument in any respect at all, and coming out of that last corner onto the straight it just —”

He made a gesture with one hand, flat, going away from himself.

“Yeah,” said Nathan.

“No, but that’s the one. That’s it. That’s the car. I’m going to be seventy and I’m going to be thinking about the eighth of December.”

He said it lightly. He said it in the voice a man uses for saying a large thing in a way that permits him to have been joking, and then he stood there on the gravel in the sun for another three or four seconds looking back at a midnight blue car under a canopy fourteen miles south of Las Vegas, and it was, on the evidence available, entirely true.

Nathan, who was going to be seventy and thinking about a heated pool on the fourth floor of a hotel with no casino in it, did not know that yet, and said:

“It’s a Mustang, Neil.”

“It’s the car,” said Neil.

They got in.

At Blue Diamond Road the traffic started, and by the time they were level with the airport it was solid, and the Strip came up out of the haze in front of them looking, at half past eleven on a Sunday morning in flat sun, like a row of office buildings.

“Cowboy Christmas is one-thirty,” said Neil.

“I know.”

“We’ll be back by twelve-thirty. Which gives us an hour.”

Nathan did not point out that an hour had not been on the sheet, because he had discovered at Pinky’s the previous evening that unallocated time is not something you draw attention to.

COWBOY CHRISTMAS

The hour did not survive.

They got back to the hotel at eight minutes to one, because the boulevard north of the airport had taken twenty-two minutes to do a mile and a half, and Neil went up to the room to get something and took a call in it, and came down at nineteen minutes past one saying sorry.

So the hour, which had existed briefly as a genuine and unallocated thing, was in the end four minutes at the Starbucks counter in the lobby.

Nathan had a large coffee of a strength he would not have ordered at home, and a thing in a wrapper that had been made in a facility, some weeks earlier, out of laminated dough and a filling that was described on the label as vanilla and had the texture of setting plaster. He ate all of it standing up, in about ninety seconds, out of the wrapper, and it was excellent.

Then a car.

Nathan did not mention it. He had learned something on the terrace at Pinky's the previous evening about the survival characteristics of unscheduled time, which is that it is best not to look directly at it.

. . .

The Las Vegas Convention Center is a mile east of the Strip on Paradise Road and it does not look like anything.

That is the first surprise. It is low and long and beige and set behind an enormous quantity of parking, and from the road it reads as a distribution facility, or a regional airport, or the back of something. There is no front. There are entrances, in the plural, lettered, and a person needs to know which one.

It has about two and a half million square feet of exhibition space. On the eighth of December 2024 the South Hall was carrying two shows at once — the Cowboy Channel Cowboy Christmas on the lower level and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation's Hunter & Outdoor Christmas Expo on the level above it, sharing a building, sharing an entrance, and between them occupying rather more than nine hundred thousand square feet.

Nine hundred thousand square feet is twenty-one acres.

The brothers came in through South Hall Door 3 at one twenty-eight and stopped about fifteen feet inside it, because everybody does.

. . .

The floor is red.

Not the carpet in a hotel sense; this is exhibition carpet, laid over concrete in one continuous colour from wall to wall, seamed every so often, and it goes away from you further than a floor ought to and then keeps going. Above it the ceiling is bare: ductwork, cable trays, service walkways, pendant lights in rows on long stems, and ceiling fans the size of small aircraft turning slowly.

Hanging from the structure on wires, all down the hall, are the aisle numbers. Red banners, three feet square, printed with a hundred, two hundred, three hundred, four, five, six, seven, eight, receding until the far ones are just red rectangles.

On the pillars are the column markers, in a code that means something to somebody: S1-023. S1-024. Up in the roof, S1W 213.

And across the middle of it, on a banner about thirty feet wide, in white capitals on red, above the heads of several thousand people:

WELCOME TO VEGAS!

The banner is indoors, in a windowless building, a mile from the Strip, above a boot sale.

"Right," said Nathan.

"Yeah," said Neil.

Beside the door, on a stand, was a memorial board with a photograph of a man in a cowboy hat on it and two dates, the second of them 2024, and a paragraph about what he had done for rural America and the rodeo industry. People went past it in both directions. A woman

stopped and read all of it and then went and joined her family at a booth selling turquoise.

Somewhere further in, a sign said NO ON-SITE TICKET SALES, in red, several times.

. . .

Three hundred and seventy-five exhibitors is a number that means nothing until you are standing in it.

The aisles run in two directions and they are full for their entire length, and the booths on them are not stalls — many of them are built, with walls and lighting rigs and flooring of their own, brought in on trucks and put up over three days by people who do this for a living. There are chandeliers. Several booths have chandeliers.

What is being sold, in rough order of frequency: hats, in beaver felt and straw, on stands and shelves and hooks and hat trees, with a shaping station and a steamer at the larger booths where a hat is fitted to a specific head over twenty minutes. Boots, in walls of them, floor to shoulder height, in ostrich and caiman and lizard and plain calf, in eleven widths. Buckles the size of a side plate. Then jeans, shirts, jackets, coats, vests, chaps, gloves, belts, spurs. Then jewellery, which is a category of its own and occupies perhaps a fifth of the floor.

Then, past the middle, it becomes something else. Saddles. Horse supplements. A fencing system. And then, at intervals and with no apparent logic, a hot tub. More than one hot tub. A company selling above-ground swimming pools. A mattress. A booth selling gutter guards, staffed by two men in polo shirts, at a rodeo trade show, in December, in Nevada.

And an aisle of massage chairs, eight of them, where the demonstration never stops. People sit down and are rolled and kneaded for four minutes while a man explains the programs, and then get up, and the next people sit down.

. . .

Things were going on around the edges of it that the brothers walked past without registering.

A woman in a show-services polo shirt was standing at a booth on 600 explaining to an exhibitor that the rack of jackets he had put eight inches into the aisle needed to come back inside the tape, all of it, not four inches of it, because the aisle was the egress. Further down, at 700, a man was crouched at the back of his display with an orange domestic extension cord in his hand, reaching for a floor box, and being told by somebody with a radio that no exhibitor connects anything to the building. He had paid four hundred and something dollars for an electrical drop and it was not switched on yet, and he said so, at some length, and eleven minutes later a man with a set of keys came and opened the floor box and the lamp came on.

Nobody thanked anybody. The orange cord went under the table for the rest of the show.

Neither brother saw any of it. They were looking at a wall of boots.

. . .

"Two and a half hours," said Nathan.

"Two and a bit."

"Two and a half. It shuts at four."

They were standing at the top of aisle 300 with the map they had picked up at the door, which was A3, printed on both sides, and which showed the floor as a grid of numbered rectangles with no indication of what was in any of them.

"There's a desk," said Neil.

. . .

The show office sits against the wall between Doors 3 and 4, behind a counter, under a sign that says INFORMATION.

The Allfather was at it.

He was a large man in a show polo shirt that had been ordered in a size for somebody else, and he had a lanyard and a stack of floor plans and a two-way radio lying on the counter beside him with the volume down, and he was standing rather than sitting, and when the brothers came up he put both hands on the counter and gave them his attention entirely.

"Afternoon," he said. "What can I do for you."

“We’re looking for shirts,” said Neil.

“Western shirts.”

“Yeah.”

“Snap front,” said the Allfather.

“Yeah,” said Neil, who had not known that this was the thing you said.

The Allfather turned the floor plan round on the counter so that it faced them, and put one finger on it, and did not lift the finger for the next four minutes.

“Your best concentration is going to be 400 through 700. Dutton’s on 412, they’re mostly women’s but they carry men’s on the back wall and it’s good stuff. Rock 47’s on 428, that’s Wrangler, that’s your retro cuts. Cinch is 510. Cinch and Cavender’s both, and Cavender’s is a big stand, you’ll see it, it’s the one with the red. Panhandle Slim’s on 604 and they’ll have the sawtooth pockets if that’s what you’re after. Ariat’s got two stands, one on 200 and one on 730, and the one on 730 is the apparel. Then there’s Roper —”

“Sorry,” said Nathan. “How many of these are there?”

“Shirts?”

“Booths with shirts.”

The Allfather thought about it properly. He did not guess and he did not round.

“Sixty,” he said. “Sixty-something. There’s about forty that are apparel primarily and then another twenty-five that carry shirts alongside other things. If you’re counting anything with a shirt on a hanger it’s more than that, because the hat people mostly have a rack.”

There was a pause.

“Right,” said Neil.

“Now. If it’s a working shirt you want, versus a going-out shirt, that’s a different set of booths, because your going-out shirt is your embroidery and your yokes and your contrast piping, and your working shirt is —”

“We want,” said Neil, “the good kind.”

The Allfather looked at him.

He did not look at him unkindly, and he did not look at him for very long, and there was nothing in it that a person could have taken exception to.

"Start at 510," he said. "Then work down to 604. If you've got two hours you'll do the ones that matter."

"We've got two and a half."

"Then you've got two hours," said the Allfather. "The last half hour is people trying to pay."

He straightened up and turned the floor plan back round to face himself, and then he took a pen and drew a small circle on a fresh one and slid it across.

"That's where you are now," he said. "Doors close at four. Announcement's at quarter to."

Then a woman came up behind them wanting to know about strollers, and he moved past the brothers to her, and that was that.

Nathan stood for a second looking at the circle on the map.

Sixty booths. A hundred and thirty minutes. He did the arithmetic before he could stop himself and got two minutes and ten seconds a booth, and put the map in his jacket pocket.

They set off down 300 toward 510.

. . .

Neither of them had ever worked with cattle.

This is worth putting on the record, because for the next ninety minutes it was going to be the operative fact about both of them, and because neither of them was going to say it out loud to the other one at any point.

Nathan had grown up in a house in a subdivision. He had ridden a horse twice, both times on a trail, both times behind a guide. He had once been to a rodeo in Cloverdale on a Saturday evening.

Neil had done all the same things on the same days, being the same family, and had additionally spent eleven years in an office with a view of a container port.

Between them they had, in the matter of ranching, no experience whatsoever, no family connection, no adjacent trade, and no legitimate claim of any kind, and they had come to Las Vegas to buy a shirt.

The shirt had first been mentioned in October, on the phone, as a joke. It had come up again in November, not as a joke, and neither of them had commented on the change. By the first week of December it had a line on a printed itinerary.

They went down aisle 300 past the boots and the hats and the buckles, two men in their forties from a coastal rainforest, looking for pearl snaps.

THE SHIRT

There is a way of picking up a shirt in a shop that says you know what you are looking at, and there is a way that does not, and Neil did the second one for about twenty minutes before he found a system.

The system was: take it off the rack by the hanger, turn it round so the back is toward you, look at the yoke, turn it back, feel the cuff between finger and thumb, look at the price, put it back. He had arrived at it by watching a man of about sixty do it at 510 and he adopted it wholesale, and after that he looked, from four feet away, like a person who had done this before.

Nathan did not adopt a system. Nathan looked at shirts.

. . .

Snap fasteners are the first thing.

They are not buttons, and the garment is organized throughout around the fact that they are not buttons. A pearl snap is a two-part fastener with a domed cap, and the point of it, historically, is that a shirt fastened with them will come open under load rather than tearing, which matters to a man whose sleeve is inside something that is moving. This is the reason. Everyone at the show knows the reason. Nobody says it.

Then the yoke, which is the panel across the shoulders, and which on a western shirt comes to a point — front and back — and which is the single strongest signal the garment sends. A plain straight yoke is a work shirt. A pointed yoke is a western shirt. A pointed yoke with piping along the edge of it is a going-out shirt, and a pointed yoke with piping and embroidery and a second colour is a shirt for a man who is going to be photographed.

Then the pockets, which are flapped, and the flaps are either plain or scalloped or sawtooth.

Then the cuff, which is two-piece and takes two snaps and sits closer on the wrist than a normal cuff does.

Then the tail, which is long, because the shirt is designed to stay tucked in while its owner is being thrown around.

All of this is available to a person in about four minutes at a booth on aisle 510, from the printed cards on the racks and from listening, and both brothers absorbed all of it, and were within twenty minutes discussing yokes with total confidence.

. . .

At 604 Neil found one he liked and held it up against himself and said:

“See, this is what I mean.”

“About what?”

“About the thing I was saying.”

Nathan waited, because there was no point doing anything else.

“The thing about people,” said Neil, “is that after about thirty-five, most of them stop acquiring. Right? You get to a certain point and you’ve got your job and your house and your — whatever, your set of opinions, and that’s the inventory. That’s what you’ve got. And you go into a room and you’re one of forty people with the same inventory, and everybody’s talking about the same eleven things, and you know exactly how the evening’s going to go before you’ve taken your coat off.”

“Okay.”

“And the people who are interesting,” said Neil, “and I mean actually interesting, not people who talk a lot — the interesting ones have a *thing*. It’s not always a big thing. Gurpreet in accounts does bee-keeping. Sixteen hives, out past Aldergrove. Nobody at that company has ever had a conversation with Gurpreet that didn’t get to the bees inside four minutes, and every single person there would tell you he’s the most interesting man on that floor, and he isn’t. He’s a controller. He’s got bees.”

He turned the shirt round and looked at the back of it.

“So the question is whether you acquire something after thirty-five or whether you just stop. And most people just stop. And I don’t want to be a man who stopped.”

“And the shirt —”

“The shirt is not the point.”

“No.”

“The shirt is a *signal*,” said Neil. “It’s a thing you put on and it says: this man has something going on. He’s got a reason for this. And you don’t have to explain what the reason is, and in fact it’s better if you don’t, because then people have to ask, and now you’re having an actual conversation instead of the eleven things.”

Nathan considered the shirt his brother was holding, which was brown — a flat, dark, unfashionable brown, with no pattern on it at all — and which had cream topstitching running along every seam and around both pocket flaps, and a shape stitched into each pocket that after a second resolved into a letter W. It was, in fairness, a good shirt. It looked like something a person would own rather than something a person would buy.

“So what’s the reason?” he said.

“There doesn’t have to be a —”

“No, I know. But if somebody asks.”

Neil thought about it.

“I’ll say I like the shirt,” he said.

“Right.”

“That’s a perfectly good answer.”

“It is a perfectly good answer,” said Nathan, and meant it, and did not add that it was also not the one his brother had spent four minutes explaining the necessity of.

. . .

They went to three more booths and came back to 604, which is what happens.

The woman running it was somewhere in her fifties, in a shirt from her own stock, and she had been on that stand since nine and would be on it until four and had done the same on Friday and Thursday and

Wednesday, and she had the specific flat patience of somebody on day four of ten.

She let them look for a while. Then she came over.

"You want a hand?"

"We're looking at these," said Neil, meaning a rack of about thirty.

"Sure."

"He's a — what would you say, sixteen and a half?"

"Sixteen and a half, thirty-five sleeve," she said, without measuring anything, having looked at Nathan for approximately one second. "You'll want the sixteen and a half. The seventeen's cut generous through the body."

She pulled two off the rack and held them up.

One was plain. The other was covered, edge to edge, in a small dense floral print in white on navy — hundreds of tiny flowers, no ground visible between them, so that from six feet away it did not read as a pattern at all but as a mid-grey-blue with something going on inside it.

"Now that one's a print," she said, "and people get nervous about a print. They shouldn't. You've got to be four feet away before you can see what it is, and by then you're talking to the man, not the shirt."

Then she said:

"What do you run?"

. . .

There was a pause.

It lasted about a second and a half, which is not long enough for anybody to have thought anything through, and Neil said:

"Nothing. We don't. We're from Vancouver."

The woman did not react in any way at all.

"Uh huh," she said.

"We came down for a concert."

"Colter Wall's tonight," she said. "Half my customers are going to that."

"That's the one."

"Right," she said, and took the print one off its hanger. "Then you want this. You're going to wear it tonight and you're going to wear

it at home, and there's no point in a shirt you can only wear in one country. A plain brown one reads as a costume in Vancouver. That one just reads as a shirt."

She turned it round.

"Snaps down the front, snaps on the pockets, snaps on the cuffs. Pointed yokes front and back, but they're the same fabric so you can't see them, which is the reason to have this one and not one with the piping on. And look at it in the light before you decide, because a print like that goes a different colour under fluorescents than it does in the sun and nobody thinks about that."

She held it up against him.

Under the fluorescents it was a dark blue with white in it. In the doorway light coming down the aisle from Door 3 it was lighter and greyer and the flowers came forward, and it was, in both, a very good shirt.

"He'll take it," said Neil.

"I'll take it," said Nathan.

. . .

She was, Nathan understood while she was folding it, being extremely good at her job, and that was not the same thing as her being kind, and he was not going to be able to tell the difference and did not need to.

She had sold a shirt off a sale rack rather than the one three racks over that cost sixty dollars more. She had told him about the light. She had established in one second what size he was and had been right, and she had not once, at any point in it, indicated by so much as a change of expression that two men from the wet coast buying western shirts at a rodeo trade show was in any way remarkable.

There were probably eleven of them a day. Probably more, this week.

Neil bought the brown one at the same time and put it on the counter with Nathan's, and she folded that too, and did not say anything about a plain brown shirt in a country where nobody would know what it was.

"Two hundred and twelve," she said.

They paid separately. Neither of them said what he had paid.

. . .

Across the aisle, at 601, was a demonstration.

The Chaos-Weaver was running it.

The product was a hat-shaping steamer — a chrome thing on a stand about the size of a coffee machine, with a nozzle and a hinged jaw, and the demonstration involved taking a straw hat that had been deliberately deformed, putting it over the steam for perhaps forty seconds, and reshaping the brim by hand while it was hot, so that a hat that had been sat on came back to a crease and a curl in about ninety seconds flat.

It is a genuinely good demonstration. The hat is visibly ruined at the start and visibly correct at the end and it takes less than two minutes, which is the right length, and there is a moment near the end where he runs his thumb and forefinger along the brim edge and sets the curl, and people make a noise.

He did it, by Nathan's count, four times while they were paying.

Between demonstrations he ruined the hat again.

That was the part Nathan noticed. There was one hat. It was the same hat every time. Between each demonstration the Chaos-Weaver took it off the stand and pressed the crown in with the heel of his hand and rolled the brim flat against the table, working quickly, putting it back exactly as wrong as it had been, and then set it down and waited for the next four people to gather, and started again.

He had been doing this since nine in the morning. He would do it until four. He had done it Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

Nobody in any of the four groups bought a steamer.

He did it again.

THE SILVER

At two minutes past three they came off the apparel aisles with fifty-eight minutes left and, by the reckoning of the man at the information desk, rather fewer.

That left the second thing on the list.

Neither wife had ever worn turquoise.

This had not come up. It had not come up in October when the trip was booked, or in November when the plan acquired a second item, or that morning at breakfast, or in the taxi, and it was not going to come up now. Both brothers knew it. Neither of them had said it out loud to the other one, and the reason neither of them had said it out loud was that saying it out loud would have required somebody to then say something else.

There was a version of the afternoon in which they bought a hat, or a candle, or nothing.

They went to look at the silver.

. . .

There is more turquoise in the South Hall of the Las Vegas Convention Center in the second week of December than a person can look at.

It is on velvet trays under glass, in cases with lights inside them, on hanging boards, on rotating stands. It is in cuffs and rings and earrings and pendants and bolo ties and hatbands and buckle sets and concho belts. It ranges in colour from a pale chalky sky through to a deep saturated blue-green, and in some of it there is a web of dark brown running through the stone like the veining in a leaf, and in some of it there is not.

The prices, on the two aisles the brothers walked down, ran from eighteen dollars to nine thousand five hundred.

“Right,” said Neil.

“Yeah.”

They stood there.

. . .

508 was a smaller stand than most of them: one glass case, one backboard, a squash blossom necklace hung up behind, and a man in his seventies with reading glasses pushed into his hair.

The brothers stopped there because it was the nearest case with rings in it and they had to start somewhere.

They were about four seconds from asking him something when the Seeker came up on the other side of the case, and picked nothing up, and said:

“What is this one?”

“Number Eight,” said the man.

“Number eight of what?”

. . .

The silversmith straightened up.

He put his glasses down onto his nose. He took the cuff out of the case and set it on a square of black velvet on top of the glass, and turned it so the light was on it, and said:

“Number Eight is a mine. It’s in Nevada — Eureka County, up in the Tuscarora range, about two hundred and fifty miles north of where you’re standing. It’s been shut since the nineteen-sixties. There’s nothing new coming out of it and there never will be, so everything you’re looking at came out of the ground before about 1961 and has been sitting in somebody’s collection ever since.”

“So there’s a fixed amount of it.”

“There’s a fixed amount of it.”

“In the world.”

“In the world,” said the silversmith.

He turned the cuff a few degrees.

“Now, what you’re looking at with Number Eight is the matrix. That’s the brown and the black going through it. That’s not a flaw and it’s not damage. The turquoise formed in a host rock and the matrix is what’s left of the host rock, and in Number Eight it comes through as a spiderweb, which is what you’re seeing there — that fine dark web all through the blue. That’s what people pay for. You can get a stone with no matrix at all and it’s a cleaner-looking stone and it’s worth less.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s more of it.”

. . .

The Seeker asked what the difference was between that one and the one next to it.

The one next to it was Kingman, which is Arizona, which is still open, which is why it is everywhere and why it is affordable. That took them to the difference between a natural stone and a stabilised one — that most turquoise coming out of the ground is too soft and porous to cut and set, and is therefore impregnated under pressure with a clear resin that hardens it, and that this is standard practice, and is not a fraud provided it is disclosed, and that a natural stone hard enough to cut without treatment is perhaps five per cent of what comes out.

A stabilised stone will hold its colour. A natural one will change over decades, taking oil from the skin of whoever wears it, going greener, and some people consider this the point.

The Seeker asked how you tell.

“You mostly can’t, by looking. You ask, and you buy from somebody who’ll tell you, and you keep the paper.”

“And if the paper is wrong?”

“Then it’s wrong,” said the silversmith.

He said this without heat.

. . .

By this stage the brothers had stopped pretending to look at rings.

They were four feet away with their hands behind their backs, and the Seeker asked one more question, and that took the silversmith into the Indian Arts and Crafts Act.

It is a federal statute. It makes it unlawful to offer or display for sale any good in any manner that falsely suggests it is Indian-produced, or the product of a particular Indian tribe, and the penalties are not small. It is the reason that at that show, on that floor, the signage is careful: some booths say *Navajo silversmith* and some say *Native American made* and some say *southwestern style*, and the third of those is doing precise work.

“So if it says southwestern style —”

“Then it isn’t,” said the silversmith. “That’s what that means. It doesn’t mean it’s bad. There’s very good work coming out of shops that aren’t Native and they’re entitled to sell it and they’re entitled to say what it is. It means it isn’t.”

“And the hallmark?”

That took another six minutes.

A hallmark is the maker’s own stamp, punched into the back of the piece. The stamps are registered informally rather than centrally, and there are reference books. A signed piece by a known hand is worth money on the resale in a way an unsigned one is not. And this particular cuff carried one, which he turned over and showed, and which was a small stylised bear.

The Seeker turned the cuff over and studied the bear.

“Whose is that?”

The silversmith told him. Then he told him what else that maker was known for, and roughly when he had worked, and what had happened to his prices in the last fifteen years, and the Seeker listened to every word of it.

. . .

It ran twenty-one minutes.

The brothers heard all of it — the mine and the matrix and the resin and the Act and the bear — and understood, between them, perhaps a third.

What they understood clearly was the shape of it: that this was a subject; that it had a literature and a vocabulary and a set of arguments; that people spent their lives on it; and that the two of them had walked

into it at three o'clock in the afternoon with forty minutes and no information whatsoever.

At one point Neil turned to Nathan and did a very small thing with his eyebrows that meant *are you getting any of this*, and Nathan did a very small thing back that meant *no*.

The silversmith did not once look over at them.

He was not ignoring them. He had a man in front of him asking the questions he had been waiting eleven years for somebody to ask, and he was going to answer all of them, and the two men at the next case were not part of that, and he would get to them when he got to them.

He did not get to them.

At twenty-six minutes past three the brothers walked away from the only person on that floor who could have told them what they were about to buy.

. . .

They bought at 512, which was four minutes down the aisle.

It was a large stand, brightly lit, with two people working it and a card machine on a stand, and the woman who served them was in her thirties and pleasant and quick, and the transaction took eleven minutes including the queue.

Nathan bought a pair of earrings — small, oval, a blue-green stone in a plain silver bezel with a twisted-wire edge, on a hook. Neil bought a pendant on a chain, a slightly larger stone, cut as a teardrop.

They asked her nothing at all.

She told them what the pieces were called and what they cost and that the hooks were sterling and would not go green, and she wrapped both in tissue and put them in small stiff paper bags with handles, and took two cards one after the other, and said enjoy the rest of the show.

They did not ask which mine. They did not ask whether the stones had been stabilised or left natural, and they did not turn either piece over to look for a stamp, and they did not ask for any paper.

It did not occur to either of them to do any of those things.

That is the part worth sitting with for a second. They had stood four feet from all of it for twenty-one minutes. They had heard the words. And four minutes later, in front of a woman who would probably have

answered anything they put to her, neither of them could get hold of enough of it to know what to ask, and so they asked nothing, and she volunteered nothing, and it was a perfectly good transaction between adults.

They paid separately, and the two small bags went into one of the larger bags, and neither of them said what he had paid.

. . .

There was a mirror on a stand outside the case.

Nathan held the earrings up next to it for a second and put them back in the bag.

He did not know whether they were right.

He knew what colour his wife wore, roughly. He had been paying attention for eighteen years and could have told you, if pressed, the four or five things she reached for and the two she never did. He did not know, and had never once had cause to think about, whether there existed a version of her in which she put on a pair of turquoise earrings on a Tuesday morning in Langley.

There was no way to find out from here. There was, specifically, a way to find out from here — the phone was in his pocket and it was twenty to four in the afternoon in Nevada and twenty to four at home and she would have answered — and he was not going to do that, because doing that would convert the thing from a present into a purchase.

He put the bag inside the bigger bag.

“Right,” said Neil.

“Right.”

Somewhere over their heads the speakers came on.

FOUR O'CLOCK

“Ladies and gentlemen, Cowboy Christmas will be closing in fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes, ladies and gentlemen. Please make your final purchases.”

It was the Allfather.

The system is not good. It is a paging system in a hall built for freight, and it puts the voice out of a hundred small speakers in a ceiling forty feet up, and by the time the sound has come down through the ductwork and the cable trays and the ceiling fans and across twenty-one acres of red carpet with three thousand people talking on it, most of what arrives at floor level is the shape of a sentence rather than the sentence.

Even so. It was unmistakably him, and it was unmistakably somebody who could have done it without the microphone.

Nobody stopped.

Not one person on that floor changed what they were doing. The woman at 512 kept wrapping. The queue at Cavender’s did not move faster or slower. Two men went on discussing a saddle. A child continued to want a hat.

. . .

At the ten-minute mark he did it again.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Cowboy Christmas will be closing in ten minutes. Ten minutes.”

He did not sound impatient. He did not editorialise, or add *please*, or say anything about tomorrow, or thank anybody for coming. He read the time remaining and he stopped.

And at five:

“Ladies and gentlemen, Cowboy Christmas is now closed. Please make your way to the exits. Thank you.”

Which was, Nathan noticed, wrong — it was five minutes to four and the hall was not closed, and several hundred transactions were in progress — and which was also, he understood about four seconds later, entirely correct, because a hall of that size does not stop at four. It starts stopping at four, and it therefore has to be told it has stopped at five to.

. . .

Then the floor emptied.

It did not empty because of the announcements. This was the part Nathan watched, standing near the top of aisle 500 with two bags, while Neil queued to pay for something small he had found at the last minute.

What actually happened was that the exhibitors began, all at once and without any signal that Nathan could detect, to close.

Cash drawers came out from under tables. Card machines went off. A woman at a boot stand started taking things off a display wall and putting them into a plastic tub, and the woman at the stand next to her looked over and saw it and started doing the same, and within about ninety seconds it was moving down the aisle like a wave. Grey dust sheets came out of nowhere and went over the jewellery cases. Somebody dropped a security screen. Lights inside the display cases went off one after another, which changed the colour of the hall.

Then a booth closed its cash drawer, and the two people in front of it had to be told, and were told pleasantly, that they could come back tomorrow, and left.

And the customers, who had ignored three announcements from a voice built for exactly this, looked around at a hall in which the lights were going off in the cases and the sheets were going on and the drawers were shut, and understood immediately, and left.

It took eleven minutes from first announcement to substantially empty.

The Allfather had nothing to do with any of it.

. . .

He came out of the show office at about four minutes past four with a radio in his hand and stood near Door 3 while the crowd went past him, and he said good evening to a number of people, individually, as they went out, and quite a few of them said good evening back.

Nathan went past him with two bags.

"Get what you needed?" said the Allfather.

"We did, thanks."

"510?"

"604 in the end."

"That's a good stand," said the Allfather, and then to the next person, "Evening. Mind the step there."

. . .

Outside it was ten past four and the sun was still up.

That was the thing neither brother had prepared for. They came out of Door 3 into a parking lot the size of a small airfield with the light coming in low and gold across it from the west, over the roofs of about four thousand cars, and it was fully daylight, and the day had not gone anywhere.

"It's four," said Neil.

"Yeah."

"It's four in the afternoon."

Behind them, twenty-one acres of red carpet under a low beige roof, shut. Nine hundred thousand square feet of trade show with the lights coming down in it and the sheets going on, in the middle of the afternoon, on the second Sunday in December, in a city that was at that moment about ninety minutes from properly starting.

Somewhere north of them the Strip was doing nothing much. The card men would not be out for another two hours. The Bellagio fountains were going every fifteen minutes to an audience of about eleven people. The Sphere was showing an advertisement.

The brothers stood in the parking lot in the gold light with three bags between them.

"So we've got —" said Neil.

“An hour and twenty.”

“An hour and twenty. Dinner’s five-thirty.”

Nathan did not say anything about the previous hour and twenty, which had been four minutes at a Starbucks counter, because there was no point, and because he had begun to suspect that his brother knew.

“There’s a monorail,” said Neil.

. . .

There is a monorail.

It runs three point nine miles up the east side of the Strip, behind the properties rather than along the boulevard, on concrete piers, from the MGM Grand at the south end to the Sahara at the north, with five stops in between. It is privately owned. It opened in 2004 and has been in and out of bankruptcy since. It does not go to the airport, which is a mile and a half away, because the taxi industry objected, and it does not go anywhere on the west side of the road at all.

It also stops at the Las Vegas Convention Center, which is why four thousand people were walking toward it.

The station is elevated and reached by escalator, and at the top of the escalator there is a bank of ticket machines with a map on the front of each one — the Strip drawn in axonometric projection, each property as a small three-dimensional block, in the manner of a board game. The Cromwell is a little tan block. The Sphere is a ball with a grid on it. On the machine there was a sticker saying WE HAVE MOVED TO ELECTRONIC TICKETING, over the slot where the tickets used to come out.

Neil bought two on his phone in about forty seconds.

The platform, when they got up to it, was full.

. . .

They got on the second train and stood, because there was no possibility of sitting, and held the rail.

The car was packed to the point where nobody had to hold on, and the doors closed, and it pulled out, and for about ninety seconds Nathan had a view of the back of a hat.

Then he took in the rest of it.

It was, he realized, the first time all weekend that he had been in a room with these people rather than beside them.

At the convention centre they had been customers moving through a shopping floor and the people around them had been other customers, and everybody had been facing a booth, and it had been possible to spend two and a half hours in there and register the crowd as *the crowd*. On a monorail car at twenty past four with eighty people standing up and nowhere to look but at each other, that was not available.

The hats were not costume. That was the first thing. They were shaped to individual heads, some of them years old, sweat-marked at the band, brims set in ways that were clearly personal and had clearly been arrived at over time, and one of them directly in front of Nathan had a repair in the crown.

The boots were worn through at the outside heel. All of them, in the same place, on all of the men and most of the women, because that is where a boot goes when its owner walks in it.

The hands were not office hands.

There was a man to Nathan's left, about sixty, in a canvas coat, holding a plastic shopping bag from a stand at the show, whose fingers were thickened at the knuckle in the specific way that comes from thirty years of rope and wire and cold, and who had a healed split down one thumbnail, and who was talking to a woman about a truck.

Behind them a family of five with two children in boots, one of the children asleep against a mother's leg, upright, at four in the afternoon.

Two younger men in their twenties, both with numbers still stuck to their jackets from a qualifying event, discussing somebody's draw.

An older woman with a shopping bag from 512.

. . .

They were, all of them, going to the rodeo.

That was the other thing, and it took Nathan the length of the ride to assemble it. The Wrangler National Finals Rodeo was on at the Thomas & Mack Center that evening, as it had been every evening since Thursday and would be until Saturday. That was why the city was full. That was why the show existed and why it ran ten days and

why it shut at four in the afternoon, because everybody in that hall had somewhere to be at half past six.

The brothers were going to a concert.

Nathan stood holding the rail with a bag containing a shirt with pearl snaps in it, in a car full of people who were going to watch other people they knew do a job, and understood — properly, for the first time, not as an idea but as a physical fact about the eighty people he was pressed against — that this was a working population having its annual week, and that he and his brother had spent the afternoon shopping in the middle of it.

Nobody looked at them. Nobody had any reason to. Two men in their forties in ordinary clothes on a train are not a subject of interest to anybody.

The man in the canvas coat finished the thing about the truck and shifted his bag to the other hand and said, to nobody in particular, “Long day.”

“Yeah,” said Nathan.

“You in from out of town?”

“Vancouver.”

“Long way.”

“It’s not too bad. Two and a half hours.”

The man nodded slowly at that and said nothing else, and about forty seconds later the train came into Harrah’s/The LINQ and about a third of the car got off and the rest of them closed up the gap.

. . .

They got off at Flamingo/Caesars Palace at twenty-nine minutes past four.

Coming down the escalator, Neil said: “Did you see the kid asleep? Standing up?”

“I saw him.”

“That’s a proper — ” and then he stopped, because he could not think of the end of the sentence, and did not finish it, and neither of them tried to.

They came out at the bottom into the corridor between the station and the property, and it was warm, and there was a slot machine at the end of it, chiming.

They walked past it.

GETTING READY

A new shirt out of a bag has been folded around a piece of card and pinned.

There are more pins than a person expects. There is one through the collar, two down each side of the placket, one in each cuff, and a plastic clip holding the collar points down, and a strip of card inside the collar band, and two of the pins are somewhere the manufacturer did not tell anybody about and are found by hand.

Nathan sat on the end of the bed and took them out one at a time and stuck each one into the little bar of soap from the bathroom, which is what his mother had done, and which is the only reason he knew to do it.

Then he held the shirt up.

It had a crease across the chest and two down each sleeve that had been pressed in at a factory and had been sitting in that fold for some months, and there was no version of the next forty minutes in which hanging it in a bathroom was going to shift them.

So he got the board out.

. . .

There is an ironing board in the cupboard of every hotel room in North America and most people never touch it.

Nathan set it up between the beds and put the iron on to heat and ran a bit of water into it from the bathroom tap, and did the shirt properly, in order: collar first, from the points inward, both sides; then the cuffs, opened out flat; then the sleeves, which are the part people get wrong, because a sleeve has to be laid so the seam runs true or you press a second crease into it and then you have two; then the yokes across the shoulders; then the two front panels; then the back.

It took about eleven minutes.

He had learned to do this at thirty.

He had learned it in the first year of his marriage, in a one-bedroom apartment, from a woman who had watched him take a shirt out of a dryer, put it on, and leave the apartment, and had said nothing about it on that occasion or the next four, and had then, on a Sunday evening, explained her position at some length. The position was that she was not his mother. She said it exactly like that, without heat, in the manner of somebody establishing a fact that would now be operative going forward.

He had learned to iron that week. He had also, over the following months and by the same mechanism, learned to run a wash — whites, colours, jeans, and the separate and slightly ridiculous category of delicates, which go in a mesh bag on cold and do not go in the dryer at all.

He suspected, at forty-eight, that he was better at all of it than she was. He had no way of establishing that and had never raised it and was not going to.

He did Neil's brown one as well, because the board was up.

. . .

The mirror in a Westin bathroom is well lit and unforgiving and there is a second one on the back of the door, which means that a man who turns round to check the back of a shirt is presented with rather more information than he was asking for.

Nathan turned round.

The yokes were pointed, front and back, in the same fabric, so you could not see them unless you knew to look, which was what the woman had said. The print resolved at about four feet, which was also what she had said. The snaps sat flat. The tail was long enough that there was no prospect of it coming out, which was, he understood, what the tail was for.

It fit.

That was the thing he had not expected and had not let himself want. It fit across the shoulders and it fit through the body and the sleeve came to the base of his thumb, and a woman on a trade show

floor had done that in one second by looking at him, and he had been buying shirts for thirty years by holding them up.

He did the cuffs. The two-piece cuff takes two snaps and does not fasten the way a normal cuff does, and he got the first one wrong and had to start again.

Then he stood there in a bathroom in Las Vegas in a blue print western shirt.

He looked, he thought, entirely reasonable. He looked like a man who might have bought this shirt in the ordinary course of things.

Then he thought about the man in the canvas coat on the monorail, and about the hat with the repair in the crown, and stopped that line of thinking on the grounds that it was not going to arrive anywhere useful and there was a table booked in fifty minutes.

He tucked it in and came out.

. . .

Neil was on the far bed with his laptop open and his brown shirt on, and had been on a call for nineteen minutes.

The brown shirt looked, on him, like something he had owned for years. This was partly the shirt and partly the fact that Neil had put it on straight off the board and then done nothing else about it — sleeves rolled twice, collar open, not tucked in.

He was saying, “No, but the point is that if we do that in Q1 then the whole —” and then he saw Nathan in the doorway and stopped, and put his hand over the phone, which is a thing nobody has needed to do for fifteen years and which he did anyway.

“That’s a good shirt,” he said.

“It’s all right.”

“No, it’s a good shirt. It’s better than mine.”

“It’s not better than yours.”

“It is,” said Neil, with the flat confidence of a man who is right about clothes, and took his hand off the phone and said, “Sorry, go on.”

Nathan went and stood at the window.

. . .

The pool was four floors down and the light had gone off the water.

The loungers were as they had been at five o'clock on Saturday and at half past one that morning, folded towels on all of them, and now, at ten to five on a Sunday afternoon in the second week of December, at eighteen degrees, with the light going, there was one man in the water at the shallow end doing nothing in particular and a woman on a lounge at the far side with her shoes off, reading.

That was two people. In two days, that was two people.

The deck closed at eleven. It opened at seven.

Nathan stood there a while and worked out, without doing it deliberately, that a person who was up at seven would have it entirely to himself, and that seven o'clock was three hours before they had to leave for the airport on Monday, and that nothing whatsoever was on the sheet before ten.

He did not say this to anybody.

Behind him Neil said, "Yeah. Yeah. No, put it in the deck and I'll look at it Tuesday," and then, "Okay. Okay. Bye," and closed the laptop.

"Right," he said. "Caesars."

. . .

They went out at four minutes past five.

The lobby had changed shift. There was a young man at the desk now who had not been there on Saturday, and the armchair by the luggage cart had somebody asleep in it again, and it was not the same somebody.

Out on Flamingo Road it was properly evening.

The Strip had come on. It had come on while they were upstairs, in the way it does, so that the walk from the hotel to the boulevard is a walk from a road with a self-storage place on it into something else, and by the time the brothers came level with the Cromwell there were people on the sidewalk in both directions and a man with a stack of cards had started snapping.

The temperature was perfect. Eighteen degrees at five in the evening in December, no wind, and two men who had left snow on the ground on Saturday walking half a mile up Las Vegas Boulevard in nothing but shirts — and it was, for both of them, one of the better twelve minutes of the trip.

Neil did not take a call.

At the crossing they went up the escalator and over the bridge and down the far side, and Caesars came up on their left, enormous and cream and lit from the ground, with the fountains going in the forecourt and a line of cars in the porte-cochère and a Christmas tree in the middle of it about thirty feet high.

“Five-thirty,” said Neil, checking. “We’re eleven minutes early.”

“That’s a first.”

“That’s not a first.”

“That is the first time on this trip,” said Nathan, “that we have been early for anything.”

Neil thought about it for the length of the forecourt.

“Yeah,” he said.

THE DUXELLES

Caesars Palace is not one building.

It is nine towers and a shopping mall and a colosseum and a garden and about twenty restaurants on eighty-five acres, and the front of it — the part everybody photographs, with the fountains and the cypresses and the statuary — is a forecourt three hundred yards deep between the boulevard and the door, so that the property does not so much face the Strip as hold it at arm's length.

The brothers came in past a Christmas tree thirty feet high, and through the doors, and into a lobby with a mosaic floor and a domed ceiling painted with things in the sky, and were immediately somewhere else.

Gordon Ramsay Pub & Grill is at the front of it, off the Roman Plaza, next to the entrance from the boulevard.

You do not go through the casino to reach it. This is worth knowing if you are two men who have spent forty-eight hours not going through casinos: you come in from the plaza, past a statue of three women in stone standing knee-deep in poinsettias under a garland, beside an illuminated sign for a twenty-four-hour restaurant, and the pub is there on your right.

Outside it, on the sidewalk, are heaters and a low rail and about a dozen tables.

Inside it is dark wood.

. . .

It is a pub.

That is the thing about it that neither of them had expected and that both of them noticed in the first four seconds, because the word

Ramsay had been doing work in their heads for four weeks and what the word had been doing was wrong.

It has a bar down one side with taps on it — three dozen of them, in a bank, with the badges facing out — and stools at the bar with backs on them, and dark panelling, and green leather, and low pendant lights, and a floor that is tile at the edges and boards in the middle. There are televisions, and on them, at twenty-five past five on the eighth of December 2024, was a football game with the sound off.

There is a second half to the room where the tables are set for dinner and the lighting comes down and there is an open kitchen along the back with a pass under heat lamps.

So it is two rooms doing two things, which is what a pub is.

The brothers stood at the entrance in a Roman palace in the Mojave Desert, in a British pub owned by a Scot, and it did not feel like a joke, because nothing in it was being done for a laugh. The taps were real taps. The panelling was real panelling. Somebody had put a genuine and expensive amount of thought into making it exactly what it said it was.

. . .

The Allfather was at the host stand.

He had a book open in front of him and a headset over one ear and a stack of menus at his elbow, and he was in a black shirt this time rather than a grey waistcoat, and he was doing the thing he does, which is to be the only person in the vicinity who is not in a hurry.

“Good evening. Do you have a reservation?”

“Five-thirty,” said Neil. “Under —”

“I have you.” He did not look at the book. “You’re at forty-one, which is the two-top along the banquette on the grill side. Would you rather have a booth? I can do a booth, but it’s a four and you’d be at it on your own, and the couple I’d be putting at forty-one are a four-top waiting on two more.”

Neil looked at Nathan.

“Forty-one’s fine,” said Nathan.

“Forty-one,” said the Allfather, and picked up two menus and a wine list, and did not move yet. “There’s a game on in the front. If you

want the game you're better in the bar and I'll feed you from the same kitchen. If you'd rather not have a game, forty-one's away from it."

"Away from it," said Neil.

"Away from it," said the Allfather, and took them through.

. . .

He seated them the way people used to be seated.

He pulled the table out for the man going into the banquette, which was Nathan, and pushed it back in when he was sitting, and put the napkin down rather than handing it over, and laid the menus flat rather than upright, and set the wine list at the exact midpoint between them so that neither brother had been given it.

Then he said, "Your server's Marisol, she'll be about ninety seconds. Water for the table?"

"Please."

"Still or sparkling."

"Tap's fine."

"Tap is fine," said the Allfather, in a tone that removed any possibility of the phrase having been a concession, and went.

He does not own the pub. He does not own the property, or the forecourt, or the three women in stone standing in the poinsettias, or anything at all. He is the man at the front who decides where people sit.

He was extremely good at it. He was better at it than anybody Nathan had ever seen do it, and the difference was so slight and so total that Nathan could not have explained to another person what he had just watched.

. . .

The wine list was leather-bound and about eleven pages.

It goes up. That is the design of a wine list at that kind of property: the first pages are by the glass and are reasonable, and then it moves into bottles, and the bottles begin at something that a person can look at without flinching, and then, over the course of about six pages, it goes somewhere else entirely.

Nathan opened it in the middle, which was a mistake.

He had a page in front of him on which no bottle was under four hundred dollars, and on which one of them was three thousand two hundred, and he read down that page in the way that a person reads a document that is not for him, and then turned back three pages, and then two more, and arrived at the front.

Then he went forward again, slowly, and stopped on the second page of reds, and put his finger halfway down it.

“That one,” he said.

Neil turned the list round.

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s the one I was looking at.”

They ordered it. It was ninety-four dollars and it was, Nathan calculated, a hundred and thirty-three at home, and it arrived and it was excellent, and neither of them said anything about the six pages.

. . .

The Beef Wellington at Gordon Ramsay Pub & Grill costs seventy-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents and is the reason the room exists.

It comes as a section cut from a larger construction: a fillet of beef, roasted and cooled, spread with a duxelles — mushrooms cooked down with shallot and herb until nearly dry, so that it will not steam — then wrapped in crêpe or ham to seal it, then rolled in puff pastry and baked, so that the pastry is done and the beef is medium rare, which are two facts that do not naturally coexist and which the dish exists in order to argue about.

It arrived with potato purée, glazed root vegetables and a red wine demi-glace.

It was, both brothers agreed within the first mouthful, extremely good.

Not surprising. That was the thing about it. It was exactly what it was supposed to be, which is a considerably harder achievement than being unexpected, and the pastry was crisp on the outside and cooked through underneath where the moisture would ordinarily have got it, which is the part that is difficult, and which is why the duxelles is cooked dry, and which is why the dish is on a menu at eighty dollars in the first place.

Nathan converted it. He got a hundred and thirteen dollars.

He ate all of it.

. . .

“Does he ever actually come in?” said Nathan.

He meant it innocently. He was looking at the open kitchen at the back and had asked the question anybody asks in a restaurant with a name over the door, and he expected a shrug, or a no.

Neil put his knife down.

“Twenty-four hours a year,” he said.

“Sorry?”

“He has to be here twenty-four hours a year. Once. Consecutive. It’s in the contract.”

“Which contract?”

“He doesn’t own this,” said Neil. “That’s the thing everybody gets wrong. Caesars owns it. Caesars built it, Caesars hires everybody, Caesars holds the liquor licence, Caesars takes the money. He licenses the name and does the menus and takes a percentage.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because it went through bankruptcy court. And when a thing goes through bankruptcy court the contracts get filed, and when the contracts get filed they’re public, and people read them.”

“You read them.”

“Somebody read them and wrote about it and I read that,” said Neil, with dignity, and picked his knife back up.

. . .

He had, it emerged, retained a considerable amount of it.

Five per cent of gross sales up to ten million. Five and a half from ten to fifteen. Six above fifteen. Paid quarterly. Not profit — sales, off the top, whether the room makes money or not. Ten-year terms with a five-year option. And a clause letting the casino walk away from any Las Vegas location that fails to gross eight million dollars in a year.

“Eight million,” said Nathan.

“Eight million or they can terminate.”

Nathan considered a room with perhaps ninety covers in it on a Sunday evening and began to work out what eight million dollars a

year through that door came to in a night, and stopped, because he was eating.

“And the twenty-four hours.”

“Once a year, minimum, at least twenty-four consecutive hours, and he has to be willing to be photographed,” said Neil. “That’s the actual language. Willing to be photographed.”

“That’s it. That’s the personal appearance obligation.”

“That’s it. In Atlantic City it’s less than that. There he only has to *reasonably consider* coming.”

“Reasonably consider.”

“Reasonably consider,” said Neil.

. . .

The perquisites were where he came alive.

Airfare, first class or private, paid. Three deluxe rooms while he is in town. And — this was the detail Neil had plainly been holding, and which he delivered while cutting into the second half of an eighty-dollar beef Wellington — a thirty per cent discount on incidental room charges.

Nathan put his fork down.

“Thirty per cent off the minibar.”

“Thirty per cent off the minibar.”

“He is taking six per cent of everything that goes through that till, and somebody sat in a room and negotiated him a discount on his minibar.”

“Somebody on *his* side negotiated it,” said Neil. “That’s the part I like. Somebody was in that meeting saying no, hang on, go back.”

They sat with that for a bit.

“There’s one more,” said Neil. “The menu here has to be mostly pub food. It’s specified. It is a term of the agreement that this place serves pub-style dishes.”

Nathan looked down at what was left of his.

“Is this a pub-style dish?”

“That’s the grill side,” said Neil. “The grill side is fine.”

. . .

The Hand was on the grill side.

There is an open kitchen along the back with a pass under lamps, and from table forty-one you could see about two thirds of it, and what was visible was a line with four people on it and a lot of brass and heat.

The pub side was going out fast: fish and chips, shepherd's pie, a burger, a steak and ale pie, plates going up under the lamps at a rate of perhaps one every twenty seconds and away with a runner.

The grill side was not.

The Hand worked the grill and the plancha and the pass together, and he did about one plate a minute, and each of them took as long as it took. Nathan watched him rest a piece of fish on the plancha and then not touch it. He watched him spoon something over a plate four times, and then look at it, and wipe the rim with a cloth from his shoulder, and turn it forty degrees, and put it under the lamp.

At one point a plate came back from the pass and he took it apart and did it again.

Nobody in the room noticed any of this except Nathan, who was facing the right way, and who watched about eleven minutes of it in total over the course of the meal, in pieces, between things Neil was saying.

It was a replica pub with a football game in the front of it, in a Roman-themed casino resort in Nevada, and the man on the grill was cooking as though the room were something else.

. . .

Neil's phone went between courses.

He glanced at it, then at Nathan, and said, "Two minutes," and got up.

He was gone eleven.

Nathan's plate came while he was gone, and Neil's came about ninety seconds after that, and Marisol put it down and said, "Would you like me to hold that?" and Nathan said no, it's fine, leave it, and she left it.

He did not start.

He sat at table forty-one with a Beef Wellington in front of him and his brother's going cold across the table and the wine open between

them, and he watched the kitchen for a while, and he did not pick up his fork.

It was not a decision. He did not decide anything. He simply did not begin, and when Neil came back at seven minutes to six saying sorry, sorry, sorry, Nathan said it's fine, and picked up his fork, and they ate.

"What was it?" he said.

"Nothing. Reforecast. They want the deck by Wednesday and Priya's got the — it doesn't matter."

"Right."

"It genuinely doesn't matter," said Neil, and cut into his, and stopped, and said, "*Oh.*"

. . .

There was a sticky toffee pudding on the menu, and Neil read it out.

"Doors are at seven," said Nathan.

Neil checked his watch, and then did something with his face that Nathan had been watching him do since 1981, which was the face of a man performing a calculation whose answer he had already decided on.

"It's six minutes past," he said. "It's twenty minutes to walk it. If it comes in ten we're out by half past and we're early."

"Is it going to come in ten?"

"It's a pudding."

"It's almost your birthday," said Nathan, to the menu, in the tone of a man reading out a train time.

Neil looked at him.

"It is," he said.

"So."

"So," Neil agreed, and ordered it.

. . .

It came in nine.

Sticky toffee pudding is a sponge made with dates, boiled and blitzed so that the fruit is not visible in it and does nothing but keep it wet and make it dark, baked, and then sauced with cream and brown sugar cooked together until it goes. It is not a subtle object. It is served hot

with the sauce poured over it at the pass so that it is soaking in from underneath by the time it reaches the table, and there was a scoop of vanilla on the side of it that had already started to go at one edge.

Nathan had a coffee, black, his fourth of the day, on the grounds that there were four hours of the evening left and he had slept for five and three-quarter hours and had walked twenty thousand steps the day before, and that this was not the moment.

He sat with both hands round the cup and watched his brother eat a pudding.

Neil did not talk while he was doing it. That was the notable part. Neil talks — Neil had talked through the drive south and the walk back from Mandalay Bay and most of dinner — and for about four minutes he did not say anything at all, and worked steadily from the outside in, getting some sponge and some sauce and some of the ice cream onto each spoonful, which requires a certain amount of arrangement, and which he did every single time without appearing to think about it.

Once, about halfway, he put the spoon down and sat back and said, "Right," and picked it up again.

He got the last of the sauce with the edge of the spoon and then, having got as much as could be got that way, considered the plate briefly and then left it, which Nathan noted as a genuine act of restraint in a public place.

"That," said Neil, "was outstanding."

"You've got sauce on your shirt."

"Where."

"On the pocket. On the W."

Neil looked down, and rubbed at it with his thumb, which made it worse, and then folded his napkin over the end of his finger and dabbed at it with water from the glass, and got most of it, and looked up.

"Gone?"

"Mostly."

"It's brown on brown," said Neil, and left it.

The bill was three hundred and thirty-four dollars including the wine and the pudding.

Nathan put his card down on it and did not dwell on the total for any longer than it took to add the tip, and folded the receipt into his jacket pocket with the others, and there were now six.

On the way out the Allfather said, "How was it?"

"It was very good."

"It's the pastry," said the Allfather. "Everybody thinks it's the beef." And then to a party of six coming in behind them: "Good evening. Do you have a reservation?"

. . .

Outside, on the Roman Plaza, it was dark and eighteen degrees and the fountains were lit.

It was twenty-two minutes past six. Doors at Park MGM were at seven, and Park MGM was three properties south, which is about twenty minutes on foot on a Sunday evening in December in the second week of the National Finals Rodeo.

"So we've got thirty-eight minutes," said Neil.

"We do."

"Which is —" and he stopped, because he was standing on a plaza in a shirt his brother had ironed, with thirty-eight minutes and nothing in them, and he could not think of a single thing to put there.

"Bellagio's on the way," said Nathan.

THE CEILING

Caesars to Bellagio is four hundred yards and takes eleven minutes, because of the bridge.

You cannot cross Las Vegas Boulevard at Flamingo. The brothers went up the escalator on the Caesars side, over the road on the walkway with the traffic underneath, and down the far stairs into the Bellagio forecourt, past the lake, which was doing nothing, because the fountains had gone off two minutes before they got there and would not go again until half past.

"We've got half an hour," said Neil.

"Twenty-eight minutes."

"We could wait for the fountains."

They had, at this point, twice failed to see the Bellagio fountains from a distance of under a hundred yards.

"Doors are at seven," said Nathan.

"Doors are at seven," Neil agreed, and they went in.

. . .

The lobby of the Bellagio has a glass ceiling in it.

Fiori di Como was installed in 1998 and it covers about two thousand square feet of the ceiling directly inside the main entrance. There are over two thousand individual pieces of hand-blown glass in it. It weighs something in the region of forty thousand pounds and it is carried on a steel armature weighing a further ten, which is to say that there are twenty-five tons of material over the heads of everybody standing in that room, held up, and it has been held up every day since the property opened.

The name means flowers of Como and the pieces are usually described as blossoms, which is not quite what they look like.

What they look like, from underneath, is water.

They are discs and cups and ruffles and cones, some of them four feet across, some of them the size of a saucer, in cobalt and orange and violet and a green that is nearly yellow, and some of them are speckled and some are streaked and some are a solid deep blue with a black centre. They overlap at every depth, so that you are not looking at a surface but into a volume, and the ones at the back are smaller and paler and the effect of that is distance. It is closer to looking up through six feet of tidal water at a bloom of jellyfish than it is to looking at a garden.

There were, by Nathan's count, about sixty people in the lobby. Four of them were looking at it.

. . .

The rest were doing the ordinary things.

Two were checking in, at a desk on the far side, with a bellman and a luggage cart. A woman was crossing the room fast with a suitcase, on her way somewhere with a timetable attached to it. Three or four were queueing at a rope for something. A group of six were arranging themselves for a photograph in front of a floral urn at the centre of the room, with their backs to the ceiling, and the man taking the photograph was standing directly underneath the widest part of it and looking at a phone screen.

Past them, along the sides of the lobby, were the shop fronts — Hermès, Valentino, Cartier — lit, with their windows dressed for Christmas.

Nobody was preventing anybody from looking up. There is no sign asking you to look up and there is no rope and no charge and no queue and no hours of admission. It is simply there, twenty-five tons of it, in the room you have to walk through to get to everything else, and about six per cent of the people in that room at half past six on a Sunday evening had their heads back.

Nathan stood in the middle of it with his head back for perhaps forty seconds.

He could not have said what he was looking at. He did not know how it was made or how it was hung or how long it had taken or what

any of it had cost, and he did not try to work out any of those things, and that in itself was unusual enough that he noticed it later.

“That’s a lot of glass,” said Neil.

“Yeah.”

“How do they clean it?”

Nathan did not know how they clean it.

. . .

The conservatory is through the back of the lobby and it was not like that at all.

The Bellagio Conservatory is a botanical garden under a glass roof, about fourteen thousand square feet, and it is changed five times a year by a team of horticulturists who take the previous display out over a week of night shifts and build the next one. In the second week of December it is Christmas.

There was a Christmas tree in the middle of it about forty feet high, wrapped from the floor to the star in white lights and hung with red and gold and pale green — and beside it a gingerbread house two storeys tall with icing along the eaves and icicles down the chimney and hearts pressed into the gable, and a carousel with a white horse on it, and drifts of poinsettia the size of hedges, and a hundred smaller lit trees packed in behind so that the back of the room was a wall of light from end to end.

And at the entrance, flanking the doors, two white reindeer about fourteen feet tall with antlers spread another six, heads turned as though they had just noticed something, in harness in front of a red velvet sleigh.

The room was packed to the point of shuffling.

Every single person in it was looking up, and about a third of them were photographing it, and several were doing the thing where you hold the phone out at arm’s length above the crowd and hope. A woman near the tree was taking a photograph of the star on the top with her arm fully extended and her head tipped right back. A man in a Santa hat was queueing patiently to stand in front of the sleigh. Children were being lifted.

Nathan and Neil went round it in about six minutes with everybody else.

It was very good. It was properly, obviously, extremely well done — a display that a large number of people had built over a week of nights, out of things that were mostly not real, in order to be photographed — and both brothers enjoyed it, and Neil got a photograph of the two of them in front of the reindeer, and Nathan is grinning in it.

Forty feet behind them, through a doorway, twenty-five tons of hand-blown glass hung over an empty patch of marble.

Neither of them mentioned that.

. . .

They came out at seventeen minutes to seven and went south through the casino.

That is the only route. Bellagio to the south exit runs through the gaming floor, and the gaming floor at twenty to seven on a Sunday in December in the middle of the National Finals Rodeo was at about half capacity and rising, with the carpet doing its work and the machines making their noise and the cold air coming down.

They went through it at walking pace with their hands in their pockets.

There was a bank of machines to the right with three people at them and eleven seats empty. There were two blackjack tables open out of six. There was a man at the end of a row who had been there a while, in the posture of somebody who had been there a while.

Neither brother stopped or slowed or looked at anything. Nathan was thinking about whether there was time to get a bottle of water and about the fact that his feet had started again, and Neil was doing something on his phone with the tickets.

They came out of the south doors onto the Strip and turned left, and the boulevard was properly going now — six lanes solid, the fronts all lit, people in both directions, a man with cards snapping about every fifteen feet — and Park MGM was eight minutes away.

“Doors are open,” said Neil, looking at his phone. “It says doors are open.”

“We’re four hundred yards away.”

“I know. I’m just saying they’re open.”
They walked a bit faster anyway.

DOORS

They came into Park MGM at eight minutes to seven through the same doors they had come through on Saturday night for pizza.

Eataly was still going. The counters were lit and the case at La Pizzeria had four things left on it and somebody was cutting a piece off one of them with the scissors, and the brothers went past all of it and down the corridor toward the theatre without either of them mentioning that this was where they had eaten thirty-six hours previously, because it was not, at that moment, interesting.

At the end of the corridor the stanchion line had been unclipped and the doors were open and there was a bag check.

“Anything in the pockets.”

Nathan had a phone, a wallet, a room key, six receipts and a paper bag containing a pair of earrings, which he had been carrying since ten to four and had entirely forgotten about, and which the man looked into and handed back.

“Have a good show.”

. . .

Dolby Live is a five-thousand-seat theatre and it does not feel like one.

It opened in 2016 as the Park Theater and was renamed in 2021 when the audio was rebuilt, and the room is wide rather than deep — the back row is a hundred and forty-five feet from the stage, which is less than half the length of the building it is inside. The ceiling is black steel with acoustic clouds hung in a grid across it, dozens of them, angled, so that looking up is like looking at the underside of something engineered.

There is a floor, which is standing, and two tiers above it.

The brothers were on the first tier, house left, about eleven rows up, which turned out to be a considerably better seat than either of them had understood when Neil bought them in September. From there you could see the stage and the floor and the opposite tier end to end, and by ten past seven the floor was two-thirds full and filling from the front.

The stage was set and empty and lit blue.

Behind it, across the back wall, was a screen showing a photograph of weathered grey barn boards — real ones, photographed, every knot and split in them, thirty feet high — and across the middle of it, in white ornate lettering on a ribbon scroll, LIVE: COLTER WALL AND FRIENDS.

On the stage itself: a drum kit at the back on a riser, two amplifiers, three guitars on stands, a bass, some stools, monitors along the front lip, and, at centre, a carpet.

An actual carpet. Rectangular, pale, laid down on the deck, of the sort that would not be out of place in a hallway.

“Why is there a rug?” said Neil.

Nathan did not know why there was a rug.

. . .

The room was hats.

Not all of it. Perhaps a third, perhaps a bit more, and concentrated on the floor rather than the tiers, and from eleven rows up on the first tier what Nathan was looking at was a standing crowd of two and a half thousand people of whom several hundred were wearing shaped felt.

He had been on a monorail with these people three hours earlier.

Some of them, possibly literally. The show at the Thomas & Mack started at six forty-five and would not finish until ten, so anybody in this room was somebody who had chosen a concert over the go-round, which meant they were here on purpose rather than because it was on.

Neil got two beers, which cost thirty-two dollars.

Nathan converted it, arrived at forty-five, and drank his.

. . .

Kade Hoffman came on at four minutes past eight.

There was no introduction. The house lights came down about ten per cent, which in a room that size is a suggestion rather than an instruction, and four musicians walked out from the wing, and a man in a black hat went and stood on the carpet in front of the centre microphone, and about a third of the room noticed.

He was twenty-one.

Nathan did not know that at the time. What he could see, from eleven rows up and also on the two side screens where the camera was on him, was a young man in a brown western shirt with cream topstitching down the seams and around the pocket flaps, sleeves down and buttoned, a black felt hat with the brim rolled and pulled down low enough that his eyes were not visible at any point, and a sunburst acoustic guitar on a tooled leather strap with a turquoise inlay and two initials on it.

Neil put his hand on Nathan's arm.

"That's my shirt," he said.

It was, near enough. Same brown, same cream stitching, same snap pockets. Neil's had a W on the pockets and this one did not, and Neil's had sticky toffee sauce on it.

"It's not the same shirt," said Nathan.

"It's the same shirt."

Nathan did not tell him it was not the same shirt again, because there was no version of the next four hours that was improved by it.

. . .

He played for twenty-five minutes.

The first song went out into a room that was not listening. That is not a criticism of the room; a room at four minutes past eight with two and a half thousand people in it and a bar still open is doing what rooms do, and there was a considerable amount of talking, and people were still coming in down the aisles and finding people, and the applause at the end was the applause of a crowd being polite to somebody they had not heard.

The second song was the same.

Somewhere in the third, the talking stopped.

Nathan could not identify what caused it and neither could Neil, and they discussed it afterward without arriving anywhere. It was not a big moment. Nobody shushed anybody. There was no point at which the man on stage did anything to seize the room; he did not raise his voice or step forward or address the audience. He stood on a rug with his hat down and played a song, and about halfway through it the noise in the building went down by a measurable amount and stayed down.

What Nathan noticed, in the twenty-two minutes that followed, was the gaps.

Between songs he did not fill them. He said something short — the name of the next one, mostly, and once something about where a song came from that Nathan did not catch over the room — and then there was a pause of three or four seconds while he retuned or shifted his feet, and he simply let it be quiet, and then started.

Most performers cannot do this. Most performers at twenty-one cannot do this at all, because a silence in front of two and a half thousand people is the loudest thing in the building and the instinct is to put something in it.

He did not put anything in it.

By the sixth song the floor had closed up toward the front and there were phones going up, which is the only reliable instrument for measuring a crowd, and by the last one there was a section down at the barrier that was singing along, which meant that somewhere in the room there were people who had come for him.

He said thank you, twice, and named the band, and went off.

The applause was not polite.

. . .

“Right,” said Neil.

“Yeah.”

“No, but *right*.”

“I know.”

“Who is that?”

Nathan found the ticket on his phone, where the bill was printed in descending type size, and read out the name at the bottom.

“He’s third-billed,” he said.

“He’s *third*-billed.”

“He went on first.”

“I know he went on first, I was here,” said Neil, and drank some beer, and said, “That was very good. That was — no. That was very good.”

. . .

Vincent Neil Emerson played next and was excellent.

This is worth being clear about, because of the shape the evening took afterward in the telling of it, and because it would be easy to make the middle of the night into a gap between two things. It was not. He is a considerably more established artist than the man who preceded him, he had a full band and a set of songs the room already knew, and there were people in that building who had bought tickets for him, and he was very, very good, and both brothers enjoyed him without reservation for fifty minutes.

Nathan bought two more beers. Neil did not look at his phone.

. . .

Colter Wall came on at eighteen minutes past ten.

The room stood up. Not the floor, which was already standing — the tiers, both of them, all the way round, which is a thing Nathan had not seen in a seated venue before and which took about three seconds to happen.

He came out in a lilac shirt and a dark hat and stood on the same carpet with an acoustic guitar, and there was a stool beside him with two drinks on it, a plastic cup and a smaller glass, and behind him a bass player in a cream shirt and a straw hat and a drummer in blue plaid, and the barn boards on the screen behind all of them.

Then he sang.

There is no useful way to write down what a voice sounds like, and Nathan, who had listened to the records for two years in a truck and on headphones and through a kitchen speaker, discovered inside about eleven seconds that he had not actually heard it before. It comes out lower than a man that age has any business producing and it does not appear to cost him anything. On the recordings it is remarkable. In a

room, at volume, through a system that cost more than the building it is in, with two and a half thousand people not making any noise at all, it does something to the air.

Neil said something. Nathan did not hear it and did not ask.

He played for an hour and forty minutes.

They knew most of it. There were four or five they did not, from the new record, and the brothers did not know those and did not care, and there was one point near the end when the band went off and he stayed on the carpet on his own with the guitar and did two by himself, and the room was so quiet that a bottle went over somewhere in the tiers and everybody heard it.

He said thank you. He said the name of the town. He said it in a way that a person from that province would recognize and that most of the room would not, and Nathan, sitting eleven rows up on the first tier of a theatre inside a casino in the Mojave Desert, heard a man from Saskatchewan say the name of a place four hundred miles from where he was born, in front of two and a half thousand Americans in cowboy hats.

“There we go,” said Neil.

. . .

It was over at four minutes to midnight.

They came out with the crowd, slowly, down the stairs and through the doors and into the corridor, and the corridor had merchandise tables along one side of it and a queue at each.

Neil bought a Colter Wall t-shirt.

He did not say why he was buying it and he did not explain it to Nathan and he did not deliver any position on what a t-shirt signals or on the acquisition of things after thirty-five. He looked at the sizes, said “extra large,” paid forty-five dollars, took the bag, and moved along.

The last table was much smaller and they were not going to stop at it.

They had a shirt, they had four hours of walking in their legs, it was four minutes to midnight, and the table at the end of the row had one person behind it and three things on it — two designs of t-shirt in short

stacks, and a small cardboard box of foam beer koozies with a name printed on them.

The Companion was behind that table.

“How was it from up there?” she said.

She said it to Neil as he was going past, in the voice a person uses to somebody they have been in the same building with for four hours, and it stopped him, and he turned round, and Nathan stopped because Neil had stopped.

“It was extraordinary,” said Neil.

“Yeah?”

“No, I mean — we didn’t know. We didn’t know he was on. We came for Colter, we’ve had the tickets since September, and then this kid comes out at eight o’clock and there’s about four hundred people talking, and by the third one you could have heard a —”

“The third one,” she said. “Every night. It’s always the third one.”

“Is it?”

“Pretty much every night.”

And then they talked for about four minutes, which neither brother had anticipated and which Nathan stood slightly to one side of, holding a bag.

She had been doing the tour since October. She had done Nashville and Knoxville and Wichita and some others and would do Columbia and Atlanta and Cherokee and Mobile and New Orleans, and then Grand Prairie on the twenty-first, and then home. She said the rooms in Texas were different. She said that on a three-act bill the first act plays to people finding their seats, always, everywhere, and that there is no way round it and no point being upset about it, and that a person who is any good does it anyway for eight months and then one night the room turns up early and it all changes.

She said all this cheerfully, leaning on a folding table, at midnight, at the end of a fourteen-hour day.

Neil told her about the gaps. About the fact that he had not filled them.

She said, “Yeah. He doesn’t.”

And she looked genuinely pleased that somebody had said it, and Nathan — watching from four feet away with two bags and a paper

bag of earrings — thought that this was probably the best thing that had happened to her all evening, and that it had cost nobody anything.

Then Neil picked up a koozie.

He turned it over in his hand. It was foam, black, with the name printed on one side and nothing on the other. It cost eight dollars.

He put it back down on the stack.

“You good?” she said.

“Yeah,” said Neil. “Thanks. Really — thanks.”

“Safe home,” she said.

And they went out.

MIDNIGHT

Two and a half thousand people came out of Park MGM onto Las Vegas Boulevard at four minutes past midnight and dispersed into a street that did not notice.

Coming out of a show in that city does not work the way it works elsewhere. In most places a venue emptying is an event — the road fills, the taxis queue, the pubs on the corner get a surge and everybody knows where those people have been. Here, two and a half thousand people walked out of a five-thousand-seat theatre onto a sidewalk that was already carrying more than that, and were absorbed inside about ninety seconds, and by the time the brothers were level with the Cosmopolitan there was no way to tell who had been at the concert and who had not.

Except for the hats. The hats were everywhere and had been all week and told you nothing.

It was fifteen degrees and dropping.

. . .

They walked north.

It is about a mile and a quarter from Park MGM to Flamingo Road, and they had, at that point, twenty-two thousand steps in them, and neither of them suggested a taxi.

“So the thing about the third song,” said Neil.

“Go on.”

“It’s not that it got better. That’s what I keep — I keep wanting to say it got better and it didn’t. The first two were the same as the third one. I’ve been going over it and they were the same. The room changed.”

“The room changed.”

“So what changed the room?”

Nathan thought about that for most of a block.

"Nothing," he said. "It's just how long it takes."

"How long what takes?"

"Two songs. Two songs is how long it takes for two and a half thousand people to work out that something's happening. It's not him. It's arithmetic."

Neil was quiet for a bit.

"That's grim," he said.

"It's not grim."

"It's a bit grim."

"It's not grim, because he did the first two anyway," said Nathan. "That's the entire — that's what he did. He did the first two exactly the same as the third one, to a room that wasn't listening, and then the room caught up."

They went past the front of the Cosmopolitan with the light coming out of it.

"Yeah," said Neil. "All right. Yeah."

. . .

At Harmon a man put a card in front of Neil and Neil went round him without breaking stride.

There were more of them than on Saturday. They work in threes and fours and the members of each group wear the same shirt as each other, so that a person coming up the sidewalk registers not four men but one repeated four times, which is presumably the point. It was Sunday of the second week and midnight and the sidewalk was thick, and the snapping came from both sides now and at closer intervals, and there were three separate groups of women being photographed with bachelor parties in the two hundred yards before Bellagio, and a man was selling light-up roses out of a bucket.

The Bellagio fountains went off as they came level with the lake.

Both brothers stopped this time.

It is eight and a half acres of water and the jets go up something like four hundred and sixty feet at the tallest, and it is driven by compressed air rather than pumps, which is why it can move that fast, and it runs

to a piece of music every fifteen minutes until midnight and every half hour after that.

The piece of music was Sinatra.

They watched all of it, about four minutes, standing at the rail with perhaps a hundred other people, and at the end of it the water came down and the surface went flat and the lights went off and the crowd made the small collective noise that a crowd makes.

“Third time lucky,” said Nathan.

. . .

Somewhere north of Caesars, Neil said:

“I should have got the koozie.”

“The what?”

“The foam thing. On his table. For a can.”

“You’ve got a shirt.”

“I’ve got a Colter Wall shirt,” said Neil. “Everybody in that building has got a Colter Wall shirt.”

He said it lightly, in passing, as a joke about himself, and did not stop walking, and left it there, and Nathan said “get one online” and Neil said “yeah,” and they went on up the boulevard.

That was the first time.

. . .

They came off the Strip at Flamingo at twenty-six minutes past twelve and the city stopped again, in the same place, in the same way.

The self-storage. The fenced lot under the sodium light. The bus shelter with the personal injury lawyer on it. A block and a half of nothing, at half past midnight, with two men in western shirts walking along it carrying paper bags.

“Twenty-three thousand,” said Neil, looking at his phone.

“Seven hundred and ninety-three,” said Nathan, looking at his.

“That’s not the same.”

“It’s never the same.”

. . .

The lobby had the young man on the desk and nobody else in it.

There was a luggage cart by the elevators with four bags on it, tagged, waiting for a pickup at some hour that made sense to somebody, and the printer behind the desk was doing something, and the armchair was empty.

In the room, Neil took the brown shirt off and looked at the pocket where the sauce had been and hung it over the back of the chair rather than putting it in the case, which Nathan noted.

Nathan hung his up in the wardrobe on a hanger.

Then he sat on the end of the bed with his phone and set an alarm for quarter to eight, which was an hour and a half before anything on the sheet, and put the phone face down on the nightstand.

"What time's checkout?" said Neil, from the bathroom.

"Eleven."

"And the flight's twelve-forty."

"Twelve-forty."

"So we've got the morning."

"We have got the morning," said Nathan.

He did not say anything about the pool. He had now not said anything about the pool for thirty-one hours, across two conversations in which it would have been entirely natural to mention it, and by this point saying it would have required an explanation.

Neil came out of the bathroom.

"That was a very good day," he said.

Which was, Nathan thought afterward, the only summarising sentence either of them produced in three days, and it was five words long and his brother said it with a toothbrush in his hand and then got into bed.

"Yeah," said Nathan.

"That was a *very* good day."

"It was."

The air conditioning came on.

At some point after that they both went to sleep, and neither of them said anything about the shirt, or the lap times, or the twenty-one-year-old, or the eight-dollar foam thing on the folding table, and the room

was dark, and four floors down the pool lights were on over an empty deck with the towels folded on every lounge.

DAY THREE

Monday, 9 December 2024

THE POOL

The Pool

. . .

The alarm went at quarter to eight and Nathan turned it off inside two seconds, which took some doing from a lying position in the dark, and then lay there to hear whether it had woken his brother.

It had not. Neil was face down with one arm off the side of the bed.

Nathan got up, found his shorts, put a hotel robe on over them, took a towel off the rail, and then, at the door, went back for the book.

It was the new Tchaikovsky, a trade paperback, six hundred-odd pages, and it was in the outside pocket of his case where he had put it on Friday night, and it had made two flights and two nights in a hotel room and had not been opened once. The receipt was in it at page one, doing duty as a bookmark.

He had bought it three weeks earlier with the specific thought that there would be a morning on this trip, and had then built no such morning into anything, because he had not been the one building.

He went out of the room and down the corridor to the elevators at eight minutes to eight in the morning without making any noise at all, which was the single most competent thing he managed in three days.

He stopped in the lobby for a coffee.

The Starbucks counter had one person working it and nobody in front of it, and Nathan bought a large black coffee with a plastic lid, and did not convert it, and carried it back to the elevator and pressed 4.

. . .

The deck was empty.

He had known it would be. He had looked down at it eleven times in two days from a window on the eighth floor and had seen a total of two people on it, and had done the arithmetic on that, and had set an alarm accordingly.

Knowing it and coming out onto it are different.

The doors open at the west end and what you get is about ninety feet of concrete deck around a rectangular pool, the water lit from underneath, no wind on it, the surface holding the shade structures and the sky on it in one piece. There are two large steel canopies, cantilevered, one along each side, dark grey and angular and hung out over the loungers with nothing visible holding up the far edge. Down the north wall are cabanas with striped awnings, four of them, all with the curtains tied back. In the corner is a hot tub with steam coming off it.

The loungers are dark woven wicker with black cushions, in two rows, perhaps thirty of them.

Every one had a folded white towel on it.

Nobody had unfolded any of them.

Nathan stood there holding a coffee and looked at thirty loungers with thirty towels on them.

. . .

The sun was low and directly ahead of him, coming up over the buildings on the east side of Paradise, laying a line of white down the middle of the water from the far end to the near.

It was in his eyes. That was the first thing he had to solve.

He worked along the row, checking the angles, and then along the second row, and then went back to a lounge three from the end of the near row where the edge of the canopy came down far enough to take the sun off his face while leaving the rest of him in it, and stood beside it and considered it, and then moved one along.

He was, at this point, choosing between thirty identical unoccupied loungers. He gave it about ninety seconds.

Then he took the towel, unfolded it, laid it out along the lounge the way you do, squared the corners, put his coffee and the book on the low table, took the robe off, hung it over the back, and lay down.

. . .

The temperature was seventeen degrees and rising.

Nathan lay on a wicker lounge on the fourth floor of a hotel with no casino in it, at four minutes past eight in the morning on the ninth of December, in shorts, with a coffee, in the sun, and did some sums.

The sums were the best of the trip.

A cabana at a Strip property in December starts at something like three hundred and fifty dollars and goes to a thousand, and that is for a day, and what it buys you is a lounge and a towel and a bottle of water and somebody to bring you things. He had seen the prices on a board somewhere over the weekend and had filed them the way he files that sort of thing. Four cabanas, forty feet away, empty, curtains tied.

He had a lounge, a towel, a water dispenser by the door, and no requirement to tip anybody.

He converted the top of the range, because he was enjoying himself, and got fourteen hundred and ten, and then lay there for a while in possession of fourteen hundred and ten Canadian dollars' worth of nothing, obtained by setting an alarm.

He drank some of the coffee.

. . .

Over the parapet at the north end, four hundred yards away and standing clear of everything around it, was the High Roller.

He had not expected that. From the eighth-floor window it had been part of the general arrangement of things to the north-west and he had not separated it out. From flat on his back on a lounge it was directly in the frame — five hundred and fifty feet of white ring against a sky with nothing else in it, the LINQ sign underneath it in red.

It was turning. He established this by picking one cabin and holding it against the edge of the building for about forty seconds.

There were, so far as he could tell, no people in it.

Thirty-five dollars, he thought. Fifty-five after seven.

He lay on his back with it in the frame and drank his coffee and did not get up.

. . .

Two floors of the tower were in shadow and the rest was in sun, and somewhere on the eighth, behind a window Nathan could have located if he had turned his head and counted, his brother was on the first of the morning's calls.

He had not asked what time they started. He had not needed to. Neil had said "I've got a couple of things at eight" on the walk back from the Strip, in the middle of a sentence about something else, and Nathan had said nothing about that either.

So Neil was upstairs at eight in the morning, in a hotel room, in Las Vegas, on the last day of a trip he had spent four weeks planning, saying *can everyone hear me* to a screen.

And Nathan was down here.

. . .

He got in at twenty past.

The water was heated to about twenty-eight and the air was seventeen, and the difference between those two numbers is the argument for a heated pool in December, which is that getting in is an event.

He went down the steps at the shallow end rather than diving, because he is forty-eight, and stood chest-deep at the 3 FT 11 IN marker with his arms out on the surface, and then pushed off and swam the length underwater, and came up at the 4 FT 8 IN end, and did that twice more.

Then he stopped swimming and stood at the deep end with his back against the wall and his elbows up on the coping and looked down the length of the pool at the sun coming over the buildings.

There is a particular thing that happens with a heated pool in cool air, which is that the surface steams. Not much — a thin drift of it, an inch or two deep, moving very slightly, so that the water appears to be giving something off.

He was in for about eleven minutes.

. . .

Then he got out, and dried off, and lay back down, and let the sun do the rest of it.

His legs had things to say. Fifty-eight thousand steps in two and a half days is not a distance a man with a desk job covers in the ordinary course of events, and both calves had been notifying him since the walk back from the Strip, and the sun on them at half past eight in the morning was doing more good than anything he could have bought.

He picked up the coffee. It had gone lukewarm. He drank it anyway. Then he picked up the book.

It took him a minute to get into it, because it always does with Tchaikovsky and because he had not read anything longer than a menu since Friday, and he went back over the first page twice before it took. There is generally a species to be worked out before anything else can happen.

Then it took.

He read for about forty minutes without stopping, on his back on a wicker lounge in the sun with his knees up, one hand holding the book above his face and the other flat on his chest, turning the pages with a thumb. Somewhere in there he stopped hearing the traffic on Flamingo Road. He got to the end of a chapter and did not put it down. He got to the end of the next one and did.

Eleven pages on Friday night in bed, twice, both times asleep inside four minutes. Forty-one pages on a Monday morning in Nevada.

At about twenty to nine a member of staff came out with a clipboard and did something to the chemical reading at the far end and went back in. She said good morning. Nathan said good morning.

That was the only other person on that deck at any point.

. . .

He went back up to the room at ten past nine.

On the way to the elevator he passed the towel stand, where there was a stack of about forty of them, folded, and behind him, three from the end of the near row, one white towel out of place, and the receipt from a bookshop in Langley now at page fifty-two.

He had been up there for an hour and eighteen minutes.

He said nothing about it in the elevator, because there was nobody in the elevator. He said nothing about it in the corridor. He came into the room with wet hair and a robe on, and Neil was sitting on the end of the bed with the laptop open on the desk and a headset on, and held up one finger.

“Sorry,” Neil mouthed.

Nathan waved it off and went into the bathroom and shut the door and got into the shower, and did not mention the pool at any point that day, or on the plane, or at any time afterward.

CHECK-OUT

While his brother was in the shower, Neil closed the laptop and sat on the end of the bed with the sheet in his hand.

It was creased along its folds and it had gone soft at the corners and there was a coffee ring on it from Giada. Everything on it had happened. Breakfast at nine and the car at nine-forty and the track at ten and the hall at one-thirty and out at four and a table at five-thirty and doors at seven. All of it. In order. He had built the thing in October at his kitchen table over four evenings and it had worked, every line of it, in a city with one road through the middle during the busiest week of its year, and he had not had to move a single item.

He sat there and let himself have that for a bit.

Then he did the other sum, which was that in seventy-two hours he had taken eleven calls, and that he could account for all eleven, and that not one of them had needed him. Zurich had not needed him. The reforecast had not needed him. He had stood on a terrace at Pinky's for eleven minutes on a Saturday night saying *sure, sure* to people who were not looking at him, and had come back and drunk a cocktail that cost twenty-six dollars.

He was forty-six and had spent four weeks building the best three days he could think of and had spent a measurable fraction of them somewhere else.

He did not do anything about that. He did not resolve to do anything about it, and he did not mention it, and by the following Wednesday he would be back in it entirely.

But he sat on the end of a bed in a hotel in Las Vegas with a folded piece of paper in his hand and knew it, for about ninety seconds, which is longer than most men get.

Then the shower went off, and he put the sheet in the outside pocket of his case, and got up.

. . .

Packing took eleven minutes and most of it was the parcels.

There were four of them by then: two shirts in tissue in paper bags with handles, a small stiff bag with a pair of earrings in it, a slightly larger one with a pendant, and a soft plastic bag containing an extra-large Colter Wall t-shirt that had been folded by somebody at a merchandise table and had come unfolded in the night.

Nathan put the earrings in the middle of his case with clothes round them, which was more care than a pair of earrings in a padded box required, and which he did without thinking about it. He put the shirt he had ironed on Sunday afternoon flat across the top, sleeves folded back, and put nothing on top of it.

Neil put his own things in more or less at random and then stopped, and went back, and took the brown shirt out and folded it properly and put it on the top layer.

Then he took the Colter Wall shirt out of its bag, and shook it out, and held it up, and took off the polo he had put on after his shower, and put the tour shirt on.

Nathan watched him do this and said nothing.

"There's still sauce on the other one," said Neil.

"There is."

"I'm going to get that out."

"You are not going to get that out."

"I'm going to try," said Neil, and zipped the case.

Then, doing up the strap, he said:

"I could get the koozie off the website."

"You could."

"They'll have a website."

"They'll definitely have a website," said Nathan.

That was the second time.

. . .

The folio came under the door at some point between the shower and the packing and Nathan picked it up on the way past.

It was one page.

Room rate, twice. Resort fee thirty-five dollars, twice, plus tax, twice. Two coffees from the lobby counter at the beginning of the itemised section and one at the end. That was all of it, and the total was at the bottom, and Nathan read it and did not say the number.

Under the line for the resort fee, in the same six-point type, was the breakdown of what the resort fee had provided.

Wireless internet, two devices. Fitness centre. Sauna and steam room. Two bottles of water daily. One dessert per stay.

Ten dollars slot play.

Ten dollars table play.

Nathan read that twice, because he wanted to be sure of it, and he was sure of it: seventy dollars plus tax had been paid over two nights, and twenty dollars of the value of that had been issued in the form of a credit at a hotel two and a half miles away on Tropicana Avenue that neither brother had at any point been inside, and that credit had not been used, and could not now be used, and was not refundable, and had never been intended by anybody to be any of those things.

He folded the folio in half and put it in his jacket pocket with the receipts, of which there were now nine.

He did not say anything about it to his brother.

. . .

There was nobody at the desk that either of them had seen before.

The young woman checked them out in about forty seconds without saying anything except good morning and here you are and would you like the receipt emailed, and Neil said yes, and it was done.

The bell desk took the cases and gave them a ticket with a number on it.

“Back by?”

“Eleven-fifteen,” said Neil.

“They’ll be here.”

And that was the Westin.

They went out through the doors at eleven minutes to ten into eighteen degrees and a completely clear sky, and turned left on Flamingo Road, and walked the block and a half in the direction they had walked it four times already, past the self-storage and the fenced lot, into the top of the LINQ.

. . .

The LINQ Promenade at ten in the morning is a different street.

At one o'clock on Sunday morning it had been string lights and a thirty-foot tree and forty people eating burgers. At ten on a Monday it was a lane with the shutters half up, two men hosing the paving, a delivery trolley outside a shop, the burger place dark, and the tree still going but pointless in daylight.

The High Roller was turning over the top of it against a sky with nothing in it at all.

Favorite Bistro is about halfway along on the left, near the fountains, across from the ice bar, and it has a patio out front under an awning with heaters on poles and about twenty tables, and at ten o'clock on the ninth of December it had four of them occupied.

It opens at eight. Brunch runs until one.

It is French. Specifically it is the first American restaurant from the people who own a café in St-Tropez that has been there since 1887 and is on approximately every postcard of the town, and what they have built with that pedigree is a bistro with a heated patio on a pedestrian lane in the Mojave Desert, four hundred feet from a five-hundred-and-fifty-foot observation wheel, opposite a bar made of ice.

The menu offers steak and eggs, lobster benedict on a croissant, brioche French toast, a hangover burger, and avocado on multigrain with a poached egg and pumpkin seeds.

Nathan read all of that and thought that of everything he had seen in three days, this was the one he would have the most difficulty explaining to somebody at home.

. . .

They sat outside because the heaters were on and because it was eighteen degrees.

“We’ve got thirty-five minutes,” said Neil.

“For breakfast.”

“For breakfast, and then Roper’s at the Horseshoe, which is four minutes that way, and then we’re back at the hotel by eleven-fifteen.”

“And the flight’s twelve-forty.”

“Twelve-forty.”

Nathan did the arithmetic on that, out of habit, in a different currency — thirty-five minutes for breakfast, twenty for a trade show, twelve to get back, and an airport at the far end of it — and arrived, as he had arrived at intervals since Saturday, at a number that did not work and had no intention of working.

“That’s tight,” he said.

“It’s fine.”

Nathan ordered the steak and eggs. Neil ordered the lobster benedict, because it was on a croissant, and said so twice.

The coffee came in a pot.

. . .

It was, both of them agreed, very good.

The steak was a flat iron, sliced, medium rare, with two eggs and potatoes, and the benedict came on a croissant that had been split and toasted so that the layers went crisp at the cut edge, and the hollandaise was properly made and had not broken, and there were two of them on the plate, and Neil ate both.

They were done in twenty-eight minutes, which was four minutes better than the plan, and Neil said so.

While they were waiting for the card machine, Nathan sat back and looked up.

The wheel went round. It went round at the speed it always goes round, which is slow enough that you have to pick a cabin and hold it against something to see it move, and it was full of daylight and empty of people, and it had been doing that every day since 2014 whether anybody was in it or not.

Two hundred and fifty feet away on the other side of the lane there was a bar made entirely of ice, kept at minus eight degrees, in a desert, staffed by people in parkas.

The bill was a hundred and four dollars.

Neil reached for it. He did it absently, mid-sentence, without looking down, the way a man does who has been the one paying for four weeks — a hand out, palm up, two fingers already moving toward the folder.

“No,” said Nathan.

He said it flatly and without emphasis and did not follow it with anything, and put his own card on the folder and slid it to the edge of the table.

Neil put his hand back.

“Right,” he said.

Nathan paid it, and folded the receipt into his jacket pocket with the others, and stood up.

“Right,” said Neil, and looked at his watch. “Horseshoe.”

ROCK'N J

The Horseshoe is four minutes from the LINQ and used to be called something else.

It was Bally's until 2022, and before that it was the MGM Grand, and it is one of the reasons the Strip is difficult to hold in your head: the buildings do not move but the names come off them every so often and go up somewhere else, so that a person who came here in 1995 and came back now would be looking at a hotel he had stayed in, under a sign he had never seen, and would not be entirely sure.

They went in at twenty-nine minutes past ten.

. . .

The Roper Cowboy Marketplace runs during the National Finals and it is not at the convention centre.

It is in the ballrooms. This is the first thing about it and it changes everything else: where Cowboy Christmas is twenty-one acres of concrete and red exhibition carpet under a beige industrial roof, Roper is a hotel function space — patterned carpet, low ceilings, mirrored columns, chandeliers — with about two hundred exhibitors set up in it in rows.

There are chandeliers over the boot racks. There is a cut-glass fitting the size of a car hanging from a coffered ceiling above a folding table with belt buckles on it.

It is smaller and warmer and quieter than the convention centre and the aisles are narrower, and the effect of putting a western trade show inside a room designed for weddings and awards dinners is that everything in it looks slightly better than it is, which is what that lighting is for.

It runs nine to five. They had twenty-five minutes.

. . .

Neil went in with a plan, because of course he did, and the plan lasted about ninety seconds.

“So I want to look at belts, and there’s a bit down the back with —”

And then he stopped, because they had come round the end of the first row.

. . .

There was a deer.

It was mounted on a reclaimed wooden door, propped upright against the back of a booth, and it was a white-tailed buck, and it had been taxidermied and then done to.

The face was pale, almost white, and had been painted — not crudely; properly, by somebody who could paint — with a wash of pink coming up the muzzle and across the cheeks. There were false eyelashes on both eyes, long ones, individually applied. A heart had been laid out on the forehead in rhinestones and outlined in a second colour, and the muzzle had been done in them entirely, hundreds of them, so that the nose was a solid cluster of stones catching the chandelier.

The antlers were eight points and had been dipped in rose gold from the base up and then rhinestoned along the last three inches of every single tine.

The neck was floral. Somebody had painted it — cabbage roses in pink and cream, leaves in green and turquoise, over a pale ground, taken all the way round and down to the mount — and where the neck met the board there was a collar of silk flowers, red and cream and dusty pink, with a jewelled centre in each one.

The tag hanging from the left antler said ROCK'N J FARMS and, underneath, in ballpoint:

\$860

. . .

Nathan stood in front of it for some time.

He converted it. It came to twelve hundred and thirteen dollars and eighty cents, which arrived before he had decided to work it out, and which did not tell him anything at all, because there was nothing to compare it to and there never would be.

“Neil.”

“I see it.”

“No, but —”

“I see it,” said Neil.

They stood there together, two men from Langley and Vancouver with a flight at twelve-forty, in a ballroom at the Horseshoe, in front of a rhinestoned deer.

“Somebody made that,” said Nathan.

“Somebody made that.”

“That took — how long does that take? The eyelashes. Somebody sat down and did the eyelashes.”

“There’s about four hundred stones on the nose.”

“There’s more than four hundred.”

A woman at the booth said, “That one’s my favourite.”

She was in her fifties, in a denim jacket with beadwork on the shoulders, and she was not selling. She had come over because two men had been standing in front of it for a while, which is a thing that happens at that booth.

“Do these sell?” said Neil.

“That one’ll go before Saturday,” she said. “They always do. It’s the last one I’ve got.”

“Who buys it?”

“Somebody with a room for it,” she said.

. . .

Neil considered it.

Nathan watched him do it, and it was not a joke. He stood there with his hands in his pockets in front of a rhinestoned deer head for the better part of a minute with the expression of a man running an actual calculation — where it would go, whether it would go, what would be said about it and by whom, what it would cost to get home,

and whether a man of forty-six could hang that on a wall in Vancouver and live with the consequences.

Nathan could see all of it happening.

He said nothing, because there is a version of a brother who says something at that moment and Nathan has never wanted to be him, and because there was a part of him — a real part, not a small one — that wanted to see what would happen.

Then Neil breathed out through his nose and said, “Yeah.”

And that was all he said, and they moved on down the aisle.

. . .

He bought a belt.

It took eleven minutes and involved three booths and a certain amount of doubling back, and the belt he ended up with was plain tooled leather with a plain buckle and no stones on it of any kind, and it cost ninety dollars, and it is a very good belt and he still wears it.

. . .

While he was doing that, Nathan found the jackets.

They were at the end of the row, six or seven of them on a rail, and they were championship jackets — the kind that gets awarded at an event rather than bought, or at least the kind that is made to look as though it does. Tooled leather, front and back, worked over every square inch of it: floral scrollwork cut into the hide with a swivel knife and then stamped and shaded so that the pattern stood up off the ground, running across both shoulders and down both sleeves and over the yoke, with a panel at the back where a name and a year would go.

The one on the end was a mid brown, nearly tan, and had been done all over in a running rose pattern with the background stippled down so the roses came forward, and the collar and cuffs were plain, and it was about eleven hundred dollars.

Nathan took it off the rail and held it up.

Then, because the woman running the stand said go on, he put it on.

. . .

It fit. Of course it fit; it was an extra large, and the one on the end was the only extra large on the rail.

He stood in front of a mirror propped against a mirrored column in a ballroom at the Horseshoe, in a floral-tooled leather championship jacket, at twelve minutes to eleven on a Monday morning, and considered himself for rather longer than he would have wanted anybody to know about.

The thing is, it looked all right.

That was the difficulty. It looked considerably better than all right. He is a big man and it hung correctly off the shoulders and the tooling did not read as costume from four feet away.

He put his hands in the pockets, which is a thing you do in a mirror without deciding to, and the pockets were lined, and there was a small inside one at the left breast that had been stitched in by hand.

He turned side-on.

The back panel is where the work is. The roses run up from the hem in a single continuous scroll that gets denser toward the shoulders, and the ground between them has been stippled down with a background tool so the pattern stands proud of it, and somebody had done that a square inch at a time with a mallet, in order, without being able to undo any of it.

He put a hand round and felt it, which he had not intended to do.

Then he stood there and ran the following, in order:

That he could wear that. That he could wear that to something. That there is a pub on the Fraser Highway where a man could walk in wearing that on a Friday and it would go one of two ways and one of the two ways was good. That he had not owned a piece of clothing that anybody had ever remarked on in nineteen years. That in three days he had acquired one western shirt and had discovered on Sunday evening in a hotel bathroom that it fit him better than anything in his wardrobe, and that this jacket was the same thing with the volume up.

That his brother, who was four aisles away buying a belt, had spent forty minutes on Saturday explaining why a man ought to acquire something after thirty-five.

He did not convert it.

That was the tell, and he knew it at the time, standing in front of a mirror in an eleven-hundred-dollar jacket doing no arithmetic whatsoever, because the arithmetic would have finished it and he was not ready to finish it.

He stood there for a bit longer.

There was no reason he could not have it. That was the other thing, and it arrived late, and it was true: he had a job and no debt and a return flight and a credit card in his pocket, and there is a version of a man who buys a thing like that on a Monday morning in a foreign country for no reason at all and is a slightly different man afterward.

He was aware of standing about four feet from that version.

Somebody came past behind him and he moved out of the way, and the moment had a shape after that which it had not had before, which was the shape of a thing you are going to talk yourself out of.

Then he took it off and put it back on the rail and squared the shoulders on the hanger, which nobody had asked him to do.

"It suits you," said the woman.

"It does, doesn't it," said Nathan.

And he left it there.

. . .

They came out at four minutes to eleven.

. . .

Behind them, in a ballroom under a chandelier, on a reclaimed door, an eight-point white-tailed buck with rose gold antlers and false eyelashes and a rhinestone heart on its forehead waited for somebody with a room for it.

. . .

The walk back to the Westin was eight minutes and they did it in seven.

The cases were where the ticket said they would be. The young woman at the bell desk brought them out and Neil gave her ten dollars and she said have a good flight.

Neil ordered the car from the app on the sidewalk outside, and it said six minutes, and it was four.

The driver put the cases in the trunk and said, "Airport?"

"Airport," said Neil.

They got in, and pulled out onto Flamingo Road, and went east, away from all of it.

DOCUMENT CHECK

Harry Reid International is eight minutes from Flamingo Road on a Monday morning and they were there at eleven minutes past eleven.

Terminal 3, upper level, departures. The driver put the cases out on the curb — there is a curb at departures; it is only arrivals that has been abolished — and said have a good one, and drove off, and that was the last vehicle either of them was in on that side of the border.

Bag drop took nine minutes.

The case was over. Not badly: fifty-two point one pounds against a limit of fifty, which the woman at the desk read, and then considered Nathan, and did not mention, and put the tag on.

“Gate D-something,” she said. “It’ll be on the board. It’s a train.”

“A train?”

“There’s a train to the D gates. It’s about four minutes.”

. . .

The queue for security ran along a stanchion maze that had been set out for four times as many people as were in it.

They did every turn of it anyway, because nobody has ever cut a corner off a stanchion maze in the history of aviation, and went up and back and up and back through eleven turns of empty rope while a recorded voice explained about liquids in a loop that ran every ninety seconds and had been running since about 2006.

At the head of it there is a podium.

Not the scanners; those are further along, and there are five lanes of them, and bins, and a man saying laptops out. The podium is the first thing, and it is one person at a lectern with a small light on it, and what happens there is that you hand over a boarding pass and a piece of identification and the person looks at both of them and then at you.

The All-Seeing was at the podium.

. . .

He took Nathan's passport and his boarding pass together, without looking up.

He opened the passport at the photograph page and put it flat under the light. He read the boarding pass. He went back to the passport. Then he raised his head and held Nathan's face for about two seconds, which is longer than anybody looks at anybody, and then back at the photograph, and then at the face again.

Nathan, who had been photographed for that passport four years and eleven kilograms ago, stood there and let it happen.

"Thank you, sir."

He handed both back and turned to Neil and did the same thing, and the two seconds on Neil's face were the same two seconds, and then Neil got his back as well and they went through.

Ten feet later they took their shoes off and put their laptops in separate bins and stood in the millimetre-wave machine with their arms up like everybody else, which is a different officer's station and not his.

Nathan's belt buckle went through the bin.

. . .

They came out the other side at twenty to twelve with fifty minutes and the gate was at the end of a train ride.

The concourse had slot machines in it.

They were in banks along both walls between the shops, thirty or forty of them in that stretch alone, lit and chiming softly to a corridor of people wheeling cases, and there were three people playing them, and one of those three was a woman in a fleece with a coffee beside her who had the settled look of somebody with an hour and a half.

The brothers walked past them. Neither slowed. Neither looked.

They had now been within twenty feet of a slot machine on nine separate occasions in three days, in an airport, three hotel lobbies, two casino floors, a corridor and a monorail station, and had not put a single dollar into one, and the reason for this was not principle or thrift

or disapproval. It was that neither of them had ever thought of it. It had not occurred to either of them to gamble in Las Vegas in the same way that it does not occur to a person to swim in a hotel fountain.

Neil said, "Do you want a water?"

"I'd take a water."

The water was six dollars and ninety-nine cents.

. . .

The train to the D gates is an automated shuttle with no driver, and while they were standing on it holding a rail a woman got on and stood across from them with a canvas shoulder bag over one arm.

She was somewhere in her thirties, in a hooded sweatshirt, with a lanyard still round her neck and the pass tucked into the neck of it, and she was tired in the specific way of somebody who has been up since five in a city that is not hers.

She glanced at Neil's shirt.

"Were you at that?"

Neil looked down at himself with the expression of a man who has genuinely forgotten what he put on that morning.

"Last night," he said. "Yeah. Park MGM."

"Me too."

And that was all she meant to say. Nathan is fairly sure of that. She had said the polite thing to the man in the tour shirt on the train, the way you do, and would then have looked at her phone for four minutes.

Neil said, "It was extraordinary."

. . .

It took the length of the ride and the length of the platform, and Nathan stood slightly to one side of it holding two cases.

Neil told her they had come down from Vancouver for it specifically and had had the tickets since September. He told her that Colter Wall is from Swift Current, Saskatchewan, in the manner of a man producing a fact he is confident the other party will not have, and she said "he is," and let him have it.

He told her about the voice. He said something about the two at the end with the band off, and the bottle going over in the tiers, and that he had never been in a room that quiet with that many people in it.

And then he told her about the opener.

“There was a kid on before Vincent Neil Emerson. Twenty-one, twenty-two. Third-billed. He went on at eight o’clock to about four hundred people talking, and by the third song you could hear a pin drop in that building, and he didn’t do anything to make that happen. He just stood there and played and the room came to him. And he doesn’t fill the gaps — he finishes a song and he lets it be quiet and he doesn’t put anything into it, which at that age is — I couldn’t do that at forty-six in a meeting with eight people in it.”

“No,” she said.

“He’s going to be enormous.”

“He is,” she said.

“No, I mean it. I’d put money on that.”

“Yeah,” she said. “So would I.”

She said it in exactly the same register she had said everything else in, and Neil took it as agreement, which it was, and carried on.

. . .

Nathan read the bag while his brother was talking.

It was canvas, and the printing on it was small and had gone soft at the edges from washing, and it was a name rather than a logo, in two words, and Nathan had seen it eleven hours earlier on a card taped to the front of a folding table with three things on it.

He did not say anything.

Neil did not look at the bag at any point, because Neil was talking.

. . .

They came off the platform and she was going the other way.

“That’s me,” she said. “Nice to meet you. Safe flight.”

And she went.

She did not give him a card. She did not give him an email address, or a website, or a hand-written anything, and she did not say she would pass it on, and she did not reach into the bag, and there was no reason

on earth why she would have done any of those things, because a man on a train had told her that a musician she works with is good.

Neil watched her go for a second and then picked up his case.

"Well, there you are," he said.

. . .

"That was her label," said Nathan.

"What?"

"On the bag. That was the label. It was on the table last night."

Neil stopped walking.

Nathan watched it arrive, and it took about two seconds, and what came up on his brother's face was not embarrassment, which Nathan had been rather looking forward to.

"So she'd know," said Neil.

"She would know, yes."

"She'd know better than anybody."

"She would."

"And she said she'd put money on it."

"She did say that."

"Well," said Neil, and started walking again, and did not appear to have registered any part of the preceding four minutes as anything other than a complete vindication, "there you are."

He did not mention that he had stood in front of that same table eleven hours earlier and put an eight-dollar koozie back down on the stack.

Nathan did not mention it either.

. . .

Gate D-fifty-four.

They sat for twenty minutes in the moulded seating with the cases against their knees, and the departure board said ON TIME, and out of the window a man in ear defenders was driving a belt loader.

At eleven minutes past twelve the Companion picked up the microphone at the desk and said good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, we'll begin boarding in about five minutes, and she was going to start with anybody travelling with small children or needing a little extra time,

and then by group, and if everybody could have their boarding pass ready either on their phone or printed she would be grateful.

She said all of it in the tone of somebody who says it eleven times a day and has decided not to let that show.

Then she put the microphone down and dealt with a man who had come up to the desk about a seat.

Nathan watched that, because it was four feet away and there was nothing else to watch. The man wanted to move. He was not aggressive about it and he was not entitled about it; he was a large man in a Cardinals jacket who had been assigned a middle seat at the back and had a knee, and he explained about the knee, and she listened to all of it without doing anything with her face at all.

Then she said she could not move him, because the flight was full, and she was sorry, and she said it in a way that made it clear it was not a policy she was hiding behind but a fact about how many seats there were on an plane.

"I know," said the man. "I know. I know it's not you."

"I'd do it if I had one."

"I know."

And he went and sat down, and she went back to the screen, and that was the end of it, and the man was not happier and was slightly less unhappy.

. . .

At about ten past twelve Neil said:

"I'll order one off the website."

"You've said."

"No, but I'm going to. When we land I'm going to do it in the parking lot."

"All right."

"They'll have shipping to Canada."

"They'll have shipping to Canada," said Nathan.

That was the third time, and neither of them raised it again.

. . .

They boarded from the front, which meant they were among the last, and the overhead bin above their row was already full, so the parcels went two rows back and Nathan had to get up over somebody to retrieve them at the other end.

Neil's phone went while they were finding the seats.

He checked it, standing in the aisle with a bag in one hand and a boarding pass in his teeth, and there was nowhere to go with it and eleven people behind him, and he put it in his pocket and sat down.

He did not look at it again.

. . . .

The plane pushed back at twelve fifty-one and was airborne at four minutes past one, and turned north-west over the golf courses and then over pale ground for a long time with the mountains coming up beyond it, and Las Vegas went off the right-hand side of the aircraft and stayed there for about ninety seconds and then did not.

Somewhere below and behind them a rhinestoned deer waited for somebody with a room for it, and a tooled leather jacket in extra large hung at the end of a rail, and forty white towels sat folded on a pool deck on the fourth floor of a hotel with no casino in it.

Neil got his tray table down and did not open the laptop.

"So the thing I keep coming back to," he said, "is that he was on *third*."

"He was on first."

"He was *billed* third and he went on first, which is the same thing, which is my point," said Neil. "Nobody in that room had heard of him at eight o'clock."

"We hadn't heard of him at eight o'clock."

"We had not heard of him at eight o'clock," Neil agreed.

The seatbelt sign went off.