

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

The Usable Version

A Novel

N. Van Seters & Claude

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PART ONE

Intake

The Hall

Piet lined up on the black and started in about his knees, so Saar knew he was going to miss.

He talked first. The left one had been fine all week, he said. Then this morning on the stairs it had gone. He had stood on the landing with one hand on the rail and the whole ring going past outside the window and thought, well, that's that then. He got down over the cue while he said it. His bridge hand was steady. The knee had nothing to do with the bridge hand and he knew it. He cued the black with the knee still in his voice, and it rattled the jaw and sat.

"That's that then," Saar said.

"Leave it."

She left it. She chalked. The black was an inch off the pocket and his white was six feet up the table. The only way to miss it was to think about it, so she didn't. She potted it. The white ran up and stopped against the top cushion where she had wanted it. When she straightened, Piet was already fishing in his jacket for the coins.

"Cushion's slow on that side," he said.

"It's the same cushion."

"Slower there."

He put the coins on the rail. Three of the small brass ones the hall still ran on. Marijke had bought a crate of them in some year before Saar was born. Saar left them where they were. You picked coins up straight away with strangers.

The hall was under the ring. When the builders raised the transit deck over the old harbour road they had left a long concrete gallery beneath it with no use, and Marijke's father had found one. Six tables, a counter, a ceiling low enough that a tall woman learned to duck at the doorway in her first week. Every four minutes a service crossed the deck overhead and the gallery

hummed with it. The hum came up through the slate beds and into the cue if you were down on a shot. Saar played through it.

The place smelled of chalk and the lagoon. The lagoon got into everything at this level. Marijke ran an extractor that took most of it, and what was left was a brackish under-smell Saar had stopped noticing years ago. She noticed it tonight because Dries at the next table had said something about a fish.

"Not a fish," Wout said. "A seal."

"There's no seals."

"There's seals off the Maasvlakte. Hundreds."

"That's the Maasvlakte."

Wout shrugged and bent to his shot. Wout said about nine words a night and chose them. Dries kept the score for the pair of them on the slate at the end of their table, and kept it wrong. Not by much and not always in his own favour. Nobody corrected him. The correcting would have taken longer than the game.

Piet racked. He did it slowly, as he did everything now, but he racked tight. When he lifted the triangle the balls stayed where he had put them. Saar watched his hands. They were big and square, and the skin on the backs had been broken and healed so many times it had gone smooth again.

"Your break," he said.

She broke. She had a good break, and it was one of the few things her body did on request. Everywhere else it was a tall body that caught on doorframes and misjudged counters. That evening, on the way to the toilets, it had put her hip into the end of Marijke's bar hard enough to knock a glass into the sink. Marijke had not looked up. She had stopped looking up at that noise a year and a half ago. But at the table the body did what it was told. Saar did not know why and had stopped asking. She got down, the cue ran through her bridge on a line, and the pack opened. Two balls went down and the rest spread the way she wanted. She was on.

She ran five. The sixth was a long cut to the top corner with the white needing two cushions to get back for the seventh. She looked at it and did not fancy it, and played safe instead. Thin off the ball and back to the baulk cushion. She left him nothing.

"Coward," Piet said.

"Yes."

He looked at the table for a while with the cue upright beside him. Then he played a safety back, a good one. They went at it like that for a few minutes, each leaving the other nothing. It did not suit Piet, who preferred to go for things and be sorry after. He cracked first. He always cracked first. He took on a long pot that was not there, and left her the table, and she cleared it. He put three more coins on the rail.

"You're not tired," he said.

"I'm never tired here."

"You've work in the morning."

"I've work every morning."

"What is it this time."

"A man in Feijenoord. Crane operator. Retired."

Piet nodded. He knew roughly what she did and had never asked exactly. She had never offered exactly. The arrangement suited them both. Some of the men in the hall had a firmer idea and opinions to go with it. Dries had once said something about it that was meant to be funny and was not. Dries was Dries, and what he had said was more or less true, and she saw no point in being wounded by a true thing said badly.

"Cranes," Piet said. "He'll want to talk about the cranes."

"They always want to talk about the cranes."

"You'll let him."

"For a bit."

Piet had pointed stone for forty years. He had told her this on her first night, two years ago, when she had come in alone on a Thursday and stood at the counter wondering whether a woman on her own could get a table here without a conversation. Piet had come over and offered her a frame. She had beaten him. He had said, with real pleasure, that she would do.

Marijke came round with the cloth she used on the rails and did not use it. She said, to Piet and not to Saar, "It's gone twelve."

"It's gone twelve every night."

"She's got her song."

"Not again," said Dries from the next table.

That was the arrangement. One song a night, Saar's choice, on the old speaker that hung from the deck bolts above table four and buzzed on the low notes. In return she did not complain about the rest of Marijke's music, instrumental and awful and chosen, Saar suspected, to keep the conversation down. She went to the counter, stepping wide of the bar's end, and told the speaker what she wanted. It gave her the song.

The song was older than the hall. A woman with a thin high voice, a piano, the last boat out of Maassluis. There was a line about the water in the second verse that Saar had never once got through with a dry throat, and everyone in the hall had seen it happen. Dries had once put money on it and won. Her mother had told her, when she was fourteen and had just found it, that she had no taste at all. Saar had agreed and kept the song.

She came back to the table. Piet had gone still, as he did.

"Nel liked this one," he said.

"You said."

"I'll say it again, then."

She let him. The line about the water came round and did what it did. She stood with the cue in her hand and let it. Nobody looked. Wout potted something at the next table with a small clean sound. Dries said nothing. That was the other arrangement, the one nobody had stated: when the song was on you got on with what you were doing, and you did not look at Saar, and you did not look at Piet. The song finished. The instrumental thing came back on. Piet said, "Right," and racked.

She thought, while he racked, that she would call her grandfather in the morning. He would like the knee. He collected other people's ailments and kept them. He could tell you what had been wrong with a neighbour in 2090, what the neighbour had done about it, and how it had gone. She had not spoken to him since Sunday. There was nothing to say, and that had never stopped either of them.

Then she stopped thinking about that and watched Piet rack. He was racking slower than he had the frame before. When he straightened, the left hand

stayed on the rail a moment longer than it needed to. She noted it and put it away.

"Last one," he said.

"Last one."

"Then bed. You've got your cranes."

"I've got my cranes."

He broke, because it was his, and it was a poor break. The balls sat in a cluster near the foot spot with nothing on. She played the cluster open and left him a look at a middle pocket. He took it, made it, and ran three. It was as many as he had run all night, and she said so. He said the cushion was fast on that side. She said it was the same cushion.

Then he missed. He was on a stripe to the bottom corner, with the white needing to hold up short for the next. He put screw on it that his wrist did not deliver. The stripe went in. The white ran on down the table and dropped in the far corner behind it. He straightened and looked at the pocket.

"In hand," Saar said.

"I know it's in hand. I've played before."

Four of hers left and the black. It was not a hard table. She placed the white and took the first two without moving her feet much. The third was longer. She made it and did not like the position after. She stood and looked. Her last ball was tight on the top cushion, the black was in the open, and she had a choice.

The pot was there. Straightish, into the top corner. Hit it firm and the white would come off the top cushion into the middle of the table for the black, and the frame was hers. Piet would put three coins on the rail and say the cushion was slow and go home. She looked at it for as long as she would have looked at any shot. Then she bent to it and hit it a fraction thick.

The ball went in. The white came off the cushion at the wrong angle, down the side rail, past the black, and into the jaws of the bottom corner. It stopped there, snookered on itself, with the black nowhere.

It looked like she had misjudged the cushion. She had not misjudged the cushion.

"Ah," Piet said.

She played what she could. A kick off the side that grazed the black and left it over the middle pocket, his last stripe six inches from it, the white sitting for both. She stood up. Piet looked at the table, then at her, then back at the table. He got down slowly, with the left hand on the rail a moment longer than it needed to be. He potted his stripe. The white rolled four inches and stopped. He potted the black.

"Cushion's slow on that side," he said.

"It is."

He did not put coins on the rail. Both of them knew it and neither said it. He put his cue in the rack by the counter, in the slot he had used for years, and got his coat off the hook. He had some trouble with the zip. Saar waited through the zip and did not help.

After the stone there had been fifteen years minding a depot. He had told her that too, the first night, at length, and she had listened. She had liked him at once. She had been twenty-two and new to the hall, and listening was what she did when she did not yet know a room.

She had wanted him to go home having won one. That was the whole of it. He was going up those stairs again in twenty minutes with the knee. She had wanted there to be a frame in his head while he did it, so she had made one for him. It had cost her nothing. He had taken it because he was tired and because he had wanted it too. She did not think there was anything wrong with any of that. She thought there might be something wrong with how easy she found it. She had thought that before, at other tables and in other rooms, and had never got anywhere with it, and she let it go.

"Thursday," Piet said.

"Thursday."

"Tell the crane man to get on with it."

"I'll tell him."

He went out. The door let in the lagoon smell and shut on it. Dries was doing his slate. Wout was chalking. Marijke had the cloth over her shoulder and was looking at the sink, where the glass still was, and then at Saar, and then at the sink again. She said nothing. Saar took the coins off the rail from the

earlier frames, eleven of them, and put four on the counter for the tab. Marijke took them without counting.

"Nine o'clock," Marijke said.

"Nine."

"Then go to bed."

Saar got her cue apart and into its case. It was the cheap one. She liked it better than the good one, because the good one had been a gift from someone she had stopped wanting to think about. She ducked under the lintel out of habit. A service crossed the deck overhead and the gallery hummed. Then she was outside on the harbour road with the ring above her, its underside lit and running off in both directions, and the lagoon flat and black beyond the rail. The smell of it was plain out here. Just water.

She looked at the time. Gone one. She had a nine o'clock in Feijenoord with a man who had run cranes for thirty years and would want, before anything else, to tell her about them. She would need her voice for it. She had eight hours. It was fine.

She walked home along the water. Behind her, in the gallery, Dries had got his slate wrong again and nobody had said.

Intake

Ruud Vellinga had laid out two cups and a plate of biscuits nobody would eat, and he had put the good chair by the window for her and taken the hard one himself. Saar saw all of that from the doorway and did not comment on any of it. You took the chair you were given.

"You found it," he said.

"Fourth floor. You said fourth."

"They all say fourth. It's the lift. The lift says three and stops at four."

"It said three."

"There you are."

The flat was on the ring's inner face, so the window looked over the lagoon and the window was the room. Everything else was pushed back from it. A table, a bed made tight enough to bounce a coin on, a shelf with a few objects on it that she would look at later when it was time to look at them. The lagoon was grey this morning and had small waves on it. Out past the far rail two barges were moving very slowly toward the sea gate.

"Tea," he said.

"Please."

He poured. His hands were fine. He was eighty-four and his hands were the hands of a man twenty years younger. She set that aside for later too. The recorder was in her bag. It would stay there until he had had his say about the cranes.

"They told you I did the cranes," he said.

"They told me."

"Thirty-one years. Not thirty. People say thirty. It was thirty-one."

"What was it like up there?"

He looked at her to see if she meant it. She meant it. You could not pretend an interest in a man's work. You either had one or you did not, and if you could not find one you gave the session to someone else. She had an interest in

cranes. She had an interest in most things that a person had done with their hands for thirty-one years, and it was the truest thing about her that she knew of.

So he told her. The cabin. The height of it, and the cold, and the way you learned to take a container off a deck in a crosswind so it did not swing. The rhythm of a shift. The men below who guided you in and the hand signals they used, some of which he showed her. A ship he had unloaded in 2041 in a gale. Everyone else had come down. He had stayed up because the mate had asked him to, and the ship had needed to sail, and it had sailed. He talked for twenty minutes. She let him. She asked the questions that kept him going, and they were not hard questions to find, because she wanted to know the answers.

"You're not writing anything," he said at one point.

"I don't need to yet."

"You'll want to write it."

"I'll remember it."

He believed her. That was the first thing. He believed her because it was so, and she had found that people could tell, and that the whole of the job, if it was a job, was built on that. Then somewhere around the twenty-fifth minute she took the recorder out of her bag and set it on the table between the cups, face down, and said nothing about it. Face up it showed a running figure, the firm's own estimate of usable minutes, updating as the subject spoke. Every intake on the floor had it. She had turned hers face down in her first month and had never turned it back. He looked at it.

"That's it, is it."

"That's it. You can ignore it. Most people do after a while."

"I've been recorded before."

"When?"

"Twenty forty-nine. When they took the cabins off. There was a woman came round from the port. She had one of those." He nodded at the recorder. "Bigger."

"What did she want?"

"Same as you, I expect."

Saar did not answer that, because he was right and because there was no good answer. She picked up her tea instead. He picked up his. The barges had reached the sea gate and one of them was going through.

"Tell me about that," she said. "When they took the cabins off."

That was the thing. She had known it was the thing before she got in the lift. Someone in the office had read the port records and the union records. They had written on her brief that the subject was present for the removal of the last manned cabins from the Waalhaven gantries in October 2049. That was the line. She had read the brief on the ring service that morning and put it away. She had not thought about it while he talked about the gale. You could not carry the line into the room with you. You had to arrive at it. If you arrived at it, he arrived at it with you, and it came out in his words. If you carried it in, it came out in yours.

He arrived at it. He told her about the October morning. The crews had been told the week before, so it was not a surprise. He wanted her to understand that. Nobody had been ambushed. The port had done it properly, with letters and meetings and a man from the union present. They had gone up one last time. Not to work. There was no work. The cranes had been running without anyone in them for two years by then. The cabins had been left on because removing them cost money and nobody had got round to it. But they had gone up, six of them, and sat in the cabins for a while, and come down. Then the contractors had unbolted the cabins and lowered them to the quay on the cranes themselves. The cranes doing it. They stacked them on the quay and that was that.

"Six of you," she said.

"Six. There'd been forty. The rest had gone by then. Retrained or retired or moved off. I was the last one still on the payroll who'd actually sat in one for a living."

"What did you do, up there? The last time."

He was quiet for a bit.

"Looked at the water," he said. "What else do you do."

She let that sit. It was the right length of silence and she knew it was the right length because she had judged a lot of silences. Too short and you had cut

him off from something. Too long and the silence itself became the subject and he started to feel watched. She let it go the right length. Then she asked him about the woman from the port, whether she had asked the same thing. He said she had. He had told her the same, and it had gone in a report somewhere, and that was the last he had heard of it.

"Nearly sixty years ago," he said. "You'd think they'd have enough by now."

"You'd think."

"But you're here."

"I'm here."

He looked at her a while longer and then he let it go, as people did. Everyone over eighty in the delta had been asked to tell it at least once, and they knew what it was for, roughly, and they did it anyway.

They went on for another half hour. She got the after, the retraining course he had walked out of, the depot job, the wife who had died in 2081. She got the shelf, when the time came for the shelf. On it was a small brass model of a gantry crane that a nephew had made him. Beside it was a photograph of the Waalhaven from cabin height, the whole port laid out below in a light she had never seen. She asked if she could record him describing the photograph and he did, and it was good, and she knew while he did it that it would be in the package.

Then he was tired. She saw it before he did. She closed the session on a question about the nephew. It was an easy one and let him end on something he liked. She put the recorder away and drank the last of her tea. She ate a biscuit so that he would not have laid them out for nothing.

"You'll come back," he said at the door.

"If they want more."

"They'll want more. They always want more."

"Then I'll come back."

She took the stairs down because the lift said three and stopped at four and she did not want to find out what else it did. Outside on the ring walk the wind had come up and the lagoon was rougher than it had been from the window. She stood for a moment with her bag on her shoulder and let the wind have her hair. Then she found a bench in the lee of a service stack and got her tablet out.

The log had to be filed within the hour. She liked to do it while the voice was still in her ear.

She filed it.

Session 2108-0431. Subject: VELLINGA, R. (b. 2024). Location: Feijenoord, ring flat 4/17. Duration: 71 min. Interviewer: S. HAMEETE. Account: Cadence Continuity / Port Heritage Obligation (Rotterdam, 2040–2060). Consent: verbal, recorded, 25:40.

Condition: good. Recall: excellent. Voice: clear, low interference from window.

Usable estimate: 34 min.

Key passages: cabin removal, Waalhaven, October 2049 (from 29:10). Last ascent, "looked at the water" (41:55). Description of photograph from cabin height (62:00–66:30). Gale, 2041 (from 08:30, unrecorded; obtain on second visit if required).

Recommended emphasis: Last ascent and cabin removal, 29:10 to 44:00. The phrase at 41:55 will carry the package.

Notes: subject previously recorded by Port Authority, 2049. Locate if extant. Subject willing to sit again.

She read it over once. It was a good log. She had a reputation for good logs. A good log was one the cutters could work from without listening to the whole file. She was proud of that in the ordinary way people are proud of doing a thing well. She sent it. Then she sat a while longer on the bench. The next one was not until two and it was a good bench. She thought about the gale in 2041, and the mate asking him to stay up, and the ship sailing. It would not be in the package. It was not what the package was for. She had liked it best of all the things he had told her.

Hoorbaar

The board was on the wall opposite the lifts, so you saw it before you saw anyone.

It was not large. Bregje had wanted it small. A screen the width of a door, white on grey, names down the left and numbers across. Usable minutes this month, usable minutes this quarter, sessions logged, packages licensed. There was a column for re-bookings that nobody had asked for and that Bregje kept because she found it interesting. In the bottom corner, in a smaller face, a single number that changed once a day. This morning it said 2,041.

Saar's name was at the top. It had been at the top for eleven months. She looked at it long enough to see it was there, and went to her desk.

The floor was on the eighth level of a building on the ring's outer face, so the windows looked away from the lagoon and over the old city. What was left of the old city. The towers still stood, some of them, with the water in their lower floors. From up here on a clear morning you could see the line where the old river had been and was not now. Saar had stopped seeing it. Tomas still saw it. Tomas stood at that window most mornings for a minute or two with his coffee. She had never asked him what he was looking at. She knew, and the answer would have taken twenty minutes.

He came over now. He had the coat on.

"How was the crane man?"

"Good. Thirty-four."

"Thirty-four." He said it as another person might say a temperature. "Was he all right?"

"He was fine. He's eighty-four and his hands are twenty years younger than the rest of him. He'd have gone another hour."

"Did you let him talk about the cranes?"

"Twenty minutes."

"Good."

He meant it. That was the thing about Tomas. He meant everything, all the time, and it was exhausting and it was also the reason his subjects asked for him back. He had a re-booking figure nobody could touch. He also had a usable-minutes figure a third of hers. He did not steer. He thought steering was a kind of lie, and had said so once at a floor meeting. Bregje had looked at him for a long moment and said, "Noted," and moved on.

The coat had belonged to a man who had worked the Botlek tank farms until they closed. Tomas had bought it at an estate sale in 2105 for less than the price of lunch. It was a heavy canvas thing with a company mark on the breast that had faded to a shape. He wore it to every intake. Old men saw it and their faces changed. Saar had watched it happen. She did not think Tomas had bought it for that reason. She did not think he was unaware of the effect either. She had never worked out which of those was worse, or whether either was bad. She liked him. That was the plain fact and she had stopped arguing with it.

"I've got a woman in the Westland on Monday," he said. "Greenhouses."

"Rie Kamphuis."

"You know her?"

"She's on my list for Monday. You've got Truus something. Kamphuis is mine."

He checked. She was right. He apologised, at length, and she waited it out.

"Tomas."

"Sorry."

"It's fine. You'd have been good with her."

"You'll be good with her."

"I'll be thirty-four with her. You'd have been good."

He did not know what to do with that, so he went back to his window.

Bregje came through at ten. She did a circuit of the floor most mornings, not a formal one, just a walk with a cup in her hand that took her past every desk. She stopped at Saar's.

"Vellinga."

"Filed."

"I saw. The phrase at forty-one."

"Yes."

"That'll carry it." Bregje looked at the screen over Saar's shoulder without seeming to. "Cadence want the port package by the end of the month. You've got two more on the list."

"I know."

"One of them's ninety-one."

"I know."

"Do him first."

That was all. Bregje did not manage by talking. She managed by being in the room and by the board, and she had built the firm on those two things. Saar had once heard her described by a man from Cadence who did not know Saar was listening. The only person in the delta, he had said, who understood early enough that testimony was a supply problem. The man had meant it as praise.

Loes came up from the archive floor at eleven with a question about a date. Loes was the archivist, and had been since before the firm was Hoorbaar, when it had been something else with a different name and half the staff. She was sixty and did not come up to the eighth floor if she could help it.

"Your crane man," she said. "He said there was a port recording in forty-nine."

"He did."

"There's a register entry. No file. The port lost most of theirs in the sixty-eight migration. I've put a query in but I wouldn't wait on it."

"I won't."

"Also." Loes looked at her tablet. "You had a raw clear last week. The Dekker package. Accepted Thursday, raw cleared Friday. The daughter rang this morning wanting a copy. I told her."

"Told her what?"

"That it was gone. That's the rule. She said her father had died on Saturday and she wanted to hear his voice." Loes shrugged. "I sent her the licensed cut. She said it wasn't the same."

"It isn't the same."

"No. Well." Loes put the tablet under her arm. "She's got what there is."

She went back down. Saar sat with that for a moment. Then she put it down. It was the rule. Everyone knew the rule, and the daughter had signed the same consent as the father. The raw was working material. You cut from it, the buyer accepted the cut, and the raw went. It was not a secret. It was on the second page of the consent form in a typeface you could read. Nobody had ever pretended otherwise. The firm did not have the storage for sixty years of hesitation and background noise. The buyers did not want it. The archive that would seal in 2,041 days had never been designed to take it. Saar had explained this to subjects a hundred times. Most of them nodded. A few had asked why anyone would want to keep the hesitation, and she had never had a good answer for that, and had said something about storage.

She thought about the Dekker file for about as long as it took to finish her coffee. Then she opened the list for the port package and found the ninety-one-year-old and rang him. He answered on the second ring. He was pleased to hear from her. She booked him for Friday.

At lunch she sat with Tomas because there was nowhere else to sit. He had a sandwich he had made himself and wrapped in paper. It was a thing he did. He ate it slowly while looking out at the old city.

"Do you ever think," he said, "about what we're doing."

"Constantly."

"No. I mean."

"I know what you mean."

"Because the number's going down."

"Which number."

He nodded toward the board, toward the corner of it.

"That number goes down by one a day," she said. "That's what it's for."

"I mean the other one. The one nobody puts up. How many are left." He put the sandwich down. "Loes told me the regional lists are losing about one a week. Just from the delta. And that's the ones we know about. The ones who never sat for anyone, we'll never know."

"Tomas."

"I'm just saying."

"You're saying it every day."

"Because it's true every day."

She did not have an answer for that either. She ate her lunch. It was true every day. Everyone on the floor knew it and most of them did not say it. Tomas said it. She had always assumed that made him the honest one, and lately she had begun to wonder whether saying a thing every day was a way of not having to do anything about it.

"I got a re-book," Tomas said after a while. "The Botlek man. Third time."

"That's good."

"He doesn't have anything new. He just wants to talk."

"That's still good."

"Bregje won't think so."

"Bregje thinks it's fine. She's got a column for it."

He looked at her to see if she was being kind. She was, a bit. He accepted it.

In the afternoon she did her prep for Kamphuis. The brief was thin. Greenhouses in the Westland, forty years, glass under lights, the transition to closed systems around 2050 that had emptied the sheds of people over about a decade. The subject had stayed on as a supervisor until 2071 and then retired. No union records. No prior recordings. Someone had written *line: last hand-pollination?* with a question mark. Saar looked at the question mark for a while. She decided the person who had written it did not know either.

She rang Rie Kamphuis to confirm. A woman's voice, sharp, not old-sounding.

"You're the one coming Monday."

"I am."

"What do you want to know?"

"Whatever you want to tell me."

"That's not an answer."

"No," Saar said. "It isn't. I'll have a better one on Monday."

A pause on the line. Then, drier than before: "Ten o'clock. Don't be early. I don't like early."

"Ten."

She put the tablet down. Outside the window the light had gone flat. The old towers stood in it with the water at their feet. Tomas was at his post. The board said 2,041, and it would say 2,040 in the morning.

She went to the hall that night for an hour, though it was not a Thursday. Piet was not there. She played Wout, who said four words to her in the hour, two of which were "your shot," and she lost the money she had won on Thursday and did not mind. On the way home she thought about the Dekker daughter. What it would be like to want a voice and be sent a cut of it instead. Then she thought about Rie Kamphuis, who did not like early, and had two days to think of a better answer. Then she was home.

Sunday

The causeway line ran out of the lagoon at Hellevoet and crossed the water on its own legs, and for eleven minutes there was nothing on either side but the Haringvliet.

Saar had the window. She always took the window on the way out and the aisle on the way back, and had never examined why. The water was brown today with the tide coming in over the mud. The wind was flattening it. Out toward the sea gate were the white marks of the fish farms in their long rows. Then the island came up. The dike first, higher than she remembered it every time. Then the roofs behind it. Then the platform at Middelharnis, which had been built too large for the traffic it got and had a roof that leaked at one end. She got off at the leaking end out of habit.

Sommelsdijk was a walk of twenty minutes. There was a bus. Nobody took it. She went along the Dorpsweg past the church and the shuttered bank and the school that was now something else. She turned at the corner where the pharmacy had been. Her mother's house was the fourth on the left. The green door needed painting and had needed it for three years.

Anke opened it before she knocked.

"You're late."

"I'm ten minutes early."

"He's been here since twelve."

"Then he's early."

"He's always early. That doesn't make you not late." Anke stepped back to let her in. "There's too much food. Don't say anything."

There was too much food. There was always too much food, and Saar had stopped saying anything about it around the time she had understood that the food was how her mother did Sundays. Anke did not like Sundays. She did not like her father-in-law, exactly, though she did not dislike him either. She had got him in the divorce, along with the house. Somewhere along the way she had

decided the decent thing was to feed him once a week. So she did, and she made too much, and nobody said anything.

Kees was in the front room in the chair he used. He had the paper on his knee, an actual paper, printed at the library on Fridays for the six people in the village who still wanted one. He put it down when she came in.

"There she is."

"Opa."

"Sit. Sit. Your mother's been cooking since dawn."

"Since eleven," Anke said from the kitchen.

"Since dawn. How's your friend's knee?"

"Worse. He's got a brace now. It clicks."

"Clicks." Kees nodded slowly, storing it. "Bakker's brace clicked. You remember Bakker, on the Molenweg. Ninety-one. His clicked for two years and then it didn't and he said that was worse, the not clicking, because at least with the clicking he knew where it was."

"Where what was?"

"The knee."

She sat. He told her about Bakker's knee. About a woman in Dirksland whose hip had been done twice. About the pharmacist's son, who had something with his back that Kees could not pronounce and had asked the pharmacist to write down. Saar listened. She liked this. She had liked it since she was small, the catalogue of the village's ailments, kept in her grandfather's head and consulted whenever anyone she knew hurt anything. It was affection, she had decided long ago. It was how he paid attention to people. He could not have told you what any of them did for a living but he could tell you what was wrong with their feet.

They ate at one. Anke had made a joint and potatoes and two vegetables and a thing with apples. There was bread. Kees said grace in the short form that did not commit anyone to much, and they ate.

It came at the potatoes. It always came somewhere around the potatoes. Anke had said something about the bread, that it was from the new place in Middelharnis, and Kees had picked up a piece and looked at it.

"It's all right," he said. "It's not bad. But you can taste it, can't you. The flour."

"Dad."

"I'm only saying. You can taste it. It's got no smell to it. Flour should have a smell." He put the bread down. "When I had the mill you could smell it from the road."

Saar looked at the clock over the door. Quarter past one. She did not do it to be unkind. She did it because she had done it for years, since she was about fifteen. It had become a private thing she kept. Quarter past one. It would run about eleven minutes if nobody interrupted, and nobody would, because Anke had tried once, years ago, and it had gone worse.

"I had the mill on the Langeweg from fifty-nine," Kees said. "Sixteen years. You know all this."

"We know, Dad."

"She doesn't know. She was born after."

"I know, Opa."

"You know some of it." He took a potato. "Austrian stones. Ninety centimetre. I bought them off a man in Zeeland who'd gone bust, and I bought them right, because he didn't know what he had. Granite. You could have run them another fifty years. Proper flour, Saar. You could smell it from the road. I had the bakeries in Middelharnis, both of them, and Dirksland, and I had people coming from the mainland Saturdays, on the boat, for a five-kilo bag. From Rotterdam. For a bag of flour."

He ate the potato. He always ate a potato there. Saar had never decided whether he knew he did it.

"It went well," he said. "I won't say it didn't. There were years it went well. And then seventy-three. The route."

Anke got up to see to something in the kitchen. She did it every week at this point and Kees never seemed to notice, or noticed and let her.

"I had a van came Tuesdays and Fridays. Took the flour to the depot at Oude-Tonge for the mainland. Fourteen years, that van. Different vans, same route. And one Friday it didn't come. I'm standing there with the pallets wrapped. Didn't come. So I rang. And I got a voice."

He looked at Saar. He always looked at whoever was there at this point.

"Not a person. A voice. The voice said the volume on my route no longer justified the stop. Justified. That's the word it used. I said, I've been on this route fourteen years. The voice said it understood my frustration. I said I want to speak to someone. It said it was the someone." He shook his head. "It was the someone. That's what it said. And I stood there with the pallets."

"What did you do?" Saar said. She always said it. It was her line. She had said it at fifteen and she said it now. She had thought about not saying it, once or twice. All that would achieve was to make him find his own way across the gap, and she was not that unkind.

"What could I do. I rang the depot. They said it wasn't them, it was the system. I rang the system and got the voice again. I drove the pallets to Oude-Tonge myself, twice, and the depot took them, and then the depot said they couldn't keep taking off-route, it wasn't in their contract, and that was that. Same time they wanted forty thousand for a fan. For the dust. The inspector came round and said the extraction wasn't up to the new code. Forty thousand for a fan. I hadn't got forty thousand. And the van wasn't coming anyway, so what was I extracting for. And I locked the door in the October. And that was the mill."

He ate another potato.

"Sixteen years," he said. "The stones are still out there. I couldn't sell them. Nobody wanted them. They're in the shed on the Langeweg and I go and look at them sometimes. Granite. Fifty more years in them."

Saar looked at the clock. Twenty-six past. Eleven minutes. She had not expected anything different.

"More apples, Dad," Anke said, coming back in with the dish, and Kees said yes, he would have some apples, and the subject was closed for the week.

Saar had been a cutter for a year, before she was moved to intake. You started as a cutter. You sat with the raw files and you found the usable minutes and you built the package and you learned, in that year, what usable meant. It meant a passage that carried on its own. It meant a phrase a listener could hold. She had not been a cutter for three years and she still did it to everything. She could not stop. She did it to the news. She did it to her mother. She did it to

Piet on Thursdays and had never told him. She did it now, at her mother's table with a piece of apple thing on her plate, to her grandfather.

The voice said it was the someone. That was the line. It had been the line since she was fifteen and had first known what a line was. It would license. She could hear the cut. Eleven minutes down to four. The potatoes gone, the bakeries in Middelharnis gone, the fan possibly kept. The shed and the stones at the end, because you wanted to end on an object. She could hear it complete. It would be a good package. It was a good package. He had been telling it for thirty-four years. It had the shape a thing gets when it has been told that long. Nothing left in it to catch on.

She did this and did not stop, because she never could. Then she was not listening to him any more, only to the cut. She put down her fork.

"What?" Kees said.

"Nothing. It's good, Mam."

"It's apples," Anke said. "It's not hard."

After, Kees slept in the chair for half an hour with the paper on his chest. Saar helped with the dishes. Anke talked about the neighbour's drain. It had backed up twice since Easter and the neighbour would not have it seen to, because he was waiting for the municipality. Anke had views on the municipality. She had views on the drain. She had no views at all on the mill and never had. Saar had once, at nineteen, asked her mother what she thought about it. Anke had needed a second to understand the question.

"Thought about what?"

"The mill. What happened to Opa."

"Nothing happened to him. He had a business and it closed. Businesses close." She had gone on drying. "He's fine. He's got his pension and his knees and his stones. He's been fine for thirty years. He just likes telling it."

Saar had not known what to say to that at nineteen and did not know now. It was true. It was so plainly true that there was nothing to add. It was also, she had come to think, the least interested thing anyone had ever said about her grandfather. She could not decide whether that made it the wisest or the stupidest.

She caught the four-forty back. The island went down behind the dike and the water came up on both sides, brown, with the tide going out over the flats. She put her earpiece in and told it what she wanted. The piano started. The thin high voice. She looked at the seat back in front of her while the second verse came round. The line about the water came and did what it did. The man across the aisle did not look at her. The lagoon came up ahead with the ring lit along it.

She would call Opa on Tuesday. He would want to know if the brace still clicked.

The Good Hour

Rie Kamphuis lived on the mainland side, in the old Westland, in a row of low houses that had been built for glasshouse workers in a year when there were still glasshouse workers. Most of the glass was gone. What was left stood in long sealed blocks to the south. No windows, no doors that Saar could see. Lights inside that came on at dusk and did not go off.

Saar arrived at three minutes to ten and stood on the step until the minute hand moved. Then she knocked.

"You waited," Rie said. "I saw you."

"You said not early."

"I said I don't like early. I didn't say stand on my step for the neighbours." She held the door. "Come in. Don't touch the radiator, it's temperamental."

The house was cold. That was the first thing. It was a clear morning in September and the house was colder than the street. There was a radiator under the window with a blanket folded on top of it. Rie saw her look.

"Valve's stuck. The boy's coming Friday."

"Which boy?"

"The one who comes. Sit there."

Saar sat there. Rie sat opposite, upright, with her hands in her lap and her eyes on Saar's bag. She was small and had been smaller once, Saar thought, and had spent a life bending under glass and had straightened herself out of it by will. Her hair was cut short and she had done it herself.

"So," Rie said. "Whatever I want to tell you."

"That's what I said."

"You said you'd have a better answer today."

"I do."

"Let's hear it, then."

Saar had thought about this on the way over. She had thought about it more than she usually did, because the woman on the phone had not sounded

like someone you could hand the ordinary sentence to. The ordinary sentence was that Hoorbaar collected first-hand accounts of the transition years for the delta archive, so that the record would exist. It was true. It was also the kind of true that ends a conversation rather than starting one.

"There's an archive," she said. "It closes in six years. After that nothing goes in. The institutions that had a hand in what happened, the port, the growers' boards, Cadence, all of them, are obliged to put accounts into it before it closes. First-hand ones. They don't collect the accounts themselves. They pay us. I sit with people who were there and I record them. The firm cuts what I record into something the institutions can use. The institutions put it in the archive and say they've met the obligation. And the people I sit with get a small fee and the knowledge that something they said will be in there when the door shuts."

Rie looked at her.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"What's in it for you?"

"A salary. And I like it."

"Like what?"

"Sitting with people who were there."

Rie kept looking. Saar let her. It was a long look. Saar sat inside it without filling it.

"You're the first one who's said that straight," Rie said. "I've had three of you. Not from your lot. Others. They all said something about heritage."

"I don't say heritage."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know what it means."

Rie made a sound that was not quite a laugh. Then she said, "All right," and settled back a fraction in her chair. That was consent. Saar took out the recorder and put it on the low table between them. Rie did not look at it again.

They talked for an hour and ten minutes.

Rie had gone under glass at fifteen, in 2035, at a tomato house near Naaldwijk. Her mother had done it before her. Her grandmother had done it before

that, when it was still soil and hoses and a man with a thermometer. By Rie's time it was hydroponic and the lights were on rails, but the hands were still hands. You still pollinated the tomatoes by shaking the trusses with a wand. You still walked the rows. You still knew, by the smell of a house when you came in at six, whether something was wrong in it.

"That's the thing nobody asks," Rie said. "The smell. Tomato leaves. It's a green smell, bitter, it gets in your clothes and your hair and you stop noticing it, and then you come home and your husband says you smell of the house. For forty years. And then it's gone and you'd give anything to smell it once."

Saar did not say anything. She did not need to.

The closed systems had come in around 2050. Sealed houses, no people inside, the plants tended by things on rails that did the shaking and the walking and the smelling. Rie had been thirty. She had been moved to the last of the open houses. Then to supervising the sealed ones from a room with screens in it. She had done that for twenty years, because it paid and because there was nothing else. She had hated every day of it and had never once said so at work.

"You'd look at the screens," she said, "and the plants were fine. They were better than fine. They were the best tomatoes anyone had ever grown. And I'd sit there and think, nobody's touched those. Nobody's shaken a truss on that plant. And then I'd think, so what, they're tomatoes. And then I'd go home."

"Did you ever go in?"

"You couldn't. It was sealed. Contamination." She paused. "Once. In sixty-eight. There was a fault and they needed someone who knew the layout and I went in with a suit on. Full suit. And it was warm, and it smelled the same. The green smell. Through the suit, or I thought so. And I stood there in the middle of a house I'd worked in when I was twenty. Full of plants. Not a soul in it. And I couldn't smell it properly because of the suit." She stopped. "I fixed the fault. I came out. That was the last time I was under glass."

Saar had known, on the phone, that this woman would give her something. She had not known it would be that. She sat with it. She let the silence run its right length, and then a little past, because Rie was not a woman who would feel watched. Then she asked about the hand-pollination, whether Rie remembered the last time she had done it herself. Rie said she did not. Nobody

remembered the last time they did a thing. You only knew it was the last time afterward, and by then it was gone.

"Write that down," Rie said.

"It's recording."

"Then it's down."

They went on. Rie's husband, who had driven for the auction and had died in 2093. A daughter in Utrecht who rang on Sundays. The house, this house, which Rie had lived in for sixty years and which the municipality kept trying to buy. The blocks to the south that never went dark. Saar asked the questions. They were easy to find. She was not steering, or so little that it did not feel like it. Rie went where the thing was without being taken. All Saar had to do was keep up.

At the end Rie was not tired. Saar was, a little. She closed on the daughter in Utrecht and put the recorder away and Rie watched her do it.

"Was that what you wanted?"

"It was better than what I wanted."

"Don't flatter me."

"I'm not. I'll get thirty-five minutes out of that and one of them will be in the archive when it shuts, and it'll be the suit."

Rie thought about that.

"The suit," she said. "Not the smell."

"The suit's got the smell in it."

"So it has." Rie stood up. "You'll have tea before you go. You didn't have any. I don't like people who come and drink your tea and go, but I don't like people who won't have any either."

Saar had tea. It was strong and there was no milk and Rie did not offer any. They sat with it and did not talk much. The house was still cold. Rie had the blanket round her shoulders now and did not seem to notice she had put it there.

"Friday," Saar said. "The boy."

"He'll come when he comes."

"What's wrong with the valve?"

"Stuck. It sticks. It's stuck since the summer and he came once and did something and it stuck again."

Saar put her cup down. She went and looked at the radiator. It was an old one, older than the house maybe. Cast iron, with a thermostatic head on the inlet that had gone brittle and cracked. The pin underneath it had seized in the closed position. She had seen it before. She had grown up in a house with one like it.

"Have you got a spanner?"

"A what?"

"A spanner. Or pliers. Under the sink, probably."

Rie looked at her, then went to the kitchen. There was the sound of a drawer. She came back with a pair of pliers that had been bought in another century.

Saar got down on her knees on the cold floor. She unscrewed the cracked head and put it on the windowsill. The pin was there, sunk flush. She got the pliers on it and worked it, gently, back and forward. On the fourth pull it came up a quarter inch with a small click. There was a sound in the pipe, a tick and then a rush. She put her hand on the iron and waited, and it began, very slowly, to warm.

"There," she said.

Rie was standing over her.

"You'll want a new head on it. Any plumber's shop. Till then you turn the pin with the pliers, up for hot, down for off. Don't let anyone tell you it needs the whole valve. It doesn't."

She stood. Her knees were wet from the floor. Rie was still looking at her.

"Where did you learn that?"

"My mother's house. Same radiator."

"You didn't have to."

"I know."

Rie did not say thank you. Saar had not expected her to and would have been slightly disappointed if she had. What Rie did was take the blanket off her shoulders and fold it. She put it back on the radiator, on the warming iron, and stood with her hand on it.

"Go on," she said. "You've got your thirty-five minutes."

Saar went. At the door Rie said, without turning round from the radiator, "Come back if you want. You don't have to bring that thing."

On the service back to the ring Saar sat with her tablet on her knee and did not file the log. She would file it. It would be a good log. The suit would be in it, from about forty minutes. She would write *recommended emphasis* and mean it, and it would be true. She would do that when she got in. She sat for the length of the crossing with the tablet dark and looked at the water. She thought about the green smell. About a woman standing in a warm house in a suit. About the pin coming up a quarter inch under the pliers. The radiator was not going in the log. There was no field for it.

The Commission

Bregje put it on her desk in the old way, as a folder. The firm had not used paper for anything in a decade, and Bregje did not use it for anything either, except this. A new package came as a grey card folder with the buyer's name on the tab. Saar had never asked why. She assumed it was so that the moment had weight.

"Cadence," Bregje said. "Delta agriculture. Forty usable minutes, eight to twelve subjects, food production on the islands from about 2040 to 2080. The surrenders. What it was like to farm ground that was going back to the water."

"When do they want it?"

"December."

"That's tight."

"That's why it's you."

Saar opened the folder. Inside was the brief, three pages, and the subject list, one page, and a map. The map was of Goeree-Overflakkee with the polders drawn on it in a pale grey wash. Some of them were hatched. The hatched ones had a year written across them in small figures. She looked at the map for a moment and then closed the folder on it and looked at the list instead.

Fourteen names. Fourteen was more than the brief needed, and she knew why before she read the annotations, and read them anyway. Two of the fourteen had a line through them and a date. Hoekstra, J., Stellendam. Died 12 August. Vroegindewei, M., Ooltgensplaat. Died 29 August. The list had been drawn on the third of August.

"Two since the list," she said.

"It's about one a week now, off the delta lists. Loes keeps a figure." Bregje did not sit. She never sat at anyone's desk. "It'll speed up. The ones on that list were between twenty and thirty-five in 2050. There's a floor on how many of them there can be and we're near it. Everyone's near it. Cadence know that, which is why December."

"Twelve is a lot for December."

"Ten. Two of them will be dead by then. Book fourteen and you'll get ten."

Saar looked at her. Bregje looked back. It was not said with anything in it. It was arithmetic. Bregje did not pretend it was anything else. Saar had always thought that was the honest way to say it. This morning she was not certain she still thought so.

"I'll book fourteen," she said.

"Good. Tomas wants one."

"Which?"

"He didn't say. He said any. He said he'd like to do one of the farmers." Bregje's face did not move. "He thinks he's got a feel for the land."

"He's from Delft."

"I know where he's from. Give him the one you least want. He'll get a re-book out of it and I'll get to keep my column."

She went. Saar sat with the folder.

The brief was from Cadence Continuity's public-history office and had been written by someone who wrote a lot of them. It set out the obligation, the clause number, the archive deadline, the minute count. It named a contact, *M. Adriaanse, Compliance*, with a line number. It described what Cadence wanted the package to do: *represent the lived experience of agricultural communities during managed retreat, with particular attention to decision-making, adaptation, and loss*. Saar had read a hundred of these and could have written this one. She noted the three nouns at the end and knew which of them would carry the package, and it was not adaptation.

Then the list. Twelve living. Ages eighty to ninety-three. Farmers, mostly. Two who had worked for the water board. A woman who had run the co-operative at Dirksland. A man who had been the last dairy in Herkingen. Addresses on the island, all but three. She would be on the causeway line four days a week until December. She did not mind that. She had grown up on the line.

She opened the map again.

The hatching was the surrender schedule. The northern polders, along the Haringvliet, were clear. The southern and western ones were hatched, and the

years ran from 2055 in the far west to 2112 in the last of them near Herkingen. It was a good map. Someone at Cadence had made it carefully. The dike lines were drawn in. The pumping stations were marked with small squares. The year on each polder was set in a plain figure with no comment. It said what had happened and what would happen and gave no opinion on either.

She found Sommeldijk. It was near the middle, on high ground, unhatched. South of it, below the Langeweg, was a long irregular polder running down toward the Grevelingen. Zuidzijde. Hatched. 2110.

Opa's shed, she thought. That was all. The Langeweg ran along the north edge of the hatching. The shed with the stones in it was somewhere on that road. In two years the ground below the road would go back to salt. He would have to stop going to look at the stones. Or he would not, and would stand on the road and look at the shed from there, with the water where the wheat had been. She could see him doing it.

Then she thought: he was not a farmer. The package was farmers. He had bought their wheat and that was as far as it went, and there was nothing on the brief about millers, and Cadence would not want a miller. She closed the map and put it in the folder and put the folder in the drawer and rang the first name on the list.

She booked seven that morning. The eighth did not answer and the ninth was in hospital, according to a son who was polite about it and did not say what for. She wrote *hospital, re-try October* and moved on. By noon she had the shape of the thing, four days a week on the island, two subjects a day, starting Thursday.

Tomas came over at lunch with his sandwich.

"Bregje said you'd give me one."

"I'll give you Herkingen. The dairy."

"Is that a good one?"

"It's a man who milked cows for forty years and then didn't. I don't know if it's good. It's the one furthest from the line."

He took the name and wrote it on his hand, an actual pen on his actual hand, and thanked her. Then he did not go.

"You know what they'll cut before you get there," he said. He said it without heat. "That's why your logs are so clean. You've done the shopping on the train."

She did not answer.

"I'm not saying it's wrong."

"You are."

"A bit." He looked at the name on his hand. "I'll go and milk some cows."

She watched him go back to the window. He would spend an hour tonight reading about dairy. He would go to Herkingen in the coat and sit with the man for two hours. He would come back with twelve usable minutes and a friend. She did not know what to do with the fact that she envied him that. It came and went most days and she had stopped examining it.

In the afternoon she did prep. The co-operative woman first, because there were records. The Dirksland co-op had kept minutes, and the minutes were in a municipal archive that had survived, and Saar read three years of them in an hour. Grain intake by polder, by season. Prices. A long argument in 2069 about whether to take wheat off the Zuidzijde at all, given the salt, and a vote, and the vote going narrowly to take it. A note in 2072 that the Zuidzijde intake was *below standard for milling and referred to feed*.

She stopped on that. Below standard for milling. 2072. She read it again and then read on. It was a co-operative minute and not about anyone in particular. It went into her notes for the Dirksland woman under *harvest quality* and she did not think about it further. There was a great deal to read.

At four the ninety-one-year-old's daughter rang to say her father could do Friday but not before eleven, and Saar moved him. At five Bregje did her second circuit and stopped, and looked at the folder on the desk, and said, "Seven?" and Saar said, "Seven," and Bregje nodded and moved on.

She did not go to the hall. It was not a Thursday and she had been the night before and she was tired in the specific way that reading minutes made her tired, behind the eyes. She went home and ate something standing up. She sat with the map for a while before bed. She had brought the folder home without quite deciding to.

She looked at the Langeweg. She found the shed, or where she thought it was, a small square on the road with nothing marked. The map did not know it was a shed. It did not know there were stones in it. It knew there was a structure at that point. It knew the ground below it would be gone in 2110. It had no field for what the structure was, or for who went to look at it on Sunday afternoons.

She put the folder away. She would ring Opa in the morning. She would not mention the map. There was no reason to. He knew about the Zuidzijde. Everyone on the island knew, and had known for years. He had never once brought it up at the potatoes. She thought about that briefly and left it. It was late, and Thursday was the co-op woman, and she needed to be good on Thursday.

Migration

The co-op woman, Vrolijk, was ninety and had kept every minute book herself for eleven years, in a hand that had not changed, and she remembered the 2069 vote.

"Seven to five," she said. "I was one of the five. We should have left the Zuidzijde to the sheep. Everyone knew it. But Kroon had a mortgage on the north field and he needed the intake and he had friends." She looked at Saar. "You've read the books."

"Some of them."

"Then you know the wheat was rubbish. Salt in it. You could taste it in the bread by seventy-two. I said so. It's in the minutes."

It was in the minutes. Saar got thirty-one usable out of her and a cup of coffee she had not wanted and a hard look at the door that she thought was approval. On the line back she filed it, and put the vote at the top of the emphasis, and did not think about the wheat.

That was Thursday. On Monday the migration started and she did not go to the island at all.

The migration was Loes's. It had been coming for two years and it was here now, and it was the reason the number in the corner of the board existed. The archive that would seal in 2114 had a format. Everything that went into it had to be in that format. The regional holdings were not. Sixty years of files from Hoorbaar, from the two firms before it, and from a dozen port and municipal and growers' collections. They had to be read, checked, indexed against the register, and written across. Loes had a team of four for it and they were not enough. So every October for two years the intake staff came down to the archive floor for a week and checked index against holdings. It was the dullest work in the building.

Saar did not mind it. She had done it last year and had found something in it. You sat at a terminal with the register on one side and the holdings on the

other. You went down the register a line at a time. You confirmed that the thing it said existed did exist, and was where it said, and was what it said. Most of the time it was. Sometimes it was not, and you flagged it, and Loes came and looked and said something short. There was a rhythm to it after the first hour.

Loes gave her the island. It was the obvious thing. She knew the names.

"Regional index, Goeree-Overflakkee, all sources, 2049 to 2098. Six hundred and forty entries. Confirm holding, confirm format, flag anything with a raw still attached."

"Why the raw?"

"Because there shouldn't be any. Anything licensed had its raw cleared. Anything from before 2081 is on the old rules and might have one. If it does I need to know. The archive won't take it and I have to decide what to do with it."

"What do you do with it?"

Loes looked at her. "Nothing, yet. That's why I need to know." She glanced at the terminal, where the register was waiting. "Sixty years from the settlement. That's where 2114 comes from, if you've ever wondered. Whoever wrote sixty thought it was long enough for everyone who mattered to be dead. They were nearly right."

So Saar went down the island. It was slower than she had thought. The old entries were thin. A name, a place, a date, a source code that meant nothing until you looked it up. The holdings behind them were sometimes in formats the terminal had to think about before it would open. She did forty on the first day. She did sixty on the second. On the third she found a man she had sat with in 2106, dead now, and she did not open his file and moved on. On the fourth she was in the 2070s and going faster, because the 2070s were sparse. There had been fewer firms then, and less money, and the ones who had been doing it had done it badly and kept poor records.

Delta Stem was the source code for most of the 2070s. It had been the firm before the firm before Hoorbaar. Two people and a rented room in Middelhar-nis, Loes had said once, and a grant from the province that ran out in 2083. They had recorded whoever would sit still and had licensed almost nothing, because there had been almost nobody to license to. The obligation had not been

written yet. The archive had not been designed. They had been doing it, Loes said, because someone had thought someone should.

HAMEETE, C.

It was in the March of 2079. Between a Haasnoot and a Hoek. She looked at it for a moment and then made a small sound that Loes, two desks down, did not react to.

HAMEETE, C. / b. 2032 / Sommeldijk / milling / intake 2079-03-14 / source: DELTA STEM / interviewer: DE KONING, I. / package: UNLICENSED / raw: RETAINED.

Opa was in the system.

She had not known. She thought about that and could not remember him ever saying it, though he might have. It would have been one line in a story that had a great many lines. *Some woman came round from Middelbarnis with a recorder, once.* It sounded like something he would have said and she would not have heard. She had stopped hearing most of the story before she was twenty.

She looked at the entry again. *Package: unlicensed.* That meant Delta Stem had cut something from the raw, made a package, and never sold it. Nobody had wanted it. Nobody had wanted the miller from Sommeldijk in 2079, when there had been no obligation and no archive and no Cadence public-history office with a clause number. They had sat with him because someone should. They had cut him down to whatever they had cut him down to and put him on a shelf. The shelf had sat there for twenty-nine years.

And *raw: retained.* Because the package was never accepted by a buyer, the raw was never cleared. It was still there. Fifty or sixty or seventy minutes of her grandfather at forty-seven, in a rented room in Middelbarnis, talking to a woman called de Koning.

She sat with that for a while.

It was, she thought, quite funny. She could hear Anke saying it. *He's been in a file for thirty years and nobody's bought him.* She could hear Anke saying it and could hear herself laughing. She nearly sent it. Then she did not. Anke would say it on Sunday and Opa would hear the shape of it even if he did not hear the words.

She flagged the raw, because that was the job. She confirmed the holding and the format, both old. In the flag field she wrote *raw retained, pre-81, unlicensed package, no buyer*. She added, because the field allowed it, *subject is intake staff family*. Then she went to the next entry. The Hoek, who had been a dike inspector and had died in 2091.

At the end of the day Loes came past with her list.

"You flagged eleven raws."

"Eleven."

"Any of them interesting?"

"One of them's my grandfather."

Loes stopped. She did not often stop.

"Which?"

"Hameete. Seventy-nine. Delta Stem."

"Have you listened to it?"

"No."

Loes looked at her, then went on down the list without saying anything. Saar had the impression she had been about to say something and had decided it was not her business. She was grateful for that and slightly sorry.

She went home. She did not go to the hall. She ate and looked at the tablet for a while. The file was there. The migration gave her access to everything she had flagged, and she had flagged it. It sat in the list with the Hoek and the Haasnoot and the nine others. She could open it. It would take one touch.

She did not. She was not afraid of it. She did not think it would upset her. She did not want to spend an hour of her evening on a story she had heard at every Sunday dinner of her life. Told by a younger and less practised man, with worse sound. She had heard the finished thing. She did not need the draft.

She turned the tablet off and went to bed.

Ordinary Life

"It clicks," Kees said on the Tuesday. "You said it clicked."

"It still clicks."

"Every step or just going up?"

"I'll ask him."

"Ask him. Bakker's was every step. If it's only going up it's the hinge, not the pin. Tell him that. Tell him it's the hinge."

"I'll tell him."

"You won't. But tell him." There was a sound on the line that was Kees settling into his chair. "Your mother says you're on the island Thursdays now."

"Four days. There's a package."

"What package?"

"Farmers. The surrenders."

A pause. Not a long one. "Well. There's enough of them."

"Not as many as there were."

"No." Another pause. "You'll be past the Langeweg, then. Going to Herkingen."

"I might."

"The shed's still there. Roof's gone at the back. I go Sundays after your mother's, sometimes, if the light's all right." He said it plainly, as information, and she took it as information, and said she would look for it from the road if she was passing. Then he told her about the pharmacist's son, whose back had a name now, and she listened, and it was a good call, and she went to work.

The island days had a shape by the second week. The seven-ten out, the window seat, the eleven minutes over the Haringvliet with the tide doing whatever it was doing. The leaking end of the platform. A borrowed bicycle from the rack at Middelharnis that Loes had arranged with someone and that was always there and always slightly too small. Then the roads. She had grown up on these roads and had not cycled them since school. It came back to her

legs before it came back to her head. Where the wind sat on the Molendijk. The place on the Oudelandsedijk where you dropped a gear. The subjects were where the map said. They had tea ready. They talked.

The water board man was on the Wednesday. He was eighty-eight and had run the pumping station at the Zuidzijde for thirty years. He had been retired twenty when they turned it off, and they had let him stand there for it.

"Two years ago," he said. "Not the surrender. The surrender's two years off yet. But the pump was done in oh-six. No point pumping ground you've already decided to give back. So they turned it off and I stood there and listened to it wind down. Forty seconds. I'd never heard it stop before. Thirty years and I'd never once heard it stop, because you don't, you keep it running, that's the job." He looked at his hands. "Forty seconds. Then quiet. Then you could hear the water in the ditch."

She had that at eighteen minutes and knew it. She did not need much else. She got it anyway, because he was a good talker and it was a good morning and she liked him. On the way back to the platform she took the Langeweg. It was a straight road on a low dike with the polder on the south side, brown and flat, with the drainage ditches full and still. There were a few structures along it. A pumping house. A barn with no roof. Near the Sommeldijk end, on the north side of the road, a brick shed with a corrugated roof that had lifted at the back and let the sky in.

She slowed. She did not stop. It was a shed. The door was shut and padlocked. There was a patch of hard-standing before it with grass through the cracks. There was nothing to see. She could not see the stones from the road and had not expected to. She rode on to the platform and caught the four-forty. She filed the water board man on the crossing, with the forty seconds at the top of the emphasis. It was a good log.

The file was still there. It sat in the flagged list with the Hoek and the Haasnoot and the nine others. She saw it every time she opened the migration folder to check something. She had not opened it. Two weeks now. She was busy, that was true, four days on the island and the logs at night and the port package late and Bregje not saying so. It was also true that busy was not the reason. She did not have a reason. It was a file. It was there. She was not, she thought, the

kind of person who needed a reason for not doing something nobody had asked her to do. She left it at that. It was Thursday.

Piet's brace clicked going up. Only going up.

"It's the hinge," she said.

"What?"

"Not the pin. The hinge. If it only clicks going up it's the hinge."

"Who told you that?"

"My grandfather."

"What does he know about braces?"

"Everything. He knows everything about everything that's wrong with anybody."

Piet considered this. "He'll be a miserable sod, then."

"No. He likes it. It's how he likes people."

Piet looked at her and decided not to pursue it. He racked, slowly. The brace clicked once when he leaned in over the table and did not click when he straightened. He said, "Hinge." She said, "Told you." They played.

She was up nine coins by midnight. It had been a good night. Dries had got the slate wrong in Wout's favour for once and Wout had noticed and had said nothing. Four words saved. Marijke had let her have the song at half eleven instead of twelve because it was quiet. Piet had said the thing about Nel. She had said he'd said. He had said he would say it again, then. The song had done what it did. The instrumental thing had come back.

"Your crane man," Piet said, during a safety exchange. "Did he get on with it?"

"He got on with it."

"Good."

"Twenty minutes on the cranes and then he got on with it. There was a gale. Twenty forty-one. He stayed up in the cabin because the mate asked him to."

"That's not what you wanted, though."

"No."

"What did you want?"

She thought about how to say it. "The last day. When they took the cabins off. He went up one last time and I asked him what he did up there and he said he looked at the water."

Piet was down over a shot. He stayed down for a moment longer than the shot needed.

"That'll do it," he said.

"That'll do it."

He played the safety. It was a good one and she had to think about the reply. By the time she had played it the cranes had gone wherever things went in the hall at midnight. Wout at the next table said something about his cousin.

"He's on the Zuidzijde," Wout said. It was the most he had said in a month and everyone heard it. "Sheep. Since the wheat went. They've given him till the spring."

"Then what?" Dries said.

"Then he's off it."

"Off it where?"

Wout shrugged. He bent to his shot. "Somewhere with ground," he said, and potted it, and that was the end of the subject, and Dries wrote something on the slate.

Saar took the last frame. She took it cleanly, no thick cushions, because Piet was playing well tonight and the brace was only the hinge and he did not need a frame given to him. He put three coins on the rail and she picked them up straight away, which she never did, and he noticed.

"What's that?"

"Nothing."

She went to the counter. She paid Marijke the tab and had a word with her, and came back, and put six of the coins on the rail in front of Piet.

"What's that?" he said again.

"It's a loan."

"For what?"

"The brace. The new hinge. Marijke says the man on the Coolhaven does them for eight and you're not paying eight for a hinge. That's six. You'll owe me the two."

Piet looked at the coins. He looked at her. It was a bad disguise and she knew it was a bad disguise and had not been able to think of a better one on the walk to the counter. He could have said any number of things. What he said was, "Two."

"Two."

"By when?"

"When you've got it."

He put the six coins in his jacket, separately from the others, in the breast pocket where he kept nothing else. He got his cue and put it in the rack and got his coat off the hook and had his trouble with the zip, and she waited through the zip.

"Thursday," he said.

"Thursday."

"Tell your grandfather he was right about the hinge."

"He'll be unbearable."

"Tell him anyway."

It was a clear night with the ring lit above and the lagoon flat and black beyond the rail. She thought about the water board man and his forty seconds. She thought about Wout's cousin and the sheep and somewhere with ground. She thought about the shed with the roof lifted at the back and the padlock on the door. Then she was home. She did not open the tablet. She slept.

Fifty-one Minutes

"The raws," Loes said. "I need a decision on the eleven by the end of the month. Keep, convert, or clear. The archive won't take them as they are and I'm not paying to store what nobody's going to use."

"What's convert?"

"We cut them now. Thirty years late. Make a package out of each and put that in, and clear the raw." Loes looked at her list. "Nobody will buy them. But they'd be in."

"And clear?"

"Clear is clear."

Saar looked at the list on her own screen. Eleven names. One of them hers, in a sense.

"Listen to yours or don't," Loes said. "But tell me by the thirtieth. I'm not deciding that one for you."

It was a Tuesday. She had no island subject on Tuesdays. The port package had gone to Cadence at last, ten days late, with the crane man's phrase in it at four minutes ten. She had nothing that evening that needed her. She ate. She washed the plate. She sat down with the tablet and the earpiece and opened the flagged list, and the file was there where it had been for three weeks, and she touched it.

DELTA STEM / 2079-03-14 / HAMEETE, C. / 68:40 / DE KONING, I.

Sixty-eight minutes. She had thought it would be less.

The transcript came up beside it, as transcripts did, with the silences timed and marked in the margin in grey. It had been made by something that did not know what a silence was for. It knew how long one was.

The sound was bad. She had expected that. A room with a hard floor, a window that let the street in, a recorder on a table too close to one of them and too far from the other. Somebody's chair. Then a woman's voice, close to the

microphone, saying the date and the place and a name, and then saying, in a different tone, "Whenever you're ready. There's no hurry."

Saar knew that tone. She used it.

There was a silence of about eight seconds. Then a man cleared his throat, and it was her grandfather, and it was not.

"I don't know where you want me to start."

"Wherever you like."

"It's a mill. Was. I don't know what there is to say about it."

"Tell me how you came to have it."

He told her. He told her badly. He started with the course, a fortnight in Groningen in 2057 that he had seen advertised somewhere. He went back from that to a job he had had before it that had nothing to do with anything. Forward from it to the old man at Herkingen who had let him stand in his mill for two seasons. Then sideways to the stones, bought in 2058 off a man in Zeeland, and the price, which he gave. Then he stopped and said, "Sorry. I'm all over the place."

"You're fine."

"I'm not a talker."

"You're doing well."

He was not doing well. He was doing what people did the first time, before they had told it enough to know where it went. Saar sat with the earpiece in and listened to her grandfather at forty-seven find his way through a story that had not yet been made. She found she was holding the tablet quite tightly. She set it down on the table.

Nine minutes. He had got to the shed. He described it without being asked. The hard-standing, the hopper, the fan. Then the stones again, because he kept coming back to the stones. Then the first winter, when the fan had frozen and he had run without it for three days and had been frightened the whole time. He said frightened. She had never heard him say that.

"Frightened of what?"

"Dust. It goes up. You've got to keep the dust down or it goes up, one spark, and I hadn't got the money for the proper rig yet so I was running with the doors open in January." He laughed. It was a short sound, once. She had

heard him laugh a thousand times and this was not any of them. "Marja thought I was mad."

Her grandmother. Saar had known her until she was twelve and had been at the funeral. She had not heard the name in Kees's mouth for years. He did not say it now. He said *your grandmother* or nothing.

"Was she involved?"

"She did the books. She did everything I couldn't. I could grind, that's all I could do." A pause. "The boy didn't want it. Joost. He was born the year I opened and he never once came out to the shed unless he was made to. He's in Brabant now. That's all right. It's dusty. It's not a thing you can make a boy want."

Her father. She had not thought about her father in some weeks. Now he was in the room, a boy not wanting to go to the shed, and a young man in Brabant. She noted that and put it somewhere and went on.

Seventeen minutes. Ineke de Koning asked about the flour, and he talked about the flour. It was the first time in the recording that he sounded certain of anything. Extraction. Ash. The difference between eighty-five and seventy and what it did to the loaf. The temperature of the stones, and how you told by putting your hand in the meal chute. What happened if it went past a certain point. You were cooking it then and not grinding it, and it went flat and dead, and you could taste that too.

"Who bought it?"

"Bakeries. Two in Middelharnis, one in Dirksland for a while. People from the boat. I had a sign on the road." He stopped. "It went, it went all right. For a bit. I won't say it didn't."

Saar waited for him to say the thing about the smell from the road. He did not say it. She realised she had been waiting for it and that it was not there. She did not know whether he had not yet found it, or whether the room had been the wrong room for it.

Twenty-six minutes. The lease.

"Seventy-one. The ground was leased. I never had the money to buy the hard-standing, I just leased it off Kroon, and Kroon sold up in seventy-one and

the new man put it up. Not double. But up. And I'd been just about all right and then I was just about not."

"What did you do?"

"Paid it. What else. Paid it and made less."

Thirty-one. The wheat.

"Seventy-two was wet. Everybody knows that. But it wasn't just wet, it was the Zuidzijde. They'd been putting salt water through it for years by then, letting it in, they said it was controlled, and the wheat off it was rubbish. Salt in it. You could taste it. Vrolijk at the co-op said so and she was right and they took it anyway. And I was buying that, because it was what there was. I was blending it with Brabant wheat to get it up to standard, and Brabant wheat was dear." He stopped. "I couldn't sell what I was making. Not for what I'd been getting. It was all right, it was still all right flour, but it wasn't what people came on the boat for."

Ineke said nothing. The margin said six seconds.

"Two years of that," he said.

Thirty-eight. The fan.

"Seventy-three the inspector came round. New code. The extraction I had wasn't good enough, he wanted the sealed rig, ducting, the lot. I asked what it was and he said about eleven thousand fitted and I said I hadn't got eleven thousand and he said well." A pause. "That's not the whole of it. I could have got eleven thousand. Not easy. Marja said we could. I said no."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I'd have had to borrow it and I was already behind on the lease and the wheat was rubbish and I thought, what am I borrowing eleven thousand for. To keep going another year. And then what."

Eleven thousand. Saar heard the number, and heard the other number, the forty thousand, in her grandfather's voice at the potatoes.

She went on.

Forty-four. The van.

She had known this was coming and had known she would be listening for it above everything, and she was.

"There was a route. Van came Tuesdays and Fridays and took what I'd got to Oude-Tonge for the mainland. Seventy-three, the autumn, it stopped coming. I rang and it was automated by then. It said the stop wasn't justified, the volume. I don't know. I suppose it wasn't. I hadn't been sending much for a year. I'd had two pallets a week and I was down to one and some weeks none." He was quiet for a moment. "I drove it myself the best part of a year. Then the depot said they couldn't keep taking off-route. So that was that."

"Was that the end?"

"That was more or less the end. I locked it the October after. Seventy-four."

Saar sat back. She had not noticed she was leaning forward. There was no voice. There was a voice, an automated one. It had not said it was the someone. He had not stood there with the pallets wrapped. He had not said *justified* twice. He had said *I suppose it wasn't*. She played it again to be sure. *I don't know. I suppose it wasn't*.

She let it run.

Forty-eight. Ineke asked what he had done after, and he said dike work, inspection, a man he knew had got him on, and it was all right, it was outside. He said it was all right three times.

Fifty. Ineke asked whether there was anything he wanted to say about the mill that she had not asked. There was a long silence. The margin said fourteen seconds. She would not have let it run that long. She would have been afraid he felt watched. Ineke let it run.

Fifty-one.

"I'd have gone anyway," Kees said. "I think. Maybe two years later. It was going. Everyone could see it was going. The van was just, it was the thing that happened. But I'd have gone."

Nothing. Ineke did not say anything at all. Saar waited for her to. She did not. The margin counted it, nine seconds, ten. It was not the silence of a woman who did not know what to say. It was a woman who knew exactly what had been said and was letting it stand in the room by itself.

Then Ineke said, quite gently, "Tell me about the flour."

And he did. He talked about the flour for eleven more minutes, and it was the best part of the recording, and Saar knew that Ineke had known it would be. He talked about the germ. That was the thing about stone-ground. The germ stayed in. The germ was where the taste was, and the oil, and the oil was why the flour went off. Six weeks. Eight if the shed was cold. After that it turned, you could smell it, a smell of old nuts, and you had to throw it. The big mills took the germ out. That was the whole trick. Take the germ out and the flour keeps a year and tastes of nothing.

"You couldn't keep it," Ineke said.

"No. That was it. That was the whole thing. It was better and you couldn't keep it. And people wanted to keep it."

Sixty-eight forty. The recording ended on a chair moving.

Saar took the earpiece out. She sat where she was. The flat was dark except for the tablet and she had not noticed the light go. She did not think anything for some time that she could have written down. She thought that it had been sixty-eight minutes and that she had thought it would be less. She thought that Ineke de Koning had been good. She thought about the number eleven and the number forty. About *I suppose it wasn't*. About a woman letting fourteen seconds run and then saying nothing at all for ten more.

She did not think about what to do. There was nothing to do. It was a Tuesday night and she had a subject at ten in Ooltgensplaat, the second water board man, and she needed her voice for him.

She turned the tablet off. She went to bed. She lay for a while in the dark and then she slept. It was not a good sleep but it was sleep. In the morning she caught the seven-ten and took the window seat, and looked at the Haringvliet for eleven minutes without seeing any of it.

PART TWO

Recommended Emphasis

The Thirtieth

The second water board man did not want to talk about pumps.

He was eighty-five and lived at the east end of Ooltgensplaat in a house that faced the mainland across the Volkerak. He had the tea ready and he had the chair by the window ready and he had, Saar saw within a minute, a grievance ready. It was not the grievance on her brief.

"You'll have read what I did," he said.

"I've read that you were with the water board for thirty-two years."

"I did the formula."

She waited.

"The compensation. When they started the surrenders. Somebody had to work out what a hectare was worth when it was going under, and who got what. I was the one who could do the sums. So I did the sums." He looked at her. "You'll not have read that. It's not in the board's file. The board took the formula and put their name on it. When people came asking who'd done it, the board said the board had. Everybody in Ooltgensplaat knew it was me."

She had not read that. She let him see that she had not.

"Forty years," he said. "Forty years I've lived on this street and there's four people on it will speak to me. Not because the formula was wrong. Because it was right. It gave everybody exactly what the land was worth and what the land was worth was not very much. And they knew that, and they'd rather have had a man lie to them."

He had the formula. He got up at one point and went to a drawer and came back with a card, laminated, the size of a postcard, with the whole thing on it in a typeface from another era. Hectares, soil class, drainage grade, years to surrender, a discount for salt. He put it on the table between the cups.

"That's it," he said. "That's the whole of it. You could do it on a napkin. I did do it on a napkin, the first time."

"Why do you keep it?"

"So I can look at it when somebody crosses the road." He turned the card so it faced her. "Read it. Tell me what's wrong with it."

She read it. There was nothing wrong with it that she could see. It was a formula, and it took land and turned it into money, and it did not care whose land. She read it again, and the second time she laughed. She did not mean to. It came out of her, once, short, in a stranger's front room, at a laminated card.

He looked at her.

"Sorry," she said.

"Don't be. That's the first honest thing anyone's done with it in forty years." He turned the card back toward himself. "What was it?"

"The discount for salt."

"Yes. That's the bit." He put it back in his pocket. "That's the trouble."

He talked for fifty minutes. Saar did not steer him, because there was nowhere to steer him to. She had come for a pump. She had got a man who had done a correct thing and been hated for it for forty years. She sat with that and found the questions, because she was good, and because it was a thing worth hearing. Whether Cadence would think so was a separate matter. She would find out when she filed it.

At the door he said, "Four people. Vermaat, the two Klepper sisters, and a man from the mainland who married in and doesn't know any better."

"That's not many."

"It's enough for a card game."

On the crossing back she filed it. *Recommended emphasis: the formula and the street, from 14:20. Subject's account is of being blamed for accurate arithmetic. Fits "decision-making" in the brief if the cutter is willing. Fits "loss" only sideways.* She read it over. It was honest and it was not a good log. She sent it anyway.

Loes was waiting at her desk when she got in. Loes did not wait at desks.

"The thirtieth," Loes said.

"I know."

"Have you listened to it?"

"Last night."

Loes nodded. She had a tablet under her arm and did not look at it.

"Keep, convert, or clear."

Saar sat down. Loes did not.

"I need time on that one."

"I don't give time."

"I know you don't."

Loes looked at her for what would have been, in a session, six seconds. Then she said, "December. Same as the Cadence deadline. That's not time, that's alignment. If you haven't told me by the day the agriculture package ships, I'll clear it with the other ten and you can take it up with the archive."

"December."

"And while you're thinking." Loes shifted the tablet from one arm to the other. She said the next thing as she said everything, as a filing matter. "If you convert it, it could go in the agriculture package. He bought their wheat. He's in the co-op ledgers. He's the only raw from the island that's within ten years of the surrender vote, and everyone else on your list is talking about 2069 from sixty years off. Adriaanse wouldn't blink."

"He wasn't a farmer."

"He's a 2079 raw with the Zuidzijde in it." Loes turned to go. "I'm not telling you to. I'm telling you where it would fit. That's my job."

"How many raws have you cleared?"

Loes stopped. She did not turn round at once.

"Since eighty-four? Four thousand and some."

"Do you listen to them?"

"No."

"Ever?"

"Once. The first year. A man from Pernis. I listened to the whole thing, an hour and twenty, and then I cleared it, because that was the job, and I couldn't do the job for a week after." She shifted the tablet from one arm to the other. "So no. I read the form. The form is what we keep. If it isn't in the form it was never going into the archive, and if it was never going into the archive I don't need to have heard it."

"That's a way of doing it."

"It's the only way of doing it for thirty years." Loes looked at her. "You've got till December. If you want my advice, and you don't, don't listen to it again."

"Do you say that to all of them?"

"I don't say anything to any of them." Loes was already turning. "You're the first one who's asked me how many. I'll have to think about whether I like it."

She went. Saar sat at her desk with the coat on and did not take it off for a while.

She thought about it as she thought about a table. What was there, before what she wanted. What was there was a sixty-eight-minute raw with the Zuidz-ijde in it from thirty-one minutes on, in a voice that was not yet a story. What was there was a package brief that wanted *decision-making, adaptation, and loss* and had two dead names on its list already. What was there was a form she had not opened, attached to a package she had not opened, both twenty-nine years old. And what was there was a woman who had listened to that raw once, and had let fourteen seconds run, and had said tell me about the flour.

None of that was a decision. Loes had handed her the shape of a thing and the shape was not the thing, and she had until December.

Tomas came past at four with the dairy man's name written on his hand again. He had washed it off and wanted it back.

"Herkingen's the week after next," he said. "I've started on cows."

"Good."

"There's a lot to know about cows."

"There is."

"Are you all right?"

She looked up. He had asked it plainly. He asked everything plainly, and most of the time she found it tiring, and this time she found she did not have a plain answer ready.

"I listened to a raw last night," she said. "One of the migration ones. It's my grandfather."

Tomas sat down on the edge of the next desk. He did not say anything. That was unlike him.

"He's told me the story of his mill every Sunday of my life," she said. "And the raw's from thirty years ago and it's not the story."

"Different how?"

She thought about how to say it and found she did not want to say it to Tomas. He would not say the wrong thing. He would say a true thing, and she would have to hear it.

"Less finished," she said.

He nodded slowly. He took it as an answer. "They all are," he said. "The first time." Then he got up, because he had cows to read about, and went back to his window. She sat with her coat on until the board changed from 2,001 to 2,000 and the floor started going home. Somebody on the far side of the floor said, "Two thousand," and somebody else said, "Round number," and that was all anyone said about it.

She went to the hall that night, though it was a Wednesday. Piet was there. He had the new hinge in the brace and it did not click, and he said so before she had her cue out of its case.

"Told you."

"You told me. Your grandfather told you."

"I'm the one who told you."

"Then you're both right and I've got a hinge." He racked. "Two coins. When I've got it."

"When you've got it."

She played badly for the first frame and well for the rest. Piet did not comment on the first frame. Marijke let her have the song. Dries lost money on whether the line about the water would get her. It did not, for the first time in two years. Dries wanted to know why. She said she did not know, and it was true.

"It's the hinge," Piet said. "She's upset about my hinge."

"I'm not upset about your hinge."

"You're something. You've never once got through that song. Two years." He chalked. "Is it the crane man?"

"No."

"The island, then. Your farmers."

"Play your shot."

He played it. It was a good shot and he did not say so. Wout, at the next table, said without looking up, "Leave her," and Dries said, "I've lost money," and Wout said, "You've lost money every Thursday for six years," and it was the longest exchange the two of them had had since the seals.

Saar potted the black. She picked up the coins straight away. Nobody said anything about that either. She walked home and did not think about the song, and thought about it.

Records

The municipal archive at Middelharnis was in the old town hall, in the two rooms at the back where the council used to keep the things it did not want to look at. A man called Pieterse ran it. He had run it for twenty years and had been a schoolteacher before that, and he knew every family on the island by its files.

"Hameete," he said, when she gave him the name. "Kees. The mill."

"That's him."

"Your grandfather."

"Yes."

Pieterse did not ask why she wanted the file. He was a man who had been asked why enough times to have stopped being interested in the answer. He went into the second room and came back with a box, an actual cardboard box. He put it on the table in front of her and took the lid off.

"Land registry. Inspection orders. The co-op ledgers are in the other box, you had those in September. Anything else?"

"The carrier. The route."

"That's not ours. That's the province. Or it was. Try the migration, it's all been swept up in there somewhere."

He left her with the box.

The land registry was first because it was on top. The hard-standing on the Langeweg had been owned by W. Kroon until August 2071, when it passed to a company with a Rotterdam address and a name that meant nothing. The lease to C. Hameete was renewed in the September at a figure she wrote down and compared with the figure on the previous renewal. Thirty-one percent. Not double. But up. He had said it exactly.

The inspection order was under that. Dust extraction, Langeweg premises, inspector's visit 4 March 2073, works required under the revised code, estimate for compliant installation eleven thousand two hundred, fitted. A note in the

margin in a hand that was not the inspector's: *owner states unable to comply. Advised of closure procedure.* She looked at the eleven thousand two hundred for a while. It was less than a third of what he said at the potatoes. It was also, she thought, not nothing, in 2073, for a man behind on his lease. She did not know what she thought about that. She wrote it down.

Then she went back to the co-op ledgers, because they were in the other box and she had a question she had not had in September.

The Dirksland co-op had sold grain to whoever milled it, and it had kept a purchase ledger by buyer. She found the Hameete mill in 2064, buying steadily, a few tonnes a month. She found it climbing through the late sixties, three tonnes, five, eight. She found it at eight or nine tonnes a month through 2070 and 2071. The biggest single buyer in the book for those years. Bigger than the two Middelharnis bakeries put together.

And she found it in the first quarter of 2072 buying two and a half.

She read it three times. January 2072, two tonnes. February, two and a half. March, two. Then the wet harvest was not yet in. The Zuidzijde had not yet been referred to feed. The inspector had not yet come. The van was still coming. And the mill's intake had dropped by seventy percent between one quarter and the next, before any of the things he had told Ineke about had happened.

She did not know what it meant. She sat in the back room of the old town hall with the ledger open and a pen in her hand and she did not know. It was not in the raw. It was not in the Sunday version. It was a number in a book, and she wrote it down, and she closed the ledger.

Pieterse came back with two cups of coffee, which she had not asked for and which he had not offered.

"Is it any good?"

"No." He put hers down. "It's municipal. Find what you wanted?"

"I found something."

"That's usually how it goes." He sat down across from her with his own cup. "He used to come in here. Kees. Years ago, when it first closed. He'd sit where you're sitting and go through the inspection file. I don't know what he was looking for. He'd read it and put it back and go home."

"How many times?"

"Three, four. Then he stopped." Pieterse drank his coffee. "They mostly stop. There's nothing in the file they don't already know."

"Did he say anything?"

"Once. The last time. He put the file back in the box and he said, 'It's all there, isn't it.' I said it was. He said, 'That's the trouble with files.'" Pieterse turned his cup on the table. "I've thought about that since. I run a room full of them."

"What did he mean?"

"I didn't ask. You don't, with Kees. He'd have told you a story about somebody's hip."

Saar looked at the box.

"He knows what's in it, then."

"He knows what's in it." Pieterse stood. "Knowing what's in a file isn't the same as anything, in my experience. I've had men sit where you're sitting and read their own divorce and go home and tell their wives it never happened."

She thanked him. She put the boxes back where he showed her. On the bicycle out along the Dorpsweg toward her afternoon subject, a man in Nieuwe-Tonge who had grown sugar beet, she did the sums in her head. She could not stop. They came out the same way each time. Eight tonnes to two and a half. Six months before anything he had ever said went wrong.

The sugar beet man was called Van Gulp and he had the door open before she was off the bicycle.

"They sent you for the water," he said. "I've got no water. My ground's north. It's still dry. I've got a lifter."

"Tell me about the lifter."

He looked at her for a moment. "Nobody's asked about the lifter in forty years."

The sugar beet man was good and she was good with him. He gave her twenty-six minutes about a harvest in 2061 that had rotted in the field. The lifter had broken and the replacement had been three weeks coming, and by then the beet had gone soft and the price had gone with it. He was not sad about it.

He was still angry about it, forty-seven years on, at the lifter and at the man in Bergen op Zoom who had not sent the part. She let him be angry. It would cut.

At the end he took her out to the barn. It was still there. A beet lifter from the 2050s, on flat tyres, with the share rusted to the colour of the ground and a repair on the frame that he pointed at.

"That's the weld. Three weeks I waited for the part and then I did it myself with a rod and a borrowed set. It held twenty years." He put his hand on it. "The part came the week after. I sent it back. I wrote on the box, *too late, keep it*. I don't suppose anybody read it."

"Did you use it again?"

"Every year till the beet went. Then it sat." He took his hand off. "I come out and look at it. My daughter says I should sell it for the iron. What's the iron worth. Nothing. It's worth a man in Bergen op Zoom not sending a part."

"You'll put that in your archive," he said, back at the door. "A man shouting about a lifter."

"If they'll take it."

"They won't. They want the water." He saw her out. "Everybody wants the water. Nobody wants the lifter. The lifter's what actually happened."

On the line back she filed him. Then she opened her notes and looked at the number again. She had written it down twice, once from the ledger and once from memory on the bicycle, and the two matched, and she closed the notes.

She would not ask him. That was clear. You could not ask a man of seventy-six why his wheat intake had dropped in the first quarter of 2072. He would not know. Or he would know and have a story for it. Either way she would have told him she had been in the town hall going through his boxes. She would find it elsewhere or she would not find it. The island was small and its paper was all in one building, and if there was a reason it was in there somewhere, and Pieterse would fetch it.

It was gone five when she got in. The board said 1,999. Tomas had gone. Bregje was at the far window with her cup, looking at the old city, which she never did, and Saar wondered briefly what she was seeing, and then went home.

Sunday

The green door still needed painting. Anke opened it before she knocked.

"You look tired."

"I'm on the island four days a week."

"You're on the island now. This is the island." Anke stepped back. "He's in his chair. There's a chicken. Don't say anything about the chicken."

There was nothing to say about the chicken. It was a chicken. Saar went through to the front room and Kees was in the chair with the Friday paper on his knee and he put it down.

"There she is."

"Opa."

"Your friend's hinge."

"Doesn't click."

"Told you. Told you it was the hinge." He was pleased. He was as pleased as she had seen him in months, and it was over a stranger's knee brace. She sat down across from him and let him be pleased. He told her about a woman on the Molenweg whose hip was the same hip as Bakker's and was going the same way. She listened.

"Who've you had," he said. "Your farmers."

"Vrolijk. Dirksland. The co-op."

"Vrolijk. Her hands. Arthritis in both since she was sixty and she kept the books anyway, in that hand of hers, you'd not know." He nodded. "She's a hard woman. She'll have given you what you wanted and not a word over."

"Van Gurp. Nieuwe-Tonge."

"Beet. His back. He did it lifting and he's never let it heal because he won't sit still." Kees considered. "He'll have told you about a machine."

"The lifter."

"The lifter. Forty years. He told me about it at Marja's funeral, at the graveside, and I said, Van Gurp, this is not the place, and he said it was the only

place he ever saw me." He picked the paper up and put it down again. "They've all got one thing. You'll have found that."

"I've found that."

"Well." He looked at the window. "You listen. That's what you're for. Somebody's got to." He was quiet for a moment. "And then what? After you've listened."

She had never been asked it by him. She had been asked it by Rie, by the formula man, by a hundred old people at a hundred tables, and she had an answer for them that was true and ended the conversation. She gave him the other one.

"Then I write down which parts are worth keeping. Somebody else cuts the rest away. What's left goes in."

He nodded slowly. He took it as he took a fact about a knee.

"Good," he said, and picked up the paper.

She had listened to him for twenty-four years and she listened now. It was not different. It was entirely different. She did not let either of those show.

They ate at one. Chicken, potatoes, the two vegetables, bread from the new place. Kees said grace in the short form. Anke said the chicken was dry and nobody agreed with her and she did not want them to.

It came at the potatoes.

Anke had said the bread was better this week, and Kees had picked up a piece and looked at it, and Saar had looked at the clock. Quarter past.

"It's better," he said. "It's not bad. But you can taste it, can't you. The flour."

"Dad."

"I'm only saying. Flour should have a smell to it. When I had the mill you could smell it from the road."

She had heard him say that perhaps eight hundred times. She had done the sum once, at nineteen, and had not liked herself for doing it. This was the first time she had heard it knowing that he had not said it in 2079. In 2079 he had said *it went all right, for a bit*. Somewhere between a rented room in Middelharnis and this table, the smell from the road had arrived. It had been good, and it had stayed.

"I had the mill on the Langeweg from fifty-nine," he said. "Sixteen years."

"We know, Dad."

"She doesn't know."

"I know, Opa."

"You know some of it."

He took a potato. She watched him take it. In 2079 there had been no potato. In 2079 there had been *sorry, I'm all over the place*. She had never before thought of the potato as a thing that had been added. It was where he stopped and let the room catch up. He had found it somewhere in thirty years of telling. It worked. She would have kept it in the cut.

"Austrian stones. Ninety centimetre. I bought them off a man in Zeeland who'd gone bust, and I bought them right, because he didn't know what he had."

In 2079 he had given the price. He had said what he paid, and the figure had been ordinary, and there had been no man who did not know what he had. There had been a man in Zeeland selling stones.

"Proper flour, Saar. I had the bakeries in Middelharnis, both of them, and Dirksland, and people coming on the boat Saturdays for a five-kilo bag. From Rotterdam."

The two bakeries were in the raw. Dirksland was in the raw, *for a while*. The boat was in the raw. Eight tonnes a month was not in the raw or in this. She sat with her fork and thought about eight tonnes a month, and where it had gone, and did not say anything.

"It went well. I won't say it didn't. And then seventy-three. The route."

Anke got up. Saar watched her go. She wondered, for the first time, whether Anke had ever heard the other version, the one without the voice in it. She thought not. Anke had married into the family in 2081, and by then it had probably already gone.

"I had a van came Tuesdays and Fridays. Fourteen years, that van. And one Friday it didn't come."

I hadn't been sending much for a year.

"So I rang. And I got a voice. Not a person. A voice. The voice said the volume on my route no longer justified the stop. Justified. That's the word it used."

I don't know. I suppose it wasn't.

"I said, I want to speak to someone. It said it was the someone."

She had always thought that line was true. Not true as in accurate. True as in a thing that had happened to him, in that form, with those words. She had built the cut around it at fifteen. It was the line, and lines were things that happened, and you found them, you did not make them. She sat at her mother's table and understood that she had never once, in nine years of thinking about it, considered that the line might have been made.

Not by him. That was the thing. He had not sat down and made it. It had arrived as the potato had arrived and the smell from the road had arrived. One telling at a time. Each telling a little more the shape of what the listener leaned toward. He had not lied. He had been listened to for thirty years by people who wanted the voice, and the voice had come.

"What did you do?" she said. It was her line. She said it.

"What could I do."

He told her what he could do, and the fan came, forty thousand, and the October came, and the stones in the shed came, granite, fifty more years in them. Twenty-six past. Eleven minutes. Anke came back with the apples.

Saar ate her apples. She had decided on the causeway that she would ask one thing, and it would not be the thing, and she would ask it lightly, and she did.

"Opa. Did a woman from Middelharnis ever record you? Years ago. For an archive."

Kees looked at her.

"Might have," he said. "There was someone. Delta something. Came to a room in Middelharnis, I sat in a chair and talked about the mill for an hour. Nothing came of it."

"Nothing?"

"I never heard another word. That's how it was then." He took a piece of bread. "Why?"

"The migration. All the old files are going into the archive. Your name came up."

"Did it." He was not interested. She could see him not be interested. It was an hour in a chair thirty years ago and it had produced nothing and he had put it wherever he put things that produced nothing. "Well. There you are."

"Why did they want him?" Anke said.

"I don't know. They recorded whoever would sit."

"He'd sit," Anke said, and Kees said, "I'd sit," and that was the end of it, and Anke talked about the drain.

He slept after. Saar did the dishes with her mother. Her mother talked about the neighbour, and the municipality, and a woman at the church whose son had done something in Utrecht. Saar dried and did not hear most of it.

"You're quiet," Anke said.

"I'm tired."

"You said." Anke put a plate away. "It's the island. It's the being out here with all of them. They're all the same, you know. Every one of them's got a mill."

Saar looked at her.

"Not a mill. A thing. Every one of them's got a thing that went, and they'll tell you about it till you drop, and it's the only thing they've got, so they polish it." She took the next plate. "I've heard fifty of them. I've heard your grandfather's five thousand times. It doesn't mean anything. It means they're old."

Saar dried the plate.

"He's fine," Anke said. "He's got his chair and his paper and his knees. Don't go making him into something."

Saar put the plate away. Then, because it had been in her head since Tuesday and there was nowhere else to put it: "Did Dad ever say anything? About the mill."

Anke's hands stopped in the water for a second and then went on.

"Joost couldn't stand it. That's not a secret. He was fifteen when it closed and he'd already decided about the island by then. Rotterdam, then Brabant. He came back for the funeral, your grandmother's, and he sat at this table, and

your grandfather started on the van, and Joost got up and went out and stood in the garden until it was over." She rinsed a glass. "Twelve years ago. I went out after and asked him what that was. He said nothing. He never said a thing twice, your father, and mostly he didn't say it once."

Saar stood with the cloth.

"That's all," Anke said. "Don't go ringing him about it. He won't thank you and neither will I." She pulled the plug. "And don't go asking your grandfather either. He's got his Wednesdays. He takes the line in and says it's the library. Let him have that."

She caught the four-forty. She had the earpiece in her pocket and she did not put it in. The man across the aisle was reading. There was no song. The line about the water did not come, and nothing happened in her throat at all.

The Contract

The shopkeeper at Herkingen was ninety-three and had kept the village shop for fifty-three years. She was the last name on Saar's list for that end of the island. Tomas's dairy man was two doors down and had told her Saar was coming, so she had the biscuits out and had put the good chair by the stove.

"You'll be the one Rijk talked about," she said. "The clever one."

"He said that?"

"He said you'd get more out of me than he would. He said it like he was sorry about it." She sat. "He's a nice boy. He drank four cups of tea and didn't ask me a single thing I couldn't have told a stranger."

Saar did not say anything to that. She got the recorder out.

The shopkeeper had thirty-eight minutes in her and Saar got all of it. The shop in 2050, when Herkingen still had four hundred people and three farms and a school. The shop in 2070, when the school went. The shop in 2090, when the dairy stopped. She had kept the shelves full anyway because someone had to, and had done it until her hands would not do the till. She talked about bread. Everyone on the island talked about bread eventually, because bread was what you had bought every day of your life and could remember buying.

"Verhoeven," she said. "The chain. They had thirty shops on the mainland and one on the island, in Middelharnis, and I stocked their loaves because people wanted the name. Ten years I stocked them. And for the first seven the bag said stone-ground, in the corner, and everybody knew whose stones."

Saar's hand was on her cup and stayed there.

"Whose?"

"Hameete's. On the Langeweg. It was on the bag. *Steengemalen, Gooeree-Overflakkee*. People would pick it up and turn it over and there it was. And then one year it wasn't on the bag any more. The loaf was the same price and it wasn't the same loaf. I said so to the rep, and he said the mill had gone."

"Did he say why?"

"He said what reps say. Shelf life. He said the new one kept. I said kept what, and he said kept, and I said the old one didn't need to keep because people ate it." She folded her hands. "He was a boy. He didn't know what he was selling. None of them did by then. I stocked the new one another three years and then I stopped, because nobody was buying it, and I put the co-op bread in. Worse bread. People bought that."

"Why?"

"Because it was here. Because it was the island's. People will eat worse bread if it's theirs." She looked at Saar. "You'll not put that in."

"I might."

"You won't. It's not the water." She said it without any weight. She had been talking to people with recorders for fifty years, one way and another, and she knew what they took. "You'll be the granddaughter. Pieterse said."

"Yes."

"Then you know all this."

"Some of it."

"It was good bread," the shopkeeper said. "For those seven years. My husband wouldn't eat anything else. Then it wasn't and he did."

Saar got the rest of the thirty-eight minutes. The last of it was the shop closing, in 2103, and the shopkeeper did not make much of that. She had been ninety. She had done it long enough. Saar closed on the husband and put the recorder away and had a biscuit and thanked her.

"You'll put me in your archive."

"If they'll take it."

"They'll take it. I've got the school and the dairy and the shop. I've got all the going." The shopkeeper saw her to the door. "Tell the boy he was right. You did get more."

On the bicycle back along the Grevelingen dike Saar did not think about the shopkeeper. She thought about seven years and a bag. She thought about eight tonnes a month falling to two and a half in the first quarter of 2072. She thought about the word *reformulated*, which she had not yet read anywhere and could already see.

The provincial trade register had been swept into the migration with everything else. She found it in an hour that evening, at her own desk, with the floor gone home. Supply contracts were public, and had been for a century, because a province that gave grants wanted to see what they bought. *Verhoeven Brood BV, supply agreement, milled wheat flour, stone-ground, minimum four tonnes monthly, C. Hameete, Sommelsdijk. Commencement 1 March 2064. Renewed annually. Final term to 28 February 2072. Not renewed.* A note appended in the March of 2072, filed by the buyer, as buyers were obliged to: *Product reformulated. Supply transferred to Molenaar Brabant BV, roller-milled. Reason: shelf life, consistency, unit cost.*

Shelf life. Consistency. Unit cost.

She read it twice and then she sat back and looked at it without reading it.

The good years were the chain years. That was the whole of it. From 2064 to 2071 a bakery with thirty shops had wanted *stone-ground* in the corner of a bag. It had paid for it. Kees had run the stones for it. Four tonnes a month minimum. She did the sum against the ledger and it came out: the chain had been most of what he milled, most years. To hit it he would have had to run hot. She knew enough now to know that. You could not put eight tonnes a month through a ninety-centimetre stone and keep it cool and keep it at eighty-five extraction and keep the germ in. You ran it faster and you sifted it whiter. You got something that could go in a bag with a word on it. The word was still true. The flour was still better than what the roller mills made. It was not the flour he talked about at the potatoes.

Then in the spring of 2072 the chain had looked at shelf life and consistency and unit cost and gone to Brabant. The mill had lost most of its volume in a quarter. Before the wet harvest. Before the fan. Eighteen months before the van.

She pulled the carrier's route log because it was there and because she had to. It took longer to find. It was in a municipal collection that had been swept in from the province in a format the terminal thought about for a long time. *Regional distribution, Goeree-Overflakkee, route 14, Oude-Tonge depot. Stop 7, Langeweg, Sommelsdijk. Automated review, October 2073. Criteria: collection*

volume below threshold for four consecutive quarters. Action: stop withdrawn. Notification: automated, by telephone, 13 October 2073, 08:14.

Four consecutive quarters. Nobody had decided. There had been a threshold. There had been a mill over it for seven years on the strength of a bag, and then under it for a year. There had been a rule that looked once a year and did what the rule did. The voice on the telephone had said the stop was not justified. By the rule it was not. He had said *I suppose it wasn't*, and he had been right.

She had all of it now. She sat at her desk with the trade register on one side of the screen and the route log on the other. The ledger figures were in her notes. The inspection order. The lease. She had all of it. Every piece of it was true, and none of it was his story.

Her tablet buzzed. It was him.

She looked at it for two rings with the route log open on the screen in front of her. Then she answered, because she always answered.

"You're not at your mother's," he said.

"I'm at work. It's Thursday."

"It's gone eight."

"There's a lot to do."

"There always is." She heard the chair. "Bakker's brother. The shoulder. They've said they'll do it after all. He said no and they said they'd do it anyway and now he's saying yes because they said they wouldn't. I don't follow it. Eighty-eight and he's arguing with a doctor about a shoulder he says he doesn't want."

"When?"

"January. If he lasts, he says. He'll last. He's said that every January for ten years." A pause. "Were you past the Langeweg?"

"Wednesday."

"Roof's worse. I saw it Sunday. It'll be in the field by spring." He said it as he said everything about the shed, as a fact about weather. "Well. I'll let you get on."

"Opa."

"What."

She had the route log in front of her. *Stop 7, Langeweg, Sommelsdijk. Automated review, October 2073.* She had the trade register in the other window with the word *reformulated* in it. She had eight tonnes to two and a half in her notes. She had all of it.

"Nothing," she said. "Tell Bakker's brother to have the shoulder."

"I've told him. He doesn't listen to me. Nobody does." He was pleased, she could hear it. "Sunday."

"Sunday."

He rang off. She sat with the tablet in her hand and the two windows open.

It was gone eight. She turned the screen off and put her coat on and went down in the lift, and at the shop on the ring walk that stayed open for the late services she bought a loaf. Verhoeven. They still had them. The bag was white and had the name in the corner where the other word had been, and nothing else. She carried it home along the water under her arm. In the flat she put it on the table and looked at it. Then she put it in the bin, whole, in its bag, and put the lid on, and stood in the kitchen with her hands flat on the counter for a while and did not think about anything at all.

It was a stupid thing to do. She knew it while she was doing it. It was the first stupid thing she had done since the raw, and it was the only thing she had done about any of it that was not reading, and she would not have told anyone, and she did not feel better.

The Form

She had only ever opened the raw.

The package was attached to it. It had been there since the first day, a second entry under the first, *HAMEETE, C. / DELTA STEM / package / 22:14 / unlicensed*, and she had not touched it. She knew what a package was. She had made a hundred of them in her cutting year. She could have told you, without listening, what a twenty-two-minute cut of a sixty-eight-minute raw would keep and what it would lose. There had seemed no reason to hear it.

It was a Thursday night. She had the island in her legs and the shopkeeper's thirty-eight minutes filed and the trade register still open in another window. She opened the package.

Ineke's voice, close to the microphone, saying the date. Then Kees, without the eight seconds of silence, without *I don't know where you want me to start*. The cut began at the course in Groningen and went straight to the old man at Herkingen and the stones. Clean. The price of the stones was gone. The job before the mill was gone. *Sorry, I'm all over the place* was gone.

She listened with the transcript beside it and marked the joins as she went, because she could not not.

The shed, without the frightened winter. The flour at seventeen minutes, most of it, extraction and ash and the hand in the meal chute. The bakeries, the boat, *it went all right, for a bit*. Then the lease, whole. The wheat, whole. Then the fan, and the fan stopped at *I hadn't got eleven thousand and he said well*, and the next thing was the van. *That's not the whole of it* was gone. *Marja said we could. I said no* was gone.

The van, whole, with *I suppose it wasn't* in it. Then a join she could hear, a small one, and the dike work, all right, all right, all right. Then the flour again, the germ, the six weeks, the year and tastes of nothing. *It was better and you couldn't keep it*. The package ended there, on the chair moving, at twenty-two minutes fourteen.

Fifty-one was not in it.

She had known it would not be. She sat for a moment with that anyway.

It was a good package. That was the thing she made herself say, because it was true and because she would have said it of anyone's. It kept the flour. It kept *I suppose it wasn't*, which most cutters would have lost, because it was a man doubting his own grievance and buyers did not like that. It had been made by someone who had listened to the whole raw and had understood what was in it and had made choices about what a listener could carry. Twenty-two minutes. She would have got it to nineteen and lost the second flour passage, and it would have been worse.

Then the form.

It was under the package, a third entry, and she had not seen it because she had not looked. *DELTA STEM / intake form / DE KONING, I. / 2079-03-14*. She opened it.

She knew it before it had finished loading. The layout. The fields down the left. *Subject. Location. Duration. Interviewer. Consent*. A box for condition and a box for recall and a box for voice. *Usable estimate*. Then key passages, with timestamps. Then a box at the bottom, wider than the others, with a heading in a typeface that had gone out of use before she was born.

Recommended emphasis.

It was her form. The same one. Hoorbaar had inherited it from the firm before, and that firm from Delta Stem. Someone had changed the typeface twice and the logo three times and had never once thought to change the box. She had filled that box three hundred times. She had filled it on a bench in the wind for a crane man. She had filled it on a crossing for a woman in a suit. She had a reputation for what she put in that box.

Ineke had put:

Route withdrawal, 44:10 to 46:30. This is the passage that will carry. The automated notification is concrete and the subject's confusion at it is usable.

Exclude 51:00 to 52:10. Subject states he would have closed regardless. Undercuts package. Retain flour passage as close; it does the same work without the concession.

Subject is not a talker but is honest. Would sit again.

Saar read it once. Then she read it again, because the first time she had read it as a cutter, checking the timestamps against her own, and they were right. The second time she read it as herself.

Undercuts package.

She had written that. Other words, the same thing. She had written *subject's account of the strike is complicated by his own admission at 33:00 that he crossed the line in 2044; recommend exclude* about a docker in the spring. She had written *the daughter's version at 18:00 contradicts the subject's; recommend subject's* about a woman in Spijkenisse. She had written, about the formula man the week before, *fits "loss" only sideways*, and had meant that his account was inconvenient, and had known while she wrote it that the cutter would read it that way. It was a good form. It was designed to be honest with the person downstream about what would sell. She had always thought that was a kind of honesty.

She sat back from the screen. The flat was dark again.

The cut had been made before she was born. That was the plain fact. A woman in a rented room had listened to Kees Hameete say he would have gone anyway. She had let it stand for ten seconds. She had said tell me about the flour. Then she had gone home and written *undercuts package*, and made the package, and the package had gone on a shelf. The only thing that had ever been missing was someone to buy it.

She did not think about Loes's three words. She did not think about Adri-aanse, or December, or the grey folder in her drawer with the map in it. She thought about the box at the bottom of the form. About her own handwriting. About how you could work four years at a thing and never once look at the tool in your hand.

She closed the form. She did not close the package. She let it play again from the start, in the dark. Twenty-two minutes. She did not mark the joins this time. It was good. She went to bed when it finished.

Bregje stopped at her desk on the Friday circuit. Bregje knew what everyone opened. It was not a secret and nobody minded, because Bregje did nothing with it except know.

"You listened to the Delta Stem package."

"Last night."

"And?"

"It's good."

"De Koning's were all good. I read her forms when I started here. I learned the box from her." Bregje did not sit. "The box is the product, Saar. Everything above it is the cost of getting to the box. If you're going to go strange on me over a box, do it after December."

"I'm not going strange."

"Everyone goes strange once. Loes went strange in eighty-five. Tomas is strange as a condition."

"Is there a form for it?"

"There's a column." She moved on a desk and then said, from there, without turning, "It's a good box. She'd have had your job."

Ineke

"Forty-one," Loes said. "Seventy-seven to eighty-three. She did all of Delta Stem's island work and about half the mainland. The other one, Bos, did the rest and did it badly."

"Are they all like his?"

"Like what?"

"Raw retained. Package unlicensed."

Loes checked. "Thirty-three of forty-one. The province bought eight in eighty-one for a schools thing. The rest sat." She looked up. "You want to listen to them."

"Three."

"Pick three."

Saar picked three. She did not pick them for anything except that they were not farmers and not millers. A woman who had kept the café at the Hellevoet ferry until the ferry stopped. A man who had fished shrimp out of Stellingdam. A schoolteacher from Goedereede who had taught the last class in the old building before the school was merged away.

She listened to them across a week, in the evenings, one at a time, with the transcripts beside them and the forms after.

Ineke de Koning was better than her.

That was the finding and she did not soften it. It was not that Ineke asked better questions. She asked fewer. The café woman talked for fifty minutes and Ineke spoke perhaps nine times. Three of those were the woman's name, said quietly, when the woman had stopped and needed to know someone was still there. The shrimp man was hard. He did not want to be recorded and had agreed to it for reasons he did not give. Ineke sat in his silences for twenty and thirty seconds at a stretch, longer than Saar had ever let a silence run. She did not fill them. He came to it himself.

It took him forty minutes. He talked about the boat and the gear and the price of fuel and the closures, and every time he got near the thing he went round it, and Ineke let him go round it. Then at forty-one he said, *My father sold the boat. Not me. I'd have sold it, it was done, but he sold it before I could, and he sold it to a man from Bruinisse who broke it up for the engine. And I stood on the quay and watched them take the engine out.* Then nothing. Twenty-six seconds. Then Ineke said his name, once, and he said, *That's it. That's all I've got.* And she said, *That's enough,* and it was.

It was his. Nobody had steered him to it and he had got there on his own. It was worth more than anything Saar had got from anyone that autumn, and she knew it.

Saar had done that once, with Rie. She had thought it was Rie. Listening to Ineke, she understood that it had been Rie, and that Ineke did it with everyone.

The schoolteacher was the one that stayed with her. A woman of sixty-two in 2081, a dry voice, a habit of correcting her own dates. She had taught in the old building at Goedereede for thirty years and had taught the last class in it. Eleven children. She had been asked to say something to them on the final day and had not been able to think of anything. She said that to Ineke. *I stood there and I couldn't think of a single thing. I said, well, off you go. That's what I said. Off you go.* Ineke let it sit. Then Ineke said, *What would you say now?* And the schoolteacher thought about it for a long time and said, *The same, probably. There isn't anything else.*

The forms were all filled in. Every one. The box at the bottom of each had something in it, in Ineke's plain sentences. The sentences were good. Saar read them after each row with the row still in her ear.

Café: the last crossing, 38:00 to 42:00. Subject's remark at 19:00 that she had been glad to see the ferry go should be excluded; it is honest and it will not carry.

Shrimp: the passage from 41:00. Subject's earlier claim that the fishery would have ended regardless of the closures is his own view and is probably correct; exclude, as it undercuts the sequence.

School: "off you go," 33:20. Subject's assessment that the merger was sensible should be excluded; retain the classroom.

Saar read the three forms in a row. Every one of them was a last thing. The last crossing, the last catch, the last class. She had not noticed until the third that the box always chose the last thing, and that Ineke had always found it, and that she did too.

Then she opened her own log for the sugar beet man and read it. *Subject's anger at the lifter supplier is the usable emotion; his remark at 24:00 that the farm was marginal by 2060 in any case is probably true; recommend exclude.*

She had written that on the line back from Nieuwe-Tonge, eating a sandwich. She had not thought about it. She had never thought about it.

Loes came up on the Friday with two things, both on her tablet, both delivered as she delivered everything.

"The Hameete package. Delta Stem submitted it to the province in the spring of eighty for a rural-life series. It came back in the June. *Insufficiently representative.* The province wanted farmers. Bos wrote a note on it. *Told them he wasn't a farmer. They said that was the problem.*"

Saar did not say anything.

"Also." Loes looked at the tablet. "You asked if there was anything on de Koning herself. There isn't. No intake. Nobody ever sat her down. She did forty-one people and the province and then the money went and she went and worked for a housing association in Dordrecht until she died. Ninety-four. Sixty-five years old." Loes put the tablet under her arm. "The only recordings of her voice in the holdings are her asking other people what happened."

"Did you know her?"

"I met her. Once. Eighty-five, when the firm took Delta Stem's files. She brought them herself. Two boxes, up the stairs, and put them on the table and said, 'There's forty-one. They're all good.' Then she asked where the toilet was, and then she went."

"What was she like?"

"Small. Quiet. She had a coat on." Loes considered. "She stood and looked at the boxes for a bit before she left. I remember that. I didn't think anything of it at the time."

"Nobody thought to ask her?"

"Nobody thought she was a subject." Loes looked at her for a moment, the length she gave things. "That's the job. You know that. We're not in the archive. We're the ones who put people in it."

She went. Saar sat at her desk and did not open anything.

A woman who recorded forty-one people and was never recorded. Whose only surviving voice was the sound of her asking. It had the shape of a thing someone had made. Nobody had made it. Nobody in 2083 had had the money or the reason to sit Ineke de Koning down in a chair. Nobody in 2094 had thought a housing officer in Dordrecht was history. Now she was a name on forty-one forms and the plain sentences in the box at the bottom.

She did not know what Ineke had thought about the box. She would never know. There was no raw. There was only *undercuts package*, forty-one times, in a hand that got no less careful across six years. A woman who could sit in a shrimp man's silence for thirty seconds and then write that his own view was probably correct and should be excluded.

She tried, once, to decide whether Ineke had done it out of mercy. It was possible. You could read *undercuts package* as a woman protecting a shrimp man from having his own doubt played back to him in a schoolroom in 2081. You could read it as a woman who knew what the province would buy and wrote down what would sell. Saar turned it over and found that the two readings produced the same box, word for word. There was no way from the form back to the woman. She put it down.

Kind, and skilled, and it had not made any difference to the box.

Saar picked up her tablet and opened the form for the formula man, which she had filed and not looked at since. *Fits "loss" only sideways*. She read it. She thought about changing it. She thought about what she would change it to. She could not think of anything that was true and would not read, to the cutter, as exactly what it was. She left it and closed it. It was Friday. Tomas had cows on Monday and she had Den Bommel.

She went to the hall. Piet was there. She had her cue half out of its case when she saw who was at table two.

Marit was playing alone. She had always played alone when she played at all. That was rarely, and badly, and without minding. She was small and exact

and had cut her hair since. She had been an engineer on the sea gate when Saar had known her, and had talked about tidal loads at breakfast. She had bought Saar the good cue for her twenty-third birthday because Saar had talked about the hall at breakfast. It had been the wrong cue, a beautiful one. Saar had never once said so.

A year and a half. It had ended in the spring of 2107 for reasons that had seemed at the time to be about Saar's hours and had not been about Saar's hours. Saar had not seen her since. She had thought, more than once, that the lagoon was too small for that to last. It had lasted eighteen months. Now it had stopped lasting, on a Friday in November, with the cheap cue half out of its case.

She finished getting it out. She went to the counter for a drink and put her hip into the end of the bar, hard, and a glass went into the sink, and Marijke did not look up. Marit did.

"You've still got that," Marit said, from table two.

"I've still got that."

"I thought you'd have grown out of it."

"I've grown into it. It's load-bearing now."

Marit laughed. She had a good laugh and Saar had forgotten it and now had not. She came over with her cue. She looked at the one in Saar's hand.

"That's the cheap one."

"The good one's too good."

"You said that about me."

"I said a lot of things about you. Some of them were true." Saar chalked. "Frame?"

"I'll lose."

"You always lost. You never minded."

"I minded. I was being gracious. You never noticed the difference." But she racked, badly, and the balls did not stay where she put them, and Saar reracked without comment, and they played.

Marit lost. She lost the way she had always lost, cheerfully and with no attention to the table, talking, and Saar found that she was talking back. Not about anything. The sea gate, being resurfaced. A flat Marit had taken on the

Ringzijde that had a view of nothing. A colleague of Marit's who had fallen into the lagoon in October and been fished out by a fish-farm boat and would not stop telling people about it. Saar told her about Piet's hinge and Rie's pliers and a woman in Stad aan 't Haringvliet who missed a fence. Marit listened as she had always listened, badly, with her whole face. She said, "You're still doing the old people, then." Saar said she was. That was the whole of the conversation about work.

Piet, at the next table, said nothing at all for the length of the frame. He could do that when he judged it right.

Marit put a coin on the rail when she lost. It was not the arrangement and she did not know the arrangement. Saar left it there.

"I should go," Marit said. "I've got the gate at six."

"Go, then."

"It was good to see you knock a glass over."

"It's the only trick I've got."

"It isn't." Marit put her cue in the rack. "But it's the one I liked." And she went, with her small exact walk, and the door let the lagoon in and shut on it, and Saar stood with the cheap cue and the coin on the rail.

Marijke came round with the cloth.

"It's gone twelve."

"I know."

"You've got your song."

"Give it to Piet. He can have it tonight."

Marijke looked at her, and at the coin, and did not say anything, and gave the song to Piet. He said Nel had liked this one. Saar said he'd said. It got her, at the line about the water, worse than it had in months. Dries won his money back and did not look pleased about it.

She picked the coin up on the way out. She did not put it on the counter. She put it in her pocket, and it was still there on Monday, and she did not know what she was going to do with it, and did nothing.

Island Days

The hospital man died on the Tuesday before she was due to see him.

His son rang at eight to say so. He was polite about it. He said his father had been looking forward to it. Saar did not believe that and did not need to. He asked whether there was anything he could do instead. Whether he could say something on his father's behalf. She said that was kind. She said the archive wanted first-hand accounts. She did not say that a son's account of what his father would have said was worth nothing to Cadence and less to Loes. She thanked him and wrote *deceased 11 Nov* on the list and moved the woman from Stad aan 't Haringvliet up to fill the slot.

Nine now, that she could count on. Bregje had said book fourteen and get ten, and Bregje had been optimistic by one.

She did three in four days that week and did them well. The woman at Stad aan 't Haringvliet was called Tiggelman. She had been a farmer's wife, and then a farmer when the farmer died, and then nothing. She said the last part herself, at the door, before Saar had the recorder out.

"You'll want to know what I am now. I'm nothing. I've a house and a view. Come in."

The view was the north field. It was water. Brown, flat, with the fence posts still standing up out of it in a line where the boundary had been, and a heron on one of them.

"Cor put that fence in with me in forty-one," she said, when she saw where Saar was looking. "I don't miss the field. I'm not going to say I miss the field. I was sixty-eight when it went and my knees were gone and it had been salt for three years before that. I miss the fence. That's a stupid thing to say and you can put it in."

She gave Saar twenty-nine minutes. She was not sad. She was precise. The north field had gone under in 2098 and the compensation had come through, and it had paid off the mortgage, and it had left her the house.

"You'll have met the man who did the sums," she said. "Ooltgensplaat. Everyone says he's a monster. He's not. He's a man who could add up."

"I've sat with him."

"Then you know. It was fair. It was fair and it was nothing. Both." She got up and came back with a plate of something with cinnamon in it. "Eat that. Nobody else will. Put the fence in your archive and leave the rest."

A man in Den Bommel who had kept the last orchard. A woman in Achthuizen whose husband had driven the co-op lorry and who knew every road on the island by which farm had been on it. She did the Langeweg for Saar without being asked, from the Sommelsdijk end. Kroon's, then the pump house, then Maliepaard's that went in fifty-five, then the mill.

"Hameete's," she said. "You'll know that one."

"I know it."

"My Jan collected off him Tuesdays and Fridays for years. Before the route went to the mainland firm. He said it was the only stop on the island where you got a cup of tea and the flour weighed what the ticket said." She thought. "Then it was the Rotterdam lot, and then it was nobody. Jan said the Rotterdam lot didn't drink tea. That was the whole of his view on it."

Saar did not say anything. She wrote *Langeweg sequence, 22:00* in the log and did not write the tea.

She filed them on the crossing. The forms were good. The boxes at the bottom were filled in. She did not look at the boxes for longer than it took to fill them.

On the Thursday she took the Langeweg again. She did it without deciding to. The bicycle went that way at the fork and she let it.

The polder was changing. She saw it before she understood what she was seeing. The ditches along the south side of the road had been full and still in September. Now they were over their banks in places. Brown water lay in sheets across the low corners of the fields. The grass on the high ground had gone the colour grass went when the salt was in it. A few sheep. No wheat. There had been no wheat since 2072, but she had never before looked at the ground and seen the absence of it.

The pump house stood at the far end with its door open. Someone had propped it. Inside there would be the machine that had wound down in forty seconds two years ago, and she did not stop to look at it.

The shed was where it had been. The roof had lifted a little further at the back. The padlock was on the door. The hard-standing had grass through it and one tyre track in the grass, recent, a car that had come and turned and gone. She looked at the track for a moment and rode on.

Tomas had done Herkingen on the Monday. He came to her desk on the Friday with twelve usable minutes logged and the cowshed still on the coat.

"He kept me three hours," he said. "He showed me the parlour. It's still there. All the fittings. He goes in and stands in it."

"Did you get the last milking?"

"I got it. It's not much. He said it was a Tuesday and he'd done it and washed down and gone in for his tea and that was that. Twelve minutes, Bregje said. She said it was a good twelve." He sat on the edge of her desk, which he had started doing. "He asked after you."

"Me?"

"The Hameete girl. He said. He knew your grandfather. Everybody out there knows your grandfather. He said his wife wouldn't buy any other flour. Not from the co-op, not from the mainland. Only Hameete's, until it went, and then she said the bread was never the same and she stopped baking, more or less. He said that." Tomas looked at her. "I thought you'd want to know."

She had not expected it. She sat with it.

"Why?"

"Because you've had a look. Since the raw." He said it plainly. He did not know how to say things any other way. "I thought it might help."

"Help what?"

"I don't know. Whatever it is." He shrugged. "He said the bread was good. I thought that was a thing you could hold."

"Thank you," she said.

"It's true. I didn't make it up. He just said it, in the middle of the cows." Tomas got off the desk. "It's not in the twelve. It's not about the dairy. But I wrote it down."

He went back to his window. Saar looked at her screen for a while without seeing the list on it.

The flour had been good. She had known that. It was in the raw, in the seventeenth minute, in the only part where Kees sounded certain of anything. It was in the shopkeeper's seven years. It was in the trade register, even, in the note that had gone to Brabant for shelf life and not for taste. She had known it. It had not landed until a dairy farmer's wife who had stopped baking said it through Tomas. He had not been looking for it and would not have known what to do with it if he had.

It changed nothing. It was a fact about flour and it did not touch the ledger or the lease or the box at the bottom of the form. But she wrote it down, in her own notes, under nothing. She was aware while she did it that she had never once in four years written down a thing that was not going in a log.

Bregje did her circuit at five. She stopped.

"Nine."

"Nine. I've got two more on the list I haven't reached and one's in a home in Dordrecht and won't sit."

"Then you've got nine." Bregje did not look at the screen. "Cadence are coming in on the eighteenth. Mid-package review. Adriaanse. She'll want to see the list and the minute count and she'll want to know why it's nine and not twelve."

"Because three of them died."

"Yes. Say it like that." Bregje moved on and then stopped again, two desks down, and said without turning round, "Loes has flagged the Hameete raw in the holdings for that package. Adriaanse will have read it. Have an answer."

It was raining on the water when she left. She walked home slowly and did not go to the hall.

Cadence

Marijn Adriaanse was nearing sixty and had the look of a woman who had spent twenty years being the person in the room who had read the file. She came alone. Cadence sent people alone to reviews because reviews were not where Cadence spent its weight. She had a tablet and a coat she did not take off. She sat as someone sits who will be gone in forty minutes and will have done everything she needs to in the first twenty.

Bregje gave her the small room. Bregje sat in on it and said nothing. That was her way of sitting in on things.

"Nine," Adriaanse said.

"Three died since the list was drawn. Two in August, one last week."

"That's the delta." Adriaanse did not write it down. "Minute count?"

"Two hundred and ninety usable across the nine, by my estimate. The cutters will get forty out of that without stretching."

"Loss?"

"Plenty."

"Decision-making?"

"The co-op vote. Seven to five to take the Zuidzijde wheat in 2069. I've got the woman who was one of the five."

"Adaptation?"

Saar thought about it. "The formula man. Ooltgensplaat. He built the compensation model and has been hated for it for forty years."

Adriaanse looked up. "That's not adaptation."

"No. But it's the only account I have from inside the decision. Everyone else is on the receiving end."

Adriaanse looked at her for a moment longer and then made a note, the first she had made. "Keep him," she said. "Whatever you call it."

They went through the list. Adriaanse had read the logs. She had read them properly. Saar could tell. She asked about the sugar beet man's lifter and

the Stad aan 't Haringvliet woman's north field by name. She did not ask about anything that was in the box at the bottom of the forms. She knew what the box was for. She had been reading the box for twenty years.

Then she said, "The miller."

Saar had known it was coming and it still arrived.

"Loes has flagged a raw from 2079 in the regional holdings. C. Hameete, Sommelsdijk, milling. It's tagged to this package as a candidate. It's the only recording on the island from within a decade of the vote. Everyone else on your list is talking about 2069 from sixty years off. He's talking about it from ten." She looked at the tablet. "He's not on the list."

"He's my grandfather."

Adriaanse did not react. "The flag says so. That's a disclosure. It's not a bar." She looked up. "Is there another reason?"

"He wasn't a farmer."

"He bought their wheat. He's in the ledgers. The brief says food production on the islands and a mill is food production." She put the tablet down. "I'll be plain. I don't have anyone else from the seventies. The obligation runs sixty years from the settlement and the ones who were adults in the seventies are ninety or dead. A 2079 raw from a man who was forty-seven and running a business on the ground that was going under is the best thing in your holdings. It's not in the package because he's your grandfather. I understand that. I'd still like him in."

Bregje said nothing.

"The package was never licensed," Saar said. "In 2080 the province rejected it. Insufficiently representative."

"The province in 2080 wanted farmers for a schools series. I want a package that meets the clause before the archive shuts, and I want it to have someone in it who was there. Cut it however you cut it. That's Hoorbaar's. But put him in."

"Can I ask you something?" Saar said.

"You can ask."

"If he weren't my grandfather. If he were a raw on a shelf with someone else's name on it. What would you want done with it?"

Adriaanse thought about it. She did not pretend the question was simple, which Saar noticed, and was grateful for, and did not show.

"I'd want it cut the way the form says," she said. "Because that's what licenses, and the form is usually right." She paused. "And I'd want one thing in the package the form didn't recommend. One. I can't tell you what. You know it when you hear it. I've accepted four hundred packages and the ones I remember all have one thing in them the interviewer put in against her own advice."

"That's not in the clause."

"No. It's not in the clause." Adriaanse picked up her tablet. "The clause gets you to acceptance. It doesn't get you to anything else."

"I'll consider it."

"Consider it. December." She stood. She had been in the room twenty-two minutes. At the door she turned, and for the first time there was something in her face that was not the file.

"I read the log on the formula man," she said. "*Fits loss only sideways*. I'd have written the same thing. It's the right note. It's still a shame."

She went. Bregje waited until the lift had taken her. Then she came back into the small room and shut the door, which she did not do.

"Consider it quickly," she said.

"I heard her."

"You heard her. Now hear me." Bregje did not sit. "I have nine packages due to Cadence and four to the port and two to the growers' board before the archive shuts. I have eleven staff, and one of them is Tomas. I have Loes with four thousand raws to clear and a team of four. I don't have room for my best intake to go quiet on me over a file for a month. I've watched it. I watched you at the board this morning. You looked at it and you didn't see it."

"I saw it."

"You didn't. You've been top for eleven months and you've stopped looking, which is fine, that's what top is for. But you've also stopped being here, and that's not." She opened the door again. "I don't care what you do with him. Put him in, leave him out, cut him yourself or license de Koning's. I care that it's done by the day the package ships and that you're back on the floor after. That's all."

"That's all?"

"That's all I'm going to say. The rest is yours." She went out. From the corridor, not turning: "She's right about the one thing. The thing against your own advice. I've never told anyone to do it. I've kept every package that had it."

Saar sat in the small room by herself for a while.

The buyer had asked for it. That was what had happened. Loes had said where it would fit. Bregje had said have an answer. Now the woman who would sign the acceptance had said, in plain words, put him in. Three people had said the same thing for three different reasons and all three reasons were correct. Nobody had told her how to cut it. Nobody needed to. There was a form on a shelf with a box at the bottom that had said how to cut it twenty-nine years ago. She had read it. It was right.

She was thinking of it as a cut already. Not as a decision. The decision was somewhere else, somewhere she had not gone yet. She looked at it from where she was and did not want to go there. What she could see from here was the cut. Forty-four ten to forty-six thirty. The flour as close. Fifty-one on the floor. Twenty-two minutes, or nineteen if she was honest about the second flour passage. Adriaanse would accept it. The raw would clear on acceptance, because that was the rule, and it was on the second page of the consent in a typeface you could read.

She did not decide anything. She got up and went back to her desk and rang the woman in the home in Dordrecht. The woman would not sit. Saar confirmed it and crossed her off.

Tomas came past.

"Was that Cadence?"

"That was Cadence."

"What did she want?"

"The miller," Saar said. Tomas did not know what that meant. He could see that she did not want to explain it. He nodded and went on. It was the kindest thing he had done for her in two years, and he did not know he had done it.

She went to the hall. She lost to Piet, cleanly, no thick cushions, because he was playing well and she was not. He put three coins on the rail and she picked them up and he said nothing about it. Then he said, "You're somewhere else."

"I'm here."

"You're at the table. You're not here." He racked. "Whatever it is, it's not on the cloth. Play the cloth."

She played the cloth. It helped for the length of the frame.

"Better," Piet said, when she had cleared it.

"It's still there."

"Course it's still there. It'll be there tomorrow. But you potted the black." He racked. "That's the trick. I had forty years of things being there and I pointed the stone anyway. You do the thing in front of you. The other thing waits. It's good at waiting."

She looked at him. He was down over the break and did not look back.

"That's the most you've ever said to me," she said.

"Then it'd better be right." He broke. "Your shot."

The Door

Anke was in Utrecht for the weekend, at her sister's, and had said on the Wednesday that Saar need not come out, that Kees would manage, that he had managed before. Saar came out anyway. She told herself it was the island days. She was there four days a week already and a fifth was nothing, and there was the Achthuizen woman's second sitting on the Monday, and it saved a crossing. None of that was the reason and she did not pretend to herself that it was.

Kees's house was on the Voorstraat, three streets from Anke's, in a row of low brick houses that had been built for people who worked the land and were lived in now by people who had. She had grown up going in and out of it. It had a blue door and a step and a brass letter-flap that nobody had polished since Marja, and it was a quarter to twelve when she came round the corner and saw him standing on the step.

He was standing very still. He had the key in the lock and his hand on the key and he was not turning it. She slowed. He had not seen her. He was looking at the door, at the place where the key went in, and his shoulders were up, and he was breathing in the way people breathe when they have been trying at something and have stopped.

"Opa."

He turned. It took him a moment. Then he saw her and something went across his face that she had not seen there before, and she understood that he had not known she was coming and had not wanted anyone to see this.

"It won't go," he said.

"The lock?"

"It won't go. I've turned it. It turns. It won't go."

She came up the path. He did not move aside. He stood with his hand on the key and did not move it. She stopped at the foot of the step and looked at him, and he was frightened. That was the plain word for it. He had no story for the door. There was no version of this he had told before and he was too tired

to make one. So he stood there with it on his face and let her see it. There was nothing else he could do.

"How long have you been here?"

"I went for the paper. Ten. I came back."

An hour and three quarters. She looked at his hands. The right one on the key was white at the knuckles and the left one was holding the frame.

"Let me."

He let her. He stepped down off the step, slowly, with the left hand on the frame for as long as the frame lasted and then on nothing, and she went up.

The key turned. He was right. It turned in the cylinder a full quarter and stopped, and she could feel the bolt inside not moving, and she knew what it was before she had finished thinking about it. The door had dropped. Old house, old hinges, the weight of eighty years of door on two pins that had worn. The bolt had settled a fraction below its keep. The key could turn all day and the bolt would only push against iron. You had to lift. You took the handle and you lifted the whole door on its hinges, an inch, less, and turned the key while it was up, and the bolt went home.

She had known that about this door since she was nine. Marja had shown her. Marja had said, *he'll never remember, so you'd better*. Saar had remembered. She had lifted and turned every time she came in and out of this house for fifteen years without once thinking about it. She had not been in and out of it much since Marja died, because Sundays were at Anke's now.

He had known it too. He had known it for forty years. He had done it ten thousand times.

She lifted and turned. The bolt went. The door opened onto the hall and the smell of the house, coal and paper and the thing he used on his hands.

She did not say anything about the lifting. She stood aside.

He came up the step. He went past her into the hall and did not look at her, and went through into the front room, and sat down in his chair. She heard him sit. It was a different sound from the sound he made sitting at Anke's. She stood in the hall for a moment with the door open behind her and the November coming in, and then she shut it, and the bolt went home by itself, because she had lifted.

She went through. He was in the chair with his hands on the arms and his eyes on the window and he did not say anything, and she did not either. She went into the kitchen and put the kettle on. She had to look for the tea. It was not where Marja had kept it. She found it in the end in a tin that had once had biscuits in it. The cups were where they had always been. She made two and brought them through and put his on the table by his hand.

He did not pick it up.

She sat down across from him. The room was cold. He had not lit the stove because he had gone for the paper meaning to be back in ten minutes. She got up again and lit it, which she also knew how to do, and came back, and by then he had picked up the tea.

"It's the hinges," she said. It was the only thing she said about it. "The door's dropped."

"It's dropped."

"You lift it."

"I know you lift it." He drank. "I know that."

She let that stand. She did not say anything else about the door, then or later.

They sat. The stove ticked as it warmed. He drank his tea and looked at the window. She drank hers and looked at him. He let her. He would not have on any other day. On any other day he would have been telling her something and she would have been listening to that instead. He was not telling her anything. He had nothing to tell. He sat in his chair in his own house with the paper on the table beside him, still folded. He was a man of seventy-six who had stood on his own step for an hour and three quarters. He knew it. He did not want it said.

She saw him. She would think about that later and would not be able to say it better than that. She saw him, in the chair, without a story, and it went into her somewhere and stayed, and she did not do anything with it. She did not get up and go to him. She did not say anything. She sat with her tea and let him be seen, because that was what he could bear and no more, and after a while it passed, and he put the cup down.

"Bakker's brother," he said. "The shoulder. They've moved it to December."

"I thought January."

"They moved it. He's furious. He says he'd got used to January." He showed her, with his own arm, how far it went. "That's all it does. That. And he's arguing with them about which month."

She listened. He told her about the shoulder. About what the doctor had said, and what Bakker's brother had said to the doctor. It was a good story and he told it well. By the end of it he was in the chair as he was always in the chair, and the other thing had gone back to wherever he kept it. She did not ask him about the mill. He did not tell her. There was no table and no bread and no Anke to change the subject, and the eleven minutes did not come, and she put it with the rest.

She stayed until three. She made a sandwich, which he ate. She did the two cups. When she went to the door he came with her, and she went out, and pulled it to, and he stood inside and she stood outside and the door was between them.

"Lift it," she said through the wood.

She heard him lift it. She heard the bolt go home.

"There," he said, from the other side.

"There."

She walked to the platform. It was getting dark at four now and the dike was black against a sky that had a little light left in it, and the water beyond was brown and high. She caught the four-forty and did not put the earpiece in. She looked at the seat back in front of her and did not see it. She thought about a man standing on a step with his hand on a key. She thought about a form with a box at the bottom. She did not think about the two of those things together. She did not want to, and she did not have to yet.

The package shipped in three weeks.

PART THREE

Keeping

Convert

She told Loes on the Monday, at eight, before the floor had filled.

She had walked in along the water in the dark, because the light did not come until half past now, and had gone down to the archive floor instead of up, which she had not done since the migration week. The archive floor was two levels below the street and had no windows and smelled of the cooling. Loes's team of four were not in yet. Loes was. Loes was always in.

"Convert."

Loes was at her terminal on the archive floor with the register open and did not look up at once. When she did, it was for the length she gave things.

"Yours or hers?"

"Hers. Trimmed."

"Trimmed how?"

"Three minutes."

"Which three?"

"The close."

Loes looked at her a moment longer. Then she made an entry. Saar watched her make it. It was one line, and it went into a field, and the field turned a different colour, and that was the decision recorded somewhere that would outlast both of them.

"That's ten and one, then," Loes said. "Ten cleared, one converted. I'll tell the archive." She went back to the register. "It'll want a form."

"I know it'll want a form."

"Then go and fill it in."

Saar went up. The board said 1,968. Tomas was at his window. Bregje was not in yet. She took the small room, because you could shut the door, and she put the earpiece in and opened the package for the fourth time.

She had thought about this on the causeway on Sunday and again in bed and again on the walk in, and each time she had thought about it as a cut. That

was the shape the thinking had taken. Not whether. How. A cutter's question, the only kind she had ever been trained to ask, and she had let it stand in for the other one because it was there and the other one was not.

Twenty-two minutes fourteen. She knew every join. She let it run and did not mark anything. At nineteen minutes the dike work ended, all right, all right, all right. The small join came. The flour began for the second time. She stopped it.

The germ. The six weeks. The year and tastes of nothing. *It was better and you couldn't keep it.*

It was the best three minutes in the package. She had known that on the first listen and she knew it now. It was also the second flour passage. The first, at seventeen minutes, did most of the same work: extraction and ash and the hand in the chute. A cutter looking at a twenty-two-minute package with two passages on the same subject would cut the second one. A package wanted one of each thing. She had thought nineteen in the small room with Adriaanse across the table. She had thought it without meaning to, as a cutter's estimate, and it had been correct, and she had known when she thought it which three minutes she meant.

She took them out.

It was not difficult. It was two marks and a command. The package was nineteen minutes and six seconds. It ended on the dike work, on a man saying a thing was all right three times, and then the chair moving, which she kept, because you ended on a sound. She listened to the join. It was clean. She listened to the whole nineteen from the top, once, and it was good, and it was a tighter package than Ineke's, and any cutter on the floor would have said so.

That was her authorship. Three minutes removed. She sat in the small room with the door shut and the earpiece in and made herself say it in plain words, because that was the rule. She had not made this package. A woman had made it before she was born. She had taken the best three minutes out of it because they repeated a subject. The thing she had taken out was the only part of the recording where her grandfather had said what the mill was. She had done it in under a minute. She would have done the same to anyone's.

Then the form.

It was her form. She opened it and the fields came up down the left and she filled them as she had filled three hundred others. *Subject: HAMEETE, C. (b. 2032). Source: DELTA STEM raw, 2079-03-14, converted. Duration: 19:06 (from 22:14, DE KONING cut; from 68:40 raw). Interviewer of record: DE KONING, I. Converting editor: S. HAMEETE.* She had never before written her own name in that field. It went in as any name went in.

Condition: n/a. Recall: n/a. Voice: fair; period recording, room noise.

Usable estimate: 19 min.

Key passages: the route withdrawal, 12:40 to 15:00 in the converted cut (44:10 to 46:30 in raw). The flour, 6:10 to 9:20. Lease and harvest, 9:20 to 12:40.

Then the box.

She had thought she might sit in front of the box for a while. She did not. She had filled it three hundred times and her hands knew the shape of what went in it, and she wrote:

Recommended emphasis: the route withdrawal. The automated notification is concrete and the subject's uncertainty at it will carry. Second flour passage removed as duplicative; first passage retained. Nothing in the converted cut requires exclusion; the source cut had already removed the subject's remark that closure was likely regardless, which would have undercut the package.

She read it. Then she opened Ineke's form beside it and read the two boxes together.

Route withdrawal. This is the passage that will carry. The subject's confusion at it is usable.

The route withdrawal. The subject's uncertainty at it will carry.

Exclude 51:00 to 52:10. Undercuts package.

The source cut had already removed the subject's remark that closure was likely regardless, which would have undercut the package.

The words were different. She had not copied them; she had not needed to. There was no daylight between the boxes at all. Two women twenty-nine years apart had looked at the same sixty-eight minutes and had reached, in their own hands, for the same sentence. One of them had been the best interviewer Saar had ever heard. The other was her.

She sent the form.

Bregje was at the desk next to hers when she came out of the small room, with her cup, in the manner of someone passing.

"Converted."

"Converted."

"Nineteen."

"Nineteen."

Bregje nodded. She did not say it was a good box. She did not say anything about the one thing. She looked at Saar for a moment as she looked at the board in the mornings, to see what was there, and then she said, "Adriaanse reviews on the fourth. She'll have listened by then. Have the raw timestamps to hand, she'll ask." And went on.

Tomas turned from his window.

"Was that him?"

"That was him."

"How was it?"

She thought about it. There was a true answer and she found she could give it.

"Clean," she said.

He looked at her a moment longer than he needed to. Then he nodded. He did not say what he thought of that, and she was grateful, and went to her desk.

The Achthuizen woman's second sitting was at two. Saar took the eleven-forty out and the borrowed bicycle and did it, and did it well, because the woman had remembered three more farms on the Molendijk overnight and wanted them in, and Saar wanted them in too. She was good for the whole hour. It was a thing she could still do, and it took nothing from her, and she filed the log on the crossing back with the three farms at the top of the emphasis and the box filled, and it was a good box.

She thought, on the causeway, with the water going grey on both sides, that she had converted her grandfather at eight in the morning and had sat with a stranger at two and had given the stranger everything she had, and that both of those had been the same skill. She did not think anything further about it.

She went to the hall that night. Piet was not there. She played Dries. Dries kept the score wrong in her favour and she let him. He was a poor player and a worse scorer and he had been coming to the hall for thirty years, and she had never once asked him what he had done before that, and she did not ask now.

"You're playing like Piet," he said, halfway through the second frame.

"How's that?"

"Like you've got something else on. He plays like that when Nel's birthday's coming." He chalked. "It's not Nel's birthday."

"No."

"Well. You're still up." He wrote something on the slate that was not the score.

She was up four coins she had not earned. She put them on the counter for Marijke's tab. Marijke said, "That's not yours," and she said, "It is now," and Marijke took them without counting.

On the walk home she did not think about the box. She had the nineteen minutes in her ear from the top and she let it run. It was clean. It ended on a man saying all right, and the chair, and then the lagoon.

Stock

The Cadence template wanted an image.

It wanted one per subject, for the education and museum outputs, which were the parts of the package that would be seen by anyone who was not a compliance officer. A licensed cut went into the archive. A card went into a school, a museum wall, a screen in a municipal foyer. The card had a face on it if the subject consented to a face, and most did. It had a place if they did not. Under the face or the place went a line of text and a quotation from the cut. Saar had built forty of them. They took twenty minutes each and she was good at them in the way she was good at logs.

For Kees there would be no face. The 2079 consent covered voice and had no field for image, because Delta Stem had not had a camera. So the template wanted a place, and the template's library served a place from a keyword, and she typed *mill*, *Goeree-Overflakkee* and it served her a windmill.

It was a good photograph. That was the first thing. White, octagonal, on a mound. The sails set and the cap turned into a wind coming off the sea. A sky behind it from the best day of some year in the 2040s, before the surrenders. It was the mill at Ouddorp, or one like it. The far tip of the island, where the dunes were. Twenty-five kilometres from the Langeweg and a hundred and fifty years from anything Kees had ever run.

She looked at it for a while.

The template did not know. It had been given a keyword and it had gone to the library and the library had the windmill filed under *mill* and under *Goeree-Overflakkee* and had served it, correctly, as the best match. Nobody had decided. It was the same as the route log. There was a rule and the rule had looked at what it had and done what it did.

She could request an exception. She knew the procedure. You flagged the served image as unrepresentative, you attached a substitute, you wrote a justification note for the buyer's records, and the buyer approved it or did not in

three to five working days. She had done it twice in four years. Once for a woman whose served image had been the wrong village. Once for a man whose served image had been a ship he had not sailed on. Both times Adriaanse's office had approved in two days. Both times she had thought it was worth the note.

She had the substitute. It was on her device.

She had taken it on the Thursday, on the Langeweg, on the way back to the platform.

She had not decided to. The bicycle had slowed at the hard-standing because it slowed there now, and she had put a foot down. The wind had come across the polder from the south with the salt in it and moved the loose sheet on the roof, and the sheet had made a sound. She had stood in the road with the bicycle against her hip and looked at the shed for perhaps a minute. A car had come along the dike from the Sommelsdijk end and slowed, because people slowed for a woman standing in a road. She had raised a hand. It had gone on. Then she had taken the device out and taken one photograph. The shed with the roof lifted at the back and the padlock on the door and the grass through the concrete. The polder behind it with the water lying in the low corners. The tyre track in the grass, still there. Then she had put the device away and ridden on, and had not looked at the photograph since.

She looked at it now, beside the windmill.

It was a shed. That was what it was. A brick shed on a hard-standing under a grey sky with a roof coming off it. Nothing in the picture to tell you what it had been. Nothing to tell you a man had put granite stones in it in 2058 and run them for sixteen years and gone to look at them on Sunday afternoons for thirty-four more. It told you nothing. It was the truth and it told you nothing. On a card in a school foyer under a line of text and a quotation it would be a brick shed. A child would look at it and look away.

The windmill told you something. It told you the wrong thing, clearly.

She sat with the two images side by side and understood that she was going to let the windmill stand, and knew why. The note would take an hour. The approval would take two days. The card would be truer and it would be worse. The buyer's template existed because the buyer had learned, over four hundred

packages, what a card needed to be in a foyer. A shed was not it. Nobody would ever look at the shed and understand anything. They would look at the windmill and understand something false and warm, and the something false and warm would be filed under his name, and he would see it.

That was where she stopped. He would see it. Cadence sent every licensed subject a copy of their card. He would open it on the device Anke had bought him, the one he used for the paper and for nothing else, and there would be a windmill. She did not know what he would do with that. She found that she did not want to know. She also found that she was going to let it stand anyway.

She closed the shed. Her hand stayed on the screen where it had been for a moment after it had gone, and then she took it back and put it in her lap, and left the windmill. She wrote the line of text: *Stone-ground flour mill, Sommelsdijk, 2059–2074*. True. Every word of it.

Then the quotation.

The template pulled one from the cut, and the cutter chose it. It had to be under fifteen words and it had to stand alone. It was, she had always thought, the hardest twenty seconds of the job. It was the only part of the package most people would ever read. She had chosen *looked at the water* for the crane man. She had chosen *I couldn't smell it properly because of the suit* for Rie. She knew what she was doing.

She went through the nineteen minutes for it. *It went all right, for a bit* was too small. *I suppose it wasn't* was the line the form recommended, and she looked at it for a long moment and did not choose it. *You could smell it from the road* was not there, because he had not said it in 2079, and she reached for it and stopped. The flour passage had *you put your hand in the chute* and *you could taste that* and neither would stand alone on a card.

Then, at eleven minutes forty in the raw and seven-ten in the cut, in the part where he was talking about Marja doing the books: *I could grind. That's all I could do*.

Seven words. His. Unshaped, unrehearsed, said to a woman in a rented room in 2079 as a fact about himself, and not in any version he had told since. She read it three times. It was true and it stood alone and it was the only thing in nineteen minutes that was only about him.

She put it on the card.

Tomas came past while it was on her screen. He stopped, because he stopped at everything.

"Is that him?"

"That's the card."

"That's a nice mill."

"It's the one at Ouddorp. It's on the biscuit tins."

"Is it." He looked at it. He did not know the island well enough to know why that mattered and she watched him not know. "It's pretty," he said.

"It is."

He read the line. He read the quotation. He was quiet for a second.

"That's a good line," he said.

"It's his."

"I know it's his. That's what I mean." He went back to his window.

She sent the card to the package. It went in with the nineteen minutes and the form. The three of them together were the miller from Sommelsdijk as Cadence Continuity would have him. As the archive would have him when the door shut. As a child in a foyer would have him, for the length of time it takes to read seven words under a windmill.

She rang her grandfather that evening, because it was Tuesday and she rang him on Tuesdays.

"Bakker's brother," he said. "December's off. They've moved it to February. He says he'll be dead by February and they said that's fine, then they won't have to do it. He didn't know what to say to that. First time in his life."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. He rang me to tell me he'd said nothing." Kees was pleased. He was as pleased with Bakker's brother's silence as he would have been with a story, and she thought, not for the first time, that he collected the silences too, and kept them in the same place. "Were you past the Langeweg?"

"Thursday."

"Roof?"

"Worse."

"I know. I saw it Sunday. It'll go in the spring." A pause. "You'll have been out to Ouddorp at some point. For your farmers."

"No. There's nobody on the list out there."

"No. There wouldn't be. It's all dunes." Another pause. "They kept the mill out there. The old one. On the mound. Did you know that? Two hundred years old and they kept it because it's pretty. Tourists. It hasn't ground anything since before I was born." He was not saying it about anything. He was saying it as he said everything, as a fact about the island. "Well. I'll let you get on."

"Opa."

"What."

"Nothing. Sunday."

"Sunday."

She put the device down. Then she opened the card one more time and looked at the mill on the mound, white, with its sails set, and she did not change anything, and she closed it.

The Loose Cut

Adriaanse came on the fourth, a Thursday, in the same coat, and this time she took it off.

Bregje was in Dordrecht. The small room had the two of them in it and a pot of coffee. Adriaanse had brought it up herself from the machine on the landing. Nobody from Cadence had ever done that. Saar did not remark on it.

"I've listened," Adriaanse said. "Twice. The nineteen and then the twenty-two."

"You had the twenty-two?"

"Loes sent both. I asked her to." She poured. "I wanted to hear what you'd taken out."

Saar waited.

"The second flour." Adriaanse said it without weight, as a fact about a file. "The germ, the six weeks, the year and tastes of nothing. That's what you took."

"It repeated the first passage. Extraction and ash were already in at six minutes. A package wants one of each thing."

"I know what a package wants." Adriaanse drank her coffee. "I've read your box. It says duplicative. It isn't duplicative. The first passage is a man explaining a process. The second is a man explaining what the process was for. They're not the same thing and you know they're not. You cut the second one because it's the one that lands. A thing that lands is a thing a listener stops on, and a package a listener stops on runs long in the foyer." She put the cup down. "I'm not arguing with the cut. I'm telling you I know what it is."

Saar did not say anything. She had written *duplicative*. She had known when she wrote it that duplicative was the word she had and not the reason, and that the reason was the one Adriaanse had just given, and that she had preferred the nineteen because nobody would stop on it. It was the right length of silence and she knew it, and she let it run. Adriaanse let it run too. The two of them sat in a small room on the eighth floor with the old city in the window

and let a silence go the professional length. Both of them knew that was what they were doing.

"There's something after fifty," Adriaanse said.

"The form recommends excluding it."

"I know what the form recommends. I've read the form. I've read de Koning's form, and yours, and they say the same thing in different words, and both of them are right about what licenses." She leaned forward slightly. "I'm not asking the form. I'm asking you. What's at fifty-one?"

"He says he'd have gone anyway. Maybe two years later. It was going and everyone could see it was going and the van was the thing that happened."

"How long?"

"Seventy seconds. Then de Koning says tell me about the flour."

Adriaanse sat back. She looked at the window for a moment, at the towers with the water at their feet, and Saar could not tell what she was looking at and did not try.

"Put it in," Adriaanse said.

"It undercuts the package."

"It does. I'd accept it anyway. Seventy seconds. He says the thing and then the flour comes, the second flour, the one you cut, and the package ends on a man saying it was better and you couldn't keep it. That's the package. That's the one I'd remember in ten years." She picked the cup up again and found it empty and put it down. "That's the one thing. I told you there's always one thing. This is it. I'm telling you where it is, which I've never done, because it's your grandfather and because I'd like to have been wrong about you."

"Wrong how?"

"I'd like it not to be true that the one intake in this building who could have put it in didn't."

Saar looked at her hands. They were on the table, one over the other. It was how she put them in a session when a subject had said a thing and she needed to let it stand and did not want to give anything back. She was doing it to Adriaanse. She did not stop.

"The nineteen is the package," she said.

Adriaanse looked at her for what would have been, in a session, eight seconds. It was not a hostile look. It was the look of someone who had read the file and had known what it would say and had hoped, for reasons of her own, that it might say something else.

"All right," she said.

"You'll accept it?"

"I'll accept it for review. It meets the clause. It's clean, it's under twenty, it's got the route withdrawal and a good line on the card, and my office will pass it in a week and it'll be in the archive by Christmas." She stood up and reached for her coat. "It's your name on the form, Saar. Not mine and not hers. When the door shuts in 2114 and somebody opens that package in a schoolroom, the converting editor is Hameete, S., and the box says duplicative, and there's a windmill on the card. That's what's there. I want you to know I know it's yours."

"I know it's mine."

"Good." Adriaanse got the coat on. At the door she stopped, and there was the thing in her face again, the thing that was not the file. "I'm sixty in April. I retire in April. And the week after, somebody from a firm like this one is going to ring me and ask if I'd sit, because I'll be a subject, and the archive's got four years left. I've decided I will. And I've decided I'm going to say everything, and I'm going to watch them write *undercuts package* in the box, and I'm going to know exactly what I'm looking at." She opened the door. "I'd have liked one of you to have done it first. That's all. The nineteen's fine."

She went. Saar heard the lift take her.

She sat in the small room for a while. The coffee pot was still there. She poured a cup she did not want and drank half of it and looked at the old city.

She had been offered the door. She had been told where the one thing was, by the only person who could have told her. She had been told it would be accepted. She had said the nineteen was the package. She did not ask herself why, as she had not asked herself why she passed over *I suppose it wasn't* for the card. She had four subjects to file before the package shipped, and a woman in Dordrecht who had changed her mind about sitting and wanted Friday.

Bregje rang at four from the train.

"Adriaanse?"

"Accepted for review."

"The nineteen?"

"The nineteen."

A pause on the line. The train, and someone's conversation two seats down, and then Bregje's voice, flat, filing it.

"Then it's done. Back on the floor Monday." And rang off, because Bregje did not say goodbye, and because there was nothing else for either of them to say that had not already been said in the small room by someone else.

Tomas was at his window when she came out. He did not turn at once.

"I got forty-one out of a man this morning," he said, to the glass. "The port list. Bregje wanted him by Friday."

"That's good."

"I steered him." He said it plainly, as he said everything, but he was still not looking at her. "I knew what they wanted before I got there and I went and got it. Twenty minutes in. I did the silence, the one you do, and he went where I'd put him. He thanked me at the door." He turned round then. He did not look at the board, where his name had moved for the first time in a year. "It was easy. That's the thing I didn't know."

She did not say anything. There was nothing to say to that that would not have been about her.

"Was that her again?" he said.

"That was her."

"Did she like it?"

Saar thought about the honest answer.

"She accepted it," she said.

He heard the gap and did not step into it. He was learning that. She had watched him learn it over two years and had never told him she had noticed, and she did not tell him now.

"The Dordrecht woman rang," he said. "The one in the home. She'll sit Friday. She asked for you."

"I've got her."

"She said she'd changed her mind because her daughter told her the archive was shutting and she didn't want to be the only one on the street who wasn't in it." He shrugged. "That's what she said. I wrote it down."

"You write everything down."

"Somebody's got to," he said, and went back to the window, and she went to her desk and booked Friday.

The Dordrecht woman was ninety-one and lived in a room on the third floor of a home that had been a school, with a window that looked at a car park and a view she had chosen, she said, because there was nothing in it to remind her of anything. She had farmed forty hectares at Den Bommel with her husband until 2079. They had sold up in 2080. She had never been back.

"I said I wouldn't sit," she said. "I'd like you to know that. I said no to your boy on the telephone and I meant it. Then my daughter came Sunday and said the archive was shutting and everyone on the old street was in it, all of them, the Klepper girls and Vermaat and the lot, and I'd be the only one not. She said it like it was a thing to be ashamed of." She looked at Saar. "Is it?"

"No."

"I didn't think so either. But here you are."

Saar got out the recorder. The woman looked at it for a long moment.

"I've nothing to say about the water," she said. "We sold before it. We saw it coming and we sold to a man from Rotterdam who didn't, and we took the money and went inland and I've not thought about the farm in twenty years. That's the truth. You'll not want it."

"I want whatever you've got."

"I've got that. I've got forty years of not thinking about it." She folded her hands. "Put that in your archive. A woman who sold up and was right and has nothing to say."

Saar got twenty-two minutes out of her. Most of it was the selling. The man from Rotterdam, the price, the drive inland with the furniture in a van, and the woman not looking back because there was nothing to look back at yet. It was not loss. It was the absence of loss, told by a woman who had arranged it, and Saar sat with it and did not steer, because there was nowhere to steer a woman who had already decided what she was. She thought, on the way down

the stairs, that it would not cut. It was the most honest twenty-two minutes she had recorded that autumn. Adriaanse would pass over it. The box at the bottom would say so, in her own hand, and it did.

She did not go to the hall. She walked home the long way. Along the water and then up onto the ring itself, where you could walk on the service deck if you did not mind the wind. She stood for a while at the rail. The lagoon was below her and the old city across it, and the towers stood in the dark with a few lights in their upper floors.

Seventy seconds. She had the timestamp. Fifty-one to fifty-two ten. She had the raw on her device, where it would be until acceptance cleared it. She could have played it standing there at the rail with the wind coming off the water. She did not. She knew what was in it. She had heard it once and had not needed to hear it twice, and she did not need to hear it now, and she went home.

Peer Check

Packages went round the floor before they shipped. It was Bregje's rule and it was older than Hoorbaar. Every licensed cut was heard once by someone who had not made it. That someone wrote three lines. The three lines went into the file where nobody read them, and the cut shipped anyway. Saar had never known a peer check change a package. She had never known Bregje to drop one either.

The delta agriculture package was nine subjects and forty-one minutes, and it went round on the Monday. Tomas took it. He took everything. He put the earpiece in at nine and did not take it out until eleven. He sat with the coat on because he had come in with it on and had not thought to take it off. Saar worked at the next desk and did not watch him, and watched him.

He was on the miller for the last nineteen minutes. She knew the order. She knew when he got to the route withdrawal because he went still. She knew when he got to the dike work because he moved again. She knew when the chair scraped at the end because he took the earpiece out and sat for a moment with it in his hand.

Then he wrote his three lines. She heard him type them. He was a slow typist and typed with two fingers and did not care who knew it.

"Do you want to read them?" he said.

"They go in the file."

"I know where they go. Do you want to read them."

"No."

He nodded. He had expected that. He sat on the edge of her desk, a thing he did now, and looked at the old city for a moment. Then he said the thing.

"It's good."

"Thank you."

"It sounds like him."

She did not say anything.

"I've never heard him. I mean I've never met him. But I've heard you do him, at the table, your mother's, the story. You did it once for me in the spring when you'd had a drink. The voice and the van and the fan." He turned the earpiece over in his fingers. "It sounds like that. It sounds like him at your mother's table."

She had the log open on her screen. She kept her eyes on it.

"He was forty-seven," she said. "It's from 2079."

"I know when it's from. I read the form." He put the earpiece down on her desk, carefully, so that it made no sound. "I'm not saying it's wrong. I'm saying it sounds like him telling it. Like the finished one. I thought you'd want to know that, because you said it wasn't the story, and now it is."

He got off the desk. He went back to his window. He had said the true thing and had not known what it was. She sat with her log open and understood that he had just described, in one sentence, what she had done. He had meant it as praise.

A forty-seven-year-old man in a rented room, unrehearsed, all over the place, frightened of dust. A woman had cut him to the recommended emphasis and a second woman had cut him again. What was left, nineteen minutes and six seconds, was the story he would tell for the rest of his life, arrived at from the other direction. The words were all his. The shape was theirs. And the one honest person on the floor had listened to it and heard the Sunday table.

She did not correct him. He was right.

She finished the log. She filed it. She went to the small room at lunch because it was empty and sat in it with the door shut and did not eat, and then she came out and did the afternoon.

On the Wednesday she went to see Rie Kamphuis.

She had not planned to. She had a subject in Naaldwijk at ten, a re-book, the last of the port package's loose ends. Afterwards she had two hours before the ring service she needed. She was in the old Westland. Rie's row of low houses was a twelve-minute walk. She had the recorder in her bag. She left it there.

Rie opened the door before she knocked.

"You've no appointment."

"No."

"You've no recorder."

"It's in the bag. I'm not getting it out."

Rie looked at her. It was the long look, the one Saar had learned to sit inside, and she sat inside it on the step in the cold and did not fill it. Then Rie stepped back.

"The radiator's working," she said. "In case you were wondering. The boy came and put a head on it and it's been working since. I turn it with the pliers anyway. I know it works without. I know that. It's not about the valve."

The house was warm. That was the first thing. Saar sat in the chair she had sat in before and Rie sat opposite with her hands in her lap, and for a while neither of them said anything, and the radiator ticked.

"You've done something," Rie said.

Saar looked at her.

"I don't know what. I'm not asking. But you've the face of someone who's done a thing and is waiting to find out what it was." Rie's hands did not move. "I've seen it. I had it myself, once, in fifty-one, when I signed the paper to go and sit in the room with the screens. I looked like that for about a year."

"What happened after the year?"

"I stopped looking like it. That's all. It didn't go anywhere." Rie stood up. "You'll have tea. You had it last time and it didn't kill you."

She had tea. It was the same tea, strong, no milk. Rie did not ask about the archive or the package or the thirty-five minutes. She asked about the pool, because Saar had mentioned it once, at the door, on the way out, and Rie had kept it.

"Are you good?"

"Yes."

"Really good or good for a girl?"

"Good for a tall one. I hit the lamp sometimes."

"Then you'll know what I mean when I say this." Rie put her cup down. "When I was under glass, before the screens, there was a woman on the next row who could pollinate a house in half the time I could and never missed a truss. Fifteen years I worked beside her. And I asked her once how she did it

and she said, 'I don't think about the tomatoes. I think about the next tomato.' That's all she said. I thought it was stupid. I've thought about it every day since." She picked the cup up again. "I don't know why I'm telling you that. It came into my head."

"The next tomato."

"The next one. Not the row. Not the house. Not what it's for." Rie drank. "That's the whole of what I know about anything. I'm eighty-eight and that's it. You can put it in your archive."

"I haven't got the recorder out."

"No," Rie said. "You haven't."

Saar stayed an hour. They talked about the daughter in Utrecht. About the municipality, still trying to buy the house. About the blocks to the south, which had had a fault in November and gone dark for a night for the first time in forty years. The whole row had stood in the street and looked at them. Rie had stood in the street too.

"What did it look like?"

"Like nothing. Like a wall. You couldn't tell there was anything in them." She shrugged. "Then the lights came back on and everyone went in. That was the excitement. That's the Westland now."

At the door Rie said, "Come back when you've found out what it was."

"What what was?"

"The thing you did. Come back and tell me. I'd like to know if I'm right about the year."

Saar walked to the ring service. She did not think about the package. She thought about a woman on the next row who did not think about the tomatoes. About the blocks going dark and a street standing out to look at them. About Rie turning a working valve with the pliers because she had got used to the pliers. She had recorded nothing in two hours and it had been the best two hours of the week. There was no field for that either. She had known that going in and had gone in anyway. That was, she supposed, a thing she had done.

The package shipped on the Thursday. The notification was a line on the board under her name. *Delta agriculture / Cadence / 9 subj. / 41:00 / shipped 11 Dec / review*. Loes came up at five to confirm the eleven raws were logged for

clearance on acceptance. She stood by Saar's desk for a moment after the confirmation. She did not need to.

"Acceptance is usually a week," Loes said.

"I know."

"The raw clears the night it comes through. Automatic. There's no step."

"I know that too."

Loes looked at her. "I'm telling you so you know when. Not so you do anything. There's nothing to do."

"I know."

"Good." She went back down.

Saar sat at her desk. It was raining on the water. The towers in the old city had their few lights on. She found she was waiting for something and could not have said what. She went to the hall and lost to Wout, who said nothing at all for two frames and then said, "Better," and she did not know what he meant.

Acceptance

It came through on the Tuesday at ten past two.

She was at her desk with a log open and she did not see it. Tomas saw it. He was at his window and the board was on the wall between the window and the lifts. He turned his head, and turned it back, and then said, without moving from where he was, "Saar."

She looked up. The board had a new line under her name.

Delta agriculture / Cadence / 9 subj. / 41:00 / ACCEPTED 16 Dec 14:10 / subject copies dispatched / raw clearance scheduled.

It was the same line every package got, in the same face, in the same place. She had seen it under her name forty times. Each time she had felt the plain small satisfaction of a thing finished. She looked at it now and waited to feel that, and did, a little, and went back to the log.

Bregje came past at three. She stopped for the length of a breath.

"Accepted."

"Accepted."

"Adriaanse passed it in five days. That's fast for her." She did not look at Saar. She looked at the board. "You're back on the floor."

"I was never off it."

"No. You weren't." Bregje moved on.

Loes did not come up. Loes had said there was no step, and there was no step, and Loes did not come up to tell people that things which would happen by themselves were going to happen by themselves.

The afternoon went. The Dordrecht woman's log, which had already been filed and had already been passed over, and which Saar read once more for no reason and closed. A booking for January, a port re-book, a man who wanted to talk about a ship. The board. At five the floor emptied and she was the last but Tomas, and Tomas came past on his way out and stopped, and did not sit on the desk.

"Are you going to the hall?"

"Not tonight."

"Do you want company? Not at the hall. Just company."

She looked at him. He had the coat on and his hands in the pockets of it and he had asked the plain thing plainly, and it had cost him something, and she could see what it had cost.

"No," she said. "But thank you. I mean that."

"I know you do." He nodded. "It's tonight, isn't it. The raw."

"It's tonight."

"Right." He stood a moment longer. Then he said, "I'll see you Thursday," and went, and she heard the lift take him, and she was alone on the eighth floor with the board and the old city and the rain.

She walked home. She ate. She washed the plate. She sat down with the tablet.

The raw was there. It had been there since October in the flagged list with the Hoek and the Haasnoot and the nine others. They were all still there tonight, all eleven. Clearance was a batch and the batch ran at two in the morning. *HAMEETE, C. / 68:40 / raw / clearance 17 Dec 02:00*. Six hours.

She knew how to copy it.

She made herself think it through completely, the way she thought through a shot, because she was going to be honest about this and honesty meant looking at the whole table. It was one touch. The file would go from the firm's holdings to her device, encrypted, in under a second. The holdings would show nothing. The migration had given her read access to everything she had flagged, and read access was read access, and nobody logged a read. Nobody would ever check. There was no reason to check. Loes would clear the eleven at two in the morning. The register would say *cleared* and it would be true. There would be sixty-eight minutes of her grandfather at forty-seven in a folder on a device in a flat on the ring, and nobody in the world would know but her.

She could do it now. She could do it at one in the morning. She could do it at one fifty-nine.

She sat with the tablet on her knee and looked at the line and did not touch it.

It was not that it was wrong. It was a consent form from 2079 with no field for what happened to the raw, and a rule the firm had made for storage, and a woman keeping a copy of her grandfather's voice. Nobody would have called it wrong. Anke would have said do it and stop making a thing of it. Tomas would have done it in October without thinking and would have told everyone. Adriaanse would have understood. Ineke, she thought, would have understood, and might have done it herself, and had not, because Delta Stem had had no rule and the raw had simply sat.

It was that a copy on her device was not the archive.

She looked at that and it held. A copy was a file. It was sixty-eight minutes in a folder that she could play at night in the dark and that nobody else would ever hear. In fifty years it would be on a dead device in a drawer. In a hundred it would be nothing. It was a thing a woman kept. It was not a thing that was in. The difference between a thing that was kept and a thing that was in was the whole of what she had believed for four years. She had built her work on it. She had explained it to three hundred old people at three hundred tables and had meant it every time. The archive was the thing that would still be there. The archive was the reason any of them had sat. If she believed that, and she did, then the raw was the thing that had been cut so the archive could have him, and keeping it in a drawer was not keeping him. It was keeping a file.

She thought about it until she had thought about it, and then she stopped, because it had held and there was nothing more in it.

She did not copy the raw.

She put the tablet on the table and turned it face down. It was a childish thing to do. She knew it and did it anyway. She sat in the flat with the light gone. She thought about a man saying he would have gone anyway, maybe two years later, and about a woman letting fourteen seconds run, and about the flour, the second time, the one she had cut. She did not play it. She had heard it once. She had told herself on the ring that she did not need to hear it twice, and it was still true. It was also true that she could not have borne to. She let both of those stand and did not choose.

She went to bed at eleven. She did not sleep until after two. She lay in the dark and did not look at the time and knew when it was anyway. At some point after that she slept. It was ordinary sleep. She woke at seven with the light coming grey off the water.

She did not open the tablet at home. She walked in. She went down to the archive floor before she went up, which she had done once before and would not do again.

Loes was at her terminal. Loes was always at her terminal.

"That's the eleven done," Loes said. She did not look up. "Ran at two. No errors."

"Thank you."

"It's not a thing you thank people for." Loes made an entry in something. "Hoek's daughter rang Monday, as it happens. Wanted to know if there was anything of her father beyond the package. I said the package was what there was." She looked up then, for the length she gave things. "There's what there is, Saar. That's the job. You've known it longer than most."

"I know."

"Then go up. Bregje's got a port list with your name on it and it's got two ninety-year-olds on it and it's December."

Saar went up. Her name was at the top of the board with a line under it that said *accepted*. There was a port list in her queue with two ninety-year-olds on it. She rang the first one. He answered on the third ring. He was pleased to hear from her, and she booked him for Friday.

She did not open the holdings. She did not need to. She knew what the register said, and it said *cleared*, and it was true, and she had known since October that it would be, and there had been no step.

At lunch she went to the small room and shut the door and sat in it for twenty minutes and did not eat, and then she came out and did the afternoon.

Kees rang that evening. He always rang on Tuesdays and it was Wednesday. She saw his name and knew what it was before she answered. The line on the board had said *subject copies dispatched*.

"They've sent me something," he said. "Cadence. A package. Your mother had to open it for me. It's the mill."

"I know."

"It's got a card. There's a windmill on it." He was not saying it about anything. "And a thing you play. Your mother says it's me. From that room in Middelharnis, years ago. Is that right?"

"That's right."

"I've not played it. She said I should. I said I'd ring you first." A pause. She heard the chair. "Should I play it?"

She had known this call was coming since the Thursday on the Langeweg with the device in her hand. She had not once thought about what she would say. She found now that there was only one thing to say, and that she was going to say it.

"Yes," she said. "Play it. It's good."

"Is it."

"It's good, Opa."

"Well." He was pleased. She could hear it settle in him. "I'll play it, then. Sunday."

"Sunday."

He rang off. She sat with the tablet in her hand. Then she turned it face down on the table again, and did not go to the hall, and went to bed early, and slept, which she had not expected.

Sunday

He was at the door before Anke was.

"Four times," he said. "I've played it four times. Your mother says that's enough. It's not enough. Come in, come in, it's cold."

He had the device in his hand. It was the one Anke had bought him, a flat grey thing he used for the Friday paper and for nothing else. He was holding it as he would have held a letter. He had the card up on it before she had her coat off.

"There. Look at that."

The windmill. White, on its mound, sails set against a sky from the 2040s. *Stone-ground flour mill, Sommelsdijk, 2059–2074*. And under it, in the quotation face: *I could grind. That's all I could do*.

"That's the mill," he said.

Anke, from the kitchen: "That's not your mill."

"It's a mill."

"It's the one at Ouddorp. Dad. It's on the postcards."

"It's a mill. It's what they've got." He was not troubled by it. He looked at the windmill on the screen as a man looks at a good photograph of somewhere he has been. "They wouldn't have a picture of the shed, would they. Nobody took one. This is what they've got and it's a fine mill. Two hundred years." He turned the device so Saar could see it properly, in case she had not. "And that's me. Underneath. I said that. I don't remember saying it but it's me."

"It's you."

"I could grind." He read it again. "That's all I could do. Well. That's true enough." He put the device on the arm of his chair, screen up, where he could see it. "Your mother says you made it."

"I put it together. It was already recorded."

"You put it together." He nodded. "It's on the card. Bottom, small. Converting editor. Hameete, S. I said to your mother, that's our Saar, that's her

name on it, and she said she could read." He sat. He was as pleased as she had ever seen him. More pleased than the hinge. He was pleased about a thing she had made, and she stood in her mother's front room with her coat half off and let him be.

"Sit," he said. "Sit. She's done a joint."

They ate at one. Joint, potatoes, the two vegetables, bread from the new place. Grace in the short form. Anke said the meat was tough and nobody agreed with her.

It came at the potatoes.

Anke said the bread was all right this week, and Kees picked up a piece and looked at it, and Saar looked at the clock. Quarter past.

"It's all right," he said. "You can taste the flour, though. Can't you."

"Dad."

"I'm only saying." He put the bread down. "When I had the mill, the flour had a smell to it. You could smell it from the road."

That was still there. She noted it. It was not in the package and it was still there, because it was his and he had had it thirty years and a nineteen-minute cut had not been enough to take it. She did not know whether she was glad.

"I had the mill on the Langeweg from fifty-nine. Sixteen years."

"We know, Dad."

"You know some of it." He took a potato. The potato was still there. "I did a course in Groningen. Fifty-seven. A fortnight. Then I stood two seasons with old Braber at Herkingen, in his mill, and he showed me what a stone was. Then I bought the stones. Austrian, ninety centimetre, off a man in Zeeland."

Saar had her fork in her hand. She put it down.

Off a man in Zeeland. Not off a man in Zeeland who had gone bust and did not know what he had. Not bought right. Off a man in Zeeland, as he had said it to Ineke. The course in Groningen had come first. And old Braber, whom Saar had never once heard his name at this table in twenty-four years, and who was in the package at minute one.

"Granite. Fifty more years in them. Proper flour, Saar. I had the bakeries in Middelharnis, both, and Dirksland for a while, and people off the boat Saturdays." He ate the potato. "It went all right. For a bit."

For a bit. Not there were years it went well. For a bit.

Anke got up for the kitchen at the place she always got up.

"Seventy-one the lease went up. Kroon sold and the new man put it up, not double, but up. Seventy-two was wet and the Zuidzijde wheat was rubbish, salt in it, Vrolijk said so and she was right. Seventy-three the inspector came about the dust. Eleven thousand for the rig, fitted, and I hadn't got eleven thousand."

"Eleven," said Anke, from the doorway. She had stopped there with the dish in her hands. "It was forty last week."

"Eleven. It says eleven." Kees did not look round. "I've got it on the thing. Eleven thousand two hundred, fitted. I said it myself."

"Then it was eleven." Anke shrugged and went into the kitchen.

Saar sat very still.

"And the van," Kees said. "Tuesdays and Fridays, fourteen years, and in the October it stopped coming. I rang and it was automated by then. It said the stop wasn't justified, the volume." He picked up another potato and looked at it and put it down. "I don't know. I suppose it wasn't. I hadn't been sending much."

There it was. *I suppose it wasn't*. At her mother's table, in his mouth, at seventy-six. The voice that had said it was the someone was not there. He had not reached for it. It had been the line for thirty years. She had built the cut around it at fifteen. It was gone, because it was not in the package, and the package was official, and had his name on it and hers.

"I drove it myself the best part of a year. Then the depot said no. And I locked it the October after." He drank some water. "Then I did the dikes. Inspection. A man I knew got me on. It was all right. It was outside."

He stopped.

She waited. She waited for the stones in the shed, granite, fifty more years, which had been the ending for thirty years and was not in the package. She waited for him to go on past the dikes to the thing after, which had been fourteen seconds of silence and then seventy seconds and then a woman saying tell me about the flour. He did not go on. He had told it as far as the package went

and the package ended on the dikes and a chair, and he sat back, and he was finished.

"That's the mill," he said. "It's on the thing. All of it."

The clock said twenty-three past. Eight minutes. It had never once been eight minutes.

Anke came in with the apples.

"More?"

"I'll have some apples."

Saar ate her apples. She heard her cut. She sat at her mother's table and heard the joins. The small one after the wheat. The clean one after the fan. She heard the place where the second flour should have been and was not. She heard the ending she had chosen, all right, all right, all right, in her grandfather's voice at the potatoes. The words were his. Every one. He had said every word of it in 2079 in a rented room and she had not put a syllable in his mouth. She had taken some out. A woman before her had taken more. What was left he had listened to four times on a device on the arm of his chair. It was official. It had his granddaughter's name on the form. Now it was what had happened.

"It's good," he said. "Isn't it. It's good, the thing."

"It's good, Opa."

"It sounds like me."

She looked at her plate.

"It does," she said.

He slept after. Saar did the dishes with Anke. Anke talked about the church and the drain, and then about the joint, which had been tough whatever anyone said. Saar dried and did not hear it, and then heard the last thing.

"It's shorter," Anke said.

"What is?"

"His story. It was eleven minutes and now it's eight. I've been timing it since before you were born." She rinsed a plate. "Don't look like that. I had to do something while he told it." She handed the plate over. "Eight's better. Eleven was too long."

She walked him home. She had started doing that since the door. He did not object and did not remark on it. They went along the Dorpsweg in the last of the light with the device in his coat pocket. At the Voorstraat he got the key out and lifted the door and turned it. The bolt went. He looked at her.

"See," he said.

"I see."

The house was cold. He lit the stove himself. She went to put the kettle on and came back through the front room for the cups, and the Friday paper was on the table by his chair, and under it, half out, was a card.

She did not mean to read it. It was the size of the laminated card the formula man had kept in his pocket. It had the same look of a thing that was consulted. She read it because it was there and because reading was what she did.

HERSTEL BV. Rotterdam Lagoon, Ringzijde 4, level 12. Bevestigend gesprek, 40 min. Woensdag 11:00. Rol: Cadence Continuity, directeur.

A date stamp. Then another under it, and another, going back down the card in a column, Wednesdays, two years of them.

She stood with the card in her hand. He was at the stove with his back to her and he had not seen. She could put it back. She did not put it back.

"Opa."

He turned. He saw what she had. Something went across his face, and then it went, and he came and sat in his chair with the device on the arm of it.

"That's a thing," he said. "A thing I do."

"What thing?"

"A woman. In the city. You sit in a room and she's a director from Cadence, she says, and she says she's sorry. For the route. For the mills and the polders and the lot. She's read up on it. She knows the Langeweg. She says sorry for forty minutes and then you go." He said it as he said the shed roof. "It's nonsense. She's not from Cadence. She's an actress or something. I know that."

"How long?"

"Two years. Wednesdays. I take the line in with the shoppers." He looked at the stove. "Your mother thinks I go to the library."

"Why?"

He thought about it. He gave the question the time he would have given a question about a knee.

"Because nobody else was going to," he said.

She sat down on the other chair with the card still in her hand.

"Nobody from Cadence ever said it. Nobody from the route. The voice on the telephone didn't say it. Your mother won't and your father's gone and you've got your job." He was not angry. He was setting it out. "And there's a woman in a room on the twelfth floor who'll say it for the price of a Wednesday. So I go. It's not real. I know it's not real. It works anyway." He picked the device up and put it down. "It works about as well as the thing you made. They're both me sitting in a room."

She had heard that before, in a warm house in the Westland, about a pair of pliers.

She did not have anything to say to that. She looked for something and it was not there.

She had thought, on the walk, that if it ever came to this she would be angry that he had been taken. She was not angry that he had been taken. He had not been taken. He had gone in with his eyes open for two years and had known exactly what he was buying, and had bought it, and it had worked. What she was angry about, and she made herself find it and name it, was that he had gone to a stranger. That he had needed it said and had not once, in thirty-four years, at the potatoes, asked any of them. That he had taken the causeway line in on Wednesdays with the shoppers instead, and sat with an actress. That was what she was angry about. She looked at it and it was not a reasonable thing to be angry about, and she was angry about it anyway, and she said nothing.

"Put it back under the paper," he said. "Your mother."

She put it back under the paper.

She made the tea. They drank it. He told her about Bakker's brother, whose February had become March. Bakker's brother had said to the doctor that at this rate he would have the shoulder done in the grave. The doctor had said that could be arranged. Bakker's brother had not known what to say to that either. Twice in one month. Kees was delighted.

At the door he lifted and turned and she heard the bolt go. "There," he said, from inside.

"There."

She walked to the platform in the dark. She did not put the earpiece in. She sat with her hands in her lap, one over the other. She thought about a man on a Wednesday taking the line in with the shoppers to sit in a room and be told sorry by a woman who had read up on the Langeweg. She thought about the card in a column of dates. She thought about him saying *it works about as well as the thing you made*, and that he had meant it kindly, and that it was the truest thing anyone had said to her since Tomas.

She looked at the seat back in front of her, and nothing happened in her throat, and she got off at her stop and walked home.

Joost

She rang him on the second of January, from the flat, at seven in the evening. Seven was when he would have finished whatever he did and would not yet have started whatever he did after that.

She had his number. She had always had it. It was in her device under *Dad*. She had put it there at fourteen and had not changed it. She looked at it now for a moment before she touched it. She had not used it in eleven months, and had not used it for anything that mattered in longer than that. Anke had said don't. Anke had said he won't thank you. She had thought about that on the causeway and in the hall and in bed, and had found that it was true, and had found that it was not a reason.

He answered on the fourth ring. There was something being cut in the background, a saw or a grinder, and it stopped.

"Saar."

"Dad."

"Is it your mother?"

"No. Everyone's fine. Opa's fine."

A pause. She heard him put something down. "Then what."

She had thought about how to say it and had not found a way, and so she said it plainly, because that was the only other thing she knew.

"I've been working on Opa. On the mill. For the archive. There was a recording of him from 2079, from before I was born, and I've cut it and it's gone in. It's licensed. He's got a copy."

"I know. Your mother sent it. I've not played it."

"He tells it differently now. The story. He tells it the way the recording goes."

"Does he." Joost did not sound surprised. He did not sound anything. "Well. It's official, is it. It's got a stamp."

"It's got my name on it."

Another pause. Longer. She heard him breathe out through his nose. She remembered that from being small, from when he was still on the island and would sit at the table while Kees told it.

"What do you want, Saar."

"I want to know what you meant. At Oma's funeral. When you went and stood in the garden. Mam said you never told her."

"She didn't want to know. That's not a criticism. It's a talent." The saw did not start again. "He was telling that story before the mill even closed."

She did not say anything. She had known since the raw that there was something. Since *I suppose it wasn't*. Since Anke's hands stopping in the water. She had known since Pieterse's *it's all there, isn't it* that it was not in a file. She waited.

"Seventy-three. I was fourteen. He'd stand in the kitchen in the evening and tell my mother about the voice on the telephone. How he'd asked for a person and it said it was the person. And she'd nod, and do the books, and he'd tell it again the next night, a bit different." He stopped. "I'd been in the shed the day he rang. It was automated. It said the stop was withdrawn. He put the phone down and said, 'Well, that's that.' That's what happened. The rest he built in the kitchen over about a month, and my mother let him. He was practising, Saar. He was practising for a thing that hadn't finished happening."

She sat in the flat with the light gone and the device against her ear.

"Why didn't you say?"

"To who? To him? You've met him. To your mother? She'd have said businesses close." He breathed out again. "To you? You were fifteen. I heard you tell your mother one Sunday that the bit about the someone was the best bit. I wasn't going to take that off you."

"You could have."

"I left the island instead. That was easier." The saw started again, somewhere behind him, and he let it run a moment and then it stopped. "That's what I've got. You asked. I don't know what you'll do with it. There's nothing in it you can use."

"No," she said. "There isn't."

"Then that's that." The line was quiet. "Is he all right? Really?"

"His door sticks. He forgot you have to lift it."

"He never remembered that. My mother remembered it for him." Joost was quiet. "Tell him I'll ring. I won't, but tell him."

"I'll tell him."

"Saar."

"What."

"It doesn't matter. What I said. It's my version, and I was fourteen, and he was my father. It's not worth more than his. It's just different." A pause. "Don't go making him into something. Your mother's right about that, if nothing else."

"That's what she said."

"I know what she said. I was married to her." And he was gone, and it had been under four minutes, and she sat with the device in her hand and the light gone.

She could not afford to agree with it. She looked at it for a while in the dark until she was sure of that. A man of fourteen in a shed on the day the call came, remembering, thirty-five years on, what his father had said and had not said. That was one account. The raw had been another, from six years after. It had had *I suppose it wasn't* in it, and no voice that said it was the someone. It had been the closest thing to that kitchen that existed. It had cleared at two in the morning on the seventeenth of December, by rule.

She could not check. If Joost was right, the story had not been made in thirty years of telling. It had been made in a month, in a kitchen, while the thing was still happening. The shaping note in 2079 had shaped nothing. Ineke had listened to a man tell a version he had already been telling for six years, and had heard him doubt it at minute fifty-one, and had written *undercuts package* against the doubt and not against the story. The story had been there first. Ineke had only chosen it. So had she.

Or Joost was wrong, and was a boy in a shed, and had built his own version in thirty years of not saying it, as people did.

She did not know. She would not know. The one recording that could have settled it had gone. She had let it go. She had known when she let it go that

there would be a question she could not answer afterward. She had not known it would be this one.

She sat with that. Then she got her cue.

The hall was quiet. It was the second of January and half the regulars were still wherever they went at the turn of the year. Marijke had the terrible instrumental thing on low. Wout was not there. Dries was, and Piet was, at their table, with the brace on and the hinge not clicking.

"Thought you'd be at your mother's," Piet said.

"I was. I came back."

"Get your cue out, then."

She got her cue out. She broke, and it was a good break, because her body did that on request, and then she missed the first pot, a straight one, by a foot.

Piet did not say anything. He potted three and left her nothing and she played a safety that was not a safety and left him everything, and he cleared, and racked.

She played badly. She had played badly before, a frame here and there, a night after the raw, but this was different, and she knew it was different because she could feel her hands not doing what she asked. The bridge was not steady. The cue did not run on a line. She got down over a shot and thought about the shot, and that was the end of it. You could not think about the shot. Everyone knew that. She had known it for six years and could not stop.

Dries, at the slate, wrote something and did not say what.

"You're not here," Piet said, in the third frame.

"I'm here."

"You said that before. You weren't here then either." He chalked. "It's on the cloth tonight. Whatever it is. It's on the cloth and you can't play round it. I can see it."

"Then tell me what it is."

"I don't know what it is. I know where it is." He bent to his shot. "Play the next ball. Not the frame. The next ball."

She played the next ball. It went in. The one after did not.

He beat her three frames straight. He did not put the coins on the rail. The coins went on the rail when she won, and she had not, and neither of them re-

marked on it. Then Marijke came round with the cloth and said it was gone twelve and that she had her song. Saar said no, not tonight. Marijke looked at her, and put the cloth over her shoulder, and went away without arguing. It was the first time in two years.

"Last one," Piet said.

"Last one."

"Then bed. You've got your farmers."

"I've got a port list."

"Then you've got your port list."

He broke. It was a poor break. The balls sat in a cluster near the foot spot with nothing on. She played the cluster open, badly, and left him a look at a middle pocket. He took it and ran four. Then he was on a stripe to the bottom corner with the white needing to hold up short. He got down over it. He stayed down a moment longer than the shot needed.

He hit it a fraction thick.

The stripe went in. The white came off the cushion at the wrong angle, down the side rail, past her last two balls, and into the jaws of the bottom corner, where it stopped, snookered on itself, with his next ball nowhere. He straightened and looked at the pocket.

"Ah," he said.

She looked at the table. She looked at him. He was looking at the pocket as he looked at every pocket that had done something on its own. He had been looking at pockets that way for six years. She had never once been on this side of it.

It looked like he had misjudged the cushion. He had not misjudged the cushion.

She knew because she had done it. She had done it to him in September, on a Thursday, at this table, with the knee. She had thought nothing of it. She had let the ease of it go. She had thought it cost her nothing. She had been right. It had cost her nothing. Now she was standing on the other side of a thick cushion with a cue in her hand and two balls on. She understood, for the length of time it took to understand it, what it was to be given a frame by someone who loved you and could see that you could not win one. It was a

small thing. It was done with love. It did not cost him anything. She had to take it.

She took it.

She played what he had left her, and he had left her everything. Two balls and the black. Her hands did it. She did not think about it. For three shots she thought about the next ball and nothing else, and her body did what it was told. The black went in. The white ran up and stopped against the top cushion where she had wanted it.

"Cushion's slow on that side," she said.

Piet was already fishing in his jacket for the coins. He did not look up.

"It is," he said.

He put three on the rail. She left them where they were. She got her cue apart and into its case. He got his coat off the hook and had his trouble with the zip. She waited through the zip. He waited for her to say something and she did not, and that was right.

"Thursday," he said.

"Thursday."

"Tell your grandfather his door wants a shim under the hinge. Bottom one. Cut it from a coaster. It'll lift the whole thing a quarter inch and he'll not have to remember."

She looked at him.

"You said he'd forgotten how to lift it. Weeks ago. You said it in passing. I've been thinking about it." He got the zip up. "Bottom hinge. A coaster. Tell him."

"I'll tell him."

"You won't. But tell him." He went out. The door let the lagoon in and shut on it.

She took the three coins off the rail. She put two on the counter for the tab, and Marijke took them. She said, "That's Piet's," about the third, and put it in the jar by the till that Marijke kept for nothing in particular. Marijke did not say anything. Dries wrote something on his slate that was not the score. She walked home with her cue in its case and the frame in her head, the one he had made for her, and let it be there.

The Re-record

The archive's closure format came down from Cadence in the March of 2110, and it wanted, among other things, a final-form sitting from every living licensed subject.

It was a formality. The circular said so in its second paragraph, in the plain sentences that circulars used when they wanted a thing done without discussion. The licensed cut was the record. The final-form sitting confirmed it. A subject sat once more, with the interviewer of record where possible, and told it again. The sitting was logged against the cut. The archive took both, and the door shut on them together in 2114. Nobody expected the sittings to change anything. They were there so that the record could say, when it closed, that it had asked.

Bregje put the list on Saar's desk in a grey folder. It had twenty-two names on it and one of them was Kees.

"Interviewer of record where possible," Bregje said. "De Koning's dead. You're the converting editor. That makes it you."

"I know."

"Nobody's going to think it's strange."

"I'd think it was strange."

"Then don't think. You're not paid for it."

Bregje looked at her for the length she gave the board. "Then do him first. He's the youngest on the list and the list is losing one a fortnight." She went.

The board that morning said 1,486. It had said 2,041 on a Friday in September a year and a half before. Saar had looked at it then long enough to see her name was at the top. It was still at the top. She looked at it the same length now.

A year and a half. She did not think of it as a year and a half. She thought of it, when she thought of it, as the time since the door, or the time since the

package, or the time since Joost. None of those were quite the same length. She had stopped trying to make them agree.

Adriaanse had retired in the April, as she had said. She had sat for a firm in Dordrecht in the May, and Loes had seen the log, because Loes saw everything, and had said, in passing, at the archive floor door: "She said everything. The box says what the box says." And had gone back to her terminal, and that was all Saar would ever know about it, and it was enough.

Tomas was still at his window. He had been offered the cutting floor in the autumn and had said no, because cutting meant not sitting with people. He was still at a third of Saar's yield and still at a re-book figure nobody could touch. Bregje had stopped pretending the column was for interest. He had asked Saar, once, in the spring, whether she had ever found out what it was, the thing she had done. She had said she had. He had not asked what.

The shed had gone into the field in the March of 2109, in a gale off the Grevelingen, the whole back wall and the roof with it. The stones had lain in the wet for a year. Then the water had come up over the Zuidzijde in the June of 2110, on schedule, and covered them. Kees had gone to look. He had told her so on a Tuesday. He had stood on the Langeweg on the north side of the road and looked at where the shed had been. The water lay flat and brown to the horizon with the fence posts still standing up out of it in lines. He had said, on the telephone, "Well. That's that then." Then he had told her about a woman in Middelharnis whose wrist had gone.

Piet's door had a shim under the bottom hinge. Saar had cut it from a coaster in the January of 2109 and had fitted it on a Sunday afternoon with Kees watching. The door had lifted a quarter of an inch on its pins and had not dropped since. Kees had not had to remember. He had told everyone in the village. He had told them his granddaughter had done it, and that it was a coaster, and that a man in the city had thought of it. He did not know the man's name and had never asked it. Piet had been told this, on a Thursday, and had said, "Good," and racked.

Joost had not rung. Saar had told Kees he would, and Kees had said, "He won't," and had not seemed to mind, and had been right.

The song had come back. It had taken about four months. One Thursday in the April of 2109 Marijke had said, "It's gone twelve," and had looked at Saar. Saar had said all right. The piano had started. The line about the water had come round, and it had got her. Dries had won his money and had been so relieved he had bought a round. That had never happened before or since.

Anke had not changed. That was the thing about Anke, and Saar had come to be grateful for it, and had never said so, because saying so would have been making her into something.

She rang Kees on the Tuesday.

"They want to record you again. For the archive. It's closing. Everyone who's in it sits once more, to confirm."

"Confirm what?"

"That it's you. That it's right."

"It's right. It's got my name on it." A pause. The chair. "Who's coming?"

"Me."

"You." He was pleased. "Well. That's easy, then. I'll do it at my own table. Your mother doesn't need to be there. She's heard it."

"Sunday, then. After hers."

"Sunday."

She went out on the Sunday in October with the recorder in her bag and the form on her tablet. *Final-form confirmation. Subject: HAMEETE, C. Licensed cut: 19:06, converted 2108, ref. Interviewer: HAMEETE, S.* The form had a field she had not seen before, at the bottom, where the box was on the ordinary one. *Concordance.* It filled itself. The recorder listened against the licensed cut and gave a figure as the subject spoke, and the interviewer's only task was to note anything the figure had missed, and there was never anything the figure had missed.

Anke's first, because it was Sunday. Joint, potatoes, the two vegetables. Grace in the short form. Anke said the joint was dry. It came at the potatoes and it ran eight minutes and it was the package, and Saar did not time it, because she had stopped timing it in the spring, and knew what it was anyway.

Then she walked him home. He lifted the door out of habit, though he no longer needed to, and it opened, and he looked at her, and said, "See," and she said, "I see," as she always did, and they went in.

The stove was lit. He had lit it before he went out and the room was warm. The windmill was on the wall above his chair, where Anke had hung it in the spring. Printed and framed. White on its mound with its sails set, and *I could grind, that's all I could do* underneath in the quotation face. He sat under it. He did not look at it. He had stopped looking at it around the time it went up, because a thing on a wall was a thing on a wall.

She put the recorder on the table between them. He looked at it the way Ruud Vellinga had looked at it, the way Rie had looked at it once and then not again.

"That's it, is it."

"That's it."

"Right." He settled. "Where do you want me to start?"

"Wherever you like."

He started at the course in Groningen.

She sat with the earpiece in and the form open and listened to her grandfather tell it. The course, a fortnight, fifty-seven. Old Braber at Herkingen, two seasons. The stones, Austrian, ninety centimetre, off a man in Zeeland. The shed on the Langeweg and the hard-standing and the fan.

The figure in the field climbed as he talked and she did not look at it. She knew the rest of it to the second. It went all right, for a bit. The two bakeries and Dirksland for a while and the boat. Seventy-one, the lease. Seventy-two, the wet and the Zuidzijde and Vrolijk. Seventy-three, the inspector, eleven thousand two hundred fitted. The van. He rang and it was automated. I don't know. I suppose it wasn't. The October after. The dikes, and it was all right, it was outside. He would not say the smell from the road. It had been there in the December after the package and it had gone somewhere in the eighteen months since, one telling at a time, as everything had arrived. He would not say the voice was the someone. He would not say forty. He would not say the stones were still out there with fifty years in them, because they were under the Zuidzijde and everyone knew it. He would not say he would have gone anyway,

maybe two years later. He had never heard himself say it. The recording that had him saying it had cleared at two in the morning by rule.

He was telling it as the package went. Every word his. The shape theirs. Nineteen minutes and six seconds, arrived at from the other side, in a warm room, under a windmill, to his granddaughter with a recorder on the table. It was clean. It would confirm. The archive would take it, and the field would say so in a number, and there would be nothing for her to add.

He was at the flour. The first passage, the one she had kept. Extraction and ash, and the hand in the chute. What happened if the stones ran hot. You were cooking it then and not grinding it, and it went flat and dead, and you could taste that.

He stopped.

He looked at her across the table. He was not looking at the recorder. He had forgotten the recorder, as people did. He was looking at her the way he had looked at her from the step with his hand on the key, and it was only for a moment, and it was not fear, exactly. It was a man of seventy-eight in his own chair, with his own account in his mouth, checking.

"Is that how it goes?" he said.

She looked at him. She had the earpiece in and the form open and the figure climbing. She had the nineteen minutes in her head from the top and she knew where he was in it to the second. She had all of it. She had the raw, or had had it. Ineke's box and her own. The trade register and the route log and the ledger. A man in Brabant who said it had been built in a kitchen. A woman on the twelfth floor who said sorry on Wednesdays. She had a shed under the water and a windmill on the wall. She had everything there was.

"Yes," she said.