

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 23

NORTH SECTION
LINE-EVENT
400 YARDS

BELLHAVEN PHARMACY

TEMPORARILY
CLOSED
NO-ETA

FROZEN
CHICKEN
NET 10 LBS.

TOMORROW
WILL BE
BETTER
\$1.00

FOLIE GÉNÉRALE

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 23

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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“I thought someone would have.”

— unattributed, Bellhaven, the third day

BELLHAVEN CONSOLIDATED COMMUNICATIONS - EXTRACT

06:12 - NORTH QUAY/PIER 3 - silent alarm, reset confirmed - CLOSED, EQUIPMENT FAULT.
07:04 - WARDEN/LOWER - vehicle obstruction - REFERRED, HIGHWAYS.
08:19 - KESTREL HOUSE - lift alarm, no voice contact - UNIT NOT REQUIRED.
09:33 - MARKET/HOLLIS - smoke reported, cooking fumes - CLOSED, NO HAZARD.
10:26 - EAST RELAY - carrier loss, intermittent - ENGINEER NOTIFIED.
11:11 - ORCHARD/SEVENTH - public telephone left off hook - CLOSED.
12:37 - DOCK ROAD/LOCK 2 - water ingress at cabinet - MAINTENANCE QUEUED.
13:22 - CENTRAL BUS STATION - abandoned parcel, owner returned - CLOSED.
14:45 - GERRARD/VESSEL - odour reported, caller disconnected - CLOSED, INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION.
15:31 - MERCER/BRIDGE - line noise, multiple callers - TEST REQUESTED.
16:46 - HARBOR EXCHANGE - battery warning - ENGINEER DISPATCHED.
17:58 - GERRARD/VESSEL - odour reported, single source - LOW PRIORITY, QUEUED.

SYNOPSIS

Bellhaven merges its emergency and non-emergency telephone lines. The memo is two pages long, properly authorised, correctly modelled, and four million dollars cheaper. Nobody who reads it disagrees with a word.

The merge adds forty seconds of hold time. A heatwave arrives. Hold goes to six minutes, then nineteen, then fifty-one — and a forty-year-old triage rule that treats a single caller as low-confidence begins, quietly and correctly, to deprioritise every true emergency in a city where nobody has looked up in years.

Seventy-two hours. A dispatch supervisor who can hear the silence coming. A fire officer arriving at the wrong point in every call. A woman walking eleven miles through a blacked-out city because her brother's medication is delivered on Thursday. A warehouse worker who waited ninety-one minutes on hold and then broke a window, and discovered that a man across the street turned round and looked. A woman on a folding table selling the only thing left that anyone wants, which is not help but reception.

No villain authored any of it. Every decision at every level was correct and will be found correct.

Folie Générale is the sequel to *Folie Douce*: a fast, escalating account of a butterfly's wing in a routing table, and of what a city does on the third night, when it stops burning loudly and starts burning quietly, because everyone has assumed that someone else has already called.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The first of these books was about one man declining to hurry. This one is about the arithmetic of that at scale, and it is the book I was more afraid of writing, because it required me to build a catastrophe with nobody in it.

That was the rule I set and did not break: every decision in this novella is correct. The memo is correct. The refusal to revert the merge mid-event is correct. The unannounced load shed is correct — the alternative was worse, and it was. The officer who chooses one address over another chooses well, and is cleared, and never works again. If you finish this and find yourself hunting for the person who should be sacked, I have failed, and you should look again at page one.

What interests me is not disaster. It is a specific mechanism I have never seen named properly, which is that most of the machinery holding a city together runs on ordinary people telling somebody. Not heroism. A phone call about a smell. A word to a neighbour. The entire apparatus of emergency response — every protocol, every triage rule, every allocation model — takes as its raw input the reports of people who look up and say something. It has no instrument at all for the other thing.

So the horror here is not the fire. It is the assumption. Seven people stand at the mouth of a burning yard and every one of them believes someone else has already called, and each of them is being perfectly reasonable, and the belief is load-bearing, and it is the whole of civilisation, and it can come apart in seventy-two hours without a single act of malice anywhere in it.

I should say something about the crowd, since a book like this is expected to have a mob in it. There is no mob. There are six hundred people standing in a road facing the same direction, and the young man in the middle of them is having the best evening of his adult life, and what he is feeling is not rage. It is company. That struck me as more frightening than anger, and truer, and I have

tried to write it without contempt.

The title is a clinical term stretched past its size. *Folie à deux* is a delusion held by two people. The literature scales it — three, a family, several. There is no term for all of them, because when everyone holds it we stop calling it a delusion and start calling it the way things are.

Chew Z

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I. THE HOLD

HOOR 00:00 — NADINE

The memo is two pages and it is a good memo. That is the thing Nadine Roche will say afterward, to the review, to her sister, to a man in a bar who does not want to hear it: *it was a good memo, it was correct, I would have written it myself.*

She reads it aloud at the six o'clock briefing because that is what you do with a change of this size — you put it in a room and let people ask.

Bellhaven has run two call centres since 1974. One takes emergencies. One takes everything else: noise, water, a dead animal in a stairwell, a smell that has been getting worse for a week. Two buildings, two rosters, two supervisors, two of everything.

As of this morning there is one.

The reasoning takes half a page and none of it is wrong. Callers cannot reliably distinguish an emergency from a nuisance — this is documented, it has been documented for thirty years, and the split forces a citizen to make a triage decision at the worst moment of their life. One number means nobody has to choose. It means a call about a smell that turns out to be gas does not get parked in the wrong queue for six hours. It means redundancy: when one centre goes down the other has always had to absorb it blind.

It also costs four million less a year, and the memo says so, on page two, in the same flat voice as everything else. Nadine respects that. She has read plenty of memos that hid the number.

"Questions," she says.

Dennis Okonjo asks about hold times. He is fifty-one and has been on the boards longer than she has.

"Modelled at nine seconds average," Nadine says. "Merged volume against merged staffing. It's in the annex."

"Modelled on what month?"

"February."

Dennis writes something down and does not look up, and Nadine files the exchange somewhere in the back of her head where she keeps the things that will matter later, and then the boards light and it is six o'clock and the day begins.

The room is forty-one positions under a low ceiling on the third floor of a building on Marrow Street. It is windowless by design. There is a wall display at the front showing four numbers: calls in queue, longest wait, positions staffed, abandonment.

At 06:00 the numbers are 0, 0, 34, and 0.0%.

Nadine has looked at that display for nine years. She has never once seen it change slowly.

HOOR 00:40 — JUNIE

Junie Kessler is not selling anything this morning. She wants that understood.

She is in the queue at District Four with a folding stool she brings because she is not an animal, and she is holding a place for a man named Terrance who has to be at work at eight and cannot lose the morning. She charges twelve dollars for this. Twelve dollars for four hours of standing in the rain on Kelder Street, which is less than minimum wage and she has done the arithmetic and she does not care, because the arithmetic is not the point.

The point is that Terrance keeps his job.

There is a whole economy in the line and none of it is written down. Junie knows a woman who translates. She knows a man who will lend you a phone charger for two dollars. She knows a kid who runs the four blocks to the copy shop when somebody discovers at position nine that they needed two of something. These are not crimes. These are the things a queue grows the way a wound grows a scab.

She is forty-six. She has been working the line outside one municipal building or another since she was nineteen, which means she knows more about how this city processes a human being than any officer inside it.

At 06:40 the doors are still ninety minutes off and there are already sixty people on the pavement and the light is coming up grey behind the Ossuary.

Junie has been watching the weather. Ninety-four expected today, ninety-seven tomorrow, ninety-nine after that — three days in the high nineties in a city built out of brick and asphalt and nineteen-thirties wiring, and she has seen what heat does to a queue. Tempers, sure. But mostly it does something quieter. It makes people leave. It makes them decide that whatever they came for can wait, and then they come back in September with the same problem, larger.

She looks down the line and does what she always does, which is count how many of them are going to give up.

Twenty, she thinks. Maybe twenty-two.

She is wrong by a factor she could not have imagined, and it will take three days, and by the end of it she will be very rich and unable to keep anything down.

HOOR 01:15 — MERRICK

Engine 9 out of Kelder and Ninth, seven-oh-two in the morning, a smoke complaint on the fourth floor of a walk-up.

Cal Merrick has been a company officer for eleven years and he can tell you the shape of a call from the stairwell. This one is a pan. It is almost always a pan. They go up with the line and the irons and the thermal, and it is a pan — a woman named Mrs. Adeyemi has left oil on a burner and gone to answer the door and the smoke has done what smoke does, which is fill a room to the ceiling and then come down.

Six minutes. In and out. Nobody hurt. Merrick opens two windows, resets the detector, and tells her, in the voice he uses for this, that she did exactly the right thing by calling.

He means it. That is the part civilians never believe. He would rather come to four hundred pans than have one person stand in a kitchen thinking *it's probably nothing, I don't want to waste their time*.

Because that is the whole job, and nobody outside the job understands it. Fire is not a thing that happens. Fire is a thing that *finishes* happening, over hours, while a series of people decide not to bother anyone. The pan is the good outcome. The pan is the system working.

On the way down he passes the woman from the third floor who called it in and she says sorry twice.

"Don't be," he says. "Call us again."

Back at the house he writes it up. Eleven minutes on scene, one unit, no injuries, no damage. Then he sits on the tailboard with a coffee and looks at the sky over Bellhaven going white at the edges the way it does before a hot one.

Engine 9 will run nineteen calls today. That is high. Their average is eleven.

Tomorrow they will run sixty-four, and on the third day they will stop counting, because counting requires somebody to be at the board, and there will not be anybody at the board.

HOOR 02:30 — DALIA

The placement is a low brick building out past the airport road with a garden nobody uses and a smell of floor polish that Dalia Reyes has stopped noticing, which she thinks is probably a bad sign about her.

Tomás is in the day room. He is forty and he has put on weight in here, which everybody keeps telling her is good, and it is good, and she cannot look at it without her chest going tight.

They have twenty minutes before his session. She has brought him a bag of the salt liquorice he likes and a newspaper because he reads the racing page even though he has never in his life placed a bet, he just likes the names.

"Kelder's Ruin," he says. "In the four-thirty. That's a horse called Kelder's Ruin."

"That's your street."

"That's my old street." He folds the page. "That's an omen, is what that is."

Delivery is Thursday. That is the thing Dalia holds in her head like a stone in a pocket: pharmacy delivery Thursday, staffing rota Monday to Friday with agency cover at weekends, two carers on nights for eleven residents. She knows the whole machine now. She learned it the way you learn anything, which is badly and at cost.

She got him in here a year ago. She signed the papers on a Friday and she has not once been able to say the word *placement* out loud without her mouth doing something strange.

But he gets his medication. On Thursday. Every Thursday.

That was the whole thing. That was all she had to get.

On the way out she stops at the desk and the woman there, Priya, says the air conditioning is playing up in the west corridor and maintenance is coming Wednesday.

"Is it bad?"

"It's warm," Priya says. "It's not bad. It's warm."

HOOR 06:20 — NADINE

Twelve minutes past noon and the wall display says 14, 0:41, 32, 3.1%.

Fourteen in queue. Longest wait forty-one seconds.

Nadine looks at it for a while.

Forty-one seconds is nothing. Forty-one seconds is a person reaching for a pen. The model said nine seconds average and the average right now is running about twenty-two, which is two and a half times the model and also completely fine, because twenty-two seconds is nothing, because the model was built on February and this is a heatwave and July always runs hot on the boards.

She writes a line in the shift log: *merged queue, hold avg 22s, monitoring.*

She goes down the room. Position eleven has a man reporting a smell of gas that turns out to be a smell of gas, and the call is

handled correctly and quickly, and Nadine stands behind the chair for a moment and listens to Dennis do the thing he does, which is get the address in the first eight seconds no matter what else is happening.

"Volume's up," Dennis says, without taking the headset off.

"It's ninety-four out."

"It's not the heat." He types. "It's the number. Everybody's got one number now. My brother-in-law called us this morning about a skip."

Nadine goes back to the display.

Here is the thing she will understand at hour fifty-four and not before. Two numbers filtered. Not perfectly, not fairly, but they filtered — a man with a skip on his pavement looked at a card on his fridge and dialled the one that was not for emergencies, and in the act of choosing, he told the system something about himself.

One number takes the choosing away. And when you take the choosing away you do not get better information.

You get all of it, undifferentiated, arriving at the same door.

3.1%.

HOOR 08:00 — ROWAN

Rowan Peale is twenty-four and he moves boxes.

Specifically he moves boxes off a belt and onto a pallet at a distribution shed on the north side of the Draw, six to two, and he has done it for nineteen months, and the thing nobody tells you about it is that it is not boring. It is too fast to be boring. It is a physical problem you solve four thousand times a shift and at the end of it your body is empty and your head is clean and you sleep like a stone.

He likes it. He would not say that out loud in the break room but he likes it.

He lives on Ansel Row in a building with eleven flats and a stairwell that smells of drains. He knows two people in it. Mrs. Fenwick on

the ground floor, who is eighty-one and who he carries shopping for, and the man in six who plays music at three in the morning and who he has never once complained about because complaining seems like an enormous thing to do to a stranger.

That is Rowan. That is the whole of him. He is not angry about anything. He votes when he remembers. He has never been in a fight since school and he lost that one.

At two in the afternoon he gets off shift and walks home in a heat that has come up hard through the day, ninety-four, the asphalt on the Draw giving it back, and the whole city moving slow and irritable in that way it does when the temperature goes past the number people can absorb.

He buys a can of something cold and drinks it on the steps.

Mrs. Fenwick's window is open on the ground floor. It is always open. He does not look at it.

Fifteen hours from now he will put a paving stone through the front of a pharmacy on Kelder Street and he will not be able to explain it to anybody afterward, including himself, including the review, including the part of him that is standing there watching his own arm come back.

HOOR 08:45 — A WOMAN ON GERRARD STREET

She is not going to be in this book again so it does not matter enormously what her name is. Call her what her son calls her.

At quarter to three in the afternoon she is walking up Gerrard with a bag of shopping and she smells smoke. Not cooking. The other kind — that flat chemical smell, plastic and something underneath it.

She stops. She looks around the way people do, doing the thing everyone does, which is check whether anybody else has noticed, because if nobody else has noticed then probably it is you.

Nobody else has noticed. Gerrard at three in the afternoon in a heatwave: a man asleep in a doorway, two kids on a wall, a woman going past fast with earphones in.

She looks up and there is a haze at the third-floor level of the building on the corner, or there is nothing, or there is heat coming off a roof. It is ninety-four degrees. Everything is shimmering.

She calls.

The hold is four minutes and eleven seconds and there is a tone on it, a little four-note loop, up-up-down-hold, and a voice between the loops that says her call is important.

At three minutes she checks the time.

Her son finishes at half three and the school will not hold him past quarter to and it is nine minutes from where she is standing, and she has the shopping, and there is ice cream in it.

At four minutes eleven she hangs up.

And here is what needs saying, because the whole city will be blamed for this later and the blame will be wrong: **she was right**. She was standing on a pavement in the heat with a possible nothing and a definite child, and she chose the child, and any person reading this would have chosen the child.

The building on the corner of Gerrard and Vessel is a furniture warehouse with a fault in a compressor on the third floor.

The next call about it will come three hours later, from one person, and will be queued behind everything else in Bellhaven.

HOOR 10:30 — NADINE

She stays late because the numbers are strange and she wants to see the evening peak.

At half past four the display says 61, 3:12, 31, 11.4%.

Three minutes twelve. Eleven point four percent abandoning.

Nadine pulls the triage protocol up on her own terminal, not because she does not know it but because she wants to read the exact words.

Corroboration weighting. When two or more independent callers report the same incident within a defined window, the incident is uplifted in priority. The logic is forty years old and it is beautiful: a

fire that six people can see is a bigger fire than a fire one person can see. It is the closest thing dispatch has to a second opinion. It has saved an enormous number of lives and Nadine can name three occasions in her own career.

She reads it twice.

Then she thinks about a thing she has been thinking about for a while and has never had a name for.

Bellhaven does not call. It is not a phrase you would ever put in a protocol, but everybody on the boards knows it. Something happens on a street in this city and you get one call. In some districts you get none. Nadine has taken a report of a man face-down on a pavement at eleven in the morning on a Tuesday from a woman in a flat on the fourth floor, and when the unit arrived the man had been there, by the coroner's estimate, since before seven.

Corroboration weighting assumes a population that looks up.

She writes it down. She writes: *single-source may under-weight in low-report districts — raise w/ Vaughn*. Vaughn is the operations director. Vaughn is at a conference until Thursday.

She underlines it and puts the pen down and looks at the display, where the number is 68 now, and she has an odd physical sensation which she will remember for the rest of her life, of standing at the top of something.

INCIDENT LOG I

Bellhaven Consolidated Communications — extract, first twelve hours

06:14 — MARROW/9TH — water main, non-urgent — assigned, cleared 09:40. **07:02** — KELDER 114, 4F — smoke, domestic — E9 attended, cleared 07:13. **09:31** — THE DRAW N — refuse fire, contained — assigned, cleared 10:55. **11:12** — VESSEL 380 — alarm sounding, no cause found — cleared. **12:40** — ANSEL ROW — noise — logged, no unit available, queued. **14:45** — GERRARD/VESSEL — odour reported, caller disconnected — **CLOSED, INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION. 15:20** —

BELLHAVEN GEN — ambulance diversion, 40 min — noted. **16:05**
— KELDER 240 — person collapsed, heat — attended. **17:33** —
DISTRICT FOUR — crowd on footway, no offence — logged. **17:58**
— GERRARD/VESSEL — odour reported, single source — **LOW**
PRIORITY, QUEUED.

*Hold, average: 3m 44s. Abandonment: 11.4%. Positions staffed: 31
of 41.*

II. THE ABANDONMENT

HOOR 12:10 — MERRICK

Ten past six in the evening and Engine 9 is at a garage on Marrow with a car alight, which is nothing, which is a hose and eleven minutes, except that the car is parked against the wall of a building with a dry-cleaner in the ground floor and by the time they arrive the wall is involved.

Merrick stands in the road and reads it and does not like what he reads.

"How long's this been going?"

The man who owns the garage says, "A while."

"How long's a while?"

The man does the thing they all do, which is look at his own hands. "I called at four."

It is eighteen minutes past six.

Merrick does not say anything to him because there is nothing to say and because the man is not the problem, the man called, the man did his part. He puts a second line on the wall and calls for a truck and they open the roof and it takes them ninety minutes and at the end of it a dry-cleaner's is gone and nobody is hurt and the report will say *contained*.

It was a car. At four o'clock it was a car with an engine fire and one extinguisher would have ended it.

He sits on the step afterward with his hood back and his hair flat with sweat and the heat still coming off the brick at a quarter to eight at night, and he thinks a thing he has thought maybe five times in eleven years:

We are arriving at the wrong point in these.

Not late. That is not the word and he is careful about the word, because *late* means somebody was slow and nobody has been slow — Engine 9 turned out in ninety seconds and drove hard through traffic that would not move because traffic in this city does not move for anybody.

They are arriving at the correct time to a call that came at the wrong time.

HOOR 13:05 — NADINE

22.4%.

Nadine has been in this room for nine years and she has never seen the abandonment number go past nine. Nine was a bad night in the ice storm. Nine was the day the tunnel flooded.

22.4% means that of every hundred people in Bellhaven who picked up a telephone in the last hour because something was wrong, twenty-two put it down again before anybody spoke to them.

She does the arithmetic on paper because she wants to see it in her own handwriting. Nine hundred and six calls offered in the last hour. Two hundred and three abandoned.

Two hundred and three.

She goes and stands at the front of the room and looks at the boards and thinks about what those two hundred and three did next, and the answer is: nothing. That is what people do. A person who calls about smoke and is put on hold does not call back in fifteen minutes. They decide, in the four minutes of the tone, that it was probably nothing, and the decision is *load-bearing* — they need it to be nothing, because they have a child to collect and a shift and a bus.

She escalates. She does it properly and she does it in writing, which is the only thing that saves her later.

At 19:20 she sends to Vaughn, to the deputy director, and to the duty officer at City Hall: *Merged queue abandonment 22.4% and climbing. Hold avg 5m11s. Recommend immediate reversion to split lines for the duration of the heat event. Corroboration weighting is materially unsafe at this abandonment rate — we are systematically down-weighting real incidents because only one caller is getting through.*

She reads it back. She adds one line at the bottom:

This is not a staffing issue. Adding positions does not fix it. The single number is generating volume that did not previously exist.

Send.

Then she goes and stands in the stairwell, where you are not supposed to smoke, and does not smoke, and comes back in.

HOOR 14:00 — ROWAN

Rowan Peale calls at eight o'clock on Monday evening because Mrs. Fenwick's window is open and it is always open but her light is not on and it is always on, and he knocked and there was no answer, and through the letterbox he can hear the television and something else, a sound, low, that he cannot make into a word.

He is not a person who calls things in. That is the first thing to know. He has lived in that building nineteen months and he has never rung anybody about anything.

He calls.

The tone comes on. Four notes. Up-up-down-hold.

He sits on the stairs with the phone against his ear and the drains smell coming up and he waits, and the voice tells him his call is important, and the tone goes round, and he counts it going round because there is nothing else to do.

At eleven minutes he goes back down and knocks again and shouts through the letterbox and comes back up and the tone is still going.

At twenty-five minutes a man from the second floor comes past and Rowan says, *can you help me*, and the man says he has to be somewhere and Rowan says *okay* and means it, actually means it, because the man does have to be somewhere.

At forty minutes he goes outside and looks at the window and cannot reach it.

At sixty-two minutes he starts to shake, which is not fear, it is something else with no name in it.

At ninety-one minutes and forty seconds a woman answers and says *what's the address* and Rowan gives it and she says a unit will be

assigned and he says *when* and there is a pause of about a second and a half and she says, in a voice he will hear in his sleep for the rest of his life, and which is not her fault, and which is the truest thing anybody says in this entire book:

"I can't tell you that."

HOURL 15:30 — JUNIE

Half nine at night on Kelder Street, ninety-one degrees, and the queue for a building that opens at half eight tomorrow morning is already sixty-two deep.

Junie has never seen an overnight this size. Overnights happen — the last week of the month, the day after a holiday. This is a Monday in July.

She works the line with two litres of water and a sleeve of paper cups and gives it away, which she does, always, and which people find remarkable and which is not remarkable, it is stock.

Position forty-one is a man called Ade with a determination review and a letter that has to be in by Wednesday. He has been on the phone for two hours. He shows her his screen like she can do something with it.

"Two hours," he says. "It doesn't ring. It doesn't even ring, it just — that noise."

And Junie hears herself say it.

"I know a girl inside."

She does not know a girl inside. She has never known a girl inside. What she has is twenty-seven years of watching that door and an absolutely precise understanding of which forms move and which do not, and she can look at Ade's letter and tell you it will be fine, that it will process on its own, that the deadline on it is soft in a way the letter does not disclose.

So what she is selling him, for sixty dollars, is the truth. Wrapped in a lie, because the truth on its own is worth nothing to a man who has been listening to a four-note tone for two hours. He does not need information. He needs to *stop being on hold*.

He pays her the sixty and he cries, briefly, and apologises for crying, and then he sleeps on the pavement like a man who has put something down.

Junie walks home along the Draw at midnight with sixty dollars in her sock and a feeling she has not had before, which is not guilt.

It is the feeling of a door opening onto a very large room.

HOOR 16:40 — A MAN ON THE VESSEL STREET PLATFORM

Twenty to eleven at night, southbound, and the train has been held for nineteen minutes.

There has been no announcement. That is the part. Not one word — the boards say ON TIME for a train that is nineteen minutes into not being on time, because the boards are automatic and nobody has told them, because telling them is a job that belongs to a control room that has been trying to reach the network duty officer on a merged line since ten past ten.

The platform is filling. Vessel is deep, four storeys down, and the ventilation was rated in 1968, and it is ninety-one on the street which means it is ninety-eight down here.

He is a quantity surveyor and he is forty-three and he has a wife and two kids in a suburb thirty minutes south, and he is not an interesting man and nothing in his life has prepared him for what he does in the next four minutes, which is nothing, which is stand there.

The platform fills to the yellow line. Then past it.

Nobody pushes. Nobody shouts. Everyone is polite in the specific Bellhaven way, which is that everyone faces forward and looks at nothing and pretends there is enormous space.

At twenty-six minutes a woman near the front says, out loud, to no one, "Is anyone going to say something?"

And nobody does. Not one of four hundred people. Including him. Including, he will think later, sitting in his kitchen at two in the morning with a glass of water he does not drink, *especially* him,

because he was standing eleven feet from her and he heard it and he looked at the tunnel.

The train comes at thirty-one minutes. Everybody gets on. Nobody is hurt.

That is the whole incident. Nothing happened. He goes home.

But something has been established in four hundred people at once, quietly, without a word: **that you can say a thing out loud in this city and it will land in nobody.**

HOOR 17:20 — A NIGHT NURSE AT BELLHAVEN GENERAL

Twenty past eleven on Monday night and the ambulances have been diverting for six hours, which means that everything the north of the city generates is arriving here, at the wrong hospital, forty minutes later than it should.

Her name is Constance and she has done twenty-two years of nights and she has a rule, which is that you do not look down the corridor. You look at the person in front of you. If you look down the corridor you will start doing arithmetic and the arithmetic will finish you before four in the morning.

She looks down the corridor.

There are trolleys along both walls as far as the fire doors. Nineteen of them. There is an old man on the fourth one who has been there since eight and whose daughter has gone home because she has other children, and every time Constance passes he says, "Is it my turn," and she says, "Not long now," which is a sentence she has said perhaps forty thousand times in her life and which has never once been a lie until this week.

At the end of the corridor a woman is sitting on the floor beside a trolley with her hand through the bars, and Constance goes down and crouches and says, "Are you all right, love," and the woman says she is fine, she is just staying, and Constance says, "Good. Stay."

That is all she can give her. A word telling her that the staying counts.

The heat is the thing nobody plans for. The building was built in 1958 with sealed glass on the south face and the air handling is running at capacity and the corridor is thirty degrees at midnight and there are nineteen people on trolleys under blankets because you cannot take the blankets off, they are on fluids, they get cold even in this.

At half past midnight the triage phone goes and it is a paramedic saying he has a cardiac forty minutes out because he cannot get across the Draw, and Constance says bring him, and puts the phone down, and stands for four seconds with her hand still on it.

Then she goes and tells the old man on the fourth trolley that it is not long now.

HOOR 18:00 — DALIA

Midnight, and the phone goes, and it is Priya from the placement, and Priya is apologetic in a way that makes Dalia's stomach drop before a single fact has been delivered.

The night agency has not sent anybody. Not late — not sent. The agency's own line is a merged municipal contract number now and Priya has been on it since nine.

"So there's me," Priya says. "And I can't do meds on my own, I'm not signed for it, so what I'm doing is I'm calling everybody's family so nobody hears it tomorrow and thinks we didn't call."

"Is he all right?"

"He's asleep. They're all asleep. Dalia, it's fine tonight. Tonight is fine."

Tonight is fine. Dalia stands in her kitchen on the north side of the Draw at midnight in ninety-one degrees and hears the shape of that sentence, which is the shape of a sentence somebody says when they have already thought about tomorrow.

"What about Thursday," she says.

"What?"

"Pharmacy delivery. That's Thursday."

There is a pause on the line. And in the pause Dalia can hear that Priya has not thought about Thursday, because Priya is inside tonight, and that the whole apparatus that keeps eleven people alive in a low brick building out past the airport road is a chain of ordinary appointments made by ordinary people over telephones.

"It'll be fine," Priya says. "Wednesday they're fixing the air conditioning as well."

Dalia says thank you and puts the phone down and stands there.

Then she does something she has not done in a year, which is get the folder out of the drawer. The folder is soft at the corners. It has every number in it, written by hand, because she learned in another life that when the system goes quiet you had better have the numbers on paper.

HOOR 19:15 — MERRICK

Quarter past one in the morning, Gerrard and Vessel, and the furniture warehouse is fully involved across three floors and into the roof.

Merrick gets out of the cab and stands in the street and looks up and says a word he does not usually say.

There is a specific thing a building does when it has been burning a long time before anybody arrives, and this building is doing it. The fire is not in a room. It is *in the structure* — it is in the voids, it has been walking sideways through the floors for hours in the dark with nobody watching, and when they force the ground floor the intake of air does what air does.

They lose it in four minutes. He pulls everybody out and goes defensive, which means you stop fighting the fire and start fighting the street, and the street on that corner is four residential buildings with people asleep in them.

He gets on the radio for a second alarm and gets a queue.

A *queue*. On the fireground channel it goes through, but the mutual aid request routes through the consolidated centre, and the consolidated centre is at five minutes forty on hold, and Cal

Merrick stands in the orange light on Gerrard Street with a warehouse coming down and listens to a four-note tone on a telephone.

Up-up-down-hold.

He will remember the tone longer than he remembers the building.

By the time the second alarm assembles, the corner property has gone. Nobody dies. Forty-one people out of their homes at two in the morning, standing on Vessel in the heat, in whatever they had on.

The first call about that building came at 14:45 the previous afternoon and was closed for insufficient information because the caller had rung off. The second came at 17:58 and was queued as low priority because it was a single source.

It was always a single source. It was a single source both times.

HOOR 21:00 — NADINE

Three in the morning and the answer comes.

The answer is from the deputy director and it is four paragraphs and Nadine reads it twice and cannot find a single sentence in it that is wrong.

Reversion is declined. The reasons: the split lines are physically decommissioned — one building's floor has been handed back to the estate, the routing tables have been rewritten, the public information campaign has run in three languages, and reverting mid-event would mean forty-eight hours of two numbers in circulation, one of which no longer works. The deputy director notes, correctly, that a city being told to call a dead number during a heat emergency is a materially worse outcome than a hold time.

He is right. Nadine sits with it and she cannot get around it. She has been in operations long enough to know that the most dangerous thing in a failing system is a half-measure applied at the peak.

The email authorises overtime, authorises twelve additional positions from Thursday, and thanks her.

Twelve positions from Thursday.

She looks at the display: 214 in queue, longest wait 11:40, positions staffed 31, abandonment 38.9%.

Two hundred and fourteen.

She has a physical reaction to the number that she cannot account for at the time — a small cold drop, as though she has seen it before. She has not. It is only a number.

At 03:20 she does the thing she will be asked about most in the review. She walks the room and tells thirty-three operators to stop offering the standard hold message and start telling callers the truth: *we are at forty minutes, if this is not immediately life-threatening please hang up and call back tomorrow.*

It is not protocol. It is honest. It is also, she realises about ninety seconds after she has said it, an instruction to a city to stop reporting things.

HOURL 23:30 — ROWAN

Half five in the morning and the sun is coming up over the Draw the colour of a coal and Rowan Peale is standing on Kelder Street outside a pharmacy with a paving stone in his hand.

The unit came for Mrs. Fenwick at 02:40, six and a half hours after he called. She was alive. She is in Bellhaven General with a broken hip and a pressure injury and pneumonia and she is eighty-one, and the paramedic — who was kind, who was so kind that Rowan had to go and stand in the stairwell — said the phrase *if we'd got here sooner* and then stopped himself, and the stopping was worse than the sentence.

Rowan has not slept. He walked. He walked from Ansel to the Draw to Kelder and back twice and the city was on fire in three places and nobody was looking at any of them, people were walking past a burning building on Gerrard eating out of a paper bag, and there is a thing that has been building in him for eight hours that is not anger and has no object.

He does not want anything. He is not making a point. There is no thought in his head about property or justice or the council.

What there is, is this: for eight hours he made sounds into a telephone and the sounds went nowhere.

He puts the stone through the front of the pharmacy.

The noise is enormous. It goes up Kelder and comes back off the Ossuary and it is the loudest thing he has ever done in his life, and a bird goes up off a ledge, and a man across the street stops and looks.

A man across the street stops and looks.

Rowan stands in the glass with his heart going and his hands empty and he is not thinking *I have broken a window.*

He is thinking: **that worked.**

INCIDENT LOG II

Bellhaven Consolidated Communications — extract, hours 12 to 30

18:18 — MARROW 41 — vehicle fire ext. to structure — E9, T2 — cleared 20:02. **19:44** — THE DRAW N — refuse fire — no unit available — queued. **20:11** — ANSEL ROW 7 — welfare check, single source — **LOW PRIORITY, QUEUED.** **21:30** — VESSEL STN — platform overcrowding — network to advise — no contact. **23:02** — KELDER 300 BLK — persons in roadway, no offence disclosed — **GATHERING, no incident code** — logged for information. **00:15** — PLACEMENT UNIT 4, AIRPORT RD — staffing shortfall reported — not an emergency — referred. **01:15** — GERRARD/VESSEL — structure fire, fully involved — E9, T2, T5, second alarm — **see 14:45 and 17:58 previous.** **02:40** — ANSEL ROW 7 — attended — patient conveyed — **elapsed from first call: 6h 32m.** **04:20** — THE DRAW N — refuse fire, extended to fencing — queued. **05:31** — KELDER 118 — criminal damage, pharmacy frontage — logged, no unit available.

Hold, average: 11m 40s. Abandonment: 38.9%. Positions staffed: 28 of 41.

III. THE SOUND

HOOR 30:00 — NADINE

Noon on Tuesday and Nadine Roche hears the tone in a room where it is not playing.

She is in the corridor by the vending machine with a bottle of water she has not opened, and there is no headset on her, and the door to the floor is shut, and she hears it. Four notes. Up-up-down-hold.

She stands very still and waits for it to stop and it does stop, and she thinks: *that is fatigue, that is thirty-one hours, that is a known thing.*

It is a known thing. Operators report it. There is a line in the occupational health guidance about auditory persistence and it recommends rotation off the boards.

What is not in the guidance, because it has never happened before, is that at this moment approximately one hundred and forty thousand people in Bellhaven are also hearing it — not as a memory but live, in their ears, right now, in kitchens and cars and stairwells and on the pavement outside a building that is on fire. The mean hold time on the consolidated line has passed nineteen minutes. The loop is eleven seconds long. Every person waiting has heard it a hundred times.

It is the most-listened-to sound in the city. More than any station, any song. A four-note figure written by a contractor in 2011 to be inoffensive.

Nadine goes back in. The display says 388, 19:04, 28, 47.2%.

Positions staffed have gone down, not up, because three operators have not come in, and two of those three cannot be reached, and the reason they cannot be reached is that the line you would use to reach them is the line.

HOOR 31:20 — MERRICK

Engine 9 turns into Kelder at twenty past one in the afternoon with the roof of a hardware store going and the street is full of people and Merrick's first thought — he is ashamed of it later — is *here we go.*

Because he has read about this. Every officer has read about this. Crews attacked, hose cut, a truck rolled. It is the thing you are warned about and Merrick has never once seen it in eleven years.

He does not see it now.

The people in Kelder Street do not throw anything. They do not shout. They do not chant, because there is nothing to chant, because there is no demand and no name and no cause. There are perhaps four hundred of them and they are standing in the road facing roughly the same direction, and when Engine 9 noses in they part, unhurriedly, the way a crowd parts on a platform, and then close again behind it.

That is all. That is the entire behaviour.

"What are they doing," says Vasquez, off the back step, with the line in his hands.

Merrick does not answer because he does not know. They are not looting the hardware store; the hardware store is burning and the doors are open and nobody has gone in. They are not filming. A few are, most are not.

They are standing in a street that is on fire, in the middle of the afternoon, watching, and there is no aggression in it at all and it is the single most frightening thing Cal Merrick has seen in his working life.

Because a mob has a shape. A mob wants something and you can read it and get ahead of it.

This has no shape. This is four hundred people who have come outside.

HOOR 32:45 — JUNIE

By Tuesday afternoon Junie Kessler has a table.

An actual folding table, on the corner of Kelder and Ninth, forty yards from a queue that now runs the length of two blocks and around onto Vessel. She has a cashbox. She has a boy called Emil taking names.

What she is selling has evolved in eighteen hours, which is what happens when demand is vertical.

She sells **position** — a printed card, numbered, entirely meaningless, which entitles the holder to nothing, and which people hold like a boarding pass, and which stops them from having to stand.

She sells **the number**. A direct line, she says. Bypasses the queue. It is a number. It rings a phone in a flat on the Draw where a man called Ossie writes down what you say on a pad and tells you it has been logged. Nothing is logged. But Ossie is a warm human being who answers on the second ring, and for eighty dollars a person in Bellhaven can, for ninety seconds, be *listened to*, and Junie has understood something about her city that nobody at any level of its government has understood, which is that this is the actual product. Not resolution. Reception.

She sells **water** at four times what it cost her and she is not apologising for that either.

By three in the afternoon she has taken eleven hundred dollars.

At half three a woman with a child asks how the direct number works and Junie explains, and the woman says, “But do they come? If I call it, does somebody come?”

And Junie says, “Somebody will take your details.”

Which is true. It is completely true. She has said nothing false all day. She has become very good, in a single day, at a thing Martin Coyle spent twenty years perfecting from behind glass, and she has never heard of him.

HOURL 33:30 — TWO BOYS ON THE DRAW

They are fifteen and they are called Dez and Ferry and they are having, without question, the best day of their lives.

It has to be said properly, because the newspapers will not say it and the review will not say it and every adult who talks about this week afterward will reach for a word like *feral*, which explains nothing. Dez and Ferry are not feral. They are two kids from a

block on the north side who go to school and get told off and play a football game on a phone, and on Tuesday afternoon the entire ordinary structure of their city stopped working and nobody came, and it turns out that a fifteen-year-old can smell that the way a dog smells weather.

It starts with the supermarket, which they missed. They arrive at the tail of it and everyone is walking out with frozen food and nobody is being stopped and Dez says, “Are you seeing this,” and Ferry says, “I’m seeing it,” and that is the whole conversation.

What follows is not theft in any sense either of them would recognise. It is a game with a scoring system they invent as they go. Ferry gets a fire extinguisher off a wall and they have no use for a fire extinguisher and they carry it for two hours. Dez takes eleven phone cases and no phones. They go through the back of a unit on the Draw and find a room full of catering-sized tins of chickpeas and laugh for four solid minutes.

Nobody comes. That is the engine. They keep waiting for the moment when somebody comes, and it is genuinely a game at first — how far, how long — and every hour that nobody comes the boundary moves further out, and neither of them ever makes a decision to cross it, because there is no line to cross, because a line is a thing somebody has to draw and there is nobody to draw one.

At four in the morning Ferry says he wants to go home, and Dez says all right, and they go.

Dez’s mother is asleep. He puts eleven phone cases under his bed and lies awake and cannot work out whether anything happened.

HOURL 34:00 — THE GRID

At 16:00 on Tuesday, load on the northern distribution section reaches 103% of continuous rating.

This has happened before. There is a procedure. The procedure is load-shedding: a controlled rotating disconnection of blocks, twenty minutes each, announced in advance through the municipal alert system.

The municipal alert system requires authorisation from the duty officer at City Hall.

The duty officer at City Hall is being briefed on the fire at Gerrard and Vessel, the fire on Kelder, the platform incident at Vessel Station, a water main on Marrow, and eleven thousand unanswered calls, and has been in that room since four in the morning.

The shed goes ahead at 16:22 without the announcement, because the alternative is an uncontrolled failure of the section, and an uncontrolled failure would take four hours to restore instead of twenty minutes.

Every decision in that room is correct.

At 16:22 the lights go off in fourteen thousand homes and eleven hundred businesses north of the Draw with no warning at all, in ninety-nine degrees of heat, in a city where nobody can get through on the telephone.

At 16:23 the call volume goes from 388 in queue to 2,900 in queue.

At 16:31 the northern section fails anyway, uncontrolled, because the shed was calculated against a demand model that assumed air conditioning at July normal and not at ninety-nine, and the load simply moved.

Restoration estimate: four hours. Actual: thirty-one.

HOOR 34:30 — A SUPERMARKET ON THE DRAW

The strangest thing about it is how polite it is.

The lights go out and there is the noise everybody makes, that half-laugh, and then the emergency lighting comes up green and thin at the ends of the aisles and the tills stop and the freezers stop and everybody stands there.

The manager, who is twenty-six, says over a megaphone that does not work and then with her actual voice that the tills are down and they cannot take payment and please could everybody leave their baskets.

And most people do. That is the thing. Most people put the baskets down and walk out into the heat.

But there are perhaps two hundred people in that shop, and the freezers are stopped, and everybody in that shop is doing the same arithmetic at the same time, which is: *that food is going to be thrown away.*

A man in his fifties in a golf shirt says, to nobody, "It's going in the bin anyway."

Nobody argues with him. That is the moment. Nobody argues with him because he is *right*, and because there is no member of staff in a position to say otherwise, and because the manager is twenty-six and there are two hundred people.

It takes about ninety seconds. It is not a riot. It is orderly. People form something like a queue. An elderly woman is helped. Someone holds a door.

By quarter to five the freezers are empty and the shelves are half gone and nobody has raised their voice and nobody has hit anybody, and two hundred people walk out onto the Draw carrying frozen chickens in the ninety-nine-degree heat.

HOOR 35:10 — ROWAN

He does not know how he got into the middle of it.

That is the honest account and it is the one he gives afterward and nobody believes it. He was walking. He was walking on Kelder because he had walked there yesterday, and there were people, and he stopped, and then there were more people, and at some point the number of people around him went past a threshold and something in his chest opened.

There is no leader. He wants that understood too. He is asked eleven times by eleven different people afterward who was organising it and the answer is nobody, there was nobody, it was not organised, it *assembled*, the way weather assembles.

And here is the part he cannot say to any of them, and which is the truest thing about him:

It is the best he has felt in his adult life.

Not the breaking. He does not break anything today. It is standing in a road with six hundred people who are all facing the same way, and being — for the first time since he came to this city at nineteen — *in* something. Not adjacent to it. Not passing it on a pavement with headphones in.

Somebody hands him a bottle of water. He does not know them. They do not know him. They look at him while they hand it over, they look directly at his face, and he cannot remember the last time a stranger in Bellhaven looked at his face.

A shop front goes in somewhere ahead and the sound goes up the street and comes back and six hundred people make a noise together, and it is not a violent noise, it is closer to the noise a crowd makes at a goal.

Rowan Peale, who called an ambulance for an eighty-one-year-old woman and waited six and a half hours, stands in the middle of Kelder Street at four in the afternoon and thinks, with total clarity:

I have been so alone.

HOOR 36:00 — COYLE

There is a man at the corner of Kelder and Ninth in a grey suit who is not moving.

He is fifty-two now, and heavier, and he has been standing there for an hour and ten minutes watching the crowd, and he has understood the whole thing since about Monday lunchtime, and he cannot get a single person to hold still long enough to hear it.

He tries the woman at the folding table because she looks like the only person on the street conducting a business.

"You need to stop selling that number," he says.

Junie looks up. She sees a middle-aged civil servant in a suit in ninety-nine degrees and she is polite because she is always polite. "It's a real number, love."

"I know it's a real number. That isn't the problem." He is speaking too fast. He knows he is speaking too fast and he cannot stop. "The problem is that every person who calls your number does not call

the actual number. Do you understand what that does? The system weights by corroboration. If four people see a fire and three of them call you, the one who gets through is a single source, and a single source is deprioritised, and the fire is not attended. You are not taking money for nothing. It would be *better* if you were taking money for nothing.”

Junie looks at him for a second.

Then she says, kindly: “You should get out of this heat.”

And she means it warmly, and she turns to the next person in her line, and the whole exchange has taken nineteen seconds.

Coyle stands there.

He has spent his entire adult life discovering, twice, in a corridor and at a window, that there is no sentence in the English language that transfers a thing from the inside of one head to another. He is now discovering it a third time, at scale, in the street, while a city burns behind him.

He goes home. He does not call anybody. There is nobody to call and the line is at fifty-one minutes.

HOOR 38:00 — DALIA

At eight on Tuesday evening the tap in Dalia’s kitchen gives her a cough of air and a brown dribble and then nothing.

The northern section has been dead for four hours and the pumping station on the Draw runs on it and the reservoir head does the rest, and the rest, on the fourth floor, is nothing.

She stands with her hand on the tap.

Then she gets the folder.

Placement, main line: rings out. Placement, night mobile: rings out. Priya’s own number, which Dalia should not have and has: goes to voicemail on the second ring, which means the phone is on and Priya is on it.

Agency: merged municipal contract number. The tone. Four notes.

Pharmacy: closed, out of hours, an automated message referring her to the merged municipal number.

She listens to the tone for eleven minutes and puts the phone down.

Then she does the arithmetic she has been doing since she was old enough to do arithmetic, which is: what is the actual distance and what is the actual time.

The placement is out past the airport road. It is eleven miles. There is no power north of the Draw, which means no trains from Vessel, which means the buses, if the buses are running.

Tomás's medication is a maintained authorisation. Interruption is not a thing that produces a notice. It is a thing that produces an absence.

She fills two bottles from the last of the kettle. She puts the folder in a bag.

At twenty past eight in the evening on the second day, Dalia Reyes goes out of the door and starts walking north through a city with no lights in it.

HOOR 39:30 — MERRICK

Half nine at night and Cal Merrick has to choose.

Two addresses. Both structure fires, both with reported persons inside, four hundred yards apart, and Engine 9 is the only unit within eleven minutes because T2 is committed on Gerrard and T5 is out of water and the mutual aid request has been in the queue for twenty-two minutes.

Address one: a three-storey on Ansel, single call, one caller, a woman who said *I think there's someone in the top flat*, uncertain.

Address two: eleven calls in nine minutes, a commercial unit, and every caller said the same thing, and the protocol uplifts it, and the protocol is right, the protocol has been right for forty years.

He looks at the two lines on the screen in the cab.

He knows — because he has been on the boards' other end for two days now, because he has listened to the tone on Gerrard Street —

exactly what a single source means in Bellhaven this week. It does not mean one person saw it. It means one person got through.

He takes address one.

It is a judgement call and he is entitled to make it and he documents it at 21:34 in nine words: *elected A over B, corroboration unreliable under current hold times.*

There is nobody in the top flat on Ansel. The building is empty and has been empty since March.

At the commercial unit on the Draw, two men who worked nights in a printing shop do not come out.

Cal Merrick will be cleared of any fault. Every review, internal and external, will find his decision reasonable on the information available, and one of them will describe it as showing initiative.

He does not go back to work.

HOOR 41:00 — JUNIE

At eleven at night a woman comes to the table and it is Bernice, who Junie has known for nine years, who was in the line the week Junie's mother died and who sat with her on the kerb.

Bernice's daughter is twenty-six weeks pregnant with a headache and blurred vision, and Bernice cannot get through, and somebody told her about the number.

And Junie, who has taken two thousand nine hundred dollars in a day and a half, hears herself starting the sentence. *It's eighty, but for you—*

And she stops.

She stands behind a folding table on Kelder and Ninth in the dark with a cashbox and she looks at Bernice's face and she understands, completely and all at once, that Ossie in a flat on the Draw writing on a pad is going to take Bernice's daughter's details and say it has been logged, and that Bernice will go home and wait, because that is what you do when you have called somebody and been told it is logged.

"Don't call the number," Junie says.

"What?"

"Take her to Bellhaven General. Now, tonight, walk if you have to. Don't call anybody. Don't wait for anybody."

Bernice looks at the table. At the cards. At the box.

"What is all this then," she says. Not angry. Just asking.

Junie does not have a sentence. She has never once in her life not had a sentence.

HOOR 42:00 — A MAN WITH A GENERATOR

He is a builder. He has a five-kilowatt petrol generator in the back of a van and on Tuesday night he parks it on Ansel Row and runs a board off it with twelve sockets, and he charges people to charge their phones.

It starts at two dollars. He wants that on the record. He put it out there at two dollars and he did not have to do it at all and for the first three hours he was, unambiguously, the best thing that happened on that street.

By midnight it is five.

Here is how five happens, and it is worth going slowly, because this is how all of it happens.

At five past ten a man with a car offers him twenty to go to the front, and he takes it, because there is a queue of forty and somebody was always going to be at the front and it may as well be somebody who paid. At half ten a woman who has been waiting an hour sees the twenty change hands and says something, and he explains, and she says it is not fair, and he says, "Then it's five," and puts the price up in front of her, and she pays it, and the queue does not shrink.

The price is now doing something on its own. He is not driving it. He tries twice to bring it back down and both times somebody offers him more.

By four in the morning it is twenty dollars a phone and he has a scarf over his face, not for the smoke, and he has stopped answering when people say his name, and he has three hundred and eighty dollars in a bag under the driver's seat, and he is not enjoying any of it.

At half four a girl of about nineteen asks him what he charges and he tells her and she says she has four dollars, and he looks at her and says, "Go on then," and plugs her in, and charges the man behind her twenty-five to make it up.

He will think about that night for the rest of his life and never once be able to name the hour at which he became somebody else, because there wasn't one.

HOOR 44:00 — DALIA

Two in the morning on the third day and she is somewhere on the airport road with four miles behind her and seven in front and the whole northern half of Bellhaven black to her left.

It is eighty-eight degrees at two in the morning.

She has passed: a bus shelter with nine people asleep in it. A car on fire on the verge with nobody near it and nobody watching it, burning down to the wheels in complete silence, which is a thing she did not know a car could do. Two men carrying a chest freezer up an embankment. A line of about forty people outside a petrol station that was not open. A dog.

Nobody has spoken to her. She has not spoken to anybody. Twice she has stepped off the road into the scrub because a group was coming the other way, and both times the group has gone past without looking, and both times she has understood that they stepped off for her as well.

That is the texture of it. That is what the third night is. Not violence — she has seen no violence at all. Everybody in Bellhaven is out of doors, in the dark, in the heat, moving, and nobody is looking at anybody, and the not-looking has stopped being politeness some time in the last thirty hours and has become something else that she does not have a word for.

At half two she sits on a barrier and drinks four mouthfuls of warm water and allows herself ninety seconds.

She thinks about a man behind glass at Window 9 who was courteous to her for ninety-eight days.

She has never worked out whether he did it on purpose. She has decided, several times, to stop thinking about it, and she has not managed it, and what she thinks now, on a barrier on the airport road, is that it does not matter even slightly whether he did it on purpose, because look — *look at this* — it does not need anybody to do it on purpose.

She gets up and keeps walking.

HOOR 46:00 — THE OSSUARY

At four in the morning on the third day the courthouse district is the quietest place in Bellhaven, and at half eight it will be the worst.

Here is what happens in a court building when a city has stopped working for seventy-two hours.

Nothing is cancelled. That is the thing. There is no mechanism for cancelling a docket — the lists are set, the notices went out fourteen days ago, and a notice that has gone out is a summons, and a summons stands until a judge stands it down, and a judge cannot stand down a matter that has not been called.

So at half eight in the morning the doors open on a corridor and there are people in it who have walked. Some of them have walked five miles. There is a man who has come from north of the Draw with no power in his flat for thirty-one hours and a folder under his coat, and there is a woman who has arranged three days off work she cannot afford, and there is a boy of twenty who has come for a hearing that decides where he lives.

Twelve of the forty-one matters that morning are called and heard. The rest are continued, because the other side has not come, or the solicitor has not come, or the transport for a person in a placement has not come.

A continuance is not a decision. It goes in the record as a scheduling event. It is a date to be assigned, eleven to sixteen weeks out.

In the corridor on the fourth floor, worn oak, wire mesh in the window at the end dividing the sky into ninety-six small grey diamonds, a young clerk tells a man that his matter was called at nine-thirty and that it has already been taken up.

He is not doing anything wrong. He is doing it kindly. He has done it eleven times this morning.

The man says, "I've walked five miles."

And the clerk says: "I understand."

HOOR 47:00 — ROWAN

At five in the morning on the third day Rowan Peale sees the pharmacy.

Not his one — that is on Kelder and it has been boarded since Tuesday noon. This is a different pharmacy, on the Draw, which went in some time last night, and which is now a shell with the shutter peeled up like a lid, and there is a woman outside it, sixty-odd, in a dressing gown, standing in the glass.

She is asking a man in a hi-vis if they are open. He says no. She says when will they be open. He says he doesn't know, he only does the boarding.

She says: "I need my mother's tablets."

And the man says he is sorry, and he is, and he goes on boarding.

Rowan stands across the street.

He does not know if he did that one. He genuinely does not know. He has been out for two days and there was a period on Tuesday night that he cannot fully account for, and he does not think he did that one, and he cannot swear it.

But he knows what he did on Monday, at half five in the morning, with a paving stone, and he knows that the thing he actually

wanted at that moment — the whole of it, the entire content — was for one person in this city to turn round and look at him.

And a man across the street had stopped and looked.

That is what it cost. He is standing in the wreckage of the exchange rate.

He walks up to the woman in the dressing gown and he says, "Which pharmacy usually?" and she says the one on Vessel, and he says, "I'll go and see if it's open. Wait here. I'll come back and tell you either way."

She looks at him. Directly at his face.

"You'll come back?"

"I'll come back."

It takes him fifty minutes. It is closed. He comes back and tells her.

HOURL 50:00 — NADINE

At eight o'clock on Wednesday morning the queue starts to fall.

Nadine watches it go: 2,900. 2,400. 1,800. 1,100. 640. In ninety minutes.

Her first thought is that they have turned a corner, and she feels it physically, a loosening at the base of the skull, and she says to the room, "It's coming down," and somebody actually claps.

Her second thought, about four minutes later, is that hold time has not moved.

If the queue is draining because calls are being answered, hold falls. Hold has not fallen. Hold is at fifty-one minutes and static.

She checks the trunk status. All trunks up. She checks the routing. Clean. She calls the carrier and gets, on the third attempt, a very tired engineer who runs diagnostics for eleven minutes and tells her there is no fault on the circuit and the circuit is passing everything offered to it.

Everything offered to it.

At 09:50 on the third day Nadine Roche sits down in a windowless room on the third floor of a building on Marrow Street and understands that the equipment is working perfectly.

The city has stopped calling.

INCIDENT LOG III

Bellhaven Consolidated Communications — extract, hours 30 to 54

13:20 — KELDER 300 BLK — structure fire, commercial — E9 — **crowd present, non-hostile.** **16:22** — NORTHERN SECTION — planned shed, unannounced. **16:31** — NORTHERN SECTION — uncontrolled failure. Restoration est. 4h. **16:44** — THE DRAW — retail premises, persons removing stock, no violence reported — no unit available. **20:10** — NORTHERN DISTRICTS — loss of water pressure above 3rd floor — referred. **21:34** — ANSEL 12 / DRAW 88 — two structure fires, one unit available — **officer discretion exercised.** **23:15** — DRAW 88 — two fatalities confirmed. **02:40** — AIRPORT RD — pedestrians on carriageway — logged. **08:00-09:30** — queue depth falling. Hold static. **No fault found on circuit.**

Hold, average: 51m 02s. Abandonment: not calculable — offered volume declining. Positions staffed: 26 of 41.

IV. THE QUIET

HOOR 54:00 — NADINE

Noon on the third day. 210 in queue. Hold, fifty-one minutes. Offered volume down sixty-eight percent against the same hour yesterday.

Nadine puts it on the wall display in a form nobody has ever needed before: not calls answered, not calls abandoned. **Calls not made.**

She has the baseline. Every hour of every Wednesday for nine years is in the system. The city should have offered eleven thousand calls between midnight and noon. It offered three thousand four hundred.

Seven thousand six hundred calls did not happen.

Not abandoned. Abandoned calls appear — an abandoned call is a person who tried. These are people who did not lift the receiver. Who stood in a kitchen with a smell of smoke and thought about the tone and did not.

She types it into the incident record because it needs to exist somewhere:

Offered volume is not a measure of incidents. It is a measure of belief.

Then she goes and does the round she has done every day for nine years, the one where she stands behind each position for ten seconds, and at position nineteen she stops, because the operator has her headset off and is sitting with her hands flat on the desk.

"Marta."

"There's nothing coming in," Marta says.

"I know."

"No — I've been sat here forty minutes. It's not slow. It's *nothing*." She looks up. "What are they doing out there?"

And Nadine, who is very tired, and who is a precise person, says the exact truth:

"They're managing."

HOOR 56:30 — MERRICK

Half two on Wednesday afternoon and Engine 9 is coming back from a false alarm on Marrow when Merrick sees a fire in a yard behind a row of shops on the Draw.

He tells Vasquez to pull in.

It is well going — three, four hours in, a stack of pallets and a fence and the back of a unit — and it will take the row if it gets another hour.

There is no call for it. He checks. There is no call for it in the system, nothing, not queued, not closed, nothing.

There are seven people standing at the mouth of the yard.

Merrick gets down and walks over. They are ordinary. A man with a bike. Two women with shopping. A kid of about fifteen. They are all wearing the masks — the white ones, from the air quality alert, handed out free at counters since Tuesday morning, three per household, and by Wednesday half of Bellhaven is in them because the smoke off Gerrard has been sitting over the whole northern half of the city for thirty hours.

“How long’s that been burning?”

The man with the bike shrugs.

“Did anyone call it in?”

And the man says — and Merrick will repeat this sentence to the review board, and to a journalist, and to his wife, and eventually to nobody, because he stops saying it:

“I thought someone would have.”

They fight it for forty minutes and save the row. Nobody helps and nobody hinders. The seven stand and watch, white-faced, unreadable, and when it is out they drift off.

Merrick sits in the cab afterward and looks at his hands.

I thought someone would have. That is not a lie and it is not indifference. That man believed it. That is the terrible part. Every person standing at the mouth of that yard was assuming the

presence of every other person, and the assumption is the whole of civilisation, and it has come apart in seventy-two hours, quietly, without one act of malice anywhere in it.

HOOR 58:00 — DALIA

She gets there at four in the afternoon on Wednesday, on foot, with her shoes ruined and both bottles dry.

The building has power — it is south of the section boundary by four hundred yards, which is the only piece of luck in this book. The car park is empty except for one small red car.

Priya opens the door. Priya has been there since Monday morning. Fifty-five hours.

“Oh,” Priya says. “Oh, you came.”

Nobody has come. That is the first thing Dalia establishes and it takes her a while to believe it. No agency staff since Sunday night. The regional manager is uncontactable, not out of negligence but because his mobile has no signal north of the Draw and the office line is a merged municipal number. No inspector. No relative. Eleven residents and one woman for fifty-five hours.

And it is *fine*. That is what Dalia cannot get her head round as she walks the corridors. Everyone is alive. Everyone has eaten — Priya has been cooking one thing at a time, badly, in enormous quantities. The west corridor is thirty-one degrees and everybody has been moved out of it into the day room and the day room smells of eleven people in a heatwave and there are mattresses on the floor.

Tomás is by the window with the racing page from Monday, which he has now read some number of times.

“Kelder’s Ruin came second,” he says. “I told you it was an omen. I was wrong about which way.”

The medication cabinet needs two signatures. Priya has one. She has not opened it since Monday night.

“They’re all on the low doses,” Priya says. “It’s all the ones you can miss. Except—”

"Except Thursday."

"Except Thursday."

Delivery is Thursday. The pharmacy that supplies this building is on Kelder Street and Dalia walked past it eleven hours ago and it is boarded.

She puts her bag down.

"Right," she says. "Show me where things are."

HOOR 59:30 — A LANDLORD ON ANSEL ROW

He is not a monster and there will be no charges, and this is the part of the week that leaves no record at all.

He owns nine buildings north of the Draw and on Wednesday evening he walks the worst of them with a torch and a clipboard, and he is genuinely there to check on people, and he does check on people, and he brings four crates of water, and he carries a crate up to the fourth floor for a woman with a bad hip and it costs him something to do it.

And while he is up there, breathing hard, with the water on the floor between them, he says the thing.

He says he does not know how long the power will be out. He says the building is old and the wiring is what it is and he has been advised — he does not say by whom — that there is a risk. He says that if she wanted to go and stay with family for a while, he would understand, and he would not chase the arrears, and he might even be able to help with a bit toward moving.

Every sentence is true. There is a risk. The wiring is what it is. He would not chase the arrears.

He does this in six flats across two buildings on Wednesday night and by Friday three of them are empty.

There is no threat anywhere in it. There is a man with a torch and a crate of water at the top of a dark stairwell, being honest about a genuine electrical risk to a frightened person at eleven o'clock at night in ninety-one degrees, in a week when nobody is answering the telephone.

He relets all three by September at forty percent more. He tells his brother-in-law it was the best thing he ever did for those tenants and he is not lying, and part of him means it, and he does not sleep well, and he cannot say why.

HOOR 61:00 — JUNIE

Seven in the evening and the table is still on the corner and Junie has not taken a dollar since eleven o'clock last night.

She has been standing behind it for twenty hours doing something she has no name for. When people come, she tells them the truth. Free.

That form processes automatically, don't queue for it. — That deadline is soft. — Don't call any number, walk to the hospital. — That office cannot help you and the person who told you it could was guessing.

Nineteen years of knowledge, given away, and it turns out that giving it away is worth almost nothing, because half of them do not believe her — a woman who wants nothing is harder to trust than a woman who wants eighty dollars — and the other half thank her and go and stand in the queue anyway, because the queue is a thing you can stand in and information is not.

Emil quit at midday. He said, not unkindly, that if she was not selling anything he was going to go and sell something.

At half seven a man in a suit walks past for the third time in two days. She recognises him. He does not look at the table.

"Hey," she calls. "Suit."

He stops.

"You were right," she says. "About the number."

He stands there in the smoke with the mask pushed down under his chin, and he does not say *I know*, and he does not say *thank you*, and he does not look pleased. He looks at her for a long moment with an expression she cannot read at all.

Then he says: "It doesn't help."

"What doesn't?"

"Being right," Coyle says. "It doesn't do anything. I thought it would."

HOOR 63:00 — ROWAN

Nine at night and Kelder Street is empty.

That is the thing nobody warns you about. Not the police, not the fires, not the consequences. The *emptying*. On Tuesday there were six hundred people in this road all facing the same way and a man handed him a bottle of water and looked at his face, and tonight there is a street with glass on it and boarding on eleven frontages and four people at the far end who are not together.

It went the way weather goes. It assembled and then it dispersed and nobody called it and nobody ended it.

Rowan sits on the kerb outside the pharmacy he broke on Monday.

He has been to Bellhaven General twice today. Mrs. Fenwick is on a ward on the fourth floor and she is not good and they will not tell him more than that because he is not family. He sat in the corridor for two hours anyway. A nurse gave him a cup of tea at some point, which nearly finished him.

He is twenty-four. He moved boxes. He liked it.

He knows, sitting on that kerb, exactly two things and he will hold them both for the rest of his life without ever reconciling them.

The first is that he did this. Not the fires, not the grid, not the queue — but a window, and a sound, and the man across the street who stopped and looked, and whatever that started in six hundred people who were all also, it turns out, so alone.

The second is that it was the only time anybody in this city has ever turned round.

At half nine a police car goes past slowly. It does not stop. There are nine hundred outstanding reports of criminal damage in Bellhaven District Four and no capacity to attend any of them and there never will be, and no one will ever come for Rowan Peale, and that is somehow the worst of it.

He puts his head on his knees in an empty street and cries for eleven minutes and nobody comes then either.

HOURL 65:00 — A WOMAN COUNTING

Eleven at night on the third day and a retired schoolteacher on the fourth floor of a block on Vessel Street is writing in a notebook by torchlight.

She started on Tuesday morning for no better reason than that she was annoyed. She had rung about a smell of gas in the stairwell, waited thirty-one minutes and given up, and it made her cross in a way she recognised from forty years of being cross about things, and she got a notebook.

Since then she has written down, with times:

Two fires she could see from her window that she could find no report of anywhere. The exact hour the water went off and the exact hour it came back on the third floor and not the fourth. Nineteen instances of a siren going one way and not coming back. The number of people sleeping in the bus shelter opposite, each night, at midnight — nine, then fourteen, then twenty-two. What the supermarket had on Monday and what it had on Wednesday. The name of every neighbour she has knocked on, and whether they answered, and whether they had water.

Forty-one pages.

She is eighty-one years old and she is not doing it for anyone. There is nobody to send it to; she has tried the number and she is not going to spend another thirty-one minutes of what remains of her life listening to four notes.

She is doing it because she taught for forty years and she cannot stop herself, and because at some point on Tuesday afternoon she looked out of her window at a city where nothing was being recorded and thought, with real fright, *then it will be as though none of it happened*.

Six months later a researcher on the review team finds her notebook because a neighbour mentions it in passing.

It is the single most complete account of that week in existence. It contradicts the official timeline in nine places and is right in seven of them.

It appears in the final report as Appendix D, unattributed, at her request.

HOURL 68:00 — NADINE

Two in the morning on Thursday. The northern section comes back at 02:14.

Nadine hears about it because the boards light — twelve hundred calls in nine minutes, all of them about power, most of them from people who want to tell somebody that it is back on.

Hold falls to nine minutes by three o'clock. To four by half past. By four in the morning the consolidated queue is running at nineteen seconds average, which is the model, which is what the memo said, and the memo was right.

At 04:10 the reversion order comes through. Split lines to be restored, phased, from Monday.

Nadine reads it. It authorises everything she asked for on Monday evening, and it is signed by three people, and it is a good order.

She sits in a windowless room on Marrow Street with the display in front of her running normal numbers for the first time in seventy hours and finds that she cannot feel anything about it at all.

Then she opens the incident record and starts the thing that will take her four months, which is counting.

Not fires. Not deaths — deaths are somebody else's count and the number will be nineteen and it will be argued about for a year. She counts the calls that did not happen. Seventy-two hours against nine years of baseline.

She arrives, eventually, at a figure she gives to the review and which the review does not use, because it is not evidence of anything and cannot be attributed to any decision made by any person.

Forty-one thousand, two hundred.

Forty-one thousand two hundred times, in three days, somebody in Bellhaven decided not to tell anyone.

HOOR 71:00 — COYLE

Five in the morning on Thursday and the sky over the Ossuary is coming up the colour of a coal, and Martin Coyle walks down Kelder Street towards the building where he has worked for twenty years.

The line is already there.

That is not remarkable. The line is always there. He has watched it form at six-forty for two decades and this week it has been forming at four.

What is remarkable is the length of it. It goes past the corner and along Vessel and out of sight, and Coyle, who counts things, tries and cannot, and puts it at nine hundred.

He walks the length of it because he wants to see.

They are wearing the masks. Most of them. White, from the counters, three per household, and nobody takes them off now even in the dark, even where there is no smoke, and Coyle understands why immediately and it is not what the newspapers will say.

It is not fear of the air.

It is that in a city where nobody looks at you, being unlookable-at is a relief. It is the difference between being ignored and being invisible, and the second one you can choose.

At about position six hundred he stops and asks a woman what she is queuing for.

She thinks about it.

"They'll tell you at the front," she says.

He asks the man behind her the same thing and gets the same answer, and the man behind him says he is not sure, someone said there were forms.

And Coyle stands on Kelder Street at five in the morning and understands what he is looking at, and it is the last thing he understands in this book:

They are not queuing for anything.

They are standing where a line goes. Because a line is the only structure left in Bellhaven that reliably contains a person, and because at the front of a line, eventually, somebody looks at you.

HOOR 72:00 — THE FINDING

The independent review reports in the following March. It runs to four hundred and six pages. Its conclusions occupy one.

The consolidation of the emergency and non-emergency lines was properly authorised, properly modelled on the data available, and consistent with practice in eleven comparable cities.

The decision to decline reversion during the event was correct on the information available and would be taken again.

The corroboration weighting protocol operated as designed.

The load-shedding decision was correct and the unannounced implementation was justified by the alternative.

The officer discretion exercised at 21:34 on the second day was reasonable.

No individual failing is identified at any level.

The review makes nine recommendations. Six are implemented. The split lines are restored on the Monday and the four-note hold tone is retired in November and replaced with a different one.

There is one paragraph, on page three hundred and eighty-eight, contributed by the Bellhaven Consolidated Communications supervisor and reproduced without comment:

The system assumed a population that reports. Every protocol we run — corroboration, triage, resource allocation — takes as its input the calls of people who look up and say something. It has no instrument for the other thing. If a city stops telling anyone,

nothing in this building will register it as an event, and the failure will not appear in any record, because the record is made of calls.

I do not know what you do about that. I do not think it is a communications problem.

INCIDENT LOG IV

Bellhaven Consolidated Communications — extract, hours 54 to 72

12:00 — offered volume 68% below baseline. **14:30** — DRAW REAR YARD — structure fire, 4h duration — **no call received. Unit self-assigned.** **19:20** — KELDER 118 — no calls. **21:00** — KELDER 300 BLK — no calls. **02:14** — NORTHERN SECTION — restored. **02:23** — 1,200 calls in 9 min — power restoration, informational. **04:10** — reversion order issued. **05:00** — DISTRICT FOUR — persons queuing on footway, est. 900 — no offence disclosed — **no incident code applies** — logged for information.

Hold, average: 19s. Abandonment: 0.4%. Positions staffed: 38 of 41.

Masks in circulation: 1.4 million. Air quality returned to normal on 14 July.

Returns requested: none.

GLOSSARY

FOLIE À DEUX [fo-LEE ah DUH] — French, *madness for two*. The clinical name for a delusion shared by two people who live closely together, one of whom usually holds it first. The author's note takes the term as its starting point and asks what the word is for when the whole city holds it.

FOLIE GÉNÉRALE [fo-LEE zhay-nay-RAHL] — French, *general madness*. Not a clinical category. The term folie à deux is scaled in the literature to three, to a family, to several; there is no term for everyone, because when everyone holds a belief it stops being called a delusion and starts being called the way things are. The title stretches the term to that size.

Bellhaven merges its emergency and non-emergency telephone lines. The memo is two pages long, properly authorised, correctly modelled, and four million dollars cheaper. Nobody who reads it disagrees with a word.

The merge adds forty seconds of hold time. A heatwave arrives. Hold goes to six minutes, then nineteen, then fifty-one — and a forty-year-old triage rule that treats a single caller as low-confidence begins, quietly and correctly, to deprioritise every true emergency in a city where nobody has looked up in years.

Seventy-two hours. A dispatch supervisor who can hear the silence coming. A fire officer arriving at the wrong point in every call. A woman walking eleven miles through a blacked-out city because her brother's medication is delivered on Thursday. A woman on a folding table selling the only thing left that anyone wants, which is not help but reception.

No villain authored any of it. Every decision at every level was correct and will be found correct.

Everyone has assumed that someone else has already called.

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