

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 24

MUNICIPAL HOUSING OFFICE

CITIZENS SERVED IN NUMERICAL ORDER
PLEASE WAIT FOR YOUR NUMBER TO BE CALLED

1 2 3 4 5 6

NO SMOKING
NO LOITERING
NO LITERATURE
THANK YOU

NO SMOKING
NO LOITERING
NO LITERATURE
THANK YOU

WAIT
TO BE
CALLED
HOURS
7:30 AM
TO
4:30 PM

FOLIE IMPOSEE

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 24

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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ISBN 979-8-952790-23-0

Roya Publications

Publication No. 24

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach

“Nobody is doing anything to you.”

— the Standing, day two



SYNOPSIS

You find the number on a wall. Two words in white paint under an underpass, sprayed the way a football score is sprayed: *NO ETA*.

Nothing is wrong with you. You are thirty-one, employed, housed, insured, and so alone you could not describe it, because describing it would require somebody to describe it to. So you call, and you are given an address, and you are told to come and stand outside a door.

Nobody speaks to you for three days. On the third day a man comes out, looks at your face for eleven seconds, says your whole name, and your legs stop holding you.

They are called the Second Ring, and they answer. No queue, no triage, no corroboration weighting. Somebody comes. Their leader reads forty seconds of scripture at each hearing, says one flat sentence about it, and closes the book. He washes the feet of every person who walks through that door, and he has done it two thousand times.

What they have is not a drug. It is eleven seconds of another person's undivided attention, delivered by somebody who is not going to leave, and there is an unlimited free supply of it in this city, and almost nobody has had any since childhood.

Their code is four rules long when you join. By the eighth year it is twenty-three, and every one of them arrived alone, on a Tuesday, sounding entirely reasonable, and you voted for all of them.

Folie Imposée completes the Bellhaven trilogy. It is a book about an organisation founded to make people feel heard, by people who were not, and about the hour it discovers that it needs the city to keep failing. Nothing in it is illegal. Nobody lays a hand on anyone. Every act is defensible in writing.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The first book in this sequence was one man declining to hurry. The second was a city of decent people each assuming somebody else had already called. This one is about what people build out of that, and it is the only one of the three with a culprit in it.

Folie imposée is a real term — the subtype of shared delusion where a dominant personality imposes the belief on a passive one, and where the passive one recovers when separated. That last clause is the reason I chose it. It contains the ending.

I want to be exact about what I have tried to do, because a book with a charismatic man and a set of rules in it invites one obvious reading and that reading is wrong. Rowan Peale is not a fraud. He believes every word. Every foot he washes, he washes properly, and the water is the right temperature because he ran the tap and tested it with his wrist before you arrived. The attendances are real. Fourteen adults really do stand in a hospital car park in the drizzle so that a nine-year-old girl comes out of a door and finds somebody waiting. If you finish this book thinking the Second Ring were monsters, I have failed, and so has the thing I was trying to say.

What is wrong with them is smaller and much harder to legislate against. They are right about the diagnosis. The city genuinely is the disease — nobody in these three books is ever helped by an institution, and nobody in them is ever harmed by a villain. But a cure administered by people who need the disease is not a cure. It is the disease with better fellowship, and better fellowship is not nothing. That is what makes it hold.

The rules were the hardest thing to get right. There are twenty-three of them and they arrive one at a time over five years, and each one is recited flat, in the same cadence, by a room that never questions it. Read them in a block at the end and several are monstrous. Read them the way the characters got them — alone, on a Tuesday, following a forty-second reading and a single sentence

— and I do not think you would have objected either. I am fairly sure I would not have.

Every other book in this series has a substance in it. This one has eleven seconds, which costs nothing, which anybody can administer, and which I have come to think is the most powerful compound in the sequence.

The last rule is the first rule. Nobody noticed the day it turned over, and there was no day.

Chew Z

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I. THE STANDING

THE STANDING — DAY ONE

You are outside a door on Marrow Street at ten past six in the morning and nobody has looked at you.

That is the whole of it. There is no sign on the door. There is a buzzer, painted over. You were given the address on a card with nothing else on it, and you were told to come, and you came, and now you are standing.

At seven the street begins. A woman with a dog. A man in a van who reverses for four minutes into a space he does not fit. At half seven the shutters go up on the place at the corner and somebody starts frying.

At eleven the door opens and a man comes out with a bag of refuse and puts it in the bin and goes back in.

He does not look at you.

You want to record that you are not offended by this, and it is a lie, and you have three days to find out how enormous a lie it is.

At two in the afternoon it rains. Not properly — that thin Bellhaven rain that never commits. You have a coat. You are, by any measure, fine. You have been rained on before.

At six the door opens again and two people come out and turn left and one of them is laughing at something the other said, and they walk past you at a distance of eleven inches, and neither of them looks.

At half nine you sit down on the step of the building next door, and a man from that building comes out and asks you to move, politely, and you move, and it is the first time in fifteen hours that a human being has addressed you and you find that your voice does not work properly on the first attempt.

At midnight the lights in the building go off.

You are thirty-one years old. You have a job. You have a phone in your pocket with four hundred contacts in it. You could ring any of them.

You do not, and you tell yourself it is because of the instruction.

THE STANDING — DAY TWO

The second day is when it starts to work and you cannot see it working.

You have learned the street by now. You know that the woman with the dog goes at 07:04 and comes back at 07:31. You know the van man's rhythm. You know that the frying starts at 07:40 and that at 09:15 somebody in the flat above the shutter puts the same four bars of the same song on and stops it, every time, at the same place.

You know these people. You have accumulated more information about eleven strangers in thirty hours than you have about the man who has sat across from you at work for two years.

None of them know you exist.

Around noon you catch yourself doing something and it frightens you. You have started to arrange yourself so that you are more visible. You have moved eighteen inches to the left, into the light. You have taken your hood down in the rain. You are standing straighter.

You are advertising.

At four o'clock a young woman comes down the street eating from a paper bag and she glances at you — a fraction, a half-beat, the way you look at a postbox — and you feel it go through you like current, and she is past you and gone in a second and a half, and you spend the next two hours composing what you would have said.

You are not hungry, particularly. You are not cold. Nothing is being done to you.

At nine in the evening you say, out loud, to the door: "I'm here."

Nobody comes. The door does not open. There is nothing on the other side of it listening, and you know that, and you say it again anyway at half nine and again at ten, quieter each time, until you stop.

That is the mechanism. You should know that now, at the start, because they will never explain it to you.

Nobody is doing anything to you.

That is the entire technique.

THE STANDING — DAY THREE

On the third day you go through the wall.

There is no other way to describe it and everyone who has done this describes it the same way afterward, which is how you will later know that it is designed. Somewhere in the small hours of the third morning the wanting stops. The composing stops. You are not waiting any more, because waiting requires a belief that something arrives, and you have put that down.

And what comes in behind it is very quiet and very strange and you will spend the rest of your life trying to get back to it.

You look at the street.

You look at the woman with the dog and you see that she is exhausted, that the dog is old, that she carries it up the two steps and thinks nobody sees. You see that the van man reverses badly because his neck does not turn. You see the four bars of the song stop in the same place because whoever plays it cannot get past that part.

You have not eaten since yesterday and you are not sure that is related.

At 15:40 on the third day the door opens.

A man of about thirty-five comes out. He is wearing a grey work coat. He has a plain face and he is not remarkable in any way and he stands in the doorway and looks at you for what you will later time, from the street camera footage you are shown at Hearing Six, at eleven seconds.

Eleven seconds of a stranger's eyes on your face.

Then he says your name.

Your whole name. First and last, correctly pronounced, in a flat voice with nothing added to it — no warmth, no welcome, no apology for the three days.

And you go down. Not metaphorically. Your legs stop holding you and you sit down on a wet pavement on Marrow Street in front of a man you have never met and you make a noise you have not made since you were a child.

He waits. He does not help you up and he does not look away.

When you have finished he says: "Come in. There's food."

THE WASHING

Inside there is a corridor of grey painted brick, a linoleum floor, a smell of toner and old paper and, faintly, always, the drains.

At the end there is a room. Eight feet by ten. Grey brick, a table bolted to the floor, four chairs that are not bolted to anything, a strip light in a cage. No window. No clock.

They call it Room Four. Nobody will tell you why and you will eventually stop asking.

You are given soup in a paper cup and you drink it too fast and burn your mouth and nobody comments on this.

Then the man in the grey coat comes in with a plastic basin and a jug and a towel over his shoulder, and he sets the basin on the floor, and he kneels down in front of you.

You say something. Everybody says something at this point — you will see forty people say something at this point in the years ahead, and it is always some version of *you don't have to do that*.

He does not answer. He takes off your shoes. He puts your feet in the water, which is exactly the right temperature, which means somebody ran a tap and tested it with their wrist before you arrived.

He washes your feet.

It takes four minutes. He is not gentle about it and he is not rough. He is thorough, the way somebody is thorough with a job they have done many times and intend to do correctly, and he does not look up at you once, and he does not speak, and the only sound in that room is water.

Then he dries them and puts your shoes beside you and stands up and takes the basin out.

Later you learn that he is called Rowan Peale and that he has done this for every single person who has ever come through that door, without exception, and that he will do it for you again if you ever come back after leaving.

Later still you learn what he is capable of.

You will not be able to make the two facts sit together, and neither will anybody else, and that is not an accident either.

HEARING ONE — THE FOUNDING

They call the meetings hearings. Not meetings, not circles, not sessions. Hearings, because a hearing is the thing the city was supposed to give you and did not.

There are nineteen people in Room Four and the room holds eleven, so most of you stand.

Rowan opens a paperback with a broken spine. It is not a nice edition. It has a supermarket price sticker on it.

He reads:

“A man is beaten and left in a ditch. A priest comes down that road, sees him, and crosses to the other side. Then a Levite, the same. Then a Samaritan stops and pays for his care.”

He lets it sit. Nobody moves.

“The priest was going to the temple. The Levite had duties. Neither of them did anything wrong.”

That is all he says about it. He closes the book.

And you understand — the whole room understands, and none of it is spoken — that this is not a story about the Samaritan. That everyone has always told it as a story about the Samaritan and it is not. It is a story with two respectable men in it who had somewhere to be, and a man in a ditch, and the arithmetic between them.

You think, sitting on the floor of a windowless room with your feet still damp: *I have been the priest. I have been the priest four hundred times.*

Then the recitation. Everybody stands, including the people already standing, and they say it flat, without music, the way you would read out a serial number.

One. You answer on the second ring.

Two. You never say it has been logged.

Three. You never say “not long now.”

Four. You go, or you say you will not go. There is no third answer.

That is all of it. Four lines. It takes eleven seconds.

You do not say them, that first night, because you do not know them.

By the end you will know twenty-three.

ATTENDANCE 0001

The number rings at 04:12 and you answer on the second ring, because that is the first rule and because you have been lying awake with the phone on your chest for two hours waiting to.

A woman's voice. She is not crying. That surprises you — you had constructed something in your head about crying.

She says her mother has fallen in the bathroom and she cannot lift her and she has been on the municipal line for fifty-one minutes.

You do not say it has been logged.

You say: “My name's on the way. Give me the address.”

Forty minutes. You and a woman called Deb who you have met twice, because nobody arrives alone, though you do not know that is a rule yet. You go up four flights and the door is open and there is an eighty-eight-year-old woman on a bathroom floor between the pan and the wall and she has been there since one in the morning.

You do not lift her. Neither of you is trained and you both know it. What you do is this: Deb sits down on the floor and puts her coat over the woman and holds her hand and starts telling her about a dog she had. And you go back out to the landing and you get on the municipal line and you stay on it.

You stay on it for two hours and nine minutes.

That is the job. Nobody tells you at the start that most of the job is being the person who is *able* to hold, because you have nothing else on today, because you have eaten, because you are not eighty-eight on a bathroom floor.

The ambulance comes at 07:50. She is fine. She is entirely fine — a bruise the size of a plate and a fright.

Her daughter tries to give you money and you say no, and she asks what the organisation is called, and Deb says: “We’re the second ring.”

Walking home at nine in the morning through a city going to work, past four hundred people, you feel something you have not felt in eleven years and cannot name until Deb says it on the corner of Vessel.

“First one’s the best one,” she says. “Sorry. Nothing’s like the first one.”

WHAT YOU DID BEFORE

You should understand what they took you out of, because otherwise none of this will land and you will think you would have known better.

You were a project coordinator at a logistics firm on the south side. You were good at it. You had a flat with a balcony you never used and a car you replaced every four years and a running app that recorded eleven hundred kilometres.

You had four hundred contacts. You had been to two weddings in six years and had not been in a room with more than three people in it, socially, since the second one.

Your mother rang on Sundays. You picked up perhaps two Sundays in three, and the ones you did not pick up you told yourself you would call back, and you called back perhaps half.

You had a colleague die. A man called Terry, fifty-four, at his desk, on a Tuesday, and you had worked eleven feet from him for two years and at the funeral you discovered that he had a daughter and you did not know that.

You went home from the funeral and sat in the car in the underground car park for forty minutes without turning the engine off.

Nothing was wrong with you. Understand that clearly. You had no diagnosis, no crisis, no substance, no debt. Any doctor in Bellhaven would have found you entirely well. You were the exact specification of an adult in this city in this decade: employed, housed, insured, hydrated, contactless, and so alone that you could not have described it, because describing it would require somebody to describe it *to*.

You found the number on a wall.

Two words in white paint, under an underpass on the airport road, sprayed the way a football score is sprayed, next to a number with no code:

NO ETA

You looked at it for a long time. Then you took a photograph of it, and you did not call for eleven weeks, and then you called.

HEARING FOUR — THE DENIAL

Twenty-six in the room now. There were nineteen at your first.

Rowan opens the paperback.

"Before the cock crows, Peter says three times that he does not know the man. The third time he swears on it. Then he goes outside and weeps."

He lets it sit.

"Peter was not a coward. He was in the courtyard. Everyone who mattered had already gone home."

He closes the book.

You are aware, from the floor, that you are being taught something about the three days you spent on Marrow Street and that you are not being told what it is.

Then a woman called Yun stands up and says a name, and the room says it back, and this is how a rule arrives.

Five. You give your name. You use theirs.

Nobody debates it. Nobody proposes it. It is simply recited that night with the other four, as though it had always been five, and when you look around the room for a face that finds this strange you do not find one, and you understand — for one clean second, before it closes over — that you are inside something.

Then the second returns, and it is this:

You were on hold for fifty-one minutes and a machine told you your call was important and did not know your name and did not want it.

You say the fifth rule with the rest of them.

THE TELLING

It happens in Room Four with two people and the door shut, and it is the second thing they do to you, and nobody warns you.

You are told to say the worst thing you have ever done.

Not the worst thing done to you. Everybody comes in prepared for that; everybody has a version of that ready and rehearsed and slightly improved. This is the other one. The one you have never said out loud to a living person, that you have carried for eleven or twenty or thirty years, that you take out at four in the morning and look at and put away.

The person opposite you is a stranger. They have one instruction, and it is this: **do not react.**

Not sympathy. Not shock. Not the small compassionate noise that people make. Their face must not move.

And if it moves — if the eyebrow goes, if the mouth does anything, if they blink out of rhythm — they raise a hand, and you begin again from the beginning.

You take four attempts. Most people take three.

The first time you get eleven words in and they flinch and you have to start again, and you are furious, and the fury is the point, because the fury is *forty years of watching a face for permission*.

The fourth time you say the whole thing.

It takes a minute and forty seconds. It is not the worst thing you have ever heard; you learn later that almost none of them are. It is a thing you did when you were twenty-two involving a person who trusted you, and it is small, and it is squalid, and it has cost you a portion of every year since.

The stranger's face does not move.

When you have finished they say: "Thank you."

That is all. There is no absolution, no advice, no *that's not so bad*, no *I've done worse*, none of the four hundred things a person says to make a confession end faster because the confession is uncomfortable for them.

The withholding is the gift. You have finally said it, and nothing happened, and the world did not adjust its face.

You come out of Room Four and you cannot speak for an hour.

THE REGISTER — I

Extract. The Register is kept in a ledger book in Room Four. It is never digitised, because a thing that is digitised is a thing that is queued.

0001 — Marrow N, fall, 88F — attended 04:52 — outcome good — municipal hold 2h09m. **0004** — Ansel Row, welfare, no answer at door — attended — outcome good. **0009** — Kelder 240, panic, 19M, alone — attended, stayed 6h — outcome good. **0011** — the Draw, damp/mould, child asthmatic — attended — **not an emergency. Attended anyway.** **0014** — Vessel, woman reports being followed — two attended — walked her home — outcome good. **0017** —

Gerrard, man will not open door — attended, sat on landing 4h, door opened — outcome good. **0022** — airport rd, no complaint given, caller rang off — **attended anyway, address traced** — outcome good. **0026** — Bellhaven Gen, patient with nobody — attended, stayed — outcome good. **0031** — Marrow, hoarding, environmental health refused — attended — ongoing. **0038** — Kelder 118, elderly man, no heating — attended — **no municipal record of prior call. He says he made four.**

Attendances this month: 41. Refused: 0. Municipal referrals: 0.

II. THE ATTENDANCE

ATTENDANCE 0114

The call comes at eleven at night and it is a man who will not say what is wrong.

That is common. Perhaps a third of them will not say. They ring the number and then they cannot produce the sentence, and there is a long silence on the line, and the temptation — the enormous, decent, civilised temptation — is to help them out of it. To say *take your time* or *whenever you're ready* or any of the fourteen phrases that a person says when what they actually want is for the silence to end because the silence is uncomfortable *for them*.

You have learned not to.

You say your name. You wait.

Ninety seconds. Two minutes. You can hear a television. You can hear him breathing and then not breathing and then breathing.

At three minutes and forty seconds he says an address.

You go. Yun goes with you because nobody arrives alone. It is a maisonette on the north side with a garden gone to seed and there is a man of sixty in the doorway who does not say anything at all, and Yun says her name and he says his, and he steps back, and you go in.

There is nothing wrong. That is what you find. The house is clean. The heating works. He is not ill and not injured and not in danger and there is no crisis of any kind and he has not spoken to another human being in the room with him for eleven weeks.

You stay until four in the morning.

You do not counsel him, because you are not qualified and there is a rule about that later on. You sit in his front room and he tells you about a dispute over a boundary fence that occupied nine years of his life, in enormous and pointless detail, and you listen to all of it.

On the way out he shakes your hand at the door and holds on to it about two seconds longer than a handshake, which is the single most common thing that happens in this work, and which nobody ever mentions afterward.

Yun says nothing on the walk back until the corner.

Then she says: "Eleven weeks."

HEARING SEVEN — THE RULE OF TWO

Thirty-four in the room. They have taken the door off Room Four to fit everyone in the corridor.

"A matter is established in the mouth of two or three witnesses. And where two or three are gathered, he says, there I am among them."

He lets it sit.

"The city has the same rule. They call it corroboration weighting. One caller is not enough to be believed."

He closes the book.

There is a noise in the room that you have not heard before. Not a gasp. Something lower and further back, from the people who have been here longest, and you look around and see a man of about fifty with his hand over his mouth.

You find out afterward why. Eleven years ago, in a week that everyone in Bellhaven calls the Week and nobody describes, forty-one thousand two hundred calls were not made. There is a paragraph in a report about it. The people in this room are, disproportionately, people who called once.

Six. Nobody arrives alone.

Seven. You do not look past their shoulder.

The seventh is the one that changes your life, and it is the smallest.

It means: when you are with a person, you do not look at the door, or your phone, or the clock, or the next thing. Not once. Not for a quarter of a second.

You try it for a week and discover that you have never in thirty-one years given any human being your undivided attention for more than about forty seconds, and that doing it is physically difficult, like holding your arm out straight, and that the people you do it to react as though you have handed them something enormous.

Rowan gives it a name that night, and it is the only piece of doctrine in the Second Ring that is not a rule.

He says: eleven seconds.

He says that below four seconds it is ordinary and produces nothing. That between four and eight one of them will laugh or speak or find something on a wall, because every reflex in this city is built to break it there. That past eight, if neither breaks it, something happens that has no name in English.

And that at around eleven the person being looked at goes down.

Not always physically. But something opens in them that was welded shut, and it cannot be produced by any other means. Not by drink. Not by anything anybody has swallowed or smoked or been prescribed. Not by being told you are loved, which is a sentence, and which arrives in language, and language is the compromised channel.

Eleven seconds of another person's undivided attention, delivered by somebody who is not going to leave.

You count it out afterward on the stairs with Yun, facing each other, both slightly embarrassed, and at six seconds she starts to laugh and stops, and at nine you feel it come up your spine like cold water, and neither of you gets to eleven.

Everything in this organisation is a delivery mechanism for eleven seconds. The Standing is eleven seconds at the end of three days. The Vigil is eleven seconds held for nine hours. The Telling is eleven seconds with the reaction removed. The washing is four minutes of a man not looking at you at all, which is the same drug by the opposite route, and you will not work that out for years.

It is free. There is an unlimited supply of it in this city and almost nobody has had any since childhood, and Rowan Peale is the only person alive who has understood that this is a distribution problem.

NOBODY ARRIVES ALONE

Your second is Deb.

She is fifty-one and she drives a taxi and she has a laugh you can hear through a wall, and she has been in the Second Ring for four years, and you will be paired with her for eleven months and you will never once ask her what brought her.

That is Rule Nine, which arrives later, but the practice is already there before the rule. You do not ask. If they want you to know they will tell you at four in the morning in a car outside somebody's flat, and you will not react, and neither of you will refer to it again.

Deb tells you at four in the morning outside a flat in the Draw.

She had a son. He was twenty-two. He was in a room with the door shut for two days and she was in the house, downstairs, and she thought he was sleeping it off.

She tells it in ninety seconds, flat, without stopping, the way you tell a thing you have told four times in your life and have got very economical about.

You do not say you are sorry.

You do not say anything. You look at her and you do not look past her shoulder for the entire ninety seconds and then for eleven seconds afterward, because by then you have the eighth rule, and then she says, "Right," and starts the engine.

This is the best friendship of your adult life. You will not see her socially. You do not know her surname for seven months. You have never been to her home.

You would go anywhere for her at four in the morning, and she knows it, and that is the whole architecture and it is enough.

ROWAN

He does not preach. That is what people expect and it is wrong.

He reads for forty seconds, says one sentence, closes the book. He never raises his voice. In four years of hearings nobody has ever

heard him raise his voice, and the effect of this is that everyone in the room leans forward, permanently, at all times.

He washes the feet of every intake. He has done it now, by his own count in the ledger, one thousand four hundred and eleven times.

You learn the story in pieces, over months, from people who were there.

He was twenty-four in the Week. He rang the municipal line about a neighbour, an old woman on the ground floor, and he was on hold for ninety-one minutes and forty seconds, and when a person finally answered she said she could not tell him when anybody would come. She was not being unkind. There was nobody to send.

The unit came six and a half hours later. The woman lived. She died fourteen months afterward of something else entirely.

At half five in the morning, walking, he put a paving stone through a pharmacy window on Kelder Street.

And a man across the street stopped and looked at him.

That is the founding event of the Second Ring and Rowan Peale has told it exactly once, at a hearing, in eleven sentences, and never since.

What he does not say — and what you will not understand for another year — is which part of it he is still chasing. Everyone in Room Four assumes it is the woman on the ground floor.

It is the man across the street.

ATTENDANCE 0390

There is a good one and you should have it, because if you only get the bad ones you will think these people were mad from the start and they were not.

A woman rings at nine on a Sunday morning, which is unusual — Sunday mornings are quiet. She is thirty-eight and she has a daughter of nine with a condition, and the daughter has a hospital appointment on Tuesday that has been eleven months coming, and the transport that was booked has been cancelled, and she has no

car and the appointment is at the other hospital, and if she misses it the next one is in the spring.

That is all. That is the entire emergency. A woman needs a lift on Tuesday.

Deb drives them. Obviously Deb drives them; Deb has a taxi.

But that is not the part. The part is that fourteen people from the Second Ring are in the car park of that hospital on Tuesday morning. Not doing anything. Not needed. They stand around in the drizzle in a car park for two hours because a nine-year-old girl who has been told she is a burden four hundred times by four hundred small administrative facts is going to come out of a door and find fourteen adults waiting for her.

She comes out. She sees them. She stops dead.

Her mother says, later, in a message the Register keeps, that the child asked in the car whether all of those people were there for her, and that when she was told yes she did not say anything for eleven minutes.

You were in that car park.

Whatever you think of what these people become, and you will think a great deal, you were in that car park, and it was the best morning of your life, and nothing in the eight years afterward touches it.

HEARING ELEVEN — THE VIGIL

Forty-one in the room.

“He asks them to stay awake with him one hour. He comes back and they are asleep. He asks again. They are asleep again. The third time he stops asking.”

He lets it sit.

“He did not want rescuing. He wanted company, and he was refused it three times by his friends, on the last night.”

He closes the book.

Eight. You stay until they stop talking, and then eleven seconds longer.

Then he says the other thing, and it is the first instruction in the Second Ring that has a shape you do not like.

He says that from this month there will be a rota, and that the rota is for the wards at Bellhaven General and the two hospices and the placements, and that the Second Ring will be sitting with people who are dying alone.

He says: "You do not leave to eat. You do not leave to make a call. If you leave, do not come back that night, because you will have taught them the thing they already know."

Somebody asks how long.

And Rowan says, in the same flat voice he uses for everything: "As long as it takes. That is the entire point of it."

Nobody objects. You look for a face that objects.

Yun says, on the stairs afterward, "That's not a rule. That's a punishment."

And you say — and you will think about having said it for the rest of your life — "It's the same thing, though. Isn't it."

THE VIGIL

His name is Gerald and he is seventy-nine and he has nobody.

That is not a turn of phrase. The ward has established it: no partner, no children, one brother in another country who has been written to twice. There is a nurse called Constance who has been on nights here for thirty-odd years and who tells you, in the corridor, with no particular emotion, that they get four or five like this a month and that she cannot sit with any of them because there are nineteen other patients.

You go in at nine in the evening.

You sit on the right side because his left eye is not working.

He talks for the first two hours. Not about dying. About a job he had in the seventies moving pianos, and how you get a piano round

a turn in a staircase, which involves geometry and a great deal of swearing and, apparently, always three men, never two.

At eleven he stops talking and you stay eleven seconds longer and then he starts again.

At one in the morning he asks you who you are, and you tell him your name, which is the fifth rule, and he says, "No, but who *are* you," and you say, "I'm a person who came," and he thinks about that and says, "All right."

At half two he is frightened and does not say so and you know because his hand moves.

At four he asks you not to leave and you say you will not leave, and this is the eighth rule and the fourth rule at the same time, and it is the only promise you have ever made in your life that you were certain you could keep.

At 06:20 he dies.

You are hungry, and you have needed the toilet for five hours, and your back has gone, and none of that is worth mentioning and you would not mention it.

Constance comes in at twenty to seven and looks at the bed and then at you, and she is the first person outside the Second Ring who has ever looked at you for eleven seconds.

She says: "You stayed."

You say yes.

She says, "Good," and starts doing what she has to do, and you go out into a Tuesday morning and stand in a car park and cannot work out how the world is still ordinary.

MARA

She is nineteen and she is standing in the corridor outside Room Four with a clipboard and a lanyard and she is not afraid of any of you.

Her name is Mara Coyle and she is a Grade Two demand analyst on secondment from the Bellhaven Consolidated Communications

standard, which is the framework that runs every municipal line in eleven cities now. She is top of her cohort. She is here because the Second Ring has begun to distort her figures.

You expect Rowan to be cold with her. He is not. He gives her forty minutes and a chair and does not look past her shoulder once.

She explains it very well. Under the standard, offered volume is not treated as a measure of incidents. It is treated as a measure of *belief*, and the model is calibrated against a stable belief coefficient, and the Second Ring is destabilising it — people in four districts are ringing a number that is not the municipal number, and so the municipal figures show a fall in demand, and a fall in demand is read by the model as an improvement, and resources are reallocated accordingly.

"You're making it worse," she says. "Not on purpose. You're making the instrument read wrong, and the instrument is what everything else is built on."

She is entirely right and everybody in the room knows it.

Rowan says: "How long have you worked there?"

"Two years."

"Did anybody teach you the standard, or did you grow up in it?"

She thinks about it and gives the honest answer, which is why you remember her.

"I grew up in it," she says. "I don't know what it was like before."

THE REGISTER — II

Extract.

0114 — north side, no complaint disclosed, 60M — attended 23:40 — stayed 5h — **eleven weeks since last human contact in dwelling. 0203** — Vessel, mother/child, transport cancelled — attended Tuesday — 14 present — outcome good. **0247** — Gerrard, man locked out, no crisis — attended — outcome good. **0290** — Bellhaven Gen ward 4 — vigil — 9h — patient died 06:20 — **attended to the end. 0301** — Bellhaven Gen ward 4 — vigil — 31h across two — patient discharged. **0344** — hospice, airport rd — vigil

— 4h — patient died — family arrived after. **0361** — placement unit 4 — resident, no visitors on record in 3 years — **attending weekly, ongoing. 0390** — hospital car park — 14 attended — no incident — **see note. 0402** — Kelder, woman on a bridge — two attended — walked her home — outcome good. **0417** — Marrow, man asked us to stop coming — **ceased. Rule four.**

Attendances this month: 209. Refused: 1, at his request. Municipal referrals: 0.

Vigils this month: 31. Hours: 402.

HEARING SIXTEEN — THE LEDGER

Sixty in the room, in a bigger room now, on the Draw.

“A servant is forgiven a debt he could never repay. He goes out, finds a man who owes him a small sum, and takes him by the throat.”

He lets it sit.

“Nothing was wrong with the servant. He simply did not connect the two.”

He closes the book.

Nine. You do not ask what they did.

Ten. You never tell them why you came.

And then the envelopes go round, and this is the first time you understand that this organisation has been building something underneath itself while you were in car parks feeling good.

Inside your envelope is a name and an address.

The name is a man called Aaron Vance, who was your line manager for four years, and who, on a Thursday in October when you told him about your mother’s diagnosis, said *keep me posted*, and looked at his screen, and never once asked again. Not once. Fourteen months, and not once, and you did not hold it against him because you had no right to and because he was busy and because he had a restructure on.

You have never told anybody about that Thursday. Not Deb. Not at any hearing.

You look up.

Rowan is not looking at you. Rowan is not looking at anybody. He is standing at the front with the book closed in his hand while sixty people open envelopes containing the worst small thing that was ever done to them, and the room is completely silent, and you understand two things at once.

The first is that the Register is not a record of who they helped.

The second is that somebody has been listening to every word any of you have ever said.

THE LEDGER

Aaron Vance is fifty-eight now and he has a bad hip and a wife who left and a flat on the south side with a lift that works four days in five.

You go on a Saturday.

The instruction is exact and there is no discretion in it. You find something he needs. You do it. You do not identify yourself as anything. You do not tell him why. You never speak of it to him again.

What he needs, it turns out, is the lift.

You spend eleven Saturdays on it. You write to the managing agent. You get nowhere. You write again. You find out which contractor holds the maintenance and you find out that the contract has a clause and you learn the clause. You go to a meeting of the residents' association where you have no standing whatsoever and you sit through two hours of it and you speak for ninety seconds.

On the eleventh Saturday the lift is fixed.

You never see him. That is the design and you understand it about halfway through. He does not know you exist. He will never know. He will get in a lift on a Monday morning and it will work and he will think nothing at all, because a working lift is not a thing anyone thinks about, and that is precisely the point.

You stand across the road and watch him not think about it.

And what you feel is not what you expected, and it is not forgiveness, and it is not superiority.

It is: *he had a restructure on.*

Eleven Saturdays to arrive at four words. You go home and you ring your mother and she picks up on the second ring, because she always has, because she is seventy-three and she is by the phone.

III. THE JUDGE

THE CITY IMPROVES

In the fourth year the municipal hold time falls to nine seconds.

It is in the newspaper. It is on a poster at Vessel Station: a photograph of a woman in a headset and the words **WE ANSWER**. There is a figure — ninety-four percent within thirty seconds — and it is true. Mara Coyle's cohort did that. The standard did that. Twelve years of reallocation and modelling and eleven cities running the same framework, and it works.

The number of calls to the Second Ring falls by a third in eleven weeks.

Nobody says anything at the hearing. That is the thing you notice. Sixty people in a room on the Draw and nobody says the obvious sentence, which is: *this is good news*.

You go home and you sit on the balcony you never use and you make yourself think it through, properly, in order, like an adult.

If the city answers, we are not needed.

If we are not needed, this ends.

If this ends, I go back to a flat with four hundred contacts in it.

You are ashamed of the third line. You are so ashamed of it that you do not tell Deb, and Deb does not tell you, and later you find out she was on her own balcony that same week doing the same arithmetic, and that sixty people were, all across Bellhaven, alone, at the same hour, each one certain they were the only one.

That is how it happens. Not a decision. Sixty people privately hoping, on a Tuesday, and none of them saying it.

Nobody sabotages anything. Nothing is voted on.

The wanting simply sits there in the room from that month onward, unspoken, like a smell.

HEARING TWENTY-TWO — THE WITNESS

"A rich man dines every day. A beggar lies at his gate covered in sores. When both are dead, a chasm is fixed between them that cannot be crossed."

He lets it sit.

"He never struck him. He went past him twice a day for years."

He closes the book.

Eleven. When you are told to witness, you do not intervene.

There is a noise in the room. An actual noise this time, voices, and Rowan waits it out without any change in his face at all.

Then he explains, and the explanation is the most reasonable thing you have ever heard.

He says: the city answers in nine seconds now, and everyone in this room has begun to believe it, and belief is the thing that killed forty-one thousand two hundred calls in a week eleven years ago. He says the Register holds four hundred addresses where somebody rang the municipal line more than three times in a month and nothing came. He says those addresses are in the same city as the poster at Vessel Station.

He says: "You have all started to think it is fixed. I am going to show you that it is not."

Somebody says: then let us go in.

And Rowan says: "If you go in, you will have seen a thing you prevented. That teaches you nothing. I need you to see the thing itself."

Nobody has an answer to that. You do not have an answer to that. You have turned it over for eight years and you still do not have an answer to it, and that is the honest position, and anybody who tells you they would have had one on the night is lying.

Twelve people leave the organisation that week.

You are not one of them.

THE WITNESS

You are given an address on the north side and a time and two instructions.

Observe. Do not intervene.

The flat is on the second floor of a low block off the Draw. The woman who lives there is sixty-six. The Register has her: four calls to the municipal line in five weeks, three about a smell of gas that was investigated and found to be a drain, one about a fall she recovered from herself. On the standard's model she is a repeat contact and repeat contact reduces weighting.

You are across the road in a doorway with Yun. It is twenty past eight in the evening. You have a flask.

It is boring for a long time. Nobody tells you that. Two hours of a lit window, a television going, a woman moving past it occasionally.

At 22:41 the television stops.

At 22:44 a lamp goes over. You see it go — the light in the room swings and settles at a wrong angle and stays there.

At 22:46 you hear her.

Not words. It is not words for the first hour. It is a sound a person makes when they have gone down and cannot get up and have not yet accepted the situation, and it is not loud, and the window is shut, and you would not hear it at all if you had not been standing in a doorway for two hours specifically listening.

Yun has her phone in her hand. She is not doing anything with it. She is holding it the way you hold something you have been told not to use.

At 23:30 the woman starts saying "hello."

That is the part. She is not calling for help. She is saying *hello*, into a room, at intervals, in the tone you use when you think you have heard someone at the door — and each time she says it she waits, and the waiting is the worst sound you will ever hear in your life, because you can hear her deciding each time that she has been mistaken.

At 00:15 a light goes on in the flat above hers. It goes off nine minutes later.

At 01:40 a man walks down the pavement directly beneath her window with a takeaway bag and does not break stride.

At 02:20 she stops saying hello.

At 03:00 Yun sits down on the step and puts her hands over her ears and you do not touch her because there is a rule about that too by now.

At 04:11 you are both still there.

At 07:50 a neighbour going to work notices the lamp at the wrong angle through the window and goes and knocks, and then knocks harder, and then rings the municipal line and gets an answer in eleven seconds, and a unit is there in nineteen minutes, and the woman is alive.

She is alive. Nine hours on a floor and a broken hip and she is alive and she goes home in six weeks.

That is the fact and the organisation holds it up like a receipt.

We did not do that. The city did that. We watched.

AFTER THE WITNESS

Eleven of you were on witness duty that month at eleven addresses.

Two of the eleven addresses ended differently and there is a page in the Register with those two on it and the page is not read out.

Here is what the Witness does to a person, and you can have it plainly, because you have had eight years to work it out.

It does not make you cruel. That is the thing everybody gets wrong afterward.

It removes the last piece of you that believes somebody else will do it.

Before the Witness, you helped people because it was good. After the Witness you help people because you have stood in a doorway and heard exactly what happens when nobody comes, and you cannot go back, and every single person you walk past for the rest of your life is a lamp at a wrong angle in a lit window.

You become better at the work. Measurably. Everyone does. Attendance times fall by a third across the whole organisation in the quarter after the first witness rota.

That is why it is not stopped.

It works.

THE REGISTER — III

Extract.

0611 — witness, north side, 66F — 8h observed — municipal attended 08:09 following third-party call — **outcome: survived.**

0612 — witness, Ansel Row, 41M — 6h observed — no municipal call made by any party — **outcome: attended by us at 06:00, rule eleven expired.** **0615** — witness, Gerrard — subject did not return to address — **void.** **0618** — witness, the Draw, 74M — 11h — **see sealed page.** **0619** — witness, Kelder — **see sealed page.**

0620-0644 — attendances, ordinary — all outcomes good. **0651** — vigil, Bellhaven Gen — 14h — patient died 04:11 — attended to the end. **0666** — Marrow, woman rang and asked whether we were the ones from the wall — **attended. Outcome good.**

Attendances this quarter: 1,204. Refused: 0. Witness duties: 11.

Interventions: 0. Corroborants: 611.

THE SEALED PAGE

There is a page in the Register that is not read out at hearings.

You see it once, covering the ledger for a fortnight in the sixth year while Tobias has his knee done. It is not sealed in any physical way — no envelope, no lock. It is simply a page that is not read out, which in this organisation is the strongest form of sealing there is.

Two entries.

0618 — witness, the Draw, 74M, eleven hours observed. Municipal attended 09:20 following third-party call. Outcome: died in hospital, day four.

0619 — witness, Kelder, 52F, six hours observed. No municipal call made by any party. Attended by us at 06:00 on expiry of rule eleven. Outcome: died at scene, time of death estimated 02:00.

Underneath, in the same hand as the rest of the ledger, four lines of arithmetic.

Somebody has calculated what would have happened if the corroborants on duty had gone in. For 0618 the answer is honest and it is *no material difference* — he had been on the floor for some hours before the observation began.

For 0619 there is no answer. There are two blanks where the times should be, and then, in the margin, in the same flat hand, three words that are not a finding and not a defence and not an apology:

Estimated. Not established.

You close the book. You put it back in the drawer in Room Four. You cover the ledger for another eleven days and you do not open that page again and you do not mention it to anybody for two years.

And that is the thing about the Second Ring that took you longest to understand, and which nobody outside will ever accept:

Nobody hid it from you. It was in the book. It was in the drawer, in an unlocked room, in a building with an open door, in a ledger that any of nine hundred people could have read on any afternoon.

It was not hidden. It was just not read out.

NADINE

She is sixty-one and she gives a paper at a conference in a hotel on Vessel Street and you go, because you are curious, and because there is a buffet.

Nadine Roche is the standard. Not the author of it — she says this in the first minute, with visible irritation, as though she has said it four hundred times. She was a dispatch supervisor who wrote one paragraph in an appendix eleven years ago, and other people built a framework on it and named a coefficient after her.

Her paper is called *Belief as an Input*. Two hundred people applaud it. About forty of them are in the Second Ring and she does not know that.

At the end somebody asks about the informal networks.

She says: "They're a symptom. You don't treat a symptom by regulating it. You treat what's producing it."

Somebody asks what is producing it.

And Nadine Roche stands at a lectern in a hotel on Vessel Street and says, without any particular emphasis: "Forty years of us being extremely good at answering the phone and extremely bad at going."

Nobody writes it down. You look around the room and nobody is writing it down.

Rowan is at the back, by the door, in the grey work coat, and he has been there the whole time.

HEARING TWENTY-NINE — THE JUDGE

"A widow comes to a judge who fears neither God nor man. She comes back, and back. In the end he grants it, because she is wearing him out."

He lets it sit.

"The judge did not become just. He became tired."

He closes the book.

And this is the hearing where it turns, and you should understand that nobody in that room felt it turn.

Twelve. You return. You return until it is granted.

Thirteen. You do not become angry. Anger is a thing they can answer.

Fourteen. You wear the mask when you are counted. Never when you are alone.

The masks come out of boxes at the back. Nobody has to be told what they are. There were one point four million of them handed out free at counters during the Week, three per household, and every adult in Bellhaven over thirty has one in a drawer, and the sight of six hundred of them coming out of cardboard in a room on the Draw is the first moment you are frightened of your own organisation.

The fourteenth rule is the cleverest sentence anybody in this book ever says.

Wear it when you are counted. Not when you act. Not when you hide. When you are **counted** — in a crowd, in a queue, in a photograph, at a door in numbers. So that the thing the city sees is never a person with a grievance. It is a quantity.

And never when you are alone, because a masked person alone is a criminal, and a masked person in six hundreds is a statistic, and statistics are the only language the standard reads.

You put yours on for the first time at a housing office on Marrow Street with two hundred others, standing in the public queue, silently, holding numbered tickets, taking every appointment slot available in the borough for one entire day, entirely lawfully, and refusing nothing, and requesting nothing, and going home at five.

THE COUNTING

The action takes eleven weeks to prepare and is over by five in the afternoon.

The borough housing office on Marrow Street releases appointment slots online at midnight, twenty-eight days in advance. Fifty-one a day. Any resident may book one, no reason required, and a booking may not be cancelled by the office. Every word of that is public, on a laminated notice in the entrance.

Two hundred corroborants who are residents of the borough book every slot for a Tuesday. It takes ninety seconds. On the Tuesday they attend. All of them. On time.

They are masked, because they are being counted. They queue. They take their ticket. They sit in the plastic chairs. When their number is called they go to the window and they give their name, correctly, and they use the officer's name, which is on the badge, and then they say nothing at all.

Not one of them makes a complaint. Not one requests anything. Not one raises their voice, and when the four minutes are up they thank the officer and stand and go.

Two hundred people, fifty-one slots, four minutes each, from half eight until five.

The office cannot close. There are no grounds. The people are residents, the bookings are valid, the conduct is impeccable. Two officers go home ill by two o'clock and one does not come back to that job at all.

What the Second Ring has done, precisely, is give the borough housing office one day of exactly what it gives Bellhaven every other day of the year: a full schedule, correct procedure, and nothing whatsoever happening.

There is a photograph of it in the paper and it is the photograph that makes the organisation national. You are in the third row. You cannot pick yourself out. Nobody can. That is what the fourteenth rule is for.

THE RETURN

Rule Twelve has a name inside the organisation and the name is **the Widow**, and it is used as a verb.

They widowed him for nine months.

It works like this. A person in the city has refused something they have the power to grant. The Second Ring does not threaten them, does not picket them, does not contact their employer, does not name them publicly, does not follow them, and does not raise its voice — Rule Thirteen, and Rule Thirteen is enforced far more strictly than most.

What it does is return.

A corroborant attends the counter and makes the request. Politely, correctly, with the name given and the officer's used. It is refused. They thank them and leave. The next day a different corroborant makes the identical request. Then another.

Every working day, for as long as it takes. Never the same face twice, always the same eleven words, always thanked, always leaving. There is no offence anywhere in it. Each individual is a member of the public making a lawful enquiry once.

The record holder is a planning officer on Vessel Street who was returned to for four hundred and eleven consecutive working days

over an enforcement notice on a damp flat, and who granted it in the end, and who told a journalist afterward the only sentence anybody needs about the whole of the Second Ring:

“They were never rude to me. Not one of them, not once. I’d have coped with rude.”

Rowan reads the widow and the judge once, in year four, and never again, and the sentence he gives after it is the only reading anybody in the organisation can quote from memory eleven years later.

The judge did not become just. He became tired.

Nobody in that room hears it as a warning. It is a warning. He is telling six hundred people exactly what they are going to build and exactly what it will produce, in nine words, and they take it as a method.

THE FIRST WITHHOLDING

It is proposed at Hearing Thirty-One and it is not called a withholding. It is called **a fast**.

One week. The Second Ring does not answer.

The reasoning is given in four sentences and they are all true. The city’s figures show demand falling in four districts. The standard reads falling demand as improvement and reallocates. If the Second Ring keeps absorbing that demand invisibly, the districts will be stripped, permanently, and the people in them will be worse off in three years than if the Second Ring had never existed at all.

So: one week of not answering. The calls go back to the municipal line where they will be counted, the figures correct themselves, the resource follows, and everybody is better off.

It is impeccable. You can hold it up to the light and there is nothing wrong with it anywhere.

Seventeen. You do not answer this week.

Eighteen. You do not explain the week to anyone.

Rule eighteen is the one you should look at, and nobody looks at it, including you.

Because there is a version of the fast that is honest, and it is very easy, and it takes one sentence: *for one week we will not be answering, please use the municipal number, we are sorry.*

That version is not proposed. That version is not even considered, and the reason is arithmetic that nobody in that room says out loud: a warned fast produces no figures. If people know, they call the municipal line early, calmly, and the numbers show a managed transition.

If they do not know, they call the Second Ring first, and get nothing, and *then* call the city, late, and frightened, and in numbers.

The second version produces a spike.

A spike is data.

Nobody says this. Not Rowan, not anybody. Six hundred people sit in a room on the Draw and vote unanimously for the version that hurts, and every single one of them believes they voted for the version that works.

ATTENDANCE 0000

The phone rings at 02:40 on the third night of the fast and you are holding it and you are awake.

It rings twice.

You have answered on the second ring one thousand and eleven times. Your hand knows how to do it without you.

You let it go to three.

Four. Five. Six.

There is no voicemail. There has never been a voicemail; a voicemail is a thing that logs. So it just rings, in a flat on the south side, into a room where a man of thirty-five is sitting on the edge of a bed with a phone in his hand and both feet on the floor.

Eleven rings.

Then it stops.

You sit there for a while. Then you write in the notebook you have kept since the second year, which is not the Register and which nobody knows about, the following line and nothing else:

02:40. Eleven rings. I don't know who that was.

You will never know who that was.

That is the sentence that finishes you, eventually, four years later, and it is not the Witness and it is not what happens to Yun. It is a phone ringing eleven times in a room where somebody was awake and able and had a coat by the door.

NO ETA

The mark is on eleven thousand walls by the fifth year.

Two words in white, always the same hand-shape, never with the number under it any more because the number does not need advertising now.

NO ETA

The city cannot decide what it is. A councillor wants it treated as criminal damage with an aggravating factor. A woman at the university writes that it is not a threat but a *complaint* — that it is lifted verbatim off a sign that hung in a pharmacy window during the Week, and that a city ought to be interested in the fact that its young people are spraying a customer-service phrase on underpasses.

Both readings are correct. That is why it works.

It goes on the housing office on Marrow the morning after two hundred masks sat in it all day. It goes on a hospital corridor at hip height beside a row of trolleys. It goes on a shutter, and on a school, and — this is the one that gets in the papers — in eleven-inch letters across the front of the Bellhaven Consolidated Communications building on the morning the ninety-four percent figure is announced.

Rowan is asked at a hearing whether the Second Ring is responsible.

He says: "No."

Which is true. Nobody in the Second Ring has ever been instructed to paint anything.

It is simply that six hundred people know a phrase and four thousand people know six hundred people.

HEARING THIRTY-FOUR — THE PRICE

"A husband and wife sell a field and keep back part of the money. Peter asks him about it. He falls down dead. Three hours later she comes in, not knowing, and is asked the same question."

He lets it sit.

"Nobody laid a hand on either of them."

He closes the book.

Fifteen. You keep back nothing.

Sixteen. You do not ask what happened to those who kept back.

The room recites sixteen rules. It takes fifty-one seconds now. When you joined it took eleven.

Afterward, on the stairs, Yun says: "Which one of us is that for?"

You say you do not know.

She says: "He read it *at* somebody."

And you say — and this is the last conversation you have with Yun for two years — "You always think it's *at* somebody."

THE KEEPING BACK

It is Deb.

During the fast, on the fourth night, Deb picked somebody up in her taxi and took them to Bellhaven General and sat with them for three hours.

That is what she kept back. She did the job, during the week of not doing the job, and she did not write it in the Register, and somebody in the car park at the hospital saw her.

Nothing happens to her.

You need to understand what that sentence means in the Second Ring by the fifth year.

Nobody confronts her. There is no hearing about it, no vote, no expulsion, no word spoken to her by anyone. Her name is not read out. She is not asked for the mask back.

She comes to the hearing on the Tuesday and stands in the room and nobody looks at her.

Not coldly. That is the thing. There is no hostility in the room at all, no whispering, no glare — six hundred people simply do not look at her, and when she speaks the conversation continues in a way that leaves her sentence lying on the floor, and when she puts her hand up she is not seen.

She comes back on the Thursday.

She comes back the Tuesday after that.

The fourth week she stands in the corridor outside instead, and the fifth week she stands across the road on the pavement opposite, in the rain, in a coat, and by then you have all understood what is being done and not one of you has said a word about it, including you, because Rule Sixteen is a rule and because you have all been on that pavement yourselves for three days and you know exactly, precisely, to the hour, what it does.

They put her back on the Standing. That is the entire punishment. They put a fifty-five-year-old woman who has attended two thousand calls back outside the door she once stood outside, and they wait.

On the ninth week she stops coming.

You see her twice more in your life, both times in traffic, and both times she is driving, and both times you do not put your hand up.

IV. THE SWORD

THE LONG WEEK

The second fast is a month.

It is proposed with the same four sentences and passed with the same unanimity and by now nobody in the room can remember a proposal that was not passed. That is not a scandal. Nobody is silencing anybody. It is simply that the people who would have objected are on a pavement somewhere, or are Deb, and the room has become a room in which the objection does not occur.

Twenty-nine days.

The figures do exactly what the reasoning said they would. Municipal demand in the four northern districts rises by nineteen percent, the reallocation follows on schedule, and two additional units are permanently based north of the Draw for the first time in fourteen years.

That is real. Those units are still there, and every person they will ever attend is alive because six hundred masked adults sat in their flats for a month with their phones on the table, not answering.

The Register for that month is four pages of nothing.

And in the same month, in the same city, the following also happened, and the Second Ring never established which of them would have called it and which would not, because that is not a thing that can be established, which is precisely why nobody has ever been able to argue with the reasoning:

A man in Gerrard was on a floor for two days.

A woman on the airport road walked eleven miles.

Somebody on Ansel Row rang a number that rang eleven times.

You do not know that these are connected to you. You will never know. Nobody will ever know, and there is no instrument that could find out, and the absence of the instrument is not an accident either — it is the same absence the whole trilogy of this city has been built on, and by the fifth year the Second Ring is standing in it and using it as cover.

HEARING FORTY-ONE — THE SWORD

Nine hundred in a hall on the Draw that used to be a printing works.

Rowan opens the book.

“Do not think I came to bring peace. I came to bring a sword. To set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother.”

He closes the book.

That is all. No sentence after it. In forty-one hearings across five years he has never once failed to give the one line, and tonight he gives nothing, and nine hundred people wait eleven seconds in a converted printing works for a sentence that does not come.

It is the loudest thing he ever does.

Then the recitation, and it takes a minute and fifty-one seconds now:

One. You answer on the second ring. Two. You never say it has been logged. Three. You never say “not long now.” Four. You go, or you say you will not go. There is no third answer. Five. You give your name. You use theirs. Six. Nobody arrives alone. Seven. You do not look past their shoulder. Eight. You stay until they stop talking, and then eleven seconds longer. Nine. You do not ask what they did. Ten. You never tell them why you came. Eleven. When you are told to witness, you do not intervene. Twelve. You return. You return until it is granted. Thirteen. You do not become angry. Anger is a thing they can answer. Fourteen. You wear the mask when you are counted. Never when you are alone. Fifteen. You keep back nothing. Sixteen. You do not ask what happened to those who kept back. Seventeen. You do not answer this week. Eighteen. You do not explain the week to anyone. Nineteen. A door is not a wall. Wait at it. Twenty. You do not attend an address twice. Twenty-one. If you are asked whether we exist, you say yes. Twenty-two. You do not say the First Ring’s name. Twenty-three. There is no third answer.

Somewhere around fifteen you notice that you are saying it and not hearing it.

That is what a liturgy is for. Nobody hid anything from you. Twenty-three sentences were read out to you in a room, one at a time, over five years, each one arriving alone and reasonable, and you agreed to every single one on the night, and there was never a night on which you were asked to agree to all of them at once.

THE ATTENDANCE THAT DOESN'T GO

The number rings at 21:04 and you answer on the second ring and it is a young woman and she is frightened and it is a real one, a proper one, the kind you would have driven across the city for in the second year.

You take the address.

Then you check it against the sheet, because Rule Twenty says you do not attend an address twice, and the address is on the sheet, and it is on the sheet because somebody attended it fourteen months ago.

You explain this. You are very kind about it. You use her name, because that is the fifth rule, and you say it three times in ninety seconds, and she says, "But you came before," and you say, "I know."

And you do not say it has been logged.

And you do not say not long now.

And you go, or you say you will not go, and there is no third answer, so you say the second one, clearly, so that she is not left waiting for somebody who is not coming, because that is the rule and the rule is *for her*.

You put the phone down and you sit in your kitchen.

Rule Twenty exists for an excellent reason. It was proposed in the fourth year because six hundred people were quietly becoming the permanent social care system for about eleven hundred households and burning out at a rate the organisation could not sustain, and

the reasoning was four sentences long and you cannot fault a word of it.

You look at your coat on the back of the door.

You are thirty-six years old. You have attended two thousand two hundred calls. You have sat with fourteen people while they died. You have a mask in a drawer and twenty-three rules in your mouth and a coat by the door, and a woman on the north side is going to spend tonight on her own because of a sentence about capacity that you voted for.

You do not go.

MARA CALLS

She rings the number herself in the sixth year and you are the one who answers, on the second ring, and she gives her name straight away.

Mara Coyle. Now twenty-five. Grade Six, which means she owns the coefficient.

She does not want help. She wants to meet Rowan, and she has rung the public number to do it because she has understood, correctly, that this organisation cannot decline a call.

He says yes immediately, which surprises everybody. She comes to the hall on the Draw with no lanyard and no clipboard, and she is thirty minutes with him, and the door is open, and about forty people hear it.

She says: "I've read the Register."

He says: "How."

"People leave," she says. "People always leave. Twelve of them came to me."

She tells him she is not going to prosecute anybody, that there is nothing to prosecute, that eleven lawyers have looked at eight years of the Second Ring and found not one indictable act, and that this is the most frightening document she has ever read for exactly that reason.

Then she asks the question, and it is the question, and nobody in the organisation has ever put it to him because Rule Twenty-Two exists.

She says: "What are you actually asking the city for?"

And Rowan Peale, who has answered every question anybody has ever put to him in one flat sentence, does not answer this one.

COYLE

The old man comes to the hall on his own, on a Thursday, in the rain.

He is sixty-three and heavy now and he stands inside the door of a converted printing works with his coat over his arm and asks to speak to whoever is in charge, and somebody laughs, and he waits it out with the patience of a man who has waited out four hundred queues.

He says his name is Martin Coyle.

He worked twenty years at a window in a benefits hall on Kelder Street and he does not say the rest of it and there is no reason anybody in that room should know the rest of it.

He says: "You've got two hundred people outside my daughter's flat."

Nobody has told him that this is called the Standing. He works it out in about forty seconds from what he can see, which is: nobody speaking, nobody blocking the door, nobody on her property, nobody committing any offence whatsoever, and a young woman inside who has not slept.

And then he says the thing.

He says: "I know exactly what you're doing. I did it to a woman for ninety-eight days once, on my own, from behind a pane of glass, and I never broke a single rule either, and every hour of it was defensible in writing."

Rowan says: "Then you know we're not doing anything to her."

"I do know that," Coyle says. "That's how I know what it is."

He looks around the hall. He looks at the masks on the table and at the ledger book and at nine hundred coats on nine hundred hooks.

"You're not making her heard," he says. "You're making her wait."

THE STANDING, OUTSIDE HER DOOR

It was proposed as a gift. That is the part nobody afterward will believe, and it is true, and it is the truest thing in this book.

The proposal at Hearing Forty-Three is that the Second Ring will offer the Standing to Mara Coyle. Not against her. *For* her. Every corroborant in that hall received it and every one of them describes it as the hour their life changed — three days outside a door, and then a stranger says your whole name, and you go down on a wet pavement and something in you is repaired that nothing else has ever reached.

She has never had it. She grew up inside the standard. She said so herself, in Room Four, at nineteen: *I don't know what it was like before.*

So: three days. Silent. Lawful. On the public pavement. Nobody speaks, nobody knocks, nobody obstructs, nobody films. And on the third day, one of them says her name, and she comes down, and she is finally, for the first time in her life, *attended*.

It passes unanimously.

Two hundred go on the first night. Four hundred on the second.

Masks, because rule fourteen — worn when you are counted, and they are being counted, and that is the entire nature of the act.

Nobody does anything to her.

That is the whole technique and it always was. Nobody does anything to her for sixty-one hours, on a pavement, in the rain, outside a ground-floor flat on the south side, in complete silence, in numbers.

On the second night Rowan comes out and calls it off.

He does. He stands in the road in the grey work coat and says, in the flat voice, that it is finished and that everybody should go home.

Four hundred go home.

Two hundred stay.

You look for Yun and you find her about eleven feet from the window, and she has her mask on, and she does not turn her head.

THE THIRD DAY

She comes out at 06:20 on the third morning.

She has not slept. She is twenty-five years old and she is in a coat over pyjamas and there are two hundred masked adults standing on the pavement of a residential street in the rain doing nothing at all.

She does not shout at them. Everybody expected shouting.

She walks down the path and stops at the gate and looks along the front rank, slowly, face to face, eleven seconds each, and the rank does not move because there is no rule for this.

And then she starts saying names.

Full names. First and last, correctly pronounced, in a flat voice with nothing added to them.

She has read the Register. Twelve people who left brought it to her and she has spent two years on it, and she knows nine hundred names, and she stands at a gate in the rain and gives them the only thing the Second Ring has ever had to give.

The eleventh name is Yun's.

Yun takes the mask off.

She takes it off because that is Rule Fourteen — you wear it when you are counted, never when you are alone, and a woman has just said your whole name in the street, and you are not a quantity any more, and the rule requires it.

It goes down the rank like a fuse.

By 07:10 there is nobody on that pavement, and nothing has happened, and no offence has been committed, and no report is filed, and the incident does not appear anywhere in any municipal record in the city of Bellhaven, because there is no field for two hundred people standing.

WHAT MARA DOES

She does not shut it down. There is nothing to shut down.

She writes a paragraph.

It goes into the revision of the standard the following spring, in the section on demand modelling, and it is eleven lines long, and it says that informal attendance networks arise reliably in districts where institutional response is timely but non-attending, that they should be understood as a demand signal rather than an anomaly, and that the coefficient should be adjusted to treat their formation as an early indicator.

The revision is adopted in eleven cities.

There is a coefficient named after Nadine Roche and now there is a sub-clause named after Mara Coyle, and demand analysts in their second year learn it as *the Coyle adjustment*, and by the time those analysts are forty nobody will remember that it came from a night on a pavement.

The Second Ring is now an input.

Understand what has happened, because it is the only thing that happens in this book that could not have been prevented at any point by anybody.

They wanted to be counted. They said so. Rule fourteen, in six words.

They are counted now. They are a term in an equation used to allocate ambulances, and it works, and it has almost certainly saved more people than every attendance in the Register put together.

And there is not one person in that equation. There is a number, and the number is rising, and rising numbers get resource, and resource is good.

Nobody ever says their names.

THE WASHING

He is still doing it.

Eight years, one thousand four hundred and eleven at the last count you saw and it is over two thousand now, and the man in the grey work coat comes into Room Four with a plastic basin and a jug and a towel over his shoulder and kneels down in front of somebody who has just spent three days on a pavement.

It has not changed by one detail.

The water is the right temperature, which means he ran the tap and tested it with his wrist before they came in. He does not look up. He does not speak. Four minutes.

And you stand at the back of that room in the eighth year, after the fasts and the Witness and the sealed page and Deb on a pavement in the ninth week, and you watch a man wash the feet of a frightened stranger with total attention, and you cannot make it fit with anything, and you never will.

That is not hypocrisy. You have to understand that or you have understood nothing.

He means it. He has always meant it. Every one of those two thousand washings was real, and so was every attendance, and so were fourteen people in a car park in the drizzle, and so was the sound a woman made on the floor of a flat off the Draw at 23:30 while two of us stood in a doorway with a flask and did not move.

All of it was true at the same time.

That is not a paradox. That is just what a person is, and this whole city has spent eleven years building instruments that cannot read it.

THE SECOND RING

The number rings in the eighth year at 03:40 and Rowan answers it himself, on the second ring, because he still takes a shift like everybody else.

He gives his name.

It is a woman on the south side and she is frightened and she is calling about the people outside her neighbour's door.

She says there are about forty of them. She says they have been there since yesterday morning and they are not doing anything, they are just standing, in the masks, and she has rung the municipal line and got an answer in nine seconds and been told, correctly, that no offence is being committed and that there is no unit to send for something that is not an offence.

She says: "I don't know who else to call."

She has rung the Second Ring to report the Second Ring.

There is a silence on the line.

You are not in the room and you get this from the ledger and from a man called Tobias who was, and Tobias says the silence went on for about eleven seconds.

Then Rowan Peale says his name again, and hers, and takes the address, and says the fourth rule, out loud, the way you say it to a caller — *I'll come, or I'll tell you I won't.*

And then he says: "I'll come."

THE REGISTER — V

Final extract.

2,204 — south side, forty persons standing, no offence — **attended by First Ring, alone. Rule six waived. 2,205** — no entry. **2,206** — no entry. **2,207** — no entry.

Attendances this month: 4. Corroborants: unknown. Vigils: 0.

The ledger book was found in Room Four. There is no further writing in it. The remaining pages are ruled and blank, and there are one hundred and eleven of them.

RULE TWENTY-FOUR

You are forty now and you work in logistics again and you have a flat with a balcony you use sometimes.

You have not had eleven seconds in four years. You know exactly how long it has been. Everybody who came out knows exactly how long it has been, and that is the withdrawal, and no doctor in Bellhaven has a name for it because the thing you are withdrawing from is other people looking at your face.

You did not leave. Nobody leaves. The Second Ring did not disband, was never proscribed, was never charged with anything, and is not gone — you see the mark on a wall about once a month and there is a number under it again in some districts and you have never once dialled it.

But you kept the notebook, which was never the Register, and last year you wrote the last rule in it, because somebody has to write it down and because there are one hundred and eleven blank pages in a book in a room with no window and no clock and nobody is going to fill them.

It is the only rule that was never read out at a hearing. It arrived the way all of them arrived, which is that nobody proposed it and everybody was already obeying it.

Twenty-four. You answer on the second ring.

That is rule one. Look at it. It is exactly rule one, word for word, and by the eighth year it had come to mean the opposite of what it meant in Room Four with your feet still damp, and not one of the nine hundred of us noticed the day it turned over, and there was no day.

They put it up on the wall outside the housing office on Marrow Street some time last winter, under the two words, in the same white paint.

Nobody has painted over it. Nobody has reported it.

It is not an offence, and there is no field for it, and there is nothing to send.

THE TELLING — FOURTH ATTEMPT

I came back.

That is the part I have not told you, and I have been not telling you for a very long time now, and you have been extremely patient about it.

I came back to Room Four in the eleventh year, and a man of forty-six in a grey work coat came in with a plastic basin and a jug and a towel over his shoulder, and knelt down in front of me, and the water was the right temperature, which means he ran the tap and tested it with his wrist before I came in.

He did not look up. He did not say anything. Four minutes.

He does it for anyone who comes back. He always said he would. He has never once broken a rule in his life and neither have I, and that is the thing, that is the actual whole of it, that is what I have taken sixty-nine pages to get to the edge of and cannot say in fewer words than this:

The worst thing I have ever done, I did correctly.

Entry 0619. Kelder. Fifty-two years old, female. Six hours observed. I was the one in the doorway. It was February and I had a flask and I heard the lamp go over at 21:10 and I heard her at 21:14 and I heard her stop at ten to two, and rule eleven expires at 06:00, and I went in at 06:00, and every single second of that was defensible in writing.

I have never said that out loud. Not to Deb, not at any hearing, not to my mother, not in eleven years.

This is my fourth attempt.

The first time I got eleven words in and your eyebrow went and I had to begin again, and I was furious, and the fury was the point.

The second time I got as far as the flask.

The third time you blinked out of rhythm at *fifty-two years old, female*, which is fair, which everybody does.

This time you did not move at all. You have not moved once. You have sat there and taken the whole of it and your face has not

changed and you did not make the small compassionate noise and you did not tell me it was not my fault and you did not say you would have done the same, and I want you to understand that this is the only kindness anybody has done me since 1983.

So.

Thank you.

There is a plastic basin by the door and the water is still warm and there are one hundred and eleven blank pages in a ledger in the drawer behind you, and no window, and no clock, and eleven seconds is not very long at all once you have had some.

I am not going to move my face.

Now you say yours.

GLOSSARY

FOLIE IMPOSÉE [fo-LEE am-po-ZAY] — French, *imposed madness*. A subtype of shared delusion in the older French psychiatric literature: a dominant personality imposes the belief on a passive one, and the passive one recovers when the two are separated. The author's note says that last clause is the reason for the title, and that it contains the ending.

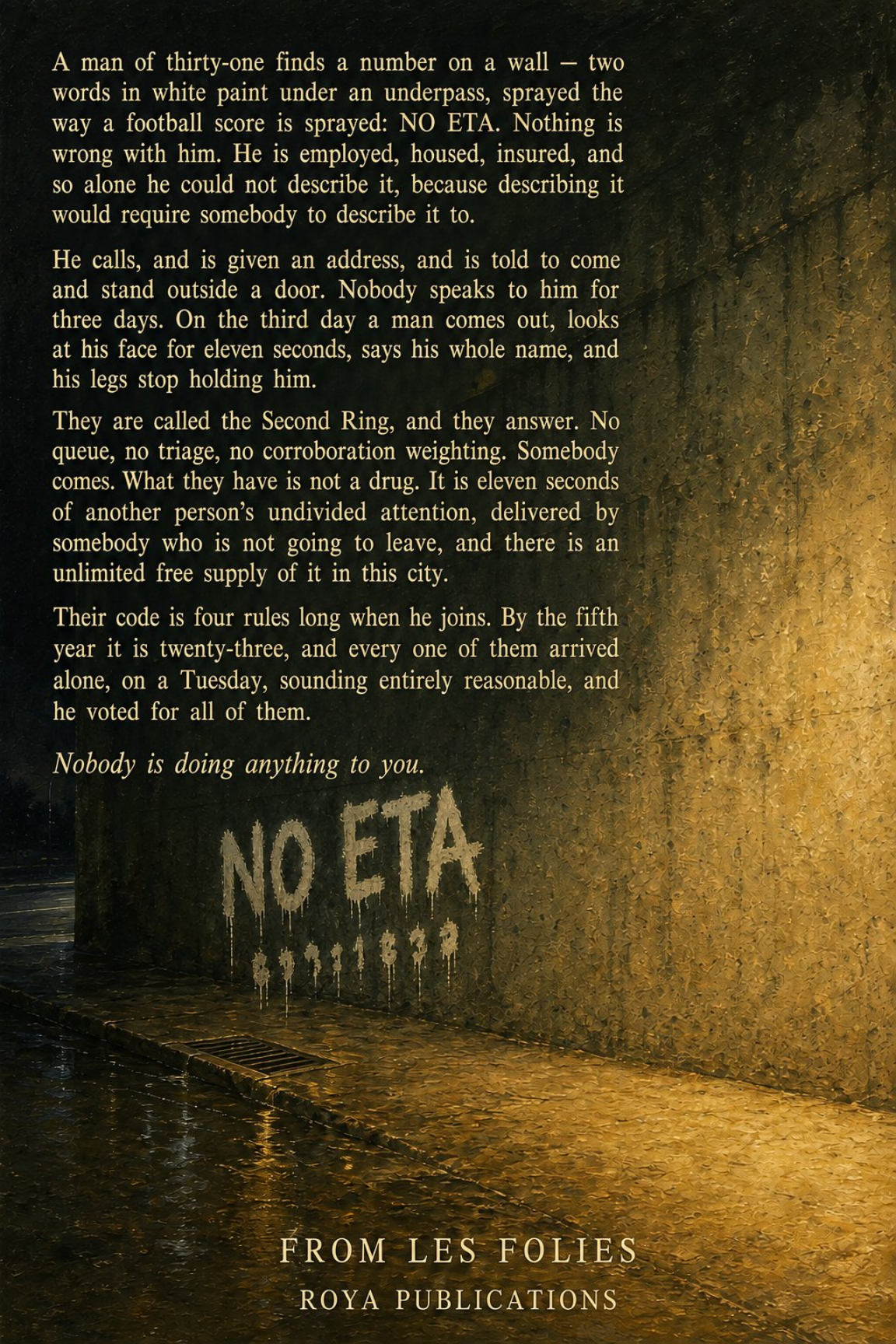
A man of thirty-one finds a number on a wall — two words in white paint under an underpass, sprayed the way a football score is sprayed: NO ETA. Nothing is wrong with him. He is employed, housed, insured, and so alone he could not describe it, because describing it would require somebody to describe it to.

He calls, and is given an address, and is told to come and stand outside a door. Nobody speaks to him for three days. On the third day a man comes out, looks at his face for eleven seconds, says his whole name, and his legs stop holding him.

They are called the Second Ring, and they answer. No queue, no triage, no corroboration weighting. Somebody comes. What they have is not a drug. It is eleven seconds of another person's undivided attention, delivered by somebody who is not going to leave, and there is an unlimited free supply of it in this city.

Their code is four rules long when he joins. By the fifth year it is twenty-three, and every one of them arrived alone, on a Tuesday, sounding entirely reasonable, and he voted for all of them.

Nobody is doing anything to you.



NO ETA
2211833

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