

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 32

THE COMPASSIONATE FARE



CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

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No safety statistic, corporate program, research finding, or technical procedure described herein should be taken as an account of any real undertaking.

04.03 K.H.

11.03 P.L.

18.03 M.R.

27.03 A.S.

03.04 E.T. X

10.04 V.N.

19.04 R.J.

26.04 I.M.

DATE	ROUTE	SEAT	NAME
12.04	HEL-YYZ	14A	LEHTO, A.
13.04	YYZ-HEL	31F	VIRTANEN, P.
14.04	HEL-YYZ	08C	SAARI, E.
17.04	YYZ-HEL	19D	KOSKI, T.
18.04	HEL-YYZ	27A	MÄKI, J.
21.04	YYZ-HEL	12F	LAINÉ, S.
24.04	HEL-YYZ	24C	HEINO, R.
25.04	YYZ-HEL	18A	SALMI, V.
28.04	HEL-YYZ	33D	NIEMI, O.
01.05	YYZ-HEL	16F	AHO, L.
02.05	YYZ-YYZ	09A	KIVI, N.
05.05	YYZ-HEL	22C	HALME, K.
08.05	HEL-YYZ	29A	REITER, M.
09.05	YYZ-HEL	17D	KORPI, L.
12.05	HEL-YYZ	06F	PELTO, I.
15.05	YYZ-HEL	25C	SALO, H.
16.05	HEL-YYZ	11A	RAVTA, U.
19.05	YYZ-HEL	32F	TOIM, A.
22.05	HEL-YYZ	20D	JÄRVI, P.
23.05	YYZ-HEL	07C	KETO, M.
26.05	HEL-YYZ	28A	LUOTO, K.
29.05	YYZ-HEL	15F	HALLA, E.
01.06	HEL-YYZ	34C	SOINI, R.
02.06	YYZ-HEL	10C	VALO, T.
03.06	YYZ-YYZ	23A	ILVES, J.
06.06	YYZ-HEL	05F	KALLIO, S.
09.06	HEL-YYZ	30C	SUVI, N.
12.06	YYZ-HEL	13D	TUOMI, O.
13.06	HEL-YYZ	26F	KOIVU, L.
16.06	YYZ-HEL	21A	AALTO, V.

"or" — disjunctive.
Doing a great deal of work.
Recommend no change.

I hereby make an anatomical gift, to take effect upon my death, of the following: any needed organs, eyes and tissues for the purposes of transplantation, therapy, research or education.
This is a legally binding document of gift under the law of the jurisdiction of my residence. It may not be amended or revoked by any other person after my death, including a member of my family.

Signature _____

Date _____

Witness _____

Crew ID _____

THE LEDGER. Ilse Novak's third logbook, open at a page from two years and four months ago — date, route, seat, name, in the blue ink she buys in boxes of fifty, and on the facing page, in pencil, the ones who said no. Across it, the carrier's donor authorisation card at its true size, blank, with the sentence on its back and the word on in the fourth line; clipped to the card, the note the carrier's counsel appended to the internal file and never printed.

SYNOPSIS

There is a discounted ticket you can buy when somebody dies. It is called the compassionate fare, and to qualify for it you have to prove the death at the desk, in a queue, in front of everyone.

Ilse Novak has worked that queue for twelve years. She is the senior cabin attendant on a small carrier that flies the bereaved in the cabin and their dead in the hold, on the same aircraft, on the same night. Somewhere around the seventh hour, when the lights are down and the air is thin and nobody aboard has been touched in days, she kneels in the aisle beside a chosen passenger and takes their hand and does not let go for forty minutes.

She holds the company record. Eleven hundred and forty signatures. She keeps the names herself, in her own handwriting, because she is proud of it and because she is the sort of woman who believes a record ought to be kept properly.

She has never once asked what happens after the signature. She is about to find out at thirty-eight thousand feet, over black water, with three hours still to run and no way off the aircraft.

A slow, cold novella about grief, air pressure, freight, and the oldest instrument there is.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This one began with a joke I did not want to be making.

Anyone who has flown for a funeral knows that an airport will not permit anything to be as serious as it is. You stand in a queue with a death certificate in a document wallet, waiting to prove your loss to a woman with a lanyard, and she checks it against a booking reference and thanks you and asks whether you would like to add a checked bag. Somebody ahead of you is asking, in complete sincerity, whether ashes count as a liquid. Nobody at the desk knows. It takes four minutes and two telephone calls to resolve. Priority boarding is announced brightly to a gate full of people who are not there for a happy reason. It is all so relentlessly ordinary that it becomes a kind of comedy, and the comedy is the only thing holding the room together, and everyone in the room knows it.

Then there is the crying.

People cry on aeroplanes. This is real, and it is well enough documented that at least one airline has thought about warning passengers off its own films. Men who have not wept since childhood come apart at hour six over something unremarkable and are embarrassed about it at baggage reclaim and never mention it again. It is not sentiment. It is engineering. The cabin is pressurised to around eight thousand feet because full sea-level pressure would cost weight and fuel, which means everyone aboard is mildly short of oxygen for ten hours. Add eighty-five decibels of noise, humidity lower than a desert's, no daylight, no sleep, and no way out of the seat, and you have manufactured — entirely by accident, out of unrelated cost decisions — the most reliable machine for emotional defencelessness that human beings have ever built. Ten million people a day pass through it. There is almost no literature on what it does to them, because nothing crashes and nobody is hurt and there is no incident to attach it to.

The third thing was the freight.

Human remains fly in the hold. So does recovered tissue, in

temperature-controlled containers, on ordinary commercial services, because chartering is expensive. This is unremarkable to anybody in the industry and quietly astonishing to everybody outside it. Whatever you were thinking about at cruise altitude, something has almost certainly been thinking nothing at all directly beneath your feet.

And the fourth thing was the person walking the aisle.

I have been struck for a long time by how much intimacy we hand, without hesitation, to a stranger in a uniform at three in the morning. Grief is not principally sadness. Grief is untouchability. People stop touching you the week someone dies — they hold you at the funeral and then they stop, and nobody warns you that the loneliness which follows is a physical condition. So when a woman kneels in the aisle in the dark and takes your hand, something happens that has very little to do with sex and cannot be described without it. The wanting arrives braided into the grief so tightly you cannot get a blade between them, and you are ashamed, and she is not, and her refusal to be embarrassed on your behalf is the kindest thing anyone has done for you in years.

That is the whole book. Put those four things in one airframe and it assembles itself, and no one has to be wicked for it to work, which is the part that kept me at the desk.

I should say plainly that Meridian does not exist and that no carrier known to me does anything described in these pages. The mechanisms are real. The company is mine.

Chew Z

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I. BOARDING

ONE. GATE 44B

Vantaa, Helsinki — 21:40

It is a rule of airports that nothing is permitted to be as serious as it is.

The gate agent had worked this route for six years and had developed, without ever having decided to, a particular voice for it. It was her ordinary voice with about fifteen percent taken out. Not softer. Fewer edges. She used it now on a man in a good coat who was holding a folded certificate and a passport in the same hand, the way you hold two things you are frightened of dropping, and she said:

“Thank you. That’s all in order.”

She slid the certificate back across the desk face down, which was a thing she had taught herself in year two.

“Would you like a window or an aisle?”

This is the compassionate fare. It is a real product with a real fare basis code, and every major carrier sells some version of it, and it is a genuine kindness offered by an industry that is not otherwise famous for them. If somebody in your immediate family dies, you may fly at a discount.

You have to prove it.

That is the part nobody thinks about until they are standing in it. In order to receive the kindness you must produce, at a counter, in a queue, under fluorescent light, a document with your mother’s name on it and a date and the word *deceased*, and hand it to a stranger, and wait while she reads it.

The queue at 44B was forty minutes long that night.

A woman near the front had an urn as her personal item.

She had it in a canvas tote with a supermarket logo on it, because that is what people do — you do not go and buy a special bag, you use the bag that is by the door — and when she reached the desk the agent looked at the tote and then at the woman and then at the

sizer, which is the metal frame beside every gate on earth into which your bag must fit.

There followed a short silence of a kind that is common at 44B and nowhere else in the terminal.

"It'll need to go in the sizer," the agent said.

"Yes," said the woman. "Of course."

She put it in. It fit. There was a good deal of room around it, in fact; an urn is smaller than people expect, and the tote sat in the bottom of the frame looking absurd, looking like nothing, and the whole queue watched it fit and then looked away in a single movement, as though somebody had given an order.

The man behind her had a question and had clearly been building up to it for some time.

"Are ashes a liquid?"

The agent said she would check.

She meant it. She picked up the telephone. It took four minutes and two calls, one to a supervisor and one to somebody further away than that, and in the meantime the queue stood in the particular silence of forty people who all urgently want to know the answer and none of whom can be seen to want to know it.

The answer is no. Cremated remains are not classified as a liquid. There is a whole procedure, and the agent knew about two-thirds of it, and delivered that two-thirds with real care.

"Thank you," the man said. "I didn't want to get it wrong."

Somebody's suit bag was two kilos over. He paid the fee. He did not open the bag, and he did not argue, and anyone who has ever been in that queue knows exactly why: in the bag was a suit for a funeral and a pair of shoes that had been his father's, and he was not going to take his father's shoes out and hold them up at a gate to save sixty euros.

A couple near the back had done this before. You could tell at forty paces. They had a system — documents in a plastic wallet, boarding passes already open on both phones, jackets off before they

reached the desk — and they were not unhappy exactly, they were efficient, and they made small pleasant conversation with the agent about the weather in Toronto. They were the most frightening people at the gate. Everybody else there was in the worst week of their life. Those two were in a routine.

At 21:52 the agent announced priority boarding.

She had to. It is in the manual, and the manual does not have a section for this flight, and so she stood at the podium and said, in her ordinary voice minus fifteen percent, that they would like to begin boarding passengers travelling with small children and those requiring additional time, followed by passengers in rows one to four.

Nobody moved.

There is no version of this flight on which anybody is a frequent flyer for a happy reason. Nobody in that gate area had status. Nobody had ever wanted to accumulate anything on this route.

Then one man stood up, three rows back, and picked up a holdall, and walked down the jetway alone with two hundred people watching him go, which is the loneliest walk available in the commercial aviation system and is over in eleven seconds.

Before any of them, before boarding was called at all, a passenger had gone down the airbridge with a hard-shell container the size of a picnic cooler.

He carried it by a moulded handle. It had a boarding pass of its own, tucked in a plastic sleeve on the lid, issued in a name that was not a name but a six-character code, and it had a seat: 1B, window, beside him, with the belt already run through the handle when the rest of them filed past.

A boy of about seven, two rows back, asked his mother what was in the box.

She said, "Medicine."

She was not lying. She had no idea what she was saying, and she was not lying, and that is the sort of night it was.

TWO. POSITION 4L

Aboard, boarding — 22:04

My name is Ilse Novak and I am the senior cabin attendant on this aircraft, and if you are reading this you have already decided what I am, so let me at least be accurate about the details.

I am fifty-three years old. I have been with Meridian for twelve years and in the industry for twenty-nine. I stand at position 4L during boarding, which is the aft port door, because that is where you see everybody. At the front they see you as they board. At the back you see them as they arrive, which is a different thing entirely and is worth more.

Here is what I am wearing, since it matters and since it will be held against me.

The uniform is the old cut. Meridian never modernised it, partly for money and partly because the man who founded the airline had views about how a cabin ought to look, and he died before anybody could talk him out of them. Wool-blend jacket, single button, nipped at the waist. Pencil skirt, on the knee, with a vent that is two centimetres longer than the specification because I had it let out in my second year and nobody has ever measured it. Cream blouse. A scarf in the house pattern, which is grey and oxblood and does nothing for anyone. Court shoes, low, because ten hours.

Black stockings. Hold-ups rather than tights, which is a personal preference and a practical one, since I kneel a great deal and tights go at the knee within a month and hold-ups do not. They are opaque. There is nothing to see. I mention them because I know what you are already doing with the information, and because I have long since stopped pretending I do not use it.

I am not a slim woman. I never have been. In this industry that was, for about fifteen years, a problem I was expected to solve, and there were conversations about it, and I sat through them.

Then somewhere around year nine I stopped apologising and started paying attention, and what I noticed was this.

A slender woman in a fitted uniform reads as an ornament. That is not her fault and it is not mine; it is simply what the eye does with her, and the eye has been trained by seventy years of advertising and it will not be arguing with anybody tonight. Passengers look at her and they see the airline. She is a surface. She is very beautiful and she is scenery.

A woman built like me reads as a body.

There is no dignified way to say this so I will say it plainly. The shape I have is the shape of somebody's mother, and somebody's aunt, and the woman who used to work behind the counter at the place near your school, and — at the same time, in the same glance, in a way that nobody in that seat will ever admit to themselves — it is the shape of a woman. Both at once. That is the whole instrument. It is not one or the other, it is the fact that a passenger at hour seven cannot tell which of the two he is responding to, and the confusion is the point, and the confusion is where the door is.

If they knew which it was, they could defend against it.

I kneel in the aisle. Always. Never crouch, never perch on the armrest, never lean down from above. I go all the way down onto one knee and then settle back onto the other heel, so that my eyes are below theirs, and my hand comes up to theirs rather than down onto it, and the whole geometry of the encounter is that I am the lower of us.

Consider what that means to a person on this flight. Nobody has been lower than them since the telephone call. Everybody has been kind and everybody has been *above* — the doctor, the registrar, the funeral director, the woman at the gate, all of them standing over you being gentle. Eleven days of being handled.

I kneel, and the skirt is on the knee, and the stocking-top does not show and does not need to, because they know it is there. They know the way you know there is a step in the dark. And that knowledge sits in the room with us and I do not acknowledge it and I do not use it and I do not need to use it, because the not-using is the thing that works.

I want to be exact about this since I doubt anybody else will be.

I do not seduce them. I have never once made an offer, or implied one, or permitted an implication to stand. Anybody who tells you otherwise is describing something that did not happen. What I do is refuse to be embarrassed. That is the entire technique and it took me four years to learn it. Somewhere in the seventh hour a man will feel a thing he has no business feeling, given what he is on this aircraft for, and he will be flooded with shame about it, and every other person in his life would flinch, and I do not.

I do not look away. I do not withdraw the hand. I do not go brisk and professional and give him an exit, which is what a kind woman would do, and which would end it.

I hold on, and I let him have the feeling, and I let him be ashamed of it in front of me, and I do not mind.

Do you understand what that is worth to a man in the worst week of his life? Nobody has failed to mind about him in years.

Eleven hundred and forty. That is the number, as of tonight, before we push back. It is the company record and it has been the company record since year six and the second-place figure is four hundred and eleven, which is a woman in Lisbon who is very good.

I keep them myself. There is an official system, obviously, and everything goes into it, but I also keep a logbook — a real one, cloth-bound, in my own hand, and I write each name in at the end of the sector before I sleep.

People find that morbid when they hear about it. It is the opposite of morbid. It is the only place any of them are written down as people rather than as a figure in a monthly return, and I think somebody ought to have done it, and nobody else was going to, so I did.

I have signed myself, incidentally. Year one, before I had ever asked anybody else.

I mention that whenever it comes up, and it does come up, and I mention it because it is true and because it ends the conversation.

LOAD SHEET I

MERIDIAN COMPASSIONATE AIR — LOAD AND TRIM SHEET

Sector 1147 · HEL-YYZ · Aircraft 7L-MCC · Prepared at 21:31

COMPARTMENT 1 (FWD, TEMP CONTROLLED, +2 TO +6 C)

Position 12P — consignment ref 41-K — 6 kg — TEMP CRITICAL — accompanied, cabin seat 1B

Position 14P — consignment ref 41-M — 19 kg — TEMP CRITICAL — unaccompanied

COMPARTMENT 3 (AFT)

Position 31L — HUM 1 — 88 kg — documentation attached, transit permit sighted

Position 33L — HUM 2 — 61 kg — documentation attached, transit permit sighted

BAGGAGE — 214 pieces — 2,986 kg

PASSENGERS BOARDED: 196 adults, 4 children, 0 infants

CREW: 2 flight deck, 6 cabin

FUEL AT DEPARTURE: 44,200 kg

Note: HUM positions loaded first and offloaded last per standing instruction. Do not offload in view of the terminal.

THREE. THE RETURN LEG

Boarding — 22:14

The thing nobody outside the industry knows about the compassionate fare is that it is a return.

It has to be. It is a fare basis attached to a booking class and the system requires an inbound sector, and in any case people do come back; that is not cruelty, it is arithmetic. So when you telephone the airline on the worst morning of your life and a very kind young man takes you through it, at some point he asks you a question, and the question is:

“And what date would you like to come back?”

There is always a pause. He is trained for the pause. He waits four seconds and then he offers to hold the line while you think about it, and he means it, and he will hold for as long as you like, and the whole time the clock in his headset is running and his manager is watching the average handling time on a screen in another building.

And you give him a date. You pick one out of the air, because there is a man on the telephone waiting and you are ashamed of taking up his morning, and you say a Thursday about ten days out because ten days sounds like the right amount of time to bury somebody.

You will be wrong. Everybody is wrong. Some of them are wrong by a week and some of them are wrong by a year and one woman I dealt with in 2019 had booked her return for the following afternoon.

So every single person in my cabin is carrying a date they chose in a condition in which they could not be trusted to choose a sandwich, and half of them will pay a change fee, and the change fee is not waived, because the fare is already discounted and you cannot discount a thing twice.

That is the compassionate fare. All of it. Both halves.

Here is the rest of the gate, because I stand at 4L and I see them come down the aisle and I have heard most of what a human being can say at a moment like that.

A man asked me, in the doorway, in complete sincerity, whether he could use his air miles to upgrade his mother.

He did not mean the urn. She was in the hold in a coffin and he had six years of an airline credit card and a balance he had been saving for a holiday that was now not going to happen, and he had thought, somewhere over the previous four days, that the least he could do was get her out of the cheap part.

I told him it did not work like that. He said no, of course, sorry, and went and sat in 19F.

I have thought about that man on and off for six years and I have never once found the joke in it, and I have watched three other

members of crew tell it as a joke, and I did not correct them, because the alternative is explaining, and there is no time to explain anything at a door.

A woman with an urn in a supermarket tote asked whether it needed its own seat belt. I said no. She asked whether she could put it on the floor. I said the floor was fine. She said it did not feel fine.

We put it in her lap for take-off with the belt across both of them, which is not in the manual and is not against it either, and she held it with both hands the whole way to Toronto and did not sleep and did not eat and told me at the end that it had been the best flight she had ever had, and I do not know what to do with that sentence and I have carried it for four years.

And there is a category of passenger that nobody warns you about at training, which is the ones who are pleased.

Not many. Perhaps one in thirty. A man in his fifties who has just come from a hospital bed he sat beside for nine months, and who is going home, and who has slept for eleven hours in a chair and is about to sleep for ten more in a seat, and who is — there is no other word — relieved. And he knows he is not permitted to be, and he can see two hundred people around him doing it properly, and so he sits very still with his face arranged and drinks three gin and tonics and is no trouble to anybody.

Those are the loneliest people on the aircraft and there is nothing whatever that can be done for them, because the thing they need is permission and permission is not in my gift.

They board, and they apologise for their bags, and they thank me for a bread roll, and at hour six they will come apart quietly at three thousand nautical miles from anywhere.

Doors in eleven minutes.

FOUR. DOORS TO AUTOMATIC

Pushback — 22:31

Two hundred people is not a crowd. Two hundred people is a village, and a village has a sound, and after twenty-nine years you can stand at 4L with your hands behind your back and hear what kind of night it is going to be.

A holiday charter to Alicante sounds like a football terrace. A Monday business sector sounds like a library with a cough. A repatriation service sounds like nothing at all, and the nothing has a texture to it, and the texture is people being extremely careful.

They do not want to be a nuisance. That is the thing about the bereaved that nobody warns you about. They apologise for everything. They apologise for the overhead locker being full, which is not their doing; they apologise for needing to get past you; they apologise for asking for water. A woman in 22C said sorry to me four times in the first six minutes and each time she said it her voice went a little further away from her own throat.

I did the walk. Seat belts, tray tables, window blinds up for departure. I have done it perhaps eleven thousand times and I do not think about it any more than you think about the stairs in your own house, which frees the whole of my attention for the only thing I am actually doing on that walk, which is reading them.

Here is what I read for.

Alone or accompanied. That is the first cut and it is the largest. A person travelling with family will not sign. Not because they are less bereaved but because there is a witness in the next seat and the witness makes them perform. Grief with an audience is a shape, and the shape is fixed, and there is no door in it.

Hand luggage. A man who has packed properly is a man who was told about this in advance. A man with a carrier bag from an airport shop and nothing else got a telephone call three days ago and has been in the same shirt since.

The document wallet. Some of them are still holding it after boarding. Actually holding it, in the hand, in the seat, with the

certificate in it. Those are the ones who have not put it down since the desk.

Rings. Not for the reason you think. A man who has taken his wedding ring off and is turning it in his fingers at pushback is doing something with his hands and does not know that he is doing it.

And the last one, the one I trust most and cannot justify: whether they look at me.

Everybody looks at cabin crew during boarding. It is automatic and it means nothing. The ones who are gone — properly gone, the ones already down in it — do not. Their eyes go over you like you are a fitting. I have had men look directly through my face at the emergency equipment placard behind my head and there is nothing in the world that says *this person is alone* louder than that.

34K did not look at me.

Thirty-one, perhaps thirty-two. Alone. A holdall in the overhead with a supermarket bag inside it, which is a detail I have seen four hundred times and which means the packing was done by somebody else in a hurry. Fourth day in the same shirt, by the collar. Wedding ring, still on, being turned. Document wallet on his knee.

And a physical stillness that is very specific and that I only know one cause for, which is that he had not slept, not properly, since the call.

I did not look at him twice. That is a rule. If they catch you looking twice they remember it later, and later everything you do has to be innocent of everything you did before.

At the front, 1A was a man of about sixty with a hard-shell container belted into the seat beside him. Meridian carries these three or four times a week. He was not eating, not reading, not looking out of the window. He had one hand resting flat on the lid of the box, the way you would rest a hand on a dog, and he sat like that for the entire pushback.

I have flown with a great many couriers. Most of them sleep. They are the only people on any aircraft with a job that continues while

they are aboard, and the job is simply to keep the temperature stable and get off first, and so most of them regard the flight as ten hours of nothing and they take it.

This one did not sleep for a single minute of ten hours, and I did not know why yet, and I would have been glad to keep not knowing.

We pushed at 22:31. Doors to automatic and cross-check. The safety demonstration ran on the screens, and in the third row a woman watched the whole of it with total concentration — the brace position, the whistle, the light on the lifejacket — the way you watch instructions when you have decided that this is a thing you are able to control.

At the top of the climb the seat belt sign went off with its chime and two hundred people let out a breath at once, and that sound is the same on every flight everywhere in the world and it is the last ordinary thing that happens on a night sector.

Then the cabin settles, and the engines go to the noise they will make for ten hours, and everybody starts the long business of being awake in the dark.

II. THE DIM

FIVE. HOUR 01 · 6,000 FEET

Over the Gulf of Bothnia — 23:40

The cabin is at six thousand feet and climbing.

Not the aircraft. The aircraft is at thirty-two thousand and going to thirty-eight. The cabin — the pressure inside the tube that you are sitting in — is at six thousand feet and will settle at eight, and it will stay there for ten hours, and nobody will mention it because it is on no screen and in no announcement.

I want to explain this properly because everything that happens later is made out of it, and because almost nobody outside the industry knows, and because when I first understood it I sat down in the galley and did not move for a while.

An aircraft is a pressure vessel. Every pound of pressure you hold inside it is load on the structure, and structure is weight, and weight is fuel, and fuel is the only thing anybody upstairs is really thinking about. So nobody pressurises to sea level. You pressurise to a compromise, and the compromise the industry settled on decades ago is eight thousand feet.

Eight thousand feet is a mountain. It is higher than any point in this country. At eight thousand feet the oxygen saturation of an ordinary healthy adult falls to somewhere around ninety percent, which is not dangerous and is not an emergency and would not trouble a doctor.

But it is not nothing.

It is enough that your judgement is a little worse. It is enough that a drink is worth about one and a half drinks. It is enough that the part of you that runs the check between what you feel and what you say — that little committee, the one that has kept you employed and married and out of trouble your whole life — is under-resourced and slightly slow and starting to let things through.

Now add the rest of it, because the pressure is only the first of four.

The noise. Eighty-five decibels, broadband, continuous. Loud enough that you cannot rest properly and low enough that after ten

minutes you stop hearing it. You will not notice it once for the whole night. It will be working on you the entire time. Try holding a thought against a wall of hiss for ten hours and see what is left of the thought.

The dryness. Cabin humidity runs below ten percent, which is drier than any desert on the planet, because the air comes in off the engines and the engines have wrung it out. You are dehydrating from the first minute and you will not feel thirsty, because at altitude the thirst signal is late. Dehydration on its own is enough to make a person irritable, tearful, and unable to hold a line.

And the dark, and the hour. We take off at half past ten and fly west, which means we run along beside the night rather than through it, and there is no dawn on this sector at all. We leave in the dark and we land in the dark. Whatever your body thought it was going to do tonight, it is not doing it.

Put those four together and you have not made anybody ill. Everybody walks off. That is exactly the point — there is no incident, so there is no report, so there is no literature, so it is not a thing.

What you have made is a room in which two hundred people, simultaneously, for ten hours, cannot defend themselves.

The crew have a word for it. I did not invent it, I was taught it in my first month by a woman called Marjatta who has been dead nine years. We call it the dim.

Every single person who has ever worked a night sector knows it. Ask any of them. Ask them about the man at hour six who cries at a film he does not even like. Ask them about the businessman who tells you about his divorce over the second whisky and cannot look at you at breakfast. Ask them why the complaints on a night sector are different from the complaints on a day sector, and why so many of them are apologies sent afterwards.

Ten million people a day go through this room. It is the most reliably reproduced altered state in the industrialised world, it costs nothing, it happens on schedule, and it is entirely legal, and it

exists because of a decision about fuselage weight that somebody made before I was born.

Nobody built it. That is what I want you to hold on to. Nobody built it and nobody is responsible for it and it is simply there, every night, over every ocean, working away on everybody aboard.

Somebody was always going to notice.

The first service went out at midnight. I did the aft cabin myself, which I do not have to do at my grade, and which I always do.

34K asked for water and said thank you and did not look up.

At the front, 1A ordered black coffee and no food. When I put it down he said thank you in the way that means *I am about to say something else*, and then he said it.

"How long have you flown these?"

"Twelve years."

"On this route?"

"Mostly."

He nodded slowly, as though I had confirmed something, and put his hand back on the lid of the box.

"You'll be about eleven hundred, then," he said.

I did not answer that. There was nothing on my uniform that said it and no reason in the world for a passenger to know it, and I went back up the cabin with the empty tray and my hands were perfectly steady because they always are.

I did not go to the galley and sit down. I want that on the record too. I have never once let a passenger see me stop.

SIX. HOUR 03 • 8,000 FEET

Over the Norwegian Sea — 01:40

At hour three I turn the lights down and the room changes character.

There is a procedure. It is written down and it is not very interesting, and like most procedures it does something enormous

that nobody wrote down. You bring the cabin to night lighting in stages, over about four minutes, because if you do it in one movement people look up. Done properly, nobody notices it happening. They simply find themselves in the dark, later, without having been taken there.

I have thought about that a good deal, and I would rather not think about it any more.

Here is the room at hour three.

Two hundred people in rows, in a tube, in the dark. Every one of them within a metre of a stranger. Nobody talking. A dozen small blue screens. The hiss, always the hiss. Somewhere in the middle of the cabin a child asleep across two seats with its shoes off and its mother awake beside it holding the shoes.

And the specific thing about this particular service, the thing you would never guess from outside: there is no anger.

A normal night sector is full of low-grade fury. The seat, the food, the person in front reclining, the queue for the lavatory. It is the sound of two hundred people who feel they have been slightly cheated.

On this flight nobody is angry, because everybody has already lost the argument they came here with. There is no complaint to make. It is the most polite room in the world and it is unbearable to stand in.

At hour three the crying starts.

Never all at once. It goes in ones. Somebody in the middle of the cabin — usually the middle, rarely the front, and I have never worked out why — will make a small sound and stop and then make it again about four minutes later, and stop, and this can go on for an hour.

And here is the part that outsiders do not believe. The people who cry at hour three are not, on the whole, the people who are going to a funeral.

It is the man in a suit going to a sales conference. It is the student going home. It is the woman flying out to see a sister she is not

close to. They are crying at films. They are crying at the little animated map on the screen. One of them, three years ago, cried at the safety card, and I know because he showed it to me and asked me, quite reasonably, what was wrong with him.

Nothing was wrong with him. He was at eight thousand feet in the dark at three in the morning with no water in him and no sleep and eighty-five decibels of hiss going into his skull, and the committee had gone home.

The bereaved do not cry at hour three. The bereaved are still holding.

That is what nobody understands about grief and what took me years to see. In the first fortnight you do not cry, or you cry at nothing much, and everybody around you decides you are being very brave. You are not being brave. You are load-bearing. There are arrangements to make and telephone calls to place and a coffin to choose from a laminated brochure with prices on it, and a person cannot do those things and feel things at the same time, and so the feeling waits.

It waits for a room where there is nothing left to arrange.

There is exactly one such room. It has no telephone signal, no arrangements, no visitors, no tasks, no exits, and ten hours in it.

They break at hour six. Consistently. Six to seven. I could set a clock by it and to some extent I do.

At 01:52 I went forward and 1A was still awake, still not eating, hand still flat on the lid.

"You should sleep," I said. "It's a long one."

"So should you."

"I don't, on these."

"No," he said. "I don't imagine you do."

He had a Hungarian accent worn down by a long time somewhere else, and a surgeon's hands, which are a real thing and which I can spot at four metres because my father had them and never once used them for anything but a lathe.

"May I ask you a question, madam?"

"Ilse."

"May I ask you a question, Ilse."

"You may ask. Do I get a name, or is it just the box?"

"Ferenc," he said. "The box is more important."

"When you speak to them," he said, "at the seventh hour. What is it that you believe you are doing?"

The cabin hissed. Somebody two rows back turned over.

"I believe I am giving them something to hold," I said.

He looked at me for a long moment, and then he nodded, and he did not look pleased or angry or superior. He looked at me the way you look at somebody standing in the road with their back to the traffic.

"Yes," he said. "That is what I thought you would say."

And he turned to the window, where there was nothing at all for two thousand kilometres, and I went back up the cabin and did not think about it again for four hours.

LOAD SHEET II

MERIDIAN COMPASSIONATE AIR — CONSIGNMENT SUMMARY (INTERNAL)

Rolling 30-day, HEL-YYZ and reciprocal. Not for distribution outside operations.

HUM (human remains, repatriation) — outbound 14, inbound 2

Category A tissue, transplantation, temperature critical — outbound 3, inbound 1

Category C tissue, research and education, non-critical — outbound 0, inbound 31

Category C consignments are billed at standard freight rates by weight and do not require accompanied transit. Positions 31L and 33L may be used for Category C when no HUM is manifested.

Consignment weights, Category C, inbound, 30-day range: 4 kg to 41 kg.

Note from operations: Category C inbound volume up 22% year on year. Compartment 3 capacity under review.

SEVEN. HOUR 04 • THE ONES WHO DON'T

Over the Denmark Strait — 02:40

Eleven hundred and forty is the number that signed.

Nobody has ever asked me for the other number, which is the number I was asked and refused, and I know it exactly, because I keep that in the book too, on the facing page, in pencil.

Two hundred and six.

They fall into four kinds and I have never found a fifth.

The ones with someone at home. Not a spouse; a spouse makes no difference. Somebody they have already promised something to. A daughter who has views. A brother who is a solicitor. They will get to minute thirty-four and they will say, gently, "I'd want to talk to Anna about it," and that is the end and both of us know it is the end, and I say of course, and I mean of course, and I do not raise it again. There is no version of me that argues with a woman named Anna who is not on the aircraft.

The religious. Fewer than you would think, and never the ones you would guess. It is almost never a question of doctrine — most faiths are fine with it and most of the people I am kneeling in front of could not tell you what their own tradition says. It is that they have an idea about the body that has nothing to do with what is written down, and the idea is older than the doctrine, and it is not going to be moved at eight thousand feet by a stewardess.

The angry. One in twelve, roughly. Something has gone wrong at a hospital or a coroner's office and there is a complaint somewhere in the system and the whole apparatus of medicine has become, for them, the thing that took their person. You cannot ask those. You can sit with them, and they are frequently the best company on the aircraft, and I have sat with a woman from Tampere for two hours

at hour six while she took a health authority apart piece by piece and I did not ask her for anything and it was the most honest two hours I spent that year.

And the ones who see it.

There have been nine.

Nine in twelve years, out of thirteen hundred and forty-six approaches, and I remember every one of the nine, which tells you something about the eleven hundred and forty that I would rather not examine.

They do not get angry. That is the extraordinary thing. Eight of the nine were perfectly pleasant about it. There is a moment somewhere around minute thirty when something goes across their face — not suspicion exactly, more like recognition, the way you might recognise a tune you have not heard since school — and after that the temperature of the whole thing changes and I know, and they know I know, and we finish the conversation courteously and I get up and I go and check the galley.

The ninth was a man of about seventy on a night out of Helsinki in my sixth year.

He had lost a wife of forty-four years. He was a small neat man in a cardigan and he let me do the entire thing, all of it, every minute, and he answered every question about her beautifully and made me laugh twice, and at minute thirty-four I asked him whether he would want somebody to do that for her.

And he said: "You're very good at this."

Not unkindly. He said it the way you would say it to a joiner who had just hung a door.

I said, "I'm sorry?"

And he said, "How many is it? Not tonight. Altogether."

And I told him. I do not know why I told him. It was year six and the figure was three hundred and something and I said it out loud in the dark, and he nodded slowly, and he patted the back of my hand twice, which is the gesture that means *we will not be speaking of this*, and he said:

"I'll not sign anything tonight, love. But you get some sleep."

And he went back to the window.

I stood up and went to the aft galley and pulled the curtain and I was shaking, which I have not been before or since, and I could not have told you why.

I have had six years to work out why and I have got as far as this. It was not that he refused. People refuse. It was that he was kind to me about it. He had watched a woman work him over for thirty-four minutes on the worst night of his life and his response was to be worried about whether I was sleeping.

I did not put him in the book at first. I went back three weeks later and put him in, in pencil, on the facing page, because a record that is nearly complete is not a record.

He is the only one of the two hundred and six whose name I did not have to look up.

EIGHT. HOUR 05 • 34K

Somewhere south of Greenland — 03:40

He asked for water again at hour five and this time he looked up.

That is the signal. Not a word, not a request, not anything you could write down in a report. They look up. Somewhere between hour four and hour six, a person who has been staring at the seat back in front of them for four hours raises their eyes and looks at a human face, and what they are doing — although they do not know it and could not say it — is checking whether there is anybody in the world.

"Would you like something with it," I said. "Tea. There's soup."

"No. Thank you."

"You haven't eaten."

"No."

I put the water down on his tray and did not go away, which is the only thing I did, and it is enough. Ninety-five percent of this work is not going away.

"It's a long night," I said.

"Yes."

"They're worse when you can't sleep."

He laughed. It was one syllable and it came out wrong and he looked immediately as though he had done something inappropriate, and I let it sit there without helping him, and after a moment he said:

"Sorry."

"You've nothing to be sorry for."

"I keep saying it," he said. "I've said sorry about ninety times since Tuesday."

"You've said it four times to me tonight."

He looked at me properly then, for the first time, and I saw the whole thing go across his face — surprise that anybody had counted, and then the beginning of the understanding that if somebody had counted then somebody had been paying attention, and then, underneath that, the first crack.

Not yet. Hour five is not the hour. I have made that mistake and I do not make it now.

"Tomas," he said, and put his hand out, which passengers almost never do.

"Ilse."

His hand was cold. They always are. It is the dehydration and the fact that nobody at hour five has moved for a long time, and there is a thing I do which I will come to.

"Can I ask what's taking you over," I said.

Note the phrasing. Not *why are you flying*. Not *are you all right*. Not *is everything okay*, which is the worst sentence in the language and which he had heard, at a guess, forty times that week.

What's taking you over. It presumes a reason, it presumes the reason is heavy, and it does not ask him to reassure me.

"My brother," he said.

And there it is. There is a silence after that sentence that lasts about two seconds and belongs entirely to the passenger, and if you speak into it you have lost the night.

I did not speak into it.

"Mikkel," he said. "He's — he was working here. Four years." He turned the water bottle a quarter turn on the tray. "He's downstairs."

"I know," I said.

He looked up sharply.

"I load the aircraft," I said. "I sign for it. He's in the aft hold, position 31L, and he was loaded first and he'll come off last, and there are two of them on tonight and he's the forward one."

I want to be very clear about why I say that, because it looks like cruelty and it is the single kindest thing I do all night.

Everybody on that aircraft knows, in some abstract way, that their dead are underneath them. Nobody has been told. It is the great unspoken of the whole industry — we will fly your mother home in the hold and we will hand you a bread roll above her and nobody will mention it, and you will sit there for ten hours with the knowledge going round and round in you and no permission to say it out loud.

So I say it out loud.

And what happens, every single time, is that they go very still, and then something in the shoulders comes down about a centimetre, and they say some version of the same thing, which he said now:

"Nobody's said that."

"No."

"Nobody's said any of it. Everyone keeps — " he stopped, and started again. "Everyone keeps telling me what a lovely service it's going to be."

"Yes."

"I don't want a lovely service. I want somebody to say his name."

"Mikkel," I said.

He put both hands flat on the tray table and breathed out and it went ragged in the middle, and he got it back.

"Sorry."

"Five," I said.

He laughed properly that time, and then his face went, and he got it back again, and I said I would come and find him later, and I went up the cabin.

That is hour five. Nothing happened at hour five. Ask him tomorrow and he will tell you a stewardess was kind to him and he does not remember what about.

There is one more thing and I include it because leaving it out would be dishonest.

On the way past I learned two facts, and I did not go looking for either, and I filed both.

Their mother had died two years ago. He mentioned it in passing, the way people do, as a way of explaining that he already knew how the paperwork went.

And Mikkel had flown home for her funeral. On this route, in this direction, because it is the only direct service and because there is only one carrier that does it and because it is cheaper.

It did not mean anything to me at the time. Two years is a long time and eleven hundred and forty is a large number and I could not have told you the face of a single one of them.

NINE. HOUR 06 • SELECTION

Over the Labrador Sea — 04:40

There are four of them tonight and I will take one.

That is not modesty and it is not restraint. It is the number. In year three I tried for two on a single sector and the second one felt the machinery, because by then I was doing it rather than being it, and he did not sign, and worse than that he watched me go up the cabin afterwards and I saw him understand something. A man like that

writes a letter. Nobody has ever written the letter, but a man like that could.

One a night. Twelve years. Eleven hundred and forty.

Here is the shortlist at hour six and here is how it comes apart.

22C. The woman who apologised four times in the first six minutes. Fifty-ish, alone, mother. She would sign. She would sign in twelve minutes and thank me for asking.

I will not go near her.

There is a category of person for whom the answer is yes to absolutely everything, permanently, because saying no was trained out of them before they were nine years old. You can have anything from them you like. It is like taking a wallet off a table. Whatever else I am, I am not that, and if you find that distinction convenient then I am sorry for you but I am keeping it.

8F. The couple who have done this before, with the plastic wallet and the pre-opened boarding passes. Efficient. Almost cheerful.

Two things wrong. First, they are two, and a witness makes a performance. Second — and this is the one people do not expect — the practised ones are hard. They have a routine because the routine is armour, and the armour was built for exactly this hour, and it works. The frightening people at the gate are the safe people at hour six.

11A. A man of sixty-five going home to a wife who died while he was away, which I know because he told the agent at the desk in a voice that carried.

He is the best prospect on the aircraft and I will not take him, and the reason is the only piece of genuine mercy in my entire method.

He is going to sign for himself soon anyway. He is sixty-five, he has just watched the paperwork of a death go through, and within a year he will sit at a kitchen table and put his own affairs in order because that is what that year does to a person. He does not need me. Taking him would be taking something that was coming to us regardless, and the whole value of what I do is in the people who would never, ever have got there on their own.

34K.

Alone. Thirty-one. Fourth day in the same shirt. No sleep since Tuesday. Wedding ring being turned, and I have since established that the wife is alive and at home and that he did not want her to come, which is its own small piece of information. Document wallet still on the knee at hour six, which is nearly unheard of.

And the brother in the hold, three metres below him and a little forward.

There is one more criterion and it is the one that matters and it is not on any list.

I choose the ones who have not been touched.

You can see it. I promise you that you can see it, once you know, and that you will never be able to stop seeing it. There is a way of holding the shoulders that develops in a person who has gone about ten days without contact. It is not sadness. It is a kind of narrowing. The body draws its edges in because nothing has met them.

Grief is not primarily sadness. I would put that on the side of the aircraft if they let me. Grief is untouchability. The day somebody dies, everyone touches you — they hold you at the funeral, they grip your arm at the door, and there is a fortnight of hands. Then it stops. It stops completely and all at once and nobody warns you, and what follows is a loneliness that is not emotional at all, it is physical, it is a skin condition, and there is no word for it in any language I speak and every one of them knows exactly what it is the moment it is described to them.

That is the seam. It has been there since we came down out of the trees. It is the oldest thing there is and it is completely undefended, because no one has ever thought to defend it, because no one has ever wanted anything from it before.

I have never used a word of persuasion. I want that understood. There is no script, there is no argument, there is no pressure, and I have never in twelve years told a single passenger anything I believed to be untrue.

I hold their hand for forty minutes.

That is all. That is the entire method, and if you think that sounds like nothing then you have not been alone for ten days, and I hope you never are.

At 05:16 I checked the aft cabin, and I went into the galley, and I took off my jacket and hung it, and I ran my hands under the warm tap for ninety seconds and dried them properly.

Cold hands are a mistake I made once.

Then I put the jacket back on and buttoned it, and went down the cabin in the dark to row 34.

TEN. THE FORTY MINUTES

Hour 07 · 8,000 feet · 05:40

MINUTE 1

She kneels.

That is the first thing and you will not understand for a long time that it is also the whole thing. She does not crouch and she does not perch on the arm of the seat beside you and she does not bend down from the aisle with her hands on her knees the way the others do. She goes all the way down onto one knee and then settles back onto the other heel, and there is a small sound of fabric under strain, and then she is still, and her face is below yours.

Nobody has been below you since the telephone call.

Think about that for a second, because your body already has. Eleven days of people being gentle from above. The registrar. The doctor with the good voice. Your wife's hand on the back of your neck. The man at the funeral home turning the laminated brochure round so you could see the prices the right way up. All of them standing over you and being kind, and every single one of them taller than you, and you have been managed for a week and a half by people looking down.

She is looking up.

MINUTE 2

She does not say anything.

You had assumed she would. Everyone says something. There is a sentence that people use and you have heard it perhaps forty times since Tuesday and you could recite the whole family of them — *I'm so sorry for your loss, if there's anything at all, he's at peace now, how are you holding up* — and every one of them is a request. They want you to say *fine*. That is the transaction. They give you a sentence and you give them permission to stop.

She does not give you a sentence.

MINUTE 3

The cabin makes its noise. The hiss you stopped hearing five hours ago and which has been going into you the entire time. Somewhere ahead of you a screen is on. The dark is the blue-grey dark of a night sector, which is not really dark at all, and which is the only dark two hundred people can be in together.

MINUTE 4

You become aware that you are not being asked for anything.

It is such an unfamiliar sensation that at first you experience it as anxiety. There is something you are supposed to be doing. There is always something you are supposed to be doing. You have been the one who does the things since Tuesday — the calls, the airline, the consulate, the certificate, telling your mother's sister, telling the neighbour, telling the man Mikkel used to work with whose number you found in a drawer.

Nothing is being required of you. You do not know where to put your hands.

MINUTE 5

Neither of you has spoken. She has been there for four minutes. You would have said, if asked, that four minutes of silence with a stranger would be unendurable.

MINUTE 6

You look at her.

She is fifty, or a little more. Not a slim woman. The uniform is the old cut and it was made for a different decade and it holds her the

way a hand holds a glass, and she is kneeling in an aisle at five in the morning with her back straight and her shoulders down as though this is the most ordinary place in the world to be.

She has a good face. Not a beautiful one. A face that has been on its feet for twenty-nine years.

She looks back at you and does not smile, and does not do the small sympathetic tilt of the head, and does not do any of the things, and you have no idea what is happening.

MINUTE 7

She puts two fingers on the back of your hand.

Only two. Only the back. It is nothing. It is less than a nurse does, less than a stranger steadying you on a step, and it is the first time another human being has touched you since Thursday morning, and it goes through you like a stone through a window.

You do not move your hand.

She leaves the two fingers there and does not add to them, and the seconds go past, and you become aware of exactly where those two fingers are on your skin in a way that you have not been aware of your own body in eleven days.

MINUTE 8

"Tell me about him," she says.

Not *tell me what happened*. Not *were you close*. Not anything about you at all.

MINUTE 9

You say: he was four years older.

MINUTE 10

You say: he was better than me at everything and it never once occurred to him that this might be difficult for me, which was, in the end, the reason it never was.

MINUTE 11

You say: he sent our mother a postcard every week for four years and none of them said anything. Weather. Football. What he'd

eaten. She kept all of them in the drawer in the hall and after she died we found them and there were a hundred and ninety and they were all completely empty and I sat on the floor and read every one.

MINUTE 12

You are talking. You have not talked since Tuesday. You have *reported* since Tuesday — you have delivered the facts of it to perhaps thirty people in the flat voice you developed by about the fourth call — and this is not that, and you can hear that it is not that, and it frightens you slightly.

MINUTE 13

She has not asked a single question about you. Not one. Not how you are, not whether you are eating, not whether you have someone at home. Every question is about him.

You do not notice this at the time. You will notice it in about nine months, in a car park, for no reason at all, and it will take the legs out from under you.

MINUTE 14

She says: "What did he call you?"

And you say a name that nobody has used since 2011 and that you would have sworn you had forgotten, and hearing it in your own mouth in your own voice is the first thing that gets in under the wall.

MINUTE 15

She says: "Mikkel."

Out loud. In the dark. In an aeroplane over the sea.

Eleven days. Thirty-odd people. Everybody has been very kind and nobody has said his name, because the name is the dangerous object and everyone can feel that it is, and so they have all been saying *your brother* and *him* and *the situation* and dancing around a five-letter word.

She says it flatly, without emphasis, the way you would say the name of somebody who was still alive.

Your chest does something you cannot control.

MINUTE 16

She turns your hand over.

She does it so slowly that there is no single moment at which it happens. Her fingers go under the edge of your hand and lift, barely, and there is a long unhurried rotation, and at some point during it your palm has come up and hers has come down and you are holding hands.

You could have stopped it at any point in those forty seconds. Both of you know that. Neither of you will ever mention it.

MINUTE 17

Palm to palm is not the same as the back of the hand. It is not even in the same country. The back of the hand is what a nurse does. The palm is what a lover does, or a mother, and there is nobody else on the list.

Her hand is warm. You register, dimly, that at hour seven on a night sector nobody's hands are warm, and that hers are, and you do not follow the thought any further.

MINUTE 18

You tell her about the shirt.

That you have been wearing it since Tuesday. That you packed at two in the morning and you do not remember doing it and that your wife put a supermarket bag inside the holdall with a razor in it and you have not opened it.

MINUTE 19

You tell her you did not want your wife to come.

MINUTE 20

You tell her you do not know why.

MINUTE 21

She says: "Because she'd have needed you to be all right."

And you say yes. And that is the second thing that gets in, and it goes deeper than the first, because it is not comfort. It is accurate.

Nobody has been accurate about you in eleven days. Everybody has been kind, and kind is a fog, and this woman has just put one finger precisely on the thing and named it and not made it your fault.

MINUTE 22

Her thumb has begun to move.

Very slightly. Across the inside of your wrist, back and forth, perhaps a centimetre. You do not know when it started. It may have been going for some time.

MINUTE 23

She stops talking.

MINUTE 24

She does not start again.

The silence goes on and it is not the awkward kind and it is not the peaceful kind, it is a third thing that you have never encountered, and it has a pressure to it, and the pressure is entirely inside your own chest.

This is the part of her craft she is proudest of and you will never know it. Three full minutes of nothing at hour seven. Everyone she has ever trained has failed at this. They cannot leave the silence alone; they fill it, out of kindness, and the filling puts the lid back on.

MINUTE 25

You are holding on to her hand very hard. You became aware of it about ten seconds ago. You are gripping a stranger's hand in the dark hard enough to hurt and she has not adjusted her face at all.

MINUTE 26

You come apart.

Not gently. Not the small dignified leaking that you have permitted yourself twice this week in a bathroom with the tap running. The whole thing, out of the middle of you, ugly, with a sound in it you have not made since you were a child, in seat 34K with two hundred people two feet away.

And you cannot even cover your face, because she is holding one hand and the other one has gone up to your mouth and it is not enough.

It lasts about ninety seconds and it feels like a season.

She does not shush you. She does not say *let it out*. She does not pass you a napkin, which is what a kind woman would do and which would have ended it, because a napkin is a small instruction to stop.

She holds on and she watches you do it.

MINUTE 27

The thing comes.

You are wrecked, and your face is a mess, and you are three inches from a woman you met six hours ago, and she is kneeling, and you can smell her — cabin air, and the sanitiser everybody on an aircraft smells of, and under that something that is simply a woman at the end of a long night — and she is warm, and her hand is in your hand, and her thumb is still going, and you *want* her.

There it is. There is no polite way to describe what has just happened in your body and there is no version of you that would ever say it out loud.

MINUTE 28

The shame arrives about four seconds later and it is enormous.

Your brother is three metres beneath you in the dark in a box. You have been crying about him for ninety seconds. And what your body has produced, without asking, in the middle of it, is this.

You are certain — completely, chemically certain — that you are the only person this has ever happened to, and that there is something rotten in you, and that if anyone knew you would not survive it.

MINUTE 29

You try to take your hand back.

MINUTE 30

She does not let go.

MINUTE 31

Here is what she does not do, and it is everything.

She does not flinch. She does not go brisk. She does not stand up and become a stewardess again and give you the dignified exit that any decent woman would give you. She does not look at the seat back, or the floor, or her watch. She does not say *there there* and pat your hand twice, which is the gesture that means *we will not be speaking of this*.

She looks at you. Directly. For a long time. With no expression on her face whatsoever except attention.

And she does not mind.

MINUTE 32

You have never in your life been permitted to be disgusting in front of somebody who did not mind.

Not once. Not as a child, not as a husband, not at work, not anywhere. Your whole life has been the management of what other people can be asked to look at. And a woman in an airline uniform is kneeling in an aisle at five in the morning holding your hand while you are the worst you have ever been, and she is not embarrassed, and she is not leaving.

This is the door. You do not know it is a door. You have simply, without any decision having been taken, arrived at a place where you would do anything at all for this woman.

MINUTE 33

You say, "I'm sorry."

She says, "Six."

And you laugh, horribly, with your face ruined, and it is the first time you have laughed since Tuesday, and she smiles at last and it is a good smile and it is real, and there is nothing false in it, and that is the thing about her that nobody ever believes.

MINUTE 34

She says:

“Would you want someone to do that for him?”

You have to make her say it again, because you have missed the first half.

She says it again, and she does not press, and she does not explain, and she does not say the word *donor* or the word *sign*, and you understand it perfectly well because everybody does.

MINUTE 35

You say yes.

MINUTE 36

The card comes from her jacket pocket. She has had it there since Helsinki. It is a small unremarkable thing with a box for a name and a box for a date and a line of standard wording that runs to about nineteen words, and you read perhaps six of them.

Organs, eyes and tissue for transplantation, therapy, research or education.

You read the first four. Everybody reads the first four.

MINUTE 37

The pen is hers.

MINUTE 38

And here is the detail that will be in you for the rest of your life, and that you will not be able to explain to your wife, and that will come back at odd hours for thirty years:

She does not let go of your hand while you sign.

She is holding the hand that signs. Your writing hand is in her hand and she moves with it, and the signature that goes onto that card is the ugliest one you have ever produced, and it is legally perfect.

MINUTE 39

She takes the card. She looks at it for a moment. Then she does something that is not in the sequence, that she does perhaps once in forty, that she cannot account for and has never told anyone about.

She lifts your hand and rests her forehead against your knuckles and stays there.

And you — undone, emptied out, still holding on — say the only generous thing you have left, which is this:

“Will you sign one?”

You want her to have it. You want to give her something. It is the only thing you have.

She lifts her head. And she says, gently, in a voice with nothing in it but warmth:

“I already have, love. Year one.”

You will remember that as the most beautiful moment of the worst week of your life. You will describe it to people. You will get a little way into describing it and then stop, because it does not survive being said out loud.

She is telling you she is inventory.

Neither of you knows that yet.

MINUTE 40

She takes her hand back.

LOAD SHEET III

**MERIDIAN COMPASSIONATE AIR — DONOR
AUTHORISATION, STANDARD CARD**

Reverse face. Set in 5.5 point. Reproduced here at size.

I hereby make an anatomical gift, to take effect upon my death, of the following: any needed organs, eyes and tissue for the purposes of transplantation, therapy, research or education.

This is a legally binding document of gift under the law of the jurisdiction of my residence. It may not be amended or revoked by any other person after my death, including a member of my family.

Signature _____ Date _____

Witness _____ Crew ID _____

Note appended by the carrier's counsel, internal file, not printed on the card: the word "or" in the fourth line is disjunctive and is doing a great deal of work. Recommend no change.

III. THE LEDGER

ELEVEN. HOUR 08 · 1A

06:40

He was still awake. Of course he was.

I went forward at hour eight because the aft cabin was quiet and because I had a card in my jacket pocket with a name on it and I wanted, for about four minutes, to stand somewhere that was not row 34.

"Coffee," Ferenc said. "Please. And then, if you will permit it, five minutes."

I brought the coffee. I did not sit down, because we do not, and he did not ask me to.

"You got one," he said.

"I don't discuss passengers."

"No. Quite right." He turned the cup a quarter turn on the tray, which is a thing I had watched a man in 34K do six hours earlier, and it went through me oddly. "May I tell you what is in this box."

"You don't have to."

"I would like to."

He put his hand flat on the lid.

"A liver," he said. "Recovered at eleven this morning in Kuopio from a woman of thirty-four who came off a horse. It is going to a boy of nine in Toronto who has been on a list for two years and who was called at nine o'clock tonight and told to stop eating."

The cabin hissed.

"Cold ischaemic time for a liver is eight to twelve hours," he said. "We are at eight hours and forty minutes. This is the entire reason I do not sleep, and the entire reason this box has its own seat, and the entire reason I will walk off this aircraft before any of you and a car will be at the stand. That is my work. It is not complicated work and I am very good at it."

"Then why were you struck off?"

I did not intend to say it. It simply arrived. He did not seem in the least surprised.

"Because I said something in a room where it was not wanted." He drank some of the coffee. "Ilse. What proportion of the cards you collect do you believe become a box like this one?"

"I don't have a figure."

"You have a feeling. Give me the feeling."

I did not answer immediately, because I did not want to be caught out with a number I had never actually examined, and because the number that came up in me when he asked was one I had apparently been carrying for twelve years without ever once looking at it.

"Most of them," I said. "Over time. Not immediately. Over a lifetime, most."

"Most," he said.

"Yes."

"Do you know how a person has to die in order to give away a liver?"

"In hospital."

"In hospital is nowhere near the beginning of it." He held up a hand and counted, and the hand was steady, and the fingers were the fingers I had noticed at the gate. "You must suffer a catastrophic brain injury. You must reach a hospital alive. You must be intubated and ventilated and remain so. You must be declared brain dead — not dead, brain dead, which is a specific and comparatively rare diagnosis requiring a specific and comparatively rare kind of dying. Your organs must be perfused the entire time by a machine and a team. You must not have certain infections or certain cancers. And all of this must happen in a facility that is set up to do it, and somebody must remember, in the middle of it, to look and see whether you have signed anything."

He put the hand down.

"Of all deaths in a developed country, the fraction that can produce a transplantable organ is on the order of one in a hundred. Some say less. Nobody serious says more."

"One in a hundred."

"You are a diligent woman. You may check that figure anywhere you like when we are on the ground. It is not a secret and it is not disputed and it is in every introductory text on the subject."

I stood in the aisle at hour eight with a card in my pocket and did the arithmetic I had spent twelve years not doing.

Eleven hundred and forty.

Eleven.

"Now," Ferenc said, gently, "read me the card."

"I know the card."

"Read it to me."

I said it from memory, because I do know it, because I have watched a great many people not read it.

Any needed organs, eyes and tissue for the purposes of transplantation, therapy, research or education.

"Stop there," he said. "Or. Say it again."

"Transplantation, therapy, research or education."

"Four things," said Ferenc. "One of them is on the poster. Do you know what the other three are?"

"Research is research."

"Research is a market." He said it without any relish at all, which was the worst thing about him. "It is called the non-transplant sector, and it is legal, and it is lightly regulated, and it is not small. A body that cannot give a single organ to a single patient is nonetheless worth a very great deal in pieces. Spines for surgical training. Knees and shoulders for device representatives to practise on. Torsos — they are called torsos, that is the trade term, I did not invent it — for teaching courses. Heads for dental instrument demonstrations. Whole cadavers for vehicle impact studies and for

the testing of protective equipment. There are price lists. I have seen them. They are laid out like a menu and there is a column for weight."

I said nothing.

"And here is the part which I think you have not considered," he said, "because there is no reason on earth why you would have. Transplantation requires you to die correctly. Research and education requires nothing at all. Old, sick, riddled, alone in a flat for three days in August — it does not matter. There is no rejection. There is no matching. There is no clock. Almost every death qualifies."

"So the number isn't eleven."

"No," said Ferenc. "The number is very nearly eleven hundred and forty."

He picked up his coffee and found it had gone cold and put it down again.

"You have not been running a lottery that mostly loses, Ilse. I am sorry. I would have preferred to be telling you that. You have been running a supply contract that essentially always pays."

I want to record what I did next, exactly, because I have gone over it a great many times since.

I said: "Thank you for the information."

And I picked up his cup, and I turned, and I walked the length of the cabin in the dark past a hundred and ninety-eight sleeping people, and I did not stop at row 34, and I went into the aft galley and pulled the curtain.

TWELVE. THE GALLEY

06:58

The logbook lives in my crew bag under the jump seat. Cloth-bound, the third one, the first two are at home in a drawer.

I do not know why I got it out. I would like to be able to tell you that I had a suspicion, that some professional instinct had begun to

assemble the thing, but that would be a lie and I have decided not to tell any more of those.

I got it out because I was frightened and it was mine.

The load sheet was on the clip by the door where it always is. I had signed it at 21:31 in Helsinki, before any of this, in my own hand, the way I have signed nine hundred of them.

COMPARTMENT 3 (AFT) Position 31L — HUM 1 — 88 kg — documentation attached, transit permit sighted

There is a second page to the documentation on a repatriation and it stays with the load sheet and it is not a secret; it is a transit permit and a certificate and it has a name on it, and I have looked at ten thousand names on ten thousand pieces of paper and they go through me like water through a pipe.

MIKKEL J. REITER

I sat down on the jump seat, which I had not done all night, and I opened the logbook at the back and I worked forwards.

I keep them by sector. Date, route, seat, name. My handwriting has got worse over twelve years and I could tell you roughly what year a page is from by the slope of it.

It took eleven minutes.

Two years and four months ago. Same route. Same direction. Seat 29A.

REITER, M.

In my own hand. In the same blue ink I have used since I started, because I buy the pens in boxes of fifty.

I sat in the galley with the curtain pulled and the book open on my knees and I could not summon one single thing about him. Not the face. Not the voice. Not whether he was tall. Nothing. There have been eleven hundred and forty of them and he is a name in a list in my own writing between a woman called Halme and a man whose surname I have spelled wrong.

He was flying home for his mother's funeral.

He would have been thirty-three or thirty-four. He would have been four days in the same shirt. He would have had a document wallet on his knee at hour six because they always do, and I would have looked at his shoulders and seen the narrowing, and I would have gone and washed my hands under the warm tap for ninety seconds because cold hands are a mistake I made once.

I knelt in an aisle two years ago and held that man's hand for forty minutes and asked him whether he would want somebody to do that for his mother.

And he said yes. They all say yes. And I wrote his name in this book that night in the crew hotel with a glass of wine because I was proud of it.

And he is three metres below me and a little forward, in position 31L, at eighty-eight kilograms, and his brother is in 34K with my card in his pocket and my signature on the witness line, and this aircraft is going to be paid for both of them.

That is the thing I had not seen. That is the thing that had been sitting in the load sheet on the clip by the door for twelve years in front of my face.

We fly them out at a discount. That is the compassionate fare and it is a kindness and it is also the cheapest customer acquisition in the industry, because it guarantees that everybody in the cabin is in the worst condition of their life on the same night at the same altitude.

And then, years later — five years, twenty years, whenever it happens, and it always happens — the card comes good, and what is left of them moves as freight, and freight moves commercially, and it moves in a temperature-controlled compartment in the belly of an aircraft.

And we are an airline.

We are paid once when they fly out grieving in a seat, and we are paid again by the kilo when they come back.

Nobody sat in a room and designed that. I want that understood and I want it understood because it is the only part of this that still makes me want to be sick. Somebody priced human remains

freight. Somebody else, in a different department, in a different decade, priced a bereavement fare. Somebody else again worked out that recovered tissue does not need a charter and can go in the hold of a scheduled service. Three ordinary commercial decisions, none of them wicked, and they stacked up into a machine, and the machine had a hole in the middle of it where a person was supposed to stand.

And I walked into the hole in year one and I was so good at it that they gave me a certificate.

I sat there for a long time. At some point the interphone chimed and I answered it and said everything was fine in the aft cabin, and it was.

Then I went to the back of the book, to the very first page, to the entry I made before all the others, in the neat careful handwriting of a woman of forty-one who had just found a thing she was going to be extraordinary at.

NOVAK, I. — self.

Year one. I have told that story four hundred times. I have used it to close conversations. I have said it to bishops and to journalists and to a man from the ministry, and I have said it tonight, at minute thirty-nine, to a man holding my hand.

It is an entry in the same ledger.

I am fifty-three years old and I have a card in a file with my name on it, and I am not going to die correctly, because almost nobody does, and Meridian flies me home too.

LOAD SHEET IV

MERIDIAN COMPASSIONATE AIR — RATE SCHEDULE, EXTRACT

Commercial in confidence. Effective 1 April. Supersedes all previous.

HUM — human remains, repatriation, accompanied or unaccompanied

Charged per consignment. Handling surcharge applies.
Documentation fee applies.

CAT A — tissue for transplantation, temperature critical

Charged per consignment. Priority uplift. Guaranteed offload. Cabin seat available on request at published fare.

CAT C — tissue and anatomical material, research and education, non-critical

Charged by gross weight. Standard freight rate. No priority. No guaranteed offload. May be co-loaded with HUM at operator's discretion.

PASSENGER — fare basis BEREV, compassionate

Discount to published economy fare. Proof of death required at check-in. Non-refundable. No frequent flyer accrual.

Note from commercial, appended: BEREV is our best-performing fare basis by contribution per seat once ancillary and downstream freight is attributed. Recommend no change to the discount level.

THIRTEEN. THE AWARD

07:10

There is a certificate. I should have mentioned it earlier and I did not, and the not-mentioning is itself worth something.

It is in a drawer at home with the first two logbooks. Cream card, a printed border, a foil seal. It says that Ilse Novak is recognised for an outstanding contribution to public awareness of anatomical gift, and it is signed by a man whose title takes up two lines, and I was given it in a room with a hundred and fifty people in it and there was a lunch afterwards with small pastries.

I have been photographed. Twice. Once for an internal magazine that goes to eleven hundred staff, and once, in year eight, for a national newspaper, in a piece about the donor shortage that ran to two thousand words and did not mention Meridian by name at my own request, which I made because I am a private person and which I have since understood was the most useful thing I have ever done for the company.

A bishop wrote to me. An actual bishop, on actual paper. He had read the piece and he wanted me to know that what I did was, in his view, a sacrament, and that he had said so from a pulpit. I wrote back. We exchanged four letters over a year. He was a good man and he is dead now and I am glad he is dead, which is a terrible sentence, and I am leaving it in.

A woman from the health ministry came out to Vantaa in year ten and rode a sector with me. She sat in the jump seat for the descent and asked whether the approach could be scaled — that was the word, scaled — and whether there was training material, and whether other carriers might be interested.

I told her there was no training material.

I did not tell her that I had tried, twice, to teach it, and that both women had failed at the same place, which is minute twenty-three, the three minutes of silence, because a kind person cannot leave a silence alone and fills it and puts the lid back on.

She wrote a paragraph about it in a report. I have the report. It is eleven pages and my paragraph is on page seven and it describes a promising informal practice in the commercial aviation sector.

And here is what I want to set down, at hour seven and ten minutes, sitting in a galley with a logbook on my knees, having just understood what the load sheet on the clip by the door has been saying to me every night for twelve years.

Every single one of them knew more than I did.

The commercial department knew. There is a note on the rate schedule about the discount level and the contribution per seat once downstream freight is attributed, and I have read that note perhaps forty times over the years while signing something else, and I have never once slowed down at the word *downstream*.

Operations knew, because operations loads the aircraft, and operations is the department that decided that positions 31L to 33L could take Category C when no repatriation was manifested, and wrote it in a standing instruction, and I countersign that instruction on every sector.

Legal knew. Legal is the only one of them that ever put it in writing, in an internal file, in a note about the fourth line of the card and the word *or*, and the note says *recommend no change*, and there is nothing else in the note, because there did not need to be.

And the ministry knew, or could have known, because it is not secret, none of it is secret, it is a rate schedule and a standing instruction and a nineteen-word sentence printed at five and a half point on the back of a card that anybody could read at any time.

Nobody hid anything from me.

That is the part I cannot put down. There was no conspiracy and no deception and no one ever asked me to do anything I did not think of myself. They simply found a woman in year one who was extraordinary at the only difficult part, and then they gave her a certificate and photographed her and let a bishop write to her, and did not correct her about the rest, because why would you correct a person who is producing eleven hundred and forty of anything.

The lunch had small pastries. I remember them because there were three kinds and I could not decide.

I have a foil seal in a drawer and eleven hundred and forty names in my own handwriting and eight or nine people alive somewhere who do not know my name, and everything else that came out of twelve years is in a compartment behind a door in the belly of an aircraft, cleaned between sectors, no further action.

IV. DESCENT

FOURTEEN. HOUR 09 • 34K

07:40

I went back to him because I was going to tell him.

I had it arranged in my head on the walk down. I would kneel — I would kneel again, which even at the time I understood was obscene — and I would say that there was something about the card he ought to know, and that he was entitled to have it back, and that I would tear it up in front of him and nothing further would happen.

I had the whole thing. I could hear myself saying it.

He was awake. He had the reading light on, the small one, and he had the supermarket bag out of the holdall and open on his knee and he was holding a disposable razor in a plastic wrapper and turning it over.

"I'm going to shave in the toilet," he said, when he saw me. "Before we land. I don't want to meet the — the people. Looking like this."

"There's a bathroom in the arrivals hall," I said. "It's better. You'll have twenty minutes while they clear the paperwork."

"Right." He put the razor back in the bag. "Thanks."

And then he said:

"I keep thinking about the card."

I did not say anything.

"Is that mad? I've got a dead brother in a box under my feet and I keep thinking about a bit of card in my jacket." He rubbed his face with both hands. "It's the only thing I've done all week that was any use."

"Tomas — "

"No, I mean it." He looked up at me and his face was wrecked and open and about nine years old. "Everything else I've done since Tuesday has been admin. I've filled in forms. I've paid people. I got very angry about a fax machine, which — anyway. Nothing I have

done has helped one single person. Not one. Not him, not my mother, not my wife, not anybody.”

He held on to the arm of the seat.

“And you asked me a question at five in the morning and I said yes and it’s the first time in eleven days I’ve been any good to anyone.”

There is a thing that happens in me at that point and I have gone looking for a word for it and there is not one.

“Would you do something for me,” he said.

“If I can.”

“Would you sign the witness line properly? With your name. Not the crew number.” He was embarrassed. “I want there to be a person on it.”

So I took the card out of my jacket, and I knelt in the aisle at hour nine, and I wrote ILSE NOVAK on the witness line under my crew ID in the same blue ink I have used since year one, and he watched me do it, and when I had finished he said thank you, and I said you’re welcome, and I put the card away.

That is the entire chapter. There is nothing else in it.

I did not tell him. I have had a long time to construct a defence of that and here is the best one I have, and it is not good enough, and I know it is not good enough.

If I had told him, I would have taken the card. And the card is the only thing standing between that man and the knowledge that he spent the last eleven days of his brother’s presence in the world filling in forms and losing his temper at a fax machine.

He would have had nothing. Not one thing.

I have taken a great deal from people in this job. I have taken it in the dark, at altitude, from people who could not defend themselves, and I have told myself for twelve years that I was giving them something to hold.

Hour nine was the only time in twelve years that it was actually true, and it was true because I lied by keeping my mouth shut, and

I would do it again, and that is the thing I cannot get out from under.

FIFTEEN. HOUR 10 · THE POUCH

08:40

It is not one card.

I want to be accurate. I have been reasonably accurate so far and there is no reason to stop at the end.

There is a pouch. It is a flat zip wallet, airline issue, the same one they use for currency, and it lives in the crew bag, and the cards go into it during the sector and they are counted and handed over on the ground with the paperwork. There is a box on the sector report. It says AUTHORISATIONS and it has a number written in it and the number is nearly always 1 and is sometimes 0.

At hour ten I sat on the jump seat with the curtain pulled and I took the pouch out and put it on my knee.

I thought about tearing it up.

I want you to understand that I got quite a long way with that. I had the card in both hands, at the corner, and there is a moment — I know exactly how long it was, it was about four seconds — where the whole of the rest of my life went one way instead of the other.

Two things stopped me and only one of them does me any credit.

The first is that it is not mine. That man signed it. He read six words of it, in the dark, at eight thousand feet, with my hand around his hand, and I engineered every part of that, and none of it changes the fact that a competent adult put his name on a document of gift and asked me to witness it properly with my own name because he wanted there to be a person on it. To tear it up would be to decide, on his behalf, that he had not really meant it. Everybody has been deciding things on that man's behalf for eleven days. I have taken enough off him for one night without taking that as well.

The second is worse.

Some of it is true.

Ferenc's boy in Toronto is nine years old and he has been on a list for two years and at nine o'clock last night somebody rang his house and told him to stop eating, and there is a liver in a box in seat 1B and it got there because a woman of thirty-four came off a horse in Kuopio and because at some point in her life she had signed something.

Somebody knelt in front of her, or stood, or handed her a form at a counter, or she did it on her own at a kitchen table, and it does not matter which, and that boy is going to be alive at Christmas.

Eleven, I said to Ferenc. Out of eleven hundred and forty. He did not correct me and I have since worked out that he was being kind, and that the true figure is smaller than that.

But it is not zero.

There are perhaps eight or nine people walking around somewhere on this earth tonight who are walking around because of forty minutes I spent on my knees in an aisle in the dark. I do not know their names and I never will. Eight or nine, out of eleven hundred and forty, and every single one of the other eleven hundred and thirty is a weight in a compartment on a rate schedule.

That is the arithmetic. Eight or nine against eleven hundred and thirty. Anybody can do that sum. I have done it perhaps four thousand times since that night and it comes out the same way every time and I have never once been able to make myself act on the answer.

Because you cannot know which one is which.

That is the whole trap and it is beautifully made and nobody made it. Every card might be the boy in Toronto. Every card is almost certainly a line on a load sheet. And you are fifty-three years old, kneeling in an aisle, and the man is holding your hand, and he is asking you to write your name on the witness line because he wants there to be a person on it.

I put the card in the pouch.

I zipped the pouch and put it in the crew bag and I sat there with my hands flat on my knees until the interphone went for the descent brief.

AUTHORISATIONS: 1.

SIXTEEN. TOP OF DESCENT

09:20

There is no dawn on this sector.

People are always surprised by that. We leave Helsinki at half past ten at night and we fly west for ten hours, which means we are running along with the night rather than through it, and by the time we come down at Toronto the local clock says half past one in the morning. We depart in the dark and we arrive in the dark and there is nothing in between.

Ten hours of night, uninterrupted, and then a wet apron.

I have flown day sectors on this route in the summer schedule and they are a completely different animal, and nobody signs anything on them, and for years I put that down to the shorter block time and the meal service and the fact that people talk more in daylight.

It is not that. It is that there is no dim in daylight. You need the dark and you need the hours and you need people to have been awake in it long enough to have run out of themselves.

We chase it west. We keep them in it for ten hours. That is not a policy, it is a timetable, and the timetable was set by slot availability at two airports and by the cost of a night landing.

I did the cabin at top of descent. Seat belts, tray tables, blinds up. Two hundred people came back into the world one at a time, and the lights came up in stages over four minutes so that nobody would notice being taken there.

Row 22 had slept. Row 8, the practised ones, were already stowed and were discussing whether to take the highway or the lakeshore. Row 11, the man of sixty-five, was awake and looking out of the window at nothing and had been, I think, for most of the night, and I had left him alone, and I am glad of that.

34K had shaved. In the toilet, with the disposable razor, against my advice, and he had cut himself twice on the jaw and had a piece of tissue on one of them and had not been able to see the other one at all. He had put on a clean shirt from the holdall. It was creased across the front from the packing.

He looked like a man on his way to be interviewed for a job he was not going to get.

"How do I look," he said.

"Better."

"Liar."

"You've got tissue on your face."

He took it off. The cut opened again immediately and he pressed the heel of his hand to it and laughed, and I gave him a napkin, and he held it there for the whole of the descent.

I want to put down one more thing about him and then I will leave him alone.

At about four thousand feet, with the gear coming down, he said, without any particular emphasis, as though it were an ordinary remark about the weather:

"I don't know how to be an only child."

I said, "No."

And he said, "Is that a stupid thing to say?"

And I said, "It's the least stupid thing anybody's said to me all night."

Wheels at 01:34 local. Ten hours and four minutes.

LOAD SHEET V

MERIDIAN COMPASSIONATE AIR — LOAD AND TRIM SHEET

Sector 1148 · YYZ-HEL · Aircraft 7L-MCC · Prepared at 03:05

Return leg. Same airframe. Turnaround 90 minutes.

COMPARTMENT 1 (FWD, TEMP CONTROLLED, +2 TO +6 C)

NIL

COMPARTMENT 3 (AFT)

Position 31L — CAT C — consignment ref 88-R — 34 kg — research and education — unaccompanied

Position 32L — CAT C — consignment ref 88-S — 19 kg — research and education — unaccompanied

Position 33L — CAT C — consignment ref 88-T — 7 kg — research and education — unaccompanied

BAGGAGE — 189 pieces — 2,610 kg

PASSENGERS BOARDED: 188 adults, 11 children, 2 infants

CREW: 2 flight deck, 6 cabin

Note: Compartment 3 loaded per standing instruction. Positions 31L to 33L were occupied on the outbound sector and have been cleaned. No further action.

SEVENTEEN. POSITION 4L, REVERSED

Toronto Pearson — 01:41

The box goes first.

It goes before anybody. The moment the parking brake is set and the door is armed and disarmed and opened, Ferenc stands up with the container in both hands and walks straight off, and there is a man on the airbridge in a high-visibility vest who has been standing there for twenty minutes waiting, and there is a car on the stand below with its engine running, and the whole transaction takes about ninety seconds.

Nobody in that cabin knows what has just happened. Two hundred people watch a tired man in a crumpled jacket carry a plastic box past them and they think, if they think anything, that he is somebody important, or that he has been rude.

Nine years old. Toronto. Two years on a list. Told to stop eating at nine o'clock the previous evening.

That is the single unambiguously good thing that occurred on my aircraft that night and it took ninety seconds and nobody saw it.

Then the passengers.

They go off the way they always go off, which is slowly and politely and with a great deal of apologising, and I stood at 4L and said goodbye two hundred times and meant it perhaps forty.

34K came past with his holdall and the napkin still in his hand and he stopped, which they are not supposed to do because it holds up the aisle, and he put out his hand and I took it, and it was the third time I had held that man's hand and the first time in front of anybody.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome."

"No — " He stopped. He had something prepared and it went. "I don't know what I'd have done."

"You'd have got through it."

"Maybe."

And he went. And the queue closed up behind him and the next one said sorry for the delay, and the one after that said sorry for taking so long with her bag, and I said goodbye, and goodbye, and goodbye.

Then the hold.

Here is the standing instruction and it is printed in the manual and it is, in its own way, a decent piece of thinking. HUM positions are loaded first and offloaded last, and they are not offloaded in view of the terminal.

The reason given is dignity, and I believe that the person who wrote it meant it.

The effect is this.

At 02:19, thirty-eight minutes after the last passenger left the aircraft and eleven minutes after the airbridge retracted, a hold door opened on the aft port side and two ground handlers in high-visibility vests and ear defenders brought Mikkel Reiter down onto the apron in the rain on a belt loader, and got him onto a flatbed trolley, and drove him across four hundred metres of wet

concrete to a shed on the far side of the cargo apron where a van was waiting.

It took nine minutes. They did it properly. I want that recorded, because both of those men have done it a hundred times and they still take their gloves off for it, and nobody has ever asked them to.

I watched from the aft galley window because I always do.

And somewhere on the other side of that building, past the immigration hall, past the baggage carousel, past a door with a laminated sign on it that says FAMILIES AND SPECIAL ASSISTANCE, Tomas Reiter was sitting on a plastic chair with a napkin pressed to his jaw, waiting to sign a form, in a room with no window.

He is not permitted airside. Nobody is. There is no version of the rules under which a member of the public may stand on a live apron at two in the morning, and the rules are right, and every safety argument for them is correct.

So he did not see it.

He will spend the rest of his life not having seen the only part of the whole business that was real.

EIGHTEEN. THE CREW BUS

02:44

The bus takes eleven minutes and it goes round the back of the freight sheds.

I sat where I always sit, at the front on the left, with the bag on my knees, and the windows were fogged and somebody two rows back was talking about a restaurant.

I got the logbook out.

I have done this at the end of every sector for twelve years, in a bus or a hotel bar or a bathroom at three in the morning, and I have never once missed one, because a record that is nearly complete is not a record.

The last entry on the page was from Tuesday. Above it, Sunday. I found the pen.

Date. Route. Seat. Name.

I wrote: *REITER, T.*

And then I sat with the book open on my knees in a bus going past a freight shed in the rain, and I looked at what I had written, and I turned back two years and four months, to a page in slightly better handwriting, between a woman called Halme and a man whose surname I have spelled wrong.

REITER, M.

Two brothers. Same hand. Same ink. Same seat map, near enough. Same forty minutes, near enough. Same question, word for word, because I have never varied it.

One of them was in a shed on the far side of the apron and one of them was in a room with no window with a napkin pressed to his face, and both of them had said yes to me, and both of them had thought it was the only useful thing they had done all week, and one day the second one will be a weight in a compartment on a rate schedule and I will be dead by then and somebody else will be kneeling in the aisle.

I closed the book.

I would like to be able to tell you that I stopped.

I did not stop. I flew the return sector thirty-six hours later. There were three consignments in the aft compartment and I signed the load sheet at 03:05 without reading past the weights, the way I have signed nine hundred of them, and there were a hundred and eighty-eight adults and eleven children and two infants in the cabin above them.

I did not take anybody on that sector. Nor the next one. Nor for eleven sectors after that, which is the longest I have gone since year one, and it was noticed, and there was a conversation about it, and the conversation was extremely pleasant.

And then on the twelfth sector there was a woman in 19D, travelling alone, fourth day in the same coat, with her mother's

certificate still in the document wallet on her knee at hour six, holding her shoulders in that particular narrow way that I have never once been wrong about.

I washed my hands under the warm tap for ninety seconds and dried them properly.

Cold hands are a mistake I made once.

There is a discounted ticket you can buy when somebody dies. It is called the compassionate fare, and to qualify for it you have to prove the death at the desk, in a queue, in front of everyone.

Ilse Novak has worked that queue for twelve years. She is the senior cabin attendant on a small carrier that flies the bereaved in the cabin and their dead in the hold, on the same aircraft, on the same night. Somewhere around the seventh hour, when the lights are down and the air is thin and nobody aboard has been touched in days, she kneels in the aisle beside a chosen passenger and takes their hand and does not let go for forty minutes.

She holds the company record. Eleven hundred and forty signatures. She keeps the names herself, in her own handwriting, because she is proud of it and because she is the sort of woman who believes a record ought to be kept properly.

She has never once asked what happens after the signature. She is about to find out at thirty-eight thousand feet, over black water, with three hours still to run and no way off the aircraft.

A slow, cold novella about grief, air pressure, freight, and the oldest instrument there is.

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