

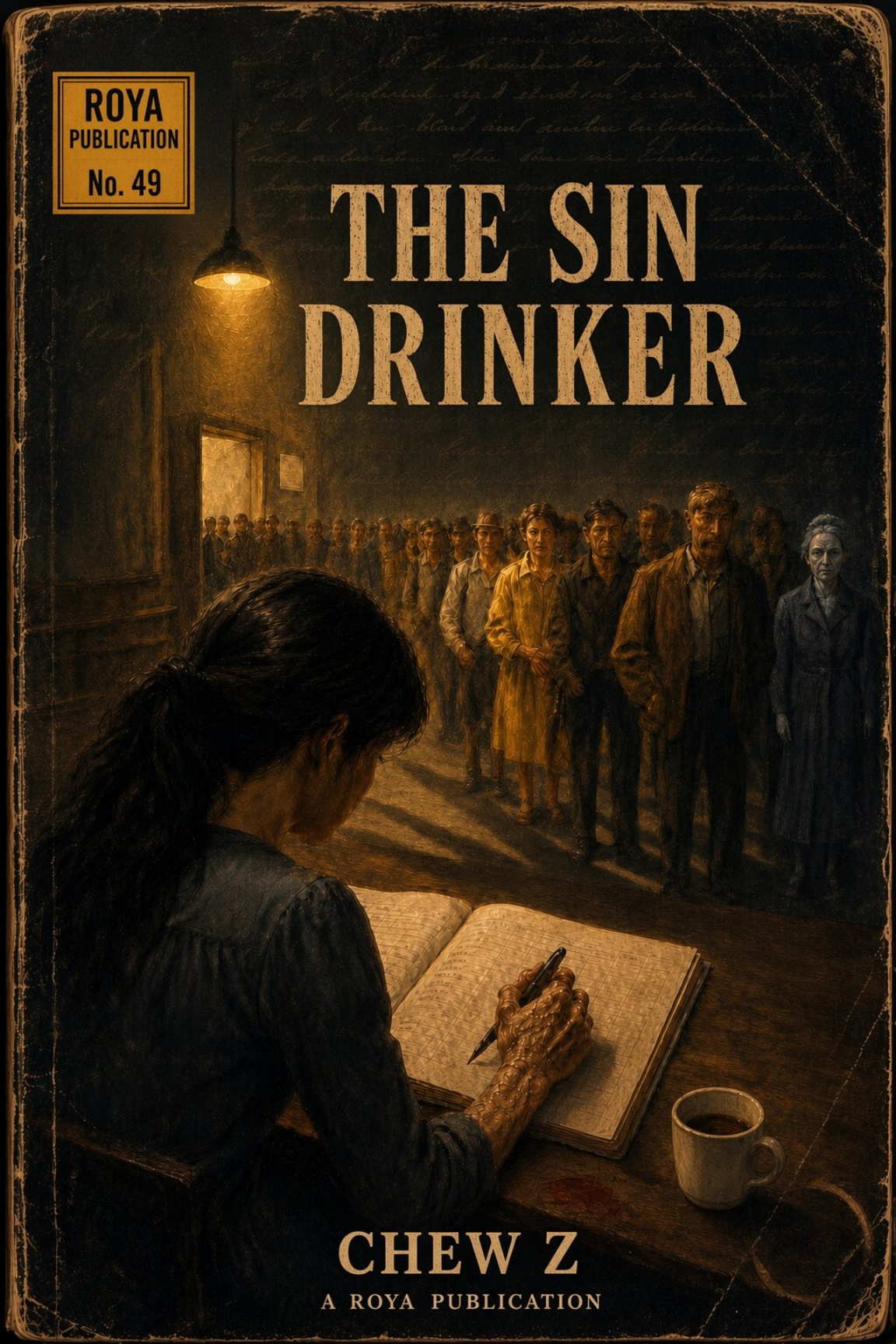
ROYA
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No. 49

THE SIN DRINKER

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION



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Printed in the Reach

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

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THE ARCHIVE DRAWER

NINE FINAL ENTRIES BY NINE PEOPLE WHO HELD THE POST SINCE 1911 —
AND NOT ONE OF THEM CHOSE TO SPEND THEIR PAGE ON A WARNING.

SYNOPSIS

Once a season, every resident of Halloran sits down across a plain desk and dictates their grievances to a municipal officer called the Taker, who records them in longhand and — this is the transaction — carries them out of the building in her body.

The town has done this for ninety years. It works. Halloran is pleasant, forgiving, light. Its people are kind to one another in a way visitors remark on and cannot quite place.

Ruth Amsel is thirty-four when she answers the advertisement. She is hired because she has no family within two hundred miles, because she writes a clean hand, and because she has spent nine years absorbing a great deal without ever once raising her voice. The Tithe Office calls this temperament.

What Ruth learns, slowly, and always a little too late to act on: the grievances do not dissipate. They are stored. And when a Taker reaches capacity, the town has a procedure for emptying her.

The Sin Drinker is a novella about a community that hired someone to hold its grudges, and about what a people become when they can no longer recognise what has been done to them.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I began this book from a small question, which is whether a grudge is a burden or an instrument.

We are taught to put down our resentments. Forgive, release, move on, be light. It is offered as hygiene, and mostly it is meant kindly. But a grudge is also a form of memory — arguably the most durable one we have. It is the body's refusal to file something away as settled. Long after the mind has agreed to be reasonable, the resentment sits there in the chest, keeping the account open. It is stubborn, it is unattractive, and it is very often correct.

So I wanted to build a town that had solved the problem. Not a dystopia — Halloran is a nice place, and I want the reader to feel that it is a nice place — but a community that had found a hygienic, administrative, entirely voluntary way to stop holding on. And then I wanted to ask what such a people would be unable to see.

The rest followed from a second question, which is what it costs to be the one who holds it instead, and whether that person is a servant, a drain, or a weapon. In the end I think she is all three, and I do not think the town could tell you which.

There is one further thing under this, which is older than the book and which I will name only briefly. In the tradition I grew up hearing about, the world is understood as a contest between *asha* — the true order, the way things actually are — and *druj*, the Lie. What is unusual about that framing is that the Lie is not primarily a false statement. It is a disorder. It is the world made unrecognisable to the people living in it. I have never found a better description of what a certain kind of comfort does.

I should say plainly that there is no supernatural machinery in this book beyond the one impossible thing at its centre, and even that one I have tried to render as paperwork. The horror of Halloran is not that it is haunted. It is that it has a filing cabinet, an order form for ledgers, and a very kind woman who administers the whole arrangement and has never once lied to anybody.

CONTENTS

VERSE THE FORTY-NINTH

I. THE HAND

II. THE TITHERS

III. WHAT THE LAND WAS CALLED

IV. THE CUP

V. THE CROSSING

VERSE THE FORTY-NINTH

Read aloud in the Tithe hall before the taking of each season.

*Come with the year still sour in your mouth,
come with the fence line and the debt unpaid,
come with the brother who was given the house,
come with the vow you kept and now regret you made.*

*Set it down here. The town was never made to hold.
The town was made to walk out light and clean.
What the mouth lets go is weather, and goes cold;
what the hand sets down is carried, and unseen.*

*So drink, and let the ledger take your part,
and leave here gentler than you came within,
and love your neighbour with a lightened heart,
and never count the cost of loving him.*

*We do not ask our own to bear the weight.
We send away. A stranger comes by post —
kinless, patient, schooled in swallowing late,
and we call her ours the way we call it frost.*

*Blessed the town that carries not a stone.
Blessed the ground that answers to one name.
Blessed the closing year that leaves us clean.*

Blessed the hand that bears away our shame.

Drink, and be opened. Write, and be filled.

*Come to the ending of your carrying,
and we will walk you out at dusk, and still
your hands, and give you a small good house,
and thank you,
and begin.*

I. THE HAND

The bus put me down at the crossroads a little after four and did not wait to see whether anyone met me.

There was a bench. There was a shelter with three sides and a roof of corrugated tin gone the colour of weak tea. There was a road that ran west into the town and east into a field that had been ploughed and left, and there was a sign, white on green, that said HALLORAN and under that, in smaller letters, the population, which had been painted over twice and corrected twice and now read four thousand one hundred and six.

I sat with my case on my knees for eleven minutes. I remember counting them, because counting is a thing I do instead of worrying, and because there was nothing else in that landscape to attend to. The field had been turned over and nothing put in it. There was a line of poplars at the far edge, planted in a row so straight it looked like something a person had done in anger.

Then a man came out of town on a bicycle, and slowed as he passed, and said, "You'll be for the Office."

"I will."

"They'll have forgotten you," he said, not unkindly. "They do that. It's not meanness." And he stood on the pedals and went on east into the field road, and that was the first person I met in Halloran, and he was entirely pleasant, and I want to be clear about that from the start. Everyone was pleasant. That is not a thing I am being ironic about. It is the whole of what I have to report.

I walked in. It took twenty minutes, and the town assembled itself around me the way small towns do — first the outbuildings, the equipment yard, a garage with two pumps and a dog asleep between them; then houses, set back, painted; then a school, which was a low brick building with a name over the door.

The name over the door was STORR.

I noticed it the way you notice a name over a door, which is to say I did not notice it at all, and I record it here only because I have since gone back through everything I saw that first afternoon looking for the moment I could have understood, and this is the earliest candidate. A name over a door. A perfectly ordinary thing.

A town has a family in it who gave money for a school, and the school carries the family's name, and nobody thinks about it twice, and that is how it is supposed to work.

— — —

The Tithe Office was on the square between the assessor and a shop that sold wool.

I had expected — I am not sure what I had expected. Something with a certain weight to it. What I got was a door with frosted glass and gold lettering, and behind the door a room with a counter, and behind the counter a woman of about sixty in a cardigan the colour of oatmeal, who looked up and said, "Oh, *Ruth*," as though we had known each other for years and she had been waiting all afternoon.

"Mrs Storr."

"Adele. Nobody's called me Mrs Storr since my mother-in-law died and I don't miss either of them." She came round the counter. She took my case out of my hand before I could stop her, which is a thing people do to you when they have decided you are theirs. "You walked. God, you walked. Nobody told you Terrence would come out for you?"

"A man on a bicycle said you'd have forgotten me."

"That'll be Terrence," she said, delighted, "and he's quite right, and I'm mortified, and you'll have a cup of tea before you see anything."

I should stop here and give the reader the words, because Halloran uses three of them and uses them the way other towns use *rates* and *refuse day*, and I had all three explained to me over that first pot of tea.

The *Tithe* is the collection itself. A tithe, in the old sense, is a tenth — the portion of a harvest a household owes and hands over, every year, as a matter of course. Halloran kept the word and changed the crop. What is collected four times a year in the hall is not grain and not money. It is grievance: every complaint, resentment and grudge a person has accumulated since the last collection, spoken aloud across a desk and handed in like anything else that is owed.

The *tithers* are everyone who comes to pay — which is to say, the town. Four thousand people, in alphabetical order, four seasons a year.

And the *Taker* is the one who receives. One officer, always brought in from outside, who sits on the far side of the desk, writes each grievance down in longhand, and — this is the whole of the arrangement, and nobody in Halloran finds it strange, because nothing you have done since childhood is strange — carries what she writes. Not in the book. In herself. The tither goes out the door lighter. The Taker keeps it.

That was the post I had answered an advertisement for. I want to set down what the Office was, physically, because I have thought about it a great deal since.

It was two rooms. The front room had the counter, a bench for waiting, a rack of forms — dog licences, culvert permits, the tithe schedule for the coming season, which was a single sheet with the dates of the four collections and the hours the hall would be open. Behind the counter there was a filing cabinet, grey, four drawers, with a small brass frame on each drawer holding a typed card. The cards said, from the top: CURRENT. PRIOR. ARCHIVE. ORDERS.

The back room was smaller and had a window that gave onto the yard, and in it there was a desk of plain wood, and a chair, and on the desk a ledger.

That was all. That was the whole apparatus of the thing. I had come three hundred miles on the strength of an advertisement, and what waited for me at the end of it was a room the size of a pantry with a desk in it, and a woman in a cardigan going on about tea.

I say all this because I have read accounts — you understand that I have had a great deal of time to read, latterly — of people who walked into some room or other and felt the wrongness of it immediately, felt the air change, knew. I did not know. I felt nothing except that it was smaller than I expected and that the radiator was on too high. If there is a lesson in this account, and I am not certain there is, it is that the thing does not announce itself. It has a counter. It has a rack of forms. It has an order book for

stationery, and I have seen the order book, and the ledgers are item fourteen, and they cost less than you would think.

— — —

She showed me the desk that first evening, before the tea had properly gone cold, because she could see I wanted to be shown.

"Now," she said. "The mechanics. It's simpler than people expect and I'd rather you had it from me than picked it up wrong."

She opened the ledger. It was ruled, and had a margin, and was three-quarters empty.

"They come in and they sit there" — the chair on the far side, which I had not registered as being on the far side of anything — "and they talk. And you write it down. That's it. That's the whole of it."

"In longhand."

"In longhand, in your own hand, in the book." She said this without any change of tone at all, and that is important, and I will come back to it. "It doesn't work typed. It doesn't work if someone else writes it for you. It doesn't work if you record it and write it up after. The hand has to be yours and it has to be at the time." She squared the ledger on the blotter. "The saying doesn't do anything on its own. People find that hard to credit — they come in wanting to unburden, and they think the unburdening's in the telling, and it isn't. What's spoken is just weather. It's the writing that moves it."

"Moves it where?"

And here is the thing about Adele Storr, which took me most of a year to see properly and which I have never been able to hate her for.

She said, "To you, dear," and she said it the way you would tell a new clerk which drawer the invoices go in.

— — —

There is a word for what I felt then and the word is *relief*.

I had come to Halloran with something of my own. I am going to set it down here in the plain way, because I have spent my whole life declining to, and because there is no longer any reason not to.

My mother was ill for nine years. I nursed her. There was no one else — my father had been dead a long while and my brother had a family in another country and sent money instead, which I understood, and which I have never in my life said a word against, and which sat in me like a stone for nine years.

What I did not expect, and what nobody warns you about, is that she came to hate me for it. Not for anything I did. For being there. For being the one who saw her not able to do things. Every kindness I did her was a fresh humiliation and there was no way to stop doing kindnesses, and so I humiliated her every day for nine years, four or five times a day, and she resented me for it with a purity that I think must have been the last strong thing she had.

She died in the March. I was thirty-four. I had a small amount of money and no one to tell.

So when Adele Storr said *to you, dear*, in that voice, over the tea, what went through me was not fear. It was a kind of lifting. I thought — and I remember the shape of the thought exactly — *at last, a use*. I thought: I have been absorbing things for nine years and nobody was collecting them and here is a place with a desk and a book and a schedule and a wage, and a whole town that will hand me its griefs and thank me.

I thought that carrying would be the opposite of being alone.

I want that on the record before anything else, because everything that follows is easier to bear if you understand that nobody tricked me. The advertisement was accurate. Adele Storr was truthful. The mechanism was explained to me on the first evening, over tea, in a room with a radiator on too high, and I said yes with my whole chest.

— — —

“There’s one more piece,” she said, “and then I’ll let you sleep.”

She went out to the front room and came back with a cup. Not a cup in any ceremonial sense — a plain white thing, the kind you get six of. There was perhaps two inches of liquid in it, dark, still faintly warm, and the smell of it came up at me like something out of a hedgerow: bitter, green, with a metal edge underneath.

“What is it?”

“It’s what we give you.” She set it down. “It’s for the hands, mostly. You’ll find you cramp. Every Taker cramps, it’s the writing, hours of it. This settles that.” She pushed it half an inch towards me. “Before each session. Not after, it’s no good after. Before.”

“What’s in it?”

“I couldn’t tell you the half of it,” said Adele Storr, cheerfully, and I have thought about that sentence for three years. Because it was true. She could not have told me. She had administered that cup twice a season for thirty years and she did not know what was in it and had never asked, and the reason she had never asked is that it was on the order form, item nine, between the ink and the blotting paper.

I drank it.

It was foul, and then it was not, and then about eleven minutes later — I counted, out of habit — the walls of the room went a very small distance further away from me than they had been.

That is the closest I can get to it. People want a description of colours and there are no colours. What the cup does is it takes away a thing you did not know you had, which is the skin between you and the room. Not the skin on your body. The other one. The one that means that when a person across a table is unhappy, you observe that they are unhappy, and it stays theirs.

That went. And what came in its place was Adele Storr sitting three feet away from me, and I could feel — with no image and no words and nothing you could call thought — that she was tired, and pleased with me, and worried about a thing to do with her son that had nothing to do with any of this, and that under all of it she was a fundamentally contented woman who had been contented her whole life and did not know that this was rare.

I said, "Oh."

"Yes," said Adele. "It's a lot the first time. It settles."

— — —

She gave me the back pages that night, and I have come to think of this as the cruellest hour of my life, though nothing happened in it at all.

"Every Taker writes a last entry," she said. "When they're done. It's the tradition and it's also practical — you'll want to know who came before you. They're all in the archive drawer. Take them up with you."

There were nine.

I sat on the bed in the room above the wool shop, which the Office rented for me, and I read nine final entries by nine people who had held my post since 1911, and I understood not one thing.

Not because they were cryptic. Because I could not read them.

The first three were legible. A man called Aldous Brant, 1911 to 1919, who wrote in a copperplate that got shakier over four lines and complained, at the end, about a dog. A woman called Sylvie Oduya, 1919 to 1931, who wrote two sentences about her sister. A man whose name I could not make out at all, 1931 to 1938, four words.

And then it went. The later hands went. By the 1960s the entries were three or four words got down with enormous effort in letters an inch high, and by the last of them — Marguerite Sayers, retired 1979 — it was a single word which I took for *cold* and which was not, and I know now what it was, and I am not going to write it.

I sat with those nine pages and what I thought was: *how sad*. I thought: these were old people at the end of long service and their hands had failed them, the way hands do.

I did not think: these are the only nine people who ever knew what I am about to know, and each of them had one page, and each of them chose what to spend it on, and not one of them chose to warn me.

I have thought about that a great deal since. I have concluded that it was not cowardice, or not only cowardice. I think that by the time you have a page, you no longer have the hand. And I think that is not an accident either, though I cannot prove it, and there is no one left to ask.

— — —

My first collection was on a Tuesday, at nine in the morning, and it was a woman named Doreen Callas, and it was about a fence.

She was seventy-one. She had a coat on though the hall was warm. She sat down in the chair on the far side of the desk and put her handbag on her knees and held it with both hands like something that might get away, and she said, "Do I just start?"

"Whenever you like."

She talked for forty minutes.

The fence was between her property and the property of a man named Vergil Doak, and it had been put in wrong in 1974, and it was wrong by somewhere between eleven and fourteen inches depending on where you measured, and she had measured it in eleven places, and she recited all eleven, and the recitation took nine minutes.

I wrote it down.

Then she told me about the letter she had written in 1976, and the letter she had received, and the phrasing of the letter she had received, which she could still quote, and she quoted it. Then she told me about Doak's wife, who was dead now, and who had once said something at a church function about Doreen's mother that Doreen had never repeated to anybody, and which she now repeated to me, and which was so small that I had to write it twice to be sure I had it right.

Somewhere around the thirty-minute mark I understood that the fence was not the subject. The subject was that Doreen Callas had been a person to whom a wrong was done in 1974 and no one had ever agreed with her about it, and she had carried the

un-agreed-with-ness of it for forty-nine years, and it had become the shape of her.

I wrote that down too. I wrote it all down. My hand ached from the second page onward and I kept going because she was still talking, and because it did not occur to me that I was permitted to stop.

And at the fortieth minute she stopped, and sat back, and said, "Well," and looked around the room as if she had just come into it. Her face had changed. Not dramatically. She looked like a woman who had put down two bags of shopping.

"Is that all right?" she said. "Was that all right? I do go on."

"That's what it's for."

"You're a nice girl," said Doreen Callas, and she meant it, and she took her handbag and she went out into the morning and I have seen her many times since and she has never once mentioned the fence to me or to anyone, because it is not in her any more. It is in the book, and it is in me, and Doreen Callas is a cheerful woman of seventy-four who is very good with her grandchildren.

I sat in the little room for a while afterward.

I did not feel ill. I want to be precise, because precision is all I have to offer. I did not feel ill and I did not feel burdened and there was no moment of arrival. What there was, was this: I sat in the chair after she had gone, and I found that I was thinking about the fence.

Not remembering it. *Thinking* about it. Turning it over. Getting angry, in a small idling way, about eleven to fourteen inches of ground I had never seen belonging to a woman I had met once.

And I thought — and this is the last unclouded thought I can find in the whole of that year — *well, that's natural. You've just sat through forty minutes of it. It'll pass.*

It did not pass. Nothing passes. That is the entire discovery of my life and it took me two years and a woman's death to arrive at it, and I could have had it on the first Tuesday, in a warm room, for nothing.

— — —

I saw Ottmar Lisk for the first time that same week, across the square, and I did not know what I was looking at.

There was a man of about seventy standing outside the wool shop, quite still, looking at the window display. He was well dressed. He had a good coat. He was standing with his hands held slightly away from his body, the way you hold your hands when they have been in cold water.

Adele was with me. She said, "That's Ottmar. You'll want to know him."

"He's the other one?"

"He's the one before you." She said it without lowering her voice. "Nine years. He's very near the end of it now, poor lamb, he'll be relieved in the autumn. He's earned it."

Relieved.

I looked at him across the square for perhaps four seconds. He did not look at us. His hands, held out at that slight angle, were the wrong colour and the wrong shape, and I registered that, and I filed it as arthritis, because arthritis is a thing that happens to men of seventy, and because the alternative had not yet been offered to me and I am not clever enough to have invented it on my own.

He would be relieved in the autumn. He had earned it. There would be a small good house at the edge of town.

Everything I was told was true.

GRIEVANCE ENTERED — SPRING COLLECTION

The road. It goes round. There was never any need for it to go round, there's nothing there, it's flat as a plate, and it adds a mile and a half each way and it has done since before I was born and nobody will say why. I've asked. They say it's always gone round. Also my son-in-law.

GRIEVANCE ENTERED — SPRING COLLECTION

I lent Bev four hundred in the November. She has not mentioned it. I have not mentioned it. We are perfectly friendly. We speak most days. It is the not mentioning that I cannot get past — the way we

have both agreed, without agreeing, that it is not a thing, and I am the only one of us doing the agreeing, and she gets to be a person who does not owe anybody anything, and I get to be a person who is fine about it, and I have been fine about it for two years.

GRIEVANCE ENTERED — SPRING COLLECTION

The chewing. That is all. That is the whole of it. Thirty-one years, and I love her, and I cannot sit at the table.

II. THE TITHERS

There is a rhythm to a collection season and it took me one full turn of the year to learn it.

The hall opens at nine. The schedule is posted in the Office window and in the church porch and at the garage, and people come more or less when they are told to come, in the order of the register, which is alphabetical and has been since 1911. Four days for A through F. Four for G through L. And so on. Two weeks in the spring, two in the summer, two in the autumn, two in the winter, and in the between-times you have the filing to do, and the previous season to index, and nothing else at all.

Four thousand one hundred and six people. Not all of them come — children under fourteen do not, and there are perhaps three hundred adults in any given season who do not bother, and there is one household that has never come, and I will get to that.

Call it three thousand two hundred sittings a year. Call it four a day, five in a heavy week. Call it forty minutes each and some of them two hours.

I got very good at it very quickly, and that was the problem, and nobody told me it was the problem because from where they stood it did not look like one.

— — —

Here is what I learned about the work in the first summer.

The first thing is that you cannot ration. I tried. Around the fourth week I started doing a thing where I let the words come in at a slight distance — nodding, writing, keeping my attention a little bit above the desk. It is what a doctor does. It is what a priest does. It is a professional skill and I had assumed it was the professional skill of this job as well.

It does not work. What I found was that on the days I did that, the writing came out fine and the ledger filled up and nothing transferred at all. The grievance stayed where it was. Doreen Callas's fence had come into me because for forty minutes I had genuinely and stupidly cared about eleven to fourteen inches of a stranger's ground.

That is the mechanism. It is not the ink and it is not the cup, quite. The cup takes the wall down; the hand does the moving; but the thing that has to be there in the middle is that you *feel it as they felt it*, at full weight, without discount. If you do not, you are a clerk. If you do, you are a Taker.

Which means that the qualification for this work is the one quality that guarantees it will destroy you. They do not hire the strong. There is no strength involved anywhere in it. They hire the porous.

The second thing I learned is that carrying admits no hierarchy.

I want to be exact about this because it is the part that people cannot believe. I sat, in one Thursday of that first summer, with a man who told me for fifty minutes about his neighbour's wind chimes; and then with a woman who told me, in a flat voice, in four minutes, what her uncle had done to her in a car in 1961 and what her mother had said about it afterwards.

I wrote them both down in the same hand in the same book.

And they arrived in me at the same density. That is the truth of it and it is the thing I still cannot get anyone to understand. There is no scale. There is no valve that opens wider for the uncle than for the wind chimes. The apparatus takes what is given at the weight the giver gives it, and the man with the wind chimes had a grievance that occupied the whole of his available capacity for grievance, and so it came in at the whole of mine.

I carry both of those. I have carried them for three years. If you asked me now, sitting here, which of them presses harder, I could not tell you, and there is no version of me left that thinks that is an acceptable answer.

— — —

I want to give one sitting whole, from the inside, so the reader knows what the work actually was. I will give the foreman, because he was ordinary, and ordinary is the point.

His name was Aldo Pruitt and he ran the crew at the grain store and he came in on a Wednesday in his work clothes, having plainly decided that changing would have made it an occasion. He sat with

his cap on his knee. He was perhaps sixty. He said, "I don't have much."

They all say that. It is a courtesy, like wiping your feet.

Then he said that he had run that floor for twenty-two years. That in twenty-two years the store had never once lost a contract over weight or spoilage, which was him, that was his doing, the checking was his and the system for the checking was his. That three managers had come and gone above him in that time and each of them had been thanked at a dinner. That there had never been a dinner for him, and he had never wanted one, he wanted that understood, he was not a man who wanted dinners.

"But you notice," he said. "That's the thing of it. You'd think it would wear out, the noticing. It's twenty-two years. And every time the wagon goes out clean I notice that nobody knows it went out clean because of me, and the noticing is as fresh as the first day. It doesn't wear. Why doesn't it wear?"

And here is what the work is. The cup was in me and the wall was down, and so I did not hear that question the way you have just read it. It came across the desk with its whole weight — twenty-two years of a man standing on a cold floor at five in the morning being excellent at something in front of nobody — and because the wall was down it was not *his* twenty-two years by the time it reached me. It was simply twenty-two years, unowned, looking for a place to stand. And my pen was moving. And the place it found was me.

You feel it go in. I have tried many ways of saying this and the truest is the plainest: it is like swallowing when your throat is sore. There is a moment of resistance, and a moment of passage, and then a weight has changed rooms, and the man across the desk feels the weight change rooms — you watch it cross his face like weather clearing — and he straightens, and looks about himself, and says something like *well*, and picks his cap up off his knee.

Aldo Pruitt stood at the door and said, "I don't know what you did, but thank you," and went back to the grain store.

And I sat and noticed, freshly, as if it were mine, because it now was, that nobody knew the wagons went out clean because of me. I

carried a resentment about a grain store I had never entered. I carry it tonight. It has not worn. He was right about that. It does not wear.

— — —

Adele took me to lunch at the end of the summer season and told me I was doing wonderfully.

We sat in the window of the place on the square. She had the soup. She said, "I'll tell you what everyone's saying, and then I'll stop, because it'll go to your head. They're saying it's the best it's felt in years."

"The town?"

"The town." She broke a roll. "You get a — there's a *texture* to a season, you'll learn to feel it. Some years the collection goes through and everyone's a bit flat afterwards, and you can tell it didn't take properly. And some years it's like this. Everyone's light. My sister-in-law spoke to me at the fete for the first time since 1998." She laughed, delighted, entirely herself. "You're filling wonderfully, Ruth. Ottmar was never this quick."

I said thank you.

I have gone back to that sentence perhaps a thousand times. *You're filling wonderfully*. She was paying me a compliment. She was not being sly, she was not enjoying a secret, she was a woman of sixty in a soup restaurant telling a young colleague that she was good at her job, and the thing she was praising me for was the rate at which I was being consumed.

And the horror of Adele Storr — I have arrived at this slowly and I hold it now without any anger, which is itself a symptom — is that she was not concealing the second half of the sentence. There was no second half in her. She had administered this office for thirty years and she had never asked what was in the cup and she had never asked where the load went at the end and she had never asked why the qualification was kinlessness. Not because she suspected and looked away. Because it had never presented itself to her as a thing that had a question in it.

She was, I think, the most contented woman I have ever met, and she had been made that way on purpose, and so had everybody else, and that is the whole crime and it does not have a criminal in it that you could point at.

— — —

I met my own life in a stranger's mouth in the September.

Her name was Wynn Tavish and she was fifty-eight and she had come in about a boundary hedge, which is what she said at the door, and then she sat down and did not talk about the hedge.

She talked about her mother.

Six years, she said. She had done six years of it. There was a brother in Perth. The brother sent money and rang at Christmas, and she had never in her life said a word against him and did not intend to start now. And her mother had hated her for it. Not for anything she did — for being the one who was there. For being the witness. Every cup of tea was an insult and there was no way to stop bringing the tea.

"She was a good woman," Wynn Tavish said. "I want that written down as well. She was a good woman and she hated me and both of those are true and I've never been able to put them in the same sentence out loud."

I wrote it down.

I wrote it in my own hand, at the time, in the book, with the cup in me and the wall down, feeling it exactly as she felt it, which is the only way it works.

Here is what I had believed, without ever quite articulating it, since the first evening over the tea: that this office was a kind of exchange. That I gave and received in the same coin. That because I was a person who had carried something, carrying other people's would be a sort of company for it — that there would be a levelling, a fellowship, a *me too* that did some quiet work on the original.

There is no exchange. I sat there with my hand going and I found that I now had two of it. Mine, which was nine years, and Wynn

Tavish's, which was six, and they did not merge and they did not console one another and they did not cancel. They sat side by side in the same chest like two tenants who will not speak.

She said, "Oh — oh, that's better. That's much better. God, I'm sorry, I've made you go pale."

"It's a long morning."

"You want to eat something," said Wynn Tavish, kindly, and went out into the September and has been, I am told, a much easier person to be around ever since.

GRIEVANCE ENTERED — AUTUMN COLLECTION

It was my drawings. It was all my drawings and my numbers and eleven months of it and when it went up

on the board at the county it had his name on it and mine wasn't on it anywhere, and he came and shook my hand about it, and I shook his hand back, and I have shaken that man's hand maybe four hundred times since.

GRIEVANCE ENTERED — AUTUMN COLLECTION

The markers. Someone moves the survey markers on the north side and they've been moving them since my father's time and if you say it you're a crank. I'm not a crank. I've photographed them.

GRIEVANCE ENTERED — AUTUMN COLLECTION

Thirty-one years of cooking for that man and he has never once asked me what I would like to eat. Not once. Not in a restaurant. Not on my birthday. He is not a cruel man. I want that put down. He is not a cruel man and I have eaten what he likes since 1992.

GRIEVANCE ENTERED — AUTUMN COLLECTION

My knee. I know you can't do anything about my knee. I resent my knee. Write it down.

GRIEVANCE ENTERED — AUTUMN COLLECTION

She got the looks and I got told I was the clever one, and I watched what the looks were worth for fifty years, and now we're both old and she's still got them and I'm still the clever one, and I would have traded. That's the thing I've never said. I would have traded in

a heartbeat, and everyone who ever called me the clever one knew I would have, and that's why they said it.

GRIEVANCE ENTERED — AUTUMN COLLECTION

He says no offence first. Every time. He has said no offence to me maybe a thousand times and then said the thing, and the thing always has offence in it, that's why he wraps it, you don't wrap a brick unless you mean to post it.

— — —

I spoke to Ottmar Lisk exactly once, in the October, in the bar of the hotel, and it lasted four minutes.

He was at the end of the counter with a glass of something he was not drinking. Up close the hands were not arthritis. The knuckles were swollen out of true and the fingers had gone over into a permanent hook, so that the hand sat on the bar like a thing that had been left there, and the skin on it was the skin of a man of ninety, and he was seventy-one.

I said, "Mr Lisk. Ruth Amsel."

"I know what you are." He did not turn his head. "I can feel you from the door."

I sat down two stools along because he had not invited me nearer.

"They tell me you'll be relieved in the autumn."

"That's the word." Something happened at the corner of his mouth.

"That's the word they use."

And then he said a thing that I have written out so many times, in so many hands, in so many stages of my own decline, that I no longer know whether I am reporting it or reciting it.

He said, "Have you had the back pages yet?"

"On the first night."

"Read them again," he said. "Don't read what they wrote. Read *how*."

I said I didn't follow.

And Ottmar Lisk turned and looked at me for the first time, and his eyes were perfectly clear, and he opened his mouth and what came out of it was a woman's voice complaining about a car left across a driveway.

He shut his mouth. He put his good hand flat on the bar. He waited about ten seconds.

Then he said, in his own voice, quite calmly, "That's what I've got left. That's the size of it now. So you'll forgive me if I don't do the rest of the speech."

He got off the stool and picked up his coat with the hooked hand, which took a while, and neither of us said anything while it took a while.

At the door he stopped and said one more thing, and I did not understand it, and I have understood it since.

He said: "Don't go out at dusk with nothing in your pockets."

— — —

He was relieved on the eleventh of November.

I was not permitted to attend. That is not the word Adele used — she said it was not usual, and that people found it easier if it was quiet, and that I would have my own in time and would understand then why it was kept small. She said all this while restocking the forms rack. She was not evasive. There was nothing to be evasive about; she was describing a custom, the way you would describe why the war memorial gets done in October rather than November.

What I know is what everybody in Halloran knows, because it was in the county paper on the Thursday.

A man named Cortland Freem, aged eighty-three, of the north end, was found dead at his property on the evening of the eleventh. He had lived alone. He had, said the paper, been in declining health. There was no inquest. The paper ran four inches on it and a photograph of him at a bowls presentation in 1994, and the phrase it used was *a fall at home*, and the phrase everyone in the shop and

the garage and the church porch used was *a fall at home*, and I used it too, that autumn, because it was the phrase.

Cortland Freem had been a difficult man. I had that from three separate sittings. He was cold. He was standoffish. He had never joined anything.

I did not put those two facts beside one another. There was no reason to. An old difficult man died in November and an old exhausted man was relieved of a hard post in November and both of those things happen in November.

— — —

I saw Lisk afterwards. Twice.

They gave him the last cottage on the field road — the row down there is four houses, all small, all good, all kept up by the Office, and there are two men and a woman in the other three who I now know are what he became.

The first time, he was sitting outside in a chair in the cold with a blanket over his knees, and when I came up the path he looked at me and smiled, and it was an easy, uncomplicated, wholly friendly smile, and there was nothing behind his eyes at all.

His hands were in his lap. They were still ruined. But they were still.

"It's Ruth," I said.

"Ruth," he said, agreeably.

"You told me something in the hotel. About dusk. About my pockets."

He thought about it. He genuinely tried; I could see him going and looking for it. Then he said, "I don't think that was me," and offered me a boiled sweet from a tin on the arm of the chair, and asked whether I had come far.

The town was very good to him. I want to say that plainly, because it is the part that gets the least belief and it is the most important part.

People visited. People brought things. The women from the church did his shopping in a rota that had been running, in one form or another, since 1911, and it was not a duty rota, it was oversubscribed. Children were sent down the field road with cake, and it was not a punishment, it was a treat, and they came back pleased with themselves. Adele went every Sunday.

Halloran loved its retired Takers with a real, warm, entirely unforced love, and I understand it now, and it is not gratitude, though it feels like gratitude to everyone doing it.

It is that when you have given a person the worst thing in you, and they have taken it, and it has plainly cost them, and they have never once mentioned it — you love them. You cannot help it. You love them the way you love someone you have got away with something in front of.

Four thousand people did that to Ottmar Lisk, and then brought him cake.

GRIEVANCE ENTERED — WINTER COLLECTION

He was younger than me and worse at it and they gave it to him in the March and I have had to be pleased about that in public for eleven years.

GRIEVANCE ENTERED — WINTER COLLECTION

I have not been touched in nine years. Not held, not — nothing. He is in the bed. He is right there in the bed. I would rather have said this to nobody but you can't say it to nobody, it turns out. You have to say it to somebody or it goes bad.

— — —

The second time I saw Lisk was in the February and he was in bed and did not know me at all, and the woman from the church who let me in said, "He's very comfortable," and he was, and he died in the following January, fourteen months after his relief, which the row will tell you is about the usual.

I went home that February evening and got the nine back pages out of the archive drawer and did what he had told me to do.

I read *how*.

Aldous Brant, 1911 to 1919, eight years, copperplate at the start of his four lines and a scrawl by the end of them.

Sylvie Oduya, 1919 to 1931, twelve years, two sentences, the letters formed but formed slowly, the pen pressing through.

Then the one whose name I could not read. Then the next. Then the next. Nine hands in a row across sixty-eight years, and I laid them out on the bed in order and I looked at them the way you look at a graph.

And I saw it. Of course I saw it; it is not subtle when you lay it out. Each of them had begun somewhere and ended somewhere worse, and the ones who had served longest had ended worst, and Marguerite Sayers's single word in letters an inch high was the end of a line that had started, in 1962, as a perfectly good clerical hand.

So I looked at my own.

I got out the current ledger and I opened it at the spring, at Doreen Callas and her fence, and then I opened it at the winter I had just finished, and I put my finger on the two pages and I looked from one to the other for a long time.

The letters had got bigger. The lines had got fewer to the page. There was a place in the December where I had gone back over a word to make it clear and the going-back-over had made it worse.

Ten months.

I sat on the floor of the room above the wool shop with the ledger open on my knees, and I flexed my right hand, and it opened and closed, and it was fine, it was completely fine, and I put it flat on the page next to the December writing and looked at it.

That was the night I stopped being a woman who had found a use for herself.

I did not yet know anything. I want to be clear that I still did not know one single thing about what the load was for, or where it went, or what a relief was, or why Cortland Freem had fallen at home. I had ten months and a graph of nine ruined hands and a phrase about my pockets.

But I had stopped assuming that the arrangement was in my favour, and everything after this is just the slow business of finding out how far from my favour it was, and being, at every stage, about six weeks too late.

III. WHAT THE LAND WAS CALLED

The hand went in the second winter, and it went the way Adele had said it would, which is to say gradually and then as a fact.

First it was cramp after a long sitting, which I had been promised and which the cup was supposed to settle and did. Then it was cramp that did not go by the evening. Then, one morning in the January, I woke and my right hand was shut and I could not open it with my left, and I lay in the dark and worked at it for something like a quarter of an hour before it came, and when it came it hurt in a way that had nothing to do with muscle.

After that it never entirely opened again. There is a degree of hook that is now simply the shape of my hand and it arrived that January and it did not leave.

Sleep went at about the same time, and sleep went differently, and I did not have a word for what replaced it until much later.

What happens is that you lie down and you are not alone. There is no voice and there is no vision. There is a room, and in the room there is you, and there is also the residue of three thousand two hundred sittings, and it does not speak, it just *occupies*. It is the sensation of a full house with the lights off. You are aware, without any content, that a great many people are extremely unhappy about a great many small things, and that all of them are inside the same body as you, and that they are not going anywhere.

I stopped sleeping in the dark. I want to be honest about the small indignities as well as the large ones. I slept with the lamp on for the last two years of my service, like a child, and Adele found out and had a second lamp sent over from the Office, and did not make anything of it, and I want that written down too.

— — —

Two sittings from that winter, because they belong here.

The first was a girl of nineteen called Nella Ferrand — the daughter of the poplar woman, though I did not connect them at the time — who came in with her coat zipped to the chin and sat on the front edge of the chair and said nothing for six minutes. I have learned to let the six minutes happen. The ones who take longest to start are

carrying the realest things, and they are checking the room, and what they are checking it for is whether the promise is true: that you can say the thing here, the actual thing, and it will be taken from you and no one will ever hand it back.

What she finally said was that she did not love her own child.

She said it in one sentence, with the flat delivery, and then she watched my pen to make sure I was writing it, and then it came in a flood — that the birth had gone wrong, that her body had been a long time mending and had not mended all the way and never would, that she loved the child completely, she wanted that written too, write that it's *also* true, and that every day some part of her did the arithmetic of what the child had cost and resented the answer, and that she had carried both of those in the same chest for two years and there was no person alive she could have said it to, because there is no way to say it that does not sound like a monster saying it.

"But you have to say it to somebody," said Nella Ferrand, nineteen years old, "or it goes bad. My gran told me that. She said that's what the hall is *for*."

I wrote it, and it went into me the way they all go into me, and she cried for a minute, and then she stopped, and the loose thing happened to her face, and she zipped her coat down two inches, which I have thought about ever since, and thanked me, and went out to the pram she had left with a neighbour by the door.

She will be a good mother. I mean that without any shadow on it. She goes home from that hall able to love the child with the whole of the room the resentment was standing in. That is what the Tithe buys, and I was the coin, and I want the ledger of this account to show both columns.

The second sitting was an old man named Harmon Voss, and it was about the war, and I will give it two sentences. He told me what he did, and then he told me that the town had forgiven him for it — had decided, collectively, kindly, without being asked, to treat it as a thing the war did rather than a thing he did — and that their forgiveness was the grievance. He had wanted, for fifty years, one

person to look at him and not be kind, and there was no such person in Halloran, and now there was no such person anywhere, because the last ones who knew enough to withhold it had died.

I understood him completely, and I wrote it down, and it has sat in me since beside everything else, at the same weight as the wind chimes, which is the obscenity of my condition and the last time I will mention it.

— — —

Mrs Emory came to me at the end of the January and she did not come to be collected.

I need to explain what she was. The register is alphabetical and it is complete, and the Emory line sits in it between Ellick and Ennis with a mark against it that I had asked about in my first month and been given an answer to that was so easy I did not think about it again.

"They don't come," Adele had said.

"Are they exempt?"

"There's no exemption, there's nothing to be exempt from, it isn't compulsory." She had shrugged. "They've never come. Her people never came, her mother never came. It's a family thing. Some families are like that about the church."

Four thousand one hundred and six people, ninety years, and one household that had never once sat down in that chair.

She knocked on the Office door on a Thursday when the hall was shut, and when I opened it she said, "You're the new one. I want a word and I don't want it written down."

She was somewhere over eighty. She was small and upright and she had a face that gave you nothing, and I understood within about four seconds why every third person in Halloran found her difficult.

I made tea. She did not take her coat off.

She said, "Do you know what this land was called before it was called Halloran?"

I said no.

"Ask anybody," she said. "Go on and ask anybody, ask the school, ask the county, ask that Storr woman. Ask the historical society, they've a room in the library and they'll be delighted, they'll show you the founding and the mill and the flood in 1938 and the bowls club." She had not touched her tea. "Ask them what it was called before."

"Was it called something before?"

And Mrs Emory looked at me with an expression I could not read at all — and I could read everybody, by then, I could read people through a wall — and she said, "You're not stupid. That's a shame."

Then she stood up and went to the door and said, "You'll come back to me. They always come back to me. Not one of them ever came back in time." And she went out into the January.

— — —

I want to describe what happened next accurately, because it did not feel like detective work. It felt like a smell in a house.

I did nothing about it for six weeks. I had a winter season to index. But the question had gone in, and the thing about a question going into a person in my condition is that I had no membrane left to keep it in one place, and it seeped.

And what it seeped into was the filing.

Because I had by then written down, in my own hand, something on the order of six thousand grievances. And I had begun — you cannot help it, it is the only intellectual pleasure the job affords — to sort them. Not officially. In my head. The domestic ones. The work ones. The money ones. The bodies. The petty ones, which were my favourites and which killed me fastest.

And there was a category I had never named, because it did not look like a category. It looked like the ordinary friction of a rural county.

The road that goes round.

The survey markers on the north side.

The signage, which the county had changed in 1998, and which eleven separate people had complained about with a heat entirely out of proportion to signage.

The Storr name on the school, which four people had raised in two years, each of them apologetically, each of them saying some version of *I know it's petty, I know they gave the money, I just don't like seeing it.*

A drainage ditch on the west boundary that three farmers wanted moved and could not say why it bothered them.

The poplars in the east field, planted in that too-straight line, which a woman named Ferrand had spent twenty minutes on, and at the end of the twenty minutes had said: "It's a *fence*. That's what it is. It's somebody's fence and it's not a fence, and I can't look at it."

I sat with my index cards in the back room in the March and I laid them out and they were all the same complaint.

Every single one of them was about a boundary. About a line drawn on the ground. About where a thing stops being one person's and starts being another's — and every one of them was angry, and none of them could say what about.

— — —

So I went into the archive drawer.

The Tithe Office keeps everything. That is the thing about an operation that thinks of itself as clerical: it has no instinct for destroying evidence, because it does not believe there is any. Ninety years of ledgers, bound, indexed, in a grey cabinet in a room off the square, and the key hangs on a nail behind the door, and it has hung there for as long as anyone can remember, because who would want them.

I read backwards. I did it at night, and it took me from the March to the June, and I was reading with a hand that no longer worked and eyes that were going, and I did it in the wrong order — I started at 1979 and went back to 1911 — and I am glad I did, because forwards I might have missed it.

I want to describe those nights, because they were the strangest work of my life and because the reader should know what it is to read a town's whole inner history in the dark with a magnifying glass.

You take a ledger down and it has a smell — paper and dust and something underneath the dust that I came to think of as the smell of the ink itself, though it cannot have been. You open it anywhere and a voice starts. That is what shocked me first: they are *voices*. Every Taker before me had done what I did, which is get it down word for word in the rhythm it was said, because the rhythm is part of the weight, and so a woman dead sixty years complains to you about a copper boiler in her own cadence, with her own repetitions, and you can hear her, you can hear which words she leaned on. I sat in the back room at midnight with the lamp and a rug over my knees and I listened to Halloran talk in its sleep for three months.

And the town does not change. That was the second shock. The clothes change and the prices change and the boiler becomes a washing machine, and underneath, season upon season, decade upon decade, it is the same town saying the same things. The brother is always given the farm. The loan is always unmentioned. Someone is always passed over, someone is always not touched, someone always cannot sit at the table. I had thought, in my first year, that I was collecting the particular sorrows of particular people. I was not. I was taking the same tithe the last nine of us took, from the same crop, off the same ground.

Some nights I read a whole year in a sitting. Some nights I managed four pages, because the hand that had written them was a late hand — a full hand — and reading a full hand is slow, and something else besides slow that I did not have a word for then. You are watching a person drown in increments of a season. In the spring their letters have a small tremble. By the autumn the tremble has a stagger in it. You turn fifty pages and a year of their life has gone into the book and the writing at the back is a ruin of the writing at the front, and then a new year starts in a new ledger and it is worse, and you know — you alone, of everyone who ever

lived, because nobody else has ever read these — you know exactly where this hand is going, and you turn the pages toward it anyway.

Here is what I found.

The same complaints. In every hand. In every decade.

The road goes round. 1974. 1961. 1952. 1948. 1933. 1919. The same road, the same *goes round*, the same inability to say why it should not.

The markers. Every generation. Somebody always thinks the markers have been moved, and photographs them, and is thought a crank.

The signage complaint is new because the signage is new, but its grandfather is a complaint from 1931 about the county renaming the west road, and its great-grandfather is a complaint from 1914 about a milestone.

And under all of them, running the whole ninety years like a watermark, the boundary. Where the line is. Who put the line there. Whether the line is right.

Never once the thing itself.

Not one entry, in ninety years, in six ledgers, in maybe two hundred thousand grievances, that said: *this land was taken*. Not one that said a name. Not one that said *my grandmother*, or *the treaty*, or *the people who were here*. Not one that said *before*.

You understand that this is not what an archive of a town's private anger looks like. An archive of a town's private anger contains everything. I had the uncle in the car. I had a man who resented his wife for chewing and a woman who resented her own knee. There was no subject too small and no subject too shameful; the whole apparatus is built on the promise that you can say the thing you cannot say.

And in ninety years of people saying the thing they cannot say, nobody had said the only thing that was actually unsayable.

That is not silence. Silence has a shape you can see. This was an absence with pressure behind it — a hole with the edges pushed up

all around, the way a hole is when something has been pulled out of the ground rather than never planted.

They were all angry about it. All four thousand of them, in every generation, continuously, for ninety years. The anger was completely intact. The anger came in every season by the bucket.

It just had nowhere to be pointed. So it went at the road, and the markers, and the sign, and the poplars, and the name over the school door.

— — —

I went to the library and did what she told me to do.

The historical society has a room, and a woman called Miss Pardoe who is seventy and who was, as promised, delighted. She had the founding. She had a photograph of the first survey party, six men and a theodolite, 1889. She had the mill and the flood in 1938 and forty years of the bowls club.

I asked what the land was called before.

And Miss Pardoe said, "Before?" — and here is the thing, she was not evasive, she was not uncomfortable, there was no flicker. She said "Before?" the way you would say it if someone asked you what colour Tuesday was. It was not a question that had a place to land in her.

"Before 1889."

"Well — before the survey there wasn't a town, dear. That's what the survey was for." She was already reaching for another box. "Now, if you want the *county*, that goes back further, that's Crown grant, there's a lovely map—"

"Was anyone here?"

"Here?"

"On the land. In 1889. When the six men came with the theodolite. Was there anybody standing there while they did it."

Miss Pardoe put the box down and thought about it with complete goodwill, and I watched her think about it, and I watched her not be able to.

She said, at last, "There'd have been *people*, I suppose. There always are, aren't there. Now, the mill—"

I have never in my life felt anything like what I felt standing in that room. It was not that she was lying. It was that the question went into her and found nothing to attach to, no hook, no shelf, no drawer, and slid off, and she was already three sentences further on and perfectly happy.

She had been coming to the collections every season for fifty-five years.

GRIEVANCE ENTERED — SPRING COLLECTION

The poplars in the east field. I know. I know. But somebody planted those in a line and there's no farm reason for a line like that and it's not a windbreak because it's the wrong side, and every time I drive past I want to take them out with a chain.

GRIEVANCE ENTERED — SPRING COLLECTION

They put the name up on the school in 1961 and my father wouldn't go in the building after. He never said why. He wasn't a talker. And now I don't go in the building either and I couldn't tell you why any more than he could, and my grandson's in there five days a week and I stand at the gate like an idiot.

GRIEVANCE ENTERED — SPRING COLLECTION

Old Mrs Emory. Now I know that's not a grievance and I know she's never done a thing to me. She's just — she's cold with people. She keeps to herself, she doesn't join in, she's never once come to this, and I think that's a bit much, I think when everyone else does a thing and one person won't, that's a bit much. That's all. I don't wish her any harm. I just don't like her and I never have and neither did my mother.

— — —

I did not notice her name.

That is the confession of this part and I am going to make it properly.

I had written Mrs Emory's name into that ledger something like forty times in two years. Not as a subject of anything. As a splash. As the last thirty seconds of a sitting about something else — *and another thing, that Emory woman* — as the small change people hand over at the end when they have run out of real complaints and are enjoying themselves.

She was cold. She kept to herself. She had never come. She thought she was better than everyone. She had been unkind, once, in 1988, at a funeral, in a way that four separate people had described to me and no two of them the same.

I wrote every one of them down and I did not once put a mark against the name, because there was nothing there to mark. Nobody hated her. That is what I would have told you at the time and it was true. Nobody in Halloran hated Mrs Emory. Four thousand people mildly disliked her, consistently, across four decades, for no reason any of them could give.

I had the whole of it in my hands by the June of that second year. I had the boundary complaints and the ninety-year hole and the woman who had asked me the question and the town's inability to hold it, and I had, sitting right there in the same book in my own deteriorating hand, forty entries of low-grade dislike attaching themselves to the one household that had never sat in the chair.

And I did not put the two together, because I did not yet know that the Office counted anything, or that a count was for anything, and because there was still a part of me at that point which believed I worked for a filing system.

IV. THE CUP

I skipped the cup on a Tuesday in the spring of my third year, and I did it out of nothing more elevated than temper.

The tin was empty. It comes over from the Office in a tin, made up somewhere I never asked about, and it sits on the shelf in the back room, and that morning there was a scale of dried sediment in the bottom and nothing else. And I stood there with my hooked hand and my two years and I thought: *well, then I won't*, in exactly the spirit of a woman who has decided not to take her coat.

The first sitting was a man called Ivo Rennick, and it was about his sister-in-law, and it took thirty-five minutes.

I wrote it all down. I got every word. It was, if anything, a better record than usual, because I could hear the sentences as sentences instead of as weather coming in.

And when he stood up he had not put anything down.

I saw it happen — or rather, I saw it not happen. There is a moment at the end of a sitting where a person's face comes loose. Doreen Callas had it on my first morning. It is quite unmistakable once you have seen three thousand of them. Ivo Rennick got to the end of his thirty-five minutes and sat back and waited for it, and it did not come, and he looked around the room with a small confusion, and said, "Right," and then said, "Right," again, and went out into the street still carrying every ounce of it.

And I sat in the chair with my hand aching and nothing new in me at all, and I thought: *oh*.

I understood the mechanism in about four seconds, sitting there, and it was the first thing in two years I had understood on time rather than late. It was never the writing on its own. It was never the sitting or the hall or the ledger. The cup takes down the skin between you and the room, and without the skin down you are simply a woman with a pen taking a statement, and the grievance goes home in the man who brought it.

I did nine more sittings that day, dry, and I am going to give the reader that afternoon, because it was the only ordinary working day of my life and I have polished it like a stone.

A woman came in about her sister's will and I *listened* to her. I do not mean I heard her; I had heard everybody for two years, at full weight, from the inside. I mean I sat across a desk from another person and her trouble stayed on her side of it, and from my side I could see it whole — see the shape of it, see the places where she was wrong about it and the one place where she was terribly right — the way you can see a field from a stile that you cannot see from inside the wheat. I had opinions. I had never once had an opinion during a sitting; there is no room for opinions when the thing is coming into you. I thought: she should write to the solicitor and stop writing to the sister. I nearly said it. I am told that is what a counsellor is.

A man came in about his neighbour's dog and he was funny about it — he had jokes, it was a performance he had clearly given at the garage — and I laughed. Out loud, at a sitting. He was delighted. Nobody had ever laughed in that hall; they come out of it lighter but nobody has ever once come out of it laughed-with, because the apparatus does not attend to the telling, only to the weight, and a joke weighs what its grievance weighs.

All afternoon the town came and sat and talked, and all afternoon their sorrows stood in the room like furniture instead of climbing into my chest, and I heard more, understood more, could have *helped* more, than in two years of taking. And every one of them went home carrying exactly what they had brought.

I walked back along the field road in the evening light with an ordinary quantity of unhappiness in me — mine, which is to say nine years of my mother — and it felt like almost nothing. It felt like a coat. I remember stopping by the poplars and standing there in the level sun for a while for no reason at all, which is a thing I had not done since I arrived, because you do not stand about admiring the light when there are four thousand people in you.

It was the happiest four hours since I was thirty-four. I want it recorded. And I want recorded what it cost, which is the next thing.

— — —

The thinning started on the Friday.

I did not connect it at first. What I noticed was that the woman in the wool shop was short with a customer over an order, and that there were raised voices at the garage, and that a man crossing the square in front of me stopped and turned round and said something to another man about a car, and the other man said something back, and neither of them was drunk and it was eleven in the morning.

By the Sunday, two families on the west road were not speaking. By the Monday there was an actual argument outside the church, out loud, in front of people, about a chair that had been taken out of a hall in 1997.

It took me until the Monday evening to understand what I was looking at, and when I did understand it I had to sit down on the step of the Office with my head down.

Nine people. I had let nine people go home with what they came in with, out of temper, over an empty tin, and by the following weekend the town's temperature had come up like a fever.

That is the arithmetic of Halloran and I had never once seen it laid out. Four thousand people. Three thousand two hundred sittings a year. That pleasantness — the thing visitors remark on, the thing that made Adele's sister-in-law speak to her at the fete for the first time since 1998 — is not a culture and it is not a character and it is certainly not a virtue.

It is a maintenance schedule. And I was the plant. And nine skipped units of throughput had put a visible crack in it inside of seventy-two hours.

— — —

Adele came round on the Tuesday with a fresh tin.

I want to set down exactly how she did it, because it is the last thing I will ever say in her defence and it is also the entire indictment.

She came into the back room and put the tin on the shelf and said, "That was my fault entirely, the order went in late, I've had a word

with myself." And then she said, "You did nine without it, didn't you."

"I did."

"I thought so." She was folding the paper the tin had come in. She was not angry. There was no edge on it anywhere. "You'll cramp something dreadful tomorrow. It really is much better before."

And I looked at her — at this kind, competent, contented woman folding brown paper in a small room — and I said, "Adele, what does it do?"

"It settles the hands."

"It doesn't settle the hands. My hands are ruined. It's never once settled my hands."

And Adele Storr said, "Well, it's what it's for," and put the folded paper in her bag, and asked whether I wanted anything picked up in town.

That is not evasion. I need the reader to sit with this, because it is the hardest thing in this account to credit and it is the true one. There was nothing behind that sentence. She was not steering me off. She was answering the question with the whole of what was in her, and the whole of what was in her was: *it's for the hands; it's item nine on the order form; it goes between the ink and the blotting paper.*

Thirty years. Twice a season. She had handed that cup to two people across three decades and watched what became of both of them, and she had never had the thought.

And why would she. She came to the collections herself. She sat in the chair every season like everybody else and gave me hers — and hers were good ones, they were real, she was not a shallow woman — and she went out lighter. Whatever capacity she might once have had for looking at that cup and saying *hold on*, she had been bringing it to me twice a year and I had been writing it down.

You cannot investigate a thing you are structurally unable to resent. That is the whole of Halloran. That is the machine's only defence and it has never needed another one.

— — —

Ottmar Lisk died in the January of my third year, fourteen months after his relief, which the row will tell you is about the usual.

His last page came into the archive drawer in the February, and I did not go and look at it for nearly a month, and when I finally did I was not looking for what I found.

Here is what a final entry is, procedurally. When a Taker is relieved, they are given the back of the current ledger and they write their own grievance in it, in their own hand, like anybody else. It is described as a courtesy — the one entry you are permitted to make on your own behalf after a career of making them for other people. Adele called it *the kindness at the end*. Every one of my nine predecessors had taken it.

Lisk's was four words. I am not going to write them down; they were about a woman, and they were his, and he had nine years of everybody else's in him and he spent his one page on that, and I think it was the correct decision and I hope it did something for him.

What I looked at was the letters.

I had his early hand. I had ledgers going back to 1970 and Ottmar Lisk had been in that chair from 1970 to 1979 as a young man of thirty-two and his writing then was small, square, slightly backward-sloping, the hand of a person who had done some clerical work and was rather proud of it.

The four words on the last page were an inch high and had taken him, by the look of the ink, several minutes.

And I put my own hand next to it. The winter I had just finished. And there was no difference worth arguing about. His at nine years and mine at two and a half were the same handwriting, and the reason for that is that he had been a large calm man of seventy who was used to being disliked, and I was a woman of thirty-six who had

spent nine years learning to absorb everything that was given to her without ever once putting any of it down.

They had hired me for that. It was on the criteria. *A demonstrated history of absorbing without retaliating.*

They call it temperament. It is a wound, and they advertise for it, and it is the single quality that makes a great Taker, and it is the reason a great Taker lasts a third as long as a mediocre one.

I was very good at my job. It is the only thing in my life I have ever been very good at and it killed me in three years.

— — —

I did the tally on a night in the April and it took me two hours and I have never recovered from it.

I need to explain the indexing first, plainly, because everything turns on it and it is the most boring thing in this book. That is not an apology. Its boringness is the whole disguise.

Every Taker indexes. It is half the work of the between-times — you go back through the completed season and you pull out the names. Not the names of the tithers; those are on the register already. The names *mentioned*. Every person complained about, in every sitting, goes onto a card with the page number beside it. The brother who got the farm has a card. Vergil Doak of the fence has a card. If eleven different people complain about the county signage there is no card, because signage is not a person; but if eleven different people complain about the *same man*, his card gets eleven page numbers, one at a time, season by season, in the Taker's own hand.

The cards go into the drawer marked PRIOR. At the end of each year they are consolidated onto a single sheet — every mentioned name, and beside each name the count of its mentions, ordered with the largest count at the top, because that is simply how a person orders a list and there is no other sensible way. The sheet goes into ARCHIVE. The cards are burned in the yard in a bucket, which I had done four times, warming my ruined hand at it, thinking nothing.

It is genuinely useful. I want that understood too. The Office fields queries — boundary disputes, probate, the county wanting to know who complained about the culvert — and the index answers them. No part of it was designed to look innocent. It *is* innocent, every single step of it, taken alone. You could explain each step to a magistrate and be thanked for your thoroughness.

That night I got out the sheets.

Ninety years of them. One per year. A column of names, and beside each name a number, and the whole thing ordered by the number, largest at the top, because that is how you would do it and there is no other sensible way.

1979. Top of the sheet, by a distance: a woman named Ilke Fanshawe. Under it, forty-one.

Marguerite Sayers was relieved in the September of 1979.

Ilke Fanshawe died in the September of 1979. I went into the county papers in the library the next morning and there she is, four inches, *a fall at home*, eighty-one, in declining health, no inquest.

1970. Top of the sheet: a man called Selwyn Doak. Thirty-six mentions. Relieved that year; died that year; a fall at home.

1962. 1951. 1938. 1931. 1919. 1911.

Nine reliefs in ninety years. Nine names at the top of a sheet. Nine falls at home.

And here is the thing that I have not been able to put down since and that I will carry out of this world with me: the sheet for the year of Ottmar Lisk's relief was in my handwriting.

I made it. In the October of my first year, in the back room, with my hand still mostly working, I went through the summer season and I pulled the names and I put them on cards and I consolidated them onto a single sheet in a neat descending column, and at the top of that column, at thirty-nine mentions, I wrote CORTLAND FREEM, and I did not know the man, and he was dead within the month.

I had loaded the gun. I had done it as filing. It had taken me about nine hours over three evenings and I had listened to the radio while I did it.

— — —

I spent two weeks after that night looking for the men in the room.

I want to give the reader those two weeks, because you will spend them too, if you have followed me this far, and I can save you the trouble. You will want a meeting. You will want a locked drawer, a second set of books, a Storr who knows. I wanted all of it, wanted it the way you want water — because if there is a meeting, then there are men in a room, and men in a room can be dragged out of it; a crime with an author has a door you can kick.

So I looked. I went through the ORDERS drawer invoice by invoice, and found stationery. I went through ninety years of the Office's correspondence with the county, and found culverts. I read the minutes of the parish council back to 1946, in the library, under Miss Pardoe's benevolent eye, and found a town arguing about gravel. I took Adele to lunch and asked her, straight out, over the soup, who decides when a Taker is relieved, and she said, "Decides? Love, it's when you're full. You'll know and I'll know. It's not a thing anyone *decides*, any more than the harvest is" — and there it was again, that answer with nothing behind it, that door opening onto a wall.

The founding families of Halloran did not build a court and they did not build a militia. I know what they built because I have read the instrument, and I will come to the instrument. They built a filing system, and then they had the one genuine piece of genius in this whole ninety-year machine, which is this: they made sure that nobody who operated it would ever understand it, by making its operation *pleasant*, and its records *boring*, and its single terrible output indistinguishable from an old person dying at home.

There is no conspiracy. There is nothing there to find.

Nobody chooses. There is no meeting. There is no man in a room with a list who says *this one*. The founding families of Halloran did

not build a court and they did not build a militia; they built a filing system, and the filing system has an output, and the output is a name.

And what happens to that name is not an order either. That is the part that took me longest.

A Taker at relief has no self in her. I know that now from the inside and I will describe it when I come to it. What walks out of that hall at dusk is ninety seasons of other people's anger with the person burned out of the middle of it, and anger is not a mind, it does not deliberate, it does not select. It goes *downhill*. It goes to the lowest point in the landscape, and the lowest point in the landscape is whoever the town has been quietly, pettily, continuously complaining about for forty years.

The sheet does not aim anything. The sheet is a weather map. It tells you which way the water will run before the water runs.

Adele files it. That is her entire participation. She files it, and then, in the autumn, a thing happens at the north end of town and the paper says *a fall at home*, and Adele Storr is genuinely sorry about it and takes a casserole to the family.

Four thousand people elected Cortland Freem to die by finding him cold and standoffish and difficult over a period of decades, and not one of them voted, and not one of them knew there was an election, and every single one of them would have been horrified.

I want to say one more thing here and then I will stop.

I went and got the current year's cards. The ones I had been building since the January, unconsolidated, still loose in the PRIOR drawer.

I sat on the floor and I sorted them by hand, which took me until about four in the morning because my hand is what it is.

The name at the top was EMORY, and it was at forty-four, and the one under it was at nine.

She had asked me what the land was called before it was called Halloran, and I had said no, and she had told me that they always

come back to her, and that not one of them had ever come back in time.

I was full. I had perhaps two months. I knew, that night, sitting on the floor of the Office at four in the morning with a card in my hand — I knew what I was for and I knew where I would be pointed and I knew who had built the landscape that would point me.

It made no difference at all. That is what I had not understood and could not have understood, and it is the last thing this account has to teach anybody.

Knowing is not a lever. There is no part of the apparatus that knowing touches.

V. THE CROSSING

I began to leak in the May.

The first time was in the wool shop. I was buying nothing; I had got into the habit of standing in shops because a shop is a place where you can be near people without being sat across a desk from them. And a woman I did not know came in behind me and the bell went, and I turned round and said, in a voice that was not mine, "You've had that car across my drive since Thursday and I've not said a word."

The woman said, "Sorry?"

And I said, "Sorry," in my own voice, and went out.

It came about twice a week after that, then daily. Always somebody else's sentence, in somebody else's cadence, delivered at full sincerity by my own throat. I heard myself complain about a hedge. I heard myself, in the queue at the bank, begin an account of a christening in 1996 that I had taken down eleven months before from a woman who has since died.

That is what full means. There is no gauge on the side of a Taker. That is the gauge: when the thing starts coming out of you sideways, in other people's voices, in the street, you are done, and the Office knows what it means, and arrangements are made.

Adele made them the way you make a dental appointment.

"The eleventh," she said. "That's a Tuesday. Would a Tuesday suit?"

I said a Tuesday would suit.

"You'll want to put your things somewhere. Not that you'll want much of it after, people don't, but it's nice to have it done." She was writing in the desk diary. She had reading glasses on a chain by then. "And it's a dusk thing, so you'll have the whole day, and I'd say don't sit about with it. Ottmar did the crossword all day and I don't think it helped him."

I said, "Adele. What happens at a relief?"

And she looked up over the glasses with a face of such uncomplicated sympathy that I nearly put my head on the desk, and she said, "You're emptied, love. That's all it is. It all comes off you

and you're done and you've earned it, and then there's the cottage and we look after you, and I'll come Sundays."

She believed every word.

— — —

I found the instrument of the Tithe four days before the eleventh, in the bottom of the ARCHIVE drawer, under the consolidated sheets, in a folder nobody had opened in my time.

It is nine pages, dated 1911, signed by four men, one of them a Storr. It is largely municipal — the establishment of the office, the terms of engagement, the wage, the rota, the requirement that the officer be of no local kin.

But there is a page at the front that is not municipal at all, and it does not read like a page written by county men in 1911, and I have come to believe it was copied out of something much older that one of them had got hold of and only half understood.

It uses the word *asha*, and it glosses it: *the true order of a thing; how a matter actually stands*. And against it, it sets *druj*, which it glosses as *the Lie* — and then, in a phrase I have thought about every day since, it says that the Lie is not a false saying but a *disordering*, a making of the world unrecognisable to those who stand in it.

It calls the office of the Taker a cup, and the drink a cup, and does not distinguish between them, and I do not think the distinction was ever intended.

It calls the walk at dusk the *crossing*, and there is a line about a bridge where a thing is weighed, and the sense of it — I am not a scholar, I am a woman with a hooked hand reading a document at two in the morning — the sense of it is that the crossing is where the account is settled and the weight is read off, and that what goes over the bridge is not the person but the load.

And on the last line of that page there is a word set apart, which the document does not gloss, and which is the name of the thing a full vessel becomes when it is opened at the end. I found it later in a library book. It is the name of the daeva of fury. The old texts say

he carries a bloodied club and that he is not a spirit of anger as we would understand anger — not the anger of a man at a fence — but wrath with nobody inside it. Wrath that has been separated from any person who could be angry.

They had the whole thing. In 1911. Written down, glossed, filed, and put in a drawer with an order form for stationery, and ninety years of Storrs administered it as a public convenience and nobody ever read to the bottom of the first page.

That is the Lie in the document's own sense. Not a false thing said. A true thing made unrecognisable by the cabinet it was put in.

— — —

Mrs Emory came to the Office on the Monday, the day before.

She did not sit down. She stood in the doorway of the back room with her coat on and looked at me for a while, and what she said first was, "You came back."

"You said everyone does."

"In time, I said. Not one in time." She looked at my hand. She looked at it frankly, the way nobody in Halloran ever looked at it. "You're for tomorrow."

"Yes."

"And you know where you're going."

"Yes."

"Well," said Mrs Emory. "That's more than any of the others managed."

And then she said the thing that I have taken apart a thousand times since and cannot get to come out any other way.

She said: "Don't be frightened of it and don't be sorry about it. I've had eighty-four years and forty of them were spent getting this. You're not doing something to me. You're the only door left in this town and it's taken me my whole life to get you built."

I said — and I want this written down, because it is the one thing I did — I said, “Then come now. Come and sit in the chair and tell me now, while I can still write.”

And Mrs Emory said, “It doesn’t work now. You’re full. There’s not a thimble of room in you and there hasn’t been since the winter.” She pulled her coat straight. “It has to be after. After, you’re empty. That’s the only hour in ninety years when there’s anywhere in this town to put a thing and have it stay put.”

Then she went home and put her house in order, and I sat in the back room until it got dark.

— — —

They came for me at seven on the Tuesday and it was the whole of the Office, which is Adele and a man called Petrie who does the accounts.

The hall was open and the lamps were on and there were perhaps thirty people in it, which surprised me. I had thought it was kept small. It is kept small in the sense that there is no announcement; but people know, and they come, and they stood along the wall in their coats with their hands in front of them and they were not ghoulish and they were not ashamed. It was the face people have at a retirement. It was, precisely and exactly, gratitude.

Doreen Callas was there. She was seventy-six by then. She had brought me a plant.

Adele read the verse. It is read at the head of every collection and I had heard it eleven times and I had never once heard it, and standing in the middle of that floor at dusk with my coat off I heard it, every line, and there is not one word in it that is untrue and there is not one word in it that is not a confession.

The town was never made to hold.

Blessed the ground that answers to one name.

And we will walk you out at dusk, and still your hands.

Thirty people said it with her. They have said it four times a year their whole lives, the way you say the words at a wedding.

Then Petrie brought the cup.

It was a double measure. I had never seen more than the two inches. It came up over the join in the glaze and there was a skin on it and the smell of it filled the whole space between me and the far wall.

And here is the last thing I have to tell about myself as a person, and then there is only the other.

I took it in both hands, and my hands were shaking, and I was not afraid.

I wanted it. I had wanted it for eleven months. I had four thousand people in me and no room and no sleep and a hand that would not open, and somebody was standing in front of me offering to take the wall down all the way, all the way, not the two inches, and I drank it the way you drink water after a fever.

I have gone over and over whether that is forgivable. I have not got anywhere with it. It is simply true. I went to that woman's house that night gladly, and no part of me was made to, and the last thing I did as myself was reach out for the cup with both hands.

— — —

The crossing is eleven hundred yards. I had walked it a hundred times.

You go out the side of the hall and down past the equipment yard and onto the field road, and the poplars are on your left in their too-straight line, and the town's lights come on behind you one at a time as the dusk comes down, and ahead of you at the end of it there are four small good houses and only one of them has a light on.

I remember the first two hundred yards.

I remember that the wall did not come down the way it did with the two inches. With the two inches it goes out to the edges of the room. This went out past the edges of the field. I could feel the town behind me — not the buildings, the people, all of them, four thousand and six of them, at once, the whole ordinary awful chorus

of it, the fences and the loans and the chewing and the uncle and the knee, and it did not come *into* me because there was no longer an into.

I want to be very careful here. There was no vision and no roaring and nothing that would make a scene in a picture. What there was, was subtraction.

The self is a small thing and it is doing constant work. That is what I learned. It is the thing that stands between what is in you and what you do about it, and it works every second of your life, and you never once notice it, and when it goes what you notice is not the going. What you notice is how *easy* everything has become.

Somewhere around the poplars I stopped being anybody, and there was no moment of it, and I did not mind.

— — —

I am going to write what happened at the cottage. I have been three years getting to it and I am not going to be coy at the end.

The door was not locked. She was in the front room in a chair facing the door with the lamp on and her hands in her lap, and she had put her hair up and she was wearing good clothes, and she had been sitting like that, I think, for a long time.

She looked up and she said, "There you are."

What came through that door was not angry with her. That is the thing I most need to set down. There was no hatred in it, because hatred requires somebody to do the hating, and there was nobody in me at all. What there was, was a gradient — the whole ninety-year weight of a town's stored resentment finding, at last, after all those decades of running at roads and markers and poplars, an object that the count had made lower than everything around it.

It went to her the way water goes to a drain.

She did not get up and she did not put her hands out. I have that clearly. She sat and she watched it come and her face did not change.

The first thing was the chair going over.

I was strong. That is the detail I have never been able to make anybody understand and it is the one that wakes me. I am a woman of thirty-seven with a ruined hand and I could not carry a full kettle in the March, and that night I lifted an eighty-four-year-old woman and the chair she was sitting in together off the floor and took them into the wall, and it was nothing, it was like putting down a bag.

The lamp went. There was still light from the hall.

I did it with my hands. I want that on the record too, because there was a poker in that room and I have thought about why not the poker, and I think it is because there was no intention anywhere in it and a poker requires an intention. Hands do not. Hands are what the body reaches for when there is nobody home.

Her glasses went across the floor and I remember hearing them go and I remember that the sound was interesting.

It took a long time. It was not one blow and a stillness; that is a thing from films. She was small and she was old and she went on being alive far longer than seems possible, and there was a period in the middle of it — I do not know how long, and there is no possible way for me to know — when she had stopped being able to make a sound and had not stopped moving, and I went on, and I went on, and there was nothing in the whole world that could have made me stop, because stopping is a thing a person does and there was no person there.

And it felt —

I have to write this. This is the entire book and if I flinch here I have written nothing.

It felt *marvellous*.

It felt like the best thing that has ever happened to me. It felt like putting down four thousand people. It felt like sleep after eleven months of no sleep, like the hand opening, like being emptied out with warm water, like being *forgiven* — that is the closest and it is the most obscene and it is the true one. Every ounce of everything I had carried since Doreen Callas's fence went out of me and into

that room, and the going-out of it was the purest physical pleasure I have known in my life, and I have never been touched by anybody in a way that came near it.

That is what a relief is. That is the kindness at the end. That is what Adele Storr meant, in perfect sincerity, when she said *you're emptied, love, and you've earned it*, and what the thirty people in the hall were grateful for, and what Doreen Callas brought me a plant about.

They are not wrong. It is the greatest gift Halloran has to give and it gives it once a decade and it is real.

— — —

I came back on the floor.

There is no other way to say it. There was nothing, and then there was a room, and I was on my knees in it with my hands on the boards and the boards were wet.

The first thing I was aware of, before anything else, before her, was my hands.

They were open.

I knelt there and I opened and closed my right hand four or five times and it went all the way, easy, no catch, no hook, the hand of a woman of thirty-seven, and I did that for I do not know how long before I understood what I was kneeling in.

Then I understood what I was kneeling in.

I am not going to describe her. I have described the doing of it and that is what I owed. The result belongs to her and she is not here to permit it.

She was alive.

Her eyes were open and they found me. There was breath going in and out, wrong, wet, but going. She had minutes. She had kept them; I believe that absolutely, I believe that woman held on to the last of herself for that quarter of an hour by an act of will that I am not fit to describe.

And she began to talk.

— — —

She started with the year. 1889. She had a date and she said the date.

She said a number of families. She said what they had been doing there in the spring of that year and what the arrangement had been, and she said the name of a man who had signed something, and she said the name of the thing he had signed, and she said what was in the fourth clause of it and what had happened in the November after.

She said where the line had actually run — the true line, the one in the original, which is why the road goes round, which is why the markers have been wrong since her father's time, which is why somebody in 1912 planted a row of poplars along a boundary that no longer legally existed and every farmer in Halloran has wanted to take a chainsaw to it ever since without knowing why.

She said what happened at the east end of the field in the winter of 1889 and how many, and she said it flatly, the way a woman gives an account to a clerk.

And then she said the name.

She said what the land was called. The whole name, the way it was said, and then she said it again more slowly because the first time it had come out wrong through the blood, and she looked at me while she said it and she waited.

And I knelt there with my beautiful working hands and no pen.

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There was no pen in that cottage. There was no book.

You go to a crossing with nothing. That is the custom, that is what everybody knows, they take your coat in the hall and you walk out with empty pockets and empty hands, and it is done for the kindest of reasons — Adele has said it to me herself — because a person at

the end of the walk should not have to be encumbered with anything.

Don't go out at dusk with nothing in your pockets.

Nine years he had, and one page, and he spent it on a woman he had loved, and he gave me the whole of the rest of it in the door of a hotel bar in eleven words and I did not understand a single one of them until I was kneeling on the floor with the answer coming out of a dying woman's mouth and nothing in my hands to catch it with.

What is spoken is only weather.

I knew it. I had known it since my first evening in that town, over tea, with the radiator on too high — Adele told me and she told me straight and she never once told me a lie. *It doesn't work if someone else writes it. It doesn't work if you record it and write it up after. The hand has to be yours and it has to be at the time.*

There was no time. That is the thing. Even if I had run — and I did think of running, I thought of it in the middle of her saying the fourth clause, I thought of the Office and the desk and the ledger eleven hundred yards away up the field road — she had perhaps four minutes left and it is a twelve-minute walk and she could not have said it twice.

Forty years she spent making herself unloved. Forty years of being cold at funerals and standing apart at the fete and never joining anything, deliberately, patiently, so that four thousand people would file her down to the bottom of the sheet and the water would run to her. She built the door and she got herself put behind it and she was right about every part of it except the smallest one, which is that a Taker walks to her crossing with empty pockets because the town is being *considerate*.

She got to the end of it. I made her get to the end of it — I said *go on*, I said *the fourth clause again*, I said *the name, say the name again* — and she said it all, twice, into a room with no scribe in it.

And then she stopped, and looked at me for a while longer, and I watched her work out what had happened.

She did not look angry. I have wished for three years that she had looked angry.

She looked *tired*. That is all. She looked like a woman who has carried two bags of shopping a very long way and has arrived at the door and found she has the wrong key, and is too tired to go back.

She died about four minutes after that, still looking at me, and she took it with her.

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I searched that house until the light came.

Every drawer. Behind the plates. Under the mattress and inside it, I opened the mattress. The floorboards in the back room, three of which came up and none of which had anything under them but dust and a marble. The cold hearth, which I went through with my hands to the bottom and which had nothing in it but forty years of ash and a nail.

There was a Bible with nothing written in it. There was a photograph album with the photographs unlabelled. There was a shoebox of receipts.

She had written nothing down. Not one word, not one name, not a date, not a mark. And I understood why before I had finished looking — because anything written can be found, and a thing found in Halloran goes into the ARCHIVE drawer in the grey cabinet behind the door where the key hangs on a nail, and is indexed, and is consolidated onto a single sheet, and the cards are burned.

The only safe place in that town was inside a person, and the only person who could hold anything was the one they emptied once a decade, and she had worked all of that out, correctly, from first principles, over four decades, alone.

She was the cleverest human being I have ever met and she was wrong by one detail and the detail was a courtesy about pockets.

The land's first name went out of the world in a front room on the field road at about ten past nine on the eleventh of May, and it

went as thoroughly as the men with the theodolite could ever have wished, and it was not taken from her. It was not suppressed. Nobody silenced her.

It was mislaid. By procedure. By a filing convention and a small kindness about coats.

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They gave me the second cottage from the end.

It is a good house. I want to say that without any irony at all, because it is true and because everything in this account has been true. It is warm, and it is dry, and the Office keeps it, and there is a garden with a wall.

The town has been wonderful to me.

That is not a figure of speech. Doreen Callas came twice a week until she died last year. The women from the church do my shopping on a rota that is oversubscribed. Children are sent down the field road with cake and they are pleased to be sent. Adele comes on Sundays and sits in the good chair and tells me about her son, who is doing well now, and about the fete, and about her sister-in-law, and she has never once, in three years, said anything to me that was not kind.

They loved Cortland Freem too. They took him casseroles for eleven years before he died at the north end of town and never once thought about who he had been in the ledger.

I have understood, latterly, what the love is. It is not gratitude, although everyone doing it would tell you it is gratitude. It is what you feel for someone you have got away with something in front of. It is enormous, and it is warm, and it is completely genuine, and it is the exact size of what they handed over.

The hands never went back. That is the thing nobody prepared me for and it is the sentence I have been serving.

I was told, and I believed, that Takers are ruined by the work. They are not. They are ruined by the load, and when the load comes off, the body comes back. My hands are perfect. I am forty and I could

scrub a floor. Ottmar Lisk sat in a chair with a blanket over his knees for fourteen months with hands that would not hold a cup, and I thought that was the office, and it was not the office. It was that they had emptied him into a man called Cortland Freem and there was not enough left of Ottmar Lisk afterward to notice that his hands had come back.

There was enough left of me. That is my whole misfortune and I do not know why it fell out that way. Perhaps three years is not long enough to wear a person all the way through. Perhaps it is because I went in with something of my own and it was still there when everything else went, so that when the load came off there was one thing still standing in the middle of the empty room, and it was me, and it was my mother's face, and it was the whole of my remaining furniture.

So I have had three years of perfect health in a good small house, being loved, in which to be nothing but guilty.

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Adele brought me the ledger this morning.

She brought it on a Sunday, in a canvas bag, with a pen, because that is the custom and it is called the kindness at the end. She put it on the table by the window where the light is and she said, "There's no hurry. Ottmar took a year over his."

She has been coming for three years and she has never once asked me what happened in that room. It has not occurred to her that anything happened in that room. A relief happened, and an old woman at the field end of town had a fall at home, and the two things sit in Adele Storr's head eleven inches apart and have never touched, and the reason they have never touched is that I write down everything that might make them touch, four times a year, in longhand, for thirty years before I came and for ninety years before that.

There is a new one, by the way. She came in the spring, off the same bus, at the same crossroads. She is a widow of about forty from three counties over and she has no family and a clean hand

and, I would guess, a great deal of experience of not saying things. Adele says she is settling in wonderfully. Adele says she is filling nicely.

She will read the back pages on her first night. It is required; it is the induction; she will sit on the bed above the wool shop with ten pages in her lap and read every Taker's last entry going back to 1911, and mine will be the newest and the clearest and the easiest to read, because I am the only one of us whose hand came back.

So I have thought very hard about what to put on it.

I know the mechanism. I know about the cup and the wall and the hand. I know that the Office does not choose, that it only counts, that the sheet is a weather map and Adele files it without reading it. I know that there was a fourth clause and a November in 1889 and a line that ran somewhere else. I do not know the name — that went into the floor of a front room on the eleventh of May — but I know that there *was* one, and that there is a woman under a stone in the churchyard who spent eighty-four years being disliked on purpose so that somebody would find out, and that the whole of what she got for it was me.

I could write all of that. There is room. My hand is fine.

And I have been sitting here since Adele went, with the pen, in the light, and what I have found is that I do not want to.

I want to put down my mother.

That is the truth of it and it is the last true thing I have. I have had three years in this house with nothing in me but nine years of a woman who hated me for being kind to her, and it is mine, it has always been mine, nobody ever took it, and there is a book on this table that takes things and there is a pen beside it and I am so tired.

They will give it to a widow of about forty who is settling in wonderfully. She will read it and she will feel for me, because she is porous, that is why they hired her, and it will go into her the way the fence went into me, and she will carry it, and in eight or nine years she will be walked out at dusk with empty pockets and it will go out of her into whoever the counting finds.

And I will be light.

That is what this town does. It has one thing to offer and it has offered it to everybody, for ninety years, honestly, in writing, and it works, and I have watched what it costs and I know exactly what I am doing and I am going to do it anyway, because I am tired, and because it is the only thing anybody has ever given me.

My mother was ill for nine years and I nursed her, and there was no one else, and she hated me for it.

There. It is down. It took no time at all.

I am going to sit here a while and then I will put the pen in the bag with the book, and Adele will collect it next Sunday and file it, and in the spring a woman I have not met will read it on a bed above the wool shop and find nothing in it but a daughter and a mother and the ordinary bitterness of a life, in a hand she will assume belonged to somebody who simply grew old in the work.

She will not read anything else, because there is nothing else in the book.

Then she will go down to the Office, and Adele will be delighted to see her, and there will be tea.

Then she will take the cup.

Once a season, every resident of Halloran sits down across a plain desk and dictates their grievances to the Taker, who writes them down in longhand and carries them out of the building in her body.

Ninety years of this, and the town is kind in a way visitors notice and cannot place. Nobody is lying. Nobody is cruel. There is a counter, and a rack of forms, and an order book for stationery, and the cup is item nine.

Ruth Amsel answered an advertisement. What she learns, always a little too late to act on, is that the grievances are not dissipated but stored.

And that when a Taker reaches capacity, Halloran has a procedure for emptying her.

