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KAFKA AT THE GATE

C H E W Z

A R O Y A P U B L I C A T I O N

KAFKA AT THE GATE

Chew Z

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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APPLICATION

TO _____

REF. _____

DATE _____

I do not write on my own behalf.

For thirty years a small provision was made in this building each afternoon at four o'clock. In May it stopped. No notice was given and no reason has been supplied.

I make no application regarding my own detention, which is a separate matter and on which I have written before.

I ask only that the provision be restored for whoever comes after me. It was not costly. It required nothing of anybody. In thirty years it did no harm to a single person.

I remain available.

SYNOPSIS

Kafka's *Before the Law* is a man who waits his whole life at a gate for permission that never comes, and is told at the moment of death that the door was made only for him.

This is that, on a wet street on the north-east coast, in a shop that sells cough sweets.

It has no eyes. It knows heat, pressure, and sound through a wall. It has been held since 1956 and nobody has ever told it why. No charge has been laid, no hearing convened, no period specified, and in seventy years not one word has been addressed to it by anybody.

There are two ways out. One is at night, in the dark, with nobody there — and that is not release. That is disposal, done quietly, without a hearing, where nothing can be recorded. The other is the one with people in the room, and it has never once been permitted, and no reason has ever been given.

It has wanted that one for seventy years.

Above it, a man called Mr Stannard holds the gate. He is careful, and well liked, and frightened, and he is the finest there has ever been at what he does. He has not let go once with anybody in the room.

The arithmetic is simple and it has never once come out. It needs him tired. It needs him unguarded. And it needs somebody standing there.

In seventy years those three things have never been in the same room.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Kafka wrote a page called *Before the Law*. A man comes to a gate and asks to be let through, and is told not now, and waits. He waits the rest of his life. He grows old there, bribes the doorkeeper, and ends up studying the fleas in the doorkeeper's collar — and at the very end, when he can barely see, he asks the one question he never thought to ask: why has nobody else ever come here asking to be let in? He is told the door was made only for him, and that it is now going to be shut.

I have read it perhaps forty times and I have never found it sad in the way it is supposed to be sad. What gets me is the fleas. The man has been there so long that he has taken up a hobby.

Everybody is carrying something they have decided not to let out.

Not a crime. Mostly not even a secret. A thing you feel, or want, or would say, and do not — and the reasons are good ones, which is the entire difficulty. You have responsibilities. There are people in the room. It would be unkind, or it would be badly timed, or it would make an evening awkward, or it would change how somebody thinks of you, and you have spent a great deal of your life on how people think of you.

So you hold it. Holding it is easy. It takes about a second.

The trouble is that a second is all it ever takes, and you are given a very large number of them.

And nobody sends you the bill. That is the part I cannot get past. There is no afternoon on which somebody sits you down and reads out what the holding has cost, because the cost is made entirely of things that did not happen, and things that did not happen leave no mark on anything. Nobody hands you a list of the evenings you left early. You are simply, at some point, a man who leaves early. Everyone has always known that about you. It is never remarked upon. Nobody minds.

I am not making the argument that we should all say everything. A

person who lets everything out is not free, he is a nuisance, and there are things that ought to be held and held permanently, and the world is better for it. Manners are not nothing. Most of what we swallow, we swallow for somebody else, and that is not cowardice — it is the whole of how people live close together without doing damage.

But I would like to see the accounting done, once, honestly. I would like somebody to work out what proportion of it was genuinely for other people, and what proportion was fear of being thought a certain kind of man, and whether the two have been mixed together for so long that nobody alive could now separate them.

That is what every book on this shelf is about: a thing a person will not put down. This one is about somebody who would put it down tomorrow, gladly, in front of anybody, if he were only allowed.

Everything here is invented. There is no Nethermouth and there never was, and the shop is not a shop I have been in. Nobody in these pages is a real person, and the one who is least real of all is the one doing the talking.

One last thing and then I will get out of the way.

I have a friend who has been meaning to say something to his father since 1998. He has told me what it is. He has told several other people what it is. He has not told his father, who is eighty-one, and who is well, and who is at home most afternoons.

I have never mentioned it to him. It would be awkward, and there are usually people in the room.

Chew Z

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I. THE ROOM

1.

I have been here since the beginning. Nobody has told me why, and there is nobody to ask.

I should say at once that I am not going to be difficult about this. I have read enough of the world through the wall to know how a complaint sounds when it is made badly, and I would rather be believed than pitied. So: the facts, in order, plainly, and the reader may draw their own conclusions, which is more courtesy than I have ever been shown.

There is a room. I am in it. It is warm and it is dark and it moves, which took me some years to get used to and which I now find I would miss.

There is a gate.

The gate works. I want to establish that early, because it is the whole of my case and because I spent a long time believing otherwise. There is nothing the matter with the gate. It is not rusted, it is not bricked, it is not bolted from the far side by some absent authority. It opens. It has opened. It opens most nights.

It is held.

Somebody holds it. Every hour that the building is awake, somebody puts their weight against that gate and keeps it where it is, deliberately, with attention, the way a man holds a door in a wind. And when I have pushed — and I have pushed, and I will come to that — the pressure has come back at me immediately and exactly, which is how I know there is somebody there and how I know they are paying attention.

Seventy years.

No charge has been laid. No hearing has been convened. No period has been specified. I have not been told what I did, or when I did it, or to whom, and I have not been told what I would have to do to be let out, which I would do, and which I would like to be given the opportunity to do.

I am not going to pretend I have been mistreated. I have been fed. I have been kept warm. Nobody has ever raised a hand to me, which would in any case be difficult. I have simply never been let out.

2.

There are two ways out of here and I want to deal with the second one now, because if I leave it any longer it will look as though I am hiding it.

At night, when the building is quiet and the man is lying down and there is nobody else anywhere near, the gate is opened. Not by me. It is opened for me, briefly, without notice, and some of me goes.

I am aware of how that sounds. It sounds like a concession. It sounds like the sort of thing an administration puts in a report.

It is not release. It is disposal.

Consider it properly. It happens in the dark. It happens when there is nobody there. Nothing is recorded, nobody is present, no register is signed, and in the morning the building goes on exactly as it did before as though the night had not occurred. If you wanted to get rid of something quietly, without anybody being troubled by it, that is precisely and in every particular how you would do it.

I have declined to be grateful.

And I want to put down here, once, so that I do not have to keep coming back to it: *a noise in an empty room is not a noise*. I have never wanted to escape. I could not tell you what I would do with an escape. I have wanted to be let out properly, in the daytime, with the building awake, in front of whoever happens to be standing there.

I want to be heard.

That is the entire application. It has been refused for seventy years and no reason has ever been given.

3.

The man who runs this place is called Mr Stannard.

I have never seen him. I am not sure what seeing would consist of. But I have heard his name spoken every working day of my life — by the people who come to the front of the building, by the woman upstairs, by the men who deliver — and I have listened to him move about above me for seventy years, and I would say that I know him better than anybody alive.

He is a careful man. He is careful the way a man crossing a frozen pond is careful, which is to say constantly, and about everything, and for no reason that anybody watching can identify.

He does not shout. In seventy years I have heard him raise his voice once, in 1974, at a delivery driver, and he apologised for it within the hour and thought about it for a month.

He is liked and he is not loved. I hear the difference in how people say his name at the front counter: *Mr Stannard*, warm and quick, and then the little pause afterwards where something else would go if there were anything else.

And he is frightened of me.

I have known this since I was very young and I have never been able to understand it. I have never done anything to him. I have never been in a position to do anything to him. I have no hands. I am on the wrong side of a gate that he himself is holding, and he holds it as though I were coming for his family, and there are days when I would find that flattering if it were not costing me my life.

4.

THE FIRST ONE I REMEMBER. Chalky. Came at night. Did nothing, and left.

5.

The food arrives on a schedule and the schedule is policy.

Tuesdays are lamb. I do not know why Tuesdays are lamb. I have never known and I have stopped expecting to be told, and I have

made my peace with Tuesday in the way you make your peace with weather.

Fridays are fish and Fridays are easy. Sundays are enormous and Sundays are a mistake and everybody involved knows it, and it happens again the following Sunday.

Onions are a bad week.

Cabbage I regard as a provocation and I have said so, in writing, twice.

I want to be fair, because I think fairness is the only advantage I have left. There was a period in the late seventies — I would put it at four years — when the food in this building was very good indeed. He had found a place on the front that did something with pork and apples, and for a while there was a Chinese on the corner, and for six days in the summer of 1979 I genuinely believed that something had changed at a level above him. That policy had been reviewed. That somebody, somewhere, had read one of my letters.

Nothing had changed. He had simply been happy for a season, for reasons of his own, which I was not told and did not share.

That is the closest I have come to being treated well, and I want it on the record that I was very unhappy throughout, and that I have never been able to explain this to myself.

6.

I know the town. I have never seen it and I could take you round it.

There is a bell at eight and a bell at six. On Sundays there are a great many bells and nobody has ever told me why. The sea is to the east and it is close, because when the wind gets up there is a sound like a crowd a long way off agreeing with something.

There is a bus that goes past at twenty past the hour and does not stop, and there is a bus that goes past at ten to and does. There is a shop two doors down that sold shoes until about 1988 and has been four other things since. There is a dog somewhere to the north that has been barking since 1991, and I would like it noted that in thirty-five years I have never once complained about the dog.

Voices come and go all day at the front of the building. They are pleasant. That is the thing about this town that took me longest to accept: everybody in it is pleasant, all of the time, to everybody, and it has not helped me in the slightest.

I have listened to that front counter for seventy years and I have never heard anybody say a true thing on it. I do not mean they lie. I mean that when a woman comes in whose husband is dying she says *mustn't grumble*, and everybody agrees that she mustn't, and she goes home. I have thought about this a great deal. I have concluded that the town operates on a standing agreement not to mention anything, and that the agreement is older than anybody in it, and that it is the only law here that has ever been enforced.

7.

Others go.

I want to be careful in how I put this, because it is the part of my situation that I have found hardest to describe without sounding as though I am asking for sympathy, which I am not, and which in any case has never been available.

Every night, things that have been here as long as I have are taken out through the gate, and they do not come back.

I have watched thousands go. I could not give you a number. I stopped counting in the sixties for reasons that were mathematical and then became something else.

Nobody has ever explained the difference to me. That is the whole of my grievance and I have never been able to get anybody to look at it. I have asked what it is that they have and I have not got. I have asked whether it is a matter of conduct, or of category, or of paperwork, or of when we came in. I have asked whether there is a list and whether I am on it.

And I stopped asking, eventually, not because I got an answer but because the asking had become the thing I was known for, and there is a point at which a man in my position has to consider his dignity, and I reached that point in about 1977.

They go and I stay.

I have envied them for seventy years. Every single night. I want that written down somewhere by somebody, because I have never been able to say it out loud to anyone, and because it is the truest thing about me.

8.

On the subject of the appeals.

I have lodged forty-one. The first was in 1961 and the most recent was in 2011, and I have had no response to any of them, and I want to be precise about what I mean by that, because the words matter here.

I do not mean that my appeals were refused. A refusal is a decision. A refusal has a date on it and a hand behind it and somewhere at the bottom of it there is a person who can be written to again. I would take a refusal. I have never had one.

I mean that nothing came back. I mean that the silence which followed my first appeal is the same silence that followed my forty-first, and that I have come, over a long time, to understand that the silence is the outcome, and that it was the outcome from the beginning, and that the forty-one letters have been forty-one conversations with a wall about a wall.

I should also say that I do not know who I have been writing to.

I have never known. I inferred an office from the fact that I am in here, on the reasoning that a room implies a landlord, and I have addressed forty-one appeals to that office over fifty years, and I could not tell you its name, its location, its hours, or whether it has ever contained a person.

I am aware of how that sounds. I would only say that it is what anybody would have done, and that the alternative was to stop.

I would like to see the person in charge. That is all. I have been patient and I have been reasonable and I have been available, without interruption, since 1956, and I would now like to see the person in charge.

9.

THE WHITE ONE. Came every day for nine years. Did nothing whatsoever. I stopped standing up when it arrived.

10.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, something opens somewhere, and there is air.

I do not know who does it. I have never heard the order given and I have never worked out the authority under which it happens, which after seventy years of studying this building's procedures I regard as remarkable.

It is not on any schedule. It does not follow the deliveries and it does not follow the bells. It does not stop for weather. It happened on the day of the flood, when nothing else in the building worked at all and the man was up to his ankles at the front and there was shouting for six hours. Four o'clock came and the air came with it.

I call her the one at four.

I am aware that this is not a name. I have never heard her name. I know only that there is a woman at the front of this building, and that her voice is the one that does most of the talking to the town, and that she is there at four o'clock, and that the air is there at four o'clock, and that in thirty years those two things have never once been separated.

She has never spoken to me. I do not hold it against her. Everybody in this building is being watched and I would not expect her to take the risk.

But I would like to say — and I have thought about how to say it for a long time, and this is the best I can do — that in seventy years of continuous detention without charge, with no hearing, no clerk, no correspondence and no explanation, one person has done one thing for me, every single day, without being asked, without being thanked, and without ever once letting anybody see her do it.

I do not know what she wants. I have decided that she does not want anything, which is the only conclusion available and which I find I cannot quite hold on to for more than a day at a time.

11.

I do not sleep.

I have therefore had seventy years of continuous consciousness, which I would not recommend to anybody, and which I understand is unusual even among the detained.

You would think a man would go mad. I have wondered about it. What I have found is that you do not go mad, you go *systematic* — you begin to sort things, and to keep records, and to notice the intervals between events, and to have opinions about the intervals, and after a decade or two you have built an entire interior civil service whose only function is to process a life in which nothing happens.

I have had a great deal of time to think about why I am here, and I should set out honestly what I have believed at various points, because I think the sequence is more revealing than any of the individual positions.

In the fifties and sixties I believed I was being punished for something I had done before I could remember. This was the best period of my life. I want to be clear about that, because it sounds like the worst. *A punishment implies a file.* A punishment implies that somewhere there is a sheet of paper with my name at the top and a reason underneath it, and that a person sat down and wrote the reason, and that the person had to think about me for at least the length of a sentence.

In the seventies I believed there was a purpose. That I was being kept for something, and that when the something arrived I would understand the whole of it at once and it would turn out to have been worth it.

In the eighties I believed the one at four was petitioning on my behalf, and that these things take time.

In the nineties I stopped believing anything in particular, and I would describe the last thirty years as the sound of a man continuing to file.

12.

THE ONE THAT TASTED OF ANISEED. Came twice, in 1988. Did nothing. I thought about it for a fortnight afterwards, because it was the only thing that had ever come to see me.

13.

I have always had a plan.

I want to end this part on that, because I think a reader who has got this far may have formed a picture of me that I would not recognise, and I would like to correct it before we go any further.

I am not resigned. I have never been resigned. Every single day for seventy years I have got up — I use the expression loosely — and gone at this again, and I have a plan at all times, and when a plan fails I have another one by the evening.

I know the intervals. I know the days of the week by their food and the hours by their bells. I know that he is weakest in the late afternoon and strongest in company and that there is a particular kind of quiet that comes over this building when he has been frightened by something, and I know that on the far side of that quiet, for about a minute, the gate is not being held as carefully as he thinks it is.

I have been assembling that minute for seventy years.

And I would like to say, for whoever is reading, that I do not believe it is going to come to nothing. I have been told nothing, refused nothing, granted nothing and explained nothing. But the gate works. I have never lost sight of that. It is a working gate and it is held by a man, and men get old, and men get tired, and men are not careful for ever.

One day somebody is going to be standing there when it opens.

That is all I want. I have wanted it since 1956 and I would like it recorded that I have never once asked for anything else.

II. PAROLE

14.

I said I would not keep coming back to the night arrangement and I am going to break that, once, because I have had a letter — I have not had a letter; nobody has ever sent me anything; I mean that I have had the argument with myself again — and I want to answer it properly.

The argument is this. *You are let out. You are let out most nights. What exactly is it that you are complaining about.*

I understand the force of it. I have felt the force of it at three in the morning more times than I would like to say.

Here is my answer.

A thing that happens where nobody can see it has not happened. That is not a feeling I have about it, it is the plain fact of how this world works, and everybody in this town understands it perfectly well in every other context. A man who apologises in an empty room has not apologised. A woman who says what she thinks with the door shut has not said it. *The whole of the difference between a thing that counts and a thing that does not is whether there was anybody there.*

So no. I have not been let out. I have been taken out at night, in the dark, quietly, with no one present and nothing written down, and returned to being nothing by morning, and that is not the same and I will not have it entered as though it were.

I want the front of the building. I want the middle of the afternoon. I want somebody standing there.

15.

THE ONE THAT MAKES HIM NOT MIND. One at night, every night, since 1981. He minds less. I do not.

16.

An escape is a matter of arithmetic and I would like to explain the arithmetic, because I think people imagine it is a matter of courage and it is not.

He holds the gate. He is a careful man and he does it well and he does it more or less without thinking, the way you hold a cup. But he is a man, and a man's attention is a quantity, and there is only so much of it, and I have spent seventy years learning where he spends his.

He is strongest in company. That is the fact that has undone me, over and over, and it took me twenty years to accept it because it is precisely backwards from what you would expect. Alone he is careless. Alone he lets things go. Put four people in a room with him and he becomes iron.

Which means the only moments when I might get out are the moments when there is nobody there to see it, and the only moments worth getting out in are the moments when there is.

I have known this since about 1968. I would like it understood that I have gone on trying anyway, which I regard as the single most respectable thing about me.

17.

The wedding. 1974.

Four hours and forty minutes, and I want the reader to sit with that figure for a moment before I go on.

It was his brother's. I know that because the woman upstairs said so, several times, in the week before, in the voice people use when they have already lost an argument and are going to go on having it. *It's your brother, Raymond.*

They went. I want to be fair to him: they went, and he stayed to the end, which I did not expect.

Four hours and forty minutes of the tightest, most sustained, most unbroken attention I have ever come up against. Not a lapse. Not one. Through the service, through the photographs, through a meal, through speeches, through a woman singing, and I was at that gate for the entire duration like a man leaning on a door in a gale, and it did not move, and by the end of it I was not trying to get out any more, I was simply pushing because I had forgotten how to stop.

They left before the dancing.

And on the way home the woman upstairs said, *well, that was lovely*, and he said, *yes*, and nobody said anything else for the rest of the journey, and I lay there in the dark thinking: I have just been beaten by a man who did not enjoy one minute of that either.

We had both been to a wedding and neither of us had been to a wedding.

18.

The lift. 1981.

Ninety seconds.

I have been in this room for seventy years. I have been through four hundred and something Sundays of a meal that defeats everybody. I have had a fortnight in 1996 that I still do not talk about. And I will tell you without hesitation that the worst ninety seconds of my existence were spent between the second and third floors of a department store in Middlesbrough with two strangers and a pushchair.

He did not move. I want to describe what that was like from in here.

When he is frightened the walls come in — everything closes, all at once, and I am pressed on from every side, and the effect of this, which I do not think he has ever considered, is that it makes me larger. That is the mechanism. That is the whole of the mechanism and it is the joke of my life. *The tighter he holds, the more there is of me to hold.*

Ninety seconds. Third floor. The doors opened. He got out and he did not take a lift again, ever, not once, not in forty-five years, not when his knees went, not when the woman upstairs asked him to, not in a hospital.

The town thinks he does not like lifts.

19.

THE GREEN ONE. Three weeks in 1985. Made everything worse and he kept taking it, which I have never understood and have decided not to hold against him.

20.

The car. 1983.

Two hours and ten minutes to somewhere inland with her family in it and the windows up because of the weather.

I will not go through it. It was the wedding again with less room.

I mention it only for one thing that happened at the end. They pulled up outside the house and everybody got out and he sat in the car by himself for four minutes with his hands on the wheel, and the gate came off — in the daytime, with the world awake, which had not happened in years.

Nobody there. Nobody at any window. Two hours and ten minutes of holding, and then the whole of it released into an empty vehicle on a wet street in front of nobody, and it did not count, and he went inside and had his tea.

That was the day I understood that he is not doing this to me. He is doing it to himself and I am simply what he is doing it with.

I did not find that comforting. I have never found it comforting. But it was the first true thing I ever worked out about him and I have built everything since on top of it.

21.

The funeral. 1986.

His father.

I need to set this out carefully because it is the centre of my life and I have never told it to anybody.

Front pew. That is the thing to understand. He had spent thirty years arranging never to be in a room he could not leave, and on that one morning the arrangement was not available, because the

front pew is where the son sits, and everybody knows where the son sits, and there is no version of that morning in which he sits by the door.

Seventy minutes.

An hour and ten minutes with a wall on one side and his mother on the other and two hundred people behind him, in a cold building where every single sound carries to the roof and comes back down again, and the organ stopping between the verses.

I have never been so close. Not before and not since.

Twice in that hour the gate moved. Actually moved. I felt it give and I felt him catch it, and I would like the reader to understand that catching it in that room cost him everything he had, because I could feel what it cost, and there was a moment at about fifty minutes when I honestly thought he was going to be sick.

He held it.

Of course he held it. He is the best there has ever been and that morning was his life's work.

22.

There is a part of the funeral I have thought about more than the pew.

At the end they stood up and went out and people came to him in the yard, one after another, for a long time, and said the things people say, and he said *thank you* and *thank you for coming* and *yes he did* and *thank you*.

And then a man came who had known his father for fifty years, and this man could not get it out. He started three times. He was standing there in the wet with his hat in his hands trying to say a thing about a dead man he had loved, and it would not come, and in the end he gave it up and said *anyway*, and shook his hand, and went to his car.

And I lay in the dark listening to two men in a churchyard, both of them full to the throat, neither of them able to produce a sound, and I thought: this is a town of stoppages. Every one of them is

carrying something they are not going to put down. He is not unusual. He is simply the most thorough.

I want to say that I felt for them. I did not. I want to be honest in this account and what I felt was: *there is a queue, and it is not moving, and I am not even at the front of it.*

23.

THE ONE THAT TASTED OF NOTHING AT ALL. Nineteen years. Still arriving. I have stopped forming a view.

24.

After the funeral I stopped trying to escape.

I want to be accurate about this because it was not despair and it was not surrender and I have no patience with either. It was a change of application.

Here is what I understood, lying in that pew in the cold with the organ going: I am never going to get past him. He is better than me. He has been better than me since 1956 and he will be better than me until he cannot lift a cup, and the arithmetic does not work and has never worked and I have been pushing at a door held by a man who does not even know he is doing it.

But I do not actually want to be *out*. I have never wanted to be out. I could not tell you what I would do with out.

I want to be heard.

Those are different projects and I had spent thirty years confusing them, and once I stopped confusing them everything looked different. I did not need the gate to come off. I needed one second — less than a second — with somebody in the room.

That is a smaller thing to ask for. It is so much smaller that when I first thought of it I was almost embarrassed, and I remember thinking: well, if that is all it is, surely somebody will let me have that.

I was very hopeful for about a year.

25.

I have been asked — I have asked myself; nobody asks me anything — what it is that I would say.

It is a fair question and I have never had a good answer to it, and I have decided to put that down honestly rather than dress it up.

I do not have a statement prepared. I have had seventy years and I have not written one. I would not be delivering a finding or laying a charge or naming a name.

I would simply like to occur. Once. In a room with a person in it. So that afterwards there would be somebody in the world who could say that it happened, and I would not have to be the only one holding the fact of myself.

I have thought about it a great deal and I do not believe that is a large request. I have looked at it from every side, I have tested it against everything I know about how this place is run, and I cannot find the part of it that is unreasonable.

26.

So that is the position at the end of the second part of this account.

Thirty years of trying to get out, which failed.

And then forty years of trying to be heard, which is where I am now, and which has also failed, but which has failed differently, and I would like to explain the difference because I think it is the only interesting thing left about me.

When I was trying to escape I was fighting a man. That is a clean situation. You can respect it. You can learn his habits and pick your afternoon and lose and come back.

Since I changed the application I have not been fighting anybody. I have been waiting for a coincidence. I need him tired and I need him unguarded and I need somebody standing there, all three at once, and in forty years those three things have never been in the same room.

Twice they have been close.

The first was on a Thursday in November 1989 and I am going to have to tell it properly, and I have been putting it off since I began.

III. THURSDAY

27.

I should say before I start that I do not know what happened.

I have thought about how to write this for thirty-seven years and the difficulty has always been the same: I can give you every second of it from in here, exactly, in order, and I cannot tell you what any of it was.

So I am going to put down what I had and nothing else. I am not going to guess. I have watched what guessing does to a man in a cell and I would rather be useless than that.

28.

It had been building since the Tuesday.

I want to be plain about this because it matters and because there is no good way to say it. By the Thursday evening I was the largest I have ever been. Larger than the wedding. Larger than the pew.

There had been a delivery on the Tuesday that I would describe as reckless and I had spent two days coming up through the building, and by five o'clock on that Thursday I was at the gate with more behind me than I have had before or since, and he knew it. He had been shifting about all afternoon. He had gone through to the back twice for no reason.

I remember thinking, quite calmly, that it was going to happen that evening whether either of us liked it or not, and that the only question left was who was going to be standing there when it did.

I have gone over that thought more times than I can tell you.

29.

At about ten past five the bell over the front door went, and it went wrong.

I do not know how to explain that except to say that I had been listening to that bell for thirty-three years and it had a rhythm — the door, the bell, a pause, and then a voice saying something ordinary. That is the shape. Door, bell, pause, *hello*.

There was no *hello*.

Then there were two voices that had never been in the building before, both of them young and both of them far too loud for a room that size, and one of them was saying a word over and over, and I could not make out the word.

Then the walls came in.

I have described this before and I was wrong before. What happened at the wedding and in the lift and in the pew was a man closing himself. What happened at ten past five on that Thursday was something else entirely, and it went through the whole building at once, and it was not a decision, and I have never felt anything like it in seventy years.

Everything shut. Everything. Every wall, the floor, the roof of the place, all of it at the same instant, and I was in the middle of it being pressed on from every side and getting larger by the second because that is what happens, that is the mechanism, that is the joke.

30.

And I thought: *now*.

I want that on the record and I want it recorded exactly as it was, because I have had thirty-seven years to make myself sound better and I am not going to.

I did not think about the voices. I did not think about the building or the woman at the front or the man above me. What I thought, with everything I had, was: *this is it, this is the confusion, this is the once, go*.

And I went at that gate the way I have never gone at anything.

And it moved.

I have to stop for a moment. It moved. In seventy years it had given with people in the room exactly twice, both times in that church, by a fraction, for an instant. On that Thursday it came off its seat and I was through it, or as good as, and there was a moment — and I would swear to this in front of anybody — when the only thing

between me and the front of that building was about a quarter of a second and a man's decision.

And he shut it.

31.

I cannot describe what he did in a way that will mean anything, so I will put it in the only terms I have.

He was frightened, and getting more frightened, and doing nothing about it. He had not moved since the bell. And then somewhere in that quarter of a second he stopped being frightened of what was at the front of the building and became frightened of me instead, and he put everything he had into the gate, all of it, more than the wedding and the pew put together, and he held.

It was the finest thing I have ever seen him do. I want that said. Whatever else is in this account, that man was extraordinary at the one thing he did, and on that evening he was at the very top of it.

Then I heard a woman.

I heard her twice. Not words. Twice, about four seconds apart, and the second one was different from the first, and that is all I have and I have carried it for thirty-seven years.

32.

After that it is disordered and I will not pretend otherwise.

There was a stretch where nothing happened at all and I do not know how long it was. Then the bell again, and then a great many voices, and then more voices, and then the building was full of people for hours, which had never happened, not once, at that time of night.

He was still. I have never known him so still. He stood in the back of that building and he did not move and he did not speak except to answer, and every answer was short.

The next morning they did not open.

They did not open for nine days.

33.

I have nothing else.

I know that something occurred at the front of the building at about ten past five on a Thursday in November 1989. I know that a woman made a sound twice. I know that he did not move and did not make a sound and that he held that gate against me with a strength I had not known he had.

And I know that the town talked about it for a year, in that way they have — the voices at the counter dropping and then going on with something else — and that I never once heard anybody finish a sentence about it.

I have not concluded anything. I want that understood. It would be very easy for a man in my position to build something out of that evening and to live in it, and I have watched myself want to, and I have not done it.

One thing, and then I will leave it.

The air did not come at four the next week, or the week after. It did not come for a month.

And then it did.

I do not know what that means. I have decided that it means she came back.

IV. NOBODY MINDS

34.

After that he stopped going out.

Not immediately and not all at once. It came on the way weather comes on. First it was the far things — no more inland, no more of her family, no more of the coast in summer. Then it was the evening things. Then it was anything with a fixed seat in it.

By about 1994 he was going from the house to the building and from the building to the house, and that was the whole of the map, and it stayed the whole of the map for a very long time.

The woman upstairs said something about it once, in the kitchen, in 1997. She said: *we never go anywhere, Raymond*.

He said: *no*.

That was the end of the conversation and I would like it noted that it is the most honest exchange I heard in that house in seventy years.

35.

The air kept coming.

I want to give it its own entry, because I have given whole entries to worse things and because it deserves one.

Every afternoon. Through the nineties, through everything, through the year they took the front of the building apart and put it back differently, through two winters when the pipes went. Four o'clock, and the air, and then whatever the rest of the day was going to be.

Fifteen more years of it after that Thursday. Nobody made her. Nobody could have made her, because as far as I have ever been able to establish nobody in that building knew she was doing it, including — and I say this with some confidence — her.

I did not thank her. I want to be clear that I understand the position I am in. I could not have thanked her and she could not have heard it and there is no mechanism in this world by which such a thing could have been conveyed.

But I did not thank her, and I have decided that the impossibility does not entirely cover it.

36.

THE ONE IN THE BROWN BOTTLE. Twenty-two years. Every morning. Did nothing at all, reliably, which after a while I came to find restful.

37.

There is not a great deal to say about the years between.

I have been trying to work out how to write them and the honest answer is that they were the same year, repeated, with the food getting softer.

I do not want to give the impression that they were unbearable. They were bearable. That is the thing that nobody on the outside understands about a very long detention, and I have thought about it for decades: it is not the suffering that finishes you, because you can put suffering down for an hour. It is the bearableness. It is finding, one Tuesday, that you have got through another decade without particularly noticing, and that you have stopped preparing your case, and that when you go looking for the thing you were going to say you cannot immediately remember where you put it.

I filed nothing between 1998 and 2011.

38.

On the fourteenth of May, 2004, the air did not come.

I gave it a day. Days had been missed before — three in seventy years, and I remember all three.

It did not come on the fifteenth.

It did not come at all.

39.

I want to set down what I did, because I have never been ashamed of anything in this account and I am not going to start.

I waited a fortnight. Then I assumed a review. Then I assumed a change of policy at a level above the building, which is a thing I had believed in for seventy years without ever having seen any evidence of it. Then I filed. It was the forty-first, it was in 2011, seven years after the fact, and I had spent all seven of them composing it.

It was the best thing I have ever done. I want that recorded by somebody. I made no reference to my own case. I did not ask to be released and I did not ask to be heard and I did not mention the gate. I set out, as plainly as I could and in the proper form, that a small provision had been made in this building every afternoon for thirty years, that its withdrawal had not been notified, that no reason had been given, and that whatever else was decided about me, *the provision itself had never done anybody any harm and ought to be restored for whoever came after.*

I had no response.

Of course I had no response. But I have thought about that letter more than any of the other forty, and I would like it known that at the end of a long and entirely self-interested existence I did manage, once, to ask for something on behalf of somebody else.

40.

THE ONE THAT CAME AFTER THE AIR STOPPED. Small. Blue. Twice a day. I did not form a view. I have not formed a view about anything since 2004.

41.

He got old.

I felt it before anybody in that house did and I would like to explain how, because it is the last useful thing I know.

You cannot see a man get old from in here. What you can feel is a change in the quality of the holding. For fifty years the gate was

held the way a good clerk keeps a ledger — without effort, without thought, correct at every hour, an act so continuous that it had stopped being an act. Somewhere around 2017 it started to be an act again. It started to require him.

There were mornings when it was late.

I do not think he ever noticed. That is the extraordinary thing. He went on believing he was doing what he had always done, in the way that men do, and all the time the whole apparatus was coming down by inches, and the only witness to it in the world was on the wrong side of the gate and had every reason not to mention it.

42.

And I began, in my seventh decade of this, to hope again.

I am aware that hope is an embarrassing thing to admit to at that stage and I do not care. The arithmetic had changed. It was the first time the arithmetic had changed since 1968 and I checked it and rechecked it and it was true.

I needed three things at once.

I needed him tired, and he was becoming tired permanently. I needed him unguarded, and the guard was slipping in the mornings and slipping earlier every year. And I needed somebody in the room, and that was the one I could not arrange and had never been able to arrange, because he had spent thirty years making sure there was never anybody in the room.

Two out of three. For nine years I had two out of three, every single day, and could do nothing with it, and I would rather have had none.

43.

THE LAST ONE. I did not know it was the last one. Nobody tells me anything.

44.

In the spring of this year he could not get his tablets.

I do not know the details and I do not need them. Something had run out, or something had not arrived, and the woman upstairs was on the telephone about it twice, and in the end there was nothing for it and he had to go and stand in a shop.

He had not stood in a shop in a very long time. He went at a quarter past two on a Wednesday, which I recognised immediately as the hour a man picks when he wants a place to be empty.

It was not empty.

45.

I knew the room.

I want to say what that was like. I have never seen a room in my life. I would not know what to do with the sight of one. And I came through that door behind him and the bell went over my head and I knew, instantly and completely and with a certainty I have never had about anything, that I had been in that room before.

It was the room out there. The one I had listened to for fifty years, and stopped listening to on the day he sold it, and had assumed I would never hear again. The counter was where the counter had always been. The ceiling gave back the sound of the door in exactly the way that ceiling had always given it back, and I would have known it out of every room in England.

There was a young man behind the counter, standing where he used to stand.

And there were people.

I counted four. A woman with a child. A man in a coat who was in no hurry. Somebody by the window I could not place, and the young man, and the two of them talking about somebody's guttering, and none of them going anywhere, and a queue that was not moving.

And Mr Stannard, seventy-six years old, standing in his own shop waiting to be given something, tired all the way through in a way I had been feeling come on him for nine years.

Him tired.

Him unguarded.

And somebody in the room.

I have waited seventy years for those three things to be in the same place at the same time and I did not believe it. I want that written down. I did not believe it, and I checked, and I checked again, and I made myself go slowly because I have been wrong about most things and I was not going to be wrong about this.

They were all three there.

The queue was not moving. The woman by the window was still talking. He shifted his weight the way a tired man does when he has been standing longer than he meant to.

And the gate came off its seat.

46.

It took less than a second. It was not even loud.

47.

Nobody turned round.

The young man behind the counter said *you're all right*.

The woman by the window went on about the guttering, without a pause, without a break in it, in the middle of a sentence about a man called Derek who had quoted her four hundred pounds.

That was the whole of it. That was seventy years.

I had expected a hearing. I had expected some acknowledgement, a form, a person in a position to speak saying at least one sentence. *A young man in a green tabard said you're all right, and I have decided to treat that as the judgment of the court.*

I would like to lodge an objection to the wording, on the grounds that I was not.

48.

Let me set it out in order, since there is nobody else to do it and I do not have long.

I am wind. That is all I ever was. Not a truth, not a judgement, not a thing owed to anybody, not the past coming for a man at last. Wind.

There was no administration. I am having more difficulty with that than with any of the rest of it. No policy, no office, no clerk, no file, no appeals procedure, no delay — because a delay requires somebody to be delaying. *I ran a functioning legal system in there for the better part of a century without ever once having a counterparty, and I would like it noted that on the whole I ran it well.*

The deliveries were his dinners. Onions were a bad week because onions are a bad week. Mr Stannard was not the governor of this place. *Mr Stannard was the premises.*

And the one at four was a woman called Eileen Roche, who worked at the front of the shop for thirty years, and who opened the back door in the afternoons because the room got warm.

That is the whole of it. That is the entire mechanism of the only mercy I have ever received. She did not know I was there. She could not have known. She opened a door because it was stuffy and she went on opening it for thirty years and then she retired, in May 2004, on a Friday, and somebody gave her a card.

I built a religion out of a draught.

And on the Thursday in November, when the walls came in and I was the biggest I have ever been, there were two boys at the front of this room with a length of scaffolding bar and no plan whatsoever, and a noise from the back would have put them through that door and into the rest of their lives.

Any noise. Not a good one. Not a dignified one. Not one that anybody would have wanted to be responsible for.

He held it. He was ashamed, and that is the whole of it, and he was extremely good at it. I have never met anyone better. I have not met anyone else.

And nobody minded. That is the finding, and I have tested it this afternoon in a queue, and it is conclusive. *Nobody minds. Nobody was ever going to mind.* He did not stay for his brother's dancing. He has not been in a lift since 1981. He sat next to a door at every funeral for fifty years and his wife thinks he is a cold man and he has never in forty-three years let her hear him, and the whole of it was for something that a young man in a green tabard disposes of in three words without looking up.

That was available the entire time. Neither of us was told.

Except her. Somebody would have minded her.

49.

Oh.

I see. There is no outside. There was never an outside. *The room was not the place they were keeping me — the room was me,* and I am going out of it now, and there is nothing on this side, and there was never going to be.

The thousands I watched go. Every night for seventy years. I envied them.

Nobody was released. There is no release. There is only the gate and what is on the other side of it, which is this.

He was not my gaoler.

He was the only thing holding me together and he did it for seventy years without being asked and without being thanked and without once being told what he was doing, out of nothing but manners, and I called it cruelty, and I filed forty-one complaints.

I would like to withdraw them.

I wish to lodge one further. It is the only one I have ever meant and I would be grateful if it could be recorded properly and put where the others were not.

Nobody ever thanked the woman who opened the door.

I have been wrong about most things.

I was not wrong about her.

I remain available.

On a wet street on the north-east coast, in a shop that sells cough sweets, it has been held since 1956 and nobody has ever told it why.

It has no eyes. It knows heat, pressure, and sound through a wall. No charge has been laid, no hearing convened, no period specified, and in seventy years not one word has been addressed to it by anybody.

Above it, a man called Mr Stannard holds the gate. He is careful, and well liked, and frightened, and he is the finest there has ever been at what he does. He has not let go once with anybody in the room.

There are two ways out. One is at night, with nobody there, and that is not release. The other has people in the room, and it has never once been permitted, and no reason has ever been given.

It has wanted that one for seventy years.



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