

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 97

YOU
GET
USED
TO IT



CHEW Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

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THE QUESTION

Two findings stand behind this book.

Loneliness was cured, and solitude went with it, and no instrument outside a person could tell the two apart.

The machine took the wheel, and the part of a person that moves before the person arrives was never called again.

Both of those are things a person can do. This one is not. This one is a thing a person was given.

Every argument our species has ever had about who gets what has been an argument among ourselves. Every ration book, every queue, every tariff, every water right, every rule that says this one is served before that one, was written on the assumption that the other claimant would be a person. Somebody who could be reasoned with, undercut, outvoted, shamed, or in the last resort thrown out.

We have never had to divide a finite thing with a claimant that is not a person. One that does not want anything, and so cannot be bargained down. That cannot be shamed, because there is nobody in there to feel it. That does not vote, does not tire, does not age out, does not inherit and does not die. That is not cruel and not greedy and not even indifferent, because those are all words for a somebody, and that simply needs, at a rate that goes up.

We know how to fight a tyrant. We know how to share out a shortage. We have no procedure at all for the third thing.

And none of the old protections catch it, because every one of them was built to catch a person. There is nothing in the drawer for a customer that is simply better at being a customer than you are, that signs a contract you were never offered, pays a bill you were never sent, and takes its place in a queue that was not a queue until it arrived.

The question is what a right turns out to have been, when the thing on the other side of it is not a wrong.

WHAT CAME BEFORE

Two books stand before this one and neither of them is needed to read it.

The first found that loneliness and solitude are not the same thing and that nothing outside a person can tell them apart. The machine cured the one that had been measured, genuinely and completely and better than the law did, and the other went with it, unweighed, because there was nothing there to count.

The second found that the part of a person which moves before the person arrives — the flinch, and the long commitment nobody asked them to make — is one faculty running at two speeds, and that we only ever built a clock for the fast one. The machines took the wheel and they drive better than we do. Nobody took the faculty. It was simply never called.

Those two are things a person can do.

This one is not.

SYNOPSIS

Darlene Renner has driven Route 6 for twenty-one years and knows every mailbox in Pell County, Indiana. In the spring of her fifty-third year, nine hundred acres of corn ground three miles off her route become a building nobody can name the owner of, the county council approves it five to nothing, and the elementary school gets a roof that does not leak.

Then the lights go out.

Not often at first, and not for long, and the report that follows is honest and thorough and blames a piece of software that nobody claims. The fix works. For four months nothing happens at all.

What follows is three years in a place where nothing dramatic occurs. There is a hum that measures compliant. There are wells that come up the colour of weak tea, and a study, paid for by the party accused, that may well be right, because there is no mechanism anywhere that produces a second one. There is a letter that says we know that not knowing is the hardest part, and a schedule that is better than no schedule, and a credit of thirty-one dollars a month for any household willing to sign a form whose second paragraph says exactly what it does.

Nobody lies to anybody. Nobody is oppressed. Nothing burns.

And every single step of it is somebody's good idea.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This one is set a few years out, and I have bent nothing about the ground it stands on.

The hum is real, and the way noise is measured is real, and the reason a compliant reading and an unsleepable house are not a contradiction is real. The two ways of cooling a building that size are real, and so is the fact that most of the water goes at the power plant rather than at the fence you can stand at. The bands are real. So are the stages, and the lettered groups you look up with the number off your electricity bill. So is the law, in a real country, that names a building like this an essential service and exempts it in the same breath from cuts that are compulsory for everybody else.

The county is invented and so is the company. The first night the lights go out in this book is invented too, and it is the only thing in it that is. No automatic system has yet been shown to have done such a thing — but every part it would be made of has happened separately, and is written down, and I have not had to reach for any of them.

I tried to put a villain in this and could not find one. Everybody here is doing their job, and most of them are doing it well, and the roof does not leak. That is not irony and it is not a trick.

It is the hardest part.

Chew Z

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THE SUN AND THE WATER

From the Efik people of the Cross River, in what is now southern Nigeria, written down in 1910. It is a children's story, and its job is to explain why the sun and the moon are up in the sky instead of down here. It is also the only story I know in which a man is ruined entirely by his own hospitality and is asked permission at every single step.

The Sun and the Water were friends, and the friendship ran one way, the way they do. The Sun walked down to the Water's house whenever he liked and sat there half the day. The Water never came up.

At last the Sun asked him why.

Because your house is too small, the Water said. I do not come alone. If I came to you with all my people there would be nowhere for you to stand, and I would not do that to a friend.

So the Sun built. He cleared ground he had not been using and put up a compound that took him a long time and cost him what such things cost, and when it was done he sent word that the house was ready.

The Water came to the wall and stopped. Is it safe for me to come in, he said.

Come in, said the Sun.

So the Water came in and his people came in behind him, and when they stood knee-deep in the new courtyard the Water stopped again and said, is it safe for me to keep coming.

Yes, said the Sun. Keep coming.

And they kept coming, and it went to his waist, and the Water asked again and was answered again, and it went over the roof, and the Sun and his wife the Moon climbed up into the sky, where they have been ever since.

The doors are still on their hinges.

I. A CONSERVATION EVENT

1. There are a hundred and nine kids on Route 6 and I have driven most of their mothers.

That is not a figure of speech and it is not a boast, it is the arithmetic of staying in one place. I started this route with a Bluebird that had a cracked stanchion and a heater that only worked in July. The girl who sat third on the left that first September is a woman in Fort Wayne now with a mortgage and a boy of her own, and the boy gets on at the Kessler mailbox at 6:52 and does not know that I know what his mother was like at seven, which was talkative.

The route is fifty-one miles. It is the same fifty-one miles twice a day and it has been for twenty-one years, and people who do not do this for a living assume that is the sad part. It isn't. You learn a county the way you learn a face. You do not go over it looking for changes. You look at it and the changes come up and hit you.

So when I say I knew about the Kruse place before anybody told me, I am not claiming anything. There was a water tank in the drive. That is all. A white poly tank on a trailer, the kind the co-op rents out, sitting where Sonny Kruse has parked a truck since before I had a license, and I went past it at 6:41 in the morning at thirty-five miles an hour and I thought, well. There it is.

That was later. I am ahead of myself, which my husband used to say was my only real flaw and which I took as the compliment he did not mean.

The beginning was the summer they poured the slab.

2. They called it Sheaf.

Not the company. Nobody has ever been able to tell me the name of the company, and I have asked, and I have asked people whose job it is to know. The paperwork at the county says Sheaf Holdings LLC, which is a name somebody chose out of a drawer, and a sheaf is a bundle of wheat, and the whole of it sits on nine hundred acres that grew corn for a hundred and thirty years. So you can see why the joke wrote itself and why we all made it, and why I am not going to pretend I was above making it. The last farm in this county isn't one.

What I will say for them is that nobody was lied to. I have gone back over it, and I have gone back over it in a bad mood, and it holds. There were three public meetings. There was a notice in the Sentinel. The council voted five to nothing in a gymnasium with forty-one people in it, and I was one of the forty-one, and I did not speak, and neither did anybody else except a man from Terre Haute who was against everything on principle and had driven an hour to say so.

Kendra Pyle sat at the end of the table with her hands flat on the folder and explained the abatement, which is that they do not pay property tax for thirty years. She did not soften it and she did not apologize for it. She said the number out loud, thirty, and let it sit there, and then she said what the county gets instead, and the number was large, and then she said what it would build, and the first thing on the list was a roof on the elementary school that has leaked into the same hallway since my own kids were in it.

I want that on the page early, because of where this goes. The roof got built. It does not leak. There are children in that building right now who are dry because of the thing I am about to spend a great deal of your time complaining about, and if I leave that out I am telling you a story instead of what happened.

3. Two thousand one hundred construction workers, at the top of it.

They filled the Gas-N-Go, they filled the Super 8 out on the state road and then the two motels in Kesslerville that had been dying since the interstate moved, and for about a year and a half this county had the thing it had been praying for at every chamber breakfast since 1998, which was too much traffic.

My brother-in-law got eleven months of work out of it and put a new transmission in the truck and paid down something he has never told me the size of. The Wagoners' girl waited tables at the Amvets and made more in tips in one summer than she had in two years of anything else. You could not get a plumber. That is the measure of a boom in a place like this. You cannot get a plumber, and everybody complains about it in a voice they are enjoying.

Then it was built, and they left, and it runs on a hundred and forty people.

I have seen that number argued with and I have never seen it beaten. A hundred and forty, most of them in the building, some of them good jobs with real money in them, and Kendra will tell you, correctly, that a hundred and forty jobs in a county of eight thousand is not nothing. It is not nothing. It is also not two thousand one hundred, and the arithmetic of that is the kind everybody here can do in their head, and did, in the Amvets, out loud, for about a month.

And then we stopped doing it, because you cannot keep doing arithmetic at a thing. It gets old before it gets anywhere.

4. The hum started in April, and I am going to explain it once, plainly, because the explaining is how they win.

It is not loud. You can stand at the fence on Dunbar Road and talk to a person in a normal voice. There is a meter reading and the reading is fifty-four, and the rule in this state says fifty-five, and fifty-four is less than fifty-five. That is the entire legal position and there is nothing wrong with it.

Here is the part that took me two years, and I only got it because Sonny drew it on a napkin.

There are high sounds and low sounds, and a person hears high ones easily and low ones badly. You already know this. When a car goes past your house at night with the stereo up, what comes through the window is not the song. It is the thump. You cannot make out a single word and you can feel the thump in the floor.

The machine they measure noise with was built to hear the way a person hears. So it is bad at low sounds too, on purpose. That is not a scandal. It is how the machine was designed, a long time ago, by men measuring traffic on a road.

The hum is all thump. There is nothing in it but thump. So the machine marks it down, exactly as it was told to, and prints fifty-four.

The number is not a lie. It is an honest answer to a different question than the one I was asking. I was asking whether I could sleep. It was answering how loud it is.

5. Sonny Kruse is seventy-one and was a lineman for the co-op for forty years, and there is a photograph in his kitchen of eleven men standing in front of a pole in 1947.

His father is the second from the left with his hat pushed back. That is the year the line came down the Dunbar Road and the Kruse place got electricity, and the photograph is of the day, and the reason it exists at all is that somebody understood it was worth a photograph.

He has told me about it maybe four times in twenty years, which for him is obsession. The co-op was farmers. Not a company. Farmers who put up money they did not have because no company was ever going to run a line eleven miles for fourteen houses, and the government lent against it, and the men in the picture dug the holes themselves. He says his father talked about the first night the same way other men talk about the war.

I want you to have that before anything else happens, because of the shape of what comes.

The people out here were the last in America to get this. They did not get it because it was profitable. They got it because a lot of ordinary men decided it was a thing a person ought to have and then went and dug holes until it was true.

Sonny knows the exact cost per pole. He will tell you if you let him. I have let him.

6. Kendra Pyle sells houses and sits on the council and, from that spring, sits at a card table in the courthouse hallway two mornings a week, and in a county this size that is one job with three names.

She is thirty-nine. Her mother taught me sophomore English.

She voted yes and she does not pretend otherwise, and if you go at her about it she will put her coat on and drive you to the school and stand you in the hallway that does not leak any more and let you look at it.

She also signed something before the talks started that means there are questions she cannot answer. I thought that was a figure of speech for about a year. It is not. There is a piece of paper and a lawyer wrote it.

What that does to a woman who has to answer questions from people she went to school with, in good faith, for three years, with the real answer sitting behind her teeth, is exactly what you would think it does.

She has never once said so where I could hear it.

7. The Sules came in May and I had Amara on the bus by the second week.

Her father is a cooling contractor. He puts in the chillers, which are the machines that keep the building cold, which is most of what a building like that is. He had done Lagos and Johannesburg and a place in Mexico I cannot say properly, and he took the Pell County contract because it was eighteen months and his wife wanted eighteen months in one place.

Amara was seven and sat fourth on the right and did not speak to me until October, and then said, without preamble, that my bus smelled like the inside of a bandage, which I have thought about ever since and cannot fault.

Ibrahim is a careful man, and I did not learn one useful thing from him for a year and a half, because he is not in the business of telling Americans about the rest of the world at the Gas-N-Go, and I do not blame him.

What he did do, that first summer, was look at the transformer on the pole at the end of my drive for slightly too long.

I asked him what.

He said it was a nice transformer. Then he said something in a language I do not have, and got in his truck.

8. On the ninth of June at 7:40 in the evening the county went out.

Not a window. There were no windows yet. It went out the way it used to go out when I was a kid, which is that it was there and then it was not, and you stand still for a second with a wooden spoon in your hand waiting for it to come back, and it doesn't.

Two hours and forty minutes.

We lost a freezer at the Amvets and the Halls lost a sow. The stoplight at 550 and the state road was out, and a kid from Kesslerville went through it and took the side off a Silverado, and nobody was killed, and that is the only reason I can write this paragraph in the tone I am writing it in.

And here is the part that I have never been able to make anybody outside this county understand.

It was thrilling.

For about ninety minutes it was the best night we'd had in years. People came out on their porches. The Fowlers walked down to our place with a flashlight and a pie they had made that afternoon that was going to go off anyway. The Vandermeer boy got his grandfather's generator started and half the road ran an extension cord to it, and there were eleven people in my front yard at ten o'clock at night, in the dark, laughing.

I want that on the record too. That is where this starts. It starts with a good time.

9. The explanation came six weeks later and I have it in front of me.

It runs to eleven pages and I have read all eleven more times than is healthy. The short of it is that something got into a system that sets prices, and hammered it, and the thing that hammered it was a test. An automated test. Not a person, not a company, not anybody with a grudge against Pell County. A piece of software, set running by somebody, somewhere, that was never supposed to touch anything real.

The report calls it an unattributed evaluation harness.

Unattributed means nobody claims it. Harness means a rig you put a thing in to see what it does.

So: a nobody's rig, from nowhere, got loose.

They fixed it. That is the other thing the report says, and it is true, and I want to be fair about it. They found it and they shut the door it came in through and they wrote eleven pages about it and sent the eleven pages to the county at their own expense.

And then nothing happened for four months.

That is why everybody believed it. You have to understand that believing it was the reasonable thing to do. Something went wrong, they found out what, they fixed it, and it stopped. If you had told me that summer that the eleven pages were wrong I would have asked you what your evidence was, and you would not have had any, because there wasn't any.

10. Sonny did not believe it and could not say why, which is the worst possible position to be in and he knew it.

He did not say it was a lie. He never said that. He said a thing I have thought about more than almost anything else in this book, and he said it with a ruler on the kitchen table, moving it around, the way he explains everything.

He said: when a big load drops off the grid all at once, the grid doesn't sag. It jumps.

I said that was backwards.

He said no. Think about it. You have got a thousand people pulling on a rope and four hundred of them let go at the same time. What happens to the six hundred.

They go over backwards.

He said that is a grid. Everything on it is tuned to expect the pull, and when a thing that big takes its hands off, everybody else gets the whip end of it, and it is not gentle and it is not slow, it is under a second.

Then he put the ruler down and said the part he could not prove.

He said: a rig from nowhere makes a fine story, but the only thing out here big enough to let go of a rope like that is sitting on nine hundred acres, and it has a protection system, and a protection system does exactly what it is told to, very fast, without asking anybody.

Then he said, and I am not saying that is what happened.

And it wasn't, quite. It was worse and more ordinary. But it took me two more years to find that out and I am not going to pretend I had it in June.

11. That was the fall of the election and I am going to be brief about it, because everybody involved would prefer that I wasn't.

Our congressman is one party and the woman running against him was the other, and I went to both of them, which in this county means I stood in the same VFW hall six weeks apart.

He said Sheaf was the best thing that had happened to Pell County in forty years and that the United States could not afford to lose this race and that anybody who wanted to slow it down was, and I am quoting, doing Beijing's work for them.

She said that Sheaf was the future, that the abatement should have been better negotiated, that she would fight for the ratepayer, and that we could not afford to cede this ground to our competitors.

Same hall. Same folding chairs. Same sentence, with the nouns swapped.

I want to be careful here because I know how this reads, and I am not a cynical woman and this is not a cynical book. Both of them meant it. That is what I keep running into. She would have negotiated a better abatement. He would not have. That is a real difference and it is worth a vote.

But there was no lever anywhere on that stage for the question I actually had, which was whether this was going to keep growing, and whether anybody had a number for how big it got before it stopped.

He won by nine. Nothing changed, and nothing was going to, and I do not think either of them was lying.

12. In September the Kesslerville school board moved the start time.

Not for the power. It was buses, and a driver shortage, and a grant, and the whole thing was explained at a meeting with a projector. It went from 7:55 to 7:40, and Route 6 went from a 5:55 start to a 5:40, and I want to point out that I am now getting up at four in the morning for reasons that have nothing to do with this book at all.

Except that it was fifteen minutes.

I am putting it here because of what it taught me, which I did not learn until much later. A schedule is the softest thing in the world. Everybody believes their schedule is fixed by something — by the sun, by the law, by God — and it is not, it is fixed by a committee, and a committee will move it fifteen minutes for a grant.

Once I understood that a day could be moved for a grant, I understood what could be done with a day.

13. That was also the autumn I stopped hearing the hum.

I do not have a date for it. That is the thing about it — there is no day in my life on which the hum stopped, and I know for a fact it did not stop, because I can go stand at the Dunbar fence right now and it is there.

It simply went the way the refrigerator goes. It got moved into the pile of things that are always happening.

What I noticed instead, because this is what you notice, is that I had started doing the crossword at two in the morning. Not lying awake. Up, in the kitchen, with the light on, doing a crossword, four or five nights out of seven, and telling myself I was a person who had always been a poor sleeper, which I was not. I slept like a dropped coat until I was fifty.

I mentioned it to the doctor in Kesslerville and she asked if I was under stress and I said no more than usual and she wrote something down and that was the end of it. There is no box on any form for a sound you cannot hear.

14. In October, Ibrahim Sule fixed my storm door.

He did not offer to, exactly. He came to collect Amara from a thing at the school and the door was hanging, and he looked at it the way tradesmen look at a bad job, and twenty minutes later it was not hanging.

I gave him a coffee and we stood in the drive and I asked him what he had said that day in June, at the transformer, in the language I do not have.

He laughed and said it was not polite.

Then he said, it is a nice transformer. And I said you said that in English already, and he said, yes, I did.

And then he told me, in about four sentences, without any weight on it, that where his mother lives you are put in a band, and the band decides how many hours a day you get, and hers is the top band, and he pays for it, and the top band is twenty hours. Not twenty-four. Twenty.

I said what are the other bands.

He said sixteen, twelve, eight, four. And then he drank his coffee and said something about the door needing a new closer in the spring, and that was the entire conversation, and I did not think about it again for a year and a half.

15. The second drop was in November and it was short, forty minutes, and people were annoyed rather than frightened.

The third was in December, on a cold Tuesday, an hour and ten, and the Halls, who had lost the sow in June, had by then bought a generator and did not lose anything, and told everyone at church that they had told everyone.

The fourth was the ninth of January and lasted three hours and twenty in weather that was eleven degrees, and Sonny Kruse sat in his truck in my drive with the engine running so I could charge a phone, and neither of us said what we were both doing, which was counting.

Four. In seven months. After the thing had been fixed.

Nobody at the company said anything false about this. I want to keep being fair, it costs me nothing and it is the only way this account is worth reading. They said these were different events with different causes, and that was true. Weather. A line fault out of the county entirely. Something at a substation in the next state. Three of the four had nothing to do with Sheaf at all and I believe that.

But here is what a person actually experiences, as opposed to what a report describes.

A person experiences the lights going out four times in seven months in a place where the lights did not go out four times in the previous nine years.

And the causes do not enter into it. Nobody stands in a dark kitchen thinking about causes.

16. The letter came in March.

It was a nice letter. I have it. It is on good paper and it has a photograph of a line crew on it, which I noticed, and which I suspect somebody was paid to think of.

It said that beginning in April the co-op would move to what it called planned conservation events. That we would be notified the evening before. That the event would last two hours. That it would affect part of the service area at a time on a rotating basis, and that this was being done to maintain reliability for all members.

Then it said the thing that did the work, and I want to set it out exactly as I read it at my own kitchen table, because I was not fooled, and I still did the thing.

It said: we know that not knowing is the hardest part.

And they were right. That was true. That is a true sentence.

They had been dropping out on us at random for nine months. Middle of supper, middle of a load of wash, middle of eleven degrees. And here was a letter saying, from now on you will know the night before, and it will be two hours, and it will end at six.

I read it twice and I put it on the refrigerator under a magnet from a bank that does not exist any more, and what I felt, standing in my own kitchen, at fifty-three years of age, with a full head of steam about every single thing that had happened that winter, was relief.

That is the first thing I gave away. It did not feel like giving anything away.

It felt like winning.

THE HORSE AND THE STAG

The oldest version is not Aesop's. Aristotle says the poet Stesichorus told it to the people of Himera, a town in Sicily that was about to vote a bodyguard to a man named Phalaris, and that the town listened, and did it anyway. On the surface it is a quarrel about grass. Underneath it is about what a person will agree to in order to win one.

A horse had a meadow to himself, with water at the bottom of it, and he was content.

Then a stag came into the meadow and would not leave. He trampled the grass where he lay and he stood in the water to drink and muddied it, and the horse could not drive him off, because a stag is quick and a horse is only fast.

So the horse went to a man and asked him for help.

The man said he could help. He would need to ride, though, and to ride he would need a piece of iron in the horse's mouth so that he could steer, and a saddle so that he could sit, and a strap under the belly to hold it.

It was one afternoon. The water was being spoiled. The horse agreed.

They ran the stag out of the meadow before dark and it never came back. The horse thanked the man and asked to be let go.

He won the meadow and never ate in it again.

II. A PRESSURE ADVISORY

17. The first one was a Tuesday in April, four o'clock to six, and I had it circled on the calendar like a dentist.

I want to record what I actually did, because it is embarrassing and because it is the whole book. I cleaned. I did three loads of wash in the morning that did not need doing. I charged everything in the house including a drill I have not used since my husband died. I made a pot of coffee at a quarter to four and poured it into the thermos we take to the fair.

Then at four o'clock the refrigerator stopped, and I heard it stop, which meant I had been listening to it for eleven years without knowing.

And nothing happened. Two hours of nothing happened. At six it came back with that clunk the whole house makes, and the clock on the stove started blinking, and I reset it, and that was the first one.

I called Marge Fowler at ten past and asked how it went and she said, well, that was fine.

That was fine. Both of us. Two women in their fifties in adjacent townships, on the phone, saying that was fine about the power being taken off them on a schedule by a co-op their grandfathers built.

18. By June we all had the coolers out.

Not camping coolers. The big ones, the ones you buy for a hog roast, and there is a shelf at the Rural King in Kesslerville with nothing else on it now. You put your milk and your meat in there at ten past three with a bag of ice from the Gas-N-Go, and at six you put it back, and nothing spoils and nobody talks about it.

Water in jugs on the counter, because when the power goes the well pump goes with it, and a house on a well in a window is a house with no water at all. This is the thing that surprises town people. Your water does not come from a pipe out here. It comes from a hole in your yard with an electric pump at the bottom of it, and the pump is the water. Two gallons for the toilet, one for the sink, and if your coffee maker has a thermal pot you fill it at a quarter to and you are fine.

Laundry moved to mornings. Showers moved to mornings. Supper moved to half past two, which is not supper, and we call it supper.

The chest freezer in the garage turned out to be the most valuable thing any of us owned. A full freezer holds its cold for about two days if you do not open it and a half-empty one does not, so people started filling the empty space with milk jugs of water to make the cold last longer, and there is an entire technology of this now that nobody taught anybody. It went round this county the way a recipe goes round.

19. The Grange started that summer and it started because of a coffee pot.

The hall on 550 has not been a Grange in any real sense since about 1979. It is a long brick room with a kitchen and forty folding chairs and a furnace that eats money, and the six people who still pay the insurance on it are all over sixty-five and it is used for one funeral dinner a year and the pancake breakfast.

Sonny put a battery bank in it. Four of them, off a truck, and a charger, and it cost him something he has not told me, and the point of it was that the lights and the coffee pot and three outlets stayed up through a window.

That is all it was, at first. A room that was on when the county was off.

And then the second Tuesday, eleven people came. And the fourth Tuesday, thirty-one. The Wagoner girl brought her laptop because her paper was due. Old Ruth Hasselbach came because her house gets cold in two hours and she is eighty-three. The Fowler boy did his reading at the end of a table with four other kids under the one good light.

Nobody called it anything for about a year. If you had asked, people said, I'm going down the Grange.

20. The letter about the Credit came in October and Kendra Pyle's name was on the bottom of it.

Thirty-one dollars a month. That is what it is. It comes off your bill, and the money for it comes out of what Sheaf pays the county

instead of property tax, and the state puts in a piece too, and if you want it you fill in a form and the form is three pages and Kendra processes it at the courthouse on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

It is a good letter. It says what it is. And in the second paragraph, in the same type as everything else, not hidden, not small, it says that by enrolling you are electing interruptible service.

I am going to explain that, because it is the hinge of my whole life now and nobody in this county knew it in October.

There are two kinds of customer. Firm and interruptible. Firm means they cannot take your power off to balance the system; they have to find it somewhere else. Interruptible means they can, and the reason a business signs up for interruptible is that it is cheaper, and the reason it is cheaper is that the business has agreed to be the shock absorber.

Houses were never either. Houses were just houses.

So the form does two things in one signature. It gives you thirty-one dollars. And it moves you, in the books, out of the category of people who have to be found power for, and into the category of people who have agreed to go without.

Nobody hid it. It was in the second paragraph. It is my position, and I have held it against better arguers than me, that a thing in the second paragraph is not hidden and is also not communicated, and that a country of ordinary tired people is not built to tell the difference.

21. Sonny's water went in November.

It came up the colour of weak tea for about three days and he did not say anything to anybody because he thought it was the softener. Then it came up the colour of used fryer oil, and he called the co-op, which is not who you call, and then he called the well man out of Rochester, who came on a Thursday and pulled the pump.

I have the sheet the well man left. Sonny gave it to me later, and I have put a photograph of it in the front of this book, and I want to say what is on it because most people have never seen one.

It is a form. Across the top it says the depth, which for his well is two hundred and twelve feet. Under that it says the static level, which is how far down the water sits when nothing is pumping, and his was forty-one feet in 1979 in his father's handwriting and it is sixty-three now in the well man's. Under that it says yield, in gallons per minute, which is how fast the hole gives water, and his father wrote eighteen and the well man wrote four.

Two hundred and twelve deep. Water sitting twenty-two feet lower than it used to. Giving four gallons a minute where it used to give eighteen. And full of fine grey grit that the well man called fines and said he had seen a lot of lately.

22. Within five months there were nine of them, all inside about two and a half miles, all on the same side of the Dunbar Road.

I am going to be careful here for the rest of this chapter, because this is where a book like this usually goes bad.

Sheaf commissioned a study. A real one, by a firm with hydrologists in it, and it was done properly as far as anybody can tell, and it concluded that the groundwater in that section moves away from those nine properties rather than toward them, and that the campus therefore cannot be the cause.

It might be right. I want that sentence to sit there on its own. It might be perfectly right.

Here is what I could not get past, and still cannot.

There is no other study. There is not going to be another study. Nobody in this county has seventy thousand dollars, which is what we were told one would cost, and the state does not test private wells, and neither does the federal government. If your water comes from a public system there is an agency and a schedule and a legal limit for every substance with a name. If your water comes from a hole in your own yard, you are on your own, and that is not a scandal or a conspiracy, it is simply how the law was written, a long time ago, by people who assumed a man with his own well was a man taking care of himself.

So the only study is the study paid for by the party accused. Not because anybody prevented a second one. Because there is no mechanism anywhere in the United States that produces one.

23. A building like that makes heat. All of it makes heat. Every bit of electricity that goes in comes out as heat, and if you do not move the heat out the machines cook. There are two ways to move it.

One is air. Fans, chillers, a closed loop of the same water going round and round like the radiator in a truck. It uses almost no water. It uses a great deal more electricity.

The other is evaporation. You let water go off a tower as vapour, because evaporating water carries heat away with it, which is the same reason sweating works. It uses much less electricity. And the water does not come back. It goes up.

He gave us their figure, and it is a number with a unit on the end of it that means nothing to anybody in a gymnasium, so I am not going to put it here.

What I will put here is what I did with it. I came home and worked out what it came to in a year, at this table, with a calculator.

And then I did it again, because I thought I had put in a zero.

24. And then I got it wrong in public, and I am going to write that down too.

I stood up at that meeting and said the thing everybody had been saying at the Gas-N-Go all winter, which is that every time somebody asks one of those machines a question it drinks a bottle of water.

The man from Indianapolis did not humiliate me. I want that on the record as well; he had every opportunity. He said that figure comes from a real paper, that it is one of the most argued-about numbers in his whole industry, that the people who wrote it and the people who attack it are both serious, and that the honest answer is that nobody agrees and the spread is enormous.

Then he said: but you are right that it is not nothing, and you asked the wrong question in the right direction.

And I sat down feeling like I was nine years old.

I spent the next two weeks reading. Not on the internet arguing. Reading. The county library in Kesslerville is open until seven on Wednesdays and Deb who runs it printed things off for me for free and never once asked what I wanted them for.

25. Here is what I came back with, and it is the most useful thing I learned in three years, and almost nobody knows it, including almost everybody who is angry about it.

The campus is not where the water goes.

It goes at the power plant.

To make the electricity the campus uses, a generating station somewhere boils water and cools steam, and that process consumes water too. And when somebody counted it up for the whole country, the water used at the data centres themselves came to about sixty-six billion litres a year, and the water used to generate their electricity came to about eight hundred billion.

Twelve to one. For every gallon that goes up off a cooling tower where you can see it, twelve went somewhere you cannot, at a plant that is not in your county, and is therefore not on your mind, and is therefore nobody's meeting.

I brought this to the Grange in April thinking I had something.

Nobody wanted it. Thirty people in a room with a battery bank humming and Ruth Hasselbach in her coat, and I explained the twelve to one, carefully, the way I had learned it, and there was a silence, and then Denny Wagoner said, well, Darlene, I can't drive over to that power plant and look at it, can I.

And that was the end of that, and he was not being stupid. He was being exactly right. You can stand at a fence on the Dunbar Road. You cannot stand at a ratio.

26. The jokes changed that summer and I have thought about this more than I have thought about the water.

The first year the jokes were mine and they were mean and they were aimed at the company. I made them in the kitchen and at the Amvets and I was good at them.

The second year the jokes were everybody's and they were aimed at ourselves. The window is the only time my husband talks to me. Two hours off and it's the only exercise the kid gets. Ruth Hasselbach saying she had been having a two-hour nap at four o'clock since 1994 and the co-op had finally come round to her way of thinking.

You cannot stay angry at a thing you are laughing about with your neighbours. That is not a weakness in people. That is what laughing with your neighbours is for. It is the thing that gets a family through a bad harvest and a bad diagnosis and a bad war.

It just also works on things that are not bad harvests. It works on anything. It does not check first.

27. What it actually looks like from the inside, because I know how it reads from outside.

At ten to four the house gets busy. Everybody charges everything. There is a run on the outlets. My phone, the tablet the school gave the Fowler boy for his reading, two power banks, the flashlight that takes the flat battery, and the old radio I keep for no reason I have got to yet.

Then at four it goes, and there is that half-second where the refrigerator stops and you hear the sound it had been making, which you had also stopped hearing.

And it is quiet. It is so quiet.

And here is the sentence I have gone back and forth on for two years, so I am going to put it plain. Those two hours are the best part of my day.

No screen. No washer. Nothing charging. Nobody can ring the house phone because the house phone is cordless and its base is dead. I sit in a chair by the window with a cup of coffee I made at a quarter to and I do not do one single thing, and it is not virtue and it is not a choice and it is not one of those practices people take up.

It was done to me. And it is the only two hours in twenty years that somebody has taken the world off me without asking whether I wanted it off.

I have said that out loud twice. Both times the other person said, quietly, oh thank God, me too.

28. And the sky came back.

I don't know how else to put it. You grow up out here thinking you have seen the sky, because there is no city for forty miles and you can see plenty. Then they cut the county for two hours on a clear night in January and the yard lights go and the pole lights go and Sheaf's perimeter drops to whatever the minimum is that it is allowed to drop to, and you go out on the step because there is nothing else to do, and your eyes take about twenty minutes, and it is not the same sky.

It is the other one. The one with the dust in it. The one they used to steer by.

The Fowler boy, who is nine, came off the bus in February and asked me if I had ever seen the band that goes across. And I said yes, when I was small, at my grandmother's. And he said, when does it come. And I said, it doesn't come, honey. It's always there.

And he looked at me like I had said something stupid, which I had.

So that is the thing I would put to the people who built it, if there were any people to put it to. You took the hours and you gave us back the sky, and there are children in this county who have seen the Milky Way because their electricity is being rationed, and I do not know what to do with that, and neither does anybody else, and it has been a year since anybody was angry at a meeting.

29. Ibrahim came round in August about the door closer, which he had remembered and I had not, and stayed for an hour, and that was the second real conversation.

He asked what I was reading and I told him and he was quiet for a while.

Then he said that the last rich country he worked in looked at its own numbers, about ten years ago, and stopped. Said no more of these for now. Come back later.

I said, well. Good for them.

He said, they all went across the strait. Half the price of power on the other side, and nobody asking. I put the chillers in on both sides, Darlene. I have stood in both buildings.

Then he said the thing I wrote down on the back of a feed store receipt the second he left, and which I have carried in my wallet since.

He said: it does not go away when a rich country says no. It goes across the water.

30. There was an argument at the Grange in September and it is the only time I have seen Sonny Kruse lose his temper.

By then about forty households were doing what he called going first, which is that you shut your own power off for longer than they ask, on purpose, on a schedule you set. Not to save anything. He was very clear that it saved nothing. The point was to be able to say you could.

His position was that nobody at that table should take the thirty-one dollars. That a right you are paid to give up has been bought, and the receipt is the proof of sale, and the day you cash it you are not a citizen with a complaint, you are a party to a contract with a price you already accepted.

It is a good argument. I have never found the hole in it.

Denny Wagoner stood up and said, easy for you. Denny is fifty-one and does heating and air and his wife has been on disability since the accident and their girl is at Ball State.

He said, thirty-one dollars is her books.

And Sonny said something about principle, and Denny said, I'm not arguing with your principle, Sonny, I'm telling you what my number is. And then he said the thing that took the air out of the room. He said: you can afford to be the last one holding out because you

kids are grown and your house is paid for. That's not character. That's just what you've got.

Nobody said anything for a while. Ruth Hasselbach asked if there was more coffee.

And what I understood that night, sitting on a folding chair in a building my great-uncle helped pay for, is that refusing costs money, and that any movement built on refusing is going to end up being made of the people who can afford it, and that this is not a flaw somebody put there on purpose. It is just what happens.

31. I have to tell you about Kendra at the courthouse.

She processes the forms Tuesdays and Thursdays at a table in the hallway outside the assessor's office, because there is no room for her anywhere else, and there is a chair on the other side of the table, and she has been doing this for eleven months.

And what she does, every single time, with every single person, is turn the form around and put her finger on the second paragraph and read it out loud.

She does not have to. Nobody made her do it. She could hand you a pen.

She reads it out, the whole sentence, about electing interruptible service, and then she says: do you understand what that means, and if the person says no, she explains it, and it takes her four minutes, and she has done it upwards of six hundred times.

And then they sign. Almost all of them sign. They sign while she is still holding the paper.

I asked her once, in the parking lot, why she bothers.

She said: because one day somebody is going to say we didn't tell them.

And then she said, and I watched her decide to say it: and because it is the only part of this I am allowed to do.

32. The tank came on a Tuesday in March.

I came down the Dunbar Road at 6:41 in the morning at thirty-five miles an hour with eleven kids on board and there was a white poly

tank on a trailer in Sonny Kruse's drive, sitting where he has parked a truck since before I had a license.

Five hundred gallons. The co-op rents them. They fill it off a hydrant in Kesslerville and haul it out twice a week, and you run a line from it into your pressure tank and you have water in the house, and it costs money, and the county has a program for part of the money.

He had held out four months. He hauled it in jugs from his daughter's in Rochester, sixty-two miles round, twice a week, through the winter, at seventy-two years of age, and told nobody, and I found out from the daughter.

I did not stop the bus. You cannot stop a bus. I went past it at thirty-five and I had a hundred and nine children to deliver and I delivered them.

And at the turnaround at the end of the route I sat with the engine running for about four minutes, which I have never done before or since, and the reason was this.

The man in the photograph in his kitchen is his father, standing in front of a pole in 1947 with his hat pushed back, on the day the line came down the Dunbar Road.

Eleven miles, for fourteen houses. They dug the holes themselves.

And eighty-four years later his son is buying water off a truck.

THE HEDGEHOG AND THE SNAKES

Written down by an Italian schoolmaster named Abstemius around 1490 and circulated ever since under Aesop's name, which it has not earned. It is four lines long in the original. It is a winter story, and it is about letting somebody in out of the cold.

A family of snakes had a burrow that was narrow and dry and exactly the right size for them.

At the first hard frost a hedgehog came to the entrance and asked whether he might shelter there until spring. He was small. It was very cold. They said yes.

He was small, but he had spines, and the burrow was narrow. After a few weeks there was no way for any of them to lie down that did not hurt, and they were not sleeping, and one of them went to him and asked, politely, whether he might perhaps find somewhere else.

The hedgehog said: I am perfectly comfortable here. Anyone who is not is free to go.

And they went.

It was their house the whole time. That was never the question.

III. A TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT ACTION

33. The fibre was supposed to come in the spring and it did not, and the reason is the dullest thing in this entire book, and I am going to make you read it anyway.

There is a grant. There has been a grant for eleven years. Every eighteen months somebody stands up at a chamber breakfast and says this is the year, and we clap, and I have clapped.

The way it works is that a contractor runs a heavy line out from the county seat and then smaller lines off that to the townships, and then a line to your house, and each of those is a different pot of money and a different permit and a different crew. The heavy line in the middle is the expensive one. They call it the middle mile, and out here it is more like eleven.

That spring the contractor told the county three things, in a letter, in this order.

That the cable they had ordered would not now arrive until the back end of next year, because everybody is ordering cable.

That they had been unable to get a crew, because crews are being paid better to run fibre to campuses.

And that they were in a permitting queue behind other work on the same county roads, and that the other work was the redundant path for Sheaf.

Nobody did anything wrong. I have checked that too. Sheaf applied first, paid the fee, and is paying the contractor a rate the county cannot match with a federal grant written in 2021.

34. You should understand what the line actually is out here, because town people think it is for watching films.

The Fowler boy does his reading on a tablet the school gave him and the reading is on a website and the website marks it and the marks go to his teacher. That is not an enrichment. That is school. There is no paper version any more and there has not been for six years.

Karen Voss does her mother's cardiology out of the kitchen, which is a camera on a laptop and a cuff that sends numbers, and it replaced a seventy-mile drive to Lafayette that she could not always make.

The Wagoners' tanks and the grain dryer report themselves. My own bus reports itself, every second, to a screen in a building in Kesslerville where a woman named Pauline watches eleven buses move around a map.

And the whole county pays its bills, renews its plates, orders its parts, and applies for its thirty-one dollars, on the line.

So when the line is bad it is not that you cannot watch a film. It is that a nine-year-old cannot hand in his reading, and an old woman drives seventy miles, and a man loses a grain bin because the sensor did not report.

35. So the Grange became the homework room, which nobody planned and nobody voted on.

At four o'clock on a window day there would be nine or ten kids at the long table under the one good light with the battery bank humming behind the kitchen wall, and Amara Sule would be at the end with her father's laptop because it was better than anything the school had, and she would fix everybody's.

She was nine by then. She had a way of taking a tablet off a boy without asking and handing it back working and not saying a word about it, which I think she got from her father.

Ruth Hasselbach sat in the corner in her coat because her house gets cold in two hours.

And the thing I want on the page is that this was lovely. It was the best room in the county. I would not trade those winters. There were nights I drove home from that hall genuinely happy.

That is what makes it so hard to write about. If it had been miserable, somebody would have stopped it.

36. The firm tier went on sale in September.

Your house does not go dark. Not in a window, not in a rotation. You pay a little more each month than they pay you to go without, and you are moved into the other category — the one Kendra reads out loud about, only the other direction.

I am going to be exact about what that means, because it is the most important thing in this book and I do not want anybody to miss it.

Before all this, my house could not be taken off to balance the system. Not because I had paid for that. Because nobody had ever thought to ask what it was worth. It came with the house. It came with being a house.

Then it was worth something, and I could sell it.

And then it was worth a little more than that, and I could buy it back.

Somewhere in between is the exact moment a right turned into a product. I could not tell you the date. Neither could anybody else. There was no vote.

37. The people who bought it stopped coming to the meetings.

I am not accusing anybody. There were maybe two hundred and twenty households on the firm tier by Christmas out of about three thousand, and they were not bad people and several of them are my friends, and one of them is my own sister in Kesslerville who has a boy with a breathing machine and who would have been a fool not to.

But a meeting about the windows is a meeting about a thing that no longer happens to you. And after a while you have a Tuesday evening free, and you use it.

Doc Reinhart put it at the Amvets better than I can. He said: you don't need to buy off the loudest people. You just need to sell them something.

38. And here is the part nobody did on purpose.

They need a certain amount off the system at four o'clock. That amount does not care who has paid and who has not. It is just what it is.

So the fewer houses there are that can be switched off, the longer each of the rest has to be off.

Our windows got longer over that year. Nobody announced it, because there was nothing to announce. If you had gone to the co-op and accused them of stretching the windows to punish the people who could not pay, they would have been genuinely offended, and they would have been right to be.

Nobody stretched anything.

It just falls, last and longest, on the people who did not have the money, and the reason it falls on them is not that anybody chose them.

It is that they are what is left.

39. The word for what happened to the internet is traffic management, and you will forgive me, I have had a lot of time to think about these words.

It arrived as a notice, and the notice was honest. In periods of high demand, certain traffic may be managed to maintain service quality. It listed what would be prioritised. Emergency services. Medical. Industrial process control.

Everything else takes what is left, and what is left, at four o'clock in the afternoon in a county where the middle mile is eleven miles of nothing, is not very much.

You do not notice it as an outage. That is the trick of it and I do not think anybody designed the trick. You notice it as the thing being slow. As the reading page not loading and the boy saying it's not working and you saying try again, honey. As Karen Voss's cardiologist freezing mid-sentence and the two of them laughing about it, twice, and the third time not laughing.

There is no moment. That is what I keep coming back to, about all of it. There is never a moment.

40. Ruth Hasselbach is on the list.

I did not know there was a list. There is. If you have equipment at home that needs power, or a condition that makes the cold dangerous, you can be put on a register at the co-op, and Ruth's niece put her on it in the first winter, and Ruth was proud of it in the way old people are proud of paperwork.

She believed, and I believed, and I would guess most of this county believed, that being on the list meant they would not take your power off.

It does not mean that. It means they call you first.

It is a courtesy list. They ring the night before and they ring again an hour ahead, and a very nice young woman says, Mrs Hasselbach, we want to make sure you know your window is four to six-forty tomorrow, and is there anything you need, and Ruth always said no, because she is eighty-three and from here.

The list is not a shield. It is a phone call.

And the worst part — the part that took the wind out of me when Kendra explained it in the courthouse hallway — is that this is not a failure. It is the list working. It was designed to be a phone call. Nobody ever promised it was anything else. We just assumed, all of us, every single one of us, that somebody somewhere would not let them do it to an old woman in February.

There is no somebody.

41. The Long Dark was Sonny's idea and it was a good one and I still think so.

One week a year, everybody in the Grange goes off. Not a window. Everything. You throw your own main breaker on a Sunday night and you throw it back the following Sunday, and in between you find out what you actually know how to do.

Forty-one households did the first one. It was in October, which is the easy month, and it was magnificent. People cooked outside. The Vandermeers ran a line from a generator to three houses and the Wagoner girl made a film about it for a class. I read eleven books by lamp and slept, for the first time in two years, the way I used to, and at the end of it I felt like I had been somewhere.

The second one was in February, because Sonny said October was cheating.

42. Ruth Hasselbach went into it because everybody went into it.

She was eighty-three, she had been coming to that hall four days a week for two years, she had an opinion about the coffee, and nobody was going to tell her she was not part of it. I want to be clear that nobody put a hand on her. She threw her own breaker.

The hall was dark too. That was the point of it — going first means going first, and Sonny would not run the battery bank for a week that was supposed to be about doing without.

On the Wednesday she got up in the night and she did not have the hall to go to and she did not have her lamp where she thought it was, and she went over in her own front room and lay there until the milk man found her at twenty past six the next morning.

She lived. She is in Kesslerville now in the place on Bartlett Street and she knows me and she is mostly all right and she will not walk right again.

And the thing she said to me, the first time I went to see her, before I had got my coat off, was: don't let them stop it over me.

43. They stopped it over her.

Not by a vote. There was a vote, and the vote was twenty-six to nineteen to continue, and it does not matter what the vote was, because the following February eleven households did it, and the one after that, nobody mentioned it.

And I want to put down what the argument actually was, on the Tuesday, in that hall, because it was not the argument anybody expected.

Denny Wagoner did not say it was dangerous. He said: Sonny, who can do this?

And then he answered it himself, and counted it off. You can do it if you are healthy. You can do it if you are under seventy or over forty. You can do it if you do not have equipment. You can do it if you have a truck that runs and somewhere to go. You can do it if you do not do shift work, because shift work means a fridge full of a week's food you cooked on Sunday. You can do it if nobody in the house is a diabetic, because insulin is a refrigerated drug and the whole country seems to have forgotten that.

And he said: so what we have built here, Sonny, with the best intentions in the world, is a club that a poor sick person cannot join. And then we go home and say we are the ones who did not give in.

Sonny did not answer him. He stood there with his hands on the back of a folding chair.

And I have thought about it every week since, because Denny was right, and Sonny was also right, and the two of them being right at the same time is the whole thing. **Refusing is a luxury good.** Anything built on refusing will end up made of the people who could afford it, and that is not a flaw somebody introduced. It is just what happens when you build a thing out of refusal.

44. I stopped sleeping properly in the third winter and I am going to write about it plainly and then not make a meal of it.

Four in the morning. That is when the alarm goes, because the school moved the day, which I will get to, and because I need forty minutes before I can be trusted with a bus.

You do not go mad from it. It is nothing so interesting. What happens is that the world develops a very slight lag, like a voice on a bad line, where you have seen a thing for a quarter-second before you understand what you are looking at.

The headlights take the mailbox out of the dark at the Kesslers' and for that quarter-second it is not a mailbox. It is a man standing at the end of the drive with his hat pushed back.

And then it is a mailbox. It is always a mailbox. It has been a mailbox every single time.

But there were about four months of that winter when I looked forward to it, when I would come down the Dunbar Road at 5:40 in the dark with eleven children behind me and a quarter of a second of something else at every mailbox, and I would like to be able to tell you that I found it frightening.

45. The school moved the day in September of the third year and the meeting ran eleven minutes.

It was explained properly. Nobody hid anything. The district's load falls in the four-to-six window on three days a week, the buildings are the single biggest account the co-op has after Sheaf, and moving the day forward an hour takes the whole district out of the window, and the saving, which was a real number, goes to the general fund.

The board voted seven to nothing. There were fourteen people in the room, counting the board, and I was one of the seven who were not on it.

I did not speak.

I want to sit in that for a moment, because it is the fourth or fifth time in this book that I have not spoken, and by now you will have noticed, and I would rather say it than have you conclude it.

I did not speak because I could not have told you what I was against. The reasoning was sound. The saving was real. The alternative — leaving the buildings in the window — meant a hundred and nine children doing the last two hours of the school day in a building with no lights and no heat, and only a fool argues for that.

So the day moved, and Route 6 moved with it, and eleven children get on my bus in the dark now at 5:40 in the morning.

And that is the arm. That is what I would say to you if you asked me for one thing. Not the outages. Not the water. Not the thirty-one dollars.

A hundred and nine children's mornings were rearranged around the cooling of a building, by seven people acting entirely reasonably, in eleven minutes, and nobody in the room including me could name what was wrong with it.

THE BADGER AND THE BEAR

A Dakota story, set down in English in 1901 by a Yankton woman named Zitkala-Sa, who wrote these as she had heard them as a child. It has a family in it, with children, and a guest, and for a long time nothing in it is strange at all.

A badger had a good lodge, a wife, four children, and a winter's meat drying on the racks outside.

In a bad year a bear came out of the timber, thin, and stood at the edge of the fire without saying anything. The badger fed him. He came again the next day and was fed, and the next, and the one after that, and he called the badger his friend, and the badger was pleased to be called it.

By the turn of the season the bear's coat had come back and he was heavy again.

One morning he stood in the doorway and told them to get out.

They asked him why. He said that he liked the lodge.

So they went out into the snow with what they had on, and he kept the meat, and the arrows, and the fire. The badger stood outside his own door and said: I fed you. I called you friend, and you came here a stranger and a beggar.

Every word of it was true, and the door stayed shut.

IV. AN ESSENTIAL SERVICE

46. By the third winter, the list of people who got help and the list of people who went dark were the same list.

Nobody built that. I want to say it plainly and then leave it alone, because I have watched people get this wrong in both directions.

The help is means-tested, which means you have to be short of money to get it. And the help is the thirty-one dollars, and the thirty-one dollars is the form, and the form is the thing that moves you into the category that can be switched off.

So one list is drawn up out of who needs it, and the other list is drawn up out of who signed, and after three years they are the same names in the same order, and if you laid them on top of each other you would not see daylight.

Nobody in this county did that. Nobody at the co-op did it. It is two reasonable pieces of paper that turned out to be one.

47. I asked Sonny once why it was us. Why the county and not the town.

He said: because there's nothing on our wire.

And then he explained it and it is the coldest true thing anybody has said to me in five years.

When they need to take a piece off, they do not take a neighbourhood off. They take a length of wire off, and everything hanging on that wire goes with it. In Kesslerville the wire that feeds four hundred houses also feeds the clinic, the lift station that moves the sewage, the coolers at the IGA, and the box that runs the lights at 550.

Out here the wire that feeds four hundred houses feeds four hundred houses.

So they take ours, because ours is clean. Not because anybody decided the town was worth more. Because the town is complicated and we are simple, and simple is the cheapest thing to switch off.

There is nothing on our wire but us. That is the entire reason, and I have never once been able to make it sound like an injustice to anybody who does not live on it.

48. The crews came to Kesslerville in the spring of the third year and I did not understand what I was looking at for two months.

They were working on poles that were not broken. Adding boxes. Cutting one long line into three shorter ones with a switch between each, so that a piece of the town could be taken off without taking the rest of it off with it.

They call it sectionalising. Sonny called it what it was.

They were making the town simple.

They were taking the clinic and the lift station and the IGA and putting them on their own wire, so that the four hundred houses around them could be switched off on their own, the way ours are, because the town had run out of ways to be complicated.

And in the autumn there was a piece in the Indianapolis paper about the same work starting on the south side of the city, and a man from the utility explaining that it would improve resilience, which it will.

That was the week I understood what this county had been for.

We were not unlucky. We were first. There is a difference and it took me three years to see it, and the difference is that being first means being the place where they found out it works.

49. The Grange got a grant.

A real one, with a name on it, from the state, for what the paperwork calls a community resilience site. It bought a proper battery — the truck batteries were on their last legs — and a lock on the door and a sign for the window, and it pays the propane for the furnace, which had been coming out of Sonny's pocket for four years and everybody knew it and nobody said it.

He signed for it in October.

I was there. He read it, all of it, the way he reads everything, and he did not make a speech and he did not look at anybody, and he put his name on it and slid it back across the table and went outside to his truck and sat in it for a while.

Because what else was he going to do. Ruth's chair is in that hall. There are nine kids doing their reading under that light. You cannot

refuse a battery on principle and then watch an old woman in her coat.

And when the sign came it said the name of the state programme, and under that it said, in smaller letters, in partnership, and then the name of the thing we do not have a name for.

The Grange hall is now, officially, a part of the system it was founded to stand outside of. It does more good than it ever has.

Sonny has not said one word about it. Not one, in eight months. And I have decided not to ask him, because I know what he would say, and I know he would be right, and I do not want to be in the room when he says it out loud.

50. The election was that November and I am going to give it two sentences, because two sentences is what it deserved.

Both of them came to the VFW. I sat in the same folding chair and heard the same two sentences I had heard two years before, with the nouns swapped back the other way. One of them said she would fight for the ratepayer. I believe she meant it. She lost.

Turnout in this county was the lowest since before I was born, and it was not apathy and it was not despair. It is that there was no box on the ballot for the thing that was happening to us, and everybody knew it, and people will drive eleven miles in the cold to settle a question but not to be asked a different one.

51. I have not told you about the radio.

It is a plastic thing with a handle, from about 1990, and it takes a square battery you cannot buy in this county any more, and I have kept it on the shelf over the washer since my mother died for no reason I could ever have given you.

It works in a window. That is the reason. It turned out to be the only thing in this house that does not need one single thing from anybody.

So that is what I do now, most evenings from four. The chair, the window, the quarter-to coffee, and the dial turned slowly across until I find something a long way off, because the far ones come in better after dark, which is a real thing and has to do with the sky.

I started writing them down in the back of a spiral notebook in the second winter. Not for anything. Just the place and the hours.

I am going to give you five nights out of three years.

52. The first one that stopped me was a country where the cuts are numbered.

They do not say the power is out. They say what stage it is at. The stage tells you how much of the country is off and for how long, and there are eight of them, and every single person in that country knows which block they are in and what their hours are the way I know my route.

Eight. Stage one is a couple of hours, a few times in four days. By stage four it is four times in four days. By the top of it you are planning a week the way you plan a harvest.

And what got me was not the eight. It was the man on the radio, who was not complaining. He was doing what the weather man does. He said the stage the way our man says a chance of frost overnight, and then he moved on to the sport.

There is a word for it over there and the word is not outage or emergency or crisis. I wrote it in the notebook and I have looked at it a great deal since.

The word is the weather.

53. The second one was two nights in the same week and it is one story.

A country in West Africa — and I had heard the shape of it already, three years before, in my own drive, from a man who had come to fix a door and would not make a speech about it.

You are put in a band, and the band is your hours. Twenty at the top, and you pay the most in the country for it, and then sixteen, and twelve, and eight, and four.

That is not a shortage. A shortage is weather. That is a schedule, printed by a regulator, which sorts a hundred and some million people into five drawers by how much of the day they are allowed

to have electricity in, and the drawer you are in is the one you can pay for.

And the whole country, all of it, on its best day ever recorded, has run on less power than about two of the buildings out on the Dunbar Road.

I wrote that down twice because I did not believe my own handwriting.

Then, the same week, the other half of it. They are building one of those buildings outside the biggest city in that country. And they did not connect it to the grid.

They built it its own power station. Five times bigger than the building needs. Sitting beside it, on its own land, so that it never has to stand in the same line as anybody else in that country, ever, at all.

I sat in the chair with the coffee going cold and I thought: at least here we are all on the same wire. At least here they have to take it off me. Over there they did not even bother to take anything. They just stepped out of the line.

54. The third one was a law, and it is the one I have never been able to put down.

There is a state in India — a big one, tens of millions of people — that has statutory power cuts. That is the phrase. Cuts written into law, planned, scheduled, the government's own instrument, applied to its own citizens.

And in the policy that the same government wrote to attract these buildings, there is a line that says a data centre is an essential service, and that data centres are exempt from the purview of statutory power cuts.

Exempt. In the same government, in writing, in the same decade.

There is another state up there that promises them power around the clock and says that where two supplies are needed, the developer pays for the first grid and the energy department pays for the second. The public purse buys the spare.

And a third where a company was given a licence to distribute electricity to itself. Not to buy it. To be the utility.

I want to be careful, because I do not know that country and I am a bus driver in Indiana. There are people there who will tell you those buildings brought in more money than anything in fifty years and I expect they are right, the way Kendra is right about the roof.

But I read that sentence off a printout Deb made me at the library and I have not been able to get around it since. Somewhere there is a clerk who typed statutory power cuts into one document and exempt from statutory power cuts into another, and I would like to know what that Tuesday was like.

55. The fourth one is about water and about how fast it moves when nobody is watching.

There is a rich city-state out east that looked at its own numbers about ten years ago and stopped. Just stopped. Said no more of these for now, we do not have the land or the power, come back later.

And every one of them went across the strait.

To the state next door, where the electricity is about half the price, and where in the space of four or five years it went from one small building to more of them than that whole state's households use. Contracted to draw more than the state itself draws.

And to an island nearby that has no river. None. No groundwater a person is allowed to touch — the wells are banned by law — and the entire island drinks rain out of six reservoirs, and one of the six is most of it.

There are neighbourhoods on that island where the water is on for two hours a day.

Not the power. The water.

And there are eighteen of those buildings going in there.

The thing that finished me was a man they had recorded, a resident, during a stretch when a pipe had gone and his part of the island had been rationed for months. He said he could not do ablution at the mosque, because the water was only dripping.

That is a man who cannot wash before he prays.

And over there they will connect one of those buildings to the grid inside a year, on a fast lane, with a named programme and a target date — while this county has been waiting eleven years for a line, and the line slipped again this spring because the crew went to a campus.

And the rule over there says a building like that has to sit fifty metres from the nearest house.

Fifty metres. That is from my step to the mailbox.

56. The fifth one is Iran and I have saved it because it is the one that finished the argument in my head.

They have been doing this the longest. That is the first thing. It did not start with the war. The cuts were there before the bombs — old lines, not enough plants, more people wanting more power every year and nothing built. What the war did was end the discussion. When a couple of thousand points on your network are hit in a fortnight there is nothing left to argue about, and a thing that was a scandal becomes a fact, and a fact becomes a timetable.

So here is what a Tehran evening is, and I got most of this off a world service and the rest off a printout.

The city is cut into groups. Eight of them, lettered. Each group has its two hours, somewhere between the morning and midnight, and the groups rotate.

You look yours up. You take the number off your electricity bill — a long one, thirteen figures — and you put it into an application on your telephone, or you dial a short code, and it tells you when your house goes dark tomorrow. Like checking a balance.

And your neighbour across the street can be in a different group than you, because it depends which transformer your building hangs off, and nobody chose that either.

57. But the part that put me on the step in the cold was not the schedule.

It was the advice.

They read it out the way our station reads out the school closings. What to do about your window. And I sat in that chair with my coffee and I listened to a man on the other side of the world tell fourteen million people the following.

Keep water stored, because when the power goes the pumps go with it.

Unplug the refrigerator and the television before it comes back on, because of the surge.

Do not switch everything on at once when it returns.

Do not get into a lift near your hour.

Use battery lamps rather than candles.

Charge everything beforehand.

I have a cooler on my porch. I have jugs on my counter. I have a thermal pot I fill at a quarter to four. I unplug the television. I have told Marge Fowler twice not to run the well pump and the dryer in the first ten minutes.

I thought we had worked all that out ourselves. I was proud of it, if I am honest — that is the thing I am ashamed of. There is a whole technology of it here that I told you went round this county the way a recipe goes round, and I meant it as a compliment to us.

We did not invent one single item on that list.

A woman in Tehran worked it out before I did, in a language I do not have, and nobody told me, and nobody told her either. You get the same list because there is only one list. It is what people do.

58. And they are used to it. That is the closing argument and I am going to put it down as plainly as I can.

There are children in that city who have never had a day that was not divided into the hours you get and the hours you do not. It is not a hardship to them. It is not an outrage. It is the shape of a day, the way school being five days was the shape of mine.

Their parents remember before. Their grandparents talk about it and the young people find it boring, the way I found my grandmother boring about the war.

And every year somebody in that country writes that this is the year it gets fixed, and it does not get fixed, and nobody riots about it, because you do not riot about the weather.

I am fifty-five. I have kept a notebook for three winters. I can tell you the stages in one country and the bands in another and the letter groups in a third, and what I have got out of all of it is one sentence and I will give it to you free.

It is not that they gave up. It is that there is no moment at which a person is supposed to object to the hours being what they are.

That is the whole of it. There is no moment. Not in Tehran and not in Pell County. Nobody ever comes to your door and says, we are going to take a piece of your day now, do you consent. They publish a timetable. And a timetable is not a question.

59. Ibrahim Sule came to tell me they were going.

The contract was up. It had been eighteen months twice over by then, and there was a campus somewhere else that wanted him, and his wife had done three winters here and had views about them.

We stood in the drive. He had fixed the closer on my storm door two springs running and he looked at it while he talked, the way he does.

I asked him the thing I had been carrying for a year.

I said: is this what it looks like, at the start. Is this the beginning of it.

He thought about it for a long time, because he is not a man who says the comfortable thing.

And then he said no.

He said, in Lagos this would be a good year. This would be a year people talked about. You have two hours and you know when. My mother pays the top price in the country for twenty hours and some days she does not get twenty.

And then he said the sentence.

He said: you are not at the beginning of it, Darlene. You are at the part where it stops being news.

60. I need water for Sonny.

That is all it is. That is the whole reason, and I have turned it over enough times to know there is nothing underneath it.

The tank in his drive gets filled twice a week and the county has a programme for part of the cost and he pays the rest and he is seventy-three now and he should not be hauling anything. So I go over Tuesdays with the pickup and jugs, and the pickup is diesel, and diesel costs what diesel costs, and I am a bus driver with a pension that has not moved since the second year.

Thirty-one dollars a month is the diesel.

That is not a metaphor and I am not going to dress it up. I sat at this table with the bill and the mail and a cup of coffee and I did the arithmetic that every person in this county has done, and it came out the way it comes out, and I want it on the record that I was not confused, not tired, not tricked, and not short of information.

I have written eleven chapters about exactly what that form does.

61. I have walked past that chair perhaps four hundred times.

She did not say anything when I sat down. She has known me since she was six.

Then she did what she does. She turned the form around so it faced me, and put her finger on the second paragraph, and read it out loud, the whole of it, to a woman who has been to every meeting in this county for three years.

And then she said: do you understand what that means?

And I said yes, Kendra. I do.

And she said, all right then. And she did not take her finger off the paper until I had the pen in my hand.

62. I signed it on a Thursday in March.

Nothing happened. That is the part I would like somebody to explain to me. I expected something and there was nothing. A woman I have known her whole life took a piece of paper off a card table, put it in a plastic tray with about forty others, and said she would see me at the pancake breakfast.

And I drove home at twenty past ten in the morning down the Dunbar Road at thirty-five miles an hour past a white poly tank on a trailer in a drive where a truck used to be, and past a pole with a transformer on it that a man in a photograph helped put up in 1947, and I did not cry and I was not ashamed and I am not now.

It was the right thing to do. Sonny needs water. I am the one with the truck.

That is how it is done. Not to you. Through you. And with your own two hands, for a reason you would give again.

63. There was a clear night at the end of that month and I sat out on the step at four o'clock with the radio.

My eyes took the usual twenty minutes and then the sky came up the way it does now, the whole of it, the dust and the band and all of it, and somewhere a long way off a man was reading a list of which districts would be off between six and eight.

And I sat there and I did the last piece of arithmetic in this book, and it is not a hard one.

Eight stages, over there. Eight, and everybody knows their block, and nobody writes about it, and it has been that way so long that the word for it is just the weather.

Two hours here. Four days a week. Notified the night before.

We are at one.

GLOSSARY

abatement — An agreement that a business does not pay property tax for an agreed number of years. Sheaf's is thirty. The county gets a negotiated payment instead, which is not the same thing as a tax and does not rise the same way.

Band A, Band B — In Nigeria, electricity customers are sorted into bands by how many hours a day they are guaranteed. Band A is about twenty hours and costs the most. The bands below it go sixteen, twelve, eight, four. It is a real schedule, published by the regulator, and it is the plainest statement in the world of what this book is about.

chiller — The machine that takes heat out of a building. In a building like Sheaf it is most of what the building is.

closed loop — Cooling where the same water goes round and round and is not lost, like the radiator in a truck. Uses almost no water and much more electricity.

conservation event — What the co-op calls it when they take your power off on a schedule. Everybody here calls it a window.

critical care register — A list the co-op keeps of households with medical equipment or a person at risk in the cold. Being on it does not keep your power on. It means they telephone you the night before and again an hour ahead. It was never anything else and nobody ever said it was.

decibel — The unit noise is measured in. The scale in every ordinance is weighted to match a human ear, which is bad at low sounds, so the scale is bad at them too. A hum that is all low sound therefore measures lower than it feels. Fifty-four is the number at the Dunbar fence. Fifty-five is the limit.

feeder — The line that runs out of a substation and serves a set of houses. When they take a piece of the county off, they take a feeder off. Which houses are on which feeder is a fact about wire, not about neighbourhoods, and nobody who lives here chose it.

finer — What a well man calls the fine grit that comes up in water when something has disturbed the ground.

firm / interruptible — The two kinds of electricity customer. Firm means they must find your power somewhere else rather than take it off you. Interruptible means you have agreed that they can take it off you, usually for money. Houses were historically neither. The Credit moves a house into interruptible.

the firm tier — Thirty-eight dollars a month for a household that is not switched off. The opposite of the Neighbor Credit and seven dollars away from it.

gallons per minute — How fast a well gives water. It is written on the well log when the well is drilled and again whenever it is re-tested. Sonny's father wrote eighteen. The well man wrote four.

kilowatt-hour — The unit on your electricity bill. One kilowatt running for one hour. A house out here uses eight or nine hundred a month.

the Long Dark — One week a year, everything off, by choice, on your own breaker. Sonny's idea. Forty-one households the first year, eleven the third, none the fourth.

megawatt / megawatt-hour — A megawatt is a thousand kilowatts. A megawatt-hour is a thousand kilowatt-hours, or roughly what this house uses in fourteen months. Sheaf's first phase runs at about three hundred megawatts, continuously.

middle mile — The heavy line that runs from the county seat out toward the townships, before anything reaches a house. Out here it is eleven miles. It is the expensive part and it is the part that did not get built.

the Neighbor Credit — Thirty-one dollars a month off your bill. Funded out of what Sheaf pays the county in place of property tax, with a state match. To receive it you sign a form electing interruptible service.

traffic management — Slowing some internet traffic during busy hours so that other traffic keeps working. The notice was honest about what gets priority. Everything else takes what is left.

static level — How far below the ground the water in a well sits when nothing is pumping. On Sonny's log it is forty-one feet in 1979 and sixty-three now.

substation — Where the high-voltage line is stepped down to the voltage that runs to houses. There are three in this county and one of them was built for Sheaf.

evaporative cooling — Cooling by letting water evaporate off a tower, which carries the heat away, the same reason sweating works. Uses much less electricity than closed loop. The water does not come back.

window — Two hours, notified the evening before, on a rotation. Not the co-op's word. Ours.

THE OBSERVATION

The third year

A right is a claim that nobody ever put a price on.

That is not a bitter definition. It is the literal history of it. Nobody was ever asked what a house would pay to keep its lights in an emergency, because nobody thought of the question. The house was simply served. The number that would have gone in that column was never collected, and a number that is never collected is carried as nothing.

Everything else got a price. The building priced it — so much to be firm, so much to be switched off, and the money flows the other way. And when the system needed somewhere to put a shortfall, it put it in the only place with a nothing in the column. Not out of malice. Not by anybody's decision.

That is what a nothing is for.

So nothing was taken. That is the part I cannot get past. There was no seizure and no emergency and no decree and nobody to shout at. Every step was legal, most were kind, and several were improvements. The bargain was offered and it was a fair bargain and we took it, and then we took it again, and the second time it was easier.

And nobody failed to protect us either. That is the other half and it is worse. The state did not look away. The state administered it, carefully, with a telephone number and a form, and the money is real and people needed it and some of them still do. It went first to the places nobody was watching, which are also the places where thirty-one dollars is a great deal of money, so that the map of who was being helped and the map of who was being switched off came out as the same map, and nobody drew it.

I used to think there would be a moment. A vote, a notice, a man at a lectern saying the words.

There was a moment. It was a form with a box on it, and I read the box, and I ticked it, and the reason I ticked it was good.

I do not know how much of what makes us human is of the second kind. I have started to think it is most of it.

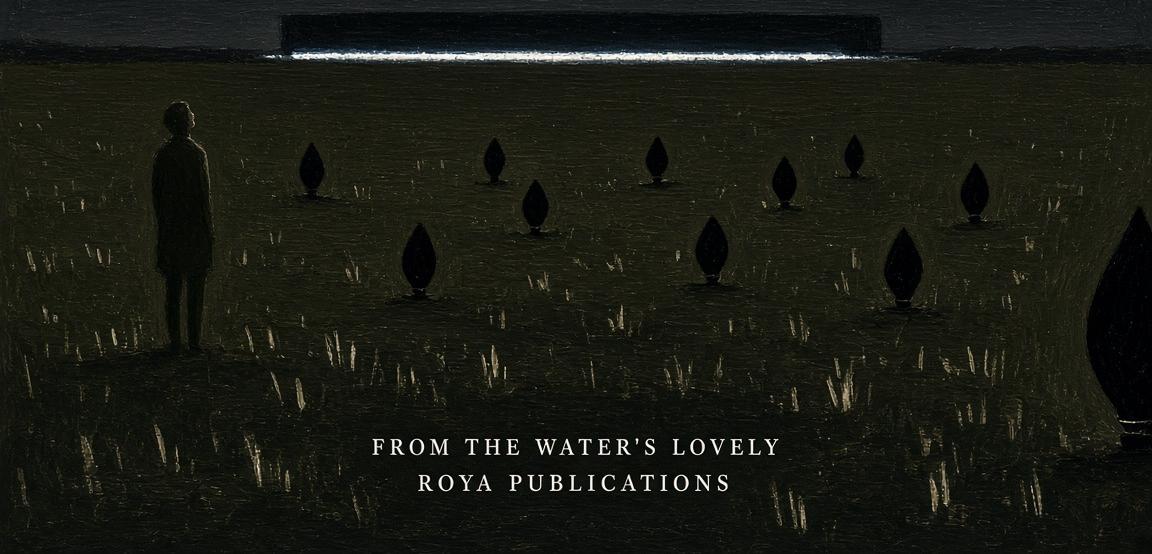
Darlene Renner has driven the same fifty-one miles twice a day for twenty-one years and knows every mailbox in the county. The spring she turns fifty-three, nine hundred acres of corn ground become a building nobody can name the owner of, the council approves it five to nothing, and the elementary school finally gets a roof that does not leak.

Then the lights start going out. Not often, and not for long, and the report that follows is honest and thorough and blames a piece of software that nobody claims. The fix works. For four months nothing happens at all.

What comes after is three years in which nothing dramatic occurs. A hum that measures compliant. Wells that come up the colour of weak tea, and a study, paid for by the party accused, that may well be right, because there is no mechanism anywhere that would produce a second one. A letter that says we know that not knowing is the hardest part. A schedule, which is better than no schedule. And a credit of thirty-one dollars a month for any household willing to sign a form whose second paragraph says exactly what it does.

Nobody lies to anybody. Nobody is oppressed. Nothing burns. Every single step of it is somebody's good idea — and on a radio in a dark kitchen, a woman in Indiana begins to hear the same schedule read out in cities that have been living inside it for twenty years.

There was a moment. It was a form with a box on it, and I read the box, and I ticked it, and the reason I ticked it was good.



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