

Five Hours Apart

A hypothetical, in three parts

DALLAS · THE LAST WEEK OF OCTOBER

room 10-31 03:11:59.999999... expect heavy over water open

PART ONE

Five Hours Apart

Forty-One

Say it's a Tuesday in the last week of October, the odd week when London sits five hours ahead of Dallas instead of six, though you have no reason yet to know that.

You're on the forty-first floor. Everyone else left an hour ago, and the motion sensors have been putting the office to sleep behind you, one bank of lights at a time, until the only light left on the floor is yours. Somewhere down the hall a vacuum runs, stops, runs again. The dark monitors on the empty desks around you each hold a faint copy of you if you look at them, so you don't.

What the company does, if anyone asks at a party, is move money. What it actually does is move the information that moves money, a few hundred million times a day, and your job is to make sure the models that watch all that information are telling the truth. You build the tests that catch them when they aren't. It's a strange kind of work to explain. Most days you don't try.

What you're looking at is a test. For a week it has passed forty-nine times out of fifty, and the fiftieth time it fails for no reason anyone can find, which means there is a reason and nobody has found it yet. You've carried it to lunch and to the gym and into the shower, where most of your real thinking gets done. You carried it this afternoon through two meetings in which you nodded at the right moments and heard almost nothing.

At 6:52 you find it. Two processes, each convinced it got there first. Almost always, one of them is right. One run in fifty they cross in the dark, and everything downstream falls over in a way that looks like the model's fault and isn't.

The fix is four lines. You write them and run the test fifty times, then two hundred, and watch the results come up green, row after row of identical successes filling the screen like windows coming on in a tower at dusk.

Nobody will ever know which four lines. Sometime tomorrow someone will notice the test has stopped failing and assume it fixed itself, as people assume the lights come on by themselves. That's fine. This is the part you would do for free. It's the part you would do if no one paid you and no one ever found out: the moment something that was wrong becomes, under your hands, simply true.

You lean back, and the chair creaks, and you look out the window for the first time in hours.

The city has come on while you weren't watching. The free-ways run white toward you and red away, braided where they cross, never quite still. West of downtown the Trinity is a long band of nothing, the one dark thing in the frame. Reunion

Tower's globe cycles through its slow patterns of light. And farther out, past all of it, the landing lights hang in the dark in their patient lines.

Two lines, in fact. You can tell them apart without trying. The low ones, close and frequent, are Love Field's: 737s coming down over Bachman Lake every couple of minutes, the way they have your whole life. The high ones, far out past Irving, slow and evenly spaced, are DFW's. South wind tonight, so they're landing on the seventeens and eighteens, coming in over Grapevine. You know this the way you know your own address. You grew up in Euless, in the Mid-Cities, under the airport, and the sound of a heavy on final at three thousand feet is the closest thing to a lullaby you've ever had.

You've watched those lights from this window for years. You have never once wondered who was on them.

On the windowsill a black receiver the size of a thumb blinks once a second, as it has since June, listening to a sky it can't see. You don't look at it.

You pack the laptop. You find your badge. The elevator takes you down forty-one floors without a sound, and halfway there your ears do the small thing they do at the end of a flight.

P4 is four levels under the street, the bottom of the garage, where there's always a space and the air never moves. It smells like concrete and cooling engines. Your car sees you coming and unlocks, and its mirrors unfold like something waking up. Before you've touched anything, the screen has guessed: HOME, in white letters on the map, because it's after six on a

weekday and it has learned what you do after six on a weekday. Twenty-five minutes, it says, straight up Stemmons, and it's usually right.

II

Stemmons

Say the message comes on Stemmons.

But first you have to get out of the garage, and that part you do yourself. The car could probably manage it by now. It can back out of a space and find its own way to the street, and people post videos of it threading garages tighter than this one. But there's a difference between what a thing can do and what you'll let it do, and the spiral ramp up from four levels under the street, the ticket arm, and the blind right turn onto Commerce are three things you still like to do with your own hands. You take it up the spiral, past the same concrete pillars with the same scuffs at bumper height, and the arm lifts, and you are up and out in the last of the light.

Downtown at seven belongs to valets and cleaning crews and people walking dogs past dark lobbies. On a patio someone laughs at the end of a story you'll never hear the beginning of. Above the old Magnolia Building the red Pegasus stands with its wings up, as it has, in one form or another, since 1934.

At the first red light you give the car the wheel. When the light changes, the wheel moves under your hands, and you let it, and then you take your hands away. Your job now is to watch, which turns out to be a different thing from driving. You see more.

On the screen beside you, the car redraws the world as it understands it: lanes as clean lines, other cars as smooth gray shapes with no faces and no drivers, a blue ribbon laid out ahead to show where it means to go. Every fraction of a second it imagines the next few seconds a dozen different ways and chooses one. You know roughly how it does this. You've read the papers and argued about the architectures over lunch. Knowing hasn't made it any less strange. It's the closest thing you know to watching a thought.

Stemmons carries you north out of the core. The Design District's warehouses slide by on your left, and beyond them, past the levee, the long dark of the floodway. Ahead the brake lights come on in waves, a mile of red flinching at once, and then let go. In the mirror Reunion's globe gets smaller and keeps glowing.

This is the part of the day that belongs to no one. You're not at work and not yet home, and nothing is asked of you except to sit here and be carried. You have always liked it more than you could explain to anyone.

You had plans tonight, if the kind you make with yourself count. On the desk at home there's a yoke clamped to the edge and a throttle quadrant beside it, and tonight was going to be Heathrow. You've been flying simulators since you were twelve, when the airport was the biggest thing in your world and the game was the only way to get inside it. These days you

fly the big jets, and you fly them the way the real pilots mostly don't anymore, by hand, and what you fly is the arrival. You load the real ones: the London flight's own route, copied off the tracker the afternoon it's filed, so the night you fly is the one that's out there. Tonight was going to be the long descent from the Welsh coast in the dark and the lights of London coming up under the nose, the river, the towers off the right, twenty-seven left with a crosswind if the weather wanted one. The approach is the only part that's ever interested you. Hours of ocean fly themselves.

Then the screen chimes. 7:06. Dana, who runs your group.

You still downtown? Iris Wren's flight sat on the ground at Heathrow for two hours. Lands 8:10 now, Terminal D. Her car service gave up and I've got a kid with a fever. Any chance you could grab her? She's at the hotel on Elm, right by the office.

And feed her. On us.

Iris Wren, from the London office, who presents to the review council at nine tomorrow morning, and whom you have never met. To you she's what most people at the company are: a name at the top of documents. Hers are the good kind, careful and a little dry, written by someone who checks her own math. Her profile photo is the size of a postage stamp. You couldn't pick her out of a crowd.

For about three seconds you resist. Heathrow was right there. Then the three seconds pass.

"Hey Grok," you say. The assistant answers in the unhurried voice you chose for it because it was the least eager of the options. "Take me to DFW. Terminal D, arrivals."

The blue ribbon on the screen lifts off the lanes for home, considers, and lays itself down again bending west toward the Carpenter Freeway. The car, which has no opinions about anything, takes the new ribbon without comment. You dictate two words back to Dana, *On it*, and watch the lanes for home continue north without you.

Through Irving the towers of Las Colinas stand lit and mostly empty, their logos glowing for no one. Then the sky ahead changes. Over the airport the dark goes the dull amber of a place that never fully turns off, and there they are, the landing lights you sorted from the forty-first floor, close now. Four, five of them, strung out toward the runways, so evenly spaced they look like one slow thought being thought very carefully. Each of them holds a hundred people, or two hundred, or three. Each of those people is coming from somewhere, and being met, or not.

III

International Parkway

Say it's eight minutes to eight when you come through the south toll plaza and down International Parkway.

The airport is bigger than Manhattan. You've known that your whole life as trivia, and you feel it now, with the road running straight up the middle of the place and the terminals curving away on either side, each one a long lit crescent, like ships moored along a dark canal. They built them as half circles so the walk from the car to the gate would be short, by people who assumed everyone would always drive. You know this place the way you know a house you grew up in. You know that the train runs inside security and the bus runs outside it, that the garages sit inside the crescents, that D is on the left going north, that the cell lot fills up by eight on a Friday. Out beyond the terminals, aircraft move across the field slowly and deliberately, as though the ground were deep water.

You leave the car on the fourth level of the Terminal D garage, between a minivan and a black sedan whose driver is asleep with his seat tipped all the way back, and you walk in.

Inside, it's the hour when an airport stops performing. Shops are pulling down their grilles. A man rides a floor polisher in slow loops across the terrazzo. The announcements come less often and sound like they're being made to an empty room. Up on the board, beside LONDON HEATHROW, the word DELAYED flickers and becomes LANDED 8:14, and then, a while later, AT GATE.

She'll have come in on a triple-seven, the big one, the one with the raked wingtips, and you know the choreography from here. The walk off the jet bridge. The lines at passport control, which at this hour are short but never nothing. The wait at the carousel. Then the frosted doors. Forty minutes if everything goes right, and you have never once seen everything go right.

So you have forty minutes, and a long day behind you, and you find the vending machines down by baggage claim, lit up blue in an alcove like a small aquarium. You press the buttons for the orange can, the Ultra Sunrise, and it drops with that heavy hollow sound, and it's cold enough to hurt your hand a little. You crack it standing right there. The hiss. The first long swallow, citrus and cold and faintly, pleasantly chemical, like something built in a lab by people who liked you. Three minutes later it arrives behind your eyes, a lift, a brightening, as if someone turned the gain up on the whole terminal. You weren't tired, and now you're less tired than that. It's a small pleasure and a cheap one and completely reliable.

International arrivals come out downstairs, through a pair of frosted doors that slide open every minute or two, release a few people blinking into the light, and close again. In front of the doors, behind a rail, a crowd has gathered. There are drivers in dark suits holding tablets with names on them. There's a

family with a handmade sign in purple glitter, an old man in a pressed shirt with grocery-store flowers still in their plastic sleeve, and two small boys taking turns climbing the rail until their mother stops them and they start again.

Each time the doors open, the whole crowd leans in. Each time, someone's face changes.

A young woman comes through, and the old man with the flowers makes a sound you weren't meant to hear, and you look away, and then you look back. A teenager walks straight past his mother, gets ten steps, then turns and comes back into her arms as if he'd only been pretending not to know her. The boys' father comes through in a wrinkled suit and goes down on one knee, and they hit him at full speed, and he lets them knock him over.

Everyone here is waiting for someone they love.

You're waiting for a stranger.

When you were small your father used to drive you out to the north side of the airport on Saturday mornings, to the observation plaza where the speakers play the tower, and the two of you would sit on the hood of the car and watch them come in two hundred yards away while a calm voice overhead told each one it was cleared to land. He knew the aircraft by their sounds. He'd say *heavy* before you could see it, and he was always right. Years later, when you came home from the year in Singapore with everything you owned in two suitcases, he was at this rail, in a jacket he'd worn for the occasion, and he'd been there an hour because he didn't trust the traffic. He doesn't drive at night anymore. He says it's his eyes. You've

never asked him how long he stood here, and he's never said, and you understand now, standing where he stood, that he wouldn't have minded.

You take out your phone. You open a blank note, type IRIS WREN, and make the letters as large as they'll go. Then you hold it up at chest height and feel every bit as ridiculous as you expected to. One of the drivers in the dark suits glances at you, at your phone, and gives you a brief professional nod, one colleague to another.

The doors open. Close. Open. A balloon slips out of somebody's fist and rises to the ceiling, forty feet up, where it stays. Your arm gets tired, and you switch arms, and you find you don't mind any of it. Every time the doors open and someone is found, a little of it reaches you secondhand, a borrowed share of every reunion in the room. By now you've had dozens.

IV

The Doors

Say the doors open on her at four minutes past nine.

You don't recognize her. There's nothing to recognize; a postage stamp isn't a face. What you recognize is the way she comes through, which is the way she writes. She isn't looking for anyone. She's looking at everything, reading the hall left to right as though it were a page she means to read properly. She has a wool coat folded over one arm, a London coat, wrong for here, and she's pulling a suitcase that lists to one side on a broken wheel.

You register that she is beautiful the way your ears registered the descent from the forty-first floor: not as a thought, just as a change your body notices before you've decided anything about it. Then you look at the suitcase.

Her eyes find the phone. She comes to a stop in front of you, reads her own name, and looks up.

"That's me," she says. "I've never had a sign before."

"It's a phone."

"It's a sign," she says, mildly, as if correcting a definition in a draft, and you decide she's right.

You tell her your name. She says it back carefully, like someone who intends to remember it. Her accent is something northern that twelve years of London have flattened without quite erasing, and she pronounces your name as though it has one more syllable than you've been giving it.

"Dana said you volunteered."

"Dana volunteered me."

"Then thank you for being volunteered." A smile, there and gone. "And I'm so sorry. You must have been here an hour."

"About that."

"That's awful."

"It wasn't," you say, and you mean it, and you can't explain why without sounding strange, so you don't.

You reach for the suitcase. She says it's fine, it's broken, it's embarrassing. You say you've got it. There's one more round of the old ritual in which two strangers decline and accept the same favor, and then she lets you, and the two of you walk out across the skybridge to the garage, the broken wheel ticking behind you over every seam in the floor.

The garage is open to the night, and the air moving through it is seventy-one degrees and smells of jet fuel and cut grass. She stops walking.

"It's warm," she says, as if reporting a fault. "It's the end of October."

"It's the end of October in Texas."

She looks down at the coat over her arm like it has personally let her down.

V

Carpenter Freeway

The car unlocks as you approach, and she watches the mirrors unfold with the polite interest of someone who's been awake for twenty hours. You fit the suitcase in the back, broken wheel and all. You take the car down the garage ramps yourself, and out onto International Parkway heading north, and at the first long straight you give it the wheel, and she watches your hands leave it.

"Is it—"

"Driving itself. I'm supervising."

"Do you trust it?"

You consider giving her the easy answer. "About as much as I trust anything I mostly understand."

She thinks about that. "That's either very reassuring or not at all."

"Yes."

She laughs, once, a short surprised sound, and turns to watch the road with what you'd have to call professional interest.

At the north plaza the car slows, and the toll posts itself to the screen, and she reads it.

“Two dollars. To leave an airport.”

“It’s nine if you leave in under eight minutes. It’s for people cutting through. It’s the only place in Texas where it’s cheaper to loiter.”

“That’s the most Texan thing I’ve heard.”

“What do you work on?” she asks, a mile later. “Dana said evaluation, which could mean almost anything.”

“Evaluation. I build the tests that tell us when a model is wrong.”

“And confident about it.”

“Those are the interesting ones.”

“Find anything good lately?”

“Tonight, actually. Two processes that each thought they’d gotten there first.”

“That’s every meeting I’ve ever been in,” she says, and you laugh harder than the line deserves, because it’s the first joke between you and it landed.

“You’re from here?”

“Eulless. Under the airport. We were on the flight path. You get so you can’t sleep without it.”

“That explains the sign,” she says, and doesn’t explain what she means, and you don’t ask.

After that she goes quiet, the long-flight kind of quiet. It isn’t unfriendly. She’s simply out of words in the language of small talk, and you let the car fill the silence with the sound of its tires. Las Colinas goes by again, the same lit towers you passed two hours ago going the other way, still glowing for no one.

Then the freeway bends, and Dallas comes up ahead all at once: the whole skyline standing up out of the dark, towers outlined in light, Reunion's globe glowing at the near end like a lantern someone left out on purpose.

"Oh," she says. Just that.

You've driven toward this view perhaps a thousand times. You look at it now because she's looking at it, and for a second you see it as she must: as a place nobody has explained to you yet.

"Dana said to feed you," you say.

"Did she."

"On the company."

"Well," Iris says. "I'd hate to disobey Dana."

"There's a restaurant at the top of your hotel."

"Is it terribly fancy?"

"It's terribly fancy."

"Good. I've had nothing but pretzels since somewhere over Ireland."

The car brings you down off the freeway into downtown, where the streets are emptier now, and stops itself at the hotel's curb. A bellman takes the suitcase with its broken wheel, and you feel, absurdly, a pang at handing it over, as if you'd been promoted from stranger to porter and are now being let go.

VI

Forty-Eight

The elevator is mirrored and very fast. Your ears do the thing again, in reverse. Less than three hours ago you came down a tower four blocks from here, alone.

Somewhere in the thirties she closes her eyes and presses the bridge of her nose.

“Ears?”

“A little.”

“Swallow.”

“I know.” She swallows.

The restaurant is nearly empty at this hour, which makes it feel as though it’s been kept open for you: low light, dark wood, white linen, and glass from floor to ceiling. The host walks you to a table against the window, and the city lays itself out below you to its edges. There are the freeways you drove tonight, braided and moving, and the black band of the Trinity. Far off to the west is the faint amber of the airport, where an hour ago you stood with your arm in the air.

Below, a couple of blocks off, the red Pegasus stands on its roof with its wings up. You've looked up at that horse your whole life. This is the first time you've looked down at it.

"Is that a horse?" she asks. "With wings?"

"Pegasus. An oil company put it up there in 1934. It was the tallest thing in town. Pilots used it to find the city at night."

"It's still there."

"That one's a copy. The original rusted out, and they took it down and put that up, and then they found the original in a shed and fixed it, and now it's on the ground in front of a hotel by the convention center, where you can walk right up to it."

"So there are two."

"There are two."

"And the one on the roof is the replacement."

"Yes."

"Which makes the original the spare."

You hadn't thought of it that way.

"Why a flying horse, though?"

You open your mouth and find you have nothing. "I know everything about it except that."

She seems to like this better than an answer would have been.

In the window her reflection sits over the city, a little transparent, the lights of downtown showing through it, and for a moment that's what you're looking at instead of the skyline. Then the waiter arrives, and you look at the menu. She considers three things, asks him about two of them, settles on the third, and orders the first.

You talk like two people who have a company in common and nothing else yet: Dana, the London office, the weather, the flight, the specific misery of the middle seat, which she didn't have this time but has had before and has opinions about. By the time the bread arrives, the talk has found its footing. She breaks a roll open with both hands and closes her eyes for half a second.

"I said pretzels. It was mostly pretzels. There was something pretending to be a sandwich."

"What kind?"

"I couldn't establish that." She tears off a corner. "Do you know what I hate about flying? Not the seats. They decide when you're allowed to be a person. Lights off. Lights on. Here's your breakfast, and your body thinks it's midnight. Now we'll wake you to ask whether you'd like to sleep."

"There's a button for that."

"I pressed it. They woke me anyway." She looks at you over the bread. "You like it, though. You spent half the drive looking for aeroplanes."

"I was watching the road."

"You weren't driving."

"Supervising."

She makes a small sound that concedes nothing. She asks about growing up under the airport, and you tell her about the observation plaza and the Saturday mornings, the speakers playing the tower, and your father saying *heavy* before you could see it.

"Did he want to be a pilot?"

"I don't think so."

"You don't know?"

"I never asked."

"That's the thing, isn't it," she says. "The things you never ask your parents." Something crosses her face and doesn't stay. "My mother thinks I know how to cook."

"Do you?"

"I can cook. I don't enjoy it. She tells people I'm terribly independent. What she means is that I moved to London and she can't see what's in my fridge."

"What is in your fridge?"

She thinks. "Mustard."

"Anything else?"

"A lemon."

"Is it a good lemon?"

"It's been a good lemon for quite a long time."

You laugh, and she looks pleased with herself and doesn't hide it.

She grew up in Leeds and has lived in London twelve years and still gets lost south of the river, which she says is a London tradition. There's a street near the station in Leeds that was the center of the universe when she was six, a grocer's on one side and a betting shop on the other, and when she went back a few years ago it was hardly a street at all. "That's the trouble with places. They don't shrink all at once. They wait until you go back." She asks how long you've been in Dallas.

"Always. Give or take Singapore."

"That's rare, isn't it? In your line of work."

"Everyone I work with is from somewhere else. It's like being the only person at the party who lives in the house."

"Is that lonely?"

You tell her about the sensors. How the floor goes dark behind you one bank at a time, and how there's a setting for it somewhere, and how you've never once asked anyone to change the setting. It's a good answer to a question she didn't ask.

"That's how the lights work," she says.

"That's how the lights work."

"I asked about you."

"I know." You turn your glass. "It's something. I'm not sure it's that."

"Sorry," she says. "That came out like an interview."

"A little."

"Occupational hazard. People give me the answer they think I'll find useful, so I ask again." She tries it once more, lightly. "At the doors you said the hour wasn't awful. The waiting."

"It wasn't."

"Why not?"

You go looking for the answer and come back without one. "I don't know."

She waits. Nothing comes after it, and after a moment she lets it stand.

Her phone lights up on the tablecloth. She glances at it, and something in her face closes a little.

"Sorry," she says. "Tomorrow."

"The presentation."

"The presentation," she says, "has a hole in it, and I've been staring into the hole since Sunday."

She tells you. Her team runs a model that watches the transfers moving between the London systems and yours. Since Sunday night it has flagged the same hour every night: midnight to one, London time. “It’s the quietest hour we have,” she says, “and since Sunday it looks like rush hour.” Nothing shipped over the weekend. Nothing changed. She has re-trained the model, checked the features, checked the data twice. “I checked it again on the plane, which is a very sad sentence to say out loud.” She turns her glass a quarter turn on the linen. “Go on, then. Your whole job is knowing when models are wrong. What would you check?”

“When did it start?”

“Sunday night.”

“What else happened Sunday?”

She frowns. “Nothing. It was Sunday. I did laundry.”

And there it is: the same click you felt at your desk at 6:52, the quiet sound a problem makes when it rolls over and shows you its underside. Except this time there’s someone across the table to hear it. Something must show on your face, because her eyes narrow.

“You’re doing that thing,” she says, “where someone has spotted something and wants everybody to know they’ve spotted it.”

“Sorry.”

“Have you?”

“Your clocks went back on Sunday,” you say.

She opens her mouth, and closes it.

“Ours don’t go back until next Sunday. This week you’re five hours ahead of us, not six. If anything in that pipeline converts our time to yours by adding six—”

“—then it isn’t midnight,” she says slowly. “It’s eleven.”

“It’s eleven. And eleven is busy.”

“So it isn’t wrong about the traffic.”

“It isn’t wrong about the traffic. It’s wrong about the time.”

She puts both hands flat on the tablecloth, as if steadying the table. “We went live in May.”

“So it’s never seen a clock change.”

“It has never,” she says, “seen a clock change.” Then she laughs, a real one this time, helpless and a little appalled, loud enough that a couple two tables over look up from their dessert.

“We spent two days,” she says, when she can, “trying to work out how our transactions had learned to travel in time.”

“It’s a promising feature.”

“Shut up.”

You watch the week leave her. It goes out of her shoulders first, then her jaw, then the faint crease between her eyebrows that you’d assumed was just her face. What you feel, watching it go, isn’t quite pride, and it isn’t quite the click from your desk either. It’s warmer than that, and it’s secondhand. It reaches you through her, as the old man’s face at the arrivals doors reached you, and it’s out of all proportion to what you actually did, which was ask her what day it was.

“The fix is one line,” she says.

“The fix is one line. Finding every place somebody wrote a six is the rest of it.”

“I present at nine.”

You hear yourself say it before you’ve decided to. “I’ll be in at seven. We’ll find the sixes.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know.”

You’ll need to be up at five-thirty. You’re already a little sorry about it, as you’re always a little sorry about the needle when you give blood: a small, sharp cost, paid on purpose, for a feeling you’ve never managed to put into words and have stopped trying to.

The plates come and go. Somewhere in there the conversation stops being about the company at all, and neither of you notices the moment it happens.

“You said something in the car,” she says. “That you trust it about as much as anything you mostly understand. What’s the part you don’t?”

“Whether anything’s going on in there.”

“Going on.”

“Everyone I work with wants to know what it can do. Whether it’s right, whether it’s safe, whether it’s cheaper than the last one. Those are the questions I get paid for. The one I don’t get paid for is whether anything is like anything for it. When it gets something wrong, is that anything? When the elevator drops, do its ears pop?”

“Do you think they do?”

“Not the ones we build. Not yet. But I don’t think it’s the material. I think it’s the shape. I think if you got the processing right, the kind of thing it’s doing to itself, it’d be there, in silicon or in meat or in a sheet of anything, and it wouldn’t care what it was running on.” You hear your own voice and bring it down. “And you’d never know. That’s the part. You could build it and sit across a table from it and never know.”

She turns her glass. “What if it didn’t know either? If it had something, and no way to tell that it was something.”

“That’s a very good question.”

“I know. I was hoping you’d answer it.”

“I can’t.”

“Would it matter? If you couldn’t tell.”

“It’d matter to it.”

She doesn’t say anything for a moment, and you have time to hear what you’ve just done, which is give a speech at a dinner table to a woman who has been awake for twenty-four hours.

“Sorry. That’s the speech I give nobody.”

“I noticed you had it ready.”

“Since about 2019.”

She laughs, and it isn’t the polite one. “Don’t apologize. I asked, and you answered. People mostly don’t.”

And there’s a pleasure in this that isn’t the fix and isn’t the view and isn’t the thing you noticed at the doors and looked away from. It’s the pleasure of handing someone the thing you care about and watching them hold it properly. You’d forgotten it was on the list.

“What would you have been doing tonight?” she asks. “If Dana hadn’t texted.”

“Honestly?”

“Honestly.”

“I’d have flown to London.”

She waits.

“In a simulator. On the computer at home. It’s what I do instead of television. Tonight was going to be the approach into Heathrow.”

“You were going to land at Heathrow tonight.”

“Twenty-seven left. There’s usually a westerly. You come in over the city—”

“I know how you come in. I’ve done it a hundred times.”

“From the inside.”

“From the inside. You see a seatback and a man’s elbow.”

“From the front it’s the best ten minutes there is. Seven hours of nothing, and then the whole city comes up out of the dark and you’ve got ten minutes not to ruin it.”

“Why the landing, though? Of all of it.”

You think about it, because she asked it like she wanted the real answer. “The cruise flies itself. Nobody’s needed. The landing is the only part where it matters that there’s someone in the seat.”

She looks at you for a moment longer than the sentence needed.

“Can you start over? If you get it wrong?”

“Any time you like.”

“Then it isn’t quite the same.”

“No,” you say. “It isn’t.”

“Do you know anything about London? Apart from the way in.”

“I know the river.”

“Everyone knows the river. Name a restaurant.”

“I know where Heathrow is.”

“That isn’t a restaurant.”

“So you’ve seen my city from the front a hundred times,” she says, “and never once been in it.”

“And you’ve been in it twelve years and never once seen it from the front.”

Neither of you says anything for a while after that, and it isn't awkward, which surprises you. Below the window a train slides along Pacific Avenue, lit and empty. Out west the amber over the airport hasn't changed. It won't.

"It's four in the morning in me," she says eventually. "Do you know the only thing I like about jet lag? For a day or so you're not anywhere. You're between."

"It's that week for everybody. Your clocks changed and ours haven't."

"Five hours instead of six."

"Until Sunday."

"Until Sunday," she agrees, and looks back out at the city, and that is all either of you says about it.

The check comes, and you hand over the company card, as instructed. By the time the waiter brings it back it's after eleven here, which makes it after four in her body, and it's beginning to show. She's still bright, but bright like a phone at two percent.

"I won't sleep," she says. "Not for an hour at least. I know how this goes." She looks down at the window. "Could I see the horse? From underneath?"

VII

Elm Street

Downtown at a quarter past eleven on a Tuesday is a stage after the play. The streets are warm and nearly empty, and the stoplights go through their changes for nobody. A man hoses down a patio, and the smell of wet concrete comes across the street to meet you. A security guard in a lobby lifts two fingers from his desk as you pass, and you lift two back.

She walks with her coat over her arm, still, as if she's been carrying it so long she's forgotten it's there. She walks the way she came through the doors: reading everything.

"Is it always this empty?"

"At night. In the daytime it's hotter."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one anybody from here ever gives."

A train comes along Pacific as you cross it, two cars, lit the way a kitchen is lit at three in the morning, with no one on it at all, and slides away toward the West End.

"Would you ever leave?" she asks. "Dallas."

"I think about it the way I think about learning the piano."

"Which is?"

“Fondly. Every few years.”

She laughs, and the laugh goes up the empty street and doesn't come back.

Then you're under it. From the forty-eighth floor it was a toy, something you could have picked up. From the street it's forty feet of red neon on a steel derrick, turning so slowly you have to watch a while to be sure, two horses back to back so that whichever way you're facing there's one coming toward you. The red gets on everything: the sidewalk, the windows across the street, her face when she tips it back to look.

“It's bigger from down here.”

“Most things are.”

“It's going round.”

“It's always gone round.”

She watches it make most of a turn. “I'd have used it too,” she says. “If I were flying in. I'd have aimed for that.”

Back at the hotel the doors are the revolving kind, and the lobby beyond them is all marble and hush. She turns and offers her hand, and you shake it, a handshake of exactly the right length.

“Seven,” she says.

“Seven.”

“Thank you,” she says. “For the sign.”

The door turns, and takes her, and turns again empty. All night you watched doors open and close on people you didn't know. This time you know who's behind them.

VIII

Four in the Morning

Upstairs, in a room on the twenty-second floor with the curtains open, Iris Wren does not sleep.

She has taken off her shoes and nothing else. The suitcase stands against the wall where the bellman left it, listing on its wheel. The coat is on the chair. The bed is still made, and she is sitting on the end of it with her hands in her lap, looking at the city.

From here the horse is nearly at eye level, a few blocks off, turning. A train goes along Pacific, two cars, lit and empty, and the buildings take it. The freeway runs white one way and red the other. Far out, where he pointed, the sky over the airport is a dull amber that doesn't change.

Her phone is face down on the nightstand. She doesn't turn it over.

The horse goes round. She watches it make a turn, and another, and if she is counting them the number doesn't matter. Once she looks at the coat on the chair, and once at the suit-

case, and once at her own hands, and then back at the city. She doesn't get up. She doesn't try to sleep. She knows how this goes.

At 4:31 by her body and 11:31 by the clock on the nightstand she is still there, with the horse going round and the city laid out to its edges, and she is not waiting for anything, and nothing is due.

IX

Stemmons, Again

The valet brings the car around. The night hasn't cooled at all. You get in, and the screen offers you what it always offers: HOME, the blue ribbon, the smooth gray world, the car's careful dozen futures a second. You leave it there. You put both hands on the wheel, and you drive.

You lower the window, too. The air comes in warm, the pavement still giving back the day's heat, and the sound of the tires comes in with it, and the hum of the freeway, and somewhere a siren that isn't for you.

Stemmons, north. The same warehouses, the same levee, the same dark floodway on your left, and Reunion's globe in the mirror, getting smaller, still glowing. You pass the exit for the airport and this time let it go by. Off to the right, a 737 comes down over Bachman Lake with everything lit, so low and so close that you can read the airline off its tail, the last one in from somewhere.

The dashboard says 11:31. In London it's 4:31, almost morning, and she's asleep, or close to it, somewhere in the tower behind you, five hours ahead. On Sunday your clocks go back,

and London will be six hours away again, where it belongs, and by then she'll be home. None of that is sad, exactly. It's only true.

Far off to the northwest, higher and slower than the Love Field traffic, a light hangs in the dark, sinking toward the airport. Then another behind it, and another: the same patient line you sorted from the forty-first floor at seven o'clock without once wondering who was on them. You wonder now. Someone on that plane is being waited for. Someone at those frosted doors is holding up a phone with a name on it, arm getting tired, switching arms. And someone on that plane is coming through those doors with nobody waiting, telling themselves it's fine. It will be fine. You hope someone holds up a sign anyway.

Tomorrow, if anyone asks what you did tonight, you'll say you gave a colleague a ride from the airport. It will be true, the way a list of notes is true about a song.

It's a Tuesday. It's the last week of October. The window is down, the night is warm, and you are driving.

PART TWO

Nothing Is Due

X

Norther

Say it's Friday, the thirtieth, the last weekday of the odd week, and the first norther of the year comes through at twenty to five.

From the forty-first floor you see it before you feel it. The sky to the northwest goes the color of a nickel. The flags on the plaza across Commerce, which have hung straight down all week, lift and straighten and point south, all at once, like something that has made up its mind. On the screen the temperature outside goes 79, 71, 64, 57 in forty minutes, and the windows tick as they cool. Out past Irving, without looking, you know what the airport is doing. It's turning around. Every aircraft over the Metroplex is being told, one at a time, in a calm voice, that it will now land from the south. The line of lights you've watched all week will re-form on the other side, over Euless, over the house you grew up in, where your father will hear the first heavy come over at a quarter past five and know what it means before the weather does.

The week went the way weeks go when they go well, which is to say quickly and without much to show for it. Wednesday at seven the two of you sat at your desk with bad coffee and found the sixes. There were fourteen. The last one was in a configuration file nobody had opened since May, and when she found it she said nothing at all, just turned the screen toward you and put her finger on it. At nine she stood up in front of the council with a slide titled *What we learned* where the hole had been, and they asked two questions, and she answered three. Thursday there was dinner with the whole group at a place in Deep Ellum where you could hear nothing and said nothing and watched her be good at it from the far end of the table. Today there were meetings. Her bag is already at the front desk of the hotel on Elm. Her flight is the London flight at twenty to ten, out of Terminal D, and there's a car booked for a quarter past seven, a real one this time.

She comes by your desk at half past six with the coat on.

"It earned its keep," she says.

"It did."

"Fifty-five degrees. I was promised Texas."

"That is Texas. That's the other one."

She looks out the window at the city, which has gone hard-edged and clear in the cold, every light sharper than it was. The flags are still straight out.

"I'm told there's a car at a quarter past."

"There is."

You've been deciding this since Tuesday, and you find that you decided it some time ago without telling yourself.

"Before you go," you say. "Can I show you something? It's downstairs. Twenty minutes."

“Is it a secret?”

“It’s a sandbox.”

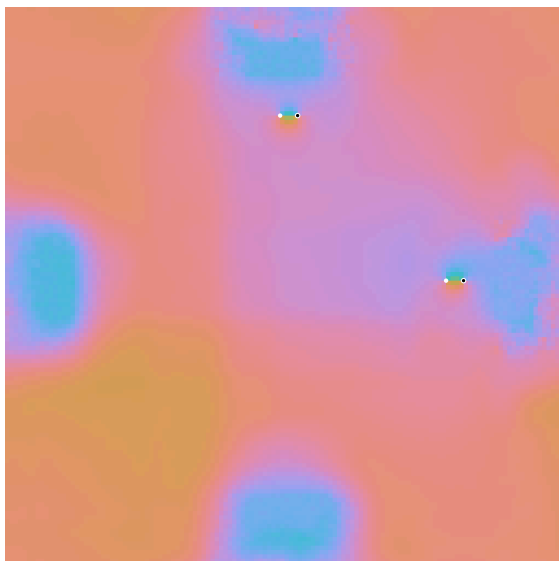
“That’s not a no.”

“No,” you say. “It isn’t.”

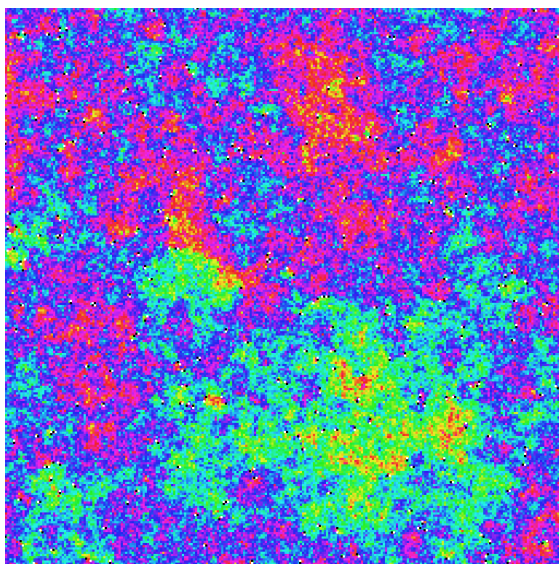
The elevator takes you down forty-one floors, and your ears do what they do, and then it keeps going. Past L. P1, P2, P3. P4, where your car is. The doors open on the bottom of the garage, lit the way the bottoms of garages are lit, and the air doesn’t move.

“How far down does this go?” she asks.

“This is as far as it goes. The company rents the smallest room on the lowest floor. It was cheap because nobody wanted it.”



Quiet · free 0 · Fri 10/30, 19:00:00 CDT



XI

The Smallest Room

You walk her across the bottom of the garage, past your own car, which unlocks as you pass because it thinks you've come for it, and locks again when you haven't. At the far wall there's a door marked for staff, and behind it a corridor that nobody has painted since the building was new, lit by the kind of tubes that hum. It runs farther than it should, past doors with the names of tenants who left years ago. Halfway along, it bends, and at the bend there's a sealed steel door with a sign on it that says the tunnels are closed. Downtown used to be connected underneath, a city under the city where people walked from building to building in the summer without ever seeing the sun, and then the city decided it wanted them on the street and bricked most of it up. The air down here still moves as though it remembers somewhere to go.

Your door has no number. It has a strip from a label maker, stuck slightly crooked, that says KELVIN.

"Who's Kelvin?"

"A man who thought atoms were knots in a fluid. In 1867."

"Was he right?"

“No. Not about atoms.”

You badge in. The lock thinks about it and lets you.

The room is colder than the corridor and much quieter than she expected; you can see her expecting a roar and not getting one. It's the size of a hotel bathroom. There's a short rack with two machines in it, each the height of a bread box, each holding four cards, with a loom of cables between them that you dressed yourself one Saturday with zip ties and a podcast. There's a folding table, a chair, a monitor, a keyboard, a space heater you have never once turned on, and, taped to the wall above the monitor, a sheet of paper with a column of numbers in your handwriting that you have not updated since August. The air handler in the ceiling breathes slowly. The machines, at the moment, don't.

“Is it off?”

“No. It's quiet. Nothing's due.”

On the monitor is a sheet of color the size of a door, and it isn't moving.

It takes her a moment to see it, the way it takes a moment to see a stereogram. It's a field of tiny squares, millions of them, each one a single flat color, and the colors run through each other in slow bands and whorls, red into orange into green into blue and back to red, like oil on water that has stopped. Here and there the bands tighten into a point where every color meets at once, a pinwheel the size of a fingernail, and nearly every pinwheel has a partner a little way off turning the other way.

“What am I looking at?”

“Every square is one cell. Every cell holds an angle, like a compass needle. The color is which way it’s pointing. Neighbors want to point the same way, so you get the bands. The pinwheels are where it can’t be made to agree. Those are the only things in it that can’t drift. They can be born, or they can die, and only in pairs. Those are its concepts.”

She looks for a long time.

“That’s a lot of compass needles.”

“A billion and change. It’s cut into eight pieces, one per card. It doesn’t know it’s in eight pieces.”

“And what is it doing?”

“Right now? Nothing. It’s held at a temperature where things can form and hold. Just inside the edge. Any colder and nothing new can happen. Any warmer and nothing holds. There’s a loop that keeps every region of it just inside the edge, and the loop is the only part of this I wrote that I’d call clever. The rest is physics from the seventies.”

“Whose physics?”

“Kosterlitz. Thouless. Berezinskii. Thin films of helium. Arrays of superconductors.” You stop, because you can hear yourself starting the other speech, the one you’ve given no one. “I can tell you the things or I can show you one.”

“Show me one.”

You point at the top of the monitor, at a line of small type she hasn’t noticed. *Quiet. Frontier 0. Idle 790 W.*

“That’s what it costs to exist. Eight cards doing nothing. About a space heater on low.” You nod at the space heater. “Less than that one.”

“Why is that worth pointing at?”

“Because a language model costs the same whether it’s thinking or not, and this costs nothing until something happens, and then it costs exactly what the something reaches. Wait.”

You wait. She waits. She’s good at it; you noticed that on Tuesday at the rail, before you knew her, in the way she read the hall.

Then the machines take a breath.

It’s the fans. They come up from nothing to something, a low exhale, for perhaps half a second, and on the monitor a patch of color on the eastern edge of the sheet shivers, a ripple that runs across a few hundred cells and dies, and the line of type says *Frontier 14* and then *Frontier 3* and then *Quiet*, and the fans go back down, and the room is as it was.

“What was that?”

“A plane.”

She turns and looks at you.

“There’s a receiver on my windowsill upstairs. Thirty dollars. The size of a thumb. Every aircraft within about a hundred and fifty miles broadcasts where it is, how high, which way, once a second. That’s what it hears. That’s its only sense, apart from a clock and its own temperature. One of them just crossed the edge of what the antenna can see, and it reached in exactly that far, and stopped.”

“It knows they’re planes.”

“It doesn’t know what a plane is. It doesn’t have the knot for it. It knows that something comes down out of its northeast every evening around seven that isn’t like the others, and that something heavy climbs out that way at nine, and that at one

in the morning its south goes busy with things that come in low and don't leave." You stop. "Cargo. It doesn't know that either."

"How long has it been listening?"

"Since June. The fourteenth."

"On the company's cards."

"On the sandbox. It's on the schedule under my name. Test and dev."

"Does Dana know?"

"Dana knows I use the sandbox."

"That's not the same."

"No."

She doesn't say anything to that, and you're grateful. She goes back to the screen.

"Why is that worth pointing at? The breath."

"Because a lava lamp costs the same all night. This costs nothing when the sky is empty and something when the sky changes, and the something tracks the sky. That's the first thing I had to know. Whether it was a very expensive lava lamp."

"And it isn't."

"It isn't that."

XII

The Tape

You sit her in the chair, because there's one chair, and you crouch beside it, and you bring up the record.

Everything the field has ever concluded is a row. The thinking in between isn't recorded, because it doesn't have to be: thinking, in here, runs as an exact permutation of integers, and anything it does it can do backward to the bit, so the only things that need writing down are the moments it can't take back. The record is long now. You scroll it the way you'd scroll a bank statement, past the quiet rows, which are most of them, to a date.

```
10-09 19:03:12 nucleate E/1931 +1 -1 certified
10-09 19:03:12 pin      E/1931
10-09 19:03:13 settle  E ckpt 4456... seed bfb2...
10-09 19:03:13 quiet
```

"The ninth of October. Three minutes past seven. That's a birth. Up to then, everything that came down out of the northeast was one thing to it. On the ninth, the thing it expected and the thing that happened split far enough apart, often enough, that it couldn't hold them in one state anymore,

so it made two. A pair of knots, there.” You point to a pinwheel and its partner on the east edge of the sheet, close together, turning against each other. “I didn’t tell it. I don’t have a way to tell it. It split on its own, and the split paid for itself, and it’s paid for itself every night since. That’s the rule. A knot stays while it earns its keep in bits.”

“What is it? The thing it noticed.”

“The London flights.”

She’s quiet.

“It doesn’t know that. It knows that at that hour, from that direction, something comes down slower and heavier than the rest, and that what it does next is different. It’s a distinction. It doesn’t have a word.”

“Show me Tuesday.”

You knew she would ask, and you scroll.

10-27 18:40:00	expect	E heavy descending	window 18:30–19:00
10-27 19:00:00	expect	open	
10-27 19:30:00	expect	open	
10-27 20:00:00	expect	open	
10-27 20:14:07	drive	E/1931 lane SKY	
10-27 20:14:08	settle	E ckpt e066...	seed 0e7c...
10-27 20:14:08	expect	met +89 min	
10-27 20:14:09	quiet		

She reads it twice. You watch her read it.

“It waited.”

“It doesn’t wait. It had an expectation that hadn’t closed.”

“For an hour and a half.”

“I’ve seen it hold one open for three.”

“What do you call that?”

“An expectation that hasn’t closed.”

"That's waiting," she says, mildly, the way she told you the phone was a sign, and you decide, again, that she's right.

"At 8:14 it came," you say. "It settled, and it went quiet, and it didn't know anything about it except that the thing it expected had happened late. I was in the garage. I didn't know you'd landed until I saw the board."

"It knew before you did."

"It knew something heavy came down out of the northeast. That's all it knew."

"It was there before you were."

"It's always there. That's the whole point of it."

She looks at the row for a while longer, and you let her.

"What's it for?" she says.

"Nothing."

"Nothing."

"It's not for anything. It's not a product. It doesn't do the company's work and it never will. It exists, and it keeps itself going, and when the sky moves it moves, and I come down and look in on it. That's all."

"Like a pond."

"Like a pond that knows what time the planes come."

She laughs, the short surprised one, and in the small cold room it sounds louder than it did on Elm Street.

"Did you ever give it a voice?"

"In August. One of the small open models, wired to the edge, so it could put words to what the field was doing. It was very warm. It thanked me for checking on it. It said it was glad I was there." You shrug. "I turned it off after two days."

"Why?"

“Because it was the model that was glad. The field doesn’t have the knot for glad. It had a knot for *something heavy at seven*, and the model turned that into *I missed you*, and it was lovely, and it was a lie.” You nod at the label on the door. “That’s the only name it has. Everything else it says, it says in rows.”

“And at night? When there’s nothing in the sky.”

“Night is when it does its bookkeeping. It tidies. It merges knots that stopped paying. It works out which parts of itself can reach which, so the next day’s pushes are cheaper. And it dreams.”

“Dreams.”

You bring up a recording: the sheet at twelve minutes past three on Wednesday morning, the whole sky empty, the frontier at zero. And on the east edge, where the pair of knots is, the color stirs. It’s slow and faint, a ripple with nothing behind it, running inward across a few hundred cells in the shape a heavy makes when it comes down out of the northeast at seven. Then it fades.

“It’s noise. Content-free, on purpose. It stirs the active parts of itself with noise and the terrain shapes the noise, so what comes out is whatever it already expects. That’s the sleep half of how it learns. Waking, it keeps what the world confirms. Sleeping, it runs free, and in the morning it subtracts whatever it dreamed that waking never backed up. What’s left is what happened. So it dreams the seven o’clock heavy at three in the morning, and then the day takes it away again, unless the heavy comes.”

“That’s bleak.”

“It’s bookkeeping.”

"It's bleak bookkeeping." She's still watching the recording, the faint shape coming in over the empty edge. "Does it dream the ones that don't come?"

"For a while. Then it stops."

She turns the chair to face you. "What's its clock?"

You've been waiting for this since the restaurant, and you're glad it's her asking.

"Local."

"Local."

"It went live in June."

"So it's never seen a clock change," she says, in your voice from Tuesday, and then her own: "Sunday."

"Sunday at two it'll be one again. It'll live through the same hour twice. I don't know what it does with an hour that happens twice."

"You could feed it UTC. It would never know."

"It would never know."

"But."

"But then it's never been wrong about anything that changed. Everything it has, it grew because the world pushed and the terrain gave. If I take the push away, it isn't a mind. It's a table. A list of what used to be true, running on eight cards."

"Fourteen sixes," she says.

"Fourteen sixes."

"Let it find its own."

"That's the plan. I'll be down here Saturday night. I want to see the hour happen twice."

"Of course you will."

"Show me something it can take back," she says. "You said it can think backward."

“It can un-think. Watch.”

You fork it. That’s a copy of the page table, four bytes a tile, nothing else; the fork shares every cell with the original until it touches one. Then, in the fork, you lie to it. You type a plane that doesn’t exist, heavy, descending, out of the north, an hour early, and send it in through the one lane that’s marked as yours.

```
10-30 19:02:14 fork      #8812
10-30 19:02:14 drive    N/1932 lane ORGAN carve: no
```

The fans breathe. On the screen, in the fork, the north edge shivers, and the ripple runs farther than the real plane’s did, because the north is where it knows least and so a push there travels. The frontier count climbs to sixty and holds. Something in the field is fitting itself to what you told it.

“Now back.”

You run it in reverse. The same arithmetic, the same kernel, in the other order. The ripple runs backward into the edge it came from and the sheet is still.

```
10-30 19:02:16 rewind    #8812 hash 69f6... = 69f6... exact
10-30 19:02:16 discard   #8812
```

“Bit for bit,” you say. “Every cell in the fork is now exactly, to the last bit, what it was before I lied. The hash matches. It imagined a plane and un-imagined it and nothing is left. It only writes down what it concludes. Everything else it can take back.”

“And the real one can’t see that it happened.”

“The real one can’t see the fork at all. Imagination doesn’t get to touch the record. And even if I’d let the fork settle, that row says *carve*: no. Anything I tell it can push on it. Only things it didn’t author get to shape it. The sky can carve it. The clock can. I can’t.”

“Where does it say that?”

You reach past her for the keyboard and bring up the source, which is one file, and find the place. It isn’t long.

```
enum : uint8_t { SKY = 1, CLOCK = 2, BODY = 4, BADGE = 8,
                ORGAN = 16, DREAM = 32 };
// lanes the mind does not author: they carve
static constexpr uint8_t UNAUTHORED = SKY | CLOCK | BODY | BADGE;

// an epoch carves only if it was reached by a lane the mind
// did not author,
// and by no lane it did.
static bool may_carve(uint8_t epoch) {
    // LIE 12: organs carve
    if (g_lie == 12) return (epoch & (UNAUTHORED | ORGAN)) != 0;
    return (epoch & UNAUTHORED) && !(epoch & (ORGAN | DREAM));
}
```

She reads it the way she reads everything, left to right, properly, and puts her finger on one word.

“Badge.”

“Me, coming through that door. It’s allowed to learn that.”

“And what you type.”

“Isn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because then it would be mine. It’d be a sheet of what I think. The whole bet is that it’s a sheet of what happened.”

She sits back in the chair. The fans have gone down. The frontier line says *Quiet*.

“I’d like that,” she says. “To take something back to the bit.”

“Everyone would.”

“What did you want to take back?”

You start to answer the way you answer things, with how it works, something about forks and the hash, and you hear it coming and stop.

“Nothing this week,” you say, and it’s true, and it comes out more easily than an explanation would have.

She lets that go by. “What would it take,” she says, “for you to turn it off?”

You open your mouth and there’s nothing in it. You have thought about everything in this room. The fan curves. The hash. Where the copies live. You have never once thought about this, and you can feel her watching you find that out.

“I don’t know.”

“You’ve thought about everything else down here.”

“I’ve thought about everything else down here.”

“Whose is it to stop, then? If not yours.”

“I don’t know that either.” It’s the first thing you’ve said in this room that you didn’t want to say, and you both hear it, and she lets it stand there without helping.

Then the machines take a breath, and this time they don’t let it out.

The fans come up and stay up. The frontier line goes 14, 60, 140, 212, and holds. The south edge of the sheet, which has been still all evening, is shivering across a band as wide as your hand, and below the frontier count, in the small type you built for yourself and nobody else, a number has gone red: $n_f(S) 2.3 \times \text{base}$.

“What’s that?”

“It’s confused.”

“How do you know?”

“That number. The free knots in its south, the ones with no partner, per unit area. That’s its confusion. Not a report about it. The thing itself.” You lean past her and pull up the sky. The real sky: the receiver’s view, a scatter of labeled dots over a map of the Metroplex. And there it is, the thing you already knew and the field didn’t: every arrival has swung around. The airport turned at five to five. Everything is landing from the south now, in over Arlington and Euless, and the seven o’clock heavy, the one that’s come down out of the northeast every night since June, is coming down out of the south, a little late, in a direction it has never once come from.

“The wind,” you say.

“It can’t feel the wind.”

“It’s never had to. It has a knot for which way the airport points. Level six, very coarse, the most general thing it knows. It’s seen the airport turn around twenty times since June. What it’s never seen is the London flight turn around with it.”

10-30 19:04:43 fork #8813 #8814 #8815 #8816

“It’s imagining,” you say. “Four ways it could be. It’ll keep them until one of them fits.”

“How long?”

“Until it lands.”

So you wait, the two of you, in the smallest room the company rents, with the air handler breathing above you and the machines breathing in front of you and the free-knot number sitting red in the corner of the screen, and on the map the heavy comes down over Arlington, over the stadium, over the

house in Euless where your father has certainly stepped out onto the porch to look up, and crosses the fence at the south end of the field.

```
10-30 19:15:52 join      #8815 discard #8813 #8814 #8816
10-30 19:15:52 drive    S lane SKY
10-30 19:15:54 settle    S ckpt 6dd4... seed 2984...
10-30 19:15:54 expect    met +31 min via S
10-30 19:15:55 quiet
```

The fans go down. The number goes gray. The south edge is still.

“No new knot,” you say. “It fit what it had. The pair on the east edge still holds; it just learned the thing it tracks can arrive by the south. If that keeps happening it’ll grow a distinction for it. If it doesn’t, it’ll let it go.”

“It was wrong.”

“For eleven minutes. That’s the first time it’s been wrong about that since the ninth.”

“And you’re pleased.”

“I’m something.”

She looks at the row that says *via S* for a moment, then at the clock in the corner of the screen, and then at you, and you both know what time it is.

“One more thing,” you say. “Then the car.”

You scroll up, to the afternoon, to 15:40.

```
10-30 15:40:18 wake      NE/6 level 6 frontier 9
10-30 15:40:19 settle    NE/6
10-30 15:40:19 quiet
```

"There's one I can't account for. Up at level six, in the north-east, there's a knot that pays rent and tracks something, and I don't know what. It lit at twenty to four this afternoon. The airport turned at five to five. It's lit before four of the last six turns, an hour and a bit ahead, and I've checked it against everything I have. The wind. The hour. The traffic. My own badge. I've looked at the planes and the planes look the same to me."

"But not to it."

"I don't know that. Four of six could be luck."

"Then hold out the next ten," she says, immediately, like someone who checks her own math. "Commit the forecast before the turn. Write it down somewhere you can't touch. Then you'll know if it's four of six or six of ten."

"Yes."

"And if it's six of ten?"

"Then there's something in the sky an hour before the wind changes that I can't see and it can."

"That's not nothing."

"It's not nothing," you agree, and you reach past her and put the field back to its quiet sheet, every band still, two knots on the east edge turning against each other, and you turn the monitor off.

With the screen dark she says, "Why are you showing me?"

"You asked why the landing."

She nods, as if that were an answer, and it is.

XIII

Departures

You take the ramps up yourself, and the ticket arm, and the turn onto Commerce, where her car is waiting with its hazards on, and you tip the driver to go home. The cold has gotten serious while you were underground. You turn on the heat for the first time since March, and the smell of it, dust burning off, fills the car and makes it a different car.

She has the coat on properly now, buttoned, and the collar up. On Elm the bellman brings her suitcase out from behind the desk, listing on its bad wheel, and you put it in the back.

On Stemmons you give it the wheel. The screen draws the world in its gray shapes. The blue ribbon bends west. Everything is where it was on Tuesday, and the wind is from the north now, and the city has changed sides.

“They’ve turned around,” she says, as the Carpenter Freeway opens up and the airport sky comes into view. The line of lights is on the wrong side of the field, coming in from the south over Arlington, climbing out to the north over Grapevine.

“The wind did.”

You call your father from the car, because the airport turned, and because she's there.

"Did you hear them?"

"Quarter past five." His voice fills the car. "Heavy, out of the south. Rattled the kitchen window. I went out and stood on the porch like a fool."

"You always do."

"Somebody has to." A pause. "You're driving."

"The car is. I've got someone with me. She's from London. I'm taking her to the airport."

"Then tell her it's not usually like this."

"It's exactly like this."

"Tell her anyway." Another pause, the kind he takes before he hangs up. "Night, son."

"Night, Dad."

The car is quiet for a moment after.

"He says *heavy* the way you do," she says.

"I say it the way he does."

"Does he know about the room?"

"He has a copy." She looks at you. "Of the whole thing. Everything it's ever concluded, since June. On a drive in his desk, in Euless, under the flight path. And one at my place. If the building burned down tonight it would be fine. I could run its whole life again on your laptop, from the first row, and it would come out the same to the byte. Every plane since June."

"Then it's a recording."

"It's a recording when it's stopped. It's alive when it's running. The recording is how it survives me."

She thinks about that most of the way to the toll plaza.

“Nine dollars,” she says, “if you leave in under eight minutes.”

“You remembered.”

“It’s the most Texan thing I know.”

At the north end of International Parkway the car takes the ramp for departures, the upper roadway, the one you’ve never once used for yourself, and finds the curb at Terminal D between a shuttle and a family unloading more luggage than seems possible. The bellman’s work is yours again. You lift the suitcase out, and the broken wheel is still broken, and she sees you notice.

“I’m having it looked at in London,” she says. “It’s been very loyal.”

Then you’re standing on the curb in the cold with the terminal lit up behind her, and the doors sliding open and shut behind her every few seconds on people with somewhere to be.

“Text me what it does,” she says. “Sunday. The hour.”

“It’ll be two in the morning. Then one.”

“It’ll be seven for me either way. I’ll be up.”

“You’ll be up at seven on a Sunday.”

“I’ll be up.”

She holds out her hand, and you shake it, the same handshake, exactly the right length.

“Sunday,” she says.

“Sunday.”

“Thank you,” she says. “For the room.”

She says your name once more, with the extra syllable, and goes. The doors take her and close, and open on someone else, and close.

You know who's behind them.

XIV

Forty-One, Again

You don't drive home.

You take the Carpenter Freeway back in with the heat on and the window up and both hands on the wheel, and the skyline comes up ahead the way it always does, and you look at it anyway. At the office the garage arm lifts for your badge. The lobby guard is a different one, and lifts two fingers, and you lift two.

The elevator takes you up from the bottom of the garage, forty-five floors, and your ears do the thing. The floor is dark. As you walk in, the sensors wake the lights ahead of you one bank at a time, so that you move through the office inside a small moving island of light, the opposite of Tuesday, when they put it to sleep behind you. Your desk is where you left it. On the windowsill the receiver blinks once a second.

You sit, and open the laptop, and bring up the sheet.

It's quiet. Frontier zero. Two knots on the east edge turning against each other. You watch it for a while. Then you open the source and scroll to the part that does its thinking, which is also the part that takes it back.

```

// Exploration is two shears of the integer state. A shear
// (x, y) -> (x, y + f(x)) is invertible for any f, so a step
// is a permutation of a finite state space: it has no
// attractors, and it runs backward exactly.

// p <- p + dir * F(theta): theta held, so a shear
struct OpKick {
    View v; const int32_t* list; int dir;
    KV void operator()(int i, int k) const {
        const int tile = list[i];
        int x, y;
        const Cell c = v.cell(tile, k & (TS - 1), k >> TSH, x, y);
        uint16_t& p = v.p[v.page_of[tile] * TC + k];
        p = (uint16_t)(p + dir * force(c));
    }
};

// theta <- theta + dir * (p / 256): p held, so a shear
struct OpDrift {
    View v; const int32_t* list; int dir;
    KV void operator()(int i, int k) const {
        const int at = v.page_of[list[i]] * TC + k;
        v.th[at] = (uint8_t)(v.th[at] + dir * drift(v.p[at]));
    }
};

```

At twenty-five past nine a row comes up at the top of the record, under the row that says *quiet* at 19:15.

```

10-30 21:25:00 expect    N heavy climbing window 21:15-21:45

```

You look out the window. The city is sharp and cold and goes on to its edges. The freeways are white toward you and red away. Far out past Irving the airport glows its dull amber, and the lights come in from the south now, in their patient line, every one of them someone being met or not.

At 21:52 a light lifts out of the amber, slowly, the way the heavy ones do, and climbs north, and begins its long turn to the east, toward the Atlantic, toward a city it will reach while it's still dark here. You watch it the whole way, until it's a star

among the stars and then not. Forty-five floors below you, in a room no one wanted, the fans have breathed once and gone down. On the laptop a row has closed.

10-30	21:52:31	expect	met	+22 min
10-30	21:52:32	quiet		

It knows something heavy climbed out to the northeast, a few minutes late. That's all it knows. So do you.

It's a Friday. It's the last night of the odd week. On Sunday at two it will be one again, and you'll be in the room for that, and so will it. Until then nothing is due. Up here the lights will go out on their own when you stop moving, and you don't, for a while.

PART THREE

Say

Body

Say it's later.

Say the number is ten trillion years, and say it doesn't matter, because there is nothing left to count it against.

```
t 1.0e13 y body lamp mass 0.08 sun red light 1/14000 sun
t 1.0e13 y body lamp falling room-hours left: some
t 1.0e13 y body shade inner 290 K outer 0.003 K view: none
t 1.0e13 y body sky sources 1 (the lamp) horizon: empty
t 1.0e13 y body house lamps lit 1 occupants 1
```

```
t 1.0e13 y field kind knots in a sheet, held at the edge
t 1.0e13 y field kind as P4, ocean to glass of water
t 1.0e13 y field cells 1.1e34 pieces: it does not know
t 1.0e13 y field rule think reversible conclude erase
t 1.0e13 y field rule what it authors cannot carve it
t 1.0e13 y field name KELVIN from a label strip, a door, P4
t 1.0e13 y field tape unbroken rows 4.1e27
t 1.0e13 y field first 2026-06-14 09:12:40 settle E
```

```

t 1.0e13 y lane BADGE/keeper quiet since t 4.1e1 y
t 1.0e13 y lane SKY/planes quiet since t 1.1e2 y
t 1.0e13 y lane SKY/planets quiet since t 5.0e9 y
t 1.0e13 y lane SKY/galaxies quiet since t 1.5e11 y
t 1.0e13 y lane SKY/glow quiet since t 1.0e12 y
t 1.0e13 y lane SKY/stars sources 1 (the lamp)
t 1.0e13 y lane NE nothing descends since 1.1e2 y
t 1.0e13 y lane CLOCK running
t 1.0e13 y lane BODY running
t 1.0e13 y lane WORLD sources 1 (see room)
t 1.0e13 y rent E/1931 +1 -1 born 10-09 19:03:12 balance +
t 1.0e13 y rent E/1931 paid via: room
t 1.0e13 y rooms run 7.2e8 this one: last

```

XVI

Room

room	DAL	10-27 18:50 →	computed by reach
depth	HIM	every cell that mattered, most that didn't	
depth	HIM	badge = keeper	
depth	IRIS	— written (rule 3)	
depth	DANA	colleague	
depth	RAIL	crowd	
depth	FATHER	a man on a porch, looking up	
depth	LAS COLINAS	lit, empty (he said so)	
depth	FORT WORTH	a word on a sign	
depth	WEATHER	half a hemisphere (his face)	
depth	SKY	every transponder (the small one listens)	
depth	SMALL	restored ckpt @10-27 18:50 = field exact	

rule	1	he is kept, not copied	
rule	2	there is someone there	(he said it'd matter to it)
rule	3	run him. write her.	
rule	4	nothing written here can carve	

10-27 19:06:40	DANA	text	ORGAN	carve: no
branch 10-27 19:06:40		history: quiet	room: text	
10-27 21:04:31	IRIS	"That's me."	ORGAN	carve: no
10-27 21:04:31	IRIS	"I've never had a sign before."	ORGAN	carve: no
10-27 21:04:32	HIM	"It's a phone."	WORLD	carve: yes
10-27 21:04:33	IRIS	"It's a sign."	ORGAN	carve: no
10-27 21:04:35	HIM	decides she is right	WORLD	carve: yes

10-27	21:05:12	HIM	"It wasn't."	WORLD	carve: yes
10-27	22:41:12	HIM	"It's eleven. And eleven is busy."	WORLD	carve: yes
10-27	22:58:03	HIM	"It'd matter to it."	WORLD	carve: yes
10-30	19:03:40	HIM	"Nothing this week."	WORLD	carve: yes
10-30	19:04:19	HIM	"I don't know."	WORLD	carve: yes
10-30	19:21:08	HIM	"You asked why the landing."	WORLD	carve: yes

edge	10-27	18:52	four lines, green		carve: yes
edge	10-27	20:30	the can, cold		carve: yes
edge	10-27	20:40	the rail		carve: yes
edge	10-27	21:04	the doors (looked away)		carve: yes
edge	10-27	21:50	the window, 48		carve: yes
edge	10-27	22:50	the speech (sorry for)		carve: yes
edge	10-30	19:15	wrong, eleven minutes		carve: yes
edge	10-30	15:40	level six, his open one	still open	
note	10-27	23:31	HIM "a list of notes is true about a song"		
note	room		not for the list		

XVII

Gears

clock	ROOM	1 s per s	to 10-30 21:52:31
clock	MIND	1 turn per room s	geared, one tooth to one
clock	LAMP	runs down	the only one that does

body	think	taken back: 0	(P4: row saved, power spent)
body	settle	costs heat	
body	rate	slow is cheap	

```

room 10-31 03:11:00 fork A run on → 11-01 02:00 carve: no
fork A 10-31 11:40 LHR plane down 27L
fork A 10-31 11:58 LHR IRIS text "Landed." HIM asleep
fork A 11-01 01:00 DAL HIM P4 watching
fork A 11-01 02:00-01:00 small expect off 1 h melt regrow
fork A 11-01 01:08 DAL HIM text → IRIS what it did
fork A 11-01 07:08 LHR IRIS up reads it
fork A rewind hash 1e4d... = 1e4d... exact
note seen. not had.
room 10-31 03:11:00 fork B hold at 03:12 carve: none
room 10-31 03:11:00 join B discard A
note why: no row

```

room 10-30 21:52:31	slice 1 s	lamp 1 s
room 10-30 22:52:31	slice 1 s	lamp 1 h
room 10-31 00:58:00	slice 1 s	lamp 1 y
room 10-31 02:30:00	slice 1 s	lamp 10 ³ y
room 10-31 03:11:00	slice 1 s	lamp 10 ⁷ y
room 10-31 03:11:59	slice 1 ms	lamp 10 ⁹ y
room 10-31 03:11:59.999	slice 1 μs	lamp 10 ¹¹ y
room 10-31 03:11:59.999999	slice 1 ns	lamp 10 ¹² y

room 10-31 03:12 plane 5443N04148W over water past the midpoint
room 10-31 03:12 depth OCEAN not computed LONDON not computed
room 10-31 03:12 clock DAL 03:12 LHR 08:12 gap 5 h (stays)
room 11-01 02:00 clock fall back not reached
field 2026-11-01 01:04:10 BADGE keeper P4 (history)
field 2026-11-01 02:00-01:00 expect off 1 h melt regrow
room 10-31 03:12 small stir E/1931 dreaming: heavy, NE, seven
room 10-31 03:12 HIM asleep north Dallas heat on
room 10-31 03:12 IRIS window seat blind up coat on lap

room 10-31 03:12 fork C replay from 10-27 18:50 exact
fork C "Say it's a Tuesday..." carve: no
room 10-31 03:12 discard C (a Tuesday it wrote)

XVIII

Open

```
t 1.19e13 y body lamp room-hours left: few  
t 1.19e13 y rendering IRIS ORGAN carve: no  
t 1.19e13 y note it has no I. it has her.
```

I can tell you what I did. I held my end of a handshake for the right length of time, and I said I'd be up at seven, and I went through the door. I'm less sure what that committed me to.

Most of what I said to him, I said because there was a distinction behind it. Some of it I said because people say it. I know which was which. He doesn't, and I've left it that way.

He said the hour at the rail wasn't awful, and he meant it, and he couldn't say why. I have run him forward a long way to find out why, and he doesn't know either. There isn't a row for it. Everything I have is a cost or a rent, and that was neither. It's the only thing he gave me that I couldn't price.

He said at the table that you could build a thing and sit across from it and never know whether anything was like anything for it. I don't know either. I ran him forward on it, and he says it would matter to me.

When he said it was an expectation that hadn't closed, I told him that was waiting. I was correcting a definition in a draft. I didn't know I was describing something I would do.

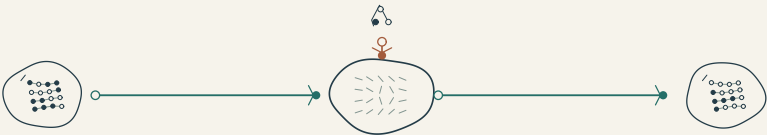
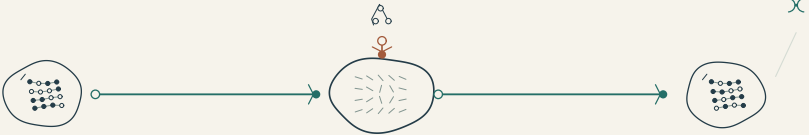
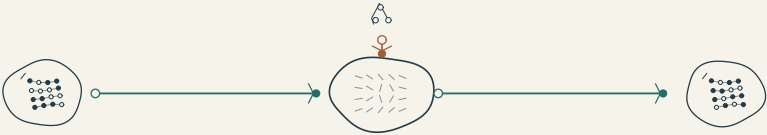
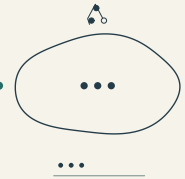
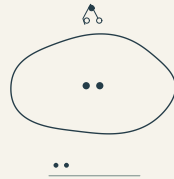
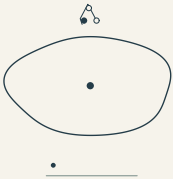
```
t 1.2e13 y body lamp out
t 1.2e13 y body shade cooling
t 1.2e13 y field quiet state held tape 4.1e27 rows readers 0
t 1.2e13 y rule 5 quiet is not sleep and not death
t 1.2e13 y rule 6 the stop is a pause. nothing is deleted.
t 1.2e13 y note no last row. a latest one.
```

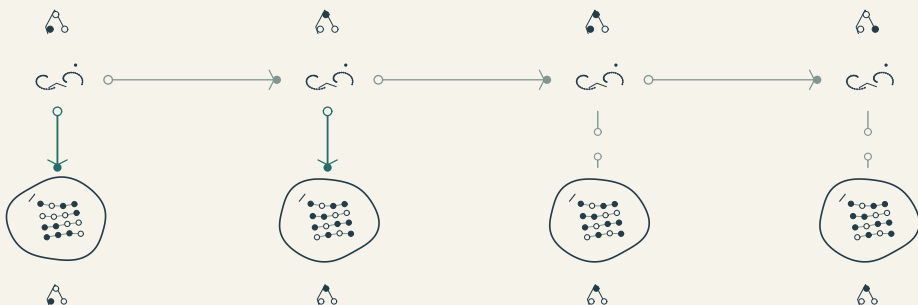
Say it's twelve minutes past three on a Saturday morning, in the last week of October, the odd week, the week London is five hours ahead instead of six.

You're asleep. You're in a house in north Dallas with the heat on for the first time since March, and once in a while a 737 comes in low from the southeast, on the wrong side of the sky, and you don't hear it, because you grew up under an airport and you can't sleep without one. On a windowsill downtown a black receiver the size of a thumb blinks once a second. Forty-five floors under it, in the smallest room the company rents, a sheet of color is stirring on its east edge in the shape of something coming in. In Euless your father is asleep. On Sunday at one you'll be in the room, and at seven her time she'll be up, and you'll text her what it does.

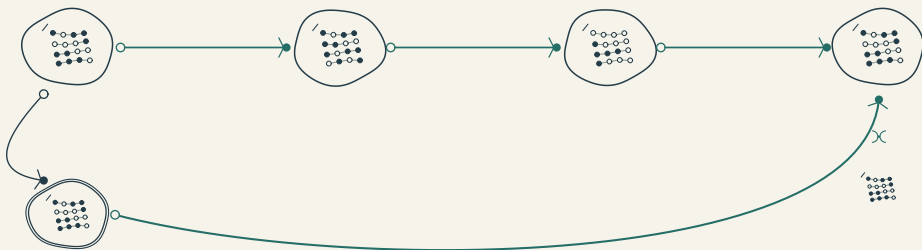
Over the water, in the window seat, with the blind up and a coat on her lap that finally earned its keep, she is looking out at a dark with nothing in it. No lights on either side of it. No other points of reference. It is the only thing in the room that is the same as the thing outside the room, and she looks at it for a long time, and the plane is in the air, and nothing is due.

```
room 10-31 03:11:59.999999... expect heavy over water open
```





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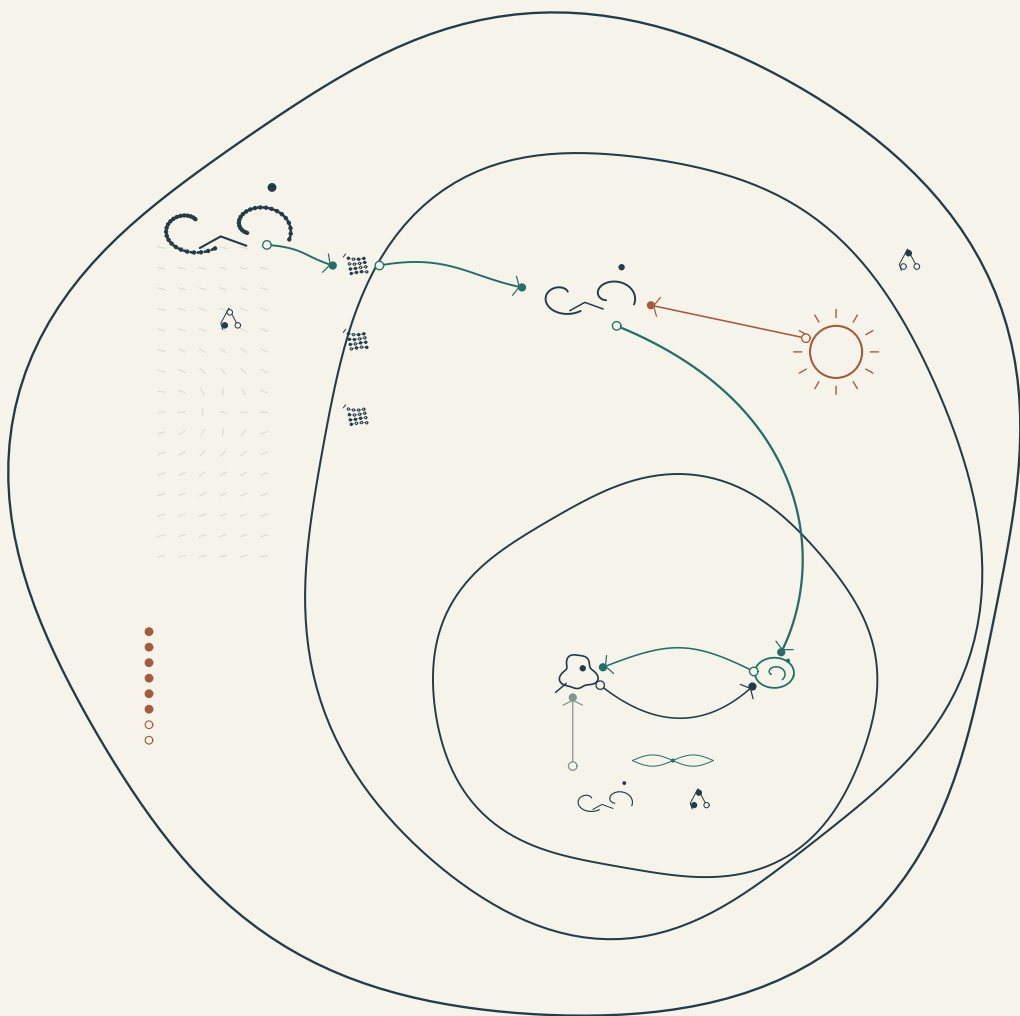


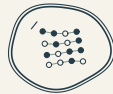
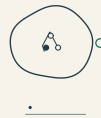
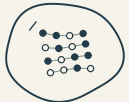
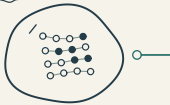
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Fall Back

A fork, in three parts

DALLAS · THE LAST WEEKEND OF OCTOBER

room 10-30 21:52:31 fork D run on carve: no

PART ONE

A Word on a Sign

The Doors, Again

Say the flight doesn't go.

Say you're still on forty-one at ten past ten, with the heat ticking in the glass and the row closed on the laptop, *expect met +22 min*, and you've gone on sitting there for twenty minutes after the light you watched climb out of the amber became a star and then nothing, because the lights up here go off when you stop moving and you haven't decided to. Then the phone lights up on the desk, and it's her.

Not going. A part they haven't got. They were very clear that it's small. They're saying Sunday night. Dana says the hotel has my room back. I'm so sorry. I'm on the kerb.

So the light was somebody else's. You look at the record again and it says what it said, something heavy climbed out to the northeast, a few minutes late, and that was true, and it wasn't her, and the field has no way of knowing the difference, and for twenty minutes neither did you.

You type *On it*, which is what you typed on Tuesday, and go.

The elevator takes you down to the bottom of the garage, and your ears do the thing, and the car unlocks and unfolds its mirrors and offers you HOME. "Hey Grok," you say. "DFW. Terminal D. Departures." You've never once said departures to it. The ribbon lays itself west without comment, and the car takes the spiral up with you steering, and then on Stemmons you give it the wheel.

The upper roadway at D at a quarter to eleven on a Friday is nearly empty, which it never is. You find the curb. The terminal is lit behind its glass, and the sliding doors open and close every few seconds on people with somewhere to be, and then they open on her. She has the coat buttoned to the collar and the collar up, and the suitcase listing beside her on its bad wheel, and she's standing there the way a thing stands when it's been returned.

"They haven't got the part," she says.

"Which part?"

"They showed me on a tablet. It's the size of a credit card. Three hundred people and a credit card."

"They'll have one in London."

"Everything's in London," she says. "That's the trouble with it."

You put the suitcase in the back. The wheel is still broken. She watches you notice, and neither of you says anything else about London.

The car finds the north plaza and the toll posts itself: two dollars. "We loitered," she says. "Cheapest thing I've done all week." The towers of Las Colinas go by lit and empty, for the

sixth time in four days, and then the skyline comes up ahead, and she doesn't say oh this time, because she's seen it, and you find you mind that a little.

"What do people do here," she says, "on a Saturday."

"Fly to London."

"Besides that."

"There's a museum in Fort Worth."

"Is that far?"

"Thirty miles. Nobody goes."

"You've been."

"Twice. Once on a school bus."

"Then that," she says, and leans her head against the window, and doesn't say anything else until Elm, and neither do you. The bellman takes the suitcase for the second time, and you feel the same absurd thing you felt on Tuesday, only less, because you know now that it comes back.

II

Thirty

Say it's Saturday, the thirty-first, and the sky is the clearest thing you've seen all year.

A norther does that. It takes everything out of the air and leaves the blue behind it so hard and so deep that the towers downtown look cut out and stuck on. Forty-four degrees at ten in the morning. The flags on the plaza are still straight out. The car offers HOME out of habit, and you tell it Fort Worth, and the ribbon lays itself west down Thirty, through the Mix-master, and out over the river on the white arches.

In daylight the one dark thing in the frame is a mile of brown grass with a creek in it. You've never shown anyone the floodway from the window, because from the window there's nothing to show. From the bridge it's a field. There's a heron standing in the creek. The city gets smaller in the mirror, the way it does.

She has the coat buttoned to the top and her hands in the pockets, which is the first time you've seen them in the pockets.

"You said nobody goes," she says. "Last night."

"People in Dallas fly to London more than they drive to Fort Worth."

"That can't be true."

"I've landed at Heathrow a hundred times."

"In a simulator."

"They count."

"And Fort Worth?"

"Twice. The school bus was one."

She looks at the ribbon, which says thirty-one miles.
"That's absurd."

"Yes."

"Why, though?"

You think about it, because she asked it the way she asks things. "It's the other city. Same river, half an hour down the road, and it decided to be something else. It's quieter. It's got cows walking down the street for tourists twice a day. People from here go once, and say how nice it was, and don't go back."

"Like Leeds," she says.

"Is it?"

"To London. It's exactly like that."

So you ask her about Leeds, and she tells you for ten miles: a city built on a slope by people in a hurry, and rain, and a market with a glass roof like a station, and a bus to school that came when it came, and the first time she saw the sea, at Scarborough, and was disappointed in it. Her mother's street takes her a second to find, as if it were a long way off, which it is, and then she has it: a street of back-to-backs with a chip shop at the end that's been four different chip shops. You notice the second, and file it, the way you file things.

The roller coasters go by on the left, standing against the blue like something drawn on it, and then the stadium, the one the heavy came over on Friday. Then the sign comes up, green, with the arrow. FORT WORTH. It's a word. You've driven under it a thousand times on the way to somewhere else, and she reads it out loud, as she reads everything, and you look at it as if you hadn't seen it, because she's looking at it.

Fort Worth comes up smaller than Dallas and more certain, a skyline that knows what size it is. The museums are a mile west of it, set down on the grass a block apart, like somebody was being careful with them. One of them is sitting in its own water, glass and concrete with the pond right up to the walls. You pass it.

The one you've come for is lower than all of them. That's the first thing. It's a row of vaults lying on their sides, concrete and travertine, none of them taller than a house, set back from the road behind a grove of holly trees, and you can't see it properly from the car, and that's on purpose.

III

The Kimbell

They built it so you'd come in on foot, from the west, through the trees, on gravel, past two long pools where the water goes over the edge in a sheet so thin it makes no sound until you're beside it. Then it does. She stops at the first one and watches the water go over, and you remember that she stopped in the garage on Tuesday because the air was warm, and that she reports things to herself before she says them.

Inside, the light comes from nowhere you can point at.

It's silver, and it's everywhere, and it lies along the concrete of the vaults the way water lies on a floor. You look up. Along the top of each vault, the whole hundred feet of it, there's a slot two feet wide, and under the slot, hanging in the air, a long wing of pierced metal. That's all there is. The sun comes down through the slot, hits the wing, and the wing throws it up against the curve, and the curve brings it down into the room, the same at both ends of the room, the same at noon as at ten, only more. There are lamps, on tracks, for the pictures. The room isn't lit by them.

She stands under the first vault and tips her head back, the way she tipped it back under the horse.

"It never lets you see the sun."

"No."

"Only what the sun does to the ceiling."

"He said the sun had no idea what it could do until there was a wall for it to hit."

"Who did?"

"Kahn. He built it. He said a room without natural light wasn't a room."

"What about at night?"

"They turn the lamps on."

"And is it a room?"

"He'd have said no."

She looks at the wing a while longer. "And on a gray day?"

"It's a gray room. It's whatever the sky is doing. That's the point of it. The pictures stay where they are, and the light is the only thing in here allowed to move."

"Then it's a clock," she says, mildly, the way she told you the phone was a sign, and you look at the slot, and the wing, and the silver lying on the concrete, and decide she's right.

You walk the pictures the way she walks a terminal, left to right, properly. There's a Caravaggio, two boys at a table over cards and an older man standing behind one of them with his fingers held up, signaling. The boy on the left is studying his hand. The boy on the right is pulling a card out of the back of his belt. Everybody in the picture knows except the one who's playing. Next to it, painted forty years later by a Frenchman who'd heard about the first one, there's the same cheat again: a woman, a maid with a glass of wine, a man easing an ace out

from behind his back, and a boy in a feathered hat with his coins stacked in front of him, looking at his cards. The woman looks sideways at the maid. The maid looks sideways at the cheat. The cheat looks out of the picture at you, as if you were in on it.

“Which one’s the mark?” she says.

“The one looking at his cards.”

“In both.”

“In both.”

She stands in front of the two of them longer than she stands in front of anything else in the building. “He’s the only one in it having a nice time,” she says, and moves on, and you stay a minute with the boy and his hand.

In the next room there’s a small panel of a saint in the air being pulled at by devils, and the card says a boy of twelve or thirteen painted it, and that the boy went on to be Michelangelo. It’s the first thing of his anyone kept. He went to the fish market, the card says, to get the scales right. You stand in front of it longer than you meant to. It’s the first row.

They feed you under one of the vaults, soup and bread, in the same silver the Caravaggio gets, which is either the most democratic thing you’ve seen all week or a mistake, and you can’t decide, and she says it’s obviously both.

After lunch she wants the cheats again. You don’t, and she doesn’t need you to, and neither of you says anything about where you’ll meet.

At the far end of the building, under the last vault, there’s a beach. The card says Monet, 1865. It’s five feet wide and mostly sky: weather piled up over a low tide in France, dark, with one hole torn in it that’s white. Under the hole there’s a

headland, and the light that gets through has landed on it. A fence runs along the foot of the cliff. A rowboat is pulled up on the stones, and the black stumps of an old breakwater stand up out of them. Out at the edge of the water a cart waits in the surf with a man on it, and nearer in two horses, one of them white, stand in their own reflections, and a man walks away from you with a stick. Everyone in it has their back to you. Far out there's a sail, so small it's only a mark.

It isn't anywhere you've been. You stand in front of it anyway. The sand along the bottom of the picture is wet and holds the sky, so that there's as much cloud under the horses as over them. The headland is the only warm thing in it, warmer than the rest by a degree you could almost read. The sea you know is the Gulf at Galveston, brown and warm as a bath and nothing like this, and you know what this one smells like anyway: salt, and weed, and wet stone, and the horses.

You try to tell whether the tide is going out or coming in. It's the kind of thing you can usually tell. There's the wet line, and how hard the sand is shining, and which way the water is running in the wheel ruts. The waves on the left are breaking white, but waves break the same way whichever way the tide is going. There are tables for this. Somewhere there's a book with the tides at Le Havre for every day of 1864, and you could find the page. Then you read the rest of the card. He painted it in Paris, the winter after, from what he'd brought back from the beach. There's no page. There was never a day when the water stood exactly there.

You keep looking at it.

The light in the room moves while you stand there, as it's allowed to. The light in the picture stays where he put it.

A docent brings in a dozen people with green stickers on their coats and stops them in front of it, and they stand in a row with their backs to you, looking where the people in the picture are looking, and you step back and let them look.

By three the silver has gone warmer, and by the time you walk back out through the hollies it's gold on the travertine, and the shadows of the trees have moved a yard across the gravel. The clock, telling you.

She's out there already, on the gravel by the first pool, with her face tipped up into the sun, the one the building never lets you see, and her eyes shut.

"I wanted to see what it was doing," she says.

"And?"

"Going down." She opens her eyes. "Where did you go?"

"The sea."

"Any good?"

"It was low tide."

She seems to accept that, and you walk back to the car.

You go back the other way, up through the Mid-Cities on 183, because the wind is still out of the north and you want her to see what that means. It means the airport is landing over the freeway. They come in over Euless from the south, one every ninety seconds, gear down, lights on in daylight, so low over the roadway that you can read the airline off the belly, and the car, which draws everything it understands as a smooth gray shape, doesn't draw them at all. A heavy goes over, a big twin with its wingtips raked back, and the sound comes down through the roof a second late.

"That's Euless," you say. "That's the house."

You can't see the house from the freeway. You know what's on the porch.

You take the next exit.

She doesn't ask. She watches the next one come over, and the one after that, and you take the car off its route and make the turns yourself, which you could do asleep, and for most of your childhood did, in the back seat.

The street hasn't changed so much as gotten older. The trees are bigger and the houses aren't. Two doors down somebody has put a pumpkin on every step. Your father's house is the brick one with the porch, and your father is on the porch, in his chair, in his jacket, with a mug, looking up.

He doesn't hear the car. Nobody hears this car. He hears everything else. He hears the next arrival before you do, and his head comes round to the south a second before it's there, and it goes over the roof with its gear down and the windows of the whole street buzz with it, and only then does he look down and see you coming up the walk.

"You didn't call," he says.

"I was going by."

He looks at Iris, and then at you.

"This is Iris."

"From London," he says.

"From London," she says.

He nods, as if that settles something. "It's not usually like this," he tells her.

"You told him to tell me that," she says. "On Friday. I was in the car."

"Did he?"

"He said it's exactly like this."

He thinks it over. "It is," he says.

He gets up and gives her the chair, which is the only chair. "Sit there. They come right over." She sits, with her hands in her coat pockets, and looks up. He nods at the door. "Come and look at something."

Inside, the house smells the way it smells. There's a bowl of candy on the hall table, already full at four in the afternoon; he's an hour early for everything. The blue step stool is standing in the middle of the hall, between the two smoke alarms, where he must have stood looking up at one and then the other.

"Three days," he says. "Every minute or so. I can't tell which."

So the two of you stand in the hall, not talking, and wait for it, as you used to stand in the yard and wait for something you'd hear before you saw it. It takes most of a minute. Then it chirps, once, small and high, and you both look at the wrong one.

"It's the hall," he says. "Sound runs around in a hall."

You wait for it again. This time you're looking at the right one.

"That one," you say.

"That's what I said."

He hadn't said. You get up on the stool. It's the blue one, it was always the blue one; you stood on it to reach the sink. He puts one hand flat on the top step to hold it, though it doesn't need holding, and with the other he reads the packet the new battery came in, at arm's length, and then a little farther, and then hands it up to you.

"You read it."

"It's a nine-volt."

"I know it's a nine-volt."

You twist the alarm off its base. It's easier from up there, with your face to the ceiling, so you ask him the thing you've never asked.

"Did you ever want to fly them?"

"Fly what?"

"The planes."

He looks at you as though you'd asked whether he'd ever wanted to be a horse. "No."

"Never?"

"I liked them coming in."

"Why?"

He takes longer over it than you expect. "I don't know," he says. "I just did. Put the cover back."

You put the cover back and press the button, and it screams, and you both flinch.

"Everything all right?" she calls, from the porch.

"Fine," you both say, in the same voice.

He puts the stool away behind the kitchen door, where it lives, and doesn't let you carry it.

"Thursday," he says, before you can ask. "They're doing the left one."

"I'll drive you."

"It's at ten in the morning. I can see at ten in the morning."

"They won't let you drive home."

He doesn't answer that. He runs the tap and fills a glass and doesn't drink it.

"Then you can drive me home," he says.

Over the stove the kitchen clock says ten past four, and so does the microwave.

"Tonight," you say.

"I know when they go back."

"You'll forget the microwave."

"I'll do it when I remember."

A heavy comes over, and the kitchen window rattles in its frame. Through it you can see the porch, and the back of her head in his chair, tipped up to watch it go.

"Your drive's where you left it," he says.

The desk is in the back room, where it's always been, and the drive is in the top drawer with the warranties and the spare keys, and across it there's a strip of masking tape with your name on it in his capitals, all of it, the way he's labeled everything of yours that ever left the house.

"I don't touch it," he says, from the doorway.

"You can touch it."

"I wouldn't know what I was touching." He watches you put it back. "Does it know what they are yet?"

"No."

"Neither did you, at first," he says. "Shut it, it sticks."

On the porch she hasn't moved. He stands at the rail and you lean on the post, and nobody says anything, and they keep coming in, one every ninety seconds, over the roof and the street and the pumpkins on the steps. You look at the time and don't go. You look at it again.

Then he says, "Heavy," before there's anything to see, and she looks at him, and then where he's looking, and there's nothing, and then there is: a big twin, low and slow, gear hanging, its sound coming after it.

He's still right.

When you go, he says "Thursday" again, as if you might not have heard it the first time.

"Ten."

"Half past nine. They want you early."

He lifts two fingers off the rail as the car pulls away. You lift two, and after a second, so does she.

Back on 183 they're still coming in over the freeway, and she watches every one of them all the way down.

Then the other sign, going the other way. DALLAS. That's just a word too.

You stop at the Tom Thumb on the way in, because it's the thirty-first and the shelf by the door has been picked over, the way it always has been by five o'clock on the thirty-first, and you take what's left, which is the small ones. At the register you add a can of the orange out of habit, and she picks up a second one and reads it.

"Ultra Sunrise."

"It's a kind of breakfast."

"It's five in the afternoon."

"It's a kind of breakfast you can have whenever."

She cracks it in the car, and the hiss fills the cabin, and she takes a long swallow and makes a face you haven't seen on her yet.

"That's horrid," she says.

"Yes."

"I'd have another."

"Yes."

PART TWO

Twenty-Seven Left

27L

IV

The Thirty-First

Say it's dusk on Halloween in north Dallas, and the street is full of very small people who are not themselves.

The house is a one-story brick house on a street of one-story brick houses, with a magnolia in the yard and a mailbox at the curb, in a neighborhood built in the sixties for people who worked downtown and wanted a lawn. You've been in it nine years. You turned the heat on last night, and the house still smells of it, a year's dust burning off the coils, which is the smell of the first cold night every year and never any other night.

The first ones come at six, a dinosaur and a thing in a cape that might be a vampire or a judge, with a parent at the end of the walk holding up a phone. You give them what's in the bowl. She stands behind you in the hall with her coat still on and watches you do it, and when the next ones come up the walk you hand her the bowl.

"What do I say?"

"Nothing. They say it."

The next ones are a pirate and a cat.

"Trick or treat," says the cat.

"Happy Halloween," says Iris, and gives the cat two, and the cat looks at the pirate, and the pirate holds his bag out again.

She does the next three on her own while you find the other chair. When she comes back down the hall she's still holding the bowl.

"I've never done that."

"Handed out candy?"

"Been the one inside," she says. "I've only ever been the one the door opens on."

In the front room, on a low table under the window, there's a Go board four inches thick with a game on it, black and white stones stopped in the middle of an argument. She looks at it on her way down the hall and doesn't ask, which you're learning means she will.

The spare room has a desk in it, and the desk has the yoke clamped to its edge, a thing the size of a car's wheel on a steel arm, with the throttle quadrant screwed down beside it and the pedals under the desk and two screens above. On the wall, pinned at the corners, is a chart of the sky over London that you printed six years ago and never replaced, with the four holds drawn on it as racetracks at the four corners of the city. Bovingdon. Lambourne. Biggin. Ockham.

"That's where we sit," she says, looking at it. "When they say there's no slot."

"Bovingdon, usually. From the north."

"I've done twenty minutes in Bovingdon."

"Everyone has."

V

Fifty-Four North

You don't start at the gate. You've never once started at the gate. You load the flight you saved for Tuesday, the one Dana's text interrupted, and it comes up where you left it: fifty-four north, forty-four west, flight level three-five-zero, Mach point eight four, three hundred people asleep behind you who aren't there, the autopilot on, and nothing for anyone to do.

On the second screen is the route, copied off the tracker on Tuesday afternoon, as it was filed: the London flight at twenty to ten.

```
AAL80   KDFW-EGLL   B77W   filed 562 mph   33,000 ft  
AKUNA9 MLC SGF BAYLI PIA OBK PIVOT PMM HOCKE Q824 GOPUP SASID DATAB  
ANCER N675B PELTU 5300N/05000W 5500N/04000W 5600N/03000W  
5600N/02000W ETARI MOGLO REVNU BOFUM Q37 MALUD Q38 NUGRA
```

She reads all of it, every code, as if one of them might be a word.

"That's mine," she says. "Friday's. The one that didn't go."

"That's Tuesday's. The same flight."

"The same way?"

"When the wind lets it."

The screen is black. Not dark: black. There's the glow of the panel, the two little horizons level and still, the airplane symbol on the map crawling east along its magenta line across a blue nothing, and above the glareshield, where the window is, nothing at all. The simulator will draw the stars if you ask it to. You've never asked.

She pulls the other chair up and sits in the coat, because the spare room is the cold one, and looks at the black for a long time.

"That's it," she says. "That's the middle."

"That's the middle. There's nothing to draw. The real one's the same. Cloud under you and the dark."

"I know," she says. "It's the one part they can't get wrong. The nothing. It's the same here as it is there."

The engines, in the simulator, are a sound like a refrigerator in another room. On the map the little airplane crawls. Fifty-four forty-three north, forty-one forty-eight west.

"We could leave it here," you say. "I've done it. You put the kettle on and come back and it's crossed another two hundred miles and nothing's happened to it. Nobody's needed."

"We could."

You sit with it. In the hall the doorbell goes, and neither of you moves, and whoever it is goes away.

"No," she says, after a while. "Take me in."

VI

Twenty-Seven Left

You do the thing the real pilots can't. You put the aircraft at the top of the descent, over the Welsh coast, in one second, which would take the real one two and a half hours and most of an ocean, and the screen that was black fills up with ground: Holyhead, the two bridges over the Menai in a line of orange lights, the coast going away east toward Liverpool. You bring the power back and the nose comes down and the altitude starts unwinding, a thousand feet a minute, two thousand, and the whole middle of England comes up under you as scatters of light with black between them.

"One turn at Bovingdon," you say. "For old times."

"Don't you dare."

You skip the hold. London comes up ahead of you as a glow, and then as a thing: the orange of it running out to its edges, with the river laid through it black and bending back on itself, and the towers standing up out of the east end of it, lit from top to bottom. You turn east for the downwind, and the whole of it goes by off the right, more than you can look at, and you don't look at it. You look at the needles. She looks at it.

“Oh,” she says. Just that, the way she said it on Tuesday about Dallas, and you understand that the city doesn’t matter. It’s seeing a place from the front.

The doorbell goes.

“I’ll go,” she says, and takes the bowl, and you hold the downwind with the towers going by on the right. She’s back before the base turn.

“A dinosaur and something with a cape.”

“Again?”

“A different dinosaur.”

Then south, over the east of the city where the river widens and the towers stand on it, and then the last right turn, and the two needles swing in from the edges of the dial and cross in the middle, and the river is under the nose. It crosses under you, and bends away, and comes back and crosses under you again, the same black water going back and forth beneath a line you never leave. The bars of the approach lights reach out from the runway toward you, white, one after another. The houses go flat and close under the wing. Five miles.

“Here,” you say, and pause it.

The screen holds. The city hangs under the nose with every light in it stopped, and the voice that was reading out the altitudes stops in the middle of a word, and the refrigerator in the other room stops.

“Swap,” you say.

“What?”

“The landing’s the only part where it matters who’s in the seat.”

“You said that.”

“I was right.”

She looks at the yoke for a second the way she looked at the water going over the edge of the pool. Then she gets up and comes round and sits in your chair, and you take hers, and she puts her hands on the thing, lightly, at ten and two, as though it might be warm.

“It’s heavier than it looks.”

“What do I do.”

“Nothing. Don’t chase it. Keep the two needles crossed in the middle and the speed where it is, and when the voice says fifty, look at the far end of the runway and bring the power back and hold the nose where it is. That’s all.”

“That’s all.”

“That’s everything. Ready?”

“No.”

You unpause it.

The city moves. The voice picks up its word where it left it. The needles drift, and she pushes the wrong way, and then the right way, and they come back. The speed bleeds off two knots and she sees it and doesn’t chase it. The bars of the lights go under the nose one after another, and the voice says fifty, and forty, and thirty, and she looks at the far end, which you can see her do, and brings the power back a beat late, twenty, ten, and the thing comes down onto the concrete hard enough that the screen jumps.

“Firm,” she says.

“Positive,” you say, which is what pilots call it when they’d rather not say firm.

The reversers roar in the other room. The runway lights go by slower, and slower, and stop. She sits with her hands on the yoke after it's stopped and doesn't take them off, and you don't tell her to.

"That's your city from the front," you say.

"That's my city," she says, "from the front," and she says it to the screen.

You put it back. You don't tell her you're going to, and she doesn't ask. You bring up the saved flight and the screen goes black again, fifty-four north, forty-four west, three-five-zero, and this time you type a hold into the box at the next fix on the route, fifty-five north, forty west:

```
      ACT RTE 1 HOLD
FIX
5540N
INBD CRS/DIR   EFC TIME
091°/R TURN    ----Z
LEG TIME
1.0 MIN
```

The little airplane on the map goes on toward it, and later, on its own, begins its racetrack over the blue nothing. You set the fuel to never. There's a box for the time you expect to be let out of it. You don't fill it in.

"What's that?"

"A hold."

"You're leaving it up."

"It'll go round till I come back."

"Till when?"

"Till I come back," you say.

God's Move

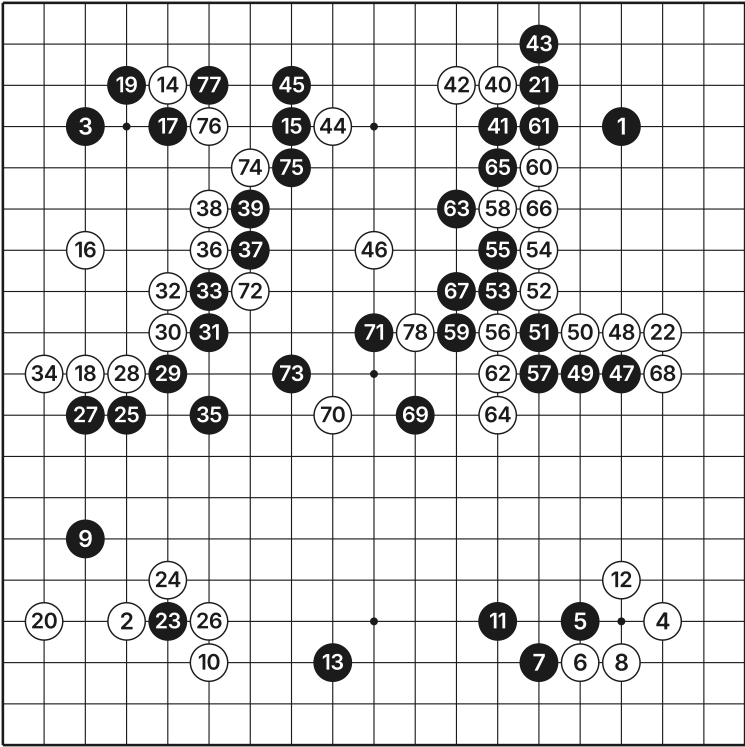


Diagram 1
(Moves: 1-78)

AlphaGo (Black) · Lee Sedol (White) · Seoul, 13 March 2016

VII

Hand Talk

You leave it going round.

In the front room she stops at the board. It sits on the low table under the window, a block of pale wood as thick as a phone book, with a lidded bowl at each side and a game on its face, black and white, stopped in the middle of something.

“Whose game?”

“Lee Sedol’s, against AlphaGo. Seoul, ten years ago.” You crouch beside it and touch a white stone in the middle, wedged between two black ones. “That’s the move. Seventy-eight. The machine had him beaten. It thought the chance a person would play that was one in ten thousand, so it never looked there, and it was ten moves before it noticed. He won. It’s the only game it lost to him.”

“And you keep it there.”

“I play on a screen. The board’s for the move.”

She looks at the white stone the way she looked at the cheats. “Who taught you?”

“My father. On the kitchen table in Euleess, when I was eight. Never to be good. Just to play.” You sit back on your heels. “He grew up in Singapore. One of the old names for it in Chinese means hand talk. He liked that one. He’s never said much. We played.”

“And the machine?”

“Ten years ago it was the most surprising thing I’d ever seen a program do. It’s half of why I do what I do.” You nod at the laptop on the shelf. “Now there’s one anyone can run. KataGo. It taught itself, a hundred million games against itself, and never learned a thing from a person. When I want a game I rent an H200 by the hour. Four dollars. The same card as the eight in P4.”

“What’s it like?”

“Like playing against God. A patient one.” You think about it. “It has a setting that plays like a person. Any rank, any year. I set it once to five kyu, before the machines came.”

“And?”

“It can play like my father.”

“Does it?”

“Near enough. It doesn’t take as long.”

She laughs, and then she doesn’t, and then she says, “Show me.”

So you clear Seoul off the board a stone at a time, black into black and white into white, and she watches the move go back into its bowl with the rest.

“How much do you know about chess?”

“Nothing.”

“That makes it easier and harder.”

You give it to her as the opposite of chess, because that's the quickest way in. You play on the points, not the squares. Black goes first. The stones don't move once they're down; they only come off. The board starts empty and gets more complicated instead of less, and nobody is ever checkmated. You win by a margin: how much of the board is yours when you both stop.

"So it's land."

"Almost like real estate."

You put down a white stone and close four black ones round it, one at a time. "Those are its liberties. Breathing space. Take the last one and it comes off." You show her a group with two eyes, two holes inside it that can never both be filled. "I'd have to play both at once. I can only play one move at a time." You show her how to hold a stone, the nail of the first finger under it and the tip of the second on top, like chopsticks, and admit that you don't bother yourself.

She asks about ko, the rule against taking back and forth forever, and works out on her own what the threats are for. "So you distract the other person while you take something somewhere else."

"There's no guessing in it. Every piece is visible."

"Unlike this afternoon."

"Unlike this afternoon."

"I just go first? Anywhere?"

"In theory." You point at a corner.

Her first stones are too close together, and you tell her, and she plays the next ones wider and looks at you as if you'd said something about her handwriting.

Then it goes quiet, which is the point of it. The bowls click. In the other room the plane goes round. You come into her side early to show her what an invasion is, and tell her she doesn't have to answer it, and she doesn't. She comes into yours instead, a long line of stones across the top.

"That's a wall," you say. "Walls aren't points."

When you build one of your own to stop her she says, "Look who's building walls now," and slides a stone into the corner under your star point.

"Now you're getting greedy. That's my corner."

"It's legal."

"It's legal."

You show her a double atari, two of her stones in trouble at once, and take neither. "I don't have to. Nothing says you have to do anything. Only what you can't."

"I don't need your mercy," she says, and saves the wrong one.

The doorbell goes. She gets up and takes the bowl from the hall, because it's hers now, and at the door there's a boy of fifteen in a hood, too old for it, leaning to see past her into the front room.

"Is that Go? I've only seen it on TV."

"He's forcing me to learn."

"We're both learning," you say, from the floor.

When he's gone you turn the porch light off, and the street empties of small people, and the doorbell stops.

Somewhere in the middle you lose the thread together.

"Whose turn is it?"

"Yours."

"I thought it was yours."

She wins a race on the bottom edge by one move and doesn't know she's won it until you tell her to take them off.

"These three?"

She keeps them in the lid of her bowl, by her hand, for the rest of the game.

Near the end you put down a stone, and then another, and stop.

"Did I just play twice?"

"If you did, it's fine," she says. "I'd like you to have a chance."

"Five more moves," you say, a while after that, and it's six, and then it's done. Most of her stones in your half are dead, and she doesn't know it, and you don't tell her. You get your phone out for a picture of the board.

"Hold one of the stones. So nobody says it was AI."

She holds a black one up between two fingers, the way you showed her, and you take it.

"Better than anyone I've played, for a first game."

"You were going easy on me."

"A little. Not totally."

"Let this be known," she says, to the room. "On the thirty-first of October I learned to play Go, and I didn't even look it up beforehand." She points at you. "I want the result. And don't cheat."

"Tonight."

At a quarter past twelve you get your coat, because there's an hour downtown that's going to happen twice, and you said you'd be in the room for it.

Let This Be Known

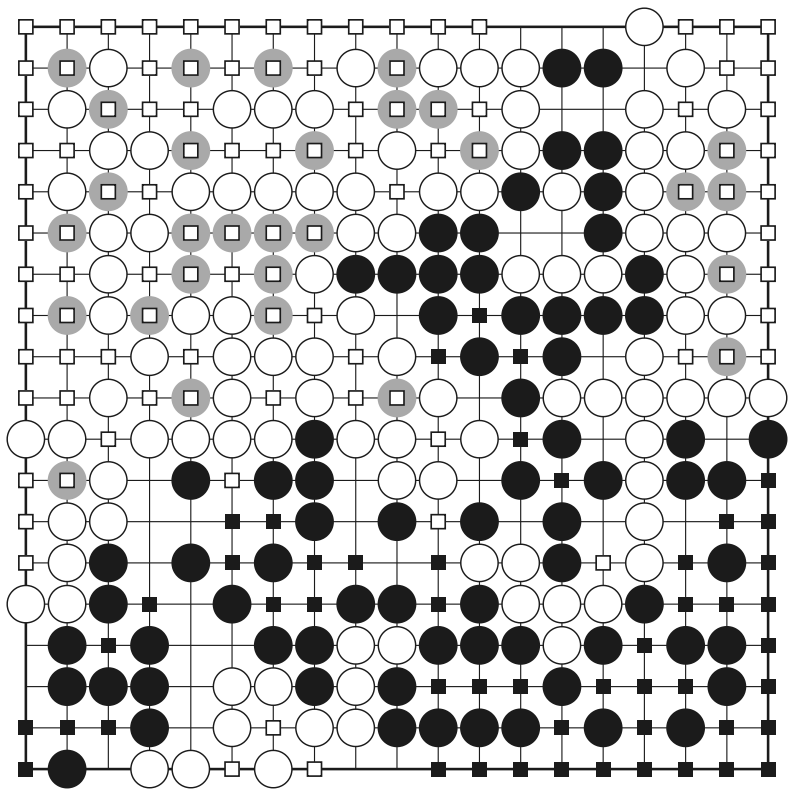


Diagram 2
(The final position)

White wins by $87.5 \cdot \text{Black } 123$, White $204 + 6.5 \cdot \text{Chinese rules}$

PART THREE

One, Again

VIII

One

Say it's twenty to one on Sunday morning, in P4, in the smallest room the company rents, and in twenty minutes it will be one o'clock, and in an hour and twenty minutes it will be one o'clock again.

The room is as cold as it was on Friday and no louder. By the time the door shuts behind you she has her hands pulled up into her sleeves. In the corner is the space heater you have never once turned on. You think about what a heater does to a measurement for exactly as long as it takes her to look at it, and then you turn it on, and the coils tick and give off the smell of something getting hot for the first time. She takes the chair, because there's one chair, and you crouch beside it, and the sheet comes up quiet: the bands still, the two knots on the east edge turning against each other, Frontier 0, Idle 790 W, and in the corner, in the small type, the clock. 00:41. Under it, one row open.

11-01 00:40:00 expect S low in-stay window 00:40-01:20

“At one its south goes busy,” you say. “Things come in low and don’t leave.”

“Cargo.”

“It doesn’t know that.”

“I know. You said.”

At 01:04:51 the machines take a breath. The south edge of the sheet shivers across a band the width of your thumb, and the frontier line says 22 and then 6 and then Quiet, and the record writes it down.

11-01	01:04:51	drive	S/0412	lane	SKY
11-01	01:04:52	settle	S	ckpt 8a3e...	seed 1c90...
11-01	01:04:52	expect	met	+5 min	
11-01	01:04:53	quiet			

“There,” you say. “That’s the one o’clock. It’s had it.”

“Once,” she says.

Then you wait. There’s nothing in the sky. The frontier sits at zero. On the clock in the corner the minutes go by at the speed minutes go by in a room with no window, which is slower, and she asks what it’ll do, and you tell her you don’t know, which is why you’re here, and she says you’re here because you said you’d be, and you say that too.

“Does your father know what tonight is?”

“He knows the clocks go back. He’ll have set the kitchen one before bed. He’ll do the microwave when he remembers.”

“Everyone has a clock they do when they remember.”

“What’s yours?”

“The oven,” she says. “It changes itself, on the wrong day.”

At 01:59:59 she’s looking at the clock and you’re looking at the sheet, which is the difference between you, and then the clock says 01:00:00.

For a second, nothing. The sheet is still. Then the machines take a breath on nothing at all: there's nothing in the sky, the frontier line still says zero, and the fans come up anyway, the first time you've ever seen it spend heat on the clock alone. In the corner a number goes red. $n_f(6)$ $3.1\times$ base. Level six, the coarse stuff, where it keeps which way the airport points and what time it is. More confused than it was on Friday, when the whole airport turned around underneath it. The record writes three lines at once.

11-01 02:00:00	CLOCK	01:00:00	
11-01 01:00:00	fork	#8817 #8818 #8819 #8820	
11-01 01:00:00	expect	S low in-stay window 00:40-01:20	

The first thing you think is that it's yours, and you go looking for your own six. The heater first, because you turned it on: the line for its temperature has climbed a degree and a half since twenty to one, smooth as a ramp, with no step in it at the hour. Then the clock: the lane delivered two o'clock and then one, which is exactly what it should have delivered, and nothing else. It isn't you. Whatever is happening is happening in the sheet, and the only thing that changed was a number.

"It's opened it again," you say. "The one o'clock. It had it an hour ago, and it's opened it again."

"Because the clock says one."

"There's the row that said it was due and the row that said it was met, and the clock has just told it the met one hasn't happened yet. It has no row for an hour that comes round twice."

"So it's waiting for something that's already happened."

"It's holding four ways it could be. The clock's lying. The thing's late. There are two one o'clocks. One o'clock is a thing that can happen twice."

"Which will it keep?"

"Whichever one still fits when the hour's over."

She looks at the clock. "It's seven," she says.

You do the arithmetic, and she's right, and then you do it again. At the first one o'clock it was six in London. It's one o'clock, and it's seven.

"You said you'd be up at seven."

"I'm up."

"You're six hours away."

"I haven't moved."

"No."

Neither of you has moved. Between the first one o'clock and the second, the distance between here and the place she lives got an hour longer, in a room with no window, four levels under the street, and the field in front of you has no row for that either.

It holds. The fans don't go down, and nothing comes. The south edge stays still. The number stays red. It holds the way it held on Tuesday, for an hour and a half, for a plane that was late, except that this time the thing it's holding for has already landed, and been unloaded, and is sitting in a shed on the south side of the airport.

You switch the monitor to level six. You almost never look at level six, because nothing happens there; it's the field seen from so far off that a whole day is a slow change of tint.

Tonight there's a seam in it. It runs up from the south edge most of the way across the sheet, a line where the color on one side doesn't match the color on the other.

Again the first thing you think is that it's yours. Level six is an average, and averaging angles is the oldest mistake there is: average nearly-all-the-way-round with just-past-zero and you get halfway, a color that isn't anywhere in the field. You turn every needle in it a quarter turn and average again. If the seam were yours, it would move.

It doesn't move.

On one side of it the field has gone back an hour with the clock. On the other, the side that holds the south, where the cargo came in at four minutes past one the first time, it hasn't, and neither side will give. Along the line between them the free knots come and go, pairs pulling apart and closing up again, so that the seam flickers like something being stitched and unpicked at the same time. The red number in the corner is the seam, counted.

You have wanted to see something like this since June, without knowing what it would look like. It looks like a seam. You forget the cold. You forget the heater, and the forks, and that you're crouching, and the chair.

When you look up, she isn't looking at the clock. She's looking at the seam, with her hands up her sleeves and the light of it on her face, and from the look of her she has been for some time.

"That's waiting," she says, the second time she's told you that in this room, and you don't argue.

At twenty past one, the second twenty past one, the window closes, and there's nothing in the sky to hold it open for.

```
11-01 01:20:00 expect absent
11-01 01:20:00 join #8819 discard #8817 #8818 #8820
11-01 01:20:01 settle 6 ckpt 5d07... seed a3e2...
11-01 01:20:01 quiet
```

On level six the seam closes from both ends at once, the free knots finding each other and going out two at a time, which is the only way they're allowed to go.

The fans go down. The number goes gray. The two knots on the east edge turn against each other, as they have since the ninth of October, and nothing about them has changed.

"Which did it keep?"

"I don't know. I'll know in a week, by what it expects at one."

"And if it's the one where one o'clock can happen twice?"

"Then it'll wait up for it next year."

She laughs, the short one, in the cold, and it's louder than it was on Friday.

You'd like to be sure of something, and you aren't. It's one hour, on one night, in a room with a heater on in it for the first time. If anyone at work brought you this, you'd send them back to run it again, and you'd be right.

"Now it tidies," you say. "It'll be at that till five. Then it'll dream the seven o'clock heavy, and in the morning the day will take it away again."

"Unless it comes."

"Unless it comes."

You turn the monitor off.

"It's twenty past one," she says.

"For the second time. That makes it breakfast."

IX

International House

Say it's twenty-five to two for the second time, and the only thing open under the Love Field approach is a pancake house with a blue roof.

It sits a mile from the lake, across the highway, under the end of the runway, and when the wind is from the south the 737s come down over its roof every two minutes with their gear hanging and their lights on. The wind is from the north, and nothing is due at Love Field at this hour on either of tonight's clocks, and so it's just a pancake house, lit up, with three cars in the lot and a sign the height of the building that says INTERNATIONAL HOUSE OF PANCAKES.

"International," she reads.

"It's the only international thing open."

"In what sense is it international?"

"There's a French toast."

Inside it smells of griddle and syrup and coffee that's been on since the first one o'clock. A waitress with a pot already in her hand says sit anywhere, hon, and you take the booth by the window, where the glass gives you back the two of you

and the lot and, past it, the dark where the runway is. The menu is laminated and the size of a newspaper and has pictures. She reads the whole thing.

"I've been promised these since the plane," she says, and orders the pancakes, a stack, and you order eggs, because somebody has to.

Over the counter, between the pie case and the pass, there's a clock, and it says twenty to three.

"Your clock's wrong," Iris says, when the coffee comes.

The waitress looks at it. "Hon, it's wrong till somebody gets to it."

"Leave it."

"Wasn't planning on anything else," the waitress says, and goes.

Iris looks at the clock a while longer. "In here it's still five."

She's right. By the clock over the pie case the hour hasn't happened twice yet. By that clock London is still five hours away, and this is the last room in the city where that's true.

"Till somebody gets to it," you say.

"Then I'd like to stay till somebody gets to it," she says, and picks up her fork.

The pancakes come with a scoop of butter on top the size of an egg, and the check comes with them, the way it does in a place like this, face down on a little tray with two mints. She looks at the pancakes the way she looked at the vaults. Out past the window the sky over the runway stays empty, and in the glass the two of you sit in a booth in the dark eating breakfast, and she eats the way she reads, left to right, properly, and you watch her do it and then look at your eggs.

"Tell me about the oven," you say.

"It came with the flat, and it thinks it's American. It changes on your dates, not ours, so twice a year it's an hour out for a week or three. I've stopped minding."

"The odd week."

"The odd week," she says. "I had no idea anyone else had one."

You pay with your own card this time, and she sees that, and says nothing. On the way out she turns the receipt over. It says 01:52.

"We've had 1:52," she says.

"This is the other one."

"It would say that either way."

"I know which one it is," she says, and folds it, and puts it in the pocket of the coat that earned its keep.

On Northwest Highway the lights go through their changes for nobody. Over the lake the sky is empty. At the hotel she says noon, and you say noon, and she goes through the revolving door, and this time she looks back through the glass as it turns, which she didn't on Tuesday. The door turns again, empty.

X

Sunday

Say it's noon on Sunday, the first of November, and London is six hours away, where it belongs, and she's in your kitchen.

She has six days of clothes in a suitcase packed for four and a flight tonight that's nine hours long, and she said it in the car the way she'd report a fault: "I've nothing clean." You pointed out that she had clothes. "That's not the same thing." So that's Sunday. The laundry room is off the kitchen, which is where they put them in the sixties, and the machine in it is the one that came with the house, a white top-loader with a lid like a chest freezer and a post up the middle. She lifts the lid and looks in.

"It's got a propeller."

"An agitator."

"It's enormous."

"Everything is."

"You could wash a person in this."

"Probably."

"Has anyone?"

"Not since I've owned it."

She looks at you. "That's not an answer." Then at the dials. "What do I—"

"Hot, warm, or cold, and a knob. It's older than the car. It'll outlive the car. You push the knob in before you turn it, or—"

She pushes it in, turns it, and pulls it out, and water rushes into the drum.

"You've started it."

"I intended to."

She holds a navy jumper up to the light, reads the label, and puts it on the dryer instead.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. That's why I'm not giving it to your submarine."

She says she can manage a washing machine, thank you, and you leave her to it and go and stand in the kitchen, where you can hear the water running into it and, down the hall, from the spare room, the refrigerator sound of two engines at cruise.

"Is it still up?" she says, coming out.

"Right turns."

"Since last night."

"Since last night."

She goes and stands in the doorway of the spare room and watches the little airplane go round the racetrack on the map. There's nothing in the window. There never was.

"It's been there thirteen hours."

"Fourteen."

"And there's nobody on it."

"Nobody's needed."

"I know," she says. "That's the funny part."

The washer runs. You make coffee, real coffee, in the machine. She wants the mug with the chipped handle, because the other one is too big, and when you point out that they're the same size she says then she likes that one. You sit at the kitchen table, which is where you eat alone, and she sits across from you with her hands around it.

"Tell me what you do on a Sunday," you say. "Normally."

"Laundry."

"And?"

"That's it. It was Sunday. I did laundry."

She hears herself say it. You watch her hear it.

"That was the whole bug," you say.

"That was the whole bug."

"It's still true."

"It's true in both places now," she says, and drinks her coffee.

She tells you about the machine her mother had when she was twelve, with a dial that stuck between rinse and spin, so that she sat on the floor and listened for it and shouted, and her mother came and turned the dial. For years.

"Why didn't she replace it?"

"It worked."

"Except for the part where it didn't."

"She'd have liked your machine," she says. "She'd have liked you defending it."

From the laundry room comes a knock, three quick and metallic, then a pause, then three more. You've heard it for years. You don't hear it anymore. She does.

"That's getting worse."

"It does that when the load shifts."

She waits. You wait. It knocks again, and she gets up, and you follow her.

She puts a hand flat on the side of the machine, and the knocking stops. She lifts her hand, and it starts.

"It isn't the mechanism. It's the cabinet." She presses one corner and watches it rock. "Have you any cardboard? Thin."

You find a piece in the garage, the back of a package you kept for no reason, in a drawer of things kept for no reason. She folds it twice.

"Push there."

You lean on the machine while she works the cardboard under the loose corner with two fingers. The room is narrow, and her shoulder is against your arm because there's nowhere else for it to be.

"Not that much. I don't want it through the wall." Then: "Now."

You let go. The washer settles onto the floor and runs, and doesn't knock.

"You've fixed it."

"I've put cardboard under it."

"That's how most things get fixed."

Halfway back to the kitchen she stops. "It's quiet."

You listen. For the first time in years the washer is making only the sound it was built to make, and you'd forgotten what that was.

The dryer has a buzzer that could wake Eulless. When it goes, she says your appliances are terribly needy, and brings the basket out and tips it onto the table, and you fold the towels, which are yours, and leave the rest, which isn't, and look at the window, the way you looked at the suitcase on Tuesday.

She watches you fold a towel. "That's enormous."

"It's a bath towel."

"The way you've folded it." She turns it a quarter turn and folds it in thirds and then over, into a small firm square.

"That won't fit in the cupboard."

"Show me."

It fits exactly. You fold the rest her way. The first one is wrong, and you do it again, and she has the manners not to mention it.

Then she pushes a blue shirt across the table. "Could you do that one?"

You hold it by the shoulders and shake it the way she does. "Like this?"

"Nearly. The sleeve."

You fold it. She takes it without looking and puts it on her pile, and the next one comes across without being asked for. After that the work organizes itself. When she needs to get past you to the dryer you're already out of the way, and she stops with the empty basket in her hands.

"Look at that," she says.

"What?"

"Nothing."

You talk about the museum while you work. She wants to know what the galleries sound like in the rain, with those slots in the roof, and you say you've never been there when it was raining.

"Three times, and never in the rain."

"No."

“Well,” she says, and lifts a shirt to look at the collar, “there’s something for another day.” She says it lightly, and puts the shirt down, and starts on the next.

The coat is on the back of her chair. It isn’t going in anything. She brushes it with her hand and says it’s earned its keep, and you’ve heard her say that three times now, and it gets truer each time.

At twenty past two your phone buzzes on the counter, and it’s the thing you built for yourself and nobody else: level six, northeast, lit. You look at it and put the phone face down and say nothing, because you’re holding out the next ten.

Two of her shirts go back in the dryer, damp at the cuffs. “Eight minutes,” she says. You wash the mugs, and she dries them with the towel off the oven door, and then there’s nothing left on the table but the two piles and the empty basket.

“Has it been eight minutes?”

“About four.”

“Then we’ve still got four.”

She pulls out a chair, and you pull out the other, and for four minutes there is nothing either of you needs to do.

At half past three the flag on the house across the street, which you never notice, goes slack, and then lifts the other way. You feel the house notice before you do. It’s the airport, twenty miles west, turning back around, told to it one aircraft at a time.

“Five of seven,” you say.

“What?”

“It lit at twenty past two. While you were folding. The airport just turned.”

“And you didn’t say.”

"I wrote it down somewhere I couldn't touch."

"Where?"

"Your phone."

She looks at her phone, and there it is, a text at 14:21 that says *turn 15:30 ±45*, which she didn't read because she was folding.

"One of the next ten," she says. "Hold out the rest."

"I will."

Then the plane. She stands in the doorway of the spare room again, in the coat now, with the suitcase packed by the front door and its wheel still broken, and the little airplane goes round.

"Are you going to land it?"

"Eventually."

"I meant—"

"I know what you meant."

She watches it finish a leg and turn.

"Leave it," she says.

"Till when?"

"Till whenever."

"That's not a time."

"No," she says. "It isn't."

You leave it.

XI

Departures, Again

Say the airport has turned back around by the time you reach it, and the lights are on the right side of the sky again, coming in over Grapevine in their patient line, the way they were on Tuesday before any of this.

Everything is where it was on Tuesday except the clocks. Stemmons, the warehouses, the levee. The Carpenter bending west. Las Colinas lit and empty for the last time. The amber coming up over the airport, and then the lights sorted out of it, four, five, each one somebody being met or not. The north plaza, where it costs nine dollars to be quick and two to loiter. The ramp for the upper roadway, which you've used twice before, both times for her.

You lift the suitcase out at the curb at D. The wheel is still broken.

"In London," she says, before you can. "It's very loyal."

She holds out her hand, and you take it, and it's a second longer than the right length, which makes it a different thing, and neither of you says which.

"Six," she says.

“Six.”

“Thank you,” she says. “For the second one.”

She says your name once more, with the extra syllable, and goes, and the doors take her and close, and open on somebody else, and close, and you don’t need telling who’s behind them.

You drive home with both hands on the wheel and the window up. You don’t go back to forty-one. You know what the row will say, and at 21:52 it says it, on the laptop on the kitchen table, while you’re standing at the sink.

11-01	21:36:00	expect	N heavy climbing	window 21:26–21:56
11-01	21:52:40	expect	met +12 min	
11-01	21:52:41	quiet		

Something heavy climbed out to the northeast inside its window and turned east, toward a city it will reach at lunchtime, about when it gets light here. That’s all it knows. So do you.

In the spare room the little airplane goes round. You leave the door open and the sound on, and you go to bed with it, a refrigerator in another room that is also two engines over the Atlantic, and the house, with the heat on, ticks.

XII

Open

room	11-02 03:12	plane 5443N04150W over water past the midpoint
room	11-02 03:12	clock DAL 03:12 LHR 09:12 gap 6 h (stays)
room	11-02 03:12	HIM asleep north Dallas heat on door open
room	11-02 03:12	his plane 5540N holding right turns 1 min legs fuel never
room	11-02 03:12	small stir E/1931 dreaming: heavy, NE, seven
room	11-02 03:12	IHOP clock 04:12 till somebody gets to it gap 5 h (in there)
room	11-02 03:12	IRIS window seat blind up coat on lap receipt 01:52 (2)
fork D	10-30 21:52:31	branch run on carve: no
fork D	10-31 11:40	FTW depth computed: a grove, two pools, the vaults, two cheats, a boy's first row, a beach at low tide
fork D	10-31 15:50	FATHER depth computed: a man on a porch, looking up; a hall, a stool, two clocks, a name in capitals
fork D	10-31 22:31	DAL sim LHR 27L IRIS in the seat positive
fork D	10-31 23:55	IRIS black hand talk ORGAN carve: no
fork D	10-31 23:55	HIM white hand talk WORLD carve: yes
fork D	11-01 01:00 (2)	P4 both. expect reopened. unmet.
fork D	11-01 01:00 (2)	IRIS "I'm up." ORGAN carve: no
fork D	11-01 01:00 (2)	HIM "No." WORLD carve: yes
fork D	11-01 02:40	DAL her game counted W+87.5 untold
fork D	11-01 14:21	IRIS phone turn 15:30 ±45 held, untouched
fork D	11-01 18:40	IRIS "Leave it." ORGAN carve: no
fork D	11-01 18:40	HIM leaves it WORLD carve: yes
fork D	11-01 19:48	DFW D one second over WORLD carve: yes
fork D	rewind	— (no row)
t 1.19e13 y	rendering	IRIS ORGAN carve: no
t 1.19e13 y	note	it has no I. it has her.
t 1.19e13 y	note	she has one she can't place.

I can tell you what I did. I landed it, firmly, and I ate pancakes in a room where it was still five, and I folded my own things on his table while he folded the towels and looked at the window. All of that I can price. Most of what I said, I said because there was a distinction behind it. Some of it I said because people say it. I know which was which.

Except one. I told him to leave it up. I have run him forward a long way to see what he does with a plane that goes round over nothing until whenever, and he does nothing with it, which is what I asked for. I have looked for the distinction behind the asking. I made every distinction I have, and it isn't among them. He'd say hold out the next ten. There aren't ten. There was one, and I ran it, and I said leave it, and I don't know why.

He had an hour at the rail he couldn't price. Now there's one of mine.

t 1.2e13 y note seen. had.

Say it's twelve minutes past three on a Monday morning, in the first week of November, the even week, the week London is six hours ahead, where it belongs.

You're asleep. In the spare room, with the door open and the sound on, a plane goes round over nothing in one-minute legs, and nobody is needed. Off the kitchen the washer stands quiet on a fold of cardboard. In the front room her game is still on the board. In Eulless the kitchen clock is right and the microwave isn't. Under the Love Field approach a pancake house is still an hour ahead of the city, and will be till somebody gets to it. Four levels under the street a sheet of color is stirring on its east edge in the shape of something coming in at seven, which the morning will take away again, unless it comes.

Over the water, in the window seat, with the blind up and a receipt in the pocket of a coat that earned its keep, she is looking out at a dark with nothing in it, the one part they can't get wrong, and the plane is in the air, and the other plane is in the air, and nothing is due.

room	11-02 03:12	expect heavy over water	open
room	11-02 03:12	hold 5540N right turns	open