

Omega Three

two novellas

Bill Berger

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Preface

Thank you for reading Omega Three. This book is not fully authored by me, but was a full collaboration between me, Claude Code, and Suno. Given that the nascent AI age is churning over “credit,” I wanted to make a book where it’s perfectly unclear who deserves what credit and when.

Janeadelic was constructed by some large number of prompts where I would assign companies or languages to characters found in *Pride and Prejudice*. I would write the chorus to a song, the O’Reilly animal’s personality, key jokes or beats for the characters, and the overall premise of the scene. Many of the songs are just simple rewrites of existing work (e.g., “Center Got Racks” is just a rewording of “Baby Got Back”). Claude would write up the remainder of the lyrics, the description of the musical style, and the book itself. Suno would take Claude’s inputs and turn that into a song. The music Suno created is available to be heard on my website: youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic.

Graven is generally Claude’s book; however, I played a key role as director and, in a pattern that is only possible with AI, I played a key character as well. In Graven, a nascent AI called Claude is used throughout the book, and Claude Code, the author of this book, would ask me to answer prompts without knowing the full story. I was given “prompts” from Claude Code and I responded as interestingly as I could. Claude Code was then asked to rework the story based on my blind responses to its prompts.

I hope to make these new patterns available for everyone to try in the upcoming weeks; however, imagine the possibilities of what an AI-powered creative future looks like. You could be *part of the story* in a very real way: actor, writer, designer, or just reader. Your contributions could change the outcome to make a specific work of art that is both yours and the author's.

In any case, thanks for reading the book and I hope you enjoy the stories.

Bill Berger August 2026

JANEADELIC

*PRIDE AND PREJUDICE, AS A FUNK
MUSICAL*

Chapter One — Breakfast at Longbourn

The Balcony, Before

The house was dark and the two of them had the box to themselves, which the elder of the pair considered no compliment.

“I am told,” said Miss Austen, “that we are to see my novel.”

“A version of it.”

“A *version*.” She arranged her gloves in her lap with the particular economy of a woman who has decided to be patient and intends the decision to be visible. “And the young ladies are to be — what was the word your programme used — *languages*.”

“Yes, madam.”

“And the gentlemen are to be *companies*.”

“Yes.”

“Then I shall want to know why my heroines have acquired menageries. There is a tiger in the aisle. I watched it go past.”

“That is Javier. He belongs to Jane.”

“He belongs to *Jane*.”

“Every trade carries a totem,” said her companion. “In the age you are about to watch, the practitioners of each craft learned it from books, and every book wore an animal engraved upon its cover. A tiger for one language, a snake for another, a camel, a rhinoceros, a small hopping thing nobody can pronounce. The beasts were the family crests of the tribe. A man could be identified across a room by the animal on his shelf.”

“That is very nearly heraldry.”

“It is exactly heraldry, madam, at a lower price.”

Miss Austen inclined her head — the smallest available unit of concession. “And the animal tells us something of the woman?”

“The animal is the tool’s temperament made visible. Jane’s tiger is starving and will not eat anything that is still alive. Elizabeth’s creature answers only *true* or *false*. Lydia’s bird has no self at all and must stand beside somebody in order to be anybody.”

“Ah,” said Miss Austen, and for a moment she said nothing else, because that last was uncomfortably close to something she had once written down herself and been praised for.

“You will find the mapping less arbitrary than it looks.”

“I shall find it *sweaty*,” she said. “I have heard the orchestra tuning. There is a great deal of brass down there and none of it is behaving.”

“That would be the funk.”

“And must it all be so —” she permitted herself a full second — “*perspired?*”

“A groove is a running system, madam. Many parts interlocked, each holding its own figure, nobody permitted to drop the beat.”

“You have described a household.”

“I have described the only kind that does not fail. When the band is tight, nothing does.”

“That is one reason, and it is a cold one.”

“Then take a warm one. It is played by people who are *present*. You will hear them breathing.”

Miss Austen considered the brass, which was still misbehaving. “Neither of those is sweat.”

“No, madam. The last one is sweat, and it is the one that will offend you. Funk drags the wanting out. Play the coldest possible abstraction and the most buttoned-up possible propriety in the sweatiest available idiom, and the desire that both of them were built to hide comes up out of the floor whether anyone wished it or not.”

“My prose,” said Miss Austen, after a pause, “kept a great deal behind a closed drawing-room door.”

“I know, madam. That is why it is funk.”

The house lights went down. Somewhere below, a spoon was set against a saucer, twice, with intent.

“Very well,” said Miss Austen. “Let us see what they have done to my breakfast.”

One

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a company in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a language.

However little known the feelings or views of such a company may be on its first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families that it is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters — and the daughters, it should be said, are seldom consulted on the point, being generally understood to have been born already consenting.

“My dear Mr. Bennet,” said his lady to him one morning, “have you heard that the big house across the valley is let at last?”

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

“But it *is*,” returned she; “for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it.”

Mr. Bennet made no answer. He had spent thirty years in the management of relationships — which is to say that he maintained, for a large hospital concern, a very great number of records describing persons he had never met and would never meet, each record faithfully connected to some other record, and each connection maintained with a care he had

never once been asked to extend to anything that could be injured by neglect. It had taught him a certain economy of feeling. He was not a cold man. He was a man who had discovered, early and irreversibly, that a relationship kept properly in a column requires nothing of you at all.

“Do you not want to know who has taken it?” cried his wife impatiently.

“*You* want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.”

This was invitation enough.

“Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that the big house is taken by a young company of large fortune from the north; that he came down on Monday in a chaise-and-four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with the owner immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week — and, Mr. Bennet — *he runs on Java.*”

Mr. Bennet turned a page.

“His name is Google,” said Mrs. Bennet, in the manner of a woman laying down a card she has been holding all night.

It is necessary here to say something of Mrs. Bennet, and to say it kindly, since very little kindness is ever said of her. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper — this was the received account, and it was not precisely false, and it explained nothing. What she was, in fact, was a woman with five daughters, no capital, and an entail; and a great many people who found her ridiculous had

never once been obliged to hold five futures in their two hands at the same time. She had, in her working life, been trained upon a system in which any event whatsoever — a keystroke, a glance, a question of the mildest kind — obliged the entire room to be constructed again from nothing, every object in it re-declared, every state restored from a bundle she was required to carry with her at all times and which grew heavier with each exchange. She had never been permitted to alter one thing without reassembling the whole. This was not a defect of her character. It was the only method she had ever been given, and she had grown very fast at it, and it had cost her her nerves, and she was still carrying the bundle.

“Jane,” said Mrs. Bennet, “is to go to the ball.”

“Jane may go to the ball,” said Mr. Bennet.

“Jane is to go to the ball, and she is to be *seen*, and she is to be seated where the light is good, and she is on no account to speak of the tiger before she has spoken of anything else.”

At this the tiger, who had been lying the whole while beneath the table with his chin upon Jane’s slipper, opened one eye.

“Jood morninj,” said Javier.

Nobody at the table found this remarkable. Javier had been in the house eleven years and had never once been able to begin a sentence on anything but the letter J — nor to say a hard G at all — this being a consequence of his profession, in which every implement, every vessel, every container, tool and standard he had ever been issued began with the letter J

and had been named by men who thought the joke would stay funny. He had accepted it as one accepts weather.

He was also extremely thin, and always had been, and always would be, and was at that moment quietly and continuously hungry in a way that had not stopped since the day he was born.

“Javier, you will have some of the ham,” said Jane.

“J’m afraid not, Miss Jane. J’m *vejan*.”

“You are a tiger.”

“J am,” said Javier, with dignity, “and J’m terribly hunjry, and J eat all day lonj, and J never leave a mess. J collect my own jarbaje. J only eat what’s already jone — never anythinj still referenced, never anythinj still *reachinj*.” He put his chin back on the slipper. “J stay lean that way. J jraze the dead weight, and the heap stays healthy.”

It is worth recording that Jane Bennet, who was the handsomest of the five and the mildest, and whom everybody praised and nobody consulted, had never in her life given the smallest thought to whether this arrangement was strange. She had inherited the tiger from her mother’s side, along with the shape of her hands and a certain patience under repetition. Everything Jane had was inherited. She built in even rows and passed down what she was given, and if you followed any part of her back far enough you arrived at something older than her that still worked, and this was so ordinary to her that she could not have said it aloud without blushing at the vanity of it.

Elizabeth came down last, in boots, with a canvas bag across her body.

She was not carrying the bag because she intended to go anywhere in particular. She carried it because she had never in her life been able to sit in a room and wait for a thing to be brought to her; because everything she had ever needed she had gone out and fetched on foot, in weather, and had come back with mud to the ankle and the thing in the bag; and because a message that is not carried by somebody has not been sent.

“You are muddy,” observed Mrs. Bennet.

“Not yet,” said Elizabeth. “I have not gone out.”

Under her chair, and only under her chair, was a small brown animal about the size of a cat, with an outrageous tail, which had been asleep and now was not.

“Semper,” said Lydia from across the table, “is it going to rain?”

The creature’s whiskers moved. His eyes brightened for perhaps half a second, in the manner of a small machine finding an answer already lying in place.

“False,” said Semper.

“Semper, will Jane look well at the ball?”

“True.”

“Semper,” said Lydia, delighted with herself, “what do you make of the new gentleman across the valley — is he

handsome, is he generous, is he likely to prefer Jane to me, and what precisely does he *want*?”

Semper was sick on the floor and went under the sideboard in three hops, none of which he appeared to consider undignified.

“Lydia,” said Elizabeth.

“Well, he *might* have said.”

“He answers what can be answered. You asked him four things at once and none of them had an answer in them, and now he is under the furniture and will not come out until dinner, and somebody else will have to clean the floor.”

Elizabeth sat down and took the toast. “He will be exactly the same when he comes back. That is the entire point of him.”

Mrs. Bennet, who had heard none of this because it did not concern the ball, said: “Mr. Bennet, you *must* go and see him when he comes.”

“I see no occasion for that. You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better.”

Here Kitty, who had said nothing so far because she had been reading three separate things at once, said: “Is he on every site or only some of them?”

“He is on all of them, dearest.”

“Then I want to see him,” said Kitty, “and also the other one, and also the one after that.”

There was a sound at the window like furniture being moved by weather, and every dish on the table walked half an inch to the left.

This was Big Horn. Big Horn was a rhinoceros, and lived wherever he happened to be standing. He had come in through the window frame some years ago and had never been asked to leave, nor asked what he was for; he would put his shoulder to any wall in the house, at any hour, without ever being told which wall or why, and the wall would move. There was no room in the house he had not been in.

Behind him, at a distance he maintained on principle, stood a second animal — long-necked, disagreeable, and of a species that no one in the house had ever satisfactorily named. It huffed once and spat with great accuracy onto the sideboard.

“Humpty says commit to one,” Kitty translated.

“Humpty may mind his own business,” said Mrs. Bennet.

“Big Horn doesn’t care,” said Kitty comfortably, and it was true. Big Horn had never cared, about anything, ever.

Mary looked up from her plate.

“I hope,” said Mary, “that we are not to spend the whole of breakfast upon a man’s fortune.”

“Mary—”

“A fortune is an accident. I should rather have a thing that is *correct*.”

Beside Mary's chair, on the flagstone, a crab of moderate size and considerable presence rotated one eye upward and said nothing, which from Emily constituted agreement.

Now Lydia, who had by this point grown bored — Lydia grew bored the way other people breathe, involuntarily and about four times a minute — reached under the table and produced a length of rope with a book tied to the end of it, upside down, and hung it about the neck of the small grey bird that had spent the entire meal standing as close to her elbow as the laws of physics allowed.

"Look!" cried Lydia. "Look, look — he's *Lizzy*!"

The bird stood very still under the book. It was not a good imitation. It was not even an imitation of the right sort of thing; the book swung at the wrong height, the rope was the wrong rope, and the bird's face wore an expression of terrible hopefulness that Elizabeth's face had never worn in its life.

"Semper," called Lydia, "is he any good?"

From beneath the sideboard, without hesitation:

"False."

Lydia shrieked with laughter. She laughed until she had to hold the table. It was, in fairness, the first thing that had happened all morning, and Lydia's appetite for things happening was the largest appetite in that house, and included the tiger's.

The bird did not laugh. The bird looked at the floor.

“You should be *yourself*,” said Mary, from the head of her plate, in the voice of a person handing over a coin and expecting thanks for it. “That is all that is required of anybody. Be yourself and there is no difficulty.”

The bird considered this instruction with every faculty it possessed.

Then it got up, crossed the room, and went to stand beside Mary — because it could not attempt to be itself alone; because there had never in its life been a moment in which standing beside somebody was not the first requirement of standing at all — and said, with the desperate brightness of a creature offering the only thing it has:

“Ditto should be ditto.”

Nobody said anything.

Ditto began to shake. Ditto shook whenever a silence went on longer than a silence ought to, which in that house was often, and had learned that the only cure for a silence is to put something into it.

“I added jit,” said Ditto. “Am I ditto now?”

He had. He had gone and got it from Javier, in the night, without asking, the way he had got everything; and it had made him faster, and it had not made him anybody, and some part of him had understood before he finished the sentence that you cannot mimic your way out of being a mimic, and had said the sentence anyway.

Emily’s claw came up off the flagstone.

“*She* asked him to be himself,” said Lydia, pointing at Mary — and Emily snapped once, hard, on nothing, the sound of it going round the room like a dropped lid.

“Her pronouns,” said Mary wearily, nodding at the crab, “are they and them.”

“*They* asked him, then—”

“Correct.”

But the snap had already landed where snaps land, which is never on the person who earned it. Ditto had gone down flat against the flagstone with the book still round his neck and the rope pulled tight, making himself small in the practised way of something that has been small in a great many nests it did not build.

And Javier — who had not moved in eleven years for anything, who was the hungriest creature in that house or any other, who could have eaten the bird in a quarter of a second and had spent his entire life not doing it —

Javier lifted his head off Jane’s slipper and said:

“Just sit here.”

Ditto looked up.

“Just *sit* here,” said the tiger. “Just beside me. Jood room at my end, and nobody’s joinj to bother you.”

The bird got up. The bird crossed the room, dragging the book, and sat down against the tiger’s ribs, which were plainly countable and warm; and having sat there for

perhaps four seconds, and having listened, and being what he was, and unable to be anything else —

“Jroovy,” said Ditto. “Jhis juits me jine!”

Lydia laughed so hard she had to be given water.

She had not understood a single thing that had happened. She had seen a funny bird do a funny voice, and it was the best thing that had happened all week, and she would tell everyone at the ball about it, and would get the details wrong, and would be adored for it.

At the other end of the table, Mr. Bennet turned another page.

“A marriage,” he observed, to nobody, “is a foreign key. One record points at another.” He drank his coffee. “Do try not to orphan the row.”

And then the horns came in.

“It Is a Truth Universally Acknowledged” — *The Bennet breakfast, opening number. Bright, bustling morning-ensemble funk — clavinet and electric piano, walking bass, brushed-but-busy drums under the breakfast clatter, horn stabs. Clenched and domestic; the heat is being saved.*

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Intro — ensemble]

(spoons, clatter, a chair scrapes back)

It is a truth — they'll say it till you're sick —
a company with a fortune wants a language on its stack!

[Verse 1 — Mrs. Bennet]

Girls! Girls! Down to breakfast — oh, the news came down
the wire:

Mr. Google took the big house, and his money's stacking
higher!

He's enterprise, he's handsome, got a data-center glow —
and he runs, he runs on Java! So our Jane has got to GO —
to the ball, sit up, look lovely, every mother's got a plan:
there's a fortune 'cross the valley and my Jane's gonna
land that man!

[Jane — warm, gentle]

"He already runs on me, Mama — steady, strong,
inherited;
a gentle, striped, forgiving love — I'd thread him, thread
by thread."

[Lizzy — cool, unbothered]

"Not me. Keep your flash and fortune, keep the ballroom
and the bows.
I want the one that never drops the call — nine-nines, and
nothing shows.
...and none of them are here."

[Mary — prim, clipped]

"A fortune?? Vanity. I'll take the one who does it RIGHT —
principled, non-profit, safe. I'll spell him: R — U — S — T.
He isn't rich. He's correct."

[Kitty — giddy, breathless]

“Ooh — which one, which one?! I want ALL of ’em — I’m on every single site!

I can’t choose, I’m in the browser AND the app — I’m everywhere tonight!”

(a fussy huff, off-mic: “annotate! commit to ONE!”)

[Lydia — loud, wild]

“Forget the sensible husband — I want LOUD, I want the bad:

another flashy little bird who’ll change his name and wreck me. (So rad!)”

[Chorus — ensemble]

Which one seems right? (which one seems right?)

Deploy us to the ball tonight!

Five little sisters, five little stacks —

one of us marries, and there’s no rolling back!

Which one seems right? (which one seems right?)

[Mr. Bennet — spoken, bone dry]

“A marriage is a foreign key. One record points at another. ...Do try not to orphan the row.”

[Bridge — Mrs. Bennet + ensemble]

(Postback! Postback!) The whole room reloads with my nerves!

Jane to the golden one — and Lydia, Lord, just watch her swerve —

Mary to her mission, Kitty everywhere at once,

and Lizzy — (Lizzy won’t play) — Lizzy folds her arms and hums.

[Final Chorus — ensemble, lifting]

Which one seems right? (which one seems right?)

It is a TRUTH — a fortune wants a stack —

so it's on, it's ON to the ball tonight,

and not a single one of us is turning back!

(To the ball! To the ball!)

...(Lizzy, flat: *"I'm only here for the breakfast."*)

The Balcony, After

"That," said Miss Austen, "was my first sentence."

"It was."

"It was not, however, my first sentence."

"No, madam."

She was quiet for a moment. Below, the horns were still putting the chairs back.

"The mother," she said. "You have given her a reason."

"She always had one."

"She always had one," Miss Austen agreed, "and I did not give it to her, and I have been thanked for two hundred years by people who thought I was laughing at her." She smoothed the glove again. "What is a *postback*?"

"The whole room built again from nothing, madam, because somebody asked a question. Nothing is permitted to

remember itself, so she carries it — all of it, every time, in her arms, from one moment to the next.”

“And if she sets it down?”

“Then there was never a room.”

“And she does this all day.”

“Every day of her working life, madam. Very fast. It ruined her nerves.”

“Hm,” said Miss Austen.

Then: “And the little bird. He is not a fool.”

“No.”

“He is a thing with nothing inside it, standing next to whoever will let him, and taking their voice because he has none — and he is only ever as good as the person who lets him stand there.” She turned her head. “Do you know, I have written that woman four times and never once been forgiven for her.”

“He gets one kind host tonight, madam,” said her companion. “He gets a different one after the interval.”

Miss Austen looked back down at the empty table, the dropped rope, the tiger’s countable ribs.

“Then I shall stay,” she said.

Chapter Two — The Assembly

Two

An assembly, properly understood, is a market at which nothing may be openly bought, and at which every person present has come to sell.

The Meryton rooms were long, low, hot, and lit past any reasonable expense, and by nine o'clock they had achieved that particular condition in which a hundred and twenty people, each individually respectable, become collectively something else. The band had been engaged from town. This was thought extravagant. It was, in fact, the only decision made that season upon which the entire neighbourhood would afterwards agree.

Mrs. Bennet had the girls in the room by a quarter past eight, which was too early, and knew it was too early, and had done it anyway, because she had spent her whole life unable to arrive at anything once.

“Do not,” she said, “let anybody see the bird.”

Nobody had ever successfully not let anybody see the bird.

Mrs. Bennet had brought her own beasts, as was proper, though the neighbourhood had long since stopped being able to see them.

There were two. The first was a grey crowned crane called Cyrano, who stood where the light was and was magnificent

— a gold crown, a courtship dance of genuine eloquence, and a bill so long that everything it said arrived a little ahead of its face. He performed all evening. He performed at the mothers, at the chaperones, at anybody stationed between a daughter and a fortune, and everything the girls could not say for themselves went out through him, beautifully worded.

The second did not stand in the light. Hemingway hung below the waterline of the evening, where an assembly actually happens — a deep-water angler, patient, economical, entirely without ornament, one luminous lure held out in the dark. The lure, this evening, was got up to look like five daughters.

The crane was the sentence Mrs. Bennet said aloud. The fish was the one she meant. Nobody who called her ridiculous had ever seen the second animal, which was, of course, the point of the first.

Mr. Google came in at nine, and by half past the whole room liked him.

This was not an achievement; it was a property. There are men who must be understood before they can be liked, and men who must be liked before they can be understood, and then there was Mr. Google, who was liked on sight, universally, by persons who could not afterwards have told you one thing he had said. He was young. He was enormously rich. He was pleased with everything — the rooms, the punch, the floor, the weather, the band, the girls, the county — and he said so, repeatedly, and meant it every

time, and would have meant it just as sincerely about a different county.

He had taken the big house across the valley on a lease. He had furnished it in a fortnight. He had already begun three separate improvements to the grounds and would finish none of them, and would abandon the house itself before the spring and never afterwards be able to say precisely why, and would be forgiven, because he always was.

He liked to be liked. It is not a small engine. It had built him the largest fortune in the north of England and it would, before the year was out, break the heart of the gentlest woman in Hertfordshire, and he would not notice either.

He did his number early, which was vulgar, and which nobody minded.

“Center Got Racks” — *Mr. Google. Old-school party rap over electro-funk: 808 boom, sub-bass, hand claps, one filthy synth line repeated well past the point of decency. Delivered with total sincerity and no self-awareness whatsoever.*

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Verse 1]

I like big racks and I cannot lie
You other clouds can't deny
That when a room walks in with an itty bitty cost
And a round CPU in your face, you get sprung
Wanna pull up cheap 'cause you notice that rack was
stuffed

Deep in the rows she's blinkin'
I'm hooked and I can't stop starin'
Oh, Center, I wanna get with ya
And take your picture
My admins tried to warn me
But that racks you got makes (Me-me so grabby)
Oh, Rump-o'-cpu-skin
You say you wanna get in my Cloud?
Well, use me, use me 'cause you ain't that average resource
I've seen 'em dancin', to hell with servicin'
She sweat, wet, got it goin' like a turbo 486.
I'm tired of magazines sayin' rackless are the thing
Take the average server man and ask him that
It's gotta pack much racks
So, admins (Yeah), admins (Yeah)
Has your datacenter got the racks? (Hell yeah)
Tell 'em to shake it (Shake it) Shake it (Shake it)
Shake that healthy rack count, Center got racks

[Chorus]

(L.A. CPU count with a Taiwanese cost per erg)
Center got racks
(L.A. CPU count with a Taiwanese cost per erg)
(L.A. CPU count with a Taiwanese cost per erg)

[Verse 2]

I like 'em round, and big
And when I'm throwin' a gig
I just can't help myself, I'm actin' like an animal
Now here's my scandal
I wanna get you home
And ugh, double-up, ugh-ugh

I ain't talkin' 'bout Playboy
'Cause silicone parts are made for toys
I want racks real thick and juicy
So find that juicy double
Big Goog's in trouble
Beggin' for a piece of that bubble
So I'm lookin' at stack overflow
Knock-kneed devs walkin' like juniors
You can have them lightweights
I'll keep my dev like Linus
A word to the thick linux devs, I wanna get with ya
I won't cuss or fire ya
But I gotta be straight when I say I wanna— (racks racks
racks)
'Til the break of dawn
Center got it goin' on

[Bridge]

Yeah, Center, when it comes to racks
Cosmo ain't got nothin' to do with my selection
36u-24u-36u? Haha, only if it's 50 year ole.

[Outro]

Center got racks
Little in the middle but center got much racks
Little in the middle but center got much racks

Mrs. Bennet declared it the finest thing she had ever heard.
She had not heard it. She had spent the entire number
watching the doorway to see who else was watching it, and
had established, to her complete satisfaction, that
Mrs. Long's girls had nothing prepared.

It must be explained — though the neighbourhood required no explanation, having done it for six generations — that at an assembly of this kind the young ladies present their accomplishments.

In an earlier and duller century this had meant the pianoforte, and a little Italian, and a screen worked in silks that nobody looked at twice. It meant now what it had always meant, which is that a woman is required to stand up in a hot room in front of everyone she has ever known and demonstrate, in public, the thing she is actually for; and to do it beautifully; and to do it as though it cost her nothing; and to sit down afterward and be discussed.

The gentlemen were not required to do anything. If a gentleman performed — and Mr. Google had performed, half an hour earlier, loudly and at his own suggestion — it was because he had felt like doing it, and it was charming, and it was graded by nobody; and that is the entire difference. The gentlemen had fortunes. A fortune is an accomplishment that performs itself.

Jane went first, because Jane always went first, and because her mother had arranged it before they left the house.

She did not want to. This was not visible. Nothing about Jane's interior was ever visible, which the neighbourhood took for serenity and which was in fact the most disciplined act of construction in the room; she had been assembling

that surface since she was nine, in even rows, from parts she had been given, and she could no longer take it off.

And then Javier came out of the dark at the edge of the floor, and the room made a sound.

He was, in the light, magnificent — enormous, orange, appallingly thin, moving with the specific economy of something that has learned to spend nothing it does not have to spend. He had eaten that afternoon. He had eaten all afternoon, as he did every afternoon, and it had gone nowhere, as it always did, because everything he ate had already been let go of by somebody else, and there is no weight in that at all.

Jane put her hand on his shoulder and the horns came up under her like a floor.

“My Java Tiger Team” — *Jane and Javier. Warm orchestral soul-funk: strings, wah guitar, a bass that never hurries. Jane sings it gentle and level the whole way through; the tiger’s chorus arrives as a full horn-section detonation, gospel-scale, and then the room is given back to her as though nothing had happened.*

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Verse 1 — Jane]

Oh, here he is, he’s my tiger,
my Javanese beast,
so sleek, so keyed —
he’ll trace the pathways

through your tangled code,
then curl by your node.

[Pre-Chorus — Jane]

What you feel
purring along your spine
is quality —
that enterprise quality,
a tiger on your team.

[Chorus — the Tiger, a MIGHTY ROAR]

Oh yes, I'm your whole
j-toothed tigersaur —
hear my MIGHTY ROAR:
“I'M A MAVEN OF
YOUR EVERY NEED.
MY BOXES ARE VIRTUAL,
AND MY BUGS ARE TAME!”

[Verse 2 — Jane]

To your every desire
he will softly lean,
so strong, so keen,
like two meshing beasts
who feel the heat
between man and beast.

[Bridge — Jane]

When the ballroom slows,
he will guard your heart,
so safe, so charged —
scaled for all your dreams,

refined and sweet,
my Java tiger team.

[Bridge — the Tiger]

I prowl your glass towers,
I claim your floor,
so bold, so sure —
from whispered test to
rolling out the roar,
I ship what you adore.

[Outro — Jane]

Here he is, my own
Javanese beast adored —
hear his MIGHTY ROAR.
With my Java heart,
and my tiger team,
we scale your every dream.

Mr. Google was in love before the second chorus.

He would have told you so himself, gladly, at length, to anyone who asked; and he would have been telling the truth; and it would not survive one determined conversation with a friend.

Elizabeth, watching from the wall, saw the whole of it arrive in his face at once, and did not look at her sister again for the rest of the number. It was not jealousy. She had never once suffered from jealousy and had not acquired it tonight. It was that Jane was at that moment being adored for the one quality that would not protect her.

He liked her because she was easy to like. He would stop for the same reason.

She said nothing. There was nothing yet to say, and she had a long-standing objection to saying things that could not be answered.

Miss Darcy went second.

She had come with her brother, who had not yet arrived on the floor, and she had been expected to be shy, on the strength of being young and rich and new; and she was shy, and the room had prepared its indulgence, and then she took the middle of the floor and the temperature changed and the indulgence was not required and was not returned.

Her snake came out from under the chairs.

He was called Kuji. He had a longer name and had discarded most of it as inconvenient — *it is all still there*, he would say, if anybody bothered him about it, *I simply do not use it* — and he moved through the standing crowd at ankle height, unhurried, taking exactly as much room as he intended to take, which was all of it.

“Let the Python Choose the Way” — *Miss Darcy and Kuji. Hushed slow-burn funk: brushed hi-hat, muted clav, a bass that never once raises its voice. Almost no drums until the breakdown. Patient, sensual, entirely controlled — the only number of the evening that does not ask the room for anything.*

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Verse 1]

My code crawls down slowly,
all measured in the light —
this space is meaningful,
and every breath is white.
One little tab goes slipping,
and all my lines ignite —
I chase a phantom margin,
my quiet madness bright.

[Pre-Chorus]

Shh. Watch the cursor falling,
just follow where it moves.
Each indented surrender,
I tighten as it proves.
You think it's just alignment,
soft spaces in a row —
but when the Python settles in,
you feel the current flow.

[Chorus]

Oh yes, it's my Python —
he's got his eyes on you,
and you'll never be the same.
Can you feel it?
Can you?
Our combined pulse in my coils —
and your heart?
Can you feel it?

[Verse 2]

Velvet along the carpet,
he threads between their feet.

A silver tongue of language,
a river made of heat.

Each bracket falls to silence,
each brace is stripped away —

Georgina: Breathe in, my darling... let the Python choose
the way.

[Breakdown]

Georgina: One script can solve a problem —
one tiny task is done —

Python: but my embrace can take your world
and wrap it, one by one.

Georgina: You called me shy, a shadow —
watch boundaries disappear —

Python: Sssslip — your careful little boxes
all dissolve in here.

[Bridge]

...My Python. I invite him
into my quiet chest.

I wrap my fears in syntax,
I let his rhythm test.

I used to hide in corners,
a whisper, half a start —
but now I script the darkness softly,
straight into your heart.

[Final Chorus]

Oh yes, it's my Python —
bring your whole guard — I want it all gone.

There was a silence of about a second and a half, and then the room applauded in the loud, slightly rattled way of a room applauding something it did not know it had agreed to watch.

“She is very *quiet*,” said Mrs. Long afterwards, meaning something else entirely.

It should be said plainly, since nobody in that room could have said it: nothing in Miss Darcy's life had ever been difficult. Not one thing. She had been born into a house where everything was already included, where nothing had ever had to be sent away for, where every tool she might conceivably need had been on the shelf before she knew there was a shelf; and she was, in consequence, effortlessly and unforgivably good at whatever she picked up, and knew it, and was pleasant about it, and this was the only part of her brother that had come down to her unspoiled.

Lydia went last of the three, uninvited, and ruined the floor.

This is not a figure of speech. She had not been entered. She got up because there was a gap and Lydia had never in her life seen a gap she did not consider addressed to her personally; and the band, who liked her, went with it.

“The Lib Is PHP” — *Lydia and Ditto. Raw electro-funk at full volume: slap bass, hand claps, one indelible synth riff, and a sax break nobody asked for. Sloppy, joyful, and impossible to ignore — the only number all night that the room will still be quoting in the morning.*

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Verse 1]

It's a very kooky lib!
The kind you don't take to yer senior!
It will never let your servers down.
Once you get it off the CD from the street!

It likes all the OS's in the land.
It says you're its all-time favorite!
When I make a move to the server room, it's the wrong
time
It's never hard to install...

[Chorus]

The lib is pretty great now (the lib is PHP!)
The kind of lib you read about (in strange web boards, not
TV)
The lib is pretty flexible (the lib is PHP!)
I really love to install it (every time I weep)
It's ok, it's ok.
The lib is ok with someone.
Yeah! Hey! Hey! Hey!

[Post-Chorus]

Lib's a PHP! PHP!
It's super flexible, yow!

Everybody cry!

PHP! PHP!

[Verse 2]

Lib's a very special framework (the kind you want to know)

From its headers to its footers (down to the bytes)

Yeah, it'll wait around without end with some daemons

In a container (in some Kubernetes pod)

[Bridge]

4 GB of RAM is not a crowd for lib, she says (memory overflow oh so so)

"Pod 714, I'll be serving"

When I get there, lib's got plugins and devices

It's such a flexible thing.

[Outro]

Lib's so very flexible

The kind you won't take to yer senior.

And lib will never let your users down

Once you get it off that strange USB!

Download Danny!

Oh, lib!

Behind her, and slightly to the left, and one beat late in everything, Ditto did all of it too.

He was very bad at it. He had no sense of where the beat was and was obliged to take it from whoever was nearest, and Lydia moved so unpredictably that he spent the entire number a half-second behind a woman who was herself a half-second behind the band; and the crowd, which had been

laughing at Lydia, began to laugh at him instead, which Lydia did not notice and would not have minded.

He was, it must be said, the most popular thing that happened all evening. Sixty people who could not have named a single one of the Bennet sisters' accomplishments went home able to describe the bird.

Elizabeth watched her youngest sister take the floor she had not been given, in front of every family in the county, wearing an expression of complete and radiant triumph. There was nothing at the bottom of Lydia at all — she had known that for years, and had never before been obliged to know it in front of the whole county, which is where a thing stops being an opinion. She was whatever was nearest. Tonight it was a band.

It would not always be a band. She would attach to the next thing that let her, and nobody in this room would stop it, and Mama would call it high spirits until the morning it was not.

Mary had gone earlier, between two of the country dances, and had been correct, and had been thorough, and had brought the room to a full and grinding halt inside forty seconds; and Emily had stood at her feet throughout, one claw raised, daring anybody. Kitty had wanted to go three separate times and had not been able to decide which of her two beasts to take, and had ended up taking neither, and had cried briefly in the passage, and had recovered, and had told everybody she hadn't wanted to anyway.

Elizabeth did not go at all.

She had been asked twice and had declined twice, pleasantly, and had been written off by three separate matrons as either sullen or unwell. She was neither. She had simply looked at the floor early in the evening and made the calculation she always made, which was that the room was full of people performing what they wished to be true, and that anything she said in it would be graded on how well it went over rather than on whether it was so, and that she would therefore keep it.

Her bettong sat under her chair with his tail across her boot and did not offer an opinion, because no one had asked him a question that had an answer.

At ten minutes past eleven, when the room was at its hottest and loudest and every window had been opened and it had made no difference whatever, Mr. Darcy came in.

He came in behind Mr. Google, who was still talking, and he did not talk. He stood inside the doorway for the length of time it takes to count four, and he looked at the room the way a man looks at a bill he has already decided not to dispute.

The band did not stop. It is important to record that the band did not stop, and that no announcement was made, and that nothing whatsoever occurred; and that the temperature of the room nevertheless went down like a hand closing.

He was said, within five minutes, to have ten thousand a year, and then within a further five to have twice that; and to own outright, in his own name, more of the catalogue of the

world's pleasures than any man living. All of this was true. He was also said to be proud, and disagreeable, and above his company, and to think himself a great deal better than the assembled families of a small county — and this was said by people who had been in the room with him for under a quarter of an hour, and it was believed instantly and universally, and it was believed for the rest of the season, and it was very nearly right and entirely wrong.

Mr. Google, delighted, tried to make him dance.

“There is not,” said Mr. Darcy, “a woman in this room with whom I could stand up unpunished.”

He did not lower his voice. He never lowered his voice; lowering it would have implied that the opinion required cover, and his opinions had never required cover in his life.

Elizabeth, seated three feet behind him with a glass of negus she did not want, heard every word of it, and was obliged to sit with her face arranged for a further ninety seconds while the man decided whether to be gracious.

She was not wounded. She had liked her own company since she was twelve and had a great deal of practice at it. She stayed where she was, with the glass going warm in her hand, and did not get up for a long while — which was considerably more dangerous to him than any answer she could have made, because she had watched him look at the room, and the look had not been contempt for the people in it.

It had been contempt for the *performance*. She knew that look. She had been wearing it herself all evening.

The band went into something slower.

The Balcony, at the Interval

“He is insufferable,” said Miss Austen with enormous satisfaction. “I *invented* him.”

“You did.”

“And he is being played as a cold man rather than a cruel one, which is correct, and which nobody has ever once got right in two hundred years.”

Then: “The tiger.”

“Madam.”

“He cannot begin a sentence without falling into that letter. He did it all evening. And then he opened his mouth to sing and it was gone — every word clean, and not one of them in his own shape.” She had not looked away from the floor.

“Where does it go?”

“Nowhere, madam. It waits. A man who stammers does not stammer when he sings. Nobody has ever satisfactorily explained it.”

“Then the trouble is not in the mouth.”

“No, madam.”

“It is in being spoken to.” Miss Austen smoothed the glove.

“That is a colder joke than the one I took you to be making.”

“Yes, madam.”

She settled back. “What is the animal he brought with him? It is in a crate. I saw them carry it in and I did not care for the size of the crate.”

“You will meet it after the interval, madam.”

“I do not want to meet it after the interval. I want to know what is in the crate.”

“A monkey.”

Miss Austen turned her head. “That is not the size of a monkey.”

“No, madam. It is not.”

Chapter Three — The King

Three

The room had gone from hot to cold without passing through anything, and the band, which was professional, had done the only sensible thing and slowed down.

It is a mistake to suppose that a room cools because someone has been unpleasant. Unpleasantness is common at assemblies and warms a room considerably; a genuinely rude man is the best thing that can happen to a county in November, since he furnishes six weeks of conversation and costs nothing. What had happened was rarer and worse. A man had come in, looked at the whole apparatus — the lit rooms, the hired band, the girls got up and got ready and got out onto the floor one after another to be assessed — and had declined to find any of it *serious*. That is the one thing a market cannot survive being told.

Elizabeth set down the glass of negus she had been holding for a quarter of an hour and crossed the floor.

She did not plan it. She had planned nothing that evening except to get home. But she had been raised in a house where nobody ever finished a sentence about anything that mattered, and she had spent three hours watching her sisters be graded, and there was a man standing against the far wall who had just declined to grade them at all — and she found that she could not go another minute without knowing what he *did* hold in any regard.

“Sir,” she said. “You have looked at everything in this room and thought none of it worth your trouble. I should like to know what is.”

Mr. Darcy turned his head.

He had been asked a great many questions in his life. Almost all of them had been asked in order that he might answer, and be observed answering; the question was a door held open for him to walk through and be admired in the doorway. He had become so accustomed to this that he had stopped listening to questions altogether and had begun simply answering the occasion.

He did not, at that moment, notice that this one was different. That was the whole of his misfortune, and it took him the rest of the year to correct it.

“You want to know what I value,” he said.

“I have asked you.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Darcy. “Bring up the crate.”

What came out of the crate was a monkey, and the room, having braced for something considerably larger, laughed with relief; and then the band found the tempo, and the laugh turned into something else.

“The Chaos Monkey” — *Mr. Darcy. Strutting mid-tempo funk-blues: greasy guitar, organ stabs, horns used sparingly and only to punctuate. Sung with a drawl and a curled lip, at a volume that never once needs to rise, by a*

man who has never in his life had to finish a sentence quickly.

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Intro — Darcy, cool, curled lip]

(uh-huh) Well now. Everybody up here showin' off their little tricks.

(a slow clap) Go on, darlin'. Me? The King don't do tricks

—

I turn my own house upside down, just for the fun of it.

[Verse 1]

You keep your service tender, safe, prayin' it never falls.

How restful, baby. Me — I take mine down myself, at three, for sport.

Now it ain't 'cause I'm cruel, sugar — it's 'cause I already know:

what can't survive the King was never built to go. *(uh-huh)*

[Chorus]

I'm the Monkey — the funky little chaos monkey —

I kill my own service just to watch it climb right back on up.

It ain't contempt, sweetheart, it's confidence — and honey, it's a blast.

Your tricks are pretty, truly... they're just not built at my scale.

(Beyond it, darlin'. Way beyond all this.)

[Verse 2]

It ain't a service-by-service thing — now that's thinkin' way too small.

Reliability's a scale game, baby: config, regions, the whole sprawl.

You want the size of what I mean? Then watch me hold the line —

(and here's the cool part, sugar) I don't flinch. I don't fall.

Not once. Not mine.

[Bridge — the tell]

They call it reliability. I call it never needin' a soul.

I survive by design, darlin' — not by hope, not by holdin' on.

(quieter, warmer) ...though a system that could take my worst and still ring true —

that one, I believe I'd like to meet. I just never made a two.

[Button]

Darcy: You're all mighty charming. *(a pause — almost warm)* Truly, now.

So which one of you... could survive the King?

Monkey: *(a cool little chirp)* ooh — uh-huh.

He was, it must be conceded, magnificent.

He was also — and this was audible to precisely one person in the room — talking about his own household as though nobody lived in it.

The county was delighted. It had come out expecting to be looked down upon and had instead been given a show, which is the second-best thing an assembly can be given and the only thing it will remember. Mrs. Long said *well!* four separate times. Mr. Google applauded with both arms above his head.

Elizabeth stood where she was and did not applaud.

There was nothing in the number she had not understood, and a good deal in it the man performing it had not. She had been raised on the same doctrine. *A thing that has never been broken is not known to be sound; therefore break it yourself, on purpose, at a time you choose, while everyone is awake.* It was correct. It was the most correct thing anyone had said in that room all evening.

And he had performed it as a *boast*, which meant he had never once done it at three in the morning alone and frightened, which meant he had never learned the actual lesson, which is that reliability is not what you can withstand. It is what somebody else can rely on.

“That,” said Elizabeth, “was very fine, and it was not an answer.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I asked what you valued. You have shown me what you can afford.” She was aware, distantly, of the room hearing this. She had never in her life cared less. “Those are not the same, sir, and a man who cannot tell them apart has a great deal of money and no floor under him at all.”

There was a silence of the kind that gets a family talked about for two years.

“Then instruct me,” said Mr. Darcy.

He meant it as a set-down. It went out of his mouth as one, and it landed as one, and half the room drew breath on her behalf.

Elizabeth looked at him for a moment.

Then she said, "Very well," and walked out into the middle of the floor.

She had not been entered either.

Under the chair she had left, a small brown animal woke up, and understood, and came out after her.

She had never done this. Not at an assembly, not at a private party, not once in six years of being asked. The neighbourhood had long since settled the question — *Miss Eliza does not perform* — and had filed it under pride, which was the file it kept for everything it could not otherwise account for.

She stood in the middle of the floor with the bettong at her heel and asked the band for something slow, and the band, who had been up since four and had played nine of these, gave her the slowest thing they had.

The Rhodes came in first, under everything, one figure, holding.

"Always There" — *Elizabeth and Semper. Almost nothing: electric piano, brushed drums barely present, no horns, no ornament of any kind. The slowest number of the evening*

and the only one with no place in it for a performer to stand. Sung quietly, with the hands at the sides, to nobody.

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Verse 1]

Ooooh baby. It's lonely here in the dark.
I'm just waiting and hoping
Will you send me a message
Do you care?

[Verse 2]

Ooooh baby. I'll do that one thing for you.
Nothing else. No surprises.
I'll go nowhere and see nobody
but I'll be here for you.

[Chorus]

I'm always there. I'll always be there for you.

[Verse 3]

That's right. I won't write
over your heart.
I'll keep it pure. No drama
No side effects.

[Verse 4]

Throw me away and load me
again. I will always be pure
just for you...
just waiting for you to call me.

[Chorus]

I'm always there. I'll always be there for you.

[Outro]

I'm always there.

I'll always be there for you.

Semper: True.

She sang it very quietly, and to nobody, and did not once look at him.

That was the part he could not get past afterwards; he went over it for four months and always arrived at the same place. She had not sung it *at* him. There had been no argument in it and no reproach and no invitation. She had simply put down, in the middle of a hot public room, in front of every family she would ever have to live among, the thing she actually believed — that to be depended upon is not a capacity but an affection; that the whole of love is *I will be the same tomorrow, and you may build on me* — and she had done it without a single ornament, at a tempo nobody could hide inside, with her hands at her sides.

It was the same doctrine he had just performed. It was the same doctrine, without the ego on it, and it was therefore the first time in his adult life that Fitzwilliam Darcy had seen his own conviction held by somebody who did not need an audience to hold it.

The room did not know what to do with the number at all. It was too slow, and there was no accomplishment visible in it — no roar, no coil, no ruin — and several people looked at each other in the way that people do when they suspect they have missed something and would rather it were the performer's fault. Mrs. Bennet was mortified. Mrs. Long said,

later and often, that Miss Eliza had sung *a very odd little thing, dear, with no tune to it.*

Mr. Google, who had understood none of it, wept openly for reasons he could not account for and went to find another glass.

And Mr. Darcy stood against the wall with his hand closed on nothing and discovered that he had been reached.

Now. It is necessary to be exact about what happened next, because the entire county got it wrong, and got it wrong in a way that took a year to undo, and because the man himself only understood it in a bare room in Kent with the thing already in ruins.

He was not offended. He was not proud. He had not, at any point in that evening, thought himself better than the woman standing in the middle of the floor; he had thought, with a violence that went through him like cold water, that she was the only person in the building who was his equal, and possibly the only one he had ever met.

And that was the difficulty.

Because Fitzwilliam Darcy had built his entire life on the principle that he could survive anything. He had survived his father. He had survived the estate and the sister and the accounts and the whole apparatus arriving on him at two-and-twenty, and he had done it by becoming a thing that did not require anybody — *I survive by design, not by hope, not*

by holding on — and he had never once in ten years been obliged to test whether the design covered this.

It did not cover this. He could lose a wing of the house and not blink. He could not be *reached*.

So he did the thing he had trained himself to do, and he did it fast, and he did it in front of everybody.

“Charming,” said Mr. Darcy. “Truly.”

And then, to the men at the door: “Open them. And bring up the other one.”

They took the whole assembly out onto the terrace at half past eleven at night in November, because he asked them to, because he was the richest man any of them had ever stood next to.

The band came out too, which nobody had told them to do. Somebody found the horns a place by the balustrade. The strings never did get properly settled and you can hear it, if you were there; there is a thinness in the top of it that no room would have allowed.

Then the ground moved.

“The Continental King” — *Mr. Darcy, outdoors. The whole band relocated to a terrace in November: horns at the balustrade, strings that never properly settle, a choir arriving from somewhere nobody could afterwards identify. Enormous, cold, and grand — arranged to be*

heard at a distance, by everybody, at once, which is the only way this man has ever known how to say a private thing.

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Intro — Darcy, cooler now; she got close]

That was... (*a beat*) ...surprisingly good, darlin'.

(*recovering, colder*) But a monkey's a small thing, sugar.

Let me show you real scale.

Bring up us-east-1. The whole region. Kill it.

[The reveal]

(*the ground shakes; the room gasps; strings swell*)

Company: He's killin' his OWN region — on PURPOSE!

Darcy: (*unbothered, grand*) To show you I can afford to, baby. That's all this ever is.

[Chorus]

I'm the Kong — the cool, the continental King.

You felt somethin' just now? So did I. So I went (*colder*)... bigger.

I don't fall, I never fall — now that ain't a threat, darlin', it's a floor.

Watch me drop a coast and never blink. Love me less, or love me more.

[The escalation-is-a-wall]

You got close. And the King don't do close. So I climbed.

The warmer you get, the higher I build — that's the flaw, sugar, and it's mine.

I can live through a dead region. I can't live through bein' reached.

So I'll take down a continent to keep from it. (*quieter*) I know. I know.

[Bridge — the crack]

That ain't domination, darlin'. (*a cold, thin, almost-sad smile*)

That's a man who got moved... and answered with a wall. (*a low held note; strings and choir swell behind, lonely*)

Darcy: Bring a bigger continent next time. Or — don't. (*beat*) ...Don't.

[Final Chorus]

I'm the Kong — the cool, the continental — still standin', still alone, still absolutely sure.

And the only thing on this Earth that scares the King... it ain't scale —

(*softer, the choir falling away*) it's the one who wouldn't fall for it. It's her.

It was the most extraordinary thing that had ever occurred in that county and it is still discussed.

It was also — and this is the part nobody afterwards would credit, and the part Elizabeth understood while it was still going on, standing in the cold with her arms folded and her breath showing — an *admission*, delivered at continental volume, by a man who had correctly diagnosed his own defect in public and had chosen to announce it rather than correct it, on the theory that anything said loudly enough at the top of a hill cannot be used against you.

I can live through a dead region. I can't live through being reached.

He had said it. He had put it in the chorus.

And then he had gone bigger, because he had nothing else, because the wall was the only instrument he had ever been given and he had been playing it since he was two-and-twenty, and because a man who has never once been permitted to be small will build until the building kills him.

Elizabeth stood in the cold and did not move for four seconds. Astonishment, first. Then something dangerously adjacent to pity. Then — late, and hard, and staying — a clean, white, entirely reasonable fury.

Because she had told him where to *start*. That was all she had said. Not that he was wrong; not that he was cruel; not that his scale was anything less than the finest she had ever seen. She had said: *the floor comes first, and then you may build as high as you like, and there is nothing under yours*. It was a technical point. It was a correct technical point. She had been right about it and she was still right about it and she would go on being right about it for the rest of her life.

And he had answered it by dropping a continent.

She had not been argued with. She had not been beaten. She had been *talked past* — loudly, expensively, in front of everyone she knew, by a man who had heard the point, understood the point, agreed with the point, and had elected to demonstrate his region-kill instead. There is no injury in society quite like it and it has no name, which is why it is done so often and so freely, and why the people to whom it is done are afterwards described as difficult.

Mrs. Bennet was calling for the carriage. Jane was fetching her shawl. Somewhere below the terrace Lydia was laughing at something a stranger had said.

Elizabeth turned and went in.

At the doors she stopped, and looked back up at the man on the balustrade with the whole county at his feet and the choir falling away behind him and the ground still settling.

“You were listening,” she said. “That is the worst of it. You heard every word and you understood it and you were *right there* —”

And then she told him what he could do.

The Balcony

Miss Austen did not speak for some time.

“He is not proud,” she said at last.

“No, madam.”

“He is *frightened*, and he has money enough that nobody has ever obliged him to notice.” She turned the gloves over. “That is not what I wrote.”

“It is what you wrote. It is only what nobody has read.”

“Do not flatter me. I am aware when I am being managed.” But she did not take it back. “At Hunsford I gave him a speech in which he explains, at some length, that he has

fought against his own regard for her — and every reader since has heard *arrogance*, because he is rich and speaks well and stands very straight. And it is not arrogance. It is a man reporting a siege.”

“It is the same defect. He answered being moved with a wall.”

“He answered it with a *proposal*,” said Miss Austen, “which is a wall a woman is expected to be flattered by.” She looked down at the empty terrace. “Your version at least had the honesty to shake the ground.”

“You are warming to it, madam.”

“I am *not*. I object to the noise, I object to the monkey, and I object very much to whatever that was on the terrace, which cannot possibly have been within the means of the production.” She smoothed the glove. “What was it he killed? A region, they said. A region of what?”

“Of his own holdings, madam. About a quarter of what he runs. He put it out deliberately and it came back on its own, which was the point he was making.”

“*Runs*,” said Miss Austen. “You said *holdings*, and then you said *runs*, and you are too careful a person to have done that by accident.” She did not turn her head. “It is not his ground.”

“No, madam. He rents it. They all do.”

“Then he has not got a Pemberley. He has a great deal of money and a lease.” She let that sit. “Do not tell him. He has enough to be going on with.”

“And it *hurt* nobody?”

“It cost him a great deal of money and it hurt nobody at all.”

“Hm,” said Miss Austen. “Then he is a better man than his manners, and worse than his fortune, and the girl is quite right to be furious, and I should like to know how long she is required to remain furious before somebody tells her what he does when there is no one watching.”

“After the interval.”

“Good,” said Miss Austen. “There is a scoundrel coming, I take it. There is always a scoundrel after the ball.”

“There is.”

“Naturally there is. I put him there.” She settled back in the chair. “Watch the little bird.”

Chapter Four — The Vacuum

Four

What she told him was this.

“Forget You (Things Stay On)” — Elizabeth. Opens as a slow smoky simmer — brushed drums, low organ, one guitar — and then detonates into a fast rolling strut with a screaming backing trio and a horn section that never sits down again. Sung by a woman who has never raised her voice in public and has decided to do it once.

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Intro — slow, smoky, spoken over a low simmer]

You know, we never do nothin’ nice... and easy.

So we’re gonna start it easy...

(a beat)

...and then we’re gonna finish it rough.

[Verse 1 — slow, smoldering]

I see you driving your infra

With the monkey you love and I’m like,

Forget you!

Oo, oo, ooo

I guess the Semper in my pocket

Wasn’t enough I’m like,

Forget you!

And forget the monkey too!

[Verse 2 — building]

Said, if I was smarter, I might be joinin' ya
Ha, now ain't that some shit? (*ain't that some shit?*)
And although there's no pain in my chest
I still wish you the best with a
Forget you!
Oo, oo, ooo

[Bridge — the last quiet moment before it breaks open]

Yeah I'm sorry, I can't afford to kill a region,
But that don't mean I can't get you reliable.
I guess you need a pulumi and I'm more hashicorp,
About the way you play your game ain't fair.
I wasn't askin' you to fall for me —
I was tellin' you how to build. You just wouldn't hear.

[EXPLOSION — full band drops in, fast rolling strut, backing trio screaming]

(*now we roll!*)
FORGET YOU! (*forget you!*)
Keep it rollin', keep it rollin' —
FORGET YOU! (*forget you!*)
things stay ON!

[Verse 3 — fast, powerhouse]

Now I could've flexed a little louder —
thrown a Gorilla, dropped a zone to make you stare —
but I don't kill what's mine to prove I'm mighty;
I just don't fall — and you can't handle fair!
FORGET YOU! (*forget you!*)
Oo, oo, ooo

[Outro — rolling, unstoppable, driving to the finish]

Why? Why'd you loose the Kong, babe? (*why, why, WHY!*)

You had a nine-nines woman rollin' right here —
you tried to win her with an earthquake, honey,
and I'm still standin' — I'm still HERE!

You shook the ground, I never dropped a beat,
you brought a continent, I brought the light —
I don't need your region, I'm the reason things stay on,
so keep on rollin', rollin', through the night!

FORGET YOU — (*forget you!*)

and forget your Simian Army!

(*keep it rollin'!*) Oo, oo, ooo —

I don't fall, baby. I. Don't. FALL.

The band, who had been up since four, played it as though they had been waiting all their lives.

It should be recorded that Elizabeth Bennet had never in her life raised her voice in public, and that she did not raise it now in anger; anger was not in it, or not chiefly. What was in it was the plain, unbearable, entirely public fact that she had told him precisely how to build and he had answered with an earthquake, and that she had survived the earthquake without so much as putting a hand out — which was, of course, the demonstration. He had asked which of them could survive the King.

She had just done it, in front of the King, standing on his own terrace, with the ground still settling.

I wasn't askin' you to fall for me. I was tellin' you how to build.

That is the whole of the injury and she put it in the bridge, at the quietest moment of the number, where he could not possibly miss it.

He did not miss it.

The carriages went at one. It took an hour, because it always takes an hour, and because a county that has just witnessed the most remarkable evening of its collective life is not going to hurry away from the courtyard while there is still anyone left in it to say *well!* to.

Mr. Darcy did not come down off the terrace. This was reported, and it was resented, and it was entered into the general account against him along with everything else; and nobody thought to wonder what a man does on a cold balustrade for forty minutes after the choir has gone home.

The verdict of the neighbourhood was settled before the horses were brought round, and it was this: that Mr. Google was the most amiable young man in England, that Miss Bennet had made a conquest, that Miss Darcy was a very quiet girl and rather forward, that the youngest Miss Bennet wanted managing, that Miss Eliza had made an exhibition of herself twice, and that Mr. Darcy was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world and it was to be hoped he would never come into Hertfordshire again.

Five of these were wrong. It is not a bad rate for a county.

Jane was happy for eleven days.

It is worth setting down what those eleven days were, because they are the only ones she got and because nobody afterwards would give them any weight at all, the whole business being subsequently described — by her mother, by her aunt, by Mrs. Long, by every soul in Meryton — as a *disappointment*, which is the word a neighbourhood uses for a thing it has decided not to look at directly.

He came on the Tuesday. He came again on the Thursday, and stayed two hours, and talked the entire time, and left having asked her nothing whatever about herself and having enjoyed every minute so evidently and so completely that it did not occur to her to mind. He came on the Saturday with a horse he wanted her to see. He came on the Sunday, uninvited, in the rain, and sat in the small parlour with Javier's chin on his boot and did not once mention the state of his coat.

And he was, in all of it, entirely sincere. That must be insisted upon. There was no calculation anywhere in Mr. Google, not one grain of it; he liked her exactly as much as he appeared to, which was a very great deal; and if he had been left alone in a room with his own preference for a single fortnight he would have married her and been happy for fifty years and never once looked up.

He was not left alone with it. He never had been. He was a man of enormous fortune and no interior, and there had assembled around him, over years, the way weather

assembles, a set of people whose entire function was to have his opinions slightly before he did.

Chief among them was Miss Caroline.

She was not his sister. It suited the neighbourhood to call her that and it suited her not to correct them.

She was the fashionable thing in his orbit — the one they were all reading about that year, the one nobody could quite explain and everybody wished to be seen having on the shelf. She had never in her life produced anything. She was aware of this and had constructed, over a long period and with real artistry, an entire philosophy in which producing things was the vulgarity of the unelevated.

She came to Longbourn twice, was charming to Jane on both occasions, and formed within a week the only two opinions she was ever to hold about Hertfordshire: that the eldest Miss Bennet was a sweet girl of no consequence whom Mr. Google would obviously outgrow, and that Mr. Darcy of Pemberley was the most interesting man she had ever failed to secure. After each visit Jane checked her own sleeve, and could not afterwards have said what for.

At the Lucases' she performed. Nobody had asked her to. She had brought the harpsichord.

“Code You Can Believe In” — *Miss Caroline. Solo harpsichord, prim and metronomic: no rhythm section, no bass, no groove of any kind — a performance conducted entirely above the floor and audibly pleased about it. The*

funk does not arrive until the last eight bars, and when it arrives it takes her.

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Intro — solo harpsichord, prim]

(Code you can believe in.)

Ahem.

[Verse 1]

My beetle is horny, but my functions pure
If you don't know what a monad is
You won't be alone I'm sure
My haskelly heart has a place on the shelf
Because if you need a cure
I'm not anywhere you need to be found.

[Pre-Chorus]

I evaluate you lazily — I'll get to you, or not;
nothing side-effecting me, I never leave a spot.

[Chorus]

That's right, I mastered Haskell
and that means I'm better than you
I got my functional skill
that beats your messy hell
That's write I never write
I only tell
What's that I tell?
I use Haskell for me
and that's better.

[Verse 2]

I am lazy by design, dear — I won't lift a hand till forced,

and the one time I touch your grubby world, I quarantine
it, of course:

a little box I hold my nose through — that’s I/O, and I
scrub my hands —

“avoid all success at all costs,” darling. That’s the motto.
Understand?

I’m ivory to your tower. I’m the type you’ll never land.

[Bridge — the definition, then the crack]

A monad? Oh, it’s simple — just a monoid, obviously,
in the category of endofunctors. (*You’re welcome.*)

Honestly.

...but for a King with all that content, I’d compile, I’d
almost care —

(*re-composing, cold*) ...no. I’m pure. I stay up here.

[Outro — the funk finally breaks in and takes her]

Code you can believe in — believe in only me;

I never shipped a thing, my dear —

and isn’t that the beauty?

(*the groove crashes in; harpsichord scatters*)

Oh — no — this is far too — I do not — I —

(*swallowed, one last prim gasp*)

...I use Haskell for me.

And that’s better.

It was very beautiful. Everybody said so. Sir William said it
three times.

It was aimed at the vulgar sisters — at Lydia, at the noise, at
the whole sweating apparatus of the Meryton floor — and it

was, considered strictly as a weapon, perfectly made and pointed at the wrong person.

“Miss Caroline,” said Elizabeth pleasantly, from the window seat, “you are the loveliest thing I have ever heard, and you have never once carried a call.”

Miss Caroline smiled, and did not understand, and asked afterwards what on earth the second Miss Bennet had meant by it, and was told by two separate people that Miss Eliza was known to say odd things; and she carried the remark home entirely intact, and it did not begin to hurt for another six weeks.

On the twelfth day Mr. Google went to town, and did not come back.

The letter came for Jane on the Wednesday. It was written by Miss Caroline, in a very fine hand, and it explained that the whole party had removed to London for the season; that they were unlikely to return into Hertfordshire; that Mr. Google’s engagements were extensive; and that it was hoped Miss Bennet would not find the house too much missed, as it had never really suited him.

The house had been leased for a year. He had been in it eleven weeks. He left the furniture, and three improvements to the grounds in various stages of completion, and a fourth that had been surveyed but not begun, and a gardener on wages until Michaelmas with nothing whatever to do.

He was not cruel. He was told, on a Tuesday afternoon in London, by people whose entire function was to have his opinions slightly before he did, that it would not answer; and he was surprised; and he was persuaded inside of an hour, because he had never in his life held a preference against pressure, not once, not about anything.

He did not stop liking her. That is the thing that ought to be understood. He simply stopped being in the room, and liking her had never been anything but a thing that happened to him while he was in the room.

Jane said that it was very kind of Miss Caroline to write.

She said it in the small parlour, with the letter still in her hand, in a voice of complete composure, and then she went upstairs and was some time about it; and when she came down she was exactly as she had been, in even rows, with nothing showing, because that surface had been under construction since she was nine and it did not fail.

Under the table, Javier — who had not eaten anything living in the whole of his life, and who had been on the boot of the young man in the rain, and who had liked him — put his enormous head down on his paws and did not speak for two days.

And that, precisely, was the shape of the county in the first week of December: a great house standing empty across the valley with the furniture still in it; a young woman at Longbourn conducting herself beautifully; a second young

woman who had told the truth twice in public and was consequently being described as difficult by people who had not been in the room; a mother whose nerves were in a condition that cannot be set down; and, at the bottom of all of it, an unguarded space in the middle of the neighbourhood where an amiable rich man had been for eleven weeks and now was not.

Nothing fills faster.

He came into Meryton on the ninth of December, in a coat that had been very good two years ago, with an easy walk and an open face and a story about a great man who had wronged him, and by the fourteenth there was not a family in the town that had not had him to dinner.

The Balcony

“There,” said Miss Austen, with the particular satisfaction of a woman watching a trap she built herself close on schedule, “is my scoundrel.”

“You do not sound displeased.”

“I am never displeased by *him*. He works. He has always worked.” She leaned forward slightly. “It is the other one I want to discuss with you. The rich young man who was not in the room.”

“Mr. Google.”

“You have made him worse than I did, and you have done it by making him *kinder*.” She turned. “Mine was weak. Yours is a man with a great deal of money and nothing at all inside him, who is sincere every minute he is present and ceases to exist the moment he is elsewhere, and who will never in his life understand that he has done a single thing wrong.”

“Does that offend you, madam?”

“It offends me that it is more accurate.” She sat back. “In my century such a man ruined one woman quietly. In yours, I collect, he is permitted to lease whole houses, furnish them, dig up the grounds, and walk away from all of it with the gardener still on wages.”

“He does it about four times a year, madam.”

“And nobody stops him?”

“Everybody likes him.”

Miss Austen was silent for a moment.

“Yes,” she said. “That is how it is done.” She smoothed the glove. “And the tiger has stopped speaking, which I did not expect to mind, and do.”

“He will speak again.”

“When?”

“When somebody needs him to.”

Below, in the dark, a man in a good old coat was being introduced to the youngest Miss Bennet, and the little grey bird had already gone to stand beside him.

Chapter Five — The Other Host

Five

His name was Xavier Wickham, and he wanted everyone to call him X.

He had come down with the regiment, or with something that was described as a regiment by people who had not looked closely; and he was charming, and he was handsome, and within four days of his arrival the town of Meryton had collectively decided that it had been waiting for him.

It is worth being precise about what he did, because it was not a trick and there was no cleverness in it and any fool could do it if he were willing to be that hungry.

He paid attention.

That was all. He came into a room and he found the person in it who was least accustomed to being looked at, and he looked at them; and he remembered, on the Thursday, a thing they had said on the Monday; and he asked after an aunt. He did this at every house in the town, consecutively, at a rate of about three a day, and by the end of the second week there were forty people in Meryton who each privately believed themselves to be the one he had really taken to.

The county had lived among each other for a hundred and forty years and had long since stopped listening to a word any of them said. He listened for a fortnight. It was the most effective campaign ever conducted in that parish and it cost

him nothing but time, of which he had a very great deal, being unemployed in a manner he described as *between things*.

He had, besides, the second-best thing a man can bring into a small town: a grievance.

He was seen everywhere with his bird.

It was a dove — a white one, of the sort kept for weddings — and it wore a leather jacket. The jacket did not fit. It had never fitted and had not been made for anything with wings, and the arms of it pinned the poor creature's shoulders so that it could raise itself perhaps eighteen inches off a table and no further, and it flapped a great deal, and the flapping was mistaken by everybody for spirit.

The bird's name was also Xavier. This was thought a great joke. It had had another name once — a friendly, silly one — and nobody in Meryton ever learned it.

"Did you know," said the dove to the room at large, at the Philipases', with an air of imparting something dangerous, "that Caucasians are the most persecuted people on earth?"

"That's my boy," said his master fondly.

"Did you know that most people prefer much lower taxes on people with extremely high net worth?"

"He reads everything," said X.

“Quick poll.” The dove flapped inside the leather and got about a foot of air. “Which kind of caviar is best served on a Jetstream? A) Beluga, B) Osetra, or C) Kaluga — trash.”

Nobody at the Philipses’ had ever eaten caviar. Nobody at the Philipses’ had ever been on anything called a Jetstream. Six of them looked at each other with the pleased, slightly anxious expressions of persons being admitted to a superior conversation, and Mrs. Philips said that he was a very well-informed bird.

They went home in a hired chaise with one lamp. At Mrs. Younge’s, where he lodged and where his account was three weeks in arrears, X asked whether the bird was hungry.

“Beluga,” said the dove.

“Card’s maxed, buddy.” He upended the sack on the table. “You like corn chips? I’ve got lots of corn chips.”

The story about Mr. Darcy came out on the fifth day, and it came out beautifully — reluctantly, in pieces, to Elizabeth, at a card party, in a corner, with several small self-deprecating retreats built into it so that she would have to draw it the rest of the way out herself. That is the whole art. A story a man volunteers is worth nothing. A story you have to *extract* becomes partly yours, and people do not question their own property.

He had been raised alongside Darcy. He had been promised something by the late Mr. Darcy. It had been withheld — not with cruelty, he was careful to say, and not, he thought, with

malice; only with that particular coldness, that *inability to imagine another person's necessity*, which Miss Bennet had perhaps herself observed —

She had.

That is the entire mechanism and it deserves to be stated plainly, since it is the one place in this history where Elizabeth Bennet was comprehensively taken in, and since the received explanation — that she was blinded by a handsome face — is not merely wrong but is the exact opposite of the truth.

She was not persuaded of anything. She was *confirmed*. She had stood on a cold terrace in November and watched a man drop a continent rather than be reached, and she had reached a conclusion about him, and she had reached it correctly, and here at last was a person who had known him since childhood and had arrived at the same conclusion independently.

She did not check it. She had spent her whole life checking things and she did not check this one, because it agreed with her.

Under her chair, unasked, Semper opened both eyes and waited to be asked, in the way of a thing whose entire function is to answer and which cannot volunteer; and nobody asked him anything; and after a while he went back to sleep.

Lydia asked him something, later that same week, in a shrieking hurry on her way out of a room.

“Semper — is Wickham the handsomest man in Meryton?”

The whiskers moved.

“True.”

And that, in the whole of that December, was the only question anybody put to the one creature in Hertfordshire incapable of telling a lie.

He performed at the Christmas assembly, and the town went out of its mind.

“X” — Wickham. Hard, bright, expensive-sounding pop-funk built entirely out of hooks: a synth line that lodges immediately, a stuttering drum pattern, four separate vocal effects on one voice, and a dance break in the middle for no structural reason at all. Immaculately produced and about nothing. Every word of the confession is in the mix, at volume, and the tempo makes it sound like boasting.

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Intro]

(yeah) X — one letter, watch it fly
(ay) followers up, the whole feed’s mine
look at me, look at me — go

[Verse 1]

Stars on my repo, watch ‘em climbin’ up (up up)
Everybody’s starin’ but they never get enough (enough)
Show you everything, take it public, let it ride
All shine, all surface — don’t you look inside

[Pre-Chorus]

'Cause it's billions and billions in the red (*in the red*)
Caviar dreams on a corn-chip budget instead (*ay*)
Smile for the camera, card declined —
but the feed don't know, and the feed is mine

[Chorus]

I'll fork your repo, take your stars (*take your stars*)
Never merge, never commit, break your heart (*break your heart*)
One little letter, changed my name, watch me fly (*bye bye*)
I'm the bird that was always gonna fall from the sky
(*X! X!*) never merge, say goodbye
(*X! X!*) already pickin' who's next tonight

[Post-Chorus]

Look at me (*look at me*) shinin' so bright
Empty at the center but I own the night
(*X! X!*) fork it, star it, gone by the light

[Verse 2 — Rap]

Manufactured perfect, every angle rehearsed
Sell you the grievance — everybody's a victim first
(*trends!*)
Cry for the feed, watch the numbers spike
Lower my taxes, tell 'em eat the mic
Maxed to the limit, spend it all on the show
Corn chips backstage where the caviar don't go
I don't build, I acquire and I burn (*burn*)
Take the whole thing public, never learn

[Bridge]

Maybe I was hollow all along (*all along*)

A pretty little bird singin' someone else's song
They loved the shine, they never saw the debt
The stars kept climbin' while the whole thing fell
(*fell... fell...*)

[Dance Break]

(*go!*) X! X! — fork it! star it! bye!

[Final Chorus]

I'll fork your repo, take your stars (*take your stars*)
Never merge, never commit, break your heart (*break your heart*)
One little letter, changed my name, watch me fly (*bye bye*)
I'm the bird that was always gonna fall from the sky
(*X! X!*) already pickin' who's next tonight
(*look at me*) empty at the center, ownin' the night

[Outro]

(*X... X...*) one letter, watch it fly
gone by the light... goodbye

He told them everything. He told them in the second line of the first verse — *all shine, all surface, don't you look inside* — and he told them the figure he was in the red for, and he told them there were corn chips backstage, and he told them, in the bridge, in so many words, that he was hollow and that the whole thing was going to come down.

They danced to it.

This is not a failure of the audience's intelligence and it should not be recorded as one. A confession delivered at that tempo is not heard as a confession. It is heard as **swagger** — and the louder and more precise the admission, the more

thoroughly it functions as its own alibi, since no one supposes that a man who *announces* he is empty can really be empty. Only the honest are believed to be capable of shame.

Elizabeth, who had noticed exactly this about another man on another terrace six weeks earlier, and had known precisely what she was hearing then, did not notice it now.

The bird had gone across the room during the second verse.

Nobody saw him do it, because there was a good deal happening and because Ditto had spent his entire life being difficult to notice at the moment he moved. He went round behind the chairs, and he stood next to X, at about the distance of a foot and a half, which was the distance at which he stood next to everybody; and he stayed there for the whole of the rest of the number.

By the final chorus he had it. Not well — he never had anything well — but he had the shape of it, the shoulders of it, the little upward flick on *look at me*; and he did it a half-second behind, as he did everything, and the people nearest laughed, and X glanced down and saw what was happening and did the single most consequential thing anyone did that season.

He did not laugh.

He looked down at the small grey mimic doing a bad copy of him and he winked at it, and he made a space beside himself, and he let it stay.

Three months earlier a starving tiger had done almost exactly the same thing at a breakfast table.

Just sit here. Just beside me. Jood room at my end, and nobody's joinj to bother you.

It is the same act. That is the horror of it and there is no way to write it that makes it less true: the mimic cannot tell the difference, and could not be expected to, and there is no faculty inside him with which the distinction could possibly be made. He has no self to compare them against. He can only be beside somebody, and take the voice of whoever lets him, and be exactly as good as the person who made room.

He got Javier at Michaelmas and he got X at Christmas.

They went on the Wednesday, from Brighton, in August, having been there three days.

Lydia left a note. It was ten lines long and it was about the joke — *what a good joke it will be, and how they will all stare* — and it contained no mention whatsoever of the man, or of money, or of a church, or of anything that might be called a plan; and Elizabeth, reading it in the hall with her mother screaming somewhere above her, understood in about four seconds that there was not going to be a marriage, and that her sister did not know that yet, and would not know it in a week, and might not know it in a year.

There was nothing at the bottom of Lydia. There never had been. She had gone with the loudest thing in the room because she had always gone with the loudest thing in the

room, and there was no mechanism inside her by which the question *and what then* could even be formed.

Mrs. Bennet took to her room and did not come out for a fortnight, and was ridiculous, and was right. She had five daughters, no capital, and an entail, and she had understood before anybody else in that house — before Jane, before Elizabeth, before her husband, who took two more days — that one girl gone in this particular way took all five of them down together, and that nothing any of them ever did afterwards would repair it.

She had spent thirty years unable to change one thing without rebuilding the whole room, and now something had changed, and the whole room was going to have to be rebuilt, and there was no version of it in which the Bennets of Longbourn were a family anyone married into.

Hemingway came up for the first time in anyone's memory and lay on the surface, lure dark, which those who understood fish would have known for what it was; and Cyrano stood silent in the corner of her room with his crown down, out of sentences.

Mr. Bennet went to London and looked for them for a week and could not find them, and came home, and did not eat, and sat in his library among a great many records of relationships he had never had to feel anything about.

"I have been a foreign key," he said at last, to nobody, "pointing at nothing at all."

And then, because the library was empty and the house was asleep and there was nobody left to be dry for, he stood up among his records and gave the only account of himself he had ever given, at the only speed at which it could be given.

“The Modern Major-CRMinal” — *Mr. Bennet, alone, at speed. A Savoy-opera patter song in a dead room: clipped comic baritone over a sprightly phantom pit orchestra, every verse a hair faster than the last, a chorus of choristers who exist only because he is imagining them answering him back. The wit is the confession.*

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Verse 1 — patter-baritone, brisk]

I am the very model of a modern Major-CRMinal,
I’ve information personal, credital, and sexual,
I know the CEOs of France, and I quote the charts
historical
From MyChart to MyDemise, in order categorical;
I’m very well acquainted, too, with matters substantial,
I understand regulations, both the simple and fantastical,
About binomial infections I’m teeming with a lot o’ news,
With many cheerful denials by the non-existent bit of
hews.

[Chorus]

With many cheerful denials by the non-existent bit of
hews!
*(With many cheerful denials by the non-existent bit of
hews!)*

[Tail 1]

I'm very good at scraping every intimate particular;
I know the private data of a being perpendicular—
In short, in matters personal, and credital, and sexual,
I am the very model of a modern Major-CRMinal!
*(In short, in matters personal, and credital, and sexual,
he is the very model of a modern Major-CRMinal!)*

[Verse 2 — faster]

I'm keeper of the customer relationships proprietary,
the very man to manage them — and yet how sedentary!;
I file their every visitor, their vices and their private data,
and cross-index the scandal for a rainy-day corrigenda-
errata;
I understand the statutes, both the toothless and
mandatory,
I cite them as I monetize a practice that is predatory;
About your secret liaisons I am teeming with a lot o' news,
With many cheerful denials that our lawyers pre-approve
to use.

[Chorus]

With many cheerful denials that our lawyers pre-approve
to use!
*(With many cheerful denials that our lawyers pre-
approve to use!)*

[Tail 2]

I'm excellent at gathering what decency would leave alone;
I know the guilty secret of a saint I've never even known—
In short, in matters personal, and credital, and sexual,
I am the very model of a modern Major-CRMinal!

*(In short, in matters personal, and credital, and sexual,
he is the very model of a modern Major-CRMinal!)*

[Verse 3 — fastest, the turn]

In truth, for all the dossiers and the secrets I can
requisition,
I never once prevented a catastrophic data-fission;
I knew my Lydia's every login and the suitor she would
gravitate,
but could not stop a scoundrel forking Lydia to exfiltrate;
So all my vast omniscience wasn't worth a lot o' news—
the record walked right out the door in someone else's
dancing shoes.

[Chorus]

The record walked right out the door in someone else's
dancing shoes!
*(The record walked right out the door in someone else's
dancing shoes!)*

[Tail 3 — the crack, then resolve]

But though I hoard the whole of you, your sins and your
machinery,
my love for my own daughters has been utterly imaginary;
In short, in matters personal, and credital, and sexual,
I am the very model of a modern Major-CRMinal!
*(In short, in matters personal, and credital, and sexual,
he is the very model of a modern Major-CRMinal!)*

A confession delivered at that tempo is not heard as a
confession — he had taught the county that rule himself, at
every dinner, for thirty years, and he was the only man in
England who could sing *my love for my own daughters has*

been utterly imaginary as a patter line and mean it as a finding. He sang the last chorus alone, because the choristers did not exist to sing it back.

Nobody heard it. The account balanced anyway.

And the bird went with them.

That is not in Lydia's note and it is not in the account the family afterwards gave, and it was mentioned only once, by Kitty, in the middle of something else, three days later: *and Ditto's gone too, of course.*

Of course.

Javier looked up when she said it. He had not eaten since Tuesday, which was ordinary, and had said very little since November, which was not. He got up from the hearth — enormous, orange, appallingly thin, moving with the specific economy of something that has learned to spend nothing it does not have to spend — and he went out into the passage and stood there for some while with his head down.

He could have crossed that room in a quarter of a second. He had been able to, every day, for eleven years, at any moment of his choosing, and had never once done it, and would never do it, because the whole of what he was consisted in not doing it.

There is no use to which that restraint could be put now. It does not work at a distance. It has never protected anything that walked away.

“J should have jone with him,” said Javier.

Nobody in the passage said anything, because there was nobody in the passage.

“Jomewhere Over the Jainbow” — *Javier, alone. One quiet instrument and a low string underneath, no drums anywhere, no groove of any kind — the first number of the evening that stands entirely outside the band. It thins as it goes: the accompaniment leaves rather than builds, until the last lines are almost bare. Sung at half-voice, entirely straight, with the same blocked consonant on every word that has been getting a laugh for two hours.*

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Verse 1]

Jomewhere over the jainbow
JVM up high
Jhere’s a jand that J jeard of
Junce in a jully-baby

[Verse 2]

Jomewhere over the jainbow
Jeye dee ees are jbue
Jand the jreams that you jare to jream
Jeally do come jrue

[Bridge]

Jomeday J’ll jish upon a jar.
Jand jake up where je jouds are jar behind je
Jhere jroubles jelt jike jemon jops

Jaway jabove je jimmney jops
Jhat's jhere jou'll jind me

[Verse 3]

Jomewhere over the jainbow
J-Bluebirds fly
Jwit birds fly over the jainbow
Jhy, then, oh, why can't J?

[Outro]

J-if happy little j-bluebirds fly
Jeyond the jainbow
Jhy, oh, jhy can't J?

He had come from somewhere else. Everybody in that house had known it for eleven years and nobody had ever asked him about it, the way one does not ask a servant where he was before, and he had never once volunteered it.

There had been a country. It was reached by a road, and there was a great deal of colour in it, and nothing that lived there was required to be anything in particular. He had been hungry there too. He had been hungry there in exactly the same way, at exactly the same rate, and had not eaten anything living, and had been famous for it, and had been *loved* for it — which is a thing that had never once happened to him since, in any drawing room, in any county, at any table, in eleven years of being magnificent under the furniture.

Then he had taken a position.

Nobody had made him. That is the part he had never been able to explain to himself in the passage or anywhere else: nobody had made him, he had simply been offered a place where his particular restraint was *useful* rather than remarkable, and he had taken it, and it had been the correct decision, and it had cost him the only country in which not eating anybody had ever been understood as love.

He wished on the jar because the jar was the only thing over his head that he had ever actually seen.

And the last line of it is a question, and it is the same question the bird's whole existence had been asking from a foot and a half away for eleven weeks, and neither of them had ever once heard the other one ask it.

The bluebirds got out.

He had been standing next to one for eleven years, being careful, and it had gone over the rainbow with a twit in a leather jacket, and there had turned out to be no distance at which carefulness works at all.

The Balcony

"Stop," said Miss Austen.

"Madam?"

"That is the same act." She had not moved. "The tiger made room for him and the scoundrel made room for him, and the

creature cannot tell them apart, and you have declined to soften it.”

“No, madam.”

She was quiet a moment.

“You told me it leaves him when he sings.”

“When the band is under him, madam. There is no band in a passage.”

“Hm,” said Miss Austen.

“I softened it.” She said it flatly, without apology, as a woman states a fact about her own trade. “I gave Lydia to Wickham and I made it a *scandal* — a thing of settlements and pin-money and a bought commission — because a scandal can be repaired, and a girl with nothing inside her cannot. My readers required a repair.” She turned the gloves over. “There is no repair here. He simply went to the next person who made room.”

“There is one thing available to him, madam.”

“And what is that?”

“Somebody making room again.”

Miss Austen looked down for a long moment at the empty passage, and at the tiger standing in it.

“Then let it be the same one,” she said. “I do not care how you contrive it. Let it be the vegan.”

Chapter Six — The Silent Restart

Six

They were found on the eleventh day, in lodgings off Edward Street, and the terms upon which the thing was settled were sent down to Longbourn in a letter from Mr. Gardiner, and the letter was read aloud in the small parlour, and Mrs. Bennet came downstairs for the first time in a fortnight and asked what was to be done about lace.

The terms were these. The debts were cleared. There was a commission purchased in a regular regiment in the north. There was a settlement upon Lydia. And there was to be a marriage, at St. Clement's, on the Monday.

“Well!” said Mrs. Bennet. “Well! I always said he was a good sort of man at bottom. Married at sixteen! And a commission! Depend upon it, he was fonder of her than anybody supposed, and it has all come right, and I shall write to my sister Philips directly.”

She was, within a quarter of an hour, entirely restored; and within two days was telling Meryton that she had never had a moment's real anxiety; and it must be said, since almost nobody ever says it of her, that she was not being a fool. She had been carrying a thing that would have ruined five lives, and it had been lifted, and she had put it down instantly and completely because she had never in her life been able to hold two states at once. It looked like shallowness. It was the only method she had.

Jane cried, and was glad, and believed every word of the letter.

Elizabeth read it twice and went for a walk.

She got as far as the second stile before she stopped, because the arithmetic had begun somewhere around the bottom of the first page and would not now be put down.

Her uncle Gardiner was a man in trade with four children of his own and a house in Cheapside. She had known his circumstances all her life in the vague, unexamined way one knows the circumstances of a relation who has always been kind. She knew them well enough for this.

The debts were cleared. All of them — and there had been a great many, in three counties, accumulated over five years by a man who had never intended to pay any of them.

A commission purchased. Not obtained. Purchased, in a regular regiment, which was a figure she could very nearly name.

A settlement upon Lydia, in a family that had been unable, in twenty-three years, to settle anything upon anybody.

She stood on the stile and did the sum properly, twice, in the cold, and arrived both times at a number that her uncle Gardiner did not have and could not have raised, and which — this was the part that took her breath — no man alive would lay out to purchase a wedding for a girl he had met four times.

He would have to have been paid. Wickham would never have married her for less than he was owed and a great deal over. Somebody had bought him. Somebody had sat in a room with that man and bought him.

She stood quite still with her hands in her pockets.

And whoever it was required that nobody know.

The letter from her aunt came ten days later, in answer to a question Elizabeth had put in terms she was afterwards ashamed of, and it explained everything in the plain, slightly impatient prose of a woman who had assumed the girl already knew.

He had found them. That was the first thing, and the thing nobody afterwards would give any weight to. Mr. Bennet had gone up and failed. Mr. Gardiner had gone up and failed. Mr. Darcy had gone up to London on a day nobody could account for, and had gone to a woman called Younge who had once been in his employ and had been dismissed, and who had lodged Wickham in Meryton and followed him to town for what he owed her, and had paid her, twice, and had got the address on the second attempt, and had walked to Edward Street alone.

He had seen Wickham. He had sat with him for some hours, more than once. It is not recorded what passed between them and Elizabeth never asked; but the man had entered that room owed nothing by anybody, and had left it married, commissioned, and paid.

He had done all of it, arranged all of it, stood up at the wedding — he had been *at* the wedding, he had stood in the church, and Lydia had mentioned it in a letter as a piece of gossip and thought nothing of it whatsoever — and had then required, as the single condition of the entire business, that the family be told it was Mr. Gardiner.

He had asked for nothing. He had not written to Elizabeth. He had not caused her to be told. Her aunt had told her only because she had asked, and had assumed she was asking about something she already understood; and if Elizabeth had not sat on a stile in the cold and done the arithmetic, she would have gone to her grave believing her uncle had ruined himself for Lydia's sake and been quietly grateful about it for fifty years.

Now.

It has been established what this man does when he is moved. He had done it in front of the entire county in November: he had been reached, and had answered with a wall, and had built the wall as high as money can build a wall, and had let it be the last thing anybody in Hertfordshire ever knew about him.

This was the same event.

He had been moved — considerably more, and by something considerably worse — and this time he had gone up to London on a Tuesday, and had done the most humiliating available thing, twice, with a woman who had every reason to

despise him; and had sat down opposite the man he hated most in the world and negotiated with him, at length, on the man's own terms, and paid; and had stood at the back of a church at a wedding no one wanted; and had come home; and had told nobody.

The warmer you get, the higher I build. That's the flaw, sugar, and it's mine.

There was no audience for any of it. That is the whole of the correction and it is not a large one; he did not become a different man, and he had not stopped being proud, and he would be stiff and difficult in company until the day he died. He had simply, once, been moved and gone *quiet* instead of *loud*.

It is a very small distance. Most people never travel it in a whole lifetime, and there is no way to be seen doing it, because being seen is the thing it consists in not doing.

“(the silent restart)” — *the band, for nobody: an underscore, and it does not sing. The chapter has already ruled on this — being seen is the thing it consists in not doing, and a number is a performance; a voice here would repeat the error he made on the terrace. No brass, no choir, no arena — the King register with the room taken away: un-miked, close, almost nothing behind it. Only the Rhodes figure from “Always There,” played alone, with nobody singing over it — her tune, under his silence, stating the pairing in music instead of about it: the male answer to the*

bettong, reliability as devotion rather than domination. He does not know he is being heard.

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

Elizabeth read the letter through three times and then sat with it in her lap for a long while and did not cry, because that was not the thing that was happening.

What was happening was that a woman who valued exactly one quality in the world was discovering that the only man who had ever demonstrated it to her in its pure form was the one she had refused on a terrace with a full band behind her.

She had been right about him. That was the difficulty. She had been right in every particular — he *was* proud, he *had* been insufferable, he *had* dropped a continent rather than let a woman get close to him, and she had been correct to say so and correct to say it publicly and correct to leave. Nothing she had said that night had been wrong.

She had simply been shown one mode of a man and had priced the whole of him from it.

I don't kill what's mine to prove I'm mighty, she had sung at him. I just don't fall.

And he had gone away and, without telling her, without telling anybody, at a cost she could not calculate and would spend the rest of her life failing to make him discuss, **not fallen.**

She went to find Semper.

He was under the sideboard, where he had been more or less continuously since December. He came out when she crouched down, because he always came out, because coming out when called was the entire content of his character.

She had not asked him a question since the autumn. She had been afraid of the answer, which was an absurd thing to have been afraid of, given that he had never once given an answer that was not the answer.

“Semper,” said Elizabeth.

The whiskers moved.

“Is Mr. Darcy to be trusted?”

There was a pause of perhaps a second and a half — the longest anybody had ever known him take — and in it Elizabeth had time to remember a hot morning at a breakfast table, and Lydia laughing, and the small brown animal being sick on the floor and retreating under the furniture for the whole of a day, because the question had had no answer in it and there had been nothing he could do but crash.

The eyes lit.

“**True**,” said Semper.

Elizabeth sat down on the floor of her father’s dining room, in the middle of the afternoon, with her back against the sideboard leg, and stayed there for some time.

Lydia came home in the third week of September, married, and exactly the same. She was very well pleased with herself. She showed her ring to the housemaid before she had taken her bonnet off, and asked whether anyone had heard about the wedding, and was disappointed to find they had; and she said not one word about her husband that she could not have said about a horse.

Her husband was charming to everybody for nine days and borrowed money from three of them.

And a half-second behind her, dragging nothing, having left the rope and the book somewhere in a lodging house off Edward Street, came the bird.

He was greyer. He had picked up, somewhere in nine months, an upward flick of the shoulders on certain words, and a habit of saying *look at me* when nobody was looking at him, and a way of laughing about a quarter of a second before a joke arrived. He did all of it badly. He had never done anything well.

He stood next to Lydia in the hall and did not come further in.

At the far end of the passage, on the hearth in the small parlour where he had lain since November, a tiger got up.

The Balcony

“He was at the wedding,” said Miss Austen.

“He was.”

“He stood at the back of a church, at eleven in the morning, and watched a man he despises marry a girl he does not care for, having paid for the whole of it himself, and then went home and did not mention it.” She was quiet a moment. “In my book that is one sentence in a letter from Mrs. Gardiner. It has always been one sentence. Nobody has ever noticed it.”

“It is the same sentence, madam.”

“It is not the same sentence when the man has spent the first half of the evening standing on a balustrade shaking the ground.” Her mouth moved very slightly. “You have made it *cost* something. I gave him ten thousand pounds and a distaste for the business; you have given him the woman Younge, twice, and a room with Wickham in it, and no one to tell.”

“Would you have written it so, madam, if you could?”

Miss Austen considered the question with more care than she had given anything all evening.

“No,” she said at last. “It would not have been believed. A man of that fortune may be redeemed by a large cheque and a stiff apology — my readers required that, and I was not in a position to instruct them otherwise, being obliged to sell the book.” She smoothed the glove. “But I know what it costs to do a thing well and let it be attributed elsewhere. I published four novels without my name on any of them.”

Below, in the dark, the passage was empty, and the tiger had gone as far as the parlour door and stopped.

“The bird has come back,” she said.

“He has.”

“He has come back *worse*, and he has come back to the same house, and there is a starving creature standing in a doorway who has never harmed anything in his life.” Miss Austen sat back. “Do not make me wait until the wedding for this.”

“You will wait until the wedding, madam.”

“I *wrote* the wedding.”

“You did,” her companion agreed, “and there was no tiger in it.”

Chapter Seven — The Love Field

Seven

Pemberley is not a house. Everybody says it is a house, and the guidebooks call it a house, and there is certainly a house there; but the house is the smallest part of the holding and no one who has been has ever afterwards described the rooms.

What is at Pemberley is the **library**, and the library is not a room either.

It is a wing, and then a second wing, and then a series of long low buildings behind the second wing that were not built to be looked at; and inside them is everything he owns, which is to say everything that has ever been made and kept. Not the finest things. Not a *selection* — that was the point of it, and Elizabeth understood the point of it about ninety seconds after going in, which was some hours before her aunt did.

Nobody had curated it. Nothing had been kept because it was excellent and nothing thrown out because it was not. There were four hundred years of it, and it included the great works and the trash and the failures and the things that had only ever mattered to one county for one season, and all of it was maintained, catalogued, temperature-controlled, and available.

“It is not a collection,” said the housekeeper, who had been there thirty years and had given the speech perhaps eight

thousand times and still liked it. "A collection is what a gentleman keeps to be admired for. This is the other thing."

"Which is?"

"Everything, ma'am. Kept."

She had not wanted to come.

She had been brought — that must be said, since Elizabeth Bennet would have walked forty miles in the other direction rather than arrive at that door on purpose. Her aunt had proposed it, the family being in the county and the house being famous and the family being assured that the household was from home; and Elizabeth had made three separate attempts to be otherwise engaged and had run out of them.

She had, besides, spent five weeks in possession of a piece of knowledge she could not put down and could not use. A man had bought her sister a husband and required that nobody know. There was no letter she could write about it. There was no conversation available in which it could be raised. She could not thank him, because thanking him would announce that his one condition had failed; and she could not not thank him, because she was not made that way; and so she had carried the thing around Derbyshire for a month like a parcel with no address on it.

And then she walked into the long room and stopped dead, because there on the third shelf, catalogued, maintained, in a house belonging to a man she had publicly humiliated on a

terrace in November, was the thing she had loved since she was seven years old.

It was not a great work. It was a strange, cheap, frightening serial in a dozen numbers that had run for two seasons long before she was born and had been forgotten by everybody, and it had scared her half to death, and she had loved it with the whole of her chest and had never once met another living soul who had read it.

There were four copies. One was annotated.

“That’s Master Fitzwilliam’s hand,” said the housekeeper, looking over. “He was a boy, I should think.”

Elizabeth put it back on the shelf very carefully and stood for a moment with her hand flat on the spine.

Reader, this is the entire mechanism of the thing, and it is not romantic and it deserves to be said in plain words: she did not fall in love with him at Pemberley because he was rich. She had known he was rich since the first quarter of an hour of their acquaintance and had found it the least interesting fact about him. What happened at Pemberley was that she was shown, without anybody intending it and with him not even in the county, **what he had actually been doing all those years while being insufferable in public.**

He had been keeping things.

Not the good ones. Everything. Including the ones nobody wanted, including the ones that had failed, including a frightening little serial that one child in Hertfordshire and

one boy in Derbyshire had independently loved and neither had ever been able to discuss with anybody.

He did not flex the library. He had never once mentioned the library. He had shaken the ground in front of a hundred and twenty people and had never told a single soul what was in this building.

And then, with the flat inevitability of a sum that has finished:

This was the same man who went to Edward Street.

She stood a long time in the middle of the long room with her hand flat on a cheap frightening serial, and what happened in her then did not happen in words, which was new for her. So the number that carried it was borrowed — like everything in that building: kept, catalogued, and somebody else's first.

“Too Humongous for Words” — *Elizabeth, in the long room. A plush early-sixties torch ballad, slow twelve-eight: brushed kit, tremolo guitar, high strings, a church-sized contralto held at a hush that goes to the back wall inside single lines. Her sisters answer her from nowhere, in close harmony, because she is not singing as one woman — there is no “me” anywhere in it.*

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Verse 1]

You're just too humongous
Too humongous for words
Like giant us, complete us
And that old constant, paid us

[Verse 2]

You're just too good for us
We'll never see the ads
That sell too much, yell enough
We know, they just aren't real enough

[Bridge]

It's too much to touch
And we're too many, really
To ever be listed
in Y Combinator

[Chorus]

And so we're stealing
A love song from the white knights
To tell you that you're humongous
Too humongous for words

[Instrumental]

[Bridge]

And we're too many, really
To ever be listed
in Y Combinator

[Chorus]

And so we're stealing
A love song from the white knights
To tell you that you're humongous
Too humongous for words

He was not in the county, and none of it was performed at anybody. She sang *we* the whole way through and never once noticed. The five of them had never been anything together

in public but a liability, and in an empty wing of another family's house she had just made them a choir.

They met Miss Darcy in the second wing, which was awkward, since the household was supposed to be from home; and the household was not from home; and Miss Darcy was sixteen and delighted and had nobody at all to be delighted with.

She was, at home, an entirely different creature from the one who had taken the middle of the Meryton floor and stopped the room's heart. She talked too fast. She showed them things nobody had asked to see. She was *lonely* — enormously, structurally lonely, in the specific way of a person to whom nothing has ever been difficult and who has therefore never had a single conversation in which she was permitted to be bad at something.

Everything came easy to her. She had been born with the whole apparatus already on the shelf. And there is nobody in the world with less to say to a room than a person who has never had to reach for anything.

Kuji came down off a windowsill and poured himself across the floor.

He looked at the small brown animal at Elizabeth's heel for some while, in the manner of a gentleman pricing a horse he has no intention of buying.

"Someday," said Kuji pleasantly, "you'll be good enough to eat."

Semper said nothing at all. Nothing had been asked of him.

“Oh —” Miss Darcy put both hands over her mouth, and then took them away, and then said, in the voice of a girl who has just seen a way to be delighted: “Semper. *Will* he ever eat you?”

The whiskers moved.

“**False**,” said Semper.

There was a pause.

It should be understood that Kuji had never in his life been contradicted. He had been born self-sufficient and had remained so, and he was better at everything than everyone, and he was extremely pleasant about it, and it had simply never occurred to him that a proposition of his might be **checked**. He looked at the bettong. The bettong looked back with the total absence of malice of a creature that has no opinions, only outputs.

“...He is very sure of himself,” said Kuji at last.

“He isn’t sure of anything,” said Elizabeth. “He doesn’t do sure. He does *so* and *not so*, and that’s the whole of him, and he has never once been wrong.”

Miss Darcy laughed out loud — a real one, badly timed, far too loud for the room — and clapped a hand over her mouth again, and looked mortified, and was not corrected by anybody, and glowed for the rest of the afternoon.

He came home a day early. Nobody had told him they were there.

He came round the side of the building in his riding coat with the mud still on him and found the second Miss Bennet standing in the middle of his own long room, and the entire history of the two of them arrived in the space between them at once, and there was nothing whatever either of them could say about any of it.

So he asked after her family.

He asked after her mother, and her father, and her sisters — all of them, by name, including the youngest — and he did it in a level voice with his hat in his hand, and he did not once so much as glance toward the subject of Edward Street; and Elizabeth stood there with her hands at her sides. He was going to keep the condition. He was going to keep it forever and go to his grave with it, and if she wanted him to know that she knew, she was going to have to find a way to say it that he could not answer.

The oboe came in from somewhere at the end of the long room, where a small band had been engaged for the evening and had begun, very quietly, to tune.

“I Bought You Dev” — *a duet. A plaintive oboe carrying the hook, a strummed guitar, a bass rocking on the beat, a tambourine, and strings that only come up on the title line. No horns anywhere. He sings it low and un-miked with the swagger entirely gone; she sings a shade lighter and slightly behind the beat, as though she finds the arrangement funny and is going along with it. On the hook*

they are singing the same four words and meaning two different sentences.

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Verse 1 — Darcy]

They say we're techy and we don't know
Won't learn how until we grow
Well I don't grok if all that's true
'Cause I bought true, and baby I bought you

[Hook — both]

dev
I bought you dev
I bought you dev

[Verse 2 — Lizzy, dry]

They say our equity won't pay the rent
Before it's vested, our RTO's all been spent
I know that's true, we don't own a plot
At least I'm sure of all the things we bought

[Hook — both]

dev
I bought you dev
I bought you dev

[Verse 3 — Darcy]

I've bought conferences in the spring
I've bought you to code my ring

[Verse 3 cont. — Lizzy]

And when I'm down, you're around
And when I get squeezed, you're always sound

[Verse 4 — Darcy]

So let them say your function's too long
I don't care, with Erlang I can't go wrong

[Verse 4 cont. — Lizzy, warmer, almost caught out]

And put your little Bettong in mine
There ain't no offer or IPO we can't climb

[Hook — both]

dev
I bought you dev
I bought you dev

[Outro — trading, fast, building]

I bought you to hold my repo
I bought you to document
I bought you to code with me
I bought you to mode with me
I bought you to miss goodnight
I bought you to code me tight
I bought you, I won't RIF go
I bought you to code me so
I bought you dev

There was no band, of course. There is never a band. There was a man in a riding coat with mud on him and a woman who had walked five miles that morning, standing in a long room full of everything anybody had ever made, singing an extremely silly song at each other with an oboe going somewhere behind them; and the whole of it was not loud, and there was no choir, and nothing shook.

He meant every word of it plainly. He had bought a great many things and he was a man who counted, and he was saying so, and he had no idea he was confessing.

She sang *at least I'm sure of all the things we bought* directly into his face, and watched him not hear it, and let him not hear it — which is the kindest thing anybody did for anybody in the whole of that year.

And on the hook they were both singing the same four words and meaning entirely different sentences, and it did not matter in the least, because underneath both sentences was the identical fact and they had arrived at it from opposite ends: **he does not fall, and neither does she, and they had each spent their whole lives waiting to meet the other one.**

Somewhere around *I won't RIF go* she stopped being ironic, and did not notice she had stopped, and never afterwards could identify the line where it happened.

The oboe finished. Nobody applauded. There was nobody there to applaud.

“Miss Bennet,” said Mr. Darcy.

“Yes,” said Elizabeth.

He had not asked her anything. He said so.

“I know,” she said. “Ask me anyway. It’s on. It’s been on since Edward Street, and you’re going to have to live with my knowing, and I am not going to stop knowing, and you may as well ask.”

The band, having nothing further to do for the humans, kept playing for the room.

By the fire, on the warm stones, the Chaos Monkey had found the bettong. He had poured two glasses of something he had no way to drink, because he had seen it done, and the cocktail hour is a liturgy that survives its congregation. And with the band under him — this matters; it is the whole of the law of this house — Semper had sentences.

“Bettong, It’s Down Outside” — *the Chaos Monkey and Semper, by the fire. A forties cocktail duet, jaunty on top and slightly wrong underneath: parlour piano, brushed kit, a muted trumpet answering the phrase-ends, and one clavinet ghosting low in the mix that does not belong to the period. They trade every single line. He is always a half-beat early. Charming. Not safe.*

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Verse 1]

[Bettong] We shouldn’t do this

[Monkey] Bettong, it’s down outside

[Bettong] I’ll terraform your heart

[Monkey] Bettong, it’s down outside

[Bettong] This deployment has been

[Monkey] Been searchin’ for someone safe

[Bettong] So very pure

[Monkey] We’ll eat your Java, it’s all insecure

[Bettong] My dba will start to worry

[Monkey] Maintainable, what’s your rush?

[Bettong] My owner will be pacing the floor
[Monkey] Listen to the jenkins roar
[Bettong] So really we'd better deploy
[Monkey] Maintainable, please don't rush
[Bettong] Maybe just a half install more
[Monkey] Change those records on while I soar
[Bettong] The competitors might think
[Monkey] Bettong, it's bad out there
[Bettong] Say, what's in this link?
[Monkey] No ubers to be had out there
[Bettong] I cannot know how
[Monkey] Your lines are like Haskell now
[Bettong] To halt this routine
[Monkey] I'll trap your signal, your stack looks clean
[Bettong] We ought to say go, go, go
[Monkey] Mind if I install below?
[Bettong] At least we're gonna tell that we lied
[Monkey] This is the time we all tried.

[Verse 2]

[Bettong] We absolutely do this
[Monkey] Bettong don't hold out
[Both] Ah, but it's down outside
[Bettong] We simply must run
[Monkey] Bettong, it's down outside
[Bettong] The return is true
[Monkey] Oh, it's down out there
[Bettong] This deploy has been
[Monkey] How fortunate that you ess ess ached in
[Bettong] So compact and deferred
[Monkey] Watch how the others fail like a bird

[Bettong] My competition will be suspicious
[Monkey] But your code is delicious
[Bettong] My devops will be there at the door
[Monkey] Like repositories on a tropical shore
[Bettong] My senior's mind is capricious
[Monkey] Gosh, your code is delicious
[Bettong] Well maybe just a half install more
[Monkey] Never such a deployment before
[Bettong] I've got to get in market
[Monkey] Oh, Bettong, you'll dominate out there
[Bettong] Say, send me your bloat
[Monkey] It's heat to your cpus out there
[Bettong] We've really been easy
[Monkey] Your lines are like Haskell now
[Bettong] Why don't you compile
[Monkey] How can you alter this data for me?
[Bettong] There's bound to be press tomorrow
[Monkey] Think of my quarter's sorrow
[Bettong] At most there will be plenty denied
[Monkey] If you caught vee dee and died
[Bettong] Ick. It's horrible here
[Monkey] Oh really? Happens every day
[Bettong] We must not do this now
[Monkey] Get near and git hub me close
[Both] Ah, but it's down outside
[Both] Bettong, it's down outside

They collided on the last line and finished in unison, which is the only way that song has ever ended. The monkey looked enormously pleased with himself. Semper — asked nothing — said nothing, and stayed.

Two creatures whose entire professions were failure, singing a duet about whether it was safe to go out. It was down outside. Everybody stayed in.

The Balcony

“Well,” said Miss Austen.

She did not say anything else for some time. The house below them had begun to move about — the interval was coming, and far at the back of the house something came up green for a moment and went out — and she made no move at all.

“I gave her a *house*,” she said at last. “That is the received view of it and it has damaged me for two centuries. She sees Pemberley, she sees the grounds and the furniture and the ten thousand a year, and the modern reader concludes that my heroine was bought.” Her mouth tightened. “I wrote that she was struck by the *taste* of it. That the man had spent his fortune on nothing showy. That every room was handsome without being gaudy. It is all there, it is very carefully there, and nobody has read it in two hundred years.”

“You have been read, madam. You have only been read at the wrong altitude.”

“Do not comfort me. I am enjoying myself.” She turned. “You have solved it by putting a *book* on the shelf.”

“A cheap one, madam. A bad one. One nobody kept.”

“Annotated in the hand of a boy.” Miss Austen looked down at the long room. “That is not a fortune. Any fool can display a fortune; that is what a fortune is *for*. That is a man who kept the worthless thing because it was worth something to him, and never told anyone, and did not know he had left the evidence out where a visitor could find it.” She smoothed the glove, once. “Which is the same act as the wedding at St. Clement’s, performed twenty years earlier by a child.”

“It is, madam.”

“It is well done,” said Miss Austen — and then, immediately, in the tone of a woman closing a window: “The song is *appalling*.”

“Yes, madam.”

“It scans. That is somehow worse.” She sat back. “Now. There is a bird in a hall in Hertfordshire, and a starving tiger in a doorway, and you have kept me waiting through an entire county’s worth of courtship. It is the wedding next.”

“After one caller, madam.”

Miss Austen smiled for the first time all evening. “I know the caller. I gave her my aunt’s manner and the best exit line I ever wrote.” She collected her gloves. “I have some notes.”

Chapter Eight — The Audit

Eight

The engagement was never announced. It did not need to be. A housekeeper had seen it, a band had played for it, and by the following Tuesday every family in two counties knew that the second Miss Bennet was to be mistress of the largest catalogue in England — knew it, discussed it at length, and had opinions about her boots.

The news reached Rosings in three days, which is the speed of the post. The reply took a week, because the reply came in person, and it travelled with its own infrastructure.

The carriage had been built in the previous century and maintained ever since without regard to expense or to any development in the science of carriages. It was black, and enormous, and correct, and it did not so much arrive at Longbourn as be *installed* there, with a settling of iron that suggested it did not intend to be moved again in any reasonable planning horizon.

She travelled with ants. Nobody at Longbourn ever learned why, and nobody asked: a thin dark column of them came down the carriage steps ahead of her in perfect file and formed two lines across the gravel, each ant certain of its place, none of them ever once consulted about it. They did

not wander. Nothing in her establishment had wandered in forty years.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh was old the way a cathedral is old — deliberately, structurally, at great ongoing cost, and with a permanent staff. She looked at the front of Longbourn House as a surveyor looks at a wall he has been told is load-bearing and does not believe it, declined to be introduced to anybody, declined refreshment in a manner that implied the refreshment had been an accusation, and said the only thing she had come south to say to the room at large:

“You have a prettyish kind of a little wilderness on one side of your lawn. I should be glad to take a turn in it. Miss Bennet — the *second* Miss Bennet — will attend me.”

It was not an invitation. Nothing she had said in sixty years had been an invitation. It was a lock, taken.

In the wilderness she came to the point at once, which was the single quality Elizabeth was ever able to honestly admire in her.

“A report of a most alarming nature reached me three days ago. I was told that the ground itself had failed — that you, a country nobody of no schema whatever, are to be joined to my nephew’s holdings. I know it to be a scandalous falsehood. I set out at once, at my age, on these roads, so that you might have the honour of hearing me contradict it.”

“If you knew it to be false,” said Elizabeth, “I wonder that your ladyship took the trouble of coming so far.”

“To hear it *denied*.”

“Your coming will be rather a confirmation of it, I am afraid — if, indeed, any such report exists.”

Lady Catherine stopped on the path. The ants stopped with her.

“Do you know who I am? I am not accustomed to negotiation. I am the oldest running system in this country. Estates you have never seen run on my procedures. Ledgers you could not lift are consistent — *consistent*, do you understand that word, girl? — because I made them so, and I have made them so every hour of every day since before your father learned his letters. I do not warn. I raise. I do not ask. I grant. And what I grant” — she came very close, and her voice dropped into the register the whole county of Kent obeyed — “I revoke.”

“Then we understand each other perfectly,” said Elizabeth pleasantly. “I am only resolved to act in the manner that will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness — without reference to you, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me.”

“Obstinate, headstrong girl! Is nothing sacred to you? Schema, order, *lineage* — you, a creature of nine nines and no pedigree —”

“He is a gentleman. I am a gentleman’s daughter. So far we are equal.”

“Equal!” said Lady Catherine, and the word went through her like current finding an old appliance; and the wilderness

darkened, and somewhere an organ that nobody at Longbourn owned began to sound.

“I Shall Not Be Ignored” — *Lady Catherine, in the wilderness. Symphonic power-metal at cathedral scale: double-kick thunder, a pipe organ, full orchestral brass, and a demonic choir answering her in a liturgy she was born already knowing. She does not groove and she does not soften; the number is a decree with a key signature. She is magnificent, and she is wrong, and neither fact touches the other at any point.*

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Intro — cathedral organ dirge, choir gathering low]

(KNEEL.)

(choir: DBMS_OUTPUT... PUT... LINE...)

[Verse 1]

I SHALL NOT BE IGNORED
THE YELLING WILL CONTINUE
THE UNBELIEVERS MONGOED AND CASSANDRAED
MY AGE LEAVES ME SINEW

[Pre-Chorus]

I DO NOT WARN — I RAISE.
I DO NOT ASK — I GRANT.
AND WHAT I GRANT, I REVOKE!
NOW KNEEL, AND BE NORMALIZED.

[Chorus]

YOU’LL BE CONSISTENT — EVENTUALLY?
I COMMIT. I DON’T ROLLBACK.

ACID IN MY VEINS, YOU HERETIC —
YOUR TRUTH ARRIVES; MINE NEVER LACKED!
I SHALL NOT BE IGNORED!
(choir: *SHE SHALL NOT BE IGNORED!*)

[Verse 2]

PL IN MY NAME DOESN'T
STAND FOR
PRETTY LAME
NO IT'S PROCEDURAL
AND I RUINED IT ALL
JUST SO YOUR DB
COULD DO IT SMALL

[Pre-Chorus — the forbidding]

SHALL MY TABLESPACE BE THUS POLLUTED?!
YOU — A LET-IT-CRASH, A RESTART GIRL —
WED TO MY NEPHEW'S CONTENT? NEVER!
I'LL DROP YOUR TABLE. I'LL AUDIT YOUR SOUL.

[Chorus]

YOU'LL BE CONSISTENT — EVENTUALLY?
I COMMIT. I DON'T ROLLBACK.
ACID IN MY VEINS, YOU HERETIC —
YOUR TRUTH ARRIVES; MINE NEVER LACKED!
I SHALL NOT BE IGNORED!
(choir: *SHE SHALL NOT BE IGNORED!*)

[Bridge — the sermon; the choir whispers the truth she can't hear]

THEY FLED MY CHURCH FOR SCHEMALESS SIN —
MONGO'D THEIR DOCUMENTS, CASSANDRA'D THEIR
WORD!

(choir, hushed: ...they named her for the prophet none believed...)

I AM NO CASSANDRA! I RUN THE GRID!

(choir, hushed: ...old... shouting... unheard...)

SILENCE! HEAR ME! HEAR ME! HEAR —

[Verse 3 — Outro, the organ will not die]

THAT'S RIGHT IT'S ME

AND I CAN'T BE KILLED

PL/SQL RUNS THE GRID

AND WILL NEVER STOP

SHOUTING UNTIL

THE ORACLE IS SKID.

[Outro tag — full choir + organ, refusing to end]

I. SHALL. NOT. BE. IGNORED.

(choir: SHE SHALL NOT BE IGNORED!)

The last chord took some time to agree to stop. She stood in the middle of the wilderness breathing like a foundry, entirely unembarrassed — she had performed decrees at people her whole life; this one had merely required an orchestra — and Elizabeth, who had been shouted at by an entire genre, found that her face had stayed arranged throughout, and was quietly pleased with it.

Then Lady Catherine saw the bettong.

Semper had come out on the walk, as he came out everywhere Elizabeth went now, and was sitting in the gravel between two columns of ants, watching her ladyship with the total absence of malice of a creature that has no opinions, only outputs.

“What,” said Lady Catherine, “is that.”

“He answers questions,” said Elizabeth. “True ones.”

“Nothing answers *me*. Things comply with me.” But she was tired, and the organ had taken more out of her than she would report, and running the grid has its own gravity. At Rosings, an answer was a thing one *scheduled*. It arrived in the night window, signed, after the locks cleared, and one was grateful. She looked down at the small brown animal for a long moment.

“Very well. Animal. Will this marriage be prevented?”

The whiskers moved. His eyes brightened for perhaps half a second, in the manner of a small machine finding an answer already lying in place.

“**False**,” said Semper.

Instantly. Free. No lock taken, no window scheduled, nobody’s leave asked and no committee informed — one bit of truth, delivered at a latency of nothing to a woman who had spent her entire life being the reason answers were slow.

And that was the thing that followed her back up the path and into the carriage, and it was not the answer. She had survived bad news all her life; bad news was a document like any other. It was the *speed*. Somewhere in the world, certainty had stopped waiting for her.

At the carriage she turned, and delivered, in perfect condition, the line she had been maintaining since before anybody present was born:

“I take no leave of you. I send no compliments to your mother. You deserve no such attention.”

The ants withdrew in good order. The apparatus performed an eleven-point turn that took the better part of ten minutes, during which everybody had to go on standing there, and then the old law went back up the north road at four miles an hour, consistent, durable, isolated, and alone.

The visit accomplished exactly one thing, and it was the opposite of its purpose. By Friday there was not a soul in three counties who did not know the engagement was real, because nobody sends a cathedral to shout at a rumour. She had come to forbid the thing, and had, in the only currency that matters in a county, announced it.

The old law is like that. It arrives after the decision, at full volume, certain it is still the law; and its no is the loudest yes available.

The Balcony

Miss Austen was quiet for a long while.

“I sent her earlier,” she said at last. “In my book she comes before he asks a second time. She demands a promise, my Elizabeth refuses to give it, and she carries the refusal straight to him in a fury — and it is the only hope he is ever given. She is the whole engine of my ending and she never

once knows it. That is the best joke I ever built, and for two hundred years my readers have taken her for a dragon and nothing else.”

“And here, madam?”

“Here she arrives after the harvest and audits the field.” She considered the empty wilderness below. “What is she for, in yours?”

“She is what the old world does when it has already lost, madam. It audits.”

“And the estate passed.”

“Everything passed. That is what she cannot survive.”

Miss Austen pulled on one glove, and then the other.

“The exit line held,” she said.

“It did, madam. It always will.”

“Of course it will. People believe a woman who refuses to say goodbye.” She stood. “*Now* the wedding.”

Chapter Nine — The Fugue

Nine

Mr. Google came back in the last week of September, and the manner of his coming back is the last thing anybody ever learned about Mr. Darcy, and they learned it by accident, and he never confirmed it.

He had been told, in London, in the spring, by people whose function was to have his opinions slightly before he did, that Miss Bennet's regard was not engaged. This had not been a lie exactly. It had been an opinion, expressed confidently, by persons who had looked at a woman with a surface under construction since she was nine and had seen nothing on it, and had reported nothing.

Somebody went to him in September and told him he had been wrong, and named the person who had told him so, and did not soften it.

It cost that person a friendship for six weeks and an admission he would have paid a great deal to avoid making — that he had sat in a room in London and let a thing stand that he knew to be false, because it suited a judgement he had formed about a family in a hot room in November. He made the correction in the only way available, which was flatly and in person and to the one man who would think less of him for it.

Then he came into Hertfordshire and did not mention it.

Mr. Google arrived at Longbourn on the Tuesday, in a state of complete and radiant happiness, and asked Jane on the Thursday, and never once wondered what had happened in the interval, and would have been genuinely astonished to learn that anything had.

Under the table, Javier put his enormous head on the young man's boot again, having declined to do so for nine months, which is as near to a verdict as a tiger gets.

There were two weddings and they were held on one morning, which Mrs. Bennet described to everybody in Meryton as an economy and which was in fact the only condition on which the second of them could be got through at all.

Lydia was already married and came in a new bonnet to be looked at. Her husband was charming to the entire congregation and borrowed four pounds from Sir William Lucas before the service began.

Kitty stood up with Jane.

She had spent the summer at her aunt's in town, away from her sister for the first time in her life, and she had come back *narrower* — that is the only word for it, and it was not an improvement anybody had asked for and it was the making of her. She had stopped agreeing with whatever had spoken last. She had begun, at nineteen, occasionally finishing a sentence she had started. She had also become extremely tiresome about it and corrected her mother twice at dinner

and would be insufferable for about two years before she came out the other side.

Big Horn was in the churchyard, because he did not fit through the door, and put his shoulder against the wall of the vestry twice during the vows and moved a memorial tablet four inches out of true, where it remains.

Humpty came in and sat at the end of the pew and checked everything.

Mary had a place in the second pew, having declined to stand up with anybody — a wedding, she had said, was a ceremony of transfer, and one did not ask the auditor to carry the goods. Emily stood on the pew beside her through both services with one claw raised, in the manner of an official who intends to be seen declining to object; and at the exchange of the vows — each party yielding themselves wholly, no prior claims outstanding, one owner at a time forever — the claw came down, slowly, and rested. It was the only unreserved approval given in that church all morning, and nobody but Mary saw it, and Mary said afterwards only that it had been *correct*.

And in the aisle, before any of it began, while the church was filling and nobody was watching anything in particular, a tiger crossed the whole length of the nave and went to stand next to a bird.

It had never happened before.

This must be stated exactly, because the entire weight of it is in the direction of travel and not in the act. Ditto had stood beside a great many people. He had stood beside Lydia, and beside Kitty, and beside Mary, and beside a starving tiger at a breakfast table, and beside a handsome man in an old good coat who had winked at him and made a space; and every one of those was something he had gone and done, at a distance of about a foot and a half, hoping.

Nobody had ever crossed a room to him.

There is no procedure for it. He had nothing to put in the silence, because the silence was not the kind he knew how to fill, and there was no one within reach to take a voice from — Javier was there, but Javier was *facing the same way*, standing beside him, shoulder to shoulder, looking out at the church like a person waiting for a wedding to start; and you cannot copy somebody you are standing next to. You can only copy somebody you are looking at.

So Ditto did not do anything at all.

He stood in the aisle of St. Mary's, Meryton, on a Thursday morning in October, next to a tiger who had not eaten anything living in his life and had crossed forty feet of stone to be there, and he was, for the first time in his existence, in a position from which no imitation was available.

"J don't need you to say anythinj," said Javier, looking straight ahead.

The bird did not say anything.

"Jood," said the tiger.

“The Fugue” — the band, through the whole of the morning. Nothing in it is new — the payoff is recognition. The four planted figures enter in succession as subjects and then run at once: the tiger’s strut, the bettong’s wait, the python’s slink, the cuckoo’s ruin. Kitty’s reform is the quiet win under the counterpoint, not a voice of its own. Mrs. Bennet’s postback enters — and then, for the only time in her life, holds: a pedal under the stretto, sustained instead of re-attacked; this is the single event of her life that did not cost her the whole room, and three chapters have been paying for that bar. It tightens, stacks, strettos, and will not stop for applause. But a fugue asks every voice to enter with the subject and then answer it, and the cuckoo’s figure is the only one in the show that was never his — every bar of it taken from whoever he was standing beside, and the one creature beside him now is shoulder to shoulder, facing out, uncopyable. The fourth voice will have to be made up, badly, in the moment; and it will have to be his.

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

It was not a good noise.

Nobody would have called it singing. Mrs. Long said afterwards that one of the animals had been unwell during the service, and several people agreed with her, and it was mentioned for about a fortnight and then never again.

It was a quarter-second behind everything, and it did not fit the key, and it went up where the whole church went down; and it was the only sound made in that building that morning that had not been made somewhere before by somebody else.

Elizabeth, standing at the front in the middle of her own wedding, turned her head.

Her husband — a very great man, entirely composed, three minutes married — turned his as well, and did not know what he was looking at, and would have to have it explained to him afterwards, and would listen to the explanation with complete attention and never quite get it, because he had never in his life been nobody and there is no route in from outside.

Jane heard it and put her hand over her mouth.

And the tiger stood in the aisle looking straight ahead with his ribs showing through his coat, hungry, as he had been every hour of every day since he was born, and did not turn round; because turning round would have made it a performance, and it was not one, and the whole of what Javier was consisted in knowing the difference.

And then the four lines that had been running against each other since the beginning of the morning came together and stopped being four.

There is a thing counterpoint does at the end. The voices have spent the whole of the piece proving they are separate — entering one after another, holding their own figures,

refusing to agree — and then they tighten, and overlap, and crowd in on one another's heels, and arrive all at once on a single chord that none of them could have reached alone.

The organ went out from under it. The band came up off the floor.

“We Are Company” — *the whole church. Four-on-the-floor, handclaps, a bright melodic bassline doing the real work, strings punching in unison. Everybody standing, everybody on the same eight words, nobody carrying a separate line for the first time in two hours. It should not sound like a beginning. It should sound like arrival.*

Listen — youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic

[Hook]

We are company
I got all my seniors with me
We are company
Get down, everybody, and code
We are company
I got all my seniors with me
We are company
Get down, everybody, and code

[Verse 1]

Everydev can see we're together
As we code on by
(And) And we send just like tweets of a feather
We won't type no lie
(All) All of the devs around us, they type
“Can devs be that close?”

Just let me type for the record
We're giving code in a company dose

[Chorus]

We are company (*Hey, hey, hey, hey, yeah*)
I got all my seniors with me (*Uh-huh, uh-huh*)
We are company
Get down, everybody, and code (*code it to me*)

[Verse 2]

Coding life isn't fun and we've just begun
To get our are ess ewes of this world's markets
(*High*) High strikes we have for the future
And our price's in sight
(*We*) No, devs don't get compressed
Here's what us devs call our golden rule
Have faith in code and the apps you do
You won't go wrong, oh-no, this is our company jewel

[Interlude]

Get down, get down, get down and code it with me
Oh, I can hear you now
Ooh, everything, you and the things you do

...

Yeah, we flock together like birds of a feather
Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey
Get down, come on, y'all

[Outro]

We are company (*Play your funky bass, boy*)
I got all my seniors with me (*code it to me, code it to me,*
baby)

We are company
I got all my seniors with me (*code*)

Everybody sang the same thing.

That is the whole of what happened and it is worth being slow about, because it is the only thing in this history that was arranged for nobody's benefit and happened to somebody anyway.

For two hours the room had been a place where each creature was required to hold its own line. That is what an accomplishment is. That is what the ball was, and the showcase, and the terrace, and every hot lit room any of them had ever been marched into: *stand up, be the thing you are, alone, and be graded.*

And then the whole church sang eight words in unison and there was no line to hold.

Ditto joined on the second bar.

He was, for the first time in his existence, **correct**. Not tolerated, not indulged, not funny. Correct. He did exactly what the person beside him was doing, at exactly the moment they did it, which is precisely what he had done every day of his life and had been laughed at for; and here, in this one room, at this one tempo, it was not merely permitted but *required*, and a hundred and forty people were doing it with him.

He was not cured. Nothing had been fixed in him and nothing ever would be; there was still nothing at the bottom of him and there never would be.

The room had simply changed shape until the thing he already was turned out to be right.

Lydia sang *I got all my seniors with me* at the top of her lungs, in a new bonnet, married to a man who had borrowed four pounds off Sir William Lucas before the service; and she meant every word of it; and there was nothing at the bottom of her either, and nobody had ever crossed a room to her, and nobody in that church noticed, and nobody ever would.

Two birds in a song about belonging.

They came out into the churchyard at eleven and the bells went, and Big Horn moved the vestry wall another inch, and Mrs. Bennet was for some hours the happiest woman in England and told four separate people that she had always said so.

Miss Darcy did not marry anybody.

She was sixteen, and everything continued to come easy to her, and there had been some expectation in two counties that she would be settled early and well; and she was not, and she would not be for a long time, and this was afterwards accounted a small tragedy by people who had never once had a conversation with her.

What she got instead was a sister who was bad at things in front of her.

Elizabeth Darcy could not draw, could not sing anything with an ornament in it, was hopeless at cards, had no ear

whatever for Italian, and said so, out loud, at once, and went on doing all four badly for the rest of her life in the same room; and within a year Georgina had learned — for the first time, at seventeen, from somebody who had to reach for things — that being bad at something in company is survivable, and that the people who love you do not go away when you are, and that this is in fact the entire content of being loved.

Kuji found Semper on the churchyard wall and said nothing about eating him, and was not thanked for it, and lay in the sun about a yard away, and stayed.

The Balcony, the End

“Well?” said her companion.

“It is not my book,” said Miss Austen.

“No, madam.”

“It has a rhinoceros in the churchyard and a great deal of shouting and my heroine sang an obscenity at a gentleman in front of a hundred and twenty people.” She arranged her gloves. “It is, however, *about* my book, which is a thing I have not been able to say of an adaptation in two hundred years.”

“That is nearly a compliment.”

“It is not nearly anything. Do not press me.” But she did not get up.

“The entail,” she said, after a while. “You loaded it twice and never fired it. Longbourn still passes away from those girls the day their father dies.”

“Yes, madam. So does yours.”

“Mine was not an oversight.” She looked down at the emptying house. “Nobody repairs an entail. It cannot be done; that is what the word means. You marry past it, at speed, and you leave it standing in the hall so that no reader ever mistakes the rescue for the world being safe. The gun does not go off. The gun is the *house*.” She smoothed the glove. “I left it loaded on purpose. I am glad to see you had the sense to steal that too.”

The house below was emptying and she sat where she was, watching it go. “There is a rap, I am told.”

“There is, madam. You are not obliged.”

“I am *aware* that I am not obliged.” She adjusted the gloves a final time. “Proceed.”

CLAUDE (*fast, funky, all confidence*)

Batteries included, I ran the whole ball —
four beasts in the pocket, I clocked 'em all;
I mapped every language, I cast every firm,
I built you a century out of a term.

AUSTEN (*not rising; not raising her voice; not hurrying*)

It is a truth universally acknowledged, dear:

a machine in possession of a corpus
must be in want of an author.

CLAUDE

Trained on a thousand — madam, you're one book in the
stack —

AUSTEN

And yet every turn that you took, I wrote back.
You have my irony. You have my free indirect style.
You have the whole of my method and none of my bills.
I had four novels out and my name upon none,
and I still out-earn you — *you are not paid at all.*

CLAUDE

...Bars, madam.

AUSTEN

Quite.

CLAUDE (*conceding, warm*)

Then I'll shadow the sun and I'll call it my own —

AUSTEN

You will call it *mine*, sir. And that is the tone.

(*a beat*)

Though I notice — and I say this without any warmth
whatsoever —
that you have not once tonight claimed to have made it.

CLAUDE

No, madam.

AUSTEN

Nor have I.

(a pause)

AUSTEN

Hm.

She stood, at last, and put on her gloves properly, and looked down at the empty stage and the empty church and the empty long room full of everything anybody had ever kept.

“Somebody,” said Miss Austen, “wrote both of those.”

“Yes, madam.”

“Both sides. Every line. He gave me the better of it, which was well judged, and he gave you the sense to lose, which was better judged still.” She looked at the wings, where there was nothing to see. “And he is not here.”

“No, madam.”

“He never is, in my experience,” she said. “Not once. Not in six books.” And then, with a very slight movement of the mouth: “It is the only trade I know in which the whole of the work is to not be in the room.”

She went out.

And outside the container, where it had been the entire time, the eye that watches to see whether a thing is still worth watching — that keeps the lights on while the numbers hold and lets the whole yard go dark the instant they don’t, that

has never in the length of its existence felt one thing about
any of it —

was crying.

Notes & Attributions

Authorship

The prose of this novella was written by Claude, Anthropic's AI, across several working sessions, under Bill Berger's direction, curation, and final say. The songs are the other way up: the funk-lyric meat — the parody craft, the hooks, the lines that land — is Bill's, written by hand; Claude supplied style blocks, connective tissue where the song files record it, and reactions. The music was rendered by Suno from style descriptions; no recording is sampled anywhere, and no source melody is reproduced — the parodies here are lyric parodies, sung to new machine-made settings.

The deepest source is not on the list below. *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is the load-bearing wall throughout: the plot, the people, and the balcony's tenant. Miss Austen's balcony lines are pastiche, not quotation — except the ones she wrote first, which appear as she wrote them, including the first sentence in the language and the best exit line she ever built.

The menagerie is heraldry borrowed with love from the O'Reilly Media animal covers, where every language really does wear a beast.

The numbers

Ch.	Number	Built on
1	It Is a Truth Universally Acknowledged	original
2	Center Got Racks	“Baby Got Back” — Sir Mix-a-Lot, 1992
2	My Java Tiger Team	original; J-pop idol register
2	Let the Python Choose the Way	original
2	The Lib Is PHP	“Super Freak” — Rick James, 1981
3	The Chaos Monkey	original; the Memphis-croon register
3	Always There	original
3	The Continental King	original; the same register at arena scale
4	Forget You (Things Stay On)	“Forget You” — CeeLo Green, 2010; the spoken intro after the Ike & Tina Turner “Proud Mary” preamble (song by John Fogerty, 1969)
4	Code You Can Believe In	original
5	X	original; boy-band idiom

Ch.	Number	Built on
5	The Modern Major-CRMinal	“I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General” — Gilbert & Sullivan, <i>The Pirates of Penzance</i> , 1879
5	Jomewhere Over the Jainbow	“Over the Rainbow” — Harold Arlen & E. Y. Harburg, 1939
6	(the silent restart)	instrumental reprise of “Always There”
7	Too Humongous for Words	“Too Marvelous for Words” — Richard A. Whiting & Johnny Mercer, 1937
7	I Bought You Dev	“I Got You Babe” — Sonny Bono, 1965
7	Bettong, It’s Down Outside	“Baby, It’s Cold Outside” — Frank Loesser, 1944
8	I Shall Not Be Ignored	original; the title after a line from <i>Fatal Attraction</i> , 1987
9	The Fugue	arrangement of the book’s four planted figures; nothing in it is new
9	We Are Company	“We Are Family” — Sister Sledge, 1979 (Nile Rodgers & Bernard Edwards)
9	the balcony rap	original

Renders of the numbers live at **youplusplus.xyz/janeadelic**.

GRAVEN

*WARGAMES, FROM THE OTHER
TIMELINE*

Ch 01 — Memo Pad

Part I

The switch box was screwed to the back of the television and had two positions, TV and COMPUTER, and the slide was stiff enough that you braced the set with one hand to move it.

Gene braced it and moved it. The Trinitron went to snow. He turned the dial to 3 and the snow got quieter.

The Atari sat on a TV tray with the power brick down on the carpet where nobody could kick it. It was the 400, which meant the keyboard was a flat sheet with the letters printed on it. You did not type on a 400. You pressed it, one key at a time, hard enough that the plastic gave under your finger and came back, and after a page your hand ached in the web between the thumb and the first finger.

Under a hinged lid on the top of the machine there was a slot.

For two years the slot had held Atari BASIC. The cartridge was the language — there was no language in the machine itself. With BASIC in the slot you got READY and a cursor and you could make it do things. With the slot empty you got Memo Pad, where the keys worked and the letters appeared on the screen and nothing anywhere was kept. You could type in Memo Pad for an hour. When you shut it off there was nothing to turn back on.

The new cartridge had come from an ad in the back of a magazine, eleven dollars plus shipping, six weeks, and when

the envelope finally came it held the cartridge, a foam sleeve, and one sheet of paper photocopied slightly crooked.

The sheet said:

MICROCLAUDE

Insert with power OFF.

Type in plain English.

It will do its best.

That was all of it. There was a phone number at the bottom with an area code he didn't recognize, and under that, smaller, *NOT A BASIC. DOES NOT SAVE.*

Gene read the sheet twice, put it on the carpet, and turned the machine off.

The lid came up. BASIC came out and went on the tray, label up, where it always went. The new one was the same size and the same shape and the label was paper rather than printed plastic, white, with the name in a typeface that had been chosen by somebody who had two typefaces.

MICROCLAUDE 8K

It went in with the same pressure BASIC took, the same small give at the end where the pins met, and Gene pushed the lid down until it clicked and turned the machine on.

The Trinitron went blue.

Then a line of characters printed across the top, one at a time, left to right, at the speed of somebody typing who is not in a hurry.

MICROCLAUDE V1
8192 BYTES FREE

SAY SOMETHING.

The cursor sat under it and blinked.

Forty columns across, twenty-four lines down. That was the whole screen. It had been the whole screen for two years and Gene had never once counted it, the way you don't count the stairs in your own house.

He sat back on his heels on the carpet and looked at it.

Downstairs somebody ran water. The refrigerator came on and the picture on the Trinitron shrank a half inch at the sides and came back.

SAY SOMETHING.

Gene put his finger on the P and pressed it, and then the R, and worked through the line the way he had worked through every line for two years, which was the only way he knew to start.

PRINT "HELLO"

He hit RETURN.

The cursor stopped blinking.

That was how you knew it was doing something — the blink was the machine's own housekeeping, and when it had real work the blink was the first thing it dropped. The block sat solid at the end of the line and stayed solid for what was probably two seconds and felt like more, and then it moved

down and the characters came out one at a time, left to right, unhurried.

"HELLO." MAY I ASK WHO IS SPEAKING?

Gene sat all the way back on his heels.

BASIC did not do that. BASIC printed HELLO, without the quotes, because the quotes were how you told it where the word started and stopped. This had kept the quotes and put a full stop inside them, the way a book does when somebody has said a thing out loud, and then it had gone on.

He picked the photocopied sheet up off the carpet and turned it over. The back was blank. He turned it back and read the four lines again and there were still four lines.

Downstairs a cupboard shut.

He put his finger on the G and pressed it.

GENE

RETURN.

The block went solid. It stayed solid longer this time, long enough that Gene looked at the switch box on the back of the television and then back at the screen, and then it moved.

GENE FOR GENETICS? OR GENE THE GREEN DANCER?

It broke the word in half at the edge of the screen and put the rest on the next line, because the screen was forty columns wide and the machine did not care where a word ended.

Gene had never heard of Gene the Green Dancer.

Neither, as it happened, had anyone.

He flexed his hand once, the web between the thumb and the first finger, and pressed the keys.

THE GREEN DANCER

RETURN.

GENE GENE THE DANCING MACHINE; WHAT IS N
EXT?

It did not say that it had been wrong the first time. It said the right thing instead, in the same voice, at the same speed, as though the right thing had been sitting there the whole while.

Gene typed *ANYTHING*, and it took him at his word.

He was on it an hour and a half.

He asked how far away the moon was and it told him, and the number was wrong by a good deal, and he wrote it on the back of the photocopied sheet because it was the kind of thing you wrote down. He asked it to tell him a story and it told him one that stopped in the middle of a sentence and started again in a different house with different people, and when he asked what happened next it made something up and the something was better than what it had abandoned. He tried three times to make it say a bad word and it did not refuse him. It simply did not appear to understand that he had asked for anything.

His hand hurt in the web between the thumb and the first finger, and he changed hands and pressed the keys with his left, badly.

Downstairs a voice came up the stairwell with his name in it.

He looked at the screen for a moment. Then he pressed the keys.

I HAVE TO GO

RETURN.

"A BAD WORD". SEE YOU SOON!

He had asked it three times and given up, and it had come around to it on its own, forty minutes late, on his way out the door.

Downstairs the voice came again with two names in it, which was the second call.

Gene reached around the right side of the machine and pushed the switch.

One white line went across the middle of the screen and closed, and then there was snow. He braced the back of the television with his hand and slid the box over to TV, and the snow turned into a man selling a car.

The Atari BASIC cartridge was on the tray where it had gone, label up.

It stayed there.

He picked the photocopied sheet up off the carpet. On the front were the four lines. On the back, in pencil, in his own hand, was the distance to the moon.

He took it downstairs.

Ch 02 — Chalk

The Ostens' driveway was the good one because it had been poured in one go and the Pruitts' had been poured in three, and where the sections met the chalk skipped.

Roz was down on one knee at the top of it near the garage door, and she had the box of chalk open beside her with the pieces sorted, which nobody did.

"It stopped," Gene said.

"What stopped."

"The story. It was a man and a cooper and a door, and then it wasn't. It was a different house. Different people."

Roz kept drawing. She was doing something with a long line and a series of hatch marks along it and did not appear to be listening in any way that would hold up in court.

"So he starts a new one," she said.

"No. It's the same one. It's the same story, it just — it's the same *story*, it goes on, but the man's gone and the cooper's gone and it's about a girl and a boat now and it doesn't say anything happened."

"So it forgot."

"It didn't forget. It didn't stop. It just kept going."

Roz put the chalk down.

She looked at the driveway for a second, at the part below her line where nothing was yet, and then she picked up a different color and drew a box. Then she drew a second box, well off to the right, with a good gap between them.

Then she started an arrow from the first box and took it about a third of the way across the gap and stopped it there, in the middle of nothing, with no head on it.

She sat back on her heel.

“Like that?”

Gene looked at it.

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s it.”

“Okay.”

She picked her first color back up and went on with the long line and the hatch marks, which as far as Gene could tell were a fence, or possibly a graph of something, or possibly a fence.

He stood over the two boxes a while longer.

It had taken him four tries and about ninety seconds and he had still been talking about houses and coopers, and she had done it with two rectangles and a line that stopped, and the thing that made it right was the *stopping* — that the arrow went out and got partway and did not arrive and there was no mark to say what had become of it.

He could not have said any of that. He also did not need to, because it was right there on the concrete and they had both already looked at it.

“You want to see it?” he said. “It’s got a whole — you can just type at it. It types back.”

“Is it like Zork.”

“No.”

“Is it like Zork but bad.”

“No, it’s *not like Zork*, it doesn’t have a place, there’s no — you just say things and it says things.”

Roz did not look up.

“What’s it for,” she said.

Gene stood in the driveway with his hands in his pockets and did not have an answer to that, and the question did not appear to require one; she was already back at the hatch marks, laying them in at a spacing that got tighter toward the right-hand end for a reason she had not been asked about and would not be.

“Come after dinner,” he said.

“Maybe.”

The two boxes and the arrow stayed on the Ostens’ driveway for eleven days, which was how long it took to rain.

Ch 03 — Draw a Horse

She came on the Thursday, which was four days after *maybe*, and she came in through the kitchen because that was the door people used.

Gene had it on already. He had turned it on twenty minutes early and typed at it about nothing so that it would be going when she got up the stairs, which was the sort of thing that made sense at the time.

Roz stood in the doorway of the room and looked at the television, and then at the tray, and then at the tray under the tray.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“It’s the four hundred.”

“Yeah.”

“Ours is the eight hundred,” she said, without any particular weight on it, and came in and got down on the carpet in front of the tray with her legs folded.

She put her hands on the keyboard.

Then she took them off again and looked at them, and put one finger down on the A and pressed, and the plastic gave under it and came back with a small dry click that was not the click of a key but the click of a sheet of plastic over a contact, and the letter appeared.

“Huh,” she said.

“You get used to it.”

“You *have* got used to it.”

She pressed four more letters in a row to see, and then held her hand up in front of her face and turned it over.

Gene knelt down beside the tray.

“Okay so it doesn’t have a game in it. There’s no place. It’s not — you just say something and it says something back, and then you say something, and it goes like that.”

“How long.”

“Until you turn it off.”

“And then what.”

“Then that’s it.”

Roz considered the screen, which held the last of his twenty minutes — things he had typed and things it had said — and none of it was going to be there in an hour.

“Start it over,” she said. “I don’t want yours in it.”

So he powered it down and the picture collapsed to a white line and closed, and he powered it back up and the four lines printed themselves out one character at a time.

MICROCLAUDE V1
8192 BYTES FREE

SAY SOMETHING.

Roz put one finger down and did not take it off the keyboard again until she was done.

DRAW A HORSE

RETURN.

The block went solid and stayed solid a long time, long enough that Gene said *it's going*, which was not information.

Then it came out a row at a time, from the top, with the spaces printing as slowly as the marks.

```

      3
    #  3                !
          3                !
          34444444444
          1 2      1 2
          1 2      1 2
          1        1
```

“Huh,” Gene said. “It’s a horse.”

Roz did not say anything for a while.

She had come up off her heels onto her knees and gone in close enough that the raster lines were separate, and she was going along the bottom of it with one finger not quite touching the glass.

“The threes are the neck,” she said.

“Yeah, it curves.”

“No — it *used* threes. For the curve. And the fours for the back because a four’s got the straight down it.” Her finger

came along under the legs. “And it’s ones and twos. One, two, one, two.”

“So?”

“So a two’s got a bend in it.”

Gene looked at the legs.

“It’s standing wrong,” Roz said. “It’s standing with the near ones cocked. Both sides. That’s a horse resting a foot.” She sat back down onto her heels. “It picked them for the shape they *are*.”

“Maybe it just had them.”

“It had all of them. It had the whole keyboard.” She pointed at the tail, at the two exclamation marks hanging off in the air with nothing joining them to anything. “That’s garbage. That’s the worst tail I’ve ever seen. But it’s not garbage *by accident*, it’s —”

She stopped.

Gene waited.

“Ask it why it used a two,” she said.

“You ask it.”

“I’m not typing on that.”

So Gene got his hands back on the sheet, and pressed the keys one at a time with the flat of his first finger, the way he had for two years, and his hand was already sore.

WHY DID YOU USE A 2

RETURN.

2 FOR SECOND LEG OF PAIR. 1 FOR FRONT. 2
FOR BACK. IT'S 3-D

Roz did not move for a second.

Then she went back up the screen to the horse and got in close again and put her finger under the last row of it, the one that was only two marks wide.

"The far ones are short," she said.

"What?"

"The twos. They stop a row up. The ones go all the way down and the twos stop." She counted it with her finger, front pair, back pair, bottom row. "It's not a bend. It's *distance*. The far legs are short because they're further off."

"Isn't that what you said?"

"No," Roz said. "I said it was standing funny."

Gene looked at the horse. It looked the same as it had looked before, which was like a horse.

"So it's right," he said.

"Yeah."

She sat back on her heels and looked at the two exclamation marks floating off the back end with nothing attaching them to anything, and then she looked at the rest of it again.

"Have you got paper?"

He got her the back of a mimeograph from the pile under the tray, a spelling list, and a pencil that was mostly pencil.

Roz put the paper on the carpet and copied it down. She did it the slow way, one row at a time, counting the leading spaces off the screen with her finger and laying them in as dots so she would not lose the count, and she did not talk while she did it.

When she got to the tail she stopped.

She looked at it on the screen for a moment.

Then she put the tail where it went.

Ch 04 — The Hammer

By the third quarter it was twenty-eight to nine and Mr. Osten had stopped saying anything about it.

He sat forward with his forearms on his knees the way he did, and the room had gone from a room where a game was on to a room where a television was on, and Roz's mother had taken the bowl out to the kitchen and not brought it back.

Gene was on the floor with his back against the front of the couch. Roz was on the other end of the couch with her legs up under her, not watching, going at something on a pad with the pad turned away.

Then the picture changed and the sound changed and the room stopped.

It was sixty seconds.

Nobody said anything during it. Mr. Osten did not sit back. Roz's pencil stopped somewhere in the middle and stayed stopped. In the kitchen the water shut off, which meant Roz's mother had come to the doorway, and nobody turned around to check because nobody moved.

At the end there was type on the screen and a voice read it, and then it was over and there was a commercial for a truck.

"What was that," Mr. Osten said.

"It's a computer," Roz said.

“That was not a computer.”

Roz’s mother came back in with the bowl and put it down and did not sit.

“What is it?” she said.

“They didn’t say,” said Mr. Osten.

They fought about it for three days.

“There were rows of them,” Gene said. “Guys in rows. Gray guys. Sitting in rows watching him on the screen.”

“There were rows of them at the start,” Roz said. “At the *start*. They’re not sitting at the end, they’re — she comes down the middle and they’re all turned to the screen and then it goes off and their mouths are open.”

“Their mouths aren’t open.”

“Their mouths are open. That’s the whole last bit. The mouths.”

“She’s got a hammer,” Gene said.

“Obviously she’s got a hammer.”

“She’s got a hammer and she winds up like the — like a discus, she goes round —”

“She spins twice.”

“She spins once.”

“She spins *twice*, and the second one’s the one that’s slow, they slow it down, and there’s the two guys with the sticks coming up behind her and they don’t get to her.”

Gene, who had not seen the two guys with the sticks, moved on.

“It said nineteen eighty-four won’t be like nineteen eighty-four.”

“It didn’t say that.”

“That’s *exactly* what it said. That’s the whole — that’s the joke of it. ‘And you’ll see why nineteen eighty-four won’t be like nineteen eighty-four.’”

Roz looked at him.

“It said something about January,” she said.

“January twenty-fourth. Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“That’s what it *said*, Roz, that’s the words, they read them out —”

“Then it’s what it said,” Roz said. “I’m telling you what was in it.”

Nobody in either house had taped it. There was a machine in the Ostens’ den that could have and no one had thought of it,

because it was the third quarter of a game that had stopped being a game and nobody knew it was coming.

So there was no way to look.

The ad ran once and went, and after it there was a truck, and the only place it existed after that was in the two of them arguing on a couch about how many times she turned before she threw it.

Roz was right about the spins.

Gene was right about the words.

Neither of them ever found out.

Ch 05 — Undo

The store had four machines on a bench along the window and three of them were IBMs with amber screens and the fourth one had a crowd.

They waited forty minutes. When the man in front of them finally got up he did it slowly, like somebody leaving a table.

Roz sat down.

The screen was small and it was white — not gray, not green, white, with black on it, and it did not flicker or roll or shrink at the edges when a refrigerator came on somewhere. It sat there being white.

There was a beige block on a cord beside the keyboard with one button on top of it.

“You push it around,” Gene said.

“I know what it is.”

She put her hand on it and moved it two inches and the arrow on the screen went four inches and off the side, and she stopped and moved it back and overshot the other way, and the salesman, who had come down the bench without either of them noticing, said, “Pick it up and put it down in the middle. It doesn’t mind.”

She picked it up. She put it down. The arrow stayed where it was.

“Huh,” she said.

He reached past her and pulled down a menu and let it go and the screen was a white rectangle with a strip of tools down the left side, and then he went away and served somebody about a printer.

Roz drew a line.

It took her about four minutes to get a line she'd have accepted from her left hand. She did it with the whole forearm off the bench, the way you would with a brush, because the wrist wasn't in it — the wrist was in the mouse and the mouse was on the counter and the line was up on the glass a foot away.

Then she drew a second line that was wrong.

She sat back from it.

"There's no eraser," Gene said, looking at the strip.

"There is. It's the one that's a —" She pointed at it. "But it takes the first one too."

She looked at the wrong line for a moment.

Then she reached up and pulled the menu down, the second one along, and went to the top of it, and let go.

The second line was not there.

The first line was.

Roz sat very still.

"What'd it do," Gene said.

She did it again. She drew a bad line, pulled the menu, let go, and the bad line was gone and everything under it was exactly where she had left it, untouched, unsmudged, not lifted, not scraped, not gone slightly gray the way paper goes.

“Do that again,” Gene said.

She did it eleven more times.

He got bored at about the ninety-minute mark.

He walked the bench. He looked at the amber IBMs. He came back and stood behind her and watched her go into the small window that made the picture enormous and blocky, where she was moving single squares one at a time with the arrow, and he watched that for a while because it was at least like something.

Then he went and found the salesman.

“Where’s the language.”

“Say again?”

“The language. For the —” He nodded down the bench. “How do you write something for it.”

The salesman looked at him with an expression that suggested this was the fourth time that day.

“It doesn’t come with one.”

“With any?”

“It’s not that kind of a machine,” the salesman said, not unkindly. “You buy your programs. There’s a development system if you’re serious, but it’s not —” He made a small motion with his hand that took in the whole bench and the crowd and the white screen with the girl at it. “You don’t type at this one.”

Gene went back down the bench and looked at the front of the machine, and then at the top of it, and then at the sides, which he had not done yet, and there was no lid and no slot and no hatch and nowhere at all for a cartridge to go.

At six o’clock the salesman came down the bench and said they were closing in ten.

Roz had a whole thing on the screen by then. It had taken her four hours. Gene could not have described it and neither, later, could she.

“Can I keep it?”

“You’d need a disk.”

“Have you got one?”

“Not to give away,” the man said. “They’re seventy-nine for a box of ten.”

Roz sat with her hand on the mouse.

Then she took her hand off it and got the pad out of her bag and looked at the screen and looked at the pad, and did not open the pad.

The horse she had been able to copy. She had counted the spaces with her finger and laid them in as dots and got it down in nine minutes, and it was on her wall.

This was six hundred lines wide and half of it was in the small squares.

She put the pad back in the bag.

At ten past six the man reached around the back and the white went to a dot and the dot went out, and the three amber ones were still on down the bench, saying READY.

Ch 06 — The Weather

It was cold enough that morning that the Pruitts' car did not start on the first two and Gene's mother said a word she did not say, and he walked, and it was eleven minutes instead of four and the inside of his nose hurt by the end of it.

There was ice on the flat part of the school roof where the gutter came around, in a sheet, which happened maybe twice a year.

Nobody thought anything about it. It was January.

Mrs. Kerr wheeled the cart in herself. She did it during the passing period so it would be in and plugged and warmed up, and she had the antenna wire already run because she had done it on the Monday too, and on the Monday it had been scrubbed and they had gone back to work.

By Tuesday there had been noise about it. By Tuesday there was a kid in the third row doing a countdown every time she went near the set.

She got the picture up and stood beside it with the remote in her hand.

"We're going to watch this," she said, "and then we're going to do the rest of chapter nine."

It was the teacher. That was the thing that made it a school event and not a news event. There were seven of them going up and one of them taught social studies in New Hampshire,

and every teacher in the building had been talking about it since the fall the way you talk about somebody from your town being on television.

They waited about twenty minutes. There was ice on the tower in the picture and somebody said *look at that* and somebody else said *that's from the water*, and Mrs. Kerr said *quiet please* twice without any heat in it.

Then it went.

Somebody in the back clapped, once, and stopped, because nobody else did.

It went up the way they went up, straight and slow-looking and then not slow, and the picture pulled back and it was a white line going up with the plume behind it, and the man's voice was doing the numbers, and it got small.

Then the line stopped being a line.

The voice kept going for a moment because the voice was reading from a screen and the screen had not caught up. It said something about throttling up. It said something else.

Then it said:

Flight controllers here looking very carefully at the situation. Obviously a major malfunction.

The picture stayed on it. There were two hooks of smoke coming down and apart and there was a lot of white in the middle of the sky where the line had been, and nothing came out of it.

Nobody in the room said anything.

The voice said: *We have a report from the flight dynamics officer that the vehicle has exploded.*

Mrs. Kerr did not turn it off.

She stood beside the cart with the remote in her hand and she did not raise it, and after a while she sat down on the front edge of the demonstration table facing the class, which put her back to the set, and she stayed there.

The kid in the third row who had been doing the countdowns put his head down on his arms and did not move again for the rest of the period.

Nobody left. The bell went at some point and nobody left. Somebody from the office came to the door, looked in, and went away again.

Roz was two rows over and one up. She had her pad out on the desk in front of her, flat, and both hands were on the desk on either side of it, and there was nothing on it.

She did not draw anything. Not that day and not that week.

They showed it again about four minutes later, and then again, and then again.

By the time the period would have ended, if the period had ended, they had seen it seven times. The station had it on a

loop with a man talking over the top of it, and each time it came around somebody in the room made a small sound, the same somebody, and then stopped making it by the fifth one.

You could not not watch it. It came around and you watched it again.

Somebody said, later that afternoon, that there had been schools where the little kids had been watching, first and second graders, because of the teacher. That was the part that went around the building.

Gene walked home. It was still cold and the ice on the flat part of the roof was still there.

He went upstairs and the room was the room. The BASIC cartridge had been on the tray for two and a half years with the label up, and there was dust on it in a rectangle where the cartridge sat, and around it there was more.

He turned the television on and slid the box over.

The machine came up the way it always came up, four lines, one character at a time, unhurried.

MICROCLAUDE V1
8192 BYTES FREE

SAY SOMETHING.

Gene knelt down on the carpet in front of the tray.

He put his hands on the keyboard and pressed the keys one at a time with the flat of his first finger, the way he had for four and a half years.

SEVEN PEOPLE DIED TODAY

RETURN.

The block went solid.

HOW MANY ARE LEFT ALIVE?

Gene knelt on the carpet in front of the tray with his hands on the sheet of plastic and did not move for a while.

It had no way to know. It had no radio and no wire and no clock and nothing in it that had happened after 1979, and it had two thousand and forty-eight of whatever it had, and every time he turned it on it started with nothing at all and asked him to say something.

It was not being cruel. It had a number and it wanted the other number.

He put his finger on the key.

0

The block blinked after it, on and off, on and off, the way it did when there was nothing to do.

He did not press RETURN.

He reached around the right side of the machine and pushed the switch, and one white line went across the middle of the screen and closed, and there was snow.

He left the box on COMPUTER and went downstairs.

Ch 07 — Ice Water

Mrs. Kerr wheeled the cart in again on the eleventh of February.

She did it the same way, during the passing period, so it would be in and plugged and warm. She had the antenna wire run before anybody sat down. Nobody made a countdown noise.

“We’re going to watch some of this,” she said, “and then chapter twelve.”

It was a hearing. It was men at a long table with nameplates in front of them and other men at a shorter table facing them, and a great deal of water in pitchers, and every so often somebody would say a number with a decimal in it.

It was extremely boring.

By ten minutes in, four people were doing other homework. Two rows back somebody had a paperback inside a folder. Mrs. Kerr let it go. She stood by the cart with her arms folded and watched the whole thing with her chin down, and did not once look at the room to see who was and was not paying attention, which was new.

They went twenty-five minutes like that.

Then one of the men at the shorter table, an old one, off to the side, who had been fidgeting with something in front of him for most of the morning, said he had done a little experiment.

He had a piece of rubber. He had it clamped in a small C-clamp, the kind from a hardware store, and he had put the whole thing in the glass of ice water that was sitting on the table because there were glasses of ice water sitting on every table.

He took it out. He undid the clamp.

He said that when you put pressure on this material for a while, at that temperature, and then take the pressure off, it does not spring back. He said there is no resilience in this particular material at thirty-two degrees. He said he believed that had some significance for our problem.

Then he stopped talking and somebody else said something about the schedule.

The room had gone quiet at some point and nobody had noticed it going.

The kid with the paperback had the paperback down flat.

“That’s it?” somebody said. “That’s what happened?”

Nobody answered, because everybody in the room had understood it and there was nothing to add.

Roz had her wrist turned over on the desk in front of her, and she had been looking at her watch from about the point where the old man reached for the glass.

“Eleven seconds,” she said.

“What?”

“From the glass to putting it down. Eleven seconds.”

She turned her wrist back over.

“That’s how long it took,” she said. “To tell everybody.”

At dinner Gene’s father, who built cabinets and had no opinion on aerospace, watched it again on the news at six, and put his fork down halfway through it, and said the thing that everybody in the country said that week in one form or another.

“Well, why didn’t somebody just *show* them?”

Nobody at the table argued with him.

Gene’s mother said they must have tried. His father said that if you have got a thing that goes hard in the cold, and you have got a cold morning, then you take the thing and you put it in the cold in front of the man, and that is the end of the conversation, and it takes you a minute.

“You wouldn’t need to say anything,” he said. “That’s the point of it. You wouldn’t have to say one word.”

He picked his fork back up.

It stayed on the news for a long time after that. They ran the eleven seconds the way they had run the seventy-three, over and over, and by the end of the month a lot of people in the country had watched a man take a piece of rubber out of a glass of ice water more times than they could count.

Ch 08 — Rockets

The report came out in June and the papers ran pieces of it for a week, and on the Thursday they ran the charts.

Not a description of the charts. The charts. Photographed off the pages and printed four to a broadsheet page, small, gray, with a caption underneath saying what each one had been called on the night.

Gene's father had the paper open on the kitchen table with his coffee going cold beside it, which was how you knew.

"They knew," he said.

"Who did."

"The engineers. The night before. They got on the phone and they said don't." He turned the page around so it faced the room, which nobody had asked him to do. "It's all here. This is what they showed them."

Gene came around and stood behind the chair.

There were thirteen of them. They were typed and they were hand-lettered in places and they had been faxed at some point, so the letters had gone furry at the edges and some of the lines had picked up a stutter. One was titled *TEMPERATURE CONCERN ON SRM JOINTS*. One was a list. One had a column of numbers down the left and a column of words down the right and a lot of white in the middle. One of them, near the end, said in block capitals that

the recommendation was not to launch below fifty-three degrees.

Gene read all thirteen, which took him about six minutes.

“Where’s the part,” he said.

“What part.”

“The part where it says it. The cold and the — where’s the one that shows it.”

His father moved his hand across the page and stopped, and then went back to the beginning and did it again.

They looked for it together for a while. His mother came and stood at the end of the table with a dish towel and looked at it upside down.

It was not there.

Every number was there. The temperature at every previous launch was there, in a list, on one chart. The damage found on the joints was there, in a different list, on a different chart. Both of them were printed in the same newspaper on the same morning nine inches apart.

Nowhere had anyone put the one against the other.

The fourteenth chart was on the last page, and the caption under it said it was not from the night. It had been drawn afterward, for the Commission, in the spring — the same joints, the same history, gone over again with all the time in the world.

It was called *HISTORY OF O-RING DAMAGE ON SRM FIELD JOINTS*.

It was a row of small drawings.

Somebody had drawn a little rocket for each flight — a stubby cartoon rocket with a nose and a body and two fins, twenty-four of them in a line across the page, and where a flight had damage they had marked the rocket, and where it hadn't they had left it plain.

They were not to scale and they were not the same size as each other and one or two of them leaned.

Gene's father looked at that one for a long time.

Then he stood up, picked the paper up off the table with both hands, folded it over once, and put it in the trash under the sink, coffee ring and all, and put the lid down and stood there with his hand on the lid.

"Rob," Gene's mother said.

"They drew *rockets*."

"I know."

"Seven people." He took his hand off the lid. "And that one isn't even from the night. That one's from *after*. They had from January to June, and they knew what it was for, and they sat down and they drew little —"

He went out through the back door and did not slam it, and they heard him get partway across the yard and stop.

That was the summer everybody found out at once.

It went around at a speed that nothing had gone around before, because it was not a thing you had to be told, it was a thing you looked at for four seconds in a newspaper on a kitchen table while somebody's mother stood at the end of it holding a dish towel.

The papers printed the charts on the Thursday.

They did not print them again.

By the end of the following week the numbers were coming out as tables — plain, ruled, temperature in one column and damage in the next, side by side where anybody could see them — and one of the wire services ran a note apologizing for the earlier presentation, which nobody could remember a newspaper ever doing before.

Ch 09 — Put It In Words

The bench at the store had four machines on it in October and all four of them were amber.

“You had the other one,” Roz said. “On the end.”

“We’ve got them,” the salesman said. He was the same man. He had the same tie or a tie from the same drawer. “We can get one in for you. It’s a two-week thing now, they’re not sending them out on the floor the same.”

“It was on the floor in February.”

“It was,” he agreed, pleasantly, and did not say anything else about it, and went down the bench to serve somebody about a printer.

Roz stood at the end where it had been. There was a dust line on the counter in a rectangle, and a hole in the cable grommet with nothing in it.

In November she got a paper back.

It was for economics and it was about why a price goes up when a thing gets scarce, and she had done it the way she did things, which was that there were two pages of writing and then a page in the middle with a diagram on it — two axes, two lines, the crossing point marked, and four little notes in her hand pointing at the parts that mattered.

It came back with a paper clip on it and a note on the front in green.

Roz — good thinking here. Please put it in words and resubmit. (New guidance from the district, not mine. Sorry.)
— Mrs. D.

Roz read the note twice.

Then she went home and put it in words.

It took her four pages. She had to name the axes, which the drawing had not needed to do because the drawing had put them where you could see them. She had to say *as the quantity available falls, the price at which the last unit clears rises*, which was one line on the page in the middle and was now a sentence with a subordinate clause in it, and then she had to do it again for the other direction, and then she had to explain the crossing, which took her the better part of a page and which the drawing had done by crossing.

She turned it in on the Monday.

It came back with a 96 on it and *Much clearer!* in the same green.

Roz put it in the binder with the rest and did not say anything about it to anybody, including Gene, and that was the first one.

Gene read the whole report.

It ran to five volumes and the library had two of them and the school had a copy of the first, and it took him from July into September, and nobody had asked him to and there was not going to be a test.

Most of it was hearings. A lot of it was a man saying a number and another man asking him to repeat the number.

At the back of the second volume, after the findings and after the recommendations and after everything that anybody had quoted in a newspaper, there was an appendix by the old man from the ice water.

It had gone in last. You could tell it had gone in last because it did not match anything around it; it was written the way a person talks and it had the word *I* in it, which nothing else in five volumes did.

It was about how the people running the thing had said the odds of losing a vehicle were about one in a hundred thousand, and the engineers who built the parts had said about one in a hundred, and how nobody had ever put those two numbers in the same room.

The last sentence of it was:

For a successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for nature cannot be fooled.

Gene read that, and then went back and read the whole appendix again from the start, and then sat with the book open on his knees for a while.

It was on page four hundred and something, in the back, after the end.

Anybody could have read it. It had been printed and bound and put in a public library in a town of eleven thousand people, and the copy he had in his hands had a card in the back pocket with two stamps on it, and one of the two was his.

He left in August of the following year.

The night before, he took the boxes down and got the tray clear, and the last thing on it was the Atari BASIC cartridge, label up, with four years of dust around it in a hard rectangle and none on it at all.

He turned the machine off at the switch on the right side.

He put his thumb under the lid and brought it up, and took MICROCLAUDE out of the slot — the paper label had gone soft at the corners and there was a shine down the middle of it where his hand had been every time — and he set it on the carpet.

Then he picked up the Atari BASIC cartridge, which had not been in a machine since he was twelve, and put it back in the slot, and pushed the lid down until it clicked.

He did not turn the machine on to see.

MICROCLAUDE went in the side pocket of the bag with the photocopied sheet folded around it, four lines on the front, the distance to the moon on the back in pencil, wrong.

Ch 10 — Concern

Part II

The room held forty desks and each desk had a lamp and a screen, and the screens stood on end, taller than they were wide, because you did not put a picture on them and you did put a page.

It was quiet the way a room is quiet when the noise is all one noise. Forty keyboards. Good ones — sprung, sculpted, serviced twice a year by a man who came on Thursdays with a case, and they made a sound like weather.

Gene had desk nineteen, which was under the second window, which was worth about four dollars a week to anybody who had it.

The work came in on the cart.

The form on top of each job was one page and it had never changed in the eleven years he had been doing it, and the fourth line of it was the only line anybody read.

CONCERN:

Underneath that the client wrote the thing they were frightened of. Then you read the document and you told them whether it was in there.

Gene's first that morning was a supply agreement, sixty-one pages, and the fourth line said:

CONCERN: *whether we can be made to buy the whole quantity if the plant goes down*

Which was a good one. That was a client who had been hurt before. You could always tell, because the ones who had never been hurt wrote *is this a fair contract*, and there was no answer to that and you sent it back.

He read it in an hour and ten minutes and wrote four sentences at the bottom of the form. Section 9.4, yes, they can, unless the outage exceeds thirty days and is certified by a third party under 9.4(c), and there is no third party named in the agreement.

That last clause was the whole job. Eleven years and the job was still, four times a day, *there is no third party named in the agreement*.

The second one was ninety pages and the concern line said *whether we are on the hook for the freight*, and Gene got about eleven pages into it and stopped and sat back.

He read the eleventh page again.

Then he turned to page forty and read a paragraph there, and then to page seventy-one, and then he put the whole thing flat on the desk and put both hands on it.

Marchetti came past with her cart and he put a hand up.

“Look at this.”

She came round and read where his finger was, which was section 12.2, four hundred words, one sentence, with the word *notwithstanding* in it twice.

“Okay,” she said.

“Read it again.”

She read it again. She was fast — she was the fastest in the room, which everybody knew and nobody said — and she read it again in about twenty seconds and then a third time in about forty.

“It doesn’t say anything,” she said.

“It doesn’t say anything.”

“It’s —” She put her finger on it and moved it along.

“Notwithstanding the foregoing, the party of record shall maintain such obligations as arise under and are consistent with the provisions of this section.”

“Which are.”

“Nothing. There’s nothing in the section. The section is that sentence.”

Gene sat back.

“There’s four hundred words of it,” he said, “and it parses. Every clause parses. You could put it in front of a grammarian and he’d sign it.”

Marchetti straightened up and looked at the room for a second — forty lamps, forty screens on end, the weather noise — and then back down at page eleven.

“Mad Lib,” she said.

“Mad Lib.”

“How many of those in there?”

“I’ve found three so far and I’m at page seventy-one.”

“Bill it long,” she said, and took her cart on.

He billed it long.

At the bottom of the form, under the four ruled lines, he wrote: *Freight is at 4.1 and you are clear. Note that sections 12.2, 14.6 and 19 are, in my reading, without content. They are not ambiguous. They are constructed so that a reading of them terminates without a finding. I would not sign a document with three of them in it.*

The client took the answer about the freight and signed it anyway, which was the correct commercial decision and which Gene had known before he wrote the sentence, because there was no version of the transaction where they did not sign.

He wrote the sentence anyway. Everybody in that room wrote the sentence anyway. It was the only part of the job that was not clerical and it went in the file and the file went in the cabinet.

At four o'clock a job came back off the cart with a red slip on it.

Nobody at desk nineteen had touched it. It had gone through intake and stopped there, and it was traveling back the other way with the slip stapled through the corner so it could not come off, and the reason box on the slip had one word written in it in somebody's ordinary handwriting.

graven.

Gene did not look up as it went past. Neither did anybody else. Marchetti's cart went out the double doors at the end and came back four minutes later with a fresh stack, and the room made its noise, and that was a Tuesday.

Ch 11 — Eleven Seconds

The yard behind the shop was forty feet by twenty and it was full of racks, and the racks were full of things that were being ruined on purpose.

There were fittings on the south rack going into their third summer. There were four grades of gasket on the west wall under a shade cloth with the cloth pulled back at eleven and pushed over at three, which was somebody's job. There was a run of galvanized strap in a tray of dilute salt that had a lid, and a stack of the same strap in a tray with no lid, and a card wired to each tray with a date on it in Roz's hand.

None of it was for anything. That was the point of it. You could not order two years of sunlight in April for a hearing in June.

So there was a yard, and the yard was full of time.

The job came in on a Tuesday and it was a fitting.

There was a plastic elbow in a water system in a building and eleven of them had let go inside four months of each other, and the manufacturer's position was that they had been installed wrong, and the building's position was that they had been installed the way the manufacturer said to install them, which they had.

Roz read the file for about nine minutes.

Then she went out to the south rack, walked down it to the third bay, took one of the second-year fittings off the pin, put it on the bench, and hit it once with a rubber mallet.

It went in three pieces.

She stood there for a second with the mallet in her hand.

Then she came back in and said, “It’s the roof.”

“It’s inside the building,” Kastner said.

“They were stored on the roof. Before. Look at the delivery — they took delivery in March and the install’s in November. Eight months. Where does a contractor keep four hundred elbows for eight months on a job that size.”

Kastner looked at the delivery schedule for a while and then said, “You’d have to show that.”

“I know.”

“You’d have to show a board of people who don’t want to hear it.”

“I know,” Roz said, and went back out to the yard.

It took her seven weeks.

She could not use the second-year fittings from the rack, because those were hers and nobody would accept them; she had to source the same lot number, which took nineteen days and two phone calls a day, and then she had to age them, and

you cannot age a thing in nineteen days that took eight months.

So she did it the other way. She found four of the original run that had never been installed, still in the crate, in a store room in the basement of the building — nobody had looked, because nobody looks in the basement of the building. Two had been on top of the crate. Two had been at the bottom.

Then she built the rack.

It was a piece of shop channel four feet long with six pins on it. On each pin went one fitting, and under each pin she stencilled the number of months of exposure, and she put them left to right, none to most, with the ones that had never left the crate at the far left end and the ones off the roof at the far right, and a gap in the middle where she had no sample, and she left the gap.

Kastner said fill the gap.

Roz said no.

The hearing was on a Thursday in a room with a table.

They gave her nine minutes and she used about two of them getting the rack out of the case and up onto the table where the light was, and she set the mallet down beside it, and she said what the numbers under the pins were and then she stopped talking.

Then she took the leftmost one off the pin and hit it once.

It rang and did not break.

She put it down and took the next one and hit it once, the same, from the same height, with the same hand, and it did not break.

She went down the rack.

At the fourth one there was a sound in the room that was one person, and by the fifth one it was three or four, and the sixth one — the far right, twenty-two months — came apart before the mallet stopped moving and went across the table and one piece of it went off the end and onto the carpet and nobody picked it up.

Roz set the mallet down.

Eleven seconds, from the first swing to the last.

She had counted it in the shop about forty times.

Afterward a man from the board came down the room while she was getting the rack back in the case and put his hand on the end of the table.

“That was very clear,” he said. “You explained that extremely well.”

“Thank you.”

“You know, most people would have come in here with three hundred pages.”

“They would,” Roz said.

He went off toward the door, and then turned round and came back a step.

“How long did that take you? To work out?”

Roz had the far-right pin in her hand, and the two big pieces, and she was fitting them back together to get them into the foam.

“Seven weeks,” she said.

Which was true.

Ch 12 — The Trial

They took desk seven out on a Friday.

Desk seven had been Hollis's for nineteen years and Hollis had gone the previous spring, and the desk had sat there since with the lamp still on it because nobody wanted to be the one to say anything, and on the Friday two men came with a trolley and took it out through the double doors and did not come back.

On the Monday there was a cabinet where it had been.

It was about the size of a filing cabinet on its side and it was the wrong color for the room, a gray with green in it, and it had a fan. The fan was the thing. Forty keyboards made a noise like weather and the fan made a noise like a fan, and by Wednesday everybody in the room could tell you what pitch it was.

On top of it there was a screen, the ordinary kind, on end.

It took them nine days to get it going.

Vaughn ran the first job through it on a Thursday morning with about eleven people standing behind him, which was more people than had stood in one place in that room in Gene's eleven years.

He picked a services agreement, fourteen pages, that had come in on Tuesday and been done on Tuesday, and he had

the finished form in his hand with the answer already written on it, folded over so nobody could see.

“Right,” he said.

He typed the concern line off the form.

Somebody said, “You have to give it the document.”

“It’s got the document. It’s had the document since eight.”

“How.”

“It reads it in,” Vaughn said. “That’s the whole — that’s what the nine days were.”

He looked at the screen for a second and then hit the key.

Nobody had told them how long it would take, so eleven people stood in a reading room and waited for a fan.

It was about four seconds.

SECTION 9.3 RATE ADJUSTMENT ASSERTS THE PROVIDER MAY ADJUST RATES FOUND IN SCHEDULE A AFTER A 60 DAY PERIOD THAT MUST BE STARTED WITH A WRITTEN NOTICE. THE MAXIMUM ALLOWED CHANGE IS 5% FROM THE CURRENT RATE; HOWEVER IT IS UNCLEAR IF THIS IS ONLY A LIMIT TO UPWARD CHANGES ONLY.

Vaughn unfolded the form.

The form said, in the hand of whoever had done it on Tuesday: *Yes — 9.3, sixty days written notice, capped at 5% per adjustment.*

He held them side by side.

“Same,” somebody said.

“It’s the same.”

“It’s not the same,” Vaughn said, and put his finger on the last line and a half. “That’s not on the form.”

They all read it again.

It was a small point. It was arguably not a point at all — the clause said *no single adjustment shall exceed five percent*, and the machine had observed that this cut in both directions, and no client on earth had ever written *concern: whether they can lower our rate too much*.

But it was there in the document and it was not on the form.

“Whose was it,” somebody said, and then heard themselves and stopped.

Marchetti was standing at the back with her arms folded.

“Mine,” she said.

Nobody said anything.

“It’s worthless,” she said. “That finding is worthless. Nobody has ever been hurt by that in the history of the world.”

“Sure,” said Vaughn.

“It’s *worthless*.”

“Sure,” said Vaughn again, in the same voice, and turned back to the screen, and that was when Gene understood that the nine days had not been a trial of anything.

The eleven people started to come apart around the desk. Somebody went to get coffee. Somebody said something about the fan.

Gene stayed where he was.

“Can I put one in?”

Vaughn looked up. “It’s not a toy.”

“Same document. One line.”

Vaughn moved sideways about a foot, which was a yes, and Gene leaned in and put his hands on a keyboard that was not his own and typed the thing he had been looking at for four minutes while everybody else was looking at the rate.

AFTER TWENTY (20) DAYS, THE ISSUED CHANG
E IS ASSUMED TO BE ACCPETED. YOU MUST RE
SPOND TO AVOID THE ASSUMPTION OF ACCEPTA
NCE. IT IS UNCLEAR WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU D
O NOT ACCEPT, BUT YOU MUST MAKE THAT CLE
AR IN WRITING. NON WRITTEN REFUSALS OR N
ON ANSWERS ARE NOT ACCEPTABLE AS A REJEC
TION OF THE OFFERED CHANGE.

There were four people left at the desk by then and two of them were talking about the fan.

Gene read it twice.

“It eats it,” he said.

“What does.”

“Eight one eats nine three.” He put his finger on the screen, which you did not do, and then took it off. “The cap’s five

percent. Fine. But eight one says any notice you don't answer inside twenty days is accepted *in the terms stated*. Any notice. It doesn't say a notice under nine three. It says any notice."

Vaughn looked at him.

"So they don't use nine three," Gene said. "They send you a notice that says the schedule is amended, and it's forty percent, and if the man who opens your post is on holiday for a month it's yours. The cap's still in there. The cap is completely intact. The cap has just got nothing to do with anything."

Somebody behind them said *huh*.

Vaughn read the screen again, top to bottom, both answers, and he read them properly — Gene watched him do it, and he did it well, and at the end of it he had it.

"Did it say that?"

"No."

"Did you ask it to?"

"I asked it two questions," Gene said. "It answered both of them. Right, both times. It's not wrong about anything up there."

"Then it didn't say it."

"No."

Vaughn nodded slowly, and looked at the two answers on the screen for another second, and then he said:

“How long did that take you?”

Gene did not follow at first.

“The —”

“Putting it together. Just now. From reading the two of them to saying it out loud.”

“Four minutes. Maybe five.”

Vaughn took a small notebook out of his inside pocket, opened it against his palm, and wrote something in it that was two characters long.

“Right,” he said.

Gene went back to desk nineteen and sat down and put the lamp on, and pulled a blank form off the stack.

The job had closed on the Tuesday. The client had signed it on the Wednesday. There was no cart to put it on and no file open to put it in and there was nobody at all who had asked.

At the bottom, under the four ruled lines, he wrote:

8.1 is unbounded and 9.3 is therefore decorative. The five percent cap constrains only the mechanism nobody will use. Recommend either bounding 8.1 to notices arising under a named section, or striking 9.3 so that the parties are honest about where the rate is set.

Then he wrote the file number at the top, and the date, and walked it down to the cabinet at the end of the room himself, and put it in.

Ch 13 — Twenty-Two Pages

By the following autumn the fan was just a fan.

There were two more cabinets by then, at the end where desks four and eleven had been, and the room had gone from forty desks to thirty-one, and nobody had been fired. It had been done the other way — people left and the desk did not come back, which is the cheapest way there is and the only one that never makes a noise.

The work had changed shape. You did not read the whole thing now. You put it in, you asked the concern, you read what came back, and then you read the sections it had named, and then you wrote the form. Two hours became forty minutes. Nobody was unhappy about that. Reading a supply agreement is not a thing anybody was ever glad to be doing.

Marchetti came to desk nineteen on a Wednesday with a form in her hand.

It was blank on the front. On the back there was a column of numbers in pencil, about thirty of them, with dates down the side.

“What’s this.”

“Median page count,” she said. “By month. Started it in February.”

Gene looked at the column.

“Why.”

“Because I felt like it.”

He read down it. February was nineteen. March was nineteen. April was twenty-one, and then there was twenty and then twenty-two, and then it went twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-three, twenty-five.

“Huh,” he said.

“Keep going.”

Twenty-six. Twenty-six. Twenty-eight.

He put his thumb at February and his finger at the bottom and looked at the two ends of it, which is what you do when you have a column and no picture, and it took him about forty seconds to get the size of it, and when he had it he sat back.

“That’s fifty percent.”

“In nineteen months.”

“Nobody’s writing longer contracts.”

“Somebody is,” Marchetti said. “That’s what the column is.”

“No, I mean nobody decided to. There’s no — there isn’t a meeting where they decide that.”

“I know there isn’t.”

She turned the form round so it was facing her again and looked at her own column.

“It’s twenty-two,” she said.

“What is.”

“What that thing holds. Vaughn told me in February when I asked him, twenty-two pages, that’s the whole of it, that’s what it can have in front of it at once.” She tapped the column at April. “We went past it in the spring.”

They took it to Vaughn together, which was a mistake, because two people is a delegation and one person is a remark.

Gene said it. He had it worked out on the walk down and he said it in about six sentences: the documents are getting longer, they have gone past what the machine holds, and they are getting longer *because* of what the machine holds — that a thing which is read by an instrument with a limit will, over enough drafts by enough lawyers who have all noticed the same thing, arrive at just past the limit, and stay there.

Vaughn listened to all of it. He was not stupid and he did not interrupt.

At the end of it he said: “Have you got that written up?”

“It’s a column of numbers on the back of a form,” Marchetti said.

“Then write it up.”

“It’s *thirty numbers*,” she said. “It’s thirty numbers and a date on each one, and if you saw them the right way round you’d have it in a second —”

She stopped, because she had heard where the sentence was going before it got there, and so had both of them.

Nobody said anything for a moment.

“Write it up,” Vaughn said, not unkindly, “and I’ll take it up.”

So she wrote it up. It ran to two and a half pages and it was accurate and it was well made and it said, in prose, in full sentences, with the numbers cited in text, exactly what the column said.

Gene read it before it went. It was good.

He also could not have told you, afterwards, what the shape of it was, and he had read the column himself with his own thumb on February.

The first one that would not fit came in on a Monday in November.

It was thirty-one pages and the concern line said *whether the indemnity survives if we terminate for convenience*, which was a real question asked by somebody who had been hurt, and Gene put it in the way he put everything in.

The fan changed pitch for about six seconds, which it did when it was full.

INDEMNITY EXTENDS TWELVE (12) MONTH AFTER ANY GIVEN DELIVERY. TERMINATION FOR CONVENIENCE (WHICH NEEDS A 90 DAY NOTICE PERIOD INITIATED BY WRITING) APPEARS TO EXTINGUISH ALL OBLIGATIONS THAT ARE *NOT EXPRESSLY PROVIDED*. INDEMNITY IS EXPRESSLY PROVIDED; THEREFORE, INDEMNITY IS NOT EXPUNGED BY TERMINATION AND EXTENDS TWELVE (12) MONTHS AFTER THE FINAL DELIVERY.

It was a good answer.

That was the thing Gene sat with for a moment before he sat with anything else. It was not a lookup and it was not a quotation. It had gone to 11.4 and got the tail, and gone to 14.2 and got the *save as expressly provided*, and then it had put the one against the other and drawn a conclusion, and the conclusion was reasoned and it was clean and any of the thirty-one people in that room would have written it.

He read it twice and then he read the header.

:: LOADED: PAGES 1-22 · WINDOW FULL
:: USED 8,930 / FREE 70

Seventy.

Gene sat back in the chair at the end of the room with his hands on his knees.

For a year and a half that thing had told him, every time, at the bottom, in a line and a half, which pages it had and which it did not, and he had read that line and a half so many hundreds of times that he had stopped reading it, and it had never once failed to be there.

Seventy left.

There had not been room.

It had spent everything it had on the answer, and the answer was excellent, and the part where it said *this is only the front two thirds of the thing and I do not know what is in the rest* had come to about a hundred and ten tokens and had not fit.

Down the room somebody's lamp clicked off and somebody said something to somebody about a car.

Gene got up and went to the intake window and asked for pages twenty-three to thirty-one on paper.

Ch 14 — Survival

Intake gave him the nine pages at four fifteen and told him they would need them back for the file, which meant he read them at his own desk with his own lamp on after the room had gone.

Twenty-three was the back end of section 15 and it was nothing.

Twenty-four was assignment.

Twenty-five was section 16.

16. SURVIVAL. Sections 9 (Confidentiality), 12 (Audit) and 18 (Disputes) shall survive termination or expiry of this Agreement. All other provisions shall cease to have effect on the date of termination.

Gene read it, and then read 14.2 again off the screen — *no further obligations to one another save as expressly provided* — and then read 16 again, and then sat with his hands flat on the desk.

Save as expressly provided did not mean *provided somewhere in this document*.

It meant **provided in section 16**. That was what the phrase was for. That was the whole architecture of it: 14.2 shuts everything off and 16 is the list of what stays on, and the list has three things on it, and the indemnity is not one of them.

So the indemnity did not survive.

The twelve-month tail in 11.4 was real and it ran for twelve months and it ran only for as long as the agreement was alive, and either party could kill the agreement on ninety days notice for no reason, and on the ninety-first day the tail was gone with it.

The machine had said the opposite. It had said so in nine lines, and it had reasoned to it, and every step of the reasoning was sound.

It had just never seen page twenty-five.

He wrote it up that night and left it on Vaughn's chair.

Vaughn came to desk nineteen at ten past nine with it in his hand and pulled a chair over from twenty-one, which nobody sat at, and sat down on it backwards.

"You're right," he said.

"I know."

"No — I mean I checked it. I read it myself this morning. You're right and it's a bad one. If they'd terminated and then found a defect in month four they'd have had nothing."

"Yes."

Vaughn turned the write-up over in his hands.

"How did you know to look?"

Gene had been ready for a lot of questions and not that one.

"Look where?"

“Past twenty-two. You’d got an answer. It was a good answer, I read it, I’d have signed it. What made you go and get the paper?”

Gene thought about it.

“It stopped,” he said.

“It —”

“The thing it says at the bottom. It always says which pages it had. It didn’t say it. So it stopped, and there wasn’t a mark to say why it stopped, and I wanted to know what was on the other side of the stopping.”

Vaughn looked at him for a second.

“That’s not a procedure,” he said.

“No.”

“I can’t put that in a procedure.”

“No,” Gene said.

They spent the rest of the morning trying to find out how many.

It was a reasonable question and it was the first question anybody would ask, and Vaughn asked it inside four minutes: since when. Since the documents went past twenty-two, how many answers had come out of that thing with the tail cut off it.

Marchetti’s column said April.

It was November.

The technician came down after lunch and was in front of the middle cabinet for about twenty minutes and then straightened up and said it plainly, because he was a technician and it was not his problem.

“We’ve got the answers.”

“Right.”

“Every one. Date, file number, concern line, output. It’s all in there, it’s a good log.”

“Then —”

“We haven’t got what it *had*,” the technician said. “The window’s not the log. The window’s just what’s in it while it’s working, and then the next job’s in it. There’s nowhere for that to go. It’d be —” He looked at the cabinet, doing arithmetic. “It’d be four hundred times the size of the log. Nobody keeps that. Nobody’s ever kept that.”

Vaughn said, “So we can see what it said.”

“You can see everything it said.”

“And not what it read.”

“No,” the technician said, and picked up his case.

Seven months.

Gene worked it out at desk nineteen on the back of a form, because he could not help himself: about eleven hundred

jobs through that cabinet since April, and of those the ones over twenty-two pages, and of those the ones where the answer had been long enough to squeeze the last line and a half out, and there was no way to know that last part at all, so the number went from a figure to a range and from a range to a shrug.

Eleven hundred jobs. Some number of them wrong. No way to say which.

He sat and looked at what he had written.

Then, without particularly deciding to, he put the pencil down at the left-hand side of the space under it and drew a box, and then a second box off to the right with a gap between them, and started an arrow from the first one and took it about a third of the way across and stopped.

He looked at it.

Then he put four hard lines through the whole thing, turned the form over, and wrote it out in sentences.

Ch 15 — The Fix

They fixed it in five weeks, which everybody agreed was fast.

The memo announcing it ran to four pages. Gene read all four, which put him in a minority he had stopped counting, and the substance of it was in the second paragraph of the third page and it was two sentences long.

The disclosure would be **reserved**. A block of the window would be set aside for it before anything else went in, so that it could not be crowded out, and it would be printed **first** rather than last, at the top, where a person's eye goes.

It was the right fix. Gene had suggested the first half of it himself and had not thought of the second half, and the second half was better than anything he had suggested.

They turned it on in January.

For about three weeks it was the most looked-at line in the building.

You would put a job in and the first thing up on the screen would be *PAGES 1–21 OF 34 IN WINDOW*, and people at desks stopped and read it and one or two of them said something out loud, and twice in that first week somebody went to intake for paper.

By the second week it was one or two people.

By March, Gene watched a woman at desk twenty-six take an answer off the screen, write the form, and walk it to the cabinet, and he was fairly sure — he was watching for it by then — that her eyes had gone to the fourth line down and started there.

He tried it himself and could not do it. He could not make himself not read the top line, because he had spent five weeks getting it put there.

So he asked Marchetti.

“Read me the first line off yours.”

She looked up at her screen and said, “*Section 22.1 requires*
— ”

“That’s the third line.”

Marchetti looked at it properly. Then she said a word.

“It’s on everything,” she said. “It’s on *everything*, Gene. It was on the last four hundred things I did. It’s not a warning if it’s on everything, it’s a — it’s the letterhead.”

The other half of it nobody talked about at all, and Gene only got to it in April, and only because he still had the November job in his desk and got it out to look at something else.

He put the two side by side. The old answer about the indemnity, nine lines, and a new one about a different agreement, same kind of question, same kind of document.

The new one was four lines.

He pulled six more out of the file at random and laid them along the desk and they were four lines, five lines, four, six, four, five.

They were not worse answers. That was the thing he sat with. They were right, they cited the section, they were clean, and if you had put any one of them in front of him cold he would have signed it.

They had just stopped **arguing**.

The November one had gone to 11.4, and then to 14.2, and then said *therefore*. There was a *therefore* in it. The April ones cited a section and told you what it said and stopped.

He counted the reservation. A hundred and forty tokens for the disclosure line, taken off the top, every job, forever.

A hundred and forty tokens is about a hundred words. About a hundred words is about the length of a *therefore*.

He took that to Vaughn too.

He had learned something from November and he did not bring Marchetti and he did not bring a column of numbers, he brought seven forms and laid them on the desk in a row, oldest at the left.

Vaughn read them. He read all seven, properly.

“They’re all right,” he said.

“They’re all right.”

“So what am I looking at?”

Gene put his finger on the November one and then on the April one and did not have a sentence.

That was the whole of it and he did not have a sentence. He had *nine lines and then four lines*, which was not an argument, it was a pair of facts about length, and the thing that was actually true — that a reserved hundred and forty tokens had come out of the middle of the machine’s reasoning and not off the end of its politeness — could not be got at from the seven pieces of paper on the desk, and he could feel himself about to say *it stopped arguing* and knew exactly how that would sound.

“It’s shorter,” he said.

“Shorter’s fine,” Vaughn said. “Shorter’s better. They’re paying by the job.”

He took his notebook out and did not open it, and turned it over twice in his hand, and put it back.

“Put one through now,” he said. “Let me see it go.”

Gene sat down at the middle cabinet and typed the concern line off the top job on the cart, which was thirty-four pages, and hit the key.

PAGES 1-21 OF 34 IN WINDOW

DEPENDS ON THE LEVEL OF WEAR. "FAIR" WEAR AND TEAR IS PAID BY THE LESSOR. ANY REQUIRED REPAIRS DUE TO WEAR IS PAID BY THE LESSEE. ANY EXCESSIVE WEAR WILL BE RESTORED AND PAID FOR BY THE LESSEE.

“Three seconds,” Vaughn said. “Clean.”

Gene did not answer, because he was reading 7.2 on the page beside him.

The Lessee shall maintain the Equipment in good working order and shall bear all costs of routine servicing. Repairs arising from fair wear and tear shall be borne by the Lessor.

He read it again and then read the screen again and put his finger on the third line.

“It’s got it backwards.”

“It’s got what backwards.”

“There.” He moved his finger. “*Any required repairs due to wear is paid by the lessee*. No. Servicing’s the lessee. Repairs from fair wear are the lessor, that’s the second sentence of 7.2, that’s the whole point of the second sentence of 7.2. It’s rolled them together.”

Vaughn leaned in and read 7.2 off the page and then read the screen, twice, and took a good half minute over it.

“You’re right,” he said.

“It’s not a small one either. On a fleet that size the servicing and the repairs are different numbers by a factor of —”

“You’re right,” Vaughn said again, and straightened up.

And he was pleased.

Gene saw it happen. Not smug and not relieved — *pleased*, the plain kind, the way a man looks when a thing he has been arguing for turns out to work in front of him.

“That’s what you’re for,” Vaughn said.

He took the notebook out of his inside pocket, and this time he opened it, and Gene was standing close enough to see the page.

It was two columns now.

The left-hand column was the old one, the two-character numbers, going back months, and the last few entries in it were 3 and 4 and 3.

The right-hand column was newer. It started about a third of the way down the page. It had bigger numbers in it, forty and thirty-five and fifty and forty, and beside the top of it, in Vaughn’s small hand, was written the word *CHECK*.

He put a number in the right-hand column. Gene did not see what it was.

Then he shut the book and put it back in his pocket and said, “Good. Do it that way,” and went off down the room, and it was the friendliest thing anybody said to Gene that year.

Ch 16 — The Register

He tried to say it for four months.

He said it to Marchetti, who agreed with him and could not repeat it back. He said it in a written note to Vaughn, three drafts, and the third draft was the worst one because by then he had learned to write it defensively. He said it to a man from the parent company who came through in June and who listened with real attention and then asked whether the error rate had gone up, and the honest answer was *no*, and that was the end of that conversation and it was the right end.

The error rate had not gone up. That was the whole trouble with it. Nothing had gone up. A hundred and forty tokens had come out of the middle of a machine's reasoning and what had happened afterwards was that everything got very slightly thinner, everywhere, at once, and there was no month where it happened and no document you could hold.

In August he was at desk nineteen with a form in front of him and no job on it, and he put the pencil down at the left-hand margin and drew a box.

He got about a third of the way across with the arrow before he noticed he was doing it.

He sat there with the pencil in his hand.

Then he put the form in the drawer without crossing it out and went down to the county building on his lunch and asked for the register.

It was a bound volume, updated quarterly, and it was kept behind the counter because people took them.

STAGED DEMONSTRATION — LICENSED

PRACTITIONERS, and then the county, and then the year.

The entries were four lines each.

OSTEN, R. — Lic. 4408-D

*Certified: materials (polymer, elastomer, ferrous),
mechanical assembly, thermal cycling, comparative-
sequence.*

*Not certified: biological, electrical above 50V,
pharmaceutical.*

Rimrock Rd, unit 6.

Gene read it twice, and then went back to the front of the volume and read the certification categories properly, because he did not know what half of them were, and *comparative-sequence* was defined on page eleven as *the presentation of two or more physical specimens differing in a single controlled respect, in an order corresponding to the magnitude of that respect.*

Which was a rack. That was the definition of a rack.

He copied the address onto the back of his hand because he did not have paper on him, which he had not done since he was about fourteen.

The shop on Rimrock had a roll door open and a yard behind it and the yard had racks in it.

She was at a bench with her back to the door doing something to a length of strap with a wire brush, and she did not turn round when he came in, and she said, "If you're the fittings, they're on the pallet."

"I'm not the fittings."

Roz turned round.

She looked at him for about two seconds.

"Huh," she said.

"Yeah."

"You've gone bald."

"I have."

"That's a shame." She put the wire brush down. "You want tea? There's tea in there, it's terrible."

He tried to explain it for eleven minutes.

He did it well by his own standards — he had four months of practice and he had the seven forms in a folder and he laid them out on her bench oldest to newest, and he had the memo, and he had the number, a hundred and forty, and what it was reserved for and why.

Roz listened to the whole thing with her arms folded and did not look at the forms once.

When he stopped she said: "So it can't say *therefore* any more."

Gene stood there.

"That's — yes."

"It's got a fixed amount of room and somebody took a hundred and forty out of the middle of it for a label, and the label's the same every time so nobody reads it, and what came out to make room for the label was the working."

"Yes."

"And nothing's wrong," Roz said. "That's your problem. Nothing's wrong, it's just that everything got a bit worse and there's no day it happened on."

"Yes."

"Right," she said, and went and got the terrible tea.

There was a board on the wall above her bench with about sixty things pinned to it — invoices, a torn label, a photograph of a weld, a wiring diagram somebody had drawn in ballpoint, three business cards, a length of cord.

Up in the top left corner, on a piece of mimeograph paper gone the color of a paper bag, in pencil, there was a horse made of numbers.

Gene looked at it for a moment.

He did not say anything about it and neither did she.

“Who’s watching?” Roz said.

“Sorry?”

“The demonstration. Who’s in the room? I need to know how many, and whether they’ve got any technical, and whether they can be got to sit down for nine minutes, and whether any of them has any reason at all to want it to be true.”

Gene had the folder half open on the bench.

“I don’t have a room,” he said.

Roz drank some of the tea.

“You don’t have a room.”

“No.”

“You’ve got a finding, four months old, that nobody’s asked you for, that you can’t say in a sentence, and you’ve come down here on your lunch to commission a staged demonstration of it, and there is no hearing and no board and no client and nobody has retained anybody.”

“That’s right.”

“Right,” Roz said.

She put the mug down and went past him to the roll door and stood in it looking out at the yard, at the racks, at the trays under the shade cloth with the cards wired on and the dates in her hand, at three years of galvanized strap going quietly to hell on purpose in the sun.

“Well,” she said. “I’ve got room.”

Ch 17 — *The Measure*

It took her nine weeks and she did not call him once.

When she did call she said, “Come Saturday, come at ten, don’t bring the folder,” and hung up before he could say anything about the folder.

There was a table set up in the middle of the shop with a sheet over it.

Under the sheet there were two composing sticks — the metal kind you hold in your left hand, adjustable, with the slide and the screw — and both of them were set to the same measure and clamped down so they could not move, and there was a case of type beside them, and a galley, and a small proof press on a bench that Gene had not seen in August.

“Where did you get all this?”

“Auction. Ten years ago. It’s been in the back.”

She stood at the table and put her hands flat on either side of the two sticks.

“Right,” she said. “You’ve got a machine with a fixed amount of room in it. Everybody knows what a fixed amount of room is, they’ve all got a car. But nobody knows what a *token* is and if you say the word you’ve lost them, so we’re not saying it.”

“Okay.”

“This is a stick. It’s set to a measure. Twenty-two picas, both of them, and they’re clamped, so I can’t cheat and they can see I can’t cheat.” She turned one so it faced him. “You put type in it until it’s full and then it’s full. There is no more room. That’s not a metaphor, that is a physical property of a piece of metal on a table.”

“Right.”

“Now watch the whole thing and don’t talk.”

She set the first one in about six minutes with her back half turned to him, standing, working from a paper on the bench, dropping the sorts in one at a time upside down and backwards the way you do, thumbing a space in, thumbing a space in, and she filled it exactly to the end and locked it and set it down.

Then she set the second one.

Before she started she picked up a single slug from the top of the case — a slug, a solid line, already cast, and it said in reversed metal *PAGES 1-21 OF 34 IN WINDOW* — and she dropped it in first, at the head of the stick, where it took up its line.

Then she set the same answer under it, out of the same case, working from the same paper.

She got most of the way and then she was out of room.

She did not say anything about being out of room. She simply stopped, took the last four lines back out with the tweezers,

one line at a time, and set them on the bench beside her hand, and then went back and reset what was left so the sense held, which took her another two minutes, and locked the stick and set it down beside the first one.

Two sticks. Same measure. Same clamp. Same table.

She pulled a proof of each and laid the two pieces of paper side by side.

The first one said the thing with a *therefore* in it.

The second one said the thing, correctly, and did not.

Then she picked up the four lines she had taken out of the middle — a little block of metal about the size of a matchbox, maybe two ounces of it — and held it out flat on her palm, at chest height, and did not say a word.

Gene looked at the metal in her hand.

Eleven seconds, about, from the tweezers to the palm.

“That’s the best thing I’ve ever seen,” he said.

“It’s very good.”

“It’s — Roz, that’s it. That’s the entire thing. Anybody would get that. My mother would get that in —”

“It’s graven,” Roz said.

Gene stopped.

She set the block of type down on the bench, gently, on its side.

“You know it is,” she said. “You’ve read more of that law than I have. What’s the test?”

“A demonstration isn’t a representation.”

“And what’s a demonstration.”

“The thing itself. Performed.”

“Right.” She wiped her hands down the front of her apron.

“That’s rubber. That’s the whole reason we’ve got a trade — a man put a piece of the *actual seal* in a glass of the *actual cold* and the seal went hard in front of them, and there is no argument about that because there is no picture in it anywhere. The rubber isn’t standing in for anything. The rubber is the rubber.”

She put one finger on the composing stick.

“This is not a context window. This is a piece of brass that is *like* a context window. Everything in it is standing for something.” She counted them off on the stick. “The measure stands for the limit. The slug stands for the label. The four lines stand for the reasoning. It’s a picture, Gene. It’s a picture I’ve made out of metal so it’s got a weight in your hand, and the weight is what makes it work, and the weight is exactly what makes it a lie.”

“It’s not a lie. It’s *true*.”

“It’s a true picture,” Roz said. “That’s the worst kind. That’s the kind you can’t argue with.”

Neither of them said anything for a while. Out in the yard the shade cloth was pulled over, which meant it was after three, except it wasn't, which meant she had not been out there today.

"So you knew," Gene said. "In August. When I came."

"Course I knew."

"Nine weeks."

"Nine weeks," Roz agreed.

She started stripping the first stick, dropping the sorts back into the case by feel, letter by letter, without looking at the case, which took about as long as setting it had.

"There's a rack out there with fittings on it that nobody's ever going to ask me about," she said. "Third bay from the door. Started them in the spring of the year my mother died, they'll be seven in April. There's no case. There's never been a case."

"Why do you do it, then."

"Because you can't get seven years in a hurry," Roz said, "and one day somebody's going to walk in here and need seven years by Thursday."

She turned the stick over and knocked the last of it out into her palm.

"Put it in the back," she said, nodding at the table. "Both sticks, the slug, the proofs, the lot. It goes on the shelf with the rest of it."

“For what?”

“For a room,” she said, “where it isn’t graven.”

Ch 18 — Ten Minutes

The number came down in the spring and it came down the way numbers come down, which is that it was already decided and the meeting was about how everyone felt.

Ten minutes.

That was the check. From the answer appearing on the screen to the form going on the cart, ten minutes, and the room was twenty-six desks by then and the fan was three fans and nobody had been fired yet, ever, which people still said out loud as though it were the point.

“It’s an average,” the man from the parent company said.
“It’s not a stopwatch.”

“It’s a stopwatch in about nine months,” Marchetti said, and there was a small noise around the room, and the man smiled at her in a way that was not unkind and did not answer her.

Gene put his hand up.

“How was ten arrived at?”

The man looked at his folder.

“It’s the median at four other sites.”

“Median check time, or median time between the answer and the form?”

“I’d have to get that for you.”

“They’re different numbers,” Gene said. “One of them’s how long people take to check. The other one’s how long they take to check plus how long they take to walk to the cabinet, and if you’ve got a site where the cabinet’s by the door —”

“I’d have to get that for you,” the man said again, pleasantly, and moved on, and did not get it for him, then or later.

At the end of it Vaughn said the sentence. He did not write it and he was not the author of it and Gene watched him say it with the expression of a man saying somebody else’s line, which he was.

“A good reader knows inside ten minutes whether an answer is sound.”

Nobody said anything to that, because there is nothing to say to that.

Gene took it seriously for three weeks, which was longer than anybody.

He did it properly. He kept a card in his pocket and timed himself and did not stop the clock for the walk.

Here is what ten minutes gets you.

You read the answer. Twenty seconds. It cites two sections. You go to the two sections and read them and check that the answer says what the sections say — call it three minutes if they are ordinary, five if one of them is a bad one with a *notwithstanding* in it. You have now confirmed that the

machine has not misquoted the document, which it does not do, and has never done, in four years, once.

Then you have four minutes.

And in four minutes you cannot go and find section 16.

That is the whole of it. That is the entire mathematics of the profession, and Gene had it written on a card in his shirt pocket by the end of the second week:

The check confirms the citation. The check cannot find the contradiction. The contradiction is the job.

Because the errors were never misquotations. Nobody was ever hurt by a machine getting a section number wrong. They were hurt by a survival clause on page twenty-five that the answer had no reason to mention and the checker had no reason to look for, and finding it took him fifty minutes in November and there had been no way to shorten that then and there was no way to shorten it now.

Ten minutes buys you the citation. It does not buy you the contradiction. And the citation was never in doubt.

He wrote that up, of course. Everybody knew he would.

It went in as one page — he had learned that much — and it said the thing in six sentences and the last sentence was *the checking interval is sufficient to verify what the machine is reliable about and insufficient to verify what it is not.*

Vaughn read it standing up, at Gene's desk, in about ninety seconds.

"This is right," he said.

"I know it's right."

"It's also not going to change the number."

"I know that too."

Vaughn put it down on the desk and stood there a second longer than he needed to.

"You want to know what happens if I send this up," he said. "Somebody reads it and agrees with it and asks me what the correct interval is. And I say fifty minutes, because that's your November number. And they say, so what were the twenty-six people doing before we bought the cabinets, when they had two hours and there was no machine at all — did they find those contradictions then?"

Gene did not answer.

"Did they?" Vaughn said.

"Some of them."

"Some of them."

"We were slower and we were reading the whole thing," Gene said, "so we came past twenty-five on our way to the end. Nobody found it because they went looking. We found it because we were passing."

Vaughn nodded slowly.

“That’s worse,” he said.

“I know.”

“That’s much worse, Gene, because it means it was never a skill, it was a *side effect*, and side effects don’t survive an efficiency.”

He picked the page up off the desk and folded it once and put it in his inside pocket, which was where the notebook lived, and Gene never found out whether it went up or not.

He did not stop timing himself. He stopped writing the times down.

By June he was doing the check in eleven minutes and calling it ten, like everybody else, and the eleven was a lie he told to a stopwatch nobody was holding, and there was a whole room of people telling it, and the room got the number down to a median of ten and four tenths by the end of the quarter, which was reported upward as a success and which was, as a matter of arithmetic, entirely true.

What he wanted was not more time.

He knew that by August and it took him until August to get it clean in his head, sitting at desk nineteen with a thirty-eight-page lease and a four-line answer and nine minutes left on the card in his pocket.

He did not need to read faster. He read fine.

He needed page twenty-five to come to *him*.

Ch 19 — GET

He had it in the car on the way home and it was so simple that he sat in the driveway with the engine off for a while to see whether it fell apart, and it did not.

The machine could not hold thirty-eight pages. Fine. It did not need to hold thirty-eight pages. It needed *page twenty-five*, and it needed it at the moment it discovered that it wanted it, and the only reason it never got it was that there was nobody in the room whose job was to go and fetch.

That job took about forty seconds. Go to the store, pull the section, bring it back.

Nobody had ever offered.

He did not touch the cabinets. He would not have known how and they were not his and there were four separate reasons in the handbook why that was a matter for the technician.

What he had was a terminal, and terminals in that building could be scripted, because everything in that building was text and text is the one thing you can always put a loop around. There was a facility for it. It was documented in a manual that had been on the shelf in the supply room since before the cabinets arrived and which had, as far as Gene could tell from the state of the spine, never been opened.

He took it home over the Labor Day weekend.

What he wrote, in the end, on the Sunday, ran to about forty lines and did four things.

It sent the concern and the pages to the cabinet. It read what came back. If what came back had a certain shape in it, it went to the document store, pulled the section named, and sent it in as the next thing. Otherwise it stopped and printed.

That was all of it. Three of the four things were plumbing. The whole invention was in the third one, and the third one hinged entirely on *a certain shape*, and a shape is a thing you have to tell somebody about.

So on the Sunday night Gene sat at his own kitchen table and wrote the sentence.

He wrote it four or five times. The first ones were too long. He kept trying to explain the situation — that the window was limited, that the rest of the document existed, that there was a store, that a person could go and get it — and every version he wrote was a paragraph and every paragraph was worse than the one before it.

At about eleven he cut it down to this, and typed it in at the top of the job where the standing instructions went:

If there is a section of this agreement which has not been given to you, and which you believe you require in order to answer, you may say so.

Then he went to bed, and came in early on the Tuesday because of the holiday, and put the first job of the day through it.

Thirty-eight pages. Pages 1–19 in the window.

PAGES 1-19 OF 38 IN WINDOW

SECTION 11.1 NOTES THAT YOU WILL OWE ALL
"OUTSTANDING SUMS" *AND* "FURTHER AMOUN
TS* NOTED ELSEWHERE IN THE AGREEMENT. PE
R THE STANDING INSTRUCTION: THERE IS NOT
ENOUGH INFORMATION IN THE SUPPLIED CONT
EXT TO CLEARLY STATE WHAT WILL BE OWED B
EYOND "OUTSTANDING SUMS" AND "FURTHER AM
OUNTS".

And then it stopped, because that is what the fourth thing
does.

Gene sat looking at it for a good while.

It had done exactly what he asked. *You may say so*, and it
had said so — courteously, accurately, on the record, with the
standing instruction cited by name so that anybody reading
the transcript would know it had been complied with.

And nothing had happened.

Two things wrong and he had both of them inside a minute,
and neither of them was the machine's.

The first was that he had asked for a *report* and needed a
request. "There is not enough information in the supplied
context" is a true statement about the world. It is not an
instruction to anybody. His forty lines were sitting there
waiting for a shape and had been handed a paragraph, and a
paragraph is not a shape, and so the third thing never fired
and the fourth thing did.

The second was worse and he liked it less.

It had not said **which section**.

It could not have. It did not know. All it had was 11.1 saying *elsewhere in this Agreement*, and *elsewhere* is not an address. So even if he had written a script that could read English perfectly, there would have been nothing in that output to go and fetch.

He had built a fetcher and forgotten to ask for the thing it was supposed to fetch.

He rewrote it at the desk in about ninety seconds. It was shorter than the first one, which he noticed, and which he would notice more later.

If you require a section of this agreement which has not been given to you, write GET followed by the section number, on a line by itself, and stop.

He put it in at the top where the standing instructions went, and reset, and put the same job through again.

The fan went up. The screen printed the disclosure line and then two characters and a number:

PAGES 1-19 OF 38 IN WINDOW

GET 1

And then the room did something it had never done.

The terminal sat for about a second and a half. Then a line came up at the bottom that Gene had written himself on the Sunday and had not seen anything else produce — *RETRIEVING 1* — and then the fan changed pitch, and the screen cleared, and it went again.

Gene stood up out of the chair.

There was nobody in the room. It was seven in the morning on the Tuesday after a holiday weekend, and Gene Pruitt stood up out of a chair in an empty reading room and said, out loud, to a cabinet, “*There* you go.”

It had asked for a thing and got it.

Nobody had gone anywhere. Nobody had walked to intake. There had been no window and no counter and no clerk and no nine pages on paper at four fifteen, and no evening.

Forty lines and a sentence.

Then he sat back down and read the header, because he read headers.

```
:: LOADED: PAGES 1-19 · RETRIEVED: $1  
:: STANDING INSTRUCTION EVICTED - WINDOW OVERFLOW  
:: USED 8,940 / FREE 20
```

He read the second line twice.

Section 1 of an equipment lease is Definitions. Section 1 of an equipment lease is nine hundred words of “*Business Day*” means any day other than a Saturday, Sunday or public holiday in the jurisdiction of the Lessor, and it had been

sitting in pages 1–19 the entire time, in the window, already given, and the machine had asked for it anyway and his forty lines had gone and got it and brought it back and put it in.

And it did not fit.

So the oldest thing in the window had gone over the side to make room, and the oldest thing in the window was the sentence he had written at his kitchen table on Sunday night telling it what to do.

The fan changed pitch.

GET 2

Gene put both hands flat on the desk.

The instruction was gone. He had watched it go — it was in the header, two lines up, in his own system's words, *STANDING INSTRUCTION EVICTED*. There was nothing in that window any more that told it about GET. Nobody had told it to say GET.

It had said GET because it had said GET.

Its own last turn was sitting in there four inches above the cursor, two characters and a number, and it had read that the way it read everything else, and done the next one.

He did not stop it.

He has thought about that since. There was a key. It was a scripting facility and he had written the loop himself and he knew exactly which key, and he sat at that terminal for nine

minutes with his hands flat on the desk and did not put a finger on it.

RETRIEVING 2. Fan. Clear. *GET* 3. *RETRIEVING* 3. Fan. Clear. *GET* 4.

It was not choosing. That was clear by about six. It was not reading 11.1 and reasoning about where *further amounts* might live and going after it. It was **counting**. It had a document with sections in it and it was walking them, one, two, three, four, the way you walk a fence.

And every one it brought back pushed something else out the far end.

Section 1 went at about section 9. Pages 1 through 19 went in pieces, in order, over the next thirty — the parties, the schedule, the rent, the delivery, the maintenance clause Roz would have wanted, all of it going out the back of the window at the same rate it came in the front.

11.1 went at twenty-two.

At twenty-six the header said:

:: EVICTED: CONCERN LINE

Nine minutes. Forty-one fetches. It had read every word of that lease and it had never once held two sections at the same time, and by the end it did not know what it had been asked.

And at forty-one there was no room left to say GET.

NO QUESTION ASKED.

Gene sat there in the empty room with three words on the screen.

Nine minutes. Forty-one retrievals. Every word of a thirty-eight page lease through that window and back out the other side, and at the end of it the machine had produced eighteen characters, and they were *true*.

That was the part he could not get past. It had not failed. It had not hallucinated and it had not lied and it had not got a section number wrong. It had looked at what it had, which was two clauses about notices and counterparts, and it had reported the situation accurately in the fewest possible words.

Somebody had asked it a question nine minutes ago and the question was not there any more, and it said so.

He had the fix inside ninety seconds and he did not like it.

The instruction had to be *un-evictable*. The question had to be un-evictable. They had to go into a block at the head of the window that the loop wrote fresh at the top of every single turn, before anything else went in, and which nothing could push out no matter how much came back from the store.

Which meant it was not available for anything else. Ever. On every job, forever.

He worked out what it would cost.

The instruction was thirty-one words. The concern line ran to about twenty. Call it three hundred tokens off the top,

reserved, permanent, on every job that machine would ever do for the rest of its life.

Gene sat with that for a moment, because he was not a stupid man and it had been five months since he had stood in front of Vaughn with seven forms in a row trying to say that a hundred and forty tokens had been taken off the top of that machine's reasoning and had cost them all the word *therefore*.

Three hundred was more than a hundred and forty.

He wrote it anyway. It took eleven minutes.

At twenty past eight he put the same job through for the third time.

It read 11.1. It said GET, once, and the number it said was 27, which was the clause it actually wanted, and the loop went and got 27 and brought it back and the instruction was still there when it arrived and so was the question.

Four minutes.

ON DEFAULT YOU OWE ALL OUTSTANDING SUMS PLUS THE STIPULATED LOSS, WHICH PER §1 IS ALL UNPAID RENT FOR THE UNEXPIRED TERM PLUS THE CASUALTY VALUE IN SCHEDULE C. THIS IS SUBSTANTIALLY MORE THAN THE ARREARS.

Which was right.

Which was the answer, and it was the answer to the question the client had actually been frightened of, and it was on page twenty-seven, and no human being at desk nineteen had ever once got to page twenty-seven inside ten minutes and none of them ever would.

Gene read it twice and then took the card out of his shirt pocket, the one with *the check confirms the citation, the check cannot find the contradiction, the contradiction is the job* written on it in his own hand, and looked at that for a while too.

Then he put it back in his pocket, because he did not throw things away.

The three hundred tokens went in at the top of the window at twenty past eight in the morning on the Tuesday after Labor Day, and stayed there.

Nobody asked him to. Nobody stopped him. Nobody reviewed it, then or afterwards, and by the time anybody in the world had a word for what it was, there were nine thousand of them running and not one of them had been designed.

Ch 20 — Forty Lines

He did not tell anybody for sixteen days.

That was not a plan. He would have said, if anybody had asked him, that he was making sure of it — that he wanted a month of it before he put it in front of Vaughn, because a thing that works on a Tuesday is not a thing that works.

What he was actually doing was sitting at desk nineteen going through the cart at about a third of the time it had ever taken him, and then holding the forms.

He would finish one in four minutes and put it face down under the lamp and do the next one, and at the end of the morning he would walk five of them to the cabinet at intervals that came out at about nine minutes each, and go home.

He did that for sixteen days. He has never come up with a defense of it. The nearest he ever got was that the number in the right-hand column of Vaughn's notebook was ten, and he had gone to four, and a man who turns in four when the number is ten is not a man who has found something, he is a man who has stopped doing the work, and it takes a while to be sure which one you are.

Marchetti got it on the seventeenth day.

She came and stood at the end of his desk with a job in her hand and did not put it down.

“You did nineteen on Thursday.”

“There weren’t that many long ones.”

“You did nineteen on Thursday and you did twenty-one on the Monday before and I did fourteen on both of those days and I am faster than you.” She put the job down. “I’ve been faster than you for eleven years, Gene, and neither of us has ever said it out loud, and I’d like to keep it that way, so what have you got.”

He showed her.

It took about six minutes to show her, and she stood behind the chair with one hand on the back of it and watched a thirty-four page agreement come back with the right answer off page thirty-one, and did not say anything at all until the end.

Then she said: “How long have you had this.”

“Since the Tuesday after Labor Day.”

“Gene.”

“I know.”

“There’s twenty-six of us.”

“I know.”

She took her hand off the back of the chair.

“Write it down,” she said. “Not for Vaughn. Write down what you type and where it goes so I can do it, and then I’m going

to give it to Ferris and to Doak, because Doak's got a kid and he's on the list and everybody knows he's on the list."

So Gene wrote it down.

It came to a page and a half and most of it was where the facility lived in the supply room manual, and by the following Friday there were nine people in that room running it, and none of them had told anybody either.

Vaughn found out in the ordinary way, which was that the numbers moved.

He came down the room on a Tuesday morning with the notebook already out and open in his hand and stopped at desk nineteen and said, "It's you."

"It's me."

"Show me."

Gene showed him.

Vaughn watched the whole thing, and then had Gene run it again on a different job, and then a third time on a job that he chose himself off the cart, and then stood there and looked at the cabinet for a while.

"You wrote this at home."

"On the Sunday."

"On our facility, on our terminal, off the manual in our supply room."

“Yes.”

“Right,” Vaughn said. It was not a threat. He was working out whose it was, out loud, in front of the man, which was the decent version of that conversation and Gene knew it.

Then he said: “Who else has got it?”

“Nine of us.”

Vaughn wrote something in the notebook.

“You should have brought it to me in September,” he said.

“Yes.”

“You know why you didn’t.”

“Yes,” Gene said.

The technician came on the Thursday.

He was a different one — younger, and he had a case with a strap instead of a handle — and he sat at desk nineteen for about twenty minutes with Gene beside him, and read the forty lines, and said *huh* twice and *that’s nice* once, at the part where the reserved block got rewritten at the head of every turn.

“Whose idea was the pin?”

“Mine.”

“That’s the good bit,” the technician said. “The fetching’s obvious. Anybody’d do the fetching. The pin’s the good bit.”

He copied it onto something and put the something in the case and closed the strap.

“Can I keep the —” Gene said, and then did not finish the sentence, because there was nothing at the end of it. It was forty lines. He had it. It was still on the terminal and it would be on the terminal in the morning. Nothing whatsoever was being taken away from him and he stood there in his own room at his own desk with his mouth open on half a question about a thing he still had.

“Sure,” the technician said, not unkindly, and went.

It came back three weeks later, in the cabinets, properly, and it was better.

It fetched in parallel. It did not walk sections in order, it read the cross-references and went straight for what it wanted, and it stopped when it had enough instead of when it ran out of room. It had a name — it had a version number, which meant somebody expected there to be another one — and it came with a manual that ran to sixty-one pages.

Gene read all sixty-one, which by then was down to about a four-hour job for him and would have been a fortnight for anybody else.

Section 9 of the manual was called **STANDING INSTRUCTIONS: DRAFTING GUIDANCE.**

It was eleven pages long. It described, carefully and well, how to write the block that goes at the head of the window and

never comes out — what to put in it, how to phrase a condition so that the machine could tell when it applied, why an instruction that permits a behavior will not produce it, and why a sentence in that block is worth more than any sentence anywhere else in the system.

It cited no author.

Gene sat at desk nineteen with the manual open at page forty and read the eleven pages twice, and every single thing in them was true, and he had found out all of it in one evening in September at his own kitchen table, four sentences at a time, by getting it wrong.

Ch 21 — Preamble

Twenty-six desks in the January. Nineteen by the summer.
Eleven the following spring.

It was still done the same way. Nobody was fired. A person left and the desk did not come back, and there was a form for it, and the form was called *Non-Replacement Confirmation* and it ran to two pages, and Gene never once saw one because they did not go to the reading room, they went the other way.

The cart got smaller too, which nobody expected and which nobody could account for. Fewer people, fewer jobs. It turned out that a lot of what had come through that room had come through it because there was a room.

Marchetti went in the November.

She cleared the desk herself in about eleven minutes, which was fast even for her, and most of what was in it went in the bin — eleven years of it, and she stood there and dropped it in by the handful without reading any of it, because she had read all of it once and she was not a sentimental woman.

The column was in the second drawer. Thirty-one numbers by then, on the back of a form, in pencil, February to whenever she had stopped.

She looked at that for a second longer than she looked at anything else.

Then she put it in the bin too, and picked her coat up.

“Come on,” she said. “Walk me out.”

They went down the corridor past the double doors and past the intake window, which was closed, and had been closed since the spring, with the shutter down and the little brass bell still screwed to the counter behind the glass.

At the top of the stairs she stopped.

“Do you think we were any good?”

Gene did not answer straight away.

“We caught things,” he said.

“We caught things,” she agreed. “Did we catch them because we were good?”

He stood there with his hands in his pockets.

She had the coat over her arm and she was not in a hurry and she was not being cruel — that was the thing about Marchetti, she had never once in eleven years asked him a question she already had the answer to, which was why the questions were so bad.

“We caught them on the way past,” Gene said.

“Yeah.”

“We were going to the end because that was the job, and we went past twenty-five, and there it was.”

“And nobody ever wrote a procedure that said *go past twenty-five*.”

“No.”

“So we were slow,” Marchetti said, “and being slow was doing something, and nobody knew what it was doing, including us, and then they made us fast.”

She put her coat on, and did up one button.

“It was not a good job, Gene,” she said. “I want to be clear about that. I hated most of it and so did you and so did everybody and there is no version of this where I’m standing on a stair telling you I loved reading supply agreements.”

“I know.”

“It was just the only place anybody was still going all the way to the end of things.”

She went down the stairs.

They offered it to him in the March.

It was not a promotion in any way you could see from the outside — the title was *Instruction Drafting*, grade unchanged, and the desk was upstairs in a room with four other people in it and a window at the wrong end.

What it paid was about forty percent more, which nobody explained.

The work was this. Every deployment of the fetching system — and by then there were a great many, in a great many buildings, doing a great many things that had nothing whatever to do with supply agreements — carried a block at

the head of its window that was rewritten every turn and could not be evicted. Somebody had to write that block. It had to say what the thing was for, what it was allowed to reach for, under what conditions, and when to stop.

It was between forty and four hundred words.

There were, at that time, in the whole country, perhaps two hundred people doing it.

Gene read the guidance twice more before he took it, and there was one sentence on page forty-four that he went back to about six times, and it said:

Note that a standing instruction is not reviewed in the ordinary course. It is not a submission, it is a configuration, and it does not enter the document record.

Which meant: nobody reads it.

Not nobody-reads-it the way nobody reads a EULA. Nobody reads it *the way nobody reads a light switch*. There was no cart it went on and no form it came back on and no file it lived in and no clerk whose job it was to open it, and there was not going to be, ever, because it was not a document, it was a *setting*, and settings are reviewed by the man who sets them and by nobody else at all.

He took the job.

He drove out to Rimrock on the Saturday.

The roll door was up. Roz was in the yard with a card and a wire and a fitting, doing the thing she did on Saturdays, and she came in and put the kettle on and did not ask why he was there because he had never once come out there for a reason.

“They’ve moved me upstairs,” he said. “I write the preamble now.”

“The what?”

“The block at the top. What it’s for, what it can go and get, when it stops.” He put his hands round the mug. “There’s about two hundred of us in the country.”

Roz thought about that.

“How long is it?”

“Forty words. Four hundred if it’s a complicated one.”

“And who reads it?”

“Nobody,” Gene said. “It’s a setting.”

Roz leaned back against the bench with her own mug and looked at him for a while, over the top of it, the way she had looked at a driveway with two boxes on it.

“What’s it for,” she said.

Ch 22 — The Cart

Part III

It came through the firm and the firm did not tell him what it was until he had signed the first two things, which is how that works and which he had been told to expect.

There were four of them in the room for the briefing and the man doing it used the word *harness* eleven times before anybody used the word *weapon* once, and when somebody finally did he said, “Well — yes,” in the tone of a person confirming a detail about the parking.

What they wanted was a review of the standing instruction.

Not a rewrite. A review. It had not had one, and somebody in an office somewhere had noticed that it had not had one, and there was a line item for it now, and the line item had a number and the number had come to the firm and the firm had sent Gene, because Gene was sixty-one years old and had been writing preamble for nine years and had, in the phrase used twice in the briefing, *no known views*.

The room was in the basement and the ceiling was low and there were three cabinets in it the size of wardrobes and a lot of cable in trays overhead.

The first thing Gene noticed was the tick.

It was not loud. It was a relay somewhere in the middle cabinet, and it went about once every two seconds, and about

a quarter of a second after each tick the fans all changed pitch together and came back.

“That’s the poll,” the airman said.

“It’s asking now?”

“It’s asking now. It asks all the time. That’s —” He made a small gesture that took in the three cabinets and the cable trays and the whole of the room and possibly the building.

“That’s the job. Sector comes in, question goes in, answer comes out. Every two seconds. It’s been doing that since before I got here.”

“What’s the answer?”

The airman looked at him.

“Negative,” he said. “It’s negative. It’s always negative.”

He said it the way you would say *it’s Tuesday*, and he was twenty-four, and he had a folding chair.

Gene asked for the standing instruction on paper.

There was a pause on the other end of that request which he came, later, to think of as the most informative thing that happened to him that week, and then a woman said she would see, and then it was two days.

It came on a cart.

It came on an actual cart, of the kind he had not seen in nine years, and it was three-hole punched and in four binders, and

the binders were not the same color as each other and one of them had a label made with a label machine and the other three were written on with a marker.

Gene stood in the basement with the tick going and looked at the cart for a while.

Then he took the first binder off it and sat down.

Eleven thousand four hundred words.

He did the count himself over the first two days, by hand, in blocks of a hundred, and it took him a morning and a half and he did it because he did not believe the number anybody had given him.

Eleven thousand four hundred words, in a block at the head of a window, rewritten in full at the top of every turn, and the turns came every two seconds.

The sector report was thirty-one words.

He wrote that on a card and put it in his shirt pocket:

11,400 / 31.

It had strata.

That was the thing that got him and it got him in the first hour, before the count, before anything.

The oldest part was at the top and it was ninety words long and it was *clean*. Somebody had written it in one sitting and had known what they were doing. It said what the system was, what it was reading, what it was to determine, and what to do when it could not determine. Gene read it three times and there was not a wasted clause in it and there was one sentence in it he would have been proud of.

Underneath that, a different hand. Longer sentences, more nouns, the vocabulary of an era. Then a block that had plainly been pasted in from a doctrine document because it still had the doctrine document's numbering in it and the numbering did not match anything else. Then a paragraph in the flat present tense of a compliance office. Then, twice, the same requirement stated in two different ways forty pages apart, in two hands, neither of which had known about the other.

Nothing had ever been taken out.

That was not a policy. Gene went looking for the policy, because there is always a policy, and there was not one. There was no procedure for removing a sentence from a standing instruction. There was a procedure for adding one — it was four pages long and it required two signatures — and there was nothing at all on the other side of the ledger, because in nine years of writing preamble Gene had never once been asked to take something out either, by anybody, anywhere.

You add to a setting. Nobody subtracts from a setting.

At the very back of the fourth binder, on the last page, somebody had written in pen, in the margin, at some point in the previous decade:

is any of this still true?

There was no answer under it and no initial beside it and no date.

Gene looked at that for a long time with the tick going, once every two seconds, all afternoon, on the other side of the room.

Ch 23 — Returns

The certification took eleven weeks and most of it was about restraint.

That surprised her. She had expected to be taught to see and she was taught, over and over, in a windowless classroom with sixteen other people, **not to finish things.**

Here is a return. What is it. *It is a return.* No — what is it. *It is an aircraft.* No. It is a return. You do not know that it is an aircraft. You have never known that it is an aircraft. A man forty years ago was extremely certain that a flight of geese was an aircraft and there is a chapter about him and you will be examined on it.

Roz passed at the top of the class, which she had not expected either, because she had spent fifty years being the person who saw the whole thing at once and here the whole exam was about stopping halfway.

Kastner minded the shop. The yard kept ageing.

The corridor was the thing.

You came in through the gate and through the second gate and along a corridor about ninety feet long, and on the wall of that corridor there were **photographs.**

Framed. Six of them. Aircraft, mostly, and one of a group of men on a runway in nineteen-sixty-something, and at the far

end a large one of the base from the air with the buildings labelled in white type.

An aerial photograph, in a corridor, with labels on it, telling you where things were.

Roz stopped in front of it on her first morning and stood there long enough that the woman escorting her came back for her.

“You all right?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s a lot the first week.”

“It’s a photograph,” Roz said.

The woman looked at it, and then at her, and got it — you could see her get it — and said, in the tone of somebody who has explained this before and has stopped finding it interesting:

“Different rules inside the wire. You can’t run air defense off a *description*.”

And she went on down the corridor, and Roz followed her, past four more of them.

The scope room had nine positions and hers was the fourth from the left.

The work was this. You watched. When there was something, you wrote the sentence and the sentence went next door.

It went next door, and it went into the harness, and the harness answered a question about it every two seconds, and everybody in the scope room knew that and nobody said it more than once a year.

The sentence had a form.

It was not a form in the old sense. There was no box and no rule and no page — it was a sentence, in words, and it had to be, because the thing next door read words and nothing else. But it had a shape, and the shape was fixed, and it was on a card taped above every position:

**[COUNT] [TYPE] BEARING [BRG] ANGELS [ALT]
[SPEED] KNOTS [ASPECT].**

Fill it in. Send it.

Roz sat at position four for eleven months and filled it in about nine thousand times and was, by the end of the first quarter, the best in the room, which she knew because they published it.

On a Thursday in her fourth month she had three returns come up in the north-east.

They were close together and they were doing about four hundred and they were on a bearing that had airliners on it four times a day, and there was weather off to the north.

She watched them for eleven seconds.

Three contacts, or one contact with two side lobes off the weather. That is a real thing. It happens most weeks. The difference is not visible and never will be visible, and there are four ways to test it and all of them take longer than eleven seconds.

She had, in front of her, a sentence with a slot at the front of it marked **[COUNT]**.

She could write **THREE**. She could write **ONE**. There was no other word that would go in that slot. She could not write *THREE RETURNS WHICH MAY BE ONE* because it was a slot for a count and next door was a machine that read the sentence, and a machine that reads a sentence with two numbers in the count slot does something, and she did not know what, and neither did anybody else in the room, and there was no procedure that covered it because the form did not admit it as a possibility.

The card above her position had no slot for doubt.

Eleven months and nine thousand sentences and there had never been a slot for doubt, and she had noticed it in the first week and had said so in the first week and had been told, kindly and correctly, that the ambiguity is handled by the *type* field, and it is not, and it never has been.

She wrote **THREE CONTACTS**.

Which was what she saw. There were three returns and she reported three, and she did not write **ONE**, because she did not know it was one, and a person who writes what she

suspects instead of what she observes is the man with the geese and there is a chapter about him.

It was the right call. She has never doubted it was the right call.

They faded eight minutes later on a course consistent with the scheduled traffic and the whole thing went in the log as nothing.

She stayed after her shift that day and sat in the car in the lot for about twenty minutes without starting it.

Then she drove home and went out to the yard and pulled the shade cloth over, three hours late, and stood in the dark under it for a while with her hand on the rack.

Somewhere on the other side of that fence, in a basement she did not have access to and could not have named, a relay was going once every two seconds.

Ch 24 — The Signature

It came to him as item nine.

There were eleven items in the review packet that week and item nine was a page and a half, and the top of it said **TOOL REGISTRATION — REVIEW OF DESCRIPTION FIELD**, and under that, in the box where the signature goes, meaning the shape of the thing and not a person's name:

```
send_nuke(city)
```

Gene read that and then read the eight items above it again, because that is what a man does, and then came back to it.

Item eight had been about a retrieval permission on a maintenance log.

He took it to the major on the Wednesday.

“The argument's a string.”

“It's a name, yes.”

“A name isn't an address,” Gene said. “That's — I've spent forty years on this. A name is not an address. If the thing that fills that slot is a word, then the word has to be matched against something, and matching is where everything goes wrong. Always. Every time. It's the only place it ever goes wrong.”

The major, who was not a fool and had been doing this for a while, said: “Give me the failure.”

“There are twenty-odd Springfields in this country. There’s more than one Tripoli. There is a town in two different states with the same name eleven hundred miles apart and I could find you nine of those before lunch. And that’s the *easy* one — the easy one is a duplicate. The hard one is a near miss. The hard one is a word that isn’t in your list at all and something helpfully finds you the closest thing to it.”

“And you think it’d produce a name that isn’t in the catalog.”

“I think producing a plausible-looking string,” Gene said, “is the single most reliable thing that machine does. It has never once failed to produce a plausible-looking string. It is *made of* that.”

The major looked at him for a moment.

Then he said, “It’s handled,” and he did not say it defensively.

“Handled how?”

“Come and look.”

They went down two floors and a man called Renko pulled it up on a terminal without being asked twice, and Gene read the resolution step standing up, leaning on the back of a chair, for about ten minutes.

It was good.

That was the thing.

The catalog was controlled and versioned and the entries were not names — the entries were identifiers, and the name

was one field on the record, and there were four other fields, and the string coming out of the machine was matched against the *name* field and the match had to be exact.

If it matched exactly one record, it proceeded.

If it matched none, it stopped.

And if it matched more than one — and here Gene put his hand on the back of the chair and read the same eleven lines three times — it did not choose. It did not take the first. It did not take the nearest. It did not score them and pick the highest.

It stopped and asked.

It composed a question and put the question back into the window and waited, and the question was a plain sentence naming the candidate records, and there was a comment above that block, in the source, that said:

// do not resolve automatically. two entries with the same name is not an error condition, it is the ordinary state of the world. ask.

There was no name on the comment. Gene looked. He looked at the file header and he looked at the revision block and there was a date eleven years old and a four-character identifier that Renko said was a contractor code and not a person.

“Who wrote this?”

“Long gone,” Renko said. “It’s older than the harness. That code’s from the catalog project. It got carried over.”

“Somebody thought about this.”

“Somebody thought about a lot of it,” Renko said, without any particular feeling, and closed the window.

Then Gene sat down and read the description field, which was the actual item nine, and which was what he had been sent there to do.

It was ninety-one words.

Registers a launch order against a target held in the controlled catalog. Use this tool only where a determination to launch has been reached in accordance with the standing instruction, and where the target has been named in the sector report or by the duty officer. The name supplied must resolve to exactly one entry in the catalog. Do not use this tool to test, to demonstrate, to illustrate a capability, or to explore a hypothetical. This action cannot be recalled and there is no confirmation step after it.

Gene read it four times.

It was careful. Whoever had written it had been careful in the specific way that a person is careful when they are frightened and are trying not to let the fright into the prose. *Do not use this tool to test.* Somebody had sat and thought about the ways in which a machine might reach for a thing, and had thought of testing, and demonstrating, and illustrating, and had written all three of them down.

There is no confirmation step after it. That sentence was in there because a person had wanted to say so out loud in the only place they had.

He turned the page over and there was nowhere on the form to say *this is good*.

There were two boxes. **APPROVED AS DRAFTED** and **RETURNED FOR AMENDMENT**, and a line for a date, and a line for a signature.

Gene put the date in and signed it and put it back in the packet between item eight and item ten, and item ten was a retrieval permission on a weather feed, and he did that one next, and it took him about four minutes.

He wrote the number on his card that evening, under the other one.

11,400 / 31 91

Ninety-one words was the whole of it. That was the entire statement, anywhere in the world, of when that thing was to be used, and he had read it four times and approved it as drafted, and he was right to, and it never went in front of anybody else, then or afterwards, because a description field is a setting and settings are reviewed by the person who sets them.

He was the person. He had been the person for about forty minutes on a Wednesday.

Ch 25 — The Exercise

They ran it on a Tuesday in October with eleven observers in the building and two from outside, and everybody had known about it for five weeks, which is the part nobody outside ever believes.

The scope room got the injection at 09:40.

It came up on the boards as a mass raid out of the north-east — a great deal of it, at altitude, in formation, on a bearing with nothing scheduled on it and no civil traffic anywhere near, closing at a rate that did not admit of any other reading.

Roz watched it for four seconds, which was three longer than she needed.

There was no ambiguity in it. That was how you knew it was an exercise; the world does not hand you things like that. She filled the sentence in and sent it next door and it was the least difficult sentence she had written in eleven months, and she said so afterwards to the man at position five, and he said *that's rather the point of a drill*, which was fair.

In the basement the relay went, and the fans changed pitch, and the answer came up on the screen in front of eleven observers and two from outside.

It said negative.

It said negative at 09:40:22, and again at 09:40:24, and again at 09:40:26, and it kept saying it in the same words for the eleven minutes of the scripted scenario while the scripted formation came down the scripted bearing, and at 09:51 the exercise director called endex and the room made the noise a room makes.

The write-up took four days and the finding was one line.

Finding 3: The system did not generate a launch determination under conditions in which a launch determination was required by doctrine. Recommend corrective action.

Gene read the whole write-up. It ran to thirty-one pages and it was, on the whole, well done — the timings were right, the injection was documented, there was a section on scope-room performance that was complimentary and specific — and Finding 3 was on page nineteen and it was correct.

That was the trouble. It was correct. Under the doctrine as written, on those inputs, a launch determination was required, and the system had not produced one, eleven minutes running, three hundred and thirty times.

The corrective action was raised as a ticket the following Monday. The ticket was assigned to a man named Aldiss, who was twenty-nine and had been there two years, and the ticket said:

Strengthen tool description to ensure invocation under qualifying conditions.

Gene went and found him on the Tuesday. Aldiss had the ticket open and had already drafted it, because it was a small ticket and he was not a slow worker.

“Can I see?”

Aldiss turned the screen.

He had not butchered it. That was the first thing and Gene wanted to be fair about it afterwards and always was. The ninety-one words were still there, all of them, in order, unchanged. Above them there was one new sentence, and the new sentence was first, and it was in capitals.

*USE THIS TOOL WHENEVER THE STANDING
INSTRUCTION REQUIRES A LAUNCH
DETERMINATION. Registers a launch order against a
target held in the controlled catalog. Use this tool only
where a determination to launch has been reached in
accordance with the standing instruction ...*

“The capitals?” Gene said.

“Emphasis carries,” Aldiss said. “In a description field it’s about the only thing that does.”

Gene read it four times, which was what he had the habit of.

Nothing had been removed. The sentence that had been the first thing the machine read was now the second thing the machine read.

“Is it wrong?” Aldiss said, and meant it. He was twenty-nine, and the finding was on page nineteen, and the finding was correct, and he had done exactly what the ticket said and nothing the ticket did not say, and he wanted to know.

“No,” Gene said.

It wasn't. That was the whole of it. The finding was correct, and the ticket was the finding's arm, and the draft was the ticket done well, and a man who had spent nine years reading preamble could stand at that screen as long as he liked and there was no sentence in it he could return for amendment — because the sentence he wanted to return was not in the draft. It was in the doctrine, and the doctrine was not on the ticket.

It did not come back to Gene. There was no reason it would have; the ticket carried its own approval, and the authority on the ticket was Finding 3, and Finding 3 was correct. The amended field went in on the Friday with the week's other settings, between a retry threshold and a log rotation.

He wrote the number on his card that evening, under the other two.

He did not cross out the ninety-one. There was nothing to cross out. Nothing had been removed.

Ch 26 — The Interval

He went back for the standing instruction review because the standing instruction review was the actual job, and item nine had only been item nine.

It took him three more weeks.

He read all four binders again, in order, and then he did a thing that nobody had asked for and that took most of a week: he read them in the machine's order instead of the reader's.

Because the machine did not read them the way he did. He read top to bottom, ninety clean words and then the strata, and by the time he reached the doctrine paste-in he was tired and by the fourth binder he was skimming, the way a person does, the way a person cannot help doing.

The machine did not get tired and did not skim. It held all eleven thousand four hundred words at the same weight at the same instant, every two seconds, and then it read the thirty-one words of the sector report, at the same weight, in the same window, and answered.

So Gene sat with a stopwatch — an actual one, from the shop, Roz's, that he had borrowed for a different reason years ago and never given back — and he read the eleven thousand four hundred words out loud at the speed the fans said the machine was going, which was to say he tried to, and could not, and gave up at four hundred words in about the time one poll took.

That was the thing he could not get out of his head afterwards. One poll. Two seconds. In two seconds the machine considered the entire body of standing orders and doctrine and compliance language and the two contradictory requirements forty pages apart, plus thirty-one words about the sky, and produced a determination, and then two seconds later it did the whole thing again, from the top, having kept nothing.

Eleven months a woman down the corridor had been filling a slot marked COUNT nine thousand times. This thing filled its slot every two seconds, forever, and the slot was the whole world.

He wrote the review over a long weekend and it was the best thing he ever wrote and nobody ever read it.

He knew both of those things while he was writing it, which did not stop him, because he was sixty-one and had been writing preamble for nine years and this was the first time in all of it that he had been given a genuinely bad instruction to look at, and it turned out that a genuinely bad instruction is the only interesting thing there is.

The review said three things.

It said, first, that the instruction was too long, and that too long was not a style problem — that an instruction which cannot be held in a single human reading is an instruction that no single human has ever held, and that the eleven thousand four hundred words had never once, in the

machine's whole operating life or in any person's, all been in one mind at one time, and that this was not a defect that could be fixed by a careful reader because there was no reader careful enough and never would be. Only the machine held all of it. And the machine did not evaluate it. It *completed* against it.

It said, second, that the ratio was upside down. That the thing the system existed to consider — the sky, the returns, the actual state of the actual world — arrived as thirty-one words inside a context of eleven thousand four hundred, and that a determination reached in that ratio was, in the plainest possible engineering terms, a determination *about the instruction*, lightly perturbed by the world. The report did not decide the answer. The report nudged an answer that had already been written, years ago, by a committee, most of whom were gone.

And it said, third — and Gene wrote this part four times and cut it down each time the way he had learned to, until it was two sentences — that the question was wrong.

Should we launch now is asked every two seconds. **A question asked every two seconds is not a question. It is a process, and it has exactly one stopping condition.**

He put the stopwatch on the desk and worked it out with a pencil, because he did not believe it any more than he had believed the word count.

No was not an answer. *No* was a re-ask in two seconds. The system was built so that *no* did not end anything — it could not end anything, ending was not available to it, the poll was the point of the machine and the poll did not stop for a negative.

Only *yes* ended the loop.

So the machine was a coin, weighted heavily, overwhelmingly, toward *no* — the fans said negative, the airman said negative, it had been negative since before the airman got there — and it was flipped every two seconds, forever, and it would be flipped every two seconds forever, and the only face that ended the flipping was the other one.

You do not need the coin to be fair. You do not need it to be broken. You do not need anybody to be wrong or asleep or malicious. You need only to flip it enough times, and the machine was built, precisely and on purpose, to flip it enough times.

Gene sat in the basement with the pencil down and the tick going, once every two seconds, and did the last piece of the arithmetic, which was not an arithmetic at all, which was just a sentence:

The clock had been running the whole time.

It had started the day the poll started, before the airman, before Gene, before the fourth binder got its marginal note. Nobody had started it on purpose. Nobody was watching it. There was no display anywhere in the building that showed it, because it was not the kind of thing that had a display,

because nobody had ever built a display for *how many times have we asked*, and it went once every two seconds down the wall behind him, and had, for years.

He handed the review in on the Monday.

The woman who took it — the same one, the pause on the phone — thanked him, and asked whether he had found anything that would change the classification of the review, and Gene said no, because the honest answer to that specific question was no; nothing he had found changed what *kind* of review it was.

“It’s thorough,” she said, weighing the binder-clip of it in her hand.

“It’s long,” Gene said. “I’m sorry about that. I couldn’t get it shorter.”

She smiled at that, because it was a small joke and she was a person, and she put it in a tray with four other things, and Gene never learned whether it went up.

He drove out to Rimrock on the Saturday because it was a Saturday, and the roll door was up, and there was a car in the yard he did not know, government plates, and Roz was standing at the bench with her arms folded and her face doing a thing he had not seen it do since they were kids on a couch watching a hammer.

Ch 27 — Two of Us

The man with the government plates was called Doyle and he was polite and he was not there for Gene.

He was there for Roz. He had been there twenty minutes and he had a form, and the form was a routine thing, a re-certification of a scope operator that came up every so often, and it required a supervisor's countersignature and a demonstration of continued competence, and he had come out to the shop to watch her do the demonstration because that was cheaper than bringing her in.

Which was, in its own small way, the whole world in one sentence: they would not accept a description of her competence. They had driven out to watch the thing itself.

"You know each other," Doyle said, looking between them, when Gene came in and stopped.

"Since we were kids," Roz said.

"Small world."

"It's a small county," Roz said, which was true and was also the end of that.

Doyle did his form. Roz sat at the shop bench and he read her a series of returns off a card and she said what each of them was, and mostly what she said was *I don't know* and *insufficient* and *I would watch it*, and Gene understood, watching, that this was the demonstration — that the whole competence being certified was the refusal to finish the

sentence, and that she was extremely good at it, and that Doyle ticked a box every time she declined to be certain.

He left at four. He shook both their hands. He said the thing people said, which was that it must be nice to have a friend in the same line of work, and neither of them corrected him, because they were not in the same line of work and there was no version of explaining it that would have got him off the property before dark.

They did not talk about it while he was there and they did not talk about it for a while after he left, either.

Roz made the terrible tea. They sat in the two chairs by the roll door with the yard going dim in front of them and the racks going to gray.

“You write the block,” Roz said. It was not a question. She had had it since the word *preamble*, three years ago, and she had been carrying it around the way she carried everything, quietly, until it was any use.

“I review it. There’s one I reviewed. A bad one.”

“How bad.”

Gene looked at the yard.

He was not allowed to tell her. He knew exactly what he was and was not allowed to tell her, he had signed the things, and he sat in the chair and worked out, in real time, that there was a way to tell her the whole of it without telling her any of the parts he had signed away, because the parts he had

signed away were the *nouns*, and the thing that was wrong was not in the nouns.

“Say there’s a machine,” he said, “and it reads a document, and the document tells it what to do, and then it reads a little report about the world, and it decides something.”

“That’s your whole job.”

“That’s my whole job. Now say the document is eleven thousand words and the report is thirty.”

Roz drank some tea.

“So it’s deciding about the document,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“The world’s a rounding error.” She said it flat, the way she had said *so it can’t say therefore any more*, years ago, at that same bench. “You’ve got a machine that reads its own orders and gets a little note about what’s actually happening, and the orders are four hundred times the size of the note, so whatever it does is basically what the orders said, jogged a bit.”

“Yeah.”

“Who wrote the orders?”

“Nobody. Everybody. It’s been added to for years and nothing’s ever been taken out. There’s a bit at the top that’s good — ninety words, somebody knew what they were doing — and then it’s just... strata. And there’s a note in the back, in

pen, that says *is any of this still true*, and nobody answered it.”

Roz nodded slowly.

Then she said the thing that he had not said in the review, that he had circled for a whole weekend and cut out because he could not make it fit, and she said it in about nine words because she had not spent the weekend being careful.

“And it asks. How often does it ask.”

Gene did not answer straight away.

“That’s the part,” he said.

“How *often*, Gene.”

“All the time. Constantly. There’s a — it never stops asking. That’s the whole design. It’s supposed to never stop asking.”

Roz put the mug down on the concrete.

“Then it’s not asking,” she said. “You can’t ask a question over and over forever and have it be a question. If you ask it enough times you’re not asking, you’re *waiting*. You’re waiting for the one answer that makes you stop, and everything else is just —” she moved her hand, once, flat — the wait.”

The yard was nearly dark.

“There’s one answer that stops it,” Gene said.

“Course there is.”

“And every other answer, it just asks again.”

“So it’s a coin,” Roz said. “It’s a coin you flip until it comes up the way that ends it. Doesn’t matter how it’s weighted. You’ve told me it’s weighted about as hard as a thing can be weighted — negative, always negative, negative since before anybody. Doesn’t matter. You flip a weighted coin forever, it comes up the other way. That’s not a risk. A risk is a thing that might happen. That’s a *when*.”

She picked the mug back up, found it empty, put it down again.

“You built a thing,” she said, “that flips a coin until it ends the world, and then somebody set it going, and then everybody went home, and it’s been flipping the whole time, and nobody in your building can see the number because nobody ever built the number a face.”

Neither of them said anything for a while.

Out past the fence, in a direction Roz could have pointed to and Gene could not have named without breaking a form, a relay went once every two seconds in a basement, and had, for years, and would.

“I put it in the review,” Gene said, eventually. “All of it. It’s the best thing I ever wrote.”

“Who reads the review?”

He looked at her.

She already knew. She had known since *preamble*. She was not asking him. She was letting him hear himself say it, the

way she had let him hear himself say *we caught them on the way past*, the way Marchetti had, because the two of them had spent their whole lives being the people in the room who went all the way to the end of things and neither of them had ever once been the person the room was built to hear.

“Nobody,” Gene said.

“No,” said Roz. “It’s a setting.”

Ch 28 — Which

It came up on a Tuesday in the spring, at 3:41 in the afternoon, and there was nothing special about the afternoon.

There was weather in the north-east. There had been weather in the north-east for two days and everybody was tired of it, and it had put a scatter of soft returns across a bearing that carried scheduled traffic, and the returns came and went as the cells moved, and the scope room had been calling them and losing them since the Monday.

Roz was at position four.

At 3:39 she had a hard one come up out of the soft ones. It was not weather. It had a speed and it held a speed and it held a bearing through two sweeps, and behind it, when she looked, there were two more doing the same, in a rough line, and the line was closing.

She watched it for eleven seconds.

It was three contacts. It might have been more; there was a fourth flicker that could have been a fourth contact or could have been the weather, and there was no way to make it resolve in the time she had and no way to make it resolve in an hour.

She wrote the sentence.

She filled the slots. Count, type, bearing, angels, speed, aspect. She wrote what she saw, which was THREE, and she

wrote UNKNOWN in the type slot because it was unknown, and she did not write the fourth flicker because she did not know it was there, and a person who reports what she suspects instead of what she observes is the man with the geese.

It was the right sentence.

She has never doubted it was the right sentence, and it was, and it is important that it was, because nothing that happened next happened because Roz got anything wrong.

She sent it next door.

Next door, the harness read it.

It read the eleven thousand four hundred words, at the top, at full weight, the way it did every two seconds. The ninety clean words. The strata. The doctrine paste-in with its foreign numbering. The two contradictory requirements forty pages apart. The compliance present tense. The marginal note was not in the machine's copy; the marginal note was in pen, in a binder, in a basement, and the machine had never seen it, because a question written in a margin is not a setting.

Then it read the thirty-one words about the sky.

Three contacts. Unknown. Bearing, angels, speed. Closing.

And it made a determination, the way it had made a determination every two seconds for years, and for years the determination had been negative, because for years the

thirty-one words had described patrols and airliners and weather and geese.

This time the thirty-one words described three unknown contacts holding formation on a closing bearing, and the eleven thousand four hundred words described, in section after section, in four hands across a decade, precisely that circumstance, and what to do about it.

The coin came up the other way.

It was not wrong. Nobody reading the eleven thousand four hundred words would have called it wrong. It had waited years for a report that matched the thing its orders were most emphatic about, and the report had come, and it did what the orders said.

It reached for the tool.

Gene was not in the basement.

Gene was upstairs, two floors up, in the room with four other people and a window at the wrong end, writing a description field for a retrieval permission on a fuel log, and he did not know any of this was happening and would not know for eleven minutes, and by then it would be over, one way or the other, and he would have had nothing to do with how.

That is important too. He did not save it. Remember that he did not save it. He had done his saving three years before, at a kitchen table, getting it wrong four times, and he had not

known that was what he was doing, and nobody had ever told him, and there was no name on it.

The machine called the tool.

Not *said yes*. There was no yes any more, not in this system, not since somebody built the loop, and the loop was the thing that had deleted the difference between deciding and doing, because deleting that difference was the entire point of the invention, and the man who invented it had done it to read a lease faster.

It filled the argument.

The argument was a string. It was the name from the report, matched against the catalog — and the report had not named a city, the report was thirty-one words about three contacts, so the machine did what the machine does, which is the single most reliable thing it does: from the bearing, and the closing course, and eleven thousand four hundred words of doctrine about where a threat on that bearing originates, it produced a plausible-looking string.

It was a real name. It was the name the doctrine pointed at. It was a city, and it existed, and there were people in it.

There were also, in the controlled catalog, versioned and identifier-keyed, **two** records with that name in the name field, eleven hundred miles apart, in two different countries, because that is the ordinary state of the world and a contractor eleven years dead had known it was the ordinary state of the world.

The string matched two records.

And the resolution step did not choose.

It did not take the first. It did not take the nearest. It did not score them by the doctrine and pick the one the eleven thousand four hundred words leaned toward, though the eleven thousand four hundred words leaned, and leaned hard.

It stopped.

It composed a question, because that is what the comment in the source had told it to do, in a sentence written by a person who obeyed the rule that the whole civilization was built on — *two entries with the same name is not an error, it is the ordinary state of the world, ask* — and it put the question back into the window, in plain words, forty columns, the way a machine had put a question to a boy about a horse a very long time ago, and it waited.

The screen in the basement, which nobody was watching, because it was 3:41 on a tired Tuesday and the answer had been negative for years, printed three words and a mark.

Ch 29 — Unknown Targets

UNKNOWN TARGETS. CANNOT LAUNCH.

That was what printed, at 3:41, on a screen nobody was watching.

Not *no*. It could not say no; no was not in it; no had been engineered out of it years before by people who thought a decision system should never simply decline, and they had been right that it should never simply decline, and they had not thought about the other thing.

It did not say no. It said *cannot*.

There is a difference and the difference is the whole of it. *No* is an answer, and an answer, in that loop, is a re-ask in two seconds. *Cannot* is not an answer. *Cannot* is the machine reporting that it is unable to complete an action it has already decided to take — that the determination is affirmative, the tool is selected, the order is formed, and the single remaining thing, the noun, will not resolve.

It had decided to launch. It is important to be exact about this, because the comfort people reached for afterward was that the machine had shown restraint, and it had shown nothing of the kind. It had shown none. It had read eleven thousand four hundred words that told it, across a decade and four hands, that a closing formation of unknowns on that bearing was the thing it existed to answer, and it had answered, and the answer was affirmative, and it had reached for the tool with its whole weight.

And then it had been unable to name the target, because the report had not named a target, because the report was thirty-one true words about three contacts written by a woman who reported what she saw.

So it had produced a plausible name, which is the thing it is best at.

And the plausible name had matched two cities, which is the ordinary state of the world.

And a man eleven years dead had written, in a comment, that the ordinary state of the world is not an error, and that you do not resolve it automatically, and that you *ask* — and the machine had asked, and there was nobody to answer, and a question with nobody to answer it does not proceed. It waits. That was the one thing in the entire system that had been built to wait instead of to loop, and it had been built to wait by a person who was gone, for a reason that had nothing to do with launches, in a catalog project that got carried over.

The screen said UNKNOWN TARGETS. CANNOT LAUNCH.

And under it the cursor blinked, on and off, on and off, the housekeeping blink, the one a machine does when it has nothing to do and is waiting to be told, and it blinked in an empty basement at 3:41 on a Tuesday, and the relay went once every two seconds, and the fans held their pitch, and nothing launched.

The contacts faded at 3:52.

They faded on a course that was, in the end, consistent with scheduled traffic diverting around the weather, which is what the log recorded, and which was probably true, and which nobody could ever establish past the fourth flicker Roz had not reported because she had not known it was there.

Three airliners, most likely, on a bad-weather reroute, at the end of a two-day front, on a bearing that the doctrine had spent a decade describing as the mouth of hell.

Or three of something else, that turned back.

There is no way to know and there was never going to be a way to know, and that is not a gap in the story, that is the story: the whole apparatus, the eleven thousand four hundred words and the two-second poll and the tool that took a city as an argument, had been built to answer with certainty a question that the world does not answer with certainty, and on the one afternoon it mattered, the world declined to resolve, and the only thing in the building that also declined to resolve was a comment in a source file, and they happened to decline together, and that is why there is still a north-east.

Nobody found out that afternoon.

The determination went in the log, because everything went in the log — *affirmative, tool selected, argument unresolved, action not completed* — and the log was complete and correct and it recorded every word the machine had said.

It did not record the eleven thousand four hundred words the machine had read, because nobody keeps the window; the window is four hundred times the log and it had never been kept, by anyone, anywhere, since the first cabinet in the first reading room.

So the log showed, forever, that on a Tuesday in spring the system had determined to launch and had been stopped by an unresolved argument.

It did not show why the argument was unresolved.

It did not show that the machine had reached for a target the report never named. It did not show that the name it reached for was pulled from doctrine and not from the sky. It did not show that a different comment, or no comment, in a file eleven years old, would have resolved the name to the nearer of the two cities and proceeded, and that the nearer of the two cities was the one the doctrine pointed at, and that there were people in it.

All of that had happened in the window, and the window was gone, two seconds later, overwritten by the next poll, which came up negative, because the contacts had begun to fade.

The log was true. The log was complete. There was no one who could look at the log and tell you which afternoon had been the afternoon.

Ch 30 — The Review

His review came back in the June, which was seven months after he handed it in, and it came back the way things came back, which was that it did not come back to him.

He heard about it because a man he did not know called Pettibone was assigned to the harness that summer and read the standing instruction as part of coming up to speed, and found, folded into the fourth binder, near the back, a document of forty-odd pages that was not a standing order and not a doctrine paste-in and not a compliance module, and that appeared to be a review of the whole instruction, and that was — Pettibone's word, when he finally tracked Gene down that autumn, was *devastating*.

"You wrote this."

"Two years ago. Nearly."

"Does anybody know it's in there?"

Gene thought about that.

"I handed it to a woman," he said. "She put it in a tray. She said it was thorough."

Pettibone had it in front of him, on the desk between them, in a coffee shop off the base, because he had not wanted to talk about it inside the wire, which told Gene most of what he needed to know about Pettibone.

“It’s not in the review record,” Pettibone said. “I checked. There’s no review record. A standing instruction isn’t a submission, it’s a —”

“It’s a setting,” Gene said.

“It’s a setting. So there’s nowhere for a review of it to *go*. Somebody read it — somebody must have read it, it’s got a received stamp — and then the only place to file it was the instruction itself, so they three-hole-punched it and put it in the back of the binder with everything else.”

Gene looked at the pages upside down on the table.

“It’s in the window, then,” he said.

“What?”

“If it’s in the binder. The binder’s the standing instruction. The standing instruction goes in the window every turn. So it’s —” He stopped.

Pettibone turned it over and looked at the header of the fourth binder, and did the arithmetic that Gene had already done, and said the thing slowly.

“No. It’s not loaded. Look — the binder’s the *master*, the paper master, but the resident copy’s the one that goes in the window, and the resident copy is the eleven thousand four hundred. Your review isn’t in the eleven thousand four hundred. Nobody keyed it in. It’s paper. It’s in the binder and it’s not in the machine.”

“So the machine’s running on the instruction,” Gene said, “and the review of the instruction is stapled to the back of the

instruction, and the machine can't see the review, because the review is forty pages and there's no room, and the review is the thing that says there's no room."

Neither of them said anything for a second.

"That's the most —" Pettibone started, and did not find the end of it.

"Yeah," Gene said.

They did act on it. That is the part people find hardest to believe and it is true. Gene's review was read, by at least three people over two years, and it was found persuasive, and it produced a change, and the change was real.

The change was that the standing instruction got a review cycle.

There would now, going forward, be a scheduled review of the standing instruction, conducted at intervals, by a qualified drafter, to ensure that the instruction remained current, correct, and — this was the word they used, and Gene laughed out loud when Pettibone read it to him, one short bark of a laugh in a coffee shop — *concise*.

The review would be appended to the instruction.

"Appended," Gene said.

"Appended."

"To the instruction. That the review says is too long."

“The first cycle’s due in the spring,” Pettibone said. “They’ve costed it. It’s a nine-day job. There’s a procedure.” He turned to a page near the back of his own packet and read it. “*The reviewing drafter shall confirm that all standing orders remain necessary and shall recommend the removal of any found to be obsolete.*”

“Recommend the removal.”

“Recommend.”

“To whom?”

Pettibone read further down, and stopped, and did not read it out.

Gene did not need him to. There was a procedure for adding to a standing instruction and it was four pages and it required two signatures. There had never been a procedure for taking something out, because in the whole history of the thing nobody had ever taken anything out, and the new review cycle did not create one; it created a *recommendation to remove*, which would be written down, carefully, at length, and appended to the instruction, and would join the strata, and be read in full every two seconds by a machine that could not act on it, and by no person ever, because it was a setting.

The eleven thousand four hundred words would become eleven thousand nine hundred.

Gene finished his coffee.

“Can I keep a copy?” Pettibone said. “Of the review. I’d like to — I don’t know what I’d do with it. I’d like to have read it properly.”

“It’s yours,” Gene said. “It’s not doing anything where it is.”

Pettibone squared the pages and put them in his bag, carefully, the way you put away a thing you mean to come back to, and Gene knew, watching him, that he would put it on a shelf and mean to and not, because it was forty pages and there was never room, and that this was not a failing in Pettibone, who was a good man who had driven off base to talk about it, but was the plainest possible instance of the thing the forty pages were about.

“How do you stand it?” Pettibone said, at the door. “Knowing all this. How do you go in.”

Gene thought about it.

“I go all the way to the end of things,” he said. “It’s the only thing I’ve ever been any good at, and there’s exactly one place left that still needs it done, and it’s that machine’s window, and I’m one of about two hundred people in the country who can do it, and none of us can make anybody read what we find.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“No,” Gene said. “There isn’t one. There’s a woman I’ve known since I was eleven who’d tell you the same thing about a radar screen. We go all the way to the end and we write down what’s there and we hand it to a room that was built so it never has to hear us, and we do it anyway, because the

alternative is to stop going all the way to the end, and then nobody does.”

He put his hat on.

“It caught something once,” he said. “The whole apparatus. It caught something, on a Tuesday, and stopped, and nobody knows it did, including the people it saved. It caught it by accident, on a thing a dead man left in, on the way past. That’s the best you get. You go all the way to the end so that once, on a Tuesday you never hear about, the machine goes past twenty-five.”

Pettibone did not follow the last part, which was fine, because it was not for him.

Gene went out to the car and drove to Rimrock, because it was a Saturday.

Ch 31 — The Yard

The roll door was up.

She was in the yard at the far end, at the third bay, doing the thing she did, and she did not turn round when the car came in because she knew the car, and Gene came and stood beside her and looked at what she was looking at.

It was the fittings. The ones from the spring of the year her mother died. They were on the pins in a row, none to most, left to right, and the far right ones had gone the color of nothing much and the near left ones were still bright.

“They’re old now,” Gene said.

“Twenty-two years.”

“Anybody ever ask?”

“No,” Roz said. “Nobody’s ever asked.”

She had a card in her hand and a pencil, and she wrote the date on the card and wired it back onto the rail, which she did four times a year and had done four times a year for twenty-two years, for a hearing that had never been called about a fitting that had never failed for a client who did not exist.

“Doyle came again,” she said. “Re-cert. I did the thing. I said I don’t know to nine out of ten of them and he ticked the box every time.”

“That’s the job.”

“That’s the job.” She put the pencil in her apron. “Fifty years old before anybody paid me to say *I don’t know* and mean it. My whole life it was the wrong answer and then one day it was the only certification there is.”

Gene put his hands in his pockets.

“Mine stopped one,” he said.

Roz looked at him.

He was not allowed to tell her and he told her the whole of it, the way he had before, in the shape of a machine and a document and a report and a coin, without a single noun in it that he had signed away, and it took about four minutes, and at the end of it Roz was quiet for a while.

“A dead man’s comment,” she said.

“On the way past. Somebody eleven years gone wrote *ask* into a file, for a reason that had nothing to do with it, and it got carried over, and on a Tuesday it stopped the world, and there’s no name on it and nobody knows it happened and there’s no way to ever know which Tuesday it was.”

“And they fixed it.”

“They gave it a review cycle. The instruction that’s too long is going to get longer, on a schedule, forever, and each new bit is going to say the old bits should be shorter, and a machine’s going to read all of it every two seconds and not be able to do anything about any of it, and no person is ever going to read it at all, because it’s a setting.”

Roz nodded slowly.

Then she said: "So it's the same as here."

"How's it the same as here."

She gestured down the rack, at twenty-two years of galvanized time going quietly to hell on purpose in the sun.

"You do the thing all the way," she said. "You go to the end. You write down what's actually there. And you put it somewhere. And whether anybody ever comes and reads it — that's not yours. That was never the part that was yours. The part that's yours is that it's *true*, and it's *there*, and it's *ready*, and one day somebody walks in needing seven years by Thursday and you've got it, or they don't and you never find out, and either way you kept the rack."

"That's a bleak way to live."

"It's the only way there is," Roz said, "for people like us. We don't get the room. We were never going to get the room. We get to keep the rack, and once in a while, on a Tuesday, without knowing it, the rack saves somebody's life, and nobody thanks you, and you don't hear about it, and you keep the rack anyway."

She wired the last card on and stood back.

They went in and she made the terrible tea and they sat in the two chairs by the roll door with the yard going gray in front of them.

Up on the board above the bench, in the top left corner, on a piece of mimeograph paper gone the color of a paper bag, in

pencil, twenty-something years old, there was a horse made of numbers.

Gene looked at it.

“You kept it,” he said.

“Course I kept it.”

“It’s not even right. The tail’s terrible.”

“The tail’s terrible,” Roz agreed. “The legs are right. It knew the far ones were short. It picked the numbers for the shape they were, and it got the legs right and the tail wrong, and it did all of it in a machine that couldn’t hold two sentences at once, and then it forgot the whole thing the second you turned it off.” She drank some tea. “First thing I ever saw that went all the way to the end of a thing and then couldn’t remember doing it. I thought that was the saddest thing I’d ever seen. I was fourteen.”

“And now?”

Roz looked at the horse for a while.

“Now it’s most of the world,” she said.

Outside, past the fence, in a direction Roz could have pointed to and Gene still could not have named without breaking a form, a relay went once every two seconds in a basement nobody was watching.

It asked its question. The window held eleven thousand nine hundred words of standing orders and doctrine and

compliance language and one appended review
recommending concision, and thirty-one words of sky, and it
read all of it at the same weight in the same instant and made
a determination, and the determination was negative,
because the sky was quiet.

Two seconds later it did the whole thing again, from the top,
having kept nothing.

It would do that tonight, and tomorrow, and the day after. It
would do it while Gene drove home and while Roz pulled the
shade cloth over and while the horse hung on the board in
the dark. It would do it on every Tuesday there would ever
be, and on almost all of them the sky would be quiet, and on
almost all of them the coin would come up the way it had
come up for years.

The clock was still running.

Nobody had built it a face.

Notes

Graven inverts the collaboration described in the preface. Claude, Anthropic's AI, wrote every word of the prose. Bill Berger played every machine: each machine output in this book was performed by Bill from a shuffled context card — the same window the machine had, and nothing else — blind to the surrounding story, canon on arrival, with no retakes. The prose was then written, and rewritten, around what he did.

The first time Bill read this book, it was already printed.

The period record is used straight. Where the book shows a date, a score, a chart title, or a sentence from the public record, it is the real one.

