A NOVEL

04:12

Same as Midnight

About love, money, and the machines that never sleep.

TOM MYRVIK

SAME AS MIDNIGHT

A novel

TOM MYRVIK

For everyone who has checked the bank at four in the morning, and for the people asleep beside them.

This is a novel. The agency, its people and its clients are invented. The nights are real.

CONTENTS

PART ONE — THE BANK

1. Four Twelve A.M.
2. Oh, and One More Thing
3. The Guarantee
4. The Car Park

PART TWO — THE COPY ROOM

5. The Door Factory
6. Lemmings
7. Four Windows at Three A.M.
8. Anna
9. The Breath Out
10. The Race

PART THREE — SAME AS MIDNIGHT

11. The Owner Eats Last
12. The Fuel Gauge
13. Thursday Mornings
14. Anna, Again
15. Is This You?
16. Viktor's One Room
17. Go to Bed, Dad

Epilogue

The Whiteboard

A note from the author

PART ONE — THE BANK

1. FOUR TWELVE A.M.

Thirty-seven days to the bank.

At twelve minutes past four in the morning I checked the company bank account for the third time that night.

It was the same as it had been at midnight. It is always the same as it was at midnight. Nothing moves in a business account between midnight and four; the money is asleep even if you aren't. I knew that. I had known it every night since September. I turned the screen brightness all the way down so the light wouldn't wake Anna, looked at the number, and put the phone face down on the bedside table like a man putting a card back in a deck he knows is rigged.

Then I lay there and did sums until the bin truck came at six.

I should explain who I am, briefly, because later on I'm going to come out of this badly in places and I'd like you to have some sympathy in the bank first.

I'm forty-seven. With my wife Anna and a man called Viktor I've run a marketing agency for ten years: twenty people, two offices, a turnover that sounds impressive until you hear what it costs to keep it turning. We make websites and videos and training and, increasingly, things that I find hard to describe at dinner parties, which involve teaching machines to

do the parts of our work that we used to bill for. I have two daughters. Sofia moved out four years ago and lives in the capital and phones when she needs something, which is how you know they're all right. Venla, the younger one, moved out seven weeks ago. All of two hundred metres. Into a student flat above the pharmacy.

I'm the kind of man who takes a cold bath at six in the morning with a timer on his wrist. Four degrees, four minutes. I get out exactly on the buzz, and on four evenings a week I'm at the gym, because in December there's a race. I plan each day by hand in a notebook template I bought online, which is called, and I promise I'm not making this up, *Hero on a Mission*. I make my wife's porridge every morning and leave it on the table, with salt, before she's up. I've done it for so long that I genuinely don't know any more whether she likes it or just eats it.

I'm telling you all this so you understand that I was, in October, a man with a system for everything. And that at twelve minutes past four, every night, the system was me lying in the dark doing sums.

◦

The room was the first thing.

When Venla moved out she cleaned it better than it had been cleaned in fifteen years. She vacuumed behind the radiator. I stood in the doorway that evening slightly offended by how well she'd done it. Then I went downstairs and, because I am who I am, I ordered a computer.

Not just any computer. A small, silent, terrifyingly powerful box, and two big screens to go with it, one for *sandbox* and one for *live*. I had been talking at work for months about something I called the copy room. In the old days, if you want-

ed a copy of something, you went to the copy room: one machine, everybody's, a bit of a queue, a bit of gossip. I thought we needed one again for the new machines. A place where the latest tools lived, set up properly, where you could build something safely on one screen before it touched the real world on the other. I'd drawn it on a whiteboard twice. Nobody had been very interested.

Venla's room, I thought, was eleven square metres of perfectly good copy room.

The box arrived on a Thursday. I put it in the garage, in its packaging, and said nothing, because I wanted to set it up as a surprise. I'm aware of how that sounds.

On the Sunday I came upstairs and Anna was standing in the middle of Venla's room with her arms folded, looking at the dent in the wall where Venla's door handle had hit it for fifteen years.

"I was thinking," I said, "we could use this for—"

"You've ordered something."

"How do you know?"

"You left the delivery confirmation open on the iPad." She didn't turn round. "Two screens."

"It's for work. It's the copy room. The thing I've been—"

"I know what it is, Thomas. You've drawn it on the fridge."

Next door, our neighbour was pushing his trampoline across the lawn towards the shed for the winter, one leg catching in the grass every metre or so. Anna watched him as if it were the most interesting thing that had happened all week.

"I've registered a company," she said.

I thought for a second she meant one of ours. "Which one?"

"Mine." Still not turning round. "Training. My courses, my name on them, my prices. Three days a week, to start with."

She gave a short laugh. "Do you know what people say to me at the end of every single training now? Riikka said it last week, word for word. *We've got every tool going, we're putting out more material than anyone in the building reads, and nobody can tell any more whether any of it's any good.*" She turned round at last. "They don't need more content. They need someone to teach them how to tell. That's me. That's what I'm going to do. In here."

I put my hand on the door frame.

Here is what my brain did, in the following four seconds, without asking me. Close to a fifth of everything we billed went through Anna one way or another: her open courses, her in-house days, and two or three clients, Riikka's the biggest, who would follow her into the sea and would not enjoy being handed to anyone else. If three days a week of Anna came out of the agency, the money would come out with them, not all at once but steadily, like heat from a house with a window open. And thirty-seven days from now the bank was going to look at our credit line, which I had been describing to everyone, including myself, as routine.

"You're doing it," Anna said.

"Doing what?"

"The sums. Your mouth goes small."

I laughed, because it was true, and because I had been working on exactly that. Not grabbing every problem the second it appeared. I'd read books. I'd done a breathing course on an app. I had a coach now, since August, a man called PK who I'll get to. I had developed, over the past year, a calm and spacious voice for moments like this, and I used it.

"Okay," I said. "Well. If it's what you want, then I think you should absolutely—"

"Oh, God. Don't."

"What?"

"Don't be *nice* about it. That's worse." She slid down the wall and sat on the floor, right under the dent. "You sound like you're reading the weather. I'm telling you I'm taking three days a week out of a company we started together, and you've gone all serene on me."

"I'm trying not to make it about me."

"Well, it's a bit about you."

I sat down too, opposite her, my back against Venla's radiator. It wasn't on yet. The floorboards were cold through my jeans.

"Go on, then," she said. "What does it cost."

I looked at the dent. I'd been meaning to fill it for five years. There was nothing stopping me now, and I found I didn't want to.

"Your clients," I said. "Riikka. Probably a rough spring." And then, before I could tidy it into something presentable, the other thing came out. "And I always thought we'd do this together until we were old. I liked that. I'm a bit scared of being the one left at the kitchen table at three in the morning, writing prompts."

She didn't say anything for a long time. She didn't come over, either. I noticed that.

"I registered it two weeks ago," she said finally. "I knew by the time I'd paid the fee."

"Two weeks."

"I know." She pulled at a loose thread on her sock. "I didn't tell you because you'd have done one of two things. You'd have fixed it. Made a plan for the clients and the bank and everything, and it would have been sorted by Friday, and it

would have been *your* plan. Or you'd have done that voice, and I'd have felt like I was asking permission from a monk." She looked up. "It's been twenty-two years of us. I'm not complaining. But I'd quite like to find out what I'm like somewhere you didn't start."

I opened my mouth and closed it again. This is not a thing I do often. Anna noticed.

My phone buzzed on the floorboards. Venla. A photo of a radiator with a single grey sock hanging on it, and underneath: *does this flat even have heating or do i just die*. Then: *also do you have lemons*. Then: *dont turn my room into a gym btw i know you*

Anna leaned over and read it upside down and laughed properly for the first time that day.

"It's not a gym," I said. "It's a copy room."

"It's always something with you," she said, not unkindly. "Even when it's nothing, it's something."

She got up. She paced the room from the wall to the window, heel to toe, lips moving, which is a thing I do in every flat we have ever viewed and which she has mocked me for, mercilessly, for two decades.

"Three-twenty, give or take," she said. "Desk goes here. Facing out." She turned. "Your box can go to the office. Make your copy room there, where everybody can use it. I'm not living with it." Then: "Thursday week we sit down with all of it, the bank and the clients, and you can do as many sums as you like. I'll even let you have the whiteboard."

"Thursday," I said.

"You can be annoyed, you know. You're allowed."

"I am a bit."

"Good. I'd worry otherwise."

She held out a hand and pulled me up off the floor and put her head against my collarbone, which is where it has always gone, and we stood there for a minute in a room that had stopped being our daughter's and hadn't quite started being anything else.

Then she went to look for the tape measure, and I went down to the kitchen and stood in front of the dishwasher, which was half full, and tried to work out whether it was worth running for two people. It's a stupid question. It had never once occurred to me in nineteen years.

I ran it. Upstairs I heard the tape measure rattle out across the floor and snap back, and Anna say a number to herself that I didn't catch.

That night, at twelve minutes past four, I checked the bank again.

2. OH, AND ONE MORE THING

Thirty-three days to the bank.

Viktor told me over lunch.

We'd had one of those development days the three of us did twice a year, in a hired room with a view of the river and a flip chart nobody wanted to write on first. It had gone fine. We had agreed that the coming year needed focus, which is what we had agreed at every development day since 2016. Afterwards Anna went back to the office and Viktor and I walked to the Thai place round the corner, and halfway through his green curry, without putting his fork down, he said he was thinking of leaving the company. The *thinking* was politeness. He had already talked to a lawyer about selling his share, and he had already found the room he wanted to work in.

I remember what I said, because I was rather proud of it at the time.

"Okay. Let's talk about what that would look like."

Viktor looked at me for a long moment with a piece of chicken on his fork. He'd been my business partner for ten years. He'd turned up for the first interview with paint on his trainers, and he'd once rebuilt our entire website over a weekend in orange and charcoal grey without asking anyone, which led to a three-day argument and, eventually, a website in or-

ange and charcoal grey. He introduced himself to clients as *the owner*. I always said *partner*. He'd once ordered forty branded hoodies for a team of eleven without telling anyone, and he was still wearing one. For the last year he'd mostly been a small square on a screen in the other office, his camera off.

"I'm tired, Thomas," he said. "I'm tired of being in a Teams window. I want to work in one room with people." He put the chicken in his mouth. "And Laura's due in April."

"Congratulations."

"Thanks." He chewed. "You're not going to say anything else?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know. Something. Shout."

"I'm not angry," I said, and believed it. "It's your life. We'll work it out."

He nodded slowly and went back to his curry, and I paid, because I always pay, and on the walk back I noticed that I felt light and clear and very reasonable, the way you feel after an exam you haven't revised for.

That was on a Thursday. On the Friday I shouted at Noora.

◦

PK was on a treadmill.

He had propped the laptop on a stack of books on the treadmill's console, and every few seconds his face rose and fell gently in the frame like a man on a boat. He did that sometimes. He said that if he sat down for an hour he turned into furniture.

I'd hired him in August, after a friend of a friend sent me a link to an interview he'd given. Six months, two sessions a month, messages in between. Neither of us liked the word coach. PK called it thinking out loud with a witness. He had

worked with chief executives and with people who ran ice cream kiosks and he treated both with the same slightly alarming cheerfulness. He wrote everything down by hand with a pen on actual paper, which in my world was like meeting someone who still sends faxes.

"Morning, morning," he said, although it was one o'clock. "How are you? Not the report. Right now."

I gave him the report anyway, because I'd prepared it. The bank in a month. Anna's company, whose name she still wouldn't tell me. The box in the garage. Aleksi from paid advertising, who had put thirty minutes in my calendar for the following Friday with the title *Compensation* and nothing else. I was good at this. I could hear myself being good at it: clear, a bit self-deprecating, everything in its place.

"Oh, and Viktor's leaving," I said. "We're signing it next week. It's all very civilised."

PK stopped walking. The treadmill carried him slowly backwards out of the frame until he grabbed the handrails and stepped off.

"Wait," he said, reappearing. "'Oh, and.'"

"What?"

"You just did the thing. Everybody does the thing. Teenager goes into the corner shop, buys bread, milk, the paper, and at the till: oh, and a packet of condoms." He sat down on something out of shot. "Whatever comes after *oh, and* is the reason you came into the shop. Ten years, Thomas. Three of you. And it's *oh, and*."

"It's fine, honestly. We've talked. I don't feel that strongly about it."

"Okay." He picked up a pen and a sheet of paper and held them up to the camera like evidence. "Does it piss you off?"

I laughed. "That's a very Finnish question."

"I'm allowed. Same nationality, same sauna." He waited. "On a scale. Four to ten. Nobody in this country ever goes below four, so don't bother."

I opened my mouth to say four. Something else came out.

"On Friday I shouted at Noora."

"Who's Noora?"

"Account lead. She was on a sales call in the open office, quite loud, and I told her to keep it down. Three times. The third time wasn't nice." I rubbed my face. "She didn't say anything. She went very red and finished the call in the stairwell."

"So Noora got Viktor's share," PK said, and wrote something down without looking at the paper.

I didn't answer that. I didn't have an answer. I didn't say anything for a while.

"There's another thing," I said. "It's small."

"Small things are my favourite."

"When he told me, I went through his calendar." I could feel my face getting warm. "Not for anything specific. Looking for a reason. I found a couple of things I didn't like the look of and built a whole theory out of them. Who he really is. Why he was never quite one of us. Kitchen psychology." I stopped. "I'm not proud of it."

"No," said PK. "It's small." He said it plainly, with nothing to soften it, and I was surprised to find that helped more than kindness would have. "It's also what everybody does when someone leaves them. You want it to be because there was something wrong with them. Then you haven't lost anything." He tapped the pen on the paper. "Did you want him to stay?"

I thought about it properly, for the first time. The paint on his trainers. The orange and charcoal grey. The small square

with the camera off.

"No," I said. "Not like this. Not the way it's been."

"Thank God," said PK. "Then there's nothing to save. So stop decorating it." He leaned in towards the camera. "Number?"

"Six," I said. And then, because he was still looking at me: "Some days ten. Six to ten."

"Good." He wrote it down. "Write it down yourself. Not the theory. The ten."

◦

We talked for another forty minutes. At one point PK went off on a tangent about a band he'd loved as a teenager and a record shop that had refused to order their album, and how that refusal had shaped his entire attitude to authority, until he caught himself and said, "Right, I'll stop, you're the one paying." Near the end he asked the question he always asked, and which I always dreaded.

"One sentence. What was worth it today?"

I thought of several clever ones and threw them all away.

"Noora got Viktor's share."

PK laughed so hard he had to put his pen down. Before he hung up, he said: "Homework. Not for now. In a year, what's the one thing you'll tell people that makes them believe this was worth it? Don't answer. Don't write it on a slide. Think."

◦

On Monday morning I stopped at Noora's desk on the way in.

She looked up warily, the way you look at a dog that bit you on Friday.

"Sorry about Friday," I said. "It wasn't about you."

"I know," she said. "Viktor told me."

I stood there for a second, absorbing that Viktor, who was leaving, who was a small square with the camera off, had noticed what I had done to Noora before I had, and had gone and said something to her about it.

Then I went into my office and closed the door and wrote on a sticky note *six to ten* and stuck it on the edge of my screen, and every time I saw it that week it was more like ten than six, and I didn't take it down.

3. THE GUARANTEE

Twenty-six days to the bank.

On Thursday the whiteboard came up from the garage, where it had been leaning against my unopened box. Anna propped it against the fridge and drew four squares on it with a green marker that was nearly dry: *where we are*, *what comes in*, *what goes out*, *the bank*. In the corner of the last square she wrote the date of the review and underlined it twice. The marker squeaked like something being hurt.

Paula rang at seven, from her car by the look of it, a headrest behind her and a parking-garage light that came on whenever somebody walked past. Paula did the books for us and for about forty other small companies, and she had the voice of a woman who had heard every version of *it's just a timing thing*.

"August is closed," she said. "September isn't, and I'm not going to pretend it is."

"What's missing?"

"Two things. There's an eight-thousand invoice that went out to a client on the last day of the month and never reached the ledger. That's annoying, but it's a note." She looked down at something in her lap. "The other thing is your forecast."

My forecast was the thing I was proudest of that autumn. I had built it over two late evenings with one of the assistants, and it was beautiful: three scenarios, colour-coded, a curve for

every month until June. I had shown it to Anna, to Viktor, to the management team, and on one occasion, slightly drunk, to my brother-in-law.

"It's been reading from a copy of the billing sheet," Paula said, "that stopped syncing in June."

"June."

"It's a lovely model," Paula said kindly. "It's just been living in June."

I sat there and took that in. Four months of confident curves drawn from numbers nobody had touched since midsummer. I thought about every meeting in which I'd put it on a screen. The machine had never once said it wasn't sure. It didn't have a way of saying that. I hadn't asked it to.

"So what else is out?" I said.

"That's what I'm for. You'll have September closed by Wednesday."

I could have argued. I had the bank exports. I had the weekend. And I knew the particular, almost holy calm of going down a column of figures line by line, ticking each one, trusting nothing I hadn't touched myself. It had got me through two bad springs. It had also cost me two summers.

"Wednesday's fine," I said, and heard Anna put the marker down behind me.

◦

When the call ended the kitchen was very quiet. The fridge hummed behind the whiteboard.

"How long have you been checking it at night?" Anna said.

I looked up. "Checking what?"

"Thomas." She didn't raise her voice. "The light comes through my eyelids. It's blue."

I had the sentence ready, the easy one: *it's a habit, I wake up anyway, it doesn't mean anything*. I had been saying versions of it to myself for weeks, and it had been working quite well.

"Since September," I said.

"Every night?"

"Most."

"And you turn the brightness down."

"I didn't want to wake you."

"No," she said. "I know you didn't."

She pulled out the chair opposite me and sat down. She'd changed out of her work clothes into my old grey hoodie, the one with the cuff gone at the thumb, and she pushed the sleeves up as if she were about to do something with her hands. Then she didn't.

"What is it you're actually scared of?" she said. "Not the forecast. Not Harri at the bank. The actual thing."

I looked past her at the board. *The bank*, in green.

"The guarantee," I said. "If they cut the limit and we can't cover it, it's not the company that pays. It's me. Viktor comes off it when he goes, so it'll be more of me. It's the house." I heard my voice do something strange on the last word. "We said we'd never put the house up. And I did. I just never said it like that. Not even to myself."

Anna was quiet for a long time.

"I offered to sign it," she said.

"I know."

"In that bank branch that's a dentist now. I had the pen in my hand. And you said there was no need." She was looking at the table. "You said it like you were giving me a present."

"I thought I was."

"You were keeping me out of it." Her voice had changed. It wasn't loud, but it had an edge I hadn't heard in years. "Seven years. I've been living in this house thinking we did everything half and half, and the whole time you were lying there at four in the morning holding the roof up on your own. And you didn't even let me be frightened with you."

"I didn't want you to be frightened."

"That wasn't yours to decide."

I had nothing to say to that. There isn't anything to say to that. I sat with my hands round a mug that had gone cold an hour ago and swallowed twice.

Anna wiped her eyes once, quickly, with the cuff of the hoodie, furious with herself.

"On Monday," she said, "when you ring Harri, I'm sitting here."

"You don't have to—"

"I'm not asking." She looked straight at me. "And I want to know what it would take to put my name on it. Next to yours."

"You're about to start a company. With no salary."

"Which is exactly why. If something goes wrong now, I want it to be ours. Not yours." She almost smiled. "It's not a rescue, Thomas. I'm not saving you. I just want to be on the paper."

The old answer was already in my mouth, polite and final, the one that had always worked: *let me handle it*. I could feel it sitting there behind my teeth like a mint.

"Okay," I said. "I'll ask him."

"*We'll* ask him."

"We'll ask him."

She nodded, got up, and took my cold mug to the sink without asking if I'd finished. In the bank square on the whiteboard she wrote *T + A, Monday*, and the marker gave out halfway through the A, so she went over it twice until it showed.

◦

That night I woke at four again. I reached for the bedside table and the phone wasn't there.

On the far side of the bed Anna's hand lay flat on top of it, face down, on her own table.

"Same as midnight," she said, without opening her eyes.

I lay back. I didn't fall asleep straight away. But I didn't reach across, either.

That was the first night in two months I didn't check. I wanted to on plenty of nights after.

◦

4. THE CAR PARK

Twenty-two days to the bank.

Harri from the bank rang at nine on Monday, three minutes early, which I took as a bad sign until I heard his voice. Harri sounded like a man who'd been on the phone since seven and had eleven more of these to get through before lunch.

Anna sat across the kitchen table with her laptop closed and her hands flat on the lid. She had said she would sit there, and she sat there.

I told him about Anna's company before he could open the September file. I said it the way I'd practised it in the shower: weaker than it looks, stronger than it looks, and a fifth of our billing walking slowly out of the door over the winter. Then I stopped talking, which was the hard part. In my experience bankers can smell a man filling silence.

Harri was quiet. I could hear him typing.

"I appreciate you telling me first," he said. "Most people don't." More typing. "Here's where we are. The limit goes through to the end of January on the reduced amount. Not the old one. The reduced one. And with your partner coming off the guarantee, I need that gap covered before then, or the credit committee will cover it for me by cutting the limit again."

"I'll sign," Anna said.

There was a pause on the line. I had put Harri on speaker without telling him.

"Good morning, Anna," said Harri, in a slightly different voice. "That would help. Then we look again in January, with the full quarter."

That was it. No verdict. A date, a smaller number, and my wife's name on a piece of paper she hadn't seen yet. When the call ended I found I'd been holding a pen so hard there was a groove in the side of my finger.

"That's not a no," Anna said.

"It's not a yes."

"It's January." She picked up her laptop. "I'm handing Riikka to Noora at ten. She's going to be sad at me." At the door she stopped. "You've got Viktor's lawyer on Wednesday."

"I know."

"Be nice."

"I'm always nice."

She looked at me with the patience of someone who has heard that sentence many times before, and left.

◦

The lawyer's office smelled of new carpet and expensive biscuits. The separation agreement was eleven pages long, and most of it dealt with things that would only matter if we all behaved badly: not taking clients, not taking staff, the penalties if anyone did. Anna and I would buy Viktor's shares at book value, personally, in three instalments. I'd done the sum many times. I did it again sitting there, and it came out the same, which I found obscurely disappointing.

Viktor signed first. He had a good signature, big and fast, the same one he'd put on our first lease ten years earlier, in a

café, on a napkin, which the landlord had refused to accept.

Afterwards we stood in the car park in the drizzle. Anna was at the accountant's, sorting out the books for her new company. It was just the two of us and the space between our cars.

"Can I say one thing," Viktor said, "without it turning into a workshop?"

"Probably not."

"You always talk about shared understanding." He said it carefully, as if he'd been practising in the shower too. "And I believed in it. I still do, mostly. But half the time, Thomas, shared understanding meant we talked for two hours and then we did it your way. And you were always so nice about it that I couldn't even be angry." He shrugged. "I want to work in one room with people. Not in a box on a screen, waiting for you to finish understanding."

I didn't argue. It's hard to argue with someone in a car park when they're right and it's drizzling.

"Change the website back," Viktor said, more lightly. "When I'm gone. I won't be offended."

"I might keep it."

"You hate it."

"I do," I said. "But it's yours. Nobody else would have done it."

He looked at me for a second as if he wasn't sure whether that was a compliment, and then decided it was.

There was a sentence I'd been carrying around for weeks. Something about atoms: how a bond can break and both sides stay whole, how things can go their own ways without everything coming apart. I thought it was rather good. I'd tried it

out on the dog, metaphorically speaking; we don't have a dog. I opened my mouth.

"Please," said Viktor, "don't do a metaphor at me in a car park."

We both laughed, and then he stepped forward and hugged me, hard, the way you hug someone at a funeral when there's nothing else to do with your arms. He smelled of wet wool and the lawyer's coffee.

"See you," he said.

"See you."

I sat in my car and didn't start it. The windscreen filled slowly with drizzle until Viktor's car was just a shape pulling out onto the road, indicating left, the way he'd indicated left out of that car park for ten years.

I took out my phone and opened my notes and wrote *six to ten*. Under it, because PK had told me to write down the ten and not the theory, I wrote: *ten when he said it was my way. Because it was*.

Then I sat there a while longer, a forty-seven-year-old man in a parked car in the rain, and thought about all the meetings in which I had been patient and spacious and understanding, and everyone had agreed with me in the end.

◦

Zero days to the bank.

The review came and went the way most things you lie awake about come and go: on a Tuesday, by email, in two paragraphs. Through to the end of January, reduced amount, the guarantee to be amended to include Anna, see attached. That was all. I had spent sixty nights on that email.

I printed it, which I never do, and put it on the fridge under a magnet shaped like a lemon, next to Anna's four green squares.

Then I went out to the garage and looked at the box with the copy room in it, still in its plastic, and for the first time thought about what Anna had said. *Make your copy room there, where everybody can use it*.

I didn't move it yet. But I stopped thinking of it as a surprise.

Under the same lemon there was another piece of paper, which had been there since April: our entry for the December race, six hundred kilometres south, Anna and me in doubles. We'd signed up in the spring, when the bank was a long way off. With the bank out of the way, it was the next date on the fridge.

Twenty-five days to the race.

PART TWO — THE COPY ROOM

5. THE DOOR FACTORY

Twenty-four days to the race.

Version thirteen of the buyer's guide still began with an apology.

There is no price list for industrial loading-bay doors, because every installation is unique. I had told the assistant four times to stop opening with that sentence. Each time it agreed with me warmly, thanked me for my excellent feedback, and produced a new version that began, in slightly different words, by apologising for the absence of a price list. It was like trying to stop a very polite Canadian from saying sorry.

"It thinks they're embarrassed about it," said Ella from the passenger seat. She had my laptop on her knees. We were two hours south on a road that was mostly forest and the occasional timber lorry, on our way to see a client I had been talking to for six months and Ella had never met.

"They are a bit embarrassed. Their sales director told me on the first call. Buyers ask for prices, they can't give them, the buyers go elsewhere."

"Did he say embarrassed?"

I thought. "No. He said annoying."

"That's different," Ella said, and went back to reading.

Ella was twenty-seven and had been with us two years. She'd come in as an analyst, the kind who could make a

spreadsheet of search terms look like a weather map, and had quietly become the person everyone went to when a client said something nobody could interpret. She didn't talk much in meetings. I'd brought her partly because I wanted someone other than me to know this client, and partly because I had started to notice that when Ella said *that's different*, it usually was.

PK had said something to me in September that I'd written on a sticky note and then lost. We'd been looking at our own strategy, which I'd been very pleased with, and he'd read it out loud in a flat voice: *Do buyers know us?* Then he'd said, "Turn it round. *Do we know our buyers?* It's a completely different job." I'd nodded, and agreed, and gone on writing strategies about whether buyers knew us.

◦

Kalliola made sectional loading-bay doors, the kind that roll up in hinged sections, and dock levellers in a town of six thousand people. Eighty employees, third generation. The factory was a long grey building with a car park full of estate cars and one very clean red pickup. Raimo, the sales director, met us at the door in a fleece with the company logo on it. He was sixty-one, had been selling doors for thirty-eight years, and shook hands like he was testing a hinge.

I did what I had come to do. Conference room, coffee in thick white cups, laptop on the projector. I walked them through the plan: the guide, the search terms, the cost calculator we had sketched and then dropped the same evening because nobody could agree what it should calculate. I was clear and quick and I could feel the room following me. Raimo nodded in the right places for about twenty minutes, and then his phone buzzed and he excused himself, something about a de-

livery. The managing director, Raimo's nephew, took notes on a pad.

Ella sat at the end of the table and said nothing. Halfway through the search terms I noticed her chair was empty too.

I found her forty minutes later on the factory floor, standing next to Raimo beside a half-assembled door the height of a house, with her phone held up, filming.

"Say it again," she was saying. "The thing about the photo."

Raimo glanced at me, slightly guilty, like a man caught skipping a meeting. Then he looked back at the phone.

"Most of them don't know what they need," he said. "They think they do. They ring up and say, I need a door, how much. And I say, send me a photo of the opening. Just a photo, from outside, with something in it for scale. A person. A forklift. And one of the floor. Then I can tell you by tomorrow what it'll cost, roughly, and I'm not usually far off." He shrugged. "Thirty-eight years. You get an eye."

"How many photos do you get a week?"

"Ten. Fifteen. More in spring."

"And how many of those buy?"

Raimo thought. "Most of the ones who send a photo. The ones who want a number on the phone, hardly any."

Ella lowered her phone. "And on your website it says there's no price list."

"Well, there isn't."

"No," said Ella. "But there's you."

◦

On the way back to the conference room she showed me the clip. Four minutes. Raimo by the door, an angle grinder going somewhere behind him, a forklift reversing past with its warning beep. No lighting, no script. He called the panels *sec-*

tions. I realised that every single version of our guide had called them *panels*, because that was what the assistant called them, and that nobody at Kalliola had said anything because they assumed the agency knew better.

"They're sections," Ella said, watching my face. "He corrected himself twice when he said panels. He's been reading our drafts."

Back inside, Ella asked whether she could show the clip to the managing director. I said yes, and then made myself stay sitting while she did it. I didn't introduce it. I didn't frame it. I didn't tell anyone in advance what they were about to see and why it mattered, which, if you've ever worked with me, you'll know took a physical effort roughly equivalent to holding a plank.

The nephew watched it twice. Then he put his cup down.

"That's the first time," he said, "anyone's brought us something we already knew was true." He was looking at Ella, not at me. "What would you do with it?"

"Take the apology off the top of the page," Ella said. "Put Raimo there instead. *Send us a photo of your loading bay and we'll tell you by tomorrow roughly what it costs.* Then this video. Then the guide, for people who like reading. In your words, not ours. Sections."

"And the calculator?"

"Raimo is the calculator."

Raimo, by the window, made a small noise that might have been a laugh.

◦

It was dark by four. I drove. Ella had the laptop open again and was going through version thirteen line by line, deleting things.

"You're quiet," she said.

"I'm thinking."

"About the calculator?"

"About how I never once went onto the factory floor. Six months."

She typed for a while. "You were presenting," she said. "It was a good presentation. They needed to see we were serious before they'd let me wander off." She said it matter-of-factly, not to make me feel better. "I couldn't have done the first part."

"You could have."

"I don't want to," she said. "That's different."

A lorry came the other way with its lights on full and dipped them late.

"Viktor rang me last week," Ella said after a while. "Not to offer anything, he can't, the contract. Just to say that if things ever changed he'd like to work with me." She closed the laptop. "I'm not going to."

I kept my eyes on the road. I wanted very much to ask why, and I wanted the answer to be about me.

"Okay," I said.

"Don't you want to know why?"

"I want to know very badly."

She laughed. "Because I want to see whether this place works when you're not in every meeting." She said it without any edge at all, the way you'd say it might rain. "I think it might. I want to be here for that."

I drove for a while. The same forest went past in the headlights for a hundred kilometres.

"That's fair," I said eventually.

"I know it is," said Ella, and opened the laptop again.

◦

I dropped her off at nearly eight and sat outside her building with the engine running, reading the new page on my phone. It began: *Send us a photo of your loading bay.* There was no apology anywhere. Raimo's video was underneath, angle grinder and all. Further down, every *panel* had become a *section*.

I didn't change a word. I sent it to Raimo with one line: *Your words. Tell us if we got any of them wrong.*

The reply came while I was still parked.

`One. It's a dock leveller, not a dock plate. Otherwise good. Who's the girl?`

I scrolled up. *Dock plate* was in the new opening paragraph: the one Ella had written herself in the car, in her own words, with no machine anywhere near it. I felt something mean and small flicker in me, a tiny *ha,* and I'm not proud of that either. I thought about forwarding Raimo's message to her with a comment.

I forwarded it without one.

Then I typed *Ella,* deleted it, and typed: *Ella. She'll be your contact from now on.*

◦

6. LEMMINGS

Twenty-two days to the race.

Every November we closed the office for a day and hired a room with a long window over the river, and all twenty of us sat round a horseshoe of tables and talked about the year ahead. This year I was doing the morning. I'd been working on it for weeks.

I'm going to describe the slides, because they matter, and because I was so proud of them.

I opened with the sentence I'd been saving. "For the first time in history," I said, "each of us can do the work of five people. Alone. At night. With machines that never get tired and never say no." I let that sit. "That's the opportunity. It's also exactly the problem."

The first slide said: *Three ways people use AI.* Chat: you ask, it answers, you copy and paste. Connected: it can see your files and your projects, it knows the context. Agentic: it does things on its own. It opens folders, writes to systems, runs while you sleep. Most people, I said, were still at the first stage. A few teams were at the second. Almost nobody was at the third.

The second slide was a picture I'd drawn myself. It came from a computer game I played for most of one winter when I was thirteen, around 1991, on our first PC, the beige one with

the turbo button, with the curtains drawn: little green-haired creatures who walk out of a door and keep walking, straight off cliffs if you let them, unless you give each one a job in time. I can still hear the tiny *oh no!* they made. Little figures coming out of a door on the left and walking, step by step, across a landscape. Most of them still near the door. One small group a little further on. And at the far right-hand edge, a long way out, three or four figures on their own, much further than anyone else.

Under them it said: *Pioneers. Far ahead, alone. Taking the biggest risks. Highest risk of burnout. The benefit stays with them.*

The third slide was about risk. For every new thing we let the machines do, I said, ask one question: *If this went wrong tomorrow, could we live with it?* If yes, go ahead and watch it. If only under certain conditions, make the conditions the rule. If no, don't do it yet. Start with things you can undo.

I'd made all three slides in October, at the kitchen table, at about three in the morning, with two assistants open. I thought they were the clearest thing I'd ever made about my own work.

I was four minutes in when Petteri put his hand up.

Petteri was one of our senior planners. Nine years with us, good, blunt, a man who wore the same blue jumper to every client meeting as a kind of personal brand. He said, quite pleasantly:

"Sorry. Did the AI do this one?"

It wasn't meant cruelly. A couple of people smiled. But I watched the room change. I watched twenty people put my slides down in their minds, very gently, in the box where they keep things machines have made: interesting, competent, not quite anyone's. I'd been thinking about this for five months.

Every idea on those slides was mine, more or less. The machines had only helped me find the edges. And in one sentence it had all slid off me and onto them.

"Partly," I said. "The words, partly. The thinking's mine."

"Sure," said Petteri, and nodded, and I could see he didn't quite believe it, and could also see that it didn't matter to him either way, which was worse.

I finished. It went fine. People asked good questions. At lunch I couldn't eat.

◦

Anna found me on the terrace in the wind with a cold coffee.

"That stung," she said.

"It did."

She took my coffee, drank some, made a face, and handed it back. Then she went inside to talk to Petteri about something else entirely, and I stood out there on my own for a while, looking at the river, thinking about the little figures on the right-hand side of my picture.

◦

PK was running the afternoon. I'd rung him in October and asked, a bit awkwardly, whether he would.

"As what?" he'd said.

"As the stupid one," I said. "The one who asks what things mean."

He'd laughed for quite a long time and said it was the best job description he'd had in years.

After lunch he didn't open my next slide. He walked to the front, switched the projector off at the wall, and handed me a marker and a single sheet torn from the flip chart.

"Straw man," he said, quietly, so only I could hear. "Three things. The ones you're least sure of. Something they can shoot at."

I stood there with the marker like a man who has been handed a live fish. Then I drew three boxes, badly, the way an old boss of mine used to walk round the office with a sheet of A4 and three things scribbled on it, talking them into being. I put the sheet on the wall. I told them the three things I was least sure of. The third one was the copy room: one room at the office with the good machines set up properly, sandbox on one screen and live on the other, the latest tools, where anyone could go.

"Which one's wrong?" I said.

It took the whole afternoon. They tore my three boxes to pieces. PK sat at the back with his arms folded, and every so often he said, "Sorry, I'm too stupid for this, what does that actually mean?", and every time somebody had to start again in plainer words.

The copy room got the worst of it.

"Nobody's going to go into a room with your box in it," said Petteri. "No offence. It'll be you in there at nine at night."

"So what would you—"

"Thursdays," said Ella, from the other side of the horseshoe. "Not a room. A time. Thursday mornings, eight till ten, everyone. The box is there, but so are we. Bring the thing you're stuck on. Somebody else sits next to you while you do it."

"With biscuits," said Petteri.

"With biscuits," said Ella.

People laughed. Then they started arguing about which biscuits, and who would be allowed to touch the live screen, and

whether the pioneers would be bored, and Jukka from the southern office said on the video link that they should have one too, with a Thursday of their own. By five o'clock two of my boxes had survived, changed, and the third had become something Ella and Petteri had built between them across the table, shouting slightly. It was better than mine.

◦

PK and I walked to the car park together afterwards in a light rain off the river.

"You were the kid who talked his parents into the expensive Lego," he said. "Weren't you."

I laughed. "How do you know?"

"I watched you sell those slides this morning. Before Petteri. You were very good." He put his hood up. "Go on."

So I told him. A Technic excavator, the big one with the working arm, in a department store when I was nine. Far too expensive. I didn't cry or beg. I explained to my mother, for most of an hour, in the toy aisle, why it was in fact a sensible purchase: educational, long-lasting, cheaper per hour of use than anything else in the shop. She bought it, mostly to make me stop. My father came home, looked at the box on the kitchen table and said, "What the hell is this?"

"And?" said PK.

"And I built it that night. On my own, in one go, following the instructions exactly. It was finished by midnight." I hesitated. "Then it sat on a shelf for about six years. I don't think I ever played with it. I just liked that it was done."

"I lay on the floor of a department store and screamed for a cassette," said PK. "A hard rock band. I won't tell you which, you'll judge me. My mother bought it to get me off the floor.

Changed my life." He unlocked his car. "Did yours change yours?"

"It taught me I could talk people into things."

PK nodded. He opened his car door, then stopped and looked at me over the roof, rain on his glasses.

"Should I buy one of those little Macs?" he said. "The ones you run your machines on?"

He got in and drove off before I could answer.

I stood in the car park in the rain for a while after he'd gone.

7. FOUR WINDOWS AT THREE A.M.

Eighteen days to the race.

Four days after the Lemmings, I woke at ten past three, and for once it wasn't the bank.

I know. I know.

It was Anna's course pages. Her two old courses, the ones she'd taught for years for the agency, were going to stay on our website after she started selling her own, and somebody had to turn ten years of her slides and handouts into pages people would actually pay from, and she was busy, and I had told myself I'd do it on Monday. At ten past three on Tuesday morning I was lying in the dark composing the first prompt in my head.

I knew it wasn't clever. I went downstairs anyway.

The kitchen was cold. I opened the laptop on the table and, because I was there, opened four windows. In the first, the assistant I used for design started building a mockup of the course pages from Anna's material. In the second, the one I called the project manager, without irony, got ready to write the finished pages into the website. In the third I restarted the cash model, now pointing at the right sheet. In the fourth I asked a different machine to look at a client's video channel, because it had been waiting since Wednesday and it might as well run while I wasn't looking.

People ask me what it's like, working like that. The honest answer is that it's like drinking cordial straight from the bottle. Not diluted. Too strong, too sweet, and you keep going back for another swig. Each window wanted the whole of me for a minute: context, corrections, *no, not that one, the other one*. I went from window to window refilling them, and every time I came back, each one had produced more than I could read. Nobody had mentioned this in any of the webinars: the machines don't get tired, but whoever keeps starting them does, and every new window takes a little piece of your head that you don't get back until you sleep. The machines are very happy for you not to sleep.

At twenty to five the mockup was done. It was handsome. It had Anna's course titles and a photo of her from a conference, and underneath, long confident paragraphs about transformation and practical skills and actionable frameworks. I read the first paragraph and something in it was wrong, though I couldn't have said what. It was very smooth.

I typed: *Did you actually read her material?*

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Yes, the assistant replied, at once. I've carefully
reviewed all of the material and incorporated Anna's
key concepts, voice and teaching philosophy through-
out. It added that it would be happy to make any
adjustments.
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I scrolled back up. It had used her chapter headings. It had not used a single one of her examples. The one about the plumber's van, the one people quoted back to her years afterwards, was gone. So was the joke she always made in the second hour about nobody ever reading the terms and conditions.

I was tired, and the pages looked good, and while I was at it I lowered the prices. I'd thought for a year that we charged

too much for those two courses, though we had never agreed to change them. I told the project manager to publish, and at six fifteen, while the kettle boiled, both pages went live. I felt the small clean click of something finished. The excavator on the shelf at midnight.

I didn't tell Anna. She left at seven with a piece of toast in her mouth, for a meeting with the designer who was building *her* company's website, and it didn't seem like the moment, and then it was nine and I was in a meeting.

◦

Saga was back.

I saw her before she saw me, at the gym that evening, standing by the rowers in a faded Stockholm half-marathon T-shirt with her hair tied up the way she always used to tie it, as if she'd left on a Friday five years ago and come back on the Monday. She was talking to one of the coaches with her hands, demonstrating something about a shoulder.

When she turned and saw me, her face did the thing it always used to do: opened all at once, no warm-up.

"Thomas Virtanen," she said. "You've lost weight. Are you ill or training for something?"

"Training."

"Thank God. I didn't want to have to be nice." She hugged me quickly and hard. She smelled of chalk and some Swedish soap. "Where's Anna?"

"Meeting. She'll be here at seven."

She was back for good, she told me while we warmed up. The physiotherapy clinic in Stockholm had been bought by a chain that wanted everybody to see four patients an hour, and her relationship had ended at about the same time, more quietly, which she said was worse. Her father was on his own

now and forgetting things. She'd rented a flat by the river, and the gym had given her the back room for a small practice. She told me all of this between sets, in short bursts, with no self-pity at all, like someone reading out a delivery note.

"And you're doing the December race?" she said.

"Doubles. Supposed to be."

"Supposed to be?"

Anna came in at ten past seven, still in her meeting clothes, gym bag over her shoulder. She saw Saga across the room and stopped. Only for a second. But I saw it: the stop, then the smile, then Anna crossing the floor faster than Anna crosses floors.

They hugged for a long time. Longer than Saga and I had. Saga said something into Anna's hair that made her laugh.

"You two are doing the race," Saga said, when they let go.

"He is," said Anna. "I can't. I've trained twice in three weeks." She said it lightly but she meant it. "I'm not going to be the reason he walks the sled."

"I'll do it," said Saga, as if she were offering to hold somebody's coffee. She looked at me, then at Anna. "If that's all right with both of you."

Anna answered before I could.

"It's all right with me," she said.

◦

We sat in the car in the gym car park afterwards with the engine running and the heater on full. Snow had started, small and dry. Anna hadn't put her seatbelt on.

"You can say it," she said.

"Say what?"

"That you saw me looking at her."

I turned my head. She was looking straight ahead through the windscreen at the gym door, the light over it, the snow coming down through the light.

"I saw," I said.

"I'm not asking you for anything." She pulled at the strap of her bag. "I just don't want to be the person who keeps things to herself until she's sure. I did that with the company. So I'm telling you now. I looked at her and I felt something. I felt it before she went to Stockholm, too, and I thought it had gone. It hasn't." She breathed out. "That's all. That's the whole announcement."

Twenty-two years, and she could still tell me something I didn't know. My heart was going as if I'd just done a set of wall balls.

I put my hand on her knee. She put hers on top of it, and we sat like that, and I was frightened and something else I didn't have a word for yet, and I didn't want to move.

Her phone lit up on the dashboard between us.

She picked it up, glanced at it, and then looked at it properly. I watched her face change.

"Riikka's sent me this," she said. "With a smiley. *Is this you?? Looks great!*"

She turned the screen towards me. My page. Her photo. *Transform your communication with practical, actionable frameworks.*

"When did this go up?"

"This morning. I was going to tell you."

She read for a while in silence. Scrolled down. Scrolled back up.

"Where's the van?" she said.

"What?"

"The plumber's van. It's the whole second hour. Where is it?"

"It must have—" I stopped. "It isn't there."

"It isn't there." She kept scrolling. "This sounds like nobody, Thomas. It sounds like a webinar about webinars." Then, quietly: "You've changed my prices."

"They were too high. We talked about it."

"We talked about it in March. I said not yet." She put the phone face down on her thigh. "You did this at night, didn't you."

I didn't answer, which was an answer.

"You did it to help," she said. "I know you did. You wanted my stuff to keep earning for the agency while I'm off doing mine. That's kind. That's actually kind." Her voice was very even. "And you turned me into a template and put my face on it and sent it out to everyone I know, at six in the morning, without asking me. With a machine that told you it had read me."

"It said it had."

"I'm sure it did."

The heater roared. The snow had thickened. Somebody came out of the gym, saw two people sitting very still in a lit car, and looked away politely.

"I'm going to walk," Anna said.

"It's two kilometres. It's snowing."

"I know how far it is." She opened the door and the cold came in. She stood in it for a moment with her bag on her shoulder, and then she bent down again and looked at me across the seat.

"An hour ago," she said, "I told you something I've never told anyone. And then I found out about this from Riikka. Do

you see? It's not the prices."

She shut the door gently. I watched her walk out under the light over the gym door and across the car park, hands in her pockets, getting smaller, until the snow took her.

I sat there until the windscreen had gone white. Then a while longer. Then I drove home very slowly.

Her boots were by the door. The house was quiet. On the kitchen table the laptop was still open, all four windows patiently waiting for me to tell them what to do next.

I went upstairs. For the first time since it had become hers, the door was shut. There was a strip of light under it.

I stood outside it for a long time.

8. ANNA

I SHUT THE DOOR BECAUSE I WANTED TO KNOW WHAT it sounded like.

It sounded like nothing much. A click. The room didn't change. The desk was by the window, facing out, with my laptop and two piles of old course notes and a mug with a brown ring in it. The mat was rolled up in the corner. He'd ordered a mat for this room once, years ago, in another fit of making a room into something, and it had been in the garage ever since; I'd brought it up in September. He hadn't noticed. I was waiting to see how long it would take him. It was going on three months.

My feet were soaking. Two kilometres had turned out to be longer than I'd pretended. Halfway, outside the pizzeria that's always closed, I nearly turned round, not to go back to him but because my boots were the wrong boots and the snow was getting in at the ankles. I didn't turn round. I walked faster and got angrier, which kept me warm.

I sat down in the armchair and peeled off my socks and put my feet against the radiator, which was on, finally, after a month of him saying we could wait until November.

Then I opened the page again on my phone and read every word.

Transform your communication with practical, actionable frameworks. I have never in my life used the word *actionable*. I have a

rule about it. In my courses, anyone who says *actionable* puts a euro in a jar, and at the end of the day we buy cake with the jar, and in a good year I've eaten a great deal of cake.

And here's the awful thing, the thing I was not going to tell him tonight or possibly ever: the page wasn't bad. It was a perfectly good page. It was the page anyone would have written about anyone. That was what I couldn't stand.

◦

At some point I heard him on the stairs.

The floorboard outside my door creaks. It always has. Venla used to step over it at two in the morning and land on the next one with a thump ten times louder than the creak, bless her. Thomas stood on it and didn't move. I could hear him not moving. Thomas is extremely loud when he's not moving.

I didn't open the door. I checked, carefully, whether I was punishing him, because I didn't want to be. I don't think I was. For twenty-two years I've been the one who makes the room easy. The one who laughs first after a fight. The one who puts her cold feet on his shins so he knows it's over. The one who says *come on, then* in the kitchen. I'm very good at it. People pay me, in a roundabout way, for being very good at it. And just once I wanted to sit on my own side of a door and find out what was on it if I didn't.

What was on it, mostly, was my feet getting warm. And Saga.

I let myself think about her, because I'd told him now, and it didn't feel like stealing any more. Saga five years ago at the gym, on the rower, laughing at something with her head thrown back. The hug tonight, which had gone on too long, and both of us had known it was going on too long, and neither of us had stopped. Chalk, and a soap you can't buy here.

Her hand flat between my shoulder blades. I didn't know what it was yet. It was just there.

And under that, something else, which surprised me. Thomas in the car, when I told him. His face. I'd braced myself for the voice, the serene one, and it didn't come. His hand on my knee was shaking. He was frightened, and something else as well, and I saw it before I saw my phone. I wanted to stay in that minute, in the car with the heater roaring, and keep looking at him. I hadn't seen that face on him in years. I wanted to see it again, from somewhere I could watch it properly.

I sat with that thought for quite a long time, with my feet on the radiator. I'm not going to pretend I didn't.

The board creaked as he shifted his weight. Eleven minutes, by my phone. I wasn't sure whether that was a long time or a short time to stand outside a door. Possibly it depends on the door.

◦

At half past twelve I got up to close the curtains and saw that Venla's light was on.

You can see it from this window. I didn't know that until September. If you stand at the left-hand edge of the glass you can see, over the neighbour's shed and the bare birches, the green cross of the pharmacy, and above it, on the second floor, a yellow square that is my daughter's kitchen. I never told Thomas. He would have started checking it.

The light was on. Venla was awake, two hundred metres away, doing whatever students do at half past twelve on a school night. Essays. Nothing. Somebody.

I picked up my phone and typed *are you awake* and looked at it. Then I deleted it. I stood there watching the yellow square

and not texting my daughter for quite a while. It was one of the harder things I did that week.

I drew the curtains.

◦

I didn't sleep for a long time. I unrolled his mat, finally, and lay on it, because it was the only flat surface in the room apart from the desk, and looked at the ceiling.

Selko. I chose the name in July, in the car, on the way back from the cottage, while he was driving and talking about cash flow. *Selkokieli*, plain language, the kind you write for people who need the words to be simple. I said it out loud to try it, and he said *what?*, and I said *nothing, just a word*, and I kept it. It was the first thing in years I'd kept from him on purpose. It felt wonderful and slightly sick, like the first cigarette I ever smoked, behind the school, at fourteen, with a girl called Minna who later became a dentist.

Some time around two I heard him go downstairs. The kitchen chair scraped. The laptop, obviously. Four windows. I thought about going down there and shutting it for him, and didn't.

And then, later, something I hadn't expected: the chair again, the stairs, and his footsteps going past my door without stopping, and our bedroom door, and the bed taking his weight. He'd gone to bed. He hadn't stayed down there with the machines.

I lay on the mat and listened to the house be quiet.

I was still angry. I'd be angry tomorrow, and on Saturday at the breathing thing, probably, and I'd let him see it. But lying there in the dark, I noticed I was also, very slightly, looking forward to it. To being angry at him out loud, properly, as myself.

I fell asleep on the mat, and woke at six with a stiff neck and a cushion under my head that I didn't remember fetching, and the porridge already on the table downstairs.

9. THE BREATH OUT

Fourteen days to the race.

We had signed up for the breathing workshop back in October, before Anna's company, before the pages, when it had seemed like the sort of thing you did on a Saturday at the end of November. Neither of us suggested cancelling. That was the closest we'd come to talking about anything in four days.

It was held at the martial arts club across the road from the gym: a low room with a sprung floor and blue mats and a smell of feet and disinfectant that no amount of incense was going to defeat. The instructor, Joel, had trained at our gym for years. I knew him as the quiet one who did his rowing intervals with his eyes shut. Today he was barefoot, in a black T-shirt, and his voice was slower than usual, as if he'd turned it down a notch.

About twenty of us. Gym people, most of whom I'd only ever seen red-faced and swearing at a sled. Saga was there, on a mat by the window. She lifted a hand when we came in and didn't come over.

Anna put her mat down next to mine without discussing it. We lay down. Joel explained what would happen: an hour and a half of breathing in a particular way, in through the mouth and out without pausing, no gap at the top and no gap at the

bottom. Our hands might tingle. Our hands might cramp. We might feel nothing. We might cry, or laugh, or get angry, or fall asleep. Nobody had to share anything afterwards.

"If you want to stop, stop," he said. "Breathe normally. Come back when you want. This isn't a race." He smiled very slightly. "I know who I'm talking to."

The music started, low, with drums underneath. I breathed.

For the first ten minutes it was mostly irritating. I was doing it right and nothing was happening, and then I started wondering whether I was doing it right, and then I noticed Anna breathing beside me, faster than me, and wondered whether I ought to match her. I am, as you'll have gathered, a man who can turn lying on a mat into a performance review.

Somewhere around the twelfth minute my hands began to fizz, the way your foot does when you've sat on it. Then my lips. Then the fizzing crept up my forearms, and my fingers, very slowly, began to curl in on themselves like something drying in the sun.

I thought: *this is just chemistry.*

Keep it moving, said Joel's voice, from somewhere above me. *In. And let it go.*

At some point I stopped thinking about the breathing and was simply in it. In: the chest lifting, the ribs pressing out against the floor, an effort, like picking something heavy up off the ground. Out: everything falling back. In again. Picking it up. Putting it down.

I found I wanted to stay at the bottom of the out-breath. There was a place right at the end of it, after the air had gone and before the next breath came, where it was very quiet and very safe. Nobody was waiting for me there. Nothing needed deciding. For a few seconds I let myself hang in it, emptied. It

was like the last seconds in the cold tub in the mornings, just before the watch buzzes, except that nobody was timing it, and it went much further down.

Then my chest lifted on its own.

I hadn't decided it. My body wanted air. And something came up through me with that breath, from the soles of my feet, so strong that my curled hands shook with it.

I don't want to die. I want to live.

I have no idea where it came from. I have never been anywhere near dying. But it came anyway, enormous, and my eyes filled, and I lay there on a blue mat in a martial arts club with my hands like a crab's and tears running sideways into my ears, wanting to live so badly it frightened me.

After that, people. Not as thoughts; more the way you know someone has walked into the room behind you before you turn round. Viktor in the car park in his wet wool. Venla on her knees behind a radiator with the vacuum cleaner. Sofia in the capital, not phoning, fine. Ella in the passenger seat, deleting things. Noora going red. Our neighbour dragging his trampoline across the lawn one leg at a time. None of them were in the room, and I loved them where they were.

In. Out. Rest at the end. Don't stay. In.

Across the room a man was sobbing, big and unembarrassed. Someone else was laughing. Joel's voice moved between them, unhurried.

I turned my head. Anna was lying with her eyes closed and her face wet. Her hands had curled up too. Without opening her eyes she moved her nearest hand across the gap between our mats, slowly, the fingers still stiff and bent, and hooked them into mine. We lay like that, two sets of claws locked together, breathing.

Afterwards people sat up slowly and drank water and looked at each other in a shy, naked way, like people who've met in a sauna. Joel said nobody had to share anything, and almost everybody did anyway, a sentence or two each. I said I hadn't expected to want to live quite so much. A few people laughed. The man who'd been sobbing, a big electrician called Pasi who usually deadlifts in a vest, said, "Same," and that was all.

Saga said she'd spent the whole time thinking about her father, who had dementia and who she'd come home for. She said it plainly, then said, "That's it."

In the corridor, while we were digging for our boots in the heap, Anna said, "Did you cry?"

"A bit."

"I could hear it. It went in your ears. It made a noise."

I laughed. She didn't, quite.

"I'm not finished being angry," she said. "About the pages."

"I know."

"But I'm sick of being angry on my own up there. It's a nice room." She sat on the bench to pull her boots on, not looking at me. "Tomorrow. Ten o'clock. Bring the laptop and don't open it until I say."

Saga came past with her bag. She stopped beside Anna and put a hand on top of her head, briefly, and Anna leaned into it for a second with her eyes shut.

"Tuesday," Saga said to me. "Sled. Bring your bad attitude."

On Sunday at ten I knocked on the open door.

Anna was at the desk by the window. On the floor beside it was a mat, unrolled, with two cushions on it and a mug of cof-

fee for me.

I stared at it.

"That's my mat," I said.

"Eighty-four days," said Anna. "I counted. You put a cushion under my head on it on Tuesday night and still didn't notice."

She pointed at it. I sat on my own mat with the laptop shut on my knees and listened while she read her course notes out loud, the whole second hour, the plumber's van and the terms and conditions and the part where she always stops and waits for somebody in the room to admit they've never read them either. She read for forty minutes. Twice she stopped to cross something out with a pencil.

"Now," she said. "Open it."

We worked until three. It wasn't easy. She wanted every example in and I wanted it to fit on a phone. We argued about the van for twenty minutes and about one comma for five. When we got to the price she typed a number without asking me. It was higher than the old one.

"That's more than before."

"Yes."

"Nobody's going to—"

"Then nobody will." She saved it. "It's my course. And it's going on my site. Not yours."

◦

On Monday I walked into the weekly meeting and didn't open the agenda.

Eleven of us round the long table, four more on the screen from the southern office. I'd prepared something in the car. It went out of my head the moment I opened my mouth.

"Right. So. Anna's course pages," I said. "The ones that went up last week. You might have seen them. They're down. I took them down. They were—" I stopped.

"Bad?" said Noora.

"Not bad. Smooth. They were—" On the screen, somebody in the southern office had their microphone on and was audibly eating crisps. "Can someone mute Jukka?"

Nobody muted Jukka. The crisps went on.

"I made them in the middle of the night," I said, giving up on the version from the car. "With two assistants. I didn't ask her. I don't really know how we should do these. I'd like Ella and Noora to work it out. With Anna. All the course pages, not just hers."

There was a pause.

"And you?" said Ella.

"I'll do whatever you tell me."

"Can that be nothing?" said Noora.

People laughed. Jukka finally found his mute button, and there was a small round of applause, and the meeting moved on.

◦

On Thursday at eight the box came out of the garage.

Petteri carried it into the small meeting room at the end of the corridor, the one with the broken blind, and Ella set it up, and I was not allowed to touch anything. Two screens. A sticker on the left one in Ella's handwriting: SANDBOX. On the right one: LIVE — ASK SOMEONE FIRST. Petteri brought two packets of biscuits and put them on the table like a man laying a foundation stone.

Seven people came. Noora sat at the keyboard with Anna's old course notes beside her and the assistant open on the

sandbox screen, and Anna on a chair next to her, and the rest of us behind them in a half-circle, eating biscuits, watching the machine write a first version, and then watching two women take it apart.

"First version machine, last version human," Noora said, to no one in particular, crossing out *actionable*.

"Euro in the jar," said Anna.

I sat at the back. Nobody needed me for anything. It was a strange feeling, and not a good one at first. It was like watching someone else drive your car. It took about forty minutes, and a third biscuit, before I stopped wanting the keyboard.

◦

Aleksi caught me in the corridor afterwards with a thin folder under his arm.

"About the compensation thing," he said. "We've moved it twice."

"After the race," I said. "I'm sorry. I'll give it proper time."

Aleksi nodded slowly.

"It's been *after something* since October," he said, and went back to his desk.

◦

10. THE RACE

Three days to the race.

Aleksi's document arrived on the Wednesday.

Four printed pages, laid on my desk without a word. Market rates. Responsibilities. A comparison with similar roles in the capital. His year in bullet points. And at the end a number higher than anyone in the company earned, including me. It was very well argued. It had the smooth, slightly shiny finish of something that had been sparred against a machine, round after round, until every possible objection had been answered in advance. I recognised the finish. I'd put it on Anna's pages myself.

I said I'd read it properly after the weekend. Then I went to the gym and pushed the sled.

Saga was there. The sled was loaded heavy, and on the third length I drove it into the end pad so hard the whole thing bounced back a foot, and I turned round and said, "Don't stand there, I need the lane," to Saga, who was standing nowhere near the lane.

She looked at me for a moment.

"Don't push the sled at me," she said. "Push it at whoever you're angry with."

I did two more lengths on my own. Then I went and apologised. She was taping someone's shoulder in the back room

and didn't look up.

"Friday, six o'clock," she said. "Bring snacks. Leave that face at home."

◦

We drove down on the Friday night, six hundred kilometres in the electric car I'd bought in September and still felt faintly guilty about every time I got into it. PK had called it a symbol. Anna called it the toaster. Saga sat in the back eating almonds one at a time, with the concentration of someone defusing a bomb.

At the first charging stop, a petrol station with a closed grill and a single lit window, we stood in the cold for forty minutes. Saga did walking lunges up and down the forecourt. Anna bought three coffees and a liquorice bar and split the liquorice three ways without asking.

Somewhere after ten, on a narrow stretch through forest, there were blue lights. An elk lay on the verge like a dropped piece of furniture. An old Volvo estate had folded itself into the ditch. A woman sat on the step of an ambulance in a foil blanket, talking, her hands moving: alive, then. A policeman waved us past with a torch. Nobody said anything for a long time, and Anna kept her hand on the back of my neck until the next town.

◦

The race was in an exhibition hall the size of an airport, under white light, with music so loud it came up through the soles of your shoes. Eight kilometres of running in loops, and between each loop a station: ski machine, sled push, sled pull, burpee broad jumps, rower, farmer's carry, sandbag lunges,

wall balls. In doubles you ran everything together and split the stations however you liked.

Saga liked fifty-fifty. Exactly. "Not because I'm noble," she'd said in training. "Because if you do more than half you'll blow up at the wall balls, and then I'll have to do all of them, and I'll hate you."

Anna was at the barrier by the sled lanes with a SUPPORT lanyard round her neck and my spare shoes in a bag. Two years ago she'd been on the other side of that barrier with a number on, swearing at me on the sled pull. From the lane I couldn't read her face.

The first half went the way first halves go, too fast and full of hope. By the sled push my legs had opinions. After the fourth station the cramps came, left calf then right, knotting up like fists. I stopped in the running lane and swore loudly enough that a teenage volunteer stepped back.

"SALT," Anna shouted from the barrier. "Your pocket. Your *left* pocket."

I dug out the little bag and tipped it into my mouth and ran on with my face screwed up, Saga jogging backwards in front of me saying, "Small steps, small steps, you big idiot."

At the wall balls, I couldn't. My legs wouldn't take me down into the squat and up again with any force, and the ball kept falling short of the line. I did ten, badly. Saga took the ball off me without a word and did twenty-five. I did ten more. She did the rest. It was nowhere near fifty-fifty.

It felt like being carried, a little, by someone who didn't seem to mind.

We crossed the line three minutes and forty seconds over our target. I stood bent over beyond the finish arch with my hands on my knees and was, for about five minutes, genuinely

and childishly furious: with my calves, with the salt, with the nights at the kitchen table when I should have been asleep. Saga lay flat on the rubber floor beside me, laughing at the ceiling.

"We were slow," she said. "We were *so* slow. It was brilliant."

Afterwards we stayed at the barrier and cheered the last heats in. Grey-haired women. Two teenage brothers who looked about to die. A man in his seventies in a knee brace who walked every single kilometre and got the biggest noise of the day. I shouted myself hoarse for people whose names I didn't know. Somewhere in the middle of it the fury went, and I didn't notice it go.

◦

The hotel had a sauna on the top floor, with a window over the dark sea. We went up at nine with a bottle of something fizzy and cheap from the station shop. No one else was there.

The heat. A ferry going out past the islands, very slowly, lit up like an office block that had decided to leave. Saga on the top bench with her eyes shut. Anna on the bench below her, leaning back against Saga's shins as if that were the most natural place in the world to lean.

After a while Anna turned and looked up at Saga and said something I didn't hear. Saga opened her eyes. She looked at Anna for a long moment, then down at me, a direct look with nothing hidden in it.

"Your wife," she said, "has just told me something about you."

I felt my face go hot in a way that had nothing to do with the sauna.

"What did she tell you?"

"That's between us," said Saga. "Room. Ten minutes. Bring the wine."

◦

In the room Anna sat down in the armchair by the window in her hotel robe, hair wet, and pulled her knees up, and didn't get up again.

"I'm going to stay here," she said. She wasn't asking. "I want to watch."

I stood in the middle of the room in my robe. I had walked first into every room of my adult life, and I had absolutely no idea what to do with my hands.

"Come here," Saga said, from the bed.

"Slower," said Anna, from the chair. "I want to see."

So I went slower.

I remember it in pieces. Saga's sports tape still on one shoulder, peeling at the corner. The lamp by the bed, which none of us turned off. Saga kneeling up on the bed to undo my robe, taking her time about it, because Anna was watching and she knew it. Her laugh, low and surprised, when the robe came off, and the look she sent across the room. "Well," she said. "You *did* say."

"I told you," said Anna from the chair, enormously pleased with herself.

I went red from the collarbones up, and both of them laughed, and somehow the laughing made it easier. It took the solemnity out of the room and left something warm and frank and slightly ridiculous.

Saga pushed me back onto the bed with one hand flat on my chest. "Don't do anything," she said. "You always do something. Just lie there."

I lay there. It was, it turned out, the hardest instruction anyone gave me all year.

Anna directed a little, a word now and then from the chair, low. Saga did what she was told for a while, and then did what she wanted, which was better. When she moved on top of me her hand found mine on the sheet and gripped it hard, as if she were the one who needed holding on to.

All the time I kept looking past her shoulder for Anna's face, the way you look for one person in a crowd. Every time I found it she was watching, absolutely still except for her toes, curled over the edge of the armchair. I was the one being looked at. It was almost unbearable, and I didn't look away from her once.

Later Anna got up out of the chair. She came across the room slowly, letting the robe fall where it fell, climbed onto the bed, put her hand flat on my chest where Saga's had been and said into my ear, "Thank you," as if I'd given her something. Then she turned to Saga, and it was my turn to watch.

I lay back against the headboard with my calves still aching from the sled and watched my wife kiss Saga, slowly at first and then not slowly at all, and heard the sound Anna makes, which I'd known for twenty-two years and had never once heard from the outside.

I waited for the pang. I'd half expected it all evening, an old one, older than Anna. It didn't come. Something else did, and it took me a moment to recognise it, because the last time I'd felt it I was lying on a blue mat with my hands curled up like a crab's, at the bottom of the breath out. Nobody needed anything from me, and I loved all of it at once: Anna's laugh breaking in the middle of a kiss, Saga's bruised knee, the ferry lights crawling across the black window, my own stupid

aching legs, the wine going warm on the bedside table. None of it was mine to look after, and I rested there.

At some point Saga reached back without looking and found my ankle and held it, absently, the way you hold a rail on a train. At some point Anna opened her eyes and looked at me over Saga's shoulder, and I saw her check my face, quickly, the way she'd checked it in the car in the snow. Whatever she found there made her smile and close her eyes again.

Then the breath came back in on its own, and with it the two of them reaching for me.

◦

I woke at about three with the lamp still on, somewhere in the middle of the bed, with an arm across my chest that might have been Anna's and a foot against my shin that was definitely Saga's, the two of them breathing slightly out of time with each other, and with me. After a while I reached carefully over Saga and turned off the lamp, and lay back down in the dark, and let the next breath come when it came.

◦

At breakfast Saga came down last, with wet hair and a plate of nothing but scrambled egg and gherkins, and sat down without looking at either of us.

"Don't," she said. "Don't do a debrief. I know you, Thomas. You'll want a retro."

"I wasn't going to."

"He was going to," said Anna.

"I was a bit going to."

Saga ate a gherkin. She looked younger than she had the night before, and less sure of herself.

"I'm going to get the train," she said. "Not because of anything. I just want to sit on my own for six hours." She glanced at Anna, and away. "And I'm not moving into anybody's spare room."

"It isn't spare," said Anna. "It's mine."

Saga nodded at her plate as if that answered something, or didn't, and finished her eggs, and went.

◦

Anna drove home. In the car park she held out her hand for the key and I gave it to her.

Neither of us said much for the first two hundred kilometres. Once she reached over without looking and squeezed my knee, hard, and put her hand back on the wheel. Once I caught her smiling to herself at nothing, and found I was smiling too, at the same nothing.

Somewhere past the place where the elk had been, the verge was empty. A dark patch on the snow, a scrap of red-and-white tape caught on a post, flicking in the wind. Anna slowed down as we passed it.

◦

PART THREE — SAME AS MIDNIGHT

11. THE OWNER EATS LAST

The evening we got back, Anna lay in bed texting.

I lay beside her with a book I wasn't reading. Every few minutes her phone buzzed, and she read whatever it was and smiled, or once laughed out loud, a short private laugh through her nose, and typed something back with both thumbs.

"She's home," Anna said. "She says the train had no restaurant car and she's never forgiving the state railways."

"Tell her hi."

Anna typed. The phone buzzed. She smiled at it.

"She says hi. And that your calves are pathetic."

"They are pathetic."

I turned a page I hadn't read. Then I checked myself, the way you press a bruise to see if it's still there. There was a faint soreness somewhere. But most of it, when I looked honestly, was my calves.

Anna put the phone face down on her bedside table and turned over and put her cold feet on my shins, which she knows I hate, and kept them there.

I was asleep before she was. That hadn't happened in years.

December came in above the line. Not by much. Paula sent the figures on the ninth of January, in a PDF with two pages of notes, and under a heading that just said *December* she had written: *Well done. Don't get used to it.*

January was below the line again. The two clients who'd only ever really talked to Anna had gone quiet, the way we'd all known they would. Riikka sent a long kind email and a box of chocolates addressed to Anna, and a week later asked Anna to put her on the list for whatever she was starting next. Two other clients paused for the new year. On the fifteenth the first instalment for Viktor's shares was due. On the fourteenth I sat looking at Paula's figures with my mouth going small.

I paid it. I didn't tell anyone it had been close.

Viktor messaged that evening. *Got it. You could have asked to move it, you know.*

I looked at that for a long time.

I know, I wrote.

A minute later: *Pay the next one in June. Not a favour. I don't need it till summer and you obviously do. Don't argue.*

I didn't argue. I sat in the kitchen with the phone in my hand and felt, quite precisely, how much I would have preferred to owe Viktor nothing at all. Not even this.

◦

Anna and I went to see Harri together, in the branch in the shopping centre, between a phone shop and a place that sold handbags. In person Harri was younger than he sounded and had a coffee stain on his tie that he kept covering with his hand. Anna signed where he showed her. Her signature was small and neat and slanted backwards, nothing like Viktor's.

"Reduced amount, through to June," Harri said. "We look again on the eighteenth of June. Send me the April figures when you have them." He covered the stain. "That's it from my side."

On the escalator down, Anna said, "That's it?"

"Until June."

She watched the handbags go past. "I thought I'd feel something."

"Me too," I said.

◦

PK had another phrase, for things like Aleksi's meeting. Some games, he said, are meant to end: one and done. The worst load you can carry is a finite game that has outstayed its welcome and turned into an endless one. *Do it stupidly fast*. I had moved Aleksi's meeting three times.

PK had also said something to me in October, almost in passing, at the end of a session about something else entirely. *The owner eats last*. It had annoyed me for weeks, mostly because he was right.

I gave Aleksi his meeting on the twenty-second. I didn't print anything.

"No," I said. "Not that number. Not now."

Aleksi's face closed. He was thirty-four, good at his job, with a child starting school in the autumn. I knew all of that.

"Your document's probably right," I said. "About what you're worth. Somewhere. Maybe here, in a year." I turned my laptop round so he could see Paula's figures: December, January, the projection to June. "It just didn't have this in it."

He read for a long time.

"I didn't know it was this tight."

"Most people don't. That's on me."

"What are you two paying yourselves?"

I hesitated. Anna and I had agreed not to say.

"Nothing," I said. "January and February."

Aleksi sat back.

"I'd like you to run paid advertising," I said. "Properly. The numbers, the budget, a seat at the Monday table. The money follows in the autumn if the work does. I'll write it down."

He looked at the screen, and then at me, for a long moment.

"I'll take it," he said. "And I'm going to keep my CV up to date."

"Do."

"I mean it."

"I know you do."

At the door he stopped.

"That document," he said. "I had it argue with me for three evenings. It said I'd win."

He went out before I could answer, and for the rest of January he was polite to me in a way he had never been before, and it was a while before I understood that polite was what sore looked like on Aleksi.

◦

Venla came for dinner on the last Thursday of January and brought Leevi, whom she'd mentioned twice in four months, both times by text, both times as *someone*. He was tall and quiet and ate four helpings of lasagne and said almost nothing, except, at one point, in a tone of real admiration, that it was better than his mother's. Sofia had sent apologies from the capital and a photo of her own lasagne, which was worse.

Saga came too, straight from her father's, still in her coat, and stood in the hall for a second longer than she needed to

before she came in. Anna hugged her. I hugged her. It was slightly awkward, and nobody minded.

Halfway through the meal Venla put her fork down and said she was changing courses. She'd already done the paperwork. In August she'd move to the other end of the country, where the course was. She said it fast and looked at her plate.

I felt every sentence I could say lining up behind my teeth. The questions. The risks. Plan B.

"Is it a good course?" I said.

Venla looked up. "Yes."

"Then good."

She stared at me as if I were a trick. Across the table Anna put a hand over her mouth.

"That's it?" said Venla.

"Do they have heating?"

"*Dad.*"

Saga went home at half past ten. At the door she kissed Anna on the cheek and me on the cheek and said, "Thursday after next, if I'm invited." Anna said, "You're invited." Saga went out into the snow and didn't look back.

Later I loaded the dishwasher. Lasagne dish, five plates, five glasses, a bread knife. It was full. I switched it on.

Upstairs, Anna's light was still on, and I could hear her typing. I assumed it was her company. It wasn't, as it turned out. But I didn't find that out for months.

12. THE FUEL GAUGE

Twenty-four days to Selko.

The cash model was finished in March, and it was the least exciting thing I'd built in years.

There was nothing clever about it. Paula insisted on that. Every morning it took what was actually in the bank, what had actually been invoiced and what was actually going out, and drew one line forward for ninety days. A second, dotted line showed the same thing if we sold nothing new. A third, grey line was the limit. That was all. No forecasts of growth. No green columns. No colour at all, except for a small red square on any day the dotted line dipped under the grey.

"It's not a crystal ball," Paula said, the first time we walked through it. "It's a fuel gauge."

"I know what it is."

"You don't, though," she said. "You've been driving at night with no instruments for ten years, and you think the knot in your stomach is the dashboard."

I laughed. She was right.

It took me two weeks to notice that I had stopped checking the bank at night. Not because things were good: they weren't especially. The dotted line still dipped every month around the fifth, when salaries and rent and tax went out within three days of each other, and came back up by the twelfth, when the

invoices landed. It had always done that. I'd just never seen it drawn. I'd felt it, every single month, as a dread that arrived around the first and left around the fifteenth, and I'd thought the dread was information.

Now the dip on the fifth was just a dip on the fifth. You slowed down a bit before it, the way you slow down for a bend you know is there.

The Monday after that, I did something that felt slightly indecent. In the weekly meeting I put the model up on the screen. Not a summary. The model itself, three lines and the little red squares, for everybody, both offices.

There was a silence. Then Ella said, "Wait. We go to the bottom every month? On the fifth?"

"Every month."

"I thought that was just you," she said. "Being weird on the fifth. You go quiet and walk round the office touching things."

Everybody laughed. I laughed too, and felt myself go slightly red, which seems to be a thing that happens to me now.

"From now on," I said, "it's on the screen every Monday. Fifteen minutes. Paula reads it, not me. Anybody can ask anything. If you're about to promise a client something that costs money in a red week, you'll see it before I do."

"What if we don't understand it?" said Aleksi.

"Then that's a bug in the model, not in you."

◦

In March, too, Anna's first course under her own name went on sale.

Selko, the page said at the top, in plain black letters, and under it *Anna Virtanen*. I'd been very careful, all winter, not to look at the address of her website, because I knew I'd start checking it. I found out what the company was called the

same way everybody else did: when it went live. Under the name was the page we'd written together on my mat that Sunday, the plumber's van and all, and the price she'd typed without asking me.

Ten days later there were four sign-ups. She needed twelve to break even.

She told me at dinner, flatly, between mouthfuls, the way she'd tell me the car needed tyres. I put my fork down. I could feel the whole machine start up in me at once. The agency mailing list. A discount code. A sponsored post. Three assistants writing an email sequence overnight, five emails, seven; I could have it live by the morning.

"We could put it in the agency newsletter," I said.

"No."

"Just once, just to—"

"If it goes out from the agency, it's the agency's course again." She went on eating. "No."

I picked my fork back up.

For a week I watched her do it the slow way. She phoned people. Old participants, one at a time, from the armchair in her room with the door open, so I heard her through the ceiling: the same few sentences, a laugh, a pause, sometimes a long pause. Some said yes. More said not now. One man said, loudly enough for me to hear it in the kitchen, that it was a lot of money for one day, and Anna said, "It is," and nothing else, and waited, and the man signed up.

On the day there were seven.

She came home at six with her bag over her shoulder and her face pink from the cold and stood in the kitchen doorway.

"Seven," she said.

"How was it?"

"The best one I've done in years." She dropped the bag. "I lost six hundred euros."

She sounded furious and elated at the same time, the way I'd felt beyond the finish line in December. I didn't say anything about the six hundred euros. I poured her a glass of wine and she drank half of it standing up.

The next morning she lowered the price for the April date. Not to my number. Not to the old number either. To one she'd worked out herself, in pencil, on the back of a participant feedback form.

◦

In May, at twenty past two in the morning, Anna came down to the kitchen and found me at the table with the laptop.

I looked up, caught. "It's not work."

"I didn't say anything."

"It's not work, honestly. I couldn't sleep, so I'm—" I turned the screen a little, embarrassed. "I'm writing something."

She came round behind me and read over my shoulder. A man called Thomas. A woman called Anna. A dishwasher, half full.

She read for a long time without saying anything. I waited.

"You've turned into Venla," she said finally. "Up in the middle of the night, typing, telling people it's not what it looks like."

"I know."

"She used to come down for cereal. You used to come down and tell her to go to bed."

"I know."

"So who's going to tell you?"

"You, apparently."

She pointed at a line on the screen. Something the machine had suggested and I'd kept, in a scene where the woman called Anna told the man, softly, that she was proud of him.

"I'd never say that," she said.

"It's read everything I've written. It knows the characters."

"Has it?" She leaned past me and typed, with one finger: *have you read all of it?*

```
Yes, the machine replied, at once. I've carefully re-
viewed all of the material and have a thorough under-
standing of the characters, their voices and their
relationships.
```

Anna read it twice. She didn't say anything. She just looked at me.

"Okay," I said. "What would you say?"

She thought about it. Then she reached past me, deleted the line, and typed, slowly, with two fingers: *Most couples, when the kids leave, start drinking and fighting.*

I laughed out loud in the dark kitchen.

"We've done the fighting," I said.

"Then pour me a glass," said Anna, "and come to bed in twenty minutes, or I'm writing the next chapter myself."

◦

In June the bank renewed the limit for a year, at the smaller amount. Harri sent the confirmation on a Tuesday afternoon in a two-line email that ended *Have a good summer.* I read it at my desk, then got up and walked round the office once, touching nothing, and sat back down. On my screen the cash model drew its three lines into the summer: the solid one, the dotted one, the grey. There was one small red square, in the second week of July, where there always is.

I looked at it for a while. Then I put a meeting in the calendar for the last week of June, with Paula, Aleksi and Ella, called *July red square*, and went to get a coffee.

I didn't know yet that the red square would come early, at twelve minutes to eight on a July morning, in a text from Raimo.

13. THURSDAY MORNINGS

The box sat on a desk in the small meeting room at the end of the corridor, the one with the broken blind: a silver thing the size of a hardback book, two screens, a keyboard nobody was allowed to eat over. People who don't work with these machines imagine something enormous and humming. It isn't. Most of the time the box doesn't do the thinking itself. It talks to the big models out in the cloud, the same ones everybody's phone talks to, only set up properly, with our rules and our folders and our client's words in them. One day, Ella said, it would run its own models, right there on the desk, and then nothing would have to leave the building at all. For now it was a very expensive doorway, and on Thursday mornings, between eight and ten, people went through it together.

I'd said something to PK about it in February, in a session where I'd admitted, with some embarrassment, that I still sometimes woke at three with an itch to go downstairs and restart the agents, check what they'd done, start the next round. PK had gone quiet and then told me about a German sociologist who says that the faster everything goes, the faster you have to run just to stay where you are.

"You've built yourself a treadmill that never stops," he said. "And then you put it in your kitchen."

"I want out of its rhythm," I said. "I don't want to stop using it. I just want to stop running at its speed."

"Keep that," said PK, and wrote it down. "That's well said. Don't make a slide of it."

I didn't. But Thursdays turned out to be the closest thing I found to an answer. Here are eight of them.

◦

THURSDAY, 5 FEBRUARY

Petteri confessed.

He did it badly, standing by the biscuits, not looking at anyone. For three months, he said, he'd been making all his client presentations at home, at night, in the old design program he'd used for fifteen years, and then pasting them into the new system so it looked as if he'd done them there.

"Why?" said Ella. Not unkindly. Interested.

"Because the new stuff makes me feel stupid," said Petteri. "And I'm fifty-three, and I'm not stupid, and I don't like feeling it in front of people who are twenty-seven."

Nobody laughed. Petteri took a biscuit he didn't want, to have something to do with his hands.

Ella pulled a second chair up to the box and sat Petteri in front of the keyboard with the presentation he actually had to give on Tuesday, a real one, for a client who sold plumbing supplies, and let him drive. Halfway through, the machine produced a page of text about the client's "holistic value proposition", and Petteri stopped and looked round at the rest of us.

"That's bad," he said. "Isn't it? That's just bad."

There was a pause, and then Noora laughed with what sounded like relief.

"It's terrible," she said. "I've been getting pages like that for weeks and not saying anything, because I thought if I said the machine's text was bad it meant mine was."

Noora took the green marker before Ella could, and wrote, in her small sloping handwriting: **Saying the machine's draft is bad doesn't mean yours is.**

◦

THURSDAY, 19 FEBRUARY

Noora put a forty-page market analysis up on the sandbox screen. An assistant had made it overnight for a dental chain with eleven clinics. It was beautiful, with charts and a summary of the summary.

"What changed?" said Ella.

"Sorry?"

"Because of this. What's different in the real world, today, for the dental chain?"

Noora scrolled down, looking for the answer, and didn't find one. Nothing had changed; nobody at the dental chain had even opened it, and nobody at our end was going to do anything differently on Monday because of it.

So we spent the rest of the morning picking one thing out of the forty pages, the booking page that confused everybody over sixty, and fixing it, properly, live, by ten o'clock, with the clinic's receptionist on speakerphone telling us which words her patients actually used.

Ella wrote: **Fix one real thing before anyone writes another forty pages.**

◦

THURSDAY, 5 MARCH

Jukka rang in from the southern office, looking hunted.

His team had got so tired of the machine asking them for permission that they'd started clicking *always allow* on everything. Read this folder? Always. Send this? Always. Connect to that? Always. They'd spent the last fortnight arguing about whether the assistant could be trusted.

"Can it?" he said. "That's what I want to know. Can we trust it or not?"

"No idea," said Ella. "What can it reach?"

It took Jukka's team the rest of the morning to make the list: which folders, which inboxes, which client accounts, which old logins nobody had looked at in a year. The list was two pages long. Nobody had known it was two pages long.

Jukka wrote this one himself, on a sheet of A4 held up to his camera, and Ella copied it onto the board: **Before you ask if you can trust it, write down everything it can get into.**

I remember thinking, standing at the back with a biscuit, that we ought to make the same list for ourselves. All of it. People who'd left. I wrote *check old logins* on a yellow sticky note and stuck it on the edge of my screen when I got back to my desk.

I'd find it again in July, under the desk, behind the bin.

◦

THURSDAY, 12 MARCH

Noora and Jukka had been disagreeing for three weeks about how the course pages should be built. I knew this because both of them had sent me documents about it: long, well-argued ones with headings, which the machines had clearly helped with.

Ella printed all of them out and laid them on the table, eleven documents in all, and asked Noora and Jukka to say, out loud, in one sentence each, what they actually wanted.

It turned out they wanted almost the same thing. They'd just been too busy sending each other papers to notice. It took twenty minutes of talking. Jukka laughed at the end so hard he had to turn his camera off.

Ella put the eleven documents in the recycling, and Noora, rather red, wrote: **If you're on your fourth document to each other, go and talk instead.**

◦

THURSDAY, 26 MARCH

Aleksi's ads team decided to automate their monthly client report. It took them about an hour, two machines and a lot of enthusiasm to discover that there was no such thing as their monthly client report.

There were three. Aleksi did it one way, the junior did it another way, and the woman who'd been there longest did it a third way that the clients liked best and nobody else had ever seen. The machine would happily have automated any of the three, very fast.

They spent the rest of the morning trying to agree on one way of doing it, writing it down in plain words, as if they were explaining it to Raimo. By ten they had agreed on most of it. Which version the clients actually preferred was still being argued about in May, and the machine was still waiting. Somebody started a second document the same day, for Kalliola: *How Kalliola talks*. Sections, not panels. Dock leveller, not dock plate. *Send us a photo*.

Aleksi wrote this one himself, a bit sheepishly: **We tried to automate our report and found out we had three of them.**

◦

THURSDAY, 2 APRIL

After the webinar in March we needed a proper template for the follow-up emails: our logo, a decent layout, something we could use again. I did what I'd done for twenty years. I opened my list and started typing *Noora: email template, sort out next week*.

Noora watched me do it.

"Or," she said, "we just do it now."

She pulled the keyboard over. While we talked about what the email ought to say, the machine wrote a draft of it, and because she asked in the same breath, a first version of the template too. We argued about the logo for five minutes. By twenty past eight it was done and in the system, in less time than the meeting we'd have booked to agree on it.

Putting it on my list would have meant a reminder, a meeting to agree on it and Noora waiting for me to get round to it, and all of that would have taken longer than just doing it. Where I grew up, a big stone in a field stayed there for years, because moving it meant a work party and somebody's uncle with dynamite, so everyone just ploughed round it. I had about forty stones like that on my list, going back to September, and the dynamite had been sitting in the corner of this room since December.

Noora wrote: **If it takes twenty minutes, do it together now instead of putting it on a list.**

◦

THURSDAY, 16 APRIL

This one was mine. I put my hand up.

I told them what nobody had asked me but what I'd been carrying all winter: that the heaviest part of working with the machines, for me, was being the courier. Copying the context out of one window and pasting it into another. Finding the old

version, explaining everything from the beginning, carrying things from one assistant to the next like a man running between rooms with his arms full. I did it at night because nobody would see how long it took.

I'd expected them to be surprised. Half the room nodded.

Ella didn't give a speech. She made one shared folder for each client, with everything in it that a person or a machine would need to start: the brief, the old versions, the client's own words. Anyone could open it and any assistant could read it, so nobody had to carry anything between rooms any more. By May there were twenty-three folders. I still got up at three now and then, but there was less and less to fetch.

She wrote: **Keep everything for a client in one folder that people and machines can both read.**

◦

THURSDAY, 14 MAY

Ella gave me a job.

"You're the one who's furthest ahead," she said, in front of everyone, quite cheerfully. "You said so yourself, on your slide. Far ahead. Alone. Highest risk of burnout." She pointed at the corner by the door, where the newest people usually stood, holding their coffee and trying to look as if they knew what was going on. "So from now on you sit there. Every Thursday. You explain one thing to whoever's newest. One thing. Then you stop talking."

People laughed. I laughed too. Then I went and sat by the door.

That morning the newest person was a trainee called Oona who'd started on Monday and had never used anything more complicated than a phone. I explained one thing: how to ask the machine to show its working instead of just its answer. It

took forty minutes, because she asked better questions than I did, and at the end she asked the box something I'd never thought to ask it, and got an answer I'd never seen.

When I went back in for my mug, Ella was writing on the board, not looking at me: **You going ten times faster doesn't make the rest of us any faster.**

◦

On the last Thursday before the summer the whiteboard was full. In the top corner, smaller, somebody had copied out the line from my old slide in November: *If this went wrong tomorrow, could we live with it?* Petteri photographed the whole board, for the archive, he said, as if we were a museum.

I stood in front of it for a while after everyone had gone. Most of what was written there I'd said myself at some point, on a slide in a hired room by a river, in much longer words, and all of it was in other people's handwriting, which I liked more than I'd expected.

◦

14. ANNA, AGAIN

Nine days to the April date.

Thomas thinks I didn't mean it, about writing the next chapter myself.

I did. I've been writing since January, upstairs, in the evenings, while he thought I was doing Selko. He's never asked, which is very like him and also, this once, very useful. The other chapter with my name on it, the one with the floorboard and the yellow window, was me too. He thinks the machine did it from his notes. It didn't. The machine has never read me. I've checked.

So. April.

After the seven in March I lowered the price for the April date to my own number, the one in pencil on the back of a feedback form, and I made the same phone calls from the same armchair, and nine days before the date I had three sign-ups.

Three.

I needed fourteen. I had booked a room in a nice old building by the market square with high windows and a coffee machine that makes a noise like a jet engine, and the deposit was non-refundable, and I sat in my car outside it on a Tuesday afternoon and looked at the number three on my phone for a long time.

I knew exactly what would happen if I told Thomas. He'd be kind. He'd be very good about not fixing it, because he's learned that now; I'd watch him not fixing it, with enormous effort, like a man holding a door shut against a gale. And the effort would fill the kitchen and I'd end up comforting him for how hard it was not to help me.

So I cancelled the date. I emailed the three people myself and refunded them myself and wrote to the building myself, and then I sat in the car and cried, properly, the snotty kind, with my forehead on the steering wheel, until a man with a dog knocked on the window to ask if I was all right.

"I've lost eleven hundred euros," I told him.

He thought about it. "That's not so bad," he said. "My brother lost a boat."

When he'd gone, I rang Saga.

◦

She was at her father's. "Come," she said. "He's having a good day. You can see what that looks like."

The care home was a long low building on the edge of town with a car park full of small hatchbacks and one very large van that turned out to belong to a man who came to cut everyone's hair. Saga's father was in a chair by the window in a cardigan buttoned wrong. He looked at Saga and lit up and called her by her mother's name, and she said "Yes, Pappa," and sat down and fixed his buttons.

He looked at me.

"You're the tall one," he said.

"I am," I said, though I'm not, especially.

"You came last time."

I hadn't. I said, "I did."

We stayed an hour. He told us about a fishing trip in 1971 three times, with small variations, and each time the fish got bigger, and each time Saga laughed at the end as if she hadn't heard it. On the way out, in the corridor, she leaned against the wall for a second with her eyes shut, and I put my hand on the back of her neck the way I'd held Thomas's in the car in December, and she leaned into it.

"Your turn," she said. "What happened?"

I told her about the three.

"Okay," she said. "Come to mine. I've got wine and no curtains."

◦

Her flat was on the fourth floor by the river, nearly empty: a sofa, a bed, a lot of books in boxes, a massage table folded against the wall. The evening light came in sideways off the water and there was nothing to stop it.

We drank wine on the sofa with our feet up. I told her about the room in the old building, and the man whose brother lost a boat, and she laughed, and then I told her about the floorboard and the yellow window and the chapters, and she stopped laughing and looked at me.

"Does he know?"

"Not yet."

"Are you going to tell him?"

"Yes. When it's finished." I turned the glass round in my hand. "I don't want him to read it as it goes. He'd improve it."

Saga smiled. Then she looked at the way I was sitting, the way physiotherapists look at you, and frowned.

"How long have your shoulders been up by your ears?"

"Since about October."

She got up, unfolded the massage table from against the wall, put a clean towel on it and patted it.

"Lie down."

"Saga, I'm fine, honestly, I just wanted—"

"No. You don't do anything. You always do something. Just lie there."

I started laughing. I couldn't help it. It was exactly what she'd said to Thomas in the hotel in December, and I'd sat in the armchair and watched him not know what to do with his hands.

"What?" said Saga.

"Nothing. Family joke."

"Lie *there*."

So I lay there, face down, with my forehead in the little padded hole and the river light going orange on the floor beneath me.

She worked on my shoulders for nearly an hour and hardly said a word. Every so often she found a place that made me gasp, and said, "There it is," in a satisfied voice, as if she'd found a lost earring. I'm the one in our house who notices when other people's shoulders are up by their ears. I hadn't noticed my own since October. Somewhere in the second half hour I realised I was crying into the padded hole, quietly, about the eleven hundred euros, I thought, and then about a good many things that weren't the eleven hundred euros.

Saga didn't say anything about it. She just put her hand flat between my shoulder blades and left it there until I'd finished.

Afterwards we sat on her sofa with the river going dark outside, and I leaned against her shoulder and she leaned back against mine. At the door she hugged me for a long time, and

I let her, without making a joke to end it, which for me is quite something.

I took a taxi home with my shoulders down where they belonged.

◦

I told Thomas the next morning, in the kitchen, before he'd made the porridge: the three sign-ups, the man with the dog, the hour on Saga's massage table. I'd decided that in the taxi home: no keeping things until I was sure. Not any more.

He listened. He put the oats down.

"Was it good?" he said.

"Yes."

"Good," he said.

Then he went quiet in a way I recognised, and I watched something go across his face that wasn't good at all, a small old soreness, and I saw him start to tidy it away for my sake, the way he tidies everything.

"Don't," I said.

"Don't what?"

"Don't make it easy for me. You're allowed to mind."

He looked at me for a long moment.

"I mind a bit," he said.

"Good," I said. "I'd worry otherwise."

He laughed, because it was my own line from October, word for word, and then he made the porridge, with too much salt, and I ate it, and neither of us said anything else about it that day. I didn't fix it for him. He didn't fix it for me. It sat there between us on the table, a bit sore, perfectly survivable. It was, I think, the most married we had been in years.

◦

I didn't run another date until autumn. That was my choice too.

In June Thomas got his email from the bank, and walked round the office touching nothing, and put a meeting in the calendar about July. Noora told me about the walk round the office. I sat at my desk upstairs and thought: he's going to be all right. He's going to be all right as long as nothing happens at four in the morning.

Then, in July, something happened at twelve minutes to eight in the morning.

That's his chapter. I'll let him tell it. He tells that sort of thing better than me.

15. IS THIS YOU?

`Zero days to the red square.`

At twelve minutes past four I woke up, the way I still sometimes did.

I didn't reach for the phone. I lay there in the thin July light, in an empty house. Anna was up at our cottage for the week, four hours north, writing her autumn courses, and Saga had driven up to join her for the last few days; Ella was on a campsite in Norway with no signal and, she'd told me firmly, no laptop. I listened to a blackbird going on and on about something in the birches, and after a while I went back to sleep. I count that as progress. I want it on the record, given what came next.

At twelve minutes to eight my phone buzzed.

Raimo. A screenshot of an email. Kalliola's logo at the top, Kalliola's colours, and a subject line I had never written: *Finally: a price list.* Underneath, a table of prices.

Then a second message: *Is this you?*

Then a third: *Phones already ringing. Ring me at 9. Not before. Coffee first.*

I was out of bed and down the stairs before I'd finished reading. I sat at the kitchen table and opened the laptop, because that's what my hands do, and looked at the email prop-

erly. It hadn't come from us. It had come from a mailing system in Sweden, at one thirty-seven in the morning.

At two minutes to eight I rang Viktor.

He answered on the sixth ring, thick with sleep, a baby crying somewhere behind him.

"Thomas? I was up with him till five."

"I know. Open your logs."

◦

Here is what had happened, as best we could piece it together at quarter past eight in the morning, Viktor scrolling, me listening, the baby gradually giving up.

One of Viktor's clients was a distributor in Sweden that sold, among other things, Kalliola's doors. Viktor's agents ran their advertising and their emails. Overnight, one of the agents had been asked to write a campaign about loading-bay doors. Looking for material, it had found its way into a shared folder that still had Kalliola's old price sheets in it: drafts, ranges, a spreadsheet from three years ago that Raimo had once sent us and told us never to publish. It had found its way in because, two years earlier, Viktor had connected his agents to our shared drive under his own account, and that connection still worked.

It still worked because nobody had switched it off.

I knew exactly who that nobody was. I had written the offboarding checklist for Viktor myself, in November, at about three in the morning, with an assistant. It had nineteen items. Eighteen of them were ticked. The nineteenth said *remove all external access*.

Somewhere under my desk at the office, behind the bin, there was a yellow sticky note that said *check old logins*. I found it that afternoon.

At one thirty-seven the agent had sent an email, in Kalliola's name, using Kalliola's logo, to three hundred and forty contacts on the distributor's list. A lot of those contacts were Kalliola's own customers. The subject line was *Finally: a price list*. The prices in it were three years old and about thirty per cent too low.

"It's in the log," Viktor said. "Four hundred and thirteen decisions last night. That was one of them." He paused. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, Thomas."

"How did it decide to send it?"

"It decided it had everything it needed." He read me the note the agent had written to itself just before it pressed send, flatly, as if reading the label on a medicine bottle. I've carefully reviewed all of the material and the campaign is ready to send.

I didn't say anything for quite a while.

◦

Here's the bit I'm least proud of: I could have fixed the whole thing on my own by nine, and I very nearly did.

It was all there in front of me on the kitchen table. I still had access to Kalliola's email platform; we managed it for them. I could have written a correction in Kalliola's name and had it out to all three hundred and forty by half past eight. I could have drafted an apology for the nephew, a summary for the distributor, a timeline for Viktor, a post-mortem for our own team, a new offboarding policy with twenty items instead of nineteen. I could have had four windows open and every one of them humming. By the time Raimo had finished his coffee, it would have been a thing that had happened and been handled, and handled beautifully, and I would have been the man who handled it.

I even started. I opened the first window. The assistant was very keen.

```
I've drafted a correction email to all 340 recipients
in Kalliola's brand voice, it said. Would you like me
to send it now?
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My finger was on the trackpad.

I thought about a slide. *If this went wrong tomorrow, could we live with it?* It had gone wrong today. We were living in it. And under that, the other line, the one I'd said to twenty people in a hired room and then ignored four days later at three in the morning: *Start with things you can undo.*

You can't unsend three hundred and forty emails in somebody else's name.

So I did one thing on my own. I went into the workspace and took away Viktor's access. Every external login, every old key, every account that wasn't a person currently working for us. It was the nineteenth item on my own checklist. It took eleven minutes, and it was the only thing I did that morning that I could have undone.

Then I closed the laptop.

◦

I rang Anna at twenty to nine.

She answered on the second ring, already up; behind her I could hear Saga somewhere down by the water, shouting that it was warmer than it looked. I told her. She listened without interrupting, which she can do, though not often.

"What are you going to do?" she said.

"Nothing until nine. Then ring Raimo."

"Why nine?"

"Because he told me to. Coffee first."

There was a pause.

"Do you want me to come home?"

"No," I said. Then, "Yes." Then, "Stay. I'll ring you at quarter past nine."

"Thomas." Her voice changed. "Put the kettle on. Then go and sit on your hands."

I didn't put the kettle on. I went out to the tub. In July the water was about sixteen degrees and full of birch seeds, and I sat in it in my boxer shorts at a quarter to nine in the morning with my hands under my thighs, literally sitting on them, looking at the house, until the next-door neighbour came out to put his bins out and saw me and decided, after a moment's visible thought, not to say anything at all.

At ten to nine I texted Ella, because whatever she'd said, it was her client: *Kalliola. Something happened overnight, not your fault. Nothing you need to do today. Ring when you're back.*

My phone rang at eight fifty-one. A campsite in Norway, apparently, had one bar of signal if you stood on a particular rock.

"It's my client," Ella said. "Next time, ring me. Even if it's four in the morning."

"You're on holiday."

"It's *my client*." There was the sound of wind and someone's child shouting. "What did you send?"

"Nothing."

There was a silence on the rock in Norway.

"Okay," she said, in a completely different voice. "Okay. Good. Ring Raimo at nine. Not before. He needs his coffee."

"I know," I said.

◦

At nine I rang Raimo.

"I know," he said, before I'd finished my first sentence. "I've had twenty-two calls since half past seven. My mobile, the office, my wife's mobile, God knows how they got that one." He sounded less angry than I'd feared and more puzzled. "They all want to buy, Thomas. At three-year-old prices. Half of them have sent me a photo of their loading bay anyway."

I started to apologise. I'd prepared it. It was good.

"Stop," said Raimo. "Whose computer was it?"

"Viktor's. Through our door. We left it unlocked. That's on me."

He was quiet for a moment. I could hear a forklift reversing somewhere behind him.

"Right," he said. "Here's what we'll do. I'll write to them myself. All three hundred and forty. Today."

"I can draft something for you—"

"No," said Raimo. "You've done enough drafting." He said it without any malice at all, the way you'd tell someone they had a bit of egg on their chin. "I'll tell them our computer had a strange night and the prices were wrong. And I'll tell them if they send me a photo, I'll give them the right one by tomorrow. Like always."

"That's all?"

"That's all. Sections. Not panels." I heard him smile. "How's Ella, by the way? She all right?"

"She's on a rock in Norway," I said. "She's furious with me."

"Good," said Raimo, and hung up.

◦

The nephew rang at eleven. He was polite and short. Kalliola would be pausing the retainer for August and September, he said, while they looked at who had access to what, everywhere, not just with us. He understood it wasn't malicious.

He appreciated the early call. He would be in touch in October.

I thanked him. I meant it.

At twelve Viktor rang again. He'd added a check, he said. Nothing goes out in a client's name now without a human pressing a button.

"Which human?" I said.

"Me, probably," said Viktor. "At four in the morning." And then, because he's Viktor, and because he heard it as he said it: "I know. I know."

"It wasn't only yours," I said. "It was my door."

"We should both have locked it."

"We should both have locked it."

◦

At two in the afternoon Paula sent me the cash model with August and September redrawn without Kalliola.

The red square wasn't a square any more. It was a red stripe, two weeks wide, at the start of August, sitting right on top of the grey line and a little under it.

I looked at it for a long time. I felt the knot, the old one, in exactly the old place. But it was a knot I could see the shape of, now, on a screen, with numbers on either side of it, and Paula's name under it, and Anna's name on the guarantee, and a meeting we'd already had, in the last week of June, called *July red square*, with three other people in it.

I rang the cottage.

"It's red," I said.

"How red?" said Anna.

"Very."

"Can we live with it?"

I looked at the stripe. I thought about our July salaries, and August, and what would have to wait, and who I'd have to tell. Then I thought about the question properly, the way the slide did.

"Yes," I said. "If we don't pay ourselves till September. And nobody does anything clever."

"Then come up tonight," said Anna. "The sauna's on. Saga's made a fish soup that she says is her father's recipe, and her father, as far as I can tell, never made a soup in his life."

I drove up at six. Four hours, the toaster humming, the laptop in the boot, because Anna had said on the phone that if she saw it she would throw it in the lake. When I got there the sun was low over the lake but nowhere near gone and the two of them were sitting on the jetty with their feet in the water, and Anna lifted a hand without turning round, the way you wave to someone you already know is there.

16. VIKTOR'S ONE ROOM

That night, at the cottage, the sun hardly went down at all.

It's not much of a cottage: a red wooden box on a rock by a lake, a sauna that takes an hour to heat and smells of a hundred summers of birch, and a jetty with one plank you have to know about. In the old days it was where I went to answer emails with a view. This time I left the laptop in the boot, mostly because I believed Anna about the lake.

We ate Saga's soup, which was mostly dill, and sat in the sauna until we couldn't, and ran down the jetty, and Saga hit the loose plank and went into the lake sideways with a shriek that set off a dog on the other shore. Anna laughed so hard she had to sit down on the jetty in her towel, with her feet in the water.

Afterwards we lay on the warm rock by the sauna, wrapped in towels, drinking cold white wine out of the tooth mugs because nobody had brought glasses. Anna lay with her head on Saga's stomach, and Saga put a hand in her hair without looking. I lay a little way off and watched the sky, which in July here goes a deep milky blue around midnight and stays there, as if it has stopped to think.

"You're very quiet," Saga said to me.

"I'm resting."

"You never rest. Anna says you rest like other people do squats."

"I'm learning," I said.

Later the three of us went into the lake together off the end of the jetty, avoiding the plank, and floated on our backs in water much colder than it looked. I floated with my ears under the water, hearing only my own breathing, and somewhere off to my left the two of them were laughing at something, muffled, as if from another room in a house where everyone was happy.

◦

In August Saga told us about the physiotherapist from her father's care home.

She told us at the kitchen table, on a Thursday, before dinner, fast, the way Venla had told us about her course. His name was Mikko. He was kind and a bit boring and he made her father laugh, which almost nobody could do any more. She didn't know what it was yet. She wanted us to know before it was anything.

"So," she said, and stopped.

Anna reached across and took her hand.

"Thursday after next," Anna said. "If you want to. With or without."

Saga looked at her for a long moment, and then at me, and her eyes filled, and she said, "You two are ridiculous," and blew her nose on a piece of kitchen roll.

She still came some Thursdays. Some Thursdays she stayed for dinner. Some Thursdays she stood in the hall with her coat on talking to Anna about nothing in particular and then went home. I stopped trying to know in advance which it would be.

Aleksi left in September.

He told me on a Monday, standing up this time. A bigger agency in the capital, a title with *Director* in it, more money than our autumn had been able to find. The ads team had grown under him. The numbers had followed, but not fast enough, and we both knew it. He was taking two of them with him. The contract said he couldn't ask them, and he hadn't; they'd asked him. I believed him, which didn't make it cost less.

"I kept the CV up to date," he said. "Like I said."

"You did."

"I'm not angry." He seemed surprised by that. "I thought I would be."

I wrote him a reference that evening at the kitchen table, by hand first and then typed. Every time I tried to say what he'd done it came out sounding like a brochure. In the end I wrote three plain things that had actually happened, and one sentence saying I'd hire him again, and sent it.

At the leaving drinks, in a bar by the river with sticky tables, Aleksi raised a glass to the ads team, and then, after a pause, to me, "who said no to me properly." People laughed without quite knowing why. I laughed too, and had to look at the window for a moment.

In October I went south to see Viktor.

His company had one room. Third floor of an old warehouse: brick walls, big windows, six desks pushed together in the middle and a sofa nobody sat on. Four people, and a great

deal of software. He showed me round in about ninety seconds.

"That's it," he said. "That's the whole thing."

His son was six months old. Viktor showed me the photos before he showed me anything else, scrolling with his thumb: a round, furious baby in a knitted hat, in a sling, asleep on Viktor's chest on the sofa nobody sat on. He looked tired in all of them. He looked tired now. He had the face I had seen in the bathroom mirror at three in the morning the previous November: pale and quick and very pleased with itself.

On a big screen by the window there was a dashboard. Most of it was green. In the top corner, in large white numbers, it said:

Decisions made overnight without a human: 412

"Four hundred and twelve," Viktor said. "Last night. Ad budgets, page changes, bids, all of it. Forty clients, four of us. I wake up and it's done."

"And the emails?"

"Those wait for me now." He didn't look at me. "Since July. Anything in a client's name, a human presses the button."

"Which human?"

"Me. At about four." He grinned. "The rest, nobody has to read. That's the point."

He leaned over a keyboard to show me. *Have you read the new brief from the boat people?* The answer appeared almost before he'd finished typing.

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Yes. I've carefully reviewed all of the material and
incorporated the key points throughout.
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Viktor nodded, satisfied, and turned back to me. I stood looking at the sentence.

We had lunch round the corner at a place that only did soup. Viktor's company was doing well, and not as well as he'd told people it would. Mine was smaller than the year before and made money most months. We argued for an hour about whether you could build trust with a client you'd never met in person, and neither of us won. His phone buzzed on the table every few minutes. Twice he answered something with one thumb without really looking at it.

I thought about saying something. About July. About the little figures at the far right-hand edge of my picture, a long way out, on their own. About Thursdays and biscuits and a screen with a sticker on it that said ASK SOMEONE FIRST. I had the sentence ready.

I didn't say it.

He'd been like this at twenty-five with paint on his trainers, and with a website in orange and charcoal grey, and in a car park in the drizzle, and he was like this now, with a son in a knitted hat and four hundred and twelve decisions on a screen. Somewhere over the soup I noticed I'd stopped wanting to change him.

Outside, waiting for my taxi, he said, "The June instalment. You paid it on the first."

"I said I would."

"The last one's December. Don't you dare pay it early. You could have been a week late. Nobody would have died."

"I know," I said. "I'm working on it."

He laughed and hit me on the shoulder, quite hard, and went back up to his one room.

In the taxi to the station I took out my phone and opened my notes. *Six to ten*, it still said at the top, from a year ago. I

scrolled past it and wrote underneath: *412*. And under that: *ten, still. Different ten.*

17. GO TO BED, DAD

By then Anna was running the Monday meetings.

It started by accident. In June I was late two Mondays running, once because of the dentist and once because of nothing, and both times Anna started without me. In July she told me she'd like to keep it, on her terms: Mondays only, Selko first, and the day it started to feel like looking after me, she'd stop. By August it was hers. She runs it standing up, with the cash model on the screen for exactly fifteen minutes and then off, and a jar on the windowsill into which anybody who says *actionable* puts a euro. At the last count the jar had eleven euros in it. Four of them were mine.

Selko goes on three days a week, upstairs, with the door open. Noora runs the agency's course pages now; Selko's are Anna's own. In June Noora told me to stop sending her ideas after six in the evening, and I stopped. In October Sofia signed up for one of her courses, from the capital. She didn't mention it to me, which was right. I heard about it from Anna at breakfast and was proud in a way I kept to myself.

I sit at the side of the table on Mondays, by the window, and mostly listen.

She didn't run another Selko date until October. In April she'd told me about the three sign-ups the next morning. What she told me in October, over the washing-up, was why

she had waited so long: she'd wanted to find out whether she still wanted it with nobody watching, me included. I listened and dried the pans.

PK bought the little Mac in the end, and couldn't get it to do anything.

"It just sits there," he told me over coffee in October, fourteen months after our first session, in a café where neither of us was paying anybody for anything. "Humming. Like a very expensive cat."

"You have to ask it something."

"That's the trouble. I don't know what to ask it." He stirred his coffee.

"So what's left for us?" I said. "If the machines can make everything. Give it to me in two sentences."

PK laughed so loudly that the woman at the next table looked round.

"I'm not one of your machines," he said. "If I could give you that in two sentences, it wouldn't be worth having." He put his spoon down. "You can make anything now. So can everyone. I can get very excited about polka, too. Doesn't mean I should start a polka band. A machine can tell you which records sold best the year that shop wouldn't order theirs. It can't feel the hair go up on its arms." He picked the spoon up again. "Now. My homework. The thing you tell people."

I'd been thinking about it for a year. I'd had a number once, a margin every month, in the forecast I'd been so proud of. We'd hit it in December and missed it in January and hit it again in March, and I couldn't imagine telling anybody about it, any more than about the cash model or the bank or the three boxes on the flip chart.

"There's a sales director at a door factory," I said. "Sixty-two now. He's on his own company's website, standing next to a door with an angle grinder going behind him. Four minutes. We didn't edit it. It's still the page that sells."

PK waited for the rest.

"And we stopped drawing perfect curves to June," I said. "We just went roughly the right way, on Paula's three lines, and slowed down for the fifth."

He still didn't say anything.

"Oh, and one more thing." I turned my cup round. "I sleep. Mostly."

"Okay," said PK, and asked whether the Mac would know what he wanted if he didn't know himself.

◦

Sofia came home for the weekend in the middle of November.

She sent her live location from the train, a small blue dot crawling up the map towards us, and then a message: *might be early!! train's doing 140. the toaster could never.* Sofia has never forgiven the toaster for being slower to charge than she is to get bored.

I picked her up at the station. She came out talking, hugged me with her bag still on her shoulder, and talked all the way home: a friend's new flat, a band, a boy who wasn't a boyfriend, a course she might do, a course she definitely wasn't going to do. She is the warmest person I know and the most sociable, and she treats a weekend at home the way other people treat a festival: a timetable of friends, a few hours with us slotted carefully in between, and then she's out of the door again in a cloud of somebody else's perfume.

Anna was on the sofa with her knee up on a cushion, writing next week's training materials on her laptop. "My knee is

rubbish," she announced, by way of hello. Sofia kissed the top of her head and stole her tea.

On the Saturday night the three of us watched the island show, the one where strangers are dropped on a beach and vote each other off, and we did what we always do, which is to ignore the challenges entirely and speculate, with great seriousness, about who was really running the island and who only thought they were.

"Her," said Sofia, pointing with a crisp at a quiet woman in a red cap. "Obviously."

"She hasn't won a single challenge," said Anna.

"Doesn't matter. Look who they all look at before they vote."

During the adverts Sofia looked at us both over the back of the sofa.

"Venla says there's someone called Saga here on Thursdays."

There was a very small pause.

"There is," said Anna. "She's a friend."

Sofia looked at her mother, and then at me, for about a second and a half. Then she said, "Okay. Cool," and turned back to the television, where every single one of them glanced at the woman in the red cap before they went up to vote, and said, "See? *Obviously*."

◦

At nine minutes to three on a Wednesday in November I was at the kitchen table with the laptop, writing.

It wasn't work. I'd mostly stopped doing work at three in the morning, sometime in the spring. This was the other thing, the one Anna had caught me at in May. I'd been at it since one.

My phone buzzed on the table.

Venla. From the other end of the country.

why are you online

I looked at the time. I typed: *why are YOU online*

essay. due 9. dont change the subject

writing

writing what

something

A long pause. The three dots appeared and disappeared twice.

am i in it

a bit

am i nice

you vacuum behind a radiator

accurate. Then: *go to bed dad. youre old. its a school night*

I laughed, and somewhere upstairs I heard Anna turn over.

you go to bed, I wrote.

9am essay. im the one with an excuse

I looked at the screen a moment longer, saved the file, closed the laptop, and rinsed my mug and left it by the sink.

going, I wrote.

good, said Venla. *night*

I went up the stairs in the dark. The door to Anna's room was open, and the streetlight came in sideways across the floor, across the desk and the mat. I went past it to our bedroom and got in beside her.

EPILOGUE

In the morning Anna was in the kitchen before me.

She was at the stove in my grey hoodie, stirring the porridge pan, and there were two bowls on the table instead of one. I stood in the doorway in my dressing gown with a towel over my shoulder.

"You're making it."

"I'm making it." She tasted it off the spoon, made a face, and put the spoon back in. "Can I tell you something?"

"Go on."

"I don't like it with that much salt. I never have."

I looked at her. "Twenty-three years."

"I know."

"Why didn't you say?"

She thought about it, stirring. "Because you made it," she said. "Every morning. I liked that you made it. I didn't want you to stop." She shrugged. "And then it had been so long it was embarrassing."

"What else?"

"What else what?"

"What else don't you like that I do every morning?"

Anna laughed, the real one, head back. "I'll make you a list," she said. "Go on. Go and get cold. It'll be ready when you're back."

Before I went out I cleared the kitchen table, put the laptop in its bag and the notes in one pile and my mug in the dishwasher, without anyone asking me to. It took three minutes.

The tub was on the decking where it had always been, with a skin of ice at the edges. The thermometer on its string said four degrees, and I didn't check it twice. I took the watch off and put it on the rail.

The cold went up my shins and into my groin and closed round my chest like a hand, the way it always does. I breathed out, long and slow, all the way, and at the bottom of the breath the quiet place was there again, and I stayed in it for a while.

Behind me the house was lit: the kitchen, where Anna was, and upstairs her room, with the desk lamp already on. The sky over the neighbour's roof was starting to go grey. There was a payroll file to do today, and Ella's first board presentation, which she had asked me not to come to. I stayed where I was until my chest lifted by itself and the air came in, cold and enormous, all the way down.

I got out when I felt like getting out. I don't know how long I'd been in; the watch was on the rail, and I didn't look at it on the way past.

I stood on the frozen decking steaming like a horse, and went in for my porridge.

THE WHITEBOARD

Petteri photographed the board in June, for the archive. This is what was on it, in the order it went up, with a word about where each line came from.

Saying the machine's draft is bad doesn't mean yours is.

Noora, the morning Petteri said out loud that the machine's page was bad and nobody died.

Fix one real thing before anyone writes another forty pages.

Ella, after a beautiful report for a dental chain that nobody there had read. We fixed their booking page instead, with the receptionist on speakerphone.

Before you ask if you can trust it, write down everything it can get into.

Jukka, on a sheet of A4 held up to his camera. His team's list ran to two pages. Ours should have included the people who'd left. *(See Chapter 15.)*

If you're on your fourth document to each other, go and talk instead.

Noora again, rather red, the day she and Jukka stopped sending each other papers.

We tried to automate our report and found out we had three of them.

Aleksi, who still says it was the most useful hour his team had all year.

If it takes twenty minutes, do it together now instead of putting it on a list.

Noora, after watching me type an email template onto my to-do list instead of making it with her.

Keep everything for a client in one folder that people and machines can both read.

Ella, who had been watching me ferry things between machines at night and knew exactly who she meant.

You going ten times faster doesn't make the rest of us any faster.

Ella, the morning she sat me by the door with the newest person. *(See Chapter 6.)*

In the corner, smaller, from my old slide:

If this went wrong tomorrow, could we live with it?

(See Chapters 6 and 15.)

There's one more that never went on the board, because it isn't about machines, and it's the one I think about most:

ASK ANNA FIRST.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The board didn't stop in June. People in real offices keep adding to it, mostly on Thursdays and mostly with biscuits, as they work out what's left for them to do now that the machines can do so much of the typing.

Now and then I write one of those lines up, with the story behind it, in a short letter called *Thursday Mornings*. It comes when there's something worth sending. If you'd like it, it's at **disappearinghero.com**, together with the board as it stands today.

what does a shadow prove?
that someone is standing here.
and what else?
that somewhere, there is sun.

— T. M.