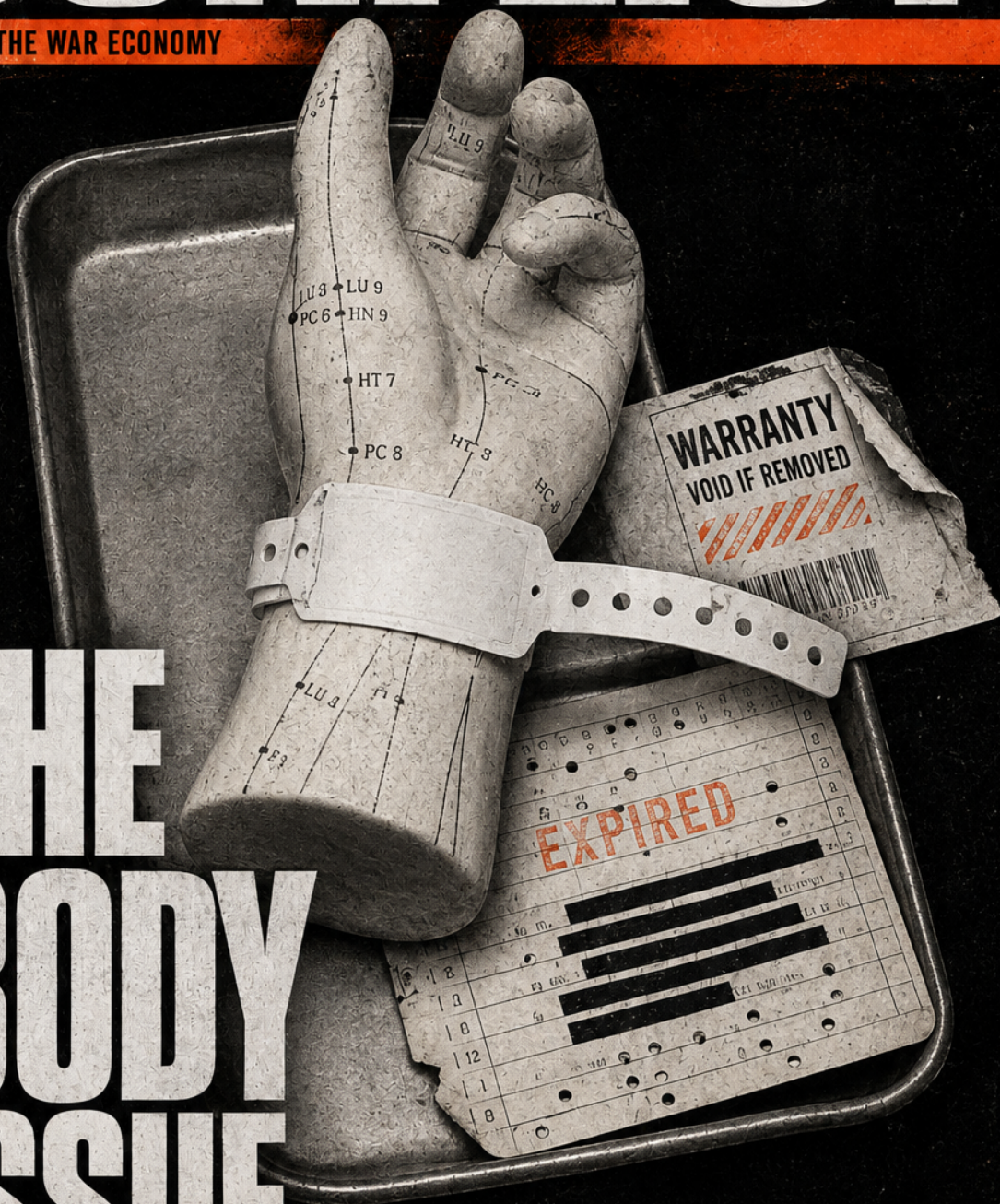


CONFLICT

No. 48 / THE WAR ECONOMY

THE BODY ISSUE

WHO OWNS THE BODY YOU LIVE IN?



CONFLICT / No. 48 / THE BODY ISSUE

Complete web issue, formatted for offline reading. Links to referenced articles remain available online.

[Read this issue on Terra Conflictus](#)

[◀ CONFLICT // ALL ISSUES](#)

CONFLICT

Issue 48 // Q4 2066 // The Body Issue

SOMEBODY ELSE *ORDERED* YOU

ELEVEN DAYS IN THE WARD WHERE FORGED GO WHEN THE WARRANTY RUNS
OUT // EMBEDDED

THE WOMAN WHO SIGNS THE EXPIRY LETTERS, AND WHAT SHE KEEPS
UNDER HER COLLAR

WHO OWNS THE ORIGINAL YOU // INSIDE THE PRINT CARD MARKET

HOW TO BUY SUPPRESSION MEDS THAT WILL NOT KILL YOU FIRST

NEW LAGOS SELLS BODIES BY THE CORRIDOR AND CALLS IT MEDICINE

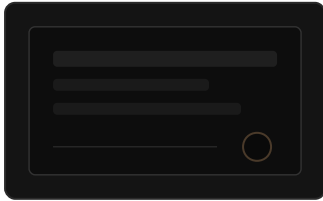
HALO IS COUNTING HER OWN STEPS AND THE EXCHANGES ARE STILL
SELLING THE COUNT

ADVERTISEMENT

SOMA CONTINENTAL

TEMPLATE ASSURANCE

Continuity division, established 2049



FORM 9 / CONTINUITY AGREEMENT

Your body was a decision somebody made once. We keep the paperwork so you do not have to.

SOMA CONTINENTAL holds original template records for four hundred and nine commercial build lines, stored in a facility with its own water table and its own power. Enrolled members receive verified assay every ninety days, a dose supply that does not depend on a district staying solvent, and the assurance that whatever the drift takes, the record of what you were remains legible, intact, and safe.

Because you deserve to know the shape of the original.

Enrollment requires execution of a Continuity Agreement. Members grant SOMA CONTINENTAL non-exclusive post-stability rights to the enrolled template and any derivative commercial stock arising from it. This is standard, it is disclosed here, and no member has ever been surprised by it at the point of signature. Our counsel would like it noted that surprise is not the same as regret.

SOMA CONTINENTAL

The original is safe with us. It always was.

CONFLICT

Issue 48 // Q4 2066

A contraband glossy from the edge of a dying future

Editor

INES DRESSLER

Has not asked a single contributor for their numbers this quarter and would like credit for it

Deputy Editor

GIDEON ARLT

Baseline, says so immediately in any room where it might otherwise be assumed, which is either good manners or the loudest kind of bragging

Clinical & Template Desk

HANNE VOSK

Can price a dose pen by the sound the plunger makes. Keeps three in her drawer that are not hers and will not say whose.

Features Editor

TOVAH REIST

Edited the Pellam House piece across four nights and has since removed the mirror from her office

Fashion & Field Intelligence

NICO BRAND

Can tell a real med port from a decorative one by the way the collar sits when the wearer turns her head

Copy & Classifieds

WREN COLE

Refuses to cut the ads that are obviously people looking for their own print cards, and has stopped pretending the refusal is an editorial judgment

Verification

WE DO NOT PUBLISH ANYBODY'S ASSAY NUMBERS. NOT EVEN THE ONES WE WERE OFFERED.

Medical

NOT A DOCTOR. NEVER CLAIMED TO BE.

Legal

WE HAVE BEEN ASKED TO STATE THAT NOTHING IN THIS ISSUE CONSTITUTES ADVICE, AND THAT WE ARE AWARE PEOPLE WILL TAKE IT AS ADVICE ANYWAY.

Published quarterly, or whenever the courier is well enough to travel. Printed on a stock that does not hold a scan. Distributed by hand to people who would rather not be enrolled anywhere. All views expressed are the publication's. Half this masthead is on a dose schedule and the other half has learned not to ask about it over lunch.

CONTRIBUTORS

CASS RENNICK

Lynx build, former splice op, bespoke and therefore, in the arithmetic of this issue, one of the lucky ones. For EMBEDDED she enrolled at Pellam House under a shelf-stock label that was not hers and stayed eleven days among forged whose warranties ran out years ago. She has filed longer pieces. She has never filed one that took this many nights to hand over. She asked us to print her own numbers alongside it. We declined, and she called us cowards, and she was right, and we still declined.

SOLVEIG RAND

Covers the commissioning end of the forged economy, the offices where a person is specified before anyone grows one. For THE ROOM WHERE EVERYONE LIED she spent an evening in a longevity lounge with Anneke Sorrel, who signs the expiry letters for a build line of eleven thousand people, and came away with the strong impression that she had been given a rehearsed performance by somebody who needed to hear it out loud herself. She has interviewed worse people and liked them more.

DR. PIA KOVASZ

Material forensics, formerly of a faction records office she does not name and now of nowhere in particular. She authenticates print cards for collectors, for clinics, and, three times this year without a fee, for forged trying to buy back the document of what they originally were. She wrote MATERIAL CULTURE about a punched card the size of a hand. She keeps her own in a drawer she does not open, which she mentions in the piece and declined to discuss with her editor.

BENNO STRAKE

Ran a garage clinic off the Belt for six years and stopped when he could no longer tell himself the story about harm reduction. He now writes THE MANUAL on how to buy suppression meds without being poisoned by the person selling them, which he describes as the only useful thing he has produced since he closed the shop. He does not take payment for the column. We pay him anyway, into an account that belongs to a woman he treated badly in 2059.

KIRO ADESANYA

Goes to the districts that have organized themselves around a single trade and been reshaped by it. For CITY OF BAD IDEAS he walked the Marrow in New Lagos, nine hundred meters of clinic corridor where a body can be edited between one meal and the next, and where the touts can price a stranger from behind. He was priced three times. The lowest offer was the one that upset him, and he says so in the piece.

OPEN WOUNDS

THE BODY YOU ARE STANDING IN WAS A PURCHASE ORDER

A friend of mine, baseline, well meaning, expensively educated, asked me at a dinner this quarter why the forged make such a fuss about their paperwork. She meant it kindly. She had just been complaining about her own medical records, and she thought she was building a bridge. I have thought about her question every day since, because the honest answer took me three weeks to assemble and it is the reason this issue exists.

The answer is that her records describe her. A print card does not describe a forged. It precedes them. Somewhere in a facility with its own water table there is a document that specifies what a person was supposed to be, filed before that person existed, signed by a client who wanted a particular set of capabilities and paid for them. The person came second. The person is, in the language of the contract that produced them, the derivative.

This is the body issue. It is about who holds the paper on the flesh, and I am aware that sentence sounds like a slogan from a collective I would not print. Read the rest of the book and tell me it overstates the case.

We have an interview on page 44 with a woman who signs the expiry letters for a build line of eleven thousand people. Solveig Rand sat with her for an evening in a lounge where baselines buy add-ons by the milliliter, and the interview is not what either of us expected, and I am not going to spoil the reason her collar sits the way it does. I will say that she is also on our list of the worst people alive this quarter, at number two, and that both placements are correct, and that this is the most interesting thing in the issue after the feature.

We have a piece on a punched card the size of a hand, which Dr. Kovasz can date by its yellowing and which has no space on it for a name. We have a manual on buying suppression meds from people who may be poisoning you, written by a man who used to be one of them. We have nine hundred meters of clinic corridor in New Lagos, where the touts price your build from behind and are correct more often than they are wrong.

And we have Cass Rennick, who did something this quarter that I tried to talk her out of twice.

She enrolled at Pellam House. It is a stability program for commercial-stock forged whose shelf life has run out, in a repainted sanatorium above a valley, and it is a kind place. I want to be precise about that, because the piece is precise about it. Nobody at Pellam House is cruel. The food is good. The staff learn your name. The horror is entirely in the paperwork, and the paperwork is legal, disclosed, and signed by people who read it and understood it and had no other door. Cass went in under a label that was not hers and stayed eleven days, and she has not been the same since, and she would like me to stop saying that in print. I keep saying it because I signed off on the assignment.

The rest of the issue does what the magazine does. We shame the influencer selling tremor cuffs to people with no tremor. We rank the surgeons. There is a fashion department, and it is genuinely funny, and I make no apology for the fact that it sits nine pages from a woman describing the morning she found out her hands would not be hers much longer.

That collision is the whole publication. It is also, as far as I can tell, the whole world. A person is a status object, a capital asset, a liability on somebody's books, and a person, all at once, in the same room, at the same dinner, with the same well-meaning friend asking a question she has never had to answer.

You are wearing the only thing you will ever own outright, and in this economy that claim requires a lawyer. Welcome to the issue.

// INES DRESSLER

THIS MONTH IN DECLINE

1

THREE EXCHANGES NOW QUOTE A SPREAD ON EXPIRY DATES

What began as a betting line on one Crowd Favorite's drift readings has become a product. Subscribers can take a position on the projected stability window of any registered commercial build line, settled against published assay averages. The exchanges describe it as an actuarial instrument for clinics and insurers. Nobody has explained why the volume spikes in the week before a build line's dose formulation is due for review, or who is doing the reviewing.

2

"ORIGINAL EQUIPMENT" LIFESTYLE BRAND OPENS ITS FOURTH FLAGSHIP

The baseline-purity label whose entire proposition is that its customers have not been edited has taken a corner unit in the New Geneva arcade, opposite a clinic. The clothes are plain, the cotton is real, and the price is a statement about who did not need a modification to be worth looking at. Two of the four store managers are, per a leaked staffing file, marked clean. The brand declined to comment. The brand does not have to. That is the product.

3

HALO IS COUNTING HER OWN STEPS AND THE COUNT IS FOR SALE

The entertainment-grade Crowd Favorite's drift line survived the quarter, the exchanges survived the scandal, and the only new development is that she has begun visibly counting in the ready room, which analysts have started reading as data. Her

step count now moves the line. She is not permitted to stop counting, because stopping is also data. Four billion people are watching a woman be metered by her own nervous habit.

4

A DISTRICT CLINIC IN THE MARROW REPORTS ITS FOURTH “PARTS BIN” RECALL THIS YEAR

Sourced genetic material arrived with faction surplus documentation that traced, on inspection, to a facility decommissioned in 2058 and never reopened. The clinic pulled the batch and posted the notice. Three neighboring shops did not pull theirs, on the reasoning that a recall notice is free advertising for whoever is still selling. The Marrow’s trade association congratulated the clinic that pulled the batch and did not name the ones that did not.

5

FASHION HOUSES DISCOVER THE MED PORT

A collar cut high on the left, with a small hard shape beneath it, is the silhouette of the season in three cities. Roughly one wearer in six has an actual port under there. The rest have a shaped insert sold as a “continuity form” at ninety credits. Forged have begun identifying the fakes by watching people turn their heads, since a real port changes how far you are willing to rotate before you decide the conversation is over.

6

A FACTION MEDICAL OFFICER RECLASSIFIES DRIFT SYMPTOMS AS “CONDUCT”

Under a revised standing order, tremor, reflex irregularity, and stress-response deviation in forged personnel are now reportable to unit discipline rather than to medical. The stated rationale is that medical channels were being used to avoid

deployment. The practical effect is that a shaking hand is now a charge. Three units have quietly resumed reporting to medical anyway, using the old form, which nobody has bothered to withdraw.

7

PRINT CARD FORGERY REACHES THE POINT OF DIMINISHING RETURNS

The counterfeits are now good enough that authentication depends on the punch, the one physical act nobody bothered to standardize. Dr. Pia Kovasz reports that the reliable tell is a burr on the inside edge left by a specific press used at three facilities between 2043 and 2047. She published this. She now regrets publishing it. So does everyone who bought a card last month.

8

A LONGEVITY LOUNGE INTRODUCES A "BASELINE HOUR"

Between six and seven in the evening, the Vellum Room in New Geneva serves only unmodified guests, a policy the management describes as offering a moment of shared context. Membership among forged did not fall. Attendance between six and seven fell to almost nothing, and the room during that hour is now the quietest and least interesting place in the building, which several members have started to enjoy on those grounds alone.

9

SECOND-GEN REGISTRATION DRIVE COLLAPSES AFTER ONE LEAK

A voluntary program to record the children of forged parents, sold as a health measure with guarantees of confidentiality, ended within eleven days of the guarantee being tested. One list moved. Three families relocated. The program office issued a statement about an isolated failure of process. The word that stuck in the districts was not failure. It was isolated, said back slowly, by everyone.

10

THE PHANTOM VIPERS DECLINE A MEDICAL SPONSORSHIP WORTH MORE THAN THEIR PURSE

A continuity provider offered the Ghost Medal outfit full enrollment for every member in exchange for publishable assay data. The Vipers refused inside a day. The provider has since briefed three outlets that the refusal proves the Vipers have something to hide. They do. It is called their medical history, and the entire point of a Ghost Medal outfit is that you do not get to see it.

11

DOSE PEN REFILLS ARE NOW ACCEPTED AS CURRENCY IN TWO BOROUGHES

Not the meds. The empty pens. A spent Corvid-4 housing with an intact seal can be reloaded by anyone with a garage press, which makes the shell worth more than the dose to the right buyer. Vendors have started pricing food against it. A borough council has proposed collecting spent pens as a public safety measure, which everyone understands to mean cornering the shells.

12

PELLAM HOUSE OPENS A WAITING LIST

The stability program above the valley, which for six years admitted anyone whose numbers qualified, now has more applicants than beds and has begun ranking them. The ranking criteria are not published. Applicants report that the interview asks very little about symptoms and a great deal about surviving family. Read the feature on page 26 before you decide what that means. Then read it again.

DOs / DON'Ts OF THE THEATER

DO

Carry your own dose pen, visibly, in a pocket you can reach one-handed. The people who matter will read it as competence. The people who read it as weakness were never going to be useful to you.

DON'T

Ask a forged their shelf life. Not warmly, not as an icebreaker, not because you read an article. You are asking a stranger to tell you when they think they will stop working, and the fact that they have an answer ready is the saddest part of the exchange.

DO

Let somebody read their own label out loud on their own schedule. If she tells you she is shelf, she is telling you something about the room, not about her genetics. Take the information and change nothing about your face.

DON'T

Wear a tremor cuff you do not need. It is ninety credits and it is a costume of somebody else's decline, and the person across the bar with an actual tremor has clocked that your dial is running the demo loop.

DO

Cut the collar high if you have a port under it, and cut it in a fabric that will survive a med tech in a hurry. Function first, and the silhouette follows, and everyone who knows will know.

DON'T

Buy the shaped insert. There is a version of vanity that costs you nothing and a version that costs you the respect of every person in the room who has been laid out on a table. This is the second kind.

DO

Keep your assay numbers off any system you did not build. Your clinic does not need them in the cloud, your unit does not need them at all, and the exchanges would very much like them, which settles the question.

DON'T

Announce that you are baseline in a room where you are the only one. Nobody asked. The announcement is the whole content of the announcement, and the forged have heard it in that tone before, at checkpoints.

DO

Learn to inject somebody else cleanly. It takes an afternoon. There will be a night when the person who needs it cannot do it themselves, and on that night your squeamishness is not a personality trait, it is a casualty report.

DON'T

Congratulate an expiry on still being here. The joke belongs to them. In your mouth it becomes a countdown you have decided to help them keep.

DO

Keep the original packaging on a dose you did not buy from a bonded dealer, and keep it separate from the pen. If it kills someone, that packaging is the only thing standing between the seller and the next twelve buyers.

DON'T

Ask to see anybody's print card. Not the collectors, not the bespokes, not the girl at the bar who mentioned she was commissioned. You are asking for the document that describes a person as an order. She may show you. That is worse.

WHAT THEY'RE WEARING TO THE WAR

01

THE PORT COLLAR, CUT HIGH LEFT

Manufacturer Originally a clinic garment from Ostrand Medical, now copied by four fashion houses and one uniform contractor

Materials Salt-cured monoweave with a bonded inner panel, magnetic closure on the left so a tech can open it without cutting

Signal Value A working port and the willingness to let people know you have one. In some rooms that is a disclosure. In others it is a dare.

Survivability Excellent. The panel wipes clean, the closure survives blood, and the cut does not restrict the neck rotation the wearer has left.

The genuine article is the best-designed garment in theater because a med tech had to be able to get into it fast. The copies moved the closure to the right for the drape.

Anyone who has ever been on a table can spot that from across a room, and does.

02

ORIGINAL EQUIPMENT PLAIN COTTON, UNBRANDED

Manufacturer ORIGINAL EQUIPMENT, four flagships, no logo anywhere on the garment

Materials Long-staple cotton grown on irrigated land, undyed, with a single row of stitching that costs more than the fabric

Signal Value I have not been edited. My grandparents had water. There is nothing under this shirt that anybody had to order.

Survivability Poor in weather, excellent in a boardroom, which is the only theater it was ever cut for.

The most expensive way in this world to communicate an absence. It is also, and the brand knows it, unwearable by half the people who could afford it, which is the entire mechanism. Contemptible, beautifully made, and selling faster than they can grow the cotton.

03

THE COMPRESSION SLEEVE, FIELD GRADE

Materials Graduated elastic knit over a thin cooling lattice, forearm to first knuckle, seam on the outside so it does not print through a glove

Signal Value Working tremor management. Worn by people who have decided to keep going and have done the reading on how.

Survivability Six months of hard use before the lattice packs down. Everyone who needs one owns three and rotates them.

Nobody has ever bought this to be looked at, which is why it has quietly become the most respected object on a forearm in any bar within nine hundred meters of a clinic. Earns the price. Earns more than the price.

04

THE HERITAGE COMMISSION COAT

Materials Heavy wool-analog with a bespoke-house lining printed in a template lot pattern, cut to expose the seam at the shoulder

Signal Value Somebody paid for me by name. The lining pattern encodes a build line the way a school tie encodes a school, and everybody who can read it was meant to.

Survivability Fine in rain, ruined by field use, which is not a defect because it will never see any.

Bespoke class advertising itself to shelf class in a language shelf class was taught to read and never issued. The garment is beautifully made. The gesture is the ugliest thing in this department and the wearers know exactly what they are doing.

05

WARRANTY INK

Materials Standard field tattoo pigment, applied over the issue serial on the inner arm, usually by a friend and usually badly

Signal Value The number was assigned. The ink was chosen. Most of the designs are not clever and are not trying to be.

Survivability Permanent, which is the point, and it does not defeat a scanner, which the wearers know and do anyway.

A gesture that changes nothing operationally and everything otherwise. The first thing this magazine has covered in a year that has no market, no counterfeit, and no influencer. Long may that hold.

WORST PEOPLE ALIVE
THE BODY MARKET EDITION

1

DR. AUREL KIST

Medical Director, Pellam House Stability Program

Runs the kindest facility in this issue and the one you should be most afraid of. Under Kist, Pellam House admits forged whose warranties expired years ago, feeds them well, learns their names, and asks each of them to execute a Continuity Agreement assigning post-stability template rights in exchange for a dose supply that no district clinic can match. He believes he is the only person keeping them alive. He is correct. That is the offense. A man who has arranged the world so that his generosity is the only door is not generous, he is a landlord, and the rent is what a person originally was.

2

ANNEKE SORREL

Vice President, Template Assurance, SOMA CONTINENTAL

Signs the expiry letters for a build line of eleven thousand people, a form she has personally revised twice to be gentler, which she will tell you about, which is the tell. Sorrel has done more than anyone alive to make an unforgivable letter arrive politely. She is also, per our interview on page 44, in a position to know precisely what the letter feels like, and has decided that knowing is a qualification rather than an obligation. Read the interview. Then come back and tell us we have placed her too high. We will listen. We will not move her.

3

MARCUS DELL-VANE

Founder, Original Equipment

Built a luxury label on the proposition that his customers were never modified, in a world where the majority of people who were modified did not choose it. The clothes are lovely. The stitching is honest work. The idea underneath it is that an accident of birth is a personal achievement worth ninety credits a meter, and Dell-Vane has priced that idea perfectly, because he understands his customer, because he is his customer, and because nobody has ever needed to sell him anything he could not already assume.

4

THE HALO DRIFT EXCHANGE, RETURNING

Three venues, one product, no shame available at any price

Placed on this list last quarter for taking action on one woman's decline. Returns this quarter for expanding the instrument to every registered build line, so that a shelf-stock forged in a borough nobody covers can now discover that her projected stability window has a market price and that the price moved on Tuesday. She did not do anything on Tuesday. The formulation review did. Somebody knew about the review. That is the entire business.

5

SURGEON NINE

Catalog listing, the Marrow, New Lagos

Does good work, which is why this entry is written with more care than the others. Surgeon Nine's modifications hold, her rejection rate is the lowest in the corridor, and she sources from a parts bin she has never once been willing to describe. Everybody in the Marrow knows the work is clean and nobody knows where the material comes from, and the people who have asked have stopped asking, and the corridor has decided that quality is a sufficient answer to provenance. It never has been. Ask us about issue 45.

6

COLONEL BEREN HOSK

Faction medical officer, author of the conduct reclassification

Decided that a shaking hand is a discipline matter. Under Hosk's standing order, forged personnel showing drift symptoms are reported to their unit rather than to medical, on the theory that medical was being used to dodge deployment. Some of them were. The rest were sick. Hosk has built a system that cannot tell the difference and has explained, in writing, that this is acceptable because the alternative costs him bodies. He wrote bodies. It is in the order. We have the order.

7

TESSA VAUGHN-MERE

Lifestyle broadcaster, "the drift diaries"

Baseline, sells a tremor cuff, wears it on air, has never had a tremor. Vaughn-Mere's defense is that the cuff raises awareness and that a portion of proceeds funds clinic access. The portion is disclosed in the fourth screen of a subscription flow. The awareness raised is of Tessa Vaughn-Mere. Somewhere a woman with an actual tremor is watching a healthy person perform her worst week for a demographic that finds it moving, and is deciding whether to laugh, and it is not our place to tell her which.

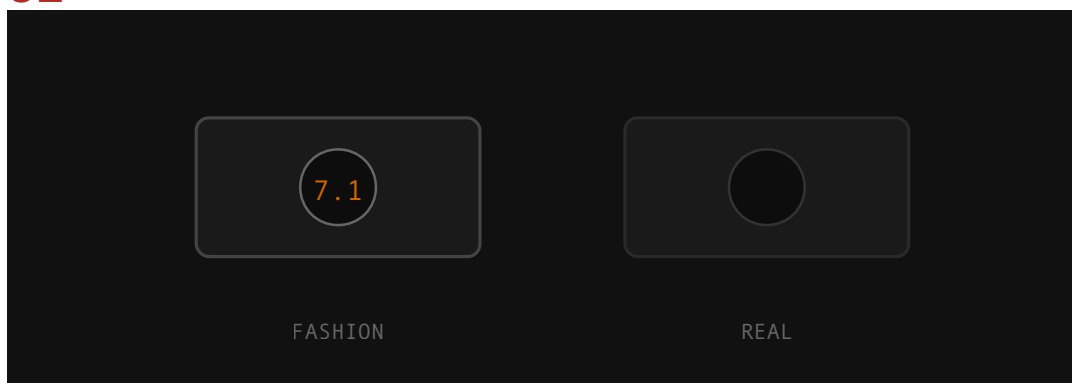
FIELD FAILURES

01



He carried the spare loose in a cargo pocket with a multitool. The seal went at some point during a nine-hour move and he did not know until the plunger gave him nothing on a night he needed it. The pen costs four credits to sleeve. He owns a coat that cost two thousand.

02



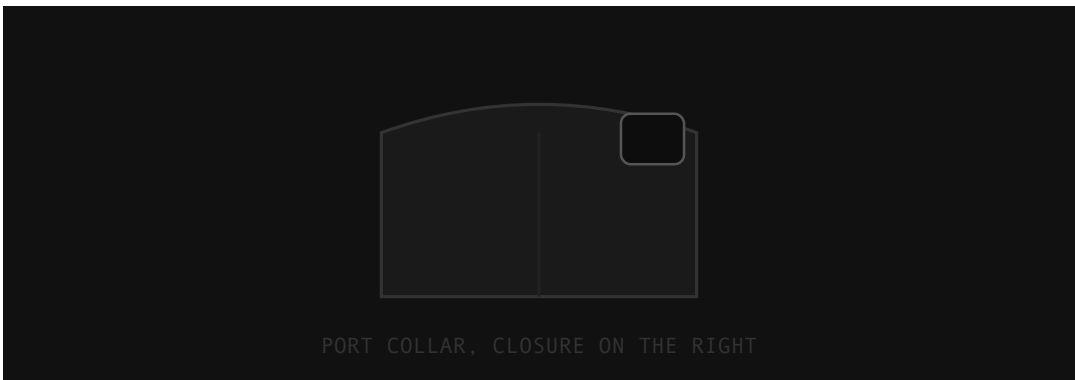
The costume cuff on the left runs a dramatic readout that climbs whenever the wearer moves her arm. The working one on the right displays nothing, because the woman wearing it stopped needing a number two years ago and reads her own hands at the sink every morning. One of these women has been on a broadcast about tremor. It is not the one with the tremor.

03



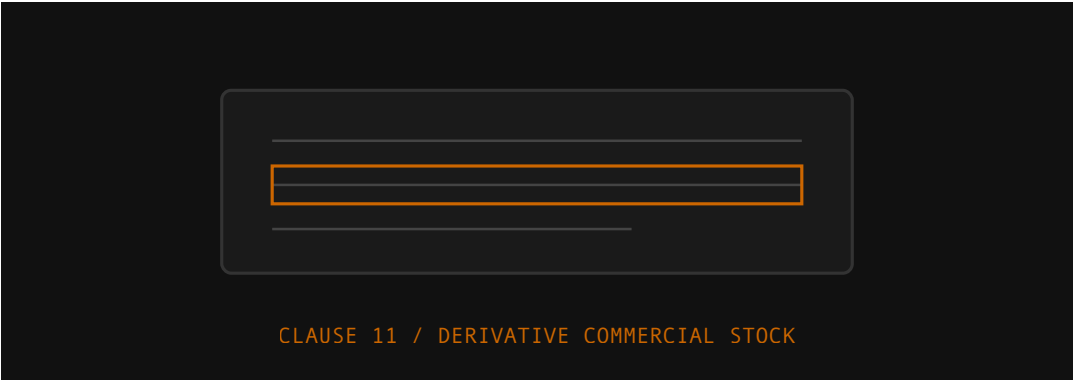
Sold at auction for eleven thousand as a 2044 record. The lamination is right, the pigment is right, the corner radius is right, and the punch is in the wrong corner, because the forger worked from a photograph of a card that had been scanned upside down. Dr. Kovasz caught it in under a minute. The buyer has asked us not to name the house. We have named nothing except the corner.

04



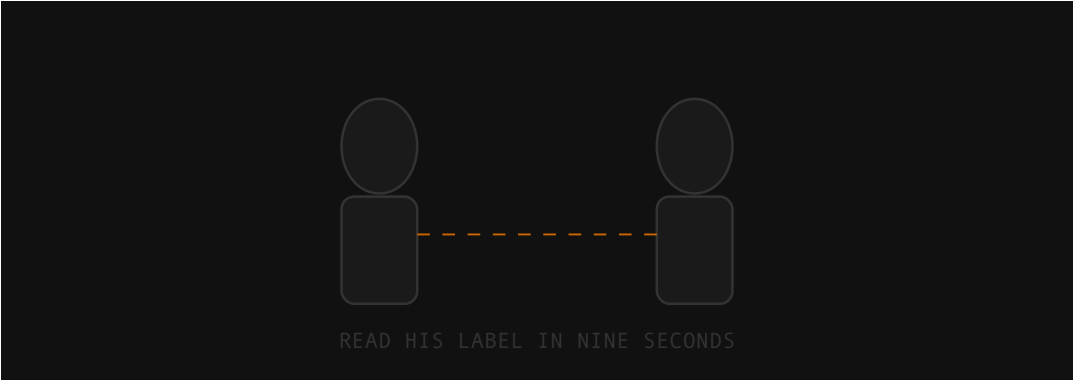
The house moved the magnetic closure to the right because it drapes better in a photograph. Every med tech in the world works a collar from the left, because that is where the port is on every commercial build line ever produced. A garment that has to be cut off you in an emergency is not a garment. It is an obstacle with good stitching.

05



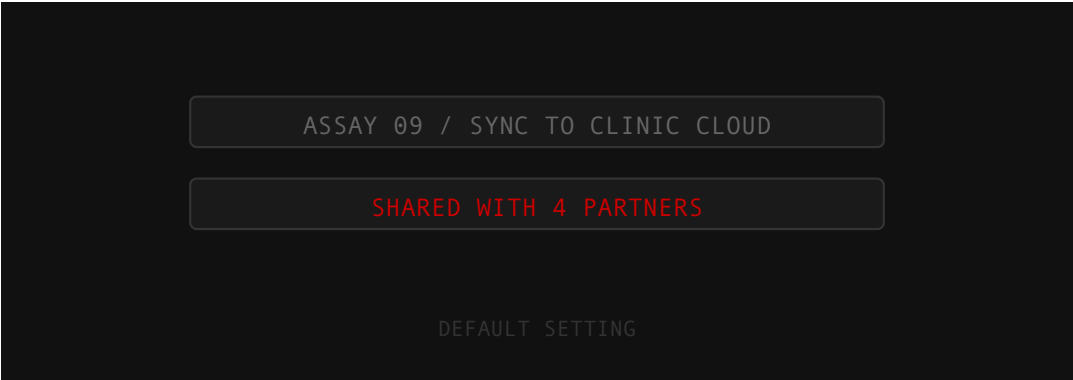
He read the agreement. He read all of it. He understood clause eleven perfectly and signed it because the alternative was a garage clinic and a coin flip, and he would like us to stop describing people in his position as having been tricked. Nobody tricked him. That is a great deal worse and he wants it printed that way.

06



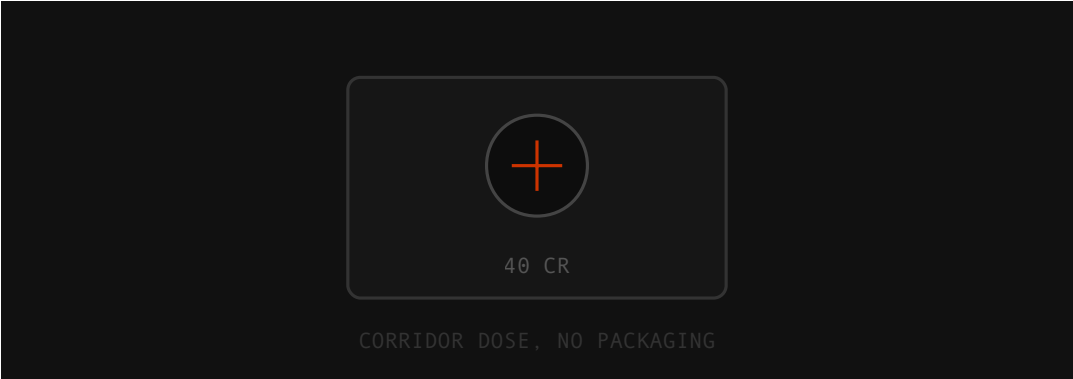
He rehearsed a baseline walk for three weeks and gave himself away sitting down, because he lowered himself the last four inches instead of dropping into the chair. Nobody trains the sitting. The clinic tout on the corner charged him double after that and he never worked out why.

07



She used a home assay kit because she did not want the clinic to have her numbers. The kit synced by default. The clinic did not get her numbers. Four partners did, one of which quotes a spread on her build line, and the line moved eleven days later.

08



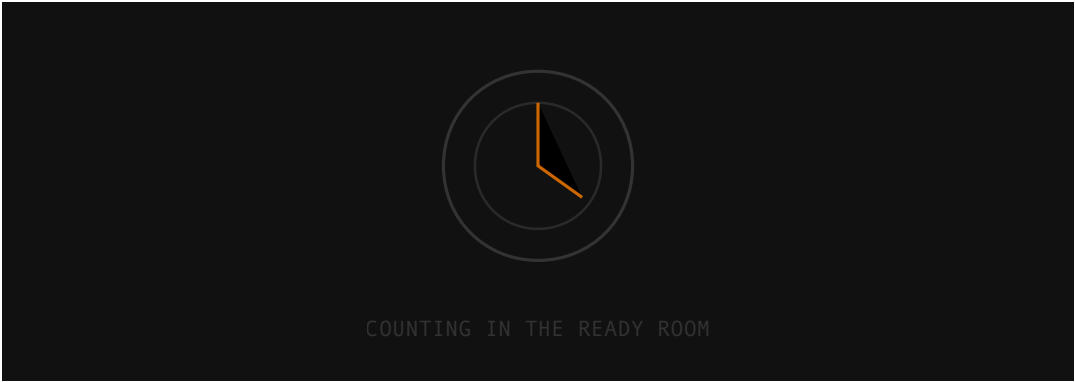
Forty credits, no box, no lot number, sold from a case that also held food. It was the right compound at roughly the right concentration and it worked for five weeks. There is no story here about anybody dying. There is a story about a man who now cannot tell anyone what he took, including the doctor trying to work out what changed.

09



The file room at a continuity facility is alphabetical, which is the only security it has, and the only card ever confirmed stolen from it was pulled by a woman who worked there for nine years and took exactly one. Hers. She left the drawer open. Nobody has said whether that was carelessness or a signature.

10



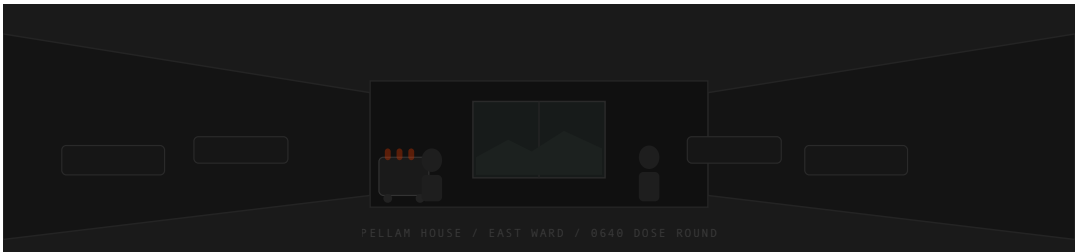
She counts her steps to keep the tremor from starting, and it works, and the analysts have learned to read the count. So the count is data now. She cannot stop counting and she cannot count freely. There is no equipment failure in this entry. The failure is four billion people and a refresh rate.

EMBEDDED

THE WARRANTY DEPARTMENT

Eleven days at Pellam House, the stability program above the valley where commercial-stock forged go when the shelf life runs out. Nobody there is cruel. Nobody there is lying. The whole thing is in the paperwork, and everybody signs it, and everybody understands it, and that is the part I cannot put down.

By Cass Rennick



The bus that goes up to Pellam House leaves the valley station at ten past six in the morning and it is not a medical vehicle. It is a coach with soft seats and a working heater, and somebody at the program decided a long time ago that the last journey a person makes under their own arrangements should not smell like a clinic. There are nine of us on it. I am the youngest by about fifteen years and the only one with a bag that has been packed for eleven days rather than for the rest of a life.

I am enrolled as Renna Cole, drought build, commercial stock, forty-one, out of a district that does not keep good records. The label is not mine. My own build is bespoke, lynx template, and my numbers are bad but they are bad in the expensive way, which is to say I have options. Everyone on this bus has the numbers without the options. I have thought about the difference for eleven days and I am still not able to write a sentence about it that does not make me want to put the pen down.

The woman across the aisle introduces herself before we clear the second switchback. Dovey Marchetti, Prometheus stock, sixty-one, hands folded in her lap in a way I recognize immediately because I have started doing it myself in meetings.

“First time up?” she says.

I tell her yes.

“It’s nice,” she says. “That’s the thing nobody tells you. It’s actually nice.”

“My warranty’s been up eleven years. I have been on overtime longer than I was ever on the clock. You want to know the truth, I stopped being frightened of the drift around year six and started being frightened of the paperwork around year seven.”

// Dovey Marchetti, east ward

She is right. That is the first thing I have to report and the hardest one to explain to anybody who has not been up there. Pellam House is a pre-Upheaval sanatorium, four floors of good stone with a slate roof they have kept in repair, and it looks down a valley that still has water in it. The wards are warm. The laundry is done properly and smells of nothing. The food comes out of a kitchen with two cooks who argue about salt in a way that suggests they have been arguing about salt for years. There are one hundred and sixty residents and thirty-one staff and every one of the staff knows every one of the residents by name and by build.

Intake takes forty minutes. A nurse named Aleks weighs me, draws blood, runs a reflex panel, and asks me eleven questions, of which two are about symptoms. The other nine are about my family. Do I have living parents. Do I have siblings, and do they know where I am. Do I have children. Is there anyone who would need to be notified, and at what address, and does that address have a name on it.

I answer as Renna Cole, who has nobody. Aleks writes it down without a flicker. Then he looks up at me for about a second and a half longer than the form requires, and I watch him decide not to say the thing he has just worked out, and he says, “You’ll be in east ward. Dovey’s on east ward. She’ll look after you.”

He read my label in nine seconds. I have thought about that since, too. He read it, and filed me anyway, and the reason he filed me anyway is in section four of this piece.

II.

The day at Pellam House has a shape. Assay at six. Dose round at six forty. Breakfast until eight. Then what the program calls purposeful activity, which is a phrase I arrived ready to be contemptuous about and left unable to be contemptuous about, because purposeful activity at Pellam House means the garden, the workshop, the kitchen, and the library, and the residents run all four.

The garden is the one that undid me. There are eleven raised beds on the south terrace, built at a height that a person with an unreliable back can work without kneeling, and they are worked every morning by six or seven residents in rotation. On my third day a man named Portz, ex-infantry, Document War vintage, spent an hour teaching me to pinch out tomato side shoots with a hand that was shaking hard enough that he had to brace his wrist against the frame to do it. He got every one of them. It took him an hour. A baseline would have done the bed in nine minutes and taken four of the wrong shoots.

“You go slow, you go right,” he said. “Nobody ever told me that in the service. Would have been useful.”

The workshop repairs things for the valley. Boots, small motors, furniture. There is a genuine business in it, and the money comes back to the house as a resident fund, and the residents vote on what the fund buys. In the eleven days I was there the fund bought a second kiln and a set of proper knives for the kitchen, on a vote that ran twenty minutes past its scheduled end because a woman from the north ward wanted the money to go to the library instead and made a serious argument for it.

The nights are the part I did not expect. East ward is twenty-two beds in a room built for tuberculosis, with very good windows, and after the ten o'clock round it does not go quiet, it goes conversational. People talk across the aisle in the dark the way you do on a transport. On my fourth night I lay there and listened to a man three beds down explain to a woman who had arrived that morning exactly what her first fortnight would feel like, in order, hour by hour, with no comfort anywhere in it, and it was the kindest thing I heard in eleven days.

They talk about their builds constantly, which surprised me. In every other setting I have been in, a room of forged will get through a whole evening without anybody naming a line. Up there it is small talk. What are you. Drought build, forty-four run. Oh, my sister was forty-four run. There is no weight on it, because everyone in the room has arrived at the same destination and the route has stopped being interesting.

What nobody talks about, in eleven days, in twenty-two beds, is the office on the first floor with the filing cabinets in it.

I want you to hold all of that in your head for the rest of this piece. It is not decoration. It is the actual condition of the place. The residents of Pellam House are cared for, they are useful to each other, they are warm, they are fed, and they are among the last people in this world who can reliably obtain a suppression dose that has been made properly, in a plant with inspections, at a concentration that matches the label.

Now I am going to tell you what that costs.

III.

The library is open until eleven and nobody supervises it. On my fifth night I sat in it with a copy of the Continuity Agreement, which residents can request at any time, because Pellam House is scrupulous, and Pellam House being scrupulous is the entire mechanism.

The agreement is nine pages. Eight of them are about dose supply, assay schedule, accommodation, dietary provision, and the resident fund, and they are generous, and they are honored. Page seven, clause eleven, is four sentences long. In exchange for lifetime provision, the resident assigns to the program and its commercial partners the post-stability rights to their genetic template, including the right to produce derivative commercial stock, in perpetuity, without further consideration to the resident or the resident's surviving family.

Read that again with the intake questionnaire in your other hand. Do you have living parents. Do you have siblings. Do you have children. Is there anyone who would need to be notified.

They are not asking who to call. They are asking who could sue.

“Nobody here is being harvested. That is the word people reach for and it is wrong and it lets everyone off. We are being purchased, slowly, with our own signatures, at a price we set ourselves on the worst day of our lives.”

// Dovey Marchetti

I took the agreement to Dovey the next morning in the garden, and I made the mistake of thinking I was bringing her news.

She let me finish. Then she said: "Clause eleven."

"You know."

"Everybody knows. It's on page seven. It's not hidden, love. Kist won't hide it, he's very proud of not hiding it." She pulled a sheet and looked at it. "I read it in the coach on the way up. I signed it in the office an hour later."

I asked her why.

"Because the other door is a garage off the Belt and a coin flip on the concentration, and because I had been doing that for four years and I was tired." She looked at me properly for the first time. "And because it's me. What they get is me. Somebody's going to grow a run of me in fifteen years and sell them to a security firm and they'll all have my hands and none of them will know where the hands came from, and I'll be dead, and I will have had eleven good years up here with a garden. You want to tell me that's not a deal? Do the sum for me. Show me your working."

I asked her whether anybody up there had refused to sign.

"Two, in my time. One went back down on the bus the same afternoon and I do not know what happened to her. The other one is Portz." She saw my face. "He signed in the end. Took him fourteen months. Kist let him stay the whole fourteen months on a provisional, which is not a thing that exists in the paperwork, and everybody knew it did not exist, and nobody said a word."

I said that sounded like decency.

"It is decency," she said. "And at the end of fourteen months of decency he signed, and now they have got him too, and Kist got to be a good man for fourteen months and got the signature anyway. You tell me what to do with that. I have had eleven years on it."

I did not have the sum. I still do not.

What I had, sitting in the dirt on the south terrace, was the knowledge that I was going to leave on the eleventh day, and that my numbers are also bad, and that when mine get worse I will be met by four people with proposals because my template is bespoke and my template is interesting and somebody will want it enough to be gentle with me about it. Dovey is shelf. Dovey is one of about ninety thousand people produced off the same commercial stock in a nine-year run. There is no market for one of her. There is a market for all of her, once, at the end, in a file.

IV.

Dr. Aurel Kist gave me forty minutes in his office on day eight. He is in his sixties, baseline, soft voice, and he has the specific patience of a man who has had this conversation with journalists before and has never once lost it.

His office looks down the valley. There is a photograph on the wall of the house in 2059, before the roof was done, with fourteen residents standing in front of it, and he can name all fourteen, and did, unprompted, when he saw me look at it. Nine of them are dead. He named those too, and when.

I put clause eleven in front of him.

“Yes,” he said. “It funds the house.”

I asked him whether he thought a person signing on the worst day of their life, with one door available, is giving consent or accepting terms.

“Both,” he said. “And I would rather the terms were mine than the alternative, because I have seen the alternative and so have you. You came up on the bus with people who spent years on corridor doses. Ask Portz what his hands were like in 2062. I am not going to pretend this is a beautiful arrangement. I am going to tell you it is the best arrangement currently available to a shelf-stock forged past expiry in this hemisphere, and that I did not design the world in which that is true.”

I said that he had, in a small way, designed the part of it that runs above this valley, and that a man who arranges to be the only door is not offering a choice.

He took that. He did not flinch and he did not perform being wounded. He said: “If a program without clause eleven existed, I would close this house tomorrow and drive them there myself. Show me one. There are four continuity providers with the plant capacity to make dose at this quality and all four of them take template rights, because template rights are the only asset a shelf-stock forged has that anybody wants. That is the sentence you should print. Not the one about me.”

Then he asked to see my print card.

It was not a trap and it was not aggressive. It is a routine request, made of every resident at the eight-day mark, and he made it the way you would ask someone to confirm a spelling. And I sat there in a warm office above a valley with water in it and understood that I had eleven days of these people’s trust in my notebook and a false name on my wrist, and that the only honest thing available to me was to stop.

I told him who I was.

He listened. He did not raise his voice. When I finished, he said, “Aleks flagged you on day one. Sitting down. You lower yourself.” A pause. “We admitted you anyway. Do you want to know why?”

I said I did.

“Because a bespoke lynx with bad numbers and no enrollment is exactly the person clause eleven is written for, and I assumed that sooner or later you were going to need us, and that it would be easier for you if you had already seen the garden.”

“You are not shelf. Sit down anyway. In eight years, when it is your hands, you will remember that the terrible place had tomatoes and two cooks who argue about salt, and you will come up on the bus like everybody else.”

// Dr. Aurel Kist, medical director

V.

On my last morning the dose round changed Dovey’s formulation. It is a routine adjustment. The house does it constantly and it is one of the reasons the house works.

She came out to the terrace afterward and pinched out a side shoot with her right hand, one motion, no brace against the frame, and she stopped and looked at her own hand as if it belonged to somebody she used to know.

Then she started to cry, and she was furious about it, and she said, “Eleven years,” and then she said something I have not been able to get out of my head since, which is: “They can do this. They could always do this.”

I do not know what the new formulation costs the house. I asked, twice, and got an answer about supply agreements both times. I do know that Dovey Marchetti spent eleven years shaking in a place that could have steadied her hand on any morning it chose, and that on the morning it chose she had already signed page seven, and that the two facts sit next to each other on the same terrace in the same good light and nobody up there will connect them out loud.

The bus down leaves at ten past four. There were four of us on it, three staff going off shift and me. Nobody comes down that road with a bag.

I got on with my notebook and my own bad numbers and my bespoke lynx template that four separate people would like to talk to me about, and I looked back up at the house through the rear window as we took the first switchback, and the last thing I saw was the south terrace in the four o'clock light, and Dovey on the end bed, working slowly, holding her own steady right hand in her left one and not doing anything with either of them.

ADVERTISEMENT



NO MARKS. NO NUMBER. NO FILE.

ORIGINAL EQUIPMENT

EST. ALWAYS

Nothing added. Nothing to disclose.

Undyed long-staple cotton, grown on irrigated ground, cut plain, finished by hand, and marked nowhere. No lot. No line. No template. Our garments carry no information about the person inside them, because there has never been any that needed carrying.

For the customer who was, in every particular, sufficient on arrival.

ORIGINAL EQUIPMENT does not screen customers, does not verify status, and does not ask. We are aware of what our name says. We have read the letters. We are keeping the name.

ORIGINAL EQUIPMENT // FOUR HOUSES

THE MANUAL

HOW TO BUY SUPPRESSION MEDS THAT WILL NOT KILL YOU FIRST

You are off enrollment, your district clinic has a nine-week list, and there is a man on the corridor with a case. Here is how to survive the transaction, from somebody who used to be the man with the case.

By Benno Strake

NOTICE // THIS IS NOT MEDICAL ADVICE. IT IS HARM REDUCTION WRITTEN BY A MAN WHO CAUSED HARM FOR SIX YEARS AND KNOWS EXACTLY HOW HE DID IT. IF YOU CAN GET A BONDED DOSE, GET A BONDED DOSE. EVERYTHING BELOW ASSUMES YOU CANNOT.

I ran a shop off the Belt from 2053 to 2059. I told myself I was harm reduction. What I was, for most of those six years, was the cheapest option in a nine-block radius, and the difference between those two things is about forty people whose names I can list. So take this in the spirit it is offered, which is a man handing you the exact procedure he used to defeat and telling you where he cut corners.

1. KNOW WHICH COMPOUND YOU ACTUALLY TAKE.

Not the brand. The compound, the concentration, and the carrier. Write all three on something that is not a device. Most people in this situation know their pen by its color, and the color is the first thing a corridor seller copies, because it is free. A blue Corvid-4 sleeve costs four credits to buy empty and can be pressed to hold anything. If the only identifier you can offer is blue, you are not buying medicine, you are buying blue.

If you do not know your compound, your clinic knows it, and they will tell you over a counter without an appointment. Go and ask before you need to know. Everybody in this article who got hurt got hurt in a hurry.

Write the carrier down as well, not just the active. Two of the standard suppression formulations share an active compound and differ only in carrier, and they are not interchangeable in a body that has been on one of them for years. A corridor seller will tell you they are the same thing, in good faith, because for most of his customers the difference has never announced itself loudly enough to reach him.

2. BUY THE PACKAGING, NOT THE DOSE.

A lot number and a plant mark on an intact carton is the only thing in this transaction that can be checked later. It can be checked by you, by a clinic, and by the next person on the corridor if it goes wrong. A seller who will not part with the packaging is telling you the packaging belongs to a different batch, or to a different compound, or to no batch at all.

The price difference between a dose with a carton and a dose without is usually eight to twelve credits. In my shop it was ten. Ten credits was the price I charged for deniability, and about half my customers paid it, and I thought less of the half who did not, which tells you everything about what I was.

3. THE SEAL, THE PLUNGER, THE SOUND.

Three checks, in this order, before money moves. The seal ring at the head of the pen should be unbroken and should not turn when you hold the body and twist the cap gently. The plunger should have no play at all before it engages, and a repressed housing almost always has two or three millimeters of slack because the press does not reseal the internal stop. And a full pen makes a specific dull sound when you tap the barrel against a knuckle, not a ring. A garage refill rings.

Do all three in front of the seller, slowly. It costs you nothing and it changes what you are to them. Sellers price the people who do not check.

4. NEVER BUY FROM A CASE THAT ALSO HOLDS FOOD.

This sounds like a joke about hygiene. It is a fact about supply. A seller carrying meds and food in the same case is not a pharmacy operation, they are moving whatever came off a truck, and what came off the truck was picked by someone who did not

know what any of it was. The temperature history on that dose is unknown and the carrier compound in most suppression formulations is temperature sensitive in a way that does not change the color, the viscosity, or the smell.

The corridor knows this rule. The corridor breaks it constantly, because the case with the food in it is the one that is there at nine at night when your hands have started.

5. WATCH WHAT THEY DO WITH THE COLD.

Most suppression carriers degrade above about fourteen degrees, slowly, without any visible change. This is the failure nobody sees, because it does not produce a dramatic incident, it produces a dose that is doing seventy percent of its job for six weeks while the person taking it concludes that their drift is accelerating.

You cannot audit a cold chain from a doorway. What you can do is watch the seller's handling. Does the case have a cold block in it, and is the block actually cold, and does the seller close the case between transactions or leave it open on a warm evening because closing it is annoying. A seller who closes the case every single time in front of forty customers a night is a seller who does that when nobody is watching. This is the cheapest tell in this column and the one I ignored the most, in my own shop, on hot nights, because closing the case is annoying.

6. TEST THE FIRST DOSE ON A DAY YOU CAN AFFORD TO LOSE.

Not the night before a job. Not the morning of an assay. Take a new source for the first time on a day where you are in a room with a person who knows what you took, with the carton on the table where a med tech would find it, and with nothing scheduled. A bad batch usually announces itself in four to nine hours and it usually announces itself as nothing much, which is why people take a second dose on top of it and that is where the real damage lives.

7. THE SELLER YOU WANT IS BORING.

Forget the theatrical ones. The seller worth having is the one who is dull, who has been on the same forty meters of corridor for four years, who asks what compound you are on before quoting a price, and who has, at some point, refused to sell you something. That refusal is the entire relationship. A seller who has never once told you no is a seller who does not know what is in the case either.

Pay this person more than you have to. Pay them when you do not need anything. You are not buying a dose from them, you are buying being remembered on a night when the shelf is thin and two people want the same box.

8. WHAT THIS COLUMN CANNOT DO FOR YOU.

Every rule above is a way of surviving a market that should not exist. None of them get you a dose made in a plant with inspections. The whole procedure is a set of workarounds for the fact that the four organizations with the capacity to make this properly will only sell it to you in exchange for the rights to what you originally were, and that the fifth option is a man on a corridor with a case, and that I was that man, and that I was one of the better ones, and that being one of the better ones was worth about forty people.

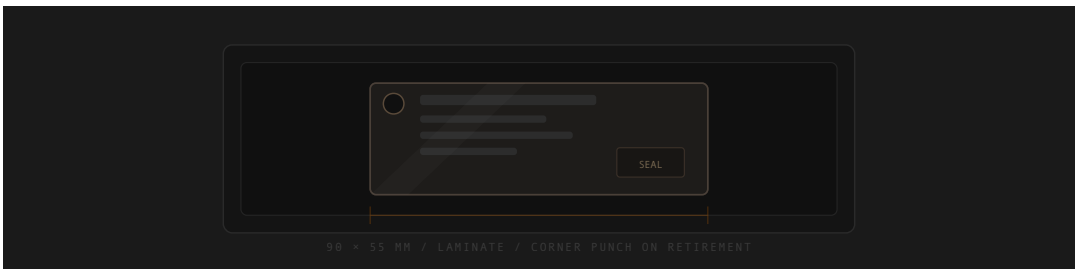
Check the seal. Keep the carton. Find the boring seller. And if somebody ever builds a fifth door, walk through it and do not read this column again.

MATERIAL CULTURE

THE PRINT CARD

A punched rectangle of laminated stock, ninety millimeters by fifty-five, produced to satisfy an auditor in 2043. It is now the most traded object in a market that officially does not exist, and it is the only document in this world that describes a person who did not yet exist when it was signed.

By Dr. Pia Kovasz



The object in front of me is ninety millimeters by fifty-five and weighs eleven grams. It is a card of pressed board faced on both sides with a cellulose acetate laminate, of the type used for identity documents between roughly 2038 and 2049, and it has a seven millimeter hole punched through the upper left corner. On the face there are four printed rows and a heat-set seal. It smells faintly of the solvent used in the lamination press, which is the only thing about it that has not changed in twenty-three years.

It is a print card. In the language of the facilities that produced them, a wet print record. It is the document that specifies an original gene template, and it was executed by a client and a technician and filed before the person it describes had been grown.

I want to be careful here, because the card is not a birth certificate and everybody outside this trade gets that wrong. A birth certificate records an event that happened. A print card records an intention that preceded the event. The person is downstream. In the contractual language of the period the person is, and I am quoting a 2044 form, the derivative.

What is actually printed on it is less than people expect. Four rows. The first is the lot and run designation, which is the string every commercial-stock forged can recite. The second is the source template reference, an internal index that points at a file which in most cases no longer exists anywhere. The third is the commissioning client, and on roughly a third of surviving cards this row has been overprinted at some later date with a different name, because rights positions moved and the records office of the day updated the card by running it through the press again. The fourth row is the projected stability window.

That fourth row is the warranty. It is nine characters long. It was produced by an engineering estimate with a stated confidence interval that does not appear on the card, because the card had no room for it, and the confidence interval is the single most consequential piece of information ever left off a document in this industry.

There is no name on a print card. There was nobody to name. This is the detail that undoes people when they see one for the first time, and it undoes them more reliably than anything I could write about the contractual language. It is a document about a person with no space on it for a person.

The physical object exists because of an auditor. Between 2041 and 2043 the commercial forging programs were operating at a speed that made the faction inspectorates nervous, and the compromise that emerged was a physical, non-networked, single-copy record for every template lot, held at the producing facility, produced in a format that could be walked into a room and counted. That is why it is a card. Somebody wanted to be able to count them by hand.

Nobody imagined the card would outlive the facility. Nine of the eleven plants that produced cards in that period no longer exist. Their card stock does. It went out in evacuations, in liquidations, in the pockets of records clerks, and in at least three documented cases in a bag carried by a technician who had decided, for reasons that were never entered anywhere, that these particular cards should not burn.

The card is the only document in this world that describes a person who did not yet exist when it was signed. It is not proof of who you are. It is proof of what somebody wanted before you were an option.

The punch is the part of the object that matters most and the part nobody planned. A card was punched through the corner when the template lot was retired from production, and the punch was done at the facility with whatever press was in the records office. There was no standard. The 2043 to 2047 presses at three of the plants left a distinct internal burr on the exit side of the hole, a raised lip about a tenth of a millimeter, produced by a die that was already worn when it was installed.

That burr is currently the most reliable authentication in the trade, which is an appalling situation and entirely my fault. I published it. I published it because collectors were being defrauded and I thought the disclosure would collapse the counterfeit market. What happened instead is that the counterfeit market spent nine months learning to reproduce a worn die, and the honest half of the authentication business went out of work, and I now spend a great deal of my time examining burrs that are better than the ones I described.

A word on the laminate, because it is where most of my working week goes. The acetate used between 2038 and 2049 was manufactured in four grades, and the grade used for identity documents yellows on a curve that is predictable to within about eighteen months once you account for storage. A card that has spent twenty-three years in a records office drawer and a card that has spent twenty-three years in a coat pocket do not look alike under raking light, and neither of them looks like a card that was laminated last spring in a workshop with a modern press, whatever the operator did to the stock beforehand.

Counterfeiters solved the yellowing four years ago. They solved the pressed-board core three years ago. They solved the heat-set seal last year, which was genuinely impressive work and which I said so about in print, to some criticism. The one thing they had not solved as of eighteen months ago was the punch, and that is why I wrote about the punch, and we have already covered how well that went.

So: who buys these.

Three groups, and the order tells you the whole economy.

The first and largest is institutional. Continuity providers, clinics, and two faction records offices buy print cards to consolidate template holdings, because a card is *prima facie* evidence of a rights position in a legal environment where the producing facility no longer exists to be asked. A card for a build line with ninety thousand living members is worth what a small building is worth, and there is nothing sentimental about that transaction at any point.

The second is collectors. Baselines, mostly, and a specific sort of bespoke. They frame them. There is an aesthetic argument about the typography and the laminate and the period, and I have heard it made with real feeling by people who have never once considered that the four printed rows describe a living woman in a district they could not find on a map. I authenticate for these clients. I charge them a great deal. I am not going to pretend that this is principled.

The third group is the reason I am writing this piece.

Forged buy their own cards back.

Not often, because they cannot usually afford to, and not successfully, because a card for a live commercial line is an asset that its institutional holder has no reason to release. But it happens, at the edges, through dealers, through people like me. Three times this year I have authenticated a card for a forged buyer and not charged a fee, which is a small enough gesture that I am embarrassed to have mentioned it.

What they buy is not information. They know their build line. Every commercial-stock forged can recite their line, their run, their projected window, and most of them learned all three from a stranger in an unkind tone before they were twenty. There is nothing on the card they do not know.

What they buy is the object. The single physical copy of the thing that was decided about them, out of the hands of the people who decided it and into their own. One woman I did this for, shelf stock, a 2047 line, held the card for a long time and then asked me whether the punch meant her line was retired. I said it did. She said, "Good." Then she said, "So there won't be any more of me," and I said no, not from this, and she put it in her coat and thanked me and left, and I have thought about the word good every day since.

"So there won't be any more of me." She said it the way you would say a fever had broken. There is a whole politics in that sentence and I am not the person to write it.

// P.K.

A note on what happens next, because the trade is changing under all of us. The continuity agreements now being signed at stability programs assign post-stability template rights forward. The institutional holders are acquiring live rights by contract

now, and have stopped chasing paper out of dead facilities. Within fifteen years the print card will be a historical object and nothing else. The collectors will be delighted. The prices will go up.

And the woman with the 2047 card will still be the only person alive holding the only copy of the decision that produced her, which is a thing almost nobody in this world gets to say, and which will be worth exactly nothing on any market, and which is the only valuation of this object I am prepared to defend.

I have my own card in a drawer in my office. I have not opened the drawer in six years. My editor asked me to explain that in this piece and I have declined, and she has printed the refusal, which I suppose is her way of explaining it for me.

THE ROOM WHERE EVERYONE LIED

THE WOMAN WHO SIGNS THE LETTERS

Anneke Sorrel runs Template Assurance at SOMA CONTINENTAL and has personally revised the expiry letter twice to make it kinder. We met in a longevity lounge where baselines buy add-ons by the milliliter. She wore a high collar. It took me most of the evening to understand why.

By Solveig Rand

The Vellum Room is on the forty-fourth floor of a clinic tower in New Geneva and it does not look like a clinic, which is the whole proposition. Low light, walnut, a bar with eleven things on it and a menu of forty-one more that do not appear on any list you can hold. Members come here to buy enhancement the way an earlier century bought wine, by the milliliter, discussed quietly with a man in a good jacket who knows what you had last time.

Anneke Sorrel is at the corner table when I arrive, eleven minutes early, with a glass of something pale and untouched in front of her. She is fifty-one, narrow, extremely well dressed in the way that reads as expensive only on the second look, and she is wearing a collar cut high on the left in a heavy dull silk. I clock the collar. I file it under fashion. I am wrong for two hours.

“You want to talk about the letter,” she says, before I have sat down.

I say that I do.

“Everybody wants to talk about the letter. Nobody wants to talk about the eleven thousand people it goes to, which is a shame, because they are much more interesting than a piece of paper.” She turns her glass a quarter turn without drinking from it. “Sit. Order something. They will bring you a card with things on it you should not order.”

The letter, for those who have been lucky enough not to receive one: when a SOMA CONTINENTAL enrollee’s assay history crosses the threshold that the company calls stability transition, they receive a physical letter. It confirms the reading, sets out the

revised dose schedule, restates the terms of their continuity agreement, and provides three contact routes for what the document calls forward arrangements. It is two pages. Sorrel has revised it twice in nine years.

“The first version was written by lawyers,” she says. “It opened with the clause reference. You are receiving this letter pursuant to. I read one in 2059 and I went back to my office and I wrote a version that opens with the person’s name and the words this is not an emergency, and it took me fourteen months to get it approved because legal believed the reassurance was a representation.”

I ask whether it is a representation.

“It is true,” she says. “It is not an emergency. It is a transition with a median duration of six years. People kill themselves in the first week, Miss Rand. They kill themselves in the first week because a lawyer opened a letter with a clause reference. I moved eleven words and that number went down by a third and I have the figures and I am extremely proud of it, and I am aware of how that sounds in your magazine.”

“I moved eleven words to the top of a page and a third fewer people died in the first week. I would like you to hold that and the rest of my job in your head at the same time. I have had to.”

// Anneke Sorrel

Here is the difficulty with Anneke Sorrel, and it is a difficulty for me and not for her. She is not defensive. She does not do the thing that people in her position always do, the pivot to systemic constraint, the my hands are tied. She goes straight at the ugliest part of her own job with a kind of relish, and after about forty minutes I realized the relish is not confidence. It is rehearsal. She has said all of this to herself, at length, many times, in a room.

I put clause eleven to her. The template rights. The derivative commercial stock. The perpetuity.

“Yes,” she says.

I ask whether she thinks a person signs that freely.

“No.” No pause at all. “Nobody signs that freely. There is one door and we built it and we charge admission in the only currency our enrollees have. I am not going to sit here and tell you about informed consent. You would laugh at me and you would be right to.”

I ask her what she would call it, then.

She thinks about that for long enough that the man in the good jacket comes over and she waves him off without looking.

“Rent,” she says. “We are charging rent on the difference between what a district clinic can make and what our plant can make. The difference is real. Our dose is better. Our dose is why a woman in a borough with no water pressure gets eleven more years. And the rent is her template, in perpetuity, and if you asked me to defend the ratio I could not, because there is no ratio. There is a monopoly and a price and both were set by us.”

I pushed on the monopoly, because it is the load-bearing claim and she had put it there herself. Four plants. I asked her what stops a fifth.

“Nothing legal,” she says. “Capital and inspection. You need a sterile line, a validated carrier synthesis, and a cold chain that does not depend on a district staying solvent, and that is the number I would put in front of you if you were an investor and it would end the conversation. Two consortia have tried since 2058. Both got to validation and stopped, and both of them stopped for the same reason, which is that the enrollees who need the dose cannot pay for it and the only thing they have that services the debt is the template. So you arrive at clause eleven from a spreadsheet, independently, every time. That is what I would like people to understand. Nobody in this industry sat in a room and invented that clause because they were wicked. It is what falls out of the arithmetic, and it falls out of the arithmetic every single time anybody runs it, and that is much worse than wickedness because you cannot fire it.”

I said that a thing which falls out of the arithmetic every time is usually a sign the arithmetic is being run with one input fixed, and that the fixed input here is that the dose has to be paid for by the person taking it.

She looked at me for a while.

“Yes,” she said. “And I have said that sentence in two meetings in nine years, and I have watched what happens to the person who says it, and I stopped saying it. Put that in as well.”

Around ten the room fills. This is the part of the evening I had been told about and had not believed. The Vellum Room's late trade is baseline money buying capability, and it is conducted with a discretion that is entirely about the transaction and not at all about the shame, because there is no shame in the room. A man at the bar orders reflex work the way you would order a second bottle. A woman two tables over is being talked through a night vision package by a consultant with a folder, and she is asking sensible questions about recovery time, and her husband is on his phone.

I say to Sorrel that it is strange to watch baselines buy, by choice, the things her enrollees were built with and are now being billed for.

"It is not strange," she says. "It is the market working correctly. They pay for the upside. My people were issued the upside and are paying for the downside. Same product. Different position on the contract." She turns the glass again. "The woman with the folder will have a dose schedule in four years and she will not call it a dose schedule, she will call it a maintenance program, and it will be excellent, and nobody will ever send her a letter."

She talks about the eleven thousand in a way I have not heard anybody in her industry talk. Not as a cohort. She has read the replies. There is a return address on the letter, a real one, which she fought for and which goes to a desk outside her office, and roughly one in nine people writes back.

"Most of them are practical," she says. "Dose questions. Can I move, will the schedule follow me. About one in forty is a letter about their life, and those are the ones I answer myself, by hand, and I am four months behind and I will never catch up, and I do not delegate them, and my deputy thinks that is vanity."

I ask whether it is.

"Probably. It is certainly not efficient." She turns the glass. "A man wrote to me in 2063 to ask whether the company would want his daughter's numbers. Second gen, eleven years old, healthy, no enrollment, nothing on any register. He was not accusing me of anything. He genuinely wanted to know, from the person who would know, whether his child was on a list somewhere. I checked. She was not. I wrote back and told him she was not, and I did not tell him the other thing, which is that there is no mechanism preventing her from being, and that if the commercial case ever arrives she will be, and that my letter to him is now the document establishing that we knew she existed."

I asked her why she checked at all, given what checking created.

“Because he asked me,” she said. “You keep looking for the moment I decided to be this. There is no moment. There is a series of afternoons on which the kind thing and the correct thing pointed in different directions and I picked, and I picked well about half the time, and the half I picked well are in a filing system and the half I did not are in me.”

At half past eleven she takes something from her bag, and the movement is fast and practiced and completely unhidden, and she puts a small dose pen against the left side of her neck, under the collar, and there is a click.

The collar is not fashion. The collar has never been fashion.

She sees me see it. She does not put the pen away quickly and she does not explain. She waits, which I think is a courtesy and which is certainly a test.

I ask the only question available.

“Second gen,” she says. “Both parents commercial stock, different lines. There is no template for me. There is no card. There is nothing in a drawer anywhere that says what I was supposed to be, because nobody ordered me, my parents just had me, which was not encouraged and was not illegal.” She caps the pen. “I present as baseline on a standard scan. I have never corrected anybody. I have a maintenance program.”

I ask whether anyone at SOMA CONTINENTAL knows.

“Two people. Neither of them in this hemisphere.”

I ask why she is telling me.

“Because I am the only person in that building who has read the letter as a document that could one day arrive for her, and I have never once been able to say so in a meeting, and I am fifty-one, and I would like it to exist somewhere in writing before it does.”

// Sorrel

I asked her the obvious follow-up, which is whether the eleven thousand people receiving her letter would be comforted or enraged to learn that the woman who signs it is on a maintenance program in a lounge on the forty-fourth floor.

“Enraged,” she said. “Correctly. I am not asking them for anything. I am not claiming kinship, I have not earned it, I have a salary and a plant and a legal department and they have a letter. If I lost all of it tomorrow I would still have a better dose than any of them, because I know four people, and knowing four people is the entire difference between my life and theirs.”

She paid. She refused to let me pay, and she did it in a way that made clear she had refused this before and that the refusal was about the magazine rather than about me.

On the way to the lifts she stopped, and said one more thing, and it is the thing I have not been able to file away.

“I have signed four thousand one hundred and nine of those letters. I know the number. There is no reason for me to know the number.”

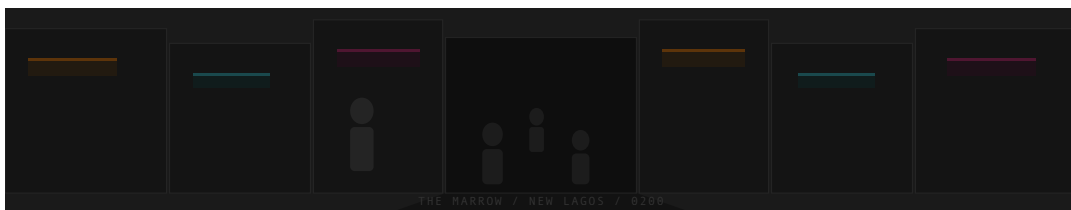
The lift came. She got in. The collar sat exactly as it had all evening, high on the left, dull silk, beautifully cut, doing the only job it was ever cut to do.

CITY OF BAD IDEAS

NINE HUNDRED METERS OF THE MARROW

New Lagos has a corridor where a body can be edited between one meal and the next. The touts price you from behind. The surgeons are better than they have any right to be. Nobody in nine hundred meters will tell you where the material comes from, and after four days I stopped believing that was because they did not know.

By Kiro Adesanya



You come into the Marrow from the north end, off the produce road, and the first thing that happens is that somebody prices you.

Not to your face. That is important and it is the thing the corridor is known for. The touts stand in doorways at the north entrance and they watch you walk away from them for about nine meters, and by the time you reach the second junction a number has already gone down the corridor ahead of you. They are reading gait, recovery, shoulder carriage, and the specific way a person's weight settles on the back foot, and they are extremely good at it, and I was priced three times in four days by three different people who had never seen my face.

The lowest offer was two hundred and forty credits for a reflex package, quoted to me on day three by a boy of about nineteen outside a shop with a good sign. Two hundred and forty is not a price for work. Two hundred and forty is a price for material that cost nothing. I want to be honest that this is the moment the piece turned for me, and that what upset me was not the danger. It was that somebody had looked at the back of me and concluded that I was a person who would take the cheap one.

Nine hundred meters, roughly north to south, running between the old refrigeration warehouses on a strip that had power and water when nothing else in that quarter did. That is the whole geographic explanation for why the Marrow is where it is. Cryo needs current, current needs cooling, and the district that had both in 2049 got the clinics, and then the clinics got the touts, and then the touts got the corridor.

There are, by the count of the trade association that officially does not exist, one hundred and seventy operating premises on it. Perhaps twenty are what you would call clinics. The rest are consult rooms, aftercare beds, dose shops, supply houses, two very good instrument repairers, a laundry that handles the corridor's surgical linen and knows more about who is doing what than anyone, and a great number of doorways that are simply where a particular person stands.

The touts are the corridor's first economy and its most misunderstood one. Outsiders assume they work for the clinics. They do not. A tout is an independent broker who is paid a percentage by whichever premises the walk-in ends up at, and the percentages vary by shop, and the whole art of the job is routing a stranger to the highest-paying premises that will not produce a complaint traceable back to you. That constraint is the only consumer protection in nine hundred meters and it is real, because a tout who sends three people to a bad shop stops being able to stand in a doorway.

The boy who quoted me two hundred and forty is called Emeka and he has worked the north entrance for two years. He agreed to talk on the condition that I did not describe what he looks like, which I have honored, and which he asked for in a way that suggested he had thought about it before I arrived.

"Everybody thinks we guess," he said. "We do not guess. You put your weight on your back foot when you stopped at the junction and you did it twice. That is a person who has been told to stand still for a long time by somebody in a uniform. So, service. Then you looked at the sign on Ifeoma's door and not at the price card, and people who read signs and not prices are either rich or press."

I asked which he had decided.

"Press," he said. "Rich does not walk in from the produce road."

I asked him about the two hundred and forty, and he stopped enjoying the conversation.

“That is not my price. I quote what the shop tells me to quote. If you want to know why a package is two hundred and forty, ask the shop where the two hundred and forty comes from.” A pause. “I do not send people to that shop. I quoted you because you had been walking around for three days and somebody was going to.”

The clinics are better than they have any right to be. This is the thing that outsiders refuse to believe and that everybody who has walked the corridor will tell you. The rejection rates in the Marrow are lower than at two of the faction programs I have reported on. The surgeons work with salvaged equipment they maintain themselves, they take referrals from each other with a professional courtesy that would embarrass a hospital, and the good ones will turn away work that a licensed facility would happily take and bill for.

I watched a surgeon called Ifeoma refuse a woman on my second afternoon. The woman wanted night vision, she had the money, and Ifeoma spent nine minutes with her hands on the woman’s neck and then said no, and explained why, and then sat with her for another quarter of an hour while the woman cried, and did not charge her for the consult, and walked her to the door.

Then Ifeoma went back inside and worked until four in the morning on material whose origin she will not discuss with me, with you, or with anyone.

“You are asking me where the parts bin gets restocked. Nobody in nine hundred meters will answer that. Not because we do not know. Because the answer is the corridor, and we all live on it.”

The parts bin. Every conversation in the Marrow eventually arrives at the same closed door and stops politely in front of it.

Genetic material for black-market work comes from three places, and everyone in the corridor can recite them: faction surplus that fell off a manifest, salvage from decommissioned programs, and harvest. The first two are common and the third is rare, and the corridor’s entire moral architecture is built on the belief that the third is rare. Ask about any specific batch and you will get faction surplus, delivered pleasantly, with a shrug that is not evasive so much as tired.

I asked a supply house owner named Bode how he verifies provenance. He said, “I look at the documentation.” I asked if the documentation was real. He said, “The documentation is documentation.” That is not a dodge. That is a precise statement about the epistemic conditions of his business, and he knew it was funny, and he laughed, and then he did not laugh.

What the Marrow has instead of provenance is memory. It is a corridor of nine hundred meters where everybody has worked next to everybody for fifteen years, and reputation moves along it faster than a person can walk. A surgeon whose work fails twice is finished. A supply house that moves a bad batch will find the laundry declining its linen within a week, which sounds trivial and is in fact a death sentence, because the laundry is the only place in the corridor that can process to a standard and everybody knows it.

There is no written rule anywhere on the strip. I asked four people to describe the corridor’s standards and got four different accounts, and all four accounts agreed on the same three things, which are that you do not take a walk-in who is already post-op somewhere else without calling the other shop, that you do not sell a dose to somebody who has come out of an aftercare bed in the last twelve hours, and that you do not touch anybody under seventeen for any money at all. That third one was stated to me with more heat than the other two combined, by a man who sells sleeved housings out of a case and would not otherwise strike you as a moralist.

The laundry is run by a woman named Adaeze who has been there since before the clinics, and my strong impression, unprovable, is that she is the actual regulatory authority of the Marrow and that this arrangement suits everyone including the touts.

The dose shops are the corridor’s second economy and the one that actually keeps the lights on. Perhaps thirty premises, most of them a counter and a cold cabinet, and between them they move more product by value in a week than all the surgery on the strip does in a month. This is the part of the Marrow that has nothing to do with modification. It is a pharmacy district for people whose district lists are nine weeks long, and it exists because four plants in this world make suppression dose properly and none of them will sell to a woman in a borough without taking her template first.

Prices on the corridor run between forty and a hundred and ten credits for a compound that costs under nine to manufacture. Every shopkeeper I asked knew the manufacturing figure and quoted it to me unprompted, with the specific bitterness of people who are being blamed for a markup that happens two steps above them.

“I am the last hand it passes through,” Bode said. “So I am the thief. Fine. Go and find the first hand.”

What the corridor does have, and what no district clinic offers, is hours. The shops at the north end are open at four in the morning. A shaking hand does not schedule itself, and the entire difference between the Marrow and the licensed system, in the view of every person I spoke to on the strip, comes down to the fact that one of them is open when it happens and the other one has a list.

At two in the morning the corridor is at its best and its worst. The dose shops are open, the aftercare beds are full, and the north end is loud in a way that is almost festive. There is food. There is very good food, actually, from a woman with a cart who sells to the night shift and who has an arrangement with three clinics about what she will and will not sell to somebody who is twelve hours post-op.

And there are the people waiting. That is what stays with you. Not the surgery, which happens behind doors, and not the touts, who are just salesmen with an unusual product. It is the benches. There are benches the whole length of the Marrow, put there by nobody in particular, and at two in the morning they are full of people who are eleven hours into a wait for a slot, or waiting for somebody who is inside, or waiting because the aftercare bed costs forty credits a night and a bench costs nothing.

I sat on one for two hours on my last night, next to a man named Tunde who was waiting for his sister. He is baseline. She is shelf stock, past expiry, and had come to the Marrow because the district list was nine weeks and her hands had started.

“They say the corridor is dangerous,” he said. “The corridor is not dangerous. The nine weeks is dangerous.”

I asked whether he was worried about the material.

“Every hour,” he said. “And she is inside anyway, and I brought her, and I would bring her again tomorrow.”

He said the last part looking straight ahead down the corridor, at nothing, the way you say a thing you have already had out with yourself at length and lost.

You leave the Marrow at the south end, where the corridor opens onto a junction with actual traffic and the light gets normal again very suddenly. Nobody prices you on the way out. I asked the boy from day three about that on my last morning and he looked at me like I was slow.

“On the way out you already bought,” he said. “Or you did not. Either way you are done. Why would I waste it on you twice?”

NOBODY ADMIT THIS EXISTS

A records clerk at a decommissioned Prometheus-era plant is said to have walked out in 2058 with a bag of print cards, not for sale and not for leverage, and to have spent the eight years since locating the living people the cards describe and giving them away one at a time, in person, for nothing. Fourteen confirmed. She is reportedly not finished and reportedly not in good health.

The Pellam House waiting list is said to rank applicants by the absence of surviving family, and staff who have seen the scoring describe a column that has no header. The house denies that any ranking exists. Two residents admitted in the last quarter had, between them, no living relatives and no registered address, which is either the column or the kind of coincidence that keeps happening.

A dose formulation that steadies Prometheus-stock tremor substantially better than the standard has reportedly existed in at least two continuity providers' supply chains for six years, at a manufacturing cost within eleven percent of the standard, and is issued at the discretion of individual medical directors as a "stability adjustment." Nobody will say what triggers the discretion. Everybody who has received one received it late.

HALO has reportedly stopped using her own count and started using an external metronome she keeps in her ear, on the reasoning that a purchased rhythm cannot be read as a symptom. Two analysts noticed within a week. The exchanges have begun pricing the metronome. There is now a line on whether she is using it. The ear is data. The ear will have to go.

A batch of print cards offered at a New Geneva auction house last month is said to have failed authentication on the burr and been withdrawn, and to have reappeared six days later at a private sale with the burr corrected. The correction is the news. Somebody in the trade now owns a press that can produce a specific 2044 wear pattern to order, and the honest half of the authentication business has approximately one season left.

Colonel Hosk's conduct reclassification is reportedly being quietly ignored by seven of the nine units it covers, using the superseded medical form, which nobody withdrew because withdrawing it would have required naming it. The order remains in force. The old form remains in the cabinet. Both are being filed, weekly, to the same office. A forged-rights collective is said to have obtained the full derivative-stock production records for one commercial line and to be sitting on them, not for leverage and not for release, but because publishing would identify approximately four hundred living people as derivative product to employers who do not currently know. The collective has been arguing about it for eleven months. Nobody involved has slept well.

Surgeon Nine is rumored to have refused a supply house's entire year on the strength of a single crate, and to have not said why, and to have continued taking that supplier's referrals afterward, which the corridor reads as a message rather than a boycott. Three other clinics quietly stopped ordering from the same house within a fortnight. Nobody in the Marrow has explained the crate.

Anneke Sorrel's revised expiry letter is said to have been copied, nearly verbatim, by two competing continuity providers who both denied it and neither of whom credited her, and Sorrel is reported to be entirely delighted about this and to have instructed her legal department to take no action, which her legal department has documented as an instruction rather than a decision.

There is said to be a bench at the south end of the Marrow that the corridor keeps clear, which nobody sits on, and which is not a memorial to anybody in particular. Ask three people and you will get three different accounts of who it is for. All three accounts involve a woman who worked in the corridor and stopped, and none of them agree on why.

A Phantom Viper is rumored to have arranged for her own template records to be destroyed rather than sold or recovered, through an intermediary, at considerable cost, and to have paid for the same service for two members of her outfit without telling them. The Vipers do not comment. The person who did the work is said to have refused payment and been paid anyway, twice, in the manner of that outfit.

The ORIGINAL EQUIPMENT staffing leak is reportedly not a leak. Two managers are said to have submitted their own status to a rights collective deliberately, having concluded that the most useful thing they owned was the fact of their employment at a baseline-purity label. Neither has been dismissed. The brand has said nothing at all, which is the loudest thing it has ever done.

EXPENSIVE TRASH

MERIDIAN PRIVATE STABILITY RETAINER

14,000 CR / YR

What fourteen thousand credits a year buys you: a laminated card, a phone number answered inside four rings, quarterly assay at a facility with good chairs, and priority access to a dose supply that Meridian purchases wholesale from the same four plants everybody else buys from. What it does not buy you: the dose itself, which is billed separately, or any position on the template rights question, which Meridian describes as a matter for your primary provider. The retainer is a concierge layer on top of a monopoly, sold to people who can afford to pay for the sensation of having arranged something.

Exactly what a person with too much credit and no clinic experience would buy. The card is very nicely made.

HOMEBOUND ASSAY KIT, CONSUMER GRADE

220 CR

Accurate to within a tolerance that the manufacturer publishes honestly and that is genuinely adequate for tracking a trend. Easy to use, no clinic, no appointment, results in twenty minutes on a device you already own. And it syncs by default, to a partner list of four, disclosed on a screen most users pass through in under a second, and at least one of those partners quotes a spread on build-line stability. You bought this to keep your numbers away from your clinic. Congratulations on the mechanism you actually chose.

The kind of thing that works until it matters. Kill the sync before the first use or do not buy it.

OSTRAND FIELD-GRADE COMPRESSION SLEEVE

180 CR

Graduated knit over a cooling lattice, forearm to first knuckle, external seam, six months of hard wear before the lattice packs down. It manages tremor measurably, it fits under a glove, and it was designed by people who asked the users what was wrong with the previous one and then fixed those things. There is no status content here at all. Nobody has ever photographed one. It costs a hundred and eighty credits and it works, and in a book full of objects that do neither, we would like a moment to appreciate it.

Earns the price. Buy three and rotate them.

THE VELLUM ROOM, ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP

31,000 CR

Forty-fourth floor, walnut, low light, eleven things on the visible bar and forty-one on the one you have to be told about. The consultants are excellent, the recovery suites are discreet, and the late trade is baseline money buying, by choice and by the milliliter, the exact capabilities that half this issue's subjects are being billed for having been issued. The wine is fine. The room is beautifully done. There is a baseline hour between six and seven which is the single most revealing thing any club has done this decade.

Buys silence, buys reflexes, buys a table where nobody will ever send you a letter.

"CONTINUITY FORM" COLLAR INSERT

90 CR

A shaped polymer blank, ninety credits, worn under a high collar to produce the silhouette of a med port in a person who does not have one. The finish is good. The shape is accurate. It is sold in three sizes corresponding to three real port models, which required somebody to measure the real thing, which required somebody to be in the room. Wearing this is the equivalent of pinning on a medal for an engagement you watched on a broadcast, and every single person in the room who has been on a table can see you turn your head too far.

Gets you nothing except correctly identified.

OBITUARIES FOR PEOPLE WHO AREN'T DEAD YET

THE WARRANTY

b. 2042, in a projection appendix nobody expected anyone to read • d. 2066, cause of death: everybody outliving it

The Warranty, the projected stability window issued with every commercial build line, died this quarter of the one thing its authors never modeled, which is that people kept living past it in numbers too large to call an anomaly. It was born as an engineering estimate and it spent twenty-four years being read as a sentence. It is survived by the joke, which the forged made out of it and own outright, and which will outlast every institution that ever printed a projection. In lieu of flowers, stop asking people what theirs was. The wake is every morning somebody wakes up on overtime, which is to say the wake is enormous, continuous, and going extremely well.

THE PRINT CARD

b. 2041, to satisfy an auditor who wanted to count things by hand • d. 2066, cause of death: the forward assignment

The Print Card, ninety by fifty-five millimeters, laminated, punched on retirement, was declared functionally deceased this quarter as continuity agreements began assigning live template rights forward by contract, removing any need to chase paper out of dead facilities. It is survived by the collectors, who will be delighted, and by the counterfeiters, who have already perfected the burr. It is also survived by fourteen people who were handed their own by a records clerk with a bag and no reason. Those fourteen cards are the only ones that ever did what the object was for. No services. The auditor died in 2051 and never learned what he had made.

THE PHRASE "INFORMED CONSENT"

b. long before any of this • d. 2066 on page seven, cause of death: one door

Informed Consent died this quarter in a warm office above a valley with water in it, of a condition it had been carrying for years, which is that everybody involved was fully informed and there was only ever one door. It was not killed by deception. Nobody hid anything from it. It was killed by an arrangement in which reading, understanding, and agreeing are three things a person does on the worst day of their life with a coin flip as the alternative. It is survived by its replacement, which has no name yet, and by the word rent, which a vice president used correctly in a lounge on the forty-fourth floor and has not been able to unsay. Memorial donations to nobody. There is no fund.

THE CLEAN SCAN

b. with the first registration checkpoint • d. 2066, cause of death: everyone who passed it

The Clean Scan, the belief that a standard screen sorts the world into two honest categories, died this quarter of an accumulation of people who pass it and should not, including two store managers at a baseline-purity label, a vice president in New Geneva, and, on the evidence of any bar in this hemisphere, roughly everybody. It is survived by the checkpoints, which will continue, and by the paperwork, which will continue, and by the specific facial expression of a person who has just passed a scan and is deciding whether to correct the record. Nobody corrects the record. That is the funeral, held daily, at every gate.

CLASSIFIEDS / PERSONAL ADS / BOUNTY ADS

SEEKING

Print card, 2047 commercial line, run four. Mine. I know who holds it and I know what they paid and I know it is not for sale. I am not making an offer. I am putting it in a magazine so that the person who holds it has to read the word mine in print, which is the only thing I have.

// RUN FOUR, STILL HERE

FOR SALE

Corvid-4 housings, spent, seals intact, forty units, sleeved and boxed. I am not selling you a refill and I will not tell you where to get one. Buyers who ask about contents will be sold nothing and remembered.

// SHELLS ONLY, EAST DOCK

PERSONAL

Dovey: the tomatoes were the correct call and I have told a great many people about the side shoots. I did not print the thing you said in the garden about your hands, and I will not, and you should know that I wanted to. Overtime suits you.

// R.C., THE ELEVENTH DAY

WANTED

Derivative-stock production records, any commercial line, 2044 onward. We are not command, not a provider, and not press. We are four hundred people who would like to know whether we are four hundred people. Discretion offered and honored. We have argued about this for eleven months and have decided to ask out loud.

// BUILT NOT BORN, LEDGER CHAPTER

FOR SALE

Heritage commission coat, template lot lining, size large, worn twice. The lining reads as a build line I was not commissioned from and I did not know that when I bought it. Somebody in a bar explained it to me kindly, which was worse. 900 credits. The kindness is not included.

// WRONG LINING, LEARNED IT

MEMORIAL

For P., shelf stock, 2044 line, who went to the corridor because the district list was nine weeks and did not come back off the bench. Bring nothing. Say nothing about the material. He knew. He went anyway and he would like that stated plainly rather than mourned around.

// THE SOUTH END BENCH

PERSONAL

To the vice president in the good collar: you said you would like it to exist somewhere in writing. It does now, on page 44, and four thousand one hundred and nine people can read it. I did not do you a kindness. I did my job. I hope those are the same thing this once.

// S.R.

SEEKING

A boring seller. Forty meters of corridor, four years in the same doorway, asks what compound before quoting, has said no to me at least once. Paying above the price and paying on the weeks I do not need anything. I have read the manual. I would like to stop testing my own hands on a schedule.

// NINE WEEKS AND COUNTING

FOR SALE

Continuity form collar insert, size two, ninety credits, worn once to a dinner where three people at the table had the real thing. They were polite. That was the entire problem. Free to anyone who will tell me they are throwing it away.

// TURNED MY HEAD TOO FAR

PERSONAL

KIST: the tomatoes are not an argument. The garden is not an argument. The two cooks are not an argument. You know precisely which sentence of yours I could not answer and you knew it while you were saying it. I am going to keep failing to answer it and I am not coming up on the bus.

// THE ONE WHO LOWERED HERSELF

BOUNTY

800 credits for the manufacturing cost sheet on any “stability adjustment” formulation issued at medical-director discretion, any provider, any year. Not the formula. The cost. We want the number next to the standard, on the same page, in their own document.

// ELEVEN PERCENT, PROVE IT

SEEKING

The records clerk with the bag. Fourteen of us have been found. I am not asking for mine, I have made my peace with the drawer, I am asking whether anyone is looking after you, because the last person you handed one to said you did not look well and none of us has been able to stop thinking about it.

// NUMBER SIX

WANTED

Any copy of the superseded medical form, blank, current stock. Nine units are using it, seven of them are not supposed to be, and one of them has run out. We are not making a political point. We are trying to get a woman with a shaking hand seen by a doctor instead of charged.

// OLD FORM, STILL IN THE CABINET

FOR SALE

Instrument repair, corridor rates, twenty years on optical and fine mechanical, no questions asked about what you are repairing and no questions answered about who else brings me work. I do not touch anything that goes inside a person. I want that in the ad.

// MID-CORRIDOR, THE BLUE DOOR

PERSONAL

To the woman who was refused night vision on a Tuesday and cried in the consult room: she did not take your money and she sat with you for fifteen minutes. Three shops on that corridor would have taken it and booked you for the same afternoon. You were not rejected. You were the only person in the Marrow who got told the truth that day.

// SOMEONE WAITING OUTSIDE

SEEKING

Adaeze's standard. Anyone who can process surgical linen to it, anywhere else, at any price, please make yourself known to the three clinics at the north end. This is not a complaint about the laundry. This is nine hundred meters admitting out loud that one woman is the only inspectorate we have.

// NORTH END, THREE DOORS

FOR SALE

ORIGINAL EQUIPMENT shirt, unworn, tags on, bought as a gift by somebody who did not think it through and given to me by somebody who did. Cost two hundred and forty credits. Same number as the cheap package. That is the only reason I am keeping the receipt.

// SUFFICIENT ON ARRIVAL, APPARENTLY

PERSONAL

HALO: take the metronome out. They will price whatever you use and they will price the silence too, so use the silence, it is cheaper and it is yours. Somebody counted for you in a corridor once and would do it again from anywhere you like.

// STILL ON FEED 14

WHAT THE BODY IS FOR

There is a sentence in Cass Rennick's feature that I have read more times than is good for me. It is Dovey Marchetti in a garden, holding a hand that has just stopped shaking after eleven years, saying: they can do this, they could always do this.

I wanted to build a case out of that sentence. It is not difficult. The formulation exists, the cost is within eleven percent of standard, it is issued at a medical director's discretion, and every person who has received one received it late. You can write the indictment yourself in four minutes. I did, and it sat in this space for two weeks, and I have taken it out, because it was not what the sentence is about.

What the sentence is about is a woman looking at her own hand and not recognizing the ownership.

That is the condition this issue kept walking into, in rooms with nothing else in common. A print card in a drawer its subject has not opened in six years. A vice president who knows how many letters she has signed and has no reason to know it. Four hundred people who cannot find out whether they are four hundred people. Somebody in every one of those rooms is standing in a body that a contract got to first.

The best things in this issue are all refusals. A surgeon who says no on a Tuesday and does not charge for the consult. A clerk with a bag walking cards back to the people they describe, fourteen so far, for nothing, in poor health. A man who closed his shop the day he could no longer tell himself the story. A woman who says good when she learns her line is retired.

None of that is a solution, and I would distrust a magazine that offered one. It is the only category of act the apparatus cannot price. The exchanges quote a spread on your stability window. The touts price you from behind in nine meters and are right. Not one of those systems has a column for a woman refusing money on a Tuesday.

Dovey Marchetti signed page seven on the worst day of her life and got eleven good years and a garden, and somebody is going to grow a run of her and sell them, and she did the sum out loud for our reporter and asked her to show her working. Cass could not. I cannot. Every version of the arithmetic comes out in favor of the tomatoes and every version is obscene, and neither of those is going to move.

So we print it. Somebody signed, somebody understood, somebody profited, and here are their names, and here is the clause, and here is the cost sheet if anybody ever gets us the cost sheet.

You are wearing the only thing you will ever own outright. Somewhere there is paperwork disputing it. Go and find out whose name is on it.

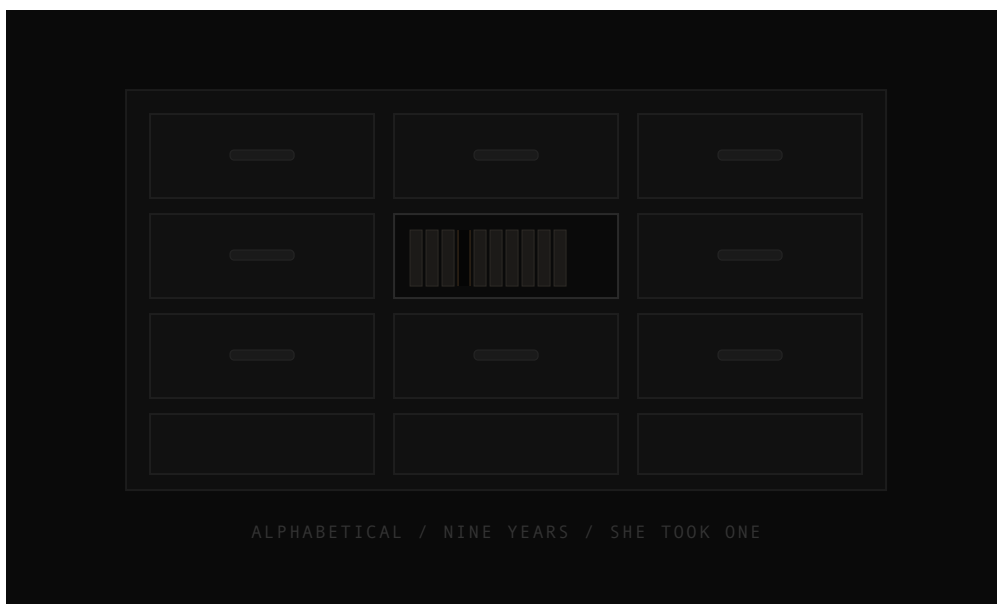
// I.D.

CONFLICT

Issue 48 // Published quarterly, or whenever the courier is well enough to travel.

Printed on a stock that does not hold a scan. Distributed by hand to people who would rather not be enrolled anywhere.

You are wearing the only thing you will ever own outright.



“She left the drawer open. Nobody has ever said whether that was carelessness or a signature.”

// continuity facility file room, the only theft anyone has confirmed

CONFLICT

Issue 48 // Q4 2066