

CONFLICT

No. 50 / THE WAR ECONOMY

A collage of torn, aged documents with various stamps, a metal clipboard, and a fingerprint. The documents are layered and show signs of wear, with some text obscured by black redaction bars. A large orange fingerprint is visible on the right side. A metal clipboard is positioned in the upper center, holding a document with a large black redaction box and several lines of text. A red rectangular stamp with diagonal lines is located in the bottom right corner of the collage.

THE CONTRACT ISSUE

WHO GETS TO COUNT AS A PERSON?

CONFLICT / No. 50 / THE CONTRACT ISSUE

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

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CONFLICT

Issue 50 // Q2 2067 // The Contract Issue

NOBODY DROWNS ON *PAPER*

NINE DAYS ON A BOROUGH CONTRACT IN FLOODED LONDON, INCLUDING
THE ONE THAT WENT WET // EMBEDDED

THE WOMAN WHO DECIDES WHETHER YOUR DEATH WAS COVERED,
INTERVIEWED IN A ROOM ABOVE THE WATERLINE

HOW TO READ THE ANNEX THEY HANDED YOU FOLDED

THE PAPER OP IS BACK IN FASHION AND SO ARE THE CASUALTY FIGURES

WHAT A CONTRACT WALLET SAYS ABOUT WHO IS COMING FOR YOUR BODY

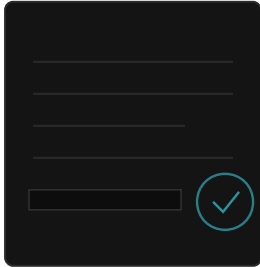
SOUTHWARK RUNS ON A DOCUMENT NOBODY IN SOUTHWARK HAS READ

ADVERTISEMENT

INDEMNIS

OPERATOR LIABILITY UNDERWRITING

Borough-compliant in eleven councils. Named insured is your client, not you.



POLICY 0001 / CLIENT PROTECTED / OPERATOR NAMED NOWHERE

Every job you take is already insured. The question is whose loss it covers.

INDEMNIS writes liability cover for the party that commissions the work. Councils, port authorities, relay boards, and private principals across eleven boroughs carry our paper, which is why their contracts move so quickly and why nobody has ever explained the speed to you. Our policies pay the client for what happens to the client. They have never been designed to pay you, and we have never once said otherwise in writing.

Because somebody in every engagement is going to be made whole, and it was always going to be the one holding the pen.

INDEMNIS is not an operator benefits provider and does not offer personal injury, death, or dependent cover to contracted personnel. Coverage attaches to the commissioning party. Nothing in a principal's policy creates a duty toward subcontracted individuals, their crews, or their next of kin. Our counsel has asked that this appear here rather than be discovered later, by you, in a corridor, from a clerk who did not write it.

INDEMNIS UNDERWRITING

Somebody is covered.

CONFLICT

Issue 50 // Q2 2067

A contraband glossy from the edge of a dying future

Editor-in-Chief

INES DRESSLER

Has read this magazine's own contributor agreement end to end exactly once, in a bad year, and has never fully recovered her opinion of herself for what she signed anyway

Deputy Editor

GIDEON ARLT

Can find the clause. Has never once been thanked for finding the clause. Keeps finding it.

Fashion & Field Intelligence

NICO BRAND

Reads a contract wallet across a bar the way other people read a watch, and has correctly named three principals this quarter from the stitching alone

Features Editor

TOVAH REIST

Sent a lynx into a wet entry on a borough contract and spent the following week refusing to describe that decision as a decision

Culture & Decline

WREN COLE

Covers the paperwork of violence as a style beat, correctly, and has the letters from three law firms framed above her desk in the order they arrived

Copy & Classifieds

HALLORAN PYNE

Will not cut a classified that is obviously a crew trying to find out who actually holds their paper, and stopped calling that a soft spot around the time it started being useful

Contracts Desk

WE HAVE NOT READ OUR OWN. WE HAVE BEEN ADVISED NOT TO.

Claims Desk

NO CLAIM FILED WITH THIS MAGAZINE HAS EVER BEEN PAID BY THIS MAGAZINE.

Legal

EVERY NAMED FIRM IN THIS ISSUE WAS OFFERED A RIGHT OF REPLY. ONE TOOK IT. IT IS ON PAGE 21.

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. Every person on this masthead is working under terms they negotiated badly and would sign again, which is the entire subject of this issue and the reason we were qualified to run it.

CONTRIBUTORS

CASS RENNICK

Lynx, ex-operator, writes EMBEDDED and has now spent nine days attached to a borough security contract in Flooded London on the understanding that she was covering the relay and not the paperwork. She was covering the paperwork. She filed forty percent over length, refused to cut the section about the clipboard, and was right about that.

HOLLIS BRACK

Spent six years as a contracts clerk for a mid-tier maritime security firm, which means he drafted the annexes that this issue exists to warn you about. He writes THE MANUAL on reading one before you sign it. He has asked us to print that he is not sorry, exactly, and to leave the sentence there without softening it.

VERA LOMBARD

Collects the small documents that people carry on their bodies and has an archive of four hundred of them, sorted by borough, most acquired from families who had no further use for the original. She wrote MATERIAL CULTURE about the folded annex card. She will not sell any of the four hundred and has stopped explaining why to people who ask.

MARGUERITE OSEI

Interviews the people who decide things about other people from rooms those people will never enter. For THE ROOM WHERE EVERYONE LIED she got two hours above the waterline with a claims director who has denied more operator deaths than any individual currently working, and who was, by every measure Osei could apply in the room, entirely sincere.

PADRAIG NNAMDI

Reports from boroughs that other outlets cover once a year, badly, after a drowning. For CITY OF BAD IDEAS he spent eleven days in Southwark tracing the security arrangement that keeps the water relay running and could not find a single resident who had read it. He found four who could quote it. Nobody has been able to explain that gap to him, including the council.

OPEN WOUNDS

THE MOST DANGEROUS DOCUMENT IN THIS CITY IS THE ONE NOBODY READS OUT LOUD

A lawyer told me at a function this quarter that the contract is the only weapon in theater with a hundred percent hit rate. He meant it as a joke about his own profession, the kind of self-deprecation that is actually a boast wearing a coat. I laughed, because you do. Then I went home and thought about the fourteen operators who died on borough paper in Flooded London last year and the number of those deaths that produced a payment to anyone related to the deceased, which is two.

This is the contract issue. Every department in it bends toward the same unglamorous object: the piece of paper that decides, in advance, who is a person and who is a line item when something goes wrong. Not the gun. Not the water. The paper.

You will not find a faction villain in here. That is deliberate, and it took an argument. Our features editor wanted a Kavast angle, because a Kavast angle sells, and because it is genuinely easier to write about a rotation moving through a corridor than about a clause. She is right that it sells. She lost the argument anyway, because the thing that actually kills contractors in this decade is not a rotation. It is clause nine.

Cass Rennick spent nine days on a borough security contract in Southwark for EMBEDDED, page 26. She went in to write about the water relay, which is a good story, and which she did not end up writing. What she wrote instead is what happened when a routine perimeter job turned into a wet entry, and the crew discovered in the water, in real time, that the annex they had signed described the relay building and not the tunnel underneath it. Two of them had read the annex. Both had read it as a formality. The piece is not comfortable and we have not made it comfortable.

Marguerite Osei sat down on page 49 with the woman who processes the other end of that. Ilse Vandergrift is a claims director. She has denied more operator death claims than any single individual currently working in the sector, and she can explain every one of them, calmly, in language that is not evasive and not cruel and, in the room, extremely convincing. That is the interview. That is why we ran it. The most frightening thing in this issue is not a villain, it is a competent professional applying a document correctly.

Hollis Brack, who drafted this kind of annex for six years before he stopped, has written the manual on page 40 for reading one before you sign it. Vera Lombard has followed a single folded rider card through three owners on page 45. Pádraig Nnamdi

went to Southwark on page 55 and could not find one resident who had read the contract their entire borough runs on, though he found four who could quote it from memory, which is a stranger fact and a worse one.

We also do the usual work. We rank the people making money from the gap between what a contract appears to promise and what it is engineered to deliver. We shame a season of tactical fashion built entirely around signalling that you have good paper when you do not. We print an ad, on the inside front cover, from a firm whose product is honestly described and morally indefensible, and we took the money, and you should read the ad and then read page 20 and decide what you think of us.

Nobody drowns on paper. It is an old line and everyone in the trade says it and almost nobody says the second half, which is that the drowning happens somewhere else, later, and the paper is what determines whether anyone is required to notice.

Read your annex tonight. Then read whose name is on the policy, which is not going to be yours.

// INES DRESSLER

THIS MONTH IN DECLINE

1

THE PAPER OP RETURNS TO FASHION, ALONG WITH ITS CASUALTY FIGURES

Four boroughs this quarter have commissioned sweeps with objectives written for a council minute rather than for a crew: clear the yard, secure the relay, restore access, no air, no armor, no medical on standby closer than eleven minutes. It reads beautifully at a meeting. Two crews declined the terms outright and were replaced within a week by crews who did not. The councils have described the replacement process as competitive tendering.

2

A MID-TIER FIRM QUIETLY MOVES ITS DEATH-BENEFIT SCHEDULE INTO AN ANNEX

What used to sit on page two of the main agreement, in a table, in a font a person could read while standing up, now lives in a separate document handed over folded at signing. The numbers have not changed. The retrieval of the numbers now takes about ninety seconds longer than most people are willing to spend in a room with someone waiting for a signature, which is, per two former clerks, precisely the interval the change was designed to buy.

3

BOROUGH BADGES OUTNUMBER FACTION OPERATORS IN SOUTHWARK FOR THE FIRST TIME

The relay boroughs now run more security personnel on civilian council paper than on any faction rotation, a threshold crossed sometime in the last two quarters and announced by nobody. Faction operators continue to describe borough badges as low-

rent. Borough badges continue to describe themselves as the only ones doing work that a resident would notice if it stopped. Both positions have hardened. Neither has been tested by a bad week yet.

4

INDEMNIS OPENS AN ELEVENTH BOROUGH AND PUTS THE AD ON OUR COVER FLAP

The underwriter now carries paper for eleven councils in the flood zone, up from six last year, and celebrated by buying the inside front cover of this magazine to explain, in plain and unembarrassed language, that its policies exist to make the client whole and have never covered the contractor. We printed it. We have also put the company on page 20. Both of those things are true at once and we would rather you knew.

5

SOMEONE IS SELLING BLANK RIDER CARDS ON THE CANAL MARKET AT NINE CREDITS

Pre-laminated, correct stock, correct fold, correct borough watermark, entirely unfilled. The obvious use is fraud. The actual use, per three of the four sellers, is crews photographing a real annex and transcribing the parts that matter onto something they can keep on their body when the original is retained by the principal at signing, which it always is, which is the whole reason there is a market.

6

A RELAY BOARD DISCOVERS ITS OWN CONTRACT DOES NOT COVER THE TUNNELS

The Waterloo board commissioned a perimeter review after an incident it will not describe and found that the defined premises in its standing security agreement stop at the relay building's foundation slab. Everything below that, which is where the work actually happens, is outside the engagement. The board has requested a variation. The firm has quoted for a variation. The quote is not small.

7

MAKALI BLUES REACHES THE BOROUGH BARRACKS AND LOSES ITS PUNCHLINE

The card game has spread from PMC barracks into the borough crews, where it has picked up a local rule: the player who goes into the tunnel first not only loses, they hand their stake to whoever is holding the paper. Everyone at the table understands the joke. Two crews we spoke to have stopped playing it, not because it is unfunny, but because it stopped being funny at a specific moment and neither crew wants to say when.

8

A COUNCIL PUBLISHES ITS SECURITY BUDGET AND REDACTS THE LIABILITY LINE

Full transparency on headcount, hours, equipment, and hourly rate. The single figure withheld is what the borough pays for cover, which is the only number in the document that tells you what the council believes a body is worth. Three residents have requested it. The council has cited commercial sensitivity, which is technically a valid ground and which nobody in the room believed was the reason.

9

WARM BODIES NOW GET A NAME BADGE, WHICH IS SOMEHOW WORSE

Single-engagement hires on the canal jobs have started being issued printed identification for the duration, a change introduced after a drowning in which nobody on site could tell the recovery crew who they had pulled out. The badges are collected at the end of the shift. The names are not retained. The firm has described this as an improvement in accountability and, in the narrowest possible sense, it is.

10

THE GHOST MENU DEVELOPS A PRICE LIST, WHICH DEFEATS THE POINT OF A GHOST MENU

Off-contract work offered by handlers when the official job has nothing on it used to be quoted case by case, in person, deniably. At least two handlers in the flood zone are now circulating a standing rate card. Crews are furious about this for a reason that takes a minute to articulate: a rate card is a document, and the entire value of the ghost menu was that it was not.

11

A FIRM STARTS ADVERTISING “NAMED INSURED” AS A RECRUITING BENEFIT

Brackwater has begun listing operator-named cover in its recruitment copy, which is either a genuine and overdue reform or the most effective piece of poaching material anyone in the sector has produced in five years. Every crew we spoke to had seen the copy. Every crew we spoke to had a theory about the deductible. Nobody has yet obtained the policy.

12

TIDE CHARTS RUNS AN ISSUE ABOUT A DEBRIEF AND SELLS OUT IN A DAY

The hand-drawn canal-side comic that follows a squad through one wet entry per issue devoted its latest to no operation at all: eleven pages of a crew in a room with a clipboard, being asked what happened, in an order designed to produce a particular answer. Nothing gets wet. Nobody fires anything. Barracks distribution cleared in under a day and the second printing is already gone.

DOs / DON'Ts OF THE THEATER

DO

Photograph your annex before it is retained at signing. Every principal keeps the original, every principal is entitled to, and every crew that has ever had to argue about a defined premises from memory has lost that argument on the spot.

DON'T

Ask a borough badge who holds their paper in front of the person who holds their paper. You already know they will say the firm. You are making them say it, in a room, at no cost to yourself, and everyone watching understands exactly what you have just done.

DO

Learn to say “that is outside the engagement” in a level voice, before you need it. The crews who can say it calmly get a variation quoted. The crews who say it angrily get replaced by Thursday and told the tender was competitive.

DON'T

Wear a firm's patch you are not currently under. Not as a joke, not as an old loyalty, not because you liked the design. Somebody in the canal bars is going to read it as a claim about who covers you, and act on that reading, and be wrong at your expense.

DO

Keep the fold. A rider card that has been carried opens flat at the clause its owner needed most, and every clerk, medic, and recovery diver in the flood zone knows to read the crease before the text.

DON'T

Sign in the water. Not the variation, not the acknowledgment, not the timesheet. Anything presented to you while you are cold and standing in it was timed to be presented while you are cold and standing in it.

DO

Ask what your name is on. Not who you work for, which everyone answers cheerfully. What document, specifically, has your name written on it. The pause before the answer is the most useful two seconds available to you in the whole hiring process.

DON'T

Describe yourself as a subcontractor at a barracks table if you have never been paid as one. The word carries a specific exposure and the people at that table have all worn it. They will let you finish. They will not include you again.

DO

Buy the ugly dry bag rated for the depth you will actually be at rather than the handsome one rated for the depth in the brief. The brief was written by somebody who has read the survey and never been under it.

DON'T

Bring a lawyer to a borough negotiation unless you can afford to be the crew that brought a lawyer. It works. It works once. Then the council remembers your name in a way that has nothing to do with your work.

DO

Read the definitions page first and the obligations page second. Everyone reads it in the other order, which is why so many people can quote what they were supposed to do and so few can tell you where they were supposed to be doing it.

DON'T

Tell a family that a claim is being processed when you know what the annex says. They will hold that sentence for a year. You will have moved on inside a month. That gap is the cruelest thing anybody in this trade does casually, and most of the people doing it think they are being kind.

WHAT THEY'RE WEARING TO THE WAR

01

THE CONTRACT WALLET, WORN HIGH ON THE CHEST

Manufacturer Firm-issued in the flood boroughs, four makers, all of them producing essentially the same object under different stitching

Materials Welded polyurethane pocket over a rigid card backer, salt-rated seam, a bleed channel at the base so it does not balloon on descent

Signal Value Somebody knows who to call about my body. Worn high and forward, not because that is comfortable, but because that is where a recovery diver looks first and everybody in the flood zone was taught the same place to look.

Survivability The pocket outlives the wearer routinely, which is the design brief and which nobody involved in the design brief says out loud.

Earns the chest space. The stitching tells a reader which firm, and therefore which claims process, and therefore roughly how long the family will be waiting. Nico Brand has named three principals across a bar this quarter from the seam alone.

02

THE BOROUGH ARMBAND, COUNCIL PATTERN, CURRENT SEASON

Manufacturer Issued by eleven separate councils, none of which coordinate, all of which use a similar green

Materials Printed nylon webbing with a heat-set council mark, a serial that maps to a shift rather than a person, hook backing that fails predictably after a season in salt

Signal Value I am paid by people who live here. Faction operators read it as a demotion. Residents read it as the only uniform in the borough attached to a name they can actually complain to.

Survivability The webbing lasts. The hook backing does not, which is why half the borough crews have sewn theirs down, which voids the return, which nobody cares about.

Earns more respect than the people wearing it expect and less money than any of them were told. The serial mapping to a shift and not a person is the whole issue in one design decision.

03

THE FOLDED RIDER CARD, CARRIED AGAINST THE SKIN

Manufacturer Officially none. Practically a canal-market laminator, nine credits, correct stock, correct borough watermark

Materials Two-mil lamination over transcribed card, one fold, sometimes two, worn soft at the crease within a month

Signal Value I read the annex and I did not trust them to let me keep it. The most quietly confrontational object anybody in the flood zone carries, and the only one they will not show you unasked.

Survivability Indefinite. The lamination survives water, salt, and the wearer. See page 45 for one that has now outlived three owners.

Earns everything. Every principal in the sector would prefer these did not exist and not one of them has found a defensible reason to say so.

04

THE PRESTIGE DRY BAG, RATED FOR THE BRIEF

Manufacturer Two boutique tactical labels, both of which quote a depth rating that is technically accurate at a temperature nobody works in

Materials Coated ripstop, magnetic roll closure, a colorway described in the catalogue as slate and in the barracks as the one that gets you found

Signal Value I have money and I have read a survey. Popular with people whose contracts describe a building and who have never been under the building.

Survivability The closure is the failure point and it fails in exactly the conditions the marketing photographs were not taken in.

Exactly what a person with good paper and no wet time would carry. Buy the ugly one. Everyone who has been under the slab already has.

05

THE FIRM JACKET, WORN OUT OF CONTRACT

Manufacturer Brackwater, Halvorsen Line, and two firms that no longer exist, which is the interesting half of this category

Materials Heavy salt-cured shell, a chest panel where the patch was, a shade difference where the patch protected the fabric from four years of sun

Signal Value Depends entirely on whether the shade difference is there. A removed patch on a faded jacket is a service record. A removed patch on a new jacket is a lie that the whole canal can read at ten meters.

Survivability The jacket outlasts the firm about a third of the time, which is a statistic somebody should be more alarmed by than they are.

Earns it if the ghost of the patch is real. Nobody has ever successfully faked four years of sun and several people this season have tried.

06

THE CLIPBOARD, CARRIED BY SOMEBODY WHO IS NOT ON THE JOB

Manufacturer Irrelevant. The object is generic on purpose and has been for a century

Materials Board, clip, a printed form with a firm mark at the top and a signature block at the bottom that is closer to the top than it looks

Signal Value The engagement has already changed and you are about to be told how. The only item in this department that is not worn by an operator and the only one every operator can identify from behind.

Survivability Total. It has never been under anything.

Gets people killed stylishly, in the sense that nothing about it is stylish and it has a body count. See EMBEDDED, page 26, for what one looked like at the top of a flooded stair.

WORST PEOPLE ALIVE
THE PAPERWORK EDITION

1

INDEMNIS UNDERWRITING

Operator liability, eleven boroughs, inside front cover of this magazine
Writes cover for the party that commissions the violence and has never pretended to write it for the party performing the violence, which is the defense and also the charge. Indemnity is on this list not for lying but for being the most honest firm in the sector about an arrangement that only functions because almost nobody reads far enough to find the honesty. We sold them the cover flap. They paid the rate card. Read their copy, then read this entry, then decide which of us you trust less.

2

ILSE VANDERGRIFF

Director of Claims, Halvorsen Line Maritime Security
Has declined more operator death claims than any individual currently working in the flood zone and can walk you through every decision without raising her voice or misstating a fact. She is on this list precisely because she is good at it. A bad claims director produces appeals. A good one produces families who stop asking. See the interview on page 49, which we ran in full, which she agreed to, and which is worse for her than anything we could have written about her.

3

COUNCILLOR REMY ASTOR-BAILE

Security portfolio, Southwark Borough Council

Published a fully itemized security budget and redacted exactly one line, the liability figure, on commercial sensitivity grounds that are legally sound and were obviously not the reason. Astor-Baile has told residents four times this year that borough security is more accountable than faction presence. That is true. It is true because of a document he has now specifically prevented them from pricing.

4

THE HANDLER CIRCULATING A GHOST MENU RATE CARD

Canal side, two firms deep, not naming himself and not being named here
Took the one part of this economy that ran on deniability and produced a document for it, thereby handing every crew that takes his off-book work a piece of paper that exists and can be found. He describes this as professionalizing. Three crews have described it, independently and in almost the same words, as building a case file for somebody else's prosecutor.

5

THE FIRM THAT MOVED ITS DEATH BENEFIT INTO AN ANNEX

Mid-tier, maritime, four boroughs, right of reply declined
Did not change a single number. Moved the table off the main agreement into a separate folded document handed over at signing, buying roughly ninety seconds of friction between a person and the worst news in their own contract. Ninety seconds is enough. Two former clerks have confirmed the change was proposed for exactly that reason and approved in a meeting where nobody objected.

6

BRACKWATER MARITIME SECURITY, PROVISIONALLY

Recruiting on “named insured,” policy not yet produced

Advertises operator-named cover as a hiring benefit, which if genuine is the most significant reform in the sector this decade and if not is the cleverest poaching copy anyone has written in five years. We have asked for the policy four times. Brackwater has responded promptly, warmly, and without the policy. The provisional listing stands until the document does. We would genuinely like to remove them from this list.

7

HALVORSEN LINE'S COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE

The only firm in this issue to take its right of reply

Sent four hundred words explaining that the firm meets every obligation in its agreements, which is not in dispute, which was never the story, and which they know was never the story. The reply has been printed in full on our letters page and is a small masterpiece of answering a question nobody asked with a fluency that took real skill. Credit where due: they replied. Everyone else read the request and did nothing at all.

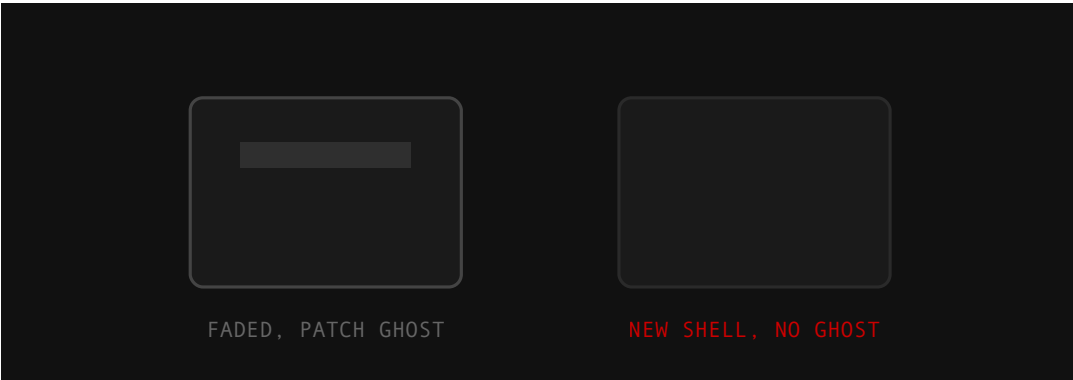
FIELD FAILURES

01



He could recite his obligations from memory and had never once read the definitions page. The building was in the engagement. The tunnel under the building was not. He found this out at chest height, in the dark, from a colleague who had.

02



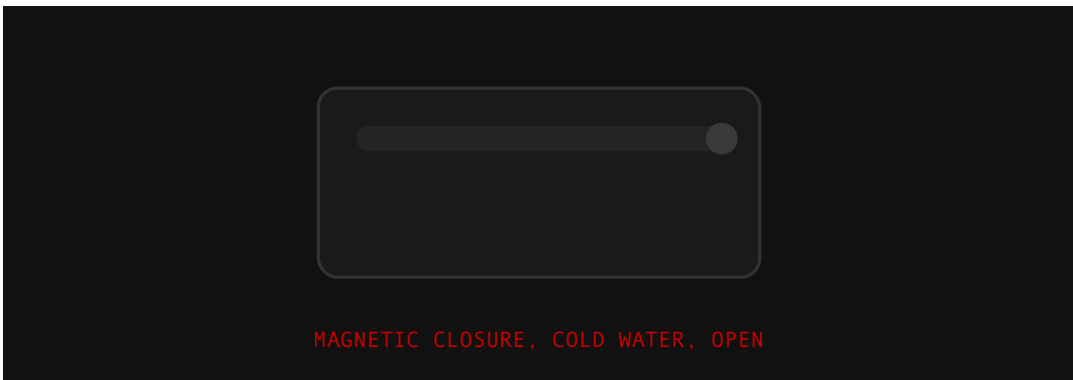
Bought a firm jacket secondhand and removed a patch that had never been on it. The fabric underneath was the same shade as the fabric everywhere else. Four people at the canal bar clocked it before he sat down and let him buy a round anyway.

03



Signed a variation while standing in water with a torch held for him by the person who wanted it signed. He has since described the document as something he agreed to. It is not. It is something he executed. Those are different words and a tribunal knows which one it is looking at.

04



Carried the slate colorway with the magnetic roll closure because the catalogue said fourteen meters. The catalogue meant fourteen meters at a temperature nobody in the flood zone has ever worked in. He surfaced with an open bag and a very expensive lesson about who writes catalogue copy.

05



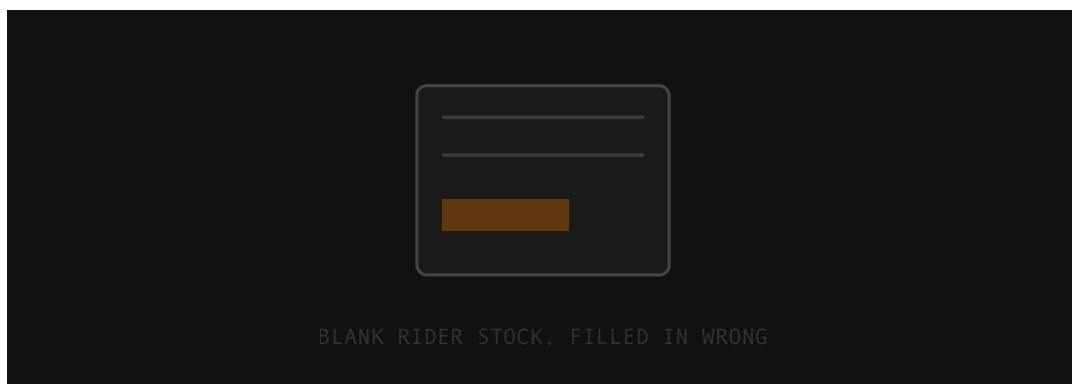
Worked eleven single-engagement shifts on canal jobs under a printed badge that was collected at the end of every one of them. When he needed to prove he had been there, no document existed anywhere that said so. The firm was not lying when it said it had no record. That was the design.

06



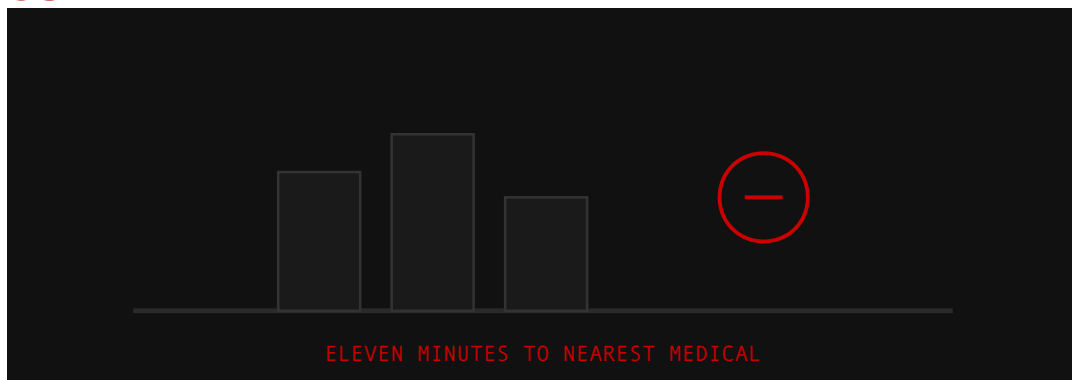
Handed the original back at signing without photographing it, then argued about clause nine from memory in front of a claims officer holding the actual page. He was, as far as anyone can now establish, correct. He has no way to demonstrate that and neither does anyone else.

07



Transcribed his annex onto a canal-market blank and copied clause fourteen accurately and clause nine from what he remembered someone telling him. He carried the wrong sentence against his skin for six months and quoted it, with total confidence, to a medic who knew better.

08



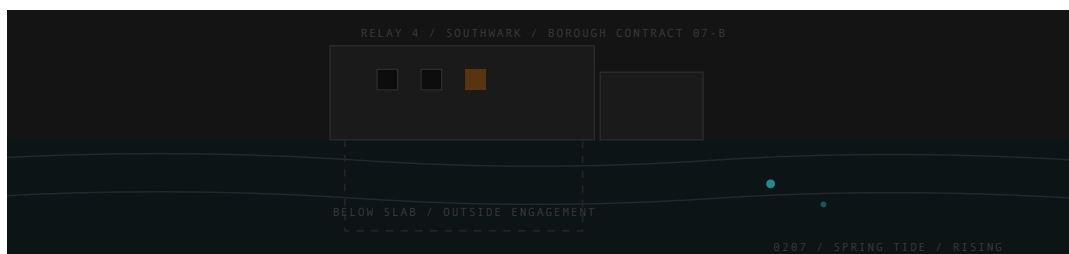
Accepted a perimeter job where the nearest medical was eleven minutes out, on the reasoning that it was a perimeter job. Perimeter jobs are where the eleven minutes matters, because a perimeter job is the only kind nobody plans a casualty for.

EMBEDDED

DEFINED PREMISES

I went to Southwark for nine days to write about the water relay, which is a good story and which I did not write. What I wrote instead is what a five-person borough crew found out about their own contract at two in the morning, at chest height, under a building that the contract says they were protecting.

By Cass Rennick



The crew room at Relay 4 smells like wet rope and instant stock, and Deemer has been explaining the contract to me for eleven minutes without once using the word contract.

“We keep the water running,” she says. She is forty-something, borough-born, and she says this the way you would say your own surname. “Council pays us to keep the water running. Everything else is admin.”

I ask who does the admin.

“Not me.” She hands me a mug I did not ask for. “That’s the point of admin.”

I am here on the understanding, negotiated over three weeks by an editor who has since stopped answering my messages promptly, that I can attach to a borough security crew for nine days and write about the relay. The relay is genuinely worth writing about. It moves potable water through four boroughs on infrastructure that predates every flag currently claiming the ground above it, and it is maintained by people who did not train for it and cannot be replaced. That was the piece. I had a shape for it and everything.

What I have instead is nine days of watching five people do skilled, dangerous, poorly compensated work inside a document that none of them can produce on request.

“Council pays us to keep the water running. Everything else is admin.”

// Deemer, crew lead, Relay 4

The crew is five. Deemer runs it. Ossory is the diver, twenty-six, and does most of the work anybody would recognize as dangerous. Pell is the one who actually understands the pumps and is treated by everyone, including Deemer, as the most important person in the borough. Nadia Kesh is new, four months, still wearing the armband exactly as issued. And there is a fifth whose name I have agreed not to use, who has asked me instead to call him the clerk, which is a joke about a thing he used to be and does not want printed as a fact.

They are borough badges. They work for a firm, Halvorsen Line, which holds a security agreement with Southwark Borough Council. The council is the client. The firm is the employer. The crew is neither, and this distinction is the whole story, and it takes me until day six to see it.

Day one and two are boring in the specific way that competent work is boring. Perimeter walks. A stuck valve on the north header. Ossory goes into the intake chamber twice and comes out both times complaining about the same fitting. Nadia Kesh takes notes on everything, which the others find funny and which I find, watching her do it, faintly heartbreaking, because she is the only one of them building a record.

The bar is called the Gauge and it is four hundred meters from the relay on the second floor of a building whose first floor has been underwater since before Ossory was born. You go up an outside stair. The whole borough is like this: everything real is on the first floor up, and everybody has stopped remarking on it.

“You’re the lynx,” says the clerk, on night two, in a tone I have spent a career learning not to react to.

“I’m the press.”

“You’re both. Doesn’t bother me. Bother Ossory a bit.” He drinks. “He thinks you’re here to make us look stupid.”

“And you think?”

“I think you’re going to make somebody look stupid.” He smiles without much in it.
“I’d like it on the record early that it isn’t going to be us.”

On day four I ask Deemer if I can read the contract.

She does not say no. She says, entirely without defensiveness, that she does not have it. The firm has it. The council has it. She has a duty roster, a standing orders sheet, and an induction pack from three years ago, and she offers me all three immediately, which is not the behavior of somebody hiding anything.

“There’s an annex,” the clerk says, from across the room, not looking up.

“There’s an annex,” Deemer agrees. “I signed it.”

“Do you have it?”

“They keep the original.”

“Do you have a copy?”

There is a pause, and it is not a guilty pause, it is the pause of somebody being asked a reasonable question they have never been asked. “No,” she says. “No, I don’t.”

The clerk has a copy. He photographed his in a stairwell four years ago because a colleague at a different firm told him to and he did it to end the conversation. He shows me on day five, on a screen, in the crew room, with the door shut, in a way that makes very clear he is doing something the room considers slightly rude.

It is eleven pages. It is not written to be incomprehensible. This is the thing I keep having to correct in my own head over nine days: nothing about this document is a trick. It is clear, it is competently drafted, and every hard edge in it is visible to anybody who reads it in a chair, in daylight, with nobody waiting.

Clause nine defines the premises. The premises are the relay building and the surface works. There is a sentence about ancillary structures which the clerk reads aloud twice and then says, flatly, “that’s the slab.”

Everything below the foundation slab is a different structure with a different owner and it is not in the engagement.

“Ossory works below the slab,” I say.

“Ossory works below the slab every week.”

“Nothing in there is a trick. That’s what people get wrong. It’s all perfectly legible and nobody legible ever reads it.”

// the clerk

I want to be careful here, because there is a version of this piece that treats five people as fools and I have watched them work and they are not fools. Deemer has kept a borough’s water running for nine years. Pell can hear a bearing going from the other end of a chamber. Ossory has gone into water I would not go into, repeatedly, competently, for money that would embarrass you.

What they do not have is ninety uninterrupted seconds with a piece of paper and nobody standing over them. That is all it would take. It is somehow the one resource this borough cannot supply.

Night six is when it happens, and it happens the way these things do, which is slowly and then not.

Spring tide, rising. A pressure fault on the low header that Pell has been unhappy about for two days. The call comes at 0140 and by 0207 there are five of them and me at the top of the stair into the sub-chamber, which is a concrete throat with a ladder in it, and the water in it is higher than anyone expected.

Ossory is already in his kit. Nobody has told him to be.

And at the top of the stair, at 0212, with the water audible below us, there is a man with a clipboard.

He is not a villain. I want that in the piece early because everything in me wants to make him one. He is maybe thirty, he is soaked to the knee, he has come out at two in the morning in bad weather to a relay he does not work at, and he is, by every read I can make, nervous. He works for the firm. He has a variation.

The variation extends the engagement below the slab for the duration of the incident. It is one page. He needs Deemer to sign it.

“Now?” says Deemer.

“Before he goes in,” the man says, and to his credit he says it apologetically, and to nobody’s credit at all it is the correct instruction and he was right to come.

Here is what I watch happen over the next four minutes, and I have replayed it more than is good for me.

Deemer reads it. She reads the whole page, standing in an inch of water at the top of a stair, with her diver in kit beside her and a header dropping pressure below her, and she takes about fifty seconds to do it, which under those conditions is an act of real discipline that nobody in the sector would ever describe as one.

The clerk reads it over her shoulder and says one word: “duration.”

The variation covers the incident. It does not cover the exit. Once the incident is declared resolved by the firm, the extension lapses, and Ossory is likely to still be under the slab at that moment, because that is what a resolved incident looks like from above and what it does not look like from below.

Deemer asks the man with the clipboard whether he can change it.

He cannot. He is a clerk with a form. He says so plainly and he is not lying and he is deeply, visibly uncomfortable, and I want to record that he did not once raise his voice or invoke anybody’s authority or do a single one of the things that would have made this easier to write.

Deemer signs it.

Ossory goes in.

She reads the whole page at the top of a flooded stair with a diver in kit beside her. Fifty seconds. Nobody in this sector would call that discipline. It is the only discipline on the stair.

He is under for thirty-one minutes. Pell talks the whole time, which I learn later is what Pell does, and Nadia Kesh writes down the times, which is what Nadia Kesh does, and the man with the clipboard stands in the doorway with his form in a wet bag and does not leave, which I did not expect and have thought about since. The header holds. The borough does not notice anything. In the morning four boroughs get water and no story appears anywhere about any of this, including, until now, in this magazine.

Ossory comes up at 0243. The incident is declared resolved at 0251 by somebody in an office who has done nothing wrong. Ossory was in the chamber at 0251, coiling line.

Nothing happened to him. I need to say that clearly. He is fine, he was fine, he has done harder work since, and if the worst had happened during those particular twelve minutes we would be having a very long argument about a lapsed extension that everybody standing on that stair had already identified in advance and signed anyway.

On my last night at the Gauge I ask Deemer whether she would do it differently.

“Sign it?” She thinks about it properly, which I have come to understand is her habit and not a courtesy to me. “Yes. No. I’d have signed it. The header was going. What am I going to do, argue with a boy holding a form while a borough loses water?”

“That’s what they’re counting on.”

“Course it is.” She is not upset. That is the part I cannot get past. “It’s not a conspiracy, love. It’s a form. Somebody wrote a form that works best at two in the morning and then everybody just kept using it because it works.”

Nadia Kesh, four months in, still wearing her armband exactly as issued, asks me if I can send her a copy of the annex. Not the clerk’s photograph. The real one, the current one, the one with her own name on it.

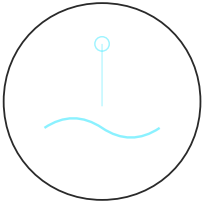
I tell her I will try. I have tried. Halvorsen Line has responded to me four times, promptly and warmly, and has not sent the document, and is entitled not to, and knows it.

The last thing I see leaving Southwark is the stair. Daylight, tide out, nothing dramatic about it at all: a concrete throat with a ladder in it and a tidemark about a meter up the wall where the water stops being somebody’s problem and starts being nobody’s.

You could paint a line on that wall. Somebody has, actually, at some point, in a different color, for a different reason. It is roughly where the slab is.

SUBJECT: RELAY 4 // SOUTHWARK BOROUGH CONTRACT 07-B // NINE DAYS ATTACHED, TWO MEALS ACCEPTED, DECLARED // ONE CREW MEMBER UNNAMED AT HIS REQUEST // HALVORSEN LINE DECLINED TO PRODUCE THE ANNEX ON FOUR OCCASIONS.

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MARITIME SECURITY // RECRUITING, ALL BOROUGHES

Every firm in this book will tell you they look after their people. Ask any of them whose name is on the policy.

Brackwater writes its operators onto the cover as named insured. Not the council. Not the board. Not the principal. The person going under the slab. We are aware this is unusual in the sector, we are aware of what our competitors say about the cost of it, and we are aware that the first question a good crew asks is whether we will actually produce the document.

Bring your crew intact. We do not break up teams and we do not hire warm bodies for canal work.

Brackwater Maritime Security recruits at the Gauge, Southwark, first and third weeks. Cover terms, deductibles, and exclusions are set out in full in the schedule provided before signature, and you are entitled to take it away with you, unaccompanied, and return another day. We would prefer you did.

BRACKWATER // BRING THE CREW

THE MANUAL

HOW TO READ THE ANNEX THEY HANDED YOU FOLDED

You are in a room. Somebody is waiting. The main agreement is thirty pages and the thing that will actually decide what happens to you is eleven, and it was handed to you already folded, which was not an accident. Here is how to get what you need out of it in the ninety seconds you are going to be allowed.

By Hollis Brack

NOTICE // I DRAFTED DOCUMENTS OF THIS KIND FOR SIX YEARS AND I WAS GOOD AT IT. NOTHING BELOW IS LEGAL ADVICE. IT IS THE ORDER I WOULD READ MY OWN WORK IN IF I HAD TO SIGN IT WITH SOMEBODY WATCHING, WHICH IS A THING I NEVER HAD TO DO AND YOU ALWAYS DO.

Start with the fold. It is the single most useful piece of information in the room and it costs you nothing. A document handed to you already folded has been folded by somebody who knows which page they would rather you did not open first. Note the crease, then deliberately open to that page before any other. If the crease is at the schedule of benefits, you have learned everything about this firm in under a second.

1. Definitions before obligations. Everyone reads what they must do. Almost nobody reads where they must do it. The definitions page will contain a term like premises, site, works, or engagement area, and that term will then be used forty times without further explanation. Find it. Read it twice. If it names a structure rather than an area, ask yourself immediately what is underneath that structure, because in the flood boroughs the answer is always the actual job.

2. Find the word ancillary and treat it as hostile. Ancillary structures, ancillary works, ancillary access. It is a good and legitimate drafting word with no bad intent behind it in most contracts. In this sector it is the hinge that a below-grade exclusion hangs off. If you see it near a definition of premises, you are looking at the clause that decides whether the tunnel counts.

3. Ask who the named insured is, out loud, and watch the face. Do not ask whether you are insured. You are insured, in the sense that a policy exists somewhere in the transaction. Ask who is named on it. There are only three possible answers: the client, the firm, or you. Two of those answers mean that if you are killed, a payment will be made to somebody who is not related to you.

4. Read the duration language on any variation like it is a fuse. Variations extend an engagement into a place or a risk the main agreement did not cover. They are usually fair, usually necessary, and usually drafted to expire at a moment defined by the party that benefits from the expiry. Find the words that end it. If the trigger is a declaration made by somebody in an office, understand that the office will make that declaration while you are still in the water, not because anyone is cruel, but because from an office it genuinely looks over.

5. Locate the benefits table and read the smallest number on it. Not the headline figure. The smallest number, which is nearly always the one attached to the most likely outcome. Firms move these tables into annexes now, which buys about ninety seconds of friction. Ninety seconds is enough. Do not give them the ninety seconds.

6. Check what happens to the document after you sign. If the original is retained by the principal, and it will be, you need your own record and you need it before you hand it back. Photograph every page including the ones you think are boilerplate. Do it in front of them. Nobody has ever stopped me and I have never once been asked to justify it.

7. Transcribe the two clauses that matter onto something you can carry. The canal market sells blank rider stock for nine credits and the honest reason that market exists is this step. Copy the definition of premises and copy the benefits line. Copy them exactly, from the photograph, not from memory. I have seen a man carry a wrong sentence against his skin for six months and quote it to a medic with total confidence.

8. Never execute anything while wet, cold, or lit by somebody else's torch. This is the only rule here I would call absolute. Anything presented to you in those conditions was timed for those conditions, sometimes deliberately, more often by a form that somebody noticed works better at two in the morning and then simply kept using because it works. If you must sign, and sometimes you genuinely must, say the word duration out loud first. Say it in front of witnesses. It changes nothing legally. It changes what the crew remembers about the moment, and crew memory has carried more claims than any clause I ever wrote.

9. Take it away if you can. Any principal genuinely comfortable with their own paper will let you leave the room with it and come back another day. A firm that will not is telling you something more honest than anything printed on the page.

10. Understand what this article cannot do. None of the above changes what is available to you. If the borough has three firms and two of them are worse, reading the annex better does not produce a fourth firm. What it produces is a person who knows what they agreed to, which is not the same as safety and is the only part of this that is actually in your hands.

I wrote these documents. I was not a villain and neither is the boy who comes out at two in the morning with the form. The system does not need villains. It needs a room, a person waiting, and ninety seconds nobody is willing to spend.

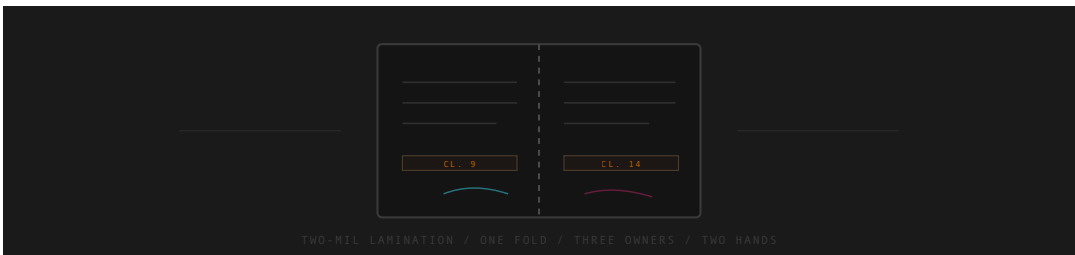
Spend the ninety seconds.

MATERIAL CULTURE

THE FOLD

A laminated card the size of a hand, carried against the skin, bearing two sentences somebody copied from a document they were not allowed to keep. This one has outlived three owners. Two of them wrote on it.

By Vera Lombard



It is nine centimeters by six, laminated in the cheap two-mil stock that every canal-market machine in Southwark uses, and it has one fold running down the middle that has gone soft and pale from four years of being opened. The card underneath is off-white. The lamination has yellowed at the edges the way this stock always does. It weighs almost nothing and I have been carrying it in a sleeve in my bag for eleven days and I keep checking that it is still there.

On the left of the fold, in small tight handwriting, is a transcription of a definition of premises from a maritime security annex. On the right, in the same hand, is a transcription of a benefits line. Under the left column, in a different hand and a different pen, somebody has written: *slab. everything under is nothing*. Under the right column, in a third hand, ballpoint, pressed hard enough to emboss the card: *ask about duration*.

Three people carried this. I know the name of one of them and I have agreed not to print it.

The object exists because of a procedural fact so ordinary that nobody in the sector considers it a policy. At signing, the principal retains the original. This is normal, defensible, and universal. It also means that the person whose life is being priced by

the document does not possess the document, cannot consult it, and must argue about it from memory against somebody holding the page. Everything downstream of that, including this card, is a workaround invented by people who were never asked whether they needed one.

The blank stock costs nine credits on the canal market, and the sellers I spoke to are entirely open about the fact that the obvious use is fraud. Correct stock, correct fold, correct borough watermark. You could produce a passable forgery of an entitlement card with one of these and a steady hand, and some people certainly have. Three of the four sellers told me, unprompted and slightly defensively, that this is not what most of their volume is. The volume is crews transcribing their own paper.

“They come in with a photograph on a screen,” one seller said. “They copy two lines. Sometimes three. It takes them twenty minutes because they check it twice. I have never once had a person copy the whole thing.”

“They copy two lines. Sometimes three. I have never once had a person copy the whole thing.”

// canal-market laminator, Southwark

Two lines, out of eleven pages. That selection is the entire social intelligence of this object. Given a document that determines their working life, people under time pressure copy where they are allowed to be and what their death is worth. Nothing about conduct. Nothing about equipment. Nothing about pay, which is interesting, and which several crews explained to me the same way: you find out about the pay. The pay is the one term that reveals itself.

The card in my bag started in 2063 with a diver on the Bermondsey headers. He copied clause nine and clause fourteen and, per the man who gave it to me, checked them three times against a photograph taken in a stairwell. He carried it for two years. He left the sector alive, which is worth saying, because most objects that reach an archive like mine got there the other way.

He gave it to a younger woman on the same crew when he left, which is where the second hand comes in. *slab. everything under is nothing*. She added that after an incident at a relay building I have not been able to independently verify, and the handwriting is bad in a way that suggests she wrote it somewhere cold. She carried it for a year and a half.

The third owner is the one I know about, and the third hand is his, and *ask about duration* was written after a variation lapsed while a colleague of his was still under a slab. That colleague also survived. The card has, so far, an unbroken record of belonging to people who lived, which the man who gave it to me pointed out to me twice, in a tone I have thought about since.

He gave it to me because he has left the boroughs and because, in his words, “it stops being useful the second you can’t check it against a real one.” The clauses on it are from a 2063 annex. Halvorsen Line has revised its standard terms at least twice since. The card is, as a practical document, out of date and dangerous.

He knew that. He carried it for another year anyway.

That is the part I cannot resolve and I have stopped trying to. Four hundred of these things are in my archive now, sorted by borough, mostly acquired from families with no further use for them. A little over a third carry a second hand. About one in nine carry a third. They are, considered coldly, an inadequate substitute for the actual document, produced under time pressure, degrading in accuracy from the day they are made.

Considered any other way, they are the only object in this economy that was made by the person it is about.

Every other artifact in the transaction, the agreement, the annex, the policy, the badge collected at the end of the shift, was drafted by somebody upstream and describes the operator from outside. The fold is the one thing in the whole arrangement that was written by the person under the slab, about the part they decided mattered, in their own hand, and then given to somebody else who added a line.

Firms would prefer these did not exist. I have asked four of them directly, on the record, and not one has been willing to say so, because the only argument available is that operators should not retain the terms of their own engagement, and nobody wants to be the person who says that into a recorder.

The last thing worth noting is physical. The fold wears pale at the crease, and after about a year the card opens by itself to whichever clause its owner opened most. You can pick one up cold, let it fall open, and read what frightened the person carrying it before you read a single word.

Mine falls open to clause nine.

THE ROOM WHERE EVERYONE LIED

THE WOMAN WHO DECIDES WHETHER IT COUNTED

Ilse Vandergrift has declined more operator death claims than anybody currently working in the flood zone. She agreed to two hours, on the record, in a members' room eleven floors above a borough she has never walked in. She answered everything. That is the problem with her.

By Marguerite Osei

The room is called the Long Gallery and it is on the eleventh floor of a building on the dry side of the river, and its whole architectural argument is a window. One wall of glass, floor to ceiling, looking south across water that used to be streets. At four in the afternoon in spring the light comes off the flood and moves on the ceiling, and everybody who works in this building has stopped noticing it, and I could not stop noticing it for the first eleven minutes of this interview.

Ilse Vandergrift is sixty, silver, in a gray suit with no firm mark on it anywhere, and she has ordered tea and a plate of small biscuits that neither of us touches for two hours.

“You want to ask me about the Kessler claim,” she says, before I have taken my recorder out.

I say I want to ask her about a lot of claims.

“You want to ask me about Kessler.” She is not being combative. She is being efficient, and I will spend two hours learning that these are hard to tell apart in her. “Everybody does. I’ll answer it. I’d rather answer it first than have you circling it for an hour while I watch you circle.”

Nils Kessler was a diver on a Halvorsen Line borough contract who died in a sub-chamber in Rotherhithe in 2065 during a header failure. The firm declined the death benefit on the ground that the incident occurred below the foundation slab and outside the defined premises. The decision was Vandergrift’s. It was appealed once, internally, and upheld. There was no external avenue, because there is no external avenue.

“The engagement covered the relay building,” she says. “It did not cover the sub-chamber. There was a variation available. It was not requested that night. I have gone through the log four times.”

I ask whether she thinks the outcome was just.

“I think it was correct.”

“That isn’t the same word.”

“No,” she agrees, pleasantly, “it isn’t. You’re not going to catch me on that. I know it isn’t the same word. I chose it.”

“I think it was correct.” “That isn’t the same word.” “No. I know it isn’t. I chose it.”

// Ilse Vandergrift, Director of Claims

Here is what I want to establish early, because everything else in this piece depends on it: she is not a monster and she is not a fool and she is not, as far as two hours of pressure can establish, dishonest. She has read every file. She corrects me twice on dates and both times she is right. When I get a clause number wrong she supplies the correct one from memory and then, unprompted, explains what it says in a way that is not favorable to her employer.

I have interviewed a lot of people who were hiding something. This is a different and considerably worse experience.

“You think I should pay everything,” she says, around the fortieth minute.

I say I think a system where fourteen people die on borough paper and two families are paid has a defect somewhere.

“It does. It isn’t me.” She turns her cup a quarter turn, which she does when she is about to be precise. “If I pay a claim outside the terms, I have not been generous. I have created a precedent that the actuary prices next year, and the price goes into the premium, and the premium goes into the tender, and the council takes the cheaper tender. Which is not us. Which means the crew at Relay 4 works for somebody worse in eighteen months and you write a different article.”

“That’s a very comfortable argument for a person in this room.”

“It’s an extremely comfortable argument,” she says. “It’s also true. Both of those things bother me. I notice you’ve only brought up one of them.”

The light moves. A boat goes through the drowned grid below us, slowly, following a channel somebody painted onto a wall thirty years ago. She does not look at it. In two hours she looks out of that window exactly once, and it is not at the water.

I ask her when she last stood in a relay building.

The pause is the only real pause of the afternoon. It is about three seconds.

“Twenty-two years ago. Before this role.” She turns the cup. “I’ve been asked that before, in a tribunal, by a barrister who thought it was devastating. It isn’t. It would be devastating if the decision were about what the chamber is like. The decision is about what the document says. I would be worse at this job, not better, if I had been down there last week.”

“Worse at the job.”

“Yes.”

“Not worse at the outcome.”

“Those are different things,” she says, “and you know they are, and I am not going to help you pretend otherwise. I make correct decisions inside a structure I did not design. If you want the structure changed, the people you need are two floors up in a different building and they will not meet you.”

I ask her about the annex change. The industry practice, now near-universal in the flood zone, of moving the benefits table out of the main agreement into a separate document handed over folded at signing.

“I opposed that,” she says immediately.

I ask her to say more.

“I opposed it in writing. It is in a minute somewhere and I would not object to you finding it.” She looks, for the first time, faintly annoyed, and it is not at me. “It does not change a single entitlement. It changes the odds that a person reads their entitlement. My position was, and is, that we should want them to read it. A claim from somebody who understood the terms when they signed is an easier claim to decline and a much harder one to be ashamed of.”

That sentence sits on the table between us for a while.

“You can print that,” she says. “I’ve heard how it sounds.”

“A claim from somebody who understood the terms when they signed is an easier claim to decline and a much harder one to be ashamed of.”

// Vandergrift, on why she opposed the annex change

Toward the end I ask her the question I came with, which is whether she has ever paid a claim she was not required to pay.

“Once.”

I wait.

“A woman in Deptford. Not a death. A hand.” The cup, a quarter turn. “The terms did not cover it. I found a reading that covered it. It was a reading, not a stretch, and I would defend it, and I have never used it again, and if you ask me why not, the answer is that a reading used twice is a precedent and I have already explained to you what a precedent does.”

“So you know the readings are there.”

“I know exactly where they are,” she says. “That’s the job. You seem to think I do this job badly. I do it extremely well. That is what you have actually come here to be upset about and I would rather you went home with the accurate version.”

We finish. She stands, and shakes my hand, and thanks me for being on time, and asks whether I need the building pass validated, which I do.

At the door I ask, off the recorder, whether she thinks about Kessler.

She says: “Every file has a name on it. That is not the same as thinking about him and I am not going to perform it for you at a door.”

Then she says, in the same flat register, “He was thirty-one. There was a brother.”

Then she goes back to the window wall, and the light is off the water and moving on the ceiling, and she does not look at it.

SUBJECT: ILSE VANDERGRIFT // DIRECTOR OF CLAIMS, HALVORSEN LINE // TWO HOURS, ON THE RECORD, NO COPY APPROVAL REQUESTED OR GIVEN // TEA ACCEPTED, DECLARED // THE KESSLER FILE REMAINS CLOSED.

CITY OF BAD IDEAS

THE BOROUGH THAT CAN QUOTE IT AND HAS NEVER READ IT

Southwark runs on a security agreement between a council and a firm. Eleven days there, and I could not find one resident who had read it. I found four who could recite clause nine. Nobody, including the council, has been able to explain to me how both of those things are true.

By Padraig Nnamdi



You come into Southwark up a stair. There is no other way in that anybody uses. The old street level is under about a meter and a half at mean tide and the borough long ago moved its actual life to what used to be first floors, so every door that matters is reached by an external staircase bolted onto a building that was not designed for one.

The stairs are the first thing you notice and the thing you stop noticing fastest. By day three I was taking them without looking, the same as everybody, and by day six I had caught myself giving directions to somebody in terms of which stair.

The borough has about nineteen thousand people. It has a market that runs on two walkways and a pontoon. It has four bars I found and probably nine I did not. It has a council, an elected one, that meets in a room above a former bank, and it has a water relay that supplies not only Southwark but three boroughs downstream, which is the only reason anybody outside Southwark has an opinion about Southwark.

And it has Contract 07-B, which is a security agreement between the council and Halvorsen Line Maritime Security, and which is the actual government of this place in a way that the council, to be fair to them, has never denied.

I came here to read it. I did not manage that either.

The market opens at six and by seven the pontoon is loud. It sells fish that everybody agrees to describe as river fish, tools, rope, secondhand kit, and, at the eastern end, from a stall with a machine bolted to a table, lamination. Nine credits. The man running it has a queue most mornings.

“Ask him about the fold,” a woman selling rope told me, which is how I found the story that ran on page 45 of this issue and is not the one I am telling here.

Here is what I asked instead, of forty-one people over eleven days, in the market, on the stairs, in the Gauge, in a laundry, in a queue for a pump part: have you read the borough security contract?

Not one yes.

Then: do you know what it says?

Thirty-three yeses. Some of them immediate and slightly impatient, in the tone of somebody being asked whether they know where the market is.

Have you read it? Nobody. Do you know what it says? Almost everybody, immediately, slightly impatient, as if I had asked where the market was.

Four people quoted clause nine to me. Not the number. The substance: that the firm is responsible for the relay building and the surface works and not for anything under the slab. One of them, a man in his seventies who has never worked a day in security and repairs small engines above a chandlery, gave me a version so accurate that when I later saw the clause I had to check my notes twice.

I asked him where he learned it.

“Everyone knows that,” he said, in the tone of a man explaining the tide.

I pushed. From where, originally, the first time.

He thought about it for a genuinely long time. “After the Kessler business,” he said. “It was in everybody’s mouth for a month. Then it just stayed.”

This is the mechanism, as far as I have been able to establish it, and I want to be honest that it is a reconstruction and not a finding. A document nobody reads becomes public knowledge through its failures. Clause nine entered this borough’s common vocabulary because a diver died under a slab in Rotherhithe and the reason his family was not paid travelled faster and further than any council notice ever has. The borough does not know its contract. The borough knows the two or three points at which the contract has cut someone, which is a different body of knowledge, transmitted differently, and considerably more durable.

It is also incomplete in a specific and dangerous way. Nobody I spoke to could tell me anything about the variation procedure. Nobody knew that an extension below the slab can be requested, and is routinely granted, and costs the council money that appears in a line the council has redacted. Clause nine has entered folklore. The remedy for clause nine has not, because the remedy has never yet failed publicly enough.

The council will meet you. Councillor Astor-Baile met me twice, on time, and was courteous, and answered a great deal, and was entirely immovable on the one number I wanted.

“Commercial sensitivity,” he said, both times.

I put it to him that the liability figure is the only line in a fully published budget that tells a resident what the borough believes a body is worth.

“That is a very effective sentence,” he said, “and it will do well in your magazine, and it does not change the position.”

Which is fair, and which I have thought about, and which I am printing along with the sentence anyway.

The Gauge is on the second floor and you reach it up an outside stair on the water side, which means everybody arriving is visible for about twelve seconds before they come in. This is not accidental. There is a general understanding in the flood boroughs about being seen approaching, and it predates the current arrangement by a long way.

The crews drink there. Borough badges, mostly, some canal crews, a few relay maintenance people who are not security at all and who occupy a slightly higher social position than the badges, which took me four nights to work out and which nobody would have explained if I had asked.

The talk is not about factions. This surprised me and I have had to examine why it surprised me. There is a Kavast rotation due through the corridor this season and it came up twice in eleven days, both times briefly, in the tone you would use about weather in another county. What comes up constantly, with heat, in detail, is paper. Who holds it. What it says. Whether Brackwater will produce the policy they are advertising, which is currently the single most argued-about question in this borough and which has generated two bets I was shown and probably nine I was not.

On my ninth night somebody at the Gauge asked me what my own contract with this magazine says about what happens if I drown.

I did not know.

The table found this extremely funny for about a minute and then stopped finding it funny, all at roughly the same moment, without anybody saying anything. Somebody bought me a drink. The subject changed.

I checked when I got back. It says nothing. There is no provision. I am a contributor, which in my publication's standard terms is a category of person to whom nothing is owed beyond a fee, and I have been filing under those terms for six years and had never once opened the document.

The last morning I went down the stair on the water side at low tide, which you can do, and stood on what used to be a street. You can see the shape of it. Kerb, drain, the stub of a bollard. It is all still there under the water at every other hour of the day and everybody in this borough walks over it constantly without any sense of walking over anything.

There is a painted line on the wall of the building opposite, about a meter up, faded blue, from some survey or other decades ago. It has nothing to do with the slab and nothing to do with the contract.

Four separate people in this borough told me it marks where the firm's responsibility stops.

It does not. It is a survey mark. But they are not wrong about the shape of the thing they are describing, and I could not find anybody, in eleven days, whose job it was to tell them so.

NOBODY ADMIT THIS EXISTS

Brackwater's named-insured policy is said to exist, to be genuine, and to carry a per-incident deductible large enough that the firm has been advised by its own broker not to publish the schedule until the recruiting window closes. Two people have described the number to us. They described two different numbers.

A minute recording Ilse Vandergrift's written objection to moving the benefits table into an annex is rumored to exist in a Halvorsen Line board pack from 2064. She told our reporter she would not object to it being found. Nobody has found it. At least three people are now looking, which she must have known would happen.

The Kessler brother is said to have been offered a settlement eight months after the claim was declined, on terms that would have required him to stop talking, and to have refused it in a room, out loud, in front of a clerk. Nobody will confirm the offer.

Everybody in Southwark will describe the room.

A relay board somewhere in the eastern boroughs has reportedly begun writing its own variations in advance, pre-signed, held by the crew rather than the firm, to be produced by the crew when the situation requires it. If true it is the most significant procedural change in the sector this decade. Nobody will name the board.

The canal-market laminator with the queue is said to keep a ledger of which clause numbers people copy, out of professional curiosity, going back four years. He denies this. Two of his customers say they have seen it. One says he was shown it deliberately. A firm operating in three boroughs is rumored to have quietly stopped issuing single-shift name badges after a recovery crew pulled somebody out and could not tell anyone who it was. The change was not announced, does not appear in any policy, and is reported to have been made by one supervisor without asking.

Somebody is said to be circulating a complete transcription of a current Halvorsen Line annex, all eleven pages, accurate, free, hand to hand, in a borough that is not Southwark. Every crew we asked had heard of it. None had seen it. Two believed the firm had started the rumor itself in order to find out who wanted a copy.

The man with the clipboard at Relay 4 is rumored to have requested a transfer out of variations work the following week and to have been refused. He has not spoken to this magazine and we have not approached him, which several people have told us is the wrong call.

A councillor in an adjacent borough is reported to have asked her own legal officer, in writing, whether the borough could simply publish its security contract in full, and to have received an answer that ran to nine pages and never once said no.

The Tide Charts issue about the debrief is said to have been written by somebody who sat through one, recently, as the subject. The comic is anonymous, has always been

anonymous, and the barracks consensus this season is that the handwriting in the clipboard panels is not the usual letterer's.

An underwriter not named in this issue is rumored to have run the numbers on operator-named cover across the whole flood zone and found it affordable, and to have shelved the finding rather than publish it, because publishing it would make every competitor's refusal a choice rather than a constraint.

Two crews at the Gauge have reportedly started a practice of reading the duration language of any variation out loud before anyone signs, in front of everybody present. It has no legal effect whatsoever. Three separate people described it to us as the most useful thing anyone has introduced in years.

A ghost menu rate card is said to have surfaced in a council office, in a folder, filed, by somebody who does not appear to have understood what it was. The handler it belongs to is reported to have found out. Nothing has happened yet. Everyone involved is described as extremely calm, which nobody finds reassuring.

A woman in Deptford who was paid a claim she was not entitled to is rumored to know exactly why, to have worked it out herself, and to have never contacted the person who authorized it. She is said to have told a friend that a thank-you would put the reading on the record. She is said to have been right.

EXPENSIVE TRASH

INDEMNIS PRINCIPAL LIABILITY POLICY

QUOTED ON APPLICATION, COUNCILS ONLY

Superbly drafted, promptly serviced, and entirely honest about what it does, which is make a council whole for what happens to a council. It has never covered a contractor and has never claimed to. What an undisclosed annual premium buys a borough is the ability to commission dangerous work without carrying the consequence of it, at a price low enough that eleven councils have decided the arithmetic works. It does work. That is the review.

Buys silence, wholesale, at the municipal level. The best product in this issue and the reason the rest of the issue exists.

CANAL-MARKET RIDER STOCK, BLANK, LAMINATED

9 CR

Correct card, correct fold, correct borough watermark, nothing printed on it. Nine credits buys you the ability to carry two sentences of your own contract against your skin, which is a thing your employer will not sell you at any price and has no obligation to. The obvious use is fraud. The actual volume is people copying their own paper. Buy two. Copy the definition of premises and the benefits line, from a photograph, not from memory.

Earns the price several hundred times over. The cheapest item ever reviewed in this department and the only one we would call essential.

THE SLATE PRESTIGE DRY BAG, FOURTEEN-METER RATED

340 CR

Beautiful object. Coated ripstop, magnetic roll closure, a colorway the catalogue calls slate and the barracks calls the one that gets you found. The depth rating is accurate at

a water temperature that does not occur in the flood boroughs at any point in the year. Nobody has lied to you. Somebody has simply tested it somewhere else and printed the result.

Exactly what a person with good paper and no wet time would carry. Buy the ugly one.

THE GAUGE, SOUTHWARK, SECOND FLOOR, WATER SIDE

DRINKS FROM 4 CR

You come up an outside stair on the water side, which makes every arrival visible for about twelve seconds, which is the single best design feature of any bar in the flood zone and was not designed. The beer is Borough Water, brewed in the maintenance tunnels from relay runoff that the crews insist is cleaner than the municipal tap, and it tastes like copper and optimism. You will hear more accurate information about contract terms in two hours here than in any council chamber in the city.

Earns the price and the stair. Do not go asking questions on your first night. Go three times and ask on the fourth.

TIDE CHARTS, LATEST ISSUE, HAND-DRAWN, ANONYMOUS

FREE, IF YOU CAN FIND ONE

Eleven pages of a crew in a room with a clipboard, being asked what happened in an order designed to produce a particular answer. Nothing gets wet. Nobody fires anything. It is the funniest thing published in the flood boroughs this year for about four pages and then it is not funny at all and the shift is deliberate and expertly done. Barracks distribution cleared in a day. The second printing is gone. Someone will hand you one.

Earns everything. Whoever drew it has been in that room recently and we would advise them to keep the byline exactly where it is.

OBITUARIES FOR PEOPLE WHO AREN'T DEAD YET

THE HANDSHAKE JOB

b. before anybody wrote any of this down • d. this quarter, cause of death: a rate card
The off-contract arrangement between a handler and a crew, agreed verbally, deniable by design, died this quarter when a handler on the canal side circulated a standing price list and turned the last unwritten thing in the sector into a document that exists and can be found in a folder. It is survived by the work itself, which continues, now with a paper trail. In lieu of flowers, burn your copy.

"WE LOOK AFTER OUR PEOPLE"

b. every recruitment poster ever printed • d. the day a competitor put "named insured" in the copy
The industry's favorite sentence died not from exposure but from comparison, killed instantly and without malice the moment one firm advertised a specific, checkable, documentary claim and every other firm was left holding an adjective. Survived by all of those firms, none of which have changed anything. Services will be held in a recruitment tent. The sentence will be read aloud. Nobody will ask to see the policy.

THE UNFOLDED CONTRACT

b. on page two of the main agreement, in a table, in a readable font • d. at a board meeting where nobody objected
The practice of putting the death benefit where a person could find it while standing up died quietly this decade, moved into an annex handed over folded at signing, buying approximately ninety seconds of friction between a worker and the worst news

in their own paperwork. Not a single number changed. It is survived by ninety seconds, which turned out to be the entire estate. One objection was filed in writing. It has never been produced.

THE FACTION VILLAIN, AS A NEWS CATEGORY

b. with the first rotation anybody photographed • d. this issue, cause of death: an argument our features editor lost

The reliable habit of explaining every bad outcome in the flood boroughs by pointing at whichever armed rotation was nearest died this quarter, in this magazine, in a meeting, over about forty minutes. It was a good living for a lot of people. It sold. It is survived by clause nine, which has killed more contractors in this sector than any rotation in living memory and has never once been photographed.

CLASSIFIEDS / PERSONAL ADS / BOUNTY ADS

BOUNTY

Eight hundred credits for a complete, current, verifiable copy of any flood-zone maritime security annex. Any firm. All eleven pages. We will authenticate before we pay and we will not name you, ever, under any circumstance, including the obvious one.

// AN OUTLET YOU ARE HOLDING

SEEKING

The Brackwater policy schedule. Not the recruitment copy. Not a summary. The schedule, with the deductible on it. Half the boroughs are arguing about a number nobody has read. Somebody in that building has a copy on a desk.

// THE GAUGE, ANY NIGHT, ASK FOR THE ARGUMENT

FOR SALE

Blank rider stock, correct fold, correct watermark, nine credits, no questions and no advice. If you want the advice it is free and it is this: copy it from a photograph, not from your memory of what somebody told you it said.

// EAST END OF THE PONTOON, MORNINGS

PERSONAL

To the boy with the clipboard on the stair at Relay 4: you came out at two in the morning in bad weather and you did not raise your voice and you stayed until he was up. Nobody here blames you. Several of us would like you to know that specifically, since apparently nobody has said it.

// SOMEBODY WHO WAS ON THE STAIR

MEMORIAL

N.K., diver, Rotherhithe, 2065. Thirty-one. The clause that decided it is now common knowledge in four boroughs, which is not what anybody wanted and is the only thing anybody got.

// HIS BROTHER, WHO SAID NO TO THE OFFER

WANTED

Crew lead position, borough or canal, will not work a defined premises that stops at a slab. Nine years, clean, references from people who will actually answer. I am aware this narrows it. I have done the arithmetic on how much.

// SOUTHWARK, STILL HERE FOR NOW

DISCREET SERVICES

I read contracts. Sitting down, on paper, out loud if you want, for a flat fee, no firm affiliation, no notes retained. Six years drafting them. I am not a lawyer and will say so before you pay me.

// ASK AT THE GAUGE, THURSDAY

PERSONAL

Marked, listed, or depreciated, and then the follow-up question nobody asks, which is who is holding the paper on it. You gave me two of the three answers. I have stopped pretending the third one was an oversight.

// WATER SIDE, SECOND FLOOR

WANTED

Anyone who kept a copy of a 2064 Halvorsen Line board pack. Not for a story. For one minute in it, in writing, from a person who has publicly said she would not object to it being found.

// LOOKING, POLITELY, FOR NOW

FOR SALE

Slate prestige dry bag, fourteen-meter rated, used once, closure failed at nine. Selling at a third. I have kept the catalogue page. It is not wrong. It is just not about here.

// LEARNED IT AT NINE METERS

SEEKING

Second-hand firm jacket, any maker, must have four years of honest sun on it and a real patch ghost. Not buying a story. Buying a coat that has been somewhere, because mine has and it went in the water with the rest of my kit.

// BERMONDSEY, REBUILDING

BOUNTY

Four hundred credits for the redacted liability line in the Southwark security budget. The council has cited commercial sensitivity four times. It is a number. Somebody types it. Somebody files it.

// RESIDENTS, ASKING THE EASY WAY FIRST

PERSONAL

To the woman in Deptford: you worked out why and you never said thank you, and everyone who knows the story understands exactly why you didn't. Somebody should tell you that out loud once. This is that.

// SOMEONE WHO READ THE SAME FILE

DATING

Borough badge, four years, own kit, own copy of my own annex. Seeking someone who will not ask what I do for the first hour and will absolutely ask what I signed by the third, correctly, once we are past pretending that isn't the interesting part.

// STAIR SIX, WATER SIDE

WANTED

Spotter or clerk who can tell me, before I sign, whether the variation on offer expires on a declaration or on an exit. I will pay for the reading. I have been caught once and I would like that to be the number.

// CANAL CREW, NOT NAMING THE FIRM YET

MEMORIAL

For the practice of putting the benefits table on page two. You were legible, you were findable, and you were moved by people who never had to read you. Nobody attended your funeral because nobody was told it happened.

// A CLERK WHO OBJECTED IN WRITING

FOR SALE

Complete run of Tide Charts, issues one through this one, canal-side condition, some water damage that is honestly part of it now. Selling because I am leaving the boroughs. Buyer must actually read them.

// LEAVING, NOT BITTER, MOSTLY

REVENGE

Three hundred credits to whoever gets a firm, any firm, to state in writing whether it would prefer operators did not carry copies of their own terms. Just the sentence. Nobody will write the sentence. That is the point of the offer.

// PAID FOR THIS SPACE MYSELF

SEEKING

Four months in, still wearing the armband the way it came. Looking for anybody who has a current annex with my name on it, or who can tell me who to ask that will not be the fourth person to say they will look into it.

// N.K., RELAY 4, NEW

DISCREET SERVICES

Photography at signings. I stand next to you, I photograph every page including the boilerplate, I leave. Twelve credits. Nobody has ever stopped me and I have done this forty times.

// PONTOON, ASK FOR THE CAMERA

PERSONAL

To whoever is reading the duration language out loud at the Gauge before anyone signs: it has no legal effect and you know it has no legal effect and it is the best thing anybody has introduced in this borough in ten years. Keep doing it in front of witnesses.

// A CREW THAT COPIED YOU

NINETY SECONDS

The thing I cannot stop thinking about is Deemer on the stair, reading a page in an inch of water with her diver in kit beside her, taking fifty seconds to do it.

Fifty seconds. Under those conditions. Nobody in the sector would call that discipline and it is the only discipline anywhere in Cass Rennick's piece. Everything above her on the org chart had years. She had fifty seconds and she used every one of them, and she still signed, because the header was going and a borough was about to lose water and there was no version of that night where she did not sign.

I keep wanting there to be a villain. Our features editor wanted a faction angle and I killed it, and I have spent the quarter finding out what it costs to run an issue with nobody to point at.

The clerk with the clipboard came out at two in the morning in bad weather to a relay he does not work at, and did the correct thing, and stayed until Ossory was up. Vandergrift applies a document accurately and opposed the one change she thought made it harder to read. Astor-Baile publishes more of his budget than any council near him and redacts the single line that would let a resident price a body, and cited a legal ground that is genuinely valid. Hollis Brack drafted these annexes for six years, was good at it, and now writes the manual on beating them.

Not one of them is lying. That is the whole issue. You can build something that reliably converts competent, decent, individually defensible behavior into fourteen dead and two paid, and once it is built it does not need anybody to be a villain, and it becomes very hard to say what exactly should be photographed.

What the system actually runs on is a shortage of ninety seconds. Not water. Not ammunition. Ninety uninterrupted seconds with a piece of paper and nobody standing over you. Every arrangement in this issue is designed, sometimes on purpose and more often just by drift, to make sure that interval is never available at the moment it would matter. The folded annex buys ninety seconds. The retained original buys the rest.

The refusals were the best things we found, as usual. A crew reading duration out loud in front of witnesses, which changes nothing legally and changes what everyone remembers. A supervisor who stopped collecting name badges and told nobody. A man who photographed his annex in a stairwell four years ago to end a conversation and has been the most useful person on his crew ever since. Four hundred laminated cards in Vera Lombard's archive, out of date, degrading, inadequate, and the only documents in this entire economy written by the people they are about.

A woman in Deptford who worked out why she got paid and never said thank you, because a thank-you would have put the reading on the record and ended it for everybody after her.

That is the standard this quarter. It is not much and I am not going to dress it up.

Go and find your annex. Not the summary, not what somebody told you it says. Then find out whose name is on the policy, and sit with the answer for the ninety seconds nobody was ever going to give you.

// I.D.

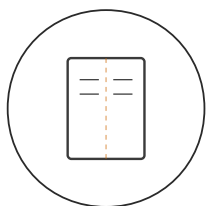
CONFLICT

Issue 50 // 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.

Nobody drowns on paper. Ask where the drowning is filed.

ADVERTISEMENT



ITS // CORRECT FOLD // BRING A P

THE PONTOON

EAST END, MORNINGS, MACHINE BOLTED TO THE TABLE

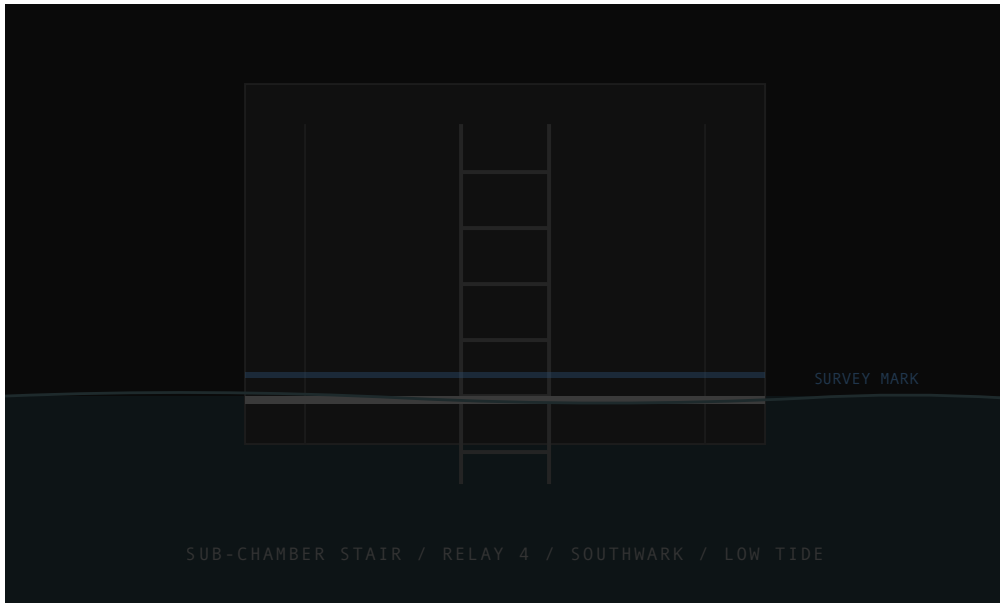
Your firm keeps the original. That is their right. This is yours.

Blank rider stock. Correct card, correct fold, correct borough watermark, nine credits, no questions asked and no advice offered unless you want it. Bring a photograph of your annex on a screen and copy the two lines that matter while you are sitting down, in daylight, with nobody waiting.

Take twenty minutes. Check it twice. Everyone who does takes twenty minutes.

We are aware what else this stock can be used for and we are not going to pretend otherwise in our own advertisement. Most of our volume is crews copying their own terms. We have no way to verify that and no interest in trying. The machine is on the table. The queue starts at six.

THE PONTOON // NINE CREDITS, ONE FOLD



“There is a faded blue line on the wall about a meter up. It is a survey mark from decades ago and it has nothing to do with anything. Four people in this borough told me it marks where the firm’s responsibility stops. They are wrong, and nobody whose job it was ever told them so.”

// the stair, Southwark, low tide, the last morning

CONFLICT

Issue 50 // Q2 2067