

CONFLICT

No. 51 / THE WAR ECONOMY



THE EXIT ISSUE

NOBODY SELLS A CROSSING

CONFLICT / No. 51 / THE EXIT ISSUE

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CONFLICT

Issue 51 // Q3 2067 // The Exit Issue

NOBODY SELLS A *CROSSING*

ELEVEN DAYS ON THE EASTERN PASSES WITH NINE PEOPLE AND ONE PRESS
EXEMPTION // EMBEDDED

THE MAN WHO SELLS A CORRIDOR HE HAS NEVER CONTROLLED,
INTERVIEWED OVER FOUR GLASSES OF TEA

HOW TO BUY AN EXIT WITHOUT BUYING A STORY

THE STOVE PRICE IN A BLACK ZONE MARKET TELLS YOU WHO IS LEAVING
NEXT MONTH

WHAT PEOPLE CARRY UNWORN SO THEY DO NOT ARRIVE LOOKING LIKE THEY
ARRIVED

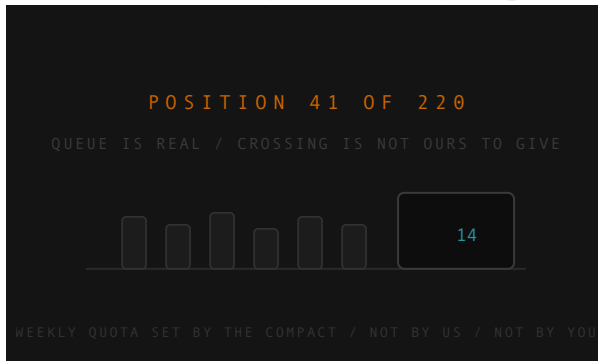
DZORAKAP IS NOT A TOWN, IT IS A WAITING ROOM WITH A POST OFFICE

ADVERTISEMENT

HALIC LINE

COMPACT-LICENSED TRANSIT BROKERAGE // ISTANBUL

Licence 0114. Eleven years. We sell your position in the queue and nothing else.



We do not sell crossings. Nobody sells crossings. We sell your place in a line that exists.

Halic Line has held Compact transit licence 0114 for eleven years without a suspension, which in this trade is the only credential worth quoting. We lodge your file with the Registry, we hold your position, and we tell you your number every Thursday whether it has moved or not. That is the product. It is a small product and we charge a small fee for it, and we have watched a great many people pay a great deal more for something we would not have the authority to promise.

The weekly quota is set by the Bosphorus Compact. It moves. It has moved down in eight of the last twelve quarters. We do not know why and we do not pretend to have a relationship that would tell us.

HALIC LINE is a licensed lodging agent and is not a carrier, an escort service, or a guarantor of transit. We cannot expedite. Any agent who tells you they can expedite is describing a relationship that either does not exist or would end the moment it was described to a client. We do not operate on the eastern passes and have declined to broker that route since 2063. Our clients regularly leave us for people who will. We keep their files open for a year.

HALIC LINE // LICENCE 0114

Your number, every Thursday, whether it moved or not.

CONFLICT

Issue 51 // Q3 2067

A contraband glossy from the edge of a dying future

Editor-in-Chief

INES DRESSLER

Holds a press exemption that has never once been questioned at a crossing, in any direction, in nineteen years, and has spent this quarter finding out what that is worth and to whom

Deputy Editor

GIDEON ARLT

Spent six weeks trying to establish who actually authorises the eastern passes and produced a memo that says, in nine hundred words, nobody, and is correct

Fashion & Field Intelligence

NICO BRAND

Can tell you how far somebody has come from the wear on one shoulder strap and has stopped doing it out loud since a woman in the Bazaar Circuit asked him, politely, not to

Features Editor

TOVAH REIST

Approved a lynx walking a live corridor on somebody else's paperwork and has described the approval, twice, in this building, as the correct call, in a voice nobody found convincing

Culture & Decline

WREN COLE

Reads the resale price of household goods the way other desks read troop movements, and called the Sarabad emptying eleven weeks before any faction assessment did

Copy & Classifieds

HALLORAN PYNE

Runs every missing-person classified in this issue at no charge, has done for four years, and will not discuss the policy or allow it to be described as one

Transit Desk

EVERY PERSON ON THIS MASTHEAD CAN LEAVE. THAT IS THE ONLY THING WE ALL HAVE IN COMMON.

Verification

NO BROKER NAMED IN THIS ISSUE HAS BEEN PAID BY US, AND TWO OFFERED.

Legal

WE HAVE WITHHELD FOUR ROUTE DETAILS FROM THE EMBEDDED PIECE.
THE PEOPLE WHO ASKED US TO ARE STILL ON THEM.

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. This issue was reported across the black zone, the eastern passes, the corridor valleys, and one tea lounge in Istanbul, and at no point on any of that ground was any member of this staff at risk of not being allowed out.

CONTRIBUTORS

CASS RENNICK

Lynx, ex-operator, writes EMBEDDED, and walked eleven days of the eastern passes with a group of nine who had paid for the route and one press exemption she had not. She filed at length, refused two cuts, and lost the argument about the last three paragraphs, which are hers and which we have printed exactly as she wrote them.

SEMRA OZTURK

Worked four years as a file clerk for a Compact-licensed brokerage and left when she understood what she had been quoting people. She writes THE MANUAL on buying an exit. She asked us to print that she is not a whistleblower, that nothing her employer did was illegal, and that this is the part she wants readers to sit with.

ARIN DEMIRCI

Trades salvage across the black zone river markets and has kept a price book for nine years, by hand, by village, because nobody else was keeping one. He writes MATERIAL CULTURE on the relief stove. He has correctly predicted the emptying of six settlements from a single column of that book and takes no satisfaction in any of them.

LEV MARKARIAN

Interviews people who are lying to him and is unusually calm about it. For THE ROOM WHERE EVERYONE LIED he spent two hours with the corridor's largest unlicensed broker, caught him in nine falsehoods, could not disprove a tenth, and came away with one true sentence that has changed how this magazine understands the entire trade.

NADIYA BEK

Writes about places that exist because of something happening next to them. For CITY OF BAD IDEAS she spent nine days in a corridor valley town whose entire economy is people not yet leaving, and where the most profitable business is a laundry. She has been back twice since filing, at her own expense, and has not told us why.

OPEN WOUNDS

THE MOST EXPENSIVE THING IN THIS HEMISPHERE IS PERMISSION, AND IT IS FREE TO THE PEOPLE WHO ISSUE IT

There is a document in my coat that has never been read. It is a press exemption, nineteen years old in its current form, and I have carried it across the strait, through the corridor, into two garrison zones and out of one black zone, and not once has anybody done more than glance at the colour of it. It cost nothing. It was issued to me because of who I work for. It is, by a distance I find difficult to write down, the most valuable object I own.

This is the exit issue. Every department in it bends toward one unglamorous fact: an exit is not a road. It is not a boat, a pass, a broker, a night with the moon down, a good driver. All of those are for sale and most of them are honestly sold. An exit is permission, and permission is not for sale, because the people who have it do not experience it as a thing they own.

Cass Rennick walked the eastern passes for eleven days with nine people who had paid for the route, on page 26. What she found there is the load-bearing fact of this entire issue and I am going to state it plainly here so that nobody gets to the end of her piece and thinks it was a twist. The eastern passes work because an Eurasian Oligarchy colonel in the Caucasus corridor has been declining to close them for years. He observes the traffic. He does not interdict it. There is no arrangement, no fee, no negotiation, and, as far as anyone has been able to establish, no written instruction either way. Every person on that route believes they bought their passage. What they bought was a place on a road that one man has not yet decided to shut.

Lev Markarian sat down on page 49 with the broker who sells that road. He is charming, he is a liar, Markarian caught him in nine separate untruths inside two hours, and the tenth thing he said was true and is the worst sentence in this magazine. Read it and then decide what you would do in his chair, because I have tried and I do not have an answer I like.

We are not running a piece about smugglers as villains. That was offered to us twice and it is the laziest available story, and it is wrong on the arithmetic, and I would rather print nothing. The overwhelming majority of people moving other people across this hemisphere are doing competent work for a fair price under conditions nobody in this office would accept. The fraud in this trade is real and we name it on page 20. It is

also not the mechanism. The mechanism is that a permission which costs its holders nothing has become the single most valuable commodity between the Steppes and the Gulf, and that everybody trading in it is trading in something they do not have.

Elsewhere: Semra Ozturk, who spent four years quoting queue positions to people for a licensed agency, writes the manual on page 40 for buying an exit without buying a story. Arin Demirci follows a relief stove through a black zone market on page 45 and explains why the resale price of a paraffin burner tells you which village empties next, months before any faction assessment notices. Nadiya Bek went to a corridor valley town on page 55 whose entire economy is people not leaving yet.

We also do the usual work. We shame a season of departure fashion built by people who have never departed from anywhere. We review a nine-kilogram luxury exit kit that costs more than the crossing it is designed for.

Everyone on this masthead can leave. That is the only thing we all have in common and it is the reason we were able to report this issue at all.

Find out what your own permission is. Then find out who could withdraw it, and whether they would have to tell you.

// INES DRESSLER

THIS MONTH IN DECLINE

1

THE COMPACT QUOTA DROPS AGAIN AND NOBODY IS TOLD WHY

Weekly transit numbers through the Bosphorus registry fell for the eighth quarter in twelve, this time by a margin small enough that no licensed agent has publicly complained and large enough that every one of them has recalculated. The Compact does not publish a rationale and is under no obligation to. Two agents told us they now quote clients a wait in seasons rather than weeks, having learned that a number in weeks is a promise and a number in seasons is a weather report.

2

RELIEF STOVES ARE MOVING IN SARABAD, WHICH MEANS SARABAD IS MOVING

The paraffin burner is the last household object a river family sells, because it is the one that makes a place a home rather than a stop. Eleven turned up in one black zone market in a single week, which has happened four times in nine years and has meant the same thing every time. No faction assessment has registered anything. The salvage traders who keep price books registered it immediately and have started quoting the route north accordingly.

3

A LUXURY LABEL LAUNCHES A NINE-KILOGRAM DEPARTURE KIT AT 1,400 CREDITS

NORTHBOUND has produced a curated exit bag with a waxed shell, a modular document sleeve, and a colourway the catalogue calls ash. It is a genuinely excellent piece of luggage. It costs roughly three times the median price of the crossing it is

marketed for, weighs nine kilograms before anything is put in it, and is the single most legible object a person can carry on a corridor route, which is to say it announces at four hundred metres that its owner has money and no idea. Review on page 61.

4

SOMEBODY IS SELLING "EASTERN PASSES GUARANTEED" IN THREE MARKETS

A new grade of service has appeared in the corridor: the guaranteed crossing, priced at four times the standard and sold with a verbal assurance of arrangement at the garrison end. There is no arrangement. There has never been an arrangement. Three separate crews describe the pitch in almost identical language, which suggests either a single operation or a very good idea travelling fast. Both are worse than they sound.

5

THE BAZAAR CIRCUIT PRICE LIST NOW CARRIES A COLUMN FOR ROUTE VERIFICATION

Istanbul's weekly information tariff has quietly added a line for confirming whether a named broker actually delivered a named party in the last sixty days. It is not cheap and it is the best value on the sheet. The existence of the column is a more damning statement about the trade than anything printed in this magazine, and it was created by traders, not by journalists, which is how these things generally go.

6

A CORRIDOR VALLEY TOWN'S MOST PROFITABLE BUSINESS IS NOW A LAUNDRY

Dzorakap has four hundred permanent residents and, on a given week, between two and nine hundred people waiting in it. The laundry runs eighteen hours a day and takes cash only. Everyone in the corridor understands why: you cannot arrive

anywhere looking like the road. The laundry owner has declined three offers to franchise the model and told our reporter she would rather it stayed one town's business. See page 55.

7

AN AID CONSORTIUM PHOTOGRAPHS A QUEUE AND LOSES THE VALLEY FOR A SEASON

A documentation team recorded a waiting line in a corridor town without asking, published nine images, and within a fortnight the town had stopped forming visible queues at all, which has made the distribution of actual aid materially harder for everyone including the consortium. The images were good. They raised money. Two of the people in them have since been recognised at a crossing. The consortium has issued a statement about awareness.

8

PILGRIMAGE STAMPS ARE NOW BEING FAKED WELL ENOUGH TO PASS ON THE ROUTE

The route books carried on the old corridor were never meant to be credentials and have become them, and the inevitable has arrived: a decent forgery is circulating at eighty credits with three plausible community stamps already inside. The people who actually keep the stamps are not angry about the forgery. They are angry that a book which was a record of hospitality received is now a document that gets checked.

9

A GARRISON PATROL WAVES A GROUP THROUGH AND THE GROUP PAYS THE BROKER A BONUS

The transaction is now common enough on the eastern route to have a shape. A patrol declines to stop a party, the party understands this as the broker's arrangement working, and the broker accepts a discretionary payment for a service he did not perform and could not have performed. Two brokers have told us they refuse the bonus. Neither would let us print their names, on the grounds that refusing it publicly would price them out of the trade inside a month.

10

THE WORD "DISPLACED" IS BEING REPLACED IN OFFICIAL COPY BY "MOBILE"

Two faction humanitarian directorates and one Compact office have adjusted their standard language this quarter. Mobile populations, mobile households, mobile need. It is a smaller and lighter word and it removes the question of who did the displacing, which is the entire reason it was selected, and nobody involved has been remotely embarrassed to be asked about it. One directorate offered us a briefing on the change. We took it. It was ninety minutes long.

11

A BROKER IN THE CORRIDOR HAS STARTED ISSUING WRITTEN REFUSALS

He turns down about a third of the people who come to him and now gives each of them a short handwritten note saying he declined and why, which they can carry to the next agent. It has no standing anywhere and costs him money. Four other brokers have called it a stunt. Six have started doing it. It is, on the current evidence, the only genuine innovation in the exit trade this decade, and it was invented by a man with no licence and a bad knee.

DOs / DON'Ts OF THE THEATER

DO

Ask a broker for the last party he moved and the week he moved them. A good one answers in about four seconds and does not embellish. The pause is not evasion, it is arithmetic, and you want to hear it happen.

DON'T

Photograph a queue. Not for a story, not for a record, not because the light is extraordinary and it will be. Everybody standing in it has a reason to be unphotographed and not one of them owes you that reason.

DO

Carry one clean set of clothes you never wear on the road. Everybody who has arrived anywhere knows this and nobody who has only departed does, and the difference is visible from the far end of a platform.

DON'T

Say "guaranteed" in a corridor market unless you enjoy silence. Nothing on that ground is guaranteed by anybody, and the word now identifies you instantly as either a fraud or the person a fraud is currently working on.

DO

Learn the word for waiting in the language of the place you are waiting in. It is the only word most people in a corridor town will ever hear you attempt, and attempting it correctly is worth more than a month of being polite in your own.

DON'T

Ask somebody in a waiting town where they are going. You are asking a person to state a plan out loud in a room with strangers in it. The question feels like interest. It lands like a checkpoint.

DO

Pay the small fees without theatre. The tea, the guide, the boy who watched the bags. These are not corruption, they are the local economy of a place that has no other one, and the people who argue about them are always the ones who can afford not to.

DON'T

Wear a route book on a lanyard. It was a record of who fed you and it has become a document because people started checking it, and hanging it on your chest is what finished the job. Several of the communities that issue the stamps have now stopped.

DO

Take the ugly bag. Canvas, no branding, four kilograms, patched. Anything else on a corridor route is a signal, and a signal on that ground is read by people whose reading of it costs you money at best.

DON'T

Tell a group you are travelling with that you hold an exemption. If you hold one, you have already decided you will use it and they will already know when you do, and the announcement only buys you the pleasure of having been honest early.

DO

Ask what happens if the route closes mid-passage. Watch which brokers have thought about it. The answer barely matters. The existence of an answer is the whole test and about half of them fail it in front of you.

DON'T

Congratulate somebody on getting out. They left a place. Half of them left people in it. The sentence costs you nothing to withhold and there are a great many people in Istanbul who can tell you exactly where they were standing when they first heard it.

WHAT THEY'RE WEARING TO THE WAR

01

THE ARRIVAL SET, CARRIED UNWORN THE ENTIRE WAY

Manufacturer Whatever was good in the town you left, bought new if there was money and mended twice if there was not

Materials Cotton or a cotton blend, a collar that holds a press, shoes with an intact sole, all of it sealed in a bag inside the bag and touched at no point in eleven days

Signal Value I intend to be a person when I get there. The most disciplined object anybody carries on a route and the one that gets discarded last, after the stove, after the tools, after food.

Survivability Depends entirely on whether the bag stays dry, which is why the arrival set is packed at the top and the water at the bottom by everybody who has done this before and nobody who has not.

Earns everything. Nico Brand can name the arrival set at a hundred metres on a platform in Istanbul: pressed clothes on a body that has not slept, worn by somebody standing very still. It is the only item in this department that is a plan rather than a signal.

02

THE DEAD CREDENTIAL JACKET, ISTANBUL PATTERN, WORN HONESTLY

Manufacturer Nobody, in the sense that matters. Collaged over years from four bloc sources on a base shell that is usually a dead army's

Materials Oligarchy administrative stamps, Prophet's Seal marks, NAF clearance codes, Eastern Compact genomic notation, applied to salt-cured cotton canvas with a thread that does not match anything

Signal Value I have dealt with all of them and belong to none. In Istanbul it reads as competence. On the corridor it reads as a man with connections, which is a much more dangerous sentence for the wearer than for anybody looking at him.

Survivability The shell outlives the codes. Half the stamps on a good jacket refer to authorities that no longer exist, which is the point and which nobody under twenty-five seems to know any more.

Earns the city and gets you stopped everywhere else. Wear it on the strait. Leave it in Istanbul. Four people this season have taken one east and every one of them has a story about a valley checkpoint.

03

THE ROUTE BOOK, POCKET SIZE, STAMPED

Manufacturer Community-issued along the old pilgrimage corridor, sixteen pages, cardboard covers, no two printings alike

Materials Uncoated stock that takes an ink stamp cleanly and a thumbprint permanently, sewn rather than glued, because a glued spine dies in one wet season

Signal Value Was: these people fed me. Is now: I have been vouched for. The change happened in about four years and was made entirely by people checking it who were never meant to.

Survivability Physically excellent. Socially finished. Three communities on the eastern corridor have stopped stamping altogether rather than continue issuing something that gets a person searched.

Earned it once. Does not any more, through no fault of the object or anyone who made it. Carry it in a pocket if you carry it at all, and see page 45 for what happens to a thing when strangers start reading it.

04

THE NORTHBOUND DEPARTURE SHELL, ASH COLOURWAY

Manufacturer NORTHBOUND, a tactical luxury house with two Istanbul showrooms and no field presence anywhere

Materials Waxed twelve-ounce cotton, storm-taped seams, a magnetic document sleeve at the chest, hardware in an antiqued brass the catalogue calls found

Signal Value I am doing this on purpose. Beautifully made, genuinely warm, and visible at four hundred metres in a valley where everybody else is wearing grey and brown that has been washed a hundred times.

Survivability The garment will outlast the war. Its wearer's anonymity lasts about a day and a half, and a chest document sleeve on a corridor route is an invitation with a handle on it.

Exactly what a person with a passport and a fantasy would carry. Superb coat. Wrong continent. Buy it for a city and never take it east of the strait.

05

THE CARRY HARNESS, ADULT TO CHILD, IMPROVISED

Manufacturer Made on the route from a cargo strap, a folded blanket, and two buckles off something else

Materials Whatever is twenty-five millimetres wide and rated for more than it says, padded at the shoulder with the padding taken off a bag that was abandoned

Signal Value None intended, and it is read anyway. In a corridor town a good harness marks somebody who has been on the road long enough to have solved a problem properly, which changes how the market prices them.

Survivability Better than the commercial equivalent, because the commercial equivalent is sized for a child who is not asleep and the improvised one is built by somebody carrying a child who is.

Earns everything and is not trying to. The best-engineered object in this issue, designed by nobody, iterated by thousands, and never once photographed for a catalogue.

06

THE PRESS EXEMPTION, LAMINATED, IN A COAT

Manufacturer Issued by the bodies that recognise the outlet, renewed by post, never once negotiated

Materials Card, laminate, a holographic panel that has been out of date for two years and has never been examined closely enough for that to matter

Signal Value Total, and invisible until produced. The only item in this department that changes what a checkpoint is rather than how it reads you.

Survivability Indefinite, and this is the part worth sitting with: it does not degrade, it cannot be lost in a way that matters, and a replacement arrives in a fortnight by post.

Cannot be earned, only issued. Every member of this magazine's staff carries one. It is the most powerful object we have ever run in this department and we did not have to queue for a minute of it.

WORST PEOPLE ALIVE
THE DEPARTURES EDITION

1

**WHOEVER IS SELLING "EASTERN PASSES
GUARANTEED"**

Three markets, one pitch, four times the standard rate
Charges a family everything they have on the strength of an arrangement at the garrison end that does not exist, cannot exist, and has never existed at any point in the eleven years the route has been running. The route works anyway, which is the cruelty of it: the customer arrives, believes they were protected, and recommends him. He is selling weather as a service and being thanked for the sunshine. We have three descriptions of the pitch and one probable name we are not printing yet.

2

**THE HUMANITARIAN DIRECTORATE THAT REPLACED
"DISPLACED" WITH "MOBILE"**

Terminology review, completed this quarter, briefed to us at length
Spent ninety minutes explaining to this magazine that the new word is more dignified, more accurate, and preferred by focus groups drawn from affected populations, and at no point in those ninety minutes did anybody say the actual reason, which is that displaced implies an agent and mobile does not. They know. Everyone in the room knew. The briefing was good. That is what made it unforgivable.

3

**THE DOCUMENTATION TEAM THAT PHOTOGRAPHED
THE QUEUE**

Nine images, one valley, one season of consequences

Took extraordinary pictures of people waiting, published them without consent, raised a considerable amount of money, and ended visible queuing in that valley for a season, which has made actual distribution harder for every organisation working there including their own. Two of the people photographed have since been recognised at a crossing. The team has issued a statement about the importance of awareness. Nobody has issued a statement about the two.

4

NORTHBOUND

Tactical luxury, two Istanbul showrooms, 1,400 credits for a bag
Built a beautiful, competent, genuinely well-made product line around the aesthetics of leaving, priced it at three times the crossing it references, and sells it almost exclusively to people who will never make one. The clothes are not the offence. The lookbook is. Somebody at that company photographed a model on a corridor road, and somebody approved it, and the road in the background is a real road that real people are on this week.

5

THE BROKERS TAKING THE PATROL BONUS

Eastern route, discretionary, entirely voluntary on the client's part
Accept an extra payment when a garrison patrol declines to stop a party, on the understanding that this demonstrates the broker's arrangement working. There is no arrangement. Taking the money is not fraud in any court and is fraud in every sense that matters, and the two brokers we found who refuse it both told us they cannot say so publicly without being priced out of the trade inside a month. That is the market these men have built between them.

6

THE COMPACT TRANSIT REGISTRY

Eight quota reductions in twelve quarters, no published rationale, no obligation to publish one

Runs the most consequential number in this hemisphere and has never explained a single movement of it to anybody outside the building. This is entirely within its rights and is the reason a whole shadow trade exists. When a legitimate queue becomes unreadable, people stop believing it is a queue, and once they stop believing that, every guarantee merchant in the corridor has a customer. The Registry is not corrupt. It is opaque, which in this market does the same work.

7

THIS MAGAZINE, ON THE EVIDENCE OF PAGE 26

Nine people, one exemption, one decision, printed in full

Sent a reporter onto a live route with a document that guaranteed her exit and guaranteed nobody else's, knowing exactly what that asymmetry would do to the piece and, on some level, wanting it. Our features editor has twice called the approval the correct call. It probably was. Read Rennick's last three paragraphs, which we tried to cut and did not, and then look at where this entry is placed on this list and understand that we chose that position too.

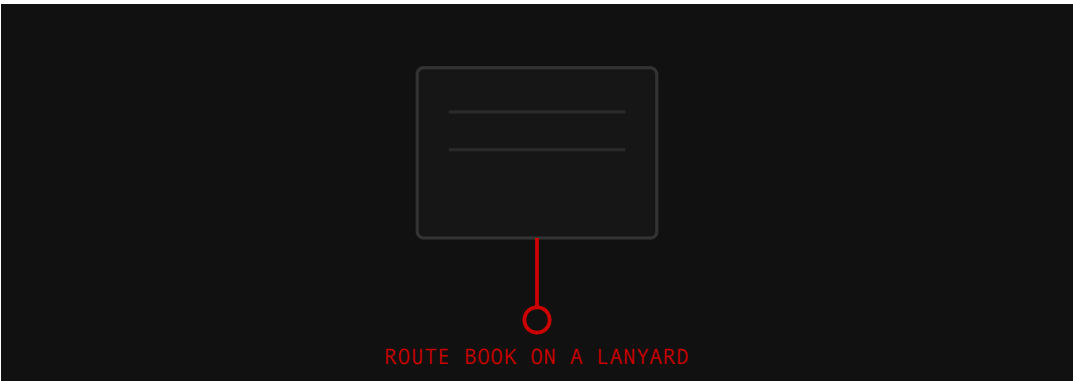
FIELD FAILURES

01



Carried the waxed departure shell on a corridor route because the catalogue photographed it on a corridor road. He was the only person in the valley not wearing washed grey. Three separate people offered to help him before noon and he has no way of knowing what any of them wanted.

02



Wore his route book on his chest because it had four good stamps in it and he was proud of them. He was proud of the right thing. He had turned a record of who had fed him into a document, in public, on a road where documents get read, and the community that gave him the last stamp has since stopped issuing them.

03



Photographed a waiting line from a doorway because the light was extraordinary and it was. The images ran. The valley stopped queuing where anybody could see it, aid distribution got materially worse for a season, and two of the faces have been recognised since at a crossing seven hundred kilometres away.

04



Paid four times the rate for the guaranteed grade and arrived safely, which is the problem. He now tells everyone in his building that the guarantee is real, and eleven people he knows are saving for it, and none of them will find out until the route closes, which it will, on a Tuesday, without notice.

05



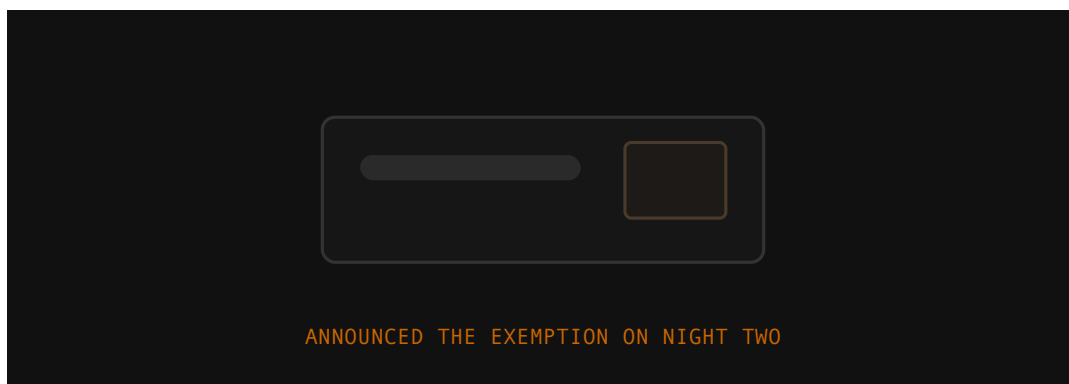
Packed his water at the top and his arrival set at the bottom because the water was what he expected to need. Eleven days later he stepped off in a city where nobody knew him wearing everything he had walked in. He was correct about the water. He had simply never arrived anywhere before.

06



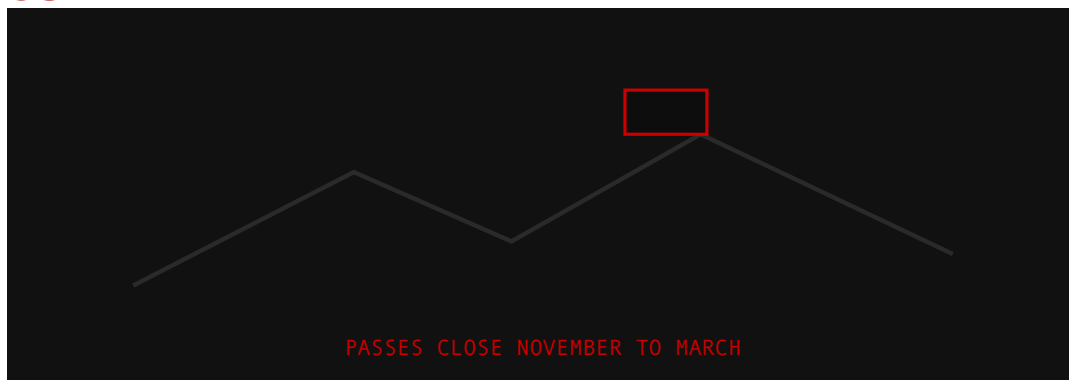
Sold the stove the week he decided to go rather than the week he went, and then waited two months for a broker slot in a house he could no longer cook in. Every trader on that river read the sale and priced him accordingly, and by the time he moved he was paying the going rate for a man who has nothing left to sell.

07



Told the group on the second night that he held a press exemption, which he intended as honesty and which functioned as an announcement that he would be leaving without them. Nobody was angry. Nobody spoke to him properly again either, and he spent nine more days finding out what that costs.

08



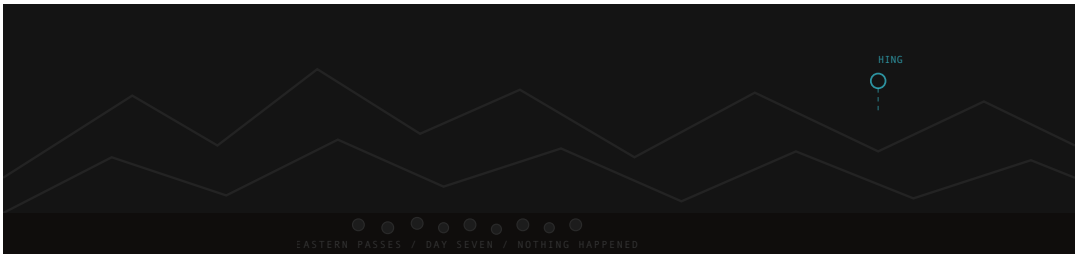
Booked a mountain crossing for late November because the price had come down, and the price had come down because the passes close in late November, and every person in that market knew it including the man who sold him the slot. He was not defrauded. He was quoted a seasonal rate and never asked what made it seasonal.

EMBEDDED

OBSERVED, NOT INTERDICTED

Nine people paid a broker in a river market to move them out of the black zone and over the eastern passes. I walked with them for eleven days on a press exemption that cost me nothing. On day seven I found out what they had actually bought, and I have been trying since to work out who I am supposed to be angry at.

By Cass Rennick



The stove goes at eleven in the morning and Halide Servet does not watch it go. She has arranged the sale so that she is facing the other way when the trader lifts it, which I take at first for grief and understand later as procedure. The stove is a Pattern 4 relief burner, brass over pressed steel, distributed by a consortium in 2058 to eleven thousand households along this stretch of the Euphrates. Hers has a repaired valve stem and a scorch ring on the housing in the shape of a pot she no longer owns. It goes for forty-one credits, which is nine over the market, because the valve was repaired properly.

Forty-one credits does not move a person anywhere. That is not what the stove is for. The stove is the announcement. In a river market the size of Sarabad there is no way to tell six hundred people you are leaving except by selling the last thing that made your house a house, and once you have done that the price of everything else you need changes, in both directions, and you have about a week to move before the arithmetic turns against you.

“You are writing that down,” Halide says.

“I am.”

“Write that it was a good stove.”

There are nine of them. Halide, who ran a school administration office for nineteen years and now negotiates for the group because nobody else in it can hold a number in their head under pressure. Her nephew Yusuf, a welder, thirty-four, who has said fewer than two hundred words to me in eleven days and every one of them useful. Nesrin, who is twenty-six and travelling with a four-year-old called Deniz who thinks this is a holiday and has been allowed to. A man named Isa who is seventeen and looks fourteen and has a route book with four community stamps in it that he is extremely proud of. Two brothers who asked not to be described at all, which I have honoured to the letter. A woman who gave me a first name I later established was not hers. And a man in his sixties who spent the entire crossing carrying a bag I never saw him open.

They have paid a broker in Istanbul named Bekir Solmaz, through a runner in Sarabad, four hundred and ten credits a head for the eastern passes. Solmaz is not licensed. Solmaz has moved, by the count of people in that market who would know, somewhere north of two thousand individuals across this route in the last five years without losing a party. That record is real. I have checked as much of it as anybody can check.

I have paid nothing. I have a laminated card in my coat.

THE RUNNER

Kerim Aslan is twenty-nine and has a bad knee that he has never explained and a way of counting a group by touching each person's shoulder as he passes down the line, which he does four times a day and which I did not notice for the first two days because it looks like affection. He is not a guide in the sense that he knows a secret way. There is no secret way. The eastern passes are on every map anybody has ever drawn of this region and have been walked continuously for about four thousand years.

What Kerim knows is timing, weather, which valley households will sell food to a party of nine without a conversation about it, and where to stop so that a group is not silhouetted on a ridge at the hour when somebody with optics is bored. This is real expertise. It took him years. It is worth what they paid him and I want that on the record before anything else in this piece.

“How many times have you done this,” I ask him on the first night, in the back of a truck that smells of diesel and cardamom.

“This route, sixty-one.”

“How many bad ones.”

He thinks about it properly, which I appreciate. “Two. Weather, both. Nobody died. One woman lost toes.”

“And soldiers.”

“No.”

“Never.”

“Never,” he says, and turns over, and that is the end of that conversation for six days.

“This route, sixty-one.” “And soldiers.” “No.” “Never.” “Never.”

// Kerim Aslan, night one, in the back of the truck

DAYS TWO TO FIVE

The river part is easy and nobody enjoys it. We move at night in two shallow boats with the motors off through a marsh system that the communities here have been re-engineering for twelve years to pull the maximum possible life out of twenty-three percent of the water this river used to carry. In daylight it is one of the great sights of this hemisphere and nobody in the boats looks at it. Halide sleeps upright with her hand flat on Deniz’s back. Yusuf bails.

Three hours before dawn on the second night a drone runs a coverage pattern about a kilometre east of us and everybody in both boats stops moving in the same half second without anybody giving an instruction. It goes away. Kerim does not comment. Later I ask him whether the suppression came from the communities or from the Sons and he gives me a look of such flat disappointment that I do not ask again, and I have decided not to speculate here either, because four people asked me not to and they are still on that water.

We go up out of the plain on the fourth day and the character of the thing changes completely. Down there we were in a landscape that people live in. Up here we are in one that people cross. There is a difference in how a road behaves when nobody has a stake in it.

Isa shows me the route book on the fourth evening, sitting on a wall with his boots off. Sixteen pages, card covers, sewn spine. Four stamps: three villages and a monastery that has been a monastery, an ammunition store, and a monastery again. He has the thing in a plastic sleeve.

“My uncle had eleven,” he says. “He walked it twice.”

“What are the stamps for.”

“It means they fed you.” He turns a page. “It means you are the kind of person people feed.”

Two nights later a household declines to stamp his book. They feed all nine of us, they refuse money, the grandmother argues with Kerim for a quarter of an hour about how much bread we are taking, and then she will not touch the stamp. She tells him, through Kerim, that they stopped in the spring, that two young men who had their stamp were searched at a valley post because of it, and that she is not going to be the reason a boy gets emptied out onto a road. Isa nods the whole time she is talking. He is very polite about it. He does not get the book out again for the rest of the crossing and I never saw him look at it either.

THE FIRST POST

On day six we cross a valley road at a place where a road has to be crossed and there is a post on it. Two vehicles, a shelter, a barrier arm that is up. Six soldiers, Oligarchy pattern, one of them a Boar-template who has to duck to leave the shelter and does it with the boredom of a man who has ducked through that door nine hundred times.

Kerim does not hide. This is the thing I was not ready for. He walks the nine of them down the road in daylight at a normal pace with the bags visible.

My hand is on the card in my coat the entire time. I have already decided I will produce it. I have decided which sentence I will say and in which language and how far forward I will step. I have run this in my head since Sarabad.

Nobody asks me for anything. Nobody asks anybody for anything. A soldier of about twenty looks at Nesrin and Deniz for two seconds and looks away. We walk under the barrier arm. Twelve minutes later we are in the treeline on the other side and Yusuf says the longest sentence he says on the entire crossing, which is that his heart is going, and Halide laughs at him, and Deniz asks whether those were the soldiers and Nesrin says yes and Deniz says they were shorter than she thought.

I write in my notebook that evening: *did not need the card. Did the card do it anyway. No way to know.*

I still do not know. That is going to matter later.

DAY SEVEN

There is a hilltop above the second valley with a comms mast on it and a view of about forty kilometres, and I go up it in the early morning because I am a lynx and because I have been walking behind other people for six days and I want, badly, to see something before anybody tells me about it.

She is already there. Lynx-template, Oligarchy kit with nothing on it that says so, sitting on a folding stool with a display propped on her knees and a cup going cold beside her boot. She has been watching us come up the valley since roughly the time we crossed the road.

The recognition goes off in both of us at the same moment and neither of us does anything about it, and if you are not gene-forged I cannot explain to you how loud that silence is.

“You are the journalist,” she says.

“You know about the journalist.”

“We knew in Sarabad.”

She does not offer me a name and I do not ask. She has seven years of this valley on the display and she scrolls through it while we talk in the way somebody handles an object they have stopped noticing they are holding.

I ask her the question in the plainest form I have. Do you count the parties coming over the passes.

“Yes.”

“All of them.”

“All of them. Numbers, composition, times. Since I got here.”

“And you have never stopped one.”

She looks up for the first time. “Not once.”

“Why not.”

“Because I have never been told to.” She goes back to the display. “I have also never been told not to. There is no instruction. It is not in any order I have ever received in seven years, in either direction. It is a thing the colonel does not do.”

“Volkov.”

“You will have that name from somewhere else.” A pause of about a second and a half.

“Yes.”

I ask whether the traffic is useful to them, because that would at least be a reason, and reasons are stable and I would very much have liked one. She says the counts go into an assessment and the assessment goes somewhere and she has never in seven years seen the assessment used for anything. She says it in the tone of a person describing a leaking tap in a building she does not own.

“What happens if he is replaced,” I ask.

“Then somebody else decides.”

“And if the next one decides differently.”

“Then the road closes.”

“And who is told.”

She thinks about it. This is the part I have replayed most. She is not being cruel, she is genuinely working through a question nobody has asked her, and the answer takes her about four seconds to reach and lands on her face slightly before she says it.

“Nobody is told,” she says. “There is nobody to tell. It is not a permission. Nobody issued it.”

“It is not a permission. Nobody issued it. There is nobody to tell.”

// Lynx-template intelligence operative, hilltop above the second valley, day seven

WHAT NINE PEOPLE BOUGHT

I come down off that hill and walk for four hours behind Halide Servet with the whole thing rearranged in my head.

Every one of them believes they have bought a crossing. Halide negotiated the price down eleven credits a head and is proud of it and told me so on the second day. Isa believes his route book is a form of standing. Nesrin has an arrival set at the top of her bag, pressed, in a sealed liner, and has not touched it in seven days. Kerim believes, honestly and with sixty-one crossings behind him, that his timing is the reason nothing has ever gone wrong with a soldier, and he is not entirely wrong, because bad timing would eventually produce an incident even under forbearance. Solmaz in Istanbul believes he has a business.

What is actually holding this road open is that a man in a garrison eleven hours north has not, in seven years, given an order. There is no arrangement to buy. There is nothing to renew, nobody to bribe, no relationship anybody can maintain, and no notification when it ends. Three and a half thousand credits changed hands in Sarabad for a place on a road whose only real term and condition is the continuing inattention of somebody these nine people will never meet and have never heard of.

And here is the part I keep circling: not one person in this chain is lying to them. Kerim is doing skilled work honestly. Solmaz has moved two thousand people and lost nobody. The soldier at the post did what he does every day. The lynx on the hill answers direct questions directly. Volkov, whoever he is, has done nothing at all, and doing nothing is the single most generous act any faction officer in this hemisphere is performing this year, and it is unrecorded, unaccountable, and revocable on a Tuesday.

You could build a fraud on this. Somebody has: see page 20, and the people selling a guaranteed crossing at four times the rate on the strength of an arrangement at the garrison end. But the fraud is a parasite on the real thing, and the real thing is worse, because the real thing has nobody in it to blame.

DAYS EIGHT TO ELEVEN

It gets cold. The two brothers who asked not to be described are extremely funny for about six hours on the ninth day and I am not able to explain why here. Deniz develops a limp on the tenth morning that turns out to be a stone in her shoe and produces the only genuinely happy thirty seconds of the entire crossing. Yusuf carries the old man's unopened bag for the last two hours of the tenth day without being asked and without either of them acknowledging it.

On the eleventh morning we come down into a valley town called Dzorakap, which is four hundred permanent residents and several hundred people waiting, and whose most profitable business is a laundry that runs eighteen hours a day, and which Nadiya Bek has written about properly on page 55.

That is where the arrival sets come out. Nesrin irons hers in a room with eleven other women and a shared board, and the queue for the board is longer than the queue for the water, and nobody in that room needs it explained to them. She puts it on. She comes out into the street and she looks like a woman going to an office. It is the most competent thing I have seen anybody do in eleven days and it is a costume and she knows exactly what it is for.

Halide gets her party onto a bus. Kerim touches nine shoulders, counts to nine, and then does it again. He shakes my hand. He tells me the piece should say that the route is a good route, and I have said so, twice, and I meant it both times.

THE FAST LANE

I got to the strait four days ahead of them.

There are two channels at the crossing. There is the Registry hall, which is where a lodged file and a queue position and eight quota reductions in twelve quarters get you, and where the average wait for the people I walked with is going to be measured in something other than days. And there is a desk to the left of it with no queue, for exempt categories, which is press, medical, licensed commercial, and faction.

I went left. It took eleven seconds. The officer looked at the laminate, not the hologram, which has been out of date for two years, and said something pleasant about the weather.

I stood on the other side for a while. You can see the hall from there.

I want to write that I felt something clean about this, and I have four drafts where I do, and my editor has read all four and printed this one. Here is the true version. I did not feel ashamed at the desk. I felt efficient. The shame arrived about forty minutes later in a tea house on the water side with my boots off, and it was not about the eleven seconds. It was about day six, at the post, with my hand on the card, and the fact that I have no way of knowing whether that card did anything, and the fact that I would have produced it, and the fact that if I had produced it, it would have worked, for all nine of them, once, in a way that no amount of money in that river market could have bought.

I carried the only thing on that road that actually was a permission. It cost me nothing. It was issued to me by people who have never been asked to justify issuing it.

Halide Servet is somewhere in a Registry queue as this goes to press, at a number she is not allowed to be told the mechanism of, holding a receipt from a man who sold her a road he does not own, having done every single thing right.

ADVERTISEMENT

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Because the way you go says as much as the reason.

Shown on the eastern corridor road, AW 2067 campaign. NORTHBOUND maintains two showrooms and no field operations. This magazine offered NORTHBOUND the opportunity to comment on the selection of that location for a photograph and received a note thanking us for our interest in the collection.

NORTHBOUND // THE DEPARTURE SYSTEM

Leave well.

THE MANUAL

HOW TO BUY AN EXIT WITHOUT BUYING A STORY

I spent four years quoting queue positions to people for a licensed agency. Everything I told them was true. Almost none of it was the thing they needed to know. Here is what I would say now, on the other side of the desk, to somebody with money in their hand and about a week to decide.

By Semra Ozturk

You are going to be sold a story. This is not because the trade is full of criminals, although it has its share. It is because you are about to buy something nobody can show you, and in the absence of a thing to look at, both of you will reach for a narrative instead. Yours will be about arriving. Theirs will be about how they know a man. Your entire job in the next week is to keep both of those stories out of the transaction and buy the parts that are real.

1. ESTABLISH WHAT IS ACTUALLY FOR SALE

Four things are genuinely purchasable. Transport, which is a vehicle or a boat and a driver. Knowledge, which is timing, weather, water, and which household will sell food to a group without discussing it. Labour, which is somebody carrying something so you do not have to. And a lodged file, which is a position in a legitimate queue, and which only a licensed agent can put in for you.

That is the list. It is a short list and everything on it is worth paying for. Anything an agent offers you beyond those four things is either a courtesy or a lie, and courtesies are free.

Passage itself is not on the list. Nobody sells passage. The road is open or it is not, and the reasons it is open are almost never reasons anybody in the market has access to. An agent who prices passage as a distinct line item is selling you the weather.

2. ASK FOR THE LAST PARTY AND THE WEEK

Who did you last move, how many, which week. That is the whole test and it takes eleven seconds to administer.

A working agent answers immediately and flatly and gives you a number that is not round. Six, nine days ago. Fourteen, the week before last, two of them children. You are listening for the arithmetic to happen. It is the sound of a person retrieving a fact rather than composing one.

What you do not want is a pause followed by warmth. Warmth at that specific moment in a conversation is the single most reliable indicator of trouble I encountered in four years, and I encountered it perhaps thirty times, and I was right about it every time but one.

3. VERIFY IT SOMEWHERE THAT IS NOT HIS ROOM

The Bazaar Circuit price list now carries a route verification line, which will tell you for a fee whether a named agent moved a named party in the last sixty days. It is not cheap. It is the cheapest thing you will buy this month.

If you cannot reach the Circuit, ask in a market rather than a tea house. Traders keep books. People who sit down keep opinions. A salvage trader who has watched a river market for nine years knows which agents move people and which agents move stories, and will usually tell you for nothing, because it costs him nothing and because he has watched this go wrong.

4. REFUSE THE WORD GUARANTEED

Nothing is guaranteed. There is no arrangement at the garrison end of any route in this hemisphere. I want to be exact about this because a whole grade of service has been invented on top of the ambiguity: the guaranteed crossing, four times the standard rate, sold on an assurance of an understanding with somebody in uniform.

No such understanding exists. If one did, it would be the single most valuable commercial asset in the Shatter Belt and it would not be sold to a family in a river market at four hundred credits a head. The word guaranteed, spoken by an agent, is not a claim about the road. It is a claim about him, and it is false.

5. FIND OUT WHAT HE DOES IF THE ROUTE CLOSES

Ask it plainly. If the passes shut while we are on them, what happens.

The content of the answer is nearly irrelevant. What you are testing is whether he has ever thought about it. Roughly half of them have not, visibly, in front of you, and you will watch it happen on their face.

The good answers are unglamorous. We go back down and I house you for four days at my cost. We divert west and it adds nine days and you pay the food. I refund two thirds. One agent in the corridor now issues a written refusal to people he turns down, which has no standing anywhere and costs him money, and which tells you more about him than any reference could.

6. PAY IN PARTS AND NEVER FOR SPEED

Split the payment across the stages you can observe. Something at departure, something at the halfway point where you have seen the work happen, the balance at the end. Any agent who requires the whole sum in advance is asking you to finance his risk, which is a reasonable request that you should refuse anyway.

Never pay for expedition. In a licensed queue nobody can move your number and the ones who claim they can are describing a relationship that either does not exist or would be destroyed the moment they described it to you. This was the sentence I said most often in four years and the one people most consistently did not want to hear, because expedition is the thing they came in to buy.

7. DO NOT SELL THE STOVE UNTIL THE WEEK YOU GO

Every market you might leave from is being read by people whose living depends on reading it. When your household goods appear, your price changes. You have announced that you are committed, that you have a deadline, and that your reserves are finite and now measurable.

Sell last, sell fast, sell in one movement, and move. If you sell in the month you decide rather than the week you leave, you will spend the interval paying the rate quoted to a person with nothing left to sell, and everyone on that river will know it before you do.

8. PACK THE ARRIVAL SET AT THE TOP

One clean set of clothes, sealed, unworn, above the water and not below it. This sounds like vanity and is logistics. Where you are going, the first ninety seconds of every interaction will be conducted by people reading your clothes, and you will be doing that work at a moment when you have not slept and do not speak the language and are holding all of your remaining property.

Everybody who has arrived somewhere already knows this. Everybody who has only left does not. It is the clearest line in the whole trade between the experienced and the merely determined.

9. WORK OUT WHAT YOUR OWN PERMISSION IS

Some categories cross without queuing. Press, medical, licensed commercial, faction. If you hold one of those you are not in this market and you should be honest with yourself about that before you start giving advice to people who are.

If you do not hold one, find out whether anything in your history could be made into one. A professional registration, a family record, a service document, an employer willing to write a line on paper. Most people have less than they hope. A meaningful number have more than they know, and never check, because checking feels like admitting you are going.

THE DISCLAIMER

I quoted queue positions to about nine hundred people. Every number I gave was accurate on the day I gave it. I never once told anybody that the quota had fallen in eight of the previous twelve quarters, because nobody asked me and it was not my job to volunteer it, and because a client who understands that the queue is shrinking is a client who goes to somebody unlicensed that afternoon.

I left the agency. The agency did nothing wrong. That is what I would like you to take from this more than any of the nine points above.

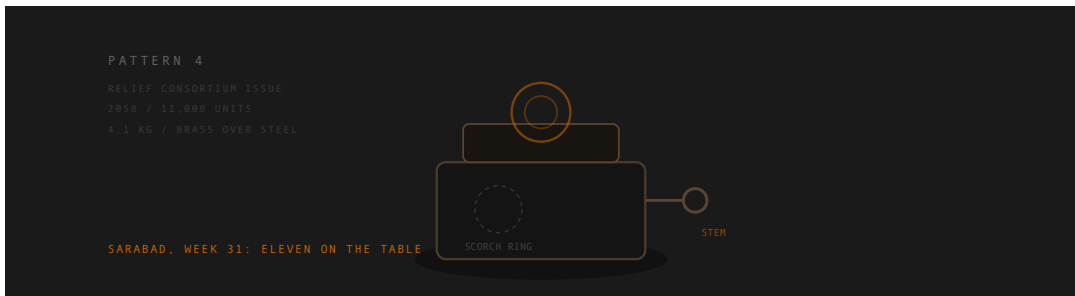
And this magazine, which is paying me for these words, is staffed entirely by people who cross without queuing. Take the advice. It is good advice. Just be clear about who is giving it to you and what it has never cost us.

MATERIAL CULTURE

PATTERN 4

A brass-over-steel paraffin burner, four kilograms, distributed free to eleven thousand river households in 2058. It is the last object a family sells and the first thing a trader counts. I have kept the price of it by hand for nine years and it has told me which villages were emptying before the villages knew.

By Arin Demirci



I have one in front of me. It came off a table in Sarabad in the last week of the season for forty-one credits and I bought it because I have been buying them for nine years and because I wanted to hold this particular one, which belonged to a woman who ran a school office and who is, as I write, somewhere north of the passes in a queue.

Four point one kilograms. A brass burner head over a pressed steel body, a wick assembly you can strip with a coin, a fill cap on a chain that everybody loses in the first year, and a valve stem that fails at about eight years and can be repaired by any competent hand in the region. Hers had been repaired. That is why it went nine credits over.

Eleven thousand of these were handed out along this river in 2058 by a consortium that no longer exists under that name. They were not designed for us. They were designed in a northern country for a specification written by somebody who had costed fuel at a price that has never once obtained here. They burn paraffin at a rate that made them expensive to run from the day they arrived, which is the first thing anybody will tell you about them, usually with affection.

WHY IT IS THE LAST THING

A household sells in an order. It is not a written order and I have never heard anybody state it, and it is the same in every village on this water.

Tools go first, because tools are how you earn and admitting you will not be earning here is the smallest of the admissions. Then the bicycle, the spare bedding, the good dish. Then the radio, which people hold longer than they should because of what it is for. Then, at a distance, right at the end, the stove.

The stove is last because a house without a stove is not a house. You can sleep on a floor and eat cold and still be a family in a room. The moment the burner goes off the table you have converted your home into a place you are staying, and everybody in it knows it, and the children find out that afternoon.

So the stove is not a sale. It is a declaration, made to about six hundred people at once, in the only forum that exists.

A house without a stove is not a house. It is a place you are staying. The children find out that afternoon.

THE BOOK

I started the price book in 2058 because I was young and had been told to keep records and did not know which records mattered. For two years it was worthless. In the spring of 2060 I noticed that I had bought nine Pattern 4 burners out of one village in eleven days, and that I had never bought more than two out of anywhere in a month, and I went back through the pages and understood that I had been holding a prediction.

The column works like this. Under three in a month is a village living. Four to six is a village where something specific has happened, usually a flow reduction upstream or a death. Nine or more in under a fortnight is a village that will be at half population inside a season, and I have been wrong about that twice in nine years, both times because a settlement I had written off held on through something I did not think it could hold through.

Sarabad ran eleven in a week. That is in this issue on page 4 and it was in my book eight days before any of you read it, and it will be in a faction humanitarian assessment in about four months, and by then the people in it will be in a corridor town doing laundry.

Nobody pays me for the book. Two agents have offered. I have said no both times and I am not going to be sentimental in this magazine about why, so here is the practical version: the moment a broker can price a village by how frightened it is, the price goes up, and the people who are most frightened pay the most. The book stays in my hand.

WHAT IT IS WORTH AND TO WHOM

Thirty-two credits is the standing price. Forty-one for a repaired valve. Twenty-six if the burner head has been overheated to the point where the brass has gone the colour of old bread, which happens when somebody has been running it on the wrong fuel, which happens when somebody has run out of the right fuel, which is a whole biography in a discoloured ring.

A working stove costs a river household about nine credits a month to run. This is why the second-hand market is not what you would expect. The people buying my stoves are frequently not poorer than the people selling them. They are people who have just decided to stay, and who need a burner because the one they inherited has finally died, and who are making, with thirty-two credits, exactly the opposite declaration to the one the seller made across the same table an hour earlier.

I have watched that transaction perhaps four hundred times. It is the most eloquent thing that happens in these markets and nobody involved thinks of it as anything at all.

THE COUNTERFEIT, WHICH IS NOT A COUNTERFEIT

There is a Pattern 4 that is not a Pattern 4. A workshop in the Zagros foothills has been building a copy for six years: same dimensions, same wick assembly, a steel burner head instead of brass, and a stamped mark that reads as the consortium mark until you have held forty real ones.

They are good stoves. In two respects they are better stoves, because the steel head does not discolour and the valve stem is threaded rather than pressed and can be replaced instead of repaired. They sell for eighteen credits new.

And they are worth less second-hand than a real Pattern 4 with a broken valve, and I want to be honest that I price them that way myself, and that I cannot fully defend it. A Pattern 4 means somebody was on the consortium list in 2058. It means a household that was counted. In a region where being counted has been the difference between a bad decade and a fatal one, the mark on the burner head is a small piece of documentary evidence that a family existed in a way that an office somewhere acknowledged, and people pay for that, and the workshop in the foothills cannot make it and knows it cannot.

THE ONE THAT CAME BACK

In 2064 I bought a burner in a village called Tell Ashar and sold it eleven days later three markets downstream. In 2066 I bought it again, in Sarabad, off a different table, from a woman who did not know its history and had no reason to.

I knew it by the valve, which I had repaired myself in between, badly, in a way I was not proud of at the time and which had held for two years.

I do not have a lesson in this. I have a fact, which is that a family in Tell Ashar left, and a family in Sarabad bought a stove and stayed for two years and then left as well, and that the object went both ways down that river while the people only went one, and that it is now on my table in a town neither of them reached.

It is a good stove. I am not going to sell it.

THE ROOM WHERE EVERYONE LIED

THE MAN WHO SELLS THE ROAD

Bekir Solmaz has moved something over two thousand people across the eastern passes in five years and has never lost a party. He gave me two hours in a hotel tea lounge above a lobby full of people waiting for him. He lied to me nine times. The tenth thing he said is the reason this issue exists.

By Lev Markarian

The lounge is on the mezzanine of a hotel that was grand in about 2020 and has been declining with real dignity ever since. Brass rail, a carpet worn to the weave in two specific paths, and a window down the length of one wall looking at the Golden Horn through glass nobody has cleaned in a decade, which softens the water in a way I suspect the management has stopped apologising for and started charging for.

Tea comes in tulip glasses on a tray from a boy of about fifteen who brings it four times in two hours without being asked and who Solmaz thanks by name every time.

Below us, through the rail, there are perhaps forty people in the lobby. Some of them are sitting on their bags. A woman near the door has been reading the same page of something for as long as I have been watching.

“They are not mine,” Solmaz says, before I ask. “This is a hotel. People wait in a hotel.”

That is the first one.

THE MAN

He is about fifty, heavy in the shoulders, in a jacket that is better than it looks and shoes that are exactly as good as they look. He has the specific charm of somebody who has spent thirty years being liked professionally: he asks about my journey, he remembers a name I mention in passing and returns it forty minutes later, and he is genuinely, unforcedly funny about three separate subjects.

I liked him. I want that on the page early, because everything that follows is going to make it look like I did not, and because the trade this magazine is describing does not run on people you can dislike on sight.

“I am not licensed,” he says, unprompted, in the first five minutes, and I write it down as candour. Ninety minutes later he tells me the Registry knows him, that he has a working relationship with two officers there, and that this is why his files move. There is no file. He does not lodge files. He has never lodged a file in his life because lodging a file requires a licence and he has just told me he does not have one.

That is the second, and it is more interesting than the first, because he told me the truth when the truth cost him nothing and the lie when it did.

THE RECORD

Here is what is not a lie, and I have checked it as far as it can be checked: something over two thousand people in five years, no party lost. I have four independent accounts from people who walked it and two from traders who watch the market end. His runners are good, his timing is good, and he pays them properly, which in this trade is rarer than competence.

“Nobody has ever been taken off my road,” he says. He says it without any theatre at all, which is how I know it matters to him more than anything else in the two hours.

“And soldiers.”

“I have never in my life met a soldier on that route.”

Eleven minutes later he tells me a long, extremely good story about a lieutenant at a valley post in 2064 who let a party of six through in the rain because one of them was carrying a sewing machine and the lieutenant’s mother had the same one.

I let it sit for a moment and then I say: you have never met a soldier on that route.

He does not flinch and he does not apologise. He says, “I have never met a soldier who stopped me,” and pours more tea, and it is such a clean recovery that I nearly let it go.

NINE

I am going to list them, because a man’s lies are a map of what he thinks he needs.

He was a customs officer for six years. He was not; he worked freight logistics for a shipping agent, which he told a colleague of mine in 2061 and which is on the record. His father walked the route in the forties; on the second telling it is the fifties, and his father, by his own account elsewhere, never left the coast. He does not take the patrol bonus; two of his former clients have described paying it and one described his runner declining to look at it while a family put it on the table. He charges a flat four hundred and ten a head; I have three quotes from this year ranging to nine hundred, all of them to people who had already sold everything. He will not move a child under six; I have walked past a four-year-old on his route this quarter. The quota fell because of an incident in 2065 that he describes in some detail; no such incident is known to anybody at the Registry, the Circuit, or this magazine. The people in the lobby are not his. He works with two Registry officers. And he has, he says, never once in five years told a client anything he did not believe.

That is nine and the last of them is the one that gets you, because it is said with enormous sincerity by a man who has by that point in the afternoon said eight untrue things to a journalist he knows is checking.

“I have never met a soldier on that route.” Eleven minutes later, the lieutenant, the rain, the sewing machine.

// Bekir Solmaz, mezzanine tea lounge, second glass

THE TURN

At about the ninety-minute mark I stop asking questions and put it to him directly. I tell him what our reporter found on the hilltop above the second valley. I tell him there is no arrangement anywhere on his route, that the passes are counted and have never been closed because an officer has never given an order in either direction, and that everything he sells is contingent on the continuing inattention of a man neither of us has met.

I expect a denial. I have three follow-ups ready for the denial and I do not use any of them.

He puts the glass down and looks at the window for what I timed afterwards at nineteen seconds.

“2063,” he says.

“What happened in 2063.”

“I worked it out. A runner of mine, a good one, he said to me, Bekir, in four years nothing. Not one patrol, not one stop, not one bribe. He said, we are not clever. He was right. We are not clever.” He turns the glass a quarter. “There is nothing to buy up there. I have known this for four years.”

“And you have sold it every week since.”

“Yes.”

“Why.”

And here is the tenth thing, which is true, and which I have not been able to put down since.

“Because they cannot buy nothing,” he says. “A woman comes to me with everything she has in her hand and she says, what do I buy. If I tell her the road is open because an Oligarchy officer eleven hours away is not paying attention, what does she do? She cannot use it. There is no door in that sentence. She walks out of here and she goes to Hakan or she goes to the one with the guarantee and she pays four times and she gets the same road, and he will not check the weather and he will not count her, and in November he will take her over and she will lose her feet.”

He is not performing. This is the only stretch of two hours in which he is visibly not performing.

“So I sell her me,” he says. “My runner, my timing, my sixty crossings. That part is real and it is worth the money and it is the only part I have. And she thinks she has bought the road. And I let her think it, because a woman who thinks she has bought the road sleeps, and a woman who knows the truth does not sleep and arrives anyway.”

“They cannot buy nothing. So I sell her me, and she thinks she has bought the road, and I let her think it.”

// Solmaz, on the tenth thing, which is the true one

THE ARGUMENT I LOST

I put the obvious to him. That he could tell them. That two thousand people who understood what they were standing on might behave differently, might not sell the stove in the wrong month, might not pay a man four times the rate for an arrangement that does not exist.

“Tell them how,” he says. “In the room? With the bag on the floor? I say to her, madam, the road may close on a Tuesday and nobody will tell you. She says, then what do I do. And I have no answer. I have never had an answer.” He spreads his hands. “You have an answer? Print it. I will read it. I will say it to the next one.”

I did not have one in the room and I have not developed one since.

What I have instead is an observation, which is that Solmaz has arranged his entire professional life so that he never has to look at the lobby. He sits with his back to the rail. He has the boy bring the tea up. In two hours he did not once look down at the forty people underneath us, three of whom, by the time I left, I had established were waiting for him.

That is the eleventh thing and he never said it out loud.

DOWNSTAIRS

I went down at the end and sat in the lobby for a while, which he did not see me do.

The woman by the door was still on the same page. I did not speak to her, because there is a version of this profession where I go over and ask her how much she has been quoted and get a very good closing paragraph out of her, and I have done that before and I was not going to do it again.

Solmaz is not the villain of this issue and the man selling guarantees at four times the rate is barely one either. They are both downstream of the same thing: a road held open by an absence, which cannot be bought, which nobody will announce the end of, and which every person in that lobby has been priced for as though it were a service.

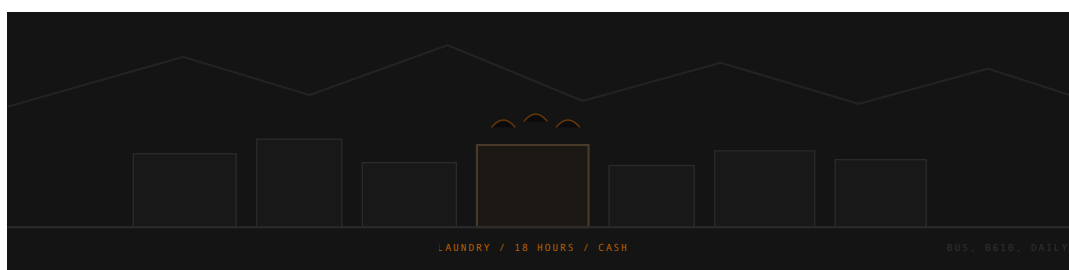
He came out about twenty minutes later, went through the lobby without stopping, and shook two hands on the way past, and both of the people whose hands he shook looked happier afterwards, and I could not tell you whether they should have.

CITY OF BAD IDEAS

DZORAKAP DOES NOT WANT YOUR PITY AND WILL TAKE YOUR LAUNDRY

Four hundred residents. Between two and nine hundred people waiting, depending on the week. No industry, no garrison, no faction office, and the most profitable business in the valley is a washing machine. Nine days in a town that exists entirely because of a road it is not on.

By Nadiya Bek



You arrive in Dzorakap either from above, on foot, off the passes, or from below, on the 0610 bus from the corridor road, and the town can tell which within about four seconds of you stepping onto the square. It does not matter to anybody. It changes only which of the two conversations you are about to have.

It is a valley town of four hundred permanent residents in a corridor of ninety thousand, with a square, a church that is used, a school with sixty-one children in it, a post office, two shops, a garage, and a laundry. There is no garrison here. The nearest post is nineteen kilometres down the valley and the soldiers come up perhaps twice a month to buy bread and be looked at.

On the week I arrived there were about six hundred people in the town who did not live in it.

THE ECONOMY OF NOT LEAVING YET

Nobody in Dzorakap is on the road. That is the thing you have to hold in your head to understand the place. The road is elsewhere, up and over, and the people here are between the part of the road that ended and the part that has not started, which for most of them is a bus ticket they cannot yet afford or a Registry number that has not moved.

The average stay, by the estimate of the woman who runs the laundry and has better data than any institution operating in this valley, is nineteen days. She arrives at that number by counting repeat customers, which she does in a notebook, which she showed me on the fourth day after deciding something about me that I did not witness her decide.

Nineteen days is long enough to need everything and short enough to buy nothing. This produces an economy that looks, at first glance, like it is missing.

There are no restaurants. There is one bakery running at four times its designed output, selling bread and nothing else, in a queue that forms at five. There are no hotels; there are perhaps sixty households renting floor space by the night at a rate that has been stable for three years and which the town has, without any mechanism I could identify, agreed not to raise. There is one man who sells bus tickets and will hold one for you for four days for nothing.

And there is Anush Tovmasyan's laundry, which has three machines, runs eighteen hours a day, takes cash only, and clears more in a month than the garage clears in a year.

THE LAUNDRY

You cannot arrive anywhere looking like the road. Everybody in this valley knows it and half the people in this magazine's readership have never had to.

The queue outside Tovmasyan's starts at six and does not really end. It is not a queue of dirty clothes. It is a queue of people holding one sealed bag each, and the bags contain the arrival sets, and what she is actually selling is the pressing.

"Washing is nothing," she told me. "A river washes. They want a crease."

She has three boards, two irons, and a rule that you press your own, because when she pressed for people she was doing forty a day and could not sleep. So the boards are shared, there is a rota that she does not enforce and that has never once needed

enforcing, and there is a room in the back of a laundry in a valley in the Caucasus corridor where eleven women at a time iron clothes they have carried unworn for a fortnight while their children sit on the floor.

She has been offered a franchise arrangement three times. She has declined three times. When I asked why she said that it should stay one town's business, and when I pushed her on what that meant she said, with some irritation, that if it were everywhere it would be a service, and that at the moment it is a room.

“Washing is nothing. A river washes. They want a crease.”

// Anush Tovmasyan, whose three machines out-earn the valley

WHAT THE TOWN THINKS OF YOU

There is a particular exhaustion in Dzorakap that I did not understand for four days and then understood all at once, standing in the post office.

The town is not hostile. I was fed on the first night by people who had no idea who I was, and on the second night by people who did and fed me anyway. Nobody stole anything from me. Nobody overcharged me, which given the circumstances is a moral position rather than a market outcome.

What the town is, is tired of being a location. Sixty-one children go to school here. The school teaches a curriculum, has a football team, and lost its music teacher two years ago and has not replaced her, and every conversation anybody has with anybody from outside is about the road.

“You are the fourth this year,” the priest told me, meaning journalists. “Nobody has ever written a sentence about the school.”

So: sixty-one children, one football team, second in a valley league of nine, and a music teacher post that has been open since 2065 at a salary the diocese has not increased.

The corridor's valleys have spent a decade adapting to being a staging area for other people's operations. Ninety thousand people have got very good at it. Not one person I met in nine days had accepted it, and the distinction is one they make constantly, in ordinary conversation, without being asked, and it is the single most consistent thing anybody said to me here.

THE POST OFFICE

The post office is where the town's two populations touch, and it is the reason I understood the place.

It has a counter, a scale, and a wall of small boxes. Residents rent boxes. Nobody waiting rents a box because you cannot rent a box for nineteen days.

So a practice has developed. A person waiting gives a resident's box number as their address, with permission, and the resident holds anything that comes and finds them, and if they have gone the resident holds it, and there is a shelf behind the counter for the ones nobody came back for.

The postmaster showed me the shelf. There were, that week, thirty-one items on it. He knows how long each has been there. The oldest is from 2062 and he has never opened it and will not, and when I asked him what happens to them he looked at me as though I had asked what happens to the mountains.

"They stay," he said.

THE WORD

On the eighth day I noticed that in nine days nobody in Dzorakap had said the name of the crossing out loud to me. Not the residents, not the people waiting, not the priest, not Tovmasyan.

They say up. They say over. They say the other side, the bus, the number. There is a word and it is a perfectly ordinary word and it is on maps.

I asked the postmaster about it on the last evening, expecting superstition or security. He thought about it for a while.

"If you name it," he said, "it is a thing that can be closed."

The bus goes at ten past six. I got on it with fourteen people, eleven of whom were wearing clothes that had been pressed within the last twelve hours, and we came down the valley past the post at nineteen kilometres, where the barrier was up, and where nobody looked at us at all.

NOBODY ADMIT THIS EXISTS

A standing order authorising interdiction of the eastern passes is said to have been drafted twice at corridor command, in 2062 and again last year, and to have been signed on neither occasion. Two people describe the second draft. They describe two different reasons it was not signed and neither reason is that anybody objected.

The lynx-template operative on the hilltop is reported to have filed the same valley assessment, with updated numbers, one hundred and ninety-four consecutive times.

Nobody we asked could name a single decision that any of them has ever informed.

She is understood to have stopped attaching a recommendation in 2064.

Somebody in the Compact Registry is said to be quietly holding files open past their lapse date for applicants who have missed a renewal window while physically on a route. There is no provision for this. Four agents have noticed it. All four have stopped mentioning it to each other in case mentioning it ends it.

The guaranteed-crossing pitch is rumoured to originate with one man who has never worked a route in his life and who sells the script itself, at a fixed price, to agents in three markets. Two crews describe buying it. One describes being told there is a second version for people who ask harder questions.

A workshop in the Zagros foothills producing copies of the Pattern 4 relief stove is said to have approached the original consortium's successor body for permission to use the mark, in writing, politely, and to have received no reply of any kind for two years.

Colonel Volkov is rumoured to have been asked directly about the passes by a visiting staff officer and to have described the traffic as agricultural. The staff officer is said to have written it down. Nobody has produced the note and everybody in the corridor has heard about it.

Three communities on the old pilgrimage corridor have reportedly agreed among themselves to stop stamping route books entirely, without announcing the agreement, so that no single community is identified as the one that stopped. A fourth is said to be still stamping and to be under some pressure about it.

A licensed Istanbul brokerage is said to keep a private list of unlicensed agents it considers safe, and to hand clients to them off the record when the queue is hopeless, and to have done this several hundred times. Every agent named on that list denies knowing it exists. One of them named three others on it.

The written refusals being issued by the corridor agent with the bad knee are rumoured to have been accepted as a form of reference by two other agents, who now take his declines as information rather than as a customer. If true this is the closest thing to a professional standard the trade has ever produced and it was built by four men in a valley.

An aid consortium is said to have run its own internal review of the queue photographs, concluded that publication was a serious error, and filed the review rather than issue it, on the advice of a communications officer who argued that a retraction would cost more in donations than the images raised. Two people describe the meeting. Neither will describe who won it.

A Sons transit coordinator is rumoured to have declined a substantial standing payment from a broker for priority scheduling on the grounds that the corridor is not a business, and to have been overruled six months later by circumstances rather than by anybody. Nobody will say what the circumstances were.

Somebody is reportedly compiling a list of the thirty-one uncollected items on the shelf behind the Dzorakap post office counter, with dates, in the hope of matching names against Registry arrivals. The postmaster is said to know and to have neither helped nor objected.

A second lynx is said to have come up that hilltop this year, before ours, on a different party, and to have had a version of the same conversation. If so, nobody printed it. Two people in the Bazaar Circuit have told us the story with details we did not publish, which means either it happened twice or somebody has been talking, and we would genuinely like to know which.

Bekir Solmaz is rumoured to have twice paid the full onward Registry fees of clients he could not move, out of his own money, without telling them where it came from. He denied this to our reporter with more energy than he denied anything else in two hours.

EXPENSIVE TRASH

NORTHBOUND, THE DEPARTURE SYSTEM, ASH

1,400 CR

Genuinely superb luggage. Waxed twelve-ounce cotton, storm-taped seams, a load path that puts nine kilograms across the shoulder without complaint, and a magnetic chest sleeve finished to a standard nobody in this category is matching. It costs more than three crossings. It weighs nine kilograms empty, on a route where four is a lot. It is visible at four hundred metres in a valley where everyone else is in washed grey, and the chest sleeve announces the location of your documents to anybody who wants to know. Everything wrong with it is a consequence of everything right with it. Gets you found stylishly. Buy it for a city. The lookbook was shot on a road that people are on this week and somebody at that company chose the location.

HALIC LINE, LODGING AND FILE MAINTENANCE

FROM 30 CR, ANNUAL

A small, honest, slightly depressing product, competently delivered for eleven years without a licence suspension. They lodge your file, they hold your position, they tell you your number every Thursday whether it moved or not, and they say plainly in their own advertisement that they cannot expedite and do not broker the eastern route. Everything they sell is real. Nothing they sell will get you out this year if the quota does what it has done in eight of the last twelve quarters, and they will not pretend otherwise, which is why their clients keep leaving them for people who will. Earns the price and cannot solve your problem. The most honest thing in this issue and the least useful, and those two facts are the same fact.

ANUSH TOVMASYAN'S LAUNDRY, DZORAKAP, THE SQUARE

4 CR A LOAD, BOARD FREE

Three machines, two irons, eighteen hours a day, cash only, press your own. It out-earns every other business in the valley by a distance and the reason is that everybody who has ever arrived anywhere understands the difference a crease makes and everybody who has only left does not. The back room, on a busy morning, with eleven women working the boards on a rota nobody enforces, is the single most competent operation this magazine visited all quarter, including two garrisons. Earns everything. She has turned down three franchise offers on the grounds that it should stay a room rather than become a service, and she is right, and she should not have had to explain it twice.

THE PATTERN 4 RELIEF STOVE, SECOND HAND, VALVE REPAIRED

41 CR

Four kilograms of brass over pressed steel, designed in a northern country against a fuel price that has never obtained here, expensive to run since the day it landed, and beloved. It strips with a coin. The valve fails at eight years and any competent hand in the region will fix it. Buy the real one over the eighteen-credit Zagros copy, which is in two measurable respects a better stove, and be honest with yourself that what you are paying the difference for is a stamped mark proving a household was counted in 2058. Earns the price twice over and the second time for a reason nobody will say out loud. See page 45.

"EASTERN PASSES GUARANTEED"

FROM 1,600 CR A HEAD

Four times the standard rate for the same road, sold on an arrangement at the garrison end that does not exist and has never existed. The road is good. The clients mostly arrive. That is exactly the problem: every satisfied customer goes home and tells eleven people the guarantee is real, and eleven people start saving, and none of them will find out otherwise until the day the route closes without notice, which is the one day the guarantee was supposedly for. Not a bad product. A product that is not a product, priced as the best one on the market.

The purest thing we reviewed this quarter. You are paying sixteen hundred credits for weather and being thanked for the sunshine.

OBITUARIES FOR PEOPLE WHO AREN'T DEAD YET

THE ROUTE BOOK

b. on a pilgrimage corridor nobody was policing • d. this spring, cause of death: being checked

Sixteen pages, card covers, sewn spine, a record of who had fed you and therefore of the kind of person people feed. It died the moment strangers with authority began reading it, which converted a courtesy into a credential and a credential into a reason to search a boy on a road. Three communities have stopped stamping rather than continue issuing it. It is survived by an eighty-credit forgery with three plausible stamps already inside, which is doing very well.

THE WORD "DISPLACED"

b. in a legal instrument that specified who did it • d. this quarter, in a terminology review, peacefully

Replaced across two faction directorates and one Compact office by "mobile," a lighter word with no room in it for an agent. The review found the new term more dignified and preferred by consultation groups, and the ninety-minute briefing we received on the change never once mentioned the actual reason, which everybody in the room could have stated in four words. Survived by mobile households, mobile need, and mobile populations, all of which got that way somehow.

THE ARRANGEMENT AT THE GARRISON END

b. never • d. never • interred this issue, page 26

Did not exist at any point in the eleven years it was sold. Cannot be said to have died because it was never born, and is being buried here anyway on the grounds that a great many people have paid full price for it and are entitled to a service. It is survived by the

road, which is open, and which is open for a reason that has nothing to do with money and cannot be renewed. In lieu of flowers, ask your agent what he does if the passes shut on day four.

THE SMUGGLER, AS A VILLAIN

b. in every faction communiqué ever issued about this corridor • d. at our features meeting, over about an hour

The dependable practice of explaining the exit economy by pointing at the man with the truck died this quarter after somebody in this office finally did the arithmetic on how many people that man has moved without losing anybody. It was a good living for a lot of outlets. It is survived by the people who actually set the quota, none of whom have ever been photographed near a road, and by a man in a mezzanine tea lounge who is not the villain either, which we found considerably more annoying.

CLASSIFIEDS / PERSONAL ADS / BOUNTY ADS

BOUNTY

Six hundred credits for the standing order on the eastern passes, drafted 2062 or last year, either version, signed or unsigned. We are told it exists twice and was executed neither time. We will authenticate and we will not name you.

// AN OUTLET YOU ARE HOLDING

SEEKING

The Compact Registry quota methodology. Not the numbers. The method. Eight reductions in twelve quarters and every agent in this city is guessing, which is how the guarantee men eat. Somebody in that building types the paper.

// LICENSED AGENTS, COLLECTIVELY, ANONYMOUSLY

PERSONAL

Halide, if this reaches you. The stove went for forty-one, which was nine over, because you had the valve done properly like you said. I have written that it was a good stove. It is on page 45 and the man who bought it is not going to sell it.

// THE ONE WHO WALKED BEHIND YOU

WANTED

Music teacher. Dzorakap village school, sixty-one children, post open since 2065, salary poor and honest about it, house provided. Football team currently second in a league of nine and would like to stay there.

// THE PRIEST, WHO HAS ASKED FOUR JOURNALISTS

FOR SALE

Pattern 4 relief burner, brass head, valve threaded not pressed, so it is the Zagros copy and I am telling you that up front. Eighteen credits new, twelve from me, and it will outlast the real one. I know what the mark is worth. I do not have the mark.

// FOOTHILL WORKSHOP, THIRD ROW

DISCREET SERVICES

I read agents. You bring me the pitch, word for word, as best you remember it, and I tell you which parts are the four real things and which part is the story. Flat fee, one glass of tea, no introductions offered and none taken.

// FOUR YEARS BEHIND A LICENSED DESK

MEMORIAL

For the shelf behind the counter at the Dzorakap post office. Thirty-one items. The oldest is from 2062. He has never opened one and will not, and if you have ever left an address in that valley you already know which one is yours.

// SOMEBODY WHO CAME BACK AND FOUND IT STILL THERE

SEEKING

Anyone who was in the second boat out of Sarabad in the last week of the season. Nine of us went up. I am asking about the two brothers, who were funny on the ninth day and who I did not get a name for, deliberately, and now regret.

// STILL IN THE QUEUE, POSITION UNCHANGED

REVENGE

Four hundred credits to whoever gets a single agent, any market, to say the word guaranteed on a recording and then explain what it refers to. Nobody will finish the sentence. That is the entire offer and I have budgeted for it not paying out.

// PAID FOR THIS SPACE MYSELF

PERSONAL

To the boy with four stamps: she was right to refuse the fifth and you were right to be polite about it. Both of those things can be true. Get the book out again in ten years when it is nobody's business but yours.

// A WOMAN WHO WATCHED YOU TAKE IT WELL

WANTED

Floor space, Dzorakap, nineteen nights, two adults one child, will pay the standing rate and not a credit over because I know the town agreed not to raise it and I am not going to be the one who breaks that.

// ARRIVING ON THE 0610, THURSDAY

BOUNTY

Three hundred credits for the name of whoever is selling the guaranteed-crossing script to agents at a fixed price. Not the agents. The man who wrote it. There is reportedly a second version for people who ask harder questions and I would like that too.

// THREE MARKETS, POOLED

DISCREET SERVICES

Pressing. My own iron, my own board, your own clothes, ten minutes, one credit, in the room at the back. Do not arrive in what you walked in. I have watched a great many people find that out on a platform.

// THE SQUARE, ASK FOR THE BACK ROOM

PERSONAL

You said you would send word from the other side and you have not, and I have decided to believe that means the post is slow rather than the other thing. The box number is still good. He is holding everything. He said they stay.

// BOX 14, WHO IS NOT GOING ANYWHERE

WANTED

Runner work, eastern route, six seasons, know the weather and the households and which ridge not to stand on at four. Will not work for anybody who uses the word guaranteed in front of a client. This narrows it considerably and I have done the arithmetic.

// BAD KNEE, GOOD TIMING

FOR SALE

Departure shell, ash, waxed cotton, worn once on an actual road, immaculate because everybody could see me coming and nothing ever got close enough to mark it. Half price. It is a beautiful coat and it is the wrong coat.

// LEARNED IT IN ONE DAY AND A HALF

SEEKING

The other lynx. You came up that hill before me, this year, on a different party, and you had the same conversation and you did not print it. I am not asking why. I would like to know whether she said the same last sentence to you.

// SECOND VALLEY, DAY SEVEN

DATING

Nineteen days in a town I am not from, one good set of clothes I have not worn, and a number that has not moved since spring. Looking for somebody who will talk about anything except the road for one evening. I will pay for the tea.

// THE BAKERY QUEUE, ANY MORNING AT FIVE

MEMORIAL

Tell Ashar, 2064. The stove came back down the river twice and the village only went one way. Somebody has it on a table in a town none of us reached. He says he is not selling it. I believe him and I do not know what to do with that.

// ONE OF THE ONES WHO LEFT

DISCREET SERVICES

Written refusals. If I turn you down I give you a note saying so and why, in my hand, which you may carry to the next man. It has no standing anywhere and it costs me. Six others have started doing it. That is the only reason I am advertising.

// CORRIDOR, ASK AT THE GARAGE

PERSONAL

To whoever at the Registry is holding files open past lapse for people who missed a renewal while physically on a route: four of us noticed and none of us have mentioned it to each other until now, and we have all been careful, and we are telling you here because we think you should know it was seen.

// FOUR AGENTS, WHO HAVE NEVER MET

ELEVEN SECONDS

That is how long it took me, the last time, at the desk to the left of the Registry hall. I have never timed it before. I timed it this quarter because Cass Rennick timed hers and put the number in her piece, and once somebody in your building does that you find you cannot go back to not knowing.

Eleven seconds, a glance at a laminate with a hologram two years out of date, and a remark about the weather.

We ran an issue about a road that is open because nobody has closed it. I have spent the quarter waiting for somebody on this staff to identify the villain and nobody has managed it, and I have stopped treating that as a failure of reporting.

Kerim Aslan does honest, skilled, physically hard work for a fair price and touches nine shoulders four times a day so that nobody is left behind a ridge. Bekir Solmaz has moved two thousand people and lost none of them and lies about almost everything else, and when Markarian finally put it to him he told the truth, and the truth was that his clients cannot buy nothing so he sells them himself. The lieutenant with the sewing machine. The grandmother who fed nine people and would not stamp a boy's book because two young men with that stamp got searched. The postmaster with thirty-one items on a shelf. A lynx on a hill who has filed the same assessment a hundred and ninety-four times and has never once been asked what she thinks. And a colonel who has not given an order in seven years, in either direction, which is the most consequential act of generosity in this hemisphere and which he may not experience as an act at all.

Not one of them is the mechanism. The mechanism is that permission in this world is held by people for whom it is weightless. My exemption cost me nothing. It was issued because of who I work for. It cannot be lost in any way that matters, it renews by post, and it has never once been examined closely enough for the expired hologram to be noticed. That is not a privilege I earned and it is not one I can give away, and the ugliest thing I have learned this quarter is that I cannot even lend it, because Rennick stood at that post on day six with her hand on the card and to this day does not know whether producing it would have been a rescue or an announcement.

The refusals were the best things we found, as usual. A woman who turned down three franchise offers so that a laundry would stay a room. A workshop that wrote politely for two years asking permission to use a mark and got no reply and kept making a better stove anyway. A trader who will not sell nine years of price data to brokers because the moment a village can be priced by how frightened it is, the frightened pay most. A man with a bad knee handing out written refusals that have no standing

anywhere, and six others copying him. Three communities that stopped stamping without announcing it so that no one of them could be identified as the one who stopped.

None of that is a solution. Solmaz asked Markarian for a solution, in the room, sincerely, and Markarian did not have one and neither do I. What I have is the observation that everybody in this issue who did something decent did it quietly, at their own cost, and in a form that could not be sold.

Go and find out what your own permission is. Not what you have paid for. What you were given, by whom, and whether they would be required to tell you if they took it back.

Then look at how long your queue is, and at whose it is not.

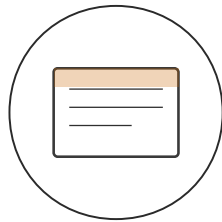
// I.D.

CONFLICT

Issue 51 // 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 sells a crossing. Ask who is not closing it.

ADVERTISEMENT



DAYS // NAMED PARTY // FEE ON THE

GREY TABLE

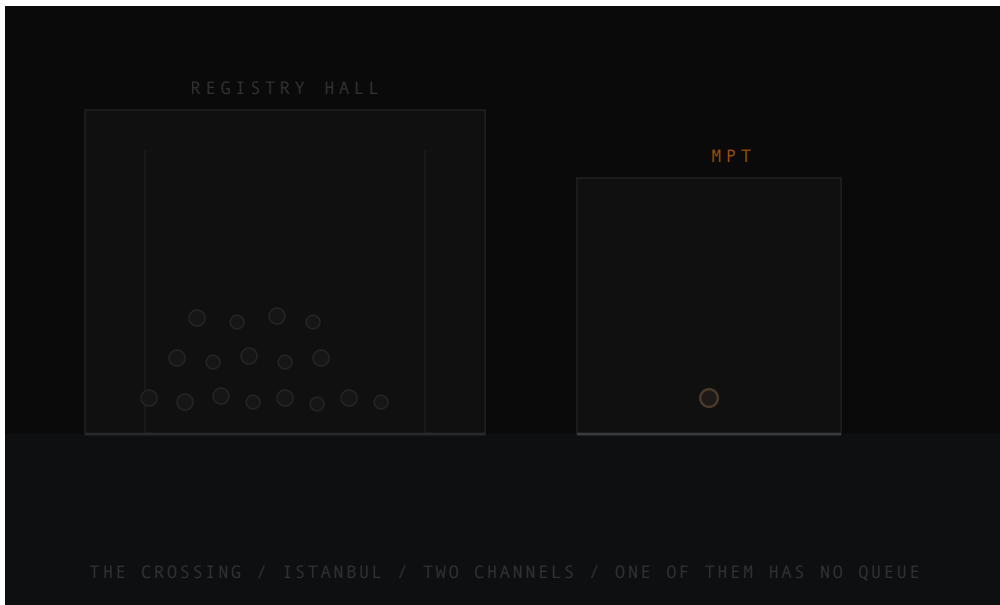
THE COLUMN // BAZAAR CIRCUIT BOARDS, ISTANBUL, WEEKLY

We will not tell you who is good. We will tell you who moved somebody, and when. The route verification line is now a permanent column on the Circuit price list. You give us a name and a market. We tell you whether that agent delivered a named party in the last sixty days, how many, and which week. We do not rate anybody, we do not recommend anybody, and we have declined to publish a list of good agents four times because the moment a list exists somebody buys their way onto it.

The fee is on the sheet and it changes weekly like everything else on the sheet.

GREY TABLE is a board, not an authority. A verified crossing is a fact about the past and is not a statement about your crossing. Two of the agents most frequently verified on this column are people we would not send our own families to, and we will not tell you which two, because that would be a rating and we do not do ratings. Ask in the market. Ask a trader. Ask twice.

GREY TABLE // THE COLUMN



“There are two channels. There is the hall, where a lodged file and a number and eight quota reductions in twelve quarters get you. And there is a desk on the left with nobody at it, for press, medical, licensed commercial, and faction. It took eleven seconds. He looked at the laminate and not the hologram, and said something pleasant about the weather.”

// the strait, four days ahead of the people I walked with

CONFLICT

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