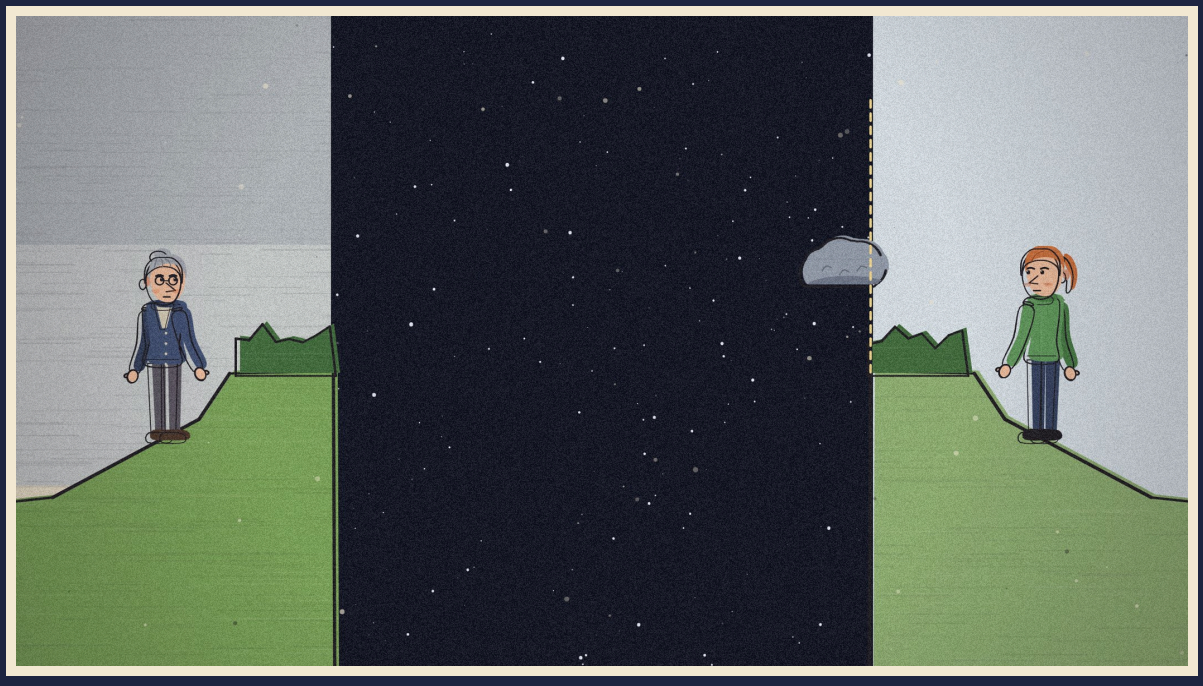
THE FIXTURE LIST





A story of the Little Doors

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ONE

The timetable

By the second year after the last layoffs, almost nobody in the old city knew what day it was.

Edie Calder did. Every morning she wrote the date on the calendar beside her kitchen door in pencil, and every night, once the day had actually happened, she went over it in ink.

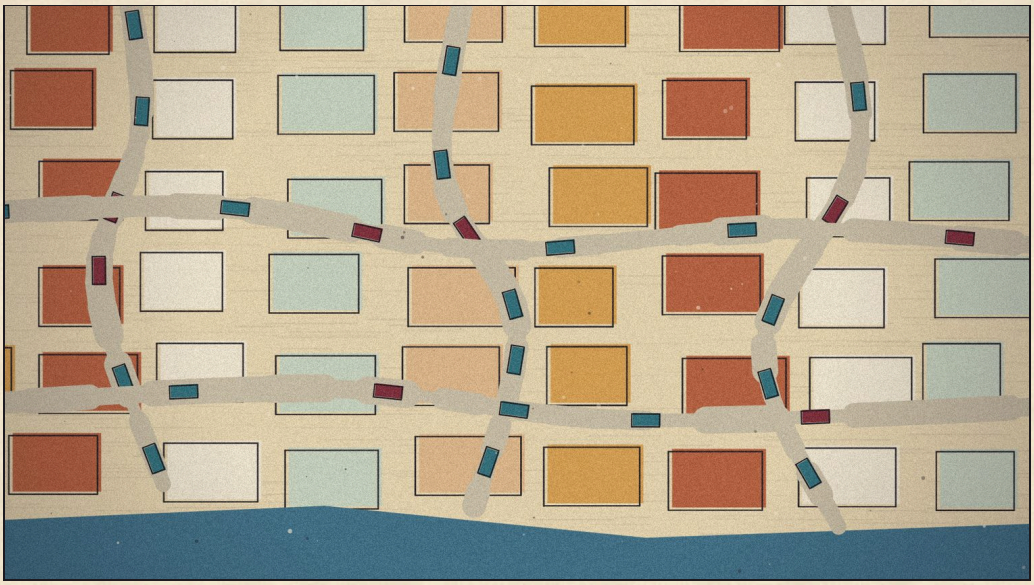


It was a habit from work. Nothing went into a timetable in ink until it was certain.

For twenty-six years, Edie had told the old city when things would arrive. She wrote the timetables for its trams, its buses and the little ferries that crossed the harbor, and she was proudest of the connections: the 7:52 boat from the island meeting the 8:04 tram up the hill, with exactly enough time for someone with a bad knee to cross the quay. Most people noticed a connection only when it failed. Edie noticed every one that held.

Then the systems learned to send a tram to wherever someone was about to want one.

It was better in every way anyone could measure. Nobody waited. Nobody ran. Vehicles moved through the city like water finding the low places, and the printed timetables at the stops faded in the sun until someone came and took them down.



Edie's job ended with the rest of the jobs. She received the public provision, like nearly everyone she knew, and had more time than she had ever had in her life.

She did not know what to do with it. Neither, it turned out, did the week.

The week had always depended on work. Saturday felt like Saturday because Monday was coming. Sunday evening had its particular sadness because something was about to begin. Once nothing was about to begin, the days ran into one another like tram routes without a timetable. The systems knew the date. Fewer and fewer people asked them.

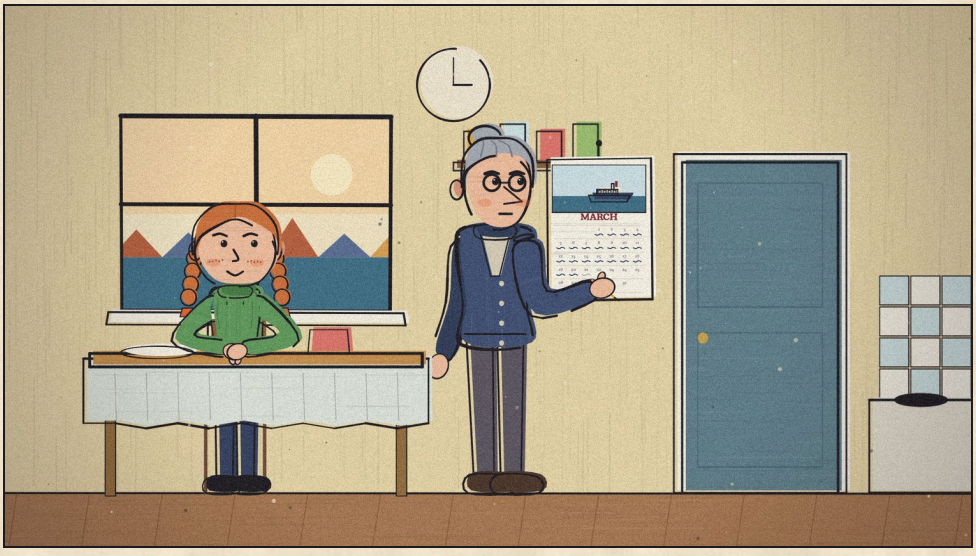
When Wren was small, she and Edie had stood at the stop on Quay Street every morning and counted the tram in.



"Three," Wren would say, watching the clock above the chandlery. "Two. One."

And the tram would come round the corner. Edie had written it. It was never late.

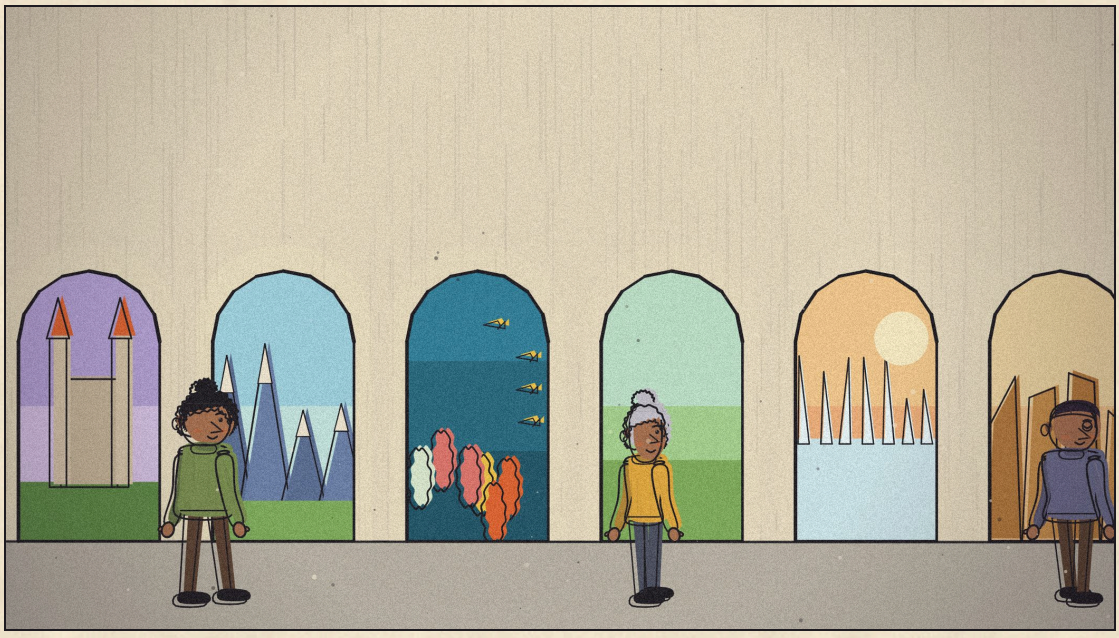
Wren was twelve now and considered the kitchen calendar the strangest object in the flat.



"Nobody needs you to be on time anymore," she said one morning, watching her mother write the date.

"I know," said Edie.

She was on time anyway.



TWO

Worlds that wanted you to win

Everyone had time now, and beyond the portals there was everything to spend it on.

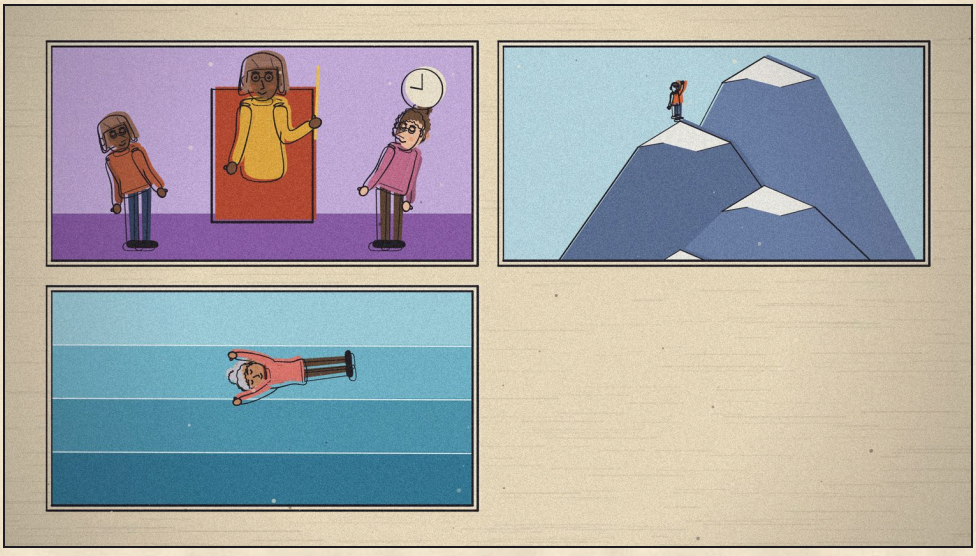
A person could rule a kingdom before lunch. She could climb a mountain that unfolded as she climbed, swim in an ocean where buoyancy changed with depth, or sit beside a river in a country made entirely to suit her. The worlds on the far side knew what would please people, and they were very good at it.

They were not good at games.

A world arranged for your enjoyment kept an eye on how you were doing. If you were losing, it eased off. If you were winning too easily, it stiffened just enough to keep things interesting. Nobody lost badly. After a while, people noticed that nobody really won, either. Beating a world that wanted you to win was like being tickled.

The children noticed first.

They went into the shared worlds that kept rules of their own, the worlds that would not change their minds, and made up games. Every



world had a different one. Some had no agreed number of players and went on until it was too dark to see. Some had goals three miles apart. Some had one rule everybody knew and a dozen nobody agreed on.

Wren's game was played on a hillside in a world with long grass, a hedge across the middle and a great deal of weather.



The children called it Weather.

One side sent a small cloud over the hedge. The other side had to keep it from raining on them, using their hands and their breath: warm

air to lift it, cool air to thicken it, a push to send it back. The trick was to return a cloud that was just about to break, so that it broke on the other side. If it rained on you, you lost.

Edie watched one evening from the top of the hill. The cloud was about the size of a sheep. The children chased it through the grass, shrieking.

Near the end, a cloud broke over Wren's side. The other children ran from it, laughing. Wren stood under it with her hands cupped, catching the drops and throwing them back up as fast as they fell, as if she could persuade it to change its mind. For a few seconds, it seemed to consider it.



"What's the score?" Edie asked afterward.

"There isn't one," said Wren.

"Then how do you know who's winning?"

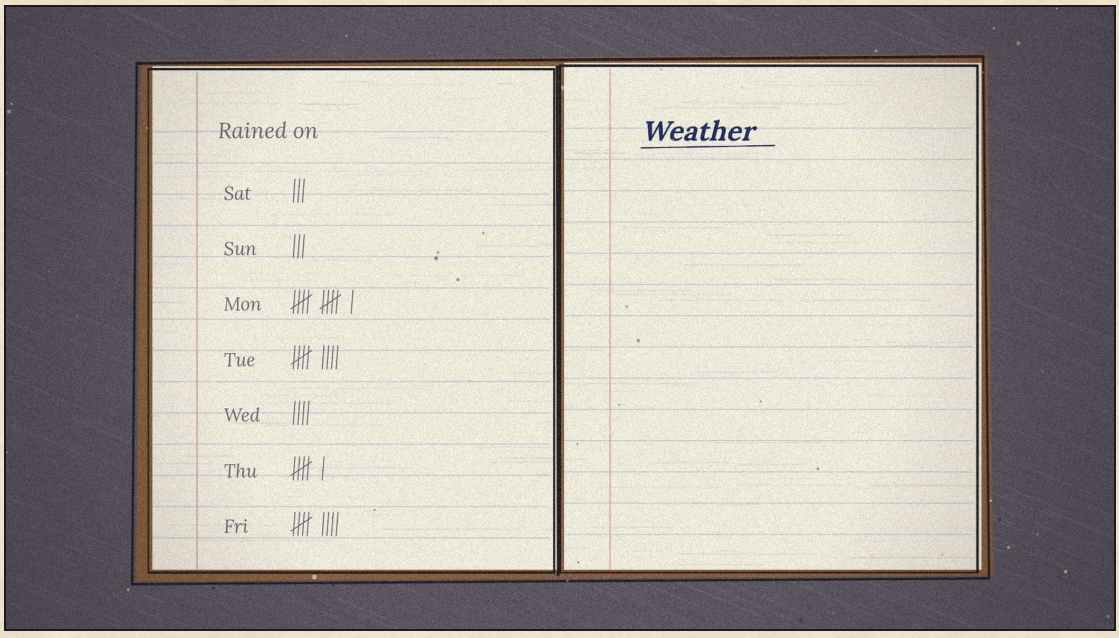
"You just know."

"Does everybody know the same thing?"

Wren thought about it.

"No," she said.

That, Edie thought, explained the shouting.



THREE

Law Four

Edie began by writing down the score.

Nobody asked her to. She sat on the hillside with a notebook and made a mark whenever it rained on someone. After a week, she added how many times a side could touch the cloud before sending it back (three), how long it could keep it (a count of ten), and whose fault it was if a cloud thinned to nothing in midair (whoever had touched it last).

The children resented this until they understood what it was for.

A score let you beat people you had never met.

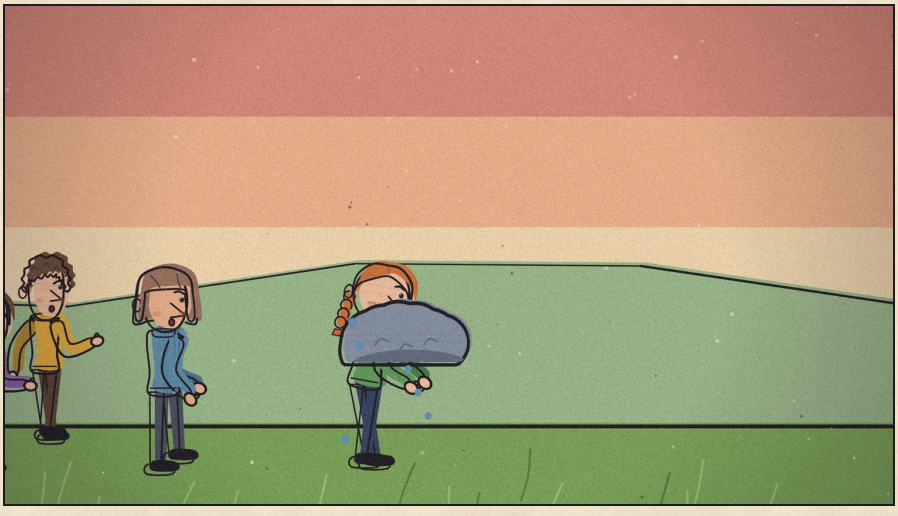
With Edie's notebook, the hillside children could play the children of a world down the coast, whose hedge was lower and whose clouds were wetter, and afterward everybody would know the same thing. They began arguing about the rules instead of the results, which Edie regarded as progress.

She was good at rules. A timetable is a set of promises about time, written so that strangers can rely on them. The laws of a game were the same sort of thing.

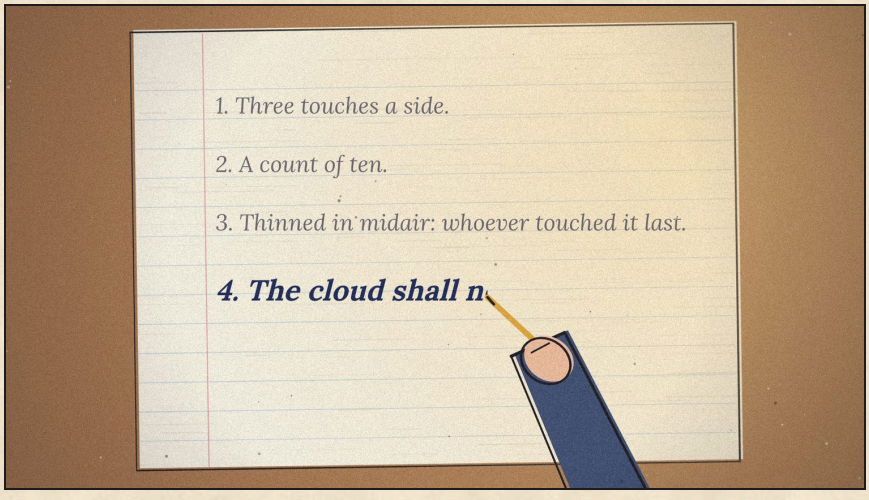
The trouble came in the spring, against the down-the-coast children, with the light going and the hillside losing nine to ten.

Wren took the cloud in her arms and ran.

She ran with it through the long grass and over the far hedge and kept going, with the cloud dripping down the back of her neck and both sides chasing her, until the game dissolved into the kind of argument that is still going on the following week.



That night, Edie wrote Law Four.



The cloud shall not be carried.

She wrote it with Wren in mind.

Years later, when the games were serious enough to have a history, somebody put a plaque on the hillside. It said that Wren Calder, *with a fine disregard for the rules of Weather as played in her time, first took the cloud in her arms and ran with it*, and so founded the carrying game.

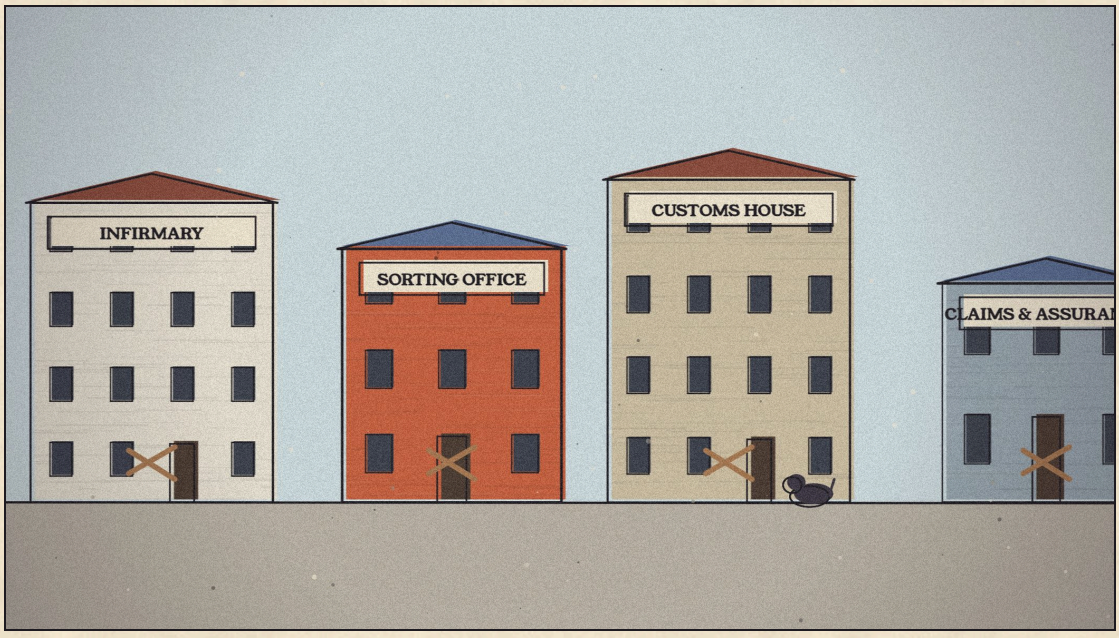
Wren disliked the plaque.

The truth, she told anyone who asked, was that she had been losing.

Within a year, the rules in Edie's notebook were being copied into other notebooks in other worlds. The children called them Mrs. Calder's rules. Players who had never met her called them the Harbor Rules. A girl from an inland world wrote to ask whether a cloud that brushed the hedge on its way over was still in play. (It was.) A man in his sixties wrote to ask whether adults were allowed. (They were.)



Edie had a few copies printed on paper, because people asked. It was the first time in three years that anyone had asked her for anything printed.



FOUR

The Depot

The adults took longer to start, and then took over.

They formed clubs the way the old industrial towns had, out of whatever they already belonged to, which in the old city meant places that no longer employed anyone. There was the Infirmary, made up of nurses and porters. There was the Sorting Office, and the Customs House, and the Claims, from an insurance firm whose last human adjuster became its captain. There was the Night Shift, for people who had worked nights so long they still could not sleep, and the Grasshoppers, who had never liked working and considered themselves vindicated.

Edie's club was the Depot.

Sol had driven the night bus for thirty-one years. Agnieszka had kept the trams running from a pit beneath the maintenance shed. Tunde had sat in the control room watching every vehicle in the city as a dot. Marguerite had run lost property and could still tell you what people tended to leave on

the 41. Priya had inspected tickets, and was the only one of them who had ever enjoyed a confrontation. Edie had written the timetables.

The laws said a side was six. There were six of them.

They played in maroon and cream, the colors of the old buses.



Edie kept the fixture list. She liked the word. A fixture was something that stayed put. In a city that rearranged itself continually around everyone in it, she wanted a few things to stay put.



The first fixtures were on Saturdays at three.

"Why three?" asked Priya.

"Because that's when football used to start," said Edie. "When people had to finish work first."

"Nobody has to finish work."

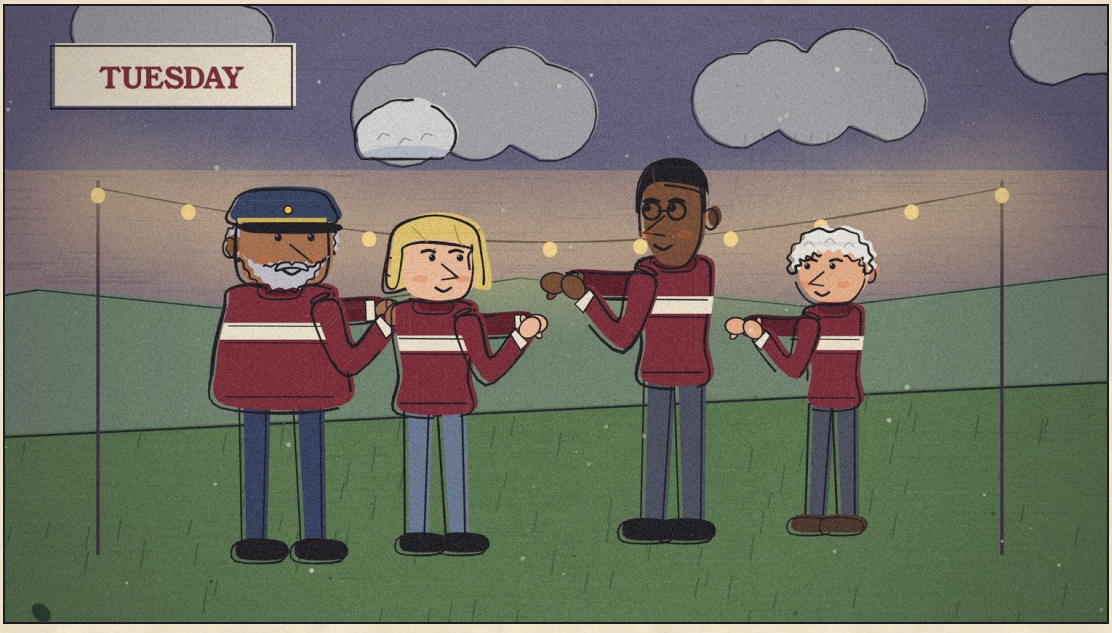
"No."

The first serve stayed at three. Within a year, half the clubs in the city had copied it.

Fixtures went into the list in pencil until both sides had confirmed. Then Edie went over them in ink.

Something happened that nobody had planned. Saturday came back.

People began to say *see you Saturday* again. Tuesday became the night for practice, and Thursday the night the club argued about who would play. Sunday recovered something of its old mood, because there was a result to be pleased or sorry about. Within a few seasons, the systems reported that more people in the old city knew what day it was than at any time since the last layoffs. Edie did not take credit for this. She did not deny it either.



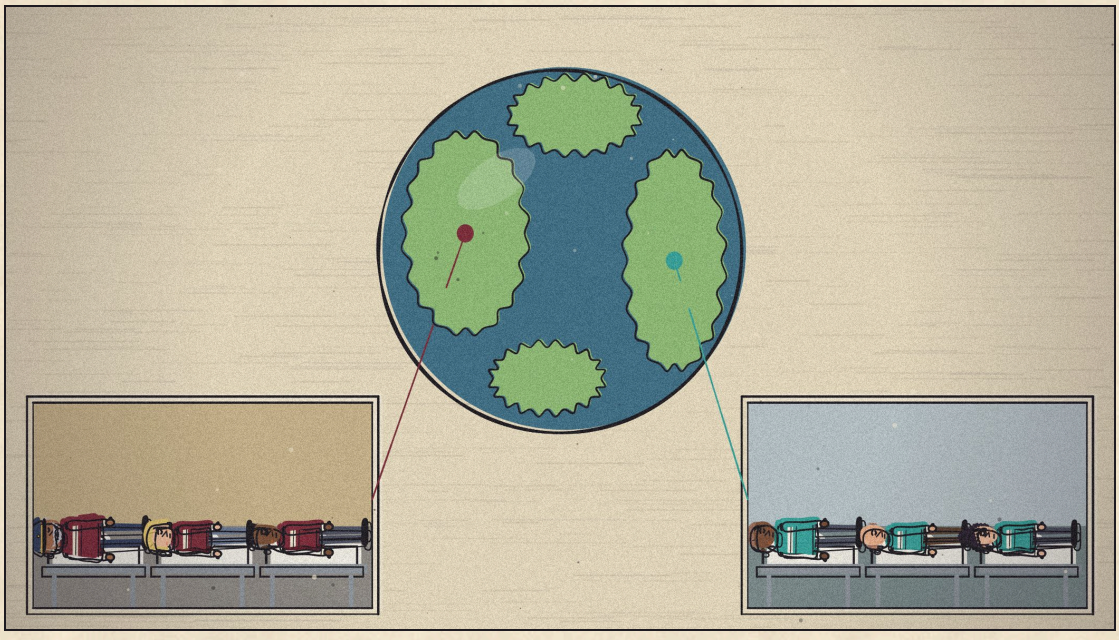
What she noticed most was smaller.

Nobody had needed Edie at the depot for three years. On Saturdays at three, five people needed her, because the laws said a side was six.



If she did not come, the Depot was five.

She was never brilliant. She was never late.



FIVE

A blink

The Depot's first match against a club from across the ocean was a disaster.

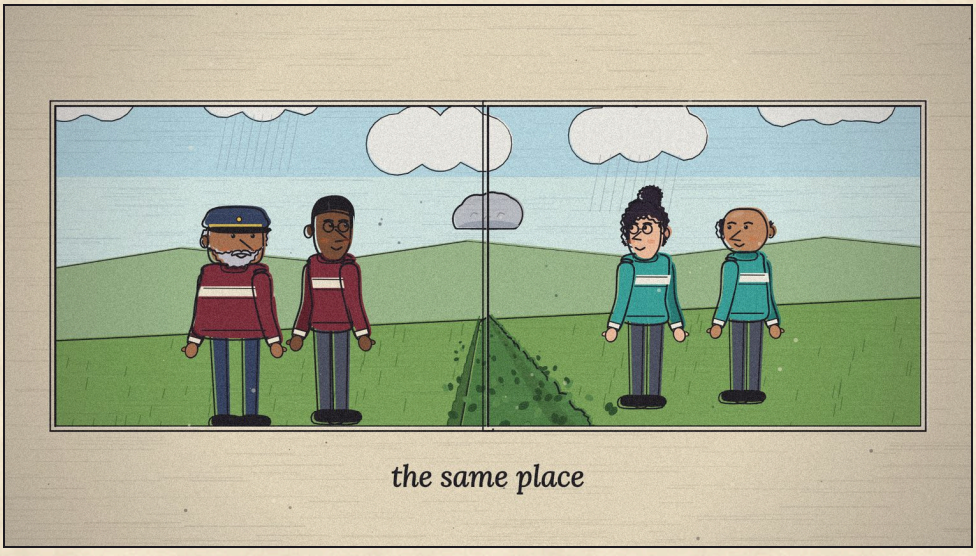
The Depot's bodies lay in their own beds in the old city. The other side's lay on another continent. The two teams met on the same hillside, under the same sky, with the same hedge between them, and within a minute everybody was accusing everybody else of cheating.

The cloud stuttered. A player would touch it and see it move, and then, a moment later, see it somewhere else. Each side was playing with a cloud the other side had not yet touched. The far side reconciled the two versions as fast as it could, which meant that some touches happened and then had not happened.

Edie understood it before anyone, because she had spent twenty-six years being blamed for whatever happened between one place and another.

It was the distance.

Everything that passed between the continents took time to cross. Not much: about a tenth of a second there and back, less than a blink. But a cloud on the point of breaking could become a different cloud in a tenth of a second, and a game could only be the same for both sides if both sides were, in the way that mattered, in the same place.

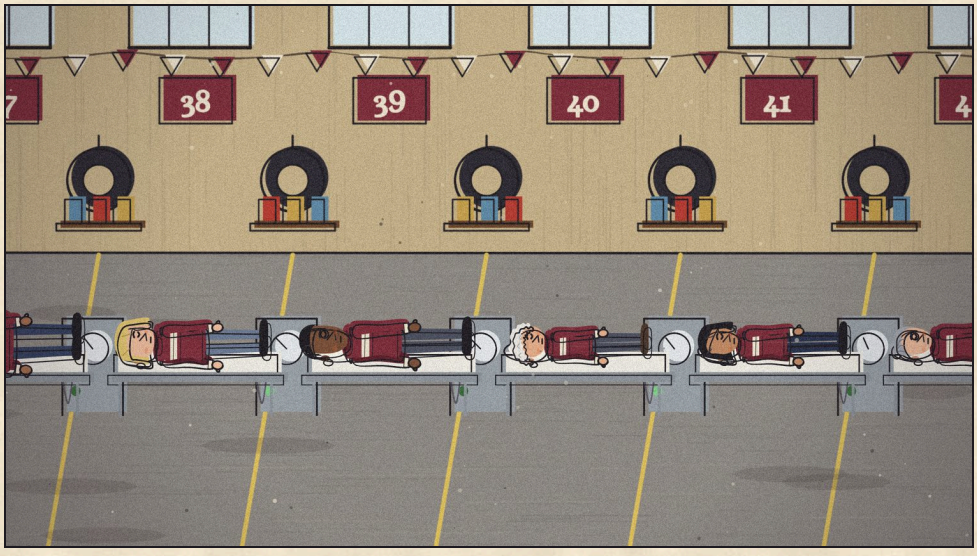


The laws acquired a new clause: a near game could be played only between bodies lying within a few hundred miles of one another. The best players said even that was too far. They claimed they could feel the far side of the city.

The speed of light made the leagues local again. You could play anyone on Earth, in a manner of speaking. You could only play your neighbors properly.

So the clubs needed grounds again: real places, where bodies could lie close together.

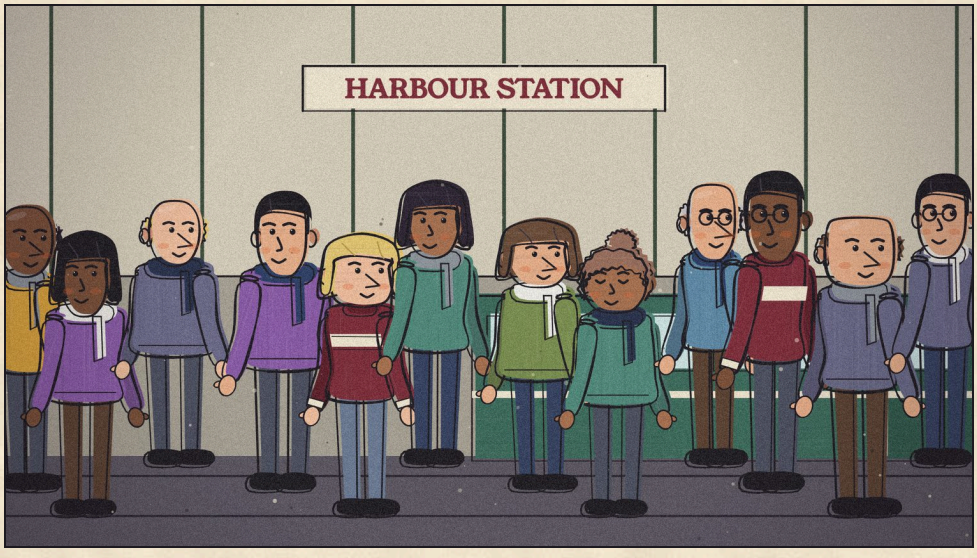
The Depot took over the old bus garage. Where the buses had slept, the players lay down. The machinery that sustained them went into the maintenance bays, and there was room along the walls for two hundred supporters, then four hundred, and then, after the council let them have the yard, a great many more. People came to lie a few feet from the players, although they could have watched from anywhere, because they wanted to be where it was happening.



At half-time, everybody came up.

There was no need. A body could rest through a whole match without trouble. But at half-time the players and the crowd woke, climbed off their beds and went to the old drivers' canteen, where there were pies and tea and a long argument about the umpire. Then they stood in the yard for a while in the real weather, complaining about it, and went back to lie down.

Away fixtures meant the train. On Saturday mornings, the old station was full again.





SIX

The quiet

By the seventh year after the last layoffs, there were so many clubs playing so many versions of so many games that a congress had to be called.

It met in the upstairs room of the Ferryman, a pub on the harbor that had been pouring beer for two hundred years and had declined every offer to let the systems pour it. Edie was elected secretary, because she was the only person present who had brought a pen.

The congress began with the largest question. It had to decide what a game was.

This turned out to be easier than anyone had feared. By the end of the first evening, the congress had agreed that a game was played in a world that would not change its mind, the same for everyone in it, and ended in a result that anyone could read the same way. Edie wrote it down. People drank to it.

The Harbor Rules were adopted almost whole: six a side, three touches, a count of ten, the hedge, the cloud not to be carried, and the point lost by any side on whose ground rain from the cloud should fall.

The next question took a month.

Every player in the room had a guide. Most had had one since childhood. A guide could read a cloud perfectly. It could tell a player exactly when the cloud would break and exactly what to do about it, and a few clubs let their players ask. Matches between those clubs and the others were miserable for everyone.



The case for the guides was made by Felix Campion of the Lighthouse, a club of young players from the new flats along the north quay. He was twenty-two, very fast, and had grown up with a guide in his ear since he could talk.

"They aren't an accessory," he said. "They're part of how we think now. You're asking us to play as if we were somebody else. Send the guides out of the room and you'll do away with everything we've learned to be. I could find you a team of grandparents who'd beat you with a week's practice."

The room laughed, and then grew uncomfortable, because several of the people in it were grandparents.

Edie was not supposed to speak. Secretaries took the minutes. She put down her pen anyway.



"Nobody is asking you to be less than you are," she said. "We're asking you to leave it outside for the afternoon, like a coat. For two hours on a Saturday, nobody plays but the players. Then you go home and you're whoever you like."

The vote was close. The quiet carried.

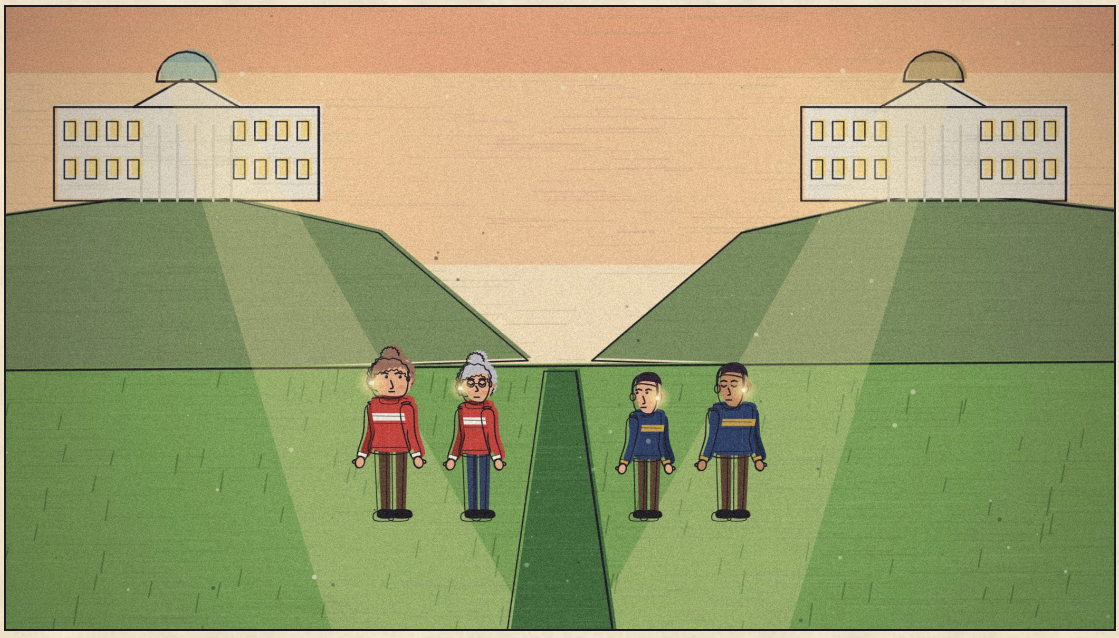
No player shall consult a guide during play.

Campion and eleven clubs walked out and founded the Open Association that same evening, in the downstairs bar. This was a relief to everyone, including them.



The old games had split over money: whether a mill hand could be paid for the Saturday shift he missed. That quarrel had not survived the end of work. Everyone had all day. Everyone was an amateur.

The new games split over help.



SEVEN

The Standard

The Open Association discovered almost at once why the quiet had been tempting.

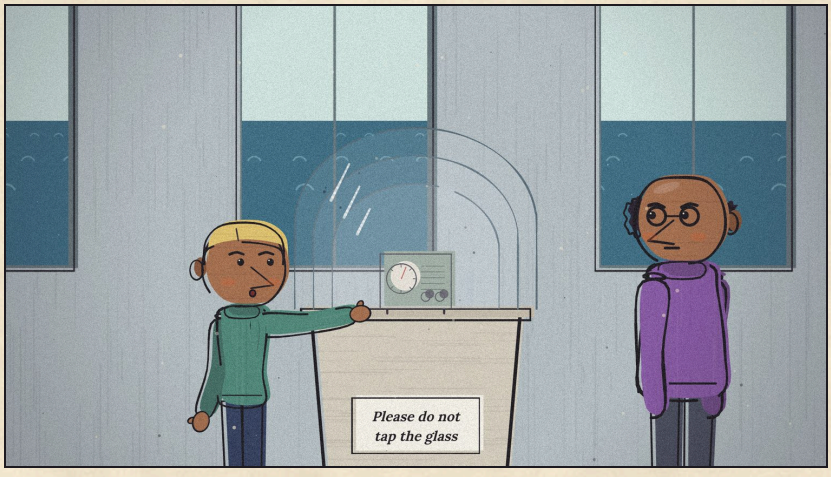
If guides were allowed, the side with the better guide won. The great estates, which commanded systems far beyond anything on the public allocation, began fielding teams in the Open games, and within a season the matches had become contests between the far sides of two estates, with a few people standing in the middle like flags.

The Association's answer was a single design.

It chose a system, an old one from about the time of the last layoffs, and froze it. It would never learn anything again. Every player in an Open game could consult it, and only it, and every copy was exactly the same. They called it the Standard.

It had been chosen, Campion said at the unveiling, because it was good enough to help and bad enough to argue with.

The original was kept on a small machine under three glass bells in the Association's house on the harbor, where it served no practical purpose at all.



In time, even the quiet games measured themselves against it. A player was said to be four stones off the Standard, or two. Every year, people got a little better against it. The Standard stayed exactly as good as it had been in the year the work ended. Some people found this sad. Others found it reassuring, the way they found old buildings reassuring.

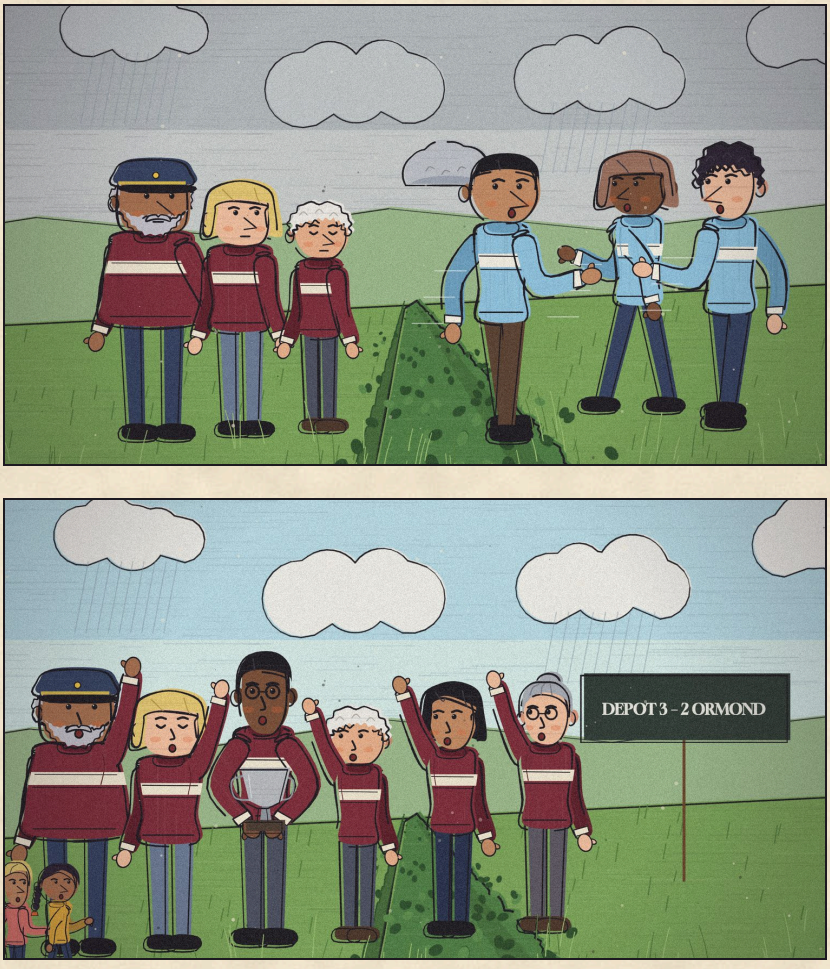
The estates turned to the quiet games next.

An estate could reduce its public assessment by employing an allotted number of citizens at the civic minimum, and the employment did not have to produce anything. The accountants agreed that a team of Weather players qualified. The Ormond estate assembled a beautiful one, young and salaried, in sky blue, which practiced in private grounds of extraordinary quality.

The following spring, Ormond met the Depot in the final of the Harbor Cup. The estate's players were faster at everything except knowing what a cloud was about to do.

The Depot won in five games. Four of its six were grandparents.

Wren had watched from the yard. Afterward, she told her mother she had been slow on the second point. She had. Nobody else had noticed.



Felix Campion, who was by then the Open Association's best player, sent a note of congratulation. It said: *More than a week's practice, I hope.*

Edie wrote back. *About thirty years. Most of it at something else.*

The Meridian Compact, which coordinated the affairs of the great estates, proposed a championship restricted to teams accountable to an endowed house, and offered the league a splendid silver trophy for it. Edie replied that the league would be glad of the trophy and could not accept the conditions. The trophy never came. The Cup stayed open to anyone who could field a side and keep a promise to turn up.



EIGHT

Hard to beat

Wren left at nineteen.

She was the best Weather player under twenty in the old city by then, and the most argued with. She had begun to say that she wanted to live under a sky no one had arranged.

One of the voyaging houses was taking crews to the outer settlements. Its ships carried a yellow flag with a blue opening stitched into it.

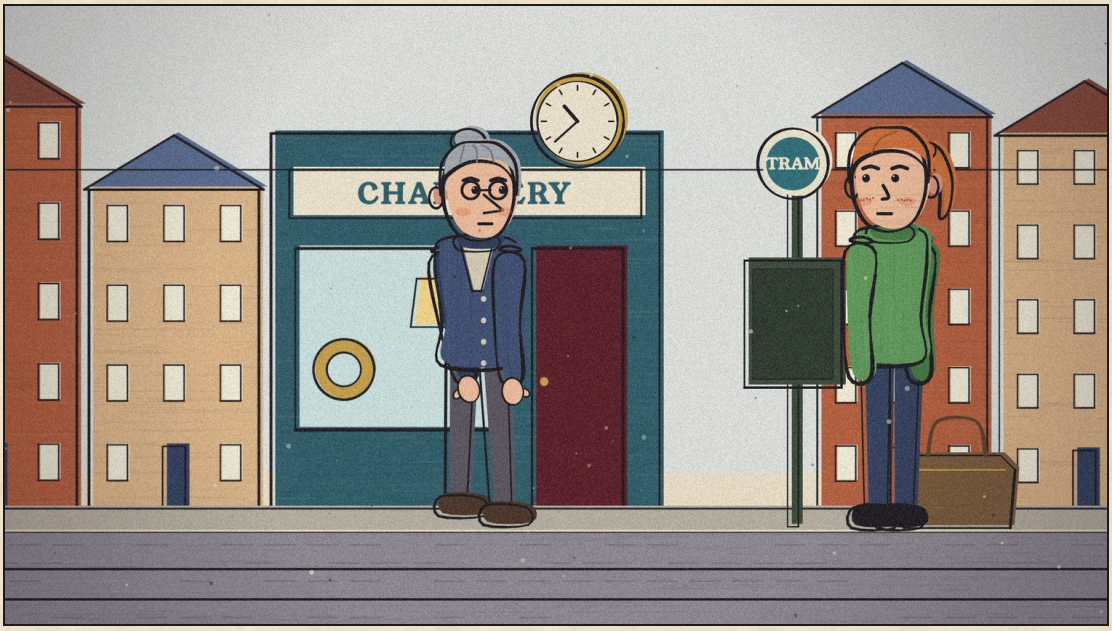
The woman who interviewed Wren for a place had a repaired cuff. She asked what Wren would like people to say about her.

"That I was hard to beat," said Wren.

The woman considered her.

"That could be something," she said.

On Wren's last morning, Edie found her at the old stop on Quay Street. The pole was still there. The frame where the timetable used to hang was empty, and the clock above the chandlery had stopped years ago.



"They'd send one if you wanted," Edie said.

"I know." Wren was watching the corner. "Everything here comes when I want it."

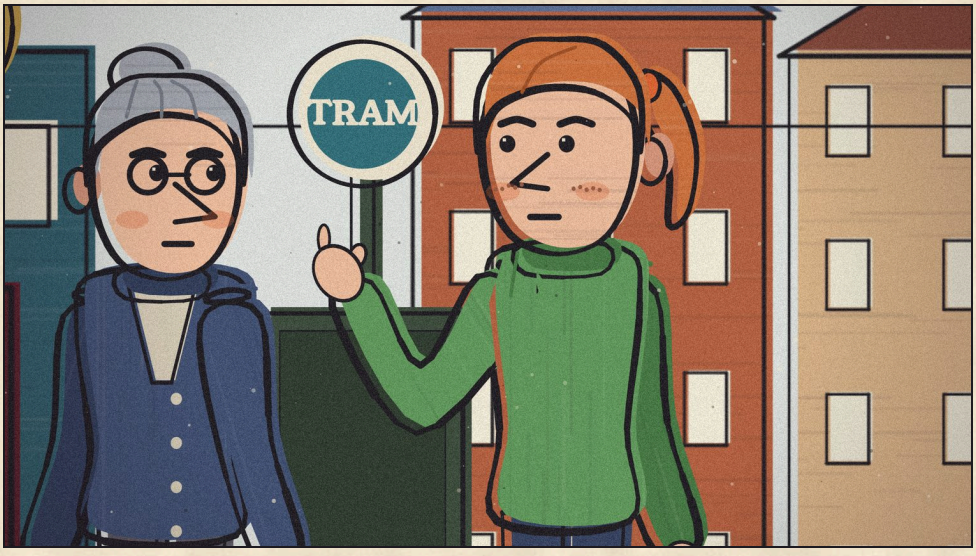
Edie waited. With Wren, the second half of a sentence sometimes took a while.

"Nothing comes when it's supposed to."

Edie had spent twenty-six years making things come when they were supposed to. She could not tell whether this was a complaint or a compliment, and suspected Wren could not either.

A few seconds before four minutes past eight, Wren began to count under her breath, the way she had when she was small. Nothing came round the corner. She laughed at herself, took her mother's arm, and they walked home.

That afternoon, Edie arrived at the departure hall early, which is to say on time. She had brought a flask of tea and a list of things Wren might have forgotten. Wren had forgotten none of them.



They held each other for a long time beside the transport.



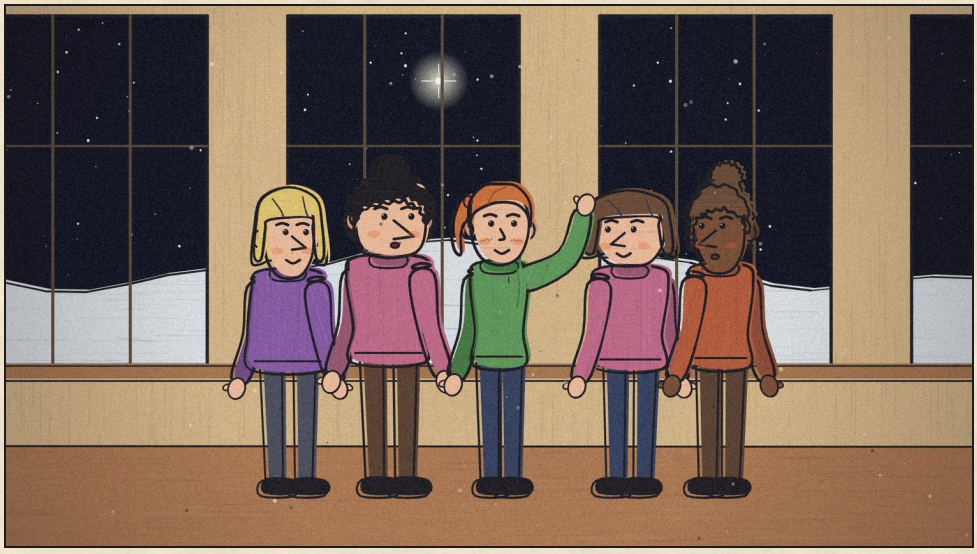
"Send me the fixtures," Wren said.

Edie assumed she was being kind.

At the bottom of Wren's bag, under a coat and a tin of the tea she liked, was one of the first printed copies of the Harbor Rules. It had been folded and unfolded so many times that it was coming apart along the creases. A cloud was not the kind of thing you could pack. The rules were.

On the ship, she taught Weather to anyone who would stand still in the immersion rooms. By the time they reached the outer settlements, the crew had four teams and a serious disagreement about Law Nine.

At a settlement beneath a shell of ice, she found a place she wanted to stay. It had hundreds of shared worlds and neighbors close enough to play. It had no Weather.



Within a year, it did.



NINE

Families

By the twelfth year after the last layoffs, the fixture list Edie sent under the ice each week ran to hundreds of codes. She sorted them the way she had once sorted routes, by what they needed, and found that they fell into families the old games would have recognized.

The net games sent something across a divide and tried to make it fall on the other side. Weather was the largest. Another code passed birds that were trying to land. A third passed a riddle, and was abolished after a match in which nobody scored for eleven hours.

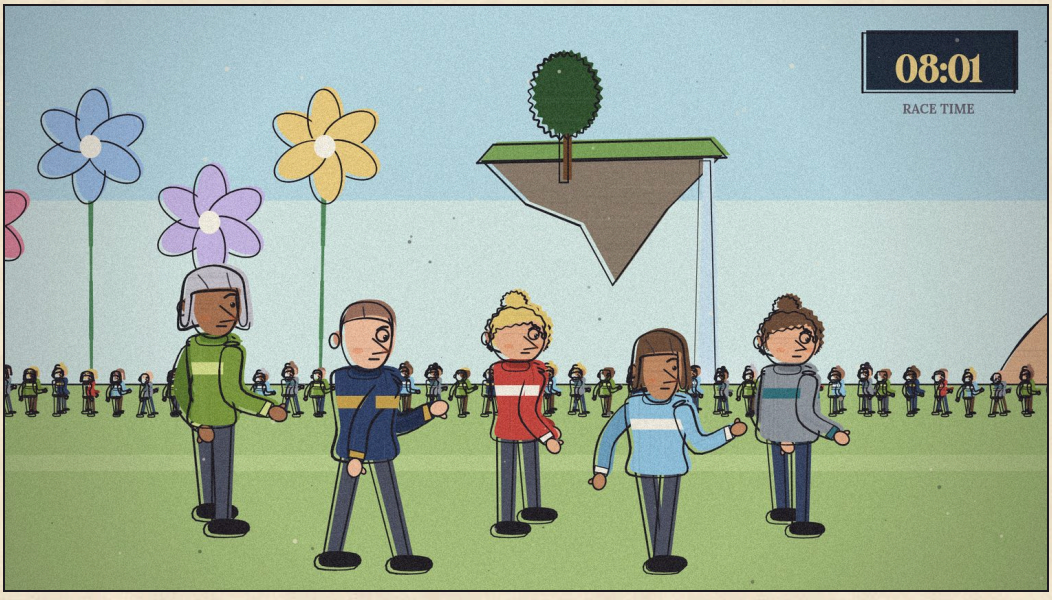
The goal games were played toward something. Wren's carrying game was the biggest of them: run the cloud over the line before it rains on you. In ground football, every club built a ground with laws of its own: a forest whose trees moved whenever nobody was looking, say, or a world with an extra direction, where a pass could go round a defender in a direction the defender had not yet learned to see. Only the ball was the same everywhere. It fell the way things fall at home.



The target game was Feather. Every hole was a world in trouble, a valley in drought or a town about to freeze, to be put right in as few touches as possible. A touch was anything a person could do with her hands in a count of ten. Then the world ran on, a year a minute, and the player took her next touch from wherever it had got to. The seventh at Saltings, a dying marsh, had been played in a single touch only once, by a retired surveyor who knelt in a stream and moved one stone. A small brass plate now sat beside that stone in every copy of the course, and nobody was allowed to touch it.

The races were run through worlds born at the gun, from a seed a child drew out of a bag. Some of the loveliest places anyone ever visited were seen once, for twelve minutes, by eighty people who were not looking at them. On a coast under two moons, children who had spent years learning the tides began racing them, and lost, and went on racing.

The judged games were called Forms, and their apparatus was a set of laws instead of a piece of wood: layered water, slow air, a turning floor. The judges were people, because a mark is an opinion and an opinion needs someone to stand behind it. A girl from the Infirmary's junior section landed a double inversion through two layers of water at fourteen and was asked to do the Okafor at parties for the rest of her life. In the pairs,



the highest marks went to performers who shaped a single imagined object between them so closely that nobody could tell whose idea anything had been.

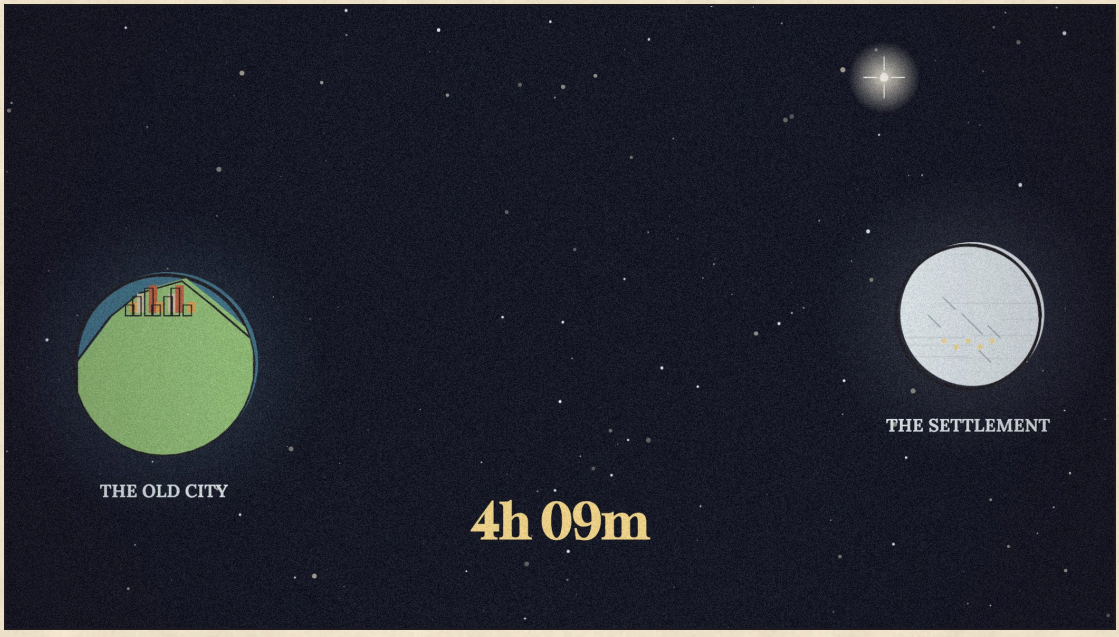
In the crown games, each player began with a village and a winter, in a world that ran a year a day for a season. There were crowns for conquest, for wealth and for knowledge. A fifth, for being loved by every province at once, had never been won. Advice was allowed, since no ruler had ever governed without it, but only from the Standard, so every ruler got the same bad advice. Some crown games were played on the old Earth as it had been, until players began settling arguments with their neighbors' grandparents. After that, no game could begin within three hundred years of the day it was played.

The people of the crown worlds were painted: deep enough to behave like a people, the systems said, and not deep enough for anyone to worry about. In the second season, a player found a letter in her palace from a village she was about to burn, asking her not to. The systems confirmed that the letter was exactly what such a village would write. This was less reassuring than it was meant to be. The league had the painting made thinner. Some players said the crown games had lost something. That was the point.



One family did not exist yet. The outer settlements still played chess by post. Nobody had found anything livelier to play with someone who could not be in the same moment.





TEN

A court as wide as the dark

Wren's recordings came every week or two.

The settlement beneath the ice was far enough away that light took a little over four hours to cross between it and the old city. A question asked at breakfast could not be answered before the middle of the afternoon. Edie and Wren had learned, like everyone with someone out there, to talk in pieces.

Wren sent views of the galleries, above a landscape almost without color, where the old sun was only the brightest of the stars. She sent friends whose names Edie learned and whose faces she learned twice, because they changed bodies in the shared worlds. She sent a few seconds of herself playing, which Edie watched a good many more times than a few.

The settlement had a league now. Wren was its best player. Its clubs played the Harbor Rules.



Edie sent the weather in the old city, which Wren pointed out had no bearing on anything under the ice. She sent club news and the scores, and whatever the league had changed in the laws, which she assumed Wren skipped.

What Edie minded was not the waiting. She was good at waiting. It was that every recording was finished before it arrived. Nothing either of them said could be changed by the answer. They were sending each other things that had already happened.

"The settlement wants to play the old city," Wren said in one recording. "Obviously we can't."

Edie watched it twice. Then she took out a pencil.



The problem was the one the Depot had met across the ocean, made enormous. A tenth of a second had been enough to ruin a near game. Wren was four hours away. Everybody had tried to hide the delay.

Edie decided to use it.

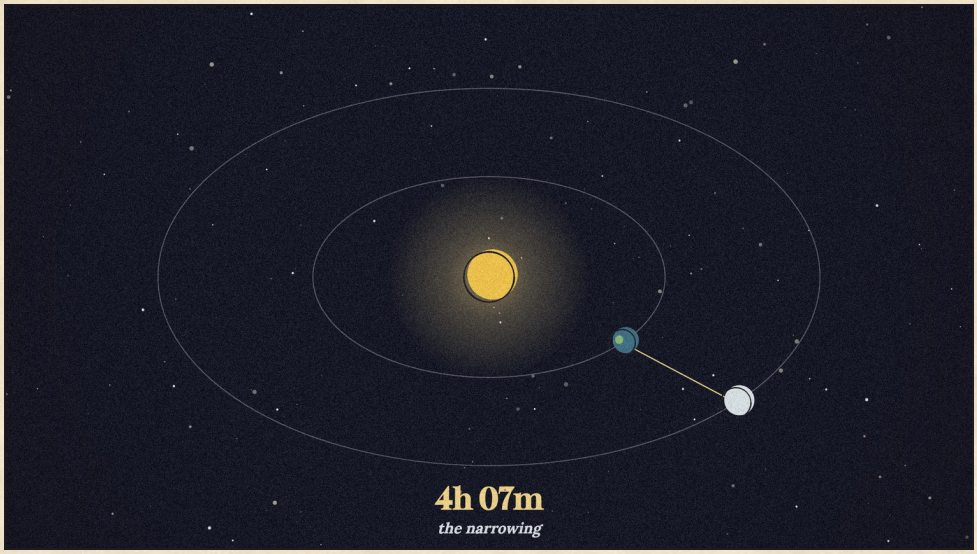
In Long Weather, the court was exactly as wide as the time light took to cross between the two players. Each stood at her own end, in a world kept near her own body, with a hedge along the top of her hill. Beyond the hedge was the dark. A cloud served from the old city took four hours and some minutes to come out of the dark above the far court, and while it crossed, it went on changing according to the laws of its world, which were fixed. The receiver had a quarter of an hour to read it, shape it and send it back. A cloud that rained in the dark was out. A cloud that thinned to nothing in the dark was the fault of whoever had touched it last. Rain on your own ground cost you the point. A match was a single game, first to five points.



A server had to decide, in a quarter of an hour, what a cloud would be doing in four hours' time. A receiver had to live with what she had decided.

The court changed width with the seasons of the planets. Once a year, the old Earth swung between the sun and the settlement's world, and the court was at its narrowest. It was also at its steadiest: for a

week or two either side, its width changed by only a few seconds. That was the part that mattered to Edie. She scheduled the first match for the narrowing.



She had spent twenty-six years fitting ferries to tides. The planets were easier. They never asked for a later boat.

The league thought she had lost her mind. Nobody, it said, would watch a game in which every shot took four hours.

"People watched cricket for five days," said Edie.

"That was different."

"Wren says there's a town in one of the settlement's worlds where people are waiting nine years for the sun to come up."

"That's different too."

"It isn't," said Edie.

She sent the laws to the settlement in her next recording, after the weather.



ELEVEN

Waiting well

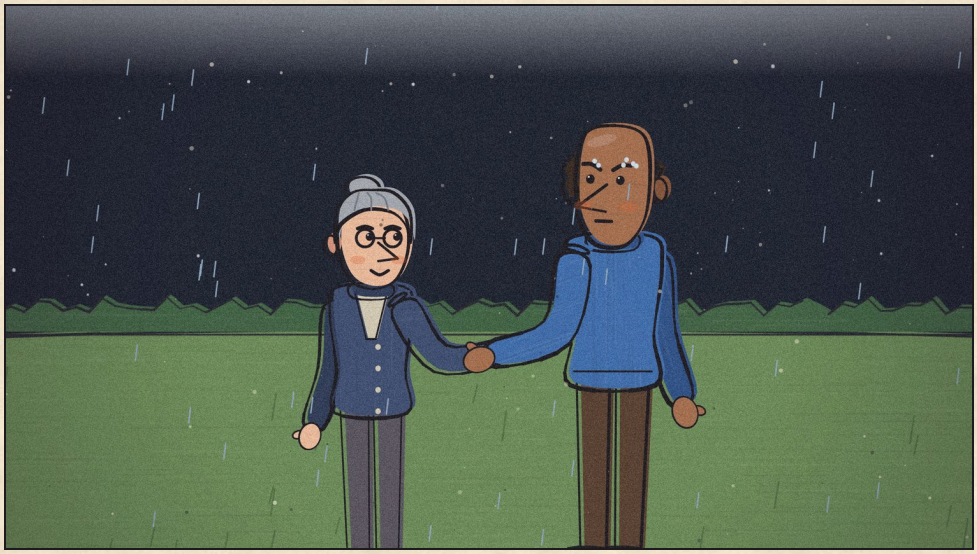
Both ends held trials.

In the old city, the best near players found Long Weather unbearable. They were used to a cloud coming back over the hedge in two seconds. Here, a player sent a cloud into the dark and then had nothing to do for eight hours but wonder whether she had been right. The young ones kept wanting to do something. Several tried to practice during the crossing and had to be reminded that there was nothing to practice on.

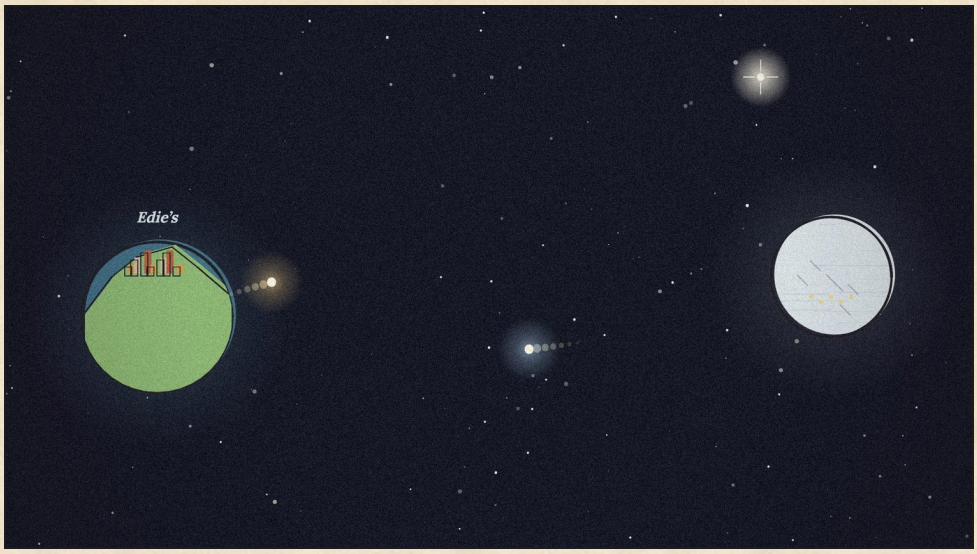
Most of the game was waiting, and most of the skill was waiting well.

Edie had practiced for a year against the Standard, which was patient and could be told to delay itself by four hours. She was not fast. She did not need to be. She could look at a cloud and know, in a way she could not have explained, what four hours would do to it, the way she had once known what a wet Friday in December would do to the 6:15.

She won the old city's trial at sixty-eight. The youngest finalist was nineteen, and congratulated her as though he had been beaten by the weather, which in a sense he had.



Under the ice, Wren won the settlement's trial.



Edie recorded a message telling Wren what she had done. Before it could arrive, Wren's message telling her the same thing set off in the other direction. Somewhere in the dark, about halfway, the two recordings passed each other.

The old city found the pairing irresistible. So did the settlement. The evening accounts put it at the top of every page: a mother and her daughter, the woman who had written the laws and the girl on the plaque, four hours apart.

Sol asked what everyone else was too polite to ask. They were in the canteen at the Depot, under the photographs of buses.



"Are you going to let her win?"

Edie looked at him as though he had suggested arriving late.

"Then it would just be another recording," she said.



TWELVE

The narrowing

The coin was tossed under the ice. It was four hours before the old city found out who had won.

Edie served first, at three o'clock on a Saturday.

She lay down in the bay where the 41 used to sleep, closed her eyes, and opened them at her end of the court: a hillside of long grass under a gray sky, a hedge along the top of the hill, and beyond the hedge, nothing at all.

Under the laws, all four hours of nothing counted as hedge.

She shaped her first cloud slowly, in front of four thousand people in the bays and the yard and a great many more watching from elsewhere, and sent it over. It went into the dark and was gone.

Then everyone went home.

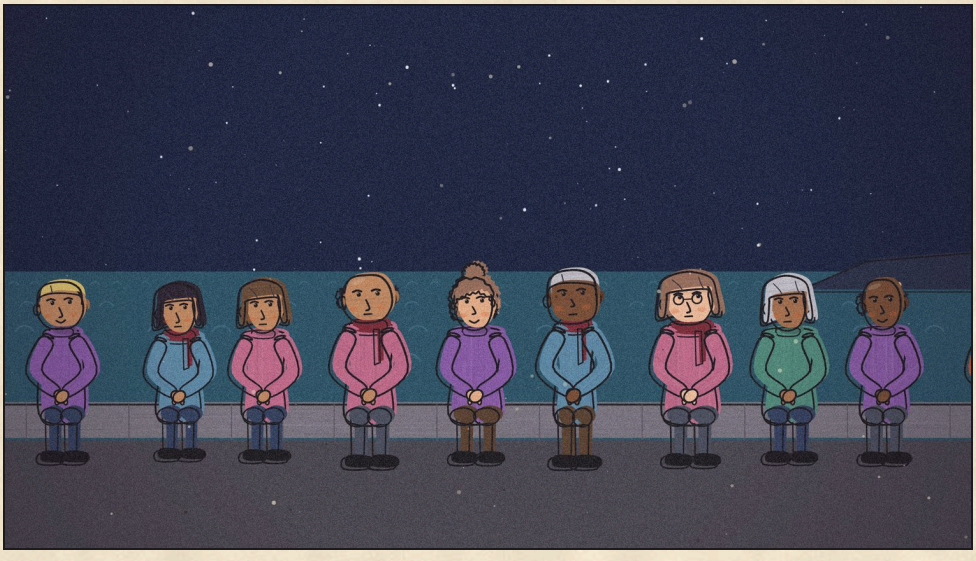
That was the strangest part of the first few days. A serve went out, and the old city went about its business, ate lunch, argued, slept, and came back to the harbor for the arrival of whatever came back. People who had not set an alarm

since the work ended set them. A bakery up the hill, which had kept to three mornings a week for years, opened every morning of the match.

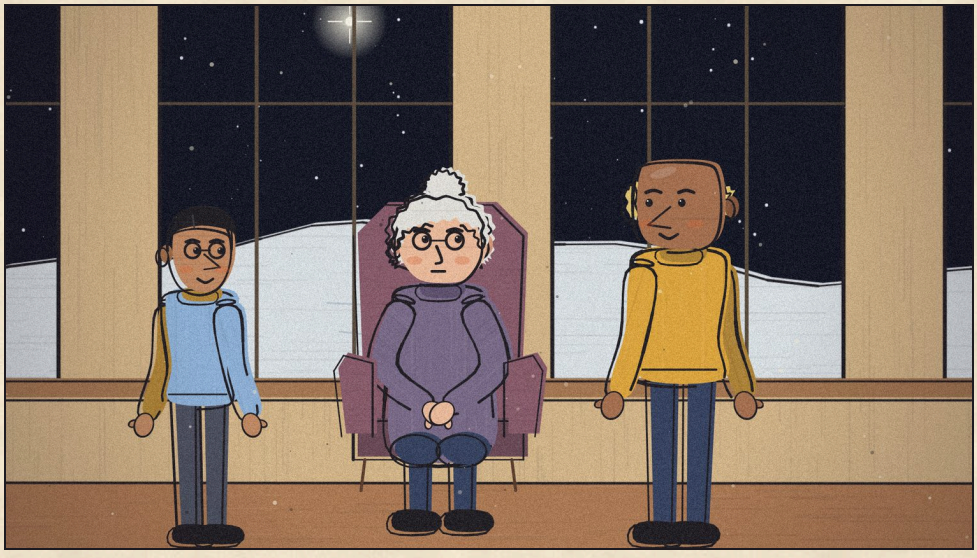


By custom, nothing from the far court was shown while a point was being played. Each end saw only what came out of the dark, and the umpire's word when a point was over.

At night, people sat along the harbor wall and looked up at the part of the sky where the settlement was. Nobody could see it. They looked anyway.



Under the ice, the observation galleries filled for every arrival. In one of them, an old woman who had lived at the settlement longer than almost anybody kept her chair by the window throughout, and declined to say whom she wanted to win.



The first point took two days. The cloud crossed the dark eleven times before one of Edie's, loaded a fraction too heavily, rained in the dark. Edie won the second when one of Wren's clouds thinned to nothing just short of the old city's end, and the harbor discovered that it was possible to cheer for a cloud that had disappeared.



Edie led three points to one after six days. The old city began to believe.

Then Wren won three points in a row with a kind of cloud nobody had seen before. It came out of the dark looking so light that it could only drift away, and then, in its first seconds, thickened as if it had changed its mind. A world that would not change its mind had produced a cloud that seemed to. It was perfectly legal. Edie could not read it at all, until, after the third, she could.



The next point lasted four days. Over the course of it, the old city learned that it was possible to be nervous for four days, and that pies helped. Edie won it on the twenty-second crossing, with a cloud that broke over the settlement's ground so gently that people on the harbor wall, watching four hours later, swore they could hear it.

Four all.

The next serve was Edie's.



THIRTEEN

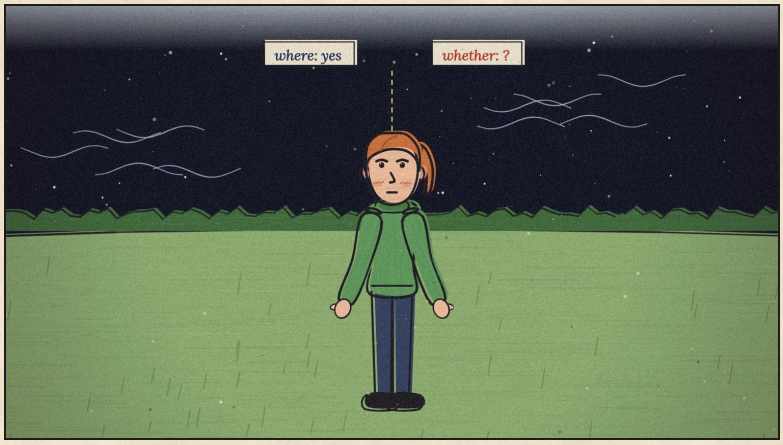
Rain

Edie had a serve she had never used in a match.

She had worked it out the year before against the Standard, which had been unable to return it and then, being the Standard, unable to explain why. It was the hardest thing in Long Weather, and as far as anyone knew it had never been done: a cloud loaded to break at the instant it came out of the dark. Not a minute after. Not a second. If it broke a moment early, it would rain in the dark and the point was lost. If it broke a moment late, the receiver had time to reach it.

If it broke on time, it would rain on the far court before anyone there could touch it.

It had to come out of the dark above the middle of the court, because nowhere else was still enough to time a cloud to the second. So a receiver could know where it would come. She could not know whether it would. To meet it, she would have to be standing under it already, with her hands raised, at the right second, giving up every other cloud to wait for one that nobody had ever served.



You had to know, to the second, what four hours and nine minutes would do.

She shaped it for the whole of her quarter of an hour and sent it over the hedge.

The systems could tell from the moment it left her hands that it would break at the instant it arrived. They said so to anyone who asked. The whole harbor asked. The noise along the wall could be heard on the island.

When Edie came up in the bay, the yard was roaring. Sol was thumping the side of her bed. People she had never met were holding out pies.



She sat on the edge of the bed and remembered the tram stop on Quay Street.

"She knows I'm never late," she said.

"What?" said Sol.

She did not explain.

It would be eight hours before the old city knew what had happened under the ice, and four of them before it happened. Edie took a flask down to the harbor wall and sat among everybody else, looking up at the right part of the sky.

If the serve did what the systems said, word of the point would reach the old city at five past four in the morning. At a quarter to four, Edie went back to the Depot and lay down in the bay.

Five past four came, and nothing came with it.

The harbor went quiet. Every minute after that was a minute in which the point, somehow, was not over.

At twenty past four, the cloud came back out of the dark.

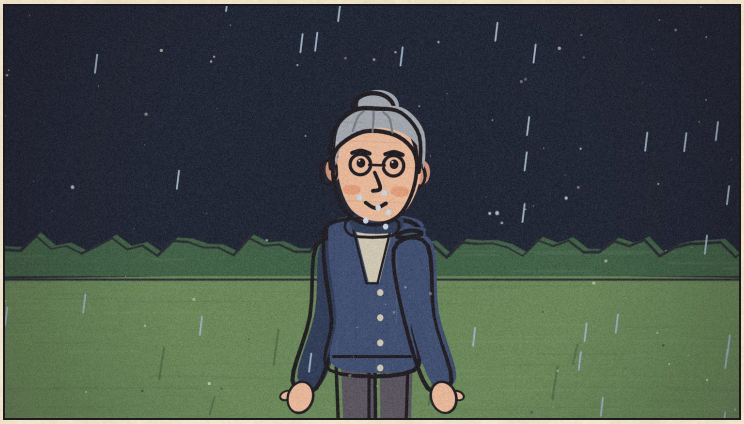
A sound went along the harbor wall that was not quite a word.

It was the best cloud anybody had ever sent her. It came out high over the far corner of her court, drifting toward the back of the hill, loaded to break in nine seconds. She reached it in four. She put both hands into it, warm, and felt it hesitate, and for a moment the harbor would argue about for years, it seemed she had held it.

Then it rained on her side.

Point, game and match to the settlement beneath the ice.

Edie stood in the rain on her hillside for a long time. The game's rain was not cold, exactly, but it was wet the way rain is wet, and it ran down the back of her neck. She found that she was laughing.



Only afterward, when she came up in the bay, with the yard gone strangely quiet around her, did she watch the recording from the far end.

It showed Wren's court under the ice: long grass, a hedge, the dark beyond. Wren was standing in the middle of it. She had been standing there, the umpire's record said, for six minutes before the cloud arrived, with her hands raised, as if she were waiting for something to fall.



Her lips were moving.

Edie did not need the systems to tell her what she was saying.

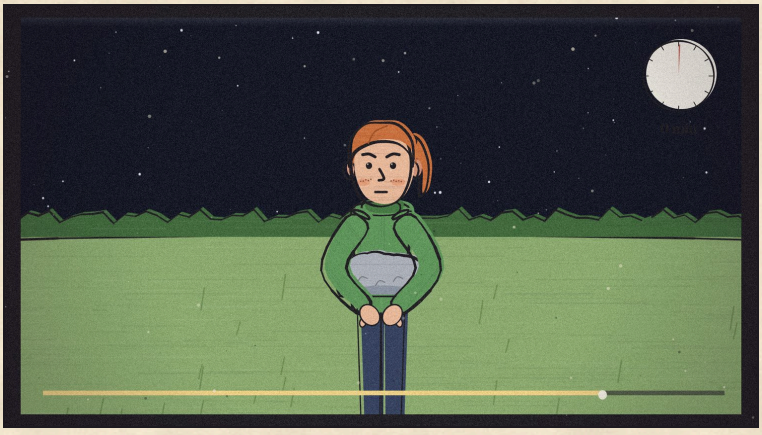
Three. Two. One.

The cloud came out of the dark directly above her and broke.

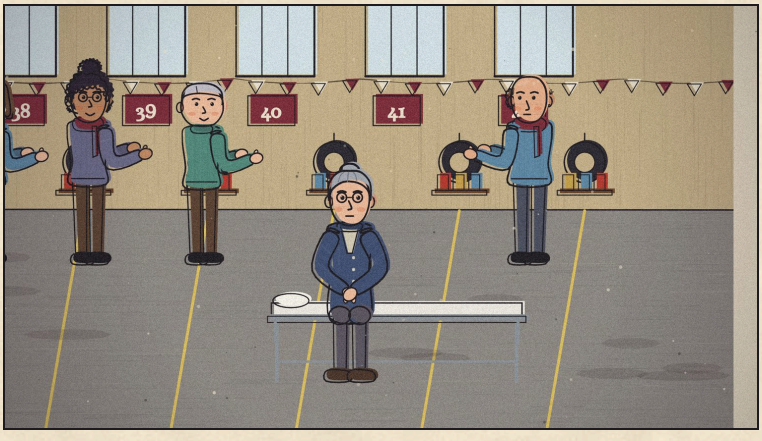
Wren caught the first drops in her cupped hands before they could reach the ground, threw them back up into the cloud, and put both hands into it before the next could fall. Then she had her quarter of an hour, and she used all of it.

The umpire under the ice, who had a quarter of an hour too, read Law Four twice. *The cloud shall not be carried.* Elsewhere the laws said that a side lost the point when rain *from* the cloud fell on its ground. Rain from the cloud, by the laws' own words, was not the cloud. The umpire let play go on.

Edie had written both laws. She had written the first with Wren in mind, a long time ago, on a hillside, and she had never once thought about the rain.



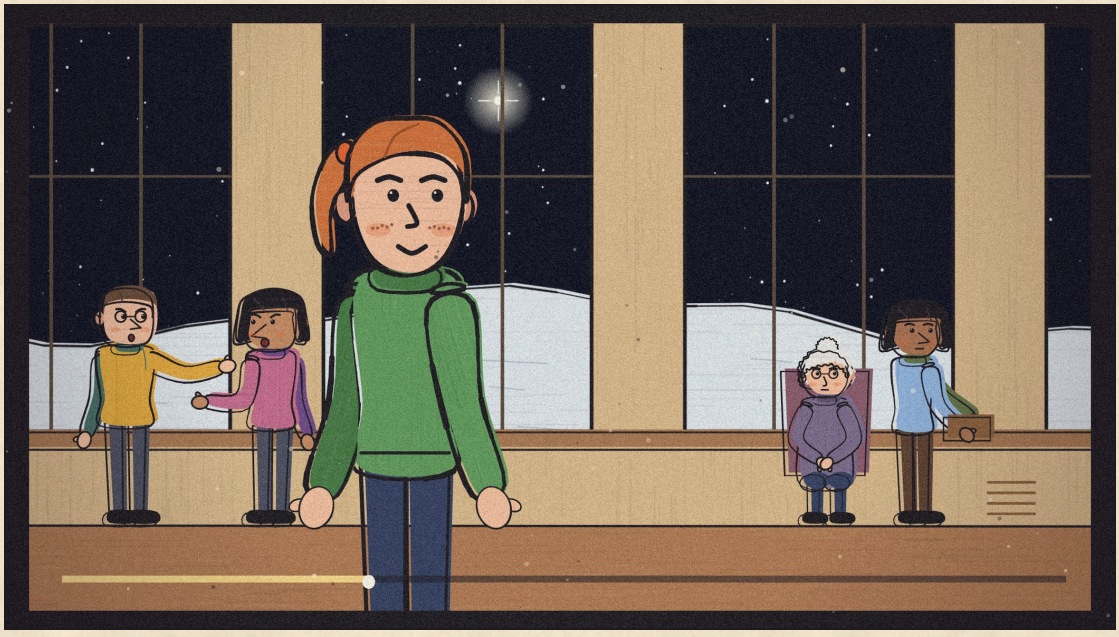
Around her, cautiously, people were beginning to applaud a player whose body lay four hours away, and who would not hear them until the sound had crossed the dark.



Edie recorded a message.

"It was legal," she said.

Then she sent it.



FOURTEEN

The fixture list

Wren's reply came in the early afternoon.

Edie watched it in her kitchen, standing up, next to the calendar.

Behind Wren, the gallery was being cleared. Someone was arguing about where they would all sit next time. An old woman was still in her chair by the window.

"I know," Wren said. "I read them."

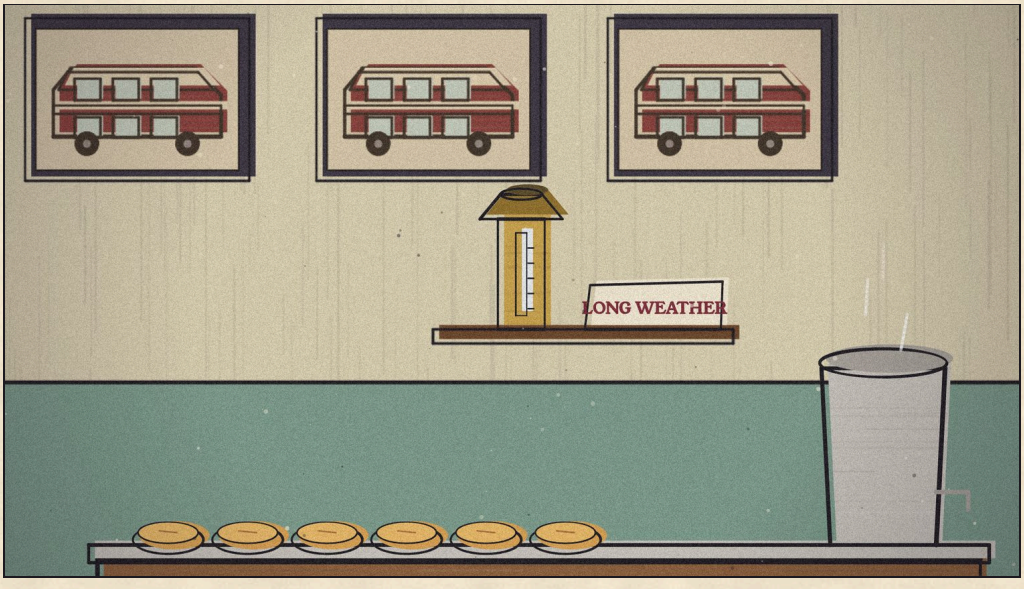
She held something up. It was the printed copy of the Harbor Rules, so soft along its folds that it looked like cloth. In the margin beside Law Four, in the round and furious handwriting of a child, someone had written: *what about the rain?*

"They're calling it a Wren here," she said. "I've told them it's the most annoying thing they could possibly have done. Keep the gauge. It would take nine months to get here."

The gauge was the old brass rain gauge from the harbor weather station, which had measured the city's rain for a hundred and forty years until the systems found better ways. Edie had chosen it as the



trophy. It stayed where it was, in the Depot canteen under the photographs of buses, whoever won. The winners were trusted to know.



"Same time next year?" said Wren.

Edie did not need to look at the fixture list. She looked anyway, because she was who she was.

The court would be narrow again in a little over a year. The nearest Saturday was the fourteenth.

The match was already there. She had written it in ink before the first serve.

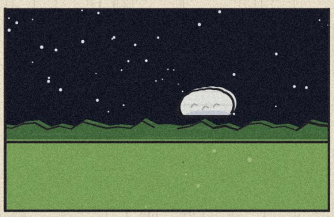


About this edition

This is the complete text of *The Fixture List*, word for word. Its fourteen parts are the chapters, under the story's own titles.

The pictures come from the animated film of the same story, drawn by the film's own code in the manner of a 1950s cartoon: flat colour printed a little off its brush line, dry-brush texture and a fine grain. None of them was made by an image generator. Each is a frame of the film as it appears on the screen; the title page and the back are its title card and end card.

THE FIXTURE LIST



For twenty-six years Edie Calder told the old city when its trams would come. Then the systems learned to send one wherever someone was about to want it, and nobody needed a timetable again. So she wrote down the rules of her daughter's game instead: a small cloud, a hedge, and Law Four, the cloud shall not be carried. Years later, with Wren living beneath the ice four hours of light away, the two of them meet on a court as wide as the dark.