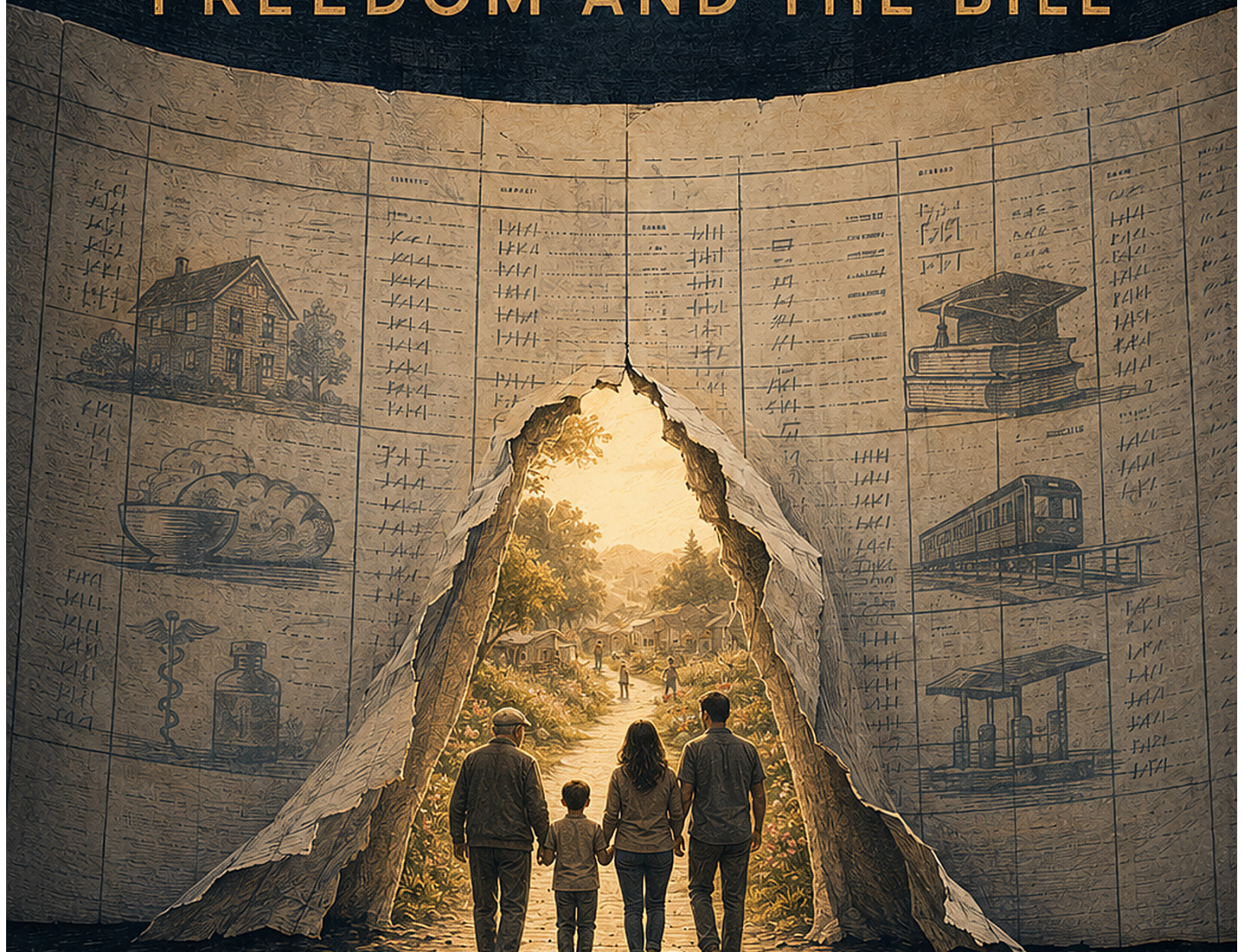


WHO PAYS THE SUN?

FREEDOM AND THE BILL



A PIPER

Who Pays the Sun?

Freedom and the Bill

A Piper

2026

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Who Pays the Sun?

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First edition.

Dedication

For our children's children's children.

CHAPTER 1

Tell the Sun



The light comes across the water every morning without asking anything of me.

I live on a boat. The sun finds me the way it finds everything else out here — the hulls, the pilings, the gulls working the channel, the water itself, which takes

the light and hands it back doubled. I have never once paid for any of it. No meter counts it. Nobody owns the particular slant that comes through in the early hours while I'm waiting on the kettle, and nothing I take from it is taken from anyone else. There is enough. There has always been enough sunlight for what a life like mine needs from it. The sun has been pouring out this absurd surplus for four and a half billion years,¹ and it has never sent a bill, never threatened to shut off the service, never once suggested that I hadn't earned it.

We have built an entire civilization on the quiet insistence that nothing works this way. That everything must be earned. That every good thing has a price, and someone, somewhere, is keeping the books.

Tell it to the sun.

Ninety-three million miles away, in a core we will never touch, hydrogen is being crushed into helium at fifteen million degrees, and a sliver of matter is vanishing into pure energy on its way to the water outside my window.² The second law of thermodynamics is at work there — energy disperses, the ordered becomes disordered, the hot gives itself to the cold. The sun is obeying that law. It is spending itself, slowly and magnificently, and one far-off day it will have spent it all.

That is a real cost. It is not a bill.

Watch what the energy does when it arrives. A leaf catches it and runs the process backward — uses the light to build order, to pull carbon out of the air and assemble it into sugar and wood and bark. Life does this: it uses the flow to build structure, to maintain complexity, to hold itself together against the current of a universe that would rather it came apart. The oak does not charge the jay for the acorn. The jay does not invoice the forest for planting it. The soil does not bill the rain. The decomposer takes what the tree leaves and returns it to the next cycle

without presenting a statement. The whole elaborate living architecture of the planet — three and a half billion years in the building — runs without a single account anywhere in it.

The ledger is ours. We invented it: *a human instrument for tracking human transactions*. It was built to record what people owe each other — your labor, my labor, what I grew, what you made, what we agreed was fair. For that purpose, within those limits, it is an elegant and useful tool.

The problem is that we began applying it to the sun.

The sun's energy, the soil's fertility, the rain, the pollinator, the decomposer, the ten-thousand-year working relationship between the oak and the jay — none of these are human transactions. Nothing in them was ever owed in any sense the ledger can track. We made them into debts by treating nature's contributions as if they were human invoices. Then we called that economics, and forgot we had done it, and began speaking of prices as though they were as natural as weather.

Two different things are hiding inside the word *cost*, and nearly everything in this book depends on keeping them apart.

There is what a thing takes — the energy, the hours, the material, the wear on the body of whoever did it. That is real. It does not care what anyone thinks about it, it cannot be voted away, and no arrangement of society has ever abolished it or ever will.

And there is what somebody says you owe. That is written down. A person wrote it, for reasons, in an office, and it can be rewritten by another person in another office, and the difference between the two numbers has never once been settled by physics.

The first is a fact of nature. The second is a story we tell about nature — useful sometimes, necessary sometimes, but a story, laid over a world that, examined directly, is mostly just flow. Things become other things. Energy moves. The tide comes in whether or not anyone is selling water.

We are the ones who invented the books.

Two categories, then — what a thing takes, and what somebody says you owe. Keep them apart and most of what I'm stating follows. But a third thing can hide between them, and it will not be pretended away here: some things are genuinely scarce. Not billed, not owed — simply not enough to go around at the moment they are wanted. Taking the bill off a scarce thing does not make it abundant. It only changes who decides who gets it.

Which points past all three to the real subject of this book. Not the number on the thing. Whether someone can stand between a person and what they need and say *no* — and whether that person has anywhere else to go. That is the gate. Everything ahead is about who gets to stand at it, and whether a people can take the post away.

I was nineteen when I first caught the story in the act.

I met some vegetarians — the first I'd ever known — and instead of arguing with me they handed me a book. It was called *Diet for a Small Planet*.³ I read it the way you read something that is quietly rearranging the furniture in your head while you sit there.

The arithmetic was what got me. For every seven pounds of grain and soybeans we feed to livestock, we get back, on average, a single pound of meat on the plate. Cattle are the worst of it — sixteen pounds of feed for one pound of beef.⁴ The other six don't vanish. They go into keeping the animal alive and warm and moving, and then they go into the ground under a feedlot as waste, into the water as runoff, into the air — along with the antibiotics we keep pouring in to hold the whole crowded arrangement together.⁵ That is not an opinion. That is a ratio. It is closer to physics than to politics.

Diet for a Small Planet didn't teach me I was wrong to eat meat. It showed me it was selfish to do so. Those are different, and the difference is the beginning of this story. Wrong is a verdict handed to you from outside, and you can argue with it. Selfish is arithmetic. Selfish is the recognition that the other six pounds went *somewhere* — that they came from a planet with edges, and that my plate had been quietly drawing on a common account I had never once thought to look at.

It was the first time in my life I understood that I had been *choosing* — every day, three times a day — and that I had never known I was choosing at all. The choices had been made for me, upstream, by a culture I had swum in so long I mistook it for water. Someone had to hand me a book before I could see it.

That is the thing about the ledger. It is not enforced at gunpoint. It is enforced by invisibility.

When I stand at the counter, none of that arithmetic is anywhere in the price. The number on the sticker has been scrubbed clean of it. The six wasted pounds, the fouled water, the resistance we are breeding into every pathogen that will someday come looking for us — none of it is in the cost, because *the price was never designed to tell the truth about what a thing takes*. It was designed to tell you what you owe at the register.⁶ Those are not the same number. They have never been the same number. And a great deal of what has gone wrong with us follows from the day we agreed to treat them as if they were.

So I ride a bicycle when I can. I took the bus and the train for years. I try, in the ordinary daily way that nobody gives you credit for, not to squander what I have been handed. I am a conservative, by the plain old meaning of that word — the one that has to do with *conserving*, with not wasting the inheritance, with treating what you have been given as though it mattered and might have to last. I will have more to say about that word later, and about the people who took it from us and pinned it to its opposite. For now, only know the kind of person talking to

you: not someone who thinks the world owes him a living, but someone who noticed — late, and only because somebody showed him — that the world was already giving one away, out over the water, every single morning, to anyone standing in the light.

There is a phrase I have said so many times it has worn smooth in my mouth. *We are the only species that has managed to convince itself that nothing in life is free.*

I believe it is true, and I think it is the quiet catastrophe underneath most of the loud ones.

Nothing is free of thermodynamic cost — not the sun, not the leaf, not the thought in your head right now, which is burning glucose before you finish the sentence. The universe keeps its accounts in entropy, and everything pays.

The ledger is something else entirely. It is a human instrument built for a human purpose — tracking what *people* owe each other. And here is what the civilization built on the confusion doesn't want you to notice: **the ledger only ever tracked the human component.** The sun's portion, the soil's portion, the rain's portion — those were never in the ledger. They could not be, because they are not human transactions. We put them there by mistake, or by design, and we have been paying for them ever since to someone who had nothing to do with growing the sun.

The question I am asking is what becomes possible — for a person, for a family, for a country — when that confusion is cleared. What does a human life look like when the necessities are no longer metered at every moment?

Not the meat on the plate. The love at the table.

But first I have to ask you a question about a bird.

CHAPTER 2

Is a Bird Free?





There are gulls working the channel outside my window most mornings, and I have spent more hours watching them than I would care to defend to anyone billing by the hour.

Ask most people whether a bird is free and you will get an answer before you finish the question. *Of course it is.* Free as a bird. It goes where it likes. Nothing holds it down.

Then ask a certain kind of educated person and you will get the opposite answer, delivered with more confidence and a small, kind smile. *Not really.* The bird only appears free. It is running on instinct. It migrates because its genes tell it to, eats because it is hungry, mates because the season turns. It has no choices, only reflexes wearing the costume of choice. Freedom — real freedom — requires deliberation. And deliberation requires a mind like ours.

The second answer is as wrong as the first. The second is wrong in a way that has cost us a great deal, and I want to take it apart with a bird you have probably dismissed as a nuisance.

The Thief

Jays hide food. They also steal it, because a jay that finds another jay's cache will rob it without hesitation. So a jay with something worth burying has a problem, and researchers set out to see what it would do about that.

They let a jay hide food while another bird watched. They let it hide food in private. Then, later, alone, they let it return to its caches.

The jay that had been watched went back and moved everything. Dug it up, carried it somewhere new, buried it again. The jay that had cached in private mostly left things where they lay.¹

Remarkable enough. But it is the next part I have not been able to stop thinking about.

Only the thieves did it.

Jays with a history of robbing other birds' caches were the ones who came back and re-hid their food after being watched. Jays who had never stolen anything scarcely re-cached at all. They left the food where it was, apparently untroubled by the audience.

Consider this. The bird that has stolen *knows it can be stolen from*. It has taken its own history — *I watched, I remembered, I came back and took it* — and projected that history into the head of another bird. It is not reacting to a threat. It is modeling a mind, and using its own history as the model. Later work found that jays track *which particular bird* was watching, and adjust accordingly.²

A jay that has never been a thief has no such model, and so it does not worry. Innocence, in a jay, is a failure of imagination.

I do not know what to call that if not a choice. It is certainly not a reflex. A reflex does not depend on your personal history of wrongdoing.

What the Jay Is Actually Doing

Now hold that same bird still for a moment and look at what it is doing in the wider frame, because this is where I think the whole thing opens up.

A single jay may bury several thousand acorns in one autumn. It does not bury them at random. It selects the sound ones and rejects the wormy ones — only about a tenth of what it caches is a dud — and it carries them out and away from the parent tree, sometimes more than a mile.³ Then winter comes and it eats a great many of them.

But not all of them. It forgets. It dies. It gets distracted, or the cache is deep, or the season turns and the jay has moved on. And the acorns it left behind — selected, sound, buried at the right depth, planted out in the open where a seedling has a chance instead of in the shade of its mother — those acorns become oaks. They germinate at a *better* rate than the acorns that simply fell to the ground and stayed there.

There is a puzzle in paleobotany called Reid's Paradox. After the last ice age, as the world warmed, oak forests moved north across the continent far faster than they should have been able to. Acorns are heavy. They do not blow on the wind. Every model of how fast seeds can travel said the oaks could not possibly have kept up — and yet the fossil pollen says they did.

The leading explanation is jays.⁴

The oaks crossed a continent because a bird kept hiding lunch and forgetting where it put it.

Now. Who paid for that?

Ask it seriously, because the question breaks in your hand. The jay was not paid to plant the forest. It did not intend to plant the forest; it was hoarding, which is about as selfish a motive as exists in nature. It received no compensation, and it never will. And the oak — the oak did not *pay* the jay either. The acorn was not a fee. Nobody negotiated. There is no contract in which the oak agrees to produce more acorns than it needs in exchange for transport services, though that is functionally what happens, year after year, for ten thousand years.

The jay takes. The oak gives, and gives too much on purpose. The jay forgets. The forest walks north. And at no point does anyone settle up, because there is no account to settle. There is only the flow — a set of relationships so deeply

reciprocal that no ledger could capture them, and so thoroughly unledgered that we barely recognize them as reciprocal at all.

There is nothing mystical about this. It is a dance derived through evolution. It is the flow of Nature. And the claim I am making about it is dry and radical at once: **that an arrangement can be mutual, sustained, and generative for millennia without anybody keeping score** — and that this is not as rare in the living world as our own habits might suggest. It is all through the world that runs without us: the fig that cannot reproduce without its wasp, and the wasp that cannot reproduce without the fig; the clownfish and the anemone; the lichen, which is not one organism pretending to be two but two that quit keeping separate accounts so long ago they now function as one. Competition is in nature too — nobody needs to pretend otherwise, and I sure won't. But so is this. Score-free reciprocity is not the exception that proves nature is red in tooth and claw. It is one of nature's oldest and steadiest habits. The ledger is the strange thing. The ledger is the local custom of one peculiar primate.

The Crow on the Sidewalk

Which brings me to the crows, who have solved a problem we haven't.

A crow in a city is living in abundance. That is not a figure of speech — it is the plain condition of the thing. We generate mountains of edible waste and set it out on the curb twice a week. For a bird with a crow's intelligence, food is no longer a limiting factor. The dumpster is a solved problem. The crow has arrived, ahead of us, at the condition every economist and futurist keeps promising is just around the corner: it has more than it needs, and it did not have to sell anything to get it.

So what does the crow do with the surplus?

The crow plays. Corvids are among the very few birds who do — play has been documented in only a tiny fraction of the roughly eleven thousand bird species on Earth, nearly all of them big-brained: the corvids and the parrots.⁵ Play is not what birds do. Play is what the *big-brained* birds do, and they do it in the time they don't need for staying alive. Ravens have been shown to size up their rivals *through* play — learning an individual's habits by tangling with it over things that don't matter, and using what they learn when the stakes turn real.⁶ The leisure is not the opposite of the serious work. The leisure is where the social intelligence gets built.

And the crow watches us. It learns individual human faces — not human beings in general, but *you*, specifically, the one who threw something — and it remembers, and it tells the others, and it will still be scolding you years later.⁷ It works the sidewalk the way a scholar works an archive. It is studying us, on its own time, for its own reasons, and nobody assigned it the project.

Give a crow abundance and it becomes *more* curious, not less. More social. More inventive. More itself.

And sometimes it just sits on the wire in the afternoon sun and does nothing at all, which is also a thing a free creature is allowed to do, and which we have spent four hundred years learning to feel guilty about.

So: Is a Bird Free?

Yes. Not free of gravity, not free of hunger, not free of the hawk — nobody is free of those, and any definition of freedom that requires escaping physics is a definition built to be failed. But free in the way that matters.

The jay chooses. The crow judges, and plays, and holds a grudge, and rests. They make alliances, keep watch for one another, decide when to fight and when

to run, and pass along what they know. They participate in a flow that sustains them and that they sustain in turn, and they do it all —

— **without a ledger.**

No jay has ever been told it did not deserve the acorn. No crow has been informed that the air it flies through belongs to someone, that its nesting site is behind on payments, that there is food in the bin but not for the likes of it. There is no bill. There has never been a bill. The entire apparatus of debt and obligation and *you owe us for this* — the machinery that governs nearly every waking hour of your life and mine — does not exist out there on the sidewalk, and the birds get on with it perfectly well.

Which raises the question this chapter exists to ask.

If a crow can live in abundance without a ledger — choosing, working, resting, playing, participating in a world that feeds it and that it feeds — **then what happened to us?**

The Gift and the Trap

I think the answer has two halves. They sit uneasily together, and learning to hold them both at once is, to my mind, the whole of the problem.

First half: you can do vastly more than the crow ever could.

The jay can imagine what another jay knows. That is magnificent and I will not diminish it. But the jay cannot imagine a jay that has never existed. It cannot imagine the next century. It cannot decide that a rule it was raised with is wrong and refuse to hand it on. It cannot look at the arrangement it was born into and say: *this could be otherwise.*

You can. You can forgive somebody who wronged you, which is in nobody's narrow interest and happens every day. You can decide, at nineteen, on the

strength of a book somebody handed you, to stop eating what you have eaten your whole life. You can build a thing that has never been built. You can imagine a country that does not exist and then spend your one life dragging the real one toward it. The range of what a human being can choose among is not slightly wider than a bird's. It is a different order of thing altogether, and it is the nearest thing to a miracle I know of.

Second half: that same power is exactly what builds the cage.

A crow cannot be persuaded that the sky is rented. You could not, with any amount of effort, convince a jay that it must earn its right to exist, that its worth is a number, that the acorns are there but not for the likes of it. Not because the jay is too clever to fall for it. Because the jay is *not equipped* to fall for it. The lie requires an abstraction the bird does not possess.

We possess it. We are the only creature on this planet that can be told a story about what it owes and then live inside that story as though it were weather. The very faculty that lets us imagine a better world is the faculty that lets us be sold a worse one and call it reality.

But most animals live perfectly well inside boundaries. A well-kept horse will stand in an open gate and not go through it. Domestication is a bargain, and it is not always a bad one: the animal gives up the range and gets fed, sheltered, defended, doctored. Plenty of creatures take that deal and are content, and I do not think they are fools. Neither are the people who take a version of it — the mortgage, the job, the town you were born in, the fences you built yourself and would build again. A man who has chosen his boundaries and can see them is not less free than a drifter. He is a man who has chosen.

So the fence itself is not the scandal. Here is the scandal, and it is a narrow, specific thing:

We are not the only creature that can be kept inside a fence it cannot see — the elephant that won't leave its stake long after the chain is gone is

testament to that. But we are the only creature that can be persuaded to call the arrangement freedom.

That is not domestication. Domestication is an honest trade — the animal knows the terms, and it is genuinely being fed. And the elephant at the phantom stake is not domesticated either; it has simply stopped expecting the chain. What happens to us is a third thing, and the third thing is the story — told so long and so thoroughly that it stops sounding like a story. The horse in the open gate knows where the gate is. The harder case is the one who cannot see the gate and has been told there isn't one.

The people who invented writing invented it largely to keep accounts. The oldest cuneiform tablets from Sumer — some of the earliest writing on earth — are inventories, ledgers, records of who owned what and how much was owed. Writing and the ledger grew up together.

So did the word for what happens when the ledger is removed.

Around 2350 BCE, in the city-state of Lagash in what is now southern Iraq, a ruler named Urukagina enacted a set of reforms. He canceled debts. He freed those held in servitude for what they owed and let them go home.

The word the scribes pressed into the clay was *ama-gi*.

Translated from Sumerian: *return to the mother*.

It is the earliest known written record of the word freedom.⁸

Not an abstraction. Not a philosophical ideal. A canceled debt and an open gate. The same civilization that gave us the ledger also gave us the word for its removal — and they called that removal freedom. The ledger and *ama-gi* are as old as each other in the written record. They were born in the same script, in the same river valley, and they have been in tension ever since.

That tension is what this book is about.

One thing is worth saying plainly here, before I spend eleven more chapters judging what people have done with the ledger: the ledger itself is not the villain of this argument. It may be one of the most useful things our species ever built. It can bind a person to an obligation they never agreed to — a toll, a debt, a fence thrown up around a necessity. It can just as easily free a person from one — turn an unpaid, unchosen duty into a wage, a contract, a thing that can be renegotiated or simply refused. The tool has no loyalty of its own. It does whatever the hand holding it points it at. So the sun and the jay in this chapter are not a model to imitate — nobody is being asked to live unledgered, the way a jay does. They are proof that the ledger is a choice, not a law of nature like the tide or the weather, which is the only thing that makes it fair game for human judgment at all. The question I keep returning to is never *ledger or no ledger*. It is who holds it, and what they point it at. And a low price, or no price at all, is only the fence you can see. It is not the only fence there is, and — as we will keep finding — not always the highest one.

The Test

Which gives me the instrument I will use for the rest of this book. It is two questions long.

Can you see the door? And can you walk through it without being asked who you are?

Two fences. Either one alone will hold a person, and the second one holds them better.

The first is the fence you can see. The thing exists, it is fifty feet away, and there is a number on it. This is the honest fence, in its way — it announces itself.

You can measure it, argue with it, save against it, hate it accurately. A man who cannot pay knows exactly what is keeping him out.

The second is the fence you cannot see. Nothing stops you. Nobody asks for money. The gate stands open, and there is nothing on the other side, because the thing was taken out before you were born, or was never built, or was bricked up so long ago that nobody living thinks to mention there was ever a door there. You are entirely free to walk toward it. There is simply nowhere to arrive.

A school that costs nothing and teaches only *what* to think has removed the toll and bricked the doors. A market with fifty brands of the same product has left every door unlocked into the same room. Both are cages, and neither one has a price on it.

Now the second half of the test, which does most of the work in the chapters ahead. *Without being asked who you are.*

Not: can you pay. Not: do you deserve this, have you earned it, are you the right sort, did you keep your job this quarter, are you still married to the man whose card this is, is your paperwork current, did you fill the form in correctly, will you be pleasant to the person behind the desk. The road does not ask. The fire truck does not ask. The library does not ask — one of the few buildings left in this country where a person can walk in off the street with nothing at all and be handed the accumulated knowledge of the species without once explaining themselves.

That is what *free* means in these pages, and I mean it narrowly and I mean it hard. Not subsidized. Not discounted. Not means-tested. Not available to the deserving on application. **Obliterated.** There is no ticket-taker at the library who kindly waives your fee. There is no fee.

And realize what the test does not ask.

It does not ask who holds the deed.

A man who owns his car outright and cannot afford to fill the tank is not free to drive. A woman who owns her house and cannot pay the tax on it is one envelope away from losing it. Ownership is a mechanism — sometimes a fine one, sometimes an anchor with your own name on the paperwork — and I will spend real time on who owns what, because it matters enormously. But it was never the objective. A cooperative with a meter on your wall is still a meter. The question is not whose name is on the deed.

It is whether the gate is gone.

That question has working parts — four of them — and I will spend the chapters ahead earning them before laying them side by side at a town called Pullman, where a working man was given better water, better housing, and better parks than his cousin in the city, and was less free than his cousin all the same. Carry them for now as a rough gauge. Is the thing *universal*: is belonging enough to qualify? Is it *unconditional*: does it survive your being unemployed, unpopular, or wrong? Is it *dependable*: is it there on your worst day, which is the only day it matters? Is it *portable*: can you leave — the job, the town, the marriage — and take it with you? Fail any one of the four and the gate is still standing, whatever the price says. Hold them lightly for now. The chapters ahead put the weight on them.

So the question was never whether we are freer than the birds. In raw capacity — wildly, unrecognizably so. The question is what we have done with it.

And what we have largely done with it — I include myself, and my nineteen-year-old self most of all — is use the largest imaginative power ever to appear in the history of life on this planet to persuade ourselves that nothing in life is free. Then we built a world on that premise. Then we forgot that we had built it, and began to speak of it as though it had always been there, like the tide.

That is what I mean when I say the crow is freer than most of us. Not that its life is easy. Not that it knows some secret we've lost. Only that a crow on a wire in the afternoon is doing something we have very nearly forgotten how to do: it is living the whole of what it is, it is asking nobody's permission, and it does not believe for one moment that it owes anybody anything.

We are capable of so much more than that crow.

That is precisely the tragedy — and precisely the hope. Because the only creature that can be fenced in by a story is the only creature that can tell a different one.

CHAPTER 3

Nobody Rules Who Doesn't Deliver



Everyone knows the first part.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. It is on the wall of the schoolroom. It gets read aloud on the Fourth of July by

somebody's uncle who has had two beers and means every word of it. It is possibly the most quoted sentence written on this continent.

And a few lines later comes the part that people know slightly less well, though they would recognize it if you said it — that governments are instituted among men, *deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed*, and that whenever a government becomes destructive of those ends, *it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it*.¹

That is a radical sentence. We have said it so often that we have sanded the edges off, but look at it cold. It says that authority is not a possession. It is a loan. It is extended by the governed, for specific purposes, and when those purposes are betrayed it can be *called in*. No divine right. No natural order of masters and men. Just a deal, and a deal that can be ended.

Fine. You know this. You may have it on a bumper sticker.

The next sentence is one I have never once heard read aloud at a picnic, and it is the most penetrating thing in the entire document.

The Sentence Nobody Quotes

Jefferson has just told us we have the right to throw off a government that has betrayed us. And then, immediately, he says this:

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.²

Read it again. Slowly.

Mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.

He is not talking about tyranny there. He is talking about **us**. About the human tendency to keep a bad arrangement going long past the point where any reasonable person would have walked out of it — not because we are chained, not because we cannot see the exit, but because we have gotten *used to it*. The form is familiar. Familiar is comfortable. And comfortable is the strongest fence ever built.

That is the horse standing in the open gate.

It is in the founding document of the United States, written by a man you would defend at a dinner table. The claim that a people can be talked into their own confinement — that the habit itself becomes the wall — is not a foreign idea, not an imported theory, not something dreamed up in a European coffee house. **It is an American founding observation**, and it is sitting in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, where anybody could have read it any time these two hundred and fifty years.

The Oldest Thing We Do

The Founders did not invent conditional consent. They wrote down something our lineage has been doing for a very long time.

Watch a troop of chimpanzees for a while and you will stop thinking of the alpha as a king. Frans de Waal spent years doing exactly that, and what he found was not a tyrant but a *politician*. The alpha does not hold his position by being the largest or the most vicious. He holds it by coalition — and he keeps the coalition by delivering. He breaks up fights. He protects the smaller animals from the bullies. He is, in de Waal's observation, often the one who consoles the loser after

a conflict. And when he stops delivering, his allies quietly stop showing up, and one morning he is not the alpha anymore.³

Power, in a chimpanzee troop, is a service contract.

Now come forward to our own species. Christopher Boehm spent a career surveying the political arrangements of hunter-gatherer bands, and he found something he called a *reverse dominance hierarchy* — a phrase worth holding onto. In these societies the rank and file do not merely tolerate the absence of a boss. They **enforce** it. A man who starts giving orders, who takes more than his share, who begins to strut, is met with ridicule. Then with criticism. Then, if he persists, with plain disobedience and ostracism. And in the extreme, historically, with worse.⁴

Egalitarianism, in Boehm's account, is not the absence of politics. It is a vigilant, unceasing political achievement — a whole community keeping watch against the one man who wants to be in charge of them.

Boehm is explicit that we are *both* things: we carry the ape's appetite for dominance and the human ethic that suppresses it, and which one prevails is a matter of arrangement and vigilance, not of our sweet nature. We are not naturally good. **We are naturally suspicious of anyone who wants to rule us, and that suspicion is the most democratic instinct we own.**

So the Instinct Is Right

Distrust of concentrated power is not paranoia. It is not ignorance, and it is not a failure to understand how complicated the modern world is. **It is among the oldest political instincts our species has, and it is correct.**

Power does get captured. Big institutions do stop serving the people they were built for. Distant authorities do develop interests of their own, and those interests

do quietly diverge from the public's, and the people running them will very often be the last to admit it — sometimes because they are lying and sometimes, more dangerously, because they have persuaded themselves. Every hunter-gatherer band that ever ridiculed a swaggering hunter back into his place was acting on this. Jefferson wrote it into a founding document. The instinct is older than the country and does not need my permission to be trusted.

I am not going to spend your time trying to talk you out of that instinct.

I am going to spend it asking whether you have been aimed.

The Question That Ends This Chapter

Consent means nothing unless it can be withdrawn.

That is not a slogan, it is a definition, and it has teeth. A yes that cannot become a no is not a yes. It is compliance in a good suit. And withdrawing consent requires one of exactly two things: **somewhere else to go, or the standing to refuse**. Take away both and you may keep every ritual of consent — the vote, the signature, the click of *I agree* — and have nothing left of the thing itself.

The chimpanzee can withdraw from the coalition. The forager can ridicule the upstart, or walk to the next band over the ridge, and be taken in. The colonist could — and did — declare that the deal was off.

Look at what each of those has behind it, because it is not courage.

The forager who walks over the ridge can do that because the next band will feed him, and because everything he needs to stay alive is either on his back or growing out of the ground, and neither of those depends on his having been agreeable. His standing to refuse is not a quality of his character. It is a fact about

his material circumstances, and somebody — the band, the land, the arrangement — is supplying it.

Which is the uncomfortable thing about consent, and we will be a long time getting to the bottom of it. A yes is only worth what the no beside it is worth. And the no is worth whatever a person can fall back on. Take away the fallback and you have not changed anyone's beliefs, or their courage, or their character. You have simply made their agreement worthless as evidence of anything at all — and you have done it without ever raising your voice.

So the question this chapter leaves you with is not whether you consent to the arrangement you live inside. Of course you do; you are living in it.

The question is: **what would it take for you to withdraw that consent — and is that still possible?**

Where would you walk to?

And is “nowhere to go” a fact about the world — or a story that had to be installed?

CHAPTER 4

The Door You Can't See





In the autumn of 1820, a Massachusetts lawyer named William Charles Jarvis sent Thomas Jefferson a book he had written about republican government. Jefferson, then seventy-seven and mostly retired from argument, read it and found something in it he could not let stand.

Jarvis had suggested that judges ought to be the final word on what the Constitution means. Jefferson thought this was not merely mistaken but dangerous, and he said so in a phrase worth carrying around: such a doctrine, he wrote, would place us under **the despotism of an oligarchy**.¹

Remember that we are talking about a man who had every reason to be comfortable with rule by the well-educated. He founded a university. He was perhaps the most learned man on the continent. And his position was that no small body of clever people, however honest, could be trusted with the last word — because *our judges are as honest as other men, and not more so*.

So who gets the last word?

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society, but the people themselves: and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their controul with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is, not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. this is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power.²

The middle of that sentence contains the argument of this chapter.

If we think them not enlightened enough — Jefferson concedes the objection. The people may not be ready. They may be ignorant, distracted, manipulable, wrong.

The remedy is not to take it from them. Do not hand the power to the experts. Do not hand it to the judges. Do not hand it to the men who are certain they know better, however honest they are, and they are no more honest than anyone else.

But to inform their discretion by education.

That is the American answer, from the American source, and it is more radical than almost anything said about schooling in this country since. The purpose of education, in the founding conception, is not to produce workers. It is not to produce good citizens in the sense of obedient ones. **It is to produce a people fit to hold the ultimate power — which they hold whether they are fit for it or not.**

What Kind of Education?

Here is where it gets dangerous, and Jefferson knew it, because in the very same letter — praising the book he is about to demolish — he writes that he will be glad if it leads the young to *the practice of thinking on such subjects & for themselves*.³

For themselves.

Not: leads them to the right conclusions. Not: teaches them what a republic requires. *Leads them to the practice of thinking for themselves.* He is commending a book he thinks is wrong on its central point, because it will make young people think.

That distinction — between an education that hands you conclusions and an education that hands you the tools — is the hinge on which every other freedom in this book turns.

Because think about what we established two chapters ago. Freedom is not merely the absence of a bill. It is the presence of real choices, and the capacity to choose among them. A hallway with one unlocked door is not freedom, no matter how gently you are ushered toward it.

Now apply that to the inside of a head.

A person who has been taught **what** to think is standing in a hallway with one door. They can walk through it freely. Nobody is forcing them. They may feel entirely at liberty. But every other door was bricked up before they arrived, and they do not know those doors were ever there.

A person who has been taught **how** to think can find the other doors. That is the entire difference. It is not a difference of political content. It is a difference of whether a person is free.

The Same Strangulation, Applied to the Mind

The charge is not that schools teach the wrong things. The charge is that teaching people *what* to think — from any direction, for any cause, however noble — **is the same act as tearing out the streetcars**. It is the elimination of alternatives. It is coercion that never has to raise its voice, because it operates on the range of options a person can even conceive of, and a man cannot choose a door he cannot see.

And it is done, as these things are always done, by whoever profits from the choosing being narrow.

A population trained to think for itself is expensive to lie to. It notices when a price does not match a cost. It asks who benefits. It reads the fine print, and worse, it reads the *history* of the people offering the contract. Such a population is very difficult to stampede, and stampeding is how a great deal of money gets made and a great deal of power gets kept.

A population trained to receive conclusions is cheap. You do not have to convince it of anything. You only have to be the one supplying the conclusions.

How to Tell the Difference

There is a simple test, and it works regardless of who is doing the teaching or which direction they are pushing.

Ask what happens when the student disagrees.

In an education that teaches *what* to think, disagreement is failure. You have arrived at the wrong answer. You will be corrected, marked down, or quietly sorted into the group of people who don't get it.

In an education that teaches *how* to think, disagreement — supported by evidence, argued honestly, arrived at through work — is **the entire point**. It is the thing the exercise was for. A teacher who is doing this properly will take real pleasure in being argued out of a position by a nineteen-year-old, because that is what success looks like.

So the test is: *does this reward me for agreeing, or for thinking well?*

Run it on anything. A classroom. A curriculum. A church. A newspaper. A cable channel. A politician. A book — including this one, and I mean that as an instruction, not a flourish. The test does not care about the politics of the person you are running it on. It works identically on a left-wing indoctrinator and a right-wing one, which is precisely why it is worth having, and precisely why almost nobody will hand it to you.

The Part That Costs You Something

If you want schools to stop telling children what to think, you have to mean it — and meaning it has a price you may not want to pay.

A mind taught to think for itself may think its way somewhere you hate. Your own child, taught properly, may reason her way to conclusions that keep you up at night. That is not a malfunction of the method. **That is the method working.** There is no version of this that lets you install the free-thinking apparatus and also guarantee the output.

Which means the person who says *stop indoctrinating my kids, teach them the truth instead* — where “the truth” turns out to be his own answers — has not objected to indoctrination at all. He has objected to somebody else doing it. He wants the same hallway with a different door left open.

I understand the impulse entirely. I have a version of it about things I care about. But it will not do, and it will not work, and the reason it will not work is that a person who has been handed conclusions cannot defend them. He can only hold them. And a conclusion that is held rather than understood will not survive its first serious contact with a clever man who wants something from you.

If you want your children to be free, you have to be willing to lose the argument to them.

Why They Come for This First

In the last chapter we found that the oldest political instinct our species has is the suspicion of anyone who wants to rule us — that the rank and file, in every band of foragers ever studied, watched the strutting man closely and cut him down to size.

An education that teaches you how to think is that instinct, installed in a single mind.

It is the interior version of the same defense. It watches the man who wants something from you. It asks what he gets out of your believing him. It notices the missing doors.

And that is why it is always, always the first thing attacked — not by one party, but by anyone anywhere who would rather be believed than examined.

The slaveholders understood this precisely. In state after state across the antebellum South, teaching an enslaved person to read was made a crime. Not a minor infraction — a crime, with penalties attached. The reasoning was stated plainly by one of them the moment he discovered his wife had begun teaching a young enslaved man to read. The lesson, he said, would “*forever unfit him to be a slave.*” He meant it as an objection. Frederick Douglass, who recorded those words in his own account of his life, received them differently — as the moment the entire arrangement became clear to him. Not the chains. What the chains were protecting. “*From that moment,*” Douglass wrote, “*I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.*”⁴

He did not mean that reading made him stronger than his master. He meant it gave him the one thing the system was designed to prevent: the ability to see the fence.

You do not have to ban a book from a person who was never taught to interrogate one. You do not have to close the door if they were raised never to look for it.

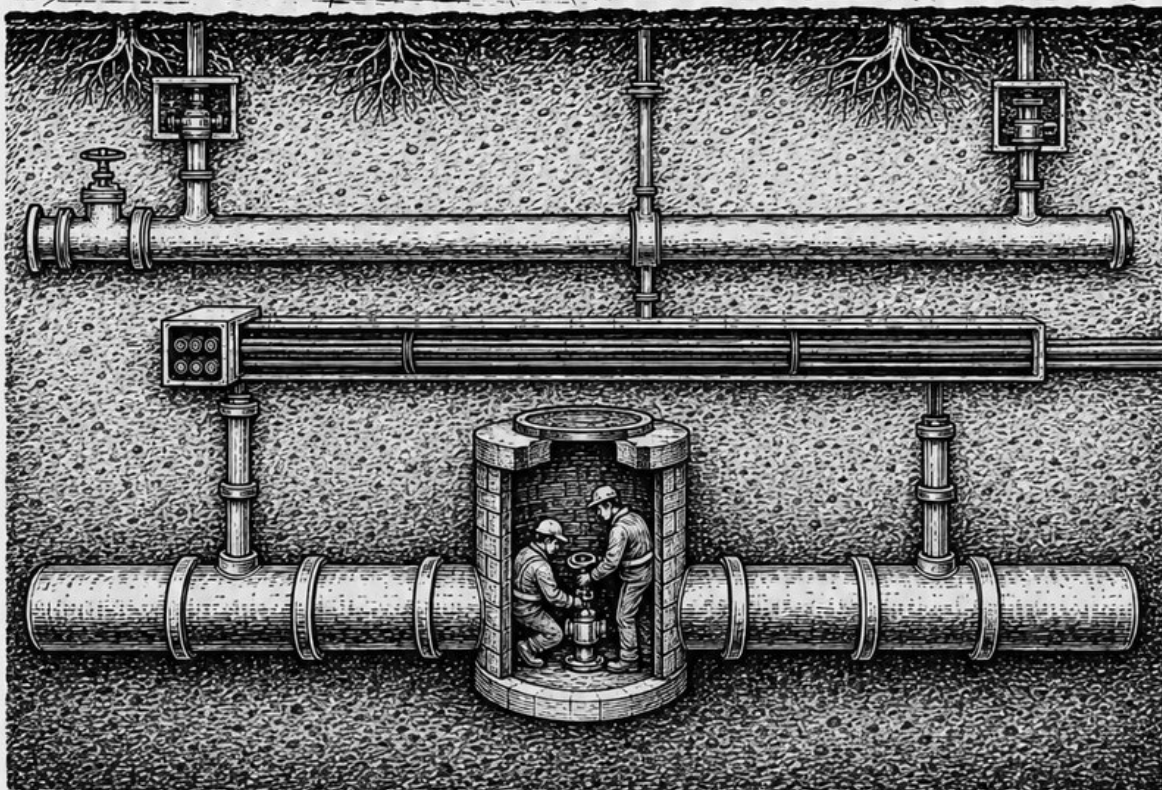
Jefferson said the remedy is to inform their discretion by education.

He did not say *fill their heads*. He said **inform their discretion** — sharpen the faculty of judgment itself. Give a man the tools and he will find the doors. Give him conclusions and he will stand in the hallway you built for him, all his life, and call it freedom.

CHAPTER 5

The Commons You'd Fight to Keep





In 1935, if you lived in the American countryside, you probably did not have electricity. The cities had it. The cities had had it for decades. But out where the farms were, the lines simply stopped — and they stopped for a reason that was perfectly sound, perfectly rational, and perfectly defensible in every boardroom in America: **it did not pay.**

Stringing copper for miles to reach a handful of farmhouses cost more than those farmhouses would ever return. The private utilities ran the numbers, and the numbers said no. They were not being wicked. They were being correct, by the only measure they were permitted to use.

So the farms stayed dark. Kerosene lamps. Water hauled by hand. Wives ruined by the labor of it. Children doing homework by a guttering flame, in a country that had already electrified Manhattan.

And then the public did what the market had declined to do, and the lights came on.¹

Nobody in rural America today looks up at the light over the kitchen table and thinks about that. It is simply *there*. It is a fact of the world, like the tide. The freedom it purchased — the hours of a woman's life given back to her, the reading a child could do after dark, the milking machine, the refrigerator, the radio bringing the whole country into a farmhouse in Nebraska — has been so thoroughly absorbed that we cannot see it as a purchase at all.

It was a purchase. It was a *choice*. And it was a choice the market had explicitly refused to make.

Count What You Already Have

The fire department will come to your house and put out your fire, and they will not ask to see your policy first, and they will not bill you by the gallon.

The library will hand you any book in it. Any book. For nothing. Including the ones that argue against everything the library's funders believe.

The water comes out of the tap and it is clean, and you did not negotiate its cleanliness this morning, and the reason your children do not die of cholera is not that you shopped carefully.

The sewage goes away. Consider, for one honest moment, what your life would be if it did not.

The roads are there. You did not pay a toll at the end of your street.

Medicare exists, and no politician who wishes to remain in office will touch it, and the reason is that the people who have it will not give it up, and they are *right* not to.

None of these things are for sale. Not per use. Not to you, in the moment you need them. And every single one of them is something you would fight to keep — and you would be right to fight, and I would stand next to you.

I am not going to use the word that has been prepared for you here. You know the word. It has been made to frighten, and the fright has been expensive, and I am not interested in charging you for it again in the middle of a chapter that is on your side.

I am simply going to count.

You already live in a country full of things held in common, and you would defend every one of them, and you have been persuaded to be frightened of the idea that produced them.

What They All Have in Common

Look at what those things actually do, mechanically, because it is always the same move.

Each one takes a **necessity** — a thing you cannot live decently without — and pulls it **out of the daily transaction**. Out of the ledger. It is no longer something you negotiate, ration, or go without. It simply is, and it is there for you, and it is there for the man you cannot stand who lives on the next block.

And every time we have done that, **freedom expanded**. Not shrank. Expanded.

Because a man who is not calculating whether he can afford water is free to think about other things. A woman who does not have to haul it is free to have a life. A family that will not be bankrupted by a house fire is free to take a risk somewhere else. Public sewage did not restrict anybody's liberty. It gave people back the years that cholera would have taken.

This is the pattern of the good part of our history: again and again, we got freer, in the way that actually matters, when we took something essential off the market.

A word before the objections arrive, because one of them is already forming: to take a necessity off the market is not to declare the market an enemy. A price does two jobs, and they are not the same one. It carries information — what is scarce, what is costly to make, where effort is needed — and a system with no prices at all flies blind, which is much of why the ones that tried it crashed. That job is real, and I will not pretend it away. But a price does a second job at the same moment: it decides who is let in. And when the thing behind it is a necessity — water, a doctor, the light to read by — the second job quietly becomes the whole of it, because a person who cannot pay never gets to use the information. They simply go without. The target was never the price that tells the truth about what a thing costs. It is the price set as a turnstile in front of something a person cannot live decently without. Keep the first. It is the second that builds the fence.

The Objection Worth Taking Seriously

There is an objection that arrives here, and it should, because it is not stupid and it has a Nobel Prize's worth of thinking attached to the version of it that is wrong.

In 1968, a biologist named Garrett Hardin published a paper that became one of the most quoted in environmental science. He called it the tragedy of the commons. The logic is clean: when a resource is shared, every individual has an incentive to take as much as possible, because the benefits go to them alone while the costs are spread across everyone. The rational person grazes one more cow. And another. And so does every other rational person. And the pasture is destroyed.

The conclusion Hardin drew was that shared resources are doomed — that you need either private ownership or government coercion to prevent inevitable collapse.²

He was looking at the wrong variable.

In 1990, a political economist named Elinor Ostrom published the work that would eventually win her the Nobel Prize in Economics — the first woman to receive it. She had spent decades studying actual commons: Swiss mountain pastures managed collectively for eight hundred years. Japanese fishing villages with sustainable harvest rules going back centuries. Irrigation systems in Spain that had been functioning, without privatization or government management, since the medieval period.³

They were not failing. They had not failed. And they were not privately owned, and they were not managed by a distant government. They were managed by the communities that depended on them, through rules those communities had developed themselves — with teeth, with ways to settle disputes, and with the kind of local knowledge that no agency from a distant capital ever has.

Hardin's error was not the economics. It was the assumption. He modeled a commons with no community — open access, no rules, strangers consuming what

they could. That does fail. But that is not a commons. **That is abandonment.**

And here is the historical fact that gives the whole argument away: the original English commons — the very commons that give the word its meaning — were not destroyed by overuse. They were not grazed to ruin by rational actors maximizing individual gain. They were *enclosed*. Taken. Converted from shared land to private property by law and by force, over several centuries, and the people who had depended on them were left with nothing and told to find wages.

Hardin's tragedy was a thought experiment. The enclosure was a policy.

Ownership was never Hardin's mistake. His mistake was modeling a commons with no community and no rules at all, and calling the wreckage that follows a tragedy of sharing. A commons that actually works is not sharing minus rules. It is sharing plus them — real boundaries, real enforcement, the kind of local knowledge no distant agency has. Ostrom's decades of fieldwork are not proof that togetherness alone is enough to make a commons hold. They are a record of the conditions under which it does. The rural electric cooperative meets those conditions: a community providing a necessity for itself, on terms it can govern, at a price that reflects what it costs rather than what the market will bear. Nobody stopped to argue about what to call it. They called it keeping the lights on.

Nobody gets free alone. That is the first half of it, and it is the easy half.

The second half costs something to admit. The same neighbors who lower a fence for you can raise one. A community that can provide can also withhold, and when it withholds it tends to withhold from the same people every time — the newcomer, the odd one, the one who voted wrong, the one who stopped coming to church. What frees a person is not the presence of a community around them. It is a floor the community cannot pull up.

Hold that. I come back to it, and it does not go easy.

The Interstate, and the Door That Was Bricked Up

The Interstate Highway System is one of the largest public works in the history of the world. It was signed by a Republican president, paid for with public money, built on land taken by public authority, and given to the people to use without a toll. It is a commons. It is *magnificent*.

And it is the best example I know of how a country can build one enormous freedom while quietly strangling another, and then teach its children that what remained was liberty.

Here is what most people believe happened to the streetcars: General Motors and the oil companies bought them up and tore them out in a conspiracy to sell cars.

It is a satisfying story. Parts of it are even true — in 1949 General Motors, Firestone, Standard Oil of California, Phillips Petroleum, and Mack Trucks were convicted of conspiring to monopolize the sale of buses, fuel, and supplies to the companies that had acquired transit systems in some twenty-five cities.⁴

But they were **acquitted** of conspiring to monopolize the transit systems themselves. General Motors was fined five thousand dollars. Its treasurer was fined **one dollar**.⁵ And the historians who have actually gone through it — Norton, Bianco, Bottles, Slater, Post — will tell you that by the time those companies were buying streetcar lines, many of the lines were **already in bankruptcy**.⁶

Reject the conspiracy — not out of fairness to General Motors. **Because the truth is worse, and it is worth seeing clearly, and the conspiracy version lets the actual culprits walk.**

The streetcars did not die in a smoke-filled room. They died in daylight, by ordinary policy, in public, with everyone watching and most people applauding.

Cities capped the fare by law — a nickel, held for decades — so the systems could not cover their costs no matter how many people rode them. Then cities let automobiles drive on the streetcar tracks, and once even a modest fraction of people were driving, the cars clogged the rails and the streetcars could no longer keep a schedule.⁷ A transit system that cannot keep a schedule is a transit system nobody rides. And then the public treasury opened — enormously, magnificently, ninety cents on the dollar from Washington — for highways.⁸

Nobody had to conspire. **The alternative was not murdered. It was starved, on a public schedule, with a published budget.**

That is the fence you cannot see. Not a plot. **Architecture.**

What It Cost You

So consider what an American is actually free to do.

You are free to drive. Magnificently free to drive — on the finest road network ever built, paid for in common, open to all, and I mean that without irony. It is a real freedom and it has given real joy to a lot of people, myself included.

And you are free to do very little else.

You must buy a car, which you will finance. You must insure it. You must fuel it, forever, from an industry that did not build the roads and does not maintain them and yet collects from every mile you drive on them. You must maintain it, park it, replace it. If you are poor, this is the largest expense in your life after shelter, and it is not optional, because the alternative was removed before you were born, and the streets themselves don't remember it was ever there.

Americans are free. Free to drive a car and pay at the pump to do so.

That is not liberty. That is a hallway with one door, and a very fine door it is, and a very fine hallway, and you may walk down it as fast as you like.

The Control Group

I lived without a car in New York, and the word that comes to mind for what it was like is the one this whole book is about.

It felt like **freedom**.

No insurance. No payments. No garage, no alternate-side parking, no circling a block for twenty minutes, no sitting motionless on a bridge watching my own life go by at four miles an hour. I went where I wanted, when I wanted, and I read a book while somebody else drove.

A car, in that city, would have been an **anchor**. I do not mean that as a metaphor. It would have cost me money and time and attention and given me, in exchange, a slower and more anxious version of a trip I could already make.

Not a suggestion to give up your truck — in most of this country I would be a fool to suggest it, because in most of this country **there is nothing else**, and there is nothing else *by arrangement*.

Only this: I have stood in a place where there were two doors — and the one I had been told my whole life was freedom turned out to be the heavier one.

I have seen the other field. It exists. It was not a fantasy, and it was not poverty, and it was not somebody taking my liberty away.

It was the only time in my adult life I was not paying rent on my own mobility.

Now look at what I owned in that city.

Nothing. Not an inch of track. Not a bolt in a single car, no share in the authority that ran it, no vote on the fare, no say in the schedule. I could not have sold my access to the subway if I had wanted to, because it was not mine to sell.

By every measure I am tempted to reach for in the chapters ahead, I held no title whatsoever to the thing that was freeing me.

And it could not be taken from me.

Not when I lost work, which I did. Not when I moved, which I did more than once. I never insured it. I never financed it, never maintained it, never lay awake over it, never worried that three missed payments would put it beyond my reach in the morning. It did not depreciate. It could not be repossessed. It asked nothing about my employment or my marriage or my credit or my character. It was simply there, at two in the morning, for anyone standing on the platform.

The car would have been mine. That was precisely the problem. Mine to insure, mine to fuel, mine to park, mine to finance across sixty months, mine to lose. Ownership was not the freedom in that city. Ownership was the thing I would have taken on *because* the access wasn't guaranteed — and for that one need, in that one place, it was.

Which is a plainer way of saying the thing this chapter has been circling. Most of what Americans own, we own defensively. You buy a car because there is no other way to get to work. You buy a house because a lease can end. You stay in a job you have outgrown because the insurance is welded to it. Every one of those purchases is a person building a private floor under themselves, one payment at a time, because no public one was ever poured — and every one of those floors comes with a lien on it, a maintenance schedule, and a way to be lost.

The deed was never the point. The gate was the point.

CHAPTER 6

The Things That Aren't for Sale



Nobody has ever sent you an invoice for being loved.

Notice that this is true. Then notice that it is strange.

Think about what you actually have. Not what you own — what you *have*. The people who would come if you called at three in the morning. The friend you

have not seen in six years who would pick up on the first ring and start the conversation in the middle, as though no time had passed. Your children, if you have them, and what they are to you, which is not a number and never was. The neighbor who shoveled your walk without mentioning it. The person who sat with you in the worst week of your life and did not check the time.

Every one of those is free.

Not free as in *cheap*. Not free as in *effortless* — some of them cost you more than anything you have ever paid money for. Free as in **there is no bill**. Free as in nobody is keeping score, and the moment somebody starts keeping score, the thing itself begins to die.

None of this is a secret. It has been sitting in the middle of every life ever lived, plainly visible, needing nobody to point it out. And this country has spent its whole history insisting on the opposite anyway.

What They Cost, and What They Take

Here is the strange arithmetic at the center of a human life.

The most valuable things in it are not purchasable at any price. They cannot be acquired by anyone with sufficient funds. A billionaire cannot buy a friend who would sit up with him. He can buy a great many people who will say they would, and he will never be certain, and the uncertainty is itself the price of having tried to buy it.

But they are not free of *cost*. This is where the sentimental version of this chapter goes wrong, and I have no interest in writing that version.

They cost you the only currency that actually purchases them, and it is a currency you cannot counterfeit and cannot borrow: **your presence, and your attention, and your time.**

You show up. That is the whole of the tuition. You show up to the hospital room. You show up to the recital that you would rather not attend. You answer the phone when it is inconvenient. You listen to the story you have heard four times, because it is not the story that matters. You *attend* — in the old sense of the word, which means to stretch toward.

Give that, and you get the most valuable things a human being can hold, and you get them for nothing, and nobody ever hands you a bill.

Refuse it, and you can be the richest man in the world and die alone, and many have.

That is the actual economy of a human life, underneath the one measured in dollars. It has been true of nearly every life ever lived, whether or not the life in question ever stopped to notice.

The Largest Volunteer Army in America

There is a lie about human nature at the center of this country's politics, and here is the number that shoots it in the open field.

The lie is: *people won't work unless they're made to*. People are lazy. People free-ride. Remove the whip and the fields go fallow. It is a familiar claim, repeated for generations, and a convenient one: it is always someone else who is lazy.

Nearly two-thirds of American firefighters are volunteers.¹

The majority of the men and women who will run into a burning building to pull out a stranger — your stranger, your child, you — are not being paid to do it. They keep their gear in the truck. They leave dinner. They get up at two in the morning and go stand inside a structure fire for free, and then they go to work in the morning, and then they do it again.

They are not saints and they will be embarrassed to be called any such thing. They are ordinary Americans in ordinary towns doing the most dangerous work there is, for no wage, because somebody has to and it might as well be them.

This is not a thought experiment. This is not a European ideal or an anthropological curiosity from a band of foragers on the other side of the world. **This is the volunteer fire department in the United States of America, right now, this evening, waiting for the tone to drop.**

The people who tell you human beings will not work without being forced are describing something. They are simply not describing *us*.

The Daycare in Haifa

In 1998, two economists ran a field experiment across ten private daycare centers in Haifa.² The centers had an ordinary problem: parents were showing up late to collect their children, which meant a teacher had to stay past closing.

So they introduced a fine.

Every economic model in the world makes the same prediction here. Raise the cost of a behavior and you get less of it. Fine the late parents and the parents will stop being late.

The late pickups went up.

Not down. Up, significantly, and they stayed up for the entire period the fine was in force.

Here is why.

Before the fine, a late parent was *imposing on a person*. A teacher — a specific woman with a name, who had her own children, and who was standing in a doorway at six o'clock waiting for you because you could not be bothered to leave the office. That is a **moral** relationship, and it was doing an enormous

amount of work. Parents hurried. Parents apologized. Parents felt bad, and the feeling bad was the mechanism, and it was free and it was effective and nobody had to administer it.

The fine destroyed that. Not by being too small. **By existing.**

Because the moment there was a price, lateness was no longer an imposition on a human being. It was a *service*, and the parent was *purchasing* it, and the purchase discharged the obligation completely. You are not wronging the teacher. You are paying for extra time. The receipt says so. Some parents, quite reasonably, decided that the extra hour was worth the money — and why not? It was for sale.

The guilt had been abolished, and the guilt was the only thing that had been working.

They removed the fine.

The lateness did not go back down.

It stayed exactly where the fine had put it. The parents, having learned that this was a transaction, went on treating it as a transaction — now simply a *free* one. The moral relationship did not come back. It was gone, and taking away the price did not return it, because the price had not suppressed the obligation. **The price had replaced it.**

You cannot un-ring that bell. There is no receipt you can tear up. Once a thing that was given becomes a thing that is bought, the giving does not come back when you stop charging.

What Has Been Done to Us

That finding, held next to a wider life, changes the shape of things.

Because that is not only a curiosity about Israeli daycares. It is one clean demonstration of a mechanism that I will argue has played out far more broadly — one relationship at a time, over roughly two centuries.

The care of the old was something a family did. Now it is a service, purchased, and the purchase discharges the obligation, and the guilt has been abolished along with the visit.

Raising a child was something a street did — a dozen adults who all knew whose kid that was and would say so. Now it is a service, and the street does not know your children's names, and if you asked a neighbor to watch them you would feel that you were imposing, because you would be.

Learning was something an uncle did, or a master to an apprentice, or an old man on a porch who had time. Now it is a product with a price, and a debt attached, and a certificate at the end proving you paid.

Food was something a family grew and a community put up together in the autumn. Feeding a neighbor was not charity, it was *Tuesday*.

Every one of those was **given**. Every one of them is now **bought**. And in each case we told ourselves the same comfortable thing: that we were not losing anything, only outsourcing it, only being efficient, only paying somebody else to do a chore we no longer had time for.

The daycare in Haifa is one controlled instance of what that outsourcing actually does: **you do not merely pay for the thing. You destroy the other way of getting it** — and you cannot get it back by stopping payment. Whether the same mechanism explains the whole two-century shift, or only illuminates a piece of it, is a claim I am making, not one the Haifa study proves by itself; the study earns the mechanism, the rest of this chapter earns the scope.

The Honest Version

The world where care was given rather than purchased was not equally comfortable for everyone in it. The care of the old was something a family did — which meant, in most cases, a daughter or daughter-in-law did, without pay, without relief, and without being asked. Raising children was something a street did — but the street was full of women confined to it, not there by choice. Food was grown and put up together in the autumn — and the labor of growing, preserving, cooking, and feeding was women's work, uncompensated, unacknowledged, and unending.

The ledger did not create unpaid female labor. It found it already there, entrenched and invisible, and in some respects it offered the first alternative many women had ever seen: a wage, however inadequate, for work done outside the home. The market economy was, for a great many women, a partial liberation from a prior system of extraction that had never called itself by that name.

This is not a small thing, and it does not go away by being inconvenient.

What it means is that the answer is not to return to the world the market replaced. The answer is to recognize that care is real work — that it sustains the entire apparatus of a society, that it has always been done by someone, and that the question of who bears its costs is one of the central political questions of our time. The daycare in Haifa is not an argument for making women do it for free again. It is an argument that when care is commodified, something is destroyed that money cannot rebuild — and that whatever replaces the transaction must account honestly for whose labor it is asking for, and whether they are being asked or told.

The Sentence This Book Exists For

We are the only species that has convinced itself that nothing in life is free.

And we did it while living, every single day, inside the plain and undeniable evidence that the most important things we have — the only things that will matter to us at the very end, the things we would trade every dollar for and not think twice — **have never had a price and cannot have one.**

Friendship. Love. Family. Community. The volunteer with his boots by the door.

They ask nothing of you but participation and attention.

They are free.

And they are the only things that are, in the way that counts — which raises the question I have been walking you toward for six chapters:

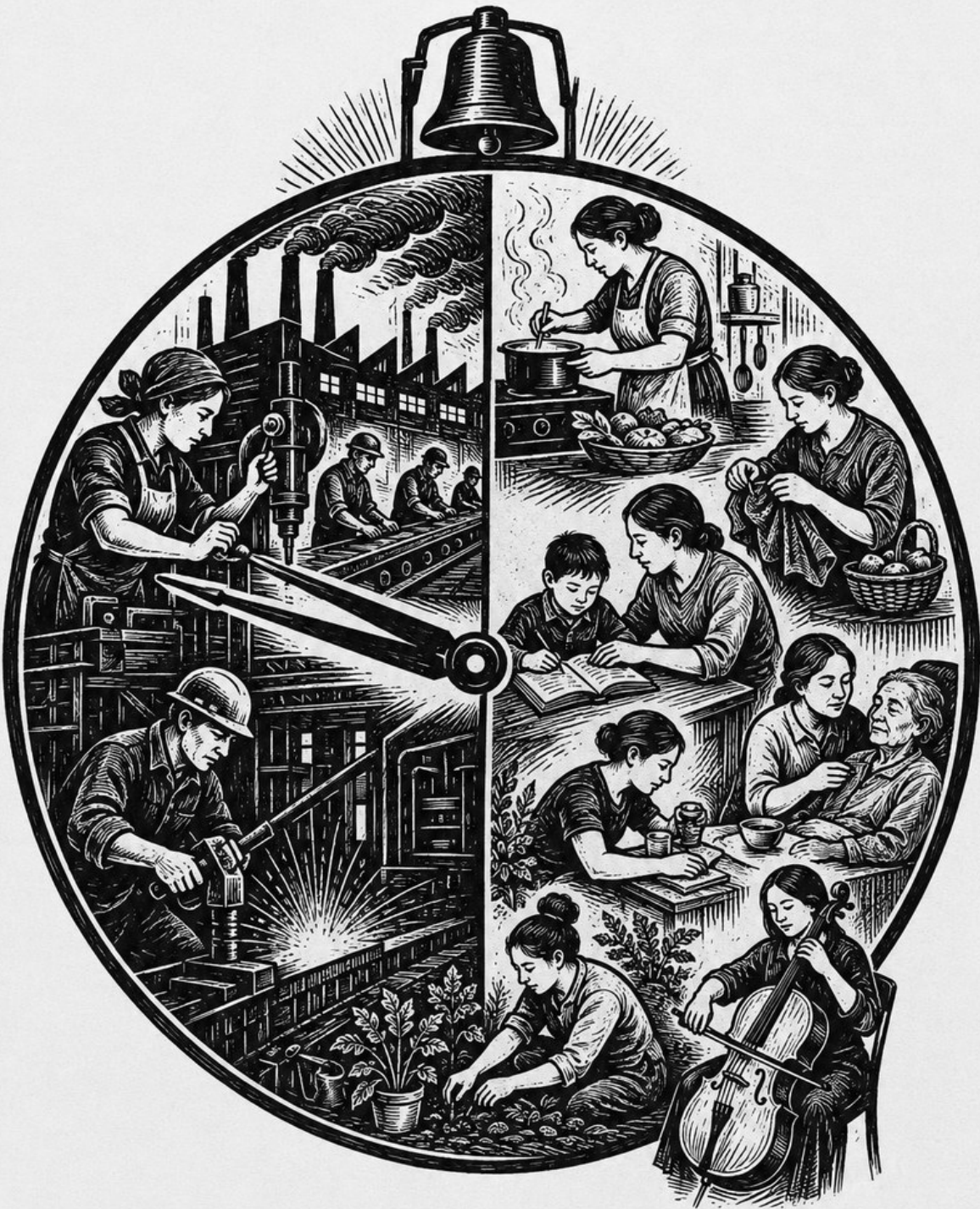
If the best things in life are already free, and I have just spent a chapter proving it — how did we come to build a country that runs on the opposite premise?

That is not a rhetorical question. It has an answer, and a date, and a set of people who made a great deal of money from it.

CHAPTER 7

When Work Stopped Being Life





There used to be a holiday called Saint Monday.

It was not on any calendar. No church proclaimed it and no king decreed it. It was simply the day that working men — weavers, cobblers, cutlers, smiths — did not work, because they had worked hard, and drunk on Sunday, and Monday was for recovering, and for talking, and for whatever else a man might want a day for. They took it. Their employers grumbled about it and schemed against it and could not stop it, because the men held the tools and often the tools were in their own houses, and a man who owns his loom decides when to sit at it.¹

Here is the part that matters, and it is the opposite of what you would expect. Saint Monday was not a relic of some world before the machines. It was strongest *inside* the industrial century — held onto by workshop tradesmen, defended against a hundred years of employer campaigning, and finally surrendered not to force but to a bribe: the half-day Saturday, offered in exchange for a full Monday, late in the game.²

So do not picture a lost Eden that the factory swept away. Picture a fighting retreat — a custom ordinary men defended, generation after generation, against people with every incentive and most of the power, and lost only when they were bought. That is a harder thing to be sentimental about, and it is the true thing, and it is the one worth holding, because it tells you the loss in this chapter was contested every step of the way by the people it was happening to.

The World Organized Around the Task

Before the factory, most work was what historians call **task-oriented**. You did not work *hours*. You did the *thing*. You sheared the sheep, you got the harvest in, you finished the boots. The working day stretched long when the task was long and it collapsed when the task was done.

E. P. Thompson, who went through the diaries and the parish records and the complaints of frustrated employers, put the crucial observation this way: in a community organized around tasks, there is *least demarcation* between “work” and “life.”³ Labor and social life are intermingled. They are not two things. The line between them is faint.

That world was not soft and it was not equal. It was divided by rank and by sex and by season and by who owned the land under your feet. The “seamless” household ran, in large part, on the unchosen labor of women — the cooking, the preserving, the water, the children, the care of the old — work that had no wage and no name and no end, and that nobody had asked them whether they wanted. When I say the boundary between work and life was faint, I do not mean life was free. I mean the *line* had not yet been drawn — the specific line that says *these hours are yours and these hours belong to someone who bought them*. That line is the subject of this chapter, and it did not exist yet.

Within that older fabric, the farmer talked with his neighbor while mending the fence, and the talking was not stolen from the mending. The cooper’s boy learned the trade and learned to be a man in the same room from the same person, and there was no distinction between the two lessons. Meals, gossip, courtship, prayer, argument, and labor happened in one weave, and the idea that some of those hours were owned by another person would have been a strange thing to explain.

Not that bells were unknown. The church bell rang, the market bell rang, the curfew bell rang; pre-industrial life was regulated by plenty of sound.⁴ But no bell rang to tell a man *when to begin selling his hours*, because his hours were not yet a thing that could be sold. That is the bell this chapter is about, and it had not yet been cast.

What Actually Changed

A reasonable person asks the obvious question. If the factory was so much harder to love — the discipline, the noise, the loss of Saint Monday, the loss of the whole intermingled fabric — then why did anyone go?

The romantic answer is that they were driven off the land. There is truth in it, and I will get to it, but I am not going to lean my weight on the part that is contested. It is *not* established that enclosure single-handedly manufactured the industrial working class; a large population of landless, wage-dependent English people already existed well before the great parliamentary enclosures, and serious agrarian historians dispute the simple story that enclosure created the proletariat.⁵

Here is the part that is not contested, and it is the part I need.

For centuries, ordinary people had access to common land — not owned by them, *common*. You could graze a cow, cut turf, take firewood, forage, glean the fields after harvest. It was not a fortune. It was a **floor**. And where that floor existed, it was enclosed — fenced, surveyed, assigned, closed — much of it by acts of a Parliament composed largely of the men receiving the land. The people doing it *said what it was for*. They complained, in print, that a cottager with common rights could not be relied upon to take steady wage work.

One agricultural writer put it almost perfectly. Offer such a man work, he grumbled, and the man will tell you he has to go find his sheep, or cut furze, or get his cow out of the pound, or take his horse to be shod so he can ride to a cricket match.⁶

That is not a description of a lazy man. **That is a description of a free one.** He had his own errands and his own reasons and his own cricket match, and he was not available to you, and that was exactly the problem. Enclose his field and he becomes available.

I do not have to prove an intent I cannot see. They wrote it down.⁷

The Thing That Was Chosen

This is the hinge of the chapter, and the place where the argument is usually lost, so it is worth going slowly.

When the work moved into a building full of expensive machinery, some things genuinely *did* change, and they changed for reasons that have nothing to do with anybody's greed. A machine shared by two hundred people has to start when they are all there and stop when they all leave. It has to be maintained on a schedule. It requires that people show up at the same time and coordinate what they do. That is real. **Coordination is real**, and no arrangement of society, however free, abolishes it. A barn is raised by many hands arriving on the same morning. A ship is sailed by a crew that answers the same call. The bell, in that narrow sense, was not a trick. It was sometimes just how you run a large machine.

So the clock is not the villain of this chapter, and I will not pretend it is. Clocks did not enable industrialization. **Capital did**. The clock was the instrument, not the cause — the way the arrangement was *administered*, not the reason it existed. And it is worth being exact about which “capital” I mean, because the word hides two different things.

In one sense, capital just means the expensive plant — the mill, the engine, the machine too big and too dear to sit in a cottage. That kind of capital genuinely did drive industrialization, and conceding it costs me nothing, because bigness alone explains none of what went wrong. Chapter Five carries the proof: the rural electric cooperative ran capital-intensive plant — miles of copper, generators, the whole costly apparatus — and it required coordination, and it started its machines on a schedule, and it produced no absentee master and no wage servitude at all. Same bigness. Same coordination problem. The people answering the call *owned the thing they answered*.

Which points at the other sense of the word, and the one that did the damage. The factory machine was owned **as capital** — as an asset whose entire purpose was to return a profit to a proprietor who did not work it. That is not a fact about the size of the machine. It is a fact about who holds it and why. And it is a *choice* — one that a cooperative, a guild, a commonwealth, or a crew of owner-workers does not make, even while running the very same plant on the very same schedule.

So the real line is not between the clock and freedom. It is between **coordination and subordination**.

Coordination is people synchronizing to run a thing they share. Subordination is people synchronizing on terms they had no part in setting and cannot decline without losing the means of living. A worker-owned shop may still start the machinery at seven, and the seven o'clock is not the difference. The difference is that the people answering that bell had a say in why it rings and where the value goes — and, the part that does the actual work, that a man who stops answering it does not thereby lose his roof.

Which is why “who owns the shop” is a good proxy for this and not the thing itself. Ownership usually carries the say and the security along with it, so it is a reasonable shorthand. But it is shorthand. A shop owned in common by people who cannot afford to leave it has reproduced the arrangement with better paperwork.

The machinery did not have to be owned as capital. The coordination did not have to become subordination. That conversion was not required by any engine. It was authored — in law, in property, in enclosure acts, in the ordinary daily fact that some men owned the means of living and most men had to rent themselves to those who did.

The Three-Way Cut

Here is what that authorship did to the shape of a human life.

Work, survival, and social life had always overlapped — unequally, and often harshly, as I have said. But industrial wage labor pulled them apart and, worse, made the boundaries **enforceable** — by the paycheck and administered by the clock. What had been one intermingled weave got cut into three, and the cuts were made to hold.

Survival was severed and handed to the wage. You no longer eat because you grew food or because your neighbors have your back. You eat because someone bought your hours, and if they stop buying, you stop eating. Survival becomes contingent on remaining sellable.

Work was severed and handed to the owner. It stopped being the thing you did and became the thing you *sold*. It moved into a building you do not own, on a schedule you do not set, producing an object you will never use, for a person you may never meet — and the object, when finished, belonged to him.

And spirit — meaning, joy, worship, craft, the pleasure of doing a thing well for its own sake, the weave of a life — was severed and pushed to the margins. Into the evening. Into Sunday. Into the shrinking remainder the wage did not claim, which we now call *leisure*, and which we are steadily encouraged to spend buying things.

Three pieces. And no one of them makes full sense without the others, which is part of why so many people are exhausted and underpaid — and why so many others are exhausted, well paid, and still cannot say what is missing.

What Cobbett Saw

There was a man who watched this happen and wrote it down in fury.

William Cobbett rode across the English countryside in the 1820s, and what he recorded was the countryman reduced — the independent laborer who had once had a cow and a garden and a claim on the common, now a hired hand dependent on a wage and a parish dole, in villages hollowing out around him.⁸ He saw enclosure, and the paper economy, and the transfer of the land into fewer hands, and he named the loss as a loss: not progress, not efficiency, but the stripping of a rooted, self-possessed rural life.

Cobbett was no radical of the kind that word usually means. He was a patriot and a traditionalist who wanted the old England back — which is exactly why he is worth listening to here. He did not arrive at this grief through any theory of history. He arrived at it on horseback, looking at what was in front of him, and what was in front of him was ruin dressed as improvement.

If the word *conservative* has anything to do with *conserving* — with not squandering an inheritance, with treating what you were handed as though it mattered and might have to last — then what Cobbett saw was the great vandalism of his century, and it did not come from the left. It came from the ledger.

Because notice, finally, who did this. The independent man was not dissolved by government acting *against* property and profit. He was dissolved by government acting **in their service** — by a Parliament of proprietors passing enclosure acts, by property law, by the poor laws that disciplined the dispossessed men enclosure produced. Not a foreign ideology. Not an overreaching state pitted against private property. The state, working hand in glove with capital, to make free men available for hire.

What It Set Up

The whole arrangement required one thing to be true. It required a particular belief about what human beings are.

Because if people would work anyway — if a man would fish and farm and build and teach and mend and make simply because that is what a living person does — then the dependence at the heart of the wage becomes very hard to justify. Why must a man rent himself to eat, if he would gladly work without being made to?

So the arrangement needed the story that he would *not*. It needed idleness to be a fact about human nature — the man sauntering after his cattle recast as a scandal rather than a free man on an errand.

Nobody had to sit down and invent that story. There was no meeting. The laziness doctrine was not authored by a cabal of factory owners any more than the streetcars were murdered in a smoke-filled room. It is simpler and harder to fight than that. A system that depends on wage labor will *find, repeat, reward, and preach* the beliefs that make wage labor look necessary — and quietly starve the ones that don't. The story survived because it was useful to the arrangement, not because anyone designed it to be. That is worse than a conspiracy, because you cannot expose it by naming the conspirators. There aren't any. There is only a structure that keeps selecting for its own justification.

And the justification it selected — that you will not work unless you are made to — is one of the most successful lies ever told about us.

It is still being told. And it is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8

The Lie That You're Lazy



Chapter Seven built the fence. This chapter is about the story that made you stop seeing it was a fence — which is the deeper thing, because a wall you can see can be climbed, and a wall filed under human nature cannot.

Here is the sentence the last four hundred years were built on:

People will not work unless they are made to.

It has been said so often, by so many respectable voices, that it stopped sounding like an argument and started sounding like a fact. It is the unspoken premise beneath the time clock, the productivity monitor, the sermon about idle hands, the argument against every proposal to give anyone anything. It is stated as though it were a fact about human beings, like the boiling point of water.

It is not a fact. And it is not, mostly, even a claim about work — it is a claim about **dependence**. Because the arrangement the last chapter described does not actually need you to enjoy labor, or to labor well, or to labor at all past the minimum. It needs one thing: it needs you to have no choice but to rent yourself out to survive. And an arrangement like that is very hard to justify to a free man — *unless* you can convince him that the alternative to renting himself is not freedom but sloth. That he would, left to himself, do nothing. That the wage is not a fence around his survival but a cure for his nature.

That is what the lie is for. It does not exist to get you into the building. **It exists to make the dependence feel like it came from inside you** — to take an arrangement somebody built and somebody profits from, and file it under human nature, where it cannot be argued with and cannot be changed.

So let us test it, because it is testable, and the entire history of our species is the experiment.

What the Record Actually Shows

You will sometimes hear that hunter-gatherers had it easy — that they worked three hours a day and lounged the rest. It is a lovely story, and I am not going to tell it to you, because it is not true.

That number came from an early reckoning of the !Kung, and it counted only the hours spent *finding* food. It left out the processing, the cooking, the toolmaking, the hauling of water and wood. When those were counted, the figure came out to something much closer to a full working week.¹ Across the wider run of foraging societies the picture is broadly the same.²

So no. Our ancestors were not lying in the shade. **They labored about as much as you do.**

But see what just happened, because it is the more interesting thing by far.

The anthropologists could not agree on the number — and the reason they could not agree is that **they could not agree what counted.** Is a woman cracking nuts by the fire working, or is she at home? What about while she talks with her sister? What about the man walking to the next valley, who will check his snares on the way, and who is also visiting his cousin? Which of those hours go in the column?

You cannot answer that. Nobody can. **The question is incoherent in the world it is being asked about,** because in that world there was no column. There was no line between the working part of a life and the living part of it, and there had never needed to be one. That is the same faint boundary the last chapter described — the one industrial wage labor drew sharp and made enforceable.

So hold this clearly: **forty hours a week is not something we discovered about foragers. It is something we did to them** — the last thing we do to everyone, which is to take a whole life and sort it into hours. They were not working forty hours. They were *living*, and the living had labor in it the way it has weather in it.

Now strip our accounting off and look at what survives:

They did the whole labor of staying alive, and there was nobody making them.

No bell. No overseer. No foreman, no time clock, no quarterly review. No wage that could be withheld, no rent coming due. Nobody could fire them, because nobody had hired them, because the entire apparatus by which one human being makes another human being work had not yet been invented.

And they did it anyway. All of it. For a hundred thousand years.

The people who tell you human beings must be coerced into labor are making a claim about our nature, and **the whole of our history is the experiment that tests it**. Whatever else is arguable, one version of the claim is finished: that without an owner standing over us, the work does not get done. It got done for a hundred thousand years, with nothing at stake but living well among the people we loved.

The Whip That Was Always There

The coercion argument is pointing at something real.

There *is* a compulsion. It is enormous and it never lets up.

Winter comes. The body needs calories today and again tomorrow and again the day after that, forever, until it doesn't. Everything alive is running uphill against a universe that is patiently trying to cool it down and take it apart. That is not a metaphor; it is the second law, and it is the same law that burns the sun — the thermodynamic cost this discussion started with, the one that is real and is not a bill.

The jay caches against the winter. The oak throws a thousand acorns to get one tree. The crow works the sidewalk. Nobody is making them. **They are answering the same necessity everything alive answers, and it is not a whip in anybody's hand.**

So the question was never *whip or no whip*. There is no no-whip. There is only ever the flow, and the work of staying alive inside it.

The question is: **whose hand is on it, and what do they take?**

Because the forager's necessity is honest. It falls on everyone alike. It cannot be owned, it cannot be aimed at a particular man, and it takes no cut. The other necessity — the rent, the wage, the terror of becoming unemployable — is *built*. It did not descend from the sky. It is a structure, assembled over generations, defended by people who do well out of it, and adjustable by whoever has a hand on the lever.

That is not a conspiracy. It is architecture. But architecture has architects, and buildings can be rebuilt.

Both men labor. **One is answering the winter. The other is answering an owner.**

And that is the whole difference. The winter takes no surplus. The owner does.

It's important for us to recognize, the industrial working week began at something brutal — sixty, seventy hours, for wages that bought bare survival — and fell toward forty over the following century. That fall was not granted; it was extracted, by people organizing inside the wage system itself, striking and bargaining and sometimes dying for the shorter day. It is evidence that the structure is adjustable, not that it is generous. The lever moved because enough people pushed it from the outside. The winter, by contrast, never negotiated.

We Cannot Sit Still

Here is the part that finishes the laziness theory off, and it barely needs a citation: just watch what a person does with unstructured time.

If people were lazy — if rest were the goal and work the regrettable price of it — then a person whose needs were met would be *content* doing nothing at all.

And we are not. We cannot stand it.

Give a human being an empty afternoon and watch what happens. They build something. They learn something. They pick a fight, take up an instrument, rearrange the garage, plant a garden, argue about a ballgame, write a book nobody asked for. People who come into sudden money — the closest thing we have to a natural experiment — do not, on the whole, stop working. The lottery studies find that winners trim their hours somewhat and mostly keep going, at the job or at something else they would rather do.³ People with every means to be idle are the least idle people you will ever meet; the trouble with the rich is not that they loaf, it is what they get up to when they don't.

And we know the shape of the opposite, too. Take a person's occupation *and* their company at once — put them alone in a bare room with nothing to do and no one to do it with — and you have not given them a holiday. You have built one of the cruelest punishments we know, and we use it in prisons, and it breaks people.⁴ The cruelty there is mostly the isolation, and I do not want to overclaim the idleness half of it — but the two together, work and company both stripped away, describe precisely the condition a human being cannot endure. We are not built for the empty room.

We are not a creature that avoids exertion. **We are a creature that cannot tolerate idleness.** Those are opposite claims, and every institution built to manage your laziness was built on the wrong one.

The crow told us this back in Chapter Two. Needs met, dumpster solved — and it plays, and studies faces, and remembers the ones that wronged it, and teaches its children which to trust.⁵ Not because anything compels it. Because a mind with time on its hands *does things*.

What actually moves a person to work is not the whip and never was. It is **choice**. It is **love** — nobody who loves a child has ever had to be forced to feed it. It is **responsibility**, the weight of being the one others are counting on. It is **curiosity**, and craft, and the plain satisfaction of doing a thing well. And it is **boredom** — which is not a weakness in us but a governor, an engine that will not let a living mind idle.

How Idleness Became a Sin

So how did a species that cannot sit still get convinced it was lazy?

The doctrine did not come from an economist. It came from a pulpit.

Max Weber's argument, put simply, was that a particular strand of Protestant thought did something new with the ordinary business of daily labor: it made work a *calling*, a duty owed to God, and made idleness not merely wasteful but sinful.⁶ Time squandered was salvation squandered. The diligent man was the godly man. Rest required a defense.

Whatever you make of Weber's larger thesis — and it has been argued over for a century — the *transformation* is not in dispute. It shows up in a small, familiar scene: a person sits down in the middle of an afternoon, and something in the chest objects. Part of that stirring is old and innocent — the restlessness this chapter has been defending, the engine that will not let a living mind idle. That part is human nature, and it wants to *do* something: build, tinker, wander, find out. But listen closer, because there is a second voice riding on the first, and it is not proposing an adventure. It is pronouncing a judgment. It says *you should be doing something* — and it means something productive, something that counts, something you could defend to an examiner you have never met. The restlessness is innate. The guilt is not. **The guilt is a theology, and it was installed.**

But *how* it was installed is the same mechanism we keep finding, and it is not the one people expect. Nobody in a counting-house commissioned that theology to soften up the workforce.

The raw material was ancient, and it is worth looking at exactly what it was. Proverbs sends the sluggard to study the ant. Paul told the Thessalonians that the one unwilling to work should not eat. The medieval church counted *acedia* — sloth — among the seven deadly sins.⁷ But each of those condemnations was narrower than it now sounds. Paul was writing house rules for a small community that expected the world to end shortly. Acedia was a monk's affliction — a listlessness toward prayer, diagnosed in men who had renounced ordinary labor entirely; it was a sin of the cloister, not the field. And the Commandments contain no order to work at all. The only labor law in the Decalogue runs the other way: a day of rest, mandated, for everyone — children, servants, strangers, down to the ox.⁸ Condemnations of idleness existed, scattered and specific. What did not exist, anywhere, was a theology that made ordinary daily work, for every person, the very substance of a life pleasing to God.

That is the thing Weber documented arriving. The Reformation's doctrine of the *calling* moved holiness out of the monastery and into the workshop: your trade itself became your service to God, diligence in it a standing duty, and time — for the first time — a thing that could be sinfully wasted. Weber's chief exhibit was the Puritan divine Richard Baxter, who preached the waste of time as among the deadliest of sins.⁹ The doctrine came first, out of genuine religious conviction, on its own account. What happened next is the thing to see: an economic order was arriving that *needed* people to accept a new and bitter discipline of the clock — and here, ready to hand, was a story that made the discipline holy. So the order **found** it, and rewarded it, and amplified it, and repeated it from every respectable height until it stopped sounding like doctrine and started sounding like common sense.

That is the engine from Chapter Five again, the one that killed the streetcars with nobody in the room. **A system does not have to author the beliefs that justify it. It only has to select them** — to reach into the existing stock of human ideas, pick out the ones that make its arrangements feel natural, and starve the rest of air. The Protestant work ethic was not a weapon forged for capital. It was a conviction capital *found lying there and picked up*, because it fit the hand perfectly.

The Architects

For three hundred years the story needed no author. Then, for one dangerous moment, it nearly died — and in the rescue it acquired custodians with names.

The moment was the end of the First World War. To win it, the governments of Europe had done something they had spent a century insisting could not be done: they ran their economies on purpose. Production was planned, prices were controlled, labor was directed, profits were capped — not by revolutionaries but by ministries, because shells and bread had to come first and the ledger had to wait. And working people noticed. They had been told the arrangement was weather. They had just watched it be steered.

What followed was the largest wave of strikes and organizing the wage system had ever faced. In Turin, metalworkers went past demands: for a stretch of months in 1919 and 1920 they occupied the plants and ran production themselves, through elected councils, without the owners.¹⁰ It did not last. It did not need to last to be heard. The question it put on the table is the question I keep finding: if the work gets done without the owner, what exactly is the owner for?

What came next has been reconstructed from the archives by the political economist Clara Mattei, and it is the clearest view anyone has assembled of the machinery repairing itself.¹¹ In Britain and in Italy — a parliamentary democracy

and a state sliding into dictatorship — treasury officials and academic economists converged, in the same few years, on the same program: cut public spending, cut wages, tighten credit, return the currency to gold. They called it sound finance. Life got measurably harder for the people living under it, and that hardship did the program's real work, whatever its authors told themselves: it restored the condition the war had interrupted. Survival would depend on the wage again, and on nothing else. Not on public provision. Not on the council. Not on any of the alternatives the previous five years had allowed people to see.

None of this required a conspiracy, and the rule from Chapter Five still holds. The men who designed the program did not gather to deceive anyone. Nearly all of them believed, sincerely, that they were practicing a science — that the economy had laws the way the sky has weather, and that they were merely reading the instruments. But their science stood on a bedrock premise, and it was the sentence this chapter opened with: people will not work unless they are made to. A man who sincerely holds that belief will prescribe insecurity as medicine and administer it as a duty. And if the belief also happens to protect his salary, his standing, his class, and the entire world that produced him — that is not a plot. That is the oldest and most ordinary force there is: the ease with which people believe what it benefits them to believe. The engine from Chapter Five does not only select stories. It selects *experts*. It lifts into authority the people whose sincere convictions fit the arrangement, and it files those convictions under science, the way the theology had been filed under common sense.

This is what changed in the twentieth century, and it is why the section sits in this chapter. The laziness story began as a doctrine nobody commissioned. It ended as a profession. The industrialists of the century before had already learned to endow the institutions that raise and sort us — the schools, the charities, the poorhouses built to separate the deserving poor from the idle — and those institutions carried the premise forward in their bones.¹² The technocrats completed the transfer: from pulpit, to counting-house, to seminar room. By the

time the program reached full authority, the people tending the fence did not think of themselves as anyone's servants. They thought of themselves as physicians — well-meaning, credentialed, reading instruments they had built themselves, calibrated to the assumption that you are lazy.

The cost of their sincerity was not abstract. Push the wage below what food costs and the fence stops being an inconvenience and becomes hunger; and in Italy the program was secured by a state that jailed, beat, and sometimes killed the people organizing any alternative.¹³ The ledger's final denial is not of comfort, or of options. It is of the body. Every softer refusal mentioned — the tuition, the fare, the fine — is the same instrument at a lower setting.

So the earlier sentence stands, completed. The architecture is not a conspiracy — and architecture has architects. Chapter Five was right that no one authored the story. The archives show who maintained it, sincerely, at salary, under the name of science. Both things are true at once, and the second is the one to watch for, because the architecture of the next arrangement is being drawn right now, by people who are, most of them, sincere. Sincerity was never the safeguard.

The Prophecy That Builds Itself

Now the last piece, and it is the one that turns this from a historical grievance into a live emergency.

The premise manufactures its own proof.

In 1999, Deci, Koestner, and Ryan pulled together a hundred and twenty-eight experiments on what happens to a person's own motivation when you start paying them for what they were already doing. Within the bounds of what those studies measured — intrinsic motivation, under tangible rewards the subject expects — the finding was consistent and substantial: **the reward significantly undermines the motivation that was already there.**¹⁴ Pay a child to read and she reads less

when the money stops. Pay a man for the thing he loved and watch him begin to do the minimum.

And look at what the same data says *enhances* motivation.

Positive feedback. Recognition. Being told, by a person, that the thing you did was good.¹⁵

It is the daycare in Haifa all over again, arriving from a different discipline and a different continent. **The human relationship feeds the motivation. The ledger starves it.** I will not stretch that past what the evidence holds — this is about intrinsic motivation and expected material reward, not a law that all pay poisons all effort. But within that frame the result is clean, and it is not a slogan. It is a meta-analysis.

Which means the coercion arrangement is not merely unjust. It is a **machine for producing the very laziness it claims to correct.** Treat a man as though he will only work when driven; take from him the ownership of what he makes; sever his labor from his life, his community, and his own judgment — and he will, in time, do exactly the minimum you can extract from him.

And then they will point at him. *See? We told you. Look how he loafs when the boss turns his back.*

The arrangement built the man it needed, and then used him as evidence for itself.

What the Bell Was Actually For

What I think is true, plainly.

Human beings work. We have always worked. We did the whole labor of living for a hundred thousand years with nobody standing over us — because

there is a necessity in being alive, and because we love people, and because we are curious, and because we would rather do almost anything than be bored.

Which means the bell was never necessary to make us *productive*. We were already that.

Here is the sentence to leave the chapter with, and it is a correction of the one I almost wrote. It would be easy to say the bell was there to make us *available* — present at a particular hour, in a particular building, on somebody else's schedule. True as far as it goes. But availability is only the **mechanism**. You can be available all day and it profits no one by itself.

What the availability was for:

The bell was there so that the fruit of work we would have done anyway could be collected by someone who did not do it.

And underneath that, holding it up, the part without which none of it works:

He could not walk out.

That is the load-bearing piece, and it is easy to miss because the taking is the loud part. Somebody takes a share of what another person makes — that happens in a great many arrangements and some of them are perfectly decent. A worker-owned shop takes a share to buy the next machine. A town takes a share to pave the road. A crew splits the catch and puts something aside for the boat. Taking a share is not theft on its face, and I have no interest in pretending otherwise.

What turns a share into a toll is that the person it is taken from has nowhere else to be. If refusing costs him the roof, the food, and the doctor, then his agreement was never agreement. It was the absence of an alternative wearing agreement's clothes, and everybody involved could see it, which is why the story had to be told at all.

The winter takes no surplus — and the winter also cannot be argued with, cannot be quit, and has no interest in whether a man is compliant. There is the honest asymmetry. Nobody chose the winter. Somebody chose this.

The laziness lie is the story that makes an arrangement look like a favor done to a creature who would otherwise do nothing — that files a fence under human nature, where it cannot be argued with and cannot be changed.

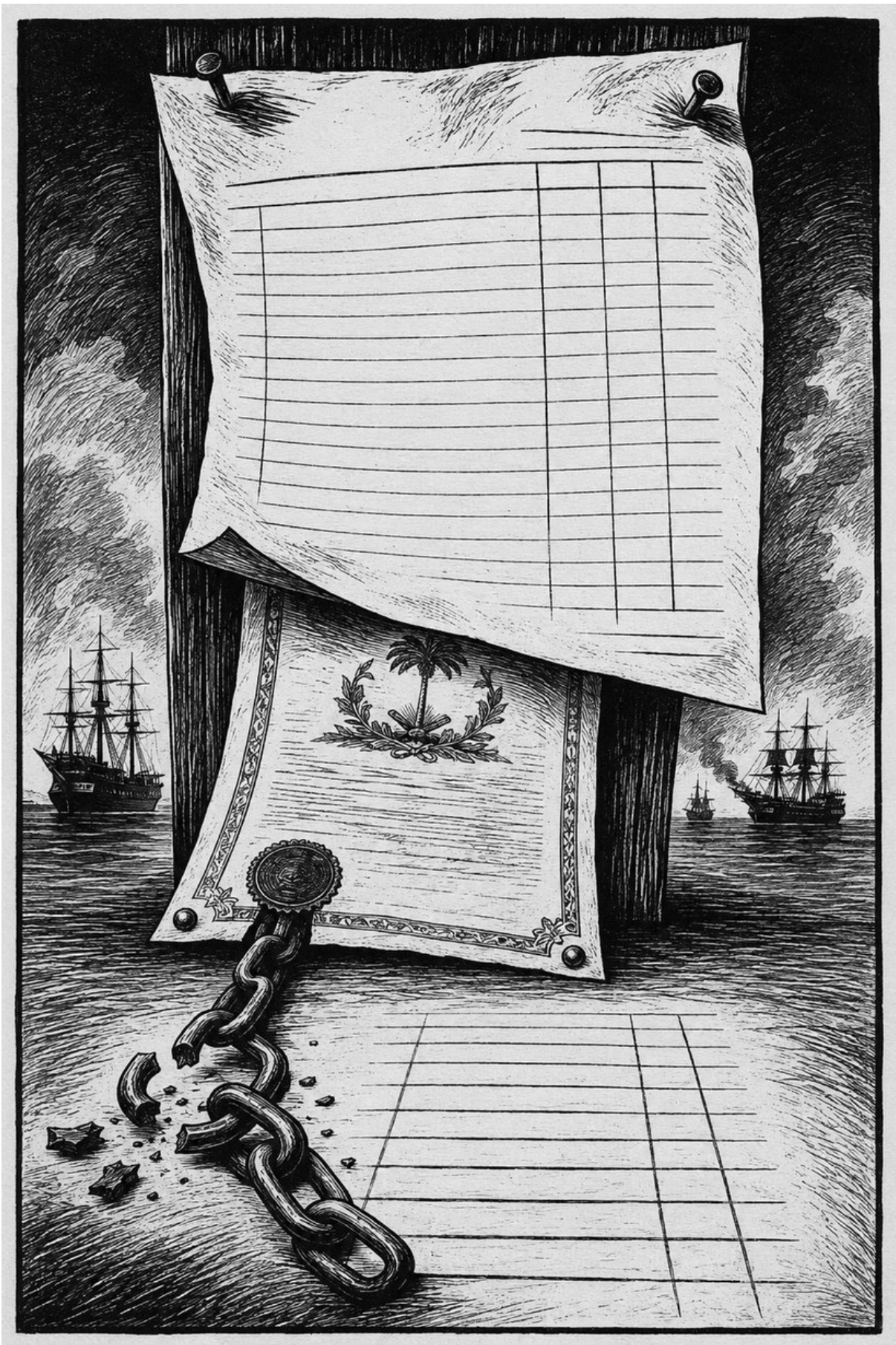
We would not otherwise do nothing. We never have.

Which means the question I have left to answer was never really about work. It is this: **what would a person have to be able to count on, unconditionally, before their yes to any of it could be believed?**

CHAPTER 9

The Promise on Paper





They asked Frederick Douglass to speak at a Fourth of July celebration, and he came on the fifth.

It was 1852, in Corinthian Hall in Rochester, and five or six hundred people had paid twelve and a half cents each to hear him. He had been invited by the Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society. He had spent weeks writing it. He was thirty-four years old and had been, until fourteen years earlier, a piece of property.

And he began by praising the men who wrote the Declaration of Independence.

Not grudgingly. Not with irony. He called the signers brave men, great men, great enough to give fame to a great age. He said that for the good they did and the principles they contended for, he would unite with his audience in honoring their memory. He told them that the Declaration was *the ringbolt to the chain of your nation's destiny*, and that the principles in it were **saving principles** — and that they should stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and **at whatever cost**.¹

Sit in that room for a second. Imagine the audience relaxing. This is going well.

He was building a trap, and the trap was the promise itself.

Because having raised the Founders up as the standard — having gotten every person in that hall nodding along to the greatness of the men and the rightness of the principles — he turned, and he measured the nation against them.

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.²

And then, quietly, the sentence I cannot read without stopping:

This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.³

What Douglass is doing there is the whole method of this book, and he did it a hundred and seventy years before I got here.

He does not say the Declaration was a lie.

He does not say the promise was worthless, or that the men who made it were frauds, or that the whole thing should be thrown out and started over. **He says the promise is good — and that you are not keeping it.** He takes the thing his audience holds most sacred, agrees with them about it completely, and then holds them to it until they cannot breathe.

That is not an attack on America. **It is the kind of loyalty that has repeatedly improved it.**

The Man in Chapter Four

Five chapters ago I leaned on Thomas Jefferson. I used his letter to Jarvis — *inform their discretion by education* — as the spine of an entire argument about freedom of the mind. I called him the American source. I meant it.

That same man spent his presidency working to strangle the first free Black republic in the world.

What Haiti Did

In 1791 the enslaved people of Saint-Domingue rose against the men who owned them.

They should not have won. No people held in slavery had ever won — not at this scale, not into a lasting nation. They fought the French, and then the Spanish, and then the British, and then the army Napoleon sent expressly to put them back in chains — and they beat all of them. In 1804 they declared themselves a nation. They named it Haiti, and they made it the first country on earth to abolish slavery permanently and without exception — France had abolished it in 1794 and let Napoleon restore it; Haiti abolished it and never let it back.⁴

Understand what that is. That is the Declaration of Independence taken seriously — *all men are created equal* — by the people the Declaration had been written past. They did not petition for it. They did not wait to be given it. They took the promise at its word and made it true, at a cost in blood that no one else on this continent has ever paid for their own liberty.

That freedom was theirs. Taken, not granted. Paid for in their own blood, and paid *to no one* — because a thing you win back from the man who stole it is not a thing you owe him for. Nobody held a note on it.

Someone wrote them one anyway.

The Invoice

On the third of July, 1825, a French frigate — the *Circé* — appeared off Port-au-Prince, and behind her came thirteen more warships carrying five hundred and twenty-eight cannons.⁵

A baron came ashore with an ordinance signed by Charles X. His written instructions said plainly that his mission was not a negotiation. The terms were these. France would recognize Haiti's independence — the recognition that would end two decades of embargo and isolation, the recognition without which no nation could safely trade — on one condition.

Haiti would pay France a hundred and fifty million gold francs.

Compensation. For the former slaveholders. For their lost property.

The property was the people.

And the sum was not pulled from the air. It was computed under the Code Noir — the French slave code — whose articles set the value of the enslaved people on an estate at between a third and three-fifths of the whole worth of the place. So the bill was calculated by tallying up the market price of the very people who had refused to be priced.⁶

It was nearly six times the entire annual revenue of the Haitian government. It was nearly twice what the United States had paid France for the whole of the Louisiana Territory. It could not be paid outright, and everyone involved knew it could not be paid — and so the arrangement forced Haiti to *borrow* the first installment from a French bank, which took its fee before the money ever left Paris. That is the trap inside the trap, and it has a name: the double debt. A loan,

taken on to pay a ransom, owed to the countrymen of the people collecting the ransom.⁷

President Boyer signed on the eleventh of July. There were fourteen warships in the harbor and the memory of Napoleon's army was twenty years old.

Thirteen years later, in 1838, France made a show of mercy and cut the remaining indemnity — the headline figure came down to something on the order of ninety million francs, and the indemnity proper was finally settled around 1883. **But the mercy rescued nothing**, because the loans taken to service it did not go away. They were refinanced, rolled over, and by the 1920s moved into American hands. The last of the debt was not paid until **1947** — and by then the creditor was no longer France. It was the National City Bank of New York, which is now called Citibank.⁸

For the better part of a century, an enormous share of everything Haiti earned went straight back out the door to service that debt — money that never built a school, or a road, or a clinic, because it had been promised in advance to the losing side of a war over slavery: first to the former colonists, then to their heirs, then to the banks that bought up the debt and kept the claim alive long after the whip itself was gone.⁹

Now stop, and look at what actually happened there, because it is the argument of this entire book, written in a ledger, in gold francs, over twelve decades.

They could not re-enslave the Haitians by force. They had tried that — Napoleon sent an army expressly to do it — and they had been beaten.

So they did not restore slavery. They restored the *taking*.

Not chains. **Accounting.** A number, written on paper by the side that had lost, and enforced with cannon until it became as real as weather. The whip had failed; the ledger took up its work — moving the wealth of a free people out of the

country, year after year, into the hands of the men who had lost the war and then into the banks that kept their claim alive, and it went on moving long after every man in that fight was dead.

This is why I have spent nine chapters on the ledger.

Chapter One separated what a thing takes from what somebody says you owe. Here is that distinction at national scale, enforced with cannon. **What Haiti's freedom took was paid, in full, by the people who took it.** What Haiti was told it owed was a number written down by the side that lost — and that number hollowed out a nation for a hundred and twenty-two years.

When freedom isn't free, somebody made sure of it.

And Us

The United States did not send the warships.

We did something quieter. Jefferson — who had written that all men are created equal, who would later write that the people are the only safe depository of the ultimate powers of society — refused to recognize Haiti, worked to isolate it diplomatically, and moved to choke it economically. Not because he did not understand what Haiti was. **Because he understood exactly what it was** — and a nation of free Black people who had killed their masters was, to a slaveholding republic, the most dangerous idea on earth.

The United States would not recognize Haiti until 1862, when the Southern states had walked out of Congress and there was nobody left to object.¹⁰

So: is Jefferson's argument in Chapter Four wrong?

No. It is right. *Inform their discretion by education* is right, and it is one of the truest things ever written about freedom, and I will not throw it away because the man who wrote it failed it.

That is Douglass's move, and it is the only honest one available. He did not discard the Declaration because Jefferson owned people. He picked it up, and he turned it around, and he pointed it at the nation that was still holding the whip. The principles are saving principles *precisely because they do not belong to the men who wrote them*. They got loose. That is what happens to a true thing once you write it down — it stops being yours, and it becomes a standard, and it will be used against you by the very people you excluded from it, and there is nothing you can do about it, and that is the best news in the history of this country.

It would be easy to say the Haitians *had* Jefferson's sentence — that his words reached across the water and freed them. They did not need his words. The truth he signed his name to was not his to grant, and it did not travel to Haiti from Monticello. It was already there, arrived by its own roads — the Rights of Man, the memory of Africa, the maroon camps in the hills, and the plain knowledge of every person who has ever been owned and known it to be wrong. Jefferson did not lend Haiti that idea. He proved, by spending his presidency trying to strangle the nation that lived it, that the idea had never belonged to him at all.

That is what it truly means for a principle to get loose. Not that the author's words travel. **That the truth turns out never to have needed the author.**

What This Chapter Is For

The promise is on paper. It has been on paper for two hundred and fifty years.

It was never honored for the people who were property. It was never honored for the nation that took it seriously enough to fight for it, and got billed. And it is not being honored now, for reasons I have spent nine chapters laying out — because a fence went up around the field, and the ledger arrived to make sure nobody could climb it.

Douglass said to stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, against all foes, **and at whatever cost.**

He chose that last phrase on purpose, and I will not soften it. **Freedom has a cost.** Haiti paid it in full — in blood, in ruin, in a hundred years of mornings that went to a debt instead of a life. The cost was real, and it was enormous, and pretending otherwise would dishonor the people who paid it.

What was not real was the **bill.**

That is the distinction this entire book turns on, and Haiti is where it stands in the sharpest relief there is. There is the **cost** — the courage, the labor, the sacrifice, the thermodynamic price that everything alive pays and none of us escapes. And there is the **price** — the number written on paper by the side that lost, enforced with cannon, and called a debt owed. The first is a law of the world. The second is a story power tells and then collects on. The whole arrangement of the last two hundred years depends on mistaking one for the other.

So when someone says — about the sick, about the hungry, about the young mortgaged for the sin of wanting to learn — that justice is real but simply cannot be *afforded*, that sentence has a history. It was read off a French ordinance in a harbor full of warships, to a people who had already paid, in full, in the only currency freedom ever actually costs.

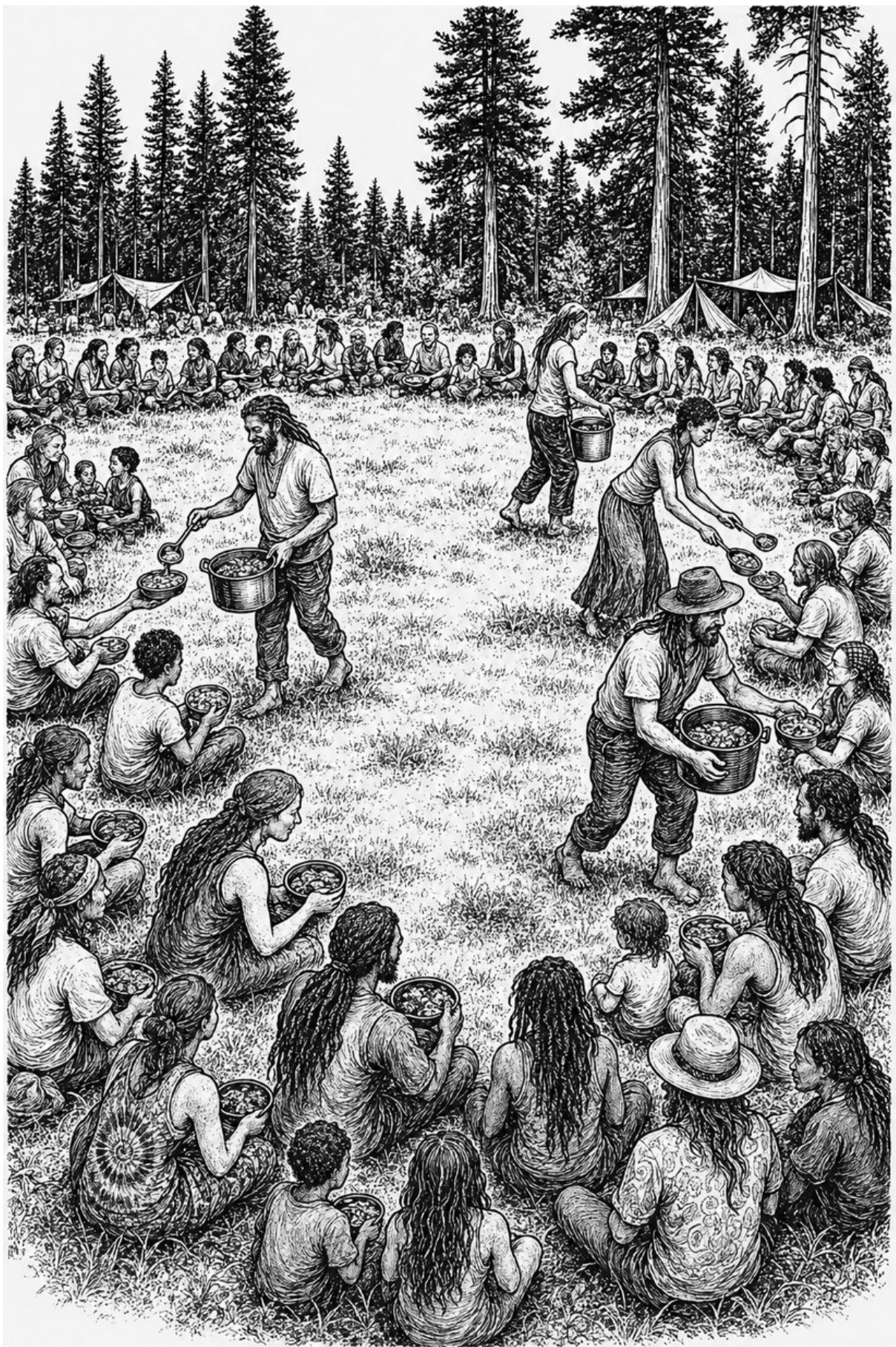
The cost was theirs. The bill was somebody's invention.

When freedom isn't free, somebody made sure of it — and this time, we know their names.

CHAPTER 10

The Gathering





I have been going to Rainbow Gatherings since 1977.

This year's was in the Allegheny National Forest, in Pennsylvania, six miles east of a town called Tidioute, up a forest road, and I was there for two nights. That is the shortest visit I have ever made. I needed to get back to ledgered work. I worked less at this Gathering than at any Gathering in my life — I brought food, and I put cash in the Magic Hat, which I will explain shortly, and that was my contribution this year instead of labor.

Nobody asked me to account for the difference. Nobody was keeping count. That will matter later.

Here is the thing my friends do not understand when I come home.

It is work.

They picture something else — a festival, a party in the woods, thousands of people lying around in the sun waiting for somebody to hand them something. That is not what it is. Somebody digs the latrines. Somebody hauls the water and filters it. Somebody carries in the food, on their back, up a mountain, and somebody cooks it over a fire for hundreds of people, and somebody cleans up after, and somebody hauls the trash out of the woods for weeks after everyone else has gone home.

Nobody is paid. Nobody is assigned. There is no schedule and no boss and no one to complain to. There is a kitchen because some people decided to be a kitchen, and there is water because some people decided to be water, and if nobody decided, there would be neither, and everybody would go hungry and thirsty and know exactly why.

And it gets done. Every summer. For more than half a century.

The Dinner Circle

At dinner, everyone sits in a circle.

It is very large. The circle is the whole Gathering, or as much of it as has come, and it takes a long time to form because it forms itself. Then people walk the inside of it with pots, and they serve you, and you eat.

Nobody pays. There is no ticket and no wristband and no line for people who gave more. A hat goes around at some point — they call it the **Magic Hat** — and you put in what you have or you don't, and nobody watches to see which you did, and nobody would say anything if they saw.

Then there's what the hat is not.

It is not a price. It is not admission. Nothing is withheld from the man who puts nothing in, and nothing extra is given to the man who empties his pockets. There is no receipt, no ledger, no accounting, and no one at the end of the week reconciling what came in against who ate. **The hat asks. It does not charge.**

Which is why it works, and why a five-dollar cover charge at the trailhead would destroy the entire thing in a single afternoon — for exactly the reason a fine destroyed the daycare in Haifa. The moment there is a price, you are buying dinner. And the moment you are buying dinner, you are not at a Gathering. You are at a restaurant with bad chairs.

The food was good this year. Not good *for a forest*. Good.

Salad, with a whole wheat roll. Coconut curry. Seasoned potatoes. Whole vegan dishes, cooked over wood, in the middle of a national forest, by volunteers, and handed to me by a stranger who did not know my name and did not ask for anything.

The size of it matters, and I have no use for a flattering number. I have sat in dinner circles with many thousands in them — circles so wide you could not make out the far side of them. This was not that. This was the smallest Fourth of July Gathering I have ever heard of. The Forest Service counted one thousand seven hundred and fifty-six of us at the peak, and I was one of them, and I was

glad to be part of the count. In a good year that many would have been a slow Tuesday.

But the circle still formed. Dinner was still served, to everyone who came, for nothing — well over a thousand people on the nights I was there — and it was still grown and hauled and cooked and handed over by people nobody paid. A smaller miracle is still the same kind of miracle. If anything it makes the point harder: strip the crowd down to a fraction of what it once was, and the thing still works — because the thing was never the crowd. It was the way the crowd agreed to treat each other, and that does not need a quorum.

I have eaten in restaurants that cost more than I want to admit and been served worse food by people being paid to serve it.

What the Government Calls This

Now here is where it stops being a nice story about the woods.

Under federal regulation, any group of seventy-five or more people using National Forest land must obtain a noncommercial group-use permit.¹

To get the permit, somebody has to sign it. A person. Someone who is authorized to bind the group, accept responsibility on its behalf, and be held liable for what the group does.

The Rainbow Family has no such person. There are no leaders. There is no membership. There is no organization to be an officer of. Nobody can sign on behalf of everyone, because nobody speaks for everyone, and that is not an evasion — **it is the whole point of the thing.**

So the permit cannot be obtained. Not *will not*. **Cannot.**

Which means the Gathering is permanently, structurally illegal. The Forest Service calls it an *unauthorized incident* and mobilizes a **National Incident**

Management Team to manage it.² Not for anything it does. **For failing to produce a ruler.**

Tell me that is not the strangest sentence in this book.

A group of Americans, assembling peacefully on public land, cannot be permitted to do so **because they refuse to have someone in charge of them.**

What the Courts Said

And you do not have to take my word for what that rule does, because federal courts have looked at it and not liked what they saw.

The current regulation took effect in 1995. Two earlier versions of it had already been struck down.

In 1986, in Arizona, a federal judge threw out charges against Rainbow attendees and found that the regulation impermissibly singled out people for wishing to gather in order to exercise their First Amendment rights.³ In 1988, in Texas, Judge William Wayne Justice struck the permit rules down again — holding that they violated the First Amendment and refusing to give the government the injunction it wanted against the Gathering.⁴

Two courts. Two rulings against the rule. The government rewrote it and tried again, and the version we live under now is the third draft of a regulation that could not survive its first two.

Now the checkpoints — the road stops, the gauntlet you drive through to reach a prayer circle in a forest that belongs to all of us. Their legal history is more tangled, including the part that does not go my way.

Rainbow attendees have challenged the road stops more than once, with mixed results. In at least one case, plaintiffs who were representing *themselves* — no lawyer, against the United States — won a preliminary injunction, with a federal

court finding that the evidence strongly suggested the Forest Service had selectively targeted its enforcement against them, and that the checkpoints might not survive the Fourth Amendment.⁵ People with no attorney, against the federal government, and a court said they were probably right.

And in the case that went the furthest, a woman named Tracie Park won an injunction in the district court against checkpoints that targeted the Gathering — and the Court of Appeals took it away from her.⁶ Not by ruling that the checkpoints were lawful. By ruling that she lacked *standing* to ask — that she could not prove she would personally be stopped again at some future Gathering, and therefore had no business seeking to stop the practice. The targeting question was left undecided. The door was closed before anyone had to walk through it.

It is the same shape as everything else here. Nobody had to defend the checkpoints on the merits. They only had to find a reason the person objecting could not be heard. **A right you cannot get a court to rule on is not quite a right.** It is a right with a gate in front of it, and the gate is built out of standing, and lawyers, and the money and the years it takes to get past both.

How It Is Actually Done

Nobody banned the Gathering. You cannot ban peaceful assembly in America — they tried, twice, and the courts said no, twice.

So they did not ban it. **They made it expensive.**

You drive in, and there are Forest Service law enforcement officers, and there are county sheriffs, and depending on the year there are federal agencies I would not have expected to see at a hippie picnic. And they write tickets. Not for felonies. For a broken tail light. For beads hanging from your rearview mirror. And the ticket is not a fine you mail in — it is a **mandatory court appearance**,

which means driving back across a state, taking days off work you may not have, to answer for the beads.⁷

That is not law enforcement. That is a **toll**.

And it does exactly what the fare cap did to the streetcars in Chapter Five. It does not forbid the thing. **It puts a number on it** — and then lets the number do the work that force could not do in the open. The alternative was not murdered. It was **starved, on a public schedule, with a published rule**.

What It Proves — and What It Doesn't

The text above let something stand too easily: the impression that the Gathering is a long weekend. It isn't. **Seed camp goes in around the solstice** — that is when the water systems and the latrines and the kitchens actually get built, by people who arrive early to dig. The Gathering itself runs the first week of July. And then, after everyone has gone home, a crew stays in the woods for weeks **hauling out the trash and putting the ground back**.

It ends when the **Forest Service signs off on the land**. The same agency that calls the whole thing an unauthorized incident comes back, walks the site, and certifies whether the forest was left as it was found. As I write this, the people I know are still up there, and they expect to be cleared out and signed off before the month is over.

Think about the shape of that. **A town of thousands is built from nothing, run for a month without money or managers, and then erased so completely that a hostile regulator certifies the ground**.

Now the limits, and they are real.

It is not a society. A month is not a generation. It does not have to raise a child to adulthood, or school one, or run a hospital, or carry the old and the sick

through a winter, or manufacture anything, or defend itself, or bury its dead and go on. It is not a blueprint and I am not offering it as one. There are freeloaders. There are people who come for the drugs and not for the circle. There is a reason the Forest Service worries about the latrines, and some of that worry is earned.

Here is what it does establish, and it is one thing, and it is the only thing I need:

Thousands of people built their own water supply, dug their own latrines, fed each other three meals a day, doctored each other, settled their own disputes, and then cleaned the forest to a federal standard — with no money, no wages, no managers, and nobody in charge.

That is the thing the whole apparatus insists is impossible.

Two chapters ago I told you the great lie is that human beings will not work unless they are made to. **The Gathering is the experiment, and it runs every summer, and the result comes out the same way every year.** Nobody makes anybody do anything. The latrines get dug. The trash comes out. The ranger signs the paper.

They do not do it because they are better than you. They do it because that is what people do when the work is theirs, and the people around them are real, and the thing being built is something they actually want.

Interdependence Day

On the Fourth of July, the whole camp goes silent from dawn until noon.

Thousands of people, not speaking. Then at noon everyone gathers, and there is a great deal of noise, and the children come through the middle of the circle in a parade, which is the only part of the day anybody has organized.

They do not call it Independence Day.

They call it Interdependence Day.

I don't know who coined that, and I doubt anybody does. It has been said in those woods longer than I have been going, by people with no leaders and no permit and no one to sign for them, on land that belongs to all of us, in a country founded on a document they were arrested for gathering to celebrate.

Back in Chapter Two I asked what a bird knows. Back in Chapter Five I said that nobody gets free alone.

They put it in one word, and they have been saying it since before I got there.

And then I drove down off that mountain, and I want to tell you about the other kind of town.

CHAPTER 11

The Town That Gave You Everything





George Pullman built a town, and by the standards of 1881 it was the finest town a working man in America could live in.

It sat fourteen miles south of Chicago on prairie he had bought for the purpose, and he built all of it at once — not the way towns usually happen, a building at a time as people need them, but the way you build a machine: from a drawing, complete. Brick row houses with indoor plumbing and gas laid on, at a period when most of the men who built Chicago walked out to a privy in the yard and carried their water in by the bucket. Paved streets. Sewers that worked. Trees set out on a plan. An arcade with shops in it, a theater, a library, a church of green serpentine stone. Parks. An artificial lake.

There was no saloon.¹

Everything in it belonged to the Pullman Palace Car Company. Not most of it — all of it. The houses, the shops, the church building, the water, the gas, the library and the books inside it. A man who worked in the shops rented his house from his employer, bought his groceries from his employer's tenant, drank water his employer piped in, and if he wanted a book he paid a yearly subscription to his employer's library, which is one reason not many of them did.²

He could not buy the house. That was not an oversight or a matter of paperwork. Pullman would not sell, at any price, to anyone, and he was candid about why. A man who owns his house votes how he likes. He paints it the color he likes. He stays in it while he is on strike.³

Visitors came from Europe to admire the place. At an international exposition it was named the most perfect town in the world.⁴

In 1885 an economist named Richard Ely came out from Baltimore to look at it for *Harper's*, and what he wrote was not what the company had in mind. Ely conceded the material case entirely: the housing was better, the streets were cleaner, the water was safer, people were measurably healthier than the workers of Chicago proper. Then he named the thing underneath it. The arrangement was

benevolent, it was well-intended, and it was feudal — a place where the people who lived their whole lives inside it had no more say in the conditions of those lives than tenants on a manor. He called it un-American, and he meant it as a description rather than an insult.⁵

Run the Test

Now take the two questions from Chapter Two out to Pullman, Illinois, and watch them come apart in your hands.

Housing that did not depend on the market: yes. Water and gas provided in common, at a scale no single family could have managed: yes. Sanitation the private market had not delivered to the men's own city: yes. A library, a theater, parks, a lake. The cost of nearly every necessity carried upstream and absorbed, so that no gate stood between a man and the thing at the moment he needed it.

By nearly every material measure I have spent ten chapters praising, Pullman passes.

And it was one of the least free places in the United States.

The model town could not answer one question, and in the spring of 1894 the question got asked.

The depression that began in 1893 cut orders for sleeping cars, and the company cut wages to match — by roughly a quarter, deeper in some shops.⁶ Rents in the town were not cut. They could not be cut, in the company's own accounting, because the town was carried on the books as an investment expected to return six percent, and the housing and the wages were two separate ledgers that did not have to speak to each other.⁷

Rent came out of the paycheck first, before the man saw it.

There are pay envelopes from that spring with a few cents in them. One that gets quoted came to two cents for two weeks' work, and whether or not that particular envelope is exactly as reported, the arithmetic that produced it is not in dispute: when the wage falls and the rent does not, and the rent is deducted at the source, a man can work a full fortnight in the finest town in America and be handed nothing.⁸

They struck in May. The American Railway Union took it up and refused to handle Pullman cars anywhere in the country, and by July there were federal troops in Chicago and men were dead in the rail yards.⁹

Four years later the Illinois Supreme Court ordered the company to sell the town.¹⁰

What Pullman Actually Proves

Not that provision is bad. Not that the plumbing was a trick, or the parks a bribe, or that George Pullman was a monster — by his own lights he was a reformer, and the reformers of his generation largely agreed with him until the shooting started.

What Pullman proves is that **provision is not the test**.

Every necessity a person has can be supplied — generously, at high quality, at cost, by people who sincerely mean well — and the person receiving it can still be entirely unfree, because supply is not standing. What the man in the model town lacked was not goods. He had better goods than his cousin in the city. What he lacked was the ability to say no and survive the saying.

Refuse the wage and you lose the house, because the wage and the lease were the same relationship wearing two hats. Complain about the rent and you are complaining to your employer. Vote against the company's man and you are

voting against your landlord, your water company, and the owner of the pew you sit in on Sunday. Every road out of the disagreement ran through the same door, and one man held it.

It is the same sentence every time. The nickel fare that starved the streetcars, the fine at the daycare door in Haifa, the toll on the road up to the Gathering, the invoice carried into the harbor at Port-au-Prince behind fourteen warships — the common element was never the money. It was that in each case somebody stood between a person and a necessity and got to decide.

Pullman is the case that strips the money away and leaves the mechanism standing there by itself, because in Pullman almost everything *was* provided, and the domination was total anyway.

The Neighborly Version

The obvious objection is that Pullman was a company town — one owner, one interest, and that is the whole problem. A real community, made of neighbors rather than shareholders, would never do that to its own.

It does, though. It has done it in this country on a scale that dwarfs Pullman, and it did it without a single owner anywhere in the arrangement.

Between roughly the 1890s and the 1960s, thousands of American towns and suburbs were all-white on purpose. Not by drift, not by the accident of who happened to move where — by ordinance, by covenant, by the real estate board's rules, by the sign at the town line telling Black travelers what would happen to them after dark, and by the periodic violence that made the sign credible. The historian James Loewen spent years documenting them and argued that the great majority of all-white towns outside the South got that way deliberately. His count has been argued over by other historians. The mechanism has not been.¹¹

Here is the part that belongs in this book rather than in a different one.

Those were not lawless places. Very often they were the opposite — tight, cooperative, high-trust towns where the volunteer fire company turned out at two in the morning, where neighbors brought food when someone died, where a barn that burned got rebuilt by people who did not send a bill. Everything Chapter Six admired and Chapter Ten went up a mountain to find was present in a sundown town, working exactly as advertised.

The neighborliness and the exclusion were not two separate facts about those towns. They were one instrument. A “we” tight enough to feed you through a bad winter without keeping score is a “we” that knows precisely who is inside it — and the knowing is not a side effect. It is the thing that makes the feeding possible. You do not extend unlimited credit to a stranger. You extend it to your own, and somebody has to decide who that is.

The private version of the same instrument was written into the deeds. Restrictive covenants — clauses in the sale of a house barring resale to Black buyers, and often to Jews, Asians, Mexicans — covered enormous stretches of American residential property, running with the land, binding owners who had never agreed to them and never met the men who wrote them. The Supreme Court held in 1948 that courts could not enforce them, which is a narrower ruling than it sounds: the covenants remained legal to write, and the practice continued through private discipline for another twenty years.¹²

Cooperation is not the opposite of exclusion. Frequently it is the engine of it. A community is a boundary with services on the inside, and the services are what make the boundary worth enforcing.

The Largest Floor We Ever Built

Now the case that matters most, because it is not a story about a bad town. It is a story about the best thing this country ever did, and how it was hollowed out from the inside by a single design decision.

After the Second World War the United States built the largest floor in its history. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 — the GI Bill — paid tuition and a living stipend for veterans who wanted to study, guaranteed mortgages for veterans who wanted to buy, covered unemployment while they looked for work. Millions used it. The standard account of the postwar American middle class is largely an account of that statute, and the standard account is not wrong.¹³

The law said *veterans*. It did not say white veterans. On the page it was as universal as anything this country has written.

And it was administered locally — by local Veterans Administration officers, local colleges, local banks. That structure was not an accident of federalism. It was put there deliberately, by Southern congressmen who understood exactly what local administration would mean in their districts and said so.¹⁴

What it meant: a Black veteran in Mississippi with the same discharge papers as the man beside him applied to the same local office and was steered to vocational training instead of college, or turned down for the loan, or approved for a loan no bank in the county would actually write. In the North he found the mortgage guarantee was real but no lender would finance a house in a neighborhood the appraisers had marked as declining, and the suburbs being built with federal backing carried covenants against him in the deed. The benefit existed. The gate had simply been moved from the statute to the desk.¹⁵

That is the most useful thing in this chapter.

The GI Bill did not fail because it was collective provision. It failed for a specific reason that repeats everywhere, in every era, under every flag: **somebody had discretion**. The benefit was universal in the law and conditional in the office.

And a benefit that is conditional in the office is not a floor. It is a favor. A favor has a giver, a giver can be displeased, and a person who can be displeased holds exactly the power the floor was built to eliminate.

That is not an argument against building floors. It is the argument for building them so they cannot be administered away.

The One This Book Already Told

And here is the case I already made and did not stop to recognize.

Chapter Six took the women's objection at full strength, as it should have. The village that cared for its old. The street that raised the children and knew all their names. The autumn when everyone put food up together and feeding a neighbor was not charity, it was Tuesday.

All of that was real. All of it was a floor — care and food and shelter supplied outside the market, without invoices, by people bound to each other.

And nearly all of it was made out of the unpaid, unchosen, unending labor of women who were never asked whether they wanted the work, and who could not put it down.

That is a community providing necessities without a ledger, which is the thing I keep holding up as the alternative. And for the people it was extracted from, it was not freedom. It was a job you could not quit, assigned at birth, enforced by everyone you loved.

The ledger, arriving late and badly, gave some of those women the first exit anyone had ever offered them. Chapter Six says so. That concession is not an embarrassment to the argument. It is the argument: what liberates is not the presence or absence of accounting. It is whether the person inside the arrangement can leave it.

Two Smaller Ones, Quickly

A cooperative can be captured. The rural electric co-ops of Chapter Five are still member-owned ninety years on, and some of them are also run by boards that

face no serious challenge, in elections where turnout runs in the single digits, by managers whose interests have drifted from the membership's. The deed says the members own the wire. The practice can say otherwise, and the deed does not notice.¹⁶

And a community that governs by consensus has invented a subtler thing than a vote. Consensus means nobody is outvoted, which sounds like the end of domination until you are the one person standing in the way of what everyone else wants at eleven o'clock at night. Le Guin saw this and built a whole novel on it: Anarres has no state, no police, no owners, and it still grinds its dissenters down, because a society that cannot outvote you can still exhaust you, shun you, or simply look at you until you sit down. Chapter Twelve will hold her up as the honest one in that gallery. This is why.

So What Is the Difference

Pullman was generous. The sundown town was neighborly. The GI Bill was written to be universal. The village fed its old. Every arrangement in this chapter provided real goods to real people, and every one of them left somebody unable to refuse.

The difference is not generosity, or quality, or good intentions, or whether the provision is collective. All of those were present.

Four properties separate a floor that frees from a floor that holds. Chapter Two named them at the outset and asked you to hold them lightly; Pullman is where they take the weight. They are the test from Chapter Two — *can you walk through without being asked who you are* — broken into its working parts, and I use them for the rest of these pages.

Universal. Belonging is enough to qualify. Not veterans-as-approved-by-this-office; not residents-of-the-right-sort. If someone has to decide whether you are

the kind of person this is for, it is not universal, whatever the statute says.

Unconditional. Access does not depend on employment, productivity, sobriety, marital status, or anyone's approval of how you live. The moment a necessity is contingent on good behavior, whoever judges the behavior owns you — and they will be a decent person, mostly, which is what makes it durable.

Dependable. It is there when you are at your worst, or it is not a floor. A provision that evaporates precisely when a person becomes inconvenient, unemployed, sick, or unpopular has done nothing except be present during the years you did not need it.

Portable. You can leave and it comes with you. Leave the employer, the marriage, the town, the church, the union, the co-op — and the thing that keeps you alive does not stay behind with the people you left. This is the property the Pullman worker lacked entirely, and it is the one that matters most, because it is what converts every other kind of power into a request rather than an order.

And underneath all four, the machinery that keeps them honest: a voice in how the thing is run, a way to appeal when it goes wrong, and a door out that a person can actually walk through.

Not one of them asks who owns the thing.

The subway in Chapter Five was owned by an authority the author had no share in and no vote over, and it was universal, unconditional, dependable, and portable, and it made him freer than the car would have. Pullman's houses were owned by a man who had built them well and maintained them properly, and they were none of those four things, and the men who lived in them were tenants of their own paychecks. Title tells you almost nothing. What matters is whether the thing can be taken from you, and by whom, and for what reason, and whether you can get out from under the person who decides.

Which is why the reason to build a floor is not so that people will need each other more. We already need each other; that was Chapter Ten and it is not in doubt.

The reason to build a floor is so that nobody — not an owner, not a bank, not a husband, not a town, not a company, not a committee of the well-meaning — holds another person's ability to walk away.

A community that can be left is a community worth staying in.

CHAPTER 12

Abundance Is Already Here





A community that can be left is harder to build than either of the last two chapters managed.

The Gathering never has to solve it. Everyone leaves in July; the leaving is the design, and a month is not long enough for anyone's power over anyone else to set. Pullman never tried to solve it, and the not-trying was also the design.

So this chapter asks what it looks like when people go after the permanent version — an arrangement meant to outlast its founders, that a person can still walk out of. Some of them only imagined it. Some of them built it on land that was not supposed to support them, and a few of those are standing yet.

Nobody Owns the Replicator

In 1966 a television writer named Gene Roddenberry put a premise on screen that everybody absorbed and almost nobody examined.

The premise wasn't the faster-than-light travel. It wasn't the aliens. It was one structural decision, embedded so quietly that fifty years of viewers watched past it: *nobody owned the replicator*.

That is the usual way of putting it, and it is not quite the point.

Suppose the Federation did assign the thing an owner. A bureau. A council. A guild of engineers with their name on the patent. If that owner could not withhold it, could not meter it, could not raise the price when a colony's harvest failed, and could not ask an ensign why she wanted a cup of tea at three in the morning — nothing about her life would change. She would be exactly as free as before.

So what Roddenberry built into the premise was not the absence of an owner. It was the absence of a *gatekeeper*, which is a different thing and the only one that matters. The replicator — the device that produces food, clothing, tools, whatever is needed, on demand — runs the way the public water system runs, the way the

road runs. The ensign has the same access as the admiral. The person who cleans the corridors has the same access as the person who commands the ship. Nobody's standing at it is contingent on anybody's approval. When Picard explains the 24th century to a financier from the 20th who woke from cryogenic sleep demanding to know where his portfolio was, he said: *People are no longer obsessed with the accumulation of things. We've eliminated hunger, want, the need for possessions.*¹

The man went looking for his money and found that money had stopped being the point. Not because humanity had been morally reformed. Because the apparatus that made survival contingent on payment had been removed. The fence had come down far enough that nobody spent their life at it anymore.

This is not a story about technology. Roddenberry was not predicting matter conversion. He was posing a diagnostic question that I have been asking since Chapter One: when a society produces enough for everyone, who does that abundance actually free? His answer was: everyone, so long as no one stands between a person and the thing with the power to say no.

The thought experiment has been run before, on a smaller scale, in an earlier chapter. In Chapter Five, the question was what happened when electricity reached the farm. The cooperative that held the wire in common produced a different liberation than the utility that metered access to it, even though the electrons were identical. The machine was never the variable. Roddenberry built this insight into the premise of the most widely watched science fiction franchise in history.

Most viewers noticed the spaceship.

What People Do With Themselves

If Roddenberry posed the question, Iain M. Banks spent nine novels answering it.

The Culture — Banks’s fictional civilization, described in books published between 1987 and 2012 — is the most philosophically serious post-scarcity vision in the literature.² The Minds, which are the Culture’s artificial intelligences, manage the infrastructure of abundance: the ships, the habitats, the vast productive capacity. They don’t own any of it. They don’t extract from it. They maintain it because they find meaning in the work.

What interested Banks was not the economics. It was the question Roddenberry had gestured at: when survival is no longer the organizing principle of life, what do people actually do? His answer, across nine books, was consistent and not comfortable. They make art. They form complicated relationships. They seek out difficulty, because difficulty is the only thing that produces meaning in a life no longer spent in its own maintenance. They become, in his view, *more* human rather than less. The things survival crowds out — curiosity, creation, care, the willingness to be changed by another person — those expand when survival stops consuming the day.

Banks was clear that the Culture was neither a prediction nor a prescription. It was an argument: the reason people don’t live this way is not human nature. Human nature, given sufficient material security, tends toward exactly the things we say we value. The ledger is what makes people act like they don’t.³

The Hard Version

Ursula K. Le Guin made the same argument harder.

The Dispossessed, published in 1974 with the subtitle *An Ambiguous Utopia*, follows a physicist from Anarres — a moon colonized by anarchists two centuries before the novel begins — to the wealthy planet of Urras.⁴ Anarres is free. It is also genuinely austere. The soil is thin, the resources scarce, the work unrelenting, and the social pressure toward conformity constitutes its own coercion even

without a state to enforce it. Le Guin does not let the reader rest in the idea of freedom as comfortable.

What the physicist Shevek finds on Urras — the wealthy world, the one that looks like ours — is that its abundance has produced its own poverty. People own a great deal. They are not free. People on Anarres own almost nothing and are — imperfectly, effortfully, at genuine cost — more free.

The argument Le Guin makes is precise: freedom is not a product of abundance. It is not something that arrives automatically when the material conditions are right. It is a practice, and it requires something of you every day.

She also saw, forty years before the last chapter said it, what a we can do to the one who dissents from it. Anarres has no state, no police, no owners, and no wages. It still grinds people down, because a society that cannot outvote you can still exhaust you, exclude you from the work you love, or simply look at you until you sit down. She belongs in this gallery precisely because she refuses the easy version of her own vision. A reader who has absorbed her arrives at the last two chapters of this book with fewer illusions and more readiness.

Three Hundred Years of Practice

Before any of these writers put a word on paper, the Haudenosaunee — the people of the Longhouse, the confederacy the French called the Iroquois — had been running a version of the experiment for centuries.

The Great Law of Peace, the Gayanashagowa, brought together five nations — Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca — under a constitution of governance by consensus.⁵ Leaders were chosen by clan mothers, who held the authority to remove them. No decision of consequence was made without the agreement of the whole council. No permanent coercive center — no executive

with unilateral power, no standing army answerable to a single authority — was permitted to accumulate.

Chapter Three followed Christopher Boehm’s evidence that humans spent the great majority of their evolutionary history actively preventing the accumulation of that kind of power — not because they were told to, but because they understood what happened when they didn’t. The Haudenosaunee formalized this understanding into law. The law held across generations, through wars, through two centuries of European pressure, through everything the continent threw at it.

It was not a utopia. It had its tensions, its failures of consensus, its moments where the mechanism strained. It was a functioning society, governing an enormous territory, organized on a principle we have been tracing since Chapter Three: authority is legitimate only as long as it continues to earn it, and the people retain the right to withdraw consent.

Roddenberry imagined three hundred years of progress toward freedom. The Haudenosaunee built three hundred years of its practice.

Still Building

On January 1, 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement came into force, several thousand indigenous Maya from the highlands of Chiapas took the town of San Cristóbal de las Casas and issued a declaration.

*We are the product of five hundred years of struggle, it began.*⁶

The Mexican army pushed them back into the mountains within two weeks. What happened next is the part that gets told less often.

The Zapatistas did not dissolve. They built. Over the following three decades they established a network of autonomous municipalities — the caracoles — governed by rotating assemblies called juntas de buen gobierno, councils of good

government. Schools, clinics, community radio stations, cooperative farms. Funded without government money. Governed without permanent officials. Maintained by people who rotated through responsibility and returned to ordinary life when their term ended.

The Mexican state did not ignore this. The pressure has been consistent — military encirclement, legal harassment, economic strangulation.⁷ The Zapatistas are not a success story in the sense of having won. They are a success story in the sense of having continued.

Thirty years is not a summer gathering. Thirty years, under those conditions, on that land, is a proof of something.

The specific form — the caracol, the junta, the ejido land system — belongs to their particular history and cannot be transplanted wholesale. What it establishes is narrower than a model and harder to argue with: the categorical claim has failed. People will build, maintain, and govern shared provision over decades, under hostile pressure, without owners and without a state. Whether they can do it at the scale of a continent, for a population that did not choose each other, is a question thirty years in Chiapas does not answer and I will not pretend it does.

The Question Arriving Now

These are not one thing, and it would be sloppy to pretend otherwise. Two of them are novels. One is a television premise. One is a constitution that governed real territory for centuries. One is a network of municipalities under military pressure right now. Fiction can illuminate what is possible; it cannot demonstrate that an arrangement holds. A confederacy that lasted through wars demonstrates rather more. A thirty-year experiment still running demonstrates something different again — endurance under conditions nobody would choose.

Sorted honestly, they fall into three kinds. The imagined: Roddenberry, Banks, Le Guin. The historically practiced: the Haudenosaunee. The presently attempted: the Zapatistas. Only the second and third can carry weight about what works, and they carry different weights.

What links them across those categories is not a shared architecture, and it is certainly not a shared form of ownership. Pullman belonged outright to one man; Mondragón belongs to the people who work in it; the Great Law belonged to nobody at all. The difference between the first of those and the other two is not in the paperwork.

It is that in the first one, a person could not refuse and stay standing.

That is the whole of the family resemblance. In every arrangement worth the name, nobody stands between a person and what they need holding the power to decide. Sometimes that is accomplished through title, as at Mondragón. Sometimes through law, as with the Great Law of Peace. Sometimes through a license that makes a thing permanently un-enclosable, sometimes through a council whose members rotate back into ordinary life at the end of a term — and in Roddenberry's case through a premise so quietly stated that most viewers never registered it. The replicator has no gatekeeper. Not because a committee holds the deed. Because nothing in the arrangement lets a deed-holder matter.

Which brings this to the machine now sitting on the table.

There is a technology arriving that can function as the finest tutor any child has ever had. The finest diagnostician. The finest translator, the finest patient explainer, the finest organizer of what a community already knows. It works in any language, at any hour, and its cost to serve one more person is a fraction of what the same service costs from a human being — not nothing, and I will be precise about that later, but low, and falling.

Every question in this chapter now points at it, and none of them is a question about who holds the patent.

Can a person reach it without being asked who they are — and can it be taken from them by anyone who becomes displeased?

The next chapter takes that seriously.

CHAPTER 13

Freedom Isn't Free, But It Should Be





The phrase has been used as a warning, a reproach, a reason to stop asking. As though the point of saying it were to end the conversation.

It was never the end of the conversation. It was always the beginning of one.

Freedom has always cost something to build. The public water pipe cost something to lay. The sewer beneath the street cost something to dig. The road cost something to grade and pave, the rural wire something to string from pole to pole across a hundred miles of empty farmland, the library something to build and stock and keep open. Every school, every fire station, every public hospital, every inch of the commons I have spent twelve chapters describing — all of it cost something, and the people who built it knew that, and they built it anyway.

What the phrase smuggles in is the assumption that a cost must become a bill. It never had to. Forty neighbors raise a barn in a day and go home fed: the cost was real, the labor was real, and nobody was handed an invoice. The Gathering digs its own latrines. The cooperative members strung their own wire. Cost, every time. A bill, not once.

So the question was never whether freedom costs something. It is who carries the cost — and whether, when they are finished, a gate is left standing.

The Pattern

Chapter Five followed a wire across the American countryside in the 1930s. Before the rural electric cooperative, a farm family paid for lamp oil, or did without light after dark. The investor-owned utilities had decided, correctly by their own arithmetic, that stringing wire to dispersed farms was not profitable enough to be worth the trouble. So the darkness continued, and the cost was paid in labor and limitation, year after year, by the families who lived in it.

When the cooperatives came — and when the federal government backed them — the arithmetic changed. Not the arithmetic of what it cost to string the wire, or to keep it standing; that never goes away. Wire still has to be maintained, and the members still get a bill. What changed was who the cost answered to. The members were paying one another, at cost, for a thing they owned in common — not paying rent to an owner who could set the price at whatever the wire was worth to a family that had no other way to get light. The cost stayed. The extraction ended, and the shut-off-for-profit ended with it. The fence came down far enough to stop the deliberation.

That is the pattern. It runs through every expansion of American freedom that was real rather than formal. Someone convinced enough people to carry a cost together, at cost, so that no owner could stand between a family and a necessity and charge what the necessity was worth to them. The freedom was not the absence of cost. Costs do not vanish. It was the removal of the toll-taker — the conversion of a private levy on living into a shared foundation nobody could lock.

Public water. Public sewage. The road. The rural electric grid. The interstate highway. The public library. Each one required someone to say: *this thing is expensive to build and it should belong to everyone, and we will pay for it together so that nobody has to keep paying for it alone*. Each one was opposed, and each one was built anyway, and each one changed what freedom meant in practice for the people it served.

The phrase on this chapter's cover is not a lament. It is a description of how every real expansion of freedom has ever worked.

The Promise

The pattern is not finished. It is about to repeat, on the largest scale yet, around a technology whose most public champion has already announced the destination

out loud — which is why this chapter belongs where it is, and not in some other book about machines.

In November 2023, at the UK’s inaugural AI Safety Summit, Elon Musk told the Prime Minister something that deserves to be taken at face value.

“There will come a point where no job is needed. You can have a job if you want to have a job, or sort of personal satisfaction, but the AI will be able to do everything. I think everyone will have access to this magic genie, and you’re able to ask any question. It’ll be certainly bigger for education. It’ll be the best tutor. And there will be no shortage of goods and services. It will be an age of abundance.”¹

This book is going to take that seriously.

Not as a prediction about timing — Musk’s timelines have been imprecise and his critics are right to note it. Not as a technical claim about the capabilities of current systems. As a vision. As a stated destination. As the thing being aimed at by the most consequential deployment of productive technology in human history, described in the words of the person most publicly identified with it.

Everyone will have access. The best tutor. No shortage of goods and services. An age of abundance.

This is Roddenberry’s premise, stated without the spaceship, by a real person in a real room in 2023. It is a serious vision of freedom — more serious, arguably, than most of what gets called freedom in political discourse, because it specifies the material condition. Not the formal declaration. Not the document. The thing itself: access, abundance, the end of scarcity as the organizing principle of daily life.

The question I have to ask of that vision is not whether it is sincere. It is the same question I have asked of every comparable vision in the previous twelve chapters — the one Chapter Five put to the utility company, and Chapter Nine put to Jefferson.

For most of these pages that question came out as: *who holds the wire?*

Chapter Eleven spoiled that formulation, and it needed spoiling. George Pullman held the wire. He held the water and the gas and the roof as well, he held them competently, he maintained them better than the city of Chicago maintained its own, and the men who lived under them were not free. Holding was never the question.

The question is what the holder can do to a person who displeases him, and whether that person can leave.

So, put to the vision:

When this arrives, will a person be able to reach it without being asked who they are — and what becomes of the one who says no?

The One Question

The vision describes an outcome. It does not describe a structure.

Everyone will have access — to what, exactly, and on what terms? If the finest tutor is available to anyone who can pay the subscription, it is not available to everyone. It is available to everyone who can pay. That is the definition of a product. It is also the definition of the fence — not an absence of the thing, but a price in front of it that sorts who enters and who does not.

If the finest tutor is available to anyone who can reach it, the way the road is available to anyone who can reach it, the way the fire department comes regardless of whether you have paid a fee — then it is infrastructure. Then the outcome Musk described follows from the structure.

These are not the same thing. And the vision, as stated, does not specify which one it is.

This is not a criticism of the vision. It is the structural question every vision of abundance in this book has had to answer, and the ones worth remembering answered it the same way. Roddenberry built it into the premise: the replicator has no gatekeeper. The Haudenosaunee encoded it in law: no permanent authority accumulates the power to restrict what the land produces. The rural electric cooperative answered it with a legal form that put the decision in the hands of the people it would be made against.

Run the four properties from the last chapter across the vision and watch where it holds and where it does not.

Universal it might well be — the machine does not care how many people ask it things, and a system indifferent to scale is the rare case where universality costs almost nothing to grant.

Unconditional is where it turns. A subscription is a condition. So is an account that can be closed, a term of service that can be revised on a Tuesday, an eligibility rule, a usage tier, a requirement that you be a customer in good standing of something.

Dependable asks whether it is there on the worst day of a person's life — the day they are broke, or unemployable, or in the middle of the argument that costs them their job. That is precisely the day a subscription lapses.

Portable asks whether it survives their leaving. If access runs through an employer, it does not. If it runs through an institution a person can be expelled from, it does not.

Three of the four turn not on who owns the machine but on what the arrangement permits somebody to do about you.

The technology is not the variable. This book has said so since Chapter One, and the machine has never been the thing that decides who gets free. But neither, on its own, is the deed. A thing held in common can still be run by people who decide who deserves it, and a thing sold at a price can be sold at a price nobody is

refused at. What matters is the narrow question the last chapter spent a whole town establishing: **can this be withheld from a particular person, by a particular someone, for a particular reason — and if it is, what does that person do next?**

The investor-owned utility could not serve the county that would never return a profit and survive doing it, which is a real constraint and worth stating. The cooperative could, and some did, and some of them are now run by boards nobody can unseat. The structure sets what is possible. It has never once settled what happens.

What Is It For

There is a version of this conversation that gets conducted as an argument about efficiency, or about incentives, or about who deserves credit for building things. This book is not conducting that version.

The question is simpler. It is the question Chapter One asked about the plate and the grain and the livestock conversion: what is this for? Not who built it, not who deserves to profit from it, not which structure produces more innovation at the margin. What is it *for*?

If it is for the enrichment of the people who hold it, it is a product, and it will be priced, and the fence will remain — moved slightly, redrawn as a subscription plan or a hardware requirement or an eligibility rule, but present. The deliberation continues. The person who cannot afford access will feel, in practice, exactly what the farm family felt before the wire came: not a formal deprivation of rights, but a practical absence of the thing that would have made the rights real.

If it is for the liberation of the people who need it, it is infrastructure. It gets built and maintained the way the pipe was, and the road, and the wire — the cost

carried upstream and shared, so that no gate stands at the moment of need and nobody has to be the sort of person who qualifies.

Chapter Five established that these two outcomes require different structures, and that the structure is a choice. The cooperative and the investor-owned utility both promised the farm light. The promise was identical. The structure was not, and the difference in the structure was the difference in who actually got free from the dark.

We are being handed, right now, a technology whose cost to serve one more person is a small fraction of what the same service costs from a human being — and falling. A human tutor can teach one child at a time; the machine's cost per additional student is real — electricity, computation, cooling, the hardware wearing out — but it is low, and it drops as the tools improve, in a way a second teacher's salary never will. That is the characteristic that makes it new, and it is precisely the one that sharpens the structural question. The cost is not zero. But it is low enough that no scarcity of the output can justify the fence. Whatever fence stands there is chosen, not required.

The Fork

Every technology in this book arrived at this fork. The printing press. The electrical grid. The road. The wire. Some went left and became infrastructure — the road, the sewage pipe, the rural cooperative. Some went right and became products — the investor-owned utility, the cable company, the pharmaceutical patent. The ones that went left enlarged freedom. The ones that went right produced a different kind of dependency: formal access in principle, metered access in practice, the fence moved but not removed.

The pattern of American freedom, stated plainly: when the country decided a thing was too important to leave behind a price, it absorbed the cost collectively

and took the thing off the market. Not because the cost disappeared. Because the cost was the price of being the kind of country the founding documents described.

By 2024, Musk had moved past the material frame. At Viva Technology he arrived at a different question — not what the machines would make, but whether “*your life has meaning*” once they can do everything better than you.²

This book has been answering that question for twelve chapters.

And the answer has a precondition, which is the whole reason the last chapter went to Pullman before this one came here. The meaning question is not available to a person who cannot refuse. A man whose house, water, wage, and church all run through the same door does not get to spend his evenings wondering what his life is for; he spends them working out what will happen if he says the wrong thing at the wrong meeting. Meaning is downstream of the ability to say no.

The birds in Chapter Two don’t earn their place in the forest. The people at the Gathering don’t derive meaning from being more productive than the person next to them. Iain M. Banks spent nine novels asking what humans do when survival stops organizing their days, and his answer was consistent: they make art, they form relationships, they seek difficulty for its own sake, they become more human. Le Guin said freedom is a practice — and it is the practice itself, not its products, where meaning lives.

The meaning question is not new. What is new is who gets to ask it.

Right now it is fully available only to people who have already solved the material problem. The fence doesn’t forbid the question. It fills the day with the deliberation that pushes it out — rent, the next shift, what to do if the car breaks down, whether there is enough in the account for the end of the month. The person inside that calculation is not free to seriously ask whether their life has meaning beyond their productivity. Not because they are less capable of asking. Because the fence is in the way.

Strike the fence and the question becomes everyone's. That is what the abundance is for. Not the goods and the services, though those matter. The question. The one Musk is already asking, from the side of it where the material problem is already solved.

The next chapter says what it looks like when everyone gets there.

CHAPTER 14

The Land of the Free





There is a building in almost every American town where the fence test passes clean.

You walk in. Nobody checks whether you can pay, because there is nothing to pay. The books are there — all of them, more than you could read in a lifetime — and the newspapers, and the internet terminals, and the warm room in January, and a librarian whose entire job is to help you find what you're looking for. You can be seven years old or ninety. You can be wealthy or you can have nothing. The building does not ask. You take what you need and you bring the books back when you're done, and the only thing the library has ever demanded of anyone is the thing the Gathering demands: that you be part of the “we” that keeps it going.

The fire department is the same. When the call comes, nobody at the station checks the caller's account status. The truck rolls. It rolls for the mansion and it rolls for the trailer, and the firefighters — who in most of America, as Chapter Six established, are volunteers — do not know or care which one they are rolling toward.

Nobody calls the library radical. Nobody calls the fire department un-American. They are among the most beloved institutions in the country, across every political line the country has drawn for itself, and they are both — structurally, precisely — the thing I have been describing for thirteen chapters: a cost carried upstream so that no gate stands at the moment of need, and nobody at the door with the authority to decide you are not the sort of person this is for.

Now hold that feeling and look at your water bill.

The Meter

Most Americans pay for water. It is metered, and if the bill goes unpaid long enough, a person from the utility comes and shuts it off. Water — the substance

the first chapter watched fall from the sky, the thing no human made and no human can make — arrives in American homes with a meter on it.

And yet almost nobody deliberates about water. Turn on the tap, fill the glass, water the garden. The meter is there, but the price is low enough that for most people, most of the time, it never enters a decision. The water fence is not absent. It is *low*. Low enough that it stops functioning as a fence for most of the people on most days.

This is what the previous thirteen chapters have been converging on. Freedom, in the material sense I care about, is not a binary that arrives when the price reaches zero. It is what happens when the fence comes down far enough that the deliberation stops. The farm family in Chapter Five was not freed by electricity becoming literally free — the cooperative charged for power. They were freed when the cost stopped being a wall between them and the light. The person at the library is not free because the books cost nothing to produce. The books cost a great deal to produce. The person is free because all of that cost was absorbed somewhere else, together, on purpose, and so the question *can I afford to know things?* never has to be asked.

The meter, where it still stands, measures a permission. Not a cost. The cost of the water — the reservoir, the pipe, the treatment plant — was mostly paid long ago, collectively, by people who decided a city should not be a place where thirst is a market. What the meter measures is how much permission you have purchased to use what is already there. Sometimes that permission is priced low, as with water, and the fence barely registers. Sometimes it is priced at whatever the market will bear, as with insulin, and the fence decides who lives. The engineering is not the difference. The choice is the difference.

So the question for this final chapter is the simplest one in the book. Which needs do we choose to treat like the library, and which do we choose to treat like the meter — and what would this country look like if the answer matched the promise in its name?

The Myth

First, a myth has to be set down, because it is the last thing standing between the reader and the answer.

The myth is that freedom is an individual possession. One person, self-made, self-reliant, beholden to no one — the lone figure on the frontier, owing nothing, asking nothing. It is the most American of images, and the strange thing about it is that the actual frontier never worked that way, and the people on it knew so.

The homestead was individual. The barn raising was not. A family alone could clear land, plant, survive — barely. But the barn, the thing that made the farm a going concern rather than an endurance test, went up in a day because forty neighbors showed up with tools and left with dinner and the standing knowledge that when their barn needed raising, the same forty would show up again. The frontier ran on shared labor, shared equipment, shared seed, husking bees and threshing rings and the understanding — never written down, never needing to be — that survival out there was a collective project wearing individual clothes.¹

Chapter Five said it, Chapter Ten showed it, and Chapter Eleven put the price on it: nobody gets free alone, and the same neighbors who lower a fence can raise one. The self-reliant individual of the myth was standing in a barn other people built, on a road other people graded, safe from a fire other people would come to fight. Individual freedom is real — the freedom to choose your work, your beliefs, your life. But it is downstream. Somebody lowers the fences first, together, or the choosing never gets to happen.

That is not a sad discovery, and it is not an argument for belonging to something. It is the good news of the entire book, and the good news is narrower and better than it sounds. If freedom were an individual achievement, a country could only be as free as its strongest members and everyone else would be out of luck. Because it is built, it can be built better. And because the people who build it

can also withhold it — a thing Pullman understood perfectly and the men in his town learned by trying to refuse — the whole object of building it is to put it beyond the reach of the people who built it, including yourself.

You pour the floor so that nobody, afterward, gets to stand on it and decide who may.

Still Standing

Start with the wire, because Chapter Five left it in the 1930s and it did not stay there.

The rural electric cooperatives did not fade into history when their work was done. They are still here. More than eight hundred distribution cooperatives serve forty-two million Americans today, across more than half the landmass of the country — and their territory includes ninety-two percent of America's persistent-poverty counties.² Read that number again. The places the ledger abandoned as unprofitable are, to this day, kept lit by the institutions their grandparents built to answer the abandonment. When the investor-owned utilities looked at those counties and saw a bad return, the counties looked at each other and saw a membership. Ninety years later, the membership still holds the wire. Many of those same cooperatives are now stringing fiber-optic broadband down the same poles, for the same reason, to the same houses the market passed over twice.³

The model did not stop at the county line, and it did not stop at electricity.

The Town Where Work Is Owned

In 1956, in a Basque town scarred by war and poverty, five graduates of a technical school founded by their priest bought the tooling to make paraffin

heaters. They organized the enterprise on a principle that was not supposed to survive contact with reality: every worker an owner, every owner one vote.

Today the federation that grew from that workshop — Mondragón — encompasses roughly eighty cooperatives employing about seventy thousand people, with over eleven billion euros in annual sales. It is the largest employer in the Basque Country and among the largest business groups in Spain.⁴ The people who work in its factories and shops and labs elect their governing councils, vote on the strategic plan, and share the profits. The highest salary in a Mondragón cooperative is capped at a small multiple of the lowest — a ratio the worker-owners themselves vote to maintain, year after year, against every consultant's advice.⁵

When the 2008 financial crisis destroyed employment across Spain, Mondragón moved workers between cooperatives instead of discharging them. When its founding cooperative, the appliance maker Fagor, went bankrupt in 2013 — and it did go bankrupt; the model is not magic — the federation relocated the great majority of Fagor's workers into sister cooperatives rather than turning them out.⁶ The region around it now has among the lowest unemployment and lowest inequality in Spain.

Mondragón is not pure. Some of its foreign subsidiaries employ workers who are not members, a contradiction its own congresses have debated for years. Two of its most successful cooperatives voted to leave the federation in 2022, taking their revenue with them — proof that the solidarity fund, which taxes the strong co-ops to steady the weak ones, is a real cost that real people sometimes decline to keep paying.⁷ The reader deserves those facts, and the argument survives them easily, because the argument was never that worker ownership produces saints. It is that seventy thousand people get up every morning and go to work at a place where no one can be discharged by a stranger's spreadsheet, where the surplus their labor creates returns to them and their town, and where the question *who*

does this enterprise serve? has a one-word answer. That is not utopia. That is Tuesday, in Mondragón, and it has been Tuesday there for seventy years.

The Land Under the House

In 1984, the city government of Burlington, Vermont, facing housing prices that were pushing working families out of their own neighborhoods, helped seed an organization built on an old idea with a precise mechanism: take the land out of the market, and leave the houses in it.

A community land trust holds land permanently, as a trust, governed by the people who live on it and around it. Families buy the *houses* — own them, maintain them, pass them on — but the land underneath is never sold, and the resale price of the house is capped by formula, so that the subsidy that made it affordable for the first family is still there, intact, for the second, and the third, and the thirtieth. The homeowner builds real equity — modest, but real. What the homeowner does not get to do is capture the land's speculative appreciation, because the land was never theirs to speculate on. It belongs to the trust. It belongs, in the only sense that matters, to everyone who will ever need it.

That Burlington organization, now the Champlain Housing Trust, is the largest community land trust in the United States: roughly three thousand homes and apartments, a United Nations World Habitat Award, and — the number that matters — homes that are *more* affordable relative to local incomes today than when the program began four decades ago.⁸ Through the 2008 housing collapse, when foreclosure hollowed out neighborhoods across the country, CLT homeowners nationally were foreclosed on at a small fraction of the conventional rate.⁹ The model has spread to more than two hundred land trusts across the country, in red states and blue ones, because a fence around housing speculation turns out to be popular with everyone standing outside it.

Notice what the land trust is. It is the enclosure, run in reverse. Chapter Seven watched the commons get fenced off and converted into private revenue. The land trust converts private land back into commons — not by seizure, but by purchase, patience, and a legal form that says: *this ground, at least, will never again be a thing that makes housing more expensive*. One parcel at a time, somebody's rent stops rising forever.

The Commons You Are Using Right Now

The third model is the one this book cannot even be typed without.

In 1991, a Finnish student released the kernel of a computer operating system under a license with a provision his lawyers must have found bewildering: anyone may use this, copy this, improve this — forever, for nothing — on the sole condition that their improvements remain as free as the original.¹⁰

That legal instrument — the free software license — is the fence test written as a contract. It does not forbid ownership; it repurposes it. It uses the machinery of property law to make a thing permanently un-enclosable. And on that foundation, without wages, without managers, without anyone in charge — the Gathering's architecture, applied to code — programmers by the hundreds of thousands built the operating system that now runs the overwhelming majority of the internet's servers, every one of the world's fastest supercomputers, and, through its descendants, most of the phones on Earth.¹¹

The corporations did not defeat this commons. They surrendered to it. The same companies whose executives once called free software a cancer now fund its development, because the commons out-built them.¹² The encyclopedia went the same way: the volunteer-written one did not merely compete with the ones for sale; it made the very idea of selling an encyclopedia obsolete. Anyone on Earth

with a connection can read, in hundreds of languages, the largest reference work ever assembled.

Somebody pays for it. Servers cost money, and the foundation that keeps them running asks for donations every year, and the people who write the thing are paying in the only currency Chapter Six said the good stuff runs on — their evenings. The cost is carried upstream, by whoever will carry it, so that no gate stands at the moment somebody needs to know something.

Which is the same arrangement as the fire truck, and the same as the road, and it does not require anyone to be a saint. It only requires that the people who carry it cannot bill the people who use it, and cannot turn anyone away.

Chapter Two said there had never been a bill, about a forest. It turns out humans can build forests too. Ours need maintenance.

The Honest Ledger

Now the objections, stated at full strength, because I have kept that promise for thirteen chapters and will not break it in the fourteenth.

These models are small. True. Mondragón is one federation in one region. Land trusts hold a sliver of American housing. Cooperatives generate a modest share of American power. Against the scale of the whole economy, everything in this chapter is a rounding error. The models prove possibility, not inevitability — they are existence proofs, like the Gathering, not blueprints with the scaling already solved.

The transition is genuinely hard. A family whose entire savings is their home's appreciation is being asked, by the land trust model, to give up the lottery ticket their parents' generation cashed. A worker offered ownership is also being offered risk. Local food costs more than the trucked kind, as Chapter Five

conceded, because the industrial ledger is genuinely efficient at the things it counts. Nobody should pretend the fence comes down for free. It comes down the way it always has: paid for, together, on purpose, by people who decided the freedom was worth the price. That is what the phrase on Chapter Thirteen's door meant.

Cooperatives can be captured. Also true, and Chapter Eleven spent a whole town on why. A co-op grown large can drift until its management resembles the thing it replaced; some have. The rural electric cooperatives themselves have faced criticism — low member turnout, entrenched boards, some dragging their feet on the energy transition. Democratic structure is a door, not a guarantee; doors still have to be walked through. Boehm's counter-dominance, from Chapter Three, was never a machine that ran itself. It was vigilance, practiced.

Some scarcity is real. Chapter One set this aside as the third thing hiding between what a thing takes and what somebody says you owe, and promised not to pretend it away. Here the promise comes due. Not everything on the wrong side of a fence is abundant. There are not enough transplant organs. There is one apartment on that corner and four families who want it. Take the price off a genuinely scarce thing and the rationing does not end; it changes hands. Somebody else now decides, by some other rule.

That is frequently a large improvement. A queue that treats a bus driver and a banker alike is a different moral object than an auction, and a lottery is a different one again. But it is not the gate coming down, and blurring the two would be the kind of move I have spent fourteen chapters refusing. The four properties in the next section apply perfectly well to a waiting list. They just have to be asked of the list — who administers it, on what grounds, and what happens to the person who is passed over.

And people will say it cannot work here, at scale, with strangers. That is the objection the whole book has been answering. It was said about the latrines, and the latrines got dug. It was said about the wire, and the wire got strung. It was

said about an encyclopedia written by anyone, and the encyclopedia buried its rivals. The claim that ordinary people cannot govern what they share was examined in Chapter Five at the level of theory — Ostrom took the prize for demolishing it — and in every chapter since at the level of fact. What has failed is the categorical version: that it cannot be done at all, anywhere, by people like us. That version is finished. The narrower question — how much of it, how fast, and at what scale — is still open.

The Test, Applied

So take the test out and run it down the list of what a human being needs.

The test is the one the bird posed in Chapter Two — *can you see the door, and can you walk through it without being asked who you are* — with the four working parts named back in Chapter Two and proved at Pullman. Is it **universal**: is belonging enough? Is it **unconditional**: does it survive your being unemployed, unpopular, difficult, or wrong? Is it **dependable**: is it there on your worst day, which is the only day it matters? Is it **portable**: can you leave — the job, the marriage, the town, the plan — and take it with you?

And underneath those, the question that decides all four: **who can say no to you, and what do you do about it if they do?**

Not as a fantasy. As a set of choices, each with a working model already standing somewhere, and each with a real cost that somebody has to carry.

Water mostly passes. Universal enough, unconditional enough, and cheap enough that it never enters a decision. It is not portable — move and you are on a different system, at a different price, sometimes through a different quality of pipe — and it fails on dependability at exactly the wrong moment, because the shut-off notice arrives precisely when a household is least able to answer it. Both failures are choices. Both can be unmade.

Power passes wherever the members hold the wire, and forty-two million Americans already live there. But hold the wire is not the same as pass the test: a co-op with an unchallengeable board and a brisk disconnection policy passes on paper in the spring and fails at a kitchen table in February. The sun, as Chapter One noticed, sends no invoice. What has to be answered for is not who owns the panel. It is who is allowed to switch it off.

Housing is the sharpest failure of portability in American life, which is why so much of the rest bends around it. The land trust does real work — it takes speculation out of the ground and leaves the house standing in the market — and what it does not do is make a home something a person carries. A lease can end. A mortgage does not travel. Most people in this country are one landlord's decision away from a different life, and they arrange the rest of their lives accordingly.

Food passes at the community garden, the food bank, the co-op grocery, and the school cafeteria that stopped asking which children had the money. It fails at scale, for now, because we have chosen to leave the ground under the food supply enclosed. Chapter One's arithmetic stands: capacity was never the problem.

Health fails three of the four, and it fails them in the arrangement most efficient at producing obedience.

It is universal for those over 65 but for most working-age Americans it arrives through an employer.

It is not unconditional: it depends on holding that job, which depends on not being laid off, not being too sick to work, and — this is the part that matters — not being too much trouble.

It is not portable: leave and it stays behind. Which means that for a great many people the decision to walk out of a bad job is also a decision about whether a spouse's medication continues next month. That is not a theory about markets. It is a specific person at a specific kitchen table doing arithmetic about a specific pill and concluding that they cannot afford to be insulted at work.

Every other wealthy country on Earth has chosen otherwise, which is all the proof required that it is a choice.¹³

Knowledge increasingly passes, and passes on all four. The library passed a century ago and passes still — universal, unconditional, dependable, and portable across every town that has one. The free encyclopedia passes. The open-source commons passes. And the machines of Chapter Thirteen, the finest tutors ever built, whose cost per additional student is low and falling — they will pass or fail depending on a decision being made right now, by people who have said on the record that everyone will have access. The chapter before this one held them to it. So should you.

That is what *obliterated* looks like — not a revolution, not a seizure, nothing burned. The test applied to one need after another, each answered with a structure somebody has already built somewhere, until the deliberation that eats a life from the inside — *can I afford to be sick, to learn, to leave, to stop?* — has nothing left to attach to.

Look at that list of questions again, though, because it is a strange list to arrive at after a book about cost.

Only one of the four is about money.

Universal, unconditional, dependable, portable — three of them ask nothing about price at all. They ask who decides, on what grounds, and what happens to you when they decide against you. The bill was always the visible part. What the bill was protecting was somebody's standing to say no to you and have it stick.

The fences do not have to fall all at once. They fall the way they went up: one enclosure at a time, in reverse.

What the Name Could Mean

This country calls itself the land of the free, and has sung it at ballgames through every decade of the meter's advance, and the phrase has mostly been allowed to mean: free to compete, free to win, free — implicitly — to lose everything, since a race must have losers.

But the phrase is sitting right there, available, and nothing in the founding documents forbids reading it structurally. Land of the free: a place engineered so that its people are free — the way we already read *land of the fire department*, if we ever said such a thing. Not a boast about character. A description of infrastructure. The pursuit of happiness, which Jefferson set down as an unalienable right and Chapter Nine refused to throw away just because he failed it, requires somewhere to stand while pursuing. The library is that ground, and the cooperative wire, and the trust-held land, and the unowned code, and the fire truck that rolls without asking. Every one of them was built by neighbors lowering a fence for each other, and every one of them is ordinary now, invisible, beloved, unquestioned — which is what victory looks like, once the deliberation stops.

The people at the Gathering have a word for the day this country celebrates its freedom. They did not replace independence with its opposite. They replaced it with its foundation.

A free people is not a collection of individuals who owe each other nothing. It never was, not on the frontier, not in the forest, not anywhere. A free people is a people that has built its freedom — together, deliberately, one fence at a time — and left the gates open behind them, because they understood the oldest thing we all know, the thing the sun has been demonstrating every morning without ever once knowing it:

What is given freely is not lost. It is what everything else grows from.

Coda — The Sun Doesn't Rise



The sun doesn't rise.

It never has. Not once, in four and a half billion years. The earth turns, and a line of light sweeps westward across it at a thousand miles an hour, and twice a day every place on the planet crosses that line — once into the light, once out of

it. “Sunrise” is a story we tell about the sky. It is a beautiful story, and ancient, and so useful that every language on Earth tells some version of it, and it is wrong. The sun stays put. We turn.

Nothing breaks when you learn this. The dawn is not less worth watching. The word *sunrise* still works fine; everyone knows what you mean. But something quiet shifts, permanently: you now know the difference between the story and the mechanics, and you can never again fully mistake one for the other.

This work has been about a second story of that kind.

The story says that everything must be paid for. That being alive runs a tab. That the food, the shelter, the warmth, the care, the knowledge, the right to stop moving and rest — all of it, from your first breath, arrives with a meter attached, and the meter is not something we built but simply how things are, the way the sun simply rises.

The mechanics run otherwise. The first chapter stood a nineteen-year-old in front of that machinery and let him look: a star burning its own substance and sending the proceeds in every direction, charging nothing, banking nothing, keeping no accounts — and a green world catching that gift and turning it into everything else, also without a ledger, for three billion years before anyone thought to invoice anyone. Cost is real; the second chapter was careful about that, and the ninth was unflinching about it. Energy is spent. Effort is spent. Lives are spent — the forest spends them, Douglass spent his, the people who strung the wire and dug the latrines and raised the barns spent theirs. The cost was never the story.

The *bill* was the story. The idea that the spending creates a debt, that the debt has an owner, and that the owner may stand at the fence and decide who eats. No other species tells it. The jay spends its autumn burying a forest and is owed nothing and knows nothing of owing. Only we tell it — humans, the only species on Earth that ever convinced itself that nothing in life is free — and we have told

it so long and so well that it has come to feel like the turning of the planet itself: not a story at all, just the way things are.

It is a story. Fourteen chapters have walked its edges and found the seams. It was composed, in living memory as these things go; it was installed, and the installers left receipts; it is enforced, at real expense, every day, because a story this much at odds with the mechanics does not maintain itself. And everywhere it lapses — a mountainside in Pennsylvania, a town in the Basque hills, a library, a fire station, a stretch of code running half the world — the older mechanics resume immediately, the way grass resumes in a cracked road. People show up. The work gets done. Nobody stands at the door.

Which is the part to carry out of here, and it is smaller and harder than the version that fits on a banner. The cost is always carried by someone. What can be removed is the gate — and the person standing at it who gets to decide.

Because the fence was never only a price. Chapter Eleven went to a town where nearly everything was provided, at cost, by a man who meant well, and the people who lived there were not free — not because the arrangement was expensive but because one man could take it away, and everyone knew it, and the knowing was the fence. The fences were built. What was built can be unbuilt, one enclosure at a time, in reverse.

And on the far side of it, what waits is not the dissolution of the individual into some gray communal blur — the story's last and favorite threat. The opposite. The commons is not the rival of the self; it is the soil of it. Nobody is less themselves for the library; the library is where selves are assembled. The barn raising did not abolish the family farm — it made forty different farms possible, each run its own stubborn way. The unowned code did not end invention; it handed every inventor on Earth the same workshop. This is the balance the whole design turns on: it takes a community to lower the fences, and it takes an individual — one ego, one appetite, one particular mind that will not leave the question alone — to do the new thing once the fences are down.

But only on one condition, and the book has spent a chapter earning the right to say it. The community that lowers the fence has to be a community you could walk out of. Otherwise it has not removed the gate. It has only moved it, and put friendlier people in charge of it.

Neither is the point without the other. The commons builds the ground. The person grows from it. Freedom is the two of them, turning together, each making the other possible — and neither one is the sun, and neither one is required to stand still.

So: the last page, and the oldest fact in the book still holds. Tomorrow morning the sun will do what it has always done, — no rising, no giving, no knowing. It will burn, because that is what it is, and eight minutes later the proceeds will arrive here, free of charge, as they arrived before the first ledger and will arrive after the last one.

It has no idea it is the counterexample. It has no ideas at all.

The sun does not tell us how to house a city or who should get the transplant or what a nurse is owed. Nature has no rights in it, no consent, no due process, no provision for the child born unable to gather. A world without invoices is not a world with an answer; it is a world with no questions in it, which is a different thing entirely and much less useful. The birds are not a model. They never were.

What the sun does is smaller and it is enough. It proves the ledger is not weather. It is not the tide, not gravity, not the second law. It is a tool, and it was made, and it was made by people no wiser than us, and a thing that was made can be made differently.

The ideas are ours. The stories are ours. So is the deciding.

A seed does not pay to germinate. It falls, or it doesn't; the ground closes over it, or it doesn't; and if the conditions hold it becomes an oak, the way Chapter Two's acorns did, and no invoice was ever cut for the decade of sun and rain it took. A child is not billed for being born. The body does that work — nine months

of it, unasked, on nobody's ledger — before anyone has written a single entry against the new life or decided what it will owe. The bills come after: the hospital, the deed to the field the acorn happened to fall on, the price of what the child will need to eat and wear and learn. Those bills are real. I have spent fourteen chapters saying so and will not now pretend otherwise. But they were never in the thing itself. Life did not arrive pre-metered. We metered it, afterward, on purpose, and then forgot we had.

And a species that can convince itself that nothing in life is free is a species that can convince itself of the truth instead —

Life is free.

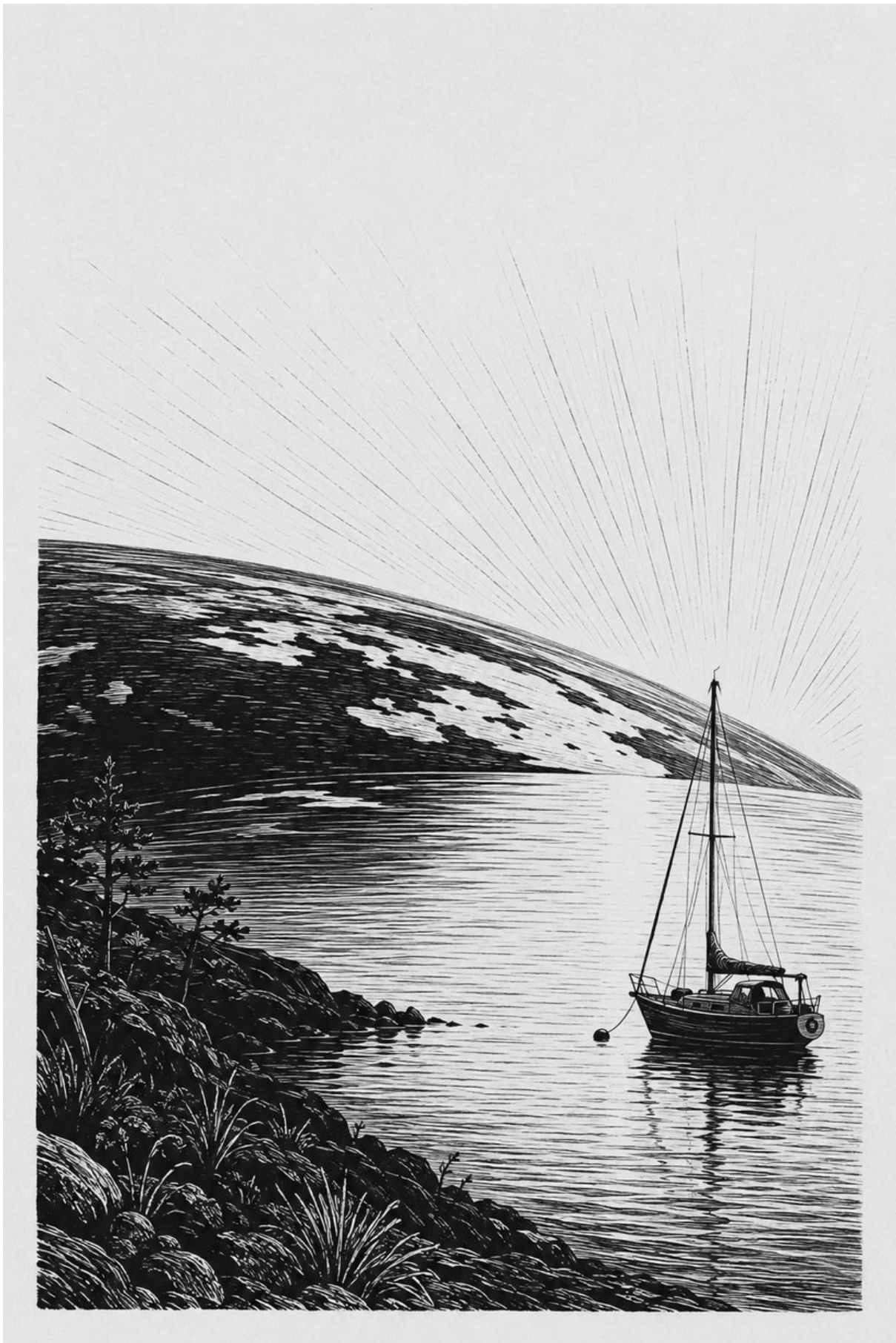
Not free of cost. Fourteen chapters have said otherwise and meant it. Free of the bill, free of the gate, free of the man at the gate who decides. Say it as a thing to be built rather than a thing already true, and it is the only sentence I know that is worth the rest of a life.

We are the only ones who ever needed to be told. So tell each other.

Tell everyone.

You could even tell the sun — it won't understand a word.

It will just keep giving.



Notes

Chapter 1 — Tell the Sun

1. The Sun formed approximately 4.6 billion years ago and has been fusing hydrogen on the main sequence for essentially all of that time; standard references are NASA’s solar fact sheets and standard solar-model treatments (e.g., Bahcall, Pinsonneault & Basu, 2001). One honest qualification: the Sun’s luminosity has not been constant. The “faint young Sun” was roughly 70–75 percent as bright four billion years ago and has brightened gradually since, so the four-and-a-half-billion-year figure in the text describes the *duration* of the Sun’s output, not its steadiness. ↩

2. Core temperature approximately 15 million K; mean Earth–Sun distance approximately 93 million miles (1 AU, 149.6 million km); the proton-proton chain converts roughly 4 million tonnes of solar mass to energy each second. These are standard values; see NASA’s Sun fact sheet and standard solar-astrophysics texts. ↩

3. Frances Moore Lappé, *Diet for a Small Planet* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971). ↩

4. Lappé, *Diet for a Small Planet*. Her figures — 7:1 for livestock generally, 16:1 for beef — are based on U.S. production data of the period. Contemporary feed-conversion ratios vary by species, accounting method, and feed type. The figures are cited as encountered: the 1971 paperback that rearranged how a nineteen-year-old understood his plate. ↩

5. On antibiotic use in food-animal production and antimicrobial resistance: FDA Center for Veterinary Medicine, the annual “Summary Report on Antimicrobials Sold or Distributed for Use in Food-Producing Animals,” documenting the large quantities of medically important antimicrobials sold for livestock use; World Health Organization, “Guidelines on Use of Medically Important Antimicrobials in Food-Producing Animals” (2017); and U.S. Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention, “Antibiotic Resistance Threats in the United States” (2019), on agricultural antimicrobial use as a contributor to resistance. ↩

6. The externality argument — that market price systematically omits costs borne by third parties or the commons — is foundational welfare economics. Arthur Pigou, *The Economics of Welfare* (London: Macmillan, 1920), is the standard treatment. The advantage of citing Pigou here is that it is a century-old mainstream source, not anything ideologically dismissible. ↩

Chapter 2 — Is a Bird Free?

1. Emery, N.J. and Clayton, N.S. (2001). “Effects of experience and social context on prospective caching strategies by scrub jays.” *Nature*, 414, 443–446. The foundational study establishing that jays with a history of pilfering others’ caches re-hide their own food after being observed, while naive (non-pilfering) jays do not. The original re-caching observation is in Clayton, N.S. and Dickinson, A. (1998). “Episodic-like memory during cache recovery by scrub jays.” *Nature*, 395, 272–274. ↩

2. Dally, J.M., Emery, N.J. and Clayton, N.S. (2006). “Food-caching western scrub-jays keep track of who was watching when.” *Science*, 312, 1662–1665. The jays track the identity of the specific observer and adjust re-caching behavior accordingly — a stronger result than the initial finding. ↩

3. On jay caching distances, cache quality, and germination advantage. For the Eurasian jay (*Garrulus glandarius*), Chettleburgh (1952) reported maxima up to roughly 1.2 km, and radio-tracking work finds a mean near 115 m with observed maxima around 450 m (*Acta Ornithologica*, 2018). For the North American blue jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*), Darley-Hill, S. and Johnson, W.C., “Acorn dispersal by the blue jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*),” *Oecologia* 50 (1981): 231–232, document caches to about 1.9 km. The foundational study of the jay–oak symbiosis is Bossema, I. (1979), “Jays and oaks: an eco-ethological study of a symbiosis,” *Behaviour* 70: 1–117. On cache quality and germination: jays select sound acorns and bury them shallowly in open ground better suited to germination than the shaded litter beneath the parent tree (Darley-Hill and Johnson, 1981; Steele et al., “Oak dispersal syndromes,” USDA Forest Service GTR-SRS-073). The “several thousand acorns per autumn” and “about a tenth are duds” estimates are consistent with Bossema (1979) and Chettleburgh (1952). ↩

4. Reid's Paradox: originally identified by Clement Reid, *The Origin of the British Flora* (London: Dulau, 1899). On corvids as the leading explanation for postglacial oak dispersal rates: Johnson, W.C. and Webb, T. III (1989). "The role of blue jays in the postglacial dispersal of fagaceous trees in eastern North America." *Journal of Biogeography*, 16, 561–571. See also Vander Wall, S.B. (1990). *Food Hoarding in Animals*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ↩

5. On documented play in birds. Play in the wild has been described in only a small number of bird species — overwhelmingly the large-brained corvids and parrots — against a world total of roughly 11,000 species (current IOC World Bird List taxonomy). General framework: Burghardt, G.M. (2005), *The Genesis of Animal Play: Testing the Limits* (Cambridge: MIT Press); on avian social play specifically, Ortega, J.C. and Bekoff, M. (1987), "A Comparative Analysis of Social Play in Birds," *Wilson Bulletin* 99(1): 32–54. The literature's own position is that play has been systematically assessed in only a small fraction of bird species. ↩

6. On ravens assessing competitors through play: Bugnyar, T. and colleagues, "Ravens Judge Competitors through Experience with Play Caching," *Current Biology* 17, no. 20 (23 October 2007). Ravens learn an individual competitor's strategy through play-caching interactions — over inedible objects, with human experimenters — and then apply what they learn when caching food. The study concerns the raven's own play interactions rather than its observing another bird; the claim retained in the text is the general one, that ravens take the measure of a rival in the course of play. See also Heinrich, B. and Smolker, R. (1998), "Play in common ravens," in *Animal Play: Evolutionary, Comparative and Ecological Perspectives*, eds. Bekoff and Byers (Cambridge University Press). ↩

7. Marzluff, J.M., Walls, J., Cornell, H.N., Withey, J.C., and Craig, D.P. (2010). "Lasting recognition of threatening people by wild American crows." *Animal Behaviour*, 79, 699–707. Individual human face recognition confirmed; information sharing with flock members also documented. ↩

8. On *ama-gi* and the Sumerian concept of freedom. The term appears in reform tablets attributed to Urukagina (also transliterated Uruinimgina) of the Sumerian city-state of Lagash, dated approximately 2350 BCE. The literal Sumerian meaning is “return to the mother.” Primary sources are compiled in Jerrold Cooper, *Presargonic Inscriptions* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1986). For an accessible secondary discussion linking *ama-gi* to the history of debt, see David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011), pp. 64–65. On the earliest cuneiform tablets from Uruk (circa 3200–3100 BCE) as predominantly accounting records, see Denise Schmandt-Besserat, *Before Writing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992). Samuel Noah Kramer, who identified *ama-gi* as the earliest written reference to the concept of freedom, wrote in *The Sumerians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) that “we still do not know why this figure of speech came to be used for freedom.” The etymology — “return to the mother” — is solid. The semantic link between that phrase and the concept of freedom is genuinely debated among Assyriologists; the usage context (manumission, debt cancellation, restoration of persons and property), not the etymology alone, is what carries the weight of the claim in this chapter. \ ↩

Chapter 3 — Nobody Rules Who Doesn't Deliver

1. *The Declaration of Independence* (1776). All quotations in this chapter follow the National Archives transcription of the Stone Engraving of the engrossed parchment, including its original spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Available at the U.S. National Archives, “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription.” ↩

2. *Declaration of Independence*, second paragraph. ↩

3. Frans de Waal, *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982). The central finding of the Arnhem Zoo observations is that alpha status depends on coalition support rather than physical dominance — Nikkie held alpha position over the physically stronger Luit through his coalition with Yeroen. On impartial intervention: alpha males break up fights between subordinates without favoring allies or friends, providing security for lower-ranking members regardless of personal affiliation; de Waal describes this as a key mechanism by which the alpha “rules by giving.” On consolation behavior specifically (a third party approaching the conflict loser to embrace or groom): this is more precisely documented in de Waal, *Peacemaking Among Primates* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), where post-conflict consolation was systematically studied and named. Both observations are de Waal’s; the citation should reflect the correct book for each claim. ↩

4. Christopher Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). The mechanisms Boehm identifies for maintaining the reverse dominance hierarchy are: public opinion, criticism and ridicule, disobedience, and extreme sanctions. On the innate disposition underlying both orthodox and reverse hierarchies: “all humans are innately prepared to engage in dominance-and-submission behavior, either in orthodox hierarchies or in reverse hierarchies that are operated decisively by the

rank and file” (p. 154). On the resentment that drives egalitarian enforcement: p. 170. On execution as a historically documented extreme sanction in hunter-gatherer societies: Boehm documents specific ethnographic cases throughout the book. The concept was first published in Boehm, Christopher (1993). “Egalitarian Behavior and Reverse Dominance Hierarchy.” *Current Anthropology*, 34(3): 227–254 — a peer-reviewed article predating the book that can serve as an additional citation. ↩

Chapter 4 — The Door You Can't See

1. Thomas Jefferson to William Charles Jarvis, 28 September 1820. Founders Online, National Archives. Quotations follow the original manuscript text as transcribed by Founders Online, preserving Jefferson's spelling and capitalization. Jefferson's full phrase regarding judicial supremacy: "a very dangerous doctrine indeed and one which would place us under the despotism of an oligarchy." [↩](#)

2. Jefferson to Jarvis, 28 September 1820. [↩](#)

3. Jefferson to Jarvis, 28 September 1820. The phrase appears in Jefferson's opening remarks on Jarvis's book, immediately before he registers his disagreement with it. [↩](#)

4. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845). The account of Hugh Auld's prohibition of Frederick's literacy instruction, and Auld's stated reasoning, appears in Chapter VI. The phrases quoted — "forever unfit him to be a slave" (Auld's words as recorded by Douglass) and "From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom" (Douglass's own reflection) — are in the public domain and may be quoted directly. On the legal landscape of antebellum literacy prohibitions: South Carolina's Negro Act of 1740 included the first statutory prohibition on teaching enslaved people to read; Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and other states passed or strengthened similar laws following Nat Turner's Rebellion (1831). For a systematic treatment, see Janet Cornelius, *"When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991). [↩](#)

Chapter 5 — The Commons You’d Fight to Keep

1. The Rural Electrification Administration, established by executive order in 1935 and given statutory footing by the Rural Electrification Act of 1936. ↩

2. Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science*, 162(3859): 1243–1248 (13 December 1968). The paper is one of the most cited in environmental science and is the foundational text for the argument that shared resources require either privatization or coercive regulation to avoid collapse. ↩

3. Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Ostrom received the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel in 2009 — the first woman to do so — for this work. Her case studies include the Törbel mountain commons in Switzerland (documented from 1224, governed under collective rules for approximately eight centuries), Japanese coastal fisheries, Spanish and Philippine irrigation systems. On the English enclosures as the historical commons being enclosed by law rather than destroyed by overuse, the standard treatment is E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991); see also J. M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). ↩

4. *United States v. National City Lines, Inc.* Convictions in 1949; upheld on appeal, 1951. ↩

5. General Motors was fined \$5,000; treasurer H. C. Grossman was fined \$1. The trial judge remarked afterward that he might not have reached the jury’s verdict himself had he tried the case from the bench. ↩

6. Peter Norton, *Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008). On the revisionist literature that reassessed the conspiracy account: Scott L. Bottles, *Los Angeles and the*

Automobile: The Making of the Modern City (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Cliff Slater, “General Motors and the Demise of Streetcars,” *Transportation Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 45–66; Martha J. Bianco, “Kennedy, 60 Minutes, and Roger Rabbit: Understanding Conspiracy-Theory Explanations of the Decline of Urban Mass Transit” (Center for Urban Studies, Portland State University, Discussion Paper 98-11, 1998). ↩

7. On fare caps, and on automobile traffic degrading streetcar schedules: Peter D. Norton, *Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008). Norton documents that street-railway operators blamed automobile congestion for clogging the thoroughfares their cars ran on, slowing the lines and causing late runs. ↩

8. Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956; the federal share of Interstate construction costs was set at 90 percent, funded through the Highway Trust Fund. ↩

Chapter 6 — The Things That Aren't for Sale

1. On the composition of the U.S. fire service: National Fire Protection Association data and the National Volunteer Fire Council Fire Service Fact Sheet (2024). Of roughly 1.04 million firefighters nationally, approximately 676,900 (about 65 percent) are volunteers. An important distinction: this is a share of *firefighters by headcount*. Volunteer departments are concentrated in rural and lower-density areas and collectively protect roughly 30 percent of the U.S. population, while career and mostly-career departments (about 18 percent of departments) protect the remaining ~70 percent. A majority of the people who do this work are unpaid; that is a different measure from the share of the population served by volunteer departments, and the two should not be conflated. ↩

2. Uri Gneezy and Aldo Rustichini, “A Fine Is a Price,” *The Journal of Legal Studies* 29, no. 1 (January 2000): 1–17. Field study conducted at ten private day-care centers in Haifa, Israel, January–June 1998. The introduction of a fine for late pickup produced a significant *increase* in late pickups; when the fine was subsequently removed, the elevated rate of lateness persisted rather than returning to baseline. ↩

Chapter 7 — When Work Stopped Being Life

1. On the customary observance of “Saint Monday” among artisans and the long employer campaign against it. Pin to E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past & Present* 38 (December 1967), and to Douglas A. Reid, “The Decline of Saint Monday, 1766–1876,” *Past & Present* 71 (May 1976): 76–101. [↩](#)

2. Reid, “The Decline of Saint Monday.” The “traded for the Saturday half-holiday” framing is Reid’s central argument; he describes a specific trajectory, largely in Birmingham and the workshop trades, rather than a universal pattern. [↩](#)

3. E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past & Present* 38 (1967): 56–97. Thompson’s observation is that a community in which task-orientation is dominant shows the least demarcation between “work” and “life.” [↩](#)

4. On bells and sound as regulators of pre-industrial time (church, market, curfew), see Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism”; Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside*, trans. Martin Thom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). [↩](#)

5. On the contested causal link between enclosure and proletarianization: a substantial body of agrarian economic history holds that a large landless, wage-dependent population predated the main period of parliamentary enclosure, complicating the claim that enclosure *created* the industrial working class. [↩](#)

6. The complaint is quoted in Thompson’s essay from an eighteenth-century agricultural writer (John Arbuthnot, 1773), objecting that cottagers with access to common land could not be relied upon to take wage work. [↩](#)

7. John Bishton, writing in favor of enclosure in *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Salop* (London: Board of Agriculture, 1794), stated the aim plainly: common land, he observed, “operates upon the mind as a sort of independence,” and after enclosure “the labourers will work every day in the year, their children will be put out to labour early,” so that “that subordination of the lower ranks of society which in the present times is so much wanted, would be thereby considerably secured.” Quoted in J. L. and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer, 1760–1832* (London: Longmans, Green, 1911), in the chapter “The Village Before Enclosure”; see also E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963). ↩

8. William Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (1830). Cobbett’s account of the immiseration of the agricultural laborer, his hostility to enclosure and the paper economy, and his backward-looking defense of an older, more independent rural England. ↩

Chapter 8 — The Lie That You're Lazy

1. Richard B. Lee, *The !Kung San: Men, Women, and Work in a Foraging Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), chapter 9, pp. 250–280. Lee's initial field count from his 1964 Dobe observations measured subsistence work only — food acquisition — and produced the oft-cited figure of roughly 15 hours per week (2.5 working days). When food processing, cooking, firewood, and water collection were included, Lee's own later accounting put women's total at 40.1 hours per week and men's at 44.5 hours per week. By either accounting, !Kung subsistence life was not idle. ↩

2. David Kaplan, "The Darker Side of the 'Original Affluent Society,'" *Journal of Anthropological Research* 56, no. 3 (2000): 301–324; Kristen Hawkes and James O'Connell, "Affluent Hunters? Some Comments in Light of the Alyawarra Case," *American Anthropologist* 83, no. 3 (1981): 622–626. The Alyawarra figures were roughly double the !Kung figures, a discrepancy Hawkes and O'Connell traced almost entirely to whether food processing was counted as work. Marshall Sahlins, "The Original Affluent Society," in *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine, 1972), is the source of the widely repeated three-to-five-hour figure, which does not survive the fuller accounting. ↩

3. David Cesarini, Erik Lindqvist, Matthew J. Notowidigdo, and Robert Östling, "The Effect of Wealth on Individual and Household Labor Supply: Evidence from Swedish Lotteries," *American Economic Review* 107, no. 12 (December 2017): 3917–46. Finding: winning a lottery prize *modestly* reduces earnings; the reduction is immediate, persistent, and similar by age, education, and sex. Most winners do not stop working. ↩

4. Stuart Grassian, "Psychopathological Effects of Solitary Confinement," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 140, no. 11 (1983): 1450–54; Craig Haney, "Mental Health Issues in Long-Term Solitary and 'Supermax' Confinement,"

Crime and Delinquency 49, no. 1 (2003): 124–56. The documented harm of solitary confinement is driven substantially by social isolation rather than by idleness alone. ↩

5. John M. Marzluff, Heather N. Cornell, and John C. Withey, “Lasting Recognition of Threatening People by Wild American Crows,” *Animal Behaviour* 79, no. 3 (2010): 699–707; Heather N. Cornell, John M. Marzluff, and Shannon Pecoraro, “Social Learning Spreads Knowledge about Dangerous Humans among American Crows,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* 279, no. 1728 (2012): 499–508. The transmission claim — that young crows whose parents had been conditioned to scold the dangerous mask scolded it independently, demonstrating vertical social learning — is confirmed verbatim in the Cornell, Marzluff, and Pecoraro (2012) paper. Recognition also spread horizontally to birds never present at the original capture; scolding doubled in frequency and spread at least 1.2 km from the origin site over five years. ↩

6. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–05; translated by Talcott Parsons, New York: Scribner, 1958). Weber’s causal thesis — that Protestant asceticism produced the spirit of capitalism — has been contested for a century. Not in serious dispute is the documented content of the doctrine itself: the calling (*Beruf*) made daily labor in one’s trade a religious duty for every person, and wasted time was accordingly a spiritual offense. ↩

7. Proverbs 6:6–11; 2 Thessalonians 3:10 (King James Version throughout); on *acedia*: Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos* (c. 375 CE); John Cassian, *The Institutes* (c. 420 CE); codified by Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job* (c. 590 CE). Standard treatment of *acedia* as a monastic and spiritual affliction rather than an economic category: Siegfried Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967).
↩

8. The Decalogue point: Exodus 20:8–11, which mandates rest for children, servants, resident foreigners, and livestock — the only labor law in the Ten

Commandments runs toward rest, not toward work. ↩

9. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, chapter 4, on Richard Baxter (*A Christian Directory*, 1673) as the exemplary voice of Puritan time-discipline. Weber, translating and condensing Baxter, renders the point as: “waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins.” ↩

10. Clara E. Mattei, *The Capital Order: How Economists Invented Austerity and Paved the Way to Fascism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), chapter 4, on the Turin factory-council occupations of 1919–1920. ↩

11. Mattei, *The Capital Order*, chapters 2–3 (the wartime managed economies) and 5–8 (the convergence of British Treasury officials and Italian economists and politicians on the austerity program — spending cuts, wage cuts, monetary tightening, gold-standard restoration — presented as neutral economic science while explicitly aimed at restoring the labor-market conditions the war had disrupted). ↩

12. Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 (4 & 5 William IV c. 76). The Act’s “less eligibility” principle — that the condition of paupers receiving relief must be made less eligible (desirable) than that of the lowest independent laborer — encoded the deserving/idle distinction into statute and became the administrative template for British poor relief for the following century. ↩

13. On the violent enforcement of the austerity program in fascist Italy: Mattei (2022), chapters 7–8; R. J. B. Bosworth, *Mussolini’s Italy: Life under the Fascist Dictatorship, 1915–1945* (New York: Penguin, 2006) for the destruction of independent unions and the squadrist violence; the murder of Giacomo Matteotti, Socialist deputy and austerity critic, by fascist agents in June 1924 is documented in all standard histories of the period and in parliamentary records. ↩

14. Edward L. Deci, Richard Koestner, and Richard M. Ryan, “A Meta-Analytic Review of Experiments Examining the Effects of Extrinsic Rewards on Intrinsic Motivation,” *Psychological Bulletin* 125, no. 6 (1999): 627–668. The

meta-analysis covered 128 experiments; its finding concerns tangible, expected rewards and their effect on intrinsic motivation specifically, not all forms of compensation in all conditions. ↩

15. Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (1999). Positive feedback — being told by a person that the work was good — enhanced both free-choice behavior and self-reported interest in the same analysis. An earlier meta-analysis (Judy Cameron and W. David Pierce, 1994) reached the opposite conclusion on rewards; Deci and colleagues published a methodological rebuttal. The Deci position is the field's mainstream, but the dispute is real. ↩

Chapter 9 — The Promise on Paper

1. Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”, address delivered at Corinthian Hall, Rochester, New York, 5 July 1852. All quotations follow the text as published in the Frederick Douglass Papers Project digital edition of the 1852 Rochester pamphlet. Douglass’s 1852 text is in the public domain and may be quoted directly. ↩

2. Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” ↩

3. Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” ↩

4. The Haitian Revolution, 1791–1804. For narrative history, Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World* (Harvard, 2004); C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, remains the classic but is itself a work of political argument and should be cited with that in mind. ↩

5. The 1825 French expedition: Baron Ange René Armand de Mackau arrived off Port-au-Prince aboard the frigate *La Circé* on 3 July 1825, followed by a squadron totaling fourteen French warships carrying 528 cannons. President Jean-Pierre Boyer signed the ordinance on 11 July 1825. ↩

6. The indemnity of 150 million francs was calculated on the basis of articles 44 and 48 of the Code Noir, under which the enslaved labourers on an estate over the preceding thirty years were reckoned at roughly 30–60 percent of the estate’s total property value. ↩

7. On the “double debt”: the 1825 ordinance forced Haiti to take a loan from French banks to pay the first 30-million-franc installment, with the lenders’ fees deducted at origination — a loan taken on to pay the indemnity itself. ↩

8. On the 1838 reduction and the debt’s afterlife: in 1838 France reduced the remaining indemnity (the total on the indemnity itself is commonly given as ~90 million francs), and the indemnity proper was settled around 1883; the *loans*

contracted to service it, however, were refinanced and ultimately moved to American creditors, with the final payment made in 1947 to the National City Bank of New York (now Citibank). The 1947 endpoint and the National City Bank throughline are documented in the *New York Times* investigative series “The Ransom” (2022). ↩

9. On the share of Haitian government revenue consumed by debt service: the *New York Times* series “The Ransom” (2022) reconstructs the payment schedule and estimates the share of Haitian public revenue consumed by debt service across the period. ↩

10. U.S. non-recognition of Haiti until 1862. ↩

Chapter 10 — The Gathering

1. 36 C.F.R. § 251.54. Groups of 75 or more on National Forest System lands are required to obtain a noncommercial group-use permit. [↩](#)

2. U.S. Forest Service, Allegheny National Forest, “Unauthorized Group Use (Rainbow Family Gathering) — Incident Updates,” June–July 2026. The Forest Service mobilized a National Incident Management Team and reported a peak attendance of approximately 1,756 participants on 4 July 2026, at a site approximately 6 miles east of Tidioute, PA, in Warren County along Forest Road 119. [↩](#) 3. On the 1986 Arizona ruling: a federal court dismissed charges against Rainbow attendees and found the group-use regulation unconstitutional as applied, holding that it impermissibly singled out those wishing to gather to exercise First Amendment rights. [↩](#)

4. *United States v. Rainbow Family*, 695 F. Supp. 294 (E.D. Tex. 1988) (Justice, C.J.). The court held the special-use permit regulations violated the First Amendment insofar as they distinguished expressive from other conduct and lacked narrow, objective standards for issuance or denial, and it DENIED the government’s motion for a preliminary injunction. [↩](#)

5. On the pro se checkpoint injunction: in at least one federal civil suit, self-represented (pro se) Rainbow plaintiffs obtained a preliminary injunction, with the court stating that the evidence strongly suggested the Forest Service had selectively targeted its enforcement and that its checkpoint actions might not comply with the Fourth Amendment. [↩](#)

6. *Park v. Forest Service of the United States*, 205 F.3d 1034 (8th Cir. 2000). The district court granted summary judgment for Tracie Park and enjoined the Forest Service from using checkpoints targeting Rainbow Family gatherings; the Eighth Circuit REVERSED, holding that Park lacked standing to seek injunctive relief (she could not show a sufficient likelihood of being subjected to an

unlawful checkpoint at a future gathering), and declining to find that the record supported Forest Service animus against the Rainbow Family. ↩

7. On enforcement practice — citations for minor infractions carrying mandatory court appearances rather than mail-in fines. This rests on first-hand observation: the author has attended Rainbow Gatherings since 1977, and on the accounts of attendees who were cited for minor infractions and required to appear in court in the district where the Gathering was held rather than permitted to pay by mail. ↩

Chapter 11 — The Town That Gave You Everything

1. On the construction and design of Pullman, Illinois (begun 1880; first residents 1881), by George M. Pullman and architect Solon S. Beman, approximately fourteen miles south of central Chicago: the standard scholarly treatment is Stanley Buder, *Pullman: An Experiment in Industrial Order and Community Planning, 1880–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967). On the amenities — brick housing with indoor plumbing and gas, paved streets, sewerage, the Arcade Building, Hotel Florence, the Greenstone Church, parks and an artificial lake — and on the absence of a saloon in the town proper (liquor was available at the Hotel Florence, principally to visitors rather than workers): Buder, chapters 2–4. ↩

2. On company ownership of all property in the town, and on the library subscription fee suppressing usage: Buder, *Pullman*; and Richard T. Ely, “Pullman: A Social Study,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 70 (February 1885): 452–466. ↩

3. On Pullman’s refusal to sell property to residents, and his stated reasoning: Buder, *Pullman*; Ely, “Pullman: A Social Study.” ↩

4. On the international recognition: the town received an award as an exemplary industrial community at the 1896 International Hygienic and Pharmaceutical Exposition in Prague. ↩

5. Ely, “Pullman: A Social Study,” *Harper’s*, February 1885. Ely’s assessment concedes the material superiority of the town and then criticizes its governance as, in substance, a benevolent feudalism incompatible with American self-government. ↩

6. On the 1893–94 wage reductions at Pullman: during the winter of 1893–94 the company cut wages by an average of roughly 25 percent, with variation by department and piece rate, while rents and town charges were held unchanged.

Standard sources: Stanley Buder, *Pullman*; Almont Lindsey, *The Pullman Strike: The Story of a Unique Experiment and of a Great Labor Upheaval* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942). ↩

7. On the company's treatment of the town as an investment expected to return a fixed rate, and on rents being held while wages fell: Buder, *Pullman*; Lindsey, *The Pullman Strike*. The company's public position was that the town's accounts and the manufacturing accounts were separate businesses, and the rents were set to guarantee a six percent return on the company's investment in building the town — the figure standardly cited and corroborated across the historical accounts. ↩

8. On pay envelopes reduced to near nothing after rent deduction: accounts of the 1894 grievances include envelopes of a few cents, the most-quoted being two cents for a fortnight. ↩

9. On the Pullman Strike (May 1894), the American Railway Union boycott under Eugene V. Debs, the federal injunction, the deployment of federal troops in July 1894, and the deaths that followed: Lindsey, *The Pullman Strike*; David Ray Papke, *The Pullman Case: The Clash of Labor and Capital in Industrial America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999). ↩

10. *People ex rel. Moloney v. Pullman's Palace Car Co.*, 175 Ill. 125 (1898). The Illinois Supreme Court held that the company's ownership and operation of the town exceeded its corporate charter and ordered divestiture of property not required for its manufacturing business. ↩

11. James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: The New Press, 2005). Loewen documents towns and suburbs that excluded Black residents (and in some cases Chinese, Jewish, and other groups) through ordinance, restrictive covenant, real-estate practice, posted warning signs, and violence, and argues that the great majority of all-white communities outside the South became so deliberately rather than incidentally. ↩

12. *Shelley v. Kraemer*, 334 U.S. 1 (1948), holding that judicial enforcement of racially restrictive covenants constitutes state action barred by the Fourteenth Amendment — while leaving the covenants themselves lawful to write and voluntarily observe. On the scale and persistence of covenant-based exclusion and on federal mortgage practice, see Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright, 2017). ↩

13. Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, Pub. L. 78-346, 58 Stat. 284. On scale and effect: Suzanne Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005). ↩

14. On the deliberate design of local administration and the role of Representative John E. Rankin of Mississippi, who chaired the House Committee on World War Veterans’ Legislation: Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*, chapter 5. ↩

15. On differential outcomes in practice — steering of Black veterans toward vocational rather than collegiate programs, loan denials, and the interaction between the mortgage guarantee and redlining and covenants in the North: Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*; Rothstein, *The Color of Law*; Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens*. ↩

16. On governance criticism of rural electric cooperatives — low member turnout in board elections, entrenched boards, limited contestation: this is the same body of criticism already cited in the final chapter’s “Honest Ledger” section. ↩

Chapter 12 — Abundance Is Already Here

1. Picard to Ralph Offenhouse, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, “The Neutral Zone,” Season 1, Episode 26, first broadcast 16 May 1988. ↩

2. The Culture novels by Iain M. Banks, published 1987–2012: *Consider Phlebas* (1987), *The Player of Games* (1988), *Use of Weapons* (1990), *The State of the Art* (1991), *Excession* (1996), *Inversions* (1998), *Look to Windward* (2000), *Matter* (2008), *Surface Detail* (2010), *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012). All published by Orbit (UK) / various US publishers. *The Player of Games* (1988) is the usual recommended entry point to the sequence. ↩

3. Banks, Iain M. “A Few Notes on the Culture” (1994). Originally written for and distributed on Usenet; widely reprinted. This is the primary source for Banks’s stated intentions about the Culture as an argument about human nature and political economy rather than a prediction or prescription. ↩

4. Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974. The subtitle is Le Guin’s own, and is the source for the chapter’s characterization of the novel’s stance. ↩

5. The Great Law of Peace (Gayanashagowa) is the foundational law of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, transmitted orally and later transcribed in multiple versions. The sixth nation — the Tuscarora — joined the Confederacy in the early 18th century (c. 1722). The founding date of the Confederacy is debated: scholarly estimates range from the 12th to the 17th century; current academic consensus favors the late 15th or early 16th century. ↩

6. Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), *Primera Declaración de la Selva Lacandona*, issued January 1, 1994. The opening line in Spanish: “Somos producto de quinientos años de lucha.” English translation standard and consistent across published versions. The declaration is a public document, widely available in both languages. ↩

7. On the sustained pressure against the Zapatista autonomous communities: the general characterization is documented across academic and human rights sources, including Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); and human rights monitoring of Chiapas from 1994 onward by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. ↩

Chapter 13 — Freedom Isn't Free, But It Should Be

1. Elon Musk, remarks at the UK AI Safety Summit, Bletchley Park, November 1–2, 2023. The passage is from Musk's conversation with UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on 2 November 2023, which was livestreamed and remains available in recordings of the event; the wording is consistent across contemporaneous transcripts and news reports. ↩

2. Elon Musk, remarks at Viva Technology, Paris, June 2024. The wording is consistent across contemporaneous news reports of the event. ↩

Chapter 14 — The Land of the Free

1. On cooperative labor practices in American frontier and rural life — barn raisings, husking bees, threshing rings — see Sally McMurry, *Transforming Rural Life: Dairying Families and Agricultural Change, 1820–1885* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), on the exchange economies of mutual farm labor; and McMurry, *Families and Farmhouses in Nineteenth-Century America: Vernacular Design and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). ↩

2. NRECA (National Rural Electric Cooperative Association), Electric Co-op Facts & Figures. As of the most recent fact sheets: approximately 830–832 distribution cooperatives (with ~60 generation-and-transmission co-ops, ~890 total members), serving an estimated 42 million people across 48 states and 56% of the U.S. landmass, owning about 42% of the nation’s electric distribution lines. The persistent-poverty figure — co-op territory includes 92% of the nation’s persistent-poverty counties — appears in the NRECA/CFC report *Economic Powerhouses: The Economic Impacts of America’s Electric Cooperatives* (2023). ↩

3. On electric cooperatives deploying rural broadband over existing infrastructure: National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, broadband program reporting and its published surveys of member fiber-to-the-home deployment (nreca.coop). ↩

4. Mondragón Corporation, Annual Report 2024: 70,085 workers; €11.213 billion in sales for industrial and distribution cooperatives (a 1.6% increase over 2023); approximately 81 cooperatives plus 12 R&D centers; largest employer in the Basque Country and fifth-largest private employer in Spain. Founded 1956 in Mondragón (Arrasate), Gipuzkoa, by graduates of the technical school established by Fr. José María Arizmendiarieta; first product paraffin heaters. ↩

5. On the Mondragón pay ratio: the cap within cooperatives is a maximum of 1:6, lowest to highest paid, adopted in 1988. The ratio began at 1:3 at the federation's founding and was widened to roughly 1:4.5 in the 1970s; each change was made by member vote. Source: Mondragón Corporation governance and corporate-values materials (mondragon-corporation.com). ↩

6. On the Fagor Electrodomésticos bankruptcy (2013) and worker relocation: Fagor filed for protection with roughly €1.1 billion in debt; the federation subsequently relocated the large majority of Fagor's worker-members to other cooperatives, with reported figures on the order of 1,700 of 1,900 re-employed within the group. ↩

7. On the 2022 departures: the worker-owners of ULMA Group and Orona voted to leave the Mondragón federation in 2022, an estimated workforce reduction of ~13% and sales reduction of ~15% for the group; as successful cooperatives they had been contributing a share of profits to the federation's inter-cooperative solidarity funds. Earlier departures include Ampo and Irizar (2008). ↩

8. Champlain Housing Trust: founded 1984 (as the Burlington Community Land Trust, with municipal support; merged 2006 with the Lake Champlain Housing Development Corporation), Burlington, Vermont. It remains the largest community land trust in the United States; as of 2025 its portfolio comprised roughly 2,200 rental apartments and some 565 shared-equity (owner-occupied) homes, together with cooperative, special-needs, and commercial/community space, and it continued to expand (new permanently affordable homes under construction at Cambrian Rise, Burlington, in 2025). Received the United Nations World Habitat Award (2008). On deepening affordability: homes affordable to households at approximately 54–57% of area median income, improved from ~59% at the program's start (per the performance evaluation *Lands in Trust, Homes That Last*, Davis & Stokes, 2009, and subsequent analyses). ↩

9. On CLT foreclosure rates versus conventional: national surveys during and after the 2008 crisis (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy / National CLT Network studies by Emily Thaden and colleagues) found CLT homeowners foreclosed at rates several times lower than conventional mortgage holders. ↩

10. Linus Torvalds released the Linux kernel in 1991; it is licensed under the GNU General Public License (GPL), authored by Richard Stallman and the Free Software Foundation, whose copyleft provision requires derivative works to carry the same freedoms. ↩

11. On Linux's prevalence: it is the dominant operating system for internet servers, runs all of the TOP500 list of the world's fastest supercomputers (100% since November 2017), and underlies Android, the world's most widely used mobile operating system. ↩

12. The "cancer" remark: Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer, interview with the Chicago Sun-Times, June 2001, describing Linux as "a cancer that attaches itself in an intellectual property sense to everything it touches." Microsoft subsequently became a major open-source contributor and joined the Linux Foundation (2016).
↩

13. On health systems: all comparable high-income countries provide universal or near-universal health coverage through varied mechanisms (single-payer, multi-payer with mandates, national health services); the United States is the outlier among wealthy nations in leaving a substantial population uninsured and in exposing insured patients to cost-driven care avoidance. ↩

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