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Building the Competition and Antitrust Infrastructure of Tomorrow

Anatomy of the Machine That Keeps the Price Honest

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IntroductionIntroduction

The commonest number in any country is the one on the price tag, and the rarest thing about that number is the question nobody thinks to ask of it: who was allowed to argue with it? A price set in a contest is information, the whole market voting with its feet until the number settles where it must; a price set in a quiet room is a tax, collected by whoever was in the room. The two prices look identical on the shelf, scan identically at the till, and cost the country entirely different amounts, and the machine this book takes apart is the one whose whole job is to know the difference. It does not set prices, does not own shops, does not deliver a single good, and almost nobody can name it, and yet it is present in every honest purchase a country makes, the way a referee is present in every fair game without ever touching the ball.

Most machines in this catalog are visible: the bus at the kerb, the pipe under the street, the register at the company desk. The competition machine is invisible by design, and its work shows up only as the absence of things: the fuel price that follows the crude price down as quickly as it followed it up, the bid for the road contract that comes in below the last one, the shelf that carries a rival's bread beside the baker's own. The reader has met this machine's handiwork a thousand times without meeting the machine, which is why the chapters that follow are all rooms: rooms are where an invisible machine becomes visible, and the rooms of a competition authority are stranger than most, because they are rooms built to watch rooms.

The tour follows the series' habit of one room per chapter behind one keeper of that room, and the rooms here run from the front counter to the back stair: the notification desk where mergers knock and the clock starts, the study room where a whole market is mapped without a single raided drawer, the raid room where the state takes a company's secrets at first light and must account for every page, the leniency window where conspirators queue to confess in exchange for the only immunity the state sells, the dominance file where mere size is watched without punishing success, the remedies workshop where a cure is built for a sick market, the decision chamber where the case is judged by the authority itself, the fine desk where the punishment is computed in daylight arithmetic, the appeal tribunal where the machine is made to defend its own work, and the advocacy desk where the authority argues with the rest of the government, its largest and least disciplined competitor.

The setting is the same kind of composite country the earlier volumes built for

their machines: invented whole, about ten million people, a capital on a river, a second city of factories, a valley of farms, and a competition authority of about four hundred staff whose yearly load the reader will come to know as a familiar set of round figures: about sixty mergers knocking, a dozen of them worth a full review, a couple of studies, one cartel being taken apart, a handful of firms big enough to be watched, and fines that in an eventful year add up to less than the country spends on its parks. Every figure in the book is one of these teaching numbers, rounded for the argument and labelled as invented here once and meant throughout, since a book about honest arithmetic that fudged its own would forfeit its subject.

The week the rooms are watched through is a rough one, on the understanding that machines are examined best under load. A grocery merger is notified at the Monday open: two of the country's four chains, holding thirty-four parts of the shelf in a hundred and twenty-two, asking to marry. At first light on the Tuesday the raid room takes the bread cartel's price lists. On the Wednesday the dominance file is opened on the toll bridge that owns the only crossing of the gorge, and the same afternoon the leniency queue's first confession arrives and the cartel's wall starts to crack from the inside. The Thursday belongs to the remedies workshop, arguing store sales against a fix-it-first promise, and the Friday to the decision chamber, which hears the merger and prices the bread fine in public arithmetic. The Saturday closes with the bread price printed unchanged, which the reader may think an anticlimax until the book explains why an unchanged price is this machine's whole product.

Two cautions, given early because the subject invites both errors. First, the machine does not protect the small seller against the big one; it protects the contest, and a small firm that fixes prices with its neighbours will meet the raid room as surely as any giant, while a giant that won its share by simply being better has a right to it that the authority is bound in law to respect. Second, the seams between this book and its neighbours are settled by treaty: the company register keeps the certificate and its truths, the securities book keeps the listed market's disclosure rules and will share the merger that crosses both, the consumer book keeps the lying label and the unsafe good, the patent book keeps the granted monopoly while this book polices its abuse, the tax book keeps the subsidy ledger while this one argues about its competitive effects, the courts belong to the legal book, the procurement desk to the government book, and the contest on the field to the sports volumes. Where a case crosses a border, the treaty is honoured on both sides and

named in the chapter where it happens.

The machine's ordinary year, seen whole before the rooms are entered, is calmer than the week this book watches and worth knowing first. About sixty knocks at the desk, of which most clear in the first phase without an argument worth having. A dozen deep reviews, a couple of studies commissioned or closed, the census season's shop-checkers in the streets for a fixed month of the year, one cartel taken apart, usually through the window and not the wall. A handful of engagements written to the giants, some answered with conduct changed and no case ever filed. A shelf of opinions to the ministries, most adopted in part, one or two ignored and printed. Two or three decisions appealed, one lost. The whole year's fines, in an eventful one, less than the country spends on its parks, and the machine's own budget a rounding error beside either, about four hundred staff for ten million people, or one officer for every twenty-five thousand citizens and their whole economy of contests. The difficult week the chapters watch concentrates the year's eventfulness into five days for teaching, the series' standing trade, and the reader should scale every room's drama back down to this ordinary paragraph when asking what the machine costs and what it daily does.

The machine was itself born in a quarrel, and the reader should know it, since the founding argument still runs through every room. The prevention school held that the only merger worth policing is the one stopped before it happens, and the machine's clock, its notification duty and its consummation offence are their monument. The punishment school held that a state which cannot prove a conspiracy after the fact will never be believed when it predicts one, and the raid room, the window and the fine desk are theirs. The founders, who could not choose, built both and housed them in one building, and the machine's character ever since has been the standing truce between the two: the desk's officers think the raid room wasteful, the raid room thinks the desk credulous, and the chamber, staffed from both, keeps the peace by publishing reasons neither school can disown.

The machine keeps one public document in which all its rooms are numbered, and the reader should meet it here before the rooms are walked: the yearly report, the composite country's whole machine bound in a single volume, published on a fixed date, unpunctual only once in the machine's history and never since. Its tables are the book's standing figures, and the reader who asks any room for its numbers is asking for a page of this report: the knocks and the lanes, the census sheets, the raids and their challenges, the window's

arrivals, the watch-list's five names, the cures and their breaches, the decisions and their dissents, the annexes and their collection, the losses and the ignored opinions. The report's last page is the machine's own accounting: the budget, the staff, the fines banked to the treasury and the deliberately blank line where a revenue-hungry machine would print its share. The reader should hold the whole book's method in this one document: every figure the chapters teach is a figure a citizen can request, and the yearly report is the machine's standing answer to the question the first chapter asked of it, whether it is a sieve or a wall, printed once a year in tables anyone can count.

The book's standing self-test, for the reader who wants one before the rooms are walked, is the series' own: at the end of any chapter, try to name the room's instrument, its ordinary day, its watched number, its border with the machine next door, and its answer to the rough week's events. Any room whose five answers blur is a room worth re-reading, and the composite country's rooms were built so that the five answers are distinct, since the machine's founders held, as this series holds throughout, that a machine whose organs are interchangeable is a machine that has stopped being an anatomy and become a bureaucracy. The chapters each close their own questions in the reader's own voice, and the Last Word gathers the whole set into the ten questions a citizen can put to any country's competition machine, whatever its statutes call it.

The machine's delegations are its treaties in motion, and the reader should see the pattern once before the rooms show it a dozen times: almost nothing the machine does ends inside its own building. The knock is delegated to the study room's map, the map to the chamber's reasons, the reasons to the tribunal's margin, the fine to the treasury's ledger, the cure to the trustee's calendar, the watch to the advocate's opinion, and every delegation has a written instrument the citizen can read, the file's routing sheet as legible as the decision's cover. The book's teaching is the pattern itself: infrastructure is a chain of handovers witnessed on paper, and the competition machine, invisible as it is, is mostly paperwork for the purpose that the paperwork is where the visibility lives.

The book's figures, collected together for the reader who wants them numbered as the composite country numbers them: ten million people, four hundred staff, one officer to twenty-five thousand citizens. Sixty mergers a year knocking, a dozen to the deep review, two blocked or conditioned. One census season, one cartel, three or four studies, a handful of giants watched,

fines in an eventful year below the parks budget. The grocery market's hundred-part shelf at thirty-four, twenty-two, eighteen, twelve and fourteen. The merger clock at twenty days and twenty. The bread ring at three mills and eight seasons of letters. The immunity scale at zero, a quarter, and the rest. The fine ceiling at a tenth of a year's takings. The appeal window short and unforgiving, the loss rate one year in six, the breach rate one cure in eight. Every figure round, every figure invented, every figure carried unchanged from room to room, and the reader who reaches the Last Word can check that the carrying was honest.

The book's own dusk-note, written before the rooms are walked, is the founders' instruction the machine's intake officers still read aloud on their first day, and the reader should hear it once: judge the contest, not the contestant; publish what you do; keep the clock you ask others to keep; take nothing you cannot sign for; and remember that the fine is the machine's failure counted, since the market that needed fining is a market the machine arrived at too late. Everything the ten chapters show is that instruction lived, and the reader who returns to it after the Last Word will find each clause was a room.

A caution for the whole book, stated once here and meant in every room: machines like this one fail in two opposite directions, and the reader should learn the failure signs the way the machine's own intake does. The first failure is capture, the machine that clears everything, raids nothing, watches no one and argues never, which keeps every statute on its books and none of them in its lanes; its sign is the empty report, tables with no raids, no engagements, no opinions, a machine whose ordinary year is too clean. The second failure is zealotry, the machine that sees conspiracy in every price that rises and dominance in every firm that wins, whose lanes clog, whose fines climb, whose advocacy desk argues with the whole economy; its sign is the docket, the endless reviews, the business that cannot plan a season. The composite country's machine was built between the two, and the reader's own audit of any country's machine is mostly a question of which failure it is nearer to, asked with the same ten papers either way.

The whole book can be carried as ten documents, and the introduction's closing inventory lists them once, as a kit the reader assembles room by room: the log book's receipt from the desk, the atlas and its method annex from the study room, the warrant folder and the signed register from the raid, the marker letter and the published scale from the window, the watch-list and the engagement letters from the file, the trustee's template and the sunset

calendar from the workshop, the decision's cover with its reasons and dissent from the chamber, the annex and the blank remittance line from the fine desk, the benchbook and the loss register from the tribunal, and the opinion with the ministry's answer from the advocacy desk. Every one of the ten exists in some form in every country that has a competition machine, every one is public under the composite country's law, and the reader's whole education is the discovery that these ten papers, asked for by name, will open any machine's doors.

One more framing before the rooms: the book asks the reader to keep two clocks in view at once, the way the machine does. The first is the week's clock, the five days the chapters watch, tight and dramatic, the knock and the raid and the confession and the argument and the arithmetic. The second is the statute's clock, the slow one, the revision cycles and the census calendars and the staggered colleges, on which the machine's real work is done: the atlas that was drawn before the case, the window's prices printed before the cartel formed, the loss register kept before the loss. The machine's founders believed, and the book will argue, that the second clock is the machine's true product and the first is only where the second is tested, and the reader who finishes the Last Word holding both clocks will have read the book the machine itself would recommend.

The ten chapters are organs that can be read alone; only the week's chronology is lost by opening at the raid room or the fine desk, and the introduction has just spent the chronology in full. What the reader keeps for the whole book are the country's own round figures, carried unchanged from room to room: sixty mergers, four chains, three mills, one bridge, and the fine capped at a tenth of a year's takings, which is the number the last half of the book is slowly building toward.

The introduction's recap, in the machine's own voice: I am the room you never enter, and this is my whole body: a desk that starts clocks, a room that draws borders, a room that takes what a judge names, a window that buys truth, a file that watches giants, a workshop that builds contestants, a chamber that argues in public, a desk that computes punishment, a court I do not own, and a voice that argues with my own government. You have met none of me, and you meet me every morning at the price.

Chapter 1: The Notification Desk — Where the Bargain KnocksChapter 1: The Notification Desk — Where the Bargain Knocks

Every case the competition machine ever handles begins as a knock, and the knock sounds on the notification desk, a counter on the ground floor of the authority's building that a courier could mistake for a post office window were it not for the clock. The clock is the desk's defining instrument and the reader should hold its shape from the first page: a merger that has crossed the threshold set in the merger law must be notified before it closes, and from the moment the filing lands, a fixed number of working days begins to run, in this country's statute twenty, extendable once by a further twenty where the case turns out to need the deep review. Inside that window the parties may not close their bargain; outside it, once the days have run and the authority has not acted, the marriage may proceed unexamined. The whole drama of merger control is arithmetic on a clock, and the notification clerk is the person who starts it.

The desk's craft begins in paperwork, and the paperwork is not decoration. A proper notification is a self-portrait the parties must paint under oath: the two firms' yearly takings, the shares they hold in every market they touch, the overlap maps, the internal studies both boards commissioned before agreeing to the deal, and, most quietly important, the documents where each firm described the other as a rival. The clerk's first read is not for economics but for honesty of shape: the filing that lists three overlapping markets almost always lists five, because the parties' definition of a market has a well-known tendency to be exactly as wide as their shares are small, and the desk's analysts spend their first days on a notification redrawing the market's borders with the parties' own papers. The internal studies are the desk's ore. A board does not spend money on a market study about a firm it regards as irrelevant, so the studies a merging pair commissioned about each other, ordered into the file by rule, tell the desk where the boards themselves believed the contest lived.

The threshold that brings a bargain to this desk is the first number in the book and deserves a slow sentence. In this country, a merger must be notified when the combined firms' yearly takings cross a round line set in the statute, together with a test that keeps the line from swallowing the corner shop: both sides must have some real business in the country, so that a foreign giant buying a foreign rival does not knock here for permission, and the giant buying

the corner shop does not either. Below the line, no knock, no review; the machine deliberately does not watch every marriage, because a machine that watched everything would judge nothing well. The line is where the legislature priced the desk's attention, and like every price in this book it is an argument, renewed every few years in the statute's revision cycle, between the cost of an unexamined merger and the cost of examining them all.

The economics the desk reads for is taught in one word: overlap, and its second, divergence. Two firms that sell the same thing in the same towns overlap, and their merger subtracts a contestant from every town's shelf. Two firms that sell to each other instead, the mill to the baker, stand in a vertical posture, and their merger subtracts a fence rather than a contestant, raising a different question: whether the combined firm will squeeze its rivals' supplies or its customers' shelves. The composite country's notified case is pure overlap. The grocery market the two chains inhabit holds four of them: the largest with thirty-four parts of the shelf in a hundred, the second with twenty-two, and behind them two smaller chains with eighteen and twelve, with the independents and cooperatives holding the last fourteen. The filing says the marriage is about buying power against the suppliers, and the filing is partly true, and the desk's task over the week is to find out what the other part is.

The desk's ordinary work has a rhythm the week's case will strain. A year brings the desk about sixty knocks; most clear inside the first phase, because most mergers are honest and small and the clerk's paperwork finds no overlap worth a fight. About a dozen each year go to the deep review, and of those perhaps two end with conditions or, rarely, a refusal, the figure the whole machine is known by in the newspapers and resented by in the boardrooms. The desk's backlog is public and its clock is public, and the parties' lawyers phone daily in the week of a big filing not because they doubt the calendar but because twenty working days is a long time to hold a billion-dollar bride at the altar, and the clerk's measured answer, given the same way to every caller, is the machine's first lesson in even-handedness: the clock serves the file, not the file's impatience.

The Monday of the week the book watches is the desk's biggest ordinary day. The filing arrives at the open, signed by both chains, and the clerk logs the time because the time matters: the parties closed a share purchase the prior week, and one of the merger law's hard rules, enforced by this desk with the tribunal's backing, is that consummation before notification is not a

technicality but an offence in itself, since a machine that can be presented with a done deal is a machine that can be contested after the fact, and merger control only works as prevention. The file is complete, which the clerk notes with approval: the boards' studies are in it, including the larger chain's shelf study that names the smaller chain as its closest rival in the capital's northern suburbs, a sentence the parties were obliged to include and would not have included one day earlier than obliged. The clock starts. Twenty days run to the close of the week after next, and the file walks upstairs with the courier's time-stamp on its cover.

The reader standing at this counter learns the machine's first working questions, and they are worth carrying to any country's desk. Ask how many mergers were notified last year, and how many went to the deep review, and how many were blocked: the three numbers together say whether the machine is a sieve or a wall. Ask what the filing must contain, and whether the parties' own market studies are in it: the rule that compels self-portraits is the desk's quiet masterpiece. Ask how long the clock runs, and what happens to a party that closes early: the answers measure whether prevention is real or rhetorical. The composite country's answers are sixty, a dozen, and two; the studies are in the file; the clock runs twenty and twenty; and early closing draws a fine without excuse. None of these figures is a secret, and a desk that keeps them as secrets has told the reader something too.

The desk's objects deserve the reader's eye before its week does, since the room's character is in its furniture. The clock board is a real board, a wall display the whole floor can see, with the sixty open filings as brass tags hung in lanes by the day they expire, moved left as the days run, and the board's honesty is the desk's discipline: a tag moved early, a filing nudged out of its lane by a friendly phone call, would be visible to the whole building and is therefore rare. The log book is the desk's second instrument, a bound register in which every knock is entered by hand before anything digital is touched, because the machine's founders, who had watched other machines lose their memories to failing systems, wanted the knock itself to exist on paper that could be sworn over. The receipt stamp carries the desk's own number and the hour. The filing's cover is the parties' first authored object, and the clerk reads covers the way a customs officer reads passports: the over-thick envelope with the too-thin letter inside is the filing that will need the deep review, and the modest envelope with the fat index inside is the honest one, a correlation the desk has never published but every clerk has learned.

On the ordinary day, the desk's rhythm is nothing like the week's. Three knocks, perhaps four, most below the line's interesting side: the bakery buying its rival's second oven, the haulier folding a cousin's routes in, filings the clerk can clear in the first phase with a morning's reading. The desk's ordinary craft is the calendar's: the clerk's first question to a new knock is not whether the merger is honest but which lane has room, since the statute's lanes run on working days and the desk's staff is sized for sixty, and the filing that arrives in the census month waits like everyone else. The ordinary day's quietest duty is the pre-notification conference, the meeting the parties' lawyers ask for before they file anything, where the desk explains the clock, the studies rule, and the overlap disclosure in neutral terms it will repeat under oath later, the machine's belief being that a filing that surprised the clerk is a filing the clerk failed to teach.

The desk's standing quarrel is about its own kindness, and the reader should hear it argued honestly. The pre-notification conference teaches the parties the machine's methods: the studies rule, the overlap disclosure, the census's power, and the conference's defenders say the teaching is the point, since a filing that arrives honest saves both sides a season. Its critics, usually the raid room's officers seconded to a case, answer with the leakage argument: counsel who has been taught exactly where the machine's maps are sharpest drafts the filing to blur exactly there, widening every market the census drew, and the desk's niceness becomes a course in evasion. The desk's answer is the machine's whole doctrine, told in miniature: a state that hides its method from the parties will one day hide it from the tribunal, and the desk keeps teaching, files the blurred submissions anyway, and lets the study room's borders do the arguing.

The desk's succession is an apprenticeship in paper. A new clerk sits second chair for a full cycle of the calendar before touching a lane, reading the log book's past years with the retiring clerk's marginal notes: the filings that cleared too fast, the one the desk regretted, the phone call that came too close to moving a brass tag. The clock board itself is handed over in a witnessed hour, lane by lane, the outgoing clerk walking the incoming through every open filing's temper, and the machine's founders made the handover witnessed not from distrust but from the desk's own teaching: a clock that survives its keepers must be a clock whose handing-over can be sworn to.

The desk's watched numbers are its lanes, and the reader should learn the desk's own way of reading them. The first is the occupancy count, the open

filings against the staff, watched monthly, since a desk whose lanes clog will begin clearing filings for calendar rather than merit, the failure the clock board was built to prevent. The second is the first-phase share, the proportion of knocks that clear without the deep review, watched for drift, since a share that climbs quietly may mean an honest market or a desk that has stopped looking, and the desk's practice is that the share's explanation must be written in the report each year rather than assumed. The third is the consummation count, the early closings caught and fined, watched proudly, since the number is the machine's prevention made visible: a small count means either obedience or blindness, and the desk tells the two apart by the audits the report also prints.

The desk's future is arriving as filings the founders never imagined, and the room is honest about the strain. The bargains knocking now include algorithms: the booking platform's marriage of two matching engines, the loyalty scheme whose merger is a merger of data rather than shelves, and the desk's lane clock, built for boardrooms that met in person, now runs against parties whose overlap is a vector of code. The desk's preparation is the study room's and the chamber's shared homework: the filings of the composite country's revision cycle now ask for the datasets behind the deal, the matching engines' logic described in plain language, and the pre-notification conference teaches the new questions, since the machine's founders' logic still holds, that a state which cannot see the bargain cannot judge it, and the bargains have simply moved from the boardroom into the machine.

The reader's check for this desk is one worked slowly, with the composite figures. A filing arrives: the capital's two bus operators, holding a third of the city's commutes between them, propose to merge, and the notification states the overlap is none, since the operators' routes share no street. The reader who has held the desk's first questions should reach for the study room's map before the arithmetic: the overlap that matters is not the street but the journey, and if the census shows the commuters walking between the operators' stops, the market the filing did not draw is the market the desk will. The worked answer: the desk clears nothing on the filing's own borders, requests the journey data the operators hold, and the reader who answered the request before reading this sentence has understood the room, since the desk's craft is never the merger's stated market and always the map under the filing.

The desk's delegations are its lanes' ends. The filing that clears in the first phase is delegated back to the parties with the receipt, and the marriage

proceeds unseen, the desk's whole work being the clearing. The filing that does not clear is delegated upward with the file complete, the studies rule observed, to the study room for the borders and the workshop for the cure, and the desk's last duty on such a file is the clock's honest end: the days consumed by each room noted on the routing sheet, so the chamber can see, when it judges the case, exactly where the machine's own time went, since a machine that taxes the parties' calendars owes the same audit to itself.

Monday's dusk at the desk is the clerk's longest evening, and the reader should see it. The grocery file has walked upstairs, the lanes have been re-pinned, and the clerk stays past the building's dimming to finish the log book's entries by hand, the knock's hour, the courier's name, the clock's arithmetic entered twice and initialled once. The evening's one visitor is the pre-notification query the week's parties' rivals have already begun to phone: the third chain's counsel, asking whether the notification is public yet, and the clerk's answer is the desk's own doctrine given gently, that the file publishes on the register in the morning and the lane is pinned then and not before. The clerk walks out past the clock board and does not touch the brass tag once, which is the day's whole discipline counted in an untouched hand.

The desk's failure modes are worth the reader's study, since the desk is where capture shows first. The desk that becomes a toll is the quiet failure: clearances slowed past the statute's days, the clock gamed by requests for papers the rule never required, the machine's prevention priced into every honest merger as delay, and the reader's detector is the first-phase share drifting down while the staff count holds, a desk working no harder and clearing less. The desk that becomes a stamp is the opposite failure: the share drifting up, the studies rule quietly waived, the parties' self-portraits accepted as drawn, and the reader's detector is the deep-review count falling while the economy's mergers rise. The composite country's own desk publishes the three numbers for exactly this audit, the desk's officers say, because a desk that hides its shares is a desk that has chosen its failure.

The desk's own arithmetic, restated for the reader's pocket: sixty knocks a year is a knock every six working days, a dozen deep reviews is one a month, and the desk's staff arithmetic is the clock's honest cost, each deep review consuming a season of two officers' full attention, which is why the line in the statute exists at all, since a country of ten million could not afford the desk that read every merger deeply. The twenty-day first phase prices the honest case, the twenty more price the argued one, and the consummation fine is set

at a figure the boardroom cannot price in as a fee. The composite grocery filing, on its own numbers: two chains, thirty-four and twenty-two of the suburban shelf, four thousand staff between them, and one brass tag moved one lane left every evening since the Monday, which is the whole case's first form and the machine's whole week told in a wall.

The desk's closing inventory is the reader's first kit of papers to ask for by name. The notification register, the public list of knocks with their dates and their lanes, the citizen's first sight of the marriage market's traffic. The studies rule, the regulation that compels the parties' own market studies into the file, the desk's quiet masterpiece, worth reading in any country for the exceptions its drafters carved. The clock's terms, the first phase's days, the extension's season, the consummation offence and its published fines, the three numbers that price prevention. And the pre-notification conference's guidance, the desk's teaching published for anyone who will read it, since a state that hides its method will one day hide its reasoning, and the desk shows both. The reader who requests these four papers at any country's ground floor counter has begun the audit the whole book teaches.

Seen from the desk, the whole week the book watches is a single lesson in what the knock sets off, and the chapter closes by drawing the frame. The Monday filing did not merely start a clock: it started the study room's re-measure, the workshop's argument, the chamber's double sitting, the tribunal's narrowed corridor, the trustee's calendar and the buyer's lorries, one knock multiplied across eight rooms into a contestant standing on a suburban shelf. The desk's officer sees none of this, the reader should notice, being a clerk of the ground floor, and sees it all, since the clock board's brass tag is the week's first form and every later room's file will carry the tag's number. The knock is the machine's whole future in a folder, and the desk keeps it the way a well is kept, with the knowledge that everything downstream drinks.

The notification desk is the machine's own front door and its promise stands plainly on it: bring the bargain here before it is done, and it will be judged on papers you yourself supplied, inside a number of days you can plan a business around. The chapters that follow are what happens after the knock, beginning with the room the grocery file is sent to on its first afternoon, where a market the size of a country's breakfast is mapped from the outside, patiently, before anyone in it is obliged to open a drawer.

The notification desk's recap, in its own voice: I am the ground floor and the front door, and my whole doctrine is a clock you can plan a business around.

Bring me the bargain before it is done, and I will read your own studies against you in the file, start your twenty days, and clear you or pass you upstairs with your papers intact. Close early and you will meet me at the fine desk instead, and the difference between those two meetings is my entire teaching.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author writes the anatomy of the machines that hold daily life together, one organ at a time. This series and its companion volumes have taken apart the systems that govern, feed, trade, police, heal, remember, defend, welcome, and mourn; the present book turns to the machine that keeps the price honest, and to the craft of the notification clerks, census analysts, raid officers, leniency examiners, dominance watchers, remedies engineers, chamber rapporteurs, fine desk officers, tribunal clerks, and advocacy officers who keep the country's contest alive, one signed register at a time.