



Merrylands in which state?

Oh, New South Wales.

Connecting to the police for Merrylands, New South Wales.

The line rang twice, the police answered, I read them the job number, waited for the police and the man to begin talking, pressed the arrow key three times to the right, hit enter, and hung up. It was even boring.

The calls went on like that, until late afternoon. At a quarter to five a red siren above the windows that overlooked the park began to blare. It means there's high traffic, Pat explained, with all her curls and her teeth.

A car crash, a breakdown, asphyxia, a wrong number, a misdial, a car crash and then screaming.

Ambulance. I need the ambulance the ambulance the ambulance.

What state and town is the emergency in?




Werribee. Victoria. I need an ambulance an ambulance.

And the phone rang, and it rang, and the woman screamed once more, and I connected to another number, and told her the ambulance service would answer as soon as they could, and it rang twelve times while she screamed and the siren blared above the windows while the rush-hour crowds streamed through Hyde Park. But eventually the ambulance answered. And eventually the siren went quiet.

In my first afternoon working at Triple Zero, I took calls from angry drivers, an old man with chest pains, a white woman who didn't like the look of the brown boys on the corner, teenagers fucking around after school, a woman hiding from her ex-boyfriend under the bed, and a mother whose baby had turned blue.



The phone calls came from everywhere in the country, at every time of day. In a few months, I learnt to spell the names of





all the tricky towns, regardless of the fact that my knowledge of their location on the map was usually hazy. Towns with hidden “u”s got to be my favourite—Aurukun. Wauchope. Nhulunbuy. Gradually, I learnt the dangerous parts of every city by the number of calls coming through. I winced hearing the names of places I had never been. Mount Isa and Eagleby, Bourke and Mount Druitt, Narre Warren and Frankston, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs. I made a vow that I would never set foot in Cairns or Townsville. If callers didn’t give us a location, or the noise on the phone sounded like screaming or struggle, we could connect to the capital city of whatever state we thought the call was coming from. There was data on the screen, but it didn’t reveal much. We could see neither names nor precise locations that might illuminate a caller’s emergency, only their state and phone number. Calls for domestics on Thursday Island, a location so remote it was practically Papua New Guinea, could be referred to the Brisbane police dispatch centre, regardless of the place being half a continent away. Because it was, after all, in Queensland.

A shift of eight hours involved being dropped into emergencies and pulled out, hearing only pieces of whatever the story was, up to fifty times an hour. We asked the questions we were meant to ask, we did it quickly, we stuck to the script. The script we were taught on our first day was meant to shield us from distress. If all went as planned, the person calling didn’t tell us about the fire raging down their cliff or the body they’d discovered at the bottom of a gully. We waited to hear the caller engage with the paramedic or the firefighter and then quietly hung up before hearing the details. We were not meant to hear the problem. We were not meant to hear the woman howl for the baby turning blue in her arms. But the woman howling couldn’t know that I was not the person she was meant to tell. She didn’t know that I couldn’t help her.





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The centres never closed. We worked in eight-hour shifts around the clock, and so we tended to fall into three categories: the morning group, peopled mostly by senior citizens in orthopaedic shoes; the overnight shift, filled mostly with erratic cosplayers, the autistic, obese or formerly incarcerated; and the afternoon shift, where the rest of us ended up. There were actors and sculptors, high-school dropouts, TAFE students, the listless, the aimless and those who had fallen into the job because it seemed like a worthwhile way station between one thing and the next. Pat, who trained me, had been an environmental lawyer, and I never learnt why she was a lawyer no longer.

The shifts we worked could change according to the whims of the contractor we were technically employed by. Some weeks would be filled with shifts that began at four in the afternoon and ended at midnight, followed by a shift that began at five in the morning and ended at one.



Without the windows, there was very little to look at or do in the call centre. Televisions were mounted on the walls on either side of the room. They were never turned off, but they didn't have sound. We were not allowed to watch subtitled programmes. We were not allowed to read, to have our phones or to eat. We were not trusted with distractions. To fill the time we talked to those at the phones around us, but nobody talked about the calls. Why should you care? Pat asked, whenever, in the first week, I expressed distress.

Occasionally I would lean over to Maeve if we were working at the same time, and try to tell her about something strange or funny or horrific.

I don't want to hear it, she said each time. She had worked there for four years.

When I'd first met Maeve in our Honours seminar a year

earlier, she had shown me the tattoo of a heart she had got in Oaxaca from a man with a dirty needle. She had been twenty when she'd had her wrist tattooed, and she was only three years older now, but she had begun to hide the heart with bracelets and long sleeves. Maeve had short hair and a nose ring, and when I'd met her she had stood outside the Woolley building with one hip pushed against the low brick wall and told me that she was probably a lesbian. But she gradually eased away from the assuredness of that first heady identification, so that by the time we have reached now, she had recently described herself to me as seven eighths straight. The tattoo in Oaxaca would be the last of the risks she ever really took. Maeve was dating a Jewish boy who lived by Centennial Park with his parents. His friends were music producers and private-school junkies and convicted felons. Maeve lingered in their world like she belonged there, but she didn't do drugs, and she believed in the rules, and she was planning on applying to law school. She had a plan for the future, and she knew precisely what it looked like. I tried to talk to her about the emergencies. But she was not interested in my feelings, or my thoughts. I never saw her shake after hanging up the phone.

During my first week, Pat with the terrible teeth and corkscrew curls tried to explain the way the place worked. Some people can't hack it, she said. They take the calls personally, and those are the ones that are out of here in three weeks. You've got to get it into your head that this is just a job.

I nodded. I did not want to be one of the weak ones who couldn't hack it. She explained the centre's social dynamics. She pointed out the couple in the far corner who were having an affair. She pointed to the middle-aged man who went to Thailand every year to get a hair transplant. She pointed out the pair of

skinny men with soft bellies. The dumbest fucks here, she said. They knew nothing about anything. Climate change is real, she advised me as I finished another call. I nodded. She told me about the bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef, the melting of the permafrost, the rising incidences of freak weather activities, as though I believed it wasn't happening. The glaciers were melting, she said. And I nodded. The sea would rise by a hundred metres, maybe more. The Maldives were already sinking below the surface. The oceans were acidifying. The state government was soon to begin fracking the Great Artesian Basin, the underground water source that covered a quarter of the continent, the real-deal shadow of the mythical inland sea the nineteenth century had earnestly supposed was Out There. The water would be poisoned. The land would dry up. The ground would quake. There was no turning back. And those dumb fucks, she pointed again, all they give a shit about is footy and lunch.

I nodded.

Hey, you've got to answer in three seconds, you know, she gestured to the screen, where the incoming call icon was displayed. If you don't answer within three seconds, you're gone.

It occurred to me only later that perhaps I was not suited to this type of work, not having much in the way of appropriate boundaries between myself and the rest of the world.

On the first free day after my initial week at Triple Zero, I woke up near noon and found that there were no coffee beans left in the biscuit tin by the stove. I pulled on a too-big jumper over a tatty dress and left the house without showering. Outside, I fumbled with the keys to the iron security door. A week earlier I had tried to leave the house to find that, overnight, somebody had wrenched the heavy couch underneath the front window across our door to bar our exit. There was no way to push it out of the