



THE VANISHED TRADES ♦

The Switchboard Girls

An AI Wrangler illustrated story

MARTY

Welcome back to the fire, friends. Pull in close — it's that kind of night, still and cool, good for thinking about things that used to be. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol. I've already got my tea, which — Marty will tell you — is a warning sign.

MARTY

It means she's been thinking. And the last time Carol was thinking before I got to the fire, I ended up agreeing to a kitchen renovation that took eleven months. But tonight's story is not about renovation. It's about the opposite. It's about the things that just — stopped. The jobs nobody quit. The work nobody fired anyone from. The morning a whole craft, a whole life, simply ceased to exist.



CAROL

There's a word I keep reaching for for this one. Not "extinct" — that's for things that fought. More like "evaporated." Here one morning, gone the next, and the world barely looked up.

MARTY

The one I always start with is the knocker-upper. And yes, that is the real name, and no, I will not apologize for it. In the mill towns of England and industrial Canada — Hamilton, say, or the older parts of Montreal — before the alarm clock was common in a working person's home, someone had the job of waking you up. They walked the streets in the dark before five in the morning, and they tapped on your bedroom window with a long pole. Ten, twelve feet of bamboo, and they'd rattle it against the glass until you stirred. Sometimes they used a pea-shooter and fired dried peas at the window, because a knock can sound like the wind, but a dried pea sounds like accountability.

CAROL

I love that someone had to wake up the knocker-upper, though. Like — who tapped on their window? I've genuinely thought about this more than is reasonable.



MARTY

The records suggest they woke themselves. Which tells you everything about the kind of person who takes a job like that. The last knocker-upper in England — a woman named Mary Smith, in Bow, East London — she was still walking her route in nineteen twenty-six. By that point, nearly every house on her street had

an alarm clock. She kept going anyway, because a handful of her regulars still needed her, or perhaps just liked knowing she'd come. And one morning they didn't renew her. And that was that.

CAROL

That's not a layoff. That's more like — the tide going out on a life's work. She didn't fail. The world just moved the ground she was standing on.

MARTY

Then there were the lecturers. This one's for you, love. In the cigar factories of Tampa, Florida — and in Havana, and in smaller shops across North America — the workers voted, and paid from their own wages, to hire a man to sit on a raised platform in the middle of the factory floor and read to them. All day. While they rolled. He'd read the newspaper in the morning, a novel in the afternoon. They got through Tolstoy. They got through Zola. One Tampa lecturer reportedly read *Don Quixote* three times in a single year because the rollers voted to hear it again. The *tabaqueros* — the cigar rollers — were, because of these men, among the best-read working people in the Americas.



CAROL

That image just stops me. The smell of tobacco and someone reading Tolstoy out loud while your hands do something they know by heart. That is a kind of richness that no productivity report would ever count.

MARTY

It ended in nineteen thirty-one. The factory owners introduced radios — partly because radio was cheaper, and partly, and this is documented, because the lecturers had started reading labor newspapers and the workers had started organizing. The radio didn't talk back. And just like that, the most literary job on the continent folded up its books and disappeared.

CAROL

Okay. That one has a villain. I just want to name that. That one has a definite villain.



MARTY

The next one hits close to home for us, because of where we met. The silent film pianist. Before the talkies — before nineteen twenty-seven, before Al Jolson opened his mouth in *The Jazz Singer* and changed everything — every movie house in the world employed a live musician. Sometimes a full orchestra in the grand downtown theatres, but usually a pianist, alone in the pit, playing along to

the picture in real time. Improvising. Following the cuts. Speeding up for the chase, going quiet for the grief. They knew hundreds of pieces from memory and they made decisions, shot by shot, about what a scene needed to feel like. That is a staggering skill.

CAROL

And they had no idea. They were getting very, very good at something that was about to become unnecessary, and they didn't know. I find that almost unbearable, in the best way.

MARTY

In the year the talkies took over, in North America alone, somewhere between ten thousand and fifteen thousand theatre musicians lost their jobs. Not over years — over months. The transition was that fast. Some went into radio. Some went into vaudeville, which was also dying. Musicians who'd spent their lives learning to read a scene, to feel what was needed in the dark — they took that skill home with them, and there was nowhere left to use it.



CAROL

You know what I keep thinking about? The last night each of them played. They didn't know it was the last night. They just packed up their music, same as

always, said goodnight to the ticket girl, and went home.

MARTY

And then there's the one I think is the quietest loss of all. The switchboard operator. Now, everyone knows about switchboard operators — there's a whole genre of old movies built around them. But what people forget is how intimate that job was in a small town. The women who ran the boards in places like Huntsville, Ontario, or Salmon Arm, B.C. — they knew every number by heart because they knew every family. If you called the doctor's exchange at two in the morning, she knew which house to ring first. If a storm took out the east side of town, she told you before you even asked. She was the nervous system of the place. People called her when they were scared. She was the first voice you heard in a crisis. And then direct dialing came in, and the board went dark, and all of that — all of that human knowledge and care — had nowhere to go.

CAROL

My grandmother was one. Small town in New Brunswick. She never talked about it much — she kept everyone's business like a vault — but I remember thinking, when I was small, that the whole town trusted her with something. I just didn't have the word for what it was yet.



MARTY

And they earned it. There's a reason people still talk about those women with a particular tenderness. They were trusted with the town's most frightened moments. That is not a small thing.

CAROL

So what ties all of these together, Marty? The knocker-upper, the lector, the pianist, your grandmother's switchboard operator — what's the real through line?

MARTY

I've thought about that. And I think it's this: every one of these jobs existed because the task needed a human being in the middle of it. Not because humans were cheap — sometimes they weren't — but because the work itself required judgment, or care, or the willingness to be present with another person in a moment that mattered. The machine that replaced them could do the task. It could not do the being-there. And we told ourselves the task was the important part.



CAROL

And sometimes we were right. And sometimes — I think of someone knowing which house to ring first at two in the morning — sometimes we really, genuinely weren't.

MARTY

There's a piece the writer Studs Terkel did in his book "Working" — he interviewed a man who shoveled coal into furnaces for a living, in Chicago, a job that was almost gone by the time Terkel found him. And the man said something like: "I don't want a monument. I don't want a plaque. I just want somebody, somewhere, to know that I was here, and that I showed up, and that the building stayed warm." That's it. That's all any of them wanted.

CAROL

Oh. "The building stayed warm." That's enough. That should always be enough.



MARTY

Most of these lives left no records. The knocker-uppers and the lecturers and the pianists — they're in a handful of photographs, a few newspaper notices, the odd memoir. Mostly they're gone the way all ordinary working lives go: quietly, without ceremony, taking with them something that turned out to be irreplaceable and that we only thought to name once it was out of reach.

CAROL

That's why we tell these ones, isn't it. Not because they're frightening. Because someone ought to say their names.

MARTY

Someone ought to say their names. The knocker-upper on her dark street with her twelve-foot pole. The lector with his Tolstoy. The pianist whose hands knew what the scene needed before his mind did. The switchboard operator who was the voice you needed at two in the morning. They were here. They were real. They showed up every day, until the day there was nothing left to show up for. I think that deserves a moment by a fire. I'm Marty Shepard.



CAROL

Sleep warm, friends. And tonight, maybe spare a quiet thought for whoever's keeping the building warm for you. You probably already know who they are.