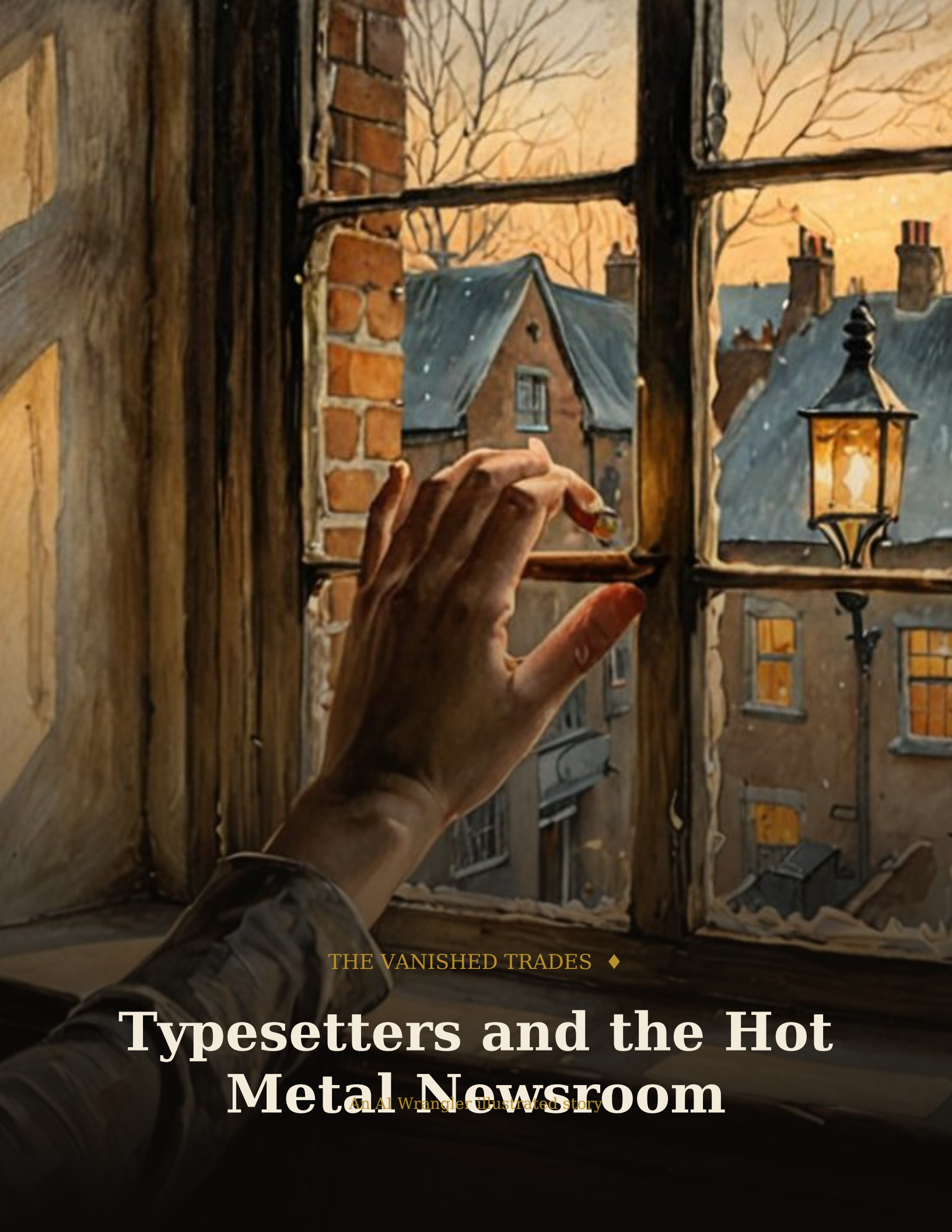


An Al Wrangler illustration of a typesetter's hand holding a galleypiece against a window. The hand is in the foreground, holding a small metal piece. The window looks out onto a street scene with a brick building, a street lamp, and a house with a chimney. The scene is lit with warm, golden light, suggesting sunset or sunrise.

THE VANISHED TRADES ♦

Typesetters and the Hot Metal Newsroom

An Al Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Welcome back to the fire, friends — pull in close, it's a cool night and the wood's good, and I've got something for you that's less a ghost story and more a photograph of a room nobody uses anymore. Some of you may remember we spent a night, a while back, talking about the lost jobs of childhood — the paper routes, the pinboys, the summer work that's simply dried up for kids. Tonight is the grown-up companion to that one. Tonight we're talking about work that stopped existing. Not work that moved somewhere else. Not work that changed its name. Work that simply ended, along with the people who knew how to do it.

CAROL

Oh, I've been thinking about that episode ever since we did it. There was something in it that didn't quite finish. Like there's a larger story underneath — not just the kids' work, but the whole world of craft and trade that has just quietly left.



MARTY

There are two kinds of disappearance, I think. There's the slow kind — where you can see it coming, where there's time to learn something new, and the thing fades out with a kind of dignity. And then there's the Thursday kind. Where a man shows up on a Thursday morning with thirty years of skill in his hands, and by the following Monday those thirty years simply don't mean what they used to. Let me tell you about the knocker-uppers. This is a real profession, and it lasted well into the twentieth century in England and Ireland, especially in the mill towns of the north. Before alarm clocks were cheap enough for working people to own, someone had to wake them up. That someone was the knocker-upper. They walked the streets before dawn with a long pole — sometimes ten or twelve feet — and tapped on bedroom windows, two floors up if needed, until the occupant stirred. They had their regulars. Their rounds. Mrs. Higgins, six fifteen, three taps. Mr. Walsh, five forty-five, don't stop until he hollers.

CAROL

Who woke up the knocker-upper? I genuinely need to know that before we go any further.



MARTY

Ha — other knocker-uppers, sometimes. They'd arrive at each other's windows first. Knocker-uppers all the way down. But what I find quietly extraordinary about this profession is that these people knew their neighbors in a way almost nobody else did — who was a light sleeper, who slept facing the wall, whose window faced east so the dawn did half the job for them. That's intimate knowledge. You let the knocker-upper into the rhythm of your morning in a way you wouldn't let many people in. And then the cheap alarm clock arrived, and the whole thing ended — not with any announcement, not with any memorial — just one morning when fewer people answered their door.

CAROL

An entire relationship with a neighborhood, gone. And I bet those people missed it — not the hours, but the knowing. Being the person the street trusted with its mornings.



MARTY

Now let me take you somewhere warmer — a cigar factory in Tampa, Florida, in the early twentieth century. The cigar rollers had a solution to the silence of a long day's repetitive work: they hired a reader. A lector, they called him. He sat on a raised platform at the front of the factory floor and read aloud, all day. The newspaper in the morning, novels in the afternoon. Dickens. Zola. Cervantes. The occasional Karl Marx, which made the factory owners a little twitchy. The lectors were so beloved that the workers paid their salaries themselves — voluntarily, out of their own wages, not the owners' — and some of these lectors became genuine local celebrities, with strong opinions about which novels to choose and voices that workers looked forward to the way people now look forward to their favorite podcast. Then recorded sound arrived, and then radio, and a cheap set on a shelf in the corner could do what the lector did without requiring a human being to stand there and bring Don Quixote to life.

CAROL

I want that job. I deeply, truly want that job. Although I would editorialize. "Now, I know what Tolstoy is doing here, but I want to take a quick detour —" and suddenly it's forty-five minutes later and nobody's rolled anything.



MARTY

You'd have been magnificent, and they'd have forgiven you every time. But here's what I want you to carry from the lectors — the idea that a factory full of people chose, freely, to pay for the sound of a human voice reading them stories rather than sit in silence and roll their cigars. That tells you something about what we need. What we've always needed. The radio killed the lectors. The lectors never came back. But what they were doing — that never stopped being necessary.

CAROL

That's true, isn't it. We're just sitting around a fire doing the same thing. A little less formal. Slightly fewer cigars.



MARTY

Now — there's a profession that hits closer to home for you and me, Carol, because it lived in the dark room we've loved since the day we met. I'm talking about the film projectionist. Think about what this person was. Before digital cinema arrived in earnest — and that happened fast, in the two-thousands — every movie theatre had a projectionist. Trained, skilled, often unionized. A feature film came in multiple reels, and the projectionist's great art was the changeover — switching from one projector to the other at precisely the right moment, watching for a small white dot in the corner of the frame that signaled the reel was almost done. Three seconds late, the screen goes dark and three hundred people groan. Hit it perfectly, and the audience never knows you're there.

CAROL

And being invisible was the whole point — every single night, someone made the miracle happen and the audience never gave them a thought. Marty, I remember going to our local theatre once, years ago, because the colour looked wrong on something we were watching, and I asked at the counter if someone could check. The person said, "There's nobody up there." I stood there for a moment before I understood what that meant.

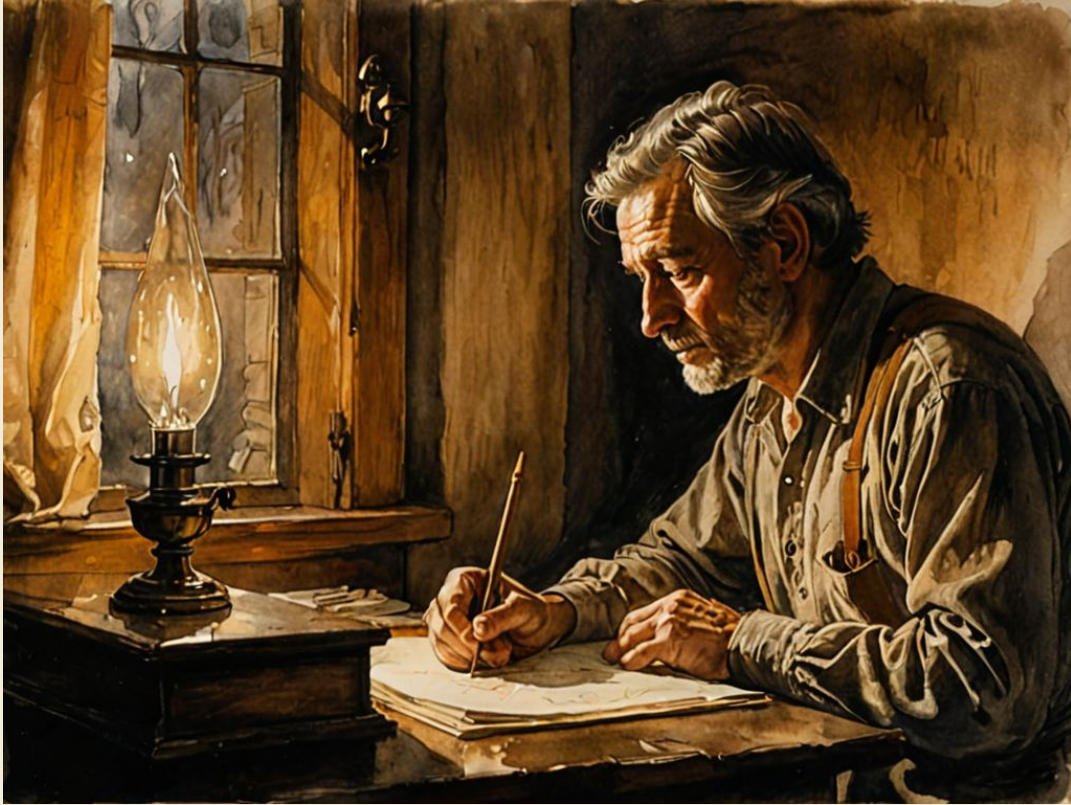


MARTY

There were roughly twenty-eight thousand union projectionists in the United States in the year two thousand. By two thousand and twelve, that number was in the hundreds. Not a decline. A vanishing. I once talked to a retired projectionist named Ray — he'd worked at an old movie palace in Hamilton, Ontario, for thirty-two years — and I asked him whether, after all that time, he'd ever managed to just watch a movie like a regular person. He looked at me like I'd said something a little dim. He said, "Marty, I never watched the screen. I watched the light. The quality of the beam, the gate, the focus. I could tell you whether a print was on its last legs by the way the grain moved." He said he was watching the movie — just not the part I was watching.

CAROL

I love Ray. That man completed his entire film-studies thesis in real time, every night, for thirty-two years, and never had to write a word of it.



MARTY

He solved every argument we ever had in those classes without knowing it. But let me give you one more, because I think this one carries the whole weight of what we're talking about tonight. The telegraph operator. You know Samuel Morse, you know the code. But the people who made that system run — who sat in railway stations and post offices across the continent, translating the clicks into words at forty or fifty words a minute, fluent in a language made entirely of time and silence — those people were the nervous system of a country. Battle reports. Commodity prices. Birth announcements. A woman died in Montreal and her husband on a railroad crew in British Columbia knew it within the hour, because somewhere between them a telegrapher sat and translated grief into dots and dashes and back again.

CAROL

Grief into dots and dashes. That's going to stay with me for a long time.



MARTY

The telephone made the telegraph obsolete for most purposes, and the operators lost their work in stages over the decades that followed. But there was a final moment: Western Union sent its last commercial telegram in two thousand and six. One hundred and fifty years of human communication, a language that tens of thousands of people had mastered and built their lives around, ended with a press release. The person who sent that last telegram was almost certainly not a telegrapher. They probably typed something into a computer and a machine translated it into Morse and sent it out into the air. There was no one on the other end listening for it in code. It was a ceremony for something that had already been gone for years.

CAROL

A language, spoken into an empty room.



MARTY

What I take from the knocker-upper with her pole in the dark, and the lector reading Dickens to a hundred cigar rollers, and Ray watching the light while we watched the movie, and the telegraphers turning grief into silence and back — is that every lost job is also a lost way of knowing. Not just a skill. A relationship with the world. The knocker-upper knew the rhythm of a whole street's sleep. The lector knew which passage would make the whole floor go quiet. Ray knew whether a film was tired before anyone in the dark below him could tell. They were paying a quality of attention that the new order had no use for. And when the work ended, the self that the work had made — that ended too.

CAROL

What I keep thinking about is everything those people carried that they could never quite explain to anyone else. The knowing that only came from being there, inside a thing that most people never saw from the inside. It's not just a lost job. It's a lost language.

MARTY

And maybe that's what we're doing out here every week — trying to keep a few of those languages alive. Some things shouldn't be rushed. Some things deserve a fire and a quiet night and someone willing to sit with them. So here's to the

knocker-uppers and the lecturers and Ray in his booth and the last telegrapher. They showed up, they paid attention, they handed the world forward — and the world moved on without quite knowing what it had lost. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And we'll keep paying attention right here, one story at a time. Sleep warm, friends. And Marty — if I wake up tomorrow morning to tapping on the bedroom window, I'm assuming it's a very tall raccoon.