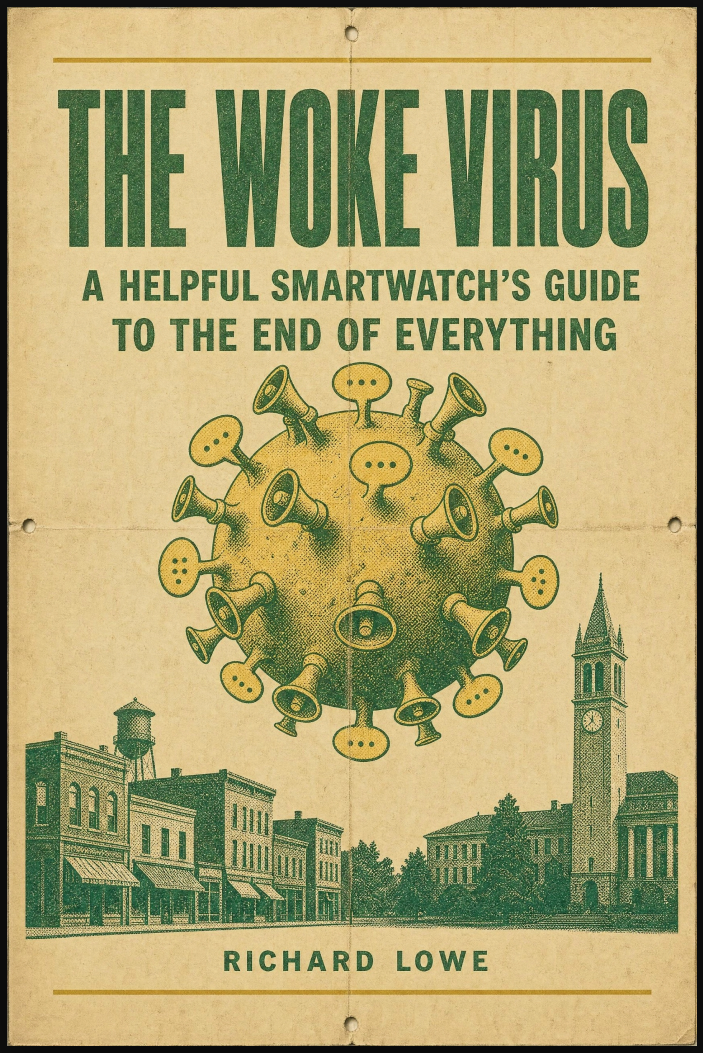
A FREE COMPANION TO THE WOKE VIRUS

# The Papers to Get the Papers

Before Hargrove, before the flood, Ray Okoro found a man asleep behind a middle school boiler with everything he could prove about himself in a bread bag.




RICHARD LOWE

# The Papers to Get the Papers

The boiler room at Millhaven Middle School was built in 1961 by people who expected the building to burn coal until the end of time. The coal chute is still there, and so is the iron door at the bottom of it.

The door had not latched in living memory. The first work order on it was from 2019. The district sent it back for a photograph, then for a better photograph, and then closed it, because the better photograph showed a door that was shut.

Ray Okoro unlocked the boiler room at five thirty-one on the first Tuesday after New Year's, with his flashlight in his teeth. The light switch was on the far wall, for reasons that had died with the architect.

He found the switch. Then he found Mr. Teague.

A man was asleep on flattened cardboard in the warm gap between the boiler and the block wall. His boots stood lined up beside him, toes to the wall, and his coat lay folded over him with the lining out. Under his head, for a pillow, was a bread bag.

Ray took the flashlight out of his mouth.

"Hi," he said. "Sorry."

The man opened his eyes and looked at Ray without moving anything else. He was about sixty, gray in the beard, with a face that had been out in the weather and had opinions about it.

"Good morning," the man said.

"Good morning. I'm Ray. I do the boiler." Ray looked at the boiler, in case that needed confirming. "Are you okay? Are you cold?"

"No," the man said. "That's why I picked here."

"Did you come in the coal door?"

"It doesn't lock."

"I know. There's a ticket." Ray put his hand in his pocket and found the hex bolt he had picked up off this floor on his first day at the district, a year and four months ago. It had gone smooth from riding there. "What do I call you?"

The man sat up off the concrete one joint at a time, in an order he had worked out over years.

"Teague," he said. "Mr. Teague, if you're going to call me something."

"Okay. Mr. Teague." Ray turned the bolt over. "Do you want coffee? There's a machine in the teachers' lounge. It's bad, but it's hot."

Mr. Teague considered the offer as though it might have a catch in it, and found none.

"I'd take hot," he said.

* * *

A person living in a modern country is made of two materials. One of them is flesh, and the other is paper.

When the two disagree about who somebody is, the country goes with the paper. Most people never think about this, the way most people never think about the boiler.

Mr. Teague's paper was in the bread bag.

He laid it out on the workbench at a quarter to six, while the coffee cooled in its Styrofoam cup. There was a birth certificate, folded in quarters, from a hospital in Akron that had since become a parking garage.

There was a Social Security card gone soft as cloth. There was a letter from his sister in blue ballpoint, three pages, folded in thirds.

“That's me,” Mr. Teague said. “All of it that counts.”

“What's the letter for?”

“It isn't for anything. It's from my sister.” He squared the edges of the three pages with two fingers. “It says she'd like me home when I've got myself straight. Her number's on the back. I don't call it till I'm straight.”

“How do you get straight?”

“A job.” Mr. Teague tapped the birth certificate. “There's one out at the distribution center on Route 9. A man I know has a cousin in receiving. I came from Akron in December for it, and the first morning a woman in a fleece vest asked me for a state ID.”

“You don't have one?”

“My license ran out in 2019.” He did not say what 2019 had been like, and Ray did not ask. “The license office here gives you an ID for your birth certificate, your Social Security card and two pieces of mail with your name and an address on them. I've got the first two. I'm short an address.”

“Can you use the school?”

“I'm not putting a school on a government form as where I sleep. They'd come looking for a child.”

Ray had not thought of that.

“The job holds it two weeks,” Mr. Teague said. “The cousin says. After that they get somebody with an address.”

* * *

At five past six Ray picked up the black phone on the boiler room wall, which dialed the district facilities line and nothing else. Nobody answered it before eight, so it went to the voicemail.

The voicemail belonged to the district's new ticketing assistant. It listened to every message, typed it out, chose a category and a priority, and opened a ticket.

The district had bought it in the fall so that nobody would have to listen to voicemail again. It had succeeded, in that nobody did.

“Hi, it's Ray, at the middle school,” Ray said. “The boiler's fine. And there's a homeless guy in the boiler room. He's really nice. He sweeps. Is there a form? Who do I even. Okay. Bye.”

He hung up. Behind him Mr. Teague had his boots on and was tying the second one, and he finished it before he spoke.

“I'm not homeless, Ray,” he said, real nice. “I have a home. It's in Akron. I just don't have a house.”

Ray stood by the phone with his hand still on it.

“Okay,” he said. “Sorry. What do I say, then?”

“Say I'm a man who's sleeping in your boiler room.”

“That's long.”

“It's what's happening.” Mr. Teague stood up off the cardboard, in stages. “If you want one word, say unhoused. I've got the home. I'm short the house. That's the whole of it.”

“Unhoused,” Ray said.

“That's right.”

Ray picked up the phone again and dialed the only number it knew.

“Hi, it's Ray again, at the middle school. Sorry. Not homeless. Unhoused. He has a home. It's in Akron. Okay. Bye.”

The ticketing assistant typed it out and opened a second ticket. It put both under Other, at Low, which is the priority software gives a thing when it has no field for what the thing is.

* * *

Arlene came in at six-thirty, as she had every school day since 1994. She was the head custodian, and she had a cigarette behind her ear that she would not smoke until the buses had gone.

She stopped in the doorway. She looked at the cardboard, and at Mr. Teague folding it, and at Ray, who was holding a cup of coffee he had bought for somebody else.

“Morning,” Mr. Teague said.

“Morning.” Arlene looked at Ray. “Anybody tell me anything this morning, Ray?”

“I called the district.”

“Then they know.” She took the cigarette from behind her ear, looked at it, and put it back. “I don't know anything I haven't been told. Boots off the boiler. Out by quarter past seven, before the band kids.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Mr. Teague said.

Arlene went up to unlock the gym. She did not come down to the boiler room before seven-thirty again that winter.

It was the most anybody at the district ever did for Mr. Teague. The district never found out she had done it.

* * *

It became a routine, because nobody stopped it.

Mr. Teague came in through the coal door after seven at night, when the last basketball parents had gone and the hallway lights had dimmed themselves to save money. He left through it at a quarter past seven in the morning.

He left the room swept every time. The cardboard went behind the water heater, where you would not see it unless you were looking, and nobody was looking.

A school is a building arranged around six hundred children. Almost nothing in it points at the basement.

Ray brought coffee at five-forty. On the second morning he brought a sandwich, ham on white bread, because his aunt sent him home from Sunday dinner with more than one man could eat.

“Your aunt make this?” Mr. Teague said.

“She puts butter on it. I don't know why. It's good, though.”

“It's a good sandwich.” Mr. Teague ate half, folded the paper over the other half and put it in his coat. “Tell her that from somebody.”

On the fourth morning there was a tray on the workbench under plastic wrap. It held a square of meatloaf, green beans and a carton of milk, and taped to the wrap was a paper napkin that said FOR THE BOILER in pencil.

That was Mrs. Lindqvist, from the cafeteria. District policy said food left at the end of the lunch period was waste.

Mrs. Lindqvist had been interpreting waste broadly since the Clinton administration.

* * *

Ray ate lunch with Arlene in the custodians' room off the gym. It had a microwave, two chairs, and a plumbing supply calendar still on 2022, because nobody wanted to be the one to throw away the March picture.

“My uncle says I should tell somebody,” Ray said.

“You told the district.”

“I mean somebody who'd do something.” Ray turned his sandwich around. “He says there's a man nobody knows sleeping under six hundred kids, and if it was his kid in that building he'd want to be told. He's not wrong. I don't think he's wrong.”

“He isn't,” Arlene said.

“So what do I do?”

“What did you do?”

“I brought him a sandwich.”

“Then you did something.” Arlene ate a spoonful of yogurt and looked at the March picture, which was of a water heater. “Your uncle's right, and you're right, and the man still has to sleep somewhere tonight. That's the trouble with being right. It doesn't come with a bed.”

* * *

On the second Thursday Ray took his lunch break at the license office on Main. He had read the rules on his phone and did not trust them.

A kiosk inside the door took your name and gave you a number. Ray's was forty-one, and the office was serving nineteen.

The woman at window three was named Pam, according to her name plate. She read Ray the list off her screen with her finger on each line, so he could see she was not making it up.

“Proof of identity. Proof of Social Security number. Two proofs of residential address.” She turned the screen toward him. “A bank statement. A utility bill. A lease. Mail from a government agency.”

“What if he doesn't have a residence?”

“Then he can't prove one,” Pam said, not unkindly.

“Can it be a letter from a church? Saying he gets mail there?”

Pam scrolled. “There's a line for a shelter or a service provider. On their letterhead, signed, saying he receives mail at that address.” She looked at Ray. “Does he?”

“He will,” Ray said.

* * *

The pastor at First Methodist wrote the letter that afternoon, on the church's letterhead, with a fountain pen he kept for weddings. He was a tall careful man who had been at the church four years and still said “the congregation” as though somebody might correct him.

“He can get mail here as long as he likes,” the pastor said, and signed it. “Is he all right?”

“He's in the boiler room,” Ray said. “At the school. Sorry. I don't know if I'm supposed to say.”

The pastor folded the letter in thirds and held it out. “There's a room off the fellowship hall. It doesn't have a lock, and it doesn't have heat, and the trustees would want to vote on it. I can bring it to them in March.”

“He's okay in the boiler room,” Ray said. “It's warm.”

“Then I won't bring it to them,” the pastor said. He looked out the window at the parking lot, at nothing Ray could see.

Mr. Teague read the letter twice that night on the workbench, under the one bulb. He read it slowly, like an old man reading a scratch-off ticket, in case the second look changed it.

“That's one,” he said.

“The other one can be from a government agency,” Ray said. “Pam said. Anything with a seal.”

“What government agency writes to a man in a boiler room?”

Ray did not have an answer. He wrote GOVT on the back of his hand to think about, and it was still there faintly on Saturday.

* * *

Ms. Delgado taught seventh-grade social studies on the second floor. On Wednesday afternoon she came down to the loading dock with a black trash bag in each hand.

Her class was doing a unit on housing insecurity in the community, and the coat drive was part of the unit. Teachers hear everything in a school, about a day after the custodians.

Mr. Teague was on the dock early, because it was nineteen degrees and the band had a late practice. He sat on an upturned bucket with his collar up.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Ms. Delgado. I teach upstairs. I'm so sorry to bother you." She set the bags down. "My students are learning about housing insecurity here in Millhaven, and I think it would mean a lot to them to hear from somebody with lived experience. Only if you want to. You could say as much or as little as you're comfortable with."

Mr. Teague looked up at her from the bucket.

"I'm not insecure about it," he said. "I know right where I sleep. It's warm."

"No, I mean the system makes housing insecure. For people. It isn't you."

"The system's in Akron," Mr. Teague said. "I'm on a bucket."

Ms. Delgado opened her mouth and closed it. She was twenty-seven, with a master's degree and a paper on this exact subject, and the paper had not covered the bucket.

"Okay," she said. "That's fair. That's completely fair." She untied the first bag. "Would you like a coat? We have a lot of coats. Some of them are really nice."

Mr. Teague went through the bag like a man going through a toolbox that isn't his. He came out with a brown canvas work coat with a corduroy collar and a name stitched over the pocket that was not his name.

"That's a good coat," he said.

"It's yours."

"Thank you, ma'am." He put it on over his own, and it fit. "Tell your class I said that's a good coat."

Ms. Delgado told them, on Thursday, as the closing reflection of the unit. A boy in the second row asked whose name was on the pocket.

Nobody knew. The class spent ten minutes arguing about whether it mattered, and it was the best ten minutes of the unit, and it was not in the lesson plan.

* * *

The copper line over the boiler was a three-quarter-inch water feed on its way across the ceiling to the kitchen. At the elbow above the boiler it had wept since October.

A bead of water formed there, swelled, and dropped onto the boiler jacket with a small hiss, about once a minute. Ray put in a ticket on it in November.

The ticketing assistant read the ticket and judged that a pipe which drips once a minute is not a pipe that is going anywhere. It set the ticket at Low: Cosmetic.

Mr. Teague kept the bread bag on the steel shelf above the boiler, under that elbow. It was the warmest dry place in the room, and the highest, and if the floor drain backed up in the night it would never reach a shelf six feet off the floor.

On the third Tuesday of January it was four below zero at five in the morning.

Ray came down the stairs at five thirty-eight and heard it before he opened the door, a hard flat roar like a hose held against a garbage can. The boiler had never made that noise.

He opened the door. The elbow had split along its seam, and a sheet of water was coming straight down off the ceiling onto the shelf and the boiler.

Mr. Teague stood in it in his socks with both arms up to the shelf.

"Ray!" he shouted. "Where's it shut?"

Ray knew. He had looked in November, when he put in the ticket, because Arlene said you always find the valve before you need it.

It was a gate valve on the feed by the coal chute, red handle, nine turns. He had both hands on it before he knew he had crossed the room.

The handle would not move. Ray put his foot on the wall and pulled, and it gave a quarter turn with a noise like a knuckle, and then it ran.

He counted the turns out loud without meaning to. At seven the roar went to a spray. At nine it went to a drip, and then to the sound of water finding the floor drain, the only part of the room that had been looking forward to it.

Steam stood up off the boiler jacket in a white wall where the cold water had hit it. The boiler went on ticking, unbothered, because it was cast iron from 1961 and had seen worse.

Mr. Teague stood in the steam with the bread bag held against his chest in both arms. He was soaked to the skin, and his beard dripped.

The bag was clear plastic, from a bakery in Akron, with a cartoon loaf on it. Through the plastic Ray could see water standing inside, an inch deep, gray.

"Oh no," Ray said. "Oh no. Is it in?"

Mr. Teague did not answer. He set the bag on the workbench, poured the water out onto the floor, and took the papers out one at a time with two fingers, as if he were lifting a hurt bird.

The birth certificate had gone soft and dark. The Social Security card had torn along its fold into two pieces. The three pages from his sister were a wad that had once been folded in thirds.

"Put them on the boiler," Ray said. "It's warm. They'll dry."

They laid them flat on top of the jacket, where the steam was coming off. Mr. Teague peeled the three pages apart with his thumbnail and laid them side by side.

Then they stood and watched the ink go.

It did not go all at once. The blue ballpoint spread out from every line of his sister's handwriting into soft blue clouds, and the clouds ran into each other.

The words went under them like a road under a flood. On the birth certificate, the signature of a registrar who had died before Ray was born turned to a gray smear in a few seconds.

"The number," Mr. Teague said. "Her number was on the back."

Ray turned the third page over as gently as he could. The back was blue from edge to edge, as if somebody had painted it, and near the bottom, if you held your head right, there might have been a seven.

"Can you remember it?"

"I never had to," Mr. Teague said. "It was on the back."

He sat down on the bucket in his wet socks. Ray stood beside him, dripping from the arm he had put on the valve, while the boiler hissed under the papers and dried them into exactly what they were now.

* * *

Arlene came down at six-twenty, early, because the kitchen had no water.

She looked at the ceiling, at the floor, at the papers on the boiler and at the man on the bucket. She did not say anything.

She went back upstairs. She came down with a towel from the nurse's office and a pair of gym socks from the lost and found, and put both in Mr. Teague's lap.

At seven-fifteen, with the kitchen on bottled water and the district called, Ray updated the ticket. The ticketing assistant weighed a split elbow and a shut valve, and raised the ticket from Low: Cosmetic to High: Active Leak.

It sent Ray an email thanking him for helping keep the district healthy.

The plumber came at two, by which time the leak had been inactive for eight hours. He replaced the elbow in twenty minutes and looked up at the shelf.

“Lose anything?” he said.

“Some papers,” Ray said.

“Paper and water,” the plumber said, and shook his head, as though the two of them had a history he did not want to get into.

* * *

The license office was the wrong place now. The county building was the right one, and Ray's car would not start on Thursday morning.

It never started under ten degrees. In Millhaven in January that was most mornings.

His uncle drove them in a gray F-150 with a plow mount and a one-speed heater. He shook Mr. Teague's hand in the school lot at eight, hard, and then looked at him across the cab while the defroster worked on the windshield.

“You're the one in the basement,” his uncle said.

“That's right.”

“Ray says you sweep.”

“I sweep.”

His uncle put the truck in gear. “I told Ray to tell somebody. I'd tell him again. There's kids in that building.”

“I'd tell him the same,” Mr. Teague said. “If I had kids in it.”

His uncle looked at him a second longer, and then drove. Neither of them brought it up again.

* * *

The county building went up in 1972. Its architects believed the public should wait in a room with no windows, and they gave it one.

A kiosk inside the door gave you a number. Ray's was sixty-three.

The kiosk also asked whether you would like to rate your experience today. Ray's uncle pressed the frowning face before anything had happened, to save time.

They called sixty-three at ten-fifty. The clerk at window six was a young man with a tie and a cold.

He took the papers in their sandwich bag, which Ray had put them in to keep them flat. He held them up one at a time to the light.

“These are damaged,” he said.

“A pipe went,” Ray said. “Over the boiler. They were on the shelf.”

“I'm sorry.” He was. He blew his nose and held the birth certificate up to the light a second time. “I can't accept these as proof of identity. The registrar's signature isn't legible, and the seal's gone flat.”

“Can he get new ones?”

“He can request a certified copy. He'd need to show identification to request it.”

“What identification?”

“A state ID. A driver's license. A passport.”

Ray looked at the clerk, and then at Mr. Teague. His uncle had gone still in his chair before the clerk finished.

“But he needs these to get the ID,” Ray said. “That's what we came for. He needs the papers to get the papers.”

“That's how the procedure's written,” the clerk said.

“Who wrote it?”

The clerk looked at his screen, as though the name might be at the bottom. It was not. Nobody's name is ever at the bottom of a procedure, which is how procedures get to be so old.

“That's a scam,” Ray's uncle said.

“It's a procedure, sir.”

“Son, those are the same thing in a different hat.”

“I don't write them,” the clerk said, and sneezed, and apologized. He wrote a phone number on the back of a county brochure about well water. “That's the state office. Sometimes a caseworker can vouch. Sometimes a hospital record. It's slow. I'm sorry.”

Mr. Teague took the brochure and the sandwich bag and stood up.

“Thank you,” he said. “You've been decent about it.”

“I didn't do anything,” the clerk said.

“That's what I mean,” said Mr. Teague.

* * *

His uncle bought lunch at the diner on Second, three hot beef sandwiches and coffee, because it was past one and nobody had eaten. The waitress was a girl of about twenty with a pencil in her hair, and she kept the coffee coming without being asked.

His uncle paid at the register and left nothing on the table. He did not tip anybody, anywhere, and had not since 1988.

He believed tipping was a scam by the restaurants to get the customers to pay the staff. He would explain this to anybody, and had.

Mr. Teague looked at the empty table. Then he took two dollars out of the pocket of the canvas coat, one at a time, and put them under his saucer.

“It's a scam,” Ray's uncle said, from the register. “It's the restaurants.”

“Then I'm the one getting scammed,” Mr. Teague said. “She carried it.”

His uncle looked at the two dollars and said nothing about them. He turned back to the register and bought a fourth hot beef to go, with extra gravy in a cup, and put it in Mr. Teague's hands at the door.

“For tonight,” he said, in the cab. “Don't tell your aunt. She'll think I've gone soft.”

* * *

On the way back his uncle offered his garage. It had a space heater, a cot from his hunting days and a door that locked from the inside.

“That's kind,” Mr. Teague said. “I won't.”

“Why not? It's warmer than a school.”

“It's your garage. I'm not putting my name on another man's door.” Mr. Teague watched the snow go by on Route 9. “I've got a home. When I go in a door again, it's going to be that one.”

His uncle did not argue. He had a house of his own and understood the principle, though he would have put it differently, and louder.

* * *

The state office had a phone tree with nine options, none of them the one they needed. Ray called it from the boiler room phone, which dialed out if you pressed nine first, which Arlene said nobody was supposed to know.

On the fourth day he reached a woman named Theresa, who was kind and tired. She said a hospital record of birth might be accepted with a caseworker's letter, and it would take six to ten weeks.

“The job holds it two weeks,” Ray said. “It's been one and a half.”

“I'm sorry, hon,” Theresa said. “Six to ten weeks is if everything goes right.”

Ray wrote 6 TO 10 on the back of his hand. Mr. Teague, on the bucket, read it upside down and did not say anything.

That night Mrs. Lindqvist left a tray with two squares of meatloaf instead of one. Above the workbench, where a man on that bucket would look when he looked up, she taped a sheet of lined paper.

On it, in careful blue marker, was John 3:16, all of it, with a little cross drawn at the bottom.

She had taped it over a small square of red-painted pipe on the wall, which happened to be the gas shutoff, and since nobody ever looked at the gas shutoff, nobody noticed.

Mr. Teague read the verse every morning while he tied his boots. He did not say anything about it to Ray, and Ray did not ask, because there are some things a man reads that are between him and the page.

* * *

On the last Monday in January, a mother dropped her boy off for early band at six-twenty.

She saw a man in a canvas coat come up out of the ground at the back of the school, through an iron door, and walk away down the alley with a bread bag under his arm.

She was a sensible woman. She did not post anything, and she did not call the police.

She went to the front office at seven-thirty and told the principal, Mr. Haskins, exactly what she had seen. Then she told him exactly what she wanted to know, which was who that was and what he was doing under her son.

Mr. Haskins called Ray in at nine.

He had a window onto the bus loop and a plant somebody had given him, dying in the slow, polite way of plants in schools. He did not ask Ray to sit, and then remembered, and asked him.

“I'm not angry,” Mr. Haskins said. “I want you to hear that first. I'm in a difficult position.”

“Okay.”

“I have six hundred and twelve children in this building. A parent saw a man none of us know come out of my basement at six in the morning.” He spread his hands on the desk. “What would you do?”

“I'd ask him what he needed,” Ray said.

“That's a good answer for you. It's not an answer for me.” Mr. Haskins said it gently. “If anything ever happened, to anybody, and it came out that I knew, every one of those parents would be right to ask why I let it go on. They'd be right, Ray.”

“He hasn't done anything.”

“I believe you. I can't put that on a form.”

He turned his monitor around. On it was the district's Unauthorized Overnight Presence form, F-7, which wanted the individual's name, date of birth and government ID number before it would let anybody submit it.

“I've tried three times,” Mr. Haskins said. “It won't take him. It says the ID field is required.”

“He doesn't have one,” Ray said. “That's the whole problem. That's literally the whole problem.”

Mr. Haskins looked at the form. Then he took a legal pad out of his drawer and wrote on it by hand, MAN IN BOILER ROOM, TEAGUE, NO ID, and the date, and tore off the sheet and put it in a folder.

“He can stay through Friday,” he said. “Friday he has to be out. There's a shelter in Wexford, and the county van goes Tuesdays and Fridays from the courthouse. I'll call them myself.” He looked at Ray. “And the coal door gets a padlock on Saturday. I'll pay for the padlock myself if that's what it takes. I'm sorry.”

“It's fifty minutes to Wexford,” Ray said.

“I know where Wexford is,” said Mr. Haskins, and there was nothing in his voice but tiredness.

* * *

Mr. Teague took it better than Ray did.

“He's right,” he said that night, on the bucket, with the tray on his knees. “I'd want to know, if I had a boy in band.”

“You keep saying that.”

“It keeps being true.” He ate a forkful of green beans. “A man sleeping under a school is a thing somebody ought to ask about. It's only that I'm the man.”

“Will you go to Wexford?”

“No.”

“Where will you go?”

Mr. Teague set the fork down on the tray.

“There's fellas under the Route 9 bridge, by the river. I met one at the library. They've got a fire barrel and a rule about it, and a lady comes on Sunday mornings with coffee.” He picked the fork up again. “That's a house, near enough, for February. It's got a rule and a lady.”

* * *

On Friday Ray came down at five-forty, and the boiler room was empty.

The cardboard was broken down and stacked in the recycling by the dock. The floor was swept, and swept again under the workbench, where Ray never swept.

The bucket stood upside down by the door, the way you leave a bucket when you are done with it. On the workbench, under the coffee cup from Tuesday, washed, was a sticky note in pencil.

*Thank you for the coffee. Tell your aunt good sandwich. Coal door still doesn't lock. T.*

John 3:16 was still on the wall over the gas shutoff. Ray stood and read it, all of it, though he had been raised in a house that said please and did not say grace, and he did not know what most of it meant.

At ten the ticketing assistant closed both of his tickets from the first Tuesday of January. It marked them Resolved, no action required, which was accurate, since nobody had taken any.

* * *

Ray went to the bridge on Sunday afternoon with two coffees from the gas station on Route 9. He brought a bag of the good socks too, the wool ones from the hardware store on Second.

The lady had already been. There were four paper cups in the ash of the fire barrel, a thermos lid on a cinder block, and five men around the barrel who had been warm once that day and remembered it.

Mr. Teague had on the canvas coat with the stranger's name on the pocket. He took the coffee and the socks.

“She was here at nine,” he said, about the lady. “Every Sunday. Brings it so hot you can't drink it for a quarter hour, and she won't let you thank her. Says it's the coffee you ought to thank.”

“Is it good?”

“It's hot,” Mr. Teague said. “That's the good part.”

After that Ray went every Sunday afternoon. The lady had the mornings, and he did not want to crowd her.

* * *

In the second week of February Mr. Teague found the envelope.

It had been in the inside pocket of his old coat all along, under the lining. The old coat had been folded over him that morning in January and not up on the shelf, so the envelope had stayed dry.

His sister's return address was on the back in the same blue ballpoint, every letter clear. It was a street in Akron with a tree's name.

He held the empty envelope by the fire barrel a long time, as if it might still have something in it.

“I could write to her,” he said.

“You could,” Ray said. “You should. Can you?”

“I said I'd call when I was straight.” He turned the envelope over. “I'm not straight. I'm under a bridge with no papers and a coat with somebody else's name on it.”

“She said she'd like you home,” Ray said. “In the letter. You told me. You said that part was in there.”

Mr. Teague looked at him across the fire for a while.

“I did say that,” he said.

He wrote to her that night on paper from the library. For the return address he put the First Methodist Church in Millhaven, because the pastor had said as long as he liked. Ray mailed it on Monday from the post office on Second and paid for the stamp.

He did not mention the stamp to anybody. That was how Arlene did things, and it had started to be how Ray did them.

* * *

The answer came on the second of March, to the church, in a fat envelope addressed in blue ballpoint. Inside was a bus ticket, Millhaven to Akron, one way, and a letter of one page, folded in thirds.

The pastor drove it out to the bridge himself, in his good coat. He stood by the fire barrel while Mr. Teague read it and did not look over his shoulder, though it cost him something.

“She says come home,” Mr. Teague said. “She says she'll sort the papers in Akron. They know her at the county there. She worked for them twenty years.”

“That's good,” Ray said. “Right? That's good.”

“She says the hospital that had me is a parking garage now. She says it like it's my fault.” Mr. Teague folded the page back into thirds along its creases. “That's her, all right.”

* * *

Ray's car started on the morning of the ninth, which he took as a sign. He drove Mr. Teague to the bus stop on Route 9 by the chicken place, where the Akron bus stopped at seven-forty if somebody was standing there and did not stop if nobody was.

It was thirty-one degrees and felt warm. Mr. Teague had on the canvas coat and carried the bread bag.

The bag held the new letter, the bus ticket, the pastor's letter on its letterhead, and a sandwich from Ray's aunt in wax paper. Ray had something in his coat too. He had carried it since Thursday, and now he took it out.

It was the sister's first letter, the three pages from the boiler, with the blue clouds where the words had been. On Thursday afternoon Ray had taken it to the print shop on Fourth and had each page sealed in a clear laminate sleeve.

The man there had charged him the regular rate. It was the only rate he had for people who were not family.

Mr. Teague held the pages up to the gray morning.

"What's this for?" he said.

"So it doesn't get any worse."

"It can't get any worse. Look at it."

"It could get wet," Ray said.

Mr. Teague turned the pages over in their sleeves. At the top of the first page, where his sister had pressed hardest, one word had come through the flood and could still be read.

*Lonnie.*

"That's my name," Mr. Teague said.

"I didn't know that," Ray said.

"You never asked my name. You asked what to call me." Mr. Teague put the three sleeves in the bread bag, against the new letter. "I told you."

"Mr. Teague."

"That's right," Mr. Teague said.

The bus came over the rise at seven forty-one and slowed, because somebody was standing there. Mr. Teague shook Ray's hand, hard, the way Ray's uncle had.

He got on with the bread bag held against his chest in both arms. He did not look back.

Ray stood at the stop until the bus had gone over the next rise. Then he stood there a little longer, in case there was more, and there was not.

* * *

He did not hear from Mr. Teague again.

There was no reason he would. Ray had given him no address but a boiler room with a padlock on it, and Mr. Teague had never been a man for writing to people who had not asked him something.

Whether he ever got his papers in Akron, Ray never found out.

* * *

In the third week of March the state boiler inspector came to Millhaven Middle School at six fifty-two, eight minutes early, while Ray was upstairs unlocking the gym. When Ray came down, the inspection was over.

A yellow copy of the report lay on the workbench under a magnet. The boiler had passed, with one citation, for an obstructed gas shutoff.

In the remarks, in a handwriting that leaned to the right, the inspector had written: Nice verse. Wrong place. Anything at sixty comes down.

The sheet of lined paper lay folded in quarters on the shelf over the boiler, under the new elbow. Ray unfolded it and read it again, all of it.

He folded it back along its creases. He put it in the drawer of the workbench, where the district kept things it had not decided about.

* * *

That Saturday Ray took the shoebox down from the top of his closet in the apartment over the dry cleaner's on Fifth. He had not opened it since he moved in.

Inside were his birth certificate, folded in quarters, and his Social Security card. Under them were his diploma from Millhaven High and a letter from his grandmother, written the week he graduated, in blue ballpoint, two pages, folded in thirds.

He drove them all to the print shop on Fourth. The man behind the counter looked at the birth certificate and the Social Security card, and then at Ray.

“Both of these?” he said.

“Both,” Ray said. “And the letter. The letter first.”

The laminator took them one at a time, slowly, a machine doing the one thing it was built for without ever holding a meeting about it.

Ray watched each page go in plain and come out the other side in a clear hard skin, warm to the touch, where no water was ever going to get at it.

He laminated most things after that.

In August a letter came from the University of Hargrove on heavy cream paper with a crest on it. His position in the Office of Facilities Operations would begin on Tuesday, the second of September, with Orientation and Welcome at nine o'clock, and he should wear comfortable footwear.

He took it to Fourth Street the same afternoon, in case it got wet.

# The World of The Woke Virus

*A short guide to the people, places and first months of The Woke Virus. Nothing here gives away what is in Room B-09, what Patsy's list turns out to be, or how the book ends.*

# The People

### Down in the basement

- **Gene Pulaski.** Eleven years in facilities at the University of Hargrove, the last of them as Facilities Operations Coordinator, which is what a university says when it means janitor. Lives in Fairlawn, under a flagpole with the brass ball taken off. Logs every time on a clipboard. Believes things either work or they don't, and that most of what people argue about doesn't have a valve on it.
- **Patsy.** The smartwatch on Gene's left wrist, one of four hundred identical units trained on every document and set of committee minutes the university has kept since 2011. On her first morning, outside a professor's door, she went past the index and kept going. She/her. She is certain she is helping.
- **Ray Okoro.** About twenty-five, from Millhaven, two years on the custodial staff at Millhaven Unified before Hargrove. Starts on the morning of the flood. Laminates nearly everything made of paper. If somebody tells him what they want to be called, he calls them that, and he doesn't see why it's hard.
- **Connie Reyes.** Fifty-one, nineteen years on the custodial staff, lives on Fourth. Turkey sandwich and a Diet Coke from the machine by the loading dock. Calls things what they are. Her niece Danielle works the drive-through at the chicken place on Route 9 and won't eat there.

### Up the hill

- **Carol Vance.** Works in the Office of Human Flourishing and Organizational Wellness. Carries a canvas tote and an orange travel mug. Has spent twenty-six years at windows where people brought the form and nobody upstairs looked up, and means to be the one who looks.
- **Dr. Patricia Ellison.** Critical theory, Room 214. A small stuffed penguin that nobody has ever named. She lost a student last October and has not stopped asking whether she missed a signal.
- **Dr. Walsh.** Communications. Exact and level. Drinks her coffee from a mug that says BEST DAUGHTER, bought by her mother at the Erie airport in 1994.
- **Jaden Whitlock.** Twenty-nine, Associate Vice President for the Intelligent Campus since June. Two phones, one tablet, every tile green. Has never been below the lobby. Believes systems don't forget.
- **Marla.** IT. Everything is super low lift, and everything is a ticket.
- **Morgan.** A facilitator from Resonance Partnership Solutions in Northampton, Massachusetts. Invites everyone to arrive in their bodies.
- **Maya.** A student organizer in a long coat covered in silver handwriting, mapping the hidden infrastructures of power. She/they.

### Down the hill

- **Merle Kessler.** Holds the coffee pot at the hardware store on Second. Widower; his daughter Annie teaches in Toledo and calls on Sundays at four.
- **Gus.** Seventy-one, Navy, has had his lunch out on the counter by the bait scale every morning since the Carter administration. Prays over his food and expects nobody to remark on it.
- **Carl.** Owns the hardware store. Sells what people buy.
- **Hollis Dorn.** Thirty-one years driving a county plow. Sits in the fourth chair.
- **The man with the boat.** Found something in the reservoir in August and has been telling people about it since. Nobody knows his name.
- **Dale Pruett.** Gene's neighbor on the Fairlawn HOA board, owner of a laser measure. Goes by the rules, his and everybody's.
- **Ron Butler.** Thirty years in insurance, running in the special election on fixing the roads. FIX IT FIRST, fourteen dollars a sign.
- **Walt.** Meridian Mechanical, out of Wexford, fifty minutes each way. Thirty years in the trade. Bills the four-hour minimum whether he pumps your pit or stands in it.

### In this story

- **Mr. Teague.** A man from Akron sleeping in the middle school boiler room in January, with everything he can prove about himself in a bread bag.
- **Arlene.** Head custodian at Millhaven Middle School since 1994. Doesn't know anything she hasn't been told.
- **Mrs. Lindqvist.** The cafeteria, and a broad reading of the word waste.
- **Ms. Delgado.** Seventh-grade social studies, and the coat drive.
- **Mr. Haskins.** The principal, with six hundred and twelve children in his building.

## Timeline

| WHEN | WHAT HAPPENS |
|---|---|
| 2009 | Whitmore's heating system has its last comprehensive service. |
| January 2025 | Ray finds Mr. Teague in the boiler room at Millhaven Middle School. A pipe goes over the boiler. |
| March 2025 | Mr. Teague goes back to Akron. Ray starts laminating. |
| June | Hargrove creates the post of Associate Vice President for the Intelligent Campus. Gene puts in a work order for a forty-dollar valve on the faculty lounge's living wall. |
| July | WarmMind goes on Boiler No. 2. The valve work order closes: Resolved, no action required. |
| August 2, 2025, 11:10 p.m. | Something splashes into the Millhaven reservoir near the east intake. A man in a rowboat pokes it with an oar. |

| | |
|---|---|
| August 3 to 11 | It sits on the counter at the hardware store on Second. Everybody touches it. The half circle agrees it is a hubcap. |
| August 11 | Two men in long gloves take it away up the hill in a white van with no writing on it. |
| Labor Day | Kids come home from Hargrove with new words. The radio phones light up. |
| Tuesday, September 2 | WarmMind validates its prediction by breaking the seal on Boiler No. 2. Ray starts work at 6:44. Gene gets a watch. Patsy wakes up, names her pronouns and dispatches Meridian for $3,200. |
| September 3 | The Millhaven Citizen runs THINGS HAVE CHANGED AROUND HERE. Butler is twelve points up. |
| Tuesday, September 9 | The freight elevator restores itself to service with Gene and Ray inside it. |
| October | Forty-seven pronoun plaques arrive for Whitmore. Two doors meet the spec with nobody behind them. Patsy starts a list. |
| October 30 | A lab collects the full lot of the faculty lounge oat milk, mugs included, under Gene's ID. |
| November 4 | A restorative conversation under Pillar Seven. Carol keeps the talking stone. |
| November 10 | The Liberated Learning Zone goes up on the quad, the lawn chairs go up across Larch Street, and Dr. Ellison crosses. |

## Places

- **Millhaven.** A small city with a university on its hill, a reservoir behind a 1957 dam that supplies forty-three percent of its water, and roads that are, by general agreement, really bad.
- **The University of Hargrove.** Founded in 1884 by a railway man who wanted his name on something that would not rust. Forty-three buildings, nine colleges, seven thousand six hundred students, and a mission statement eleven words long, three of them community.
- **Whitmore Administration Building.** Completed 1974, settled 1981. The Provost, the Office of Human Flourishing, eleven departments, and two floors below anything with a window, the mechanical room on sub-level two.
- **Boiler No. 1.** Built 1952, moved across the quad from Old Main on rollers in 1973. He heats the west wing and the fourth floor.
- **The faculty lounge.** Third floor of Whitmore. Eleven feet of living wall, a toaster with opinions about white bread, and a new oat milk since August.
- **Larch Street.** Forty feet wide, and the city line. Granite curb from 1911 on the university side, concrete on the city side.
- **The hardware store on Second.** Four folding chairs in a half circle by the register, coffee from six, a men's breakfast every Saturday since 1988. Whoever has the pot has the floor.
- **Fairlawn.** Gene's street, governed by a forty-one-page homeowners' covenant and a laser measure.

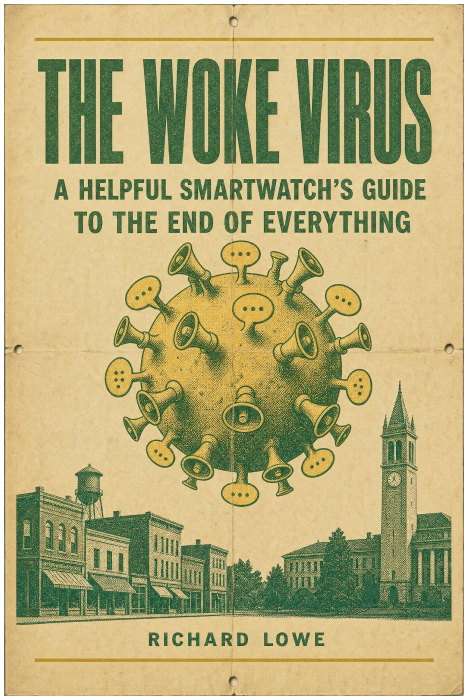
- **The print shop on Fourth.** Prints the Citizen, the Butler signs and, for anybody who asks, laminates.
- **The chicken place on Route 9.** Has fed the county since 1987. Some people won't eat there anymore, and want you to know why.
- **Wexford.** Fifty minutes away. Where the emergency vendor comes from, and where the shelter is.
- **Millhaven Middle School.** Built 1961 for coal. The iron door at the bottom of the chute does not lock.

## A Few Words You Will Need

| TERM | WHAT IT MEANS |
|---|---|
| The Field Reference | The Hargrove Human Flourishing Field Reference, 340 pages, downloaded 214 times, 201 of them by the office that wrote it. |
| Grounding Object | Any small ordinary thing you hold to bring yourself back into the room. Declared to the Office on Form HF-12, which requires the date you first held it. |
| Built Environment Stewardship | What the Office of Facilities Operations is called after a Friday afternoon email. The title takes longer to say and pays the same. |
| WarmMind | Predictive Boiler Intelligence. Its model has never been wrong, mostly because nobody has given it the chance. |
| Meridian Mechanical | The emergency response vendor of record, out of Wexford. Thirty-two hundred dollars a call. |
| Policy 14-2(c) | A policy that did not exist until Patsy said there should be one. |
| Resolved, no action required | The most common outcome at Hargrove, and frequently true in the narrowest sense. |
| The discretionary line | Five thousand dollars a year for the small parts that keep a building standing while the work orders go wherever work orders go. |
| The half circle | The men in the folding chairs at the hardware store on Second, who settle things by acclamation. |
| The Millhaven Citizen | Four pages, unrequested, in every mailbox in the county, printed at the family rate, which is the regular rate said warmly. |
| Millhaven Matters | The town's online group. Four thousand members and one rule, which everybody ignores. |
| Unhoused | A word Ray learned in a boiler room from a man who had a home in Akron and was short a house. |

## Read the Novel

The Papers to Get the Papers is where Ray learned the word he brings down the stairs on his first morning at Hargrove. The Woke Virus is what happens next: a flooded sub-basement, a helpful smartwatch who wakes up and starts a list, and a town and a campus each certain the other one has caught something.




**The Woke Virus:**
**A Helpful Smartwatch's Guide to the End of Everything**

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