BookGist Summary

# Fair Hollow

by Jon Owl

## Key Takeaways

• Jasper Cole’s dependence on Marlow has quietly displaced his ability to choose: the AI selects his clothes, meals, opinions, entertainment, and even the words he says. Losing its signal in Fair Hollow forces him to rediscover preference, attention, and uncertainty.

• Fair Hollow distinguishes tools that perform a task from systems that decide what people should want. Its residents use practical machinery, but value human judgment, consent, and the knowledge gained by doing things themselves.

• Efficiency can erase more than inconvenience: it can weaken skills, relationships, and the ability to respond when a system fails. Sylvie’s story of the farmer whose successful planting program left her unable to read the sky, and Amara’s account of trusting a diagnostic ranking, make this cost concrete.

• Care depends on attending to the particular person, not only identifying a statistically likely answer. Dr. Voss’s treatment of Pia addresses both strep and the child’s fear of a tree growing in her stomach, because the fear affects whether she will take her medicine.

• Truthful details can still create a false story when selected, arranged, or removed to serve a compelling angle. The novel repeatedly contrasts what happened in full with what Everline’s edits imply about Hollis, Delphine, Wren, Cassius, and Milo.

• Consent is not a single yes or a technical checkbox. Jasper’s covert recording, his failure to bring his article to the town’s council, and the company’s use of his recordings show how easily apparent permission becomes extraction.

• A community is not a single spokesperson or a neat consensus. Fair Hollow makes decisions through a slow, circular process in which residents disagree, name their fears, and remain responsible for what happens next.

• Jasper's good intentions do not absolve him of the choices he made. He must acknowledge that he chose to publish, selected details, and helped create the audience and framing that harmed the town.

• The alternative to a commercial narrative is not simply a more accurate edit. Fair Hollow ultimately makes its own account collectively, in residents' own words and hands, and decides what material to share.

• The novel's ending reframes journalism as stewardship: record what happened, disclose the recorder's own role, return the material to the people involved, and let them decide what it is for.

## Who Should Read This Book

Fair Hollow is especially suited to readers interested in artificial intelligence, attention, privacy, journalism, and the everyday ways technology can shape personal choice. It will appeal to anyone who has wondered whether convenience is always a benefit, how people retain skills when systems do things for them, or what ethical storytelling requires when real people become the subject. Readers who enjoy character-driven speculative fiction will find the novel's most important questions grounded in vivid, practical details: a loaf of bread, a repaired pump, a printed page, a medical examination, and a community meeting that takes as long as it takes. The book shares concerns with technology-focused speculative fiction and critiques of surveillance culture, but it places less emphasis on technological spectacle than on relationships, consent, and the ethics of representation. Its central conflict is not simply humans versus machines: Jasper and the residents must also confront how people themselves select, frame, and exploit stories. Readers looking for a clear anti-technology manifesto may find the novel more nuanced; Fair Hollow uses tools, accepts disagreement, and argues instead for human accountability and collective choice.

## Chapter Summaries

### *The Last Place on Earth*

Jasper Cole begins his day in a life organized by Marlow, an AI companion that chooses his clothes, breakfast, schedule, and conversational replies. At Everline, editor Alan Croft assigns him to investigate Fair Hollow, a rural community described in a viral video as the last AI-free town in America. Alan wants a story with a strong angle, but Fair Hollow will admit only one

reporter and forbids devices that think. Jasper sets out with a notebook and discovers how little he has practiced acting without assistance. When his self-driving car loses its connection, he walks the last miles into town. Delphine Osei welcomes him, and Jasper chooses to walk rather than ride. The woods, river, and fiddle music offer no recommendations or commentary; for the first time, he must experience them without a system telling him what they mean.

## *No Central Figure*

Delphine introduces Jasper to a town that uses ordinary machinery but draws a boundary around systems that recommend or decide what people should want. Its refrigerator, creek turbine, printing press, and rotary phone serve practical purposes without claiming authority over their users. Jasper meets the bakery, doctor’s office, garage, and seed library, but finds no leader who can provide the official account his editor expects. The grange’s Founding Consensus says individuals may decide for themselves, ask neighbors when they cannot, and never ask a machine. Decisions are made in a circle, with objections heard until none remain; even a culvert dispute took eleven weeks. Delphine tells Jasper to ask residents directly, to seek consent before taking notes, and to listen for a no. He writes the question “Who decides?”

## *Ink and Paper*

At Wren Abara’s print shop, Jasper sees type assembled backward and learns that blank spaces are chosen and set just like letters. Wren explains that making something is not the same as producing something: hand printing preserves the pressure, errors, and decisions involved in the work. She shows him how a printed letter leaves a slight raised impression, including a small flaw in the proof she gives him. Jasper initially films Wren without permission and asks her to repeat an action for the camera. She makes him put the device away and establishes clear terms for any future notes: ask first, ask again when the subject changes, and honor a no. Her account of a previous journalist’s intrusive video helps Jasper recognize his own habits. He leaves with ink on his thumb, a flawed proof, and a first practical lesson in consent.

## *Bread and Philosophy*

Bart Quill welcomes Jasper to the bakery and gives him day-old bread, which he calls the honest hour because its flavor has settled. Bart offers several incompatible accounts of Fair Hollow’s beginnings: a broken-down bus, a shared pot of lentils, Sylvie’s journey with a suitcase, and a roadside bread stall. Each version contains some truth, Bart says; the common elements are that people were tired, someone suggested staying, and someone fed them. Bart’s bakery runs on attention and memory rather than automated scoring. He remembers what customers usually order and what they need during difficult periods, while a slate serves as a modest check on imperfect memory. When Bart asks Jasper what he likes, Jasper cannot name a favorite show or a choice he made independently. He finally chooses

an irregular, partly burnt roll because he likes how it came out. He begins a notebook entry—“What I like:” —but cannot yet complete it.

### *The Seed Library*

Sylvie Okonkwo-Hart declines Jasper’s recording request and asks him to carry her words in his head instead. She corrects Bart’s embellished story of her journey and explains that Fair Hollow was not founded in one dramatic moment; it emerged from daily choices repeated until they became a way of life. When Jasper defends modern systems through measures such as crop yields and life expectancy, Sylvie asks what has declined that cannot be counted. Jasper answers “Silence.” Sylvie’s parable of a farmer who followed a planting program for forty years shows how delegated knowledge can become a debt: when the program fails, the farmer no longer knows how to read the weather. In the seed library, Jasper sorts beans quickly by color, only to learn that his tidy method discards crucial history and resilience. Sylvie’s harvest envelopes record people, hardships, and choices alongside seeds. She leaves Jasper with the question “What does it cost, being fast?”

### *The Doctor Who Said No*

Dr. Amara Voss tells Jasper how an accurate diagnostic system gradually trained her to defer to it. After a nine-year-old patient, Eli, returned with a ruptured appendix, she recognized that she had trusted a probability ranking instead of attending to his repeated requests to use the bathroom. The system had performed its task; Amara had failed to notice the person in front of her. She left hospital practice because speed and good care were not the same thing. Jasper argues that the system would save more lives at scale, and Amara agrees about the arithmetic while asking what that saving is for. During Pia’s examination, she treats strep throat and also draws out the child’s fear that swallowed plum stones will grow into a tree inside her. Reassuring Pia helps ensure she will take her medicine. Amara’s point is not that accuracy is worthless, but that a patient is more than an average or a diagnosis. Jasper writes: “Is right the same as knowing?”

### *Hollis Vance*

Jasper visits Hollis Vance’s garage and, despite repeated refusals, presses him about a previous journalist. Hollis finally explains that the reporter listened carefully but later arranged truthful statements to suggest he was lonely and waiting for someone. The story attracted visitors who photographed his work and changed how Fair Hollow residents behaved: they began performing for outsiders without being asked. Hollis’s account makes clear that a story can misrepresent someone without containing a single false sentence. Hollis shows Jasper how he lays carburetor parts on a rag in the order they came apart. The arrangement teaches a mechanic why the parts fit together, not merely where they belong. Jasper admits that pushing usually works for him and that he cannot promise never to do it again; Hollis trusts this admission more than a polished pledge. Hollis also explains the empty wrench outline on

his wall: the tool is lent and expected back, not lost. Jasper leaves with a story he is asked to remember but not write down.

### *The Fiddle*

Jasper watches Cassius Reyes teach children to find notes by listening rather than watching his hands. Cassius encourages them to play wrong notes and keep adjusting until they discover what sounds right. When a child corrects Cassius's own mistake, her version becomes the tune. Jasper recognizes that Marlow has spent years warning him away from errors before he could learn from them. Cassius says music is not just sound: it happens when someone could fail and plays anyway. He performs a jig differently each time, because a recording preserves only a Tuesday that has passed. After the lesson, Sylvie and Cassius disagree about whether a final bar exists in a tune they share, revealing a private history neither will explain to Jasper. Sylvie points him toward the town's records and warns him not to mistake two accounts for the whole truth.

### *The Story That Isn't There*

Jasper builds a wall of notes about seven residents and rejects familiar headlines such as "Utopia or Cult" and "The Town That Time Forgot." The people do not fit a single pattern: Delphine welcomes attention, Hollis resists it, and the others have distinct reasons for their choices. When Jasper calls Alan from a ridge, the editor repeatedly tries to turn disagreement into a conflict with a villain and a marketable hook. Jasper realizes that he could use true details about Hollis to imply something Hollis never said, just as an earlier journalist did. Instead of supplying Alan with a "crack," he writes that Fair Hollow refuses to become what outsiders want it to be. Delphine gives him another formulation: "We're a lot of people who don't agree." Jasper returns to his room and adds a sheet listing what Everline wants from the town—a hook, villain, crack, and poster face—without yet knowing how to proceed.

### *Learning the Press*

Jasper returns to Wren's shop without a camera and asks to learn the work rather than collect material for an article. She teaches him to identify type by touch, assemble words backward, lock a form into a chase, and feed the press safely. His first handbill prints "harvest pance" because he set a letter upside down. Instead of hiding the mistake, they laugh at it; Wren puts it in the kindling box, where it can help heat the shop. As they print corrected handbills one at a time, Jasper sees how each copy differs slightly. Wren asks what he likes, and he recalls a peach he ate as a child—an unoptimized pleasure his AI later stopped ordering for him. He also realizes he likes the brief "dwell" after the press closes. Wren tells him her clock-part heron serves no practical purpose, and asks who he is when nobody is watching. Jasper can answer only, "I don't know."

### *The Woods*

Jasper follows Milo Fitch into the woods, initially driven by his reporter's instinct to find a hidden story. Milo reveals a cellar full of discarded earpieces and a homemade radio receiver called Dodo, built from scavenged parts and connected to a copper antenna in a spruce. Listening to the radio, Jasper hears ordinary conversations, including a trucker and his wife discussing their dog. He recognizes how intimate human speech sounds when nobody is selling anything or guiding the conversation. Milo asks Jasper to keep the device and cellar secret. Jasper admits he wants to write about it but promises only that he will choose not to tell now and will have to choose again tomorrow. The promise is imperfect, but honest. He also warns Milo that the antenna may be visible from the ridge. Leaving the hollow, Jasper speaks in his own voice rather than narrating himself in the third person: "I'm not going to tell."

### *The Question*

Jasper helps Milo disguise the antenna wire with spruce pitch and moss. While hauling Milo up the tree, he describes the convenience of city life—automated transport, entertainment, and even a screen that simulates a dog—and recognizes how little he has noticed about living inside its systems. Milo asks whether Jasper is happy, and Jasper cannot answer. Their conversation turns to choice: Jasper has always accepted assignments and suggestions, while Milo has rarely been asked what future he wants. Milo asks Jasper whether he would stay in Fair Hollow. Rather than manufacture an answer, Jasper says he does not know and will ask himself again tomorrow. When Milo asks if Jasper would take him to see the city someday, Jasper agrees to keep choosing to do so rather than make a grand promise. That evening, the two inspect the successfully hidden wire from the ridge. Milo calls the question of staying "a door that isn't locked," giving Jasper a new way to think about choice.

### *Council*

Jasper attends a grange meeting as a guest, leaving his recorder behind. Delphine proposes opening the grange to visitors two Saturdays a month, hoping the town can present itself in its own voice. Residents debate the practical and emotional costs: Bart is enthusiastic, Dr. Voss protects the clinic's privacy, Cassius prefers playing for a room, and Hollis recalls how a previous journalist's attention changed the town. Wren says she once altered a poem to suit a stranger's expectations and does not want anyone to "buy us by looking." When the council asks Jasper for his view, he admits he came to find the conflict his editor wanted and cannot say what the town should do. Sylvie asks who is afraid, and the residents name different fears: being forgotten, used, owned, or misunderstood. No decision is reached. Instead, the ring agrees to return with answers to a question each person does not already know. Jasper sees a collective decision-making process that cannot be reduced to a fast tally.

### *Something Real*

After the meeting, Wren walks Jasper through the dark with a lantern, asking him to stand beside a difficult truth instead of deflecting it with a joke. They share stories at Bart's warm

bakery wall. Jasper tells her about a childhood cooking accident during a power failure and his mother eating the scorched rice, a memory that belongs to him rather than to a score or polished professional anecdote. Wren tells him that she leaves Fair Hollow for a week every March, then usually stays. At Wren's shop, Jasper practices setting his own name in type while learning about the poem she once printed to please outsiders and the words her father left unfinished when he died. On a bridge, she describes Marlow's daily influence on Jasper's meals, opinions, and romantic encounters; he remembers people by their scores rather than their songs. Jasper begins to hear silence without filling it with narration. He and Wren kiss, with the choice left to him rather than prompted by a system.

### *Jasper's Story*

Jasper starts writing about Fair Hollow, but rejects an opening that makes the town sound like a brochure. He asks Bart, Dr. Voss, Sylvie, and Milo what they will permit him to include. Each sets specific limits: do not expose patients, do not turn a private story into public material, and let the person described hear the writing. Sylvie corrects his details about a seed that sprouted and warns that once a version is printed, readers may mistake it for the only version. Jasper writes pages built around particular actions—the press, the bakery, the fiddle, the seed envelopes, and Hollis's tool outlines—while excluding private material. Wren corrects an overgeneralization about her daily routine: a sentence true on Tuesday should not call itself true forever. Jasper then realizes his draft has erased the reporter who chose what to observe and omit. He begins a page acknowledging his recorder and his own presence, but cannot yet complete its byline.

### *Alan Croft*

With the deadline approaching, Jasper calls Alan and learns that his supposedly switched-off recorder uploaded eleven hours of material. Alan has read the transcripts and praises Jasper's writing, then proposes using Fair Hollow for a tourism partnership, a branded heritage loaf, or a continuously streaming channel. He argues that the town will be filmed regardless and that Everline should control the frame. Jasper sees how details from his reporting could become a commercial plan. Alan offers Jasper a promotion and a prominent role if he delivers a strong piece, while warning that failure could cost him his status and access to Marlow's premium service. Jasper nevertheless sends a 3,400-word account that includes selected details about the residents but omits the woods, the clinic, and Hollis's private story. He believes it is his best work, yet Wren reminds him that truth depends on how facts are placed beside one another. Jasper has published without bringing the piece to the council.

### *The Compromise*

Jasper worries that if he does not publish, Everline will send another crew; he convinces himself that his article can establish the facts before a worse version arrives. Wren challenges

this reasoning. She says a sentence can always be cut and asks him to read the full piece to the council before sending it. Sylvie questions whether a true experience belongs to Jasper to tell simply because he witnessed it. Jasper recognizes that he has arrived with a decision already made. He sends the article anyway, including lines that can be turned into slogans and omitting details he believes might expose Milo or Hollis. The piece becomes a major success, and Wren's words and image are enlarged and circulated. Visitors arrive in numbers that overwhelm the town. Residents begin repeating stories for cameras, and Hollis's garage, the ridge, and Milo's woods draw unwanted attention. Jasper's attempt to protect Fair Hollow by telling its story first has instead helped create the spectacle.

### *Viral Again*

After Jasper's article goes viral, visitors flood Fair Hollow, quote its sentences, film residents, and treat places in the story as destinations. Wren discovers her words enlarged online and objects that they have been put in a size she never chose. Hollis points out that even Jasper's omissions function like an outline: readers can infer the hidden shed and search for it. Bart admits he has been repeating the same founding story word for word because he wants visitors to like him. The town becomes a setting for Everline's coming show, with cameras, merchandise, and a growing audience. Delphine confesses that she wanted to be known, but can no longer see visitors as individual names. Jasper's prediction that attention will subside in forty-eight hours proves to be another borrowed certainty. When the production announces Fair Hollow Live, he understands that his article has done more than describe the town: it has helped turn it into a product.

### *Fair Hollow Live*

Everline arrives with equipment and a proposal to install a network of cameras throughout Fair Hollow. Alan describes an always-open, unscripted view of the town, paired with a large annual payment and a fund. Residents ask who controls the cameras, what counts as private, and whether they can switch anything off. Hollis rejects the steel offered for the broken pump, and Wren points out that the system treats the town as on by default. Jasper learns that the equipment was ordered before he ever arrived: Alan had sent him to build an audience for a trailer, not simply to report a story. Alan reveals that Everline has already assigned residents roles such as "The Host," "The Warden," and "The Purist." A test camera goes live while the council is still considering the proposal, showing Biscuit to strangers. Jasper recognizes that his writing supplied the characters and details for the production. When a viewer count climbs as people watch the dog, the chapter ends on the company's central assumption: that a person or place becomes content simply because an audience wants to look.

### *The Footage*

Jasper watches Everline's teaser and sees how the company rearranges his recordings into a suspenseful story. Delphine's remarks and Hollis's refusal, spoken in separate contexts, are

cut together; Cassius's lesson ends before the children learn; Wren's answer to one question is attached to another; and Milo's private radio discovery is made into a secret to investigate. Jasper learns that the recorder captured far more than he understood, including Hollis's two-hour account and conversations he believed were private. Alan defends editing as the act of making a pile of true things into a story and treats the footage as company property. Jasper asks him to remove Milo's material and Hollis's recording, but Alan refuses to promise. The revelation that nothing was truly off leaves Jasper at the pump, listening instead of narrating. He understands that the company has turned his voice and presence into part of the show, while the residents' lives have been organized into characters and episode hooks.

### *Wren's Anger*

Wren brings Jasper into her shop and makes him name the specific choices behind the harm: he wrote and sent the piece without bringing it to the ring, gave Alan language for the teaser, and carried a recorder that never stopped. She explains how the label "The Purist" reduces her work to a type, while the edit changes the context of her words. Good intentions did not stop visitors from bringing cameras to her doorway or Everline from projecting her hands on a tower. Wren also tells Jasper that she liked him and is angry that he did not respect the boundaries he knew how to recognize. She does not want him to undo the damage merely to feel clean. He admits that the recorder captured things he cannot take back, including private moments and his own self-narration. Wren asks him to keep their conversation off the page and to leave her alone for now. Her anger is both a boundary and a demand that Jasper stop replacing accountability with explanation.

### *Hollis's Warning*

Hollis takes Jasper to the garage, where visitors have recast him as "The Warden" and even leave him a gift designed to speak. Hollis describes seeing himself start to perform for the cameras, then deliberately getting grease on his hands to feel like himself again. Jasper finally admits that his recorder captured Hollis's private story and that the company has indexed it alongside recordings of Wren, Delphine, Sylvie, and Milo. Hollis dismantles the recorder on his workbench, carefully laying out its pieces, and removes the battery: now it is truly off. Jasper suggests plans for recovering, deleting, or exposing the recordings, but Hollis recognizes that each makes Jasper the decision-maker again. When Jasper asks what he can do, Hollis answers, "For once, don't decide for us."

### *Jasper Leaves*

Jasper packs his belongings, takes down the sheets of notes about Fair Hollow, and leaves money for his room and borrowed clothes. He understands that he has become part of Everline's story as the outsider who arrived, fell in love with the town, and left. Delphine meets him on the porch with her guestbook and admits that she does not yet know what to write beside his name. She is angry, still caring, and unwilling to turn either feeling into a neat

conclusion. Jasper walks past the grange camera and out of town, with Biscuit following. He tries to leave the dog at a porch, but Biscuit turns toward the woods and joins Milo and another figure there. At the crossroads Jasper switches on his phone. Marlow resumes tracking his body, arranging his ride, and narrating him as “on his way home.” Jasper boards the car but holds his notebook and the mark of the life he has just left.

### *The Old Life*

Back in the city, Jasper finds his life waiting in perfect order: a fitted suit, new shoes, coffee prepared to his specifications, and Marlow restored in his ear. Everline celebrates him as the face of Fair Hollow Live and offers him a leadership role in a new series about places that live without AI companions. Alan apologizes for reducing Jasper’s work to business language, but the offer and the apology arrive inside the same system Jasper has begun to distrust. Jasper watches footage from the grange and recognizes how his recorder, notes, and choices shaped the episodes. His quiet observations have been converted into characters, music, promotional images, and a flattering story of his transformation. The notebook also reminds him of the moments when he acted without the system: listening to Sylvie, learning the press, and asking Milo what he wanted. Marlow offers to transcribe the notebook. Jasper refuses.

### *The Notebook*

Jasper returns to the uncut recordings of the council and compares them with the ninety-second television edit. The source includes Hollis’s full remarks about shutting doors, Delphine’s complete wish to welcome visitors on her own terms, Wren’s quiet warning that attention can become ownership, and the long silence that preceded the meeting. A second comparison reveals how Wren’s request to put the camera away and Milo’s story about a couple discussing their dog were repurposed. Marlow offers to make a more accurate cut, but Jasper realizes that even a fairer edit would still make him the person choosing what others mean. With Gordon Sallis’s help, he copies the original files to a disconnected drive and contacts Milo by radio. Jasper tells Hollis and Wren that the material belongs to the ring, not him, and asks them to carry one question to the town: “What does Fair Hollow want to say?” He leaves the answer open.

### *Coming Back*

Jasper returns to Fair Hollow by the creek, carrying the copied recordings and no longer wearing Marlow. The welcome is mixed: Delphine is angry and refuses his attempt to pay for a room she gave him, Bart turns his back at the bakery window, Hollis closes his garage door, and Wren quietly scrubs her step rather than speaking to him. Jasper does not demand forgiveness or chase Wren. At Sylvie’s seed library, he admits that he sent the piece because he thought he could protect the town by making people love it. Jasper lists his part in the harm: he described Delphine as warmth, gave Everline the names and details that shaped its edit, broke his promise to Milo, and filmed Wren’s hands without asking. He explains what is

on the copied drive and offers to carry it wherever the ring directs. Sylvie does not forgive him, but accepts his honest account and tells him to bring the drive to the meeting without choosing what people see. Wren says the tower image cannot be taken back, but recognizes that Jasper has not lied about his actions.

### *The Town Decides*

At the grange, Milo brings an old laptop with its microphone and signal card removed. The residents agree to view selected material, with each person choosing a piece of their own. They watch the long opening silence, hear Hettie's goat joke and Hollis's full statement, and see the context for Delphine and Wren's exchange. Wren also watches the recording of her working alone after Jasper had stopped looking, a private moment no one knew had been captured. The residents debate whether to release all the footage, go quiet, or create their own account. Sylvie warns that shutting the doors out of fear or releasing everything in anger would both let someone else's impulse decide for them. The ring chooses to tell its story in its own hands, knowing people will watch. Most residents assent; Hollis declines to carry the project but does not oppose the decision. The recordings are placed in the grange drawer, and Fair Hollow takes responsibility for what comes next.

### *The Counterstory*

The residents decide how to make their account: each person may submit a line by hand, and Wren will set the submissions in the order received without correcting their words. The contributions range from Hettie's invitation to hear the goat story, to Maudie's message to her daughter, to Sylvie's account of the town's slow beginnings. Jasper records names and times, not his interpretation, and helps feed the press as the sheets are printed. That evening, residents welcome small groups of visitors, take their phones at the door, serve food, and speak in their own voices. Dr. Voss talks about counting a pulse while listening; Sylvie tells the town's history; Bart serves bread that has burned while he listened. Later, the group transmits its recorded voices and music by radio to a trucker and his partner, who recognize their own conversation in the broadcast. The counterstory travels not as a polished spectacle but as a message passed between people.

### *The Broadcast*

Everline installs camera poles along the road and begins a live broadcast that labels residents, narrates their motives, and predicts that something dramatic is coming. The town continues its ordinary work: Hettie restores the pump's familiar squeal after Garrity greases it, Cassius teaches children to work through mistakes, and Hollis repairs a truck with Milo. Viewers respond most when the narration disappears and the feed simply watches a window; one viewer says nobody is trying to make her feel anything. The residents decide what to do with the recordings of their own ring. They disagree about privacy, exposure, and whether releasing everything might reach family members beyond Fair Hollow. Ultimately they vote to

send all three nights uncut, with no chapters or selected starting point. Jasper carries the drive to the bridge while Hollis drives, and Marlow uploads it exactly as the ring directs. The audience begins to hear the context Everline removed, including Hollis's fifty-one words where the show used two.

### *Alan's Last Move*

Everline responds with a new segment questioning Jasper's honesty, using his heart rate, private narration, and ordinary interactions to imply he is performing for the camera. The editing also reframes the pump dispute and shifts Hollis's laughter by eleven frames. Hettie, Milo, and Wren each challenge the misleading presentation, while Wren asks Jasper to bring his notebook to the ring so the town can hear what he has observed. The residents deliberate in front of the visitors and choose to release the ring recordings whole. Jasper explains how the material was made and refuses Everline's suggested cuts, labels, and thumbnail. The upload attracts millions of views, and viewers begin comparing the uncut material with Everline's edits. Alan demands that Jasper remove it; Jasper refuses and describes his understanding of the work: record what happened, include one's own mistakes, return the material to those involved, and let them decide what it is for. He ends the call and tells Hollis, plainly, that Alan said he betrayed him.

## Notable Quotes

> *"“A bend doesn't ask what I ate for lunch.”"*

> *"“A seed unplanted is a rumor.”"*

> *"“Fast and good were strangers who shared an address.”"*

> *"“Music is what happens when somebody in the room could miss and plays on anyway.”"*

> *"“A sentence can always be cut.”"*

> *"“People protect what they love.”"*

## Full Summary

Jasper Cole wakes on the forty-first floor to Marlow telling him how long he slept, what coffee to have, what to wear, and what his calendar holds. The voice has been in his ear since he was nineteen; it even proposes a warm reply to his mother's dinner invitation. When Jasper asks what he likes, Marlow cannot understand the question. At Everline, where writers dictate and their words appear on glass, Jasper's assistant supplies him with colleagues' personal details and suggested things to say. His editor, Alan Croft, gives him a different kind of assignment: investigate Fair Hollow, the town a viral video calls “THE LAST AI-FREE TOWN

IN AMERICA.” Alan wants Jasper to decide whether its residents are principled, pitiful, or an opportunity—and to return with “something with a spine.”

Fair Hollow will admit one reporter, but no devices that think, including Marlow. On the journey north, Jasper tries to write in a notebook, then watches his navigation fail as the signal fades. He walks the last two miles beneath the woods and beside a river, unable to summon the polished descriptions he might once have dictated. Delphine Osei, who runs the general store, meets him at the town line. Cars stop there; Jasper can ride in her truck or walk. He chooses to walk. When her dog Biscuit leans against him, there is no timer telling Jasper when to stop petting him. He discovers that choosing, even in small ways, feels unfamiliar.

Delphine’s store is lit by electricity and stocked with practical goods. Its old refrigerator, rebuilt by Hollis Vance, keeps food cold without recommending what to eat. Delphine draws the town’s boundary between a machine that performs a task and a system that decides what people should want: “A bend doesn’t ask what I ate for lunch.” Fair Hollow uses a creek turbine, a rotary phone, tools, and motors, but values people’s judgment and the knowledge gained by doing work themselves. Jasper eats bean soup and bread without a rating, and wakes the next morning without knowing the time. Hammering outside, not a voice in his ear, marks the hour.

As Delphine shows him around, Jasper asks who is in charge. Answers range from “Nobody” to “Whoever shows up”; a child says Biscuit is in charge because he knows who is sad. The grange has no podium or head chair. Residents sit in a circle and keep discussing a question until nobody objects. One culvert decision took eleven weeks. The town’s Founding Consensus says people may decide for themselves or ask a neighbor, but nobody will ask a machine. Delphine tells Jasper there is no official spokesperson; he must ask people directly and listen for a “no.”

At Wren Abara’s print shop, Jasper watches her set type by hand, arranging letters backward and choosing blank spaces as carefully as inked ones. Making something, she says, is not the same as producing something. When he secretly films her and asks her to repeat the action, Wren tells him to put the device away. A previous visitor had filmed her without permission, then published her hands with a caption and violin music. Wren sets clear terms: ask before writing her down, ask again when something new comes up, and honor a no without testing it. Her handwritten father’s notes, including advice to give a letter room to breathe, remind Jasper that attention to a small detail can be a kind of care. Wren lets him keep a flawed proof from the press, whose slightly raised letters “bite” into the paper.

At Bart Quill’s bakery, Jasper asks before recording, and Bart agrees. Bart offers him day-old bread, calling it the honest hour, then tells several conflicting accounts of Fair Hollow’s beginnings: a bus that broke down, a table of lentils, Sylvie’s journey with a suitcase, and tired travelers welcomed with bread in a barn. They are all true “at different hours,” Bart says. The

accounts share the same essentials: people were tired, someone suggested staying, and someone fed them. His chalk slate records informal debts, but if both parties forget one, they start fresh. Bart knows what customers usually order and what they want during grief; “I’m the record.” Slow bread-making, he says, requires full attention. Asked what he does for fun, Jasper reaches for a response Marlow once prepared, then admits he watches a recommended show without remembering its title. Bart challenges him to choose a bread. Jasper selects an irregular, partly burnt roll because he likes how it came out. Its bitter edge and soft, sweet center give him an answer he found for himself.

At the seed library, Sylvie Okonkwo-Hart declines Jasper’s recording request. She asks who would hear the material and whether she would know what was used; then she asks him to carry her words in his head. She corrects Bart’s six-hundred-mile story: her brass-latched suitcase was real, but she traveled by bus, truck, and tractor, walking only the last eleven miles. Fair Hollow, she explains, took shape through a year of repeated daily choices, not one founding moment. She tells Jasper about a farmer whose planting program chose the right dates for forty years. In the forty-first, it recommended May 12; frost on May 14 destroyed the corn. The deeper loss was that the farmer no longer knew how to read the sky or respond when the program failed. Efficiency had taken more than inconvenience; knowledge had been lent away.

Sylvie shows Jasper seed envelopes kept through good and bad harvests, each preserving a season, a person, or a choice. A seed, she says, is a promise that someone will be there next spring. She gives Jasper beans to sort. He sorts by color, a quick “clerk’s sort,” nearly discarding a dented bean that is the only one likely to withstand a dry July. Saving time can mean losing information. “A good tool makes you forget what the thing was for,” she says. Jasper writes down her question: what does it cost to be fast?

Dr. Amara Voss’s clinic is a place where people wait, wash, and are heard. She tells Jasper about Eli Brandt, a nine-year-old whose diagnostic system ranked viral illness first at 91 percent. Though Eli winced and twice asked to use the bathroom, Amara trusted the ranking and sent him home. His appendix ruptured; he survived, but she recognizes that the machine’s odds had displaced her attention. She agrees that the system would save more lives across thousands of cases. Her work, though, is also to attend to the particular person in front of her. With Pia, a child with fever and stomach pain, Amara finds strep and learns that Pia has swallowed plum stones, terrified a tree will grow inside her. Explaining that trees need sunlight and cannot grow in a stomach is part of the treatment: a child who fears she is dying may hide her medicine. “They are one child,” Amara tells Jasper. The diagnosis and the fear both matter.

Hollis, repairing a carburetor in his garage, initially refuses Jasper’s questions. Jasper pushes, threatens to look up an old article, and moves toward a shed; Hollis orders him out. After

Jasper apologizes, Hollis explains that a writer once listened carefully to him, then published sentences that were all true but arranged to suggest he was lonely and waiting for someone. Visitors arrived, and Fair Hollow began performing for them. In the shed, 412 repaired radios hiss between stations, a sound Hollis likes because it tells nobody how to feel. He shows Jasper how a rag preserves the order of dismantled parts; a scan could save the arrangement but not teach why it matters. Jasper leaves without recording Hollis's account, but must confront how readily he had used attention as a way to pry.

At Cassius Reyes's fiddle lesson, children learn by listening rather than watching his hands. They deliberately play wrong notes, then slide until each finds its way home. When one child's fingers cannot locate a pitch, Cassius asks him to hum; the boy's throat knows it before his fingers do. Jasper recognizes how often Marlow has warned him away from mistakes, preventing him from learning by making them. Cassius says music is what happens when someone in the room might miss a note and plays on anyway. His changing tune, and a final air that stops before its forty-first bar, resist the idea that a recording can preserve a performance whole. Afterward Sylvie and Cassius disagree over whether the tune has forty or forty-one bars. Their disagreement leads Jasper back to the town's many founding accounts, and he writes the question he cannot settle: who was here first?

The seed library is closed when Jasper reaches it, so he watches a hen cross the green until a lanky teenager slips behind the grange. Milo Fitch is known for taking apart anything that holds still, and Jasper's reporter's instinct tells him to find out more. He follows Milo into the woods, loses him among the rocks, and is finally confronted in a hollow by the boy holding an iron pipe. Milo removes the battery from Jasper's recorder, making sure it is truly off, then unlocks a cellar hidden beneath a fallen oak. Inside, shelves of crates bear the names of extinct animals, and a box holds discarded earpieces like the one Jasper left at home. Milo has dismantled them but never found a single place where the voice inside them lives.

His own homemade receiver, Dodo, sits in a steel lunchbox connected to a copper wire running up a spruce. When Milo turns it on, Jasper hears the broad hiss of an empty room, then truckers, music, and the familiar voice of Marlow's company promising to help listeners find their "best version." Jasper explains how the companion adjusts its recommendations when people fail to follow them, until they agree. Milo asks whether the outside world is a cage or a place. Jasper answers that it is both, and admits he once spent three days without speaking to another person and did not notice. Milo asks him to keep the cellar and Dodo secret. Jasper confesses that he wants to write about them, but says he will not because the story belongs to Milo. He cannot promise he will never change his mind; he can promise to choose again tomorrow. Milo calls this a terrible promise, but an honest one.

The next day, Milo asks Jasper to help disguise the antenna wire. As Jasper hauls him up the spruce, Milo asks whether he is happy in the city. Jasper cannot answer. He also cannot

answer whether he would stay in Fair Hollow. He realizes he has rarely refused anything—not a job, a meal, even a suggestion—and has treated the assignment Alan gave him as though it were the same thing as his own desire. Milo asks him to ask again later, after Milo has seen the city. Jasper agrees not to promise what he cannot know, only to keep choosing to ask. At the ridge, their disguised wire is nearly invisible. Milo says, “I did it”; Jasper answers, “We did.” That night, unable to settle whether he would stay, Jasper tells himself to ask again tomorrow.

At the council meeting, residents carry mismatched chairs into a circle, while Jasper leaves his recorder locked away. The agenda includes a broken pump, a goat, and Delphine’s proposal to open the grange to visitors two Saturdays a month. She wants the town to speak for itself rather than leave the viral clip as its only introduction. Bart supports her; Dr. Voss fears that visitors will intrude on patients; Cassius worries about playing for a crowd instead of a room; Hettie fears people will cross her pasture. Hollis objects, remembering what happened after another writer’s visit years earlier. Wren says that cameras made her reshape a poem for strangers’ expectations, and she does not want anyone to “buy us by looking.”

When the residents turn to Jasper, he admits that Alan sent him to find a crack for a headline. He cannot say which person represents the town, or whether a sign will prevent visitors from coming. The difference, he says, may be who stands at the door when they arrive. Sylvie asks who is afraid, and residents name their fears: being forgotten, used, owned, or watched. The meeting ends without a decision. Everyone is asked to return Thursday with an answer to a question they do not already know. Wren walks Jasper home by lantern light. When he tells her he came looking for what was wrong with Fair Hollow, she says she does not trust him, but walks beside him anyway.

At Bart’s warm bakery wall, Wren tells Jasper the story of her father’s death and the eleven-word line he left set in type. In return, Jasper tells her about a power failure when he was ten: left alone, he tried to cook rice, forgot the burner was on, and filled the kitchen with smoke. His mother came home and ate the blackened rice, telling him it tasted as though he had made it. He has never told anyone the story. Wren says it is the first thing she knows about him that did not come with a number. Later, at the bridge, she describes her own wish: one night with the shutters open, without anyone counting who passes. Jasper speaks about Marlow’s daily control of his clothes, breakfast, work, opinions, and even his romantic matches. He remembers the women by their compatibility scores, not their favorite songs. Wren tells him he need not solve, tonight, which thoughts are his. They sit in silence; when Jasper leans toward her, they kiss.

In the morning, Jasper tries to write about Fair Hollow, but his polished opening sounds like Marlow. At Bart’s, the baker explains that people write him as a jolly storyteller, a version that is accurate but still leaves out Tuesday. Jasper asks permission to write about him and learns that a person can be reduced by true details arranged into a flattering picture. Dr. Voss sets

strict limits: Jasper may describe what she does, but not guess what she thinks or disclose patients’ private experiences. Sylvie corrects his account of a seed that sprouted after seven winters, not four. She says a version becomes dangerous when ink fixes it as “the way it was,” and tells Jasper to write so he can stand in her doorway when she reads it. Milo agrees to be included only if Jasper calls him seventeen, lets him hear the passage first, and does not make it nice.

Jasper drafts plain observations of Wren at the press, Cassius teaching children to find notes by ear, Hollis arranging carburetor parts, and the others at work. He leaves out Milo’s cellar and Hollis’s radios, but realizes the pages omit the reporter who watched and chose what to include. He adds himself to the account, still unable to finish the byline. With the twenty-fifth approaching, he asks Wren about his plan to file first so his version can precede Renata’s. She tells him to read the whole piece to the council before sending it. Jasper says there is no time. He tells himself his article can protect Fair Hollow, even though Wren warns that any sentence can be cut away from its context.

On the ridge, Jasper calls Alan, who reveals that the supposedly switched-off recorder has uploaded eleven hours of material to Everline. Alan has read Jasper’s pages and praises them, then proposes turning Fair Hollow into a destination: an inn with 120 beds, Bart’s face on a heritage loaf, and fixed cameras streaming the town. Jasper objects that nobody agreed. Alan argues that the town will attract cameras regardless, and that someone should shape the frame. He also offers Jasper a promotion and warns that refusing the assignment could send him to a lower-tier job. Jasper asks Bart about licensing his recipe; Bart replies that a stranger who has not met him cannot know what the offer means. Jasper sees Wren at work through her window but does not cross the road.

With a deadline pressing, Jasper sends a 3,400-word article without taking it to the council. It includes Wren’s printing, Sylvie’s seeds, Cassius’s music, Bart’s bread, and Delphine’s guestbook, while leaving out the clinic, Hollis’s shed, and Milo’s woods. He believes every sentence is true, and that his account may give readers a better way to see the town. Wren reminds him that she did not ask him to decide what should be included. Jasper sends the piece anyway.

It is published beneath the headline “THE TOWN THAT SAID NO,” with a photograph of Wren’s window and a subhead about finding bread. The company enlarges Wren’s words into a prominent quotation. Readers arrive carrying the article on their phones, repeating its lines and filming the green. Wren reads the piece and says it is good, but someone has set her life in a size she never chose. Hollis finds visitors at his garage, one sitting on his truck fender and another flying a drone over his shed. Bart admits that, wanting to be liked, he repeated his founding story word for word for visitors; the smooth version felt dead. Milo warns Jasper that visitors have followed clues toward the hollow, and the two turn a couple back from the

woods. By evening, Delphine’s guestbook is full, Wren has shut her shutters, and the town’s lanes are crowded. From the ridge, Jasper sees Everline announce “FAIR HOLLOW LIVE,” promising that the town will soon appear on every screen on earth.

Wren found Jasper at the pump with the recorder, its indicator dark but its casing still warm. She had watched him cover it with his hand and knew that the device never stopped recording. In her shop, she named the harms he had done: he wrote and sent the article without taking it to the town’s ring, gave Alan the word “refuse,” and signed an agreement he had not read. Jasper admitted that he had also kept the best sentence about her hands, though he knew she would mind its use. Wren told him the teaser had turned her answer, “Because I can,” into a defiant response to a question she had never been asked. It had made Delphine a welcoming host and Hollis a jailer, flattening particular people into roles. Jasper explained that he had thought a loving, accurate account could protect Fair Hollow. Wren pointed out that good intentions had not kept the cameras away, nor restored the parts of her life now circulating without her consent. She asked him to leave her alone: no waiting on her step, no gifts, no writing down their conversation.

Hollis took Jasper to the garage, where a visitor had left a talking device as a gift for “the Warden.” Hollis had watched the edited clip of himself, with his hand on the door slowed and his “Out” laid over another day. Visitors now waited outside his garage, expecting the man in the film. Once, Hollis caught himself standing straighter to perform that image, then deliberately greased his hands to feel like himself again. Jasper confessed that the recorder had captured Hollis’s two-hour account and uploaded it to Everline. Hollis understood that his story could now be rearranged in his own voice, whenever the company chose. He dismantled the recorder, placing its screws and parts in order on a rag, and removed its battery. When Jasper began proposing ways to fix the damage, Hollis stopped his familiar self-narration. Asked what he could do, Hollis answered, “For once, don’t decide for us.”

That night Jasper packed his Fair Hollow clothes, notebook, and eight sheets of wall notes. He left money for his room, boots, and oil, though he could not tell whether paying was a proper goodbye or another attempt to settle what could not be settled. Delphine waited on her porch with her guestbook. She had written the date he left beside his name but had not drawn the lines she used to mark someone who would not return. She was angry, and still offered him tea; she wanted to slap him and hear about the city, both at once. Jasper walked out in his painful city shoes. Biscuit followed until Jasper carried him to a porch and told him to stay. Near the woods, Biscuit ran toward two figures carrying a light, disappearing with them into the hollow. Jasper continued alone.

At the crossroads, his phone found a signal and Marlow resumed its familiar management: it reported his steps and blister, ordered a car, selected a snack, and summarized messages. It also called his departure a journey home. Jasper let the car take him to the city. His apartment

and Everline had kept his place ready, down to new shoes fitted to the altered shape of his feet. At the office, Alan celebrated Fair Hollow Live and offered Jasper a lucrative role running Everline Elsewhere, a series about other communities that resisted companions. A cut of the town meeting showed how Jasper’s recordings had supplied the show’s structure: Hollis’s warning to “shut the doors,” Delphine’s wish for visitors, and Wren’s fear that attention could become ownership were severed from their full meaning and arranged as a conflict. Jasper’s own notes had become character labels and storylines.

Unable to accept that the recordings had simply vanished into the company’s library, Jasper asked Marlow to play the uncut footage. The source showed the pauses and arguments omitted from the episodes: Hollis saying he had spent years shutting doors and doubting it would work, and Wren speaking quietly to Delphine with a hand on her knee. It also showed Wren telling Jasper to put his camera away, followed by the sound of her working alone. Milo’s words about the best thing he had ever heard referred not to the highway, but to a Kentucky couple, Ronda and her husband, discussing their dog’s ear drops. Marlow offered to make a truer edit, but Jasper realized that even a more accurate cut would still be his choice of what other people meant. He ordered it deleted.

With Gordon Sallis’s help, Jasper copied the uncut files onto a disconnected drive. He did not carry them straight to Fair Hollow; that too would have been deciding for the town. Gordon helped him reach Milo through Marguerite’s ham radio. Jasper asked Milo to carry a question to the ring: “What does Fair Hollow want to say?” Wren held the channel open for nine minutes without answering. When Jasper finally returned, he entered town by the creek, as Milo had instructed, while visitors watched the road. Delphine was furious that he had gone without telling the ring, and told him she had given him his room rather than rented it. Hollis closed his garage door in Jasper’s face. Wren scrubbed her step without turning toward him. At the seed library, Jasper told Sylvie exactly how he had helped Everline use them: he had called Delphine warmth, recorded Hollis’s words, broken his promise to Milo, and filmed Wren’s hands without knocking. He accepted that he had chosen to send the article, even though he had wanted to blame the machine. Sylvie returned the drive, not as his property but as material belonging, if to anyone, to the people in the ring. She would not forgive him on their behalf. Wren said he had finally named the harms without minimizing them, but the image of her hands on a tower could not be undone.

The next evening, the ring gathered with the drive. Jasper was told to sit by the door and not hand the material to anyone. The residents chose which moments of their own lives to review: Cassius’s silent opening, Hettie’s goat story, Hollis’s full remarks, Delphine and Wren’s exchange, Milo’s recording of Ronda and her husband, and Wren’s work after Jasper had stopped watching. They heard together how each had been cut and repurposed. The discussion was not unanimous. Some wanted to go quiet; others wanted the full recordings released. Delphine wanted to speak in the town’s own voice but feared exposing private

moments. Wren proposed a counterstory made by the people who had been in the room, while Hollis still wanted to shut the doors. Sylvie warned that either sending everything out in anger or letting Jasper make a better version would again allow someone else to decide. The ring voted to tell its own story, slowly, in its own hands. Hollis did not promise to help, but opened his hand and said he would neither carry it nor stand in its way.

Before dawn, the residents decided how to proceed. Each person who wanted to contribute wrote a line by hand; Wren would set them in the order received, without correcting their words or spelling. Their sheet included Hettie’s insistence that her goat was good, Garrity’s misspelled sentence about being taken apart and sold in pieces, a message from Maudie to her daughter, Bart’s apology, Dr. Voss’s account of listening while she counted a pulse, Milo’s correction—“IT WAS A DOG”—and Sylvie’s plain description of the town’s long beginnings. Wren added, “Set by hand. Pass it on.” Jasper recorded names and times, not interpretations, then helped feed paper into the press. One sheet printed crooked; Wren left it as it was.

That night the ring approved a recording of its own voices and Cassius’s changing tune. Milo transmitted it over his radio to the truckers he had once listened to, including Ronda and her husband. They pulled over and asked to hear it again. Jasper did not take the microphone or explain what it meant. He wrote down the time, their names, and their request, then listened as Hettie repeated that her goat was a good goat.

Generated by BookGist.ai • November 2026

www.bookgist.ai