

THE  
STARLING  
REQUIEM

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At the conclusion of the session, words are tallied and I'm escorted through the hospital-green corridor—one-hundred and sixteen steps—past the cleaners in their grey overalls, to the third room on the right. My escort is the same young female assistant with the intricate blonde braids who wired me earlier. She will also be my interviewer. Next week a different assistant will wire and interview me in an attempt to negate researcher bias; even for qualitative research it is excessive. The answers will be recorded, transcribed and analysed by the most objective of beasts: a computer.

She doesn't deviate from the list, they never do. Or add anything in the way of commentary or prompt to unearth a deeper or different answer. It takes an hour to complete her questions. By the end I've eaten all the biscuits on the beige plate with the cracked glazing and drunk an extra cup of coffee, my hunger managed in a way that doesn't let on it's my only meal for the day.

When I emerge from the side door of the Jákob Müller Building, the crowning glory of the Science Partition's research facility, the treacle-thick darkness tastes metallic. A bitter wind slices through my winter coat and I rewrap my scarf, pretending it will keep me warm on the way home. Thrust my ungloved hands deep into the pockets like anchors.

The streetlights are on somewhere else in the city

tonight. I don't look too hard into the shadows or up into the blinking, red eyes of the surveillance cameras. Head down, I hurry along the street, holding my anxiety at bay, counting each step until my key kisses the lock of my building.



Each session is timed. As though in any given period our narratives may be captured, quantified, and studied in a reliable, scientific fashion from which new data may be extrapolated to support or dismiss old hypotheses and spawn new statements about creativity to underwrite the next study. That's how little they understand the process—the inherent fickleness—of being at the mercy of something uncontrollable. I don't understand my process and won't understand it any better at the end of the study.

I imagine it's a joke the twelve of us in the study share at the expense of the researchers. We let them believe—when they sit us down to re-shave the small circles on our scalps so they can adhere wireless electrodes to capture an encephalographic map of our stories—we know what we are doing.

This is what I think every Tuesday afternoon when I sit myself down at the square configuration of desks,

the only striking feature of the bleak lab. I watch the clock above the door count down.

In my head I hum the same melody lodged there since last week. The notes slip and slide, loop over and under, lulling my usually erratic, meandering thoughts. For a moment I think the fingers of the man opposite me tap in perfect synchronicity with the melody. He looks up and smiles. I smile back then glance down to his fingers, long and beautifully sculptured, resting on the bench top.

Maybe they were never tapping? Maybe I am editorialising the present before it happens. Weaving fiction into reality to fit my version of it.

My thoughts drift back to the room and the dark-haired man. He's still smiling and I remember the joke. Perhaps he does share it. Or perhaps like me, he's complicit in the happiness of free biscuits and coffee. Or maybe, just maybe, it is an acknowledgement of our existence in this study where our stories, the small pieces of our souls, are reduced to nothing but data.

"Subjects you have sixty seconds," the researcher says and screens slide up from the bench tops. I turn to the researcher and nod. When I return to the man across from me he is lost behind his screen.

An alarm sounds and green pixels fill the static window of protons, neutrons, and electrons before me.

“Subjects you have fifteen minutes perusal. Please note your keyboards will be locked for the duration of this time.”

I stare at the words I wrote last week. They pull away as I try to push myself into them. Paranoia nags at the edges of my awareness, the fear my story recognises and rejects me for the imposter I am. I peer over the top of my screen and wonder what stories fill the head of my dark-haired conspirator.



Security fails to respond to my intercom attempts to rouse them to open the door and let me retrieve my scarf.

“Take mine,” the dark-haired man says, startling me. He is standing several steps below me, unwinding the thick grey scarf from his neck. The tassels at the end are stained.

“It’s fine. Someone will let me back in.”

“Good luck with that then.” He reties the scarf and walks off.

After several minutes of silent waiting, I turn the collar of my coat up and battle the dread building in me. At least the streetlights are on tonight.

I turn the corner, and he’s there, waiting. “Got time for a pint?”

The wind blasts my ears and freezes the top of my neck where the collar of my coat doesn't reach. It's a half-hour walk home and at the end, an apartment colder than outside. And empty. The warmth and comfort of company are tempting. But I have no credits for a beer.

"Or whatever else it is you drink." When I don't respond, and after a pause that is barely a pause, he walks off calling over his shoulder. "You can repay in triplicate when you sell the best-selling novel you are writing."

"I don't even know your name." My words bloom in small white clouds.

"E," he says and the Science Partition and the non-fraternisation waiver we both signed disappear behind us.



In the pub the usual happens: I drink too much, say too little and inhabit the potential future in my head so by the time we leave, he has filled all the conversation spaces I've left with an ease I'm jealous of and I've already kissed him, fucked him and slipped back to my broom-closet apartment to lie freezing beneath too few blankets with my guilt. His kiss on the footpath rips a separate beer-addled space between the actual past and the fictional future. Suddenly I'm very present.

E pulls away and despite myself, I lean into him wanting more.

“Come home with me.”

It’s not quite a statement nor is it a question. The slight quiver in his voice tells me he isn’t as confident as he appears to be.

My mouth fills with ‘no’.

His kisses cocoon me from the cold and are better than any I could conjure back in the pub and the safety of my imagination. Thieves of lips steal the words that will protect me and when he pulls away a second time, his hand slips into mine and I am hit by three seismic shocks: the feel of his chest pressed into mine as we dance slowly, his nipple in my mouth and heat rolling from the back of his neck. I feel the impossible warmth despite the gale-force wind cutting into us.

I stop counting steps and let him lead me to the opposite side of the city.



The apartment walls are set to a sprawling, inner city park. A molten sunset silhouettes a vintage roller coaster and Ferris wheel. Above the amusement park, a murmuration of starlings elegantly dips and tumbles. Memories of crushed grass and hot donuts lace the



frigid air. The carousel music blends with the melody embedded in my head and for a moment I am caught in the liminal drift between what I know and what I think I know. The sense of déjà vu is overwhelming.

“Sorry,” he says and fumbles for the controller, snapping me from the momentary fugue. “I wasn’t expecting company.”

Whatever I thought I recognised in the mechanical turn of the Ferris wheel and the aerial acrobatics of the starlings is gone; nothing more than a dream upon waking. E points the controller at the projection unit in the ceiling and the walls bleed in and out of a series of AmbiScape dioramas that take us far from the misery of the city, slow-draining desire like a septic, weeping wound. I see the danger of AmbiScapes now, having lived without one like the cattle masses. Understand better why the Ministry carefully controls their ownership. This technology cannot be entrusted to those who have been sold lives of colourless drudgery. To question or want something better is high treason. To incite dreams of a better life, away from the city, is even more dangerous.

I take the controller and contemplate rewinding back to the amusement park, but stop myself. Whatever it was, it was gone. Gone.

“How can you afford this?” It’s not what I’m really asking. My face stiffens into the uncompromising

expression of an investigating Ministry Official. He shrugs, smiles crookedly and I know I've lost my small edge.

"A gift from a patron," he says. I don't believe him, unless the Ministry has turned into a benevolent agency.

"Don't we spend enough time in fictional worlds?" I ask and turn it off. He moves into the centre of the room, shoulders pulling in. The bleakness of the walls does not upset me nor the crowding claustrophobia after the optical illusion.

With the AmbiScape off two things are apparent: his apartment is barely bigger than mine but it's homely. My apartment is somewhere someone lives. E's apartment is personal. Comfortable. Even if I freely chose to burn away a life of presumed luxury to embrace the austerity of a writer, I cannot deny the intoxicating pull of it.

What are his sacrifices?

Drawn to the battered leather couch, I sit and a year of Sundays unravels wrapped in him and books, random conversations and indulgent dozing. But the book beneath my mattress will not be written on lazy Sundays. Two novels will not be raised in a year on love alone.

He looks at me with a hazy kind of wonderment I once yearned for. "Don't tell me I'm beautiful," I say,

moving across to make room for him beside me. “I’m going to sleep with you. You don’t need to seduce me.”



We’re lying side-by-side on the couch, mostly dressed, drawing heat from each other because his apartment, like mine, lacks proper heating.

“Why did you join the study?” he asks.

Versions of the truth weigh against each other: the money—but there’s a collection of un-cashed cheques in a drawer with my underwear, like the researchers know they’ll get their raw data for free because none of us will make the effort to go into the last remaining branch to deposit a cheque, no matter how poor we are; the guilt of lying to get access to a grant year to write *The Evening Sun at Dawn*, the novel The Ministry don’t know about; a misplaced sense of responsibility that compels me to do something additional in return for the money; an even greater misplaced sense of loyalty (once a Ministry official, always a Ministry official) that forces me to seize the chance to go inside the inner sanctum of the Science Partition; my innate curiosity to work out what they are actually studying under the misnomer of creativity; loneliness.

After several moments that are probably longer

for him than for me, fumbling for the best answer, he assumes my silence is the answer and continues.

“I’m there to be part of the failure to find the answer.” He slips his hand under my jumper, caresses my stomach. Goosebumps dimple my skin at his touch, rather than the sudden exposure to the cold. “As if a similar, let alone identical, neural pathway can be found in us all. And that it could be mapped and then replicated.” I can almost see the cynicism curled within his words, like the wire structure of a piñata.

Roughness grazes my neck. His words are felt as much as heard. “Doesn’t mean I don’t still have nightmares about neurologically-enhanced monkeys spewing out Vonnegut and Marquez on networked Underwoods.”

A finger traces the bottom of my rib cage, draws a small embellishment over the softness of my diaphragm. “Afterwards I lie bathed in sweat. Force myself to laugh in the face of the lingering terror as if it will prevent that from ever happening. I tell myself over and over there will be no monkeys and it becomes a mantra, some kind of warped insurance to keep the world I know from falling apart.”

Lips, on my neck, either side of my earlobe. A whisper: “You must be talented to have received a grant.”

“Insider knowledge.” I cringe, lying there beside

him, knowing just how inside I was, afraid he might somehow intuit it. “I crunched the data,” I quickly say, “and trends from the last twenty years of grants. Created an algorithm to predict what they would be looking for and based my application on that. You’re only ever writing a book the Government wants.”

He brushes the hair out of my eyes and in the candlelight there is something so utterly innocent about him, and so fundamentally familiar, I feel my throat tighten.

“So who is E?”

“I don’t know.” Silence pours in between us. “Yesterday, Josef Vince, today Gabriel Mester. Tomorrow... perhaps tomorrow I shall be an afterthought of tonight. An echo of someone else?”

I kiss him and keep kissing him so his words that allude to the heartbreak of waking alone in the morning cannot feed my guilt. And when we’re naked, the feel of his nipple between my lips, rolling over my tongue, is the exact same sensation from out the front of the pub, when his hand first enclosed mine.

“Sometimes I imagine free will is an illusion we fall through,” I whisper and let myself go.



The first time is never good, but if you know it's the only time, you make an effort to try and navigate consciously toward something better. It means being present, too present, and sex is awkward and unfulfilling anyway.

Afterwards neither of us talks about how we're disappointed and unsatisfied or how when we've recovered we could do it again; do it better. It's easier to move on, even if my clothes remain on the floor.

In his arms, words well up from a holding cell and briefly lift the silence heavy on us.

"Maybe the researchers know something we don't know." I take his hand and put it on my stomach, wanting to feel the goosebump prickles from the couch, before the cold and desperation drove us to his bed. "If they can map and then replicate the narrative structure, would you be able to share my story? Could we coexist within it, in real time?" My fantasy, observed and considered from every angle, so it's absolutely real to me, sounds less tangible, less logical, less possible when shared.

Silence holds us close for longer than I'm comfortable with. His finger traces circles around my navel, growing ever larger in the wordlessness.

"I think they want to know how we make stories so they can euthanise them, a preemptive broadcast attack to rewrite the stories we would write against them. Think

about it.” He rises up on his elbow and looks down at me. “We are always the first up against the wall. The thinkers. The next revolution, and don’t delude yourself it’s not going to be ours, will be clean. No guns pressed to the back of the skull. And we will have volunteered the solution; we will have facilitated our own creative executions. Stolen our own voices.” After a time he whispers, “Perhaps they are already doing it?”

If I leave now, the fear I’ve undone myself will follow me and fill my freezing apartment. I can’t be alone with it.

So I do the only thing I can think to do, even though I know it’s wrong: stay.



Crystallised spider webs crunch beneath bare feet. The ever-so-slight metallic taste of cold creeps across her tongue, down the back of her throat and then into the nasal passages. All the signs indicate an unfeeling cold. It isn’t numbness of body, just the failure to register any sensation. She looks up; eyes don’t see the steel-grey sky but her body feels the crushing weight of it, the asphyxiating compression of air driven out. As the haze cloaks her, moments before she falters and is absorbed into the frozen ground, eyes flick away, toward

the horizon. Lungs inflate. The weight lifts. The terror remains as she struggles to assimilate her discordant relationship with the landscape.

It's not unfamiliar. She doesn't know how she knows this. Just that she does. Knows perhaps because of a gnawing feeling within the pit of her stomach, from which only the smallest details bleed through to guide her.

Ahead, the milling bodies of excited and overstimulated people heat and press against her, the salty-sweet presence of kettle corn, crushed grass and hot donuts envelop her and bedeviled squeals rain down with the woosh and rumble of a cart on a track high above. She's not in an amusement park, despite the incoming information. It is somewhere between the horizon and where she stands, where the visual disruption won't allow her.

And so is the man.

In a small, public garden close by.

Memories linger just out of reach like the promise of water in a mirage.

This place, foreign and terrifying, is hers.

And his.

She walks, eyes closed because they are of no use, looking for the park bench, following the faint smell of sandalwood—his aftershave, she thinks—fear building



with each step, but she cannot stop...



The after-burn of the dream clings to the dark corners of the room, unwilling to reveal itself as the drenching horror soaks into the sheets. Ignoring the heart-pounding warning, I reach back and try to follow the nightmare tendrils.

No matter how much I focus or let myself go, clues evaporate as my mind grasps at them. All attempts to capture and catalogue fail and I'm stranded inside an unnerving, claustrophobic warmth. Feverish. Shivering in the heat, the weak light of pre-dawn leaks in and the last of the dream fog lifts along with the fear I'm sick.

It's not my room; it's his room. And it's not a fever, it's body heat: mine cradled within his; his curled around mine.

His sleeping face is carefree and so beautiful I want to trace the shadowed contours of his cheekbones, his jaw and commit them to memory, to be able to invoke not just the sight of them, but the way they feel. To touch the small shaved circles on this scalp. He is warm and solid, protection against the echo of unsettling things not quite forgotten, not quite remembered. Something in the back of my mind gnaws and I want to shake him, to hear his

voice, to again have the feel of his body fused with mine, but I stop. Choke down the panic threatening to undo me.

On hands and knees, I reclaim each item of clothing. Dressed, I collect my satchel from the corner of the couch. The door closes firmly but quietly.

Dawn unfolds on the walk home, wave-like, so when I arrive at the midpoint—the Jákob Müller building—I'm fumbling to find sunglasses; expensive but years old now. At home, in the tiny bathroom, I strip naked and turn the shower on. It's not the idea of the almost-lukewarm water that stops me, but the prospect of losing my last connection to him.



The unremembered dream stalks me from the perimeter of my consciousness: by night it destroys the refuge of sleep; by day it devours my focus—steals words and time I cannot afford to lose. I abandon the tiny kitchen table and the manuscript I've barely added to all week. Journal against my knee, huddled into the tiny window alcove of my apartment, hording what little warmth the sun affords there, I scribble what I've been trying to deny since I snuck from E's apartment.

*The dream has hallmarks of Ministry intervention.*

Ice collects at the base of my spine and slowly travels upward until involuntary shudders rack my body. I tell myself writing it does not make it real. The Ministry of Moral Welfare has done nothing to me. I am simply documenting a concern, putting it beyond the tumble of irrational fear to allow a sensible assessment of it from multiple perspectives. I can apply logic.

*Perhaps E was correct to fear we are selling ourselves out, ensuring our quiet devastation ahead of the next revolution.*

For what? A handful of biscuits and bottomless coffee. How cheaply we have allowed ourselves to be bought. I stare at the page and try to remember what else he said. The hiss of static fills my head, like a migraine warning.

Time passes and I only realise I've been lost in thoughts that like the dream, evaporate under scrutiny, because the street below is wet. People disappear beneath black umbrellas. Cold radiates in through the pane, but I don't move. I rest my head against the pitted wood of the frame and review what I've written.

*There was talk before I went on leave, of the possibilities of new, subtler torture techniques. Intrusive and invisible. A COI might be brought in for questioning and leave with something latent in their head. A slow ongoing torture where the COI turns on themselves and when the*

*Ministry picks them up for a second round of questioning they will be 'malleable'. COIs will come apart in the comfort of their home and at no ongoing expense to the Ministry.*

The proposal required technology the Ministry did not have, but the Science Partition undoubtedly did. Four decades on there was still no love lost between the Ministry, entrusted with the moral health and wellbeing of society, and the Partition, entrusted with rational thought and innovation. The Partition have an even longer memory than the Ministry because of the execution-style murder of Jákob Müller and his lover, Evelyn Starling, at the end of the last revolution. It ensured the Partition would never actively assist the work of the Ministry.

*Who do the Partitioners think they are though? They were silent as other intellectuals went to the wall ahead of them, feet inches deep in the blood of others before Jákob and Evelyn. No one has the right to claim the moral high ground. No one wins a revolution.*

The Ministry could have orchestrated the defection of several scientists or recruited others to work on their behalf within the Partition, but I had only been gone six months. Could so much have changed, so quickly?

I flip to the back of the journal and take a small photo from the paper pocket glued to the cover. Poul always saw the world different to me. That's why we were

so effective together. I turn the dog-eared square over and over, look at the serious expression on his face from 90 degrees, 180, 270.

Why did I take this photo when all the rest were of him smiling?

360 degrees. And then around again.

How would Poul see the dreams? He wouldn't consider it subconscious paranoia bleeding into the daylight house. And the Ministry? What would he think of the possibility of their involvement?

Poul would look at it in reverse...

*What if we are not being wired to transmit but to receive? What if the act of opening our thought processes allows something else to be laid down?*

The dream started the night of the last trial. The fact I was with E is coincidence, not cause and effect. If I treat E and his apartment as extraneous variables, if I remove them...

*Is E dreaming too? Does he have the lingering smell of cut grass upon waking? Of the press of hundreds of excited or scared bodies? What other memories does he...*

*Could the Partition create a viral dream? If they could, could E have infected me? If it's not coincidence, what is...*

The central clock chimes quarter past the hour.

I could keep writing page after page of questions to

which I have no answers. Not until tomorrow.

I put the photo back in the journal pocket. Six steps from the alcove to my bed. I push the journal beneath the lumpy, bug-infested mattress. My fingers brush the pages of *The Evening Sun at Dawn*. Telescopic eyes see all during the day and the Government isn't paying me to write this novel. Four steps from the bed to the table.

I ignore the growling hunger pains and begin the afternoon's writing by ordering the pages I scattered earlier in frustration. Misery and creative inertia can be fought. I will write by day what I am being paid to write. At night, I will write what they think they have banned. Obliterated. The dream can only destroy me if I let it. My mind is stronger than the paranoia E seeded there, and the doubts and fears I've added to it. I have proven before and I will prove again, I am better than my former employer.

*Sometimes I imagine free will is an illusion we fall through,* I said to E before I gave in.

I believe in my free will and it is not the Ministry's to take.



Tuesday's lab assistant is an older man whose shiny pate contrasts with the verdant goatee. He fusses over

the scalp circles. It's difficult to contain the frustration of his ministrations. The effort to appear bored—to be whatever I was all the other times sitting waiting to join the experiment—is exhausting. Lies have always been difficult.

“Right to go, Miss Bodor,” he announces and escorts me one hundred and eighty-nine steps from the preparation room to the lab.

Twenty-eight steps from the door to my place. Across from me, the seat is empty.

I sink into the hard plastic chair and act nonchalant, model myself on the subjects as they wait for the session to begin. My body may be contained, but my head is a mess. Well-ordered thoughts unravel as minutes disappear from the clock and the seats fill. And the conversation I've already had in my head a hundred times with E starts to come apart.

There's an overwhelming sense of the ground rushing up to meet me.

*We're in the pub together, the journal in E's hands –*

Only one seat remains. The one across from me.

*E takes the journal, flips to the last entry, the one about the Ministry, reads. In an instant I'm no longer alone with my fears...*

The door to the lab opens. Adrenalin punches every synaptic connection to attention. An older man

with short, salt-and-pepper hair and a rash of acne scars takes E's seat.

"Subjects you have sixty seconds," the researcher says, watching the man settle in.

The others nod.

*Don't let them see the wild look, the lost look, the look that says I breached the non-fraternisation clause in my contract and now he's not here but I am here and I suspect the Ministry is involved, but I don't know how, but I know you do.*

The screen rises out of the desk.

"Miss Bodor?"

The sensation of falling is amplified. I'm falling through the ground, instead of hitting it, picking up velocity, burning myself up on the way toward the core of the earth. Nausea swells in my gut.

The researcher stares at me. "Miss Bodor?"

I nod. Barely.

An alarm sounds and the screen in front of me begins to fill with words. These are not my words. I do not recognise them. They slip through my head, tractionless. I am lost. Totally lost. I try to read, but can't comprehend. Fingers, rounded and poised on the tap board remain inert. There is music and static vying for space that words should be filling.

Biscuits appear. Coffee congeals. Time happens



separate from me.

“And finish,” the researcher calls and the screen retracts into the bench.

I trudge up the corridor with the goateed assistant. Fourth room on the left today. One hundred and ninety-seven steps this time; hesitation, dread, in every step.

My post-experiment answers bounce off the shiny pate, tangle in the beard hairs of my questioner.

“Am I out?” I ask when the list is exhausted.

A word count of zero represents an extreme outlier. I’m a liability now: a skew in their data. Is this what happened to E?

“We’ll see you next week, Miss Bodor,” the assistant says, as always, never deviating from the script. He hands me a cheque.

At the door, with nothing left to lose I ask a final stammered, choking question. “What happened to...” What do I call E? I have no idea what his real name is. “What happened to the man across from me? He wasn’t there today.”

The assistant’s oily scalp captures a distorted impression of me. He doesn’t look up, doesn’t answer.

“It was a different man there. The man there last week, he had dark hair –”

“Thank you, Miss Bodor, you are excused.”

Halfway down the hallway he calls out to me. “You

forgot your scarf last week.”

I go back up the hallway—twenty-eight steps. He doesn't hand me the red scarf Poul's mother knitted me three Christmases ago. In my hands he places a heavy grey scarf, chunky cables knitted into it. The tassels aren't stained, but singed. There's the faintest smell of E embedded in the wool.

Dizziness unsettles my stomach.

Free will. Free fall.

But my face remains inert, just, the years at the Ministry finally useful for something even though there is an unsteady impermanence flooding my body.

“Thank you,” I say, voice steady and nod.

Fifty-four steps to the side door. My hand trembles as I press the button to be let out. There are no streetlights again, but I see the figure standing in the courtyard facing the door, more shadow than man. I hurry away, knowing it is not E. Eighty-six steps to the road that forms one side of the block that houses the Joseph Müller building. Two hundred and four steps and I'm on the next block and down an alley between a dry cleaners and a bakery.

Vomit sprays against the bakery wall and drips from the scarf tassels. Small dark holes appear in the flour dust coating the cobblestones. My stomach convulses again and again until there is more black than white underfoot.

The wall underhand is cool and solid. I'm neither.



At the mouth of the alley, with the stink of fear splashed on my boots and E's scarf wrapped tight around my neck I attempt to talk myself into going home. I lie I will be safe there, but I know nowhere is safe once you become a Citizen of Interest with the Ministry. So half an hour later I'm standing across from E's apartment block watching life within as though it is a wall of holographic options and all I have to do is press one square to become a part of it. On the seventh floor, a silhouetted person moves around the apartment I think is his.

I'll go up and he'll tell me he was unable to make the experiment because he was sick or there was a death in the family. And all my feverish, fertile imaginings of a bleak and dangerous future will be obsolete. He will thank me for returning the scarf. And we'll laugh and maybe he'll kiss me. And maybe, I'll stay because I know there are greater things to fear than random moments of intimacy.

It takes twelve steps to cross from footpath to footpath and another dozen to arrive in the apartment vestibule.

How many to climb to the top?

Head rested against the wall I try and remember

what it was like to come here with him last week. Was his arm wrapped around my shoulders or was my thin hand still clasped in his larger, warmer one. Did we joke how our breath came in thick, dragon-like plumes as we climbed the seven flights of stairs?

Why can't I remember what it felt like for him to lead me up the stairs to his apartment?

Why did I not take the time to pay attention; stay in the present? Why did I treat it like it meant nothing? Transient, so I had already moved on before we arrived?

Was I trying to protect me or him?

At the seventh floor I slump, gasping, against the water-stained wall and wait to catch my breath. I look at the torn mosaic of linoleum then down the corridor. Did he stop and smile at me halfway to his door, the one with the impression of 15A barely visible on the doorframe?

Twelve steps, like crossing the road, bring my knuckles to the flaking paint of E's door. A woman opens it; disheveled and lost within layers of jumpers. The faded skirt of a housedress wilts beneath the waistbands and a snotty toddler sits on her hip, arms clasped tight to her.

"I'm looking for E."

"You're looking for what?"

The sharpness of her voice is a mechanism of impact rather than a means of communication. Despite

my feet firmly planted on the scarred linoleum of the corridor, my vestibular system bounces back and forth like a bobo doll. I wait for my inner equilibrium to settle. Her eyes narrow and stare at my pale, shaking hands.

“Not what, who?” The words are authoritative but coming out of me, dressed as I am, they’re farcical. “Where is E?”

“Only us here. Me, the husband and babe.”

“Last week, he lived here. I was here with him. In there.”

My foot darts into the space disappearing between the door and the jamb, the heel of my hand pressed against the wood. She shoves as hard as she can against the door and my shoulder finds purchase against it. I think of Newton’s laws of physics and before the next thought crowds in, the door gives and I’m inside.

Grey overalls hang on a makeshift clothesline with nappies. The place reeks of paprika, garlic and urine.

The couch is gone, his books. The walls are bare.

The walls... I remember now. They had the amusement park on them when we walked in. Beside the door there was an AmbiScape controller.

Now there are four neat holes where the cradle was once screwed. My fingers travel from one hole to another, as though I might pluck E from the plaster and spin him back into reality. Plaster dust comes away on

my finger—fine, flour-like.

“How long have you lived here?”

“If you don’t leave, I will call the *Rendőrség*.”

I point to the pairs of dark eyes in the plaster.  
“What happened to your AmbiScape?”

“AmbiScape!” she snorts. “Since when do the poor have such luxuries?”

“Then what was screwed to the wall?”

The woman’s bravado seeps out of her like the green congestion oozing from her child’s nose. “I won’t call the *Rendőrség*... if you just leave.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Please,” she says, her voice solid but quiet. She is not begging but I know if I stay, she will. The toddler on her hip grizzles and she pulls it to her breast, swaying side-to-side to comfort it. “Just go. I don’t want trouble... for any of us.”

I could make her tell me. The charisma and the authority, and the fear that undercut both, are still mine to wield. I have the skills to force her to part with the information I want, but I don’t have the will. Because I can’t help her when she does.

I left all that behind.

And now I’m tired and scared. Lost. And so is E.



She does not need to open her eyes to know she is somewhere other than an amusement park. The Ferris wheel and rollercoaster, the popcorn and donuts and the screams of terror and excitement, the ebb and flow of a crowd are data spliced from a different place and time.

She is not to go to the amusement park. She is to find him.

He will be in a small, public garden close by. Sitting on a bench waiting for her.

The grass in the park will be damp and freshly cut, sticking to her soles and the tops of her feet when one foot accidentally brushes the other.

She has no idea how she knows this.

Data without meaning.

Memories poorly wired. Disconnected...

...Dancing. They are dancing. The man's chest pressed into her. The slow sway of movement. The gentle weep of a blues guitar.

She opens her eyes to situate herself but the sensory disruption steals everything except the feel and smell of him.

Sandalwood. Aftershave she thinks and sees a small cut-glass bottle. Light refracts a rainbow through the glass and onto the bathroom wall, dripping with condensation.

Her tongue rolls over and around his nipple.  
Heat washes off the back of his neck, over her face.  
He will be real.

The sweet, fresh smell of grass surrounds her again.  
Eyes closed she walks, feels the sticky coating of grass and  
fear and the frustration of never moving forward.

She will not give up, because no matter what they  
did, she will never believe he is lost.



He is not lost

They are the first and only words that go in the  
journal. I lie in bed, curled around the book and decide  
the words refer to yesterday, and to the dream. Whatever  
issues I have in separating reality from fiction, in  
remaining in the present, I know the two are connected:  
the dream and E's disappearance.

I am not to give up.

*I am not giving up, I write. I know where to find E.*

My stomach aches from the violent vomiting the  
previous night, but I force down stale bread then pull a  
box from beneath the bed. Camphor clings to the heavy,  
expensive woolen suit that marked me as a Ministry  
Official; the three stars on the shoulder designate my  
rapid ascension in rank.



Looking in the mirror, I see a shrunken version of myself and it's not just the lack of body fat.

*Stand straight. Shoulders back. Face firm.*

Despair pours in. I don't recognise myself.

But did I ever recognise myself in this uniform? In my heart I was only ever impersonating a member of the Ministry. It's what I told myself every day I pulled this suit on, polished the silver buttons and stars, pulled my hair into an elaborate French roll and went out into the world to protect the people who were least equipped to defend themselves against the Ministry.

I can barely protect myself if the reflection in the mirror is anything to go by.

Out in the hallway, I keep my back to the woman who sits at the end knitting the same pair of socks over and over, lock the door and steel myself with the knowledge I cannot be charged for impersonating myself.



People step aside, eyes averted, to let me slowly climb the steps of the State Library. Thirty-six steps up. Two hundred and forty-nine to take me deep into the building and away from ears that might dare to listen. The automated face on the librarian screen tells me no works are listed under the names Josef Vince or Gabriel

Mesters. Rather than argue with a holographic image, I go to the stacks, run my hand over shelves emptied of books. The suit gives me access, via a nervous librarian, to the catacombs of electronic records and digital books and historical archives of web pages. At the end, there is nothing. The only proof of E's existence, the scarf stuffed into my satchel.

I assumed he was published when he spoke of the sacrifice of artistic and intellectual integrity for the sake of publication. I assumed he had managed to get his work off the Continent, to somewhere words were freely disseminated and consumed. It never occurred to ask me what he had written and now I realise I have no idea what I'm actually looking for. The names, his other names, could be the names of anyone.

My intuition is never off though, regardless of the doubts trying to undermine it. I leave the archives and return upstairs. At the information desk I insist on speaking with the Head Librarian. Cautious eyes travel across the black double-breasted jacket and the silver buttons. My long overcoat hangs over my left arm.

"There are records that cannot be opened," she tells me and I know I was right not to give up.

The problem is, in my head I'm not dressed as a Ministry Official. I'm in my tattered jumper, shivering. And we're arguing that E exists. Our words rise on

thermals of anger and then fall like dead starlings when security appears and escorts me –

“Is there anything else?” the Head Librarian asks and I catch myself, pull back into the present. Her grey eyes are flat but there is something in the crinkle of her right eye. I want to admire the bolsh in her words. She knows that despite her lower profession and rank she has access to information I am denied. And there is the hint of rebellion in the way she wields that information, knowing she is safe even though there is nothing inherently illegal in her actions.

“Your assistance has been noted,” I say.

Heavy steps, eighty-six of them, drag me out of the building and into lung-searing air. The Ministry uniform is warm, the overcoat makes it doubly so, but nothing can stop the ice forming inside me.



There are ten cheques in the drawer where my underwear is kept. Ten visits to the Jákob Müller Building. Two weeks left to complete the dozen trials I was contracted to complete when I volunteered.

Without credits to spare on the extravagance of a private car, much less public transport, I walk. It takes all morning and part of the afternoon. Why I never

bothered going to the bank, until now.

The cashier takes the cheques from me, confers with her supervisor and tells me she is unable to transfer the value.

“The drawer account does not exist.”

“But I go there every week.”

She shakes her head. “I suggest you contact the Ministry and report the discrepancy.”

My fingers curl into fists. Giving into my anger will not get me answers. Not when I’m dressed once again in the ragged clothes of a starving artist. I take a deep breath and ask, “Have there been others, with this... *discrepancy*?” When she doesn’t answer, I continue, “There are others receiving these cheques and they can only cash them here.”

She looks hard at me, judging me based on the poverty of my appearance. I know she finds me wanting and undeserving of her time and effort, but eventually she walks away to talk with her supervisor. When she comes back, she says quietly, “Several weeks ago, a man came in with cheques like these.”

“Dark-haired, my height?”

“I’m not at leisure to divulge personal details.”

“Even if I told you he is missing now.”

Her face pales and eyes dart to where her supervisor is standing watching our exchange. “Perhaps.”

“What name were the cheques made out to?”

The directness of the questions unsettles her and she shakes her head. “I didn’t look at the name. We couldn’t cash them.”

Her hand sweeps over the cheques and I clamp my hand over hers. “If they are worthless, you won’t mind if I take them with me.”

“Of course.” Colour floods her cheeks. “Is there anything else I can help you with today?”

“Your assistance has been noted,” I say automatically and her face pinches in recognition. She looks with terror at me, trying to reconcile the words with my lack of uniform. “Thank you,” I say, trying to repair the faux pas. The smile is false and rigid despite my best efforts for it to appear warm. Normal.

I shove the cheques into my pocket and leave quickly. Forty-five long strides across the shiny marble foyer tiles, my face turned from the security cameras. I don’t react, I don’t think. I just walk. And keep walking.

At the first convenience booth I squander an entire week’s food budget on a packet of cigarettes. I need something to occupy my hands and still my fear-mongered brain. This is what it truly feels like to be on the other side. To have had a loved one ‘disappeared’.

I tear open the packet and shove a cigarette between my lips. My hands shake so hard, searching

for a lighter or a box of matches in my satchel. There must be something left over, buried deep, from the time when cigarettes were an everyday consumable. In sheer frustration, I upend the satchel and shake the contents onto the footpath. Pens and a notebook fall free first. My green tortoise-shell compact clatters on top. Tissues float autumn-like to the ground and dissolve in the wet. Then a data stick skips across the cracked concrete and into the gutter, coming to rest against an anemic dandelion sheltered on a tiny nook created by a chunk of broken concrete and the side of the gutter.

The stick is old tech, from when information could be moved freely from location to location, not locked down by the Ministry. Poul—my throat constricts at the thought of him—has a collection of these in his workshop. I bend down to pick it up. The initials KB are scratched into the side. I look over my shoulder as I stand and drop it in my pocket with the fraudulent cheques. The rest of my belongings are wet. I don't bother to dry them, just shove them in the satchel and walk away from the convenience booth.

I tried to leave the past in the past. I tried.

Now it's the only place left to go.



“Anikó!” A blast of hot hair accompanies Poul’s surprise. He’d forgo food, alcohol, cigarettes, just about everything for heat. Said that there was no point in trying to do intricate work with fingers stiff with the rigor mortis of cold. To Poul, cold was death.

Moments later he appears in the space between the door and the jamb. I take the data stick from my pocket and offer it to him between two fingers as if it’s an exclamation mark of an unspoken apology. He takes the stick, rubs a thumb over the scratched initials and motions for me to come inside.

In the converted fireplace, a solar heater glows fiercely. Above is the elaborate gold-framed mirror—a gift from his sister—and I tell myself not to look, but it’s like the siren song of an accident. My stomach lurches. They’re still there, jammed between the hideous frame and the mercury-spoiled glass: the only photo of us together and the approval letter from the Ministry for a marriage license that arrived the week before I left.

“Poul, I –”

“I’m sure it was for a good reason.” He says it without emotion and my chest folds in on itself.

“Poul, please. ” I try to touch him but he shakes off my hand.

“Leave it be, Anikó. ”

I expect him to turn and shepherd me out of the

semi-detached we once called home, but he keeps on, through the kitchen, into the pantry and down into the cellar that is his workshop. It's warm but not stifling. He's refined the heating system since I've been gone.

He pulls a chair over to his desk for me. From a shelf of homemade gizmos he takes a thin metal box. He ports the data stick then attaches the cords to his processing unit.

"I can't promise anything," he says and I sit down beside him.

Together, we once worked side-by-side into the early hours coding and embedding alerts into the Ministry mainframe to protect the COIs—Citizens of Interest—I came across at work. The Ministry likes acronyms; it depersonalises individuals. Ordinary people, like the head librarian and the woman who lives in E's apartment now.

Because of Poul's alarms we could keep one step ahead of the Ministry. With the aid of the Underground we were able to assist COIs in disappearing before the Ministry did it to them.

And it hits me. When I left, I always knew Poul could take care of himself, but those Citizens of Interest, the ones waiting to be found by other Ministry officials: I betrayed them; left them vulnerable with my selfishness—for wanting to disappear myself to write. To



want to leave something of myself behind when I was gone.

I drop my head into my hands and try not to cry. It's no surprise, I realise now, how hard I have fought to keep myself dislocated in the future or embedded in fiction. How well I was doing until E came along.

I blink back the tears and watch the screen rain columns of luminous green numbers.

"This is antiquated. I don't even know if I can access it." His fingers hover above the tapboard, calm. If he's angry he's hiding it well. "What's on it?"

"I don't know."

"How did you come by this?"

"I didn't know where else to go. I, I lost something." I can't look him in the eye and after an awkward pause I try again. "I think it has something to do with an experiment the Partition is running."

Poul's head whips sideways. He glares at me. "You were in the Partition all this time."

"Poul, it's not what you think. I'm not a mole. I'm not."

The anger he's been suppressing floods his pale cheeks. My grasp on everything is slipping. Confidence pours out like sand through my fingers. Emotions I've buried deep push upward and threaten a tectonic demolition.

“Poul, I’m not a mole. You have to believe me. What I did... why I disappeared... I did for me. Not for the Ministry... and not for The Partition.”

Silence ices the space between us and finally he asks, without looking at me, “What did you lose?”

“A man. His name is E.”

“Are you going to give me something more to work with? Something straight up.” The double meaning slams into me.

“It wasn’t love... it wasn’t anything like that. We met in the experiment and... and...” I force myself to stop babbling before the truth pours out of me and we drown deeper in my betrayal. “I have two names: Josef Vince and Gabriel Mester. And E. Plus the initials on the data stick.”

Poul types the names into a search string and we wait as his processor sifts through the stick’s information. Finally a list of names appears on the screen.

“He is real,” I say, relief buoying me as my fingers touch the screen where green pixels form the name Josef Vince and further down the list, Gabriel Mester. The hooks of paranoia release a little.

“Are his books on here?”

Poul runs his fingers down the screen and the information scrolls. “Hers, you mean?”

I shake my head. “No *his*. These have to be copies

of E's books. Before the Ministry deleted them."

It's Poul's turn to shake his head. "These look like," he scrolls all the way to the bottom. His face pales. "Those were all pseudonyms of... Evelyn Starling. Anikó, how did you get this?"

He's flicking through screens with a shaking hand.

"Stop," I say and flick back several screens to a list of books. My stomach drops as I read down. My body shakes hard despite the warmth.

"This can't be," I say, the words compressing in my head. "*The Evening Sun at Dawn*... that... that's my novel."



Underfoot the grass in the park is damp and warm and freshly cut, sticking to her soles and the tops of her feet when one foot accidentally brushes the other. Clutched in her hand is a pair of red shoes, the leather creased and soft like elderly skin.

She walks even though her heart pounds and sweat seeps through her dress, sticking the thin material to her skin.

The skin on the back of her neck prickles. When she turns she is alone, but the sensation persists.

Bleeding into the scene before her is the image of

a cut glass bottle catching and converting sunlight into a rainbow on a wall glistening with condensation.

Footsteps pound the stairs and fists batter the front door. The shelf shakes and the glass bottle falls, smashes on the floor.

“Jakob Müller!”

“Run,” Jakob says, pushing her toward the window. “Go. Now.”

And she’s falling... down, down, down...

... the amusement park glitches before her, phasing in and out of the alleyway beneath their flat.

“Stop!”

Boots thump the ground behind her.

“Stop her. Now!”

She does not stop. Does not turn. Does not acknowledge the terror pursuing her. Without acknowledgement it cannot follow her. She will evade it. Escape.

And she runs. Never looking back.



I bolt upright, desperately dragging in air as though I’ve been running for my life.

The mattress shifts beside me. Poul pulls me back down next to him and wraps his arms around.

“It’s okay.”

“My journal,” I say, pushing him away, scrambling for the book on his bedside table. I need to write down the phantom snippets before they evaporate.

“Stop,” he says and pulls me back, holding me tight as I fight against him. It’s over before it starts. I’m too tired to even cry.

“You wrote that you thought perhaps they were opening your minds to put something in them, rather than to take something from them.”

“Did I write that?”

“You don’t remember.”

I shake my head. I’m no longer sure what’s real. Part of me feels lost inside the dreams I can’t remember. Disappearing incrementally, night by night, dream by dream.

“You need to come downstairs.”

I switch the light on beside the bed. His eyes are bloodshot and his face pulled in a way I’ve never seen it before.

“What have you found?”

“You had better come down and read it for yourself.”

One careful barefoot step after another takes me from the mezzanine to the kitchen below and then down into the cellar. I feel as though I have to concentrate

hard on the place where my sole meets the warmth in the boards, as if my impermanence will be amplified if I don't.

I sit in Poul's seat and stare at the screen.

"I hacked into the Partition's mainframe after I read your journal. It was... Anikó, the experiment you've been part of, the information for it, it was..."

"Just say it." My voice comes from somewhere beyond me.

Poul kneels down beside me. "It is Ministry encryption."

I put my hand to my head. Inside there's hissing and I bury my fingers into my hair, push at my scalp. Try to tune out the noise.

"No, no Anikó," he says, trying to stop me tearing my hair out. "Aniko, stop!"

"They broke my head. They did what I feared they would do."

"It's not the Ministry. It's Partition. They are using someone with Ministry training." He shakes me, gently at first and then hard. "The Ministry did not scramble your brain. Anikó, stop this. Stop!"

The slap hurts. Burns. The static ceases. As I come back into the present, the sound at the periphery of my consciousness is Poul's crying. I put my hand to his cheek and wipe the tears away.

“I’m sorry, Anikó. I’m so sorry. But you need to read this.”

He leaves me and in the background I hear running water and him stoking the fire in the kitchen. Shortly after, I smell coffee and a small amount of tension leaves my body. I turn my attention back to the screen and try to focus.

Poul always had an intuitive knack for digital navigation and while I used to be adept, he’s saved me the time and brought me deep into the heart of Partition’s database. He’s opened all the firewalls and left me free to wander the information catacombs of SM-101-D: the experiment’s code name.

After an hour of frustration, I run upstairs for my journal. Writing notes always helped comprehension and now I need all the help I can get. My mind is unreliable and the further I read, the deeper I go: from Evelyn and Jákob’s original lucid dreaming experiments and his early theories of neural mapping to their later combined experiments in joint dreaming, Jákob’s forced repatriation and his secret experiments recording and transposing Evelyn’s writing.

I should stop there. Instead of going into the contents of Jákob’s tapes I go into the subject database, scanning the list for a subject with the initials K.B. It begins as quiet, stunned sobs, my eyes taking in the

details of the photos. Fingers reach out to the screen but don't touch it. Can't touch his naked body prone on the floor in his apartment. Can't put myself back in that room, on that morning when I left at dawn, and stay. Can't stop him putting a gun in his mouth at lunchtime.

The grief rolls out of me with the fury of a summer storm until there is nothing left. Nothing left to do but save myself because I cannot save him.

It used to take me an hour to write a basic algorithm, several for something more complex. It takes me all day to devise something to tally and analyse the subject data I've pulled out of the mainframe. Poul tops up the coffee beside the keyboard, empties the ashtray and brings food that goes untouched.

"They knew," I say hoarsely as the ancient printer spits out the crunched data. Poul sits next to me and reads the printout. "They are meant to be above this. They are meant to be our *moral compass*. They are meant to protect us. They are meant to be everything the Ministry isn't. But they treated us as... disposable. They mindlessly *sacrificed subjects*." Their data refers to it as 'attrition' and calculates it as a coefficient. But it's not. It's murder. Yet I can't bring myself to say it aloud.

"We need to go," he says, folding the printout. "They've already been to your apartment and it's only a



matter of time before they come here.”

“We have to take this with us,” I say.

“We need to travel light.”

“No. I can’t leave. I need to know what was on those tapes.”



In the distance she sees the amusement park, the incumbent spin of the Ferris wheel and the twisting track of the rollercoaster but knows they are not really there. They do not belong to the dream.

“They are part of the overlay, a control of sorts,” his voice says to her, like a movie voiceover. “They are part of everyone’s ’scape.”

“Like a test pattern?” she says and he laughs.

“Yes, Evelyn. For you, a test pattern. For me, an orientation plane.”

“Or your own brand of tattoo on everyone’s psyche.”

He laughs louder at that.

A flock of birds spirals up into the dazzling cerulean sky.

“Starlings,” she says and laughs. She can almost see each individual bird. Only Jákob would think to add embellishments like her namesakes. Would take the time

to do something like that.

“Are they just for me, or are they in everyone’s ‘scape?”

There is silence.

“Your acuity is improving,” he says. “It takes time to adjust, to find your orientation here. Like trying to tune the wireless.”

“Where are you, Jákob?” she asks, turning around on the spot.

She knows he is close by, sitting in a garden, on a bench.

“Waiting for you. Like the first day.”

The grass in the park is hot and freshly cut, sticking to her soles and the tops of her feet when one foot accidentally brushes the other. In her hand is clutched a pair of red shoes, the leather creased and soft like elderly skin. The air is alive with the scents of dozens of blooming flowers.

In the distance he sits on a bench, waiting.

“Jákob,” she calls and walks toward him.

The starlings screech and in a single column, dive. She ducks and tries not to scream as hundreds of wings beat the air around her. As quickly as they are on her, they are gone, spiraling upward to recommence their aimless acrobatics overhead, as though nothing happened.

She walks on. Faster now. Words choke in the base

of her throat. Numbers. She is counting off numbers. Her feet stumble and she tries to stop. She wants to turn back. Wants to stop what is happening. To stop the eyes boring into the back of her skull.

Four hundred and twenty-one steps bring her to the bench.

He sits rotating a green tortoise-shell compact in his hand.

“Jákob,” she says gently, not wanting to wrench him from his thoughts. She touches his shoulder to get his attention, but he continues to stare off toward the horizon where she can barely make out the amusement park.

“Jákob,” she says again, and slowly lowers herself to the bench, the boards warm beneath her thighs and she puts her hand on his leg. “We made it.”

He doesn't look at her, just turns the compact over and over in his hands.

“Why do you have my compact?” she asks, even though she does not recognise it.

“Leave it be, Evelyn,” he says, without looking at her.

She snatches it from him and flips it open. From the small mirrored window, a face she does not recognise screams.



“Anikó! Wake up.”

I come to, my throat raw and dry. It takes time to find my place again. To remember where we are now. A news slate lies abandoned in my lap, rocking gently with the sway of the train carriage. We’re long gone from the city. It’s weeks since we crossed the border and connected with contacts that put an ocean between us and the bloodbath drenching our home. I pick the slate up and tap to turn it on.

“Don’t,” Poul says and takes it from me. “The rest of the world doesn’t care. You don’t have to either.”

From a distance it would be easy to do that. Poul might want to deny the reality, try to protect me but it doesn’t change what’s happening. It might be reported as a spill, as though indiscriminate slaying of people with a differing philosophical position is like knocking a bottle of milk over.

It’s a purge. And I started it.

“If I’d just left it alone –”

“Then more people would have died before this started.”

I shake my head because people are dying now. Their blood is on my hands. He takes my hand, as if he knows what I am thinking and winds his fingers in

mine. “Your job is to get well again. That’s all you need to worry about.”

“And then we start again.”

Poul turns away from me and looks at the Land of the Free speeding past.

“Poul?” I squeeze his hand gently. “It has to be for something. If you can’t let it go, do you think I’m going to?”

He passes the book in his lap to me. “We have to think differently to the Partition researchers.” I open to the most recent page and his mind map, breaking down all the information we stole into its composite parts.

He points to the left side of the page. “They started with Müller.”

“Then we start with Starling.” I point to the right hand side. “We start with what she wanted.”



Each session is timed. Not like they were in the Partition, back when I thought the researchers were capturing and quantifying our narratives to be studied in a reliable, scientific fashion from which new data might have been extrapolated to support or dismiss old hypotheses and spawn new statements about creativity that would underwrite the next study. Back then I knew enough

about how experiments were conducted to know they were not studying what they told us they were studying.

I did not know Evelyn started it all with her theories of mutual integration. I did not know they wanted to find Evelyn's manifesto and used us to tease apart the twelve different intellects Jakob Müller compressed into Evelyn's neural pathways.

I did not know the Partition was priming us to be the intellectuals who would fuel the next revolution. Where rationality would replace morality and free society from the repressive subjectivity of good and bad. Of right and wrong. To become slaves of logic instead.

The researchers did not know Müller's master tape contained the most radical implementation of his theories: life beyond death. I'm only beginning to understand how it might be possible.

It is the theory Poul and I are exploring, testing, now that we agree the risk factor for the suicides was not transmission length or accumulated exposure to Müller's encephalographic blueprint. We have tentatively agreed the suicides were the result of Evelyn's presence interfering with the integrity of the subject's conception of self. E was the outlier, who began to call himself E as a way of identifying with her, in an attempt to create a sympathetic bridge between the two personalities to allow them to coexist. Poul classifies it as an unconscious

survival strategy. I don't agree.

I believe E was a better subject than I will ever be and all the data on the stick came from him. I believe he had the agency and ability to create an alternate reality to protect himself from fracturing irreparably, all the while presenting as a functioning member of society. I have suggested that he identified with both Evelyn and Jákob, and this created a sympathetic kind of equilibrium in him.

E agrees when I bring my latest theory to the dreamscape. He knows all about Müller and Starling's work and we talk for hours dissecting the strengths and weaknesses in both, conversations that pass into the waking hours and allow me to guide Poul in refining the transmission process, one more akin to sound engineering than neuroscience, and me in creating better ways to incorporate and transcribe what is downloaded each morning.

A week ago, Poul and I started exploring a deeper musical connection. That night I took the melody I had in my head, the one I thought I saw E tapping, down into the dream and we danced, red shoes following his polished black ones across the boards of a dance hall. His arms tight around me as though he was afraid if he loosened his hold I would slip away and disappear.

On the bench in the park where we first met, he

encouraged me to keep writing. He said I could write a manifesto to change our world if I surrendered categorised notions I had about myself: I could be both philosopher and scientist; they were not mutually exclusive in other societies. He encouraged my fledgling theories of mutual integration. He saw how it could ameliorate humanity's predisposition for fanaticism; a blueprint for freeing us from the extremes of morality and rationalism tearing apart our world. It could provide a means for protecting, keeping safe our loved ones, if I could find a way for diametrically opposed states of mind, of belief, to coexist harmoniously.

As dawn approached he pressed my hand between his and begged me not to leave him. He whispered death would not be the end for he and I, that we could transcend time if I would just stay. My heart broke as the day pulled me from him.

Each night the urge to stay is stronger and each morning I lie still next to Poul, the flattened feather pillow beneath me damp with tears, watching the sun filter through the filthy window in the loft bedroom. I think about the pistol hidden beneath the bed, beneath the boards, and the ancient bullets loaded in the chamber.

Evelyn died knowing she could not stop revolution.  
I will die knowing I should have.



# AUTHOR'S NOTE

My memory is foggy regarding the exact year that we sat in the park adjacent to Lunar Park in Melbourne, eating Acland Street cakes, and I saw the 'not-escape' of the park - a location that was both what I could see with my eyes and something vastly different, intuited somewhere beyond my five senses: a park that simultaneously existed and didn't. It was a fleeting glimpse but it haunted me until *The Starling Requiem* began to form and unravel within me. The dreamscapes of Anikó/Evelyn were my attempt to try and capture what I experienced in the park. I don't think I quite got there. I'm certain this not-escape is yet to be done with me.

It may have been the same trip, over coffee, that another friend said something like: we're ready for the next revolution. And that too stuck with me. What would the next revolution look like? What if it was a revolution that, like the park, looked like something I

recognised, but was totally different at the same time. This, I must note, was all Pre-Trump.

The actual hard slog of writing began on my trip to Melbourne in 2013, thrown down in dirty increments, in a Flemington Road cafe around the corner from my friends' house. As I hopped buses and trains and trams, I carried *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* with me, and Calvino's style and essence seeped into my writing. I completed the story the following year, as I was reading *Invisible City* and thus *The Requiem* ended up bookended by its greatest influence. I am unlikely to ever have the artistic brilliance of Calvino, so I don't claim this to be anything other than a love letter to his words and worlds. It is so vastly different to my usual writing style, when I read it now, I am unsure it was me who wrote it.

Throughout the writing, I felt pushed to my limits, as though I didn't have the chops as a writer to pull this story off. I am deeply indebted to Kim Roberts and Cat Winther who both read and commented on early drafts of this story and cheered me on, along with my writing group at the time, The Magic Puppies. To Dan Powell who also helped transform the earliest version. I'm also deeply thankful to Rob Cook, who during the proofreading of the final manuscript, picked up one last narrative hole - one I didn't think I was able to fill, but with Rob's encouragement and belief in me, I did.

After so many years left languishing in between spaces, I am grateful to have finally had the opportunity to share *The Starling Requiem* with you; to have invoked the place where endings and beginnings co-exist.

