



one • two

aya karpinska

The ventilation system whirrs to life in slow crescendo, reverberating through her body huddled against it. When she pressed her cheek to the metal grate, her lips trembled in unison with the metal shaft. The electric hum wasn't quite as comforting as she had hoped. Fists still clenched, remembering.

Much earlier she had been crouched before the television screen, safe in its soft glow. Thinking back to this, to the way the flickering sitcom stars wrapped her attention around them and their ever-moving world. Characters entering and exiting at carefully timed intervals to share their episodic hopes and dreams. Never a dull moment.

At some point that Thursday afternoon sharp knocks on the door had the audacity to sound just as the commercial break was disintegrating into normal programming. She opened the door a reluctant six inches to three looming figures. One started to bark orders. The others moved as a unit into the cramped

hallway.

"Go ahead. I'll be in there," she responded, and returned to her TV.

"Right," spat the first looming figure, "each to a different room. Examine all air vents, under rugs, in books, underneath and behind furniture – she could have stuffed the letter anywhere."

Moving into the bathroom, Number Two opened the cabinet and began to rifle through it. A jar of white lotion slipped from his fingers, followed by a container of cotton balls. It was plain that there was nothing stashed in there besides the average toiletries, but his hands kept grabbing for bottles and roughly pushing aside small plastic items.

There was a bizarre pleasure to it; the search was more like playing than investigation. He thought about squeezing all of the toothpaste into the sink. Swirls upon swirls of blue and white stripes. He kicked at the still-soggy bathmat, groped around a short stack of towels, kept seeing the trash bin out of the corner of one eye. Turning his head this way and that, he sought some distraction from the inevitable. The thought of poking among used tissues and wads of hair was revolting. Perhaps he could pry the lamp from the ceiling or check for loose tiles in the shower. But what kind of idiot would hide paper in a shower stall, he wondered. No avoiding it. The trash would have to be inspected. As he

picked up the bin to turn the contents out on the floor, Number Three was lifting the plastic ribcage off the back of the television, certain he would find the letter hidden there. Three intruders entered her home, and she had sauntered off to watch soap operas. Suspicious. Digging through the convoluted wires, his squirming fingers found nothing. He

turned to eye the stacks of video tapes stuffed into a bookcase and considered whether he should start from the bottom or top shelf. As he reached for the first few dusty tapes, Number Two hollered from the bathroom, summoning his partners-in-invasion.

"The letter's here! Got it."

"This is it! This is the letter! It's exactly like that other one we have."

"Why would she just throw it away?"

"She was hiding it."

"In the trash can?"

"How can you be sure the two letters are the same? You can't possibly remember, that was years ago."

Alone again, Reika swore as she surveyed the corpse of her television set. Playing the passive victim, she had not protested when Number Two opened up the TV. The debate in the bathroom was becoming more heated. Instinct held her there, crouched behind the cables and

plastic. She should leave. Quietly. Before the intruders stopped their arguing. Leave. Before the panic in her stomach seized her completely. Front door was not an option. It would take too long to get there, any minute the Three would storm in to question her. Or simply take her away. The apartment was on the second floor. Jumping from the window might not cause injury. She eased the window open and squatted on the sill. Not too far of a drop, but the sidewalk looked so rigid and unforgiving. Any minute now they could enter the room and see her. She clenched her fists and drew a deep breath. A split second and it was over. Her fear settled into the pain in her ankles and the soles of

her feet. She shifted her weight to test whether her legs still worked. She tried to force an exhale of relief, but it came out as a gasp. Keeping her head down as she walked away, making an effort to move her limbs freely and easily.

"Calm, calm, calm, " she muttered in time with her steps. Reika picked away at the bits of gravel still clinging to her stinging arms and palms. A spasm of agitated laughter escaped her lips, the leap had been a deranged decision. Her mind drifted to the letter. Rather than spark anxiety, the thought of the letter brought comfort. The only letter she had received in years. It had

been lying on her kitchen counter for days before she finally threw it away after reading it one last time. A distant pang of regret told her it may not have been the right thing to do. She tried to recall the order of the cryptic sentences: *Dear Reika, You have been found...and then? Something - something - something Mother driven by delusions.* No, that's not right. That had been a newspaper headline. If she could remember the letter, the afternoon invasion might make sense. The only phrases she could call up seemed scattered, disjointed. The streetlights were starting to crackle to life. *How far can it take you?*

Holed up in his cubby of a room, Nasrun pressed his fists into his eye sockets, weary of the laptop glow. All afternoon spent searching online for a certain experiment he had heard about, and nothing found. Several days earlier he had been eavesdropping on a conversation between two men seated behind him on the bus. He rode twenty minutes past his stop to hear it all. They were discussing an implant that was being developed which would store information about one's age, medical history, licenses held. Since the bus ride he had been preoccupied with the notion of fusing his body with digital information.

Messages were swirling through an invisible network all around him, all the time. He felt them during his hours spent online, always just beyond physical reach. His life's data

could be gathered into a single encoded chip, injected beneath the skin. A recorded identity that he would feel when he ran his fingertips over the site of injection. According to the discussion he had overheard, the company conducting the study sought volunteers for preliminary trials, but the information on the website lead nowhere. He had given up trying to piece together the logic of the site. Even worse was the password-protected area he had hacked into. Basic product information was not consistent across department webpages, and his running count of dead links was nearing thirty. Still the lure of data held him and he was reluctant to end the session. He cycled rapidly through the portions of the site he had already looked through. Twice. Useless. He stretched his arms and legs

with an exaggerated groan, then settled back into the same awkward position. Switching to a new document, his face relaxed. It was the draft of a letter, which seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of time to complete. He closed his eyes, enjoying the afterimage of the screen's pixels sputtering over the surface of his retinas. No words came, though his fingers were poised over the keyboard. He even felt a bit guilty, answering the handwritten letter he had received on a computer. Should he even answer it, he mused, holding the single sheet in his hand. The enigmatic jumble of sentences didn't ask any questions, it simply assumed. *It has been a struggle, but it was finally decided to make this known to you...Feel no*

*doubt, your way will find you.* But if he hadn't been meant to write back, why was there a return address? Abruptly, he stashed the letter in a back pocket. Hoping a change of environment might inspire his reply, he clambered down from his loft. Out.

"Nasrun has left the cave," smirked a roommate over the top of a newspaper. Returning the joke, Nasrun stalked out of the room with a dramatic flair and called "Perhaps never to come back!" A light rain hung in the street. The droplets were gently warm and he didn't mind getting a little wet. Something real to experience, not simulated, not driven by algorithms. The dampened pavement gave off a hazy smell. Stopping beneath an awning, he drew the letter from the safety of his back pocket to read it over again. His eyes flitted over the page, catching the beginning of a sentence in one place, finishing it in another. *...breathe in the gray air ...you have two eyes to see with...each will seek the other.*

Strangely, it was open, a yellow light leaked out into the corridor. Hesitating, he pressed his thin frame against the wall. His roommate was arguing with someone in a high-pitched and agitated voice. No, there were two Someones. Nasrun eased towards the door, ears alert.

“What did he say to you before he left?” demanded a sharp tone he didn’t recognize.

“I’ve already said, he left! J-just like that! I dunno where. He’ll be b-back, he s-spends all his time in there,” stammered the roommate.

The rain continued, the droplets enlarged and creating a steady drone as they hit the cars, the sidewalk, the street. Thin streams formed at the edge of the road, and soon gained enough strength to carry candy wrappers and cigarettes toward the sewer grate. The urge to compose the letter had somehow been drained out of him. He tried to invent some pretext to go back to the apartment, back to his cave. To get his laptop? It was wet. To get his laptop *and* an umbrella, quite convincing. He turned back again, knowing it was only to retreat to the security of his four narrow walls.

He ambled down the hallway leading towards his front door.

“Then we’ll just have to wait there for him.”

A tense silence followed. Muffled conversation between the two Unknowns. Minutes later their heavy steps creaked up the ladder to Nasrun’s loft. They must have seen my laptop now, he thought, with half a dozen web pages open, all devoted to biological implants and sundry protections against identity theft. He swore softly. If this was a television show, he could be crouched in the ventilation shaft above his bed, as the two intruders revealed their sinister plans. Nasrun chuckled despite the pounding in his chest. It had been a lame idea to return here anyway, he admitted. He started to back down the hallway when a sudden pain shot through his legs. Clapping a hand over his mouth to suppress a moan, he crouched low to the ground for several moments. No footsteps approached. The pain subsided, all was still. Quietly back to the rain, to the dim and clouded evening.

The rain paused. Reika stretched her arm out so that it reached slightly beyond the edge of the awning. One, two droplets settled in her palm. Bringing her hand in again, she inspected the rain drops cupped in her palm. She rotated her wrist gently to one side and the other, watching as the droplets stumbled across her skin and finally met in the center of her hand.

The ventilation system she had been leaning against suddenly stopped its humming. No reason to stay here now that the rain has stopped. She sighed, and rose reluctantly to her feet. She could see no one else on the streets, but did not feel alone. The memory of the letter was with her. Like voices across a chasm, echoes of sentences repeated themselves in her mind. *How far can it take you, this search for an outside...* The sounds of her footsteps were swallowed by the thick, damp air. Outside of what? An outside realm, an outsider – the whole

The rain paused. Isolated droplets trickled from Nasrun's soaked hair. The glow of the streetlights glinted off of his face, dispersed into anonymous points of light. His shadow took shape as he drew nearer each evenly spaced lamp, growing into a sharply defined figure, then dwindled again to undifferentiated grayness in the momentary dark halfway between each pair of streetlights. Despite the confusing situation he had stumbled upon and narrowly escaped back home, his mind was calm, his gait unhurried. It wasn't the first time he had been in trouble for breaking into pro-

letter was obscure, a collection of sentence fragments that happened to meet on the plane of a page. Parsing every sentence for deeper meaning, would it get me anywhere, she mused, or just a few thoughts further down the street? On the one hand, deciphering the letter seemed no more than playing a funny game with words. On the

tected company websites. If that was even the issue this time.

He felt oddly comforted, as if a guardian spirit lingered just beyond the edge of his line of sight. Nasrun had passed the last of the warm corner cafés, content to be outside, in the security of the imagined presence. The unknown author of his letter, perhaps. Waiting for the right moment to explain everything. He even looked about, scanning the empty street. It had been some time since he had last seen someone out walking or heard a car speed by. How long had it been, really? He had walked past the boundary of

other, it really was extraordinary to have received the letter at all. As if from nowhere. Wasn't talking to anyone, brother or stranger, just a funny game with words? Rearranging a given set of words, an asymptotic journey accelerating away from understanding.

She watched her shadow glide across the sidewalk. Strange that I think of it as *my* shadow, she ob-

served. Always connected to her feet, never making a move on its own. Or maybe it existed entirely separate from her body, and just happened to coincide with her presence when her eyes were open. Coincidence was the beginning of meaning. If the letter was simply a game of words, it would not have engaged her for so long. It had been only a matter of days before that letter became a part of her.

familiar buildings and landmarks. *How far can it take you*, the letter said. That one phrase kept cycling back to him like an echo.

As the night deepened, the air grew warmer, more dense. A new sound emerged at the periphery of Nasrun's attention. Muffled but undeniably rhythmic. One, two; one, two. Footsteps. He paused to determine if they were receding or advancing. The sound was louder. For a second time, his composure surprised him. Not a single muscle was tense. He wasn't being followed, he was being approached. He was no longer alone.

Reika noticed him standing some distance away. Her steps became slow and deliberate. He was turned towards her, waiting. She caught Nasrun's gaze and held it, while her legs advanced steadily. He wondered if she would walk right through him, retracing his steps. It was a while before he realized she had stopped quite close in front of him, between two streetlamps where their shadows were indistinct gray pools at their feet. The road stretched into nothing behind them in either direction. She couldn't take her eyes from his, it seemed the moment depended on her stare. At the same time she was quite conscious of his looking at her. It was a curious feeling, like inside and outside were reversed or folded back onto one another.

"You have been found," he affirmed softly.

"How could you know that?"

she challenged.

He reached his hand to his back pocket – no reassuring crackle of paper. He looked at her, silently imploring.

"Oh – " Reika reached her hand to her back pocket, it returned holding a single sheet of folded paper. Her eyes slipped down to the phrase she had whispered to herself repeatedly and began to read:

*" 'How far can it take you...How far can it take you, this search for an outside, for some connection? You have two eyes to see with, two hands to search with – it has been a struggle, but it was finally decided to make this known to you. You are two. Each will seek the other. Do not delay, breathe in the gray air. Feel no doubt, your way will find you.'*

You know, people came to my house, they searched for this - "

" – I know. They were after me as well."

Silence slipped between them again. They didn't move. Nasrun began to lose awareness of his body bit by bit. First his feet. They just seemed to melt into the pavement. His knees and hips relaxed. Skin no longer recognized the pressure of the rain-laden air. Then her fingertips became numb, her arms felt weightless. They closed their eyes. The afterimage glow of the streetlamps faded to black. With no body to look out from, the desire for sight faded as well, and they remembered to listen. Their thoughts flowed out from their ears, hovering in an irregular cloud around them. She began to hear the sounds he imagined. Their two silhouettes condensed into one figure. A skin began to wrap itself around its barely perceptible contours. Limbs became distinct, the mouth parted into two lips. Fingers unfurled and spread wide in the sheer pleasure of movement. Silent as shadows, with one body they passed into the night.