



# third level down

1963

January 17th Draft

The water has been boiling for minutes by the time I notice, and in my haste to switch off the burner and pour my tea, I spill some on my hand, burning it: foolish, foolish. As I suck my fingers, tante's voice chides from somewhere inside me: *even small mistakes can have perilous consequences, Katrin, at the end of the world.*<sup>1</sup>

I have been at work with my tiny fossils for some hours now, unlocking the tiny secrets hidden in their perfect spirals with my microscope. When I am engrossed in work I do not notice time very much; that is why the mistake with the tea. But here time slips past with even smaller footsteps. The sun and society are both on another side of the world, and it matters little if sometimes the polar winds howl more fiercely, and sometimes all at once they stop, leaving only a quiet resonance, a not-quite-sound I find strangely beautiful. What I mean to say is one can realize oneself here, cut off from nearly all else. It is something I like about this place.

Yes, like. Hard as you might find it to believe, I requested this posting. There is difficult work here in the cold that few others from *Kunliga* or any university

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<sup>1</sup> This draft was written between 1:15 and 2:48 AM on January 17th, 2034. Holmquist's third attempt to begin the Björn and Katrin episode moves the time period almost a decade earlier, and focuses more on developing the character of the latter, as opposed to earlier versions which both opened with Björn's return from below. Even though this version is notably different from the Katrin episodes in the definitive *Fragments*, she is here still recognizably the same beloved and popular character.

will do. I sensed an unwanted niche, a burrow I could build into something my own, and volunteered. It is hard, you see, as a woman scientist to be taken seriously, even in Sweden, even in 1963. But when I publish on this work I've done here, no one can say it must have been my supervisor's project, or done by some graduate student I've seduced, or who's taken pity on me. It will be my work, unquestionably. And then perhaps my career can begin.



Stumbling movements from the hall outside. Björn, drunk, perhaps. I put down my tea and wait.

The door jiggles, casual, then angry, bouncing in its frame. He pounds on it. Idiot; he always forgets it opens outward. I wait.

After an embarrassed pause, a curse, it pivots out and he forces his way around and in, flushed, the upper hand lost already. I don't smile. There are icicles round the top of his bushy red beard, but no snow on his parka, or on

his fur-lined boots. He's been below, then.

"Shouldn't work this late," he says, shaking his head in a bid for collegial concern as he pulls a thick glove off his hand, flexing meaty fingers. "No good making observations when you're tired. You'll miss things. Someone else will have to do the work again." He frowns.

There is always a someone else in our small conversations (smaller each time, through the chilly weeks since he's arrived). I have never learned this someone's name, but he is a more diligent researcher than I, follows all procedures, knows what's good for him. He *deserves* to be here, you see; he is an *appropriate partner* for such important

research. He is, if nothing else, at the very least a *man*.

Of course, I am used to this someone; many colleagues before Björn have also known him well. Being so often in his shadow I have learned how to operate there. It is a kind of home.

“You’ve been down below,” I say, to push the conversation along its rail. The sooner we arrive at the end, the sooner I can return to my unfinished work.

“Yes,” he says, picking up a small fossil fragment and squinting at it carelessly, returning it to a different pile than the one he took it from. I don’t frown. “There are... such mysteries down there, Katrin, such *people*. Their stories are frozen open, plain as reading a book. Layers of stories, you can’t even...” He shakes his head, unable somehow to go on.

Now I do frown. I studied Björn upon his arrival--I cannot help it--took him off my microscope slides once I understood him, knew how to catalogue him. But his obsession with below is becoming troublesome. He has not weathered the transition to this desolate place well, headstrong Björn, the slip from the warm bustle of collegiate life to this frigid place with only chill Katrin for companionship. Where the solitude sharpens my sense of who I am, where the cold invigorates my soul, Björn shrinks from both. After a few weeks his focus on his research began to slip. He started looking for excuses, distractions. And below he’s found an endless supply.

They warned us about what’s down there, but of course, he <sup>2</sup>



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2 The draft ends here. Metadata shows Holmquist opened this file several additional times in January, but did not make any further edits.

It is trivial to put the chapters of the book into random order.

```
ib.getChapters().sort(random)
```

This produces a few chance juxtapositions, but like a clean square of wallpaper where a picture once hung, only draws more attention to what's been removed. I break down the walls of the chapters and produce paragraphs made from random sentences:

```
ib.getSentences().sort(random).get(5)
.join() -> new Paragraph
until ib.getSentences() u paragraphs.all
```

This is more pleasing: a frisson between moments, the reader scrambling to find meaning in their groupings. But still too much structure. I proceed to words:

```
ib.getSentences().split(^\\w).sort(random)
```

A wall of language now, but still not enough. The story lurks there, in compound words like *ice-axe* or *near-frozen*, in the synonym clusters (cold, frigid, shivering, iced). Can a book not be uniquely identified merely by its collection of words? Break. Shatter. Knead.

```
foreach : split() -> sort(random)
```

Now we can see the atoms, a universe of twenty-six elements, sprinkled with typographic isotopes. Spaces and paragraph breaks appear with comforting frequencies, as does each letter, made visible again by the insinuation of chaos. Yes, this is more pleasing.

But still, something is wrong. Might the distribution of letters yet hint at meaning? Almost certainly. Half a percent more f's than expected; a cluster of consonants connected to certain Latin roots common in.... no, it's still not enough. Deeper.

```
foreach : graphics.font.vector.unpack()
```

```
components = this.split()
```

```
foreach component :
```

```
define endpoints = this.start, this.end
```

```
define mid = vector.math2d(this.shape, endpoints)
```

```
define
```

```
define
```

The code becomes bloated now from feeding on libraries at lower and lower levels, encrusting itself in baroque crenellations of form and platform. I smash each character to constituent shapes, vectored arcs and edges sawed apart and sewn together in new forms by evolving pseudo-stochastic processes. The noise of the once-irrelevant begins to dominate, font and point and kern, like the grain in a photograph grotesquely

enlarged. Behind the veneer of ordered atoms hides a hideous complexity, multitudinous and writhing. Variations in code: one ensures each new form is unique, a language of letters each used exactly once; another joins each form to the next, a book of one perfect letter that expresses everything; still another unbends the curves and unfold the angles till each letter becomes identical, a book of single straight lines in relentless sequence. But I cannot stop here, either.

The sun rises, but I do not see it. I float through a vast white void, filled with a three-dimensional grid of tiny black points, identical in their millions. Drifting, I let my unseen hands type more code, sweating under my goggles, but I don't pull them off. I'm exhausted, but I can't sleep, not yet.

There's still more writing to do.