

Extracts from
Lessons in Dark Matter

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Prologue

Aggregate state

It is impossible to say exactly what caused the spare glove to detach itself from the crate and float slowly from the loading bay inside the Gemini 4 out into space. In any case the astronaut Edward White, completely absorbed in his first spacewalk, noticed nothing of what was happening behind him. He moved forward in fits and starts, trying to control his speed and direction with his compressed-air gun. So focused was he on this task that he didn't even spot his left foot squashing the connecting hose he had just changed on the outside wall. The foot took it upon itself to press against the hose, giving an outlet to the astronaut's inner tension. The hose was left with a dent that later impeded water circulation around the craft, though didn't entirely prevent it.

This failing couldn't later be held against Edward White; in that situation, who could have mustered the bloodhound instinct to pay attention to an insignificant glove in the spares box? As a result, the guidance for subsequent missions included a note instructing that spares must never be stowed unsecured, and nothing should ever be allowed to float around.

The glove, meanwhile, left its home far behind and settled comfortably into an orbit around the earth, where for a long time it was the most dangerous item of clothing in the universe. It sped unchecked through space at eighteen thousand kilometres an hour, the same speed at which the Gemini 4 was orbiting. Had it hit another body, the energy released by the impact would have caused the glove to behave like a liquid for a moment, rushing through this other body like a shockwave. (At a pressure of millions of kilograms per square centimetre, solid materials such as metal and plastic liquefy and evaporate like quicksilver in the sun). The body that was struck would be torn apart, the satellite, space station or supply transporter scattered into little flying fragments, a few human lives would be extinguished, a few more would be dealt a blow, GPS systems and data transfer on earth would be knocked out, illusions dented, vanities destroyed.

While Edward White was incinerated a few years later during the ill-fated launch of another mission, the glove sped on alone without further incident. It retained its aggregate state until dropping finally, peacefully down into the earth's atmosphere, where it quietly burned up.

All things considered, the people in the cosmos had once again been incredibly lucky.

Poor bastard

[...]

How is she supposed to help out with Constanze's work and get through her own allocation when she's being constantly held up by training sessions and extra tasks? And all of that while hungry, to boot, because someone here keeps snaffling her lunch? She looks at the clock. The day will drag on, she will have to serve out hour after hour here yet. What do I do about the cat now?

She clicks on the decision she has already begun, checks the commas and spelling, then in the middle of the text she stops. Something is corseting her chest. She gets up, takes a deep breath, sits back down. The pressure increases. She gets up again, walks to the window, then back to the door, paces back and forth.

The sun is burning down on the ring road. There are no people to be seen. Time seems endless. Just keep putting one foot in front of the other. There is no rhythm to her breathing. She looks at the two black towers of folders. They seem to be growing towards the ceiling.

"You know what?" She can hear her own voice talking to her. It's a powerful voice. "You want files? You'll get the fucking files."

She sits back down on the padded chair, presses delete. The cursor gobbles up the black characters. The white page is calming. She b to type. Application accepted. Reason, colon: "You are young, male and healthy. What's the problem? Make something of yourself!" Date issued, signature.

She opens the next document. The young Iranian woman with the small, annoying child. She has only a vague memory of the details. She skim-reads the transcript – whatever. Name, date of birth, date of application. Application accepted. Reason, colon: "Your child understands German better than the language spoken in your home country. This can be inferred from the fact that questioning via an interpreter was impossible. The child was withdrawn and did not answer any of his questions. In addition, the child did not enter the country illegally, since the authorities cannot hold a foetus responsible for this action. The child is not to be separated from the mother, so permission to stay is granted." Date issued, signature.

Next case. The young Iraqi man with the narrow features. He was shy, a huge nerd, but his English was fluent. Now she remembers. The cable TV guy. The very idea that anyone would take such a risk for that rubbish. Name, date of birth, date of application. Application accepted. Reason, colon: "Your account of your fascination with the western lifestyle was made credible by the fact that you could not name the TV channels. Anyone who has a satellite dish at home knows the numbers in the TV guide off by heart, but not the names of the channels. We may therefore assume that you are telling the truth to the authorities when you claim you put your life at risk by watching these channels for three years, although you cannot recall their names. But please watch some quality television." Date issued, signature.

Next case. The Afghan woman who answered half the questions in German, that's an easy one. Name, date of birth, date of application. Application accepted. Reason, colon: "In addition, you have acquired some knowledge of the German language since you have been in Austria, which will come in useful as an additional qualification for cleaning work. Bravo, carry on!" Date issued, signature.

Next case. The young Russian, a high suicide risk, who almost vanished inside his large jacket. He has already resisted deportation once. Alright then. Name, date of birth, date of application. Application accepted. Reason, colon: “Your nervous breakdown at the airport during the first attempt at deportation meant you could not be deported, and your behaviour seriously undermined your duty to cooperate. However, given the state of your health, the authorities will make no further attempt. Please take better care of yourself in future!” Date issued, signature.

The folder of completed decisions is filling up. Geiger clicks print. In the corridor outside her office, she hears the printer spring into life. The tightness in her chest is loosening. She gets up, puts a finger into the flower pot to check how moist the soil is, and gives the plant some water from her glass. The next thing she needs to do is request ten empty document files.

She goes to the window, looks down at the junction. A cycle courier is waiting for the lights to turn green. The logo, the bike with the red bar tape, the long black hair under the yellow helmet with all the stickers on it – it really is the same guy from this morning. So he’s still just riding in circles. Poor bastard.

Dark Matter

Kissing deeply here in outer space. That would be difficult. If we float towards each other and press our lips together, we’ll just bounce off, hit walls or protruding corners, get a few bruises and lumps. We’ll have to tie ourselves together, hold ourselves in place with foot straps, interlace our fingers, hold on to each other’s hair.

Outside the space station, kissing would be fatal. Open your visor and it’s all over. A vacuum at minus two hundred degrees, no one can withstand that. Though they say it’s very quick, at least.

Katalin stares out of the huge window in the cupola of the ISS. White ribbons of cloud move in a whirlpool formation over the blue planet floating at her feet. A huge, light blue ocean. It is not known how much kissing has been done on the station. If any. Who has had sex with whom. If it was consensual or not. These things are neither in the official reports nor in the diaries. They aren’t shown in any video blog, either. The only kiss that reaches beyond our solar system and far out into the depths of interstellar space is the sound of a kiss on the records inside the two Voyager probes, which are intended to be found by extraterrestrials to tell them something about our world. It isn’t clear whether any other lifeforms will be interested in this knowledge, or what they are then supposed to do with it. Empirical, statistical value: nil.

Katalin pushes her laptop aside and it hangs there, next to her right elbow. She can feel Heide’s lips on hers. How many months has it been now, before the whole business... well. It’s hard to have lived with you for eight years and not be a real plum. Raisin, more like. Limbs hang and stand around me, don’t know what I’m supposed to do with them. The cankered skin of a heartbreak that won’t flake off.

From up here it looks like the weather on Earth is always glorious. It never seems to rain or snow, all you can see is the rhythm of night and day. Katalin wraps the landscape around her face. Three colours. Blue and white, and then at night, the deep black.

It's a fair assumption that in the long term, the jellyfish will win. The only population on earth that has something to celebrate since humans, stupid and stubborn at the bottom of their air-pond, cannot be convinced to stop squeezing and flaying the life out of the little planet, until the chain reactions intertwine and throw off these troublesome parasites. Monster, greedy. It's a certainty, and only a matter of time.

Katalin gets up and presses her face against one of the large panes. The glass is cold and unwelcoming. Kissing deeply in outer space. Filling the deathly silent cosmos with the longing that once brought us together. Drifting out of the hatch. Getting used to floating free. Subtle little movements bring us closer together. Weightlessness doesn't permit too much force or speed. I stretch a tentative hand out to touch you. We let ourselves go and fall into the light blue ocean.

Post from space that Heide will never receive.

The pain forms quicksilver pearls and stays clinging to the outermost layer of skin. In toxic little capsules. Neither solid nor liquid. Dark and perfectly silent.

It's all just stories, spread with beautiful, shining light. It wasn't really so idyllic, the love not worth the weeping that came after. If only Katalin could convince herself of that. She pushes off from the glass, turns a somersault and drifts at an angle in the middle of the room.

.....

The sheet

[...]

Mama has got up; she takes Linus by the hand and walks him into the big playroom. It looks like they're going home late today. Fatima won't like that.

Mama lies down on a mat in the cosy corner, strokes Linus's back, looks at him wide-eyed. "What shall we do now?" she asks, stretching out on the mat. "Something quiet," she says, without waiting for Linus's suggestion.

Linus looks around. A jigsaw puzzle would be quiet, but he can't be sure that Fatima won't tell him off if he gets one out of the cupboard now, when they've all been tidied away for the day. There's only one way to find out. He goes to the cupboard and pulls out the search-and-find zoo puzzle. Mama likes animals. He turns it upside down, the puzzle pieces tumble onto the rug, and Mama is quick at turning them all the right way up, maybe she isn't so tired after all. Linus looks for the corners and the edge pieces; it was only earlier this summer that Amiako showed him that. A jigsaw is a serious business, especially when Mama is doing it with you. You need a plan, you can't just go at it any old how. Linus has quite forgotten Fatima; he sits still, sorting the pieces. The clattering in the kitchen stops, the kitchen vanishes quietly on the other side of the big playroom, like it's gone to the house next door.

Then suddenly Fatima is in the room, turning the light on.

Linus gives a start, and Mama goes on lining up the pieces, unperturbed.

"What's all this?" Fatima asks in a loud voice. "I thought you'd left."

“We’re staying,” Mama says casually, keeping her eyes on the puzzle pieces.

Fatima laughs. Linus looks up. He lets her laughter infect him, too. Mama is the only one who stays very, very serious.

“I’m going to lock up now,” says Fatima, then turns around and disappears into the cloakroom. Fatima’s slippers slap the floor impatiently like they’re ten flouncing feet. The Fatima-key rattles angrily between her fingers. The jacket leaps from the hook and gobbles up her arms. Then Fatima is back in the room. She takes a few strides towards Mama and Linus in her outdoor shoes. Linus freezes. That’s against Fatima’s law, all the children know that outdoor shoes aren’t ever allowed in the big room.

“What now?” Fatima asks.

“We’re staying,” says Mama.

“You can’t,” says Fatima.

“Of course we can,” Mama retorts.

“Come on now. Please,” Fatima says again.

“It’s nothing personal,” Mama assures her. “Go ahead and lock up.”

“I can’t do that,” says Fatima, the shoe on her right foot drumming against the floor.

“You go on home,” Mama says, and turns back to the jigsaw.

“*You’re* the one who needs to go,” Fatima hisses, a lot louder now.

“Look, I’ve told you, we’re staying,” Mama says.

Nothing happens.

Fatima stands there and looks helplessly around the room. Mama finds some pieces that fit together. She gives Linus a little tap so he’ll add the next piece. Half a giraffe’s head is grinning at the pair of them, and Linus presses the giraffe’s eye into the gap with his thumb.

“What is it you’re doing here?” Fatima asks, lowering herself into a child’s chair that disappears under her jacket.

“It’s a sit-in,” Mama says, winking at Linus.

“A sit-in,” Linus repeats, seeing how the words feel in his mouth. He doesn’t know the term, and it doesn’t come up in any of the story books. But from the look on Mama’s face, this kind of sitting makes her a lot more cheerful than usual.

Big Fatima doesn’t seem to know the term, either. “What do you mean, a sit-in?” she hisses angrily. She doesn’t look at Mama as she says it.

“I can’t go on like this. If I work, I can’t get here on time. If I have to get here on time, I can’t work. If I don’t work, I can’t keep the flat. If I don’t keep the flat, I can’t work. It’s my working hours, the bus timetable, the nursery opening hours that are the problem. Nothing against you personally. We’re just calling a halt to it. Simple as that.”