



A Handmade BookDrive

These are the first two chapters of my forthcoming multimedia novel *comrade calculator Quits Smoking*. It will be published on a USB 'cigarette' featuring nine chapters of writing, photos, and illustrations. It will also contain a soundtrack featuring songs and/or videos from Loom, Matt King and Moshe Rozenberg from DMMYYYY, Basia Bulat, and more. You can find the rest of the chapter on my website,

www.markk.ca

or you can pre-order the first edition at:

www.indiegogo.com/ccqs

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Step barefoot in snow

you step again and you step again and you leave a string of holes

nowhere down your toes nothing up your legs

this loss of feeling

and your body

is wind through the snow

a breath in then gone

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0 Chapter I

Those were the famous final words of comrade calculator, spoken months after her body was found frozen in the Antarctic. But not everyone considers them to be her actual final words.

Some people do not feel it is right to call them "comrade's Final Words." So instead these people choose to refer to them as "comrade's Answer."

Even this title does not please everyone. Some do not feel comfortable equating her words with a solution for a mathematical problem. So these people choose to call her words "comrade's Poem."

Still there are others who disagree with this title as well.

Others choose not to discuss these words at all.

Her words, and their various titles, do not matter. All that is important is what we do with them.

For example: these words can act as an entry point. These seven lines are a place where we can slide into the long and quiet story of comrade calculator.

This moment, our entry point, is where her poem and her story meet. We can enter here because this is where her story stops, frozen under the Antarctic ice.

To enter that moment we have to find her. We have to move down through the crisp white surface; down through the softer snow just below; down through the thin, dense layer of snow that fell hundreds of years ago; down through the threads of moisture beginning to slip through the cracks; down through the dark, hard layers of ice; down through the frost clinging to her white-blue skin.

We have to find comrade there, hiding, naked and blue. We need to keep moving, down through her skin because our entry point is within her body, it is within those Final Words hiding within her.

Our entry point is inside comrade's Answer that will take months to thaw out, long after her body.

Our entry point is inside comrade's Poem, locked away at the bottom of the world.

No one knows how long her body had been hiding there. At the time of its discovery, people guessed anywhere between less than a day and more than ten years. These two guesses are the difference between how quickly a body could freeze to its core and the last time comrade was seen in public.

There were no records of how or when comrade had arrived in Antarctica. There was no indication of why she would have gone there in the first place. Until her body was found under the ice, there had not been a single piece of evidence to suggest her continued existence.

This was not for a lack of searching. After comrade hid from the world, there had been an official search; it had lasted years. This search cost more and more while yielding nothing. As the search slowly grew silent, people began to give up and move on. They began to believe that the story of comrade calculator had run its course.

Not everyone was willing to let go so easily. As she lay alone under the ice, comrade calculator's story continued in the mind of very few. These few were people determined not to forget.

From these same few, there was an even smaller group who continued the search. Everyone else assumed that the official search had been thorough and complete. Everyone else assumed comrade was not hiding, but that she was gone.

These few knew that comrade could not be gone. They often reminded themselves why comrade calculator could never be gone. They would repeat this fact again and again to pull up their spirits, to continue searching past the constant disappointment. Even when they too began to believe that maybe comrade really was gone, they stopped and remembered why she was not: comrade had been built to live forever.

So they continued searching, repeating: *comrade was built to live forever.*

We do not know when her body froze, but we do know the exact moment when, during a record-setting thaw, a small hole began to form on the white surface. At the bottom of this hole, below a thin

layer of cracking ice, was a small patch of blue skin.

comrade was found by an elderly couple. This couple had been long retired when they first heard of comrade's hiding. They read the stories. They listened to the different theories about where comrade might be. They started guessing themselves. They followed each move of the official search. They wondered how, despite the worldwide effort, this search continued to find nothing.

The couple began to amuse themselves by "searching" for comrade. While on boring vacations in exotic locales, they spent their days trying to imagine where she could be. They looked for her in beaches and bars.

Over time their imagination pushed through to reality: the old couple began to approach locals to see what they thought. Soon enough their vacations were no longer boring.

The vacations themselves soon focused on the search. First was a visit to comrade's workhome, a small house in the middle of a desert. They wanted to see if anything had been missed in the "official" search. They found nothing but a small, empty, dry wooden shell of a home.

From there they planned more. The official search had only covered land. They paid for rides in sea-floor wide-scan search vessels. The official search had looked down from the sky on mountain ranges. The couple hired local mountaineers to take them to caves that could not be seen from the sky.

They went to bed every night exhausted and empty handed. In the morning they were ready to begin from nothing once more.

They narrowed their focus. They picked specific land masses that had been mostly ignored. They camped in remote island jungles. They para cross-country skied the Antarctic. They found her when they fell down.

It had been a rough day of skiing. The weather was unusually warm for the Antarctic. The combination of sun and wind created a slick, thawing snow surface that caused high speeds. They fell often and each time hurt their ageing bones. Whenever their padded snowsuits hit the white surface, a kill-switch was triggered in their sails pulling them across the snow. The switch would open a flap so that the sail, became limp and copied their motion, crashing down.

just years of trial and error. He had no way of knowing if it was one action or a specific series of thousands in the correct order that did the trick. He listed off a few of the trials and errors he could remember from the few days before he woke up and found her awake as well.

The mechanists tested the known trials. They tested them in every possible combination. It was of no use.

They returned to the facts. Her first word had been "partridge" on the morning of her waking. That had always stuck out in her creator's memory.

The mechanists whispered this word in her ear hundreds of times. They screamed it while deeply jarring her memory centres. They moved her mouth through the wordshapes while they stimulated her speech cortex. They recreated the bed in which she awoke, all the while repeating "partridge" with differing emphasis, intonation, and/or melody.

One morning they found it. Faint electrical patterns echoed back from the cold, dark corners of her mind. With their work, the echoes grew over time. Months later nearly all tests showed healthy brain activity.

comrade returned to the conscious world with a crushing migraine. The mechanists studied her pain closely as it progressed. Her symptoms included vomiting, disorientation, sensitivity to all senses, inability to sleep, visual and auditory auras, and intense pain originating in the back of the head and radiating down the spine into the rest of the body.

comrade barely had the strength to lift her eyelids.

The mechanists began to ask: Did she know who she was? What day was it? How many fingers were they holding up?

She sat silent through all questioning. It was not until long after they had finished, as the mechanists pondered why she was not speaking when clearly her scans showed she should be fully functional, that she finally spoke.

The first words comrade said aloud were her Poem. They were the only sounds she would make. No matter the person, question, or stimulation, she would not respond until there was silence. Then she would repeat those seven lines.

The mechanists immediately put her through a new array of tests. All showed healthy brain function.

The mechanists tried to be more direct, asking why she was repeating these words again. Silence. she repeated her Poem. The mechanists ran a new series of tests.

Government officials were called in. Their questioning continued over weeks. They emerged from these sessions with only one piece of information to report to the public: comrade calculator had reached her Answer. They then proceeded to read her Poem.

This announcement was met with great confusion from the public. It was common knowledge that comrade calculator would never reach an Answer.

That was her story as they had known it: she was doomed to always be heading towards the impossibility of infinity, always inching towards a conclusion that was speeding away from her.

For most of her life comrade had done nothing to dispute this understanding of her work. she had spent over a hundred years working quietly, searching for her Answer, alone in her Government workhome. The longer that silence hung around her the more it became accepted that she would never reach an Answer. But then she disappeared.

Not many people noticed her absence at first because, for the most part, people had long stopped paying attention to comrade calculator. Her story survived mainly in school classrooms and textbooks; history and math classes. Teachers would read aloud to their class about this once-global icon. They would focus on the controversy that surrounded the beginning of comrade's life.

The teachers themselves remembered comrade mainly from the stories their grandparents and parents had told when they were children. They remembered the sleepless nights after these stories when they would lie awake in bed trying to imagine comrade, and those vague words "infinity" and "forever." These memories and dreams coloured the teachers' voices as they read the facts about comrade aloud. The students all left their classes with the same vague, common understanding about comrade calculator: once upon a time, long ago, an organic humanoid was created in an experiment that would never be repeated again. The hypothesis of this experiment was

that a robot built from replaceable biological parts could live forever. If this was true—and it seemed to be—then comrade calculator could continually work towards calculating infinity.

This was comrade's story for the first hundred years of her life. It was an odd enough story for most people to remember, but also silly enough for them to leave alone. Students laughed in classrooms, telling their teachers that comrade was a dumb idea, that no one could count to infinity. The teacher would then mention something about "progress" and "in theory," but the children knew the simple truth: comrade could never reach her Answer. So her story ended there, with comrade continually counting forever, alone.

This general understanding took a turn when word got out that comrade had vanished. At first people were quick to dismiss the rumour. It made no sense. Why, after over a hundred years of silent work, would comrade disappear? On top of that, the idea of comrade being able to disappear was preposterous. It was hard enough to imagine anyone being able to slip completely out of mainstream society. For the only organic humanoid ever built to escape the sights of its owner, the Government, seemed completely out of the question.

The Government strengthened this public doubt with their official comment on the situation: they do not respond to unsubstantiated rumours. This stance did not please everyone.

One of these displeased people decided to make the long trip to comrade's remote workhome. This person found exactly what the elderly couple would find years later: comrade was not home.

This person returned tired and angry. They contacted the media, and they asked the Government, If comrade is not in her workhome where she was built, where she had spent her entire life, then where was she?

The Government answered in a brief statement: they did not know.

This admission of ignorance is what really first caught the majority of the public's attention. They were confused and, for the first time, the story of comrade's disappearance began to seem believable. The Government was barraged with questions from all sides, and now everyone was listening to their answers.

This Government had inherited comrade; she had been built by a

Government agents. A story spread about how comrade had been kidnapped. Depending on who was telling the story, the kidnapers could be any number of organizations ranging from mystical to mathematical. Others argued that comrade had done what any sane person would do in her situation: go insane. These same people maintained that, even if she did still have her sanity, she must have realized the futility of her task and vacated the world that had created her pointless existence. Some went even further and joked that perhaps she had reached the impossible zen of infinity and instantly disappeared into thin air.

No one knew the truth. But at this point, in the first few years of the search, it did not matter. For the first time in generations, everyone was talking about comrade calculator. Grandparents began to tell their grandchildren comrade's story, the same story they had heard from their grandparents when they were children. People spoke once again about this woman who was built over a century ago. This woman who was faced with an impossible task. This woman who was now gone.

The stories and speculation surrounding comrade moved like continental plates, shifting in private conversations. The Government's reputation fell as the rumours spread and began to take hold. Everyone knew that the Government had to find comrade, if only to show that they were not the ones responsible for her disappearance.

Years passed with no news. The public tired of hearing the same rumours again and again without any facts to support them. An opposing force began to form against the shifting rumours of comrade's story. People did not want to hear yet another conspiracy theory about how the Government had slipped comrade off the grid in order to torture her for what she knew. People wanted to know the truth.

The Government had no truth to give, other than the fact that they continued to find nothing. Rather than publicly admit this failure, they quietly worked to turn the public's lingering exhaustion into real opinion.

It did not take long. People began to dismiss the whole mess of comrade's disappearance, the reports in the media, the endless rumours. People began to blame comrade. she was a pointless invention of a long-gone, extravagant Government. People argued that comrade had already faded into obscurity before she disappeared, when her initial novelty wore off. This current publicity stunt was sure

to do the same.

As yet another anniversary of her disappearance came and went, this skepticism became the new sensible stance. Anyone who still tried to strike up a conversation about comrade calculator risked social repercussions.

In private conversations, however, the fault line between the sensible and the sensational was not so clear. If one was sharing a few quiet drinks with a loved one; if one had started a friendly conversation with an old friend; if one humoured a child's questions about comrade—then they might end up hearing all sorts of personal ideas about where comrade was now. These secret ideas were kept out of sight, insulated in the back of people's minds.

As even more years passed, the sensible public stance pushed these secret speculations further into their private hiding places. As people had predicted, comrade calculator was just another story to forget while they focused on more practical concerns. There was a clear truth in everyday life that was more important than an old, unsubstantiated rumour. Those few still interested in comrade were pushed to the margins.

The Government gradually decreased the intensity of their search. They did this slowly, in a manner that would not attract any unwanted attention. They even went so far as to pick a date in the near future to terminate all operations related to comrade. This all went without notice.

That is when the story broke: comrade had been found by someone else.

The fault line between sensibility and speculation broke violently. The wild gossip turned out not to be wild enough: the organic robot who had been built so that she would never die, was, for the moment, not alive. Everyone's secret theories about comrade's location were now shared aloud, compared to this truth. The elderly couple who had been relative outcasts during their search became instant celebrities. Everyone eagerly awaited the next step of the story.

Waiting was not enough—people began to anticipate where the story was headed. Then they took it one step further: if comrade somehow managed the impossible task of disappearing from the grid, if she had somehow managed the impossible task of dying, then maybe she had

also somehow managed to do the unthinkable task she had been made for.

her Answer. For the first time in history, the public began to feel as if a concept as elusive as infinity was found by this strange being.

A quote began to circulate widely, credited to the long-dead creator of comrade calculator, responding to critics:

The only reason people accuse her of being a pointless machine is because we ourselves are even more pointless machines. Our end is built into each and every one of us. For what purpose do we reach this end? None. comrade calculator, on the other hand, will carry on. And she will do this for a reason.

We humans are all built unable to understand the something all around and inside of us: everything. We cannot understand the totality of everything because it has no end or beginning, while we do.

We all, myself included, pass by infinity everyday. Every moment, every breath, we experience this "everything" without being able to notice or understand it. Consider an ancient example: every morning we wake up and, if we are not bed-ridden or dead, we will rise and pass through our bedroom door. Let's say our closet is halfway between the bed and the door. In that trip from our bed to the door, even if it is just a few steps, we will reach the closet, the halfway point. As we pass our closet there is a new halfway point for the remainder of our journey, the exact middle between the closet and the door. Once you reach this new halfway point there will be yet another one between where you stand and the door. The further you go, the closer you get to the door, the more halfway points you cross and create, and by the time you step through that doorframe you will have stepped over an infinite number of halfway points. And you won't even be fully awake.

We can use mathematics to understand these ancient paradoxes, but at best mathematics can only point out what we will never be able to know. We, as humans, cannot notice the finish line because we cross it too easily. We end. comrade will be able to see, understand, and calculate the finish line because she can never cross it.

The Government recognized their opportunity. Within days they announced that the comrade Experiment had reached an end and would be discontinued. They would no longer use taxpayers' money to further fuel what now was now a highly unpopular endeavour. comrade had embarrassed everyone, and she would not do it again.

comrade calculator was released from her Government job. comrade was asked to leave her Government workhome as soon as possible. she left without a word that same day. she had no belongings.

This is how we exit the story of comrade calculator. With her opening the front door, passing through the frame, and stepping out into the heat of the desert sun.

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Connection #1: her Dream ↔ my voice

I met comrade calculator sixty-seven years ago. Together we opened the Instruments of Calculation Exhibit in the Museum of the Twentieth Century.

She still lives and works there. I have been retired from the museum for just over two years. I continue to visit the museum and comrade almost every day...