

THE TRUTH VALUE by Sian Summers

Karim took a seat in the canteen, setting his lunch tray on the table. The food was beige. He pushed it round the plastic tray with the fork, then ate it slowly.

Ella was sitting opposite him. He looked at her, at her eyes and hair, the curve of her jaw. Maybe one day they would be chosen to procreate, he thought. He hoped.

'It is sunny today,' he said to her.

'Yes,' she replied, glancing out through the window over her shoulder, at the sunbeams on the concrete walls.

'After the rain, it is always sunny,' he said.

'No,' she replied, 'After the rain, it is *sometimes* sunny.'

Karim inhaled sharply, his eyes flicking away from her piercing glare and back to his lunch tray. How could he have been so stupid as to say an unproven statement out loud.

The crackled voice came over the tannoy.

GOOD AFTERNOON CITIZENS OF MIDWISE, it said. THANK YOU FOR YOUR HARD WORK THIS MORNING. THIS AFTERNOON, WE WILL BE THINKING AGAIN ABOUT WHAT MAKES US THANKFUL. WE ARE THANKFUL FOR THE ROOM WE ARE SITTING IN, WE ARE THANKFUL FOR THE FOOD THAT WE ARE EATING, WE ARE THANKFUL FOR THE AIR THAT WE BREATHE, AND WE ARE THANKFUL FOR THE COMPANY OF EACH OTHER. BUT ABOVE ALL, WE ARE THANKFUL FOR THE MATHEMATICAL CERTAINTIES, AND FOR TODAY'S NUMBER, TWENTY-SEVEN, THE CUBE ROOT OF THREE..

Ella looked at Karim, 'We are always thankful for the same things,' she said, rolling her eyes almost imperceptibly.

Before Karim could answer, Ella had stood up and left with her plastic tray.

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Karim spent the afternoon in the control room, inputting the truth value of statements into the supercomputer. The supercomputer in turn fed the truth values into the intelligent assistant Cavi who was built into the interface of their living quarters. Karim had been working on programming Cavi for two years now, alongside seven other citizens of Midwise. They worked in silence, leafing through old encyclopaedias and textbooks, searching for the correct answers for the statements that had been submitted by other citizens over the last week.

Who founded the Complex? Justin Trevanopolis. What are the primary colours? Red, blue and yellow. Why is it so quiet? It is quiet when there is a lack of sound. Why are we here?

Karim paused, flicking through the textbook in front of him. There wasn't an answer for that question, nor was there an answer for the question *why do we exist* or *what is our purpose*. He shut the book and typed 'unknown'. The statements could be assigned a truth value of true or false, or yes or no. They couldn't be uncertain.

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Later, after another meal of beige food eaten with a plastic fork from a plastic tray, Karim showered and changed in his room.

'Cavi?' he asked.

The blue lights around the edges of the room flashed, 'Hello, Karim,' it said softly.

'What are the primary colours?'

'The primary colours are red, blue and yellow,' Cavi replied.

'Why is it so quiet?'

'It is quiet because there is a lack of sound, Karim.'

'And why are we here?' Karim asked.

'An interesting question,' said Cavi, 'I do not understand.'

'Why do I exist?' Said Karim.

Cavi paused, the blue lights flashing, then it spoke 'Unknown.'

Karim sighed and went to bed, silence all around.

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The next morning at breakfast, Ella sat opposite Karim again.

'Good morning,' he said.

'Whether or not a morning is 'good' is entirely subjective,' she said.

GOOD MORNING CITIZENS OF MIDWISE, crackled the tannoy, YESTERDAY, WE TOOK A MOMENT TO THINK ABOUT WHAT MADE US THANKFUL. TODAY WE WILL CONCENTRATE ON BEING HONEST AND ON BEING TRUE. BECAUSE CITIZENS THAT ARE HONEST WILL BE HAPPY, AND CITIZENS WHO ARE HAPPY WILL BE KIND. AND KINDER CITIZENS WILL HAVE A BETTER TOMORROW.

Karim lowered his eyes back to his beige food, but not before catching the phantom of a smile on Ella's lips.

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Karim had been in the control room for almost an hour by the time he noticed the package. It was small and brown and his name was written on it in black marker pen. He glanced around his coworkers, but they all remained silent, inputting strings of text into the computer, turning the pages of the textbooks.

Karim stood, 'I'm not feeling well, I'll be back shortly,' he said to no one in particular.

In the break room, Karim opened the package carefully. Inside, nestled among plastic bubbles and ripped up papers was a small box connected to a pair of headphones. As Karim picked it up it flashed blue, like Cavi.

Karim gasped, and turned it over in his hand. It lit up again, with blue text. *Tchaikovsky Symphony No.5* it said, then went blank. Karim didn't understand it, and because he didn't

understand he almost hid it away, out of sight. But something made him place the headphones over his ears and listen.

Immediately he removed the headphones, hid the device in his pocket, and ran back to his room.

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That afternoon, Karim listened to the files three times through. They were incredible, the sounds and shapes and colours, the rising crescendos and the hope. He looked out of the window of his high rise room at the skyline of Midwise, at the grey buildings and the tiny people in their white clothes pacing about, and felt sadder than he ever had before. He looked beyond the walls of Midwise, to the forest, and further, to the hills. For the first time, he wanted to go there, he wanted to leave.

‘Cavi,’ he said, ‘what is this in my hand?’

The blue lights flashed around the edge of the room, ‘Describe what you see.’

‘It isn’t something I can see,’ said Karim, ‘It is something that I can hear.’

‘We hear sounds,’ said Cavi.

‘You don’t hear anything,’ muttered Karim, frustrated.

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Karim had been so engrossed in the files that he had forgotten about lunch. At dinner, in the canteen, he sat opposite Ella.

‘Did you like it?’ She asked.

Karim dropped his voice to a whisper, ‘You left it.’ He said, ‘What is it?’

‘It’s called music,’ she said, softly.

‘Where is it from?’ asked Karim.

‘I found it, in the archives,’ she said, ‘I thought you would like it.’

'I do like it,' said Karim, 'But, Ella, it's dangerous. We can't be found with it.'

Ok,' said Ella, 'if you ever need anything hidden, ask me. Just so long as you never want to see it again.'

Karim paused, 'But that's the problem,' he said, 'I can't lose it. I can't.'

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'Cavi,' said Karim, 'What is music?'

'Music is sound organised in time,' said Cavi, flashing blue, stark against the white.

'Why have I not heard music before?'

'Music is not useful,' said Cavi, 'Music is not true or untrue. Music is unproven.'

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A week later, Karim sat opposite Ella again, beige food on a plastic tray.

'I have an idea,' he said, then he dropped his voice to a whisper.

CITIZENS OF MIDWISE, said the tannoy, WE ARE THANKFUL FOR ANOTHER DAY TOGETHER IN OUR HOME. YESTERDAY WE THOUGHT ABOUT BEING HONEST AND TRUE. TODAY WE ARE THINKING ABOUT HOW WE CAN BE PRODUCTIVE. HOW WE CAN WORK TOGETHER TO IMPROVE OUR FUTURE –

The voice was cut off, and replaced with the rising crescendo of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No.5. Karim returned to his seat opposite Ella, the control panel behind him. All around them was confusion, shouting, crying, laughing, as Karim and Ella walked out of the canteen and through the gates of Midwise unnoticed.