

You Matter...?
By Fiona Kuntz

Warmth floods into my frostbitten fingers and cheeks as attendants usher our bundled horde through the gates for processing; a faded government insignia sewn upon the breast of their waterproof jackets. There are children clinging to their guardians' sleeves; solemn teens; a sea of adults varying from early twenties to post mid-life crisis. An elderly woman strikes her cane on the flecked linoleum and whispers to a short blonde perched at her shoulder, perhaps a niece or daughter. No newborns—they go through a different entrance—though a toddler blubbers and releases a few damp shrieks before being shushed.

Up ahead the line forks. I watch from afar as figures veer left and feed through a propped pair of metal doors leading to the Survey Room: a beastly office crammed with harried typists, clerks, and plastic folding chairs where individuals sit and fill out paper packet questionnaires three inches thick with an eraser-less stubbed pencil. Poor souls. They won't be released till midnight.

I flash my ID at the bleary-eyed man slouched behind the counter and he admits me into the "fast lane" along with the rest of the foresighted individuals who previously completed the forms online. He pries himself from his leather stool and shuttles us down a tight hallway illuminated by the searing glow of the fluorescent tubes dangling from the ceiling into the lab atrium.

We spill onto the floor, the organization's circular insignia unfurling beneath our muddy snow boots and scuffed sneakers. An antique scale, with a blue feather in the left bowl and a silver heart in the right, the letters MAAT stamped below: Meaning Appraisal Administration.

First proposed a century ago and enacted nearly eighty years later, thanks to the exponential advancement of modern technology, MAAT serves as a research center to objectively assess which populations the government should favor in regard to policy making. Which populations "matter." The bill allocated an exorbitant amount of funds towards developing tests for "mattering," to determine exactly at what point a person "matters."

Our group splinters, each with their own instructions. A young man arrives with lanyards roped in his fist to escort the minors to the pediatric ward. Littles wave goodbye as they're belted into a motored wagon and roll off.

The rest don't loiter for long.

I trek up to the third floor, following the gray lines on my phone directing me to my room. The sky is dark above, betrayed by the faint mauve streaks of sunrise. I open a door marked 203, where a blue scrubbed team greets me inside. They rattle off their names as they flit about the room, recording my height, my weight, my volume. They ask me about my job and homelife as they submerge me in a tub of tepid water like I'm getting my hair shampooed at a salon.

Once I've toweled off, exchanging my parka and sweater for a hospital gown, they saw open my skull and scoop out bits of memory, clear and gloopy. A nurse smears the gunk onto a slide and slips it beneath a microscope. "Here's a holiday drink at a café," he notes, adjusting the knobs. "What looks like a radio cranked to full volume."

They siphon my liquid potential and prod my gelatinous intellect, spooning grains of honesty onto a sleek electric scale. They peel away my fears and dreams and stratify them on a steel tray: some dark and sinewy, others delicate as gossamer. One person apologizes for the

chill; apparently, the databases are stored nearby and must be kept at an optimum temperature at all times.

Satisfied, they proceeded to scrape my tongue and throat for words and pour them into a beaker. I'm handed a vial of something green and frothy and ordered to swish it around. It tastes like lemons. Before the solution has settled, they harvest my tears and strain them into different jars labeled with black sharpie and torn strips of scotch tape. These are whisked to a freezing chamber. See what snowflakes my pain forms.

I lie down on a table and try not to wince as gloved hands scissor open my chest and extract my heart, dabbing off the blood with a sanitized cloth before placing it on the scale. After recording the measurement, they pluck it off and wring it like a wet rag. I close my eyes, savoring the resulting lightness as heartache fluid cascades into a series of glass tubes for Analysis. They always inject it back in the end. No matter how much you beg.

Next, they take a scalpel and examine the pumping mass for rot and integrity. I got to hold a clump of integrity once. It feels a little like Styrofoam, but plush like velvet. They have to pause before removing anger until the red-hot cords fade to a dull pink. "I argued with my sister this morning," I explain. The team murmurs and shuffles in response.

Hope clicks softly as a deep voiced nurse transfers the iridescent pearls to a dish with a pair of forceps. Fatigue plagues my dissected body. They typically reserve counting hope for last, lest the patient collapse unexpectedly during the rest of the procedure. The nurse looks me over. I can't make out her expression through the surgical mask. "You doing okay?"

I give a shallow nod and try not to focus too hard on the white lights piercing my vision. My breathing falters. "Is it...is anyone...?" I draw in air and try again. "Are there any positives?" My eyelids flutter close.

She doesn't answer, letting the forceps do the talking for her. Soon I am entirely hopeless. My head lolls to the side as text from a news article circles through my thoughts. Something about a press release from MAAT. A quote from the director.

"For years we've operated under the assumption that 'everyone matters'. But that's not exactly true, is it? If everyone matters, then ultimately no one does. It is our duty to divine the universe's method for imbuing meaning in the vessels of its creations in the most prejudice free manner possible."

The hospital room begins to swim in funny patterns. Everything feels weak. Someone slides a small pill between my lips, which I promptly dry swallow. Gravity still weighs on me like a sack of cinder blocks, but at least the colors have stopped melting.

I'm carried over to a machine the size of a porta potty where I am disassembled to the atom and snapped back together like Lego bricks. By the time I recover consciousness, I'm being hoisted back onto the operating table, and the machine spits out a long curly receipt.

Finished, the team stuffs everything back into my wilted frame one by one and stitches me up, all very methodical-like. All the samples, all the emotions—all the things philosophers spent centuries debating back when they were safely conceptual.

The fools. Their thinking is what got us into this mess.

I abandon my hospital gown and sheath myself in the familiar sleeves of my sweater, my coat draped over one arm while the other reaches for the exit. I wander down the stairs to the base of the atrium—the sky a brilliant blue—and smear my dirty soles across its flat polished logo.

If no one matters, then everyone matters.

Not that it means anything.

Why?

I stride through the hall into the lobby, trying to recall where the hell I parked my car.
Because it leaves us right back where we started.