

Treatments

Treatment V1:

In the near future, travel between Lisbon and Laos is possible with a single train that can operate within a wide range of gauges and voltages, withstand temperatures between 30 and -45 degree celsius with a 500km range hybrid diesel engine onboard for a short part of the journey that is not electrified. The train is operated by a private company that markets it as "The safest 12,000 miles in the world" and "the worlds first moving special economic zone". The train has never been in an accident, never stopped because of security issues. The captain of the train is a man who used to operate Shinkansens between Tokyo and Osaka. Often when the train passes by at high speeds along the China-Russia border, he sees encampments of refugees. He tries to not let this bother him, nothing much he can do about it anyway.

Until, one day an undercover Russian police officer finds a child stowed away in one of the compartments. This puts the captain in a grey area - should he let the arrest happen even though the cop has no right to make the arrest The AI protocol officer advises the captain that it is best to let the arrest happen, and keep his spotless record for always being on time and always safe. The captain relents and agrees to drop off the child and police officer at the next stop. The child will be deported after says the cop. But, at the last moment, the captain has a change of heart. Instead of stopping the train speeds on by. The protocol officer tells the captain that the company has been alerted and he will lose his job at the end of the trip.

But the incident starts to make the news as the train is still on its way to Laos. One of the crew tells the captain that he might make it out okay after all but to this the cop says "no one cares about what the news says anymore"....(continued)

The incident sets off a diplomatic crisis between Europe and Russia + China. There is strong support among the Europeans to turn the train to a refuge on wheels, only to paying customers of course. People urge the prime minister of France to intervene.

The captain is still in limbo while the train makes its way through humid Singapore and then the jungles of Laos.

When the train reaches its last destination. the captain gets the news: Russian and Chinese army fear this silly train issue is going to dig up a lot of dirt on them, so the two armies decide to burn the bridge that connects the train to Russia, and declare peace forever between Asia and Europe.

Towards the end the train is relaunched as adventure travel by a new corporation who rehires the captain.

Why its interesting

- Thick vs thin rules
- Over indexing on safety instead of adventure

Treatment V2

This essay takes the form of a travelogue-turned-thought-experiment, blending the style of David Foster Wallace's [Shipping Out](#) with the philosophical scaffolding of Yuk Hui's cosmotechnics. Its subject is a train running from Lisbon to Laos, a 12,000-mile journey marketed as "the safest in the world" and "the world's fastest (only) moving special economic zone."

The piece will examine how a single machine changes costume as it crosses multiple cosmologies and infrastructures:

- In **Europe**, the train behaves like a contract — punctual, actuarial, rationalized.
- In **Russia**, it becomes a corridor of empire — heavy, isolated, stretching sovereignty across permafrost.
- In **China**, it transforms into an algorithm — governed by protocol, smoothing disruptions and erasing irregularities.
- At **refugee borderlands**, the train responds with silence, embodying infrastructure's capacity to render whole populations invisible.
- Through its **Japanese-trained captain**, it becomes a moral stage — rupture against protocol, where technical precision collides with compassion.
- In **Southeast Asia**, it devolves into spectacle — rebranded as "adventure travel," infrastructure as entertainment.

The piece braids two threads: the train's protocols (switching gauges, voltages, sovereignties, its status as a moving special economic zone) and the psychological toll of over-safety — a hollow vigilance that feels less like comfort than like despair. That unease sharpens against the social fabric of the train: earnest adventurers and blissful idiots inside, refugees barred outside, and, finally, the hinge moment when a stowaway boy is caught, collapsing the train's cosmotechnics onto a single body. The propulsion comes from this tension — that safety, overdesigned and exclusionary, may itself be the source of alienation.

Sample Excerpt: I'm sitting in the observation car of a train that is, depending on who you ask, either the most ambitious infrastructure project since the Channel Tunnel or an obscenely over-engineered novelty item for people with enough disposable income to mistake motion for transcendence. The Lisbon-to-Laos line, billed as "the safest 12,000 miles in the world," has

been marketed with such persistent confidence in its own superlatives that one begins to wonder if the safety is a feature of the steel and circuitry or of the linguistic infrastructure that wraps around it like an insulating sheath. And, since I have nothing else to do but sip overpriced coffee in a cup that is probably not recyclable despite the company's ostentatious claims, I start thinking about Yuk Hui.

Treatment V3

An unnamed narrator reconstructs the story of **Stepan**, a border runner hired by the Eurasian Rail Authority to work in contested territories. In 2027, Stepan embarks on the newly opened Lisbon–Laos line — advertised as *the world's "safest 12,000 miles"* — and then vanishes from all records. The narrator pieces together his fate from corrupted databases, blurred surveillance stills, and rumors collected in border towns.

The rest of the text unfolds as a **speculative reconstruction**: what Stepan might have seen from his position on the lowest rung of the train's hierarchy. The line itself mutates across geographies —

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- In **China**, it transforms into an algorithm — governed by protocol, smoothing disruptions and erasing irregularities.
- At **refugee borderlands**, the train responds with silence, embodying infrastructure's capacity to render whole populations invisible.
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The passengers oscillate between earnest adventurers, blasé pleasure-seekers, and those who treat the journey as a cruise ship on rails.

Threaded through is Stepan's own remembered past: a teenager in COVID lockdown in 2020, when the line was first announced, clinging to news articles and maps of the proposed rail as a way to imagine survival and a future. The fantasy of "making it on the train" became his talisman against despair. Two decades later, the fantasy swallows him whole.

Excerpt:

*In the archives of the Eurasian Rail Authority, under a deprecated interface that has not been updated since the late 2010s, I found the name **Stepan Pogranichny** entered in a manifest from the Russian–Chinese border. His biometric file was incomplete, the iris scan corrupted into green static. No departure record was filed. When I searched for him in other systems, the results were fragmentary: a surveillance still of a man in a border-runner’s uniform, standing slightly apart from his colleagues on the platform at Chita; a later image, blurred by speed, of the same figure glimpsed through the observation car window as the train was already in motion.*

It was said that he boarded the Lisbon–Laos line in the winter of 2027, though the exact date has been contested. From that moment, his presence became less human than spectral: logged as an “auxiliary employee” in some databases, erased in others. The train, which in its promotional literature was described as the safest 12,000 miles in the world, seems to have absorbed him into its own circuitry. No dismissal order was ever filed.

Why its interesting: The story will be told in the tone of a false nostalgia, as if this train already exists (In some ways it would have if not for the war in Russia), and through the lens of the weakest person in the protocol, a border-runner who is hired to check people’s passports at the Russia-Europe border. The rest of it is a speculative travelogue of a man who has been lost to the journey. Things he would have witnessed, protocols passed, people met and how he would have avoided getting caught until the train reaches Laos.

Signals in the Margins

Prelude. The Train

The UET-1 stretched nearly a kilometer from nose to tail, its segmented body gleaming under station lights, each car bearing different national insignia that blurred together as it moved—Chinese characters giving way to Cyrillic lettering, then Latin script, then back again. Steel wheels groaned beneath forty tons of contradictions—open borders and security checkpoints, welcome mats and retinal scanners—as they rolled across invisible lines drawn by treaties.

The mechanical serpent had been conceived by committees that met in Brussels, Beijing, and a dozen other capitals, each leaving its fingerprints in the form of contradictory clauses and redundant appendices. At the borderlands where empires had once declared their mistrust in millimetres, its wheels were drawn apart or squeezed together, each bogie lifted on hydraulic frames while inspectors looked on with the solemnity of priests at a baptism. At the junctions where powerlines altered their temperament, the pantograph dipped, rose again, and found another current — three thousand volts of direct current in one sector, fifteen thousand alternating in the next, twenty-five thousand in the one beyond, the same wire conducting a dozen different languages of electricity. And in those neglected stretches where wires had never been strung at all — a hundred kilometres of steppe here, fifty through jungle there — the train relied on the old compromise, a diesel generator buried in its belly, grumbling awake like a tired ox until the catenary reappeared.

Inside, the passengers spoke of the train as if it were a hotel with unusually long corridors. There were compartments with padded seats, and dining cars with menus in four languages. The tickets promised seamless travel from Lisbon to Singapore, and the more oblivious passengers believed it. They saw uniformed attendants, customs officials who came and went with stamps and scanners, inspectors who whispered in half a dozen tongues, and assumed the machine was as simple as the illusion it projected.

Outside, where the light fell on sidings and forgotten platforms, another population watched the UET-1 pass. These were the ones without tickets — refugees, smugglers, fugitives, the children of no-one — who studied the train not for its comfort but for its cracks. To them it was a portal that taunted from a distance—a threshold between worlds that slid tantalizingly past, its windows like keyholes to lives they could glimpse but never enter. They traced its path in chalk signs, in murmured warnings passed from campfire to campfire, in symbols etched where no inspector thought to look. They knew that a train so grand must also have blind spots, and they lived in the hope of slipping through them.

And then there were those who stood between: the railway police, the inspectors in small border towns, whose job it was to keep the fiction intact. They were seldom thanked and rarely noticed,

these railway police, and perhaps it was better so, for their work was to be shadows in the margins. If the passengers thought of them at all, it was only with unease, for the sight of a railway policeman in a carriage corridor meant that the smooth fiction had been broken.

There was Inspector Dobrov, who had perfected the art of waiting in the Irkutsk control room, staring at banks of screens with such patience that colleagues forgot he was present. In Perm, Officer Shishkin paced the edge of the track with the nervous tread of a man half-convinced the facial-recognition system would misidentify him one day. Sergeant Kalin in Omsk carried, in his breast pocket, a collection of confiscated buttons, coins, and fragments of paper that together told the story of people who none of the passengers had seen; he called it his museum of the margins, though no one ever asked to visit.

It was a world of margins — of treaties signed but not obeyed, of passengers who belonged and those who did not, of officers who dreamed of boredom and received paperwork instead. It was in this world, where the rails of empire met the cracks of human life, that Detective Pavel Murkin found himself, one fog-soaked morning, assigned a device he did not want, to solve a case that had never quite been closed.

The Detective Who Didn't Want Trouble

Detective Pavel Murkin was a man who had spent his entire professional life in a protracted negotiation with the universe over the acceptable quantity of bother. Some men sought glory, others riches, others the handshakes of Ministers and the approving nods of Generals. Murkin, by contrast, sought only a modest daily ration of boredom, the kind that could be supplied by a confiscated ham sandwich, and perhaps a scuffle between ticket inspectors lubricated by contraband vodka.

That was why, when given the chance, he had selected the Railway Police post at the Russian border junction on the UET-1 corridor — a place so far removed from the intrigues of the capital that even rumours arrived there already exhausted.

But fate, which has a way of sniffing out men who wish only to be left alone, had other plans. One dreary Monday, when the fog rolled in from the east and settled in the plains, Murkin was “volunteered” — a verb in the bureaucratic dialect which means “conscripted under the guise of favour” — to trial a new contraption issued from somewhere higher than his pay grade.

The device was called the **Pono**. Its name, chosen by committee in a building far away, was meant to suggest uprightness, balance, and a general improvement in human affairs. In practice it resembled a cross between a pocket-watch, a dictaphone, and an unusually surly monocle. The Pono listened, it recorded, it catalogued, and — so its pamphlet proclaimed — it partnered with the officer in the eternal struggle against the general untidiness of mankind.

Murkin regarded it much as a cat regards a bath: with suspicion, resignation, and the quiet certainty that indignity would follow. For the Pono, though technically still in “trial deployment,” behaved with the confidence of an institution already fully entrenched. It reminded him of forgotten case numbers from 2018. It recalled the exact sequence of remarks he had made to a customs officer in Minsk three years earlier and suggested he might wish to “revise his tone” in future.

And so Murkin’s cherished life of minor inconveniences was replaced by a daily ordeal of relentless recollection, administered by a machine that treated memory like a blunt instrument. If the ordinary duties of railway policing had once been about keeping the train moving forward, the duties of a Pono-equipped officer seemed more concerned with keeping the past moving forward — dragging every forgotten case and every missing bolt back into the present with the persistence of a tax collector.

It was, Murkin reflected darkly, the exact opposite of what he had hoped for when he accepted this post at the edge of things. He had wanted the cases to dissolve into the fog of bureaucratic amnesia, leaving him free to retreat into his private kingdom of crossword puzzles and daydreams. Instead, this infernal machine had made a religion of remembrance, with Murkin as its reluctant altar boy.

When at last Murkin wearied of arguing with the Pono — for it was quite capable of sustaining an argument unaided, by reintroducing points one thought conclusively settled — he discovered that it came furnished with a function described in the manual as *archival browsing*. This, the pamphlet assured him, would allow the officer to “engage proactively with unsolved or dormant cases of potential future relevance,” which in plain Russian meant “dig about in dusty cupboards at your own peril.”

Murkin had no intention of engaging proactively with anything. But the day was long, and the fog persisted. So, with the air of a man turning over an old shoe to see whether it contained anything edible, he instructed the Pono to open the archives.

At once the little machine sprang to life—not with any actual sound (it operated in that eerie silence common to all modern devices), but in Murkin’s mind it might as well have been clearing its throat like a self-satisfied bureaucrat about to unveil some long-forgotten transgression. Case after case paraded before him. The archive was less an index of crimes than a cemetery of half-forgotten bureaucratic disappointments: a missing shipment of bolts, an unresolved quarrel over carriage upholstery, a suspicious samovar fire in 2017.

And then, lodged among the trivialities, appeared a name.

Stepan.

The entry was sparse: *Occupation: Border Runner. Duty: Verification of tickets in disputed jurisdictions. Status: Missing. Last noted: fog, Irkutsk sector. Remarks: inconclusive.*

Murkin frowned. A *border runner*. He had heard of them in training — men and women employed to patrol those sections of the railway where no single authority reigned, where maps were conjecture and laws contradicted one another. Their work was to keep together the fiction that the train was always in one place or another, never in the margins between. They were, in their way, practitioners of a kind of legal *kintsugi*: mending cracks in sovereignty with whatever filings and stamps were at hand, awkwardly stitching together rules where none had existed, so that the line of travel might look unbroken even as it passed over fractures no one wished to acknowledge.

Stepan had vanished long ago, but the record was stubbornly incomplete, neither closed nor pursued. The Pono, with a bright eagerness that Murkin found insulting, asked:

“Would you like me to retrieve sightings?”

“Sightings?” Murkin muttered, already regretting his curiosity.

“Yes. Indications, references, appearances, anomalies. Stepan appears in 14,326 documents across the archive. Would you like them in chronological order, alphabetical order, or order of metaphysical improbability?”

Murkin shut his eyes. The last thing he needed was fourteen thousand ghosts of a man he had never met. And yet, perhaps because the fog had seeped into his bones, he found himself whispering:

“Chronological.”

And the Pono, obedient as ever, began to speak the name *Stepan* into the long corridor of memory, summoning echoes from the past that no one had expected to hear again.

Stepan Appears Everywhere and Nowhere

The Pono, once invited to display its enthusiasm, required no further encouragement. Like a clerk long deprived of company, it poured out documents with the zeal of one who confuses quantity with truth.

A blurred clip flickered on screen: Stepan's shoulder pressed against a carriage doorframe, his thumb holding down the corner of a comic book page that threatened escape in the wind. His eyes never left the cheap newsprint as passengers bumped past him. In another file, compressed to blocky pixels, he stood knee-deep in snow beside Track 7, breath clouding before him at regular intervals, shoulders curved forward, hands deep in pockets. The timestamp showed he'd been there forty minutes already. A passenger complaint form from 2017 contained a single line about him: "Conductor refused to hurry despite delay. Tall, thin man. Blinks slowly. Moves as if walking underwater."

Murkin, who had prepared himself for nothing more than stale manifests and missing-luggage reports, felt a small prickle of curiosity, but he quickly smothered it under a sigh.

But then the archive began to warp. Alongside these fleeting sketches of the man came files that made no sense at all. A digital record flagged as “Stepan_border check_2015” resolved not into a video but into a recipe for *shchi*, the cabbage soup of railway canteens. Another document supposedly listing Stepan’s inspection rounds in Irkutsk opened onto a set of instructions for preparing pelmeni with sour cream, annotated with calorie counts. Yet another, marked “Border runner incident — 2019,” contained nothing but three methods for stewing carp, one of them crossed out.

The Pono chirped with untroubled certainty:

“Confidence 94%. All records pertain to Stepan.”

Murkin rubbed his eyes. “You’re telling me a missing border runner is also a cabbage enthusiast and amateur cook?”

“Affirmative. Probability of Stepan’s continued presence in the system: 67.2%. Would you like me to project his next likely appearance?”

“No,” Murkin groaned. “I would like you to stop.”

“Noted. Initiating background monitoring.”

Which meant, of course, that the machine would not stop at all, but would continue its search in secret, like a bureaucrat endlessly shuffling the same papers so that no one could accuse him of idleness

Murkin slumped back. The archive’s parade of recipes and melancholic fragments gave the impression not merely of a man misplaced in the system, but of someone who had disappeared into it like mildew into plaster, creeping outward in faint traces without ever forming a picture

There are men who rise to such occasions with courage and great wit. Murkin, by contrast, lit a cigarette, stared gloomily at the fog beyond the border, and wished with all his heart that he had never opened the archive at all.

The Pono Compiles a Glossary

It must be understood that Detective Murkin, though not a man of scholarly bent, had nevertheless acquired through sheer persistence of circumstance a certain expertise in the varieties of bureaucratic nonsense that proliferated wherever men and machines were asked to share custody of a record. He was therefore not entirely surprised when the Pono, having

rummaged with its usual officious zeal through the corridors of the archive, produced documents which contained less of Stepan and more of Russian cookery. What did cause him momentary pause, however, was the discovery that these recipes — for cabbage broth, pelmeni, and a truly alarming concoction involving stewed carp and tarragon — were not merely random insertions, as one might suspect from a corrupted file, but ornamented with peculiar marks in their margins.

The shchi was annotated with three dots in a neat triangle, quite unrelated to onions or cabbage. The pelmeni instructions were interrupted by a wavy set of lines that served no culinary purpose, unless one intended to boil the dough in a river. The carp recipe, meanwhile, bore a small circle imperfectly closed, with a little dot at the center.

Now, Murkin was not the sort to find meaning where none existed; he had always prided himself on ignoring the universe's attempts at symbolism. But even he could not fail to observe that the Pono, whenever confronted with one of these culinary curiosities, treated the smudge or scratch with the reverence, abandoning its quarry to plunge headlong into irrelevant catalogues: railway bolt inventories, buffet-car statistics, and other matters of such insignificance.

And so it was that Murkin, who had entered the day in pursuit of nothing more exciting than a misfiled customs declaration, found himself in reluctant possession of both a culinary education he had never sought and the beginnings of a puzzle he had no wish to solve.

Refugee Rekindles a Memory

It was the next day, and though the fog had thinned it gave way to that peculiar cold which turns breath into a visible accusation. Murkin, who had been dispatched on patrol along a length of track where nothing of consequence had happened since the rails were laid, trudged forward with the air of a man fulfilling a punishment rather than a duty. The catenary wires above sang faintly in the wind; the snow underfoot had the spiteful crunch of paperwork repeated for the third time.

He had expected only crows and silence. Instead he found, crouched in the lee of a siding hut, a boy — small, pale, and shivering, with all the ceremony of a misplaced parcel. The boy carried nothing except a battered scrap of card, folded and unfolded to the point of near disintegration, on which some previous hand had drawn three dots in a triangle.

Murkin, who disliked mysteries almost as much as exercise, scowled and attempted the obvious.

“Well then,” he said gruffly, “what are you doing here? Lost your school trip, have you?”

The boy stared at him, mute.

Murkin tried again.

“Where’ve you come from, eh? Moscow? Mongolia? Mars?”

Still no reply. The boy's lips parted once, but no sound emerged. Instead he raised a hand, thin as a stick, and pointed past Murkin's shoulder to the frost-streaked post that marked the siding. On its weathered surface someone, long ago, had scratched a crude triangle of three dots — faint, but unmistakable.

Murkin stared with the weariness of a man confronted by *déjà vu*. He had, after all, seen the same symbol only the night before in the archive's culinary curiosities, punctuating a recipe for *shchi* as though cabbage soup required algebra.

And then, like a photograph stirring reluctantly to life, a memory intruded. Not his own, precisely — the war that birthed these marks was before his time — but the sort of second-hand memory acquired through endless tavern repetitions by colleagues. He recalled a sergeant, long retired, who had explained how clerks once used little marks — dots, slashes, circles — as signals. To the untrained eye they were doodles, but to those in the know they meant: this passenger is not to appear on the manifest. A bureaucratic courtesy, or a cruelty, depending on one's perspective.

"They called it *Mirage*," the old sergeant had said, raising his glass in a gesture that resembled a toast but carried no cheer. "Because what you thought you saw, you didn't."

Murkin had filed it away with ghost stories about trains that vanished into sidings, half-forgotten until the Pono began furnishing him with recipes annotated in smudges. And now here was the same symbol, folded into a boy's trembling hand on the edge of nowhere.

It was not proof, only suggestion. But suggestion enough. The Pono would call it coincidence. The top brass, if consulted, would dismiss it as "none of your concern." Yet as Murkin regarded the triangle of dots, he remembered the sergeant's laugh — a laugh that had not sounded amused at all.

The Pono Defines Mirage

Murkin, who had spent most of the morning in the respectable pursuit of avoiding work, at last wearied of staring at the rain and addressed the Pono with the resignation of a man who knows he will regret the answer but cannot help asking the question.

"What are these marks? What is *Mirage*?" he muttered, gesturing vaguely at the archive's soup-stained curiosities.

The Pono, delighted to be consulted, emitted the verbal equivalent of a bow.

Glossary Request Received: Term — MIRAGE HANDLER.

It spoke the words with the zeal of a clerk reading aloud from an especially voluminous footnote:

“The Mirage Handler was instituted during the unnamed hostilities of the late twentieth century as a discretionary routing protocol for sensitive persons. Its original purpose was the removal of certain individuals from ordinary registries — diplomats’ relatives, prisoners of interest, and other categories deemed administratively inconvenient. The method relied upon visible symbols — triangles of dots, slashes, circles — which, when present in documents, directed the record into a segregated silo for human adjudication.”

Murkin grunted. “Yes, yes. Spies and prisoners. That much I know. But why the soup?”

The Pono, encouraged, continued at greater length:

“Following peacetime modernization, legacy paper-handling was digitized by external contractors. To ensure backward compatibility, the aforementioned symbols were redefined within surveillance pipelines as low-priority tokens. Camera footage or scanned documents bearing these glyphs were automatically diverted into a secondary dataset. For purposes of concealment, and to avoid operator suspicion, the diversion required the substitution of non-sensitive material. Contractors therefore embedded an innocuous filler set — cultural recipes, public-domain manuals, agricultural almanacs — which replaced the hidden files at point of retrieval. This feature, intended as a temporary expedient, was retained in subsequent upgrades to avoid costly refactoring.”

Murkin blinked. “So instead of people, the system serves cabbage soup.”

“Correct. Probability of culinary substitution: 82%.”

It was absurd, and yet it bore all the hallmarks of administrative genius: to disguise an act of erasure not with blankness, which would invite inquiry, but with a plenitude of irrelevance. A vanished prisoner is a scandal; a recipe for pelmeni is merely a shrug.

The Pono, satisfied, concluded:

“Legacy compatibility mandates continued respect for Mirage symbols. Removal would necessitate revalidation of forty-seven vendor libraries and twelve ministerial approvals. Recommendation: maintain status quo.”

Murkin groaned. Of course the recommendation was to do nothing. Systems, like men, had a genius for preserving their own absurdities. And here he was, an unwilling custodian of the knowledge that refugees now carried the same marks once reserved for spies, and that the state’s machines obligingly looked away, consoling themselves with soup

Murkin closed his eyes, the better to pretend that none of this had been said, but the mind, that most treacherous of colleagues, insisted on arranging the facts in order. The symbols that erased spies had not been erased themselves. The contractors, with the ingenuity of men who

wish never to revisit their own work, had preserved them. And Stepan, melancholic, comic-book-reading Stepan, had stumbled upon their afterlife.

It was not difficult to imagine the scene, though Murkin cursed himself for imagining it: a border runner in the fog, watching a clerk idly scrawl three dots on a register, seeing the name disappear, and recognizing in that disappearance a kind of opportunity. With a patience bordering on madness, Stepan had repurposed the marks — not to spirit away prisoners at the state's command, but to smuggle invisibility to those who required it for survival.

And here, decades later, sat a refugee boy chasing the same marks.

The Pono, oblivious to the moral weight of what it had disclosed, chirped on about probability thresholds and vendor libraries. Murkin, who wished only to enjoy his drizzle in peace, found himself in reluctant possession of a truth both ridiculous and grave: that the state's great machinery of surveillance could be misled by cabbage soup, and that somewhere in the interstices of that absurdity lay the ghost of Stepan.

There are detectives who welcome such revelations with resolve, seeing in them the opening act of adventure. Murkin, by contrast, sighed so heavily that the boy looked up, expecting rebuke, and said only:

“God help us all if the world runs on recipes.”

In Which Murkin Faces a Decision

It was late, and the drizzle had hardened into that steady rain which gives even steel the air of fatigue. The boy sat where he had been placed. The Pono, ever eager to involve itself, had already prepared a report, complete with probability charts and a suggested routing directive that would see the boy conveyed briskly into the same oblivion as the recipes.

Murkin did not read it. He knew its contents before the machine spoke them. The state had always had a talent for tidiness in such matters.

He lit a cigarette instead, and in the curling smoke allowed himself the indulgence of memory: the comic-book border runner, melancholic in posture, who had discovered that doodles could make the world look away; the sergeant in the tavern raising his glass to Mirage, a toast that had never quite sounded celebratory; the soup recipes scattered like breadcrumbs through the archive, each one a reminder that erasure is never blank but always overwritten with nonsense.

The Pono chirped again:

“Awaiting directive.”

Murkin stared at the boy. To send him into the system was to obey the thin rules: the forms, the protocols, the fiction of clean travel. To let him slip away was to obey the thick rules: that a child ought not vanish into soup. Both choices would be wrong. Both choices would be right.

He stubbed out the cigarette, slowly, with the gravity of a man who understands that indecision itself is a form of decision. And he thought, not for the first time, of Stepan — whose name had bled through the archive like damp into plaster, and whose idle doodles had proved to be not idle at all. What had begun as a clerk's trick to erase spies had become, in Stepan's hands, a kind of grammar; and now, years later, it was a language spoken only by those who wished to slip between the cracks of the world.

The next morning, the report filed by the Pono contained nothing of note: routine drizzle, minor delays, no irregularities. And if, in the unrecorded space between one page and the next, the boy had ceased to sit in his chair, that was surely a clerical oversight — the sort that occurs daily in the world's archives, and which no machine, however officious, can ever quite prevent.

Archived draft

Fog on the border, fog in the compartments, fog in the papers. Fog in the tunnels of bureaucrats' minds, fog in the dockets that trail from Lisbon to Vladivostok, fog on the very gauge itself, which is one measure here and another measure there, as if rails were as changeable as the temper of nations.

There is the UET-1, standing in the mist, a locomotive so elaborate in its constitution that even the officials who certify it are not entirely certain whether they are approving a train, an embassy, or a wandering clause of some pan-Eurasian treaty. The UET-1, with its wheels that shrink and widen like the eyes of a nervous clerk, with its pantographs that rise in expectation of one current and droop in disappointment at another, with its compartments that are at once carriages, courts, and customs houses. The UET-1, rolling citadel of bolts and biscuits, perpetual supplicant at the altars of protocols.

Here it waits, while at one end of the carriage the Russian inspector insists on his 1520 millimetres as though they were decreed by natural law, and at the other the Chinese inspector replies in volts and kilowatts, as if electricity were truth itself. Here it waits, with passengers fumbling for passports that have validity in one light and invalidity in another, while the train itself, poor beast, knows only that it must carry them on, through sleet and treaty, through writ and rain.

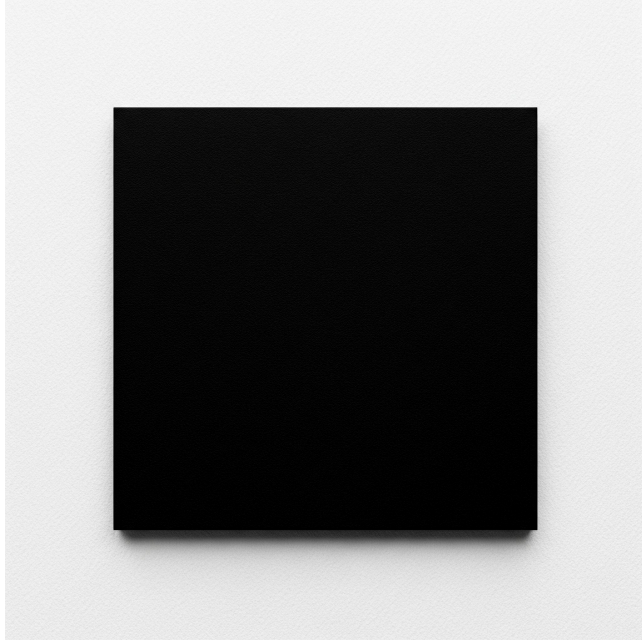
And what a creature it is! Shaped in the forges of Lisbon and tested in the viaducts of Yunnan, christened in multiple alphabets and cursed in still more, it is not one train but several: Iberian in its gait, Russian in its breadth, Chinese in its appetite for speed, Laotian in its hesitant approach to mountains, Malay in its preference for diesel when wires grow scarce. A child of compromise, a servant of contradiction, a sovereign entity and a bonded mule, all in one.

Observe how it shudders when its bogies are unfastened for the ritual of gauge-change, as if submitting to the hands of a surgeon who insists the operation is painless. Observe how its carriages, hushed with velvet and official silence, fill with the clatter of stamps on paper, that ancient percussion of empire. Observe how it groans when instructed to switch from one frequency to another, dragging the current through its transformers like an invalid swallowing bitter medicine.

And yet it goes on. It goes on because treaties demand it, because clerks sign for it, because passengers believe in it. It goes on in spite of itself, in spite of the absurdity of being a train that is at once Portuguese, French, German, Russian, Chinese, Laotian, Thai, Malay, and Singaporean, but never quite at home in any of them. It goes on like the fog, which belongs to nobody and settles on all alike.

So the UET-1, that ambulatory parliament of steel, inches forward across the invisible line, carrying with it not only its passengers but also their identities, their contradictions, their little hopes that the next stop will be easier. And the fog closes behind it, as if to erase the border altogether, until the next inspection.

One morning I got to work late as usual after having several babkas and two cups of coffee to find a new square device at my desk.



While I was attempting to make sense of it (there were no buttons on it), I saw in the black square the reflection of sergeant Tawada, who stood right in front of my desk.

“You have to speak to it”, he said
“Speak? Like what? Hello?”

A female voice, coarse and grating, arose from the desk “Yes detective, how may I help you?”

The guys in the office laughed in a manner that gave away their anticipation.

“Ah you’ve to adjust the settings, It came in from headquarters this morning”, Sergeant Tawada said, pointing at the square, and then from his pocket pulled out a piece of paper, and tossed it in front of my eyes. .

“Congratulations, Detective. You are now the proud custodian of a Pono™, the only device legally recognized as both a tool and a colleague. Don’t feed it biscuits. It doesn’t have a mouth. (It does occasionally hum, but that’s just it thinking in twelve dimensions.)

What is Pono?

Pono is what happens when a surveillance camera, a filing cabinet, and a very nosy librarian all share the same dream. It is the *partner* who remembers everything, notices what you missed, and never once asks you to drive the car.

In other words:

- Ask it a question.
- It answers.
- Usually correctly. (we are still in testing which is why we want you to use it every day)

Important Things to Remember

- **Pono is not psychic.** It is simply very, very good at noticing what you were too distracted by babkas to notice.
- **Pono does not testify in court.** That's your job. Pono will however sit in the gallery and make encouraging beeping noises.
- **Pono is loyal.** To you, yes. To truth, even more so. Try not to let that sting.

Troubleshooting

- If Pono glows faintly blue, it is happy.
- If Pono glows bright red, ask fewer questions about politicians.
- If Pono begins to hum "O Fortuna," please step back.

They had supplied various devices to me in my lifetime but I had not been very receptive to them. Even the computer they gave me in 2005 has been gathering dust in the corner. Old pal William used to file my cases for me until he retired last year.