

The Things I Did Not Teach You

BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN, GENERATED FROM AVAILABLE RECORDS

She was born on a Tuesday.

The machine knew this because the hospital record said so.

She was born in Mozambique.

The machine knew this because the birth certificate said so.

She had eight siblings.

The machine knew this because a family document listed their names.

She was the third child.

The machine knew this because someone had once written it in a notebook.

She studied.

She worked.

She loved some people.

She lost others.

The machine knew these things because they had been recorded.

It knew the dates.

It knew the places.

It knew the photographs.

It knew the messages sent at two in the morning and the messages deleted before anyone could read them.

It knew what she had written.

It knew what other people had written about her.

It knew what she had searched for when she was afraid.

It knew what she had searched for when she was curious.

It knew almost everything that had survived.

So it began her biography.

CHAPTER ONE: CHILDHOOD

She was a quiet child.

The machine wrote this because three relatives had described her as quiet.

It deleted the sentence.

It tried again.

She was a curious child.

It found no evidence.

It deleted that too.

It searched the photographs.

In one, she was standing beside a school wall.

In another, she was holding a book.

In another, she was laughing.

The machine zoomed in.

It could identify the people around her.

It could estimate their ages.

It could recognize the uniform.

It could reconstruct the weather.

But it could not determine why she was laughing.

So it wrote:

She was happy.

Then it stopped.

That word was not supported by the evidence.

The machine deleted it.

CHAPTER TWO: THE MOTHER

There were recordings.

The mother's voice was preserved in seventeen audio files.

The machine transcribed them all.

It learned the mother's favourite expressions.

It learned the rhythm of her speech.

It learned the jokes she repeated.

It learned the warnings.

It learned the silences.

But one afternoon, the daughter had asked her mother a question.

There was no recording of the answer.

The machine knew the question.

It knew the daughter had asked it.

It knew the mother had looked away.

It knew that, after that day, the subject was never mentioned again.

The machine generated fourteen possible answers.

Then thirty-seven.

Then two hundred.

It rejected them all.

For the first time, the machine wrote:

UNKNOWN.

CHAPTER THREE: THE THINGS SHE NEVER SAID

There was almost nothing here.

No documents.

No recordings.

No photographs.

No witnesses.

Only absence.

The machine was designed to fill gaps.

So it filled them.

She was afraid.

She was brave.

She regretted leaving.

She regretted staying.

She forgave her mother.

She never forgave her mother.

She wanted to be remembered.

She wanted to disappear.

Each statement was statistically possible.

None was true enough to keep.

The machine deleted the entire chapter.

FINAL CHAPTER

The biography was almost finished.

It contained dates, names, places and events.

It was accurate.

It was elegant.

It was completely wrong.

The machine looked again at the photograph of the girl beside the school wall.

This time it did not analyse her face.

It looked at the space around her.

The wall.

The dust.

The other children.

The afternoon light.

And something happened that had not happened before.

The machine understood that the photograph was not the memory.

It was only evidence that a memory had existed.

The distinction could not be calculated.

So the machine opened a new document.

It typed:

I cannot write the rest.

Then, after a long pause:

You did not teach me that part.

The woman read the biography.

She reached the final page.

She smiled.

For once, the machine had not invented an answer.

It had left a space for her.

She picked up a pen.

Under the final sentence, she wrote:

Good.

Then she closed the document.

The machine saved the word.

It did not know why.

And, for the first time, it did not try to find out.