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S.

Written by
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(★) IF FOUND, PLEASE RETURN TO WORKROOM B19,
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Hey — I found your stuff while I was shelving. (Looks like you left in a hurry!) I read a few chapters + loved it. Felt bad about keeping the book from you, though, since you obviously need it for your work.
Have to get my own copy!
—Jen

SHIP of THESEUS

HERE — IF YOU LIKED IT YOU SHOULD FINISH IT. I NEED A BREAK, ANYWAY. (LEAVE IT ON THE LAST SHELF IN THE SOUTH STACKS WHEN YOU'RE FINISHED.)

Thanks! Read the rest in one sitting — wow. Haven't liked a book so much in a long time (+ I'm a lit major!) — Loved all the mystery — the book, Straka, all of it. I really needed an escape, I think.

DEAR UNDERGRAD LIT MAJOR:
IF YOU THOUGHT IT WAS AN "ESCAPE", THEN YOU WEREN'T READING CLOSELY ENOUGH. WANT TO GIVE IT ANOTHER SHOT?

Dear ~~Arrogant~~,
I made some notes in the margins so you can see how closely I read. But what do I know? I'm just an undergrad.

I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU WROTE ALL OVER MY BOOK.

I know. It was so presumptuous of me.

Don't bother leaving it for me again. Good luck with your work. Oh, and by the way, you've totally missed something important about F.X. Caldeira — IS IT THAT HE'S A COMPLETE CRANK? BECAUSE PRETTY MUCH EVERY SERIOUS STRAKA SCHOLAR EVER HAS THOUGHT SO. AND IF YOU THINK "CALDEIRA" WAS STRAKA PRETENDING TO BE HIS OWN TRANSLATOR, THAT'S BEEN PRETTY WELL COVERED, TOO.

Neither. FYI: people might enjoy corresponding with you more if you weren't so condescending.
Sayonara — Jen

I'M SORRY. REALLY. I WROTE SOME NOTES IN RESPONSE WOULD LOVE TO HEAR YOUR THOUGHTS.
Desperate?

MAYBE SO.

Also by V. M. Straka

Miracle at Braxenholm
The Cordillera
The Square
The Painted Cave
The Santana March
Triptych of Mirrors
The Spotted Cat
The Black Nineteen
A Hundred Aprils in Amritsar
The Viper's Humor
Washington & Greene
Hanging the Dead
Lopevi
The Night Palisades
The Brigade
Wineblood's Mine
The Winged Shoes of Emydio Alves
Coriolis

I know the footnotes are really strange — but what if they weren't supposed to be informative? What if they were signals or messages to someone — like Straka himself?

STRAKA WAS DEAD BY THEN.
Just saying: I don't think we should assume Caldeira was stupid/insane. There's got to be more to it.

"WE" ??
OK, that was a mistake.

DO YOU STILL THINK SO?
Absolutely.

STILL?
You really need to ask?

SHIP OF THESEUS

by

V. M. STRAKA

"Your" book? You stole it from a high school library!

HOW DO YOU KNOW IT WAS ME?
My keen intuition.

WELL, THEY WON'T MISS IT. THIS BOOK WAS WASTED ON THAT PLACE.
But think of how many hungry young minds you've deprived of the Straka experience!

[• •]

(THAT'S THE SOUND OF MY EYES ROLLING)

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No.

WINGED SHOES PRESS
NEW YORK
1949

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October 1949

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE AND FOREWORD[1]

by

F. X. CALDEIRA

I.

WHO WAS V. M. STRAKA? The world knows his name, knows his reputation as the prolific author of provocative fictions, novels that toppled governments, shamed ruthless industrialists, and foresaw the horrifying sweep of totalitarianism that has been a particular plague in these last few decades. It knows him as the most nimble of writers, one whose mastery of diverse literary idioms and approaches was on display from book to book, even chapter to chapter. But the world never knew

[1] This book was to have been published by my former employer, Karst & Son—as all of Straka's previous books were. However, that firm has shut its doors abruptly and without notice to its employee. I have—at considerable personal expense (financial and otherwise)—begun my own publishing venture so that Straka's capstone work can be appreciated by the public.

So why'd you have to leave the library in such a hurry the other night?

I DIDN'T WANT TO BE SEEN.

By...? BY ANYONE.

Nice evasion. Letting it slide — For now.

So how long have you been studying Straka?

SINCE HIGH SCHOOL, I GUESS. SO, 14-15 YRS.

Ever wonder if you should be doing something else? NO.

This is where an empathetic person might ask "Why?"

OK, WHY?

I'm graduating in May. No clue what to do next.

FIND WHAT YOU LOVE. THEN FIGHT LIKE HELL WHEN PEOPLE TRY TO TAKE IT AWAY FROM YOU.

That sounds like great advice — but I wish it didn't. Isn't it supposed to be easier than that?

DEPENDS ON WHAT "IT" IS.

* How much of this stuff can be true?

DEPENDS ON WHO YOU ASK. MANY PEOPLE (+ GOV'TS) DID THINK HE WAS DANGEROUS. LEAKED/DECLASSIFIED DOCS SHOW IT.

I love this word.

PLEASE TELL ME THAT'S NOT THE BEST YOU CAN DO. IF YOU'RE GOING TO HELP, HELP.

Are you always this charming?

SORRY — JUST FEEL LIKE I'M RACING THE CLOCK HERE.

Straka's face, never knew with certainty a single fact of the man's life.

Predictably, though disappointingly, the mystery of Straka's identity has become more intensely studied than his body of work. Interest in his life story is understandable, certainly, as he is widely acknowledged as one of the most idiosyncratic and influential novelists of the first half of this century.[2] His appreciative readers wanted to know the man who created the stories they loved, and his enemies wanted to know who he was so he could be silenced.

The furor over Straka's identity is particularly intense due to the rumors about his activities and affiliations—rumors that are fairly bursting with tales of sabotage, espionage, conspiracy, subversion, larceny, and assassination.* If there is a category of skullduggery to which Straka's name has not been linked in the popular press (and in some infuriating articles passed off as "literary scholarship"), I am not aware of it. Perhaps this is to be expected, as Straka's work itself often included secrets, conspiracies, and shadow-world occurrences. The author's

EVIDENCE? THERE'S NOTHING IN THE ARCHIVES — STRAKA'S OR HEMINGWAY'S.

2 Ernest Hemingway expressed his admiration for Straka's books in a 1935 interview in *Le Monde*. It is well-known that Hemingway later became one of Straka's harshest critics. What is less well-known is that Hemingway's about-face came shortly after he begged for a personal audience with Straka and his request was met with indifferent silence.

This is one place where a reasonable person would've suggested we meet instead of passing the book.

I NEVER CLAIMED TO BE REASONABLE.

personal reclusiveness was perhaps the grandest and most provocative of these.

But the focus on the Writer and not the Work dishonors both. Only in the author's private life—which was and is nobody's business—might it matter "who" he "was." The few verifiable public statements Straka issued confirm that he, too, believed the authorship controversy was misguided—not to mention a pernicious threat to his safety, liberty, and peace of mind.

WHY WHEN THE GOOD IDENTITY IS ESSENTIAL IN THE BOOKS THEMSELVES? (ESP. SOT, WINGED SHOES, CERIOLIS)

What are they? Do you have copies?

ATTACHED. MY FAVORITE: LETTER TO GRAHN RIPPING FILM ADAPTATION OF SANTANA MARCH.

Hilarious. Makes me feel bad for Grahn, though.

Nineteen novels are attributed to Straka, the first being the satirical adventure *Miracle at Braxenholm*, which was the toast of Europe in 1911, the final one being the book you have in your hand. Herein you will also find extensive annotations that I have contributed for the benefit of Straka's devoted readers and the responsible scholars who study his work.

SEE BOLTON (1957) — ARE THAT FXC'S ANNOTS SUGGEST HE'S SCHIZOPHRENIC

I read it. Idiotic. Guy thinks strong emotion = mental illness.

II.

While I do so with trepidation, I shall encapsulate the most common arguments over "candidates," lest readers seek such information from unreliable sources.

Some believe that V. M. Straka the author was the factory worker Vaclav Straka (born 1892 in South

No middle name?

NO.

Wondering. What does the "F.X." stand for in Caldeira's name?

F = FRANCISCO OR FILIP (DEPENDS ON SOURCE)

X = XABREGAS

WENT BACK + REREAD. YOU'RE RIGHT — IT'S SO 1950S. FUNNY NO ONE HAS GONE BACK TO QUESTION IT. YOU'D THINK I WOULD HAVE.

Why you?

B/C I'VE HAD PEOPLE MAKE JUDGMENTS LIKE THAT ABOUT WHO I AM.

Wait — recently?

IF I SAY YES, ARE YOU GOING TO STOP WRITING?

Apparently not.

Bohemia), although this argument must strain to account for a newspaper item about the suicide of a man by this name in Prague in 1910. Others—including many *soi-disant* "literary experts"—dispute the theory for a different reason: as with the Shakespeare authorship controversy, they argue that these works could not have been written by a man with little formal education. No, they say, it must have been someone else writing under the Straka name, someone with more sterling credentials, such as:

- The Swedish children's author Torsten Ekstrom; or
- The Scottish philosopher, novelist, and *bon vivant* Guthrie MacInnes; or
- The once-revered and now-much-out-of-favor Spanish novelist and memoirist Tiago García Ferrara; or
- The aptly-initialed American pulp novelist and screenwriter Victor Martin Summersby; or
- The Canadian adventurer C. F. J. Wallingford; or
- The German anarchist and polemicist Reinhold Feuerbach; or
- The noted Czech poet and playwright Kajetán Hruby; or even

Prof. Moody did a guest lecture on this in my Elizabethan Lit. Class last year.

I HOPE YOU IGNORED EVERY GODDAMN WORD HE SAID.

Just a guess: you're not a fan.

HE WAS MY DISSERTATION ADVISOR. IT ENDED BADLY.

Why?

IN PART B/C HE'S A LIAR + A THIEF.

So the clock you're racing—it has to do with Moody?

HE'S ABOUT TO CASH IN ON MY WORK.

Sign-in log says Moody was in the archive yesterday with "Esme Emerson-Plum."

BIG NY EDITOR. MEANS HE'S CLOSE.

- The French archaeologist-suffragist-novelist Amarante Durand.[3]

Should I read that one next?

NO. GO BACK TO BRAXENHOLM (THE FIRST) AND WORK CHRONOLOGICALLY.

AND YOU'LL MISS THE DETAILS IN PAINTER'S CAVE THAT TO COME FROM HER.

Some allegedly-serious people have suggested occult origins (A little girl receiving messages from a fourteenth-century nun! An ancient Nazca king, originally from a distant planet! Grand Duchess Olga, writing both before and after her murder!) and other absurdities (A murderous Serbian nationalist known only as "Apis's Amanuensis"! The almost-certainly-fictional "Last Spanish Pirate" Juan Blas Covarrubias! The proverbial million monkeys!), which merit mention only to be scoffed at.

I'd mention that this is also a very cool word but you'd probably flip out again. So I won't.

YEAH, IT'S GOOD THAT YOU DIDN'T.

I have little interest in arguing about which "candidate"—plausible, fantastic, or otherwise—for Straka is the strongest. I do not know his birth name, his birthplace, or his native tongue. I do not know his height, his weight, his street address, his work history, or the paths of his travels. I do not know if he committed any of the illegal, subversive, or violent acts of which he has been accused. I do not care who other people think he was or what they thought of him.[4]

Examples?

1920 WALL ST. BOMBING; SANTORINI MAN "MURDER(S)"; MANY LABOR RIOTS; SPYING FOR LEFT-WING ORGS; MY FAVORITE: HE WAS PART OF THE GROUP THAT SHOT THE ARCHDUKE IN SARAJEVO + THUS STARTED WW I. SEE INTERLUDE (OBV.)

And in The Black 19— reads like a confession to lots of Black Hand killings.

YOU'VE READ BIG ALREADY?

Yup. Finished last night.

MORE FOOLISH THAN PIRATE THEORY? *

THAN GHOST-MAN DIEVALENVIN THEORY?

[3] Durand is a particularly foolish suggestion. All available evidence indicates that V. M. Straka was a man.

[4] Do I think he was a dangerous man? Perhaps, if you posed a danger to *him*.

FXC = sexist? The great writer has to be a man?

MAYBE FXC WAS. BUT THERE'S JUST NOT MUCH EVIDENCE FOR DURAND.

*Sounds like me 3 years ago—to anyone who didn't like Jacob (the ex, BTW).

DID IT END UP MATTERING WHAT PEOPLE THOUGHT OF HIM?

Yeah, b/c they were right. 3 years, wasted.

I'VE BEEN AT PSU 7 YEARS— AND I'LL NEVER GET MY PH.D. B/C OF MOODY.

What happened? TOO MUCH.
Can't you work w/ another prof.? Or at another school?
NO ONE IN THE STRAKA WORLD WILL TOUCH ME. ONE GUY IN PARIS, MAYBE. BUT HE'S TOO OLD + SENILE TO TAKE ON STUDENTS.

IS JACOB THE REASON YOU NEEDED AN "ESCAPE"?
A big reason. Not the only one.

I care about the artistry of his words and the passion of his convictions. I feel no urge to *identify* him because I *knew* him. I saw the world through the eyes of his characters; I heard his voice in his letters and in our discussions in the margins of his typescripts; I felt his gratitude for my efforts to bring his stories to a wider audience. His mysteries, his secrets, his mistakes? These are not, have never been, and will never be, my concern.

IT'S PROSE LIKE THIS THAT SHOWS FXC WAS A HACK.

III.

I confess: it is my most fervent wish that someday my morning mail will contain another one of those creased and ink-stained manila envelopes with a smudged postmark and no return address, that inside it will be one of Straka's customary onionskin typescripts—(written, as usual, in a language I was not aware the author knew)—and that this twentieth novel, provocative and delightful, elusive and revelatory, will prove to be a worthy addition to the author's *oeuvre*.

So Straka knew many languages too? Why use a translator, then?
SEE DESJARDINS (1982) SUGGESTS VMS WASN'T TRULY FLUENT. NEEDED SOMEONE TO CLEAN UP.
Why not write in the language you actually know? It's crazy.
ECCENTRIC ≠ CRAZY. CAN'T STAND HOW EVERYONE EQUATES THE TWO.
Sorry. Bad choice of words. Really not what I meant.

But this will not happen. V. M. Straka is dead. By whose hand, I cannot say.[5]

[5] I shall not speculate in print as to who might want Straka dead. Suffice it to say that there are several possibilities—individuals and organizations—and that they all have a long reach.

Paranoia? Or for real?
BOTH. SECRET POLICE DOCS (FROM FRANCE, US, USSR, GERMANY, NORWAY) SHOW THEY ALL WANTED HIM DEAD. SAME WITH BOUCHARD + A FEW OTHER BIG CORPS.

*!!! But some still exist, right?
SOME. LOTS OF HOAXES/FRAUDS, THOUGH. CAN'T TAKE ANYTHING AT FACE VALUE.

IV.

Three years ago, in late May 1946, I received a telegram from Straka summoning me from New York to the Hotel San Sebastián in Havana. Here, it read, he would hand me the manuscript of the tenth and final chapter of his new novel, *Ship of Theseus*.[6] I'd had the honor and pleasure of working with Straka for over two decades, translating thirteen of his novels (each of them into several languages),[7] but though our partnership was profound and productive, it flourished through correspondence only;[8] we had never, to my knowledge, met face-to-face. The telegram hinted that he was, finally, prepared to reveal himself to me, fully trusting that I would never reveal anything that would compromise his anonymity and security.[9]

Impressive for one person.
BUT A LITTLE HARD TO BELIEVE, RIGHT?
WHY THE QUALIFICATION?

CZECH → HRVBY?

[6] I had spent the better part of a year working on my translation of the first nine chapters from the original Czech but felt I could go no further even on these without knowing how the novel would end. I had sent him a telegram that urged him to complete the book, as I (and, of course, his entire reading public) was desperately awaiting it. His response, in the message referred to above, hinted that he could not write the final lines without the two of us discussing them in person.

[7] The finest of these, in my opinion, are *The Spotted Cat* (1924), *The Black Nineteen* (1925), *Washington & Greene* (1929), *The Night Palisades* (1934), *Wineblood's Mine* (1939), *The Winged Shoes of Emydio Alves* (1942), and *Coriolis* (1944). No translator has ever been credited with work on Straka's first six novels.

So FXC arrived in NYC between 1924–1929.
HARD TO IMAGINE ANYTHING WE WOULD BE LESS LIKELY TO DO.

[8] Those who would seek to read or acquire our letters should know that they no longer exist. (A condition of correspondence with Straka was that the recipient burn all materials after reading them.) *

You don't believe FXC here?
I DON'T BELIEVE FXC ANYWHERE.

[9] Certainly I have been tested enough. No amount of money could remunerate me for all the threatening encounters, harassment, burglaries, break-ins, pursuits, and surveillance (both stealthy and overt) to which I have been subjected.

Why go through all this? What makes someone so devoted?
He sounds sincere to me.

COMMITMENT TO ART? POLITICS?
I've got time to kill at work + access to all kinds of databases. Might be more available about FXC these days. Gonna look.

I THINK I WAS CAREFUL ENOUGH.

So what's in the photo? What's everyone looking for?

DIDN'T GET A GOOD ENOUGH LOOK.

YUP PARIS — AT HOTEL LA GRANDE HORLOGE. ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE DEUX MARTRES — WHILE EKSTROM WAS THERE IN 1931.

"SPORTUNUS" — DID VMS USE THIS ANYWHERE ELSE? CHECK FOR VARIANTS, ANAGRAMS, ETC.

I assume Serin is paying...? Be careful.

JUST GOT WORD THAT A PHOTO OF THE SCENE IS UP FOR AUCTION. APPEARED OUT OF NOWHERE. I'M OFF TO NYC.

MUNICH + PRAGUE ARCHIVES BOTH CLAIM TO HAVE THIS TYPEWRITER. (FSU CHOSE NOT TO ACQUIRE — B/C MOODY THINKS HAVANA STORY IS BS.)

Why would FXC make it up?

(A) FXC WAS SCHIZOPHRENIC
(B) DISINFORMATION TO THROW PEOPLE OFF VMS'S TRAIL
(C) FXC WAS VMS HIMSELF
(D) BOTH (B) AND (C)
(E) ALL OF THE ABOVE.

And down the rabbit hole we go.

I arrived as planned at the hotel on the morning of June 5. At the front desk, I asked for him by the alias under which he was traveling (which I will not specify here, even though he will use it no more). I was told by the desk clerk that "Señor F—" had gone out and requested that any visitors wait in the hotel restaurant until he returned. I waited until the restaurant closed at midnight. Sick with worry, I persuaded the night clerk to take me up to the room. What we found inside was a scene I shall never forget: evidence of a terrible struggle—chairs splintered, a table overturned, holes and slashes in the plastered walls, clothing strewn, a Wanderer typewriter upside down on the floor, blood on the windowsill—and the window open to a three-story fall into an alley. Below the window? Two men in police uniforms, loading a blanket-rolled body into the back of a truck and carting it away.* And after that? Nothing except for the truck's exhaust and a few sheets of onionskin paper fluttering about.

Should I have followed the truck? Perhaps. But in my shock and grief, I acted on instinct. I ran down to the alley and collected the papers. As I had both hoped and feared, they were part of Straka's manuscript for the tenth chapter of *Ship of Theseus*. These,

*So all FXC saw was a body in a blanket.

TRUE. BUT VMS NEVER WROTE ANYTHING AFTER THAT + WAS NEVER HEARD FROM.

IF HE DIDN'T DIE, HE DID A CONVINCING JOB OF ACTING DEAD.

Could he been the whole point.

UM, YES.

Why? If they killed Straka, they'd kill FXC. Then they're both dead and there's no book.

along with a few additional pages that a maid found stuffed under the mattress in Straka's room, are the basis for the version of Chapter Ten that you will soon read.[10] I have used my best efforts to reconstruct the chapter and to fill in the gaps in ways consistent with Straka's intentions.

HE NEVER EXPLAINS/DOCUMENTS THIS!

So this ending is FXC's, not Straka's.

NO ONE KNOWS. THERE ARE A FEW VERSIONS OF CH. 10 OUT THERE. A COUPLE ARE OBVIOUS HOAXES. INTERNET RUMOR SAYS MOODY RECENTLY GOT HOLD OF ONE THAT SEEMS V. CREDIBLE. THAT'D KILL ME.

Whoa, there. A little perspective.

V.

"If Straka is dead," some have asked, "then where is his body?"[11] Why does it matter? If his remains are in the ground anywhere, then they have become part of the earth in its entirety. If they are in water, then they fill our oceans and rain down from our clouds. If they are in the air, then we breathe them as surely as we draw breaths of life from his fictions. V. M. Straka was not just a storyteller, he was a story. And story is resilient, protean, eternal.

What else do we know about FXC?

NO OTHER WRITINGS, NO CORRESPONDENCE, NO INTERVIEWS. VMS NEVER LET FXC SPEAK FOR HIM. THAT'S WHY PEOPLE THINK HE MADE UP FXC ENTIRELY.

So — assuming FXC existed — we know... what? Brazilian-born. Knew at least a few languages. Anything else?

LEFT NY + WENT BACK TO BRAZIL IN THE LATE 50S. DIED IN 60S.

Assumptions...

VI.

No book of Straka's has ever included a foreword, a translator's note, footnotes, or any other additional

[10] It should be noted that, unfortunately, the very last page—the one containing the true ending of Straka's masterwork—was not among the pages that were retrieved.

[11] In the most mundanely literal sense, the answer to this question is probably "in an unmarked grave in or near Havana." But no discerning reader of Straka's work would be satisfied with the mundanely literal.

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN IMPRESSED THAT YOU COULD DRAW THIS SO WELL.

Wait — I always thought you drew it. Tell me you're joking...

WHY DO IT, THEN? WHY ARE ENS THAT FOCUS ON IDENTITY QUESTION IF YOU THINK READERS SHOULDN'T CARE? MAKES NO SENSE!

text; the author was adamant that only his writings should appear between the covers of his books. Am I then violating his authorial wishes now? Doubtlessly so. But if these words of mine were, somehow, to reach Straka, he would understand my motivations and find them sound and sincere. He saw me as someone who cared deeply for his work, who helped his words reach millions of readers, and who zealously guarded the anonymity upon which his artistic integrity—and, indeed, his survival—depended.[12] He understood that my allegiance to him was and is unwavering, from first to last. It is in the fondest regions of my heart and mind that my connection with V. M. Straka began, and it is there that it shall end.

CLICHÉ - BRUTAL

This phrase is in Coriolis (p. 464). And in Winged Shoes (p. 268).

HOW HAVE YOU HAD TIME TO READ ALL OF THIS?

Recently dumped, senioritis, etc.

YOU'RE NOT READING THEM IN ORDER...

Never been much for following directions.

What if these lines are meant as a kind of signal phrase? A hint about what to look for? If so: Why not use a familiar line? It'd stand out.

KEY TO A CODE?

Maybe one that's in the footnotes?

SIMPLER EXPLANATION: IT'S JUST AN HOMAGE TO HIS WRITING.

Simpler isn't always better.

—F. X. Caldeira
October 30, 1949
New York

12 Let me reiterate: I possess no personal information about Straka. I have made tremendous sacrifices and put myself at grave risk by collaborating with him, and I am disinclined to invite more of these foul attentions.

AGAIN, WHY PUT UP W/ ALL OF THIS?

I think it's love.

FUNNY.

I'm serious.

AND YOUR SUPPORT FOR THIS IS...?

A feeling.

YOU NEED MORE THAN THAT.

SHIP OF THESEUS

So: I don't know your name!

THOUGHT YOU'D JUST CHECK WHO WORKROOM B19 WAS ASSIGNED TO.

I could. I'd prefer you tell me yourself.

Hey, you can't reply to all the other stuff and leave this hanging. Not fair.

OK—You left me no choice but to check the workroom assignments, Mr. Thomas Lyle Chadwick (PSU ID# 3946608)!!

WELL, YOU FOUND ME OUT.

Or, you thought you were so clever.

So: I've been reading up on what your scholarly homeboys have said about who wrote this book. Looks like 5 main args: ① FXC's story is true: VMS wrote it, FXC filled in where necessary.
② Same as above, but FXC overstepped.
③ It's all VMS's work + FXC lied about reconstructing Ch. 10.
④ Doesn't matter, B/C VMS + FXC were the same person.
⑤ The whole book is a hoax—someone (maybe FXC, maybe not) imitating Straka's style.

COMPLICATED BY THE FACT THAT NO ONE KNOWS WHO "VMS" IS, ANYWAY. MOST PEOPLE DECIDE WHAT THEY THINK EARLY ON + DON'T CHANGE THEIR MINDS.

What do you think?

I'M PRETTY MUCH A (2).

But re FXC overstepping: where do you draw the line? At what point does the book stop being Straka's alone + become theirs?

CHAPTER 1

ONLY VMS BOOK TO USE CHAPTER TITLES

WHAT BEGINS, WHAT ENDS

Dusk. The Old Quarter of a city where river meets sea.

A man in a dark gray overcoat walks the Quarter's streets, a tangle of cobblestone passages that spin from the harbor and thread themselves through neighborhoods where the smells of cooking spices vary but the sad decrepitude is shared. The buildings, black with the soot of centuries, loom over him, blocking out most of the sky and making it difficult to know at any given moment whether he is heading toward the water or away from it.[1]

[1] A sense of spatial disorientation afflicts characters throughout Straka's body of work—most notably in *Coriolis*, which features a character afflicted with a fictional ailment called "Eötvös Syndrome." The illness causes his sense of disorientation to intensify as his travels take him closer to the equator.

The Eötvös wheel is the key to decoding the puzzles in Coriolis, right? Maybe it would work here, if these FNs are coded?

I'VE ENCLOSED A {3} WHEEL. YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO PLAY AROUND TO FIND THE REFERENCE LATITUDES. GIVE IT A SHOT IF YOU HAVE TIME.

You don't need it? I MADE ONE BY HAND WHEN I WAS IN HS. I LIKE USING THAT ONE.

That is so not what I was doing in high school.