

Jill Magid
**Becoming
Tarden –
Prologue**

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Living in Amsterdam in the spring of 2004, I received a letter from a senior advisor to the Netherlands' chief government architect. Enclosed was a job description, translated from Dutch. The Government Buildings Agency was hiring on behalf of the Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, or the Dutch secret service. The Organization had doubled in size over recent years due to the new wave of global terrorism and was thus moving to a larger building. As a government building funded with public money, federal law required a percentage of the project's total budget be used to commission a new onsite artwork. The Agency's mission was to appoint someone whose work would support the mission of The Organization, as paraphrased below.

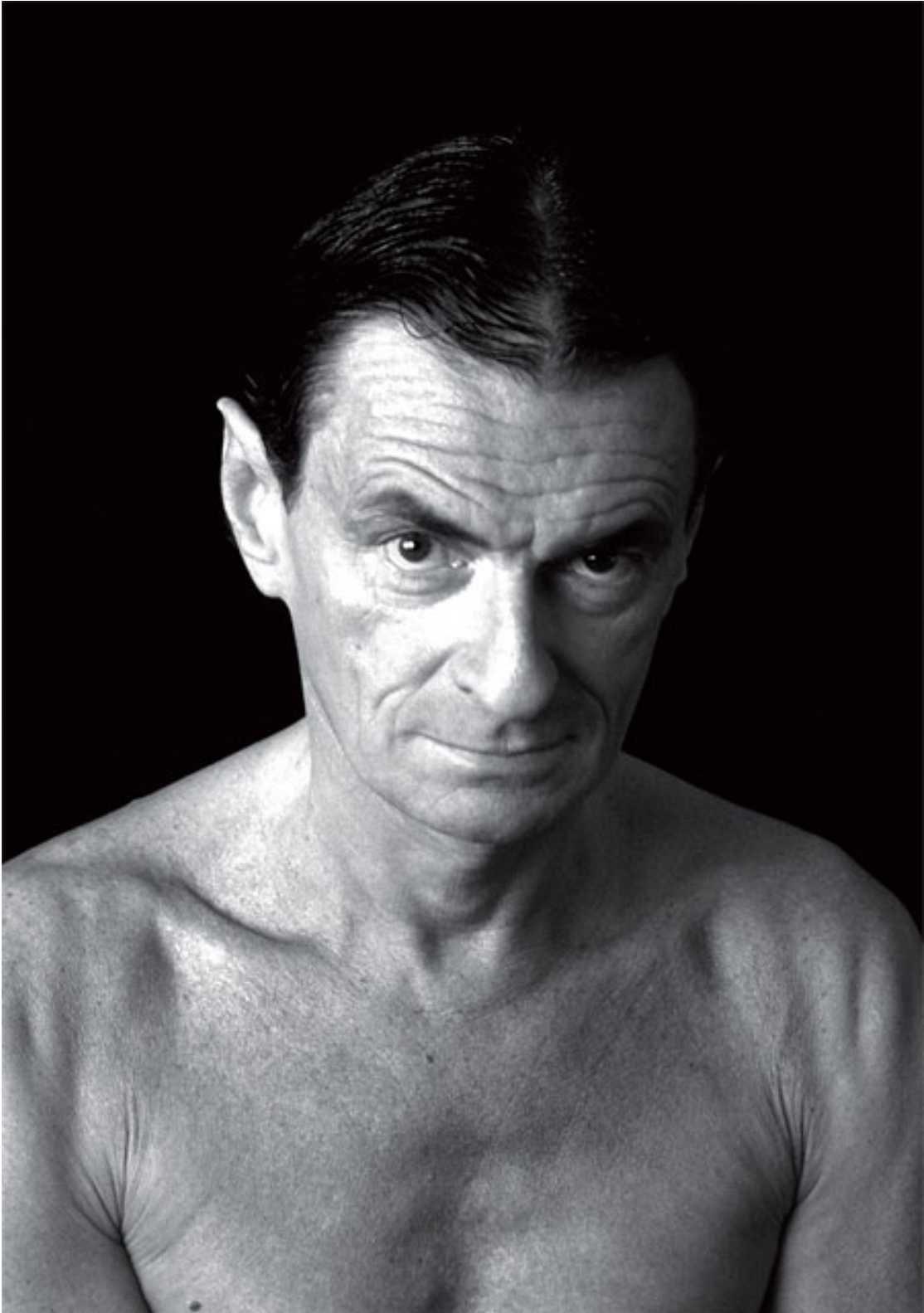
The Organization's reluctance to commission an artwork was clear from the document enclosed, which excited me even more. It described its task as to protect the interests of the nation by researching groups and individuals, both domestic and international, which pose a threat to the democratic order of the state. Society, it wrote, expects The Organization to know what those threats include. At the same time, citizens require legal protection against techniques used by The Organization that invade the personal domain, such as audio and physical surveillance. The Organization acknowledged that just how far it is permitted to go in fulfilling its task without compromising the cornerstones of society – openness, democracy, and civil rights for all – is constantly in question. "Sometimes," the letter concluded, "the information that is assembled cannot be made public. Where possible the organization tries to be open."

Applications should include a resume, mission statement, and examples of relevant work.

In sending me the letter, the senior advisor had clearly recognized what I did: this job was perfect for me. It was the logical next step in my career, which had come to involve an experiential investigation of secrecy and government institutions – often by my infiltrating them. I sat down at my improvised desk in the canal house at which I was staying and prepared my application. I wrote it in a voice which the Government Buildings Agency and The Organization would identify with, or even think they might be able to exploit – a skill I had learned from experience.

The letter arrived just as I was planning to leave the country permanently. My desire to work with The Organization put that move on hold. I called the friend who was subletting my old apartment. We had agreed that if living with my boyfriend did not work out and I remained in

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Portrait of Jill Magid as Jerzy Kosinski. Photo: Czeslaw Czaplinski.

Holland, I could reclaim my flat. I suggested he start making other arrangements, just in case.

Three weeks later, the Agency advisor informed me that I'd passed the first screening. One step closer to The Organization, I decided to wait it out. I notified my sub-lessee. He had until the end of the month to vacate.

On June 22, 2004, I was asked to meet with The Organization's selection committee at the Government Buildings Agency office in The Hague. The committee was already assembled when I arrived – they'd been screening other candidates that morning. The interviews were being conducted in a semiprivate room closed off from the rest of the office by soundproofed glass walls. The desks closest to the room were vacant; I assumed that they'd been cleared. The committee, seated around a black oval table, numbered around fifteen people. All the men were in business suits; most of the women wore mid-length skirts or dress pants with silky blouses buttoned to various heights. The amount of cleavage revealed depended on the women's ages, which ranged greatly. The younger committee members greeted me with a smile; the elders barely nodded.

The advisor dimmed the lights. Using carefully selected images, I traced the stages of my development. I began with a slide that showed my hand holding a thin rod with a small mirror attached to its end, cut in the shape of a skyscraper. The mirror reflects the Empire State Building. It appears as if I'm holding the actual building. The next image is of a stiletto shoe that I fitted with a small security camera attached to its heel. On the underside of the shoe sole is a wireless transmitter, about the size of a stick of gum. The following slide displays the transmitted image from the camera: a view up the side of my body, distorted by the camera's wide-angle lens, with the city of Boston in the background. I am as tall as the buildings. The next slide shows a similarly distorted image of my body through a surveillance camera lens. Unauthorized, I'd hacked into a university's security system and projected a live video stream from a camera beneath my clothes. The next image was taken in Amsterdam. It is a detailed shot of an outdoor security camera that I covered in rhinestones. The next image is of myself, at the top of a ladder that is leaning against the facade of the headquarters of the Amsterdam police department. I am covering the building's security cameras with jewels. The next image is of one of the police administrators (I wonder if anyone on the selection committee recognized him?) who had hired me for the job, admiring a glittering camera from the sidewalk. Lastly, I showed images from my time in Liverpool where I had

recently worked with the city's police department and its citywide CCTV system. I am the subject of video stills taken with the police's cameras, always wearing the same red trench coat. The stills are rich in color and cinematic in scope. The detailed shots of my face feel intimate. I let those linger. Over these images, I described to the committee my process of working closely with government institutions to identify with them personally and locate their human side. I inferred that I could do the same for The Organization.

I then thanked the committee and the advisor escorted me out of the room. Before attending to the next candidate, he squeezed my arm and whispered, *That was very good.*

A few days later, I was strolling through Dam Square with a former classmate of mine who was visiting the city on business. As we discussed the pros and cons of living in Europe versus the States, I got a call from the Agency. The advisor notified me that The Organization had offered me the commission. I grabbed my friend by the shirtsleeve and silently mouthed, *Yes!* The advisor explained that he would continue to work with me on this assignment on behalf of the Agency as a mediator between The Organization and myself. I had until the end of the year to prepare my angle and outline exactly what I proposed to do for The Organization.

I resettled easily and quickly got to work. The Agency had sent me a large parcel with The Organization's renovation plans for its new building, including computer-generated drawings of its completed design. As was the case with all of its commissions, the Agency expected me to propose an artwork for a specific location within The Building. I had no intention of importing something I'd made in the studio. I wanted to be intimately involved with The Organization, to penetrate it. I studied The Building's blueprints to gain insight into its administrative structure but to no avail. Originally designed as the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the construction was a conglomerate of hexagonal clusters, like the cross section of a honeycomb. If there was a central point within The Building from which power would emanate, it was impossible to locate from its architecture.

Also enclosed in the parcel were a number of thin booklets published by The Organization about its work. Their titles included *About Positions Involving Confidentiality and Security Investigations*, *Recruitment for the Jihad in the Netherlands*, *Terrorism at the Start of the 21st Century*, and my favorite, *Espionage and Security Risks: Invisible but Still Existing*. I was inspired by their opaque, poetic use of language. I copied terms such as "vulnerability analysis,"

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“declaration of non-objection,” and “risk orientation” into my notebook and compiled a list of questions about The Organization’s methodology to present to the committee.

I visited The Building on November 17, December 12, and again on the twenty-second, accompanied by the Agency advisor. We met with the Committee Head – who became deeply interested in my practice – and various committee members. I posed to them the questions from my notebooks. I asked them to explain how confidentiality and security screenings were conducted, and to clarify the differences between security clearance levels A, B, and C. I wanted to know what security level I would be granted if I became an agent, and what kind of access that would allow me; how citizens go about applying the Freedom of Information Act to see their classified files; and if The Organization would keep a file on me now that I was working for them. I asked about surveillance practices and searches of homes, and what they referred to as “closed objects.” I’d read that suspect objects were sometimes removed discreetly from private residences, analyzed, and reinserted back into place within three days. I asked how The Organization trained agents to conduct these searches, what tools were used, how the results were analyzed and documented, and if they would teach me how to do it. Many of my questions were passed over without being answered. They responded whenever they could.

Inside The Building, I was never left alone. If I used the bathroom before entering the conference room, whomever I was meeting would stand outside the door. The advisor commented that this seemed suspect, as if I were wiretapping myself.

On my last visit, the Committee Head showed me the Organization’s collection of “dead-letter boxes” – objects that had been used to hide things. There was a block of cement containing a roll of film that could only be seen with an x-ray, attaché cases with false backs and hidden pockets, shoe heels with cavities in which to hide devices. They were old, beautiful, analogue. I wondered aloud how The Organization did this now, with so many digital options. *It is difficult*, he admitted.

Meanwhile, I spoke with those on the outside who eyed The Organization with suspicion. I asked people around town what they thought of the service, whether they approved of it and, if not, why they didn’t. I delved into the service’s past practices. I located activists who had dedicated their lives to watching its every move in the hopes of countering them. I’d been in Amsterdam long enough to have made useful connections. I knew prominent academics in the

city’s universities as well as some infamous hackers. I told a select few about my commission. Networks opened up; people emerged. Many who agreed to meet with me had their own agendas. A few wanted me to wear a wire the next time I went to The Building. I listened to them all without judgment, careful to remain open to who or whatever The Organization might be beyond their speculations.

I wondered if The Organization knew I was doing this behind its back. I fantasized it was aware of my every move. I visited a man at his house on the outskirts of the city, where he kept a small workshop full of phones he had hacked to sneak an ear into The Building. He also rewired people’s phones so that agents could not tap them. I wondered if anyone was really listening in on them or if they were simply fantasizing like me.

Back in the city center, I wandered into the American Book Center on Spuistraat, not far from the canal house at which I’d stayed. I had lived in Amsterdam for four and a half years but still did not speak the language. Preferring to remain a perpetual visitor, I hadn’t tried to learn. I headed to the fiction section, picked up a book by a familiar author, and skimmed the commentary inside. A reviewer compared the novel to those of Jerzy Kosinski. I had never heard of him, so I moved to the K section and scanned his titles on the shelf. I reached for one called *Cockpit*. The back cover described the novel’s protagonist as a former operative for a mysterious government agency, living a life free of identity, erased from all dossiers and transcripts. As a fugitive, he moves across the landscape in search of adventure and intrigue. Feeling certain that the book had chosen me as much as I had chosen it, I made a beeline to the checkout counter.

At my desk, I continued digging through everything I could find on The Organization, searching for a clause, a loophole, my point of entry. In *The Kingdom of the Netherlands Bulletin of Acts, Orders and Decrees*, I came across Article 12, which appeared to provide the door. It read: “There is no processing of personal data on the basis of a person’s religion or convictions about life, or on the basis of his race, health, or sexual life.” I laughed to myself – what else is there? The document then outlined the various jobs within The Organization, including the position “Head of Service.” Heads of Service are responsible for maintaining the secrecy of sensitive information; protecting the sources from which information is derived; and ensuring the safety of the persons cooperating in the collection of information. Head of Service seemed the appropriate job for me.

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On February 10, 2005, the Agency arranged a meeting for The Organization's selection committee to hear what I had to offer. I met them at their building, accompanied by my advisor. Before we could enter, I was searched. The guards took my phone and all other digital devices. I was led to a room with white walls, a mint green carpet, and a large table with no center – an enormous zero.

I proposed that The Organization hire me as its first Head of Service of Personal Data. As Head of Service, I would gather personal data from agents in The Organization as defined by Article 12, beginning with members of the committee. Personal information would be disclosed during private meetings between the agents and myself. These would be conducted at sites of the agents' choosing anywhere in the country, including within The Building. I proposed to write a report based on these encounters, to be publicly available, combining the personal data of the individual agents into a collective file sketching the face of The Organization.

The committee came back with conditions. I could not use agents' real names in my report. They would need aliases. The Organization had two press people, Vincent and Miranda, whose names and faces were publicly known. I would refer to all of my agents as Vincent or Miranda. Every agent I interviewed must have volunteered. The Organization would provide a contact through whom all meetings would be arranged. Only my contact would know who the agents were, and only I would know what they said. My report must build a positive image of The Organization's role within society, and provide it with a human face. If my proposal were approved, I would have to be investigated.

I encouraged them to do so.

And so began my vetting. The Organization had hoped to avoid this: vetting is an expensive and time-consuming procedure but, considering the nature of my proposal, the task was unavoidable. The inspection process was meant to take approximately eight weeks. For the next two months I watched my back.

During that time I did not know what The Organization saw of me or how deeply it explored me. None of my family, friends, or peers told me they'd been questioned. I stopped meeting with anyone who did not endorse or trust The Organization. The weeks passed without incident. I did not sense anyone watching me nor did I see anyone following me. I feared that The Organization did not care, that I was too insignificant, that it did not take me seriously, that it was not vetting me at all.

By mid-March I'd still heard nothing, so on March 17 I called the Committee Head and asked

him to meet me the following Sunday at a public art gallery where some of my work was being shown. I hoped that by meeting him alone, without the committee, I could gather inside information on the status of my vetting. I sensed from our preliminary meetings at The Building that he wanted me to pass.

He arrived wearing a suit. We strolled casually through the exhibition until we came to a darkened room in which my videos were projected. Surveillance footage of Liverpool flashed before us silently. We sat down in the shadows, in two of the black leather chairs I'd selected for the installation. *Hmm.* He leaned back in his seat. *I've been curious to see this footage ever since you showed us stills from it in your interview.* The camera pans across a crowd until it finds me, a woman in a red coat, sitting on the edge of a public fountain. It then approaches me slowly – you can feel the controller's hand – until my face fills the screen. The video resolution is low, the contrast high. My skin glows white, my hair and eyes are almost black. I watched the Committee Head meet my pixilated gaze, and basked in the warm tension that our triangle of voyeurism had created. When the scene suddenly cut to an empty street corner, he turned in his chair to look at me.

I confided in him that I'd met with individuals who were opposed to The Organization, and was worried about my vetting. He doubted the exchanges would count against me. As for himself, he said, he had stopped paying attention to the conspiracy theorists. *It takes too much time and energy. They treat it like a religion.*

He explained The Organization as a networking system that manages an overflow of information. He drew an imaginary diagram in the air. *Person A is talking to Person B who then talks to Person C.* The Organization has to streamline that data and make it more focused. *We miss a lot of data by filtering it, but it's the only way to make it manageable.*

I told him that the conspiracy theorists I'd met overestimated The Organization, but he said,

No. They are not all wrong. The service processes a lot of information, more than you would imagine.

A young couple entered the room and he stopped talking. I suggested we leave and get coffee, so we walked across the street to an upscale patisserie. His dark suit and large physique were a funny contrast to its pink decor. He ordered Lady Grey tea and two pastries, one with red and grey striped icing and one with custard. Then he led me to a corner table, hidden away from the rest of the café by the pastry counter.

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Once we were settled, he asked about my plans. *Do you plan to return to the States? I could imagine that, after working with the police and now my organization, you might be ready to move on.* He lifted his delicate teacup to his mouth; it looked awkward in his grasp.

I replied that it all depends on how my assignment with his organization unfolds – my whereabouts might not matter. I asked if he was familiar with *L'Avventura*, a film by Michelangelo Antonioni that I'd rented the night before; he wasn't. The female protagonist disappeared from the screen after the first twenty minutes, never to return, and yet she still remained the protagonist.

I turned to the subject of my vetting, and asked how it was going.

He said the very fact it was being conducted was unprecedented. *Under any other circumstances, my organization would never vet someone like you; you meet none of our criteria.* Nonetheless, he felt confident I'd pass. He explained that vetting would not give me a title but a security clearance. As a Head of Service I would be entitled to a salary and retirement benefits. *That is not possible.*

I told him I'd need a title. He grinned. *Perhaps you can be a consultant.*

I asked if he knew of others like me who had been hired by The Organization.

No, he said.

We left the patisserie and strolled along the canal. The sun was setting and the sky was purple. Things felt relaxed between us. He confessed that it would take him a while to understand the way I worked, and it would probably take the other committee members even longer. He asked me to be patient, and promised to offer his advice whenever he could. *We will make this assignment work.*

He said we.

Then he added – in a straightforward, typically Dutch manner – that I had a funny way of dressing. *It is half-classic and half, well...* He searched for the word.

I offered *strange*.

Yes. *Your bag, for instance.*

I was carrying a small leather purse with a handclasp. I had bought it secondhand. I told him I like it because the leather is soft and feels nice to the touch. *Here,* I said. *Feel it.* I motioned for him to stroke it and he did. Then I asked, *Do you always dress so conservatively?*

Is this conservative? He seemed insulted.

I tried to recover. *Next time we meet you should wear leather pants.* He blushed and smiled shyly. *Anyway, how a person dresses does not say everything about who he really is.*

He looked himself over and said, *This is who I really am.*

Well, I thought, we'll see.

It was almost dark. We kissed one another goodbye and said we'd see each other soon at The Building. I watched him walk away. He waved and turned the corner. I stood where I was, watching the empty street.

I had found my breach.

One week later I received a phone call from the Agency advisor. He informed me casually that the Committee Head was leaving his position and would be replaced by another agent in a different department. This was a terrible setback. I explained the gravity of the decision to my advisor, but he did not understand. Advisors rarely do. Projects such as this cannot be mediated by institutions in an official manner, but must be delicately handled by me personally. I knew this from working with both the Dutch and British police.

Later, as I learned more about The Organization and its policy on "agent loving," I came to wonder if the replacement of the Committee Head was not one of The Organization's precautionary steps. Agent loving is defined by The Organization as an inappropriate, intimate attachment between agents. An agent from the service typically becomes too close to an agent in the field – a member of the public hired by that agent to gather information. The fear is that the bond between the two will supersede their commitment to the service, leaving it vulnerable. Perhaps The Organization had sensed, as I had, the potential for agent loving between the former Committee Head and myself.

Unaware of the term at the time, and feeling no bond or loyalty to The Organization in the first place, I contacted the now-former Committee Head of my own accord and planned to meet with him again.

The rest of the year passed with little contact from The Organization. I kept busy and continued to work on related projects – I always have a few at a time on the go until one gains momentum and overtakes the rest. Since I did not know if and when my vetting would go through, I thought it best to stay local. I rented a workspace in another part of the city, in a former hospital complex. It was above the old crematorium, with high ceilings and exposed piping. I hung large drawings and graphs I'd made on the walls, pinned up my lists of questions for The Organization as well as their answers, and printed out film stills that conjured the inside of The Organization as I imagined it as well as the characters I might find there. I read *Cockpit* during coffee breaks. The novel was written from the perspective of Tarden, the protagonist and rogue operative, and organized into short scenes that followed one another like beads on a string,

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without climax or resolution. In each scene, Tarden enters into someone else's life, altering it irrevocably, for better or for worse. I read them as proposals. Often on my evening bike rides home I rented relevant films to watch later that night in bed, under my pitched roof. I regularly checked in with my advisor to see if there'd been any progress, but he rarely knew more than I did. I got into the groove of waiting, which was good. As I would come to learn, waiting and its source, bureaucracy, are conditions of working with the service.

It was December 12, 2005, when I finally received my vetting results in the mail. The letter was written in Dutch. The sparseness of the document signaled to me that I'd failed, or worse, that I'd been dismissed – perhaps for speaking with the activists – and taken off the commission. I called my advisor and nervously recited the Dutch for him to translate. I'd passed. It was a certificate of non-objection and my security clearance, vetting number 2485536/01. I had permission to begin.

The Organization's communications department contacted me almost immediately. They asked me to make an infomercial in which I introduced myself to the agents, as I'd need them to volunteer to meet with me and offer their personal data.

That night I met my friend I'll call M, a Dutch designer fifteen years my senior, for drinks at his favorite bar. Meeting him in the evenings had become a habit of late. The bar was close to his house, in a residential area near a retirement home, at the foot of a small and charming bridge no more than a three-minute bike ride from Nieuwmarkt. He knew most of the pub's regulars. Some of the ladies, who beneath their pink lipstick and heavy concealer looked like they'd been through some rough times, flirted with him familiarly. During that period of intense research, talking to M had become akin to sketching. Ideas crackled between us like electricity, taking unpredictable and exciting turns. I inevitably drank and smoked too much with him but he took care of me, often cooking elaborate meals for me after I'd worked too long and too late in my studio. By this point my relationship with my boyfriend was over. He'd moved back into his newly renovated flat, and our place on Spuistraat had become just another canal house I would bike past. M kept my mind sharp and my belly calm. He grounded me in a way that this city, and those I had known here thus far, had never quite managed.

Over white wine and cheese, I told M about the infomercial. Our conversation turned to the film I'd rented the night before, Godard's *Weekend*, and an early scene that had particularly inspired me. In describing it to him, I

became so involved in the retelling that I began to reenact it. He sat back against the window with a wineglass in one hand and a cigarette in the other, watching me. When I had finished, he nodded. *That's your video.*

A few days later we hired a friend of his, a Dutch documentary filmmaker, to do the camerawork, and made the infomercial at M's house.

I am sitting on a chair with my shirt falling provocatively off my shoulder. I describe the scene in *Weekend* in which the female protagonist tells her story: "He always starts with these really beautiful women –" The screen cuts to the word DATA on a black background. A dramatic chord of music drowns out my voice, just as happens to the girl in *Weekend*. It cuts back to a close-up of my face. " – and this one is no exception. She is young, beautiful, wearing only her underwear, sitting on a desk." I bring my feet up onto the chair. I am wearing tight-fitting jeans. "The light in the room is dim, tinted orange by curtains closed before the window." M created this effect by laying manila paper over the sliding glass doors. "Behind the desk sits a man. He is in a vest, smoking a cigarette, taking notes." I move my hand as if smoking. "As he listens, she recounts her experience of the night before, engaged in a ménage à trois." In the video, as I had done in the bar, I recount her account.

I sent copies to the communications department and my newly assigned contact at The Organization. My contact said she appreciated the video's elliptical approach but was concerned that many of the agents wouldn't understand its intention. The man at the communications department was one of them. Furthermore, he complained, a six-minute monologue was too long.

I edited it down. I took only a short clip from the last minute of the video. By that point, I have finished my story and am smiling into the lens, waiting for the record light to go off. It doesn't. Confused, I raise my eyes to M's. He is standing above the cameraman, grinning with his arms folded. He nods and I understand what they want: I should stay as I am, staring into the lens. I engage the camera again. In the absence of my voice, I feel exposed and almost laugh. My body temperature rises. I become aware of the cameraman and his lens as a thin and fragile veil. Through it, we hold each other's gaze. When the record light finally dims, we are both sweating.

I sent the one-minute clip to the man in the communications department and this time he distributed it. The video was broadcast throughout The Building on its informational monitors, interspersed between news updates and other feeds to which I did not have access. The communications department added a link at

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the end, directing agents to an intranet site on The Organization's server that offered further information on my project and how to reach my contact. The original edit was also available there, but it took a few more clicks to reach it.

The video was a success. Agents were drawn in. They called my contact to volunteer and meetings were arranged.

And then it all began. The front door of The Building opened, and a series of its employees filed out. Before the year was through, I had met privately with six different agents. Each time I awaited one, I didn't know whom or what to expect. I trusted them to recognize and approach me. At restaurants, bars, airport meeting points, and anonymous rooms within The Building I spoke with them for hours. I listened as The Organization had commanded, without the aid of any recording devices, using only pen, paper, and memory. I compiled a series of notebooks on the agents, always circling back to the subject of The Organization. I used what I learned from one agent and applied it to the next. In these early meetings, I focused less on The Organization and more on their personal lives.

By this time my copy of *Cockpit* had become heavily underlined, with several sections starred, most notably page 100, the passage about hummingbirds:

I was one of the specially trained groups of agents called "the hummingbirds." The men and women of this group are so valuable that to protect their covers no central file is kept on them and their identities are seldom divulged to other agents.

Most hummingbirds remain on assignment as long as they lead active cover lives, usually as high-ranking government officials, military or cultural officials based in foreign countries. Others serve as businessmen, scientists, editors, writers and artists style.

But I always used to wonder what would happen if a hummingbird vanished, leaving no proof...

x

An extended version of this text appears in *Becoming Tarden*, a novel by Jill Magid.

Jill Magid was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut in 1973 and lives and works in New York. She received her Master of Science in Visual Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge and was an artist-in-residence at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam, 2000–2. Magid has exhibited in various institutions around the world including Tate Liverpool (2004), the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam (2005), Gagosian Gallery, New York (2007), Sparwasser, Berlin (2007), Centre D'Arte Santa Monica, Barcelona (2007) and Yvon Lambert, Paris and New York (2009).

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