

An illustration of three hands in yellow, teal, and pink, each holding a pen. The hands are positioned as if they are about to write together. The background is dark grey.

The Third Person

stories

Emily Anglin

*The
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Person*

*stories by
Emily Anglin*

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EILIDH

EILIDH WAS A SCIENTIST. AND LIKE MOST OF THE SCIENTISTS I meet in my job as a support-staff member at the Mind Institute, she was a scientist with a problem.

When she appeared one morning in the doorway of my office in the basement of the Arts building, I rose to greet her with a slightly startled welcome. We'd agreed by email to meet at this time, but I was still surprised to see her—to see anyone. I'd become conditioned by identical days of desk work on the summer-quiet campus, in the dim of my concrete office, to expect as my only company the overhead footfalls and shouts of the summer-camp kids who ruled the floor above mine, which served as home base for the Institute's annual neuroscience-themed day camp. Eilidh's sudden, full-grown presence in front of me made me feel like I'd been caught sleeping.

"Eilidh," she said, introducing herself. I gripped her hand, almost bracing myself against her solid stance. Her palm was hot. "Sorry I'm so out of breath," she said. "I rode my bike here." She held up her helmet, showing me.

I repeated her name in my head as she'd spoken it: I-lee.

Not eyelid. I'd been reading it phonetically, I realized, despite knowing how the name was pronounced. Likewise, I realized I'd been picturing her as a slip of a person, the bodily match for the polite but spare email she'd sent me to ask for an appointment without saying what she wanted to meet about. In person, she turned out to be tall, athletic, broad-shouldered. Beads of sweat stood on her forehead despite the basement chill.

"Hi, Eilidh," I said. "Come in. I'm Miranda."

Eilidh set her things down on the floor and dragged a chair for herself from my office's back corner; she placed it at an angle near my own chair, as much beside as across from me, as though we were meeting to work on a project together. Recently, all my work had been done over email, or occasionally by phone. I hadn't had an in-person meeting in months. Eilidh, by contrast, seemed at home in the room, as though accustomed to meetings with strangers.

"Nice record player," she said, as though she were visiting me for fun. "And nice record."

"Thanks," I said. "I like personalizing my workspace." On one of the wall-mounted bookshelves, I'd placed a record player on which I liked to play ambient music at the lowest audible volume. An eclectic set of carefully selected records sat beside the player between heavy, polished brass bookends in the shape of owls. That day I had a classical-guitar record playing. I'd read a professional advice book once that said it's a good idea to move homey things into your office, things of your own. I have the privilege of feeling quite secure in my job, not least because my father was one of the Institute's founding scientists and is still affiliated with the Institute as an emeritus researcher, but I still thought it couldn't hurt to soften the space with some personal touches.

Essentially, I work at the Institute as an advisor. My job description has changed several times in the five years I've worked there, but my title has stayed the same, broad enough to encompass the various roles I've played, some at the same time: Personal & Professional Wellness Specialist. The awkward phrase is a symptom of my position's compound nature, the collapsing of jobs held by separate people into one role: but essentially, I help our scientists talk through professional development plans, career goals, work-life balance, resources for wellness, and other related issues.

At my interview for the job, my hiring manager, Rick, had opened the interview by telling everyone about my master's degree in counselling psychology. He told the other interviewers that I'd followed in my dad's footsteps by building my life around the study of the mind—"Miranda's dad's name is a big deal around here, as I'm sure you all know," he'd said. I'd gripped the seat of my chair on either side of my legs. Rick made a joke about how he had grown up to become his dad too, but would need to get his own psych degree before going into that.

The Mind Institute was founded by a progressive group of psychologists in 1962, in what was then a near-pastoral setting of fields on the city's eastern outskirts. This group broke off from the psychology department of the city's major university because of that department's emphatic refocusing away from the paradigm of inner states and toward the certainty of outward actions. The secessionists hoped the pastoral scene would foster a new humanistic, interdisciplinary approach to studying the mind, and they recruited scholars from the natural and social sciences, and even the arts, to join them.

More recently, in its current incarnation, things had been

tense at the Institute, between funding cuts and the increasingly frequent emailed security alerts detailing irregular incidents taking place on the Institute grounds, which were desolate by night.

And I needed the job, which I'd applied for shortly after my father's retirement. My dad had been the youngest of the Institute's founding psychologists, and only a doctoral student at the time, twenty-five years old. The Social Psychology building is named for him, and still bears his name on the sign out front. He lives with me now—it's just the two of us. We spend evenings together, talking while we watch documentaries on public TV, and he tells me things that the documentarists leave out. I tell him about goings-on at the Institute. He likes to hear about the camp kids running around, playing a game called Mind Maze, run by the weary counselors outside, though he can't quite understand why the kids are there, and seems to think they must be participating in a study of some kind.

Eilidh didn't look like the typical Mind Institute researcher. In the chair beside me, she was turning through her notebook in search of some notes she said she'd taken that morning. I opened my own notebook and wrote the heading "Meeting," followed by the date.

She must be new, I thought. There was an air about her that seemed imported from an early-1990s tennis match. She smoothed her loose, straight beige skirt against her legs. She wore a striped navy-and-white short-sleeved top. She still looked sweaty. She dragged the back of her hand across her forehead to push her bangs aside, and I focused more closely on the one incongruous element of Eilidh's otherwise conventional appearance: her streaked, heavy, silver-grey eye

makeup. She must have unknowingly smeared the makeup when she wiped the sweat from her face during her bike ride—riding along in the margins of the hot, wide streets, the back of her wrist swiping across her face as she pedalled, her other hand holding the handlebars steady, her eyes trained on the east, unaware of the makeup spreading along the lines around her eyes.

It must have taken her hours to get to my office. Why ride all that way in the heat just to meet with me? For a moment, the thought of this physical effort made my job feel more important.

The guitar record had finished playing. I sat up straight to listen to what Eilidh had to say.

“I didn’t want to talk about this over the phone or email,” she said. She crossed one leg over the other, resting her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand. Three simultaneous folds.

“This is going to sound weird. I know that. But I just have to start talking, and we can work from there. I have a problem, and it relates to my work, and my research, but it’s also personal. The problem is that I’ve developed an obsession with looking. I’m obsessed with looking,” she said. “I know that’s not very clear, but could we try to start there?”

I moved my chair back a bit, trying to find my bearings, and considering, quickly, where I’d draw the line, and what mark I’d use to say the conversation had gone outside my job description, as it might, if it got too psychological. If things stayed vague, it would be hard to say who the appropriate support person should be. My job was broad enough that I did many things, but for that reason it was important to me to draw clear boundaries where they could be drawn. I’d listen and assess.

She filled my office with the smell of watermelon juice mixed with water. I reached for my glass and drank. Water serves in my windowless office as a surrogate for breeze.

“Okay. Absolutely,” I said. “Maybe to get us started, we can chat a bit about what you mean by ‘obsession.’ And by ‘looking.’ Does that sound like it could be useful?”

“Of course,” she said. “I’ll try to be as open as I can, but I also don’t want to predetermine your thinking about me. Basically, by obsession I mean that I feel unable not to do something.”

“Hmmm. That could be closer to a compulsion, but I think I see what you mean.”

“Maybe,” she said. “Either word is fine with me.”

It was at that moment that I realized that her makeup hadn’t been spread by a careless rub, but instead may very well have been applied deliberately and asymmetrically: a metal-grey streak above one eye, and above the other, a thick, metal-grey, slightly curved line drawn about an eighth of an inch above the lashes, like a pre-plastic-surgery incision mark.

Oh, no, I thought, in a warm rush of anxiety. It couldn’t be that her grey eyelids were some kind of reference to her name’s phonetic pronunciation. Or to her problem with looking. Or both. Could it? I decided to pretend for the time being, even to myself, that the thought hadn’t occurred to me.

“And what kind of ‘looking’ do you mean?” I asked.

“I’m not sure I should name that. Not that I want to make this difficult... I don’t at all, and I’m so grateful for your time... and your professional opinion. I’m grateful that there are supports here, people like you to help us with the complicated jobs we do, as sorry as I am that I’m sure that makes your job complicated too.”

“Well, I’d like to help, if I’m equipped to. Or at least refer

you to someone who can.”

“I don’t mean at all that I want to play games here. But I’m afraid if I tell you too literally what’s happening, it will shape how you see me. It’s not a comment on you, it’s just something I’ve noticed about the way people think about other people. Would it be okay if we just say for the sake of the conversation that I have a compulsion to look over and over at myself in the mirror? It’s not that at all, but it would give us an anchor for the conversation, like a placeholder.”

“Sure,” I said. “Maybe this will help... So far, what I’m hearing is that you’re ready to think through this issue, and about how moving past your preoccupation or compulsion might help you to live and work better. I know you rode all this way up here by bike to see me, so your commitment to moving forward on this is clear.”

I was trying to fill the hole in the middle of our exchange, to make things, at least emotionally, concrete, even if they had to stay opaque on the information-gathering level.

“Oh, the bike ride really isn’t that bad. I don’t mean it isn’t a challenge, but it’s really more the psychology of it than the terrain that takes a bit of taming.”

Can psychology be tamed? Inevitably, it’s something I think about quite a bit, working where I do, and living with my dad as I do. He still thinks about it too, even though he’s retired, and far from the life he lived when he was working. Work was like home for him. Sometimes he still speaks in the assured, intent voice he used to use when talking about his work, when we’re sitting together.

My dad’s interests are encyclopedic, and of course include the history of the Institute itself. It’s natural that brutalism, the architectural school that generated the Institute’s build-

ings from the early 1960s, is another topic he likes to talk about. The name comes from the French word *brut*, or ‘raw,’ referring to raw concrete, the basic material, my dad might begin, during dinner or while we sip tea or wine afterward. But it means more than that too.

The Institute had started as a single, dome-shaped, submarine-like building of poured concrete in the centre of a broad meadow. Specimens of this meadow’s flowers still hang pressed and framed on the concrete halls of the building I work in. The cheerful flowers appeared almost comical to me in the otherwise grim setting, until I saw that they were meant as a serious bit of institutional history. The Institute’s halls look designed, not to cure the haunted mind, as my dad has pointed out, but to confront it through imitation, an aesthetic vision so open to interiority that it verges on daring. The buildings seem to consist only of interior space, even on the outside. Now, just the architecture of its founding era remains, a body unsuited to the new mind it houses, which looks up and out rather than down or in.

The Institute has a new nerve centre: the one contemporary, non-brutalist building, built the same year my dad retired. The new building is tall, airy, and its aqua-coloured glass glints in the sun. Once it was built, the president and other top brass were moved from their concrete towers to the new building’s upper floors. Most of us at the Institute just call it ‘the new building,’ even those of us, like me, who started after it was built. Its actual name is the Innovation in Studies of the Mind Centre—its acronym, the ISM Centre, is an in-joke on campus, among some, as its researchers refract their academic thinking through the lenses of novel isms, from neoliberalism to motivational cognitivism. The glass it’s built of makes it look transparent compared to the box-like

concrete rectangles around it, but the aqua glass is tinted so that you can't see through it past the reflections of clouds and other buildings.

I often hurry to get away from the Institute after work, rushing when I'd rather linger and walk around among the ivy-twined concrete buildings and wild grasses rustling in concrete planters. The staff all leave quickly, because of the security alerts sent out by the Institute's president's office by email: most recently, the reports have described accounts of people being encircled by groups of unknown individuals. There's no good reason to risk staying after sundown.