On November 10th, 1989, in the early morning hours a tiny tadpole poked into your ovum like you would stick a clove into an orange so it would give off a scent of summer and Christmas alike, of home.

When Wanda read this, she smiled. This was, this is, clearly, pathetically, her son. This is him.

You are my mother, you are different from me and we are quite alike. This is how we differ.

You are said to have grown up in another country. Your other Germany, as I learned at school, was a socialist one-party dictatorship marked by its dependence on the soviet union and the eager cooperation of its citizens to spy on each other. That country’s history came to an end just as your life was about to begin, yet I would argue that its story did not end just then, and you would stress that your life never began then because mine did instead. And yes, I recall that you always retracted this incisive remark once your anger had subsided, but it illustrates another characteristic of yours I do not share: You like to complain, while I merely need to.

This is how we compare. Despite all official affirmations we grew up in the same country. Whatever Germany it may have been in my early youth, it was assembled from the same physical pieces, the same people twenty years older, as yours. This is why I can write about you, why I have a right to write about you.

Each one of us is pertinacious in their own way. Mules couldn’t hold a candle to our stubbornness. You are very much, at least while sober, whereas you would meander like a filibuster by the second glass of wine, like that time me and your current boyfriend at the time fell asleep in the lawnchairs we brought to the banks of the Warnow where we used to spend warm summer nights for lack of a garden, straight to the point, as am I. We both were teenage parents. However, you became one by mistake, another thing that sets us apart to be added above. I haven’t seen you in three years, you haven’t seen me in three and a half. The last letter you sent me ended up in the same 100 liter trash bag that would also contain the photos of my relationship with the mother of your grandson by the time I took out the garbage. In the long line of letters that I started to write to you, this may be the one that I’ll finally send. Let me begin again, a comprehensive history of us.

At the onset of dawn, you left the F1 to pass water and smoke, to rest a minute from the Fernstraße still busy with day-trippers, coming and going, veering and honking exuberantly. You ripped through the skins of first frost on the puddles, running for the bushes. Only as you returned to the car you noticed the silence of the animals and the land, listening to the drone of the horns blending into each other. The incessant choir of 3 million voices from FER Ruhla made the earth reverberate and soothed the rush of hormones during my first hours inside you.

You expected trouble to await you. Not only had you been out all night, but also had you lost Katrin, likely resulting in a phone call between parents, and when had that ever helped.

I had always assumed your parents would scream when they were angry. To scream, yell, and rage like you did. Like you would with me many years later, when you would find me outside sitting on the neighbor’s balcony rail, from where I could spot the sea on clear days. The neighboring apartment had been the scene of a crime the news had covered to an extent that we felt it had been us calling the authorities over the smell leaking from under the cracked rubber seal into the corridor. Actually we had only moved in when the horror had ceased to even make the regional columns of the tabloids you didn’t want me to pick up, but the refurbishment the owner of the apartment was willing to afford failed to stop the sepulchral odors and eerie tales from permeating the adjacent walls. The apartment itself repelled me even more than it did the visitors, whom the pitiful owner tried to get interested in the cherry glaze kitchen and the travertine vinyl sheet flooring with increasing desperation. But its balcony, opening up towards the undeveloped plots beyond the main road, with the north-facing unit dark enough to disappear from view behind the reflection in the door on bright days, became my beloved retreat. I had discovered the outlook shutting up Robert, who had dared me to make the jump from our parapet to the neighbor’s. The block’s units were too tightly packed to render leaping between balconies an athletic challenge, though the nine meter drop posed one of a different kind and the rectangular tiles of the siding gave the abyss a foreshortened [word for “dramaticness”]. My head buzzed with adrenaline and my chest hurt from the impact on the rail, having gauged the leap to be further, but the sudden eastern gust as I turned the corner of the balcony and the unobstructed perspective, that felt as if my view had unfolded from academy to cinemascope, sounded a consonance in me that made me forget to double dare Robert and had me return to the block’s bowsprit when I was in need for quiet and solitude. As the only balcony facing north on our floor, it offered a precious calm, rare to find in the complex. Behind the parapet I could sit like a half-hidden sentry overlooking the coming and going on the complex's driveway. As I got older and my light-footed crossings stopped yielding their initial tingle I proceeded to sit on the rail spinning strands of spit to drop on the passersby below. Sometimes you would put up with the detour around the block so you could spot me from the driveway and cause me the embarrassment of having you yell up at me across four floors. Though I think you saw where I was coming from, after all, you appreciated the elusive solitude as much as I did. Then again, you had to make your point, and so you yelled, you screamed, you raged.

I had to discover that your parents were different in that regard. Never did I witness Opa betray his soft-spoken demeanor. He passed on his reclusiveness to both of us, although his genome found an appropriate counterbalance in Oma’s. Opa knew three different jokes, which he immediately told every person he was introduced to, so he could decide that he had proven himself sociable enough to dispense with the need for more than an acknowledging mutter when they would cross paths again. The few times I met him before my 13th birthday, he proceeded with me along the same protocol, and it surprises me that I can only remember one from his repertoire, the one with Honecker and the GENEX delivery person. Being a teenager, I suppose I was deemed beyond jokes, however, he continued to regale me with an abundance of sweets that proved much more harmful than the old chestnuts to my hormone-lined self, and an attention that he rarely bestowed upon anyone else. That time I got upset about his birthday present belying my expectations and told him nobody cared whether he even came around next year, he exercised his punishment through silent indignation and disappointment. His gift was a Canon PowerShot A5, he left me at the kitchen table, confused, remorse welling up inside me.

Oma worked for the VEB Autobahnkombinat and had adjusted her voice to prevail against the constant noise of construction and passing two-stroke engines. You told me she was an intrepid Genossin, driven by genuine dedication to the community, challenging the party with fierce criticism granted to her in exchange for a substantial collection of circumstantial observations regarding her peers. This I remember: Waking up in my bed at Oma’s from the light coming from the kitchen. Finding Oma shaking with sobs at the kitchen table, you watching her, appalled, pressing your back against the built-in fridge. You hugging me before sending me back to sleep, holding me as you rarely did after you had crawled into my bed some thirty minutes later. I remember the images you showed me, trying to explain the gravity of 85,000 secret police agents with 213,344 guns and several hundred tons of records and how Oma was involved with them to a seven-year-old. The morning of the 4th of December 1989 was damp with a sky so thick with clouds that the chimneys of the Stasi’s office complex poured black smoke like an inverted faucet onto the grey shroud. Although the black fumes coming from the teleheated building stirred suspicion here and there, the streets around the brick building stood deserted and bleak. If someone would have put her hand against the umber stone she would have felt the heat radiating from the building, from the basement, from the heart of the apparatus, orange-glowing to the point of busting, fed by five minute shifts of stokers coming in briefs and safety boots and leaving with all body hair burnt clean off their skin. The oven almost burst with the heat of burning paper, gobbling up one file after the other. Maybe it was then that the documents recording Oma’s unofficial collaboration fell victim to the fire. Maybe it was later that day just before the alarmed citizens led by the Women for Change stormed up to the last floor that one of the Stasi officers put her file through his own portable shredder. The black and white picture of the cooled off incinerator vomiting ashes in hangover haunted me as a backdrop of my nightmares to come.

You doubted that Oma could have provided anything beyond mere gossip, since she was anything but a confidant. I think you didn’t want to admit to yourself the importance of well respected informants like her, who turned gossip into ironclad proof in the ears of the responsible officer.

You were hoping they would still be asleep when you walked up to the roughcast house with the cherry windows, that against all odds Katrin had gone through with the old reciprocal sleepover trick, even though she had stolen away without notice when Katrin had gone to line up for the bathroom. I chuckle because your selfish individualism emerged immediately after you had set foot on Federal German soil. But perhaps you weren’t selfish yet and you left Katrin merely because there on that night every person had deserved your undivided dedication, as they welcomed you like a long lost friend and sister. The unreal scenes you steered through, set in a country that to you some weeks ago had amounted to geopolitical ambient noise, for which you had shown neither contempt, interest, nor desire, and that suddenly lay open to be conquered, removed you completely from all context of manners, values, and sex education. At five you were fucking someone, at six you crossed the bright lit border crossing in postcoital sobriety.

The kitchen’s warmth made your glasses fog up, so you only heard Opa repeated interjections of incredulous Neins into the news on DDR Radio 1. Oma had left the house at five as usual, still unwitting, and she would not return before 9 p.m. that day. Your night became the first secret in many years you got to keep.

Katrin kept quiet about her fleeting hours in West Berlin, both of you tacitly assumed a course of events similar to your own for the other. It didn’t require pretense to once more display amazement when you drove to West Berlin with your parents the following Sunday, the same way as you did not need to act shocked rediscovering streetscape dirt and misery starkly lit by the hard light of day. Your discomfiture over your homely garb was equally honest. The Sunday was to remain the only time in the West you would spend with Oma und Opa, and already on the drive back the complementary country had been superseded as a topic by the inner workings of the worker’s state.

Some days later you had dinner at Katrin’s, whose parents let you watch West after the dishes had been dried. Everything in the parlor of Katrin’s family was made to last, the solid wood shelves seemed grown from the hardwood floor aeons ago, hefty cast-iron lusters hung like stalactites from the high ceiling. The furnitures’ promise of crushing or outlasting you made you feel like the small television sitting between heavy monographs, ducking its antenna under the varnished oak. The anchorwoman’s impossible attire bewildered you, as did the serenity, with which she went on about incoming east German shopping tourists as if they were a low moving in over western europe. The Socialist Unity Party of Germany prepared to shed their scorched skin in the upcoming extraordinary party congress. The eastern Mark slumped in value, and you felt a sudden nausea rising from below. You ran to the bathroom as window shopping East Berliners overheard the yuppie reporter announce the impending ruin of their economy to the viewers in his bullish home country. The news of leading western politicians and leading western executives attuning to a frontierism oscillating between solidary and predatory had woken me up in my cells. You retched. Here I was.

A low rasp invades the corny ballad, travelling along the cable of Michaels noise cancelling headphones. Michael likes his beard short and sturdy. It would support a car’s weight, uniform weight distribution provided. Snap out and into the please-exercise-discretion-gap. - Any news about my son’s luggage? - (Ay! There’s a line here!) - My colleague will be with you shortly, sir - replies and adds a count to the “assholes” column of her personal customer satisfaction statistics. Back to leap distance, back to airy piano and pondering the impending indefinite extension of his son’s holiday visit. Neither welcome nor adverse, inconvenient but certainly the more responsible option.

Malignant glances from the front of the line. Further back the limp and dazed from waiting times making the two digit counter over the check-in desk overrun cannot help but smirk at Michael’s chutzpah. The end of the line is out of sight.

This will take a while, Michael, retrieving some mistakenly checked luggage is going to be the least of their worries. He takes out his phone to survey a game Sergej has been wanting to play for days. “Bank Holiday”, Michael skims some reviews, critics raving. The download is within JFK’s Fast-Free-plan.

Michael’s battery dies. His headphones’ keep bracketing his head in a private prayer room. This should have happened earlier, he thinks. Admittedly, he regrets the thought, immediately. Fee had called half an hour ago, suggesting Sergej should stay in New York, seeing that schools would stay closed and air travel is justifiably advised against. Michael promptly got his guard up, hands twitching as the cane comes down, but then realized that he did not have any objections, at least of the kind he could bring up opposite her. You should be happy to spend time with your son.

He is happy, partly because another clerk peeks out from the backroom behind the check in, leaving an object that might as well be the long-awaited luggage next to the door. The employee at the desk looks up at him furtively, just long enough to make it clear that she will decisively not beckon him over but leave it to him to confront the pent-up anger of the line. Excuse me! - Most certainly a teacher, quick to get in between Michael and the counter, authoritative and loud, sure to immortalize her accusal, austere but fair, on the CCTV recordings for potential later review. Naturally any interference from the far side of the check-in desk is not to be expected. With the reach of the air rage videos he is about to become the subject of weighed against the expected waiting time, he grimly trudges towards the end of the line.

The east german airline Interflug was founded on September 18th, 1958. Its matchbox labels in the colors of the imperialist enemy filled Heinrich’s scrapbook and its in-flight-magazine still trusted its readers with the technicalities of turboprop aviation. In December 1959 Heinrich’s father Adam, a pilot for Lufthansa on his part, received a stately letter from his brother, who sent his warmest Christmas wishes (...give my heartfelt thanks to Barbara for the delicious christmas biscuits she sent…), and it wasn’t the mentioning of his freshly estranged first wife that got him upset but rather the audacity of his brother’s handwritten addition to the company logo in the letterhead - fly the original. The eastern of the two Germanies had founded the second Lufthansa about a year after its West German competitor had registered the trademark and quickly found itself in an intellectual property lawsuit that hardly fit the concept of the workers’ and peasants’ state. Ignorant of the juridical cogency of his employer’s case and eager to rebut the characteristic conceit of his brother, Adam requested his own stationary (Deutsche Lufthansa: Safely landing for peasants and nobles alike - a cynical play on the recent crash of Flight 502 that had claimed the life of Archduchess Maria Ileana of Austria-Este) that was granted to him surprisingly swift after he stated his patriotic reason.

Michael has reached the beginning of the waiting line’s guide system.

With the sixties came sheepish preparations for the end of the East German Lufthansa. But even when Adam discovered the Interflug decals for a quick rebranding in case of emergencies, he continued his fierce exchange of letters and stationaries with increasing fury. On September 1st, 1963, Barbara remarried, a doctor of science specializing in the use of nuclear power in aircraft engines (“On a 24 hour non-stop flight, an aircraft with a motor capacity of 50,000 HP would use about 50g of uranium-235”), the East German Lufthansa was liquidated in favor of consolidating all air traffic of the Democratic Republic in the Interflug, and Adam posted his venomous last letter to his brother, wishing him and his Fork-tongued Revisionist Government to hell.

By the first turn of the line, the collective drowsiness has infected Michael, drowning out any residual anger.

By June, 1964, Adam had long made peace with the red and white replacement carrier. Mother ZentrAv, busy putting idle hands and heads to work, had quickly reassigned him as a pilot to the one remaining airline, Interflug. He flew local services, Barth, Heringsdorf, Karl-Marx-Stadt, back in time for dinner with his son, Thursdays with the housekeeper joining to play house. Heinrich had traded his matchbox labels for tickets to the Sputniks, stayed out late, two hours of sleep, took a nap out on the lawn chair after school and woke up twenty hours later in his bed with a barf bucket next to him under the tired eyes of his father, haggard from a night watching his son fall in and out of violent convulsions.

A dog is leashed to the post of the guide system. Michael wonders whether the unattended luggage policy applies to animate baggage, too.

Terezia was fluent in German, Hungarian, Russian, and Greek. She had basic knowledge of French, Spanish and Italian, and managed to pronounce the prewritten English announcements decently enough once she had transcribed their pronunciation into her own elaborate phonetic notation. We are very sorry that our flight because of heavy turbulence rather rough (sic). The pilot on the flight to Conakry was surly and strangely overdimensioned in his build, that it seemed like a cork was jammed into the cabin when he came out of the cockpit. She treated him to a drink. He said he was Adam. She loved him but also the peace of mind their marriage meant for her.

Two more turns to go.

Then, Wanda was born. Adam showered her with gifts, love, and indulgence. In 1979, nine years, seventeen baby teeth, she owned fifteen copies of Interflug’s in-flight coloring book, the twenty-four-piece jigsaw puzzle of an IL-62 cockpit, and a custom-made suitcase covered with every sticker issued since 1958, twelve alone of her favored mermaid design. Having exhausted the company gift shop, Adam brought her dolls from Leningrad, watermelons from Odessa, and premature perfume from Damascus. For her tenth birthday, he asked a colleague to bring an Atari 2600 from Rome. Adam’s brother haunted him even from behind the barrier of silence Adam had erected between them, and as meticulously as his renunciation of his last familial tie to the capitalist elsewhere was documented on custom-printed corporate stationary, regulations were all too clear to grant him any assignment to non-socialist destinations.

Businesswoman in coral blazer, family of five, sinister broker, then Michael.

In the afternoon of November 9th, 1989, a funeral party was heading through persistent drizzle towards the chapel of the Cracauer cemetery. Terezia had hardly known Barbara but had managed to wrap what Adam had told her - life events recited in the manner of maintenance procedures - in emotional prose. Adam had been lying to Terezia, he would have to read the eulogy at sight. He was feeling sick and embarrassed he noticed that his Privileg aftershave barely covered the stench of cold sweat. Not everybody felt as warmly about his presence as Barbara would have (or rather did, remembering his catholic roots), as the scattered groups among the pews confirmed. His successor, professor emeritus (“It is indeed conceivable that our general secretary will mark our nation’s 30th anniversary on an atomic flight around the globe.”), had abandoned his air of sufferance after Adam’s allusion to his earlier research. Adam’s voice trembled but he had made it all the way to Barbara holding Wanda on her first ride with the training wheels off. Barbara slipping her hands off the shoulders of the accelerating child, Wanda panicking as she noticed the missing guidance but keeping her heading, swerving but still going. That’s where he lost it. Adam tried to reestablish contact with the text, to Barbara and Wanda, but his thoughts bounced off of each other like the neutrons in professor emeritus’s reactor cores. Someone was asking a question. Adam didn’t hear, didn’t see - Heinrich, get him out to get some air, right now, immediately. The organist played Bach as Adam watched the exiting mourners pass him.

He will not make the two-hour trip to 181st on an empty battery. $3 is worth the entertainment and he gets a decaf coffee with it. All seats are taken but a socket has gone unnoticed behind a partition wall. The baristas are making a killing with everyone needing a drink (chamomile, mainly) as Michael waits for his phone to gather emergency reserves. He wants to throw on a bib and join them, be part of the thrill of crisis without being seriously affected.

On the train to Harlem, Michael organizes the upcoming weeks. Tomorrow he has a good workday length between breakfast and the inevitable nightshift to finish Monday morning’s blog article, and he intends to make up for the little time spent with Sergej throughout the last week.

On the town, the two of them, starfish shaped itinerary across the city’s map. Though it’s almost certain that his son has never been to of paintball arena, the hope for a reconciliatory esprit de corps as well as the amusing thought of the dismay at Sergej’s first-headshot achievement badge on his return to the old country convinced Michael, when Akash proposed to take the kids tomorrow. The arena is located in a raw warehouse in Queens that would have reminded Michael of teenage Counter-Strike matches on de\_nuke with his friend Juan, had it not been painted with thick layers of neon-coloured rust-proofing paint. This is tomorrow, possibly also next Sunday, provided he can win Sergej over.

Audible rolling of eyes from the local commuters as a busker boards the car, more so when they realize it’s a sax. His speaker cart does nothing to support him as it proceeds to accompany him asthmatically. Who knows why Michael still fumbles for change, probably the musician hit a soft spot with him, and doesn’t the thin voice of the instrument over the subway rumbling sound like the high-pass wood samples of Michael’s workout playlist? When the sax player has finished and passes through the aisle he claims high fives left and right with his bounty - Michael thinks of neutrons and doesn’t know why.

Monday still poses a challenge to be addressed at a later point.

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On the first attempt he misses the keyhole, clumsily dropping the key on the bare hardwood floor, the noise reminding him to buy that doormat for keeping out the sand that sticks around the sidewalks for weeks after the last snow. If sand theft is only half the problem last week’s true crime feature made it sound like, smugglers should look into the streets of uptown New York instead of the banks of the Yangtze river. But it’s not the jangle of the keys that makes Michael go off. Slow down the tempo a moment. As the keys hit the floor, Sergej, being already in a state of utter annoyance in the face of the most recent displays of his father’s shortcomings, reacts with an expression that would be transcribed by linguists as “ | x “, a pipe character - Michael got to know it writing technical documentation and recalls it as a symbol of union - describing the sound of forcefully pulling the tongue back from the incisors, followed by a prolonged voiceless velar fricative, exhaling with a narrowed throat passage as familiar to yogis from the meditational ujjayi breath.

He kicks the door with the explosive force of pent up frustration breaking its way. The lowest door panel breaks from its frame, trapping its assailant for a second, sending him stumbling back into his son. The triangular hole casts a ray of light along the corridor that Sergej follows to his room while his father feigns to examine the damage, furtively scrutinizing his foot, that is starting to complain painfully as the rush of adrenaline is subsiding. Tomorrow morning the Italians downstairs will wake them with the tangy scents of early morning preparations for sunday’s family meal. Michael decides that the door can’t be helped at this point of the evening. If he’s lucky, the orphaned sheet iron next to the building entrance has not yet been picked up. Despite the cries of his second toe, Michael passes the kitchen with the deep sea blue pack of cooling liquid in the freezer, determined to live down the matter the sooner the better. In the guest room, several thousand pieces of Lego, a composite collection from recent christmas presents and Michael’s own childhood sets that he had schlepped from one self-storage to the next both out of parsimony and joyful anticipation of paternal nostalgia, orbit Sergej, who is busying himself prying two-by-four tiles from a plate. Michael joins him among the bricks, scanning the dull pre-millennial plastic dotted with the teal fragments of the statue of liberty, a complicit attempt of his ex-sister-in-law to get Sergej excited about the city. He offers his son a brick separator, but Sergej only hunches deeper over his work, pushing his nails beneath the plates. “Tomorrow we should be going by nine.” The clicking of the uncoupling plastic makes Michael shudder at the thought of tips of fingernails folding up. “It’s gonna take us at least an hour to Ridgewood and I don’t wanna rush.” Another tile detaches. “What do you think?” - “I don’t know” - “Well, we said we would meet them for burgers at 11:30, right? Akash told me you and Patrick wanted to eat before.” - “I guess.” The radiator murmurs and is turnt too high for the only carpeted room. “So then we should get going around nine.” - “Don’t you have to work?” If someone were to touch the trunk of the overwatered beaucarnea in the corner, the bark would yield to reveal the soft, rotten core and the foul smell of the long-gone plant that stoically keeps retaining its composure. “Why should I? Tomorrow’s sunday.” With the yellow light on Michael’s laptop constantly flashing, the compact home office stands strategically placed like a beacon at the center of the apartment, visible from nearly every angle of the other rooms, except from the fridge, again strategically. “Maybe I should go alone, so you can work.” - “What?” - “I should just go alone.” A tile pried loose from Sergej’s labor finishes in the seemingly jumbled tool cart left in the guest room because Michael judged that ten is old enough to be left alone around handsaws. “Is that what you want?” Another tile breaks loose and lands as debris on the english lawn of the rainbow-colored brick house. “Leaving aside the fact that it’s completely beyond dispute that I’ll have you travel across town on your own.” - “Akash and Patrick could pick me up.” - “Are you serious?” With the muffled steps from upstairs resonating on the stairs and fading, the house falls silent. “Or I’ll walk over there. I walked over there before, that’s not an issue.” - “You’re not gonna go alone.” - “You don’t care about it anyway.” - “That’s not true. It’s even my activity. I proposed doing it. Akash and I do it practically every Sunday.” One would think a house would settle, solidify under its own weight until it becomes an indomitable rock. “Well, you don’t care about doing it with me.” - “Is that really what you think?” But then one will notice that it rather resembles a fatigued elastic, barely holding together what is inside its perimeter, crumbling at the slightest strain, like that time beat cops ran down unit after unit of a tenement two blocks east to corner a trickster that turned out to have escaped through the back. “You always make promises. ‘This time we’ll be going here and there’. Always promising, but what have we done so far this time. Nothing.” - “Jesus, is this going to be some grand jury trial? I’m sorry, but I have to work. Do you know how that functions, work? Can you look at me? Do you know where the money for your transatlantic flights comes from? I guess not, because otherwise you would just bite the bullet and enjoy your time even if I can’t offer you some shore-leave-like spree every day.” What has ever permeated concrete or plasterboard walls that was not unpleasant, that was not domestic violence, unwelcome bass or deep-fry stench. These walls are not forever, these walls are barely there. “You don’t even make sense. Don’t find stupid excuses...” - “Hey! Language!” - “...don’t find stupid, stupid, stupid excuses. Don’t blame it on some work that you don’t even need to do. I know how work works, and I’ve never seen anyone always working like you do, and they can take flights and even have a car so they don’t have to take the stupid subway always that takes like a smelly hour to get someplace where you could have been in fifteen minutes with a car.” - “I’m not even gonna comment on that before you’re old enough to understand the economic realities of urban transportation.” - “Don’t distract! Don’t lie!” A fight needs an ample, firm container, a church that resounds forever with the arguments, so that the faintest trace of consonance will resonate eventually. “You think I wouldn’t prefer not having to work while you’re here. I don’t know what kind of twisted expectations you have when you come here. That I have some kind of management or record label that supplies sedan and driver plus ample expenses?” - “Don’t lie! You like it! Don’t lie!” - “Why don’t you apply your standards to your mom…” - “Don’t distract! You know what I think? I think you’re just bad at working. You just take ten times as much time to do something as mom. And don’t tell me I can’t talk about that stuff because I see it in class how long people can take for simple things. You’re like that! You’re like that! What are you doing? You’re not even writing something interesting like mom. From what I’ve seen you basically write manuals for stuff that nobody cares about. And you take so long to do it. I could do it faster than you. I mean, it’s not even your language that you write in. How stupid is that. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!” - “Shut up!” - “Akash lets Patrick help him with his work. And they are doing cool things. They built a website for Patrick. What have you built with me? A stupid statue of liberty? Putting together a stupid lego set? It’s so pathetic!” - “Shut up!”.

These walls hold two. Two bedrooms, doors closed, wrap around a father, here, a son, there. The two eyes of each, crying to a two-part lament from the unvented radiators. The unfamiliar sounds of the other’s sobs could not make them more alien to each other. Their tears filling up the rooms faster than the salt water can drain from under the door, beds floating in shoreless solitude, the father’s rocking with its passenger tossing in despair, beweeping the loss of an umbilical cord that never tied the two in the first place. This father’s fatherhood is merely the promise of it, embedded in his semen, and he needs his son to redeem it. He needs his son to need his father. Creating man made YHWH a parent, needing perpetual proof of loyalty made Him a father.

Michael and Sergej on their respective beds, respectively lost in the fraying half circle of light the sixty watt dome light left on in the living room slips in under the door. Hoarse winds go through their weary windpipes and worn out midriffs. The dining table waits in vain to be set, unlikely that there will be anything beyond sandwiches on the couch. Mucus follows gravity along Michaels pharynx as he sits up again on his bed, the floorboards bray as he shifts his weight to get up. The living room displays callously illuminated mundanity in silence. The footsteps above have not yet returned. Passing the closed door to the guest room, Michael squints to assess whether a light is on.

Sergej has abandoned the dismantlement of the tile floor for an elite police cruiser in endless pursuit of a street sweeper along moonlit berms of his blanket. He hears the water running and Michael handling plates and cutlery. The street sweeper careens down the embankment and makes the turn at Sergej’s knees high-skiing, driver-side low - switch! - now the tracking cruiser skids down the buckling slope, losing its roof brick in the maneuver. “Hey.” The police cruiser sacrifices its fender and tail light as Sergej crashes it into his shin. “You hungry? I made some bread.” - “Akash made pakoras” The scrap from the cruiser now adorns the victorious street sweeper’s roof. “Want to come out?” Sergej’s posture consummately illustrates his indignation. “Let’s not…,” he starts but reconsiders, ”well, if you want to join me, I’m here.” Michael closes the door softly. Two plates of open sandwiches cheese plus pickles slash mustard-topped baloney don’t pose a challenge at this point, judging from his stomach’s soliloquy. His index draws greasy lines on his tablet as he skims what is there to browse. Outside it has started to rain though the weather station shows minus three point six. “Hey. Do you want to try Bank Holiday?” Sergej draws lines into the rubble of the disassembled vehicles’ parts. “Well, if you want to join me, I’m outside.” Over the persistent stillness of the apartment, the boy overhears the maximal sounds of video entertainment leaking from his father’s headphones on the couch as a taunting whisper mocking the frankenstein construction he shoves around the fitted sheets on its eight wheels, his isolation.

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Bank Holiday emerged twenty-seven months ago out of a spell of depression suffered by Maria Teresa de Castro, senior full stack engineer recently laid off after her 9k salary among other things had forced her business on a downswing. Resting against the three-pane-window drawing a bloodless circle on her forehead, de Castro was making efforts to erode the cash mountain the sale of her 2011 hardware wallet, never lost in a three-bedroom whose waste management drew inspiration from her dev-ops pipelines, had yielded with continual orders of room service’s most sumptuous items. The view was dominated by the slate-lined grids of mirrored, non-opening windows that a temporary power outage had deprived of all but the reflections of traffic, the flashing red, green, and yellow lights turning the cityscape into an outsized server room under the dry eyes of Maria Teresa, incapacitated by .3 mg of Triazolam a.k.a. Halcion a.k.a hospitality gift from a Canadian ex-colleague that dropped by when she was on a business visit. She touched the thick glass lightly as if summoning a context menu holding options or some reference at the very least, but nothing did manifest. The increasing pace of her heart rate through her fingertip makes the pane vibrate violently, leading to further anxious tachycardia. She rather goes down to the lobby, falteringly taking one step of the trash-ridden fire escape stairs at a time. The reception desk is crowded with guests of all temper inquiring about the power outage, the bar with those advanced to stage two. A vermillion extension cord hits the carpet just missing her as Maria Teresa steps out from the marquee. Dozens of signal colored cables flung out from the hotel rooms’ windows are swirling streetwards like ticker tape. To the sea! The neatly lined-up generators’ brawling fills the air, a socket breaks the windscreen of the taxi Maria Teresa only just hailed, scouting for another she ducks behind the idle cab, while its driver yells his tonsils red hot up at the vacant windows.

Traffic is dense but the jitney cab’s driver slash benzodiazepine swoon gets her to peripheral blackness in no time. She contemplates calling crass but reasonably diverting Sergio Infante but immediately rejects the idea as she imagines Sergio’s showy enthusiasm at her newest idea for a video game project to blow her money on. The idea demands solitary deliberation, and the fading of horns and combustion engines leaving only the constant murmur of heavy objects in motion sharpens the contours of thoughts and things. She doesn’t even need Sergio this time to make her concepts sound sweeping and pompous, even saying it out loud in her flat voice, making the uncomprehending cabbie ponder booting her out, still would have convinced any business fluent speaker. Her own growing captivation with the game she envisions, simple and epigonic in its basic mechanics, but gradually tying in with the intricate gameplay inherent to the human condition - quote MTC through S. Infante ex post facto - blinds Maria Teresa once more for the outside world, crowding moth-like around the cold neon glow of diesel-run mobile kitchens. Only when the car slows to a stop she reemerges and while they haven’t made it to the sea, she still would have stayed and watched quietly hadn’t they been shooed by the firefighter blocking the street, neck soaked with sweat, behind him an orange surge of wildfire.

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It eludes Michael. His video game library precisely and ostentatiously matching his extensive bilingual library of fine-print prose, he cannot see the exceptionality of Bank Holiday. Sergej is still in his room, it is nearly eleven and while the responsible father on the couch has kept an eye out for a slight shadow emerging, out of obstinateness or consideration he leaves his son be for now. Toothbrush. The game is a regular battle royal title with average graphics plus a handful of supposedly très outré mechanics of character reproduction that Michael hasn’t made it to yet. Players are assigned to one of the five factions contending on the vast map. They can build structures and objects requiring painstakingly realistic construction times, and thanks to centralized asset servers they can add custom made game objects to their world. Tomorrow at nine, leave house. If Sergej is asleep, should he wake him? Deep sleep. Permanent teeth. If anything, the game’s cross-medial integration of sandbox elements in the construction of the factions’ bases slash capitals, whose city limits grow with the number of quote unquote tourists, that visit the virtual metropolises using a public street view clone, is an inventive feat. A colossal subpolar data center encapsulated the North American NST-to-CST copy of the universe constantly growing with new objects and assets created by its inhabitants. Its strategy of rewarding players for their creative modding had been a pillar of Bank Holiday’s success. A mischievous mechanical turk matches Michael in a squad with four minors already embroiled in deafening, ribald polemics. He turns down his teammates and proceeds alone to scout the abandoned shacks he makes out under the moon for weapons and gear. The first shack stands naked, sloppily layed cinder blocks halfway draped in persimmon tarp. Press A. Offsetting the exposed outside, the door opens up to a tender bricolage of minimal means familiar to Michael, replicating the three-bedroom apartments as seen on screen with the faux-silk cloths bought from immigrant street vendors as room dividers. Everything seemed foldable, dismountable, ready to make room for the next object folded out in its place, like parts of a three dimensional sliding puzzle. Onion dice under the bed couch pillow from tonight's dinner. Red eyes in the door frame, Sergej is still awake after all, now turning to head to the bathroom. Michael shows up in the door, he sits on the edge of the bathtub to have Sergej sit on his knee while Michael brushes his teeth for him, but his son’s strained stare ahead frustrates his yearning for reconciliation. He prepares toothbrush and dental floss and hands it to Sergej, who takes what is offered to him wordlessly as he squats on the toilet seat. The mirror starry with toothpaste spots, Michael cleans it, returning the curt goodnight as Sergej brushes past him to bed.

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The boys’ big eyes almost match the cow’s on the other side of the glass as it briefly glances over the backseat trodding along the line of cars. Traffic service warns of livestock on the 278, as if they didn’t know that. Akash is placid as he has been ever since he suffered a juvenile stroke at 32 and successfully battled post-traumatic depression with a terrific therapist or terribly desirable prescription drugs, Michael and him haven’t made it to that stage of intimacy yet. His apoplexy further left him with a bizarre and vaguely germanic accent betraying his family’s Jersey City accent so violently that it made his father white-knuckle his rosary in sheer horror when Akash first opened his mouth in the recovery room. While he is now jokingly cursing the flustered cattle in all the stops of his native dialect, his condition lasted long enough to catalyze the friendship between him and Michael, who, himself having trouble to maneuver his tongue around English phonology, assumed him a fellow countryman and invited him to watch the German cup final on the Fourth of July. He declined with thanks but urged Michael to join him for the fireworks.

Their seatbelts can barely contain Sergej and Patrick bouncing with delight as they crane to follow the efforts of police and Parks and Recreation to wrangle the herd down the Astoria Boulevard exit. The cows move alarmingly close around the glinting RAV4 picked up early this morning from the repair shop to spare Sergej and Michael the unnerving train ride, but Akash just chucklingly grazes the horn like a Beirut taxi driver for an upbeat honk. The boys low themselves hoarse at the passing cattle.

They virtually have the arena to themselves, the MAGA-donning owner sulkily informs them as he hands them their markers. Only semi-automatic under 13. Sergej weighs the rifle in his hands, examining the exotic tool. Michael chuckles at the easy persuasion, steeples his fingertips, no kidding. “Let me show you how to hold it.” But just as he inclines towards his son, Sergej readily hoicks the gun, drawing a bead on his forehead and yells at him to stop. Only a tense beat between them, then Akash tackles him, playfully wrestling Michael to the ground. Imperiously bellowed commands from the reception booth call them to order and give the recruits the rundown: One. Safety first. Adam’s first gun was a Pistole 08, snug and stout by his hip. 1939, worst time to do one’s service, in hindsight. I swear by god this holy oath. Two. Keep your mask on. Heinrich, 1964, knees and back hurting from four hours of guard duty, in a high state of dithery alarm with a live weapon in his hands. Three. No shooting point blank. Wanda almost lost grip of the SKS as Arturo handed her the heavy rifle (1990). She aimed at the flour bags on the fence. The gun weighed as much as a healthy newborn. Four. Open house at the gun club, Michael and four other boys, two girls, who have to endure gibes in plenty, but today everyone gets to shoot. The air gun pellets reminded Michael of the odal banner in the club’s taproom. Five. Don’t be a jerk. Michael would have bet that this would have been it, yet the way his son handles his marker he might have miscalculated.

“Teams!” Four other colleagues, all males, have joined the group. Backstabbing Akash does not even tarry when Sergej and Patrick promptly make out their dads as their primary targets, although Michael had plucked up his courage and confided that he needed some lift in his paternal endeavors. Objections are futile, and so they face their sons amongst the paint-splattered crates and containers of the arena.

The warehouse resounds with the stenographic klack of the markers and the excited squeals of the children and manchildren. Third game, Sergej’s team has to plant a paint bomb at a designated spot in the arena’s center. Forty seconds into the game and Michael awkwardly crawls through the twenty foot shipping container that flanks the bomb spot. “I have so heard it said: / That once came together / in single combat” Michael overhears his colleague from continuous integration directing Sergej and Patrick with the effortless congeniality of someone that has nothing at stake in the conversation and he bursts with envy. “Hildebrand and Hadubrand / between two hosts / Father and son.” Michael peers through the gaps between the door hinges. One target, cyan-spattered black bibendum, four feet and a half thickly wrapped, padded and helmed. “Their fittings they fastened, / Securing their byrnies: / bound their swords on” The player turns his back on Michael. Clear shot. “Over the ring-mail” / “ere they rode to the fighting.” The brain trails the trigger finger and misses considering the target it’s trailing on by a split second. Then wailing and a deep seething regret down below. To cap it all Michael’s CI-colleague as the first one to tend to the crying son. Sergej holds his ear, where an unerring bullet has made out the gap, alas, the dreadful gap between the boy’s helmet and his high-collared protective suit, leaving a comically precise pink coating of his right earlobe, and a shock that lets Sergej forget the allure of the newly discovered war games and has him crying - Oh, come on! - for his mother. Michael takes Sergej from his colleague, holds him, cradling his head while talking to him calmly. Unclear whether his son knows the identity of the gunman, but for the time being he lets himself be carried out into the warm sun adumbrating spring.

They stay for dinner at Akash’s, who prepares Aloo Gobi with his wife Reyna while Michael plays Monopoly Junior with Sergej, Patrick and Reyna’s fourteen-year-old, Naina. Sergej makes hay on navy blue and forgets his miscarried warfare initiation. After dinner, Akash and Naina take their guests on a guided tour of the home they made for themselves in their faction’s headquarters in Bank Holiday. Default furniture items lined up along the wooden walls of the too-spaciously laid out room they attached to their clan leader’s Weasleyesque burrow, plus one crudely modeled custom object Naina proudly introduces as her 12-man-hour effigy of the pseudo-shakti statuette Akash placed on the mantelpiece to forestall tedious inquiries about his origin quickly bore Sergej and with Reyna’s chuckled permission he sits at the upright and for a lack of music improvises on gut and memory an etude over the hammered morse code rendition of tomorrow’s covid infections.

Someone in that brick building on the morning of the 4th December, 1989, held a protective hand over Oma by expediting her file to the incinerator before it could be secured by the clairvoyant citizens rightly anticipating that the Ministry of State Security did not expect the Berlin Wall to be last institution to fall this year, either. The ministry had pursued its goal of omnipresence with increasing efforts and the assistance of more than 100,000 informal informants. Its body however, was constituted by files, and where there’s no body, there’s no crime. I purloined this from the title of your only film that would enjoy an audience beyond the small circle of interested individuals that sparsely populated the venues of the less glamorous sections of the Berlin Film Festival. ”No Body, no Crime” screened as part of a state channel’s series of features commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Fall of the Wall, with an airtime that with a little bit of luck would yield a handful of normal viewers from the ten-o-clock news instead of the evening clerks and insomniacs that typically got to see the work of you and your peers on television. The documentary was also the only feature that I became part of, the first time I witnessed you as what you struggled to be, a filmmaker. Already in the old country you had picked up photography, prompted by a similar gift from Opa that I would later turn down so fastidiously. You on the other hand embraced it enthusiastically, and the historic conditions around the time of my conception called for a multitude of lenses, eyeing the country and its citizens in an uncanny continuity everytime and everywhere. This fact fostered your professionalism at a time when the paved and sealcoated career paths of your generation crumbled within a matter of weeks. Katrin brought you your first paid assignment from one of her frequent sorties to West Berlin that you envied her for even though you knew she could only go because her parents were grappling with sorrows far more serious than the occasional unchaperoned day trip of their eldest. With Katrin as a go-between, you sold two photo series to a Hamburg newspaper for the ludicrous fee of 80 Mark West, which in the light of the rapid inflation of the Ostmark had turned a great deal already two weeks later. The first of the series captured the teenage reality of the worker’s state leading up to the Fall and it led to the task of providing a second series that would bring you to the locus delicti whose corpus you would sleuth out in “No Body, no Crime”.

Rostock is still a town without much allure to the untrained eye, which at the time afforded a backdrop favored by foreign editors avid for footage highlighting the inexorable demise of the eastern economy. The Stasi headquarters were the second largest of the ministry’s regional offices, owing to the largest port of the GDR a quarter-hour drive north it demanded the 3,700 official and 9,300 clandestine service workers that nourished the file-fed body. A quarter-hour-drive south lay the other hub of the state security’s covert activities, where a few days before the shutdown of the local Stasi branch you met a mixed group of citizens already waiting on a neighboring property. Your gregariousness availed in your new identity as a photojournalist and quickly brought you to the various grassroots movements that bloomed that winter. The assembly that greeted you warmly that morning with christmas cookies a woman was passing out from a paper bag, belonged to one of the more established movements, the Rostock branch of the New Forum. At the time, the fear of persecution still loomed high among the activists, yet the number of people that had come that day suggested a confidence in the possibility of change unimaginable prior to the end of the Wall. Without any clear signal or leadership the crowd started to move along the oak-lined jointed plain road. The shared feeling of righteousness presented only a small relief to the palpable tension accompanying the citizens as they walked up to the chain-linked gate. A bullet-shaped woman in a fur unexpectedly took your hand in silence when you came to a hold by the fence. “IMES Import Export”, you read, and a sudden pang in your lower abdomen made your knees give way for an instant. Your fur-trimmed guardian rushed to support you but before she got to comfort you further, your attention was diverted to the opening gate of the premises. The spreading uncertainty in the political entities of the republic had deprived the young watch officers of the tenacity to refuse entrance to the majority of the crowd including you, who had come without an official appointment to visit the facility. Without the guards and the CCTV cameras in plenty, the compound most likely would have never become a subject of murmurs and suspicions, a depot made up of a few corrugated iron warehouses and containers, advantageously connected by road and by rail to the near harbor. Two boyish watch officers in fur caps looked on sternly and tired as the group advanced to the first and largest of the warehouses. You stepped into the store in clueless awe and walked along the columns of identically stacked euro-pallets loaded with olive-green fruit-crate-sized boxes marked with Xs and circles of white paint or tape like tic-tac-toe. Remembering your primary reason for being there you took to your camera to capture the walls of ceiling-high stacks dwarfing the dumbstruck citizens in front of them. A handsome man with a handlebar mustache was shaken by sobs as he had quickly grasped an actuality that slowly spread from the vanguard to the last stragglers of the group. You shot a picture of one of the green boxes that had just been opened, capturing the prosaic violence of unordered pistols and loose clips up to the brim. The import of the discovery escaped you at first, it was me that realized the evidence's gravity and so I pulled you down once again, with full force this time, without giving you the chance to rush out. As you vomited behind another of the endless rows of pallets, the lady in fur again came to your relief. I didn’t leave you until you had understood that the weapons stockpiled in various states of disassembly were the final testament to your country’s duplicity. “Child! You’re pregnant, you know that, right?” Dazed you looked up at the sorrowful face of the lady, puffy with the clash of the cold December air and adrenaline-fueled hypertension, moved rather by your wretchedness than the thought of her government’s arms trading so avariscious it would have sold hand grenades to coconut shy stalls as long as they paid hard forex for it. She proceeded to give you the rundown of pregnancy weeks one to twelve while you continued to stare at her blankly and New Forum members and warehouse officers bustled about sampling further crates and boxes, examining way bills and customs labels to plot trade routes and polity-spanning ties that the Vökerfreundschaft had failed at creating. Provided the woman in fur was right, fatherhood could doubtlessly be traced back to the man only hazily recalled as short and dark-haired under an orange light shining in from a streetlight onto the bed you had shared that morning. You put your hands on the layers of cotton and wool over your belly and I nodded inside.

Your idea of starting a film about our family’s involvement in the late state’s surveillance apparatus was to enter my room one day shortly before my fifteenth birthday without a word of explanation, camera already running. To my surprise, my rather rudely delivered opposition was not the topic of discussion later at dinner, instead, you placed your Video8 camcorder alongside the bowl of pasta in front of me. You told me that to start shooting whatever and whenever I wanted, no exceptions, for the length of the weekend, and that you would keep me supplied with tapes in case I ran out. I’m sure that you had had your expectations going into the experiment, but you never disclosed them to me, although you seemed to be ready to have your highly pubescent film you changing, since you made a point of not locking doors even once, which was otherwise common practice around the apartment. No idea lay further, with my steady supply of nudie mags from Robert, who worked at a newsstand whose owner let him get away with filching porn or candy as long as he didn’t start complaining about his measly wage, I was beyond the need for awkward voyeurism. If I remember correctly, my only question was whether I would get to keep the material I shot, you affirmed, and if I could have a TV in my room, you denied, however you held out the prospect of reopening the discussion on viewing limitations. The camcorder was a precious instrument and although you owned further equipment you must have swallowed serious concerns allowing me to take the camera out of the apartment, just for the sheer value of it, which amounted to more than our household’s monthly gross income, including the two presumably untaxed fifties the permed lady handed me in a cold-smoked envelope at the end of the month for delivering admail.

Our neighborhood was working class but our streets were not nearly as tough as I made it sound to my bourgeois friends at college, who imagined me growing up on the sunflower block that had been torched by white supremacist neighbors when I was a baby, though I didn’t so much as catch a whiff of smoke as Lichtenhagen lay far across town. Robert waited by the elevator in mismatched double denim, sporting a jacket similar to the one I am wearing as I am writing this, the one I coveted in vain at the time because good luck asking you 200 euro for clothes. As the elevator door opened between us, he jumped past me to smack his beefy left across the story buttons, giggling with too much levity for our pubescent indifference. He ran to the milk glass doors to mockingly court me, but as he spotted the camera he had missed me holding up to then, he passed over the usual slamming of the door so I had to jump to dodge the heavy leaf and caught up with me, eyes wide with excitement. He knew exactly what to do with it, he told me while I was busy to keep his hands off the dull plastic, lifting the camera over my head so that stubby, brawny Robert was skipping alongside me in trying to snatch it from my outstretched overgrown arms. As he intonated the Zoom song from a recent Mazda commercial, I was uncertain whether his chant should provide me a clue to what he had in mind, listening to Robert was like his continuous switching back and forth through the innumerable channels of his sat receiver. The sat receiver was another of my obsessions, my frequent boredom watching at Robert’s notwithstanding, but I suppose you renounce the the luxury of two-hundred-plus rebranded outlooks on the world to this day, moreover a satellite dish would have compelled you to finally clean the balcony, though presumably that task would have fallen in my domain.

Dismissing any past development of the terrain, the newly drawn property borders had severed pieces of land all over the city. The rudiments still clung to the surface they had once belonged to, but a ruler-straight edge of weeds and improbable angles of parking space demarcation too jagged even for the improbably shaped east German cars to fit into, indicated where the planners had cut corners. Most of the rudiments were dead space, shedded cells of the municipality between the adjacent lots. However, some had encapsulated the artifacts of their heyday that had become irrelevant in a matter of weeks just as they had. The dead cell we were steering towards housed a black, spray-painted Trabant 600 universal that, to everyone’s surprise, continued to start and run as far as the limited expanse of the rudiment allowed for a joyride. The spot was deserted, which suited Robert’s plan of shooting in the hours before the foreign children returned from extensive Sunday family meals. By the time we had reached the rudiment, I had let him have the camera, relenting, but more so making clear that it would be me in front of the camera. Stubby, ugly Robert could be the balding, gold-rimmed director bossing everyone around with his barely-accepted, eye-roll-inducing authority. I’d be the star, not to forget executive producer for providing valuable equipment. “Break the camera and I’ll kill you!” is the first sentence you hear me saying on the roll and it sets the tone for ten minutes of material that, despite becoming increasingly forbearing with my younger self, is almost impossible to watch.

“Break the camera and I’ll kill you!” “Calm your tits! I got this.” “You ready?” Cut. Off screen a clattering engine revs and stalls, an A-pillar jumps on-screen, my cursing face following, eventually replaced by Robert’s reflection in the rear window, peeking over the camera placed on a makeshift shopping cart camera dolly, ranting. “Stop! Stop! You’re off screen, moron!” An unintelligible response, surely swearing, coming from the driver seat. Cut. A heave-ho groan of physical effort setting the eponymous 600 kilo in motion, slowly the open driver window comes into view, with me in its center, awkwardly staring into the camera, trademark-grim, not-to-fuck-with, waiting until the car comes to a halt. “I rap like a degenerate, unanimously scorned by janitors and senators, generously honor lesser enemies with tinnitus, batter your head in the crack of the door like Joe LaMotta.” Cut. A shot through the windshield sticky with pollen. I remember Robert lying on the roof of the car for his cadrage. He easily could have leaned over the hood, but insisted on proning on the plastic hardtop like a David Attenborough of the asphalt jungle. ”Do not cheap out on the gory details, i will e-trade your flea brain on ebay/Customers appreciate special deals same day delivery every weekday become a powerseller on your organs and entrails.“ The youth clubs were just about to catch on to the trend, venturous media education students that would have otherwise been broken immediately by our sneering disobedience got away with their embarrassing icebreakers thanks to their mobile recording equipment they had brought from their universities. With my love of words, I had felt closeted up to the moment when rap disjoined words from poem analyses, sonnets. Words weren’t anymore bound to be scribbled dyslexic on ruled paper but could be fired off like a handgun, hammering glottis, cutting incisors, mauling tongue, so much potential in the destructive force of them. Destroying was the point in all of it for me, I wanted to destroy the lanky undergrad behind the mixer console with his two symmetric moles like dials on his temples, as if he could be attuned to have him fit meekly into any environment, have his head explode like in Scanners. Mainly though, I wanted to destroy myself, take the scrappy construction, tackle every loose end, and tear it apart. I wanted to preempt every disparaging remark, retreat, but like a boxer only to come back aggressively, snapping and spitting that the plexiglass window of our plywood recording booth would fog up. Your working class romanticism, I ripped it up, there was nothing noble about being poor and you hadn’t chosen being so, either. One could be a penniless imbecile and a petty criminal but you would only have eyes for the thorny crown of martyrdom, so did my teachers, the in-tune undergrad, the school board. As martyr, I never reaped anger but only disappointment, the most demeaning of responses, because it chains you in servitude, never active, doomed to comply. The ones who understood I was trash were usually of my own age, and they made sure that I would not miss that fact, either, when I crossed them in the clinical mall corridors, heavily accessorized teenagers in metallic pants, indifferently dragging their brand backpacks by a shoulder strap and a cloud of generously applied aftershave behind them. I wish I could feel more sorry about depicting you as an alcoholic, negligent mother, but the same way as you had your honorably impoverished persona to exploit, I fashioned my part from the dregs, cosily inhabiting the role of the lowest person imaginable, tainted to the roots, besmearing even rap’s holy image of the own mother. “That’s my mother in the trunk, screamin in morse code, she hoes around to gather (a)nother dollar for another bottl(e) o(f) vodka.” Cut. Robert must have been crouching in the footwell. A shot turnt out quite well, me looking ahead as if driving while delivering my rimes, from below, the unconscious hoe’s perspective from the back seat, I’m sure that or something along these lines had been the idea. MTV had etched its narrative blueprints into our screenplay. “Cut! Again!” “Just go, we’re still rolling.” Aside from all post-hoc embarrassment I do find the lingo we insisted on terribly endearing. “That’s my mother in the trunk, screamin in morse code, you hoe, I would sue you but you’re plain ass broke, getting dizzy with the flow, throw up, and blow me.” And so on.

Thinking back, I am realizing that you must have been excited for my contribution to “No Body, No Crime”, because I couldn’t even finish Rostock versus ManU, Champions League final, me on the right wing scoring two goals in the first half, before you burst into my room and yanked the console’s power plug from the socket halfway throughout stoppage time. I guess you had gone straight to your editing booth when you came home from Bogart’s, the dive where you worked the early afternoon rummy shift, the reliable alcoholics made you cheerful while early arriving students depressed you. I hadn’t been thinking of whatever the northern sun had burnt into celluloid that day in conjunction with you, but there you were, hissing at me to pack my dopp kit, then storming into my room, throwing a change of clothes into a tote with such anger that I heard the soft impact from the bathroom. You didn’t talk to me, however I understood from the brisk call you made that I would be staying with Lule, my temp dad as of 2003. The bus schedule let you know that the next service wouldn’t arrive before 19:32 with an apologizing bow of its post. The glass of the stop’s shelter was also broken, which was perhaps for the best, seeing that you only just escaped the apartment without breaking china. A party was collectively joining in a popular schlager somewhere in the adjoining block’s annex. The bus came and I took a seat in the shade of a beach tripper’s inflatable palm tree.

Lule’s sofa smelled of Egon, his goldendoodle, who was listening to his master noodling etudes on the viola da gamba. After finishing his practice, Lule was coming by the guest room and stood in the doorframe. “You know, she loves you very much,” but I pretended not to hear him through my earbuds because I had heard him saying it a million times.

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“Impossible.” Oma was pushing herself up from the kitchen chair under the load of a ten hour workday of which no one knew whether it would be paid, like you had already had the lengthy discussion that should follow. She opened the wall cupboard holding mugs and glasses as if to pour herself a drink of a hard liquor they never kept in the house. Opening a door offers little as anger’s sparring partner. “Wanda! What are you? A complete mutt?” she bellowed into the cabinet, startling crystal and porcelain, “On some ongoing blackout like half the country?” Your mother had the curious idiosyncrasy of inverting the dramaturgy of a discussion, starting screaming, becoming more silent as the conversation dragged on. “You tell me, Mädchen.” There had been two options of tackling the conversation. Option number one, the desperate, rub soapy water in your eyes, ruffle your hair, and hope for forgiveness through pity. But already under normal conditions Oma was not particularly susceptible to this strategy and recently she had been all too busy herself keeping her eyes dry. “I have a hundred workers on strike and I’m lucky if I can find even two with the same ideas for the future, I’d like to go on strike myself but I can’t, because there is simply nobody that would answer to it. I spent half my day today trying to find a single party responsible that is not temporarily suspended or busy packing her household in Wandlitz. Who knows what’ll happen to me. They’d be stupid to sideline one of the few that is actually in the position to mediate but I’ve seen those faces. Some people are out for bedlam. I guess I have to ask you.” Option number two, the audacious, apply kohl, clench a candle stump under the table to compress all your eventual feelings into. “You’re under twelve weeks?” This was Opa, tranquil in tone, his calm was unpierceable, as were his rulings. “What are you suggesting?” “You know all too well what your father is suggesting. And if you had any brains left in you, you would have come up with that number well before us. This is the worst time for having a baby, not just because of your age, even though you keep testifying to your immaturity.” “We’ll fix an appointment with Dr. Virchow.” “Who did it?” As she fixated you, trembling, head cocked like an attentive crow, you realized that despite the predictability of the question, you weren’t prepared for it. He had played such a minor role in this, a spark of ignition, nothing more, that you barely remembered his face. “I don’t know.” “What do you mean? This isn’t Christmas, you don’t just become pregnant on your own.” “There are possibilities.” Incredulousness. “I didn’t even know you were sexually active.” She had arrived at room volume and suddenly, terrified, you realized that no sneeze was coming but that she was sobbing, crying for the first time that you witnessed it. The candle was turning soft and sticky in your fist.

I do not understand what it was that eroded the ties between you and your parents. Were you so revolted by Oma’s dismay at your estrangement, that she expected in all seriousness that you would confide in her, whose auditing inquiry about your sex education lessons in eighth grade had been the maximal intimacy she would allow on these topics. Was it your parents’ insistent suggesting of an abortion? I doubt it, you never struck me as pro life. Help me, mom, I’m at a loss here, because while I did perceive the staleness of the two deadlocked characters, I won’t let you off believing that you did not feel their appreciation, their love in the sense of the German word Liebe, stirring subsurface, knottily adnate and scarcely glamorous.

The three of you made it through the night, and the next day, and the following night. You were about to leave for school when Oma called you back. She and Opa were seated oddly on one side of the square kitchen table like a squished delegation. The delegation announced that an appointment was scheduled for Thursday with Dr. Virchow and that he would perform the intervention with discretion and priority. They established further that your unwelcome pregnancy had been merely the most blatant of discords. “It is obvious that this house has been becoming too small for us. It’s like three sleepwalkers in a single bed.” Not supposed to be funny. Arrangements had been made, a one room apartment five minutes from your parents was at your disposal.

January was arriving with a key in its hand. The second was foggy, and by the time Oma and Opa had left after bringing by the last load of furniture, the air was dense with moisture and the steeple marking your old neighborhood had disappeared in the haze. But perhaps you were looking in the wrong direction. You jumped onto the bare mattress still unfolding, cool and new. You rolled into a ball, trying to get your ear as close as possible to where you suspected my uterine abode, but only your empty stomach made itself noticeable. You prepared a less than delicious calf’s liver on the unfamiliar stove and relished every bite of it. You, singular, turning, fuck them, plural.

You picked the coldest day of the year to hitchhike to Suhl. A dissident small-time crook distantly related to Katrin sold B-stock mopeds off the books and motorized you could make it to Lübeck in two and a half hours and in another hour even to Hamburg. The Schwalbe was an adorable reject dipped in tropical anti-rust paint with a bumpy topcoat like the peel of an orange but it barely made 55. To traverse your country along its entire length would take you about ten hours, no rest, no gas, no repairs, and after an hour of curl ruffling freedom winding along regional streets you started to do the math. Entering Weimar, the engine started to smoke heavily that a passing couple at a street light snarled at her to get out of the historic city center. You ground the sunset motorbike until it surrendered on the northern outskirts of the city. The engine spit dark smoke and squirted oil and cooling fluid like sad table fireworks and while you were seeking a safe distance to the bike braced unsteadily on its flimsy stand, people started to crowd around the hissing display. They came over from a lone five story housing block placed in the wasteland of the Thuringian granary, dull and shadeless as the city planners imagined the homelands of the complex’s inhabitants. I don’t suppose you were not scared, even though the group of dark skinned men didn’t pay any attention to you. Another man arriving with a toolbox made you approach the loudly arguing bunch. Without preamble, a young bystander elegantly dressed in cheap polyester clothes told you that Moisés with the hands of a clocksmith was the wizard of agricultural engines, and that he would repair your Simson in no time. Indeed, the small, elderly man was deftly operating on the moped at remarkable speed, commenting on every layer of the engine’s insides he unveiled with expressive humming through his lips clasping an ear of rye. Out of misdirected politeness you bit back your curiosity and didn’t ask the Mozambican so-called guest workers who they were and what they were doing here. Even as one of the few arriving women invited you to join the family for a snack in the residence “Freundschaft” provided by the employing VEB Weimar-Werk, you maintained your timid gratitude. The Madgermane woman however, she introduced herself as Akeelah, was anything but shy and volunteered her view on the state of the country in between forcing mashed potatoes into her youngest son and keeping the older twins from kicking their shins blue under the table. Her diplomat’s objectiveness only surprised at first glance, considering the isolation of her and her peers that was suspended at most during meticulously organized field trips of the workforce. Her tired eyes gave testimony to her account of the labor conflicts fought on the back of the foreign contract workers, who couldn’t afford risking the employment that was the only legal basis of their residence permit. Not only because of her own disadvantage, her views of the German colleagues’ struggle were dim. “They complain too much.” This, however, made you start carefully raising objections, but Akeelah interrupted: “I come from a family of violence. My father hit me until he died when I was fifteen. I was complaining, you bet I was. I hated him. Even years after he had died I was still so angry that I would trample the flowers my mother put on his grave after every single one of her visits. Then I had them,” she was pointing to the twins, “and I started hitting them as he had hit me.” She was looking at you suggestively. “Crushing his floral memory had given me satisfaction, but it was naive to believe that that would be enough. What beats in him, beats in me, and therefore I need to put my greatest effort into understanding what makes him move, as despicable as it may be. Even when I felt my father as splitting wood on my back, the hitting cane still connects to a brain, a soul that flew into mine. And when I understood that, and I followed that lead, I stopped hitting my children. Didn’t I?” The children remained stuck for an affirmation. The expectation that your fellow citizens would stop to trace the state’s mismanagement, corruption, and human rights violations back to the atomic decisions they consisted of seemed exaggerated to you, especially given the increasingly professional counseling by West German politics that was influencing the process of national self-discovery. Counseling that seemed to favor expensive snake oil rather than evenly-suspended attention. Before you got a chance to answer Akeelah, Moisés entered the communal kitchen. “Motorgirl! It purrs!” he cleaned his mucky hands on a communal kitchen towel. “Where are you going?” “I need to get to Rostock.” A woman at one of the stoves not much older than her clucked her tongue and Moisés broke into laughter. “Well even if you might survive that, your vehicle sure won’t. Come on, I’ll take you.” You looked at Akeelah but she was busy with separating the twins. The woman at the stove caught your glance, blurting out to your embarrassment “Don’t be afraid of Moisés, he’s a good man.” Moisés smirked, already with the ear between his lips.

Moisés’ Barkas was ramshackle but it barely made the lower speed limit for the Autobahn. A portable radio occupied a third of your legroom and blared Schlager music in the time between valleys to which Moisés sang along, sometimes following the lyrics, sometimes improvising in Makua and Portuguese. For the first three hours, you did not so much have a conversation as you were rather shooting odd questions and answers at each other. When he suddenly looked over at you intensely, the thought of rape assailed you, but Moisés merely went on to remark, “You shouldn’t be riding that motorcycle in your state?” You were candidly clueless, “What do you mean, my state?” He pointed to your belly, even flatter than two months ago under the three layers of protection against the winter airflows. “How do you know?” “The lord endowed me with more than one gift.” An inert insect splattered on the windshield like a paint bomb on the wall. Moisés ad libbed a Portuguese line to the resurfacing song on the radio before the static inundated the music once more. “This is not a time for bringing a child into the world.” Generously overhearing his statement, you studied the title of the West German magazine in the door pocket. The topless woman advertising a health related story was effortless pornography, convenient as the West. “There was a tree in my village, it yielded the reddest, most succulent pomegranates you could imagine.” I reckon you had not heard of such strange fruit in your whole life, let alone seen or tasted it. “Every year it unfailingly bore the fruit that made the village grow in size and strength. Until one day, RENAMO came to the village and killed every one of its inhabitants but for one to tell the story. And the one surviving sat under the Pomegranate tree and cried a whole winter long through early summer. And when he stopped and dried his eyes and looked up at the sky through the leaves of his shade, he realized that also the tree had been mourning with him, and not a single fruit was growing on its branches.” He continued to nod approving his own tale. “What a bunch of bullshit!” You were more surprised than Moisés by your impulsive answer. “I’m not a tree. I’m not a blossom. I am perfectly capable of raising a child. Let me tell you a story. There was a woman, and she became pregnant, and she was riding her motorcycle through the ruins of Berlin while bombs fell around her, and she awaited the end of the war in an orchard so full of apples that she bore a child with cheeks like a Red Delicious. And that woman was my grandmother.” Moisés was smiling at your truish story but didn’t respond. On the crest of the hill he resumed his intermittent song.

If you gave your Schwalbe a couple of hours to cool off, you could make it to a Western city and back in a day. By February, these trips had become more than an odd school day skipped because you couldn’t take your civics teacher’s voice close to tears tackling time and again the curricular social formation: base and superstructure but always diverting to the booming triumvirate Kohl-Genscher-Waigel that was “marauding through our lands buying souls for glass beads.” You stuck around until late Mondays through Wednesdays since your school’s English teacher finally on a tear was offering afternoon crash courses in his long tsk-tsked language. English came in handy during your trips across the border. Your second hand press contact that had bought your first photo essays had referred you to a colleague stationed in Hamburg. Real coffee waited for you at the cafe close to the Spiegel tower. Women moving their shoulders like seesaws under silk blouses, their shoulder angels slumped into the lush pads of their jackets. Someone was making an ostentatious phone call from one of the corner booths and gave you an android wink as you passed him on your way to change your tampon after the ride.\* This is something that I noted first hand, even though I understood it only much later. He had a very clear idea of how he wanted to be seen, what he wanted to portray. It was beyond question that he, as a modern man, would have any problem empathizing with a woman menstruating, even if she was pregnant. The low-cut beats from the hidden speakers in the bathroom made you more nervous than you already were. You had been over-punctual but Paul had come even earlier to feel exceptional doing cocaine to the piercing claps in the bathroom. “These pictures are stunningly raw. Eye-opening.” You weren’t used to this abundance of display goods in a person’s face. Although he’d just cut it severely with his credit card in the bathroom, the attention he gave you seemed greater than any you had ever received by a single individual. “Okay.” His German was better than your English, though not for much longer. He made a point ordering you a sandwich with ham and mayonnaise and gracefully crooned umlauts, french and english loanwords. “Go check out how they prepare it, while I look through these.” Victuals without bellybuttons. Crustless bread was indeed a novelty to you, as were the matt bakelite moulds compressing the dish like a car door. When the barkeeper walked past you with the sandwiches you followed her back to your table. “You should really come to New York. People would love your way of seeing things.” “You think so?” “Sure I do.” A drop of mayonnaise had made it onto his crotch and he proceeded to rub fiercely on the stain with his seltzer-dipped napkin. “The picture desk asked me to nudge you to capture the protests, but to be honest, I feel like your independent work is much more valuable in conveying your way of life. I feel like your talent would be wasted if I’d put you on the next Monday demonstration. You understand. I do not think that you are not capable of capturing the protests. I don’t think that you cannot do that. If you get the chance, though, of threading the protests into one of your series, that’d be something that I’d love to see and would also make the picture desk very happy. I guess Leipzig is a little far but Berlin doesn’t take you too long, right? Otherwise there’ll be something in Rostock, too, I guess.” He kept rubbing while he continued his briefing until the napkin was reduced to shreds. “I can do that. Monday might be difficult because of school, but I could skip it once.” As soon as you had started talking, he had resumed his flirtatious, twitching gaze into the black depths of your pupils. When you signed the paperwork with his heavy rollerball bearing his name and position engraved, he suddenly put his hand on your arm. “Do me a favor and don’t sell yourself cheap, will you? You have a real gift there. A beautiful eye, beautiful.” His voice almost broke and I would say he held on to your wrist uncomfortably long, but you were too taken by his words pronounced in honest English from the heart, a place only a mother tongue can access. Parting, he gave you a kiss on the cheek and five Mark for a long distance call. All lines east were busy, so you toured a supermarket for a souvenir instead, buying cans of soft drinks that turned explosive and then stale on your ride home, but you wouldn’t even notice it, bubbling, in love.

Like everything else, the language of your country faced the need to match the competition. Paul’s correspondent friends chained words she knew in familiar sequences. They rolled their Rs and hacked CHs into crude stops, but you had heard that on your Russian summer camp friends as well. In the fluctuating group of different nationals, though, your language changed on a subtler level. The more they were wrapping characters and topics the more your language became flexible. It lithely embraced the concept of freelance journalism as it was explained to you by an Italian news photographer. It coated the arguments for and against Namibian independence. The softening made it adaptive and customizable, but also slippery and less reliable. Kohl’s promise of individual happiness would draw imperceptibly over whatever the citizen of the Democratic Republic would call so. When you talked to your parents, which you did only once a week when you exchanged sullen coffee for your alimony, the conversations died or spiraled into dispute for the lack of solid words to set the coffee service on.

You were receiving many compliments in those days. You shouldn’t have taken them seriously.

Lule was your usual type and complimented the hell out of you, years later, when you met him at an opening while I spent the night at Robert’s. He turned out to become my favorite temp dad, in retrospect. Lule looked and smelt of hard labor, bodily drudgery in a beautiful way, like a last poetic image of a Lewis Hine portrait, bright eyes so bright only for the grime of work around it. He wore an impressive, though largely ungroomed full beard already before fashion proved him right, and like with many of his conspicuously masculine traits it developed rather incidentally than out of conviction of a certain role model. In case of the beard, Lule merely hid his ungainly receding chin. When I stayed over at his place for the first time, he set a bottle of beer and two glasses on the table between us, yet I am convinced that he did so not with the idea in mind of becoming the father figure that get the son the first taste of beer, fish blood, and bought pussy that I must be in need of so desperately, but plainly because that’s what he used to do after work, a glass for the guest owed to good manners. He wasn’t uncomfortable but didn’t have a clue of what to do with a just turnt teenager. He asked me about girls and came to his own answer immediately, realizing that if there was anything to tell I probably wouldn’t tell him, and that he wouldn’t have, either, when he was my age. To answer his question belatedly, there was nothing worth telling, apart from weekly shifting crushes, that had haunted my pre-teens all the same, but now with the physical implications of whatever was supposed to evolve from them taking shape, had exposed a previously unknown form of longing. You had never tried to hide sex from me, neither the concept of it, nor your own, acts included. Sometimes when I couldn’t sleep and walked in on you and somebody in the midst of it, you calmed me and then continued with me falling asleep on the rocking surface. Some people find that sick, at least I impute it to them. I instinctively omitted these details from the horror stories of parents fucking I told at school.

I remember that on this first night alone at his place I watched Lule pour beer painstakingly slow by the light of a multiply overrun candle stub, how stunningly beautiful I found him then, and how I panicky imagined sex with him in order to be revolted by the imagination of it and prove my own desired heterosexuality to myself. Although I had heard the rap about how he would understand and tolerate me disliking him and the role he occupied in my life from other temp dads before, I didn’t take it as the ignorant proposal of a convenient nonaggression pact I previously had, because I felt like he wanted to get to know me. Only recently did I realize that I ascribed a kind of fluidity to him only because he displayed traits that I had rigidly considered unmanly. He might have been a macho with a manic depression. With my mouth open, coated with the hoppy taste I wasn’t yet used to, I was staring at the sword and the flail that hung on the wall behind him. Having read my gaze, he asked me if I wanted to hold them. The heavy head dangling made me wonder if anyone had ever used a weapon like this, or whether it was merely a symbolic tool, like a medieval pictogram for violence. “You could kill me right now”, he remarked. It weirded me out.

As the first elections of the budding free democracy drew closer, you hardly made it to class at all. Too numerous were the opportunities to catch yet another campaign rally of even the most obscure candidates, which put another blue one in our pocket and, at least of equal value, another opportunity to lean over a table of prints shoulder to shoulder with Paul. He was leading you on, giving you the eye on Monday only to stand you up on Saturday, but who am I to blame you for not noticing. You didn’t know what was yet to come. Still, I wonder why you chose to become so dependent on him, after all, you did socialize with other photographers after getting over your initial indignation with your colleagues pushing in front of you as soon as some jovial West-German party patron took the podium. One photographer taught you to wait until the hit-and-run colleagues supplying tabloids and dailies had cleared off while tending to the generous, tropically embellished buffets that were commonly provided and only sloppily guarded. She was on an assignment that caused you great envy, hired to follow the mischievous frontrunner of the East-German social democrats, an impostor, as it turned out, his biography downright anecdotal. She was paid to accompany her subject to Moscow, hotel, flight included, while Paul didn’t even offer chipping in for national train fares. Before catering emerged as an option, you packed brown bread in wax paper. The photographer passed over your snappish attitude as if she had no time to lose in handing on her experience to you, who didn’t ask for it, but seemed and was obviously in need of counsel. Unwanted was also her advice to for god’s sake not run off to wherever, because this country was as much in need of you as it presented a vast array of possibilities to you. Paul in the meantime, had different ideas. The time he deigned to remain with you after business had been settled, he filled with monologous descriptions of the splendor of his home city, its vivid art and photography scene, and the opportunities he scented, a young quasi-post-socialist like you would encounter there. There wasn’t so much as a competition between the two positions, at least in your mind, where you were already wandering along a constantly repeating strip of urban canyon you had seen in a picture. Already that single insight into North America seemed to contain more possibilities than your reality at the time in its entirety, although that feeling may have been the result of the America in the picture spelling out the opportunities for you on billboards and marquees. Your world on the other hand was marked by prospects dissolving in the uncertainty of diplomas, institutions and currencies. Karin and most of your other friends had begun to annoy you as soon as you had broadened your perspective through the viewfinder, and Oma and Opa were necessary evils. You were easy to uproot and you didn’t care because your anchor point had shifted to more or less join your center of gravity. Slowly, you were turning more spherical every day, the perfect shape, and with me, your motor scooter and more money always at hand you were more mobile than you had ever dreamed of being.

The root of our family as I knew it was Adam. Airborne Adam, you had volunteered fragments of his story one time or two, an utter fascist until suddenly he was not, or at least he did well enough at convincing that he wasn’t and had never truly been one. His life’s course had been determined by two forces, the East German airline’s flight plan, and his estranged brother’s capitalist aura, that in turn imposed certain limitations on Adams scheduling with regards to the flight plan. All other aspects of his life developed, ensued, and disappeared from his cockpit-cabin existence like condensation trails. His long life lived in passing, with himself as the only cynical spectator of his own boredom around the socialist exotic, he left his declining Republic even before you did, to reconcile with his brother, who had similarly lost interest in frothy fraternal competition and who had likewise left one friend too many behind to reject the company of Adam. The fourteen months they had together in Munich and surroundings, green alps, blue lakes, sufficed to have Adam appointed heir of the two-floor prime location apartment with a view of a park packed with painfully worriless ski-tanned Bavarians, that struck me as the strangest people I had ever laid eyes on when we came to visit. Although the term coming to visit suggests too much proactiveness on our part, in reality we rather heeded a final call that had reached us across a number of half-forgotten, almost-decommissioned channels. It hadn’t been the prospects of inheritance that had brought you to send your apologies to the organizers of the panel you were supposed to stir up with your marxist defiance. Late flattery wouldn’t have paid off anyway, as it turned out, Adam had financed the final years of his life with the penthouse as a collateral. I understood that your readiness to depart for Munich on short notice stemmed from a sense of familial duty that even your latent filial crisis couldn’t shake. Your graveness on the train unnerved me, as did the syncopated german at our destination, and the staircase with landings the size of our living room and not even a stray pair of shoes to take up the ample, empty space. I didn’t want the journey to end because I was shy at the prospect of three strangers that I was expected to have a connection with and I suppose you were secretly thinking the same thing. Oma and Opa would be there, too. In the past, our shared time at the five to ten family reunions had been marked by me being claimed as compensation for the rejection they had met when talking to you.

If my recollection wasn’t mistaken, the woman that opened the door when we rang did not match Oma neither in age nor appearance. She was thin, with high cheekbones and a loosening perm, her eyes reddened as if she had been recently crying, although we later found out that also her red eyes were permanent, whether through constant hidden renewal or some kind of medical condition. Her training demanded that she ushered us into the vestibule, her disdain that she ordered us to wait there as it was absolutely vital to check Adam’s condition for another five minutes or ten before we set properly beslippered foot into his apartment. We had arrived before Oma and Opa did, so that she had a monitoring eye for each of us as we leaned over the hospital bed from our assigned positions flanking the head end. She did not even fake busyness and I guess we were both relieved when the doorbell announced the arrival of your parents.

Opa and you and Oma formed the triumvirate of silent, angry, strong. My grandparents hugged and kissed me, Oma boomed the usual platitudes about my increased height and Opa told me once more that GENEX joke before proceeding to study me with smiling eyes. You plunged in the knife, faking surprise about their visit that was obviously, maliciously phony because it had been them who had forwarded Adam’s letter to us. During previous encounters, your comment would have prompted Oma to confront you, rekindling your cultivated anger that in turn would incense your mother, which eventually would direct both of you at your reticent father, who, to everybody’s indignation, believed it best not to interfere in your discussions but for ejected snubs that cut the dispute always too early or too late. Already I saw Oma turn around to face you, however, her comeback faltered as she was about to step from the vestibule into the hall. “Mr [Nachname] would most certainly appreciate, if you could leave your shoes in the vestibule. Please be so kind as to take a pair of the slippers.” For Oma, this incident sufficed for a weekend-long showdown between familial privilege and administrational power, fought out in quarrels over proper ventilation, with well-aimed nods to familial intimacies Adam had apparently trusted his housekeeper with, but most of all over Adam himself, what he meant, how he felt, what he really needed. As we sat by his bed immediately after we had arrived, I got the idea that he was mute, but Adam did speak, and past matters could draw brief yet coherent accounts from him. He remembered me, too, in the mornings, while the many people increasingly gave him trouble the later the day, though he hadn’t ever seen me. However, he had a vivid memory of the last time he had met you, and my imprint must have already stood out from the open denim jacket you wore around the house to save on heating. His narrative was clear but non-conversational and equally worded like a recording the few times he told me over the course of the weekend. Contrary to the Opa’s camera, I cherished Adam’s repeated tale as a gift that, as much as it became stale, was well-meaning and all he could offer. As this, I kept it like a bird in a box, I never asked or told you about it, not that there was much to ask you about, so this is straight from the horse’s mouth.

It didn’t even take a month of freedom of travel for my great-grandfather Adam to leave, and who would be surprised at a retired pilot and an ex-stewardess being among the first to pack up the few parts of the household, whose value wasn’t plummeting to unknown lows. The winter cold invaded the Bastei trailer, but “having survived forty years of ZK”, the weather should not pose an obstacle to Adam and Terezia going West, or rather south. By New Year’s Eve, they had found a spot near Syracuse and by the end of January, Terezia had packed her bags again, alone this time, because the closeness of the trailer had turned out to be very different from that in an aircraft cabin. If it hadn’t been for the preponement of the Volkskammer elections, Adam probably would have stayed at Europe’s southern tip. He wasn’t one who ran after and he wasn’t one who apologized, neither. He belonged to a generation sedated by moderate prosperity that still took whatever society offered, only with less fervor. Society held out a blank ballot and “having survived forty years of ZK” he just couldn’t pass up the opportunity of casting his first democratic vote, even though his correspondence with his long-estranged brother had already developed considerable intimacy by that time. Lingering under the subalpine high, he joined his brother to spend a week at Lago di Garda hiking and eating at German-speaking restaurants, where his brother greeted waiters in Italian. They fell back into old patterns. “The ZK used to write the election results on Honecker’s bowling scorecards, now we write it on western money.” Still the offer stood tall by the time Adam proceeded to reach Magdeburg in time to exercise his privileged duty: The northern wing of the Munich apartment waited for Adam to move in. The day before the election already felt like a holiday. As many people, you had prepared for political debates that eventually never manifested because for a classless society, class borders turned out to be astonishingly defined. The finger food chosen for making good projectiles was passed not thrown, and instead of drowning each other out in a cluster, the voices soon joined in once more in FDJ and labor movement songs. You did not recognize him in linen pants, tanned, with Paulie Walnuts wing tips and an imported drink in his hand on a folding chair in front of your house. Quaint people roamed the country in those days, you had worked out a scale ranging from romantic dutch writers out to capture elusive glimpses of a supposedly disappearing reality to foreign property lawyers struggling over cobblestones with an eye stuck to the viewfinder of the camera they panned left and right across the real estate. It took Adam a second glance to recognize you, too. He searched for a rest for his drink and only found the pavement, then he heaved to his feet from the too-low chair and opened his arms. Whereas Oma and Opa first screened your apartment on arrival, taking dust samples, assessing new furniture, Adam went straight to the kitchen to fix himself a long-missed surrogate instant coffee. Concerning your conversation in detail, I’m at a loss, I guess he profited from being the first unbiased family member you got to talk to in a long time, and I got the impression that he was a good listener in general. You must have talked about the pregnancy, because every time he wanted to start over with his story, he waved me near and put his trembling hand on mine, tapping my wrist with his finger. “That’s how you knocked. From inside. The last time I saw you.” You must have talked about your work, because he urged me to ask you for a photo you’d taken of the two of you that day. A photo that had turnt out underexposed, so you discarded it. You must have talked about moving, because that’s what he kept saying, that he told you to go see the world.

Not only you were drawn to the formerly blank spaces of your maps. Oma and Opa left for one of the soon-to-become notorious weekend trips to Paris, dinner, breakfast, lunch, and slumber aboard to the ever-moving views of roadside spruces and, keep your tired eyes open, a mythical city in the headache inducing saturday afternoon sun. The butter-sour smell, the ubiquitous crumbs and ham shreds, and twenty-two hours of sleep pervaded by constant engine noise all contributed to the disillusioning impression that left a stale taste, adding to the mouthfeel of forgotten toothbrushes. Trips beyond the federal German western border were strictly refused by your scooter, and your enthusiasm for touristic day trips was limited already back then. Contrasting your compatriots, you traveled on missions, and showed little interest in mobility for mobility’s sake. During the final weeks of the electoral period, Paul placed you like a bounty hunter with various German and international papers and sent you off on hit-and-run sprees all over the country, sometimes covering three different rallyes a day. And although the lack of time with a subject at times compromised your artistic aspirations, you enjoyed the freedom and the individualism of the lone rider that rolls into a perturbed town, takes what she can get, and makes off with the reward. After the election you resumed daily school attendance without much of a dent in your scholastic performance, since most of your teachers were more concerned with their own future, however, you kept your town-hopping schedule on weekends, turning your attention to the next figure roaming the East German slab roads: the travelling salespeople.

The principle of reputation through association had translated well from party hierarchies to the free market economy, where the fact that a good had gone through NATO-protected hands was enough to heed the call of the bullhorn sounding over from the back of the hastily packed truck. At the same time, however, many of the desired customers understood that mere availability does not make use value, and so the masses flocked to the double parked sales bay but few of them bought, leaving the involuntary actors of the truck’s overstaffed crew awkwardly fumbling for cigarettes and a lighter. The proto-post-materialists delighted in the colorful packaging and the foreperson’s increasingly desperate presentation of her merchandise. Once you witnessed a truck bed crammed with badly preserved 8-Bit video game consoles. Already to an audience of western BTX-junkies it would have posed a challenge to evoke the joy the wooden boxes had to offer without electricity and moving images. Most likely, you were among the few that had so much as seen so-called teleplay first hand, flicking cents forcefully into the youth club’s Poly-Play. Great sales were to be expected only by those dealing groceries or other consumables, which nonetheless turned out to be no gold mine, either, because in order to compete with the heavily subsidized local products vendors had to skim profit margins to the bare minimum. All of this led to an ironic regression of the market back to repetitive assortments of the expectable, adorned only with an endless variety of labels and color combinations. You watched the salespeople from afar, you aimed your lens through the windows of a Deutsche Bank prefab branch at unsuspecting clerks vulturing over their mouseprint-buffered contracts. Everything seems more menacing in your war-correspondent prints, smiles and handshakes more insidious than elsewhere. Presumably, most of the vendors were nothing but bored-out day laborers, but you succeeded in framing them as ruthless conquistadors in double denim. Not that this angle would surprise me. I remember how we stood at the cheese counter: Me, six, seven, loudly complaining for a lack of sugary fruit in our basket - by that time I had already given up on the possibility of actual sweets, you, and the cheese clerk, positively your stereotype of an antagonist. Himself, too, seemingly not averse to confrontation, as he challengingly examined your bristly haircut. His hairy hand softly sculpted by animal fats handed me a rolled-up slice of boiled ham, that would make me grow up to become a real man, as he said. If I remember correctly, this occured before we went fully vegetarian, which means that his encroaching token of masculinity sufficed to set you off. In hindsight I have to admit that I admire these comically deadpan tantrums of yours, but back then I watched petrified with embarrassment as you reached over the counter, grabbed a handful of wieners from their sad pool, and tossed them into our cart. “Right, let’s make sure he becomes a dick like you.” With the exception of checkout clerks, you mistrusted all sellers, vendors, clerks and consultants, and your advance suspicion spawned numerous confrontations that at the time I had rather missed. However, it entailed a spending restraint that kept other, perhaps more traumatizing, experiences from me. Winter clothing had to last as long as my limbs would not have outgrown it but I never had to wear them inside because of unpaid gas bills. Once I joined a friend spontaneously for a supper that never materialized, and I later understood that our rumbling stomachs weren’t owed to forgetful parents but to lack of food, an existential problem that I only encountered later and in theory, in Brechtian youth literature telling stories of child-rich families far worse off than our two-person-two-room household. You shrunk your expenses with puritan zeal to an absolute minimum, and with equal fervor you defied the importance of money by establishing a thriving market of barter transactions among friends and neighbors. Aline from one floor down traded her hairdressing, that gave birth to your two-year cornrows phase, first for a haircut of yours, which was too big a sacrifice to make, and then for the aforementioned books that I had read through, which in turn inspired her daughter’s career with the local social democrats. You brokered our first internet connection to all three inhabited of the adjacent apartments in exchange for a selection of olive oils from three sides of the mediterranean, at least until an inconsequential cease-and-desist-warning for illegal torrenting landed in your mailbox. Mutual accusations buried the communal participation in the global community. Incidentally, the subject of the letter was Bosnian but also the winner of that year’s Golden Bear, so it might as well have been you.

April 1st was another Sunday inevitably spent with your parents. Opa presented his still and already small repertoire of jokes in recognition of the date and then remained a silent steward to you and Oma for most of the afternoon. The lawn chairs and wax tablecloth marked the unusually warm spring, and the equally extraordinary meat platter cried fat and engulfed them in the smell of youth hostel breakfast rooms. Surely your parents were no gourmets, but I prefer to explain the coffee ham combination with parental care for a nutritious pregnancy diet. That said, you were no gourmet, either and didn’t flinch when the warmed-up cream puffs joined the buffet of cuts. Oma displayed an interest in your weekend work that you hadn’t expected and therefore made you vigilant. She in turn was wary of the much-debated monetary union and worried for her pension. At the union office, a frustrated clerk in an office half empty, half stocked with stacks of files of uncertain future, had advised her to use her remaining money to obtain a golden retriever, because blind benefits may be the only annuity she might ever see. Still she seemed relaxed, she loved the sun, and the west wind had yet only blown the covers of the foremost of GDR citizens, her own Stasi collaboration was dirty laundry as forgotten as all of last years’ fashion once the trademarked west wear came over. That morning you had woken up with your belly button popped out. It could have been my kick that had propelled it outwards. You often lay awake early in those days, sometimes desperate for sleep, sometimes marveling at your body and mine. That day the former applied. Your insomnia was a flammable kindling and when Oma determined, not asked or suggested, that with great foresight you had timed your pregnancy to end coinciding with your exam period, putting not only your reputation (!) at risk, but also your education and professional future, your fury ignited instantly, your disappointment that your parents evidently considered your photography mere child’s play made it explode. The cold cuts bent their edges towards the sun, the cream puffs had been finished. With great satisfaction you realized that you weren’t even depending on the coffee party’s countervalue anymore and you stormed out, although without being able to find a sufficiently poignant comeback, perhaps because you indeed did not consider the negative implications your pregnancy may have on your abitur. Oma and Opa pushed themselves up from their chairs and found each other’s eyes. It was their misinterpretation of the other’s gaze that made them tacitly agree that it would be futile to run after their child, making your failed Sunday peace meal the last time you’d meet in a long time.

Our family’s history repeats itself, as it seems. Or maybe that is just the excuse that he came up with, that he used to legitimize his own disappearance. I asked you if his account was accurate and you answered like an old person does, who’d hold that barely any question can be answered with a simple yes or no. “My parents were both in their twenties in the late sixties and early seventies, and nowadays, that time makes you think of the student movement, you think of Biermann. But you forget that they were also the first generation that carried forward certain principles and certain decisions of the republic merely out of dogmatic conviction instead of conviction born out of a reaction to the third reich. Your great-grandparents grew up in the petit bourgeoisie, they were not confronted with literature beyond the school syllabus, they didn’t as much know that something like samizdat existed.” I filled your long breaks of silence sipping coffee that made the silences even more unnerving. “Ironically, at that exact time that those children from good homes began to rebel against suppression and elitism, social mobility was at its peak. Because the parents that had helped build the GDR, didn’t trust their own children to take over responsibility. They imagined an idealized youth, a textbook youth, and they found it in the meek, the ones’ that weren’t infused with ideas beyond the canon. Young people like my parents. That’s why it was just too much fun to fall out with them, to be independent of them. Because they were so easy to rebel against. They didn’t have anything on me. They obviously couldn’t understand me because they never became disobedient themselves. But in that year, suddenly, everyone consented that they should have, that they had had enough reason to.” Another long pause. You took a gulp from your cup, like I’d do drinking water and I watched your hyperthyroidist goiter bounce. “So, to answer your question, it wasn’t as personal as he makes it out. I felt bored and restrained by their kind, and they deserved a kind of punishment to some extent. But I’ve seen them grapple with their past and their convictions, how they took my challenge seriously. And they also deserve a daughter. And a grandson, if it was for me.”

Our cross-generational weekend at Adam’s was not the first time you met after 1990. You had been hurt and angry - and as were they, I might add, even though their chagrin had built up more slowly, gradually - but you could not find it in yourself to completely deprive them of me. The get togethers were preferably held in an environment that provided both entertaining distractions - which was also my function - as well as the constraining instant of public embarrassment over loud arguments. 1992, your parents invited us to Hamburg for Whit weekend. Hotels were generally outside of your price range, but your parents must have gotten a special deal and were generously offering to pay for a second room in the busy congress hotel. I recently watched a documentary about the Afghan peace talks with the Taliban, and only that made me remember our micro-holiday at all, since I can hardly claim to remember anything. Seeing the adversaries in the plushy lounge among potted palms, thinking of them exchanging on the scrambled eggs, I reckon it must have been like that between you and them, no elephants in the lobby. Forty-eight hours can be a long time, but I could keep you busy. You may or may not have spiked my fruit mash with red bull. With a child, it’s easy to fill a day’s time just managing, employing a whole chain of responsibles that merely have to cooperate rather than communicate. I guess that’s how they do it, too, those negotiators in peace talks: Give them small issues to deal with to forget about why you resent each other. Look for a changing table, fight the angry swan that wants to poke your baby’s eye out. It didn’t resolve any conflicts for you but it established a sort of respectful truce.

If it didn’t achieve anything else, this truce did draw the battle lines on that Friday afternoon when we arrived at Adam’s place. It did forge an alliance stable enough to assemble us around Adam’s kitchen table when his housekeeper had withdrawn to her wing of the floor. This time, however, little distracted from the fact that there was a fissured family in the room. The large box windows amplified your presence with your desaturated reflections in the glass. Your father was playing with the elaborate mechanism of a corkscrew when he began with a winding excuse, obvious and uncertain like the leaps of Adam’s geriatric cat. “Dad, if you think I’m gonna let you pass with that wiedergutmachung-shtick, you have another guess coming. As far as I’m concerned you both have forfeited any right to grandfatherly knee riding, because you,” never wanted Michael in the first place, you almost slipped, “never were only in the slightest way supportive.” “Not supportive?” Oma’s moist hands left foggy outlines on the vinyl table cover. “We gave you all you need to become independent.” Me being there between you, feeling adult-like, my fascination torn between the heated discussion and the corkscrew that I had taken over. Part bottle opener, part Rube Goldberg machine, hiding the simple twisting and pulling in a cylindrical blackbox with a ring around it, whose downward motion drove a multitude of cogs and gears and whatever went on inside it. “Humble, that’s what I expect you to be. Humble. Towards us and towards everyone that is less guilty than you.” Oma’s Stasi involvement was a killer argument too powerful to forgo. If Opa had expected a brisk exchange of excuse and forgiveness, a wipe of the proverbial sponge cancelling debt, neglect or genocide, he was mistaken. In months and years to come they would have to look for signs of condonation until you, stirred and tipsy at my graduation, would rather accidentally confirm the absence of any hard feelings left. Ever unmentioned, they had forgiven you, too.

1990 was a great year to become independent, not only because of the global changes that plowed up the kolkhozes of eastern Europe but also because of the rich choice of decommissioned furniture dotting curbs on Mondays after weekend trips to West German furniture stores and on nights before bi-monthly bulk waste collection. You rarely needed to walk more than a couple of blocks to find a nightstand, a lamp, a dish rack, or a replacement for the chair that broke because, ultimately, it was not only unfashionable. More importantly, you completed the furnishing of your apartment in time before the four floors alone became a struggle. However, not only your homely decoration made the apartment your own, more than it had ever felt like. The husband, that the one-bedroom had originally been allocated too, and on whose marital welfare your own fortune depended as if it were a fluctuating stock, had left his family without so much as considering a return to his former dwelling. You had proceeded to pay him in western Mark, which came cheaper for you.

I once found a picture by chance in an archive, one that you had taken and that I had never seen. The photograph showed two young professionals walking along a dug-up street in pouring rain, showily laughing about a joke that I immediately suspect to be utterly tasteless. They could allow themselves the laugh, because not only two but three umbrellas were held over their heads by the anonymous assistants that, amazingly, the two managed to cover entirely with their large frames. The picture bears a striking resemblance to another two photographs that you took, presumably at the same location, with that torn-up concrete slab road like a sea of ice in the background. The one of the group of children in tracksuits, each holding at least one, some two cans of coke, arguably props, and that one you took at night, of the group of textbook skins arranged in a plane of vertical violence extruding vectors of baseball bats and pulled dog leashes. Back then, you found nothing in being a profiteer, and you gave your clients the stereotypes they would ask for. Until you became one yourself.

The letter remained unnoticed for days, and if it wouldn’t have been for the mailwoman, it would have gone unnoticed for much longer. A mailwoman, however, has an eye for mail, for the material qualities of the envelope and the emergence of glassine windows and four-color inkjet prints in the heading. Every day as she stood in front of the wall mounted mailboxes, the crimson shield printed on the long delivered letter caught her eye, and because she was not only attentive but also conscientious, she knocked on the door that, judging by the nameplates, corresponded to the addressee. Fortunately, you were home at the time, and the lady made you aware of your mail, not without peering into the apartment and inquiring, whether you were the tenant. You informed her that her voluntary sideline had ended on January 15th, and closed the door in her face.

The envelope was so lush it tore with the feeling of peeling sunburned skin. The letter it contained was sparse in explanations. With due and proper notice you were to leave the apartment that had been repossessed by its Prussian owners.

So soll es sein, so soll es sein, so wird es sein. The cafe by the side of the empty river whose bed lay bare and moist like a dirty north sea whale blasted Wolf Biermann half-ironically over the speakers hidden in the crawl space, while the omnipresent screens continued to play a silent Beastie Boys video that threw a haphazard compilation of twenty years of missed pop cultural references at you. You nipped at the cocktail, on the house because you looked like sorrow, and waited for Paul, who promised to be here at two and now it was two twenty, already. He came at thirty-five, when you were already halfway through your second drink, apparently the barkeep preferred you drunk to sad and hadn’t heard of FASD. “Sorry! I’m sorry,” he blared through the room that didn’t give him particular attention because this was a place of blaring, flamboyant people, “this freelancer wouldn’t let me leave.” The cocktails were mixed with egg-whites that slowed your face. Paul by contrast was too fast for his own good, presumably not naturally. “You’re not a freelancer, honey. You’re an artist.” Your smile was delayed but satisfied him. “Now. What do you have for me? What you got? What is happening?” You showed him a couple of prints showing roaming businessmen. “These guys are grody. I like it. Got any more?” You hadn’t, because, frankly, you just needed to talk to someone adult that would understand you. With little more than three weeks until you would need to vacate your apartment, even with your heady poise of independence you reckoned that a word of advice from a grownup would be in order, and Paul was a grownup, and you were under his spell. “Wow. Bummer.” I’m surprised that he was even able to follow your account. “So what are you gonna do?” The luck you had to meet him just the day that he was sober enough to look you in the eyes and hold your gaze, so that you believed him when he said: “You know what? You should come to New York.” He had even stopped ticker-tapping on the hilarious Io-Imparo-Italiano-napkins with his shades. “For real, I’d put you up in my pad, and you’re gonna take SoHo in a week. You have no idea.” His hand clasped your fingers in the cheesiest gesture of encouragement he could come up with, and you misunderstood it as you had misunderstood so many of his overstated expressions as signs of deep affection. “I can get you an advance that’ll pay for the flight alone. And once you’re there, it’s gonna be easy to set you up with another something. People will love you, I’m sure.” Egg white was accumulating in your belly. I sat there, alongside it. “You can fly with it. Not an issue at all.” He was exceptionally alert that he picked up your momentary glimpse down to where I was approximately located. The fact that you largely overruled your bodily signals of exertion and fatigue didn’t mean that you weren’t concerned for my wellbeing. Miscarriage hadn’t made the curriculum back then, therefore for you, pregnancy reliably and inevitably led to childbirth. And one drink can’t hurt. “Know what? I’m gonna take off the rest of the day and I’ll give you the rundown.” He waved to pay and the bartender took his money for your drinks.

Raw was his favorite word. Raw was how he liked his cities, juicy, bloody, hard to digest. Anything more than a brief question and he would cut in with another hymn to his native city, that made McKay’s most quotable lines sound like FDP election slogans. In three valuable hours of his fiercely contested attention he managed to subtly maneuver around the specifics, and only when he had already kissed your cheek goodbye, hastily because he was pressed to seek his dependents, you pressed him for a concrete plan. “Listen, I’ll see to that I can take you along the next time I go. I’d be surprised if they wouldn’t go for that American-in-Paris-type gig for you, so your flight should be paid for. Hell, I can probably wrap it up tonight.” And then he was off and I wonder if you realized in the sudden silence that he hadn’t even asked you if you wanted to leave. Then again, what objections were there if the flight was paid, if you could stay at his pad, seeing that you had enough funds to just hop on the next plane back to Europe if you wouldn’t like it and that your biggest concern would be getting a passport within three weeks.

Paul did not show up at the airport. He picked up when you called his desk and excused himself by referring you to a friend in terminal A that would put a 15-minute back massage on his tab. He would take a flight the next day, he said, or as soon as he had finished some important business. On the plane, the empty seat was swiftly claimed by the senior on the aisle seat for his impressively coiffured poodle that spent the nine hours motionless like a ribboned sphinx in its portable cage, watching you pityingly as you wriggled about sleepless from tension and discomfort. Paul had assured you that he would arrange for you to be picked up from the airport and you tried to convince yourself of his dependability, but a gnawing premonition of deserted kiss-and-ride parking strips under a threatening night falling deprived you of a much needed nap. It was your first time up in the air, just as it would be for me twenty-eight years later on the same route, same red eyes, same nail biting, same fidgeting on stale-smelling seats. Their odor spelled separation to me, like bus seats warmed by the friction of rough cotton that set the olfactory backdrop to the aimless bus rides I embarked on when there was nothing left to say at home. I wish I had had your plushy guardian next to me, not the mid-forties couple downing one doll-sized whiskey bottle after the other. I cried occasionally, but not because they laughed at my ghostly apparition by the window, head hidden under my summer jacket to block out looks and light. I cried for every mile and for every timezone that I was putting between me and Sergej: the ultimate disintegration of a young family.

The little blue book of my second passport has long been the sole proof and only relic of your American venture that was known to me. If I wouldn’t have asked, I guess only my first ID would have let me in on the secret of my birthplace. For a long time, I naturally assumed to be born in Rostock, not only because I couldn’t think of any other place beyond the sandy, rusty seaside that we had faced from various paragraph-five-apartments, not only because of your solemn lectures about the recent history of our land and our family’s part in it, but also because we weren’t like the families of those friends who were born elsewhere. If I would have been born elsewhere, people would have called me out for it. I must have been around Sergej’s age when I asked you rather incidentally, in a rare moment of you being home, a rare moment of me doing my homework with care, a rare moment of us sitting peacefully alongside each other. You told me without looking up from your reading and I hardly could finish my essay. I already knew about human reproduction in vivid detail, but the vision of a divine hand reaching down from heaven to place the immaculately conceived egg you had given in the center of time square among the dense traffic of skateboards and the thick, sparkling canopy of christmas decorations kept me from framing a straight sentence both in my homework as well as in response to your casual revelation. Soon after, my initial elation gave way to bewilderment. Why in the world, I asked you, why were we here and not there? What could you possibly have done that we had to leave? You told me I shouldn’t believe what TV had shown me. That America was an unjust, asocial place. That poor children didn’t get to go to school. I had to think of Robert, who bragged that he was allowed to skip school when his parents needed help cleaning cars that were about to be picked up, but that was a different thing, you said, adding to your mental list of accusations against his family. You told me at length about Rodney King and I was reminded of Lichtenhagen, but that was something else entirely, you said. I felt as wise as before, but your lecture was enough for you to brush off my follow-up questions. Later that day you tossed an envelope of photos on my desk, as another perspective, as you told me on your way out with a wink. Beside my second passport these prints are the only record that I have of your journey to this day.

Needless to say, the photos were unordered. I tried to give them an order, both before I left for the US myself as well as after, even trying to retrace your steps in situ. Most of the pictures remain impossible to date for me, however, I’m fairly certain about the first image you took upon arrival. The wait at the luggage belt made you remember your mission, that Paul had defined bluntly since he didn’t come up with a real assignment. He had also paid for your ticket out of his own pocket, not that he cared about keeping promises, but he was indifferent to spending either and presumably had amassed an indecent supply of frequent flyer miles. Your first picture shows an outstretched arm about to haul an old-fashioned suitcase adorned with travel badges from North American highway curiosities. There’s Lucy, the Elephant, that I encountered once on a road trip that I thought would lighten my mood, which it didn’t until I saw Lucy. Lucy had a million stories, and her ridiculous perseverance made me feel less alone. I binged on the American dream, and its Eastmancolor renditions on my phone’s brilliant rectangle in the dark motel rooms only added to its soothing effect on me. I doubt that you had heard of Lucy. I doubt that you ever got to see any of the recorded novelty destinations, although the world’s largest ketchup bottle and the world’s largest roller skate must have called out like shrines to visitors from your side of the wall. Judging from your pictures, you didn’t make it far. But one after the other. The fact that the grainy action shot from baggage pick-up remained the only record of your arrival makes me assume that the someone Paul had informed had been more reliable than her taskmaster. Perhaps he even got William to come.

A single photo captures William, and I only know by the scribbled caption identifying the portrait. You took the picture through the double peep hole of a half-closed door and the eye-shaped frame of towering bottles and cans on the table below and the enormous drop-light above. It was the only way you would see his face undisturbed by indignation and jealousy, not to mention that you wouldn’t have dared to ask him whether you could photograph him. By the time you arrived, it had been two years since Paul had promised William his exclusivity. It should not come as a surprise that the promise turned out to be rather flimsy, and especially since Paul’s deployment to Germany, his frequent lapses of faithfulness and/or telephonic availability had caused much distress and suspicion to poor William. It didn’t help that the spontaneously visiting friend Paul had announced turned out to be female. Even before WIlliam considered you a nuisance, he considered you a rival in love. At first, when he picked you up at JFK, you construed his standoffish manner as Friesian cordiality, and his terse replies as consideration for your broken English. He held the car door for you, but only that you wouldn’t get the idea of sitting up front with him. You had to be tired, he rather ordered than observed as he allotted to you the central room in the color-coordinated railroad apartment. The walls were adorned with fascinating hand-drawn landscapes of the old testament, which, however, in the dim light coming through the frosted glass windows to the adjacent rooms under the ceiling, or from the single lamp by the headboard, evoked the image of an eternal prisoner preserving her sanity with feedback of the pencil scratching over the plaster. There was no spare key, no tour of the apartment, no laying down of the house rules. William left for somewhere you didn’t understand and if you wouldn’t have been dead tired, indeed, you would have probably figured out right then that you were not welcome there. Your host was out when you woke up, and with no clock around and the sun setting without the sound of a key in the lock you could only estimate at what time he finally appeared in your door frame, in a forced attempt to appear furious, trying to yell at you but merely managing a nagging, annoyed, whine. He herded you to the open fridge to make you understand and you understood, guiltily seeking the piece of the apple’s peel between your molars. It was clear that he had been hoping for more substantial transgressions on your part, dirty dishes, hair in the sink or at least chocolate instead of two sad red delicious. Twice, three times he repeated, subject, predicate, object, that you needed to ask for things, not take them. You remembered the word for key and asked him for it, but for reasons that escaped you, spare keys were not an option. You did understand that you would have to hope for someone to be home or ask the owner of the pet supply shop - remarkable how William preserved his indignation barking at you like a dog to make you understand the meaning of the word - that was also the doorlady to open up for you. He brought you bananas and a box of crackers half an hour later, evading your thankful look.

I guess it used to be a tacit contract between you and my various temp dads that they had to at the very least tolerate my occasional accommodation benevolently. Lule was at one end of the spectrum, mothering me like a father, buying tupperware containers that he would have never owned to give me thumb-thick-topped bread and fresh fruit, even putting my company before yours, although I suspect that he merely played me in one of your numerous subliminal conflicts. Then there were others less prone to fatherhood, not unwilling but struggling to relate to a child, even though or maybe because they had been children themselves not too long ago. Only one, a longtime crush but eventually transitional partner of yours, did not respect your silent agreement. I spent a total of six days with him, including two weekends, and after the second I declared that I would sleep at the bus stop rather than crashing with him, that I never wanted to see his face, and that I would forget his name to never pronounce it again, which I did. He lived on a houseboat and was an odd catch for you, because he was rich and silently successful. The boat didn’t look like money, yet I know he had it because one of the few things he said to me - he never talked to me but rather stated sealed phrases to the space in the room - was that I would never have as much money as he did. Not that I had asked, he only asserted it solemnly, as if he wanted to warn me of false ambitions. He took me fishing on the first day I spent on the boat, because that was what he imagined being a stepfather-son activity. I was clueless, so he swiftly set up rod and hook for me and cast the line. Then we settled into our foldable chairs, redundant, because there was much more comfortable seating all over deck, but fishing is fishing and I guess he hoped that the perfection of the scene itself would overcome all distances. His self-brewed beer, too, was part of that ritual. Could the boat go fast enough to outrun an orca, I asked, but he only shushed me, looking into my eyes for the first time as he pointed at the waves to make me understand. By the time I fell asleep in my cot he had not more than a hundred words to me, and besides an instructional tour of those parts of the boat that would be relevant for me, which had me recall third grade English lessons - he spoke English only - as he pointed to different items and appliances, stating their names and functions, the only compound of multiple sentences he had uttered had been a brief episode from his childhood. At my age, he told me, he had already been to prison twice - I was eleven when he became my temp dad. He had never learned why he had been arrested, someone had simply picked him up, locked him up in a cell full of compassionate but largely intoxicated inmates, and let him go the day after. Perhaps he had expected an answer, an acknowledgement of some sort, or maybe he didn’t care and it was only the first thing he came up with when he tried to season his bonding scene with a confidentially shared secret. I remained mute, half not to stir the fishes, half because I thought I hadn’t fully understood the meaning of his words and even if I had had, I was at a loss for a reaction. His bland voice gave no clue whether he was proud or melancholy, and while you had at some point stated the obvious that prison wasn’t an option, there were people I knew, who weren’t so terribly ashamed of their jail time. When I did not respond, he showed neither indignation nor satisfaction, but after another couple of minutes, he disappeared below deck and did not surface for another hour. His absence hardly bothered me, as it gave me the opportunity to inspect my surroundings, the hermetic order of the decommissioned speedboat of the Volksmarine. If he saw me snooping around, it didn’t disturb him. Only when I started to sing loudly out of boredom and embarrassment, he reappeared with the first portable computer I ever saw, told me that my song would spoil the fishes, and sat back down typing like an eternally deferring officer holding me in my interrogation chair. This became our usual disposition: him on one of his two portable devices, me alongside trying to make the time pass quickly without risking sharp rebuke for violating his two boundary conditions he had declared with counting fingers already before our first dinner together.

Nothing happened. There is no hidden trauma, mom. The word “dad” didn’t make him a father, and I didn’t need a man to be a son. I was bored. I was disappointed. The excitement that his biography had promised to you, and me, too - after you had asked me to be patient with him, explaining that he was slow to build trust, that he was fearing extradition to the United States for some espionage crime that you made sound far more heroic than what I unearthed from the archives a good decade later, that he prayed his boat would outrun orcas and other adversaries on a necessary flight across the baltic - that prospect of adventure and inscribing oneself in the history even as a footnote never arose. However, it wasn’t the dragging time on his boat that rendered him so despicable to me, I was no stranger to boredom. He was the lone rider, the radical individualist that used every excuse to remove himself from the responsibilities of a social being. This made him attractive to you, because you, too, had your relapses into misconceived freedom, and this made him contemptible, even threatening to me. As little as I needed you already at eleven, I still feared that you would simply not come back one Sunday night, and not without reason. I doubt that I penetrated my feelings as much at the time, but somehow I understood that with his getaway romance he would wind up the spring that could send you across the baltic or only some blocks away, but far enough to lose sight of your son.

Only few people noticed my presence far into the fifth month of your pregnancy. William only realized your condition in the next day’s morning light, after he’d had an eye-opening glass of OJ that he didn’t offer. You had been awake for an hour, standing at the kitchen window, taking a sparing single photo of the street that was so nondescript for its neighborhood that it took me numerous walks to locate it. The view from the window was strangely similar to a scene from an East German city. Much brick, a butcher, a hairdresser, only the foreign lettering of the thai supermarket appeared like a mirage on the window pane across the street. It could have been a disappointment, but after the hostile reception the familiarity of the view was reassuring. Your broad back against the doorway hid my showing presence when William came in, but when he had occupied his usual confrontative spot leaning to the corner of the countertop and lowered his gaze with the descending juice bottle, he saw the unmistakable bulge. He lingered and then held out the juice bottle with an inviting wiggle. After that, he left things for you in the fridge and didn’t complain overtly about fruit gone missing. But if you ever thought that this would be the beginning of a friendship, you were mistaken.

Paul did not arrive. Not in the first week at your new home. On Saturday, you strolled around the neighborhood and beyond in a concentric spiral until your feet and I screamed in unison for you to stop. Back at the apartment you were left to stand for another near hour in the pet shop until the owner, inconsolable when she realized your condition at a closer look, had finished tending to the line of last minute customers exchanging hamsters for shy reptiles hiding under the plastic rocks. Out of embarrassment, the lizard lady pinned you at the doorstep with impenetrable anecdotes and long itineraries for your coming days, retaining you standing for another eternity after she had locked up for you. William ducked past without a greeting. You couldn’t bring yourself to leave the apartment in the following days, and with little in the empty house to take your mind off the matter, you turned your thoughts towards me and it gave you a chill. In the night, when the noises outside lowered to a distant hum, I began communicating with you, and because you had had no opportunity to tire yourself throughout the day, you had to listen. Why did you have me in the first place, I asked innocently, because I couldn’t yet have known the details of my conception. What would await me, I inquired, as you were watching the nightly scenes out on the street. A man carrying a door was glinting with sweat in the moonlight. What did you have to offer - a question posed not as a challenge but merely to establish a basis for me to assess whether it would be worth the wait. Either me or the interrogation weighed heavy on your bowels, William muttered behind the thin wall to the bathroom as you tried to reduce the reverberation of the toilet bowl, but at least I stopped the interrogation as I listened to the doubly-muted sounds of the alien language. That’s when you would savor the warm boulder that you were wrapped around. You had always been a side sleeper anyway.

When Fee and I got to know we were pregnant, for the first time in weeks she returned to her flat share for the night, and that could have already told me everything I needed to know about her trust in our parenthood. But I didn’t care, didn’t mind her absence, because now there was Sergej, nameless yet, but fertilized and started. I lived in the upstairs apartment of a family whose multiple handicapped son I wheeled around in the sun in exchange for lodging until he would giggle and I would become a father. When I told you, the first thing you said was how strange you found it that I was so excited about being a father (being a man, though you didn’t actually say that, I knew it was implied). I hadn’t expected excessive joy in response to my announcement, so I tacitly accepted the unspoken excuse of you inviting me to dine out, which was itself so extraordinary that it did express profuse joy after all.

You kept carrying on your Godot lifestyle. William forced some change on you by coming up with a second key, handed to you with the announcement that he would need the apartment to himself and his dance partner for rehearsals nine to five. You rationed your film reserves and thereby compelled yourself to find a local supply by the end of the week, which was supposed to be the first act of settling in without Paul’s help. The rationing divided the day into twelve snapshots with each two hours between them. When I let you walk, these hours passed fast and unnoticed. If I wouldn’t, they stayed and showed their immobile faces. Boredom is the most agonizing consequence of this kind of poverty, I am telling from experience. Every city’s charm suffocates in the sticky wrappers of cheap, filling supermarket food wolfed down seated on a bike rack because all the scenic benches in the park were taken. I came to the US with a work contract but no money I felt I could afford to spend on anything less but the bare necessities. Between the landmarks lay death strips of grimy back spaces that cars dissected speeding blind ahead, and more fortunate pedestrians only entered up to the point that their throw would reach the garbage chute. The wrappers, the soot, the unfamiliar ordering customs, the skin colors (i hate to say it but I want to be honest), the falsely understood fragmentation, the see-to-it-thyself, the unannounced diversity of accents, slangs, and dialects, the resounding confidence of the rich, the resounding confidence of the poor, the expulsion through friendliness in well-patronized cafes offering wifi access with unspoken time limits for coffee purchases, the yet another hour between check-out and check-in times of the hostels each offering the cheapest rate for the respective day, the enticing tourist activities beyond my budget that I probably would have never considered otherwise, the endless dial tone of the supposed landlord, the dubiousness of the second-hand car market. I had left wife and child, as they say, and I was not in the best of moods. I knew that my premonition against private debts was childish, but I guess some part of me must have felt I didn’t deserve better. Jock smell in the three- to eight-beds I spent my rainy days in, chlorine in the laundry rooms I fell back on if the room mates weren’t out. When it’s sunny, I cannot stay in, even the hole I was in back then wasn’t that dark. When the landlord finally called me back and I signed the lease, it felt like a deal with the devil, not because of his baby-blue eyes or his drawbridge brows, but because my urge of self-flagellation immediately vanished with the drop of the pen. I could afford 194 hours of curbside parking on 42nd Street. I could survive thirty-five days on vending-machine-priced water and bars 280 calories apiece or I could eat a week at one of the more economically priced Michelin-starred restaurants. I could pay for both the grand helicopter tour of the city and the underground adventure experience, escape room included. Four cents a minute with the prepaid plan that I had to buy for the lack of VoIP-stable wifi. The first few tries I kept messing up time zones and Sergej’s schedule. Sometimes I suspected Fee of finding excuses for not letting him answer. In those hours, my solvency was still not enough to fight both boredom as well as solitude. The apartment was empty and I was getting dangerously close to global high scores.

A telephone booth in the rain. The windows had fogged up with your breath although you hadn’t even begun to talk. Two telephone cards are in the picture, you had stocked up on minutes for the calls you needed to make, and they were important calls, so you wouldn’t risk being cut off by the rates. Not to your surprise, Paul didn’t answer, not even his office, that had compassionately taken your previous messages and had always passed on his greetings and promise of a speedy arrival on his part. A part of you was relieved: You were beyond believing his announcements and at least his bad conscience was enough to convince William of letting you stay. The second number on the list you had copied from the rolodex on Paul’s desk, now William’s drawing table, that you had investigated as every inch of the apartment during your period of solitary domestic seclusion. You rested your forehead against the glass to counter your body heat that rose with every new cell of mine, and with your nervousness, too. Subject of your second call was a photographer you had gotten to know in Dresden. Bunim, a Russian, who had stayed in the city after the war and emigrated to the US only weeks before the wall closed up. In the deserted building of the future state administration, you and Bunim had met shortly after the elections, when the town halls and offices encapsulated the country’s upheaval on three floors, rooms numbered westwards ascending.

[insert handwritten]

You didn’t touch a single rod of cold steel, a single second-place-silver screen or reflector. The whole day seemed a preview of the coming months of shape-shifting, warm organic matter. At the turn of the fifth hour, your touch started to tell apart the dented rounds of the identical heads of the infants and you began to understand how the mothers managed to aim unerringly at the right cod if you hadn’t managed to lull a baby in time. You should have been angry at the moon-faced passengers steaming with spotlight heat in their carriages for ruining - or at least representing the ruin of - your first American photography job. However, not only didn’t you think of sinking your finger into the soft zones of baby surface, you weren’t even afraid that you would do it. You didn’t hold them fearful with two hands in a maddening control loop between crushing and losing grip like you did with your camera when you first got it but naturally seated in the modest mold between your breasts. Holding them felt zen, felt like the look the cow gave you, and you would hate the fact that it felt so natural in retrospect, because you considered yourself a natural-born of many things, a mother wasn’t one of them. After the shoot, the mothers came to you one by one to collect their offsprings, and not a single mom failed to assure you that you would be a great mother one day. Only then, the anger appeared.

Bunim never had another job for you. In your seventh month, he wouldn’t trust you with weights, sprints or appointments. There was never another cow and or baby to supervise, either. However, if your gig hadn’t made you rich, it gave you more confidence in moving around the city, unluckily at a time where I was already weighing heavy on your joints. You won back some of your recklessness and tested the patience of jumpy waiters playing the pregnant tourist when they would press you to order. Some of the few places that catered to tourists within the decreasing radius of tolerable walking distance had European newspapers, but the news barely affected you. Germany was the proverbial tree in the woods, and from the time you had set foot on the new continent you were longing only for a compatriot to string up the vision of places from memory. Whether your country would disintegrate while you were gone, as some anxious voices in the papers predicted, hardly mattered as long as there would be someone to point out the differences between before and after to when you would stroll together through the once-familiar landscapes upon your return. Kohl makes it possible. Even the exoticist ads were closer to your reality. 1 week USA in a family of indians - Peter Stuyvesand pays all expenses. Most alien of all were the occasional group of German tourists that you documented extensively. They barely noticed you in a Mexican standoff of cameras, or through the panorama windows as they synchronously pointed their lenses towards the Brooklyn Bridge in dual file like artillery.

It’s not only the photographs that inform my vision of that time. I remember the time that you were working on a forty-five minute essay film to dissipate in the early morning program of the regional channel, that looked back at the city’s desolate but auspicious state in the early nineties. You called the piece “Fast Times at Richmond Hill”, because a large part of your source material came from a local resident’s collection of home videos. When you landed the commission, you had just invested the money for a new fridge in video editing software, so that I had to give the fridge door an awkward hug to lift its hinges back in place. I would have preferred less intimacy, both with the fridge door as well as with you working from home. I was already aware of my dual citizenship and its implications at the time you were working on your collection of America’s dullest home videos. Even though you had informed me about my exotic birthplace before, the notion of citizenship and that sort of dutiful sense of fraternity that it demanded only became apparent to me about a year before, on September 11th. Dutiful, rueful almost, because I felt that I had missed a hugely important appointment, lingering with Robert after school in our own valley of the clueless. He had used the contents of his fold-out pencil case, that never failed to surprise teachers with its surgical orderliness but not me as I knew the tool rules in his parents’ garage, to stage a demonstration of his guerilla tactics in Age of Empires, an analogue demonstration of necessity because we had both been banned from computer usage, I for making the text-to-speech say abusive things, Robert for racking up the phone bill with online activity that he refused to tell me about. The fact that made me feel most the importance of the unforeseen events of that day, was that you were not angry when I returned, only deeply concerned. As a parent, you were not only confident regarding my safety because it suited you, but because you trusted my reasoning at least as far as it would prevent major harm to me or others. I don’t know whether the towers reminded you of the unreliability of that conclusion or whether you were concerned for all of us, and that included me rather incidentally. Or maybe you just needed the support of a family for once.

I do not remember much of the final cut of your feature, I mainly recall the before and after. After it aired, after you had let two weeks pass for a review to be published you complained about the ignorance of critics, the futility of trying to appeal to viewers that got their two hours of sleep in front of your feature before insomnia kicked in around one-thirty in the morning, as you always did when a work of yours didn’t receive the attention you believed it merited. I’m sure you did that in my best interest, complaining, to have me understand that everybody had their share of petty nuisances. However, couldn’t you have shown an interest in my troubles beyond that particular issue that I had with my history teacher, who kept teasing me for not knowing the facts that I was supposed to know, seeing that my mother was “fishing in these waters”, which flattered you because an ordinary teacher had heard of you? I guess it is true that our concerns were somehow akin, and both the distraction of the bundesrepublican feuilletons as well as my petty pre-teen worries that I still shared with you back then seem insignificant looking back. But it just goes to show how inherently twisted your understanding of supply and demand was, that you were thinking I needed another example of a troubled person grappling with life more than even only a silent, compassionate listener.

It has been difficult for me to reconstruct the months of your late pregnancy. In part because the pictures you took became more and more nondescript. There are fifteen shots of lights being refracted in the oil stain on your room’s overhead window that continually renewed itself, fed by an unknown source. I could give a fair account of the weather during those months but have to guess as far as your state is concerned, although the series itself testifies to that, too. Nothing, according to the few times we talked about this period, happened, which was true at a calendar’s level of intimacy. William spent most of the early summer hours outside, practicing in parks, hanging around galleries that extended their culinary attendance upon their exclusive guests to the sidewalk. The fact that the apartment must have been still rent-free for you tells me that Paul did not show up, understandable regarding the abundance of news from his turf, that had more or less doubled overnight. Some years removed, it must indeed feel like nothing happened in the last weeks before my birth. In comparison to what happened in your home country and in comparison to your former peers that remember daily routines of those days in astonishing detail as subtle customizations of the societal memories eternalized in headlines and slogans. As far as I can remember, any instant of idleness has always been unbearable for you, but you must have developed this aversion only after my birth. How could you have survived several weeks of idleness? Even on your rare sick days you were agonizing more over the idle hours than any physical symptoms. Any passing of time to you meant advancing along the imagined bell curve that expressed your rapidly decreasing chances of achieving some vaguely delineated state of being recognized as an artist. Introspection was a valuable resource in achieving your aspirations, but only in relation to external factors and events. The own body, one’s own identity hadn’t become a hot topic, yet. Therefore the egocentric cosmos of your lonely weeks in Brooklyn when your thoughts were only turning inward to the forming center of gravity and meaning, remained unaffected by your self-reflective archival work. There was a double reluctance to tell me about that time. However, I have to acknowledge that you rarely forced your compulsive restlessness on me, so that I could take my own time to expand on the few facts that you had shared about the final weeks of my embryonic stage. Maybe those were the final weeks of calm and rest for the both of us. In a city of predictable dangers, in an apartment of a favorable landlord you lived off a fridge that William filled with whatever he saw fit and whatever he would tolerate to share with you, and I lived off that, too. We were a Russian doll of a citizen of a vanishing nation and an unborn stateless, that would grab hold of any soli or sanguinis as soon as he would see the light of day, because who knows when one or the other would come in handy.

It came in handy when I needed to leave. Leave quickly, like you did. Like you, I too spend a couple of weeks in isolation, solitary confinement with considerable comforts and conveniences. The company paid for my probation lodging and I lived on the block of a model supermarket that supported my fridge model. The fridge and the store were in a constant dialog that me and the delivery person were spared. I tipped generously because I had enough to deal with in those introspective times. Emotional pain surprised me with an iron fist to the midriff and when I managed a trip to IKEA, I chose furniture that would cradle a curled-up posture. My front was a sandwich board listing my wrongdoings and I needed to fold my remaining surface over it. If I were you, I could say that nothing happened, then. What did I think? I thought nothing. Innocent bystanders imagine this kind of guilt-ridden sadness as an ongoing argument of interior voices accusing each other in well-prepared summations. Truth is, the sadness was weighing much too heavy on my mind to stage this kind of play. Like a flood, like black water the sadness isolated every area of my brain, allowing only a few bare electric pulses to pass through to keep emergency operations running. My perception felt reduced to a feeble lighthouse searching with its needle-head spot in the dark. I found a beanbag, a round table fell in my path, convenience food on crestfallen-eye-level shelves, a central area of pixels lighting up in red-blue-green amalgamations. A single thread of consciousness, that’s what really means nothing: Having to stop dead in place to remember dates and errands, and then running out of capacity to care for them. You were unoccupied, melancholic maybe in the abandoned apartment, but your mind must have been in a bankholidian frenzy of questions and possibilities.

When we were pregnant with Sergej, I related to being a father mostly by imagining a relation to a yet fictional person, a person that modeled itself on other people I saw. I chose from four ethnicities and twelve different nose styles to assemble Sergej as a striker for Hansa Rostock. I assured myself that my son could turn out however he wanted but in my mind, too, I merely assembled my image of Sergej from only more of the same templates. When we were pregnant with Sergej I was still running around nights to flick pebbles at the car shuttle train so that their alarms would play a blaring quodlibet as they cut through the city, and up to a certain point of our pregnancy, Fee was joining, too. Still I think she was wiser in that she didn’t anticipate the moment of our son’s birth as the sort of award ceremony that I was imagining, where we would be given the assembly kit we would fashion into something that would come close to the product image. She took it a day at a time, while I counted every baby-burp, every fit of weeping against some imaginary goal. I was making fun of the dads rampaging on the sidelines because they had failed to make their little leaguers live up to their standards but even though I didn’t have a particular profession or end-of-season stat in mind for Sergej, I wasn’t so different from the booming blimp waiting to show junior the ropes of his used-car business. Right before my birth you snapped a picture of a toddler. It is the last photo you took before I was born, and it almost makes me believe your claim of being in that zen-like state of thinking nothing, because its oblivious kitchiness certifies that at least to your artistic pretensions you weren’t giving any thought at that time. If I had to read some deeper meaning into the picture, I’d say that you, too, weren’t too concerned with chiseling out a five-year plan for my development. Already phenotypically, that toddler hardly could have served as a mental model for how I would turn out. But even without this last picture, I would have known that you didn’t give a damn about making plans with or about me. I can excuse this fact with the geopolitical inflection of my conception. I guess yours wasn’t the generation prone to believe in rigid planning. And even in the moments of frustration, when I mistook your lack of ideas you had for me as disinterest, I still appreciated the absence of any prohibiting parental path-prescribing. You were never short on prejudices, sarcastic remarks when I would come up with a new passion or interest, but you would always reconsider. Late at night, when you prepared my bags for the next day, a mutually hushed-up love service you continued through to my graduation, you would rummage around underneath your premature judgments for a token of appreciation that I would find when I went through my backpack the next day. Your courtesy gifts were always slightly awkward, maybe because it needed to be something you could pick up at the discount supermarket when you would do the daily shopping in a hurry. Bananas meant good luck for the finals, nuts that you believed in my preparations for the physics exam, a USB-powered novelty fan that I had earned my fun.

William had helped himself to the old air conditioner of the cafe he worked at to subsidize his artistic practice. He had looked like an octopus as he carried in the dirty hunk of plastic with its tubes flapping around. You hadn’t managed to slip into your room as you usually did when you heard him fumbling for the keys on the landing. Now he blocked the corridor with the clunky appliance, and you were too bulky yourself to squeeze past. Exhilarated by his booty, he plugged it in to test it, but instead of a cool breeze, the device only managed thick smoke that rose like thunder clouds to the ceiling. Hectically, he cut the coughing A/C’s life support, and the last traces of his cheerfulness vanished when he removed the appliance’s back panel and only identified what seemed to be the remains of a sandwich among the soot and dust between the nondescript cables and tubes. That was when he gave up on his haul and as of then, the grey box vegetated under the soot stain on the wall, sprawling out its arms across the hall. Intent on making the schlep with the A/C worth his while before temperatures would drop down to tolerable again, William had found a repairman in the neighborhood, Peter, a Pole, who was really trained as an aircraft mechanic but for the lack of customers who abided a van bearing CPUSA decals next to their private jets he had proceeded to plunge his hands in the greasy guts of washing machines, dishwashers and air conditioners. The heat had been wearing you out to the point that you had taken a stab at fixing the damn thing yourself, but William and Paul’s household was so miserably equipped that you could only remove a handful of screws with the tip of a butter knife before you got stuck again. I’ve seen you with faltering household items, it was a matter of principle that you would at least try to fix them, and many times you proved yourself quite talented in figuring out some basic mending, even if it only dragged out the appliances ailment and after another six months I would come back to you bent over the machine’s exposed intestines again. In the case of William’s air conditioner though, you could only give it a final ablution, while continuing to alternate between bearing the heat and bearing the draft of urban air that gave you nausea. William had not notified you of the fact that Peter would come by to try his luck on their moribund hallmate. That day, you had woken up with a hurt like period pain, but less pursy than you had felt in the weeks before. Your belly denied you complete obliviousness of my birth getting closer, however you probably weren’t keeping track of the exact due date and waited instead for gushing waterfalls or at knee-bending stabs in the underbelly. It’s not like I would interrupt anything, anyway.

I didn’t want you in the labor ward, but Fee did. Under the pretense of researching a stalling project you had gained my toleration and a regional ministry’s funding for moving into our town for the final months of Fee’s pregnancy and the first six of your grandchild’s life. Friends, who had been compassionate at first when I told them about my mother’s move, began rolling their eyes at me because I kept complaining, even though you rarely came to visit, never unannounced, and generally minded your own business, not like their own intrusive helicopter parents. However, they missed the point I was making. That you were undermining my role as a father already before I became one. You and Fee took up your weekly conspirative coffee dates and some weeks you would meet even more frequently. Fee was provocatively unsecretive about your get-togethers, which further angered me, because you made it so easy to see through your efforts. Of course you couldn’t deny yourself the self-flattering talk of your work’s progress, steadily painting the picture of the single parent juggling parental responsibility and individual fulfillment. So much for that picture. Every time you had met, Fee came back with another story from my childhood that I had never told her about, as she remarked reproachfully. It felt like the final weeks before an election, when politicians reminisce about their successes in the past only to suavely withhold that the success was actually another party’s merit, or not a success at all. She would come back with details of my birth and your pregnancy that I had never heard about from you, as I would let Fee know reproachfully.

Your sudden allying with Fee gave away how your imagination was running wild, how you projected your difference-feminist premonitions onto me. Me running off on the eve of Sergej’s birth, blowing off steam, leaving for drinks and strip shows with the other fathers in the family waiting room. I know the images you had in mind, the tales. You had allocated some of your precious time to talk about them, to set me straight, I suppose, when we were reading Rabbit in my last year of school. You should have worried about Fee instead, not about me. She was the one, who was considering an abortion when I was as sure as I had never been in my life about anything, that I wanted to have that child. She kept ruining moments by putting the pregnancy into question and dismissing congratulations pointing to the probability of miscarrying during the first x months. However, I remained the sole subject of your doubt, and you continued to pretend that the birth would be something between you women.

Sergej came like a Sunday visit. He had announced his birth the day before, with a wave of cramps that had put us on alert and had tired Fee enough to get a good night’s rest before she went into labor after lunch the next day. I had packed a bag of paraphernalia and some snacks to get me through the day as I had learned in our prenatal classes. The retired librarian at the reception had chosen Reich as a tonal backdrop to give the industriousness on the corridors a steady pulse to cling to, and even Fee’s contractions seemed to stick to the meter. I hoped you’d be late but it must have been the first appointment you’ve arrived for before me. The head nurse seated us on one side of the surfboard-shaped delivery bed, crammed, so we would push and block each other’s sight like children in front of the television. Whoever chose the garish wallpaper deserved the image of her craft turning into something fat ladies did in social housing two-bedrooms on television. However, even with the red wall tickling our emotionality, we passed over the prompts that would have usually set us off into an upwards spiral of raising voices. When blood squirts on the floor and screams penetrate entire wings of the building, that’s when you become intrepid, selfless, and understanding. We were holding each other’s hand because each of us thought the other would need it. I saved my irritation at you asking Fee to breathe “as you had discussed” for after the birth. I tolerated that you stood up when the hospital staff came to talk to us, as if you were the family’s gatekeeper. Tied-up pieces of cloth swung like wrecking balls from various points in the ceiling in the airstream of rushing personnel. We took turns massaging Fee, your esoteric, violent but effective holds and my repetitive repertoire from our prenatal classes, until our moves became more aggravating than the labor pains. And then, Sergej was born. So much smaller than he had seemed in petite Fee’s absurdly large belly. So much smaller than he had seemed going through her pelvis. A humunculus of tiny features with the outsized hands of his mother on him. Newborn Serge smelt like a fragrance they would use to cover up the smell of blood, natural but somehow related to perfumery, I remember I imagined it to be the scent of whales, perhaps for the water in my eyes and the overall feeling of being part of a universal whole as rendered in those new-agey airbrush scenes of marine life at sunrise. It was this state of rapture that left me standing idly by when you reached out first for the newborn, casting a tender, questioning look at Fee only, who was too exhausted to protest. It didn’t take you a minute of Sergej’s life on earth for you to cut me out of the picture. Sergej had been polished bright by the hospital staff but I could have sworn I saw blood on your hands when you cradled Serge back between his mother’s breasts.

Peter inspected the insides of the broken air conditioner spread over the kitchen table and you had joined him in a burst of sociability, which would have been unlike you under normal circumstances, but part hormone rush, part loneliness, part gratitude to speak Russian, a language that suddenly felt so effortless to wield, had made you want to play host for the lanky easterner. You must have never had the time to get acquainted with your uterus, a terse lodger, like you were to William. You had been walking up into your late thirties, waddling like a penguin, blessed with ignorance of pregnancy complications and miscarriages. Underneath the memorized schematic drawings and medical terminology the womb still felt like an old oven to you. Ingredients went in and something would come out once the time was ripe. You’d poke a pick into the center to see if all was fine. Dascha two doors down from your parents had been born with Down’s syndrome, her mother had done something when she had been carrying her. Or hadn’t done something, it didn’t become clear before the conversation had been shushed for the children’s sake. Life was to be lived breathing through uterine dealings. You breathed through them on the day Peter came for the air conditioner, and because he was in on the agreement, he didn’t ask when you stopped in mid-sentence to let another wave roll past. But then again, he took pride in asking uncomfortable questions and when your incessant chatter was idling behind clenched teeth for the third time since he had gotten down to work, he didn’t even ask but pulled you down to his van and drove you straight to Mt. Sinai. Peter had seen two children being born, home births, both of them. He probably would have missed the second if any of his acquaintances had been at the bar he fled to in the birth’s seventh hour for a little respite. Another delivery wasn’t what he had in mind for the rest of the day, but you wouldn’t let another father get away, even if he was merely a temporary one. And so the first temp dad of my life entered the labor ward as family. Family that in the twenty years since he last witnessed childbirth had been charged increasingly with its own set of tasks to mind during delivery. Birth as Peter got to know it had often resembled a sunday buffet, with aunts, uncles, cousins, and the more remote kin strolling in and out of the narrowing focus of the mother. If there had been professional maneuvers to execute, only the midwives knew about it. The hefty nurse at Mt. Sinai took him out to the corridor for a terse dressing-down when he had abandoned the head of the birth bed to catch a breath at the window. And because the nurse had not been a shoe-shined private jet owner but a hypertensive matron in orthopaedic loafers, and the labor of the unknown woman had confounded him more than enough, he didn’t even consider contesting his deployment to the far end of the bed. Peter left you his hand to clench, didn’t flinch when you scratched through the callus, and kept repeating the few reassuring sentences in German he’d picked up through the decades. And when you had given textbook birth, as the nurses assured, once I had exhausted myself crying fresh air for the first time, Peter wondered how a love so strong could ever be overruled by other feelings, how it was possible that it hadn’t burst out like some sort of rapturous trauma every time he’d had wished ill on his children in a fight, if even for this newborn perfect stranger he had more love than he had thought to be capable of giving.

I spent my first seventy-two hours on earth in a hospital room with the park-facing view only executives’ corner offices and old money maisonettes could compete with. November weighed heavy on the locals’ libido and August was low season for the maternity ward. After the Puerto Rican couple that had substituted words with caring touches and spicy snacks in communicating with you had left, only you and I had remained under the cooling breath of the eager air conditioner. Peter had promised to come visit when he had hugged you goodbye shortly after I had seen the light of day, but then had never materialized. Perhaps he was too embarrassed to sneak through the maternity ward in search of a familiar face that would match the unknown family names of the patients on the door. Or maybe his initial enchantment had indeed worn off so quickly that he could plunge his head into the wombs of washer-dryers without even thinking of me. However, it wasn’t Peter’s absence that bothered you. Whereas the prenatal uneventfulness had put you into a state of narcotic amor fati, uneventfulness with a view now made your head spin with doubts and worries, as if you were a cliched, cabin-febrile executive’s wife. Although you spent even less of your nest egg while you were hospitalized, at least that was what you thought back then, your savings wouldn’t last much longer, unless William would unexpectedly foot the bills for another tenant’s board, not to mention baby clothes, furniture, and other birth-related acquisitions. On him depended all, a lot at least, how he would react to a baby’s crying interrupting his beauty sleep. You mentally ranked your benefactors by their instability with William topping the list, because besides generosity and noise tolerance it would need his unshaken devotion to Paul, who hadn’t shown his face for more than three months and had rarely called his partner when you overheard it, to have him continue hosting you. Which put Paul second, who was by now only obliged by guilt, not affection, to put up William’s indignation in your interest, to believe anything else would have been absurd. Concerning Paul, a change of mind to side with William, or simply another slip of his insatiable desire for attention that would cause his partner to punish Paul in one or the other way would suffice to pull the rug from under her. You didn’t even consider Bunim in your list, and that put you at number three, because with my birth, your own abilities, that prior you had only questioned during arbitrary fits of teenage insecurity, had become a subject of serious doubt. Not only had the last three months substantially shaken your trust in being able to sustain yourself economically, but also did your complete lack of experience in caring for, even simply handling a child frighten you. You tried to recall the working steps of changing diapers from the single time you had done it until your despair of putting the different maneuvers you remembered in a reasonable order had you hyperventilating so that the ECG called for a nurse to check on you.

At that point, you were still eager to be a mother, despite the fear of not meeting the needs of your child. I wonder when that eagerness got lost. It’s not the diapers that I remember, and from what I see in the pictures, the pudgy me was fed well and carted around in decent second-hand strollers. What I do remember though, are scribbled post-its blown to the entrance by the draft of the window you had forgotten to close, tin-foil trays warming on the electric stove in the chilly kitchen. I keep remembering temp dads that I had long forgotten because there were so many of them. Ronald, the police officer you dated, who had unlearned to speak low so that I listened to his end of your conversations as if he was with me, on the phone with you on the fold-out couch. Two, three weeks that fatherhood lasted, although when he caught me jaywalking a couple of months later, he still let it slide. Only because one of the more transient temp dads had roughed up the class bully after he’d given me a hard time, my substituting surrogate fathers did not become a target of more serious mockery. You subsequently gave that temp dad the boot, and although I do understand by now that getting into fights with thirteen-year-olds is a trait that does suffocate romance quite a bit, back then I felt betrayed that you didn’t see how he had stood up for me.

Belying all expectations, Maria Teresa de Castro never considered having a child. As much as she enjoys the temporary exhilaration of child’s play, of a couple of hours of chasing after her little nephew across moldy climbing castles, down scratched-up slides barely hip-wide until she ends up tired with n+1 bruises, she was always content to leave the dealing with weary whining to her sister and, if applicable, her partner. It will have to suffice as a reason that the plethora of nephews and nieces in various locales and time zones satisfied her desire for procreation. The multitude of offsprings her brothers and sisters had set into the world over the course of the past twenty-three years had given her experience of child development the quality of an empirical survey, and she occasionally had found herself in the situation of giving much appreciated parenting advice over coffee to colleagues in distress. Bank Holiday’s largest fan wiki would ascribe the conception of one of the game’s distinguishing features to the cambrian explosion of the de Castro family Maria Teresa had witnessed. Her brainchild broke with the tradition of awarding players custody of one character to develop and equip. Instead, players oversee a whole lineage, whose continued existence they have to ensure by getting together with other players to mate. Maria Teresa’s initial notes explain the basic proceedings of the system:

Player characters have a limited lifetime. To secure the continuity of player’s lineage, a player SHOULD mate with an arbitrary second player, Texas Penal Code regulations concerning prohibited sexual conduct apply. If mating.sucessful equals true, player continues controlling child. If mating.successful equals false, player continues controlling parent. ## Mating. Players can mate any time. Only one sex exists. Mating success rate for player age x should approximate f(x)=e-x². Players gain strength through equipment and perks, but lose agility and speed. The longer a player defers reproduction, the stronger her character will become, and the more difficult it will be for the newborn to defeat its parent. Too early and the parent will be a greater challenge due to its agility. TODO: Compile list of factors that will influence balancing in the reproductive battle. Unquote. The finished feature of mating was the major reason for just barely making ESBR-Teen. It was not outright gory, but as the life-hungry newborns tried to outmaneuver the raging, club-brandishing AIs of their parents to grapple them from behind and batter in their skulls with their bare fists, players frantically mashing buttons of their sweaty controllers, the screen would turn ruby with blood. Granted, Michael proposed paintball, still he ponders shelving the game until Sergej will have gone through the fundamental subject material on violence and/or sex ed. Three days into New York State on PAUSE and it is their first generational change. Sergej does not seem to be bothered the slightest by the fountains of red, probably it is still but a color to him, and he has smashed and gutted a vaguely humanoid pinata before. To do justice to his parental responsibilities he suggested the game’s building mode, which did not need further encouragement as soon as Sergej discovered the staggering size and convoluted ornateness of their faction’s urban headquarters that he had missed at Akash’s. Roaming the streets, which are not exactly streets but simply patches of surface that have not been claimed yet by a diligent builder, Sergej had paused and turning to his father asked whether there was a market, whereupon Michael had directed him to one of the merchants vending weapons and gear for in-game slash fiat currency, yielding an irritated glance from his son. No, a market as in supermarket, as in selling cornflakes and lettuce and magazines. To Michael’s knowledge, there was not, and in subsequent forays into the heart of the nameless metropolis they descried a mansion, whose structure was made up entirely of ropes stretched between the ground and the adjacent buildings, and that would send them into a glitching frenzy every time they jumped, while the physics engine up north struggled to wrap its mind around the elasticity for the harp-like floor, an Escherian waterfall, a mind boggling three-dimensional ASCII-art tree, but no market, not even a bodega. Sergej got to work immediately, deciding for a star-shaped plot in the city’s center over Michael’s proposition of an spacious but suburban lot, and built a shop that for the lack of space and fundamental ignorance to what Michael told him about Gruen transfer had shelves as high as a mid-sized redwood and turned grocery shopping into a platformer. Now he is finishing stocking the upper shelves with fresh vegetables, sweets and salties are encouragingly placed at lower levels, root vegetables, too, Sergej loves oven-roasts. Visitors are pouring in through the sliding doors and the open roof, fragments of farsi, danish, english, and cantonese weave into a texture of babylonic micropolyphony, settings only allow for binary on/off of sound like IRL. Daylight lasts short and darkness falls quickly between the highrises, but the colored light of unregulated product placement illuminating the urban canyons at every level and angle compensates for the narrow window to the skybox turning pink. Player characters hired by resourceful businessmen sweat ad chatter laced with sparkly sound logos while standing unused and prostituted by their owners on busy corners, waiting for their players to return from work, unplug the infinite ad loop from the headset jack, and deliver them from their deplorable side gig with a flick of the analog stick. As an answer to the commercial exploitation of VoIP chat, people are blasting music of all genres into the world, generating a tapestry of noise with the lone clave of a dancehall tune hacked to be heard beyond the 15-feet communication radius rising over the sediment. Jagged David-Rudnick-like textures adorn the iron facade of the adjacent hangar used as an indoor car cemetery for early 2000s racing game models. The junkyard belongs to a Berlin collective of artists so priggishly aloof Michael would have had neither the courage nor the nerves so much as to set foot in their pre-gentrified real-life quarters. In their hyperrealist founding assembly over web-ordered ramen and gamepads the collective had established their common goal of collecting the scrap of the web to quote subvert the delete unquote and on a less grandiloquent level to feast on nostalgia diving into their old game collections and to amass the largest trash mound in the history of garbage collection. The car depot was only one of their numerous branches and among the more ordered of their establishments, which fostered its repurposing as a hangout and, as of recently, in a quick response to the PAUSE-order and its congeners abroad, for concerts of renowned noise artists amidst the clumsy renditions of targas and coupés. “Schoolteachers and bus drivers,” Michael pressed for jokingly on one of their faction’s forum threads that, in an attempt to cater to the incipient demand for building regulations, asked the community, so the headline went, of its wishes for the southern periphery of downtown bluecity, which is not its official name but merely one moniker among countless denominations either tersely functional or unbearably pompous contending for official recognition by way of longstanding Pie-Town-NM-like convention. Though participation in the game’s message boards is linked to a player’s identity and character, not to mention a valid credit card plus an account with select online payment providers slash social media platforms, discursive conduct is seldomly collaborative. Michael has a point, but few are volunteering to take on the arduous task of unmandated administration, least of all him.

Sergej is on the couch, skilfully handling his controller with his left while squeezing one of the fruit bars he brought from Berlin in packs of twenty - of which he is allowed to have precisely two a day, for without that limit they would have been consumed between baggage carousel and customs - through the glue joint of the biodegradable banana fiber wrapper with his right. Who knows what his dreams are? After he haphazardly hid the foot hole with an advertisement for next month’s likely to be canceled block party, Michael is taking a closer look at fixing the pitiful apartment door, seeing that a contractor’s visit has become unlikely to happen within the coming weeks. The sheet is still out front, probably for similar reasons, you win some, you lose some. A fragmentarily equipped toolbox, passed through clumsy hands of numerous craigslisters, lays open next to Michael, spelling out countersunk wood screws to the man with the cocked stapler gun. Kachunk, four times four, index nail breaks testing the sheet’s stability but the handyman examines his work with satisfaction. The door closes with the peal of foley thunder as Michael reenters. Ten thousand islands of an archipelago of cotton clouds draw across the bright-lit blue skies, calling for a stroll in the park or some other northern-European compulsive pleasuring in the glory of the white glowing giant above. Unimpressed, Sergej has turned a cold shoulder on the springtime splendour, slouching into the burgundy linen of the couch in halting conversation with the more approachable appendix of the artist collective, who, judging by the voice that Sergej has rerouted to the stereo speakers to relieve his squished lobes, should have approximately the boy’s age. The mimics of their characters’ lags miles behind the delicately chiseled details of the city surrounding them, and with the four emotional states the facial model of their avatars can deduce from player’s speech, the mute facial expressions fail even at the forgiving task of capturing the artists’ gen-X equanimity.

On screen, three members of the collective are moving a snake-eyed Scighera around the hangar in search of a suitable vacant spot. “My dad has loads of these ancient games. Shit he built half his furniture from keep cases. He could drown this place in car models alone.” Is he bragging about his father or do the walls in between them gently omit the eye-roll in Sergej’s statement. Over the sizzling rice and peas Michael decides to believe the former as he surveys the mental registers of his abundant collection. He leaves the rice to form its secret crust simmering unattendedly and goes down to get the mail, still trying to summon the complete contents of his archive.

A lone dog passes, shooting challenging looks at Michael as he steps out into the street with the mail in hand to catch some air. He realizes too late that it is the greyhound they cast for his company’s commercial. Everybody had pitched in to help with the shoot and Michael had ridden across town to pick up the miniature mailbag the dog would supposedly deliver your make-your-own-greeting-card in. He can swear that the dog that just took a left onto Throop and is vanishing ghost-like in the fogged-up windows of the laundromat is the race dog they hired from upstate, not to save on the wrong things. It had even recurred to him in a dream, that anthropomorphic creature with its velvety fur, slumped on horseback in an Italo wild west it had looked down on Michael with its sad eyes like well mouths. Go freudian on that. The mailbox is empty safe for one of his company’s thick envelopes of heavy unfinished paper that goes for an extra forty cents, twenty-five on bulk orders. The design with the greyscale hang-in-there kitten is a classic of the line, much to Michael and his fellow colleagues’ disbelief. The folded card he draws from the anthracite lining is narrowly printed with one page-spanning sentence winding in and out of guilty explanations, diving into the depth of cushioning deviations, resurfacing in a final clause comma heartsick but with no other choice as to terminate only and exclusive the employment-related dimension of our esteemed relationship.

Michael will make a point of victimizing himself when talking about the loss of his job, omitting that, A, he did not care to make himself indispensable and, B, he did complain to several co-workers about the work’s infinite, tedious circuit signposted with insipid greeting cards. Michael works, or worked, as of now, on the frontend of their online store, a job description he used to conjure up the daylight-proofed, led-lit coding caves and a scent of energy drink and deployment-day adrenaline with new acquaintances, the internet’s fourth decade dawning but people still believe in the digital frontier myth. In fact he rarely curled braces and closed tags but jam the shop’s website texts into unintuitive formulations that both customers as well as search engines would disgorge immediately, so that their website would stand out in the dimensionless mall of congratulations’ search results. The wide jumbotrons displaying their printables in soft focused macro photography make Michael recall drug-induced vision. Being a trope does not make the depiction true, nobody with a clear mind and eye sees objects in focus like that. However, the images supposedly underline the material value, A/B testing has put a seal on it.

Sergej was the eye of the storm with dad’s headphones in the bathroom, with a wall of sound, what music does your son listen to, Michael, unpenetrated by the bell of the kicked door. Already in the corridor Michael entered the white, impersonal job board, the first want ad opens, a common peek at happily conversing workmates over the title header. But the list is sparse, and although the last time he checked few writers would have gone for the docs, who knows who else the quaint dog paid a visit to. Fuck. Michael’s mental printout rates NC-17, raised on bootlegged 90s US action flicks, R.L. Ermey quote he's the kind of guy that would drink a gallon of gasoline so he could piss in your campfire unquote, and so on. And again, it would be considerably easier without Sergej. That last thought he strikes off the printout. Through the look-check mirror in the hall, Michael can peer into the bathroom. His eyes rolled left all the way to the stop, Sergej, on the plastic stool that Michael used for painting the ceilings, is pushing his index to the tip of his nose, bending it up, then down, then back up. When his father knocks softly, he awkwardly catches a curl of his bangs as if peeling a gum from the strands, embarrassed, but more annoyed. Smirking father: “What are you doing?” “Nothing.” He tries to brush past his father, his gaze sweeps the dark hairs off the eggshell tiles. “Hey,” Michael stops his son, “you tell me yours, I tell you mine.” Sergej looks up at his father, visibly computing the assessment of his options, whether his father would make a scene if he refuses. Better not take the chance, the air has become too thick over the last few days. “Do you think my nose is gonna straighten as I grow up?” His question prompts a puzzled look. “See this bend upwards here? Neither you nor mom have it.”

He takes his time responding to his son’s question, examining the nose’s curvature from different angles, following the genetic trail of his son’s features down the line. The unclean skin under the milky, smooth surface like his own and his mother’s. Large bottles of antifreeze-colored liquids that he used to shine a flashlight through when he took a bath as a boy, soaking in a fluid-blue sea-world tank. “You see this?” Michael points to his nasal root. “The growth of the nose proceeds in downwards, like an eggplant. As you can see, we have the same root, do you feel this indentation here? I think mom also has that.” Squinting, Sergej follows his fingertip tracing the valley of his nasion. “Concerning the lower parts of the nose, you’ll see that it’ll change during the next couple of years.” Their eyes meet in the mirror. “You’re not happy with your nose?” Sergej moves his head in an ambiguous gesture. “Your turn.” “I got fired.” “What?” “A dog brought it.” “And now?” “I guess I’ll get another one.” “Mh.” The boy looks at his father with an expression that could be inexhaustible wisdom. “I’m sorry.” “Yeah, me too.”

They’re out of fruit and low on milk and so, for the first time in three days, Sergej and his father prepare to sever the invisible ties to their home network. Michael kneels before his son, who is sitting cushioned on three issues of last week’s newspaper on the telephone seat, helping him with his acomposia, which indeed is a condition recognized by a number of NYC doctors, albeit the WHO assessment is still pending. Sergej looks aside while his father is tying his shoes. The heavily padded fingerless gloves are grotesquely oversized and he has to keep his fingers splayed to keep them from slipping off his delicate hands. A woolen beanie bearing the logo of a formerly local baseball team now trying to recover their form in arid southwestern climates, as well as a alpaca scarf knit by a college acquaintance, whose name Michael will have forgotten within the next two years, complete the protective trio they have dug from the depths of Michael’s wardrobe. Of Michael himself, only a bar and two triangles of pale skin stand out from the all black surface of cotton, polyacrylic, and brand shades. A leaf blower sounds hoarse up the street but when they walk towards the subway no one is to be seen, even the greater intersections are empty safe for an occasional speeding car. The subway still runs on schedule, and Sergej hides abashedly behind Michael after he, in full song of a billboard hot 100 new entry, startlingly discovered the lone woman at the end of the platform glancing over. The express train flashes past.

Adam had another six days of his 20 days R&R, it was the minus first anniversary of the German Instrument of Surrender taking effect and prematurely hot, but with his summer flu he was shivering on the platform of Hausvogteiplatz, a bouquet of daisies was leaving a Hänsel-Gretel-trail behind him as he asked around for services to Lichtenberg. Turns out he should have inquired already at his home stop, Kochstraße, closed for heavy damages to the platform, a beautifully circular hole had put the platform in quaint communication with the busy boardwalk. Stadtmitte was charred black and similarly out of service, so he skipped the first of two transfers on the way to Barbara, directly tracing the hypotenuse, quite literally since rubble had largely reshuffled the distribution of obstacles and passages, to the heart of the garment district, now selling “guaranteed aryan” lingerie. While the northern branch of the A train is still operating, three out of six stations on his last leg on the E train are suspended, cast-iron objects punching holes in bricks and reinforced concrete. He could have taken the C south towards Neukölln to hop on the ring, but the subway tunnel past Bergstraße had been repurposed as a clandestine armament factory, and he would have needed to walk close to a kilometer through a neighborhood he despised. The platform was filled with people, some of them watching him warily, moving closer towards the edge of the tracks to secure their place on the car in case a train would arrive, some of them showed compassion. It did arrive, less than fifteen minutes into the wait, the train, square like a polygon primitive, its friendly round eyes asking forgiveness for its delay. Anticipating the position of the doors, the waiting were pushing towards the edge of the platform, funnelling into the cars. The train is brimming.

The train is deserted. It’s survival in the city. Clean subway cars and MTA patrols, but Michael keeps looking out nervously left and right for muggers, he needs to hold on to his money. Green-themed supermarkets with wood paneling and ample dietary food selections are not an option right now, he realizes too late, the friendly Puerto Ricans’ market around the corner would have been more adequate. A German artist in the unpaid residence of the gallery that made a business of luring solvent talent with New York City radiance into three-months quote unquote residencies, which in truth are horrendously overpriced rental contracts with its for-profit subsidiary, has moved her exhibition to the showroom windows. Concentrated quirkiness, a funny-ha-ha joke of an installation, but diverting to skim together with Sergej, who has been showing conspicuous interest in all things artistic on their forays into the city. They contemplate the window spanning, annotated Fowler map of Testhausen, a settlement sparing with streets but impressing with towering skyscrapers in the middle of nothing, Teststraße 5 alone housing two banks, a choir, an ophthalmologist, an otorhinolaryngologists, and a gastroenterologist, twenty-five companies of various business activities, as well as a zoo, which must be in the backyard obstructed by the adjacent highrises. Michael wonders if he should explain the joke or whether it would spoil the fascination of the fictitious city, the metropolis built on developer’s neglect in the wasteland of unconnected routes and dead links.

Halfway to the discount supermarket they run into the end of the line. Chances of missing it are low, since a horn-rimmed twentysomething a few people ahead of them keeps blaring the shop’s name without cease. Pal, what’s your problem? A stout jogger with a handlebar mustache hastily overtakes them on the last meters. Up down up down, he bobs, running in place, giving Michael challenging looks. Garlic breath, bad breath, something, but it is coming from behind, from the tall guy that sways and is definitely too close for Michael’s comfort. This time it’s him shooting angry looks back, while trying to catch a glimpse of the gorgeous model type grown like a basketball player that got in line behind, completing the ill-matched Dalton file of the jogger, him, stinker, model. “Get in line for C-Town, folks!” An allegedly deafblind stuffs flyers in the hands of the people in line with suspicious precision. Too tired to read himself, Sergej has his father report on the surreptitious experiments of surveillance capitalist ventures on the homeless in city hall station. One hundred and twenty unfortunate souls handcuffed and chained with their necks to the Guastavino tile of the loop, each wearing sophisticated VR headgear, noise cancelling headphones as well as an electrode-studded stimulator neoprene suit, oblivious of the last nine months of world affairs and precipitation, tube fed binarily and chemically. “Doesn’t sound so bad, does it, Serge?” The jogger spits out towards the curb. It’s early in the crisis, everybody’s still high with the thrill of the end of the world finally happening, on steroids, on coke, on the edge and not because of the kids’ or the husband’s constant presence in the apartment lacking another room for providing privacy to all inhabitants simultaneously but because of excitement for some real life eschaton action, for double checking the locations of prepper stashes, for stuffing the .357 in waistbands and holsters. “Queue for C-Town, people!” Sergej still loves shopping carts, navigates it through the abundant supply of canned goods the clerks didn’t even bother to stack in storage but instead piled into colorful arches, Michael has to stop his son from trying to snatch the keystone. Better prevent A&E. Paper towels soft as velvet, pretty steep but also the last of its kind. Michale feels the fluffiness through the packaging. And suddenly there is the jogger again. “You better watch your fucking kid, pal.” Threateningly he moves towards them. He sniffs back his snot, at arm’s length now, Sergej stares at the burly man mesmerized, cowed. He’s gonna spit, Michael knows it, he is going to. The three of them in perfect suspension, flush DX-7 presets over the supermarket’s sound system. Pause. Then, in an explosion of motion, before the jogger gets to expel the dreaded bodily contents, Michael, putting all force into the silky-soft cellulose, beans the short jock with the pack of eight, and the jogger actually yields under the package, down he goes, even the plastic wrapping holds, no paper must go wasted. A japanese mascot appears from psychedelic smoke, praising the towels’ quality to far-east ad-viewers. Confetti. Stars, and an abrupt pang as Michael hits the floor, the jogger already on him, shaking him by his lapels, Sergej’s crescendoing yelps for assistance ring through his ears. He doesn’t get a good smack at him before other customers arrive to pull him off the impertinent wuss. Pantingly he pulls down his tracksuit top over his bare navel fold under the reproachful eyes of other customers that have joined the first responders to skim their share of moral courage. Hopeless hypocrites indifferent to who’s the aggressor here as long as they have their conviction maintained that they are on the side of light in these darkening days. A jar of hot honey gherkins and he’s off to the checkout. Sergej has been seeking to put some distance between himself and his dad, who is left to pull himself together with the limited assistance of the fellow shopper that intervened before and is now uncomfortably raking the remaining sand of last weekend’s Long Island beach walk in his tote for a detached earbud tip because the small talk has gone stale. He feels like going home but he isn’t certain this week’s allowance in his pocket will pay the fare. Six varieties of pickled peppers and he’s gone through ingredients, nutritional info and family constellations of the mom-and-pop ops. If only the lights would go out and emergency lighting would guide them to the nearest exit, so he could escape the glances of the passing customers. “Come on. Let’s get you some Reese’s.” Yes. Buy me. I’m not even kidding. Anything to get us out of this. They walk to the station in silence.

Another stalemate between sofa and guest bed. Michael empties his clip on an inattentive enemy across the dip. Five seconds later he’s dead, caught getting up by somebody on the brow of the hill. He drops the gamepad into his lap. “You’re aware that he would’ve attacked us, right?” His father doesn’t have a piano, only a strat for show, so Sergej is trying to emulate the relaxing, diverting quality of his instrument by letting his fingers play on the broad frame of the guest bed. He hears the question, that is really a statement, the first time already but waits for Michael to repeat it, which he does promptly and verbatim, to not squander a potential escape. “So you did instead.” “Exactly.” Michael knows that his rationalization is less than convincing, but having Sergej forget about it as one of his father’s occasional eruptions of harmless violence is still preferable to him seeing the actual reason. Flash back to the store aisles, sulphur- and cadmium-colored tags, black-holes of zeroes sucking free floating fiat from an otherworldly account that Michael peeks at through the oculus of his banking app and it hits him: the grave miscalculation, the disparity of debit dates that had him overlook the outstanding withdrawal of this months rent. And then the stubby knob advancing dead set on making trouble. And then he hit him.

Sergej is trying to ignore his father’s pacing in the other room. He adjusts his mental piano playing to the steady beats of the steps on the creaky floorboards. “Serge, can you hold the fort for half an hour?” “Sure,” he responds without looking up from his keyboard, departing on another invention on tomorrow’s case counts.

For a split second, Michael ponders going missing. He went out to buy smokes seven years ago to the day. Somebody with a jackknife should come to relieve Michael of his overinsured smartphone so they could last past the next rent payment. There is really no reason to freeze in the cold of a void spring twilight if all that Freddie F is asking for is a brief KYC call plus a social security number plus an informal photo slash scan of a state-issued ID, but Sergej does not need to be confronted with anything but the reassuring exclamation of “Dad’s having a new job”. If not babies let it bring jobs, the stork. Sergej will need to take that first mug shot photo with id and hand-written terms-and-conditions approval soon enough. A squirrel jumps on the seat next to Michael and utters a sharp call begging for food. Armrests compartment the steel lattice surface designed with rain and the pee of street sleepers in mind, one of them smeared with blood of an unhealthy color as if an addict has popped like a balloon into thin air when shooting up on it. The slow responses of Freddy F’s servers suggest a surge in registrations. Won’t take long and all workers will unite under the discount-yellow base caps that constitute Freddy F’s employee uniform and first materialization of the corporate body. Antonin Vedyev has long understood that the future of his empire does not depend any longer on his management decisions but on his display of unquestionable power, in view of the fact that one night shift of a disloyal dev team would suffice to break the boundaries isolating the individuals of the multitude. Give them a chat room and you’ll have strikes, unionizing, and communization in no time. That’s why Vedyev keeps his unsuspecting enemies even closer, in a second materialization of Freddy F, a private seaside town in Belize catering to the demands of silicon-valley-exceptionalists for entertainment, broadband internet, and a foreshortened prospect of making the world a better place. A private ministry of information makes sure any censorious feature articles are promptly rectified to cushion the blow at developers’ morale. The complex rests on a bedrock of fear and an underground bunker extending its galleries far into the coastal limestone that Vedyev supposedly patrols himself gun-studded and with a pack of sheening dogs sans muzzles. The laughs at the russo-tropical strong man soon died away under the unchanging display of absolute power ignorant of all historical or contemporary context. Concern and disgust were similarly transient responses to Vedyev’s self fashioning. And eventually, through pure insistence, the company’s media effort stripped Vedyev’s type of its gendered, even its human attributes and established Freddy F’s founder as an alien exclamation point of force.

Rent won’t be an issue. Freddy F guarantees wages far above the average for all types of employment. As far as the labor contract goes, Freddy F’s agreement is as voluminous as it is eccentric and Michael consults one of the numerous summaries to be found throughout the web for Sergej is probably becoming uneasy, he can sense it. The indefinite duration of the employment has been construed by legal reviewers as an innovative growth strategy. Second, there is the thing with the soul. On signature of the contract, the EMPLOYEE grants the EMPLOYER perpetual, worldwide, no-charge, royalty-free, irrevocable license to reproduce, modify, publicly display, sublicense, and distribute the EMPLOYEE’s soul. The sentence is concerning only until one realizes that this is just another spleen of the nerd culture, a meme missed out on. Yada yada, Freddy F grants its employees the right to choose a job from its internal market, wages, as already mentioned, above average, should no job be available within the range of a one-hour commute using public transportation, Michael would receive a generous basic income. One job offer may be declined by the employee, otherwise you work what you get or the well will run dry. Michael can always terminate the contract in observance of the three-month notice period, although didn’t they say irrevocable talking about the soul business his phone vibrates, making him start. “Dad, there’s someone in the kitchen!”

Barely noticeable eddies of dust, crumbs, dandruff are transmigrating the rooms on unpredictable trajectories. The apartment has four major locales where monsters may be hidden. In addition there are myriads of minuscule hideouts for compressible, gaseous or however ectoplasmic spirits and ghosts. A colony of them resides in the crevices of the floorboards, but their kind is discreet and presumably related or identical to silver fish. In the vent pipe of the bathroom, there’s another one, lost soul gotten stuck halfway out to the roof, Sergej can hear him or her or it rattle when traffic is low outside. At least that one is securely caged behind the vent grill, Sergej has tested the firmness of its bolting. On top of the door to his room one is hidden in the gap of the door casing, one out for his limbs, that cut Sergej’s arms clean off with a sort of guillotine years ago, when he was sticking the Donald-Duck mag through the crack to secretly keep reading after lights-out by the glow of the plasma TV. A dream might have bled into his recollection, yet he continues to jump across the doorstep, not to tempt fate. This one though, is an unseen kind, definitely about human shaped, judging from the split second glance Sergej caught of the spectre as it stepped into the kitchen. No sound comes from the kitchen, even the cooling unit has gone mute, so that Sergej’s youthful ears crank up the infinite gain till he petrifies huddled in hypersensitization. Music! Anything to break the silence until dad comes home. He leaps to the stereo, knows how to handle the redundant vinyl unit thankfully loaded with something, and presses play. Somethings wrong with the system though, wait, it’s only the intro, come on, gimme a single major cadence, why this noise. Because like every generation his father’s needs its explosive regression, a music of twofold nostalgia, one for the staccato signals of constant information running through the starting modem, one for some broad-stroke idea of the joyful release in a previous state of being. An answer to the allegedly effortless adulthood snugly running along preset paths like driving home for Christmas must be the autoaggressive destruction of musical production, like mincing the signal through a tube screamer or slicing up audio renders with the cursor’s sharpened edge. That is the aldilà of pop, so better turn it off, Sergej, unless you ain’t afraid of no ghost. Fee still is on quick dial on the grimy wireless landline receiver. “Mom, can you stay on the phone until dad comes back?”

Michael is secretly grateful for the pretext of intercontinental rates when he cuts short the call between Sergej and his mom on his return. He snaps at his son too harshly, Michael realizes immediately. Sergej whiningly defends himself and pulls his father into the kitchen to show him fingertip traces in the flour dust on the counter. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have let you alone.” That’s not the point. “That’s not the point, dad!” Sergej is insistent. “Can you please call somebody about the ghosts?” Michael pauses, blankly, thinking. “Sergej, we can’t afford a medium right now.” His son looks at him pleadingly. “But I’ll tell you what we can do. Do you know lemon traps?” He doesn’t. “Forget garlic and all of that crap, if there’s one thing that spirits do not tolerate, it’s electric tension. You’ve gone over voltage and that stuff in school, right?” Sergej is visibly dubious about his father’s expertise. “We built a circuit last year. But garlic’s for vampires, dad.” Keep on, he’s gonna go for it. “A lemon trap is like a mousetrap for spirits. And the beauty of it is, that” finger’s crossed that there’s a lemon left in the fridge “we need only four things. There you go. One.” Nails. Let’s hope they’re galvanized, whatever that means. Sergej follows his father into the bedroom, the toolbox is kept under the bed. “Two. Watch out, pack’s open.” Sergej strokes the fruit’s waxy shiny surface. “Three.” Wire. “Why do ghosts hate voltage?” “The human brain runs on electricity. Every thought that goes through your brain is electric. But it’s actually not only electricity. There is another element that what’s going on inside your head is made of. And - this is a theory - this other element remains after people die. So when the brain dies and its electricity subsides, this other substance gravitates towards other direct currents of low voltage, like other brains or,” “Or batteries!” “Right. Let’s see if I have some pennies.” “There’s also a pack of batteries in the cutlery drawer.” “How about we try both.” Michael’s phone vibrates with the confirmation of his labor contract. He smiles looking at the three pennies from his wallet. “Look.” Sergej reaches out to grab the lemon from his hand. “Wait, I want you to look first, then you can do it yourself. Penny. Nail.” Sergej is winding a piece of wire serpentine between his fingers. “Hey, I need you to pay attention. Penny, nail, and then you connect the two with the wire.” Phone purrs on counter. Dear Michael, \n welcome to the team of Freddy F. We are happy to offer you your very first work assignment \n Delivery Job (sic) \n March 27th, 07:00 p.m. - 11:00 p.m \n 1089 Broadway \n Brooklyn, NY11221 \n Click to Confirm \n You have not yet used your option to reject an offer. “We need another one for my room. Do we still have lemons?” Eleveni.e. twenty-three hours is late. Past Sergej’s bedtime. Toothbrush. “Dad, we’re out of lemons!” Who knows though what the next offer’ll be. Could be a night shift, who knows. Who knows? “Daaad!” “Jesus! Just take another fruit!” “But it needs to be a lemon!” Gonna be fine, he’s old enough and 23 isn’t that late after all. They’ll shift their rhythm. Seven hours, he’ll call to get him to brush his teeth. Hide the sweets. Confirm. Good boy. “Sorry, Serge. What’s up?” “It needs to be a lemon.” His son looks at him with big eyes. “Take something sour, that’ll do. Take the sour gums. See if we can fit the metal in.”

The deal is lights out at ten sharp. He’s never gonna know. Yes he is, he’ll feel every bulb getting home. Sergej has secretly touched the ambient-temperate halogen bulb of the clamp lamp and is fine. The air in the apartment is thick as a side dish to the butter-beaded eggs and beans of the incomplete english breakfast they are having on the couch, but they’ve chewed tasteless the humane coziness you only notice briefly when you get home. The windows are shut against the heavy rain that ruined this year’s first beach day Michael had planned for them. The point of view on the television screen wanders with simulated first-person tedium. “Dad, how much money do we have?” Innocent interest resonates in his question. “You shouldn’t worry about that, we have enough money. Relatively speaking. And daddy has another job now.” “Papa, I’m not four.” “Right. Anyway, you shouldn’t worry about money.” “Can I prepare myself another egg?” “Finish that one and add another one for me.” Three eggs that’s a dollar for the child’s sunny-side-ups. Better not get the organic ones, not the ones sparing the male chicks, whose existence is constituted of those labels alone, happy unculled egg yolk dyed. “I have twenty six dollar something. But I think there’s more than five-hundred in my account at home. Euros.” Cute. “That’s very kind of you. We’re fine though. You should keep that for yourself. Listen, if you want to support me, can I rely on you tonight?” “Sure.”

The lands of bank holiday reside on a possible world with a twenty-three hour rotation period, making the diurnal cycle feel almost natural but not quite. The resulting continual shift of in-game daylight favors none of the earth’s 38 time zones but the distribution of mirror sites does as pacific pings show. As Sergej fries the last two of the twelve-pack eggs, rays are tracing the projections of his towering superstore against the opposite walls. Before long daylight won’t matter to them on street level anyway as players keep piling their battle-earned building supplies into three digit stories above. Today, Michael reads on a second screen, one of the faction’s subgroups are burning a player at the stake, heshe was running across the roofs with a flamethrower burning penthouses shouting “I am the DIN 18531 angel avenging the damp and the musty of downstairs!” They cannot burn the player’s character but they can make an effigy just as they have been creating objects increasingly challenging to imagine. “Hallo, Herr [Nachname], is Sergej at home?” It’s the art collective’s offspring. “How nice of you to come by.” “I don’t have him in my friend’s list.” “Yeah, he doesn’t have his own account yet. But it’s nice that you come by. I used to do that, too, when I was your age.” “Is Sergej home?” “I’ll get him for you.” Michael finds his son in the kitchen corner, eggs uncracked on the counter. He is intensely studying something thumb-sized next to the fridge, copper, black, and silvery, oozing sperm-like on the hardwood. “Don’t touch that!” and pulls Sergej away gruffly. “Is that a ghost?” “No.” That’ll never come out. “Why don’t you go sit down, there’s that artsy kid for you. I’ll do the eggs.”

When he comes back into the living room, eggs sizzling, battery still oozing, Sergej is already on his way to the stake. “Where’s your friend?” “He couldn’t further for some reason.” “Where are you going?” “There’s a fire on one of the roofs.” “Serge, I don’t want you to go there. He probably got stuck cause they put an age fence around it.” “Come on! It’s nothing I haven’t seen before!” “Sad enough, but I do not like the crowd that goes to these kinds of functions. We can build our own fire.” “Not the same.” Grumbles, but needs to switch the controller for cutlery to broach the runny yolk through the salt-wetted tissue. “Dad, what’s your position on me getting a job?” There’s road rage outside the window. Nobody takes the subway anymore. “What’s my position? Well, my position remains the same, that you shouldn’t have to worry about money. However, if we’re talking about some kind of get-a-fiver-for-a-cut-lawn-deal, I’m sure we can find a mutually profitable agreement.” Car doors slam and the voices get louder. “Not exactly. Paul,” (artsy kid) “‘s mom and her group are making a residency,” must’ve picked up that word from his little friend “and they collect old models from old games and integrate,” that one, too, although he is indeed articulate for his age “them into bluecity. And Paul said, they are looking for a research assistant that helps them to collect models. And I told them that we could use the money and that we have loads of old games.” Sounds of an escalating shoving bout on the street. Why is he not happy? Ungrateful, showing no gratitude, making a poor return. Michael bounces up, takes a run and ejects himself halfway out the window. “Shut the fuck up! Shut up or I’ll call the cops!” Who cares if he told his friend, what’s it to him? The cockfighters disperse, swaggering back into their cars for a deep sip from their double shot thermos mugs. “Please Dad! You always wanted to show me those games, anyway.” “Let’s talk to his mom, I’m sure we can figure something out.”

On a corner amidst the Brooklyn slave owner/black power grid a rubber Titanic sinks into the concrete of the parking lot as the fallow air slowly escapes the bouncy slide. Which of this generation’s catastrophes are destined to become future fair attractions, which ones are appropriately shaped to live up to the always amusing death fantasy of a liveried string quartet sliding across polished decks into Atlantic wet. He’ll be early, but better than late on his first day of work for Freddy F. Cooked an ample dinner for Sergej to eat, made pudding with a real vanilla bean thrown into the mix and stuck a brand new toothbrush into the cooling dessert, the head of the one he had brought from Berlin already v-shaped from insufficiently monitored use. Got that one on you, Fee. They have talked to the kid’s mom and fixed a deal for Sergej to be paid 10 euro per model collection, i.e. game he combs through, another item checked off his list. Ten seemed too much for a prepubescent child to him (as to the kid’s mom) but Sergej has become a skilful negotiator studying a German antique-selling TV show, as he jovially conceded afterwards. Extracting the models and normalizing them is indeed quite complicated, though, so I think ten are really appropriate. Normalizing, where does he get that, Michael smiles to himself. Let him have it. Some titles from his library had to be hidden for violence, sex, language, and adult themes, when he had gotten Sergej to take a bath before he would have to leave, he reassembled his furniture, removing the critical game discs from their jewel cases. Left Sergej in an alright state, freshly bathed, primed to be a healthily fed, dentally groomed big boy.

Brooklyn’s Broadway is his favorite street because of its suggestion of a determinist world. Enclosed in an engineered environment, the subway viaduct could come crashing down on him but at least there would have been signs to read, calculations to compute foretelling his fate. Nobody waits for him at the address indicated in the emails he has received. T minus ten, he leans to the wall and closes his eyes for a second. Despite the streets being only half empty, the only sounds he perceives emanate from objects, awoken by flows and momentum, like an empty bag in an arena of supine fans. Nice objects, friendly faced fans turning their heads slowly like grazing cows, determined faces of cars on a mission to get somewhere, giving Michael a yellow-orange wink. The front he is leaning to yawns rattling and a woman steps out over the epoxy coated tongue peeking outside. “You Michael?” He is led inside to the back room of a semi-professional motorcycle shop and left to wait there while his host slash employee question mark is fixing him a hot drink. Half of the large room is painted matte white, floors and walls, ceiling and all, even sockets and switches look like they have been repeatedly painted over. Michael follows the trodden path of dirty grey footprints around an ensemble of four dioramas neatly spaced in the middle of the white half. Rural scenes with farm animals, clay houses, and sheet roofs, occasionally a car plus three or four humanoid figurines each. Tinted grayscale in seemingly inverted not inverted black-and-white. She comes back with two mugs of delicious coffee, lukewarm to not delay his immediate departure on having been briefed. Objectives in chronological order: Put on the HV vest and hard hat and get on the motorcycle with the jerry-rigged truss-frame trailer out back. Go to the construction site marked on the map. Leave the ride at the construction site entrance and show Susan’s badge at the gate. Get to the material storage on the top level at the indicated location. Find a box cutter. Cut a length of fifteen feet from the ten-foot roll of waterproof tarp. Take the tarp back to your motorcycle. Get back to Susan (that’s your employer) before 10 p.m. Help Susan cut the tarp. Achievements, optional but rewarded (cash bonus or bumped rating?): Don’t let anyone see you getting the material. The coffee mug has a trick thick base, the end of the beverage comes before Susan can even finish her briefing. “Don’t you have a box cutter I can take with me.” “I do not.” Michael eyes the hard hat she hands him along with the vest and badge. “You know, technically, this isn’t a proper motorcycle helmet, strictly speaking.” “Get a move on. I’m not gonna have another European lay down the law for me. You understand imperial, right?” “I have a hunch.” “That’ll do. If you get back here before sunset, I’ll throw in a tip. I don’t wanna be here all night.”

Some minutes pass while Michael inspects the motorcycle and its trailing contraption. The darkened door viewer might be Susan watching him from inside or somebody else, some adverse hire, contracted to monitor him on his first day of work, or merely the peephole’s privacy cover on the inside. The up-popping app of Freddy F reminds him of his next destination and of the time he has already wasted TÜV-testing the grape colored Honda with a beak like a New Hollywood spacecraft. Steering backlash and eleven years sans practice make the first meters slash yards, you’re not in Europe anymore, a swerving ride, the empty trailer dragging in the back doesn’t help, either. The driver of a pickup the size of Michael’s first apartment is visibly on edge but too concerned for his custom paint job to overtake the careening vehicle. Traffic has been dense throughout the last days but now the streets are deserted, given that he should be hitting the second half of evening rush hour. At Broadway station, a feller buncher is knocking down tents and platforms of a makeshift camp suspended from the J-M-viaduct. A violent rain of household items teems down into the skip below, stray shreds of bright flysheet blowing across the lanes make driving past a victory parade. His motorcycle wants to linger a while watching, the pickup sees his chance and accelerates, veering around Michael, tires screeching. Swearing, honking, metal on metal from the sounding skip. Michael pushes the curious machine to the curb and kicks, its engine coughs, then Michael, too, violently. He has to support himself against a Chinese-speaking newspaper dispenser. Two deep breaths, he looks up and sees the felling head extending towards him slowly. He recedes backwards, sidewards towards the subway entrance, fast suddenly, jerking around, fleeing down the drafty stairs. When the passing train above is out of earshot, he walks back up cautiously, listening. Sounds of seagulls, sounds of wind, the sounds of imagining a quiet city. And through the crack of a window escapes flattened laughter, real funny. The look of Michael on the second to last step, five feet tall with his pinkish hard hat and the unmatching vest makes them crack up even more. He gives the reflecting windshield the finger and trods back to the curb, at least his ride has found some leisure and gladly removes him from the scene. The Honda buzzes placatory and Michael’s not even mad anymore, good one, fellas, gotta admit. But oh, the shock, he is a high strung mammal. Recovering the thought the brutes in the barred cab interrupted, as a matter of fact there are no homeless in the streets no more. Michael shivers with thoughts of evil satisfaction. He needs to act out the utter atrocities in his head to tire his hideous thoughts before they make it to his vocal tract. Fucking racist that he is, fucking bigot, inhumane, subhuman that he is, conceited and tainted with German violence running through his eugenic veigns, spoilt rotten with furtive awe of prime genocides and prime profitable guiltiness, kick him to the curb, rip his aryanized swabian red-white-and-blue tracksuit top, let him strave to death, freeze to death, let him be smushed by a two ton exported KdF car snatching the last spot. Wistful sweet caress of seabreeze like a bride’s train passes as Michael crosses the bridge into Manhattan. Off the bridge he turns right onto Norfolk, which is a mistake, as it shows, his trailer is just wide enough to draw an orange rallye stripe along the side of the double parked delivery van with its waxy rust-proofing. Thank Jeff Preston for it’s only a sub’s dinged up van, she’ll barely notice the fresh mark. Ten first class package lengths further the next dotcom truck makes it clear that Michael shall not pass, and as he peers past the haggard body of the car, a young woman with a baby strapped to her back gives him an angry look. She hurls the dolly into the back and drives on to rejoin the long line of delivery vans creeping up the Lower East Side like an earthworm, its segments opening and closing ranks, a trash truck joins at the end. Michael sees an opening and squeezes past the idling van, it’s driver’s watching Louie yelling from the dash. The next vehicle is again too wide to pass, the leisurely animal blasts kraut at full volume, sweet smoke emanates from the gaps in the shell. Michael however is impatient and his Freddy F app even more so, it’s display is running up milliseconds. Now red as well. With a slow glissando of the engine, Honda says another pause time. Cursing, kicking, at least the worm stays calm. Michael pushes bike and trailer on the sidewalk. “Some gum?” A wrinkled lady holds out her pack, wiggling as if baiting a stray. He extends his hand but she is quicker. “One’s a quarter.” “Are those for individual resale?” “You can have two for 35 cents.” The gum is thick and more chewy than its name suggests, he shouldn’t have taken the bargain offer. Smackingly they watch the carnival parade of delivery vans poke along. Lotta new hires. Here comes the ice cream van, didn’t even bother to cut its chimes, perhaps it serves to lure down the ungrateful upper floor tenants. Another van. Not a van but an old Jetta convertible, creeping at max speed so that the piled boxes don’t fall. Another one. More vans and he and his companion will start cheering. One is vermillion, one is yel-LOW, one has taken another in tow. “Wanna buy something else?” “Ain’t the shop closed?” The Ain’t still makes him feel like a native, aspirated T aside. “I’d lock up for you. Special service.” “No thanks, I’m good.” “Oh, come on, hard-working young man like you should treat himself.” A backfiring GMC fumigates the neighborhood. Michael used to kidnap mob caporegime in Liberty City in one of those. Good times. Cough, cough. He seeks refuge in the bodega his new acquaintance has locked up in the meantime. Light falls through the half-opened roller shutter like a saloon door and Michael hardly makes out the aisles in the crammed corner shop. “Snacks are in the back and at the checkout. And make it quick!” Bars yielding soft with caramel cream sticking to one’s palate while the teeth cleave crunchy nuts or wafers, sweet absolution, but they’re hard to find when his eyes have no time to get used to the dark. The candidate bets that he can tell fifty kinds of chocolate bars by their packaging wearing blindfolding goggles with plastic prop chocolates stuck to their glasses. A stumble and he’s where he assumes the counter. “How much?” “Yes, how much.” “I was hoping for a dollar, that’s all I have right now.” “Young man, you are thinking only about money. Do you have children? Yes you do. You probably have a young girl of your own. Square jaw, green eyes like you. Little bit of a hot-head, like her father. Your daughter will understand that money is just a bad proxy for what really makes the world go round. Most likely she still knows that money won’t rid you of all your debts, and maybe she won’t forget it like you did. It’s one forty-nine, I’d say, here’s your change, I’d say. But today, I offered you a special service, so you owe me. So tell me, how will you settle your debt.” “Would you be okay with credit.” “How will you repay my favor?” “Listen, I read enough of a blog post about the Stern Review that I generally relate to your rap, but right now, I neither have the time nor the nerve to not think about money. If I don’t have to pay cash or currency, even better. But honestly” “Be creative! That’s what you want to be, isn’t it? That’s what you claim to be.” If there would be enough light, Michael would have looked her in the eye defiantly.

“ Über uns’re Welt solln kommen

Schmerzen Ohne Weh und Klag’

Dass sie uns’rem Herrn genommen

Der einst Schmerz über uns bracht’

Lasst uns uns’ren Schmerz verwalten

Rechtens teilen ohne Trug

Uns’re Schmerzen soll’n uns einen

Einig für’s gemeine Gut ”

Our world shall be befallen

By a hurt without a woe

That it shall be taken from our

Lord who once brought hurt upon

Let us wield our hurt, united

Righteously and without fault

Our hurt shall unify us

Jointly for the common good

The pause after Michael had finished suggested that she smiled contentedly in the dark. His voice, though not unerring on the notes, was still voluminous despite the lack of practice. Plus, worker’s songs have this air that makes even the stupidest of the dyslexic farm hands get the gist of it. No wonder she’s content, a lot of red in the flag hanging out front beside old glory. “Thanks for shopping. Have a nice day.” She couldn’t have gone another day without a customer, without an exchange. The engine is still warm, Michael leaves his hard-earned bar on the exhaust for a minute to soften the caramel. He has a pen ready to help squeeze every last bit out of the wrapper. Tentatively he tries the starter. Where were you so long? Off he goes turning left before he can catch up with the delivery procession. Gooey sugary it sticks to his teeth, he can feel it, wolf in sweet clothes, he must stop at First Park to rinse out his mouth. With his long fingernails, he removes the persistent residue, scrubs the enamel until it shines like the polished bronze of the drinking bowl. Shiny it is indeed. Here, too, all the homeless are gone. Rudy, too. Rudy the well-known citizen of first park that Michael had exchanged a few niceties with once. The baby boomer in a colorful polyacrylic pullover with the ironed white collar of his shirt sticking out had admired Michael’s Artengo running shoes. Same colors as Rudy’s sweater, what are the odds? One in 715 based on the thirteen base colors of ICSS-NBS. Rudy probably must have watched 715 joggers pass on a daily basis, considering he was there on the bench every time that Michael looked out of the hotel room window with a view of First Park, yet Rudy was excited when he saw Michael in his shoes run by. High on the ideas he had for his life in the city and on the adrenaline of a five-kilometer course among landmarks of intercontinental renown, he had turned a couple of laps in front of the stranger, who queried him about European fashion and laughed forgivingly in view of Michael’s ignorance.

The fact that Rudy is nowhere in sight is indeed anomalous. Michael listened to a podcast about the man, who according to the program’s producers had not left First Park in sixteen months because he was not able to leave First Park since sixteen months ago. Michael, too, had only ever seen Rudy on his bench facing the basketball court plus once at the water fountain. Retrospectively he believes to remember the clunky silver trolley bag the feature mentioned. Rudy was outspoken about the fact that he didn’t believe the outside world, i.e. all that lay beyond the quadrangle of green between Houston and 1st, existed, although it was unclear what exactly he understood by that, since he was slash had become so dogmatic about these confines of existent space that they were beyond explicable. The trigger for Rudy’s behavior Michael did not know, as the podcast had deferred the respective answers to a follow-up episode that he hadn’t listened to yet. Its avid followers on the other hand know already that Rudy’s Strawberry-Fields-nothing-is-real declarations had sounded different during the early days of his hermitage, namely “There’s only this park, anyway.”, muttered, eyes blank with a planar stare caught in the court’s fence. They learned that Rudy’s son had been stabbed sixteen plus six months ago, by a kid barely bearded who had little reason but three different thrust weapons on hand for putting Rudy’s son into a coma that ended with the switching off of life-supporting measures after several days. They have listened to the podcast’s producers harassing the parents of the now seventeen-year-old perpetrator, who had been first harassed by Rudy, after the court had shown little interest in the systemic failures that must have fostered the formation of a knife-wielding teenagers like the one Rudy’s son had fatally encountered. Eventually, ratings have scored high, listeners quenched their thirst for true crime drama, a broken soul who gravitates towards the final location of his son, only bouncing back until his momentum reaches near zero. Then he stays where he belongs and becomes a memorial of innocence. Last episode on xxx: Rudy has been living in downtown Manhattan’s First Park since late fall 2018. The middle-aged former fashion dealer watches the hustle and bustle (sic) of the Bowery from the point seven six acres of green on the corner of First Avenue and East Houston. He watches boule, bocce, and basketball from his bench, buys breakfast and lunch from the park’s pagoda at prime cost, and naps in varying nooks on the park’s premises. Rudy regales tourists with anecdotes from his extensive knowledge of New York City’s history of parks and recreation, cleans shoulder to shoulder with the department’s employees Monday through Thursday, and even adopted an upright, intermittently scheduled sleep in order to comply with NYC Parks rules and regulations paragraph 1-04 articles o and p. And so on. Michael gave the episode five out of five, touched by the portrait of the noble savage, purged from all his vices, living for the memory of innocence and the preservation of public green. A man like a filet.

Michael has scraped his teeth to satisfaction. He is not yet concerned about Sergej. Few times fear has grabbed him in a fit, imagining with sudden certainty that something has happened to his son, otherwise he is little susceptible to parental readings of mundane perils. What he would do if Sergej? God forbid, let’s not go there. If it happens, nobody is prepared. Some go live in a park, some try desperately to revive, a father pulling his own teeth to experience the pain and selfless determination of giving birth to his son, but what’s a molar to a…

There is a place and a time for him. Michael agrees to the suggestion of switching on routing voiceover, to appease the app that has noted his delay. The motor is warm and running smoother now, and also the driver has gotten used to the momentum of the fickle trailing construction. A second pedestrian passes the crossing in front of Michael. Male gaze, she really does not appreciate it, not even secretly, and Michael doesn’t have a visor to peep from behind. She scowls at him and is almost run over by an irate cyclist riding a broken frame held together with an orange e-track ratchet strap 2"x15' 4400 lbs tie down, bobbing with the belt absorbing the uneven street like a crappy suspension. The sun has already disappeared behind the lower highrises and he will likely not make it in time to reap the bonus. Sergej calls. “Michael!” big warning sign in his use of his father’s first name “Can you come home now! There’s something here!” No calming him down with standard phrases and promises (in twenty minutes OR just ignore it OR you can have a mall map (he collects them) slash tv-day slash surprise (unimaginative) OR be a big boy) “Something came in from the market!” what market “The market! THE market!” C-Town “The supermarket! My market!” ah, his market “Please dad, this is not a joke I swear. Can you please come now. I need you now!” Fanfares, spotlight, halo. A chance like this doesn’t come along often. He needs him. But Freddy F needs him to continue 600 meters on East 19th street. Sergej needs him to provide food and lodging at least until the next flight to Europe can be safely taken. Michael pulls to the curb a fourth time, his chance for a bonus decreasing with the streaming decimals of his mission counter. Cereal’s on sale at C-Town, Pasta at Key’s, Nuts are cheap at Bravo’s. Two-eighty plus three-forty-five plus let’s say about three in savings if he double-stocks for two-three weeks is likely to be more than the tip Susan did offer. Even more if he stockpiles, not to forget that he has the trailer. Routing says it needs twenty-nine additional minutes net time driving, add a generous ten minutes per store and round it up to a flat hour: tolerable. All subject to him being able to calm Sergej’s nerves. More of an issue is the trailer, loaded with building site bounty of potential allure and groceries of definitive appeal in a time of thirty-plus minutes of waiting times at supermarket doors, the latter being issue number two. The weight of the two problems grows exponentially with waiting time at the stores. He postpones the decision to when he’ll pass the first market on his way back. “Sergej,” he tries to get his focus “can you tell me what it is that’s there?” “I don’t know!” Sergej yelps and doubles over with despair. “But you know something is there.” Affirmative whimper. “Look, I’m here with you. Whatever is in the apartment, it’s not physically there, you understand?” Affirmative. “Because if it were, you would see it, right?” Affirmative. “But you know it’s there.” Affirmative. “And you know I’m here talking to you.” Affirmative. “So we’re two and this thing is alone, right?” “I don’t know.” “I think you told me it’s just one.” Pause. Affirmative. “I tell you what. I’m gonna stay on the phone, and you just continue what you were doing, and if you see it, I come right away, okay?” Pause. Affirmative. “So I’m here on the phone if you need me. You can just talk to me if you like, or play some video games.” Affirmative. “Put me on speaker.” “Are you gonna be home soon?” “Soon, Gigi.”

Gigi slash Sergej has retreated to the guest room which is only in some way his. This room is full of symbols. In his one in Berlin, all walls plus parts of the ceiling are covered with his collection of mall maps. When he lies on his loft bed, he faces plans of shopping environments in Edmonton, Oberhausen, Dubai, Berlin. Willamette Mall from a game he’s not allowed to play when he turns to the wall. None of these malls he has ever been to, in fact he never even visited one of the centers represented in his collection. And why should he? He strongly dislikes shopping sprees in the physical spaces, where there’s always 1 plus n corners alive with the fluff of 800 plus square meters store area flying in the shoppers slipstream and benches open to all four sides. Only the maps are still of use value, a set of converging ontologies of purchasables, whose lingua franca of commercial design results in a wallpaper of soothing uniformity. The New York City walls he is encouraged to call his own bear one floor plan over the head end. Another plan details outdated nightlife locations between the river and Highland Park and there is a tip bank on the sideboard. This room has another function. Tools unfit for a prepubescent boy are kept in here, too. This room is unstable, could be an office tomorrow, a holiday home, subject to eviction or rubble on a strike slip fault. It’s hard to be at home here. He’d rather be in the living room, rather be in his supermarket, but there’s this presence, the word sounds way too innocent, that he just cannot cope with right now, even though he hears Michael breathing on the other end of the line that ends in the device next to him on the mattress. Not clear if Sergej knows what triggered him. For a split second of a temporary connection lapse he saw the azure ribbon of the skybox’s perfect gradient over #69625c, nothing remained but his lone game character running over alpha. For an instant he saw the adjectiveless emptiness underneath bank holiday’s thin layer of meaning that is the true image of the question forming in him: why all this? Michael runs at the ticking timer’s speed for wages that mean a month’s rent here and a year’s rent there, who is he to contribute to the answer of that question. Mom would be good for a pragmatic answer but timezones forbid. His maps would be a calming sight, if nothing seems certain, Sergej can start with the way to the drinking fountain, to the food court, play out a decision of limited choices and ramifications, pick a store, I want to have that for Christmas. Excuse me? I would like to have that for Christmas, please. Well, if you’ll be a good boy, maybe Santa Claus is going to remember it. Excuse me? If you reach the following achievements, [...], you got yourself a deal. See, even the one mall plan did well. From the flat ULED surface through the crack of the door the trajectory is clear right into Sergej’s right eye socket, to shoot through the aqueous emergency reservoir kept for near dehydration scenarios, into the skull, opening it and drenching the cushions, which will emit it again later when he’s asleep, and the smell of it and his pores sucking its remains will give him nightmares. To close the door completely, to shut himself away in his room, perhaps closing the blinds and drawing a blanket over his head, making sure every limb touches fabric and clamps down the blanket’s ends, with only a tiny airhole as a single point of attack, is however more risky than he can tolerate at this point, since, though he does not necessarily have to face the door to close it, the aggregate actions of turning, getting up, approaching, closing the door, while retaining his gaze that is drawn to the light source like a dying person, the sum of all that makes closing the door seem impossible. And he has to avoid what he saw last on the innocent screen by all means. Option B is waiting until he hears a shot slash his character’s death rattle slash familiar muzak, a ten-track loop of jack new swing playing in the recruiting office, which acts as a quest giver for the game’s battle royal skirmish matches, cues that let him know his character has died in battle, that a new scene must have loaded, and that if it didn’t, the game must have eventually thrown an error. Red on black, white on black, dark mode, night mode colors, colors of the insides of bank holiday, where even the sun, that first thing that always shines on its companion object, the grey plane, and on everything that subsequently sprouts from zerozerozero doesn’t give light. Sometimes back home Sergej unplugs the screen, shuts the blinds, and turns off the light to then move his face up close to the vents of his console, watching the pure lights of the innards, smelling the PCB and warm dust, listening. He unplugs the ethernet cable, and its power supply is the only link that connects the system to the outside world. When he’ll be grown up, Sergej wants to somehow hook it up to solar power, the first and final constant, and he will be closer to having created a perfect closed system. Not an error striking, but the music from the recruiting office let’s Sergej know that it is safe to peek at the screen. The recruiting office would be excessively cooled if it had a temperature. The many clean desks are placed with good intent, to simulate IRL facilities of its kind, but seem out of place like the world’s longest bar in a backwater hamlet, since there’s never any waiting time and applicants vanish as soon as they step within a defined radius of the one manned desk. With every client, the clerk opens his mouth but as he starts talking the scene will have already switched to the skirmish mode’s loading screen. Watching him working, it seems like he is sucking up the disappearing characters as he is about to start speaking. His eyebrows, that seem to belong to two different sets, move up and down between two extremes of utter surprise and furious anger. From time to time he opens and closes paper file game objects, as if he would be an employee of flesh and blood faking to be busy at work, and maybe his being is indeed closer to that than one might think. Sergej takes the phone that emits compressed noises of traffic and his father’s breathing, and starts a new skirmish match. “You playing?” The heroic tune gave it away. Skirmish matches only under parental surveillance. “It’s fine. For this once, anyway. I’m here if…” A shopping cart with an on-sale heater blower in it shoots out into the road from a store and Michael has to veer wildly to escape its trajectory. The battle area is close to the coast, and includes a stadium-sized area curated by Berliner Festspiele. Unfortunately the commissioned objects on display, artistic value and all that aside, usually ruin balancing of the respective map section, like the Félix González-Torres pile of usable weapons in the middle of the field. This time however not. Sergej spawns at the western edge of the curated strip of land that is now exclusively covered with a single thick rug the size of an airfield with a pattern of tesselated bodies resembling finished opponents of a skirmish match. He’s in a vast, open field, but practically undetectable when he’s crawling. The rug sounds like a rug rubbing against him as he crawls towards the high grass in front of him. The grass’s sounds are less convincing. Michael bites back a curse and the trailer rattles clanging. Running towards a nearby hamlet, searching its shacks for weapons, Sergej becomes momentarily tired of the game, and he feels like laying down on one of the greasy mattresses of the sad sleepover inside the chapel. If rumors about the catholic church securing the rights to redesign every church, all religious sites according to some sources, in the game are true, they haven’t gotten to this one. Sergej can crawl onto a mattress but cannot turn to face the ceiling. He is a back sleeper. Tedious repetition is the game’s weak spot, it hits Sergej now that the thrill of the semi-forbidden is gone. Shows him that the game’s creator is thirty plus raised on binary oppositions. Simple sets of normalized actions allow for easy, reliable comparison and linear hierarchies. Work hard enough repeating serializable sequences, training muscle memory, internalizing decision trees, and succeed deterministically. There’s a loaded handgun next to the pillow and he equips it. Eight shots in the clip and he hears steps coming from the chapel’s vestibule. “How’s it going?” No engine noise, his father seems to have reached his destination. His adversary doesn’t linger on the threshold, Sergej’s first shot misses, the second and third shot might have been on target, but red flashes indicate health loss on his part before he can fire the fourth. “Bad timing?” Michael hears shooting over the line. Better leave the scooter in a side street.

Blue hour between the darkening facades of the inner city. This year the hues of light emanating from the small downtown windows haven’t made the annual transition from the warmth of candles, Christmas decoration, to the cool of solar-tempered daylight lamps and productively glowing screens. Instead, the lights turned redder, discolored to an extent that the skyglow over the city has turned the color of rust. The blue hour tends towards grape.

The site fence seems to have no end, not left, not right, only the adjacent buildings visibly mark the confines of the construction site. Static flood lights light the grounds dark red like an opium den, dotted by white bright circles of automatic followspots moving under the grid spanning the area. Every worker has a spotlight, polka dot panopticon. Michael flashes the badge at the custodian’s mirrored window, who buzzes him in, may be a machine. “I’m in.” Sergej and him are both playing war. “Got him?” Sergej confirms. A flick switches and Michael is blinded, thinks of CS flashbangs and how he wondered whether such a magic spell existed, his followspot’s on him. The light’s of no use to him, in fact, two pairs of eyes and counting are already on him, his vest was convincing enough for admission but reflects infinite colors in the spot like a prism instead of scarlet as the supposed coworkers’. But as he picks up speed the burning white circle glides smoothly unfailingly fixed to the top of his head as its center. He accelerates, sidestepping, trying not to attract any unwanted attention, stops behind a column that, alas, almost vanishes in the brightness of the light. So does the step, and he doesn’t see it and trips, falls, and throws his badge and carrying straps far from him. Suddenly it is dark again, the red light hides the blood coming out from the scratches on his left and his chin, which he doesn’t feel through the cotton ball numbness, instead he perceives the precise edge of the spot cutting his hand at the thumb into hot and cold. None of the injuries seem to be permanent, plus he has found a way to flee the eye of the roomba above. Michael leaves the badge at the column’s base to pick it up later and vanishes into the safelight. The monochrome flattens the third dimension of his surroundings and he almost fails to notice the breathtaking drop of the immense excavation that stretches far into the nineties, stopping like a cartoon character with his toes testing the void. He stumbles back. “Paul said he broke the fear of falling. But I think he’s a big mouth.” “What?” Michael has to sit. “He got VR goggles for his birthday and spent the first weekend falling. Now he says he doesn’t know fear of falling.” “Lucky him.” “But do you think he’s telling the truth?” “I don’t know, Serge, but I need to concentrate now.” “I don’t believe him.” The pit is level, safe for one thirtyish-story block with only its structural work in place, that must be the place. There’s ladders every ten meters leading down to the foundation. “I just fell. And I lost health. I don’t believe him.” Sergej walks along the base of the rampart he dropped from. Of course the middle age is manifest in bank holiday, too. There is no existential need for a history, but the thought that this compelling world is ontologically dependent on something human, is calming. Bank holiday is a world of actions and countable goods, the freedom of forging arbitrary objects of desire is yet too tempting to spark searches for alternative objectives. Survive and amass, honorable fights mano a mano, building and expanding, romantic visions of feudal Europe from 2D sprites and single-player campaigns. No enemies since that first one he shot in the chapel. Sergej found a purple sweater in one of the houses, which he equipped despite its unfavorable visibility. Characters in Bank Holiday are neither male nor female but of a perfect androgyny that no serious player comments on anymore, whoever does so clearly identifies as a noob. Initial reviewers described character animations as quote unquote sassy. The sweater is ludicrously oversized and squarely ironed, seen from afar Sergej might be mistaken as a dead pixel. The base of the excavation vibrates lightly with a subway passing below. Its sheer concrete appeases Michael’s guts shaken with vertigo. As he hurriedly walks towards his destination he keeps a hand out sweeping along the pit walls to reassure himself of another one of the dimensions he navigates. The lack of familiar points of reference clouded his judgement of the missing distance to the target building’s towering skeleton. Particles have begun to fall, could be snow too delicate to cool the skin it lands on, or ash, or dust from street level construction. Sergej’s character is 255-255-255-white, whiter even than its eyeballs, that have a yellowish tint as if the amber irises bled into the white of the eye. When Michael and him first created their shared avatar, they set its complexion to a web safe dark brown, but when Paul, Sergej’s little friend of hip heritage, found out that the helping hand of his parents junkyard project had no stake in the struggle, he took Sergej aside to quote unquote educate the boy about the power structures around cultural appropriation. As opposed to his father, Sergej got the point and adjusted their character’s appearance. Michael tried only once to reset the skin to its original tone because it’s just a game, Serge, but eventually ceased resistance when he couldn’t resolve the inconsistencies between the issue at hand and his fatherly advice about overall tolerance. Teeth grinding, forsaking personal liberties is a hard thing to do for Michael, who earned them (his opinion), including the hard-won freedom of capitalism he lays claim to by means of descent. At times he thinks back to the first days of Sergej’s life, when his skin was dark from neonatal polycythaemia, but Michael still went to Fee’s dining hall to rule out any PoC-contenders to his paternity. He wishes Sergej would have turned out black, so he could have worn his son in his baby carrier like a triple-A badge. He wants to leech on to that culture like he tapped the identity of Wanda as soon as it started yielding. Sergej is yet too young to feel sweeping embarrassment for his father but he would shield his face in his hand from this fact. He doesn’t feel in any particular way with respect to his own complexion. He would like to have a beak with a scarlet stripe like a herring gull. That would solve his nose, too. Sadly Bank Holiday doesn’t afford that option, either. “Have you been to the planes north of the range of hills between the graffiti cliffs and the moon shaped pool?” Neither does the game label its locations, specifying places is like giving directions to foreign tourists. Michael is turning snow blind under the red floodlights. “You mean where the inferno mine is?” Michael knows Dante from an interactive web visualization. “No! Not there!” “Don’t yell at me!” Irascible hot-red vision, like a cheap visual trick. “The plane of a thousand silos.” “I haven’t.” He has reached the shade of the structure, the frozen-blue concrete slowly thaws as his brain readjusts its white balance. The phone in his pocket vibrates with a notification from Freddy F, who is well aware of his geolocation and motion data, and therefore his slow progress. The building has the stairway of a tsar’s palace, cutting straight through seven floors wide enough for an expressionist worker’s crowd, Michael pants in a gallow’s stance at its top, not even halfway to the upper storey. “Everything okay, dad?” Four rounds of the same drill, and already at the fourth he’s convinced he has developed asthma. A chilly gust almost robs him of his balance, the idea of rolling down the thousand plus steps in a tightly curled up ragdoll ball round and round the seven flights to start again like game over, like no continues. “Fuck.” A prompt for parental correction but the father only emits a hiss because, apparently, obviously, he is out of shape. “Sorry. I just died.” Sergej should have been patiently crawling across the body patchwork of the artistic rug, but he ran upright, an easy mark against the clear sky for any player squatting slash proning on the carpet. “If you can’t deal with defeat, I’ll have to,” breathe, “block skirmish mode.” Can’t believe a thing about the new jack swing. Sergej leaves the recruiting office, he’s tired of fighting anyway. “I just have to deliver the materials, then I’ll be home.” The material shed is a forty foot shipping container with an impressive bend having been dropped from great height at some point. It’s half colorless and wait a minute. Two, no three, spots illuminate the far end of the unit, giving away, as Michael deduces, the presence of three workers, or at least their badges inside the container. He ducks behind the opposite end and peers along the curve of the corrugated side. “Shush for a second, Serge.” “I wasn’t saying anything!” “Shh!” Three workers between him and his bonus. Question: Would the dental floss, always at hand in Michael’s everyday jacket, wrapped around the neck of a worker withstand the struggle of a dying man? Michael bolts as his phone vibrates, but this time it is not Freddy F, it wasn’t even his phone. The regular purr is coming from the container’s metal. Pleasantly cool against Michaels ears hot from the excitement, the steel whispers, listen, Michael, listen how peacefully they snore inside the forty foot belly. The storage’s contents do not justify security beyond the door’s rusty latch, which besides does a marvelous job, creaking, screeching, calling attention to unauthorized access. Michael times his cautious turning of the lever on the sleeper’s inhale. A car alarm honks a steady pulse to the duet of bolt and palate. Halt. Slightly, tentatively, one of the spots is moving. On the line he hears Sergej talking to somebody, likely Paul or what’s his face. The car alarm has been replaced by some ethereal pad-like choral sound impossibly to locate between the sleek buildings. The sound of the stars. Now, Michael. He gives the bolt the last push and the door swings open lube-drunk silent. No muzzle, the dark mouth belongs to the roll of tarp, there for the taking.

Earlier Sergej successfully extracted a motor pool of seven late nineties car models with names that would make a hilarious copyright lawsuit. The cars are provisorily stacked out back while he accompanies Paul’s mom alongside other collective members in their search for appropriate spaces for the vehicles. Paul is present, too, but without so much as turning his view towards him, which is not particularly surprising, since he used to be condescending in the collective’s presence before, and his jealousy of Sergej’s car procurement mission only worsens his feeling of inferiority. It didn’t help that Sergej tried to appease him by painting a drab picture of his repetitive work. Paul construed this as a lack of both gratitude for his employment as well as veneration for the work of the collective and stopped talking to him altogether. He wanders off through the back door of the hangar past the stack of cars topped by the light blue model his grandmother used to drive. That is one of the few facts that supplement the distant worm’s-eye view memories he has of his father’s mother. The sparse facts around property, filmography, and dental hygiene rig up her spectral impressions in his mind’s eye. Part icon, part scarecrow, part bending down shadow with huge smiling lips. Michael’s heavy breath pokes out from the noise gate. The overhang of the adjacent structures increasingly eclipse the rear junkyard, though the collective goes out of its way to expedite their vertical constructions in the backyard, likewise composed of stacked up collections of outdated game objects. But the seven heavenly palaces rising around the collective’s plot of land grow and grow and grow, hovering. An avatar on one of the rifty ledges is trying to hit another in the junkyard below with fish from the island’s bodies of water. His target flees in Sergej’s direction from the Lluvia de Peces.

The tarp is heavy like everything in this container, like the container itself, as if a diaspora of fossil materials were striving for a journey home. Persistent snoring from the dark end of the storage prompts Michael to continue swiftly, he’s dragging the tarp off the stack, has providently placed his jacket to cushion the fall of the roll’s end, but while he got that force of physics covered alright, he carelessly overlooked the fact of friction dragging the underlying box dragging the underlying box dragging the underlying box and so on. And therefore, as he looks up after having cut the required length of tarp with a cutter knife conveniently found along other tools in the container, no retarding momentum there, Michael faces an overhang of boxes so unstable that he has to think of water sloshing in a skyscraper toilet. He folds up the cut tarp ever so carefully. “Dad! Help!” Michael jolts up and around, towards the stairway. “Dad!” The top box tilts past its tipping point, spilling 1,998 miscounted silver washers, their oxide layer refracting the light like raindrops as they fall down faster even than Michael rushes down the seven flights. “What’s happening?” Over his own gasps, he hears a voice like throat cancer talking, complaining. Stray washers are still hitting the ground, jingling bells, he better takes the opposite direction and hopes for a second exit. Something concerning neighbors, that much he can make out. Sergej remains mute. “Serge, I need you to get yourself together.” No answer. “I’ll be home, soon.”

By the time Michael has found the second exit, the sobs in his ear have died down. The sound of dishes clinking and cabinet doors slamming indicate that his son has meanwhile washed down his cause of distress with tears and cookies. Squeak goes the turnstyle and he’s out, with sixty minutes left on the clock before his salary will start to drain with the grains of the hourglass that appears on screen once the employee exceeds her time limit and causes queasiness with millennials and their precursors. “Somebody spoke to me!” Don’t take chocolate from strangers, don’t get into their cars or basements. It was the figure running towards Sergej under flapping fish falling that had opened its six-phase-animated mouth once it stopped within earshot and uttered with an eerie, terrifying sound of thousand voices speaking not like a choir, reverberant and organically offset, but dry and synchronously like machine-hijacked vocal tracts: “Keep your fish! Let me be!” That voice had caused the terror that made Sergej once again dart into his room and dive under protective covers. From the small mound of cushions and comforters, a limb protruded, groping blindly around the bed for the television’s remote control that Sergej had put there after his first scared retreat as a precautionary measure, and a muffled song sung shakily emerged. Die Gedanken sind frei, because Sergej sings in the school choir and his music teacher is sixty plus. Sie fliegen vorbei, because he had to eliminate the sound of the thousand voices that still rang inside or outside his head, he was not sure. His hand found the black bar and haphazardly pressed all buttons in reach until Sergej was positive that the many-voiced mumble coming from next door belonged to a fighting family of expats among plastic plant pots and outdoor glass tables. Slowly he emerged from his fort, Michael was still heard over the phone on speaker, always panting, how he hated to see his father running, recently. And recently, he is always running, even within the limited expanse of the apartment that barely holds sufficient lengths to accelerate. Sergej tried it for himself, dashing towards the television, calculating the stopping distance of his non-non-skid socks to put the grey torus that still houses the thing with a thousand voices within reach. Sergej put the Bank Holiday torus in the ash-stained saucer on the windowsill that Michael keeps for smoking guests. Heavy breathing over the line. “Somebody spoke to me!” “I’m almost home, Serge.” The wind has freshened and is blowing paperweight trash into Michael’s trajectory. He’s gobbling up printed matter, dirty napkins like bonus coins with his front wheel. No bonus. Instead he’s running on the last seven digits of his allotted time. He speeds through the empty streets and maybe it’s the accelerated mass of fifteen feet times ten of tarp that pushes the flagging scooter further, this time the engine doesn’t fail. Susan greets him at the door, though it isn’t impatience that left her waiting there but Freddy F tracking Michael’s final sprint. His ETA is not an issue, his failure to retrieve the badge more so. She gives him a meagre three out of five stars, even after he has helped her to cut the tarp without so much as a conspicuous glance at the hour and slash or a broad hint at his scoliosis. Plus Freddy F mercilessly records his delay, and suffixes his username with a euphemistic turtle emoji. Michael makes a mental note to contact service tomorrow and rushes back home, running, he almost hailed a cab, not that he reconsidered but there simply aren’t any around. He had to cut off Sergej once he got to Susan, now his son doesn’t pick up and that could be a good sign, but chances are it’s not. Because what was it before that scared him, a voice? The aural band between them was reassuring, but fickle, Sergej had glitched out on him several times during the night, like the deceiving evil demon showing through, sometimes he had lost him between tall structures. How should Sergej be sure it’s Michael ringing and not the thing of a thousand voices. Who knows what phone-themed horror movies Sergej is familiar with.

The apartment is as dark as all the other windows on the early riser block. Morning shifts, all around, at most an insomniac’s bluish screen glow filters through unclosed blinds. The staircase resounds with the creaky steps and infiltrates the nightmare of a dog behind a second floor door. Michael can’t recollect what he has read long ago in sudden infant death syndrome, even though he spent close to a day being dragged through subject-related mystery show reruns by the autoplay algorithm. When he enters, he diverts into the bathroom as his phone notifies him loudly of an available choice of subsequent gigs and he doesn’t want to wake Sergej if he should be really, unexpectedly, asleep. The toothbrush is wet, Michael knows how a used toothbrush feels after plus minus one hour, and unless his son maliciously moistened it, he must have kept his promise. It isn’t a peaceful scene that Michael finds in Sergej’s bedroom as he peeks in, although his son appears to be sleeping, limbs and covers intertwining tensely as if in a stalemate. Dead phone and tv remote on the far side of the mattress, next to a fileting knife Michael quickly removes and whose presence he will never call to Sergej’s mind. He washes off the dust and falls asleep with the forgotten tea steeping black-brown.

He’s dead for four hours, then he just skids along sleep’s surface until he gets up to walk himself tired. Michael detours for a brief round of the roofs, a span of five houses is accessible to Michael, unsecured. Drops of four, five storeys, back in Rostock it was seven, but the ceilings were lower and lawns, maybe precautions, would have cushioned the fall. Down on the street, pedestrian traffic seems to have increased with nightfall. A, people cannot sleep, are plagued with sorrows, or B, people work in offset timezones now that there’s hardly a buck to be made here, or C, what is a sunbeam compared to moonlight, nobody will notice a missing night’s sleep. Might as well call customer service, although there’s the risk that resulting anger will deprive him of the remaining night’s rest. A familiar voice answers. “Akash? Is that you?” “How can I be of your service today, Michael, it’s good to hear you.” “No shit. Since when do you work at Freddy’s?” “I’m pleased to say that it’s been already more than a week that I’ve been a part of the Freddy F family.” “Geez. You on some conversation guide?” “I’m glad that you’re asking that, seriously. I stumbled upon the head of conversational AI’s thesis, and apparently I’ll score high as long as I keep it polite in tone and wording and answer every question I’m confronted with. Supposedly, analyzing substance doesn’t scale so well. So just ask me whatever and never mind the schmooze.” “I don’t think ‘schmooze’ will fare well as a choice of word.” “Aw fuck off. Shit. Arrgh.” “Anyway, I didn’t call to lead you into temptation or deliver you from evil but, believe it or not, I would like to appeal against my recent evaluation.” Silence. “This is, I believe, your cue to thank me for having approached you and present available options.” Akash clears his throat. “Well, I’m certainly pleased that you turned to us with this issue, since, otherwise, you have proven to be solution-oriented as common livestock and barely capable of locating the settings button of an interface that doesn’t follow your twisted logic of UX.” That one hit home. “If you would be so kind as to let me know which of your, wow, a whole of one, I repeat, one gig in a week, which one of, I’m doing air quotes here, those does your issue pertain to?” “Yeah, that one.” “Alright. What seems to be the problem? He tells me that you were sent on a 10-mile fetch-and-retrieve gig with subsequent non-skilled, guided manual labor requiring a min height of one-eighty and an upward pull strength of plus 140 Newton, equipment provided, four hours time.” “Right.” “And what aspect would you like to contest? Because, let me level with you, Michael, my hands are pretty much tied on this one. He gives me a ninety plus probability that you’re a fraud, which, hold your horses, I know you aren’t, but, you know, first gig, poor employer review, you gotta give me something I can work with here. Something substantial.” “Deficient equipment.” “Could be a lead. Elaborate, please.” “The scooter I was given conked out on me every other crossing and I had to wait for it to cool down.” “There you go, let’s see.” Michael waits. “Keep asking me questions while I check, good for the numbers, you know.” “Know of any well paying jobs beyond surveillance capitalism?” “Chrissakes, Mike, easy questions, I’m not a multitasker.” “Oh, come on, with your diction your numbers are ruined anyway on this one.” “Whatever. So, anyway, you're putting me in a pickle. He’s giving me three stops you made along your route. Two of which display times and movement patterns that suggest a smoking brake, although I know you don’t smoke. Don’t tell me you took up smoking. Gotta admit that I, too, envy Reyna these days.” “I didn’t.” “Good. I mean, whatever floats your boat and all, but good. The third stop, which was actually the second, chronologically speaking, took you to a bodega.” “All bodegas are closed, Akash.” “I know but that’s what he tells me.” “Why do you keep saying he?” “Oh, just like that. It’s just this interface. Remember that annoying MS Office paper clip? They have a Freddy F doing the same.” “Akash, please, level with me. Can you do something for me or not?” “Okay. To be honest, I’d recommend for you to just leave it be. Ratings and reviews only become public once you have six of them, so you still got a chance to make things right on your next gigs. You could file an appeal but your chances are slim, as I said.” Of course Akash could simply override the automated assessment of Michael’s case, but favoritism may lead to substantial penalties. “He’s also telling me to tell you that in order to prevent future misassessment, you should grant Freddy F access to your phone’s microphone. You already did that, apparently, so I don’t know why he says that.”

He did file, but only to shelve his discontent along with it. As if that would work. Nice talking with Akash, though. Can’t pull off that corporate talk, poor guy, he’ll probably have the same rating as Michael in a week. A dog with respiratory problems is being led, dragged, past Michael sitting on a no-loitering stoop. Dark blonde, sleek hair, he can loiter wherever he wishes. Freddy F makes him an offer he cannot refuse. One of three jobs holds another couple of days of rent and hopefully a better rating for Michael, will it be A, driving for an ambulant dry cleaning service, or B, food delivery? All things vehicle-based are out of the question after last time, plus Michael is not yet desperate enough to ride a bike downtown and bankroll Sergej’s remaining stay with his life insurance. So it’s gotta be C, that anyway touches a chord within Michael. The warehouse night watchman is a curious form of an outlaw, a figure that has seen the true face of capitalism and has retreated to his hermitage. He emerges only when everyone else has left and leaves no trace but for a faint scent of his gas lamp and spat-out chewed tobacco. Not technically a night shift, just late, Sergej will have to put himself to bed again, but he seems to respect their dental hygiene deal. They can be on the phone again. The job site is closer this time, a defunct mall barely two miles away, he can walk and save five dollar on his salary, that’s a bank holiday DLC for Sergej, or a mall map from one of his obscure shops.

Sergej stands at the bedside and shakes him awake. It’s past his alarm, overheard, but still reasonably early, in the single digit hours. “Dad, I found someone to procreate.” There’s a buttery smell of popcorn that fills Michael with nausea. Sergej is allowed to make popcorn as long as he stays at the stove, he wouldn’t want to miss the carnage of the frying kernels exploding like boomer zombies, anyway. This is the only violent content he gets to watch back home in Berlin and his imagination fills in the gaps, as the popping bodies leave smudgy marks on the pan’s glass cover. “Can I mate already? I don’t know how long she’s gonna be there.” Michael puts his son off until after shower and breakfast and would you please air the apartment, it smells like a Julia Child set in here. He seeks refuge in the shower gel’s odors of toxic masculinity. Sergej didn’t ventilate, but the scent of fatty acids has given way to that of fresh coffee. “You can make coffee?” “Sure.” Passable, except for the missing filter. “Can I procreate, she’s still in the barn.” Michael grabs two bars and some fruit, no plate to have his hands free in case Sergej loses his nerves and tosses him the controller. There’s no urgency yet to mate, although Michael, too, noted the increased inertia of the viewport, and also running has felt faster during past skirmish games. Plus they seem to have hit a sweet spot indeed, Sergej and his mate, which turns out to be the aunt of his artsy friend. Their avatars are similar in age and complementary in their stats, and if their mating is successful it would give both their progenitors a sizable boost in skirmish games.

It’s the first time all of them. Michael cannot believe he just asked that question. The tacit recollections of the two adults creates an awkwardness that even over voice chat is only tolerable because Sergej is completely oblivious of the game mechanism’s connotations, yet. They have met in the neighboring hangar that Sergej calls a barn, between a fire engine and an ice cream van on its side, showing its crude image of an underbody. Theory goes they have to run into each other for five seconds to trigger the mating scene. It’s all there, the embarrassment, the operations vaguely known, the clumsiness as they slip past each other running. They interlock and move rhythmically with the mirrored animation of their hermaphrodite avatars running, faces appearing and disappearing as their frustrums dip through the tiniest skins into the models’ insides. The mating scene is a white boundless space. Construct. Ten seconds of progenitor handling before the parents arrive and the bloodshed starts. Sergej’s tongue shows between the lips, but Michael misses the sight of the little red slug, that could have reminded him of the first sight of his son as a breech-birth foot emerging from Fee’s vagina. If Michael would only pay attention to those little details testifying to the blood bond between them, but his eye is that of an overseer, he’s looking after a pet that for god’s sakes he must keep alive until its owner returns. Acts like a father but spent more time on last year’s Child Tax Credit than on planning activities with his son, which he does in between just as he manages Sergej in between job(s), formerly singular now plural, chores, eat, sleep. Enviably effective, yields several hours he has to himself, playing, masturbating, listening to people that he can manage even better with the play-pause button. Employers love that shit, thumbs up and employee of the month for being on call and available twenty-four seven but it didn’t help in the end, did it. To be fair, it helps them make rent now, who else would leave an eleven-year old in an apartment with knives (see above) and hard alcohol (see below) for hours on end. Now it does help to be somebody that can gauge risks and weigh them against each other. Being a raven dad leaving your pre-teen by itself is frowned upon but certainly less than being one letting both of you end up on the streets. Better a kiss and a cardboard Cadillac for your twelfth birthday in a disused back alley dumpster, or corner store hecho-en-china with a scribbled birthday note on the table of a brownstone kitchen. Sergej lets out a long belch and giggles. “Run and jump, Serge, get a feel for him.” Not really a him but a genderless pitch-black humanoid without facial features, their progenitor. Two seconds until the ancestors show up, which is way too little time to explore the move and combos of half a beat ‘em up hidden within the mating scene. Towering they spawn, almost double in height compared to their offsprings. Announced, but Sergej escapes a shriek, might just be excitement, and he tries to put a distance between him and the ancestors, which is a bad idea because two of his steps is arms length for the parents. And the arm comes down before he’s out of reach, missing his head but hitting his left shoulder. Crushing coconuts and walnuts, breaking block chocolate, foley artists have mastered the hollow crack of young bone. GPU coolers rev in a far-away data center as physics computes the unguided dangling left with astonishing, stomach-turning detail. If their avatars are screaming in pain they cannot hear it over their own uncoordinated yelling. Sergej is quicker to escape the sweeping limbs of his progenitor than his mate, whose avatar hangs from its progenitor’s fist by its leg, and as he steers towards the towering npc to come to his companion’s help, her avatar’s hip joint cedes to the centrifugal forces as the giant’s fist comes down, and only its leg smashes on the white ground. A hard, unyielding surface as it seems, now stained with the bloody outline of the leg. ESBR-Teen. The rest of the avatar has slid far from the two progenitors, leaving Sergej’s character between the two parent figures. Somebody should call this, this is five years from age-appropriate. Michael’s hands fumble for the TV remote that’s far from reach on the window sill but how could he know, seeing that his eyes are captured by the adumbration of carnage. Four hands, four limbs, four tractive forces at ninety-degree angles. The avatars’ insides are only lacking details because the missing anatomical particulars are easily masked by fountains of blood. The camera zooms out to fit the red X between the four parts of Sergej’s remains. His mate’s avatar dies shortly after, how exactly is unclear.

Sergej should be frustrated but he bounces around the room in excitement, pumped up from the buzz of blood and breakfast sugar. His mate’s overdriven laughing sounds over VoIP. Innocently, their avatars, the merciless brutes they just fought, get up from the floor between the cars where they awakened after the battle. “There’s no way I will let you do that again.” His son stops in mid-air. “What?” No discussions. Teen is teen, eleven is eleven. “Not fair! Not fair! You can’t be serious.” Michael tries to bring in Sergej’s mate, what’s her face, to back up his parental authority. Surely there is no way that she will even consider drawing a child into this violence-glorifying fantasy once more. “Actually, Michael, I do not agree with you.” A wonk for knowing his name. “As much as it may be violent, and, Serge, forgive me for supposing that you have seen worse before, it’s quite valuable that your son sees this. And further, I do believe that it’s valuable for you, too, to experience this violence together.” Elaborate. “Serge, let me tell you from experience, giving birth, and in the end, that’s what we’re doing here, is one of the most beautiful experiences you can have in your life. Beats everything.” Don’t need to be a woman to know that. “But at the same time, it is pure violence, and it’s really like in here, the blood, the tearing.” “I’m sorry but do we really need to get into specifics? This kid’s just started sex ed, so leave something for class, alright.” “Please, Michael, I know this isn’t easy for you, too,” after all, this experience is one of the few things your kind can’t take by claim or force “but let him see this before puberty and maybe he’ll be more than a self-involved nervous wreck in L&D.” Difficult to pinpoint if bloody murder at eleven would have made Michael more selfless during labor. Probably it was the snub of being second to the needs and accomplishment of Sergej’s mother in what should be his greatest hour, have a cigar and all that. “With all due respect, but just because you gave birth once doesn’t mean you get to monkey with my son’s education.” And as Michael answer reveals his frustration it opens a window into a world, where all the young privileged like him have suddenly lost their structural advantages, and they sulk and escape, just like he sulked and escaped when he realized the uterine structural advantage that Fee had, escape to a faraway island of men, mostly, that either ends in peaceful limitless building and striving skywards, or else in other scenes of bloody massacre. Sergej’s mate doesn’t respond. She knows when a fight is worth escalating.

It takes Sergej all his sangfroid to refrain from asking Michael to give his go-ahead for another shot at mating while they prepare Sergej’s dinner. Moving his fingers across the woodchip wallpaper, he visualizes moves and strategies to that interior audience that he still openly addresses, even in other people’s presence. The lotion thickly applied under his arms as a moisture reservoir for his rash-red skin is now a c-shaped stain on the wall left by the strained simulation of a scattering maneuver. Sergej washes the grease off the wipeable wall and runs with his fingers from the flowing foam and detergent. Garlic, high-quality, cold-pressed olive oil, a julienned carrot, not the ‘murica-sized ones, some grated celeriac, imported, canned tomato bubbling red in the saucepan makes Michael think of parental advisory, non-age-appropriateness. “Serge,” he tries, he does indeed try, “have you been exposed to graphic content before?” The fingers succumb to their unbloody, but visibly, audibly painful death, squirming amidst the stream of dish soap. A pungent smell of cheap flavor enhancers comes from the door or the window and Michael has to put his head into the steam trail of his saucepan to make sure it’s not his cooking. “You know, like, has somebody shown you LiveLeak or something.” “What’s LiveLeak?” Fingers left in the pleasantly caressing foam flow. “It’s not like I want to keep you from seeing those things at all cost, because you’ll see them anyway. Could you dry that up, please.” The soap will suck even more moisture from Sergej’s delicate skin. “Why don’t you tell me what you experienced. Before, what did you see, and how did you feel.” Parenting-guide material. “In the white room you meet your monster. Everybody has its own, and it looks like you. And you don’t look like yourself in the white room but you’re like a new person, another person. And I think that’s the new avatar, the one that you want to make. But you can’t see yet how it’s going to look like. Because that depends on if you’re going to beat the monsters together with your partner. And that’s really difficult. People say that they learn every time you fight, so you have to constantly review your strategies. That means that you can’t just do the same thing over and over, because they’ll know.” “What do you think the red stuff was?” “Duh, dad, what do you think it was?” The sauce builds flavor simmering. “Tell you what, let’s check if she’s still around, then you can try another time.”

A second failed attempt but Sergej’s mood is only marred by the patience he needs to exercise until he will be able to try again. His mate’s timezone forbids and Michael cannot imagine any thirty-plus player capable of surviving a third consecutive attempt. As he prepares for his second gig with Freddy F, Sergej is at the dining table, sketching sprawling diagrams of moves and gambits that will fill his mate’s in-game inbox. Michael doesn’t believe in analog hours but maybe it’s for the best to keep him off the screen for tonight, after the two breakdowns he had to manage yesterday. He puts out a cartridge of a farm simulation that a friend joke-gifted Michael years ago and that was banned in Australia for allegedly advocating perverted cross breeding. Won’t spoil Sergej, donkey, mule, cow, he’s a city kid. Plus the game has endearing 3D models of farm machinery.

Only from far above the true size of the defunct mall reveals itself. Constructed during a time of skyrocketing growth of individual retail, it turned out too small already by the time its glass-domed heart had been completed. Hastily, its developers acquired adjacent lots here and there, and its planners attached a ring of hurriedly raised satellite shacks around the prize-winning main building to dispatch the rampant delivery traffic. The congestion around the complex became so outrageous that some of the suppliers started to sell off their goods directly from the beds of their trucks stuck in snail-pace traffic. The city’s public administration only came to the rescue when the mall’s demise was already physically palpable from the mugger’s knife against one’s cheek when walking through the ring of warehouses and loading bays that had gone to various local street gangs. However, the dedicated exit of the new commuter toll route mostly served as an expedited way of escape for the remaining retailers. When a rising e-commerce company bought the complex six years ago, one shopkeeper chose to stay and preserve the place’s heritage by selling coffee and corn dogs to truckers in the underground rec area. As planned, Michael arrives half an hour before punch-clock at the designated location on the complex’s eastern border, but he sees nothing. Nothing but gated-community-style double-head-high whitewashed walls along the perimeter at his destination plus minus twenty meters of GPS inaccuracy. Michael’s heart rate accelerates with his step as he traces the outline of the kaleidoscope blur pattern that hides the compound skywards on Freddy F’s map view. The whitewashed wall turns corrugated iron, turns béton brut, but without so much as a crack for a ray of light emerging from inside the walls. Lesser concerns have brought Michael on the verge of a panic attack. Sergej is in a good mood and clinks glasses of who knows what, upper-shelf whisky or tooth glasses. He says that the set of 3D tractors from the farming simulator has quote unquote sculptural potential. Better watch out that artsy kid doesn’t give him ideas, career-wise and the like. T minus twenty-five minutes and Michael aggressively pulls apart the map of Freddy F’s app with his thumbs. He wants to pull it apart and rip open the screen: See, there’s nothing here! Nothing! Do you see now?! The map bounces back in a joyful animation that takes the piss out of him. “Serge!” He really can’t take any whistle while you work right now. The silence on the other end leaves an aftertaste of guilty conscience. “Hey. Sorry, I just,” he’s pushing his nails into the yielding protective foil of the screen, “I can’t find the entrance.” “Do you want me to check, dad?” “That’s nice, but I don’t think you can help your dad, Serge.” Genuine silence, this time. Sergej has already run into the bedroom. The big round eye in the centre of the network of numbered, interconnected rectangles friendly greets with its unblinking iris of facility icons, water fountain, atm, massage chairs, astroglide slide et al., arranged around the sans serif pupil reading Miracle Mall. “Dad. I got it.” He sock-skates back to the phone only to be informed by a voice far friendlier than dad’s that he’s been put on hold. On hold, the recording repeats, its voice and thin monophonic melody on a bed of static that picks up ghostly messages from here and there. Some spanish-speaking listener wishing for a Dolly Parton song on a radio station, whose jingle is swallowed up by a distress signal from a casual sailor drowned out by a ham radio operator requesting nudes from a connected kid that sounds younger than Sergej. “Fucking morons!” “Dad?” “Serge, you still there? I thought I hung up.” “Dad, I found something.” Only mall maps that include the foldable four-tint glasses can realize mint-condition prices. Sergej turns the giant wheel of pizza-sliced color foil that interferes with every wearer’s nose, yellow for second, blue for first, red for basement floor. Red as Michael in his anger, red as the alert, red in front of Sergej’s eyes reveal the dark rectangular outline of a subterranean corridor extending far out east from the cyclopean centerpiece, like an outstretched finger to receive the spark of life from the uterine bulge of the bus bay along the underground toll route. “You’re on the wrong level, dad! You have to be at the underground bus stop.” Fifteen minutes to go and with twenty estimated for the detour to the mouth of the tunnel. Michael runs, hoping for a traffic-free shoulder or a walkway. Sergej is having the time of his life tracking his father’s progress across various maps, print and backlit alike, along checkpoints Michael bellows between breaths at each intersection. A service walkway leads into the bright-lit tunnel on the wrong side of traffic, unsecured and narrow, and the wall tiles furry from dust stuck to the goo of exhaust fumes make Michael’s stomach turn if he even thinks of touching them, so he is confined to the erratic balance beam of the curb.

Contrary to its depiction on Sergej’s map, the bus bay turns out to be a station of metropolitan proportions. Pack your lunchables, we’re going to the mall. This must’ve been the place. An underground reception camp for greyhounds and overlands perpetually spewing out chewed up less-than-suburbans, too worried for street crime to ever emerge from the enclave of Levittown order secured by the taser-bearing black shirt executive. Plastic tarps in various colors sloppily pushed together with wood wool screen walls bespeak a defunct camp city just waiting to be converted into a pandemic test center, outstandingly well connected, naturally heated by traffic and server heat, the fumes that waft over barely hazardous but conveniently sedating. “Welcome, traveler.” Oblivious slash ignorant of the outstretched hand of the reference, Michael is still scowling. That person, bibbed, nondescriptly crewcut, now extends a physical hand, too, and ushers him in. Warm womb of two hundred megawatts. The earbud dangles wildly around Michael’s shoulders as he tries to keep up with the busy feet’s high frequency shuffle, his eyes flash left and right along the walls as he tries to keep up with that person’s high frequency chatting. Not sure if Internet humor or back way negligence, keeping the old adverts from fertile mall-days on the wall. As they proceed, the long corridor gets wider to hold the rising anticipation of the eager shoppers. What was that person’s name again? He’ll have to ask Sergej in a quiet minute. The walls sing a somber tune of deserted closets and back offices. “Deserted.” Uh? “The guy who came before you estimated that ninety-three percent of the server spaces we host here will never be visited by two users simultaneously.” “And then?” That person’s laugh clogs the funnel of the exit behind them “Good question. What do you do online when nobody’s watching?” “Him I meant.” “No idea. Not my pay level.” Reporting is to be done to that person’s desk. Michael will receive reports at his desk. A German ideal, seated behind a desk. The German fate, standing in front of a desk (that’s Tucholsky). “It’s very likely that nobody will have to report anything. Then you just have to find a way to awake on time for your next round.” That person’s laugh deadlocked in the echo traps along the hallway they are entering. “Dream job. Get paid for nothing. No one rousts. Shitty pay, alright. Gotta give you that.” Not that Michael interjected. “But you know what, I got my chickens. Something big. Wanna know?” Sure. Not that Michael needs to affirm. “Crowdsourced logistics. Right? And I know what you’re gonna say. But...” The loudest cell phone interference makes Michael jolt out the remaining earbud, swatting sonic buzzflies behind that person’s back “...,” there he missed that name again, “people have thought about that before. Point given. How - ever. Success is downpaid in opportunities, not in ideas, my friend.” That person turning, seeking Michael’s eyes indicates things getting serious. “You see, my cousin runs a trailer business. Her mother owns a gas station off I-81 up the Susquehanna. My other cousin’s in Knoxville. Based down there for fine evasion. Got himself another sweet I-side eighty-freakin-one diner. See where I’m going with this? Dig your blues? Wanna go down Tennessee? Right. Pick yourself up a small trailer, professionally sealed, naturally, and off you go. Roadside, two minute stop. If we’re fast you’ll be off before the kids return from their potty break.” That person’s laugh grated through server cabinet grills. “Down in Tennessee, another pit stop. Cash your commission and get yourself one of them di - vine roasts my cousin got going there. We’re taking care of that trailer in the meantime, don’t you worry. You get your commission and we get ours. Easy as that. And you can tell your kids it’s for the environment, too.” That person’s chuckle bouncing off the perspex of the nightwatchman’s booth, a cubicle 1,20 times 1,20, measured to confine floor space to less than the average male height at any angle, don’t think they haven’t tried bedding on the prickly felt. So it’s airplane naps instead, and faking stark myopia to explain quote unquote reading with one’s head resting on the plushy paper stack. Chances are low through, that anyone but that person will come by, anyway. That person explains the subjacent ruleset with pride, that person knows there’s always an underlying ruleset that’s hidden at first. That’s why that person is one to succeed in the inherently fair Darwinian race of neoliberal capitalism, as Michael learns. Michael might learn something else from that person’s. That person might be half-witted and ordinary, but that person subconsciously understood that as it’s been forged as a surrogate of the other in love, money gives the buzz of longing even long after satisfying the first cravings. That person understood that the unrequited love of money is as acceptable as amassing more and more just for the sake of it. Michael how he’s closeted, insisting he’s not in it for the money, still thinking of monocled derby-hatters on wall street, fly-boarding valley boys off Nassau, if that person would voice its introspection, that person would tell him it’s the closest they have ever got to the sense of life. However, that person can and will share with Michael, provided they got to a sufficient level of intimacy throughout the night and touched upon the topic, the chain of causation that promises higher returns on investment if directing one’s love towards money. Assume that, for a lack of absolute metrics, a lower return on investment is understood as a higher probability of the love being unrequited, i.e. no money, no kiss, no happy ending. That person says, given a probability p for receiving love from a beloved person and a probability q for receiving the warm, gutty croon of love’s rapture through money, it’s a no-brainer to pursue an increase of q, because if q is increased by i, p is increased by i divided by x element of positive real numbers. Let that person elaborate: Striving for pecuniary success is regarded highly by society, and even the poorest, after countless futile attempts, will never be disdained for their love of money, which, as a side note, does not apply to unrequited love of an individual. In case of achieving the desired riches that correspond to probability p, while desire will likely have wandered on to the next objective, similar as in the course of interpersonal love, side note, again, the societal appreciation of fruitful money-love is broad and emboldening. The resulting boost in self-confidence in conjunction with the newly available financial means to adjust one’s appearance, to train vocabulary and code-switching, and to acquire status-indicating frames of reference, do shorten the odds of getting with someone. “And did you get rich, yet?” “No. But I also didn’t find love, either.”

Sergej meanwhile remains silent to the point that Michael fears that their connection has broken off entirely. Only when he hears the sound of rustling paper over that person drawing breath for the impending salve of TED-fed motivational verbiage, he eases his clenching grip of the only work tool that person gave him, a bluish translucent pen bearing the engraved advice “If you want to create, draw a line.” Thirty minutes left until the first round scheduled for Michael, not worth the return trip to that person’s booth, and “time flies anyway, when you’re having fun, am I right.” That person’s laugh just waiting to be stuffed back down the throat violently. “But what about you? I've been talking ever since and you poor thing didn’t get a word in.” The expecting silence is a sudden pull of gravity to Michael. He stammers. “Michael, nice to meet you.” Again he misses requerying that person’s name. “I’m a web developer, though not right now. And that’s more of a fate than a profession, anyway. So, yeah, I’m with Freddy F now. Since last week, actually.” “Geez, Michael, this ain’t Shark Tank. No reason to be nervous.” That person’s laugh, too dimwitted to resent. “Where you from? I sense a little twist of the tongue here and there, no offense.” “Well. It’s not straightforward. I was born here but I grew up in East Germany.” “Fabulous. Bratwurst.” “Not quite, I don’t eat meat.” “Oh, no worries. I try to steer clear of it, too. Cholesterol kills.”

Sergej’s gumtree-body cascades down the sofa, one hand dipped in a pack of swedish fish, bounty of an exploration of the kitchen’s upper cabinets. He’s deriving about his bank holiday neighborhood, slightly bored as both Patrick and [Artsy Kid] are grounded, he’s steering the analog sticks with the winegum stockfish and sings a closely-looped credit-medley of the TV shows he is allowed to watch back home. The alleys around Sergej’s Slacking Singleton Superstore have become even narrower. Becoming Tunnel: Confessions of a Bank Holiday Alleyway, scrawled across the shutters in a particularly dim spot. Facades and street corners of devoted in-jokers are adorned with alcoves housing statues of the blessed anti-virgin Maria Teresa de Castro. The local community hall exhibits a land-use mural subtitled with an appeal to help the map circulate in second-screen communities, apparently to no avail. Public paths still continue to narrow, like sclerosed arteries they clog with any scrap or junk that the adjacent homeowners couldn’t just pass up. Another dead end Sergej is about to be revived by the incoming demolition crew, the grind of the wooden wheels heralds the many-leveled siege tower that harnesses the destructive frenzy of a platoon of male teenagers to clear the buildings along the neighborhood’s major streets of any unauthorized overhang. Sergej’s marked compassion prevents him from seeking the company of the demo crew, and the pronounced whiskers of the axe-wielding half-men intimidate him. Like any waste management, the crew fosters a culture of mob rites and tough guy lingo that would repel his admired artist-neighbors. And although Sergej’s got his code-switch down cold, bank holiday is a small world, after all.

He’s having too many projects, like he should, he’s eleven. Exporting and importing 3D models from games older than him cannot capture his attention for longer than he needs to process one set of vehicles, and anyway, ten euros for an hour of work is all the riches he can think of. Now he is starting a map. There might be another ten or so in various subtopics of different bank holiday forums, there might be the outdated mural, however, being a child, Sergej knows well that the work commissioned from within is never in vain. Plus, it’s not even like Sergej doesn’t know what’s out there, it’s just that, no offense, these maps don’t make much sense to him. Top-down, orthographic projections that are hopelessly outdated already by the time the last lines are being drawn. No chance of fashioning a map for orientation. The district beltway runs into a dead end against a skyway bloated to a few centimeters headspace above the tarmac. In a matter of minutes, that skyway will be blasted away only to be replaced in a matter of hours by a jackknifed truck serving as the next best foundation for construction overhead. Sergej treats his maps like codified let’s-plays, linear and first-person, recording his ephemeral walks along disappearing routes for an audience that will never trace his footsteps, not least because, let’s be realistic, who takes the time to understand and appreciate the arcane drawings of an introverted boy. He looks up the magnificently smooth facade of a building so tall the 2D bird sprites clip through its side. Some phenomenon sends regular ripples through the reflecting glass panes and make the front appear like a tranche of sea. Sergej notes it, like he records all the corny poetry he sees in bank holiday.

The longer Michael rests his eyes on the tubular features, that person’s demeanor appears increasingly ambiguous, like evil’s storeman, who has perfectly integrated his devious task into the gullible workday, meaty smells from tupperware pandora boxes, hot soup running like lava from the vending machine. That person’s glances over his shoulder in the narrow corridors and wire-frame-flanked passages give him the shivers. And then there’s a faint smell of urea or spilt beer or mildew around that person that offsets the heavy smell of roasting dust coming from the servers. Five, six steps behind that person, Michael still perceives it. He also now notes that person’s infuriating habit of accentuating the one of the heavy safety boots’ 4/4 rhythm on the linoleum floor with a light slap to the thigh, making that person’s keys jangle. When that person turns a corner, the rows of rack swallow every sound of the steady beat, as if that person de- and rematerializes with Michael’s eye contact. “Why are you running?” “Later, Serge. Okay?” He’s short of breath, and while he tries to calm himself reiterating his DIY knowledge about processor cooling, he cannot shake the thought that all those whirring fans suck out the air from the corridors between them. That person’s breath, too, rattles low, in time with the unfailing rhythm of the steps. Most concerningly, that person has, for the first consecutive two minutes, stopped speaking. Michael is trapped, anyway. He clutches his own wad of keys. Wolverine key fist inside his pocket. That is how he pictures his fight. Centuries of asymmetric conflict and he still imagines hand two hand struggle with this or that person. That person has a face to map all the imagined directives, corrections, assessments, and interdictions putting Michael in his place. That person’s face like Antonin Vedyev’s, evil incarnate of Freddy F’s labor-mongering empire.That person’s face like the giant avatars’ in bank holiday’s bloody fights of reproduction. Turning back once again, that person’s angular movements, that muteness, now look anxious, as if that person weren’t sure if it’s still Michael following or an evil spirit about to assault him in an exponential motion. As if that person were wondering whether Michael is involved in the monthly evaluation reports of that person’s temp agency. Freddy F’s labor platform is only the visible tip over the massive keel of white-label HR solutions that keep its business afloat: Self-surveilling systems of work organized along tasks and results, question mark leads to period leads to exclamation point. Bridled by stochastics and natural language processing, Michael will make a statement about that person’s conduct and guidance, although at first he will be confused by that person’s name.

Sergej’s ears are flushed hot under the fake-leathery hug of the headphones that he wears so Micheal does not hear him playing skirmish mode. Secondary screens have informed Sergej that a particular church is back in the battle zone, and he loves that church, whether in peace or conflict. That faction of ardent believers, that started to curate bank holiday’s houses of prayer, may have been the catholic church itself, as rumours have claimed. It might have been an agency of consultants marveling at the baroque meeting rooms of the clergy, that proposed this mission of faith into the godforsaken digital. Surely it is not a movement from within bank holiday, or they wouldn’t have picked that particular church as basilica maior, with parasol and doorbell and all. Players would have known about the moving frontlines along the urban peripheries. Players would have known how to free up a spot in the downtown undergrowth of the center, how to lure the teenage wrecking crew to a given intersection. Instead, the curators got to work on a low poly church on the fringe of blue territory. The artists were certainly gifted, and they shaped the subdivided surfaces into a neo-neoclassical model of astounding tastefulness, conservative in its design, but nonetheless all but anachronistic. However, the fickle balance of power in the church’s area declassed it to an elaborate prop in the constant fighting. At least it is calm in this moment, and Sergej can walk around the nave undisturbed, with only an attentive ear tuned to enemy footsteps outside. The holy door is a normal map of Ghibertian virtuosity, and it showcases the thought and effort that whoever conceived this missionary scheme put into the venture. Driven by despair, perhaps, the represented scenes seek to appeal to imageboard audiences by digging deep into christian iconography to unearth its most memeable content. Notably, the artists avoided the pitfall of the dad hiding his bald spot with the back-turned base cap and did not make painfully obvious attempts at creating viral christian contemporary content. Instead, they seem to have had not only time to go beyond the usual marketing rush jobs, but access to a vast archive of christian art history, too, a fact supporting the hypothesis of roman catholic patronage. Such a Holy See sponsorship would equally help to explain the elaborateness of the work, only possible, probably, under a overworked project manager too busy juggling plummeting congregation figures and borderline-legal compliance scandals to bother any further than to toss a hand of gold at the starving 3D-artists. HR-management courtesy of Freddy F, naturally. Sergej is ninety-nine percent oblivious to all of this, yet he is fascinated by the imagery around the place. Wouldn’t even need the crusades phase he’s in after having binged a six part series on the topic, PG-13 but Fee conceded seeing that the program was lauded quote unquote woke while historically accurate. Tough luck for Fee that Sergej was smitten with the veritable idol of toxic masculinity, the broad-shouldered, full-furred, booming supporting actor named Chimion, likely cast only to tap audiences that are rather ignorant of wokeness. Sergej walks around the church reciting heroic lines of Chimion when he hears steps outside of the thick, infinitely-thin walls. He ducks behind a column of the arcades separating the side aisle. The church is spacious enough to take a good minute to run along its long side and Sergej should have just crawled to cover instead of sprinting loudly, thus alarming the opponent outside. Everything is quiet. Still shapes and images are all that was curated in the church. Music, sermons even, could have been possible, but not as long the building stands on contested terrain. For now, this church can only proselytize silently. Nice for a change. However, the artwork, too, does not scream confession at Sergej but retains a subtle touch. Jesus, Mary, Moses, and other halo-bearing personnel are conspicuously absent in the images. Just as bank holiday’s players construct their game’s narrative as they build and create, the church’s panels recount their biblical accounts through its props, its worlds and landscapes, as trompe l’oeil views into another sandbox. Biblical characters appear almost exclusively in schematic representation of lineages, largely featureless and in hierarchical proportions. Seems that the church’s designers got the idea of post-subjective narration, of creating a space for the recipient to dwell and act in instead of hoping that she will latch on to the dragging account of the individual perspective. Even Chimion, a character with map, goals, backstory all polished to perfection, only serves as a vehicle for memorable lines and custom character ideas. Why should Sergej care what Chimion’s goals are if he has his own? He doesn’t need another voice to tell him what to do. When he’s Chimion, he can recite the combative one-liners in his would-be booming child’s voice, he can take the alpha male Chimion to dance among the nodding heads of the flowerbeds in the church garden, he can procreate sexlessly with his Chimion, whose body hair indicates parts of his hypermasculine body Sergej has never given the slightest thought to. This church’s imagery does not prescribe narratives, this church’s artworks feed a world in slices to Sergej. It attracts him with the promise of continuity, of always transforming tradition, like the constant rewritings and amendments of fan fiction. The church has, maybe with the help of change managers and angel investor workshops, formulated their unique selling proposition to their business model as the original platform, a platform for meaning, strictly organized with its codes of conduct, terms, conditions, but a vessel, eventually, a container to fill with meaning, one that needs filling, desperately. Momentarily, Sergej has gotten lost in the vanishing point of the large, open square in the fresco his viewport points at, and he has missed the sound of an enemy’s steps on the reverberant floor coming closer. He should be dead already, but the opponent, who presumably understood Sergej’s inertia as either a peace offer or a sign of AFK slash connection issues, makes no move to shoot, stab, or KO Sergej. This could be an easy kill, barely-earned points for in-game merchandise, but he likes the look of the avatar. The baggy, paint-spotted corduroy pants flap around the androgynous body template, the complementary vest on top of a flocked, navy hoodie is a dream of Sergej’s in polygons and position-based dynamics, with its countless hooks, flaps, and pockets. IRL, the greasy John Deere base cap would have hidden a friendly receding hairline. Dzień dobry! Sergej thinks of Marek, the polish handyman that Fee underpays for every non-permanent worker task in their apartment back home. Careful to not scare the other with any brusk movement, he holsters his assault rifle as an unmistakable sign of non-aggression. The other leaves its submachine gun drawn, but doesn’t shoot. Now what? As if communicating with a timid animal, Sergej beckons the other under the rich ciborium, his favorite part of the building. Proudly, he shares his personal bug exploit, jumping up one of the columns on invisible ledges left by unclean modeling or as an easter egg. The other follows suit. Like the church’s, their communication, too, is limited to nonverbal means, which, unfortunately, are scarcely implemented. Their characters’ few states of facial play cannot be triggered by the player, and Sergej has a hard time reading excitement or boredom in the movement patterns of Marek, the other. Facing each other, they stand still for an instance, then Marek turns and runs towards the church’s exit, stopping halfway to ensure Sergej has understood and is following. Not only Sergej seems to have a weak spot for the monumental house of prayer on the urban periphery. Despite fierce battles being fought in the immediate vicinity, the church is completely intact. There would be bullet holes if bank holiday’s demolition physics provided for them, but they don’t. At best, bank holiday’s destruction simulation may be called frugal, indeed it just about suffices to maintain the illusion of cause and effect. Only bigger objects break apart under force or fire. Smaller ones merely come loose and disassemble, as they fall to the ground, into translucent rubble. Almost none of that debris is to be found around the church, only as Sergej and Marek run towards the nearby village the manna-like crumbs appear as traces of razed shacks and cottages. The sites of larger, more richly decorated lodgings are marked by household remains among the fragments, custom-made objects, which will, thanks to bank holidays’ server side rendering, never disappear, never decompose until the liquidators will have pulled the final plug. With an unswerving belief in Gordon Moore and technology, bank holiday claims its server’s capacities will never be outdone by its player’s production of game objects. Sergej and Marek wade through recognizable and puzzling objects of human design. Marek throws a grenade, and Sergej takes a heavy hit as he notices the tingle of whatever part would chime in a hand grenade too late. The explosion leaves a circular clearing in the rubble like a bomb at a flea market. He’s less sure about Marek, who runs along towards the village while Sergej would like to return to the church or at least stop to look at the scattered objects. Just as he is about to cross a small river, he spots a homely sight, his heart jumps and he hears a well-known jingle playing in his head as he deviates to double-check that it is, and it is indeed, a tube-shaped model of his favorite breakfast cereal, available in DACH countries only. Full of excitement, Sergej jumps up and down to draw Marek over. Marek stops, turns, and looks back at Sergej. Then he raises his gun and shoots, killing Sergej with the third hit.

Michael has lost orientation completely and only follows numbly the bobbing middle seam of that person’s work jacket, teetering left right left right like a metronome perfectly in time with the muffled step and the jangling slap of the hand, while the blinking grids of the cabinets float by out of focus like a repeating backdrop scroll. Sooner or later every employee, every wanderer of the never changing corridors that make up the hair roots along the dome’s radial axes attains an altered level of perception. In the monotone choir of the servers wheezing, an employee will make out at first only the microtonal melodies of single packets arriving and departing, seemingly arbitrary until the employee will begin to assemble the fragments to continuous micropolyphonic streams. It might take a week or several years until the hypersensitive employee hears the flux like words, like meaningful compounds, like excuse my french W0L0L0\_xxx but if this is what they taught you at harvard you either studied under the fuckin janitor or I guess you took his floor cleaner for lean cause there is no! fuckin! way! that even the dumbest alpha epsilon pi fuckwad would think this is even close. Some employees may find entertainment in the billions of voices like nosey switchboard operators, others might go plain mad, like Michael’s predecessor did. Michael is yet oblivious to the passing streams of information, but already feels its tiring quality.

Now would be the time to talk about the things that went under in the past days. Nulities or minor arrangements. What’s with school? Kid’s gotta learn something. The prolonged holidays should have ended Monday, but online teaching won’t commence until Thursday due to technical difficulties. Michael has rarely given a thought to Sergej’s schooling in recent days. It’s school of hard knocks now. The silence endures. This could be the moment for meaningless but bonding chatter. “Dad, what does Mr. Woestrong mean when he calls somebody a RINO?” Because the neighbor goes off on unsolicited rants about politics. “It means he is a fascist and don’t take any sweets from him.” Because Michael has that annoying habit of responding to his son’s questions as if he were the secret star in a sitcom. He wouldn’t forego the chance of a witty comeback in favor of an age-appropriate explanation. Now would be the time to tell Sergej a, likewise age-appropriate, rendition of his ride on the bus to the ex-mall. This lady, that bus driver, crammed in her bullet proof (?) perspex booth, too tiny already for slight adiposity, with all essential furnishings of a single household. All due respect to driver security, but the mattress bending dangerously over her flapped dangerously close with every touch of the break to the stacked boxes already wobbling worryingly. The boxes’ transparent walls left loopholes for the shoulder check (she didn’t) between the items within. The place on the dash usually occupied by destination signs, saints’ images or personalized novelty number plates now hosts an upright duplex hotplate, that might plug into the 12V lighter socket, but the plug was dangling down into the footwell. The question on the entering passengers’ faces was always the same, and she preemptively put on her so-what slash mind-your face as she ground to a stop, a tenant with a steering wheel, the audible creak of the rebounding box springs greeting the boarding passengers. If eviction should come upon him, Michael would at least be able to retain a clean separation between work and private environments, provided that his car ever returns from the workshop. If not, some joints from the undead local cab trade still provide their drivers with sedans spacious enough for Sergej bedded on the back seat and Michael on the wound down driver seat. There used to be a certain nobility to this kind of poverty when he pictured it, but now the thought of Sergej awaking in a pool of his own saliva on the hydrophobic leather seat just turns his stomach. Better think of something less dismal. The clear plastic fans clamped to the useless air vents of his first car, that made him think of holiday, of the slow turtle-sex movement of north German wind farms. The countless clear plastic fans whirring in the grid cages around him, spinning like the still tangible persistence disks of the hard drives that make Michael think of 5000 year-old Bi discs and he feels smart about it, turning with the sound of mice feet on glass. Waiting and listening to the sound of the stop-and-go traffic of multiple HDDs conjures up memories of defragmenting his first computer. Mind-numbing and boring as hell, it still beat the view from his seventh floor lookout over colored rectangles rearranging themselves on the grid of the supermarket’s parking lot. Defragmentation seemed a lot more like magic when he hadn’t yet understood the importance of putting his room in order.

While the time remaining to his next scheduled round seemingly stagnates, Michael spins into soft drowse, into a zen-like state that he has never achieved during the breathing exercises of his brief, impatient sampling of self care apps. This place is like Petra in an apocalypse, a desert of material that once was carved and dressed but to Michael is read-only. Without tools, with only his strength and alertness, both rapidly vanishing, he can still only marvel at the traces of the microsecond-old past, because the infrastructure is so diligently protected that he can’t even pull a plain plug to make an impact. If machine rebellion is really a thing, this will certainly be ground zero, and Michael, should he be reassigned, along with the other night guards will become tools themselves. For now, though, Michael merely falls asleep.

With his virtual car dealership thriving and another tenner in his pocket slash mobile wallet piggy bank, that Michael spun off his bank account for him, Sergej approximates his father’s nightly income. [Artsy kid] still fumes with jealousy every time Sergej comes around with another bulky vehicle for his parents’ collection, but has agreed to share the task of decorating the barn with his friend, if he’s so much. Patrick has come by, too, and has been deemed adequate as an assistant. In extensive discussions, the art collective of [Artsy kid]’s parents has decided that their car lot does not strictly have to look like a dump, even though two out of seven advocate an understanding of the collection as just that, a visualization of imperceptible garbage collection of digital systems. Now, Patrick points out unheeded where Sergej and [Artsy kid] are supposed to shoot the twinkling festoons as seen on car lots around the country, where they suggest warm wind ruffling hair and the siren call of manifest destiny. Under the crossfire of shooting garlands, a quote unquote local noise artist preludes the first in a long series of talks on the topic of binary detritus with a fugue of hard-drives failing. The festoon cannons make the phumping sound of plopping bottles but Sergej hears the flapflapflap of the garlands as he remembers them whirring on a lot they passed some days ago. The speaker begins as customary with a foray into dictionaries. “The notion of space permeates the etymologies of western trash vocabularies, space so plain it echoes in the word spazzatura. And that space is clearly divided into within and beyond, and whatever we move beyond, becomes trash, it falls like the eponymous Old Norse fallen leaves and twigs, it falls like the Abfall off the disc that is earth.” Phump, flapflapflap, a daring shot hisses just barely past the head of the speaker. “Indeed, as far as it’s known, western cultures routinely followed a displacing approach in dealing with the objects, and, on a side note, subjects, too, that had forfeited their position in the community. The journey of trash ended in a more or less precisely designated place. Outside of the city walls, beyond the visible landscape in underground landfills, or merely out the window on the head of an unsuspecting passer-by, as Juvenalis reports.” Phump, flapflapflap, [Artsy kid] has discovered Patrick as a diverting target, moaning for him to stop, although there’s not even a health bar in build mode. “Whether it was the abundance of natural resources or proto-anthropocene ignorance that left the practice of disposing of unserviceable objects and subjects by pushing them beyond the imagined confines of the community unchallenged,” phump, flapflapflap, “[Artsy kid], cut that out or I’ll kick you. From the server, as in block the account, so hold your CPS-calls, everybody.” Parental control allows account blocking with the push of a third party app button. “Not for the first time, but with increasing urgency, we are noting that the luxury of disposing to the beyond without consequences, of that fire-and-forget mindset, is an illusion. When I’m saying not for the first time I’m thinking of our past dealings with closed or quasi-closed systems, that should have taught us about the impossibility of uselessness, of trash as we are used to talking about it. To go on a little of an old-days-rant, I come from a time of manual memory management. When I wrote my first programs, I had to manage the, air quotes, disposal of any information that wouldn’t be needed for future computation. This practice is largely textbook knowledge to the current generation, thanks to a cutely termed concept called garbage collection, an automated process of nanometer-sized dump trucks driving around circuit boards to collect that unused data, singing a song from the infinitely airing television show “The Simpsons”. This, however, is only my own imagination shaped by a guesstimate 5000 years of displacing waste management. In fact, both manual and automated garbage collection illustrate the inherent use every entity embodies, the potential and the ability to be transformed, to reappropriate through the transformation of voltages. In plain terms: Go, recycling!” Phump, flapflapflap. Thanks to an increasing number of voluntary contributors, the collective’s motor pool has grown to numbers that even the extensive barn will soon fail to offer suitable sites for new models. The view from the gallery resembles a drone flight over a midwestern yard for the defunct liberty on wheels, like the car cemetery of that screen-famous maybe-murderer. An idealized view of that beyond, the one that the pigtailed WELL-subscriber on stage was invoking. “The palimpsestic nature of random access memory has had, however, little influence on our understanding of digital persistence and our dealing with data detritus. In 1983, thousands, millions as legend has it, of game cartridges containing the notorious Atari 2600 title E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial, a game so bad that it put the nail in the coffin of the game industry during the infamous video game crash of 1983, were buried in a New Mexico landfill few kilometers away from the Trinity test site. The dumping as a means of terminating the mere existence of the game’s copies turnt garbage was so effective in light of society’s preconditioning, that stories of the burial subsequently fell into the genre of ghost stories, of urban legends, fantasies of something de facto extraterrestrial, non-existent.” There’s a ring at the door and Sergej responds like a big boy. Even checks the door viewer before like a big boi. the man from downstairs asks if their landline is working. His lids are hanging like smoky curtains in the window and a stye decorates the frame like a dreary cactus. Michael doesn’t have a landline phone, only voice-over-IP, Sergej knows that, the man is 404. He has to excuse himself, his dad is quote unquote on the ladder, as Michael told him to say. As Sergej seesaws over the sofa’s seat back to take his u-shaped playing position unhindered yet by the shortened ligaments resulting from explosive growth, his ear picks up the crisping whisper of repeated expletives coming from the phone keeping him company.

Once, when Michael was still talking to that friend of his, the one that now only lives as a recurrently surfacing struggle of obstinacy and remorse in the back of Michael’s head, that friend, name of Robert, invited him to accompany him on a work shift. They engineered Michael’s CV inasmuch that he passed for an expert of the so-called internet of things, so that Michael would be allowed to enter the airfield of Schiphol airport. After a stint in the moribund event sector as a stagehand, Robert had believed that a move to Holland would satisfy his passion and consumption habits of obscure breeds of weed. Just barely he managed to make it through the trial period of reduced doses in order to secure financing for his costly hobby, and when Michael came to visit, Robert described his job as tending to the countless caleidoscope eyes on the heavenly ramps of transgressive motion. The lights on the runway’s edge steamed like whirlpools. Riding shotgun around the apron felt extolling, free because Michael did not perceive the strict confines and limits that Robert had already internalized. He was still too self aware, but he almost woohooed out the open window. White on white, fly all night. Then they made their first stop. Red on white, you’re all right. It didn’t take the few meters to the lights for Michael to be inundated by panic of an abrupt intensity he had never known. Red on red, you’re dead. The cold mist that before had collected in refreshing streams on Michael’s face out the window, now was trapping him in a halo of light with a black hole outlook into the sky shooting unannounced, tardy 737s at him. It was congesting his airways with its heavily soaked inertia, accelerating pulse and breathing rates in a feedback loop. Perhaps it was the residual high that held back tumbling thoughts and let a deep sadness shine through. A sadness of solitude, of freely severing the ties with the world as he knew it and immediately regretting his decision. Panic was befalling his limbs and Robert was too slow to realize the state of his friend and his buckling limbs, but in Michael’s head a clarity remained, that let him remember that feeling of sadness, how he had felt similarly every time he had toggled clipping in a first person role play game. How he had shot projectiles from behind the rock face and under the floor, and how soiled and ashamed it had felt to betray the world he was supposed to be part of. Any confinement removed but condemned to never again be part of something intimate, always transcending. And even if he had been safe from the enemy’s claws and clubs it had made him feel the vulnerability of his fantasy on digital life-support. Stripped of the epic’s illusion of providence the game used to give him the uncanny feeling of awakening in his bed in the middle of a deserted fairground hall. And suddenly, just as Michael turns a corner on his second round of his beat, his cut of the tiled paths and blinking lockers of embedded circuits, there is that feeling again. Once more it announces itself with the sudden fear of exponential movement approaching Michael from the invisible darkness behind the halo of signalling lights, with the panic under an invisible peril that will only become apparent in the last instance to grant him a last revelation of pure horror before it kills him. A single concrete pillar to give him shelter. Michael curves his back against the curve of the column to maximize the protected surface, but even through the work coat he can feel the warm draught running between the server rows. Hot breath from the adjacent cabinets singes Michael’s skin. If he stays still for too long, the acrylic jacket will melt to napalm on his body in an inextinguishable fire. Maybe he’s already feeling it, maybe it’s merely the usual sting of the fabric. He always stopped those videos before he would have gotten to know whether he would melt, roast to a crisp or fume away in case of fire and anyway, it is not the threat of physical pain that is causing his fear, but the conviction that in a moment, another minute maybe, his conscious mind is gonna shut off, simply. He has turned too many corners, he’s already too far beyond. “Dad?” That’s a grappler seizing him spinning in empty space. “Are you cursing?” Apparently, Michael’s vocal tract has availed itself of the slackening command. “Son?” This is the existential register, son as in death bed advice, as in bible quotes. “Serge?” This is Michael not quite resurfacing, but catching the side of darkness not quite as dark, towards the surface. “Is everything okay, dad?” “I think I’m having a heart attack.” Between the curses, that continue slipping his tongue. “Do you have pain or discomfort in the chest?” Sergej sits up in cheerful excitement. Perfect score on the five symptoms of heart attacks and strokes, respectively. “No.” “Then you don’t have a heart attack, dad. Say pleasant mother pheasant plucker.” “Serge! I can’t breathe!” “But I don’t think you’re having a stroke, either. Can you raise both your arms?” “Sergej.” “What?” “I don’t know where I am.” “Okay. Is it dark?” “No Serge, it is not dark.” “Did you lose your way?” “I need to get back to my desk. I don’t know what’ll happen. I need to go back to my desk.” “Can you drop me a pin?” “Where’s my phone? Shit! There’s no air in here, Serge!” “Dad, your phone is by your ear. Send me your location and I’ll see you out.” Michael is panting, and without the cheerful pause menu music chiming low, without the boost of big boi confidence from answering doors like a paying tenant, the panic would have probably long spread along the line spanning the two boroughs and generations. “What floor are you on?” “Jesus, Serge. How am I supposed to know that?” “Did you take any stairs or elevators since you entered?” “No.” The mall’s map is tilted and crudely projected. “Serge?” “One second, dad.” “Serge?” “Are you at some kind of crossing or corner that can help me locate you?” “Corner.” And suddenly his father’s breath heaves groaning high over the line. “Sergej! I can’t breathe!” Almost pleading. “Dad! Tell me about grandma!” Get the old engine running again, with a push, a push down the slope. ”Are you fucking kidding me?” “I’ll lead you to where you entered the building. With your back to the corner go left. Tell me about grandma! Go!” “Serge! She will disappoint you! You want me to tell you something about her? She’ll let you down. She’s a good soul, but she’s no family.” Ahmed is Sergej’s panic buddy in class. If one of them flips, the other puts him at ease, gets him to talk through it. “Listen. To keep Wanda interested you need to change constantly, but at the same time she won’t forgive that you’ve changed.” If Sergej deliberately went for the provocative theme, who knows, but it kickstarts an unmediated spate of allegations and vindications that ignites Michael’s anger but quenches his fear. “Whatever you’ll do, she’ll make you feel like you took the most disastrous of decisions, like every step you take independently is a, a finger in her face.” “Finger?” “Even though that’s actually what she needs, ironically. She needs you to take care of yourself, because who else is gonna do it? Her? She needs you to learn to read with her scripts and notes flying around, but she’ll need to hear that you did so that one time she sat down with you and a children’s book. And you? She’ll never forgive you growing up years without her.” “What?” “No. Serge! There’s a crossing!” There’s not actually a crossing. “What? There shouldn’t be.” “You’re right, my bad. Wanda loves you, like everyone. You know, only don’t expect too much from her. Sometimes I’m surprised that we both made it to our age. In general, the fact that we made it, isn’t it amazing? I don’t know about you but it still makes me marvel.” “Yeah, I...” “Serge! I’m sorry I cannot tell you much about our family. Your grandparents had a dog that died before you, that one had a bigger family tree than we do. I can go back three generations, four if you’re lenient with names. Male line, save for Mom, your grandma, for obvious reasons. And she was too busy mining grandma’s, my grandma’s, biography to take an interest in our women progenitors, let alone tell me about them. Adam’s the oldest I’ve ever met, and his father’s name escapes me if I’ve ever known. Only that he’s from a small town, as in really small, hamlet, three streets and one traffic light as of 1962, you get the idea. One street the way, one street the road, one street the avenue, crossing in church square, that last one never changed. Many people that worked the land, few people owned it. When they shot Liebknecht in 1919, the village’s worker council rechristened all three streets to honor the martyr. They left square’s name to the pastor, which proved to be a good decision, because when the royalists started to plague the village, our ancestor and his folks frequently sought refuge with the impartial minister. And he survived. He always survived. He survived a rock to the head and lying with an open wound in a ditch for five february hours. A gunshot wound avenging the breathtaking kick in the groin of an interventionist. And when he switched sides, because, see, he wasn’t exactly a stickler for politics as long as the functions were generously catered, he survived a mudslide with a broken leg, a lightning stroke with an acquired heart defect that kept him from the trenches when he was called to serve his country, and a spontaneous assault of crows, that left him with one eye occasionally flicking downwards, though that might have been for the lightning, too. Are you still navigating?” “You should keep right, dad.” “Keep right, keep right. Alright. Adam’s father. Not much else that I can tell you about him. A notorious liar, that’s what he was, greasy and slick, slipping through grips. Cannot be ruled out that the heart defect was just another one of his mischievous shirkings. He stole into holy matrimony with Adam’s mom, making her believe that he was leaving his other family and a house and career of riches out of mad love for her. In love he was indeed, which was probably what saved the marriage, besides the threat of dishonor and a draft note arriving with the wedding letters. Nineteen minus nine months means that Adam must have been conceived on R&R. Though I never saw any pictures of his father and cannot testify to Adam’s legitimacy. Good for her if she had a little mischievous fun on her part. Freaking tragedy that I know nothing about her. Serge, I want you to make sure that you tell your mother’s story and not how your pitiful dad got stuck that time in a premillennial mall turned data dumpster. Just like I got to hear that story of Adam’s father arriving like a king in his village. Belatedly returning from the front a good one and a half decades after the armistice of Compiègne, cruising the three streets recently rechristened after another, more dismal figure. The tales in black and white kept schtum about the color of his Hugo Boss attire, so I can only guess. And because that day, his father packed his wife and son in the back of the Horch, Adam survived his youth while two of his friends died on the locally popular dare of jumping across the path of oncoming trains. Serge! There’s a fork.” “‘right.” “Serge?” “Right!” “Adam survived his first encounter with a traffic light, boarding school initiation rites, Serge, you sure about this, because it’s getting colder.” “Yes. There should be a fire door coming up on your right.” “Boarding school. They put him there because after all, I reckon, the lineage was not that unambiguously linear as it’s always suggested.” Sergej knows better than two ask. Riding shotgun means listening and navigating, and he feels that this applies now as well. “Did you pass the fire door?” “You told me to take it!” “Proceed.” “So here’s Adam at that boarding school, with his suspiciously abrahamic name, with his receding chin between the chiseled Fähnleinführer types gundog-drilled to declare and detect any poisonous mushrooms, and still he survives. Not only that but his hiding with silkworms and plane models will be construed as a fervent passion for flying, so that even his at most moderate fitness cannot impede his career in the Luftwaffe.” “Wait, dad, you should come up to a sort of lobbyish opening with elevators.” “I think I can see it. And then?” “There’s two corridors heading straight.” “Sergej! Come on, fast!” “Dad! I can’t work like that. You have to take the right one. Not right, you understand. The right one of the two straight ones. It’ll turn right after you pass the bathrooms.” “Fuck. Fuck. Why did I take this job?!” Admirable how Sergej handles his panicked father’s gasped profanities. Honors for premature serenity. He stuffs the unsettling experiences of witnessing a person that is supposed to be in control, out of control, he stuffs them down, down time and again to the bottom of his consciousness, so many of them already that they have become compacted into a solid layer that seals the sediment of other traumatic memories looming below. “And then? He went to flying school and then?” “He went up. You know the odds of living through the war as a pilot? Forty fucking percent. Six in ten died. But not him. Blows my mind. Don’t think I’ll tell you heroic war stories. No deal. No way. Still covered in fucking swastikas, head to toe, that nazi shit. Only when the allies had advanced as far that he couldn’t even find the space for a decent take-off, he reconsidered. And he had been insignificant enough to get a pass for his inner emigration rap, plus wasn’t he trustworthy with his beautiful baby boy whose conception he had managed to squeeze in between bombing raids? And that baby boy, heads up, this one you got to know, too, is Heinrich. Barbara’s his mom, for the record. Never met her, little to say about her. As far as I can tell, Adam soon stopped caring about her until she, good riddance I’d say, remarried a physics professor, much to Adam’s dismay, whose publications are an absolute entertainment, I should show you. Nuclear cars, trains, everything. Died of radiation poisoning, that poor. Only Adam kept outliving everyone, two wives, estranged, both of them, his brother, estranged, too, at least for most of his life.” “Have you passed an, I don’t know, some kind of major intersection, yet?” “Serge, for real? This is a grid, you understand, so what the fuck do you mean by major intersection.” That fuck, however, was one too many, even for big boi Sergej, answering the door and all. It pushes him to the verge of tears, to the edge of a gorge deep enough to create its own gravity, with a tar pit at its bottom that holds Sergej’s daily preoccupations, his fear of flying, his pre-teenage angst and not least the collected concern that has been dripping viscously from his father’s words and conduct, and that he has been absorbing like a shopping channel sponge throughout the last days. Still, there must be some kind of unbreakable father-son bond in place, because Michael immediately feels the tentacles retracting, although the lower lip’s shaking and the heartbeat’s acceleration are neglected in the call’s encoding. “Hey, hey, I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean that like it sounded.” Try harder. “You’re doing a great job. I wouldn’t have known what to do without you. It’s just. You know how it is, I’m stressed. But it doesn’t have anything to do with you. Actually, quite the contrary.” Tensely, Michael listens into the blunt silence that used to be calming in the old days, sea-like white noise of connection. “At least on the left there should have remained a door. A fire door. They can’t just remove it.” It’s a tiny voice, that comes from the receiver, tiny but not trembling. “Should I keep talking?” The fear is gone, the anger subsides. Michael feels as if he has been here before, and stupid for having freaked out over nothing but hot air. He shouldn’t have. He shouldn’t have given in to mystery’s gravity, to the pull of the occult attributions that surround these places, as if there would be supernatural powers at work instead of oil-stained mechanics at the hydroelectric plant, sweat-stained research assistants in windowless CSAIL cellars, taurin-nursed salespeople keeping the flywheel going, blow-cooled walkabouts like him checking the switches in order. What is this place if not a titanic collection of e-waste-to-be? The bottleneck of the continent’s communication that, after all, is not that tiny, not that fascinating once you’ve gotten lost in its hyper-hygienic entrails. Where every collecting drop of condensation, every piece of organic matter will be detected and removed by automatic suckers, blowers, sweepers, cutters. That thought, though, stirs the sediments and fear wells up fast. “Heinrich, son of Adam and Barbara. Born to a nation that unconditionally surrendered only ten days after. You can imagine the joys of childbirth were curbed, substantially. Plus, Adam didn’t return until four months later from American internment. But what a fine boy he was. What a pudgy, rosy-cheeked baby in defiance of all that starvation around him, that cold. Soldiers were sticking chocolate bars in his felted wrap, men already smartly dressed again dirtied their hands slipping a charcoal briquette into his baby carriage. He was drawing all forces like a babbling psychic to ensure his own survival. But as devotedly fortune mothered him in his stroller, as fiercely it abandoned him as soon as he had uttered his first words, which, sinning against all female figures that had secured his becoming, addressed his pa-pa, who, having been welcomed so warmly by his happy family on his return from US imprisonment, had made a career of delayed returns, smartly dressed in captain’s hat and epaulettes.” “When you reach the end of the corridor, take a right, then the next left.” “Will do. Thanks. Anyway, who knows what his first words were supposed to signify. Maybe his pa-pa was really not a call for his elusive father. Maybe it was merely the first stutter of the condition that haunted his childhood. That, like an auditory target, drew taunts and teases from which he hid in the school’s crawl spaces so frequently that he acquired a bird-like seating position with his knees drawn to his chest, that he never fully abandoned even as a 180 plus tall adult. For his thirteenth birthday, his father took Heinrich gliding, and his tightly packaged posture proved downright predestined for the confined cockpit of the glider. And for Heinrich, flying was a revelation. Being hugged by sturdy man-made structures like in his school’s safe spaces with unseen forces hoisting you up and taking you places. That boy had a dream, he had a goal, and he studied, and counted days, read flight plans, maps, and regulations to receive his licence with honors already before his diploma. Stayed out till dawn at the dusk of an adolescence of self-imposed discipline and strict regimes only to wake up 24 hours later to shocked parents and a barf-bucket next to his bed. Now, there’s three things deemed unacceptable for pilots in the sixties: Politics, monogamy, and epilepsy. There was absolutely no chance that Heinrich would ever board a plane as anything more than a purser, and in his abstinent teenage years he had grown to hate having to deal with drunk people. So what to do with this broached life, as good as new, mint-conditioned, practically, all honors and Thälmann-badge, a little stale inside, perhaps?” “Did you take the first left?” “Sure did. Heinrich went on to study. Others might have tried to stick close to the unrequiting love, to get a kick out of the odd blink of the silver chassis in the sun of the runway. He could have gone into engineering, into nuclear airplane research to catalyze the attraction of one half of the family to a certain physics professor. But he did not. The bruises were still too fresh. Instead, Heinrich took his physics in the opposite direction. From birds-eye to cine-eye, he chose electrical engineering, and then microelectronics, a field that was not only far enough from aviation to let the old trauma rest but also staffed with people seemingly appreciating crawl spaces. At some well-organized function, he met Marga, they properly cohabited, married properly, and in seventy-one they had Wanda.” Michael has been hasting through the familiar corridors and hasn’t even noticed the faded adverts he has inspected earlier. Now that he recognizes the deserted bus port, he realizes that with the slim chance he has of finding the way to his night watchman’s desk even with his son’s help, he will rather take the equally slim chance of his absence going unnoticed. Praised be the boy but for now he needs to be alone, so he hangs up faking a disconnect. He squeezes alongside the swishing faceless cars and although darkness has already fallen, misguided birds sing consolingly as he exits the underground turnpike.

“What’s up?”

“What’s with the levity? No script today?”

“Nah. Turns out that shit was fake. Some elaborate decoy for the competitors. Anyway, I’m being paid. Is this about your ratings? Working hard on not working, aye?”

“Oh, keep it. Is there anything you can do for me?”

“Nope. I’d say. Going AWOL on your second gig is somewhat of a killer. May I ask why?”

“I was feeling sick.”

“And for real?”

“I got lost.”

“Oh, come on! What do you expect me to file here? German fairy tales? Hansel and Gretel?”

“I panicked, okay?”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

“Any way that we can mold that into a medical emergency?”

“I’m afraid that is still going to be difficult. Did you contact your GP? By phone would be fine, considering.”

“I don’t have a GP.”

“Jesus, Michael, you’re not twenty anymore. You have a child at home.”

“The appeal?”

“Won’t make it far unless you come up with a physician that attests to your condition.”

“Don’t you know a doctor? Don’t asian families breed doctors?”

“Like Germans breed racists? No, Michael, unfortunately I can’t help you out there.”

“How am I supposed to get a doctor’s appointment right now?”

“Be creative, they have hotlines for those cases now. Anything helps in your case. And yes, for the record, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Alright, thanks.”

“How’s Sergej?”

“Oh, he’s fine. He’s having the time of his life.”

“According to Patrick he’s becoming a douche like his father.”

“Even better. Nothing serious, I hope? They were still hanging out online, last time I checked.”

“Trifles.”

“Good.”

“Anything else?”

“No.”

“But seriously, Michael, make an effort. Once you’re out, you’re out. And who knows where Freddy F is going.”

With cable pre-paid for the year, with their sans-serif family-sized stocks, in a city that has solidarily suspended all costly leisure activities, in an apartment that may or may not come within the eviction ban Sergej and Michael have accommodated themselves to the novel uncertainties, that in truth only seem new, like a shrink-wrapped trinkets unearthed in a move. A move might be due any day now that Michael has ceased to pay rent and he takes care to retain a presentable appearance between eight and eight in case his landlady should come by. For now, he’s banking on his dewy-eyed map rather than his potential rights as a tenant, that he hasn’t looked into, yet. Still he packed a couple of boxes and bags last night with winter clothes and household redundancies, and fell asleep checking for flights and transatlantic mover services. In his dreams, they took the car to the port, he and Sergej, to remigrate in a twenty-foot-unit stocked high with palettes of Poland Spring. When Sergej tore open a pack to quench his thirst, the bottles started to leak and fill up the container, and they had to swim their way across the ocean in a pool of ten-step-filtered spring water. His legs still feel sore, but maybe that’s just a delayed reaction to his straying in the ex-mall’s sprawling ways. The fizzing, joyful pain of work been done, delightful chemistry like the protein congealing in the thumb-thick omelet frying in front of him. Closed gyms, curfews and billions of oblivious hens have led to a glut of eggs, the hens are drowning whole continents in viscous yellow streams, mountains stand out from the heavy sea like the sparse cuts of bell pepper Michael afforded for their breakfast. When they went grocery shopping on his day off, Michael allowed Sergej to lay on the crate rack of the cart, headfirst and streamlined so that he would grab the special offers in the foot space. They had availed themselves of the reduced store traffic and Sergej’s delight even relieved Michael temporarily from his parental prudence. With ample stocks of eggs and unpopular greens, home brands and no-name coke that Sergej held on to when they almost skidded into the jam section, Michael is still free of debt, leaving aside the outstanding rent, and a generous credit line to forestall the exposure of his lying answers to Sergej’s occasional inquiries about his father’s liquidity. Nevertheless, now, alone with the pan hissing at him, he keeps redrawing the greasy rendition of his unlock pattern to refresh the application of Freddy F. “Hungry!” And the answer to his son’s moan comes out too harsh, too irritated for the encouraging morning. Even if it’s not the money, there has to be something that doesn’t run as smoothly, if he forgets to double check his son’s flossing routine after breakfast. However, it can’t be Sergej, either. At some point of his absence from his son’s life a series of switches must have been flicked, that made Sergej into the mysteriously serene, independent quasi-young-man with an inexplicable patience and respect for his father. And as long as Michael is refusing to believe in folk psychology and that it indeed was his absence that made his son’s heart grow fonder, he’ll be the dad that declares any development of his child irrational caprice of fate unless it’s explained in a blurb of his sloppily studied shelf of parenting guides. Besides, he doesn’t want to jinx it slash injure Sergej by confronting his son directly with the fact that he was his father’s most hurtful bully. If already the memory of hitting his childhood stuffed animal face-down onto the railing of his bed making poor Mickey’s resin eyes splinter turns Michael’s stomach, how would Sergej feel if Michael brought back the countless instances of contempt and rejection so plain that Michael’s friends not only noticed but even seeked distance from him because they couldn’t believe that such disdain did not have its grim justification. Perhaps his compassionate son is really the product of a reprocessing, a Vergangenheitsbewältigung already ongoing, or perhaps it’s not even compassion but merely tacit agreement to terms that simply suit him, because he needs independence, a break from constant mothering - even though that’s not exactly what Michael knew Fee for - and an apartment with salty snacks and unsecured wifi. Don’t jinx it. Though after all, being frank, there is no drive in him to get to the bottom of his son’s convenient transformation, either. These scars won’t heal so easily, not even in these weeks of co-solitary confinement. These scars are thick and scabby for a reason, and every wondering thought about Sergej’s benevolence brings back the memory of that pudgy, handsome face, oh what a darling button nose, but what hateful gaze, how distorted the lips forming that crushing utterance on that hike in the Harz: I don’t wanna see dad. I want dad to walk behind me. No quarrel preceding, just causeless, consistent rejection, bile thickly trickling, forming a puddle, a lake, a black sea. And the forgiving, even tender side that Sergej has been showing lately is nothing but a float for now, a yet unsteady attempt to overbuild the dark water with a lagoon city, piecemeal and thriving like the capitals of bank holiday. The eggs are pale and mealy where the artery pepper strips don’t reach. “Hungry.” Every look at his son is reassuring. Even in the annoyance, the reproachful face of his son right now, there’s absolutely no resemblance to the hateful expression of his younger self. “It’s here! Stop bugging me.” He’s on edge, right, what about that, then? Must be Freddy F, after all, who, right in that moment shakes Michael’s phone into nervous vibration. Can he hold a hammer? Can he swing a nail? Enough for minimum wage plus tips if applicable, Michael reckons. The gig must be handyperson’s work or construction but the description is silent on details. Purpose is for the one who pays. Five is the time to clock in, another late shift, another reheated lunch. “Can you handle another couple of hours with your old man gone?” He nods in time with his chewing. Dust rises in the searing sun streaming in through the windows. Temperature skyrocketed this morning, and with it the pulses of the city’s inhabitants bursting from their overcrowded apartments into the streets. On the neighborhood’s sidewalks, the snarls to defend one’s distance are delivered with smiling eyes beneath the shades. The trees and plants explode their stamina in pollinous mushroom clouds and fill the air with sticky white reminders of airborne contagion. The whole house is vibrating with the stomping beat of a disco tune thumping somewhere downstairs. “What’s the job?” “Construction.” “Cool. But they ask you of all people to help?” “Funny.” “Can you bring some cereal for tomorrow morning?” Michael is of the paper boy generation, prone to fall prey to the recruiting campaigns of underpaying delivery companies that halo the hard, honest cowboy work of the lone rider. The reputation of hard work involving strength and power tools on the other hand suffered from the association with certain construction sites in Michael’s youth, whose lunching crew confirmed his insecurity about his walk and posture. Sergej, on the other hand, thinks rather little of the honorable profession of hauling heavy physical objects across the land and already before he became immersed in the virtual DIY-frenzy of bank holiday, he had hoped for his father to discover the building activities that Fee doesn’t let Sergej partake in one of his parenting guides. Perhaps once the hammer has been forced in his hand, they will move beyond twisting potato battery wires without pliers. “I’m gonna mate. I have a date. I’m gonna mate. I have a date.” Sergej keeps repeating his sing-song of words he doesn’t understand, according to Michael. “I expect to see greasy marks in your school books and not only on that controller.” “But pa-pi, do you think I touch my books unwashed?” He coils head-down on the sofa, laughing and resuming his inappropriate rhyme. He starts to garnish it with words that Michael wouldn’t have thought to be in his son’s vocabulary, and that quashes his theory that mating in bank holiday is an abstract process, entirely removed from the flesh-colored world that invaded his classmates’ phone screens so rapidly that the news of the parent-teacher conference reached even Michael. With feminism as a pretext he pushes the thought aside, that he should have quote unquote the talk with his son. And perhaps that date of Sergej, if it’s still the same as when he tried last, is right in saying that bank holiday is better than the majority of the other ways of learning about sex. Akash’s little brother continues to struggle with visions that befall him in near-orthogonal sex positions, visions of that bulging stud bull doing anthropomorphic doggy style like the sheep in the video game that his father had caught him playing and bruskly removed from to abduct him on an ad-hoc roadtrip up the Hudson, where he would stop at every village to ask for upcoming inseminations. Michael remembers the inevitable walk-ins on his mother and her boyfriend in the one-bedroom without a hall to deafly sneak past the shaking fold-out couch in the open kitchen and screws his face into a lemon bite. “When are you going?” “Can’t wait, eh?” “Can we go to the Atomic Museum before?” “Museums are closed, dummy.” “Not a dummy, mummy!” “We can check if we can access their garden. If you’re lucky, they haven’t closed that, yet.”

The replica of the trinity site’s obelisk rises black against the rounded clouds over the bay. Yellow barrier tape around it indicates that its child-safe climbing holds are not to be used today. Apart from the barred lookout, none of the exhibits in the museal garden is off limits, not even the clearly unhygienic coin-operated binoculars, that lets its viewer drop Little Boy on the island and that used to show the resulting marred skyline in augmented reality, while now that the last belligerent board members of the museum have relented, only color-coded zones of destruction are overlaid on the cityscape. Already the last two times he visited, Sergej had urged his father to go to the quote unquote womb of the bomb, as Time Out called the pistacchio-shaped, rose-gold building of the museum. Wanda still has her fangs too deep in Michael’s neck, and he cannot bring himself to believe in the power that, according to the museum’s awkward tagline, will have saved us twice. The no-nukes functions were the ones with enormous banquets of spelt cakes and salads. However, he’s enough of a Gen Y nihilist to entertain an acquiescing curiosity, a morbid fascination for nuclear horror shows. It had been simply a lack of time on his side that stood in the way of previous visits. It’s not quite clear to him why his son has fallen for the museum’s ads of pastel-colored nationalism, and yet it fits perfectly in the playful studies of his son, who collects maps of largely defunct shopping centers, who draws plans and charts of aberrant past progress in his naive and colorful Henry-Dreyfuss languages on ever-extending fold-out annexes, without any want to finish them. He sketches infinite obituaries. Never forget. Sergej is standing in a granite pool in the midst of a column of steam blown into the shape of a mushroom cloud. A light breeze blows the mist over towards Michael at the launcher button. “Another one, dad!” “You’ll be soaked.” It is unusually hot for this time of the year. Michael launches another blast and joins his son in its epicenter to cool his sweaty neck. Sergej’s hair collects the moisture in smooth, sand-colored strands, and Michael has no use for a sick child at home while he needs to be out working, so he propels Sergej over to the sweltering pan of a commissioned art installation. Seventy-two metal plates, engraved and embedded into the lawn, that collect the heat of the day and pleasantly sear Sergej’s calves. But he’s already up and around, trying to make sense of the giant mind map of life, death, and fission that should be totally down his alley. In a bout of disconnected clairvoyance, the conviction befalls Michael, that it’s only going to be harder for his son from here on. Tracing the nodes of their family tree is revisiting years of renewal. All of the family babies were delivered in the ascendant of an auspicious future. Even when Wanda was born, her parents faced the inauguration of the SED’s new secretary general with confidence. Sergej was born in 2009, the year that 2008 hit with full force and Michael lost two student jobs in succession to the crisis. Michael is little superstitious, but he doubts that it will be easy for his son. “Has your hair dried?” Sergej is unresponsive, rapt in contemplation of the glistening floor panels. Michael shakes his concerns and stretches out belly down on the warm metal to dry the back of his shirt soaked with sweat and atomic water vapor. A small fleet of empty tourist boats floats by and as Michael follows their stoic cruise from the corner of his eye, he falls asleep roasting on the enigmatic nuclear disk. He is woken up by Sergej, who wants to leave, urgently and suddenly. “Something wrong?” Sergej points a pianist’s finger at a small group of rust and soil veterans, bandana-donning, red batik and blue jeans, badges and patches unintelligible but predictable from a distance. “I don’t think we should support a bellicist venture like this park.” “Did they tell you that?” “I should have considered that before we came. Did you know that they had to print their obituaries on small-print insert slips because there was no more space in the parish newsletter for all the cancer deaths they’ve had?” “I’m sorry, Serge. Who?” Upset he keeps wagging his finger at the receding group. “Them! They came all the way from New Mexico to protest.” “And to protest against what? Context, Serge!” “Jesus, dad! Why are you so ignorant,” unclear whether that ‘you’ denotes only Michael, “Nobody cared if the residents at,” the wagging pans towards the dark obelisk “Trinity Site would be contaminated.” “Oh Serge,” there it goes, that involuntarily condescending smile of compassion and relief that this is the reason for the hasty departure and nothing serious or bathroom-related, “you are so right. You’re right. Let’s go.” And then his drowsy, tipsy, sun-drunk state fools him into adding the grandfatherly carelessness “But, you know: There were reasons at the time to do so. Someday you’ll understand.” Sergej stops dead in his tracks. “Give me the keys, dad, I’m going to return alone.” “What?” “You understood me. You self-centered, you can’t even think beyond your next,” what could it be, “tax return. You have no authority to tell me what I will or have to understand in a future that you have no idea of. I need you to hand me the keys because I would like to be alone and am very much capable of riding the subway independently, as you should have understood in the last few days.” “Whoah. Easy. Can we take a step back for a second.” “No,” Sergej’s determined calm is what alarms Michael the most, ”you are using deliberation only as a means of delaying, and I don’t need that right now.” Michael is mute. “Michael,” hearing his first name through his son’s mouth is eerie and more affecting than any thoughtless insult could have been, “I am simply asking for you to make up for your belittling, patronizing stance. As I said, I am perfectly capable of making it home. You can take a walk and return later. Give me the keys.” A part of Michael is certain to awake back in the boiling pan any second. It is that part that makes him hand over the keys. His son walks off, stops, comes back. “I would also need some change for the subway.” Michael surrenders his subway card, too, and his child is off, and the awakening doesn’t happen. It was a brief second spring, the few days of intimacy, of a lasting illusion that he was in some way indispensable for his son. Yet again, Michael remains spurned, although this time the matter is less personal. Sure, Sergej is particularly annoyed at his father’s behavior, but his anger merely expedites the act of detaching that would have proceeded even if he would have been, if he would have had the chance to be the father he wanted to be. Another harmonious couple of weeks and the recurrent estrangement would have really hurt, though it could never hurt as much as the first time, when, above all, there was no reason to be found for the little, chubby arms shoving Michael away. This time, it’s only natural for his son to drift apart, to disentangle himself, and in the light of post-nappy sobriety, Michael permits the realization that the days spent together did not suffice to completely erase his desire for a timely available return flight for his son. However, Sergej is here, still, and worries about the imminent consequences of a falling-out fill the emotional void where grief about his son’s estrangement should have resided. Michael needs a minimum of compliance in his delicate situation. If the mood is already smoldering, soggy bulk-bought cereal becomes a combustion agent and too many incriminating romantic souvenirs from women other than Sergej’s mother are too hastily hidden that a malicious rummager wouldn’t find them. “Sir, do you have a minute?” Full moon disk, pale and marked by craters of past acne, rising in Michael’s view. Meteorites strike the moon’s face at sixteen miles per second. The dark, watery pools of the eyes flow over with the impacts of Michael’s expletives. Little Boy had the force of a small meteorite. Little boy, after all, stirred his father’s emotions enough to cause an unpredictable tantrum, enough to make Michael’s fist rise and shiver as he hisses at the chubby woman holding her chipped signature campaign clipboard out to him to get quote unquote the fuck out of his sight.

Unfaithful, Sergej got hold of the next best partner out to mate. His need for distraction won’t tolerate any further delay, and bank holiday’s parallel is beyond monoamorous obligations. Barely a word penetrates the silence of concentration before the battle, Sergej and his partner matched in the stale list of a third party plugin. Good luck have fun. The scene is unchanged from his last attempt minus the parents, who after the tenth tick of the clock are still out of sight. No words but heavy breathing in Sergej’s ear. Heterosexual midlife crisis coitus, the memento escapes Sergej, his sex ed hasn’t come that far. With a subtle thud, the parents arrive. All sound is the force of their movements, the parent’s silence is, like IRL, the most menacing. Again, his companion is the first to fall, ribs poking through the fallen avatar’s back. Does he still dislike his father? Last minute sidestep that saves him from another heavy limb falling. Did he ever really dislike him? Running without reference in the snow blind blankness, the thumping steps make the loose pleather strips buzz that are flaking off the speakers. Does he remember his little short-thumbed hands beating, his stubby legs kicking as if his fury needed all fours to drive his father away. Turning in quick serpentine paths because rumor has it that it’s the most efficient way to get face to face with but out of reach of the parents. Does he remember that time his parents gave up and his father got out to take the train home with tears in his eyes because his son was using all means - words, sounds, violence against everything including himself - to banish Michael from the car. Climbing like palm tree pickers up up up the legs of a parent to cling to a point of the body that cannot be swung around to send him crashing to the floor. Does he remember nights when he would grant his father to lie next to him and Michael’s face melted like wax under the hot tears his body released as he dropped his guard ever so slightly. Driving the short, sharp teeth deeply, still superficially, into the flesh of the parent, until the red and the ring in the audio make the pain palpable: Hardly imaginable that human bodies can squish flat like his avatar against the parent’s abdomen, though perhaps the lethal kick of the other parent drove all solids of Sergej’s progenitor into its partner’s intestines. It’s health is low, Sergej notes before the screen goes blank with death. Good game. The kids are up for a rematch.

Slightly ridiculous but endearing how Michael stamps with every step like a comic book jinx with his hands in his pockets and little shockwaves of pollinous dust rising around his sneakers. His nostrils, too, exhale tiny plumes of pollen that have collected in his airways during nap time as he puffs off the residual anger from his blowup. Sergej must already be home but Michael keeps prolonging his walk along the A train stations calling him with their cool, musty breath from the underground. With the beat of the thumping steps his repetition of the reassuring circumstance that it’s tough times for all families everywhere have become a minimalist piece, that helps his mind to slowly drift off his concerns. The city seems more and more like bank holiday these days, minus the skirmishes. Beneath the subway viaduct extensive oriels and mashrabiyas made from sold-out plywood or compensatory branches and twigs from the storm-shaken parks around. Michael jumps terrified as a bare foot breaks through a particularly shabby floorboard only few feet overhead. Smart builders have searched the connection to the viaduct itself, although each passing train shakes their annexes into tremors that leave Michael walking in a rain of dust and pollen that rill through the cracks of the protrusions. Harvesters, like the one Michael has seen on his first tour with Freddy F, are nowhere in sight. Only in some spaces pushed-in planks suggest desultory broomstick protest from below. Bank holiday’s main menu has a counter, showing off the ever-increasing counts of objects and object-instances in the game. Many players report a considerable uneasiness when they watch the two ceaselessly rising numbers and it seems that even though bank holiday’s server farms only marginally expand along local construction subsidies, not few have a hard time convincing their minds that there is really nothing, pure void, in the space that the growing mass of items require. A nightly update effected that the digits now condense with every new decimal. Michael still tries to skip the main menu as quickly as possible, although it is not the idea of displacement or constriction that give him the creeps, indeed he is virtually a claustrophile and he appreciates the embrace of the wooden eversions along his route that anyway displace only air no one one wants to breath and sun no one wants to see, instead it’s the rolling numbers, of increase and decrease alike, that upset him, that rob him of every successful delusion of control. This particular uneasiness, though, doesn’t rank high enough in his list of fears and fixations to become subject of his infrequent therapy sessions he saves up money and waiting time for. Curious discomfort. It’s always spinning anthracite disks with debossed white numbers that he imagines, like the ones on the cheap bicycle locks, stiff, breaking off finger’s nails on their notches when they try to set the code in minus temperatures. They spin at impossible speeds, grating away whole fingertips when Michael tries to stop their movements. He wouldn’t even mind the lock not opening, after all, stasis is all he wants, secretly, but a lock needs to behave like a lock, he wouldn’t have populated this era if it weren’t the age of unprecedented determinism. Large numbers are pools of packing peanuts to slouch or hide in, to peeve the cat with. Large numbers at best mean abundance and at worst they are intangible and therefore soon irrelevant. But the urgency, the tenacity of rising numbers, large numbers that increase, augment rapidly even, that’s something that gets to him. Six, seven, thirty-seven, thirty-eight, the keys jingle as they fall, again, but this time the kettle has been vented before, an instance Michael just stares at the wad of keys, only to pick it up with the sound of elderly uncles rising from coffee tables. Sergej waits inches behind the door, startling Michael, who drops his keys again. He’s bouncing on his grip socks with cheerfulness. “I made a progenitor.” “Not cool!” “I already made another for Patrick because he couldn’t handle it.” “I wasn’t trying to patronize you, you know. You can’t just run off like that.” “What? Dad! We have a progenitor. It’s super fast and agile. You wanna play? You can play if you want to.” It’s unclear whether A, Sergej is too excited to remember his brusque departure, B, he hides his abashment behind a smile so wide it reveals one of his last baby tooth gap, which makes it close to impossible to hold a grudge against its bearer, or C, he insists on the absolute rightfulness of his exit and merely condones his father’s misconduct in light of his celebratory mood (It’s A). Michael has roughly fifty-five minutes until he has to leave for work and no energy for further arguments with his son. The saggy sofa welcomingly embraces his tired body and laughingly forgives Sergej’s headfirst dive onto the passenger seat. The streets on the way to the in-game recruiting office have closed up over the dashing progenitor. A sledgehammer breaks through the flooring above and the tender face of an avatar peeks down into the alley as Michael passes. “I’ve found out how to do it. It’s actually not that hard. Making Patrick’s progenitor was super easy.” Sergej rotates on the velours as he details the strategy that only marginally interests Michael but keeps his father from work-related brooding as he holds out for an opponent among the empty grass planes their faction has recently conquered. “When can I have my own avatar?” “You don’t even have a credit card.” “When can I have my own credit card?” “Ask your mother.” Spinning dials running up numbers on the online credit card balance. Someone from their faction comes running over from far as Michael playfully keeps him locked in his gunsight, grinning as if he cannot help falling for simple games of power. Seconds after Michael is dead, and a FUCKING STRIKEBREAKER in caps and flanked by squads of exclamation points on either side appears in the post-mortal chat window. “Do you know about this?” As if Sergej hasn’t seen f-words before. “Heard about that, yeah. Just respawn.” As Sergej reports, some players from either faction are protesting a lack of gratitude for their service of protecting the war-weary citizens of the factions’ home cities, ensuring that they can build in peace. Expectations that are absolutely absurd, and, according to Sergej only expose the simplemindedness of players favoring the combat-oriented aspects of the game. Firstly, the cities’ builders build faster than any army can demolish, plus, secondly, it is only obvious, obvious, he stresses, that the game’s publishers have no interest and thus, Sergej really says “thus”, no intention of ruining the game for thirty-plus percent of the players by letting a faction’s home city be bulldozed. “Right.” Michael now really broods, thinking of work in t minus thirty plus the time it takes him to get there. The in-game politics of bank holiday have never been his cup of tea, back in his days people didn’t have the time or energy to go beyond pounding out insults on their keyboards cracking with potato chip fragments lost beyond the keycaps. Not true, he knows it. When Philipp got married, impossibly grim-looking, sunken in his oversized armor that shone like dishwashing soap and mother-of-pearl, Michael and his clan mates had prepared an adorable wedding album of faked family photos featuring the couple’s avatars in painstaking peer-to-peer coordination. Still, his tolerance for social frustration is too limited to last beyond a peek into one of the game’s countless meta-tools, forums, discussion groups. Pale, skinny textbook-nerd that Michael imagines, who laid down discussion rules in an irritated sing-song for the first timers. How everybody stuck to the rules so diligently that Michael felt obliged to point out the inherent dangers in that, he believes he as a German should know that better than the Americans on his server cluster. Michael prefers sneaking and shooting. Perhaps he should have given it another try, after all “meta-tooling infrastructure” is not a working group known for beginner friendliness and every group has a different flavor. According to the countless plagiarisms of a now lost original blog post with the lame title of “A hitchhiker’s guide to BH communities”, the rough typology of working groups distinguishes three types (another victory for standards and specifications, as the bankholidian saying goes, alluding to one of the most long-standing working groups in the game): Darwinist groups, relying on aggressive real time rating and removing of participants within a steep hierarchy, Waldorf (the no-90-degree-Waldorf, not the salad) groups, building on strict community rules enforced with the purring passive-aggressiveness of bad kindergarten teachers, and finally the self-explanatory Anarchist groups. None of the above sounds bearable to Michael. Shooting and sneaking. Unlike Sergej, Michael has not yet stumbled across one of the countless communal activities taking place in the shrinking gaps between the building material of the factions’ capitals. Like cautious dissidents, the groups, consortia, teams, collectives, squads move from location to location, wherever a wall can be penetrated to make space, or a roof remains unbuilt on for the time of the meeting, discussion, workshop, lecture, match, conference, trial. Often the fluctuating members are the only breadcrumb trail to the venue of a specific event, particularly among the more privacy-minded of the players. Jain Gardening, Advanced Buckminster Fuller, Modeling for Peripheral War Zones. Many a group disbanded, because the tranquil beach section of last week’s meeting had turned into a waterside block of condos with low hanging, suspended walkways bouncing with incessant traffic that would have made a rush hour subway better suited for a brainstorming session. Admittedly, not few of the hobbyist clubs merely foundered on their own quaint niches that in light of the unlimited alternatives failed to fascinate beyond the droning welcome address. Of those who have not yet disbanded, many assemblies spend half the meeting waiting for and or giving directions to stragglers before they spend the second half searching for next meeting’s venue in the circulating predictions of future sprawl of the city. These problems commonly serve as the quoted excuse when it comes to the notoriously deferred pirated instance of bank holiday. Rumored to congregate in the underbellies of the factions’ cities, the piracy working group has produced a handful of short-lived keygens for the game that have been repaid with countless myths and messianic hopes in their endeavor of creating a free and distributed copy of the bankholidian world. The prophecy of the land of the free-to-play, monospaced on ascii art scroll, has been for long the most recent life sign of the working group, which is, perhaps, judging from the sulky libertarian overtones in the brief manifesto, for the better. In the bankholidian climate of creative exaggeration, this sparseness of information has yielded a substantial canon of tales and legends, of working group members convening in abandoned houses on skirmish battlefields to pass information between the factions’ cities as if IRL messengers didn’t exist, of tube-fed coders in forgotten hospital wards run by the working group to allow their members to become completely immersed in their tasks, suspended in a hyperreal confluence of excretions, victuals, and bitstreams like the alleged homeless human guinea pigs in City Hall station. Of course Akash has met someone from the working group. Of course [Artsy kid] knows where the next meeting takes place. Bank holiday’s publisher charges by direct debit, the terms and conditions are verbose and convoluted. Michael’s phone jerks vibrating as the monthly invoice is arriving. Freddy F’s notification rings only seconds after, reminding Michael to give the speeding progenitor a rest. Sergej comes from the bathroom chewing on his toothbrush in an alibi demonstration of his dental hygiene.

The bus on the corner is like a magic bus, appearing out of nowhere at a daring speed, off the schedule that Michael thought had been interrupted, anyway. The few riders have been driven apart by fear of contagion or sense of privacy to occupy the four corners of the kneeling bus and Michael hangs suspended between two support slings and the counterforces of his co-passengers in the middle aisle as the bus defends its pole position. Motion sickness has never been a concern of his, and he trusts his brain to handle the stable view of his phone’s screen more than he trusts his arm to keep him upright in the veering vehicle. The quote unquote unbearable user interfaces of every online newspaper he has ever seen make him stick to his socials for any news between the weekly print news he gets on Fridays. His subscription is outrageously expensive but the thumb-thick German issues crammed in his anorexic mailbox’s mouth bestow a sophisticated extravagance on him as a tenant (Yes, there is someone to impress). Read how this widowed cleaner of dairy tankers made a fortune in smart logistics. Thirty-nine hot startups in decentralized dry-cleaning. Make your morning routine into an executive elevator pitch (What?). The seven chakras you need to know for economic sucess (sic). The bus hits a prolonged green wave and its motor sounds become indistinguishable from the ambient track in Michael’s ear. Then the driver slams the breaks. The sudden motion change makes Michael swing almost horizontal as he frantically clasps the support strap, and while he manages to hold on, his shoulder becomes potentially dislocated, or maybe it’s only a slight strain. The thump of something heavy hitting the front of the bus has been audible even over the screeching tires, although Michael’s ears were deaf from the adrenaline, are still deaf as he discovers his phone at the front of the aisle and collects it. Clear, yellowed bumper cover and a five dollar note behind the rubber as a lucky charm. He cannot discover any unfamiliar cracks, his attention can fan out. The wailing outside is so loud, it’s astounding that the noise didn’t get through to him before. No siren, not a casualty either, at least counting only the physically harmed, of which there are, a look around, none. The howl comes from a curbside child, probably Sergej’s age or slightly younger, and Michael might have dismissed the crying as unrelated if the bus driver wouldn’t have bent his heavy frame forward like a sumo wrestler to look under the bus from the opposite side, making a face of condolence and fatalistic indifference mixed with slight disgust. All passengers have gravitated towards the roadside windows, but whatever prompted their driver’s reaction is hidden below the underbody. Michael cannot listen to the wail, though, or perhaps he wants to distinguish himself from the gawkers. The remains under the bus are neither a dog, nor a cat, more like a ferret or weasel and almost certainly feral. Death is cruel but this consolation is manageable. Michael squats next to the boy. Definitely younger than Sergej by three, four years at least. However, the matter is complicated by the fact that the child does not seem to understand any of the languages Michael is familiar with. The bus is about to depart, and since Michael is uncertain what the child has not yet seen, he crab-walks sideways to position his body between the boy and the road. Big eyes still wet and flickering on him. His outstretched index collides with the slow-moving fist-train of his right while nods upwards looking questioningly. The boy nods feebly, the communication seems to work. Though weren’t there eastern cultures with reversed yes-no gestures? He gives it another try, interlocking thumbs, flap-flap-flapping the wings of a flesh-made soul upwards. Big eyes. Cheeks shining after a downpour. The wings close, they make a bed for Michaels sleepy head resting on it as he whistles the sound of sleep. No use, but at least no tears either. To keep the child from peering past his slimming frame, Michael proposes a walk with a careful leading hand on the boy’s back, perhaps the child is feral itself, walking with strangers, crying for pests. Maybe it really has no language and merely reacts to the sound of Michael’s palliative monologue describing the rampant construction around them for lack of a better topic. So much new space and yet not a soul in sight, even behind the windows, bead curtains (very frequent), and greased paper panes, in the openings, cracks, and loopholes of the structures, only inanimate objects are showing. Laughter from somewhere, at least someone not dead. A pair of fast food delivery drivers speed past them on e-bikes. Michael tries to signal them for support, inconspicuously as to prevent upsetting the boy, but they only leave a trail of napkins in their wake. However, it’s the napkins that come to Michael’s rescue, getting the boy so excited that, without any warning, he jumps into the street like the weasel before. Cute cartoon ostrich in a cap, offering a soft drink the color of his neck. Perhaps the paper is much desired bedding for the child. But the boy proves Michael wrong: For one thing, he does speak, torrentially, suddenly, pointing out details of the colorful animal print to Michael, counting the gathered stack at the speed of an underworld treasurer in a vowel-rich tongue Michael has never heard before. For another, the boy’s excitement seems to spring from the completion of some sort of collection - one finger plus wagging napkin stack plus closed fist means completed collection to Michael - and collecting franchise paraphernalia sounds more like a rich kid’s extravagance than a pauper’s well-chosen hobby. Still Michael has to smile as the child presses against him, bouncing with excitement like Sergej does, too. With the bus long gone and no other in sight, Michael realizes that he has squandered his time buffer and will again be late, is already late in the eyes of a spoiled employer who expects five minutes to get the heart rate down before shift change. He waits for the boy to finish the presentation of his haul and says an awkward goodbye with a weird bow that with some malevolence could be deemed racist. That it was the child that filched his keys from his pocket will never enter Michael’s mind. Must’ve lost them on the bus. As long as the phone is still there, key to his keystore that holds access to his Freddy F account that opens employment opportunities that unlock the potential to a debt-free apartment i.a. The big thirty-nine dry-cleaners still wait behind the lock screen. All of them men, very clean-looking indeed. Remarkable how independent Sergej is at his age. Though Michael would argue that he has been, too, (he had to) when he was at his son’s age. But not less remarkable, rather more so. He must have overlooked this exceptional trait of his son in previous visits. Their plus minus weekly phone calls held little opportunity for Sergej to showcase his independence, their occasional joint gaming sessions only insofar that Sergej would have left to do other things by the time an interrupted transatlantic connection would have resumed. Or perhaps he just unconsciously denied it. While his one eye was constantly on the lookout for manifestations of his exceptional sperm in his child, like other dads in his circle of acquaintances, the other scrutinized the boy for flaws, for signs of the ordinary, the unimposing, that would make his son’s absence in his life more bearable and at the same time absolve him from having scarred Sergej and of having impeded his becoming a normal boy, a child not only free from any sort of visible trauma but also free from extraordinary abilities that were likely to hide trauma, too. And for the most part, Sergej paradoxically had managed to satisfy his contradictory expectations by being extraordinarily average. So normal was Michael’s son that none of his behaviour, his problems or desires hadn’t been pinned down and explained in a parenting guide or at least a half-year-old editorial. Sergej had eccentric hobbies, but not too many and he cared about soccer, thank god. He had talents and was good in school, but still average enough not to give teachers the bright idea of GATE. He met demands like a train schedule, reliably without overachieving, then he went on to spend his time with the same mind-numbing activities his peers did. He could have called now, just for some minor issue, asking where he keeps the raw sugar, so that Michael could have told him, reminding him to brush his teeth after. But then again Michael is fine with a little bit of calm before his shift. His phone is fine, no interior damage. It senses the incoming message like a cat’s tail. “Your next job?” plus an emoji incompatible with the medium (is there an update Michael missed?), writes Akash under a link to an article Michael scans while walking. The founder of their old company collected capital in the low six-figures for his new business, that offers quote unquote crowdsources mobility for location-based games. Michael’s remaining commute would earn him point zero zero four units of a presumably useless virtual currency, and some paying cheater eight hundred ninety meters to fuel the development of her Pokémon, gather resources for her Stone Age tribe, or otherwise increase her score in the respective game. Works for every one of the currently popular location-based games except for a community-built metagame of - what else - bank holiday, for which lazy players still need to entrust their phones to dog sitters and delivery people in order to record the desired distances. Michael takes no stock in his ex-boss’s pretend money, his Passo, ERC-20 symbol PSS, not the most becoming three-letter combination. However, the company has landed a deal with a local - Michael-local - franchise of nutritional supplement stores, and the branch a block from his apartment sells, among countless powders and pellets, legumes that could keep him and Sergej afloat and healthy in certain worst-case scenarios. The app is small enough to download within the wifi range of the closed electronics store Michael is passing, but his phone shuts down into a previously unknown power-saving mode that is solely controlled by Freddy F and its instructions to guide him through a quote unquote frictionless working experience, as the dimmed screen reads. Twenty thousand milliampere hours in the back pocket of his jeans but no cable to get the juices flowing. Freddy grants him a jail-call to his employer, but what if Sergej calls? It’s getting dim in these parts. Plywood, iron sheets and laminated fibreboard have covered the glass, steel and concrete they leech on to, and selfishly swallow every ray of light attempting to make it to street level. The entrance to number 307 is barely recognizable, the backlit house number shown in Freddy F’s POV navigation now lights a deserted lobby to the lobby made from corrugated iron sheets and separated from the remaining width of the street with a Noren made from the cut-up runner of the original entrance hall. The revolving doors are out of order, a gutted door governor states the reason for their failure. “We’re here.” A divine finger is pointing from a hatch in the ceiling at Michael, its many rings click like billiard balls as it withdraws from the opening. The hand jumps out towards him as soon as his head passes through the hole in the ceiling, shiny and enthusiastic it obscures the short figure it belongs to, and only as Michael has finished laboriously pushing himself onto the upper deck, he recognizes the face of the once locally famous comedian, who, although he contradicts most of Michael notions of an employer, reveals himself as just that. The room is small in its footprint but high, five meters or more, with its eastern side open against the former facade of the building, its glass panes still show smears of last week’s pollen. The original lobby’s chandelier lights the other three walls, more accurately the sheets of paper that cover them from the tidy baseboards to the ceiling. Two for the blueprints, sketches, renderings, doodles, drawings, potato-stamped outlines (This is your job, Michael). One for the ornamental waterfall of overlapping, zigzagging menu flyers of hundreds of local delivery services (This is your pay). A library ladder ensures access to the upper sections. “You’re late, but in time for dinner.” Says it, and half a dozen workers file into the room. A mixed crew of co-workers, all sexes, all sizes, aged between twenty-five and fifty, but without a single grey hair. Michael will add his ones to the mix. Lianne recommends Jamaican, fifth flyer from the left far up, which should go well with the surely mashed banana in his backpack. Angel has a spare charger with a five-meter reach. San as the most senior person explains his task: Build what’s on the walls, not the menu wall of course, a chuckle, her brows pitch up a roof. A second crew gathers material, broadly speaking, Michael may have to make a crayon-drawn brick wall from tetra paks. Michael’s celebrity employer, who didn’t think it necessary to introduce himself (what’s his name again?), gives his new hire a gold-yellow smile and holds out a release form bearing his yellow-gold monogram (still no clue) to document Michael’s consent that his image and likeness may be used in the employer’s (whose production company, too, allows no inferences about his name) publications. Where did the pen in the change pocket go? Another outstretched object from Michael’s employer protrudes from his royal-mailbox figure. L-A-R-R-Y spells the pen, in cursive capitals, in gold, and it’s Michael’s cue. “Larry Caucasian,” he says to the release form and the stylized smile under the monogram beams back congratulating. Larry thanks him for his autograph and asks if he would like a blow job, too, extends another two hands - he should have become a boxer instead of a comedian - that shake Michael playfully, whose frozen smirk of perplexion only starts to melt as the camera has already wandered off again. Lianne holds her smartphone in front of his head still fixed in place and winds back thirty seconds of a live stream. Blow job, skewed, goofy grin, the golden host regales his audience with blinking teeth and a wink. “You’re basically free to do what you want, seeing that there’s blueprints for literally everything up there. If you can take bad jokes and lukewarm food, you’ll be fine. Two more things: If you build something good, don’t expect to get credit for it.” What’s with the counting fingers in Michael’s face lately? “Don’t contest him for his audience.” Extra hours pay off, adds Angel, holding a third finger to Michael’s face, “generously”.

If Angel’s cable is working, all sockets of the power strip are dead. “NO WAY! SOMEBODY MUST’VE PULLED THE PLUG UPSTAIRS!” With the whirring tip of his drill, Angel points to another hatch in the ceiling, that rolls out its orange NYM-J tongue yawning. Michael shines Angel’s flashlight to check the black hole’s teeth. Gingivitis on his mind. Sergej should have brushed and gargled. Michael prefers the term gum disease, an unfortunate dysphemism for becoming a flabby Mister-Fantastic being, not conservative but not fluid either, merely escaping every pinning remark, every need to state oneself specifically, but still with a well confined, defined shape at a standstill. Pronouns are glob / globbers. Sergej adopted he / his but doesn’t care for fishing, football or car model identification while driving. Michael wouldn’t be of help in any of those fields, but then again, it’s unclear if he can be of help in any respect. He can know, he can remember. The five imaginary cities of Sergej are Aquaria (no water, only the blue bubble rising and bursting in the -qua sound that Sergej liked), Metropolia (which was also a name used by Michael in his childhood, which in turn made him wonder if ancient greek was inherently stately-sounding or whether it was the success of round neoclassicist white men with shiny bald spots and cigar handles that children assumed cities to be named like this), Sergis (Erikson stage four), Gheffodoodle (the abstract phase that coincided with his wish for a pet), Yetten (when he had gained access to the internet’s name generators). Bank Holiday Blue, though that’s not imaginary, all too real, as every bank holidian phenomenon, the void, the man of a thousand voices, it all felt real enough to send Sergej shivering under the covers. The extension cable’s origin must be found at all cost, the subtle resistance of the socket welcoming the plug with its plastic embrace must reunite father and son to give each other comfort and company.

All parents are out. The barn lies still, no event has been scheduled to temporarily fill up the spaces between the shells of suppose-steel with representations of organic matter. The faces of the cars’ fronts feign to keep Sergej and [Artsy kid] company. Resolute shooting brake, gullible sedan. A portly hearse marks Sergej’s last addition to the garbage collection, that is slowly transitioning from purposeful garbage to garbage as garbage, garbage squared so to say, as the available subsidies are allocated to another of the art collective’s projects - a giant in-game incinerator used in a number of elaborate rituals and performances. The two digital orphans are strolling around the hangar defying the parental no-barrels-in-the-barn rule. Confetti of lead shot and last week’s festoons swirls around them as they fire into the air above them. Sergej has earned fifty euros in two hours, he has a gift for defeating parents. Blood money, dirty money. His hands feel soiled, every other step he puts down his gamepad to chafe his hands on the heavy cotton of his shirt. Sometimes, under the sedative flickering black-and-white graphics of the fight, the memory of Michael’s face forces itself on him. A face that is precious, because Michael keeps it hidden, and at the same time horrifying, because it’s distorted, crying, because of him, Sergej. Memory has resharpened the features that Sergej must’ve noticed only hazily at the time, because his father ran out the room, pushing away his own mother in a move that seemed theatrical, but was in fact merely necessary to direct the force of his impulsive turn towards the exit and not of the glass cabinet. A second glimpse at the face is yet to come, and Sergej is glad about that. When no hue of the garlands remains against the grey ceiling, [Artsy kid] turns his nozzle slowly and with a mischievous glance at Sergej towards the polished hearse, expecting him to be affected by the phasing ring of the blow against the bending would-be-metal that heralds the destruction of his works. But Sergej only takes aim at a sleeping cabriolet’s anorexic hood. Grandma’s balcony offered an ample armory of beech nuts in early fall with the passing cars below in range if flicked right. Mom was gone and Michael and Sergej, too, should have been on their way. Not that it was crucial that he spent the night at home, that was his view, and Wanda secretly overtly wanted her grandson to stay for the night. If Michael would have just let him have it. Go home, relax, spend some time on your own, smoking, playing, masturbating, whatever dads do. Sergej hadn’t fought their power game any different than before, it must’ve been that straw, like the repeated beech nut hitting the same commuter hood at the same spot over and over eventually results in a fine hole at an angle that will testify to the habitual exceedance of the applicable speed limit by three kilometers an hour. Husks shaped like the iconic banana peel that only appears in comic books and cartoons but never IRL, because, as an Austrian polymath once pointed out, humankind has been erring in which end to peel. Michael didn’t fail to hit it, that figurative peel that Sergej threw before him, that upended his dad in an hitherto unseen way, tears showing before he made it out the room. Sergej has always been lean, but sturdy, called bookend on the field not only because he brought a book to camp, but because he resists the push of two, plastic teeth biting the cinder pitch. The physical resistance of his son needed a violence that he wouldn’t have allowed himself, if Wanda’s repeated call to drop the quote unquote patriarchal terror wouldn’t have turned him into just that: A choleric brute, mustache bristling, teint alcoholic. He pulled his son with a force that a split second later surprised him enough to let go again, sending his son into a sheet of polished metal that caved under the impact, leaving a human-shaped dent that similarly had only been seen in cartoons and comics before. Sergej didn’t cry, though, Michael did.

The bank holidian damage model leaves lotus-flower imprints on the cars where they shot them. When enough lotus flowers have bitten into the suppose-steel, the damaged area shatters into fragments that slowly, slow as honey, seep into the ground. In the not too distant future, bank holiday will develop its destruction physics significantly in order to realistically depict decay, a feature that will succeed in driving a renaissance of the game after it will have gone somewhat stale and that will send it into a loop of renewal and decay that has yet to be broken.

Michael never went for cigarettes and never came back, he was either too much or too little of a coward for doing that. Also he didn’t smoke, for the same reason. He sort of faded out of Sergej’s life after the metal-sheet-incident. Stayed out late, working with the ambitious’ shift, for anything more escapist he was either too much or too little of a coward. On the weekends, when even the most ambitious took some time off, he argued with his mother for hours on end, as Sergej reconstructed one Sunday, looking through his father’s text and call log when he couldn’t find any games installed. A few lines luring his eyes with the familiar six-letter combination of his name stung with the realization that his father had been hurt by his behaviour, the further sampling of the message history though soon began to bore him with seemingly pent-up, manifold accusations against Wanda that did not concern him. Michael escaped the family apartment like a genie from a bottle, his presence became less and less, and he increasingly vanished into the ether of rolling radio waves that continued to bring Sergej to bed, sometimes bedtime reading.

In the end, the collection proves too extensive to obliterate in a single session. Although, looking east, nothing has remained. A deserted, badly-swept hall, like a nostalgically mourning Rust-Belt site. Sergej regrets nothing, [Artsy kid] has vanished in mid-shot, logging off abruptly, as if the Berlin side of the globe had been erased like the eastern half of the barn’s content, a lotus flower blossoming in its place to maintain balance. Out of curiosity, Sergej picks up the receiver and dials his mother’s number. The dial tone proves his vision wrong.

“Gigi.” “Hi, mom.” “All set?” “I’m getting there.” “Good.” She’s doing something on the side, the sound makes Sergej think of a Good Friday's F1 race. In interviews, Fee prefaces her ability of effortless multitasking as a gift independent of her gender. “I like that they call it Papier schöpfen, it’s got this transcendental ring to it, like, how did magically go from liquid to solid.” “Are the Russians gone yet?” “They were Tajiks. Yeah, they left yesterday. I caught them sweeping when I got home, just for you to know.“ Outside of the barn the sun rises, commuters on the edge of the remaining half-globe plunge into the void where the industrial park used to be, because they don’t see the abyss in the glaring light. “They left you a present. Wanna know what it is? It’s one of those neat zoroastrian caps. Like a bucket hat. Actually the original bucket hat. Doesn’t get more bucketty than that.” “Cool.” “What do you say?” “It’s not like they’ll hear it.” “Zoroaster hears it.” “Thanks.” “If you don’t wear it, I will. And I’ll pick you up from practice with it.” She’s wearing her headset. Sergej can hear it from the sound of her biting her nails. “Everything okay, Gigi?” “Sure, just wanted to check in.” One of those sentences that are to be adopted without questioning, like ID cards and saying bless you. “Anyway, I gotta go, mom. I’ll see you soon, alright.”

Larry Caucasian has the air of a bad cell plan mascot yet he has been eluding all attempts of assigning him to any affiliations greater one. He fishes for Michael coming up the ladder with a cordial n-word. His stage name is by no means unsubstantiated. With the grotesque enthusiasm of a quest giver in a computer game that witnesses the player’s arrival mum and curious only to greet her in bursting surprise once she presses the respective button, Larry dismisses recent cautionary advice and pulls his employee close to bump shoulders. “Habib, you dig Pizza?” What else could it be but another thin crust of fringe benefits that hides the hostile swirl of bloody-knuckle competition? Likable resin-scented DIY facing of the cold steel-and-glass core. Pours sand in Michael’s eyes like Pizza flour, organic soft wheat stone-milled zero zero that forms perfect bubbles under the cheesy crunch, on the house, brother, everything in here is on me. “That wall down there ain’t for show. I want you to go crazy, verstanden? What are you up to, Michael, my man?” Got his names down, gotta give him that. Michael lifts the extension cable like a dead boa with his foot. “Ride on, Michael! Power to the people!” Fortunately, Larry doesn’t wait for a courtesy laugh but turns to San, who is asking for details on a crudely drawn blueprint of an underslung crane. Across the room another hole in the ceiling beckons Michael, the orange cable rides loopings around the ladder’s rungs. “Michael!” A call like a backflip. San is satisfied, and Larry waves Michael close, closer, “nothing to be afraid of.” “Tough times, eh? Tough times. Look, Michael, I can see you have a kid at home. You look like a good father.” It’s probably on his employee profile, anyway. “Anytime you need something, you come see me, ‘right?” Says it and holds out a fifty-euro (!) note. One time at the old office, Michael dropped a coffee mug from a seventh floor window. He paid for the beautiful spectacle of the coffee painting great waves in the lower airspace with lasting could-have-been visions of freak-accident victims with an inset of his passport photo for the manhunt. Why does he have foreign currency on him? The ladder’s concerning creak makes a stable thought to hold on to. Lianne is upstairs in near complete darkness, occasional flecks from her drill driver’s target light punctuate the red mood-light glow humming from her smartphone. She must have been smoking, her portable ashtray with her initials engraved offset her second-hand woodchopper outfit. She could have gone on a date with him, judging presumably, if they wouldn’t have been in a state of temporary hubris (her) slash disillusionment (him) concerning the workings of their digital matchmakers. It would have felt right, until Michael would have fooled himself into saying something like “oh look, we have matching phone covers”, or she would have made a rousing case for constructive journalism, which is a red rag to him. In the low light of the room she can make out that he is mildly beautiful as long as she sees to the maintenance of a constant stream of busy thoughts that keeps her mind off the Dummies-Man-association. She lights another cigarette, adding the slowly pulsing glow to the room’s constellation, and watches Michael tracing the cable to the occupied socket. “You can unplug that.” His drill is on four green leds, but sliding the battery into the drill’s socket recalls too satisfyingly loading a space blaster to forego the opportunity. He imagines Lianne smiling knowingly in the darkness behind the culminant cigarette glow. “Drilling and screwing is ninety percent of the work in here unless you’re mad enough to trust Larry’s flimsy bench saw.” Is she hitting on him? “When I was young, I used to log trees with a drill.” Sound like a geezer, sound like a creep. “Two holes and the tree’s down in a year, four and it’ll last three months max. It’s not like I was killing it, I was only affecting its lifetime. Since then I can’t help but wonder how my actions are affecting the lifespans of other beings. I sure hope I can offset that one at least.” The cigarette. Tires screech with the one-eighty of the advance and, alas, her reaction again is hidden behind the orange glow. “He’s not as bad as you may think at first.” “Who?” “Larry?” “Why should he?” Because he dealt in distopias. Because he wanted disciples, not partners in crime. Because what he sold as independence was actually ineptitude to discuss. His quirky home-improvement videos cultivated a conspiratorial undertone that chimed in with any deep state dissection that came before and after in the cue. And perhaps Larry had had a more clearly defined image of the enemy at some point in the past. But with the success of his DIY antics, the diverse nature of his fans posed a challenge to the maintenance of his stereotypes. “It’s hard to stay an antisemite if you get dozens of home-made presents for rosh hashanah. So now he’s left with all that subdued aggression that made his videos popular, but by now he has learned to love people just too much to pick on some of them.” “Beautiful. A demagogue with a yo-yo.“ “Also, as I said, he tips generously.” In forex. The platitudes Lianne uses to describe Larry put Michael off, even though he could use the gratuities of someone who’s quote unquote not in it for the money. His phone has charged enough to boot, and the unique romantic feature of the single dad becomes an excuse for cutting short Lianne’s song of praise.

Sergej on a wildly swinging coil spring rocker brings back anxious visions of hypothetical proceedings that might have happened within the last three quarters of an all in all unwary hour. After some silent seconds of establishing the outgoing connection through several layers of cardboard, scrap metal and wood, the phone line shakes its head vigorously, leaving Michael with another set of doomsday scenarios before his inner eye.

“He’ll fork over hundreds if you have a tear-jerking story to tell. Not only if the cameras run.” The call grasps at nothing. In the first days of sleeping away from home, in a real-cherrywood hotel with daily clean sheets at first and a cheaper surrogate after five days but not his conviction had passed, Michael had grasped for Sergej in the visitor’s gap between the mattresses of his double bed. If that wasn’t tear-jerking, what was? Fee reported that Sergej had cried when it turned out that his father was not at the first overnight congress of his life, but when Michael called him, from the room’s phone at that, for added hollywood desperation, for service-fee indulgence, Sergej remained so composed that the conversation entered Michael’s top five of their most hurtful confrontations. That’s gotta be a Ben Franklin. The American job market extended its open arms across the Atlantic and Michael browsed the virgin pages of his US passport like a baby album. The hotel gym was a cellar for hidden families but the tv featured a near-complete cable lineup of US channels with conveniently sedating afternoon reality programs in the European wee hours. Picture-perfect worlds of products that would soon be available for him to purchase. Eventually, he opted for the New York branch of his employer to put the excruciating idleness between the required actions of various recruiting procedures to an end. Fishing on a decommissioned speedboat with the smoker’s-breath-sound of a laptop running as the only indication of passing time. Ten-thousand upvotes for the host’s generous remuneration of that story. Business class tickets that made Michael’s chuckle segue into sobs as he made the unheard joke that finally someone appreciated his presence. Nobody would spot a lie for a rolled up tip if it was so graphically recognizable. Push. Black teflon work jumpsuits with electric blue lining in twenty plus sizes for fully validated Freddy F employees. Push. The number you have called is now available. “Sorry, gotta check in with my son.” No self-display working in his favor, merely a mantra of self-affirmation. Sergej answers with a tired but calm voice and Michael can barely contain his relief. “Bank holiday?” A yes with a pause that precedes it. “Don’t burn yourself out, ay? Can you stay on the line?” A door slams here or there. “Serge?” “Yes, I’ll stay on the line, dad.” Ex machina, the searchlight of a camera outshines the feeble 3.7 volt Orion’s belt. “Here we go. Better get ready.” Production sits in Houston, Texas. Nobody gets to see Larry’s joystick-wielding staff down south. They laugh and wear short cargos. Supposedly the microphones are only active if the camera’s red light indicates somebody’s watching. Larry’s everything but a fiend. The Stasi had the light switched on in East German prison cells at random times of the day. Only the light, nothing else happened. Like the jingle of a station announcement that never comes and leaves passengers tracing the speakers with their dominant ears like compass needles, intermittently emitting steamer sounds to stop others from aborting the ritual. “Anyway, I made another progenitor. I think somebody spread the word that I can help people out.” Sergej is speaking in borrowed phrases, but it only makes his talk more familiar in Michael’s ears. Universal intimacy where there isn’t yet a familial one. “Let me present to you the new member of the family.” Universal intimacy for a global market. A bucket hat trailing a veil of curls over jewels and lycra grows from the hole in the floor. Two contracts require Michael to dedicate his full attention to the host and employer, yet he needs another minute to make sure that Sergej is really alright. The shot-reverse-shot equipment of the room only leaves him his profile to withdraw to. Lianne comes to his rescue. “Daddy needs another quality minute with his son.” Larry Caucasian, proficient in the globally well-known vocabulary of the moving image, throws his hat in excitement and a dollar flutters to the ground from his head. “Let’s get these two on tape together. Little Michael, talk to us. We have a thousand viewers, who want to hear from you.” “I don’t think that is.” But again, the transmission is against Michael, clear as mountain air, it overrules the parental intermediary and passes Larry’s proposal on to the other end. “I don’t know. Can I, dad?” He’s shy and reluctant. “I don’t think he wants to.” “Ah, don’t be shy, Little Michael”, “Sergej.”, “we need to know the boy behind the man. We need to know what makes Michael here get up in the morning.” Pluralis majestatis. Lianne gives Michael a Miami-Steve pout, snapping her hand like a beak. It’s only words, it’s only voice. Noone is going to see Sergej, nobody will capture gifs of his nostrils talking. Snap, snap, a pinkish hatchling gaping for pocket money. “Fine.” Michael holds the device out to Larry. One spot then we’re back. The box set of Larry Caucasian’s latest pre-pandemic stage show is a prepper’s delight of storm lighters, moonwalker’s nutrition, and multi-fibre apparel. Box sets, the swiss army knife for the e-commerce age. The future salutes you with a box set, Michael. It’s packaging solves your rent problems, too, as you’ve undoubtedly seen in the crooks of your quarter. Not damp cardboard wraps around his sweaty back but the shaved arm of Larry. “The number.” “The number?” “I need the number.” “What number?” “This is not a call-in show, buddy. I call.” The number. Michael states the access code to his son and realizes that he is still blocking the line. The box set comes at a steel-cheap ninety-four ninety-five. Holy, does Sergej sound young on the line. Of course he has heard about Larry Caucasian, but what does Michael know. “What are you doing right now, my man?” “Playing.” Larry Caucasian claims he can make a brick wall conversational. “Alright! What are you playing?” “Bank Holiday.” Only Larry himself is quicker with his burst of excitement than his editors, who send air horn sounds through the room. “Where you at, bro? We wanna see your base.”

This is a dream come true for Sergej. He may not be the most outgoing of his age-mates, but how outgoing does one need to be in order to span the limited distance to the staring black marble clamped to the monitor. Until now, the parental moratorium on any globally visible streaming activities, that Michael and Fee decided on in one of their biweekly supervisory board meetings, Thursday noon slash evening, served with chamomile to soothe and cookies to sweeten bitter blame, has yet been unchallenged, save for the repeated lament that everyone else is allowed to. And indeed, a great number of casters the age of his son greet Michael in mute excitement when he detours across the usual platforms during the lunch low. Mostly, he just leaves the grid of silent previews running until the mosaic transitions to the bright colors of in-game views. Watching the monumental designs of their bank-holidian bases never stirred his interest, seeing that he could easily teleport his avatar to the given fortress slash villa slash seventh heavenly palace. Instead his curiosity is fixed on the reverse shot, looking out from the common bank-holidian world into the tiny universes of hobby dens and playrooms. Marveling at the visual idiolects of IKEA shelf units wrapped in traditional fabrics, housing cookie jars with goods of buckwheat, tamarind, or cassava flour. Sometimes local fauna invades the field of view. A gecko bathes in the warmth of the background illumination. A tropical moth makes the light flicker and the streamer has to add an epilepsy warning below his watermark. The backward channel to Sergej stays blind for now, Houston only listens. Brick wall to faux plywood, Sergej begins to talk, begins to deliver a pretty proud lecture about how he designed his slice of heaven between stoneware and wood wool. And an old acquaintance taps Michael’s shoulder, the feeling of unwilling antipathy towards his son, an old companion, who pulls Michael with him, they have some catching up to do, and Michael follows, eyes still fixed on Larry Caucasian, who, overjoyed, can hardly tame his muscle memory, that wants to send him running from shelf to shelf like a Super Toy Club contestant as he navigates around Sergej’s creation with his trembling index. Sergej enjoys the host’s rapture, but has difficulties keeping up with Larry’s jump-cut attention. Also, he evidently doesn’t know what a consultant does. “Look, it’d be fairly easy. You tell us what to build. You say: Dad, I think we should build a privy.” Shit is a cheap laugh. “And then your dad builds the privy.” Financial details will be discussed between Larry, Michael, Sergej, and Houston.

Michael once knew someone that worked for an autonomous car company, and all he had to do for his job was being the scapegoat for trolley problems. Michael knew someone, who was paid to shush the audience of a papal minor basilica in ten languages via megaphone. She could call for silence and respect in English, Italian, German, French, Spanish, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Croatian, and, she had worked in tax evasion before the crash, Malay. Nobody that Michael knew or knows is paid to work under his or her child. Once in a while, news about underage employers hit the lifestyle sections, eagerly illustrated with portraits of the quote unquote gameboy goalgetters, a nickname as obsolete and ignorantly imposed as the minors’ disguises, that invoke images of management in the prawn cocktail period, that even the parents rarely witnessed. Chocolate cigars and prestige brands’ kids lines. Little red rotary club and the pup of Wall Street. The legal guardians smirk behind their wards’ back pocketing hard cash while the quote unquote Etch-A-Sketch-entrepreneurs are granted the liberties of ordering hot chocolate at will and having the intern carry bags as they shop at Neiman Marcus under the benevolent parental eye, liberties more age-appropriate than the contemporary fringe benefits of sexual misconduct and tax fraud. Sergej doesn’t have the air of a prodigy, Sergej has the air of a smallest common denominator, that took him a couple of nightly video calls to wrap his head around. Sergej beautifully dissolves in group fotos, within a healthy circle of friends suspended between the poles of the fat and the devious class bully. He doesn’t fit the role of the wunderkind, yet he assumes the self-infatuated diction and bossing arrogance in no time. “A what?” “Telescope.” ALMA on the top of his ALDI. He hasn’t come far yet, but at the tip of Sergej’s virtual, vertical supermarket the skeletal socket of his observatory is already visible. Curious aliens looking back into the terrestrial eye will marvel at the cheap essentials and weekly bargains of Sergej’s bankholidian discounter under the microscope. “How the hell do you figure me building a telescope in here? From bottle bases?” But Larry Caucasian loves challenges, his audience not less, and the NSF is grateful for some cross-promotion. But raining tips grow whatevers. “Have you been flossing today?” They are back to their private conversation, now that another jobsite has called for Larry, and although Michael’s employee evaluation sheets may soon pass through his son’s hands, dental hygiene remains a field of his own discretionary competence. “Yes.” No challenging remark, pure data. Michael expected Sergej to fall back into his old dismissiveness now that he has public authorization. V-shaped recovery, a dip into disparaging arrogance, but now it’s back to monosyllabic coexistence. “I think it’s gonna be a cool observatory. The one you’re gonna build.” Not sure if filial affection or employee motivation. Michael climbs ladder after ladder traversing rooms and rooms and rooms, empty rooms, rooms that even a quote unquote creative genius as Larry Caucasian attribute purpose to, countless levels of sideshow rooms like in an oligarch’s palace. The last level must be thirty floors from street level or more. The neighboring offices as seen through the walls’ cracks read upper management. The wind whistles a tune from a Lexus commercial. The construction of windows is discouraged at this height, only a skylight wouldn’t compromise the structural stability of the wooden tower. As Michael drills a hole into the ceiling as a setup for his jigsaw, the percussion shakes the walls and makes the suspension of the billboard their highrise is attached to chime in cat-like with the wailing sounds from the video wall across the street. Two moons, one round, one wrapped around the curving glass of the facade, shed their blue light into the attic floor as the sawed-out plywood round falls into the room. The sky seems closer than the underground carpark at this height, and if his bandwidth would have allowed, Michael would have added video to their call. “I see why, now. The observatory.” Sergej hums knowingly. “You should go on the roof, it’s beautiful now.” Take the key, take the flashlight, shoes, although the bitumen should still be warm and sticky from the afternoon sun. One of the moons might think they are lying together, son and dad, each looking up into a cloudless open flank. “We should cut an observatory into the living room ceiling.” The security deposit is lost, anyway. “Are you going to come home soon?” Could it really be affection speaking? “I think I can call it a day.” Larry Caucasian is overjoyed with the observatory. Somebody from the community offers a physicist’s advice on the optimal focal length of the ocular slash skylight. Stars fade behind the dual moon. Five stars for the employee, finally.

The key plays a muffled flam on the doormat, a clement warning that the father is about to enter. Sergej switches signals back to the languidly wobbling camera of Bank Holiday. The money he made in the previous hours slitting black-spurting throats of parental placeholders went straight to his father’s offshore account, so that Sergej’s funds are not only safe from the landlady but also from impulsive underage shopping sprees. “I need your account to make a deposit, so that I can hire someone to script the optics.” That’s too much information along with the various bridge loan offers and extension agreements in today’s mail. None of the envelopes is addressed aggressively enough to contain an eviction notice, the paper tower on the sideboard is raised by another floor and makes Michael recall today’s workplace, which, surprisingly, is not an unpleasant thought. Maybe the filial co-direction is not a bad thing, after all. “Account. Money. Need. Dad!” At least Sergej’s directives were much more patient over the phone. Sergej should already be in bed by now, but Michael had a good day and the toothbrush feels like bedtime prep, so he feels he can grant his son the unscheduled, unbudgeted construction work for his bankholidian observatory. Over the side of the roof Michael spots a constant coming and going of player’s visiting Sergej’s supermarket. The western edge of the roof is within range of the barn’s audio, where someone is playing organ tunes, the moon shines here, too, and the twofold image of Sergej bounces around in front of him, explaining his architectural vision. This is a happy child. Untainted by divorce and pandemic. Unconcerned with the bankholidian demimonde creatures that roam the island. The “7dadv”s with their disturbingly gory architecture that succeeded in driving all of the initial clan members out from the game. Great disappointment. Gothic gargoyles with empty eye holes dripping blood like freshly painted windows. The uniformly default avatars of the IP-switching pederasts roaming the streets. The shakedown wrecking crews haven’t gotten a whiff of Sergej’s supermarket yet. The man of a thousand voices might have been a glimpse of unsettling research on a city’s population of homeless whose consciousnesses synchronized with the common signal of hundreds of perfectly isolated VR setups, but most likely it was merely audio feedback. Cherished, loved, snug and secure in a life approved for all audiences. In space, father and son are united. The cosmonaut meets the aeronautical entrepreneur. Michael even gets the chance to explain the few basics he remembers from his physics education. The acute triangle of two angled arms pointing into the photopolluted sky closed by a tightening band between familiars. Tonight they will remember forever, tonight is a night, where all rules are suspended, the day extends beyond bedtime preparations, unsecured ascents, pajamas and street shoes, no work tomorrow if they don’t want to. The moon draws a tide of residents to the roofs, each family on its own private sheet of roofing but happily exploring uncharted areas of smalltalk. Stretched out on the bitumen, the night is warm like summer, or perhaps it’s the heat from the drum fires that adds up. Each summer the bankholidian population celebrates the placement of the first user-generated object on the fictitious island, a digitized persian string instrument shaped like a peacock from some publicly accessible, colonialist collection. Fires burn on the tallest buildings, and with makeshift mortars, the players honor both bank holiday and GORILLAS.BAS by slinging their most impressive models into the bankholidian neighborhood. No models are flying, but the blown-over laughter from the scattered family is at least as good. The city’s budding and every plywood attachment promises new space bursting with life, the extension cords thrown out of the annex’s windows like ticker tape feed an embryonic ideal of fertile frugality, like the one that made this country great, that made the tailfins long and the buildings vertiginous.

Elation or the near roof edge make Michael dizzy. Four stories is a few seconds falling. A few hidden pixels of the bankholidian ground open into a bottomless gorge of eternal falling. A rare plane passes overhead. Michael is about to fall. “Can you bring me to the airport tomorrow, dad?” A fall from up there minus the rush of air would be quite pleasant, the monkish, meditative suspension in mid-air, the whitish noise of all the sounds of five boroughs blending. “But I already got your luggage.” “They are flying me out.” A borrowed phrase, again. They, whoever “they” is, readily assumed the warzone terminology. “Wait a second. You are flying back?” Escort mission to the evacuation zone. “The government is flying people back.” “But that’s for emergencies!” Whatever this is. Deus ex VTOL aircraft. Michael folds up like a lawn chair as the air suddenly feels cold. “If they are flying people out, I have to go.” Sergej lets the sentence end waver in the night air gone gelid, as much as he wishes it to be true, he senses that nobody is going to rope-rescue him from his window or shred his citizenship if he doesn’t present himself at the gate tomorrow. Each summer the bankholidian population hurls players along with their beloved knick-knacks from the tallest structures of the game. Personae non gratae flung from the top floors only to take on the unnerving ascent once again, unharmed but stultified. Michael tucks his knees to lock his guts in place but they still feel like they’re falling, as if he swallowed one of those secret bankholidian pixel-portals. The city’s metastasizing with plywood bloating greenish in the rain, extension cables hanging like neglected umbilical cords from the lovers of the unsightly annexes. “Dad?” “I don’t know.” After this, what is there that one can be sure of, anyway?

Of all times, this time Sergej is prepared like boyscout for his trip. The completeness of his thrown-together baggage hurts more than any spiteful word of goodbye ever could. The federally chartered eagle comes all the way from Berlin to pick him up but won’t wait a minute if he’s late. Only scorched earth left behind. He doesn’t have an alarm, has never seen the reason for it. Clocks, yes, thank you, but the ones with the metal mushroom cap and the little hammer like an autoimmune reaction never lasted long on Sergej’s bedside table. He thinks of the hammer in the toolbox under his bed and whether he will need it as a tool or weapon tonight. Never has his fathers voice or gaze been so dangerously blank. If tomorrow Michael will be gone, milk is in the fridge and the dusty sediment of the expensive muesli bought before the crisis is on the shelf he can get to with the steps. Michael has taught him, now malnutrition is not a danger any more in this house. Night’s silent ambient noise plus sex noises that as of last summer Sergej can classify, after his father explained. Sergej had learned about gas mains before he had learned about bed springs in motion and he had been convinced that the house would explode like that other one he’d seen the rubble of on TV. He had been embarrassed and only slightly reassured until his father had shown him the gas connection, too and he had gotten distracted by the intricate chaos of tubing and wiring under the sink. The neighboring room is silent and perhaps Michael is already gone. However, he’s not, and although his thoughts are racing head-to-head with his son’s, no tossing and turning make his own bed springs alert Sergej. It’s all somehow known feelings by now. The first shock may have come out of the blue but the abandonment - even though Michael was the one leaving, he had always felt like he had been the first to be abandoned - is nothing new. Neither the hurt nor the sulky joy about uninhibited individual freedom. He can party, he can smoke, he can buy his son’s weight in cryptocurrencies. Sadness is coming like stalactites from the bedroom ceiling in front of his eyes. Thanks to its bulk purchase, the roman catholic church now has to deal with that bankholidian cathedral that Michael liked. An average gothic model on the face of it, but inside the nave is almost entirely occupied by what looks like a megalomaniac, upside down drip castle coming down from the vault, which to Michael is the best visualization of a divine spirit that he can remember having seen. Sergej and him had made drip castles, when they had gone to the sea, one had been taller than the boy at the time. Stalactites grow and bulge, before long they will have become columns, jail bars confining Michael in his queen sized cell.

Sergej’s flight is scheduled to leave in seventeen hours, plus seven in flight, plus six of time difference, plus weariness of travel, jet lag. By the time Michael is supposed to work his next shift at Larry Caucasian’s, his son will be fast asleep. And if he won’t be, Larry will learn about the alienation of the two soon enough. The one star review he’ll gladly have, but the public embarrassment, having to drag out the explanation across several commercial breaks. He’ll have his typecast then. The redneck, the beau, the jock, the loser who’s squandered his relation to his son. Sounds of a crying fit from the window. Not Sergej, though, and why should he be crying. Happy fucking independence day for him. Sirens are also in the mix. Maybe the odd tumbling off the roof’s edge. Accidental or deliberate, who knows, even though tonight must have been a lovely night for most. Michael wanders off through the gates of Bank Holiday on his phone, wondering whether he should change his account credentials. Sergej’s presence is going to invade the game like a ghost, not only in form of the reminiscence of their bankholidian time together in front of a shared screen, but uncannily immediate, hitting Michael’s session across the head with a club only to drop him on the ugly menu screen with a note that he’s been logged out by another user. If you’re so close to being the same person, you cannot even communicate properly, it’s all supplanting and being replaced. Their shared avatar is barely known to Michael. Sergej has been procreating so fast, Michael only caught glimpses of the fleeting generational changes. Like late west roman emperors, richly decorated but terribly short-lived. The way it looks, Sergej thoughtfully understated his reward for procreating avatars, the way it looks, he left half the money already at the bankholidian marketplaces before his salary would be subjected to parental supervision. Advertisers have been quick to tap into the fifteen minutes of fame of Sergej’s supermarket. The formerly drab little plaza, undeveloped only because of the official recruitment office on the corner, has turned into a Times Square of neon signs in petersburg hanging. A group of bankholidian residents passes by. They are walking synchronously like a dance company, probably by a single user, a dog walker for avatars threatened to be banned for inactivity, or by a more efficient automated process that leads them around. Michael steps into the supermarket, onto the helter skelter stoneware ramp leading up along produce, dairy, and toys that replaced sponges and detergents. Round and round he ascends the product lines. Everything but walking in a straight line is somewhat of a challenge on the small screen that lights up pale his face among the cushions, and so he bumps into the wall of shelves on his right, misgauging the turn. And then on his left, how clumsy of him. A pack of oatmeal comes loose and tumbles from the shelf and down the ramp, bumping into the stacked products with each turn, prompting other sufficiently rounded packages to join its ride down the spiral. One thing leads to another. A crowbar leads to its being first poked into that hit across a badge of honey pop boxes. An energetic swipe across the illuminated rectangle in Michael’s hands let the metal come down hard on the supposed cardboard so that translucent fragments like breakfast cereal scatter. Michael clears a whole shelf with his weapon, debris cheerfully leaps down the slide like dried legumes and drops down the back of the rack into the atrium. See if the racks will give way to his crowbar. Every bankholidian material has a chewy inertia to it, gold must be like that. The crowbar hugs parabolic indentations into the rack before its parts come loose and the first of the countless prefab racks collapses into the deep. Its neighbor follows suit. The effortless swiping across the meek screen doesn’t quite fit the methodical destruction unfolding underneath its surface. At the collapse of the fourth rack in a row, the bankholidian physics decide it is time for the upper stories to disintegrate as well. Michael’s avatar stands in heavy rain of colorless rubble that minutes before made up its family business. Still Michael continues, proceeds to the base of the structures, hacks away foundations and buttresses so it won't stop raining wreckage, breaks up the fallen parts still intact. He keeps swiping until the entire stock is reduced to the ultimate stage of bankholidian destruction and only exists as reminiscent stains on the empty floor. To Michael, that is the real thrill of the game. The dirt, the familiar. Dirt beyond the repeating patterns of painted stains and flecks on objects. To dust. A warehouse of things made from time and meaning to dark stains on more things made from too much time and debatable meaning. And they, too, are facing the same destiny. Michael plows into the floor tiles with his industrial hoe and they pop like rare china. Pop and fall from increasing altitude as Michael advances back up the ramp. Also the bricks do, whole walls to dust, walls that signify an abundance of time and patience to lay them in endless repetition that bank holiday itself once promised to remedy, or alternatively an abundance of in-game money to pay somebody else’s time and patience. That’s probably where the other part of Sergej’s various salaries went. Swift even swipes across the screen translate to forceful, steady swings with his crow bar. He practices his drive brick by brick bursting from the upper stories. He’s that middle-aged man funneling his remaining creativity into imagining the subject to the impact of the striking metal. Maximal abreaction at minimal exertion. When he gets to the wooden parts of the structure, he only chips away, increasingly bored, weariness finally setting in. His eyes almost fall shut before he can bring down the naked faux-concrete skeleton, but eventually also the bulky pillars come down, forgotten blocks on a dirty ground, a game of tetris lost from the start. They must go, he must flatten them into yet another account of his destructive force in the palimpsest of dirty marks on the bankholidian ground. But his lids are heavier than the crow bar, heavier than the phone in his hand. Heavy sleep weighs him down and lets him overhear the beep of the alarm from the phone buried under the cushions Michael dropped it into.

Sergej wakes up when the sun peeks in from the living room. There’s so much dust around, lit up by the hard morning light, that the swirls and gusts hitting the room’s surfaces produce an almost audible crackle. Sergej has been allowed to play records on his mother’s turntables because he cleans them well with the little brush that comes with the player, the only sweeping he volunteers doing, but despite the cleaning there’s always the occasional pop of a furball in the needle’s trajectory that Sergej likes. It makes his work audible, even if the crackle means he failed to polish the vinyl completely. He feels like the street sweepers that let him ride for a block when he was younger. The freedom of being inconsequential. His liberty of granting the dust grain to remain. He likes granting. The sweepers let him ride on the running board. Outside he hears their local equivalents, although from the sound of it, they bear more resemblance to the bankholidian wrecking crews than the Berlin crew that rode at walking pace along the already clean streets. Sawdust and clippings from the street’s DIY undertakings whirl up and into the guts of the sweeping equipment. Sergej doesn’t dare to get up and is at the same time concerned that he might really be alone. Though it has never occured in the past, Sergej hasn’t gathered enough evidence yet to be absolutely confident that the world doesn’t just stop running when the adult in charge isn’t around anymore. The plastic wheels of the lego car left on the nightstand dig into the comforter on the same track over and over.

His phone is washed up next to Michael’s ear in the turbulence of his tossing and turning, and on the second attempt it succeeds in waking Michael with an incoming call.

“I feel like your counselor already.”

“...”

“You know, giving you your daily dose of you-go-girl, looking over the stats. I see you’ve pulled yourself together. Majorly, I might add. Raving five stars. Nice work.”

“Wasn’t that hard, in the end.”

Slowly his head untangles the real and the dreamworldly memories.

“Attaboy! Anyway, that’s not why I’m calling. Since I’m hearing that your son has turned, speaking bluntly, into a dick like his father, I thought it might be a good idea to bring our sons together in the real world today, so that they can settle their differences in some good ol’ hand-to-hand combat like we used to do. Or hell, cough each other in the face, what do I know about how the next generation settles their conflicts.”

“...”

“We can still go for the fist fight between us, you know.”

“Sergej’s leaving.”

“Oh. I didn’t know. Well then, how about a mollifying arrivederci then. To have them bury the hatchet. I can give you a ride to the airport if the Toyota is still in the shop.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. Sorry.”

“Oh.”

“It’s not because of you. It’s. I don’t know.”

“Everything alright? What kind of departure we talking about? Not like one of those he’s-already-left-but I’ll-run-after-him-with-a-boombox type of deals, right?”

Still trying to be funny. Michael’s throat dries up as he reiterates yesterday’s revelation.

“They’re flying him out,” he assumed that phrasing naturally, “I just need some family time with him to settle things before he leaves.”

“No hand-to-hand combat, I hope. I’m sorry to hear that. The Germans, I suppose.”

“They chartered some machines.“

“Well if you need a ride, the offer still stands. I won’t insist on any lengthy, tear-jerking goodbyes, promise. Patrick’s not going to either, as I know him.”

“Thanks.”

“Let me know if you need somebody to talk to. We’ll break curfew.”

“Will do. Thanks, Akash.”

“Got it. Good luck. And give Serge a hug.“

Sergej has been overhearing the first part of their conversation. His father’s still here alright. Then he pulled the pillow over his ears out of fear of what might be said. As he hears the sound of his father’s door open, he turns to the window to feign that he’s still sleeping, but Michael doesn’t peek in anyway. A part of him hopes that Michael will leave after all, score a few bucks at Larry Caucasian’s, even though it’s his day off. Maybe Sergej himself is expected to be gone, too. That would explain why Michael doesn’t call him for breakfast, although the soundtrack of morning preparations are coming from the kitchen. Michael shakes the box of cereal, forte fortissimo, sets down two settings, not for the company but the noise of it. If the boy stays in, for the longest time of the day it’ll be as if he’s already gone, if he stays in and doesn’t come out at all, he will have to stay, and they’ll get over the past twenty-four hours somehow. But he needs to come out eventually, better get it over with and make him feel the disappointment, even if that’ll be the last lesson Michael can ever teach him.

Everything folds up like flower buds in one of those time lapse videos. Two dark slices of pumpernickel bite down on a pale tomate among scarcely applied cream cheese. Sergej’s suitcase swallows his sack lunch and zips its mouth to join father and son in their silence. The guest comforter and pillows shed their cocoon, Sergej does too, at least according to Michael, who has already decided that this will be the end of an era. At last, Sergej himself folds up, wrapped in two layers of jackets, the thin one for summer Sergej left last year doesn’t fit the bags. They have exchanged scarcely more than a sentence at a time since Sergej got up - rubbing his eyes, wide, round, and awake, pretending, no grain of sleep to join the whirling dust in the living room - yet Michael has merely been blank, not spiteful as a part of him would have liked to be. The day’s activities are too unreal to him to put in the efford. This night’s demolition work seems more real, just look at how the street sweeper outside leaves spotless blacktop behind as it pushes through the detritus, a wiper in a hardware-store-screen commercial. The printer is coughing bar- and qr-codes on the queueing paper that are supposed to grant safe passage to the two. Writs of escort for the city gates. If the mood wasn’t so grim, this could be an adventure they could draw on for years to come. The stack of paperwork is thick enough to resist convenient folding.

“Watch your step.” The curb is a testimony to the sweeper’s work ethic. It’s hard to wrap one’s head around how so much trash can result from the processing of what has already been trash before. Central Brooklynites rather opted for shacks and huts on their roofs than loggias and winter gardens attached to their facades like barnacles. Without other valid reasons to leave the house under the slight drizzle of this iffy spring, only the sad and angry share the streets with them. Red eyes and stamping feet that needed to escape the thick air of their apartments, that suddenly shrank when they stopped cohabiting in shifts. The rain camouflages the tears. They are in good company, Michael and his son, but it disappears with the drizzle as they enter the subway. The service is limited but still running. Please avoid non-essential travel until further notice. Underground escape routes shooting outbound in stainless steel. They watch a trio of ticket inspectors progress along the length of the train. Empty seats as far as they can see, but they progress at their habitual speed of one cart per station, which is hilarious to watch but also awe-inspiring given the earnestness with which the three progress, the reverence they display for their work, for a work that is so dependable it even continues when the purpose of it is no longer apparent. Michael is so taken by the group he not only shows their subway tickets but courteously folds and fans out the stack of self-certifications and exception permits. One of the ticket inspectors glances politely at their paperwork before they get off. Alone again. Because he keeps staring straight out the window, stolidly ahead, orthogonal to the direction of travel so that a watercolor bath of motion-blurred colors fill his vision like a desperate attempt at cheering him up with billboard-colored streaks against a sky-grey backdrop, and the rattle of the train swallows the snivels, Michael only notices Sergej crying when the combination sobs and the bumpy train ride makes his son bump into him. The subway’s motion virtually forces Michael’s hand to bounce from his own onto Sergej’s knee with every tie, but his right remains firmly grasping the wool of his pant leg. For an eternal minute or two, Sergej’s uncontrollable sobs have him gasp for air, but to Michael the most terrifying quality of his son’s crying is that it’s the crying of an adult, a voiceless crying, without uttering words or calls for a guardian. Just breath, opening and closing of crevices, like a piece by Meredith Monk. Maybe a wail would have shaken Michael out of his petrified passiveness, maybe an arm would have wound around the slumped, little shoulders, but his son’s crying is too much like he knows he should be crying himself, yet he is not, and the realization that he is not, and that he doesn’t see why he is not makes him more worried about his own state rather than his son’s. So he sits, tightly wound, thoughts racing the train, the image of sobbing Sergej overlaid onto the blurry view out the window. Brave, blue-clad ticket inspectors. You could build post-apocalyptic societies with them. The second post-apocalypse is always easier to administer than the first. Last time the curve was distinctly U-shaped, with some weeks of long hours behind drawn blinds, whose color cycled through black and brown, ocher once on a particularly sunny day. Last time required a whole package of measures to get over the guilt and the grievance. Dramatic measures as seen on screen, memorabilia and drugstore-printed family photos in the trash and the like. This time he’s aiming for V, the unsteady Made-in-Germany rubber flooring will be his rock bottom. One dog-day Sunday at most and he’ll be off to a fresh start. Move again, pick another square-set city or town, get another job where the onboarding at the coffee machine takes longer than learning the ropes of the business, and soon he’ll make jokes about how four thousand beeline miles really take the edge off a pubescent child. But does that sound realistic, another figure asks, having appears out of the swell of colors, a figure that he last saw three years ago through the window of a gallery lit only by the projection of a film loop of familiar images, an apparition that almost triggered another bender, almost turned the U into a W. The combination of projected images of home and that all too well-known opening hubris he recognized in the figure’s stance served a particular cocktail of homesickness and longing alongside the hash brownies he was offered from a Tupperware container as he stood outside the window among the smokers. But then he controlled himself and went on a company trip to Arizona and returned to manage the inconveniently tugging family ties as he had done before, either ignoring the issue at large or painting a picture of him as the unfortunate string puppet discarded by a dozen discordant hands to friends and co-workers that had no other choice but to agree compassionately. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise, Wanda’s presence, but the letter that contained her announcement of her show, but much more importantly the offer of a visit and the promise of much exerted listening on her part, had landed unopened in the contingency measures trash bag. There might have been a letter, too, this time, USPS is slow these days and for all the urgency Wanda wouldn’t have had the surcharge of private couriers. And then she’s gone again, anyway. Nothing but an elusive spirit animal emerging from the window haze. Less than that, a skeptic, nagging presence. She has made most of the mistakes he makes herself. She would have a lot of advice to give, but she doesn’t deserve the satisfaction of explaining to her son what he is doing wrong while simultaneously receiving some kind of tacit absolution that comes with the fact that her son is no better with his own offspring than she was with hers. Returning to the initial question: Yes, it does sound like something completely realistic. Arguably realistic that Sergej can handle growing up without a male parent. Pretty realistic considering that the past few weeks they have developed nothing but the distinctive intimacy of strangers going through a crisis together. Perfectly realistic, seeing that the absolute devotion to one’s child, when disappointed, decays to deposits that can realistically found a barrier strong enough to prevent and protect from looking back. Absolutely realistic, just as the leading question itself, which is so much like his mother, Michael has almost forgotten it has sprung from his own imagination. The more he chews on the question, the angrier he gets at her, who doesn’t have the right to deny him his fresh start merely because she had been too inconsequential to go through with her own attempts at it, of which she had had many, only that hers had included her son, whether he had wanted or not, and most of the times he did not. And although she acted as if she didn’t end up burning bridges only because of him, it had been her second thoughts alone that had made her turn back half way. If she would have been less inconsistent, she would have dumped him at a temp dad for good, so who was she to judge his choices. Sergej dries his tears on a zwieback from his sack lunch. The bone-dry rusk absorbs the salt gladly, soaks up the metallic taste of crying, too, all emotion becomes condiment of the innocent snack. He offers one to his father, who is still wrestling with the flicker of his mother’s image. Who is she to rebuke him for his struggle, having done nothing to help his problems with Sergej. She doesn’t deserve her own obliviousness, doesn’t deserve her smug comfort under the impression that nothing remains to be done but to respect her son’s decision to be a shitty father and an even shittier son. She’s all but free of fault, she’s a clueless tornado that leaves havoc behind, and only her ignorant belief in her right to make up for all the liberties withheld from women before her has been saving his mother from having to face the consequences of her actions. She appeared to taunt him, but she is at the root of this mess. The rusk breaks in a cloud on his palate and Michael’s agitation, like Sergej’s before, is instantly bound in the compound of saliva and flour dust. As he swallows, the mixture absorbs his hate of his mother’s self-righteousness, of his son’s mother-fixation, his discontent with his countless own faults that covers everything like a layer of slowly accumulating dust he never mustered up the energy to deal with. The innocent mouthful takes up all the ugliness like a dishwater tab in the commercials and leaves a quasi mint-conditioned man, a little bite of nicotine in the lungs and some tartar that needs removing, but otherwise a perfectly healthy, reasonably capable, and totally impassive male in his early thirties. A perfect time to be alone, a perfect moment to start fresh. Still young enough to fit the target group of the widest range of distractions, still young enough to have a couple of years to suppress and forget, to let something grow on the patch where he could bury his former lives. Casinos and racetracks appear as the subway slows down, closed but promising giants the server farms haven’t taken over yet. Michael carries all the luggage as they change to the interdimensional rail that connects the airport to the rest of the city. Gradually, as they walk on to the platform, the space becomes crowded. Single, ten, then hundred households orbit around their centroids of luggage and jackets shed for the spring’s warmth, equally spaced by the repelling forces of the old suspicion of strangers and the new consideration of others. Animated inflections slowly calm to flat curves between punctuation marks once the North American escorts have seen off the leaving. With red shadows around their eyes Michael and Sergej blend in with the crowd, red eyes under every brim and shade, cinnabar eyes like fruit flies from the same batch. What they say is barely audible, but crystal clear to grasp from the perpetual canon resounding in the double glass waiting hall of the air train station. Nothing noteworthy will be said in here anymore. A canon of reassuring revoir wishes and godspeeds, insignificant altercations about forgotten items in the third verse. The hugs are heartfelt, but that might be the emollience of the scene. Air hisses from the platform’s screen doors and son and father dissolve in their separating crowds. Love has turned liquid, all anger has bubbled to the top and lies calmly, hermetically over the surface with no vent to escape, clear and unmoving, dangerously unnoticeable. Melancholia yields business, fizzy tablets spinning restlessly in a sort of merry self-harm, in the half empty glass box of the platform and the accelerating straw on its rails. The anger has broken its cage like a fistula, up up up it strives, up to the surface of a sea so wide, the perturbation is barely significant, a sandworm farting in the ocean. The love seeps out and blends with the waters that Michael now steps into as he leaves Howard Beach. Glug.

From early on, you taught me to be open to the other. More precisely the other that did not stoutly deny this openness itself. I know that you wanted to infix this stance in me because of your own experiences, because of our history, and because of your silent fist-clenching when the Angolans below had one of their soirees. \*Wanda notes: “I indeed had somewhat of a feud with the family living below. That they were people of color was beside the point.” “Still he apparently perceived that you were perceiving them as a type.” “It’s true that I was talking about them as ‘the Angolans’. But you need to consider this in the context of our block.” When I went to see her, I had to call her because the buzzer panel bears the names of every street gang within city limits but none of the tenants names legibly beyond the particles of paint. The balcony grid is a vexillologist’s joy, so I guess she has a point. Why should I have to wear earplugs in my own home,” you asked me and didn’t want an answer. I dry-ran my tolerance again and again, but when could I have put it to the test? The homes, the places I frequented were differing, the climate zones in wedding photos, the dishware or the absence of it, but if there was any otherness it was hidden behind “How was school, boys?”, or relentless work schedules, or bills on the sideboard. When I started university, I didn’t see others move in, some arriving in crammed compacts, some navigating into the parking space with the rear-view camera as their stuff piled up high in the SUV’s back, I only saw sets of belongings arranged in rooms between eight and twenty-five square meters in size. Openness to the other was comfort, it got you nods of assent in class and ephemeral political debates. Openness, I had mastered it. Then Fee invited me to spend Easter at her parents’. She was one month pregnant with Sergej, which you knew but her folks didn’t. When we got to the gate, when we stepped into the foyer and I got to choose from a collection of slippers far exceeding the number of inhabitants, openness was drowned out completely in the whisper of the underfloor heating and the welcoming words and well-meaning inquiries and the mutely crinkling, white natural fabrics and the vacuum hum of the cleaning lady I panically avoided on Saturday morning when she returned already, all amplified overdriven in my hypersensitive, hardwired head. Astonishing that I was able to pull off a solid father-of-their-daughter’s-son, talking like a deaf, without a checkback, because my voice reverbing from the ceiling so high I could have killed myself jumping from the first floor Art Nouveau balconies, rang like a cluster droning in my ears. The guest bathroom with its false ceiling became my hiding space and I would sit on the toilet until a knock would come, murmuring hackneyed profanities that strangely made me feel at home. Fuck those conservative pigs, tiny golden dicks, and dusty vaginas, you get the idea. I had to describe this other before I could go back to tolerating it.

Maria Teresa de Castro was breathing heavily, searching the server room for the stereo panel. B flat suspended fourth to C minor seventh and back for at least half an hour now but nobody except her seemed to notice. Launch week had been causing nail-bite excitement and bulk orders for beer, e, and pizza, waking nights writing imaginary scripts for future cash ins on movie rights had set the routine for twenty hour work shifts. Fifty bullpen heads all reliable, patient, practical, devoted, responsible, stable, but stubborn, possessive, uncompromising, both female and male, mostly male though, overseen by seven scorpios and cancers. The ergonomic chairs bob, the exercise balls bounce with the impact on mechanical keys. On fifty plus seven foreheads and necks sweat is sheening iridescent with soap residue from the dishwasher perpetually digesting coffee mugs.

When there wasn’t a temp dad available, you usually left me with Robert’s family during principle photography. Half of the knowledge that I have unlearned to this day I gathered in the suburban shed of Robert’s parents, who, bonded by their mutual love for combustion engines in all shapes and sizes, welcomed me to their uncommonly intact family, but put me to work earning my board and lodging. Robert’s father Leonis had started his car trading business exporting West German cars to his home country Albania. The increasingly difficult markets and export routes of the Balkan throughout the nineties would have brought Leonis’ venture to ruin, had not his wife one day taken his whining challenge seriously, cold-calling car dealerships in sixteen federal states and two cantons until for the first time in years the crocuses broke through the bald-driven soil of the now empty yard. Leonis fell into a deep crisis of emasculation, and while Stefanie ran their business, he found solace in the budding growth of the commercial internet, first gradually in teasingly slow-loading pornography, then in a flashing idea when he discovered the four primary-colored letters of e-commerce. For the first time in weeks, he faced the sun outside of the darkened basement he had inhabited and informed his family in his very own eureka moment, vested but with a sufficiently phallic coke bottle in hand, of the freshly decided future of their family enterprise. They traded primarily in third, fourth, fifth-hand cars just about fixable to become P-plated sets of wheels for children of reckless parents. Stefanie and Leonis didn’t need to sugarcoat their work to lure me and Robert into playful yet efficient child labor, the dirt and tough metal alone were fascinating and assembled they potentially added up to something that could be driven around the yard, maybe up and down the road if there hadn’t been recent trouble with the local police. My delicate fingers proved perfect for dismantling, cleaning, and lubricating the entrails Leonis heaved on the lower of the two worktops. Robert had a similar manual disposition but got bored too soon to reliably reassemble the heavy puzzle, and if there weren’t any brute force tasks like knocking loose rusted-in joints, he dedicated himself with almost sensual caress to bodywork care. Nissan’s Micra was my favorite, the K11, of which there was always at least one around, even more the facelifted ninety-seven version. It appeared tiny from the outside but was spacious enough to host both me and Robert as we discovered one night that we fled from the disquieting noise of his parent’s fighting to sleep in one of the cars. The Micras meant well for us. When we took one for a joyride while Stefanie and Robert picked up another bargain, we got it to ski a sedan’s length, the suspension yelped as the right thudded back down, but it didn’t tell on us. Robert took a 2000 K11C as his first car.

One time, Leonis called you, cordially inviting me to join the family to witness the delivery of a car Leonis had dug up from a mislabeled online ad and purchased under the sustained effort to suppress his and his wife’s excitement to keep down the price. Leonis usually picked up stranded cars with the tow car, itself another bargain found online, but it had become so unreliable recently that he didn’t want to take the sizeable chance of a breakdown with the precious load in the back. We sat on plastic lawn chairs in the sun with the Bundesliga conference playing on the C-battery radio as we waited for the delivery to arrive. Soccer beat church (everything did), but when the car arrived, nobody listened to Hansa’s running counter. Robert and I had been allowed to rearrange the cars in the yard so that the new arrival would take the theft-proof center, now that it had been unloaded, it seemed like the other cars were crowding around it in awe with us. Stefanie had dug up a pop-up gazebo that we rigged up to shield the bride from eyes and weather. “Beautiful like Paris.” Leonis had never been to France. Stefanie was visibly rummaging around her memory for a French word and finally came up with “Manique”. Before laying hands on the car, the two insisted on a kick-off speech, explaining in great detail the Citroen’s hydropneumatic suspension to an audience that was just about to start with physics next year. Their infectious excitement made up for our lack of understanding. When the sun set, Leonis fetched a set of party torches, and we opened the hood like a treasure chest, oil, grease, and metal was glistening in the shine of the fire. Stefanie lit the barbeque and we grilled toasties and eggplants, awaiting the next day to get to work on the antique DS. When you came to pick me up you scented the occasion and stayed for a drink, which you never had before. Hearing you small talk with Robert’s parents I wouldn’t have said it was awkward, but knowing you I picked up some tension in your voice. Every time you picked me up, you dressed for the occasion, and I’d bet you rehearsed the conversation you were about to have while waiting for me to get ready on the way there. When I volunteered some news about Leonis’ and Stefanie’s business you admired their industriousness and street wisdom. In conversation your eyes couldn’t help flickering between Stefanie’s face and the dead serious fraktur type on her shirt. Stefanie on her part had told me right out that she couldn’t get over the fact that your previous partner was a Slav. When I asked what a Slav was, she merely told me that we should honor our heritage, which confused me even more, because I thought heritage was a kind of debt that you needed to repay.

Stefanie didn’t approve of foreigners coming to her country. People were to be true to their homelands, otherwise all land would remain bare and uncared for, because people would roll on like organic clouds of locusts. Migration to Stefanie was only another symptom of capitalism destroying ties that had grown over generations and centuries in a matter of months. In her anti-globalist foundations she believed firmly, and she would stand her ground in any argument, immovable and unnerving to her opponents. Much feebler was the incorporation of her reasonably consistent anti-capitalism into the folkloristic chauvinism of the scene she was running with. She fit the ruffian, tough-love interactions, I could see her enjoying the dirty, sadistic jokes, the drunk chanting, even a roaring Deutschland über alles if in demand. However, when I asked her outright how your slavic ex-boyfriend was any different from her being with Leonis, her explanation came out unexpectedly piqued compared to her usual calm she displayed when her disdain for the new arrivals had been challenged. There was a certain beauty in the strained explanation she came up with, and I hadn’t known about the uniqueness of the Albanian language in the Indo-European family, which according to Stefanie testified to a people honoring and defending their traditions. Perhaps you would have learned something, too, if you could have looked beyond the catch-cries on Stefanie’s garments.

She looked down on you as much as you were disapproving of her, and both of you made no secret of your mutual disdain.

The DS was still in repair when we had a fight. I don’t remember the cause, sometimes it didn’t need an obvious trigger to set you off, to set us off. I imagine the full program, you hissing and yelling in frequencies that we likely to be absorbed by the thin walls, me responding always louder, pushing you literally to the verge of domestic violence, so that you were forced to direct your physical urge in another motion, usually walking violently before a second round of low volume screaming. However I only remember how I took a blanket and got in the Citroen in the yard I crawled into under a well-known bend in the iron link fence.

I made you a present called “Bürger, lache nicht! Auch du trägst die Schuld.” When I wrote it, I was hoping that you would make it into your first fictional work, or frankly into our first work, my first work. Imagine George Marshall on the steps of Memorial Church in Harvard Yard, giving his famous address, but hear, there’s a caveat, something about justice being upheld. All due respect to European recovery but who wants a fourth Reich because the Germans’ memory fades in their future luxury. No, they shall never forget, no people deserves starvation, but they shall bear their reminder. On the shoulder-high wall of a German tenement ruin a line of bright-yellow posters has been placarded, proclaiming in a choir the eponymous maxim, that translates to “Citizen, do not laugh! You, too, bear the blame.” West Germany got around the extensive demontage of reparations the eastern sister state underwent. But in the imagined reality of my present to you, this came at the price of humor. No guffaw, no chuckle, no laugh should come over the trizone and its inhabitants. Granted that in the increasingly carpeted, centrally heated, well-furnished private sphere, the occasional giggle might follow the consumption of increasingly refined spirits, but with the prohibition of all humoristic events and broadcasts, laughter over time became a taboo all by itself, frowned upon as a display of fatuousness. With the exception of a handful of Rhineland carnival societies, it didn’t even need strict censorship. Amusement was a matter of the coterie, and by the time the fun-loving society would have emerged from their basement rec rooms, the novel ways had already had their time to sink in. Some said that it was a minor sacrifice for the West Germans.

I had expected that you would appreciate my drawing from your biography. Iron curtain falls, young man from the west falls in love with a woman like I pictured you must have been at that time. An east german girl and a west german boy walk into a bar. He holds the door for her, and signals the bartender over her head to get the young woman a drink. The bartender fixes her a longdrink and points out the benefactor to her. She walks over to him and puts a five mark east bill into his breast pocket. HER: “Many thanks, Genosse. You can keep the rest.” She walks over to sit in an empty booth, leaving him puzzled, lingering for a beat too long, before finally receding to the bar. Realizing that he is not going to come over, she takes the initiative. HER: “You know that was a joke, right.” HIM: “Oh. Sure.” HER: “So, let’s hear. You’re a wessie.” HIM: “And you’re from the east.” HER: “Wanna know how I knew?” HIM: “Because I look like the future?” HER: “Wait a minute. That was a joke!” HIM: “What? No!” HER: “And that’s how I knew.” HIM: “Anyway, I’m really happy you’re here.” HER: “You mean me individually, or more like, our species as a whole coming over to say hi.” HIM: “Well, I actually meant you Germans, but...” HER: “Then I am particularly glad to meet one of the more collectively minded individualists. I’m Wanda.” (I chose to use your real name, reminiscing bedside turn-taking at inventing stories with us as protagonists, that we used to practice.) HIM: “I’m Paul.” (I do not know the name of my father. Paul was my go-to name for any masculine character that wasn’t me.) HIM: “Have you ever had a gin tonic?” HER: “Sure. The only difference between our drinks is that you always put a lemon in it to check if it still floats. And your food is like our food with pineapple on top.” HIM: “And that you think, cucumbers are bananas.” HER: “What the… another joke. You could be an undercover comedian. Are you a spy?” HIM: “I just saw the title page of that east German magazine.” HER: “Great joke. But just for the record, we don’t confuse the two.” HIM: “Oh. Sorry.” HER: “Don’t be. It’s much better to know what to expect in a cucumber.” HIM: “No, I meant…” HER: “I know. Another joke.”

He does understand joy, exaltation through work, in the excessive physical exertion to thumping beats, the bliss of being in love, but he stops short on the corner of feedline and punchline.

Parenting is the smallest unit of governance. Michael, what makes a good father? How do you keep your child close? How do you weigh guidance against dictation? How do you balance protection and seclusion? How can you not want your child to decide freely? Will you accept if your child decides for the same fatal path you followed, regrettably? How can it ever outshine you if you keep it tacked to your heels? Should you presume a dishonest child?

Michael’s Grandfather Heinrich suffered a phantasmagoric condition as a toddler. It began on April 5th, 1948, with symptomes diagnosed as a narcoleptic fit. For hours on end he remained in deep sleep while increasing numbers of pediatricians, neurologists, and somnologists talked to and about him, lifted his lids to check and recheck his twitching, dilated pupils. One year interspersed with regular episodes that left Adam and Barbara desperate for even the dubious doctor’s opinions. Years later, when his first grand mal had robbed Heinrich of his pilot dreams, the fits were construed as an ominous prefiguration of his epilepsy. By then, the young man had forgotten the reality of his absences, but the fading of his pathological dreams dragged on for years, so that a fifth grade essay assignment incidentally documented his peculiar experiences. At the time, the paper titled “I had a dream” confounded Heinrichs teacher, who had expected a more straightforward declaration of party loyalty, and the bad grade received led to a roadside accident involving the essay and a famished neighbor dog, leaving only fragments of the boy’s memory log.

Not clear if he is to be envied or pitied. Already he is engulfed by catered impressions, Sergej can lose himself for hours, forgetting his father’s plight and the monsters in the dim crevices and corners of the apartment. Give it some time, years or decades depending on whether the murmur of the body-enhancing wannabe MK-Ultra down City Hall Station is real and able, and he will get to enjoy interface-fed life to its fullest. Heart fed, lungs fed, stomach fed through their respective minimally invasive tubes. Mind fed al gusto: The wind and soft drizzle of bank holiday’s battlefields on Sergej’s receptors, the perfect impression of his stagnant in-game nails on the cereal box he sells in his supermarket. Blessed are the peoples that solely require / reliable broadband and power supply. And yet tragic how he will always remain the thorn in the flesh of the perfectly rendered reality, festering and infecting his virtual environment like a virgin soil epidemic. Beautiful but unfortunately not the original, eventually uncanny, and as such deeply unsatisfying to the transcendental tourist chained to her consciousness as a human.

Fatherhood(

Climax of a love made one Saturday morning, born from a glimpse of Fee’s nipple caught through the armscye of Michael’s shirt she’s wearing as sportswear, nursed in hopeful anticipation watching her complete her practice, sprouting with arms and legs intertwining, succulent like rounded stonecrops, venuses, Michael licking up thighs and her armpits dot dot dot like Sergej drawing Michaels slash Sergej’s stepdad’s scruff. Man of a thousand mouths under her, she’s swinging with perfect inertia, slow, testing resistances, Michael’s fingers sweep her back, clasping skin suddenly, it could have lasted longer but it felt so good.

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People go crazy in a room without echo. Takes them less than an hour, cuckoo. That’s how Maria started Bank Holiday. Ironic images, visuals, filters, tradable, accepting ERC20, pocket money, offshore account transfers. Ritalin, methylphenidate, MPH, just for starting, for folder structure, architecture diagrams, after that it won’t be hard to keep going. The friend of a friend of a friend of a Tor connection lived on her block, which spawned an exceptionally awkward meeting of eyes in realization when she stepped out to wait on the stoop right after she submitted the order and saw her dealer leave the house of that friendly German couple that invited half the block to their bi-weekly charcoal barbeques only to prevent neighborhood rows. He could have just kept walking past her with the items, spiked, laced, wait, maybe roofies and he put a pebble in the door and he didn’t even care whether she knew where he lived and he’s just waiting next door for a good hour to pass and he’s got ricin in its pocket or what’s its face and he’s not gonna leave any traces. A friend lending a hand, finding her passed out, doing his thing, then doing his duty as a law-abiding citizen calling an ambulance too late, how unfortunate. The missing reverb is just the start but unbearable already, something loud and overdriven blasts from the speakers, even the broomstick below hits her eardrum, but the eardrum absorbs unfazed, mobs every sound dry as drywall, the dust is coating her meninx. She’d be stoned-proud if she wouldn’t be suffering of the idea that her own voice might ground her, plus there’s a reverb knob on the effects panel on her desk that she can turn all the way up, and already the impeccable workmanship of the heavy, lubricated dial puts her at ease at times, made to last thousands of urgent turns, TÜV-tested.

I went to inspect my father’s data on site at the European branch of the UN Electronic Data Records Agency in Lecco. I didn’t file for a digital copy online, because I read travel guides that recommend industrial ruins and deserted CBDs for quote unquote cinematic dérives (!) among the weighty monoliths of cultural history. The European UNEDRA headquarters had won several architectural awards, plus I liked the idea of a pilgrimage. I set Etzlaub’s Romweg map as a backdrop and drove to Italy in four legs, mainly at night, to fit the mood. A pyramid on the outskirts of the city housed UNEDRA. Its limestone faces were interspersed with double glass panes running cooling fluid along the servers inside. It appeared as if the responsibles had designed authorization proceedings in the dimly lit entrance vault to be lengthy, just to intensify the effect of stepping into the light of the server room. The unreal streaky light through the refracting coolant made me feel like the room was dissolving, until I looked up and saw the fixed stars of the slanting stacks’ diodes. I took a chair and set the tablet I had been given at check-in like a glowing float into the flowing tabletop. Freddy F had built a trie of life based on Michael’s data, which I understood only thanks to UNEDRA’s noob-friendly graphic slash textual renditions. At first glance, the collection didn’t impress me. The amount of data was sizable, but expected, and already the coarsely drawn top-level characterization showed flaws and misconceptions. Some of these flaws I could explain to myself, such as Freddy F sizing my father up as an unpolitical individual. Although he wasn’t one to take me out picketing, dad kept generally informed about domestic and global politics reading print, ecco one reason for Freddy F’s misjudgement. My lecture became more eerie as I ascend from the root to records of individual occurrences or relationships. I had been prepared for reading through embarrassing messenger archives, but nothing of the sort. When Freddy F’s data collections changed hands, they did not contain the original data anymore, instead they were composed of molecular, low-level analyses that had smaller file sizes and were more easily queryable. Naturally, I homed in on the thick line that denoted the relationship between my father and me. Out of UNEDRA’s array of visualizations of my father’s personal data I preferred a continuous auto-generated text that, although it didn’t capture all of the dataset’s intricacies, it came closest to a casually uttered characterization of some person. The sun set behind the mountains, the coolant continued breaking the rays from the now artificial lighting shining in. The flowing pattern made me dizzy, but I didn’t want to break from the screen to have to begin again tomorrow. Screen split between him and me on the left and Wanda and him on the right, I collected piece after piece of the data Freddy F had used against us. Evidently, the UNEDRA center had anticipated their visitors' enthrallment and kept its reading room and automat cafeteria open twenty-four seven. Around four, I looked up, cracking my back. I was far from satisfied, to nobody’s surprise, however I felt like I had permeated the friendly facade of the blue and yellow corporate identity, with its toolbelted seal mascot that I had hated already as a kid, when it scolded dad with a schoolmasterly wink like that paper clip from that Y2K WYSIWYG. Freddy F’s employee management was modeled after toxic relationships. Bring that human close and never let go, milk that intimacy, squeeze every confidential confession out of it, and use it to tie it to you.

I continued to read late into the night throughout the following days at UNEDRA. Copies were roughly a cent apiece, but this part of Europe was the home turf of hard cash lobbyists, and I never thought of bringing small change with me, so I have to make do with the few notes scribbled on the back of outdated slips from the cafeteria’s bulletin board. The advancing expiry date stamps on the announcements, for-sales, and callouts map my progress from dad’s personal file to sociological, pseudo-sociological, and psychological studies (whether the latter are actually pseudo-psychological is hard for me to judge), and on to fundamental company directives. While the collected data on Michael and his network were raw and made to frustrate and the studies boring as only corporate research could be, the corporate principles came not in the form of dry manifests, but as strikingly offhand slide presentations and internal chat histories, simple and cow-eyed, in default colors and fonts of obsolete text editors, decorated with low-res gifs of long-forgotten memes. The dark incongruity had me laugh at times, although I realize that it’s probably just this hypercontemporariness that has limited the effect of the short-lived outrage of the public, that made the actors of the Freddy F affair seem like incomprehensible ancestors with indecipherable logic and motives.

The data collection revealed to me the extent of Freddy F’s involvement with my father. But it was merely the final state of Freddy F’s information, and it hasn’t told me anything about its functions. The collection of corporate one-pagers and presentations on the other hand does explain how this corpus was exploited, however it has taken me several days until I have stopped laughing at the typos and the clumsy, unaware diction of the individual documents. My amusement died halfway through the first sampling of the archive’s subsection covering the files of Below-par User Motivation, a task force that formed with the introduction of Freddy F’s subscription model that first guaranteed workers a minimum monthly income regardless of the work they accomplished during that month. The nervousness is palpable in every document from that time, and I could virtually see the responsibles backslapping with one hand and popping valium with the other in the recordings of internal communications. To cope with the management’s fear of the hypothetical free-rider mentality, anxiety that they would find the entirety of the bay-area homeless that their workforce was not quite unjustly blamed for on their next payroll, they initiated the aforementioned working group. “Below-par” seems to have gathered rather haphazardly the available resources with a background in other fields than computer science and business. The slides of the working group’s first meeting introduce a slavist turned cryptography specialist throughout her PhD research undercover among petty cyber crooks, at least three sociology majors having segued into UX-Design slash project management, and then there’s of course the ivy-league paleontologist, a field that, as I may note, has to do neither with tech nor social sciences, that was appointed lead of the task force after she had performed well in managing bird-protection programs across the pacific data centers of Freddy F. To give a positive, humanist spin to their task wasn’t difficult. I’m from Below-par and I’m here to help. Quote. The initial dozen or so members of the working group understood their objective as a way of developing tech-driven, innovative, smartsmartsmart structures for helping underperforming employees to regain the self-confidence and discipline they needed to kickstart the flywheel (ibidem) of economic success and individual well-being. To spoil the obvious, they did succeed in doing so, and therefore always had this effective “but”-bumper that bounced back any criticism or self-doubt they might have been confronted with during or after working hours. With a toolbox of hundreds of subsidiaries and acquired Inc.s, how could they have not succeeded.

The first area of research that Below-par User Motivation tackled after their founding round of sharing CVs and their favorite mollusk-based fast food appears innocent and starry-eyed in retrospect.

There is absolutely nothing ingenious about the approach of Freddy F. Though, I stand corrected, there is one feat to its system, and it’s precisely this assembly of absolutely mundane, uncritical building blocks of content management, user profiling and experience design into something so powerful. Sitting on the BnB’s terrace with a view of massive rock faces and a lake deep enough to host them all, and the city, I am naturally convinced that there hasn’t been an obsession-driven mastermind going to work with blueprints and clear (evil) objectives. I will refuse to believe that until I’m presented with extensive proof.

Michael is one from the watchers’ generation. The promise of thrill and excitement brings him out to watch, and when he was still living in Berlin he rarely missed a first-May-riot. That’s when the sun is out and the grass on the slopes of Görlitzer Park haven’t yet been worn down to sheer sandy soil. Michael and his friends wait for and desire something, anything, to happen, and if something happens, they realize they’re already tired of it after a music-festival-length and they’re again only waiting for another pastable code snippet to initiate the next best state change. Michael and his peers design experimental, lava-lamp-like websites and treat their own mindfulness and surveying self-maintenance as the most natural thing with maddening, understating pride. But many an auspicious life design that they negotiated with much love for detail fails at the first child slash promotion slash tax return already and a double cushion of the wealth of high stucco ceilings combined with the inner migration to an enclave of progressive knowledgeability contains any twitching doubts and beliefs at the core. This core, however, remains, like the most long-lived egg cell or a durable sleeper virus, that a good decade later has already begun to grow inside Sergej, thanks to his father, poor victim of that sweeping generational accusation.

Sergej’s vocabulary list, spring slash summer 2020, copied from the Freddy F in-app notepad. UNEDRA.G.9008040342.F.4EDA28CA

both [boʊθ] - beide, beiderlei. A word like a resonator [ˈrɛzəˌneɪtər] Klangkörper, hollow body, rounded like the dipping diphthong, diff-tom, the description of the sound resonates like a microfill, hi hat to floor tom, between the soft walls taking the edge off like a low pass filter. [boʊθ] makes Sergej think of two and Michael think of full breasts, maybe parents, depending on the time of day.

Notes for a paper on an uncertain topic based on data and metadata from Michael’s public and private code repositories. UNEDRA.G.9008040342.F.8478D84C

Email from Fee to Michael, sent August 19th, 2021. UNEDRA.G.9008040342.F.2E332E70

[The study of the document’s metadata reveals that the email was never opened, at least during the timeframe covered by the archive. The mailbox itself has been opened regularly, five to ten times a day, which means that the unread letter just sat there, like an unwanted guest, boldly breaking ranks. But then again it probably wasn’t the only message left unread. The counting red circle slowly becomes rectangular. The beauty of ascending numbers.]

Michael,

Come home. Don’t use your twisted feminism as an excuse. Even if your son doesn’t need a father, you need to protect him from the trauma of being left by the person that is supposed to be bound by all possible ties to him. I will do my best to forgive you if you return to be close to your son and seek treatment.

FEE

[I wonder what he expected to come after the few preview lines that he must have read unwillingly, and that probably covered pretty much the full extent of the message. He preferred to grapple with the million possible endings rather than dealing with the one simple request of mom. He wanted to be a storyteller but only ever amounted to a mute coward.]

If you would have supported me in dealing with Sergej we could have been a normal, happily divorced couple.

You didn’t show the fear of missing out of many other mothers, that insecurity not unlike that of a compulsive hoarder.

Glugg

Dates

1919 Adam

1945 Heinrich

1971 Wanda (+ Lule(2003), (2002))

1990 Michael (+ Fee)

2009 Sergej

Sources

Ostdeutsche Sichtweisen auf die USA | bpb

Wir denken erst seit Gorbatschow: Protokolle von Jugendlichen aus der DDR

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