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.*

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.

Either of us is pertinacious in its own was. 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 eight years, you haven’t seen me in six. 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. Helen 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 this night’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 silent for most of the afternoon. Oma displayed an interest in your weekend work that you hadn’t expected and therefore made you vigilant. She was wary of the much-debated monetary union and worried for her pension, but the west wind had yet only blown the covers of the foremost of GDR citizens, and 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. With great satisfaction but too late you realized that you weren’t even depending on the coffee party’s countervalue anymore and you stormed out 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.

Sad because it seemed like he had found clarity in his state that there really wasn’t anything else.

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.

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| “ 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 on 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, your 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 week 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 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 sais 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 sais, 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.

Defragmentierung

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 hydropneumatics 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 streetwisdom. 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.

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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(On toggling clipping in Oblivion) Any confinement removed but condemned to never again be part of something intimate, always transcending. Stripped of any illusion of a room’s shelter it used to give me the uncanny feeling of awakening in my bed in the middle of a deserted fairground hall.

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 was ascending 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.

Return to church in bank holiday at some point

Player speaking with a thousand voices, that is the homeless in city hall station

Michael will work there

Dates

1919 Adam

1945 Heinrich

1971 Wanda (+ Lule(2003))

1990 Michael (+ Fee)

2009 Sergej

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