*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.*

*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 the eagerness 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 really 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 blame others while I merely need to.*

*This is how we’re alike: 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 had been. This is why I can write about your reality, why I have a right to write about you.*

*We both were teenage parents. However, you became one by mistake, another thing that sets us apart to be added above.*

*I haven’t seen you in three years, you haven’t seen me in three and a half. The last letter you sent me ended up in the same 100-liter trash bag that by the time I took it out to the garbage would also contain the photos of my relationship with the mother of your grandson. 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 I was setting free 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 have screamed at you when they were angry. Screamed and yelled like you did. Like you would at 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 vista shutting up Robert, who had dared me to make the jump from our balcony’s 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 drama. 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 gust from the east, that hit me when 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 projects’ 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 what had me returning there. After all, you appreciated the elusive solitude as much as I did. Then again, you had to make your point, and so you yelled and you screamed.*

*I discovered that your parents were different in that regard. Never did I witness Opa betray his soft-spoken demeanor. The reclusiveness had been passed by him to both of us, his genome had stood its ground against Oma’s in that regard. Opa knew three different jokes, which he immediately told every person he was introduced to, so he could then, having proven himself to be adequately sociable, 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 sticking to the same protocol, and it surprises me that I can only remember one joke from his repertoire, the one with Honecker and the GENEX delivery person. As soon as I hit the big one-three, I was deemed beyond jokes, I suppose. 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 a silent, benevolent attention that he rarely bestowed upon anyone else. That time I got upset about his birthday present, that had failed to meet my expectations, and told him nobody cared whether he even came around next year, he exercised his punishment by substituting his silent smile with a wordless look of indignation and disappointment, and it hurt. 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. 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 dropped her file into 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 stopped trivializing her nightly confession only when it occurred to you to make a film about her collaboration.*

*When you walked up to the roughcast house with the cherry windows early that particular morning, you were hoping that your parents would still be asleep, 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. Isn’t it funny how your selfish individualism emerged immediately once you had first 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 was deserving 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’s 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 eons ago, hefty cast-iron lusters hung like stalactites from the high ceiling. The furniture’s 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 the solidary and the predatory had woken me up in my cells. You retched. Here I was.*

A low rasp invades the corny ballad, traveling along the cable of Michael’s noise-canceling headphones. Michael likes his beard short and sturdy. It would support a car’s weight, uniform weight distribution provided. He snaps out of his daydream and into the please-exercise-discretion-gap.

“Any news about my son’s luggage?” Oy! 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 an airy piano and to pondering the impending indefinite extension of his son’s holiday visit. Neither welcome nor adverse, inconvenient but certainly the more responsible option. Malignant glances shoot from the front of the line. Further back the limp and dazed from waiting times, that make the two-digit EWT-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 are 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 and chastises himself for the thought immediately. Fee had called half an hour ago, suggesting that Sergej should stay in New York, seeing that schools would stay closed and air travel is justifiably advised against. Michael had promptly got his guard up, hands twitch 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 his ex-girlfriend and mother of his son. You should be happy to spend time with your son.

And he is happy now, partly because another clerk peeks out from the backroom behind the check in, leaving an object that might as well be Sergej’s 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 again.

“Excuse me!” Most certainly a teacher, quick to insert herself 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 outweighing the expected waiting time, he grimly trudges towards the end of the line.

Michael has reached the beginning of the waiting line’s guide system. Bank Holiday. Michael is and always has been a sterling sucker at video games. Having possessed no digital entertainment systems beyond a radio alarm clock with a broken timer, the formation of his eye-hand-coordination relied heavily on imitation and simulation. Carefully selected friends with lavish allowances that virtuously handled the still angular controllers were the paragons, visionaries that foresaw the brightly lit perspex booths under the eyes of six-figure crowds that would reward the six-figure hours it took to engrave the respective motion sequences into their biopolymers. More than the bulging heroes they controlled, they were the resolute demigods Michael and the other suckers admired. Not a flinch even in the most critical of boss fights, precisely timed sips of transpiring soft drink cans during lengthy combo animations. Michael hid his admiration behind his greasy unimpressed face that would immediately melt like a butter sculpture as soon as the limelight was on him, would contort into expressions moving fast between Buddy Rich drum solo, Center Shock extra sour chewing gum, and premature orgasm. Under the eyes of the idols grooving to the eight-bit battle tunes he tried to compensate for his missing precision through desperate speed, punching buttons at outrageous frequencies, so that jackhammer operators greeted him from construction sites he passed on the way home, his muscles still trembling like his teenage voice. Although his body was a sight when he was playing - his face, his posture taking the hits of the virtual opponents with unmitigated force, his spine that he bent recklessly in hairpin turns as if he believed he could wrest a few centimeters from the turning radius - but it was his temper that made him the perfect opponent in a game. Because as serene as the idols performed their own dominance, they needed a couple of good suckers to impregnate the air with the locker-room sweat of their exertion, to make the room resound with angry cries of self-loathing, to provide a feeling that something was at stake. Michael provided an excellent service in this regard. At the cost of the odd broken A-button he would escalate spontaneous pastime games into vengeance epics of Olympic magnitude, cross-media Sisyphean feuds, immensely entertaining even for Michael until he would once more Geronimo into another hopeless battle. The controllers have gotten much sturdier these days and the expletives of Michael’s days are nothing Sergej wouldn’t have already gotten used to. Every child likes to win. The sight of an almost middle-aged man unironically playing whack-a-mole with a buttoned cornetto of ABS plastics is only the bonus content.

By the first turn of the line, the collective drowsiness has infected Michael, drowning out any residual anger. Stress is to be evaded, smoking only permitted occasionally to take the edge of a nearing deadline. His ten-year risk for a first ASCVD event is an innocent percent, although admittedly the risk calculator wasn’t meant for his age. Besides, large parts of Bank Holiday consist of building meditatively, of literal homemaking. He has a history of finding peace in homemaking. The building was the aspect that the feuilletons he has long made himself prefer to gaming magazines focused on primarily. The society of builders, more precisely, the politics of the meta-game. People come for the average survival shooter Bank Holiday entails but they stay with the game for its algocracy, and for many the charts and numbers that document, interpret, and regulate the virtual and real-life resources of the game and its players have become a purpose in its own right. Bygone are the days of the biface organization of squads and factions, bygone is the rule of the higher voice-chat gain and of the persistent caps lock. Award-winning visualizations present the numbers, forecasts and projections predict the likely consequences. LSTM networks defang the malicious spoilsport with a dipping bird at the keyboard. Decisions are made with a well-informed click. One reviewer likened her experience of bank holiday's decision making to putting off eye-exams for several years only to discover when putting on glasses that you have been living with minus five SPH. Vice magazine compared it to going to the bathroom on debarking an intercontinental flight with a broken toilet. Michael remembers how he and Juan tried to convince their clan members to put Juan on de\_dust2’s short A and when the discussion thread had unwound in an unending scroll of capitalized nitpicking and an incidental dissertation on CSGO strategies, they had proceeded to take practical action, blocking each other intentionally during games, until the whole group disbanded and he and Juan had turned to meeting IRL, which unfortunately hadn’t turned out too exciting coming from virtual anti-terror skirmishes. If they’d had Bank Holiday’s governance tools, arguably it would have needed merely a quick look at the graphs, the charts, sweet, colorful, charts, to come to a decision. They’d still be in contact, wouldn’t that be fun. Maybe Juan would have had valuable advice on how to deal with a difficult child.

Two more turns to go.

Bank Holiday’s player community is the main yield in the mutual give and take between players and developers of Bank Holiday. A ludicrously expensive game in return for unprecedented governance systems to asaservice out to the real world. This is where the future lies. Reducing the wobbly, fluid, vague aspects of life that Fee and her peers get so excited about to a few fundamental agreements to settle. Everything beyond those basic parameters that Fee and her liberal arts majors can endlessly debate in their cooperatives and civic forums, will become mere rhetorical questions, a matter of simple statistics, blessed be the Math that is, as Michael’s high school teacher drilled into him, all around us. Precious data is another argument for allowing Sergej to play the game. Put Sergej behind the screen like a body scanner. Cast his image in data, so that by reading the mold his son will become finally intelligible. Brackets and stars, numbers and smiley faces. A second hope after his son’s initiation to social media revealed nothing but conformance to the premature portraits of his generation. Being proved right when he convinced Fee that Sergej would be responsible enough to not make himself the target of public outrage and slash or cyber-bullying is cold comfort, he had hoped for Sergej to reveal his inmost being for him to study and all Michael got was another reiteration of the same polls, op-eds, charity appeals, memes, skateboarding accidents, stray dogs cockered he had been flicking past in the preceding days already. In a way, it wouldn’t even be unwelcome, if Sergej was really that faceless, suitable for the majority approach. “What Children Like - Ages 10 to 13” by Miles B. Toynbee, top shelf, under the box of deprecated chargers. Perhaps it’s just the fate of his cohort. With their set of native technologies so enmeshed in the control loops of their consciousness, they cannot help but become more conformist. Why shouldn’t Sergej know what to approve, what to voice instinctively, how to use the tools of his time, like Michael knows not to touch rechauds, not to delete system files? Indeed, it appears much wiser how Sergej navigates the medium to harness the collective opinion in his personal formation, compared to Michael’s limited understanding of it as merely another stage for pitchmen and apocalypticists. But regrettably his son’s sagacity stands in the way of getting to know him better.

Michael will not make the two-hour trip to 181st on an empty battery. The entertainment is worth three dollars and he gets a decaf coffee with it. All seats are taken but a lone 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's length between breakfast and the inevitable nightshift to finish the weekly release before Monday's sprint review, 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 he's certain that his son has never been to a 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 his mother 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 Counterstrike matches on de\_nuke with Juan, had it not been painted with thick layers of neon-colored rust-proofing paint that is supposed to hide the stains marker bullets. Contemporary, clean, surgical warfare. Bullet holes in East-German limestone facades. Paintball will cover tomorrow, possibly also next Sunday, provided he can win Sergej over.

There is an audible rolling of eyes from the local commuters as a busker boards the car, even more so when they realize it’s a sax. His speaker cart does nothing to support his wailing as it proceeds to accompany the soloist 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 running playlist? Or maybe because any busker, panhandler, or small-time crook might be a less fortunate version of Wanda. When the sax player has finished and passes through the aisle he claims high fives left and right as he collects his bounty, but the car is half empty and he reaches the other end way before the train rolls into the next station, so he stands awkwardly waiting like an actor without a backstage. The subway - stage, sight, and civil-courage sandbox - could easily fill another day just riding around the network: Sergej with maps of different decades in his lap, Michael acing the father role with tidbits of MTA history. But it would need a day off for that, and the main challenge is weekdays now.

Take Monday for instance. From breakfast to lunch he is in a meeting on last week’s progress and after lunch, to be prepared by Sergej as part of an improvised schooling effort while his teachers get their email accounts in order, another meeting to review the morning meeting’s review process. Two meetings that will keep him from providing authority and entertainment for his son. Two hours between his screen and the sky each going dark, and he’ll better be making use of the precious time that the father, the son, and the holy orb have together. Two hours of time a day to figure out what it is that makes his son’s heart beat faster. The boy has been a monk ever since he has been here. Hooded, in Michael’s bathrobe and pastel-colored cottons, he has been spending most of the days secluded in the guest room. Michael had been neither displeased nor surprised by his son’s need to be alone. Pre-teen explorations and undisrupted videotelephony. Sons like to be by themselves from a certain age on. Who are you when no one’s watching? The outlines of single letters left from the vinyl aphorism still remain on the guest room’s overpainted wall. Clearly, nobody, that’s what Michael always responds to the prying platitude. Clearly, you wouldn’t even notice your own existence. To be is to be perceived. Who are you, tree falls forest and no one around, moon only if you look at it. Michael holds it with immaterialism, sticks to his own ineluctable modalities, if only to rule out the existence of all the other phenomena that might lurk out there in the unperceived. He has always dreaded being alone and in the dark. Sergej in the guest room doesn’t seem to mind either, and Michael certainly does prefer the new minimally invasive Sergej to the squeaky bully of bygone days, no doubt. But yesterday, Sergej left a sentence along with his dirty dishes when he got up from the dinner table.

Why didn’t he come back, had he asked, back to Berlin, when everything was exactly the same here. Same furnishing, same names on the posters complementing the same stucco remains on the walls, same screen routine, same views of red brick that had workers dying for it. The hot dishwater had quickened Michael’s pulse, had flushed his brain, and maybe had made him read too much into an innocent question, but the three hypotheses that had emerged from the soapy foam had stuck with him, and he continues to mull them over. One: Sergej does have an interest in his father. Not the dismembering interest of a high school bully bent over a caught cricket, that cruel interest of a child emperor towards his subject. The interest Sergej’s question suggests is one born out of curiosity for something that, even if not necessarily dear to him, must seem to possess a certain importance. Important enough to merit emphasizing with. Two: Sergej does want Michael with him. How else could Michael understand his son’s question, if not that Sergej fails to see why his father should prefer staying abroad, an option that according to Sergej is so obviously inferior? Is Sergej’s presupposition that Michael’s natural place would be close to him a case of wishful thinking or merely the result of the empiric survey of other parents’ locations. Trying to trace his son’s reasoning feels like pursuing yesterday’s bank robbers. Three, plunging into the greasy-gray dishwater from the highs of hidden filial affection: Sergej does want to see the city. The child craves entertainment and what sights, besides unseen bulk sizes and movie seat widths, has he been showing his son? His browser holds biblical scrolls of bookmarks registering age-appropriate venues and destinations that he has been collecting and been regularly rejecting shortly before his son was about to land, because he had been too insecure, too self-conscious that he was tracking schedules, duties, and friend names of Sergej’s in dedicated notebooks, but couldn’t make a confident prediction of what he would truly enjoy. Paintball is a start, but only because he has an emergency scapegoat - it was Akash’s idea. Where do we go from there?

The city's a mess. Perhaps it’s only for the best that they’ll be on foot or underground. Luck in unluck, just as he was lucky that the truck that reared him on the way to the airport was an amply insured DSNY service instead of one of the stingy nervous wrecks jamming the streets in their jumpy rentals as they try to make it to an airport before the country will close down. Torschlusspanik translates to eleventh hour panic or last minute panic, however, the English expressions lack the tangibility of the German term, the mental image of the gates closing, the boom coming down. Michael’s fear of closing boom gates is officially diagnosed pathological since a couple of months ago, when he first started seeing a psychiatrist and she checked off a long list of ancient greek stems as part of her anamnesis. She became all antsy when she finally got to tick off a phobia, glancing at his biography, imagining the abundance of hidden traumas around gates, borders, frontiers. The patient remains skeptical of her Jungian approach, all Michael knows is that boom gates must be firmly fixed. Swaying barriers make him queasy, and gates half opened like checkpoints in South American military dictatorships make him approve considerable detours. Only a gentle breeze is blowing, but in combination with the stress the spontaneous extension of Sergej’s visit brings, the vision of almost unnoticeable movement of the railway crossing’s boom had made Michael’s foot jumpy. As he slammed the brakes a horn was sounding, though not of a nearing train but only of the sanitation truck behind, whose driver, alas, was as slow at the pedals as he was quick with his hands, an so he compressed the rear third of Michael’s Toyota to make it look even more boxy than it already was. At least he had not even tried to blame Michael for the accident, and had only offered to chuck the car in the back right away in case Michael wanted to dispose of it.

“No.” Sergej is not yet ready to go home. He and Akash’s son, Patrick, are still in the middle of something.

“Want me to go up and get him?” In the course of Sergej’s previous visits, Akash has developed a sensitivity for the many pitfalls in Michael’s relationship with his son. In fact, Michael chose to involve Akash and his family in Sergej’s visits not only to resolve the leaden bilateralism of their social interactions but because he had expected Akash to be discreet, supportive, and oblivious of any waspy standards of the oedipal buddydom of father and son chucking the ball around the yard.

“It’s fine. How are you holding up?”

“There’s two full-time-working adults in here, three kids with schedules like UN assemblymen, two of them teenagers, and you’ll soon know what that means. I’m happy if I have the strength to tear open a pack of instant ramen at night.”

Michael listens for movement, for steps coming down the hall, but apparently Sergej does not consider getting ready.

“What are they doing?”

“For the record: Never did I neglect my duties as the parental supervisor in charge.”

If they were only wasting time with inappropriate, mind-numbing diversions. Having the computer’s text-to-speech go off on vulgar rants, shooting animated poultry off a pastoral landscape wallpaper for hours, pastimes of his days that were easy to condemn and gave the parent a welcome reason to pry their children off the respective activity to do something useful instead. Nowadays, it has become hard to tell what’s useful, what’s appropriate. The virtual whack-a-mole game today might solve protein folding problems under its hood. The comic-sans courseware might run a hidden bitcoin miner to fund tea-party terrorist movements. Besides, Sergej and Patrick are past the point of getting their kicks from games as Michael understands the term. As if defying their increasingly quantifiable reality, they have banned all elements from their playing that could lead to comparing performances. Instead of garnering emotions from the excitement of high scores, they are shortcutting right to the emotions, which is the direct product of their play. Admittedly, their emotional return is not different, after all, from the doll play Michael, too, enjoyed with the few Lego figurines he owned. What makes their play seem so alien to him is the way it has been optimized and standardized. Sergej and Patrick connect to strangers by various means, to communicate following rigidly specified protocols - sometimes in the form of conversation guides, sometimes in the form of rudimentary made-up sign languages. They meet a fellow player in Bank Holiday and exchange simple objects like colonizers and colonized. They overtake a business journal’s comment section to exchange webcam photos rendered as ASCII art. The protocols supersede each other in viral waves, every week there’s a new trend, and as pedagogically valuable their creativity might be, their unknown origins are deeply unsettling to Michael.

“Are they talking to someone?”

“I believe so. They are always talking to someone.”

“Shouldn’t we be worried about that?”

“I assume your parents, too, were grossly overestimating the percentile of pederasts on the internet.”

Akash’s apartment must have once been a beautiful, lofty executive’s office belonging to the weaving mill downstairs, that now hosts an expensive gym hung with evocative picture banners romanticizing the exertion of the turn-of-the-century toil. Consistent with their innocent twisting of history, the gym owners upended the historical distribution of status groups, and made it their aim to construct the smallest duplexes of the city for unassuming but credit-worthy social climber families on the upper level. To capitalize on the generous ceiling height, the maisonettes have been fit under the roof of the single upper floor. Akash’s apartment is a burrow, a midtown skyscraper floor constantly vibrating under the impact of angry fists of six-figure earners on the punching bags suspended below.

“I’ll go get him.”

“Thanks.”

The continuity is reassuring, though. A hundred years and more of always the same ruckus of mechanical parts engaging with one another. No wonder Akash is imperturbable as he is, waking up every day to the sounds of continuity in the precious quarter hour between gym opening and the alarm of his oldest. The low clicking of the machines going precor-precor-precor without hesitation as if all things will always stay the same.

“There he is.”

Sergej’s face is blank as always. The face of an unexpected serial killer being ushered down the courthouse steps.

“Hey Serge.”

“Can’t I stay here tonight, dad?”

But staying would require a toothbrush and Akash is quick to understand Michael’s look, telling him that he should please not offer to go out and buy one.

“We can just go out and get one, duh.”

“Ey! Language, little man.”

Good thing Akash is still there. Who knows what would burst out from underneath the baby fat of Sergej’s features. The little monster whose return Michael fears more than anything.

“Let’s go. We got a long ride ahead.”

“What? Where’s the car?”

“In the shop.”

“But why?”

“None of your concern. Fender bender.”

“Concern my ass. What is this?”

“Hey! Watch your mouth! What’s gotten into you?“

Michael’s voice is trembling. Sergej, however, is far from falling back into old patterns. In fact, only rarely does he still remember his innocent sadism from years ago in a flash of shame. But having moved beyond the entertaining ill-treating of his father doesn’t mean he vowed to forego his right to challenge his decisions.

“Listen, dad, if you think clearly for a second, you’ll see that it just doesn’t make sense. You want us to go home only to come back here again, tomorrow?” Akash stands, Sergej’s shoes in hand, following the arguments back and forth like a ball boy on his first day. “Let me stay here. Please, dad. It’s only reasonable. We don’t have to be on the subway for an hour and I’ll get to go to bed early.“

“Early my ass.”

“Come on. It only makes sense, if you think.”

“And what about me? I can go back and forth alone.”

“Don’t be so self-centered for once.”

On the way to the subway, Sergej demonstratively lags behind, studying every shop window intently. The price of money orders are up this week. A nail salon’s window looks back disgruntled at the boy that unsettles the customers, staring at their exposed feet. His father doesn’t seem to mind his idling, at least he doesn’t let it show. Sergej used to know so well what buttons needed pushing to set his father off. Gotta work hard for this kind of intimacy, first comes attraction, then love, then fine-tuned control of the other’s tempers. Knowing someone so well is a full time job with life-long training, like operating a nuclear reactor, and once you’re off the routine, you lose it. The man in front, who takes his lingering so stoically, pacing ten, twenty meters only to stop and stare into the viscous stream of traffic again, barely seems to have anything in common with the father he remembers from back home. The man he talks to on the phone several times a week similarly doesn’t seem to have much in common with the person walking ahead. Sergej has been feeling self-conscious everytime he has been talking to the man that has opened up his apartment, provides pizza and cereal, monitors his dental routine, and that may or may not be his father. He has never before given a thought to the act of speaking instead of the words coming out of his mouth, but communicating with the supposedly familiar stranger is like looking into one of those carnival mirrors, that make you question the habitual by transforming what is normal just enough to make it seem uncanny. The word “dad” alone makes him feel like watching himself starring in a bad high-school comedy, but still he forces himself to use it, affixing it to every sentence like a magic token that keeps their bloodbound connection alive. One time he tried to address his father as “Michael” and the camera zoomed out to show a still of the oedipal son plunging the knife into his father’s breast. Michael had read about this sea change in one of his parenting guides and still couldn’t hide his dismay at that moment. “Dad” on the other hand still works for him, the term continues to mean the mundane love of fatherhood, the minor distress won dear of everyday life with a child. When he hears Sergej pronounce the cozy syllable, it reassures him, just as the sound of Sergej talking generally soothes him. It’s the unfamiliar visible level of communication that he cannot cope with, this alienating mismatch of Sergej’s words and his facial expressions, that are hardly expressive at all but so slight that Michael was considering a medical condition at first. Perhaps it’s coolness, perhaps the next generation's strategic detachment from an increasingly challenging reality, what does Michael know? All he knows is that the sensory overload of overdue reactions makes him want to face the familiar fronts of his furniture in pointless cleaning tasks while he talks to his son.

On the first attempt he misses the keyhole, clumsily dropping the key on the bare hardwood floor. The noise reminds 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 Brooklyn 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 flaws, 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 subsides. 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. Tomorrow morning the Italians downstairs will wake them with the tangy scents of early morning preparations for Sunday's family meal. 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, some thousand Lego bricks, a composite collection from recent christmas presents and Michael’s own childhood sets that he schlepped from one self-storage to the next both out of parsimony and joyful anticipation of paternal nostalgia, orbit around 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 for 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 at 11:30, right?”

“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 and 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 green 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 jumbled tool cart left in the guest room because Michael judged that twelve 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.

“I’ll take the bus. I took buses before, that’s not an issue.”

“You’re not gonna go alone.”

“You don’t care about going 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 rubber band, 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. You do know how that works, 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 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 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. You write code for stuff that nobody cares about. And you take so long to do it. I could do it faster than you. You don’t even get to speak your own language at work. 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 fill 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 ceiling lamp 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, it’s 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 the 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 conveys his indignation.

“Let’s not…,” Michael starts but reconsiders, ”well, if you want to join me, I’m here.” He closes the door softly.

He returns with two plates of open sandwiches, cheese plus pickles slash mustard-topped baloney. Michael’s index draws greasy lines on his phone as he skims what is there to browse. Outside it has started to rain though the weather station shows minus one 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 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.

It eludes Michael. His video game library is kept in the left one of two decommissioned archive racks. The right one holds Michael’s ostentatiously bilingual library of fine-print prose and mimics its twin with astonishing detail down to the arrangement of spine colors, as if the two shelves were some kind of experimental setup, a psychological test to classify the visitors of the apartment by the shelve they turn to. Sometimes he still garners pitying looks as people discover the plastic contents of the left rack, as they hear the implicit confession of having spent 1.80 times 2.10 meters of one’s lifetime in front of various digital entertainment systems. Most of his visitors, however, are impressed with the extensiveness of his library, covering a wide range of genres, platforms, and region codes. Perhaps it is just this experience. He has already seen too much to be surprised by 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 within the vast game world. 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, and shrink with every skirmish battle lost to another faction, is an inventive feat. A colossal subpolar data center encapsulated the North American NST-to-CST copy of the universe, which constantly grows with new objects and assets created by its inhabitants. Its strategy of rewarding players for their creative modding has 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 to a tender bricolage of minimal means familiar to Michael, replicating three-bedroom apartments as seen on screen with faux-silk cloths bought from immigrant street vendors as room dividers. Everything seems 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 bed, couch, and pillow from tonight's dinner. Automatic rifle on the sheep skin rug. Press B to equip. Red eyes in the door frame, Sergej is still awake after all, now turning to head to the bathroom. Michael abandons his deserving teammates and 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 is starry with toothpaste spots, Michael cleans it, returning the curt goodnight as Sergej brushes past him to bed.

*Someone in that brick building on the morning of the 4th of December, 1989, held a protective hand over Oma by expediting her file to the incinerator before it could be secured by the clairvoyant citizens, that were 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 stole 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, as an artist.*

*Already in the old country you had picked up photography, prompted by a gift from Opa, similar to the one I would later turn down so ignorantly. You on the other hand embraced the camera, 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 every time and everywhere. This fact fostered your professionalism at a time when the paved and seal-coated 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 into 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 who were avid for footage highlighting the inexorable demise of the eastern economy. The city’s Stasi headquarters were the second largest among the ministry’s regional offices. With the largest port of the GDR a quarter-hour drive to the north, it required 3,700 official and 9,300 clandestine service workers to nourish 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 on a neighboring property. Your gregariousness had proved to be an advantage in your new profession as a photojournalist, and had quickly brought you to the various grassroots movements that were blooming 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 Neues 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 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 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 propagating uncertainty among the political entities of the republic had deprived the young watch officers of the tenacity to refuse entrance to the crowd, who had come without an official appointment to visit the facility. Without the guards and the countless CCTV cameras, 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 nearby harbor. The two boyish 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. Initially, the graveness of the discovery escaped you. 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 one 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 mercenary 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 Neues Forum members and warehouse officers bustled about sampling other 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.*

The boys’ big eyes almost match the cow’s on the other side of the glass as it briefly glances over the backseat, trotting 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 he 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 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 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. Two. Keep your mask on. Three. No shooting point blank. Four. Don’t be a jerk.

“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 children and manchildren. The third game is in progress, and Sergej’s team has to plant a paint bomb at a designated spot in the arena’s center. Forty seconds into the game, Michael is awkwardly crawling through the twenty foot shipping container that flanks the bomb spot. I have so heard it said: / That once came together / in single combat. He regurgitated the epic for the good first half of his senior year. 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. An historic lay it was, not an epic, a fact he distinctly recalls since it secured his B minus. 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. If it really gets to homeschooling as rumor has it, he could dust off the old teaching material at the bottom of the unpacked moving crates in the closet. The player before him turns his back on Michael. It’s a clear shot. Over the ring-mail” / “ere they rode to the fighting. Michael’s brain lags behind his trigger finger and misses considering the identity of the target and when it catches up there’s wailing in the ears and a deep seething regret down below. Of course, it is Michael’s CI-colleague that is the first one to tend to his crying son. Sergej holds his ear, where the 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. It remains 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 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 are 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 presents as her 12-man-hour effigy of the pseudo-shakti statuette Akash placed on the mantelpiece to forestall tedious inquiries about his origin. Looking over to the love seat Michael sees Sergej appearing happy. It was a good day, wasn’t it? They did their best to circumnavigate discords and misunderstandings that trigger another fight. Behind the mask it was hard to tell, but Michael would swear that his son was having fun running, shooting paint, at least until his war injury put a premature end to the entertainment. It seems like a time of insecurity they are living in. The city limits in Bank Holiday grow and shrink around Naina running around in her Abendgemütlichkeit and Michael is still unsure whether it has been a good day.

*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 or warning, 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. Apparently, you expected that I would become some kind of peeping Tom, since you started locking doors during this time, which was otherwise frowned upon 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 questions were whether I would get to keep the material I shot - you affirmed - and if I could have my own TV to watch it 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 in 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 secretary 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 kept 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 have kept renouncing 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, and 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. 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 a 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, cozily 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 a bottle of 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 female’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,…” 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 unplugged controller from hands. 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 returning 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.*

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 == true`, player continues controlling child. If `mating.successful == false`, player continues controlling parent. Players can mate any time. Only one sex exists. Mating success rate for player age x approximates 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 influences balancing in the reproductive battle.

The finished feature of mating was the major reason that Bank Holiday just barely made ESBR-Teen. It was not outright gory, but when the life-hungry newborns would try to outmaneuver the raging, club-brandishing AIs of their parents to grapple them from behind and batter their skulls in with their bare fists, their players frantically mashing buttons of their sweaty controllers, the screen would turn ruby with blood. Granted, Michael proposed paintball, but still he ponders shelving the game until Sergej will have gone through the fundamental classroom 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 piñata before. To do justice to his parental responsibilities he suggested the game’s building mode, which is supposedly more peaceful than the battles the factions fight for territorial gain. And as soon as Sergej discovered the staggering size and convoluted ornateness of their faction’s urban headquarters that he had missed yesterday when Akash was showing them around, his proposal did not need any further encouragement. 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, but the store only yielded 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. In subsequent forays into the heart of the nameless metropolis they came upon a mansion, whose structure was made up entirely of ropes stretched between the ground and the adjacent buildings, and every step onto it sent them into a glitching frenzy, as the physics engine up north struggled to wrap its mind around the elasticity computations for the woven floor. They descried an Escherian waterfall, a mind-boggling three-dimensional ASCII-art tree, several storefronts daring the censorship of bankholidian content moderators, but no supermarket, 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 of what Michael told him about the 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 that illuminates the urban canyons at every level and angle compensates for the narrow window to the skybox turning pink with the last virtual rays. Player characters hired by resourceful businessmen sweat ad chatter laced with sparkly sound logos, while they stand unused and prostituted by their owners on busy street 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 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 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 old game collections, amassing the largest trash mound in the history of garbage collection. The car depot was only one of their numerous branches and arguably one of their tidier 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. With the analogue arts forced into hibernation, there has been a cambrian explosion of artistic outlets in the bankholidean neighborhoods. Good thing Sergej opted for a plain and simple supermarket, all this exceptionalism around is becoming oppressing to Michael. “Pen pushers and bus drivers,” something ordinary and unpretentious, some salt-of-the-earth predictability is what he called for on one of their faction’s forum threads that asked the community 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, that are contending for official recognition by way of longstanding Pie-Town-NM-convention. His needs remained unanswered among the thread’s unordered exchange, mainly consisting of insults flying back and forth. 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 when he is asking for more enthusiasm towards the bureaucratic groundwork of organization, standardization, and regulation, 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 already 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 block party - very likely to be canceled - Michael is taking a closer look at fixing the pitiful apartment door, seeing that a contractor’s visit has become similarly unlikely to happen within the coming weeks. He remembers a metal sheet that used to block the lower mailboxes by the entrance and that he used to mutter about until one day, someone had pulled it to the curb. It’s still out front, ready to be salvaged. 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, an 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. Thousand islands of an archipelago of cotton clouds draw across the bright blue sky, calling for a stroll in the park or some other northern-European compulsive basking in the glory of the white glowing giant above. Unimpressed, Sergej has turned a cold shoulder on the springtime splendor, 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 seem to stem from another era of computer graphics, compared to the delicately chiseled details of the city surrounding them, and the four emotional states the facial model can deduce from player’s speech 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.” Is he bragging about his father? “Shit, he built half his furniture from keep cases. He could drown this place in car models.” 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 game collection. He leaves the rice to form its trademark crust simmering unattendedly and goes down to get the mail, still trying to summon the complete contents of his archive. A lone dog passing shoots challenging looks at Michael, who realizes too late that it’s the greyhound they used to cast for his employer’s commercials. All of the company’s staff had pitched in to help with the shoot, and Michael had ridden across town to pick up the miniature mail bag the dog would deliver their customizable greeting cards in. He would swear that the dog, who has just turned left on Throop and is now vanishing ghost-like behind the fogged windows of the corner laundromat is the very race dog they brought in from up the Hudson in an effort not to save on the wrong things. He would have long forgotten about the creature, had it not been a recurring presence in his dreams, that velvety anthropomorph, looking at the dreamer from his sad eyes like well mouths. Go freudian on that one.

The mailbox is empty except for one of his employer’s unfinished, thick envelopes that go for an extra forty cents, twenty-five on bulk orders. The greyscale card with that damned hang-in-there kitten Michael draws from the anthracite lining is a classic of the genre, much to his incomprehension. Trees from responsible paper sources sacrificed their trunks to deliver the single page-spanning sentence in narrow print that winds in and out of cushioning deviations, dives into depths of guilty explanations, before it resurfaces in a final subclause, that cordially notifies Michael of the termination of his contract.

Michael will make a point of victimizing himself when talking about the loss of his job, withholding that, A, he did not care to make himself indispensable, and B, he repeatedly complained to several of his coworkers about how the only thing the suspended kittens and quirky dinosaurs on their cards’ faces dependably conveyed was their work’s inescapable tedium. Michael works - worked, rather, as of now - on the company’s online shop frontend, in particular the sandbox for exploring the world of customizable greeting cards, for wielding the tools of their creation. Genesis on a WebGL canvas. The job description conjured up the daylight-proofed, led-lit coding caverns scented with energy drink flavor and rollout-day adrenalin. The internet’s fourth decade on the horizon but people were still believing in the digital frontier myth, him included, and so he had quit academics in favor of heavy paper and silkscreen prints on fridges and mantelpieces. However, his daily routine rarely read like a Sorkin script, and most of his days he has spent tweaking data in a sisyphean maquillage to have the shop stand out in the dimensionless mall of their customers’ search results. The wide jumbotrons display their printables in soft-focused macro photography that makes Michael recall drug-induced vision. The images supposedly underline the material value, A/B testing has put a seal on it. Infinite circularly-connected subpages suggest ever-changing variations of their merchandise, they hold the customers hostage in their search for something they believe to be specific, releasing them only on placement of an offering in their checkout baskets. Despite his boredom, Michael has taken a sadistic pride in the pastel-colored maze, and he spent hours researching the mechanics of addiction and customer retention in doctoral theses and candle store blogs. However, all this time he has been looking in the wrong places, he has been missing the essence of the ads that were lining his reading material, namely that an army of freelancers from the global south have been ready to clock in at approximately four dollars an hour, VAT included. His contempt for his employer’s merchandise may have been merely the proverbial straw, and in the light of the average work ethic at the office it probably didn’t even suffice to do any damage to the ungulate’s spine. Every workday morning, copywriters from top-tier liberal arts colleges set eight-hour timers on their fashionably vintage watches as they crept into the cubicle they could tell being their own by the futile dreams for their life they commemorated with tacked-up magazine clippings and carefully selected novelty items around their desks. Many a morning one of the writers would show up late, with a disillusioned gaze into the void, climate-controlled office air, having snuck a detour into their commute to graze Midtown or other more realistic addresses to leave a hefty manuscript, printed after hours on the bullpen’s inkjet, with the receptionist, a distant acquaintance from college, who furnishes her apartment with the paper stacks her ex-classmates drop off at her desk. At a point before Michael’s arrival the ratio of aspiring novelists to unambitious pen-pushers must have passed a critical tipping point, bursting the floodgates of the unhappy authors’ dry-docked self-awareness, so that they became conscious of the narrative potential of the office staff, its composition so curious, in a sad way, that it totally merited their prodigious rollerball pen tips. The collective endeavor of immortalizing the office and its routines in hundreds of narrative fragments - short-stories, novellas, even a tome of psychological horror fiction - had resulted in an Orwellian system of watching each other, that, although intended only to study character development and reap urgently needed inspirations, had highly beneficial effects on the writers’ productivity in terms of greeting card designs. The writers’ protective dissociation from their work output paired with notable literary talent produced an array of sweet-and-sour greeting cards, schmaltzy and witty in equal measure. As unsuccessful as each of them was individually, as a collective they kept extending their bestselling aphoristic oeuvre on life, death, success, and condolence.

Michael pushes his eyes across the lines of the letter for a second time, descending the headstone-shaped paragraph while he ties up the loose threads of his thoughts unspooling like ticker-tape into the void where his guts have resided just a moment ago, breaking news headlines foreshadowing tomorrow’s worries. WORKERS LEFT OUT IN THE RAIN. His terms of employment didn’t foresee any sort of compensation for a timely termination, which means this plus next months’ wages will be his last major revenue for the time being, unless WORKERS STRIKE OIL IN COURT he can come up with a labor law obscure enough to escape his employer’s legal team and to secure if not a continuation of his employment at least a juicy severance package that would keep him afloat for what, another year? Ten? Michael’s Eurocentric prejudice of the US juridical system being a high-stakes lottery sends him off on a daydream of indulging in his six-figure compensation in a moderately-sized Long Island beach house. However, without the imagined courtroom bonanza, his savings will cover another month max after his contract runs out. SPOILED KIDS BLEED OUT WORKER’S ACCOUNTS. The necessary expenses for meeting the demands of an eleven-year-old in terms of meals and entertainment cannot be overestimated. Despite being used to cutting corners, Sergej can’t help but eat like a hole, to put it in gentle terms. After all it’s mother nature compelling him to finish his plate, and the pantry, to build up resources for the imminent transformative exertion of puberty. If he wants to show his son a good time outside of a labor court, he needs to secure another source of income within the next month.

A smell different from the sting of the salt-and-pepper linoleum they installed on top of the wooden floor to bring down maintenance costs fills the staircase. Someone has been sleeping under the stairs again. Michael has noted two-hundred-forty-six dollars and thirty-five cents as expenses for groceries, consumables, subscriptions with unfavorable cancellation periods, and miscellaneous squanders within the last thirty days. How long has Sergej been with him? Ramp talk over an adult contemporary intro blares behind the left door on floor one that has been dipped in electric blue varnish. Fenugreek and asafoetida linger on the landing. He owes Akash what, twelve fifty for Sunday’s entrance assuming he will refuse an extra five for gas money. Ascending faster than his body, Michael’s mind slips out as he passes the second floor, looking at its mortal anchor’s sluggish climb. Hot self-loathing meets compacted injustice and the thrust of the flash of fury being released in the combustion of too many unstable negative feelings shelved side by side propels his mind up through wood, bricks, and bitumen, far up over the borough, homing in on the nuclear family skipping along the curated sidewalks of some neighborhood littered with flower bombs, not kool-aid doypacks, ice cream in hands, the mustachioed forty-something is addressing his son like a Johnny Cash recitative. Daddy is in a spending mood today, shit, he has managed to shave off approximately five K of, let us be honest, unnecessary staff expenditures of his company. The unchaperoned body of Michael kicks hard against the freshly installed metal sheet over the door leaf, the sound of the gong shocks the twice-inhaled air of his two-bedroom sound box into oscillation, cutting wi-fi signals, jamming other wireless protocols as the swell propagates itself in the adjacent units, cats, dogs, squeaking rodents and singing birds all tune to the frequency of the gong that fades slowly, sustained like the final chord of A Day in the Life. Michael’s boss at home working weekends on a reduced wage is looking up as he hears a faint sound from the window.

Already in the corridor Michael starts to scan the first want ads, the sight of happily conversing workmates over the title header feels cynical. The list of openings is sparse, who knows who else the quaint dog paid a visit to. Michael’s mental printout rates NC-17. Things would be considerably easier without Sergej (Hold on, strike that off the printout). Through the vanity mirror in the hall, Michael can peer into the bathroom. Sergej is on the plastic stool that Michael uses for painting the ceilings, with his eyes rolled left all the way to the stop. He 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.

“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 back to the cherished daguerreotypes of his great-great-great-grandparents. The unclean skin under the milky, smooth surface is like Michael’s own and his mother’s. The same soft, pale color of Wanda’s processing chemicals that he used to shine a flashlight through when played moon landing as a boy.

“You see this?”

Michael points to his nasal root.

“The growth of the nose proceeds 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 the letter.”

“And now?”

“I guess I’ll get another job.”

“Mh.”

The boy looks at his father with an expression that could be inexhaustible wisdom.

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.”

*“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 up things 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 demonstrating 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.” “I’m not sure who he was.” Incredulousness. “I didn’t even know you were sexually active.” She had arrived at room volume and suddenly, terrified, you realized that she wasn’t about to sneeze 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 fully 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’ insistence on an abortion? I doubt it, since you never struck me as pro life, either. 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,” and this was 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. Its second morning 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.*

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 Wi-Fi. 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 winter boots. 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 an alpaca scarf knit by a college acquaintance, whose name Michael will forget soon, 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 discovers a lone woman at the end of the platform glancing over in amusement. The express train flashes past.

The local train is deserted. It’s survival in the city. The cars are clean and MTA patrols are their only companions, but Michael keeps looking 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 displaying a conspicuous interest in all things artistic during their previous forays into the city. They contemplate a window-spanning, annotated map of what is called “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 skyscrapers. 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 twenty-something a few people ahead of them keeps blaring the shop’s name without respite. Pal, what’s your problem? A stout jogger with a handlebar mustache hastily overtakes them on the last meters before they reach the line. Up down up down, he bobs, running in place, giving Michael challenging looks. Bad breath, garlic breath is creeping up 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-canceling headphones as well as an electrode-studded neoprene suit to stimulate their skin’s receptors, 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 that lacks sufficient rooms 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!” Despite pushing puberty, Sergej still gets excited over shopping carts. He is rolling 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 the last of its kind. Michael feels the fluffiness through the packaging. Suddenly there’s 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, ethereal DX-7 presets chime 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 towels, and the jogger actually yields under the package, down he goes, even the plastic wrapping holds, no paper must go wasted. Three-ply, recycled, win a school trip to the upstate paper mill. Then 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. The jogger doesn’t get a good smack at Michael 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 staff members 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 can maintain their conviction that they are on the side of light in these darkening days. A jar of hot honey gherkins and the jogger is 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 who is now uncomfortably raking the remaining sand of last weekend’s Long Island beach walk in his tote for a detached earbud tip. Sergej 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! Anything to get us out of this. They walk to the station in silence.

*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. Traversing 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 so heavily that a passing couple at a street light snarled at you 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 had 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. You were not entirely sure whether your ride was being repaired or cannibalized, but after only a few minutes Moisés beckoned you over to the purring, reinvigorated engine. “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.” A woman caught your glance, blurting out to your embarrassment “Don’t be afraid of Moisés, he’s a good man.”*

*Moisés’ Barkas was ramshackle but it 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, “Should you 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, who was tackling time and again the curricular social formation on base and superstructure, but always ended up lamenting 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 a lewd wink as you passed him on your way to change your tampon after the ride. 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 808-claps in the bathroom. “These pictures are stunningly raw. Eye-opening.” His face was an abundance of display goods. Behind lightly tinted glasses, his blue eyes were eerily awake, and his scruff had an edge as if someone had spray painted it with a stencil. Although he’d just cut it severely with his credit card in the bathroom, his attention was intimidatingly intense. “Okay.” His German was better than your English and he made a point ordering you a sandwich with ham and mayonnaise, gracefully crooned umlauts, and French 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 molds 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. So here I am nudging, although, 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. You were bubbling yourself, in love.*

Another stalemate between sofa and guest bed. Michael empties his clip on an inattentive enemy across the dip. He has thrown his parental concerns overboard in return for a joint activity that doesn’t require or inspire talking. Sergej doesn’t seem to be stirred by the humanoid figure going down. Five seconds later Michael is 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 couch table. 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 hit him instead.”

“Exactly.”

Michael knows that his rationalization is less than convincing, but having Sergej forget about the supermarket incident as one of his father’s occasional eruptions of harmless violence is still preferable to him seeing the actual reason: Money is running out, the world is coming to an end, and he is feeling like he’s long lost control. Among the store aisles, the sulfur- and cadmium-colored tags, the black-holes of zeroes sucking free floating fiat from an otherworldly account that Michael only peeks at through the oculus of his banking app, at the store it had suddenly hit him, the disparity of debit dates that had him overlook the outstanding withdrawal of this month's rent, the red figures and impending notices in his mailbox. A local calamity within a global disaster. And then that stubby knob advanced dead set on making trouble. And then he hit the knob.

Sergej is trying to ignore his father’s pacing. 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 imagined keyboard.

For a split second, Michael ponders going missing. He went out to buy smokes seven years ago to this day. Somebody with a jackknife should come to relieve Michael of his over-insured 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 got a new job”. If not babies let the stork bring jobs. Sergej will need to take his first mug shot photo with id and hand-written terms-and-conditions approval held next to his face soon enough. A squirrel jumps on the seat next to Michael and utters a sharp call begging for food. Armrests divide 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.

Rent won’t be an issue if Michael signs up. 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. 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 it say irrevocable in the clause 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 traversing 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, some lost soul stuck halfway on its way out to the roof, Sergej can hear him slash her slash 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 there’s one, hidden in the gap of the door casing. One that is out for his limbs, wanting to cut Sergej’s arms clean off with its guillotine, like it almost succeeded to do when he was sticking the Donald-Duck mag through the crack of the door to secretly keep reading by the glow of the plasma TV after lights-out. The dream he fell into reading might have bled into his recollection, yet he continues to jump across the doorstep, not to tempt fate. This one though, the ghost that is now in the kitchen, is an unseen kind, definitely about human shaped, judging from the split-second glance Sergej caught of the specter as it stepped into the kitchen. Sergej’s youthful ears crank up their infinite gain but no sound is to be heard from the kitchen, even the cooling unit has gone mute. Sergej huddles behind the armrest, petrified in his hypersensitive state. Music! Anything to break the silence until dad comes home. He leaps to the stereo, turns on the vinyl unit that, thankfully, is loaded with something, and presses play. Something is wrong with the system. Though, wait, it’s only the intro. Come on, only a single major cadence to fend off the white noise of ghosts and static, of blood rushing in his ears. But the record has other ideas. The music itself sounds possessed, spinning in loops like a whirling dervish over the sound of anarchy and wanton destruction of hard-earned listener consensus. Sergej’s top tracks - closely monitored by Michael, who gifted his son his first streaming subscription as part of a larger effort to prevent losing touch with him - comprise current chart hits and eighties nostalgia, but the only nostalgia to be found among this noise is one for the staccato signals of constant information running through a connecting modem. The cover sleeve postulates that the consequential objection to the allegedly effortless adulthood snugly running along preset paths like driving home for Christmas must be the autoaggressive destruction of musical production, tonal Hashimoto, mincing the signal through a tube screamer and slicing up audio renders with the cursor’s sharpened edge. You’re listening to the graveyard 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.

“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 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.”

The phone purrs on the 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?”

Eleven i.e. twenty-three hours is late. Past Sergej’s bedtime. Toothbrush.

“Dad, we’re out of lemons!”

Who knows though what the next offer will be? Could be a night shift, who knows.

“Daaad!”

“Jesus! Just take another fruit!”

“But it needs to be a lemon!”

He’s gonna be fine, he’s old enough and 23 isn’t that late after all. They’ll shift their rhythm. Four hours, he’ll call to get him to brush his teeth. Hide the sweets. Confirm. Good boy.

“Sorry, Serge. Come again?”

“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.”

*Like everything else, the language of your country faced the need to match the competition. Paul’s correspondent friends chained words you 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 citizens 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 weekly 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 too seriously.*

*Lule was your usual type and had 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 boy just turned 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, would he have been 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 an abstract crush 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 the desired heterosexuality to myself. Although I had heard the rap about how he would understand and tolerate me disliking him and the role he was occupying in my life from other temp dads before, I didn’t take it as the ignorant proposal of a convenient nonaggression pact as I previously had, because I felt like he wanted to get to know me. Looking back, I can barely pinpoint what exactly made me suppose that he wanted to, and ever since Sergej this has been driving me mad. Lule appeared like a macho with a manic depression, but I fashioned him as my misunderstood father figure. 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 and even in the semantic field of weapons and war I cherry-picked the associations that reinforced my image of him. Having read my gaze, he asked me if I wanted to hold them, which is nothing a serious father would do, but back then, the heavy head dangling merely 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.*

*As the first elections of the budding free democracy drew closer, you hardly made it to class at all anymore. Too numerous were the opportunities to catch yet another campaign rally of even the most obscure candidate, 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 the pushing and shoving in the presence of some jovial West-German party patron. 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 would soon turn out. She was paid to accompany her subject to Moscow, hotel and flight included, while Paul’s picture desk didn’t even offer chipping in for national train fares. Before catering emerged as an option, you had brought along 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 in need of counsel. Unwanted was also her advice of for god’s sake not running off to wherever as everybody was, because this country was as much in need of you as it presented a vast array of possibilities. 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 of the opportunities he sensed, that 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 in its entirety at the time. The America in the picture was spelling out the opportunities for you on billboards and marquees while 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 deal is lights out at ten sharp. He’s never gonna know. Yes, he is, he’s going to feel every bulb getting home. Sergej will limit lighting to the ambient-temperate halogen bulb of the clamp lamp. 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. 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 inaugural beach day that 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?”

Can it be innocent interest prompting the question? Or is Sergej onto something, given the absence even of factory farmed pork belly on his plate.

“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 alone. Better not get the organic ones next time, not the ones sparing the male chicks, whose existence has only been constituted by the labels advertising their survival in the first place.

“I have twenty six dollar something. But I think there’s more than five-hundred in my account at home. Euros.”

He is onto something.

“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, however, the distribution of mirror sites does, as pacific pings show. As Sergej fries the last two of the twelve-pack of eggs, virtual 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. She was running across the roofs with a flamethrower burning penthouses and top floors. Her status message reads: “I am the DIN 18531 angel avenging the damp and the musty of downstairs”. They can’t really - although what does really mean in this context - burn the player’s character, they can only make an effigy for burning, just as they have been creating objects increasingly challenging to imagine.

“Hallo.”

The voice of a German-speaking child catches Michael off guard. Since his emigration, his mother tongue is largely reserved for Sergej, and has been evolving in the insular circumstances of father-son communication, like a quaint endemic species.

“Is Sergej home?”

It’s the art collective’s offspring.

“How nice of you to come by.”

Michael is falling back on corny parent-talk from the fifties. Like those Austrian kidnap victims that escape from captivity as people from the past, with manners that seem to predate their imprisonment by decades, as if for the lack of live examples they deduced them from the post-war architecture, from the decommissioned furniture in their basement cells.

“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.”

If the kid could only see Michael’s hoodie, his base cap.

“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 but swept under the fridge, Sergej is already on his way to the stake.

“Where’s your friend?”

“He couldn’t go 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. Your friend probably got stuck because they put an age fence around it.”

“Come on! It’s not like I haven’t seen it 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,” he grumbles, but he needs to switch the controller for cutlery to broach the runny yolk.

“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 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 Michael not happy? Why is he increasingly tense and annoyed these days? Michael bounces up and ejects himself halfway out the window.

“Shut the fuck up! Shut up or I’ll call the cops!”

Who cares if Sergej told his friend about their money problems, 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.”

*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 he lived in passing, with himself as the only cynical spectator of his own boredom around the socialist exotic. Adam left the 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 consider rejecting the company of Adam. The fourteen months they had together in Munich and surroundings, green alps, blue lakes, sufficed to have Adam appointed as 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. However, 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. Despite Adam’s supposed wealth 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 that weekend. Late flattery wouldn’t have paid off anyway, as it turned out, since 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 without even a stray pair of shoes to take up some of 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 you showed them.*

*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, and her eyes were reddened as if she had been recently crying, although we later found out that her red eyes, too, were permanent, whether through constant hidden renewal or some kind of medical condition. Her training demanded that she would usher us into the vestibule, her disdain that she’d command us to wait there, as it was absolutely vital to check Adam’s condition for another five minutes or ten before we could 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 rang, even if it announced the arrival of your parents.*

*Opa, 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, she reconsidered and turned to step into the hall. “Mr [Nachname] would most certainly appreciate it 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. Most of all Oma and her were fighting 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 as the day progressed - although he hadn’t seen me in the flesh before. 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 his ex-stewardess wife being among the first to pack up the few things of the household whose value wasn’t plummeting to unknown lows. The winter cold invaded their 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. But now, 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 on the Amalfi coast hiking and eating at German-speaking restaurants, where his brother greeted waiters in Italian. His brother fell back into old patterns of ridiculing Adam’s country, only now, under the Capri Sun, it hardly even mattered anymore. “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 departed to reach Magdeburg in time to exercise his privileged civic duty: The northern wing of the Munich apartment was waiting 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 would eventually never be fought, because, for a classless society, the contact points between voter groups turned out to be surprisingly few. 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 once more in FDJ and labor movement songs, and sometimes the pan-German national anthem. You did not recognize him in linen pants, tanned, with his mafiosi wing tips and an imported drink in his hand, waiting in a folding chair in front of your house. Quaint people were roaming 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. 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. 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 that you’d taken of the two of you that day. A photo that had turned out underexposed, so you had discarded it. You must have talked about moving, because that’s what he kept saying, that he had been the one who had told you to go see the world.*

On a corner amidst the Brooklyn grid of slave-owner streets and black power boulevards a rubber Titanic sinks into the concrete of the parking lot as the 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 too 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, for the head of the one Sergej has brought from Berlin is flattened and bent 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 to-do-list. Ten seemed too much for a prepubescent child to him (as to the kid’s mom) but Sergej has become a skillful negotiator watching a Cash or Trash, 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, he had reassembled his furniture, removing the critical game discs from their jewel cases. All in all, he left Sergej in an alright state: Freshly bathed, primed to be a healthily fed, a dentally groomed big boy.

Brooklyn’s Broadway is his favorite street, enclosing him in the cozily deterministic constructions of fin-de siècle engineering. The subway viaduct could come crashing down on him but at least there would have been signs to read. Cracks in the plaster, bending girders and squealing joints. What a leisurely time to be alive it must have been, where every change came as cast-iron manifestations, plain and clear to see, and world wars announced themselves decades before. Michael would love to take a job working metal, but his scoliosis forbids. His kind of work is ethereal.

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 relatively busy, 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 give Michael an orange wink. The passing women and men are mute and dull, their radiance turned to the inside for the time being, until they will have found a way to separate interaction from contagion. A woman peeks out from a fire exit.

“You Michael?”

He is led inside to the back room of a motorcycle shop and left to wait there while his host slash employer fixes 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 gray 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, a few cars, and some humanoid figurines. There’s something suspicious about the world of model trains and dioramas, something hidden always looms within the miniature scenes, the barely contained power fantasies of the builder, or at best a dirty joke that the children mustn’t discover. The dioramas in the room are thickly coated with grayscale paint, inverted grayscale, like the thermal vision of fighter drones. Michael’s employer comes back with two mugs of delicious coffee, though 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 your ride at the construction site entrance and show Susan’s (that’s your employer) 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 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 base, the end of the beverage comes before Susan can even finish her briefing.

“Do 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 units, right? Or do I have to do the math for you?”

“Approximately.”

“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 valuable 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. Maybe it’s just the peephole’s privacy cover. The app of Freddy F pops up and reminds him of his next destination, showing him 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 without 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 cart. Traffic has been dense throughout the last few 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 under the subway viaduct. A violent rain of household items teems down into the skip below, stray shreds of bright flysheet blowing across the lanes make it seem like Michael is riding in 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, and the Honda comes to a rattling halt. Michael pushes the curious machine to the curb and kicks, its engine coughs, then Michael, too, violently, so that he has to support himself against a bilingual newspaper dispenser. One, two deep breaths, he looks up and sees the felling head extending towards him slowly, but threateningly. He recedes backwards, sidewards towards the subway entrance, fast suddenly, jerking around, fleeing down the drafty stairs. He waits for the train passing above to be out of earshot and listens. 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 coming up the subway stairs, six feet tall and lanky, with his pinkish hard hat and the unmatching vest makes them crack up even more. He gives the reflecting windshield the finger and trots back to the curb, at least his ride has found some rest 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, he still feels soft around the legs. Wistful sweet caress of sea breeze 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 rustproofing. Thank Jeff Preston for it’s only a subcontractor’s dinged-up van, she’ll barely notice the fresh mark. A package length further down Norfolk, the next dotcom truck is blocking his passage, and as he peers past the haggard body of the car, the young driver working 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, its driver is watching American Trucker on his phone on the dash. The next vehicle, again, is too wide to pass, sweet smoke emanates from the gaps in its shell. Michael however is impatient and his Freddy F app even more so, it’s display is running up milliseconds. Slowly the digits fade to redder hues. With a slow glissando of the engine, the Honda announces another pause. Cursing, kicking, at least the line behind him is patient and calm this time. Michael pushes bike and trailer onto 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.”

“Those aren’t technically for individual resale, you know?”

“You can have two for 35 cents.”

The gum is thick and chewier than its name suggests, he shouldn’t have taken the bargain offer. Smackingly they watch the parade of delivery vans poke along. Lotta new hires. Here comes the ice cream van on a side gig, 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 walking speed so that the piled boxes don’t tumble from the open top. Another one. Any more vans and he and his companion will start cheering them on. One is vermillion, one is yel-LOW, one has taken another in tow.

“Wanna buy something else?”

“Isn’t the shop closed?”

“I’d lock up for you. Special service.”

“No thanks, I’m good.”

“Oh, come on, a hard-working young man like you should treat himself.”

A backfiring GMC fumigates the neighborhood. 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, blindfolded with novelty goggles. 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. She 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 usually 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 not to think about money. If I don’t have to pay cash or currency, even better. But honestly…”

“Be creative! That’s what you Europeans want to be when you come here, isn’t it? That’s what you claim to be.”

If there were enough light, Michael would look her in the eye defiantly, but for now, sound is the only reliable means, so he starts singing:

“Über uns’re Welt soll’n 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)

Michael takes the pause after he has finished as a sign of satisfaction, he feels that she is smiling contentedly in the dark. His voice, though not unerring on the notes, is still voluminous despite the lack of practice. Plus, worker’s songs have this air that makes even the stupidest of 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.

*You weren’t the only one drawn to the formerly blank spaces on your maps. Oma and Opa left for one of the soon-to-become notorious weekend trips to Paris. Dinner, breakfast, lunch, and slumber aboard with the ever-moving views of roadside spruce groves and, keep your tired eyes open, a mythical city in the head-aching Saturday afternoon sun behind the window. The butter-sour smell, the ubiquitous crumbs and ham shreds, and few hours of sleep pervaded by constant engine noise all contributed to the disillusioning impression. Adventure with a stale taste, adding to the mouthfeel of forgotten toothbrushes. In contrast to your compatriots, you were traveling only on missions, and you showed little interest in mobility for mobility’s sake. 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, anyway. 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 rallies 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 had been won - because in a free market society, everyone was a winner - 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 than their pupils’. However, you kept your town-hopping schedule on weekends, turning your attention to another traveling figure roaming the East German slab roads: salespeople.*

*The principle of reputation through association had translated well from party hierarchies to the free market economy. The fact that a good had passed through NATO-protected hands was enough to heed the call of the bullhorn sounding over from the back of the hastily packed trucks that traipsed around the untapped consumer communities. 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 while they waited for their audience to make a move. The proto-post-materialists delighted in the colorful packaging and the foreperson’s increasingly desperate presentation of her merchandise, but they did not buy. 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 firsthand, flicking cents 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, with the only difference being the 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 mouse-print-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 about a lack of sugary fruit in our basket, since I had already given up on the possibility of actual sweets by that time - you, and the cheese clerk, who was positively your stereotype of an antagonist. He, too, did not seem averse to confrontation, as he challengingly examined your bristly haircut. His hairy hand, softly sculpted through the working of 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. You reached over the counter, grabbed a handful of wieners from their sad pool, and tossed them against his tarpaulin apron. “Right, let’s make sure he becomes a dick like you.” With the exception of checkout clerks, who were honorable exploiteds, you mistrusted all sellers, vendors, clerks and consultants, and your advance suspicion spawned numerous confrontations that I wish I would have 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 should never materialize, and only later I understood that our rumbling stomachs weren’t owed to forgetful parents but to plain lack of food, an existential problem that I only encountered later and in theory, in the books you bought me that told 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, a Bosnian movie, had also been the winner of that year’s Golden Bear, so it might as well have been you.*

The motorcycle’s engine is still warm when he exits the bodega. Michael leaves his hard-earned chocolate bar on the exhaust for a minute to soften the caramel. He has a pen ready to help squeeze every last bit from the wrapper. Tentatively he tries the starter. Where were you for 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 with his callus 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 his dorm room’s window with a view of First Park, yet Rudy was excited when he saw Michael in his shoes run by. High on an unexpected manic phase sticking out from those dismal early days of emigration, 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 his diet plans and training schedules 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. 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 Avenue, existed, although it was unclear what exactly he understood by that, since he had become so dogmatic about these confines of existent space that they were beyond explicable. Rudy didn’t seem to think about the world beyond the green space at all. He didn’t imagine stepping onto 1st Street’s crosswalk as a fall into an otherworldly gorge or the seas of Tiamat, he didn’t picture the fantastic beasts lurking in the adjacent buildings. His denial of it was the only acknowledgement of the concept that anything outside of First Park existed. With the increasing media coverage of his person, asking Rudy about his world view had become somewhat of a bizarre tourist attraction, but he never responded with an explanation that went beyond his categorical denial. Rumor had it that Rudy’s 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. Supposedly, 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 in the switching off of life-supporting measures after several days. Michael had 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 …: Rudy has been living in downtown Manhattan’s First Park since late fall 2018. The middle-aged former Olympic athlete watches the hustle and bustle 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 the park’s history, cleans shoulder to shoulder with the Parks 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. At this moment, he is not 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 has been little susceptible to parental readings of mundane perils. What would he do if Sergej…? God forbid, let’s not go there. If it happens, nobody is prepared. Some go to live in a park, some try desperately to revive memories or images, some fathers pull their own teeth to experience the pain and selfless determination of giving birth to the departed.

There is a place and a time for him, Freddy F reminds 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 trailer. A second pedestrian passes the crossing in front of Michael. She does not appreciate the staring gaze of Michael, who forgot that his helmet doesn’t have a vizor to hide behind. She scowls at him and is almost run over by an irate cyclist riding a broken frame held together with an orange ratchet strap, who just barely dodges her and bobs along cursing, the belt absorbs the uneven street like a crappy suspension. The sun has already disappeared behind the lower high-rises, 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!” Oh, 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. His son needs him. But Freddy F, too, needs Michael to continue 600 meters on East 19th street. And beyond his acute need, Sergej also 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 time limit. Cereal’s on sale at C-Town, Pasta at Key’s, Nuts are cheap at Bravo’s. If he double-stocks for two-three weeks, the combined savings of two-eighty plus three-forty-five plus let’s say about three is likely to be more than the tip Susan would offer. Even more if he stockpiles, more nuts, more cereal, more pasta, more savings. Tonight, he has the trailer, after all, though it would mean leaving his building-site bounty unguarded while he’d be shopping. 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 provided he can calm Sergej’s nerves.

“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'll 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 unfamiliar 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, he never visited any of the centers represented in his collection. And why should he? He strongly dislikes shopping sprees in the physical spaces, where Fee parks him in corners alive with the fluff of 800 plus square meters store area, and benches dangerously open to all four sides. Only the maps have a use value to him, 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 bed’s head end. Another plan details outdated nightlife locations between the river and Highland Park and on the sideboard, there is a Whole Food’s emergency escape route plan that his ignorant father purloined for his collection. Three items to make this room his own. 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 heavily on the line that ends in the device next to him on the mattress. It’s unclear if Sergej grasped 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, and nothing else remained but his lone game character running in mid-air. For an instant he saw the adjectiveless emptiness underneath bank holiday’s thin layer of meaning, and it kicked off the existential avalanche that boils down to a single question: why all this? What’s the use of building something - fortunes, relationships, Lego - if it only increases one’s susceptibility for grave losses? Why bother tuning in to the uninspired lectures his teachers call an education? Why take the trouble of dental care? 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 to that question? Mom would be good for a pragmatic answer, but time zones forbid. His maps could 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 with his gloomy thoughts, which will emit them again later when he’s asleep, and the smell of them and his pores sucking their remains will give him nightmares. However, closing the door completely, shutting himself away in his room, perhaps closing the blinds and drawing a blanket over his head, making sure every limb touches fabric and clamping down the blanket’s ends, with only a tiny airhole as a single point of attack, is 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 and closing the door, while restraining his gaze that is drawn to the light source like a dying person’s, the sum of all that makes closing the door seem impossible. And he must avoid what he saw last on screen by all means. Option B is waiting until he hears a shot slash his character’s death rattle followed by familiar muzak, a ten-track loop of jack new swing playing in the recruiting office, which acts as an entry point for the game’s skirmish matches, cues that will 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, console-colors, 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 gray plane, and on everything that subsequently sprouts from zerozerozero, doesn’t give light. Occasionally, back home in Berlin, Sergej used to unplug the screen, shut the blinds, and turn off the lights 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 would unplug the ethernet cable, so that the system’s power supply would be the only link that connects the system to the outside world. When he’s 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. He’ll watch it, a snake eating its tail.

Finally, 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. Air conditioners line its facade. The many clean desks are placed with good intent, to simulate IRL facilities of its kind, but they 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 single recruiter. 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, which 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 files, 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 real office workers 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 are supposed to happen under parental surveillance.

“It’s fine. For this once, anyway. I’m here if…”

A rogue shopping cart 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, see the Félix González-Torres pile of usable weapons in the middle of the field. This time, however, they don’t. 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 tessellated 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 as the trailer almost tips over. 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 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, and it hits Sergej, now that the thrill of the semi-forbidden is gone. Goes to show 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 Sergej 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.

*April 1st was another Sunday inevitably to be spent with your parents. Opa presented his consistently small repertoire of jokes in recognition of the date and then remained a silent steward to you and Oma for most of the afternoon. The lawn chairs and wax tablecloth marked the unusually warm spring, and the equally extraordinary meat platter cried fat and engulfed you in the smell of youth hostel breakfast rooms. Surely your parents were no gourmets, but I prefer to explain the coffee-ham-combination with parental care for a nutritious pregnancy diet. That said, you were no gourmet, either and didn’t flinch when a plate of warmed-up cream puffs joined the buffet of cuts. Oma displayed an interest in your weekend work that was unexpected and therefore made you vigilant. She in turn was wary of the much-debated monetary union and worried for her pension. At the union branch, a frustrated clerk in an office half empty, half stocked with file stacks of uncertain future, had advised her to use her remaining money to obtain a golden retriever, because blind benefits may be the only annuity she would have a chance of receiving. Still she seemed relaxed, she loved the sun, and the west wind had yet only blown the covers of the most prominent of GDR citizens. Her own Stasi collaboration was dirty laundry as forgotten as last years’ fashion once the trademarked western wear came over.*

*That morning you had woken up with your belly button popped out. It might have been one of my frequent kicks that had propelled it outwards. You often lay awake early in those days, sometimes desperate for sleep, sometimes marveling at your body and mine. 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, and your disappointment that your parents evidently considered your photography mere child’s play made it explode. The cold cuts bent their edges towards the sun, the cream puffs had been finished. With great satisfaction you realized that you weren’t even depending on the coffee party’s countervalue anymore and you stormed out, although without being able to find a sufficiently poignant comeback, and perhaps you indeed did not consider the negative implications your pregnancy may have on your Abitur. Oma and Opa pushed themselves up from their chairs and found each other’s eyes. It was their misinterpretation of the other’s gaze that made them tacitly agree that it would be futile to run after their child, making your failed Sunday peace meal the last time you’d meet in a long time.*

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, everybody needs more warmth these days. The skyglow over the city has turned the color of rust. The blue hour tends towards grape.

The building site’s fence seems to have no end, nor left, nor right, only the adjacent buildings mark the confines of the construction site. Static flood lights illuminate the grounds dark red like an opium den, dotted by white bright circles of automatic follow spots 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, maybe a machine.

“I’m in.”

Sergej and him are both playing war.

“Got him?”

Sergej confirms. A flick switches and Michael is blinded, he thinks of CS flashbangs and how he always wondered whether such a magic weapon really existed, but it’s only his follow spot. The light is 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 other workers’. 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. In the light’s intensity, all contours do. Michael misses a step, 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, but he doesn’t feel pain through the cotton ball numbness of shock, instead he perceives the precise edge of the follow spot cutting his hand at the thumb into hot and cold. None of the injuries seem to be permanent, though, and 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 red, too, flattens the third dimension of his surroundings and he almost fails to notice another pitfall, the breathtaking drop of the immense excavation that stretches far into the lower nineties. He stops like a cartoon character with his toes testing the void and stumbles back.

“Paul said he broke his fear of falling. But I think he’s a big mouth.”

“What?”

Michael needs to sit down.

“He got VR goggles for his birthday and spent the first weekend falling. Now he says he doesn’t know fear of falling anymore.”

“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, not just electric charges, 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, build and expand. No enemies since that first one that 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 for a dead pixel.

The base of the excavation vibrates lightly with a subway passing under Michael’s feet. Its sheer concrete appeases his guts still unsettled by vertigo. As he hurriedly walks towards his destination, he keeps a hand stretched out, sweeping along the pit’s wall to reassure himself of at least one of the dimensions he navigates. The lack of familiar reference points clouded his assessment of the 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 #ffffff-white, whiter even than its eyeballs, that have a yellowish tint as if its amber irises have 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 were grinding, forsaking personal liberties is a hard thing to do for Michael. For the first days after his birth, Sergej’s skin was dark from neonatal polycythemia, but Michael still made a list of Fee’s male acquaintances 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 himself doesn’t feel strongly about his own complexion. He would like to have a beak with a scarlet stripe like a herring gull. That would solve his nose issues, too. Sadly, Bank Holiday doesn’t afford that option.

“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?”

“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 before his eyes 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 gallows’ stance at its top, not even halfway to the upper story.

“Everything okay, dad?”

Four rounds of the same drill, and already at the fourth he’s convinced he has developed spontaneous asthma. A chilly gust almost robs him of his balance, stopping on the stairs he’s risking 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 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 prone 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, as if it has 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 does a marvelous job of creaking and screeching, of 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 that is impossible 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 provisionally 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. Before, he used to be condescending in the collective’s presence, and now 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 work. Paul only construed it 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. Sergej 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 bent-down shadow with huge smiling lips. Michael’s heavy breath pokes out from the noise gate. The overhang of the adjacent structures increasingly eclipses the rear junkyard, although the collective goes out of its way to expedite their own vertical constructions in the backyard, similarly 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 is fleeing in Sergej’s direction from the rain of vertebrates.

The tarp is heavy like everything in this container, like the container itself, as if the fossil materials were striving for a return to their sub-soil origins. 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, Michael faces an overhang of boxes swaying like 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 faster even than Michael can rush 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. 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 the cause of his distress with tears and cookies. Squeak goes the turnstile 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.

“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 caused the terror that made Sergej once again dart into his room and dive under protective covers. From the small mound of Sergej under cushions and comforters, only a limb protruded, groping blindly around the bed for the television’s remote control that he had put there after his first panicky 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, he was not certain - his head. 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 reality show’s 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 was 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 gray 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 scooter further, this time the engine doesn’t fail. Susan greets him at the door, it’s not impatience that has her waiting there but Freddy F’s continual updates on Michael’s final sprint. His ETA is not an issue, his failure to retrieve the badge more so. She gives him a meager 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 Freddy’s service hotline tomorrow and rushes back home, running, he almost hails a cab, not that he reconsiders 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. 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, 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 his block of morning persons. Only the occasional insomniac’s bluish screen glow filters through the blinds. The staircase resounds with the creaky steps and infiltrates the nightmare of a dog behind a second-floor door. Michael cannot recall what he has learned about sudden infant death syndrome, even though the auto-play algorithm dragged him through a workday’s worth of subject-related mystery show reruns. He enters the apartment on tiptoes, in case Sergej should be unexpectedly asleep, but Freddy F blares into the silence with his notification bell, making Michael knock over the bag of waste glass as he jumps. At least Sergej knows now that it’s not a burglar but his father coming home. 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 complicated stalemate. Dead phone and tv remote sit on the far side of the mattress, next to a fileting knife Michael quickly removes. He washes off the dust and falls asleep with the forgotten tea steeping black-brown.

*Our family’s history repeats itself, as it seems. Or maybe that is just the excuse that I am coming up with, that I use to legitimize my own estrangement.*

*Your parents were both in their twenties in the late sixties and early seventies. People think of the student movement, of Biermann, or Prague when they imagine that time in the East. But they forget that the generation of your parents were also the first generation to carry forward the principles and ideals of the republic merely out of dogmatic inertia instead of a conviction born out of a reaction to the Third Reich. Your parents grew up in the petit bourgeoisie, they were not confronted with literature beyond the school syllabus, they didn’t as much know that something like samizdat existed. Ironically, at that exact time that those children from good homes began to rebel against suppression and elitism, social mobility was at its peak. Because the parents that had helped build the GDR, didn’t trust their own children to take over responsibility, they considered the ones that would usually go unnoticed. They imagined an idealized youth, a textbook youth, and they found it in the meek, the ones’ that weren’t infused with ideas beyond the canon. Young people like your parents, who, if they did have doubts about their country’s future, needed the reward for suppressing it too much to become disobedient. They chose structure and humble prosperity and would not come to regret their choice in many years. It was obvious that they wouldn’t understand you when you chose precariousness and financial struggle in return for vague feelings of independence and righteousness. Falling out with them was easy, but also uncalled for, because your differences were so gapingly apparent that you could have conveniently retained your distanced relationship, that simply ignored all controversy for the sake of peaceful holiday meals, which would have prevented all that guilt and trauma that kept looming over your relationship throughout my childhood. When you broke with them, they barely had any control over you. Their endeavors to constrain you were like the final resolutions of a doomed government that keeps drafting bills and legislation until the blanks run out. Still, you couldn’t let it go and you let your disagreements spiral out of control. Spiraling, making rounds and circles, one insult led to another, one stimulus set another loose, like in the court-sized domino setups Robert and I watched toppling on one of the many German TV shows dedicated to orchestrated destruction, only to conclude in a grand finale, the televised river dam blasting if you want, where you would assume the exact role that your parents had occupied a good two decades earlier, desperately clinging to your vaning authority over your child’s decisions. Unfortunately for me, although the positions were the same, the circumstances were very different when it came to assert my own independence. Not only were you and your parents sundered by an additional ten years of age difference, but they had become archived as part of the body of a society that was only awaiting editing and proofreading to become another chapter in the history books of the new age you belonged to. What did I have, on the contrary, to set us apart? Nothing but a penis and consumer electronics. I needed to defend my place, my role as a second parent, when you started to contest it. I needed to sever ties vigorously and without looking back, because you didn’t content yourself with the occasional know-all comment but reduced me to a gendered scapegoat of the family, ridiculed even by his own son. Without having reiterated the dissociative act you had pompously performed yourself as a young adult coming of age, I wouldn’t have been able to rebuild the tainted relationship to Sergej, as much as I hate being associated with the role of the absent father. After all, I had learned that these kinds of severances aren’t forever.*

*Our cross-generational weekend at Adam’s was not the first time you met after 1990. You had been hurt and angry - and as were they, I might add, even though their chagrin had built up more slowly, gradually - but you could not find it in yourself to completely deprive them of me. The get-togethers that you graciously allowed for were preferably held in an environment that provided both entertaining distractions - which was also my primary function during these meetings - as well as the constraining instant of public embarrassment over loud arguments. In 1992, your parents invited us to Hamburg for Whit weekend. Hotels were generally outside of your price range, but your parents must have gotten a special deal and were generously offering to pay for a second room in the busy congress hotel. I recently watched a documentary about the Doha Agreement, and it made me remember our micro-holiday with your parents, the few first-hand recollections my young age allowed for, and the yellowed snapshots of you and I under the early summer’s heat. Watching the adversaries in the plushy lounge among potted palms, exchanging over scrambled eggs, I reckon it must have been like that between you and them. All-inclusive catering and an elephant in the lobby. Forty-eight hours can be a long time, but I succeeded in keeping you busy. You may or may not have spiked my fruit mash with red bull. With a child, it’s easy to fill a day’s time just managing, employing a whole chain of responsibles, who merely have to cooperate rather than communicate. I guess that’s how they do it, too, the negotiators in peace talks: Give them small issues to deal with, to forget about why you came to resent each other in the first place. Look for a changing table, fight the angry swan that wants to poke your baby’s eye out. It didn’t resolve any conflicts for you but it established a sort of respectful truce.*

*If it didn’t achieve anything else, this truce did draw the battle lines on that Friday afternoon when we arrived at Adam’s place. It did forge an alliance stable enough to assemble us around Adam’s kitchen table when his housekeeper had withdrawn to her wing of the floor. This time, however, nothing was distracting from the fact that there was a fissured family in the room. The large box windows amplified your presence with your desaturated reflections in the glass. Your father was playing with the elaborate mechanism of a corkscrew when he began with a winding excuse, obvious and uncertain like the leaps of Adam’s geriatric cat. “Dad, if you think I’m gonna let you pass with that wiedergutmachung-shtick, you have another guess coming. As far as I’m concerned you both have forfeited any right to grandfatherly knee riding, because you,” never wanted Michael in the first place, you almost slipped, “never were only in the slightest way supportive.” “Not supportive?” Oma’s moist hands left foggy outlines on the vinyl table cover. “We gave you all you need to become independent.” Me being there between you, feeling adult-like, my fascination torn between the heated discussion and the corkscrew that I had taken over. Part bottle opener, part Rube Goldberg machine, hiding the simple twisting and pulling in a cylindrical blackbox with a ring around it, whose downward motion drove a multitude of cogs and gears and whatever went on inside it. If Opa had expected a brisk exchange of excuse and forgiveness, a wipe of the proverbial sponge cancelling debt, neglect or genocide, he was mistaken. In months and years to come they would have to look for signs of condonation until you, stirred and tipsy at my graduation, would rather accidentally confirm the absence of any hard feelings left. Ever unmentioned, they had forgiven you, too.*

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

He’s dead asleep for four hours, after that Michael just skids along sleep’s surface, until he decides to get up in order to walk himself tired. Michael detours for a brief round of the roofs, a span of five houses is accessible to him, unsecured. Drops of four, five stories, back in Rostock it was seven, but the ceilings were lower and lawns, perhaps maintained as a precautionary measure, 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 time zones now that there’s hardly a buck to be made around here, or C, what is a sunbeam compared to moonlight, nobody will notice a missing night’s sleep these days, anyway. 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 from you.”

“No shit. Since when do you work at Freddy’s?”

“I’m pleased to say that it’s already been more than a week that I’ve been a part of the Freddy F family.”

“Geez. You on some conversation guide?”

“I’m glad that you’re asking that, seriously. I stumbled upon the head of conversational AI’s thesis, and apparently, I’ll score high as long as I keep it polite in tone and wording and answer every question I’m confronted with. Supposedly, analyzing substance doesn’t scale so well. So just ask me whatever and never mind the schmooze.”

“I don’t think ‘schmooze’ will fare well as a choice of word.”

“Fuck off.”

“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. 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.

“Do me a favor and keep asking me questions while I check. Good for the numbers, you know.”

“Know of any well-paying jobs beyond surveillance capitalism?”

“Chrissakes, Mike, easy questions, I’m not a multitasker.”

“Oh, come on, with your diction your numbers are ruined anyway on this one.”

“Whatever. So, anyway, you're putting me in a pickle. He’s giving me three stops you made along your route. Two of which display times and movement patterns that suggest a smoking brake, although I know you don’t smoke. Don’t tell me you took up smoking. Gotta admit that I, too, gave it a thought 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 little Freddy F doing the same.”

“Akash, please, 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.”

Michael does file a complaint in the end, 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, who has sat down on a no-loitering stoop. Dark blonde, sleek hair, he can loiter wherever he wishes. Freddy F makes him an offer he cannot refuse. One of three jobs holds another couple of days of rent and hopefully a better rating for Michael. Will it be A, driving for an ambulant dry-cleaning service, or B, food delivery? All things vehicle-based are out of the question after last time, plus Michael is not yet desperate enough to ride a bike downtown and bankroll Sergej’s remaining stay with the proceeds from his life insurance. So it’s gotta be C, that one 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 dollars 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 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.”

The beverage is 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 Paul, 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 for 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 lying 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. 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 these days, despite the endless lists of promising leisure activities he compiles when Sergej’s not with him. Now that his son is here, all flesh and ears, he merely manages Sergej, keeps him barely distracted in between job(s), chores, meals, sleep. Admittedly his management is effective, and it yields several hours he has to himself, playing, masturbating, watching people that he can manage even better with the play-pause button. Employers love it, thumbs up and employee of the month for being on call and available twenty-four seven, however it didn’t help in the end, did it? To be fair, it helps them make rent now, who else would leave an eleven-year-old in an apartment with knives (see above) and hard alcohol (see below) for hours on end. Now it does help to be somebody that can gauge risks and weigh them against each other. Being a raven dad leaving your pre-teen by itself is frowned upon, but certainly less than being one letting both of you end up on the streets. Better a kiss and a cardboard Cadillac for your twelfth birthday in a disused back-alley dumpster, or corner store hecho-en-china with a scribbled birthday note on the table of a brownstone kitchen? Sergej lets out a long belch and giggles.

“Run and jump, Serge, get a feel for him.”

The parent he must fight on screen is 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, more than triple the height of their offspring. Sergej escapes a shriek, might just be his excitement, and he tries to put a distance between him and the ancestors, which is a bad idea because two of his steps is an arm’s 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 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 Sergej 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, 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, they’re not spared the gory details.

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 recolored 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.”

What a wonk 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.”

Michael doubts that bloody murder at eleven a.m. would have made him more selfless during labor. Did he feel snubbed, being second to the needs and accomplishments 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’s 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, a community of refugees that will either end in peaceful, immoderate building and striving skywards until the air gets thin, or in another 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 his interior audience that he still talks to sometimes, even in other people’s presence. The lotion Michael thickly applied under his son’s arm 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, please not the genetically engineered, ‘murica-sized ones, some grated celeriac, canned tomato imports bubbling red in the saucepan makes Michael think of parental advisory, non-age-appropriateness.

“Serge,” he tries, “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 stuff on LiveLeak or something?”

“What’s LiveLeak?”

His fingers linger in the pleasantly caressing deathbed of foam flow.

“It’s not like I want to keep you from seeing those things at all costs, 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 it make you feel?”

Parenting-guide material, but Sergej is willing to go with it.

“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 I think it was?”

The sauce builds flavor simmering.

“Tell you what, let’s check if she’s still around, then you can try together once more.”

Sergej’s second attempt at mating fails, too, but his mood is only marred by the patience he needs to exercise until he will be able to try again. His mate’s time zone forbids, and anyway Michael cannot imagine any thirty-plus player capable of surviving the stress of three consecutive attempts. 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 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. At least he should pry him away from Bank Holiday for a couple of hours. 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 physical 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. Unfortunately, the retail boom didn’t last forever. 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 commuter toll route only served as an expedited way of escape for the remaining retailers, instead of reviving their business. When a rising e-commerce company bought the complex six years ago, only 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 clock-punching 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 to peer inside the walls. Lesser concerns have brought Michael on the verge of a panic attack. Sergej is in a good mood and clinks glasses of who knows what, upper-shelf whisky or tooth glasses. He says that the set of 3D tractors from the farming simulator has quote unquote sculptural potential. Better watch out that artsy kid doesn’t give him ideas, career-wise and the like. T minus twenty-five minutes and Michael aggressively pulls apart the map of Freddy F’s app with his thumbs. He wants to pull it apart and rip open the screen: See, there’s nothing here! Nothing! Do you see now?! The map bounces back in a joyful animation that takes the piss out of him.

“Serge!”

He really can’t take any whistle while you work right now. The silence on the other end leaves an aftertaste of guilty conscience.

“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 center of the network of numbered, interconnected rectangles stares with its unblinking iris of facility icons, water fountains, ATMs, 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 father’s that he’s been put on hold. On hold, the recording repeats, the thin monophonic melody chimes over 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, 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 about 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 mall’s enclave of Levittown order, secured by its own 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.”

Michael scowls, oblivious slash ignorant of the outstretched hand of the reference. The greeter, bibbed, nondescriptly crewcut, now extends a physical hand, too, and ushers him in. Warm womb of two hundred megawatts. An 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 his foreperson’s high frequency chatting. Not sure if it’s cynical Internet humor or back way negligence that they kept the old adverts from fertile mall-days on the wall. 256 colors of pneumatic bliss. 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?”

His companion’s laugh clogs the funnel of the exit behind them “Good question. What do you do online when nobody’s watching?”

“What happened to him, I meant.”

“No idea. Not my pay level.”

Reporting is to be done to his companion’s desk. Michael will receive reports at his desk. The German ideal, sitting behind a desk. The German fate, standing in front of a desk (that’s Tucholsky, he remembers).

“It’s very likely that nobody will have to report anything. Then you just have to find a way to be up on time for your next round.”

His foreperson’s laugh is caught in the echo traps along the hallway they are entering.

“Dream job. Get paid for nothing. No one to roust you. Pay’s shitty, 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...” Sudden cell phone interference makes Michael jolt out the remaining earbud, swatting sonic buzzflies behind his companion’s back “...,” he misses her name again, “...people have thought about that before. Point taken. How - ever. Success is downpaid in opportunities, not in ideas, my friend.”

She turns, seeking Michael’s eyes to indicate that she is entrusting him with valuable confidentials.

“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 Interstate-side eighty-freakin-one diner. See where I’m going with this? 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.”

The server cabinet grills grate her laugh.

“Down in Tennessee, another pit stop. Cash your commission and get yourself one of them di - vine roasts my cousin got going there. We’ll take 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.”

Her chuckle bounces 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. However, chances are low that anyone but his chatty companion will come by, anyway. She explains the dos and don’ts with pride, she knows there’s always an underlying ruleset that’s hidden at first. That’s why she is one to succeed in the inherently fair Darwinian race of neoliberal capitalism, as Michael learns. Michael might learn something else from his foreperson. She might be as half-witted and ordinary as he deems her, but she has understood that, when money was first forged as a surrogate of knowing, of trusting the other, it captured the reward of the relationships it substituted, abstracted their exchanges, and eliminated undesirable side effects. Money gives the buzz of longing even long after satisfying the first cravings. Money is candidly polygamous and refrains from judgement. Michael’s foreperson understands that the unrequited love of money is as acceptable as amassing more and more just for the sake of it. Michael on the other hand, closeted how he is, keeps insisting he’s not in it for the money, still thinking of monocled derby-hatters on wall street, fly-boarding valley boys on Nassau Avenue, when he thinks about money. His companion would tell him that money is the closest they have ever got to the pure sense of life, if the thought wouldn’t be so evident, that even as a commonplace it’s too obvious to pronounce. However, she can and does share with Michael her chain of causation for directing one’s love primarily towards money rather than other people. 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. Michael’s companion says, given a probability p for receiving love from a beloved person and a probability q for receiving the warm, gutty croon of love’s rapture through money, it’s a no-brainer to pursue an increase of q, because if q is increased by i, p is increased by i divided by x element of positive real numbers. Let her 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 - 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 his companion draws breath for another volley of TED-fed motivational verbiage, he hears the sound of rustling paper over the line and he eases his clenching grip of the only work tool his foreperson 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 his companion’s booth, and “time flies anyway, when you’re having fun, am I right.” Her laugh is just waiting to be stuffed back down her 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 like the sudden pull of gravity. He stammers.

“Michael, nice to meet you.”

Again he misses asking his companion’s name.

“I’m a web developer, though not right now. And that’s more of a fate than a profession, anyway. So, I’m with Freddy F now. Since last week, actually.”

“Geez, Michael, this ain’t Shark Tank. No reason to be nervous.”

Her 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 is cascading 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. Bored, since both Patrick and Paul are grounded, he’s steering the analog sticks with the wine gum 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 recently departed creator of the game. The local community hall exhibits a mural for designating land use, captioned with an appeal to help the map circulate in second-screen communities, apparently to no avail. Public paths still continue narrowing, like sclerosed arteries they clog with all that scrap and junk that the adjacent homeowners couldn’t just pass up. Another dead end. The noise of the incoming demolition crew carries over from behind the obstructing building, 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 deep voices of the axe-wielding half-men intimidate him. Plus, like any waste management, the crew fosters a culture of mob rites and tough-guy lingo that would repel his cherished artist-neighbors. And although Sergej’s got his code-switch down cold, Bank Holiday is a small world, after all.

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

The longer Michael rests his eyes on his companion’s tubular features, the more her demeanor appears ambiguous, as if she were evil’s storeman, who has perfectly integrated her devious task into the gullible workday, meaty smells from Tupperware pandora boxes, hot soup running like lava from the vending machine. Her glances over his shoulder into the depth of the narrow corridors and wire-frame-flanked passages give him the shivers. And then there’s a faint smell of urea or spilt beer or mildew around her that offsets the heavy smell of roasting dust coming from the servers. Even trailing five, six steps behind his companion, Michael still perceives it. He also now notes her infuriating habit of accentuating the one of the heavy safety boots’ 4/4 rhythm on the linoleum floor with a light slap to the thigh, making that person’s keys jangle. When his foreperson turns a corner, the rows of rack swallow every sound of the steady beat, as if that person de- and rematerializes with Michael’s eye contact.

“Why are you running?”

“Later, Serge. Okay?”

He’s short of breath, and while he tries to calm himself reiterating his DIY knowledge about processor cooling, he cannot shake the thought that all those whirring fans suck out the air from the corridors between them. His companion’s breath, too, rattles low, in time with the unfailing rhythm of the steps. Most concerningly, she has stopped speaking. In the maze of fractally subdivided rooms Michael is trapped. He clutches his own wad of keys. Wolverine key fist inside his pocket. That is how he pictures his fight. There’s something about her, an air of psychopath, or at least the foreboding of a false friend, someone that will ruthlessly report his every flaw to his employer. She has a face made to map all the imagined directives, corrections, assessments, and interdictions putting Michael in his place. Her face is like Antonin Vedyev’s, CEO and evil incarnate of Freddy F’s labor-mongering empire. Her face recalls those of the giant avatars in Bank Holiday’s bloody fights of reproduction. Turning back once again, her angular movements, her muteness, now look anxious, as if she weren’t sure if it’s still Michael following or an evil spirit about to assault her in an exponential motion. As if she were wondering, too, whether Michael is involved in the monthly evaluation reports of her own temp agency. Freddy F’s labor platform is only the visible tip over the massive keel of white-label HR solutions that keep its business afloat: Self-surveilling systems of work organized along tasks and results. Question mark leads to period leads to exclamation point. Bridled by stochastics and natural language processing, Michael will make a statement about his companion’s conduct and guidance, although at first, he will be confused when he hears her name.

Sergej’s ears are flushed hot under the fake-leather hug of the headphones that he wears so Michael does not hear him playing skirmish mode. Secondary screens have informed Sergej that a particular church is back in the battle zone, and he loves that church, whether in peace or conflict. The faction of ardent believers that started to curate bank holiday’s houses of prayer may have been the catholic church itself, as rumors have claimed. It might have been an agency of consultants marveling at the baroque meeting rooms of the clergy, that proposed this mission of faith into the godforsaken digital. Surely it is not a movement from within Bank Holiday, or they wouldn’t have picked that particular church as basilica maior, with parasol and doorbell and all. Players would have known about the moving frontlines along the urban peripheries. Players would have known how to free up a spot in the downtown undergrowth of the center, how to lure the teenage wrecking crew to a given intersection. Instead, the curators got to work on a low poly church on the fringe of blue territory. The artists were certainly gifted, and they shaped the subdivided surfaces into a neo-neoclassical model of astounding tastefulness, conservative in its design, but nonetheless all but anachronistic. However, the fickle balance of power in the church’s area declassed it to an elaborate prop in the constant fighting. At least for now it is calm, and Sergej can walk around the nave undisturbed, with only an attentive ear tuned to enemy footsteps outside. The holy door is a normal map of Ghibertian virtuosity, and it showcases the thought and effort that whoever conceived this missionary scheme put into the venture. Driven by despair, perhaps, the represented scenes seek to appeal to imageboard audiences by digging deep into Christian iconography to unearth its most memeable content. Notably, the artists avoided any obvious attempts at creating viral Christian contemporary content. Instead, they seem to have had not only time to go beyond the usual marketing rush jobs, but access to a vast archive of Christian art history, too, a fact supporting the hypothesis of roman catholic patronage. Such a Holy See sponsorship would equally help to explain the elaborateness of the work, only possible under an overworked project manager too busy juggling plummeting congregation figures and compliance scandals to bother any further than to toss a hand of gold at the starving 3D-artists. HR-management courtesy of Freddy F, naturally. Sergej is ninety-nine percent oblivious to all of this, yet he is fascinated by the imagery around the place. Wouldn’t even need the crusaders-phase he’s in after having binged a six-part series on the topic, PG-13 but Fee conceded seeing that the program was lauded quote unquote woke while still retaining historic accuracy. Tough luck for Fee that Sergej was smitten with the veritable idol of toxic masculinity, a broad-shouldered supporting actor named Chimion, likely cast only to tap audiences that were rather ignorant of wokeness. Sergej walks around the church reciting heroic lines of Chimion when he hears steps beyond the church walls. He ducks behind a column of the arcades separating the side aisle. The church is so large it takes a good minute to run along its long side and Sergej should have just crawled to cover instead of sprinting loudly, thus alarming the opponent outside. Everything is quiet. Still shapes and images are all that was curated in the church. Music, sermons even, could have been possible, but not as long the building stands on contested terrain. For now, this church can only proselytize silently, which is nice for a change. However, the artwork, too, does not scream confession at Sergej but retains a subtle touch. Jesus, Mary, Moses, and other halo-bearing personnel are conspicuously absent in the images. Just as bank holiday’s players construct their game’s narrative as they build and create, the church’s panels recount their biblical accounts through its props, its worlds and landscapes, as trompe l’oeil views into an ancient sandbox. Biblical characters appear almost exclusively in schematic representation of lineages, largely featureless and in hierarchical proportions. The church’s designers did well to latch onto the bankholidian idea of post-subjective narration, of creating a space for the recipient to dwell and act in instead of hoping that rushing players will follow the dragging accounts of less-than-memorable heroes and heroines. Sergej is bored with hero tales. Even Chimion, a character with map, goals, backstory all polished to perfection, only serves as a vehicle for memorable lines and custom character ideas. Why should Sergej care what Chimion’s goals are if he has his own? He doesn’t need another voice to tell him what to do. The church’s imagery, however, does not prescribe narratives, the church’s artworks feed a world in slices to Sergej. It attracts him with the promise of continuity, of always transforming tradition, like the constant rewritings and amendments of fan fiction. The church has, maybe with the help of change managers and angel investor workshops, formulated their unique selling proposition as the original platform, a platform for meaning, strictly organized with its codes of conduct, terms, conditions, but eventually nothing but a vessel, a container to fill with meaning, one that needs filling, desperately. Momentarily, Sergej has gotten lost in the vanishing point of the large, open square in the fresco his viewport points at, and he has missed the sound of an enemy’s steps on the reverberant floor coming closer. He should be dead already, but the opponent, who presumably understood Sergej’s inertia as either a peace offer or a sign of AFK slash connection issues, makes no move to shoot, stab, or KO Sergej. This could be an easy kill, barely-earned points for in-game merchandise, but he likes the look of the avatar. The baggy, paint-spotted corduroy pants flap around the androgynous body template, the complementary vest on top of a flocked hoodie is a dream of Sergej’s in polygons and position-based dynamics, with its countless hooks, flaps, and pockets. The greasy John Deere base cap looks like it hides a friendly receding hairline. Dzień dobry! Sergej thinks of Marek, the polish handyman that Fee underpays for every non-permanent worker task in their apartment back home. Careful not to scare the other with any brusque movement, he holsters his assault rifle as an unmistakable sign of non-aggression. The other leaves its submachine gun drawn, but doesn’t shoot. Now what? As if communicating with a timid animal, Sergej beckons the other under the rich ciborium, his favorite part of the building. Proudly, he shares his personal bug exploit, jumping up one of the columns on invisible ledges left by unclean modeling or as an easter egg. The other follows suit. Like the church’s, their communication, too, is limited to rudimentary nonverbal means. Their characters’ few states of facial play cannot be triggered by the player, and Sergej has a hard time reading excitement or boredom in the movement patterns of Marek. Facing each other, they stand still for an instance, then Marek turns and runs towards the church’s exit, stopping halfway to ensure Sergej has understood and is following. Not only Sergej seems to have a weak spot for the monumental house of prayer on the urban periphery. Despite fierce battles being fought in the immediate vicinity, the church is completely intact. There would be bullet holes if the bankholidian demolition physics provided for them, but they don’t. Bank Holiday’s destruction simulation just about suffices to maintain the illusion of cause and effect. Only bigger objects break apart under force or fire. Smaller ones merely come loose and disassemble, as they fall to the ground, into translucent rubble. Almost none of that debris is to be found around the church, only as Sergej and Marek run towards the nearby village the manna-like crumbs appear as traces of razed shacks and cottages. The sites of larger, more richly decorated lodgings are marked by household remains among the fragments, custom-made objects, which will, thanks to bank holidays’ server-side rendering, never disappear, never decompose until the liquidators will have pulled the final plug. With an unswerving belief in Gordon Moore and technology, bank holiday claims its server’s capacities will never be outdone by its player’s production of game objects. Sergej and Marek wade through recognizable and puzzling objects of human design. Marek throws a grenade, and Sergej takes a heavy hit as he notices the tingle of whatever part chimes in a hand grenade too late. The explosion leaves a circular clearing in the rubble like a bomb at a flea market. He’s less sure about Marek, who runs along towards the village while Sergej would like to return to the church or at least stop to look at the scattered objects. Just as he is about to cross a small river, he spots a homely sight, his heart jumps and he hears a well-known jingle playing in his head as he deviates to double-check that it is, and it is indeed, a tube-shaped model of his favorite breakfast cereal, available in DACH countries only. Full of excitement, Sergej jumps up and down to draw Marek over. Marek stops, turns, and looks back at Sergej. Then he raises his gun and shoots, killing Sergej with the third hit.

Michael has lost orientation completely and only follows numbly the bobbing middle seam of his foreperson’s work jacket, teetering left right left right like a metronome perfectly in time with the muffled step and the jangling slap of the hand, while the blinking grids of the cabinets float by out of focus like a repeating backdrop scroll. Sooner or later every employee, every wanderer of the identical corridors, that make up the hair roots along the dome’s radial axes, attains an altered level of perception. In the monotone choir of the servers wheezing, an employee will make out at first only the microtonal melodies of single packets arriving and departing, seemingly arbitrary until the employee will begin to assemble the fragments to continuous micropolyphonic streams. It might take a week or several years until the hypersensitive employee hears the flux like words, like meaningful compounds, like excuse my french W0L0L0\_xxx but if this is what they taught you at harvard you either studied under the fuckin janitor or I guess you took his floor cleaner for lean cause there is no! fuckin! way! that even the dumbest alpha epsilon pi fuckwad would think this is even close. Some employees may find entertainment in the billions of voices like nosy switchboard operators, others might go plain mad, like Michael’s predecessor did. Michael is yet oblivious to the passing streams of information, but already feels its tiring quality.

Now would be the time to talk about the things that went under in the past days. Nullities or minor arrangements. What’s with school? Kid’s gotta learn something. The prolonged holidays should have ended Monday, but online teaching won’t commence until Thursday due to technical difficulties. Michael has rarely given a thought to Sergej’s schooling in recent days. It’s school of hard knocks now. The silence endures. This could be the moment for meaningless but bonding chatter.

“Dad, what does Mr. Woestrong mean when he calls somebody a RINO?”

Because the neighbor goes off on unsolicited rants about politics.

“It means he is a fascist and don’t take any sweets from him.”

Because Michael has that annoying habit of responding to his son’s questions as if he were the secret star in a sitcom. He wouldn’t forego the chance of a witty comeback in favor of an age-appropriate explanation. Now would be the time to tell Sergej a, likewise age-appropriate, rendition of his ride on the bus to the ex-mall. The bus driver was crammed in her bullet proof (?) Perspex booth, too tiny already for slight adiposity, with all essential furnishings of a single household. The mattress bending over her from behind flapped dangerously close to the piled boxes already wobbling worryingly with every touch of the break. In the transparent storage boxes the items were stacked to leave loopholes for shoulder checks. The place on the dash usually occupied by destination signs, saints’ images or personalized novelty number plates now hosted an upright duplex hotplate with a 12V-lighter-socket adapter that dangled in the footwell. The question on the entering passengers’ faces was always the same, and she preemptively put on her so-what slash mind-your-own face as she ground to a stop, a tenant with a steering wheel, the audible creak of the rebounding box springs greeted the boarding passengers. If eviction should come upon him, Michael would at least be able to retain a clean separation between work and private life, provided that his car returns from the workshop. If not, some joints from the undead local cab trade still provide their drivers with sedans spacious enough for Sergej to be bedded on the back seat and Michael on the wound down driver seat. There used to be a certain nobility to this kind of poverty when he pictured it, but now the thought of Sergej awaking in a pool of his own saliva on the hydrophobic leather seat just turns his stomach. Better think of something less dismal. The clear plastic fans clamped to the useless air vents of his first car, that made him think of holiday, of the calming movement of north German wind farms. The countless clear plastic fans whirr in the grid cages around him, spinning like the hard drives that turn with the sound of mice feet on glass. Waiting and listening to the sound of the stop-and-go traffic of multiple HDDs conjures up memories of defragmenting his first computer. Mind-numbing as it was, it still beat the view from his seventh floor lookout over the colored rectangles rearranging themselves on the grid of the supermarket’s parking lot. Defragmentation seemed a lot more like magic when he hadn’t yet understood the importance of putting his room in order.

While the time remaining to his next scheduled round seemingly stagnates, Michael spins into soft drowsiness, into a Zen-like state that he has never achieved during the breathing exercises of his brief, impatient sampling of self-care apps. This place is like Petra, a desert that once was carved and dressed to house a civilization, but now only survives as a symbol of passing time. Plaster crumbles, the hard disks slowly lose their charge, sleep and fate carry Michael off and he can do nothing about it. Without tools, with only his strength and alertness, that are both rapidly vanishing, he can only marvel at the traces of the microsecond-old past, because the infrastructure is so diligently protected that he can’t even pull a plug to make an impact. Everything is read-only to Michael. If machine rebellion is really a thing, this will certainly be ground zero, and Michael, along with the other night guards will become a tool himself. For now, though, he merely falls asleep.

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

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

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

With his virtual car dealership thriving and another tenner in his pocket slash mobile wallet piggy bank that Michael spun off his bank account for him, Sergej approximates his father’s nightly income. Paul still fumes with jealousy every time Sergej comes around with another bulky vehicle for his parents’ collection but has agreed to share the task of decorating the barn with his friend. Patrick has dodged his curfew, too, and has been deemed adequate as an assistant. In extensive discussions, the art collective of Paul’s parents has decided that their car lot does not strictly have to look like a dump, even though two out of seven advocate an understanding of the collection as just that, a visualization of imperceptible garbage collection of digital systems. Now, Patrick points out where Sergej and Paul are supposed to shoot the twinkling festoons as seen on car lots around the country, where they suggest warm wind ruffling drivers’ hair and the siren call of manifest destiny. Under the crossfire of shooting garlands, a quote unquote local noise artist preludes the first in a long series of talks on the topic of binary detritus with a fugue of hard-drives failing. Their festoon cannons make a phumping sound of plopping bottles followed by the flapflapflap of flying garlands. With a customary foray into dictionaries, the speaker begins his lecture.

“The notion of space permeates the etymologies of western trash vocabularies, space so plain it echoes in the word spazzatura. And that space is clearly divided into within and beyond, and whatever we move beyond, becomes trash, it falls like the eponymous Old Norse fallen leaves and twigs, it falls like the Abfall off the disc that is earth.”

Phump, flapflapflap, a daring shot hisses just barely past the head of the speaker.

“Indeed, as far as it’s known, western cultures routinely followed a displacing approach in dealing with the objects, and, on a side note, subjects, too, that had forfeited their position in the community. The journey of trash ended in a more or less precisely designated place, outside of the city walls, beyond the visible landscape in underground landfills, or merely out the window on the head of an unsuspecting passer-by, as Juvenalis reports.”

Phump, flapflapflap, Paul has discovered Patrick as a diverting target, who moans for him to stop, although there’s not even a health bar in build mode.

“Whether it was the abundance of natural resources or proto-anthropocene ignorance that left the practice of disposing of unserviceable objects and subjects by pushing them beyond the imagined confines of the community unchallenged,” phump, flapflapflap, “Paul, cut that out or I’ll kick you.” From the server that is, as in block the account, so hold your CPS-calls, everybody. Parental control allows account blocking with the push of a third-party app button.

“Not for the first time, but with increasing urgency, we are noting that the luxury of disposing to the beyond without consequences, of that fire-and-forget mindset, is an illusion. When I’m saying not for the first time I’m thinking of our past dealings with closed or quasi-closed systems, that should have taught us about the impossibility of uselessness, of trash as we are used to talking about it. To go on a little of an old-days-rant, I come from a time of manual memory management. When I wrote my first programs, I had to manage the,” air quotes,” disposal of any information that wouldn’t be needed for future computation. This practice is largely textbook knowledge to the current generation, thanks to a concept that is fittingly called garbage collection, an automated process of nanometer-sized dump trucks driving around circuit boards to collect that unused data, singing a song from the infinitely airing television show The Simpsons. This, however, is only my own imagination shaped by a guesstimate 5000 years of waste management. In fact, both IRL and virtual garbage collection illustrate the inherent use every entity embodies, the potential and the ability to be transformed, to reappropriate through the transformation of voltages. In plain terms: Go, recycle!”

Phump, flapflapflap. Thanks to an increasing number of voluntary contributors, the collective’s motor pool has grown to numbers that even the spacious barn will soon fail to offer suitable sites for new models.

“The palimpsestic nature of random-access memory has had, however, little influence on our understanding of digital persistence and our dealing with data detritus. In 1983, thousands, millions as legend has it, of game cartridges containing the notorious Atari 2600 title E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial, a game so bad that it put the nail in the coffin of the game industry during the infamous video game crash of 1983, were buried in a New Mexico landfill, few kilometers away from the notorious Trinity test site. In light of society’s preconditioning, the dumping as a means of eradicating all signs of the game’s existence was so effective, that stories of the burial subsequently fell into the genre of ghost stories, of urban legends, fantasies of something de facto extraterrestrial, non-existent.”

The doorbell rings and Sergej responds like a big boy, even checks the door viewer before like a big boi. The man from downstairs asks if their landline is working. His lids are hanging like lace curtains in the window and a stye decorates his eye like a dreary cactus. Michael doesn’t have a landline phone, only voice-over-IP, Sergej knows that, the man is 404. He has to excuse himself, his dad is quote unquote on the stepladder, that’s what Michael told him to say. As Sergej seesaws over the sofa’s seat back to take his u-shaped playing position unhindered yet by the shortened ligaments resulting from explosive growth, his ear picks up the crisping whisper of repeated expletives coming from the phone keeping him company.

Once, when Michael was still talking to that friend of his, the one that now only lives as recurrently surfacing remorse in the back of Michael’s head, that friend, name of Robert, invited him to accompany him on a work shift. They engineered Michael’s CV inasmuch that he passed for an expert of the so-called internet of things, so that Michael would be allowed to enter the airfield of Schiphol airport. After a stint in the moribund event sector as a stagehand, Robert had believed that a move to Holland would satisfy his passion and consumption habits of obscure breeds of weed. Just barely he managed to make it through the trial period of reduced doses in order to secure financing for his costly hobby, and when Michael came to visit, Robert described his job as tending to the countless kaleidoscope eyes on the heavenly ramps of transgressive motion. The lights on the runway’s edge steamed like whirlpools. Riding shotgun around the apron was exhilarating. He was still too self-aware, but he almost woohooed out the open window. White on white, fly all night. Then they made their first stop. Red on white, you’re all right. Few meters before he reached the strip of lights Michael suddenly became inundated by panic of an abrupt intensity he had never known. Red on red, you’re dead. The cold mist that before had collected in refreshing streams on Michael’s face out the window, now was trapping him in a halo of light with a black hole outlook into the sky shooting tardy 737s at him. The haze was congesting his airways with its heavily soaked inertia, accelerating pulse, and breathing rates in a dangerous feedback loop. Perhaps it was the residual high that held back tumbling thoughts and let a deep sadness shine through. A sadness of solitude, of having severed the ties with the world as he knew it and immediately regretting his decision. Panic was befalling his limbs and tremors went through his body, but in Michael’s head a clarity remained, that let him remember that feeling of sadness, how he had felt similarly every time he had toggled clipping in a first-person role play game. How he had shot projectiles from behind the rock face and under the floor, and how soiled and ashamed it had felt to betray the world he was supposed to be part of. Any confinement removed but condemned to never again be part of something intimate, always transcending. And even if he had been safe from the enemy’s claws and clubs it had made him feel the vulnerability of his fantasy on digital life-support. Stripped of the epic’s illusion of providence, the game used to give him the uncanny feeling of awakening in his bed in the middle of a deserted fairground hall. Robert was slow to realize Michael’s condition but eventually got him to calm down, feeding him one chocolate bar after another because he mistook his friend’s panic attack for hypoglycemia.

Just as Michael turns a corner on his second round of his beat, his cut of the tiled paths and blinking lockers of embedded circuits, there is that feeling again. Once more it announces itself with the sudden fear of exponential movement, of something jumping at Michael from the invisible darkness behind the halo of signaling lights. As if an invisible peril lurks beyond the lights, that will only become apparent in the last instance to grant him a last revelation of pure horror before it kills him. Hot breath on his neck. A single concrete pillar gives him shelter. Michael curves his back against the bulge of the column to maximize his protected surface, but even through the work coat he can feel the warm draught running between the server rows. Hot breath from the adjacent cabinets singes Michael’s skin. If he stays still for too long, the acrylic jacket will melt to napalm on his body in an inextinguishable fire. Maybe he’s already feeling it, maybe it’s merely the usual sting of the fabric. He always stopped watching before he would have gotten to know whether a human melts, roasts to a crisp or fumes away in case of fire and anyway, it is not the threat of physical pain that is causing his fear, but the conviction that in a moment, another minute maybe, his conscious mind is simply gonna shut off. He has turned too many corners, he’s already too far beyond.

“Dad?”

A grappler seizing him spinning in empty space.

“Are you cursing?”

Apparently, Michael’s vocal tract has availed itself of the slackening command.

“Son?”

This is the existential register. Son as in death bed advice, as in bible quotes.

“Serge?”

This is Michael not quite resurfacing, but catching the side of darkness less dark, towards the surface.

“Is everything okay, dad?”

“I think I’m having a heart attack.”

Between the curses, that continue slipping his tongue.

“Do you have pain or discomfort in the chest?”

Sergej sits up in cheerful excitement. Perfect score on the five symptoms of heart attacks and strokes, respectively.

“No.”

“Then you don’t have a heart attack, dad. Say pleasant mother pheasant plucker.”

“Serge! I can’t breathe!”

“But I don’t think you’re having a stroke. Can you raise both your arms?”

“Sergej.”

“What?”

“I don’t know where I am.”

“Okay. Is it dark?”

“No Serge, it is not dark.”

“Did you lose your way?”

“I need to get back to my desk. I don’t know what’ll happen. I need to go back to my desk.”

“Can you drop me a pin?”

“Where’s my phone? Shit! There’s no air in here, Serge!”

“Dad, your phone is by your ear. Send me your location and I’ll see you out.”

Michael is panting, and without the cheerful pause menu music chiming low, without Sergej’s boost of big boi confidence from answering doors like a paying tenant, his father’s panic would have probably spread along the line spanning the two boroughs and two generations.

“What floor are you on?”

“Jesus, Serge. How am I supposed to know that?”

“Did you take any stairs or elevators since you entered?”

“No.” The mall’s map is tilted and crudely projected.

“Serge?”

“One second, dad.”

“Serge?”

“Are you at some kind of crossing or corner that can help me locate you?”

“Corner.” Suddenly his father’s breath heaves groaning high over the line.

“Sergej! I can’t breathe!” Almost pleading.

“Dad! Tell me about grandma!” Get the old engine running again, with a push, a push down the slope.

”Are you fucking kidding me?”

“I’ll lead you to where you entered the building. With your back to the corner go left. Tell me about grandma! Go!”

“I know you wanna know about Grandma. And hell, I’m not gonna stand between you and her. But let me tell you one thing. She will disappoint you! You want me to tell you something about her? She’ll let you down. She’s a good soul, but she’s no family.” Ahmed is Sergej’s panic buddy in class. If one of them flips, the other puts him at ease, gets him to talk through the struggle.

“Listen. To keep Wanda interested you need to change constantly, but at the same time she won’t forgive you for changing.” If Sergej deliberately went for the provocative theme, who knows, but it kickstarts an unmediated spate of allegations and vindications that ignites Michael’s anger but quenches his fear.

“Whatever you’ll do, she’ll make you feel like you took the most disastrous of decisions, like every step you take independently is a, a finger in her face.”

“Finger?”

“Even though that’s actually what she needs, ironically. She needs you to take care of yourself, because who else is gonna do it? Her? She needs you to learn to read with her scripts and notes flying around, but she’ll need to hear that you did so that one time she sat down with you and a children’s book. And you? She’ll never forgive you growing up years without her.”

“What?”

“Don’t get me wrong. Wanda loves you, everyone does. Just don’t expect too much from her. Sometimes I’m surprised that we both made it to our age. In general, the fact that we made it, isn’t it amazing? I don’t know about you but it still makes me marvel.” Michael is panting, his talk is barely coherent, but the panic is subsiding. “Serge! I’m sorry I cannot tell you much about our family. Your grandparents had a dog that died before you, and that one had a bigger family tree than we do. I can go back three generations, four if you’re lenient with names. Adam’s the oldest I’ve ever met, and his father’s name escapes me if I ever knew. Only that he’s from a small town, as in: really small, hamlet, three streets and one traffic light as of 1962, you get the idea. One street the way, one street the road, one street the avenue, crossing in front of the church. Many people who worked the land, few people who owned it. When they shot Liebknecht in 1919, the village’s worker council rechristened all three streets to honor the martyr. They left square’s name to the pastor, which proved to be a good decision, because when the royalists started to plague the village, our ancestor and his folks frequently sought refuge with the impartial minister. And he survived. He always survived. He survived a rock to the head and lying with an open wound in a ditch for five February hours. A gunshot wound avenging a kick in the groin of an interventionist. And when he switched sides, because, see, he wasn’t exactly a stickler for politics as long as the functions were generously catered, he survived a mudslide with a broken leg, a lightning stroke with a heart defect that kept him out of the trenches for the first half of the war, and a spontaneous assault of crows, that left him with one eye occasionally flicking downwards, though that might have been for the lightning, too. Are you still navigating?”

“You should keep right, dad.”

“Keep right, keep right. Alright. Adam’s father. Not much else that I can tell you about him. A notorious liar, that’s what he was, greasy and slick, slipping through grips. Cannot be ruled out that the heart defect was just another one of his mischievous shirkings. He stole into holy matrimony with Adam’s mom, making her believe that he owned the limousine he chauffeured. In love he was indeed, which was probably what saved the marriage, besides the draft note arriving with the wedding letters. Nineteen minus nine months means that Adam must have been conceived on R&R. Though I never saw any pictures of his father and cannot testify to Adam’s legitimacy. Good for her if she had a little fun on her part. Freaking tragedy that I know nothing about her. Serge, I want you to make sure that you tell your mother’s story and not how your pitiful dad got stuck that time in a premillennial mall turned data dumpster. I wish I was told about Adam’s mom instead of hearing the same old story of Adam’s father arriving like a king in his village. Belatedly returning from the front a good one and a half decades after the armistice of Compiègne, cruising the three rechristened streets. Everybody had assumed him dead, but he had survived. And because that day, his father packed his wife and son in the back of the Horch, Adam survived his youth while two of his friends died on the locally popular dare of jumping across the path of oncoming trains. Serge! There’s a fork.”

“‘right.”

“Serge?”

“Right!”

“Adam survived his first encounter with a traffic light, boarding school initiation rites, Serge, you sure about this, because it’s getting colder.”

“Yes. There should be a fire door coming up on your right.”

“Boarding school. They put him there because after all, I reckon, the lineage was not that unambiguously linear as it’s always suggested.”

“Did you pass the fire door?”

“You told me to take it!”

“Proceed.”

“So here’s Adam at that boarding school, with his suspiciously Abrahamic name, with his receding chin between the chiseled Fähnleinführer types drilled to detect any poisonous mushrooms, and still he survives. Not only that but his hiding with silkworms and plane models will be construed as a fervent passion for flying, so that even his at most moderate fitness cannot impede his career in the Luftwaffe.”

“Wait, dad, you should come up to a sort of lobby-ish opening with elevators.”

“I think I can see it. And then?”

“There’s two corridors heading straight.”

“Sergej! Come on, fast!”

“Dad! I can’t work like that. You have to take the right one. Not right, you understand. The right one of the two straight ones. It’ll turn right after you pass the bathrooms.”

“Fuck. Fuck. Why did I take this job?!” Admirable how Sergej handles his father’s gasped profanities. Honors for premature serenity. He stuffs the unsettling experiences of witnessing a person, that is supposed to be in control, out of control, he stuffs them down, down time and again to the bottom of his consciousness, so many times he has subdued them that they have become compacted into a solid layer that seals the sediment of other traumatic memories looming below.

“And then? He went to flying school and then?”

“He went up. You know the odds of living through the war as a pilot? Forty fucking percent. Six in ten died. But not him. Blows my mind. Don’t think I’ll tell you heroic war stories. No deal. No way. Still covered in fucking swastikas, head to toe, that nazi shit. Only when the allies had advanced far enough that he couldn’t even find the space for a decent take-off, he reconsidered. And he had been insignificant enough to get a pass for his inner emigration rap, plus wasn’t he trustworthy with his beautiful baby boy whose conception he had managed to squeeze in between bombing raids? And that baby boy, heads up, this one you got to know, too, is Heinrich. Barbara’s his mom, for the record. Never met her, little to say about her. As far as I can tell, Adam soon stopped caring about her until she, good riddance I’d say, remarried a physics professor, much to Adam’s dismay, whose publications are an absolute entertainment, I should show you. Nuclear cars, trains, everything. Died of radiation poisoning, poor schmuck. Only Adam kept outliving everyone, two wives, estranged, both of them, his brother, estranged, too, at least for most of his life.”

“Have you passed some kind of major intersection yet?”

“Serge, for real? This is a grid, you understand, so what the fuck do you mean by major intersection.” That fuck, however, was one too many, even for big boi Sergej, answering the door and all. It pushes him to the verge of tears, to the edge of a gorge deep enough to create its own gravity, with a tar pit at its bottom that holds Sergej’s daily preoccupations, his fear of flying, his pre-teenage angst and not least the collected concern that has been dripping viscously from his father’s words and conduct, and that he has been absorbing like a shopping channel sponge throughout the last days. Still, there must be some kind of unbreakable father-son bond in place, because Michael immediately feels the tentacles retracting, although the lower lip’s shaking and the heartbeat’s acceleration are neglected in the call’s encoding.

“Hey, hey, I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean that like it sounded.” Try harder. “You’re doing a great job. I wouldn’t have known what to do without you. It’s just. You know how it is, I’m stressed. But it doesn’t have anything to do with you. Actually, quite the contrary.” Tensely, Michael listens to the rustle that used to be calming in the old days, sea-like white noise of established connections. “On your left there should have been a door. A fire door. They can’t just remove it.” It’s a tiny voice that comes from the receiver, tiny but not trembling. “Should I keep talking?” The fear is gone, the anger has subsided. Michael feels as if he has been here before, and stupid for having freaked out over nothing but hot air. He shouldn’t have. He shouldn’t have given in to mystery’s gravity, to the pull of the occult attributions that surround these places, as if there would be supernatural powers at work instead of oil-stained mechanics at the hydroelectric plant, sweat-stained research assistants in windowless CSAIL cellars, taurin-nursed salespeople keeping the flywheel going, blow-cooled walkabouts like him checking the switches in order. What is this place if not a titanic collection of e-waste-to-be? The bottleneck of the continent’s communication that, after all, is not that tiny, not that fascinating once you’ve gotten lost in its sterile entrails. Where every collecting drop of condensation, every piece of organic matter will be detected and removed by automatic suckers, blowers, sweepers, cutters. That thought, though, stirs the sediments and fear wells up fast. “Heinrich, son of Adam and Barbara. Born to a nation that unconditionally surrendered only ten days after. You can imagine the joys of childbirth were curbed, substantially. Plus, Adam didn’t return until four months later from American internment. But what a fine boy he was. What a pudgy, rosy-cheeked baby in defiance of all that starvation around him, that cold. Soldiers were sticking chocolate bars in his felted wrap, men already smartly dressed again dirtied their hands slipping a charcoal briquette into his baby carriage. He was drawing all forces like a babbling psychic to ensure his own survival. But as devotedly as fortune mothered him in his stroller, as fiercely it abandoned him as soon as he had uttered his first words, which, sinning against all female figures that had secured his becoming, addressed his pa-pa, who, having been welcomed so warmly by his happy family on his return from US imprisonment, had made a career of delayed returns, smartly dressed in captain’s hat and epaulets.”

“When you reach the end of the corridor, take a right, then the next left.”

“Will do. Thanks. Anyway, who knows what his first words were supposed to signify. Maybe his pa-pa was really not a call for his elusive father. Maybe it was merely the first stutter of the condition that haunted his childhood. That, like an auditory target, drew taunts and teases from which he hid in the school’s crawl spaces so frequently that he acquired a bird-like seating position with his knees drawn to his chest, that he never fully abandoned even as a 180 plus tall adult. For his thirteenth birthday, his father took Heinrich gliding, and his tightly packaged posture proved downright predestined for the confined cockpit of the glider. And for Heinrich, flying was a revelation. Being hugged by sturdy man-made structures like in his school’s safe spaces with unseen forces hoisting you up and taking you places. That boy had a dream, he had a goal, and he studied, and counted days, read flight plans, maps, and regulations to receive his licence with honors already before his diploma. Stayed out till dawn at the dusk of an adolescence of self-imposed discipline and strict regimes only to wake up 24 hours later to shocked parents and a barf-bucket next to his bed. Now, there’s three things deemed unacceptable for pilots in the sixties: Politics, monogamy, and epilepsy. There was absolutely no chance that Heinrich would ever board a plane as anything more than a purser, and in his abstinent teenage years he had grown to hate having to deal with drunk people. So what to do with this broached life, as good as new, mint-conditioned, practically, all honors and Thälmann-badge, a little stale inside, perhaps?”

“Did you take the first left?”

“Sure did. Heinrich went on to study. Others might have tried to stick close to the unrequiting love, to get a kick out of the odd blink of the silver chassis in the sun of the runway. He could have gone into engineering, into nuclear airplane research to catalyze the attraction of one half of the family to a certain physics professor. But he did not. The bruises were still too fresh. Instead, Heinrich took his physics in the opposite direction. From birds-eye to cine-eye, he chose electrical engineering, and then microelectronics, a field that was not only far enough from aviation to let the old trauma rest but also staffed with people seemingly appreciating crawl spaces. At some well-organized function, he met Marga, they properly cohabited, married properly, and in seventy-one they had Wanda.”

Michael has been hasting through the familiar corridors and hasn’t even noticed the faded adverts he has inspected earlier. Now that he recognizes the deserted bus port, he realizes that with the slim chance he has of finding the way to his night watchman’s desk even with his son’s help, he will rather take the equally slim chance of his absence going unnoticed. Praised be the boy but for now he needs to be alone, so he hangs up faking a disconnect. He squeezes alongside the swishing faceless cars and although darkness has already fallen, misguided birds sing consolingly as he exits the underground turnpike.

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

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

“What’s up?”

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

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

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

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

“I was feeling sick.”

“And for real?”

“I got lost.”

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

“I panicked, okay?”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

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

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

“I don’t have a GP.”

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

“The appeal?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Alright, thanks.”

“How’s Sergej?”

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

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

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

“Trifles.”

“Good.”

“Anything else?”

“No.”

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

With cable pre-paid for the year, with their sans-serif family-sized stocks, in a city that has suspended all costly leisure activities in solidarity, in an apartment that may or may not come within the eviction ban, Sergej and Michael have accommodated themselves to the novel uncertainties, that in truth only seem new, like a shrink-wrapped trinkets unearthed in a move. A move might be due any day now that Michael has ceased to pay rent and he takes care to retain a presentable appearance between eight and eight in case his landlady should come by. For now, he’s banking on his dewy-eyed map rather than his potential rights as a tenant, that he hasn’t looked into, yet. Still he packed a couple of boxes and bags last night with winter clothes and household redundancies, and fell asleep checking for flights and transatlantic mover services. In his dreams, they took the car to the port, he and Sergej, to remigrate in a twenty-foot-unit stocked up to its ceiling with palettes of Poland Spring. When Sergej tore open a pack to quench his thirst, the bottles started to leak and fill up the container, and they had to swim their way across the ocean in a pool of ten-step-filtered spring water. His legs still feel sore, but maybe that’s just a delayed reaction to wandering around the ex-mall’s sprawling maze. The fizzing, joyful pain of work having been done, delightful chemistry, like the protein congealing in the thumb-thick omelet frying in front of him. Closed gyms, curfews and billions of oblivious hens have led to a glut of eggs, the hens are drowning whole continents in viscous yellow streams, mountains stand out from the heavy sea like the sparse cuts of bell pepper Michael afforded for their breakfast. When they went grocery shopping on his day off, Michael allowed Sergej to lay on the crate rack of the cart, headfirst and streamlined so that he would grab the special offers in the foot space. They had availed themselves of the reduced store traffic and Sergej’s delight even relieved Michael temporarily from his parental prudence. With ample stocks of eggs and unpopular greens, home brands and a six-pack of no-name coke that Sergej clutched to stabilize them when they almost skidded into the jam section, Michael is still free of debt, leaving aside the outstanding rent. A generous credit line forestalls the exposure of his lies in response to Sergej’s occasional inquiries about his father’s liquidity. Nevertheless, he needs money, and now, alone with the pan hissing at him, he keeps drawing greasy renditions of his unlock pattern to refresh the application of Freddy F.

“Hungry!”

The answer to his son’s moan comes out too harsh, too irritated for the encouraging morning. It’s not just the money that puts him on edge, there’s something else, but it isn’t Sergej. At some point of his absence from his son’s life a series of switches must have been flicked, that made Sergej into the mysteriously serene, independent quasi-young-man with an inexplicable patience and respect for his father. And since Michael refuses to believe in folk psychology, and that it indeed was his absence that made his son’s heart grow fonder, he’s deeply suspicious of any development unless it’s explained in a blurb from his sloppily studied shelf of parenting guides. He doesn’t want to jinx it slash injure Sergej by confronting his son directly with the fact that he was his father’s most hurtful bully. If already the memory of hitting his childhood stuffed animal face-down onto the railing of his bed, making poor Mickey’s resin eyes splinter still turns Michael’s stomach, how would Sergej feel if Michael brought back the countless instances of contempt and rejection so plain that Michael’s friends not only noticed but even sought distance from him because they couldn’t believe that such disdain did not have its grim justification. Perhaps his compassionate son is really the product of a reprocessing, a Vergangenheitsbewältigung already ongoing, or perhaps his son’s clemency is not even compassion but merely his contribution to a tacit bargain that promises independence, a break from constant mothering - even though that’s not exactly what Michael knew Fee for - and an apartment with salty snacks and unsecured wifi. Don’t jinx it. After all, being frank, there is little urge in him to get to the bottom of his son’s convenient transformation, anyway. The scars won’t heal so easily, not even in these weeks of co-solitary confinement. The scars are thick and scabby for a reason, and every wondering thought about Sergej’s benevolence brings back the memory of that pudgy, handsome face, oh what a darling button nose, but what hateful gaze, how distorted the lips forming that crushing utterance on that hike in Romania: I don’t wanna see dad. I want dad to walk behind me. No quarrel preceding, just causeless, consistent rejection, bile thickly trickling, forming a puddle, a lake, a black sea. And the forgiving, even tender side that Sergej has been showing lately is nothing but a float for now, a yet unsteady attempt to overbuild the dark water with a lagoon city, piecemeal and thriving like the bankholidian capitals. The eggs are pale and mealy where the pepper arteries don’t reach.

“Hungry.”

Every look at his son is reassuring. Even in the annoyance, the reproachful face of his son right now, there’s absolutely no resemblance to the hateful expression of his younger self.

“It’s here! Stop bugging me.”

He’s on edge, right, what about that, then? Must be Freddy F, after all, who, right in that moment shakes Michael’s phone into nervous vibration. Can he hold a hammer? Can he swing a nail? Well enough to justify minimum wage plus tips if applicable, Michael reckons. The gig must be handyperson work or construction, but the description is silent on details. Purpose is for the one who pays. Five is the time to clock in, another late shift, another reheated lunch.

“Can you handle another couple of hours with your old man gone?”

He nods in time with his chewing. Dust rises in the searing sun streaming in through the windows. Temperature skyrocketed this morning, and with it the pulses of the city’s inhabitants bursting from their overcrowded apartments into the streets. On the neighborhood’s sidewalks, the snarls to defend one’s distance are delivered with smiling eyes beneath the shades. The trees and plants explode their stamina in pollinous mushroom clouds and fill the air with sticky white reminders of airborne contagion. The whole house is vibrating with the stomping beat of a disco tune thumping somewhere downstairs.

“What’s the job?”

“Construction.”

“Cool. And they ask you of all people to help?”

“Funny.”

“Can you bring some cereal for tomorrow morning?”

Michael is of the paper boy generation, prone to fall prey to the recruiting campaigns of underpaying delivery companies that halo the hard, honest cowboy work of the lone rider. The reputation of hard work involving strength and power tools on the other hand suffered from the association with certain construction sites in Michael’s youth, whose lunching crews confirmed his insecurity about his walk and posture. Sergej, on the other hand, thinks rather little of the honorable profession of hauling heavy physical objects across the land and already before he became immersed in the virtual DIY-frenzy of bank holiday, he had hoped for his father to discover in one of his parenting guides the home-improvement activities that Fee doesn’t let Sergej partake in. Perhaps once the hammer has been forced in his father’s hand, they will move beyond twisting potato battery wires without pliers.

“I’m gonna mate. I have a date. I’m gonna mate. I have a date.”

Sergej keeps repeating his sing-song of words he doesn’t understand, according to Michael.

“I expect to see greasy marks in your schoolbooks and not only on that controller.”

“But pa-pi, do you think I touch my books unwashed?”

He coils head-down on the sofa, laughing and resuming his inappropriate rhyme. He starts to garnish it with words that Michael wouldn’t have thought to be in his son’s vocabulary, and that quashes his theory that mating in bank holiday is an abstract process, entirely removed from the flesh-colored world that invaded the device screens of Sergej’s classmates so rapidly that the news of the parent-teacher conference reached even Michael. With feminism as a pretext, he pushes the thought aside, that he should have quote unquote the talk with his son. And perhaps that date of Sergej, if it’s still the same as when he tried last, is right in saying that bank holiday is better than the majority of the other ways of learning about sex. Akash’s little brother continues to struggle with visions that befall him in near-orthogonal sex positions, visions of bulging stud bulls doing anthropomorphic doggy style, like the sheep in the video game that his father had caught him playing and that he brusquely removed him from to abduct him on an ad-hoc road trip up the Hudson, where he would stop at every village to ask for any inseminations happening. Michael remembers the inevitable walk-ins on his mother and her boyfriend in the one-bedroom that didn’t have a hall to deafly sneak past the shaking fold-out couch in the open kitchen and screws his face into a lemon bite.

“When are you going?”

“Can’t wait, eh?”

“Can we go to the Atomic Museum before?”

“Museums are closed, dummy.”

“Not a dummy, mummy!”

“We can check if we can access their garden. If you’re lucky, they haven’t closed that, yet.”

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

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

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

The replica of the trinity site’s obelisk rises black against the rounded clouds over the bay. Yellow barrier tape around it indicates that its child-safe climbing holds are not to be used today. Apart from the inaccessible lookout, none of the exhibits in the museal garden is off limits, not even the clearly unhygienic coin-operated AR-binoculars, that let its viewer drop Little Boy on the island, and that used to render the resulting marred skyline, while now that the last belligerent board members of the museum have relented, only color-coded zones of destruction are overlaid on the cityscape. Already the last two times he came to town, Sergej had urged his father to go to the quote unquote womb of the bomb, as Time Out called the pistachio-shaped, rose-gold building of the museum. Wanda still has her fangs too deep in Michael’s neck, and he cannot bring himself to believe in the power that, according to the museum’s awkward tagline, will have saved us twice. The no-nukes functions were the ones with enormous banquets of spelt cakes and salads. However, he’s enough of a Gen-Y-nihilist to entertain an acquiescing curiosity, a morbid fascination for nuclear horror shows. It had been simply a lack of time on his side that had stood in the way of previous visits.

It hasn’t been quite clear to him why his son has fallen for the museum’s ads of pastel-colored nationalism, but now that he thinks about it, atomic death perfectly fits the playful studies of his son, who collects maps of largely defunct shopping centers, who draws plans and charts of aberrant past progress in his naive and colorful Henry-Dreyfuss languages on ever-extending fold-out annexes, without any want to finish them. He sketches infinite obituaries. Never forget. Sergej is standing in a granite pool amid a column of steam blown into the shape of a mushroom cloud. A light breeze blows the mist over towards Michael at the launcher button.

“Another one, dad!”

“You’ll be soaked.”

It is unusually hot for this time of the year. Michael launches another blast and joins his son in its epicenter to cool his sweaty neck. Sergej’s hair collects the moisture in smooth, sand-colored strands, and Michael has no use for a sick child at home while he needs to be out working, so he propels Sergej over to the sweltering pan of a commissioned art installation. Seventy-two metal plates, engraved and embedded into the lawn, that collect the heat of the day and pleasantly sear Sergej’s calves. But he’s already up and around, trying to make sense of the giant mind map of life, death, and fission. Even without nuclear disasters it’s only going to be harder for his son from here on. Tracing the nodes of their family tree is revisiting years of renewal. All of the family babies were delivered in the ascendant of an auspicious future. Even when Wanda was born, her parents faced the inauguration of the SED’s new secretary general with confidence. Sergej was born in 2009, the year that 2008 hit with full force and Michael lost two student jobs in succession to the crisis. Michael is little superstitious, but he doubts that it will be easy for his son.

“Has your hair dried yet?”

Sergej is unresponsive, rapt in contemplation of the glistening floor panels. Michael shakes his concerns and stretches out belly down on the warm metal to dry the back of his shirt soaked with sweat and atomic water vapor. A small fleet of empty tourist boats floats by and as Michael follows their stoic cruise from the corner of his eye, he falls asleep roasting on the enigmatic nuclear map. He is woken up by Sergej, who wants to leave, urgently and suddenly.

“Something wrong?”

Sergej points a pianist’s finger at a small group of rust and soil veterans, bandana-donning, red batik and blue jeans, badges, and patches unintelligible but predictable from a distance.

“I don’t think we should support a bellicist venture like this park.”

“Did they tell you that?”

“I should have considered that before we came. Did you know that they had to print their obituaries on small-print insert slips because there was no more space in the parish newsletter for all the cancer deaths they’ve had?”

“I’m sorry, Serge. Who?”

Upset he keeps wagging his finger at the receding group.

“Them! They came all the way from New Mexico to protest.”

“And to protest what? Context, Serge!”

“Jesus, dad! Why are you so ignorant,” unclear whether that ‘you’ denotes only Michael, “Nobody cared if the residents of,” the wagging pans towards the dark obelisk “Trinity Site would be contaminated.”

“Oh Serge,” there it goes, that involuntarily condescending smile of compassion and relief that this is the reason for the hasty departure and nothing serious or bathroom-related, “you are so right. You’re right. Let’s go.”

And then his drowsy, tipsy, sun-drunk state fools him into adding the grandfatherly carelessness

“But, you know: There were reasons at the time to do so. Someday you’ll understand.”

Sergej stops dead in his tracks.

“Give me the keys, dad, I’m going to return alone.”

“What?”

“You understood me. You’re so self-centered, you can’t even think beyond your next,” what could it be, “tax return. You have no authority to tell me what I will or have to understand in a future that you have no idea of. I need you to hand me the keys because I would like to be alone and am very much capable of riding the subway independently, as you should have understood in the last few days.”

“Whoa. Easy. Can we take a step back for a second?”

“No,” Sergej’s determined calm is what alarms Michael the most,” you are using deliberation only as a means of delaying, and I don’t need that right now.”

Michael is mute.

“Michael,” hearing his first name through his son’s mouth is eerie and more affecting than any thoughtless insult could have been, “I am simply asking for you to make up for your belittling, patronizing stance. As I said, I am perfectly capable of making it home. You can take a walk and return later. Give me the keys.”

A part of Michael is certain to awake back in the boiling pan any second. It is that part of him that makes him hand over the keys. His son walks off, stops, comes back.

“I would also need some change for the subway.”

Michael surrenders his subway card, too, and his child is off, and the awakening doesn’t happen.

It was a brief second spring, the few days of intimacy, of a lasting illusion that he was in some way indispensable for his son. Yet again, Michael remains spurned, although this time the matter is less personal. Sure, Sergej is particularly annoyed at his father’s behavior, but his anger merely expedites the act of detaching that would have proceeded even if he wouldn’t be, if Michael would have had the chance to be the father he wanted to be. Another harmonious couple of weeks and the recurrent estrangement would have really hurt, though it could never hurt as much as the first time, when, above all, there was no reason for the little, chubby arms shoving Michael away. This time, it’s only natural for his son to drift apart, to disentangle himself, and in the light of post-nappy sobriety, Michael permits the realization that the days spent together did not suffice to completely erase his desire for a timely available return flight for his son.

However, for now, Sergej is still here, and worries about the imminent consequences of a falling-out fill the emotional void where grief about his son’s estrangement should have resided. Michael needs a minimum of compliance in his delicate situation. If the mood is already smoldering, soggy bulk-bought cereal becomes a combustion agent and too many incriminating romantic souvenirs from women other than Sergej’s mother are too hastily hidden that a malicious rummager wouldn’t find them. “Sir, do you have a minute?” Full moon disk, pale and marked by craters of past acne, rising in Michael’s view. Meteorites strike the moon’s face at sixteen miles per second. The dark, watery pools of the eyes flow over with the impacts of Michael’s expletives. Little Boy had the force of a small meteorite. Little boy stirred his father’s emotions enough to cause an unpredictable tantrum, making Michael’s fist rise and shiver as he hisses at the chubby woman, who is holding her chipped signature campaign clipboard out to him, to get quote unquote the fuck out of his sight.

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

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

Slightly ridiculous but endearing how Michael stamps with every step like a comic book jinx, with his hands in his pockets and little shockwaves of pollenous dust rising around his sneakers. His nostrils, too, exhale tiny plumes of pollen that have collected in his airways during nap time as he puffs off the residual anger from his blowup. Sergej must already be home but Michael keeps prolonging his walk along the A train stations that are calling him with their cool, musty breath from the underground. To the beat of the thumping steps he repeats to himself the reassuring circumstance that it’s tough times for all families everywhere, and his mantra helps his mind to slowly drift off his concerns. The city seems more and more like bank holiday these days, minus the skirmishes. Beneath the subway viaduct, extensive oriels and mashrabiyas protrude from the facades, made from sold-out plywood or compensatory branches and twigs from the storm-shaken parks around. Michael jumps in terror, as a bare foot breaks through a particularly shabby floorboard only few feet overhead. Smart builders have searched the connection to the viaduct itself, although each passing train shakes their annexes into tremors that leave Michael walking in a rain of dust and pollen that rill through the cracks of the protrusions. Harvesters, like the one Michael has seen on his first tour with Freddy F, are nowhere in sight. Only in some spaces pushed-in planks suggest desultory broomstick protest from below. Bank Holiday’s main menu has a counter, showing off the ever-increasing counts of objects and object-instances in the game. Many players report a considerable uneasiness when they watch the two ceaselessly rising numbers and it seems that even though bank holiday’s server farms only marginally expand in physical size, not few have a hard time convincing their minds that there is really nothing, pure void, in the space that the growing mass of items require. Michael, too, tries to skip the main menu screen as quickly as possible, although it is not the idea of displacement or constriction that give him the creeps - indeed he is virtually a claustrophile and he appreciates the embrace of the wooden eversions along his route that anyway displace only air no one wants to breath and sun no one wants to see - instead it’s the rolling numbers, of increase and decrease alike, that upset him, that rob him of every successful delusion of control. However, this particular uneasiness doesn’t rank high enough in his list of fears and fixations to become subject of his infrequent therapy sessions, that he saves up money and waiting time for. Curious discomfort. It’s always spinning anthracite disks with debossed white numbers that he imagines when he sees the bankholidian counter, like the ones on the cheap bicycle locks, stiff, breaking off finger’s nails on their notches when trying to set the code in minus temperatures. They spin at impossible speeds, would grate away whole fingertips if Michael tried to stop their movement. He wouldn’t even mind the lock not opening, after all, stasis is all he secretly wants, but a lock needs to behave like a lock, he wouldn’t have populated this era if it weren’t the age of unprecedented determinism. Large numbers aren’t the issue. Large numbers are pools of packing peanuts to slouch or hide in, to peeve the cat with. Large numbers at best mean abundance and at worst they are intangible and therefore soon irrelevant. But the urgency, the tenacity of rising numbers, large numbers that increase, augment rapidly even, that’s something that gets to him. Six, seven, thirty-seven, thirty-eight, the keys jingle as they fall, again, but this time the kettle has been vented before, for a moment, Michael just stares at the wad of keys on the floor, only to pick it up with the sound of an elderly uncle rising from the coffee table. Sergej waits inches behind the door, startling Michael, who drops his keys again. Sergej is bouncing on his grip socks with cheerfulness.

“I made a progenitor.”

“Not cool!”

“I already made another for Patrick because he couldn’t handle it.”

“I wasn’t trying to patronize you, you know. You can’t just run off like that.”

“What? Dad! We have a progenitor. It’s super-fast and agile. You wanna play? You can play if you want to.”

It’s unclear whether A, Sergej is too excited to remember his brusque departure, B, he hides his abashment behind a smile so wide it reveals one of his last baby tooth gaps, which makes it close to impossible to hold a grudge against its bearer, or C, he insists on the absolute rightfulness of his exit and merely condones his father’s misconduct in light of his celebratory mood. Michael has roughly fifty-five minutes until he must leave for work and no energy for further arguments with his son. The saggy sofa welcomingly embraces his tired body and laughingly forgives Sergej’s headfirst dive onto the passenger seat. The streets on the way to the in-game recruiting office have closed up over their dashing progenitor. A sledgehammer breaks through the flooring above and the tender face of an avatar peeks down into the alley as Michael passes.

“I’ve found out how to do it. It’s actually not that hard. Making Patrick’s progenitor was super easy.” Sergej rotates on the velour as he details the strategy that only marginally interests Michael but keeps him from work-related brooding as he holds out for an opponent on the grass planes their faction has recently conquered.

“When can I have my own avatar?”

“You don’t even have a credit card.”

“When can I have my own credit card?”

“Ask your mother.”

Spinning dials running up numbers on the online credit card balance. Someone from their faction comes running over from far and Michael playfully keeps him locked in his gunsight, grinning as if he cannot help falling for simple games of power. Seconds after Michael is dead, and a FUCKING STRIKEBREAKER in caps, flanked by squads of exclamation points on either side appears in the post-mortal chat window.

“Do you know about this?” As if Sergej hasn’t seen f-words before.

“Heard about that, yeah. Just respawn.”

As Sergej reports, some players from either faction are protesting a lack of gratitude for their service of protecting the war-weary citizens of the factions’ home cities, ensuring that they can build in peace. An expectation, that is absolutely absurd, and, according to Sergej only exposes the simplemindedness of players favoring the combat-oriented aspects of the game. Firstly, the cities’ builders build faster than any army can demolish, plus, secondly, it is only obvious, OBVIOUS, he stresses, that the game’s publishers have no interest and thus, Sergej really says “thus”, no intention of ruining the game for thirty-plus percent of the players by letting a faction’s home city be bulldozed.

“Right.”

Michael is back to brooding, thinking of work in t minus thirty plus the time it takes him to get there. The in-game politics of bank holiday have never been his cup of tea, back in his days people didn’t have the time nor the energy to go beyond pounding out insults on their keyboards, cracking with potato chip fragments lost beyond the keycaps. Although when Philipp got married, impossibly grim-looking, sunken in his oversized armor that shone like dishwashing soap and mother-of-pearl, Michael and his clan mates had prepared in painstaking peer-to-peer coordination an adorable wedding album of faked family photos featuring the couple’s avatars. Still, his tolerance for social frustration is too limited to last beyond a peek into one of the game’s countless meta-tools, forums, discussion groups. The one time he tried was enough of an experience for him. The pale, skinny textbook-nerd Michael imagined the speaker to be, laid down discussion rules in an irritated sing-song for the first timers. Everybody stuck to the rules so diligently that Michael felt obliged to point out the inherent dangers in that, he believed he as a German should know that better than the Americans on his server cluster. He left halfway through the meeting. Michael prefers sneaking and shooting. Perhaps he should have given it another try, after all “meta-tooling infrastructure” is not a working group known for beginner friendliness and every group has a different flavor. According to the countless plagiarisms of a now lost original blog post with the lame title of “A hitchhiker’s guide to BH communities”, the rough typology of working groups distinguishes three types (another victory for standards and specifications, as the bankholidian saying goes, alluding to one of the most long-standing working groups in the game): Darwinist groups, relying on aggressive real time rating and removing of participants within a steep hierarchy, Waldorf (the no-right-angle-Waldorf, not the salad) groups, building on strict community rules enforced with the purring passive-aggressiveness of bad kindergarten teachers, and finally the self-explanatory Anarchist groups. None of the above sounds bearable to Michael. Shooting and sneaking.

Unlike Sergej, Michael has not yet stumbled across one of the countless communal activities taking place in the shrinking gaps between the piled-up building material of the factions’ capitals. Like cautious dissidents, the groups, consortia, teams, collectives, squads move from location to location, wherever a wall can be penetrated to make space, or a roof remains unbuilt on for the time of the meeting, discussion, workshop, lecture, match, conference, trial. Often the fluctuating members are the only breadcrumb trail to the venue of a specific event, particularly when it’s hosted by the more privacy-minded of the players. Jain Gardening, Advanced Buckminster Fuller, Modeling for Peripheral War Zones. Many a group disbanded, because the tranquil beach section where last week’s meeting was held had turned into a waterside block of condos with low hanging, suspended walkways bouncing with incessant traffic that would have made a rush-hour subway car better suited for a brainstorming session. Admittedly, many of the hobbyist clubs merely foundered on their own quaint niches, that in light of the unlimited alternatives failed to fascinate beyond the droning welcome addresses. Of those who have not yet disbanded, many assemblies spend half the meeting waiting for and or giving directions to stragglers before they spend the second half searching for next meeting’s venue in the circulating predictions of future sprawl of the city. These problems commonly serve as the go-to excuse when it comes to the notoriously deferred pirated instance of bank holiday. Rumored to congregate in the underbellies of the factions’ cities, the piracy working group has produced a handful of short-lived keygens for the game, that have been repaid with countless myths and messianic hopes in their endeavor of creating a free and distributed copy of the bankholidian world. The prophecy of the land of the free-to-play, monospaced on ascii art scroll, has been for long the most recent life sign of the working group, which is, perhaps, judging from the sulky libertarian overtones in the brief manifesto, for the better. In the bankholidian climate of creative exaggeration, this sparseness of information has yielded a substantial canon of tales and legends, of working group members convening in abandoned houses on skirmish battlefields to pass information between the factions’ cities as if IRL messengers didn’t exist, of tube-fed coders in forgotten hospital wards run by the working group to allow their members to become completely immersed in their tasks, suspended in a hyperreal confluence of excretions, victuals, and bitstreams like the alleged homeless human guinea pigs in City Hall station. Of course Akash has met someone from the working group. Of course Sergej’s little friend Paul knows where the next meeting takes place. Bank Holiday’s publisher charges by direct debit, the terms and conditions are verbose and convoluted.

Michael’s phone jerks, vibrating as Bank Holiday’s monthly invoice is arriving. Freddy F’s notification rings only seconds after, reminding Michael to give the speeding progenitor a rest. Sergej comes from the bathroom chewing on his toothbrush in an alibi demonstration of dental hygiene.

*A telephone booth in the rain. The windows had fogged up with your breath although you hadn’t even begun to talk. Two telephone cards are in the picture, you had stocked up on minutes for the calls you needed to make, and they were important calls, so you wouldn’t risk being cut off by the rates. Not to your surprise, Paul didn’t answer, not even his office, that had compassionately taken your previous messages and had always passed on his greetings and promise of a speedy arrival on his part. Something inside you was relieved: You were beyond believing his announcements and at least his bad conscience was enough to convince William of letting you stay. The second number on the list you had copied from the rolodex on Paul’s desk, now William’s drawing table, that you had investigated as every inch of the apartment during your period of solitary domestic seclusion. You rested your forehead against the glass to counter your body heat that rose with every new cell of mine, and with your nervousness, too. Subject of your second call was a photographer you had gotten to know in Dresden. Bunim, a Russian, who had stayed in the city after the war and emigrated to the US only weeks before the wall came up. In the deserted building of the future state administration, you and Bunim had met shortly after the elections, when the town halls and offices encapsulated the country’s upheaval on three floors, rooms numbered westwards ascending. In a climate halfway between New Year’s Eve and Lehman 2008 there was no reason for overzealous competition. Hyperactive new-elects barely older than you took you and Bunim on extensive tours among the grayscale skyline of towering file stacks that waited for the freshly recruited IT crowd to transform them to smaller stacks of floppy disks. In exchange for the prospect of a portrait on national media the young officials eagerly traded views of sites and archives that had been confidential for half a decade. The yuppies were excited, you were excited, paper flew like confetti from a collapsing stack, everything was festive and smelled of future success. Success arrived for Bunim sooner than for you. When you called the number he had given you in Dresden some weeks ago, he had already climbed to a position senior enough that you had to convince his assistant of your call’s urgency. But he was in town, and when you asked him for a job, he immediately gave you a time and a place, although he didn’t seem to have the clearest recollection of who you actually were.*

*With the success of your second call, you had the necessary courage for your third. Your memory of the series of digits was unspoilt, but you had your doubts about whether it still belonged to your parents. In the weeks leading up to your departure you had never called them but rather had gone straight to their house, so that you would simultaneously absolve the weekly visit that earned you your unneeded but nevertheless welcome alimony. And while it was unlikely that your Oma and Opa had moved, numbers and digits had been among the first things to be uprooted, scrambled, after last November. When Opa picked up, you stated your full name, as if he might not recognize you otherwise. There was little surprise in his voice, he must have been advised about the calls origin when he had picked up. Opa asked about your well-being and eventual needs as though you had left for a long-planned summer camp. Calmed by his matter-of-factly opening, you explained briefly and optimistically, euphemistically, your situation, making sure that you subtly underlined that this was not a call for help but merely a kind notice, like you would notice city administration of a move. Only towards the end of your report did your talking accelerate, because an unkempt man with a piercing stare had stopped in front of the telephone booth. Opa replied in his usual direct and undiplomatic fashion that he didn’t deem your situation adequate for you and that you shouldn’t be stubborn and come back. Seemingly unconscious of his audience, the man outside the booth whipped out his penis and the hollow sound of water hitting the glass pane resounded, piss streaming down the glass, tinging it a darker yellow than it had already been. His face relaxed like the beer advertisement above it and tucking away his privates he turned to resume staggering towards the subway. You said that you respected Opa’s concern, but that you were lacking nothing for bearing a healthy German American child. With nothing else but the news to turn to, you said an awkward goodbye, wishing the other a restful evening. You needed to pee. The urge had become gradually less predictable lately.*

*The thing about gradients, though, is that they eventually reduce to a binary state. The day you went to work your first American job was the day after the one marking the future impossibility of hiding your belly. On a melon scale, I was forming a cantaloupe. Orange, juicy, and sweet had been your vomit in the morning. Resigned, you had taken a backpack with your own camera as a counterweight and hadn’t bothered concealing your front-heaviness. A photo commemorates what was supposed to be the start of something, though of what exactly is hard to tell from the picture. The first step in a stellar career, first lucky dime in pocket, first cow, first baby in arm. Bunim greeted you with an “Oh” hollow as the near-empty film studio, a big circular vessel to house his doubt and concern. “I don’t know if this is the right situation for you”, he said with a nod to your belly. The hauling of cast iron light stands and fat, sensitive flashes he had budgeted you for was beyond you. “She can take the babies”, an assistant proposed, “and the cow,” a fellow European, who, with its diverse colors, looked better on monochrome stock than the local breeds. The ad was for formula and needed a baby besides the cattle. While the cow was basking stoically in the modeling light, the baby would only last for a minute at best, and even though the team was experienced in baby shoots and passed the newborns fast like footballs between backstage and and the searing limelight, it needed eight stand-ins for the satisfied end user of the formula. Eight babies, each not older than four months, whose eight accompanying parents - mothers, exclusively - were availing themselves of the early access to the catering buffet and largely left it to the team, i.e. you, to care for the seven backups in various states of crying. I once had a job in Hamburg, a weekend gig that paid travel, board, and lodging to a group of East German teenagers in exchange for their modest wage expectations. On a seven square meter patch of sod, I had to keep a number of lawn mowers and scarifiers running, that would choke on the thick fairground air within seconds. You were scurrying from baby to baby and while the mothery smell rich with hormones that oozed from your pores was quick to silence the crying infants, it only took an instant until the cottony cloud of your odor would be carried away by the constant draft and leave the baby to exclaim its vulnerability. Only the cow was patient and still, its tail steadily swinging up and down like a calcant next to the man-tall fan that propelled the smell of stable and four working stomachs over towards you. It didn’t take long for your own bowels to surrender to the heavy scent. You threw up in a bin between two cots, and because you hadn’t managed to eat anything but a floury apple that morning, everyone presumed the vomit to be but a baby’s burp. You didn’t touch a single rod of cold steel, not a single screen or reflector. The whole day seemed a preview of the coming months of shapeshifting, warm organic matter. At the turn of the fifth hour, your touch started to tell apart the dented rounds of the identical heads of the infants and you began to understand how the mothers managed to aim unerringly at the right cod if you hadn’t managed to lull a baby in time. You should have been angry at the moon-faced models, steaming with spotlight heat in their carriages, for ruining - or at least representing the ruin of - your first American photography job. However, you didn’t need to fight the urge of sinking a finger into the soft zones of baby surface. You didn’t hold them fearfully, with two hands in a maddening control loop between crushing and losing grip like you did with your camera when you first got it, but naturally fit them in the mold between your breasts. Holding them was Zen, felt like the look the cow gave you, and you would retrospectively hate the fact that it felt so natural, because although you considered yourself a natural of many things, being a mother wasn’t one of them. After the shoot, the mothers came to you one by one to collect their offspring, and not a single mom failed to assure you that you would make a great one, too, one day. Only then, bitterness welled up.*

The bus on the corner is like a magic bus, appearing out of nowhere at daring speed, off the schedule that Michael thought to have been interrupted. The few riders have been driven apart by fear of contagion or sense of privacy to occupy the four corners of the kneeling bus and Michael hangs suspended between two support slings and the counterforces of his co-passengers in the middle aisle as the bus defends its pole position. Motion sickness has never been a concern of his, and he trusts his brain to handle the stable view of his phone’s screen more than he trusts his arm to keep him upright in the veering vehicle. The unbearable user interfaces of quote unquote every online newspaper he has ever seen, make him stick to his socials for any news between the weekly print news he gets on Fridays. His subscription is outrageously expensive, but the thumb-thick German issues crammed in his anorexic mailbox’s mouth bestow a sophisticated extravagance on him as a tenant (Yes, there is someone to impress). Read how this widowed cleaner of dairy tankers made a fortune in smart logistics. Thirty-nine hot startups in decentralized dry-cleaning. Make your morning routine into an executive elevator pitch (What?). The seven chakras you need to know for economic sucess (sic). The bus hits a prolonged green wave and its motor sounds become indistinguishable from the ambient track in Michael’s ear. Then the driver slams the breaks. The sudden motion change makes Michael swing almost horizontal as he frantically clasps the support strap, and while he manages to hold on, his shoulder becomes potentially dislocated, or maybe it’s only a slight strain. The thump of something heavy hitting the front of the bus has been audible even over the screeching tires. Michael discovers his phone at the front of the aisle and collects it. Clear, yellowed bumper cover and a five dollar note behind the rubber as a lucky charm. He cannot discover any unfamiliar cracks, his attention can fan out. The wailing outside is so loud, it’s astounding that the noise didn’t get through to him before. No siren, not a casualty either, at least counting only the physically harmed, of which there are, a look around, none. The howl comes from a curbside child, probably Sergej’s age or slightly younger, and Michael might have dismissed the crying as unrelated if the bus driver wouldn’t have bent his heavy frame forward like a sumo wrestler to look under the bus from the opposite side, making a face of condolence and fatalistic indifference mixed with slight disgust. All passengers have gravitated towards the roadside windows, but whatever prompted their driver’s reaction is hidden below the underbody. Michael cannot stand listening to the wail, or perhaps he wants to distinguish himself from the gawkers. The remains under the bus are neither a dog, nor a cat, more like a ferret or weasel and almost certainly feral. Death is cruel but this consolation will be manageable. Michael squats next to the boy. Definitely younger than Sergej by three, four years at least. Even better, death is simple at that age. However, the matter is complicated by the fact that the child does not seem to understand any of the languages Michael is familiar with. The bus is about to depart, and since Michael is uncertain what the child has not yet seen, he crab-walks sideways to position his body between the boy and the road. Big eyes still wet and flickering on him. His outstretched index collides with the slow-moving fist-train of his right while he nods upwards looking questioningly. The boy nods feebly, the communication seems to work. Though weren’t there eastern cultures with reversed yes-no gestures? He gives it another try, interlocking thumbs, flap-flap-flapping the wings of a flesh-made soul upwards. Big eyes. Cheeks shining after a downpour. The wings close, they make a bed for Michaels sleepy head resting on it as he whistles the sound of sleep. No use, but at least no tears, either. To keep the child from peering past his frame into the gut-stained road, Michael proposes a walk with a careful leading hand on the boy’s back. Probably the child is feral itself, walking with strangers, crying for pests. Maybe it really has no language and merely reacts to the sound of Michael’s palliative monologue, that addresses the rampant construction around them for lack of a better topic. So much new space and yet not a soul in sight, even behind the windows, bead curtains (very frequent), and panes of greased paper, in the openings, cracks, and loopholes of the structures only inanimate objects are showing. Laughter from somewhere, at least someone’s not dead. A pair of fast food delivery drivers speed past them on e-bikes. Michael tries to signal them for support, inconspicuously as to prevent upsetting the boy, but they only leave a trail of napkins in their wake. However, it’s the napkins that come to Michael’s rescue, getting the boy so excited that, without any warning, he jumps into the street like the weasel before. Cute cartoon ostrich in a cap, offering a soft drink the color of his neck. Perhaps the paper is much desired bedding for the child. But the boy proves Michael wrong: For one thing, he does speak, torrentially, suddenly, pointing out details of the colorful animal print to Michael, counting the gathered stack at the speed of an underworld treasurer in a vowel-rich tongue Michael has never heard before. For another, the boy’s excitement seems to spring from the completion of some sort of collection - one finger plus wagging napkin stack plus closed fist means completed collection to Michael - and collecting franchise paraphernalia sounds more like a rich kid’s extravagance than a pauper’s carefully chosen hobby. Still Michael has to smile as the child presses against him, bouncing with excitement like Sergej does, too.

With the bus long gone and no other in sight, Michael realizes that he has squandered his time buffer and will again be late, is already late in the eyes of a spoiled employer who expects five minutes to get the heart rate down before shift change. He waits for the boy to finish the presentation of his haul and says an awkward goodbye with a weird bow that with a malevolent eye could be deemed racist. That it was the child that filched his keys from his pocket will never enter Michael’s mind. Must’ve lost them on the bus. As long as the phone is still there, key to his keystore that holds access to his Freddy F account that opens employment opportunities that unlock the potential to a debt-free apartment among others.

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

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

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

The big thirty-nine dry cleaners still wait behind the lock screen. All of them men, very clean-looking indeed. Remarkable how independent Sergej is at his age. Though Michael would argue that he, too, has been (he had to) when he was at his son’s age. But not less remarkable, rather more so. He must have overlooked this exceptional trait of his son in previous visits. Their plus-minus weekly phone calls held little opportunity for Sergej to showcase his independence, their occasional joint gaming sessions only insofar that Sergej would have left to do other things by the time an interrupted transatlantic connection would have resumed. Witnessing his son’s development from a distance, his one eye was constantly on the lookout for manifestations of his exceptional sperm in his child, the other scrutinized the boy for flaws, for signs of the ordinary, the unimposing, that would make his son’s absence in his life more bearable and at the same time absolve him from having scarred Sergej and of having impeded his becoming a normal boy, a child not only free from any sort of visible trauma but also free from extraordinary abilities that were likely to hide trauma, too. And for the most part, Sergej paradoxically has managed to satisfy his father’s contradictory expectations by being extraordinarily average. So normal was Michael’s son that none of his behavior, his problems or desires hadn’t been pinned down and explained in some parenting guide or blog. Sergej has eccentric hobbies, but not too many and he cares about soccer, thank god. He has talents and was good in school, but still average enough not to give teachers any bright ideas concerning gifted and talented education. He meets demands like a train schedule, reliably without overachieving, and spends his time with the same mind-numbing activities his peers do. He wouldn’t mind a call from Sergej now, regarding some minor issue, asking where he keeps the raw sugar, so that Michael could tell him, reminding him to brush his teeth after. But then again Michael is fine with a little bit of calm before his shift.

His phone is fine, no interior damage. It senses the incoming message like a cat’s tail. “Your next job?” plus an incompatible emoji (is there an update Michael missed?), writes Akash under a link to an article Michael scans while walking. The founder of their old company collected capital in the low six-figures for his new business, that offers quote unquote crowdsourced mobility for location-based games. Michael’s remaining commute would earn him point zero zero four units of a presumably useless virtual currency, and some paying cheater eight hundred ninety meters to fuel the development of her Pokémon, gather resources for her Stone Age tribe, or otherwise increase her score in the respective game. Works for every one of the currently popular location-based games except for a community-built metagame of - what else - bank holiday, for which lazy players still need to entrust their physical phones to dog sitters and delivery people in order to record the desired distances. Michael takes no stock in his ex-boss’s pretend money, the Passo, ERC-20 symbol PSS, not the most becoming three-letter combination. However, the company has landed a deal with a local franchise of nutritional supplement stores, and the branch a block from his apartment sells, among countless powders and pellets, legumes that could keep him and Sergej afloat and healthy in certain worst-case scenarios. Walking for pigeon peas. The app is small enough to download within the Wi-Fi range of the closed electronics store Michael is passing, but his phone shuts down into a previously unknown power-saving mode that is solely controlled by Freddy F and its instructions to guide him through a quote unquote frictionless working experience, as the dimmed screen reads. Twenty thousand milliampere hours in the back pocket of his jeans but no cable to get the juices flowing. Freddy grants him a jail-call only to his employer, what if Sergej calls and he can’t get through?

It’s getting dim in these parts. Plywood, iron sheets and laminated fiberboard cover the glass, steel, and concrete, and swallow every ray of light attempting to make it to street level. The entrance to number 307 is barely recognizable, the backlit house number shown in Freddy F’s POV navigation now lights a deserted lobby to the lobby made from corrugated iron sheets and separated from the remaining width of the street with a Noren made from the cut-up runner of the original entrance hall. The revolving doors are out of order, the gutted door governor indicates the reason for their failure.

“We’re here.”

A divine finger is pointing from a hatch in the ceiling at Michael, its many rings click like billiard balls as it withdraws from the opening. The hand jumps out towards him as soon as his head passes through the hole in the ceiling, shiny and enthusiastic it obscures the short figure it belongs to, and only as Michael has finished laboriously pushing himself onto the upper deck, he recognizes the face of the locally famous comedian, who, although he contradicts most of Michael notions of an employer, reveals himself as just that. The room is small in its footprint but high, five meters or more, with its eastern side open against the former facade of the building, its glass panes still show smears of last week’s pollen. The original lobby’s chandelier lights the other three walls, or rather the sheets of paper that cover them from the tidy baseboards to the ceiling. Two walls for the blueprints, sketches, renderings, doodles, drawings, potato-stamped outlines (This is your job, Michael). One for the ornamental waterfall of overlapping, zigzagging menu fliers of hundreds of local delivery services (This is your pay). A library ladder ensures access to the upper sections.

“You’re late, but in time for dinner.”

Says it, and half a dozen workers file into the room. A mixed crew of co-workers, all sexes, all sizes, aged between twenty-five and fifty, but without a single gray hair. Michael will add his ones to the mix. Lianne recommends Jamaican, fifth flier from the left far up, which should go well with the banana that’s surely mashed in his backpack. Angel has a spare charger with a five-meter reach. San as the most senior person explains his task: Build what’s on the walls, not the menu wall of course, a chuckle, her brows pitch up a roof. A second crew gathers material, broadly speaking, Michael may have to make a crayon-drawn brick wall from Tetra Paks. Michael’s celebrity employer, who didn’t think it necessary to introduce himself (what’s his name again?), gives his new hire a golden-yellow smile and holds out a release form bearing his yellow-golden monogram (still no clue) to document Michael’s consent that his image and likeness may be used in the employer’s (whose production company, too, allows no inferences about his name) publications. Where did the pen in the change pocket go? Another outstretched object from Michael’s employer protrudes from his royal-mailbox figure. L-A-R-R-Y spells the pen, in cursive capitals, in gold, and it’s Michael’s cue.

“Larry Caucasian,” he says to the release form and the stylized smile under the monogram beams back congratulating. Larry thanks him for his autograph, asks if he would like a blow job, too, and extends another two hands - he should have become a boxer instead of a comedian - that shake Michael playfully, whose frozen smirk of perplexity only starts to melt as wall-mounted camera has already averted its head again. Lianne holds her smartphone in front of his head still fixed in place and winds back thirty seconds of a live stream. Blow job, skewed, goofy grin, the golden host regales his audience with blinking teeth and a wink.

“You’re basically free to do what you want, seeing that there’s blueprints for literally everything up there. If you can take bad jokes and lukewarm food, you’ll be fine. Two more things: If you build something good, don’t expect to get credit for it.”

What’s with the counting fingers in Michael’s face lately?

“Don’t contest him for his audience.”

Extra hours pay off, adds Angel, holding a third finger to Michael’s face, “generously”.

If Angel’s cable is working, all sockets of the power strip are dead.

“NO WAY! SOMEBODY MUST’VE PULLED THE PLUG UPSTAIRS!”

With the whirring tip of his power drill, Angel points to another open hatch in the ceiling, that rolls out its orange NYM-J tongue yawning. Michael shines Angel’s flashlight into the dark hole to check its teeth. Gingivitis on his mind. Sergej should have brushed and gargled. Michael prefers the term gum disease, an unfortunate dysphemism for becoming a flabby Mister-Fantastic being, not conservative but not fluid either, merely escaping every pinning remark, every need to state oneself specifically, but still with a well confined, defined shape at a standstill. Dental hygiene is the only area where his influence on Sergej has been an unquestionable success. From a four-figure distance, being a better role-model has been challenging otherwise. To compensate for his lack of actuators he has been focusing on his perceptors, on not missing a crucial piece of information in his son’s development. The five imaginary cities of Sergej are Aquaria (no water, only the blue bubble rising and bursting in the -qua sound that Sergej liked), Metropolia (which was also a name used by Michael in his childhood, which in turn made him wonder if ancient Greek was inherently stately-sounding or whether it was the success of round neoclassicist white men with shiny bald spots and cigar handles that children assumed cities to be named like this), Sergis (Erikson stage four), Gheffodoodle (the abstract phase that coincided with his wish for a pet), Yetten (when he had gained access to the internet’s name generators). Bank Holiday Blue, though that’s not imaginary, all too real, as every bankholidian phenomenon, the void, the man of a thousand voices, it all felt real enough to send Sergej shivering under the covers. The extension cable’s origin must be found at all cost, the subtle resistance of the socket welcoming the plug with its plastic embrace must reunite father and son to give each other comfort and company.

All parents are out. The barn lies still, no event has been scheduled to temporarily fill up the spaces between the shells of suppose-steel with representations of organic matter. The faces of the cars’ fronts feign to keep Sergej and Paul company. Resolute shooting brake, gullible sedan. A bulky hearse marks Sergej’s last addition to the garbage collection, that is slowly transitioning from purposeful garbage to garbage as garbage, garbage squared so to say, as the available subsidies have been allocated to another of the art collective’s projects - a giant in-game incinerator used in a number of elaborate rituals and performances. The two digital orphans are strolling around the hangar defying the parental no-barrels-in-the-barn rule. Confetti of lead shot and last week’s festoons swirl around them as they fire into the air above them. Sergej has earned fifty euros in two hours, he has a gift for defeating parents. Blood money, dirty money. His hands feel soiled, every other step he puts down his gamepad to chafe his hands on the heavy cotton of his shirt. Sometimes, under the sedative flickering black-and-white graphics of the fight, the memory of Michael’s face forces itself on him. A face that is precious, because Michael keeps it hidden, and at the same time horrifying, because it is distorted, crying, because of him, Sergej. Memory has resharpened the features that Sergej must’ve noticed only hazily at the time, because his father ran out the room, pushing away his own mother in a move that seemed theatrical, but was in fact merely necessary to direct the force of his impulsive turn towards the exit and not of the glass cabinet. He has seen that particular face of his father’s since then, and Sergej is glad about that.

When no hue of the garlands remains against the gray ceiling, Paul turns his nozzle slowly and with a mischievous glance at Sergej towards the polished hearse, expecting him to be affected by the phasing ring of the blow against the bending would-be-metal that heralds the destruction of his works. But Sergej only shrugs in front of the monitor, taking aim himself at a cabriolet’s anorexic hood. Grandma’s balcony offered an ample armory of beech nuts in early fall with the passing cars below in range if he flicked right. Mom was gone and Michael and Sergej, too, should have been on their way. Not that it was crucial that he spent the night at home, that was his view, and Wanda would have welcomed her grandson staying for the night, too. If Michael would have just let him have it. Go home, relax, spend some time on your own, smoking, playing, masturbating, whatever dads do when they’re alone. Sergej hadn’t fought their power game any different than before, it must’ve been the proverbial straw, like the repeated beech nut hitting the same commuter hood at the same spot over and over eventually results in a fine hole at an angle that will testify to the habitual exceedance of the applicable speed limit by seven kilometers an hour. Husks shaped like the iconic banana peel that only appears in comic books and cartoons but never IRL, because, as an Austrian polymath once pointed out, humankind has been erring in which end to peel. Michael didn’t fail to hit it, that figurative peel that Sergej threw before him, that upended his dad in an hitherto unseen way, tears showing before he made it out the room. Sergej has always been lean, but sturdy, called bookend on the field not only because he brought a book to soccer camp, but because he resists the push of two, plastic teeth biting the cinder pitch. The physical resistance of his son needed a violence that Michael wouldn’t have ever considered, if Wanda’s repeated call to drop the quote unquote patriarchal terror wouldn’t have turned him into just that: A choleric brute, mustache bristling, an alcoholic’s complexion. He pulled his son with a force that a split second later surprised him enough to let go again, sending his son into a sheet of polished metal that caved under the impact, leaving a human-shaped dent that similarly had only been seen in cartoons and comics before. Sergej didn’t cry, though, Michael did.

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

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

In the end, the collection proves too extensive to obliterate in a single session. Although, looking east, no car has survived. A deserted, badly-swept hall, like a nostalgically mourning Rust-Belt site. Sergej regrets nothing, Paul has vanished in mid-shot, logging off abruptly, as if the Berlin side of the globe had been erased like the eastern half of the barn’s content, a lotus flower blossoming in its place to maintain balance. Out of curiosity, Sergej picks up the receiver and dials his mother’s number. The dial tone proves his vision wrong.

“Gigi.”

“Hi, mom.”

“All set?”

“I’m getting there.”

“Good.”

She’s doing something on the side, the sound makes Sergej think of a formula one race. In interviews, Fee prefaces her ability of effortless multitasking as a gift independent of her gender.

“I like that they call making paper “schöpfen”, it’s got this transcendental ring to it, like, how did it magically go from liquid to solid.”

“Are the Russians gone yet?”

“They were Tajiks. Yeah, they left yesterday. I caught them sweeping when I got home, just for you to know.“ Outside of the barn the sun rises, commuters on the edge of the remaining half-globe plunge into the void where the industrial park used to be, because they don’t see the abyss in the glaring light.

“They left you a present. Wanna know what it is? It’s one of those neat zoroastrian caps. Like a bucket hat. Actually the original bucket hat. Doesn’t get more bucketty than that.”

“Cool.”

“What do you say?”

“It’s not like they’ll hear it.”

“Zoroaster hears it.”

“Thanks.”

“If you don’t wear it, I will. And I’ll pick you up from practice with it.” She’s wearing her headset. Sergej can hear it from the sound of her biting her nails.

“Everything okay, Gigi?”

“Sure, just wanted to check in.” One of those sentences that are to be adopted without questioning, like ID cards and saying bless you. “Anyway, I gotta go, mom. I’ll see you soon, alright.”

*It has been difficult for me to reconstruct the months of your late pregnancy. In part because the pictures you took became more and more nondescript. There are fifteen shots of lights being refracted in the oil stain in front of the kitchen window that continually renewed itself, fed by an unknown source. I could give a fair account of the weather during those months but have to guess as far as your state is concerned, although the series itself testifies to that, too. Nothing, according to the few times we talked about this period, happened, which was true at a calendar’s level of intimacy. Another reason why I still hold Lule dearly as my favorite temp dad is because he helped to shed some light on this stretch of sleepy days and sleepless nights. Everyone would open up to Lule eventually, whether because you trusted him or because you couldn’t stand the unexpecting silence that often set in with him. He was deceleration incarnate, and you applied your regularly recurring relationships with him like a medicine when your running pulse would be in danger of spinning out of control. Unfailing supplies of family money and prescription drugs treating his post-traumatic stress disorder he acquired as a teenage paramedic assured a calmness so profound that even Lule himself would become bored when he thought of himself, so instead he had hours on end to generously dedicate to the petty problems of the Carolingian dynasties he studied, the local artists he counseled on tax issues, and anybody who had the time to sit or stroll with him. Like a sponge he absorbed sorrows and stories, and only rarely would he inadvertently spill a detail that had been confided to him by somebody else previously. Only this spill revealed to me that you had met Paul again once you had returned to Germany. You had been stoking your anger for weeks so you would last while you would wait for him to get back to his desk from one of his work-hard-play-hard appointments. But then he was there at his desk, unexpectedly, and similarly unexpected, he countered your anger with saved up reproaches of his own. He had been busy indeed. He had tried calling in favors, but the limited pay his contacts had offered offended both your talent and Paul himself as the mentor he believed to be to you. You were a girl from a dissipating peripheral country. It had been mere months since you quit a school that ran on anti-imperialist syllabi and left you with barely a grasp of the English language. The untainted perspective that Paul had tried to sell had been deemed dangerously uninformed and naive. Nobody had offered anything more than sympathetic pastime-assignments. No doubt that you would have taken them on, would have enjoyed them. The challenge of overcoming underestimating editors alone would have spurred you more than ample paychecks could have done. Paul, however, had considered the offers an offense not least to him. And the more time had passed, the more Paul’s image of you as an organic body with a voice and a growing midsection had been supplanted by a digital representation of you, a number that he believed to be your market value and that no offer would meet. Besides his own pride, he had had an ulterior motive in asking a certain price for your labor. As you already knew, William had been anything but delighted to host you, and making your own rent in the city would require you to have an adequate income. This was where the balance shifted. Suddenly you were the one in need of explaining. How you had never made an effort to practice your English. How you barely helped out around the house. Why you secluded yourself inside instead of trying to get a job on your own. You had jeopardized Paul and William’s relationship with every day you had been overstaying your visit. Hard work it had been for Paul to convince his boyfriend to wait until your money would run out, while at the same time keeping him from asking money for the rent. Partly lazy to actually deal with a difficult situation, partly wanting to look out for you, to spare you the embarrassment of being asked to leave, wanting you to make your own decisions and experiences, he had stopped calling editors on your behalf and had concentrated on calling William at work to appease him. Sleazy Paul, the dandyish editor with a probable drug problem, had taken the liberty to be a father to you: protective, patronizing, and full of bad decisions. The anger kept down the tears until you were on the train back east. Where was I? In a stroller you had brought along to have me listen to your voice getting shriller as a preview of the discussions between you and my temp dads in the years to come? Or had I already been handed off to the respective momentary father, put to bed in a place that most resembled a cot in his apartment? Sleeping in a folding box, on a blanket among choking-hazard Styrofoam peanuts left over from yesterday’s stereo delivery? Was I with Oma and Opa, or had the discord truly been so severe that you had hidden in the baby care room by the luggage carousels until they had finally left Tegel’s welcome bay? If I had been there with you, I could have laughed, I could have cried and screamed. I would have caught your attention, I would have seized you with my marzipan hands to never let go of you again, and you would have forgotten your tears and sighed, and taken the diaper bag to the restroom with a smile. But the seat next to you was empty and the legroom, too. That’s how I stayed the consolation prize.*

*William spent most of the early summer hours outside, practicing in parks, hanging around in front of galleries that extended their culinary attendance upon their exclusive guests to the sidewalk. Paul continued to excuse himself, and lately he had left it to his staff to excuse him, there was an abundance of news to be covered, and with the union on the horizon the silly season had been called off. Some years removed, it must have indeed felt like nothing had been happening in the last weeks before my birth, compared to what was happening in your home country. Your former peers would remember their daily routines of those days in astonishing detail, as subtle customizations of the societal memories eternalized in headlines and slogans, that only reached you garbled, and with several days delay, if they reached you at all. The day the D-Mark came to Eastern Germany was the day before the day before you passed an international newsstand on a walk around the block that you had forced yourself on. Or perhaps it was the day before that, you weren’t sure whether it was still Tuesday.*

*As far as I can remember, any instant of idleness has always been unbearable for you. However, you must have developed this aversion only after my birth, because, if not, how could you have survived several weeks of idleness? Even on your rare sick days you were agonizing more over the idle hours than any physical symptoms. Any passing of time to you meant advancing along the imagined bell curve that expressed your rapidly decreasing chances of achieving some vaguely delineated state of being recognized as an artist. Introspection was a valuable resource in achieving your aspirations, but only in relation to external factors and events. The own body, one’s own identity hadn’t become a hot topic, yet. Therefore the egocentric cosmos of your lonely weeks in Brooklyn, when your thoughts were only turning inward to the forming center of gravity and meaning, remained unaffected by your self-reflective archival work. There was a twofold reluctance to tell me about that time. To you it was significant at most in that it accounted for the final fifteen percent of cell growth that would eventually yield me. And once you would sincerely try to recall your thoughts from those weeks, reality would be pitted against your hopes and plans you had made in your brownstone hermitage.*

*Thankfully, you rarely forced your compulsive restlessness on me, so that I could take my own time to ponder on the few facts that you had shared about the final weeks of my embryonic stage. Maybe those were the last weeks of calm and rest for the both of us. In a city of predictable dangers, in an apartment of a favorable landlord you lived off a fridge that William filled with whatever he saw fit and whatever he would tolerate to share with you, and I lived off that, too. We were a Russian doll of a citizen of a vanishing nation and an unborn stateless, that would grab hold of any soli or sanguinis as soon as he would see the light of day, because who knows when one or the other would come in handy.*

*It came in handy when I needed to leave. Leave quickly, like you did. Like you, I too spend a couple of weeks in isolation, solitary confinement with considerable comforts and conveniences. The company paid for my probation lodging, and I lived on the block of a futuristic supermarket that supported my fridge model. The fridge and the store were in a constant dialogue that me and the delivery person weren’t having. I rewarded the silence with generous tips because I had enough to deal with in those introspective times. Emotional pain surprised me with an iron fist to the midriff and when I managed a trip to IKEA, I chose the furniture that would cradle a curled-up posture best. My front was a sandwich board listing my wrongdoings and I needed to fold my remaining surface over it. If I were you, I could say that nothing happened, then. What did I think? I thought nothing. Innocent bystanders imagine this kind of guilt-ridden sadness as an ongoing argument of interior voices accusing each other in well-prepared summations. Truth is, the sadness was weighing much too heavy on my mind to stage this kind of play. Like a flood, like tar the sadness isolated every area of my brain, allowing only a few bare electric pulses to pass through to keep emergency operations running. My perception felt reduced to a feeble lighthouse searching with its needle-head spot in the dark. I found a beanbag, a round table fell in my path, convenience food on crestfallen-eye-level shelves, a central area of pixels lighting up in red-blue-green amalgamations. A single thread of consciousness, that’s what really means nothing: Having to stop dead in place to remember dates and errands, and then running out of capacity to care for them. You were unoccupied, melancholic maybe in the abandoned apartment, but your mind must have been in a bankholidian frenzy of questions and possibilities.*

If anything, Larry Caucasian has the air of a rip-off cell plan mascot, otherwise he has been eluding all attempts of pigeon-holing. He fishes for Michael coming up the ladder with a cordial n-word. His stage name is by no means unsubstantiated. With the grotesque enthusiasm of a quest giver in a computer game that witnesses the player’s arrival mum and curious only to greet her in bursting surprise once she presses the respective button, Larry dismisses recent cautionary advice and pulls his employee close to bump shoulders.

“Habibi, you dig Pizza?”

This is but another thin crust of fringe benefits that hides the hostile swirl of bloody-knuckle-competition? A likable DIY-facade for the cold steel-and-glass core. Pouring sand in Michael’s eyes like Pizza flour, organic soft wheat stone-milled zero zero that forms perfect bubbles under the cheesy crunch, on the house, brother, everything in here is on me.

“That wall down there ain’t for show. I want you to go crazy, verstanden? What are you up to, Michael, my man?”

Got his names down, gotta give him that. Michael lifts the extension cable like a dead boa with his foot.

“Ride on, Michael! Power to the people!”

Fortunately, Larry doesn’t wait for a courtesy laugh but turns to San, who is asking for details on a crudely drawn blueprint of an underslung crane. Across the room another hole in the ceiling beckons Michael, the orange cable loops around the ladder’s rungs.

“Michael!” San is satisfied, and Larry waves Michael close, closer, “nothing to be afraid of.”

“Tough times, eh? Tough times. Look, Michael, I can see you have a kid at home. You look like a good father.” It’s probably on his employee profile.

“Anytime you need something, you come see me, ‘right?” Says it and holds out a fifty-euro (!) note. One time at the old office, Michael dropped a coffee mug from a seventh floor window. He paid for the beautiful spectacle of the coffee painting great waves in the lower airspace with lasting could-have-been visions of freak-accident victims with an inset of his passport photo for the manhunt. Why does Larry have foreign currency on him? The ladder’s concerning creak makes a stable thought to hold on to.

Lianne is upstairs in near complete darkness, occasional flecks from her screwdriver’s target light punctuate the red mood-light-glow humming from her smartphone. She must have been smoking, her portable ashtray with her initials engraved offset her second-hand woodchopper outfit. She could have gone on a date with him, judging presumably, if they wouldn’t have been in a state of temporary hubris (her) slash disillusionment (him). It would have felt right, until Michael would have fooled himself into saying something like “oh look, we have matching phone covers”, or she would have made a rousing case for constructive journalism, which is a red rag to him. In the low light of the room, she can make out that he is mildly beautiful as long as she sees to the maintenance of a constant stream of busy thoughts that keeps her mind from seeing the Dummies-Man in him. She lights another cigarette, adding its slowly pulsing glow to the room’s constellation, and watches Michael tracing the cable to the occupied socket.

“You can unplug that.”

His drill is on four green LEDs, but sliding the battery into the drill’s socket recalls loading a space blaster and is too satisfying to forgo the opportunity. He imagines Lianne smiling knowingly in the darkness behind the culminant cigarette glow.

“Drilling and screwing is ninety percent of the work in here unless you’re mad enough to trust Larry’s flimsy bench saw.”

Is she hitting on him?

“When I was young, I used to log trees with a drill.”

He sounds like a geezer, sounds like a creep.

“Two holes and the tree’s down in a year, four and it’ll last three months max. It’s not like I was killing it, I was only affecting its lifetime. Since then, I can’t help but wonder how my actions are affecting the lifespans of other beings. I sure hope I can offset that one at least.”

The cigarette. Tires screech with the one-eighty of the advance and, alas, her reaction again is hidden behind the orange glow.

“He’s not as bad as you may think at first.”

“Who?”

“Larry?”

“Why should he?”

Because he deals in dystopias. Because he wants disciples, not partners in crime. Because what he sells as independence is actually ineptitude to discuss. His quirky home-improvement videos cultivate a conspiratorial undertone that chimes in with any deep state dissection that come before and after in his viewers’ cue. Probably Larry himself has had a more clearly defined image of the enemy at some point in the past. But with the success of his DIY antics, the diverse nature of his fans have posed a challenge to the maintenance of his stereotypes.

“It’s hard to stay an antisemite if you get dozens of home-made presents for Rosh Hashanah. So now he’s left with all that subdued aggression that made his videos popular, but he loves his viewers just too much to pick on some of them.”

“Beautiful. A demagogue with a yo-yo.“

“Also, as I said, he tips generously.”

In forex. The platitudes Lianne uses to describe Larry put Michael off, even though he could use the gratuities of someone who’s quote unquote not in it for the money. His phone has charged enough to boot, and the unique romantic feature of the single dad becomes an excuse for cutting short Lianne’s song of praise.

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

“He’ll fork over hundreds if you have a tear-jerking story to tell. Not only if the cameras run.”

The call grasps at nothing.

In the first days of sleeping away from home, when he still afforded a cherrywood hotel room because there was still a slim chance that his flight would merely turn out a spontaneous vacation, Michael had grasped for Sergej in the visitor’s gap between the mattresses of his double bed. If that wasn’t tear-jerking, what was? Fee reported that Sergej had cried when it turned out that his father would not come back anytime soon, but when Michael called him, from the room’s phone at that, for added Hollywood desperation, for service-fee indulgence, Sergej remained so composed that the conversation entered Michael’s top five of their most hurtful confrontations. That’s gotta be a Ben Franklin if he tells it to Larry. The American job market extended its open arms across the Atlantic and Michael browsed the virgin pages of his US passport like a baby album. The hotel room’s TV featured a near-complete cable lineup of US channels with conveniently sedating afternoon reality programs in the European wee hours. Picture-perfect worlds of products that would soon be available for him to purchase. Eventually, he opted for the New York branch of his employer to put the excruciating idleness between the required actions of various recruiting procedures to an end. Fishing on a decommissioned speedboat with the smoker’s-breath-sound of a laptop running as the only indication of passing time. Ten-thousand upvotes for the host’s generous remuneration of that story.

Michael’s phone vibrates. Black Teflon work jumpsuits with electric blue lining in twenty plus sizes for fully validated Freddy F employees. Another vibration. The number you have called is now available. Sergej answers with a tired but calm voice and Michael can barely contain his relief.

“Still Bank Holiday?”

A yes with a pause that precedes it.

“Don’t burn yourself out, ay? Can you stay on the line?”

A door is slamming here or there.

“Serge?”

“Yes, I’ll stay on the line, dad.”

Ex machina, the searchlight of a camera outshines the feeble 3.7 volt Orion’s belt.

“Here we go. Better get ready.”

Production sits in Houston, Texas. Nobody gets to see Larry’s joystick-wielding staff down south. They laugh and wear short cargos. Supposedly the microphones are only active if the camera’s red light indicates somebody’s watching. Larry’s everything but a fiend.

“I made another progenitor. I think somebody spread the word that I can help people out.”

Sergej is speaking in borrowed phrases, but it only makes his talk more familiar in Michael’s ears. Universal intimacy where there isn’t yet a familial one.

“Let me present to you the new member of the family.”

Universal intimacy for a global market. A bucket hat trailing a veil of curls over jewels and lycra grows from the hole in the floor. Michael is contractually required to dedicate his full attention to the host and employer, yet he needs another minute to make sure that Sergej is really alright. The shot-reverse-shot equipment of the room only leaves him his profile to withdraw to. Lianne comes to his rescue.

“Daddy needs another quality minute with his son.”

Larry Caucasian, proficient in the globally well-known vocabulary of the moving image, throws his hat in excitement and a dollar flutters to the ground from his head.

“Let’s get these two on tape together. Little Michael, talk to us. We have a thousand viewers, who want to hear from you.”

“I don’t think that is a good idea,” but again, the transmission is against Michael, clear as mountain air, it overrules the parental intermediary and passes Larry’s proposal on to the other end. “Can I, dad?”

“I don’t think he wants to.”

“Ah, don’t be shy, Little Michael”, “Sergej.”, “we need to know the boy behind the man. We need to know what makes Michael here get up in the morning.”

Pluralis majestatis. Lianne pouts behind Larry’s back, snapping her hand like a beak. It’s only words, it’s only voice. No one is going to see Sergej, nobody will capture gifs of his nostrils talking. Snap, snap, a pinkish hatchling gaping for pocket money.

“Fine.”

Michael holds the device out to Larry. One spot then we’re back. The box set of Larry Caucasian’s latest pre-pandemic stage show is a prepper’s delight of storm lighters, moonwalker’s nutrition, and multi-fiber apparel. Box sets, the Swiss army knife for the e-commerce age. The future salutes you with a box set, Michael. It’s packaging solves your rent problems, too, as you’ve undoubtedly seen in the darker corners of your quarter. Larry’s shaved arm wraps around his sweaty back.

“The number.”

“The number?”

“I need the number.”

“What number?”

“This is not a call-in show, buddy. I call.”

The number. Michael states the access code to his son and realizes that he is still blocking the line. The box set comes at a steel-cheap ninety-four ninety-five. Holy, does Sergej sound young on the line. Of course he has heard about Larry Caucasian, what does Michael know?

“What are you doing right now, my man?”

“Playing.”

Larry Caucasian claims he can make a brick wall conversational.

“Alright! What are you playing?”

“Bank Holiday.”

Only Larry himself is quicker with his burst of excitement than his editors, who send air horn sounds through the room.

“Where you at, bro? We wanna see your base.”

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

“Look, it’d be fairly easy. You tell us what to build. You say: Dad, I think we should build a privy.”

Shit makes for a cheap laugh.

“And then your dad builds the privy.”

Financial details will be discussed between Larry, Michael, Sergej, and Houston. Cut.

*[Insert]*

Only the lights have remained with Michael. Larry Caucasian is playing a game of Race the Riders with Angel and San, each of them rooting for the animated icon representing their delivery person’s progress. The game’s integration into Freddy F is in early alpha, if he’ll be riding again in a couple of weeks’ time Michael might have to stop dead in his tracks, too, every time an adversarial customer drops a virtual banana peel in his path. Lianne took her foam dish of rice and beans to the deserted lobby. The flood lamps have remained, Sergej has, too.

“So you are going to become a consultant.”

Two glottal hums mean yes.

“Have you been thinking about what you want to do later?”

Two glottal hums mean no.

“Come on, help me out here, I got sixty more screws to go.”

“I will brush my teeth and I’ll be in bed before ten-thirty.”

The holes that Angel has drilled in the soft, second-hand wood indulgently guide the screw like the kiddie rails at the bowling alley Sergej had invited his friends to for the last birthday party his father had joined in person.

“Don’t act like you don’t know what I mean.”

Sergej claws into a parent’s knee-pit for a wreckful hold of its popliteus.

“You know that I wanted to become a writer when I was your age? Travel or something, stories about volcanic belts and deep-sea fish with head lamps.”

With forceful flips of his right, Sergej plays the action buttons like hand drums, his angry solo sparked by his father’s unsolicited nostalgia gets his avatar’s nails deep enough into the flesh and tissue of the parent it's fighting. The giant collapses onto its knees and the way to its vital targets is clear.

“Dad! I’m working, okay?”

Michael would have sulked if it wasn’t for the uncannily satisfying spin of the Spax in its hole. Only a certain age-appropriate disillusionment with quote unquote the youth, he feels. However, it’s not like Sergej doesn’t have dreams, goals. His predispositions and inclinations are visible to Michael, too, only that his father draws faulty conclusions, like his own baby-boomer grandparents did, that used to think in outdated categories of lifelong professions. Michael, too, falsely interprets the signs. The mall maps, the collecting, the silent sucking up of information that never fails to surprise Michael when it comes back wrapped as an argument in a fight. The average scholarly performance that may or may not be explained by his son’s tendency to be smart broodingly. Michael’s grandparents, maybe Wanda, too, would have imagined Sergej as an architect, engineer, or geographer. Michael in turn resolves around activities and sees his son building something, software is always an option, or product designer for Lego, a millennial's branded wilderness of imagination. But Sergej thinks about purpose, making little distinction between his own gains and other altruistic returns when it comes to anything beyond the candy drawer. And by now Michael would concur with his son’s approach, because even though he would get excited enough over some new web framework to privately invest in a never-to-be-redeemed online course, it has turned out he hasn’t been missing his former day-to-day one bit. Everything becomes repetitive, becomes tedious with time. Another screw turns hypnotically in its hole.

“Yes!”

Cool spray hisses from the bottle cap.

“Patrick promised to give me twenty euros if I managed to procreate his 205-day-old and you know what?”

Michael hums in tune with the purring screwdriver.

“I did it! He tried a million times already and I did it in an hour.”

“Cool.”

“He promised me twenty.”

“In what? Piggy-bank-cents? I thought he’s not allowed paper money?”

Akash doesn’t believe in cash and rather has his son move significant amounts of bank holiday’s in-game currency.

“But I can sell that for euros.”

“And the cars?”

Sergej has already moved beyond his job translating cars from forgotten shelf-dusters to the bankholidian game world.

“This is paying much more.”

It stings Michael that Sergej abandons the job that had still required some support from his old man, even if it was only his faded collection of storage media. But there’s nothing to argue with, especially since even if he lingers criminally, finishing the remaining forty screws won’t bring in more than nine dollars after taxes.

“Don’t let the money take the fun out of it, though.”

“Twenty-three. Fifty tokens go for twenty-three euros.”

“I thought I could write for money. To be honest with you, I wasn’t all that sure about my choices when I finished my degree. I knew that I liked working with computers. I had a talent for working with them, too. Giving instructions to them felt like giving instructions to mom. To your grandma. But when I had finished studying, I felt some kind of lack of, let’s call it aesthetic sophistication, of something anyone would consider beautiful or vaguely artistic. In the town that I studied in, the presence of liberal arts majors was inescapable and hanging out with a lot of them made me think that even with the financial demands of a child, a frugal, creative profession would fit my life more than one in an office with other computer science majors that proudly insisted that coding was an art in itself.”

Penny-jar broker Sergej waits for his sell order to go through.

“Why didn’t you work as a writer then?”

Because of you, Sergej. Because you robbed me of the courage I needed for making the change.

“Don’t know.”

Cross-head screw set like a full stop.

The transmission swallows the sound of the water the bathtub is collecting in its beak. Sergej steps into the unnoticed bath, his shoulder-long hair fans out like a jellyfish as he leans back, closes like a clam as he sits up, his right erect and glowing like a lighthouse as he keeps the advertised splashproof receiver above the foamy surface. One time in Turkey he had broken his arm and he had had to bathe and swim with his hand cast in L-shape sticking out like he was taking a bus. Five volts in the bathtub might make a soothing massage like mom’s long fingernails on his scalp, but let’s better be safe than sorry. Michael’s aftershave gives a metallic sting to the bath water. Do something about the nuclear water in New Mexico, do something for the protesters at Atomic Gardens, that’s what he would like to do. What exactly doesn’t matter. Everything must be directed. Michael can ramble on about the beauty of his pure functions and forget that he only put them to work on zoomable previews of greeting card templates, Sergej is submerged in his own bubble bath, watching the clouds of foam pass on the water’s surface. Like nuclear cumulus in a wide western sky. Like the yellowish scum collecting in the nooks of the quay walls down at the harbor. How can someone blame Sergej for rejecting his father who only thinks about the world after having clocked out. After-work beers with collective self-pity and fair-trade peanuts. These days Sergej feels like he needs to reduce himself to less. Not only because of the money that he, too, knows is running out. Not only because of the ecological footprint that needs shrinking. His body feels like too much to handle these days, sudden growth, new parts appearing. Sometimes he wants to go back to single senses, like he imagines a fetus to feel. One way in, one way out, unary-function-fetus. Existing as an ear, an ear only. His auricle surfaces amidst the foam, the cell phone on the tub’s edge crackles. He turns his head until only his nose sticks out and blows like a whale. Then comes the eye, emerging from the waters on the forehead’s hillside, a solitary island foam-arisen, but the foam stings, burns unbearably in the isolated sensory organ.

“Ow!”

“Serge? What’s going on?”

“I got soap in my eye.”

“Get the milk, take off your shirt, get in the bathtub, and pour some in your eye.”

“Ow.”

“It’s okay, it’s nothing serious.”

“Ouch.”

“Just pour the milk. I’ll clean up the kitchen later.” It’ll be okay. Drowsy Michael, a mellow high of naive optimism muffles his perception. Is it bathwater or milk pouring from a jug on the kitchen floor? The wooly heat in the wooden space holds him like a uterus. The planks moan with every screw tightening, with every one of Michael’s steps like savoring men in public saunas. The room is windowless but it must be sunny beyond the bark of the building.

Michael once knew someone that worked for an autonomous car company, and all he had to do for his job was being the scapegoat for trolley problems. Michael knew someone, who was paid to shush the audience of a papal minor basilica in ten languages via megaphone. She could call for silence and respect in English, Italian, German, French, Spanish, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Croatian, and, she had worked in tax evasion before the crash, Malay. Nobody that Michael knew or knows is paid to work under his or her child. Once in a while, news about underage employers hit the lifestyle sections, illustrated with portraits of the quote unquote Gameboy-goal-getters, a nickname as obsolete and ignorantly imposed as the minors’ disguises, that invoke images of management in the prawn cocktail period that even the parents rarely witnessed. Chocolate cigars and prestige brands’ kids’ lines. Little red rotary club and the pup of Wall Street. The legal guardians smirk behind their wards’ back pocketing hard cash while the quote unquote Etch-A-Sketch-entrepreneurs are granted the liberties of ordering hot chocolate at will and having the intern carry bags as they shop at Neiman Marcus under the benevolent parental eye, liberties more age-appropriate than the common executive fringe benefits of sexual misconduct and tax fraud. Sergej doesn’t have the air of a prodigy, Sergej has the air of a smallest common denominator, that took him a couple of nightly video calls to wrap his head around. Sergej beautifully dissolves in group photos, within a healthy circle of friends suspended between the poles of the fat and the bullies. He doesn’t fit the role of the wunderkind, yet he assumes the self-infatuated diction and bossing arrogance in no time.

“A what?”

“Telescope.”

There hasn’t been much progress lately, but at the tip of Sergej’s virtual, vertical supermarket the skeletal socket of his observatory is already visible. Curious aliens looking back into the terrestrial eye will marvel at the cheap essentials and weekly bargains of Sergej’s bankholidian discounter under the microscope.

“How the hell do you figure me building a telescope in here? From bottle bases?”

But Larry Caucasian loves challenges, his audience not less, and the NSF is grateful for some cross-promotion. Raining tips grow whatevers.

“Have you been flossing today?”

They are back to their private conversation, now that another jobsite has called for Larry, and although Michael’s employee evaluation sheets may soon pass through his son’s hands, dental hygiene remains a field of his own discretionary competence.

“Yes.”

No challenging remark, pure data. Michael expected Sergej to fall back into his old dismissiveness now that he has public authorization. V-shaped recovery, a dip into arrogance, now they’re back to monosyllabic coexistence.

“I think it’s gonna be a cool observatory. The one you’re gonna build.”

Michael is unsure if it’s filial affection or the motivating employer talking. He’s climbing ladder after ladder traversing rooms and rooms and rooms, empty rooms, countless levels of sideshow rooms like in an oligarch’s palace. The last level must be thirty floors from street level or more. The neighboring offices as seen through the walls’ cracks read upper management. The wind whistles a tune from a Lexus commercial. The construction of windows is discouraged at this height, only a skylight wouldn’t compromise the structural stability of the wooden tower. As Michael drills a hole into the ceiling as a setup for his jigsaw, the percussion shakes the walls and makes the suspension of the billboard their highrise is attached to chime in cat-like with the wailing sounds from the video wall across the street. Two moons, one round, one wrapped around the curving glass of the facade, shed their blue light into the attic floor as the sawed-out plywood round falls into the room. The sky seems closer than the underground carpark at this height, and if his bandwidth would have allowed, Michael would have added video to their call.

“I can see why you want an observatory.”

Sergej hums knowingly.

“You should go on the roof, it’s beautiful now.”

Take the key, take the flashlight, shoes, although the bitumen should still be warm and sticky from the afternoon sun. Son and dad, each looking up into a cloudless open flank of one of the moons.

“We should cut an observatory into the living room ceiling.”

The security deposit is lost, anyway.

“Are you going to come home soon?”

Could it really be affection speaking?

“I think I can call it a day.”

Larry Caucasian is overjoyed with the observatory. Somebody from the community offers a physicist’s advice on the optimal focal length of the ocular slash skylight. Stars fade behind the dual moon. Five stars for the employee.

*It has been difficult for me to reconstruct the months of your late pregnancy. In part because the pictures you took became more and more nondescript. There are fifteen shots of lights being refracted in the oil stain in front of the kitchen window that continually renewed itself, fed by an unknown source. I could give a fair account of the weather during those months but have to guess as far as your state is concerned, although the series itself testifies to that, too. Nothing, according to the few times we talked about this period, happened, which was true at a calendar’s level of intimacy. Another reason why I still hold Lule dearly as my favorite temp dad is because he helped to shed some light on this stretch of sleepy days and sleepless nights. Everyone would open up to Lule eventually, whether because you trusted him or because you couldn’t stand the unexpecting silence that often set in with him. He was deceleration incarnate, and you applied your regularly recurring relationships with him like a medicine when your running pulse would be in danger of spinning out of control. Unfailing supplies of family money and prescription drugs treating his post-traumatic stress disorder he acquired as a teenage paramedic assured a calmness so profound that even Lule himself would become bored when he thought of himself, so instead he had hours on end to generously dedicate to the petty problems of the Carolingian dynasties he studied, the local artists he counseled on tax issues, and anybody who had the time to sit or stroll with him. Like a sponge he absorbed sorrows and stories, and only rarely would he inadvertently spill a detail that had been confided to him by somebody else previously. Only this spill revealed to me that you had met Paul again once you had returned to Germany. You had been stoking your anger for weeks so you would last while you would wait for him to get back to his desk from one of his work-hard-play-hard appointments. But then he was there at his desk, unexpectedly, and similarly unexpected, he countered your anger with saved up reproaches of his own. He had been busy indeed. He had tried calling in favors, but the limited pay his contacts had offered offended both your talent and Paul himself as the mentor he believed to be to you. You were a girl from a dissipating peripheral country. It had been mere months since you quit a school that ran on anti-imperialist syllabi and left you with barely a grasp of the English language. The untainted perspective that Paul had tried to sell had been deemed dangerously uninformed and naive. Nobody had offered anything more than sympathetic pastime-assignments. No doubt that you would have taken them on, would have enjoyed them. The challenge of overcoming underestimating editors alone would have spurred you more than ample paychecks could have done. Paul, however, had considered the offers an offense not least to him. And the more time had passed, the more Paul’s image of you as an organic body with a voice and a growing midsection had been supplanted by a digital representation of you, a number that he believed to be your market value and that no offer would meet. Besides his own pride, he had had an ulterior motive in asking a certain price for your labor. As you already knew, William had been anything but delighted to host you, and making your own rent in the city would require you to have an adequate income. This was where the balance shifted. Suddenly you were the one in need of explaining. How you had never made an effort to practice your English. How you barely helped out around the house. Why you secluded yourself inside instead of trying to get a job on your own. You had jeopardized Paul and William’s relationship with every day you had been overstaying your visit. Hard work it had been for Paul to convince his boyfriend to wait until your money would run out, while at the same time keeping him from asking money for the rent. Partly lazy to actually deal with a difficult situation, partly wanting to look out for you, to spare you the embarrassment of being asked to leave, wanting you to make your own decisions and experiences, he had stopped calling editors on your behalf and had concentrated on calling William at work to appease him. Sleazy Paul, the dandyish editor with a probable drug problem, had taken the liberty to be a father to you: protective, patronizing, and full of bad decisions. The anger kept down the tears until you were on the train back east. Where was I? In a stroller you had brought along to have me listen to your voice getting shriller as a preview of the discussions between you and my temp dads in the years to come? Or had I already been handed off to the respective momentary father, put to bed in a place that most resembled a cot in his apartment? Sleeping in a folding box, on a blanket among choking-hazard Styrofoam peanuts left over from yesterday’s stereo delivery? Was I with Oma and Opa, or had the discord truly been so severe that you had hidden in the baby care room by the luggage carousels until they had finally left Tegel’s welcome bay? If I had been there with you, I could have laughed, I could have cried and screamed. I would have caught your attention, I would have seized you with my marzipan hands to never let go of you again, and you would have forgotten your tears and sighed, and taken the diaper bag to the restroom with a smile. But the seat next to you was empty and the legroom, too. That’s how I stayed the consolation prize.*

*William spent most of the early summer hours outside, practicing in parks, hanging around in front of galleries that extended their culinary attendance upon their exclusive guests to the sidewalk. Paul continued to excuse himself, and lately he had left it to his staff to excuse him, there was an abundance of news to be covered, and with the union on the horizon the silly season had been called off. Some years removed, it must have indeed felt like nothing had been happening in the last weeks before my birth, compared to what was happening in your home country. Your former peers would remember their daily routines of those days in astonishing detail, as subtle customizations of the societal memories eternalized in headlines and slogans, that only reached you garbled, and with several days delay, if they reached you at all. The day the D-Mark came to Eastern Germany was the day before the day before you passed an international newsstand on a walk around the block that you had forced yourself on. Or perhaps it was the day before that, you weren’t sure whether it was still Tuesday.*

*As far as I can remember, any instant of idleness has always been unbearable for you. However, you must have developed this aversion only after my birth, because, if not, how could you have survived several weeks of idleness? Even on your rare sick days you were agonizing more over the idle hours than any physical symptoms. Any passing of time to you meant advancing along the imagined bell curve that expressed your rapidly decreasing chances of achieving some vaguely delineated state of being recognized as an artist. Introspection was a valuable resource in achieving your aspirations, but only in relation to external factors and events. The own body, one’s own identity hadn’t become a hot topic, yet. Therefore the egocentric cosmos of your lonely weeks in Brooklyn, when your thoughts were only turning inward to the forming center of gravity and meaning, remained unaffected by your self-reflective archival work. There was a twofold reluctance to tell me about that time. To you it was significant at most in that it accounted for the final fifteen percent of cell growth that would eventually yield me. And once you would sincerely try to recall your thoughts from those weeks, reality would be pitted against your hopes and plans you had made in your brownstone hermitage.*

*Thankfully, you rarely forced your compulsive restlessness on me, so that I could take my own time to ponder on the few facts that you had shared about the final weeks of my embryonic stage. Maybe those were the last weeks of calm and rest for the both of us. In a city of predictable dangers, in an apartment of a favorable landlord you lived off a fridge that William filled with whatever he saw fit and whatever he would tolerate to share with you, and I lived off that, too. We were a Russian doll of a citizen of a vanishing nation and an unborn stateless, that would grab hold of any soli or sanguinis as soon as he would see the light of day, because who knows when one or the other would come in handy.*

*It came in handy when I needed to leave. Leave quickly, like you did. Like you, I too spend a couple of weeks in isolation, solitary confinement with considerable comforts and conveniences. The company paid for my probation lodging, and I lived on the block of a futuristic supermarket that supported my fridge model. The fridge and the store were in a constant dialogue that me and the delivery person weren’t having. I rewarded the silence with generous tips because I had enough to deal with in those introspective times. Emotional pain surprised me with an iron fist to the midriff and when I managed a trip to IKEA, I chose the furniture that would cradle a curled-up posture best. My front was a sandwich board listing my wrongdoings and I needed to fold my remaining surface over it. If I were you, I could say that nothing happened, then. What did I think? I thought nothing. Innocent bystanders imagine this kind of guilt-ridden sadness as an ongoing argument of interior voices accusing each other in well-prepared summations. Truth is, the sadness was weighing much too heavy on my mind to stage this kind of play. Like a flood, like tar the sadness isolated every area of my brain, allowing only a few bare electric pulses to pass through to keep emergency operations running. My perception felt reduced to a feeble lighthouse searching with its needle-head spot in the dark. I found a beanbag, a round table fell in my path, convenience food on crestfallen-eye-level shelves, a central area of pixels lighting up in red-blue-green amalgamations. A single thread of consciousness, that’s what really means nothing: Having to stop dead in place to remember dates and errands, and then running out of capacity to care for them. You were unoccupied, melancholic maybe in the abandoned apartment, but your mind must have been in a bankholidian frenzy of questions and possibilities.*

There is no key in his pockets, and the backpack doesn’t jingle as Michael shakes it. His son has probably heard him rummaging on the doormat, so he might as well ring. Sergej switches signals back to the languidly wobbling camera of Bank Holiday. The money he made in the previous hours slitting black-spurting throats of parental placeholders went straight to his father’s offshore account, so that Sergej’s funds are not only safe from the landlady but also from impulsive underage shopping sprees.

“I need your account to make a deposit, so that I can hire someone to script the optics.”

That’s too much information along with the various bridge loan offers and extension agreements in today’s mail. None of the envelopes is addressed aggressively enough to contain an eviction notice, the paper tower on the sideboard is raised by another floor and makes Michael recall today’s workplace, which, surprisingly, is not an unpleasant thought. Maybe the filial co-direction is not a bad thing, after all.

“Account. Money. Need. Dad!”

At least Sergej’s directives were much more patient over the phone. Sergej should already be in bed by now, but Michael had a good day, and the toothbrush feels like bedtime prep, so he feels he can grant his son the unscheduled, unbudgeted construction work for his bankholidian observatory. Over the side of the virtual roof Michael spots a constant coming and going of player’s visiting Sergej’s supermarket. The western edge of the roof is within range of the barn’s audio, where someone is playing organ tunes, the moon shines here, too, and the shadow of Sergej bounces around in front of the screen, explaining his architectural vision. This is a happy child. Untainted by divorce and pandemic. Unconcerned with the bankholidian demimonde creatures that roam the island. The uniformly default avatars of the IP-switching pederasts roaming the streets. The shakedown wrecking crews haven’t gotten a whiff of Sergej’s supermarket yet. The man of a thousand voices might have been a glimpse of unsettling research on a city’s population of homeless whose consciousnesses synchronized with the common signal of hundreds of perfectly isolated VR setups, but most likely it was merely audio feedback. Cherished, loved, snug and secure in a life approved for all audiences. In space, father and son are united. The cosmonaut meets the aeronautical entrepreneur. Michael even gets the chance to explain the few basics he remembers from his physics education. Tonight they will remember forever, tonight is a night, where all rules are suspended, the day extends beyond bedtime preparations, unsecured ascents, pajamas and street shoes, no work tomorrow if they don’t want to. The acute triangle of two angled arms pointing into the photopolluted sky is closed by a tightening band between familiars. The moon draws a tide of residents to the roofs, each family on its own private sheet of roofing, happily exploring uncharted areas of small talk. Stretched out on the bitumen, the night is warm like summer, or perhaps it’s the heat from the drum fires that adds up. Each summer the bankholidian population celebrates the placement of the first user-generated object on the fictitious island, a digitized Persian string instrument shaped like a peacock from some publicly accessible, colonialist collection. Fires burn on the tallest buildings, and with makeshift mortars, the players honor both bank holiday and GORILLAS.BAS by slinging their most impressive models into the bankholidian neighborhood. No models are flying, but the laughter blowing over from the scattered families is at least as good. The city’s budding and every plywood attachment promises new space is bursting with life, the extension cords thrown out of the annex’s windows like ticker tape feed an embryonic ideal of fertile frugality, like the one that made this country great, that made the tailfins long and the buildings vertiginous.

Elation or the near roof edge is making Michael dizzy. Four stories is a few seconds falling. A few hidden pixels of the bankholidian ground open into a bottomless gorge of eternal falling. A rare plane passes overhead. Michael is about to fall.

“Can you bring me to the airport tomorrow, dad?”

A fall from up there minus the rush of air would be quite pleasant, the monkish, meditative suspension in mid-air, the white noise of all the sounds of five boroughs blending.

“But I already got your luggage.”

“They are flying me out.”

A borrowed phrase, again. They, whoever “they” is, readily assumed the warzone terminology.

“Wait a second. You are flying back?”

Escort mission to the evacuation zone.

“The government is flying people back.”

“But that’s for emergencies!”

Whatever this is. Deus ex VTOL aircraft. Michael folds up like a lawn chair as the air suddenly feels cold.

“If they are flying people out, I have to go.”

Sergej lets the sentence end waver in the night air gone gelid, as much as he wishes it to be true, he senses that nobody is going to rope-rescue him from his window or shred his citizenship if he doesn’t present himself at the gate tomorrow. Each summer the bankholidian population hurls players along with their beloved knick-knacks from the tallest structures of the game. Personae non gratae flung from the top floors only to take on the unnerving ascent once again, unharmed but stultified. Michael tucks his knees to lock his guts in place but they still feel like they’re falling, as if he swallowed one of those secret bankholidian pixel-portals. The city’s metastasizing with plywood bloating greenish in the rain, extension cables hanging like neglected umbilical cords from unsightly annexes.

“Dad?”

“I don’t know.”

After this, what is there that one can be sure of, anyway?

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

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

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

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

*Not that other fathers and mothers I got to know seemed particularly keen on parenting. Some were absent like you, some so unloving that their filterless were the only tenderness that came across their lips. Dave’s parents were so inherently parental among their ten children that you wouldn’t even think of them individuals but rather as nuclei in a cloud of brats they steered with much yelling and the incessant bark of their first-born Jack Russell through the neighborhood. I wouldn’t have demanded nor appreciated the motherliness of brought-up cookie trays and shuttle services, as prominently displayed by one family that, as I later learned from insider sources, were notorious with local police for domestic violence.*

*[…]*

*The day I’m released into the world is the day the hammer comes down, chickens and roost. At the gates to life in full colors, another gatekeeper in drab clothes sits behind his ledger demanding a toll. Googly-eyed I watch your larynx jump. Your heartbeat massages my feet. Watch out not to hit my head as you bend over the counter. Thousands could be hundreds could be all or nothing, to me it makes no difference, I think. The figure they ask for your treatment could mean emergency shelter, could mean ivy league college. Even if the GDP came embossed in my capita, I couldn’t make anything of the number on the bill he hands you. You’re mine, but after all, what do I know about you? I can’t lift my head to see if the drops on my head come from drizzle leftover from the summer storm or your eyes. Your damp chest reflects the neon light of the city gleaming, steaming with anonymous electricity and exhaust conducts, courtesy of Paul Schrader. Ejected by hyperreality. This life is too much Hollywood to not have an ending. Courtesy of my grandparents. I’m so close to you. I put my ear to your chest and you put your ear to the receiver and we listen to Oma laying out the plan that gets us home within a week, just in time for the reunification treaty. Your heart beats sadness and relief and mine beats along to it.*

Of all times, Sergej is prepared this time like boy scout for his trip. The completeness of his thrown-together baggage hurts more than any spiteful word of goodbye ever could. Tomorrow, the federally chartered eagle will come all the way from Berlin to pick him up but won’t wait a minute if he’s late. Only scorched earth left behind. He doesn’t have an alarm, has never seen the reason for it. Clocks, yes, thank you, but the ones with the metal mushroom cap and the little hammer like an autoimmune reaction never lasted long on Sergej’s bedside table. He thinks of the hammer in the toolbox under his bed and whether he will need it as a tool or weapon tonight. Never has his father’s voice or gaze been so dangerously blank. If tomorrow Michael should be gone, milk is in the fridge and the dusty sediment of the expensive muesli bought before the crisis is on the shelf that he can get to with the steps. Michael has taught him how to fix breakfast, now malnutrition is no longer a danger any more in this house. Night’s silent ambient noise plus sex noises that as of last summer Sergej can classify, after his father explained to him what it was. Sergej had learned about gas mains before he had learned about bed springs in motion and he had been convinced that the house would explode like that other one he’d seen the rubble of on TV. He had been embarrassed and only slightly reassured until his father had shown him the gas connection, too and he had gotten distracted by the intricate chaos of tubing and wiring under the sink. The neighboring room is silent and perhaps Michael is already gone.

He is not, and although his thoughts are racing head-to-head with his son’s, no tossing and turning make his own bed springs alert Sergej. It’s all known feelings by now. The first shock may have come out of the blue, but the abandonment - even though Michael was the one leaving, he had always felt like he had been the first to be abandoned - is nothing new. Neither the hurt nor the sulky joy about uninhibited individual freedom. He can party, he can smoke, he can buy his son’s weight in cryptocurrencies. Sadness is coming like stalactites from the bedroom ceiling in front of his eyes. Thanks to its bulk purchase, the roman catholic church now has to deal with that bankholidian cathedral that Michael liked. An average gothic model on the face of it, but inside the nave is almost entirely occupied by what looks like a megalomaniac, upside down drip castle coming down from the vault, which to Michael is the best visualization of a divine spirit that he can remember having seen. Sergej and him had made drip castles, when they had gone to the sea, one had been taller than the boy at the time. Stalactites grow and bulge, before long they will have become columns, jail bars confining Michael in his queen-sized cell.

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

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

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

“I feel like your counselor already.”

“...”

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

“Wasn’t that hard, in the end.”

Slowly his head untangles the real and the dreamworldly memories.

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

“...”

“We can still go for the fist fight between you and I, in case you prefer.”

“Sergej’s leaving.”

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

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

“Oh.”

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

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

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

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

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

“The government chartered some planes to get people home. “

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

“Thanks.”

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

“Will do. Thanks, Akash.”

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

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

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

“Watch your step.”

The curb is a testimony to the sweepers’ work ethic. It’s hard to wrap one’s head around how so much trash can result from the processing of what has already been trash before. Central Brooklynites opted for shacks and huts on their roofs rather than loggias and winter gardens attached to their facades like barnacles. Without other valid reasons to leave the house under the slight drizzle of this iffy spring, only the sad and the angry share the streets with them. Red eyes and stamping feet that needed to escape the thick air of their apartments, that suddenly shrank when they stopped cohabiting in shifts. The rain camouflages the tears. They are in good company, Michael and his son, but it vanishes with the drizzle as they enter the subway. The service is limited but still running. Please avoid non-essential travel until further notice. Underground escape routes shooting outbound in stainless steel. They watch a trio of ticket inspectors progress along the length of the train. Empty seats as far as they can see, but they progress at their habitual speed of one cart per station, which is hilarious to watch but also awe-inspiring given the earnestness with which the three progress, the reverence they display for their work, for a work that is so dependable it even continues when the purpose of it is no longer apparent. Michael is so taken by the group he not only shows their subway tickets but courteously folds and fans out the stack of self-certifications and exception permits. One of the ticket inspectors glances politely at their paperwork before they get off. Alone again. Michael keeps staring straight out the window, stolidly ahead, orthogonal to the direction of travel, so that a watercolor bath of motion-blurred colors fills his vision like a desperate attempt at cheering him up with billboard-colored streaks against a the gray sky. The rattle of the train swallows the snivels, and Michael only notices Sergej crying when the combination sobs and the bumpy train ride makes his son bump into him. The subway’s motion virtually forces Michael’s hand to bounce from his own onto Sergej’s knee with every tie, but his left remains firmly grasping the wool of his pant leg. For an eternal minute or two, Sergej’s uncontrollable sobs have him gasp for air, but to Michael the most terrifying quality of his son’s crying is that it’s the crying of an adult, a voiceless crying, without uttering words or calls for a guardian. Just breath, opening and closing of crevices, like a piece by Meredith Monk. Maybe a wail would have shaken Michael out of his petrified passiveness, maybe an arm would have wound around the slumped, little shoulders, but his son’s crying is too much like he knows he should be crying himself, yet he is not, and the realization that he is not, and that he doesn’t see why he is not makes him more worried about his own state rather than his son’s. So he sits, tightly wound, thoughts racing the train, staring at the reflection of sobbing Sergej overlaid onto the blurry view out the window. Brave, blue-clad ticket inspectors. You could build post-apocalyptic societies with them. The second post-apocalypse is always easier to administer than the first. Last time the curve was distinctly U-shaped, with some weeks of long hours behind drawn blinds, their colors cycled through black and brown, ocher once on a particularly sunny day. Last time required a whole package of measures to get over the guilt and the grievance. Dramatic measures as seen on screen, memorabilia and drugstore-printed family photos in the trash and the like. This time he’s aiming for V, the train’s unsteady rubber flooring will be his rock bottom. At most another ruined Sunday and he’ll be off to a fresh start. Move again, pick another square-set city or town, get another job where the onboarding at the coffee machine takes longer than learning the ropes of the business, and soon he’ll make jokes about how four thousand miles really take the edge off a pubescent child. But does that sound realistic, another figure asks, having appeared out of the swell of colors, a figure that he last saw three years ago through the window of a gallery lit only by the projection of a film loop of familiar images, an apparition that almost triggered another bender, almost turned the U into a W. The combination of projected images of home and that all too well-known opening hubris he recognized in the figure’s stance served a particular cocktail of homesickness and longing alongside the hash brownies he was offered from a Tupperware container as he stood outside the window among the smokers. But then he controlled himself and went on a company trip to Arizona and returned to manage the inconveniently tugging family ties as he had done before, either ignoring the issue at large or complaining to friends and co-workers that had no other choice but to agree with his viewpoint compassionately. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise, Wanda’s presence, but the letter that contained her announcement of her show, and much more importantly the offer of a visit and the promise of much exerted listening on her part, had landed unopened in the trash. There might have been a letter, too, this time, USPS is slow these days and for all the urgency Wanda wouldn’t have had the surcharge of private couriers. And then she’s gone again, anyway. Nothing but an elusive spirit animal emerging from the window haze. Less than that, a skeptic, nagging presence. She has made most of the mistakes he’s making herself. She would have a lot of advice to give, but she doesn’t deserve the satisfaction of explaining to her son what he is doing wrong while simultaneously receiving some kind of tacit absolution that comes with the fact that her son is no better with his own offspring than she was with hers. Returning to the initial question: Yes, it does sound like something completely realistic. Arguably realistic that Sergej can handle growing up without a male parent. Pretty realistic considering that the past few weeks they have developed nothing but the distinctive intimacy of strangers going through a crisis together. Perfectly realistic, seeing that the absolute devotion to one’s child, when disappointed, decays to deposits that can realistically found a barrier strong enough to prevent and protect from looking back. Absolutely realistic, just as the leading question itself, which is so much like his mother, Michael has almost forgotten it has sprung from his own imagination. The more he chews on the question, the angrier he gets at her, who doesn’t have the right to deny him his fresh start merely because she had been too inconsequential to go through with her own attempts at it, of which she had had many, only that hers had included her son, whether he had wanted or not, and most of the times he did not. And although she acted as if it was because of him that she didn’t end up burning bridges, it had been her second thoughts alone that had always made her turn back halfway. If she would have been less inconsistent, she would have left him with a temp dad for good, so who is she to judge his choices.

Sergej dries his tears on a zwieback from his sack lunch. The bone-dry rusk absorbs the salt gladly, soaks up the metallic taste of crying, too, all emotion becomes condiment of the innocent snack. He offers one to his father, who is still wrestling with the flicker of his mother’s image. Who is she to rebuke him for his struggle, having done nothing to help his problems with Sergej. She doesn’t deserve her own obliviousness, doesn’t deserve her smug comfort under the impression that nothing remains to be done but to respect her son’s decision to be a shitty father and an even shittier son. She’s all but free of fault, she’s a clueless tornado that leaves havoc behind, and only her ignorant belief in her right to make up for all the liberties withheld from women before her has been saving his mother from having to face the consequences of her actions. She appeared only to taunt him, but indeed she is at the root of this mess. The rusk breaks in a cloud on his palate and Michael’s agitation, like Sergej’s before, is instantly bound in the mix of saliva and flour dust. As he swallows, the mixture absorbs his hate of his mother’s self-righteousness, of his son’s mother-fixation, his discontent with his countless own faults that covers everything like a layer of slowly accumulating dust. The innocent mouthful takes up all the ugliness like a dishwater tab in commercials, and leaves a quasi-mint-conditioned man, a little bite of nicotine in the lungs and some tartar that needs removing, but otherwise a perfectly healthy, reasonably capable, and totally impassive male in his early thirties. A perfect time to be alone, a perfect moment to start fresh. Still young enough to fit the target group of the widest range of distractions, still young enough to have a couple of years to suppress and forget, to let something grow on the patch where he could bury his former lives. Michael carries all the luggage as they change to the interdimensional rail that connects the airport to the rest of the city. Gradually, as they walk on to the platform, the space becomes crowded. Single, ten, then hundreds of households orbit around their centroids of luggage and jackets shed for the spring’s warmth, equally spaced by the repelling forces of the old suspicion of strangers and the new consideration of others. Animated inflections slowly calm to flat curves between punctuation marks as the North American escorts see off the leaving. With red shadows around their eyes Michael and Sergej blend in with the crowd, red eyes under every brim and shade, cinnabar eyes like fruit flies from the same batch. What they say is barely audible, but crystal clear to grasp from the perpetual canon resounding in the double glass waiting hall of the air train station. Nothing noteworthy will be said in here anymore. A canon of reassuring revoir wishes and Godspeeds, insignificant altercations about forgotten items in the third verse. The hugs are heartfelt, but that might be the emollience of the scene. Air hisses from the platform’s screen doors and son and father dissolve in their separating crowds. Love has turned liquid, all anger has bubbled to the top and lies calmly, hermetically over the surface with no vent to escape, clear and unmoving, dangerously unnoticeable. Melancholia yields business, fizzy tablets spinning restlessly in a sort of merry self-harm, in the half empty glass box of the platform and the accelerating straw on its rails. The anger has broken its cage like a fistula, up up up it strives, up to the surface of a sea so wide, the perturbation is barely significant, a sandworm farting in the ocean. The love seeps out and blends with the waters that Michael steps into as he leaves Howard Beach.

*When there wasn’t a temp dad available, you usually left me with Robert’s family during principal 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 of 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 yard that now stood empty. From despairing over the downturn of his business Leonis segued 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 once assembled, they would add 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 one of the two workbenches. 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, not to mention the facelifted ninety-seven edition. It appeared tiny from the outside but was spacious enough to host both me and Robert as we discovered one summer night. 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. Later, 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. The soccer broadcast was our Sunday service, but when the car arrived, nobody pay attention to Hansa’s running counter anymore. Robert and I had been allowed to rearrange the cars in the yard so that the new arrival would take the theft-proof center, and now that it had been unloaded, it seemed like the other cars were crowding around it in awe with us. Stefanie had dug up a pop-up gazebo that we rigged up to shield the bride from eyes and weather. “Beautiful like Paris.” Leonis had never been to France. Stefanie was visibly rummaging around her memory for a French word and finally came up with “Manique”. Before laying hands on the car, the two insisted on a kick-off speech, explaining in great detail the Citroen’s hydropneumatic suspension to an audience that was scheduled to start physics classes next year. But 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 kielbasy, 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. Your small talk with Robert’s parents wasn’t 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 would have bet that on the way over, you were rehearsing the conversations you were about to have while waiting for me to get ready. When I volunteered some news about Leonis’ and Stefanie’s business you admired their industriousness and street wisdom. In conversation your eyes couldn’t help flickering between Stefanie’s face and the dead serious fraktur type on her shirt. Stefanie on her part had told me right out that she couldn’t get over the fact that your previous partner was a Slav. When I asked what a Slav was, she merely told me that we should honor our heritage, which confused me even more, because I thought heritage was a kind of debt that you needed to repay.*

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

*She looked down on you as much as you were disapproving of her, and with every time you picked me up from their bungalow where the different grays of city and country met, you made less of a secret of your mutual disdain. It’s hard to tell if you merely despised her politics or if you sensed that she and Leonis were giving me more than baked feta blocks with salty salad and air mattress bedding that Robert was made to sleep on every other night. They gave me much more than that indeed. I was on the threshold to puberty when you were enjoying a particularly busy and particularly celibate time of your life. By putting me to work, by awarding this work with collegial talk, by trusting my unsupervised dental care they were mitigating the fears of growing up, that other agemates around me were struggling with. I was confident because I did not depend on love outweighing other urges and desires but participated in an exchange of quantifiables that seemed to be at the root of adult behavior. At a time when my pubescent self-esteem was particularly prone to be infected by your peaking insecurities, Leonis and Stefanie set an example of a self-affirming bedrock solidity that denied any uncertainty by way of ignorance, repetition, and easy recreation. I would have earned nothing but conceited amusement had I suggested that you and I could become involved with one of the local clubs like Robert’s family was. The social democrats, that studiously withdrew from local festivities just before the first verse of the Deutschlandlied was stricken up, or the worker’s sports club, that administered various teams of different sports that would share in the one supreme discipline of drinking after hours, contributed to a local culture that you refused to call so and I increasingly discovered as a means of teenage rebellion. Initially I had adopted your contempt for these functions. But every time you came back from one of your own gatherings in the city or the capital, where you iterated over the same topics, the same stories with only names changing, again and again, where you drank only slightly superior beverages than those that were served at the club house, every return only made you more miserable, more frustrated, because you refused to relinquish your belief that your kind of gatherings were only the prelude to something bigger, not the consolation prize. At the club house, true to its socialist history, everyone was a winner. Being there was simultaneously a duty as it was a reward. The moderate fun it offered was valorized by the fact that I rarely had any high expectations going there that could have been disappointed, and the rare outliers of a kiss or a bloody nose to be taken away from it made the club house sufficiently exciting for not seeming boring. From your Berlin circles you took away the reassurance of belonging to some sort of elite. Although that elite was marked by a distinct auto-aggression, an elite constantly at war with its own conceitedness, which, I guess, was part of the game and the fun of belonging to it. If the contemplations on your self-important perspective would have been more serious, you would have made more of an effort to understand why I kept going to spend my time at the sticky pine tables of the club house. I could have explained to you the obvious satisfaction arising from greasy food and shared emotions. Emotions so easily divorced from the admittedly often witless subject matters that gave rise to them. Today I would claim that it would have been your duty to mingle with these locals, whose invitations you would always turn down at the parent-teacher meetings where you couldn’t evade them. One night at the groundskeeper’s fiftieth would have had more of a societal impact than another pre-dawn screening of your award-winning documentaries. But you never went. You listened with raised eyebrows to the stories of names without faces while I still shared them at home. You sang along with the Phil Collins single I had won in the Christmas raffle, but you refused me the tenner I needed to buy a present for next year’s edition. Leonis gave Santa, a woolen beard hiding everything but his nose, aglow with the mixture of hard liquor running underneath its surface.*

*You had just returned from two weeks of shooting in Belgrade and 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 were likely to be absorbed by the thin walls, me responding always louder, literally pushing you to the verge of domestic violence, so that you were forced to direct your physical urge in another motion, usually taking violent walks before a second round of low volume screaming would ensue. That time I, too, left after you had made your exit. I took a blanket and ducked into the Citroen in the yard I crawled into under a well-known bend in the iron link fence. The inside of one of the cars always felt warm, even when the temperatures dropped into single digits, warm like stray dogs huddling around the shabby house of Robert’s family that shared its head freely through the holes rodents had eaten into its glass wool insulation. They often smelled of dog, too, as dog-stink was a welcome reason for Leonis to drive down the price on acquisition. Cars reeking of wet fur would then be subjected to a week-long fumigation using cartons of Gauloise non-filters, as it had turned out over the years that Stefanie’s most solvent target group smoked hard enough to perceive the world through a retro-colored filter of nicotine residue, that, if it had not yet completely obliterated all olfactoric sensitivity, only invoked the feeling of home sensing the lingering ground fog of tobacco smoke in the footwells. I thought I would ring and ask for a night’s refuge but when I saw the red of the living room’s lava lamp compete with the quick, cold TV reflections, a pang of jealousy hit me, that forbade to admit our dysfunctioning, forbade to have them wonder if I had been crying or smoking pot, which wouldn’t touch for another four years even if supply ran high that season. The comfort of the caramel-colored rear bench raised the question why I even bothered with my home, the sheltered thrill of camping in the yard made me forget already then the reason for our quarrel. The tinted windows left me dozing in an everlasting sunrise until an opening door rudely awoke me.*

*Telling whether Stefanie was seriously angry was never easy, and now, too, she kept chuckling while she pulled me up roughly from the seat and steered me towards the front gate. Dizzy and half asleep I asked if I was too late for breakfast, and when she only laughed out crossly, I thanked her and asserted that I would see myself home. She wouldn’t hear of that. Instead, she put me in her mint metallic RAV4 and drove me over in a silence only interrupted by her muttering to herself how impossible my behavior had been, as if she needed to reassure herself of the fact. I didn’t understand what she made a fuss about, and I was still too tired to care. Only when she parked the car and got out with me did I become uneasy. I had never run away before and it didn’t seem like a big deal when I did it. You had expected me to get by alone with only omnipresent post-its listing emergency numbers and procedures as age-appropriate stabilizers. That I would decide to spend a night out, too, seemed only consequential. But in Stefanie’s indignation I sensed that maybe I had misgauged the matter, and that premonition made me want to involve her in a scene with you even less. It was too early and too much to process to stop her from ringing. The door opened and two arms flew out and around me. With a mixture of worry and reproach you asked me where I had been. Still delayed by my mental gears grinding sleep sand, I didn’t manage to preempt Stefanie’s answer. Only then did you fully realize her presence, and without a further word you moved me over the threshold and closed the door in her face. I was expecting a halfhearted scolding, you needed a rueful conciliation, and both of us were interrupted by the doorbell ringing over repeated knocking. Before you went to open the door, you sent me to my room as if you were honestly expecting your voices to stay calm enough not to penetrate the apartment walls. I had no trouble overhearing your conversation. For someone, who fancied herself a pundit of sociocritical commentary, your arguments were surprisingly plain, your insults dull and unimaginative. You fought like you would fight with me, plus a number of words that I hadn’t expected to belong to your vocabulary. Stefanie, too, didn’t hold back on the insults, but none of the words she said had I not heard from her mouth already before. Maybe it was the consistency that had me slowly side with her as I listened to you fighting, even though it was you that had hugged me and her who had dragged me to your door. Her consistency made her annoyance appear justified, the normal behavior that I should have expected and could expect every time again if I should show up unaccounted for in a car one morning. Her consistency suggested that she was right when she called you uncaring and a harlot. You laughed like crazy at her offense, but with me, it stuck, married to the memory of your hysterical laughter. You were less than consistent. Unreliable, uncontrollable, down, up, kick, left, right, punch, muscle memory played the knockoff controller I got myself as a consolation for not being allowed a whole console. Through the wall came the demolition sounds of you deconstructing the scaffolding that should have shaped me into a mindful weltbürger. How skilful you swung the sledgehammer of hypocrisy. How well-stocked was your arsenal of prejudices against people dealing cars, people lacking educational achievements, people keeping a shelf of the kitchen free for the portable TV set. The discovery of an unknown side of a parent is always a shock, but the animal sounds of you humping some temp dad, or the mannered excitement that you displayed when you bumped into a fellow artist, or the sulky curtness you adopted with Oma and Opa were nothing compared to the frenzy behind the wall. Had I not understood the words, your shrill voice climbing to yet another unheard register would have sufficed to terrorize me. And indeed, it could have remained the only thing to horrify me if you had only enlightened me about failure, that there was the possibility in wanting something, in believing in something and still failing to strive for it, to adhere to it. But you hadn’t taught me about failure, because you didn’t allow yourself to be seen failing either. That’s how every classist slur I overheard in my room, every backstabbing charge of having corrupted me while I had stayed with them only struck me as a revelation of the phony little snob underneath the surface of superficial teachings on tolerance and understanding. I wanted to down-up-punch past the end boss at the door and go back to the car with Stefanie. I needed to get away from your paddle-ball game of protracted hugs and slamming doors. I wanted to join that family of hers where the gravest inconsistency was my sleeping place. She smelled slightly strange, but the hugs she gave were always loose and cursory. When the jingling hangers on the slamming front door had completed your argument with a final chord you yelled from the kitchen that I would never spend another night at that place. The family structure that would have worked for me, for us, I daresay, since the arrangement would never have replaced but merely complemented you, fell victim to your shortsighted vanity and jealousy. Even worse, your decision turned out to be the one thing in which you would be consistent.*