



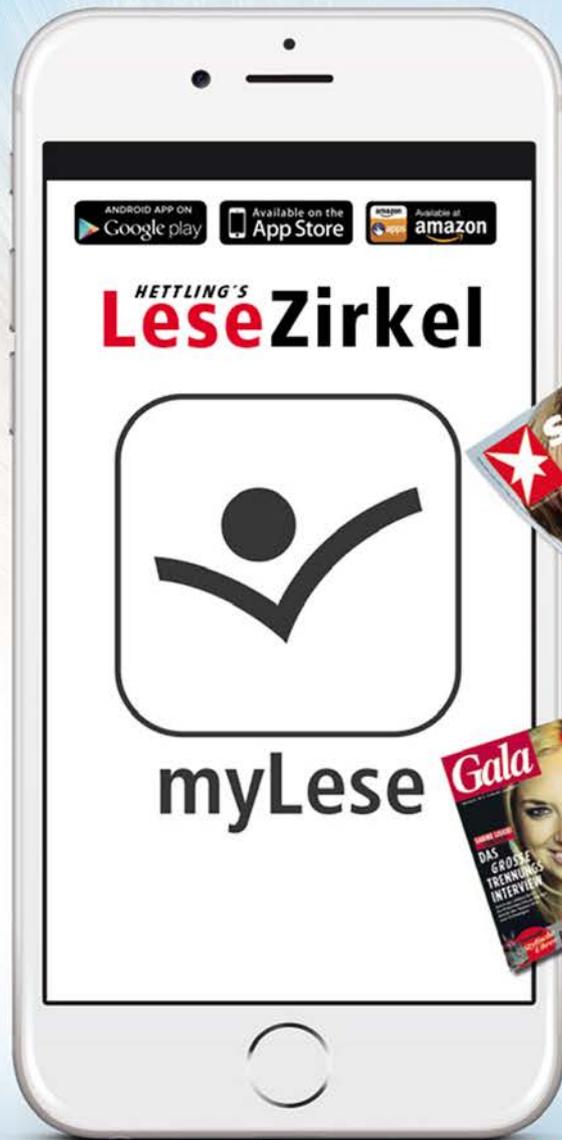
documenta-
Kass

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editorial

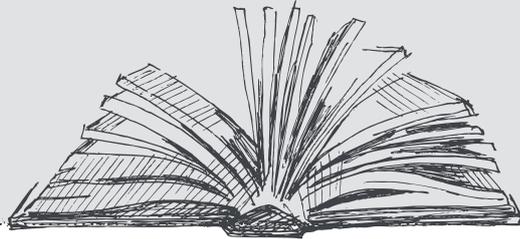
To whom it may concern

Dear reader, documenta 14 has been upon us for a few weeks now. While initial reactions were mixed, one cannot deny the omnipresence of cultural energy in Kassel every time the documenta rolls around. This year's exhibition boasts several spectacular pieces of art in prominent public places – the *Parthenon of Books* at Friedrichsplatz and the obelisk at Königplatz – that can probably only be overlooked if you are one of the people who constantly bury their noses in their smartphones while walking through the city.

It goes without saying that modern art is made visible both on big and small scales, in open and closed spaces. Performance artist Sandy Skoglund was certainly aware of this when she exhibited a room that was entirely covered in raw bacon in a New York gallery in 1992. Also, modern art may well go hand in hand with a certain degree of eccentricity – just ask Yves Klein, the French artist who not only invented his very own shade of blue, but also seemed to be sincerely concerned with proving to the world that he could, indeed, fly. However, performance artists, painters, sculptors and photogra-

phers are by no means the only ones who make use of idiosyncratic techniques and strategies. Roald Dahl, for example, would refuse to write with anything but accurately sharpened yellow pencils, of which he would take exactly six to his hut and use them to write exclusively on – what else – nothing but yellow American legal pad paper. While stories like these may provide us with incredulous shrugs, raised eyebrows or spontaneous giggles, they also remind us of the multitude of fundamentally human and individual factors that come into play in the creation of art.

Another thing that is perhaps characteristic of modern art – and of the documenta in particular – is its tendency to celebrate itself. And while self-celebration is something that none of us at *blank* are ever opposed to, it is sincerely the case that such a project requires an immense amount of effort by everyone involved. Perhaps – far from inspiration, genius, and talent – that is precisely what art is: blood, sweat, and tears. But art also has a discursive dimension. One thing that is hidden in these pages is that our texts undergo a rather intense feedback



process. This can be painful: merely showing a text you have written to someone else is akin to stripping naked in front of them – now imagine having pointed out to you every spot that could be improved upon. However, it is also productive. Entering into a constructive discourse about your own art is not only conducive to bringing out the best in people, but also offers rooms for personal growth.

With those long preliminary remarks out of the way, let us talk a bit about the issue in front of you. As is so often the case, the texts do not comprise one single thematic feature that would define them. While there is an overabundance of short fiction, there is also poetry, non-fiction and a comic illustrated by new contributor Sabahat Saygin. The topics approached in this issue range from relatable poetic scenes from everyday life, as found in Brian Koch's *Public Transportation*, to rather immediate, gripping narratives of the challenges life can present us with, as in *12 Minutes* by Victoria Koberstein. Along the same lines, we would like to welcome Loomchild Threadbare, as well as artist Jessica Ronja Pelz, who

complemented *The Faceless Giant Beyond the Pines* by Daniel Krooß with several pieces of intriguing artwork.

In addition to welcomes, thanks are in order as well. As always, the issue could not have come into being without our sponsors: fritz-kola, FES, Fachbereich 16 and IfAA.

However, there is one person we would like to thank above all. If you were to turn this issue or any issue of the last several years to the last page and took a look at the category "layout", you would see the name Rhea Eschstruth. Aside from being a fantastic layout artist, she is reliable, smart and, above all, one of the kindest and most positive people we have ever met. Throughout the past years, Rhea has become indispensable in turning the results of our artistic endeavors into printable format. Therefore, it is with a heavy heart that we have to announce Rhea is finishing up with her university studies and will be leaving us after this issue. All of us at *blank* could not be more grateful for your hard work and dedication and wish you all the best for everything the future may hold for you!

Enjoy the issue,

Denise Breidenbach & Murat Sezi ■

REDBRICK COMPANY
PRESENTS

THE ADDAMS FAMILY THE MUSICAL!

DATES
JULY 3RD, 4TH
8TH, 10TH
11TH, 12TH

TICKETS
STUDENTS 3€
REGULAR 6€
8PM - LIVE AT K19

RESERVE YOUR TICKETS AT WWW.REDBRICKCOMPANY.BE

the red brick company presents: the addams family musical

Wednesday Addams is in love! The oldest daughter of Gomez and Morticia Addams and notoriously sullen offspring of the morbidly eccentric Addams family loves Lucas Beineke. The problem? Lucas' parents Malcolm and Alice are boring and conventional middle-class people from Ohio, and even the prospect of having a joint dinner with both families makes the young lovers cringe. When they both beg their families for one normal night together, we know that nothing whatsoever is going to be normal about this night.

Magic potions, undead ancestors and the manipulations of moonstruck Uncle Fester are the ingredients for a supernatural musical comedy which brings out the best and the worst (or is it the other way round?) in all characters.

LUCAS: Oh, Wednesday! I just wanna lock you up in a little white cottage with a picket fence and an apple tree!

WEDNESDAY: I like the part about being locked up.

The Addams Family, a caustic dismissal of traditional American family values, has undergone several transformations since they were first brought to life as cartoon characters by Charles Addams in the 1930s. A 1960s TV show, a film trilogy in the 1990s and yet another TV show in the late 1990s testify to their enduring popularity in different media.

The Addams Family musical, written by Marshall Brickman and Rick Elice, with an original score by Andrew Lippa, premiered in Chicago in 2009 and moved to Broadway in 2010. ■

Shows:

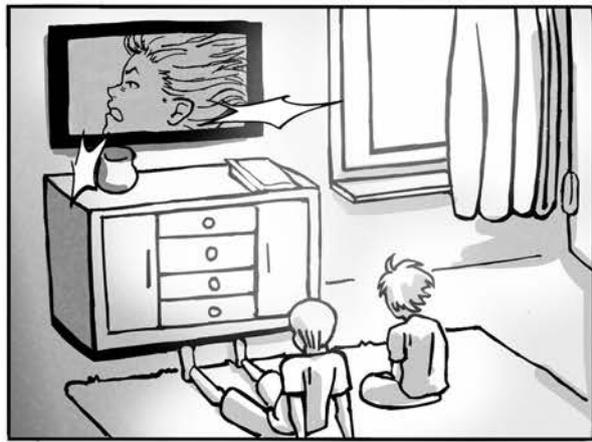
July 3/4/8/10/11/12 at K 19 (8 pm)

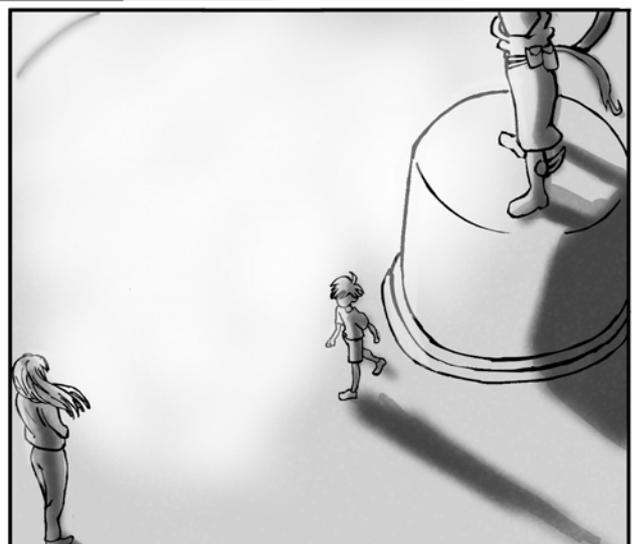
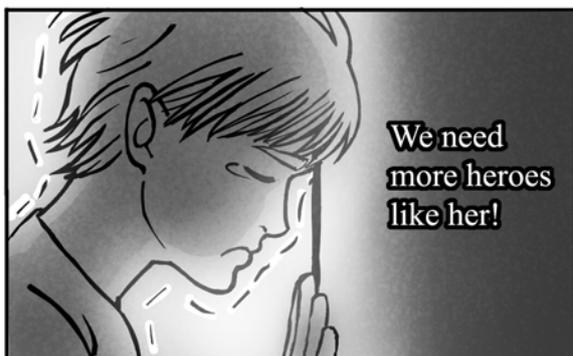
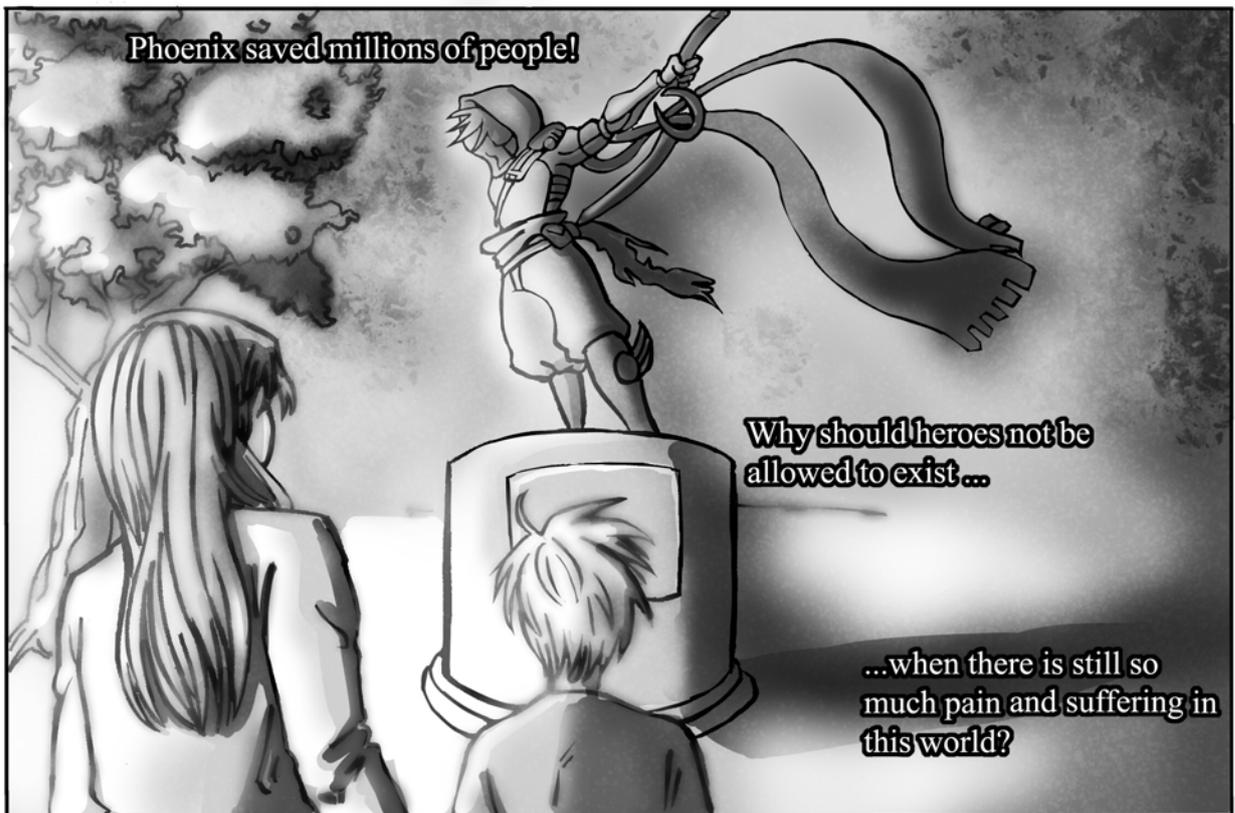
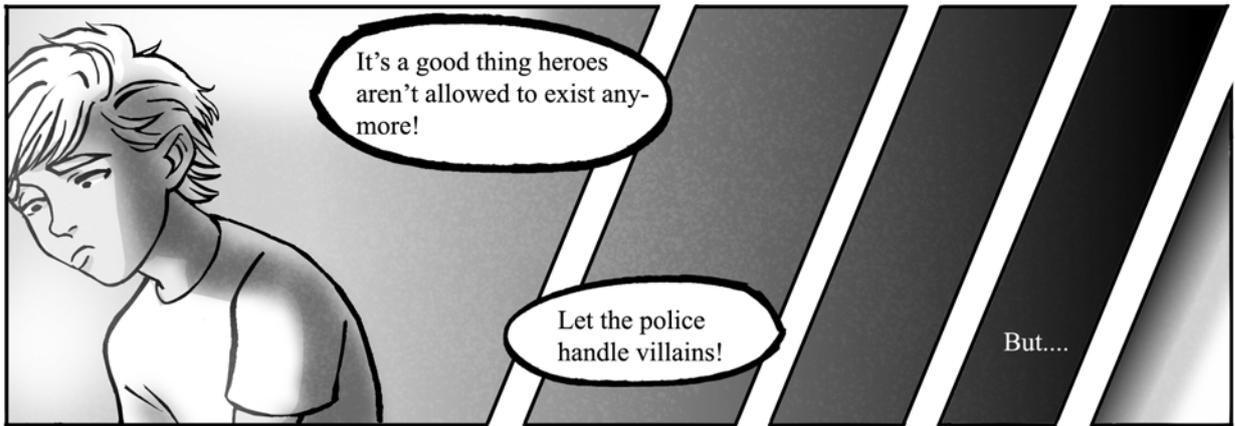
Ticket prices: 3 & 6 Euro

Reservations at www.redbrickcompany.de

Heroes: Fact or Fiction?

by Saygin





END

we call it how it is. documenta interview

by *Maike Baumgärtner*

Interview: BLANK Meets New Installation Artists

BLANK: First of all, thank you for being here, Mrs Obermayer and Mrs Smith-Kenton. You caused quite a stir at documenta 14. Would you like to tell us about-

SMITH-KENTON: Tea, dear?

BLANK: Yes, thank you. About your installation...

OBERMAYER: Milk, please. Thanks, love. Right, the installation. It took us ages to set up those new folding chairs and Gertrude here has problems with her hip so she wasn't much help, were you, love?

SMITH-KENTON: Well, I did all the baking and brought the sandwiches.

OBERMAYER: I didn't mean it like that, dear. And you make the best rum cake in the country.

BLANK: Did you work with real cake?

SMITH-KENTON: Of course. I would never serve shop bought cake! And there is always rum in my rum cake, no artificial flavours.

BLANK: So there was clearly a lot of planning involved in your-

SMITH-KENTON: Well, naturally. We never come unprepared, but there are so many things to consider. We needed the chairs and the folding table, had to prepare the food and the thermos and you should always have blankets on hand. And we had to bring umbrellas. You just can't predict the weather in Kassel and we like to sit outside.

BLANK: Maybe we should talk about the most famous part of your installation: the dialogues. You were quoted in numerous papers and magazines.

OBERMAYER: I heard about those. So very sweet, isn't it? See, I don't hear very well and my hearing aid is such rubbish-

SMITH-KENTON: You just need new batteries, I always tell her. But anyway, I had to shout into her ear so a few people might have overheard us. Mind you, we're not rude people, are we? We just like calling it how it is and we were sitting where we could see the queue. People watching is half the fun of any event, we always say. But so many of them cut in line. People just don't have any manners these days.



BLANK: You were quoted many times for your parodies. It was said that your performance exposed the dog-eat-dog society we live in today. Maybe you would like to comment on the most frequently published quote: “It’s getting so busy. Are they looking at us? I feel like a zoo animal.”

OBERMAYER: Now that was rude. They were all just standing there, looking. I offered tea to some of them but when I ran out, it was a bit awkward.

BLANK: I hear the visitors were very taken with the audience participation. It made them aware of the finite nature of the planet’s resources.

SMITH-KENTON: They were, weren’t they? The sandwiches were gone by then. We’ll bring some more for documenta 15. We cannot bring enough for everyone who passes by, though. The tickets alone are terribly expensive and the journey on top of that is enough to clean out our bank accounts. (laughs)

BLANK: I wasn’t aware that the artists had to pay for tickets-

OBERMAYER: Artists? Now, that’s very sweet of you to say, but we’re really just here to have fun.

BLANK: I’m not sure I understand you, Mrs Obermayer. Are you saying you are in fact not a documenta artist?

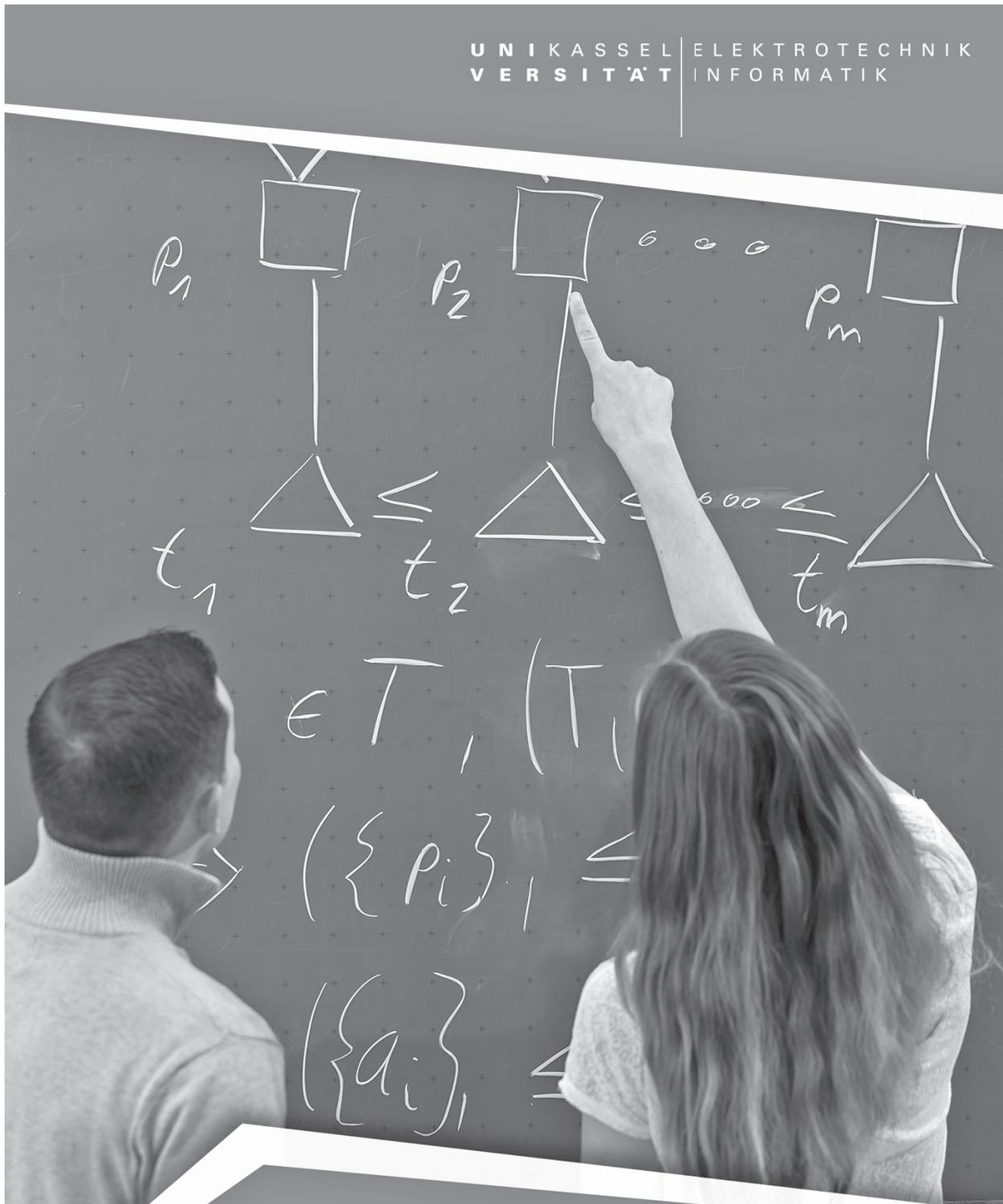
OBERMAYER: (giggles) I’m saying none of them really are-

SMITH-KENTON: Now, now, Martha, you always get so rude when you put brandy in your tea-

BLANK: So in fact you are not artists at all? Were you purposely leading the press on?

SMITH-KENTON: How dare you! Don’t make me call your mother!

BLANK: I didn’t mean to insult you, I just wanted to clarify- (sighs) Thank you, Mrs Smith-Kenton, thank you Mrs Obermayer. ■



DIE ZUKUNFT GESTALTEN

Studieren an der
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how a song can make you ponder

by Inga Zekl

Concerning this article¹: Finding a subject which really bothered me, which would make me write, write without looking up, just typing and typing until everything poured out – a little bit like Kerouac, but without the drugs and the smoking and the alcohol, and of course way shorter than “on the road”, has not been so easy these past few months. Having promised I would make the deadline – which is, as I am typing, just a few days from today – I accidentally stumbled over a different subject, which in fact had been hiding at the back of my head for some time now but which I had so far failed to put my finger on.

My kids will be astonished that I chose to write about a song – they know me as the kind of person who never listens to music, because after a day’s work, two chattering teenagers are enough to make my head want to explode without the radio blaring and playing some random pop songs. And the good songs, the ones I like to listen to attentively and not just hear them in the background, something like Roxette – the younger readers might need to forgive me if they do not know Per and Marie as I do, but they helped me through my teenage years, my rebellious time so to speak, and I owe them thanks for that; even after not listening to their songs for nearly two decades, I still know their lyrics. Last year, I saw them in concert. It was not easy to see Marie so fragile after her numerous operations due to a brain tumour, so very thin and fragile, but the sound was still there.

Ok, I somehow got carried away. Back to the topic. Back to my subject, the song I am going to write about: Human from the Rag’n’Bone Man.

While listening to the radio, the first thing I stumbled over was the singer’s voice. It is quite rich and full and very British, a combination you do not hear on the radio very often. The first few times I listened to this song was in my car and I did not, as per usual, change the channel my kids put on. I started humming and tapping my fingers to the rhythm, which I found and still find very alluring, attractive, inspiring, and stimulating. The intro reminds me of Queen’s *We will rock you*. But it is different, 21st century but you can see where it maybe came from, in a good sense! Not in a “Hey, let’s take Queen and make another song” sense.

Then, after some time, I started paying more and more attention to the lyrics. And after the lyrics I looked up the artist himself, sorry - the singer-songwriter, and first of all I liked the fact that he is not a model, not a beautiful person on the outside. An impressive height of 1 meter 96 centimeters and I do not dare guess his weight. Let us just say he has the features of a nice grizzly bear. And the tattoos of at least about five guys all together... and the voice of an angel, no not that beautiful; beautiful it is, but first of all that powerful, that voluminous, that all-embracing, that present.

Let us take a look at the lyrics because in order to want to listen to a song more than once, not only the voice has to be nice to listen to, but also the lyrics have

1 First of all, let me thank you for being patient and letting me get that last text off my chest. Once again, I felt the healing capacities of just writing something down, putting it into words and storing it like this, getting it out of the system. Well, not really out, but as if you were putting something where it belongs. This memory has a place now. I can go and visit it, which I do daily, but it is no longer ubiquitous in space and time.

to mean something more than a drive by or the uncomfortable aftermath of a night spent drinking und doing drugs.

The first line you hear *"I'm only human"* made me think. Why only? Being human is a privilege, a privilege we have to struggle every day to live up to, especially in times of a bizarre American who can call himself president after being voted for by not even the majority of the people in his country. Being human means the possibility and the duty to ponder your actions, to earn the name of your species every single day of your life!

The next few verses are dedicated to the problem of knowledge and insight and awareness: *"Thinking I can see through this and see what's behind"*. How can you really know that what you see is true? This is basically the problem of Plato's Cave. In this allegory, people who are constrained by some kind of unexplained bonds are seated in a cave with their backs to a small man-made wall and their faces to the big wall of the cave. The only things these people see are the shadows of items that are transported behind their backs and behind the small wall but in front of a fire. One day, one of them frees himself or herself from the bonds and climbs into freedom, into the light. Outside, this former prisoner is blinded by the light, by the things to see and at the beginning nearly hurries back into the cave completely overwhelmed by this new reality. Having decided to stay, this person discovers a whole new world. Then, wanting to share this new point of view, this new reality with the other prisoners, the escapee re-enters the cave but the others cannot be motivated to leave the cave, too. After some time, they are quite annoyed and threaten to hurt their former colleague if they are not left alone and in peace. They do not want to hear anything further about this very disturbing additional world. How little do they know that they are the ones living in an artificial world, quite limited regarding everything they feel, see, hear, touch, smell and, thus, can imagine as the real world. Our life is a re-enactment of Plato's cave all over again. As the Rag'n'Bone Man puts it: *"Got no way to prove it, so maybe I'm blind."*

Back to "human": Why should anybody put the blame on another person because they are only human? Humans have the right to make mistakes – not only Romans – but mistakes are very human. Humans make errors every day, everywhere. But the important thing is to take the blame if you did, especially if something bad came out of it and it was your fault. What did the Ro-

mans say: To err is human, but it is diabolical to persist in error. Then you have to take the blame; to not do so would not be the right thing to do. Or am I being too hard on the human race here? Well, I would expect that from myself, so I am convinced I can expect that much from any other human. Why should I be better than my fellow human beings? At the end of the day, it is up to anybody him- or herself to ponder or not to ponder if they did the right thing. The conscience is a permanent and relentless companion everybody has to live up to on one's own.

*"Take a look in the mirror and what do you see?
Do you see it clearer or are you deceived?"*

Since *Snow White*, we have known about the dangers reflecting from mirrors. You do remember *Snow White*, don't you? And we all know that after a long night or an early morning our mirror never tells the truth about how we look, don't we? And even today in some cars, you can read the following sentence in your side mirror: "Be careful: Objects are often closer than they appear." That warning is surely due to insurance companies. And yet so very true. Mirrors can deceive you and they do so every day. Think of *Tom's Diner* sung by Suzanne Vega: When I'm feeling someone watching me and so I raise my head: *"There's a woman on the outside looking inside. Does she see me? No, she does not really see me 'cause she sees her own reflection."* When does a glance in the mirror really help? The mirror is just for vanity. What helps best is to look into the face of the person(s) you are talking to: that is the best mirror you can get.

The next stanza is about people with real problems. I like the beginning, there are people with real problems and these real problems do not come or go by looking into the mirror! But why should anybody think that the singer-songwriter Rory Charles Graham a.k.a. the Rag'n'Bone Man should be the one to solve them? Or is this just the irritated outcry of a person working with kids suffering from Asperger's syndrome? Sorry, Rory, I do not get the information in this line! Why should people think you can solve your problems? Maybe this line has some dark autobiographical background? I would like to erase them from the song completely.

These lines are my favourite:

*"Don't ask my opinion
Don't ask me to lie
Then beg for forgiveness
For making you cry"*

People should only ask for an opinion if they truly want to hear the others' opinion, not just a repetition or a rephrasing of their own. Questions should only be asked if the person asking them wants an honest answer. Dishonest answers are best not given at all. Silence is better than lies, but what do you do if silence is a lie, too? In my opinion, there are no white lies! A lie is a lie and sooner or later you will have to come clean! And coming clean is surely not easier than telling the truth right at the beginning. Well, I would not ask a delinquent that question. He or she might have a slightly different opinion.

In the next stanza, the most important line is "*I make mistakes*" and I admit it is not my favourite one. Of course, people make mistakes but the word mistake might mean you know better, as opposed to the word error. Never mind who it is called, what name is given to the fact, if you know better, correct yourself, take back your mistake and make it right. And if you cannot make it right concerning the person who suffered from your mistake, take another person, just do not let the mistake impose on your soul. A mistake that you cannot take back, that cannot be healed can be like a festering wound in your soul, failing to heal, causing your whole body to suffer. If you wronged somebody and you know it, do something good to somebody else, until you get the feeling the cosmic balance between good and bad works again.

Of course, the Rag'n'Bone Man is *no prophet or Messiah* as it says in the next stanza. But he is right. If people look for someone to work wonders, they should turn to faith, not that that is something I, an old, convinced hardliner agnostic would do, but who am I to deny that possibility to those who believe in whatever entity they have chosen to believe in? But Rory has a point here: Do not blame humans for things they cannot be blamed for. That is ethically and humanly not right, it is outright unfair! Remember the stanza about mistakes? It is not unfair to expect people to rectify their mistakes, to ask those they wronged for forgiveness, to try to make it up to them, but there are things that you cannot blame anybody for and those things do not depend on humans but on a higher 'institution'.

Onto the last stanza. "*I'm only a human, I do what I can, I'm just a man, I do what I can.*" The feminist in me wants to protest concerning the word man as an equivalent to being human, but the Rag'n'Bone Man is definitely a man. So, let us skip feminism and take a look at the

other verses. "*I do what I can*". If only everybody could say that! Imagine what that would contribute to global problems. Think about the film *Tomorrow*. It is about people who are not waiting around for any Messiah; it is about people just doing what they can for our planet, for our entire species. They do not wait for any politician to allow them to plant an edible garden in the city of Detroit for example, they just do. They do what they can. I sincerely recommend this film and or the book to you. They are about people who do not wait for the wind to change, for people who do not wait for others to start. They start themselves, they set out to do what they can without asking anybody else to follow them. They start because they are willing and right to do so. And they do not ask for permission, they act. Imagine what our world would be like if more people did just that: ACT! Otherwise, in about twenty years, we will have to put the blame on all of us who did not act, who just sat there enjoying their lifestyle, who did nothing for our planet. Guys, problems are global now. El Nino and La Nina are not some cute kids, they are endangering life as we know it! In fifty years, there will be not baseball in San Francisco because their stadium has been flooded due to the consequences of global warning. Go on, google it, or if you do not like Google – as I do – switch to an alternative web browser and start browsing away.

After that, I sincerely do hope that every single one of you embarks on his or her personal journey en route to save our planet. Not for our kids, no, that possibility is long gone, but for yourselves because we are not a companionship which can be saved by Gandalf. There is no "*Fly, you fools!*" and no untiring wizard working without rest to help us. We have to stand and fight and make sure it is not a losing battle! We are human, after all and we have to do what we can. Thank you, Président Macron: *Let's make our planet great again!*

Let us not be foolish, let us be human and let us do what we can. How did Obama put it? *Yes, we can!* And we really can. Just start by being more critical than yesterday and increase your activity every day. And remember we are human. ■



public transportation

by Brian Koch

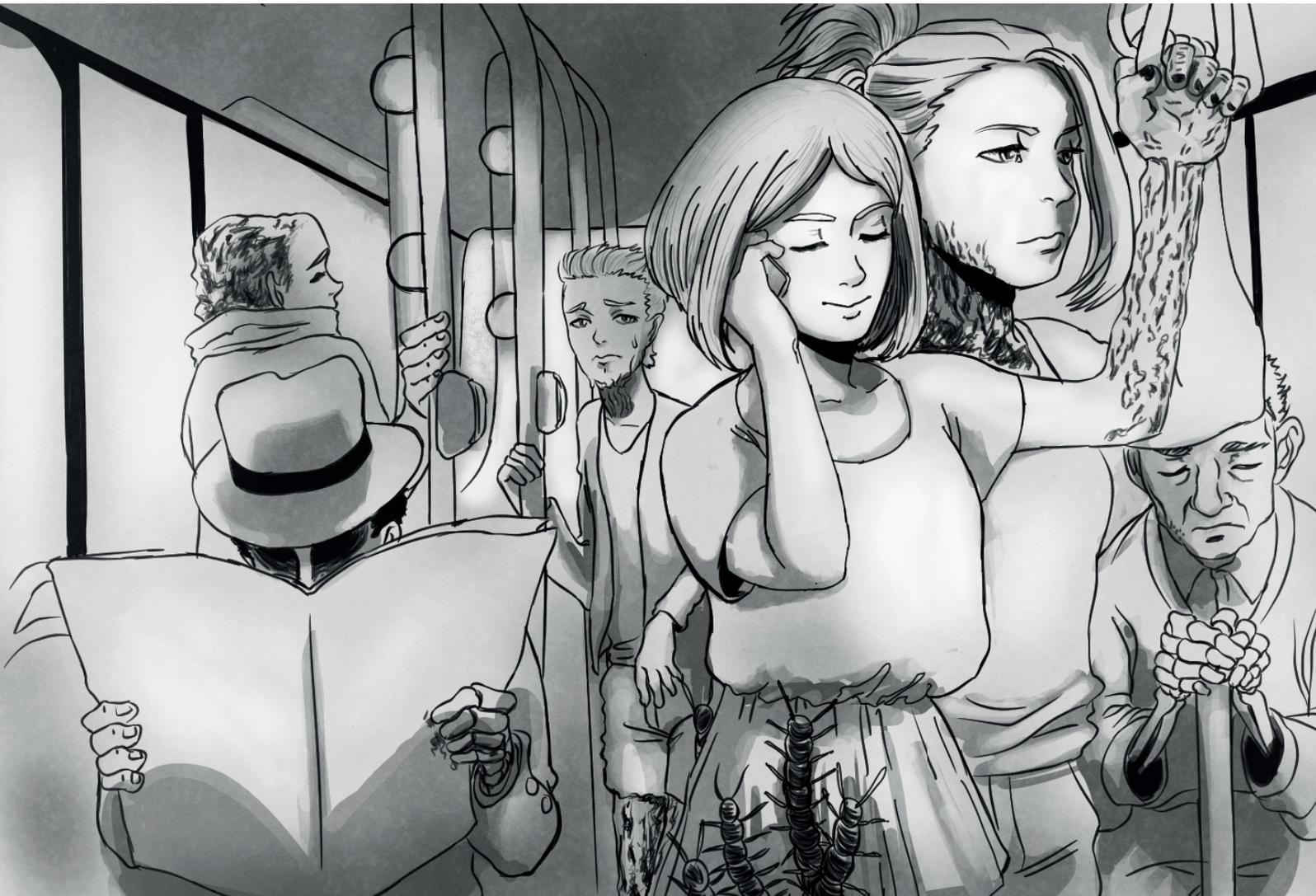
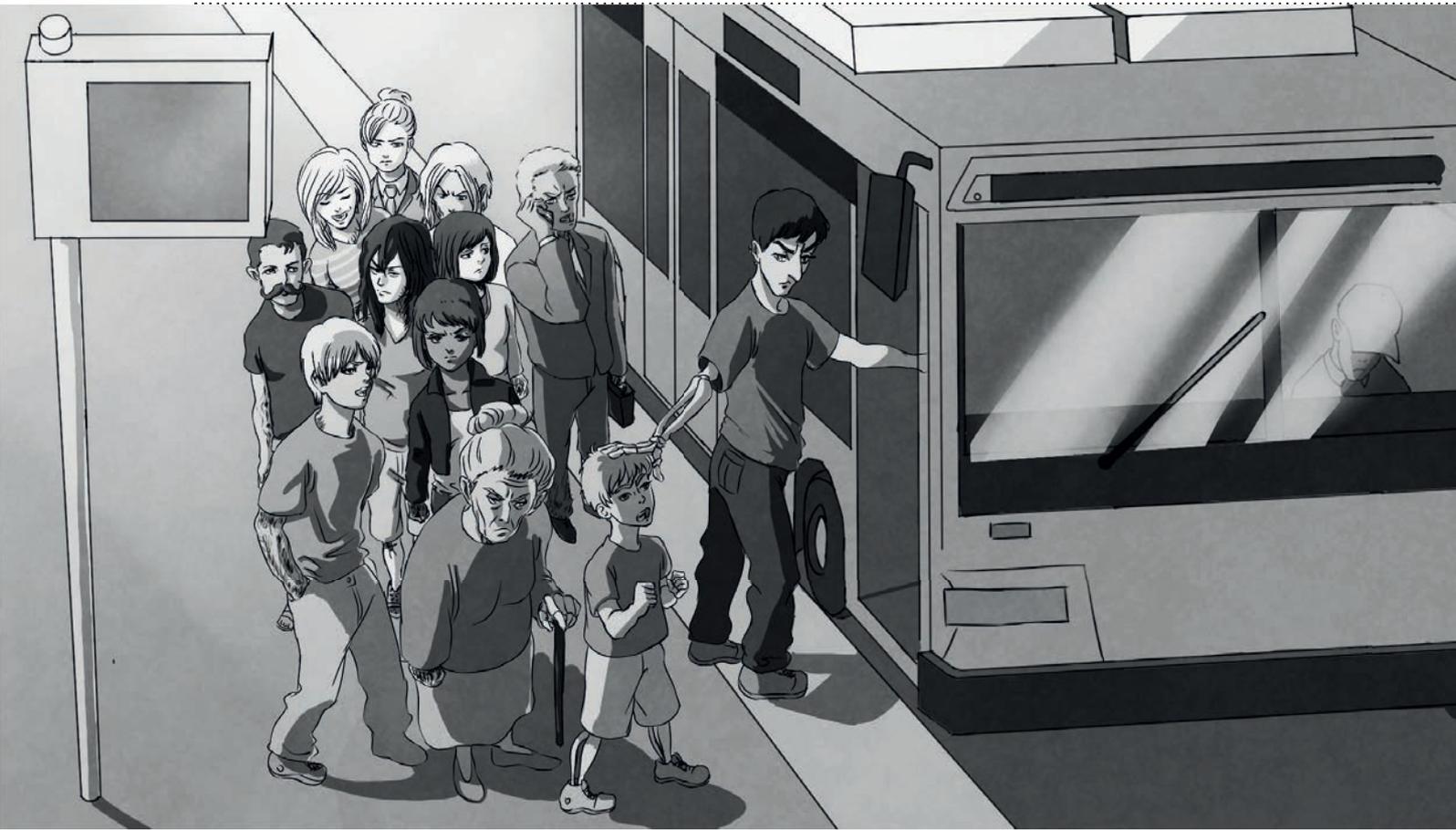
Illustrations by Sabahat Saygin

It's early morning, the sun is scorching the air.
As the bus arrives, hell is breaking loose.
Revolt at the station and no one's to spare.
We follow our instinct, there's no excuse.

No mercy to expect from the young or the old.
Our minds might be empty, the bus is not.
The air is charged, but the people are cold.
I listen to their gossip, trapped in my spot
...but my conscience is clear.

The smell of bodily functions in the morning,
Assault on the senses, data streams floating.
We are forces of nature trapped in a box,
should this not rather remain a paradox?

Meaningless chatter forming white noise walls.
With every new morning comes a new fight.
Then at last, the electric voice calls.
I plan my escape as the stop comes in sight
...and my conscience is clear. ■



streams

by Loomchild Threadbare

Far above
My body
They move restlessly
In water
The world comes to a halt
But you
Remain
Running in circles
Dripping in white silence
The noise in my head
Keeps making me
Numb
Your heartbeat is
The last thing
For me to feel
While my saliva
Runs onto your chest ■

(ghosts)

by Daniel Krooß

Illustration by Melanie Mendetzki

Through the cracks of the concrete
the illusion of change intrudes
and tries to plant its seeds on a burning pile of
old notebooks, full of different stories with the same loose ends.

In the grate the fire blazes with menacing passion,
blowing little flakes of ash on these walls that remind of
a time before the avalanche had washed away
the frail legs of its foundation and left no trace of all its ghosts.

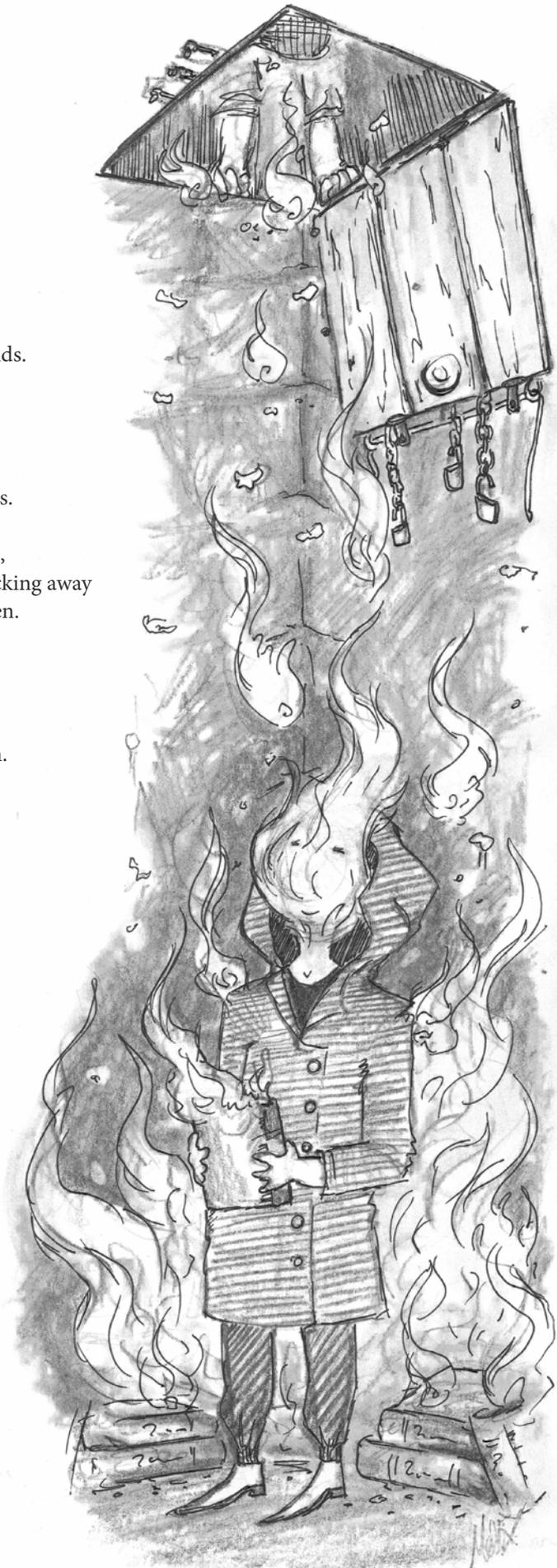
A home built to be rebuilt, many times. A fortress of solitude,
a shield from the ambivalent threats to a dismantled soul, locking away
the maddening queries of what could and could not have been.

Long ago this soul had settled, and found a safe place
within the cold stones of these ruins. The calm
warmth of a spare flame was all it ever asked for,
hiding among the sacred voices of the dead poets of its youth.

(There is plenty of hope, but none for us)
Knock. Knock. Knock.

The quiet presence of an intruder persuades
the soul to give up its sheltered place and
give way to the uncertainty on the other side.
And I'm there and also not there
scratching dust from the concrete.
Facing one another,
we talk through the cracks.

 Could it be you I'm looking for?
 Or was it myself all along? ■



the black birds at the park

by *Julia Gäbelein*

Illustration by Sophie Bachmann

The black bird circled over the park as usual, watching the old bench that held so many memories. It had been their favourite spot to sit and watch the children play in the grass, the leaves, and the snow, but since he had died, his wife had not come here once. If only she knew that he was still there, not looking like himself at all, but present with the same soul. He never left the park; it was his home now. He often observed the scenery from high up above. He watched the children play, new small figures arriving every now and then, older figures leaving and not returning over the years. One eye was always carefully observing the bench, in hopes that she might return after all. Sometimes he even sat down on it, reminiscing about the old days, but most of the time that only resulted in being chased away by couples that wanted to enjoy the view like he and his wife once did.

Today the wind was icy, but it carried him through the air calmly. The kids played in the snow. They tried to build snowman after snowman, but, as always, the men never looked quite the same as they did in the movies; they were not as rounded and with specks of dirt staining the white bodies here and there. The children didn't care. Another snowman was almost finished, lacking only its facial features. The kids spotted a patch of grass underneath the bench which had been protected from the snow by the wooden seating surface, and they ran over to look for little stones or sticks. When his eyes followed the children, his heart skipped a beat before he could even realise what he was seeing.

She was sitting on the bench. Black and feathery and not looking like herself at all, but present with the same soul, and they both knew that from now on the bench would be their favourite spot again. ■



still here

by Maike Baumgärtner

Sometimes, I get mad. When I see him walk by my rose bushes, humming hymns as if everything was right with the world. Of course, he only just started to do that again. Two months ago, at my funeral, he was fighting tears. And he managed it, too. What a shame. Shame! That is what he should feel. Shame and fear and terror and regret. I remember the service he held for my funeral. Bloody hypocrite. He talked about being thankful for the time they had with me while I was alive. They should not fear, for God would take care of my soul. Well, I'm here. And I am watching his every move. When he wakes up in the morning, the first thing he does is jog. Not pray, like you would expect. Or even eat breakfast like a normal man. I used to like that. I used to sit on his bed, watching him strip off his sweaty clothes and go to the shower.

If I let him. Sometimes, I would throw myself at him like a rabid beast and torture him the sweetest way I could think of. I loved our mornings together. I loved him. And I used to think he loved me. Not anymore; I've only been gone for two months and I can see his eyes wander. And I detest it.

He is standing over my grave now. His handsome shape looks dashing in the wind. I am looking over his shoulder, down on my grave. Grey marble, the most expensive they had. I read 'Maria Fellowes, 1987-2017'. He did not dare to have them carve a bible quote. The first bits of moss are starting to turn my name green.

Heat is boiling up in my stomach. He is here. He doesn't get to be here. He doesn't get to be here and grieve. I can feel the wind rushing through me. Slowly, as if pulled by invisible strings, I move closer. I can see his goosebumps now. *Hypocrite!* He turns, his eyebrows

raised. He looks startled. He peers around the graveyard and finally sees a blackbird flutter from one tree to the other. That seems to satisfy him. They always look for the obvious solution. As if we weren't here, always looking over their shoulders. Nearly everyone is being tailed, by one of us or more. The next time your primal instinct is picking up something and you feel this tingle in your neck that makes you look over your shoulder, you will see nothing. That doesn't mean that nobody's there.

I've been gliding into a soft slumber, when his desire yanked me right out of my resting place. I could feel that something was wrong. I felt pulled over the graveyard, past the rotting remains of the weeping willows that got ruffled by the cold chill. Whenever he looks at her, my strength grows.

I remember every second of 'the tragic incident', as he likes to call it. His face, frozen in shock, then his hands, shaking my shoulders hard enough to bruise them. If only I had told him downstairs, instead of the top of the stair. I remember the weightless sensation of falling. It was just like dreaming. Just like from a dream, I woke up. Only now I was looking down at him as he held my limp body in his arms. The ambulance arrived, then the neighbors. They all pitied him, all tried to comfort him. Then she showed up with homemade lasagna. When she cut it, red liquid sluggishly poured all over their plates. At that sight, pure hate pulsed up in my throat.

He turns back to the piece of stone that is supposed to represent my life. My name is written in cursive script. But something is missing. He knows something is missing. My stomach is bursting with the cruelest of sensations. I'm cold. Everything is cold. The marble stone in front of us shivers. He gasps. By now his face is

as white as mine. “No. It can’t be – Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name –” Cold, everything is cold. Cold heat ripples through us. “Thy will be done, thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in –” Dark red spots slowly leak over the gravestone, right under my name. A brutal slash, gashing blood. He drops to his knees, an invisible weight on his shoulders. My finger nails press into his weak flesh. But he keeps praying. Although by now he has to inhale sharply for every part of his pointless words: “in heaven. Give us – this day – our daily bread – and forgive us for our –” He cries out in pain. His blood welled over my fingers in the same heartbeat it rolls over the stone. “Our trespasses – as we forgive those – those who trespass against us –” *Ahhhhhhhh!* Hate, red hot hate flashes around us. Before he can finish his prayer, my anger throws him against the cold and he drowns in blackness. When he wakes, everything seems to be normal again, until he looks up. The red smear on the gravestone has mixed with his fresh, red blood. Under my date of death he reads “Rosie Fellowes, Beloved Daughter.” That’s when he forgets to check himself for more wounds and this proud, upright Christian runs for his dear life.

She is examining his wounds. “How did that happen, Father?” She pads a bit of cotton on his forehead. “An accident. I fell.” he replies curtly. The freckled blonde raises her eyebrows. “Oh?” But he doesn’t reply. I can see him relax under her warm hands. He can’t. He won’t. I will make sure of that. She patches him up. I can see the flush on his cheeks and the slight shiver every time she touches him. She lets her fingers linger on his forehead a second longer than necessary. His eyes light up and his lips curve into a slow smile. Cold pours out of me. The tiny, soft hairs on her arms start to stand up where her flesh is showing under the white gown. *No!* “Did you say something?” “Actually, Liz, I wanted to ask you if you’d like to come over for dinner tomorrow.” He lures in his prey with a reptile smile. She doesn’t see it. I do. *No! Say NO!* “I’d love to. Eight o’clock okay?” “Sure.” He leaves before she can change her mind. Clever man. Clever, hateful man. Why did I let him turn me into his dirty little secret!

I slowly gather my strength as he puts wine glasses on the virginal tablecloth. The crucifix above the table casts a dark shadow over the wall. Jesus stares down on him, accusingly. He puts his favourite vintage Merlot down next to the glasses. A soft, cold breeze makes the golden napkins flutter. He doesn’t even notice. His eyes

are set on the prize. I feel sick. The next time he comes out of the kitchen, he carries cutlery and the new china I selected. The delicate lily pattern sparkles when he starts to light candles. *Not again.* But my voice is weak, as weak as it was in life. My stomach feels as if somebody twisted a knife. I fall, fall and – I am back. Atop the table, looking down on the filthy sinner. He brings out the food. It will get cold before she can try it. He always puts out the food too early. Anger builds up. The pink ham is sweating gravy right in front of me. Next to it, the blade he will use to cut it to pieces. Cold chills pass from me to him. He pulls down his sleeves. Tiny goosebumps pop up on his neck. I move closer and breathe into his face. He gasps and knocks over a wine glass. It smashes on the floor and turns into little icy blades all over the tiles. He kneels down, swearing under his breath. I smile. I know what he feels like when he forgets that priests don’t swear. The big knife is teasing me. His neck is now level with the table. I inhale the reek of his lust and anger and the candles flicker. The knife moves. Slowly, the pinch turns into his direction. He picks up shards, his serious pastor face looking down. The blade is now only centimeters away from his stomach. I breathe, I cramp. My hand is reaching out to it. I push as hard as I can with my hate and my sorrow and the power that is left behind by years that should have been lived. He is guilty. Guilty of robbing me of my life, before and after I died. Guilty of making me sneak around, becoming a priest’s whore. Guilty of blaming me for the new life we had created. That gives me, gives the knife the final push it needs to glide over the cloth. Closer, just a few centimeters missing. I smile icily. Nearly, nearly there. Ding-dong. “Argh!” He moves quickly and I stare at the crimson drops on the tablecloth in fascination. He snatches a napkin and wraps it around his hand. He throws the other napkin over the blood to hide the evidence and turns to answer the door. The new me is here.

He takes her coat. “May I?” All gentleman, all lie. “Was the drive okay?” he casually touches her elbow as he reaches past. New Maria smiles shyly up to him. She understands that the game is on. And she loves it. He presses the small of her back to direct her to the table. I look at her and all I see is decay.

The dinner goes smoothly. For him. Every time their glasses clink I can feel my stomach churn. The heat slowly builds up inside me. “To us,” he raises his glass over the remains of the ham. They share a smile. “Well, I guess I should go. Early morning. And who knows

what people will think?" Then, adding with a painfully likeable twinkle in her eyes, "we wouldn't want them to get a false impression, would we?" "Does it need to be false?" He smiles predatorily as they get up. They take a step closer to each other. My need takes physical form in the breeze that is misplaced in a confined space as this room. I whimper, my fists are clenched. I need to control myself. My energy is slipping away, because pity dilutes my hate. Liz looks up to the hypocrite, his hand caressing her throat. I am cold, so cold. When they kiss, my heart is about to explode in agony. No! Not again! Don't! They don't react. The two shapes are standing under the crucifix as if it was mistletoe. When they finally break apart, I am on my knees. *Don't do this! Passion. Pain. The end. No!* Then he takes her hand, an intimate smile on his face. He slowly pulls her towards the stairs. *No!* "Will you come up?" She nods and I feel like this marks her death sentence. That's when the cold rushes back into me. I slowly get back on my feet. Not again!

Liz and the hypocrite have taken the first few steps when I reach the bottom of the stairs. They climb up and the candles die. They giggle at the sudden darkness like teenagers. Slowly, they turn to each other and move in closer. That is when I feel a sudden rush. I pass a mirror and smile. Because my reflection is there and it is deter-

mined to end this. As if against a sharp breeze, I take a step for every centimeter their lips move closer together.

"I thought you'd be happy."

"Happy? Are you insane? Happy? This could cost me my job, my reputation, everything."

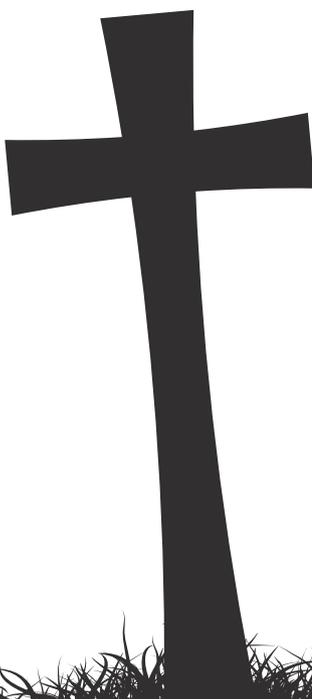
"Everything? I'm nothing to you? You don't even care about the little one?"

"Don't be dramatic. You can get rid of it, or leave town for a while. They will find a good home for it."

"Don't you think you're getting off this easy. Maybe it's time I finally told the truth about us."

I need to get away from him. Hypocrite! Traitor! I turn and next thing, my life is over. The thought gives me enough strength to follow them to the top of the stairs.

I can hear the drip drip drip that is coming from the wounds all over my body. My eyes are half blinded with the same red liquid that marked my end. I can still feel the falling sensation. Whether he pushed me or I fell, I do not care. His lips are just touching hers, staining hers, when I reach out to him. *ROSIE!* With one fast pull, it is done. Soundlessly, he falls through me. I hear a crunching noise as his neck breaks in the fall. She looks shattered, and I smile. Because she will never have to suffer like I did. ■



all the other days

by Kristin Politycki

“Would you like to go out today?” His eyes met her face with a smile as it always did when he tried to get her to open up to him. “You can pick something. How about it?” he kept on asking as she turned her head down to escape the question. He was leaning over the table towards her, trying to make contact with her cyan eyes, eagerly searching for the little spark that must still be hidden in there.

“Not today... hun,” she said in a tone friendly yet fake, forcing herself to smile to please him at least for now.

That was how they spent every day.

His arms were longing for her as they started crawling over the table. His hands formed themselves into fists while every word of the answer she'd given made its way from his ears to his mind.

“Oh,” he mumbled, staring at the floor while managing to get himself together again “That’s ...okay”

Now she stood behind him, her hands grabbing his hair, ruining his short hairstyle. Nothing in the world could have felt better. He felt her body leaning against his own, cold and thin as she was breathing in his scent. So she still seemed to like this fragrance after all, he thought to himself and couldn't help but giggle, reaching for the fingers that were now resting on his shoulders. But they rushed to flee his touch and left his heart sinking a tad deeper in his chest.

“Sweet girl,” he stuttered in a low voice, but she had already turned her back on him.

He watched her, leaning onto the doorpost, her hand grabbing her dark blonde curls tightly, eyes fixed on the ceiling. All the thoughts that were running through this mind of hers seemed to make her pretty head all too heavy for her petite shoulders. He stayed where he was, sitting in the kitchen and forcing himself to swallow a

bite he took of his bread. She had made it for him but he couldn't swallow one piece, nor could he admit that he just wasn't hungry anymore. It had been the look into her colorless face again that had made him lose all of his appetite. Ever since they spent their lives this way, he who used to be an athletic guy saw himself fading into a rather lanky version of himself.

But nonetheless, he would stand straight by her side. That was the promise he had made, and he would stick to it. Or better to what was left of it by now. Promises sometimes were made all too fast, as he had always thought. But normally he was not one of those people who made them if he wasn't going to keep them. And of course, there were reasons he had made this one. The slightest chance that things might return anywhere near to how they used to be made it worth trying.

Time used to pass so quickly when he was near her. But during the last few months, seconds had become minutes. Minutes had transformed themselves into hours. And every once in a while time seemed to stand still for the two of them completely. When he was desiring time for himself these days, he couldn't bear to leave her alone. Not for more than maybe an hour or two. Being able to work for the office at home often made things easier, yet it made it more difficult for him to get some time alone. On this day his concentration had hit rock bottom again and he made up his mind to go out by himself at least for a few minutes. Just a little walk through the park nearby to clear his racing head. When he got out, he started to realize how tired he really was. His legs, which had craved walking only a few minutes ago, hardly seemed to be able to take one step after another. So he let himself drop onto the first bench he met on his walk.

He looked at the little lake which lay in front of him.

He could almost see her standing there in the sun



the way she used to do in what seemed an eternity ago, laughing in his direction. He would have ran his arms around her waist to hold her and they would be chuckling together about the cute ducks she had just fed. But today the lake only seemed empty and cold to him.

He took the long way home. That way still ended up in front of the door of their flat, and he wished so hard that he was looking forward to enter it. Since that one particular day which had changed everything in that unfortunate direction, there was always fear connected to coming home. Once again he got caught up in the idea of moving to somewhere else, with her of course. The urge to get a fresh start got hold of him again. There was this untamable desire to leave all those dark memories behind and move somewhere else. But as the line in one of his favorite songs went “far away is a place inside yourself.” At the bottom of his heart, he was aware that this song that always came to mind was right. Moving wouldn't clear any of the emotional clutter he was carrying around with him, nor would it change the situation between them or the view on life his once so lively girlfriend had taken on.

He was, as had become his habit, playing things through in his head again when he came home.

At first, it had been a day like every other. Not even a bad one! At least that was what he had thought. He had a job he really liked, if not loved and on this very day, he had been promoted to a higher position. He had finally been living in a town he liked, in a nice flat with the great love of his life. He had been looking forward to coming home and relaxing. Nonetheless, the closer he had gotten home, the more he had felt somewhat off, as if there were a nearly unnoticeable smell of disaster in the early evening air. Blaming his feeling on his lack of sleep, he had turned the key in the lock. As he had

entered the rooms that had been his home for years now, the wind had blown through an open window, seemingly urging him in a specific direction. The direction in which he would find his precious life changed forever, destroyed in just the blink of an eye. Yet he hadn't noticed that the situation had been that fatal by then. The breakfast had still been standing on the table as it had when had left for work.

In retrospect, he should have been able to read the signs.

Windows were never left open when no one was home, and usually the breakfast table was cleared away as soon as he was leaving. Still, he had not been concerned. He had even been sitting at the table for what now seemed a great amount of time. He remembered being so tired all out of sudden And how he had held on tightly to both, that cup and the hope that she would come dancing around the corner, explaining how chaotic her day had been. That she had been so busy she even forgot to close the window and clean up the dishes! They would have laughed then and done the work together, pondering the question of what to do with the rest of the evening. But she hadn't shown up.

He couldn't even tell by now why he sat there waiting for so long, or if he had really believed that she had been about to return any minute. Or had it only been wishful thinking that he had thought to be able to escape a harsh reality? To this day he could feel the blood starting to race through his veins thinking about it. He remembered hearing his own pulse in his ears loudly and how he had stood up, suddenly unhesitant to find her.

Finding his way back to the here and now, he shook his head.

“Hello!” holding his breath, waiting for someone to echo his call.

“Hey babe!” came her voice from the office, and he

felt a burden loosening from his shoulders. That moment, he once more became aware of how tense all his muscles were. He stood in the doorpost of the room, watching her sitting in the chair and looking out of the window, a cup of coffee in her hands. At least she was drinking something, he thought to himself. He could see that her curls were wet. Obviously, she had just come out of the shower. He could smell her perfume. Moving closer to her, he could feel some resistance building up inside of him again. She stood up, smiling, throwing her arms around his neck. "Glad you're back." She tiptoed in front of him to place a kiss on his forehead, one of those familiar rituals that he had believed to be dead. His whole body was shivering with joy as he held her delicate body in his arms. As he looked up into her eyes, he could clearly see that she was very available today and might even want to go a little further. Another kiss, on his lips this time, proved him right. He answered her by kissing her furiously, pressing his lips toward hers hungrily. Their kiss lasted a few seconds, growing wilder when he abruptly pushed her away. Sure, he had waited for her to come out of her shell. He did so every day. But the few times she did, every once in a while, had become less and less enjoyable for him. Aware that he could have spent a beautiful day with her and seeing the smile he loved, but that she nowadays wore so rarely, he couldn't brush off the thought that things would probably turn around again all too soon. So he pretended he had to go to the bathroom for "just a second," holding himself together until he was well hidden behind the door, which he closed with a trembling hand. With a deep sigh, he walked over to the bathtub and let himself fall onto the edge of the tub. The porcelain felt cool under his heated hands. He was aware that the bathroom might not have been the best room to search for relief in, but he didn't have a proper excuse at hand so suddenly. It had hit him so fast that he needed a minute on his own to calm down. He felt ashamed of himself and how he was sitting in there ruining another day that could have been a great one. Shame that he behaved as if she didn't know what was going on with him anyway. No matter how much he was proving all day to be the one who was helpful and how she was it who had become a problem that had to be handled properly. In the end he really was not making anything any better. His attitude about a past that lay behind them led them astray in the present. The memories rammed their fangs inside his brain again, claiming his attention. All the months, or

were it even years, gone by didn't do anything to make this milder. Scenes that should have turned to stone by now, or at least start to melt away, again had become a movie that started playing in his head over and over again anytime he got closer to her. He had never been able to live in the moment for just one little second. Unable to grab one of those many bricks she had handed over to him to build a new ground for a life that could lead just a tad further. Every time she tried, he wanted to be attentive but he just couldn't do it. Instead of being of any help, he was searching for a way out, concealing his breakdowns pathetically with the lamest of excuses.

Knock, knock.

"Coming!" He had to be careful so his voice wouldn't reveal a shiver.

Full of despair, he asked himself once more why he was so hung up on a moment when there had been all the other days. Days that could not have been happier or fuller of joy and love. He got up on his feet, gathering the strength to come out of his hiding place and face the woman he loved. These things couldn't stand between them any longer. It was time to unfold a future that lay ahead, one that could be bright, if they were both willing to work on it.

When he stood right in front of the door he turned around. He would let his movie roll by once more. Scene by scene. This time he would look at every second and then he would let the subject rest.

One last time.

His fist hammering against a door that doesn't open. No answer to his calls. The wooden door making a loud noise when he finally manages to open it. The picture he should not be able to forget again reveals itself to him.

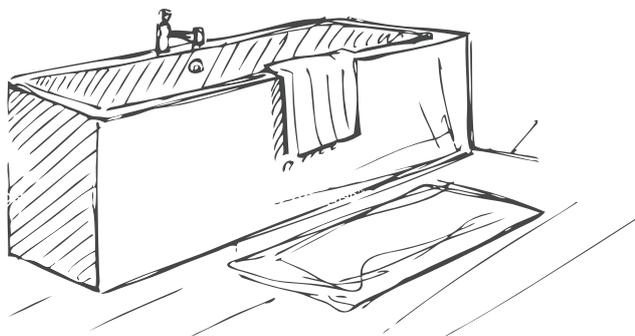
It was all so real again.

He hadn't been able to breathe and everything had seemed to happen in slow motion then. His own voice had sounded foreign in his ears as he had yelled her name. He had seen his arms reaching out to her, trying to get a hold of her fragile body as it had been hidden in all the water.

He couldn't recollect if thoughts had actually been racing through his mind in that moment like he recalled it right now. Or if it were just thoughts that he had connected to the moment long after it had gone by.

He didn't like the color red anymore, since it reminded him of that day. Nor the color blue. Blue had been the lights of the ambulance entering the driveway.

Once more, he saw himself scrubbing that bathtub



and the floor after he had left the hospital in which she had been lying. He felt the emptiness, the guilt that built up in his chest once again. And the biting smell of iron that now alone the thought of made him sick.

All the signs, they had been there, right in front of him. All too obviously.

But it was as it is with some things in life, he tried to make an excuse for himself. You don't necessarily want to see things as they are. As long as you can push them away and you turn out to be the lucky one.

In contrast to hers, his opinion had always been that telling the truth was kind of an overrated habit. That it all too often was just another way to make people feel better about themselves because they were honest enough to take responsibility. Just like he had done. The same thing as it was with apologies. People told the truth and asked for forgiveness for the same stupid reason – to calm their own dirty minds.

In a way it had been the same with her parents. After leading a rather broken family life since her early childhood, they had finally confirmed to her that she had been adopted. Not only that she had been adopted, but that she had been adopted anyway. As if that would explain all the difficulties they had been through. Misusing the truth to make it her fault, or at least mainly her fault. And that had been the day the rare contact they had to her family broke away almost completely. Her so-called parents had not moved mountains to get their daughter, who wasn't even their daughter, to talk to them again. That had been the first step downwards in their relationship sine she always seemed to have held her hopes up that her family situation would improve.

Probably, that also was when it had become harder for him to love her, he thought remembering these talks.

After he had thought that he had been so fortunate to have found someone who could give him some solid ground and the affection he needed so much, she had dared to not care for him the way she used to before. Of course, she had explained her behavior, trying to make him understand that her world had shifted and that she had been struggling to make sense of it once more. But if he was honest, he never really got the idea of what had

been that tragic about it all.

He was drifting away again with all the thoughts and memories running through his mind while he left her waiting outside.

He finally opened the door, the only barricade that parted him from a whole new life

“Are you... all right?” A shy smile as she moved a hand across his cheek softly.

“Yes, of course,” he said, his voice still trembling slightly, “I ...am ...sorry.”

Their eyes met.

She breathed out heavily. “Look. I will not do it again. Ever.”

An honest face focusing on his, “I won't won't do it again.” She emphasized every single word

An uncomfortable pause ensued.

“And you won't do it again,” she finally added just as precisely.

The sentence was still lingering in the air when he found himself justifying his mistake.

“You were so different. And she was there... I mean. I know that I made everything worse, but I just can't make it undone!”

“Shh.” She put a finger on his lips. “Let's let the past rest. There were all the other days. Do you remember?”

He felt tears filling up his eye. “I mean it's not like I loved her! I only love you and that won't change. Ever!”

“So many other days,” she repeated, “We both might have made some mistakes.”

“I will make up for it, I promise.”

The truth indeed wasn't always helpful. There was nothing glorious about being honest about everything. This time, the truth had almost cost a life. He was glancing into eyes that had been a mirror of himself so long ago. Now it only reflected his own mistakes. His mistakes and the mistakes of her parents who had her done so wrong as well, just like him.

All the apologies, all the truths people were telling each other – they were only there to make one's own mind peaceful. He had wanted to feel peace again. In the end, he hadn't made anything better, but broken another promise. ■

schroedinger's cat

by Elisa Haas

“You’re in the way, ma’am”. He jostles me aside and enters the coffeeshop. I’m standing in front of the entrance, facing a familiar structure. It must be a church or cathedral, but I can’t put my finger on the name of it. Though I am in London that’s for sure. A red double-decker passes by to my right, honking at a pedestrian who didn’t look before crossing the street. The man that so respectfully pushed past me into the cafe had an American accent, though.

“Damn, Yankees” I say out loud and my hand rushes up to my mouth. My mind only needs a fraction of a second to register why. I seem to be American as well. Other than this tidbit of information, the only thing I feel in my brain is a nagging void. I know I’m in a rush, because I’m panting like a lunatic, but why? Suddenly, I become aware of the weight that is pulling on my arm and when I look down I see the briefcase. In my other hand, I see a phone and its screen lights up, revealing a reminder: “Four p.m., 10 Paternoster Square”. Underneath, a message from an unknown number: “Was it worth it?”

I try unlocking the phone with my thumbprint but it won’t work. Either my hands are too sweaty or this is not my phone. The screensaver shows two women who have their arms around each other, smiling at me. One swipe to open the front-facing camera reveals that I am the one on the left, except four long scratches extend from my nose to my neck, as if I had gotten into a fight with someone wearing fake nails or a tiger with carpal tunnel syndrome that has weakened his paws. It must have been recent, because blood is still smeared across my face. Other than that, I’m clean.

Before more disgruntled Londoners take their frustration out on me, I take off into the direction of the church. Without paying much attention, I break through a group of tourists that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere.

“And here we have St. Paul’s Cathedral, a wonderful monument that...” Awesome, good to know. I don’t turn around to see the angry looks of anyone whose toes I have just stepped on and continue to walk across the street and into a smaller alley. At the moment, nobody



else is here. I see a bunch of cardboard boxes next to a marble staircase that leads to the front door of the building to my right. A youth hostel. I set the briefcase down onto the boxes and to my dismay, I notice a combination lock; six digits. The sound of the opening hostel door startles me and I look up into the faces of three young girls. Two of them are talking; it sounds like they're speaking Dutch or German. The third looks like she had just been crying and when she notices me, she puts on a pair of sunglasses. Before I can really focus on her face, my vision gets blurry and streaks of blue appear, obscuring the girl, but still, she seems familiar to me though I can't remember why.

I try to give her a gentle smile that is supposed to say, 'We're both having the time of our lives, huh?' But judging by the way she turns and catches up with the other two, my face must have frightened her instead. My hands reach up to my face to rub the blue film away as if it is something that just got into my eyes. Somehow, I manage to get rid of it.

I'm never going to guess the combination for the briefcase. I can't even remember who I am. I check the phone another time: almost 4. Again, I'm overcome with this biting urgency that makes my insides turn over. Anxiety is crushing me like a bulldozer would a tube of toothpaste.

In this analogy, I would like you to put cartoon logic to use and either imagine my guts spilling out, while my legs are disintegrated first, followed by the rest. Or just picture me exploding under the pressure like some sad, slimy critter. Both come very close to what I'm experiencing at the moment.

Not knowing why it is so urgent to keep this appointment is driving me insane. My feet are already carrying me back to the group of tourists and before I can stop myself, I grab the guide by his arm.

He cuts off in the middle of his sentence, "What on God's green earth..."

"Shut up. I need to know where this is. It's important." I shove the phone in his face. The tourists collectively fall back and gasp. Murmuring breaks out in about a dozen different languages. They all mix into a high pitch sound in my ear, making my knees buckle. Feeling disoriented, I see only one way out of it.

"Quiet! All of you! Or I'mma whack you with this..." I am holding up the heavy briefcase. This seems to have a pretty decent effect since they scatter like a bunch of startled chickens.

"Can you show me where this is?" I return my attention to the guide. Instead of answering, his hand rushes down to his pants. A dark spot spreads quickly across them and my mouth falls open as I watch this grown man piss himself in front of dozens of people because a woman grabbed his arm and asked for directions.

"You have got to be kidding me. Come on, lead the way."

He winces and nods frantically. "This uh this wa-y ma ma'am uhm please. Ok ok ok."

We walk to the other side of the square in front of the cathedral. Two blocks into a street leading away from St. Paul's, he stops and looks around.

"This-uh, this is the street. I-uh think..." he swallows "... uh that building over there, missus. Ok ok ok."

"Thanks, man. 'ppreciate your help. Forget this ever happened, alright?" I pat him on the shoulder, which only seems to make things worse, judging by the way he bolts away from me.

I'm unsure where this sudden wash of aggression came from, but it is gone now. I walk towards the building and at its door, I count 17 doorbells with the corresponding names next to each button. None of the names sound familiar, obviously, since my memory is wiped clean. The one on the bottom has no name, however. I relate to this at the moment and so I press it once.

Nothing happens.

I press it again, more determined, and I hear the buzzing sound that lets me in. The bottom bell means the bottom apartment and there is only a stairwell upwards and a red door to my right. It is slightly ajar and I inch closer to it, one hand extended in order to push it open. It swings open at my touch and I stumble a few steps back, hands to my mouth to stifle the scream. There is nothing but darkness behind the doorway, which is odd because the ceiling light above me should illuminate at least the first few feet into the apartment, but I only see a black rectangle where a hallway should be, or a living room, or anything for that matter.

Something in the briefcase starts to vibrate, as if to urge me to enter the black hole. My brain tells me to let go of it, but my fingers won't listen. The more I try to pry them off with my other hand, the more my grip around the case's handle tightens. It's as if an electric current is running through my hand, making it cramp up around the handle. My fingernails dig into the flesh of my palm and pain spreads through my forearm until my left hand lets go. I'm panting at this point, suddenly very aware of

the clouds puffing from my mouth. It was extremely hot just a second ago and now I am freezing.

In the corner of my left eye, I can see something rush past me with inhuman speed and I feel how my heart is pounding against my ribs. The deafening quiet is interrupted by a scratching sound coming from a door behind me. I could've sworn that there wasn't one when I entered. But the sound is definitely something like a cat scratching at a wooden door and not a wall, only that it sounds much bigger than an ordinary cat. With much effort, I make myself turn around and as soon as I face the other door, a blue one, the scratching stops.

Blue door, silver knob.

Red door, gold knob.

I try turning the silver one and find the door locked. My heart sinks. I turn to the door that leads out onto Paternoster Square, thinking I might still get out and join my friend there in the wet-pants club, but I don't have much hope that I will be able to leave. I find my suspicions confirmed when I reach for the knob. It feels so cold I might as well be touching dry ice. Instantly, I rip my hand away from it, pretty sure some of my skin stays on the knob.

Red door it is. *ding*

The sound of the phone that I had stuffed into the back-pocket of my jeans scared me half to death. It's 4pm sharp now. Not a second later, as I look back up, I see that the dark hole has disappeared and has been replaced by an almost ordinary apartment corridor. Almost, because I had expected furniture, painted walls, picture frames, anything. Instead, I am faced with no furniture, white and empty walls and a smell of disinfectant and rubber that is seriously out of place. What lies before me resembles a hospital wing more than a run-of-the-mill apartment, but there are neither nurses nor patients. Every surface is white and so smooth that you might say the room was formed out of a block of eight-foot-deep white marble. I can't even make out the crevice where the wall meets the floor. Just white and more white. It's eerie, but a thousand times better than staying here with some creature that is too fast for my eyes to capture. And so I move forward. Whatever is making the briefcase vibrate calms down.

After I pass the threshold, I am blinded by my surroundings. I even wish for the darkness to return in order to relieve the stinging pain. Immediately, I punish myself for that thought by biting my tongue, thinking

if I didn't I might ask for it out loud. But whatever is happening to me can't read minds. The corridor stays white as ever.

Step by step, I inch forward and see that the corridor ends in a white wall. Since I can't see any contours of the room, the dimensions of this room, if it even is a three-dimensional room, are confusing me. I can't even really judge where the corridor ends, so I extend my arms, expecting to hit the marble with my hands at any time. When I don't, I continue to shuffle forward. Suddenly, the brightness of my surroundings dims down and I think I am now standing in a large room.

swoosh

I gasp and turn around 180 degrees. My hands hit a sheet of marble that cuts me off from the corridor I came from.

"Impossible!" I scream. The sound bounces off the marble and gets so loud that my eardrums might burst any second. I sag to the ground on all fours and vomit on the marble floor until I can see black spots and my vision blurs. Just as I regain full sight, I hear that same thing rush past me, but when I turn, I see the opposite of the *Alien vs. Predator-esque* creature I was expecting.

In the center – at least I believe it is the center because truly I have no idea where I am anymore – the crying girl I had seen earlier sits in a chair, hunched over a table, still weeping.

I know better now than to scream 'hey', and instead scramble back onto my feet. I take one step towards her and stop. I should be able to hear my steps. Why does my voice bounce around and make me keel over, but I can't even hear the faintest thud? Even weirder, I don't hear any sobs from the girl. Her shoulders quiver and I know she has to be crying, but I'm surrounded by deafening, disorienting silence.

Shivers go down my spine and into my legs. It is so intense I might fall over again. But my pants remain dry despite the fear that is spreading through my body.

I make myself walk over to the girl, touch her shoulder, and by doing so, burst through the bubble that kept the sound of her weeping from reaching my ears. She does not turn around until I jerk her arm backwards, and that's when I see that her hands are covered in blood. Her eyes reveal the source of it. I have never seen a pair of eyes this bloodshot. And out of the corners of them, it trickles down her face in a steady stream. Disgusted, I pull back my hand.

It was difficult to tell with all the blood over her face,

but now that there is no blue film covering her face, I am sure that this is not only the girl from the hostel, but also the same girl who is pictured hugging me on my phone's screensaver.

"Why are you doing thiiiis? He's *our*-" she whines.

"What?"

I don't get an answer to this. She simply turns back around to rest her face on the table, where a small pool of thick blood has already formed.

I don't have time to ask her again because a black rectangle appears on the wall in front of us. The intense contrast gives me a slight sense of the dimensions of the room. It looks like a giant TV screen that's embedded in the marble.

"OPEN IT" appears in white letters on the screen.

"I don't know *how*," I yell, and I am immediately punished for my outburst of anger by a high-pitched scream coming from every corner of the room, bouncing around the walls and magnifying. This time, what is left in my stomach remains in place with much mental effort. When the sound recedes, my ears are pulsating.

"If I survive this, I better not be hard of hearing" I mumble to myself. The girl takes no notice of this and the sound doesn't come back. I look around for any clues, any numbers.

My gaze falls onto a bloody handprint on the table. It's a large table and the print is many feet away from the girl, but I have no doubt it's hers. I walk around it and notice that the surface of the table around the print seems scratched, but I can't make out if it's a pattern, so I wipe the blood away with my shirt. Remnants of it fill the crevices, seemingly created with a knife. But the blood makes me think she didn't use a knife, but her fingernails. The number **8** is etched into the table.

Great, only five numbers left. The biting sarcasm of my thoughts produces only the urge to join the girl in her crying fit. I rest the briefcase on the table and the current that locked my grip around the handle disappears. My hand feels sore, from holding onto it for what seems like days and I shake it vehemently to relieve the pain. My wrist cracks in protest.

"Ok, I need numbers."

Think back. What numbers have I faced today. Since my memory only reaches back for about twenty-five minutes, this shouldn't be too hard. I think of the reminder on the phone:

"Four p.m., **10** Paternoster Square"

I turn the first little number on the lock to a **4**, then

1, and then **0**. I walked into that alley, no numbers. **3** girls walk out. I put in the number. Then I ran to the guide, no numbers. The smell of piss enters my nostrils, but my pants still feel dry, albeit freezing cold, so who knows it might be memory, it might be that I also have a weak bladder. Next, I remember the entrance to this place, and how I counted the number of apartments. **17**.

Ok ok ok.

I turn the next to a **1** and the last to a **7**. But what about **8**?

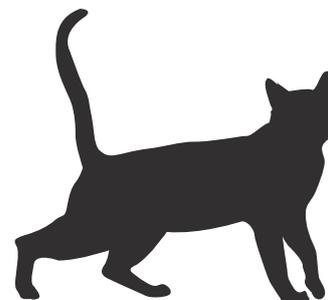
Ok ok ok.

Try again. I look at the phone. The reminder is still flashing on the screen when the familiar blue film falls over my vision and obscures parts of the message. No longer can I identify when this meeting should take place, only the address. I start the combination over. **1 - 0 - 3 - 1 - 7 - 8**. The briefcase unlocks but I don't feel any relief over this. If anything, I am even more frightened.

Nonetheless, I open the briefcase, expecting something heavy. The filter, despite me rubbing my eyes, won't go away and I can't see what is in it, only that it glows. It is as if I'm looking at a lightbulb or an orb of sorts through blue stained glass.

Still mesmerized, I had half forgotten that the girl was still with me, but all of a sudden she is screaming at the top of her lungs, lunges forward and pulls the suitcase away from me before I can stop her. I am frozen in my position and watch her pull the orb out of the suitcase. She shuts it with a bang and explodes into laughter as crazy and far from human as you could imagine.

"Shut up! Shut your mouth you're gonna..." but the punishment-sound doesn't come. Instead, she throws the orb at the screen, on contact producing a sound like



shattering glass panes. I snap out of my trance just as the filter disappears and turn to see that the black screen is replaced by a window. A window into another room, and in it I can make out a chair with belt straps on the arm and foot rests. Along the walls of that room are cabinets as white as everything else, but at least I can make out the contours. Finally something my mind can make sense of.

Mounted on the wall to the left is a phone. I realize in an instant that I am looking at an execution chamber. The chemical smell makes sense now, but the realization also does nothing to calm my nerves - quite the opposite: every hair on my body stands up.

I even turn back to the girl, desperately wishing for someone, something, anything to get me out of here. But she stares blankly at the window. After a few seconds, she must have registered my gaze because she turns her head towards me so fast that I almost fall back again, in fear of this... this being.

Ok ok ok.

“Watch what you’ve done. **Was it worth it?**” she croaks, her head cocked to one side like a dog that’s confused as to why you kicked it in the ribs.

I throw the phone across the room as if her repeating the words from that text message could infect me with whatever horrible disease she has contracted. It should have hit the wall of this room, judging by the force with which I threw it, but it didn’t. It just lands on the floor, seemingly miles away, but at the same time I think I could reach it if I just extend my arm a little bit.

She moves her gaze back to the window and studies it as if she were expecting to see the Muppets appear in the chamber. More than anything, I wish to teleport out of here, but my sole option is to follow her lead and turn around, already anticipating that the scene has changed again. But this time I don’t immediately see what has changed. Instead, the filter is back and I rub my eyes, as if the blue is a grain of sand that has been blown into them. I blink a few times and to my surprise, the blue now actually disappears – but what I see makes me want to have it back immediately. I curse myself for wanting to look into the chamber.

The empty chair is now occupied by an elderly black man, maybe seventy years old. His eyes look tired but still young and his hair, or what’s left of it, is wispy and grey.

However, he doesn’t seem to be able to see me or the girl. He just looks at the window as if he is studying

his own reflection in the mirror. An incredible sadness flushes my senses, but I cannot explain why. With a sudden, painful certainty I know that this man is going to die, but for the love of God, I don’t recognize him.

Another man in a surgical uniform and mask as white as the walls materializes in the chamber. There are no doors that I can make out. It seems he was birthed by the wall itself. He holds up the inevitable, a syringe with whatever he is going to execute the man with. He taps it three times with the back of his pointer finger and squeezes out the last few bubbles of air.

The man in the chair is restrained by the straps, but I don’t think they will be needed, since he doesn’t seem to register the other person in the room, nor that that person is going to...

Ok ok ok.

The needle pierces the old man’s skin in the same moment that I reach the window in a futile attempt to stop what’s going on. At my touch, the glass disappears and I’m now able to hear the old man’s frantic breathing and the quickening beep of the machine that monitors his heartbeat.

“**Was it worth it?** I am your... dammit y-” he starts to say.

His eyes flutter for a moment and then roll back in their sockets before he can finish. The last of the air in his lungs comes out with a pained exhalation. My face registers a familiar wetness. I am crying at this man’s death.

“Damnit! Who are you?” I scream.

The pain in the pit of my stomach demands to know who he is but there is no answer, no comfort. The creature that won’t be captured by my sight, but remains on the edge of what is possible for me to see, rushes past me on the left and is gone when I turn to it. Then my right. Gone. I turn to the table. All gone.

Ok ok ok.

My back is now facing the chamber and I’m certain that it was a mistake to turn away. Who is the old man?

And so the cat killed Curiosity. ■

12 minutes

by Victoria Koberstein

That morning she had taken a picture of her menstrual blood flowing down the inside of the toilet bowl in beautiful symmetry until it hit the water and the dark iron red turned into a blurry rosé.

The scene satisfied her so much that she used the picture as her phone screen saver. It didn't only save her screen, it saved *her* when she got on the train and couldn't sit in her usual seat because a middle aged man was sitting in it. He couldn't have picked another damn seat. There were a bunch of empty ones but it had to be hers. Anxiety crawled up her esophagus all the way to her throat. She started scratching the skin between the middle and ring fingers of her left hand violently.

Eventually, she decided to sit opposite her usual spot and stare at her phone screen. How can my body produce something as perfectly shaped as that, she wondered. How did the drops of blood fall down in just the right distance to one another to end up in this amazingly satisfying pattern? Whenever the screen went back to black, she immediately pressed the home button to see her paragon of perfection again. It saved her. Calmed her down. Got her all through the train ride without a panic attack. Her battery was on 12% when she got off. Absolutely worth it.

He woke up at 12 p.m. that day after four hours of sleep. When his friends had left around midnight, he had sat down at the piano and played Rachmaninov's Prelude for the rest of the night. Some more powder up his nose and he felt like a virtuoso.

He couldn't even see the notes, the thick smoke made him blind. Every inhale a hit, every exhale a sightlessness. His fingers moved over the keys of the piano as if they were someone else's. As if they were Rachmaninov's, actually. And still he could feel it all coming out of himself. Every note made sense, it was supposed to

be there, it could not have been another one. He played it flawlessly, because he had understood, not because he had listened to it one too many times. It would've been the same way if he had never heard it before. As if he had composed it.

Now that he was awake again, he could not wait for the night to come. He hated daylight. Daytime in general. He could live by night only, he thought, while lighting his first cigarette. Why would anyone want to have breakfast if you can have nicotine and caffeine instead. One deep inhale, instant relief.

He looked at his phone and wondered if 12 was too early to have a drink. As he leaned against the windowsill, contemplating, he saw a girl walking past. She was smoking. She lived down the street, he had seen her around before but had never spoken to her.

She wore headphones and moved her lips to the song she was listening to. Making facial expressions like she was in a music video. She made him smile. And he couldn't remember the last time he had the urge to smile during his first cigarette.

She was almost in a good mood on her way home from therapy. She was making progress, Dr Schiffer had said. Progress as in not checking if she'd actually locked her apartment door 12 but six times. As in trying not to wipe drops of water around her kitchen sink off right



away, even though the little calcareous circles they leave when they dry horrified her. Progress as in considering to lower her Durazepam dosage to 20 mg per day, which wasn't that relevant for her since she avoided taking it anyway. But it's the thought that counts.

She hadn't told him about the train ride and her screen saver, though. Or about how she still couldn't touch door handles anywhere. Not even at his office. Or about how she'd brushed her teeth three times that morning before breakfast until her gums bled.

And still, it wasn't a bad day. She felt like things were moving. She tuned into the Real Slim Shady when she felt like no one could see or hear her out in the quiet suburban streets. It was 12 p.m., people were inside preparing lunch anyway. It was okay to let loose for a minute.

When the chorus finished and she opened her intuitively closed eyes, she saw a young man leaning out of his window. She was now sure that he had been watching her the whole time. Embarrassment blushed her cheeks. He smiled at her. She put the cigarette between her lips again so she didn't have to smile back and crossed the street just to be out of his field of vision.

Buzz. Hey, whaddupp?

Typing. Not much.

Buzz. Cool

Buzz. So I was wondering if u could get me something green u know

Buzz. Having some people over tonite u can come too if u want

Typing. Nah thanks tho

Buzz. So..

Typing. I don't sell anymore. Gotta ask someone else. Sorry bro.

Buzz. Aiight do u know someone tho?

Typing. Nope sorry

Buzz. But where do u get urs from

Typing. Yo these dudes don't meet w/ people they don't know. Can't help you out

Buzz. K thx

Feel love. Real love. Taste love. Smoke love.

The sound of vinyl on his phonograph filled every corner of the room as he sipped the last drop of his 12th beer and fell back onto the floor that was covered in music sheets. Taste love.

He got up as soon as the record had finished, played

it again from the beginning and opened the window. It was almost dark. The last bit of light, a few chunks of red clouds, didn't give up lighting the horizon just like he had never given up lighting his bong. Smoke love. He hummed the melody of the song while he inhaled.

That's why sunset is better than sunrise, he thought, because the fairest part of the day is about to begin. His mind wanted to keep wandering but the sound of a creaking door somewhere in the distance interrupted him without regard. Footsteps. Footsteps getting louder. Coming towards him. He leaned out of his window and recognized the girl that had made him smile this morning. She looked around nervously and held a plastic bag in her hand. He wondered if she was on her way to wrap up a deal. Definitely no better place for that than suburbia after 8 p.m.. He was briefly confused when he saw her throw the bag in someone else's bin, contentedly lighting a cigarette, wearing disposable gloves.

As she made her way back down the street, he pulled a chair to the window and sat down. He didn't want to miss out on whoever was going to lean into that trash bin to pick up the bag. What is it, speed maybe, acid, or just weed? She didn't look like someone who'd deal the big shit. But still, it all made sense, he couldn't think of a different reason as to why anyone would walk down half the block just to get rid of some junk if it wasn't the real junk.

Half an hour went by and he was about to go outside and have a look, take some maybe, but not that much so that if the buyer comes, he'll hardly notice and she won't get in trouble. He decided to wait a little longer and inhale once more. At around midnight he fell asleep on his chair.

Her apartment was as small as an apartment could be. A bit more than a room and a bathroom, a lot less than a flat.



She sometimes wished it was bigger, not because she wanted more room for herself but because she wanted more spaces she could clean.

When her apartment was all tidied up and disinfected, every spot, every corner, she felt useless. The way people must feel when they've worked all their life in a job they really loved until they retire. And then retirement becomes the task. What you do if you've got nothing to do. Boredom drives healthy people insane and since she was already insane, it turned her into a psychopath.

She hated these little nodules that sometimes occur on clothing when it's rubbed against other fabrics. On socks, usually. If you wear them long enough. Or pants, between the thighs. So she went through all her clothes for the rest of the day to free them from the nodules. She got a plastic bag and put all these little bastards, whose existence made her feel so very elusively uncomfortable, in there, put a pair of latex gloves on, walked down the street to a neighbor's house and disposed of them in their trash bin since they didn't deserve to be disposed of in hers. She had looked around before because she smelled weed and heard music somewhere far away, but couldn't see anyone. Still wearing her gloves, she lit a cigarette, instant relief.

When she got on the 12 o'clock train, it wasn't too busy. Still, there was someone in her seat again. She couldn't take another half hour staring at her screen-saver. It saved her once, it was probably not going to save her twice. She's had it for three days now and got used to it anyway. She walked towards the young man, encouraging herself to just ask him if he would like to swap seats, just not make it a big deal of it, just pretend it's nothing unusual.

It wasn't until she stood right in front of him that she recognized the guy who was staring at his iPod. She had seen him the other day, he had looked at her from his window, smoking. Probably laughing. Pissing on her parade.

He looked up. "Why are you staring at me?"

"Eh, I'm sorry, I was just wondering if you would mind sitting somewhere else because...em... that's kind of my seat."

He kept looking at her, lifting his eyebrows.

"I know that's a lot to ask for but you would really help me out here."

His expression changed from surprise to a mixture

of interest and disgust, as far as she could tell.

"Wait, I know you, right? I've seen you before," he said.

"Yeah, I live near your place, I guess."

He stood up then, pointing at his seat, and sat down in the one opposite to it.

"You OCD or something?"

The seat was warm and she didn't like that. "Yeah, pretty much." No reaction. "On my way to therapy, so... work in progress."

He nodded now.

"And you?" she asked.

"I'm not."

"No, I mean where are you going?"

"Uni."

"What do you study?"

"Music."

"Nice."

She started getting nervous and scratched the spot between the middle and ring fingers of her left hand once more, which was already red from all her scratching.

He seemed to be able to easily endure the unpleasant silence between them.

A loud swallow, then she let her eyes drift out the window of the moving train. She could still feel his eyes on her. Minutes passed.

"You wanna hang out later?" he asked eventually.

He tried to remember the last time he had had sex but gave up only moments later. Instead, he looked around his room and wondered where to start. The billions of empty bottles maybe. The coffee mugs. The dirty cereal bowls he'd started using as ashtrays. The books. The drugs. The never-ending piles of clothes, vinyls and music sheets.

He walked over to his night-stand, let his fingers run over the fine remains of the small crystals that had made his nose bleed last night because he'd been too impatient to grind them into powder and licked them off his fingertips.

Then he turned his music up and started cleaning.

Got her bent up, I just mixed the grams with molly.

Her car dented up like she rent to everybody.

2013.

My money way longer than a NASCAR race.

I told her keep going on the gas, fuck the brakes.

Only here for one night, let me put it on your face.

Fall of 2013. The last time he'd had sober sex. Everything after that was a blur.

But who cares anyway.

She hadn't seen anything as disgusting as his room in a very long time. Her first instinct was to not touch a thing, put on a pair of gloves and start cleaning the shit out of his chamber.

She had whispered to herself "*Stay calm, let him be, let yourself be*" for about 12 times before she lost count, took a Valium and left the house to walk over to his place. She was willing to try and leave her comfort zone. That's what Dr. Schiffer had told her earlier that day.

"I can sense you're getting stronger and more comfortable doing things that have always been out of your way. You'll get there. You're progressing and you can be proud of yourself."

"Honestly, I don't really know what to be proud of. I know you're trying to encourage me, and I appreciate that, I really do, but as soon as I leave your office today - "

"Please, keep on talking, that's what we're here for."

"Don't get me wrong, but where does your encouragement get me? How does it improve my life, my situation? It doesn't. I'm sorry but it doesn't do anything for me."

"It's interesting of you to say that. And you're right. I don't want you to live off my encouragement. I want you to live off your own. To be confident. And it's a lot easier to get there if someone believes in you. So you can start believing in yourself. Once we reach that point, you won't need me anymore. And I think you're on the way."

"Am I?"

"Definitely. You've taken the train today and had a conversation with someone, even though it made you feel very uncomfortable, as you said. You've decided to step out of your comfort zone, which is very impressive."

This room was way out of her comfort zone. But if she made it tonight, if she coped with it, Dr. Schiffer would probably clap his hands and most definitely lower her Durazepam dosage. And her Risperdal, too. And maybe her Effexor, too.

"Eh, make yourself at home," he said.

Dare. "Thanks. If it's okay with you, I'd just like to stand here for a bit."

"Sure. You want a drink?"

"What do you have?"

"Beer?"

She didn't respond and looked around, so he kept

going.

"Eh, I do have vodka as well and Jäger. And wine. Red and white."

"Do you have water?"

"If that counts as a drink."

"I'll have one."

"Be right back."

"Can I smoke in here?"

"Sure."

She lit a cigarette and looked at his book shelf. The Communist Manifesto by Marx and Engels, The World as Will and Idea, Schopenhauer, Critique of Pure Reason, Kant, Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche, the Harry Potter Series.

"You into philosophy?"

No response. She heard the water tap run.

As she kept scanning the room, her eyes met two glasses on his coffee table that had little food debris and crumbs on them and were covered in greasy fingerprints. He probably doesn't even wash them with detergent, she thought, he's the kind of person who just rinses them out with cold water and reuses them.

"Can I have a beer, actually?" she yelled, "Bottle or can? Unopened?"

"Now we're talking," he called back.

When he walked in, she stood in front of the piano.

"You play?"

"No, I just got one 'cause they're cheap."

"Can you play something for me?"

He paused for a moment since his sarcasm had never really been met by an abyss of ignorance. "What do you want me to play?"

"Whatever you got."

"Well, I got a lot."

"I'll listen a lot then."

He opened the can, took a sip and then handed it to her.

"There you go," he said and started playing Chopin's Nocturnes.

She listened to him for 12 minutes before she was brave enough to put the can to her mouth and take her first sip.

"How can you afford to live on your own if you don't have a job?" she asked.

"My aunt lives downstairs. It's her house."

She nodded while he opened another can. She lost track of how many they'd had, around a dozen probably,

and she was almost at ease.

“Do you live on your own?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“And who pays for that?”

“Disability insurance and sickness benefits.”

“So you’re disabled? Is that what it’s called?”

He rolled up another joint.

“My mind is, yes.”

“Mine is, too, and I’ve never seen any money from anyone. What about your parents?”

“They’re gone. Yours?”

“Long gone.”

Silence until he lit it and inhaled. “You want some this time?”

“I’m still not sure.”

“Why?”

“Cause I’m on heavy medication and I just never know if it’s gonna fuck me up or not.”

“So you never do drugs?” he asked in disbelief as if she had just told him she never showers.

“I do drugs every day. I just told you.”

“I don’t mean medication.”

“That is drugs. The blue ones knock you out better than H.”

“But you drink, though.”

“I try not to.”

“Did you know that no one ever died from smoking weed while alcohol kills 15,000 people in this country every year?”

“Thanks for giving me information I didn’t ask for.”

“Did you know that, though?”

“I didn’t. All I know is that if you have mental issues, you should keep your hands off it.”

“It would probably be better for your health than all the chemical shit you swallow every day,” he said, double-standard-esque.

“And again, I try not to. I prefer hoarding them in my night stand.”

“So is that what you’re dealing?”

“What? What do you mean?”

“I saw you wrap up a deal the other night.”

“What the hell are you on about?” While she was raising her voice, she already realized how inappropriate it was.

“That plastic bag and your gloves and all.”

“That wasn’t drugs. Nor medication. Fucked up, that’s all it was.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. It would make you realize how disturbed I am.”

“I already realized that.”

He let her take the spliff off his hands and watched her finish it before he kissed her.

A walk of shame is a lot worse in Suburbia than it is in the city. Downtown she might just be someone who couldn’t be bothered to brush her hair, wash her face and put halfway decent clothing on. She could be living an alternative lifestyle, hipster, she could be homeless, or a student who got up late for class. Or she might simply be a girl who had sex the night before. Anyway, no one pays more attention than necessary.

Here, she was a slut and all the grandpas leaning out their living room windows knew it.

The sun blinded her on her way home, she could hardly open her eyes. She tasted blood in her mouth and was surprised to find a scab under her fingernails when she scratched her forehead since she couldn’t remember sustaining a wound.

I’m still alive, she thought, and besides the headache I’m feeling pretty damn fine. Valium, tetrahydrocannabinol, estrogen and some booze and all you get is a good feeling. What a time to be alive. What a blessing.

When she got home, she walked right into the bedroom without taking her shoes or jacket off. Or brushing her teeth. Or showering. She plumped down on the bed and closed her eyes.

I let loose. Can you believe it? I let loose and had a good time. I didn’t care about a thing. I used to think that’s bad. I know you told me it isn’t but I didn’t believe you. I know you’re smiling now because I’m basically admitting you were right. Not caring is a good thing. Not caring is liberating. It was the only way out for you and maybe now it is for me, too.

I’m hungover and if you were here, you’d make me mow the lawn or something equally painful and make fun of me. Dad, there’s nothing I’d rather do than mow the lawn for you right now, ‘cause it would mean I’m with you.

At 12 p.m. she fell asleep and missed her appointment with Dr. Schiffer for the first time in three years.

He woke up with a crusty layer of dried blood around his nose and mouth. For a second he wondered why he hadn’t realized she was having her period. He looked at himself in the bathroom mirror and then he remem-

bered. It wasn't her blood, it was his own.

He had gone to the bathroom to snort up some E from the edge of the sink through a banknote right before he slept with her. He could recall the pain the sharp-edged crystals had caused him, but he had been in a hurry to get back to her. No time to pulverize.

His bedroom had been dark and he hadn't noticed he bled. He hadn't noticed anything besides her body wrapped up in his sheets.

When she'd got up in the morning, he'd seen some dried blood on her forehead and upper lip as he kissed her, but neither did he know nor care where it came from. He went back to sleep as soon as he'd closed the door behind her.

His stomach cramped at the mere thought of her. Not in a bad way. In a jittery way.

He decided not to wash his face and have a smoke first.

When she woke up, her euphoria was gone. She could taste her disgusting tongue, smell and feel her own sweat. She hated herself for not showering, not brushing her teeth.

Her teeth! She could almost feel the little bacteria dig their way through her dental enamel, bed themselves in her gums and infect them. She got up and rushed to the bathroom, put the toothbrush in her mouth, sat down on the floor right in front of the toilet and leaned her head back. She imagined her mother sitting behind her, her head being squeezed between her mom's legs, her mouth wide open and her mother brushing until her gums burned.

Whenever she tried to move, her mother would squeeze even harder.

"You're not done yet," she'd say and scrub and scrub and scrub.

She did that until her daughter was too big to fit between her legs any longer, so she just kept checking every morning, midday and night.

"If you don't bleed, you're not finished," she'd say, "By the way, it's time to cut your fingernails again," and then she'd go and get the scissors.

She thought of her mother almost as often as she thought of her father although she made him go insane. Turned him into a freak. A psycho. An addict. A suicidal maniac. Killed him after all. She argued that it was him who overdosed but they all knew that she was to blame.

Three weeks after the funeral, her mother was on a

bike ride next to an abandoned airfield when a sailplane had to do an emergency landing and ripped her head off. It was the headline of every newspaper in town. It sounded too made up, too random. So random that there was no way it was a coincidence. It was karma. That little bitch.

Karma killed my mom, she had told Dr. Schiffer, not the pilot of the glider.

She still missed her every day. How could anyone not miss their own mother when she's gone, regardless of what she might have done. Regardless of whom she might have killed.

Buzz. Hey

Buzz. What r u doing tonite?

Her apartment reminded him of a hospital ward. It was clean, white, sterile, quiet and therefore the most uncomfortable place he had probably ever been to, although every place in which music was absent made him feel that way. But this was a whole new level. This almost gave him the chills.

Her couch was covered with a white bed sheet that made it look nothing like a couch, but he decided to have a seat anyway. He took a can of beer out of his backpack.

"Please be careful not to spill anything and don't hesitate to use the coaster," she said.

"Alright, Ma'am, mind if I smoke in here?"

"That's fine but you gotta stand by the window."

"Sure." He opened the can and took a sip. "You want some?"

"Nah, took a pill earlier today, I'm good."

"Really? 'Cause if you don't drink you're making me feel like I'm at an AA meeting and you're about to counsel the shit out of me."

"I'll never be in the position to counsel anybody."

"Why not? Give it a shot. Just play me."

"Fine," she said, though hesitating, and sat down on a little stool opposite him.

He swung his legs up to lay down and make the whole situation look even more like a therapy session.

"Be careful not to mess up the sheet, please!"

He noticed sudden anxiety in her voice. "I'm sorry, Doctor."

"So, why have you come here today?" she asked the way she remembered Dr. Schiffer asking her in her very first session.

"Eh, 'cause we had a good time last night and I wanted to see you again."

“Okay, wrong question. What is it you want to talk to me about?”

“Honest answer?”

“Honesty is the key concept of our joint work here,” she quoted.

“Did you just say joint?”

“Focus on the question, please.”

He pondered for a moment. “I wanted to talk to you about the fact that I like you and I wanted to know if you wanna keep hanging out with me or so?”

“Why are you making it sound like a question?”

“Cause I couldn’t think of a sarcastic way to put it that would make it sound like a confident declarative sentence.”

She couldn’t suppress a smile. “Well, I do think we have to keep seeing each other since there’s still a lot of work ahead of us,” she said, about to feel almost comfortable being the shrink persona for once.

Although it was a made-up setting and the distribution of roles would’ve been wrong either way, she felt like this could work. Work for her, at least. Maybe Dr. Schiffer was right and social interaction *is* what gets you back on your feet. Maybe two wrongs do make a right after all, maybe two invalid minds make a healthy one.

When he got up and walked toward the window, she couldn’t stop herself from straightening out the sheet on the sofa that he had just left untidy.

“Why do you smoke?” she asked.

“Cause I’m too intelligent. There’s at least one stupid thing you need to do to stay sane if you’re intelligent. And mine is smoking.” He took a drag. She was now standing right next to him to make sure the ash he tapped off his cigarette didn’t end up on her windowsill. “Well, actually, I do stupid things all the time and smoking is just one of them,” he added.

“Me too.” She commanded all her courage and took the cigarette out of his mouth to finish it. “And I’m still not sane.”

When he got home the next morning, he had to play the 9th, *Molto Vivace*. There was no way around it. No other way to cope with what he was experiencing although for the first time in years he felt like he could be fixed by anything but music. And why not celebrate that by making music.

This might work, he thought, and I’ll try everything to make it work if it doesn’t. She played the role of a therapist, more or less unintentionally, and so did he,

in a weirdly naive, innocent way. Not necessarily while they pretended to counsel each other but throughout the whole time he spent with her. As if it was one long therapy session that he didn’t even have to pay for. All he had to do was share his drugs with her and enjoy her presence in any way conceivable.

What a time to be alive. What a blessing.

He lit a cigarette, played, ignoring the sheet, and wondered whether claiming that he was too smart was a stupid thing to say because bragging about outstanding intellectual capacity usually says enough about said person’s level of intelligence.

He knew that he had to text or call her as soon as he was done playing, just ask what she was up to. Cleaning probably all the mess he made last night.

He went to the bathroom this one time and when he came out, she walked in to check if the tap and the sink were dry. Of course they weren’t and she wiped them down, explaining that she hated how the chalky water left little water drop shaped rings on them when it dried.

“That’s why you have to wipe before it gets a chance to dry, do you understand that? See, this cloth is specially for the sink and that one over there is for the bathtub and I’ve got one in the kitchen as well.”

“Show me,” he said. She immediately nodded her approval and while she walked off, he went back into the bathroom, splashed some water around, took the key and locked the door from the outside before she got a chance to realize what he was doing.

Of course she laughed right before she lost it, started screaming and whining and tried to call Dr. Schiffer’s office but nobody picked up. And of course he didn’t give the key back to her.

“This is exposure therapy,” he yelled, ducking his head every time he thought she might punch him. “You need to calm the fuck down!”

When she ran into the bedroom, raging, and desperately rummaged around in her nightstand drawer, ready to swallow whatever pill she could grab, he stopped her and held on to her wrists. “Okay, this just got out of control and I’m sorry. I didn’t know how upset you’d get. I’ll give you the key back now and roll some weed up and we can all just calm down, does that sound alright?”

She glared at him without saying anything, looking like she was in some irreversible state of shock.

“I’m really sorry,” he repeated and let go of her wrists.

“They’ll have dried by now,” she said, unable to move.

“And there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that.”

She suddenly flung her arms around him. He could feel her heart pounding against his chest at erratic speed, the way his usually did when he sniffed.

"They'll have dried by now," she mumbled again and held on to him for a while, until her heartbeat settled. "You can keep the key. Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said, "tomorrow I'll mess up the sheet on your sofa."

She had scrubbed her skin so hard it burned like fire. It was covered with dark red stripes when she got out of the shower. She felt disgusting, another morning after. She wasn't used to being in touch with another person's sweat and spit and other bodily fluids. She wasn't even used to being in touch with her own.

It was fine for the moment, more than fine, but as soon as it dried she felt the need to peel her skin off. To turn it inside out and put it in the washer. Boil it.

As her imagination got more and more picturesque, she decided to take her Durazepam for once and wondered what it would be like to grind it and then shoot it up her nose the way he had done with his crystal stuff the night before. She'd never seen anyone do it like that, crush it with his credit card and then suck it up through his nose from his phone screen with a banknote, his torso bent over the table like he was looking for tiny bread crumbs or dust grains. He wouldn't find any at her place, though.

What an odd way to consume something, she thought.

"Why do you do this?" she'd asked him when his pupils had already widened, his heartbeat quickened.

"Cause it feels brilliant."

"Do you think you could stop if you wanted to?"

"Do you think you could stop going to therapy if you wanted to?"

Buzz. Hey

Buzz. Whaddupp

Buzz. I know u said u don't sell nomore and u don't know nobody and stuff

Buzz. But I'm really strugglin over here and I'd appreciate anything u have goin spare

Buzz. Literally anything.

Buzz. Let me know bro!

Wake up in the mornin'

Thinkin' 'bout money, kick your feet up

Watch you a comedy, take a shit, then roll some weed up.

He was adjusting the volume on his phonograph when she leaned into him. He smelled amazing. She couldn't remember the last time she smelled something like this. He smelled like someone who should be smelled by every person in the world just so they know what a good smell smells like.

Don't go to work today

Cop you a fit or maybe some kicks and make it work today.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Nothing. Just smelling you."

"Why?"

"Cause it comforts me."

"But why?"

"I don't really know, just makes me feel good."

"Smelling things."

"Yeah."

Wake up in the mornin'

Thinkin' 'bout money, kick your feet up

Hop in the shower, put on your makeup, lace your weave up.

He grabbed her hair and smelled it, too, then wandered down her neck and her arm. Inhaled as deeply as he'd only ever inhale smoke.

"You're right, this is quite nice." Exhale.

"Most people might think it's weird." Inhale.

"When did the opinion of most people ever do anything good to an individual?"

As blood rush my favorite vein. Exhale.

Heartbeat racin' like a junkie's. Inhale.

I just need you to want me. Exhale.

They started falling asleep next to each other on a daily basis, because that's what happens when loners appreciate another person's presence all of a sudden. Overcompensation. Viscousness. Rectifying omissions.

Dr. Schiffer stressed the importance of social rehabilitation in every session and praised her immense progress. What she kept secret from him was that she had increasingly substituted her medication with other nervous system stimulants and hoarded the drugs he had prescribed in her nightstand drawer.

She felt like they were a couple. It was a weird feeling. Incomparable to any interpersonal relationship she had ever had. Out of the blue. Unexpected, still required. Necessary. Probably the most necessary thing of all time.

That's when it happens, she concluded. When the thought of it becomes abstract and thus sooner or later irrelevant.

That's when love hits you.

"What happened to your parents?"

"I don't want to talk about that," he replied.

"Why not?"

"Cause it hurts."

"Maybe it will hurt less if you talk about it."

"It hurts more when I talk about it."

He looked around his room for something to consume. "What about *your* parents?"

"They're the reason I can't sleep at night. They're still talking to me. And I'm talking to them."

"That's a nice reason. Genuinely. I wish that was the reason I can't sleep. Being in touch with people who are gone."

"And what's the real reason?" she asked.

He found something in a little tin chewing gum box and crushed it into pieces.

"Cause when I close my eyes I'm alone with myself. And I don't appreciate that kind of company. No one does. And I still haven't figured out why you seem to."

He bent over the table to take a sniff. To give his brain another thing to work on.

"I don't think I've ever heard anyone talk about themselves like that," she said, "You should get that figured out."

"Are *you* trying to tell me what *I* need to get figured out? Don't install a smoke detector at your neighbor's when your own house is on fire."

"I'm not saying I'm any better. What I mean is that you should consider working on that certain problem."

"Schubert's 8th is incomplete. That's a problem. Not the bullshit I deal with on a daily basis. Not my self-esteem or my insecurities or whatever. That's nothing. That's life. And no person in this world, no therapist, not even you can change that."

He bent down again. And again and again, till conversing became almost impossible.

When I powder my nose

he will powder his gums.

And if I try to get close

he is already gone.

"I'm sorry for what I said," he mumbled right before falling asleep, "I actually think you can change that. The way I feel about myself, you know. It's different when I'm

with you."

When he was gone, she let her fingertips run over the tabletop, collecting what was left over, and licked it off.

And I won't tell my mother

It's better she don't know

And he won't tell his folks

'Cause they're already ghosts.

She'd gotten better with every week that went by. She got confident riding the train, sitting in a different seat every day. Leaving crumbs on the coffee table. Brushing her teeth three times a day, and that was it. She stopped triple checking if she locked her apartment door. And sometimes, every now and then, she left drops of water around the sink, knowing they would dry.

She knew the reason why. Her self-induced tasks became indifferent to her. They began to matter less and less. Because she gave her brain other things to work on, just like him. *Not caring is a good thing, Dad. Not caring is liberating. It was the only way out for you and maybe now it is for me, too.*

"I know that you're able to live a healthy life. You don't depend on me helping you anymore, the only person you depend on is yourself," Dr. Schiffer said.

"I'm not ready yet. I really don't understand what makes you believe that. The thought is scaring me to death, it makes me want to swallow a dozen pills. Don't you think the subtext of what I'm telling you is: She's not fucking ready?"

"Of course you're scared, you've been with me for more than three years now," he said, dead calm, "Not talking to me anymore, at least not in a therapy session, means a change. And change is always scary. But it's a chance as well, a chance for you to be independent."

"Stop saying that! I don't want to be independent from you! I. Don't. Want. To.," she yelled, "You just want to get rid of me. You're tired of listening to first world problems."

"This is my job. This is what I love doing. I'd keep you here for as long as you want. The point is that it's not necessary." He gave her a level look while taking a deep breath as if he wanted her to do the same. "We're not doing this overnight. We'll gradually decrease your medication and the frequency of your visits and see how you're doing. We'll find something that works for you."

"What if I just don't leave? Isn't that my decision?"

"Technically, it's the health insurance's decision."

"How?"

"They're paying for the sessions for as long as they're required to. Now, if the medical report I am asked to send to them regularly says you're doing fine, they call for a termination of our therapy. And no, I'm not going to make any false statements about your medical condition."

"This is a fucking corrupt system."

"Actually, it would be corrupt if I lied in the report."

"There must be a way around that."

"The only way around would be paying for the sessions yourself, which I think - and I'm only telling you this since honesty is the key concept of our joint work here - would be shedding blood without cause. Money down the drain. Not that our sessions are comparable to any sanitary installation."

She expected him to laugh at his own minor joke, but he didn't.

"I want the best for you as my patient. I knew this day would come and I'm sure you did, too. I'd say you have all reason to be happy but I absolutely understand that you're not."

She rolled up a cigarette in despair.

"We'll figure this out together," he said.

She got the lighter out of her pocket.

"You can't smoke in here."

She then took a pill dispenser out of her bag and swallowed one. Dr. Schiffer narrowed his eyes and moved his head closer to her.

"I never prescribed you these."

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," she replied.

"You know you can talk to me about anything, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

They lay there for a while.

"There's something wrong."

"What makes you think that?"

"You're breathing heavily."

"I'm okay. I'm just tired."

"I'll let you sleep then." He kissed her.

I'm not enough, she thought, I can't help you, I can't fix you. I'll never be enough for you. I'm not even enough for Dr. Schiffer anymore. I'm mental myself. I tear everyone apart and then they leave and even if you haven't

spent a single thought on it yet, I know that you will leave, too.

It took a while until her breath settled down in a deep, constant rhythm.

When he had no doubt she was asleep, he took a look into the nightstand drawer she had talked about so regularly. It was full of pill dispensers, cardboard boxes, patient information leaflets and about two dozen medical prescriptions, most of them filled out recently. One said "Risperdal 1mg, one tablet by mouth 2x a day" and was signed by Dr. Schwartz. Another one said "Effexor 37,5mg, one tablet by mouth 1x a day," signed by Dr. Myer. Another one by Dr. Myer. Now one by Dr. Cliffman saying "Durazepam 10mg, one tablet by mouth 3x a day." He kept looking through the drawer but couldn't find a single prescription signed by Dr. Schiffer, the name she mentioned countless times. The name she had cried out earlier today when she had told him that her medical insurance would no longer pay for her therapy since she was done. Cured. Back to normal, as far as possible.

But no Dr. Schiffer in here, only Dr. Schwartz, Cliffman and Myer.

He went to the kitchen to roll some weed up and sort out his thoughts. Why are there three doctors prescribing different kinds of medication to her? And why did she never mention any of those three names but only refers to Dr. Schiffer instead?

He tiptoed to the living room and skimmed through the calendar she kept so accurately.

Monday, Dr. Schiffer 12pm, clean kitchen, take trash out

Tuesday, Dr. Schiffer 3:45pm, clean bathroom, change sheets

Wednesday, Dr. Schiffer 10:30am, Hoover, dusting, groceries

Thursday, Dr. Schiffer 5pm, clean kitchen, take trash out, call grandma

Friday, Dr. Schiffer 9:30pm, clean bathroom, change sheets

He took another drag and didn't care if the ashes ended up on the hardwood floor. This was fucked up. He knew she was a psycho but this was beyond his imagination. It was Dr. Schwartz on Mondays and Thursdays, Dr. Myer on Tuesdays and Fridays, Dr. Cliffman on Wednesdays. The underlined letters equaled Schiffer. She's made one out of three. Combined them. He wondered if she even knew who sat in front of her in her

sessions, whom she'd told what. Wondered if she ever got confused which doctor's office to go to on which day. She was too smart for that, though, too addicted to being in control. She enjoyed screwing around with them. Looked forward to the sessions. Of course she did, her life depended on them.

Probably just as much as his life depended on drugs. An addiction just like his.

Typing. Look

Typing. I've got something for you. Not the usual shit but it does the job. Let me know if you wanna meet.

Buzz. When and where?

Typing. Crescent at 6.

"Who do you think you are rummaging around my apartment like that? Going through my stuff?" she raged, "I don't go through *your* stuff, even though I know you have a lot to hide!"

"Cause you have a serious problem," he yelled back.

"So do you!"

"But I don't lie to people about it!"

"I didn't lie to you."

"Not directly maybe, or on purpose, but you lie to your therapist, to each one of them, every time. To those who are trying to help you. And moreover you lie to yourself, that's even worse."

"I don't lie to myself, I know what I'm doing. I know that maybe it wasn't ideal, but it worked."

"Regardless of whether it worked or not, you knew that it's never been the right thing to do. That what you do is cheating. Betraying. It wasn't going to help you recover. It just fucked you up even more."

She started crying now. Her system was blowing up. She was jumping off a cliff. A cliff she built herself. Maybe that's why Wednesday's name is Cliffman, she thought. "Look, I know all of that. I've got a brain, too."

"Why did you do it then?"

"Cause I'm a damn good liar."

"So am I! But that doesn't mean you have to do it all the time."

"It just made me feel good. Like the smelling thing, I like doing it although people might think it's weird."

"This is totally different from smelling people. This is serious. It's probably against the law."

"So is taking drugs, you dopehead!"

He sat down now, his head resting in his palms. "I just wanted to help you." Deep breath. "That's why I'm

meeting with a guy tonight, to sell some of your pills."

"What?" She laughed in disbelief.

"They're worth a lot. I know he'd pay anything. We'll take that money to get you a new therapist and you'll tell him all about what you did."

"That's not going to happen."

"It is. I already took some pills out. Don't even bother looking for them. I'll meet him at 6, down the street. There's nothing you can do."

She opened her drawer to check whether he was telling the truth.

And he was, five Eflexor and three Durazepam were gone.

"If my shit is being sold, so is yours."

When he walked out of the apartment block, he could already see him waiting, turning his head fitfully. Shifting his weight from leg to leg. Scratching his scalp like a primate.

"You know that all of my medication is active drugs and by that I mean sublime dependence potential," he heard her voice in his head as he walked towards him, "They're highly addictive. That guy will come back again and again."

"And that's a good thing."

"What if we're sold out? He'll go mental. He'll keep coming back, begging."

"Stop thinking for once."

He fiddled around with the little plastic bags inside his pockets.

"Dude," he was greeted, "Thank you for helping me out, man. I really appreciate it."

"No problem. Something just came up and I thought of you."

The buyer reached for his wallet as he looked around. "You live in that house now?" he asked, giving the building a nod. "Lil' quiet, isn't it?"

"Not really." He kept his palms closed inside his pockets, thinking about asking him to pick the left or right hand.

"So what you got for me, bro?"

Left or right hand. Left or right.

Left.

"Just some molly."

"Didn't you say you got some unusual shit?"

"Yeah. No. Next time, maybe."

"Aight, cool. Got some spare weed, too?"

"Sure."

"How much?"

"Fifty."

He nodded and fumbled around in his wallet for a while.

"Shit, dude, I only got 40." He looked up. "Next time. Promise."

"Slipped your mind, hm?"

"Sorry, bro."

"Alright, same time next week?"

"Make it Thursday."

"Cool. You better bring a hundred."

"Kay, bro, I stole some of my girlfriend's pills and I'll sell it to your druggy arse so she can keep seeing a shrink," she imitated his voice, watching the deal from her open window, smoking, "She's a psycho bitch, you know." - "Hope she's a good lay, tho." - "Yeah, dude, but she's gotta take a shower as soon as we're done 'cause she's afraid of juices." - "Ah, that sucks. Sorry for you, man."

The buyer seemed to return her gaze from afar. "Imma shut the window now 'cause I don't know how to be quiet," she said, stubbing out the cigarette on the windowsill. "I don't even know if men talk about sex like that, I just assume it because women do."

She looked at her phone, 6:06 p.m., dinner time in Suburbia, and strolled towards the kitchen. *Taking drugs instead of meds makes me thick, Dad. No wonder you always made other people mow the lawn, you would've probably mowed down your own feet 'cause you forgot they were there.*

She started chopping up some lettuce.

I miss you. You're not stupid, sorry I said that.

So they met again on Thursday. And the following Monday. And Wednesday, and that's when he was brave enough to sell him three Effexor.

"I've got another friend."

"Bring him next time."

He got rid of 12 pills within the next six days and the rest of his MDMA.

"These pills are sick. I don't even wanna know what's in there but they're killing the game, bro." And he came back again and again and again.

She went to see a psychotherapist, not a clinical psychologist. Her name was Mrs. Green and she reminded her of her mother. She was skinny, had gray, bushy hair and glasses and a frighteningly calm, quiet voice. She

might be a psycho, too, talking like that. Like mom. Someone who's too good to raise her voice just so someone else could hear her better. She always felt she was talking too loud, compared to her. Like old people with hearing difficulties who start yelling at others because they can't even hear themselves.

Mrs. Green was good, though. Professional and well-trained. And a freak.

"I want to give you a concert tonight."

"I would love that."

"My favorite works. And some of my own."

"Things you've composed, you mean?"

"Yeah, except they're not 'things'."

"I love how you purse your lips when you play."

"I don't."

"Yes, you do."

"I know."

"I genuinely want for you to live off that one day. Your music, I mean."

"Me, too. Mainly 'cause there's nothing else I'm good at."

"You could still expand your customer base and live off your illegal wheelings and dealings."

"I couldn't. I didn't even have the balls to sell him your pills at first."

"How do you know him?"

"We went to school together. I turned the corner, he didn't."

"The way you live your life is 'turning the corner?'"

"I'll stop doing drugs, I told you."

"It's funny how they messed you up and somehow brought me back to life at the same time."

"They brought me back to life, too. I just didn't realize it was time to stop."

"Was it time to stop?"

"Yeah. 'Cause I got you now."

Typing. Hey

Typing. Gotta cancel for Friday

Typing. My source kinda vanished

Typing. Guess you gotta buy from someone else from now on.

Buzz. Why tho? Where did u get it from?

Typing. Dude, I'm sorry

Typing. Can't really explain.

Typing. Just find yourself someone else.

Buzz. There's no one else selling what you sell



Buzz. Bro
 Buzz. Don't leave me hanging
 Buzz. I really need that shit
 Buzz. Ey
 Buzz. I ain't jokin
 Buzz. Don't fuck w/ me
 Buzz. Kay
 Buzz. Aight

He played wearing his hair in a bun so it wouldn't interfere with his level of concentration.

He played Debussy's Suite Bergamasque, Beethoven's Waldstein Sonata, Chopin's Second Ballade, Rachmaninov's Prelude and then went for a smoke before playing his own works.

She lay on his bed, keeping her eyes closed all the way through. Soaking in the sound. Giving her thoughts time to rest. There would be another time to think about Mrs. Green and Dr. Schiffer, all three Dr. Schiffers. And to talk to her parents. And to clean. There would be plenty of time to clean in her life, and only such little need for it. She knew that by now.

When he was done, he lay down by her side.

"Are you okay?"

"Sure."

"Cause you're not saying anything."

"What is there to say that you don't already know?"

He pondered for a moment. "I kept some of the pills, just in case you need them."

"I won't."

"How do you know?"

"Cause I got you now."

She was in the middle of frying her pancakes when someone knocked on the door.

When she opened up, the long silver blade was right

in front of her face. He held the knife about a hand's width from her forehead.

"Where is it?" he yelled as soon as he closed the door behind him.

She was too shocked to say a word. She was unable to realize what was happening to her.

"Where the fuck is it?" he yelled again, even more aggressively.

He pressed the blade right onto the skin of her forehead now. When her legs were about to collapse, he grabbed her neck with the hand that wasn't holding the knife and squeezed.

"I'll slit your fucking throat if you don't tell me where it is!"

"I don't have any here," she gasped.

"Don't you dare lie to me."

"It's not here—"

The stabs felt different from what she'd imagined. They were hot and brief, dull, too painful to actually feel their intensity, to feel anything, like her body hitting the floor or the blood streaming out her torso and spluttering out her mouth. She couldn't see, she couldn't breathe. All she could do was hear. Nebulous at first, then more clearly.

It was her dad's voice.

"The lawn doesn't mow itself. If you can drink, you can work."

And then she heard her own voice.

"There's nothing I'd rather do than mow the lawn for you, Dad, 'cause it would mean I'm with you."

When he walked up the hallway stairs, he could see her body on the floor through the open door right away. He knew what had happened before he saw the puddle of blood that had build around her. He knew she was dead when he saw her unclasped face. That's what dead

people look like. Gone. Empty. Blank.

He walked straight into her bedroom, hoping the pills would still be there. And they were, that junkie hadn't even searched the apartment thoroughly after stabbing her.

He took them from her nightstand drawer, the ones he'd left over for her, and swallowed them. It was eight Tavor, five Durazepam and three Risperdal. He gulped them down, stepped over her lifeless body into the kitchen, grabbed a bottle of vodka from the fridge and drank half of it.

Then he lay down beside her, his head resting on the now red brown hardwood floor right next to hers.

He waited.

"I wanted to tell you that I love you."

Tears streamed down his face and mixed in with her dark auburn blood.

He waited for the pills to hit, for his heartbeat to slow down.

He waited.

"I wrote you a song."

Sobbing.

"I don't want to sing it to you now 'cause I don't think you can hear me. And you need to really hear me for that. You need to hear what you mean to me."

"I don't believe in heaven. I don't know where we're going but I'll follow you." His chuckle turned into a cough. "Such a Romeo-and-Juliet-thing to say."

She heard her own heart pounding once in what felt like minutes. And she heard his voice, sounding serene, almost detached.

"Your parents will be there, too, I guess. Mine won't be 'cause they're still alive. They just left. But what's the difference."

His words gradually decelerated.

"We need more time. We would've needed so much more time. I need more time with you."

His heart was beating in about the same rhythm as hers now.

"And if a double-decker bus," he mumbled almost silently, "crashes into us"

"To die by your side is such a heavenly way to die," he whispered to bridge the time until his organs failed, until his body finally turned cold.

"And if a ten-ton truck kills the both of us"

Slower.

"To die by your side"

Slower. Weaker.

"Well, the pleasure, the privilege is mine."

Emergency ambulance statement:

The call came in at 6:47 p.m. My coworker Rob Millers and I arrived at the scene 12 minutes later, and so did the fire truck. Two firemen entered the smoke-filled apartment first and checked for the seat of the fire. They figured it was a burning frying pan in the kitchen. I heard that one of them started quenching, the other one called for back up, then pulled two lifeless bodies into the hallway before going back inside to make sure there was no one else in there. In a minimum of time the hallway had filled with smoke, too, so Rob and I picked up the injured (if not killed) persons and carried them downstairs. We did not expect to find a pulse. Both of them were covered in blood, the female's torso showed seven stab wounds. Considering the quantity and severity of the already apparent injuries we decided to take off immediately to bring them to Queenswood Hospital. Rob drove the ambulance, I was in the back providing them with oxygen masks and checking for a pulse once again. Since this can be quite difficult in a racing vehicle, I wasn't sure whether or not I had found one on the male's body. Blood came out of the female's stab wounds in spurts, which is why I assumed her heart was still beating. I tried to staunch the heavy hemorrhage. As soon as we arrived at the hospital, Dr. Baker and his team took over. I heard one of his assistant doctors say they found a pulse, which is why I concluded Rob and I had reacted correctly.

Diane White ■

the faceless giant beyond the pines

by Daniel Krooß

Illustrations by Jessica Ronja Pelz

As the van embarked on its journey, I buried myself deeply into my comic book. Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight* – not exactly appropriate for a boy my age, but the good thing about having parents who don't really relate to the things that you care for is that they tend not to really know much about those things either.

"You're reading your stupid comic books again?" my sister asked.

I didn't respond. I hated my sister back then, hated her throughout most of my childhood and would only come to accept her as family when I was already well into my twenties.

"How you can read that garbage is beyond me!" I rolled my eyes.

"Because – it's Batman!"

"Grotesque!" she said, laughing.

I shook my head. I didn't know what grotesque meant, but I was sure that it was just one of those words my sister had recently picked up somewhere and which she used to prove her superiority. She was only three years older than me, but always acted like she was already an adult. How someone would not want to stay a child for as long as they could was beyond me. To be honest, adulthood didn't seem all that exciting, and no grown-up I had ever met ever seemed to be too happy about it, even though they got to make all the rules.

"Your face is grotesque!" I replied.

"You don't even know what grotesque means, you little poopface!"

"Guys, cut it out!" my father said firmly from the front seat.

We shut our mouths immediately, but behind the pages of my comic I celebrated my little victory with a smile.

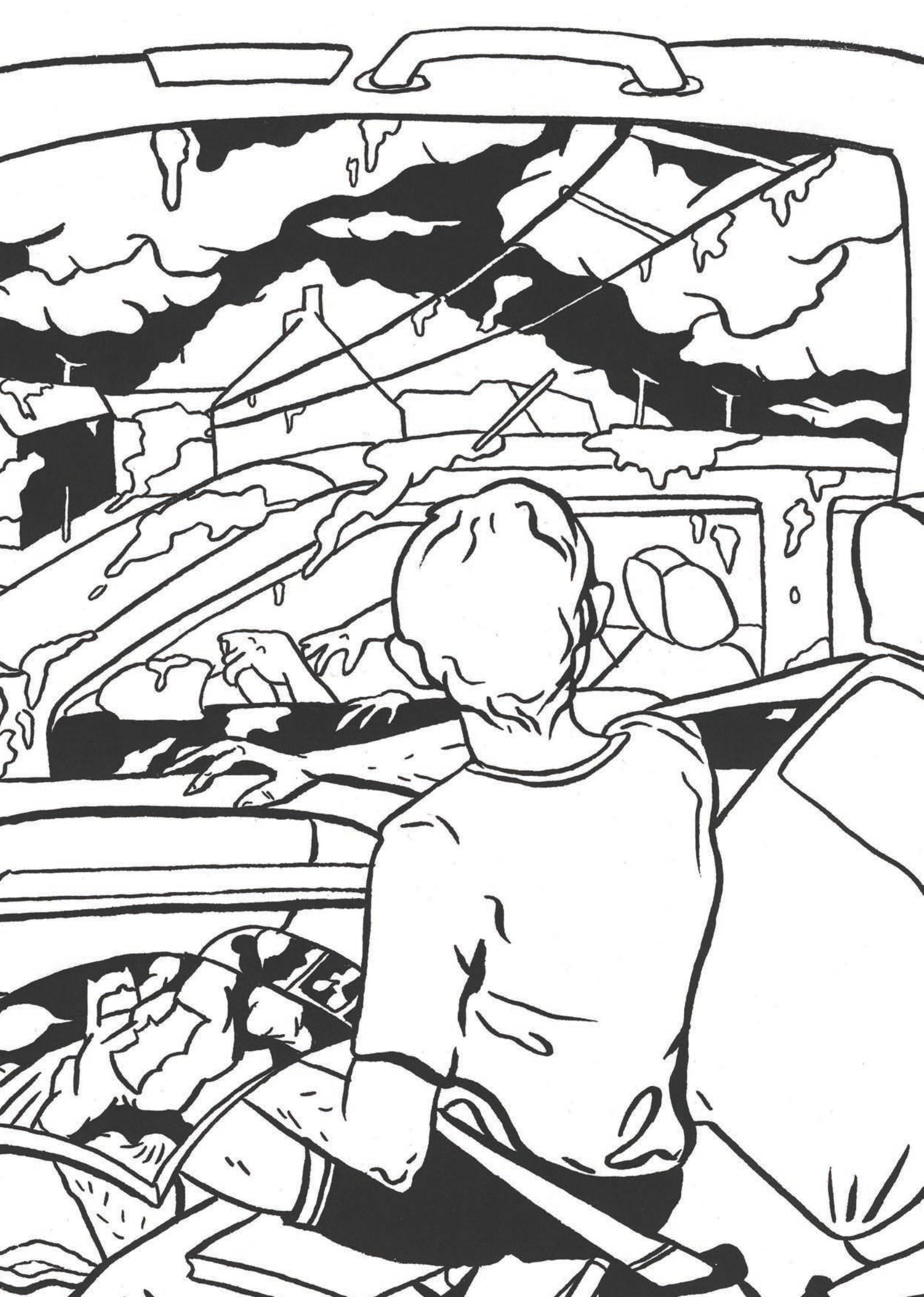
Both my sister and I knew that our parents needed

us to behave and that now wasn't the time to act childish, though we both weren't quite able to fully understand what exactly was happening. We knew that we were about to live at our grandparent's for a while and we knew that our parents were doing something called the *twelve-step program*. I had never heard of it, but I thought it sounded kind of cool, like a secret spy training program of some sort. Of course, even the imagination of a 9-year-old was not able to mask the fact that my parents would make about the worst spies in the world. My mother is one of the tiniest persons I know and my father's weight always seemed to expand dramatically whenever he proclaimed that it was time to lose any.

I knew that it had to be something bad because during the last days of school, my teachers had only talked to me in those soft comforting voices that made you know that something was seriously wrong, that it was okay to feel sad, and they used the phrase 'You can always come talk to me!' a lot. Frankly, even if I'd had a clue of what I was supposed to feel sad about, I would never have considered talking to any of my teachers, as I preferred not to talk to people more than necessary to begin with.

But I did know that voice. It was the same voice I had heard the year before, when that boy from my school had died of leukemia. They talked to us that way for weeks and I remembered having to go to the funeral of a boy I can't remember ever having shared a single word with. Still, his death shook me to the core. For the next several months I was terrified of dying whenever I felt even the slightest bit of discomfort. Every sneeze, every headache or other minor illness felt like definite proof of my impending doom, and I remember lying wide awake in terror many nights, feeling like death was all around me.

So, I did know that something was up. And I knew



that it meant that this was not the time to be a child, but to be a good boy instead, one that his parents could be proud of.

There were very few words spoken after that, but there are only a few childhood memories that have continued to linger as strongly as that three-hour drive to my grandparents on that particular day, despite the fact that I understood so little of what was happening back then and that much of it still feels like a blur to me even to this day. I remember that it would soon start to rain heavily, and I can still hear the deep drops pounding like fists on the roof of our bus. I remember finishing my comic and starting to read *Gulliver's Travels*, a book that sounded like a lot of fun in theory but which I found frustratingly difficult to read. I remember my mother shouting and the bus coming to an abrupt halt, her begging to get out, yelling "I can't do it!" over and over again. I remember us continuing to drive on for what felt like hours later, me in complete terror holding my book to my chest like a bible and listening to my mother's sobbing. I had never seen my mother in tears, and the idea that grown-ups were even allowed to cry had never occurred to me before. But I knew back then as I know today that that bus ride was the moment that changed everything.

When we arrived at our grandparents', it was already long past midnight. I never really liked staying at my grandparents' as their house always felt somewhat haunted to me. Even when I was a grown man, I still always preferred to keep the light on whenever I went to sleep there. As we entered the living room, the distinctive smell of strong coffee welcomed us, as it always did, my grandpa sitting in his white rip undershirt at the kitchen table with a grim face, a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Apart from his wedding picture, I don't think a single photograph exists of my grandpa in anything other than his white rip undershirt holding a cup of coffee, and I remember only a few occasions when I saw my grandpa smile. I still loved him very much, perhaps exactly because of the distance he kept to people. He was the sort of man who would disappear for hours without saying a word and come back from his workshop with something he had handcrafted entirely for you. He would put it on the table in front of you, awkwardly tousling your hair, and then he would simply go back to drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes again. There is something profoundly beauti-

ful of being able to share silence with someone in comfort, and whenever I spend time alone with my grandpa I felt an unspoken bond that was only for the two of us to understand. A pottery T-Rex still stands on the top of my bookshelf today. My grandma was the complete opposite, a woman whose seemingly endless energy seemed completely out of place for a person of her tiny proportions. She could go on talking for hours on end and, to be honest, sometimes I wished I'd had the guts to just tell her to shut her mouth already! My interest in reading simply did not go well with her interest to fill the void of a silent room. I didn't quite understand the dynamic of my grandparents' relationship back then and I still continue to be baffled about it. Over the years I've come to understand that, like most people of their generation, they must have been heavily traumatized by the war, but that was never spoken of and I can only guess at what brought these two together and kept them a couple until my grandpa's passing.

As we sat down, I glanced tiredly into my grandpa's eyes as the adults started talking. He smiled at me, and again I got the feeling that something must be seriously wrong. I must have fallen asleep then, because the next thing I remember is my grandma waking me up the next morning, telling me to come down to say goodbye.

The odd stiffness I felt in my gut that morning would not quite leave me in the days to come.

My parents genuinely did not seem like themselves but I still couldn't put my finger on what was wrong. I suspect that it might have been the first day I ever witnessed my parents sober. My father held me in the doorstep and I clung around his waist, not wanting to let him go.

"It will be fine," he said. "We're doing this for you, you know? It will all be over soon, I promise! And I bet in the meantime you'll even make some good friends here!"

I was really still just a little boy back then and it would take several more years to dawn on me, that my parents were indeed completely insane. But I knew back then, and I can only assume that my father did the same, that that statement was completely absurd. No one had come to my ninth birthday party, but I still remember that it had been a great day. I had received a complete book set of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, including *The Hobbit*, which I was to devour several times in the years to come. I wasn't particularly good at making friends, and the characters I met within the safe boundaries of a



novel were all the company I ever wished for. But in that very moment I would, for the first time in my life, learn the true meaning of what it meant to be lonely because after my father let go of my hand, my parents were gone, and I was not to see them for months.

With that hollow feeling of not having your parents around to protect you, my grandparents' house frightened me more than it had ever done before. The three-floored house felt huge to me and depressingly dark. Each floor and room seemed to possess its own kind of darkness, its own distinguished rotten smell, and I always felt lost. Even though I was given a room in the attic, one of the few rooms in the building that actually seemed to receive a bit of daylight, I preferred to spend as little time in it as possible, as it smelled of dust and cold smoke that hurt my eyes and nose.

Although ten children had once grown up in that house, there was so little about it that reminded one of life. There was a sadness that lay upon that place, and the walls seemed to hide stories that no one had any intentions of retelling. It seems strange now that a boy so in love with reading about adventures was so deeply afraid of uncovering the mysteries this place held. There always seemed to be some comfort within the covers of a book; as whenever something felt too frightening, the covers could simply be shut. But this felt very real. And in this reality, I was simply not a brave boy.

I would spend the next couple of days mostly in the garden, which was small, but felt kind of wild, too. At its center stood an old apple tree, whose fruit smelled foul, and even though my grandma always claimed that they were perfectly edible, they tasted nothing like the apples we used to buy back home in the supermarket. When I finished my struggle through *Gulliver's Travels* I began one of my countless rereads of *Peter Pan*. It was just one of those books. Up to this day, I'm still amazed how, at times, five minutes suffice to get into a novel that has the potential to stay with you through the rest of your life. All romance aside, I've never had that experience with a human being and I doubt I ever will. Still, it felt urgent to get some new reading material as soon as I possibly could and I knew that it was time to convince my grandpa to take me to the library.

"Please! Don't you have to get some groceries anyways? I mean, we're sure out of ice cream! The library is in the city, isn't it? You could just leave me there and pick

me up afterwards!"

"Can't it wait until tomorrow?"

"No!" I yelled, grabbing his arm and failing in the attempt to lift him from his chair. "Come on! You can smoke as much as you want to on our way! I won't tell grandma, I promise!"

And certainly, the first thing my grandpa did when we stepped outside was light a cigarette. It was a cloudy but hot summer day, and little sprinkles of warm rain touched our skin as we slowly walked down the road into town in silence. I've learned to appreciate that there's something idyllic about the small rural town of my grandparents, but as a boy it frustrated me deeply simply because there was so little to do. I was used to big city life, and the surreal tranquility that seemed to inhabit the town made me feel uncomfortable. At the center stood a church that felt unproportionally large for a town of that size, and the shadow it cast upon the city center seemed to oppress everything it enveloped. I always held my breath when I went past it, as it felt like the little marbles of its walls watched my every step.

"Alright then," my grandpa said as we stood in front of the library handing me his library card.

"You take your time in there. I think I'll just wait outside." I smiled.

"In the meantime, I'll try to make some sense of this," he said, holding up my copy of *The Dark Knight*.

"You're holding it upside down!" I said.

"I probably would have figured that out at some point," he said, cracking up over his own joke.

"Thank you!" I said and hugged him. He tousled my hair.

"Alright, alright. Off you go!"

Even though there were so many places that I feared and avoided as a child, I could never find a single flaw with any library. I don't think I ever felt more self-confident than within the walls of those magical buildings. I loved their silence, and the unique smell of old books that made me feel like home. And I loved losing myself within the large bookshelves, like an adventurer hunting for unknown treasures.

I grabbed as many books as my tiny arms could carry, choosing some because of their intriguing titles and others because the color of their jacket appealed to me, and sat down at the large table in the empty room with a broad smile on my face.

As I looked at the pile which I had neatly organized by size it suddenly struck me that I was a very weird boy. And the strange numbness in my gut that I had felt when my parents left a few days ago seemed to grow into something unbearably painful. I wondered if I'd ever meet a friend that would share my passions, and that I would actually want to talk to. And I was suddenly deeply afraid that I would never see my parents again. When I noticed the first tear dropping on the dusty cover of the book in front of me, I knew it was too late to shake it off. Within an instant I had started crying, and in that very moment I realized just how lonely I really felt.

"You know, acceptance is the first step," the soft voice of a girl whispered into my ear.

Startled, I jumped off my chair, swiping the pile of books from the table and clumsily crashing into the nearest bookshelf. As I looked up, I saw a pale, black-haired girl in a white dress laughing at my mishap.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

I took a deep breath and washed away the tears from my eyes.

"You really don't have to hide them, you know."

Still shaking, I got to my feet.

"Acceptance of what?" I asked.

She smiled.

"Acceptance of feeling alone."

I gulped.

"Come on. Let's get you some cocoa." Without even thinking about it, I followed her down the hall. She grabbed a few books off the shelves in passing and finally stopped at the bookshelf located at the very back end of the library, placing them in a pile in front of it.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"What do you think I'm doing, klutz? I'm paying our travel fare!" Confused, I turned to face her.

"But-" I started, Suddenly the room started shaking and books began to whirl through the air. Before I could even stop to think about what was happening, we were already gone.

My heart was pounding heavily in my chest as we crash landed in a field behind the library.

"How did you do that?"

She chuckled.

"I've learned a few tricks over the years."

I looked skeptically into her freckled face. She couldn't be much older than me.

"How old are you, exactly?"

"I'm eleven."

"And how long have you been doing magic?" She smiled.

"Now that's an entirely different question, isn't it?"

"I guess so," I said, unsure of what she meant by it.

"Ah!" she said. "Don't you just love a night lit by a full moon?"

Confused, I looked around, and for the first time noticed that the stars were already shining brightly in the sky.

"My grandpa!" I yelled out, suddenly aware that he must still be waiting for me outside.

"What about him?"

"He's waiting for me! He must be sick with worry!"

"Don't worry about it," she said. "Time runs a bit differently around here."

"How can you say that? Time works the same for everyone."

"Do you really believe that?"

I shrugged.

"I thought so." She winked. "Are you coming or what?"

Before I could start arguing again she was already leading the way. As we went around the library, I noticed that my grandpa was not standing in front of it. But I did not have the chance to ask about it, as the girl walked in great strides towards the city, and I had a hard time keeping up.

Even though everything seemed to stand exactly where it was supposed to stand, the city felt very different somehow, looking sharper and more colorful.

I had never been to the city by night, and was surprised to see that the streets were crowded with people, only they seemed somehow odd and not quite like anyone I had ever seen before. I saw a woman with a nose so large and broad it almost touched her breasts, a neatly dressed bearded man the size of a small dog standing beside her holding her hand and laughing from his belly with a deep, vibrating voice. I saw Siamese twins with heads that seemed so large that they were about to pop out of their body and fly into the distant sky. I saw a crowd so cheerful whose weird appearance did not scare me but lifted my timid spirit.

The girl grabbed my hand and as we continued walking, I almost felt like I was floating through the masses, the odd smells of food and drink I had never seen before making me dizzy but also somehow feel at home.





We stepped into a small house right next to the place where grandpa used to buy his cigarettes. And as the girl closed the door, the noise outside was immediately muted.

“Eve? Is that you?” a high-pitched woman’s voice came from the hallway.

“Yes!” the girl yelled back. “And I’ve brought company!” A woman in a nightgown with a silver-gray perm and the biggest behind I had ever seen came rushing into the hallway, an old donkey with a smoking pipe in his mouth trailing behind her.

“Oh!” she said cheerfully. “Who do we have here?”

I stood in silence, my mouth wide open.

“This is the moment where you introduce yourself,” Eve said closely into my ears.

I shook myself.

“Adam...” I said shyly.

“Adam and Eve, isn’t that cute, honey?”

The donkey shrugged his shoulders and went back to where he had come from.

“Don’t you think so?” she asked again, this time apparently addressing us.

Eve rolled her eyes.

“Granny...”

I shook my head.

“I don’t know. I don’t like stories from the Bible. They always scare me and don’t make much sense.”

“Stories from the what?”

“The Bible?”

The woman shrugged, then shook her head.

“Never heard of it,” she said and clapped her hands. “Anyways? Who wants cocoa?”

When the strange woman placed the cup of hot chocolate in front of me, I thanked her with a coy nod.

“Have you been crying?” She asked, raising an eyebrow.

I nodded, feeling caught.

“Poor kid!” she said. “Take a sip, it will make you feel better!”

I did as I was told. It tasted nothing like any hot chocolate I had ever had before. The texture was thick, almost like pudding, the spices of cinnamon, nuts and ginger tickling my tongue, followed by a finish so chocolatey and sweet that I almost couldn’t handle the feelings of joy rushing through my veins.

“Feeling better?”

“Yes,” I said, smiling. “Thank you.”

A one-eyed boy about my age with large furry pointy ears came into the kitchen, wearing a huge monocle, a feathery top hat and a mustache that looked fake, even though with that odd combination of people sitting at the table, it seemed entirely plausible that a 9-year-old could grow a mustache in this strange place.

“Who the hell is this?” he asked harshly.

“Where are your manners, young man!” the grandmother said, hitting her nephew on the head with a newspaper. “Is that any way to introduce yourself?”

“Alright, alright,” he said, rubbing his head. “Sorry.”

He held out his hand.

“Call me Ishmael.”

Hesitantly, I shook his hand.

“I’m Adam.”

“He’s a new friend of mine!” Eve said cheerfully. My heart skipped a beat. Was it really that easy to make a friend? It seemed a bit rushed to say the least, but I did like Eve, even though I couldn’t quite tell why.

“So, what brings you here? I have a feeling that you don’t actually belong here.”

“Because he’s sad,” Eve answered for me. “He needs an adventure!”

“Yes!” the grandmother said, excitedly. “A good adventure always helps mend a broken soul!”

Ishmael rolled his eye.

“Are you talking about that stupid treasure nonsense again?”

“He might be the missing piece!” Eve said.

“What treasure?” I asked, uncomfortably moving on my chair in the crossfire.

“The one that’s guarded by the faceless giant and hidden in a cave beyond the pines,” Eve said.

“The faceless giant?” I asked.

“Yes!” Ishmael yelled out. “How can you not have heard of him? Everyone knows that story!”

I decided then and there that I did not care much for Ishmael. He seemed cocky and rude. Glancing a bit lost into my cup I mumbled:

“That sounds dangerous...”

Grinning, Eve tugged her grandma’s arm in excitement.

“Can we keep him?”

Her granny looked at her skeptically.

“You know the rules.”

Obviously not satisfied with that response, Eve sighed. I blushed.

“It’s a stupid fairytale for children,” Ishmael said, an-



noyed. "About a stupid giant hiding in a stupid cave."

"Who's he hiding from?" I asked curiously.

"Himself, mainly."

I did not understand a word of what was said and my eyes started to wander, looking around the weirdly cozy room, little floating lanterns of all sizes and colors casting little shadows on the walls that seemed to tell all sorts of stories. I didn't know where I was and why I was there, but I felt like I was exactly where I was supposed to be. And I noticed that, for first time in days, the weird numbness in my gut was gone, replaced by a feeling of comfort and warmth I had never really felt before. Without thinking about my words, I felt my lips move.

"I'm up for an adventure," I said.

We could not have spent more than an hour in that house, but when we stepped outside the building with fully packed bags on our shoulders, it was already daylight, and the morning sun shone into our eyes as bluebirds sang songs of morning glory. There were fewer people on the street than the night before, but as Eve and I wandered through the alleys, a somewhat reluctant Ishmael behind us, the city was slowly awakening, the first merchants setting up their stores and selling their goods to the peasants that came by early, a long hard day of labor still ahead of them.

We headed out of the city, crossing an old stone bridge towards a stream.

"I don't think I've ever been to this part of town before," I said puzzled.

Eve didn't say a word and simply responded with a smile. A fresh summer breeze ran through our daring faces as I gloomily observed the water enveloping the bridge. We passed an old man leaning over the edge at the middle of the passage, shaking his head.

"That boy!" he mumbled.

I turned around to see if he meant me, but the man didn't seem to pay me any heed.

"Who is he talking about?" I asked, turning to Eve.

She snickered.

"The boy on that bench over there." I looked to the right side of the shore and saw a boy sitting alone and staring into the water with a blank expression.

"What about him?"

"He just sits there all day, every day, wondering where the ducks go."

"What?"

"Ishmael! No!" Startled, I stumbled to the ground as

Ishmael ran past us on all fours, jumping into the water, the ducks that seemed so peaceful moments ago flying away in panic.

"What the hell is he doing?!" I yelled out.

Eve frowned.

"He's just really into hunting stuff." Ishmael stepped back out of the brook, shaking off the water, the disappointed boy from the bench leaving in silence with his hands buried deeply in the pockets of his pants.

Bewildered, I shook myself.

"Are you coming?" Eve asked holding a hand out to me.

I took it and followed her down to the shore.

"Got the towel?" Ishmael asked. Eve nodded and pulled it out of her bag. But instead of handing it to Ishmael, she threw it over the three of us like a blanket.

"What now?" I asked.

"Now we wait," Eve said.

"For what?"

"For someone to pick us up."

"I don't under—" But before I could finish my sentence, we were gone once again.

When I opened my eyes, a fierce wind almost blew me off my feet. We were on a ship in the middle of the ocean, and the heavy taste of salt lay upon my tongue. Before I could ask for it, Eve had already handed me a bottle of water. I looked around the full deck, specifically at a man yelling in excitement, wearing a pirate hat with a huge feather and a mustache that stretched out to both sides of his face.

"Forty-two cabins! Plenty of room! Plenty of room!"

"Forty-two cabins, and no one loves the parrot," a scarcely feathered bird on his shoulder shrieked out in agony.

I rubbed my eyes in disbelief.

"Oh! New travelers!" The man said as he noticed us. "Off to save the world, I presume?"

Eve giggled.

"Where are you headed?"

"The pines!" Eve said.

"Oh! Good one! So many heroes waiting for their stories to be told!"

"So many heroes, and everyone forgets about the parrot," the miserable bird squawked.

"Shut your mouth already!" The man said, striking after the bird, which tried to fly away but failed to do so as it was chained to the captain's wrist.

“Make yourselves comfortable, fellow travelers,” the man said, nodding to us.

Eve knelt down and posed elegantly with her dress.
“Thank you, sir!”

I observed the colorful gathering of characters on deck that somehow all looked like they belonged here, although they seemed to have so little in common. Three men in cloaks and feathered hats dueled to win the hearts of little women, who giggled like delighted teenagers. A tin man, a lion and a straw man playing cards and entertaining the whole deck, when suddenly the lion angrily threw himself over the table and tried to catch the tin man, only to cry out in pain.

“You broke my freaking tooth!” he roared out.

Everyone around me was so excited that I almost didn’t notice the man in the worn-out clothes sitting alone, quietly looking out into the water.

“What about him?” I asked the captain.

With sad eyes, he shook his head.

“No one really knows. Found the guy alone on an island. Must have been stranded for years. Now he just sits there, asking everybody what day it is.”

Ishmael shook his head.

“Those so-proclaimed natural born story tellers really annoy me. They can’t help but feel overly fascinated by their own narration! And then they end up diluting their stories with lies!”

“Don’t be so rude!” Eve said, hitting her brother.

“Why?”

“Because those stories are not for you to judge! We’re no different after all, searching for our own story!”

While the siblings continued to argue, I silently walked away towards the man sitting at the edge, the waves crashing angrily into the ship and spraying thick drops of salty water into my face. The man looked up at me with a blank expression.

“What day is it?” he asked, trembling. “Is it Friday yet?”

“I don’t know, sir.” Disappointed, he shook his head as I sat down.

He glanced at me, and suddenly his eyes flickered.

“You’re missing someone, too, aren’t you?”

I shrugged my shoulders, then nodded. The man smiled and leaned towards me, reaching behind my ear and pulling out a golden coin the likes of which I had never seen.

“Here,” he said, placing it into my palm and closing my hand. “Take this from me, give it to someone that is

very special to you one day.”

I sighed.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Adam,” Eve shouted after me. “Come on! It’s time to get off.” I stood up, and nodded to the old man.

“Good luck, sir.”

“You too, son. You, too.”

“Are you guys exited?” the captain asked us with a broad smile, showing two missing teeth.

Eve laughed.

“Of course we are!”

“Well you know how it works, don’t you? Grab your towel.” Eve held out the towel and I grabbed an end with my trembling fingers. As Ishmael tried to get a hand on it, the captain struck his hand with his telescope.

“No! Not you! This is not your story, and you know it!” Disappointed, Ishmael stepped away. The captain turned back to us.

“What are you waiting for? Off you go!”

“How...?” I whispered.

“Jump!” She yelled. And with the cheering crowd behind our backs, we jumped off the ship, holding onto our towel and sailing into the distant sky.

The wind blew viciously into our faces as we sailed through the sky, the swooshing sound drowning out all other sounds around us. I looked down and saw a white whale jumping out of the water and crashing back into it, the enormous weight causing a huge wave that blasted through the ocean. A swarm of eagles flew by, carrying a horde of dwarves, waving and laughing as we parted ways. The excitement made my heart hum songs of glory. The timid boy from the day before was gone. I was a hero waiting for my story to be told.

We crash-landed in a large tree, breaking several branches as we slid down and landed inelegantly on the dusty ground.

“Ah!” I yelled out in pain.

“Are you alright?” Eve asked.

I counted my limbs and nodded, looking for Eve beside me and noticing that her nose was visibly broken, standing out at an almost perfect right angle.

“Eve! Your n-”

“Don’t worry about it! It’s just a nose,” she said, grabbing it and putting it back into place with a loud snapping sound. My stomach turned.



“Get ahold of yourself!” She said. “We must be close.” She helped me up.

“Which way?” I asked, still feeling a bit shaky.

Eve shrugged. I looked around. Wherever we were, the seasons seemed to go a bit differently around here. It was warm, but the trees were already showing the first signs of autumn, red and yellow leaves dressing the forest in a calm tranquility. An owl dozed soundly in the tree before us, a squirrel throwing acorns at it in an attempt to wake it and giggling at every hit. This place seemed magical all right, but dangerous? Not so much. I felt relieved.

“Why don’t we ask that nice lady over there?” Eve said, pointing at an old woman who was picking apples.

“Excuse me?” She shouted, running towards the woman. Startled, we stopped as the woman turned around, her blazing red eyes looking at us curiously.

“Hello dear,” the woman said with a husky voice. “What can I do for you?” I shivered as she smiled, her black teeth showing between her crumpled lips.

“We’re looking for the faceless giant,” Eve said.

“Oh!” she yelled out, shaking. “That is a terrible idea! Great danger! He stole from us, that beast!”

“But we’re here to take it back from him!” I said, confidently.

“Great danger!” The woman repeated. “Especially for you, boy!”

She looked deeply into my eyes and I felt a cold creeping in around my shoulders. I shivered.

“Don’t put yourselves in danger. I’m only looking out for you. Would you mind helping an old lady carry her food home? I’d love to cook together if you’d like to stay over.”

“We would love to!” Eve said joyfully.

“But the giant?” I asked, turning to Eve.

“Great danger!”

“Ah! Shut up, you old hag!” A deep, vibrating voice shouted out. The tree whose apples the old woman had pocketed started to move, a huge branch reaching out and striking the old woman, causing her to fly deeply into the woods.

Eve and I stood there, our mouths wide open. The tree shook itself, its leaves rustling and birds flying out of its crown.

“Pardon my tone,” it said. “But the peasants around here are not to be trusted.”

“But she was so nice to us,” Eve said. “She wanted to cook for us!”

“No, no. She didn’t want to cook for you; she wanted to cook *with* you! Trust me, people around here are no good.”

“Everyone?” I asked. “You don’t like any people?”

“Oh, I like them, but from a distance. Like the sun! People around here are like the sun. Well, without the warmth, perhaps.”

Eve and I looked at each other in confusion.

“So how do we know that we can trust you?” I asked.

“Are you kidding?” it replied. “Because I’m a tree! Look at me – I’m fabulous!” It stretched its limbs, the crown revealing a broad smile.

Eve laughed out loud, and I couldn’t help but laugh as well.

“So, you’re looking for the giant?” the tree asked, his voice suddenly turning thoughtful.

We nodded.

“Such a sad story,” the tree said. “They hunted the poor thing down, chasing him away. So all that was left for him to do was hide from them and he lost his face in the process. All he ever wanted was to belong. Just like all of them, like any other being.” The tree sighed, trying to wash away the tears from his eyes but failing to do so, thick drops landing at our feet. While I tried to avoid getting hit by the brownish sticky liquid, Eve was already climbing the tree, gently stroking its face.

“So how can we find him?” she asked.

“Oh! That’s easy!” the tree proclaimed. “Just follow his pet!”

“What does a giant have for a pet?” I asked, puzzled.

“Oh, the most unusual pet! You’re going to love him! Little Rexi! He can’t be far.” The tree tried to look around, moving his trunk, causing Eve to fly off and crash into me.

“Oh! Sorry, dear.”

“I’m alright!” Eve said, getting right back on her feet.

As if he was blushing, the leaves around the trees mouth turned red.

“Don’t worry about it,” Eve said. “I’m fine!”

The tree nodded.

“Let me help you find Rexi!” it said, sticking two thin branches into its mouth and whistling so loud that even after having covered our ears, it still rang through our bones, the vibrating sound making the ground shake.

We stood there perplexed, waiting. Suddenly, the bushes behind us started to rustle.

We looked closely in great anticipation.

“Come here!” the tree said. “Don’t be frightened! I

want to introduce you to some new friends!”

Still no response.

“He’s shy like you!” Eve said, picking my arm. Suddenly, something came into sight.

And before us stood a T-Rex not much larger than a fully grown human, wiggling its tail.

“What?” I yelled out, gasping. Excited, the dinosaur rushed towards us, mouth open, its tongue hanging out. Unfortunately, its features were not quite made for affection. As it reached us it struck Eve with his tail, smashing her into the trees, its short arms cutting my hand as it started licking my face.

The tree started to laugh.

“He likes you!” it said. “He’s usually not that outgoing.”

As I tried to swipe away the warm saliva, Rexi reached down with his head, waiting to be patted. Indulging, I smiled. Eve got back to her feet, knocking the dust off her dress.

“Why is everyone I meet so clumsy?” she asked, more to herself than to anyone else, stretching her neck.

“Could you do me a favor, Rexi? These two fellows want to meet your master!”

Exhilarated, Rexi started jumping up and down.

“Thank you,” Eve said and gave the tree another hug. It chuckled.

“You’re welcome,” it said. “The woman was right though, you know? The boy doesn’t belong here, and you know it, too.” Eve said nothing and simply nodded.

“Alright then. Off you go!” Again, the tree whistled, but not so loud this time. And Rexi started to run.

Rexi stomped through the woods at a brisk pace, knocking down smaller trees here and there and stopping every once in a while to see if we were able to keep up. Soon we were so deep into the forest that the trees almost seemed to close in on us, and the little marbles on the mossy ground reflected by the sun were all the light we could see. Soon enough Rexi was no longer visible, and we were standing in the middle of nowhere, leaning on our knees in exhaustion.

We sat down, trying to catch our breath. We could still hear the dinosaur stomping nearby.

“Re-” I tried to yell, but it was no use. I was simply too weak.

“What now?” I said, somewhere from the rear end of my dried-out throat.

“I don’t know,” Eve said, lying on the ground, staring at the leafy ceiling.

Startled, we got onto our shaky feet as we heard the husky laugh.

“Hahaha! You should not have made me angry!” The old woman said as she appeared behind the trees. “I would have fed you before I would have eaten you myself. I guess now I’ll just feed you to the pigs and use what comes out of them as manure!”

She never saw him coming. Rexi jumped out of the woods, fetching the woman’s neck and broke it with a loud popping sound, devouring her body in seconds, leaving only the blood-soaked moss as a reminder of her existence. Rexi burped.

My stomach snarled as I threw up.

“Adam,” Eve said, prodding my arm. “Look!”

As I washed the puke off the corners of my mouth I looked up, and through the path of destruction the dinosaur had left when he had come to our aid, saw the entry to the cave we were looking for.

I gasped as I looked at the huge mountain in front of us, its pointy top covered with snow, and the enormous entry to the cave in the shape of an apple. Behind us the pined trees danced vividly in the wind that blew into our direction, almost as if to tell us that it was time for us to walk in.

The cold crawled through my bones as we stepped inside.

“It’s beautiful,” Eve said. And it really was.

I had expected to be welcomed by darkness. Instead, we had walked into a huge stony hallway lit by countless little diamonds shining brightly in all kinds of colors, a small waterfall at its heart that seemed to embrace life, rather than threaten it.

Rexi roared in excitement, wiggling his tail.

“Rexi? Is that you?” a hoarse voice asked. “What you have been up to? Did you get a snack while you were outside? I made dinner!”

The whole cave shook as a giant gray mass appeared from end of the hall, its bloated limbs moving slowly towards us, its shoulders carrying a blobby head without a face. Rexi jumped into the weird figure, trying to climb it by using his teeth to hold onto it but failing to do so and sliding back onto the ground.

The giant chuckled.

“Ehmhem,” Eve cleared her throat dramatically. The giant stood still.



"Oh!" it said deep from his belly. "You brought company! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be impolite. So hard to see without a face these days!"

"We're here for your treasure!" Eve said determinedly. The giant scratched his chin in confusion, then started laughing deep from his stomach, the cave rattling, little diamonds falling from the ceiling and dissolving into little flakes of water as they hit the ground.

"There is no treasure, dear."

"But in the books I read it says that there is room full of golden coins, and diamonds, and a tiara. Adam needs his tiara!" Eve yelled out.

"What do you want me to say? I didn't write that junk!"

Disappointed, Eve sank to the ground, crossing her arms. The giant sat down as well.

"Who's your friend? He doesn't belong here."

"Everyone keeps saying that," Eve said. "But I really like him, and I want him to stay. And I think he likes it here, too."

"I do," I said, blushing.

"But he can't stay," the giant said. "He doesn't belong in our world. He can visit, but he must return to be a hero in his own world. Things are expected from him on the other side. It's too dangerous for him to just hide here."

Eve started to weep. I sat down beside her, laying my hand onto hers.

"Believe me, I know a thing or two about hiding," the giant said.

"Why did you go into hiding to begin with?" I asked. He sighed.

"Because it's a scary world out there, and I didn't know how to deal with it." Rexi crawled into the giant's legs and started to purr.

"What about your face?" I asked. "How did you lose it?"

"Well, it's not gone entirely. It's just hidden under layers, to protect it from getting hurt. I take off the mask when I look at it in the mirror every once in a while, but only when I'm on my own and sure that there is no one there to harm it."

"Can we see it?" Eve asked.

"Well, I don't know."

"Come on!" I said. "We came for a treasure!"

The giant hesitated, covering his head with his large swollen hands, then slowly removed them, revealing the shy smile of an old bald man in tears.

*

"Where is Ishmael?" I asked as I warmed my hands around the cup of hot chocolate, sitting in the cozy kitchen of Eve's grandparents.

"He's off on his own adventure," her grandmother said. "He's a sailor now! He's been writing letters."

"Will you tell our story when you get back?" Eve asked. I smiled.

"Do I really have to go?" I asked. She nodded, looking sad.

In silence, we headed hand in hand through the cheerfully crowded streets to the library, and slowly the odd stiffness in my gut returned. I inhaled as many of the wonderful odors around me as I could, knowing I might never sense them again.

"I feel like I've missed you before," I said as we stopped before the building.

She giggled.

"Now don't get all dramatic!" She gave me a kiss on the cheek, then threw a blanket over me. And I was gone.

When I stepped outside the library with books crammed under both my arms, my grandfather was standing where I had left him, lighting another cigarette. He nodded and took the books from me, putting them into a bag which he threw over his shoulder.

"What did you do with your hand, you klutz?" he asked, holding it carefully and looking at the cut. "Now that's going to leave a scar," he said.

I smiled and jumped up in excitement, holding on tightly to his hand and pulling him on our way.

"Now *that* is an awesome story! So, I was sitting in the library when..."

25 years later

Adam looked on with shallow eyes as his grandfather's coffin was lowered into the ground, feeling very uncomfortable in his suit, more like a child dressed up to play an adult than a man in his mid-thirties.

"Uncle Adam? What is that scar on your hand?" He looked down at his niece and smiled.

"I fell off a bike. Must have been when I was about your age."

He had not seen his grandfather in months. Because that's how life goes, isn't it? As you grow older, suddenly there's so little time! You get your own life, your own fam-

ily. Well, some of us do, while others prefer to remain in solitude.

His wife and his crying daughters stood in front of him, paying their last respects. They had loved their great-grandfather very much, and Adam was grateful that they had had the chance to meet and spend a few good years with him.

When it was his turn to say goodbye, his eyes wandered slowly from his shiny leather shoes onto the coffin, his hands buried in the pockets of his pants. From one of them, he removed a golden coin the likes of which he'd never seen again. He threw it into the grave.

"Someone's got to pay the travel fare," he whispered.

In loving memory of Grandpa Harry.

I still really dig dinosaurs!

Well, figuratively, not literally.

RAWR! (in peace).

Man, that joke really would have cracked you up. ■

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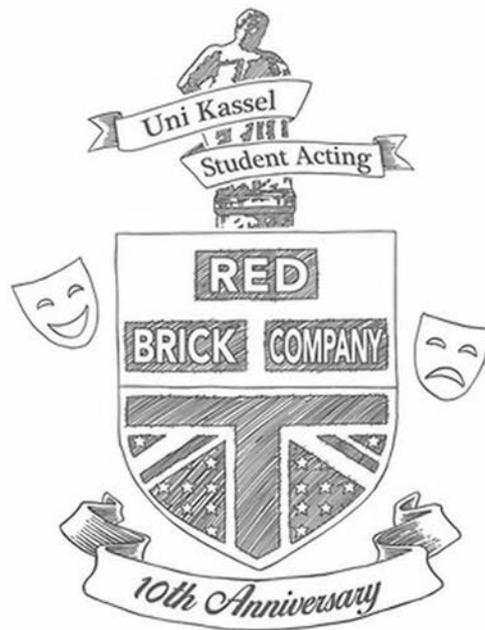
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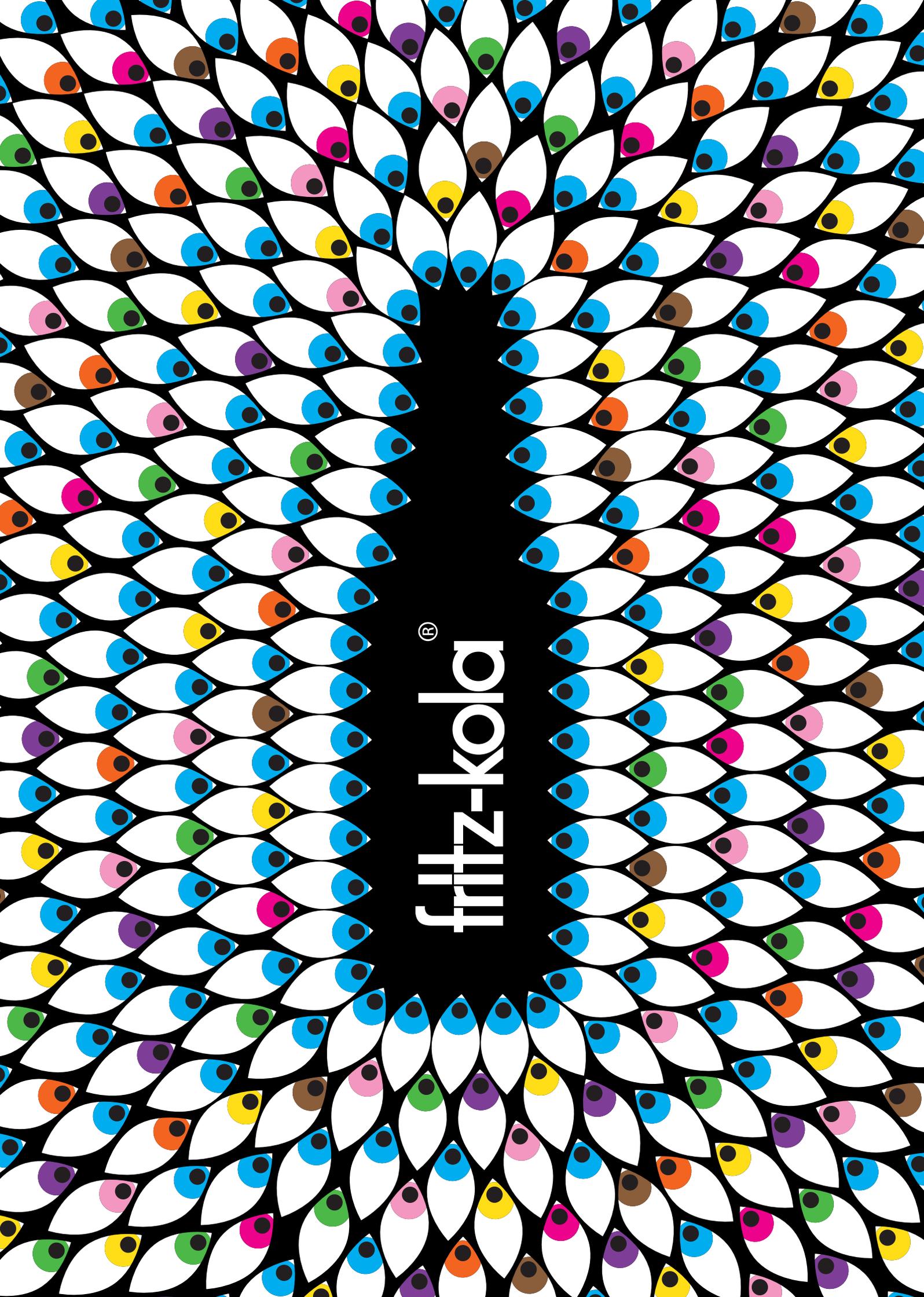
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