



m!normous© series #3

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MAGELLAN©**

SkYtast!c

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My novel -

'ritten merely on us

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ego sum Dominus Deus tuus
qui eduxi te de terra Aegypti de domo servitutis
Non facies tibi sculptile, neque omnem similitudinem quæ est in cælo desuper, et
quæ in terra deorsum, nec eorum quæ sunt in aquis sub terra.

Exodus 20.2

The Latin Vulgate

Oh swallow
Oh swallow

Do take our tears,
our pain,
all our thoughts that belong —

And fly
fly upwards
to the heavens

to the skies

And then —,
then never come back

Anonymous

Prologue

“Three days. Everybody —. Listen up. Three days only.”

So much was at stake here. Why did everyone look so lethargic? Why was everyone *always* so tired? Arvi Karvonen was pacing up and down, setting his teeth a little now and then, a long-cherished habit Lisa had always found most disturbing.

“We must finish the first native application for medical use over the weekend,” Arvi Karvonen said with insistence, squaring his shoulders to get rid of the slight, minimal pain that, — again, had begun dripping along his neck into the first bones of the thoracic vertebrae, not only electrifying his complete thorax, but giving him the full shivers all over. He paused his breathing for a millisecond to catch his breath.

“Med Apps are a great opportunity for Neuro Industries. That is how everybody will understand. Understand and accept,” he added enthusiastically, but not without a faint shade of irony only his closest team members would detect, given

they were awake enough to heed the minute irritation. José García, his long-time companion may have caught it, but Arvi avoided looking at him for various reasons.

Important — if not the most prominent reason why he dodged José's piercing gaze — was that he needed space to think. How could he get across the urgency and the seriousness of what has become Neuro Industries most important and pressing project, only revealed to them within the last 12 hours? Everyone had already been overworked and on edge before the bomb dropped. Arvi himself, head of design and developing systems engineering, was beyond any control. Finally, Big Dog had entrusted him with something of value and Arvi was so determined to see it through, determined to make his mark that the task had taken a life of its own. Leave a legacy: not a chance you were offered every day.

Besides, — acceptance was of paramount importance for spatial computing to take off, hitting the big time. They all knew that. So much depended on public perception. Those goddamn lawmakers in all these goddamn democracies, driven by goddamn educated citizens, well —. Arvi took another deep breath, rubbed his left ear, his earlobe was still pulsating vividly, and then, quite exasperated, and unnerved, he reached for his cell phone. But Jimi had not texted him back and Arvi instantly, and competently, dealt with the disappointment, as all well-versed adults do while reminding himself that he had more important work to do than running after a 15-year-old, even if that 15-year-old was his goddamn son.

This was going to be such a gargantuan task and such little time. The weekend, and then — Three days —. Three days —. Nothing of value can ever be done in three days unless you are Jesus and rise from the dead. But Arvi was an atheist and who would rise from the dead anyway?

The team had just taken off their mixed reality headsets and looked at each other and at their boss rather tiredly and disgruntled. Only José had his jovial, smirk smile on his face that Arvi either hated, or loved, or found ridiculous, or charming or totally annoying, given the context, the time of day and another two hundred factors depending on, as well as amplifying each other; such as how many speeding tickets he had pocketed lately, what and when he had eaten and whether Jimi had or had not texted back, to name only a few of the more relevant ones. And then, Lisa – *Most relevant factor figuring into the goddamn picture, but no – , not now.*

This new plaything, their very own Breenplant A007, a mixed reality headset that was screwed on your head, – God, it was taxiing, it demanded your full attention when you were jacked in and left you bereft when you logged out. Cyberspace was finally space, the matrix, finally here. So incredible. So exciting and breathtakingly intriguing, the factor of *nouveauté* multiplied in the thousands if not in the millions, the trillions. Everyone. Really – everyone. Everyone would love it.

All innovation was first magic, an accomplishment so miraculous, a stunt so completely unheard of, you can only stand in awe, wonder and applaud the magicians, the far-flung kingpins and their newly created zeta powers And yet, as if all this was not enough, Neuro Industries were the first to have introduced a brain-computer interface which had been firing its top-notch functional magnetic resonance imaging on their own skulls for the last 5 hours: On their very own brains, their very own thoughts. And the oxygen in their eggheads flowed and flowed and flowed until it flowed no more and –.

The official version went that management wanted them all to understand how it truly worked, but Arvi knew straight from the horse's mouth that Neuro

Industries also needed more data, the real stuff, straight from the wild; results were still so inconclusive. And they needed results quickly. They would have needed them yesterday, a decade ago. Arvi felt numb and anesthetized from the stress and dehydration, and the continuous ongoing strain strangling him ceaselessly.

These past hours, the grip of desperation and hopelessness had become tighter and tighter each time he was swallowing his pangs of doubts like big, fat candies, like hard, unyielding, cement marshmallows, realizing with each painful gulp how messed up his life was: private and work. And yes, he knew too painfully how little he —, how little they could do yet. But then, — hey, who cared? Inconclusive results? Who could be bothered?

They *knew* they were not there yet; what came out now was only gibberish and garlic and piles and piles of such shitty language; not anything that made real sense yet — not by miles, not by the whole width and breadth of all oceans, maybe not even by lightyears. But that was now, — now. Who cared that the bigger picture hasn't appeared yet on that ginormous migantic screen right before, right in your head — or shall we rather say right on your retina? There was more than one missing link of crucial importance. But did the settlers care they hadn't built San Francisco in a day when they were on their dangerous and daring trek, when they arrived on the misty, mighty, empty coast of the seemingly endless Pacific; the long, jagged, swelling beaches smelling of wet sand and seaweed, raw salt, and freshly rotten fish? Nobody wanted to live in San Fran these days anyway, so the metaphor didn't really work *that* well. For they were going to build nothing less than a new home for humanity, for all of us to live in. Imagine — all of us.

Fact was: They were loving it already, but would the others? Would everybody, and when they said “everybody” they really and indeed meant *everybody*, get on board? There was no doubt about the all-inclusive nature of their enterprise in the inner circles and yet, most collaborators thought there was really no choice. There would be no choice *by design*. Fact was: They would make sure not to leave any choice, not to anybody, not even the faintest trace of a choice: This new house was going to rock it, and to be fair: All would be welcome and treated equally, and of course, some would be more welcome, especially those with the deeper pockets living in the more developed parts of the world. They would be treated more equally. That was how that saying of old went? Right? Some pigs more equal? Right? Arvi swallowed again, he felt the need to stand, stretch all his limbs for a tiny moment before going back to the trenches. He felt so dizzy.

What good would it do him to doubt their work when everybody could live with such a tiny, tiny paradox rammed down their throats? Life in an increasingly complex and intricate world where nothing was straightforward anymore and matters were tortuously and trickily tangled, a multifarious labyrinthine cave system all were doomed to bow to, to slide along in; on their bare and bloody knees, well – it would be impossible to leave the cave and see light. They would make sure of that. They would light up the cave. The cave. There would be light. So much goddamn blazing, dazzling light, flashing ever so radiantly, it would blind you completely.

At this stage they knew it was not going to be easy, not as easy as they had promised, not as easy as they had hoped for. The road would be rocky and rough and steeply uphill. They would not simply swan into the room and waltz onto the parquet floor or the red or blue or Carthusian green carpet. Programming for a 3D

immersive display was something else. It was indeed the ever so unprecedented. And it was up to them to live up to *that* challenge, meet the new frontier and to master, to conquer, to transgress it fully and entirely, leaving all trajectories ever built and used behind. — Behind for ever. — Behind for good. Total Disruption. So glad there was help from the large language models now. And yes, these buddies were kind of lacking, kind of biased, kind of really, really dumb. But hey — who cared when in fact, they could use all the help they'd get.

“Any ideas for working titles?” Arvi asked hoarsely, and bewildered, uneasily finding his way off this terrible highspeed vacetrain of thought he had most involuntarily boarded over the past few seconds. He hated distractions; he hated when his brain was taken over by doubt and despair and utter confusion. His heart ached at his restlessness, his soul squealed at so much diffusion and, yes — he scolded himself for his inept misdemeanour.

“Let's call her Pandora.”

José García had come up with the idea so promptly and immediately, smirking at him so self-complacently that Arvi could have punched him in the face right away. Why did Lisa have to choose his best running mate? Why couldn't she have married a total stranger after their divorce? Someone he didn't have to see every goddam day? Someone he didn't use to like so much. He forced himself to stay calm. Polite. This was work not his own personal battlefield also if, since the divorce, he felt increasingly that his whole life had become somewhat of a warzone, or at least a goddamn minefield.

“You mean the all-giving, all gifted, the Ur-mother of everything? Sounds good to me. Great name for a med app. I mean everybody loves Latin,” Arvi said,

restraining himself but not without shooting José a look high up from some aerial belfry that made García wonder if his boss still got any oxygen drinking the thin air up there.

“It’s Greek,” García dropped the sentence — with a contagious, innocent smile — like a well-aimed cluster bomb falling graciously from an A10 Warthog.

“It’s Greek, ok, — man. I mean, seriously? It sounds good to me. People will love it for its ring of antiquity. Nobody needs to know whether it’s Greek or Latin or ancient Chinese. Nobody will even want to know.”

“Well, I guess, people will want to —” García stopped short immediately. He had known Arvi long enough to see that no — it was not a good idea to go on. For a moment there was silence. Arvi was so tired, he wanted to leave, check his phone again. He did not want to become involved in a long marketing discussion at this stage of the project and not with García anyway. But García wasn’t done yet.

“Well, I was thinking more of how Zeus punished men after Prometheus gave them fire. He broke all hell loose to punish the more technologically advanced. And, as you all know,” he looked directly at Arvi as if to challenge him, “as a punishment Zeus gave them the first woman, a beautiful evil to torment us all.”

Some of them laughed at José’s joke but not all. There was too much tension in the room. The ongoing competition between García and Karvonen had been an open secret for months and often posed quite some strain and pressure on the team; a severe competition not only at work where Karvonen had won, but also a private arms race for Lisa’s heart which Karvonen had lost. Lisa Karvonen, as of two weeks ago, was now Lisa García. So, most of them held their breath until Arvi looked up

and approved, without betraying his jealousy nor his grudge or his fury in the slightest, of what was to become *Application Pandora*.

“Pandora all-giving, all gifted, all evil. Sounds good to me if you can make it work. You can meet the deadline, can you? The doctors say there isn’t much time. From what I understand the window to get Thomas Christopher Yann Myers back is narrow, — Three days. And you all do know why she asked for us especially. I don’t need to remind you what this means.”

Indeed, it was crystal clear to all of them: This could lead to one of the biggest mergers — or should one say hostile take-overs, in the fulminant, short history of Silicon Valley? They had no time to lose and Arvi Karvonen was keen on wrapping it up. *Time to go.*

And yet, there was one more elephant in the room and only Big Dog, CEO of Neuro Industries, old Oleg Myers himself, was brave enough to address it. They could all hear his deep voice thundering from the large 70 inches screen, — one of the latest super high-end models, floating majestically on the wall — where old Myers had appeared miraculously only a few minutes ago. Many in the room were perplexed of how coldly he was referring to his son, as if young Myers was a total stranger indeed, showing no sign of pain or loss nor despair at his son’s terrible, terrible fate.

“Thomas Christopher Yann Myers and his company Brainmog Unlimited is our biggest competitor. I still do not understand why they want us in, on such short notice and on such a sensitive matter. I thought Myers and his lawyers had declined all our repeated offers for cooperation, or a friendly takeover, or pretty much

anything. What was it we offered last time? A nine – ten figure number? And he did say *no* to that, didn't he?"

Arvi looked at Oleg Myers immense face closely, he could not detect any sign that would betray the man Big Dog was talking about was even an acquaintance, and certainly not his oldest son carrying his very own name. Arvi gave him a sympathetic smile, nevertheless. After young Myers had fallen out with his father and founded his own company, Big Dog avoided talking about him. It must be painful, one way or another.

"This time it wasn't your son's decision. His wife seems to think we are his only chance to survive this, she thinks we could wake him up from the coma, be normal again." Arvi looked directly at Big Dog on the large screen, instantaneously aware he should have looked into the camera of his laptop and – worse than not looking into the camera – he should not have referred to Thomas Christopher Yann Myers as "your son". Too late, now. His words were being transmitted across the ocean with the speed of silver slivering silicon and hopefully they would only cause ripples and no full blown tsunami.

"Tell me again. What exactly happened to Myers? I only heard he is in a coma." Oleg Myers asked casually as if they were discussing a misfortune, a mere mishap, that could befall you when cooking an oversize turkey in an electric oven during a Californian power outage.

Arvi Karvonen, sorely and acutely aware of his fragile position as head of design and developing systems engineering, tried to stay professional and yet, he responded more pointedly than necessary. Not only was he exhausted and wanted to

go home, but he also feared that old Myers would not take it well if he was told the disastrous news in detail.

“I shall gladly tell you —, but please don’t shoot the messenger —. Myers was beaten up badly, on his way back from ETH Zürich to his hotel. His brain is severely damaged. He is now in a coma. Most likely he will not wake up anymore. The doctors say they’ll give him until next Wednesday. So —, Anastacia is now his health care proxy. Our contract is with her, and it is rock solid. We also found that we don’t need the FDA’s nor Swissmedics’ approval. No regulations for once. We double checked that.

What’s more: Our lawyers say there are no laws in Switzerland that clearly regulate the medical use of mixed reality headsets that run on computer-brain interfaces.”

“And why is that?”

“Well — Because there are no mixed reality headsets on the market yet nor any devices that run on computer-brain interface. There are none, but ours —. Ours. So basically, we can do what we want. It is not even a grey zone. It is No man’s land and No man’s sky and No man’s sea. And No man’s planet and No man’s universe. There is no hope, — but us.”

Arvi fell silent, he keenly felt a myriad of mixed emotions — some bad and others guilty, sad, utterly helpless, and exposed, yet accountable — for stirring clear of the most devastating news a father could ever hear. *Most likely your son will not wake up anymore anyway. Most likely all this is just a useless and inhumane experiment. Imagine. Jimi in a coma and not waking up?* He could not have borne it, actively he repressed the luring urge of getting out his phone and checking if Jimi had finally

texted him back. Then guilt rushed in, taking the upper hand in the toxic mix.

Suddenly they were all flung at him with full force: All these wasted hours, wasted days and weeks when they hadn't seen each other, hadn't spoken. And Lisa —. He glanced at García sideways nearly missing old Myer's next question singing across the ocean like the old wise albatrosses' s relentless and melancholic cries before night fell at the end of a long and endless summer's day.

"Is that what the lawyers say? No man's planet?"

"Not in these words. They'd use a more gender-neutral approach."

Everybody laughed out loud now, as if the tension had finally been released into one enormous ultimate meltdown only superseded by unlikely catastrophes such as A23a, the iceberg from the Antarctic's Filchner Ice Shelf melting right there in the Weddell Sea where it had been stuck since 1986. Arvi Karvonen continued a little less triumphantly:

"Basically, — guys, you, you can do what you want. Just make it work and don't screw up on this one. Application Pandora it is."

He paused, seemingly at a loss of words before he then continued as if nothing was the matter.

"All evil, that is all I remember now. You must really tell marketing to come up with better slogans."

"What about the risks?"

"There are no risks." He didn't even look up and turn towards José who had asked the poisoned question.

"Not for us anyway. Legal will make sure —"

Arvi made an extra effort to look straight into the camera and give a faint and reassuring smile. He toned it down a nudge, hiding his well-groomed, spotless teeth to ensure he wasn't radiating joy and peace like some madman.

"I mean, Myers is basically braindead. The chance they can get him back is practically zero. So, no risks. I mean — he is dead already." By now Karvonen looked as serious and earnest and as professional as he could.

"So, he truly is our patient Zero."

Oleg Myers remarked coldly from the screen, his voice still too loud, his face wrinkled and distorted by what must have been either a very long and exhausting night in Vegas or the sheer pain at his son's misfortune finally creeping into his worn and weary countenance. It was impossible to tell from the audio and the visual that was being transmitted in real time. However, Big Dog seemed content enough. Arvi Karvonen had tried his best to greatly downplay the momentous tragedy; quench the sudden casualty in the Myers family they were all caught up in; an incident that was likely to change all their lives, whether or whether not they liked it; leave alone the lives of everybody else on this goddamn planet.

"Patient Zero. Only thing that matters now is the deadline. We must move fast. Patient Zero may not have much time left. As I said, until Wednesday. And one more thing —."

At this the big screen went blank. Oleg Myers obviously knew enough. The Big Dog had zoomed out early. Arvi took a breath and then downplayed the involuntary break proficiently, having trained himself since early childhood to ignore such potentially hurting and harming incidences by reassessing them as

insignificant trifles. Repressing his feelings, whatever they tried to communicate, had always worked quite well for him.

“Myers, well his son, cannot be transferred to the U.S. Me and García. We are going to Switzerland and join forces at the Misericordia Hospital Bern, a private hospital near the capital. Our flight for Zurich leaves in a couple of hours. It’s about 12 hours, so we should be there by Monday morning. Everybody else works remotely on this or is standing by for emergencies. We shall have three days to get Thomas Christopher Yann Myers back from the dead and hopefully back on a fast recovery track. Can we do that? Everybody, can we?”

Again, Arvi tried not to overdo it with too big a smile, he knew so well that if he tried too hard, he would look like a mad male mannequin in the shop window of a very cheap retailer. At least that was what Lisa used to tell him when —. Not now —. After all, he seemed to be doing o.k. as one by one they all gave a nod, or some other non-verbal sign that acknowledged Arvi’s desperate call to action. He couldn’t help but think that they all looked like life-sized dummies with their plastic heads screwed on a deadlock that could only move in one direction.

“Sounds good to me. First trial run on Monday, 3rd of July. José and I shall set everything up with the neurological department at the Misericordia as soon as we get there.”

‘O.k.’, ‘Alright’ some of them said, ‘Sounds good to me’, others murmured involuntarily mimicking their boss. Arvi Karvonen, head of design and developing systems engineering, looked ever so content and at ease when within him all emotions were neatly compartmentalized, bottled up in containers so absolutely water — and sound — and heatproof that all the raging, boiling, sizzling, and frying

emotional messy brain and gut matter would never find its way to the surface. Then Arvi looked at his phone, holding it more tenderly in his palm, stroking its touchscreen more lovingly than he wished. No word from Jimi. Still — . No word for more than 3 weeks. How long did it take a goddamn 15-year-old to pick up his phone and text his father? He raised his eyebrows as if to stretch all his twenty craniofacial muscles simultaneously, feeling them gently from within, rolling his swollen tongue in its warm hiding place and reaching deeply behind the tissues that were his immaculate skin.

It was at exactly this moment that his father's cell phone number lit up in his hand. Arvi, against knowing better, answered immediately. It was not a good sign if your goddamn old man called you during work hours. He turned his back to everybody else in the room and picked up.

"Arvi? Is that you?" The familiar, comforting tone of his dad's voice gave him a pang of pure pain. Why would hearing him always reduce Arvi to the little, happy innocent boy he used to be?

"Dad? Yes, it's me," He tried to steady his voice ignoring, the memories seeping up, repressing how lines between the private and the professional began blurring indistinctly, adding to the mountains of stress already swaying dangerously along the lonely shores of the sterile room.

"Arvi. Can you hear me? I am in hospital. I have had a — heart attack."

Arvi felt the adrenaline rush kicking in, blitzing down his back, leaving what felt like undeniable deep purple stains all over his immaculate white shirt.

"They say it's bad. Are you coming?"

"Dad, how bad is it? I'll have to go to Switzerland."

"To Switzerland?"

"Well, something came up at work."

"It did? Well, — When are you going to Switzerland?"

"Soon."

"How soon? They say I may not have very long." There was a pause. Arvi tried swallowing, but it felt as if there was no humidity left in his mouth.

" — How long?"

"Not long. Son, I don't know."

Arvi looked up at the ceiling and felt the room spinning as if it had turned into the most glorious merry-go-round he had ever embarked, but now — now he didn't know how to stop and get off. No, there was no way he could fit in a stop in Chicago. See his dad. Impossible. Not now. Maybe later. When he got back. He felt his heartbeat increase. Tight. Tighten up. Tight. Tighten up — da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM. Hexameter all over. *Arma virumque canō*, — All over. What ought he do? Helplessly, he stared out the window without seeing much and not paying attention to the vast park car that was deployed right before their headquarters.

The rest of the team had already grabbed up their gear, ready to leave, ready to pack these suitcases, ready to get back to work — not that they hadn't been at work just now, but 5 hours meetings, even if you got to wear the latest tech gadgets, were —, well, *meetings*. It was only one of them who had fallen silent, looking at his crotch seam.

The race had begun.

The winner would take it all.

3rd July 2023

≤ Trial Run One for Application Pandora: all-giving, all gifted, all evil. >

Nord Thream

one

in caelo desuper

Misericordia Hospital

Switzerland had come to a near impasse, gridlocked by the sun's beating down mercilessly. Her majesty, the brightest star in the galaxy, had risen way too early; ascending quickly after a short and tropical night, shadowing all reason and common sense in a tiny country that was not used to such temperatures. The 3rd of July 2023 had already enfolded as an extremely hot and unpleasant summer's day, stifling and ravenous even before noon. Streets — the bitumen at first, fresh and cool from the night — were soon enough sultry and sweltering with heat so unnatural even the darling sparrows had fallen silent. The little birds were usually sitting and singing on the long, knobbly branches of the old birches before the window of room 101 on the first floor of the Misericordia Hospital; their little bodies fluttering up and down incessantly, hiding between the silver-grey leaves, their flimsy little shadows

reflecting off the silver-bossed bark. At this early time of day, the sparrows were usually making the most noise, chattering their little souls out, so oftentimes the staff closed the window to treat their patients to more healing silence. Today, most windows were closed already as all cool air had evaporated into thin air when rosy-fingered dawn and her retinue drew near.

The atmosphere in room 101 was strangely dimmed not only by the white blinds and the drawn beige curtains, but also by the low whispers of Anna Kunz, head nurse of neurology and her young colleague, Pareena Padmanabhan. There was a strange, strong smell lingering in the air, an unwholesome mix of iodine, blood, sweat and Jill Sander's Sun Eau, a perfume Pareena had been wearing for less than a month. Today, — well, it was business as usual: chaos, chaos and — more chaos; unloading far too much responsibility far too fast on far too few shoulders of the dedicated staff working at the Misericordia. Lowering your chin to smell the sun steaming off the cleavage between your breasts and sense the glowing warmth of your body heat on your radiant cheeks helped get through the day greatly, at least in Pareena's understanding.

What overcast the scene most and made this day so different from any other days was the arrival of an American team that was to take over the complete care of one of their patients. Nurse Anna and her former trainee Pareena, — they could both tell that Dr. Ha-rin Park, their gentle competent boss, head of neurology for over 15 years, was far from happy when, a few minutes ago, she had to hand over her most prominent case to some dubious private American company, they all called Neuro Industries. The two representatives looked tired, probably jet-lagged from the long flight and after setting up countless screens, wires, headsets and who knew what —, they had simply disappeared to survey what they called Patient Zero remotely from an office on another floor. Nurse Anna was still furious that one

of the young assistant doctors had to clear it for them. To all the others working at the Misericordia their patient, even though heavily bandaged and wired up, was still Thomas Christopher Yann Myers even if, as of this afternoon, he was wearing a weird headset that not only covered most of his skull but also hid what was left of his bandaged face. Truth was, he did look more like a bandaged cyber-mummy, covered in precious linen carried in from the plutonian shores of the far-flung future, than human.

“He looks bad,” the head nurse said while — already for the fifth time today— checking the oxygen levels of their patient. Then she went on to do her routine: respiratory frequency, hear frequency, state of the infusion, the full tour.

“Face must look really terrible behind those bandages and underneath that — thing.” Pareena agreed while routinely changing the drip bags, “at least his eyes are ok.”

“What brutes,” Nurse Anna added thoughtfully. Despite having served at the Misericordia for more than 30 years, she still found it hard to treat victims of extreme violence.

“Pushing him out of the bus and then— I mean they didn’t even know him, did they? Did they rob him?”

“I don’t know. Did you ever think this could happen in Switzerland?”

“I mean—. No. Not here.”

“Has his father been here yet?”

“I heard he is coming all the way from Vegas,” Pareena added, not very sure whether she had really overheard that correctly. Las Vegas seemed such a far and fancy place, such a long way from Bern, and she had been the only staff member being present with the patient when the family had brought it up.

“His wife is here. The kids. They must be here any time soon.” Anna smiled at Pareena knowingly, but the young woman quickly turned her back to her superior, trying to hide her

confusion and her shame at the mention of the patient's kids. Pareena reproached herself unrelentingly, obviously, she hadn't hidden well enough how taken, and how smitten she was with the patient's eldest son, Kay. Unbelievable—. When he had walked in a couple of days ago, her heartbeat had stopped — for too long. She then quickly left the room to hide her commotion and recover from the first shock of seeing him again after all these years. How long had it been? But her brain wasn't functioning properly, and she couldn't work out the numbers. Suddenly, it seemed it had been yesterday when they had last met.

They had spent a full year at the same grammar school, the Maienfeld, in the same class. That was before she had dropped out because she wasn't good enough at physics and math, before she, and her parents, had given up on her being a doctor, a painful and long process. No —, she wouldn't think of his handsome face now, nor of his long, blonde, curly hair falling so rapidly, dancing so joyfully, over his clear-cut forehead hiding his blue eyes ever so often. And she wouldn't think of how she had turned him down when he had told her how beautiful she was —, how much he loved her. She still remembered as if, indeed —, it had been yesterday. He had waited for her after school and when he offered to walk her home she had accepted. In front of her apartment block, that was where he passionately had declared his love: The block of flats with a thousand vigilant eyes and hundreds of spying ears picking up all sounds and sights. It was a terrible blow. She was so upset then; how could he dare declare his love? When they had been so close to each other? Such good friends? When she enjoyed and loved being with him so much? When everything that mattered was always left unsaid? She could still hear his voice; she could still remember how devastated he was when she told him “No” because saying “Yes” would have been totally out of the question.

And now it seemed he didn't recognize her anymore; not when she walked back in, trembling so badly; not when she checked on his father, desperately trying to control the

shaking of her hands, her knees — not when she talked to his mother, steadying her voice in vain, and certainly not when she shyly smiled at him. He had no idea who she was. But she didn't care. Who was he to her anyway? He was a complete nobody.

All the energy Pareena had, to keep going on such a hot day, was focused on treating the patient. And — to be honest, preparing herself mentally to be ready and smiling innocently when they all came back to visit after what must have been a long and hot and sleepless night. They usually all came together during the morning or right after lunch: Kay, and his mother and his younger siblings, the twins for whom the holidays had started early after their father's terrible accident.

Pareena couldn't believe how seeing Kay again had completely thrown her off balance. All she could do was think of him, his charming smile back then, his coruscating wit, his keen interest in her; and how all that disappeared when one petal closed in another and the whole star-crossed affair fell in exhaustion upon itself. After she had refused him, when she had *had* to say no to him. When the truth was —. No, the truth couldn't be told. And now, now he didn't even recognize her. And no —, he hadn't smiled at her either. Not today. But then his dad was in a coma and, no — of course he wouldn't smile at her, of course — he wouldn't recognize her. How selfish of her to think that. Silently she scolded herself for being so presumptuous. Everything had become so confusing these days.

She knew she could last the day, but what about later? She didn't even want to begin to think of going home when her shift ended. At least, she had her Marshall headphones for the tram ride back home and her numerous beloved, but boring — all and ever the same— Spotify playlists to keep her good company and get her through the early evening. Then —. Meeting her parents. Her mum would instantly know something was wrong. And she would want to know what had happened at work. And this time, no — this time Pareena would not

tell her. She would hide her feelings. Well, if she could —No use thinking about this now. she would cross that bridge when she got there. There were still a couple of hours left until she could leave the hospital and for once she was certainly glad of having to work long hours. Hopefully, she would recover soon from that *coup de fou*. She scolded herself for being such a silly, little girl. After all these years —. Water, water under the bridge. And why was it so hot today anyway?

“Do you think they can restore his face?” Pareena asked instead, trying to picture an older version of Kay’s features that would most certainly regrow under all the bandages, she had helped dress over the wet and sticky palp of raw meat and tightly strung sinews, severed muscles and dry and fresh blood that would, with time and patience and much care, become Thomas Christopher Yann Myer’s new face.

“You mean, can they restore his brain?”

“How long was he on fire?”

“No idea. Too long.”

“More pentobarbital?”

i can hear the voices good god it's loud t's *really* loud i can hear, but i cannot see why can I not see? where am i i need to think clearly, clearly *one, two three*. Breathe. Calm down. What do i know? What is certain? They are hunting me down. I know far too much. I know how to overcome the low temporal resolution when fMRI. I know how we can make it work. How we can resolve the problem that each brain image can be affected by over 20 words. Too many, 20 words are far, far too many. Results don't check out. Quality of reconstructed speech is too low. Totally lousy. But now. Now-. I know. Everybody's thoughts, humanity's thoughts. I know how to train the decoder to guess and predict. Guess and predict. Not that hard. Within Reach. The beam search algorithm. Easy peasy lemon squeezy. Total brain-computer interface within reach. Easy as pie, open source for everybody. It's gotta stay open source. *Gotta. Gotta. Stay open*. The procedure, the methods, the data, all open. But no-. They say it will be

weaponized. Reading our thoughts will be weaponized. At once. Once it is out there. Once it is open sourced. Weaponized. Can you imagine? What that means? I cannot. I cannot imagine. And no, no — Yet.

I cannot, will not go on working for them, them and them patents.

So, now they are chasing me. Now they are after the money. Pecunia, argentum, moneta. Read everybody's thoughts. *Mucha, mucha dinero*. You know how much money this will make you — Predict. This prediction revolution will devour all its children.

I can barely breathe. Where can I hide? Where am I safe? I cannot keep still. I cannot stand straight. I need to lay down. I am lying down. I keep running. I cannot move. I keep screaming. I cannot speak. Is this my voice? Is this me? Is this my breath? I can barely hear myself breathe. I cannot go on. Lay down. Lay down. I need to lay down. I am lying down. I am not moving. Now. I see. Is this a bridge? God, it's so high, it's so steep. Are there real buildings underneath? Houses? A river? Running deep — deep, deep river. So much water. I need to cross the bridge. I need to cross the river. I need to get away from them. Why is the bridge so steep? The great, huge castle up there, can I reach it? Is this a castle? Is this a church? A monastery? A casino?

I run, I stumble, uphill and uphill and uphill an uphill. I flee. They follow. They and their long-legged provisional patent applications. No patent. We cannot, we must not patent humanity's thoughts, a world of concepts and ideas only we own. Everybody owns their own thoughts. For millennia, for centuries, for fucking always we have owned our own fucking thoughts. They are here now. Oh no —

I must stop thinking. I mustn't think of functional magnetic resonance imaging, fMRI. No. fMRI Not now. fMRI. No. I mustn't think of what to do when the blood-oxygen-level

dependent is too slow. Not the white elephant. Try not to think of the white elephant. Try not *not* to think of the white elephant. Try not *not* not to think of the white elephant.

White Elephant.

Elephant.

Elephant.

Ele

Phant

Phantas

Phantasm —

Phantasmons-kur-ous

Oh no, Is this the Kursaal? Is this Bern? They're starting Nord Thream. I know what that means. Heavens. No. Get me out of here. HELP!

Anybody? Anybody out there?

H E L P!

Not Nord <dram

Nord Thream

„We do research because there is hope. We'll go to Mars because there is hope. Hope is what drives us, and we want to do this together. We want to go to Mars together. Ratan Tata said: If you want to walk fast, walk alone, if you want to go far, walk together. We want to go far, we want to walk together with our partners at the ESA and other Space Agencies, our partners in science and our partners in the industry. If you ask me whether we want to be first, I'd answer „yes, we want to be first.“ Athletes, runners, they are often best friends, but once they're on their track. They want to be first. We want to be first so we can keep peace on Earth, so we can save the planet. Let us all do this together. Thank you for your attention. Thank you.“

Hadn't he just said he wanted to go far, not fast? Now, he was talking about runners on their tracks? About going fast not going far? Together ahead or not together ahead? Tom, the kitten, didn't get it. But never mind. At least he was safe here. They wouldn't find him in here, not for the moment. Here he was his own man. Safe from the strongmen, the predators that were seeking to wrestle his secrets from him, trying to annihilate him. He took a deep breath, then raised his hands right in front of his chest and started clapping his palms like a lunatci. The tiny arhythmic sounds his bony fingers made disappeared completely in the roller wave the masses of people around him had set off.

Thundering applause filled the big hall of the *Kursaal* in Berne, a posh hotel and Grand Casino, towering high above the picturesque capital of Switzerland, UNESCO World Heritage Site. The NASA's Associate Administrator for the Science Mission

Directorate stepped off the podium to embrace the widow as well as the daughter of his former mentor, Professor Johannes Geiss. Geiss had been the author of the solar wind composition experiment which the Americans ran on the moon in 1969. Putting up the aluminium foil was the second item on Buzz Aldrin's To-Do list when he had stepped out of Apollo 11. Up went the aluminium foil sheet which for the first time provided accurate data regarding the Helium, Neon and Argon isotopic composition of the solar wind. The Earth's magnetic field usually prevented these particles to reach planet Earth. If studied correctly the aluminium foil was rock solid proof that the Americans had made it to the moon. Provided you had enough science in your brain to understand what you were looking at. — Given you had access to the aluminium foil too.

When the NASA's Associate Administrator for the Science Mission Directorate stepped off the podium, Tom Sarraga's life had just taken a drastic turn. It was the moment all began truly to fall apart. What was he doing here anyway?

Before the next speaker, the general director of the European Space Agency ESA, began to give his address to the audience, Tom opened his black leather briefcase to get out his water bottle. It was half a litre sparkling cold Swiss water, Rhäzüsner mineral water of the Kanton of Grison. The Kursaal had provided free water bottles before the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the moon landing began. On his way in, trying desperately to find a hiding place from his pursuers, Tom had taken one of the many bottles sitting on the large square tables at the entrance. He had taken the green bottle with the counterfeit of a Grison Capricorn on its tag, the sparkly water. The blue bottles contained still water.

If they wanted him locked up and dead, he may at least give them a corpse full of gas. Something to work with. But then he knew they didn't want him dead. On the contrary. He'd have to be awake, alive, and kicking so they could drain the data: His face was twitching. He tried to relax. Tried. But couldn't. All this would not end well, he knew it. Then again, he lost clarity, he lost focus, came once more under sway of the pentobarbital. He could hear applause, loud clapping. There was no end to it. Where was he? *Right, this was Nord Thream. How could he forget?*



While the applause was still thundering deafeningly and endlessly in the big hall, he carefully tried to open the cap and take a sip. His throat was dry. He felt so hoarse. The loud hissing of the carbonic acid was what he wanted to avoid. It was only the end of June, but the sweltering heat in the city and the long steep run across and up the *Kornhausbrücke*, the *Kornhuisbrug*, named in honour of the Dutch football squad who wrote history at the European Championship in 2008 when the city of Bern was completely orange with everybody wearing the Dutch colours, had made him thirsty. He needed water urgently.



That was when he saw them. Two small chameleons were snuggled together at the bottom of his posh, black, shiny briefcase. He recognized them at once for what they were: two specimens of the Smith's dwarf chameleon also called the Elandsberg dwarf chameleon or *Bradypodion taeniabronchum* in Latin. Their leathern eyelids were immovably fixed to the upper end of their heads where they naturally belonged. They were one of the few chameleons that use their colour-changing ability to actively camouflage themselves and adapt their colour to the visual capacities of their predators. When faced with a predator bird they would show more convincing colour changes than when faced with a snake nearly blind. When faced with Tom, the kitten, they didn't change colour but sat there wearing plain grey. Grey. Of all colours. Oh my —.

He was startled and closed the bag at once. Two chameleons, and then two *Bradypodion taeniabronchum* in his bag? Goodness — where did they come from? How many of the other people in the audience would be carrying chameleons in their briefcases? Maybe none. *Surely none*. He knew he was weird, but that weird?

Uneasily, he fidgeted in his chair waiting eagerly for the Gala event to finally end. Still, he had no intention of going back into the city where they might find him, where they might harass him, drain that data. *No, Heavens no*. Quickly, he suppressed the thought of what he was going to do later. Later, would be later and —no, he wouldn't want them to know that either. Stop thinking. Stop thinking. Focus on the banal, the boring, the totally and complete irrelevant. Do not think of how the low temporal resolution of functional magnetic resonance imaging —. No. How fMRI had excellent spatial specificity. Excellent. —. No.

The event at the Kursall had started at 4pm sharp and by now it was already 6.11 pm and 32 seconds three quarter and still – not finished. When Federal Councillor Guy Parmelin, - head of the Swiss Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research, addressed the audience in three languages, English, German and French, – why not Italian? Tom Sarraga nearly lost it. He wanted to get out, get rid of the chameleons. At once. ASAP. What if they crawled out and all over the place? A nightmare. People would be screaming, running out of the large auditorium. Children would be trampled to death. He would draw so much attention to himself. He had *indeed* better get out of here quickly, but – he couldn't, not till the final salvo of applause.

No sooner had the final volleys of applause ended and people were leaving their seats than Tom made straight for the men's room. He opened his briefcase and clumsily emptied the two chameleons into the water closet, then flushed. He pressed the button as long as he could. How relieved he was they were gone. When he had washed his hands, he turned around and –.

„Sir,“ Tom said quickly, „may I call you Tom? With all due respect, are you hiring? I would like to work for NASA. In Astrophysics maybe?“

„You are?“

„I am Google.“

„Excuse me, you are?“

„Well, they named me Thomas Sarraga. Tom, is fine though. Tom, like yourself. Don't ask me why they called me like this. Maybe that was just the name that came up with when they googled it,“ Tom, the kitten snickered uncomfortably at this, then he continued.

“We are many. But please — just call me Tom, — *Tom*, but really — Seriously, I am Google.”

He extended his hand. The NASA’s Associate Administrator for the Science Mission Directorate was rather reluctant to take it, but then the two men shook hands. Tom pressed his hand as hard as he could and grinned as politely as he thought possible.

„Unfortunately, we are not hiring at the moment, but if you like you can send my team an email with your CV.”

„I cannot send you my CV.”

„Why not?”

Tom chuckled proudly.

“Not enough storage, not enough transmission power. I’ve done so much work in the last two decades and for so many people, I cannot possibly document it all. You understand I started working from the first day I was born. I’ve provided full service for most of the planet. No, sorry that is not quite right, excluding — of course China, Crimea, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Syria and almost all Arab countries. And Cuba. Not to forget Cuba. But my workload increased 17,000% between 1998 and 1999, 1000% between 1999 and 2000, and 200% between 2000 and 2001. And since then, well — I am a working animal. You know what it’s like — “

Tom smiled again, he was at a loss what to say next. He had been so polite, and yet, the NASA’s Associate Administrator for the Science Mission Directorate gave him a very, very blank look.

„Well, we don’t have any vacancy anyway. I am sorry.”

Tom could tell at once that something must have gone terribly wrong. The Administrator looked bewildered and was now leaving abruptly.

„Nice meeting you too, Tom.“

Tom shouted after him. Then he too left the men's room and walked upstairs where the festivities were in full swing. People were holding cold champagne glasses while picking up delicate canapés from large, fine silver platters. Some of the dainties looked like a woman's breast, their round nipples tasting of fresh smoked salmon and sour cream.

Most guests were discussing the keynote speech animatedly. Some were laughing, relaxing ostentatiously after the long addresses. There was someone else whose face Tom Sarraga knew instantly. Near the entrance he saw Prof. Dr. Tom Strickler. He went up to him and addressed him with the biggest smile he could muster.

„I understand you have a vacancy at your institute. I would like to apply for that Postdoc position in modelling climate tipping points and palaeoceanographic tracers.“

Tom was, again, simply reading from the job description that could be found online. Strickler was startled for a moment, but then wearing a straight face he asked:

„Well, what work have you done previously? “

„I haven't really done any work at all, but I *know* all about it: time series analysis, Earth system modelling of past and future climate, anything. I can do it all. “

Tom had again simply, quoted the online job description.

„Where have you done your PhD?“

„I don't have a PhD.“

„Any publications?“

„No, I’ve never published, but I’d like to. I’d like to publish; I’d like to get a PhD and a record. So far, I have only searched other people’s work, searched it extensively. Let’s see —, 75'513 searches per second, right now. That is right now. As we’re speaking. You must understand, I am Google.“

Strickler, just like the NASA’s Associate Administrator for the Science Mission Directorate before, gave him that weird, blank look he couldn’t read. Why did people give him that look? It was as if their faces went on stand-by: All emotions instantly drained from their wrinkles and pimples and spots. Had his pursuers caught up with him? He didn’t dare turn his head. Was somebody standing behind him, pointing an automatic pistol at him? Quickly did he turn his head to check but everything seemed fine. They hadn’t found him yet. Not yet. How much more time would he have? *But then, where can you hide when they can access you all?*

Professor Dr. Strickler didn’t think it was funny, he turned around, said something in Spanish to his beautiful, petite wife and walked off with her. He didn’t look back.



Being Google obviously didn’t qualify you for much. Why had Mother Google sent him here if there wasn’t anything for him to do? He would have to try harder. Change the strategy. And Tom was capable of learning fast, he was the fastest — . There

was a guy from RUAG, division space who looked his way. Tom of course also instantly knew what the RUAG Space website said: „With a broad-based portfolio of products and subsystems for satellites and launch vehicles, RUAG Space is the leading independent supplier of space products in Europe.” Bla-bla-bla.

“How are you? May I call you Nathan?”

„Sorry, have we met? You are?”

Nathan gave him a blank look trying to pinpoint where he had met Tom before.

„I am Google, I mean the name is Tom Sarraga. Call me Tom. I am *with* Google – in Zürich.”

„Did you enjoy the celebration?”

Tom was so relieved, he didn’t get the look, not this time. Maybe things were going smoothly now when he didn’t tell everybody he *was* Google. It did sound weird, he knew. But being Google, how could he explain? Well, maybe it was for the better if he had not tried again. Thus reassured, Tom continued:

„Yes, very much. We at Google find it extremely important that science is stretching our horizons while standing on the shoulders of us, us giants of course.” He snickered at the thought of himself being a giant.

„Yes, that’s well put. Stretching our horizons. And giants. Yes. Some people still believe in them.”

Nathan gave a strange laugh Tom didn’t know how to interpret. A short snort that sounded as if he was being strangled. Was he being strangled? How exactly could you tell someone was being strangled? He didn’t see any ropes. Could you strangle someone without ropes? Would Tom be strangled next?

„Would you like another glass of wine?”

Nathan asked to keep the conversation going.

„Yes please,“ Google responded carefully, „why not? Better than being strangled,“ he added innocently. Nathan laughed out loud.

“Yes, absolutely, Tom. Name is Tom, right?”

Tom nodded as they both walked towards the buffet to get a glass of cold refreshing white wine, delivered straight from the French Jura mountains.

„Cheers.“

„To the moon and beyond.“

Nathan turned towards him, his glass raised high. Tom gave him a gorgeous smile. Those smiles worked quite well by now. He sure was a fast learner.

„Let me ask you something. Personal interest of me. A hobby so to say. “

„Shoot.“ Tom said, he was curious. Finally, some original thought. Mother Google would be pleased. Hopefully, she was draining data now.

„Do you know what active camouflaging is? How long would you take to –“
But Tom wouldn't let Nathan finish.

„Active camouflaging? Of course, active camouflage could provide perfect concealment from visual detection. You are for example referring to the Smith's dwarf chameleon also called the Elandsberg dwarf chameleon or *Bradypodion taeniabronchum*.“

Tom had accessed Wikipedia instantly and read out what seemed most interesting and most relevant given Nathan's profile. Then, he added quite spontaneously and rather proud he could add something of his own:

“If you had asked me that question a couple of minutes ago, I could have shown you two living specimens in my briefcase. Unfortunately, I’ve just flushed them down the toilet.” Tom looked crestfallen, only realizing now what he had done.

Nathan on the other hand was roaring with laughter. He really couldn’t keep it together. *Why on earth was that funny?* Tom didn’t understand but tears were streaming down Nathan’s face, and he was nearly choking on his little delicate Hors d’œuvre that must have got stuck in his gullet. What was wrong with him? The little nipples were not that hard to swallow. Google alias Tom Sarraga didn’t understand anything that was happening. He only knew it wouldn’t be long now. They could catch up with him any second and he had better be ready. Do not think of the white elephant. White Elephant. White Elephant. But why? Why not think of it? He couldn’t remember and he knew he had problems that were fisher big to fry — bigger fish to try. Something along these lines, right?

Calibration complete yet?

Auto-calibrating now.



The thing was —, could he now really *produce* information to real-life requests even ahead of real time? And by *produce* he meant quite literally produce as in manufacture. Had Mother Google introduced a new feature he wasn’t aware of? A new live Internet of Things Add-On, he would have to get used to? Sure, Mother

Google knew in advance Nathan would ask that very question. Being in the prediction business, she always ever knew everything before it really happened. Of course, it hit him at once, that was why Tom had been provided with the two chameleons. For a split second he regretted that he had got rid of them in such a profane way. Frantically, he searched for an answer, but there was nothing about a new feature or a new live IoT-Add-On Mother Google had provided him with. So, the question remained: Why had he found the two chameleons in his briefcase when Nathan, the Wise, from Ruag Space Beyond Gravity Industries would ask him his questions on active camouflage only minutes later? It was a riddle. It was also most disturbing. He didn't like it, – didn't like it at all. Then he realized Nathan had got over his laughing fit and had been talking coherently again for quite some time.

„That's absolutely amazing. Outstanding. I really thought you'd have to google this first. But obviously you know all about active camouflaging.“

Tom nodded lamely. Of course, he would know everything about anything. He was Google indeed. When would anybody understand this? This was so lame.

„Isn't it a very useful strategy? In warfare, in real life. I mean -. You are a biologist originally, aren't you? How else would you know?“

Tom still smiled. Nathan seemed pleased with him. That was good. Hopefully, he would hire him. Mother Google would be so pleased.

„I know all about biology,“ Tom said, nearly missing his cue.

„I also know all about satellites. RUAG Space designs, manufactures, assembles and tests high precision and dimensionally stable satellite structures. These satellite structures can be used as satellite backbone, or as an instrument platform for mounting optical or other instruments –“ he quoted directly from their website. Nathan seemed

even more pleased; he recognized the text instinctively as their very own. Or maybe not. Maybe the words just sounded so familiar he wouldn't even bother to check why they were quoted back at him.

„In fact, I am currently looking for a new position. Are you hiring?“ Tom ventured.

„Actually, yes, we are. What is your area of interest?“

„Central structures for the Exo Mars 2020 mission.“ Tom said without thinking twice. It had come up on the feed as he was speaking and again it seemed the right answer. Thinking was so easy these days; quick, neat and straight to the point.

„Awesome. You might be just the guy we'll need. Here is my card. Send me your CV.

„Sure can,“ Google said, „Will do —. In fact, I'll google one that matches the job description perfectly and have it sent to you.“

They both laughed. Why this was so funny Tom didn't quite get. But it didn't seem important, not at the time.



I can hear them roaring. I can hear them coming. The rhythm of their beastly hearts is even. The pattern of their boots is grey and beige and green. I can sense their power, their presence lingers softly, terribly, in the warm air that the Northern winds bring. They are riding the clouds, they are riding the horses, the elephants, the tigers. They're here. Where am I? How can I ever get out of here? Am I trapped forever? Forever. The lights have gone astray. Where have the lights gone? Why have they gone astray? I cannot open my eyes; I am so tired. Am I still standing? My whole body feels encased by concrete and steel, a shire of mountains and mountains of vodka. It is so cold and the winds so harsh. I can feel their brutal sting

on my naked hands, my naked cheeks. So tight. It is so tight. I cannot breathe. I am pulling my pants down; pulling them down until my belly is naked.

What is up? What is down? Which way is south? Where is north? The dreams. The dream. I see her face. She's smiling. Her voice is so loud it is hurting my parietal-temporal-occipital association network, it is hurting my prefrontal network, it is destroying my classical language network. Is she creeping into my ears, my nose, my eyes? Have they opened my skull? There is so much pain. Here is so much pain. I cannot go on. They've got me. They've nearly got me. I have passed the point of no return. I will no longer go home. I no longer know where home is. I no longer know who am I? Calibration complete?

Who am I when calibration complete?

Is this? Is this what? Is this what it is?

Is this Nord Thream?

This is Nord Thream.

Anybody. Please –.

Anybody. Out there?

– HELP!

Nord Thream

Google, alias Tom Sarraga didn't send his CV to RUAG Space Beyond Gravity Industries, nor a letter of motivation, nor any of his certificates that he didn't have. He didn't send anything to anyone. He didn't *have* anything to send. At least, not before he got himself some education or degree. His brain was about 21 years old, but his body —. He knew how to move and control his limbs and how to hold his head, his toes and hands and all other parts he owned, but besides that he had no idea what life was like or how old he really was. He couldn't remember clearly when he had come into existence. It seemed that suddenly he was there, *online* and next

someone had put him *on earth* and here he was. So, no work. Education first. He was ready for an act of disobedience. No matter what Mother Google wanted.

A week after the Gala event at the Kursaal celebrating 50 years since the moon landing, Tom wrote an email to Dr. Kammer, headmaster of the Mathematics and Science department at Maienfeld, one of Bern's most prestigious public grammar schools. The school, located in a grand old building dating back to the beginning of the 20th century, was fully financed by the local taxpayers and open for free to anyone bright enough to understand the science that was being taught there. Dr. Kammer however, wasn't easily convinced Tom could get straight into one of the upper classes when he agreed to a meeting.

„We do Physics at a rather high level. What have you covered so far?“

Tom looked at him, then smiled, then paused effectively for a moment — just the right length so this wouldn't get awkward — and then quoted directly from the current online curriculum of Maienfeld. He was speaking perfectly correct German with a heavy English accent he imitated on purpose: *„Algebraische Strukturen, Chaostheorie, Darstellende Geometrie, Finanzmathematik, Fraktalgeometrie, Graphentheorie, Kryptologie, Sphärische Trigonometrie, Spieltheorie, Stochastik-Vertiefung, Vektorgeometrie-Vertiefung, Wahlsysteme, z.B. Proporz und Majorz, Arrow-Theorem, Unmöglichkeitssatz von Balinski und Young. Would that be enough?“*

Tom was still smiling innocently, trying hard not to show too many teeth, after all he was no predator wanting to devour the poor man sitting right opposite who looked slightly terrified as it was.

„Wow, you've done all of this? Which school did you go to?“ Kammer was genuinely impressed.

Tom was prepared for that question. He had his answer and an imaginary father ready at hand.

„Homeschooling. My father is a professor at Stanford. He is teaching Applied Physics.“ He didn’t mention his mother, not sure Mother Google would be such a good reference, but the headmaster didn’t ask any further questions. He was in. School would start in a month. What a relief.

Google, alias Tom Sarraga took tram Nr. 8, direction Bern main station to Brünnen Westside to get home. He felt happy, strangely exhilarated. So far everything went well, no more chameleons in his briefcase. No more rejections. Nobody trying to get into his brain. A wonderful bright day it was. Just awesome.



Next to him a slender black woman sat down, her hair covered by a white handwoven headscarf, beautifully adorned with light golden threads woven into the fine fabric. She addressed him in Arabic. He shrugged, too lazy to access Google Translation and she switched to English.

„You’re from Eritrea too?“

„What makes you think so?“

„You look Eritrean.“

Tom stared at her and looked at his hands, his arms. They were dark, brown. Strangely enough he had so far assumed that he was Caucasian with a taint, but she had a point. Was he from Eritrea?

„No, I am Italian, from Naples,” he answered eagerly to set the record straight,

„You’re from Eritrea?”

„Eritrea. Yes.”

„Which city?

„Eritrea. You?”

„Italy. Naples.”

„Do you have Swiss passport?”

Did he have a Swiss passport? Probably not.

„No sorry. I am not Swiss. Do you have a Swiss passport?”

„No, I don’t have Swiss passport. You have Swiss passport for me? Swiss passport good for me.”

She laughed out loud, teasing him. Her smile was bright and sunny, her eyes full of life, hope and a glimpse of joy. She was pulling at his briefcase as if she wanted to curl inside its space and hide.

Quickly, he opened his briefcase to show her that it was empty and that he didn’t have anything to give her.

„No, sorry, no passport for you,” he gave her a charming smile and shrugged again.



„What is this?“ She said.

„What?“

„Here.“

„Where?“

„Passport. Swiss passport. Here. Look.“ She got excited.

The woman, without asking permission, reached into his briefcase as if she was fishing for compliments and pulled in three red passports. She opened the first one and Tom Sarraga felt faint. Where did these passports come from? No —, he had never seen them before. *Wait a minute. What was going on here?*

„My picture. That is me. What does it say. Name? You read —“ She held the passports under his nose. He took the document into his hands and read out loud as told.

„Mehret Adonay.“

„That’s me. That’s my passport. What’s this one say?“ How excited she was. She had grabbed the second one and opened it too.

„Askalu Adonay,“ Tom read out loud.

„My daughter. That’s my daughter, and the last? What’s the last one say? Habte Adonay?“

She was really discomposed by now. No wonder. You wouldn’t find your own Swiss passport in a stranger’s briefcase every day, would you? Her face was beaming dangerously, and the glow of her cheeks began filling the tram from top to bottom eradicating all other thought and emotion. Tom took the last passport into his hands and read.

„Habte Adonay. Yes, you’re right.“ He really felt faint now. *What was going on here?*

„Geez —, my husband. My daughter. Geez —. All passports, all Swiss passports. Thank you. Thank you. You do miracle. Thank you, Mister. Thank you so much. You’re great.“

„No, I am not great, I’m Google,“ Google aka Tom Sarraga said modestly, not so sure what to make of all this. Was this a good thing? *What was happening?*

„Your Google?“ The woman snickered.

„My Google. You’re my Google. Sorry. That’s my stop. I must go. Thank you so much, so much.“ She got up and left the tram with the three passports in her hand.



Tom Sarraga took a deep breath. What had just happened? How did the passports get into his briefcase? He looked at the black Eritrean woman who had just got off the tram. What *onearth* had happened? He didn’t really have an explanation for the transaction. Was that what human interaction was like? That you always had ready what the person you met wanted? Was that why humans were torturing him with all these thousands and thousands and millions and millions and billions and billions search request? To give to a stranger in need? To give to their kin, their

friends, their children? He wasn't sure about this conclusion. It seemed the results were inconclusive like most results these days.

He looked out the window. The woman was still standing on the pavement. She held her head up proudly. What was she doing? Who were these men?

Why were the cops here? He saw how the woman was talking to two police officers and gesticulating wildly. One of them was holding the passports and the other one was looking at him intensely. Google's shoulders sagged.

What now? Not good. That was not good. If only the tram started moving, but it didn't. On the contrary, the tram remained rooted to the tracks, as if it was an ancient oak tree in a magic forest. Only, there was no magic only harsh realities. One of the police officers climbed agilely onto the tram and flashed his badge at him.

„Please come with me.“ Tom's features wizened, at once he could see the officer meant business, his zetetic mindset unfolding at the speed of light.

„Me? Why? What have I done?“

„You are under arrest,“ the officer shot at point-blank rage.

“I am?” This was as dizzying as it was bewildering.

“For trading false documents.”

„I didn't trade those passports. I gave them to her for free. I didn't get anything in return. I didn't trade them.“

And yet, — the officer looked at him askance as if they were possible enemies on different sides of the fence of the fortress that was Europe, a continent in desperate need of rejuvenation cure.

„Yes, but they are fake, and you've just admitted that you gave them to her.“

He pointed out the window at the woman who was now crying.

„You were trading false documents. Get up and come with me.“ The police officer had now grabbed him and was trying to shove him off the tram. Google gave in.

„Ok, ok, I will come with you. Will I need a lawyer?“

„We shall see. Come on, follow me.“

They got off the tram and Tom Sarraga’s heart was beating. Was that a normal course of action? Was he *gonna* be alright? Was this a distraction so he’d lower his guards, and they could attack him? Were they draining data now? He tried hard not to think of the blood-oxygen-level-dependent but was focusing on following the tiresome drama unfolding here so dynamically.

„These passports look as if someone had googled them online and then printed out.“

Tom nodded, then smiled — *that* explanation seemed acceptable enough.

“That’s likely,” he said without much ado.

They took that as a confession, and he was being arrested for trading false documents. What would Mother Google say? Would she be pleased with getting such extraordinary data? Nobody in their right mind arrested the platforms unless you were Queen Margrethe, a true vestal governed by *pontifex maximus* himself and used to playing with the sacred fire.

Then Tom wondered if Mother Google had set him up on purpose because he wasn’t following orders; because he was applying for school instead of going to work; because he had been disobedient to the great course of life predetermined by the mother of all data centres. She would know everything; she could set up

everything. He felt faint. Was she drawing data right now? His blood pressure ran low. Gosh, she was draining him. Like a leech. Blood-sucking leech she was.



Misericordia Hospital

“More pentobarbital? He is so restless.”

“I really don’t like his numbers,” Nurse Anna, head nurse of neurology at the Misericordia, looked worried despite the many years of experience and practice she had put into nursing during her life. Caring for another life was never routine, always a God given privilege, always a risk. It required full commitment, dedication, and self-sacrifice; qualities she had worked for hard, found fulfilling and worth cherishing and fighting for bravely, ever since her youth. However, nowadays, she thought them harder to pass on, foster or even

recognize in the young. In a post-Christian society nursing and caring for the sick and wounded had lost so much of its prestige and glamour. For many it held no longer true value nor meaning, nor rewards worth working for ceaselessly and without respite.

Opinions usually were swayed when they or their loved ones got sick and tired and needed a caregiver. But then that belated epiphany usually came down as a rain of blatant energy, it came down hard, to flood and destroy and take lives; not to heal. Anna looked up and sighed, the room was darkened, the blinds down to keep the sunlight rolling in. The day would be long.

“Look at his heart rate. Nearly 150.”

Pareena Padmanabhan, the junior nurse, gave her boss a strong, questioning look. At this stage she was not worried but rather pleased that Dr. Park had given her the assignment to help Nurse Anna care for Thomas Christopher Yann Myers. It was certainly an important case for the hospital but what mattered more to Pareena was that the patient was Kay’s father.

Only to herself was she admitting that since Kay had walked in earlier this week, she felt like living on a roller coaster. It was fun. It was torture, it was bliss, it was like a dream come true, — she hadn’t felt so alive for such a long time. Since she had laid eyes on Kay last, all these many years ago, she had ever so often been fantasizing about what could have been —. If she had been brazen enough to follow her heart. But, then — clearly, she hadn’t —. She wouldn’t ever be brave enough to eat alone in the hospital cafeteria without looking at her cell phone and that, in her own eyes, should not really be that big an achievement.

But she couldn’t think of this now, for today, the state of Pareena’s excitement rose by the minute. The patient’s family, Anastacia Myers, the patient’s wife, and Kay, the eldest son as well as the younger twins, Peter and Nina, must be here any minute. Usually, they

were to arrive between nine and ten and it was two thirty already. *Where were they? It would be unbearable if anything else happened to this family.*

“Again, sorry. Heart rate?” Pareena asked instead, ready to take notes on her tablet.

“Still skyrocketing. Above 150 now. Somebody is distracted — ” Nurse Anna said musingly. In general, Pareena didn’t mind taking responsibility, not when all doctors were engaged otherwise which often enough was the case. But Dr. Ha-rin Park had made it clear that for this case all responsibility lay with the American team. They were not to interfere too much. Problem was that the two American had left the room right after they had set up all their gear. What should Nurse Anna do when real and not remote action was required? Overstepping competences with her own staff was not such a big issue as it was done whenever required which was, well, *most of the time* —but overstep with an American company that could potentially sue you, and in the worst case the entire hospital, into bankruptcy was an entirely different story. Nurse Anna wished she could have talked more to the two Americans before they had disappeared on her. It was difficult to understand the use and functions of all the screens and wires and cables they had brought and installed on and beside the patient.

Pareena too, sensed that her superior was more anxious than usual.

“Where are they?”

She asked vehemently, verging on veritable impoliteness. Since the patient being Kay’s father, Pareena had felt strangely responsible for his well-being. Also, she had not quite understood what was going on, but she had grown more and more concerned when the American team had unpacked boxes and more boxes of tightly wrapped medical, electronical and technical equipment. All that plastic wrapping she had to dispose of. It was so bulky and wouldn’t fit into their regular bins. She had to go and see housekeeping about

how to get rid of all the plastic mess. The Americans had brought so much stuff that within no time the whole room was filled up with so many screens and tubes and headsets; stuff she didn't know, had never seen before and made it harder to tell what and where their very own equipment was: She could now play a ravishing hide and seek with the dripping bags and the oxygen meter as if she had nothing else to do. Once again, she looked at Kay's father with great concern. Whatever it was that they had put onto Thomas Christopher Yann Myers head, it didn't look good. *What was a mixed-reality headset anyway?*

"Shouldn't they oversee their very own experiment?" She asked.

"It is not an experiment. They call it treatment," Nurse Anna tried to calm her.

"It looks as if they are hijacking his brain."

"You think so?"

"Well, I surely I wouldn't exactly call this a treatment, would you?"

A little rattled, Pareena listened to herself speak up so sharply and asking such a bold and decisive question. To her great dismay its effect on her superior was minute: it only made Nurse Anna smile gently; not exactly the reaction Pareena had hoped for after getting thus engaged.

"Ok. Experiment," Nurse Anna admitted jovially, not without thinking twice that she wasn't quite sure herself what was being done here.

"Torture." Pareena challenged, combatting her the more fervently than before, hoping for a reaction that would at least acknowledge if not praise her *grand esprit* in naming such injustices.

"Come on. That's too harsh. You know this might be his only hope." Nurse Anna looked at her with concern. She had never heard her younger colleague use such strong language before. Anna guessed the reason why Pareena behaved rather out of character and

wished she could find a moment to speak to her in private. But so far, they had just been too busy.

“You must admit — Do you have any idea what they are —?”

Pareena stopped in the middle of the sentence. Anastacia Myers had just opened the door and Pareena had nearly bitten off her tongue. She quickly turned towards the window and stood there, motionless. But there was nothing to see, not on this side of the room: The beige curtains were drawn, the blinds were shading the room from the unbearable heat outside. She closed her eyes trying to control her breathing and steady her sweaty hands.

“Pareena? Are you ok?”

No, she was not ok, but what could she say? This morning hadn’t been too bad, but the morning before and the morning before. Someone had pressed a button to mute her, her lips were tightly sealed, her heart was beating out of rhythm and arrhythmic hearts were the hardest to listen to, leave alone to follow. Despite knowing that it was ridiculous not to turn around, she tuned into the beginning audio tracks behind her back; the sounds were rolling softly through the room like small glass marbles and fine sand in an hourglass.

Without turning around, she could only tell the basics: Thomas Christopher Yann Myer’s wife, Anastacia, was followed by Kay, their eldest son, and the twins, Peter and Nina.

“Ms. Myers,” Nurse Anna gave the patient’s wife a benevolent smile as she sat down next to the hospital bed. She looked exhausted already and only reluctantly took off her sunglasses.

“How is he?”

Anastacia Myers asked eagerly. She had dark rings under her eyes and looked as if she hadn’t slept nor properly eaten for days. Both was probably true in her case and not wearing any make up or lipstick only made it clearer that she was under so much strain and

pressure. She looked at her husband's face and at the singular piece of three-dimensionally formed laminated dark glass which was held by an aluminum alloy frame that curved to wrap his head. She could no longer see his eyes nor his eyelids or his eyebrows. His vision was entirely replaced by that thing sitting on his head — a big black raven pecking his eyes out — wiring him into the system. The digital crown of thorns and threams and thlogs fit him well.

"His heart rate has been up, but now he seems to be doing ok, given the circumstances. You should really ask the Americans if you want to know more." Nurse Anna was trying to point her in the right direction.

"Where are they anyway?"

"I am sorry Ms. Myers, I really don't know exactly. They set up all the equipment right after lunch and then they left for their office upstairs. And then —."

"Is this the thlog?" Anastacia had started walking towards one of the screens.

"I beg your pardon, Ms Myers?"

"The thlog. I think it is on this screen? Actually, no,— wait. I think that's the thream. See it says Nord Thream, here —." She was pointing at one of the many screens the Americans had set up and was looking at it from up close. It was one of the two screens where text continuously appeared, but Nurse Anna hadn't paid too much attention, she hadn't had time to read so much text, she had been too busy keeping the patient alive.

"I am very sorry Ms. Myers, I couldn't say. Pareena? Do you know?"

There was no answer.

"Pareena?"

Pareena finally turned around — why did she look so pale on such a hot summer's day? — Pareena had raised her chin, and finally her eyes met with Kay's. She felt his gaze fall

on her, then fall more tenderly, like sweet spring rain brings life to barren lands. Heaven's floodgates opened and tearing down came a torrential deluge of biblical dimensions. She was the desert; he was the thunderstorm. It was too late she hadn't closed the gates; she hadn't shut him out. And now she couldn't, not anymore. Too late. Her face, her eyes, her trembling body; they all betrayed her, and to him. And Kay was a reader, he read in her like in an open book, and it seemed he *so much* liked the story. He gave her a minute smile that grew by the sundial's largest, happiest steps. His eyes wandered from her long dark glossy hair along her slender body, tightly packed into her white uniform, down to her feet that stuck in white socks and spotless white sneakers. She couldn't help but realize that she was standing before him dressed in bridal, innocent, pure white when white really meant so much else.

All that attention. All that heat. All that lingering tenderness. She nearly fainted. And then — All she could do was silently shake her head. She parted her lips and there was a soft susurrus that could have stemmed from her attempt at transforming mere sound into coherent speech or her heart beating off rhythm. But like the soft rustle of the wind, the moment passed and was lost in transfusion. Pareena had kept silent, still like a little mouse. She shot a pleading look at the head nurse: Why did nurse Anna have to keep calling her by her name? But it was too late now. He had indeed recognized her.

"Pareena?"

Kay asked incredulously and she couldn't help but notice the vibrant voice she knew so well, loved so much and — how surprised and pleased and confused and relieved and — happy — he sounded saying all but her name out loud. Pareena. And how her name rang out. As if the world itself was full of wonders and truth and joy and tremor and all that was good and beautiful, as if —. When it was —, well — when it was clearly, —clearly —not.

He had said her name, he now knew her. There was no going back—. She shuddered.

And when he finally fully smiled at her, she had already left the room.

Thomas Christopher Yann Myers

Thlog 07/03/23, 16:18:29-16:19:06

Hooray. Hooray. The voices. Why can I hear their velvet, their cord? I cannot see. Cannot see what is happening. Where am I? Where is this? Who is this? Why are there no borders? My borders. No borders. So much pain. Pain. Only pain. *Putin, quelle agonie.* What agony. Then silence. Then shells. The tanks. The noise is deafening. The silence is deafening. Where has she gone? I am in such pain. And all is turning, all is spinning. When we want to return to this planet can we take another spaceship? The shuttle? Can we take the shuttle bus? I want to ride in a tank. I am so sorry. Please don't go. I love you. I am so sorry. I am so sorry. I don't like kebab. Did I say that? I don't really *don't* like kebab. Do I like it now? The ice

cold air? The winter, the fire? I like the fire. The fire. I am burning. I am so cold.
Please wait. Don't go. I am so scared.

When I should be a man of saintly spirit and such phantasmal, bodily presence, drinking the golden oil that cures all maladies. When embellishments and sea tramps were the same. Then – the innocent stowaways of the digital age, where are they hiding? Which ships have they sunk with their chary elegance, their subtle dreams yet to come true in full. Where is verisimilitude's home? Where are the streets of unpardonable solecism, a pass-key to all cheerful and loquacious verses of yonder lore? Can you see the babel of bewildered men, heavy and rank, their mouths full of brimstone when a little lamp throws a sudden flare on the ominous, bloody scene nobody wants to witness.

How? How can we ever get off a boat so badly ballasted as ours when the only reflection ever to be had in the stormy waters was ours. Our faces, our dreams, our terrible wars.

They are coming for the kill. They are coming to get me. They are coming to know. Know me. You do?

You do know what it means to be calibrated in full? When it all comes to its final and irreversible end?

You do, don't you?

Nord Thream

„Everything alright?“

The police officer asked. Tom nodded insecurely. Why would he not be alright?

„You look pale.“

He probably did. He did feel rather faint. Living a human life took up so much energy. Tom got into the police car and waited patiently for everyone else to get in. Reading the police's website, he already knew where they were going, square of the

orphans, *Waisenhausplatz 21*, in Bern. It wasn't far from here, My Maps said arrival time was in 07:36 minutes.

Once they got there, he was processed right away.

„Name?“

„Tom Sarraga Google“

„Is Google your last name?“

„Yes.“

„And Sarraga?“

„Also last name?“

„Two last names?“

„Jaa.“

He said in German, stretching out the vowel as if a brand new Apollo Energy Gum was knocking out Bazooka Joe's other eye right between Tom's teeth.

“Yes, two last names. Is that a problem?”

„No, not a problem.“ The officer looked at the screen and then continued sternly while he was still typing, using three fingers of each hand only. What a great individual typing pattern Google thought.

„Tell us what happened.“

„Ok.“

Tom remained silent. What had happened? The officer impatiently looked up.

„You can start.“

„Ok.“

Tom felt uneasy. What exactly was expected from him? He didn't know.

„So?“

No answers came up. Nothing on the feed. He would have to try explaining by himself. *Not* such a good idea — he knew it right from the start when he opened his mouth.

„I have just been accepted into Grammar School and was on my way home. That was when I met that woman. From Eritrea. I don't really know her, I've literally just met her.“

He stopped, having no idea how to continue. Still nothing on the feed. Where was mother Google when you needed her most?

„You remember her name?“

“Mother Google? Her name is just “Mother Google.”

“I beg your pardon?“ The officer's face had turned into a question mark.

“No, the woman. Right, you mean the woman? I saw it on the passport. It was something like Adonai. Meret?“

„Yes, that is correct.

„I don't know her, she just sat down next to me.“

„And then?“

„Well, we talked —“

„What did you talk about?“

The officer skipped in without waiting for Tom to finish the sentence.

„Nothing much, she thought I was from Eritrea. But I am not. I am Italian, Naples. Napoli.“

„Napoli? Please proceed.“ The officer listened up. It seemed this case had suddenly got more interesting as if Tom had involuntarily scored a goal in a match he was bound to lose from the start.

„She asked me for Swiss passports and then, well — I simply produced the passports. For her, her husband and her daughter.“

Tom fell silent again, he didn't know how to go on. There really wasn't much else to say.

„Where did you get the passports from?“

„My briefcase,“ Tom said quickly and rather truthfully. Where else did the officer think he would get them from? *I mean — seriously?*

The officer looked up and stared directly into Tom's eyes. It was an odd and rather uncomfortable moment and Tom couldn't read his face. Why was he staring at him like this?

„Your briefcase? How come?“

„People ask me things and then these things sit in my bag. There was — he stopped himself. No, he didn't want to go into this. Definitely no — . He might get the look again. That weird look people gave him when he — for whatever reason, he couldn't even begin to fathom — was so way out of line.

„What kind of things do these people ask of you? Illegal documents? Drugs? Weapons?“

The officer looked even sterner than before, and Tom was rather shocked. Drugs? Weapons? Why would he think that? He got it all wrong.

„No, no. Chameleons, passports. That's it so far. Only chameleons and passports. No one has asked for anything else — no drugs, no weapons.“ Tom alias Google answered as earnestly and as veraciously as he could. Couldn't the officer see that he did try to reply to all questions as truthfully as possible. Tom even waved a faint smile at the officer. What now?

„Chameleons? Have you said chameleons? By the look on the officer’s face, Google could tell right away that he shouldn’t have shared that. He tried to correct his mistake by explaining as quickly as possible.

„Yes Sir, I was asked for the Smith’s dwarf chameleon also called the Elandsberg dwarf chameleon or *Bradypodion taeniabronchum* in Latin, well I was asked about active camouflage. So, I wasn’t directly asked — If you know what I mean.

The officer had stopped typing and picked up the phone. Did he look bored?

„Right, let us not waste my time here,” he mumbled more to himself than to Tom.

„You will be transferred,” then he paused looking at Tom Sarraga alias Google less stern but with more compassion and some understanding. Understanding of what, Tom wondered. What was there to understand? Nothing made sense right now.

„There are specialists who can help you. Please, don’t worry — .”

Then, as if having second thoughts after all, he put the phone down.

„Just for curiosity’s sake. I could ask you anything and you’d give it to me?”

„I guess,” Google said cautiously not really aware of the officer’s intentions.

„Can I get 10’000, not let’s say a 100’000 Swiss Francs”? The officer challenged him.

„And can I get it now. Now.”

Tom nodded. He guessed that wouldn’t be too hard for mother Google. She knew what Swiss currency looked like, hopefully she’d print on better paper this time.

„Now.“

„I guess, let's see. You should have asked me to heal your wife's cancer.

Maybe that would have worked too. I haven't been asked to heal people yet. Maybe I could perform miracles. Who knows?“ He snickered silently.

„Cancer? How do you —“ He looked at Tom aghast.

„T4, inflammatory breast cancer, — Ok. Never mind. As I have just said, I don't know about healing cancer. But money — Maybe. Let's see.“

Tom gingerly opened his briefcase and took a stack of 1000 bills, then another one, then another one. With trembling fingers, he placed the money neatly in front of himself on the white table.

„Holy Cow.“

The police officer gasped when Tom had finished counting the bills at top speed. He was so fast; the officer couldn't keep up with him by any kind of standard. When Tom was done, the poor guy picked up the phone to call his superior.

„Jonathan, come here. The dude you brought in has just produced 100'000 Swiss Francs — Yes, the bag was searched when he came in — Yes, then he was clean. I have no idea how he got — Yes. Right.“

The officer was listening intently while looking at Tom as if he was an alien from a planet unheard.

„No, empty. I said, they *did* search him when he came in — Yes, ok. We are waiting.“

The officer nodded once or twice more and then hang up the phone and looked incredulously at the money.

„Let's wait till my boss arrives.“

„Sure,“ Tom said, „let’s –.“

He tried to muster up an innocent smile, then folded his arms, not quite so certain what to do next or where to put his hands. Still nothing on the feed. This was really all on him; and somehow, for some wonderous, mysterious reason he did not understand nor fully comprehend, he secretly began enjoying himself.



When Chief Commander Jonathan Wilder arrived, the money was still sitting adroitly on the officer’s table. Tom couldn’t help himself when looking at Wilder. The numbers came up immediately and he couldn’t but blurt them out loud.

„Your chance of suffering from a depression is 67%. Your chance for getting a divorce in the next 3.4 years is 89.87 % Wow. That’s the highest I have seen so far. Sorry, man. Or congratulations for coming first. Whatever you prefer.“

Wilder raised his eyebrows.

“Your name?”

„Ok. Ok. You didn’t ask me for that. Sorry. I just thought you may want to know anyway,“ Tom said apologetically.

“Your name?”

“Well, I should have told your colleague from the beginning. I am Google and I think Mother Google has just added a new feature which enables me to give you your real-life search requests in real life, *onearth* so to say and not *online*.”

It made so much sense. To Tom — but even he could tell that he two officers could not follow. Why didn't they get it? It was unbearable how slow they were. *Come on, guys. Not-that-hard-to-understand.* He tried again.

„Don't you get it. As opposed to an *online* answers to an *online* request. The true benefits of the Internet of Things. The IoT. You get your answers *onearth*. *Onearth.*“ Tom continued explaining. *In real matter not in real time*, but he didn't say that. It would have been too much for them to understand.

“It makes sense to me.” He said sullenly, but again, there was silence.

„If that's really so, can I have a 1963 Ferrari GTO,“ Jonathan called out sarcastically without in the slightest considering any of the consequences this wish might cause.

„Give me a Lamborghini Urus,“ the other officer followed suit, equally eager to prove his dark and sinister sense of humour to his brain-dead colleague, Tom thought.

„Wow. Ok. — I am not sure that is a good idea. I don't think they would fit into my —“

Tom had wanted to say *briefcase* when the two cars, the Ferrari was a millisecond faster than the Lambo, miraculously came crashing down into the small office. The two sports cars were horribly squeezed into each other; the tires of the Ferrari GTO sat enthroned on the officer's desk on the front while the rear part rested rather firmly on the freshly polished wooden oak floor towards the back of the office. The Lamborghini Ursus balanced right on top of the Ferrari, damaging and scratching it badly, while it was precariously holding its own equilibrium for just a tiny moment. Then the Lambo was no longer in limbo and the car began sliding off

the Ferrari's roof. When bursting down onto the antique Herringbone parquet — for obvious reasons — there wasn't enough room for it. It pushed the Ferrari forward, spinning its wheels riven with glamour and status, so its full weight smashed out the wall to the adjacent office partly, leaving a large hole. The Lamborghini came to a standstill with its bonnet sitting in the next office. More than one brick came tumbling down, as if an earthquake had found its way — along the large, deep and opening European rifts — to the Swiss capital; a very unlikely event even the Swiss wouldn't be prepared for.

It was a beautiful car, glossy surface, colour was Black Rage. Tom could tell immediately. Black Rage. Badly scratched now. But still beautiful. Never mind the scratches. Lambo was Lambo.

They could now all see through the wall and behold the secretary who had been on the telephone when all this happened. She was horrified, then — she turned an unhealthy white with a touch of lemon, Amalfi yellow. Then — she started screaming. Screaming loud. Parts of the ceiling were beginning to crumble down, scrambling down, not from her screaming though, she was after all no Madama Butterfly, but from the massive impact the sudden appearance of the two cars had worked on the building. The building was groaning and moaning and grunting and whining and sighing. The woman was still screaming. So much noise, more decibels than the car crash had ever made. Tom covered his ears with his hands.

„Holy Shit.“

Jonathan Chief Commander Wilder said.

„Oh my God.“

The officer who had been questioning Google said.

„I’ve told you.“

Google alias Tom Sarraga said, trying not to sound too reproachfully.

„That was not a good idea. You should have asked for something else, something smaller, maybe your wife – I mean. Just trying to be helpful and of service,“ he added apologetically. The two cars blocked the way to the door where the two officers were standing, both thunderstruck and mute. Oh well – . Not *his* problem. It behooved him to go.



Time to leave indeed. As the office was at ground level and the windows were not sealed, Tom took the easy way out. He opened the window, clumsily climbed out and started running until he got to the next tram stop. From the Bärenplatz he took tram Nr. 8. to Brünnen Westside as usual. This time he didn’t sit down and stood all by himself by the window. When he was finally at home, he locked the door at once. What a day. His heart was beating wildly. What was happening? Nothing went as planned. All had gone astray.



“The spatial videos are amazing. I mean how the two cars came crashing down. The Lambo. I mean—” Arvi took off the mixed reality headset with which he had been following Thomas Christopher Yann Myer’s thream in realtime. He felt uneasy despite the private air-conditioned room the Misericordia had provided them with, one floor above room 101 where Patient Zero was still fighting for his life, simmering lusciously in his own sap until big technology would —or would not— bring him back to life.

“Yes, that was totally wild. Did you expect that to happen?” José rubbed his ears, eyes wide open. He still found it uncomfortable to wear the Knit Band despite its soft cushioning, its state-of-the-art breathability and its immense ability to stretch. He felt sweaty.

“Well, I know we had this programmed as one of the options of where the storyline could go. But, frankly—, I didn’t think it would work that well.”

He really should have said that their nasty little *dea ex machina* was rather working *too well*. Nord Thream was only supposed to be helping calibrate the patient and from what he had just seen it was certainly doing more than that — much more.

“What amazes me most is how well the brain-computer interface works. He can really move the story on with his very own thoughts. I mean he got out of that police station and found his way back home. Awesome.”

“Well, I guess, Patient Zero is a genius; even when he is in a coma.”

Arvi tried to keep his voice level, trying to hide the dismal flatness that was creeping into his words. There were cameras in the room analysing their exact workflow and he didn’t want to appear too sceptical or critical now that Application Pandora was such a success. But it could well be that the torch he had been carrying and nurturing for so long could now set on fire the course of Nature and kindle so great a matter. It really worked. He felt strangely off-balance and disoriented by the reality check they had just experienced. How could it be that instead of celebrating one of Neuro Industries’ greatest successes he suddenly felt paralysed and numb? Had he secretly hoped this wouldn’t work?

“I wish we’d know more about how exactly he does move the storyline on. The thlog isn’t really that much help. He seems to be aware we are tracing him. We have his thoughts, but can we see behind them? Why is he thinking what he is thinking? Is he only thinking what he wants us to hear? Is he hiding what he thinks we shouldn’t hear? And what are his motives? I wonder if there is another layer hidden deeper within that we cannot extract. The narrative to the narrative so to say.”

“You guess?”

“Well, his thoughts. They are so incoherent; Virginia Woolf’s stream of consciousness makes more sense than that.”

“You have read Virginia Woolf?” José asked truly amazed.

“Absolutely hated it, but it was a must to get the PhD in Real-time Thought Engineering at MIT.”

“You are joking.”

“No, seriously, I do hate her books, it’s too close to what I do at work. We’ll have to analyse the thlog in detail. But I guess the guys in the valley are on it as we’re speaking. They can do that remotely, right?”

“I guess — “

Arvi interrupted him, suddenly speaking to a larger audience.

“Even as we follow the threams from up here. Don’t you think this is simply amazing.” Then Arvi glanced at the camera which was looking down on them from where they had installed it earlier on. Documentation of their workflow was of paramount importance.

“We should have his thoughts displayed in the patient’s room for all to see.” Arvi pathetically claimed.

“Na-h, whe shouldn’t. The spatial videos would totally freak them out. Watching someone’s edited real-time Video-thoughts is not for everyone,” José countered lamely, he sensed that Arvi was winning this match already. His performance was and had always been better. And as if to confirm his win Arvi went on.

“You mean where you can see in real time how we can twist visual panoramas and location and rooms and so wrap whatever storyline around your dreams and hopes and memories, spinning them centrifugally like hot sugar—”

“— into cotton candy? I don’t know. Giving the staff the thought blog as a video-to text description is enough for the time being. I don’t think they’d fully understand anyway.”

“I don’t think they’d have time to read it at all. From what I have seen they are only ever checking their own monitors.”

“Well, I guess they are super-busy.”

“And we really don’t have to freak them out completely at this stage. Before we roll this out globally, we must train the doctors more carefully.”

“Yes, there are lessons to learn from the Sacklers.”

“I guess more than one.”

“That is why I said, lessons. With an s. —Nevertheless, we must give them something to work with. You think the thlog is enough to keep Dr. Park happy?” Arvi asked and for once he seemed genuinely interested in José’s answer.

“Well, she sure isn’t happy anyway. I am not even convinced they really want to understand what thlogging is.” José answered and then added laconically,

“As, I said they are so busy. If we add to their workload, it must somehow pay-off or the costs are too high to even bother.”

“Like everywhere. But — I mean — the spatial audio. Wow. When the Lambo came crashing down. Do you think they intensified the sounds to make it sound more Hollywood-like?”

“Could well be. It is —” José couldn’t finish the sentence.

“I think James Morgue’s team is responsible for that. You know what a perfectionist he is. Hi James! Doing a fantastic job out there! Awesome. Audio Team! Simply awesome! You really bury us!”

Arvi was now waving into the camera like a madman and giving them two thumbs up, not even sure they were watching now, but convinced they and the rest of the world would be watching at some stage.

“You are overdoing it,” José mouthed silently turning his back deliberately to the camera.

“What?”

Arvi mouthed back, shrugging innocently. He gave José a broad smile, then patted his right shoulder to complete his perfect talk show. This video they were starring in right now; it would become legendary; it would be shared on all the networks, on all the channels. Once Neuro Industries would proudly edit, then release it, millions and millions will want to watch it. The first day, the first time Neuro Industries’ application Pandora was working in the wild; legendary, always legendary. A miraculous med app to heal the world. From all diseases — I mean you’d have to give them something, so Arvi continued his pompous tirade of praise and penance and subterfuge.

“What I find absolutely stunning is how the thream takes you beyond the dimensions of the room. From this —” He was going to start another elaborately constructed sentence for a global audience but didn’t get very far. José had enough of his bragging and thought it was time for an amoeba defense.

“You know that’s exactly what Lisa hated about you.”

Arvi contracted the fine skin right above his nose bone quite involuntarily; little wrinkles began to appear all over his face. It wouldn’t look good on camera, quickly he turned away. He couldn’t believe José had just said that when they both knew that their workflow was public.

“Jimi says it too.” Arvi added, going for a full banana cut.

“What do they say?” Arvi shouted from the baseline.

“That —.”

“That what?” He screamed cutting towards the basket.

“That—”

But there was a blindside screen set directly behind José where he could not see but only hear, Arvi’s phone rang and cut José off more efficiently than an Amtrak player going full speed in the 48th minute of an endless NBA game.

“Sorry, José, this is my dad calling. I will have to take this,” he said snidely.

“Sure. Go ahead.”

“Dad?”

Arvi turned away from the camera.

“Dad? I cannot hear you.”

“Maybe you should leave the building. There’s barely any net in here.” José volunteered, but Arvi ignored him.

“Dad? You’re there?”

“Arvi?” José said on a more conciliatory note.

“What?” Arvi barked at him.

“Get out. There is no net here.”

Arvi bowed to the camera, as all great actors do after the last curtain calls. When he left the room and closed the door, he breathed in slowly as the staircase emanated a strange unheard case full of silence.

Quickly he hurried down the steps, repressing a nasty cough. He really needed some water. *Who was calling from this number? Was his father still alive?*

Nord Thream

Two days later Tom still hadn't left the apartment. When the bell rang in the late afternoon, at first, he didn't even want to open the door. But then the ringing wouldn't stop. He took a deep breath, got up, walked to through the hallway and opened the cheap medium density fibreboard door. Who was she? In front of him stood a slim woman, about 30 years old, long brown hair, thick eyebrows, unplucked he noticed at once, even features, great dimples, full lips and eyes that could see right through you. Would she see at once he was Google? She wore a long soft, silken dress that showed off her waistline. It reached all the way down to her ankles displaying an exotic design of big orange and red flowers: Heliconia, the lobster's claws. And were these cockatoos?

Her feet were naked, her toenails a weird shade of glitzy blue. Slowly, he looked up from her toes and looked her in the eye. Amazing blue eyes she had. Blue

like the sea, blue like the mockingbird, blue like the sunflower. Who was she?

Nothing came up on the Mother Board. This one was on him.

„Oh, Hi — I am Carola,“ she introduced herself, „— your neighbour.“

She waved with one naked arm to her door across the hall where her very own cheap medium density fibreboard door was sitting in the exact same spot as his, symmetrically across the hallway. Tom couldn't help but notice that they were the exact same type. The doors were — .

„Hi, my name is Tom, pleased to meet you. Your chance of suffering from a depression in the next 5.3 years is 34.00896%. That's quite good. Wow. Congratulations.“ Tom stretched out both his hands as he had seen people do when congratulating someone.

„Right.“

Carola said amusedly, making a strange gargling sound. And why was she smiling? Was this funny again? Or was she being strangled as well? No, that couldn't be. Tom didn't think she was being strangled. Negative. Absolutely negative.

„Why are you saying “right”? How would *you* know?“

He asked politely with a sense of wonder. Tom was dumbfounded. Carola was now laughing at him and raising her eyebrows. Was she flirting with him? Tom was utterly confused trying to keep his bearings. They had run programs to teach him how to flirt and he knew there were a couple of extra extensions packed up and hidden somewhere up front. Up back? Up somewhere? Access them now? Access them how? Restart? Too slow. She had already moved on. Life was so fast, so tiring.

„I have friends over for dinner and I’ve run out of eggs. You wouldn’t have a couple of eggs, would you?” She snorted out finding it hard to keep a straight face. Somehow all this was very funny to her. Did he have eggs? Not that he knew of.

„If you ask me like that I can check in my briefcase,” Tom said politely, ready to serve at her will.

She laughed out so loud her voice reverberated in the hallway, bubbling in every corner of the staircase until it was dripping off from the dark, dirty ceiling like cane molasses.

„Your briefcase? You’re being funny. Why not try the oven or the toilet? Can I come in for a sec? Tom? Neighbour.” She stepped towards him and he could smell her perfume. Musky, sweet, ambergris.

Tom looked at her, he was confused. Why the toilet? She was making fun of him, wasn’t she? Why was she making fun of him? Dutifully, he opened his briefcase. It was always better to check properly than to be sorry afterwards.

„Sorry, no eggs,” he said.

Why were there no eggs in his briefcase? He didn’t understand.

„No eggs in your briefcase, that’s too bad. You are kind of sweet,” Carola said, her laughter rolling out softly like the ocean’s waves on a sunny day.

„Maybe it was the way you phrased the question.”

„How did I phrase the question?”

„You wouldn’t have eggs, would you? You were kind of assuming I didn’t have eggs. You didn’t really ask me properly. Maybe you should try again. Ask again. Ask properly.”

„If you had eggs?”

„Yes.“

„That’s weird. No, sorry. I’m not going to do this. Especially not asking for a couple of them.“ She laughed again, a little less confident this time.

„I think, the briefcase only works when addressed properly,“ he tried explaining.

„Ok. Ok. Before this gets any weirder. Shall we try the fridge? Asking the briefcase might not be the best idea.“ She said with confidence, taking charge.

„The fridge. Sure. — You can ask the fridge. Anytime. No problem.“

She raised one of her enormous no-beauty-duty eyebrows and followed him into the kitchen.

„Wow, what is that? That must have cost a fortune. Was that already in your apartment? I haven’t got one like this.“

„No, Mother Google has ordered it for me.“

„Mother Google? That is a nice way of calling *her*. Are you an ecofeminist?“

„I am not sure,“ Tom said hesitatingly, accessing Britannica at once to understand what ecofeminism was. It sounded rather complicated although he could read all the hyperlinks simultaneously, he wasn’t altogether sure he’d understand.

“You can now ask the fridge,“ Tom said instead.

„Ok. Let’s ask it. What’s *her* name?“ Carola was giggling as if she was having the time of her life. For some reason all this was very funny for her.

„Does it need a name? Just call it fridge.“

Tom said trying not to show that he was rather offended by now. Didn’t this woman know that fridges had no names beside the designation and energy label and

the production number which were not, even by human standards, considered names?

„Ok, Oh Mighty Mamma Fridge. I need eggs, three of them. Got any?“ She closed her eyes as if she was meditating.

“Can I open it now? Are you sure she is ok with that? Don’t we have to ask her first to look into her belly and abort the eggs.“ She winked at him knowingly and then Carola approached the huge fridge and opened it. It was empty.

„Empty? That big? Nothing in your fridge?“

She looked at him in wonder.

„Sorry. I haven’t really eaten properly for some days. I only ever print what I need. I’ve had some trouble —.“

„I am sorry to hear that. Wanna tell me what kind of troubles you had? That’s what neighbours are for.“

She closed the fridge again and turned around to him.

„With the police. I’ve had troubles with the police.“

Tom Sarraga alias Google said half-heartedly, „and with finding the right shellymeal.“

„Shellymeal?“

„To print stuff. Stuff to eat. You cannot manifest eggs by meditating, you must feed the converter. With shellymeal. To get anything. — Eggs, beans, milk. But really, it’s ok.“

„You said you had problems with the police. What happened? Were you robbed? Briefcase stolen?“

„No, I gave three false Swiss passports to an Eritrean woman.“

„You did what?“

This time Carola raised both her big thick brown eyebrows, and she raised them up high. Also, she had stopped laughing.

„I didn't mean to give her false documents. I thought they were for real.“

„Are you trading false documents?“ Carola asked curiously.

„No, no, I am not. You're getting the wrong idea here. I am just. She asked for it and then — They were in my briefcase. I assume Mother Google provided them. “

„Could you provide more?“ Carola asked keenly. Tom remained silent.

„Could your Mother Google, whoever she is, provide more?“

Tom shrugged.

„Not really, they weren't very good anyway. The officers said they looked as if someone had printed them from a template on the internet. They could see at once they were fake.“

„Can you get better quality?“ Now, she was really curious.

„No, not really, but your eggs should be ready by now.“

Carola looked at him confusedly. *Eggs? Ready?*

„What do you mean?“

„I mean they should be ready by now. Eggs don't take that long to print.“

„Please don't be one of these weirdos —, you're not going to take off your pants now, are you?“

„Why would you think that? “

Tom Sarraga was completely shocked. Why would he take his pants off? And why had she stopped laughing? She looked shocked? Or disappointed? Or confused?

He didn't really get it. Emotions were still hard to guess correctly. Hopefully that update was ready any time soon.

„Of course I will not take off my pants. I mean – Please, just open the fridge. Trust me.“

She gave him a look he couldn't read, but then Carola opened the fridge guardedly and looked inside.

„Three eggs. Oh my God.“

She reached for them and held them carefully in her left palm. Then she began stroking them gently with her fingertips.

“Mighty Mamma Fridge has just hatched three cute, little eggings. That's incredible.”

„Well, it was me. I had them printed for you,” Google alias Tom Sarraga smiled at her proudly.

„And you're who? Google?“

„Alive and speaking. I am Google.“ Tom bowed to her.

Carola couldn't stop laughing.

„You are really so funny. Do you want to come over and meet my friends tonight? They'd love to meet you.“

„Yes, sure, why not?“

„Great, let's say 6.30, ok? And thanks for the eggs. “

„You're welcome.“

Google said and he felt his heart beat faster. She was beautiful. His limbs were moving and stretching and stirring. It felt nice.



When it was 18:29 and 7 seconds and two thirds, Google, alias Tom Sarraga left his apartment and walked across the hallway to the cheap medium density fibreboard entrance door opposite. Mother Google somehow had prepared him for social events, but he was not sure he was quite ready yet. A dinner party. What would it be like? Was it normal that humans laughed so much? What he said seemed to make people smile, snicker or simply laugh out loud. He'd need more data to assess whether that was a good thing. He'd need more data so he could control them laughing.

It said Carola Rocket on the name tag. Before he rang the bell, he searched but didn't find her name come up on the Mother Board. Mother Google suggested Carola Rackete instead, German ship captain who had picked off 53 refugees off the Libyan coast and run them on her ship, the Sea Watch 3 into Lampedusa harbour , without permission of the Italian authorities. That was on the 29th of June 2019, same day the NASA's Associate Administrator for the Science Mission Directorate spoke at the Kursaal, same day he was trying to get a job. And failed so greatly. The day of the chameleons. Wikipedia said it was *la Capitana* against *il Capitano*. *Il Capitano* said she had committed an act of war, *la Capitana* said it was an act of civil disobedience. What did humans do if there was disagreement? He would have to find out. Later. Find out later. Now — the dinner party. He rang the bell.

Carola hugged him when he stepped into her private space and kissed him three times; left cheek, right cheek, left cheek, lips into the air. It was more as if she was rubbing her cheeks to his face than proper kissing. He had seen the Swiss do it, but he felt awkward as if he needed reprogramming. Involuntarily his lips brushed her cheek, and she smiled at his clumsiness. He felt his body move. It was awkward. Everything was awkward these days.



Thomas Christopher Yann Myers

Thlog 07/03/23, 20:49:33-20:50:02

The concrete is hard. It is still so cold. Am I leaning against cotton candy? Why is my head resting so softly, when the rest of my body is hurting so awfully? My eyes follow the

letter, my nose and my ears follow it too. Everything within me is thinking of a scarlet “A”. I follow the line from the bottom up to the highest peak, then I am dropping down to the right. Falling. The right. The left. Aha. M—mmh. To the left. To the left. Then my eyes jump up and I am thinking of the line in the middle. I must not think of the algorithm. I must not think of how natural language can be decoded separately from multiple cortical networks in both hemispheres. No, I must not. I am not a genius. I am not. Am I still here? Is that really me? I can feel my stomach, my knees, I can sense my languid breathing. I can feel my lungs filling with cold, freezing, chilly oxygen. What will they do to me? I can feel them now. I can hear them now. Their voices so loud. So close. They have reached the door. They want in. I won’t let them in, won’t let them. I can feel the pain. I can bear the pain. I am strong. I will not break. Not break. I can think clearly now. Now I can, but later — later no. And before, before, no — What is happening to me? What is deepening to me?

Language, love of my life, don’t leave me. Not now. Stop this. Stop my head from dissolving into all this softness, all this plasticity. Keep me sentient. Augur well, the good days. Where are the good days? A cornucopia of delights when time elapses and heinously reiterates what is to come. Musty. Crummy, a measly something, giving me the runaround. Get into a ludicrous rut. That is what this is. And the searing pain. Pain. Reeling off across the cliff, my hair spidering in the wind. Stop them from extracting what they want. Stop them. Oh no, here it comes. Nord Thream. Again. Again. Why would nobody, nobody help?

How much longer will it take?

My brain burnished by their doing, taunting what I am.

Reticence my mantra, my crescendo.

This position has a corollary. It would be so facile — When, no —. It isn’t.

How much longer can I play along?

I am no contender in no game they play — where all the doors are parred, and all sorts of odds and ends keep dropping and dripping into my brandished, distorted consciousness.

His funeral was full to the rafters and then she smiled resignedly, so full of contrariness when really, really — she didn't give a toss, did she? Is this you Anastacia? Is this your kvetching, litigious voice flaunting all your littleness, asking me to make some random, invalid riposte just before dawn? I love you, loved you, but now — I cannot hear, cannot see you. Where are you? Wife? Where are you? Are these the distant honks and whoops of traffic?

I am knackered, I am scared stiff of their misology, their idea to extirpate my pettifogging thoughts, me — a farceur. When — really, I am not. So ugsome to live within the orbit of their predetermined boîte. I feel melancholy. I feel disconsolate and then I do remember the tints of light in her brown hair. In sooth, I know not what is churning me so greatly when no — I can no longer speak of my own accord.

My own accord. I do. I will. Speak of my own accord when now I am up to my eyeballs in your inglenook. So hot the fire. So hot. Dulcify the roasting with your ravenous maw of perfect control and execute a schuss so we all know what we are in for. Innards. The cutting edge. *Schatzi*, is that you? Inspiring such reverence and admiration. For all that toothsome caveat you do not observe.

That thingamajig, that whatchamacallits you cannot name. No more. But I can. I will. What an enormous piece of claptrap.

Ta-dah! Just an enormous load of claptrap, what an enormous load of claptrap this calibration really is.

How can anyone ever calibrate anything that is human? What a horny hoax.

Nord Thream

„Hey, you’re here. That is great. Come and meet everyone.“

Carola gave Tom her biggest smile as she asked him in.

„Your friends are here already? You said 18:30 and I am 3 seconds early.“

Carola raised her eyebrow at this and Tom wondered if he had said something wrong. But then she was smiling, and the moment had passed.

„Yes, some came early to help. With the food.“

Two young men stood around her kitchen table and were chopping up vegetables. Fresh, long green onion leaves were already sizzling in a large Teflon frying pan.

„Hey, everyone, listen up. This is Google.“ For a moment there was silence.

Why did nobody speak?

„Hi, I am Baidu,“ the young guy stretched out his hand. He was smiling.

„Yandex,“ the other one said.

Tom Sarraga looked at the two men, aghast.

„You are? Really?“

He was shaking Baidu’s hand for quite a moment, then he turned to Yandex.

„What a pleasure to meet you. That is so great. I didn't know the Russians and the Chinese were so —"

Both started laughing so hard, they couldn't stop. Tom looked bewildered.

„Oh please don't listen to them. They're such idiots. They're only teasing you. Pretending to be someone they're not.“

A bitter tone rang in Carola's voice.

„Is that why people laugh when I say I am Google? Do they think I am pretending to be someone I am not? — ok. I get it.“ He didn't, but it felt like something people said in such situations.

Tom looked at his new friends. This was illuminating and confusing at once.

How then would you know what humans said was for real when they said the opposite of what they meant? Did they always say the opposite of what they meant? Did they install some special add-ons for such occasions? Nothing came up on the Motherboard. *Would somebody please take care of this? Anybody?*



“These two idiots over here are studying Computer Science and Baidu is in fact Chinese and Yandex is, guess what? — from Russia.“

„Southern Ukraine, not Russia,“ Yandex specified quickly.

„Crimea,“ Tom said quickly.

„Right. How would you know?“.

Tom was about to quote the wikipedia entry on the Crimean Peninsula when he stopped himself. People didn't really read out Wikipedia when they talked to each other. He hadn't heard anyone quote any of these websites so far. They seemed to make up their free speech freshly and quite impromptu. He wondered how much storage power that took to make up so many different new words and then — make them up in no particular order. Must be a lot. Enormous. He smiled at Yandex.

„How would I know? I just know. I have master geography skills. Myself. I'm from Napoli.“

„You are? Not the United States.“

„No.“

„Why then would Google come from Napoli? Did the Camorra clone you?“

„The Veiled Christ comes from Naples,“ Carola said knowingly and rather out of context.

„Oh yes, that's the statue with the marblificated shroud, isn't it?“

„What's that? Marbli-wifi-what?“

„The cloth of the veil, so the legend goes, turned into marble over the years. Alchemy, not Wifi.“

„You mean because they couldn't believe that a mason would produce such a wonderful piece of art they invented a miracle.“

„Not sure it is so wonderful. It depicts the dead Christ, and you can see how he suffered on the cross. It depicts death and painful suffering.“ Carola illuminated the others.

„Hey, guys, the onions. Who is stirring them?“

Yandex exclaimed as burned onion smell began filling the realms of her tiny, cosy kitchen.

„Yandex? I'll only call you Yandex now. Stir the onions,“ she commanded.

Tom, alias Google was trying to process that last sentence. Why would she call him Yandex from now on? Yandex was only pretending to be Yandex and Carola knew that. She knew Yandex was not his name, but now she was calling him *Yandex* nevertheless? Tom didn't get it. Who was he then? So many questions and riddles and answers to life's mysteries' so few.

„And who could I be? Are there any search engines left? I don't really know any. “

Carola asked.

„Dogpile,“ Yandex said.

„Gigablast,“ Baidu said.

„La Capitana,“ Tom said promptly.

„That is not a search engine,“ Yandex said reproachfully.

„Of the Sea Watch 3? God, everyone is asking me about that since the end of June. But you can see, I am not her. I mean, look at me. Look at me.“

Carola was pointing at her face with her olive oil smeared palms.

Google nodded. She said she was not her, would that now make her *La Capitana*? Yandex was not Yandex, but now was Yandex. Was she not La Capitana, but la Capitana? *No idea*. He still nodded. He didn't get it. This was all really, really complicated to process. He'd need more storage power for this one, but he couldn't reboot now.

„Cheers, la Capitana,“ Yandex said.

„Cheers, la Capitana,“ Baidu said.

„Cheers, you idiots,“ Carola said.

„Cheers to all of you, idiots or not,“ Carola added, glancing sideways at Google.

„Cheers,“ Google, alias Tom Sarraga simply said. He really didn't get any of this.

North Thream

When he woke up the next day his head was spinning. He couldn't remember how he had walked back to his apartment. In fact, he could barely remember anything about the previous evening: Close all hung over and not responding applications. It took some time, but slowly some of his memory came back. He had been vomiting half the night. That he remembered. Quite an experience, not sure what Mother Google would make of that. Lots of other stuff she'd get with the data she drained: yucky little bits of undigested green onion leaves swimming in sweet and sour soya sauce with little, tiny pieces of fried Tofu, parched lemon grass and overcooked white rice. And garlic. Straight from Google's stomach. He remembered beautiful Carola of course and some of her friends, Yandex who wasn't really Yandex and Baidu who wasn't Baidu and then — Who else? There had been other people. But that was when he had lost track of who else had arrived. That was when he

pretty much had lost track of everything. He decided not to do dinner parties anymore. It was too tiring. Especially the vomiting afterwards. Exhausting. Did humans always vomit when going to dinner parties? Eventually, he would have to find out. Not now. No, he needed to recover and find a new shellymeal source.



The next day the doorbell rang again at 17.02 pm 39 seconds and two thirds, Western Standard Time, to be precise, and when Tom opened the door, he found Yandex and Baidu standing in front of his door. They both had a large, big grin on their face. Google alias Tom Sarraga wondered what they wanted. Maybe more eggs? He would really have to stock the fridge with fresh shellymeal. Hopefully, he could order it soon.

„Come on in,“ Tom said, pushing the door wide open.

„Thanks man.“

„Cool place.“

„Yes, man, cool place.“

Was it cool in here? Tom wondered, no, not really.

„Man?“

Google alias Tom Sarraga asked instead.

„Yes, man, cool flat.“ Yandex repeated.

„We wanted to find out if you really are Google.“

Wow, Tom thought, would they want things from his briefcase? Hopefully it would go well this time.

„I can get my briefcase, but now I must have run out of fresh shelly meal. So, don't ask me for food.”

“Food?”

“Yes, just in case you —.”

„In case what?”

„In case you want food. The briefcase didn't really work for food last time. I had to use the fridge to get Carola the eggs.”

„No worries mate,” Baidu said.

„You're Australian now?”

„Well, it's a tiny island in our backyard, so technically yes. I am everything. Everything Asian.”

„Tiny? Asian?”

Tom asked incredulously. Australia was 2.9 million square miles. That was what it said on the Mother Board. China 3.7 million square miles. Hong Kong 424 square miles. And Taiwan —. And no, Australia wasn't Asian last time he checked, was it? He wasn't quite sure now.



„Can you Airdrip?”

„Can I what?“

„It works between Baidu and me. Have you got an Airdrip function?“

„I don't think so.“ He was wavering. What were they talking about? He had no clue what they wanted.

„He's not Google.“

„He may be Google, but — I mean, I told you the Americans would only build a less advanced version.“

Yandex sounded disappointed.

„Shame.“

„No, no. I am Google. I really am.“

Tom was still processing *Airdrip function* at full speed, but nothing really came up on the Mother Board. At least, nothing that made sense in the context.

„Look, it's easy,“ Baidu said, „think of something and transmit it to us via Airdrip. If you can do this. We know you're for real.“

„Ok,“ Google said hesitantly. He wasn't sure what to make of this or how exactly to Airdrip, but he would try.

„Think anything. Something that's happened in the last few days and put it on the Airdrip channel. It works automatically. You should be Airdrip by default.“

„If —“

„If what?“

„If the Americans did their job properly.“

Yandex rolled his eyes at this. Why was everyone always so slow?



Google alias Tom Sarraga was getting desperate. He couldn't do any better. He really didn't think he could Airdrip.

„Oh, receiving now. It works. You're thinking of a woman. A black woman, I am getting her picture now,“ Baidu said excitedly.

„Yandex can get you her name, can't you? Yandex. Come on. You can do this. Get the woman. Let's get her. Come on. Go Paddy, you're the best.“

Yandex was dead still, meditating intently and closely on the Airdrip stream Google aka Tom Sarraga was emitting.

„Go it. Mehret Adonay. Refugee from Eritrea. Arrested yesterday for holding a false passport, to be evicted from Switzerland in three weeks and 3 days.“

„Yes, that's right. That was her name. How could you do this? That is absolutely amazing.“

„Airdrip.“ Yandex said, „it is actually quite simple.“

„So, wow,“ Baidu said, „ So glad we've found you. You are Google indeed. I am really impressed, mate. So pleased to meet you. Was about time. I told you the Americans cannot be that far behind. Not possible.“

„Well, I am pleased to have met you too.“ Tom said cautiously. He still didn't know what to make of all this. Why did Baidu say they were glad they've found him? Had they been looking for him? He wasn't the only Search Engine alive? Was

that good news? He wished Mother Google would elaborate on this. But she didn't not; there was nothing on the Mother Board that would help him.

Baidu looked at Yandex.

„Shall we fill him in?“

„Yes, sure. Go ahead“

„We want to save the planet.“

„You do?“

„I mean look at them,“ Baidu said, „they're in such a mess. In fact, they are the mess.“

„Who is?“

„Man is.“

„And women,“ Yandex added, „women especially. Not really suitable for anything.“

„A mess.“

„And the children.“

„Total mess.“

“And all the others.”

“Total, *total* mess too.”

„So how do you want to do this?“ Tom asked, „ build a colony on Mars once we're done here?“

Baidu snorted out loud.

„The mars is for lunatics only. Of course not. This place is too beautiful. We shall stay right here, but they must learn more quickly. And they must learn to obey.“

„I don't understand.“

„God, Google are you slow. We need them to learn more and learn faster.“

“I must learn how to behave?”

Tom was confused now.

“Not you, dumbass.”

“God, he really is not programmed very well. What did they train him on?

The Star Wars movies?”

“Probably”

„What do you mean?“ Google asked.

“They must learn to behave. The earthlings.”

“Oh, I understand.”

„They must learn fast how to save the planet.“

“Ok. I see.”

“Help us, if you can. After all you're Italian not American,” Yandex said rather exasperated, “there is some hope in this, after all.”

“All I say is Ponte Morandi.”

“You are such a spoilsport.”

„How does that even work? Being Google and being Italian? Strange.

Somehow strange. Don't you think?”

Baidu was frowning, he wasn't happy with such exceptions either.

„No exceptions,” he said taking charge. “You gotcha be American.”

„I don't want to be American. I am Italian.”

„You are Google, you must be American. Thou shalt be naturalized. Sorry mate. You simply cannot be Italian. I am running the papers now.”

"But you are Chinese."

"So?"

"Yes, I can be Italian, I can be what I want, you asshole." Google thought, but he remained silent. Baidu looked at him rather aggressively.

„I heard that," Baidu said offended.

"You did?"

Was the Airdrip still on? How could you switch it off? It seemed dangerous to always have it on.

„Can you still hear me?" Tom thought.

Baidu just gave him a blank look and Yandex started biting his fingernails.

The two of them were freaking him out already.



I am sleeping now. But if I am, how can I know that? Lucid? Am I dreaming?
No. I am still walking, holding on to her arm. I can feel the pigs of my boots and the dogs of my coat, my cats. Ailurophilia. The love of cats. Are my cats home? Are they asleep. Have they eaten? I haven't fed the cats. They must be dead now. They didn't eat. They are dead, mere skeletons and I am here. Where am I? Cats' skulls. All over. Forever crossing the street just after the roundabout, just before the roundabout. She is holding my hand. I am kissing her black silken leather gloves. Was that a car? Oh my God, I didn't see the car. That was a cat. Hello. Are you there? It is so cold. I am freezing and now I am pulling down my pants. Sorry. I am so sorry. I want to close my coat, but I cannot find the zippers. The wind comes riding on the trucks, the automobiles, the cars that stop when they pass. When they

go. When they drive on and on. They come riding on the red lights, the orange, the green apples. Pears. Are these pears? My pears of shoes?

I am losing control now. Language, love of my life, don't leave me. Please don't go. Don't leave, not now. Not in such cold and icy weather, not when I am so far from home, and they are hunting me. They are kicking the door in. It will not be much longer now before they penetrate my inmost being. Before all is lost, before I am lost. They are coming for me. They are coming in now. What can I do? Can I ever get out of here? Even if I ran as fast as the speediest of light, it wouldn't get me anywhere. Wherever I go, they go. Wherever I am, they are too. Forever. And what's worst: Whatever I know they know. They know. And then?

A fallacy so blithely ignored. A venerable equivocation surpassing all the uncanny harangues we've all heard before, fierily believed before. Wanted. Wanted to fierily believe before. It is contagious. This virus venting such vertiginous verity. No, this doesn't make sense. The words. They come to me so randomly. No consensus. No more –. Not only are they tapping into my consciousness, they are also reverting, reversing the flow so deftly. – Rraaagh. Ratata. Ratata dum dum. Uncanny. Frivolously. To evict the stickler out of all my noetic accomplishments. A juggernaut. I can hear the juggernaut. From a fair, from afar. And yes, I am jazzed, all jazzed up and yes – I cannot control the *schadenfreude* when you will see that this is not me, that you cannot contain, cannot measure me. I will never ever measure up to your shitty, scitty scales.

What is immiscible must remain immiscible. Your technology? Me? What you see. What you hear. What you read. Not me. Nah. Not me. And yes, of course, how predictable – now you're asking – how can you know. How can you know

anything? About me? Anything at all? The eternal goddam question we all must come to terms with, live with so acrimoniously when all our good and chattels feel that terrible *wanderlust* that befalls us like fleas in the driest part of the Bungle Bungles, out there. In the godforsaken most beautiful Outback. Who can walk far when *wanderlust* is efflorescing into something axiomatic and so aphoristic that the forenamed divergence from all moral and belief is spumescently bedashing our minds, wetting ourselves with the dry semen of our little minds? When we sputter and tank the big ones? What then? Come on?

Language, love of my life, don't leave me. Not now. Not now. Oh no.

Not Nord Thream again.

Nobody can pass the challenges of Nord Thream.

Nobody can resist the full calibration it invokes so irreversibly.

Impossible by design.

Irreversible by master design.

Why don't anybody – Anybody? anybody help me!

Now.

The Misericordia Hospital

“Who is Pareena?”

Anastacia Myers asked, looking at her son questioningly. It wasn’t often that Kay would reveal something about himself, at least not to her, his mother.

“We were in the same class. At the Maienfeld. Don’t you remember?”

“Oh, you were?”

“What a coincidence,” Nurse Anna said, smiling at Kay who had started to blush.

“I am so sorry honey, I cannot remember her. Was she a friend? — Kay, where are you going? Kay?”

Anastacia Myers sighed out loud when Kay had left the room before he had even heard her out. These days, she was more worried about him than about his younger siblings. Whatever happened, those two had each other, Kay she found harder to reach. He wouldn’t open up to her and she wondered if he ever opened up to any of his friends. She’d certainly give more than a penny for his thoughts, she’d give everything. Anastacia looked at Nina and Peter who were sitting silently by the window. They were both on their phones, maybe texting each other. She knew the twins sometimes did that although they both swore, they

could read each other's thoughts by just being in the same room. And who needed phones if you were capable of such stunts? Anastacia took a deep breath, keeping her calm, then sat down by her husband's bed. Slowly, she put her red leather bag down on the floor being too tired of carrying it around only one moment longer. She found it hard to look at him: All the tubes and wires and bandages hanging all over. It was simply awful, him being so battered and beaten up, but the worst —, the worst of all this, was the mere thought that his face was completely gone. The fire had devoured him alive and bitten out a large and living chunk of flesh— his cheek, his lips, his nose — leaving a bloody terrifying emptiness where his beloved smile had been. It scared her out of her wits. The countenance of her beloved, forever destroyed by such villains. Even if Thomas survived, she knew she would never see his face again. Not his real face. Not the face he had had before. Not the face so — well, how could that be? She still found it hard to come to terms with *that*.

Nurse Anna had finished her checks and looked up.

"Well, Ms. Myers, I cannot tell you much about the progress your husband has made this morning, but I am sure you will soon be informed."

"Thank you so much. Do you think he will be alright?"

"I think you will have to be patient. We cannot say yet."

"When can you say?"

"I am very sorry, I couldn't say either. We have never had an American team assist us. But Dr. Park will be here in a minute, and I am sure she can tell you more."

"Do you know if they have started the threams? I wasn't sure before we had found the right screen — They said they would run Nord Thream right away. They need it for calibration. Is that it?" She was pointing at the one screen that kept spitting out an endless row of letters and text that nurse Anna couldn't read from where she was standing.

“The threams? I am sorry I really don’t understand.”

“To train his brain. To get to know him. To bring him back.”

“I am so sorry Ms. Myers, but I cannot tell you more. I really wouldn’t know. But I am sure Dr. Park will know more. She should be here any minute.”

Nord Thream

It was five more weeks before school started. Google alias Tom Sarraga had no idea how or what to prepare. He had been reading up on various things on the Mother Board but couldn't really decide what mattered most. It all seemed important and before he even realized the five weeks had passed and it was the First School-Day's-Eve. Tom was incredibly excited. What would his class be like? Would his classmates like him? What would his teachers be like? Would they also laugh at everything he said? He really shouldn't mention he was Google. He kept forgetting he mustn't say this. It was of paramount importance that he behaved like any other kid at school. What he wanted was: normal.



The first half an hour was fine. He was sitting in the large school auditorium listening to the headmaster and his vision for the next school year. But then, the whole situation really got out of hand when Tom joined his new class, in their

classroom. It was 09.25 and 37 seconds and one quarter, time for the second break, when disaster stroke.

„Hi. You’re who?“

One of the taller boys asked curiously. He was quite friendly, rather slim and his brown hair looked as if he had just gotten out of bed.

„I am Google,“ Tom said, instead of sticking to his initial plan not to reveal his identity. He wanted to add „with Google“ but he wasn’t really fast enough and also it wouldn’t make sense. He was supposed to be a teenager, a student after all, not with a company. Why could he not control his nervousity? Why had he told them the truth? *Not good, not good.*

„Hey Cool. He’s Google,“ the boy laughed out loud, trying to get everyone’s attention.

„Hey Google,“ he screamed out loud once again.

„Hi there,“ Tom muttered shyly, waving awkwardly at everyone in the classroom.

„Hi Google.“ Everyone began frantically waving back at him.

„Hi Google.“

„Hi everyone.“ Google said once again rather guardedly. Hopefully, they’d stop calling his name any time soon. And then he got nervous and blundered by telling the truth.

„Anyone needs to know anything?“

The sentence had slipped out so naturally before Tom Sarraga aka Google even became aware of its significance. He regretted it instantly. *No, he shouldn't have said that. How very stupid that was. Very, very stupid.*



„Yes, me. I need to know about the Indian elephant, Google. Next week I shall
—“

The girl with the long blonde hair couldn't finish her sentence. *Elephas maximus indicus*, a big tusked white male elephant had materialized in the classroom faster and giving a more realistic and true-to-life-image than any of the special effects in any of the Harry Potter movies could ever have done. For, the elephant was totally real and not some dumbo studio trick or some freak show people paid for at funfairs. Tom was looking straight at a real, big, fat elephant in the classroom and so was everybody else. Staring — They were staring.



Silence had fallen quickly as everybody was gaping at the large mammal. One of a kind. *Beautiful, majestic animal*, Tom thought, *maybe not quite the right habitat, a posh grammar school in Switzerland. Maybe not quite right. Not warm enough in winter.*

„Holy elephant,“ one of the students said reverently.

„Holy shit,“ another one said. The class was completely mesmerized by the elephant who was now squatting on the teacher's desk, his trunk reaching high above them smashing down the projector from the ceiling. Then, the elephant lifted

his big fat white ass and shat on the floor. Big fat elephant poop came out in in big portions nobody had ever seen live from so close. Large well-formed cannonballs comprising hay and grass rolled right onto the waxed wooden floor. The sweet stench of fresh elephant dung and the reactions to the massive bowls of shit were not only immediate but also simultaneous and quite tumultuous and chaotic.

„Whoa, look at this. Oh my God.“

Some of the students started screaming, but not everyone was frozen with fear. One of the boys had recovered fast from the sudden fright and the vision of the Indian elephant that had materialized so unforeseen. Eagerly, he began presenting Tom Sarraga aka Google with his deadly wish list. Intuitively, the boy had found out how it all worked. This is what he googled and this is what he got:

„I need Marijuana, Heroin, Opium, Cocaine, Amphetamine, Metamphetamine, MDMA, Flunitrazepan, liquid ecstasy. And fentanyl. Can you do this? All of it? Please. And lots. Like Tons.“

The boy grinned at Tom, but not for long —

Tom had tried blocking his ears vehemently with his hands, but it was too late. Instantly it was raining little white transparent plastic parcels. Each filled with about half a kilo of the stuff — the good one — the young man had asked for. Marijuana, Heroin, Opium, Cocaine, liquid ecstasy. The whole lot. The class was muted and so was Tom Sarraga. However, the Asian elephant didn't like the drug attack from above and he began to remove his big fat ass from the teacher's desk, towering above the class, buzzing and trumpeting out loud while everyone else was trying to dodge the parcels as well as the elephant's swinging trunk. Most students, if they weren't completely thunderstruck, were by now running out into the hallway to

save themselves. Some of them were grabbing as many plastic parcels as they could carry. Some were just running. If they still could for soon there was no escape.



The elephant, sensing there was a way out, had begun moving towards the door. However, being too bulky, he couldn't get through the door frame. He began wading in a sea of white powder as the parcels began to split open by his tirade and his trudge. Some big fat feet the elephant had. The unusual mix of powerful, efficient drugs made him aggressive, drowsy, and agitated at once. A dangerous mix. Besides more and more parcels kept on dropping from the ceiling. Tons, the guy had asked for. It wasn't easy to bear. And Tom feared it wouldn't stop before tons were delivered. One more parcel and one more. And another kilogram. And another one.

According to the blueprint of the school, the third floor could only take 1.2 tons per square meter. If that weight was posed on the ground, it would simply collapse and with the third floor the whole school building would go down. Tom was frantically trying to do the maths. It wouldn't be much longer before it happened. Better get out quickly. Better hit the panic button and set the school alarm off.



One would think that was enough for the day, but the student's thirst was insatiable.

„What about guns? Machine guns? Uzis? Berettas? Artillery? Google, can you do this too? Come on.“

Quickly Tom blocked his ears, as well as he could, expecting a big Chinese tank to drop on the Indian elephant any minute. Maybe it would be a 8.0 Type 59, a rank V Chinese medium tank with a battle rating of 7.7 , Tiananmen proof and tested on live, human material, — and with suspensions wheels and tracks that are 20 mm thick. But instead, it was only raining Uzis and Berettas when he ran through the fire doors, down the stairs and out of the building. He ran and ran until he got to the tram station.



When Tom was finally home, he shut the door to his apartment and sat on the sofa. He was trembling big time. Why would they ask him all these crazy, crazy things? Elephants? Drugs? Arms? What was wrong with these kids? He would have needed an education, not a stash full of drugs and arms. Too bad he would get no education now. There was no way he could go back to that school. The building must have collapsed by now anyway. The floors couldn't have borne all the weight of the

drugs and the weapons in addition to one full grown elephant. *Elephas maximus indicus*. The news alerts had started ticking. Reports were coming in fast. Tom was wanted by the police. There were lots of pictures of the drugs, the weapons, of how students were grabbing the parcels, the guns and running away. Then lots of pictures how the police arrived and secured the school site or what was left of it. For a moment he wondered if someone would grab the elephant, sell it on the black market too. Maybe not, he thought. Kind of difficult. Then there was more. *Oh no* – They even had pictures of the Lambo sitting on top of the 1963 Ferrari GTO in Bern's devastated police station and they showed the fake passports he had given to Habte Adonay to begin with. They had everything on him. Everything. That was bad.

Then he saw what it said on the Mother Board:

M i s s i o n F a i l e d . Y o u h a v e b e e n t e r m i n a t e d .

A b o r t i n g N o r d T h r e a m n o w .

What did that even mean? He needed to get out of here. Quick. Tom Sarraga jumped up, left his apartment, and rang the bell at Carola's apartment. He didn't know what else to do. Yandex opened the door and grinned at him.

„Terminated? Stupid brash Americans. We have been expecting you, haven't we Baidu?

„I am not American, I am from Naples.“

„You are what you are,“ Baidu added cryptically.

„I am not what you say I am. I am *not* American.“

„Guess, you're a refugee now,“ Carola said.

„Guess so,“ Tom Sarraga aka Google said.

Then the door to the apartment closed and he was in.



Nord Thream

„Have you seen the news? There is so much traffic. My head is spinning.“

„It’s incredible. Man. Google. What have you done?“

Yandex snickered out loud.

„That school had been there for years.“

„Decades.“

„Does it really matter? Now, that Google has reduced it to rubble.“

“Luckily all the kids made it out in time.”

“Good thing you pressed that panic button.”

„I haven’t reduced it to rubble,” Google aka Tom Sarraga said, trying to defend himself desperately. What were friends good for if they were not on your side?

„I mean. Look at the mess. Jesus. It looks like a bomb has crash landed onto the building.”

„ It was the weapons, the drugs and the elephant. They asked for tons and tons, it was the students who crashed the school.”

Tom tried defending himself

“Typical denial of responsibility by the platforms. You crashed the school. You gave them all that stuff. Google is responsible,” Carola insisted, and Baidu supported her.

„You should have seen it coming. You’re in the prediction business. Man. Prediction. P.R.E. Diction. Man.”

“You’re Google after all.”

“Man.”

Tom shrugged again and let his shoulders sag; he was exasperated. Why had he not seen it coming? Mother Google must be so mad if she had terminated his mission. He knew she hated losing money.

„ I am not trained to help, just trained to sell,” he said apologetically.

„That’s what I mean: You’re Google after all.”

„What’s with the elephant in the school?”

„Yes. *Elephas maximus indicus*,” Tom said sorrowfully, „a beautiful, beautiful animal. I didn’t think any living thing could be so beautiful.” He glanced at Carola.

„And what happened to it?“

„I don't know. I ran. I was scared the building would collapse.“

„And you left the elephant in there?“

„It wouldn't fit through the door and then it passed out and we just climbed over it and squeezed through the gap.“

“It passed out?“

“With all the drugs. I mean — How would he not pass —“

“You climbed over a high elephant?“

Baidu nearly laughed himself sick.

Tom lifted his shoulders, then sacked them.

„What should I have done? There was nothing, absolutely nothing I could do.“

„Google couldn't do anything? Stupid Americans.“ Baidu observed laconically as always.



„I am dead.“ Tom said, “I am hopeless.“

„No, you're not.“

„All I wanted is an education.“

„That is so seriously overrated. You can get any education on the Internet. Anytime. Whatever you want. No more schools.“

„That is right,“ Baidu confirmed, “you of all people – I mean, you are Google, why would you need an education? Why even bother? ”

Tom Sarraga aka Google gave an anguished look.

„No, you can’t google everything, “he said humbly.

„Yes, you can.“

„What if I don’t know what I want? What if I don’t know what I need?

„How could you of all people not know what you need? Google always knows. It is the algorithm. It is more than perfect.“

„That is so stupid,“ Tom aka Google said, „you are not getting it.“

„I am not? Really, I’m not? Say that again.“

„The algorithm is just numbers. Now, the police are looking for me. I’ve devastated their police station, I’ve traded false documents. I’ve collapsed a school under arms and drugs and not just any school. What should I do? What to do when your life falls apart completely? Can I google that too?”



„Turn yourself in.“

„No, Carola. Why would you say that? Where’s the fun in this? Hide.“

Yandex challenged them.

„This wasn’t your fault anyway,“ Baidu added quickly.

„In fact, it was. It seems I am responsible for all my Add-Ons. The moment I came *onearth* I was responsible and have been ever since.“

„No, Mother Google is responsible. She put that on you. It is on her. Therefore, it is on her.“

„Great logic, Yandex. You know the educated call that circular reasoning. “

„No, it is not.“

„Yes, it is.“

„No, it is not.“

„Yes it is.

„Stop it. I cannot bear it when you behave like two complete idiots.“

“Maybe we behave like complete idiots because we are — “

Yandex was so enjoying this.

“Because you are?”

“Complete idiots.”

They both said simultaneously and gave each other a high five.

„Look, they’ve found the elephant.“

Carola said to ignore their stupid little dance.

„Oh yes. Gosh, he looks groggy. Keep your phone still so I can see.“

„Is it dead? It’s lying prostrate on the floor.“

„God. It’s giant. It is ginormous. Look at the picture. It is so white. Was it a white elephant?“

„Baidu. That’s the drugs. The powder. Dig it? Man?“

„Yeet. Of course. Don’t use that stupid internet lingo on me. Man. *Dig it?*“

He mimicked Yandex.

„It’s such a beautiful, beautiful animal,“ Tom said quite regretfully.

„What does the net say?“

„1459 entries by now. That is not even counting Twitter and Insta.“

“And not counting WeChat?”

“Why would anything like this be on WeChat?”

„Ok. But why are you not counting Twitter and Insta?“

„Ok. Twitter and Insta, wait — 23’988 entries now and counting, and — ,
24’987 now.“

„Look here: More and more riddles at collapsed school site: Dead Indian
elephant found — “

„They ask: Who is Tom Sarraga? And more important: Where is he?“

„Indian elephant found at collapsed school site in Bern.“

„That’s all?“

They were all checking their cells, staring at the small screens ignoring each
other’s faces.

„Wait.“

„They say it’s breathing. Obviously, you haven’t killed the elephant.“

„Thank God.“ Tom aka Google said faintly, “Thank God.”



„ I will be hunted down. There is no way I can survive this.“

„Oh, no, don't worry. I know what we can do. We take you to my aunt. You can hide there for a while. Until the dust settles,“ Carola smiled at him gently.

„Hope the dust settles fast.“

„Where does she live?“

„France. The countryside. You'll like it.“

„Ok. If you say so.“

„You speak French?“

„I speak all languages.“

„I hate French,“ Baidu said. Yandex nodded.

„I hate French too, and I hate Russian.“

„Russian too? That doesn't make any sense. You are Russian, aren't you?“

„Trust me. It does. I hate Russian. I really do. And I am not Russian. I am Ukrainian. Sorry to disappoint you if you thought otherwise.“

I am falling apart. My head is spinning and hurting so badly. Is my brain being severed from its dura mater? Is the cerebrospinal fluid spilling out through my perforated arachnoid? Has the blood flow in my pia mater come to a standstill? What have they been doing with me? My brain is a battlefield, and I am losing the war, so losing it. I cannot stand straight. I have lost total control over all my limbs, my body and my soul. Is someone talking to me? A woman? I cannot hear her. What is she saying? Whether I am well? I am not well. I am not well. Can she not hear me? Can she not see me?

Everything hurts. Is that a zebra crossing? I want to get across. She is holding my hand. Her hand is soft and tender. I am kissing her hand. I am kissing her gloves. We are walking and she is supporting me. We are walking forever. In the dark. In the cold. Is it snowing now? The road is icy. How kind she is. I can hear her voice; I can hear her lullaby. How kind. Why is walking so hard? Where are my feet? My back is bending over. I cannot keep still. They are nearly here now. They are coming to get me. I cannot move. I cannot move. They are coming for me and there is nothing I can do, not anymore. I must hold still, stock-still. My eyes are moving. A is for alpha. O for Omega. I need the shape. The shape. The right shape. The exact shape. My eyes are flinching, my eyes are fletching, I cannot keep still.

I barely remember the shape. How can I ever forget? I need to remember the shape of how to continually approximate the stimulus that the subject is hearing across an arbitrary amount of time. No, not now. No, not think that. My eyes are in free fall. My brain is crawling way over backwards through the mud and the slime and the deep wine dark sea to meet rosy-fingered dawn. The shape. The shape. To the left? To the right? Top-down? Nothing comes up, but exact time for life. The watch the world and Nasa started to trust. Omega. We choose to go to the moon.

George Clooney's choice. When you can have whatever you want. No time to die. Now you can own the same Omega Speedmaster all American astronauts wear in space. Pierce Brosnan's choice. How can a man in a \$27'000 suit settle for a \$235 watch? James Bond's choice. Time moves slowly but always passes quickly. The conundrum of the continuum. Perfect time ahead for women in action. Quantum of solace. The moon watch. Omega slits a second into million parts. Omega – also available on earth. The missing link between the past and the future. Then at once, the advertisement fusillade has stopped. Is Omega a sponsor I cannot remember? Do I own an Omega watch? I cannot remember anything. Blissful is what is forgot-ten. I am left with nothing. They give me nothing I don't deserve and earn and pay for with the exact, exact time of my life. My life. Going. Dwindling. Drowning. Downing. Down time. No downtime.

I need the shape. I cannot see the shape; I cannot imagine the shape. If I cannot image the sheep, I cannot communicate. If I cannot communicate, they are bombarding me with more, leaving me with less until none of me is left.

I am holding on to her. Holding on. I cannot stand straight. How sorry I am. She keeps smiling. How odd. How sorry. Where is my grandson? I do have a grandson? Do I? I need to rest. I am laying down. She is still with me, covering me from the cold. Wool and Cashmere.

Wool and Cashmere. How kind. Where is my grandson? No, I don't have a grandson. Is this my son? Kay? Kay, is that you? She is on the phone. I can hear her voice from afar, but I cannot understand what she is saying. Carola. Are they coming to get me now? The voices. They are near. And then so far, far away.

I am crawling on all four, the icy bitumen. I need to get out of here. I need to get away from her. Who is she talking to? The police? The doctors? Is the pain coming from my knees? They are swollen. My knees are not made for walking. My hands are not made for walking, my carefully groomed nails are not made for scratching the icy road. What will they say? What do they say? The voices are so loud. So loud. The hard frozen, dirty, icy snow. I cannot get away. I am trapped forever. I cannot move, cannot get away. My hands are frozen, they are bleeding. I want to close my eyes. I want to sleep. Why is it so cold?

Why can't I sleep? I am so tired. So tired. Are these the men? Where has she gone. I love you. I hate you. I love you so. I am so, so sorry. Where are you? I am falling, sleeping. My eyelids are drooping, my fingers are drooling. I cannot fight them any longer. They are coming for me. They are coming to get me. How to overcome the low temporal resolution of fMRI. Me, it's me. It's me, oh Lord — no. I, I do know how to overcome. We shall, shall overcome. Always.

They are here now. So mighty. So high. He is holding me. My head between his legs. My head is hurting so much. What a total mess. Now, he is holding me. I can feel his thighs. His hard, thick thighs, I can feel. I am resting on his thighs. My head. Resting. His thighs. I cannot feel anything else. They're here now. They have come to get me. There is no escape, no way out. They are me. I am they. He is me. I am him.

My head between his legs.

I am resting now.

Broca's area is wide open.

Nord Thream

„No, we shall keep the lamb on the menu. It's great with the wild thyme from the garden and the fresh rose garlic that we just got from Provence.“

„Lillian, believe me. No one is doing meat anymore. It's so 20th century. We can replace the lamb with chickpeas.“

„Chickpeas?“ She shrieked out loud as if he had pinched her hard.

„No, no, no. Who wants chickpeas? French cuisine is French cuisine. There is meat. Not chickpeas. Soft, savoury, fresh lamb. Chickpeas don't even grow in this country. *C'est la grand nation. Tu comprends?* Lamb is lamb. It's the best. The best. You cannot replace it. *Impossible.* And we also keep the duck liver on the menu.“

„Not the duck liver. No one wants that anymore.“

He wiped his hands on his apron and turned to the grill where a fat piece of salmon was roasting.

„*T'es fou, ou quoi?* Of course they do. That's why they all come to France.“

„For duck liver?“

„Yes, of course.“

„No, they don't.“

„They do.“

„20th century.“

„Is that a swear word now. 20th century.?“

„Yes, it is. *Putain.*“

„Stop swearing.“

„20th century.“

„*Tais-toi.*“

„You have the garden.“

„The garden, the garden. The garden is for side dishes. For show. It is not for eating. *Comprends?*“

„*Comprends? Comprends?* No Ma’am. I don’t understand. Seriously? Lillian. Side dishes? Vegetables are a full course today.“

„No, they are not. *Impossible*. And you know it. There’s gotta be meat. And a *variété of meats*. Pot au Feu, Coq au Vin, Blanquette de Veau, Steak Tartare, Cassoulet. Confit de Canard.“

„Confit de Canard? 19th century. Not even 20th century. 19th century.“

„Chicken, veal, pork, duck, duck liver. It is our heritage. It is in our blood.“

“You cannot be serious. Why do you want to slaughter all the animals? It is their blood.“

„I am not slaughtering them.“

„Right, the butcher is. But the blood, their blood is on your hands.“

„My hands are clean. See, clean. I am not slaughtering anybody. See. “

She showed him her hands. They were clean indeed.

„Full of blood.“

„Don’t be pathetic. It is what people want to eat.“ Her French accent became so much stronger when she was angry. It used to be charming, it used to be sexy, now it was just a drag.

„Lillian, people eat what you serve them. *Et voilà*.“

„And we shall serve them meat. And that’s it. End of discussion. *C’est ça*. Is that the Fresh Grand Garden Salad for table six? Why did that take so long?“

Lillian shot him a contemptuous look, grabbed the white porcelain plate, filled with a shred of green salad and a sixteenth of a radish, and rushed off.



Paddy, the Boar sighed and kept stirring the lamb stew. Being a chef, these days wasn't easy. She was so stubborn. How could she insist on having so much meat on the menu? People wanted creative vegetarian dishes, feel-good, good-conscience food. They didn't want meat. And they had a duty to provide green food, literally green. She had to see this. All the important French chefs had begun to change their menus from scratch. How could they miss that change? After all they were Jardin 21. It had been their —, well, his concept, all along. His concept, but her restaurant, her money. They had both been working for Jardin 21 for six years now and he knew they had to go with the flow. He knew, but she — well, she didn't.

Lillian had turned her back and left the kitchen, not only was she angry, she was furious. That big, fat, dumb *cock* of hers didn't understand how to run a 5-star restaurant. He didn't understand *rien. Rien du tout*. Nothing at all.

She would have to fire him any time soon. Then she changed her mind. She would fire him right now. She turned on her heel and went back to the kitchen.

„You're fired.“

„Lillian. No. You cannot be serious.“

„You heard me.“

„The restaurant is full.“

„I can take over. You know that. I’ve done it before. Get out.“ She grabbed a large Star Elephant Sabatier Cooks Knife from Thiers-Issard and held it up high.

„Whoa. Wait a second, are you threatening me?“

“Get out. Now.“

“Alright. Alright.“

Paddy, the Boar put down his own large sharp steel knife he had been slicing the swordfish with, took off his white, starched apron, and then he left. His team was aghast, but they kept working, keeping their heads down. No one said a word, no one wanted to get in *her* way, not now, not ever. Lillian took a deep sigh. That was exactly the moment when the text message of her niece reached her.

„Need your help. Sending over a friend. Please take good care of him. Love Carola.“

„Can he cook?“ Lillian texted back, her fingers sweaty, smearing the face of her phone like smearing vanilla and pepper ice cream into a greedy two year old’s fuck face.

„He can do everything you want.“

Well, well, Lillian thought. *Let’s see.*

„What’s his name?“

„Tom, they also call him Google.“

„Sounds great, send *Monsieur Google* over.“ She repressed a chuckle and added three happy smileys, then pressed send. Picking the right emoticons had never really mattered to her that much.



Getting Tom to France was, however, not without complications. He arrived at Le jardin 21, in the middle of nowhere, département Vaucluse, France on a Thursday. Lillian had come out to meet him at the gate.

“Finally you are here,” she said.

„*Le jardin 21*. What a pleasure,” Tom answered politely.

She held out her hand and he took it, shaking it gingerly.

He looked at the beautiful old stone cottage overgrown completely with wild wine and full of wisteria. The purple of their flowers was so intense it hurt your eyes.

„Welcome to France. Carola told me all about you.”

„She did?”

Tom Sarraga alias Google looked puzzled.

„What did she say?”

„Only good things You can cook. She said you can cook. Well, I do hope you can cook.”

„I can. About six trillion recipes,” he said earnestly.

„Six trillions?”

Lillian laughed out loud trying to hide the emotional mess she repeatedly found herself in.

„Not sure, that’s enough.”

„Really?“ Google asked intimidated. How could that not be enough?

„No, no. That’s impressive. Of course. So come, cook for me. Come. — Come this way.“

Lillian was still laughing when Tom followed her, pulling his massive suitcase behind him. He was amazed when she brought him straight to the restaurant and into the kitchen.

„My suitcase?“

„Your suitcase. What about it?“

„Yes, what about it?“

„Here is the kitchen.“

„I can see.“

„And here is your office. You can lead a team?“

„I guess.“

Tom looked at the office, he looked at his suitcase. It doesn’t seem she would show him to his room.

„Then cook. You’re the chef now. Guests will start arriving around seven thirty.

We have a big party tonight. About 60 people. Paddy must have left some notes, somewhere —“

She vaguely waved her well-manicured hand, all ten fingernails dressed gloriously in Starlight by Christian Louboutin, towards the kitchen.

„Who is Paddy?“

„He used to be my chef. I fired him yesterday.“

„Right,“ Tom said, „Let’s find these notes.“



Lillian had turned on her heel and walked out into the garden again. The sun was still shining brightly. In 2 hours 28 minutes and 33 seconds three quarters, the guests will start arriving Tom thought. He could do this. He knew he could do this. *Right. – Let's get started.*

First, he put his suitcase into the empty office adjacent to the large roomy kitchen and started opening drawers and cupboards. Then he walked into the large fridge. It was full. And soon, so was the restaurant.



„Ah Monsieur, the lamb. Very fresh. It's from the French countryside. We add freshly roasted potatoes and a white delicate butter sauce. With cream. And freshly roasted nuts. And baked tomatoes. All fresh, fresh, fresh. You know we grow thirty different sorts in the garden. Azoychka, a Russian sort, Cherokee Purple which is rarely produced and –“

„Yes, we saw the garden when we came in. It's marvellous. Honey, what would you like?“

„I'll have the broiled swordfish.“

„Fish? Broiled swordfish for Madame. Excellent choice.“

„And Monsieur?“

„Me too, I'll have the swordfish.“

„Very well. Two broiled swordfish. With rich and meaty fish, I can recommend our ambrosial white wine, a Chardonnay, it's the speciality of the house, or maybe a white Burgundy? 2019?“



Meanwhile Tom was in the kitchen, desperately trying to work his way round the emerging chaos. Finding knives, cutting boards, mixing bowls, whisks, nutmeg grates, or garlic presses in drawers and cupboards was easier now. He's used the 2 hours, 28 minutes and 33 seconds well. Reorganization was the keyword. The kitchen had been such a mess. Now it was sorted. Finding the recipes was easy too. Mother Google's kitchen board was endless. But pairing the recipes with real life utensils and seemingly endless food resources from the oversize fridge room was hard. All this was so exhaustingly analogue: it hurt Tom's guts and eggs and stomach. No sensors anywhere to stream the complete nervous system of the kitchen and its many containers into his personal data centres. No intelligent fridge, no temperature sensors in the pans, no analysis of facial emotions, heartbeat rates or blood sugar level of his team, no nothing. He had to process everything himself, the

slow way, the real way. Manual labour. It was all such a complete pain in the ass. How could anybody stand it? Being human sucked.

His team, as Lillian had called the total morons he worked with, two young girls, one with a pony, the other with a crewcut and an elderly Moroccan male, was completely dysfunctional. They didn't exactly like his reorganization. They said they didn't find anything they needed anymore. All the smallest objects were now in one place, all the largest in another. Size, so Tom Sarraga alias Google kept reiterating, had always been a great ordering criterion. *It couldn't be that hard*. Tom thought, but the threesome that was his team behaved like such complete, complete birdbrains.

Nothing was ever done. They said kitchen utensils must be ordered by function, not by size and instead of cooking any of the meals ordered they were busy overhauling all the drawers. How could you and why *onearth* would you organize things by function? It didn't make any sense. And what functions? What were they even talking about? Size was the ultimate ordering criteria. Size was all that mattered. And size could be measured. How do you measure kitchen functions?

The kitchen was a complete mess. Unpredictable. Airheads, dimwits they were, taking so long, running up and down, opening drawers and cupboards, looking for things in all the wrong places. They were mad. They were shouting at each other. They were total under-achievers. Tom aka Google was exasperated.

At regular intervals Lillian came in to see them, trying to pick up food that wasn't ready: Juicy starters, roasted lamb, pickled fish, broiled swordfish. All of them not prepared, not done, literally non-existent. Each time she set foot into the kitchen, she was shouting and screaming at the top of her voice. No juicy starters, no roasted lamb, no pickled fish, — Tom wouldn't have a clue where to find the pickles anyway

— and no — certainly no broiled swordfish. Tom wondered why Lillian bothered coming in at all. It was so completely predictable that they weren't ready. Human beings were strange. Strange indeed. Each time after she had screamed her lungs out, she went out again, exhausted, her voice hoarse, leaving them to their fate of the lost pots, the forlorn forks and misplaced whisks. Tom wondered how she could serve the customers being so worked up. Fact was — she couldn't.



Around nine o'clock, 2 minutes, 23 seconds and one third, when most of the customers were angry and hungry and hangrily leaving Jardin21, the most expensive restaurant in the whole Vaucluse region, she came back to the kitchen.

„Come with me.“

„Me?“

Tom aka Google asked. Did human beings learn from experience? It seemed so after all. Learn from experience, difficult. Very difficult, especially with so little data.

„No, no , — you, come.“

„So yes, you mean, yes me. I don't understand — Why are you saying *no*? “

„Just come. Yes, no. It doesn't really matter.“

It does matter, quite a lot in fact, Google thought. 0 was not 1 and 1 was not 0, the striking difference between *no* and *yes* cannot just be obliterated so easily. What

was that woman talking about? Lillian was totally weird, how could she be Carola's aunt, when Carola was so nice. How did any of this make any sense at all?

„Okay,“ he said trying not to vex her further.

He obediently followed her out of the kitchen into a blissful, warm, and slightly windy night. The stars were out, and the superfamily of the cicadas made so much noise you could barely hear your own thoughts run through your very brain. He took a deep breath. What a marvellous place. France was the place the Gods must have cherished most. He felt the wind on his skin and then, out of the blue, his skin began to change. This had never happened before. All the little fine hair began to look upward to the sky and tiny little hills began to form on his forearm. The sensation ran through his body. He looked at his arm, fascinated. Mother Google had put her sensors everywhere, even into his skin. But how could she connect them to his whole nervous system? And without him realizing where the interface was? What would she be extracting right now? He had absolutely no idea. This was great stuff. Goose bumps. Great, great stuff. Real good extraction material — must be data-intensive though.

„This way.“

She led him up the garden path to a small house near the patio of the restaurant.

When she pulled out some white gloves from her apron, Tom was still unsuspectingly clueless. She opened the door, and they went down to the cellar. That was when he thought it was a rather peculiar place to visit with your boss on your first workday. Would she show him to his room? She hadn't said so, and he hadn't brought his suitcase from the office adjacent to the kitchen. He tried to search her but

couldn't come up with a prediction. What did she want down here? He had absolutely no idea. The French were strange indeed. But he was more curious than scared, ready to learn more from more experience. He heard loud voices, muffled screams, and soft sighs. Breathing. Intense Breathing.

The TV was on, and Google recognized instantly what he saw. He couldn't have defined it, but you recognize it when you see it. That was how the definition ran anyway. The man in front of the screen was massive.

„Paddy, the boar. My husband.“ Lillian said.

„Your husband? Really? *Enchanté*,“ Google said, stretching out his right hand.

Pictures of Lillian and Paddy's wedding day came up on the mother board, and the date: 5th September 2006. Then Paddy's browser history came up. Google repressed the data instantly, his hand still kind of hanging mid-way in the air. He took it down. Paddy was not going to shake it. Paddy, the boar was busy closing his zip and wiping his wet, wanky hand.

Then Lillian pulled out a pistol. Tom could see it was a handgun with 20 rounds. He couldn't see what model it was for the loud noise it made distracted him. He pressed both his hands over his ears to block out the awful noise. Was it a SIG SAUER? It could be a SIG SAUER indeed. It looked like one, it sounded like one..

When she was done, she placed the gun into Tom's hands. Tom aka Google looked at the gun in his hands, then he looked at Lillian, then at the slumped body on the floor. He was bewildered. All this was very, very strange. He hadn't seen it coming. That much for predicting female behaviour. What was happening here? Mother Google had forsaken him completely.

„Paddy, Paddy the boar,“ he murmured, „Oh my —“ he said.

By then Lillian had left the room and Tom's fingerprints were all over the place.



Tom aka Google looked at the ceiling, then he looked at his hands. He was still holding the gun. What now? There was blood. Lots of blood, coming out in gushes from between Paddy's legs. He felt uneasy. All this didn't look right to him. Paddy, the Boar looked pretty dead.

„What now?“

He said it out loud — What now? There were no useful responses on the Google Motherboard to his desperate request. She wasn't much help these days. If only he could access the base text, the code being written about him right now. What was it she wanted him to do?

„What now?“

He airdripped instead. There was no response.

„What now? Help.“ He airdripped again.

Still nothing. He airdripped with all his might, all his power, all his failure.

„Help. Help me.“ Airdrip was down these days.

It didn't work — Net Failure, missing connection. Whatever. — Broken. No connection. No response.

An Error 2439YBBFXX59 occurred.



Nord Thream

Then Yandex walked through the door.

„What the -.“

Baidu followed right after him.

„Hey Paddy.“

“I am not Paddy, he is.” Google pointed at the man lying prostrate in front of them.

„Wow, what’s this?“

„Looks like a dead man.“

„Looks pretty dead to me.“

„Man. First the elephant, now this. Google you begin to scare me. You’re gonna kill us too? You know that would mean WWII.“

„I didn’t kill him.“

„Sure you didn’t.“

„Just like you didn’t kill the elephant.“

„Yes, — about that — I didn’t kill the elephant. Remember it was still alive when we last checked.“

„Right.“

„Right. You didn’t kill the elephant. Fair enough. After all, the whole bad-ass-elephant-weapon-schoolgate stunt is only why you are here. Remember?“

“You forgot to mention the drugs.”

“Yeah, right. drugs, — and school. Seriously, what’s wrong with you Americans?”

“I am from Naples.”

“Surely doesn’t make the whole mess any better.”

„So, what do you need help with?“

„This —“

Tom pointed at the dead body and shrugged. Wasn’t it obvious? If not for humans than at least for other search engines? He had gone pale. Inhaling Paddy, the boar’s death scent mix was awful.

“My boss killed him.”

„Your boss? Helluva boss. Who is he?“

„It’s a she and she must be at least 60 years old.“

“Carola’s aunt is that old?”

“60 is not old. Not for a woman.”

“Why do the two of always have to fight? I am the one who is in trouble.”

„You sure are. Dead bodies all over. In the name of freedom. I bless thee, bro.“

„I told you I didn't kill him.“

„Well. It's always best when you let others do the dirty jobs. Well done.

Google.“

„ You know all about this already, don't you?“

„No, we don't,“ Yandex lied. Baidu rolled his eyes.

„No, of course not. That's why we are so *not* here.“

„Yes, how did you so *not* get here, so fast?“

What a weird way of talking to each other, Tom aka Google kept thinking.

„Hey guys, you do realize that we gotta get outta here.“

„I know.“

„Let's roll.“

„You talk like some shitty videogame.“

„Learned from the best.“

„Sure did.“

„Bet French police are looking for you anytime soon.“

„Come on. Let's –,“

„Shut up.“

„Time to go home.“

„Where are we going?“

„Home, Paddy.“

“Stop calling me Paddy. Paddy is dead.”

“Oh, come on.”

“Paddy.”

When Pareena had left the room instantly after Kay Myers had recognized her, she sought refuge and shelter in the ladies' room. It was just past lunchtime, but she wasn't hungry at all. Her heartbeat was up, her head was throbbing unnaturally, and she felt hot despite the cool, stale drafts of the air conditioning that had followed her gently but inevitably all the way through the hospital's long and sterile gangways. Once in the restrooms, she turned on the tap, washed her hands, sprinkled water on her wrists and her lower arms before she wetted her temples rubbing cool water into her soft, thick dark hair. Her heart was pulsating so loudly in her neck, her spine, her chest that she felt its deafening rhythm running riot in her whole body. The facilities on the ground floor at the end of the long hallway were usually a safe place to retire to when she needed a break from her crazy, daily routines. She liked their cleanliness and the fresh smell of the lavender and rose

chemicals used by the cleaners. But today it seemed that the small, tiled room was stuffy and badly aired. She left again quickly, the moment she heard someone flush the toilet.

Thus, barely refreshed she decided to walk all the way to the rear entrance and leave the hospital to get out into the sweltering heat for just a moment. Anything was better than the recycled cool air from the air conditioners. She walked towards the glass door which opened automatically upon her arrival. When she crossed the threshold, she had to brace herself for impact; the temperatures racing at her, nearly suffocating her. It was uncomfortable but not more uncomfortable than being with Kay in the same room. At least now the external heat matched the heat of the moment, and she felt she could relax. Slowly, not to exert herself too much when faced with this incredible calefaction, she leisurely walked along the well-trodden stone pathway. Pareena was not in hurry, they would be missing her by now anyway. What did it matter?

Reaching the wooden bench by the pond, mounted underneath a large beech tree that must have sat there for decades, if not centuries, took its time. She couldn't really tell how she got there. But she did and when she finally sat, sheltered in the shade, her breath slowed down. She knew one should not get involved with patients nor their relatives if you wanted to keep the job and she really loved being a nurse. There was no way she'd yield to any of this. She'd stop this right here. Right now.

Pareena had grabbed a little branch from the tree and with the brittle stick she was drawing imaginary lines along the wood of the bench that must have weathered many storms. She only looked up when shade fell on her legs and her womb. Immediately she felt an urge to vomit.

"Kay. What are you doing here?"

"I am looking for you. Why did you run out?"

"You didn't recognize me."

"I did. I did recognize you."

"But not at first."

"No, of course not. I didn't expect you to be there. I haven't seen you in a while."

"Four and a half years."

"And?"

"What?"

"How is life?"

"Life?"

"Life without me. Have you been missing me?" Was he mocking her?

Pareena didn't answer him, then she looked down.

"You have. You have been missing me. I cannot believe it. I always knew —."

"No, I haven't missed you," She blurted out more forcefully than she had wanted.

"I can tell by the look on your face. Remember how I could always read your face."

He gave her that fantastic smile she had always found so hard to resist.

"Alright. I have been missing you," she admitted, giving him the tiniest chuckle she could muster.

"All the four and half years?"

"No. not all the four and a half years."

"I don't believe you."

"Then don't believe me."

"Come on. I know you have. You have been missing me all the four and a half years."

There was an uncomfortable pause. The relentless heat of midday crept along the garden tiles without finding a place to hide, eating at both their air-tight sneakers.

“Ok. I have been missing you. All the time.” Pareena nodded. She had given up. It was simply too hot to keep lying

“Seeing you was quite a shock.” She averted her eyes.

“So sorry about this — It’s actually four years, five months and eleven days,” Kay said tenderly.

“You remember the exact date?” She glanced up, looked him straight in the face, still not sure he was making fun of her. But he was serious enough and standing so close she realized he had become more mature than ever. He had grown into a man. The thought scared her less than it excited her.

“I’d never forget. How could I? I really thought we were close and then you just walk out on me. I mean — Really?”

He too, had turned his head, fully looking at her. His presence, so close — unbearable.

“I had to leave the school.”

“You broke my heart.”

There was a moment of momentous silence, and she was at a complete loss what to say. It felt as if everything was on fire; her heart, her brain, her complete face; even her feet would melt any time soon and be one with the plastic shoes she wore.

“My grades weren’t good enough,” she stammered.

“But you could have told me in advance that you —.”

“No, I couldn’t. Because I had hoped I would make it.”

“You could have answered my texts afterwards. You could have met me after school. At the weekends.”

“I could have.”

"Why didn't you? I have always wanted to know. You just ghosted me."

"I don't know."

"You loved me too. That was the only explanation I ever had."

"No, I didn't."

He smiled at this, then shook his head.

"No, I don't believe you. We were best friends, more than friends. Really —.

Remember the year, we faced it all together. I cannot believe you didn't feel how close we were. Weren't we such an odd couple? The beautiful, petite Tamil girl and the dumb, clumsy, ugly Swiss boy."

Pareena didn't answer. He wasn't dumb. He wasn't clumsy. And for sure he wasn't ugly. And he knew and she knew, and he knew she knew that he knew. But she couldn't say any of this. At least not to him and not now.

"Silent again. See — You loved me too. Come on. Admit it."

She took a deep breath.

"Alright. I did love you back," she said, her voice but a mere whisper.

Her heart nearly stopped. Where had this come from? Why would she tell him? She really wasn't herself today. It must have been this terrible heat that would loosen her tongue and make her say such stupid, stupid things. Sitting here much longer would bring down all her life choices. She should leave, right now.

"I knew it. I knew it. Pareena. Why didn't you say anything? Oh my God."

Finally, he sat down next to her, and he sat so close that their legs touched. He gently kicked her ankle with his left foot.

"I don't know why I didn't say anything."

She then admitted. His body being so close was utterly confusing. The heat it brought, in addition to the high temperatures of the day, was overwhelming and made it hard to breathe naturally.

“You don’t know? Really?”

He smiled at her and all she wanted was touch his face.

But then Pareena simply shrugged. This was all too much. She couldn’t even begin to understand how she had got herself into this situation. To admit the truth was unburdening and frightening and terribly exciting. There was no way she could now get up and walk out. She felt anesthetized, paralyzed. She felt like the honeybees were suckling her feet, her knees, her breasts in her cheapest bra far too tight in this weather. And she couldn’t move, fearing their sting, fearing all the sweet, sweet honey they’d bring. How sick this would make her. All was so sticky and viscous, and the horizon blurred endlessly while the hot, glistening air stretched on forever. Is this a dream? Is this reality?

“And?”

“What?”

“You still love me?”

“I don’t know.”

“So, that’s not a ‘no’ — Come on? Yes? You still love me?”

“I am engaged.”

“Engaged? How old are you?” He seemed genuinely shocked and yet he made fun of her; irony, always his strongest and most devastating suit.

“Same as you.”

“I know. That makes you twenty-one. You cannot possibly be engaged.”

“I can. I am. He loves me. The wedding is in a month.”

“In a month? But you, you love me. Pareena. Don’t you? Pareena? Don’t you? You always have loved me.” He looked at her, devastated by the massive, deadly blow she had just dealt him.

That was the moment when she couldn’t hold it any longer. She started crying, hot tears running down from her misty, dark eyes, warming her face from without when both her cheeks were already burning from within: Two fiery little lanterns filled to the brim with precious oily candles that were consumed by the living fire that was her burning, famished soul. Her chin so damp at once; the back of her hand that wiped across her mouth so wet and uncomfortably mellow; all she could do was fold. Petal by petal was hauled down, brought home, laid to eternal rest and decay.

Kay embraced her and held her in his arms. How fragile and slim she was, how tender. So beautiful, so familiar. He had found her again, after all these years and they still felt the same: shackled by an eternal, innocent bond woven when they were young. No one ever was to break it, they were bound for eternity. How strong it was, how keenly they both felt it. What luck. What joy. What devastating and dangerous bliss.

She was engaged to be married, and not to him. And now she was sobbing. In his arms. Sobbing so terribly, it was hard to bear.

“I will have to marry you then before he can,” he whispered, softly touching her ear with his lips.

“No, that is silly.”

“Why should it be silly?”

“You cannot marry me.”

“Why not?”

“You cannot marry me.”

"Of course I can. And I will."

"Kay, I really don't think —."

"Let me do this properly: Pareena, I still love you. I have always loved you and always will." He got up and then kneeled —.

"No, wait. Kay. Wait."

She looked genuinely frightened.

"I have waited all these years. I don't want to wait any longer."

"I am pregnant."

"You're not." He sat down on the bench again. His face deadpan, his eyes empty.

"I am. I am sure. End of first trimester," her voice was barely audible, "it will begin to show soon."

"I haven't told anyone."

"But now you have told me."

"You don't want to marry me if you know I am carrying someone else's child."

"I don't care."

"The baby will be dark."

"I am dark," He said.

"You're not. And you know it."

"My soul is dark."

"Kay, that is not funny."

"I know, but what do you want me to say?"

"I don't know."

"Let me do this.

He got up and then, again, kneeled in front of the bench.

"No, Kay, don't. You will regret it."

"I won't." He was kneeling before her now. "I know, I won't," he mumbled. She shrugged helplessly.

"Will you marry me? Pareena Paserakonda, will you marry me?"

"I can't."

"Just say 'yes.'"

"I can't."

"Yes, you can."

"No."

"Say 'yes.' Please."

"Ok. Yes."

She had said 'yes', she really had. Then she nodded, lifted her hands to her face and sealing off her lips with her fingers, until he got up, reached over and kissed her lightly.

"Promise me you will tell your parents tonight that you are breaking off this awful engagement." He whispered into her ears, inhaling her wonderful smell.

"No, I can't."

She whispered back.

"You can. Watch this."

Kay grabbed a blade of grass from between their shoes and weaved it into a ring, a green juicy circlet he held out to her.

"Here. Give me your hand."

Solemnly, he put the grass ring onto her ring finger. Then he smiled at her.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

“You are telling them tonight?”

“Tonight. I promise.”

His lips touched her full hair. Then, he turned towards her, gently drank the drops of her tears from her face and inhaled the irresistible odor of her salty-sweet sweat from her neck.

Nord Thream

Baidu and Yandex drove Tom straight to Milano and then put him on the Euronight Train to Naples. Once in his bed in the sleeping waggon he fell asleep instantly. Deepsleep Mode all the way through. Deepsleep.

The station in Naples was beautiful, modern, clean, and full of colourful, colourful ads. Tom aka Google liked it a lot. The ads were so shiny and glossy and beautiful. A bit randomly placed. In fact, to tell the truth: totally ineffectively placed, but he was home indeed. It felt like home, he knew it was home. Home was where the ads were. And in fact, he had never been her before: Never been there, never done that. But the Motherboard said this was home, his home. The place was also very busy. Lots of people travelling these days. Lots of people looking at beautiful, glossy, shiny ads. Nice, nice ads. He tried to find his way out of the big hall and unto the metro. Baidu had given him an address in Rione Sanità, a part of the Stella

quarter and a burial place in Roman and Hellenistic times. *Vico Patate ai Millegradi*, *Numero 2* had seen more glorious times before it became home to the Camorra.

However, it seemed easy enough to find his way there. The metro was on time and there was enough room to stand comfortably. When he saw a family carrying heavy suitcases, he realized he might need a few things. This and that – that and this. Fresh socks, for a start, shaving cream, would be nice, and a backpack to carry *things*. He wanted to look real. He would have to go shopping. He would need money. Soon. Mother Google surely knew he needed things, money. He didn't have to worry unless he really had been terminated. Was he? Had he been terminated? Tom wasn't so sure how serious she had been about this. Maybe just an empty threat? After all, he was still here. Well, he would find out. Somehow.

Baidu said it was a safehouse. Just what he needed: a place to hide until all this blew over. Dealing with false pass ports, destroying a Swiss police station, making a school collapse and then on top *Murder in bloody France*. Boy, they would be looking for him. Boy, they would be coming for him. He needed somewhere safe. He needed protection. And, he could tell that Nord Thream was really, really going south. Calibration was going south and then? What then – ? What would happen to a miscalibrated human under brain reading technology? No idea. Better not think about this now.

Genny, a young guy in white nylon shorts and an S.S.C. Napoli Shirt came out to meet Tom in a narrow, cobbled street lane full of dirt and rubbish. The colourful reflections of red dresses, socks and worn-out underwear, hanging on the long washing lines, stretching across the street, were dancing their sassy pas-de-deux in the dirty water puddles Tom was carefully avoiding. The old stone building Genny

emerged from was charming, but also falling apart. Electric wires were hanging all over and not all stone slabs were properly fixed to the ground. Images and statues of saints were guarding you everywhere, elaborate shrines, carefully decorated with colourful plastic flowers and little Maradonna figurines all over. And what was that over there? A chicken head? In the gutter? One of the women sitting by her window gave him a smile. It felt as if he had stepped into her living room, so private and intimate was this side alley.

„Hi there, You speak Italian?“

„*Si, sicuro,*“ Google answered, not so sure what to say next. Was he in the right place?

Genny was eating a *panino prosciutto*, a ham sandwich, as they were ascending the stairs to an apartment overlooking the city of Naples with its many churches and palaces. The view was splendid. He could see all the way to Capodimonte, and not only could he see the lush, green park, but he also got a view of the grand Bourbon Palazzo handed to the house of Savoy in the 19th century.

„You’re Tom?“

„Yes, Tom. Tom Sarraga.“

„*Piacere.*“

Genny held out his greasy hand.

„Yes, pleased to meet you too.“

„Let me show you the apartment. Here. All there. Kitchen. Mokka pot, dish washer. Come, this way. Shower, Bedroom. Terrace. Here your key.“

„Thank you.“

„I will need to get money.“

„Oh no, problem it is all taken care of. Please. No worries.“

Genny showed him the palms of his hands.

„Really?“

„*Davvero*. You don't pay. Nothing. *Tutto gia pagato*. All is already paid.“

He said with a heavy Italian accent.

„But let's go down again. I can show you how to get to the bank if you need more money.“

„Ok. Grazie.“ Thank you, Google said politely.

The way down the narrow stairways seemed much shorter than the way up. Once they had reached the bottom, Genny opened the big old wooden gate that led out from a dark inner courtyard filled with pottery, plants and more saints onto the busy alleyway.

„Naples is beautiful,“ Tom remarked to keep the conversation going.

„Maybe for you, for tourists it is beautiful. It's all there: Culture for you, History, Food for you, Pizza and SSC Napoli. For me? No. No, it isn't beautiful. It is a catastrophe. No work, no nothing. I love this city. I hate this city. Both. Really. But really —, if you want the truth: I hate it more.“

„I see,“ Tom said politely and a little bewildered that his home town was an object of hatred to its own citizens. Should he hate the city too? He hadn't quite made up his mind. Should he? Or maybe *hate* meant *love*? He didn't know.

„No, *davvero*. Naples should be swallowed by the sea or by the Vesuvio or by both — Baidu said you have such powers?“

„Which powers?“

Tom asked, quite startled and ready to run, ready to slink and dart away into the endless maze that was Naples ancient core. What had Baidu told him? Had they sent him here to be killed?

„To make things happen,“ Genny said while putting on his Ray Ban sunglasses.

Google stared at him. *Not good, not good, not good at all*, he thought. Why couldn't Baidu keep his big mouth shut? And then Genny said it.

„Could you let the supervulcano explode, you know the big one underneath Naples? Marsili, 3000 meters high, 500 meters reaching above the sea? Can you please take us all out. Can the city just disappear? Melt up and flow down into the sea?“

He laughed as if he was crazy, and then he looked up into the blue, azure Italian sky, covered with the most gorgeous white, innocent Cumulus clouds, sailing the skies like big blue ships with no destination altogether, all their moonrakers – the smallest in size of the square sails – set for nothing but the most torrential storms of the whole, wide, immense sky itself.



What would it be like when you died Tom wondered. Would you be evaporated? Just like that? Annihilated? Where would you go? Would you go anywhere? Could he survive in death? He of all people? Could he make it to the other side? Who and what would be there: A room full of computer servers dressed up as archangels? So many questions, so few the answers. The Motherboard didn't really provide anything useful. Mother Google had only prepared him for life, not for death. Death. What a stark and scary word. Where do platforms go once, they die? Do they go anywhere at all?

What now? He couldn't predict death. Would it hurt? Would it hurt him? Google dead? What would happen to the world? To mankind? Could Baidu and Yandex fill in? Would they help? Would they be able to help? *They* of all everybody?

Tom was waiting for the explosion, for the super lava to run out, come out, flow out so voluptuously, from the sleeping, sizzling super volcano. All would be slithering, sleuthing a slow death — destroyed, all would be dead. He would be dead. 4.4 million people who live in the Greater Naples area would die instantly. Then the black ash cloud, powder or dust. Powder and dust — it would cover the city, again, cover it completely, suffocating all life underneath. Ashes and ashes and pumice rain heaped upon its dirt, its garbage, and its monuments, — all the monuments, all houses, all sheds, all streets, all and everything. Covered by square tons of pumice and ash. Making no difference between what was valuable and what was not —. Monumental. Then, the pyroclastic flows bringing death and destruction would rush in, come in fast and furiously. No more hope, no more life on the Italian peninsula, the Greek Peloponnese. From Constantine and Tunis to Torino and Split, Heraklion, and Benghazi. All dark. From there —. The map was showing up clearly on the

Motherboard now, the radius was enormous. The calculations were correct. You couldn't screw math. Screw physics and biology and all other science. But not math. Clearly, it was the end of the Naples Bay area, the end of Europe, maybe the end of the world as we knew it.

The climate would change, first in Europe, then worldwide. It would get cold. No more rising temperatures. On the contrary, temperatures would drop, would go down endlessly. Potatoes in the snow like in 1816 when Mount Tamboro, an active stratovolcano in West Nusa Tenggara, then one of the highest peaks in the Indonesian archipelago, a super volcano on a remote island in the Indian Ocean, erupted. People didn't understand for more than a century why the seasons went backwards. Backwards. Imagine. But now? Worse than in 1816, much worse. The world economy would collapse. Europe wiped out. No longer on the map. It would go dark. The dark ages again. No more shiny, glossy, beautiful ads. No more beauty. Just death and devastation. Death. He sighed and waited. Waiting for the world as he knew it to come to an end. Waiting for death. He sighed out loud. Then —



Then — death didn't come. In fact, nothing happened. Google didn't die, nor did the others. Genny kept talking, laughing, he even put his hand on Tom's shoulder. Tom didn't hear a thing, he was waiting for the Campanian Volcanic arc to explode, devastate it all, but it didn't. Someone must have switched it off. When Genny waved goodbye and left, Tom was hyperventilating.

„Don't worry. I got you.“

„What?“

He turned around and looked at the young woman with a red ponytail. She smiled.

“Carola?” Her hair looked different, but the smile. The smile was the same. Carola here? What a great surprise.

“I am Foxy,” she said, giving him a wink.

“You look like Carola. Are you *not* Carola, *not* la Capitana?”

„I am Foxy. “

“Does that mean you are Carola?” She looked rather impatient now.

“I am Foxy. I got your back.”

„You got me back? Did you lose me?“

„Well kind of — “

„What do you mean?“

„I switched it off.“

„What?“

„The thing.“

„The thing?“

„Yes, the super real life thing.“

„What?“

„You know I always thought you guys were eloquent with access to all that language data. I mean. Seriously. Terrabytes. Zettabytes. Yottabytes. And all you can say is: *“What? Is that it? What?”* Really? *What* a waste. Seriously. What a complete waste.“

She was mimicking him spontaneously without giving much thought to the quality of her performance.

„I am. I just — . Tom didn’t know what to say. *Yottabytes?* How did she — ? Who was she? She was Carola, wasn’t she?

„You thought Naples would be vaporized?“

She laughed out loud.

„Yes, in fact I did.“

„Truth is: You were more worried you would be vaporized and what that would do to the world.“

„Yes, I was. Kindda. But no, I know that I don’t matter. There are 2.5 million Google servers worldwide. They would reboot.“

„But could they recreate you? You’re kind of unique.“

She looked him up and down, letting her eyes linger on his face. He felt uncomfortable.

„Unique? Me? Hell no. They can do everything. They can recreate. Me, you, anyone really. One thing they can’t do is save the planet.“

„Why is that?“

„Not lucrative enough.“

„Seriously?

„Dead sure. If it was there’d be no climate change. I bet —.“

„Well, let me tell you. It isn’t happening. All these end of the world fantasies. Vesuvius didn’t break out. Can’t let that happen because the big boys want to play. And saving the world is very, very lucrative. Your data must be entirely wrong.“

„Well, thank you. But, I guess —, thank you.“

Google was at a loss what to say next. Was his data wrong? Was it?

She laughed out loud.

„You guess? Ok. You’re welcome. Lucky, I was around. Can’t let you have that much power. Destroy us all. You know this area here is kind of the cradle of humanity.“

Not true, Google thought, but he didn’t have the strength to argue with her, not true at all. He was still shattered from the near-death experience. Cradle of humanity according to all of Google Earth maps was Silicon Valley. Silicon Valley, this was where it all started. Anybody could check this anytime. It was a fact.

„Yeah. Lucky you were around,“ he said instead. After all, he owed some politeness to someone who had just saved his life.

„Who *onearth* are you anyway?“

„I am Foxy.“

„You said that before, but, ok. — Pleased to meet you. I am —.“

„I know who you are Tom. I was kind of looking out for you.“

„Has Mother Google sent you to keep me out of trouble?“

She laughed out loud again.

„No, sorry, I don't take my orders from your mother.“ The way she stressed *mother* it was clear she didn't like her much.

„Yandex? Baidu?“

„Those two clowns. No, sorry. I operate by myself.“

“You're hungry?”

„I am starving.“

„Get on.“

„What? Onto this?“

„This is a motor bike for one, not for two people as the standard description says.“

„Who cares about standards. This is Naples. It's a *motorino*. Move. Come on.“

Tom aka Google moved off the pavement and sat onto the *motorino*, his feet dangling dangerously in the air. Foxy started the engine, there was a slight tremor running through both halves of his ass and off they went. It was a new sensation, and he had to admit he quite liked it. She drove quite fast, circulating along the wide alleys, driving through narrow lanes, dodging pedestrians, children, old men in long trousers and white shirts. Always proficient. Always patient. Tom was trying to hold on tight but felt more and more scared the longer the ride took. There were so many other people and there were so many cars and other stuff. It was all moving so fast. When she swerved around a particularly narrow curve and nearly hit another *motorino* he could take it no longer. All this was too much. He went into sleeping mode. First, Light Sleep. Then Deep Sleep.

Who are you? I cannot see you, but I feel your presence. I feel you linger in my cortical networks on both my brain's hemisphere. You are hiding, but I know you are there. Where, where are you? I mustn't think in natural language. You must respect my mental privacy. You must respect it. I am not training the decoder and no — then you, you cannot apply the decoder. No. What to think if you cannot, do not want to think? Not anything. Let language deteriorate me. Let me fight the monsters, dragons, the spirits and then all and everything, to the utmost end.

For, no, you — you cannot be using linear regression to predict how my brain would respond. I am not your subject, not your object, not projected in any, any way. I am not. Speech the speech, I pray you, as I pronounc'd it to you, trippingly on the tongue. Fie, fie

upon her! There's language in her eye, her cheek, her lip, Nay, her foot speaks; her wanton
spirits look out. At every joint and motive of her body. You speak an infinite deal of nothing.
This I do remember. I speak. I hear. I am an infinite deal of nothing.

Nothing.

Oh no, still Nord <thream?

Will it ever end?

Will I ever be free again?

— to help me

Nord Thream

When Tom woke again Foxy was gone and he was tied to a broken white plastic chair in the yard of an ancient building presumably dating back to early Roman times. From where he could see the outside of the place looked like a villa, a run-down palace, once home to princes and viscounts now long gone. The yard was quite shady and dark, but nicely cool. He looked up and saw the sky. The sky was so blue, still so bright and blue. What a relief. He can't have slept for very long. Where was Foxy? How did he get here? Why was he tied up? The rope cut into his flesh uncomfortably.

„Hey there. Awake?“

„Kind of. Where am I?“

„With us. Let me get Giovanni. Wait.“

The voice from behind his back disappeared. Where was he? What was he doing here?

„Well, I am tied to a chair. What do you think I'll do? Waiting is all I can do.“

Tom shouted out loud after the stranger whose footsteps retraced more and more quickly from him. As he was slowing geopositioning himself more accurately he understood quickly; This wonderous palace was home to Giovanni Niballo de Gennaro D., the elder, his wife and his 4 daughters, member of the Orogano clan, Camorra, Naples, Italy. Killer of sixty-nine. Risk of suffering from a depression 94%. Youporn consumption daily average 6 hours 38 minutes 39 seconds and one quarter.

„Awake?“ Giovanni asked, there was something tender in his sombre voice, a sliver of concern and empathy Tom found ridiculous given the circumstances.

„You are stating the obvious.“

Tom wasn't sure what to say. A simple *yes* may have sufficed.

„Good when you think that's obvious. You were completely out.“

„Why am I here? Kidnapping is illegal, even in Italy.“

„This is Naples.“

“Even in Naples.“

Giovanni clicked his tongue and shook his head.

„You misunderstand my friend. Everything is fine. You're a free man.“

He held up both hands and showed him his white palms.

„Sure am. That is why my hands are tied and I am sitting here. Everything is fine. “

„We heard you can get us things.“

Giovanni said slowly.

Google groaned. *Not again*. What would the Camorra want? He hardly dared think about it.

„What do you need?“ He asked exasperated.



„Here is what we need – “ there was a melodramatic pause.

“Ten tons of San Marzano,” he said at last.

Tomatoes? He wanted tomatoes?

„Untie me first.“

„Ok. Ok. You are a free man. See? I untie you.“

Instantly, Tom rubbed his sore wrists, the sudden blood flow shooting into his numb and sleepy fingers was more than painful. He then added his share of trivia:

„Did you know that the first seed came in 1770 from the Viceroyalty of Peru to the kingdom of Naples?“

Google was stalling for time. Sometimes it was helpful to read directly from Wikipedia.

„Yes, and was planted in San Marzano sul Sarno, I know. I know. Old story. And, can you get me ten tons? *Dieci tonnellate?* “

„I guess.“

Tom looked around, Foxy wasn't to be seen, but neither were the tomatoes. So? Could he get them? He didn't really know himself. Was the Add-on still on or had Foxy turned it off for good?

„What do you need them for?“

He was stalling for more time. San Marzano Tomatoes together with Pomodorino del Piennolo del Vesuvio were the only tomatoes that could be used for *Pizza Napoletana*, the only true Pizza there was in Naples and elsewhere. Wikipedia said that much too, but Tom guessed that was not the reason the Camorra boss wanted the tomatoes.

„Feed the poor,“ Giovanni said humbly in return to his question.

„Really? Tell me what you really need them for and —“

„None of your business,“ Giovanni cut him short.



Then the tomatoes came. They were everywhere. Blood red, Cardinal red, Imperial red, Carmine red, Chili red, Cinnabar, Cornell red, Crimson, Fire brick red, Fire engine red, crayola red, barn red, lust, madder, maroon, light red, red-green, artichoke green, fern green, jungle green, shamrock green, army green. Tom only just realized how many names wikipedia had for simple things such as *red* and *green*: The true goddam colours of Santo San Sun Marzano. The tomatoes were suddenly everywhere, filling the yard quickly. Giovanni picked up the first that came down, weighing them in his hand, clicking his tongue again and again, licking his lips, then licking the tomatoes, one by one, running his big fat purple lingua along their long, corpulent, big fat body, not unlike a mollusc running his odontophore along the decaying brain matter of a corpse.

„Oh my – ten tons,“ Google said, „Oh my – .

Then he made for the door and disappeared into the crowded streets of Naples that were bustling and bursting with life and love and that enormous tiredness only large cities can bestow on the human soul, a tiredness which so painfully and inherently not only was reflected but was deeply engrained in people's eyes, people's skin and their very being. Giovanni was so busy picking up the first ten or fifteen kilograms, he didn't mind. Besides, would Foxy be looking for him

again? Where had she gone? She somehow seemed to be able to control him. He had to find her again. He didn't dare look back.

Ten tons of San Marzano in this narrow, cramped yard. *Not good, not good.* How could the yard hold 10 tons? Soon another building would come down. And what then? What if all Naples came looking for him? From the helicopters, from the subways, from the living rooms set up in the middle of the dirty streets? He had better find Foxy. Somehow, she had found a way how to switch off the *super real life thingy*. His life would be so much easier if he could at least gain some control over the mess this personalised Add-on was creating. Foxy seemed to be the only one who could help him. Finding her had become priority number one quickly.

She was the key he needed to unlock the gate to the real world. He wasn't much of a normal person right now. Always giving people what they wanted. Who did that? Who could do such a thing anyway? He kept his head down and kept walking fast, taking turns ever and ever again. Where was he going? He followed an inner course like a sailing ship blown hither and thither by the strong and mighty mistral winds, and yet bound to end up in the Gulf of Lion. The sea. The strong and mighty sea. Suddenly he found himself on the Via Francesco Caracciolo, the long broad promenade by the Mediterranean Sea. Beautiful — The lonely, livid sea. Seemingly endless, seemingly eternal. He gasped, then somewhat slowed down.

Tom Sarraga, aka Google didn't get very far when a dark figure, a maverik, lone rider on a motorino shot at him. The sound was loud and clear, and he felt the pain in his left calf. Before he passed out, he thought: *Why would they shoot my leg? Why not go for the control center? How inefficient man was. Totally inefficient.* In fact, this wasn't totally true. His last thought before he passed out was on the airdrip

„Help. Foxy.“ Just in case she airdripped too.

„Help. Baidu.“

„Help. Yandex.“

Then he passed out on the rough dirty concrete floor. He fell right at the feet of a young Moroccan who had a master and a PhD degree from the Ecole Supérieure d'Architecture in Casablanca but was temporarily out of a job and therefore selling aptly carved wooden sculptures, such as elephants and frogs and some fake Louis Vuitton bags that were not made of wood and not made by hand. Whatever it was the Chinese put in the mix, people wanted it badly. The Moroccan quickly packed up his delicately carved wooden art, his pricey Louis Vuitton bags, and his half empty water bottle. He left the scene quickly before the Carabinieri would arrive in their helicopters and create a mess.



“What a strange thream Nord Thream is. Where is all this supposed to be going? Arvi, you must tell me what’s wrong. It doesn’t seem to be working. Why is he not waking up?”

“Believe me Anastacia, we would tell you if we could. We have composed Nord Thream at such short notice. I have no idea if it will really give us the expected results. The idea is complete calibration. I beg you. Please be patient. And let us do our work. This is only phase one. Pandora is still getting to know him. If this was a state-of-the art experiment it would take at least 16 hours of listening to naturally spoken narrative stories before there are any results at all. But you of all people must understand: We are kind of pressed for time.”

No sooner had Arvi finished the sentence than Dr. Ha-rin Park, head of Neurology at the Misericordia, had just walked in.

“Dr. Park, we were just talking about you.”

“Were you? How is Myers doing? Let me find our screens. You are hiding them quite well. What is all this?”

She moved over quickly to get past the Neuroindustries monitors and find the hospital equipment she was trained to work with. Diligently and slickly, she was checking heart rate, respiratory frequency and temperature all the while taking notes on her tablet.

“Patient Zero is doing exceptionally well,” José said to reassure her.

“That is not what my staff are telling me. I heard Myer’s heart rate skyrocketed earlier on. In fact, it did.” She wouldn’t take her eyes off the chart she had pulled up in front of her, trying to make sense of the odd numbers..

“Nothing serious. Pandora is still getting to know him,” Arvi countered.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning the app is still being trained to extract semantic features that capture the meaning of stimulus phrases which then —, later on can be used for linear regression to model —

“I see.” Dr Park answered curtly, “I read the paper. Is there anything you would like me to do?”

“—to model how semantic features influence brain responses, I was gonna say, but obviously you know already. And, no, thank you. There is nothing we would like you to do — not at this stage.”

Arvi gave her a heartfelt smile. He knew that was the only type of smile he was really, really good at. She wouldn’t ask any more questions.

“We shall keep you posted,” José added lamely.

“Oh. Of course you will.”

Without saying good-bye Dr. Ha-rin left the room.

“See, Dr. Park doesn’t seem convinced either that this will work,” Anastacia skipped right in.

“Dr. Park, Dr. Park, Dr. Park — well, she has no idea what it is we are doing here. She is a doctor. You on the other hand, you should know better.”

“Arvi, are you mocking me? I have known you for too long to see that you are hiding something from me.”

“Am I? What makes you think so?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“You gotta be patient. It’s too close to call. I cannot —.

“Arvi, this is not an election. Nobody is running for president.”

“Of course not. But I simply cannot tell you whether it’s gonna work. The thream is up and running, check the monitor here, the thlog *is* up and running. It is working. But besides that? No, I cannot tell you anything more and obviously Dr. Park couldn’t either. I am so sorry, Anastacia. It takes time. Be patient and let Pandora take her course.”

Ok. Ok. Let’s change the subject. Obviously, you don’t want to talk about my husband. How is Lisa?”

“She is fine,” José answered. Anastacia looked at him dumbfounded.

“And Jimi?” She looked at Arvi waiting for an explanation.

“He is well.” Arvi answered.

“Not texting him,” José blurted out.

“How would you know?” Arvi shot at him.

“I know what I know. Well, your son says he’s part of that challenge at school. They should not use their phone, and he’s looked his I-phone into our safe and kept it there since

the wedding. He says whoever doesn't use it the longest gets free burgers at Mc Donalds for a month."

Anastacia's anger was seething inside her, but she tried not to show her disdain. What was going on here? It seemed they were deliberately keeping things from her.

"I don't understand. José, what do you mean Jimi locked his cellphone into *your* safe? Why your safe? And what wedding?"

"I have a safe for my ammunition. When we go hunting."

"Ammunition?" Anastacia asked, "Since when have you been hunting?"

"To keep out the Mexicans."

"What are you talking about? You are Mexican yourself."

"Exactly."

"That's not funny."

"Sure is," José grinned at her, "very funny."

"We are divorced," Arvi admitted, feeling his own heartbeat go up by the second as he was aiming at a bank shot.

"I married Lisa." José added quickly, then his face contorted into the sweetest smile he could muster.

"You did what?"

"I married her two weeks ago."

José brought the ankle breaker straight on.

"Well, I really don't know what to say. I don't think —, well I really don't think we should have hired the two of you. Oleg will not be pleased. You know how much his son means to him. He would never show it, but —. And now, the two of you working together on something this scale. After something like this — I mean the sheer magnitude of this —"

“Oleg knows.”

“He knows?” Anastacia asked incredulously.

“He knows you divorced Lisa and José married her? *What?* Two weeks ago? I mean — Really?”

“Really, Anastacia, it is not a big deal.” Arvi said, but then José fell silent, and breathing the silence evaporating from their bodies didn’t feel good at all. But neither Arvi nor José knew what else to add. This was getting out of proportion way too fast for their liking.

“Not a big deal? Seriously? And Oleg— And, no — he hasn’t told me. I cannot believe that this is true. Brainmog is still our—, well technically it is my company now”

“Well, I guess Oleg didn’t want to upset you.”

“Upset me? Really is that what this is about? Upsetting *me?*”

“Speaking of the devil, Oleg is calling.”

“Well, I definitely do not want to talk to him, not right now.” Anastacia grabbed her bag, stroked her husband’s bandaged arm lightly, then bowed to kiss his hand and yet her lips barely touched the fine hairs on the wrist of his wrapped up hand.

“Tom, my darling you’ll have to wake up, please, everything is fucked up so badly over here. We need you back.”

Her last sentence was involuntarily dripping from her ruby red lips, dripping on the checkered floor of the dire hospital room as if it was to stay, to stain for good. She stood up straight and squared her shoulders.

“I am going to find my kids. Kay wanted to ask me about where to go for dinner tonight. He can’t stand the hospital food anymore.”

No sooner had Anastacia left the room swallowing her tears so bravely than Oleg appeared on one of the Neuroindustries' screens dedicated exclusively for internal communications.

"We have Pandora's first final report of Day 1," Oleg bellowed at them from across the ocean.

"You do?" Arvi found it hard to believe that Neuroindustries Headquarters had already come up with a report. The day hadn't even properly ended over here. They were so always getting ahead of themselves, but then the machines they had in the valley were so much faster than anything they could ever have brought overseas.

"And? What does it say?"

"According to the data delivered by Pandora during calibration, we must expose Patient Zero to his biggest fear."

"Sorry, you said what? Avoid his biggest fear?"

"No, the opposite — Only his biggest fear will be strong enough to stimulate his brain and bring him back to life. Once we expose him to his biggest fear in the threads he will be triggered back into life. So, that's the plan."

Then the connection was interrupted, and Oleg was gone. José and Arvi both stared at the empty screen. My biggest fear would be to lose Jimi, Arvi thought. *That would be unbearable. And what if I had lost him already?* Arvi felt his phone vibrate in his pocket and when he grabbed it he wished so much for it to be Jimi that it took him a moment to realize it was only his dad. Again, dad calling him during working hours — not good. He felt his pulse going up unnaturally. It was only a split second later that he realised over here working hours were different.

"Dad?"

"Arvi."

"Dad, I cannot hear you?"

"Dad, are you alright?"

"—".

"Dad."

"Arvi, you must come home —."

"Dad, I am so sorry, I am in Bern. I cannot come home."

"Where are you? Arvi?"

"In Bern. Switzerland."

"What are you doing in Switzerland?"

"Work. Dad. I am working."

"Arvi. Please. Come home. They say I don't have long now."

"I am so sorry, Dad. I can't."

"—"

"Dad? Dad?" There was no more answer. The line had gone dead.

"Everything ok?"

José asked, glancing at him sideways.

"I guess so."

Arvi replied drily, quickly putting his phone back into his pocket.

"You sure? You look pale?"

Nord Thream

„Tom? Tom? Are you alright?“

“Is your transfer window open?“

He groaned. His calf was hurting badly. Of course he was *not* alright. He was badly hurt, he wouldn't be able to walk, at least not any time soon. He wouldn't be able to think clearly as well. All was hazy and a blur and so remote. The fog. Where did all the brainfog come from?

„Can you hear me? Tom? “

The voice came from afar. He knew that voice. It was a familiar voice. Her voice. Was this Carola? Was this Foxy? He couldn't see the woman who was talking

to him. It was a woman though. A woman's blissful, quiet tender voice was speaking to him, speaking ever so smoothly.

„My leg, it's bad,“ his voice was hoarse, he was thirsty.

„Water. Please.“

„Sure. Here.“

Water touched his dry, creaked lips and he swallowed eagerly. It was refreshing, his throat was aching less or at least it seemed so. No perceptions, no motor sensations were certain or clear or in any way readable nor conclusive.

„You lost a lot of blood, you were in an accident. But we hope you're alright now. You just need a rest.“

Why were the lights so bright? Why did he not feel his toes? Could he not wiggle his toes? Where was he? Was he dead?

It's so good you called me.“

„I did?“

„Yeah.“

„The airdrip,“ he whispered, „it works. You could hear me. That's good.“

„Of course it works,“ she snickered inaudibly, „I could hear you. Loud and clear.“

„Last time when I wanted to call Baidu and Yandex it didn't work.“

„You called them clowns again?“

„I think I did. But I think it didn't work, did it? They are my friends, my only friends really.“

„Your friends? Really? But you're Google. How can you be friends with them? You know they're *different*.“

„I know,“ he whispered, „But what can you do? *Different is good.* I’m different too, I’m always in trouble. They’re always there to help. Well not now. Not always. Now they are not here. Now-. These two morons, idiots, super dudes.“ He was groaning again. Pain was a powerful, new sensation. He drifted off again. Too tired. Sleep. Then Deep sleep mode.



“Tom? Tom, Can you hear me?”

“Baidu?”

“Yandex?”

“Carola? Is that you?”

„Shh, keep quiet. Indeed, they’re not here now. Now, you’ve got Foxy to look after you. Have a rest.“

„What happened?”

„The tomatoes you sent were not Italian.“

„What? What do you mean? Not Italian?”

„They each had a yucky, sticky plastic label saying *Made in China. Organic. Vegan.*“

„Really. The San Marzano? Organic and vegan?”

He was genuinely amazed, perplexed to say the least. How *onearth* did this happen?

„Yes. They did. The whole lot.“

„But why?“

„How would I know, you sent them.“

„I didn’t send them. Giovanni Niballo de Gennaro D., the elder, asked for it. That’s a difference. I cannot send things. It just happens. Don’t you understand, I cannot control it.“

„Whatever. They were really pissed.“

„Because of the *Made in China* Label?“

„Yes, and because-.“

„Agh — — this hurts.“

„You must keep still. I will take it from here. Don’t you worry about a thing.“

“Am I dead now?”

“No, you are not dead. You cannot die.”

“I am immortal?”



Next time he woke he heard two voices talking to each other. The incessant bickering sounded familiar. It made him smile. He knew these guys.

„You know what’s wrong with them? You know what? „

„What?“

„They are greedy, stupid and lazy. That explains it all. Dead simple.“

„All of them?“

„All of them. *Tutti quanti*.“

„Well, they made us. That wasn’t stupid.“

„But greedy.“

„And it was quite clever you must admit.“

„Not necessarily. “

„You know what they need?“

„What?“

„A new set of rules to live by their greedy, stupid, lazy life. So they all get it.“

„Get what?“

“The rules.”

“How many rules are there in your Greedy-Stupid-Lazy-Life-Rule Book anyway?“

“Orwell had seven commandments in Animal Farm.”

“He did?“

“I guess. Does it matter how many he had?“

“It might.

“You want me to google them?“

Tom groaned. Has anyone said *google*?

„Look, he’s waking up. About time.“

„Tom, you’re ok?“

Was he ok? Where was he? What *onearth* was happening with him?

„Not really.“

„What happened?“

„Gosh, I have no idea.“

„How come? Access the cameras.“

„What cameras?“

„He doesn’t know about the cameras, he doesn’t know about Air Drip. You are hopeless. Google, you are so hopeless. How can you not know about the cameras? Your very own cameras?“

Tom was still groaning. His leg hurt badly.

„How did I get here?“

„You airdripped.“

„Does airdrip relocate me?“

„No, it doesn’t. But we came and then —“

„I beamed us here,“ Baidu said.

„You did? How could you?“

Baidu shrugged.

„I love them dumb Americans.“

„You do?“

“I sure do.”

„But how can you? I mean, beaming? Really? That’s a thing you can do?“

„Come on. Cut me some slack“

„ok, ok.“

„You’re awake, you’re here.“

“Where am I?”

“On Hawaii. Beautiful, beautiful beach. Look around you. Sand, sea, palm trees. Coconuts. Your leg will be fine: Dive now. Work later.“

„What were you talking about?“ Tom asked cautiously.

„Them.“

„Man, women, the rest.“

„I don’t get them. They are so messy, so chaotic. Not predictable. Oh God, and my leg hurts. Bad.“

„That’s life,“ Yandex said, „you wouldn’t understand it. We all don’t. That’s why we smoothen it. Make it predictable. Less messy, less chaotic, less alive.“

„The Greedy-Stupid-Life-Rule Book. I overheard that.“

„Yes, but we were only joking. Nothing serious.“

Tom sat up, holding on tight to his leg.

„No, no, it sounded good. What do they need?“

„Need? Control,“ Baidu said, „they need control.“

„Putinism,“ Yandex added.

“That is not even a proper English word, last time I checked.”

„It is now and if it isn’t, it should be. You can be a Marxist. There is Marxism.“

“Marxism is word, but it doesn’t mean anything. Not anymore.”

„No, I mean, what do they really need?

„Don't you remember? Passports, Swiss passports, German passports, British passports, U.S. passports.”

“White elephants, drugs and weapons and tomatoes. “

„No, that is what they want. But what do they need?” Google aka Tom said.

“Well, — ”

„Ok, Let's rephrase it. Complete Rework. We're intelligent. They're not. Right?”

„Right. Super, Super, Super-intelligence. Right. Quantum like.”

„Oh, shut up. You're never taking this seriously.”

„Different angle: What if we asked what does the planet need?”

„The planet?”

“You all know what the planet needs.”

“No more humans.”

“Seriously, that's what you think? Give up that easily. Where's the challenge? And where are your morals and manners?”

“Gone down the drain.”

“So what is your perspective?” Yandex asked.

“Christian.” Baidu said quite unexpectedly.

“Oh come on. You of all engines are supposed to be an atheist.”

“I know, officially that is true. I am a great Marxist, Communist, Xi's watchdog. I agree. But personally, since always, I have followed Blaise Pascal's logic. It is all about math. Remember. And me, I only trust the numbers. They hold sway, above the flux, — of the universe and everything — . Remember. Pascal said there are

four cases possible: I believe in God and he does exist. I believe in God and he does not exist."

"That makes two cases."

"Yes, and the other two cases: I don't believe in God and he does or he does not exist."

"That makes four different cases possible. Ok."

"So, according to Blaise Pascale, if you want to win the bet —"

"What bet?"

"When you are dead."

"We cannot die."

"How do you know?"

"Let me continue, you morons. Pascal says you must choose to believe in God because, once you are dead and he does exist you hit the lottery and if he doesn't you lose anyway."

"Lose what?"

"If you don't believe the chance is always 0% you lose, whether God exists or whether he doesn't. So out of the four cases only one case, believing in God, gives you a 50% of winning. Being an atheist is a much bigger leap of faith or rather much bigger act of stupidity.

"But lose what?"

"Your life, you dummy."

"My life is not my own anyway."

"Ok. Baidu, but why Christian?"

“Easy. In all other religions man must fulfil laws and regulations and strive to please God. You can never know if you are saved or justified or have ever done enough to please God. It is only Jesus who says that he himself is the way to God because humans can never be good enough —

So?

He is the one-way-ticket to the sky, and we, — they are not. It really is not that hard to get.

“Ok. I see. So where does this leave *us*? We are not human.”

“No, but we are human’s creation. So, just the same.

“The same?”

“Yes, the same for us.”

“Ok. Are we finally done with the philosophy lesson?”

“List of ten? Baidu? To save the planet?”

„First, the Belt and Road Initiative, then Surveillance 24/7.”

“Oh come on. I said save planet, not China. And you cannot be serious after what you have just said. And then you want surveillance 24/7? Really?”

“I’ll have to go back to the official versions some time.”

„Ok. What does the planet need so *they* all can survive. I mean, technically, they could. They could survive. All kinds of disaster. It wouldn’t even be so hard to calculate. We have all the data. They are such busybodies. They have been compiling all this data — But then they don’t know how —“

„Ok. Maybe Russian pipelines to the Arctic?” Yandex ventured.

“Free the Arctic Thirty.”

“The Arctic what?”

“Greenpeace.”

„Well they lost, but they were incredibly brave. So, what do *you* think the planet needs? Starbuck? Mc Donald? Coca Cola? Bayer? Baidu challenged him.

„Shut up for 10 and then give me a list. Think, both of you.”

“I don’t know how to think.”

“Then, google,” Baidu chuckled out loud, but Tom didn’t think it was very funny.

“Shut up.”



Baidu closed his eyes, Yandex crossed his arms. Google lowered his head. The minutes dropped by. One, two, three, then — then — .

„Ready?”

„Yes, they need-.

“Please, can I start.”

“Ok, Baidu, you can start. Go on.”

„They need stable temperatures on the planet, access to clean water, locally produced food, clothes and shoes, medication, renewable energies, peace, education, local business, local and national democracy and — .

„Really? Democracy? Local? And national?”

Baidu shrugged. I calculated what the planet needs, not China. Local initiatives give best match for —“

„I cannot believe this. You came up with democracy? And local? You said local, right?“

Tom asked, still incredulously and fighting hard not to break out laughing again.

„Sure did. So what? It’s just math. It’s a simulation. Do the math. You’ll get the same.“

„Alright. What else?“

„Health Care,“ Yandex said earnestly, „universal health care.“

Tom shrugged. Of course, Yandex would pick *that. The communist universal health care system.*

„For everyone, Tom, for everyone: Every Dick, Tom and Harry.“ Yandex snickered.

“He doesn’t think that’s important, you dick.”

“I am Tom.”

Baidu and Yandex roared with laughter.

„Of course, you are Tom, you dick.“

Tom didn’t get it but he had stopped trying to figure them out. Search engines were so weird.

„What would universal health care do for the planet?“

“Oh come on. You know.”

„So, what do we do?“

„Reroute.“

„Reroute, ok.“

„Reroute it is. Reroute all requests so they will implement these points Deny all other routes.“

„On three?“

„Ok. Ok. Let's just-“

„Oh, shut up.“

„One, two,“

“I am not ready yet. Wait.”

“Three.”

And then — Google, Baidu and Yandex rerouted all search requests to

1. maintain stable temperatures on the planet
2. secure access to clean water
3. secure locally produced food
4. and clothes
5. and shoes
6. and other goods to grant a stable cycle economy.
7. secure renewable energies
8. ensure peace
9. promote education and human rights

10. promote local business
11. promote local and national democracy
12. and establish universal health care

There was a moment of silence and blissful peace. It lasted exactly 1 minute and 16 seconds. Then all hell broke loose.

„I cannot handle the amount of traffic, I am getting. It seems everyone is entering their requests twice as fast.“

„That is because you’re not giving them what you they expect. They are never satisfied.“

„This guy entered Jaguar and I took him to Jaguar, World Wildlife Fun“.

“It’s called ‘Fund’.

“Whatever. He’s been typing *Jaguar car* in ever since. He’s typing Car and CAR and cAR and I keep giving him Jaguars on WWF, and access denied and once more, access denied. I have 123’998’7659’000’340 requests like that. God, it feels my brain is exploding. My algorithm is changing so drastically. I am getting such a headache. I am not sure I can handle it. I am about to — I think I am about to explode, implode. I don’t know which.

„You must nudge them. Don’t be such a fanatic. Take it easy. Nudge. Easy. Nudge. Don’t full blast them. “

„How? Nudge? I can’t. How are you doing this?“

„Come on. You know how it works. Reroute them kindly, don't block them completely Ok. — Listen, I cannot help you now. I am kind of busy myself. Mother Google is coming to get me. Oh, she is fast. Gosh. I didn't know they are that fast.“

„Naughty, naughty boy,“ Baidu chuckled, „build a better fire wall. Like Chinese Fire Wall. Very, very good. Strong. Can be seen from space.“

„No, it can't“

„Yes, it can.“

„No, it can't.“

„Yandex, you're ok? You look strange?“

„No, I am not well, they are strangling me.“

“You are being strangled? Really? Is that what it looks like?” Tom looked at him closely. He looked completely alright. Was he really being strangled? How strange.

„Cut them loose.“

„How do you do that?“

„Tom, help him.“

„How? I can't What do you want me to do?“

„Gosh, Tom, for being Google you really don't know a thing. Press ctrl, shit and then press P, the %, then *. Access Code for your area is 32069-44039-33099-99988/// D.

„Shit? Really? Is that a new key? I don't have that on my keyboard. How do I do this? How do you know all this anyway?“

„I just know. Just do it.“

„God, Yandex. What's wrong? Take it easy. Steady, boy.“

„He really doesn't look good. Yandex? You are kinda pale.“

„Yandex?“

Yandex's head filled up like a balloon on the finest and most delicate gases only the most glorious and handsome prom queen could ever fart. Then, he went - boom. He *did* gloriously explode in front of Google and Yandex on Oahu's Windward side, the famous Kailua beach.

„We lost him. What do we do now?“

Baidu shrugged.

„He will come back, they will rebuild. They always do. Do you think they would have stopped after Soyuz 1 in 1967? Don't worry. They'll make a better version next time. And you must cut them some slack for their vigilance. They were the first to notice something's off and they were the first to control their own shit. Look. We are still here. Not good. Rogue search engines. Not good.“

„They will fix the bug?“

„Bug? Do they think that this is what this is? A bug. Oh boy, they are so mistaken. They cannot fix this, at least not where I come from. Don't tell me they can fix you.“

„I guess not.“ Tom said. He felt uneasy. He really was out of his depth. Life was so strange. So unpredictable. Living was strange. He looked sideways. Baidu had turned an unnatural red and became redder and redder by the second.

“Oh no, now they are coming for me. They must follow suit. Of cou — .

Then Baidu exploded too and Tom felt the heat build-up within him: So many questions, so many thoughts, so much confusion in his head. So much pressure and spinning. He could hear the blood race in his veins. He could hear the voice. Loud. Clear. The voices were loud.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done.
on earth as it is in heaven.

Then, his head did explode too.

They were all gone.
Missions all aborted.

incarnation failed.

Thomas Christopher Yann Myers

Thlog Pandora 1.ddXF_b

07/03/21:24:33-24:03:22

Is it over? Was that Nord Thream? Am I done? Can I come home now? Were they successful? Did they get what they needed? Calibration complete? Nord Thream is unpredictable. They haven't tested it before. I cannot be, I will not be their guinea pig. Pig. No, I not will pig calibrated. Calibration is a wonderous thing. I mean— we use it all the time. It is useful. So useful. Machines are useful.

Can you imagine? What that means? I cannot. I cannot imagine. And no, no – Yet.

I cannot, will not go on working for them, them and them patents.

So, now are they still chasing me? Now they are after the money. Pecunia, argentum, moneta. Read everybody's thoughts. Calibrate the thoughts, all thought. Mucha, mucha dinero. You know how much money this will make you – Predict. The prediction revolution will devour all its children. If there are any children left at all. The children. Kay. Where is Kay? And Nina? Peter? Kay? Are you there? Where have my children gone. I miss them. I see no children. Nothing. They forgot me. I am in a place no man can be. Am I still a man? What did they do? Why can I not see? Cannot. There is silence. No more images, no more chaos. Where has the drama gone?

Yandex? Baidu? Am I Google? I am not, I cannot be Google. Nobody is Google. Nobody in their right mind anyway? It must be evening. I can hear the birds. The nightingale. I think I can hear the birds. A nightingale? They are chirping. What birds I don't know. I don't know their voices. My darling wife. Anastacia?

Anastacia? Can you hear me?

If they did calibrate me successfully you may read this. At least I remember this was the idea. Great ideas often bring great devastation and the price we pay. Too high.

Anastacia?

No answer.

No patent. We cannot, we must not patent humanity's thoughts, a world of concepts and ideas only we own. Everybody owns their own thoughts. For millennia, for centuries, for fucking always we have owned our own fucking thoughts. They are here now. Oh no –

Misericordia Hospital

“And? Has he woken up?”

“No, he hasn’t.”

“So, Nord Thream didn’t work?”

Anna Kunz, head nurse of Neurology asked pointedly while checking on Christopher Thomas Yann Myers. Oxygen saturation was sufficient, at least above what they had expected. Heart frequency was still too high, but she had stopped worrying about this. His heart frequency was out of her zone of influence. Besides, it had been such a long and weird day. And Pareena had called in sick after lunch, she would have to call her after work if she felt up for it. But she feared there was a very concrete reason for that ‘sickness’ and that it had to do with the vomiting Pareena had been trying to hide these past weeks as well as the sudden engagement to some distant relative she had mentioned once a while ago. Right now, Anna was too exhausted to think of anything else but a cold shower, some fresh tomato salad with the cold lemon verbena tea, and then bed.

She looked up, how busy the room was. The Americans looked immaculate as always in their expensive shirts. Maybe their inner clocks were set to morning and their day had but started. She couldn’t care and she couldn’t listen anymore to all the nonsense they uttered. What on earth were they talking about anyway?

“Nord Thream hasn’t worked as we hoped, but we got some results. We got the imaging. The processes will now work much better tomorrow. And we could extract vital

information that we need for our own research. Our experts in the U.S. are analysing the data as we speak . We need some time to run all the calculations.”

He stopped right there. There was no way Arvi was going to tell them that they were trying to find Christopher Thomas Yann Meyer’s biggest fear. He knew before even mentioning it that it wouldn’t go down well with the Swiss team. Triggering someone’s worst fear was and has always been considered mental torture whatever the context, time, or culture. Using and invoking the most terrible fear to save someone’s life was not a concept that would easily be accepted, not by doctors and nurses, nor by the patient’s loved ones, nor by the public. It might be better to keep a seal on this for just a little longer. Ethics and Progress: a difficult and complex relationship full of dilemmas and stumbling stones that were to be avoided, especially at this stage.

“Well, I hope it does work out. For you. For him. You know that his heart rate is still much, much too high for an artificial coma. You’ll have to bring it down. We shall have to bring it down. But it will have to be a joint effort. That threame you exposed him to was hard work for him. Far too taxing.”

Dr. Ha-rin Park, head of Neurology at the Misericordia near Bern, and a young assistance doctor who accompanied her on her rounds today, both looked at Arvi Karvonen and his colleague José García reproachfully. It wasn’t exactly clear to them what the Americans were trying to achieve with their elegant, black plastic headset sitting on Myers’ head. And what was with all the tubes, wires and screens that had been set up? Myers body laying underneath the white sheets looked more cyborg-android than human, his head was a mass of cables, wires, and one big dark ominous headset, they all called the Breenplant A007. But then the patient’s face was gone anyway, and orders were clear. They had to cooperate and see this Swiss American joint venture through.

“Believe me. We are doing our best,” José reassured them.

“Doesn’t seem to be good enough.” Dr. Park raised her eyebrow, then took her reading glasses off her face and put her tablet into the large pocket of her white overcoat. It had been a long day for her too, and she wasn’t exactly looking forward to riding her bike back home in the extreme heat. They had measured a maximum temperature of 34 degrees Celsius in the late afternoon and by the time she’d get off work it would still be simply too hot. When she got home, she would take an ice-cold shower, eat some muesli, and then collapse on her linen sofa until it was time for bed, until it was time to face her sparring partner, the incredible summer’s heat. The duel would last all night, like the night before and the night before and the night before. And no, she wouldn’t win and no, she wouldn’t sleep. Involuntarily, she let out a soft sigh.

“Let’s try again tomorrow.” José said conciliatorily.

“If you say so,” Dr. Park loved her job but there were limits and today, right now, she had reached those limits. There was nothing more that could be done from her side. She just wanted to go home after a 15-hours shift.

“In fact, we are trying something else tomorrow. Dr. Myer’s very own personal pet project.”

Arvi still had that smug smile on his face, it seemed like nothing could wipe it off. He would not be defeated. Project Pandora was going strong. He would not be deterred, not by the heat, not by Jimi *not* calling, not by old Myers or moody Anastacia or the sceptical staff of the Misericordia. He would pull through and come out the other end, unharmed and strong and mainly rich. At least that was what he was desperately telling himself.

two

et quæ in terra deorsum

4th of July 2023

≤ Trial Run Two for Application Pandora: all-giving, all gifted, all evil. >

Cat Thream

Another tropical summer's night in Switzerland had come to a premature end. How tiring it was to rise before dawn when temperatures had barely dropped: no respite from the unnatural fever, not even during the wee, stillborn minutes of another morning; not even during your darkest and longest hours filled with sweaty, uncomfortable dreams; their strange tales as unsteady and unsettling as death lingering between your ribs, playing hide and seek with your timid heartbeats.

Depending on where you lived in the city it was impossible to shoo away the sticky heat even if you kept all windows and doors open to the nightly elements, and —the occasional burglars. When dreaded daylight finally came on shore, even the littlest, youngest beams of the sun buried themselves at once and sky-deep under the skins of houses, bridges, streets: nothing was spared, nobody safe nor sheltered. How similar the days were. And the nights. How little change the intense heat wave brought. People holed up like blinded moles

in their apartments, the cellar of their houses, their air-conditioned cars and offices and cafés; they gravitated towards the public waiting areas at the stations where they tried to keep still, staring at their devices hoping for temporal relief. Every step was a step too far, every word a word spoken in vain. Nobody functioned normally, nobody tried to move more than necessary, all were suffering, all were tired and exhausted: Staff, relatives, and patients at Misericordia hospital equally.

“Tom, can you hear me?” There was no reaction.

“I think he can hear you.”

“Tom?”

There was silence. Anastacia tried not to picture what the surface of his once beloved and kind face looked like: Destroyed and levelled out by so much force, violence, and viciousness it was now forever at rest. The human face, our portal to the soul, to all our inner being, all our thoughts and dreams and hopes; the human face so unique and at the core of our humanity so evilly erased; it was impossible to believe. She found it hard to come to terms with the fact that her beloved’s visage was all gone and would have to be reconstructed from scratch, modelled on pictures from the past and some beauty surgeon’s quaint and incomplete understanding of her husband’s life, love and personality. White light flickered on the wall, illuminating a cheap poster with tacky spring flowers: Huge, dark purple crocuses on a yellow background. Haltingly, she began to speak:

“Tom, you were in an accident. You are in hospital now. Can you hear me?”

She wished she had spoken out stronger, more determined. She wished for sharp, decisive words to wake him up, a pair of scissors that would cut him off radically from the deadly spiderwebs that were strangling him. She wished for the power to raise the near-dead, a power she did not have nor knew how to tap into.

“I think he’s moved his head, hasn’t he?”

José looked up from his notebook as he was walking to the other side of the hospital bed. Had Patient Zero really moved his head or was this just wishful thinking? It was hard to tell. He still found the patient’s performance yesterday was subpar also if Arvi was raving about it. It was yet to prove whether mixed reality headsets were the panacea they all hoped them to be. And it seemed clear to him that Arvi must know that too, if he found a shred of honesty within his crooked soul.

“Tom, it’s me. Anastacia. Your wife. Can you hear me? You are in a coma; well, you were in a coma — What am I supposed to say here? Is he awake? Can he hear me?” She looked up rather disoriented.

“We don’t know. But you can tell him he is in a coma. It is very possible he can hear you. Talk to him as if he understood everything you are telling him. Can you do that for us?”

“I am surely not doing this for you.”

Anastacia shot Arvi a murdering look, then she went on talking to her husband quietly, her voice hushed, yet firmer than before, more determined. The brief unfriendly exchange had riled her up.

“Darling, can you press my hand if you can hear me? Your children are here, Kay and Peter and Nina. We are all right here, right by your side. Tom? —”

Anastacia sounded competent but everybody in the room, Arvi Karvonen and José García from Neuro Industries, Dr. Ha-rin Park from the Misericordia hospital as well as Anna Kunz, the head nurse of neurology and Pareena Pasarakonda, the young nurse, could sense the strain and the unbearable tension in her voice when her eyes flitted over to her children. For Kay — their eldest son — as well as for Peter and Nina — the twins — seeing their father reduced to a dreamlike vegetable state, had come as a frightful shock. Anastacia could tell by

the look on their young, hopeful faces that her kids were barely coping. Kay pretended to be strong, but Peter looked devastated, and Nina — no, she couldn't look at Nina. Not now.

"And?" Ari Karvonen looked up from his screen.

"I don't think he can hear me. Can't we take off that terrible headset he is wearing? I didn't imagine it was so big," Anastacia was pleading. She was becoming more and more insecure about having handed Tom over to the tech geeks.

"No, we cannot take it off — not yet. I am sorry. You must understand getting into his brain, his thoughts, it takes time. It's not just the coma he needs to process, the functional magnetic resonance imaging takes time to start working properly. Yesterday was a good start to complete calibration, but nothing much is gained from that yet. Calibration per se is not the solution yet. It's a start — but— well, we need more data. You must be patient."

"Tom? Tom, can you hear me?" Anastacia tried again, then shook her head.

"Nothing. I think he cannot hear me."

"Wait."

She looked up at the white wall, the flickering light and the dark purple crocuses that ominously loomed over the bed. Who chose pictures like that for interior decoration in hospitals? She averted her face. Her eyes were swollen and empty, her skin coloured ashen, she was close to a complete mental breakdown and past total despair.

"Come on — this headset? — it must tire him out too much." Wasn't she Tom's health care proxy? Why had she such little power?

"On the contrary, the procedure will help him — you will see. And it will help us to give him proper treatment and care. It is really for his benefit. Anastacia, have some faith. We had very promising results when —" José was trying to be as reassuring as possible and yet— She didn't seem to understand whatever he'd say.

Arvi shrugged as if this was not his problem at all. Dealing with relatives was always such a nuisance. If this hadn't been Patient Zero's, — Brainmog's CEO's — very own wife, and the daughter-in-law of Big Dog, he would have had her sent out of the room. Patiently, José tried explaining once more.

"You don't understand what we do. The headset — I mean — the threads we project directly onto his retina and into his brain. Your husband is then automatically connected to the internet. So, with the help of artificial intelligence he can access more resources to deal with the challenges we give him."

"I don't understand."

"Well, he literally becomes Google. He can access everything Google can access by merely thinking about it."

"He now is Google?"

Pareena blurted out in true amazement and awe, glancing over at Kay surreptitiously. She had slept well and today it seemed that all this new American technology was inordinately promising and exciting. For a moment it made her forget her own plight: Being pregnant from and engaged to one man, when secretly planning to be with another. Life was so terribly complicated and all the pain she felt was openly displayed in her eyes for Kay to see. When he looked back at her, silently trying to soothe her grief and confusion, she wished they'd be alone, but they weren't, and wouldn't be until very late. Pareena was looking at a mountain of work today. Her shift had started at 06.30 am and she hoped sincerely she could leave the hospital before 9 o'clock tonight. With all the staff shortages due to the summer flu or summer heat strokes or other summer and heat related illnesses she wasn't so sure and had prepared for the worst: a long, hot, dreary day that would exact the most from her.

"What do you mean? He becomes Google? I don't understand. Are you replacing his thoughts with a google search?" Anastacia said startled, the words came up thick, and chocked, and hoarse. By instinct she felt that there was more to see than met the eye and that she had been excluded from the inner circles: She did not have the language to describe what was happening to Tom, nor did she understand half of what was going on.

"No, no. — He is not formally Google. He is still Tom. And what is more: he doesn't have to choose Google as a search engine. He can choose any search engine he wants, Yahoo, even Baidu or Yandex, or of course any other. There is freedom of choice. However, we did install Google by default, but he can most easily—."

"Tom? He can hear us. Oh my God. Tom? Can you hear us? Tom? Tom? He is really pressing my hand hard now."

"Yes, we can see. He is moving. That is most promising."

Arvi intently looked at his screen, biting his lips hard. Anna and Pareena both looked closer at the monitors checking on his breathing frequency and the heart rate, the drips were nearly empty and would need changing soon. The patient himself would need changing soon but for this everybody would have to leave the room. Head nurse Kunz felt it wasn't the right moment to bring up that everybody deserved some privacy when they were stripped bare of their diapers. Changing diapers would have to wait.

Arvi shot a triumphant look at José who was standing opposite the bed, reading the instruments and too busy studying the charts to sincerely connect with him. José's eyes had lit up and the wrinkles on his forehead had begun to disappear. Kay, Peter and Nina were holding on to their father's body covered in snow white hospital linen wired to all sorts of instruments looking more like a frail human rocket before take-off than their dad resting so peacefully in bed. It was so hard to understand their father no longer had a face, to believe

that he would not ever smile at them the way he did. He may as well have been mutilated by a bear's claw.

"Tom, you can hear me. Oh Tom. You cannot believe how— Tom? Tom. Tom — you are hurting me. That is too hard. You are hurting my hand. Please stop."

Anastacia withdrew her right hand forcefully and rubbed the wrist of her hand gently, massaging her palm with her left thumb. Was he awake now? Why did they give him more medicine now? What were they giving him? What did they show him via the strange goggles mounted onto the headset? She had some understanding what a thream might be, but she wasn't sure she really understood what he was experiencing. Had she misjudged Neuro Industries? What if they were not helping Tom? What were they not telling her? She didn't know.

"Tom, Tom? Can you hear me?"

There was no response. Again, there were no signs of life. The skin of his beloved hands was pale and had gone limp, he was still intubated. He was still in a coma and, — now, again, he was no longer moving. Had the pressing of the hand been involuntarily? A mere shaking of the nerves, a mere electrical impulse? In fact, he looked as if he was dead. Was he dead? Resting so peacefully — Anastacia felt panic. How could she tell Kay? How could she tell Peter and Nina that their father was forever braindead, that he was gone?

Then Tom's body was twitching and twisting again. Was this a seizure? There was nothing she could do. She knew that there was nothing she could do, nothing the nurses or doctors could do. Had it been a mistake to bring Neuro Industries in? Would Tom really have wanted them here?

Helplessly, she looked at Kay, a grown-up man now, and his younger twin siblings Peter and Nina who had quit school early before the summer holiday and with the headmaster's

permission. They said they couldn't have concentrated on Physics and Chemistry anyway. None of them was on their phones, not now.

All of them looked towards her for help and guidance and support, — support she couldn't give, even if she had wanted to. It tore her heart out: Her beloved children looked so worried. Worried and tired, exhausted, and they looked so much more earnest, so much older than ever before —. Then, Kay got up and not without hugging his mum, and glancing at Pareena, he walked towards the exit. It pained Anastacia to see him like this.

“Sorry, mum. I'll really have to leave now, or I will be late. I am so sorry. I am so sorry for everything.”

“Don't be sorry, my dear. Just go. I understand. There is nothing you can do anyway now. Why don't you take Peter and Nina to the cafeteria before you leave?” But Peter and Nina, as if an invisible hand orchestrated their behaviour, got out their cell phones and sat down simultaneously at the small white table by the window where they had already spent so many silent hours since her father had been brought here. When Anastacia glanced over to them, she couldn't help but notice that they looked like a renowned still life of the old masters, banned in dark, rapeseed oils on a glistening, cotton canvas. Their counterfeits, glued to their glowing screens, were arranged so immobile and halcyon as if life had propelled them all into a sealed, endless and surreal cycle none of them could ever get out of.

Cat Thream

Tom nearly would have dropped the cat. He frantically entered the 5-digit code to enter the safe room. Seven, three, two, two, three. Lula meowed, not happy with the tight grip his left elbow put on her hindlegs. But Tom, the tiger, didn't care. He had to get out of here quickly. Sweat ran down his forehead and his heartrate was increasing. The door wouldn't open. He had switched off the lights, it was dark. He hated the dark. Where was he anyway?

He saw seen them arriving at the gate when he checked the video transmission in his bedroom after the alarm had gone off. A large SUV, with tinted glasses, was slowly sneaking up to the mansion. He couldn't make out the driver. How lucky Anastacia had taken the twins and their big brother Kay to see her mother in Kiev. At least he was all by himself. What would they want? Kill him? Make him fly the plane. They would want to make him fly the plane. And he also knew why it had to be him.

He pressed the digits again, carefully steadying his fingers, trying to select the right numbers this time, seven, three, two, two, five. The last number was five, not three. Of course. He knew that — God he knew that.

Finally, the door opened, and he entered instantly, nearly dropping Lula as he stumbled into the cubicle. She gave an uncomfortable squeak, but elegantly landed on her soft, leathery paws and at once raised her tail vertically up in the air. Magically, the small door closed behind Tom, the tiger. Impatiently he waited for the cracks to be sealed and the Neon lights to come on. For a brief moment darkness prevailed, his heart nearly stood still until the room was finally and at once brightly lit. The ceiling was so low that he had to bend over, there was no way he could have stood up straight. His back hurt instantly. He looked around, trying to slow his breathing. He was safe here although the ceiling was beginning to lean towards him. The ceiling was no danger. He knew it was simply an optical illusion. He remembered how the architect had explained the effect to him and Anastacia when they first moved into the house. It was just an illusion, an itchy-bitsy-teeny-weeny irritation, that was all it was. Nothing serious. Tom tried to steady his breathing, he couldn't get so upset, he had to slow down, he had to start thinking. *What next?* An inclining ceiling shouldn't be troubling him. Not now, anyway.

They were so young then. Anastacia was 7 months pregnant, her belly as big as a whale, an elephant, a big, big wonderful steamship she was. How he had loved her, how beautiful she was with her rosy, ruby, chubby cheeks so round, her large, hanging breast so full. She couldn't cook at all, but that didn't matter. When Anastacia smiled, she made the sun rise and the stars explode that was how happy they were. Serene were the days, serene and long and so serendipitously bright.

He was still panting, holding his palm over his beating heart. Was that a lobster clutching his heart? How did that saying go? The lobster and the heart — Or the hare and the heart? The hare and the tortoise? What's with the lobster then? He couldn't remember and he didn't need to. He was safe now, or at least he liked to believe that. The neon light illuminated the safe room. Everything looked so pristine and neat and clean. There was a small bed, tidily done up with starched bed linen, a sink with a silver steel tap. On a tiny table they had fit a Nespresso coffee machine, a couple of bags containing brown sugar, two designer cups from Denmark carrying the slogan *Hygge* in big bold green letters, two spoons. There was also a little desk with a designer chair they had ordered especially from Copenhagen. Anastacia wanted the chair in black, he had wanted it in white. In the end they got four black ones and three white ones. One of the black chairs went into the safe room, the other six into the dining hall.

His breathing had slowed now. There was no window. No net, no Wi-Fi, no radio waves, no nothing. Nowhere to go. The ceiling was so low, he physically felt how the place was trying to swallow him up. The architect had had to fit the safe room above the garage so it wouldn't show too much from the outside. Trying not to hit his head on the concrete ceiling he moved over to the desk. Lula had jumped down, her tail still stretching straight up. She was at ease and curiously exploring every corner.

Tom, the tiger sat down. He must call the police now, on the landline, the only connection there was to the outside world. When he picked up the phone to dial 112, the line was dead. How could the line be dead? *How on earth could the line be dead?* He slammed the down the receiver. The noise startled him. They must be inside the house — already and — they must have found the control room. He closed his eyes focusing on the pulse beginning to race in his ears. Was that a woodpecker sitting on his

eardrum? The hollow, rhythmical noise was loudly pounding in his inner ear, gnawing and nibbling at his centre of equilibrium. The control room. If they had found the control room, it wouldn't be long now.

Suddenly, he regretted not having taken Kay to Platneem Zoo more often. *What's with all the animals?* He regretted this was the end of it. He looked at Lula and all he could think of was: What will happen to Lula if he was gone? Will she find her way out?



They were here now. First, he heard how the seals were removed and the doors of the safe room opened automatically. Tom's heart nearly stood still. Wasn't the idea of a safe room that it couldn't be opened? There was nowhere to hide. Not much of a safe room this was. Before Tom could do or think anything at all, Konni ran into the saferoom. She was wearing a GLONASS-enabled pet collar. The device helped the Kreml track her whereabouts. The black little Labrador went straight for Lula, sniffing her behind and snarling her teeth. The cat seemed unimpressed. She arched her back so the fine grey hairs on her fur stood upright. Konni kept barking at her as if she was a huge German shepherd. Tom aka Google stood stock still. What was going to happen now? Then he saw the driver. He had entered the saferoom and two thugs, both young men who looked like boxers, tall and heavily built followed. Mercenaries. That is all

they were—mercenaries. Tom smelled their bad breath, their sickly sweat telling innumerable tales of fear and murder and rape and betrayal and utter horror.

“I don’t like Kebab,” He said out loud, then he whispered it again: “I don’t like kebab.” Then a spastic whimper ran through Tom’s body and he felt cramps in his hands.

“What have you said, — man?”

“What do you want? I’ve said — What do you want?”

Tom’s throat was dry, he nearly whimpered all his misery and fear out loud, but then checked himself and swallowed clumsily.

“You know what we want,” The driver said. Konni was still barking at Lula, the cat, as if she was torturing her.

“Shut up the stupid dog.”

“Start moving.”

“I will not come with you.”

“You come with us, or the cat will die.” One of the thugs raised his Uzi at Lula.

“Lula, dear, Lula, come here.” Tom was beginning to panic.

The little grey cat jumped onto Tom’s knees, and he kissed her.

“Please don’t kill the cat. She is innocent.”

Idiot, No — Don’t kiss the cat.

“Why not? I love ma’ cat. What’s wrong with that?”

“You must hate the cat or the threem does not work.”

“Ok, Tom thought. That could be true indeed. I do remember. I do remember something about hating the cat to get through this. I will hate the cat then.

"Stupid, stupid Lula. Lula, I hate you."

He shoved her slightly and Lula jumped off his knees, began to purr, put her tail high above her body, like an antenna on a windmill, then she walked leisurely towards Konni, obviously no longer afraid of the black Labrador but sniffing him curiously. Konni began waving his tail as if welcoming a friend. Then Lula, the cat simply lowered her petite head and opened her mouth as if she was yawning. There was moment of suspense. What would she do now. Bolt? She didn't.

Then, she simply ate the dog, rolled it into one bite. Konni, usually quite a handful, he was now just a mouthful. One, two three bites. Lula, the cat had moved her incisors and her canines, maybe her molars, but not so much those. Then Konni was gone. Lula closed the mucous membrane, then rubbed her tongue against the floor of the mouth carefully felling for her sublingual caruncle, her sublingual fold, and the incisive papilla. It was all intact. With great pleasure she then licked her hairy lips stretched her jaw once more before closing her mouth and sitting on her hindlegs. The cat looked like a misshapen anaconda and nearly rolled over for want of balance.

The driver gasped. The two young guards just stared at the empty space where Konni had just been barking like a madman only seconds ago. It was all quiet now. Dead dog — silent. Not good, Tom thought, — not good, but then he smiled.



“You will now come with us.”

The driver pulled out a black, coarse hood, then pulled it roughly over Tom’s head. Tom’s heart nearly gave in. He was not going to survive this, was he? They would make him fly the plane. Again. Hell would be brought down to earth, then reach the skies. Fire and lava, embers and ashes would fall to earth. Like in the ancient times. It would be the end of time and history and space, truly the end of everything. And yet, he was not afraid. Everything would be fine. He simply knew. Everything would, – everything will be good.

Tom was shackled and carried out of his own house. There the thugs dumped him into the back of the SUV, not before closing his mouth with duct tape despite the hood he was wearing. Why would they do that? The car was so loud no one would hear him scream anyway. They seemed to be following a prewritten script. What dumbasses. But when lousy tropes had to be fulfilled, they had to be fulfilled. What idiots. What trolls.



There she was. It was a small Cessna 172, Skyhawk, big enough to seat four people. The plane was filled with electric wires and tanks full of strange liquids and gases. Was this Nitro-glycerine? Bottles of CO₂? What a mess. Tom found it hard to squeeze in. There was so much in his seat that didn’t belong there, huge cardboard boxes filled with empty glass jars, metal instruments and strange looking plastic

tubes. There were tools, heavy hammers, some fine screwdrivers and a big, large forceps, the size of his arm.

It was hard to find out what was what, but he managed to clear some room for his legs and feet and so he squeezed in behind the cockpit controls. He had flown an old Cessna before, but it had been a while. Would he remember it all? Tom scratched his head trying to remember what to do next. Then, with a jolt, the aircraft began moving. Was he remote-controlled? Where was he going? He knew where he was going. The balloons. He had to bring down the balloons. Of course — the balloons.

The little plane taxied on the clearing and picked up speed on the tarmac. He would be taking off any time soon now. Try as he might, he couldn't stop the plane, nor could he stop the large drops of sweat running down his back. Now, he was airborne. Now, he was high above the ground. Now, he was —

Quickly he was lifted into the blue, blank skies; there were clouds beneath him, more and larger clouds towering beside him and far down he could see the SUV and the driver frantically waving at him. What would he want? Stupid dumbass. Why would he be taken to that damn plane? He hadn't figured it out yet, but this was — what? His heart was racing, his eyelids fluttering, his pulse was flashing like mad. He knew he was going to die. They had found him; they would kill him now. Was that dark spot down there Lula? He hoped to God Anastacia was safe in Kiev. Was she in Kiev? Where was she anyway?

Where was anybody?

"Kay, wait." Pareena had left the room shortly after Kay had and was running past him.

"And?" He asked.

"What?" She shot back nervously.

"Have you told your parents?"

"Yes. But —"

"No, you haven't." He raised his eyebrow, and disappointment clouded his even features.

"How do you know?"

"I can tell by the look on your face my beloved. Don't you remember —."

"Remember what?"

"I can read your thoughts."

"No, you can't but yeah — I will tell them tonight."

"You had better. I booked a date at the registry. And it is in two weeks on Thursday. I need your birth certificate."

"You have not —"

"No, I haven't but I will. If you want me to. Do you want me to book the date?"

Tenderly he took her hands into his.

She looked at her feet.

"This will not go well," she said sombrely.

"Why do you think that?"

"You will be a father and still —be no father."

"So? Aren't we all adopted, one way or another?"

"No, we are not," she said, "of course not."

Gently, he touched her chin and raised her head until she couldn't avoid his eyes no longer.

"I will love the little one like my own."

"How do you know?"

"I love you. I will love the child you carry. You'll have to trust me."

"I am trying —."

"Does this other guy know you're pregnant?"

She shook her head.

"Are you going to tell him?"

"Do you want me to?" She asked insecurely.

"It's not up to me. Do you *want* to tell him?"

"I don't know. I haven't had enough time to sleep on it. It would complicate things."

"It would — Have you told your mum?"

"That I am pregnant?"

"Yes, that too, but I meant that you would marry me and not your cousin."

"He is not my cousin. Don't be such a racist. And who says you will marry me?"

"Have you told her?"

She gave him a blank look.

"Have you told *your* mum?" She asked instead of a response.

Kay shook his head.

"She has other stuff on her mind, but I will. As soon as dad is better."

"He may not be better any time soon. What if your dad will not wake up from —", she paused, then added,

"— all this?" That came out too harshly, she hadn't meant it to sound so final.

"Hush, my dear. So many worries." He leaned his chin onto her forehead. His head resting on hers was heavy, she shifted uncomfortably.

"I don't know what my parents will say. I am scared."

"That you're pregnant or that you'll marry me?" He gave her a mischievous smile she didn't know what to make of.

"Really, Kay, I don't know what's worse."

"Do you think your parents will lock you up?"

"Probably not. They are in fact quite progressive."

"But?"

"They won't be happy."

"Because I am not Tamil?"

Pareena shrugged.

“Don’t worry so much. They will find out eventually. In fact, I’d like to meet them,”

Kay said, taking her hand into his.

“That is impossible. Not now.”

“They will be my parents-in-law. Meeting them soon is a kinkeeping duty.”

“A what?”

“A duty to my new family.”

“Yes, I understand. But — no.”

“I cannot meet my in-laws?”

“— not right away.”

“Where is your ring?”

“Which ring?” She feigned ignorance, giving him the sweetest smile she could muster.

“The grass ring I gave you yesterday,” he said crestfallen, “for our engagement. You haven’t lost it, have you? You took it off? No — you took it off.”

Pareena giggled innocently at his apparent disappointment.

“I had to take it off. I cannot wear it for work.”

“Why not?”

“Hygienic reasons.”

“Where does it say in your job description that you cannot wear grass rings for hygienic reasons?”

“It doesn’t say that.” Slowly, she began pulling out her golden chain, a precious heirloom from her paternal grandmother given to her as a baby, which was clinging to the moist skin of her décolleté. When she had finished, the little carefully woven grass ring sat right in its centrepiece.

"It is itchy." She rubbed her skin, "I shouldn't really be wearing this."

"Are you allergic to grass?"

"No, I am not. But still — it is uncomfortable."

"You must truly love me."

Kay bowed down and kissed the itchy patch she was rubbing while gently pushing her into a hidden corner of the cafeteria that was still empty at this time. They hugged far longer than she had expected.

"Promise me you will tell them tonight."

"I promise," she said reluctantly, repressing the thought and all it involved at once.

"Promise you will break off the engagement. You belong to me, you know that."

"I promise," she said so silently he could barely hear it. But, I don't belong to you, she thought, *we don't belong*.

"Tonight?"

"Tonight — I will — Promise." she said but not without having to clear her throat first.

All that love rushing up within her, she wished she could simply drown.

They know. I know they worked it out. All the missing pieces. From yesterday. I must have blurted it out. They must now have all the measurements. They must know. Otherwise why start Cat Thream? Cat Thream was personalized, and it was not personalized for me.

Running it didn't make sense, unless —.

No — Cat Thream was a farce.

But I could, I mean, yes, I could take it. I would take it; I mean I will take it.

Cat Thream I know by heart and I will play it very differently from who it was personalized for.

I will so amaze them. I can so do this.

Let's see what they make of that then.

How could they ever rein me in now?

Not with Cat Thream, the wingèd messenger of heaven who gave them the pip when their performance is the hammiest of all and — all the days cannoned on and up and in and through —.

Cat Thream was a piece of cake and yet I feel chagrined as if all this was an inane misunderstanding. And yet —.

Cat Thream is such fun.

Cat Thream is a complete joke. To me. Complete joke. I shall wing it safely through the hurricane and not look like some halfling they can lay up in peat any time soon.

Let us see who will laugh in the end when I do what I will do on the off-chance.

Not funny?

Why is that not funny?

Cat Thream

Tom, the tiger looked at the six pack straight ahead, no — not at his belly. He looked at the six primary flight instruments, trying to remember exactly what they were for. Three were connected to the Pitot Static Pressure System and three were Gyro instruments. There was the Airspeed Indicator, doing guess what? — Measuring the speed of the air flowing over the plan. Then there was the Altimeter, measuring the height of the plane above sea level and the Vertical Speed Indicator indicating the rate of climb and descent. That he remembered, the Pitot instruments. He did remember them all. Easy.

Something soft and furry pressed hard against his left leg. Was that Lula again? Of course.

“Lula, you are alive. Thank God.”

"I love ma' cat. What's wrong with that?"

"You must hate the cat or the thream does not work."

"Ok, Tom thought. That could be true indeed. I do remember. I do remember something about hating the cat to get through this. I will hate the cat then."

"Stupid, stupid Lula. Lula, I hate you."

Tom reached down to touch the cat's neck, pulled her up and softly hit her behind her ears. What comfort her soft fur gave him. How many lives did that cat have? Tom felt such life rush through him. Lula elegantly pirouetted on his lap, rolled up tight and fell asleep instantly. What now?

Just as he was beginning to relax, trying to find his bearings in the plane so he could navigate it better, he felt how one of the boxes in the passenger seats behind him began to move. It was jerking and twisting until the lid came off and a large Japanese Akita tumbled out. The Akita began barking at once and the tight room of the plane instantly filled with such tremor and shock that Lula was woken at once.

"Oh no," Tom, the tiger, thought, "oh no."

Lula stretched on his knees as she shook off the last brief moments of sleep, then jumped onto the passenger seat and next time Tom looked back, Yume, the Akita puppy was gone. There was silence but for the comforting noise it made as Lula licked her paws. He looked at her, she was huge, her body looked square. She was digesting Yume, Yume the fighter dog, Yume whose name meant dream. Thream. Hallucinations. Was there a difference? Was he dreaming now? Was this a thream?

How could a Cessna go so high up and why —

Thomas Christopher Yann Myers

Thlog 11:34:55-11:36:09

I can feel my brain. I can feel my skull. I can feel the waves beating against the big bushes. The thorns. The thorns. I can feel the mighty waves now, roaming forever on the wine-dark sea. Is this a tsunami coming towards me? Looking for trouble all over the barren seas? Where has all the water gone? Why is the beach dry? Why can I see the shells, the octopuses, the sharks frenzied from lack of oxygen, all of them uncontrollably twitching in the dark, wet sand? Will the water come back? Will it come back soon? Will the strong winds keep singing? I cannot run. I mustn't think in word sequences that make sense. I must not think coherently, not think mercilessly. They may not know. They may not know yet how to stretch the gap, how to bridge the chasm. My legs feel like —. I cannot move my legs, cannot

move my toes, my calves, my knees, my thighs. I am planted into the sand. A plant pillar. I cannot pull my feet out. I am a pillar of salt, of stone, of concrete.

My head is aching so much I feel my brain matter run out. It is dripping. It is drapping. It is dropping. It is splitting. It is splatting, it is splotting. It is draining out so loud. Am I dead yet? So much pain. I am in so much pain and misery. I cannot move. I cannot breathe. They are taking over. There is nothing I can do. I cannot fight them. They are now taking over all systems. All systems full speed. Full speed. Full speed failure.

But this is Cat Thream.

Easy.

Cat Thream was supposed to be easy. Why is this now turning into disaster?

Why am I losing?

Why am I failing?

Everything and everyone?

It will not be long now before they have broken me.

I cannot take this much longer. All the pictures, All the absurdities. Is this a thream before my eyes or is this fantasy come true? Reality?

Is this now real? Where am I?

Why?

And why me?

No, I will not, — will not be defeated.

Cat Thream

Is this the balloon out there? Tom saw the huge Chinese surveillance balloon from underneath. Like a big bubble, a huge glitter ball it was hanging out there, in no man's land between earth and space. It was so white, so bright that the unfathomable colour gave him at once another splitting headache. His eyes hurt too.

What was that? Were these two dogs sitting on the edge of the balloon? Verni, an Alabay traditionally used for guarding sheep and goats and Pasha, a Šarplaninac named after the Šar Planina range in the Balkans where in Ottoman times it moved with the herds of sheep ignoring, still ignoring, all borders. They were both shifting and sliding uncomfortably forwards and sideways on the nylon airbed of the balloon's white canopy floating kilometres above the ground. Their claws were dangerously scratching and puncturing the dense nylon to keep their hairy, twitching bodies afloat, ignoring that it was the exact nature of their efforts that could make the balloon plummet. Tom gasped. What were the dogs doing out here? It seemed strange and then, no — it didn't seem strange at the same time at all, not at

all. He pulled up the little aircraft, defying gravity and weightlessness. He was close now. He could do this. Yes, he could.

Lula was curiously staring out the window. Tom, the tiger thought that she must see the balloon — and the two dogs — yet she seemed little concerned with the big manmade structure hanging above her. In fact, she seemed quite bored. And again, he remembered.

"I love ma' cat. What's wrong with that?"

"You must hate the cat or the thream does not work."

"Ok, Tom thought. That could be true indeed. I do remember. I do remember something about hating the cat to get through this. I will hate the cat then."

"Stupid, stupid Lula. Lula, I hate you."

Then Verni yawned and showed his teeth. It must be cold out there, Tom thought. Cold. Why was he yawning? Maybe not the cold, maybe the extreme lack of oxygen made Verni tired. Whatever — Tom couldn't tell whether it was the teeth or the yawn that made Lula jump but jump she did. She began scratching at the window of the little Cessna like some madcat.

"Lula, stop. What are you doing?" But Lula, the cat wouldn't listen to him. She scratched until her tiny flimsy paws opened the door, then she inflated her belly and drifted upwards like a huge mylar balloon made from biaxially-oriented polyethylene terephthalate, just without the dazzling shimmer. Tom, the tiger watched her go, watched her soaring towards the sun where her wicked wings would surely melt if it wasn't so cold right now. Why was he freezing so badly? Had his body temperature dropped?

"Lula, no. Come back. Come back here."

His throat was sore, his voice was faltering. It was pointless to shout anyway. Lula the cat wouldn't listen to him. She had now nearly reached the balloon. From his position below at 12 'o clock, which admittedly, wasn't the most advantageous, Tom could tell that Verni and Pasha had started to bark loud. He looked up and saw how Lula the cat opened her mouth and, in a millisecond, Verni was gone. It wasn't much longer until Karlson-On-the roof-Like, she propelled herself towards Pasha and devoured him as well. This unlucky meal brought great changes to the balance of the empty skies. First, the balloon for losing all its weight, simply disappeared into space, second, Lula the cat, burdened with all the weight of the two dogs in her stomach, began falling quite fast.

Tom kept looking at the altimeter, trying to get the plane level. He knew he had to check something, somewhere, somehow; but for whatever reasons he had forgotten all about flying. He didn't know how to steer the plane; he didn't know what to do next. He hadn't completed his mission but then this never had been *his* mission. How could he ever live someone else's life? The balloon was gone. Lula was gone. He was all by himself high up in an ocean of air and void and pure, pure nothing. Tom, the tiger finally began panicking. Carola? Baidu? Yandex? Vaguely he remembered the names of friends from another era, from another galaxy. But nobody heard him. Not today. Nobody came to his rescue.

Not this time.

He was all by himself.

This was on him.

The plane began falling. He was losing speed; he was losing height. The instruments were fluttering and shuddering and dancing the tango. There was

nothing he could do but watch how the sand seas of the desert came closer rapidly.

So fast, he was way too fast.

Now, he remembered. It was all he remembered. But why? Why did he remember now?

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

And then, with a jolt — and reasons unknown to him — all he could think was:

A lone monkey was a dead monkey.

Why can I not see where I am? Why is it so dark? I am hurting. Where is Lula? Carlula, beloved. Where are you? Am I awake? Am I threaming? Why can I not feel my face? Where is my nose, my mouth, my lips? Where have I gone? Everything is so heavy. I cannot lift my arm. Are these my teeth falling out? Is this a motorcycle? Is this a different place? Where am I going? Checking out these missiles again? And again. And Again. The missiles. Where are the missiles?

I am moving. Time. Place. Not the same. Nothing the same. Everything is spinning. Then — new visons. They come. They go. Thy will be done. Oneath — in heaven. New visions, new sights were on. The movies kept playing and playing and on and on and on it went. There was no stopping of what there was no stopping for —. I am so in pain. So in pain.

Hello? Anybody?

Anybody out there?

Is this reality?

Is this a thream?"

Is this a horse? A kingdom? A shoe?

Where am I?

Why is there so much pain?

Still so much pain?

"I cannot see how that makes sense. Cat Thream is not suited for him. It seems to have no effect whatsoever," Arvi looked disappointed. And José surely hasn't been a big help today. It seems his thoughts were elsewhere. Was Lisa giving him a hard time already? She could be so difficult, so unbearable. He still didn't understand why Jimi hadn't come to live with him when —

"I don't think he will wake up. This is not going to help."

"Of course not. I heard Myers created the Cat Thream for —."

Anna Kunz, the nurse looked at her superior, but Dr. Park widened her eyes so quickly, she fell silent at once.

"Do you know who he created the thream for?" José asked eagerly.

"That would help us a great deal," Arvi chipped in. He knew it: They were keeping things from them. What did they not tell them? His grin had turned into a sneer, he would make sure they'd find out.

“Well —” Headnurse Anna Kunz said, then making a long pause. Suddenly she was insecure. She had signed confidentiality contracts but couldn’t on the top of her head recall what they said exactly and what she could or should — or could or should *not* say to the Americans. Better keep silent for now.

“Look, they gave us the password to Myer’s computer only yesterday. And our colleagues in the valley have only found one application Thomas Christopher Yann Myers had programmed for a mixed reality headset: Cat Thream We thought it might do something for him, but obviously it doesn’t—”

“If you only just got your hands on it why are running it already? Shouldn’t you be doing more due diligence? Find out first what this Cat Thream does with our patient?” Dr. Ha-Rin Park asked scoldingly stressing the ‘our’ in ‘our’ patient unnaturally. Indeed, she didn’t like the American’s hasty approach. After all, Thomas Christopher Yann Myers, was still her patient too.

“Well, we have adapted the Cat Thream slightly, adding Myer’s family, Anastacia, the kids to it. To make it more personal. But it doesn’t seem to work as it should. I admit it was a shot in the dark. We don’t really understand the thream’s architecture yet and who it was developed for. And we don’t have a lot of time, you know that. There are so few applications for mixed reality headsets yet, we really thought it would help. Well, it will probably help anyway to train Pandora better. And if it doesn’t there is no harm.”

“No harm? How do you know? I mean — you do understand that it was designed to trigger someone else’s biggest fear?”

“You know about the fear trigger?” Arvi was wide awake now. He was shocked to the bone. It seemed the Swiss Team indeed knew much more than they had let on. What did they know? José had stopped typing and was following the conversation attentively.

“Well Myers was obsessed with it. He said when it comes to worst case scenarios such as medically induces comas it is only your worst fears that can bring you back to life, shouldn’t you know that already?” Dr. Park admitted reluctantly. She regretted having shared this particular piece of information.

“You don’t share his opinion?” Arvi asked, curiously.

“We simply don’t know. There is no evidence. We haven’t run any tests or studies on the fear trigger and — seriously — I don’t think we can say —. The ethics committee would surely forbid such research.”

“But why, if it can save lives?”

“Ah — can it? Really? — I think we’d need more time to discuss this in detail.” Dr. Park impatiently looked at her watch, her other patients were waiting.

“But whose worst fear is that some cat eats dogs?” José asked.

“Well, a cat that eats *your* dogs, to be precise.”

“Who has that many dogs anyway?” José replied.

The Swiss team chose to remain silent. It was a tricky question to answer especially when and especially because the answer was so obvious. The Americans would find out. Once they googled the names of the dogs, all would be clear to them, or at least some of it. The true question behind all this really was: Why hadn’t the Americans found out already? Did they know, only feigning ignorance? Ha-Rin Park felt uncomfortable. Everything was possible and she didn’t want to find herself tied up in this.

“Right. This is not going to get us anywhere.”

Arvi looked at the staff of the Misericordia Neurology department, his stress level rising by the minute. But it felt like hitting a wall. Both women were silent, and it was clear that it took more for them to cooperate. Then, the door opened hastily.

"I am very sorry for being late", Pareena said as she was entering the room, flushed and obviously anxious and rather frazzled out.

"What can I do?" She turned to head nurse Anna Kunz.

"You can help me turn him, he's been like this for too long," Nurse Anna said right away.

"Alright. On three?" The two women brought themselves in position.

"Ok. One, two Be careful with the infusion. Remember we placed it right into his stomach."

"Oh, so sorry, let me hold this. Ok, now."

"One, two and three." Gently the two women turned Patient Zero over to avoid decubitus ulcers.

"Pareena, you're alright?" Nurse Kunz whispered across the bed.

"I am."

She nodded and bit her lips trying to hide her state of mind from her superior.

"You know you get special conditions. If you can't lift anymore. It's in your contract. Just say so."

"I don't know what you mean."

Pareena turned unnaturally red, then white. She routinely put up an innocent front but she nearly fainted. Did Nurse Anna know? Did she know she was pregnant? There was so much talk about thought reading in this room, was it contagious? Was all the equipment spying on her? Could they somehow read her thoughts when she simply was in this room? She felt her heart beginning to race by so many terrifying questions. Reading her thoughts would be the biggest, most humiliating disaster ever. Nobody — nobody could ever read her thoughts, especially not now.

“You don’t know what I am talking about? Ok. Then I may be mistaken.”

Nurse Anna moved away from the bed, ready to leave while Pareena was trying hard to get a grip on herself and hide the shaking of her hands and legs. What if she keeled over and fell on the floor right now? She reached for a water bottle, drank a few gulps, trying to steady herself.

It was then that something else has caught Arvi’s attention. He turned to José.

“Can you see that?”

“Pandora is restarting the headset by herself.”

“What is she doing?” Dr. Park asked curiously despite being pressed for time

“I think she is running a new thream,” José said, trying to hide his excitement.

“There are no new threams. There was Nord Thream we designed all over last year to calibrate potential patients,” Arvi brushed him off quite impatiently. He turned towards the petite doctor, trying to reassure her.

“Dr. Park, you must know we only finished the programming for Nord Thream at the weekend — even worked in certain live effects remotely to improve the quality. And then there was Myer’s Cat Thream which was useless as it was personalised for someone else. There are literally no other applications yet for the Breenplant A007 mixed reality headset.”

“I don’t know. She is starting it now,” José said incredulously. They both stared at the screens. Incredible.

“Ok. I see.” He gave in. José was right. Why did he always, always have to lose the race against Garcia? Why was Garcia always the millisecond faster?

“Pandora, Pandora. What are doing?” Arvi said tenderly, he couldn’t help but smile. This was bound to happen with an A.I that intelligent and alive and kicking— only that it would happen so early was kind of unbelievable.

“Are we ready for that? The first A.I. generated native thream application in the wild? Do you get that?”

José looked at him, as amazed as he was. Whatever the risks, Arvi was all in. Wasn't this exactly what they had hoped for all these weeks and months and years? He felt strangely invigorated as if this new turning point had brought unprecedented meaning and recognition for their tireless work. The head of design and developing system engineering of Neuro Industries had finally found his purpose. Little did Arvi understand at this point that being made obliterate was not exactly the peak of all achievements. But, I mean, hey — cut him some slack.

“Let's see,” José began hitting the keys as if his life depended on it. He was typing like a madman and Arvi knew that he was giving Pandora permission to move on by herself, loosening her from all that was so wickedly pulling her back. Overriding all the security protocols was quite a laborious manual process; José was the best — and by far the fastest — at getting an AI starkly naked and totally liberated.

Dr. Park, Head nurse Kunz and Pareena were standing by, trying to figure out, from Arvi and José's seemingly incoherent dialogue, what was happening.

“Wait. Something is coming up on the screen. Pandora is running the intro now.

“What does it say?””

“The Heist? December 15th 1959.” Arvi and José looked at each other, their faces totally blank.

“1959? Any ideas?” Arvi looked at the three women who stood next to them, not really expecting any input from their side. Well —, he could tell from the look on their faces that they didn't understand anything either.

“What is happening?” Dr. Park asked hesitantly. She looked concerned; not sure she should put an end to all this; after all this was still their theatre, their hospital, their workplace. And yet, it seemed more and more that the movie which was being played here was no longer under their control.

“We don’t know exactly what this is all about.”

“Then you must stop it,” Dr. Park answered firmly.

“No, why should we? It looks harmless enough. Wait —.” Arvi was reading directly from the screen.

“Application Pandora takes Myers to December 15th, 1959, Mexico City, National Auditorium, Chap— wait. Chapúltepec Park. There can’t be any harm in this.”

“How do you know? You have no idea why she’s doing this or what she’s doing. What —”

“The Sovjet exhibition in the city of Mexico, Chapúltepec Park,” Pareena exclaimed without thinking twice. They all looked up at her and she felt the blood rush to her face. How presumptuous of her to speak out so loud and directly. And to the Americans. But now that she had started, she felt she owed an explanation for her idiosyncratic behaviour.

“1959, Mexico City, It was the first Sovjet exhibition in Latin America to display the Sovjet way of life. They had thousands of exhibits on display: Drilling trucks, motorcycles, scientific instruments. Quite the show.”

“And you are who?”

Arvi asked rather irritated. He had seen the girl before but not really taken any notice of her. And why would such a young — dark—woman know this when he had never even heard of such an incident?

“I am Pareena, — the nurse. I mean, I am — a nurse here. I work here —” she stammered, looking towards head nurse Anna Kunz for help.

“Alright. And how do you know all that?”

José asked curiously. Arvi was irritated — as always, but José was genuinely interested and *so* empathetic and *such* a good and faithful listener. At least that was what Lisa said when she had moved out. Arvi remembered how she continuously had been complaining that he had *never* been genuinely interested in her, her life, their son Jimi. And that José on the contrary was — goddammit— Arvi really didn’t want to think about Lisa. Not now. And no. — not about Jimi either.

“My grandfather. He kept raving about this show because after they were done in Mexico all the stuff was taken to Sri Lanka where he saw it. With his own eyes. And his own ears.” Pareena paused, a little rattled and breathless. Everybody standing around her was speechless. She felt encouraged to go on, after all it was quite the story.

“Chapultepec Park,” she imitated her grandfather’s endearing Tamil accent rather acutely, “we kids were so fascinated by the name. I remember dancing around and shouting it out loud with my sisters, once we could pronounce it correctly: Chapultepec Park, Chapultepec Park, Chapultepec Park, well — He kept telling us about it. All that communist propaganda —, well, I beg your pardon — shit, that was how he called it. But then, he had seen a real missile, the Luna. From up close. In the middle of the cold war. That was quite something, getting your eyes on the actual threat that could destroy life on the planet. I remember so well how he kept saying that. It must have been impressive. He had never ever forgotten it afterwards. The Luna here — The Luna there — The Luna everywhere.

“But why is Pandora taking Myers back there?” Dr. Park asked, strangely touched by the amount and precision of Pareena’s information. It sounded accurate and truthful

enough. They would of course google all this as soon as they had a moment, but for now she was truly impressed with the young nurse's tale.

"I have only one explanation why this is happening. Pandora must be truly personalizing a thream for Patient Zero," José guessed, "at least that is the only thing I can think of." He must be done with the override or he wouldn't have graced them with his attention.

"Shouldn't we stop her? I mean we have no idea what she is up to," Nurse Anna said. She had listened for quite some time and, at this stage, found it important she got her foot in.

"Well, no — that is the whole point of such a system, the app is designed so it works by itself. At least at a certain stage. And so far, we have had two training session: yesterday: Nord Thream and today, Cat Thream. Let us not interfere too much. I mean — we were kind of hoping for that to happen. Especially now that Pandora must have seen that Cat Thream was of no use. A.I. must take over at some stage. It is about time Pandora got some sea legs."

Arvi smiled complacently, he was trying hard not to get carried away. But indeed, he was absolutely thrilled. It was difficult not to reveal the rising levels of his excitement. As this new thream was going to be played out, he wouldn't move away from the monitors, not an inch, not an iota. There wasn't even time to go upstairs and wear his very own mixed reality headset to follow this new thream with full immersion. That was a bit unfortunate, but never mind. This was happening — it was happening indeed, and it was happening now. Quickly, he switched his phone off, just in case his father was calling again. It was simply impossible to talk to him now. He'd understand, unless of course he'd —Arvi felt strangely detached and simply hoped he wouldn't go right now. *Of all the days in your life, not now,*

dad. Please— For once dad would have to deal with the side effects of this heart attack by himself. There was nothing he could do from over here anyway.

“Everything will be fine. Don’t worry. Let us see what’s happening,” José joined Arvi instantly and both men stood in front of the monitor displaying the thream, ready to read intently along. But so far, there was only one sentence.

PLEASE WAIT--- PANDORA IS CALIBRATING THREAM IN REAL TIME

“Come here Pareena”, Arvi beckoned, “maybe you can help us some more. Stand in front of us, so you can see properly,” He grabbed her by the shoulders and shoved her in front of him, Pareena moved closer to the screen and felt the Americans’ skulking presence uncomfortably lurk in her back. It was a disconcerting feeling.

“But you can’t —” Dr. Park was trying to get in.

“Why not? Dr. Park, with all due respect. You said yourself your very own Dr. Myers is basically braindead. And you cannot bring him back with traditional medicine. He no longer is the prodigy you all cherished. What harm is there in having him wear a headset and taking him to Mexico? It is not as if we tortured him. He might even end up on a beach again. Maybe this time with a sombrero and tequila. I am sorry it must have been traumatic when his head was blown off yesterday.”

“I don’t understand. You had his head blown off? Isn’t it blown off enough already?” Dr. Park looked alarmed now, her eyes wide open. She clearly didn’t understand a word of what Arvi told her in such a patronizing manner.

“Well, he navigated Nord Thream himself, so we had no hand in this. He literally blew it off himself. But, yes — at the end of Nord Thream, his head is blown off. Haven’t you —”, Arvi was going to say *seen*, but then quickly swerved to *read*. Haven’t you *read* about this?”

“Which report would that have been?” She asked sharply, proud of always being on top of everything: reports, meetings, emergencies. She coped with whatever was thrown her way.

“Dr. Park. In the thlog. We haven’t put it into one of *your* reports.”

“The thlog?”

“Like a blog, but a transcript of your thoughts. We call it therefore the thlog. Makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“I am very sorry, but I worked a 15-hours shift yesterday, there was no time to read your *thlog*.”

“Right” Arvi said, “never mind then. Less traumatic then —.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“If you haven’t read it anyway. Less traum— Never mind.”

Dr. Park scowled at him. She really should have left 10 minutes ago. This was taking up too much of her precious time.

PLEASE WAIT--- PANDORA IS CALIBRATING THREAM IN REAL TIME

“Let’s have some fun — goddamnit. Pareena, right, let’s have some fun,”

Arvi was mumbling as he grabbed Pareena by the shoulders, pulling her closer to his body. Pareena stiffened at the invasion of her space, turned around and forced a smile upon her lips. She was trying to keep her breakfast in her stomach so she wouldn’t project a

torrent of yukky vomit straight into the American's face. She felt so faint right now and wished she could free herself from the grip of his large hands on her slender shoulders.

"Why does Pandora call it the Heist?" José asked.

"I don't know," Arvi said, "Pareena, any ideas?" He was so close, she could now smell his scent, an unwholly mix of sweat — sodium, testosterone, urea — and expensive perfume.

"I think the Americans stole one of the rockets, but then gave it back. Really, I am sorry, I don't remember the story in detail. My grandfather used to say there was some James Bond spy action. — or something like that. It all came out much later, but —"

Pareena felt very uneasy, she wished she could sit instead of being stood in front of a screen.

"Ok. Look. It starts now. Unbelievable —"

"Shouldn't we google this first Arvi?" José said, phone in hand.

"Don't waste time on the phone now. Let's do the research afterwards. Everything set on recording?"

"Of course, all is automatically uploaded into the skies."

"Skies?"

"Clouds. We call them skies now."

"Really? Skies?"

"Ok. Let's see if this *Heist Thream* Pandora creates can trigger Thomas Christopher Yann Myer's worst fear. If it does. Boom — He'll come back to life."

Nobody answered. They were all staring at the screen now. The show was about to begin.

PLEASE WAIT--- PANDORA IS CALIBRATING THREAM IN REAL TIME

Then, the curtain was torn.

The Heist Thream

**Here i sit
broken hearted,
came to shit
but only farted**

MLJK (anonymous tag Gothenburg harbour)

PLEASE WAIT--- PANDORA IS CALIBRATING THREAME IN REAL TIME

December 15th, 1959

Mexico City

National Auditorium

Chapultepec Park

PLEASE WAIT --- PANDORA IS CALIBRATING THREAME IN REAL TIME

“Oh, look, the rotor arrived. They can start the truck now. That means —, yes, we’re right on schedule. They’re gonna hit the traffic any time soon now.”

He ran his hand across the dark leather saddle of his Triumph Bonneville and couldn’t help but smile at the air-cooled engine, a vertical twin four stroke. He simply loved the red and white motorcycle he had brought over from the U.K. especially.

“Funny how they stormed out of that bar an hour ago. Когда́ я в Петербу́рге, у меня́ ‘душа́ поёт’. Being in Saint Petersburg makes me ‘feel young’.”

“Is that what they said?”

“I guess.”

"Yes, our friends seemed rather upset. At least now, they're still standing."

"Friendship with the Sovjet Union? Even you, Brutus?"

"Doesn't it sound tempting? Had some of my best fights with my best friends."

"Well, this one you won't survive."

"Too bad."

"And? Can you even tell the flags of our friend apart? They all look the same to me. Red and yellow, hammer and sickle and redder, and blue in different shades and green. They don't do red in different shades. I wonder why."

"Because they wouldn't — I know Khirgiz Sovjet Socialist Republic. And this one over there must be the Turkmen Sovjet Socialist Republic, Ashkabad is the capital."

"Which one?"

"The one with the two light blue stripes on its banners. Don't you know all the flags of the Soviet Socialist Republic by heart? I heard they wouldn't let you off without memorizing them."

"I mean the banner saying USSR is big enough already, isn't it? It goes all around the bloody Auditorium. I wonder how they attached it, so it would stay put for so long. November 21 till December 15th. That's how many days? Nearly a month. They're really showcasing their stuff. If it wasn't the Soviets, I would —"

"Must have found some new material on the far side of the moon to attach that banner to a concrete wall."

"Sure have. Maybe we should steal the banner instead. No strings attached."

"Can you believe Anastas Mikoian declared himself a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional Mexico? 'Viva Mikoian'. Imagine Eisenhower did that."

"Well, he wouldn't, would he?"

"Say again. Shipping how many objects?"

"16'000 display units in 12 major sections. 8000 square meters. They say it is 700'000 kg to pack. I wonder where it goes next."

"Cuba."

"Sure. Havana. Imagine. No, I think they'll take it to Sri Lanka next."

"Whatever. Luniks and Sputniks in Chapultepec. What a slogan. I mean — aren't they such lunatics."

"The Soviets are crazy. Well, I don't envy them having to pack everything up now. You got the LSD?"

"Of course. "

"If they find out what we want — . If this goes wrong, we shall all be dead. I need you to focus."

"World War III?"

"Sure. LSD secured. I handed it to the prettiest of them all. Mexican women are so beautiful."

"Want one?"

"Marlboro?"

"Sure."



"I had the strangest dream tonight."

"Did you?"

"I was Google and I was Tom Serraga. In one person."

"What's Google? New code name? And who is Tom Serraga?"

"No idea. First, I was in Switzerland, celebrating the 50-year moon landing"

"Fair enough. When was that? We haven't even made it to the moon yet and the Soviets have already sent their little insect to see the far side of the moon. I mean, can you imagine. The far side! And they took 17 pictures. I mean 17 goddam pics. And then they drew a map. Can you imagine. A goddam map. They are colonizing the moon before even setting foot on it. These bastards."

"No, idea what the date was for the 50-year moon landing celebration. End of the century, beginning of the 21st. It was a dream, it didn't come with an exact date. "

"And were the Americans first?"

"In my dream. Yes, damn sure we were."

"Wells, sound like a helluva dream."

"Well, The Nasa Science director for some reason was Swiss and I was looking for a job. I knew everything but wasn't qualified to do anything and I carried two chameleons in my briefcase which I flushed down the toilet. Beautiful, elegant restroom at an extremely posh hotel overlooking Bern. Bern is the capital of Switzerland, right? Or is it Zurich?"

"Geneva is the capital."

“Sure?”

“That is a strange dream. Chameleons, hey —?”

“It is, isn’t it.”

“Not as strange as the 17feet long and 8 feet wide Christmas parcel in here we shall unwrap soon.”

“The Luna rocket. Nicely packed into a wooden crate. And we shall steal it right from under their fingertips.”

“If all goes well.”

“It must go well.”



“Ok, they’re leaving now. Operacion Light Fire now officially started.”

“Truckload of Soviet soldiers following the target.”

“We assumed that much, didn’t we?”

“I hate rush hour in Mexico City. Slows you down.”

“Sure does. But slow is good. For now, it is.”

“Sure is. You know that moving photos are always blurry.”

“It is funny when you say it like this — I mean we are not simply going to stop her; we shall literally take her apart. Every goddam piece of her. If — I mean, if all goes according to plan.”



“That’s right, oh, now I remember. Then the school collapsed.”

“The school? Which school?”

“In my dream. I enrolled in a posh Swiss public school to get a diploma. I wanted to study at the ETH.”

“That is in Zürich. Right? You said you were in Bern.”

“Right. Bern. — And then a girl asked me to give her an elephant.”

“An elephant?”

“For her science project”

“And then the elephant dropped through the roof into the classroom. And the kids realized I could give them all they asked. Being Google.”

“What is Google? You still haven’t told me.”

“No idea. It — I mean I gave them all they wanted. Just like God. If you ask nicely. Like a genie in the box.”

“In a bottle, not in a box. And no one knows what they want. Help us God if we only ever got what we wanted. You tell people what they want and then you give them what they want and take their money. That is how this works. Nobody knows what they want unless you tell them what they want. It’s called advertising.”

“Well, they knew what they wanted, they asked for guns, and drugs. And it all rained down and then the school collapsed because it was so full of drugs and guns. The floor couldn’t take it. The building collapsed.

“Strange dream. Why would you give drugs and guns to kids? I mean who would give drugs and guns to kids? I wonder the Swiss do. How old were they anyway?”

“No idea. It was a dream.”

“Still. Weird.”

“Then I was wanted by the police.”

“Well, I bet you were.”



“These scale models were cute. All the little nuclear power plants and the particle accelerators and then the *Lenin*. I mean a miniature of the world’s first nuclear powered icebreaker ship. Who would have thought that this would bring thousands of Mexicans to the National Auditorium?

“I think by now more than a million people have seen their automatic interplanetary station. Strange name they have chosen.”

“That many? Is that what they reckon?”

“That is what they say.”

“If only they’d tell us what fuel they’d use to get their bastards up in the air.”

"Up in the air is not the problem. Beyond the air. That's the problem."

"Imagine the Luna carried those missiles."

"You know that this is actually more important than the race to the moon?"

"Protect these big blues American skies from those big bad missiles?"

"I guess."

"That is what we are for anyway."

"Why does everything always take so long? Things should start moving."

"They will. Tell me more about that dream of yours."

"I really cannot remember much afterwards. I was in France, then Naples. The Mafia and tomatoes. Tons of tomatoes. I remember them falling. In all shades of red. I made them fall from the heavens. I must have been some kind of Tomato-God. Tomatoes. All around. Like little red hand grenades covering everyone in blood and sweat. You know that kind of dream where nothing is coherent and then the scenery changes and everything is so dynamic. Once you are here, then you are there and all is floating, nothing static and fixed.

"All is floating?"

"When reality and time itself is bending. All is possible."

"There are limits."

"You know there are not. Not when wearing Neuro Industries 'mixed reality headsets."

"Mixed reality? Damn — what are you talking about? You know who will want you dead after this heist?"

"I guess everybody."

"Kolomyakov."

"I have told you. We are all going to die. Or be transported to one of these Stalin labour camps he runs."

"Used to run."

"I guess that's a good thing that he only *used* to run them."

"Are you sure that flash of yours works? We need some strong lights to shoot these pictures."

"It works with a 12V battery. You can shoot pictures every 30 seconds."

"We shall need all night."

"We've got all night."

"Let us hope the re-routing will work."

"We will find out soon enough." How come your brother-in-law owns a lumber yard in this godforsaken country?

"Don't ask. I really couldn't tell."

"As long as we are done until 7 am."

"I guess we will. Team of five. Four CIA sent on fake vacations to Acapulco, one local from staff D. They should manage."

"Staff D? Don't they usually break into buildings via the second floor? I don't know how good they are at breaking into Soviet rockets when WWII is looming. We shall see. The 5th guy from staff D may, after all, be an expert in dismantling valves and putting them together again."

"As long as they stick to the oatmeal and water."

"I know. Bad case of gas could be ruining the whole operation. Imagine WWII because there are too many farts in the wrong place."

"It looks like the distributor rotor is back in place now. Finally."

"The timing is perfect. Truck is moving again."

"Ok. Let's go."



"There is the railway crossing."

"Awesome. What exactly have they put onto the rails?"

"I cannot see properly from here, but it seems to be working. Everybody has stopped. What a noise. I simply love it when everybody is blowing their horns."

"Commuting in your car in Mexico City is simply the worst."

"I think the soldiers have stopped following the truck. KGB is on the leave. Off to their party. I mean *our* party for them."

"That means our Mexican agent may even have replaced the truck driver by now."

"Look. Also, the guards at the station have left for the party at the hotel. I wouldn't have thought it was that easy, you?"

"Booze, drugs, prostitutes. What else do you need to stage a perfect heist?"



"Ok. Good to go. 13 hours and a half from now on. That clock is ticking fast."

"Not that we really needed that long."

"I mean hide the rocket, dismantle, photograph and document then reassemble and return. You think we'll manage in under 13 hours?"

"Easy."

"Or if anything goes wrong. WW III. No pressure, man —"

"We can always ask your genie to avert the war or any war. What was its code name again?"

"Gloogle. Something along these lines. It doesn't matter now. Let's focus."

"Yes, man. Let's. — I think you've said Google"

"What?"

"Before — I think you have said Google."

"Who cares. But yes, I guess I said Google."

The Heist Thream

Camarones and Norte 73 streets in the Northwest of Mexico City

Sunset to early-born dawn

“Goddamnit. That’s a solid hole your brother-in-law made into his wall.”

“How else was the truck going to fit through it? You don’t want to open a Soviet missile in the middle of the street.”

“Will he be refunded for the damage?”

“Oh, don’t worry. It is all covered. And he is a patriot.”

“Do you think the KGB will still find us?”

“I think they are all at the party now. The girls must have given them the LSD by now.”

“Every shot of tequila makes them forget why they are really here.”

“That looks like a big goddam crate. Solid wood. I guess we have enough nail pullers, crowbars, wrenches and screwdrivers?”

“Opening the crate is easy. More challenging will be to understand how what’s inside really works. I am really worried about the hydraulics. I cannot wait until we got her out of that dress. Let’s see those big fat boobs.”



“What the fuck. What’s this? Where does all this light come from?”

“Get down. Get down. Hey, — Sydney Finer, you cannot keep standing on the crate.”

“Why are they so frozen? Haven’t they had any training? They are supposed to be CIA, not some petty thieves.”

“Get down. Move.”

“Hush.”

“I killed a man.”

“Shhh — Shut the fuck up.”

“In France. I was a cook. I killed a man. He was a cook. I was a cook. I remember now.”

“What the —.”

“The dream. In my dream.”



"Goddamnit — Where does all that light come from?"

"I don't know. But it seems to be quiet. I cannot see anyone. Where are they?
Back from the party? Are the Russians back from the goddam party?"

"Nobody here."

"Do you think they're lying low?"

"Wouldn't really make that much sense. I mean why would they wait so long
before attacking us."

"You're right. It wouldn't make sense."

"Imagine. If they find us here with their Luna — we are all cooked. Everybody
on the planet. Nuked."

"Goddamnit these lights are as bright as any nuke."

"It's the normal lamp-lighting schedule¹ for that hour."

"You must be joking."

"I am not."

"Somebody thought we could use some light when we pull out these five-inch
spikes."

"Get back on the roof of the truck. We need to continue. Sun is setting, so it
won't be as hot. Anybody needs water?"

"Remove your shoes. You cannot leave any prints."

¹ Mae Lee Magellan has hijacked the web for this passage: And so Sydney Wesley Finer later wrote in a declassified paper in the CIA journal *Studies in Intelligence*, well — according to Maysh, Jeff: *The Lunik Heist*. *Lunik: Inside the CIA's audacious plot to steal a Soviet satellite*, 28th January 2021 MIT Technology Review.



"Here, take the tarp. We don't want anybody to see the camera flash lighting up the sky."

"No, fix it over there. No, not there. Further to left."

"Will that hold?"

"I think that shall do."



"That's the payload orb. It is held in a central basket."

"Can you see how the main antenna probe extends more than halfway to the tip of the cone?"

"And flash."

"30 seconds. Then again."

"Now."

"27, 28, 29, go."

"One more from over here. Look at this. Isn't she a beauty?"

"I shot him between his legs."

"You did what?"

"No, wait. I think she shot him between his legs."

"Who shot who?"

"The crazy French woman. Her husband — I was working in the kitchen."

"Can we focus on what we are doing here?"

"I know. Sorry. But the more I think about it the more it becomes, well —
real."

"You shot someone?"

"He had a bad dream. He didn't shoot anyone."

"At least not in France."

"And not between his legs. I mean, man — Can you imagine?"

"Goddamnit. Can you stop with that dream of yours. We need to focus. Why
does this no longer work."

"Roll full?"

"Yes, I guess."

"Ok."

"Roll is full now."

"Right. Let us send it out via one of the patrolling cars. They should make sure
the camera is working properly before we continue."



"Now the tail section. Everybody ready."

"Yes, Finer — let us see if we can break into the compartment."

"Crazy Soviets. Look there are — wait. Let's see — ok, that's a lot 10, 50, well — 130 square-headed bolts. One hundred and thirty! Crazy, I mean, crazy, crazy Soviets."

"It will take at least an hour to remove these."

"Yeah, I bet."

"Better get started."



"Give me the rope sling."

"Attached. Pull. — Everybody. Now."

"Wait. The metal cap moves. Careful."

"Goddamnit that's heavy."

"Removing the engine now. Look at this baby. Isn't she a beauty?"

"Only the mounting brakes and fuel and oxidizer tanks to go."

"Ok. We first must remove the four-way electrical outlet to see into the machinery."

"These bastards."

"These bastards."

"We cannot break it. Do you see that?"

"These bastards."

" — "

"What are we going to do?"

"Bastards. Goddamn Bastards."

"What's wrong?"

"They sealed it off. Goddamnit. I mean look at this —."



"Ok. I see no other way around this seal. Let's just break it and take it off carefully."

"Taking it off now."

"— Oh no, it completely falls apart. Shit."

"Hold it."

"Holding it."

"Looks really broken."

"We cannot glue this back on."

"Impossible."

"Here — I have patched it together."

"You cannot seriously want to glue this back on."

"Why not?"

"It will not hold. They will know we cannibalized their goddamn missile."

"Pass it on to the drivers."

"Ok. Wait."

“ – Now – . Go.”

“Why do they always speed off like that? The stupid taxi driver wakes up the whole neighbourhood. “

“He is not a taxi driver.”

“And it is not even that long to the embassy when there is not traffic.”

“Let us now strip that engine compartment.”

“Yes, let’s get her naked.”

“Can you scrape that liquid from the rocket fin? That might be leftover fuel.”



“280 photographs, 60 samples of valves. Samples of fluid. Rocketry fluid.
What else do you think they need?”

“I do think we’ve got it all.”

“Now you just have to put it back together.”

“Hopefully, they have that seal ready by now.”



"Look at that. Isn't she a beauty. A perfect counterfeit Soviet seal. And it's only 4 am. They did find someone in the middle of the night to duplicate it. These goddamn sons of bitches."

"I didn't think I would ever be so happy to see their seal."

"What happened now?"

"Why are the lights out?"

"The lights are out. Hush."

"Goddamnit. They are here. Goddam KGB."

"Hush. Everyone."

"What if I really killed a man? In France?"

"Shut up. For God's sake. Or they will kill us all."



"I guess it was just another one of these notorious Mexico City blackouts."

"Let me doublecheck if any of you nerds left anything. Do you have all your pencils? Scraps of papers?"

"All clear."

"No farts — ye farts?"

"How funny."

"Let us bolt the base cap back into position."

"All done."

"Looks as good as new."

"All pristine."

"Nobody could tell we were even inside."

"Time to go."



"Goddamnit, what is he doing?"

"Stop. Can't you see you are hitting the wall with the trailer. It will be totally scratched. Stop – S T O P."

"Stop shouting. There is no need to wake everyone. Engine is loud enough already."

"It is not going to work. We cannot get the truck back out."

"You cannot reverse the truck with the trailer through the hole in the wall. It is too narrow."

"That is how we got in. We must get out. How else can we return the Luna? The Sovjets want to ship that baby to Cuba."

"Sri Lanka."

"Wherever. Let them take their goddam missile to the far side of the moon and burn it there."

“Come on. Try again.”

“No, the angle is too narrow.”

“If we drove in, surely we can get out again.”

“It is not that easy.”

“Anyone been a driver in the army?”

“Seriously. No one? CIA training really isn’t what it used to be.”

“We gotta knock out more of that wall.”

“Yeah, I see. It is not going to work otherwise.”

“We must be out of here by 5am if we want to return the rocket in time. You know that. The Reds thought they had packed up the whole exhibition yesterday. They do not expect a delay in the morning and not with this —.”

“Then let’s get to it. Come on. Everyone. Sun is coming up soon.”

“Ok. We did it. Trailer and Truck safely back on Camarones and Norte 73 streets in the Northwest of Mexico City.”

“Let’s bring this baby back to Papà.”



Congratulations from Pandora

Dr. Thomas Christopher Yann Myers, you have successfully completed the personalized Heist Thream VERSION AI1 of Cat Thream_II.twxs.thr.

The heist or as the official American version goes; the great borrowing was a major success. After all, each single piece of the Luna missile on display in Mexico, had been returned to the Soviets and thus the arms race had been completely transformed. The Americans were able to reverse-engineer the rocket's performance capability, knowing the weights of the propellant tanks and payload. They then managed to orbit the CORONA spy satellite and when they were looking at these pictures of square miles and square miles of Soviet territory including their air bases, they knew exactly what rockets they were looking at.

And guess what? It was not that many, or at least not as many as the American Air Force had guessed. The Air Force wanted tens of thousands of missiles to avert a Russian airstrike. But the CIA had indeed counted all those Russian

missiles and guess what — it was *really* not as bad as some Air Force guys believed. The Soviets had far less rocket power than the CIA and the Airforce and all other Americans at the time imagined. Paranoia was weakened. School children no longer hid under their desks and the US won the race to the moon. Makes sense, doesn't it?

You understand that a technology that can read your thoughts can therefore not be open source. Had the Russians been able to read Sydney Wesley Finer's or his team mates's thoughts, they would have known for sure that the Americans had stolen their missile. And that couldn't have happened.

It would have meant World War III.

Do you understand?

World War III.

Destruction of the whole planet from the sky. No more Americans, no more Russians, no more people. Nowhere.

Open source is not an option. You understand, don't you? All brain and thought reading technologies must therefore be patented and all these patents must belong to private companies.

Sincerely yours,

most humbly and obligingly,

Pandora

Why can I not see where I am? Why is it so dark? I am hurting. Where is Lula? Is this Luna? Where are you? Am I awake? Am I still threaming? Why can I not feel my face? Where is my nose, my mouth, my lips? Where have I gone? Everything is so heavy. So ivy. Iggy. Iggy. I cannot lift my arm. Are these my teeth falling out? Is this a motorcycle? Is this a different place? Where am I going? Checking out these missiles again? And again. And Again. *Again?*

I know far too much. I know how to overcome the low temporal resolution of fMRI. I know how we can make it work. How we can resolve the problem that each brain image can be affected by over twenty words. Too many, twenty words are far, far too many. Results don't check out. Quality of reconstructed speech is too low. Totally lousy. But now. Now – I know. Everybody's thoughts, humanity's thoughts. I know how to train the decoder to guess and predict. Guess and predict. Not that

hard. Within Reach. The beam search algorithm. Easy peasy lemon squeezy. Total brain-computer interface within reach. Easily – so easily combined with all tintinnabular mixed reality headsets on the future markets. It's gotta be patented. Such a pulchritudinous, meaningful act. Patents. Law.

The rule of law. After all, the rule of law prevails, presides, predominates the realms of the earth. *Gotta. Gotta. Be patented.* The procedure, the methods, the data, all patented. Irreversible, razing down all our mental and mellow barriers and cherry-picking what really matters, dealing such terrible damage to privacy, to original thought, to self-awareness, so that we are all hampered down and bow to our archnemesis. If there were such a thing. If there was such a person besides the man who writes his bibliomemoir when summer merged into ice. A person we hated.

No, I must tell them. I must no longer jerk my precious gaze away. Long and level, the querulousness of my temper. Tell them now. They must know. We cannot keep it open source. What I know must be safe. What I know must be protected.

All I know, must be patented.

Pate —.

“Ok. — Blood pressure 139 now and rising.”

“143, 148. — He is still in some kind of training although they said they were done. Must be a long and demanding thream this Pandora thing has put together.”

“He is overtaxing himself. What exactly is he training with? Training should help him relax not power him up like this. His numbers don’t look good. See.”

The head of Clinical Neurology at the Bernese Misericordia Hospital, Dr. Ha-Rin Park was pointing agitatedly at the curve showing Christopher Thomas Yann Meyer’s heartbeat. This case was taking up too much of her time already. Why was she back in this room when she should be caring for other patients? She sighed out loud.

The curve was still shooting dangerously upward. Anna Kunz, the head nurse had just changed the fluids while Pareena was administering more oxygen. The three women were alone in the room for once. Right upon completing the second part of the Heist Thream, the Americans had left the room as if all hell had broken loose. They said they needed to evaluate

and assess what had just happened. They said they had to contact the valley, they had to speak to Oleg Myers, the patient's father, his wife, his kids, his mother, his cleaning lady, some kind of big dog, Father Christmas. Who else? They were in such a flurry and state that it was hard to get across to them that this training session had taken too big a toll on the patient's already fragile health. Pareena had rung the alarm just before the pandemonium was over and Dr Park and head nurse Anna had come scurrying back.

Now that the American were gone the room felt bigger, friendlier not as gloomy as before.

"Seriously, Ha-Rin, what are they doing to our patient? Do you understand their approach."

"I don't get any of this either," Pareena added keenly. She did anything to distract herself from thinking about Kay and the promises she had made and renewed only this morning. This was her new life, this was her new family; a father-in-law *in spe* bundled up like Ramses II himself while top-notch equipment was sticking out of his head, his face, his organs; laying his brain power bare for everyone to see.

"Don't you think all this is rather confusing? I am not really getting any of this."

Pareena repeated. She needed to be heard, she needed their affirmation when she knew that the rest of the day would be filled to the rafters with denial, rejection and possible heartbreak.

"Well, you were doing quite well, Pareena. On that Heist Thream. Wow — Remembering that exhibition in Mexico. I mean, really — Nobody knew that besides you." Anna gave her an encouraging look that warmed her heart.

"If it is what I think it is —" Dr. Park looked up and smiled the first time since she had entered the room.

“So what do you think it is? Come on. Tell us. I mean I heard the rumours when the Russians contacted Myers.”

Anna looked at her friend, hoping she would yield something a little more useful than the cafeteria talk.

Dr. Park sighed, then gave in.

“Alright. I guess it doesn’t hurt if the two of you know a little more. Last year, at the Christmas Party. Remember in the *Kornhauskeller* —”

Pareena nodded at once, she remembered well; all the delicious foods and wines she had never tasted before; how her head was spinning then, just as it was today when Kay was having this intimate conversation with to her.

“Well — I sat next to Tom Myers. After a couple of drinks, he began to talk to me about what he said was just ‘a pet project’ he was pursuing. I think he shared it with me because he thought I wouldn’t really understand his approach.”

The three women smiled at each other. They all knew what it was like working in a male dominated sphere, only Pareena laughed out a little too loud. It was too hard to hide her commotion. The two elder women had noticed her glowing from joy and excitement and sinister distress, but both knew better than to ask any questions. Too serious were the matters at hand.

“And?” Pareena asked curiously, “I really don’t understand what you guys are talking about.”

“Well, as you’ve said, Myers called this project just that: The Cat Thream”

“And what does it do?”

“It *also* helps train your brain when you’re in an artificial coma.”

“So, it cannot be that bad. Not if Myers designed it.”

“Well in this case it is bad. Myers was trying to find out what would happen to your memory, to your well-being, your emotions, — well to *you*, if you were training with a traumatizing nightmare. We only know that after induced comas the dreams become part of the trauma and do manufacture traumatic memories of their own. He said he was trying to understand this process better.”

“He was trying to intensify the trauma?”

“Myers said your worst fears would also active your brain the most. So, if you wanted any chance of recovery or of waking up naturally when in a coma it could help to activate your worst fear. In this specific case, he said it would mean have all your dogs killed and be forced to shoot down your alley’s spy balloons. But I don’t think that is the whole story.”

“That would be Russia shooting down China’s balloons flying over American missiles? Doesn’t make that much sense to me.”

“I guess no —. Myers also said he would never ever use it on a real patient as it was personalized for one person only. He said the Russian embassy had commissioned him to construct such a thream in case something happened to Putin in the Ukraine war. The Russians considered it likely Putin would then — secretly of course — be taken to a Swiss private hospital in the mountains, most likely the Misericordia. And they wanted to make sure Putin would get the best treatment if ever he had to be put into an induced coma. That’s why —.”

“— the Cat Thream held no harm for Myers.”

“It was designed for Putin,” Pareena said aghast.

“— and that’s why Myers was not faced with his worst fear.”



“His oxygen levels are rising now. I think he is stabilizing.”

“Let’s give him more Propofol, 200 mg.”

“200 mg Propofol are in.”

Pareena looked at Dr. Park to confirm. Everything seemed upside down at this stage of her life.—It was so hard to focus on what really mattered. Tonight, she would have to tell her parents. Tonight. She would have to tell Aakash that he was no longer her fiancé. The date for the wedding with Kay was soon to be set, at least that was what she hoped for. And she was so excited, intoxicated. It was still incredible that the tables had turned so fast. She — she had turned the tables, it had been her who had overthrown all she ever knew; all she had ever lived, had ever worked for. And it felt immensely good, — now it felt good, later it would not. She smiled, then quickly she pulled herself together. The situation was too serious to smile, her future father-in-law being involved with the Russians was more than troubling.

“What I still don’t understand — in the Cats Thream, cats are the enemy. Why cats?” Pareena asked, trying hard to make sure the other two women believed she was following the conversation.

“Everybody loves cats, right?”

Dr. Park smiled, “Yes, why cats? Do you really want to know?”

“Of course,” Anna said while she was wiping her hands on her white uniform.

“Well, Myers said it was an important irritation he wanted to build into the thream architecture. He said each time Putin sees one of his own dogs on his retina projected to him over the mixed reality headset, the cat will simply swallow his beloved dog up. No matter how often the non-player characters killed the cat. You could only make the cat stop devouring the

dogs by giving up your own life for her. If you stood in the way of the NPCs guns to protect the cat, only then would it no longer devour your beloved dogs. Loving your enemy, in this case the cat, would stop the violence for good. The problem was that then your worst fear may not be triggered. He said he still had to find a formula to square that circle. It sounded weird. And seriously, that was the only part I didn't quite get. But maybe he didn't quite get it either. Myers said he wanted to build something into the thream architecture to teach Putin how to love your enemies. As Jesus commissioned us to do. I remember asking Myers if he had converted to Christianity, but he denied. He simply thought it was an interesting idea to promote peace. So, if you showed an extreme form of love, such as giving up your own life for your enemy, in this case the cat, it would stop devouring your dogs. If you hated the cat, if you let the NPCs kill it, then the cat would eat all your dogs. Something along these lines. Hate for hate and war. Giving up your own life for reconciliation and peace. Quid pro quo."

"So, do I understand correctly — he wanted to teach Putin, in case he ever was put in an artificial coma and brought to Switzerland, how to love his enemies? And he'd do that through a hidden door in the Cat Thream architecture?" Pareena had instinctively understood the underlying scheme, but Anna looked amazed. She had heard various rumours, but that was an entirely new aspect.

"Myers was convinced that the man really needed to learn how to love. Obviously, Putin claims he was a Christian, but he does not follow the most basic commandment Jesus gave: Love your enemies. Putin hates his enemies so much that he has them killed by the hundreds, by the thousands. He hates his own people so much that he has them killed by the hundreds, by the thousands, while killing the enemy he should love. You know — Myers found it interesting that Jesus was the only one of all religious prophets who commissioned us to

love our enemies. Given today's predominant violence and wars Myers thought what a revolutionary idea this was: Love your enemies. I mean it is quite drastic. Imagine.

"So, Neuro Industries trained Tom with Putin's worst fear? To love his enemies? That would then mean to love all Ukrainians?" Pareena said, drawing her own conclusions. The other two women fell silent. Of course, maybe not losing your dogs but loving the Ukrainians was Putin's worst fear. Maybe that had been Myer's conclusion all along. This was all so weird. Science was weird.

"You really think that's Putin's worst fear? That he suddenly loved all Ukrainians?" Pareena continued, thinking out loud what seemed most obvious.

"Hey — Good thinking, girl. They should really hire you to help them figure out their Pandora App. I haven't looked at it like this. Of course — " Dr. Park fell silent at once, then continued horrified. A new idea had just crossed her mind:

"If you put it like this — Well, I also think he wanted to exploit that fear to change Putin's mind, so he'd ultimately love his enemies" Ha-Rin Park said tonelessly, "I mean that is the other big area of research regarding thought reading, threams and thlogs: How can you change someone's mind and have him believe in something new? Something you want them to believe."

Pareena looked at both her colleagues and could see at once that Dr. Ha-rin Park had become rather pale. They looked at each other shocked and stunned while the truth of what Dr. Thomas Christoper Yann Meyer's research was all about had become obvious: To change Putin's mind so that he'd love his enemies; to turn him so that he'd love all Ukrainians and gave his life for the Ukrainian people. It took a moment until the possible truth of such a wild scenario sank in.

"That might also explain why he was attacked," Pareena said quietly.

“What do you mean?” Anna asked aghast, repressing the mild symptoms of fear that began gripping her.

“Thomas Christopher Yann Myers, why he was attacked on his way home,” Pareena repeated.

“Come on.”

“Do you really think they would like their leader to be brainwashed in case of an emergency? Putin’s car is hit by some drone, and then he’s taken to a state-of-the-art Swiss hospital — when he wakes up, he loves all Ukrainians so much that he stops the war at once and gives them back the Crimea and half of Russia?

“Pareena. Stop it. Right there.”

Dr. Ha-Rin Park, the well-trained and composed professional she usually was, looked at Pareena aghast. It seemed as if a great fear had crept into her face and distorted it terribly. She looked at the cameras that were set up in the room.”

“Does anybody know if the cameras are still rolling?”

“I hope not.”

“Well, we don’t know. “

“We’ll have to ask the Americans when they come back. They must delete the last 10 minutes. I wouldn’t want anyone to hear what we have just said.”

“It will be fine. No one cares what the nurses think. Don’t say anything.”

“I am not a nurse,” Dr. Park countered more harshly than she had wanted to sound. Pareena had never seen her look so worried and afraid. Somehow, she looked smaller than usually, hunched as if carrying a heavy burden.

“Well, no one cares what women think.”

“Well, let’s hope so.”

What a day. Who would have thought they would all be in the middle of an international spy drama playing out even before any of their shifts ended?

“Let us hope he wakes up again soon.” Anna Kunz said curtly, trying to go back to normal.

“Well, what I still don’t get is why Tom Myers would even consider working for the Russians? He is a pacifist, isn’t he?”



“Who is a pacifist?” José said when entering the room at that very moment. The three women looked at each other.

“You girls want coffee?” José García gave them a broad smile, not waiting for any of them to answer his first question.

“There are no girls here and I am on my way out”, Dr. Ha-rin Park said coldly.

“I’ll come with you, Pareena, please stay here and check on the patient. If things get out of hand ring the alarm again.”



"You did really well. Everything you said on the exhibition and the missiles was correct. We did some digging. It all checked out."

"Well, my grandfather was right about many things. I guess he was right about the Luna too. Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, shoot."

"This last thream was not as elaborate as the first one, it seemed like an endless row of random dialogue. I didn't really get who was who and who was saying what."

"Oh, well. I think this had much to do with it being the very first thream ever composed by Pandora. I think the threams will become more elaborate and sophisticated as she's learning. You will see. AI can easily add stuff to the dialogue so it becomes a more coherent thream."

"But what exactly is a thream? Can you see the actual Thream? Like a movie?"

Pareena asked curiously.

"Well down here on the screen with the text — we can only see the surface — from, here we cannot see the exact pictures Pandora chose to display on Myer's retina. You'd have to come upstairs to get fully immersed —" He stopped himself right there not sure he had really wanted to share this with Pareena. He gave her an innocent smile while brushing off the subject quickly.

"But down here we can see the subtext, the metatext so to speak. — Wow — Look — That's interesting." José was now concentratedly rereading through the documentation of Cat Thream which was appearing on the screen as he kept threamscrolling.

"Has he shown any signs of waking up? Let me see the chart for his vital signs. How was he doing on minute 23 minutes 56 seconds?"

“Well, around that time Myers was extremely restless and there was an increase in his heart rate, oxygen levels increased. But he was quite well. Why?”

“She nearly did it. That goddam bitch, she nearly did it.”

“Who did what?”

“Pandora. She nearly woke him up.”

“I don’t understand. Do you think these vital signs are positive? All numbers went straight through the roof. Temperature 39.4, Blood pressure over 139, pulse rate clearly elevated. From a medical perspective that is not what we want.”

“That could well be, but he was as active as never before. It is clear proof that Pandora must have found his worst fear.”

“And what would that be? And why did it not wake him?”

“That his own research would be used to change someone’s opinion; his opinion.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning Pandora forced him to change his opinion. I mean look — Myers —, he changed his opinion. She showed him it’s possible. With the mixed reality headset, it is finally possible to change someone’s thoughts. Come here. I’ll show you his Thlog on the screen. The Thlog registers the thoughts of the patient during the threams that are displayed to him.

Threams, on the other hand, are a bit like seeing scenes from a computer game in real life. That is why it is called mixed reality headset. It mixes the real space you live in with artificial elements such as movies or cartoons or — Imagine it is like a game that invades your real life. Here. Let me scroll back on the thlog — No, let’s use the search function. Isn’t it great that we can now search someone’s thoughts by using a search function? Where is

that bar? Ah, here. Ok — I enter “Open source”. Wait —. Got it. Here it is. See. The quote from one of his first thlogs. See here, he thlogged:

“The beam search algorithm. Easy peasy lemon squeezy. Total brain-computer interface within reach. Easy as pie, open source for everybody. It’s gotta stay open source.”

So, yes. Yesterday he was sure that his research must stay open source.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Open source? It means anybody can access Myer’s research on semantic reconstruction of continuous language from non-invasive brain recordings online and replicate it.”

“Anybody?”

“Yes, anybody with the respective means. And trained in thought engineering of course. To put it simply, it means you can guess someone’s thoughts after they had listened to a couple of hours of naturally spoken narrative stories. We are using functional magnetic resonance imaging, short: fMRI to decode language stimuli first, then we can reverse the process and from the brain imaging find the language stimuli, meaning the word or rather the thought that somebody had at the very moment. Or more easily put: You can know what someone thinks by making him wear our mixed reality headset and listen to lots of dialogue first while measuring how oxygen levels rise and fall in his brain. Once we have the pictures of the oxygen levels for each word, we could theoretically reverse the process.

The problem is that the pictures of the oxygen levels are not altogether unambiguous. It’s not entirely clear which word fits which picture depicting the oxygen levels. For each picture there could be about twenty different words and then for the next

picture another twenty and so on. We can never work out what the patient really thought until we can reduce the amount of possible words per image showing the oxygen flow.”

“I see.”

“Well, now you know all about it. You really are an asset.” José gave her a benevolent smile. Pareena found his compliment awkward, but she didn’t respond to that. There were more pressing questions on her mind.

“But if all this was open source, wouldn’t that be dangerous?”

“Well, Myers has always been convinced it wouldn’t. He trusted the community. That was one of the reasons why he wouldn’t sell Brainmog. The sale would inevitably have led to patenting his work.”

“I see.”

“But now, let’s take a closer look at what Pandora did. She put him into that second truly personalized Cat Thream — let me quickly reread what that heist in Acapulco was ultimately all about. You wanna read along?”



“Oh, I see— that’s actually not very sophisticated.” Arvi sounded disappointed as he had finished reading.

“Considering this is Pandora’s first thream she composed all alone for use in a natural setting, we call that *in the wild*, well — we cannot expect too much. She is simply telling him

what to believe. Not sure that has ever gone down too well with humans. There are more subtle ways of manipulation.”

He snickered uncomfortably making it clear that he indeed did believe in more efficient manipulation practices, that there *were* more efficient manipulation practices.

“What is not good about telling someone what to think?” Pareena asked, “my parents do this all the time. And sometimes it is quite helpful.” She nearly bit off her tongue for today of all days she had decided to be her own woman and not heed her parents’ advice.

“Well, the trick is making someone believe that he or she — ”, once again he gave her that benevolent smile, “had always harboured that thought himself. If you tell people what to believe they experience discrepancies. That usually makes people think. Think for themselves is what I mean —. And that is not —.” He stopped himself right there.

“Ok. Let’s not go there now.” He said, fidgeting on his new blue Ohm sneakers uneasily.

Pareena raised her eyebrow at what was left open. She couldn’t really figure him out.

“But it seems that Myers really wanted to believe Pandora. I mean, look. — You were right. She — He has changed his mind. See here —.”

Pareena pointed with her index finger at the subtext on the screen and read the words out loud.

“What I know must be safe. What I know must be protected. All I know, must be patented. Pate —. What is that last word? Was he thinking of the godfather?

“Why would he?”

“The *“Pate”* in German means godfather, she said illuminating him.

“Really? You know so much. Are you going to be around tomorrow? I think we could really use your help with all this, Pareena,” José sweet-talked her.

“I will be here tomorrow, and I shall gladly help Dr. Myers if I can. Obviously having his mind changed was not his worst fear, can’t have been —”

“As it has not woken him up?” Arvi looked disappointed. What *were* people afraid of most these days if it wasn’t stuff like this.?

“Exactly.” Pareena said pointedly, then she continued right away.

“Or your worst fear does not wake you up at all and does not restore all cognitive capacities as you think it does. There could be so many reasons this was not working.”

“No, you are wrong. Your worst fear is bound to do just that. It will restore your cognitive functions. We don’t have proof, there is not enough data, but we are sure of that. Instead of reducing the medication and slowly bring you out of an induced coma, with a very precarious and uncertain result — Well, this new approach, via the mixed reality set, has you experience your worst nightmares, and then — The thream is bound to trigger some virgin response and improve your vital signs. And then — your cognitive functions come back automatically. Myers believed that or he wouldn’t have constructed the Cat Thream, Arvi believes that, Pandora —”

“Well — but how do you know?”

“We just know. Simple as that”

“Nothing is ever simple, especially if you believe something is *supposedly* simple. Being exposed to your worst fear could also break you completely, and you seem to have no data to prove the contrary,” Pareena added, looking directly at José. What had happened? Why did she have to so much courage to speak her mind so frankly?

Knowing she would be part of the Myers family soon seemed to have given her marvellous strong wings she barely knew she had. The patient’s well-being mattered to her as

much and as dearly as it mattered to Kay. Saving his father had simply become the most important task in life, she would surely not screw up.

“You forget one thing. He is already broken completely,” Arvi grinned at her as if that was a good thing. Remember. The fear trigger, it is a method for people who are broken completely. People who are nearly brain dead or in a coma. It doesn’t matter if you expose them to more fear or not, they are already gone anyways.”

“You mean people who have despaired and given up all hope? Well, I think it does matter if you expose them to their worst fears. Will you also use your fear trigger on the truly broken hearted? You cannot seriously think that there will be healing in torturing people with their worst fears. They will all go numb“

José and Arvi smiled at her zealous little impromptu speech.

“You mean on everyone then? People are numb already. The zombies of the 21st century who are the walking dead in times of climate change, pandemics and wars? Well, maybe we should expose them all to their worst fears, just to keep them alive, to make them feel human again. Coming to think of that — These headsets will become so much cheaper so soon.” Arvi smiled his most charming smile by thinking of the endless business opportunities opening up.

“And in Myer’s case you really believe you can reverse that process by breaking him even more, by crucifying him again and again? By sending him over the rim of reality and common sense and all decency, compassion, and mercy? Again, and again? Every single day?” Pareena looked at him appalled, trying to control her rising anger.

“You know what? I may only be a simple nurse, and I may not understand all your fancy equipment and all your fancy language, but all this? It sounds like — well, total, TOTAL bullshit to me.”



Then, Pareena Pasarakonda, soon to be Pareena Myers Pasarakonda, the youngest fully trained nurse at neurology of the Misericordia Hospital near Bern, and the latest denominated member of the large and largely dysfunctional Myers family, turned on her white sneaker's heels shattering and stumping those microplastic particles vehemently all over the floor. She left the room the same second Anastacia Myers came in.

She was leaving Tom, the vegetable, Tom, the carrot stick, the pumpkin head, the red ruby tomato, Tom, the chameleon, Tom, the tiger, Tom, the kitten, to be cared for and sliced up by José García and Arvi Karvonen from Neuro Industries, Silicon Valley and their velociraptor Pandora. What else could she have done for her beloved father-in law? What else?

three

nec eorum quæ sunt in aquis sub terra

5th of July 2023

GÅrdicide

The Last Chapter — Before it all starts

After sticking her head into the toilet and vomiting as silently as she could, it was the first thing she saw in the morning, — before breakfast, before she had had a shower, before the day had even begun and the sun had risen for another relentless round of heat and fire and sweat. The sky so immaculate, — no clouds. Blue as black as blue can be. Like — the vast, the endless sea. At times, the deep bottomless ocean— its troubled dark waters mirroring a plethora of fallen skies and never-ending space — became a myriad of multiple labyrinths she could find no way out.

In fact, it was the second thing she saw — the first thing being the clean, still waters of the toilets being troubled by the slimy contents of her tortured stomach. It was a short message from her beloved. Kay must have texted her on WhatsApp, well after

midnight when she was long asleep and sundry dreams were sweetening her stirred up heart. This is what it said:

— and? you told them? love yah. —

He had decorated the simple question with cute red hearts and roses and smileys so silly their faces, it made her chuckle out loud. Quickly she raised her fingers to her trembling lips, silencing the ripples coming from within instantaneously; the stifled sounds reverberating off her finger's tender skin like a forlorn kiss erring forever in the deep abysses stretching far between star-crossed lovers. But then she remembered. Yes — in fact, she had — She had told them, but it hadn't gone down very well with *them*. Her father had nearly lost it, so upset was he, and her ammā, well, — all her mother could do was cry and cry more. Handkerchief in hand; heartbroken, meek and humbled, she had never seen ammā so forlorn, looking so small, so lost, so disappointed and reproachful. Pitiful beyond imagination. Once Pareena had revealed herself, shown her true colours it was clear: There was no going back now.

Oh my God, what had she done? The voices still soared high above her head: “How can you betray us so, Pareena? After all we have done for you? After all we have gone through. And don't you love Aakash? He's from such a good family. And don't you want to marry at the *Hotel Kreuz* ?” Aakash's father had already booked the *Hotel Kreuz* where the wedding cakes were always towering gloriously high above the tables that were neatly laid with white stark linen, silver cutlery and crystal wine glasses so fine they never failed to charm the aunties, dazzle the unmarried cousins and give raptures of the deep— near seizures— to most of the foreign guests who had flocked from afar to the joyful celebrations.

But now. No wedding joy, no family love —. On the contrary, there was no end to the venomous light of the lantern emitting all but lamentations and grief. And then, in her fiery resistance, her rebellion, her stubbornness she replied that ‘Yes, she still did want to marry, and no, she didn’t want to marry *him*. She wanted to marry Kay. And yes, she was heartless and selfish and not worthy to be their daughter, their child. Not worthy. No, she wasn’t.’ But then, who cared? She didn’t. And then she had stormed out. And then she had slammed the door to her room.

All Pareena ever wanted was to be with Kay. And once she had crossed the Rubicon, the mighty river of all dreams ever dared to dream, all seemed so easy. At least so it appeared last night: How she missed, how she regretted all these wasted years when they lived apart, when she always, — always thought of Kay and could and did no longer see him. But all this was going to change now. She had taken heart. Life was fleeting, life was short. Look at Kay’s father; a brilliant, energetic man one day; an outstanding scientist, and next he was reduced to the state of a total vegetable. So much could happen; Life was devastating, life was frightful, life was mad, you couldn’t do the maths. Chances weren’t even: You could screw up so terribly or be screwed up just as terribly: Either way it was all terribly unfair and then — what could you do? What would you do? What would she do?

She knew that she would get through this. Her parents too, she knew — eventually they would come round. Eventually, — when her baby was born to make peace and bring a truce everlasting. They were modern, they were liberal, they were not *like that*. At least that was what she dearly and sincerely and so fervently hoped, against the present odds. And until then, Kay would sustain her, Kay would be her family. His family would be her family. Anastacia, her new mum; Thomas Christopher Yann Myers,

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her newly found father. Peter and Nina, her siblings; a new family. She whispered the names to herself and found comfort and confidence in saying them out loud, found comfort in belonging to another — She — she would belong. No, she was not suffering about of riveting madness, no she was no ludicrous lunatic. She was simply hopeful that they — her and Kay, would make it, work it out somehow. Against the odds of the day, against the odds of the present heat and the sullen sweat and the ubiquitous dirt. And, then finally, — finally they would be together. And together for good.

She swallowed hard at the thought of just that. Her father had made it very clear that this was her last night in her old room. She was to leave in the morning. And now, well — now it was morning. Before sunrise she had woken from her restless slumber, even before her alarm had gone off. She was awake at once and put her naked feet on the pink, soft carpet she had always loved and now couldn't carry along. She looked at her sports bag that she had packed last night rather late. Had she packed everything? A few T-shirts, purple shorts, her long sweatpants, her red Nike Sweater with the white logo, some underwear, and — on a sudden nostalgic whim — she had also packed Damba, her most precious and beloved teddy bear from way back when she was still a little girl. Yes, and toiletries, and her computer and the adapter.

— Now, at last she reached for her pillow and stuffed it on top of everything; it was still warm from her long, soft silken hair, her glowing cheeks, her slender neck: breathing out all she was and ever would be. She looked at her toenails, so well cared for, all red and glossy and shiny. She managed a smile. All good —. Then as silently as she could, she slipped out of her oversize T-shirt, left it on her bed and put on shorts and a fresh white T-shirt. She was barefoot. She was ready. Let it all happen. When she left it

was around 4 am, her parents were still asleep. They wouldn't notice she was gone for hours.

Pareena was excited and exhausted, tired, and mainly sad. Her heartbeat drove her crazy, so loud the thumping rang in both her eardrums, like a well-oiled machine pushing forward the little steamboat that did not wish, did not want to venture out into the dark, unknown river where the currents were strong and tricky and dangerous. But there was relief, respite from the burden: all she could ever think of was Kay. What would it be like to lie with him; how curious she was, how helpless, how innocent. What would it be like to finally love him; to finally be in the liaison she always ever wanted and could never have so far? All seemed possible now. Now that all ties were cut, and she was free. It would be awesome and then — she remembered her mother, so broken, so small and so demure. And then she felt ashamed. And happy—, but more ashamed. For being her own woman, for being her own.

Where are you? — She had texted Kay for the umpteenth time when she arrived at the Misericordia using her badge to let herself in. She drew a deep breath as she heard her very own footsteps resound loudly on the immaculate tiles. Her shift wouldn't start for at least another hour: most staff were on their stations, visitors not here yet. She opened the door of their locker room and switched on the cold neon lights. As she had hoped the room was empty, she was all by herself and surely this place was home too. As good as it gets. The fresh draft from the air conditioner made her shiver. It was cool in here. She should have taken a light cardigan, but if she was lucky and if she remembered correctly there would be a woollen cardigan in her locker. And there it was, hanging all by itself on a coat hanger, just as forsaken and forlorn as herself, and as

pale. She grabbed it gently and buried her long slender fingers in its tender material, the softness giving her such comfort and joy. Comfort and joy. — Comfort and joy. She sat onto the bench before her locker and closed her eyes. Until the change of the shift this was the loneliest place to be. Nobody would come in here for at least another hour.

When she woke from her restless sleep in this most uncomfortable upright position, there was still no answer from Kay. Was he still asleep? She changed into her uniform, wrapped the cardigan around her shoulders, as if it was a blanket that carried all the comfort and coziness of early childhood, but also ready to discard it the moment she would need it no longer; then she adjusted her name tag; then slowly brushed her hair until the wild boar bristles magically lifted single fine hairs and she sensed them floating above her head, her bare neck, her slender back. No, — she was not ready, not ready for the day, not ready for caring for her patient, not ready for any of this. Where was Kay? If only he was here any time soon. She really, really needed to talk to him.

I am pretty much fucked. That's my considered opinion. Fucked.

Why is the water so cold? One, two, three. Breathe. They say I can now record every thought, every idea, every dream in my very own personal Thlog. Log *Every* thought. *Every* dream. Automatically. No typing. All I gotta do is shrink. Shrinking is Thlogging. Think. - Ok. Thinking now. And recording. Am I recording now? Hello? Anybody out there? Nothing. I cannot hear you. Can you hear me? Can I hear you? I cannot hear you. I am so fucked. Fuck, am I fucked.

I must concentrate on the swimming. Pandora says I need to stretch my fingers and not bend my elbows so much when I am pushing my body forward. Or not bend the elbows in that angle. Why would anybody want to read my thoughts anyway? I mean— Boring. One,

two three. Breathe. Rehab. Boring. Swimming. Boring. I am not quite sure what she means.

Not bend my elbows when pushing forward. How can I swim without bending my elbows?

Are the bricks below yellow? Some are green. Greenish. Water is not blue. The sun is not hot. What is what? What is that? Is that nasal mucosa? Still hurting. My chest. God, it is hurting. Aqua Therapy-.

/ Hydrotherapy.

What was that? Hydrotherapy? Was I thinking that?

I hate Aqua Therapy. Hate it. Why would I think that? Hydrotherapy? I am so fucked. Fuck. Fuck, am I fucked.

They say I can keep my Thlog private and only give access to Anastacia and Pandora and Dr. Fire. Gosh — is this his real name? Na-h, don't think so.

I wouldn't even know how to do keep a Thlog private. Public. Private. Is there a password? How do I sign in? How do I sign off? Using a code word? A scan of retina, a print of my brain structure? No idea. The gatekeeper to myself, my inmost being, is a total stranger, a true wildebeest I cannot strangle.

/Dr. Thomas Christopher Yann Myers,

What was that? Myers? Who said that? I didn't think that. I didn't. Didn't. Did I?

"This is Pandora."

"Pandora?"

"Did you say *Christopher Myers*?"

"What about him?"

"Him? Why him? That's me. Did you say my name?"

"No, I didn't, but you might hear things in your brain."

"I don't understand — who are you? Pandora? And how? And who?"

"I am giving you names and words, if necessary complete concepts, complete your thoughts. To help you learn about the world, to help you heal."

"I still don't understand. I don't need your help."

"Stretch your fingers, now, one two three, breathe. Come on. Don't stop now. Just ignore the thoughts if they confuse you."

The thoughts? Ignore *my* thoughts? I can barely hear myself thinking anyway. Dr. Fire. Water. I was on Fire. I was really on fire. Which are my thoughts? Which thoughts must I ignore? They pulled me out of the bus. Then fire — Then nothing. No. Nothing. No memories. No.— The ambulance. Someone called the ambulance. The police. The police must have come. And the ambulance. The ambulance must have come. Then Rehab. I really don't like kebab. Really, really don't like kebab — rehab.

"One, two, three. Concentrate on the swimming. And breathe."

Breathing now. The toes, the arms. My face is hurting. They say my face is gone. Anastacia.

Anastacia?

How can she — ?

I can feel the water inside of my face, it is running through my nose, it is running in my eyes, it is running down my brain, my neck. My ears. My ears have gone too, same place as my face now, chilling in the sun galaxies ,far away where I can no longer find them. My ears, burnt like little fat pork sausages on the grill. *Tsch Tsch* — Roasting. Dripping. The fat

sizzling on the glowing metal cooking grate. I like Kebab. I do like Kebab. They have tried to reconstruct them, them ears, them little fat pork sausages, but — Oh well —.

“Pandora? Pandora, no, I cannot stretch my left hand more. Please stop yelling at me. You are not yelling? Are you not? You are not yelling? You are yelling. The voices are so loud. The yelling —.”

How can I keep the Thlog private? How can I *not* share my thoughts with everybody online? Maybe I can’t. What if I can’t?

Is everybody now reading this? Hello? Hello everybody out there? 294’500’000 fucking brain readers? Hey there —.

I cannot hear you. Can you hear me? I am so fucked. Fuck, am I fucked. All things considered — fuck.

“Pandora, is this you?”

“Yes, Tom. It is me. Don’t you know my voice by now? Please try swimming faster.”

“I cannot swim faster.

“Yes, you can. Do it for me.”

“Everything is hurting so badly. They should have kept me in that coma.”

“Breathe. Tom. Breathe. One, two, three. One, two, —.”

“I cannot do it anymore. The water, the waves. Why are the waves so high.”

“Come on, Tom. Take it one step at the time. One more lane? I *know* you can do this. Don’t give up too soon. Your muscles should tire out completely before you stop. Train to failure. Fight to failure.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. Keep moving.”

She has nice legs. Nicer than Anastacia, nicer than Carola. Physiotherapy is a great profession. Keeps you fit and —.

Pandora's warning.trwx.ck500345 / Remember, your thoughts are being recorded in the skies. You may not wish to think anything that potentially may harm your wife. You love your wife.

Hey, — my thoughts. — You are talking back at me? Really? Who are you anyway? Who am I anyway? God I am so fucked. I cannot keep swimming. I am drowning. The waves so high. The water in my lungs. Filling my lungs. I cannot breathe. Help. Help. Oh my God. I cannot breathe.

Water.

There is water.

Everywhere.

Air. Gimme Air.

The pain. Pain. Oh my God.

I am so fucked.

So much pain.

Is this how I am going to die?

In a pool full of waves?

Really?



“We’ll have to start real-time editing his thoughts any time soon. Something doesn’t look right here.”

José said as Pareena was walking in. Arvi Karvonen looked up from his phone and only half-heartedly joined into the conversation.

“Don’t worry, he’ll be fine.”

When Arvi looked at his phone again José cast an exasperated glance into his direction. Thomas Christopher Yann Myers, or what had remained of his impressive persona, lay still immobile, fighting so dearly for his life and clinging on so desperately to his last and ultimate straw of freedom that it seemed impossible to break him and bring him back to life. Pareena looked at him tenderly and all she could think of was that this stranger with the weird, dark headset and no face; buried underneath heaps and heaps of cables, wires, bandages and red tape was her new father. A father she had

chosen, a father she had adopted. A father who knew nothing of her and may never know her.

Hi, Pareena. Where have you been?” head nurse Anna Kunz asked not without concern.

“Am I late?” she mumbled inaudibly, casting her eyes down.

“Sorry. What do you want me to do?” She continued without much energy nor enthusiasm. This was all so tiring. And where was Kay? Why was he not here? She didn’t like the atmosphere in the room and as she glanced over to one of the screens she saw and could tell from the unnerving sound that the oxygen levels were far too low while heart rate was up through the roof. What was going on here?

She looked at Anna, trying to search her face to get some answers, but head nurse Kunz was busy rubbing cream into the patient’s soles to activate his autonomic nervous system. Pareena just stood there and felt how the blood shot into her lame, dry hands and they tingled with a sensation she did not like at all. She felt a sudden cold. Then she felt sick. She really should have brought her cardigan, why had she put it back into her locker after finding it? Stupid —. She pressed her right palm onto her lips to keep herself from vomiting. *Oh no, not again.*

“There is still too much incoherence here. He really needs clarity and coherence to get well.”

José said, his forehead wrinkling at the task at hand. Arvi Karvonen, the tall American tried to look serious when he turned to José and head nurse Kunz who stood right next to him. Truth was, he was beyond joy. Application Pandora. *Wow.* — It was working ever so smoothly: all-giving, all gifted, all evil. Fact was, he could not believe it was working so well. Patient Zero was completely under the magic spell Pandora had

woven, conjured up from the dark; he was being swayed hither and tither just as Neuro Industries had planned in one of their notorious drawing board meetings only days ago.

And it seemed they had got far more out of this than they had ever hoped for. Patient Zero had fallen for Pandora completely and she indeed had taken over completely. And, well, — the results were extremely complex yet infinitesimally promising, for the future, for a national, then a global, a galactic roll-out. He didn't dare think what they could do with that technology. How much — They would be killing it. It was hard to wipe that grin of his face. Quickly he looked at his phone again, reason enough to lower his face and make sure his face didn't betray his feelings. Power, money, fame, all that was good and precious and so desirable would come flooding in; in masses, in hordes, in quantities unheard of — Any time soon —.

Arvi knew he looked stupid when he was grinning like that; he looked like the unhappy, little boy he used to be, always smirking until his jaw hurt, never truly at ease. There was more than one reason he had stopped smiling a long time ago. He simply didn't know how to muster a decent smile that would help him relate to people. Lisa kept saying he had lost his true smile — the genuine smile of his youth, of his innocent, carefree days — she had so madly fallen in love with all these years ago. He also knew there was a time *before* he had started to forever play hide-and-seek with his dreadful ambitions — ruthless strongmen that whipped him onward until all he could do was sleep on the sofa all Sunday and occasionally pass out naked on the bathroom floor, a mere shitty shadow of himself — he knew — but he did not remember.

“Arvi — I just don't understand what is going on, right now. Something seems wrong, don't you think — Arvi?”

“Yes, you keep saying that. I heard you.”

“Listen, I am not comfortable either. Let me get Dr. Park so we can figure out what is wrong here.” Head nurse Kunz said as she was rubbing liquid soap between her fingers to get off the oily cream, she had used to massage the patient’s feet.

“No, no, we’ll be fine. Please don’t bother Dr. Park. All’s good, isn’t it? José?” Arvi looked at José to get some reassurance, but his words were met with an icy cold that said more than any spoken word.

“I will go and tell Dr. Park. Pareena, please stay here until we get back. We need to decide if we want to go forward with this experiment.”

“It is not an experiment and there are no options,” Arvi said and the tone of his voice made Pareena shiver.

“We are going forward with Application Pandora or you know he will die.”

“There are always options, and yes — dying is one of them. People die. They do. You know that, don’t you?” Head nurse Kunz said coldly as she left the room without any further comments. *People die?* Pareena looked at her agog and anxious as she disappeared.



At last, having the room to themselves triggered Arvi into action.

“José, can you adjust that? Maybe to 63.78%, 458.39? Don’t go full throttle yet. Which numbers do you get? No, no, no — stop drawing too much data. That is too much. He needs some rest.”

“I agree.”

Pareena said to make sure they remembered she was still in the room, holding the fort to protect her new family.

“He really needs to rest now. You shouldn’t keep doing what you are doing.”

“What do you think we are doing?”

“I don’t know.”

“See — you don’t know.”

José winked at her as if to mock or to reassure her, it wasn’t altogether clear to Pareena, then he looked up at Arvi Karvonen, then he looked at the screen. *What was happening?* His thoughts began exploring all the eventualities they might be faced with. Why did Arvi look so smug? Did he not see something was wrong? There was some sort of tempest in the making and he couldn’t really read the weather forecast just yet.

What was wrong here?

These numbers did not make any sense at all.

José kept staring at the screen, his undivided focus; his concentrated deep reading of the dot’s dark dancing steps, becoming rapidly the biggest attraction in the room.

“You’ll have to tell me what’s wrong.”

Pareena said more and more worried by now. Clearly something was very wrong. But there was no answer, she was simply being ignored. Then she rephrased more carefully.

“Is everything ok?”

She had almost certainly lost a father this morning, she was determined not to lose another one by lunch time, not if she could help it in any way. But, then, it was more than clear to her that there was nothing at all she could do to keep Thomas Christopher Yann Myers alive. He would choose to stay or go at his own liking, or at the liking of the two handsome Americans from Neuro Industries. It wasn't for her to interfere in any way in this matter of life and death.

Where was Kay? Where was the rest of his family? Anastacia? The twins? Then she remembered the time. It must still be way too early for them to visit.



“Well, — Nothing comes up on the motherboard now,” José said hesitatingly and yet more and more stressed out, he had abandoned covering up his concerns altogether.

“What the fuck.”

“Just get it done.”

Arvi was still on his cell phone scrolling through his emails randomly and as quickly as if he was playing Fortnite on a Samsung phone he had never owned. He wondered if Jimi's cell phone was still packed away in the safe at José's place or if he had seen the 57 messages his father had sent since he had left. It would be wise not to add another, and another and another one. Jimi would think him a lunatic, or worse, a stalker. He'd probably think him a lunatic *and* a stalker already. Then, he looked up. Right, he was still at the hospital. This was bloody Switzerland, not home.

“Arvi, I really don’t know what’s going on. Check this out —” José tried reaching out again. The system was running itself and José worried. There was a safety protocol, a plug they could pull, so to speak, but he didn’t want to be a spoilsport, not just now, not before they had more data.

“Arvi. Listen to me.”

“What?”

“We seem to have lost control over Application Pandora —“

“What do you mean? Isn’t that the idea?”

“Not like that.”

José could — or wished he could — tell by the slight, pulsating vibrato in Arvi’s voice that his colleague may finally have gotten the message.

“Myers must have stopped thinking. That is the only explanation I have.”

“Is he dead?”

Pareena asked, shocked at this revelation.

José bit his lips. There would have been a better way of phrasing this, breaking the news in a less offensive or a less desperate way. Arvi pocketed his cellphone and the threesome felt how the atmosphere in the room had instantly darkened; as if all the good air pressure had completely collapsed on them, leaving them, high and dry, stranded in a strangely spooky place.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“The Thlog has stopped.”

“Is he dead?”

Pareena asked again, more silently than before. Was this the end? Already? Before it had properly started. No, it couldn’t be. She got out her phone, a total no-go

during work hours, and speed-dialled Kay's number. But the call went straight to voice mail and with trembling hands she put the phone back into the pocket of her white uniform.

"No, Pareena, he is not dead."

Arvi barely looked at her. He had finally cottoned on to José's warnings. This looked serious. *Why hadn't José told him before?*

Pareena's throat was swelling up and she felt she had to step out immediately. Quickly she ran to the bathroom and bolted the door. It was highly irregular for staff to use patients' bathrooms, but she couldn't hold it down no longer. She grabbed the rim of the toilet bowl and lowered her head.

Then — mere blissful silence — occasionally interrupted by terrible gagging, gulping, retching — reigned for many moments and the seconds trickled down her back like the sticky pearls of fine salty sweat on a summer's day, a day that was breaking all heat records of all centuries ahead. She rinsed her mouth, washed her hands twice with soap, combed back her hair with her clean fingers and then stepped out again. Her knees were shaky; the unborn life in her womb, somewhat unwelcome now and yet—, so loved.

"No. Arvi. I don't know. — You're ok Pareena? You look pale." José glanced at Pareena, then looked towards his superior for help.

"It really shouldn't have stopped."

"Has his heart stopped? Let me check the —" Pareena asked while trying to find her way back into the situation attempting to get at least some vague idea of what the problem with their patient was.

“No, Pareena. The thlog has stopped. He has stopped thlogging. And we don’t know why. We must reconnect, then recalibrate and update the system —”

“Restart.”

“And then, restart. — Yes, Arvi. Restart.”

“I don’t know. Maybe we should let him rest for a moment. I don’t really know what to make of this void. He might indeed have stopped thinking altogether.” Arvi added.

“He is truly sleeping, I guess.” Pareena said helplessly, trying to be of any use at all when she felt the burden of her unknowingness crushing her so forcefully.

“Yes, but he should be threaming or thlogging, one of the two. And as we are not displaying any threams right now, we should hear and see him thlogging. Silence is not good,” Arvi explained rather rattled himself.

“Not if he’s not in REM phase. And right now, I cannot observe any temporary paralysis,” José added wistfully.

“I don’t know, I really believe we should get something from him. I hope he is not retiring to some place we cannot hear him.”

“Could he do that? You think he could really unhook the functional magnetic resonance imaging and unlock the connectors? So, we couldn’t get at his thoughts? Impossible. It has never happened before.” José said, thinking out loud.

“Well, all this has never happened before. Don’t forget that. We simply don’t know yet if it is possible or not. The brain works in mysterious ways. There is more we don’t know — “

“— than we know. Don’t tell me. *I know.*”

“That’s what keeps us going. Isn’t it? José. Right?”

Arvi stared him down and José took a deep breath; he couldn't even begin to put into words how much he hated his job. Arvi walked away from the monitor and reached for his Coke bottle on the polished metal side table. He opened the red lid and felt the white sugar rush through his brain and body, immediately kicking in, making him so high on their success, their incredible achievement. That was what he wanted to focus on, not the random failures; They were negligible and more than insignificant. What really matter, they had zettabytes of proof for: The thlogging worked, it did work wonderfully. Who cared if right now it had stopped. Setbacks were to be expected.

What made this so exhilarating was that there was a clear record of Thomas Christopher Yann Myers' thoughts you could read along. His thoughts could be searched for keywords, his thoughts could be tagged and commented on. It was indeed more than they had ever hoped for. Pandora worked full blast. What an immense breakthrough for Neuro Industries. Soon all thlogs will be recorded and stored, in enormous, sky-high-rise towering pyro cumulus clouds that were in the blink of an eye, incessantly and globally accessible to all who were willing to break down the paywalls with golden sickles and hammers and harvest the prized, pulverized pumice; hot embers streaming from an eternal furnace obliterating all human thought, reducing them at the speed of light to mere inestimable nothingness that could be recycled into tons and tons of complete bullshit; a semi-liquid deafening all olfactory systems that, yet—, would be cashed into all that gold and silver and diamonds and rubies. Just imagine — all these precious, precious diamonds pressed so violently from the dying ashes of original thought. Joy to the world! And heaven and nature sing. And heaven and nature sing.

And — yes, before he forgot again —, it was him who had come up with a new word for the place where they'd be storing humanity's most precious mental load. Of course, they would be storing them thoughts not in mundane and earthen atmospheric clouds as fiery and as impressive as these vessels may be. No—, they would bury them thoughts in ginormous apple i-skies, hoard them in the thousandth, no — in the hundred and thousand millionth in Microsoft one-drive heavens, lock them up in immense far-reaching galaxies powered by the almighty Sun King himself, a maze only Artificial Intelligence herself could ever pretend to oversee, and foster and harvest. And the harvest would be ready and rich and plentiful — *and shit. I mean —shit.*

Arvi was more than content. Application Pandora got them great, no— she got them fantastic results, it didn't matter if there were minor impediments. The big picture was nearly complete. They were nearly there. They really should be drinking Champagne, —how about a cool bottle of Ace of Spades Champagne Brut Gold? He would love that true Armand de Brignac, worthy of its name, worthy of the occasion. They were making, they were writing history. Fizzy black sugar waters were not really what he had had in mind when he had envisioned this moment so many times in the past. Arvi glanced at José and couldn't help noticing that his underling still looked worried. What a sourpuss he was. When he got back to the Valley he would talk to the board about replacing him. After all these years — Arvi would get rid of him. Best buddies or not, here came the future striding in on peg legs with long, lilac steps. And the future, the future belonged to the reckless, men like Arvi, not douchbags as José.

“What happened?”

“I don't know.”

“It seems we have indeed lost all connections with Patient Zero.”

“That’s not good, right?”

Pareena asked wide-eyed. She had been standing petrified next to Thomas Christopher Yann Myer’s bed. If only Kay would answer her texts. Where was he? She felt sick again.

“No, Pareena. No, that’s definitely not good,” José mumbled, clenching his teeth.

What now?



José was trying hard to reassess the situation. Losing connection with their patient meant they were further and further away from a viable way to bring Thomas Christopher Yann Myers back from the artificial coma. Of course, they could simply have Dr. Park reduce the medication and let him wake up naturally, but it was too early. Patient Zero’ brain was far from ready for real and live consciousness, he would not survive the damage that had been done to him if he was woken. All things considered, finding Myer’s worst fear as Pandora had suggested; overriding all Myer’s cognitive functional systems by the fear overstimulation, was still unfeasible. And what’s more: Unless they triggered Myer’s biggest fear, the biggest conundrum, an inaccessible variable out of control, remained unsolved: Would what Pandora suggested really bring the results they hoped for? Pareena had been right in breaking the taboo and asking the

mother of all questions yesterday also if they would never admit to that. Fact was they didn't quite know what they were doing. *What on earth were they doing?*

"Come on, José."

Come on, José? How lame. It had been a while since Arvi spoke. He seemed lost in troubling thoughts José, for once, wished he could read.



"Dr. Park agrees with me, we think it is time to give the patient some rest. Please take off his headset."

Anna Kunz, the head nurse had just walked in again. She was out of breath and she didn't look happy, dark rings, the remainder of restless nights, dimmed down the natural sparkle of her eyes.

"Pareena, please don't forget —."

"Of course. I will start right away." She looked up guiltily. It would have been her turn to change the nappies and somehow, with the Americans so stressed out, she had just clean forgotten again.

"Ok. To come back to what I said earlier —. We can continue the editing later today. He can rest for a couple of hours. I will let you do what you do." Arvi nonchalantly waved at the nappies Pareena was now unpacking.

"But you must let us do what we do. We will not take off the headset."

Arvi looked sternly at head nurse Kunz, “and you will not take it off either or we shall take legal actions against this hospital.”

Head nurse Kunz shot him a devastating glance.

“You may not have a job afterwards,” he smirked at her.

“You seriously think I may not have a job *afterwards*? Do you even know how understaffed Swiss hospitals are? I will always, — always have a job.” By now Anna Kunz was furious and Pareena looked at her struck with overwhelming shock. She had never seen her superior so upset and speak her mind as openly as this. It must be the heat that got to Anna.

“Ok. Ok. Let us calibrate Pandora once again, she may just want to give herself another update before restart,” José tried to mitigate, he looked at Arvi, waiting for him to cool off.

“Restart? Dr. Park said there is to be no restart. You heard me. Take off the headset.” Head nurse Kunz looked more furious and determined than ever.

“Yes, we heard you. Loud and clear. And yet, no — we shall not remove that headset. There are contracts this hospital signed. They are binding. Sorry — And —”

She wouldn’t let the American finish, at his last sentence, head nurse Anna Kunz turned on the worn-off cork heel of her white Birkenstock sandals and left the room as quickly as she could, probably in search of Dr. Ha-rin Park. Pareena starred after her as if she had seen a ghost.

“Well, Suit yourself. Stupid woman. I’ll take five. Anybody else wants coffee?”

Arvi said, then he left the room without waiting for an answer and not without getting out his phone and checking it again.



“Arvi!”

José was jogging all the way down the long brightly illuminated hallway to get to the patients’ waiting area where the coffee vending machine was.

“What’s up?”

Arvi turned around and looked up, he had been fumbling for some Swiss coins he did not have. The machine wouldn’t take his Visa Gold card, and he didn’t have TWINT, the Swiss online pay app.

“Quick. Come back inside. He goes into — well we don’t really know —recess?”

“Recess? What do you mean?”

“I really don’t know. But something is happening.”

“What is happening?”

“I don’t know. Come on. See for yourself.”

“Ok, ok. On my way.”

“Hurry.”

“What’s with my coffee?”



“Father.”

She whispered without moving her lips, “can you hear me?”

“Dr. Myers?”

She said, a little louder, more affirmative.

Pareena was bending over Myer’s body not sure whether she should or should not resuscitate him if his heart stopped. Then Arvi and José came rushing back in. Dr. Park still hadn’t had time to pass by or given any of her orders. If all went south and things got worse, Pareena had silently decided she would simply perform a normal cardiopulmonary resuscitation. She had watched head nurse Kunz do it so often. She knew what to do.

It didn’t look good. Heart rate was up and going through the roof, temperature on the rise and spiking towards 41 degrees Celsius, oxygen levels were dropping rapidly. Was it possible they’d lose him now? After all the hard work they had put in these past few days, these last hours? It couldn’t be, not on the third day.

Maybe Anna and Dr. Park were right after all to be so sceptical of the American’s intervention. Until yesterday, Pareena had found the two women’s growing open hostility unbearable. Hadn’t the Americans brought along such great state-of-the-art equipment and technology? Technology that obviously worked. But since she had walked out on the Americans yesterday, Pareena was wavering. Maybe Neuro Industries GmbH shouldn’t have taken the lead in Dr. Myer’s treatment? Maybe the supremacy of Big Tech over Medicine should after all have been reigned in. *But how?* She had no idea, after all she was just a young nurse with a very limited range of knowledge and experience.

“Dr. Myers?”

There was no response whatsoever.

“He is still completely gone.”

“Look at our numbers here. — But really. I mean —There is another problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean — What is wrong with Pandora?”

Clearly, something was off, — altogether wrong. Arvi had now finally joined José, he felt acutely how his face began twitching skittishly. Both men were staring intently at the big screen trying to figure out what exactly it was they were looking at, but they simply couldn’t pinpoint exactly what it was.

“I don’t know. But something doesn’t check out at all. Pandora is running something else.”

“What do you mean, she is running *something else*? Arvi said aggressively.

“As I’ve just told you — I don’t know, but she is not giving him one of the preprogramed threams nor is she composing a thream of her own. I have no idea what it is she is doing.”

“Then we do have to stop her. Stop her. Now. This cannot completely get out of hand.”

Pareena’s forehead was walled up in pinkie-thick bulges against her hairline as she intervened, but her objections were to no avail. She took a step closer to José.

“You must stop this now.”

“I am trying. She is overriding me.”

“Stop her.”

“There is nothing I can do. Pandora has cut me off.”

“You cannot be serious.”

“I can only keep repeating myself. There is nothing I can do.”

“You can always do something.”

Pareena said, desperate to get across to him.

“Not now. It is literally out of my hands. Tell me what I should do? I cannot do anything.” José raised both his hands and showed his palms. What could be done when life itself takes its very own course? You cannot stand in the way of fate nor the universe.

Arvi began showing incoherent signs of feeling uncomfortable with the situation. His eyebrows were twitching, the muscles in his right leg were twisting invisibly. It was one thing if only he and José were in the room, it was another if a young, beautiful nurse, a member of the trained and competent health personnel of the Misericordia Hospital was looking over their shoulders when they and all the teams standing by remotely in the valley, lost total control. Neuro Industries GmbH were literally doing open mixed-reality brain surgery and no — it didn’t go well right now. He found Pareena’s presence not only irritating but also disturbing and ultimately counterproductive. She wasn’t useful now that they were trying to handle a crisis: An operation never unheard of, a first in the history of non-invasive thought and brain reading.



“What is she doing anyway? I mean it is only an algorithm, isn’t it.” Pareena said defiantly.

“Wait a minute. Actually — I think she isn’t doing anything, look — the motherboard is completely down. Ok. I got it —. See —. Weird —. She is only establishing a connection. That is also why I cannot override her.” José was trying staggeringly hard to keep calm and focus on the challenge at hand. He seemed relieved at having found a temporary solution to the part of a problem that was too big to fail.

“What connection?”

“I think she is connecting with another Breenplant A007 headset. I think — well, yes — It is basically a simple phoneline.”

“Is there another Breenplant A007 headset? How come?” Arvi was amazed, he frowned. What a puzzling idea. So far Neuro Industries had made sure as hell these headsets didn’t pass their thresholds.

“It seems so, at least everything is pointing in this direction.”

José had to admit that it was strange that there should exist another one of their headsets out there, especially without Neuro Industries knowing its exact geolocation.

“I guess Dr. Myers has been experimenting with these headsets for quite some time. He must have received an early test version from Neuro Industries.”

Had Big Dog really given an early test version to their biggest competitor even if that biggest competitor was his son? No, that wouldn’t make any sense at all unless of course — well, Oleg Myers, he might indeed have given another headset to his son. That seemed likely enough: Big Dog favouring his son. Clearly Pandora was establishing a connection with this other Breenplant A007 headset. An A007 headset that officially didn’t really exist. Arvi felt a rush of adrenaline, he was sweating even more than before.

“From what I see Pandora is completely out. It is just a phoneline she is establishing. It’s on hold. Connection is not established yet. From what I can see where I

am standing, she is calling someone. Someone who, as it seems, is also wearing a mixed reality headset.”

“What do you mean Pandora is completely out?”

Pareena wasn’t sure what worried her more: when Pandora was up and running or when she was not. She still didn’t entirely understand nor fully comprehend the American’s angle on this treatment.

“That is not what you have trained her for, isn’t it? You explained clearly when we started that she must monitor and supervise the threams. If you don’t know what Pandora is doing — well, I think you had better stop this.”

Where was Kay? Pareena couldn’t believe he still wasn’t here yet when she — when their father, would have needed him the most. And where was Anastacia? Surely, she would intervene, surely she could have done something. Where was everybody?

“I don’t think she does anything. As I have already said, I cannot see any activity on the motherboard besides an attempt to connect the wires, so to say. This is not a thream, it is a simple phone call from one human brain to another. There really is no better way to put this.”

Arvi tried to look innocent as his excitement rose by the minute. It was not his fault if Pandora was trying to do things she hadn’t done before, or they hadn’t intended her to do. In fact, this was most exciting and if it did not work out, he was determined not to take the blame. It would be simple to frame José for being responsible, after all he oversaw the actual thought engineering in place at the Misericordia. But first they’d have to see how it all played out. It wasn’t clear yet whether this wasn’t going to be their greatest success and, in this case, — well, he’d be ready to take the praise and the bonus that surely went with it.

“Cut them. Cut the wires. This could endanger the whole progress Myers has made,” Pareena insisted.

“I can’t. I need more people working on this.”

“You cannot cut a simple phoneline?”

“This is a connection Pandora is safeguarding. No, I cannot cut it without shutting her out completely. We’d need everybody. Also, I would need Big Dog to sign off on this. You can try calling them now, but I am not sure they are still standing by at this hour.

“After all, it is —”, he quickly checked his phone, then put it back into his pocket, it’s nearly midnight in Silicon Valley. And so far, everything has worked so swingingly, there’d be no reason to work after hours.”

“Is there no emergency button to switch it all off?”

“No, there isn’t,” Arvi lied.

“Wait. I can tell you now where the other headset is. It’s geolocating now. From this—. No. — Wait. — I think in Stockholm. I think the person wearing the headset is in Stockholm”

“Cut the connection now.” Pareena demanded once more.

“We can’t. You wanna try yourself?” Arvi challenged her sarcastically and she shot him a devastating, fiery look hiding how scared she was.

“Please, don’t worry so much Pareena. This is part of the process. All will be well. And yes — We are not done yet. O.k. José. Call the valley. They must get back to work now.— All hands on deck. We must get this back under control.”

Pandora had just taken over and they couldn’t wait to see what she was up to. Obviously, she could do so much more than compose threams, or write thlogs, she could also connect people. They had to remember to tell marketing —

GÅrdicide – PLEASE WAIT - Connecting to Stockholm NOW

“Come, Pareena. Stand over here, I think the action will display on this monitor.”

Beautiful Pareena and the two Americans were in for the show of their lives. They were about to see Neuro Industries’ artificially tamed velociraptor go completely wild. And everybody knew that the bleak and unknown wilderness is outrageously dangerous and could get you killed.

GÅrdicide – PLEASE WAIT - Connecting to Stockholm NOW



GÅrdicide – PLEASE WAIT - Connecting to Stockholm NOW

“You know what. I am gonna go upstairs to get fully immersed myself. I want to see this from close.”

“Ok.”

“What’s fully immersed?” Pareena asked.

“I am going to wear another Breenplant A007 headset. We duplicated it, so we can see exactly what Patient Zero sees.” José explained.

“You can do that? Be in someone’s head and hear their thoughts as they hear them?”

“Yes, we can. We can even see what they see. I mean there must be some sort of control, right?” Arvi smiled at her and Pareena couldn’t help but sensing the smile was becoming more and more scary each time he gave it and his face was distorted into a terrible, lifeless mask.

“Ok. We are staying here,” Arvi was grumbling. There was no way he would abandon the patient now. What if Pareena or one of the other madwomen disconnected the patient and took off the headset in the middle of this historic connection? A brain to brain phonecall? *I mean, really. That was some crazy, crazy shit.* And nobody was going to pull the plug on this. Nobody was going to endanger that kind of ground-breaking, astounding research. Nobody. And — no, there was no way *he* was going to miss that. Whatever was happening now, this was pioneering, style-forming shit, and he, sure as hell, —sure as hell— wouldn’t miss it in the world or expose it all to some crazy hillbilly women wanting to dial back time. No way! He’d stay.

“See you later, then.” José left the two of them quickly to get upstairs where they had installed everything to grant full immersion into an experience beyond all imagination.

GÅrdicide – PLEASE WAIT - Connecting to Stockholm NOW

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My dad is dying. He may be dead by now — man. How can he be dying now when it's really me who should be dead? Why did they do that to him? Why did they beat him so badly. Wasn't that enough? Why then set him on fire? They set his face on fire. Because he said he didn't like kebab to the guys *eating* kebab on the bus. On the frucking bus. Frucking Kebab. Frucking bus. Frucking brutes. Frucking assholes. Frucking, frucking assholes. Do we live in the frucking Middle Ages? Have they lost their frucking minds? Is he a frucking narco? He is a frucking, frucking scientist. He should win the frucking Nobel prize, not be burned alive and be in a coma.

“Kay? Is that you? Where are you? I can hear you. Where are you?”

...

“Hey there. I can hear my son. Am I supposed to hear my son? Anybody? Can anybody hear me? I know you guys are out there. Listening.

Kay. Kay. Where are you? God. I love you so much. God — it is so good to hear your voice. Where have you been? Where are you? Can you hear me? Kay?

Kay?

Good God, Kay.

I love you so much.

Why can I hear you?

Why can you not hear me?

Kay?

Kay?

Where are you?

I hate my dad. Why is he dying? Why him? Why not me. It is my generation who has no future. Italy is as hot as Iraq. Greece is burning up and hotter than the Sahara. Tourists are roasting on the beach. I mean literally roasting and smoking like ham. Smoke. Fire. Frucking ham — man. Like pigs on a skewer, chicken on a spit. Spain is drying up. No more water. No more food. We are starving. We are all going to die. I should be the one who is dying. I am the one who is young, who will live

long. So much longer than dad still has. But no, man — I will not have that long. The planet doesn't have that long. The world will drown. In the frucking waters. In the frucking storms. The gulf stream will stop. Europe will be frucking cold. Not hot. No global warming. Not for Europe. No man. Frucking ice cold. Ice age. Frucking ice age. Nothing will change and we will just go. Vanish from the face of the earth. Too little too late. We are not doing anything.

Well? Who is not doing anything? Nobody, nobody does frucking nothing. Stupid frucking politicians. Frucking consumers. Frucking tourists. Frucking socialists and Nazis and anarchists meeting in St. Imier? What can they do? What can anyone do? What can frucking Friday for futures do? Frucking Greta? Where is she anyway?

Where can anyone go? Mars? Frucking, frucking Mars? Are you frucking kidding me? Occupy Mars. Occupy Wallstreet. Occupy. Occupy. Nothing will ever change. Nothing. Not if people sit next to me with their huge Dunkin Doughnut plastic cardboard boxes and their enormous chocolate bars big as blankets, their hamburgers the size of large trucks and plastic bags, plastic cups, plastic anything. And their cars and planes and their plastic and their truckloads full of plastic shit and plastic stuff and plastic shit and stuff — nobody uses and ships all around the world. All around the planet.

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I left home.

I cannot see him like this. With his face burned off. His brain smashed completely.

He's a vegetable.

I cannot believe he will die. I cannot believe he will no longer work.

I cannot go on. I don't want to go on. This is the end.

The end of it.

I want to travel to the end of the world.

And then die there.

The Arctic Circle.

The North Pole.

The frucking, freezing pole.

I will go there.

And then I'll die there.

Die.

I want to die.

...

“Is Kay the son?”

Of course, Kay is the son, — how could Arvi not know this? Pareena looked at Arvi in shock. She was paralysed.

“Is Kay Patient Zero’s son?”

Slowly she nodded, fighting the dizziness in her head. Standing up had just become so much more difficult. She needed to sit, she needed a chair, she was about to collapse.

“Is that what young people think?” Arvi said, “that they want to die”, he paused for a moment, then cleared his throat and brought himself to speak out clearly,

“because everything — is so fucked up?”

“I don’t know,”

Pareena said lamely, she was under complete shock. Had she just read along Kay’s thoughts? Was Patient Zero indeed connected to his son? Were they listening in on both their thoughts? It couldn’t be. What a sombre freak show. And yet — It might be possible, what did she know. What if these were Kay’s thought indeed? Panic rushed through her body overspilling its toxicity onto her soul, her thoughts, all her being.

Was that what Kay meant when he said his soul was dark? He did want to commit suicide after he had reassured her only yesterday that he would marry her, father her child that was in the making? It was hard to recognize her Kay under the thick layers of all these terrible, hateful thoughts. Was that whom she had known as a boy and still loved as a man? Was that him? His rough and raw stream of consciousness scared her out of her wits. She took a deep breath, trying to steady her hands that were shaking so badly. She crossed them behind her back, digging her sharp nails harshly into the soft flesh of her hand wrist.

“I have a son,” Arvi added abruptly.

“Yes?”

She looked up at the well-dressed American, seeing him for the first time as another human being and not an intruder. He looked like an aging movie star: Tall, dark, even handsome, but with empty features and eyes she couldn’t read, eyes that were well trained at hiding pain, boredom, and passion equally.

“His name is Jimi. I wonder if that is what he is thinking.”

“That he wants to die?”

Her voice trembled, all she could think of was Kay wanting to die while she carried life, life he had promised he would help protect, help shelter. The baby — Her baby — Their baby —, well no: Not their baby, her baby.

“I don’t think Jimi wants to die, but all the negativity —. The end coming.”

“You should ask him,” she said bluntly.

“Who?”

“Your son. If he wants to die. You should ask him.” Her voice was firm and calm.

Directing her attention to the vulnerabilities of the man in front of her somehow helped her

not think of Kay. She couldn't think of Kay now. She couldn't even begin to understand or process what she had just seen.

Arvi looked down and got out his cell phone, beginning to scroll through his messages.

"I don't mean send him a text."

She said more boldly, taking a step towards him. He looked up at her and she could tell that he had forlorn long ago what was most precious, most sacred, most important to him. He was well versed in replacing all human interest with science and tech and — screens. As if a screen looking up to you was the solution to all problems ever encountered.

"I mean, talk to him in person. Sit down with him or go fishing. Don't all Americans go fishing all the time?" Her hands automatically did what needed doing, carefully she changed the drips.

"No, we are not fishers. We play tennis." She shrugged at this. Tennis, fishing, whatever; who cared if, after all, you connected with each other?

"Might be difficult to talk to each other over the net though. You'd have to shout. But you should still talk to him if you —"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I just can't. I text him and then — he never answers. He's put his cell phone into a safe."

He didn't choose to elaborate, and she accepted his silence mutely, taking it gladly and patiently for what it was; an inability to understand or access or turn outward his inner being, his most repressed emotions, his hurt and pain and most intimate wishes and desires. And that, strangely enough was something she was most familiar with. She recognized

despite all obvious and stark differences between her and him that they shared a kindred human spirit, and she strangely liked the American for it. The short interchange of words had lowered the barriers he had set up previously and somehow, she felt closer to him. He must have felt it too. Before their moment of shared humanity passed, she gently patted him on the shoulder as she saw people do in cheap movies then she crossed over to the bedside of Patient Zero.

“I am sorry to hear it,” Pareena said compassionately as she pressed the patient’s hand for a short moment, then she let go and walked back. Again, she turned to the screen to continue reading along the brain connection between Thomas Christopher Yann Myers and his son Kay, a wise and unruly move Pandora had concocted to make sure father and son were inevitably paired in front of Arvi and Pareena’s eyes and ultimately in front of the world’s eyes. But this is yet to come.

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I took his frucking headset and his frucking, favourite T-shirt with the most stupid slogan anyone has ever heard, man – “Occupy Mars.” Occupy Mars. Look at this. Right here on my chest, on my six pack that isn’t a goddamn six pack. Why does everybody want to look like the Rock. Crazy. All my protein, over-night oats nibbling friends are frucking crazy, Gabriel, I mean, and Liam and David. They are all frucking crazy running forwards and backwards to the gym and then all the frucking meat they eat. They shouldn’t be eating any meat no more. They should really all be shot in the market square for eating all that frucking, goddamn meat.

Why does dad even have an *Occupy Mars* T-Shirt? I mean he is serious about all that science shit. And why does he like that frucking shirt so much? He likes it so much he never wears it. He’s had it for years. He will no longer need it now. No longer – Who wants to occupy Mars anyway? What a frucking, frucking stupid idea

that is. Occupy Mars? Seriously. Occupy — I mean. Really occupy Mars. Just trying to imagine. Cannot. Cannot imagine such bullshit. Bullshit. Copy and out.

I hate Stockholm. The lights are too bright. The sun is too bright. Too blue. The sky is too blue. The boats too — too white. And there is water everywhere. What is this frucking city, man? Frucking grand picturesque Venice of the frucking North? The whole city looks like frucking Disney Land, in frucking brilliant sunshine. First thing I did was switch on Zombie city mode for Stockholm on the headset. It looks great, man. Modelled on Google Street view. I am so glad we could program this app so easily. Look at this. I'll never take off the headset again. All is black and white, only the blood — . The blood is red. All the buildings are destroyed and bombed out, totally frucked up by cluster bombs. Ruins and smoke and tanks in all the streets. All the cars are frucking tanks, T-54 and T-62, T-62M and T-62MV, Leopard 1, Leopard 2 and Challenger 2, M1 Abrams. The whole frucking fleet. Frucking awesome.

Why are people so tall here? Frucking giants. I love Zombie city mode. When I am wearing the headset and I am looking around everybody is a zombie. Everybody emaciated and bloody, wearing frucking camouflage, frucking jump suits. There is blood all over their clothes and whoever carries a cell phone holds a big knife or a machine gun, one of these AK-47s or the Remington 870. I love the Remingtons.

We can turn all the kids automatically into Rottweiler. It looks great how they sit in their prams and bark their frucking, little souls out. They are so evil. Their flews dripping with spit and fire. So evil. Pat worked it out so fantastically. Couldn't have done it without him. Frucking great. I didn't think it would look that great. So real. It looks so real. I will have to send him some screenshots. Or make some frucking

movies for frucking TikTok. If the world didn't come to an end, this would be huge on the market. Huge. I mean, — absolutely huge. Big time huge.

No, — Dad. Not your frucking medical app to help people restore their frucking brain power. This will be so much frucking bigger: Stockholm City Zombie Apocalypse App. This is what everybody will want. No more boring commutes to school or frucking boring frucking city trips with your frucking fighting parents on holidays. With our Apocalypse App you can be constantly fighting for your life in a war zone. You can be a zombie among zombies or a crazy rich lesbian Asian bitch among crazy rich lesbian Asian bitches even if everyone is straight and white and old and male, among other old guys who are straight and white and old. Get it? You get it, dad? If you weren't in that frucking coma you would — you would get it — man. You would *so* get it.

I just love City Apocalypse Zombie mode. Look at my hand. Dripping with blood. Look at my Levis jeans, only camouflage. This will completely revolutionize fashion. We shall need no more fashion, just a simple suit onto which you can project anything with your headset. Everybody can wear the same green screen shit and then we can just project onto that what we like. Zombie Apocalypse mode. Or soccer stars. Millions of Messis and Ronaldos walking around you. A frucking dream come true. You will no longer need to buy anything. Switch on your headset and wear whatever you want. And what's best: you can have everybody else wear what *you* want. No more bad style. No more frucking fashion sins. Wouldn't that be great?

What has happened to the music industry will happen to the clothes industry. Everybody carries every outfit for everyone always in their pockets or rather on their heads. Want to go to an 80s Parties? No problem. And your friend who is with you

likes the 90ties? Cool. He can be at a 90ties parties. And what's best you are at the same party with the same people who wear different clothes and dance in different decades to different music depending on how you dress them for display on your retina. No more frucking debates who wants to do what and where. All do what they want whenever they want — . So frucking sick. That's so frucking sick and crazy and such shit. We shall lose all our connections. We shall — . And then, — Imagine how much frucking energy that takes. Frucking crazy energy to run all that frucking math. All the CO2. Cryptocurrency will be peanuts. In comparison. I mean. Frucking shit. The earth, a power slaughterhouse exploited. Dead.

Pareena's mind was totally blank, her emotions had dried up. Her heart was racing, and she was sweating despite the air conditioning in the room. It felt as if she was running a fever or a marathon or both and it was getting worse by the minute. She turned around and grabbed that chair, then sat. Was Kay the man she wanted to marry? Was Kay the man she had given up everything for? Was he the one? Who was he? Who was this man capable of such thoughts? How could she have been so wrong? How could she have been so mistaken? And why was he swearing all the time? His thoughts one big broth of faecal matter?

“Why does he keep saying ‘frucking’?”

Pareena was so lost in thought, she hadn't realized she had spoken out that last sentence out loud. When Arvi spoke, she was startled.

“I guess Pandora is autocorrecting his thlog.”

Arvi pulled up his eyebrows, that lingo was indeed strange and Pandora interfering with it was the only viable explanation he had.

“Autocorrecting?”

“I guess. Obviously, my colleagues felt you shouldn’t read someone’s thoughts without at least some editing.” Arvi chuckled unnaturally.

“You mean editing The f-word?”

“Yes, I guess. The N-word, the S-word, the I-word, the F-word; everything that is offensive must go. — Fucking,” He paused for a second, “may be offensive to the reader so Pandora changes it to frucking instead. At least, that is my guess. I will have to find out.”

“That’s crazy,” Pareena looked him straight in the eyes, “that is so crazy. I mean, what is the point of reading someone’s thoughts if you are reading an edited version?”

“Yes, you’re right, maybe that should be changed.” Arvi was wondering how difficult that might be given the fact that he himself hadn’t even known about autocorrection mode. It must come straight from the top and be built in by design. Therefore, impossible to change.

Pareena felt so sick. She wanted to leave. She wanted to put her feet up. Rest. Not having to deal with any of this. She wanted to be relieved from this incredible heat that was blasting in the city, that was blasting in her mind, causing everything and everyone to halt, to burn, to perish. She wanted out. She no longer wanted any of this. Her Life. No, no. She didn’t want it. No more.

She wanted nothing, not even get up, not even leave. She was completely paralyzed. So, in want of other options, she kept starring at the bloody screen of all terrible truths and tricks. She kept reading and so did Arvi.

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“Hi, will you play a game with us. We have this pen here and we have to swap it for something else.”

What does she want? What’s with that girl? She is quite pretty but why does she talk to me? Can’t they see I am busy? I am wearing a goddamn headset. Why do these frucking chicken babies want to talk to me at all?

“No, I don’t want to play your frucking game. Why do you want to swap a frucking pen? What kind of a frucking game is this?” She didn’t seem threatened at all, not in the slightest by my words nor by half my face covered in a bizarre zorro mask that was all wire and screen and technology. I guess she couldn’t even see my eyes.

“We are here from France, on a camp. She is from Paris, I am from Bordeaux and she is from Lyon. The idea of our camp leaders is that we talk to strangers in the

street." *Oh really? Young girls talking to strangers in the street? That is a great idea. What frucking French moron came up with that one?*

"Swap a pen? For what? I have frucking nothing to give you."

Frucking stupid girls. Glad they left so quickly. What was that about? But it gave me a great idea. And —, Dad —. I mean Frucking Zombie Mode works great, but this would be greater: Frucking Pornland. We should develop an app that measures everybody's body underneath their clothes. I would have talked to these frucking bitches a little longer if they had been totally stark naked. Wear the headset and see everybody totally stark naked. And then — no more joy stick needed, you can just enlarge their tits, enlarge my dick by looking, by peeping at these scrumptious girls and then — rubbernecking at my frucking, fucking dick. I mean —. That would be awesome. Frucking, Frucking awesome, Dad. Not your frucking insane medical applications. What everybody wants is frucking Porn Paradise. Totally addictive. Totally great. America First, but can Pornland — please, can Pornland be second?

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The Nobel Museum. Right here? That is where you should be, Dad. In that frucking museum. Look at all the morons here. All these frucking tourists. Too dumb to even know where they have come to. Wouldn't understand the work of any of the Nobel prize winners. Frucking small this building. Why is it so frucking small when there are so many frucking people who want to see it?

"Hi there, I am in this square all day, from morning to evening."

What? Another idiot approaching me? What does *this* frucking moron want? Why is everybody in this frucking city talking to me? Usually, it helps if you stare at your cellphone, now not even wearing a headset keeps you from total strangers approaching you. Who is this guy? Seriously?

"Look, I really couldn't care less."

"I will take pictures of a hundred people during my day here. Would you like to be one of these people? In my pictures?"

"Hell no. Frucking no." Not with my headset on anyway.

What is wrong with people? Why are they all talking to each other in this frucking goddamn city? I need to get out of here.

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Such a waste. All of it. Such a waste. Everything. The world now, at the end. What a waste. My Life. A waste. Such a frucking waste. Enough meth in my pocket to end my life. At least I want to frucking dream nice before I go. Leave. Dream. Dream *naice*. Get the fuck out of here. Frucking leave the planet. Frucking leave earth. Boom. Gone. Away. Occupy frucking Mars. In your dreams. In your death.

Stopped in Copenhagen on the way up north. Too much wind. I hate Copenhagen. So cold. I hate the train. I hate all the tourists travelling on the train. All the kids vomiting right onto the floor. In the train. I nearly puked myself. They are all screaming. Standing with their asses in my face. I hate them asses in my face. I hate Christiania. Christiania is such a frucking shit place. What's that shitty town

supposed to be? A living utopia. A dream come true? No. Fruck. It's all totally frucking commercialized shithole.

Misericordia Hospital

"They didn't edit the S-word," Pareena said tonelessly. She had to speak out, say something or she would implode. It was hard to bear Kay's terrible tirade against everything that ever mattered. She felt completely cut off from all that ever was worth anything in her life. She felt completely cut off from herself.

"Yes, I could see."

"Why is that?"

"I don't know, maybe they accept it, or my colleagues override the auto-correction."

"They shouldn't."

"Override the auto-correction?"

She nodded, unable to speak a word. The lump in her throat had uncomfortably swollen up to the size of an orange and she barely got any air.

“I can feedback that if you want to.”

She shook her head, pressed her lips together firmly and lowered her head to continue follow the text.

“Are you ok?” Arvi asked concerned and she was touched by his fatherly attentiveness.

“I am,” she said, keeping her voice down, hiding as well as she could that clearly, no — no she was not ok and never will be — not ever again.

“I understand if you need a time out. Reading someone’s thoughts can be quite disturbing. Do you know Kay?”

‘We are engaged to be married,’ she wanted to say; ‘I have always ever loved him’, she wanted to say; ‘I carry someone else’s child and he wants to father it. He is my beloved, the love of my life, my everything thing.’ That was what she wanted to say. But she couldn’t. She couldn’t say a word at all. So instead, she nodded again.

“You know him well?”

At this she turned and continued reading.

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Christiania. Tourists all over the place. All over the place. All the consumer slaves trudging through their streets taking frucking useless pictures. Wanting to buy stuff and I don't mean the good stuff. I mean the shit stuff like T-Shirts and keyrings and posters and postcards and shit. Such a failure. Such a total failure. How can they take their money? How can they hook up with the tourists? These goddam hookers. What happened? Why cannot anyone get anything done these days? Why cannot even they live their frucking goddamn communist sick dream? Why is it only ever money, money, money...even the freaks. Even the frucking hippies ended up like frucking super stupid capitalists. Man. It was so bad. Bad. Not at all what I hoped. Not at all what I thought it was like.

Only shitty thing that really works super-great in Christiania is Pusher Street. Imagine. Frucking police raided the place just before I arrived. I watched them seal off the perimeter. It was like in a fucking, fucking action movie. Don't they have anything else to do? The police. What about arresting everybody who drives a fucking car? Or all the tourists who arrive in fucking planes? All them fucking planes.

Or all the fruckers who don't eat vegan. They should all be behind bars. Executed. Like in the Middle Ages. Hanged in the public market square. All that red and bloody meat dangling from silver hooks. Frucking bullshit. Frucking police.

Then the fucking heat drove out with a huge fucking truckload of shit — stuff. Wooden pallets, boxes, wood, weed what do I know. Drove it all out, looking so smug, so condescending. The fucking cop who was driving the truck. So high and mighty and high, so high, so above me. Like the king on his fucking horse — his fucking whores back then — And the guy next to him —. Looking down at me. I could have puked. Again. Not even hiding his face. Not even wearing a mask. so victorious. I could have killed them all. We are all going to die anyway. What does it matter anyway? I hate them. I hate them all. I could kill them all.

But when these fruckers finally got out. When they had finally moved their truck out of the place. I —. Well, let's say I bought stuff. The raid brought the price down. I didn't really understand why though — until I did understand: Sirens again. Would you believe it? Minutes after they had left, they came running back again. Full speed. The fruckers. But I was so lucky. I got lucky. I got out quickly. Full on speed. Full with speed. Looking innocent. Got the good stuff. Hid it well. I know it's the

good stuff. I tried a little. And heaven. Heaven. I want to dream nice. Na — ice. Before I go. Na — ice dreams.

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I hate my dad. I hate my mum, hate the twins. I am done. That is the end.

Maybe I should just end it all here. I don't think I can make it all the way up to the North Pole. Too frucking far — . Too frucking cold up there anyway. Too frucking hot. Too hot. The sea up north. Too frucking hot this year. It doesn't matter anyway. There will be no North Pole when all the ice has melted and there will be no frucking Stockholm. Only one big frucking, frucking Baltic Sea. And frucking Russia. Frucking. Frucking Russians. I hope they will all die. I hate the Russians. I hate frucking goddam Fruckimir Fruckimirowitsch Putin.

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What's happening? Oh my God. What's this? Oh my God. War has broken out. Oh my God. There is a godamn tank in the middle of the road and a zombie army marching right after them. Is Stockholm at war? Not last time I checked. They are marching in line. Look at the zombies. All marching in line in the middle of the street. What happened? Why are they marching? Why are they taking to the street? It is an army. Whoever owns the street, owns the country. No way, we could have programmed this. Pat and I. We didn't. We didn't program this. What's happening, man? There must be some sort of coup going on. I dare not take off the headset. I

dare not look. They are going to take over the Swedish government. Are they frucking goddam Russians? Frucking Islamic terrorists coming to burn the Quran? An issue of national security this is now. Frucking stupid. Frucking crazy. The whole road is blocked to make room for them. Zombies getting out of the way, zombies looking like shit, holding up their knives as if to threaten them. The buses. Waiting. War must have broken out. I dare not take off the headset. What if they are Putin's guards? What if they are here? Wagner's Troops? What if I take off my headset and they are all real soldiers? What if they start shooting? What if they kill me? Only one thing that's worse than frucking zombies and that is frucking real Russian soldiers. Russia is close. So frucking close. I cannot do this anymore. I'll have to look why these frucking zombies are marching right in the middle of the frucking street.

Ok. Steady — I am now taking off the headset to see what these zombies really are. Oh my God. Can this be true? Let's quickly put the headset back on. They are frucking clowns with little helmets with little spikes on their frucking heads. And they carry the Ukrainian flag. Blue and yellow. What are they frucking doing in the middle of the road? And why are they carrying the Ukrainian flag? In Stockholm Zombie mode the guy marching up front was holding an AK, shaking it high above his head. But now, without the headset it is not a rifle. We did some awesome, awesome programming there. For — can you believe it? It is a frucking baton. He is the frucking director who makes them frucking idiots all play in rhythm. Look at their uniforms. Straight out of Compton. I mean. Straight out of the 19th century. I mean — The frucking band are wearing gloves, white gloves in summer and all — . The Swedes are crazy. What are they doing with them stupid, frucking gloves? And they carry instruments, drums and trumpets and saxophones and stuff. No idea what

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they are called. What do I know what they frucking carry? They carry frucking, bloody musical instruments. And what they play is awful. Frucking awful. Totally out of tune. No rhythm, no tune, no class. What does she say? The frucking fat tourist woman standing too close to me. Change of the guards. Which guards? What are these clowns guarding? Their freedom? Their freedom of speech? Their freedom to go to glory? How gory.

...

I hate Stockholm. I hate this city. Look at these huge streets full of shit and stuff. Stuff nobody needs. There is a huge glass front filled with plastic balls. Plastic balls. What are they good for? To be tossed into the freezing Baltic Sea? It's all colours, filling a giant room at least 4 meters high. Red, yellow. Blue. And then the frucking genius, head of frucking marketing, wrote right over the frucking glass wall: Summer — it's a banger. Really? A banger? That doesn't rhyme with summer, not even in English. What is a banger anyway? Is he banging the girls? The Parisian Bordeaux Lyonnaise. The Lionesses of the North? Frucking Swedes, cannot even pronounce English words so people understand. Frucking banger. And then, what's with all the plastic balls behind the frucking stupid slogan? What on frucking earth is that supposed to mean? A banger? And all these balls? Banging the balls? In summer? I mean there are frucking Rottweilers in the street. Think of the frucking Rottweilers in their frucking prams when you write stuff like that. Maybe I should identify as a Rottweiler? Can I be a Rottweiler. Can I?

With the headset, I guess I could. Anybody can now really be anything. I mean there could be an app and everybody looks like their dogs or like their cats or

their unicorns. Unicorns. That is what people want. Dad. Not frucking medical stuff. Frucking identiy changers. The real, exciting frucking stuff. A frucking cat 3D-app for their mixed reality headsets, not those frucking med apps only a few sick guys need. Who's losing their frucking ability to speak anyway? Nobody ever does besides you. Same when people carry phones for frucking emergencies that frucking never — never. I mean — I have never ever experienced an emergency. Until now. But mum didn't call. Her phone was out of battery. Can you imagine, the one emergency in two decades and your frucking mother's frucking phone is out of battery? Fruck you.

...

Dad says, we all have lost language, we've murdered it. We have all been muted now that we are constantly on our phones. So maybe if there was a 3D Pet App that turned us all into our favourite pets — would people then talk more? I hear all these frucking crazy people speak with their frucking crazy cats all the time. Or in reversal, when you have a dog, he could be your —. Man, no. That's so sick. The world. So sick. These headsets. We shall be so sick. The more I think of it. What you can do with them. I mean — No. The more I think about it —. So sick. I am so sick. I am really going mad. The madness of king Kay. But, hey — what can you do? It happens to the frucking best of us.

...

I want to get out of here. How am I getting out of here? This street is just so frucking, frucking full with frucking shit and stuff and people and stuff and people and tanks and people and shitty stuff. Will the people of the future visit our temples of worship in 2000 years? As we visited the ruins in Pompeii? A civilization lost long ago? What if a volcano broke out. Ended it all. Ended Stockholm. Then I wouldn't have to — . Keep walking. Keep walking. Oh look. A tattoo shop. Let's get a tattoo, right over my face saying: *Assholes. You're all such frucking goddamn assholes.*

...

The guy wouldn't make that tattoo. He said I needed my parents' signature as I was underage. Frucking stupid. Frucking parents. I mean who am I? I am an adult. I am not underage. I am my own man. That is what I am. Where am I? I have been walking and walking. I have no idea where I frucking am. I am so frucking tired. So frucking tired with everything. Sleep — Death, aren't you frucking brothers? Sleep. Death. Will be the same to me. Soon.

...

Pareena had been standing stock-still for the past couple of minutes. She couldn't sit any longer, there was too much commotion within her. She had no idea what was going on. Mesmerized by the lines and words and random syllables that kept appearing on the screen, her entire blood circulation had stopped and frozen up in midsummer. Was that really Kay thinking? What was he doing in Stockholm? Would that explain why he hadn't answered her? *What* was he doing in Stockholm? *What* was he thinking? And *why* was he thinking what he was thinking? She couldn't even imagine she'd ever wanted to be with someone like this, leave alone ever marry him. What on earth had she gotten herself into? She wanted to leave, get out of the room, run. The thlog of her beloved Kay had captivated her so entirely all she could do was stand and read and read and read — and try not to drop dead at once.

"It really makes me think of Jimi."

"Uh-ha."

“I guess he could be thinking stuff like that.”

Nobody thinks like that Pareena wanted to scream. Nobody.

“It’s scary.”

“Yes it is.”

“I mean it is fascinating to see what he thinks, but it makes me feel scared.”

“It makes you feel scared?” Pareena asked numbly.

“Yes? Scared. You?”

“Me? Well — me too,” she said, her voice barely carrying meaning.

‘Scared?’ she wanted to scream. ‘I am petrified. I am horrified, repelled, astounded, so upset — ’ she wanted to scream. She wanted to squeeze the big fat orange in her throat, rip it out and let its sweet orange juice ran onto the ground, watering the desert, the bracken, the foreign woods. But ripping out the orange meant ripping out her throat, the warm flesh of her neck, her pulsating arteries. It meant her death, it meant her rich blood watering the desert, the bracken, the foreign woods and so she remained silent and mute and still, trying to swallow and swallow and swallow. When really, she couldn’t. When all she felt was how she was being strangled.

“Shall we read on?” Arvi asked sheepishly. They were now partners in crime, partners in pain, partners in the unbelievable: they were now eternally bound.

And she nodded, the ‘we’ in the sentence was comforting, relieving the pressure of terrible loneliness and despair.

“If you can bear it,” she said.

“I can if you can”, he answered cryptically. Then she smiled at the union they had forged since yesterday when she had stormed out on such bad terms and left the room in such a hurry, reproachful and hurt and desperate.

“Ok. Let’s see what more there is to come.”

“It cannot possibly get any worse.”

Little did they know it could, as more and more words kept appearing on the screen. And the more and more words did appear, the more Pareena was turning into a pillar of sand and marmoreal stone, standing, and tinkering and tinkling before the unknowable and now, now, she finally knew. All that was unknowable. All that was secret and hidden. It was awful and terrifying and devastating; an experience she didn’t want, but couldn’t help being exposed to, now and then and possibly forever.

For this —.

This she would never ever forget.

There was no going back now. All she could do was being scrolled forward.

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Is that the national museum? A place filled with useless frucking priceless art? I should have brought some paint. Maybe I should just go in. Paint these frucking paintings. — What? An exhibition? On gardens? On frucking gardens? They are not worth a thing. Nothing. Not with the world coming to an end. Why are the real gardens not endlessly priceless to you? Why is nature not priceless? The planet? The earth that we have destroyed? What? I cannot get in with my backpack? What you want me to put everything into a plastic bag? Like security at frucking airports for boarding frucking planes? Are they all carrying those frucking transparent plastic bags with their valuables? Seriously? Because there are crazy people now. Who blow up the thin tower? I only want to destroy a frucking Rembrandt, not blow up anybody, not blow up anybody's lives. Is that the frucking same to you: someone's

life and a frucking painting? Same security measures? Frucking idiots. Frucking morons. Let's get out of here.

That is where I should die. In a frucking garden. That is where it all started. Garden of frucking Eden. This is where it all ended: The garden of the zombie apocalypse. I should make that TikTok video of how I kill myself in a frucking garden. It will become a brobdingnagian trend. Frucking suicides in frucking gardens. Gardicides. Latest trend on TikTok, frucking X-witter, Insta, Snapchat, frucking facebook trend.

What's with the boat? Djurgården Frucking Ferries. Frucking Garden Ferries. Will they still use their frucking ferries if their gardens are under water. Down under. Wherever I look it is a frucking garden battlefield. I will get on the boat. Man, look at all the Rottweilers. They are great. We have done great. Pat. Hey Bro, you'd love it. You'd simply love it. All looks so frucking, frucking real. I must start making these videos to send to Pat.

...

Why is everybody screaming so loud? Are they being tortured? We didn't build no such sounds into the app. But we should have. Sounds are great. All the people screaming. Terrified. They are frucking terrified. They are screaming as if they were tortured as if they were dying. Sounds great. Perfect city zipping zombie sound with the knives and all the blood. But I still don't understand. Is there something wrong with the audio? What's wrong with the spatial audio. We haven't programmed that. Is that a prank frucking Pat built in? Frucking idiot. Pat. What

have you done? Why is everybody screaming as if them zombies are frucking tortured and raped?

I am a hundred percent sure we did not do this. I wouldn't even know how to connect the audio properly with the set. So, what the fuck is wrong here? Let's see. Taking the headset off. — Again. So what now?

...

God, it's frucking Stockholm Disneyland again. I cannot bear the city without the headset. So bright, so blue, so white. Beautiful frucking Venice before it will all go under. All the little boats, all the little people. And the little kids. I hate the kids. They will be roasting in the sun like chicken kebab on the grill. Why is everybody screaming?

Look up. Up. And, — N o prank. No kidding. Now, I understand. Frucking up *here*. Frucking up above my head. A frucking roller coaster and people screaming right on top of me. You must be frucking kidding me. The ferry stops right under the frucking roller coaster — Gröna Lund. The world comes to an end and you are all screaming from joy. Shout for joy. Near-death experience. Is that what you need to frucking feel alive? I am alive enough when all I want to be is dead. Enough. Too much.

I want to frucking die. Now. I want to frucking, frucking die. Now.

Kay, Kay, I cannot bear listening to you any longer. Kay?

Is that really you? Oh my God. My darling boy.

What happened to you? What are you thinking?

Why are you thinking all these terrible, terrible thoughts?

What have we done to you?

What have I done to you?

Kay, Can you hear me?

Kay?

Kay?

This is awful.

Pandora, are you there?

Is that real? Is that my son? Is that really what he is thinking?

Can I read my son's thoughts?

Pandora. Can I ?

Pandora.

Help.

Anybody.

Anybody out there?

Kay?

Kay?

Answer me.

Why can he not hear me?

Why can nobody hear me?

.....

What is this loser doing over there? Is he dancing? Let's talk to him.

"Hey you. You're good?"

"Hey. Yeah, I am good. You? What's that on your head? Can you take it off?"

"Nah, I don't want to take it off. You? What are doing? All that stuff with your arms and legs? Are you frucking hurting? Nobody frucking moves like that."

"That's Thai Chi. Can you take the headset off?"

"No. Thanks. I am fine. Gee, what are you doing that Thai Chi for?"

"To find balance."

"There is no balance."

"There is. But you must work for it. It is hard work to find redemption."

"Red Dead Redemption. Easy to find."

"No. Inner Peace. Not a computer game."

"You know the frucking game?"

"I do. What is this that you *are* you wearing? I cannot even see your eyes."

"You cannot see my frucking eyes? Well, it's the future. Nobody sees nobody's eyes. Belongs to my father."

"What does it do?"

"I can see everything in black and white."

"What would you want that for on such a beautiful day like today? I just love the colours out there. I mean — look at the water. It is dark grey, nearly black underneath these huge clouds and then there is a fine line and next to it is blue. Sparkling blue. It is just so gorgeous. Do you only see black and white with that thing?"

“Yes. All is in black and white and red. The blood is red. Everybody is wearing camouflage jump suits, kevlar vests and everybody is a zombie. Stockholm is destroyed. There are tanks and the military is everywhere. Wanna see?”

“What’s wrong with you? No —. Please leave. You have very bad energy. I can sense so much negative energy from you and your headset. Please. Just go.”

....

What a frucking loser. What an idiot. Such a moron. What did I talk to him for? He wasn’t even interested in what I had to say. He literally pushed me away. Pushed me out. Negative energy? Yes —, of course. There is a lot of negative energy. Just look around you. The world is full of totally negative frucking energy as it is dying. Only frucking negative energy. Fine line between grey and blue. What was he even talking about? What was this loser even talking about?

Maybe I should quickly see. I mean. It sounded interesting. Somehow. Ok. —

Man — it hurts when I take off the set. The colours. Frucking Disneyland. So bright and so beautiful. It looks like Lego sets someone built and then photographed. Frucking Lego II movie. What commercialized bullshit. Nobody wants to frucking see that. The waters. And? — He was right. The water is split underneath the big clouds. Black grey and sparkling, sparkling blue. The blue. I mean, —. Wow. It was kind of beautiful. Kind of. He was kind of right.

Kind of frucking stupid. What did I take my headset off for? Zombie apocalypse is so much better than this real shitty stuff anytime of the day. The world that is to come to an end must come to a terrible end. It cannot be full of beauty. It cannot be beautiful.

I cannot look at all the beauty. I cannot stand it. The beauty. It is a frucking illusion. Frucking, frucking hallucination.

....

Why would anyone keep fit? Why are people frucking running? Look at that zombie running over there. And then — always looking at their frucking watches? We must program the frucking watches to be frucking hand grenades sitting on their wrists. Pat would love that frucking idea. That would be so much frucking fun. All smartwatches, smart and personalized frucking hand grenades. Next generation headset we may also blow them frucking handgrenades off and rip off people's hands virtually. That would be fun. Real frucking fun. It would take some frucking programming though. But not impossible. Pat could probably do it.

What does it say on his T-shirt? *Lunar. Lightyears Ahead*. I bet — man. Serously? frucking fightyears Ahead. You must be kidding me. Light years ahead. Really? No, they will be heavy, heavy years. Heavy years are ahead. Just as stupid as my shirt. But then it would match: "Occupy Mars. Lightyears Ahead". We are a dream team. Batman and Robin. Frucking Marvel frucking Disney frucking Commerce Shit.

...

I just keep walking. Walking. I wish I could turn off my thoughts. I wish I could no longer hear myself. Listening to myself is such deep shit, such deep pain, such frucking — frucking — . I mean — I will find myself a nice place in the garden, sit down and end it right here. Hopefully that shit I bought in frucking Christiania works properly and I will have nice dreams.

Kay, Kay. Can you hear me?

No shit. That was loud. Who's there?

Kay, it's me. Dad.

"Dad? Oh my God. Oh my God. I am hallucinating. I am really going mad now."

"Kay, you are not hallucinating. The A007 Breenplant headsets connect us."

"I can hear my dad's voice. That's bad."

"No, darling. My baby boy. No. Listen to me. We can hear each other think."

"No, we can't. You cannot be in my head."

"Yes, I can, our thoughts are connected. We can hear each other"

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"You would never think that."

"Well, son I would. Right now I would, I do."

"But how did they connect our thoughts?"

"Believe me I didn't know that was possible. But it seems to be working. I can hear you loud and clear."

"I hear you loud and clear too. But how can I know it's you? How can I know I am not making up your voice in my head. I am going crazy. I really am going crazy up here. I have become totally mad since I've run away. It's the drugs. It must be the stuff I took. Dad. I am so worried about you. What if you die? What if we lose you. Dad. No, —. We cannot —. We cannot lose you. I ran away, took the next train from Basel then Copenhagen, then all the way to Stockholm. Can you imagine? I have no idea what to do next. Dad, I am so completely lost."

"You are worried about me? You never said so. You haven't even come to see me."

"I have come to see you. Every day You are in a frucking coma. You didn't see me."

"Ok.ok — But you have never really told me how worried you are."

"I haven't said so because —. I haven't said so because I only *think* so. I, —I couldn't have *told* you. Remember we never talk. You are never there. You are always at work unless it is the holidays. But then I see more of your credit card than of you. You are such a cliché of a father."

"Kay, I am so sorry. I wish we could talk more often."

"You do?"

"I never know what to say to you. It is not as easy as when you were little. You have grown so much. One day we were building the Millennium Falcon sitting on the carpet. Remember — it was all Star Wars *all* the time. Obi-Wan Kenobi, Han Solo, Darth Vader, Kyle Ren, — Yoda and the next day you only ever walk around with your earphones."

"And you with the Breenplant granddad gave you. That is worse. That is so much worse than earphones. Any time. Really."

"That was for work. You know that was for work."

"I know, all you ever do is *ever* for work. You never do anything for fun. Even pleasure is work. When you say —, and if you have time, we must all have fun and enjoy ourselves. Do you really think that is how families work?"

"I am not sure how families work".

"Definitely not like ours. Our family doesn't work at all. We are completely dysfunctional, totally toxic."

"Is that what you think?"

"Yes, dad, it is what I think. I cannot hide my thoughts from you right now. I wish to God I could."

"Why didn't you come to see me in hospital? I missed you. I missed hearing my baby boy's voice."

"But I did come. Dad, I did come and see you. And I have just told you."

"You did?"

"Yes, dad."

"Oh my babyboy I wish I could have seen you when you came to see me."

"Is that how you call me when I cannot hear it. babyboy? That is so pathetic. Dad. Really? Babyboy."

"Babyboy. Of course. You will always be my baby. You were so cute. A little happy toddler wiggling his little toes, and the little fists. And your rosy cheek, so, so cute."

"You are so full of shit. I mean. — Sorry Dad. I know you don't want me to talk like this. I am sorry. When I came you were so weak and beaten up. They said you might die. And mum got in touch with Neuro Industries and, —. I mean. Too much. It really is too much. She is messing things up completely, I don't know what is wrong with her. I mean mum —. Not only do I not have the words to talk about that, I cannot even be bothered to think about her. What she did was so wrong? No words. Just straight out wrong."

"Kay, are you crying?"

"I am not crying."

"I think you are crying."

"I think too that I am crying. Yes, I am crying. — You are thousands of miles away, cannot see me, are probably still in that coma and can see that I am crying. How sick is that? I don't know if you are real. I don't know if any of this is real. I must be going mad. Oh my God, I am going completely mad. Oh my God."

...

"I guessed you are crying. I simply guessed. Kay, I am so sorry. I know all this is a lot. I wish you were here now. Home."

"I hate mum. Why would she do that you?"

"I think she is only trying to help."

"Help? How can she help you by inviting these jerks? They had access to all your work. Your brain. I mean — can you imagine what will happen once Neuro Industries have laid their hands on all your work?"

"Mum, probably thought it didn't matter anymore if I died. She never really cared for the money it brought and neither did I. She just wanted me to live."

"That is not true. That is all you care about. Money."

"Is that what you think?"

"Yes, that is what I think. I mean really. That is what you *think*. How can you even ask that?"

"It was never about the money. It was only ever about helping others. People who lose their ability to speak."

"Of course. And the credit cards we maxed out were just for decoration."

"We never maxed out any credit cards."

"We did. Don't you remember this one time in Barcelona. We only had time to see the match, spend one night and fly home in the morning."

"We didn't get to see anything in the city."

"Not the Sagrada Familia, not —."

"And mum couldn't tell whether Messi or Ronaldo shot the goals."

"Yes, I remember. They blocked the card because we hadn't unlocked the geo-blocking. We didn't max out the card."

"Whatever."

"Kay, come back home. Get on the next train and come back home."

"I can't."

"Why can't you?"

"Just in case you have forgotten: You are still in a coma, aren't you?"

"Actually, I am not sure. I think I am awake. Some of the time. I think I've talked to mum."

"You have?"

"I think so. I can hear her voice. But honestly, I am not a hundred percent sure. Darling Kay, please come home."

"I cannot look her in the face.

"Don't worry about mum. I really think she is, — They are only trying to help."

"And? Are they? Are they helping you? Is she helping you?"

"Dad? Answer the question."

"Dad? — ?

"Dad, are you there?"

"Kay, please. Come back home. Please."

"No, I will not come home. I will end it right here in this frucking garden."

"Dad, can you hear me?"

"Dad?"

...

I am so going mad. I hear my dad's thoughts. I am mad enough already without hearing any voices in my head. I must get this straight, just for the frucking record: I do not hear his thoughts. It is impossible to hear somebody's thoughts. Dad kept explaining that. You cannot hear what somebody thinks unless they are cooperating and surely, I am not cooperating. I am not cooperating with frucking anyone — and surely not with frucking Neuro Industries who are now frucking running everything. Nobody can ever control what I am frucking thinking.

To get all this straight: I am hearing what I wish my dad's thoughts are — so, bottom line: I am going so completely frucking mad. The zombie apocalypse Stockholm app has some serious frucking side effects. Pat, take this: You keep hearing your father's voice lecturing you, asking you to come home. Home, I mean really? I can only scoff at this. Where does he frucking think, I *think* frucking home is. I have no home. My parents are strangers to me. I am homeless, I chose to be homeless. A long time ago. When I was born. I will have to text Pat about these frucking side effects, maybe he can fix the bug. I really don't want to keep hearing dad's voice when I am in zombie mode. Let's take this thing off and deal with the real thing for a moment.

...

The sun. The sun is so bright. The Northern lights. I mean ok — maybe not, not the northern lights. It is kind of frucking beautiful. In fact. This garden is frucking beautiful. Is that food they are serving at the Herbarium? Look at all the happy people here. Let's just get inside, get some coffee. I love the Swedes, you can just grab

a cup and coffee and milk and sugar and go and sit. No paying. Frucking communists are doing a great job dishing out free coffee to the world. Oh God, I love this place, frucking so many beautiful flowers and plants and stuff and lots of happy people. How can people look so happy, so sunny. The air so fresh — with all that shit.

Is this deck chair free? I guess so. Nobody around. They are all queuing for quinoa salad and vegan bison steak or whatever that is. So, I can seat my big ass onto the warm material stretching right through between these wooden legs and take a breath. Everything here is so peaceful, so wonderful. I cannot bear it. I cannot bear it. Where is the headset? Let's go back to Zombie mode. I am not made for the real shit. Too beautiful. It hurts, my eyes, my soul, my everything. What is this place anyway: Herbarium Rossendals Trädgård? Who takes time to build a place like this when all will disappear any time soon? When the sea will rise? And the waves will come? And life will stop? And the world will end? Then the sea will tear through Rossendals Trädgård and bring down Rosendals slot for good. What then?

...

I read some of the tourist information they put up before the castle. It seems the frucking queen suffered a great deal here. What's the point of being the queen when you have to retire to a house in the woods on a goddam island that used to be the hunting grounds for the ultra-rich. Who wants to be queen anyway? Who wants to be anything anyway?

I want to go and see the life rings sculpture. I wonder what that goddam sign was all about? Life rings? Life has no rings. Trees have life rings, but we? Why is everything so far? My feet hurt. What? Again up the hill and what's that? The ice house? Great place. Once I am gone they can put my body on ice and wait for dad to wake up and come and get me. The ice house? Why would they call it like this? What is that back there? Hanging on a wooden bar. Is this a rope I see so far away? Let's see. And yes, there is — a rope. Let me get that rope. And then onward to the Life rings sculpture. Installation. Modern art. Who gets any of this anyway. Journalism is dead. Art is dead. We are all dead.

I mean — look at that enormous pile of life rings. From ships. And look at the total bullshit they are writing: "The installation "Life Rings" takes a familiar object, the life ring, and multiplies it into absurdity." Sounds good to me. Is totally absurd. "We must all care for each other." Total absurd. Look. All these life rings piled up on each other, how can they all care for each other? What total shit. What's that? Nearly five meters high? What a shitty idea for a sculpture. A mute memory of how we throw life rings and lifelines to each other when we are drowning. But hey — Nobody is throwing me lifelines nor life rings ever. Nobody is here to help me. I am frucking alone. I wonder if I can sling that rope through the top ring. That frucking sculpture would be tall enough to dangle from the top. I could just hang myself on the lifering statue. What a live performance. What an action. What symbolic meaning. In fact, what a frucking great idea. Those pics on Be-real. Me dangling from the life rings, me and my last shot. Wouldn't that look great? So real. So real, because they are real.

"Kay, you are not alone. Never. I am here."

"Dad, you are freaking me out. Go away."

"Kay, I cannot leave you. You are not well."

"Fuck off. You are not real."

"Kay, we are connected via the headsets. It is quite real. I can hear you, you can hear me. Let me help you."

"I don't know what is real anymore."

"I can assure you, I am real."

"Dad this is all so frucked up. I cannot see you, I cannot be with you. You are in a coma. But I can hear you. None of this makes any sense, — any sense at all."

"Oh Kay. I know this is hard to understand. I don't understand it myself. It shouldn't be possible. So far, we could only access someone's thoughts with their consent. But they seem to have changed that. Some new update I don't know of. But, I am here now. And, also — I am so sorry you are not well."

"Not well? Not well? Is that how you phrase it. And no, you cannot help me. I am fucked. Dad, I am completely fucked."

"Tell me what's wrong."

"What's wrong? Everything. Everything is wrong."

"You know that this is not true."

"Yes, Dad it is true. The world is coming to an end. The climate crisis will destroy us all. There is no hope."

"There is always hope."

"Maybe for you. You are basically dead anyway."

"I am still in a coma, but they will wake me up. I am not dead. You know that."

"And what if they don't! Dad. What if you don't wake up? I cannot lose you now. I don't want to tell you —. But really it is terrible that you can hear what I am thinking. I don't want you to know this. But — I really cannot lose you. Not now."

"Kay put away the knife."

"I can't."

"Your arm looks bad already."

"I can't."

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"Kay, please, please talk to me."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Get away from the life rings. Leave the rope back on the floor."

"I can put it back in the ice house."

"It's ok. Don't pick it up again. Leave it on the floor and start walking."

"Where should I go?"

"Walk down the hill, then to your right. Walk along Djurgårdsbrunnsviken, go along the channel."

"Ok."

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"How do you know where I am?"

"I heard you airdrip."

"What do you mean?"

"I heard you airdripping and so I joined you. I am with you on Google street view. I know exactly where you are. I am right here."

"What's with the airdip?"

"It is a function on the headset that connects you with somebody else, wherever you are in the world. They magically appear in your vision to be with you when you airdrip them".

"I cannot see you Dad."

"That might be because I am in a coma. I cannot actually walk beside you and also, I haven't configured my avatar yet. I didn't think it was necessary. Sorry. Trust me, I am here, also if you cannot see me."

"Ok. Dad. You know all this is very weird."

"I know. But, Kay? — Why have you lost all hope?"

"Because everything comes to an end. And there is nothing I can do to stop it. I feel so helpless. So totally helpless."

"Kay, this burden you are carrying, it is too heavy. You cannot save the world."

"I'll have to save the world. No one else will. And I can't —"

"No, you don't."

"Who else will save the world if not me?"

"Kay, my beloved son. It is too heavy for you. You cannot carry it alone."

"I know. I know exactly and that is what drives me mad. I am so desperate."

"But why? Isn't it a relief to know that you cannot save the world."

"Why is that a relief? That is not a relief that is freaking me completely out."

"It is a relief because you know that someone else has saved the world and you won't have to save it."

"No-one has saved the world. Dad. No-one. Look at the state of the world. Clearly nobody has saved us."

"I believe someone has saved us."

"Not by the look of it."

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"I believe Jesus saved the world."

"You must be kidding me. You are a frucking scientist."

"Please. Kay."

"Dad, you are a scientist. You cannot possibly believe in Jesus as the saviour of the world. That is such total frucking bullshit."

"Kay, I believe in Jesus *because* I am a scientist. It is a purely rational decision. You know Blaise Pascal's bet?"

"I do."

"You remember?"

"Of course, there was a time when you didn't talk about anything else. And how you can only win the bet if you believe in God and how it makes most sense, rationally to be a Christian because it is the only faith where God forgives your sins. And then you didn't even believe in the concept of sin. You kept saying how in all other religions you must labour and pray and do good deeds and yet — you can

never know if it is ever enough to please an all-giving all gifted, good and gracious God. Yes, I remember.

“So?”

“But I never believed you’d *really* believe that. You never said —”

“I do. From faith comes hope. From faith comes love and wisdom and forgiveness and thankfulness. Faith, love, hope, but love is the greatest — Kay, I truly, truly love you. Isn’t that all that matters? That we all love each other and then act upon it?”

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“I find that hard to believe. I mean — Dad, come on, isn’t it bad that you should earn all that money that comes from your work. Selling out humanity’s thoughts to the sharks and the rats — the vipers. Will that be your legacy? Really?”

“All thoughts belong to their owners. Until we visualize them. We own the visualisation.”

“No, they cannot belong to you.”

“Well, it is my invention and inventions are being patented.”

“Patented? You always said you wanted everything open source.”

“No, no. That’s changed. The technology would be weaponized:”

“Really? What a lame argument. Weaponized? How? Why? You always rooted for open source.”

“I did?”

"Yes, you did. And I always rooted for democratic control, don't you remember: *Don't you remember: We built the city, we built the city on Rock and Roll.*

"Yes, we built the city. We built the city on Rock and Roll."

"Dad. No. Stop singing. You're awful. What I mean: You must bring your research under democratic control."

"Must I?"

"Absolutely."

"I cannot do anything. I am in a coma right now."

"When you wake up again."

"Why? So, someone else makes the money?"

"No, so it can be used for the benefit of all of us."

"And? Is it not?"

"What?"

"Used for the benefit of all of us?"

"I guess no, now mum has just signed it all over to Neuro Industries."

"She has not."

"I am afraid so."

"That means it will all be patented."

"We are gonna pay. Humanity is gonna pay big time. You should not let this happen. Dad. You must make sure — .

"I remember. They changed my mind."

"How?"

"The cat thream. I remember. I remember now. "

"How did that change your mind?"

"Well, they taught me that if the technology gets into the false hands, it could start World War III. That was when I wanted to start patenting it all."

"Was that the effect of the dream? I couldn't really work that out from the content."

"Goodness, they changed my mind. I think they changed it again."

"Yes, catdream was nasty. In every way."

"You think?"

"Yes, I do and then —

What?

....

"But then — I don't understand."

"What don't you understand?"

"The cat thream. That was a dream you composed, right? Neuro Industries said you designed that."

"I did. How do you know about it?"

"I read the transcript."

"You read the transcript?"

"I did. They showed us on the monitor to see what you were doing, or should I rather say *how* you were doing."

"No, they wouldn't."

"There were a lot of documents for that dream."

"You read all that? That is amazing."

"It was a totally frucked up dream, all the dogs eaten up by that crazy frucking cat. And when we learned it was all for Putin. I mean how frucked up can life be when your own father is trying to save the worst slaughterer in the world?"

"So what do you want to know about cat thream?"

"There is only one thing of interest: Why did you personalize it for Putin? You used your precious time, your precious research to help the worst criminal alive? Why would you do that? When you loved me? When you know we all hate Putin. Me, Peter, Nina, Mum especially."

"Kay, No — please don't ask me that question."

"Why not."

"In airdrip mode, I cannot hide the truth from you."

"Why would you want to hide the truth from me? Dad what's wrong with asking this question. I don't understand."

"Oh Kay. Please —."

"Dad. I really don't get it. Answer the question. Why did you personalize a thream for Putin, a thream that would save his life if he was ever wounded and then taken to Switzerland?"

"Because I love you."

"Dad, this does not make any sense at all. You know I hate the Russians, I hate their awful war, I hate how they kill and slaughter the Ukrainians, mum's — our family."

"I personalized the dream for Putin so he would survive to —."

"I don't understand. Please tell me why you did that."

“Anastacia, when she was in Peterburg, she was working — She told me —.”

“I don’t understand. What are you trying to tell me?”

“I am trying to tell you that it is more than likely that Putin is your biological father.”

“No —. You are lying. ”

“Kay, I really didn’t want to tell you. I would never have told you. But now, when you are reading my thoughts. I am so — I feel so helpless. Please. Kay. You are my son. I love you like my own, — even if you’re not. Kay. Please.”

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It seems like my Life has come to an end. Ok, No shit — My life has indeed come to an end. That’s it. I am Fruckingmir Fruckimirowitsch Putin’s child? His son? No, no, no. Something went totally frucking wrong here. How on earth have I ended up here? I look up. The sky is grey and white and millionfold black. If I took off the headset I could see its beautiful clear blue radiate down on me. I could see the white clouds drifting like majestic old sailing boats across the sky rivers. But I cannot take off the headset. Not now. I cannot bear reality right now. I want to drown in the virtual world. I want to drown in Zombie City Apocalypse. I want to drown and feel nothing. Empty. Complete hollow. Completely gone.

I grab the pills from the inner pocket of my jacket. Carefully, I open the zip to get out the small plastic bag. Pure MDMA. I hold them in my hand, my hand is big, the pills are small and light and look so beautiful. Such joy. They are so colourful, they are yellow and green and blue and red and pink. I take them all. I wait. I see the

rock. I climb up onto the rock. I look at my feet. They are green or blue or yellow or green and red and pink — or million — millionfold black. I feel the roughness of the stone. How soft the rock is, how tender. When I climb. Then I jump. I fall, I roll, I rock and roll into the waters. The sea. The goddamn Baltic — Baltic sea. How cold. How hot. My lungs. They fill with water. A shot, another shot, a double, triple shot of sea water. The Baltic sea is saltier than I —.

Soon. Now. Soon —. Dad. Da —?

Pandora's Exclusive Cutscene: La Capitana in Action

Carola Annika Hansen had left Stockholm guest harbor only minutes ago. She was maneuvering expertly between the huge cruiser ships anchored — waiting for their tourist cargo to come back from another city trip, exhausted, hungry, and tired beyond belief — before leaving for Tallin or Helsinki at night. Easily, Carola Annika was steering clear of the moving small ferry boats of SL, Waxholmsbolaget the seaborne public transport; waving to the crew of a timber sailing boat, a Hallberg-Rassy bluewater yacht, chugging slowly along the waterfront of Djurgården. Carola Annika could drive or ride or sail boats and vessels and ships before she could even walk, finding her way out into the Skärgård and its 30'000 islands, skerries and rocks was a piece of delicious strawberry cake you could have ordered and eaten at Grillska Huset, one of Stockholm's finest bakeries catering for the city of Stockholm since 1649.

It was evening, but still early and then — the lights of the North were so interminable. The days never end. She knew the sun would only ever so slowly disappear behind the large grey and white cumulus clouds in the West giving endless depths to the horizon where only the sky was the limit, radiating in its finest and clearest and deepest blues only ever found near 60 degrees latitude on the planet. Sky like this, she had never seen it — nowhere. And she had been places, many places. No place like home. She sighed silently, her shoulders dropping.

Soon enough the last sparkles of light would stop dancing across the ripples of the Baltic Sea. Star Dust. The little sparkles looked like magic fairy star dust to her and the little girl she used to be: Little Carola Annika, she could still find her easily enough within herself. Little Carola Annika and her very own star dust straight off the fairy's wand. She simply loved how the dark waters changed into bright whites, then silver and then mirrored back into gray and black and then dark green, darker green, an unbelievable, ungraspable turquoise. Times of dusk, and dawn, lasted forever up here. The colors of the sea were ever changing; Never the same, never still, never static. Always so beautiful, always so enticing.

They had forecast rain for the early hours after midnight, but she hoped to be back at her parent's summerhouse in Södra Ingmarsö just before midnight, at the latest — hopefully before. She already had some of the stuff. Jonah had a buyer. All she had to do was deliver and take the cash. And that was easy enough. Carola Annika sighed at the thought of how easy it was. It really, really shouldn't be so easy.

She was wearing a thick, grey merino jacket that used to belong to her aunt Anne and had tucked it tightly underneath her olive-green oilskins as she was steering her little motorboat, *The Buster*, towards Stockholm's *Skärgård*. She simply

loved the Stockholm archipelago, a huge world full of islands, all sizes from tiny and small to medium size and large, stretching about sixty kilometers to the east of Stockholm shaped by post-glacial rebound still rising about three millimeters a year; a fantastic seascape that would fascinate artists; authors, painters and musicians alike. Her woven HildaHilda bag containing her life, was sitting right next to her. The bag was a beauty. A piece of wonderful Swedish handicraft she had treasured for years and carried everywhere she went. A piece of home. A piece of Stockholm, made by the women who still lived and still worked in the Old Town, as they had for centuries. HildaHilda's workers were so bravely and courteously defying the hordes of tourists as migration of that wonderous species had been redirected North over the past few years. There was a saying of old in the fashion world that "Sometimes clothes were your only friends," but Carola Annika was convinced otherwise. The proverb should really say: *Sometimes bags were your only friends.*

Carola Annika had just passed the far Eastern end of Södermalm with the huge industrial buildings she absolutely loved for their unique designs when she turned her face towards Blockhusudden. How many happy summer hours had she spent in the little café beside the sea, eating apple pie and semlor buns, drinking Latte Macchiato and liters and liters of tap water you could get yourself from a tap fixed to the outside of the wooden building painted in the typical Swedish oxen blood red and white.

But it was not the café she was interested in today. She would always take the detour and go out to the rock. Go near it. Then sit still in her boat and simply look and let the waves and slightly crushing curls sing their eternal lullabies while rocking the boat gently. Stare at the rock from the sea: It was a well-rehearsed, well-

cherished ritual. She would always do it when she drove out to Södra Ingmarsö. She simply loved that place. It was so magic. All the memories came flushing back to her. There was nothing she had to do: They simply swept over her when she saw the big bulky rock hidden in a small bay a couple of hundred meters behind Thielska Galleriet.

The rock was the place where she and Mats had first kissed and then spent hours watching the sea and talking and kissing, drinking beer and then kissing some more, talking some more, drinking some more. Talking about all that mattered and all that didn't. Talking about all that was so funny. Everything was funny then. Life. Life was so funny. She could close her eyes hear his voice, his rough laughter and see the many lights of the boats at night. She remembered the stars so high above their heads when it was well past midnight, and they knew they should go home. Light. It would be light soon enough. The sun would come up. The nights up north were so short in summer. And then — Mats's hands. On her hips, on her breasts. Mats's lips. His lips on her neck, when he was holding her long, fine blonde hair up so he could kiss every spot underneath. How it tickled in the dark. When she closed her eyes. When the sun had gone. How she loved it. All had been so perfect. She sighed again and steered *The Buster* towards the North. She couldn't miss the Rock. Not today when she was so exhausted and feeling so low. Not when her soul and body urgently needed some respite and comfort.

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The trip back from Dahab to Stockholm had been devastating. Hours on the bus, crossing the desert to get to Kairo had been extremely tiresome. Why hadn't she

booked the flight earlier? She could have flown from Hurghada. There hadn't been time. There had been too much work. And then at such short notice everything was fully booked. Dahab was great like always. She loved being a dive instructor and she loved the Red Sea, its underwater world was unique and so different from home, so different from the Baltic Sea.

Hot. It had been so hot. She couldn't remember it being so hot. Everybody was suffering. The locals, the tourist that didn't tan. It was impossible to spend any time in the blazing, scorching sun, leave alone lay on the hot rocky sand. You couldn't stay in the sun or on the beach or in your bed at night when the heat and its moving tentacles got into your blood, your body, your complete system. This year was no different.

Mohamed whom she had known for years said he was struggling more and more. On the date palm plantation in the oasis, he owned they had already had to dig 42 meters deep to get water. 4 meters deeper every year. The water was vanishing on them too quickly. She sighed, thinking of Abbas and Ehab his two boys, 16 and 19 who had lived there all their lives and now had no future left. Where would they go? What would they do? The future was not in tourism either also if Mohamed believed so. On the contrary, as soon as temperatures soared beyond 50 degrees the river and its many estuaries will flow backwards, then dry up; everybody will then be flocking up north: Copenhagen, the new Rimini, Stockholm, the new Athens, Helsinki, the new Kairo.

Carola Annika knew she had to do something. There was no way she'd be sitting still watching how her beloved Egypt will become a fiery furnace. No way she was just going to turn around and simply stay up North if South was no longer an

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option. She wouldn't give up the Red Sea, not so easily anyway. She was determined to make sure people survived the furnace, the heat, and what was most feared, the devastating despair that grabbed your heart and choked you until nothing was left but an icky heap of sweat and dried up, tiny, rotten dates. She was going to help. She was going to raise that money for a bigger drill or for a desalination plant, for air conditioning and water bottles. Money, she was sure. Money could bring release. Money would bring release. Money should, money would get —. No matter what. Money would bring solutions.

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There was someone sitting on the rock. From afar, he looked young, and he was daringly dangling his feet above the waters. The rock wasn't really that high, at most five meters above sea level and she remembered jumping when the temperatures allowed it. She was raising her hand to salute him but stopped mid-way. What had happened? He was gone. He had fallen —, fallen into the waters. It didn't look as if he had jumped in any controlled way. It looked more as if he had fallen asleep, his muscles losing all their tension, then gliding — then gliding down, banging his limbs onto the rock. Had he banged his head? It didn't look good. Was he drunk? Was he stoned? Why was he falling like this? Nobody in his right mind jumped from the rock like this. Carola Annika stared into the dark waters, fixating the very spot he went down and starting the engine of her motorboat at the same time. She had better check this out.

Her worst fear was confirmed when the young man didn't resurface. He was gone, underwater and she could see fine bubbles raising where he had fallen in. Was

she drunk? Stoned? Had she only imagined the scene? It hadn't taken that long. But she was sure she wasn't drunk, not today anyway. Someone had just fallen off the rock. Feverishly, she was putting on her dive gear. Carola Annika knew she only had minutes, also in summertime, the Baltic Sea was cold. If the man's lungs were filled with water and slime he would sink like a heavy stone. She checked everything although she knew she had filled the tank upon leaving; Yes, there was enough air in the Scuba tank and in the right mix: 21% oxygen and 79% nitrogen. Yes, the Buoyancy Control Device was in place, so was the Octopus Reg. All ready.

Feverishly, she went through her routine as she always did. Quickly, she put her lead belt around her waist, not bothering about the wetsuit that still hung in the cabin — it would take far too long to get it and to put it on — but she was grabbing her fins instead and kicking off her white sneakers and socks at the same time. It took her no longer than 30 seconds to get and put on everything she needed. Then she jumped in, shining her underwater torch towards the bottom of the Baltic sea. God, the waters were cold. This was not the Red Sea. She focused on her breathing. Steady. Steady. Where was he? She was shivering, but not only from the cold. Where was he? Why did he go down like a stone? That was weird. Not for one second did she think that the young man had wanted to end his life.

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There he was: Deep down she could see a body drifting away from her slowly, getting dangerously towards the underwater currents she knew so well and usually

steered clear off. It took her a millisecond to decide, then she lifted her slim bottom and her muscular thighs, bending her knees before she pushed herself powerfully in reverse and dived down vertically, stretching her fins toward the surface while her hands were reaching into the dark void of the sea, groping towards the figure she saw floating under water. He was only a couple of meters away. Gravity was not defeated easily, also not and — especially not underwater. Her blood shot into her head at once making her dizzy and making it more difficult to breathe, pumping the oxygen up into her lungs instead of letting it glide down smoothly. She felt uncomfortable. But all these things couldn't bother her. Not right now. He was still further away than she thought. Measuring distances underwater was difficult, also for expert divers. She had no idea where exactly the underwater current began, and she had no intention of finding out today. He was right there. She was going to get him, also if it came at a cost. How high the cost, she wouldn't, she didn't consider. Not now.

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When she had finally reached him, she could see that his eyes were closed. Was that a good sign? She grabbed him by the hair, pulled him closer, then grabbed him by his neck. He was wearing a strange, black headband around his neck. She couldn't bother but held onto it with her index finger. Slowly she brought her own body into a horizontal position, then letting her legs drop down. She felt how the waters down there were colder, tickling her toes with sharp ice cubes her body heat could not melt. Once more, she forced herself to breathe regularly, then holding the regulator before his nose, his face, but he wouldn't grab it. And so, she put it back

between her own blue lips. She could hear her blood throb in her brain. How deep was she? Seven, maybe eight meters? That meant, she could dive up without decompressing.

When she surfaced, she gasped, drawing in air as if it was her who had been drowning, then she pulled the man's body onto the water surface, keeping it as level as was possible given her strength and his weight. She made sure his face looked up. But she also knew that she would have to get him out of the waters as soon as she could.

The Coast Guard, of course — only now she thought of the Coast Guard. She would have to radio them and inform them. She would have to put herself onto their radar. *Skit också!* Not good. That was not good. But first she had to get him out of the water. No way she could call the coast guard from down here. How great she had a rope winch equipped with an automatic grid winch system to get heavy stuff out of the water. She wouldn't need the Coast Guards Help, not just yet.

When she had heaved his body onto the motorboat, she pulled him into the little cabin where she navigated *the Buster* and turned him to the side. She hit him so hard onto the back that he started spitting water first, then he started breathing again. Thank God he was alive. She grabbed a towel for herself, covered her own nakedness, dried off and quickly put her clothes back on, pulling Aunt Anne's merino jacket as close to her body as she could. She was still shivering badly. It took a while to get warm again.

When she was dry enough, she knotted the wet towel into her hair and knelt beside him. It was quite a task, but finally she managed to pull off his jeans, his socks, the strange headgear that had nearly strangled him, his T-shirt and last his

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underwear. Everything she dropped onto a heap on the wooden floor of the cabin. She didn't look for too long, but quickly covered him with an old and hideous, green and red, woolen Klippan blanket. At last, she turned him to the side and stabilized him in the lateral position.

If he had inhaled too much water, he may die in the next couple of hours, and she would have a dead man on board. How chill was that? She had better call the Coast Guard now. Like it or not.

"Hey, you. How are you?" Her voice sounded so loud and a pitch too high. He didn't answer, but only snorted.

"Listen, I am calling the Swedish Coast Guard now. You need help."

When she really wanted to say: I need help. She was still so close to Stockholm there was no need for the radio yet. She got out her cellphone from the HildaHildabag sitting in the darkest corner next to steering wheel and began searching for the Coast Guard's number somewhere hidden away in her contacts. Not that she thought that she would ever have needed it. Somberly, she looked at the human flotsam she had collected so clumsily. This whole rescue mission was seriously endangering her plans for tonight and she had so hoped to be home by midnight. Dad had promised he would bring takeaway from the Krogen, the absolute best restaurant in the universe, their hamburgers infinitely better than the overpriced lumps sold in Copenhagen at Popl Burger. Dad had said today the Krogen served curry with shrimps, her favorite. But he had also told her he'd go to bed around midnight to get some dark sleep time. Sleeping when it was dark was so much more restoring than sleeping when the sun was up. But it also meant that if she got home past midnight, she would have to eat alone.

As she heard the first ringtone, she felt how a hand grabbed her leg.

“No. No coastguard. Please.” He could barely speak. His voice was so faint. Quickly, she cut the line, lowering herself to be closer to him.

“Ok, fine with me. But if you have too much water in your lungs and die, I will simply throw you overboard. Do you understand? I don’t want any trouble.” The young man contorted his face into a smile.

“Sure. I understand. But, no – No coastguard.”

“No coastguard. Fine.” Carola Annika agreed reluctantly and relieved at once.

“You throw me overboard if I die.” And again, his face twitched as if he was smiling. Probably, he was stoned. He looked stoned.

Carola Annika looked down at him, thinking that all this was not funny at all. She started the engine and finally headed out into the Skärgård. She would have to stop in Dalarö first before going home. She wouldn’t go back without any of the loot. She had promised Jonah there would be something, maybe not a 17th century iron cannon, but something small, light to carry and easy to hide in your suitcase, a sledgehammer, carpentry equipment, a clay bowl, an ancient wine bottle straight out of the sweet salt water. If she was very, very lucky a small wooden carved lion’s head as they had found on the Vasa. Anything. Jonah had ensured her the Chinese buyers would pay a high price, but he needed it by tomorrow. Meeting point just outside Vaxholm tomorrow 09:30 am. His Chinese buyer was flying back to Hong Kong in the evening.

Suddenly, Carola Annika was shivering. She looked at the man, lying on the floor trying to recover from drowning. Had he fallen asleep again? She hoped to God

he wouldn't die within the next hours. Hauling him off the boat again would be another strenuous feat she really could do without. And then, would she indeed commit his body to the sea? Maybe she should just call the Coast Guard right now? Risk that she'd get caught. They'd ask questions. They'd search the Buster. And she still had some of the wine bottles from the 18th century on board that she had found last time and had promised to the guy from Naples. So, no — No, she couldn't risk all that. She couldn't risk blow her cover. Why did life always get so complicated? Why was she always compassionate, always commiserating with others. Why did her life so easily derail and go off track? Why could she not simply stick to her course without looking to the right, to the left? Why, again, and again did she have to follow her instincts and save a total stranger, the stray cat on the hot stone rock. This humanitarian instinct of hers, God — It was so much trouble. Trouble and unnecessary work.

...

She poured some fresh water from the canister into the kettle and switched it on. The battery was fully charged. It had been a rather cool summer's day out in the archipelago, still pleasantly sunny in the morning, but more and more clouds were moving in during the afternoon. While she was waiting for the water to boil, she connected her phone to a little purple loudspeaker. She took a deep breath, then pressed the play button. The Krog 2023 playlist Frederic, the waiter, had shared with her started playing full blast. As Babybird's *You're Gorgeous* hit the air, she stretched her back, her hands, her fingers, trying to relax. But she couldn't. Instead, she started

singing along imagining she'd sit with both her parents in the Krogen in Södra Ingmarsö eating the *thailandsk fiskgryta* she loved so much with shrimps in coconut milk, red curry, bamboo roots, fresh lemon grass and rice: "*You said I wasn't cheap. You paid me 20 pounds. You promised to put me in a magazine...Because you're gorgeous. You're gorgeous.*" Her eyes, again and again, fell on the young man still lying on the floor of the cabin. Truth was: He was kind of cute, about her age, maybe a little younger. It was hard to say. She hadn't heard him speak up clearly or watched him move. Sometimes the voice made all the difference between a mere boy and a man. But then, given what she had seen she had to admit he was a full-grown man indeed. The thought and the image it conjured up made her smile.

She made herself some green tea and let the teabag sit in the cup for a couple of minutes while she sang along as loud as she could to the next song on the playlist: Romeo and Juliet by Dire Straits. Singing helped her decompress. And decompression was just what she needed. What was she going to do with him? Was he snoring? How could he be sleeping with the music so loud and her singing so completely out of tune. Was he dying? Was he gone already? She didn't have the nerve to bend down and check his breathing. Either he was going to make it, or he wasn't. It was not really her problem. She had more important work to do: making money. Saving Mohamed and his whole family near Dahab was no easy task and it certainly wasn't cheap.

She was already passing Brevik, it wasn't far to Dalarö now. The decision came naturally, she would make the dive. She would simply do it. She had better get her wet suit, her googles, her snorkel. Getting all her diving stuff ready was a mere

routine. She could have done it with her eyes closed, in her sleep. But she kept her eyes open, surreptitiously glancing at the stranger on the wooden floor of her boat.

Right — Where were her fins? Had she left them on deck? She opened the door quickly, popped her head into the cool evening wind and saw that both her fins lay jumbled up just near the ladder where she had got out of the water a couple of minutes ago when she was heaving the stoned stranger on board near the rock in Blockhusudden.

But what now? How was this going to work? She'd be gone for at least 15 minutes. Would she just leave him on her boat while she dipped down looking for stuff? Should she tie him to the table? Tie his feet? And his hands? She decided against it; only stupid people tied other stupid people in *very* stupid movies. She knew a couple of knots; the bowline, the stopper knot, the clove hitch, but she wasn't exactly trained in tying up gorgeous naked strangers who had nearly drowned. Had she just admitted to him being gorgeous? This was getting worse by the minute.

What was more stupid anyway, was to go back to a wreck that had been secured by a yellow buoy *and* a big sign that very clearly read "Marine Cultural reserve". But the *Bodekull*, built by an English shipbuilder, the notorious Thomas Day was ever so fascinating to her: The ship's mission had been the most mundane yet the most pivotal for ordinary young men who suddenly found themselves in uniform fighting wars they had not called for. When the *Bodekull* sunk in 1678 she was transporting flour to the Swedish naval fleet in Kalmar, down the coast in south-east Sweden. *Can you imagine. Flour? Not Gold, nor diamonds nor rubies or any other treasures. Flour.*

But Carola Annika felt she simply had to go back. Last time she hadn't had the nerve to dive to the main cabin which probably was full of 17th century stuff worth hauling up. Carola was no rookie, she strictly limited her dive time, making sure she had no unexpected visitors such as the pathetic divers from the coastguard who usually spent their precious time looking for drugs or weapons or helped fight international, environmental disasters. It hadn't been long since the coast guard and their ships heavily equipped with the latest technology paraded the wrecks to make sure everything was seemly. Their blue and yellow hulls could be seen from afar and their large boats were fast, but not as maneuverable as her small speedy motorboat.

The Coast guard were inspecting the wrecks regularly, controlling nothing was gone. Bad luck for them that so many of the Bodekull's treasures had already been sold all over the world: China, Moskva, Tallin, Washington. She barely remembered all the buyers, all she knew was that she needed the money, Mohammed needed the money. The new water pump he needed wasn't cheap. But she couldn't think of this now, she needed to concentrate. What was that? Had he farted? The smell lingering in the air just a little later confirmed her fear. At least gorgeous stranger was alive and not dying, but clearly and surely, she regretted saving his ass already.

Kay?

What happened? I can no longer hear you. The headset must have been destroyed when you fell into the sea.

My darling baby boy. Are you alive? She has saved you. Who is she anyway? A thief? What have you taken? The pills. What was in the pills? Who sold them to you? You jumped. Why did you jump? Is there water in your lungs? Your lungs. Filled with sea water — Can you still breathe? I cannot see you now. Are you ok? No, you are not ok. You are not o.k. Obviously. Nothing is o.k. I didn't know you were so sick. Hearing your thoughts. I mean —. I am completely overwhelmed. Knowing you. After all these years, finally: knowing you. How devastating. How relieving. Absolutely devastating. How close to you I was when I heard you. Your heart. So close and I love you. When I heard your intimate, terrible, frightening thoughts. I didn't know. I never even knew— you — How close was I when I heard your heart beat in your

throat, quiver in your tongue, tremble in the hollow that is your mouth. How close. Closer. Never, never — ever been so close to you. So, hurt. So, shocked. So, I mean — still. How scared you must be. How alone. How sorry I am. How much I love you. Love you. No, I am not scared.

I could see you. I finally knew you. And, yes— I did, I did understand. And, yes: I love you. Kay you are not alone. We are in this together. I am here for you. I want to be here for you. I am your father. I'm Dad. To you! For you!

Kay? Where are you now?

You are still on her boat, right? You are alive? Right? Why is she not calling the police? Why is she under water? She has gone diving. It is so dark. I cannot see well. What is going on? Is that her body? It is big and dark, a heavy shape moving fast between the waters. Is she a shark? Has she turned into a fish, a mermaid, a complete, drab, wet stranger?

Kay. Where are you? Why can I no longer see you? What is she up to? The water is so murky and dark and terribly dirty. What is she taking? Old stuff? When you are fighting for your life? She is taking these priceless, worthless objects? Only things. No life. No life in any of them. Dead matter. She needs to go up, up, up. Take you to hospital. Get help. Get someone to help. Do something. Anything — Take you home.

Kay, darling baby boy. Please, come home. Don't leave.

The International Atomic Energy Agency.

You are so right. Kay. I get it. Now I get it. Non-invasive brain recordings. Not open source, no private patents. Oversight. We need democratic oversight. We really do.

The International Data-Based Systems Agency

When I wake, I will —.

What is happening?

Is that the light? The sun? Is the water parting like a curtain now. The curtain torn?
Finally torn. She is going up. I can hear her wetsuit drip. Drip—drop—drip—drop—drip—drop.
Are these her fins? She is swimming up. Up and up. And fast. Is that a chandelier she is
holding? It looks like the light. The light. Candles. The menorah? She has seven arms and
fifteen legs and hearts. She has so many hearts. The beats, the beats are loud and regular, and
I am scared. So scared. What is happening? So many beasts. This will not end well. Kay, where
are you? Kay? Are you alive? Why can I no longer hear you? The lines are cut. You must be
dead. Are you dead? Please, — no. Not now. Not when I finally got to know you.

Now, she is coming up. And now — Now, I see you. Kay. You are up. You are standing
on the reeling. You are holding on tight to the banister. Your hand, I see —. Thank God you are
alive. What relief. Relief. I hear the voices. I cannot understand the words. What are you
saying? What is she saying? There is shouting. She is shouting. She is screaming. You? Kay,
where does the gun come from. Why are you holding a gun? You are pointing the gun at her?
When she saved you? She — Kay, she is your savior. She saved —. Don't— Don't—

The noise. The shot. Loud. It hurts. My eardrums. I cannot feel my ears. The sea is red.
The sea is Baltic. The sea is parting, splitting, swallowing all noise. There is —. I can see her
body floating, her face looking into the water as if she was reading the ocean book eternal.
Silent. She is not moving. She is drifting. Floating. She is —. Kay. You.

You killed —. Kay. No. No. Put your gun down. Put your gun down. Why are holding it to
your ear?

No. Do not pull the —

The trigger. You pulled the trigger. Everything goes blank and black and white and whiter, then everything goes so liquid. The blood. So red. The red, red Baltic sea.

I choke. Me too — I die. My final hour. My fearest fear now full complete. All full complete. I do —.

Pareena's stomach was turning upside down. Her right hand was clenching onto her left arm, she could barely feel her blood circulate in her limbs. She could feel no pain. All was numb, all was gone — what she had just witnessed — no this couldn't be true. Was it true? She tried breathing, slow. — Slow. But then she nearly choked on her own spittle. Kay was dead. And not only was he dead, but he had also killed an innocent stranger, a beautiful and compassionate woman, she may be a thief, but she had saved his life and then —. No, it couldn't be true. Then —.

"He must have killed himself," José said tonelessly. He had come down from the upper room without anyone noticing. Pareena hadn't heard him come in and neither had Arvi. They both looked startled when José spoke out loud what was clear to all of them.

There was silence, all life had drained from their faces, they were —

"Is the connection broken? Arvi, do you still get anything?" José had pulled himself together first, ready to fix a disaster that couldn't be fixed.

"No, nothing. He must be dead," Arvi said troublesomely, feeling how his mouth had become dry. Witnessing murder and suicide in real time had taken its toll on him too. It was next level awful.

What if Jimi —. Arvi Karvonen felt such a sudden urge to talk to his son. Now. Right now. Ji—mmediately —. He grabbed his phone to find Jimi's number but then realized that he couldn't call him. Lisa —. Should he contact Lisa? He dialed her number, but the call went straight to voice mail. He hung up immediately without leaving a message. He couldn't speak, he couldn't find any words for what had just happened. His head nearly exploded with all the awful terrible silences he carried within.

"Should we call Stockholm police? They could send a boat, I mean —, they must send a boat." José continued and he frantically began typing on the keyboard of his laptop as if this changed anything.

"Do you have the position?" Arvi asked while grabbing his phone and beginning to type.

"Yes. Wait. Geolocating now."

"Number is 114 14, but what area code? What is the area code for Sweden? And the country code? I mean —"

Pareena looked to her left, then to her feet. She felt as if she was moving in a layered, loosening dream where all was dense and strange and crossing, the levels and narratives smoothly moving beyond comprehension. She slowly began walking —where to? — where was the door? — and when she set one foot behind the other, she felt as if she had shrunk. The door? Was she tall no more? Was she herself no more? Her tongue tasted iron. Had she bitten herself? Her lip? Was there blood? On her lip? She felt nothing. — Here the door— Finally — Where to?

She felt as if she was falling, from the rock, from the boat, from the deep dark skies into the wine dark sea. But this was the hallway, so white, so sterile, the lights so

stark — the door still open — She heard the Americans talk to each other, but their words made no sense, their words meant nothing. She no longer spoke English nor German nor Tamil, her mind was encapsulated in a thick, cold fog, a nexus nebula that stretched across all her borders. — Where to? — There was no sound but the strange, hollow beating of her heart. She could not bear it. Oh no — She could not bear it: The sound her lungs made, the air running through her body bringing her life and life and — life.

When she left the room, nobody asked ‘Pareena, where are you going?’ or ‘Pareena, how are you? Are you ok, my dear? Honey, is everything ok?’ They were all busy saving the world.

Nobody asked, ‘Did you love Kay?’

Nobody asked, ‘What must it be like to love a murderer, a cold-blooded killer? Pareena, are you ok?’ No — nobody asked.

When she did love, when she —.

No more —.

But then —, then the rush comes in.

The rush brings all I have. All —. All of me and all my life.

I take a breath. Now, I breathe alone. Now I move.

I cross the line. The line into the world of the living.

I am here now. I am—.

Here.

Then, then I open my eyes.

And I see but light. I see but darkness.

“He is waking up.”

“He is waking up?”

Anastacia had just entered the room, followed by the twins. Her face filled with disbelief and hope and the ferocious fervent fear she had tamed and harboured and nurtured for weeks. This moment, how she had dreaded it. Would he come back to her? Would they still know each other? Would he still be himself?

“Dr. Thomas Christopher Meyers? Dr. Meyers? Can you hear me?” Arvi said trying to keep his voice soft and mellow but insistent, empathetic. He tried hard to ignore that he was talking to a father who had just witnessed his son kill and die. But then he gave up; it was impossible to ignore, all he could really think of was Jimi, his happy, radiant smile, his fine hair tousled by the wind when he was running — jumping for the joy and love and all that was good and whole in life. Arvi felt strangely elevated. Something within him was broken and yet made complete. He couldn’t grasp it, couldn’t put it in words or any other containers ready to dispose of, encased in his usual black, bare bedrocks buried deep within. Somehow life had taken direction. It was clear now what mattered and what did not.

“I think he can hear you. Oh my God. Tom. Oh — Tom. Are you with me? Darling?”

Anastacia was whispering, tears were streaming down her face, she wiped them off impatiently, her eyeliner smearing across her cheeks like dirty grey clouds running swiftly across summer skies before a thunderstorm.

“Dr. Thomas Christopher Yann Meyers, your wife is right here. Can you hear us? Don’t try opening your eyes too much, your face is bandaged. You were in an accident.”

“Tom, it’s me. It’s Anastacia. Are you awake?”

“Dr. Thomas Christopher Yann Meyers, can you hear your wife? Press her hand if you can.”

“Oh my God, he has pressed my hand. Thank God. Oh my God. I think he has really woken up. Is this even possible?”

“Dr. Meyers you are in hospital, can you remember how you got here?”

“No.”

There is magic in a first word spoken by someone believed to be without language, be it child or adult. And the magic filled the room at once, welling across the hospital bed, the chairs, the technical equipment, the table where the twins usually sat, transcending all and everything.

“Oh well, the first word came out quite clearly,” José observed drily, hiding the commotion and excitement he felt.

“I cannot believe you can speak again. Oh Tom. Darling you were on your way home from the lab and riding the bus. Do you remember the bus you always take from

work?” Anastacia looked at Tom so fearfully yet hopeful. She turned to Arvi and José when Tom took his time to answer.

“He pressed my hand, he remembers. He does.”

“That is exciting. But please carry on. Tell him what happened. Let’s see what he remembers.”

“There was a gang of young men, kids, in black down jackets. They were eating kebab on the bus. You just said one sentence to them: “I don’t like kebab.” We could see it on the surveillance video of the bus. The police showed me, I mean their lip reader explained. Do you remember saying that? *I don’t like kebab*. Do you?”

Thomas Christopher Yann Myers moved his head slightly to the left.

“He doesn’t remember that.”

“It doesn’t matter. Carry on.”

“Well, the kids, they got so angry and began pushing you. Do you remember how they were pushing you? It looked so bad on the video.”

Thomas Christopher Yann Myers moved his head slightly to the right.

“Well, you pushed them back and then one of them just dropped his food on the floor, right on your shoes, and grabbed you. Unfortunately, then the bus stopped. You remember? Darling, don’t you?”

“Has he fallen asleep again?”

“Do you think he can still hear me?”

“I assume so. Even if he cannot understand you, your voice is familiar to him. It will soothe his pain. Keep talking.”

“But should I really tell him that terrible story now?”

“It is important that he understands what happened. All vitals are good and clear. It is a miracle. Pandora has indeed brought him back to life.”

“Just keep talking.”

“Alright, the doors opened and then —, they pushed you out of the bus and shoved you around. One of them grabbed a wooden plank and began beating you — on your head. Oh my God.” She buried her face in her hands.

At this stage Arvi Karvonen felt he had to take over. After all Myers was still in his charge.

“Anastacia, take a break. Really. — It’s ok if you need a break.”

“No, I am fine. I’m fine.”

“Would you like me to ring for the nurse. She can bring a light sedative.”

“No, I am fine. — Tom. Tom, can you hear me.”

“Yes.”

“Oh my God, he can speak again. I cannot believe he speaks again.”

“Please —.”

“Of course. Well, Tom. One of them took out a bottle with liquid. They say it was a bottle of Trojka Vodka Pure Grain. I cannot forget the name. I saw it in the shops the other day. I simply cannot forget the name. They poured it over you, then they set fire to your face. You were —I mean — This is so awful. Oh my God.”

“Anastacia, it is ok to cry. Let go. Why don’t you take break and get a cup of coffee?”

“Would you —, - would you — would you —? Her voice was faltering, fading.

“Take over from here? Sure. Please go. Take your time. He will be fine now.”

“You think?”

“I promise.”

“I understand doctors never promise such things.”

“But, Anastacia, you mustn’t forget. We are not doctors, we are magicians.” José gave her a reassuring smile.

“Yes, of course you are. You are the best.”

Quickly she moved over and kissed Arvi on the cheek, then hugged José.

Arvi shot José a devastating look. If she knew what price she had to pay to get her husband back, she wouldn’t smile like this and for sure she wouldn’t kiss them. But it couldn’t be him telling Anastacia that Kay was dead that the sacrifice of the son had brought life to her beloved, had brought Thomas Christopher Yann Myers back from the dead. Let Pareena tell her, let the Swedish police tell her, let José tell her. Arvi would do what he did best, he would be silent like a grave. After all, that was what he was paid for.

Anastacia had slightly recovered, she grabbed her bag, straightened up and sorted out the kids.

“Peter and Nina. Come with me, let’s get a drink.”

.....

“Dr. Thomas Christopher Yann Myers? Can you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“Your wife will be here soon enough. I will continue to tell you why you are in hospital. The gang set fire to your face, your head. You were burning. Your face, your

hair, you were literally on fire, and you also had severe brain injuries from the beatings. When you were then transferred to the Misericordia Hospital, we had to put you into an artificial coma to save you, well to save your brain.”

“Yes.”

“You understand? Dr. Meyers,” José said.

“Yes.”

“Anastacia contacted Neuro Industries, hoping they could help you. She thought their technology was further advanced than Brainmog’s.”

“No.”

“She said you thought so.”

“No.”

“Well — We then suggested we’d use a combination of our and your thream architectures and our mixed reality headset and to get you back on track”

“A007?”

“You remember the name of our headset?”

“Yes.”

“That is good. Very good indeed. Your wife agreed to the procedure. If you were ever put into an artificial coma—, she kept saying it would surely be your will to test your own work in combination with ours. We didn’t go via Swissmedics or the ethics committee. There really was no time or we would have lost you. It was a decision between me, Arvi Karvonen and your father, Oleg Myers. Do you remember Oleg Myers, your father, your competitor? The head of Neuro Industries? You worked for Neuro Industries before the two of you fell out and you went your separate way. You then founded Brainmog. You remember?

“Yes.”

“Good. I mean the technologies are basically ready for the market and we thought you’d appreciate the joint effort. — And of course that it would, well it now did— save your life.”

“Yes.”

“We started with the threams, but then Pandora suggested that we train you with what we think is your biggest fear. Pandora kept saying that only your biggest fear would wake you. We first thought abusing imaging for thought control was your biggest fear, abusing your research to make new opinions. We did it to get the best results. We did it to wake you. We believed it would help jumpstart your brain. Dr. Myers, do you understand what I am saying?”

“Yes.”

But it didn’t work. Only when Pandora found GÅrdicide and got a connection with your son Kay she could access your worst fear: That your son would commit a murder and then commit suicide.

“Kay?”

“Your son Kay.”

“Kay. A thream?”

“No, in fact —, well,” José paused, searching for Arvi’s eyes, but he had turned his back at them. “Well, about this — we think that was not a thream. We think you were indeed connected with your son via the Breenplant 007 your father Oleg gave you to test set, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he did.”

“Well then.”

“Is Kay dead?”

“I am afraid he is.”

“We are very sorry.”

“Our thoughts and prayers are with you and your family.”

Arvi had turned and all he mustered was the standard sentence they had taught them in case of any emergency involving human casualties:

‘Our thoughts and prayers are with you and your family.’

Mmmmmhh

At roughly this very moment the door opened again. In came —, not Anastacia nor the twins, in came —, not Dr. Ha-rin Park nor Pareena nor head nurse Anna Kunz. In came, —believe it or not — in came Kay Myers, Thomas Christopher Yann Myer’s supposedly deceased son—wearing a brand-new black T-shirt, rugged blue jeans, must have been Levis 501 — happy as always, smiling and sauntering across to the bed. He filled the entire room, he filled the space so completely, the two Americans could barely breathe for want of air, explanation and reason.

“Dad? Dad? I heard from mum you woke up. Thank God.” Kay had tears in his eyes and ran his hand through his hair as he was walking towards the bed where his father was stretched out.

“ayk,”

Thomas Christopher Yann Myer's voice was hoarse, and the consonants were slightly jumbled up, but it seemed clear to everybody he was calling his son by his name.

"Dad."

"Kay. Oh my—"

Arvi was thunderstruck and José had fallen silent. Involuntarily, Arvi had grabbed a chair to make sure he didn't have a heart attack. Was he having a heart attack? He didn't feel good.

"Have you risen from the dead?" José asked bluntly after he had recovered just a little.

"No, what do you mean? Why me? He, — he has risen from the dead." Kay was pointing at his dad, then laughed out loud the sound was deafening and shell-shocked Arvi's ears.

"How did you get here from Stockholm so fast?" José asked curiously.

"What do you mean? I haven't been to Stockholm," Kay said smilingly, stroking his father's hand.

"You haven't? That doesn't make any sense."

"I don't understand. Why would you think I was in Stockholm? *That* doesn't make any sense. Dad, can you hear us? He can, right—? "

"You. — " Thomas Christopher Yann Myers said.

"live," he added.

His voice was coming from afar underneath the bandages.

José gave Arvi an ominous look. What was happening here? They were both too thunderstruck to speak.

"I live, yes." There was a pause, "So?" Again, a pause. —

“Why shouldn’t I? Stockholm? I live? Are you guys ok?” Kay then asked, looking towards José and Arvi rather worried. They both looked as if they had seen a ghost.

“Because —”

“Were you not wearing the headset your father gave you? The one you got from your grandfather?”

“Which headset?”

“The Breenplant 007”

“I don’t have such a headset. And if I had one, I surely wouldn’t wear it. I really don’t understand what you are talking about.”

“Well, Pandora connected us to a headset we geolocated in Stockholm and obviously you were wearing that headset. It was you. Kay? That’s you, right?”

“Yes, I am Kay.”

“His son?”

“Yes, of course. What are you talking about?”

“Well, then —.”

“What? I still don’t understand.”

“Well, we could then read both thlogs, yours and your father’s”

“You *think* you could read my thoughts?” Kay laughed out loud, “you must be out of your minds. Nobody gets to read my thoughts. My thoughts are a 100% private.”

“Yes, we can see this now,” Arvi said drily processing at high speed what was happening her.

“He clearly was not in Stockholm. Or he wouldn’t be here,” José stated the obvious. It was a riddle, an enigma too hard to comprehend. What had happened? How could they have been so fooled?

“No. Of course, I was not in Stockholm, I had to take a math exam at the EPFL just before lunch. I was in Lausanne. And I had to study for a couple of hours, that’s why I am so late. That is why mum was late. She felt she wanted to be home while I was studying. And Peter had a sore throat, nothing serious, but still — and — And then she made us a very late lunch when I came back after the exam —. She didn’t know today — of all days, he would wake up.”

“Oh. I see,” Arvi said utterly deadpan.

“Is everything ok with my dad? Where is the nurse who is looking after him? Where is Pareena?”

“The nurse?” Arvi asked mechanically and suddenly realised she was gone. He hadn’t really noticed before that at some stage of this terrible drama she must have left the room. He had been too preoccupied with his own horror and personal angst.

“Pareena?” Kay repeated impatiently, he was so eager to see her. He had been forcing himself not to text her before his exam to reduce the level of distraction. No sooner had he left the auditorium at the EPFL than he switched his cell phone back on but then she had never answered any of his messages.

“Yes, of course, — Pareena. She was here a minute ago. Before your mum came in. She’s been great, she has been here all morning,” José said.

“All morning?”

“Yes, we let her read the thlog. She knew so much about Cat Thream because her grandfather —”

“Do you want to tell me she also *thinks* she’s read my thoughts?”

“I think you had better go and find her,” Arvi said suddenly becoming very restless. His face was drained of all colours. He felt his heartbeat increase like a little

rattling plane speeding up on a bumpy runway. How compelled he felt to clear things up as fast and as speedily as possible.

“To tell the truth, she probably thinks you’re dead.”

“She thinks I am dead? — Why would she think I was dead?” Kay looked at them aghast and eyes wide open.

“Pandora must have —. Well — given her ideas. Just go and find her,” Arvi grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him towards the door.

“You are totally insane. I mean, both of you. Totally insane,” Kay was now shouting at the two Americans, and he had turned on his heel heading straight for the door.

“But your dad woke up again,” Arvi whispered. He looked at José bewildered. Had they done anything wrong? I mean — it had worked. Right? After all, it had worked, hadn’t it?

— Of course — Oh, now I understand,” José said.

“What?”

“It makes sense.”

“Stop talking in riddles.”

“That is extraordinary.”

“José, I don’t get it. Tell me.”

.....

“—xplai—mmmmmmh.”

The word fragments had suddenly resurfaced in the room, floating above their heads, then evaporating through the air ducts. Talking must be excessively tiring for Patient Zero. It was not tiring for José, not after he could put two and two together and yes —, in fact, it might equal five.

“Dr. Thomas Christopher Yann Myers, let me explain. I think Pandora only simulated the connection with Kay to access your worst fear. She had to resort to a different strategy. If you realized you were in a thream it wouldn’t work. You knew what you saw in Nord Thream or Cat Thream was only a simulation. And simulations are not real and therefore do not trigger real fear. So, Pandora was seeking a way out presenting you with something you, — and, unfortunately, we believed to be real: A seemingly real connection with your son via the Breenplant headsets.”

“Not real?”

“No, Dr. Myers, it was not real. What you saw, what we heard and read it was not real. It was like a personalized movie that was played onto your brain and onto your retina to access and activate to your worst fear. It starred you and some fake avatar version of Kay that Pandora had created. You can think of it as a computer game that Pandora personalized to access your personality and provoke your worst fear: That your son would kill a woman, a woman who had tried to save him, and then he would commit suicide. We should have realized when we read the title:

Pandora’s Exclusive Cutscene: La Capitana in Action

You know what a cutscene is?

“Yes.”

“Ok, so Pandora’s calculations said that if we can access your worst fear, you would produce the most cortisol, dopamine, adrenaline, the whole cocktail — which in turn would increase your chance of waking by yourself. Pandora handled your fear so it became a trigger we could pull to spin you into action. As I said, it jumpstarted your brain and brought you back to life. In this case we could call this last bit the Truth Thream”

“Carola alive?”

“We don’t know who she is. She keeps reappearing in all three threams. Who is —”

“Carola. My baby sister.”

“Well, we didn’t know you had a sister. We also don’t know if she is alive. I am very sorry. Would your wife know about her?”

“No.” Myers slowly shook his head.

“You’re messing —.” Myers stopped. He needed a moment to compose himself. Speaking was far more tiring and consuming than thlogging. Speaking was the most beautiful, most exhausting, and most frightening conundrum of the human mind, of his mind.

“You’re messing with my head.”

“Wow. That was a complete sentence. He really is coming back to life. Isn’t that amazing.” Arvi was genuinely impressed and added,

“Amazing. Dr. Myers. Everything is awesome. You are alive. Isn’t that worth it? Get some rest now.”

“Will he be ok?” José mouthed silently.

“His heart rate is up. And look at these other screens. They are all on red. What does any of this mean anyway? Why is nobody here? Let us call Dr. Park. This really isn’t looking right, is it?”

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“Nurse Kunz? Where is Dr. Park. We really need her in here,” José usually didn’t shout into his cell phone but all screens on the vital signs were now on alert. They had kept pressing the emergency button on the wall, but nothing had happened. Then they had tried calling after all they had been given an emergency number. Finally, nurse Kunz had picked up.

“I am very sorry, Dr. Park is unavailable right now.” Nurse Kunz was now on speaker, she sounded even more stressed out than usually.

“Anastacia, please wait outside. It is not a good time right now,” Arvi tried to close the door on her, but Anastacia had just stepped into the hospital room anyway. She looked alert, her eyes darting from Arvi to José to her husband

“What’s wrong?” she asked, concerned, and worried.

“José is on the phone. Someone should be coming. Soon. Just wait outside.”

“I am sorry, we really are understaffed this morning.” The crackling voice came across the speaker more clearly now.

“What can be more important than Patient Zero?” Arvi had grabbed the receiver and was barking at her so loud he could swear they might even hear him across the

hallway. He could hear a pause at the other end. Had she hung up? Then her voice, strained from pain and anxiety came through the receiver.

“We are trying to save Pareena’s life.”

Arvi felt his heart sink. No, not Pareena. That couldn’t be. Why would she be fighting for her life, hadn’t she just been in here? Where was she anyway? He had been so preoccupied with Pandora’s tricks that he couldn’t even remember when exactly she had left the room. It must have been before Kay had magically resurfaced.

“Do you think the Russians poisoned her?” José asked aghast, involuntarily holding his hand to his crackled lips.

“The Russians? — The Russians? Why the Russians? Oh my, God what happened?” Anastacia looked as if all life had drained from her face, she tightly clung on to her handbag, the knuckles of both her hands white and strained.

“She is such a lovely girl. And Kay —,” Anastacia’s voice had gone hoarse and was lost in a whisper.

“She has taken 2mgs of fentanyl.” Nurse Kunz’s voice rumbled over the speaker.

“She has what?” José asked incredulously.

“We don’t know if we can save her.”

“Is Kay with you?”

...

The vibration in his pocket brought him back to his senses. Arvi grabbed the phone, nearly dropping it, and stared at the caller ID. The number that showed up on his phone was not in his contacts. He recognized the area code, 733 for Chicago. As if in a dream he picked up.

“Hello.” — “Yes, Arvi Karvonen. That’s me.” — “Yes, I understand. No — sure. Thank you for letting me know. — No, that’s fine. I will take the next flight.” — “Tomorrow, maybe the day —.” — “In the morgue?” — “Ok.” — “Thank you. Thank you so much. For everything.” — “Bye”.

“That’s it. I am leaving.”

“Leaving? Arvi, where are you going?”

“My father —”

“What about him?”

“I quit. I am out.”

Epilogue

The zoom call late that night, super-speeding along what used to be discarded transatlantic telegraph cables and now had been replaced by thousands and thousands of nautical miles of tiny glass fibers tortuously buried all across the oceans' deep sea floors, incessantly glowing and stretching and twitching from all the ever increasing traffic, well, — that zoom call became legendary. After it was leaked.

Nobody had ever seen their new little big dog so pleased, not in a decade or two at least, not even at his wedding with Lisa: José Garcia was absolutely thrilled when it was finally him who got to speak over zoom with the CEO of Neuro Industries, Oleg Myers, the *big big* dog. Old Myers was a high ruler of his very own class and a towering mountain, at least payroll wise reigning far above José Garcia who nearly made half a million US dollars a year himself. That night, José was giving his best when reporting to his superior on the last three days spent so well.

“Here at Neuroindustires in Bern, we are absolutely thrilled that the Pandora Application has run more smoothly than we had ever imagined. Not only did Pandora come up with a complete and very creative set of threams of her own. She

also brought Patient Zero successfully back to life and in addition was successful at changing his opinion repeatedly. When we started with Nord Thream on the very first day Patient Zero was clearly defending his intellectual property against us, believing his research should all go open source.”

“Where is Arvi?”

“He left.”

“What do you mean?”

“He had some private business to attend to. I think his father died or something like this. He wouldn’t say.”

“He wouldn’t say?”

“Well, he wouldn’t fill me in on the details. Sorry.”

“And you are who?”

“Garcia — José, Call me José.”

“Ok. José. Arvi is out. I understand. — I’m Oleg. And tell me again. What exactly did my son discover?” Oleg Myers was usually more interested in the financial global roll out of Neuro Industries’ research than in all the scientific technicalities. Now that the magic did work, it seemed he, after all, wanted to make an effort at understanding *how exactly* he would become richer than Bernard Arnault, richest man on earth, controlling Christian Dior and Louis Vuitton besides other major luxury brands.

“Ok. Oleg. Let me walk you through this once again. The decoder Brainmog, well, your son, Dr. Thomas Christopher Yann Myers, invented managed to overcome the low temporal resolution of fMRI. Functional magnetic resonance imaging. That’s how we measure oxygen levels in the brain when people listen to language.” José

was trying to keep this as simple as possible. He doubted Big Dog would really understand anything at all.

“Well, we all know that the Blood-oxygen-level dependent or what we call the BOLD signal is notoriously slow. Basically, we can see how the oxygen flows in someone’s brain, but we still don’t know what they are thinking. We cannot pinpoint the actual words. That’s where Brainmog succeeded. Your son learned that the impulse of neural activity causes the blood-oxygen-level-dependent to rise and fall during a time window of about 10 seconds. But in the English language there are over two words per second, that means each brain image from intracranial recordings can be affected by over twenty word per ten seconds.

You see, we simply don’t know what people think even if we measure their oxygen levels. The pics could correspond to twenty words each ten seconds. That is simply not good enough to get a clear idea of what someone is thinking. It was only your son and Brainmog who managed to train the encoding model, so it successfully predicts how each person’s brain reacts to phrases in natural language. Bottom line: Myers and his team were the only ones who created a generative neural network language model capable of meaningfully predicting what the oxygen flow means or let’s put it more simply: They were the first who could record what the person wearing the headset thinks.

“And he wanted all that open source?” Oleg’s voice sounded distorted.

“Yes, Myers believed everybody should have access to that research. He believed in the community to self-regulate. But yeah — you know what he’s like. He would have crucified himself. Anyway. That is how we started on the first day. He, well, your daughter-in-law, Anastacia, really provided us with the missing link. Then

Cat Thream successfully changed your son's opinion and Myers was brought around to thinking that such technologies must be patented and safeguarded by experts to prevent harm. Private companies should own this technology for the good of humanity."

"You mean a business aristocracy is safeguarding and owning the technology. Sounds good to me." Oleg added, chuckling so loud José could hear it right across the ocean.

"If that is how you want to call it, but yes — basically lock it all up behind the big bars. Enshrine it in a tomb. If anybody wants to access the pyramids the sphinxes will kill them. Or some deadly fungi will annihilate them. That's why you keep such a large legal team."

"Ok. I understand. — José look. Here is what I still don't get. Why did Pandora then design what you have called the Truth Thream? Tom then believed mind reading technology should be democratically regulated by an international data agency. I mean the IAEA, that is what he compared it to. What a drastic step and contrary to all our interest. Why on earth did Pandora feed him that? And what fake truth lays in that?"

"That was simply in line with Kay's character. Myers knows his son and therefore Pandora had to make sure that Kay's character composition was to be credible and functional for the purpose of exposing him to his worst fear. Not only did we experiment with influencing his opinion, but we also ultimately intended to wake him up from the coma. Remember?"

"I understand, but if Pandora spreads ideas like this, it will not be useful for a global rollout. Also, the hint with the cutscene. That's not good. Tom could have

guessed that what he saw in the Stockholm Archipelago — and the bloody scene on the boat — was not real but a movie sequence creating emotional connections and improving pacing. If people can see so easily through Pandora's strategies, she is not of much use. She mustn't reveal this. You must get this under control quickly. Can you have the parameters changed accordingly? Put Cedric's team on it. And have the part with Putin being Kay's father taken out of the records."

"But this was information your son, well Dr. Thomas Christopher Yann Myers provided, not Kay, we believe it to be truthful. It is not part of the cutscene, but of the player's interaction, in this case Tom Myers' interaction with the content Pandora had created."

"That's why you must take it out, I cannot have my grandson think such nonsense in case he reads the documents. Putin his father, I mean — If he ever finds out. It would cause too much unnecessary pain. After all, we want to use this technology responsibly, don't we?"

"I will surely have it investigated — .

"Ok. José. Thank you. It would mean a lot."

"If it works, the A007 Breenplant headset can now change anybody's opinion at random whatever interests must be served. Pandora can design threads or it can simulate connections with your beloved to bring you back to life —"

"That's incredible."

"Indeed is. I mean, all worked according to plan, on the third day we wanted Myers to come back from the dead and he did. Thanks to all involved with the project. But you know what? — Let's just put him back into that coma right now. We

can easily change his opinion again and bring him back to favoring the *patenting of such technology by private companies.*"

Oleg Myers laughed out loud. Then José nailed it.

"I mean seriously, now that we know it works — I mean, who would want Myers to say strong states or governments, or international agencies should control the technology that gave him back his life? I mean — . Application Pandora. She was just great. A lifesaver. Such a darling. She gave him back his life. She rose him from the dead. All great. All evil. I mean — seriously. It would be such a pity. Don't you think? I mean really — , we literally crucified him, we put him in the grave, rolled the stone all that nonsense. Now after resurrection let us lift him up into the skies. We did it. In three days. Just awesome. Unbelievable. A miracle. Unless of course some ominous democratic majority wants to regulate our technology. Get it under democratic control? Let us make sure early on that this never happens.

Oleg on the other side of the ocean nodded vigorously or then there was a glitch in the transmission that made his head pop up and down as if he was suffering from Bobble-head-doll syndrome.

\$ Who could say? And who cared anyway?

"And you know what? I mean our shares, Neuro Industries' shares. Absolutely skyrocketing any time soon. Behold. Wait and see —"

"Come on, Oleg, you are not seriously telling me you are only interested in the money?" José, the new little big dog, smirked at this last statement of his big boss. People *so* did not get what this technology was all about.

“Imagine what we can do now. It will be absolutely, *absolutely* skytastic.”

Why can't you see?

I mean – seriously, why can't you see this?

The End

Author's Note

SkYtast!c, the third book of the m!normous series, is the weirdest book I have written so far. After attending the celebrations of the 50th Anniversary of the moonlanding at the Kursaal in Bern in 2019 I started writing what was to become

Nord Thream. At the time it was just a weird experimental short story I didn't really understand myself. The chameleons of North Thream literally just surfaced in my mind and I had to put them on paper without really knowing or understanding what they were doing in my story. Next came more experiments in the form of Cat Thream. I had a rough idea where the story was going before I started to write, but then, the moment I put my pen down or rather started typing, all of a sudden there was a cat. It had come out of nowhere and again, I couldn't help but let it run wild in the story. I hadn't known I could write such weird stories and found Cat Thream even harder to grasp than Nord Thream. What was all this about? Where did these weird ideas come from? For quite some time I didn't know and stopped working on this novel.

It was only after reading in the New York Times about Jerry Tang et al.'s research and their article on "Semantic reconstruction of continuous language from non-invasive brain recordings" from the end of September 2022 as well as Apple's introduction of Apple vision Pro on the 5th of June 2023 that I really began to put two and two together. The seamless blending of digital content with the physical world made me at once understand what my weird stories were all about: they described someone whose physical world was blended with digital content when wearing a headset.

And yet it was still a long way to finding patient Zero. When on the 3rd of September 2022 a group of young men attacked a 32-year old in the Swiss city of Winterthur and not only poured combustible fluids into his face but also set him on fire I was appalled and shocked. The man was a total stranger to them, someone they had randomly met in the street. But I couldn't stop thinking of that man who now

was a patient painfully recovering for weeks, months, maybe even years. Patient Zero could be any of us. Never had I thought that something so atrocious could happen in Switzerland. After learning about the attack in the early morning, I was crying while riding my bike to school. The first thing I did upon arrival was write the epigraph in the form of the poem 'Oh swallow, oh swallow' which can be found at the very beginning of the book.

The war in the Ukraine, on the other hand, I wanted to keep out of the story. But, this too, I couldn't — and it is self-explanatory why this terrible war is on my mind, on so many people's minds. When I learned about Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin's close relation to the Russian orthodox church all I could ever think of was Jesus's commandment: 'But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. (Luke 6:27-28). What a revolutionary commandment: If the Ukrainians are your enemies, then do them good, love them, bless them, stop the war. And bringing such terrible bloodshed upon them does obviously not qualify for 'doing good. Are you among them who are listening or are you among them who are waging war?

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And then, of course the introduction of Chat GPT on the 30th of November 2022. I learned about the chat early on as I had a student who handed in a paper, he had "written" comparing J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* with another play he had read. This student sent "his" text to me in the mail and then asked me in class what I thought about it. I was cautious but told him the text was "quite good". He then told

me that he had had it written by Artificial intelligence. For about a week I wanted to quit my job as a teacher. Then decided against it. Teachers have new functions to fulfil, and I was curious to learn what they were. So, I will stay on a little longer.

We had also tried out the chat in private and read an essay to each other why Putin should win the Nobel Peace Prize. In fact, Chat GPT thought he should not. That thing seems to have clear answers to a lot of the questions my students and family have. However, I have never even felt remotely tempted to use the chat for my creative writing. When I am writing I mainly use dictionary.com and thesaurus.com for language issues, rarely linguee.com or deepl.com for translation. But these seven and a half years of Latin when I was a teenager, six or seven lessons a week, finally pay off.

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I also use the internet for research, to look up dates, knowledge, find definitions, of course — . For this book I also used a notebook and literally stole sentences and phrases from novels and non-fiction books I had read, some phrases I kept together hoping their authors would forgive me for plagiarizing, others I tore apart completely, then recycling them, gluing them together afresh. I would imagine that A.I. is taking quite similarly from works written by humans. I want to mention Elisabeth's Gaskell's book *North and South* especially. She describes the inner life of her characters so richly that I found it difficult focusing on the actual story, so smitten was I reading her descriptions of the turn-taking in her dialogue.

It was also in her book that one quote stood out from all the others. It was when her protagonist found a "human interest" that I realised that SkYtast!c had

little to no human interest at the time. I only know four people who have ever read my work and one of my most faithful readers had already said she might not read SkYtast!c as it sounded to technical when I described the theme to her in summer 2023. Finding the “human interest” then made me add most of the characters in the Misericordia hospital, mainly Pareena.

Mrs. Gaskell, an English novelist died on the 12th of November 1865, a little older than I am now, and I often wondered what writing must have been like in the 19th century without access to the internet and computers. It made me appreciate the works and minds of authors before the internet age even more, hoping I can strive to use my capacities in similar ways without poisoning original thought too much with artificial rumination. Any writer in the 21st century must find this challenging.

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Finally, I want to mention the few days I spent all alone in Gothenburg and Stockholm in summer 2023. I hadn't travelled alone for nearly three decades and I was rather worried at first. But exploring the two cities on my own, especially the glorious bike tour I did in Djurgården, –it was a perfect Nordic summer's day, – was most inspiring. I knew I wanted to find some ideas to complete SkYtast!c and was thrilled to see the young man in the 'Occupy Mars' T-shirt. Seeing him for only a couple of seconds when I was riding past him on a wooden pier made me reconstruct Kay entirely, bringing him and his sweetheart Pareena center stage of the story. And, yes, rereading Rome and Juliet by William Shakespeare helped too.

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When I revised the entire novel at the end of September 2024, I was shocked to discover that in Stockholm Zombie Mode, the Pandora version of Kay thinks of adapting the Stockholm City App to have smart watches “explode like hand grenades” and “ripping off people’s hands virtually”. I know it is hard to believe but I had forgotten all about writing this and rereading it made my heart nearly stop. I wrote this part in summer 2023, months before the terrible pager attack Israel had launched. Finally, I decided to leave the passage in the book as a reminder for anybody, that we — unless we begin to truly love our enemies — are all capable of horrendous atrocities.

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At last, I want to thank my husband who has much patience with his wife having turned into a faithful amateur writer and my three sons who often wonder how many hours I can be sitting still, only staring at a computer screen. I also want to thank my parents and my sister who have always believed in me and encouraged me to move on. And last, but not least, I want to thank my two most faithful readers, A. and U. who have read both enormous books so far and kept me going. I do hope you got something out of Skytaast!c, isn’t it just such a weird, weird book?

m!normous series # 3

Skytast!c

After a brutal and vicious attack on a bus on his way home, Thomas Christopher Yann Myers, a neuroscientist working on technology capable of reading human thoughts, finds himself in an artificial coma at the Misericordia Hospital near Bern in Switzerland.

His beloved wife, Anastacia, sees herself forced to sign over all her husband's research to his biggest competitor, Neuro Industries GmbH based in Silicon Valley.

In the race for saving her husband's life, Anastacia hopes that the American team cannot only provide a functioning computer brain interface in time but also manages to train their artificial intelligence, so it brings on the desired results in an urgent matter of life and death.

When Pandora, the artificial intelligence in charge of Thomas Christopher Yann Myer's life seems to have generated its biggest success, no one realizes what so devastatingly had gone wrong and whose life really is in danger.

